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Election 2.0.1: The Obama Electronic Campaign Following Victory

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By Jenn Hernandez, Berglund Student Fellow

The use of the web in the November 2008 election, and events leading up to it, was revolutionary in that it mobilized so many Americans towards a common purpose (with the promise of social interaction along the way): electing a president. This goal now accomplished, new issues arise. Will the means of the technology and how it’s used change, or remain essentially the same? How will the technology be used in response to questions of the everyday workings of legislation and running a country, and are Americans still expecting that they be kept in the loop? Also, what has Obama’s successful use of technology taught his political opponents for next time around, as campaigning will most likely never be the same again.

Technologically speaking, Obama is revamping the way we see the political machine. For the most part, we have a clearer view into its inner workings, and we can see how our own participation factors in more directly. Also, most importantly, we are asked to participate; we are asked for our ideas, to inform others, to give feedback. The idea of government for the people, by the people, takes on a new significance with the onset of a new chapter in social networking. We have been given many outlets in which to participate: most notably barackobama.com [1] and change.gov [2], a more recent addition to Obama’s online presence.

When Obama went from being a presidential candidate to the president-elect, his team put out a transitional website, change.gov. The change.gov homepage includes a section entitled “Open Government,” which invites users to continue the dialogue by sharing election stories and ideas with the transition team, and eventually the new president. The introduction reminds the visitor that, “The story of the campaign and this historic moment has been your story. It is about the great things we can do when we come together around a common purpose. The story of bringing this country together as a healed and united nation will be led by president-elect Obama, but written by you. …this process of setting up that new government is about you” [3]. The idea of open and free communication is revolutionary in that a government traditionally working apart from its people can now include direct input from them.
Change.gov includes a “Citizen’s Briefing Book” in which the people can suggest topics that they want discussed. The topics are open for commenting, and can be voted for or against. The topics with the most votes will be presented to Obama when he is sworn in, to be brought to his attention as questions or issues that concern the people. Topics and ideas range from the economy to health care, homeland security to technology. Some popular ideas include “commit[ting] to becoming the ‘Greenest’ country in the world”, “Vote and debate all bills online…”, and “Bring Back the Constitution!” [4]

Another example of change in connecting the people and their government in effect is the “archaic” Presidential radio address. In responses to a short article, “Nothin’but ‘Net’: Obama, the Web and the Whitehouse” on James McPherson’s Media and Politics Blog, one commenter addresses reactions to a transition in presidential address media from radio to Internet. The commenter admits to not listening to radio addresses in the past, but mentions that using the Internet to broadcast may widen the reach of the address across the nation. Another commenter had used the Internet to stream radio broadcasted addresses after the fact. [5]

Skeptics, or those simply not as enthusiastic about the legitimacy of the use of social networking in an election, such as Republican consultant Patrick Ruffini, state the valid point that, “Having more Facebook friends won’t make you President… It might tell you something about the enthusiasm of your supporters, but it’s just one metric.” The issue, he says, is perspective. “The emphasis, especially in the media, and to the exclusion of other technologies, is out of whack” [6].

But looking past this objection, it is no one’s place to say how many of any candidate’s “friends” actually voted for them, or were even old enough to vote. [7] And it seems reasonable to assume that anyone who added a candidate as a “friend” had some interest in learning more about the candidate, and eventually delving into the finding of reasons to possibly vote for or against them. The importance of “friends” on social networking sites is to build a network amongst people you socialize with normally, or expect to keep at least minimum contact.

In a Pew Internet study on post-election voter engagement, it was found that 51% of Obama supporters who used the Internet during the campaign to get involved expect an “ongoing communication” with the administration in office. [8] On the other hand, Republicans have also begun rebuilding an online presence since the election, through sites such as redstate.com [9], and a newer addition, rebuildtheparty.com [10], with an emphasis on grassroots activities. Though 9% of McCain voters who utilized the Internet during the campaign have visited sites like these, they still do not carry the same high expectations that Obama supporters have to hear from their party. [11]

No matter what political ideology one may hold, there is no ignoring the impact and utility of the Internet for future reference. The effectiveness of Obama’s online presence during and after his campaign will henceforth model the way politicians mobilize supporters in elections to come. Also, opening up communication in the formerly closed and mysterious process of governance to
the people for input and insight puts a renewed significance in a government for the people, by the people.

Endnotes


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