Presidential Elections Web 2.0

Ramona Sue McNeal
University of Northern Iowa, USA

Lisa Dotterweich Bryan
Upper Iowa University, USA

INTRODUCTION

An important question for any candidate is, "how does he/she reach potential voters?" One method is through making personal appeals known as the "ground war." This campaign strategy, in the past, involved both phone calls and house-to-house canvassing. This method had taken a backseat to the "air wars" or using mass media such as television or radio to reach votsaers. Recently, candidates have started reconsidering the ground war. One reason campaigns are reviving this approach to campaigning is that the electorate has become more polarized. Because the political center is shrinking, it no longer seems logical to make broad appeals to the electorate. Instead, reaching out to the base with targeted messages is becoming a central campaign strategy. For example, until relatively recently modern presidential campaigns had spending 70-75% of their war chest on the "air war." In 2008, however, the Obama campaign only spent 50% of campaign funds on mass media and instead elected to focus more money on the "ground war" (Hershey, 2013).

The ground war has become easier with the widespread use of cell phone. A Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey (2012) found that during the 2012 presidential campaign, approximately 88% of registered voters own a cell phone and made extensive use of it for political activities. The survey also found that smartphone owners were particularly apt to use their cell phone for political activities including fact checking political statements and taking part in political discussion on social network sites. A recent Pew Research Center study found almost two-thirds of those surveyed reported owning a smartphone with twenty-three percent of smartphone owners reporting that they used their phone to donate money to a political or charitable cause (2015). The fact that citizens are using their cell phones for activities ranging from fact checking candidate statements in real time to presenting their own personal views on social network sites has not been lost on candidates. During the 2012 election, candidates began adopting a number of strategies that used cell phones to reach the electorate including integrating mobile apps into their campaign strategy for connecting with the public. Finding avenues for reaching out to constituents through mobile apps have continued with the 2016 presidential election. One example is Snapchat, a mobile app that allows for the sharing of photos and videos. Presidential primary hopefuls including Senator Rand Paul (R), Governor Scott Walker (R) and Governor John Kasich (R) each experimented using the app to release campaign ads (Roth, July 30, 2015).

The widespread use of cell phones and an increasingly polarized electorate are two pieces of the puzzle that help explain why candidates are allocating more of their resources to the ground war. The final puzzle piece is social media. When the 2008 Obama campaign was redirecting its resources to more targeted messaging, the Internet was moving from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 with the development of Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006). Although his use of social media for communicating with potential voters was considered innovative in 2008, it

became common place by the 2012 presidential election. For example, in 2012 President Obama announced his reelection bid with a tweet and a YouTube video while former governor Mitt Romney announced he was forming an exploratory committee by posting it on Facebook, in a tweet and in a video posted on his website. Currently there are a number of narratives coming out of the 2016 presidential primaries. One of the more dominant themes is the importance of social media. This can be attributed, in part, to Donald Trump. While candidates in previous elections used social media as a secondary tool for communicating with the electorate, Donald Trump has been using Twitter as a direct means of communication with voters. Others candidates have followed his lead by increasing the use of social media including Facebook and Twitter as part of their campaign (Lang, April 5, 2016).

What do we know about the effect of these trends on voter turnout? More Americans are now turning to social media for campaign news and smartphones are playing an important role in this phenomenon. These changes in voter behavior have not gone unnoticed by candidates who are adopting "ground war" strategies that utilize the widespread usage on social media and adoption of smartphones. Do the changes in how candidates communicate with the electorate encourage voter turnout? To examine this question, this chapter presents an examination of recent presidential elections and the role social media in mobilize voters.

BACKGROUND

Early researchers (e.g. Davis et al., 2009) predicted that the Internet would change political campaigns in four important ways. The first is through allowing the campaign to transmit information to others. Websites could be used to distribute information that would have previously been distributed through campaign flyers and brochures. This could make it easier for voters to obtain political information. Secondly, the Inter-

net can be used to gather information including background information on opponents. This can help campaign staffers better prepare attack ads against their candidate's opponents as well as better prepare for attacks directed at their own campaign. The Internet could also increase the ability of the public to interact with the campaign. For example, a candidate can use blogs or social network sites such as Facebook to both communicate with supporters and allow them a means of voicing their opinions. By provided an avenue for voters to interact with a candidate's campaign and provide input, the campaign can get a better sense of what issues are important to voters and also allow supporters to feel like they are part of the candidate's team. This could increase loyalty to the candidate. Finally, the Internet might be utilized to mobilize or encourage political participation by citizens. Campaigns could use a number of strategies to encourage participation including sending email and text messages with reminders to register and vote.

Despite these predictions, candidates were slow to include the Internet as part of their overall campaign strategy. The 2004 presidential election was the first to use the Internet in a significant manner for generating online donations, mobilize voters and encourage volunteer efforts. One notable change in election strategy during this period was the advancement of the "ground war". Because the 2004 election was expected to be highly competitive, both parties worked to get-out-the-vote (GOTV) or contact voters either face-to-face or over the phone. The 2004 presidential election forced campaigns to address a glaring weakness in how they used the Internet. While citizens were now able to obtain political information easier, as well as donate money and volunteer to help campaign, they had chosen to seek out these activities. Campaigns created websites that facilitated these actions but did not use the Internet in a meaningful way to reach out to supporters.

The dynamics of the 2004 election forced campaigns to tap into the potential of the Inter-

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