

'New Media and the Revitalisation of Politics'
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Response to Hay, Stoker and Williamson 'Revitalising Politics: Have We Lost the Plot?'
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The problem:

In this short response to the Hay, Stoker and Williamson paper I take up the question of how far the new media can offer a solution to the 'anti-politics' culture they see as emerging in Britain in recent years. While I do not share the conviction that something is quite so rotten in the British state, and take issue with some of the causes they identify for its atrophying condition, I do accept the basic premise that there has been a decline in the levels of support and popular trust in our representative institutions and elected officials in recent decades. In the main, therefore, my response speaks to a more generic issue of whether new ICTs can address some of the current democratic deficits of representative government and help to engage and/or re-engage citizens in contemporary politics. In the course of doing so I pick up on some of the particular problems of the anti-politics trend they identify in regard to parties, pressure groups and the channels of communication between citizen and MP. Can the use of digital media work to offset or even counteract the declines in performance and public trust that our key democratic bodies are encountering?

Before turning to the question of how e-democracy might provide something of a 'rescue remedy' for the British polity, let me first summarise the key points of the authors critique, particularly as it pertains to the old and new media. Essentially they make a series of bold claims regarding what they see as a basic problem of a growing anti-politics culture in the UK. One that is expressed not via citizen apathy or withdrawal, but active disenchantment and even hatred of politics and politicians. The most proximate cause of this dislike they argue is rooted within the political class itself and the crusade of de-politicisation that has gained ground in recent years, whereby decision-making has been sub-contracted to unelected appointees. Such moves in effect send a message to voters that 'you can't trust us', fuelling fears and cynicism that our elected politicians are incompetent and even worse corrupt. The more deep-rooted causes are seen as less directly observable, stemming from acceptance of the rational choice paradigm within government circles, which has preached a message of the minimal state and optimality of the private sector. The result is a form of 'arms length governance without government' – 'a form of decision-making without full democratic accountability'. This, it is contended, has serious implications for our democratic political culture in terms of engendering public disaffection and disengagement. The impact on parties and pressure groups in membership losses and activist strength is seen as particularly worrying. Replacement with professional campaigners and organisers reinforces the 'outsourcing' model practiced by governments, reducing citizens yet further to passive political observers who are strategically and intermittently mobilised, largely during elections. More active forms of engagement have become lifestyle statements and are expressed in consumer behaviour through boycotting or boycotting items in our weekly shopping. Public engagement with politics is consequently thin, ephemeral and sporadic.

Within this mix, Hay et al. follow the line of much academic argument in recent decades that has identified the media and particularly television as bearing significant responsibility for the anti-politics malaise that has taken hold in the UK and elsewhere. Repeating the criticisms of a number of American authors from Patterson (1993) to Putnam (2000) they charge the electronic media (and particularly TV) with dumbing down its' political news content, fusing commentary and reporting, and concentrating on the negative and competitive elements of any issue rather than its substantive content. In so doing, citizens reasons to be cheerful about politics have fallen sharply. In addition, an increasingly adversarial approach toward interviewing politicians is noted, promoting a culture of contempt toward politicians. This combative style implicitly advances the assumption that the politician is withholding the truth from you the listener/viewer. By contrast the new media, in the form of the networked technologies of the internet and particularly the more recent so-called 'web 2.0' enabled activities such as blogging and social networking are seen to provide to boost for democratic practices. In the news reporting context,

blogs are seen to provide a low-cost means of publishing news and alternative perspectives, giving greater prominence to citizen journalists vis a vis established media pundits. Aggregative feed services give mass opinion a selective and even editorial power over news content that was hitherto was the domain of a small group of London-based gatekeepers. In the civic realm, social networking sites offer organizations the opportunity to mobilize quickly around a single issue and then disperse. In addition, the internet is no respecter of boundaries including national borders, making it, the authors argue an 'inherently counter-hegemonic and non-hierarchical but also transnational' medium. In short then, compared with previous media the internet spreads 'power to the people', and thereby offers a serious challenge, if not an antidote to current anti-politics woes.

The Solution: New Media and Citizen-Campaigning?

To what extent are Hay et al. justified in their expectations of the new media? In the second section of my response I seek to address the extent to which the internet and the web more specifically can provide a means of re-engaging and mobilizing voters. Clearly a full audit and assessment of the array of e-democracy initiatives that the UK government, parties and parliament have undertaken is beyond the scope of this think-piece. Instead I offer a more focused account of one area of political activity – election campaigns – in which I argue that the new media are increasingly being used to significant effect, and where some have seen a genuine potential for revitalization of democracy at the grass roots level. The central argument is that with the recent arrival of the web and particularly the newer user-centered '2.0' version into the popular domain, opportunities for more elite-challenging types of citizen-led activism – in the form of what I term 'citizen-campaigning' - are increasing. Taking in actions ranging from strategic blog posting and the forwarding of campaign-related material to one's online social circle, to more active production of web advertisements and independent fund raising sites, citizen-campaigning present a new mode of mass involvement in politics that is more self-directing, spontaneous and socially-embedded, occurring largely outside of the formal structures at the local level. Of course not all citizens are necessarily taking advantage of the new tools of co-production and co-organisation, and any assessment of their democratic potential would need to examine who participates in the new networks and how representative they are of wider society. This is an important question for future empirical research in this area to systematically explore. However, for purposes of this discussion, it is possible to draw together a number of real world examples of where this technology is being utilized to significant effect in countering elites' traditional control over party and candidates' strategy and message. In particular, evidence from the US Presidential election context and particularly the Obama campaign provides increasing evidence of how this 'revolution' in practice is being played out. Whether the UK will see an enactment of that potential in the next election, and whether such mobilization can be sustained and developed in terms of deeper civic commitment, are open questions and clearly topical for debate at this event.

Below I seek to elaborate more fully this notion of citizen-campaigning through practical examples and to draw out its benefits as well as some of the potential drawbacks that it presents in combating an anti-politics culture. Finally, we will examine the extent to which such an outsourcing and grass roots strategy can operate in a more constrained party-centered system such as the UK?

The Growth of 'Bottom-up' Campaigns: The roots, if not the birth of citizen-campaigning, can be traced to the arrival of Howard Dean on the political landscape of the US in 2004. Despite ultimately failing to gain his party's nomination, his rise from unknown governor of a small northeastern state to frontrunner status in the Democratic primaries in late 2003, marked for many a 'coming of age' of the internet as a political medium. Although his uncompromising anti-war message struck a strong chord with party activists, his ability to raise funds and volunteers was strongly linked to his strategic use of the internet. It was his leverage of 'mousepads' as well as 'shoe leather', as one former campaign worker put it, that succeeded in putting Dean ahead (Teachout and Streeter, 2008). Central to the campaign's success was its 'Dean for America' blog and email lists, which according to its National Director Joe Trippi were critical in personalizing relationships with supporters and developing a sense of joint-ownership of the Dean candidacy, foreshadowing the 'Yes We Can!' philosophy of Barack Obama. Indeed Trippi talks extensively

in his book about the way in which the technology was explicitly used to break down the 'us and them' mentality that had dominated previous Presidential campaigning 'war rooms' and establish a new grass or netroots supporter-led model (Trippi, 2004).

Although Trippi and Dean may have been the first effective users of new ICTs to build a citizen-campaign network, the Obama team operating in the new web 2.0 era have taken it to new and dizzying heights. Trippi himself captured the escalation in operations very succinctly when he observed that if the Dean campaign was the Wright brothers of 'bottom-up' campaigns as he terms it, then that of the Illinois Senator has been Apollo 11.¹ The widening of the campaign organizational base to encompass a host of ordinary citizens through the new forms of social media has proved to be one of the hallmarks of the campaign. Initiatives have ranged from the self-organizing tools promoted on his home page which include creating a fundraising page, starting a campaign blog, or group emailing a prepared message advertising Obama's policy positions. In addition the campaign exploited external applications such as Central Desktop to organize thousands of precinct campaign volunteers in advance of super Tuesday and most recently incorporated the new i-phones to aid the recruitment efforts. In the "Call Friends" application designed by volunteers, users can download an application that effectively turns a mobile phone into a personal campaign tool, allowing the user to contact friends and family to ensure they are registered and urge them to vote for Obama. The campaign blog noted that this could generate thousands of additional personal contacts that would then be turned into votes.

Outside of these campaign-sponsored initiatives, citizen involvement via 3rd party provided platforms has also expanded dramatically in this election. *YouTube* is one obvious example of a means by which ordinary voters now have the opportunity as non-professionals to distribute political ads to a world wide audience. *YouTube* was also notable for the alternative debate it provided during the 2008 primary season, although it did utilize the power of the mainstream media to promote itself to a wider audience, working with CNN and an editorial team of established journalists. *VoterVoter*, a US based site, takes the *YouTube* approach to the next level, by allowing ordinary citizens to post their home made campaign ads online and then select a target audience and market that they pay for it to be shown to. *ActBlue* acts as a direct fundraiser for Democrat candidates – but allows individuals create and run their own fund raising effort to use in getting friends, family and colleagues to contribute. Sites such as *Eventful.com* provide another example of this web-enabled 'people power' in determining the course of a campaign, with John Edwards using it to decide where he should visit. The results brought him to Columbus, KY, a surprising destination given its population numbered only 229. However, the momentum in its favour grew as the initiative was seen as a way of promoting the small towns that easily get forgotten in the campaign generally.

Democratic Renewal?: The key question to emerge from these developments for our purposes, is whether and how they might work against anti-politics sentiments? To what extent can citizen-campaigning inject a new sense of optimism and trust into politicians and our system of representative government? As a linkage tool, the new forms of web-enabled participation clearly promote a closer connection between voters and candidates. While this is most obvious in the case of the citizen campaigners who directly manage efforts at the grassroots level, the more socially mediated and personalized nature of their contacting may also serve to increase wider perceptions of candidates' authenticity and trustworthiness, which in turn may increase levels of voter involvement. The extent to which this is happening, of course remains something of an unanswered question, given that the race is still ongoing and also tracking and tracing this type of diffused networked activity is a complex and difficult task. One possible indicator of the success of the citizen-campaign in mobilising and re-engaging voters, however, may be observed in the fundraising efforts of the Dean and Obama campaigns, the scale and structure of which are seen as transforming the campaign finance system in the U.S.

¹ See JoeTrippi.com blog entry 'Author's Note — 2nd Edition of The Revolution Will Not Be Televised Saturday, October 4th, 2008'. Available at <http://joetrippi.com/blog/?cat=2&paged=2> Accessed Oct 18 2008.

Dean again proved to be the trailblazer in this regard. Using his 'Dean for America' blog, viral email alerts and clever gimmicks such as the baseball bat on his homepage that was constantly updated to record contribution levels, his campaign was reported to have raised sums in excess of \$40 million, much of his final total coming from the net. Fast forward to the 2008 race and Ron Paul, one of the more web-savvy Republican candidates for the presidential nomination lifted the bar significantly for online donations by raising an astonishing \$6million in one day in December 2007, beating the record set by John Kerry of \$5.7 million on the day after his nomination by the Democrats in 2004. It is Barack Obama, however, who is the current wunderkind of internet fund-raising, reportedly raising over \$600 million in total so far, with a substantial portion of this coming from online sources.² As of mid 2008, official receipts showed that around one quarter (\$17.2 million) of the \$52 million raised had come through online donors, with \$10.3 million contributed in the April-June period alone. While the amounts themselves are noteworthy, it is the manner in which the money has been raised that is the more significant indicator of changes that citizen-campaigning is bringing to the political system. As Hindman (2005) reports, Howard Dean's donor base included over 300,000 individuals, the majority of whom gave \$200 or less.

Ron Paul's record-breaking haul in December reportedly came from over 50,000 individuals, almost half of whom were first time donors.³ Up to the first quarter of 2008, almost one half of Obama's total donations (45%) were in increments of \$200 or less⁴, with the average donation being \$96.⁵ This shallow but very wide pool of support is credited not only with keeping Obama in the primary race, but allowing him to take the unprecedented step for a Democrat of forgoing public financing in the general election and outspending his Republican rival, John McCain.

Judged by the metric of donations, therefore, citizen campaigning does appear to be regenerating engagement with politics among voters and a sense that they can actually make a difference to the outcome. While it continues the trend of outsourcing that Hay et al. see as the fundamental ill of the British approach to governing in recent years, the crucial difference being that the transfer of tasks is going to citizens and not to professional consultants, and therein lies its democratic renewal potential. For seasoned operatives such as Trippi it constitutes nothing less than a revolution, a 'quantum leap' toward a new kind of politics. Of course, whether such dynamics can translate into the UK context is the challenge for our parties and politicians to explore.

Citizen Campaigning in the UK?

Early into their account Hay et al. note that a democratizing of all of our collective institutions for decision-making is vital if citizens are not merely going to be empowered into a few narrow fields. Revitalising politics will mean challenging arenas have effectively become de-politicised – arenas in which unelected managers, professionals and experts now dominate. It is the argument of this paper that the new forms of web-enabled citizen-campaigning offer one means of making this challenge and affecting this change within the electoral context. How far it can operate in the party-dominated environment of UK politics, however, is a question that requires further and deeper scrutiny.

The US with its weaker party control of candidates and campaigns, and lack of an established membership body clearly provides a ripe context for this more devolved approach to electioneering. Building a team of volunteers from scratch is time consuming and expensive. The increased resources and

² 'Obama Recasts the Fund-Raising Landscape' by Michael Luo, *New York Times Online* October 20, 2008. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/20/us/politics/20donate.html?_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin> Accessed on 27/10/08.

³ 'Ron Paul Supporters Make History with \$6 Million Online Haul – Updated' Sarah Lai Stirland *Wired Blog Network* December 17, 2007. Available at <<http://blog.wired.com/27bstoke6/2007/12/ron-paul-suppor.html>> Accessed on 19/01/08.

⁴ 'Squeezing the Internet for Political Cash, Part 1: Follow the Leader' *E-Commerce Times* July 25, 2008. Available at <<http://www.ecommercetimes.com/story/63779.html>> Accessed on 25/07/08.

⁵ 'Obama Raised Twice as Much as Clinton in March.' Mary Jacoby *The Wall Street Journal Online* April 4, 2008. Available at http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB120723253625786483.html> Accessed on 09/04/08.

reduced costs that citizen-campaigning offers to political hopefuls, therefore, provides a powerful incentive for its adoption. In addition, use of federalism in the States means that there are more frequent elections and thus more opportunities for innovation and experimentation than in Britain, which experiences a national election once every five years. Finally, the more liberal campaign finance rules of the US can also be seen as a spur to citizen-campaigning. The change of rules in 2002, permitting individuals to donate a maximum of of \$2,300 to candidates in particular has spawned the growth of so-called 'bundling', whereby donors gather sums from many different individuals in an organization or community that they then hand on to the campaign. The networked web environment provides a highly efficient means for the non-expert to engage in this type of bulk fund-raising.

Such constraints notwithstanding, there are a number of bases for expecting the new types of campaign-related citizen activism to emerge in the UK in the next general election. Practically, parties have already starting making use of new social media tools to set up new national supporter networks, with a number of leading and lesser known politicians now enjoying profiles on Facebook and MySpace. One of the most prominent practitioners, Liberal Democrat Steve Webb was reported to have said that he would be using *Facebook* to consult voters on their views about the Liberal Democrat manifesto (TelegraphOnline 19/09/07). In addition, dedicated online discussion fora for policy consultation with members and the wider public have been trialled such as Labour's 'Let's Talk' and the Liberal Democrats 'Have Your Say'. Politicians and parties have also moved into the online video market with the Conservative leader David Cameron setting up his own personal channel, *Webcameron*, shortly followed by *Labour Vision* and official party sites established on the popular video sharing site *Youtube*. At the local level, the parties have been encouraged to use online technologies to help increase the involvement of members in decisions, while easing the demands and requirements for membership (Hain, 2004; Cruddas & Harris, 2007; Miliband, 2005; Katwala & Brooks, 2005; Creasey & Alexander, 2006; Labour Party, 1999, 2005). Perhaps more significantly, there has also been growth in the less official uses of the technology by party members and affiliated networks. Conservative bloggers such as Iain Dale and Tom Montgomery have attracted a wide audience and become mouthpieces for Tory grassroots opinion. Many individual party members now make use of social networking tools such as Facebook and Myspace to network with other sympathizers and promote their party (Francoli and Ward, 2007).

Whether this 'peace-time' commitment to wiring up the grassroots is continued and developed in the election period to mobilize and integrate ordinary citizens into the campaign organizational infra-structure remains to be seen. The benefits of citizen campaigning in terms of efficiency gains are clear, particularly for the minor parties that have fewer resources to draw on. In addition the potential boost in mass participation and ability to forge closer relationships with voters via citizen-campaigning is no doubt a highly appealing prospect for the major parties facing membership declines and criticism for seeming out of touch and unresponsive. However, such benefits need to be weighed up against possible longer term downsides. While democracy is about ensuring a wide range of voices are heard in the public arena, it is also about decision-making and arriving at consensus. Citizen-campaigning, while it may provide a new outlet and stimulus for popular engagement also presents a challenge to those seeking to convey a coherent and consistent message, with multiple campaigns possibly running on a party or candidates' behalf. How those numerous and possibly conflicting viewpoints are reconciled into policy alternatives as the campaign proceeds, and especially if it succeeds, may prove crucial to sustaining the newly mobilized constituency of support. Once elected to office by the mousepads of citizen-campaigners, how does the politician satisfy the potentially diverse coalition of newly energized supporters that can lay claim to his/her victory? To what extent is it realistic to expect the partnership to continue and what mechanisms would be required to transfer powers of co-direction and co-production to the governing arena? While such a rewiring of the system may ultimately prove technologically feasible, given current developments in e-government, such a scenario is some years away. Is there, therefore, a potential for citizen-campaigning to heighten popular disillusionment with politics as it energises and expands the pool of stakeholders and constituencies of interest, only to deflate hopes and expectations by confronting them with government as usual?

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