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NEW MEDIA AND THE
REVITALISATION OF POLITICS

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Editor's Note

Patterson's negative views about news media campaign coverage, set forth in chapter 15, are counterbalanced by the far more positive views of Internet scholars who envision a new age of popular participation in government, especially in election campaigns. Political scientist Rachel Gibson, a British scholar, talks about "citizen campaigns" and uses Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as an example. She considers it a model for major changes in campaigns and the information flows that they generate and that nourish them. Average citizens have resumed their role as active participants and have become powerful forces that shape election outcomes.

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Introduction

. . . [T]here has been a significant decline in the levels of support and popular trust enjoyed by our representative institutions and elected officials in recent decades (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000), particularly in respect to parties' civic strength and levels of voter attachment (Dalton and Wattenberg 2001).

My purpose here, then, is to ask whether the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the newer user-driven applications synonymous with the 'Web 2.0' era, offer the possibility for a rejuvenation of formal politics, *sui generis* of the debate over the scale and particular sources of the problem. In a nutshell, do the new technologies of blogs, social networking and video-sharing sites present politicians with new and meaningful ways to stimulate popular interest and participation in established politics and the representative process? To address this question we take evidence from one of the most acclaimed e-campaigns to date, that of the Democratic nominee Barack Obama's in his bid for the US Presidency in 2008. Without wishing to steal too much thunder from our conclusions, it can be revealed at this point that the answer arrived at is a tentative yes: democratic benefits do appear to be associated with the use of Web 2.0 tools, although one must remember that even in e-politics, context is king. . . . [T]ranslated into offline mobilisation . . . these efforts helped to sustain him in the race, if to not win the election itself. The adoption and adaptation of these strategies, therefore, would understandably be of interest to politicians and parties around the world. Here we seek to identify what lay at the heart of Obama's successful use of the new media in 2008 and how they might be of utility for British parties in 2010.

The Problem: Media Culpa?

Before turning to examine the idea of e-democracy as a 'rescue remedy' for contemporary politics, let me first summarise the key points of the critique of . . . the role of the media in fostering the growing anti-politics culture. While the main source of the growing disenchantment and even hatred of politics and politicians is located within the political class itself and its zeal for outsourcing key governing tasks in recent years—a practice that has giv[en] rise to 'a form of decision-making without full democratic accountability'— the media and particularly television are also to bear significant responsibility for the current levels of discontent. Echoing the criticisms of a number of American authors from Patterson (1993) to Putnam (2000), the electronic media are regarded as complicit in fostering the general disaffection and cynicism toward all things political. Through its 'dumbing down' of news content, fusing of commentary and reporting and concentration on the competitive, scandalous and personality-led aspects of politics rather than the substantive issues at stake, the media are seen to have both trivialised and tarnished the practice of politics in the public mind. This hollowing-out of serious debate has been accompanied by the adoption of more adversarial interview tactics by journalists in interviewing politicians. Such methods, while they might bolster the integrity and independence of the fourth estate, only serve to deepen the culture of contempt towards politicians in the long run, it is argued, as the 'default' message transmitted to the public is that politicians are withholding the truth from you, the listener/viewer.

While this notion of a media-driven malaise has been countered by a number of scholars who see its influence as more limited and even positive or benign (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Norris 1999; Patterson and McClure 1976), the idea that the established media have not always served as a force for the democratic good is one that has taken firm root within academic and popular discourse over recent decades. Indeed the perceived association between mass media and democratic decline goes some way towards explaining the highly enthusiastic reception that the new media, in the shape of the Internet, received in the early 1990s. As use of the digital communication technologies began to spread across the demos, cyber-optimists such as Howard Rheingold, Nicholas Negroponte and Amitai Etzioni were quick to identify their capacity for devolving power to citizens and strengthening civic ties and networks (Negroponte 1995; Etzioni and Etzioni 1997). Despite facing criticism from cyber-pessimists who predicted instead the fragmentation and enervation of the citizen body as new ICTs spread across society, and also from more empirically-driven cyber-sceptics who argued against any significant changes taking place in either direction, promoters of e-democracy appear to have had their hopes revived with the arrival of the Web 2.0 era. These new user-driven modes of Internet interaction are seen as promoting the voice of the mass over established elites (Surowiecki 2005; Grannick 2006; Leadbeater 2007). Blogging and social networking tools are seen to hold great promise for reviving democratic practice in particular. In the news reporting context, blogs are seen to provide a low-cost means of publishing news and alternative perspectives, giving greater prominence to citizen journalists vis-à-vis established media pundits (Deuze 2003). Aggregative feed services give the masses an ability to select and edit their news content, removing or at least reducing the agenda-setting power of a few unelected gatekeepers sitting atop centralised media conglomerates based in capital cities. In the civic realm, social networking sites offer organisations the opportunity to mobilise quickly at the national and international level around a single issue and then disperse (Pickerill 2004; Pickerill *et al.* 2008; Rheingold 2003). In short, compared with previous forms of media, the Internet is seen to offer a new opportunity to spread 'power to the people' and thus present the possibility for a serious challenge, if not an antidote, to current anti-politics woes.

The Solution: New Media Campaigning Obama-style?

The question to be addressed here is the extent to which such expectations of the new media are indeed justified. Can these new forms of web-enabled activism really offer a way to engage and re-engage voters behaviourally

in politics, and attitudinally inject a new sense of optimism and trust into politicians and our system of representative government? Clearly addressing the question through an audit and assessment of the array of e-democracy initiatives that parties, parliaments and governments in the UK and elsewhere have undertaken is beyond the scope of this article. What is possible, however, is a more focused account of one arena of formal political activity—that of the election campaign—where it does appear from recent events in the US that the new media are being used to activate voters, and where some genuine revitalising potential for democracy appears to exist. We turn here to examine these events more closely, paying particular attention to the tools used by the Obama campaign team and the type of participatory involvement they stimulated. Finally we ask whether they can work outside of the American context?

The growth of 'bottom-up' campaigns

The roots, if not the birth, of citizen-campaigning can be traced to the arrival of Howard Dean on the political landscape of the US in 2004. Despite ultimately failing to gain his party's nomination, his rise from unknown governor of a small north-eastern state to front-runner status in the Democratic primaries in late 2003 marked for many a 'coming of age' of the Internet as a political medium. Although his uncompromising anti-war message struck a strong chord with party activists, his ability to raise funds and volunteers was strongly linked to his strategic use of the Internet. It was his leverage of 'mousepads' as well as 'shoe leather,' as one former campaign worker put it, that succeeded in putting Dean ahead (Teachout and Streeter 2007). Central to the campaign's success was its 'Dean for America' blog and email lists, which according to its national director Joe Trippi were critical in personalising relationships with supporters and developing a sense of joint-ownership of the Dean candidacy, foreshadowing the 'Yes we can!' philosophy of Barack Obama. Indeed Trippi, in his account of his experiences during that campaign, talks extensively about the way in which the technology was explicitly used to break down the 'us and them' mentality that had dominated previous presidential campaigning 'war rooms' and establish a new grass- or netroots supporter-led model (Trippi 2004).

Although Trippi and Dean may have been the first effective users of new ICTs to build a citizen-campaign network, the Obama team operating in the new Web 2.0 era arguably took it to new and dizzying heights. Trippi himself captured the escalation in operations very succinctly when he observed that if the Dean campaign was the Wright brothers of 'bottom-up' campaigns, as he terms it, then that of the Illinois senator has been Apollo 11 (Trippi 2008). The widening of the campaign organisational base to encompass a host of ordinary citizens through the new forms of social media proved to be one of the hallmarks of the campaign. At the heart of the operation and central to the promoting the grassroots online efforts was the 'MyBO' space built into the official website. Here a range of self-organising tools were made available to users that allowed them to sign up as mini-campaign managers. They could establish a fundraising page, start a campaign blog, set up a political group and recruit members or simply email a prepared message out to their online social networks to advertise Obama's policy positions. At a later stage in the campaign, Democrat voter databases were even opened up to registered supporters to download coordinates for local area canvassing. The campaign also deployed and made use of externally developed software to organise its fieldwork such as Central Desktop, to recruit thousands of precinct campaign volunteers in advance of the 'super Tuesday' primaries. In the last stages of the campaign attention shifted to mobile phones with the 'Call Friends' application being rolled out for download to I-phones. The software effectively converted the phone into a personal campaign tool, with address books becoming databanks for the targeted messaging of friends and family to urge them to vote for Obama. As the campaign blog pointed out, this would generate thousands of additional personal contacts in key swing states, some of which might then go on to generate votes.

Outside these campaign-sponsored initiatives, citizen and candidates' use of third-party-provided platforms expanded dramatically in the 2008 election cycle. YouTube in particular proved to be a highly popular tool for the distribution of official and also non-official political advertising to a world-wide audience. The 37-minute 'More Perfect Union' speech given by Obama in March 2008, designed to address the growing tensions over the racially charged statements of his former pastor, Revd Jeremiah Wright, became the most popular clip on the US video channel soon after it was posted and was viewed almost five million times prior to the election (Vargas 2008a). Efforts beyond Obama's formal video production unit also proved highly popular, with one anonymously posted anti–Hillary Clinton clip, portraying her as a 'Big Brother' figure as well as the more light-hearted 'Obama girl' also gaining several million hits. YouTube was also notable in providing an alternative forum for candidate debates and promoting 'ordinary' voters' questions during the 2008 primary season, although it did utilise the power of the mainstream media to promote itself to a wider audience, working with CNN and an editorial team of established journalists.

Other examples of new media opportunities that allowed individuals to assume a more directing or organising role in the campaign occurred via initiatives such as 'Voter-Voter,' a US-based site that took the YouTube model one step further by allowing individuals to upload their home-made campaign ads, select a target audience and then pay for their material to be shown on local television. 'ActBlue,' while functioning as a political action committee

and channel for donations to Democratic candidates, also strongly promoted 'DIY' tools for users to engage in fundraising and campaign organising in their own right. Use was also made of less politically oriented sites such as Eventful.com and Meetup.com, which focused on bridging the online-offline gap by channelling e-votes or chat into real-world events. The former was harnessed early on by John Edwards, a Democratic primary contender, to ask his supporters where he should show up on the campaign trail. The results ended up taking him to Columbus, Kentucky, a surprising destination given its population numbered only 229. However, the momentum in its favour appeared to increase as the initiative was seen as an opportunity to promote 'small town' America over the bigger cities that typically dominate the campaign trail.

Democratic renewal?

The key question to emerge from these developments, for our purposes, is how far they show the new media to be capable of challenging and even countering the growing disconnect between citizens and the state. . . . [D]o the new user-centred digital technologies provide a means of stemming the 'anti-politics' tide? The answer provided in this article, as noted in the introduction, is a qualified affirmative. One might be tempted to dismiss the new techniques, viewed individually, as a series of interesting albeit experimental and even quirky additions to the seasoned activist's toolbox. Viewed collectively, however, they share, it is argued, a facility for promoting the role of ordinary voters in the production, management and even message development of a political campaign. From the simple act of circulating campaign-relevant information within one's online social circle and posting on a blog to more strategic interventions such as the production of web ads and/or independent fundraising sites, these techniques are seen as combining to allow more citizens to become more directly involved in the course of the election. In order to help define or distil out the commonality or underlying logic behind these political uses of Web 2.0 technologies in the election, the term 'citizen-campaigning' is developed to apply to the new web-enabled participatory practices that were observed. Of course it is accepted that not all of the activities captured under this label were necessarily new, since many involved the re-expression of existing types of involvement such as political discussion, contacting, volunteering and donating. However, what is seen to be a significant change was the collective and proactive manner in which the practices were promoted and engaged in. So rather than individuals simply being called on to make a 'one-off' transaction with the party in terms of sending money or pledging their vote to a door-to-door/telephone canvasser, they were offered the means to spread the word themselves, producing a

new more self-directing, spontaneous and socially embedded (rather than institutionally driven) layer of political action during the campaign.

Identification and definition of the new form of citizen empowerment being fuelled by the new wave of web technologies is, however, just one step towards addressing the question under consideration here. It is the wider implications of these developments for the thesis of democratic decline that forms our central focus. In brief, we argue that the main effects of citizen-campaigning in terms of a regeneration/revitalisation of the wider polity are threefold. First, in organisational terms one immediate effect is the shifting or at least rebalancing of the locus of control from the central headquarters or the campaign 'war room' out to the new volunteer army of field operatives. In place of the 'one size fits all' hierarchical model that dominated presidential campaigns in the 1990s, we find a plethora of smaller, locally developed and personalised networks of persuasion. . . . Herein lies the second, less immediate but perhaps even more powerful, renewal potential of citizen-campaigning. For seasoned operatives such as Joe Trippi, such a downward push in campaign operation constitutes nothing less than a political revolution, a 'quantum leap' towards a new kind of grassroots politics in which citizens become active and involved once again in their parties' and candidates' future. Beyond the e-campaign practitioners and devotees, however, it is evident that such activities do fit well within the scholarly framework referred to earlier which pinpoints the growth in 'elite-challenging' modes of political behaviour and new participatory norms within Western democracies. Indeed, what is perhaps most exciting for e-democracy advocates . . . to observe is not only that we are seeing these more self-directing modes of activity emerging in the online context but that they are occurring within the sphere of conventional politics as well, rather than the more typical arenas of unconventional or protest politics. Citizen-campaigning, it seems, might just serve as a means for siphoning off some of the new radicalism and participatory energy held by the 'new values' generation, and channelling it into the representative sphere.

A third and even longer-term way that citizen-campaigning might engineer some type of democratic renewal lies in the wider domain of attitudes and norms. These new forms of web-enabled participation, if engaged in extensively and consistently enough, should help in promoting a closer sense of connection between voters and candidates and even parties. In using these tools to become more proactive and involved with a political campaign, individuals enter into more of a 'partnering' relationship with those they elect, which may lead to the development [of] a greater sense of ownership and stake in the outcome. Further, the more socially embedded and personalised nature of contacting that this type of engagement spawns may then ripple out

to a wider grassroots base, increasing the perceptions of candidates' authenticity and trustworthiness, and in turn levels of participatory involvement.

Any empirical assessment of these claims is inevitably a complex and prolonged task. Certainly it is evident from the US experience that not all citizens are taking advantage of the opportunities for co-production and co-organisation that the new web tools afford. Thus any investigation of the democratising impact of citizen-campaigning would need to pay particular attention to exactly who is active in the new networks, how representative they are of wider society and how sustainable they are over time. In lieu of such nuanced data it is possible at this point to marshal a couple of sources of evidence that may help us address at least some general questions about the scale of the uptake and enthusiasm for citizen-campaigning among the public more widely. Our first port of call in this regard is the report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project on the 2008 election which reports levels of involvement among the US population in the e-campaign. Its findings are actually rather heartening in terms of the scope of people's political engagement with Web 2.0 tools and particularly those more socially oriented applications, with one in ten of Americans claiming to have used Facebook or MySpace for political activity during 2008 (including befriending a politician or starting/joining a political group). This was particularly pronounced among those under 30 years of age. Similar numbers were reported as forwarding or posting some kind of political commentary or writing during the election and five per cent of all adults said that they posted their own commentary to a news group or blog. Fifteen per cent of email users reported sending an election-related message to friends and family during the campaign and, perhaps more significantly given our notion of 'ripple out' effects, just over one third of email users reported receiving campaign-relevant email. Not surprisingly, when the political affiliation of those politically engaging via Web 2.0 tools was investigated, there was clear evidence that it was Obama's supporters who were most active (Smith and Rainie 2008). Unfortunately the levels of political experience of those involved with these more active forms of e-campaigning is not reported, which means claiming any greater mobilising effects is not possible at this stage.

Beyond survey data, however, an alternative metric for judging the democratising claims for citizen-campaigning can be seen in the scale and structure of fundraising efforts during the 2008 race, which broke all records in terms of the amounts donated. While John McCain was among the first generation of candidates to reveal the fundraising power of the Internet in 2000, and Howard Dean sharpened the use of these tactics, raising a total of $27 million online during the 2004 primaries (Talbot 2009), the 2008 race saw the full realisation of the Internet's potential to fill the campaign coffers. One early starter in the chase for online donations was Republican Ron Paul,

who raised an astonishing $6 million in one day in December 2007 (Stirland 2007). Barack Obama, however, proved to be the wunderkind of Internet fund-raising, reportedly raising over $600 million in total, with a substantial portion of this coming from online sources (Luo 2008). While the amount itself is noteworthy, more compelling in regard to levels of democratic engagement is the donor structure underlying that record-breaking haul. According to *Washington Post* reporters, most of the donations made online were around $80 and were made by up to 3 million individuals (Vargas 2008b). The emergence of such a broad and shallow pool of small 'investors' in the campaign contrasted sharply with the deeper networks of high-dollar donors that had characterised US presidential elections in the past (Vargas 2008a). Comments by Simon Rosenberg, a former member of Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign, neatly reflected the change presented by the Obama approach, as he noted that 'compared to our 1992 campaign, this is like a multinational corporation versus a non-profit' (Rayner 2008). Such observations also provide some validity to the argument that the online political engagement inspired by the Obama campaign widened active participation among the electorate compared with previous elections. In the longer term, should this pattern be maintained and strengthened, then it may go some way towards combating public cynicism about money buying undue influence over politicians for the wealthy few.

Citizen Campaigning in the UK?

Early into their account Hay *et al.* note that a democratising of all our collective institutions for decision-making is vital if citizens are not merely going to be empowered into a few narrow fields. Revitalising politics will mean challenging arenas that have effectively become depoliticised—arenas in which unelected managers, professionals and experts now dominate. It is the argument of this paper that the new forms of web-enabled citizen-campaigning offer one means of making this challenge and affecting this change within the electoral context. How far it can operate in the party-dominated environment of UK politics, however, is a question that requires further and deeper scrutiny.

The US, with its weaker party control of candidates and campaigns and lack of an established membership body, clearly provides a ripe context for this more devolved approach to electioneering. Building a team of volunteers from scratch is time-consuming and expensive. The increased resources and reduced costs that citizen-campaigning offers to political hopefuls, therefore, provides a powerful incentive for its adoption. In addition, use of federalism in the United States means that there are more frequent elections and thus more opportunities for innovation and experimentation than in Britain, which experiences a national election once every five years. Finally, the more

liberal campaign finance rules of the US can also be seen as a spur to citizen-campaigning. The change of rules in 2002, permitting individuals to donate a maximum of $2,300 to candidates in particular has spawned the growth of so-called 'bundling,' whereby donors gather sums from many different individuals in an organisation or community that they then hand on to the campaign. The networked web environment provides a highly efficient means for the non-expert to engage in this type of bulk fund-raising.

Such constraints notwithstanding, there are a number of bases for expecting the new types of campaign-related citizen activism to emerge in the UK in the next general election. Practically, parties have already starting making use of new social media tools to set up new national supporter networks, with a number of leading and lesser known politicians now enjoying profiles on Facebook and MySpace. One of the most prominent practitioners, Liberal Democrat Steve Webb, was reported to have said that he would be using Facebook to consult voters on their views about the Liberal Democrat manifesto (Carlin 2007). In addition, dedicated online discussion forums for policy consultation with members and the wider public have been trialled, such as Labour's 'Let's Talk' and the Liberal Democrats' 'Have Your Say.' Politicians and parties have also moved into the online video market, with the Conservative leader David Cameron setting up his own personal channel, 'Webcameron,' shortly followed by Labour Vision and official party sites established on the popular video-sharing site YouTube. At the local level, the parties have been encouraged to use online technologies to help increase the involvement of members in decisions, while easing the demands and requirements for membership (Hain 2004; Miliband 2005; Katwala and Brooks 2005; Creasey and Alexander 2006; Cruddas and Harris 2007). Perhaps more significantly, there has also been growth in the less official uses of the technology by party members and affiliated networks. Conservative bloggers such as Iain Dale and Tom Montgomery have attracted a wide audience and become mouthpieces for Tory grassroots opinion. Many individual party members now make use of social networking tools such as Facebook and MySpace to network with other sympathisers and promote their party (Françoli and Ward 2008).

Whether this 'peace-time' commitment to wiring up the grassroots is continued and developed in the election period to mobilise and integrate ordinary citizens into the campaign organisational infrastructure remains to be seen. The benefits of citizen campaigning in terms of efficiency gains are clear, particularly for the minor parties that have fewer resources to draw on. In addition the potential boost in mass participation and ability to forge closer relationships with voters via citizen-campaigning is no doubt a highly appealing prospect for the major parties facing membership declines and criticism for seeming out of touch and unresponsive. However, such benefits need to

be weighed up against possible longer-term downsides. While democracy is about ensuring a wide range of voices are heard in the public arena, it is also about decision-making and arriving at consensus. Citizen-campaigning, while it may provide a new outlet and stimulus for popular engagement, also presents a challenge to those seeking to convey a coherent and consistent message, with multiple campaigns possibly running on a party's or candidates' behalf. How those numerous and possibly conflicting viewpoints are reconciled into policy alternatives as the campaign proceeds, and especially if it succeeds, may prove crucial to sustaining the newly mobilised constituency of support. Once elected to office by the mousepads of citizen-campaigners, how does the politician satisfy the potentially diverse coalition of newly energised supporters that can lay claim to his/her victory? To what extent is it realistic to expect the partnership to continue and what mechanisms would be required to transfer powers of co-direction and co-production to the governing arena? While such a rewiring of the system may ultimately prove technologically feasible, given current developments in e-government, such a scenario is some years away. Is there, therefore, a potential for citizen-campaigning to heighten popular disillusionment with politics as it energises and expands the pool of stakeholders and constituencies of interest, only to deflate hopes and expectations by confronting them with government as usual? How far citizen-campaigning can serve to counteract declines in public trust in our key democratic bodies and their performance in the longer term is clearly a topic for future research.

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