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Book review
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The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns

D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2008, 256 pages, £17.95, ISBN: 978-0-691-13341-6

In *The Persuadable Voter*, Hillygus and Shields tackle a complex and contemporarily relevant psephological topic. Fundamentally, they argue that the treatment of ‘wedge issues’ – conflict-ridden campaign topics, such as stem cell research – by US presidential candidates can be crucial to delivering victory or defeat at the ballot box.

The authors ask a number of important questions regarding wedge issues in presidential campaigns, and provide some intriguing and counterintuitive answers. The questions include: Why do candidates even attempt to campaign on such divisive issues? Who is the eponymous ‘Persuadable Voter’? What campaign techniques are used regarding wedge issues? And, what are the consequences of wedge issue politics for American democracy.

In answering these questions, Hillygus and Shields put forward three principal arguments. Firstly, some of the most persuadable voters in presidential campaigns are the loyalists of an opposing party who disagree with their party on a specific, divisive policy issue, such as abortion or the minimum wage (p. 2). Secondly, opposing candidates have an opportunity to steal these voters during communication by strongly emphasising their – sympathised with – view on the divisive issue, while minimising their broader – opposed – message. Finally, advances in technology have encouraged wedge issue use because it is now easier for candidates to “microtarget” (p. 6) voters in terms of area, method and message.

Hillygus and Shields, then, challenge “three widespread myths about contemporary American politics” (p. 3). The first myth is that wedge issues are discussed by candidates solely to fire up loyalists within their own party; the authors argue that wedge issues are discussed to steal core voters from opposing parties. The second myth is that partisans are loyally and firmly divided along party lines regarding wedge issues; the authors argue conversely that political parties, particularly in a two-party nation like the US, are merely “coalitions of diverse individuals” (pp. 3-4) which are replete with wedge issue “cleavages” (p. 4). The third myth is that “persuadable voters are the least admirable segment of the electorate – poorly informed and lacking in policy attitudes” (p. 4). Hillygus and Shields state that:

In contrast, our theory suggests that policy issues are often central to how persuadable voters make up their minds.... We argue simply that for those voters who find themselves at

odds with their party nominee it is the campaign that often helps to determine whether partisan loyalties or issue preferences are given greater weight in their vote decision. (p. 4)

The questions, arguments and myth challenging of Hillygus and Shields fundamentally revolve around the multifaceted relationship between voter and candidate, which they call The Reciprocal Campaign. For the authors, “[v]oter behaviour cannot be fully understood without taking into account campaign information, and the behaviour of candidates rests fundamentally on perceptions about what the voters care about and how they make up their minds in a campaign” (p. 4).

Hillygus and Shields argue that their book contributes to two areas of research: campaign effects research and campaign strategy research. Focusing here upon their contribution to the former, Hillygus and Shields contend that the prevailing situation – that academics believe that campaigns have no impact on voter behaviour while political practitioners believe the campaign is crucial to election outcome – has recently swung in favour of the practitioner. Hillygus and Shields, however, argue for the middle ground; that campaigns do matter to some voters but not to others. Thus, they claim that their “perspective recognises that a campaign will have little influence on some in the electorate, but for others the campaign provides critical information for selecting between two candidates, neither of whom is a perfect match for their preferences” (p. 8).

The structure of the book is linear-analytic in nature. A summary of arguments is presented in the first chapter, an analysis of existing research is undertaken in the second and an outline of methodological techniques is carried out in the third. Chapters four, five and six examine further the fundamental arguments; utilising case studies of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections for support. The final chapter addresses the impact of wedge issue politics on the American democratic process and extends the arguments of the book to other countries.

That Hillygus and Shields utilise a multimethod, multisource technique for their book is an understatement. Cross-sectional, longitudinal, panel survey, case study, statistical and interview methodologies are applied to campaign speeches, first hand contact with campaign practitioners and archival documents.

The Persuadable Voter is clearly a well researched book, with sound arguments and complex methodologies to back these arguments up. At times however, the multimethod approach is daunting and, in places, there is a feeling that too much data has been squeezed in at the expense of clarity. Some of the “unique contributions” (p. 8) too, could be described as obvious and this may leave the reader thinking ‘so what?’ Furthermore, it is difficult at times to say exactly what the book is about. At points, it diverts from the topic of wedge issues into broader campaign theory, which, while not bad in itself, is at odds with the title of the book. A deeper examination of wedge issue politics during presidential primaries would also have been beneficial.

The positives of this book easily exceed the negatives however. *The Persuadable Voter* examines well the weaknesses of the single method approach (p. 7). The 2000 and 2004 presidential election case studies are informative and well presented and the commentary (p. 183) on the impact of wedge issue politics on democratic governance is astute, particularly the argument that candidates may focus disproportionately on issues that do not matter to the larger electorate, just to steal a small number of swing votes. The discussion of how technology may undermine microtargeting as well as aid is also insightful (p. 199).

The multifaceted nature of *The Persuadable Voter* means it is a recommended companion to anyone with even a fleeting interest in US elections. For election enthusiasts however, it is an invaluable prism through which candidate behaviour in the current youth versus experience, black versus white contest can be viewed.