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Crashing the Gate. Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics

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Crashing the Gate. Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics

By Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga

The Internet was something of an issue in the Gore-Bush campaigns of 2000, principally because blogging emerged as an important channel of communication. [1] Two key figures in the 2004 election cycle have now co-authored Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics. This work both details their experiences in 2004, and makes a passionate, highly partisan appeal to reform the Democratic Party, in large part through use of Internet-enabled media.

The impacts of the Internet clearly have permeated almost all aspects of American daily life. One of the critical issues in the minds of many, however, is what impact, if any, the Internet will have on political systems and processes. In a previous issue we reviewed Richard Davis’ work, Politics Online. That work we found to be a very scholarly introduction to the political use of such electronic applications as chat rooms and blogs. One particular value of the book we felt was that “throughout it is informed by and contributes to a major issue in any discussion of the Internet as political or analytical tool: What is the “electronic commons” and what should it be in a modern democracy?” [2]

On of the critical promises that blogs in particular seem to offer is a channel capable of inspiring partisan action. Two names which are often associated with highly successful partisan blogging are Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga. Zuniga (AKA Moulitas) is the founder of The Daily Kos, a leading left-leaning blog. [3] Armstrong is credited with founding one of the first political blogs, MYDD.com. [4] Both are controversial figures, but their influence is undeniable.

This work is of interest for several reasons. First, the authors’ status as practitioners of electronically-enabled political action makes anything they might write worth understanding by
those of us concerned with the impact of the Internet. This is particularly true because in the 2004 cycle the authors were both close to the forces which raised astonishing amounts of money for what were initially viewed as fringe candidates, like Governor Howard Dean. Dean’s insurgents out raised more centrist candidates like John Kerry by astonishing margins, principally by skillful use of the Internet. [5]

But the intended audience of this book is dissatisfied Democrats. For them, the book is meant to be both a wake-up call and a sort of field manual for recasting their party. For Republicans, at least for those on the right of the party, the book might be read as a satisfying affirmation of their tactics, if not of their goals.

As this is such a political work, and the authors’ approach so highly partisan, some self-disclosure is probably in order here. When first registering to vote, I was attracted to the centrist-left wing of the GOP in Illinois, where the Democratic Party was a patronage-based machine ruled over by Richard Daly. Even in southern Illinois, about as far removed in location and culture as one could get from Chicago and remain in Illinois, our local Democratic party disbursed jobs and access to welfare in a chain which ran north ultimately to Daly’s desk.

I remain a Republican and am delighted on those infrequent occasions when I am able to vote for a candidate whose principles I can recognize as connected to the historical party. To the authors, this makes me a “Paleocon” as opposed to a “Corporate Con,” a “Theocon,” or a “Neocon,” all delightfully descriptive categorizations of the wings of the current GOP.

Armstrong and Zuniga are highly committed Democrats, emerging, in my opinion, from historical roots in Midwestern progressivism, or perhaps even prairie populism. They launch a flight of searing indictments of that party. They believe that the Democrats have been betrayed by their own organization, particularly the Democratic Congressional Campaign and Senate Campaign Committees; by their political style, particularly interest-group politics; and by outmoded tactics, principally reliance on old media and a culture of hiring consultants with little incentive to either innovate or win campaigns.

For those in either party who are most comfortable with simplistic partisan beliefs, this book will be a painful one. After an initial frontal attack on recent GOP politics, which the authors see as utter failures, they turn to analyzing the Democratic responses. The authors ask, for example:

- Which of the two parties is most dependent on large donations from a few sources rather than small ones from a wide variety of individuals?
- Which party has consistently made the best use of new media?
- Which party’s leadership would apparently often rather see its candidates lose than threaten their own control over the party’s messages and political actions?
- Which party is most open to a variety of interest groups and most willing to listen to dissident voices?
- Which party is most ready to learn from changing circumstances and to adapt to them?
And the answer in every case, in the authors’ judgment, is the Republican Party.

But neither can conventional Democrats take much comfort from other positions taken by the authors. For example, such statements as “Few groups have become so stuck in the past as the pro-choice movement.” (58) are not likely to be widely popular. It is their contention that traditional Democratic interest groups focused on women’s issues such as abortion rights, on Gay rights, or any of the other wedge issues so beloved by Republic strategists and talk radio hosts, must mute their stridency and unite behind candidates who may well fail litmus tests of total adherence to a given set of issues. The authors are often humorous—most frequently darkly so—but their discussion of a Democratic conference held in Monterey to encourage coalition building among interest groups, which quickly split into five meeting where each group could happily discuss its own particular issues among familiar faces and opinions was particularly amusing. (46)

Given this, from a Democratic perspective, desperate state of affairs, the authors propose an electronically enabled grass-roots (“Netroots) takeover of the Democratic Party. They advance a number of different models. These models are based in a very interesting fashion on their own immediate involvement with the Dean campaign, and their frequent consulting with other campaigns. Part of the appeal of the work is their easy familiarity with a number of unconventional campaigns and the individuals who led or staffed them.

Armstrong and Zuniga feel strongly that the blogerati of the left have often forced the party to adopt strategies and to select candidates more suited to the realities of politics in the 21st century than to the 1970’s, where they believe the current leadership of the Democratic Party is more or less frozen.

So, for troubled Democrats, this is probably a must-read sort of work. The question of its relevance to the Impact of the Internet is also undeniable, but it is a very problematic one. What this work gives us is one highly partisan perspective.

The Republicans, too, make very effective use of electronic media, and the authors fail even to discuss the question of why any one group should have a particular advantage at the “Netroots.” Davis, for example, pointed out in his work that lurkers, those who read but do not post, are largely more representative of the broad electorate than those who do post—there are economic and ideological differences which impact the users of the Internet. The authors ignore such issues.

While Armstrong and Zuniga give us many examples of successful Internet-enabled political actions, ultimately they leave us with only a vague feeling that the “Netroots” are somehow going to be more progressive, and if fully engaged will save not only the Democratic Party, but American democracy as well (see pp 146, 176).

Note of late August, 2006. The above review was written in early June, 2006. While I stand by
my conclusions, the startling defeat of Joe Lieberman at the hands of Ned Lamont in the Connecticut primary has made this work seem a prophetic glimpse behind the scenes of that election. The GOP, in turn, has also seen in the grassroots “blogerati” dire signs that the Democrats have again been captured by left-wing extremists. [6] There could be no better introduction to the politics of blogging than *Crashing the Gate*.

[1] For a list of political blogs see: http://www.politics1.com/blog.htm


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3 THOUGHTS ON “CRASHING THE GATE. NETROOTS, GRASSROOTS, AND THE RISE OF PEOPLE-POWERED POLITICS”

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**Rosena Laroe**

on **January 30, 2014 at 6:13 PM** said:

Someone necessarily assist to make seriously articles I’d state. That is the first time I frequented your web page and thus far? I amazed with the analysis you made to create this actual put up amazing. Great activity!

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on **February 4, 2014 at 10:31 AM** said:

Hi there! I know that is kinda off topic however I’d figured I’d ask. Would you be interested in trading links or maybe guest writing a blog article or vice-versa? My web site addresses lots of the exact same subjects as yours and I believe we could greatly benefit from each other. If you happen to be interested be my guest to send me an e-
mail. I glimpse forward to hearing from you! Terrific blog by the way!

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on **February 4, 2014 at 10:41 AM** said:

Be great to every other is 1 of my well-known quotes. I practically wrote a post about that last week! Party on, dude.