

Controlled interactivity and engagement in digitally enabled campaigning

Robin Piazza – University of Milan

This study aims to enrich the understanding of US presidential campaigns and primaries through a focus on interactivity and engagement in digitally-enabled campaigning efforts. Building on Stromer-Galley's (2014) account of digital presidential campaigns, I will reassess the role played by volunteers within such efforts, comparing how different digital and participative infrastructures define patterns and degrees of interactivity and engagement. The analysis of the three cases taken into account (Dean 2004, Obama 2008, Sanders 2016) allows to formulate some generalizations: while interactivity is usually amplified through digital tools, volunteer engagement with staffers is often allowed – even though controlled from above –, while organizational engagement is always prevented. These patterns of leverage are coherent with those established by other actors dwelling in the institutional political arena.

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of digital technologies in political activism, two competing views have sparked furious debate over the implications of the adoption of such technologies in collective efforts. On the one hand, enthusiasts such as Clay Shirky (2008) have underlined how lowered costs of action and coordination have torn down the free-rider dilemma and made action much easier than before, multiplying the causes that are finding public recognition and freeing the individual from the burdens of 1.0 organizing. On the other, many scholars have dwelled in the “politics as usual” discursive stream inaugurated by Margolis and Reissman (2000), within which many scholars have tried to show the relative irrelevance of the “flattening” effects of digital technologies alongside the persisting influence of resource differentials, institutions and big players, given also the fact that the latter are usually more able to steer the affordances of digital technologies with far more cogency than unorganized or smaller actors (Schrader, 2019).

Stromer-Galley's (2014) milestone on digitally-enabled citizen participation in US presidential campaigns clearly belongs to the second stream of the debate. The author aims at debunking what she believes are some false beliefs arisen after the Dean and Obama primary and presidential campaigns, which for the first time have leveraged the interactive features of the internet in order to allow extensive direct interactions between participants. Before those campaigns the interactive affordances of the internet had only been deployed to allow interactions between users and websites. The novelty of such campaigns has been hailed by much of the progressive punditry as the venue for the democratization of formerly verticist presidential campaigning efforts through the leverage of the internet's key affordance, interactivity.

According to Stromer-Galley, interactivity, meant as the possibility for ubiquitous and real-time feedback among users and between users and computers, potentially allows for an unprecedented degree of decentralization of collective action. However, in presidential campaigns this interactivity is strictly managed – to the point of being severely limited – by campaign leaders. In fact, only those interactions that directly translate into free labour self-extraction are favoured, while interactions that might put the structure and the

objectives of the campaigns under scrutiny – such as interactions between activists and staff and candidates – are avoided. Interactivity is controlled and structured in order to serve the purpose defined by campaign management. The property that makes interactivity management possible is the programmability of digital applications: platform owners can decide which functions to integrate within these applications, therefore allowing or “nudging” some courses of action, while preventing or disincentivizing others.

In this paper I will briefly review two of the key campaigns analysed by Stromer-Galley, adding some evidence from the more recent Sanders campaign, in order to test and refine her argument. Stromer-Galley implicitly makes a distinction between horizontal and vertical interactivity. This approach can be refined by distinguishing between interactivity – horizontal – and engagement – vertical –, following the theoretical proposal elaborated by Flanagin and colleagues (2012). These have argued that digital technologies, if leveraged, can tear down both horizontal and vertical intraorganizational boundaries, thus amplifying interactivity and engagement.

In Flanagin and colleagues’ framework the understanding of vertical interactivity – from now on, engagement – is enriched with a new meaning, as engagement is framed as the possibility for volunteers for an organization to get access to information regarding such organization and have an influence on its decisions and actions. An organization – widely defined as an organized collective effort – becomes more engaging the more it endows its members with decision-making powers. I will therefore refer to this conception of engagement as “organizational engagement”, while I will use the term “engagement with staff” in reference to Stromer-Galley’s conceptualization.

Making use of this wider but more specific framework will allow me to show how, while interactivity is often amplified and channeled in presidential efforts, it is only the latter form of engagement – organizational engagement – that is severely limited. This partially contradicts Stromer-Galley’s analysis, which poses that interactivity is usually constrained through the prevention of interactions between users and staffers – the former type of engagement pattern. Moreover, this shifted focus will allow me to compare how organizational engagement is constructed beyond presidential campaigns, in many other institutionalized digitally-enabled political efforts – as digital/platform parties (Gerbaudo, 2019; Deseriis, 2020).

2. Presidential (primary) campaigns reassessed

The choice to focus on primaries follows from Stromer-Galley’s treatment of the topic, as the author does not hypothesize any substantial methodological and theoretical difference with presidential campaigns. In what follows I will analyse these campaigns through the lenses provided by Flanagin and colleagues, with the objective of making the following points:

- interactivity is both amplified and channeled;
- organizational engagement is completely prevented;
- engagement with staffers is quite common.

Dean 2004

Howard Dean’s Democratic Party primary campaign in 2004 is the first campaign to use the Internet to organize volunteers. Given its exploratory nature, the campaign has been

quite chaotic and the digital infrastructure sedimentary. The first feature of the campaign is the separation between the databases for targeting, directly controlled by campaign staff and not accessible to volunteers, and the participatory infrastructure, initially composed of autonomous groups founded on MeetUp and Yahoo! Groups (Conners 2005; Williams 2006).

In this context of ‘creative chaos’, campaign staffers have not devoted time and resources to the limitation of interactivity. Quite the contrary, they have strenuously tried to make groups acting on different platform interact and coordinate, by infiltrating them and encouraging their migration on a newly created proprietary platform, GetLocal. The official campaign also managed to sign an agreement with MeetUp, allowing staffers to access data on Dean groups created on the platform. The plan has worked only in part, as some groups have effectively migrated on GetLocal and most other groups have accepted strategic counseling by infiltrated staffers, who are usually recognized by users as legitimate campaigning authorities (Trippi 2005). But overall, the campaign lacked cohesion and unevenly spread on the national territory, which led to its ultimate failure.

From Stromer-Galley and other author’s accounts we can clearly see the strategic priorities of the official Dean campaign. First, staffers have tried to increase interactivity, by breaking down boundaries between overlapping groups coordinating on different platforms. Second, they have tried to channel enhanced interactions towards the objectives defined by the leadership, in a rudimental effort to “reconstruct” interactivity. Third, by acquiring data on groups and trying to migrate them on a platform controlled by the campaign, staffers have tried to remove users’ – and other platforms’ - strategic autonomy, thus constraining engagement. There have also been efforts to perform some sort of top-down interaction between staffers and users through the activities of infiltration of other platforms. However, the official campaign couldn’t leverage digital affordances to do so, as it couldn’t affect the design of other platforms; the only resource the campaign could count on was based on its capacity to push for the recognition of infiltrated staffers as legitimate campaigning authorities, entrusted with strategic coordination.

Obama 2008

After the 2004 campaign, Dean was elected chairman of the Democratic Party and inaugurated a nationwide strategy to institutionalize the digital-based participatory infrastructure. The Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 build on that effort and consolidate it by developing a solid database and the MyBO platform for volunteer coordination (Kreiss, 2012). The platform hosts a map where volunteers can post and find events, a personal blogging space, fundraising tools and allows to access voter databases for targeting and data entry (Abroms and Levebvre 2009). In theory these functionalities afford volunteers the possibility to self-organize during persuasion efforts, as they are allowed to autonomously access voter data, create and distribute walk-sheets for campaigning sessions, create events and directly contact voters face-to-face and by telephone. The devolution to volunteers of data management and data entry and the automatization of the tracking of interactions greatly reduces the back-office tasks performed by official staffers (Bimber 2014; Plouffe 2009), while the other functionalities of the platform make participation more personalizable (Lees-Marshment and Petitt 2014; McKenna and Han 2015). However, the campaign does not give up vertical coordination completely; on the contrary, campaign staffers, freed from back office, use their time and energies to establish strong relationships with self-appointed “supervolunteers”, trying to

direct their local efforts through training, persuasion and constant feedback and monitoring (Isseberg 2012).

Quite interestingly, the 2008 primary campaign is hit by the rebellion of part of the volunteers after Obama's U-turn on mass surveillance policies in the context of the debate on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). Under the slogan "Get FISA Right", campaign volunteers have leveraged MyBO's functionalities to debate and organize in order to exert pressure on the leadership. Obama reacted by giving mandate to high level staffers to engage online with protesters, with the aim of showing openness while taking time, hoping that the insurgency would dissolve. In the end, despite initial enthusiasm and the creation of a group of more than fifteen thousand volunteers, the protest lost momentum without any major impact on the campaign.

By what has been said so far, it is clear that interactivity is very high among participants in the Obama campaigns. Engagement with staffers is possible, even though mediated by super-volunteers, which on the one hand emerge from below but on the other are picked by official staffers and legitimized as field leaders through such special relationship. In the quite exceptional case of the protests to get FISA right, also regular volunteers have had a chance to interact with high-level staffers, even though there are no formalized mechanisms for feedback and democratic decision making over campaign decisions. Therefore, structural engagement is entirely absent.

Sanders 2016

The Sanders campaign of 2016 is in many respects the opposite of the Obama campaigns. The campaign is chronically under-resourced and therefore cannot recruit an army of paid staffers tasked with coordinating super-volunteers. Super-volunteers are, in most states, the upper layer of the campaign, since the paid staff acts mostly at the national level. The organization of work rests therefore on a myriad of super-volunteers performing part-time jobs. Even though the campaign has a map-based platform for finding and posting events, the whole digital infrastructure is accessible only to registered volunteers, which assume a specific role and responsibilities in the campaigning hierarchies during ad hoc events called "Barnstorms" (Bond and Exley 2016). Barnstorms are utilized to build the infrastructure of the campaign from scratch: national staffers set up a Barnstorm in each state with the objective of recruiting some volunteers and distribute work along the strategy developed at the national office; some of the recruited volunteers are tasked with setting up new Barnstorms around the state to recruit lower-level volunteers (Grim 2019).

The campaign has therefore a quasi-military structure; there are virtually no chances for feedback and actions to be taken are dictated from above through the various, hierarchically ordered, layers of the campaign. The digital infrastructure, composed mostly of WhatsApp groups and live-calls services, is what glues the organization together, but is quite rigid. Databases can only be accessed by volunteers delegated to the specific task during the Barnstorms. Overall, in the Sanders campaign volunteers have been delegated far more responsibilities and work but with less room for manoeuvre and virtually no personalization of involvement. Interactivity is high but highly focused, engagement is mostly flowing from the top to the bottom.

3. Conclusions. Interactivity and engagement in presidential campaigns and beyond

The reassessment of the campaigns analysed by Stromer-Galley supports my thesis: while digital tools are always leveraged to enhance interactivity, the picture regarding engagement is more articulated. Engagement with campaign staffs is not always possible; this is not only for a sheer matter of numbers, but because staffers tend to interact only with those actors that they aim to legitimize and empower as volunteer leaders. What is completely prevented is the possibility for volunteers to take decisions on the campaign strategy, while there are no formalized structures for influencing the candidates. Volunteers may decide to use platforms in protests against campaign leadership, but with the constant risk of being shut down.

Political efforts dwelling in the institutionalised state and party arena usually assume that they need to solve problems of collective choice and to maintain control and coherence within their agenda in order to appeal to the public (Bennet et al. 2018; Cardenal 2013; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Deseriis 2020; Dommett 2020; Klotz 2005; Stromer-Galley 2000). This translates in the effort to maintain focus and to prevent, as much as possible, the unpredictable effects of bottom-up decision making. The use these actors make of digital technology is significantly influenced by these considerations.

Beyond presidential campaigns, there are political parties that have made large use of digital technologies for organizing, debate and decision making: the so-called digital parties. While all of these have built digital platforms with high degrees of interactivity, engagement of members in decision making has been much more discontinuous. In fact, even though all digital parties have given their members the possibility to vote individually in internal consultations, the procedures for establishing consultations are not formalized and the timing and content of such are decided by the leaderships, which in some cases have ignored the results (Mosca 2020). The literature frames these decision-making models as highly plebiscitarian rather than deliberative (Chironi and Fittipaldi, 2017; Dutton 2020; Kioupiolis 2016; Sampetro and Mosca 2018; Vittori 2020, 2022).

Despite the shortcomings in genuine engagement, these parties have been relatively successful in the electoral arena compared to Pirate Parties, that have followed a model of digitalization allowing greater organizational engagement but have often collapsed because of their inability to contain factionalism and maintain coherence (Barberà *et al.* 2021; Deseriis 2020; Koschmieder 2015). Until now, only actors dwelling outside the institutional arena, such as social movements and advocacies, have been able to successfully implement digital and data-driven engagement repertoires (Karpf 2016); this might have happened because these are much less forced to solve problems of collective choice by the workings of the arenas in which they dwell (Kitschelt 2006).

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