

The Paradox of Networked Politics: A Critical Examination of Presidential Campaigns in the United States

Jennifer Stromer-Galley
Syracuse University
USA
jstromer@syr.edu

Abstract

Although new scholarship has heralded the digital affordances of social media on the Internet to transform political activism in the United States, the same transformation has not occurred in presidential campaigns. Campaign practices in the United States have used social media to harness citizens in the service of winning the election, not in better empowering and engaging citizens in the political process. Thus, although political elections are essential to a democracy, political campaigns are decidedly undemocratic.

Keywords

Social media, political communication, political campaigns, activism

Argument Overview

Recent books and monographs have extolled the power of activists to organize in new ways through Digital Communication Technologies (DCTs) channeled through the Internet, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (see, Karpf, 2012, and Earl and Kimport 2011 for example). These books emphasize the affordances of DCTS--low cost, high speed, the bridging of distance, in short the opportunity of enhanced networked interaction--as opportunities that enable collective action. Similarly, recent monographs have examined how presidential campaigns are deploying DCTs to energize and mobilize citizens in the political campaign process, looking at the socio-technical systems and the ways that they have shaped the organizational and campaign practices of Democratic Party politics in the United States (see Kreiss, 2012).

For the excitement and hope that these writings offer for thinking about citizen involvement in the political process in the United States, this paper challenges that optimism. Specifically, examining the practices of political elites, manifested in presidential campaigns as they used DCTs in their campaigns over five election cycles, underscores that campaigns use DCTs not for emancipatory aims of fully engaging and promoting democratic participation by citizens but in the service of getting a candidate elected. Put another way, the end to which DCTs are put in political campaigns is to win, not to transform citizenship and political participation in the United States. Paradoxically, presidential campaigns are decided undemocratic affairs. The hope for a stronger democracy through digital media by better engaging citizens with elites (Barber, 1984), at least in the context of campaigns, has not come to pass.

Since 1996 U.S. presidential campaigns have experimented with and aimed to perfect the use of DCTs, to connect with and mobilize supporters. This paper provides a historical tracing of the shifting practices by presidential campaigns in the United States over five election cycles, and examines the challenges campaigns face as they opened up their campaigns to greater citizen involvement through the affordances of DCTs while they simultaneously worked to control these citizen activists and supporters.

The paper details interviews I have conducted with over a dozen campaign staff as well as describes campaigning practices using a close examination of their uses of DCTs. The analysis in the paper helps illuminate the evolving attitudes and approaches by campaigns in adopting to DCTs, highlighting the complex dynamic of traditional practices of political campaigns when confronted with potentially new communication technologies to interact with voters.

Practices Across Five Campaign Cycles

The 1996 presidential campaigns in the U.S. were the first to use the World Wide Web. They focused on the use of their websites to channel their relatively static message to supporters unfiltered by the mainstream news media. Campaigns made some use of email lists to disseminate or push their message out, and Bob Dole's website even experimented with gamification and sticky elements to pull people back to the website. Yet, even that experimentation was viewed by campaign managers as a minor occupation with little weight compared with television, event, and debate strategizing. Campaign staff viewed as potentially harmful the interactivity that DCTs would invite between campaigns and the public if they were to more openly use message boards or chat forums (see Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Greater innovations occurred in 2000 as the internet diffused more broadly within the U.S. Candidates Steve Forbes, Al Gore, and John McCain held versions of online town halls during the surfacing and primary stages of the campaign. Forbes, for example, held a typical dinner fundraiser in which he invited online followers to contribute a nominal amount to have a virtual seat at the table. They watched streaming video on the Web of the fundraiser (a still noteworthy feat in 2000), and sent questions to the candidate, some of which he answered during a question and answer session. McCain held a similar event after winning the New Hampshire primary. Other aspects of interactivity through DCTS were otherwise limited. Campaign staff continued to view DCTs as risky and problematic with regard to how to control their message and their supporters.

The 2004 campaign provided the first noteworthy adoption of social media. Howard Dean's campaign is given the greatest credit for his Blog for America, an open-comment blog in which campaign staff wrote posts and in the comments section supporters organized and also debated with opponents the virtues of the Dean campaign. Yet, Dean was not alone. General Wesley Clark's supporters heavily used the blogosphere to launch a grassroots campaign in support of a Clark presidency. Indeed, in the Draft Wesley Clark social movement, we see the conflict that arises when the netroots is integrated into a traditional presidential campaign. The Dean and Draft Clark campaigns recognized the power of social media to cultivate supporters who could be empowered to work on behalf of the campaign, in a virtuous circle of support breeding more support through networks of acquaintances and friends.

The 2008 presidential campaign is heralded as the pinnacle of social media use in a political campaign. Of note, many of the same campaign staff that worked on Dean's campaign worked on Barack Obama's campaign (Kreiss, 2012). They continued to experiment with the use of social media, from Facebook and Twitter to YouTube and blogs, to promote the candidate and encourage supporters to organize on the campaign's behalf. The Obama campaign was not the only pioneer, however. Mike Huckabee and Ron Paul's campaigns effectively fostered the blogosphere and other social media to generate buzz and money for their candidates, propelling them well into the primary season. The 2012 campaigns exhibited little by way of grand experimentation of the sort seen in the Dean campaign, but rather further honed effective practices of using social media to channel and carefully craft targeted messages to maximize financial contributions and activate supporters.

Conclusions and Implications

Of note in examining the history of presidential campaigns and DCTs is the shifting attitudes by campaign staff. In 1996 and even in 2000, experimenting with DCTs was deemed risky by campaign managers and staff. The novelty brought them to use DCTs but the purpose was unclear. The thought of direct interaction with voters invoked consternation by most campaign managers used to reaching voters through the controlled medium of TV advertising. The Dean and Clark campaigns exhibited an entrepreneurial spirit made possible by their insurgent status. By 2008 both insurgent and frontrunner campaigns used social media extensively. Having witnessed the success of the 2004 Dean campaign, the 2008 campaigns began to perfect the use of DCTs to greater effect in contributions and support. By 2012, the digital media staff had an equal seat at the table with staff focused on television, debate, and event strategy.

Yet, for the innovations and shifts in presidential campaign practices to integrate digital media, an emancipatory transformation of presidential campaigns has not come to pass. Instead, presidential campaign staff have worked to harness DCTs to help get the candidate elected while also using social media to involve citizens in the work of getting the candidate elected. The enthusiasm and hope that DCTs are changing the nature of political activism in the United States does not fully extend to traditional political rituals, like elections. Campaigns use DCTs to continue to manage citizens in the service of winning.

References

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the internet age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Karpf, D. (2012). *The MoveOn effect: The unexpected transformation of American political advocacy*. Oxford University Press.

Kreiss, D. (2012). *Taking our country back: The crafting of networked politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*. Oxford University Press.

Stromer-Galley, J. (2000). Online interaction and why candidates avoid. *Journal of Communication*, 50, 111-132.