« WII THE PEOPLE » : PARTIES, MOVEMENTS, INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE 2012 CAMPAIGN

Matt Browne, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

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"Change comes from the outside."
Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States

In 2008, following the US presidential election, many progressive strategists and organizers made a pilgrimage to the United States to learn the latest innovations in political organizing and communicating, and to see how this new media had been successfully channeled to political ends. The vast majority hoped that, in studying online communications and social media, they would find a new "silver bullet" that would help them modernize and re-energize their movements.

Yet in many ways the lessons of 2012 campaign are much more interesting for the European campaigners. In 2012, there seemed appeared to be less enthusiasm for President Obama that four years earlier. A tough first term had taken its toll on the President's "hope and change" brand. As the national polls began to narrow in the days following the first presidential debate, it appeared the election would be a close call.

On November 6, however, the Obama campaign machine delivered a decisive victory in the overall vote and the electoral college vote - with the President retaining key battle ground states such as Florida, Virginia, Wisconsin, Nevada, and Ohio. The result shocked Republicans, who were convinced that the Obama coalition of women, minorities and young voters would not turn out in the numbers they'd witnessed 4 years earlier.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT FOR CHANGE

To understand how this was achieved, it is useful to go back almost a decade and trace a story of political reform and institution building.

In 2004, the US Democrats were in disarray. They had been defeated by an incumbent Republican

President they thought to be hugely unpopular, but who nonetheless had found 13 million new supporters. They had also lost majorities in both the House and Senate, allowing the conservative Right to establish a monopoly of power in Washington DC. To make matters worse, conservatives looked set to establish a cultural hegemony of ideas across the country too.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, many in the media focused their attention on the superficial reasons for the electoral defeat – such as mistakes in the campaign's strategy or message. Out of view, however, a much richer and deeper analysis was made. The Democrats had no message; had lost nearly every substantial debate; and had been out-organized. On every plane, they had been defeated by the conservative political and ideas infrastructure that had been created over the previous three decades: the so-called Conservative Message Machine Money Matrix.

From this perspective, the outcome of 2004 election cycle was not simply a campaign failure (a cyclical failure); it was the result of a long term failure to invest in the development of progressive infrastructure that could counter the Right's potent machine (a structural failure).

Fired-up by this analysis, a perfect storm was beginning to form in the progressive community, one ready to shake things up: a group of donors had acknowledged the need to invest in progressive infrastructure; a large group of activists and supporters had begun to call for the party to open up, embrace reform, and use new media to help organize and communicate; and the Democrats had hit rock bottom. The environment was perfect for trying something new, and making risky investments.

To begin with, the disillusioned Democratic base would elect Howard Dean as party chair. Dean had lost his bid to become the party's Presidential nominee in part because of his maverick outspoken streak. This would, however, make him perfect to reform the DNC. Dean, used his Chairmanship to radically re-organize the party, making inroads for the new organizing and communication techniques he had pioneered in his presidential bid, and drawing on the talents and energies of those that had invented them.

From the outset, he chose to build the party 'from the ground up', choosing in the initial stages to engage with disillusioned democrats on their own terms - often during community events that had very little directly to do with the Democratic Party itself. Dean also made the strategic decision to ensure the party would become more competitive in every state across the nation. Embracing the idea of a "50 state strategy", designed and spearheaded by Tom McMahon, his Executive Director, Dean set out to build an advocacy and organizational capacity in every state – even those that most people believed would never vote Democratic, or at least not for several generations.

At the heart of this process was the creation of a national data voter file held by the DNC. Previously, different states and competing candidates ran their own databases, which were often lost from one election cycle to another, or were regarded by candidates as privileged information to be closely guarded. There was a great deal of resistance to collaboration, and a strong desire to retain control of information. In the end, however, through persuasion and the offer of technological support, the DNC was able to convince people to both share and continually update voter information and contact through a unified system. Experiences were similar when the DNC sought to push through the use of the online tools and common training programs. In the end, however, a combination of improved

resources, a growing volunteer base, and vastly improved election results convinced skeptics on the merits of reform.

In the 2006 midterm elections, Democrats gained five seat in the Senate, taking their total to 49, and a further 31 seats in the House of Representatives, given them the leadership with 233 seats.

A further strength of the DNC under Dean was that it became a hub supporting innovators in new information and communications technology. Firms such as the Voter Activation Network, which would provide the voter contact management tools for the Obama campaign in 2008, as well as Blue State Digital, who produced the online and social media tools, gained their "seed funding" with the DNC. As Sasha Issenberg has described in *The Victory Lab*, in 2012 these extra-partisan groups were still up and running, further perfecting the campaign machine and its technology.

Dean's philosophical approach to Democratic Party politics was echoed by the Obama campaign in 2008, and the investments the DNC made in organizational tools and talent would also serve the presidential campaign well.

"Respect. Empower. Include" was the mantra of the Obama campaign in 2008. The three words could be found on colorful handmade posters decorating the walls of every regional campaign office in the country. In the words of volunteers Karin Christiansen and Marcus Roberts these core values meant that, "at a minimum [the campaign] helped mitigate the usual tensions and frictions of campaign life while at best they inspired volunteers to do that extra canvass round, ask friends and families to join them, and even make those small donations that funded the campaign juggernaut." Ensuring that the treatment of volunteers was steadfast in its commitment to these principles was the part of the strategy that did most to create the biggest volunteer "get out the vote" operation of all time.

While much has been written about new media role in President Obama's campaign, Obama's tactics were essentially of old fashioned variety – grassroots mobilization, canvassing, and saturation advertising – but driven by an extremely modern set of tools. It is critical for progressives to understand where the use of the internet fitted into the list of contributing factors to Obama's victory. As Paul Tewes, the mastermind of the insurgency in Iowa described it, "message and organization won the campaign; technology served it."

That said technology played a more decisive role in improving the efficiency of the campaign operation than had arguably been the case in any previous election cycle. For example, Obama raised $687 million with nearly three-quarters raised online from 4 million people; 13 million people signed up to receive regular emails; and countless neighborhood events and campaign operations were organized through the social networking tool, MyBarackObama.com. This tool helped volunteers to self-organize in their own communities, and within their own peer group. As Tom McMahon has noted, one of the strengths of the online tools developed during this period was that they allowed volunteers to choose their own point of entry into the campaign, to engage in the campaign on their own terms. As a consequence, volunteers increasingly gave more of their time to the campaign than ever before.

As a consequence, in the run up to the election, more doors were knocked, more phone calls made, more local events organized than ever before. In the closing days, the campaign managed to speak to 6 million voters a day. As a result, on Election Day, the campaign had had face-to-face contact with an unprecedented 50% of the total electorate. By comparison, John McCain's team had only managed to speak with a quarter of the Republican supporters.

In 2012, however, the national field operation was even larger. In the swing states, the campaign had more field offices than ever, each with numerous paid organizers (700 in Ohio alone). The hundreds of Democratic field offices outnumbered GOP outposts by 2-1 or 3-1 in key swing states. Across the nation, volunteers were encouraged and included as before; with a clear set of options, centrally aligned instructions and information, organizers to help make the experience fun and socially interesting. Volunteering was also possible from home; online, via Dashboard, volunteers could receive instructions and phone numbers to make calls, find events and "get fired up." Volunteers were also encouraged more than in 2008 to organize their own events, further empowering them but also lightening the burden of paid staffers.

The army of volunteers on the ground cleared the path for an extremely efficient "Get-Out-The-Vote" operation on Election Day (and during early voting). In many swing states, families were surprised that an OFA volunteer came knocking on their door three times on election day, asking for the single family member - name and age included - that hadn't voted yet! The 125 million voter contacts the Obama team claimed were more than twice the Republican total.

The whole campaign operation was increasingly driven by data. Volunteers on the ground and innovations in ICT (such as randomized control trials and new online polling techniques) were used to build up an enormous data set that modeled voter behavior - from viewing habits to personal and cultural interests - to refine how they would be communicated with the maximize habits. This helped organize volunteers' time more effectively and craft ads, messages and e-mails in an extremely effective way.

Supporting groups also began to apply the lessons from online gaming to online campaign tools. Volunteers received direct reward points for their contributions to the campaign, which had a real dollar value. These funds could then be used for offline actions determined by the volunteer – for example financing a local event, running a particular advert, or providing financial support to a candidate nominated by the volunteer. In almost every case, however, these innovations served to reinforce three core principles: whatever lives online must be targeted to actions offline; volunteers should be trusted and empowered; and technology's first purpose is to serve the campaign strategy, not define.

These investments paid off. President Obama's field operation managed to surprise both Republican and non-partisan pollsters by securing a high turnout among key groups.

Since 2008 more than 10 million new voters have registered, and young people, many of them Latinos, made up the bulk of those voters. Latinos increased their percentage of the electorate to 10% in this race from 9% in 2008. In Florida, for instance, this meant an additional 200,000 votes. Meanwhile, black voters turned out at the same level of the overall vote as in 2008 (13 percent), while

women voters showed an increase from 53% to 54%. People earning less than $50,000 also increased their turnout, rising to 41% of the vote from 38% in 2008. And young voters increased their presence at the polls to 19% on Tuesday from 18% four years ago. The president won 55% of all female voters, regardless of race or income level, and 60% of all low-income voters.

LESSONS FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVES

During the closing decades of the 20th century, as James Harding chronicles in *Alpha Dogs*, politicians and political parties across the world looked to America and American campaign consultants to learn the "dark art" of political campaigning.

What we might term the first wave of professionalization of politics relied heavily on polling and focus groups to help define and refine messages, and modern advertising techniques to communicate them. The focus of political campaigns and communications was very much about controlling the message and message discipline. In his *Politics Lost*, Joe Klein provides a skeptical reading of these developments, bemoaning how public life was overwhelmed by marketing professionals, consultants and pollsters who, with the flaccid acquiescence of the politicians, have robbed public life of much of its romance and vigor. However, for many progressives, facing a hostile media environment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these techniques were invaluable in helping return parties to office.

Regardless of whether one was a fan or a critic of previous innovations, times have now changed. For one, the advent of a truly 24-hour media makes it virtually impossible to manage the cycle. Second, declining trust and deference means that citizens are more selective about what information they chose to consume and how they engage. The story that has unfolded in the United States since 2004 illustrates that a second wave of innovation is now underway: namely a wave of movement building, offering citizens the opportunity to participate; and of a supporting infrastructure for developing ideas, aggressively furthering the progressive cause and perfecting and assisting the campaign machinery.

For progressives seeking to emulate the revival that occurred there is an enormous temptation to think (or at least hope) that the task is one of adopting new technologies and bolting them on to how party politics and campaigning is currently carried out. Unfortunately, this would not techniques are not enough alone, they must be combined within a deep-seated shift in the philosophy of how we do politics.

The revival of progressive politics in the United States has been built on a resurgence of movement politics, but movement politics as we have never seen before. Political parties and campaigns have been opened up like never before. New ideas have been generated outside the party, and new talent nurtured and supported by non-party organizations. And the primary process itself provides for a truly open and transparent election of the leadership, helping to democratize the party structure beyond the control of the party elites.

In many European political cultures, there is resistance to such change, from both party elites and rank and file members alike.

Change, of course, is often disruptive. And, those that occupy power - at whatever level - often find it uncomfortable. Yet resistance to change is a risky strategy. Many young people no longer view organized politics as the best route to change. Mainstream political parties appear unwelcoming and sclerotic to a generation that is less deferential to power. A new generation that wants to actively engage, and more often than not on their own terms, is unlikely to wait long for an invitation or permission. Those that are offered the opportunity to participate can be encouraged to become more involved. Those that are excluded will find other channels for their energy.

In his classic work, *Democracy in America*, Alexis Tocqueville posed the famous thesis that "it is the people who govern". That, of course, has never been entirely true - neither in the United States nor Europe. Politicians and political parties have always enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy they cherish. Interest groups have always exercised undue pressure. But today, as the barriers to entry into the political process become ever lower, de Tocqueville's assertion has renewed importance. As President Barack Obama has noted, "change comes from the outside." For progressive parties, the organizing challenge of the future will be how to adapt in order to attract or to work in concert with those that hold common values, and share similar goals.

Parties that succeed will help build a movement for the future. Parties that fail will become monuments to the past.