

Loose Lips Win Elections

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HOW can we begin to understand why Mitt Romney outspent Mike Huckabee on television in Iowa by 6 to 1, yet lost, after watching his rival jump into the lead even before spending a single dollar on ads? How can we explain John Edwards's second-place finish despite his being outspent at least 3 to 1?

The answer is no less profound for being simple — what people say to one another can be as potent as what TV advertisements try to make them think.

While 30-second spots will remain a central means of persuasive communication, we have to recognize the power of individuals to influence one another. Our measurements of what Iowans were hearing from friends and colleagues reveal a critical dynamic that unfolded on caucus night.

Iowa was alight with TV advertising, but also alive with personal conversations about the candidates. Two weeks before the caucuses, 94 percent of Democrats and 85 percent of Republicans reported taking part in recent discussions concerning at least one candidate.

These conversations are more important than ever before. Public trust in all kinds of communication is eroding, with a notable exception: word of mouth. A Roper poll found the number of people who said they get good ideas and information from television ads declined from 1977 to 2003, while the number who said the same about word of mouth increased by 25 percentage points.

Our mid-December survey of Iowa voters found 38 percent saying they trusted information provided by TV ads, while 69 percent trusted “comments from friends, relatives and colleagues.”

It’s crucial to understand who is taking part in these conversations. Some participants are more important than others, transforming themselves from mere “talkers” into advocates — committed supporters who evangelize on behalf of their candidates.

Whether by chance or design, such citizen advocates created the explosive growth in support for Mike Huckabee and sustained John Edwards, even as both were vastly outspent by their opponents.

Our polling found 23 percent of Republicans were advocates for Mike Huckabee as against 16 percent for Mr. Romney. At 30 percent, Mr. Edwards had the most word-of-mouth advocates among Democrats by a narrow margin, which explains how he was able to remain competitive in Iowa despite his financial disadvantage.

Not all word of mouth is good. In fact, it was negative word of mouth that helped knock Hillary Clinton from her front-runner’s spot. Even when she was ahead, we found that two-and-a-half times as many Iowa Democrats were speaking ill of her than of Mr. Edwards. (Barack Obama nestled between the two.)

Money alone can’t purchase word of mouth. After all, Mr. Huckabee and Mr. Edwards were outspent by their opponents on political organizing, as well as advertising. But it can work outside Iowa. It doesn’t take much — just people willing to talk, and listen, to one another.

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