Digital Campaigning: Day Of Reckoning

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Tea Time?

With the rise of the Tea Party and the decline in President Obama's ratings, the upcoming US mid-term elections are going to be crucial. So two years after the triumph of Obama's Internet-fuelled campaign it is a good time to debate the role of digital politics. Polis brought together ePolitics founder Colin Delany, a veteran of 15 years in the digital politics space, and UK political analyst, Anthony Painter, who has written a book about the US 2008 campaign, too.

This report by Polis interns Svenja Ziegert and Martina Scapin

Colin reminded us of what happened in 2008, when Barack Obama used a combination of online-offline campaigning to win his election: the Internet had successfully taken a further step towards a digital democracy. This was mainly achieved by Email, online fundraising, Obama's successful website "mybarackobama.com", video and online content, as well as online advertising. Within the next ten years, Colin explained, this could be even more enhanced: email as well as text message signups, talking points, and particularly specified data collection about voting behaviour will become dominant tools for campaigning.

He was extremely excited about the mobilization apps found on iPhones, which allows canvassers working on election campaigns to collect valuable data on each and every person they meet. It allowed the parties to create instant and interactive data bases with much greater accuracy and efficiency.

Colin was convinced that the key to a successful future of political campaigning, especially in the US, lies in the value of both content and connection of politics. But Anthony took his arguments one step further by arguing that politics need to be more conversational and direct, of which digital media can only form one aspect.

"Professional marketing has turned politically savvy", he claimed. Politics, he continued, increasingly cease to be about dialogue; instead, product techniques are used to market parties and candidates, while the conversational aspect which is so critical to politics is removed.

The consequences, he argued, are not going to be felt in only one set of elections, but instead over time as political engagement diminishes and becomes transactional. This will eventually lead to large groups of people becoming alienated from the political process. And this will especially hurt people who are, for example, disempowered economically, and therefore in need of a strong political voice.

Yet perhaps one of the most worrying things, Painter says, is that the decrease in the conversational aspect of politics leads to an opportunity for very divisive political forces to form such as Geert Wilders, Thilo Sarrazin, the English Defence League, or the Tea Party.

Colin himself drew on this during his presentation, where he referred to some members of the Tea Party as "crazies." But no matter how "crazy" they are, these people know how to use the social media, and that has a fundamental impact on their presence in the American political arena.

Colin pointed to one of these websites, the Tea Party Express, which is a grass roots fundraiser and has been extremely successful in receiving small-scale donations. It is websites like these, he says, which are vastly

important in American digital politics these days.

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LSE Lecturer Nick Anstead has also written an excellent report on the event