

Australian Political Exchange Council

Individual Study Tour of the United States of America to Observe the Election

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Ben Franklin, The Nationals

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Executive Summary

I travelled to the United States of America from 13 October to 12 November 2012 to observe the Presidential and other elections held on Tuesday 6 November. I am very grateful to the Australian Political Exchange Council for providing me with the opportunity to visit at such an extraordinary time.

The first Presidential debate had been held before I arrived, where President Obama was seen to have performed very poorly against Governor Romney. Polls had tightened substantially and many commentators were suggesting that the election could be very close indeed.

This was a terrific opportunity to observe the process first hand and to examine the election from both inside and out.

I had the opportunity to meet with many key figures at the heart of the American political system including:

- Rob Farbman (Senior Vice President) and Joe Lenski (Executive Vice President) from Edison Research – the company that conducts the exits polls for all television networks on election night;
- Liz Mair – Former Republican National Committee e-communications Director;
- Mark Mellman – President and CEO of the Mellman Group;
- Ed Cox – Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee;
- Patrick Millham – State Political Director for the Pennsylvania Obama Campaign;
- Josh Zepps – Presenter and commentator on Huffington Post Live;
- Soren Dayton – Communications Director of the Young Republican National Federation; and
- Tony Fazio – President of the American Association of Political Consultants.

These (and other) key individuals gave me a significant insight into the mechanics of the election campaign, in areas including mail, research, media, messaging and strategy.

I was also able to visit campaign offices for both the Obama and Romney campaigns and observe their operations in action ‘on the ground’, in California, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New York and New Jersey. I also had the opportunity to meet and interact with paid staff and volunteers who were promoting and supporting their candidates.

It was clear that although (obviously – due to our compulsory voting laws) the voter turnout for elections in America is significantly lower than Australia, the level of engagement by the broader community is substantially higher. I believe that non-compulsory voting greatly increases enthusiasm and voter participation in the electoral process (which can only be a good thing), although, on the flip side, it does appear to encourage more extreme positions from numerous groups and candidates within the system.

On a macro level, to observe the campaign from within America provided a unique opportunity to understand their political system – and particularly highlighted the differences in political campaigns between Australia and the United States.

The saturation of television ads, the almost unrestrained negativity in much of their messaging, the use of technology and the level of public discourse were all quite different to that which we are used to in Australia.

I also had the experience of being on the East coast of the USA during Hurricane Sandy. Apart from the logistical challenges that that provided, it was fascinating to observe the impact that a freak event of nature had on the campaign. I do not believe that it gave President Obama the victory he carved out, but I do believe that it may well have significantly assisted in a State or two.

Overall, it was an extraordinary experience. My thanks go to the National Party of Australia for nominating me as well as to the staff at the Australian Political Exchange Council for their professionalism and assistance in organising the logistics of my study tour.

Political Situation

I arrived in the United States on the 14th of October 2012. This was after the first Presidential debate but before the second.

Before the first debate, most commentators felt that the President would be relatively easily returned in the upcoming election, but after what appeared to be a disinterested and unmotivated performance by President Obama, Governor Romney took the lead in almost all major polls including three of the most respected: Gallup, Rasmussen and Pew.

Previously, the Obama campaign had spent a great deal of money on television advertising once it became clear that Governor Romney was to be the Republican nominee in order to create doubts about his candidacy in the minds of the American people. When they saw that he was actually very competent and gave sensible answers in the first debate, their perceptions were significantly shifted.

I watched the second debate at a debate party held at the San Jose Obama Headquarters in California. Around 200 passionate Democrat supporters were in the audience and I spoke to numerous attendees before the debate began. All of them felt that a strong performance by the President in this debate was critical to the outcome of the election. There was a great deal of nervous tension in the room as the debate began but after the first ten minutes or so the assembled crowd made it clear they thought the President was performing well and beating Governor Romney. The polls taken on the evening after the debate agreed – with a CNN poll awarding the debate to President Obama 46:39 and a CBS poll with a similar result of 37:30 in the President's favour.

From this point onward every Democratic operative I met believed that they would win. Although a number of Republican operatives I met with could see a path to victory for Governor Romney, it was clear that many felt that would probably fall short.

Publicly, however, Republican commentators and pollsters were increasingly confident that they would win the election, pointing to supposed methodological problems with the Democrats' polling techniques.

However, for the three weeks in the run up to election day, I discussed the election with as many people as I could outside of politics – taxi drivers, waitresses, shop assistants etc. – and although there were divergent opinions on the outcomes that they desired, almost all predicted a Democratic win.

Fundraising

The cost of election campaigns in the United States continues to increase – seemingly exponentially. The Centre for Responsive Politics estimated that almost \$6 billion was spent on all campaigns in the 2012 election year.

A great deal was written during the 2008 election about (particularly) the Obama campaign enlisting small \$20 - \$50 donations from individuals.

This year both campaigns targeted substantially lower amounts – often initially asking for only two or three dollars. This was to increase their databases of potential financial supporters without asking for a prohibitive amount on the first occasion. I was advised anecdotally that this appeared to have worked – with many thousands of new donors being accessed by both campaigns.

‘On the ground’ presence

One of the most substantial differences between the two political operations was their campaigns in key communities and States.

The Obama campaign was directly responsible for the field operations throughout the United States. This meant that of the dozen or so field offices I saw across the country – all of them looked very similar, with identical messaging and inspirational posters, similar layout and design and replicated structures. It was also clear that the Obama campaign had more offices across the country, but more importantly, had remained in key States since the 2008 election. This ensured the maintenance of corporate knowledge and a consistency of personnel and messaging.

The Romney campaign on the other hand outsourced the organisation of its field operations to the Republican National Committee. This meant that each office varied wildly from its counterparts. I also strongly suspect that this decision meant that local ‘favoured sons and daughters’ (local Congressmen, State Senators etc.) were promoted at the expense of Governor Romney’s campaign. I saw a number of Republican offices where there weren’t even any posters of Governor Romney on display.

This was combined with the relatively late entry of Republican campaign activity into key swing States. I met with Patrick Millham, the State Political Director of the Obama campaign in Pennsylvania, two weeks before polling day. He felt that the Romney ground game in Pennsylvania was very weak, and said that even if they tried to increase their presence in the final fortnight, it would probably be too late. He was proven to be correct.

Polling

Polling is a critical part of the US election process and is commissioned by campaigns, third party organisations and the media. In some swing States, residents reported being polled every night in the month leading up to election day – sometimes more than once!

There was significant discussion of polling and research methodology during the campaign. Many Republican commentators argued that the polling of both the Democrats and the major research company was skewed by over-representing Democrat voters. They felt that although almost all bi-partisan and Democratic analyses of the election predicted Obama’s return, the bias was such that Governor Romney would actually prove victorious. So confident were the Republicans of this fact, that it is reported that Governor Romney did not even prepare a concession speech.

Most Republican operatives I met with hedged their bets somewhat on the final outcome. However the most senior member of the Romney campaign I spoke to before the election (who has asked to remain unnamed) said,

Florida, North Carolina and Virginia are all done (for Romney). Colorado is looking very good. Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania are the keys. And the Governor only needs to win one of those three to become the President.

This was typical of the Republican analysis in the media in the final weeks of the campaign.

I also had the opportunity to have extended discussions with Rob Farbman and Joe Lenski from Edison Research. Edison has been commissioned by the six major news organisations (ABD, AP, CBS, CNN, Fox News and NBC News) to provide exit polling since 2003.

Exit polling asks a significant sample of individuals how they voted and what issues were most important to them as they exit the polling station after voting. It is becoming increasingly challenging due to the different proportions of early voting in different States. States like Washington, Oregon and Colorado cast almost all their ballots early – usually by post. However States like Virginia, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania overwhelmingly vote in person on election day.

25,000 surveys were done by phone to early voters which were complemented by another 125,000 interviews conducted face to face at around a thousand polling locations across the country.

Operationally, Edison faced some substantial logistical challenges with the onset of Hurricane Sandy. After touring their impressive facilities it was clear that they prepared for all manner of disasters (including maintaining two completely identical data centres - one in New York and the other in Atlanta in case one should be disabled.)

Advertising

One of the most interesting parts of the study tour was to observe the many and varied methods of promotion of individual candidates – from those seeking local office up to the Presidency.

The preponderance of television advertisements in swing States was almost overwhelming. It was quite usual to see five political ads in a row in an advertisement break in the last two or three weeks before the election in States like Virginia and Pennsylvania. The entire country was not saturated however – the markets were very targeted. In the six days I was in California for example, I did not see one television ad.

Similarly the mail pieces were also very specifically targeted. I met one couple in Virginia which highlighted the strategies of the major Presidential campaigns. The man was in his early thirties, was born and grew up in a southern State and served in the military overseas. His wife had kept her own surname, was in her late twenties, grew up in New York and had just had a child.

Although they lived in the same house, he only received mail from the Romney campaign and she only received mail from the Obama campaign. Clearly both campaigns had determined exactly which groups they felt they needed to target to maximise their chances of success.

Apart from the standard advertising techniques of television, radio and mail, other candidate promotional methods have grown substantially over the past few years and were utilised significantly during the 2012 election cycle.

Social media and website promotion is now incredibly widespread with a particular focus on ensuring a campaign's material is able to be accessible on smart phones.

Other advertising methods such as mail pieces which actually 'spoke' to you were also very effective. The best of these was a piece distributed by the Democrats in Missouri opposing the Republican Senate candidate Todd Akin.

The front of the piece states, "Todd Akin would like a few words with you". When you open the leaflet you hear Mr Akin's voice espousing some relatively extreme views including the now infamous, "if it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down". At the end you hear a female voice saying, "Todd Akin, I think we've heard enough".

A senior Democratic pollster advised me that that piece of mail alone caused Akin's polling numbers to drop by three or four per cent.

Technology

Another extraordinary development in this election cycle was the use of technology in both the Republican and Democratic campaigns.

I met with Tony Fazio in Los Angeles to discuss this issue. Tony is the incoming President of the American Association of Political Consultants and he introduced me to a group of people who had developed an extraordinary application for smart phones to allow instantaneous entry of data and its immediate collation and tabulation at a central point.

This sort of technology was utilised by both Republican and Democratic campaigns around the country and was critical in 'micro-targetting' - identifying the exact voters that a campaign needed to win in order to be successful, as well as getting out the vote - the most important part of any campaign in a non-compulsory voting environment.

All field work including doorknocking and phone banking was able to be managed through this centralised system.

Both the Obama and Romney campaigns also had centralised systems to monitor the voting on election day and to identify which critical areas hadn't voted in the numbers necessary to ensure victory.

The Obama campaign's system worked very well and was fully tested on a number of occasions before polling day. I was most impressed seeing a part of the process in action in Philadelphia.

The Romney campaign's application, called Orca, was only properly tested on election day itself, and unfortunately did not perform up to expectations. Its systems appeared to be overloaded.

As Byron York, as conservative commentator with the Washington Examiner, commented after the election, "early in the evening, one aide said that, as of 4pm, Orca still projected a Romney victory of somewhere between 290 and 300 electoral votes. Obviously that didn't happen. Later, another aide said Orca had pretty much crashed in the heat of the action. 'Somebody said Orca is lying on the beach with a harpoon in it,' said the aide".

Media

The 24 hour news cycle in the United States ensures that both campaigns (and, I suspect, candidates) are in a constant state of high alert.

With such an insatiable appetite, it also means that some relatively trivial stories become national news very quickly.

There were three important periods in the US campaign where the media played a vital role.

First, after the first Presidential debate, the media spent so much time discussing President Obama's poor performance (and, conversely, Governor Romney's very strong performance) that even those who had not seen the debate (more than half of the country) started shifting their attitudes to both candidates. The constant repetition of the same theme ensured it became almost self-fulfilling – at least for the beginning of the campaign period.

Second, Governor Romney's strategy was to focus almost entirely on the economy and the Obama administration's poor record at managing it. However, other issues arose regularly which sucked the oxygen out of this message. This came from external sources (e.g. Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock's offensive public statements on rape) and well as of his own making (e.g. the "47 per cent" and "binders full of women" comments). Romney's narrative arc was rarely able to build momentum due to these distractions.

Third, Hurricane Sandy hit at a critical time of the campaign – just over a week out from election day. For a number of days Governor Romney was not able to telegraph his message, criticise the President or appear 'political' as the nation (and the President) was dealing with a catastrophe. This situation was made even more difficult (for Romney) by the Republican Governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, (previously one of the President's strongest critics) repeatedly praising Obama on the work he was doing to support the victims of the hurricane thus giving him an aura of bi-partisan credibility.

Outcome

After observing all of these issues, the result of the election was not a surprising one. Although the popular vote was relatively close (51 per cent to 47 per cent), the Electoral College margin of 332:206 was substantial.

This was because the Obama campaign secured three, four or five per cent victories in almost every swing State (with the exception of North Carolina – although many would argue that was not really a swing State anyway). This highlighted the discipline of their organisation, the effectiveness of their message and the superiority of their technology, all of which I observed at close quarters.

Contrary to the views of many Australians, I found the general American populace to be, on the whole, well-informed, articulate and engaged with the political issues of the day. I also felt that there was a good deal of intelligent and thoughtful media coverage on most issues of importance throughout the campaign, from across the political spectrum.

Politics is certainly done very differently in Australia but I don't think one system is better than the other - both are appropriate for their unique and individual countries.

But perhaps there is one area Australia can learn a little from the United States. Once someone is elected in America, the overwhelming majority of the population accepts the result with good grace and fall in behind the newly elected leader because they deeply respect the office of the President (even if they are not particularly enamoured of the incumbent). Perhaps, in this area, we could do a little better.

Ben Franklin