Political Campaigning, Elections and the Internet

Comparing the US, UK, France and Germany
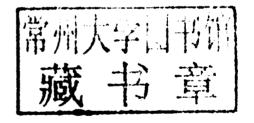
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The Internet first played a minor role in the 1992 US Presidential Election, and has gradually increased in importance so that it is central to election campaign strategy. However, election campaigners have, until very recently, focused on Web 1.0: websites and email.

Political Campaigning, Elections and the Internet contextualises the US Presidential Campaign of 2008 within three other contests: France 2007; Germany 2009; and the UK 2010. In offering a comparative history of the use of the Internet as an election tool, the authors are able to test the optimistic view that the Internet is transforming elections while also mapping the role the Internet plays and performs for parties and candidates. Lilleker and Jackson offer in-depth analysis demonstrating how interactive Web 2.0 online tools, including weblogs, social networking sites and file-sharing sites, are utilised and evaluate the role of these tools in the marketing and branding of parties and candidates.

Examining the interactivity between candidate, party and voter, this important book will be of strong interest to students and scholars of political science, elections, international relations and political communication. It will be of value to those within public relations, marketing and related communication and media programmes.

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Preface

We suggest that elections can be best understood by understanding different aspects. Campaigns can be seen as consisting of several discrete but interconnected elements, as well as the sum of all elements. Audiences, potential voters perhaps, can accidentally or intentionally be exposed to all elements, or one small aspect of the campaign. Elections are part of a competitive process between political actors such as political parties and individual candidates, at national, regional and local level. These actors seek to gain competitive advantage, and this drives them to consider using and mastering a range of new and long-standing techniques and tools. Yet, at the same time elections play a key role in liberal democracies, as they are very often the main way individual citizens participate in politics. Therefore, winning is not alone all that matters. Elections may have an obvious short-term goal of maximising support at the voting booth, but there are also longer-term impacts that the conduct of campaigns can have on attitudes towards, and trust in, the political and democratic process. Thus, it is argued that how political actors interact with citizens in chasing the quick sell, can have a key bearing on the long-term health of each individual country's democracy. Elections are health checks of the body politic, telling us how strong individual political actors are vis-à-vis their competitors, but also the overall heartbeat of the political system.

In the past ten years or so there has been increasing interest in the potential impact of the Internet on the body politic, by and large outside of election campaigns. At the same time, there has also been growing interest in the impact of the Internet on the techniques used by professional campaigners during the short election period. This book has arisen because we were interested in assessing both of these drivers of interest in election campaigns. Thus far it seems we have to either look at the impact of the Internet on democracy between elections, or how the Internet is utilised as a tool for potentiating the maximisation of vote winning. We seek, however, to see if the study of online election campaigns has to be an either/or situation. In short, we are seeking to assess whether we can now identify a discrete Elections 2.0 which combines the practical needs of the permanent campaign with those of encouraging greater elector-elected dialogue between voters and the elected.

The ideas contained within this book have been several years in incubation prior to their reaching maturity. We had previously focused essentially on the

use of e-campaigns in one country, the UK, and that mostly in 'peacetime' between elections. However, we felt that this provided only a partial insight, a sense which was magnified by the fact that the Internet has no national boundaries. Moreover, we felt that the development of the Internet was potentially changing political discourse. From the very outset, debates have centred on the extent to which the Internet and associated technologies would enhance democracy, but the debates have primarily concerned their possible impact on governance and democracy. We feel that, potentially, Web 2.0 might move on this debate so that within election campaigns, political participation is not limited to voting. This book seeks to test whether there is some substance to this view, or whether it is naïve 'pie in the sky' thinking.

In raising these big questions regarding participation, we considered two different lines of enquiry. The first direction of research relates to the nature of campaigning and the use of technology for campaigning purposes. Campaigning within corporate, pressure group, not-for-profit and political contexts, constantly seeks an edge and over time has adapted to a range of communication tools. Equally, our context of practice, political communication, has itself adapted to the challenges of new tools and technologies; the impact of television for example had profound impacts upon the prioritisation of the visual over the rhetorical. The latest technologies have been used to enhance the online environment. The Internet is now firmly embedded as a tool of political communication, but largely has played a peripheral function, having historically a limited role and so little tangible impact upon the behaviour of political actors. Web 2.0 tools are significantly different to those of the Web 1.0 era and the early days of the static web page focused Web presences. We thus sought to assess whether the social uses of Web 2.0, and the associated big ideas, will lead to a change in political communication, as the online user appears to have learned to expect a qualitatively and quantitatively different, more participatory, experience.

Our second line of enquiry focuses on the more incremental and evolutionary shifts in political communication which are driven by lesson learning between campaigns and nations. Specifically, we seek to capture evidence to test the notion that political campaigns do learn from one another and that the diffusion of innovations can, therefore, be mapped. This line of enquiry began as an MA student charged into the office of Darren Lilleker with the idea that elections must now be interactive, and the question of how interactivity could be measured. The conceptual framework developed for this, published elsewhere and revised, was extended and the data collection process expanded from selecting a sample to analysing whole websites. However, it was the overall idea that raised a number of empirical questions regarding both the strategic thinking underpinning the use of the Internet with political campaigns and so the experience that campaigns potentiated for visitors to their online presences. As the ideas for measurement developed, the need for comparative work became apparent to test for the embeddedness of Web 2.0 within the professional or marketised model of political election campaigning. Comparing the presidential election in France and the US was not uncontroversial due to the differing extents of Internet

penetration and traditions of campaigning, but broadening the comparison to parliamentary systems raised further problematics. Germany and the UK were included as test cases to test the Americanisation thesis to an extent, and given the interest in both countries that followed the innovative techniques employed by Obama, this appeared highly fertile territory. Thus, over numerous debates, some accompanied by a pint of good English real ale, and the helpful comments of reviews of our original proposal, the plan for research came together. The journey since has been an interesting one. Obama appeared to tear up the campaigning rule book, while European parties paid only lip service to ideas of Web 2.0: but this is only a fragment of the story we will be telling.

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1 Introduction

On Thursday 6 November 2008, Brian Eno, the musician and music producer, stated on the BBC's flagship current affairs discussion programme *Question Time*, that the 2008 US Presidential Election was the first to be won on the Internet. The relevance of Eno's observation is not that it demonstrates a unique insight he alone has, rather that an interested 'amateur' has come to this conclusion. This suggests that this impression of the impact of the Internet in 2008 is widespread. However, we do not need to take the view of just individuals such as Eno, as professionals also take a similar view. For example, *Wired* magazine (Stirland 2008) noted that Obama's victory was 'propelled by the Internet', suggesting that without Web technologies as a fundraising and organising tool he would not have won. Similarly, Greengard (2009) agrees that the Internet was central to Obama's electoral success, and moreover he concludes that how politicians and the public interact will never be the same again. That the Internet 'won' the election for Obama, and as a consequence other elections will never be the same again, is fast becoming a popular axiom. The purpose of this book is to contextualise the US Presidential Campaign of 2008 within three other contests: France 2007; Germany 2009; and the UK 2010. In offering a comparative history of the use of the Internet as an election tool, we are able to test the optimistic view that the Internet is transforming elections while also mapping the role the Internet plays and performs for parties and candidates.

The optimistic view of the Internet as a revolutionary tool is not one limited to either the US or Obama. It is argued that in 2005 the Internet, and so its use as a communication tool within society, for corporate communication and in our context of the election campaign, changed forever. It did so not because of a technological 'big bang', but because of a conceptual idea: Web 2.0. Up to this time, the Internet had gradually increased in use, importance and possibly impact during Western election campaigns. The Internet first played a role (albeit very minor) in an election in 1992, and this has increased at each subsequent series of elections. However, few commentators stuck their neck out and stated that this technology would transform election campaigning. Many commentators had suggested that the Internet might transform democracy, but far less credence was given to its importance on the process of how citizens decided to choose their representatives. The focus was on the impact of the Internet on governmental

decision making, not how the Internet shaped individual voters' decision making. However, the first few years of the twenty-first century saw a 'cranking up' in the use of the Internet within the body politic. In particular, as a number of new communication channels became socially popular, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, created in 2004, 2005 and 2006 respectively, pioneering political actors began to adopt these new technological developments. Taken alone, as technological improvements, these developments would have had a marginal impact on elections. However, if Web 2.0 cumulatively heralds a revolution in online communication, this may be driving changes in how organisations communicate in general, and so collectively transform the societal impact these technologies may have.

In 2005 O'Reilly published an article where he suggested that the nature and use of the Internet was radically changing. The era of Web 1.0, that of static content-driven websites was, he believed, being enhanced by a radically different phase in the Internet's short history. He suggested that Web 2.0 represented a fundamental change in how the Internet would be used. O'Reilly identified seven key themes,[1] the sum of which suggested that not only did new Web technologies offer increasingly interactive possibilities, but perhaps more importantly, the attitude of users towards the Internet was changing. This bottom-up approach that O'Reilly highlighted implied significant change for political actors in 'peacetime' between elections, but also the 'wartime' of election campaigns.

In the era of Web 1.0, the Internet played a secondary campaigning role in the four countries we will study. Probably the most advanced was in America, and certainly the experience of Howard Dean in the primaries did increase interest in the Internet (Chadwick 2006). Although the leading candidates did mobilise support and raise funds online (Cornfield 2004; Kim and Margolis 2005; Vaccari 2008), the Internet was still a second-order campaigning channel in the 2004 US Presidential Elections, lagging way behind the advertising and public relations use of mass communication channels. Probably next in importance was the UK, where during the 2005 General Election, the Internet became a mainstream campaigning channel for the first time, but its real impact was limited to the use of email lists to mobilise support offline (Coleman and Ward 2005; Jackson 2006a). At the German 2005 National Elections, use of the Internet was evolving but it was also a secondary communication tool (Albrecht 2007; Schweitzer 2008a, 2008b). Some way behind the other three countries was the experience of the 2002 French Presidential Election, where the Internet was a novelty. The inherent logic of O'Reilly's thesis is that the electoral world has changed forever, and that with the force for change from below, political actors cannot ignore the Internet; rather, they should embrace it in their election campaigns. If O'Reilly's analysis is correct, at the next tranche of elections the Internet would become a primary campaigning channel. We will explore the meaning of Web 2.0, and what impact this concept has had on elections. In short, we shall consider whether we have now entered the era of Elections 2.0. This book seeks to identify whether academics and practitioners can identify common lessons to be learnt from the four elections we will study. Therefore, the rest of this chapter

will help set up the key debates that this book will explore. First, we will explore the evolution and professionalisation of election campaigning in general, as this underpins our approach to understanding and assessing online election campaigns. This will lead on to a contextualisation of Web 2.0, its social implications and the potential impact that new technologies may have on the conduct of election campaigns.

Modern election campaigns

Textbooks on elections typically focus on their evolution, purpose, the electoral system applied and the type of government they result in (Katz 1997; Farrell 1997; Powell 2000). Whilst these factors are part of the contextual background of the four elections we study, and we will return to them in Chapter 2, our focus here is narrower. We are interested in how parties and candidates campaign during an election period. The Colombia School (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944) focused on the importance of communication and campaigning. This was, however, soon replaced by the Michigan School in America (Campbell *et al.* 1960), and the Nuffield studies in the UK (Butler and Rose 1960; Butler and Stokes 1971). The received wisdom at this historical juncture was that the campaign itself had little effect, but that the principal actors undertook campaigning techniques such as giving speeches, holding meetings and talking to the media because it was expected of them and it might have some minor impact. This view was the dominant academic view until the 1980s. However, this approach is now challenged, and increasingly, the view that election campaigns matter has support (Holbrook 1996; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2002).

The growing importance of election campaigns is not something that has happened by accident; a range of social and political factors have led to increased numbers of voters that need convincing of who to support at the ballot box. The received wisdom is thus to target these median voters, terms such as 'Average Joe', Middle England or in Germany the *ungebunden*, literally translated as the unattached (Zelle 1995; Lilleker 2003). The perceived importance of the floating or swing voter (*Wechselwähler*), who has little loyalty to any party and so may vote differently between elections, has increased since the late 1970s/early 1980s, which means that political actors now put greater emphasis on campaigning. We shall discuss three interrelated concepts which we believe are shaping the nature of election campaigns, and hence why, how and with what effect the Internet in general, and Web 2.0 applications in particular, may have: postmodern campaigning; the permanent campaign; and professional campaigning.

A number of commentators have suggested that the evolution of communication technologies has had an effect on political campaigning (Wring 1996; Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). We feel that this approach is best presented by Norris (2000), who suggests that campaigning in the past 100 years or so can be divided into three different ages dependent upon the communication channels and techniques used. In pre-modern campaigning, from the nineteenth century through to the Second World War, the dominant political communication

technique was direct communication, such as face-to-face meetings and public events (Maarek 1995; Norris 2000). Election campaigning was characterised by three features: a partisan press; reliance on local volunteers; and a short national campaign (Norris *et al.* 1999). The second, or modern era has been dominated by television (Harrop 1986; Kavanagh 1995; Denver and Hands 1998). Although mass communication had existed for some years with a national print media and radio, it was television which gradually became the mass communication tool of choice for politicians. From the late 1950s/early 1960s, political communication was essentially mediated (Swanson and Mancini 1996).

If the modern era of political campaigning has been dominant since the 1950s, a number of commentators (Wring 1996; Norris 2000) have suggested that from the early 1990s it has been challenged by a third era, the postmodern. Whilst not yet dominant, postmodern political campaigning has encouraged greater use of unmediated communication between citizen and politician. The postmodern era has been driven by three factors. First, television has become more fragmented, with significant increases in the number of terrestrial and satellite television stations (Norris *et al.* 1999). Second, to maintain market share the national press has had to become less partisan in nature (Norris *et al.* 1999), so political parties can no longer rely on communicating their messages through a few national newspapers. The third factor, the introduction of ICTs such as the fax, the Internet and text messaging, enables politicians to directly communicate with targeted groups of voters. The postmodern campaign uses a much wider range of techniques and tools. Norris's approach suggests that campaigning was originally based on direct communication between politicians and electors. This, then, was largely replaced by indirect communication via the mass media, and now direct communication is possible again. In postmodern campaigning, political actors will use both direct and indirect communication channels, building what Howard (2006) describes as a hypermedia campaign.

The second concept that we will consider is the 'permanent campaign', a phrase coined in 1980 by Blumenthal. There is significant support for the view that a permanent campaign is now a fact of American political life (Nimmo 1999; Ornstein and Mann 2000; Thurber 2002). Bill Clinton is credited with being the first permanently campaigning president (Jones 2000), and George W. Bush continued this process (Thurber 2002). The essence of permanent campaigning is that the clear separation between campaigning and governing is blurred, so that political actors seek to campaign every day and dominate the political agenda, not just during a formal election campaign (Orstein and Mann 2000; Heclo 2000).

Although Nimmo (1999) believes that permanent campaigning has taken several centuries to develop, most commentators see its history as much more recent and fuelled by particular political factors. Blumenthal (1980) believed that the existence of a professional political consultant class was vital in altering the nature of election campaigning. Steger (1999) adds a more simplistic motive, namely that candidates turned to the permanent campaign as a means of ensuring incumbency. But it could be argued that politicians have always sought