

AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS: ROLES, OPERATIONS, & ORGANIZATION

Article summary:

- *Political campaigns have developed into complex machines over time*
- *Political campaigns persuade voters and shape the image of candidates*
- *One can better understand campaign operations through money, time, and people*
- *There are many different roles and responsibilities in the staff of a political campaign*

Political campaigns are complex structures that are the operators behind large political movements and decision-making. Throughout history, political campaigns have been used for a variety of reasons, but now, political campaigns are largely used to persuade people during election seasons. Since the 1860s, political campaigning has evolved immensely, first from the development of party symbols and partisan newspapers, and now into the comprehensive, multi-tiered process that we recognize today.

WHAT IS A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN?

If you have ever seen any form of political advertising in the United States, then you have interacted with the work of a political campaign. Political campaigns are the engines behind getting a candidate elected during a democratic election. From Eisenhower's "[I like Ike](#)," to Obama's "[The Country I Love](#)," political campaigns are responsible for the images that determine how we perceive and get to know candidates. Political campaigns consist of the political psychologists who appeal to the public's psyche, the financial managers who budget candidates' tours around the country, the college students who are encouraging each other to register to vote, and many more moving parts.

While campaigns are largely [persuasive](#) entities, they are also important in providing basic and general information to the public. Campaigns are run to help a particular candidate win. This incentivizes campaign managers to spread information to the public about the candidate and the upcoming election that the candidate is running in. Thus, campaigning not only promotes a particular candidate in a curated way, but also [promotes the election at large](#), and political campaigns are largely responsible for keeping the public informed about upcoming political happenings.

HOW DO POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS WORK?

Understanding how political campaigns work can be a bit tricky, but understanding becomes much easier when you break down the political campaigning process into three categories: money, time, and people.

Money

Funding is a major part of political campaigns, and how funding works is very specifically regulated at the local, state, and federal levels. Running a campaign comes with a bunch of costs: putting out ads, developing political art, traveling around the country, paying workers—

the list goes on and on. To meet all of these costs, political campaigns need a lot of money. For example, the 2020 election ran close to [\\$11 billion](#) in campaign costs.

The funding for campaigns comes from various sources. Political Action Committees (PAC) are responsible for a sizable portion of campaign donations. These committees pool money from members and donate these funds to different campaigns. There are different types of PACs, like [Super PACs, Hybrid PACs, and Leadership PACs](#), all of which vary in how money is collected and distributed. How PACs fund campaigns are [specifically regulated](#) by the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Additionally, private donors and individuals are responsible for funding political campaigns.

Time

Unlike other democratic countries, the United States has no laws that regulate how long a political campaign must run before an election.

Before an actual campaign, potential candidates and their prospective teams also spend a lot of time researching past elections and different campaigning strategies. Depending on the political status of the candidate, whether or not he or she is the incumbent, and what type of office the candidate is running for, the length of a political campaign will vary. However, for some grounding, the political campaigning season including all candidates of the 2020 presidential election season lasted [1,194 days](#).

In addition to the actual time and length of campaigns, political campaigns also operate through a general timeline. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs has a [105-page campaign timeline document](#) outlining the six key steps of the political campaign process: researching, setting goals, targeting voters, developing a message, developing a voter contact plan, and making it happen.

People

The campaigning process requires a team of people to manage the finances, timeline, goals, and objectives of the campaign. While the candidate is the focal person of the campaign, he or she is joined by managers and consultants for the campaign to operate smoothly. Volunteers, consultants, managers, directors, and organizers are all essential to political campaigns.

WHO'S INVOLVED?

The organizational structure of political campaigns can vary, but some roles are generally essential to all campaigns.

The Candidate

This person is the face of the campaign. Oftentimes, a candidate is charismatic and has spent some time developing a favorable public image.

Campaign Manager

The campaign manager is responsible for creating the campaign's strategy. This involves planning how the campaign will run, where the campaign will spend its time, what the image the campaign wishes to convey is, and many other responsibilities. This person oversees the day-to-day campaign operations and is often the final say in campaign decisions. Campaign

managers oftentimes have campaigning experience and are sometimes involved in interviews and public appearances.

Finance Director

A finance director is essential for a campaign to begin. This person is responsible for raising funds for the duration of the campaign and making financial decisions on behalf of the campaign. The finance director will develop a fundraising strategy based on the needs of the campaign, working closely with the campaign manager in determining the financial goals of the campaign, as well as working closely with the candidate in developing an image that will bring more funding to the campaign. Finance directors will oftentimes work closely with **financial consultants** to help them make decisions.

Field Organizer

Campaigns are all about messaging to and persuading voters. The field organizer is responsible for connecting the campaign with voters. This role organizes volunteers, connects with grassroots organizations, and identifies target groups for the campaign. The field director often is involved in voter registration efforts and works closely with the campaign manager on developing campaign strategies that are specific to different geographic areas. Sometimes, a **volunteer coordinator** will work under the field organizer to recruit and organize volunteers.

Communications Director

This role is important in the development and presentation of the campaign's image and messaging. The communications director is responsible for the media and press interactions of the campaign. This person may develop relationships with certain news outlets and will set up interviews with different media outlets. With the assistance of **media consultants**, the communications director will make sure that the campaign's message effectively communicates the goals of the campaign across all platforms.

Policy Advisor

The policy advisor is responsible for doing policy research and making sure that the political campaign's platform and messaging are well-researched and factual. Sometimes this position will work closely with constituency groups in understanding and developing the campaign's political platform.

Events Director

Sometimes large campaigns will hire an events director who is responsible for managing large events, like galas, rallies, or visits to different cities. This person will work closely with the finance director in budgeting events as well as the communications director in advertising events.

Scheduler

The scheduler manages the schedule and time of the campaign. Working closely with all roles, the scheduler is responsible for making sure that the campaign is running smoothly and on track so that the campaign's message is developed and communicated and that voters are registered and knowledgeable by the time of the election.

Pollster

This position is responsible for tracking data and statistics about how the campaign is performing and whether or not the candidate is being received favorably by constituents.

Each campaign may have additional positions, such as a Technology Director for a campaign that has a large emphasis on technology. Additionally, campaigns may choose to combine or omit any of these positions. Each staffer within a large political campaign is oftentimes supported by a team of volunteers, advisors, experts, and consultants. To learn more about political campaign structures and what your role could potentially be, check out [this](https://hls.harvard.edu/dept/opia/a-quick-guide-to-working-on-political-campaigns/) article: <https://hls.harvard.edu/dept/opia/a-quick-guide-to-working-on-political-campaigns/>