



Parties, Election Campaigning and the Internet: Toward A Comparative Institutional Approach

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This paper argues that a comparative approach to analysing the relationship between technology and political institutions has the potential to offer renewed understanding of the development of the Internet in election campaigning. Taking the different characteristics of political parties and the norms and rules of the electoral environment in the United States and the United Kingdom as an illustration, it suggests that the relationship between technology and political institutions is dialectical. Technologies can reshape institutions, but institutions will mediate eventual outcomes. This approach has the potential to generate a theoretical framework for explaining differences in the impact of the Internet on election campaigning across liberal democracies.



It has now become commonplace to talk about the revolutionary impact the Internet has had on election campaigning. But this rhetoric conceals a more complex reality. The Internet's impact differs across political systems. Clearly, this discrepancy presents an interesting puzzle. One possible answer may be found by considering how the Internet interacts with the relevant political institutions that predate its existence: in particular, the organisation of political parties, and the norms and rules of the electoral environment. These vary greatly across political systems.

Different types of party organisation and electoral environment have the potential to catalyse or to retard the development of Internet campaigning because they render new communication technologies more or less useful to candidates and parties seeking office. At their most extreme, institutional structures may act as complete barriers. Examples include the ban on the purchase of television advertising in the United Kingdom, or on podcasting in Singapore. Most of the time institutions may simply make the process of deploying resources unattractive, as would be the case if stringent regulatory hurdles had to be overcome to set up a political website, for instance. Opportunity costs are also entailed in choosing to deploy a particular resource. A large billboard purchase may cut the number of mailings a party can send; dedicating campaign staff to a blogging campaign may remove them from face-to-face roles. The Internet may reconfigure or reduce opportunity costs but it does not destroy them. The benefits political actors are able to derive are thus strongly influenced by the institutional environment (March and Olsen, 1989).

This paper argues that a comparative approach to analysing the relationship between technology and political institutions has the potential to offer renewed understanding of the development of the Internet in election campaigning. Taking the different characteristics of political parties and the norms and rules of the electoral environment in the United States and the United Kingdom as an illustration, it aims to show that the relationship between technology and political institutions is best perceived as dialectical. Technologies can reshape institutions, but institutions will mediate eventual outcomes. This approach has the potential to generate a theoretical framework for explaining differences in the impact of the Internet on election campaigning across liberal democracies.

America's Online success Story

While the chronicles of headline-grabbing examples of Internet campaigning now feature several countries, it is on the United States that most interest, both popular and academic, has focused. As early as 1998, the Internet had a significant impact, greatly aiding Jesse Ventura's victory in the Minnesota Gubernatorial election (Greer and LaPointe, 2004: 117; Klotz, 2004: 71). However, it was Howard Dean's 2004 campaign that signaled the political arrival of the new medium. Dean, the former Governor of Vermont, was an outsider candidate, though his continued opposition to the Iraq War did give him a distinct platform. However, it was only when Dean employed an innovative web strategy – linking up with bloggers, building support networks and fund raising – that he realised his potential as a candidate. The web helped propel him to the front of the Democratic field and made him the most successful fund raiser in the history of the party (Chadwick, 2007; Hindman, 2005; Trippi, 2004).

After Dean's effort, the Internet continued to have a considerable influence on American electoral politics. The eventual Democratic nominee in 2004, John Kerry, used Internet fundraising to achieve near financial parity with his Republican opponent, George W. Bush, by the close of the 2004 campaign (Dwyer et al, 2004). In 2006, incumbent Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman was defeated in the state's primary contest by journeyman candidate Ned Lamont. Lieberman was an outspoken defender of the Iraq war, while Lamont worked to portray himself as an antiwar candidate. For this reason, Lamont's campaign was embraced by high-profile Democratic bloggers, the so-called 'netroots', who promoted his candidacy, raised money and even starred in celebrity-style campaign commercials. The Internet was important in creating momentum for Lamont: he convincingly defeated Lieberman in the primary (Murray, 2006; Ned Lamont For Senate, 2006).

The 2006 midterm election itself provided further examples, most notoriously during the Virginia Senate race. Republican incumbent George Allen was filmed referring to Democratic opponent Jim Webb's campaign worker as a 'macaca', a racist term. The DIY video of this event was immediately uploaded onto media sharing site *YouTube*, and soon became a viral sensation, leading to Allen's views on race being questioned both online and, crucially, in mainstream newsprint and television media. From being 20 points ahead in the polls at the end of April, Allen went on to lose (CNN, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006; NOI, 2006; YouTube, 2006).



Britain's Online Non-Events?

Observers of British elections have long been wondering if the Internet campaign phenomena witnessed in the US will make their way across the Atlantic. UK campaign managers eagerly followed the 2000 presidential contest in an effort to 'learn lessons' (Gibson et al, 2003: 51). Overall, however, the Net had little impact on the 2001 general election. Only seven per cent of citizens claimed to have used it to look for election information, compared with 74 per cent for newspapers and 89 per cent for television (MORI, 2001). It appears to have played only a marginal role in influencing how individuals decided to vote, and candidates' online presences, though improving, were not as developed as those of their American counterparts.

By the 2005 British general election, evidence emerged that Internet campaigning was shaping political behavior. Some British MPs were using the Net to reach out to supporters outside the traditional structures of party, via email distribution lists, for example, which performed some of the functions performed by blogs (Jackson, 2004). Around fifty parliamentary candidates blogged during the 2005 campaign (Kimber, 2005). But while the Internet presence of candidates was an improvement over 2001, it was clear that the Internet did not play the role it did in the 2004 US campaign. Blogging remains very much a minority sport among British parliamentarians (Francoli and Ward, 2007).

In the period following the 2005 election, as social media and social networking trends reached Britain, politicians began to experiment with *YouTube*, *MySpace* and *Facebook*. A handful of prominent politicians, including government minister David Miliband, began high-profile blogs. In the spring of 2006, Labour Party leader Tony Blair ordered a rethink of the party's approach to web campaigning. This led to the creation of the Labour Supporters Network, an email list designed to appeal to those who were not willing or able to become fully paid up party members, and *MpURL Membersnet*, a social network site that provides each party member with a blog, each local constituency Labour Party organisation with an online discussion forum, and a number of general policy related forums. Meanwhile, the Conservative Party's new leader, David Cameron, pioneered the use of viral online video in mainstream British politics, with his *Webcameron* video blog. Labour's Deputy leadership contest in the spring of 2007 saw all candidates engage with web 2.0 platforms such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*. Thus there are some tentative signs that British parties are integrating the Net.

But does this mean that they will converge on the American model? And if so, to what extent? We seek to provide a framework for answering such questions through a consideration of the differences between the United States and United Kingdom party and electoral environments.

Party Organisation and Electoral Environment: Catalysts and Anticatalysts for Internet Election Campaigning

This paper will detail five distinct dimensions of the British and American political system: the degree of systemic institutional pluralism; the organisation of membership; candidate recruitment and selection; campaign finance; and the 'old' campaign communication environment. The aim here is to show how differences between the United States and the United Kingdom in each of these areas may be used to hypothesise the distinct characteristics of online election campaigning in a political system.

Degree of Systemic Institutional Pluralism

Federalism and the separation of powers, both key constitutional values in the United States, guarantee substantial institutional pluralism. This weakens national party integration (Epstein, 1980; Harmel and Janda, 1982; Key, 1964). The separate electoral bases of the presidency and Congress provide few incentives for party cohesion. Parties have state and local committees but their influence and level of organisation differs significantly from state to state. Many state committees are flimsy, and where there are traditions of strong party organisation, such as in New York state or Pennsylvania, these are still only weakly integrated with the national committees in Washington. Parties are important for government formation and affiliation remains a very strong predictor of congressional behavior, but away from the capitol, state and local party structures have few direct policymaking roles. National party committees are institutionally separate from the party organisations inside Congress, and while there are differences between the states, much the same can be said of the relationship between state legislatures and state level party committees. The national committees have grown in influence since the 1970s, yet they are still of less importance



during presidential races than the staff and infrastructure built up by candidates themselves during both the primary season and the main campaign. Even the presidential contest necessarily becomes a matter of localised campaigning in targeted key states, due to the Electoral College system. In the lexicon of Samuel Eldersveld (1982), the American party system is strataarchical rather than hierarchical. Layers of party organisation, riven by factionalism along several dimensions, are only loosely joined.

Contrast this with the United Kingdom, where the separation of powers is strictly circumscribed by the near-fusion of the legislature and the executive (Lijphart, 1984) and where, despite recent devolution reforms, the state is unitary. The prime minister and parliament share an electoral base, incentivising party cohesion in the interests of policy success for the government and reelection for MPs. British parties are characterised by hierarchy, national coordination and integration, and while there are different political traditions associated with party activism in localities, the party structures are internally uniform. Local constituency organisations enjoy policymaking influence but despite recent trends toward internal democratisation, national headquarters exert close control over the whole party. While some local associations can and do deviate from the leadership's script, national party organisations nevertheless have a major influence on the election campaign by channeling resources, coordinating activity and applying sanctions (Ware, 1996).

How do these characteristics interact with the technological affordances of the Internet? The pluralistic environment in the United States necessitates building campaign networks composed of horizontal and vertical connections that mesh with the fundamentally strataarchical basis of the system. Integration can be achieved in a way that leaves intact the operative norms of federalism and the separation of powers, but which provides lines of communication between levels of party organisation and activists. The Internet provides for granular communication that allows party staff to quickly switch from local to state to national focus and vice versa. It also reinforces the trend, since the 1970s, towards a more active coordinating role for the national party committees. Yet, in a system where state party organisations often jealously guard their autonomy, the open, looser networks afforded by Internet communication fit well.

Compare this with the United Kingdom, where, as we have noted, the separation of powers is weak, federalism absent, and parties comparatively integrated and hierarchical. There, though constituency level organisations can be rebellious, the lines of communication are more vertically oriented, more firmly drawn and are based in long established formal structures with accompanying bureaucracies. The Internet's technological affordances for creating loose horizontal networks have fewer affinities with this set of arrangements. We can hypothesise that it is more likely that British parties will deploy the Internet in ways that jell with internal routinised institutional traits. This is evidenced, for example, by the *MpURL Membersnet*, which is a members-only layer of web applications that map onto long-standing internal party structures.

Organisation of membership

In his classic work on party systems, Duverger (1954) suggested that British (and other European) parties were organisationally 'superior' because they developed durable mass membership and participation infrastructures. Revisionists such as Epstein (1967) have suggested that the weaker American party model is better suited to the age of leader-focused, televisual politics. Either way, American parties do not have a system of individual membership, though there is a chance for ordinary party supporters to play a role in the selection of candidates through the primary system (see below). Nor do they have a leader embedded in their structure, but instead rely on a successful presidential candidate to lead the party once elected. Parties in Congress are often described as 'headless': there is no concept of permanent opposition (Janda, 1993: 164). The once decisive role of the party convention in policy discussion and nomination has, since the 1970s, been hollowed out. And, as we have seen, the difficulty of coordinating solidary resources in American parties is affected by federalism and the separation of powers.

The lack of a permanent membership necessarily makes American parties heavily campaign focused. Candidates seeking office are required to develop their own campaign infrastructure, based around personal support for their platform. This is reinforced by the primary system, which features a large scale campaign from which elements of the party's organisation, such as national and state committees, are sometimes marginalised. US politics is candidate-centered.



In the United Kingdom, parties have an organic existence outside of election campaigns; they are organs of policy and participation and have (currently declining) memberships. National party conferences differ in terms of policy influence from party to party, but conferences do retain a residual policy making role. Local, regional and national policy forums provide opportunities for rank and file activists to participate. While campaign machinery does tend to deteriorate during the periods between elections, greater institutional presence and continuous membership do not create pressures to continually rebuild from scratch. There is a strong tradition of organised opposition in British politics, spearheaded by the permanent party leader of the second largest party in parliament and his or her shadow cabinet. In Britain, parties have pre-formed structures containing activists inherited by successive leaders. UK politics is party-centered.

The often temporary and short-lived associations that constitute the American campaign offer strong incentives for using the Internet. The most successful and publicised examples, for example Howard Dean's use of *Meetup* or Barack Obama's creation of *Facebook* groups (Goldfarb, 2007) in the earliest possible stages of the campaign are attempts to construct an online network of supporters and activists at the lowest possible cost and often well in advance of organisation on the ground. We may also consider this from the perspective of activists themselves, who seek policy influence and expressive benefits from political participation. For such individuals, the Internet provides these earlier and, for some it seems, with greater intensity than in the 'old' campaign environment.

In the United Kingdom, while volunteer activists are hardly in abundant supply, the party membership is at least a pre-existing resource that can be tapped in more routinised and predictable ways by party elites, candidates and members alike. Party elites often engage in administrative reform of internal structures to realise political or bureaucratic goals (Webb, 2001), but the sense of fast-moving organisational fluidity, even chaos, that often characterises American candidates' attempts to mobilise support is not evident.

Recent developments in Britain do, however, suggest that the Internet may be catalysing some aspects of party membership organisation. The permanent membership base of British parties has been eroding for several decades. This incentivises parties to seek alternative models. As mentioned in our brief description of election campaigning, the Labour Party's new 'supporters network' and its internal 'social networking' model, *MpURL Membersnet*,

deliberately seek to attract those who do not commit to old-style party membership, or those who do not engage with traditional face-to-face participatory structures. This is not to suggest that British parties are converging on the US model. Significant differences will persist, as British parties mold the technology in their own ways. Hence, Labour's Chair Hazel Blears's view that 'We don't want a US-style party with a loose coalition of supporters, rather than an active membership' (Blears, 2007). Our assumption is that technology can shape institutions but institutions will mediate eventual outcomes.

Candidate recruitment and selection

In the United States, mechanisms for the recruitment and selection of candidates offer an institutional framework for sanctioned dissent (Bogdanor, 1984: X). Distrust of the corruption and patronage of urban party machines led to the early twentieth century reforms specifically designed to weaken party bosses and increase citizen influence via devices such as the initiative, the referendum and the recall, but most significantly, primary elections. While practices have differed across the states, since the 1970s, primaries have become fundamental to US politics. Uncertainty and risk are much greater for both party elites and candidates than their equivalents in Britain. Participation in primaries is restricted, but the thresholds are low. One must simply register as a Democrat or Republican, in some cases only a few weeks before the ballot. While caucus selection has not entirely disappeared, many caucus votes are in any case characterised by the same degree of fluidity and openness as witnessed during primaries (McKay, 2005: 93).

Primaries are all but absent from the British party system. Internal competition between contenders takes place in arenas sealed off from direct participation by the general public. UK parties do have internal procedures which, to varying extents, involve mass memberships in the selection of national leadership positions, and permanent local constituency associations select their local party candidates, subject to the final approval of central staff. But electoral rules guarantee party elites a significant power bloc in national leadership contests, parliamentary candidates are heavily vetted by central party elites, and the committees of local constituency activists are usually small and exclusive. The environment for candidate selection is much less open and fluid, much more tightly managed, and more nationally-oriented than is the case in the United States.



It is notable that in the United States, most of the Internet campaigning innovations (McCain during 1999-2000, Dean during 2003-2004, Lamont during 2006, Obama during 2007-2008) have occurred during primaries. Primary elections may be influenced but cannot be controlled by the parties themselves. Resources permitting, any individual may run for the nomination and those without 'establishment' party backing have found the Internet particularly attractive for garnering support. In Dean's case, an outsider candidate found that he could use the Net to quickly ratchet up a campaign in the early primary stages in an attempt to reduce the costs of overcoming sheer geographical scale and the complexity of the different state-level contests. The uncertainty of the primary environment forces candidates to cast around for opportunities to build what are often fragile and fleeting coalitions of support. In some respects, candidates can use the Internet to try to reduce this uncertainty and risk. When the risks are high but the costs of organisational innovation are low, candidates are more likely to experiment, for example by trying to tap into multiple online networks. During the 2007-08 primary campaign, John Edwards's campaign was notorious for spreading its bets across practically all of the important web 2.0 sites and applications, including *43Things*, *Del.icio.us*, *Essembly*, *Facebook*, *Flickr*, *Gather*, *MySpace*, *Partybuilder*, *YouTube*, *Ning*, *Metacafe*, *Revver*, *Yahoo! 360°*, *Blip.tv*, *CHBN*, *vSocial*, *Tagworld*, *Collectivex*, *Bebo*, *Care2*, *Hi5*, *Xanga*, and *Livejournal* (Edwards, 2007).

This conjuncture of institutions and technological affordances may be especially applicable to the Democratic Party, for whom the institution of the primary was created, in its modern form, with the goal of empowering activists. The disagreement between much of the party elite and its base over the Iraq war has fuelled the most prominent web campaigns, most notably those of Dean, Paul Hackett and Lamont. Institutions (the primary), and technology came together to form an mutually reinforcing environment for grassroots dissent. At the same time, however, it still needs to be recognised that factors such as the lack of a fully 'national' campaign domain, the complexities of different state level contexts and the command of territorial scale required of a successful US primary candidacy are important institutional constraints. These may be softened but cannot totally be overcome by the Internet. Dean found this to his cost when it actually came to the ballots.

Lacking primaries and having much greater control over candidate recruitment and selection, British parties operate within a radically

different environment. Factionalism, dissent and risk are important factors in British party selection processes (Webb, 2001), but they are deliberately managed, or are not permitted such blatant institutional expression (Ware, 1996). The 'selectorate' is a combination of party elites and members, but those members are fully paid-up. It would be unusual to see large numbers of citizens join a British party just to participate in an internal election campaign: the threshold is too high. And while candidates must be seen to be impressive in the face of broader public opinion, they nevertheless know that the internal electoral rules and timetable are fixed and nationally uniform, and that there will (literally) be no outsider candidates. In this environment, there are fewer incentives to take advantage of the Internet for lowering costs and reducing uncertainty and risk by spreading a campaign across a wide range of networks.

Campaign finance

The campaign finance environment differs significantly across the two political systems. We focus here on three factors, all of which mediate the Internet as an aid to fundraising.

First, there is the matter of scale and significance. American politics, by the standards of anywhere else in the world, is expensive. Indeed, there is much talk of 2008 being the first \$1 billion election (Malbin and Cain, 2007: 4). In contrast, in the twelve months preceding the 2005 British general election, the combined spending of the Labour and Conservative parties was just £90 million (\$185 million) (Phillips, 2007: 13). Furthermore, the acquisition of money is central to success in American politics. Electoral primaries, for example, are preceded by what is termed 'the money primary', where candidates' electoral viability is assessed by their ability to raise funds from donors (Adkins and Dowdle, 2002). This process received a great deal of coverage in anticipation of the 2008 presidential primary season, with much comment being made on Barack Obama's success as a fund raiser and the relative failure of John McCain to gather the funds considered necessary for a successful nomination bid (Heileman, 2007 and MacAskill, 2007). There is no comparable institution in British politics. The importance of financial resources to American politics ensures that political actors are quick to exploit the potential of new revenue streams. This has certainly been the case online, where candidates, most notably Democrats, have proved to be adept at raising vast sums of money (Dwyer et al, 2004). Through the institution of the money primary, it is possible for American citizens to have quite a direct impact on



political outcomes. For this reason, it is a far more rational course of action for Americans to make political donations. The Internet has made this more apparent, by lowering the barrier to participation and making it easier for citizens to contribute to their preferred candidate.

Second, the American political system exhibits a diverse range of donation opportunities. This is a direct consequence of the pluralistic nature of American parties. Even the national parties each contain three committees to which donations can be sent: the national committee, the house party and the senate party. Then there are party organisations at state and regional level. Money can also be given directly to candidates for office, both during the primary season (when givers will have a choice between many candidates), and then in the main electoral contest. In contrast, the centralised nature of British parties offers far fewer opportunities for individuals to donate. The vast majority of political donations in Britain are given to the national headquarters of a party. In 2005, nearly 85 per cent of the £38 million of cash contributions given to the Conservative and Labour parties and itemised by the UK Electoral Commission went straight to the central party organisation, with only the remaining 15 per cent going to sub-national bodies (UK Electoral Commission, 2005).

Third, the two countries employ vastly different regulatory systems, based on diametrically opposed principles. This has historically been the case, but has been further reinforced by recent legal decisions and legislation. In America, attempts to regulate political finance have focused on declaring and capping donations. The 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act required disclosure of donations to candidates, while a 1974 amendment to the act, passed in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, imposed a donation cap of \$1000. This law was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Buckley vs. Valeo* (1976).

However, the same hearing also ruled two significant provisos, both of which were to have huge implications for campaign finance in the United States. While caps on donations were deemed legal, any caps on spending were deemed unconstitutional, on the grounds they would breach the first amendment right to free speech. The Supreme Court also ruled that only donations made directly for the purpose of election campaigning would fall under the auspices of donation limits. In reality the distinction between electoral campaigning and issue advertising proved to be very fine, and it was this element of the ruling that led to the distinction between 'hard'

and 'soft' money' in American politics. Hard money donations to candidates fell under the remit of the Federal Election Commission and were limited by the Federal Election Campaign Act. In contrast, soft money existed outside this regulatory framework and, provided it was not used to directly endorse a candidate, could be gathered in unlimited quantities, either by issue advocacy groups or by central committees within political parties (Sorauf, 1992).

The most recent attempt to close this loophole in the law was the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (often referred to by the names of its Senate sponsors, McCain and Feingold). At the same time as raising the hard money donation limit to \$2000 per candidate, this legislation also prohibited political parties or committees within parties from gathering soft money donations. However, in-keeping with the *Buckley vs. Valeo* ruling, the act allowed organisations campaigning on issues to receive unlimited donations. Many of these 527 groups (so-called because they were defined as such under clause 527 of the US tax code) are highly partisan and only quasi-autonomous from electoral campaigns, although barred from having direct contact with candidates seeking office. The Internet lends itself to this type of loose political association. For example, Moveon.org is a 527 group, and thus legally defined as non-partisan. However, through its base of Internet supporters, it is able to organise large-scale campaigns to aid Democratic causes and candidates. Through the network structures of online organisations, it becomes possible for 'separate' organisations to coordinate their actions more effectively, to become virtually if not actually interlocking, and, in some cases to have a significant impact on elections (MoveOn, 2007).

In contrast, in Britain, there are no caps on donations to political parties. Individuals and organisations are legally able to give any sums they wish. As a result, a significant proportion of donations to British political parties come from a small number of large donors. It has been estimated that a donations cap of £5,000 (approximately five times the cap imposed by McCain-Feingold in the US) would deny British parties nearly 90 per cent of their current income (Grant, 2005: 390). Instead, British legislation on campaign finance has sought to curb spending. *The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act 1883* imposed constituency spending caps on candidates, in an effort to prevent the purchase of office. The advent of organised and wealthy political parties with mass memberships during the twentieth century led to calls for a similar national spending cap. Such a cap was only introduced by *The Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000*



(PPERA), which limited a party's national spending based on the number of constituencies it was contesting (Kelly, 2005).

In the UK then, unhindered by donation caps, politicians are able to rely on fewer, large contributions to fund their electioneering (as well as still receiving significant sums from party members). They have fewer incentives to develop support from large numbers of small donors. In contrast, in the US, candidates necessarily need to solicit contributions from a large number of supporters. The Internet has proved to be the perfect environment for this element of electoral campaigning. Indeed, there is some evidence that the Internet is changing the types of donations being received by candidates. In particular, the 2004 Presidential election saw an increase in the number of small donations (usually defined as less than \$200, the level at which they must be reported individually to the Federal Election Commission), a change for which the Internet was seen as partially responsible (IPDI, 2006). In total, 61 per cent of Dean's funds came from donations of less than \$200 (Hindman, 2005: 124). Some have even gone as far as to argue that the Internet, as a mechanism for giving, is creating a new era of 'small dollar democracy' (Schmitt, 2007).

'Old' campaign communication environment

Our final dimension concerns how the older campaign communication environment, particularly the roles of television and targeted marketing, shapes incentives for political actors when it comes to the Internet.

Internet campaigning does not exist in a media vacuum. Since the 1970s in the United States, paid-for television advertising has been one of the most important and most expensive aspects of the campaign. Advertising is largely unregulated. Candidates may buy as many slots as they are able to afford or calculate the public will bear. In addition, quasi-independent organisations affiliated with a candidate may also purchase airtime. As is well known, the United States was in the vanguard of the so-called professionalisation of political campaigning. The campaign industry, with its pollsters, consultants, speechwriters, and direct marketers was, long before the arrival of the Internet, strongly attuned to the role played by television in shaping electoral opinion and has ruthlessly packaged political campaigns for indirect dissemination via mainstream news

media. It has equally ruthlessly developed strategies for direct marketing via old technologies (phone and mail) especially in key swing states during presidential campaigns.

Party-controlled television content is a mere sideshow in the United Kingdom, where such political advertising is outlawed. British parties are allotted a handful of regulated 'party election broadcasts' during a campaign and while the audiences for these are reasonably large, they are of short duration. However, the rise of the professional campaign in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s has led to the US-style 'packaging' of candidates for the mainstream news media, which is of greater importance for citizens' political information in the United Kingdom (Farrell et al, 2001; Franklin, 2004). Similarly, direct marketing strategies have grown in importance.

Theorising differences across our two countries in this area is more complex. In general, the Internet seems to be less effective than television in reaching undecided voters (Klotz, 2004: 64). Such voters are less likely to be motivated to seek out political information using a purposive medium (Bimber and Davis, 2004). Winning elections is about raising candidate visibility among undecided voters in key marginal constituencies. Television and direct marketing have obvious benefits when compared with online campaigning in this regard, because they can be targeted to specific sets of voters. Internet phenomenon MoveOn used TV advertisements and phone canvassing to great effect in the 2006 midterms, as its website proudly proclaims (MoveOn, 2007).

A further disincentive to devoting professional campaign resources to the Internet is its unpredictability and risk when compared with older methods, as the Virginia 'macaca' incident revealed. Equally though, these things are not down to pure chance. Jessica Vanden Berg, the campaign manager of Jim Webb, George Allen's Democratic opponent, revealed a detailed account of the carefully managed campaign that launched the video, involving leaks to the mainstream media and to favoured bloggers (NOI, 2006). Such events require dedicated, skilled and well-connected campaign teams. The Internet campaign also produces opportunity costs that must be paid for by comparative neglect of other aspects of campaign communication. A characteristic response in the United States has in part been to try to mold the use of information and communication technologies to reflect the norms of the old communication environment. Political actors have looked for ways to have the Internet do the old jobs, only smarter. Howard (2006) has demonstrated the centrality to



the online campaign of the storage, retrieval and automation of vast quantities of information, the targeting of individual voters, and geodemographic data mining.

Similar factors are shaping British developments. The Labour Supporters Network and *MpURL Membersnet* are unobtrusive means of gathering data on party members. Targeted email and mobile text messaging are now familiar features of the campaign landscape. However, the British experience also reveals a growing exuberance among politicians who see the potential of the Internet to bypass the constraints of mainstream media and the heavily regulated television environment. This was precisely the reasoning behind the creation of the Conservative Party leader David Cameron's video blog, *Webcameron*, according to campaign staff. Thus we see a mix of potentialities in this field. The predominance of television and old-style direct marketing, its benefits for targeting undecided voters in key marginals are shaping the adoption of Internet campaigning in both countries. Interestingly, however, the weaker role of candidate-controlled television exposure in the United Kingdom may act as more of a catalyst there.

Conclusion

This article aimed to suggest how we might move beyond some of the assumptions that have hitherto dominated discussions of online campaigning. It seems to be the case that high levels of systemic institutional pluralism in the US, created by the separation of powers and federalism, ensure that American political parties remain much looser affiliations than their British counterparts. The lack of a permanent membership in American parties makes them more heavily election-focused than those in Britain, and candidates do not find a *ready-made* campaign organisation when they seek office. The Internet is emerging as a powerful tool for undertaking these tasks. These tendencies are even more acutely demonstrated in the primary system, which, with its low thresholds for entry and potential for mass participation, allows for internal party debate and dispute. The primary and the Internet are mutually reinforcing. Indeed, it could be argued that the reforms instigated within the Democratic Party in the 1970s have now taken on a whole new significance.

Campaign finance is another area where pre-existing institutions have an impact on Internet-based campaign strategies. In the United States, the primary system, particularly the 'money primary', give donations a greater influence on political outcomes. The Internet has

made this process easier, and may, if the claims of the advocates of 'small dollar democracy' are accepted, be democratising the process.

This article is only the starting point of a discussion of the relationship between institutions and the Internet. There is more work to be done in examining differences *within* political systems. Why, for example, do the Democrats seem to be 'better' at using the Net than the Republicans? There are also questions about institutional development and design. In the UK, for example, there is currently some unease about the way political parties are funded and a discussion of a range of options, including donation caps and state funding. Likewise, the Conservative party is experimenting with primary contests for the London Mayoral elections in 2008. Clearly these and other relevant institutional changes would have ramifications for online politics which will need to be considered and understood.

The approach suggested here has the potential to help us better understand the complex interaction between institutions and new technology. The differences between British and American campaigning provide a compelling crucible, though the approach could be used to frame the comparison of other political systems. The five dimensions outlined – the level of systemic institutional pluralism, the organisation of membership and supporters, the processes through which candidates are recruited and selected, the financial demands and regulations surrounding campaigns, and existing campaign communication structures – will play a role in explaining differences in Internet campaigning across a wide variety of political systems.



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