The Art of Elections

Introduction

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How do the arts and popular culture shape political campaigns and electoral politics? How do candidates engage aesthetic experiences and prompt voters to respond emotionally as well as rationally to their appeals? How have the various ways candidates use the arts and popular culture changed over time? What art forms and cultural symbols have lasting appeal in elections, and which have waxed and waned, and what does this tell us about the permanent and less permanent aspects of political and social orders? Do the arts and popular culture contribute to creating electoral processes that are more inclusive and representative, or less so? Does the art of elections merely manipulate voters or can it also support a more democratic politics?

In addressing these questions, the following essays illustrate the value of the arts and popular culture for understanding electoral politics. Contributors define the arts broadly to include many aspects of popular culture, including advertisements, comedy shows, film, music, posters, digital story-telling, television, theater, and videos. With this broad definition of the arts, we resist the traditional distinction between high culture and so-called low or popular culture (Love and Mattern 2013). According to Stuart Hall, this distinction presumes that "culture" is "'the best that has been thought and said' in a society. It is the sum of the great ideas as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music, and philosophy—the 'high culture' of an age" (Hall 2013, xvii). By this definition, classical music performed by professional musicians in concert halls and famous portraits hung on museum walls are high art; campaign theme songs sung by supporters at conventions and rallies and campaign posters plastered on billboards are low art. Those who distinguish between high culture and popular culture often also presume that the arts have meaning and value largely because they are relatively autonomous from popular influences, or that "a cultural practice belongs to 'popular' culture only in contrast to the cultural practices favored by a distinct, more privileged class" (Gracyk 2001, 18).

Like Hall, many scholars today argue that the arts should be understood instead as including "the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of 'ordinary people'—what is called the 'mass culture' or the 'popular culture' of an age" (Hall 2013, xvii-xviii). A further distinction can be drawn between popular culture and mass art; popular culture becomes mass art when it is mechanically produced, widely circulated, and easily accessed economically and cognitively. As a form of popular culture, "mass art must employ a familiar vernacular code" (Gracyk 2001, 18). Mass audiences also need to possess the requisite "cultural capital" so that the meaning of popular art works can be readily understood. This need for a shared symbolic order that can guide popular perceptions extends to the mass art of elections and the voting public who experience it.

The aesthetic appeals of campaign art discussed in these essays are non-literal (comedy and satire), non-verbal (images and songs), extra-rational (myth and symbol), context-specific (collective and participatory), and even subconscious (subliminal and visceral). Through such appeals, the art of elections communicates candidates' messages to potential voters and often conveys meanings without and beyond words. Yet the art of elections involves more than mere entertainment for mass consumption and voter manipulation. The art of elections also creates, expresses, and reflects the collective identities of democratic publics. Like the arts and popular culture more generally, campaign art can reinforce conformity to dominant tropes, resist established norms, or do both simultaneously. In the process, the art of elections can catalyze the imagination, shape desires and feelings, integrate self and society, produce new political symbols, and sustain a sense of community. The following essays show that these various functions make the arts and popular culture powerful tools for understanding how political candidates pursue democratic and undemocratic causes.

We begin with Paul A. Passavant's, "Political Subjectivity and Presidential Campaign Ads," which examines the relationship between symbolic orders, political subjectivity, and campaign advertising. Passavant argues that the symbolic order of the 1960s with its normative commitment to civil rights has been gradually displaced and weakened in American politics, beginning with the Nixon campaign of 1968. This ongoing process has produced the two dominant modes of political subjectivity that exist today: "whatever being" and its *doppelgänger*, "expressive resentment." Joe McGinniss's 1969 bestseller, *The Selling of the President*, famously announced the role of media manipulation in creating the new symbolic

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order of "communicative capitalism." It is an order in which law and truth are "up for grabs." Passavant analyses will.i.am's "Yes, We Can" and the Swift Boater ads as respective examples "whatever being" and "expressive resentment." He concludes that this new symbolic order and its political subjects even lack "symbolic efficiency," a core value of the capitalist ethos that sustains them. Today online as well as television campaign spin has largely displaced the political subjects, who once could render democratic judgments about political issues.

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"Elections as Theater" by Mark Chou, Roland Bleiker, and Nilanjana Premaratna follows with the argument that "electoral theater" is far more than a metaphor for campaign processes. Theatrical techniques, such as casting, staging, stylizing, and scripting, shape candidates' performances and audiences' perceptions. For this reason, they urge political scientists to consider seriously aesthetic aspects of the electoral dramas in which candidates and citizens interact. They support their argument with brief examples from elections in India and the Philippines, and then focus on a 2015 British play, James Graham's *The Vote.* The play, which was performed in real-time for stage and screen, represents the close of voting at a polling place in London where an elderly voter encounters a comedy of errors involving electoral fraud. The play asks its audience — the voters— to consider whether or not their votes really matter. By raising this question in real-time, *The Vote* also asks voters whether the election results now playing out on television news differ in any meaningful way from its theatrical performance. Chou, Bleiker, and Premaratna conclude that aesthetic experiences, such as *The Vote,* offer citizens the opportunity to think critically about campaigns as performances and their own roles as actors, audiences, and, most important, voters.

In "The Smugglers: The Rationality of Political Satire in the 2014 Elections," Jamie Warner urges political scientists also to give comedy shows the "serious" consideration they deserve in the study of elections. She analyzes how Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert smuggle rationality into their satiric portrayals of electoral politics and, in the process, counter what Jürgen Habermas describes as a refeudalized public sphere. According to Habermas, refeudalized citizens are no longer expected to engage in reasoned discourse; they are regarded instead as passive audiences for political spectacles created by a ruling elite. For Warner, the blurring of boundaries between public/private, information/entertainment, and serious/non-serious commentary creates a media environment today that seems post-modern but is more appropriately characterized as (re)feudal. Through satiric portrayals of campaign ads, election coverage, political candidates and their constituents, Stewart and Colbert—like Habermas, with whom they initially seem to share very little—express the continued value of modern ideals of "truth," "rationality," and "accountability" for democratic politics. The popularity of their shows also affirms the continuing capacity of the voting public to "get the joke," or to know the difference between democracy and spectacle.

Like comedy shows, campaign theme songs provide an alternative medium for candidates wanting to convey their message to voters. In "'I Won't Back Down,' or Will I?: The Law and Politics Surrounding Presidential Candidates' Unauthorized Use of Copyrighted Songs," Eric T. Kasper and Benjamin S. Schoening trace how the use of campaign theme songs aligns with the history of suffrage expansion, copyright laws, and technological innovations. Contemporary campaigns frequently "borrow" preexisting pop/rock songs, often without the artists' permission. Kasper and Schoening provide numerous examples of candidates' unauthorized use of songs, for example George W. Bush who used "I Won't Back Down" in 2000 received a cease and desist letter from Tom Petty; Jackson Browne sued John McCain for a 2008 campaign ad that used "Running on Empty"; and Neil Young has already objected to Donald Trump announcing his 2016 candidacy with "Rockin' in the Free World." According to Kasper and Schoening, copyright infringements occur more frequently with Republican than Democratic candidates, partly because the GOP needs popular songs to appeal to mainstream voters. Because copyright violations can be costly for campaigns by triggering negative publicity, sending ambiguous confused messages, and alienating potential voters, Kasper and Schoening conclude by suggesting how candidates might use popular songs more responsibly—and effectively.

In "Hanging Around Us in Plain Sight: The Great American Political Campaign Poster, 1844–2012," Hal Elliott Wert examines the history of another art form, campaign posters. Beginning in the 1840s and long before Marshal McLuhan coined his famous phrase, "the medium is the message," presidential candidates used the visual language of campaign posters to appeal to voters' emotions. Wert discusses how campaign posters have evolved technologically from early 1840s print posters hand-colored by women to 1940s color offset posters with floating heads to the explosions of poster art in the 1960s and again in the 2008 Obama campaign. Early posters combined iconic images, such as the bald eagle, the flag, or Lady Liberty, with candidates' portraits and simple slogans, and were often produced by the same printers as circus and show posters. More recently, campaigns have benefited from the creativity of outside artists, who were inspired by rock 'n' roll and then hip hop, skateboarder, and guerilla poster art. The art of campaign posters is, Wert argues, dynamic, ephemeral, and fragile. New social media may soon eclipse the campaign poster, and make the Obama election of 2008 its "last hurrah."

In our final essay, "Re-Imagining the Nation: Storytelling and Social Media in the Obama Campaigns," Himanee Gupta-Carlson

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turns to the role of social media in digital storytelling. She discusses how the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 used storytelling on social media to reinscribe the United States as an imagined community. Although presidential candidates have long constructed personal stories and the election campaign has its own "narrative arc," Gupta-Carlson argues that the Obama campaigns transformed top-down campaigns into peer-to-peer discourse with their unprecedented use of social media. Gupta-Carlson discusses her experience creating a shared story of the Obama campaigns and inaugurations with her students on social media. Like the Obama presidency, her mobile classroom laboratory yielded mixed results; for some students it was more important to prompt a strong response than to participate in a shared story. Gupta-Carlson concludes that, like the Obama presidency, making the story "more about all of us" served not only to bring people to together, but also to reveal the deep divisions that continue to haunt American politics.

Together these essays show that the art of elections does not provide any simple solutions to the complex problems facing democratic politics today. Like seemingly more "rational" forms of public discourse, the arts and popular culture confront citizens with their shared responsibility to create more representative democratic processes. This alone–and these essays offer much more–makes the art of elections worthy of further study by political scientists.

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