

Political e-mobilisation and participation in the election campaigns of Ségolène Royal (2007) and Barack Obama (2008)

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Abstract

The recent presidential elections in France (2007) and the United States (2008) have demonstrated the potential of Internet use in election campaigns. This paper seeks to contribute to the reflection on forms of e-mobilisation of citizens by analysing Ségolène Royal and Barack Obama's campaigns and the expectations generated by their political campaigns. The basic contention is that the Internet has enabled candidates to promote mobilisation and new communication channels in society, although ultimately these new possibilities formed part of the conventional system used for politician-citizen relations.

Key words

Electoral campaigns, Internet, mobilization, participation.

Resum

En les últimes eleccions presidencials de França (2007) i dels Estats Units (2008) ha quedat de manifest la potencialitat de l'ús d'Internet en les campanyes electorals. Aquesta aportació intenta contribuir a la reflexió sobre les formes d'e-mobilització ciutadana en les campanyes de Ségolène Royal i Barack Obama i les expectatives de participació política que van generar les seves respectives campanyes. La idea bàsica és que Internet va permetre a aquests candidats obrir a la societat vies de mobilització i comunicació, però que finalment aquestes noves possibilitats es van emmarcar dins de les formes convencionals de relació entre la política i la ciutadania.

Paraules clau

Campanyes electorals, Internet, mobilització, participació.

In the last presidential elections in France (2007) and the United States (2008) there has been exponential growth in the use of the Internet in candidates' strategies. In general, all the expectations concerning the potential of this new medium in election campaigns have been confirmed and everything suggests that we are immersed in a process of continually discovering new uses on the part of political parties and society at large. The characteristics of the Internet, its speed, its viral and interactive nature and its possibilities for spreading information selectively, etc. make it the ideal instrument for planning the campaigns of political parties and candidates.

The possibilities of interaction provided by the new medium correspond with the attitude of some parties and candidates of suggesting and promoting political communication styles that are more direct and ask for the active involvement of citizens. The dissatisfaction with representative democracy and the few opportunities for citizens to become involved in decision-making processes has created an interest in the Internet's potential to positively contribute to a greater political intervention on the part of citizens. This has pushed some parties and candidates to include, in their election campaigns, proposals for participatory democracy.

On 20 January 2009, when Barack Obama took over the presidency of the United States, Ségolène Royal, present at the ceremony, declared to journalists: "Yes, I inspired Obama and his team copied us" (Cypel 2009). The former candidate in the

last presidential elections in France added that Obama had adapted her idea of "participatory democracy" to the American style, very different from the European with regard to the meaning of "communities". According to Royal, the for Obama's campaign was the same as for her own, as it was a question of "revising how politics are carried out, the relationship between the elites and the people" (Cypel 2009). Benoît Thieulin, creator of *Désirs d'avenir* and responsible for the former candidate's Internet campaign, expressed his opinion a few days later concerning Royal's declarations. With a humorous tone, in an interview carried out for *Parlons Net avec Benoît Thieulin*, he commented that the inspiration for Obama's team might also have come from Sarkozy's use of the Internet in his election campaign (*Parlons Net avec Benoît Thieulin*, 24-1-2009).

The origins of this story date back to the expedition, organised by the French American Foundation in April 2007, of a group of political advisors (Democrats and Republicans) who went to Paris to see how the French political parties were using the Internet. In *Adweek.com*, Nicholas Dungan, president of this Foundation, argued that, in France, radio and television adverts were not as significant for candidates as they were in the United States, because paid electoral advertising was banned and, for this reason, they were forced to be more creative in looking for alternative channels (Melillo 2007).

Without reflecting on the different expressions of creativity in election campaigns (in advertising, in discursive strategies or

in mobilising voters), of note is the rapid socialising of the experiences of using this new communication medium. Discoveries made through these new uses of the Internet in election campaigns are quickly assimilated by parties and candidates as a whole, irrespective of their ideology.

Certainly, the differences in election campaigns in Europe and the United States are many and for different reasons, such as the structure of the political system, the competition between parties, the political culture, the role of the media, advertising, funding, professionalism, etc. Their similarities lie particularly in campaign techniques: the centrality of television, the growing use of marketing and of political and communication advisors, the central role of political leaders, the campaign style that's evolving towards a reduction in programme content, etc. In any case, and from the point of view of organising their respective election campaigns, Obama and Royal coincide in one aspect, namely that of being considered in their respective countries as the candidates that have advanced the most in opening up channels for the participation and engagement of their followers via the Internet.

The aim of this work is to contribute to reflection on the forms of citizen e-mobilisation in the election campaigns of Ségolène Royal and Barack Obama and the expected political participation generated by their respective campaigns. The basic idea is that the Internet allowed these candidates to open up means of mobilisation and communication to society but that, ultimately, these new possibilities were placed within the conventional relations between politics and citizens.

The political use of the Internet for mobilisation

Research into the political uses of the Internet is very extensive and reaches practically all aspects of the new medium. Among the lines of interest we may note reflection on the functions of the Internet in political parties, its capacity to influence voters, its effects on political life and the new ways for citizens to participate in electoral processes.

In each of these areas of analysis there has been a basic controversy concerning the Internet's capacity or lack thereof to substantially change how politics are carried out. Studies have been carried out on the use made by political parties of their websites depending on their objectives, resources, ideology and creativity (Römmele 2003; Gibson *et al.* 2003; Schweitzer 2008); the Internet's impact on various areas of parties and how they function (Farmer and Fender 2005; Ward *et al.* 2003; Vaccari 2008); the influence of parties on voting behaviour (Bimber and Davis 2003), and the introduction of new forms of political participation in election campaigns (Margolis and Resnick 2000; Norris 2003). Based on research as a whole, although with some different nuances, we can state that there is agreement in considering the Internet to be a tool that can make a significant contribution to mobilising voters.

The different types of mobilisation and involvement of citizens in election campaigns can be very varied. From active, militant participation to information on campaign issues, on the candidates, exchanging opinions, etc. S. J. Rosenstone and J. M. Hansen (1993; 25-26) understand mobilisation to mean "the process by which candidates, parties, activists and groups persuade other people to participate. We say that one of these actors has *mobilised* someone when they have done something to increase the probability of their participation." According to these authors, there are basically two kinds of mobilisation: direct, when leaders mobilise citizens personally, and indirect, when contact between leaders and citizens is through peer groups, such as family, friends, neighbours or colleagues. Direct mobilisation can therefore become, through social networks, indirect mobilisation.

The Internet has introduced new nuances in political mobilisation and engagement in election campaigns. The traditional party members, focusing on holding meetings, fundraising, creating opinion polls, attracting followers, etc. is being replaced by new forms of militancy and collaboration with election campaigns.

Through the Internet, political parties can increase fundraising, mobilise their volunteers and permanently incorporate the holding of debates in parties (Ward *et al.* 2003). Social websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, YouTube, etc. have provided new possibilities for attracting members, volunteers and followers. The spreading of messages through social networks that are already set up means they can circulate very quickly and results can be maximised.

Most of the time, contact is established indirectly, parties can attract quite a few *e-members* and *e-followers*, although over time their link with the party will probably be much weaker if compared with traditional militancy. Broadly speaking, the methods for mobilising via the Internet during an election campaign can be: use of the Internet as a source of information, transmitting content, signing up for content, participation in political debate (posts or comments), blogs, forums and participation in social networks, among others.

The last presidential elections in France and in the United States were important landmarks in Internet use because the election strategies of most of the candidates have been largely based on this new medium. The desire to convert a candidate's website into the centre of mobilisation and organisation of the work of his or her members and followers has also resulted in different political styles and new forms of political mobilisation.

Ségolène Royal and participatory democracy

The last presidential elections in France aroused great interest among citizens. The high number of registrations on the electoral register and growing engagement over the election campaign led to a participation rate of almost 86%. The use of the Internet to keep up-to-date with how the campaign was devel-

oping was proportionally lower than with other media. In the second quarter of 2007 in France there were 11,776 million households with Internet access, a figure accounting for 46.6% of the total.

According to a post-election presidential survey by CEVIPOF (2007)¹ carried out among the population aged 18 and over included on the electoral register, the preferred media used to keep informed of politics were: television (61% as the main source and 83% as a secondary source); radio (14% as a main source and 36% as a secondary source), and the national press (9% as a main source and 23% as a secondary source). The Internet came fourth, with 8% of respondents using it as a main source and 21% as a secondary source.

At the start of the electoral process, in November 2006, the primaries held by the French Socialist Party (PSF) and the Congress for the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) (appointing the candidates of Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy, respectively) led to great expectation. The success of Ségolène Royal (60.6% of the votes) in the primaries of the PSF compared with Dominique Strauss-Kahn (20.8 %) and Laurent Fabius (18.6 %) was resounding.

One characteristic of this primary election was that their members were highly mobilised. From March to May 2006, the French Socialist Party started up a campaign to attract new party members via the Internet, for an annual membership fee of 20 euros, which was a great success. This campaign meant that membership went from 120,000 to 200,000. According to a survey carried out within the party itself by the Secrétariat National aux NTIC,² the sociological profile of the new members was "female, young, urban and with a diploma" with an average age of 43.4, and more than 90% had not been a member of any party previously. The strong mobilisation of socialist members in the primaries became evident in the high participation rate in these primary elections, which reached 82%, and, unlike what was initially thought, the new members who had joined via the Internet campaign did not lean more towards Royal but towards Strauss-Kahn (Dolez and Laurent 2007).

Having seen the socialist primaries, Ségolène Royal focused her campaign on the Internet. From February 2006, through her website *Désirs d'avenir*, the socialist members and followers became actively engaged in its discussion spaces. The forms of participation differed depending on the category of the member: subscribing to forums, creating websites, animating debates, coordinating and summarising debates and making new proposals (Beauvallet 2007). In total, three million participants online, 135,000 contributions and 1,500 websites are an indicator of the strong activity around Royal's campaign (Dupin 2007).

Among the qualities of the socialist candidate, of note is her willingness to get involved with some of the concerns of citizens. As explained by M. Sineau (2006: 4), one of the strong points of Ségolène Royal was her capacity to understand some of the current changes: "The seizing up of party life, increas-

ingly more educated, informed and critical citizens, horizontal dissemination of information via the Internet - a fact that *ipso facto* changes the style of political authority - the need to resort to certain procedures of direct democracy (or 'participatory') to make the stagnated representative democracy come alive again."

In February 2007, Royal's election programme, "A more just France will be a stronger France", contained the conclusions of more than 6,000 participatory debates held throughout the country via the Internet. These debates were organised based on specific issues (education, work, retirement, housing, health, security, etc.) run by Ségolène Royal herself or other leaders, gathering together suggestions and making sure these were incorporated into the general programme. This programme was presented as a pact of honour, a presidential pact for everyone, a "collective work" created through citizen participation, something that allowed Royal to add that, if she became president of the Republic, never again would politics be carried out without citizens. Finally, the candidate also announced, within the context of this pact, the establishment of "juries" to introduce "participatory democracy in all public organisations".

The central lines of her campaign, denouncing a "democratic crisis" and a "moral crisis" in addition to the issues of employment, reduction in purchasing power, solidarity and reform of the state, among others, allowed her to propose the need to encourage participatory democracy and a more central role for citizens and for regions. The participation of members and followers in the discussions on Royal's election programme aroused enthusiasm and granted a certain credibility which was interpreted as a new political style, a new way of involving citizens in producing the election programme.

Notwithstanding this, in the election campaign as a whole the issue of participatory democracy gradually lost importance. On the one hand, dissension in the PSF became more relevant, the lack of support of historic leaders of the party for the proposals of participatory democracy, the effort to focus campaign interest on Royal's capacity for leadership, the difficulty in placing her discourse as a woman in relation to the campaign as a whole, her difficulties in attracting the trust of women and their vote, and the direction of the campaign depending on the opinion polls and indices of popularity. On the other hand, how the media treated her politically incorrect declarations (on Iran and nuclear energy; her reference to the speed of Chinese justice; her favourable attitude towards the sovereignty of Quebec, with the consequent reaction of the Canadian government) and her silences (when a Hezbollah member in Beirut compared Israel with Nazism) highlighted her inexperience on the international political stage.

The behaviour of Internet users did not differ greatly from the conventional patterns of citizens. The search for information focused principally on the sites of the press and television channels. According to an IFOP survey, in its *Observatoire 2006-2007 de la Netcampagne Présidentielle*,³ interest in the campaign was high: 29% of the Internet users surveyed

stated they were "very interested" in it and 47% were "quite interested". In this same survey it seems that the main sources of information from the Internet were the informative websites of the press (61%), informative websites of television channels (49%), sites of general information (36%) and informative websites of radio stations (32%). After came the sites or blogs of political figures (21%), those of political organisations or parties (18%) and forums for political discussion (13%). On the other hand, activities related to discussion and comments on the campaign were fewer: out of all the users, 14% sent information by email about the campaign and 12% recommended a political website to people they knew.

The Internet users who voted for Ségolène Royal in the first round were principally young people from higher social categories. They were also the most active on the Internet in terms of looking for information on political news (56% of her voters), visiting the site of a presidential candidate (35%) or visiting a political blog (27%). On the other hand, in other activities, such as watching a political video online (23%) or recommending a political site to people they know (10%), Royal's voters were in a clear minority compared with those of Jean-Marie Le Pen. With regard to the election results of the second round, young people were one of the groups that expressed their preference and support for Royal.

The explanation of her defeat concerns a series of aspects of a sociological and political nature that go beyond the framework of this article. However, it can be said that her proposals for participation, although they were an attempt to respond to the disenchantment of young people with politics, did not manage to convince the groups and citizens as a whole that had historically supported the PSF's proposals.

Barack Obama and mobilisation on social networks

The presidential elections in the United States, after the continued loss in popularity of George W. Bush, also opened up a period of great expectation. Electoral participation was high (63%) if we consider that the last time this percentage had been reached was in 1960, in the campaign of J. F. Kennedy against R. Nixon. In 2008, the number of households in the United States with a computer was 79%, equivalent to 92.3 million homes. The penetration of fixed broadband out of all homes with a personal computer was 72%. Internet access from homes was therefore much higher than that of European countries in general.

According to A. Smith (2009), in the study for the Pew Internet & American Life Project⁴ on the role of the Internet in the presidential election campaign of 2008, the sources most consulted by the total population were television (77%) and the press (28%). The Internet came third (26%) and, finally, the fourth place was for radio (13%). Around 55% of the adult population in the United States connected to the Internet to get information or take part in the election campaign at some point.

In the Democrat Party, the candidates for the presidential nomination had already started their respective campaigns in 2007 on the Internet. Hillary Clinton appeared as the favourite in the opinion polls, although her election campaign did not successfully connect with citizens. The strategy of Obama's team to counteract the popularity of Hillary Clinton focused on a great presence in the media, principally radio and television and direct contact with voters, especially in those states that chose their delegates in electoral assemblies. This work was based on mobilising volunteers to convince as large a number of voters as possible - door to door and via telephone - and to raise funds to support the campaign. These two aspects bore fruit in the assemblies of Iowa and were central throughout the whole campaign.

Among Internet users, 64% looked for information on the websites of television channels, such as *CNN.com*, *ABC News.com* and *Msnbcnews.com*; 54% visited the news services of portals such as Google or Yahoo; 43% consulted the sites of the local media; 40% read some comment on the campaign in an online news group, website or blog; 34% resorted to the sites of the main national newspapers, such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*; 26% visited blogs for news, politics or the media; 24% accessed sites focusing on specific issues, such as those of local or state governments or international news organisations; 21% connected to news websites provided by radio stations; 19% to the humorous news sites such as *The Onion* or *The Daily Show*, and 12% to alternative news organisations (Smith 2009: 62).

Possibly the presidential elections of 2008 will go down in history as an extraordinary event if we take into account the amount of journalists, political commentators and communication advisors that have classified Obama's campaign as "revolutionary" or "masterly". A series of elements has given rise to such descriptions: the charisma of the candidate, his capacity to seduce and his leadership, his background, his speech-giving ability, the organisation of his election campaign and the use of new technologies, the social and political context and the world financial crisis, to mention just a few of the most obvious.

Obama's campaign had two main lines of operation: Obama's election campaign website (*My.BarackObama.com*) and the mobilisation of his followers. The campaign website gathered more than 1,400,000 email addresses and 100,000 user profiles were created, more than 50,000 blog entries were written and around 20,000 events were published (Gutiérrez 2008; Talbot 2008).

"The campaign website [of Barack Obama] is designed like a social network similar to Facebook. Information from the campaign must be circulated (meetings, events...) in the heart of the "Obama community". Even more innovative, it allows followers to come into contact with each other and organise themselves into paramilitary teams. Structured into geographical groups (DC for Obama...), often very local (Prince William County for Obama...) or theme-based

(Students for Obama, Lawyers for Obama...), they have the means for action: training tools, a packet of campaign documentation, a door to door programme (the Neighbor to Neighbor programme, that obtains the home sales lists for the area), telephone lists for phoning, etc." (Thirion *et al.* 2009a; 4).

With regard to recruiting his followers, the great contribution of Obama's campaign was the capacity to create a movement capable of taking the form of action on the ground. Obama recruited 1.2 million volunteers to carry out different kinds of activities to convince voters, especially door to door. According to the Report by Terra Nova of B. Thirion *et al.* (2009b; 46): "One of the main strengths of the campaign lies in the conciliation between centralisation and control by professional teams and members being able to take over the campaign. The engagement of volunteers in favour of Barack Obama has been prepared and controlled by professional campaign teams in all the stages of the engagement process: training, organisation and fieldwork." This mobilisation meant that 68 million voters were contacted by the most traditional system, door to door, and gathered more than a million phone numbers to which were sent, on a monthly average, 5 to 20 messages (Thirion *et al.* 2009b).

The strength of the mobilisation of these followers was amplified due to their presence on social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube, among others. The day of the presidential elections, the 4 November, Obama's friends on Facebook totalled 2,397,253; on MySpace this was 833,161; his number of fans on Twitter reached 125,639, and on YouTube the number of online videos related to Obama was 104,454 and the number of visits for these videos reached 889 million (Rasiej, Sifry, 2008).

According to a study by K. Pagoda *et al.* (2009), carried out based on a survey by the E-Voter Institute (2009),⁵ Internet users who voted for the Democrat Party considered themselves to be, in a proportion of 21%, very active politically (compared with 17% of Republicans in this same case), 37% considered themselves to be not involved in political activities apart from that of voting and 43% were occasionally active. Among the most frequent political actions of Democrats were: looking online for additional information on politics (57%) and visiting candidates' websites (57%), watching online videos on the candidates and receiving emails from friends or relatives on politics (56% in each case), talking to a friend or relative about voting for a candidate or an initiative (52%) (Pagoda *et al.* 2009).

Throughout the election campaign, the Internet was not only the main tool for organising the electoral work of volunteers. It also centralised all activity in general, a phenomenon that has been called *webcentrism*. The agenda of acts, advertising, presence in the media, support of political figures and popular personalities, artistic creativity dedicated to the campaign, comments on issues, proposals, comments on debates,

answers to the rest of the candidates, messages aimed at young people, women, minorities, professionals, etc. were channelled through the Internet.

However, the Internet did not just centralise the organisation of the campaign but also strengthened citizen participation through discussion (horizontally and among citizens and candidates in general) and the making of videos, which emerged strongly right from the start. By way of example we can cite "Vote different", published in January 2008 on YouTube, in which Hillary Clinton takes on George Orwell's role of Big Brother and on which Obama's candidature is based. According to Obama himself, in statements made to CNN, the video was the proof that citizens can create all kinds of content on the Internet and it meant, to a certain degree, that the campaign had become democratised.

However, the Internet did not just allow the "democratisation" of the election campaign but, after the elections, president Obama has continued to make transparency, communication and participation the main objectives of his policy, as explained by Macon Phillips, director of New Media for the Whitehouse on *Whitehouse.gov*.

Conclusion

The possibilities for interaction and viral features of the new technologies make it much easier to mobilise thousands of party members and followers concerning common goals. In European democracies, as well as in the United States, within a context of growing widespread dissatisfaction with representative democracy and disaffection towards politics, the progressive use of the Internet seems to involve the need to set up a discourse concerning political participation. The expectations of this new medium on the part of society and the demonstrable success of its use in all social layers mean that political parties cannot refuse to use it without running the risk of being excluded from the general trend that's in favour of new communication technologies. In general, parties - apart from their ideology - offer forms of participation that, in most cases, do not affect fundamental political decisions but rather how the campaign develops.

Convincing citizens in order to mobilise them and get them to participate in political processes seems a difficult task if the political proposals are framed within conventional politics, i.e. if they are inserted within the same old politics. On the other hand, achieving participation with the aim of producing and experiencing new forms of deliberation and consensus can, in principle, attract those groups of citizens with greater responsibility and more willingness to become involved politically.

The election campaigns of Ségolène Royal and Barack Obama, although in very different contexts, are an example of the capacity of the new possibilities and new ways of carrying out politics in order to attract. Notwithstanding this, the participation that they have offered citizens has not gone very far

beyond what is merely necessary to set up a media discourse that is more or less convincing concerning the need for a greater contribution to the discussion of public affairs. Ségolène Royal's proposal for direct participation in producing the electoral programme was diluted as the campaign progressed due to pressure from the media, which focused more on the personality of the candidate. Barack Obama's promises led to the great mobilisation of young people but this did not become active participation in the proposals regarding the politics of the future. However, the invitation for citizens to collaborate undoubtedly helped the candidate's media explosion.

These electoral experiences suggest that new information and communication technologies are an instrument with great potential as yet to be discovered. Mobilisation concerning the objectives and watchwords of an election campaign has different nuances of engagement: from passive participation through voting to direct participation in taking important campaign decisions. Possibly, in the cases we are looking at, the novelty and resonance in the media have been an important factor that must be taken into account, but participation has not transcended to the sphere of important decision-making.

Proposals for political participation, discourses concerning the need for greater democratisation and participatory democracy or concerning a new relationship between the political class and citizens, run the risk of becoming commonplace and of losing meaning. Changes in political culture and in the conception of democracy will not come exclusively from the new uses of the Internet if participation does not manage to transcend the conventional framework of politics.

Notes

- 1 The survey was carried out by IFOP for CEVIPOF-Ministère de l'Intérieur, "Enquête post électorale présidentielle 2007", May 2007. The sample was 4,006 people, representative of the French population aged 18 and over and on the electoral register.
- 2 The PSF carried out a survey from 6 to 11 May on a sample of 18,000 new members, of which 8,400 people answered.
- 3 The survey was carried out by IFOP on a sample of 1,004 people on the electoral register, representative of the French Internet user population, between the 19 and 20 April 2007, just before the first round.
- 4 The study is based on a post-election survey on the use of the Internet by citizens in the United States, carried out for the Pew Internet & American Life Project. This survey was carried out by Princeton Survey Research Associates International on a sample of 2,254 adults aged 18 and over, between 20 November and 4 December 2008.
- 5 Post-election survey carried out by the E-Voter Institute on a group of 3,536 people who agreed to take part in research via the Internet, between 5 and 10 November.

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