THE PERSUADABLE VOTER: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns

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Divisive issues can be important in presidential campaigns – you can take a voter away from the other candidate by appealing to an issue they care about deeply. Examples include: abortion, gay marriage, minimum wage, school vouchers, immigration and others. This breaks with the traditional notion that candidates should run in the center.

What explains candidates’ willingness to campaign on these issues?

1. Some of the most persuadable voters are those who disagree with a certain position if their party that they care about, such as pro-life democrats.
2. Candidates can attract the support of these voters by utilizing the issues that are the source of this conflict.
3. Multiple communication channels and micro targeting make these strategies easier to carry out.

This approach challenges three common myths about voters:

1. Presidential candidates use divisive issues to fire up their base. Actually, they do so to attract persuadable voters from the opposing party.
2. The electorate is polarized, so the rhetoric is polarized. Actually, both parties are coalitions of diverse individuals and emphasis on certain divisive issues is designed to take advantage of the current mix within the parties.
3. Persuadable voters are the least informed and care less about policy in general. The reality is that they are just like other voters, and may make up their minds on such divisive issues.
Campaign information influences voter decision-making. Often as many as 76% of undecided voters agree with both candidates on some issues. Candidates use specific appeals to gain these undecided voters as well as lure some away from the other party.

With current information available about specific voters divisive issues that might be productive for a candidate can be discovered and can be manipulated. If done well, this becomes a form of “dog whistle politics” as a result, only some can hear the message.

Voters may have low levels of information, but they still have strong preferences based on politics. Treasury reform act.

Scholars view election results as determined by the voters, as predetermined outcomes. Campaign professionals view election results as having been determined by the choices of the campaigns themselves. The latest empirical research shows that the traditional academics may be wrong.

In 2004 25% of the voting public were persuadable partisans, while 9% were persuadable independents.

Increasingly, evidence shows that emphasis on particular issues may influence on who votes how and why.

Such divisive strategies are increased by:

1. The ability to target messages based on information about individuals.
2. The fragmentation of campaign dialogue.

We must not think of “persuadable” voters as “undecided.” Many of the persuadable voters are non-voters or voters from the other party.
“Swing” voters are also not necessarily independents. But, they may be more open to divisive strategies. However, many independents have that status because they are simply uninterested in politics.

A nation characterized by many “persuadable” voters may in fact be a more democratic nation. As Jennifer Hochschild puts it:

A democracy composed of consistent, tranquil, attitudinally constrained citizens is a democracy full of smug people with no incentive and perhaps no ability to think about their own circumstances. They know who they are, how things fit together – and woe betide anyone who questions or violates the standard patterns. Conversely, a democracy composed of citizens coping with disjunction and ambivalence is full of people who question their own righteousness, who may entertain alternative viewpoints, and who, given the right questions, are more driven to resolve problems than to ignore them.

The previous idea that voter choice was determined by social and group identity has given way to the reality that other factors play a more prominent role, such as conflicting social networks and the complexity of issues.

The previous idea that voters choose between candidates has been replaced by an idea that voters may decide not to vote at all. Divisive issues may cause them to vote when they otherwise would not.

Previously, it was thought that voters do not care so much so they can be swayed by an issue, while new research indicates that they use campaign information to make reasoned decisions based on the importance of the issue.
These “persuadable” voters are not necessarily the least informed or the least interested, but they are informed and interested but in the new politics divisive issues can be brought to them through new means and thus influence them.

Candidates should not always focus on middle of the road positions, but may want to stake out quite different positions that can attract sufficient numbers of these persuadable voters who care about these “wedge” issues. For example, in 2004 the stem cell research issue was able to appeal to people who were on one side of the spectrum to move to another.

New information sources can:
1. Determine what these issues might be so that campaigns can plan based on solid statistical information.
2. Reach out to those specific individuals (Log Cabin Republicans, Pro Life Democrats, etc.) to persuade them to vote for the candidate. They use direct mail, email, txt messaging, web advertisements, phone calls, personal visits and social media contacts.