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The New Activism: Why Volunteering Declined in Campaign 08

Essay by Ari Melber, December 9, 2008 in response to Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas

Additional responses include: *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, *Not the Digital Democracy We Ordered*, by Matthew Hindman, and *From the Bottom-Up: Using the Internet to Mobilize Campaign Participation*, by Dana Fisher.

Yes, we reached the turning point. This is the first time a presidential candidate successfully used the web to: upset a frontrunner in the primary; recruit broad-based support in the general election; route around traditional media on a national scale; completely obviate the post-Watergate campaign finance system; and foster novel forms of activism to stimulate people not only online, but across the three screens that mediate modern life.

Obama's aides applied the Internet as a platform to relentlessly simplify, atomize and promote volunteering, activism and political expression. While organizing is often considered ideologically neutral, the campaign cultivated an organizing *ethic* that valued grassroots labor, energized supporters and reinforced the candidate's message of reform and change. The campaign encouraged a new, rich range of activism for supporters, from posting grassroots events to downloading phone-banking lists at home to promoting the candidate across viral networks.

We know that many of these efforts were popular and effective. Recent data on web fundraising, email lists, ObamaMobile, social networking, YouTube and new media penetration bear this out. (See, e.g. TechPresident.com) There is one exception, however.

The national volunteering rates for this presidential campaign actually *dropped* compared to last cycle. The share of voters who say they "volunteered" on a presidential campaign fell compared to 2004, from nine to seven percent, in Pew's post-election survey. ("High Marks for the Campaign, a High Bar for Obama," *Pew*, Sept. 13, 2008). So is this year's mass activism actually a mirage?

No, quite the opposite, for reasons that suggest our model (and discourse) of political engagement is in flux.

Here is one hypothesis: It is precisely the success and accessibility of new, alternative activism opportunities that create the appearance of a decline in volunteering. In fact, only *traditional* volunteering is receding.

Traditional volunteering, such as registering to help in person at a local field office, has dipped slightly (at least as a proportion of the voting public). Meanwhile, a new range of decentralized volunteering and online activism is catching on. It simply does not register in traditional survey questions.

Activists themselves may not perceive that they are "volunteering," even though they are

contacting voters for a candidate, or acting with encouragement from a campaign. (See, e.g. "The Obama Campaign: A Great Campaign, Or The Greatest?," Sarah Lai Stirland, *Wired*, Nov. 30, 2008.) Forwarding political messages — whether by email, text or video — is essentially a volunteer act designed to impact the election. It spreads a candidate's message to persuade or mobilize potential voters, just like calling voters off a list at the local office.

(See, e.g. "Obama's Wired Tuesday Push," Ari Melber, *The Nation*. Also note that from 2004 to 2008, the share of voters who received campaign email spiked from 14 to 24 percent, according to Pew, while 53 percent of voters said they received campaign phone calls.)

Voter contact based on preexisting relationships and social networks is especially valuable for electoral politics — as a supplement to organized field programs. Obama's field operation, for example, designed an iPhone application on the premise that people are more influenced by friends than cold calls. (See, e.g. "Obama's Web-Savvy Voter Plan," Ari Melber, *The Nation*, Oct 8, 2008.) So as citizens explore different ways to engage and support a campaign or cause, some may favor the new activism over traditional volunteering. Why lick envelopes when you can make your own campaign commercials?

For the question facing our conference, these shifts in how people conceive and practice politics present a turning point for digital politics. An open, interactive spirit animates the activism that so many citizens are engaging in today. Open source politics can fulfill old promises and ideas from American life, from the progressive era's emphasis on transparent government to the civil rights movement's call for more participatory democracy. Internet politics can even aspire to the very founding vision of America: An open frontier where everyone has an equal voice, superficial differences recede, and citizens are empowered to debate and govern their future together.

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