CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

Issues, Concepts, Cases

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every advance in campaign technology will most certainly focus on the overriding goal of campaign-effective communication and persuasion to encourage individuals to select a certain candidate when they are behind the curtain on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November.

Case: Incumbency and Issue Advocacy in Pennsylvania’s Thirteenth District

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In this chapter, we focus on the lessons that can be learned from a comparative case study of congressional district races in the same geographic district in two consecutive general election cycles. We were participants in a nationwide study that looked at the effects of issue advocacy campaigning by interest groups and political parties in 1998 and 2000. This case study of Pennsylvania’s Thirteenth District is an outgrowth of that project.

Before the 2002 redistricting, Pennsylvania’s thirteenth congressional district was routinely one of the more competitive districts in the nation and one of the last few remaining “swing” districts in the nation. That is, party control of the seat transferred back and forth with regularity. Our study highlights the importance of incumbency, but not in the way that it is conventionally defined. The power of incumbency generally means that those already holding elective office are more likely to be reelected. The implications are that the incumbent needs the support of his or her party less than does the challenger. By the same token, the party helps challengers more than it helps incumbents. We found, however, that the power of incumbency in Pennsylvania’s Thirteenth District meant that the incumbent was more likely to receive the support of his or her party.

Conventional wisdom also suggests that most interest groups become involved in campaigns because they are interested in securing access to politicians. However, we found that most groups were more likely to support a candidate that shared their beliefs, rather than the candidate that seemed more likely to win. Part of the reason may be that in a swing district such as Pennsylvania’s Thirteenth District, it was difficult to determine which candidate was likely to win, but this uncertainty did not deter groups from becoming key actors in the electoral politics of the district. Moreover, it was found that most of the groups participating in the race were actively in favor of the challenger in 1998 but in favor of the incumbent in 2000.
Thus when it comes to the support of interest groups, the advantages of incumbency are not as absolute as they may seem, especially when organized interests are more likely to behave like ideological rather than access-seeking groups.

Finally, we learned that former House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill's old adage—"all politics is local"—requires some qualification. First, the electoral activities of national actors—political parties and interest groups—depended much more on national considerations, such as majority control of Congress and the fate of national public policy issues like Social Security, abortion, and the environment. Second, the campaign strategies followed by these national actors were informed more by a generic model based on television advertising, incumbency, and ideology than by local factors. And ultimately, although the activities of both national and local actors—political parties and interest groups—were sometimes helpful (and sometimes not so helpful), in most cases, the candidates followed their own instincts about how to campaign in the district. We concluded that it is the interplay of national and local concerns that explains the behavior of parties, groups, and candidates during the campaign, more so than the local politics of the district alone.

The District

The thirteenth congressional district in Pennsylvania was one of the more competitive and unpredictable congressional districts in the 1990s. Republican candidates won the seat in 1990, 1994, and 1996. Democratic candidates won in 1992, 1998, and 2000. One-term Democratic incumbent Joe Hoeffel successfully defended his seat in 2000 over Republican challenger Stewart Greenleaf by 20,000 votes, a substantial improvement over his 9,000-vote victory in 1998. Hoeffel's victory also marks the first successful reelection of a Democrat "in a heavily Republican region in at least eighty years."

Located in the wealthiest of Philadelphia's suburbs (most of Montgomery County, and parts of Bucks and Delaware Counties), the Thirteenth District has a relatively informed and active electorate. The Republicans enjoyed a 1.5 to 1 registration advantage over Democrats in Montgomery County in 2000, down from the 2.5 to 1 registration advantage in 1996. Lawrence Coughlin, a moderate Republican, represented the district for twenty-four years. When he retired in 1992, his open seat quickly became one of the most competitive in the country. The newly redistricted seat was still believed to tilt Republican, given the overwhelming partisan registration advantage. The race got even more attention when local television reporter (and wife of a former congressman) Marjorie Margolies Mezvinsky announced her intention to seek the Democratic nomination in the district. Her opponent was Republican Montgomery County commissioner Jon Fox. Despite Mezvinsky's fame, Fox was the favorite for the seat because of the Republican Party's registration advantage. However, a newly redistricted seat and a surge in Bill Clinton's popularity helped elect Mezvinsky by a 5 percent margin.

During the first year of the Clinton presidency, Mezvinsky broke a critical promise to her constituents. Despite campaigning heavily against new taxes, Mezvinsky changed her stance and cast the critical vote in favor of the president's economic package, as a result of enormous pressure from her party's leadership. The vote received considerable press attention—both for its consequences to the member and for the seemingly "strong-armed" tactics used to elicit it. It was Jon Fox's dream come true, and in their 1994 rematch, he defeated her by 4 percentage points. The fact that 1994 was a midterm election with a national Republican surge did not hurt Fox either, but residents of the district will always attribute Mezvinsky's dramatic vote change as the cause of her defeat.

In 1996, Fox faced a new Democratic challenger, Montgomery County executive Joe Hoeffel. Hoeffel had run for the seat previously against Coughlin in 1984 and 1986 but was not as well known as Mezvinsky. Hoeffel had a solid reputation for moderate stances and competence. Since 1996 was a presidential election year and Clinton was still popular in the district, Fox mounted a serious campaign. The year was also the first election cycle to see significant outside spending by interest groups, with the American Federation of Labor—Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) spending heavily on Hoeffel's behalf. Many thought this effort backfired as Hoeffel caught much of the blame for labor's negative campaigning. In the end, Fox held on to his seat by a record-breaking margin of only eighty-four votes, a "busload," as Hoeffel supporters called it.

The close race meant both sides almost immediately began plans for a 1998 rematch, the first of the two elections we studied in the district. Though the candidates were the same in 1998 as in 1996, the playing field had changed dramatically, as the idea of issue advocacy (by both parties and interest groups) became the norm in the nation's most competitive races. Ultimately, Hoeffel defeated Fox in 1998 by 5 percent.

In 2000, Fox declined to run again. This time, the Republican nominee was Pennsylvania state senator Stewart Greenleaf. A more moderate Republican than Fox, Greenleaf was believed to fit the district better, and thus it was felt that he would constitute a greater threat to Hoeffel. As we shall see, the political parties had a critical role here and changed the dynamics from what should have been a close contest to a relatively smooth victory for the one-term incumbent Hoeffel.

After the 2000 census, the state of Pennsylvania wrote a new redistricting plan, reflecting a loss of two congressional district seats for the state. One of these seats has been cut from the current allotment to the
Philadelphia area. The districts of Bob Borski (Third District) and Joe Hoeffel of Montgomery County were commingled, forcing Borski to retire rather than run against another incumbent. Consequently, Hoeffel’s new district is more solidly Democratic than before.

The Candidates

Political science literature has always made much of the “incumbency advantage” in elections, meaning that the incumbent member of Congress generally has more name recognition, positive evaluation by his or her constituents, media exposure, and campaign funds than the challenger. Sometimes, a high-profile challenger such as an actor, athlete, or astronaut will come along to neutralize the advantages incumbents normally enjoy. However, such well-known challengers are the exception rather than the rule. Our comparative study points out one incumbency advantage that the literature does not stress: electoral support from the incumbent’s political party.

At first blush, one might think that support from the officeholder’s party is a given. However, until the mid-1990s, it can be said that the support parties gave to their candidates was helpful but not really a deciding factor in victory or defeat. The advent of soft money spending gave the parties resources and options they did not have before. We found that in 1998, Jon Fox received a great deal of assistance from his party’s congressional committee (the National Republican Congressional Committee, or NRCC), whereas Hoeffel received modest support from his party’s congressional committee (the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, or DCCC). But in 2000, with Hoeffel as the incumbent, the tables were turned. The DCCC gave Hoeffel significant support in 2000, whereas the NRCC gave Greenleaf only token support. From the local perspective, a Greenleaf candidacy ought to have had more promise than Fox’s. But the national perspective gave incumbent Hoeffel the advantage.

Political Parties

Because of the political parties’ mastery of soft money transfers in recent cycles, the true value of the political party presence in this race may never be known. It is clear that in both 1998 and 2000, the party defending the incumbent spent the most money.

The parties reported very little in direct contributions and coordinated expenditures for each candidate in 2000. Joe Hoeffel received $4,175 in direct contributions and $10,702 in coordinated expenditures from the DCCC, well below the allowable amount of $67,560. At first glance, the small amount of hard money in Hoeffel’s race is surprising. However, sixty-seven current and former Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives donated a total of $61,550 to Hoeffel, which is further evidence of the party’s hand.

The Democrats spent approximately $1.4 million in soft money for Hoeffel on television advertising, direct mail, get-out-the-vote efforts (GOTV), and phone banks. Unlike in 1998, when the national committees of both parties placed ads and sent mail, in 2000, the national Democratic committees worked through the Pennsylvania Democratic State Committee. According to the DCCC, $1.2 million was spent on issue advocacy ad production and television airtime. The DCCC soft money ads aired early in the campaign cycle—just before Labor Day and throughout September. Though the party clearly thought Hoeffel’s race important enough to deserve a million dollars in spending, campaign insiders doubted that the issue ads had a significant impact on the ultimate outcome. Hoeffel’s principal campaign consultant, Neil Oxman of the Campaign Group, felt that these ads helped solidify Hoeffel’s position in the race but did little to improve his lead over Greenleaf. Hoeffel’s standing only improved once the candidate’s own ads ran in October. In addition to the television time, the Pennsylvania Democrats paid for six mail pieces on Hoeffel and one joint Hoeffel and Gore mail piece. The DCCC estimated its mail spending at $175,000. One soft money mailer contained a factual error that hurt the campaign’s momentum.

Party hard money spending for Greenleaf was greater than for Hoeffel, but party soft money spending for Greenleaf was considerably less because no issue advocacy television ads were produced. Stewart Greenleaf received a total of $14,500 in party direct contributions: $4,500 from the NRCC, $5,000 from the Republican National Committee (RNC), and $5,000 from the Republican Federal Committee of Pennsylvania. He also received $62,577 in coordinated expenditures.

At first glance, we might think that the NRCC supported Greenleaf more than the DCCC supported Hoeffel. However, the soft money spending for Greenleaf was reported to be zero. Though the NRCC promised to spend soft money on Greenleaf’s behalf if the race remained competitive, it never followed through with this promise. We know that the NRCC transferred $1.2 million in soft money to spend on behalf of the candidates in three hotly contested House races in Pennsylvania. The Greenleaf campaign expressed frustration with the national party committees for failing to deliver on a promise of significant television time close to the election. According to Greenleaf’s campaign manager, such assistance had been promised if the gap narrowed between the two candidates in the weeks before Election Day. However, when the NRCC decided to pursue a television campaign, no time was left to buy in the already oversubscribed Philadelphia media market, where, in addition to the presidential candidates, U.S. Senate candidates in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware were all buying time. The DCCC also noted that although Hoeffel was
listed as one of the NRCC’s prime targets in 1999, its interest in the race seemed to fade over the summer, and its support for Greenleaf continued to be tepid through the general election crunch. However, the DCCC’s concern over Hoeffel’s fate also waned in the campaigns’ last few days. The Hoeffel campaign tried to get the DCCC to spend coordinated expenditure money (hard dollars) on last-minute radio ads to counter an effective radio ad campaign by Greenleaf, but its pleas were rebuffed on the grounds that the race was no longer considered close.

In 1998, the NRCC spent heavily for Fox as part of its Operation Breakout issue advocacy program. Why did it not support Greenleaf to the same extent in 2000? There are a variety of explanations to consider: Greenleaf was more moderate than Fox, Republicans nationally were performing weaker than Democrats in legislative races, the NRCC believed that the race was no longer competitive, and in 1998 the party had the incumbent, but in 2000 it had the challenger. We believe the last of these is the most compelling explanation. Though it would seem that political parties should logically invest in challenger candidates on the premise that incumbents should be able to fend for themselves, when the margin between majority and minority control is slim, parties will protect incumbents first in an effort to pursue majorities. Since the probability that incumbents will be reelected is quite high even in marginal districts, it makes more sense to invest in incumbents than in challenger candidates.

Interest Groups

A similar case can be made to explain the variation in interest group activity between 1998 and 2000. There were clear differences in the level of group involvement and the type of group involvement in each cycle. Clearly, the most important explanatory variable for these fluctuations is the candidates involved in the race, followed by the party affiliation of the candidates in the race. Groups campaigned in Pennsylvania’s Thirteenth District simply because they wanted to affect who controlled the U.S. House of Representatives, yet at the same time, they supported the candidate who best reflected their interests. That was true regardless of which candidate was perceived to be more likely to win.

Research on political action committees (PACs) suggests that business PACs are more likely than ideological PACs to follow an access-seeking strategy. That is, ideological PACs presumably are more interested in changing the composition of Congress and are more likely to support the candidate who is closest to their interests. Although important, the behavior of ideological versus nonideological PACs can tell us very little about the interest group campaign in the Thirteenth District. Most of the groups involved in the 1998 and 2000 campaign behaved like ideological PACs.

The absence of access-seeking groups also challenges the presumption that incumbents are always in a more advantageous position than challengers. In our study we found that more groups mobilized in favor of Hoeffel than on behalf of the incumbent in 1998, although Fox had the support of many conservative social and economic groups. In 2000, more groups mobilized in support of the incumbent, meaning that Hoeffel benefited in both election cycles.

As in 1998, some of the issues emphasized by groups in their election advocacy included Social Security and Medicare, reproductive rights, and gay rights. In 2000, the environment also became a much more relevant issue. Among the groups involved in the Thirteenth District were four environmental groups: Friends of the Earth, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), the Sierra Club, and Clean Water Action (through its local branch). All the environmental groups cited Hoeffel’s past support for environmental causes as their primary reason for their involvement in the race. Compared to 1998, socially and economically conservative groups were absent largely because Greenleaf was considered more moderate than Fox. The lack of group support, in turn, contributed to the perception that Fox had been a stronger candidate than Greenleaf, making it even less likely that organized groups would support his candidacy.

The only group to use television for issue advocacy was the Sierra Club. Most voters were contacted via voter guides, literature drops, and phone banks. In-kind contributions in the form of staff or interns provided additional help to the candidates. By far, Hoeffel benefited the most from independent expenditures, issue advocacy, and in-kind contributions. Hoeffel had staff or interns on loan from the Human Rights Campaign, League of Conservation Voters, and Friends of the Earth. Preliminary data obtained from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and during interviews with group representatives indicate that Hoeffel benefited from at least $380,961 in independent expenditures.

The Sierra Club television ads ran once in April and once in early September. The issue ad, named “Strip Malls,” praised Representative Hoeffel’s leadership in protecting the environment and asked viewers to call Hoeffel to thank him and to ask him to vote in support of a bill “to help us control sprawl and protect our quality of life.” The ad cost about $70,000 to produce and broadcast. The group decided to run the ad in September, just before Labor Day “because it was a time when members of Congress were in their districts talking to voters.”

As of October 2000, the group had also spent $3,086 in in-kind contributions of salary benefits in support of Hoeffel.

The LCV launched its “Environmental Champion” campaign in 2000 and put Hoeffel on its list, spending $177,232 to support his reelection. It also polled Montgomery County voters in June and November to determine whether the environment was an important issue for the district. They
found that "nearly 90 percent of voters said that clean air and clean water would play important roles in their voting decision. Forty-two percent said they would be primary factors." LCVC then spent $136,000 for 220,000 pieces of mail, with five different pieces sent to 60,000 district homes. FEC data suggests that consultant fees and other miscellaneous expenditures in support of Hoeffel amounted to an additional $12,311.

Friends of the Earth, like the LCV, was not involved in the 1998 campaign, but in 2000 it sent a staff member to work on Hoeffel’s campaign. The group got involved in 2000 because it "had established a good working relationship with Congressman Hoeffel during his two years in office" and "wanted to make sure that he returned." Finally, a national group named Clean Water Action became involved through its local chapter on behalf of Hoeffel. The group targeted only its members in the district (8,000) through mail and a phone bank. The group’s endorsement highlighted Hoeffel’s defense of the federal Clean Water Act.

Hoeffel also benefited from the support of pro-choice groups, as he had in 1998, though both candidates in 2000 were pro-choice. Greenleaf’s opposition to partial birth abortions explains why pro-choice groups worked for Hoeffel. The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) became involved in the Thirteenth District race because Hoeffel was seen as a "vulnerable pro-choice incumbent." The group had also been involved in Hoeffel’s 1998 campaign and had a readily available list of voters identified as pro-choice. Although NARAL felt comfortable working with Greenleaf at the state level, his support for a ban on partial birth abortion was problematic. In 1998, Fox had also suffered because of his lukewarm support for abortion rights. At the time he defined himself as a "supporter of Roe vs. Wade," yet pro-choice groups campaigned against him.

In 2000, NARAL’s campaign strategy mirrored that used in 1998. The group conducted a phone survey to identify likely supporters. If voters were deemed unquestionably pro-choice, they were mailed a GOTV postcard in the days closer to election day. The postcard pointed out that Greenleaf had "sponsored legislation to promote and fund abstinence-only sex education" and "supports bans on safe, common abortion procedures throughout pregnancy, even when a woman’s health is in danger." If the voters were deemed mildly pro-choice, then they received one or two get-out-the-vote (GOTV) phone calls. In addition, voter guides were sent with a list of national and state candidates endorsed by the group. After the initial phone survey, the group targeted 15,000 pro-choice or likely pro-choice voters in the district. According to the FEC, NARAL independent expenditures amounted to $44,692 (phone banks and list processing).

Another pro-choice group, Planned Parenthood, adopted a much more neutral and low-key approach. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania also sent out a voter guide endorsing Hoeffel but noting that both candidates were pro-choice. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) was also active in both 1998 and 2000. HRC started planning its 2000 campaign strategy at the conclusion of the 1998 campaign, working closely with its lobbyists to determine which members of Congress it should help reelect. According to HRC, Hoeffel had cosponsored the Employment Nondiscrimination Act and the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. In addition, Hoeffel voted to increase funding for housing opportunities for people with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and supported programs for the "prevention, research, treatment, and care" of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS.

Most of the HRC’s activities targeted its members. In 2000 HRC members “received a voter card paid by the nonprofit side of the organization and recorded phone calls paid by the PAC.” It is important to note that the voter guide included a separate sheet of paper devoted solely to Hoeffel’s “Record on Gay and Lesbian Issues” and emphasizing his HRC scorecard rating of 82 percent. In addition, HRC has a program called “Youth College,” in which twenty young people are given campaign training and then sent to selected campaigns as in-kind contributions. Hoeffel’s campaign benefited from this “donation.” According to FEC data, the group spent $1,709 in in-kind contributions in the period between August and October.

The National Education Association (NEA) Fund and its PAC, the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education, mailed three pieces advocating Hoeffel’s reelection. According to FEC data, the group paid $89,202 for the independent expenditure mailing and a total of $101,700 for polling and research in support of Hoeffel. The PAC mailing emphasized Hoeffel’s support for Head Start, teacher training, and smaller class sizes. The NEA piece endorsed Hoeffel but did not specifically ask voters to support him at the polls. Neither of these groups mentioned Greenleaf. Finally, the National Emergency Medicine PAC of the American College of Emergency Physicians spent $2,000 in in-kind contributions to support Hoeffel.

Among the senior citizen groups, the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) both sent issue advocacy mail. The AARP piece encouraged voters to log on to its website to get access to its voter guides. In addition, the AARP sent out a voter guide. Lastly, as in 1998, Handgun Control endorsed Hoeffel’s candidacy. The group sent a postcard asking voters to support Gore and Hoeffel.

Conclusion

Ultimately, political parties and groups protect incumbents fiercely, whereas challengers, especially those outside the partisan mainstream, have to hope for the best. The Democratic Party spent more money on behalf of Hoeffel than the Republican Party spent on behalf of Greenleaf in the 2000
race, whereas the Republican Party had been far more active on behalf of Fox in 1998 than the Democrats had been for Hoeffel that year. Interest groups were also more active in support of Hoeffel than Greenleaf in 2000. With the exception of the environmental groups, all the interest groups that actively supported Hoeffel in 1998 did so again in 2000. Given that the district has a majority of Republican voters, conservative economic and social groups were surprisingly absent that year. Part of the reason is that some conservative groups thought Greenleaf to be a weak challenger. By contrast, during his two years in office, Hoeffel developed a strong working relationship with environmental, pro-choice, and education groups who wanted him to return to Congress. The events in Pennsylvania’s Thirteenth District suggest that when a district is considered competitive, party and interest group activities are likely to contribute to the outcome.

What does an examination of the 1998 and 2000 races in this district tell us? First, candidates matter. The most powerful explanatory variable for differences in the campaigns is who the incumbent was and who the challenger was. The candidate’s party, reputation, real or perceived issue stances, and experience all played a role in how other political actors responded to him and, in turn, to the outcome of the elections. Second, the incumbent will always be favored over the challenger for attention from the political parties and the voters. Even in an extraordinarily competitive district, the incumbent will receive preferential treatment. Finally, interest groups are, as might be expected, loyal to their issue stances. Thus, groups who were active for Hoeffel in 1998 remained active for him in 2000, whereas groups who were active for the more conservative Fox in 1998 did not come to Greenleaf’s aid in 2000. Understanding political party and group behavior is important in an environment in which issue advocacy campaigns are unregulated and largely undisclosed.

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Case: Violating the "Appearance Standard": A Local Campaign Controversy

Edward M. Yager Jr.

It has often been stated that "in politics, appearance is reality." This wise observation succinctly captures the ethical dilemma shared by two political antagonists in the city of Bowling Green, Kentucky—Mayor Eldon Renaud and Commissioner Joe Denning. Although both public officials would eventually be cleared by the Bowling Green Ethics Board of any wrongdoing on conflict of interest charges, they were nevertheless subject to public reprimands for violating the so-called appearance standard when the Ethics Board applied that standard to events related to Commissioner Denning’s reelection campaign in November 1998.

In this case I examine the ethical and legal dispute between Mayor Eldon Renaud and Commissioner Joe Denning. The case spans a time frame of almost two years, from November 1998 through September 2000, and presents personalities and events not unfamiliar to other local jurisdictions across the nation. Other localities can learn from the experience of Bowling Green.

The Appearance Standard

Public officials are held to a higher standard of ethical conduct than ordinary citizens. Not only are they required to avoid using public office for private gain, but they are obligated to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing. The reasons should be obvious. The public views and evaluates public officials from a distance by reading newspapers, watching television, conversing with friends, and engaging in other information-gathering activities. Although a plethora of information is often available to the extent that it would overwhelm the average citizen, it is unlikely that most citizens will follow the news so closely that they will develop well-informed opinions