

Navalny's Campaign to be Moscow Mayor

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Abstract

According to the official results of the Moscow mayoral elections held on September 8, 2013, acting Mayor Sergei Sobyenin won 51.37% of the vote and his main challenger Alexey Navalny won 27.24% with a turnout of 32%. By crossing the 50% barrier, Sobyenin avoided a runoff in which he would have competed head-to-head with the second place finisher. Navalny refused to recognize the results, claiming that Sobyenin and his Kremlin allies have falsified the totals to ensure that there would be no second round. While the consequences of the elections for Russia's political system remain unclear, it is possible to evaluate the nature of Navalny's campaign. This article compares Navalny's technique to President Barack Obama's 2012 reelection effort, arguably one of the most sophisticated campaigns yet run in the history of democracy. Navalny's efforts naturally fall short given the harsh conditions in which he was working, but ultimately he has presented an alternative to the existing system in Russia.

Setting a Standard

Regardless of the results in the September 8, 2013, Moscow mayoral election, Alexei Navalny ran the most sophisticated electoral campaign that Russia has seen. While it is seemingly absurd to compare his efforts to those of Barack Obama's 2012 presidential campaign, Obama 2012 marks the state of the art in electoral campaigning so far achieved in electoral democracies and sets a standard against which other efforts can be measured. Placing Navalny's campaign in this context shows its strengths and weaknesses. As Navalny has himself declared, "Now we are objectively setting a new standard for campaigns in Russia."

Navalny and his campaign manager themselves point to many influences from American practice. Navalny told *Vedomosti* that he designed his meetings with constituents based on the meetings of the Baltimore mayor with his voters depicted in the TV show "The Wire." Navalny also mentioned meeting with former Democratic Party leader Howard Dean during his time at Yale in 2010 and other American politicians. Navalny seemed to gather from these conversations that campaigning is relentless hard work and that attracting a strong volunteer base can make up for a lack of money.

Of course, there is nothing new under the sun in the world of campaigning. Quintus Tullius Cicero laid out the most essential strategies in 64 BC in advising his brother Marcus Tullius Cicero, who was running for consul, the highest office in the Roman Republic. The rise of the Internet has not really affected the basic contours of any campaign.

Differences between the Obama and Navalny Campaigns

The differences between Obama's presidential campaign and Navalny's mayoral effort go beyond the fact that Obama was seeking a second term as president of a coun-

try with a population of more than 300 million, running with the advantages of being the incumbent and a solid political party organization behind him, and Navalny strove to unseat the chief executive of a city of 11.5 million. The contexts were totally different: Freedom House rates Russia as "not free" and Navalny campaigned under the constant threat of imprisonment.

A crucial difference is the amount of time that the two campaigns had to prepare before the actual voting began. Obama had four years to rethink the approach that he had employed in his successful 2008 campaign. He used this period to build a sophisticated new data platform called "Dashboard" that allowed him to integrate vast quantities of information held by the campaign to turn out Democratic Party voters in the most effective manner possible. Mayor Sergei Sobyenin and President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow would hold a mayoral election out of the blue on June 4, when Sobyenin unexpectedly resigned, and scheduled the elections for September 8. This gave any potential opposition candidate just three months to organize a campaign. Additionally, those three months were over the summer, when many Muscovites leave the city to enjoy the pleasures of their country houses. September 8 is only the beginning of what could be considered a normal political season. By design, the mayoral election was neither free nor fair and could not provide any real legitimacy to Sobyenin, whose power rests on Putin's support.

The media is similarly important. The closely allied federal and city authorities control the major national and city television broadcasters that reach the Moscow electorate. State-controlled television defined the overall context of the race and Navalny had no way to influence it directly. News programs heavily favored Sobyenin. However, it is unclear how much of a factor television was in determining the results. The Obama campaign claims that its television advertising in the summer of

2012 defined Mitt Romney as an out-of-touch business tycoon and that he was never able to shake this image, contributing heavily to his defeat. In contrast, Statistician Nate Silver argues that the ads had no impact on Romney's and Obama's relative standing in the polls and therefore had little impact. In Russia, Ellen Mickiewicz's detailed research on television audiences shows that viewers do not necessarily believe what they see and there is no way to know how they will act on the information broadcast by the television networks.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Obama and Navalny campaigns in this technology-driven era was the massive database of voters that the Obama campaign had built. Voter profiles compiled by campaign managers included information gathered by volunteers, public records, and social media about how committed a voter is to the Democratic Party and how likely he or she is to vote. Using this sophisticated data, the Obama campaign could target its door-to-door efforts and phone calling to irregular voters who are leaning Democratic, and would be more likely to turn out if the campaign contacted them and encouraged them to cast a ballot. This database allows to campaign to avoid wasting time and resources contacting die-hard Democrats who will vote even without being contacted and citizens who will never vote for the Democratic Party no matter how hard the campaign might try to persuade them.

Navalny had nothing like this kind of database and therefore could not target his resources on turning out lukewarm and inconsistent voters. Rather he had to reach out to the masses, getting his campaign newspapers into the hands of as many people as possible in the hopes of reaching as many of those he needed to turn out as possible. In fact, when Sobyanin sent out a mass mailing to 2.44 million Muscovites, apparently targeting older voters whom he expected to support him, Navalny filed a complaint with the Moscow Electoral Commission complaining about Sobyanin's allegedly illegal use of personal data for campaign purposes. Navalny claimed that such a tactic was only legal if each individual had authorized the Sobyanin campaign to use his personal data. In the U.S. such information is part of the public record and freely available to all political parties.

Modern American campaigns spend only tiny amounts of money on hard copy paper newspapers or other literature. Beyond television advertising, the focus instead is on personal contacts, whether going door-to-door or on the phone. Grassroots activists and precinct-level party volunteers may disagree with this approach, but the campaign managers simply respond "yard signs and flyers don't vote." Navalny printed two newspapers, each with a print run of 4 million copies, and distributed them throughout the city. Additionally, his staff prepared

raion level newspapers that they distributed in the areas where Navalny spoke. Many of the volunteers who created these papers work in the pro-Kremlin media for their day jobs. Additionally, Navalny had distributed at least 900 banners that people could hang from their balconies, the Moscow equivalent of American suburban yard signs.

Making the Most of What They Give You

Even though Navalny's campaign had nothing like the money or information resources of the Obama effort, he has redefined the nature of Russian campaigning. After this campaign, it will be increasingly difficult for the authorities to rely on their control of Russia's political institutions and voter manipulation.

While new for the city of Moscow and national politics in Russia, Navalny's efforts drew on local precedents. In some respects it resembled the 1990 Democratic Russia campaign for the Moscow City Soviet, with the upstarts outmaneuvering the incumbent Communists. In 2009 Boris Nemtsov ran for mayor of Sochi, already deep into preparations for hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics. He likewise had no access to television broadcasts, nor could he rent space to meet with constituents. Instead, he printed campaign material and distributed it on local bus lines and street markets. The authorities could not simply remove him from the ballot because international attention was focused on the race given Sochi's Olympic status. While that campaign sparked some interest among Russian and international observers, most analysts assumed that Nemtsov was fighting a quixotic battle. Nemtsov's populist campaign promised to freeze the level of municipal fees, cut the number of bureaucrats in the city, prevent developers from building wherever they pleased, and generally return power to the local level by eliminating the ability of the governor's aides to rule the city capriciously. Ultimately, acting Sochi Mayor Pakhomov won 77 percent of the vote, while Nemtsov captured only 13.5 percent with just 39 percent of the potential voters participating in the elections. Navalny doubled this result in Moscow.

Like Nemtsov, Navalny had to figure out how to run a campaign with no access to television and constant harassment from the authorities. Moreover, he had to do it in a city about 33 times as large as Sochi. Navalny had no choice but to find ways to address the voters directly.

Like Obama and Nemtsov in Sochi, Navalny's key task was to turn out the voters who support him. The higher the turnout among his base, the greater Navalny's chances to win. That is why Sobyanin scheduled the campaign and elections for the summer time, hoping that good weather would divert attention from the balloting.

The most visible element of Navalny's campaign was the giant cubes that he placed in strategic locations

throughout Moscow, mostly near popular metro stations. Not only did the cubes serve as giant billboards, they were meeting places for volunteers who gathered there and then entered the metro system to distribute Navalny campaign material and flyers to metro riders. Like Obama's campaign, which assembled a group of whiz kids from Silicon Valley, Navalny had a team of software engineers who designed a map showing where all the cubes were located so voters could easily find them (<http://cube.navalny.ru/>).

Navalny himself traveled around the city, holding 3–4 meetings with voters a day. These meetings usually took place outside with Navalny standing in front of a crowd. Judging by the pictures that Navalny and his team posted on his Livejournal blog (<http://navalny.livejournal.com/>), the number of people who showed up for the events grew dramatically as the campaign progressed; the initial gatherings of several dozen swelled to crowds of several thousand by the end of August. The campaign had a staff of 50 people to organize these events, which included everything from microphones for Navalny to chairs for senior citizens who came to listen. Navalny did not announce his rallies publicly in advance—rather his volunteers distributed fliers near where the meeting was planned so that only locals would show up, minimizing the number of outside journalists and provocateurs. These rallies took place in many of the big new suburbs far from the center of town. Most of the people who showed up were supportive of the campaign.

Debates are a typical part of campaigns in functioning democracies, but in Russia's system Putin has traditionally refused to participate in them and Sobyenin also declined to face off with Navalny and the four additional contenders. Sobyenin's campaign manager claimed that he preferred to engage in "direct contact with Muscovites." Without Sobyenin, the five other candidates participated in two debates that were shown on Moscow television stations that have smaller viewerships than TV Tsentr, which is technically a federal, not a local, channel and therefore opted out of broadcasting the encounters. (The debates were on Moscow 24 and the second one is here—<http://www.m24.ru/videos/26321>). After two debates, Navalny decided not to participate in further encounters with the non-Sobyenin candidates. The Moskva-Doverie station that had been set to host the third debate planned to air it at 8am, when few people would be watching. In any case, these debates were not helping Navalny because they made it difficult for him to distinguish himself from the other candidates when the incumbent was not participating.

Navalny makes extensive use of the Internet and this is where he is likely to reach many of his voters. The most important Internet resources for his outreach efforts are the website of the Ekho Moskvyy radio station

(<http://echo.msk.ru/>) and Dozhd' Internet TV (<http://tvrain.ru/>). The Ekho Moskvyy site is one of the most popular news sites in Russia and Navalny's posts typically receive 50,000 hits or more, generating hundreds of comments. His material appears at the top of the page, where it is easily seen by viewers. He frequently appears on Dozhd' shows and his events are well covered there. Additionally, Navalny regularly updates his Livejournal website. On Twitter he had 393,313 followers as of September 2, 2013. The Twitter account, in particular, was a non-stop flood of cartoons, pictures, and other memes, made by the candidate's tech-savvy legions of fans, celebrating the campaign and the effort to bring change to Putin's Russia. Vkontakte, Twitter and Facebook were excellent sources for recruiting volunteers.

A key insight of the George W. Bush campaign was that people are more likely to vote for a candidate if one of their family members or friends advises them to do so. Such family and friends style persuasion is much more effective than typical campaign outreach. Obama worked closely with Facebook to identify ways for volunteers who supported Obama to reach out to their friends via social networks who might not be registered to vote or who might not support the candidate on their own. Navalny has done something similar. Since he lacked the data-gathering technology that Obama deployed, he asked his supporters to send messages to people whom they had never met among the 4 million Vkontakte users registered in Moscow, more than 50 percent of the 7.2 million voters in the city (<http://moskva.navalny.ru/>). Since Vkontakte's spam filters block users from sending more than 20 messages a day to those who are not on their friend list, Navalny called on his supporters to send out such messages every day.

Navalny's campaign is financed mainly by small donations from a large number of contributors. By the end of August, he had collected more than 100 million rubles (\$3 million). The average size of the donation was 3,500 rubles (\$10). Contributors to the campaign could donate on-line through Yandex Dengi (<https://money.yandex.ru/>), though Navalny pointed out that only 10 percent of the donors used that method to transfer money to him.

Attacking one's opponents has become a key part of all political campaigns. Navalny, known for his anti-corruption crusading focused on the expensive apartments owned by Sobyenin's two daughters. The elder daughter runs an interior decorating company that worked exclusively for government clients where her father held office. Such accusations fed the widely held view that Russia's leaders are corrupt and implicated Sobyenin in these practices (<http://echo.msk.ru/blog/navalny/1135174-echo/>). The regime likewise sought to portray Navalny as corrupt by prosecuting him for his work in advising the governor

in Kirov Oblast and apparent ownership of a company in Montenegro. Obama similarly sought to portray his opponent Mitt Romney as an unscrupulous businessman, though attacks on Romney's children were definitely out of the question.

Campaign staffing is also key. The head of Navalny's campaign is Leonid Volkov, a member of the Yekaterinburg City Duma and a specialist in information technologies. Other key players included Roman Rubanov, an auditor, and Maksim Kats, a member of the Shchukino Raion Council. Kats' Twitter account seems to be a major source of young volunteers for the campaign.

The campaign managed to attract 14,000 volunteers, however, the campaign has only managed to use 2,000 of these effectively. The failure to engage more of these people who are ready to work shows the organizational weakness of the campaign. However, the fact that Russians are willing to work on the campaign without being paid is a new development and the volunteer base will form the core of a new opposition after the election. Navalny has been able to attract many well-paid top managers from companies based in Moscow who take time off from their jobs to campaign for him. These people are willing to stand in front of the cubes and distribute literature, according to *New Times* Editor Evgenia Albats. Regardless of the outcome, the campaign built a network of politically engaged people who are prepared to work to improve conditions in their city and country.

Finally, Navalny is following Cicero's advice to bring hope to people. The campaign's main slogan was "Change Russia, Start with Moscow." Clearly Navalny has ambitions beyond Moscow. "I am a political actor, my ambition is to change life in the country," he says.

Other Candidates

Sobyanin's campaign was based on his control of the city administration, the city budget, funds to buy off influential persons or groups, access to television, and the cash in campaign war chest (84 million rubles or \$2.6 mil-

lion at the beginning of August, when Navalny had only 22 million rubles). In seeking to hold the election and allowing Navalny to compete, Sobyanin assumed from the start that he would win with "orchestrated competition" to use Nikolai Petrov's term. The national network NTV, for example, gave the mayor more than 20 minutes to explain to its audience all the new construction that he is overseeing in Moscow on August 29 (<http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/651379/>). This kind of coverage is simply not available to opposition candidates like Navalny. Sobyanin's main message was his competence in running the city and the amount of construction completed under his watch. His campaign was nowhere near as active as Navalny's in terms of generating voter activism and failed to turn out the mayor's base voters.

After the Elections

The election results showed that Navalny had mobilized more than 630,000 of Moscow's 7.2 million potential voters to support him. That is a respectable figure and could provide the basis for further growth. However, as the excitement of the election recedes, it will be difficult to maintain momentum. Assuming that he is not simply imprisoned by the authorities, Navalny has suggested that he would work with his supporters to introduce new legislation into the United Russia-controlled Moscow City Duma. Obama has not had much luck turning his campaign team into a sustainable political movement that can influence legislation between elections. His Organizing for America sends out numerous emails, but has little apparent impact in getting Congress to shift its positions on important issues like gun control or climate change. Obama did not even use the organization to round up support for striking Syria. Ultimately, though, Navalny's campaign demonstrated the presence of an activist group among Russian voters and presented the possibility of an alternative to the current system, something that Russia's rulers have worked fervently to prevent from coming into being.

About the Author

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Recommended Reading

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- Ellen Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.