The Evolution of Presidential Campaign Marketing and the Voter Relationship

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Laidlaw Scholar Summer 2025

“I am President Obama and I approve this message.”

“I am Vice President Kamala Harris and I approve this message.”

“I am President Reagan and I approve this message.”

The list can go on and on, but these familiar words have become the hallmark of a modern presidential campaign and they symbolize much more than a stamp of approval. They are a declaration of political war, ruthless campaigning for one of the highest offices in the world. The art of the political campaign is more than putting posters in the town center, or putting commercials on TV, it is creating a persona that people *want* to vote for. Presenting a person they will champion behind. But how does a candidate become that person? How does a single human being project that persona across over three million square miles? How does a single human being convince hundreds of millions of Americans that they can lead this country? Since the inception of the United States, the presidential election has shaped political discourse, and the strategies candidates use and the persona they create to market themselves has continued to impact how voters engage, participate, and perceive accessibility to politics.

Although the marketing strategies employed by Thomas Jefferson are certainly different from those used by Donald Trump, from pamphlets to tweets, candidates have the same goal of persuasion but through radically different mediums. The real question is how have presidential campaign marketing strategies evolved, and how have they shaped voter participation, accessibility and political knowledge? Looking at the campaign strategies from three different elections in American history – the election of 1800, 1992, and 2020 – they have all uniquely engaged with the American public, expanding and restricting political access, while deepening engagement for some groups and leaving others excluded.

Politics is an elitist game, one that depends on the engagement of all Americans, but limits access. Even with the growth of the American electorate, political campaign strategies are veiled manipulation, designed to garner the votes of Americans by giving them pieces of the story. By having candidates play a character that seems the most appealing, one that knows all the right things to say and buttons to push. In order for politics to truly become more accessible, for all voters to have an understanding of political tactics employed by their leaders, then campaign strategies have to be decoded. Voters need to have access to their leaders, understand their intentions and be fully informed on who they vote for. By analyzing historical elections of the past, the evolution of campaign strategies can be traced and their impact on the voting population discovered.

Literature throughout history has tracked the evolution of American presidential campaign strategy, from its inception to the most recent 2024 election. In the 1800s, campaigns centered around newspapers, pamphlets, and speeches.[1] Newspapers were the main forum for political communication, providing a public, widespread, and intellectual platform for political parties to utilize. Political organizations used published word to legitimize themselves, and their candidates, creating a means of communication from the early elite political organizations to the American people.[2] Tracing the evolution, with the rise of mass media, campaign strategies morphed to adapt to new technologies and audiences. First it happened with radio in the 20s, and the incorporation of broadcasting into political life. Radio broadcasting allowed for candidates to reach more voters, increasing communication and engagement.[3] It also represented a turning point in campaign expenditures, which increased significantly to accommodate for the new medium of campaigning.[4] This most notably manifested in Franklin D. Rooselvelt's famous *Fireside Chats,* where he used this new forum to connect with the American people and lead them through one of the biggest crises in American history, contributing to his re-election three times over.[5]

Then, we see it in the rise of television programming, where people could not only hear their candidates but *see* them and their campaign messaging. Television advertising has continued to impact voter behavior, their political opinions and turnout.[6] For example, the first televised debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960 is known as the historical turning point in presidential campaigning because it was the first time that Americans across the country had the ability to see a presidential debate – significantly impacting the way candidates were perceived by the public.[7] Finally, we see campaigns evolve again into its most recent marketing form, social media. Literature has traced the personalization of campaigns through social media, as Spierings and Jacobs in their article, *Getting Personal? The Impact of Social Media on Preferential Voting* even breaks down social media into two different effects on preferential voting.[8] Claiming social media has both a direct effect on voting where the number of social media followers a candidate contributes to the number of preference votes they receive, and the interaction effect where a candidate's active usage of social media enhances the impact of their followers on their campaign.[9]

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[1] (Pasley, 2000 pg. 51)
[2] (Pasley, 2000 pg. 51)
[3] (Abrams & Settle, 1976 pg. 1101)
[4] (Abrams & Settle, 1976 pg. 1101)
[5] (Yu, 2005 pg. 90)
[6] (Brady, et. al, 2006 pg. 20)
[7] (Druckman, 2003 pg. 559)

From partisan newspapers in the 1800s to television debates in the 20th century and social media microtargeting in the 21st, presidential campaigns have consistently adapted to the dominant communication technologies of their eras. Scholars have shown how these innovations expand a candidate's reach and reshape voter perceptions, whether through Jefferson's pamphlets, Roosevelt's Fireside Chats, Kennedy's televised debates, or Trump's Twitter feed. Much of the research is focused on the mechanics of campaign communication, but less so on how these strategies shape the voters' relationship to politics itself. They influence not only voter turnout, but perceptions of political access, representation, and knowledge. This study builds on the existing scholarship by comparing three landmark elections (1800, 1992, and 2020) to examine how evolving campaign marketing strategies have not only persuaded voters, but also transformed the broader democratic experience. And by doing so, the political techniques employed by candidates can be de-mystified, as voters can have a full understanding of the historical background behind the actions of their leaders, and the democratic implications they have.

Within each case, the analysis focuses on three dimensions: the marketing strategies deployed by candidates, the extent of voter access and participation enabled by these strategies, and the impact on voter political knowledge and perception. By applying the same analytical lens across each case, the study highlights both continuities and transformations in how candidates construct persuasive messages and how voters encounter and respond to them. This comparative design not only underscores the historical evolution of campaign marketing but also illuminates the democratic consequences of these strategies across time.

As he cautioned in his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington, the development of political factions would lead to the " the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction."[10]

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[8] (Spierings & Jacobs, 2014 pg. 216)

[9] (Spierings & Jacobs, 2014 pg. 216)

[10](Washington, 1796)

Unfortunately for the inaugural president, factionalism in politics had begun to take root before he even left office in 1797.[11]

Within his own cabinet sat the key rivals who would shape early party conflict: John Adams, his Vice President; Thomas Jefferson, his Secretary of State; and Alexander Hamilton, his Secretary of the Treasury.[12] Adams and Hamilton were both Federalists—though often at odds with each other—united in their support for a strong central government, a broad interpretation of the Constitution, and close ties with Britain. Jefferson, by contrast, embodied the Democratic-Republican vision of limited federal power, strict constitutionalism, and states' rights.[13] In 1800, the Constitution was barely a decade old, and the rules of presidential elections looked very different. Electors cast two votes without distinguishing between President and Vice President, meaning the runner-up automatically became Vice President. Participation was restricted largely to white, landowning men, and formal campaigning had little precedent.[14] Against this backdrop, the Election of 1800 emerged as both a partisan struggle and a crucial test of the Great American Experiment.

The two leading candidates were the incumbent president, John Adams and former Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Former friends turned rivals, Adams and Jefferson relied on remarkably similar campaign tactics.[15] There was less of a focus on building a personal brand, instead both men worked to attack the opposition, and make themselves the most appealing to the American people. Both emphasized their revolutionary credentials: Jefferson as author of the Declaration and ambassador to France, who would restore revolutionary principles; and Adams as Washington's vice president and the nation's sitting president, aiming to keep America stable. Both highly impressive, these men worked to market their intellectual, political and moral achievements — showcasing how dedicated to American ideals and the preservation of the new country they were. But with that came negative campaigning, each man and their respective parties doing their best to smear the opposing candidate. Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans labeled Adams not as a defender of American stability but as a monarchist, elitist and unfit temperamental leader.[16] In return, Adams cast Jefferson as an atheist,

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[11] (Larson, 2008, pg. 18)
[12] (Larson, 2008, pg. 18)
[13] (Larson, 2008, pg. 18)
[14] (Lepore, 2007)
[15] (Lepore, 2007)
[16] (Lepore, 2007)

French sympathist, and hypocrite. But how did they convince the American people of this? How did they effectively employ negative campaigning tactics in the early 1800s?

Well unlike the campaigns of today, there were no presidential debates, or many speeches for the candidates to broadcast their platforms. In 1800, it was viewed as "tacky" or baseless for a presidential candidate to advertise themselves across the country.[17] With over two hundred and fifty in circulation, newspapers were how Americans decided who to vote for.[18] Jefferson himself said "the engine [of the election] is the press,"[19] but he made it clear that when his supporters wrote on his behalf, that his name should not "be connected with the business." Even with more focus on negative campaigning, the careful choice to avoid engaging in public discourse by both candidates highlights early efforts to manage their political branding.

Not too different from today, news sources tended to be partisan, favoring one candidate over another. *The Aurora,* a Pennsylvania newspaper, was a vocal supporter of Jefferson, publishing works on behalf of the Democratic-Republican candidate.[20] The October 14, 1800 edition of *The Aurora,* had published two parallel works, "Things As They Have Been [under Adams]" and "Things As They Will Be [if Jefferson is elected]."[21] The former characterized the Adams presidency as a "reign of terror,"[22] causing the "*Nation*… [to be] divided without a cause"[23] with complete disregard to the principles of the American Revolution. [24] The author continues this narrative of a "monarchial" Adams, consolidating power for his own right while disregarding the foundational ideals he swore to protect. Marketing John Adams as someone who is seemingly unfit to be the President of the United States. On the other hand, "Things As They Will Be" places Thomas Jefferson as the best man for the job. Under Jefferson, the United States will be "at peace with the world and united in itself,"[25]and "Principles of the *Revolution* [would be] restored."[26] The Aurora painted Adams as a monarch and betrayer of revolutionary principles, while casting Jefferson as the restorer of liberty.

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[17] (Lepore, 2007)
[18] (Lepore, 2007)
[19] (Lepore, 2007)
[20] (Lepore, 2007)
[21] (Lepore, 2007)
[22] (Lepore, 2007)
[23] (Lepore, 2007)
[24] (Lepore, 2007)
[25] (Lepore, 2007)
[26] (Lepore, 2007)

Meanwhile the *Philadelphia,* a Federalist paper, offered their own rhetoric later that week in support of President John Adams. It asks for every American to ask, would they rather a president, who has an "allegiance to God – and [is] a religious president" like Adams or "impiously declare for JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!"[27] They attacked Jefferson as a slaveholding hypocrite, a radical Francophile, and above all a man of questionable faith. For Federalists, undermining Jefferson's religiosity was a central tactic: if the United States was to be "one nation under God," how could it be led by someone accused of atheism? The allegations were never confirmed, but questions of Thomas Jefferson's character floated about Early America, and the campaigning of John Adams certainly targeted it. The *Philadelphia* framed Jefferson as a godless radical who would bring French-style chaos to America. This is an attempt at early microtargeting, as the Adams campaign was strategizing to appeal to a religious electorate, one that couldn't stand an atheist in office.

With more publications circulating, and after a year of campaigning, the results were in. The election ended in a groundbreaking tie not between the two leading candidates, but 73 electoral votes for Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr.[28] Before the twelfth amendment, the president was the elector with the leading number of votes, and the vice president the runner up. The tie was a product of miscommunication, and the failed execution of the Democratic-Republican's plan to ensure Jefferson won the election, and have Burr be purposefully a single vote behind Jefferson to be chosen for the vice presidency.[29] Consequently, this led to a tie-breaking vote in the House of Representatives crowning Jefferson as the third President of the United States and the establishment of the twelfth amendment, requiring electors to cast separate votes for President and Vice President, thus eliminating future tie scenarios like 1800.[30]

But what did this mean for voters? How did this shape the democratic experience in growing America? The leading marketing strategy used by both candidates was certainly the written press, using newspapers and pamphlets penned by supporters of the candidates. They used the widespread platform to advocate for their party, while bashing the opposing party. But even with the widespread access to campaign material, not everyone had access to their candidates. Most couldn't even vote. In many states, legislatures chose electors directly, and fewer than 20% of eligible white men participated. Women and most Black Americans were excluded entirely, save for rare exceptions like New Jersey. The result of this election was undeniably a mess, with a tied vote in a failed attempt to game the system, the Election of 1800 only exposed the vulnerabilities of infant America. The political response? To make elections more elite, to concentrate the political power in the electoral college, not the popular vote. To ensure restriction of any other group besides the eligible white men. By making politics more distanced from the American people, and it defined early on what the relationship between politicians and voters will be. The election of 1800 may have expanded the *reach* of campaign marketing, but narrowed the *reach of democracy* itself.

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[27] (Lepore, 2007)
[28] (Larson, 2008, pg. 243)
[29] (Larson, 2008, pg. 243)
[30] (Larson, 2008, pg. 268-69)

This paradox defined the voter–politician relationship in the early republic. Presidents were framed not as accessible representatives but as almost untouchable figures—intellectual, virtuous, and larger-than-life heirs to the Revolution. Newspapers carried the election and the campaign tactics to more readers than ever, yet only a *fraction* of Americans had the right to vote, and those who could participate were overwhelmingly elite, literate, and landowning men. The Election of 1800 solidified the use of negative campaigning, partisan media, and fear-based appeals as permanent features of American politics. Yet its legacy was double-edged: the growth of campaign marketing coincided with the entrenchment of an elite, exclusionary democracy.

Fast forward almost two centuries later, the Cold War was coming to a close, America had fallen into a prolonged economic recession, and the election of 1992 had just begun. Unemployment reached 9.8% in August of 1992, and 43% of the electorate claimed the failing economy was the most important issue in the presidential election cycle.[31] And who did they blame? Incumbent President George H.W. Bush – as he famously proclaimed during his 1988 campaign for president, "read my lips, no new taxes," but in his time in the White House he had done just the opposite.[32] Voters felt his economic stances were contradictory throughout his term, both proclaiming the stability of the economy, as well as expressing serious concern about

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[31] (Peter Louis Goldman et al., 1994, pg. 67)

[32] (Rothman, 2018)

America's economic state.[33] The American people were dissatisfied with Bush, and looking for a change of pace. That change manifested in the rise of democratic candidate, Bill Clinton. The governor of Arkansas was promoting himself as a "new kind of democrat,"[34] one that was relatively moderate on social and economic issues – and the perfect candidate to get America out of the rut Bush had driven them into.

The 90s media landscape was certainly different than that of the early 19th century, with the written press, radio, and television.[35] Candidates took advantage of the new mediums, using cable to run advertisements, appearing on talk shows, recorded interviews, and other digital media to actively engage with the electorate. Studies have shown that political advertising via cable ads impact the engagement and political knowledge of voters.[36] Voters who recall these ads retain the candidates positions on critical issues, and the story they are marketing.[37] Both Bush and Clinton ran almost a dozen different ads each during the campaign cycle, consistently marketing their political brand directly to the American people.

Bill Clinton's brand was being a young, relatable governor who working families could not only understand but actively root for. Clinton grew up low-income in the racially segregated south. Living with his grandparents, he got the opportunity to meet John F. Kennedy as a young adult, and decided he wanted to be in politics.[38] That he wanted to make a difference, so in a classic rags-to-riches story, Clinton worked hard to gain admission to Georgetown, Oxford and later Yale Law School and he then used that education to give back to his community by going into public service.[39] This story became the backbone of the Clinton campaign, and the brand they built. His campaign ads were designed to market this persona, painting him to be relatable, and charismatic – someone who could understand the plight of the forgotten middle class, unlike Bush.[40] Most of the ads featured Clinton himself, as though he was talking directly to you,[41] or he used the testimony of other middle class workers wronged by the careless economic policies of Bush.[42] Clinton's campaign capitalized on his underdog status, using his humble beginnings and ivy-league education to impress voters across the country.[43] They marketed Clinton as the personification of the *American Dream*, who was "for the people, for a change!"[44]

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[33] (Peter Louis Goldman et al., 1994, pg. 68)
[34] (Peter Louis Goldman et al., 1994, pg. 68)
[35] (Peter Louis Goldman et al., 1994, pg. 68)
[36] (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996, pg.172)
[37] (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996, pg.172)
[38] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 14-17)
[39] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 14-17)
[40] (*The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1992 - Leaders 2*, 2016)
[41] (*The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1992 - Leaders 2*, 2016)
[42] (*The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1992 - Leaders 2*, 2016)

Clinton's campaign tactics went beyond television advertising, from playing *Heartbreak High* on a saxophone on late night television, to the rebranding of his wife Hillary Clinton.[45] By Clinton's second gubernatorial campaign, Hillary Clinton had changed her look from an academic with glasses and brown hair, to a more sophisticated look fitting of a first lady.[46] She dyed her hair blonde, lost the glasses, completely changed her style and even takes the Clinton name to appease critics.[47] Together Bill and Hillary Clinton were marketed as the perfect couple to take the White House, the model of a real American marriage.

George H.W. Bush certainly had a different approach than Clinton, hoping to win based on the legitimacy of his current presidency.[48] In March of 1991, Bush had an outstanding approval rating of 89% across the country, undoubtedly bolstered by his handling of the Gulf War.[49] By November the novelty of his military accomplishments had worn off and the people's opinion of Bush had faltered – only 49% approved his presidency the past four years, and only 18% approved how he handled the economy.[50] Bush's campaign ads aimed at highlighting his military service, his Gulf War successes, and his economic policies.[51] The ads were less personalized than Clinton's, opting for voiceovers and graphics rather than testimonials and interviews.

Clinton's negative campaigning towards Bush was centered around his failures as president, directly highlighting how he has abandoned the working class, and mishandled the economy earning him the label of elitist.[52] While the negative campaign against Clinton was a bit more complex, as it wasn't primarily driven by his opposing candidate. Bush's campaign strategy in 1988 was crafted by his campaign manager, Lee Atwater, a firm believer in ruthless politics and attack strategies.[53] Bush didn't believe in negative campaign strategies, preferring a candidate's political agenda and experience to speak for themselves.[54] Atwater passed in 1991, leaving Bush vulnerable to Clinton's attacks and aggressive political branding.[55]

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[43] (*The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1992 - Leaders 2*, 2016)
[44] (*The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1992 - Leaders 2*, 2016)
[45] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 11)
[46](Serraine, 2015, pg. 11)
[47] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 11)
[48] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 1)
[49] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 1)
[50] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 1)
[51] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 1)
[52] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 3)
[53] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 4)

This didn't mean there wasn't *any* negative press against Bill Clinton, as he had three major scandals during the 1992 campaign cycle. The first being multiple extra-martial affair allegations, threatening the perfect "American marriage" Hillary and Bill Clinton had built.[56] Most notably, a woman named Gennifer Flowers claimed to have a twelve year relationship with Bill Clinton, producing taped conversations of the two of them.[57] The Clintons respond by going on *60 Minutes* to dispel all of the rumors. Clinton with an arm wrapped around his wife in support, admitted to knowing Gennifer as a political acquaintance and nothing more.[58] The two explained how they were sympathetic to all the women involved, feeling horrible they had gotten wrapped up in political attacks.[59] Not too long after, Clinton is labeled a draft dodger after a letter to a Colonel is leaked to the press, where Clinton gives his gratitude for "saving" him from the draft.[60] Clinton quickly provides an explanation, saying he wasn't dodging the draft, his academic pursuits just exempted him from service.[61] But the scandals didn't end there, with another about how Clinton once smoked marijuana at Oxford, and while it didn't stain his reputation like the other two — 82% of voters claiming political issues like the recession were more important — it once again proved Clinton's resilience.[62] The campaign persisted, branding Clinton as the "Comeback Kid," a man perceived as admirable and accessible by America because he not only overcame scandal, he used it to fuel his campaign.[63] With little negative campaigning done by Bush himself, Clinton was able to rebrand scandal and use it to market himself and launch his campaign.

The opposing personas of Bill Clinton and George Bush came to head in a televised presidential debate, where a woman in the audience asked the candidates about their relationship to the national debt, the recession and the current economic state of the country.[64] While she asked, Bush was seen checking his watch, appearing to be disengaged from the question. Bush then had to answer first, even asking her for clarification.[65] With already low numbers in the polls, America didn't look upon Bush favorably for his confusion as it only confirmed their elitist, out-of-touch perception. Clinton on the other hand, answered easily when asked, using personal experience, and describing the impact the economy has had on his constituents in Arkansas.[66] This pivotal moment only underscored the Clinton persona of relatability and accessibility, in counter to the arrogant, weak perception of incumbent Bush.

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[54] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 4)
[55] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 5)
[56] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 12)
[57] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 12)
[58] (Horyn, 1992)
[59] (Horyn, 1992)
[60] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 13)
[61] (Ifill, 1992)
[62] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 14)
[63] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 14)
[64] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 9)

Scholar —-- Serraine once said "Bill Clinton didn't win the election as much as Bush *lost* the election." But the real question is how? In a campaign riddled with scandal, how did Clinton manage to come out on top? How did he convince millions of voters? The simple answer is, Clinton brought a lot of people to the polls. The election saw a record turnout rate of 61% of the eligible electorate, with nearly a 10% increase in the 18-25 demographic, and some increases amongst women, and black people.[67] Voter participation increased in this election, in the wake of new marketing strategies, and the capitalization on persona politics. Clinton presented himself as the everyone man — a struggle story that middle-class America can relate too, someone who worked hard for the American dream. Even his mistakes seemed to work in his favor, humanizing him, showcasing Clinton's resilience and dedication. Compared to Bush, the man who raised taxes, poorly handled the economy, and allowed the rich to benefit. Bush did what voters expect out of politicians, lie, and he was part of the reason they wanted someone new, even if it was imperfect Clinton.

What does this election tell us about marketing strategies and voter–politician relationships? Between the tactful television appearances, and construction of the candidate's political branding, the 1992 campaign was seemingly designed to be accessible. Clinton took advantage of advertisements and television networking to showcase his story, and engage voters from all demographics - especially the typically neglected youth. Rhetoric like "For the people, for a change" and "man from Hope"[68] were created to be simple, effectively spreading the desired messages. But there is an argument to be made that under the guise of accessibility, candidates like Clinton are able to focus the campaign on their personas, rather than core political issues. That despite the democratic increase of the electorate is countered by the pointed campaign strategies that keep elections elite and restricted. From the curated style of Hillary Clinton, to the saxophone stint, Bill Clinton used performative politics to cloud the narrative, masking his scandals and comparative inexperience with charisma. The numbers show that political participation certainly rose, but what kind of participation? Was it informed or branded? The 1992 election expanded access to politics by drawing more voters into the process, but it also entrenched a new kind of politics—one where personality and branding eclipsed substance. This is only highlighted by the stark contrast between Clinton's performative accessibility and Bush's dedication to legitimacy and rigid politics. This shift redefined the relationship between voters and candidates, making campaigns feel more personal, but also more performative.

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[65] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 9)

[66] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 9)

[67] (Bureau, 1993)

[68] (Serraine, 2015, pg. 13)

If the 1992 election marked the rise of candidate-as-brand, the 2020 election demonstrated how branding, amplified through social media and crisis politics, could both mobilize and polarize the electorate. The year 2020 has become synonymous with COVID-19 pandemic, every aspect of life being influenced by the spread of the virus across the globe — including presidential campaigning. The Trump administration's management of the crisis was controversial, and it impacted public perception and political dynamics.[69] COVID-19 forced its way not only into American public life, but into the political discourse across America and the 2020 presidential election, forcing candidates to adapt their campaign strategies.[70] The combination of mass social media and the once in a lifetime global pandemic provided the circumstances for a one-of-kind election cycle. Unlike past elections where television or print dominated, by 2020 social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube had become the central stage for political communication.[71] Not only did candidates use these tools to reach voters directly, but algorithms amplified the most emotional and polarizing content—reshaping how Americans consumed politics. In many ways, the election was less about campaign stops or debates than about viral clips, trending hashtags, and online engagement.

With social interactions limited to a six foot distance, the battleground of the election was the media. People were stuck inside their homes, with only their various sources of media to keep them abreast of the political situation in America. Since the 2016 election, Trump has had the unique ability to push all other news off the front page, dominating coverage by any means possible to make the opponent look obsolete.[72] In 2016 the amount of free press his campaign got was worth over six billion dollars.[73] Negative coverage even seemed to roll off his back, as he was able to successfully disregard it as "fake news."[74] So how did Trump attempt to replicate this in the 2020 election? He treats politics, and campaigning like reality TV.[75] The news isn't as riveting as the gossip column, instead of statistics and expert testimony, people want flashy headlines and soundbites and Donald Trump certainly gave them that.[76] Trump used his status as the incumbent, unrivaled republican candidate to continue to dominate the media as he had done in the election prior.[77] Even during COVID, where public gatherings were limited, Trump used daily press conferences to keep media attention, branding himself as being in control and would change the narrative by creating crazy, and false coverage on the pandemic.[78]

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[69] (Gregory, 2020, pg. 5)
[70] (Gregory, 2020, pg. 4)
[71] (Gregory, 2020, pg. 4)

Twitter, once thought to be exclusively the home of celebrity feuds and scandal, became the prime source of political information in the 2020 election. Donald Trump continued the trend from his first term, utilizing the platform to reach millions without a press filter.[79] Between June of 2020 and Election day, Trump tweeted almost 6,000 times, averaging 44 tweets per day in September alone.[80] He used it as an unfiltered way to directly attack reporters and news sources, labeling any negative press as "fake news."[81] Donald Trump's strategic objective was to undermine the public's trust of news sources, a major check on government power, regardless of whether it was the truth.[82] Throughout the election cycle he continued to tweet incorrect information, from claims the democrats were trying to "steal" the election,[83] to the declaration that he had won the election when he had already lost the electoral college.[84] Trump also relentlessly used twitter to publicize his negative campaign against Joe Biden, most notably calling him "Sleepy Joe."[85] By Election Day, Trump had made a total of 25,000 false claims, and when he was temporarily banned off Twitter and other forms of social media, online misinformation dropped by 73%.[86] By using misinformation as a campaign tactic, voters' understanding of the election and government institutions was distorted. But as one columnist put it, journalists had never really figured out how to properly market Donald Trump for "the good of citizens."[87] How to balance the marketability and genuine intrigue of Trump, with warnings of the true political ramifications of his actions, and because of this he was able to "play the media like a puppet."[88]

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[72] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 2-3)
[73] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 2-3)
[74] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 2-3)
[75] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 2-3)
[76] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 2-3)
[77] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 2-3)
[78] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 3-4)
[79] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 4)
[80] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 4)
[81] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 4)
[82] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 4)
[83] (*Trump Falsely Claims He Won the Election; Twitter Flags the Tweet*, 2020)
[84] (*Trump Falsely Claims He Won the Election; Twitter Flags the Tweet*, 2020)
[85] (*Trump Falsely Claims He Won the Election; Twitter Flags the Tweet*, 2020)

Though, the influence of social media in 2020 extended beyond Trump's tweets. Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and meme pages became critical tools for spreading both campaign messaging and misinformation. [89] Studies later showed that a handful of viral stories—many false—shaped public perceptions of the pandemic, mail-in ballots, and election legitimacy.[90] Unlike traditional campaign ads, this content spread organically, often faster than fact-checkers could respond. Both campaigns understood that controlling the online narrative was just as important as winning swing states.

Former Vice President and leading Democratic candidate, Joe Biden's prime campaign strategy was to navigate the 2020 election cycle as the complete opposite of his republican adversary. Biden's campaign was designed to reassure the American public, a deliberate counter-brand to Trump's chaos, which proved effective in a crisis-defined race. Ari Fleischer, George W. Bush's press secretary, argued that "one of the most effective weapons against Trump is Trump himself."[91] Fleischer claimed the best strategy was to let Trump fail, and make Biden as uncontroversial and reliable as possible.[92] And it worked, because Biden was leading in the polls, largely because Donald Trump's marketing strategy of misinformation only worked to his opponents benefit.[93] Biden's campaign leaned on social media less for viral confrontation and more for mobilization and fundraising. This allowed for Biden to take advantage of virtual events, grassroots Zoom calls, and targeted Facebook ads helped him reach voters while maintaining the image of stability and responsibility during a pandemic.[94] Like "A Fabulous Evening with Vice President Biden," where he raised over a million dollars for his campaign in one night.[95] Whereas Trump's approach thrived on chaos using social media as a polarizer, Biden's digital presence was quieter but strategically curated, aiming to reassure and mobilize voters rather than dominate headlines.

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[86] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 8)
[87] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 5)
[88] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 5)
[89] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 5)
[90] (Hershey, 2021, pg. 5)
[91] (Khalid, 2020)
[92] (Khalid, 2020)
[93] (Milligan, 2020)
[94] (Milligan, 2020)

Donald Trump was the incumbent president, with a massive following and media presence, but when November 7th, 2020 came, they announced that Joe Biden had become the 46th president of the United States. Why? Many attribute it to Trump's mishandling of the global pandemic, Biden's lowkey campaign strategy, his moderate politics, and his funding.[96] The 2020 election had the highest presidential election turnout since 1900, with almost 160 million voters, or 67% of the eligible voting population.[97] Across minority groups and younger generations, voter participation increased since 2016.[98] The 2020 election was also a turning point in political communication, with both candidates using new mediums to connect with all different types of demographics. But how these media forms were used also informed the voter-politician relationship, and the continuous spread of misinformation and "fake news" narratives only deepened voters' mistrust in institutions. Social media served as both a mobilization tool and exacerbator of polarization. Despite having record-high participation, the marketing strategies of candidates also created unprecedented distrust in politics. The 2020 election revealed how digital politics and crisis reshape not just campaign strategies, but the relationship between voters and information. Campaign marketing was less about persuasion than about mobilization, legitimacy battles, and controlling the narrative. Biden's cautious, steady branding succeeded in a pandemic-defined race, but Trump's combative, digital-first style left a lasting imprint on American politics. Social media did not just mediate the election, it became the election, driving record turnout while also deepening polarization and mistrust. The battle for engagement is also being a battle over truth itself.

While separated by centuries, the elections of 1800, 1992, and 2020 reveal both continuity and change in the strategies campaigns used to market candidates and the ways these strategies shaped voter engagement. Walter Lippmann famously defines the through-line in his 1922, *Public Opinion.* He argued that people don't interact with reality, instead people respond to a pseudo-environment, one that simplifies reality through symbols, identifiable stereotypes and selective information.[99] People opt for this simplified environment because reality is too complex, and disseminators of information (elites, media and political organizations) use that to their advantage in order to shape what information people have access to.[100] Applying this to politics, as previously stated, it is an elitist game where the people with the most information have the most power. The average person typically views politics and the mechanics of campaigns as too complex, accepting the strategies employed by the candidates and enjoying the simplicity of the pseudo-environment. Public opinion is fragile, guided by selective media and institutions instead of direct, reasoned judgement – which make campaigns less of a game of facts and rather who can reshape the public's pseudo-environment most effectively.

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[95] (Milligan, 2020)
[96] (Zurcher, 2020)
[97] (Bureau, 2020)
[98] (Bureau, 2020)

Looking through the three campaigns, each attempted to construct this environment differently with respect to the available electorate or public, the medium of campaigning and the external crises of the era. The Election of 1800 famously used partisan print and elite networks to shape public opinion. With a limited electorate, the usage of pamphlets, newspapers, and word of mouth kept the public sphere both narrow and elite. Jefferson and Adams used the platform to form political personas for themselves and their opponent. Stereotypes were used as negative campaign techniques, allowing the public to have an identifiable negative association with a candidate. Jefferson was labeled a francophile and an anarchist, while Adams earned the badge of monarchist and English-sympathizer, and using their established networks each worked to spread this stereotype to influence the public opinion of early America. Because information flows were narrow and elite-dominated, campaigns deepened engagement for those within partisan networks while excluding those not reached by those networks or who lacked franchise rights. Which is exactly the dynamic Lippmann predicted when elites and media curate the images the public uses to form opinions.[101]

The Election of 1992 isn't much of a deviation, using television to publicize the pseudo-environment the candidates wanted the electorate to engage with, with their crafted political personas, and strategic appeals to contemporary American anxieties. The media format shifts from the press to television, streaming debates, townhalls, and commercials in order to construct the story each candidate wanted to promote. Clinton shined in this election because he adapted to Lippman's ideology, taking advantage of the advancements in media to carefully manage his image, and message to voters. His ability to dominate the pseudo-environment is what sustained him throughout the election, allowing him to flip scandal into a comeback. 1992 shows how modern mass media lets campaigns produce vivid pseudo-environments, soundbites, TV moments, and managed appearances become the stock images citizens use to judge candidates. This new form of access certainly opened the electorate, grabbing the attention of voters not previously interested in civic participation, but it does not mitigate the impact of political manipulation and the elitist usage of pseudo-environments to influence voters.

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[99] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 1)
[100] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 1)
[101] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 23)

Finally, the election of 2020 only continues the trend as Lippmann predicted. 2020 saw the usage of mass media, similarly to 1992, and the use of digital platforms to target specific communities, and appear more accessible to voters. Biden used large scale coalition building, townhalls, zoom meetings and simple campaign tactics to construct his desired pseudo-environment. While Trump used rallies, social media, press, and the partisan divisions deep within the American system. Importantly, campaigns didn't just transmit facts—they curated competing pseudo-environments to distinct audiences, deepening engagement among some demographic clusters while leaving others excluded due to lack of access or relatability. 2020 is practically a case study in Lippmann's worry about manufactured consent, where campaigns create conflicting pseudo-environments for different publics.[102] When both candidates are targeting almost completely different electorates, political access becomes exclusive. This both broadened mobilization for targeted constituencies and deepened exclusionary effects for those outside the campaigns' prioritized networks.

All three campaigns follow the fundamental Lippiannian ideology, that people will shape symbolic pseudo-environements in order to curate the opinion of the public.[103] Albeit, the medium evolved over time, from pamphlets to social networks but the relationship between those who control the media and the public who consumes it persists. And there is a constant underlying tension between the expansion and restriction of access. Campaigns themselves expand political access, and throughout American history the electorate has surely expanded, but that expansion is still selective. Each of these campaigns targeted certain demographics, restricting access for the other less prioritized groups (marginalized communities, or those outside the media bubble). This is what keeps campaigns elite, and out of the public's reach. Lippman explains the phenomenon in which politicians concentrate their resources into certain groups of people, into a pseudo-environment that changes their behavior.[104] Campaigns fundamentally are not about accessibility, or expanding political knowledge, they are about the manipulation of the available electorate and targeting the groups that will secure a win come November. This is what causes the disparity in political participation amongst different members of society, campaigns deepen engagement for some, and exclude others. Whether through elite patronage, TV storytelling and candidate persona, or micro-targeting and platform dynamics, campaigns increasingly specialize how they communicate. Lippmann anticipated this division and the role of intermediaries in shaping who gets a coherent political image.[105] That specialization deepens engagement for groups who receive tailored, repeated, and credible images while leaving others with weak or contradictory images—and thus less effective political participation. Lippman's *Public Opinion* lays the foundation for campaign science, the success of politicians relying not on rational argumentation, rather manipulating the public's perception.[106] Which is why these three campaigns focus so heavily on persona cultivation, media control, and targeted messaging. It is also why campaigns can both democratize politics, they can also institutionalize inequalities of attention. It restricts who is granted an invitation to join political conversations, and whose voices are actually heard.

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[102] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 15)
[103] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 1)

The question the American electorate is left with, is will there ever be change? Will we always be subject to political manipulation? Will over 200 years of precedent continue to influence modern campaigning techniques? The answer is unclear, the foundation and techniques of political campaigning are embedded into the American system, we as voters almost expect it. It is hard to say that in the next coming elections, politicians will suddenly become transparent with their electorates, and not attempt to create these pseudo-environments. It is extremely likely that the next presidential election will be the same, more politicians trying to promote their images, creating environments. The real question we should be asking is what the next medium of campaigning will be? Will it continue to be social media? Will we soon see the rise of another form of technology that once again alters campaigning? If Lippmann was right, the real evolution of campaigns may not lie in their technology but in our capacity to see through it. The challenge for the next century is whether citizens can reclaim the public sphere from the pseudo-environments that have long defined it.

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[104] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 1)
[105] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 6)
[106] (Lippmann, 1922, Chapter 28)

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