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Obama + Internet + Money = HOPE

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20 May 2011

Retrieved on 22nd December 2021 from www.wsm.ie

Published in the *Irish Anarchist Review* Issue 3.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

20 May 2011

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Victory

In the final analysis, the crunch outcome for Obama's innovative mobilisation was as follows:

Obama benefited from a big increase in voter turnout – in other words he succeeded in convincing apathetic voters that this time around they could make a difference.

He also succeeded in 'changing the minds of already mobilized voters'.⁸

⁸ Voter Mobilization and the Obama Victory. Tracy Osborn. University of Iowa

The electoral system in the United States is notoriously conservative. Two political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, dominate. To be a Presidential hopeful, you need to have stacks of money – to pay for advertising and campaign teams and so on and so forth. Usually this means courting big business and corporate interests in return for campaign donations.

As a former senator Obama was well aware of this situation and how things worked. Ultimately, however, his success lay in the fact that he mobilised in two distinct constituencies – among the business community but also amongst the grassroots voters. This latter aspect – his grassroots mobilisation – received considerable prominence because it was 'news' and noteworthy. His clear and unambiguous business friendly comments received less attention, but were nonetheless important.

Obama's new methods of organising were obvious in two distinct areas – in how he raised money but also in how he spread the word about his campaign policies¹. These new and dynamic methods further enhanced the image of Obama as 'being different' and radical – this was particularly important among the younger voter groups.

Internet

Obama used the internet to build his campaign, but crucially he did this in ways that empowered and involved his target support base.

Obama had a big presence online from the outset. His campaign was registered on all the main social media platforms like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter.

He had a very smart 'online' headquarters called MyBO at my.barackobama.com. This was not just a static showcase:

¹ pep-net.eu

MyBO allowed “users to create events, exchange information, raise funds, and connect with voters in their area. MyBO was the digital home from which the campaign could mobilise its army of supporters.”² It incorporated over two million profiles during the campaign.

MyBO succeeded in creating a ‘sense of community as everyone with political interest could participate. Via blogs, people could express themselves and report about their personal experiences during the campaign. Importantly the site was also used to organise more than 200,000 offline events during the campaign.’³

The Obama campaign used traditional internet avenues like email. It accumulated 13 million email addresses and sent one billion emails to mobilise supporters. Emails were used to make contact with ‘supporters, bloggers, and online media’.⁴

Obama made massive use of texting. “A million people signed up for Obama’s text-messaging program ... On Election Day, every voter who’d signed up for alerts in battleground states got at least three text messages. Supporters on average received five to 20 text messages per month, depending on where they lived — the program was divided by states, regions, zip codes and colleges — and what kind of messages they had opted to receive.”⁵

Obama’s own blog was the centre where all news and information was displayed. “It was the hub that captured all activities in the Obamaverse and shared them with the world. The blog was the campaign’s repository, a place where stories, videos, news, and pictures were captured and pushed out to Obama’s many social network profiles.”

² Rahaf Harfoush. Yes We Did. An inside Look at how Social Media built the Obama Brand. New Riders: Berkeley, 2009.

³ ibid.

⁴ ibid..

⁵ voices.washingtonpost.com

Dollars

In terms of fundraising Obama made a lot of capital (no pun intended) from the fact that he was more citizen-funded than his opponents. This touched on a sore point with a lot of voters in the USA who see the system of candidate funding as being in the pocket of ‘big business’. So many citizens donated small amounts of money and this was both popular and a big campaign plus.

“3 million donors made a total of 6.5 million donations online adding up to more than \$500 million. Of those 6.5 million donations, 6 million were in increments of \$100 or less. The average online donation was \$80, and the average Obama donor gave more than once.”⁶

However Obama also got plenty of money from big business. Analysis shows that only a quarter of Obama’s donations actually fell into the ‘small’ category (less than \$200). To get around the matter of limits to campaign donations, Obama set up with the Democratic National Committee, the Obama Victory Fund. The maximum individual donation to this fund was set at \$28,500. However this was deemed to be quite limiting and a second pro-Obama organisation, the Committee for Change, was created which allowed individual donors to give up to \$65,500.⁷ As you can well imagine, people who give these sorts of donations are not exactly from the poor side of town.

⁶ ibid.

⁷ ibid