

Memo: 2016 is Now
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For: Colleagues and peers of Louis Perron
People interested in winning elections
From: Dr. Louis Perron

Perron Campaigns Election Update (Philippine edition): 2016 is Now

Many politicians and pundits believe that money is the most important resource in an election campaign. While I don't deny that it is a crucial factor, I happen to think that the most important resource in a campaign is time. Money can be regained; time on the other hand, is irrecoverable. Indeed, no candidate has ever lost an election because he or she started to plan too early. I write about this in my book *How to Overcome the Power of Incumbency in Election Campaigns* (published by the German editor Nomos). The key is to start early, and to use the time wisely and strategically. In the present update, I discuss what this means concretely, both for an incumbent and for a challenger.

Taking Advantage of Your Incumbency

Elections involving an incumbent are mostly a referendum on the incumbent. In that sense, an incumbent usually does not win or lose re-election during the official campaign. If he does his work properly – both in terms of governance and communication – he should have an easy re-election. In the U.S., there is a simple rule among political observers regarding presidents who run for re-election: if voters are satisfied with the way things are going, the incumbent will win. If people are dissatisfied, the incumbent is at risk of losing. Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan had job approval ratings of clearly more than 50% and sailed to an easy re-election. Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush had job approval ratings way below 50% and ended up losing their respective re-elections. The same is true in other countries and for other incumbents, in particular for other executives such as Mayors or Governors.

In that sense, taking advantage of the incumbency means to establish signature projects. Scientific public opinion research should explore if voters are able to associate an incumbent with such signature projects. An incumbent should also make sure that his signature projects are in synch with the demands of voters. There is a risk, especially once incumbents enter their second or third terms, that they lose touch with voters. One thing I noticed when working with presidents is that in every meeting, the last three words are always the same: “Yes, Mr. President”. The same is true – at a

smaller scale- for Governors and Mayors. I observed that the longer an incumbency lasts, the bigger the risk for lack of challenging views in the inner circle.

It is also crucial to recalibrate PR mechanisms to ensure that voters are aware of projects and programs. As they say in the U.S.: *“if you don’t blow your own horn, there is no music”*. It’s important that voters hear your music and that they like the music they are hearing.

A special case of incumbency campaigns are so-called succession campaigns. If an incumbent has a high job approval rating, this is wind in the back of the successor spouse, relative or ally. But this is not enough. For a succession campaign to be successful, it is important to have a comprehensive plan on how to establish the successor’s own personality. If this is meant to be credible, it cannot be done in a few weeks or months. Such a plan has to be implemented over a long period of time.

Becoming the Frontrunner Challenger

Next, let’s turn our attention to the challenger and discuss how he can use the time wisely. I often observe politicians who spend at least half of their day thinking about if they will run or not and what office they should run for. Politicians would often use the term “going around” or “testing the waters”. The problem is that going around has a price tag. Oftentimes, politicians are surrounded by people who tell them that they should run. *“Sir, people on the ground are telling us that they want you back”*, they would say for example.

A more modern and scientific approach is to commission a winnability study. Even if the numbers are brutal, at least one can make an informed decision. Challengers and neophyte candidates are often worried about their vote share in early surveys. For me, the vote question does not matter in surveys that are taken months and years before the election. Back in the 2008 presidential primary in the U.S., Hillary Clinton would lead Barack Obama by up to 40% in several primary states. An early lead can easily evaporate once that the race heats up. What matters is to know where you start. If you don’t know where you started, how can you know later on that you are doing the right thing and are actually improving your standing?

Second, what matters is to have the right message, strategy and plan to grow a candidacy. There is this myth that a candidate should create awareness first, and then worry about conversion later. I believe that awareness without conversion is an unguided missile. The risk for a disconnect between political demand and offer is huge. A candidate who is making a name for himself is conveying a message anyway in the eyes of voters. If the campaign does not actively frame that message, the message conveyed is just *“I want to run”*. That’s not very appealing in the eyes of voters.

Furthermore, a candidate should – based on accurate survey data – decide on his allies, running mates and positioning strategy.

Once the decision to run is reached, a candidate can set up his core group, build up a database and start implementing the plan. After a comprehensive baseline study, regular tracking then becomes the equivalent of the navigation system in an airplane. It is important to have a plan with realistic, but ambitious targets and to track regularly if these targets are met.

Another important thing that every candidate should do early on is what we call *inoculation strategy*. This means that a candidate should have a plan on how to neutralize weaknesses. During a time of crisis or when time is running out, one has to bank on his strength. When time is available, smart candidates use it to find out their weaknesses and come up with a strategy to neutralize them.

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