

Memo: Lessons Learned from the 2007 Elections
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For: Colleagues and peers of Louis Perron
People interested in winning elections
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**Perron Campaigns Election Update:
6 Lessons Learned from the 2007 Election Campaigns in the Philippines
and in Switzerland – and What It Means for the 2010 Elections**

Introduction

During the year 2007, I had the opportunity to closely observe the national elections in the Philippines and in Switzerland. The purpose of this memo is to draw the conclusions and to note the lessons learned during these two campaigns. The Swiss and Philippine political systems and campaign styles are about as different as they could be. Yet I find it striking how the same campaign strategies and tactics worked while the same mistakes caused politicians to lose. In the analysis, I tried to make abstraction of my own preferences for some politicians and to assess the respective campaigns as neutrally as possible.

1. Have a coherent, well-tested, appealing and believable message

During the 2007 Philippine Senatorial elections, all serious candidates aired television ads. Recto, Sotto, Aquino-Oreta, Pichay and Magsaysay (and to a lesser degree Mike Defensor) all had aggressive media campaigns and were among the top media spenders. But they all wasted their money on rhetoric, nice jingles and motherhood statements. Great campaigns are never a re-run of great campaigns. What has worked so well for Mar Roxas in 2004 is no longer working. Pichay, Magsaysay and the others did not have a message the way I understand it, namely a simple but appealing and believable reason why a specific candidate should be voted for.

Let us think about it for a minute. Let's imagine a normal voter....say, a fisherman in Bohol with 5 kids. His main concern is to put food on the table. The ads (and all other campaign communication) should talk to that fisherman and give him a reason why to vote for the specific candidate. Why vote for Sotto? The ad said because he's the best Tito. Why for Magsaysay? The ad claimed because Magsaysay is your guy. Really? How come our fictitious fisherman doesn't even know him? Why for Defensor? Because he's a Tol. Really? How come the fisherman knows him as the President's man? Why Recto? The ad says because some people dance on the left, some on the right, he is dancing in the middle. Our fictitious fisherman in Bohol wonders what the candidate talks about. It doesn't make sense to him. All these candidates were wasting and burning money at the rate of probably 2 million pesos per day instead of communicating a clear and appealing reason why exactly their guy should be elected.

Another example for a mismatch between the political demand and the political offer are the ads of Team Unity ("team unity for the country", "we will rock you"). I wonder if anybody ever bothered to test them previous to spending millions on airing them. In this sense, it is also interesting to compare the surveys over time. The amount of people who said that they will vote a straight TU ticket actually decreased during the campaign. This means that before airing TU ads, more people said they would vote TU than after the ads.

The ads of the Genuine Opposition (or at least some of them), on the other hand, were good in terms of message. Senator Sergio Osmeña is one of the few politicians who really understand modern message politics and the power of it. The ads were carefully tested and hammered the GMA administration at the sensitive points. It connected with what normal Filipinos live with every day, namely hardship and poverty. As the results of the election demonstrate, they were effective. Now, it is true that the facts are different from the GO ads. The economy is booming and doing much better now than before President Macapagal-Arroyo took office. But all that matters in a campaign is perception and how to shape it.

The same holds true in Switzerland. There was much talk in the foreign media why the right-wing party SVP won the national elections this year (by the way, none of my clients were from the SVP but they still won their campaigns). At the national level, the SVP won because it was the only party that understands the concept of message politics. They are the only party that offered a coherent and appealing message based on

scientific and sound research. The sad part is that the center-right parties have all the money in the world to campaign but they wasted their funds on bullshit rhetoric and empty motherhood statements.

2. Start planning early

There are plenty of reasons why politicians don't want to start campaign early. Oftentimes, they think that the effect of early "campaigning" will be lost until Election Day. Other politicians don't want to campaign early because they are busy with their day-to-day affairs. Another reason – probably the most honest one – is that politicians often don't want to spend the money for early campaigning. Forget about all of that! When I came to the Philippines the first time more than four years ago, a local politician in Quezon City (unfortunately, I don't remember his name) told me the following lesson which I strongly agree with: "*Train early, work hard and you will have an easy fight*". Now, by early campaigning I don't mean running around, holding rallies and saying "vote for XY". What I mean is laying the ground work, defining a message, neutralizing weaknesses and showing contrast to potential opponents.

A good example for this are the two new GO Senators **Escudero** and **Cayetano**. Both had appealing messages ("*I am against GMA*" in the first case, "*I challenge the first gentleman*" in the second case). Both portrayed themselves as young and dynamic leaders, non-trapos and both were de facto campaigning for the Senate at least since the "hello garci" scandal in July 2005 – almost two years before the election.

Especially, what a candidate should do early on is to neutralize weaknesses. A good example for this are candidates such as **Tessie Aquino Oreta** or **Chavit Singson**. Anyone that would have bothered to listen to the political demand knew that those candidacies would have needed a tremendous amount of work and time in order to have a realistic fighting chance. In both cases, the campaigns that they ran (local government for Singson, advocacy for women and children for TAO) were not wrong per se but the candidates had major baggage. Remember: it takes more time and money to change public opinion than to define it in the first place. Going into the same direction, I am convinced that Fresnedi in Muntinlupa could have won if they started earlier to build up the successor.

The same is true in Switzerland. One of my clients, a Congresswoman and Vice-President of the Social Democratic Party, was very vulnerable. She ultimately won but the race would have been much easier if she had started earlier. Having learned the lesson, she immediately invited her core group to a meeting after winning reelection. As we political consultants like to say: “after the election is before the election”.

3. Don't believe early and/or unscientific surveys

Early surveys don't matter because they only reflect the awareness of the respective candidates (which can and will change easily). As a result, early surveys have always a bias in favour of established names. In the July 06 Pulse Asia survey, **John Osmeña** was shown in the magic twelve. It was at that time that I predicted in a rotary speech and to a close aide of the campaign that Osmeña will not be (re-) elected. Being an incumbent or having an established name and running at twelve a year before the election means you got a serious problem and need some drastic measures. I never saw such measures from the Osmeña campaign.

Need some more proof? Take a look at the Swiss Governor's election in Zurich (the richest and most populous province of Switzerland). Early surveys showed the race as a statistical death head between the green and the moderate center-right FDP party. On Election Day, the results were clearly in favour of the FDP (for which I was working). Ignorant people often think that the surveys are wrong. They are not wrong but the interpretation of the numbers is wrong!

This serves as an important lesson for 2010: the vote share of a candidate does not matter in early surveys. What matters at this point in time is qualitative research to measure the underlying dynamics of a candidacy, figure out the right message, measure their potential to grow as well as their potential vulnerabilities.

Another problem are unscientific surveys that most of the time, show the one commissioning the survey ahead. It is absolutely crucial to have accurate numbers (even if they are painful) so that one can adjust the strategy. In addition to overconfidence, I think that relying on wrong numbers is the most important reason why competitive candidates end up losing.

4. The time of celebrities in politics (the way we knew it) is over

Another important lesson of the 2007 election is that the time of actors and celebrities in politics the way we knew it is over. Voters remember the Estrada Presidency, they did not embrace the candidacy of FPJ as one could have expected. Voters dropped Sotto, knocked out Manny and the campaign of Cesar **Montano** never really gained steam. What other proof does one need? Now, actors and celebrities still bring an important asset to a campaign, namely, high awareness. This saves the first 50 million Pesos in a nationwide campaign. But nowadays, a celebrity candidate needs to make the case that he is able to perform the job. He needs to tell voters what he will do for them and voters want them to run for local office first and learn their work. By the way, the same is true in Switzerland. Businessmen and sportsmen who run for office have to show voters that they are willing to learn the ropes in politics – even if they are well-known and well-funded. **The new Vice Mayor of Manila and the reelected Vice Mayor of Quezon City are good examples of how celebrity candidates should run.** In fact, a politician shared a survey with me in which I saw black and white how little a Pacquiao endorsement brings. Yes, celebrities attract the crowd, make the girls scream....but when it's all said and done, voters make a political statement on Election Day.

5. Bank heavily on paid advertising

The possibility to run tv commercials has fundamentally changed Philippine elections. Rallies are important in terms of local machinery, organization and mobilizing the base, but in terms of public opinion, it's the equivalent of preaching to the chorus. News coverage is good, but there are two problems with it: one, it is hard to get it, and two, the campaign can't control the message. In most cases, the media is only interested in pseudo scandals, celebrities, conflict, blood, poll numbers, chizmis...but certainly not in a campaign message. In paid advertising, however, a candidate can communicate what he wants and he is addressing millions of tv watchers. Advertising is an unwelcomed guest; it's hitting those who don't want to be hit.

A good example for this point is the re-election campaign of Senator Edgardo Angara. Early Pulse Asia and SWS surveys showed him vulnerable but despite joining Team Unity, he was re-elected at rank seven and as the best TU candidate. One of the main reasons for this is the smart and early use of television advertising. During an election campaign, there is so much noise going on that it is extremely hard to push through the

clutter and fully communicate a message to voters. One peso spent in advertising before the campaign is equivalent to ten pesos spent during the official campaign.

6. Stay loyal to your image (or change it slowly)

In my opinion, the **Defensor** campaign made a fundamental mistake in terms of message and positioning. Unlike many other candidates, he had a clearly established image at the beginning of the campaign, namely being the man of the President. One cannot be the President's man and political operator for years and then all of sudden, a few weeks before the election, present himself as everybody's buddy. That lacks credibility. In my opinion, he should have done two things. First, run on the theme of loyalty. "*You may not always agree with me, but you know where I stand. And you know my loyalty*". I think such a line could be communicated in a very appealing way since Filipinos want their politicians to be loyal but by far not all of them actually are. Second, I would have used what Defensor did as the President's man (as housing Minister, projects, qualities...) to show readiness for the job of a Senator. The campaign did it at the end, but it was too late. Too much time and money was already wasted and there was too much clutter going on to still fully communicate a message.

As of what I know, the purpose of the early ads was to humanize Defensor and to show a human face. There is actually some legitimacy to that plan. I think it would have been good to do that. But the ads didn't do the job. It would have been better to use some key PR events, high profile and personal interviews for that purpose (rather than a 30 second ad). Also, it should have been done much earlier when it would have been more credible (rather than right after Defensor orchestrating the TU ticket...showing him again as a political and partisan operator).

What does all this mean for 2010? And, who is ahead?

Ok, ok...enough about the past. What does all of that mean for the 2010 elections? At first, it is important to distinguish the different dynamics of the two elections. A Senate campaign is like a beauty contest, meaning that a candidate tries to appeal for votes but is not explicitly running against one or several other candidates. This will be totally different in the Vice Presidential and Presidential elections in 2010 when the likes of Lacson, Legarda and Villar will potentially run against each other. In this sense, a wannabe candidate for 2010 should have used the 2007 election not only to build up a

momentum but also to neutralize weaknesses. This takes a lot of time and an important rendezvous such as the 2007 election should have been used strategically in that way.

Out of the Senatorial candidates in 2007 **Escudero** can legitimately use his result to bring him into play as a candidate in 2010. Every Senatorial candidate that goes from zero to second place is a legitimate candidate for higher office. Other than Escudero, only **Lacson** has in my opinion successfully used the campaign to prepare for 2010. It is clear that Lacson is a very polarizing figure. His supporters would swim across the ocean to vote for him, but many other people would never vote for him because of his tough image. Therefore, his homework in view of 2010 consists of humanizing his image. Every second of the Lacson ads did just that. TV watchers saw Lacson smiling, Lacson hugging a baby, Lacson talking about hope, Lacson waving to people. It is exactly what he needed to do and this is part of the reason why he landed at rank three.

On the other hand, Legarda and especially **Villar** have in my opinion not used the 07 election in terms of preparation for 2010. Despite massive (television) spending, the sitting Senate President landed on rank 4 – clearly disappointing. What went wrong in that campaign? In terms of actors, music, technical details and so on the Villar ads were perfect. Also, unlike the above mentioned cases such as Magsasay, Pichay and Defensor, Villar did have a clear message, namely focusing on his humble background. The only problem is that this is nothing new to most voters. It is a perfect thing to begin a campaign with and every day during the campaign I watched tv and waited when the next Villar ad will come. I waited for an ad focusing on what will be next, what he will do next for Filipinos...but such an ad never ran.

The case of Loren **Legarda** is a typical problem of the expectation game. If nobody would have talked about Legarda topping the Senatorial list (such as it was the case for Escudero), it would have been seen as a big success. But since everybody was expecting it, it was only seen as a moderate success. Actually, the fact that a first time Senate candidate such as Escudero could almost endanger her number one position was seen as a weakness on the part of Legarda. Also, her ads were not used to neutralize weaknesses or sharpen her message and image. They simply showed her. In the 07 Senate campaign, this was enough because simply showing Legarda is already a comparative advantage in a “beauty contest” such as the Senate and in a field of (more or less old) men. A Presidential campaign, when voters have to choose out of different options will be very different, however. In 2004, she had the benefit of running

against a gentleman who was hesitant to attack her openly. I can easily imagine someone like Senator Gordon, for example, behaving differently in 2010.

This being said, **I strongly think that it is still everybody's game for 2010. It is way too early to seriously predict a winner.** What is sure however, is that the 2007 elections also (painfully) illustrated the strong opposition mood that is in the country. The election of Trillanes (that, admittedly, few saw coming) is a perfect illustration. If 2010 shall be a better year for the administration than 2007, the administration should come up with a coherent and smart game plan on how to fight that mood and on how to communicate the work of the GMA administration (even) better. The current ads ("I feel the progress") are a good step into the right direction.

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