



# Pointmaker

## HOW THE INTERNET TOOK OBAMA BACK TO THE 1950s

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### SUMMARY

- The use of new media by the Obama 2008 presidential campaign has been widely admired. It has helped him to attract three million donors, to raise three times as much money as John McCain and to recruit 1.5 million volunteer supporters.
- The principles on which the Obama new media campaign have been based are: that it should be easy for millions of volunteers to join and to give small amounts of their time and money; that supporters should be trusted (while being subject to central checks); and that support from the centre should be internet-based.
- Many of the new techniques pioneered by the Obama campaign could be adopted by political parties in the UK. In particular, the emphasis on raising large numbers of small donations, 'neighbor-to-neighbor' canvassing (where special interests of supporters and targets are matched by a computer database) and the use of social networking and analytical programmes could all be powerful.
- However, while the new media has been used with great effect to both recruit and help supporters, there is no suggestion that the new media is being used to influence the core messages of the campaign. For all the technological enthusiasm, it is still a campaign that is strictly controlled from the centre. It is a 'one-way' campaign.
- Hence rather than creating a new paradigm, as some claim, the use of new media has led to a form of political organisation which resembles that of UK political parties in the 1950s: a mass membership, volunteer base with a strong social network and a loose ideological base which gives limited personal support to a strong central party organisation.

## BACKGROUND

On the eve of Bill Clinton's election in 1992, his campaign manager James Carville thanked his troops in the 'War Room' saying "We changed the way campaigns were run... we took out the hierarchy... you people showed you could be trusted".

On the eve of the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama's campaign manager David Plouffe will find himself having to address more than one room. With six million e-mail addresses, three million donors, 1.5 million volunteers and, at the last count, 800 pages of Facebook friend requests every day, the Obama campaign towers over the McCain machine.

The Obama 08 campaign has raised nearly three times as much money as its rival. The Federal Election Commission put Obama's presidential campaign contributions at \$567 million compared to John McCain's \$187 million.<sup>1</sup> Crucially 49% of Obama's donations – almost one and a half times McCain's entire fundraising – comes from small donors, each giving less than \$200.

(\$millions)	McCain	Obama
Under \$200	61.7	280.0
\$201-\$500	12.6	62.5
\$501-\$999	20.6	50.6
\$1000-\$1999	31.2	67.3
Over \$2000	61.7	106.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>187.8</b>	<b>567.2</b>

Much of the momentum that the campaign has enjoyed in recent months comes from its use of new media tools and applications. This has enthused the millions of supporters who contribute their time and money, in large or small parcels, to the central campaign.

<sup>1</sup> Federal Election Commission, contributions up to 15 October 2008.

The internet has opened up a new way to tap the considerable goodwill and energies of both long-term Democrat supporters and new supporters. Tellingly, the majority of supporters involved in the Obama campaign have not taken part as political activists before, yet they have become so because it is so easy to participate.

The campaign relies on trust and is based on creating a large group of supporters to work effectively in terms of getting out the vote, canvassing, issuing rebuttals and all the other activities now essential for presidential elections.

It is also easier than ever before for people to donate money to the campaign. Low entry levels, for example, encourage more supporters. A donation of just \$30 brings involvement in the campaign. This has enabled the Democrat ticket to break free from its reliance on state funding, or on a small number of high-rollers who would make large contributions to the campaign in the expectation of better access. As a contributor, the access you get to Obama is online.<sup>2</sup>

## CHANGE? OR BACK TO THE 1950s?

It would be easy to see this approach as a new form of politics (as many have indeed claimed it is). But it can also be seen as reverting to a rather more traditional model of politics similar to that practised in the pre-television age in both the US and the UK: the 1950s.

In the US, the 1950s saw the decline of an age of the strong party machine, which was typified by mass rallies, speeches, parades and other popular events intended to mobilise mass

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on evidence collected by the author who was observing the Democrat campaigns in both congressional and presidential races in the mid-west.

support. Election workers were mainly volunteers, communications were carefully controlled from the centre and voter mobilisation was regarded as crucial.

Similarly, in the UK of the 1950s, the two major political parties both had large numbers of voluntary supporters. The Conservative Party had a membership roll of three million people (compared to under 300,000 today), while the Labour Party had around a million members (compared to around 200,000 today). Another 5.5 million were affiliated to Labour through their Trade Union membership. Then, membership subscriptions provided most political party funding. Subsidiary party organisations (such as the Young Conservatives) were important in providing a form of social networking.

## **FRANCHISING THE MESSAGE**

The Obama campaign strategy was ambitious, being based on winning a strong mandate in as many states as possible, as opposed to the more traditional concentration on marginal states. Explicit was the need not to repeat the mistake of the John Kerry 2004 campaign which, come election day, had to win Ohio or Florida.

To achieve this aim, the Obama 08 campaign realised the need for rapid 'scalability' and a common message, brand and approach. Another great 1950s feature was employed – the franchising of the campaign.

Local campaign offices were set up and given all the materials and support they needed from the centre quickly and effectively. The use of online databases, online materials and support tools has reduced the start-up costs and in many cases has meant that no physical campaign office was needed. In addition, hundreds of satellite offices have been created

at low-cost but with rapid success. Indiana, for example, has 42 Obama for President offices. It has one Republican campaign office.

As in any successful franchising operation, the centre provided the branch offices with:

- An effective, repeatable brand with strict brand and wording guidelines.
- Effective message control. Communications or mail-shots are referred up to the centre to ensure compliance. Checking and return is rapid. This ensures there is no gulf and mistrust between the centre and the field offices.
- Campaign material that is easy to order and deploy. It automatically reflects the branding values and message of the wider campaign.

While subject to some minimal levels of supervision, field offices are trusted to complete their core tasks: communicating with supporters and potential supporters to fundraise, arrange events, walk the streets, call and canvass potential voters and return vital data to the main database. The Obama campaign has thus struck a balance between the prescriptive and the anarchic.

The new media is central to all that is done. Web access enables effective analysis of each district in close to real time enabling very effective targeting and Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) activities.

Like many franchises, the delegation of tasks has allowed the whole operation to grow far faster than can be achieved through the usual centrally managed system. In addition, one of the key features of the operational IT is the use of a database into which trusted campaign

staff can add data and extract reports. This simple system again enables scalability without imposing needless administration. As one leading US software industry executive commented “the Dems finally got a clue with tech on this election cycle after being destroyed by it for the past 12 years”.

### **MY.BARACKOBAMA.COM**

The Obama campaign has acquired six million email addresses. Three million of these people have made donations (the average donation is \$84).

Unlike many recent presidential campaigns, the Obama campaign relies on the contribution of a large number of supporters, not a small number of zealots.

Supporters can join the campaign online at the ‘My.BarackObama’ (MyBO) site. Once enrolled, they are vetted by the campaign offices to check they are genuine supporters. However, this is not burdensome: the campaign assumes that some sabotage will take place but will have only a marginal impact. With so many genuine users, the ability for a saboteur to cause serious disruption is small.

Once enrolled, supporters can download or access canvass call sheets and either walk or phone canvas. Data returns from this canvas are made automatically into the central campaign database.

The process is slick, simple and effective. Each MyBO member is given a list of 30 or so voters to call and report back on. This is designed as a ‘bite-sized chunk’ – enough for a supporter to be able to fulfil without too much trouble and small enough to make sabotage a menial and repetitive business.

The campaign is also careful to monitor what happens to every email campaign. This enables effective management of future messages based on empirical data.

Canvassing is further enhanced by the use of commonalities (this is also known as ‘neighbor to neighbor’ campaigning). When registering, supporters identify their interests and backgrounds. This is used in the construction of the MyBO pages to create the user profile of the supporter. Thus a female student from Pennsylvania who is interested in hunting can access call sheets of other students in the area; or of other young women; or of gun supporters. The campaign has bought listings that detail the similar interests in the general population. In this way, both supporters and potential supporters are targeted; and are likely to be more comfortable about making calls for the campaign, which in turn is more likely to result in success.

### **RAPID REBUTTAL**

Recent US elections have often been tarnished by smears and allegations that were often later found to be false. The Obama campaign has a specific rebuttal team which not only fires off rebuttal viral emails and videos, but seems to fire them back at their source. In this way the smart rebuttal process can be undertaken very rapidly, ensuring smears do not get the oxygen they need to survive.

Anti-smear stories are linked to satellite Obama sites (for example, [www.stopthesmears.com](http://www.stopthesmears.com)). Smear recipients are pushed towards these sites which allows the negative stories to be dealt with away from the mainstream Obama brand.

In addition, the online rebuttal team is able to exploit opposition gaffes using viral emails. When Minnesota Congresswoman, Michele

Bachmann, claimed, on the 17 October edition of the TV interview show *Hardball*, that “the people that Barack Obama is associated with are anti-American”, she got more than she bargained for. A viral email of this video went to her opponent’s supporters who forwarded it with requests for help. In the 48 hours after Bachmann’s remarks more than \$640,000 from nearly 13,000 people arrived in her opponent’s campaign account, more than he had received for the whole third quarter.

### **MAKE IT EASY**

Other new media links provide content for blogs and personal emails, giving an easy way for any tentative supporter to become a networker for the campaign. It has lowered the bar for the role of campaigner, attracting volunteers who would not support a campaign if it involved too much time, effort or money. Examples of this include:

- A YouTube channel which enables bloggers to link-in campaign media (audio and video) quickly and simply to their own blogs.
- A Barack Obama version of Facebook which gives supporters the ability to reach out to friends and acquaintances. This is linked up to Facebook to enable complete integration.

### **WOULD IT WORK IN THE UK?**

A central lesson for UK parties from the Obama campaign is that low donation, mass membership funding can attract huge sums. While it might be convenient for political parties to plead for state funding, it might be more rewarding in the long run (in terms both of raising more money and engaging more supporters) to develop a similar strategy to the Obama campaign. This would mean making becoming a member easy and low cost; and making sure that supporters do not feel that

they will be expected to commit to overly onerous canvassing obligations.

Clearly there are many differences between a US presidential election and a UK General Election, not least the personality-based nature of US presidential elections (albeit that this difference is narrowing). But other aspects of the Obama new media campaign which could translate to a UK general election campaign are:

- The ‘neighbor to neighbor’ canvassing tool. The crucial point is that this is driven by a central database of supporters combined with the voter roll. Because the data is simple and live, and because canvassing tasks are relatively small, it is easy to deploy rapidly using many volunteers in a flexible method.
- High-quality, responsive teams in the centre. They must serve the field operatives quickly and effectively. The centre must have the power of approval – but must respond quickly.
- Ensuring that the centre transmits constant, relevant and interesting content online. This provides the dynamic for the great mass of users to use web tools to make their own contribution.
- The capability to use social networking sites effectively.
- The analytical programmes to supply information on what works on the ground.
- Clear and direct text messaging to attract audiences for rallies.
- Rapid rebuttal tools and websites to correct negative opposition messages.

- The confidence to delegate clearly-defined tools and operations to supporters. Without that trust, it is impossible to build up momentum and excitement among a wide range of volunteers.
- Externally-hosted IT that is scalable so that it can seamlessly grow to accommodate campaign demands.
- A central voter database which is constantly updated and accessible to the relevant members of the campaign. A distributed database cannot do this.

### **NEW MEDIA FOR OLD ENDS**

The Obama campaign's use of new media has made involvement for volunteers easy, less confrontational and more interactive. Supporters invest their time, effort and money, and they get back a feeling of belonging to the campaign. They can see that their efforts are making a small, but significant, difference. This has brought campaigning into the flexible home-working environment which suits busy supporters who may have some, but not much, time on their hands. This is all 'new'.

However, the campaign is still a strongly centralised operation. While it may create the impression of interactivity, the message and branding remain tightly under central control. The campaign software will enable online contributions and you-tube video comments – but they will make no difference at the centre. The speed of the campaign is too fast, and the scale of the operation is too large, to allow that. Any ideas coming back from the field will always be too disparate for the centre to accommodate.

There is a facility for supporters to influence and contribute to policy discussions amongst themselves, and to agitate and get the message out to their network. But this is not the panacea that some new media enthusiasts have claimed it to be. This is an internet campaign but it is a broadband internet campaign – it is asynchronous. The download from the centre is much more important than the upload from the individual.

What the centre will accept from the field, of course, are donations. The Obama campaign has made state funding irrelevant by being open and transparent about its income. But that transparency, and the reliance on small donations means that donors do not appear to have individual influence – each is one of many. The first thing that you see on the home pages of the Obama and Democrat Party websites is an open request for a donation – whereas in the UK similar requests are always apologetically tucked away to the side of the site.

But the crucial lesson from the Obama campaign is that it has used new media to perfect a franchising model which can reinvigorate political involvement. In doing so, it has restored a type of communication and solidarity that has been swamped in the last 30 or 40 years by the mass media. If the lessons of the Obama new media campaign were adopted in the UK, our political parties might then rediscover the strengths of mass membership as experienced in the 1950s.



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