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Election Media and Youth Political Engagement

Abstract

Election campaigns are regular opportunities for heightened political engagement and socialization. For many young people, politics becomes most visible and concrete during electoral contests. However, campaign media, at least in the United States, typically have not targeted young voters with messages that enhance their participation and turnout. In fact, much traditional election media coverage of youth has emphasized their lack of interest and involvement, and thus works to discourage the development of activist political orientations. With the evolution of new types of dynamic and populist media formats, such as blogs and social/political networking websites, young people have greater opportunities to establish a presence in election campaigns on their own terms. This piece will explore how new developments in campaign media are changing the relationship of young people to the electoral process.

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1. Introduction

Election campaigns are regular opportunities for heightened political engagement and socialization. For many young people, politics becomes most visible and concrete during electoral contests. As the most communication-intensive of regularly occurring political events, elections provide opportunities for young people to develop and crystallize their political orientations and ideals (Sears and Valentino, 1996). Media coverage and interpersonal discussion of politics is enhanced. The long duration of American national elections, in particular, offers a meaningful context for the acquisition of long term identifications, such as partisan preference and ideology, as well as short term information about candidates and issues (Morton and Williams, 2001).

Campaign media, at least in the United States, typically have not targeted young voters with messages that enhance their participation and turnout. In fact, much traditional election media coverage of youth has emphasized their lack of interest and involvement, and thus works to discourage the development of activist political orientations (Owen, 2005, 2006, 2007). It, therefore, should come as no surprise that young people have been abandoning traditional news media, especially newspaper and television newscasts, in favor of online sources of election information (Wattenberg, 2008). With the evolution of new types of dynamic and populist media formats, such as blogs, social networking websites, and video sharing sites, young people have greater opportunities to establish a presence in election campaigns on their own terms.

This piece will explore how new developments in campaign media are changing the relationship of young people to the electoral process. The nominating phase of the 2008 presidential election contest provides a unique opportunity to study this relationship, as novel online and digital media offerings have proliferated and user-generated campaign content has reached unprecedented levels. Young people have been at the forefront of media-related innovation in the campaign. They have produced election-specific videos for YouTube and campaign sites, and utilized Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, Faceparty, Delicious, LiveJournal, and Xanga for political expression and networking. They have established online newspapers, zines, and election blogs, and contributed content to candidates' websites. College newspapers have featured first-person accounts of campaign events using streaming video. Young people excel in the dissemination of digital campaign messages that are broadcast virally via cell phones and PDA's.

These innovations are especially important because they make politics visible to young people on their own terms via channels they mostly control. As a testament to their effectiveness, candidates have extended their outreach to young voters to include these new platforms. Further, youth-generated media have received coverage by the mainstream press. As traditional media organizations struggle with cuts to their reporting budgets, non-conventional media have become a source of news. Young people have become campaign agenda setters who can bring issues and events to the attention of candidates, political consultants, media organizations, and the general public. With this power, they became a force to be reckoned with in the 2008 nominating campaign.

2. The 2008 Election in Context

The conditions surrounding the 2008 presidential nominating contest were ripe for increased voter activation and inflated turnout. This was the first election since 1928 when neither an incumbent president nor vice president has contested for either the Democratic or Republican Party nomination. The wide open nature of the contest encouraged voter involvement, as citizens felt they had the opportunity to cast meaningful votes that could shape the direction of the country for years. In fact, political observers consider 2008 to be a watershed election.

The 2000 and 2004 presidential elections were close contests that hinged on a relatively small number of votes. As a result, Americans came to value their votes more, and perceived that their ballots could make a difference in the outcome in 2008. Issues like the economy,

the mortgage loan crisis, the war in Iraq, education, and a lack of confidence in the Bush administration, polarized voters along candidate and partisan lines, thus giving them a greater stake in the outcome (Campbell, 2005).

The fact that Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama, the first female and black candidates to make a serious run for a major party nomination, were in the race sparked unprecedented levels of interest. Issues surrounding gender and race which have divided the country were discussed publicly. That these two candidates were not afraid to go on the offensive, engage in testy exchanges in debates, and wage extremely negative campaigns added drama to the nomination race, keeping the press, if not always the voters, engaged. The Democratic nominee was not determined until very late in the process, essentially upending typical assumptions about frontloading, where the early contests are deemed most important. Typically, a candidate wins enough delegates to gain the nomination long before many states have held their primary or caucus. In 2008, the battle between Clinton and Obama went down to the wire, keeping the election in the public eye for many months. As journalist Ron Brownstein observed, "In scope and sweep, tactics and scale, the marathon struggle between Barak Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton has triggered such a vast evolutionary leap in the way candidates pursue the presidency that it is likely to be remembered as the first true 21st century campaign" (Brownstein, 2008: 26).

There are numerous indications that the young electorate in the 2008 nominating campaigns was energized, engaged, and optimistic about their future and ability to influence the election. Young people were concerned that the country's leadership had failed in their lifetime, and felt that they had the opportunity to vote for change. In addition to voting, they turned out to campaign events, rallies, and speeches, and volunteered in record numbers. As Marc Morgenstern, executive director of Declare Yourself, a nonpartisan youth voter mobilization organization based in Los Angeles, stated, "Cynicism and irony can only go so far. Eventually the pendulum has to swing the other way and it becomes cool again to care about things" (Marks, 2008).

3. Young Voters and American Elections

Conventional wisdom among political consultants and party officials dictates that investing time and resources in courting young voters is not a wise move for American presidential candidates. Young people are considered to be unreliable and volatile voters; generally apathetic, their political behavior is difficult to predict (Owen, 2005, 2007). . Some scholars and political experts attribute young voters' apparent apathy to their lack of strong attachments to political organizations and parties. They frequently are late deciders in elections and may change their candidate preference throughout the campaign (Irvine, 2008). Candidates who work to mobilize voters under the age of 30 generally do so at their own risk (Parker, 2007; Graf, 2008).

4. Voter Turnout

The perception that young voters are apathetic and not worthy of candidates' time and effort is becoming increasingly inaccurate. Young voters have become more involved in election campaigns since 2004, reversing a decades-old trend. Since 18 to 20-year-olds earned the right to vote in 1972, turnout among voters under the age of 30 has trended downward, reaching an all-time low of 39% in 1996 (after experiencing a slight uptick in 1992). In 2004, young voter turnout grew to 49%. The increase in the sheer number of young voters who turned out is perhaps more significant than the turnout percentage. Over 20.1 million 18 to 29 year olds cast a ballot in 2004, an increase of 4.3 million voters over 2000 (Lopez, et al., 2005). The trend continued with the 2006 midterm election, as a massive nonpartisan voter registration drive spearheaded by youth voting organizations recruited over a half million new voters between the ages of 18-30 (Owen, 2007). This effort constituted the largest ever midterm election registration and mobilization drive for this cohort, and contributed to an

increase in youth voter turnout of 24% over the 2002 midterm election figures (Young Voter Strategies, 2007).

Voter turnout among all age cohorts increased markedly in the nominating phase of the 2008 presidential election over 2000 and 2004. The most striking rise in participation was in youth voting. It is important to note that turnout differs markedly by state based on the timing of the state nominating contest, the type of delegate selection system used (caucus, primary, or convention), the size of the state (voters are easier to mobilize in small states), and the amount of campaign spending and activity in a state. Caucuses, party meetings where delegates to the national nominating conventions are selected, typically have lower turnout rates than primaries due to scheduling conflicts and time commitments for voters. In 2008, participation was much higher than in recent elections, including for young voters. In Iowa, which ritually holds the first caucuses of the campaign, 13% of eligible young voters (aged 18-29) turned out, up from 4% in 2004 and 3% in 2000. This was the first caucus experience for over 80% of these young voters. Young voter turnout in primary states, where convention delegates are chosen by election, also rose significantly. Turnout among 18-29-year-olds in the iconic New Hampshire primary was an impressive 43% compared to 18% in 2004 and 28% in 2000. In South Carolina, a more typical case, 19% of young voters cast a primary ballot in 2008, up from 9% in 2004 (CIRCLE, 2008). Young voter turnout continued to reach new heights on Super Duper Tuesday when fourteen states held their primaries and caucuses. Over 3 million voters under the age of 30 took part. Turnout rates in individual states ranged from 11% in Alabama to 25% in Massachusetts (CIRCLE, 2008).

Despite these optimistic trends, young voters are still significantly less inclined to turn out to vote their older cohorts. 34% of voters over the age of 30 participated in the South Carolina primary, which was not quite twice as high as the turnout rate for youth and represented a trend that was repeated in state after state. Further, the increase in youth voting has been evident in recent presidential elections only. Youth voter turnout in state and local campaigns, which are typically low interest, low engagement elections, is appallingly low (Marks, 2008).

5. Political Organization

Young people represent a sizable voting bloc that candidates can mobilize in a tight race. In 2008, over 50 million 18-31 year olds were eligible to vote, constituting nearly one quarter of the entire electorate (Young Voter Strategies, 2007). Young people registered to vote in record numbers, having been mobilized by unprecedented efforts by nonpartisan organizations, such as the newly revitalized Rock the Vote (www.rockthevote.org), Declare Yourself (www.declareyourself.com), and 18 in '08 (www.18in08.com), political parties, and candidate organizations.

Voters, especially younger people, who affiliate with a political party are more likely to be politically engaged than those who do not. Parties invite constituents to take part in elections by providing practical information, such as how to register and where to vote, soliciting donations, recruiting volunteers, and organizing rallies and social events around campaigns. While most American voters align themselves with a political party, more than one-third of the electorate consists of Independents or people uncommitted to a party. Young people typically are overrepresented among Independents. The number of people under age 30 affiliated with parties increased markedly in 2008, as only 16% called themselves Independents, down from 23% in 2006. 47% identified with the Democratic Party and 28% with the Republican Party (Lake and Tarrance, 2008).

Generally, the percentage of young people who take part in election-related organizations, such as the youth arms of the Democratic and Republican parties, voter outreach organi-zations, and candidate campaigns, ranges from 6% to 14%, depending upon the year and the study (Keeter, et al., 2006; Sitaraman and Warren, 2003). In 2008, the number of young people joining political and campaign organizations increased notably, and approached 20%. Campaigns made a point of bringing on specialists to target young voters. The Obama campaign hired Rock the Vote's former political director, Hans Reimer, to serve as its Nation-

al Youth Vote Director who oversaw a staff dedicated to reaching out to young people "where they live" (Parsons, 2007). High school and college students attended 'Camp Obama' to learn traditional peer-to-peer campaign techniques, such as working phone banks and knocking on doors. At the same time, the campaign stepped up its digital outreach to 'Generation Obama' by creating an online network of local youth activists to help organize supporters and get them to the polls (http://go.barackobama.com/page/content/gohomepage).

Young voters in 2008 not only affiliated with established political parties and candidate organizations, they also formed their own election-related organizations. These included independent groups supporting or opposing a candidate, issue-based initiatives that focused on concerns, including global warming and the Iraq war, and organizations focused on personal identities, such as race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. As we will see, many of these efforts utilized social media to generate virtual organizations that attracted thousands of members.

6. Making Elections Visible in the Digital Age

In elections past, outreach to young people via mainstream media and candidate and political party campaign communications was limited at best largely as a result of the conventional wisdom emphasizing youth apathy and unpredictability. The 2008 election marked a turning point, as the situational factors discussed above and technological developments converged to create an environment that has fostered communication that was both created by and aimed at young voters. The more open communications environment, with its plethora of traditional and new media options, made the election process more accessible and approachable.

The advent of the Internet and digital communications technologies has contributed heavily to the revolution in youth oriented campaign media. Indeed, it is possible to argue that without this technology electoral politics would have remained largely the domain of older, activated citizens, if not entrenched elites. Internet technology, in particular, has provided novel and accessible outlets for disseminating new information and repurposing old content that have captivated young voters. Electoral politics has become visible to young people via social networking sites, online videos, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, online videoconferencing, and electronic chat rooms. Not only are young people receiving campaign information via online sources, they also are producing content that can gain widespread attention from the mainstream press and candidates. Young people were encouraged to engage and innovate with these communication outlets during a campaign where the dynamics were exciting and volatile and the outcome was perceived to be momentous.

7. The Long Awaited 'Net Campaign'
The use of the Internet in presidential elections dates back to 1992 when the Clinton campaign established a rudimentary website that functioned primarily as brochureware, providing textual information that resembled the candidate's promotional literature (Davis, 1999). With each subsequent election, political observers anticipated the arrival of the 'Net Campaign,' a prediction that has been consistently premature even as the Internet's role in campaigns has grown incrementally. Since 1996, candidate websites have proliferated and become increasingly sophisticated. In the 2004 presidential election, campaign blogs, online discussion boards, and meet-ups became commonplace.

Yet, the extent to which Internet communication actually engaged citizens and encouraged participation was more limited than expected. Only a small proportion of the electorate accessed online campaign media; television remained the medium of choice for most voters (Scheufule and Nisbet, 2002; Bimber and Davis, 2003). The vast majority of online election content, especially that reaching audiences of any size, was produced by campaigns and mainstream media organizations, not by citizens (Owen and Davis, 2008). While online campaign communication was more attractive to young voters than to older citizens, the reality did not live up to the hype touting widespread engagement (Owen, 2005).

The 'Net Campaign' came to fruition at last in 2008, at least for young people. The amount of campaign content populating the Internet increased exponentially in volume and diversity. The audience for this online campaign content has grown significantly while the proportion of people relying on traditional media sources has declined. The percentage of voters who report that they rely on the Internet to learn about the 2008 election was 24%, up from 9% in 2000 and 13% in 2004. The percentage of people relying on a daily newspaper declined from 40% to 31% in four years. A similar trend exists for television news, with 32% of the population relying on network coverage in 2008, down from 45% in 2000. An ever-widening age gap is developing between the sources used by younger versus older voters for election information. Younger citizens are far more inclined to rely on the Internet than people over age 30. Similarly, they are less inclined to use traditional sources than older cohorts. The increase in Internet reliance for campaign information among 18-29-year-olds is impressive. During the 2008 nominating campaign, 42% of young voters regularly consulted the Internet for election information compared to 20% in 2004 (Pew Research Center, 2008).

8. Social Media and Election Communication

Young people have created a kind of spontaneous grassroots campaign movement through their use of Web 2.0 applications. They have employed social media, user generated content that is publicized or passed on through networks of friends and associates, to spread and gather information, influence opinion, and create organizations. Social media messages can be more influential than those disseminated by the institutionalized press or campaigns because audience members are more likely to view and believe messages they receive through their personal networks (Graf, 2008). Young voters' use of social media, undirected by a campaign, to recruit like-minded individuals to work on behalf of candidates was a transformative strategy in the 2008 race. These efforts led to unprecedented outreach on behalf of candidates at little or no cost to campaigns, greatly enhancing the incentives for candidates to take young people seriously.

In 2004, young supporters of Democratic candidate Howard Dean used the social networking site, Meetup (www.meetup.com), to organize online and gather offline. The "meetup" platform was a staple of the 2008 election for organizing supporters of major and minor candidates. As of May, the 61 online meetups that were established on behalf of Hillary Clinton had held 406 meetings in 46 cities in three countries. Barak Obama supporters had set up 103 meetups that generated 1,361 meetings in 82 cities in seven countries. Republican nominee John McCain's meetup presence was more limited, consisting of 15 meetups in 14 cities that hosted a total of 26 meetings.

The use of social networking sites for campaign-related purposes was perhaps the most significant digital innovation of the 2008 nominating process. Facebook (www.facebook.com), in particular, has become a digital political tool for young people. Developed in February of 2004 by a Harvard University student, Facebook was originally conceived as a platform that would allow students at Ivy League colleges to make connections. The service was soon expanded more broadly to other educational institutions, and subsequently membership was opened to anyone with an email address. As of February 2008, Facebook had 63 million active users (Wilkes, 2008). 86% of students at American four year colleges are on Facebook, representing a key constituency for candidates (Wilkes, 2008). Users spend an average of 22 minutes per day on the site (Freire, 2007). 23% of all 18-24-year-olds have used Facebook for political purposes, while 37% of college students have used Facebook to promote a candidate or issue (Institute of Politics, 2008). MySpace is emerging as a political networking tool, as well, and reaches more people who are not on college campuses. 11% of MySpace users aged 18-24 have used the platform for political organizing (Institute of Politics, 2008).

Facebook as a digital political utility is highly versatile. Users can post their support for a candidate or cause on their profile, link to outside content, share photos and videos, write comments on "walls" used for sharing information. These features can be interactive, as users are invited to post comments or engage in discussions about the campaign. In

addition, users can publicize online or offline events. For example, with less than two days to publicize a campus event featuring Chelsea Clinton at the University of North Carolina, a student established a Facebook group called, "Heels for Hillary," and spread the word; the result was a packed house (Brownstein, 2008). The "events" feature allows individuals to invite others to sign a petition, attend a political rally, register to vote, or sign-up to volunteer for a candidate (Wilkes, 2008). In 2008, Facebook gave young people the opportunity to join virtual fan clubs of over 500 candidates running for office at the state, local, and national levels. These groups were created by users and the candidates themselves. Users could become fans of major presidential candidates, such as Democrats Hillary Clinton, Barak Obama and Republicans John McCain, and Mike Huckabee, as well as minor candidates, like Republican Ron Paul and Democrat Dennis Kucinich, meet other supporters, and recruit their friends to join. The number of fans per group ranges between several thousand for the major presidential candidates to a handful for local candidates.

Video sharing is another important aspect of social media that has achieved political prominence in the 2008 nominating contest, and which resonates particularly with young people. Campaign videos appear on a wide range of digital platforms from candidate, party, and political organization websites, news sites, citizen journalist sites (http://www.news.com/News.com-2008-Technology-Voters-Guide/2009-1028_3-6221134.html), political parody sites (www.jibjab.com), podcasts (http://mobileactive.org/), and social networking profiles. A small percentage of videos consist of entirely original creative content. The vast majority are made up of clips from events and interviews, and mashups that reconstitute preexisting content to present an entirely new message. Videos are produced by campaigns, unaffiliated political organizations, including so-called "527 groups" that circumvent campaign finance laws, and individuals with no official attachment to a candidate's organization or political party.

Seven of the sixteen major candidates announced their presidential bids on YouTube, and all major candidates produced videos for the site (www.YouTube.com/Youchoose) (Klingebiel, 2008). In addition, the Democratic candidates participated in the first CNN/YouTube debate on July 23, 2007. The questions were posed by average Americans who submitted their questions via videos posted on YouTube. Most of the questions were asked by people under the age of 30, perhaps because they had the technological capacity to operate a webcam. The questions tended to be more frank than those asked by journalists in a typical debate, and covered topics that rarely make it onto the debate agenda. A journalist from The American Prospect recounted the variety of questions: "A lesbian couple from Brooklyn asks if they should be allowed to get married. A young black man demands that the candidates reveal if they support reparations for slavery. A student wonders if 18-year-old women should be required to register for the draft." A question about global warming was asked via a video of a melting snowman. The Republican candidates participated in a similar debate in November 2007.

Helping to bring user-generated campaign video sharing to the forefront were a number of clever and controversial videos that were first shared virally through email messages, blog stories, and Facebook postings, and then received widespread mainstream media coverage. The YouTube video, "Vote Different" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3G-lMZxjo&feature=related), aired in March 2007, and featured a mashup of Hillary Clinton speeches with an Apple commercial that depicted Clinton in the fearful role of 'Big Brother' (Klingebiel, 2008). "Vote Different" was the creation of a video producer with tenuous ties to the Obama campaign who had placed the ad on YouTube without authorization. This video had received 5,107,202 views as of May 1, 2008, and solicited 32,000 comments. It also began a tidal wave of user-produced campaign videos that are now a trademark of the campaign. Perhaps the most popular video of the 2008 nominating campaign was "Obama Girl . . . Cause I got a crush on Obama (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU). The video, which first aired in November 207, starred aspiring actress/model Amber Lee Ettinger frolicking in bikini and lip-synching a song about her love for the presidential aspirant. As of May 2008, the video had received 8,123,685 views, sparked 36,442 comments, and produced seven video responses, including copy cat videos for other candidates. Another prominent video featured a mashup of clips from Obama's concession speech after failing to win the New Hampshire primary along with clips of actors and musicians stating, "Yes, We Can." The video, produced by will.i.am of the rock group, Black

Eyed Peas, was posted on dipdive.com and YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY), received over 16 million views, and helped to mobilize young voters after the primary defeat.

The popularity of online videos is undeniable. In February 2008 alone it is estimated that there were 10 billion views of online videos, with one-third of these views attributed to YouTube alone (Nakashima, 2008). Videos produced by the Obama campaign, which was at the forefront of using digital technology for video outreach, and aired on YouTube were accessed 37 million times as of mid April 2008 (Brownstein, 2008). A 2006 study from Mashable Labs of over 40,000 YouTube users indicated that the average user was 27 years old and viewed 39 videos per day or 1,135 per year. These statistics are impressive, given that YouTube is a relatively young digital platform, having been founded in 2005 by Chad Hurley and Steve Chen and sold to Google a year later.

It is important to note that the use of social media and video sharing for campaign purposes is truly in its infancy. While the examples above indicate the potential of these platforms to make politics more visible for young voters, there are limitations. Only a handful of YouTube campaign videos achieve the same high levels of viewership as "Obama Girl" or "Yes, We Can," with most receiving under 200 views. Further, attempts to coopt these novel platforms to enhance established election practices are not always successful. A prime example is the ABC News Facebook debates that were held on January 5, 2008, in preparation for the New Hampshire primary. Over 6 million Facebook users attempted to respond to polls on the issues, participate in a live discussion of the debate, and vote for their favorite candidate. ABC News provided a "Facebook anchor" who kept the television audience abreast of what was happening online. The experiment largely failed due to information overload. During the East coast broadcast of the debates alone, Facebook users posted over 35,000 "Soundboard" messages totaling an estimated 1.75 million characters to be read during the three-hour period of the debate. To read all of those messages at 20 per page, a reader would need to refresh her or his browser's screen 1,750 times (Broache, 2008). The result was the production of reams of unusable data and frustrated participants.

9. Young Citizen Journalists

Citizen journalists, many of whom are younger and make creative use of online platforms for disseminating their work, became a prominent source of election news. News media organizations were forced to reckon with the changing information environment, and experienced significant and sustained cuts to their budgets. In 2008, there were far fewer reporters on the campaign trail with the candidates than in the past, a development that resulted in a dearth of eyewitness accounts from trained journalists. A network of young people across the nation filled in the gaps with on-the-spot coverage through blogs, videos, podcasts, and emails.

In addition, young voters have become more prominent in news stories about the campaign because they are considered to be a sizable voting block. They are receiving more consideration by candidates because of the new media they are producing to showcase themselves and their candidate preferences. The popularity of political and news-related blogs and other citizen websites has sparked media corporations to integrate features that allow citizens journalists to tell their stories into their own news products, such as CNN.com's "iReport" and MSNBC.com's "First Person Report," notably without monetary compensation. Young citizen journalists' reports about the campaign appeared prominently on these sites. CNN has a weekly online feature entitled, "Young People Who Rock," aimed specifically at the under 30 crowd, has a sizable number of profiles under its "political" tag.

10. Conclusion

The current shift in youth electoral participation may be indicative of "the civic awakening of a new generation" (Institute of Politics, 2008: 1). Conventional perceptions of disengaged youth are giving way to a new reality of politically savvy young voters who are engaged in campaigns, affiliate with political parties, and form their own organizations and networks. This awakening is clearly being facilitated by young people employing communications technologies for innovative political uses.

The 2008 American presidential election has brought to light the many ways in which young people are making politics visible. They have laid the foundation for the 21st century campaign, and are forcing older generations of politicians and activists to take notice and adapt. Web 2.0 innovations that have originated with young users have been appropriated by campaigns wholesale. However, young voters' media-centered activities outside of the official campaign context are likely to be the most compelling story of the campaign.

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