

# The Political Scientist Candidate: From Scholarship to the Campaign

Victoria A. Farrar-Myers, *Southern Methodist University*

I have studied and written about elections, campaigns, and campaign finance my entire career as a political scientist. I have examined, among other topics, the intersection of money, free speech, and fair elections (Farrar-Myers and Dwyre 2007), the impact of new media in campaigns (Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015), the role of turn-out and the impact of new voters in the electorate (Farrar-Myers 2010), candidate viability (Farrar-Myers 2007; Farrar-Myers 2011), fundraising issues for female candidates (Farrar-Myers 2003; Farrar-Myers 2007; Farrar-Myers and Boyea 2013), and assessing the forces within and outside of candidates' control that can shape the outcome of an election (Farrar-Myers and Sledge 2011). There was one question, however, that I had never asked nor considered, and that my scholarship could not answer: How do I run a campaign for myself as a candidate?

In 2016, I successfully ran for a position on the City Council of Arlington, Texas. The City Council is comprised of eight members elected in non-partisan elections for two-year terms, with half the Council up for election each year. Arlington's Mayor is elected separately, also for a two-year term. The Council consists of five members elected from geographically defined districts and three citywide, at-large seats. My seat, District 7, is one of the at-large positions; I was elected in an off-Mayoral election year.

Although situated between Dallas and Fort Worth as part of the DFW Metroplex, Arlington itself is the 50th largest city in the US with nearly 380,000 people. It is home to such highly visible businesses and tourist venues as the stadiums for the Dallas Cowboys and Texas Rangers, the original Six Flags amusement park, and a General Motors production plant. In other words, Arlington has its own identity separate from those of its larger neighbors, but also its own set of issues and concerns.

As a political scientist, I knew these were the structural parameters in which I needed to wage my campaign. I also knew of the multitude of logistical and related questions that I would need to address—the types of subjects that political scientists study and assess. For example: How do I build name recognition? How do I reach my constituency of 380,000 people? How do I identify and reach likely voters? What is my message and how do I deliver it to voters? How do I use social media and other communication methods in my campaign? How do I fundraise and from whom? How much money do I need to raise? How do I build a campaign team? For what should my campaign team be responsible?

Political science research helped inform the answer to some of these questions. For example, Mann and Wolfinger

established that voters are often able to recognize a candidate's name upon seeing it even if they cannot recall a candidate's name from memory (1980). Along these lines, among other reasons, I ran using my professional name “Victoria Farrar-Myers”—with mine being the only hyphenated name on the ballot and thus more recognizable—instead of “Victoria Myers.” Similarly, I knew that, even though social media is a tool for conveying a message and not a replacement for fundamentals of a campaign, voters have come to expect candidates to have an electronic and social media presence such as a website, a Facebook page, Twitter posts, etc. (Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015). Therefore, one of the first actions I did after assembling my campaign team was to establish these means of outreach to voters.

These examples show that, at times, the conclusions and principles drawn from political science research can be implemented and integrated into practical politics and campaigns. Other areas in which scholarship and practice overlap well include utilizing the knowledge gained from a voter's voting history (e.g., how often and in what elections they voted) and identifying precincts that are historically competitive or have high voter turnout.

Even in those areas where the scholarly and practical can mix well, conflict may arise between the two when it comes to implementation within the campaign. An example of this from my own campaign relates to the allocation of volunteers at polling sites on election day. An analysis of actual voter turnout by precinct, particularly from the year before, indicated that certain polling sites were prone to higher voter turnout. Taking a more scholarly view, though, one might question how consistent the voting electorate for my election year—where I was running at the same time as one contested district Council race, one uncontested district Council race, and an uncontested at-large Council race—would be as compared to the prior year with a contested Mayoral election and the other set of Council seats up for election, or even two years previously when the seat I would come to hold was previously up for election. Regardless of how best to answer this question, my campaign team ended up shifting volunteers around at polling sites throughout election day based on the actual turnout that day.

On the flip side of political science informing campaigns, the practical side of politics can also inform, refine, and improve political science research. Scholarship has informed political scientists about such matters as the effects of retail politics in campaigns (Vavreck et al. 2002), personally delivered campaign messages (Arceneaux 2007), and campaign

mailers (Brown et al. 2010). Scholarship like this is very relevant to both scholars and practitioners, but could be refined and made more relevant by incorporating lessons learned from the field. Consider that in local elections, a fundamental concept of running an effective campaign is creating a presence in the community, yet it seems like a concept that could be more fully fleshed out and utilized in research.

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For example, political scientists may examine candidates' barriers to entry, such as incumbency advantage. For local candidates, though, the way to overcome any potential barriers is to have created a presence in the community prior to running such that the candidate can instantly be viewed as viable upon choosing to run for office. Individuals have many ways to build such a presence, such as serving on local boards or commissions; grass root activities in community organizations; or being in a leadership role in organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, a church, or prominent volunteer organizations. The important lesson, however, is that the ground work to be a candidate for local office must be started years before running.

On a related point, timing of a candidate's first run for local office is critical. Certainly, running in an election without an incumbent, or at least against a vulnerable incumbent, is less challenging than taking on an incumbent with a solid record and strong history of being re-elected. Therefore, a potential candidate must continuously build and maintain a presence in the community to best be able to take advantage of whatever opportunity may be presented. Finally, the way a candidate demonstrates her or his presence in the community is important to consider. Social media, for example, may be a cost-effective way to build a brand and spread a candidate's

case located throughout the city may be a more effective way to demonstrate a presence in the community and the viability of a candidacy in a local campaign than extensive social media usage. In Arlington, the traditional forms of media of television, radio, and newspaper are focused primarily on Dallas or Fort Worth, and advertising pricing is based on reaching all of the nation's fifth-largest media market. Arlington, however,

covers a large area, 99 square miles, in which residents primarily drive along a handful of major roads to travel within the city. As a result of these factors, a cost-effective way of building name recognition and reflecting a presence within the city is to rely on signs along the major roadways within the city. During my campaign, more than one person made a comment to me along the lines of "Your campaign must be going well. I see your signs everywhere." Although this is anecdotal evidence, it suggests the importance that voters can place on seeing a candidate's signs throughout the city.

Based on my experience as a candidate, one area of potential research that I believe could be fruitful for political science scholars and relevant to practitioners on the ground would be identifying effective outreach and communication strategies for those prospective voters with a low sense of political efficacy. Political science scholarship tends to address efficacy from a political attitude and behavior approach (see, e.g., Clarke and Acock 1989; Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Candidates, however, do not care about the causes of low efficacy generally, but rather about mobilizing voters and what they can or need to do to get voters excited about the election at hand and supporting that candidate.

Further, political science research should consider what might be called "contextual efficacy," meaning the relevance

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message, but it may not be as an effective way to demonstrate a presence in the community. Social media can effectively reach those people who seek to get information about local politics through that method, but in a local election the percentage of the potential electorate that comprises such an "attentive public" in political science terms is likely to be very small.

As counterintuitive as it might seem given that political science research has shown a mixed or limited impact at best that signs may have (Green et al. 2016; Kam and Zechmeister 2013), having professionally made large signs on significant roadways and smaller yard signs on supporters' lawns in each

or importance of any given political election or matter based on the context in which it is presented. In the case of my election, many contextual factors affected the perception of my race even among politically knowledgeable and active individuals. Since my election was in an off-Mayoral election year, turnout was expected to be low compared to the prior year when 26,693 people voted in a highly contested mayoral race. By comparison, 6,244 people voted in my election.

Another factor affecting the perception was that that incumbent City Council member decided not to run for re-election. The incumbent had initially filed to seek re-election, was still well liked after eight years in office, and had won his last

two elections with approximately 70% of the vote. Part way through the month-long filing period, however, he decided to withdraw from the race to allow him to have more time for family and business interests. In his words, “I’m being pulled in too many directions. I just decided after a couple of days that it wasn’t right to seek another term. The fact I could run again and in all likelihood win is by no means the kind of justification I would use to make that decision” (Cadwallader 2016). As a result, my race ended up being between me and one other candidate—a perpetual candidate who had run for City Council at least four times previously, plus once for mayor, and who called for the legalization of marijuana.<sup>1</sup> I cannot speak to whether other potential candidates would have run for the race if, for example, the incumbent decided not to seek re-election before initially filing. As for me, because I had been contemplating running for an elected office at some point in time, including having discussions with some key supporters who told me that they would back me if and when I decided to run, I felt that I was in a position to run a citywide race at this time.

Returning to the idea of efficacy, while I will not discuss whether the above factors may have caused people to be less engaged in my campaign than if the context was different, I will note that many people asked me why I ran as hard and vigorous campaign as I did. For me, the campaign was obviously of great personal importance and efficacy, and I chose for my campaign to not acknowledge any perception of my race other than that we needed to run hard through election day. I knew this approach was right when a campaign worker walking door-to-door came back to tell a story of one interaction with one voter. After recognizing the other candidate’s name from his many times on the ballot (note: I did not call him my “opponent” because in my view I was running for an elective office, not against him), the voter told my campaign worker he intended to vote for the other candidate because “he is the incumbent,” notwithstanding my campaign worker’s attempts to correct the voter. Perhaps Mann and Wolfinger were partially correct—voters may recognize candidates’ names even if they do not recall the name, but recognizing candidates correctly may be a different story.

Another comment that I frequently received while campaigning and even more now that I am in office is along the lines of “you have been a political science professor for years, so you must know how all this (i.e., elections, governance, etc.) works.” The short answer is “no”—being a political scientist does not prepare one to be a candidate for office any better or any worse than other professions. Being a political scientist may provide a certain skill set or knowledge base on which to draw, just as being a lawyer, a business person, or a community activist may provide others with a skill set or knowledge base they could employ in a campaign.

Finally, a question that I also receive as a political scientist holding elective office is “didn’t you know any better than to get involved in politics?” As a political scientist, I know the positive impact of a representative democracy when it is functioning properly, and the difficulties that arise when our government at any level becomes dysfunctional. In this regard, being a political scientist did prepare me to be able to use the

ends of government—the making of public policy—to strive for and hopefully achieve a better use of the tool of the people, by the people, and for the people. ■

#### NOTE

1. A third person, who would have been a first-time candidate, filed to run in my race on the last day of the filing period, but withdrew approximately one week later.

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