



Political campaigning – how and where is the battle won?

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Speakers: Robby Mook (Senior Fellow at Harvard University, USA), Niall Sookoo (Labour Party Campaign Chief, United Kingdom), Saar Van Bueren (member of the cabinet of the Commission First President)

Moderator: Marjory van den Broeke (Head of Press Unit, European Parliament)

2017 saw a series of critical elections across Europe and beyond. Conventional political wisdom - that domestic political campaigns are centred almost exclusively on local rather than European or even global themes - no longer applies. In these turbulent times, campaign teams have been working to identify the right mix of communication messages and channels, as well as capitalising on digital progress and get-out-the-vote strategies, in order to have the greatest impact on voters' choices. Many people say democracy works best when no vote is taken for granted, but how and where is the battle won?

The moderator, **Marjory van den Broeke**, opened the session by introducing the speakers, and mentioning the recent election results, not only in the United States and the United Kingdom, but also in Catalonia. She then gave the floor to the two speakers.

Robby Mook started his presentation by mentioning the election on 7 November 2017 of the Democrat candidate Ralph Northam for the position of Governor of Virginia, which was considered to be a major victory for the Democratic Party in the United States. Mr Mook then highlighted three factors underpinning the dynamics of elections in the United States, of which every political communicator should be aware.

First of all, he explained that elections have broken down to a question of choice between options for change, or the risk it might bring. In the United States for the last ten years, every election campaign – with the exception of the Obama re-election campaign – was characterised by change. For instance, the Democrats gained 31 seats in the House of Representatives in 2006, but lost 63 seats in 2010. With regard to the 2016 presidential campaign, the Republican Party's strategy was to advocate a need for change from the Democrats' management of the country, while the Democratic Party was arguing that electing Donald Trump would be too much of a risk. Therefore it is important for campaign strategists to understand which side of this argument they are standing on.

Mr Mook argued that in this election, the populist voter-base was more energised than that of the Establishment. Consequently, strategists must understand the reasoning of these voters and how they are approaching an election in order to build an appropriate response.

The second factor is how the electorate is divided according to socio-economic status (such as education). For instance, Mr Mook said that among white voters, college-educated voters were most likely to identify as Democrats. In consequence, as the electorate divided, voters displayed completely different views of the world, because they were getting their news from different sources, either traditional media outlets – such as the Washington Post or the New York Times – or social media. Thus, strategists must understand that educated voters will receive curated news, while the information received on social media is much harder to control, often relies on emotions and often lacks context.



Mr Mook highlighted as a third factor the idea that media consumption by the electorate is changing. The amount of information at hand has increased enormously thanks to new information technologies. It has thus become very hard to drive a message in this space, especially for the Establishment when advocating against a dramatic change in the political landscape. Campaign teams might fight blind as they do not know what the voters experience and how they tackle this vast information flow. Finally, Mr Mook spoke about the rise of fake news, and advised campaign strategists to focus more on what is happening on social media in order to understand better what the voters are seeing and experiencing.

The second speaker, **Niall Sookoo**, also emphasised that the course of political campaigning has turned upside down, and no overarching political campaign could properly deal with this change. Putting this statement in the context of the 2017 UK election, Mr Sookoo explained first of all, that the Labour Party ran its campaign in an unprecedented context, being 24 points behind the Conservative Party in the election polls. He also asserted that the campaign broke down to austerity versus anti-austerity, in which the Labour Party - led by Jeremy Corbyn - stood for the latter.

Mr Sookoo then presented several points related to the content of the Labour Party campaign. First, more than advocating for change, political campaigning should have come up with a clear offer in order to enact this change. In the United Kingdom context, the Labour Party had a very clear message of investing back in people, and transforming British society thanks to improvements made in education, social services, etc.

The next point was how to target and address specific audiences. As an example, he took the case of young people's voting behaviour. He raised the issues of how to urge the younger generation not only to register to vote, but also to actually vote on Election Day. The second group targeted was those who had supported the Labour Party during the 1997 general elections, and who had later stopped voting.

Confirming that communication approaches and channels are changing, Mr Sookoo explained that using social media provided the Labour Party with better results in terms of outreach than traditional media such as newspapers. In his experience, online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram could be used by strategists to reach people, thanks to specially tailored messages. This would allow campaign teams to broadcast their message themselves, instead of relying on the media. Nevertheless, he noted that of course behind the success of their social media campaign lay a thorough analysis of big data in order to map and thus better target the audience.

Q&A discussion – key messages:

- Social media have changed the way political messages are delivered, by whom they are delivered, and how they are perceived by the public.
- Voters should be targeted on social media thanks to more widespread use of analytical tools provided by such media, and strategists should monitor what the people are experiencing online to frame their message. However, communicators should remain careful when managing private information, and respect data privacy as a matter of ethics.
- The electorate must be segmented based on the various experiences when delivering a message. This could make a significant difference in the result of an election.
- The message and the messenger (or delivery mechanisms) both play a pivotal role in an election. It is a matter of who is a credible and authentic messenger for that message. **Mr Sookoo** added that a good candidate must be someone who is local and has the support of the local party, because nobody can win a seat on their own.