

HOW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ARE USING THE INTERNET TO CHANGE POLITICS

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Virtual petitions, online money-bombs, forums to debate issues, and the use of social media and email to recruit people for meetings and protests – all are ways in which today’s political activists try to engage citizens and influence the political process. Social movements across the political spectrum use new technologies to effect change and influence party politics, but little is systematically known about how they do it – or what difference it makes.

A recent study looked closely at MoveOn and Tea Party activists in Tallahassee, Florida. On the progressive side, MoveOn participants are part of a centralized web-based organization that encourages local activists to host events as part of nationwide campaigns. On the conservative side, Tea Party activism is nationwide but not centrally managed. Grassroots Tea Party groups have formed in localities, including three in Tallahassee. In addition to doing participant observation and analyzing media coverage, websites, and public documents, researchers did in-depth interviews with MoveOn and Tea Party activists to gain fresh insights into how they use various forms of internet-based communication to pursue their political goals. The results show how social movements operate in the internet age. By acting nimbly outside established organizational channels, successful social movements have brought the “entrepreneurial spirit” online and into the American political system.

Internet Technologies Overcome Obstacles to Participation

- Online groups overcome well-known obstacles to participation – such as time constraints, lack of skills, and low income. Online movements let people choose when to click; and they usually do not charge membership dues in any traditional sense. They encourage participation in lots of small ways – allowing people to share opinions, sign petitions, ask to be kept informed, and donate small amounts of money.
- Successful online groups use internet communications and networking to teach supporters new political skills and get them involved in the “real world.” Models for action can be rapidly disseminated, and people can be given tools to get in touch with other potential supporters in their community. Supporters can be taught how to host political gatherings, organize a rally, and canvass their neighbors online.
- Effective groups use technology to get supporters involved in the decision-making process – for example, by hosting forums for discussion or by asking people to give their opinion about issues to highlight. This sustains support for a cause, because individuals see the organization as democratic and responsive to their feedback.

Internet Tactics Help Movements Stress Big Ideas and Downplay Controversy

Rather than promoting specialized causes or detailed platforms, technologically savvy political activists focus on selling big ideas that promise to change the world, stressing themes that unify rather than divide citizens from many different backgrounds.

- Movements use the internet along with other approaches to push messages that pit “average Americans” against power holders such as “the party establishment” or “elite Washington insiders.” For example, both MoveOn and the Tea Party portray themselves as insurgents and use strong rhetorical oppositions. The internet lends itself to any movement that wants to portray itself as going around or rebelling against elites.
- Successful social movements avoid issues that might divide supporters. Movements featuring online communication can manage what gets featured in their message. For example, MoveOn uses internet feedback to find high priorities that unite supporters, and it also learns what might divide people and reduce enthusiasm. Similarly, Tallahassee Tea Party groups avoid highlighting abortion and gay marriage – “hot button” issues that create fissures among their supporters.

Social Movements and Political Parties

The ability of social movements to leverage internet communication technologies with great effectiveness changes dynamics between movements and political parties in the 21st century. Internet-savvy movements can help fill in gaps in party structures. For example, in recent elections progressive groups like MoveOn.org have targeted swing states with campaigns designed to bring progressive voters to the polls on behalf of Democrats. And Tea Party groups spread enthusiasm among Republican voters in 2010. But at the same time, social movements use the internet to pressure and compete with the major political parties. This happens in several ways:

- Social movements draw dollars away from political parties. Political parties must struggle to represent voters on many issues, while raising money and maintaining broad support. Yet internet savvy social movements operating outside of direct party control can sometimes use a sharper message to raise millions and get supporters involved beyond the checkbook. This may diminish the fundraising ability of political parties. Small and big donors alike turn to activist groups they believe can quickly and effectively challenge established politicians and policy positions.
- Savvy movements can use advertising, earned media, and viral campaigns to build support for their issues and force political parties to take up their causes. For example, since 2009 all Republican candidates and officeholders have scrambled to address Tea Party calls for cuts in spending and reductions in the national debt. Movements have always pressured parties, but movements in the internet era can have a big impact very quickly.
- Movement activists believe that attempts to establish a third party will fail, and so they pressure and work with the closest major party. Tea Partiers, for example, pressure Republicans and compete for party leadership positions at local, state, and national levels; and MoveOn participants support Democrats who favor movement stances on key issues.

Read more in Rohlinger, Bunnage, and Klein, “Virtual Power Plays: Social Movements, Internet Communication Technology, and Party Politics,” in *The Internet and Democracy: Voters, Candidates, Parties and Social Movements*, edited by B. Groffman, A. Trechsel, and M. Franklin (Springer, 2014).