Running for President of Estonia: A Political Scientist in Politics

Rein Taagepera, *University of California, Irvine, and Tartu University*

My family left Estonia in 1944 when I was 11, and I had been forbidden by Soviet authorities to return to my native land until 1987. Two years later, opinion polls showed me among the most popular public figures, on the strength of my writings, radio talks and visits. In 1991 Tartu University asked me to start and administrate a western-style School of Social Sciences. The day I arrived, in late July 1992, the Popular Front asked me to run for president, and a week later I agreed. It was 50 days before the elections, to be held on September 20. The first polls in mid-August were disappointing: 12%. I brought it up to 23% by the election, still six critical percentage points short of second place. My campaign did make a difference: It blocked the incumbent head of state, Arnold Rüütel, who fell eight percentage points short of the required absolute majority. The choice between the two top candidates was thrown into the parliament, where the more reform-minded second-runner, Lennart Meri, was elected.

Political scientists running for top office have been rare in any country; was my theoretical knowledge of politics of any use in campaigning? Did the campaign alter my perception of politics? As a case study in democratization, an analysis of the Estonian presidential campaign as such is important, but a longer treatise belongs somewhere else. Here I'll concentrate on why I ran, how the campaign developed, and how political science and politics interacted.

Why I Ran

Ruled by Germans, Swedes and Russians since the 1200s, Estonia became independent in 1918, building a nation state based on a language very distinct from that of all its neighbors, except Finnish. The country was occupied and annexed by Stalin's USSR in 1940 and reclaimed independence in August 1991 (Taagepera 1993). The major political issues facing the newly-independent nation were how to democratize, how to reprivatize, and what to do with recent Russian colonists who form 30% of the population.

Building a democratic framework proceeded rather quickly, compared to other parts of the former Soviet empire (Taagepera 1991). In June 1992 a constitution was approved by referendum. The basic format is parliamentary, but the president has some veto and decree powers.

The most visible presidential candidate was Arnold Rüütel, who had been the communist figurehead head of state of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic ever since 1983, but who had shifted toward nationalism in tune with the popular mood. He was a likable person and had his moments of courage. However, he clearly preferred a strong presidency and quietly tried to undermine the Constitutional Assembly when the latter tilted toward parliamentarism. To me, he looked a poor choice as a supreme guardian of a constitution with which he disagreed.

The declared challenger was Lennart Meri, a former deportee who later created a name for himself as a writer and became the foreign minister in the cabinet of Popular Front leader Edgar Savisaar (1990-early 1992). He was ambassador to Finland when he accepted the nomination by Fatherland, an alliance of centrists who gradually had adopted more radical positions. A third candidate was Lagle Parek, leader of the radical Estonian National Independence Party; she was locked into a support base of about 5%.

My motives for running were mixed. There was vanity, but also my desire to block Rüütel. I could draw certain votes away from him that Meri with his intellectual style could not. Indeed, for this reason Meri and his crew urged me to run, even though I would also cut into his votes. The Popular Front leaders wanted a presidential candidate of their own in order to shore up their parliamentary campaign. The Popular Front had been the predominant force during Estonia's peaceful struggle for independence, but by the time it drafted me it had lost popularity, partly because it was considered too conciliatory toward Russian colonists.

The most positive reason for running was that I was the only candidate with practical experience in democracy. Under crisis conditions, I might find other solutions than to "save" democracy by establishing "temporary" restrictions. I admired King Carlos' behavior during the post-Franco years and wished to establish a similar tradition of a self-effacing head of state in the parliamentary spirit of the constitution. The factors discouraging my candidacy were the potential disruption of my family life in America and of my fledgling School of Social Sciences in Tartu, in case of victory. And if I ran, I was determined to go for victory, not just spoiling Rüütel. My wife's phone calls from California shifted from skeptical to neutral, and that may have tilted the balance.

Once I accepted, the Popular Front hurriedly collected the necessary 10,000 signatures, and I received my most direct campaign exposure debating with people at signature col-

lection stands. Too many seemed to yearn for Soviet-style social security, only without Russians and communists.

The Campaign

I campaigned harder than Rüütel, who understandably took a rose garden approach, or Meri, who felt uneasy with the crowds. I attended 35 public meetings within 40 days, all across Estonia. Planned by the Popular Front, they lasted longer than I had expected: three to four hours each, including the presentation of half a dozen Popular Front parliamentary candidates, plus musical and comical interludes. Written questions were invited from the audience, which ranged from 30 people to 1,000. I made it a point to have every single question read (or summarized) and answered, keeping a certain distance from the Popular Front: I never criticized them but did not hesitate expressing alternate views. Whenever possible, I shook hands before or after the meetings. This was new to Estonia and was well received. The meetings were more polite than I had expected. Only once was there heckling, and it was easily contained.

The press was something else: slurs abounded. I ignored them, trying to make positive news before the slurs had time to sink in. This was not easy. A speech I advertised in advance as my most important one received a dozen lines in the main dailies. The wildest rumors were disseminated by word of mouth, such as my having been a communist party member in California. I felt thankful to those who dared to ask me circumspectly at the meetings: "To what parties have you ever belonged?"

Nationwide exposure on radio and TV was severely restricted so that no candidate would have an advantage. Actually, it worked specifically against me, since both Rüütel and Meri had been in the news extensively before the campaign formally began, and Rüütel, as incumbent, continued to be. Candidates were allowed one 20-minute clip on TV, and there was a series of three panel discussions on the radio a month before the election and another three on TV during the final week.

My style in the radio debates was branded as harsh simply because I mentioned Rüütel's former communist party leadership (a hard fact his supporters preferred to forget) and Meri's tendency to be late. I sensed a typical village mentality, where it was acceptable to spread false rumors behind one's back (such as my being a communist) but bad form to mention awkward facts face-to-face. A candidate must adjust to the existing political norms, and in the final TV debate I followed the bland line of my competitors (after which some viewers complained about the lack of debate). I did well and eagerly waited for press comment to boost my advantage. Then came my biggest surprise during this campaign: absolutely no mention of the six hours of presidential TV debates in the press! Newspeople later were unable to explain to me why they had not thought it newsworthy.

The election results on September 20, 1992 were Rüütel 41.8, Meri 29.5, Taagepera 23.4, and Parek 4.2%. In the runoff, the newly elected parliament picked Meri over Rüütel, 59 to 31. Opinion polls suggested that, had I not run, enough of my voters might have gone for Rüütel to give him a first-round victory. It should be noted that in the Lithuanian presidential elections (February 14, 1993) the former communist leader did win over a single competitor who was a diplomat like Meri and an expatriate like me.

Why did I lose? Some analysts stressed my late start, noting that two more weeks could have changed the outcome. Others observed that Popular Front leader Savisaar had become so unpopular by the time his prime ministership ended (January 1992) that any tie to him was a liability. My own open preference for more generous citizenship laws was shared only by a minority. I also had two somewhat conflicting goals: blocking Rüütel from reaching 50% and, if successful in that, beating Meri for the second place and runoff. Since some opinion polls placed Rüütel as high as 48%, I avoided campaigning against Meri. Stringent rules on TV exposure worked against me, because my groundbreaking activities at Tartu University were not aired, making me look as if I had come to Estonia only to run for the top office. And people wanted a homegrown president, after a long period where outsiders had been imposed by Moscow. I received anguished apologies for not voting for me for this reason.

The Political Science Factor

Was my knowledge of political science of any help? It was, although it is difficult to separate my direct observation of U.S. elections from book knowledge. Awareness of how fickle politics can be kept up my self-confidence after the initial opinion poll gave me 12%. I was not shocked by unfair press reports, and campaigning was just as exhausting as I expected. Aware of the dangers of one catastrophic slip (Romney's "I was brainwashed") or emotional reaction (Muskie in New Hampshire), I never lost my temper during meetings nor with my campaign manager Peet Kask or other support staff.

However, being a political scientist was also a liability because some voters felt I knew too much about politics to be trusted with power, while some others thought a political scientist would run only for the sake of carrying out a political experiment. More seriously connected to my profession, I felt obliged to educate an electorate new to democracy, although I knew that a campaign is no time for education.

Were my views of politics altered? Surprisingly little, but much of what I already knew became more vivid: the shock of being suddenly trailed by security personnel; the effort to keep awake during a crucial radio debate coming on top of campaign meetings; reproducing for the dozenth time an emotional trembling of voice at the hardship of retirees that was genuine the first time around. Above all, awareness that one can be accused of dirty politics when one least expects it.

People invariably ask me whether I will run again. How could I know, several years ahead? Do I regret having run? Certainly not. Would I have regretted, if I had declined? Possibly.

References

Taagepera, Rein. 1991. "Building Democracy in Estonia." *PS* 24: 478-81.

Taagepera, Rein. 1993. *Estonia: Return to Independence.* Boulder: Westview.

About the Author

Rein Taagepera

Rein Taagepera is Professor of Social Science at the University of California, Irvine, and Dean of the School of Social Sciences at Tartu University, Estonia. He is coauthor of *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (1989).

Cartoon by Ants Kasesalu, reproduced in *Tallinn City Paper,* Autumn 1992.