

# Connecting the Dots:

## Integrating Netroots and Grassroots Political Activism in US Presidential Election Campaigns

**Working Draft Paper**

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### 1. Introduction:

Understanding the political impact of the internet rests upon the question “impact on whom?” Two of the most important institutional structures governing politics in post-industrial democracies are the political parties and mainstream media. Since the 2000 presidential election, the emerging technologies of the internet have progressively altered important characteristics of both parties and the media, largely by compelling them to become more open and adaptive.

Prior to the 2008 US presidential campaign cycle, four campaigns made notable use of the internet as an infrastructure for campaign organization. These are the McCain 2000 Republican primacy campaign, the Dean 2004 Democratic primary campaign, the Bush-Cheney 2004 presidential campaign, and the Segolene Royal 2007 French Socialist primary campaign. Of these, only the Bush 2004 campaign proved ultimately successful, and they did so by pursuing an operational approach that is ideologically incompatible with the ideologies and organizational approaches of most progressive candidates.

The 2000 McCain campaign was the first to use the internet as a significant vehicle for grassroots fundraising, activist coordination, and support mobilization. These provided John McCain’s underdog nomination campaign with unexpected durability against George W. Bush. But McCain’s insurgency failed against the overwhelming establishment-backed support Bush had accumulated within the Republican Party since his election as governor of Texas in 1995. In terms of political impact, the McCain campaign’s use of the internet was overshadowed by the Bush campaign’s intensive use of “push polls” and automated phone banks for targeted message delivery.

This period also coincides with the increasing mass utilization and technological sophistication of the internet and related computer technologies. The primary tools used by the McCain 2000 campaign were e-mail and websites. Though the other campaigns also had these, the notable feature of McCain campaign was the degree to which volunteer activists exploited these to support their candidate, often with limited direction from the central campaign.

The 2004 presidential election cycle saw another anti-establishment insurgency, this time led by Howard Dean within the Democratic Party. Unlike McCain four years before, the internet enabled Dean to generate unprecedented levels of pre-primary support and repeatedly set fundraising records from the early Summer of 2003 to the January 2004 Iowa Caucuses. Driven

by extensive support within the pro-Democratic portion of the emerging political blogosphere, Howard Dean seemingly became the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination, even before a single caucus or primary ballot had been cast. However, as soon as the actual ballots were counted, the underlying weakness of the Dean campaign became obvious. The Iowa caucuses sharply displayed the Dean campaign's inability to translate internet support into voter appeal, especially in the face of traditional media communication strategies.

During the same period, the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign virtually reinvented how the Republicans fought presidential elections. Combining advanced political databases with a novel and massive volunteer based voter contact effort, the Bush 2004 campaign created a new approach to campaign organization that relied heavily on the internet and other computer technologies, and used them to create one of the largest grassroots voter contact operations in history.

Along with the candidate's communication style and oratorical gifts, the Obama 2008 campaign's use of the internet has been among the most remarkable features of a generally remarkable campaign. It facilitated the mobilization and engagement of nearly four million Americans as campaign volunteers and small donors. Enabling the Obama victory was his campaign's "invention" of a campaign model that seemingly resolved the challenges that had stymied previous progressive candidates. The results of the 2004 election cycle led to considerable soul-searching among technologically sophisticated progressives about the relationship between "netroots" and "grassroots" politics. A central accomplishment of the Obama campaign lay in their creating a campaign structure that effectively translated the enthusiasm manifested by internet supporters be into concrete political victories.

The 2008 campaign also highlighted another important lesson. The Republicans had created a stunningly effective campaign model for the 2004 presidential election that had apparently achieved for the right all of the operational goals that were eluding the Democrats. But four years later, and despite the Republican National Committee retaining all the requisite technologies, the McCain 2008 campaign was unable to use these assets effectively. They proved unable to construct the social organization that enabled the Bush 2004 campaign to be so effective.

This implies two important "lessons" for poli-technophiles. The first is that the degree to which technologies enable campaigns to achieve strategic goals is a function of the degree to which the campaign's social organization is designed to cohesively employ them. The human dimension of campaigns determines the degree to which technologies are effective. The second is that specific configurations are more strategically effective than others. The degree to which specific campaigns are capable of optimally meeting their electoral goals is a function of specific structural capabilities that are created via a combination of strategic design and tactical adaptation to contingencies. The ability of campaigns to do either is not equal, and as with most other activities that influence competitive outcomes, they are electorally consequential.

Intellectually, both "lessons" are trivially obvious. Operationally, they may well have been consequential enough to have determined the nomination of the Democratic Party in 2008, and decided between the history-making election of President Barack Obama and "President Hillary Clinton".

Every US presidential election cycle since 2000 has seen the continuing emergence of the internet and related technologies as highly influential instruments for political communication and organizing. The internet and related technologies have enabled party activists to take on increasingly important campaign roles that had been hitherto the domain of political elites. Technologies that may seem 'alienating' and 'elite-oriented' facilitated vast grassroots voter mobilization drives that produced the highest voter turn-out in nearly two generations. This reversed the downward trend that dominated the forty year era of broadcast TV centred politics. Beginning as little more than a technological novelty in 2000, their importance became clear in the 2004 US presidential campaign cycle, and are now crucial features of successful campaigns in most advanced Western democracies, and especially the United States.

## **2. The Impact of the Internet on American Political Institutions:**

While major mainstream media outlets have been swift to adapt to the challenges posed by the internet, their impact on political institutions is more complex. Party websites are already a common feature of election campaigns throughout the world. But the degree to which parties outside the United States have embraced the broader array of technological and social changes being inaugurated by the internet is a function of specific institutional factors, and national levels of internet usage.

A key feature of American parties that facilitates the incorporation of the internet is the degree to which their organizational and structural characteristics resemble those of social networks, akin to those on the web. As a consequence, the context in which the internet consistently exhibits its greatest impact on political parties is in the United States. As with so many other aspects of politics, the United States invents, refines, and exports new electoral practices to the rest of the world.

The US party system is strikingly different from those of most other enduring democracies. While this is sometimes interpreted as indicating that the US is characterized by “weak” parties, in contrast to those found in Western Europe and elsewhere, a better way of understanding it is that they are organized along substantially different principles. Beginning with the populist era, American parties have been constrained by a succession of legal requirements that limit the influence of formal institutional leaderships. Near the opposite extreme, Canadian federal parties are characterized by remarkably high levels of institutional control by their respective Leaders. But the relative “weaknesses” of institutional leaderships is not equivalent to the “weakness” of political parties as mass social organizations. Given their ability to mobilize resources and volunteers, one may conversely argue that the US Democrats and Republicans are among the most “powerful” democratic parties in the world.

At the apex of both the Democratic and Republican parties are national committees with broad representation from state committees, and institutional officeholders. Both have congressional and senatorial campaign committees responsible for providing central support for local or statewide campaigns. Beyond these formal party committees are a plethora of more specialized groups representing particular interests. These include such historically noteworthy groups like EMILY’s List among the Democrats, and the Eagle Forum among the Republicans. In addition to well-established organizations, many emerge as temporary electoral coalitions

comprised of more established interests, or ones that are legally barred from direct political involvement. At the lowest level is the substantial industry of political consultants. While they typically work for the candidates of one party, the larger ones frequently carry out functions for a large number of candidates running for different offices in different jurisdictions. As with any industry, they have their own trade associations and publications. Along with these are seemingly vast numbers of professional lobbyists, trade associations, and special interest groups who seek to influence public policy via contacts among both parties. As well, the American system for selecting candidates emphasizes mass voter participation, formally open candidate entry, and public competition within each party's selection process.

In combination, they result in parties that are remarkably open to influence by organized groups outside of their formal institutional structures. Combined with its own extraordinary growth since 2000, these features enabled the American political blogosphere to exert significant influence upon the 2004 presidential campaign.

### **3. The Internet and the Dean 2004 Campaign:**

The John McCain Campaign in 2000 and the Dean Campaign in 2004 are rightly considered to have been the pioneering efforts in the effective use of the internet as a fundamental tool of political organizing. Less well recognized was the enormous success of the Bush 2004 Campaign in using the internet as a tool for mobilizing and coordinating a massive grassroots voter contact effort that ultimately helped Bush win reelection. Both of the Dean and Bush Campaigns began from where the McCain Campaign's internet efforts had ended, but then evolved quite different organizational models and campaign strategies. As a result, the 2004 presidential campaign witnessed the emergence of two distinctly different approaches to using the internet for political organizing. In many respects, a comparison of the two is a study in contrasts. Beyond their ideological differences, they embodied different understandings of how internet technologies can mobilize vast numbers of grassroots volunteers and donors. At the level of the internet, the 2004 election campaign was an indirect contest between two fundamentally different models of campaign organization.

The Howard Dean Campaign's phenomenal growth during the 2003 pre-primary period was driven by blogs. The apparently sudden explosion of support for Dean in the Summer of 2003 taught politicians and journalists to take the blogosphere seriously. To the bemusement of many "mainstream" journalists, both the Democratic and Republican National Committees granted media credentials and privileged access to prominent bloggers for their respective presidential conventions. Right-wing bloggers also dimmed the career of Dan Rather, one of America's most influential journalists by proving that documents used in a "60 Minutes" story about President Bush's period in the National Air Guard were forgeries. But while these events captured the emergence of the blogosphere as a significant political force, to some extent, they and similar indicators of influence were illusory.

Political blogs and the blogosphere fueled the growth of the Dean Campaign during the 2003 "pre-primary" season in five ways. First, they influenced the climate of opinion among social influentials, particularly liberal Democratic grassroots activists, but also journalists. Second, they possessed the capacity to organize and motivate online communities of activists to

take “real world” action against the Iraq War by supporting Dean’s candidacy. Third, they enhanced communication, collaboration, and decision-making among geographically dispersed and otherwise loosely organized trust clusters. Fourth, they undermined the ability of established authorities within the Democratic Party to control resource and information flows by creating alternate channels that were not susceptible to institutional control or influence. Finally, they enabled otherwise unconnected individuals to act in a cohesive and coordinated fashion outside of the ambit of established Democratic elites. These combined to transform a minor campaign for an unknown candidate into 2003’s most surprising political phenomenon.

Despite its apparent dominance in early January 2004, the Dean Campaign ignominiously imploded once ordinary voters were asked to cast ballots in the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary. One of the central failings of the Dean Campaign was its inability to organize effective traditional media and voter contact operations. This included the Dean Campaign’s sustained inability to formulate and implement a coherent media communication strategy, or articulate broadly persuasive messages targeted at undecided or swing voters. It also reflected the absence of professionally organized voter contact operations, particularly phone banks and direct mail. This was not for want of money or volunteers. It reflected the Dean Campaign’s failure to develop more traditional campaign functions of the sort typically staffed by professional consultants and experienced political operatives.

Instead, the Dean Campaign relied upon its internet campaign. It successfully recruited a vast number of volunteers, many of whom were as inexperienced as they were enthusiastic, to conduct voter contact and “get-out-the-vote” (GOTV) operations. Similarly, the Dean Campaign relied on volunteers to generate its TV ads, and conducted an online contest to select the ones that would be aired. These captured the grassroots, democratic, counter-establishment, and insurgent qualities of the Dean Campaign and those elements of the blogosphere that supported it. Paradoxically, it was precisely this unstinting emphasis on democratic grassroots voluntarism, largely unleavened by the experienced professionalism of political elites, that resulted in the Dean Campaign’s profound inability to persuasively appeal to ordinary voters and mollify their concerns about Dean.

Ultimately, Iowa and New Hampshire were not even “defeats”. They were heart-breaking political routs for a host of Americans who had become involved in the hope that their democratic activism would “make a difference”. These contests inescapably established the continuing primacy of elite professional skill over mass democratic unskilled enthusiasm. They also reaffirmed the centrality of traditional mainstream media, and electoral methods, despite the emergence and growing significance of internet-based political organizing and activism. In the absence of traditional political professionalism on the side of internet political insurgents, the Washington establishment ambushed the Dean Campaign’s enthusiastic grassroots volunteers, and planted them by the legion in the political graveyards of the Midwest and New England. This was the central cautionary lesson of the Dean Campaign.

#### **4. The Internet and the Bush 2004 Campaign:**

During the 2004 presidential election cycle, there were two equally important “stories” about the impact of the internet on electoral political. The story emphasized by the media and

blogs was the emergence of the blogosphere and its impact on the internal politics of the Democratic Party. Rarely covered but as important was the development by the Republicans of a new approach to voter contact, persuasion, and mobilization that combined existing methods with new ones facilitated by the emergence of the internet. Ultimately, these enabled Bush to win reelection, and the Republicans to maintain control over both Houses of Congress.

The importance of the blogosphere to the Dean Campaign has substantially shaped perceptions of the role of the internet in politics. The Democratic blogosphere seemed to favour loosely organized networks of those seeking political change in the face of a non-responsive and hierarchically organized party establishment at odds with a substantial portion of its grassroots activist base. This motif of grassroots insurgents fighting entrenched elites for control over the Democratic Party dominated coverage of the pre-primary period in 2003. The problem with this story is that it rarely covered or addressed the implications of the largely complementary relationship between the Republican Party establishment and the Republican blogosphere, as well as the highly sophisticated way in which the Republican Party pioneered a variety of quite electorally significant uses for the internet.

In part, this reflected the media's characteristic tendency to focus on stories about political conflict over ones discussing the orchestration of harmony, even when the latter is ultimately more consequential. But it was also a result of a remarkably successful strategy pursued by the Republicans to construct, with little journalistic fanfare, a cohesive campaign that combined traditional campaign methods with new opportunities created by the internet. This is not a consequence of journalistic indifference. While not strictly "secretive", the Republicans avoided extensive public discussion of their new approaches, at least so long as it was avoidable.

Compared to the Democrats, the Republican effort was a study in contrasts. First, not only were Republican bloggers overwhelmingly supportive of Bush, they displayed remarkable message discipline in adhering to the Republican campaign's official "talking points". Second, while Republican activists set up a variety of "independent" campaign organizations, they acted in remarkable harmony with the official Republican campaigns. Third, while independent Republican campaign groups raised appreciable amounts of money, the overwhelming bulk of pro-Republican campaign resources were channeled into the official Republican campaigns. Finally, beginning in 2003, the Republican National Committee launched a massive internet and grassroots based drive to identify, recruit, and organize over a million Republican supporters.

Underlying the Republicans' innovative use of the internet was an unprecedented volunteer-based grassroots voter contact, persuasion, and mobilization effort. In American political parlance, these are called "field operations". The Republicans benefited from a succession of strategic and tactical errors made by the DNC and Kerry Campaign. But their principal achievement lay in planning and building a centrally managed campaign organization that matched and defeated the largest mass mobilization against an incumbent president in modern American history. The paradox was that these kinds of activities dominated election campaigns prior to the rise of radio and television. For the Republicans, the internet acted like a political time machine that enabled them to revive an activity they had marginalized for decades.

The motivation for the Republican effort was George W. Bush's near defeat in during the 2000 presidential election, despite polling that showed him in the lead at the end of the

campaign. Karl Rove attributed the last minute Democratic surge to the combined impact of pro-Democratic GOTV efforts, and the decision of many evangelical Christians to not vote in response to weekend news reports that Bush had been arrested years earlier for drunken driving. The combination focused Rove on the importance of ensuring voter turn-out among the Republican base in 2004. The consequence was a wide-ranging effort to systematically understand the dynamics of voter contact, persuasion, and mobilization at a level beyond campaign anecdotes.

The details of the Republican research programme remain shrouded. However, a number of news stories reported on key elements that strongly suggest it may have gone beyond quasi-experimental research analyses using aggregate and individual level data that are conventionally done by campaigns after elections. These snippets include a Washington Post story that revealed the RNC spent over a million dollars on over “fifty experiments” on voter turn-out. In another article, the Washington Post also revealed that the RNC had exhaustively conducted repeated “field tests” studying the optimal relationships and sequences of different voter contact methods, including volunteer canvassing, phone banks, and direct mail. These suggest the RNC may have conducted a research programme similar to that of Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, except the RNC examined voter persuasion effects of specific types of voter contact in addition to their effects on turn-out.

An additional element of circumstantial evidence consistent with this suspicion is Karl Rove’s own political background as someone whose political consulting operation centred on direct mail fundraising. A common practice in direct mail marketing are controlled experiments using large multi-group randomly drawn or matched samples that test specific elements of “mailers”. Karl Rove had established a reputation as a Texas political consultant for conducting these kinds of studies in the context of direct mail fundraising, and careful analyses of variables affecting voter responses to candidates he worked for. Given his background and predilections, controlled experiments testing voter contact and mobilization methods certainly would have been consistent. As one of President Bush’s most important advisors, and as one of the influential figures in the Republican Party, he also would have been in a position to ensure such a research programme was conducted.

None of these elements establish that such a programme was conducted. But the pattern of news reports regarding the 2002 and 2004 Republican voter contact, persuasion, and mobilization strategies strongly support such an inference. What makes this surmising significant are the implications it has for understanding the logic underlying the Bush 2004 Campaign’s voter contact strategy, and its use of the internet.

Beginning shortly after their 2000 presidential victory, the Republicans initiated three projects that would be used to some extent during the 2002 campaigns, but come to fruition in 2004. These projects are “Voter Vault”, “GOP Team Leader”, and the “72 Hour Project” (sometimes called the “72 Hour Programme”). At the heart of each was the Republicans’ successful exploitation of the internet as a mass communication and grassroots organizing tool that matched the capabilities of the blogosphere while maintaining central control.

“Voter Vault” is a massive password protected internet database of 165 million American voters that can be accessed online or downloaded either via a web browser, or a variety of

specialized database client software developed and marketed by Republican software firms. While relatively few accounts of Voter Vault have been published, they provide sufficient detail for anyone familiar with internet deployed relational databases, and the voter contact operations of election campaigns, to surmise its general characteristics. Voter Vault was used in conjunction with the GOP Team Leader, and the 72 Hour Programmes. Campaign volunteers and organizers could access and update specific information regarding voter issue concerns, candidate preferences, and other characteristics. They could not alter data entered by other volunteers or organizers, some of which was hidden, depending on password determined database access level. Indirectly, Voter Vault acted as an indirect check on foot and volunteer telephone canvassing effectiveness because it was coupled with the efforts of other volunteers, campaign call centres, and direct mail operations.

A crucial feature of Voter Vault was that access to it was managed by the RNC, and state Republican committees. The RNC managed access for congressional and senatorial campaigns, while the state committees regulated access for state and local candidates. Gaining access obligated campaigns to contribute to the database via specified campaign activities, and by providing local organizational support for the 72 Hour Programme. Its inherent attributes as a central database supporting multiple overlapping local, state, and federal office campaigns provided the central Bush/RNC Campaign with the capacity to automatically monitor all participating campaigns, and take prompt remedial action when warranted.

“GOP Team Leader” was a programme designed to recruit and support activists participating in the 72 Hour Programme. It gave these and other Bush supporters access to a wide array of internet based communication tools. Team Leaders regularly received e-mailed “talking points” that periodically refreshed the Republican messages and rebuttals to Democratic claims. It also allowed Team Leaders to construct their own supporter contact lists, or “GOP Teams”. Team Leaders could e-mail all or certain members of their team by selecting from a broad menu of customizable message texts that could send via Team Leader’s e-mail facility. This also allowed the RNC to collect and store these e-mail addresses for their own periodic e-mailings. Although “Team Leader” was primarily intended as a facility for supporting internet-based campaigning by individual volunteers, it also provided basic task and volunteer management support for offline communication and activities as well.

Team Leaders could also participate in RNC blogs, or create their own blogs hosted by the RNC that were viewable only by other Team Leaders. This facilitated mutual motivation, and learning. Internal blogging ensured that the Bush campaign became rapidly aware of locally significant issues and information, a key campaign role played by the Dean Campaign’s “Blog for America”. An additional benefit was that it limited the degree to which Democrats or journalists could gain meaningful insight into the internal operations of the Republican grassroots campaign. Inevitable campaign dissent remained safely “in house”. It also brought a substantial portion of the Republican blogosphere within the formal structure (and implicit control) of the RNC and Bush Campaign.

In addition to blogging and e-mail campaigning, RNC Team Leader supported a very basic “social networking” facility. The Dean Campaign had pioneered this with their beta “Deanspace”. However, neither developed their social networking facilities beyond providing an opportunity to post basic personal, political, and contact information. While political networking



services were pioneered in the 2004 election, none were developed to the point where they were of any significant consequence.

The “72 Hour Programme” lay at the heart of the Bush Campaign and RNC voter contact efforts. It used a combination of professional organizers and the internet to manage volunteer communication, training, canvassing, monitoring, and motivation. It enabled them to identify, recruit, train, and manage over a million campaign volunteers, volunteer team leaders, and “marshals”. Volunteers directly canvassed voters in the context of doorstep registration, and engaged them on behalf of Republican candidates. While team leaders also did this, they focused on new volunteer recruitment and maintaining supportive contact with existing ones. Marshals were typically more skilled and experienced volunteers who had local organizational duties, particularly in the context of election day “get out the vote” operations. All of them were managed by professional campaign organizers. A crucial feature of the 72 Hour Programme was the ability of volunteers to have either direct or mediated access to Voter Vault, thus ensuring their activities could be remotely tracked via the internet. This allowed the RNC to manage their volunteers far more efficiently, at substantially lower cost, and with greater volunteer effectiveness than the Democrats.

In his superb New York Times article on the 72 Hour Programme, “The Multilevel Marketing of the President”, Matt Bai described it as an application of “multi-level marketing” (MLM) to electoral politics, drawing on Amway as an example. He rightly emphasizes the cult-like quality of Amway and many other multi-level marketing operations. He notes that these are, in essence, legalized pyramid schemes. However, his emphasis on this comparison misstates crucial organizational features of the programme. Most MLM schemes are steep pyramids with numerous layers between the base and apex. A disproportionate share of sales are to others within the pyramid, and to friends and family. The reason why they foster “cult-like” qualities is because they are not particularly effective at selling to those who do not already have a personal relationship to those within the structure. The 72 Hour Programme had only three levels, and focused on contacting strangers. Republican Party volunteers, including evangelicals, are no more “cult-like” than the active partisans of other parties. Had the 72 Hour Programme been as similar to a typical multi-level marketing system as Bai suggested, the Democrats would have likely won.

An intended consequence of these projects, and the way they were implemented, was that they created a framework that motivated highly structured cooperation across Republican campaigns, regardless of office, and enabled the Bush Campaign/RNC to track grassroots activism, and voter contact being conducted at the local level.

The Democrats had equivalents to each of these. However, all the Democratic efforts began after media reports announced the Republican versions, and these were created in less time. There were crucial differences between the Republican and Democratic versions in their degree of interlocking integration, participation across Democratic campaigns, and emphasis placed on their successful implementation by the two parties. Most damaging, the Democrats were unable to ensure the participation of activists belonging to the myriad independent pro-Democratic campaign groups that did nearly all the voter contact for the official Democratic campaigns. Ultimately, these factors substantially limited the effectiveness of the Democratic efforts, despite considerable technical accomplishment.

The Democrats had two separate databases. “Demzilla” tracked everyone who had contacted the party, a Democrat officeholder, donated, or volunteered for a Democratic campaign. It suffered from partial and problematic integration of campaign lists kept by different Democratic Party officeholders. “Datamart” was a relational database of US voters, roughly comparable in size and sophistication as Voter Vault. Neither database provided the same level of controlled internet accessibility for Democratic Party volunteers as Voter Vault did for Republicans. They also did not support campaign integration in the same manner.

The Democrats’ rough equivalent to “Team Leader” was “e-Captain”. Instead of “Teams”, “e-Captain” had “e-Polls”. Both were highly similar, except that e-Captain had no social networking facility. The one notable advantage that e-Captain had over Team Leader was its ability to support remote telephone canvassing. e-Captain combined on-screen telephone calling lists with scripts somewhat customized for each person. It also allowed voter responses to be entered directly via a web browser. About the only thing it lacked was support for internet-based long-distance telephone canvassing. This said, the most important difference was that “Team Leader” provided communication support for activists engaged in coordinated “on the ground” grassroots voter contact as well as cyber-campaigning. “e-Captain” could only support internet campaigning because the Democrats had not created a fully integrated campaign system.

Ultimately, the central failing of the Democratic effort was its delegation of voter contact to a host of pro-Democratic groups that were legally precluded from coordinating their efforts with official Democratic campaigns. Nominally, the Republicans suffered from the same limitation. However, Republican voter contact was largely done via official campaigns. As well, one of the enduring achievements of the Republican Party had been to create a cohesive and disciplined network of pro-Republican organizations that understood the party’s strategy and messages well enough to not need the kind of overt coordination that was legally banned. Their “real world” trust clusters minimized their need for formal institutional guidance.

The Bush Campaign’s approach clearly prevailed. Dean's candidacy did not survive its first encounter with voters during the Iowa caucuses, whereas Bush won one of the most bitterly contested presidential elections in American history. Any well considered understanding of how to mount effective internet-based political campaigns must recognize the limitations of the Dean Campaign's approach, as well as the strengths of the Bush approach. But this does not mean that the Dean Campaign's positive experiences, which bordered upon the revolutionary, ought to be discounted simply because of the eventual campaign outcomes.

Much of modern electoral politics is motivated by conflicting ideologies. The internet and its related technologies create opportunities for novel forms of political competition among electoral rivals. These technologies also embody their own sets of conflicting ideologies. These manifest themselves as opposing visions of the relationship between technology and society. Political and technological ideologies are not arrayed upon the same defining axes. But these dissimilar axes sometimes produce underlying commonalities between specific technologies and political practices. The 2004 presidential election campaign exemplified this.

The decision of the Dean Campaign to rely almost exclusively upon open source software and the internet is unsurprising. It is equally unsurprising that the Bush Campaign used a combination of Microsoft desktop and enterprise software, and Oracle's enterprise database

product, with distributed access via the internet. Tellingly, access to the Bush Campaign's internet resources required elaborate registration and sign-in requirements, whereas barriers to accessing the Dean Campaign's resources were minimal. While the Bush Campaign was structurally closed at every level, including that of technology, the Dean Campaign was as open as was viably possible. For this reason, the Bush and Dean Campaigns were reflected ideologically opposing approaches to the organization and use of political power not just at the level of conventional ideology, but also the intellectual orientation that governed how they devised and used their computing capabilities.

Despite the eventual centrality of the Dean Campaign's internet effort, it was not - at the outset - a particularly well integrated component. The emergence and effectiveness of the Dean Campaign's internet presence was driven by the actions of pro-Dean activists, and a handful of early volunteers who pioneered the application of emerging internet technologies and applications to the Dean Campaign. But what eventually differentiated the Dean Campaign from all the others was that they not only accepted the overtly political implications of the internet and the “open source” movement, they set out to implement them at the level of campaign organization.

The Dean Campaign was not simply an effort to defeat Bush. Its emphasis on grassroots organizing and open participation was not simply a reflection of traditional left-liberal political values. For advocates and activists within the open source computing movement, the Dean Campaign was their first meaningful effort to directly challenge a corporate-oriented model of not only computing, but governance as well. Ultimately, the strengths and weaknesses of the Dean Campaign mirrored many of the operational strengths and weaknesses inherent in attempting to realize these goals in the context of a “real world” presidential primary campaign. But this defeat, however crushing, would provide fundamental lessons for the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign that would enable them to prevail in 1008.

## **5. The Internet and the Obama 2008 Campaign:**

Barack Obama won the Democratic Party's 2008 presidential nomination and the US presidency by developing and integrating the four critical campaign functions. These are communication, “field operations”, internet operations, and fundraising to an unprecedented degree.

Since the Reagan 1980 campaign, effective US presidential campaigns have tended to emphasize one or both of two structuring “devices” for communicating their core positive messages. These are the “argumentative” and the “narrative” models, and they appear to have largely superseded the more traditional approach of emphasizing specific issues or candidate qualities.

The “argumentative” model consists of a seemingly simple "argument" that proposes a persuasive reason for voting for a candidate. This reason is the “ballot proposition” and is often framed by a dispositive “ballot question”. The “argument” is “seemingly simple” because it constitutes the thematic core of the communication strategy and frames all of the campaign's other messages. Every specific policy or other message presented by the campaign clearly reflects a different “facet” of this core campaign theme. The Reagan 1980 campaign was a

superb example of this. Their argument was captured by their ballot question: "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" This kind of construction was also captured by the Clinton 1992 Campaign's famous phrase "It's the economy, stupid." Importantly, this kind of appeal works best when the election is already dominated by a single issue. Under this condition, the campaign strives to frame the "ballot question" around its "argument". If it succeeds, it wins.

The central advantage of the "argumentative" model is that it applies standard market research and advertising methods to political campaigns. Though the application of this approach varies in technical sophistication and creative insight, the processes involved are well understood. For this reason, it is the standard approach for framing campaign communication.

Far less common is the "narrative" model that communicates the "argument" by implication. Prior to 2008, the best example of this is the Reagan 1984 campaign's "It's morning in America". The central challenge facing any campaign seeking to use the narrative model is that it must construct an emotionally evocative and implicitly allegorical "story" that creates an emotional bond between the candidate and voters. This approach incorporates significant elements of the argumentative model, but presents the core message via "stories" that frame the candidate and the campaign's ballot proposition through allusions to culturally salient motifs and archetypes. In a crucial sense, this is akin to constructing a "screenplay" that structures the campaign's message and actions.

Barack Obama's communication strategy used one of the oldest and most powerful storylines in world culture. It cast Obama as the hero engaging in a quest with mytho-poetic qualities that others were invited to join, and by doing so, would participate both in the quest and experience the same sense of heroic valour and purpose. The narrative model is appreciably more difficult to construct because it requires greater level of creative imagination, talent, skill, and discipline.

For Obama, the thematic framework of a heroic and redemptive quest also framed what to many may have seemed like an "exotic" candidacy. By juxtaposing his quintessentially "middle American" white Protestant Kansas ancestry against his African Kenyan Muslim heritage, and his choice to consider himself to be a Protestant African-American, Obama constituted his personal identity in a manner that both conveyed and appealed to a vision of an extraordinarily tolerant and hopeful America. Obama the person became the projective canvass for a revitalized liberal project of America. For millions of Americans, Barack Obama became personification and the avatar for this hope, and by supporting his candidacy, those who also cherished this hope could also aide in the quest to realize it. It was as if Joseph Campbell's "hero of a thousand faces" had transformed the presidential election into a quest for America's redemption. This ability of Obama to create projective identification among millions with him played a crucial role in every other aspect of his campaign, and was central to his ability to draw support from wildly disparate groups of Americans, all of whom were able to see something in him that they valued enough to volunteer, donate, and vote.

Among the central lessons of the 2004 campaign for Democrats was the importance of organizationally coherent and effective "field operations". This had two dimensions. One was the creation of a human organizational infrastructure "on the ground", and the second was the

construction of a sophisticated national voter database. Beginning with his election as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee in early 2005, Howard Dean began implementing his controversial “fifty state strategy”. At the heart of Dean’s strategy was the proposition that long-term electoral success required the revival of the Democratic Party’s political infrastructure in Republican dominant states, and this required sustained investment in building party organizations at the local level. Dean also invested heavily in the creation of an integrated national voter database for the Democratic Party that extended beyond what the Democrats had in 2004, and that was comparable in scope and sophistication to the Republicans’ VoterVault. This allowed Democratic campaigns, at every level, to have access to data similar to what the Republicans had in 2004. Both initiatives were heavily opposed by others who saw these deployments of resources as detracting from the more traditional strategy of focusing party resources on ad buys in swing districts and states for the 2006 elections. Dean’s initiatives helped create foundations upon which the Obama campaign was to build.

One of the more remarkable features of the Obama campaign was its commitment to local community organization building as an integral facet of the campaign. Barack Obama frequently noted his experience as a “community organizer” in South Chicago, and his Chicago-based and led campaign repeatedly displayed a remarkable commitment to grassroots organizing. Although the campaign emphasized standard voter registration, identification, and “GOTV operations, it also engaged in training local community organizers and building local community organizations as part of its broader effort. In this respect, the Obama campaign combined conventional political “field” operations with community organizing methods and strategies originally pioneered by Saul Alinsky in Chicago during the 1930s through 1960s. The Obama campaign commitment to grassroots organizing led to their decision to deploy field organizers across a wide swath of “red states” in which few Democrats had mounted serious campaign efforts, for either the nomination or general election. In turn, this enabled them to stalemate Hillary Clinton on Super Tuesday and prevail in the subsequent run of state caucuses.

The Obama campaign also made an early commitment to the development and deployment of sophisticated internet and data management tools. The most visible of these was mybarackobama.com by Blue State Digital, which enabled activists or those simply interested in Obama to follow the campaign via a personalized and elegant interface. Voter Activation Network (VAN) provided Obama campaign organizers with interface and data management tools comparable to those provided to the Republicans by VoterVault. Both of these companies were created by former Dean 2004 campaign staff who saw the potential in that campaign’s embryonic technologies, and developed them to fruition for the Obama 2008 campaign.

These three characteristics were instrumental in providing the foundation for the Obama campaign’s systematic and massive effort to generate grassroots volunteers and small donors. By creating highly attractive and interactive web platforms, the Obama campaign was able to obtain significant volumes of accurate contact information that enabled both its internet and field operations to solicit volunteers and donors. They also collected similar information from those attending Obama rallies during the nomination and general election campaigns. The result was over half a billion dollars in small donations from over 3.7 million individuals.

One of the central ironies of the Obama campaign was that its prowess at internet and field operations created the resource base, in terms of the colossal amounts of revenue generated,

that enabled it to dominate the more traditional forms of mass media political communications. Towards the end of the nomination and general election campaigns, both the Clinton and McCain campaigns found themselves being massively outspent in terms of radio and TV ad buys in competitive states. As a result, both campaigns found themselves having to expend resources to defend what were supposed to be relatively safe states against the Obama onslaught, and as a consequence, forfeit competitive ones to Obama. Ultimately, this effort by Clinton and McCain to defend what should have been safely theirs gave Obama both the Democratic nomination and the American presidency.

## 6. Conclusion

Barack Obama's election as president of the United States of America was a consequence of a host of different factors. These can be grouped into four broad categories. First, the 2008 US presidential election coincided with the most devastating economic downturn since the Great Depression, an unpopular war in Iraq, and George W. Bush's toxic political legacy for any Republican standard bearer. Second, Obama benefited from significant attitudinal shifts among Americans generally, and young white Americans in particular, that translate into a complex pattern of geographically distinct "culture shifts" across the American political landscape. Third, the Clinton and Bush presidencies also witnessed seemingly intricate but important changes to the legal and organizational features of American federal politics, particularly as they relate to campaign organization, practices, and financing. Finally, the 2008 presidential campaign coincided with the continuing and in many ways wrenching transformation of the technological and social characteristics of mass media and inter-personal communications throughout the world, and especially in the advanced Western democracies. All of these played an influential role in creating the broader political environment that made the 2008 presidential campaign season so different from prior ones. Although many of these factors have been evolving into being over a span of decades, many only became noticeable in terms of their political implications in the 1992 presidential campaign, and the ones since.

None of these factors "pre-destined" the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. As with nearly all democratic elections, his eventual victory was the consequence of the agonistic interplay of opposing campaign strategies, their competitive implementation, the effects of historical events, and "accidents" of politics. Further, a legitimate argument can be made for the contention that practically anyone nominated by the Democratic Party to be its presidential candidate in 2008 would have been overwhelmingly likely to win. But no similar claim can be made to explain Obama's wildly unlikely triumph over Hillary Clinton. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that Barack Obama only won the Democratic nomination as a result of a sequence of improbable and in many ways stunning strategic and organizational lapses committed by the Clinton campaign. Though it would be an overstatement to claim that the Clinton campaign "self-destructed", her team's strategic and operational failures throughout the early periods of the nomination struggle enabled Obama to first draw close to and then marginally surpass Clinton's initial campaign superiority. But as she demonstrated during the later primaries, Obama's caucus victories did not translate into anything remotely resembling a "coronation".

Despite the Obama campaign's remarkable achievements in the general election, there are no apparently conclusive grounds for arguing that their strategic and operational virtuosity

was uniquely responsible for them. Had Hillary Clinton won the Democratic nomination, there are no grounds for conclusively arguing that she would not have defeated John McCain in November, and by magnitudes of electoral and financial support similar to those achieved by Obama. But many of the same strategic and operational factors that helped Obama win against Clinton also helped him in the general election campaign against John McCain.

The Obama campaign solved the central challenge that had stymied a number of major campaigns by progressive candidates in Western democracies. Notably, these include Howard Dean's 2004 US Democratic nomination campaign, and Ségolène Royal's French Socialist presidential campaign in 2007. The Obama campaign's success stemmed from important lessons learned by its key strategists and others within the Democratic Party from the successes and failures of, among others, the Dean and Kerry campaigns in the 2004 presidential election cycle.

The Bush-Cheney 2004 Republican campaign solved many of these same challenges in the 2004 US presidential election. Both the Bush 2004 and Obama 2008 campaigns successfully translated enormous supporter enthusiasm into well organized and disciplined "grassroots" political activism. A shared achievement of both campaigns was that they created quite dissimilar organizational systems that enabled them to achieve this same goal. Further, the apparent differences between the Bush 2004 and Obama 2008 campaigns pale in comparison to many important similarities they share, including ones that significantly differentiate both from other campaigns like those of Dean, Kerry, and McCain 2008.

The Bush 2004 and Obama 2008 campaigns provide two successful but different operational models for using the internet in election campaigns. However, the effectiveness of these models is dependent upon how "up to date" they are in terms of their technical, operational, and strategic characteristics. The inability of the Republican National Committee (RNC) to "upgrade" the Bush 2004 campaign model, along with decisions made by the McCain campaign itself, meant that the McCain 2008 campaign was unable to build on its legacy. These and other campaign models are inherently "structural functionalist" and "designed", though how "intelligently" is open to question. These models are also subject to competitive developmental and selection pressures. Combined, these produce a dynamic environment that resembles that of "Lamarckian" evolution, at the level of metaphor.

Critically, the Obama campaign also developed an approach to campaign communication that is ideal for internet based campaigning, and reflects the continuing evolution of American campaign communication strategies, technologies, and practices. They used a thematic narrative approach to communicate its campaign argument in an extraordinarily compelling way. Though Barack Obama's rhetoric and communication style have been extensively discussed in media commentary, they also played an integral role in every facet of the campaign's internet and grassroots mobilization. Though the communication dimension played a crucial role in every other significant aspect of the Obama campaign this paper focuses on its role in the context of its internet and grassroots operations.

The Obama campaign embodied a host of remarkable operational innovations that enabled him to win both the Democratic nomination and the American presidency. This paper focuses on one of these. It argues that the Obama campaign developed a campaign model that transformed the operational use of and synergetic relationship between the internet, grassroots

campaign “field operations”, resource mobilization, and campaign communication. The Obama campaign’s internet strategy and operations provided the campaign with a “central nervous system” for that was substantially more sophisticated than any possessed by any of its predecessors or rivals, except for the Bush 2004 Campaign. All the elements of the Obama campaign’s strategy and operations had been invented and used before, at least in preliminary form. The Obama campaign’s achievement lay in how they integrated these into a cohesive approach.