How to Manage a Successful Election Campaign

There is unanimous consent that the 2013 elections in Pakistan were like no other held before. They were the first elections held after a democratically elected government completed its full term. The election commission and judiciary were unanimously trusted to hold free and fair elections. The voter turnout averaged a staggering 55%, primarily driven up by unprecedented, electronic and print media campaigns that encouraged citizens to vote.

The promise of ‘Change’ championed by PTI, the slogan for ‘Brighter Pakistan’ chanted by PMLN, and the pervasive dissatisfaction of Pakistanis with the PPP government, all resulted in the perfect storm of voters that poured into the polling stations on May 11th, both local as well as overseas citizens, who flew in just to vote and make themselves a part of a new and/or improved Pakistan.



Image Source: BBC

The results of the elections are in. PMLN has won with a heavy mandate and is in the process of forming government in the Center, Punjab as well as Baluchistan. PPP will lead the government in Sindh. And PTI, the party of ‘Change’ will govern KPK along with its allies and lay the foundation of a ‘New Pakistan’ in the province.

There are plenty of allegations of rigging, and the Election Commission has been following up on those complaints and taking appropriate actions, but overall there is an acceptance of everyone’s respective mandates and majority politicians and their parties are looking ahead towards delivering on the promises made during the election campaigns.

It is time for all of us to look forward as well. It is time to celebrate our respective triumphs, small or large, and more importantly, learn from our mistakes and continue to strengthen our nation.

Background

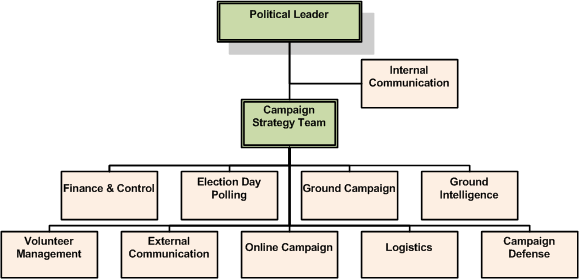
These elections were also unique for me. For the first time in my life, I got to experience, first hand, many things including:

* How the government functions with an acute focus on performance delivery during the period running up to the elections (from the pits of the PML-N government in Punjab);
* How a winning election campaign is managed (from a candidate’s campaign trenches who snatched a seat for the party from the lion’s den);
* How new and alternative channels are used to raise funds to support an election campaign (from the experience of co-managing an extremely successful fund raising campaign for a political candidate on Facebook);
* And how elections are won or lost based on how one manages the election day (from a once in a life time, unique experience of being a polling station in-charge, a polling agent as well as a government polling officer during the 2013 elections)

Before I moved on with regular technology and entrepreneurship related musings on this blog, I wanted to document the key elements of a winning election campaign of a first-time political candidate, who contested elections against an experienced and powerful stalwart belonging to a leading political party and beat him on his own turf. The strengths of this immaculately well managed campaign and the weaknesses and remedial measures identified in a postmortem after the elections can serve as a guide to other new political aspirants for streamlining their election campaigns in the future.

I have not named the candidate as this article has not yet been endorsed by him or the party. More importantly, this article is a combination of the campaign management process I observed and followed as part of the candidate’s campaign team, *as well as* weaknesses I saw and how they could be addressed to make this a model campaign management process for any politician. It suffices to say that it is based on a model championed by a provincial assembly candidate who won the elections for the party virtually inside the Lion’s den. Any politician, regardless of party affiliation, aiming to contest elections will benefit from these notes. So without further adieu, what follows are some of the most important characteristics of a successful election campaign in somewhat descending order of importance.

Well-defined Campaign Organization Structure



The campaign team of a provincial assembly candidate can reach over 200 dedicated political workers and about a similar number of volunteers. The size swells to over 500 political workers near the elections as polling day staff is brought on board. This, coupled with the fact that most of the team members are untrained, mandates the presence of a well defined organizational structure and communication process.

At a high level, the political leader oversees and manages 10 teams, primarily with the support of a Campaign Strategy team. Each of the teams has a well defined area of responsibility with a clear set of objectives and goals and unambiguous communication, reporting and escalation process.

Following is a brief overview of each of the teams:

**Campaign Strategy Team**

Strategy team comprises of 4-6 close political allies, experienced campaigners and close trusted friends/family members, ideally with prior campaign management and politics experience. Primarily works with the politician and drafts strategies to address input gathered by the campaign and intelligence teams. It also makes key decisions based on inputs from all other teams on behalf of (if there is unanimous consent) and/or after consultation with (if there is difference of opinions) the political leader. Ideally, this team evaluates all pros and cons and submits its agreed upon position on all matters for a yay or no decision by the political leader. This team also coordinates activities with the overlapping or adjoining MNA and MPA campaign teams to eliminate redundant activities and expenses.

**Finance & Control Team**

Tasked to raise funds as well as project, prioritize and manage expenses to ensure biggest bang for the buck. Also responsible for all contract negotiations and ensuring all similar services are procured at similar rates. This team needs one key, trusted ally/manager and 1-2 support staff. In hindsight, instead of using paper based registers, a small accounting software like Quick Books would have significantly helped with book keeping and ensuring transparency of campaign spending.

**Ground Campaign Team**

Tasked with grass roots level campaigning tailored to each locality based on intelligence gathered by the Intelligence team (see later). Door to door campaigning, corner meetings, ‘jalsas’ and crowd mobilization for political events and election day are some of the key responsibilities of this team. The team primarily consists of underlying Union Council campaign teams led by respective UC presidents.

The Ground campaign team of the subject provincial assembly candidate consisted of 6+ geographically focused teams headed by respective UC presidents from the 6+ union councils that fell under the PP territory. Each UC team had about 10-13 elected political workers and 15-20 additional committed workers to aid the core team. So the total size of the ground campaign team could get as high as 200 political workers for a single provincial seat.

**Logistics and Operations Team**

Tasked to arrange and coordinate all logistical matters including transportation, supplies, catering, lighting, stage equipment for ‘jalsas’, etc. This team has a significant overlap with the ground campaign team but requires one dedicated manager for every UC with prior logistics experience and one central manager. It is critical for the central logistics manager to have prior logistics management experience. This role needs a seasoned task driver who is not afraid to take responsibility and deliver.

**Ground Intelligence Team**

Contrary to the ground campaign team which comprised primarily of good talkers, the intelligence team comprised of good listeners with basic analytical skills that worked with the campaign team and primarily listened to people in each locality and identified their local issues, concerns, fears and voting preferences. This information was stored electronically and reported to the strategy team to formulate targeted campaign messaging.

This team also visited market centers to assess which ones should be targeted based on concentration of voters. For example, does it make sense to hold a corner meeting at the Hafeez Center if majority shop owners are residents of other constituencies?

**Election Day Polling Team**

Tasked singularly to recruit, train and manage polling agents and all election day activities inside the polling stations. Elections are won on the polling day and anticipating, planning, training and flawlessly delivering on the polling day will either make or break an entire campaign which might have started years in the past.

This team needs to be managed by an experienced Polling Day Manager/Trainer and approximately 500 volunteers/workers (details later). All of this staff needs to be trained and made aware of their rights, obligations, and ways others may try to rig the elections and how to identify such issues as slow-go polling, ballot sneaking, ballot stuffing, improper vote counting, results documentation recording, etc.

The ground campaign team also lends a hand on the polling day by staffing the polling booths outside the polling stations to ensure voters are properly equipped with all data required to cast their votes.

**Internal Communications Team**

Tasked primarily with all documenting, creative/design work, drafting, messaging, speech writing chores along with an additional responsibility to manage a small multi-line call center as a dispatch where people can call in and leave messages to be communicated to others if they were unable to reach them on cellular phones directly. In hindsight, it would have been better to have a UAN number which is used for all inbound communication and dispatching so no important call, e.g. an overseas Pakistani trying to reach the political leader for donation, is missed and responded to by the appropriate person.

**External Communications Team**

Primarily tasked with designing and managing the marketing and outreach program using billboards, banners, flex boards, stickers, flags, etc. The timing and marketing strategy is collectively worked out between the strategy team, external communications team and the political leader. This team’s members also took responsibility to communicate targeted campaign messages to constituents using the contact information collected by the intelligence team (details later).

**Campaign Defense Team**

Since I can’t use the word internally used for this team, let’s just identify it with this name since the team, recruited with strong, daring and extremely passionate supporters was tasked to ensure that none of the other teams faced any hurdles in their activities and more importantly were not harassed by other political parties, both during the campaigning and especially on the election day. Ideally there should be a defense team for each UC and should comprise of 4-6 strong individuals. 1-2 defense teams comprising of mature, strong willed, persistent and very vocal women also helps.

**Online Campaign Team**

This team was not needed in these elections and the politician was well rewarded for focusing on offline campaigning except for a single fan page maintained by one of the friends. But for the coming 2018 elections, this team will need to be staffed with savvy online marketers to reach out to the young, educated online voter base through the social media.

**Volunteer Management Team**

Politicians generally give a free reign to any volunteer approaching them to join any team they want and contribute anyway they desire. This team, primarily consisting of 2 individuals, was responsible for coordinating with all volunteers and personally assessing them and assigning them to tasks that exploit their strengths. For example, assigning a passionate but shy, 20 year old, foreign educated person visiting Pakistan for a month to volunteer in the election process will not perform well on the ground campaign team for Kabooterpura. The remaining teams contacted the leaders of the volunteer management team to secure volunteer support if needed.

The political candidate and/or the strategy team held weekly meetings with the team leaders to track progress of the assigned tasks and to ensure that their issues and concerns were addressed in a timely manner. There was a very clear communication and escalation procedure that was defined for each of the teams which helped in the management of such a vast HR organization.

Acute Focus on Election Day Poll Management

“Elections are won or lost on the Election Day.” I heard this statement repeated so often at the campaign office that it almost lost its meaning to me. But to the Election Day Polling team, this was the driving mantra. This entire team was singularly tasked to manage the Election Day!

An entire organization of Polling Agents was built based on the number of polling stations as well as polling booths. In the subject constituency, there were 105+ polling stations (inclusive of male and female sections in each polling station) and a total of 275+ polling booths. For each of the polling booths, a polling agent was staffed in the Election Day Polling team. One male and one female polling agent was staffed per polling station as stand-by agents in case of no-shows. That’s a total of 380+ polling agents. Each polling station had one polling station in-charge as well with approximately 10 stand-by in-charge personnel. That made the Election Day Polling team one of the largest teams in the campaign office, comprising of approximately 500 members.

A mock polling station, with multiple polling booths, was set up at the campaign office which was used during the training of the polling agents and the polling station in-charges. An experienced polling day veteran trained all polling station in-charges who were then made responsible for training their respective polling agents. The training included scenarios of regular voting as well as mock demonstrations of how various forms of rigging take place at the polling stations and how to detect and subvert them. For example:

* **Slow-go Polling:** A means to slow down the polling at a polling station where a candidate is expected to lose. This is done with either collaboration of the polling staff or by introducing old or handicapped personnel in the queue. Sometimes a candidate or his polling staff will cause disruption to the voting process to slow it down. The polling agents were trained to identify such situations and seek immediate attention of the presiding officer failing which they were told to call the campaign office so appropriate action can be taken to curtail the issue by dispatching personnel from the campaign defense team and media reporters.
* **Ballot Sneaking:** Polling agents were asked to keep a vigilant eye on voters after they are handed over the ballot paper to ensure they leave after casting their votes and are not able to sneak a ballot paper out of the booth.
* **Double Voting:** Similarly agents were trained to ensure that voters should deposit a single ballot paper in the sealed ballot boxes and do not drop multiple ballot papers, previously filled out, into the ballot box.
* **Ballot Stuffing:** Every polling agent was trained to note the serial number of every ballot book issued to the polling officers and tally the number of ballot papers issued by the polling officer as well as the total ballot papers counted towards the end to ensure they tallied with the vote count recorded by the polling agents.
* **Improper Ballot Counting:** The polling in-charge was to be present during the opening, seal validation of ballot boxes and subsequent counting of all ballots to ensure no valid votes were discarded and invalid votes were properly rejected and not counted. Stamps were verified by each polling agent from each party.
* **Improper Ballot Results Reporting:** The polling station in-charge was to ensure that the official results form was filled out properly and that a signed copy of the original results form was obtained by the in-charge so that the results could not be changed afterwards.
* **Campaigning Inside Polling Stations:** All sorts of campaigning and approaching voters or communicating with them by any party’s polling agent was strictly against the law and the agents were trained to spot such behavior and report it to the presiding officer and the party campaign office immediately.
* **Ballot Box Swap:** Agents were trained to note the serial numbers of the seals placed on the ballot boxes and to ensure that they never leave sight and are the same ones opened for counting towards the end of polling.

Such in-depth training prepared the polling agents to ensure that rigging was minimized, if not eliminated, in the elections. Authorization letters by the political candidate and a bag with all the necessary stationary and voter lists were delivered to all polling agents the night before. A list of all polling agents, their contact information was maintained at the campaign office. Lunch was arranged for all polling agents and they were asked to have lunch one by one with the polling station in-charge temporarily replacing the polling agent while he/she consumed lunch. Since all polling station in-charges left with the official results copies with them, the campaign office was able to tally the results and know whether the elections were won or lost way ahead of the official results announcement. Follow-up by the political candidate, the strategy team and the campaign defense team with the returning officers after the elections ensured no one tried to influence the results.

Disciplined Targeting of Energy and Resources

A vote bank gets built over time, almost proportional to what a political leader gave back to his constituency. As the elections near, both the time and the resources of a political leader and his campaign become increasingly precious and need to be put to best, most productive use. The main objective of a political campaign close to the elections is NOT to build a vote bank from ground up. It is time to achieve these three goals:

1. Expend the least time, energy and resources to just get the existing voters to get out and vote on the election day;
2. Spend a little more time and effort to convince critics and voters of other parties to switch sides;
3. Give the most time and expend the most resources on convincing undecided voters to become strong supporters and voters.

As I spent time with the subject political leader, this sense of priority was evident in most of his decisions. For example, during door-to-door campaigning, the moment he found out that the constituent is already a supporter, he would move on after a smile, his characteristic ‘japphee’ (hug) and delegating to the person, the responsibility of convincing everyone else in his or her family and circle of friends to vote for him. He showed trust in his voters to spread his message and many of them took it very seriously. Typical parting lines during or after the ‘japphee’ went something like this:

***“Thank you for your support. I trust you to come out and vote on the election day and more importantly, I am trusting you to be able to convince everyone in your family and among your friends to come out and vote for what YOU believe in.”***

He would move on, without wasting another second, to the next door until he could find a swing voter or someone who supported another party. Most time was spent listening to and responding to the swing voters and trying to convince them to vote for him.

He would spend relatively less time with hard core supporters of other parties and his typical parting comments went something like this:

***“I need people like you to support me and I can promise that I will not let you down. But if you have already made up your mind to support someone else, I wish that person understands the issues of this constituency as well as I do and I pray from Allah that he is guided to deliver on his promises. My only request is that you still get out and vote on the election day and let your heart guide you who to vote for after you have evaluated all candidates objectively.”***

Another great example of targeting energy and resources is working the trade centers and markets based on intelligence gathered by the ground intelligence team on actual voter density of the people in the subject political leader’s own constituency. For example, in some of the markets, it was discovered that most shop owners and union leaders/workers commute from other areas of the city and comprise a very small vote bank for the leader’s own constituency. Whereas another leader might still spend time and resources in such markets and trade centers, this political leader was very clear that this close to the election, he ONLY needs to work on his own constituents and leave the responsibility of campaigning for the party to its national level leaders or the nominated political leaders of the constituencies to which the shop owners belonged to. If the audience did not have a high concentration of registered voters from his own constituency, he was not willing to address it. His typical response was:

***“There are better political leaders than me who are working that constituency. I trust them to get the party’s message out to them better than I can. Let’s move on to the next corner meeting. No corner meeting scheduled? OK, no problem, just drop me off anywhere in my constituency where I haven’t been before, and I will start knocking on doors!”***

His typical first question after introducing himself was always whether the person answering the door is registered to vote in this area. This candidate was singularly focused on winning his own seat and will not yield to any demand for his time or resources that addressed a more dilute objective. Ultimately, I personally believe, that this was one of the key factors in the success of his campaign.

Proven Track Record of Local Delivery

It is critical that the candidate has local presence and a good track record of delivering service to the local constituents. The subject political leader had spent the past 5 years in the city he contested from, with the considerable time of the last 3 years concentrating on the constituency he contested from. The same was true for the UC teams working with the political leader. Their local relevance and delivery track record was equally, if not more, important and was a key enabler for their ability to mobilize constituents.

I personally think that the last minute ticket grants by PTI to its MNAs and MPAs was a major factor in the party’s sub-optimal performance in the 2013 elections. For the 2018 elections, all parties need to identify and declare at least 2 prospective ticket grantees from each provincial and national constituency at least 3 years before the elections and let them work in the constituency and compete for the ticket.

‘Japphee’ (Hug) Count as a KPI

Humans are emotional creatures and inherently programmed to respond to other’s empathy towards them. The politicians need to understand this and connect with the constituents at a personal level to lock-in their support.

One KPI (Key Performance Indicator) used by the subject political leader was the ‘Japphee’ count or the hug count. He would literally make sure that he hugs hundreds of people every day and would sit at night with the campaign strategy team and talk about how many people he gave a japphee to that day and how many responded to the hug with an equal vigor. That vigorous hug response count would be his KPI as well. When he was running behind on the japphee count on any day, he would try to cancel some of the meetings and substitute a corner meeting or an on-foot campaign in an area instead to catch up on his KPI. A wife, a sister or a mother can accompany the politician to hug the women constituents.

Integrating National Level and Local Level Campaigning

The national level campaigns led by Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan played a major role in mobilizing the educated youth and the upper class of the nation which contributed to a high voter turnout. But, by definition, such a campaign has to be a broad based campaign that revolves around issues of national interests and its primary objective is to define, justify and market a national ‘identity’ for the party and its position on various national issues. Although, association with a national ‘identity’ of a party does play a role in local electoral politics, but equally, if not more important to voters, is party’s position on matters of relevance to them.

A voter in Makkah Colony watching talk shows and national media campaign ads doesn’t vote based on the party’s position on drones or foreign relations with India or even corruption and economic reforms. That voter needs reassurance that:

1. He or she is heard by the local representatives of the party which is the primary responsibility of the MNAs and MPAs.
2. Their issues have been communicated by those MNAs and MPAs to the party leadership.

It’s critically important, therefore, that when a national party leader visits the constituency during the national campaign trail, he is made aware of key local issues and concerns of the constituents for inclusion in the national leader’s address. Such briefs need to be prepared by the MNAs and MPAs based on input from their ground intelligence teams and their interaction with the public, vetted by the campaign strategy team and delivered to the national leader for inclusion in his address in their constituency. National level topics need to be left for TV talk shows and electronic media based national campaigns.

Focus on Major Vote Bank Influencers

In pretty much every constituency, there will be persons who are major influencers on large vote banks, for example, the president of the Model Town workers association or an elder in a ‘basti’ or a trade union leader or perhaps a local Imam Masjid. It is critical to identify such influencers through the ground intelligence team and connect with them on a personal level and convince them to vote for the party and the political leader. That one voter converted to one’s side could mean support from 500-1000 voters.

Creative Fund Raising

To the best of my knowledge, the subject political leader was the only contestant in these elections that effectively utilized online, crowd sourcing to raise campaign funds. A small team of online campaign workers used Facebook as a channel to tap Pakistanis outside of Pakistan for campaign funds. Using means to collect money in almost any country, primarily through PayPal, the funds poured in from Australia, Middle East, Europe and Americas. This went a long way to ensure that money did not become a major constraint in the campaigning.

Awareness of NA Campaign and Avoiding Duplication

One of the responsibilities of the campaign strategy team was to ensure coordination with overlapping activities of the NA campaign in the constituency and the country-wide campaign by the party’s political leadership. This coordination helped ensure the marketing funds were better spent targeting the right areas in the constituency.

A large map of the constituency on a wall in the campaign office with colored pins reflecting different activities/meetings and campaign marketing efforts go a long way in making impromptu spending and scheduling decisions. The same can be done with the aid of a simple database managed by the internal communication team.

Database of voters and Communication Strategy

Throughout the campaigning by the ground campaign team and the door to door campaigning with the political candidate, the teams need to keep building a database of everyone they talk to, their location, contact number and most importantly their voting inclination. This database can be used by the communication team to contact the voters later and convey targeted messages.

The contacts with clear inclination for the candidate’s party are just asked to come out and vote on the Election Day and get others to vote as well. Those on the fence are targeted repeatedly with specific messages highlighting how the candidate intends to address the problems specific to the area they reside in. Constituents with a clear preference for another party are contacted just once with targeted campaign messages close to the elections.

Availability, Ease of Access and Presence on the Street

Political campaigning is done on the streets, rubbing shoulders with the constituents and trying to walk in their shoes or at least knowing first-hand what shoes everyone is walking in. Campaigns managed by political leaders from the comfort of cushy seats in air conditioned offices are not as effective as another where the political leader is braving the scorching heat on the streets and sweating alongside the political workers and prospective voters. Being accessible during a campaign strengthens the voters’ belief that the political leader will be accessible if elected also. Leaders absent from the scene except for the occasional corner meeting or jalsa scheduled during evening hours lead voters to believe that the person will be even more inaccessible if elected.

A campaign office situated centrally in the constituency which is easily accessible and has ample parking space is ideal. It’s best if it’s in a commercial area, otherwise, the first order of business is to contact the neighbors, communicate your message and seek permission. Since it’s a temporary arrangement, most neighbors would not mind especially if they are party supporters also. The office needs to be furnished with absolute essential furniture and sufficient light, fans and communication infrastructure. A generator ensured the lights and fans kept running. Constituents, workers and supporters were allowed to come and go freely.

The political leader, if not at a meeting, jalsa or campaigning door-to-door was ALWAYS present at the campaign office. The internal communication team always marked the current location of the political leader on the constituency map and a schedule diary.

Preparing for the Unexpected

One thing that I found almost abused due to over-use at the campaign offices of this political leader is contingency planning. The strategy team, logistics team, the campaign teams, the election day polling teams tirelessly worked to identify all risks and contingencies for any event and tried to ensure that alternatives or contingency measures were at place.

A prime example of this are the steps taken to ensure there were means to communicate from the polling stations to the strategy team and UC leaders in case no cellular service was available on election day as had been rumored. Each polling station in-charge was to be equipped with borrowed WiFi/WiMax internet devices so that instant messaging software like WhatsApp, Blackberry Messenger and Viber could be used to communicate with each other.

Similarly, spare cars for door to door campaigning, extra polling agent staff and contingency campaign fund are some of the other examples of the contingency planning and mitigation measures that were taken by this campaign office.

Conclusion

I am sure there are plenty of other factors that influence the success in elections: from the candidate’s ‘bradari’, qualifications and personal charisma to whether or not he/she attended the funeral of a constituent’s relative, but the aforementioned characteristics are seldom found in political campaigns that at least I have been witness to and can make the difference between a tight victory or a narrow defeat.

If you have been part of political campaigns, I’d love to hear from you about what you thought were the distinguishing factors that helped the campaign or lessons learned or may be even mistakes that should be avoided in the future. Feel free to contribute in the comments below.