



Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy, Daniel Kriess, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 291, £18.99, \$27.95

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3 **Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy,**
4 **Daniel Kreiss, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 291, £18.99, \$27.95**
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12 Political campaigning was once universally described as being technologically behind the
13 curve. While many major retailers were developing sophisticated models for collecting and
14 analysing the data of their customers, while NGOs were developing ways of delivering
15 targeted messages, and while citizens were creating and sharing content, electoral political
16 organisations languished in an era of non-interactive, mass communication (Webster, 2001).
17 Incrementally this imbalance has been redressed over the last decade and a half, and US
18 election campaigns have led the way in demonstrating how to integrate the tools and
19 concepts of Web 2.0 into strategic communication (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). The revolution
20 is not in the take up of Facebook and other social platforms as other works have explored;
21 rather it is innovation in the backstage infrastructure where Kreiss sees the emergence of a
22 new prototype for campaigning. It is backstage where data is collected, assembled and
23 analysed in order for a strategy to be developed for strategic message dissemination,
24 fundraising and media buying. It is the ebb and flow of innovations 2004-14 that this
25 important work carefully documents. Whether the description of how technology becomes
26 embedded and adapted to the service of the campaign as 'prototype politics' is useful is a
27 moot and unimportant question, what is important is how Kreiss maps the process that
28 embed and perpetuate innovation between parties across contests.
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33 One of Kreiss' key observations is that innovation comes from outside of an organisation and
34 is a process of transferring ideas and skills from other domains. Historical party network
35 processes, which govern who an organisation can connect with, are thus deemed very
36 important. The more insular an organisation is, relying purely on traditions of thinking and
37 practice, the more it stagnates. Due to high levels of cognitive diversity the Democrats
38 developed new thinking around campaigns. The critical shock of defeat led to innovation by
39 the Republicans in the run up to the campaigns of 2000 and 2004, however the advantages
40 were lost as Kerry's 2004 defeat coupled with Dean's achievements led the party to reform
41 processes and build a team to innovate in time for 2008. Unlike their rivals, Democrats had
42 access to a "liberal data analytics ecosystem" (p. 20) and the party had a culture permitting
43 their expertise to be valued. The intellectual freedom and autonomy to innovate placed clear
44 blue water between the Democrats and the Republicans, long term investment in technology
45 permitted an ongoing advantage.
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49 The failure by Republicans to innovate is symbolic of the deeper structural problems the
50 party has. Five chapters compare the structures of the parties and the impact on their
51 electoral campaigns. The team around Bush-Cheney 2004 developed a model for crunching
52 data, recruiting supporters and cross-platform campaigning capable of personalising
53 messages that fed the ground campaign, but victory led to stasis. As Democrats invested
54 and activated their "hybrid party network ecosystem" (p. 62), the Republican party placed the
55 onus on individual candidates leading to a series of insular and unstable systems to be
56 developed. As McCain's defeat was seen as purely the result of socio-political factors there
57 was no "desire for true innovation" in 2008 and the gap remained vast in 2012. The reasons
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3 are that the Republican party undervalued technology so failed to invest or to develop a
4 culture of innovation. The party also lacked an supportive ecosystem, rather innovation was
5 nurtured by a liberal-progressive coalition (see also Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012). These
6 factors resulted in a less-developed infrastructure, either physical or technological with few
7 staffers to develop the tools that facilitated strategic collection and use of data analytics. The
8 failure to invest, coupled with Obama's incumbency advantage, impeded progress for the
9 party or Romney in 2012. From early in 2012 Obama re-energised his supporters launching
10 an aggressive social media campaign to rebuild his base. Once activated, the campaign
11 "asked supporters to become conduits of strategic campaign communication to their social
12 ties" (p. 149). Analytics identified well-connected supporters and used them as credible
13 advocates to target hard to reach citizens. The inefficiency and election day collapse of
14 Romney's ORCA data analytics system became symbolic of the imbalance in investments,
15 infrastructure and resources between the parties.
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19 The launch of the Growth and Opportunity Project in the wake of the 2012 defeat has
20 highlighted weaknesses in the areas of data capture and analytics. Any innovation in these
21 areas could be crucial, particularly given that the Democrat party network is seen to be going
22 through something of an existential crisis. Equally, Democrat advantages in 2014 did not
23 stem the tide of opinion so there are a multitude of opportunities for both parties. As Kreiss
24 notes, technological innovation is no more than a single contributory factor towards electoral
25 success. Arguably the factor was not even a pivotal one. Oprah Winfrey and not Facebook
26 was probably more responsible for making Obama a credible candidate in 2008, similarly ill-
27 advised remarks about the 48% who were written off by Romney may well have pushed
28 some floating voters in key swing states into the Obama camp. Therefore one might ask why
29 this book is important for understanding election campaigning and its effects in the US.
30 Kreiss' research details not only technological innovation, but also the party culture and
31 infrastructure that facilitate putting in a strong electoral performance. Whether a party has a
32 targeted strategy for using Facebook is immaterial, but if it does not it is indicative of the fact
33 the party is out of touch with the modern media environment and is standing outside of the
34 political ecosystem where they may interact with and learn from consultants, experts,
35 enthusiastic amateurs and the everyday folk. In other words we find that being networked
36 facilitates innovation that can contribute to victory, lacking a network leads to stasis and
37 insularity which can lead to a multitude of forms of errors in strategizing and implementing
38 election communication. Whether it be harnessing support online or harnessing support
39 through a campaign on the doorsteps, the party needs an infrastructure and a network. It is
40 in these crucial areas that the Republican party has failed over recent contests.
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45 The story of the 2016 campaign infrastructures is yet to be told. The campaigns front ends
46 are highly traditional, seeking sign-ups, promoting their candidate and attacking the
47 opponent. All candidates have a presence across social media, largely appearing to
48 broadcast their messages into their respective ecosystems. To what extent these are built
49 upon data analytics is a question for to raise to experts in the aftermath. The candidates are
50 converting some supporters into "stewards of their own networked wards" (p. 219),
51 extending the reach of campaigns to some extent, whether either campaign has a culture in
52 which innovation is thriving is a bigger question. But this returns to an extent to the question
53 of whether it matters. Despite sophisticated analytics, is it possible for communication to
54 break out of a partisan ecosystem and reach the politically uninterested, mobilise the
55 typically non-voting citizens and engage them with the campaigns. Do innovations, or even
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3 the cultures within party organisations, matter or is it legacy media narratives which
4 determine election outcomes. It is not the intention of this book to raise those issues,
5 however they are very important for considering how technological innovation is impacting
6 not just on the election campaigns of candidates but also on the democratic engagement of
7 citizens and the democratic institutions of a nation. The book demonstrates one party to be
8 more insular the other more open, perhaps reflecting an ideological schism. But is this a
9 permanent schism or was Democrat party culture at this crucial time spearheaded by Dean
10 as chair 2005-9, Obama as incumbent from 2008 and through the 2012 contest. In other
11 words is a culture of innovation the preserve of the liberal progressive political schema or will
12 we see ebb and flow across parties as we move forward. This maybe the next story for
13 Kreiss to tell, and it would be welcomed, as well as research on how technological
14 innovations contribute precisely to election outcomes. This book offers significant insights
15 into internal machinations which shape culture and electoral contests as well as mapping
16 research processes (in a rich Appendix) and is of significant value for understanding how
17 parties approach electoral contests, implement strategies of innovation and so how they
18 attempt to build support.
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