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Civic Engagement: Less than Peace Corps, More than Taxes

Essay by Gene Koo, January 23, 2009 in response to Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas

Originally published on Gene Koo's blog and cross-posted at techpresident. This is one in a series of essays focused on how Obama's new CTO might transform American democracy in three areas: civic engagement, administrative transparency, and legislative advocacy.

"Yes we can," as an election slogan, implies a relatively simple mission: get more people to cast a ballot for your candidate than for the other one. But as Barack Obama's creed pivots from a battle cry to a governing philosophy, what, exactly, "we can" becomes a much larger and more complex matter. So, too, is the potential role technology can play in an Obama administration.

Barack Obama promises to re-ignite American civic life; he repeatedly proclaimed that the election wasn't about him but rather "you." His Plan for Voluntary Citizen Service describes "a craigslist for service," with "user ratings and social network features." Frankly, this idea is rather dull and unimaginative, besides being redundant of Idealist.org. (Also, most nonprofits need commitments, not one-shot volunteers; Match.com offers a better template than craigslist). But the Plan does point out the gap in civic participation options between merely paying taxes and making long-term bodily commitments to the military or the Peace Corps.

Rather than promote volunteer "crowdsourcing," I hope the Administration will push what it did so well in the campaign: build good infrastructure, provide deep training, and support team-/community-building. In short, Obama should invest less in volunteers and more in the infrastructure of volunteerism – including powerful technology tools.

Open myBo to Social Entrepreneurs

A technology infrastructure to support volunteerism should, as Clay Shirky puts it, promote "organizing without organizations" – filling the innumerable niches now empty across our communities' landscape of needs by investing in would-be socialentrepreneurs. My.BarackObama.com ("myBo") allowed any Obama supporter to become an instant leader by hosting an event. More importantly, it then did automatically what a good organizer would do: send out reminder emails the day before the event to make sure volunteers actually show up. (Most organizers I know think phone calls are better, but the basic idea is there). In other words, myBo was, in a rudimentary way, scaffolding habits of highly effective organizers. A lot more can be built: imagine the iPhone app's "Call a Friend in a Swing State" function reconfigured for local activism.

MyBo, or some Open Source knockoff, should be opened up to anyone who wants to round up friends and neighbors to make a difference, as well as to anyone who wants to tinker with new features. No software can, of course, convey the "spirit" of grassroots organizing. But well-designed systems can scaffold the basic activities of a competent organizer, enough to give such efforts a fighting chance, especially if coupled with training or mentorship.

New Media for All

Indeed, the Administration can do even more to support the work of would-be community entrepreneurs. In the last months of the campaign, Obama's new media team released a bevy of micro-targeted videos that urged, for example, supporters to volunteer in Ohio and taught the basics of how to do a phonebank (see, more generally, the Organizing Resource Center). I don't know how often local organizers used these videos (some of the more lackadaisical offices I visited really should have), but a bank of similar resources could really help jump-start local efforts.

(While I'm daydreaming here, imagine a corps of new-media geeks ready to craft similarly spectacular videos to promote the local AIDS action day or hunger walk).

The Fierce Urgency of Leveling Up

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a civic engagement infrastructure needs to convey "the fierce urgency of now." Without the galvanizing energy of a final E-Day showdown, local grassroots efforts need other motivating devices. MyBo had experimented with offering points for taking on different activities; it scaled poorly and was eventually replaced with an activity level system. A game-like interface, scaled down to the local level, could use a scoring rubric to help convey to citizens which activities were most urgently needed, especially if Obama himself is pushing and motivating service at the macro level.

A Hand Up, Not Hands-On

None of this infrastructure need come directly from the Administration, of course. Many of these ideas are already floating around, from Idealist.org to Facebook's Causes app. And, as Jonathan Klingler points out on The Next Right, the federal government is probably not the best place to house innovative civic experimentation. But if the Administration doesn't directly underwrite civic activities, it can still invest in new infrastructures for civic engagement. Just as MyBo unleashed local innovation for a political campaign, so too can new software systems launch a new era of grassroots activism all across America.

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