

From the Bottom-Up: Using the Internet to Mobilize Campaign Participation

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Essay by [Dana Fisher](#), December 10, 2008 in response to [Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas](#)

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During the 2008 Presidential Campaign, both parties aimed to mobilize volunteer armies of supporters to help get their candidates' elected.

The campaigns ran "meetup-style" components of their Websites for volunteers to take action: [McCain Nation](#) and [MyBarackObama.com](#) (which was termed "MyBo" by supporters). This election was the first time that such e-tools were made available through a national campaign to mobilize and engage local people. Although both campaigns aimed to enhance participation, the differences between the specific components of the sites had an effect on the functionality and usability of each site. In particular, the McCain site was much less usable and not as transparent for users who wanted to get involved. For example, if you wanted to participate in an Obama-related event, you could pull up all events taking place within five miles of your location, get information about the organizer, and register to participate in the event. Then, you received an automatic e-mail confirmation that you had signed up and soon thereafter, the organizer usually got in touch.

Getting involved in a McCain-related event was harder: participants could only pull up events within a wider radius, and when they tried to RSVP for an event, the request was sent out into the ether of cyberspace. Only rarely did organizers respond to requests from supporters to participate in events. There is no question that the differences between these sites had an effect on the ways individuals got involved in each campaign, as well as the degree to which they participated.

Perhaps in part due to the differences in the ways the campaigns used the Internet to connect with their base, many more Obama supporters reported giving money online. Based on research conducted at the public debate watching events in New York City during the first Presidential Debate, more than half of the participants at all of events reported donating money to their respective campaigns. Among those who gave money, 82% of the Obama supporters had donated money online and 64% of the McCain supporters had donated money online. It is likely that the constant email appeals to donate money to the Obama campaign along with the campaign's connection to younger voters also contributed to these differences.

Beyond the technology, when we look at the people who participated in the campaign events, the differences provide insights into the diverse approaches that each campaign took with regard to reaching out to, and actively involving local people.

The people who participated in these events in New York City were very different. As one might expect, Obama supporters were much more diverse. Participants at the McCain events were predominately white males. More than half of the participants at the Obama events were women (59%). Seventeen percent of them self-identified as Latino and 44% of them self identified as being non-white. Given the demographics of Internet use in the US, it is likely that the Obama campaign was able to mobilize such a diverse group through the participants' social networks, along with the campaign website.

The supporters were also very different in terms of their levels of civic engagement, as defined in part, by their previous voting records. While 90% of the McCain supporters had voted in the 2004 Presidential election and 70% had voted in the midterm election in 2006, only 80% of the Obama supporters had voted in the 2004 Presidential election and 57%

had voted in the 2006 mid-term election. In addition, participants at the McCain events had much more political experience: 59% reported having worked for a political campaign (versus only 26% of the Obama supporters). McCain supporters were also more involved in the campaign: for those who said that the debate event was not their first involvement in the campaign (48%), they reported on average having attended 12 campaign events prior to the first Debate (versus 6 events for those Obama supporters who said that the debate event was not their first involvement in the campaign).

Overall, these differences indicate that the Obama campaign's strategy of mobilizing people through their personal connections that capitalized on their personal stories, combined with a campaign Website that included components to channel people into events, was extremely successful in getting people plugged into the campaign in innovative ways.

*Dana R. Fisher is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. Her research focuses on political decision-making, grassroots activism and civic participation. Within her work, she explores the role that the technologies of the Internet play in grassroots mobilization and how they compare to more traditional forms of political mobilization. Her second book, *Activism, Inc.* (Stanford University Press 2006), analyzed the grassroots tactics of the Republican and Democratic Parties in the 2004 Presidential election. For more information, go to www.columbia.edu*

Additional responses include: *The New Activism: Why Volunteering Declined in Campaign 08*, by Ari Melber, *Participation and Polarization in the Networked Public Sphere*, by Henry Farrell, *A Response to Working Hypothesis for Internet and Politics 2008*, by Sunshine Hillygus, *The Revolution of the Online Commentariat*, by Peter Daou, and *Not the Digital Democracy We Ordered*, by Matthew Hindman.

Comments (2)

- Bob Jones wrote:

It was quite staggering how much the Internet affects the obama campaign and funding. It will be fascinating in the future to see how the Internet affects things.

- Sujan Patricia wrote:

Barack Obama won the Democratic Primary battles due to his campaign's astute use of internet based technologies in the development of communities. They saw the wave of mass participation growing, they rode it as they needed to; this helped raise more money faster than anyone else.

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