

# **How has Web 2.0 reshaped the presidential campaign in the United States?**

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## **Abstract**

In today's political world, technologies play a vital role in reaching out to the public with their campaign messages. This need to reach the mass population is most critical in elections, particularly national elections. The presidential election in the U.S. has to build local, regional, and national bases and craft messages for each base to reach all segments of the population. Until recently, this was done through traditional media and technologies including newspapers, television, cable, radio, phone, and fax. The advent of the Internet, the convergence of media, and the use of Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and social networks have reshaped how presidential campaigns in the U.S. are conducted. This paper will discuss new technologies and how they have been used in the presidential campaigns of 1992 and 2000 and how they are being used in 2008. It will also examine how Web 2.0. has changed today's campaign and what this might portend for the future of U.S. elections.

## **Introduction**

Throughout American history, the peaceful transfer of power has been the cornerstone of democracy and has served as a role model for aspiring democratic nations. This transfer of power is done through elections. Every four years there is an elaborate presidential election during which time candidates try to reach all eligible voters. In order to reach all segments of the population (i.e., gender, ethnic, age, and special interest groups), the candidates develop a campaign strategy to get their key messages to the media and the public. Until the mid-1990s, the primary means to reach out to the public was relying on print media, town hall meetings,

mass mailing, phone banks, and radio and television ads. But in recent years, the Internet and the convergence of media have put traditional media in decline, with some predicting the demise of newspapers. Some newspapers like *The Christian Science Monitor* have abandoned a print version and moved exclusively to the web. Before the 2008 presidential election, the Internet was more or less used as an information sharing portal. However, it all changed when Barack Obama ran his campaign and fully embraced the potential of what Web 2.0 technologies can do to bring communities together around his messages.

## **Analysis**

Since Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, which largely used traditional means to reach the public including television, mass mailing, telephone, pagers, and small computer networks, the U.S. presidential campaign has slowly moved to the Internet, first from the static Web 1.0 and now to today's dynamic Web 2.0. This is a major shift in U.S politics. Not only has it changed how the candidates effectively reach out to huge populations, but it has also fundamentally changed campaign fundraising, which is even more critical in an age when running an effective campaign can cost hundreds of millions of dollars. In the most recent campaign, this issue of campaign fundraising was highlighted when candidate Obama opted out of his previous commitment to campaign finance reform. Mr. Obama's successful web campaign brought him the war chest that he needed to run a national campaign through to Election Day (i.e., *Barack Obama: American Stories*, the national 30 minute infomercial).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, campaigning for an election consisted of road trips (or train trips) from city to city and from town to town, and of media reporting over telegraph and disseminated in newspapers. This changed with the advent of radio and television during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Internet is taking a prominent role in presidential campaigns (Figure 1). In its short history, the Internet has brought fundamental change to everything we do. A simple example is how we communicate with each other via e-mail or e-card rather than traditional postal service mail. These communications are instantaneous—they no longer take a week to deliver. It is easy to see how much things have changed by simply watching a movie from the 1970s. Everything from the way we do banking to shopping has changed. This is more

than just a new technology. It is about a fundamental change in human behavior and culture. Also, new virtual communities are being created to unite people from all parts of the world to live in a state of virtual togetherness, in a virtual shared space, through a virtual alter ego called an avatar. Second Life is one such place, where many people form this type of virtual community that exists in parallel with the real world, and where anyone can act out his/her fantasy life.

As these changes took place within the last decade, so did presidential campaigns begin to adopt these new technologies to reach out to voters who have become consumers of online media. According to Nielsen//NetRatings, 72.5 % of the U.S. population is Internet users [1]. This represents the vast majority of the voting population. However, it was until the most recent campaign cycle that presidential campaigns realized the full potential of web technologies, which had come out of their infancy and become more dynamic.

<b>Pre-Internet</b>	<b>Internet/Web 1.0</b>	<b>Internet/Web 1.0</b>	<b>Early Web 2.0</b>	<b>Web 2.0</b>
<b>1992</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2008</b>
Bill Clinton* v. George H.W. Bush	Bill Clinton* v. Bob Dole	George W. Bush* v. Al Gore	John Kerry v. George W. Bush*	Barack Obama* v. John McCain
Traditional Media and Technologies	Traditional Media and Computer and Telecommunication Technologies	Traditional Media and Computer and Telecommunication Technologies	Traditional Media, Technologies, and Internet Technologies	Traditional Media, Technologies, and Web 2.0 Technologies

Figure 1. \*- elected president

The Web 2.0 space is characterized by mass collaboration and a mash-up of different contents and media. Social networks like Facebook and MySpace allow people to share all kinds of content, including YouTube and Twitter. There are millions of young people who are users of these Web 2.0 sites who are there to make new friends and to share their work with the rest of the Internet community in a virtual instant. In some cases, public opinion on an issue is formed in this space. Many of these people are of voting age in the U.S. , so the key question from a campaigner’s point of view is how to engage these people during the election year. Pre-Web 2.0, the Internet more closely resembled a television; you visited another website when you wanted to

change the channel. It was largely static and informational. Web 2.0. has changed this analogy by getting the user to play with, create, and manipulate the contents. This user-oriented dynamic web environment gives users an opportunity to be active participants rather than passive receivers of information. Early on, the Obama campaign heavily relied on social networks like

Facebook to get users to create communities (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Facebook group for Barack Obama and iPhone Campaign Application

This recognition of what Web 2.0 technologies can do was one of the key factors in the Obama campaign's success (i.e., being able to raise necessary funds from individuals and creating communities to support Obama's "Yes We Can" campaign). "By using interactive Web 2.0 tools, Mr. Obama's campaign changed the way politicians organize supporters, advertise to voters, defend against attacks and communicate with constituents." [3] Obama's campaign allowed ordinary voters to become part of the movement, through blogs, community groups, and mobile applications. In contrast, McCain's campaign relied on a more traditional approach, as is evident on his campaign website (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Campaign Web Sites: Obama vs. McCain

## Conclusion

Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign can partly be credited to his ability to use technologies (i.e., "Blackberry President") and harness what Web 2.0 and social networks can do in terms of mobilizing communities and raising necessary funding to sustain a national campaign. Obama was able to spread his message of "Yes We Can" by fully employing new social media technologies. This is a historic point in terms of how one runs a presidential campaign. It is no longer about 30 second television commercials. It is about engaging the voters in a process fundamental to democracy. In the 2008 election, there was a 56.8% turnout of the voting-age population, a high in recent decades. The 2008 presidential campaign is the first one to bring its campaign to the virtual space and truly engage votes, expanding e-democracy.

## References

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