

The Unreported Story of Obama's Election

New Film: Barack Obama, People's President

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The election of Barack Obama may be long over but the campaign for change is still underway. For the first time in American history, a president is using the techniques he deployed in running for office in pushing for deeper change. Those who want him to go even further might want to master the approach he used.

It is no surprise that this significant political development is barely being covered in a media that loves to punditize, poll public opinion, and debate policy options in a top-down way. (Some like Fox are even trying to become community organizers) Yet by "covering" politics in this way, our mass media is missing the most innovative bottom-up grassroots effort in recent memory.

I know about this because as a journalist and filmmaker, I set out to document just how Obama won the election. That story, told in the film Barack Obama, People's President (slated for DVD release this month by ChoiceMedia.net) documents the online and on the ground techniques that were used to win the highest office in the land.

The President is now using those same techniques, built around an impressive thirteen million-name email list to keep his organizers and supporters involved in backing his legislative agenda. This is the biggest mass lobbying effort of all time.

While his principal campaign advisor David Axelrod joined the White House staff at a high level, his campaign manager David Plouffe set about converting a campaign apparatus into a legislative army. As MoveOn.Org advisor David Fenton explains in our film, "It's an institutionalized mass level automated technological community organizing that has never existed before and it is very, very powerful force."

They have transformed the campaign website, BarackObama.com into Organizing for America. It encourages visitors to call Congress to support the President's budget. And like the campaign, it sends out emails, text messages and uses social networking technologies. It organizes volunteers to canvass door like they did in the campaign. The first time out, they garnered nearly a quarter million signatures.

Andrew Rasiej of the personal Democracy Forum elaborates:

"He knows who is giving him money, who's voted for him. He can now reach out to these people and ask them to help him to pass his legislative agenda. Those same people can call their congressmen and say we'll support you for reelection if you vote for Obama's legislation. We will give you money if you support Obama's legislation. It's a very powerful group that is actually the most powerful grassroots organization ever built in American

history.”

The film *People’s President* shows how all of this—including the campaign’s use of Meet-up technologies including how FaceBook, My Space and twittering were used as organizing tools by the campaign.

Rasiej cites the ongoing potential:

“It’s a citizens lobby! And not only can Obama as president go over the heads of congress to speak to the American public, he can go now between their legs and go underneath Congress to the American public and the American public can do the same back and that’s created a new power structure in the American politics, where the citizens can actually participate and not rely on the old (abstract) system of lobbyists, special interests and only those who have money.”

There is also the possibility, as political theorist Benjamin Barber told us, the young people who backed Obama can use these same techniques and web platforms to challenge him to stay on track:

“There are websites of young people who are deeply involved in the campaign who talk to one another, and now it would be very interesting because now that Obama’s President, they will find that websites and some horizontal campaigns of young people involved with him, now looking at him critically. And using the web to challenge him, to live up to what these young people believed he promised them and so on.”

This is significant. The progressive critics of Obama, disappointed by his appointments and some of his cautious policies, have to go beyond railing in print or crying in their beer. They have to reach out to the grass roots army that assured his election. This means being willing to dialogue with liberals and younger people who don’t label their politics. Reminding them of the role they played in a historic election may be one way to do that—to appeal to the instincts that led them to engage in the campaign for “change.” There’s no need to deify Obama—but there is an imperative to reenergize his base,

It is hard to remember that two years earlier, Obama was barely known, registering on the radar screen for just 10% of voters. He was also hardly a brand name as a first term Senator who spent more time in state politics in Illinois than on the national stage. Moreover he was young, and a man of color—not qualities that usually prevail in the presidential arena which tends to draw far older, far whiter, and far more centrist candidates. The thought that he would beat frontrunner Hillary Clinton in the primaries was, quite frankly, unthinkable to most of the elite.

And yet he prevailed. as he used a phrase appropriated from labor organizer and Latino legend Caesar Chavez. Obama turned the farm workers Spanish language slogan “Si Se Puede” into “Yes We Can.” Rather than focus on specific political issues, he built a campaign on the promise of “Hope.” Rather than just rely on traditional fundraising—although by the end, he was flush with it—he reached out over the Internet for smaller donations from millions of donors.

Few in the major media gave him a chance but he was not discouraged because he had created his own grass roots media operation using sophisticated organizing and social networking techniques to build a bottom up movement, not the usual top-down apparatus.

While his campaign ran the show, he encouraged independent initiatives including citizen-generated media, music videos, personalized websites, twittering and texting etc.

This is the new direction our politics has taken. It is a story that may be somewhat threatening to old media –and older activists—who prefer a one to many approach to communication as opposed to forging a more interactive empowering platform. There is no question that young people—especially those mobilized by Obama prefer online media and that choice is making it harder and harder for traditional outlets to sustain their influence and, in some cases, even their organizations. Old media may be on the way out.

This is why our film is, my mind, important, not just as a record of how Obama won and what happened in 2008, but in what will happen, can happen—and is happening in the future. This is why I believe its critical for Americans to see it—as well as others in the world as well —to recognize how Obama represents more than just another politician but a whole new approach to politics. That old adage is worth remembering: “Its not the ship that makes the wave, it’s the motion on the ocean.”

Obama, for all his shortcomings which are becoming more obvious by the day has pioneered the way change must be won —not by people on the top, but by all of us. It remains for “us” to hold him accountable. We live in a culture of amnesia—it is important to learn the lessons of the recent past.

*Emmy-Award Winning producer **Danny Schechter** blogs for www.Mediachannel.org. He’s made 30 documentaries mostly on issues of change. His film Barack Obama, People’s President, produced by South Africa’s Anant Singh, is available on DVD from ChoicesVideo.net. Comments to Dissector@Mediachannel.orgv*

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