

# Social Networks Influences Vote Banks, Politician-Voter Relationship; Case Study: ‘MyBarackObama.com’

"Person-to-person-to-person" is the principle behind Social Networking. A social network is a social structure made of individuals (nodes), which are tied (connected) by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, financial exchange, dislike, sexual relationships, or relationships of beliefs, knowledge or status. Politics has always utilized these "connections" in its propaganda machinery. With advent of Internet and Social Networking and the large influx of people who are linked through SNS-Social Networking Service, the internet's influence on voters cannot be denied. Politician and thus politics entered into these SNS to promote their ideologies in cyberspace and their number is increasing day by day.

As the net-population grew, the level of social interactions became larger and more diverse. The era of uncontrolled info broadcast started, spreading more information than any other media. This gave rise to new business opportunities, more ways to connect people. Politicians have always craved a medium of unregulated form of connection to their voters and the loyal vote banks. The internet provided the perfect tool - Social Networking Sites. Designed to connect people across geo-social barriers, they could connect with ease the candidate to his constituency, providing 24/7 (comparatively) cost-effective media to broadcast the views/news of the Politician/Political Party. Updated frequently, this propaganda machinery could help swell both the vote-banks and money banks of the party. Thus one can find the profiles of many Politicians on these sites, For instance U.S. President Barack Obama, President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Nobel Laureate Nelson Mandela, and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger are some of the popular and active politicians on Facebook. Thus a politician's influence is augmented by the SNS by providing a platform for the everyday voters to interact with the candidate without having to leave the comfort of their House. This type of Politician-Voter relationship of course is only possible in countries with high internet penetration such as Korea South (77.3 %), United Kingdom (76.4 %), Japan (75.5 %), and United States (74.1 %) <sup>[1]</sup> etc. In these countries the socio-cybernetic culture is influential enough to affect the political machinery. In countries, for instance like

ours where the internet penetration is around 10% <sup>[1]</sup> such methods of campaigning wouldn't be very significant or would have a negligible impact.

This connectivity through internet technology was something that U.S. President Barack Obama understood extremely well even starting from his Senator days. Though not the first politician to use the internet, in connecting with his voters, Mr. Obama did certainly make the most of internet's connectivity in his campaign. At that time Senator Barack Obama extensively used his Web portal-"my.barackobama.com" to manage the campaign's online fundraising, constituency-building, issue promotion, and peer-to-peer online networking aspects of his 2008 Presidential primary campaign. For his 2008 Presidential primary run, the campaign managers of Senator Barack Obama foresaw that they needed to build an unprecedented online community outreach program. With the 2004 Presidential race as a guide, they knew that online contributions, online activism, and online community-building would be paramount as the race heated up, and they needed an online platform that would power all of these and much more. Critically important to President Obama's victory in November 2008 was his campaign's deliberate and extensive use of online tools.

In 2006, after a careful analysis of the market, the campaign turned to Blue State Digital (BSD) as they began preparing in earnest for his Presidential run, retaining the firm to build and manage a state-of-the-art Internet campaign operation and to manage the online fundraising, constituency-building, issue advocacy, and peer-to-peer online networking aspects of Obama's 2008 Presidential primary campaign. The campaign utilized these online tools to mobilize over 3 million individual donors to contribute over \$500 million online, to motivate over 2 million social networking participants, and to create and promote more than 200,000 offline events across the country. <sup>[2]</sup> Though these online activities were not the primary method they helped in coordination of the myriad offline activities organized during the campaign. Thus the online services acted as another communication backbone in connecting and coordinating the election campaign.

The community-driven communication platform built and operated by BSD at <http://MyBarackObama.com>, exploited all of the capabilities of the available online tools: it is arguably the most effective online campaign Website in history. The success of the

program (like the success of the Obama campaign in general) was most critically measured by its fundraising success.

The campaign used these online tools to mobilize more than 3 million individual donors to make a total of 6.5 million donations online, adding up to over \$500 million in donations online. 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. <sup>[2]</sup>

Obama for America was the first organization to make use of an innovative plan “Grassroots Match” technology, a gift-matching program that brings together new donors and their matching donors personally, so that they can meet, communicate, and reinforce one another’s commitment to their common cause. For the Obama campaign, “Grassroots Match” brought a significant and measurable lift in contributions compared to traditional anonymous-match programs, as well as concomitant media attention. Ultimately, tens of millions of dollars were contributed via these extensive online medium and through personal fundraising pages created online as part of the “myBO” (MyBarackObama.com) social network. On the personal fundraising pages, 70,000 individuals raised \$30 million. <sup>[2]</sup> This way an extensive interconnected system that grew and reinforced itself was put in place. This multi-linked system would enable a wider and deeper reach for the Obama fundraising Campaign. The many distinct features include sections addressing specific supporter groups ranging from "Mediterranean Americans" to "People of Faith". It also features an "Obama Store" selling campaign T-shirts, mugs, stickers and buttons. These creative marketing and branding techniques fueled the popularity of the website increasing further the number of Obama Supporters and inevitably the fundraising process. The site also has an "Obama-Biden Tax Calculator" by which one can find out how much tax cut to expect if Obama wins. Thus the website was one stop site for everything Barrack Obama- the *brand*, the *politician* and now the *President*.

More than 13 million people provided their email addresses to the campaign via the Website (MyBarackObama.com). Over the course of the campaign, aides sent more than 7,000 different messages, many of them targeted to specific donation levels (people who gave less than \$200, for example, or those who gave more than \$1,000). In total, more than 2 billion e-mails landed in inboxes. (Four years ago, Sen. John F. Kerry had 3 million e-addresses on his

list; former Vermont Governor Howard Dean had 600,000.) <sup>[2]</sup> Thanks to such online tools, volunteers have now, no longer require dealing with their local campaign offices and can canvass directly from their homes. The new technology has drastically peter out the hindrances for the active participation by the everyday-voters by drastically reducing the cost, time and effort involved; making the whole process interactive and placed extra control in the hands of the individual volunteers, who with their personal innovativeness and level of commitment accelerate the influence.

The Obama campaign's constituency base created over 2 million user profiles, wrote over 400,000 blog entries, and posted over 200,000 campaign events for other supporters to find and attend. Additionally, volunteers created more than 35,000 Obama for America volunteer groups. "Obama for America" supporters made more than 3 million phone calls online in the last four days of the campaign alone, on top of the millions of calls made in the several weeks prior to the election.

Furthermore, people spent more than 14 million hours watching over 1,800 Obama campaign-related videos on YouTube that garnered more than 50 million views. All of this content taken together created a healthy and positive feedback loop for the campaign.

As President Obama's constituents used these online paraphernalia, they accrued points, which served as subtle inducements to deepen their involvement. This degree of commitment is evidence that for its users, the site ([MyBarackObama.com](http://MyBarackObama.com)) was as much a social experience, as it is a fundraising and campaigning tool. The Obama Internet team made full use of the powerful, easy-to-use administrative interface to create, manage, and publicize special fundraising and advocacy campaigns and promotions. A provision for automatic statistical tabulation was used, so that the campaign's program managers could monitor performance on a continuing basis and modify promotions to maximize response and results. This continuous evaluation and modification helped both broaden and enrich the campaign's coffers, while bringing more volunteers.

The wining of the presidency by Barak Obama can be attributed principally to the medium and the methodology in taking his Clarion call –"Change" to the masses. His overwhelming

presence in the cyberspace pulverized the opposition and brought a new hope to the youth and earning their dogged allegiance to his grandeur vision.

In our country such types of political campaigning is not very widespread, taking a cue from Barack Obama's staggeringly successful strategy of using this medium to give him the winning edge, the Internet is slowly emerging as integral part of the election strategy of almost all political parties now both national and state level players. Many are also using it quite innovatively to traverse the boundary-less internet to reach out to voters who are settled abroad. Many instances of such sites include Telugu Desam Party's website (<http://www.tdpuk.com>) which caters primarily to UK and the foreign based NRIs (Non-Resident Indians). The site aims to extend its influence across Europe and set up a well oiled foreign fund raising machinery by, linking the its loyal voters who reside outside India and inside. Another website (<http://www.jaagore.com>) [meaning wake up] is trying to raise political awareness by urging many Netizens to actively participate in the election process by at least casting their votes meaningfully. . The list of Indian politicians who are techno-savvy include Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister, SM Krishna, Minister for External Affairs, Shashi Tharoor MoS (Minister of State) for External Affairs, L. K. Advani, Narendra Modi Gujarat CM, Rahul Gandhi and many more.

Ultimately it's the cost effective nature of the internet that has stimulated many politicians (candidates) to cross the threshold from real world to cyberspace. Many political parties have realized that to survive in the arena of politics they have to catch the attention of next generation voters who prefer to use new technology and keep up with innovativeness Though technology will never be substitute for real-life interaction and nor can it completely replace the traditional baby-kissing and handshake routine of political campaigns, its use for engaging youth, bringing together people with minimum effort and cost, organizing volunteer operations and providing an alternative fundraising route is bound to increase in the future.

With the Telco's thrust on increasing the broadband penetration and the multilingual access to the WWW, the present scenario of merely being present on the cyberspace by a few and random politicians, the future is pregnant with turning the SNS into a colossal tool perhaps even overtaking the Western efforts.

## References

### Websites

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- [2] [http://www.bluestatedigital.com/casestudies/client/obama\\_for\\_america\\_2008/](http://www.bluestatedigital.com/casestudies/client/obama_for_america_2008/)
- [3] [http://www.digitalcommunitiesblogs.com/international\\_beat](http://www.digitalcommunitiesblogs.com/international_beat)

### Books

- 1) 50 Ways You Can Help Obama Change America  
By Michael Huttner, Jason Salzman
- 2) Grown up digital: how the net generation is changing your world  
By Don Tapscott

### Magazines

India Today November 2008 Issue

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