

The Dynamics of Technology-Intensive Campaigning

The 2016 presidential election took shape in a different world from 2012 and even 2014.¹ The Koch brothers, longtime Republican Party network actors, increased their commitment to influencing the primaries and the general election, pledging up to nearly a billion dollars to contest the election.² As this volume went to press, the Republican Party found itself increasingly challenged by the Koch-backed data and software firm i360, which reporting from the 2016 cycle argued had the potential to further pull data out of the party's ecosystem.³ This is a direct consequence of the party's failure to keep pace with Democratic innovations in voter data and analytics, as well as database and interface technologies, over the past decade.⁴ Meanwhile, Super PACs played new roles in the election in domains ranging from advertising to field campaigning, often through novel, though legal, attempts at coordination.⁵ Jeb Bush's ultimately failed campaign, for instance, relied on a Super PAC in the primaries that spent significant money on data and analytics and was staffed by close allies who knew the candidate and attempted to anticipate the campaign's goals, strategies, and tactics.⁶

Rather than chase a moving target as this book goes to press during the extraordinary primary season in 2016, this chapter provides a broad overview of technology, digital, data, and analytics in political campaigning over the past two decades. I do so in the hope that taking a longer and wider view will not only provide insight into the 2016 election cycle, but also those in the years that follow. This chapter returns to the idea of technology-intensive campaigning and revisits the role that data plays in it, arguing both that parties are increasingly important as databases and that practitioners seek data integration so they can view and craft communications for "whole citizens," with the ultimate goal of influencing their attitudes, behaviors, and social relations. I conclude by arguing that contemporary campaigning can be conceptualized as a form of networked ward politics.

Technology-Intensive Campaigning

In their influential late 1990s article, political communication scholars Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh argued that we have entered into a “third age of political communication.”⁷ In their account, which complements much of Pippa Norris’s argument outlined in the first chapter, a first age of stable political institutions and beliefs and a second professionalized age of mass media have given way to an emerging third age that has characteristics including communication abundance, intensified professionalization, increased competition for attention among political actors, a new anti-elitism and populism amid media change, and a diversification of the forms, genres, and mediums of political communication. This work has proved prescient in many ways as a conceptual piece, with these scholars ending with a call for more “observational research . . . to ascertain how political communicators and media organizations are navigating change, redefining their purposes, and resolving their conflicts. . . .”⁸

In the years since, a number of scholars have heeded this call for close empirical research to understand how political actors adapt to changing media and social contexts. For example, political communication scholars Travis Ridout and Michael Franz show how campaigns adapted to the proliferation of broadcast and cable outlets by “microcasting” advertising to targeted segments of the electorate.⁹ Communication scholar Phil Howard revealed how campaigns take up political databases to find and appeal to voters, given an electorate with increasingly fragmented attention.¹⁰ Rasmus Nielsen demonstrated how media fragmentation, advertising saturation, and mounting evidence that in-person contacts are effective led to the resurgence in data and technology-driven field campaigning over the past two decades in ways that fundamentally transformed political practitioners’ reliance on “air wars.”¹¹ Jessica Baldwin-Philippi’s work shows how the values of practitioners as they intersect with electoral exigencies shape their uptake of digital campaign tools and mediated practices of citizenship.¹²

These works, along with this book, reveal the ways in which electoral politics has become increasingly technology-intensive, at the level of campaigns and the parties and organizations that provide core infrastructures for them. This book has identified how this shift toward technology-intensive campaigning has had a number of often surprising consequences. Campaign staffs are far more unevenly professionalized, including by design, than scholars have previously assumed, and there is significant variation in the ways campaigns use consultants and the occasions when they choose to do so. In a world where people working in politics for the first time rise to relatively senior positions on campaigns, twenty-year-olds right out of college run social media accounts for presidential and Senate candidates, and young digital staffers have managerial authority over consultancies, scholars need to revisit their assumptions about what constitutes professionalized politics. Field crossers and new entrants to the field, meanwhile, are an important

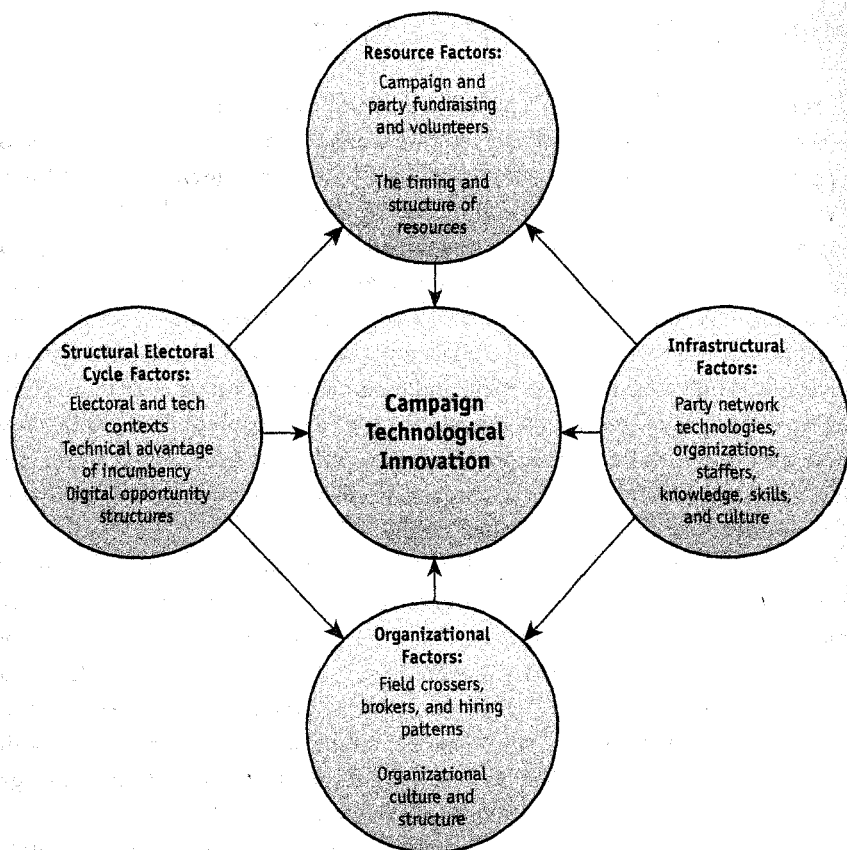


Figure 7.1 THE FOUR FACTORS OF CAMPAIGN TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION.

part of the story of technological adoption and innovation, as are the ways that parties and campaigns organizationally manage their technology operations and have cultures that support them, or fail to.

The history and analysis in this book suggests that there are four main factors behind technological innovation in electoral politics that, taken together, reveal the constraints and opportunities in electoral and technological contexts and network structures, the conditioning of history, the importance of infrastructures and resources, and the agency of campaigns (see Figure 7.1).

Structural electoral cycle factors are features of the environment that constitute the hands that candidates are dealt and shape the possibilities for technological innovation in campaigns. These factors include the broader electoral context, such as the state of the economy and the party in power, and the technological context, or the general state of media and technology. Structural factors also include the technical advantage of incumbency, which grants some candidates more time to plan and develop technologies as well as coordinate with their

political parties, and digital opportunity structures, those features of the political environment and candidates' relational positions in it such as the field of candidates, the candidate's charisma, and the strength of factions within parties and their media practices that shape the possibilities for digital mobilization—if staffers themselves perceive and can take advantage of these opportunities (which is in part the product of the historical workings of party networks). These structural factors also shape, but do not determine, the possibilities for gaining resources and hiring.

Organizational factors include the hiring done by campaigns and their cultures and structures. With respect to innovation, what is important is the desire, effort, and ability of campaigns to hire staffers from outside the political field, such as in the technology and commercial sectors, who can bring new knowledge, skills, and technologies to politics. Importantly, the conflicts that may arise from cognitive diversity on campaigns (given that it is important to have groups of staffers with political field-specific knowledge) have to be managed through the overlapping ties among staffers from different fields and brokers who can speak multiple languages and negotiate issues. Organizational factors also include culture, conceptualized broadly in terms of what campaigns value with respect to electoral strategy and how they adjudicate conflicts over jurisdiction and resources, and structure, which shapes the resources and autonomy technology, digital, data, and analytics staffers have to ply their trade.

Resource factors include the money that campaigns and parties have to devote to technological development, and the volunteers that are essential to recruiting supporters, making voter contacts, and even developing new technologies. Resources are shaped by the electoral context, the features of the candidate, and infrastructure (such as donor and volunteer databases and staffer expertise). Resources also matter with respect to their timing (the beginning of a campaign provides more time for investment) and the entities raising them (if fundraising is split with organizations such as Super PACs, candidates and parties have less money to devote to technological work). The monetary resources expended by campaigns during presidential cycles also have long-term consequences, such as investments in party infrastructure that in turn benefit later campaigns.

Finally, infrastructural factors form the background contexts that campaigns take shape within. These factors include the historically constituted sets of resources that candidates assemble when creating their campaigns, such as party network technologies ranging from field tools to voter files, and can innovate around. They also include the organizations, such as consultancies, that campaigns can turn to for technologies and expertise, as well as the staffers available to them with specialized skills in technology, digital, data, and analytics. Parties and campaigns can also create infrastructural digital media resources over time, such as building up a small-dollar donor culture and email lists to make it actionable, creating opportunities for the future. This means that digital opportunity

structures are, in part, historically and institutionally created by the work of parties, campaigns, and their staffers. These infrastructural factors shape, but do not determine, resources and organizational factors such as how campaigns value technology with respect to electoral strategy.

As is clear, as technology has become increasingly entwined with politics, this has meant that infrastructure building and system design, long familiar to science and technology studies scholars, are now essential to contemporary political communication. And infrastructure building is fundamentally oriented around changing the very media and information environments that political practitioners will encounter in the future. Daniel Galvin, writing in the context of political party building, noted this very nicely in his critique of rational choice theories for being overly presentist and narrowly focused on structural constraints, rather than on how actors work to change the future contexts in which they will ultimately have to act.¹³

Indeed, another surprising finding about technology-intensive campaigning, at least from the perspective of rational choice theories, are the persistent differences between the two parties when it comes to technology, digital, data, and analytics. This book argues against the idea of uniform adaptation to digital media environments by rational actors. It reveals how the historical workings of institutions and networks shape technological development and condition perceptions of the electoral efficacy of technology among campaign and party actors. In the history detailed in this book, Democrats have enjoyed some key advantages accrued over the course of election cycles, not least of which is an appreciation of the value of technology, digital, data, and analytics, and the development of a hybrid network ecosystem, organizational structures, and staffing patterns that reflect and continue to cultivate this. Over time, technologies, data, and digital and analytics expertise became differentially available in the two parties' extended networks (and always in short supply). And, these differences not only persisted over the course of two presidential cycles, the parties are adopting fundamentally different data ecosystems that will impact their electoral competitiveness in the future. What this book makes clear is that political actors do not all perceive the world in the same ways, nor do they simply act according to a purely rational analysis of media environments. Institutional contexts, network relationships, and historical processes condition what acting rationally means.¹⁴

Finally, the idea of political prototypes reveals that there is nothing inevitable about specific features of technology-intensive campaigning. In the broader arc of history, there is no inherent, technologically or environmentally determined reason why it was the Dean campaign that suddenly became open to large infusions of outsiders during the 2004 cycle. It was the campaign's narration as a prototype of technologically enabled politics that attracted these new entrants to the field. And, after the election, it was not inevitable that the Democratic Party network would embrace Dean and his former staffers, especially given how spectacularly

the campaign failed. It was only after party actors collectively discussed their failings and future that they embraced the campaign as a prototype, and worked to diffuse its emphasis on digital media throughout the party through investments in technology and talent. There were other options. The party could have ignored Dean's digital innovations and spurned the failed candidate's attempt to become party chair. Even more, the party could have rejected (and indeed, almost did) Dean's efforts to create a truly national voter file and its database and interface system VoteBuilder, choosing instead to direct its resources to vendors outside of the party or stick with a state party-driven system.

This also means that the paths of technological development that party networks go down are not inevitable either. These paths are responsive to, but not wholly driven by, the constraints of exogenous media and social structures or actors striving for greater efficiencies in contacting voters. Systems have their own internal dynamics, and technological development and infrastructure building in politics involve the interaction of many different actors and entail heterogeneous feats of engineering that have legal, political, technological, infrastructural, and cultural dimensions as they play out in contingent, historical processes.¹⁵ As Thomas Hughes concluded in his monumental historical study of the electric power system and the ways that it was both a cause and effect of social change, "Power systems reflect and influence the context, but they also develop an internal dynamic. Therefore, the history of evolving power systems requires attention not only to the forces at work within a given context, but to the internal dynamics of a developing technological system as well."¹⁶

All of which means that scholars looking to understand technology-intensive campaigning need to analyze not only features of the technological and social environment but also the existing paths of systems and the relations they are embedded in that shape future development and condition the future contexts practitioners act within.

Parties as Databases and the Search for the "Whole Citizen"

Much of the backstage infrastructural work of politics is oriented around the data architectures of the two parties. As detailed throughout this book, both US political parties have massive voter databases encompassing hundreds of data points on every member of the electorate. Campaigns at all levels of office, as well as party network organizations, increasingly value parties for their capacity to serve as databases. This is not to say that they do not perform other crucial functions, such as creating the rules under which primaries are contested, providing education and training to candidates and campaign managers, raising and spending monies to promote candidates, and connecting campaigns with vendors. It is simply to say that in a technology-intensive campaign era, parties are increasingly defined by and valued for their role in providing the data infrastructure for their entire party network ecosystem.

Parties provide databases with public, historical, and commercial records on voters to campaigns directly, while entities such as the RNC's Data Trust and Democratic state parties' National Voter File Co-Op serve extended party network organizations, who use the public non-strategic data they provide for things such as voter identification, registration, turnout, and strategy more broadly.¹⁷ This has come to be among parties' most important roles given the shifts in social and media structures detailed earlier, the institutionalization of this work in parties, their unique positioning as nonprofit organizations at the center of the political process, and the business models of vendors who craft tools and services around this data.

At the same time, as this book has extensively detailed, there are differences between the two parties and their respective data ecosystems. The Democratic Party's voter file provides a common object around which distributed actors collaborate. A number of organizations draw on the party's data for their campaign and other clients through APIs and interfaces, from analytics consultancies such as Civis Analytics to digital firms such as Blue State Digital. The Democratic Party's voter file is a mediator that helps gather the party network and coordinate the work of many different political actors, which is why integration has been such a crucial (and elusive) goal.

In late 2015, the Democratic Party's model of party-provided voter data made accessible to campaigns through NGP VAN's VoteBuilder became the subject of fierce controversy. While it is impossible to conduct original research around the Bernie Sanders campaign's breach of the Hillary Clinton campaign's data in VoteBuilder given the timeline of the book, I wanted to offer some broad thoughts here. The basic facts behind the Sanders data breach seem clear enough. Exploiting vulnerability in the NGP VAN system, staffers on the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign pulled multiple lists of voters from the Clinton campaign's voter data in NGP VAN. According to published journalistic reports, this included data on things such as strong Clinton supporters in Iowa and New Hampshire, 24 lists in all.¹⁸ The DNC responded by temporarily suspending the Sanders campaign's access to VoteBuilder, in effect preventing staffers from using their voter data less than two months out from the Iowa caucuses.

There are legal questions here relating to the actual contracts that users of VoteBuilder and the DNC's data sign that, without direct knowledge of the matter at hand, I am not going to opine on.¹⁹ The consensus among practitioners is that Sanders's staffers knew what they were doing and it was a clear ethical violation of the use of the NGP VAN system (indeed, the campaign's national data director was summarily fired and the candidate apologized).²⁰ What I want to focus on here is the call among some practitioners and firms with a stake in the outcome, such as NationBuilder, to open up the DNC's voter data so campaigns, and not the party, own what they use and produce. Part of this response stems from fears over monopoly power. It is an undisputed fact that the Democratic Party has built the most powerful political database in the world, and serves as the "obligatory

passage point" through which all of its political campaigns must go to gain access to it.²¹ Presidential campaigns essentially rent the DNC's voter file, which is in essence a collection of 51 different state voter files (including Washington D.C.) that states share with the national party and are all hosted in the same system, VoteBuilder. As campaigns use VoteBuilder, they enrich the voter file through all of their canvassing and voter contacts. The voter contact and identification data generated by campaigns are firewalled from each other during elections. However, after elections, this voter contact and identification data created by campaign volunteers and paid staffers goes back to the DNC and the state parties, and is ultimately made available to subsequent Democratic candidates. Campaigns do not own these voter files that they helped to enrich.

This was the basic architecture put in place by Chairman Howard Dean, with VAN gaining the contract in 2007 to put together VoteBuilder as the interface and database system for the party's voter files.²² The national party provides access to VoteBuilder for its presidential candidates, while state parties determine access for state-level campaigns.²³ This architecture grew out of the party's experiences during the 2004 cycle, when John Kerry's data infrastructure that was cobbled together from multiple state voter files, housed in many vendor systems responsible for providing access to them, crashed in important states. The data was unstandardized across states, vendors had uneven track records, there was little in the way of field tools for accessing voter files, much historical data on voter contact was simply lost, and candidates even had trouble accessing state voter files. During the 2004 cycle, the Democratic Party was significantly behind its rival in the basic data and systems for contesting elections. The work of Dean and his staff turned the Democratic Party's data architecture from a mess of often vendor-controlled state voter files into the nationalized system it is today.

A core argument of this book is that the near universal buy-in across the Democratic Party network to the party's voter file and database and interface system provided by NGP VAN has resulted in a powerful and robust piece of infrastructure that the party's technology ecosystem convenes around. The DNC's voter file has proved to be an asset for the party because of its very centralization. As a result of the fact that there is broad buy-in to VoteBuilder, the party's data is standardized and accrues across election cycles and moves up and down-ballot. There is one system for accessing the voter file, so volunteers without much in the way of technical skills or training in states such as Iowa can use it easily from cycle to cycle. Even more, as detailed in the last chapter, modeling can flow downward from comparatively well-resourced presidential campaigns to state and even local races. At the same time, the fact that campaigns have to provide the data they generate through canvasses and contacts back to the party (excluding proprietary data on donors), means that data is a shared asset across the party as a whole and the voter file is run as a partisan club good controlled by the party. And, as importantly, the near universal buy-in to the party's data has meant that the expansive, hybrid

network ecosystem of firms and organizations that former presidential campaign staffers and others have launched after cycles all work from the same basic data infrastructure. These organizations adopt and use the party's voter file and tools for accessing it—which facilitates the complementarity of services and collaboration.

Even still, there are a number of potential concerns with the party's data architecture. Dean's team created a set of agreements between the national and state parties, where the former works to ensure that state parties are fair arbiters of their voter files and the latter can hold the national party to account for what it does with the data. That said, disputes between candidates and state parties do occur. The policies of state parties with respect to challengers to incumbents in primaries vary, with states such as Missouri only providing access to VAN for incumbent office holders as the "winner of the last primary." What this in effect means is that, in some states, challengers to incumbents cannot access the party's extensive voter file and the competitive advantages it offers. This policy was recently called into question by an African American state senator active in the protests over the police shooting of Michael Brown after she sought access to VAN to contest a congressional incumbent.²⁴ However, the rationale of the state party is that there needs to be an incentive for incumbents to continue to use the party's voter data and share their voter contacts back with other candidates, or they will view their electoral work across cycles simply as being used against them. At the same time, another fear is that with monopoly comes the possibility for suboptimal technologies and stasis. However, the fact that the Democratic Party has been well ahead of its rival with a more fragmented ecosystem for a decade suggests that this fear is overblown. Finally, some practitioners worry that the party might behave arbitrarily, such as in the case of the Sanders breach when it appeared its own policies regarding the consequences of breaches were unclear. However, there are a host of normative pressures and regulative agreements and policies against this.²⁵ Indeed, the Sanders situation was ultimately resolved in 24-hours with the campaign again gaining access to its voter data after the DNC stated it fulfilled its requests for more information and the campaign filed a federal lawsuit.

While there is a romantic notion that candidates should be free of parties and just make their own direct appeals to voters, especially among a number of entities that stand to profit from the decentralization and fragmentation of the party's data, the Democratic Party's voter file is an acknowledgment of the fact that American political life is, for worse but mostly for better, organized through parties.²⁶ The DNC's voter file is ultimately a distinctly *partisan* resource, designed to strengthen its candidates' ability to contest elections by providing them with far more data than they could ever muster on their own in discrete electoral runs, or even through data swaps with allies. There is nothing precluding candidates that do not want to opt-into this system from relying on third party data firms such as Aristotle, Catalist, and NationBuilder, and taking advantage of any of the commercial customer relationship management platforms available to manage it. And, there is nothing preventing them from purchasing data, generating their

own contacts, and then building their own independent operations. But it will never be as powerful as the DNC's communal and partisan resource, and they will find that even if they gain office, they will diminish the resources available for their partisan and ideological allies to do so as well—in the end, this hurts their ability to enact legislative change. In essence, the Democratic Party has created a powerful and robust tool that facilitates its efforts to secure political power. And, I believe, in keeping with the normative role of parties in democratic societies, the party should have the ability to control access to it according to its own policies designed to further its governance interests. As a matter of course, these policies and remedies should be transparent and ultimately contestable (which appeared to be part of the issue in the Sanders and Missouri cases), but in the end I believe it is a good thing that as a multi-issue coalition of heterogeneous actors the Democratic Party sets its own policies and procedures for its use as a database.

On the Republican side of the aisle, there are both more data providers and more tools for storing and accessing this data, as the previous chapter detailed. While the Republican Party still remains at the center of the right's data ecosystem, it remains to be seen if this will change based on the party's failure to develop a more robust voter database and interface system over the past decade, which practitioners argued opened the door to competition from third-party firms such as i360.²⁷ Either way, the Republican Party's network is more diffuse and disaggregated with respect to data than the Democrats' network.²⁸ And, numerous practitioners pointed to a lack of integration across the Republican Party's data ecosystem, and comparatively few research organizations on the order of the Analyst Institute and Civis Analytics to make it actionable for campaigns as being important differences between the two parties. It also remains to be seen whether the emergence of rivals to the party's data means that establishment candidates will be more susceptible to challenges from activists in the extended Republican Party network. Indeed, the Tea Party activists that helped defeat Eric Cantor used the rVotes database and interface system (developed by a cofounder of VAN and based on the same original codebase) to put together various data files of allied organizations.²⁹ Access to comparatively cheaper and better data and tools, including those controlled by organizations within the Koch brothers network, may provide already well-organized activist groups with greater ability to influence Republican Party primaries by extending the reach of their electoral organizing capacity.³⁰ And we should not expect this to dissipate in the future. As political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins argued, "A party primarily united by ideology will always remain particularly vulnerable to charges from within its ranks that elected leaders, faced with the constraints of a separation-of-powers system and the need to maintain popular appeal beyond the party base, have strayed from principle and must be forced back into line."³¹

As is clear throughout this book, in the words of Romney's digital director Zac Moffatt, the voter file (through the modeling derived from it) serves as the "north star" for campaigns, orienting their activities and especially their attempts

to communicate with the electorate. To facilitate these efforts, over the past two decades practitioners have continually strived to create data that reveals whole citizens. Practitioners attempt to reveal, through data, not only the psychological attitudes and beliefs, political dispositions, media use, cultural practices, and behavior of citizens, but also their geographic, affiliational, and social embeddedness. Revealing whole citizens requires assembling a comprehensive view of individuals, including their social identities and connections, and this effort has not been fully realized, at least not when this book went to press. On the Obama campaign in 2012, for instance, revealing and appealing to whole citizens was more aspirational than actual. That said, this is the quest that political staffers on both sides of the aisle have been and will continue to be on, and it is the goal that drives much of the infrastructural work behind contemporary campaigning, particularly around data integration (and more data always means more integration).

In many respects, the effort to know and appeal to whole citizens resembles an earlier pre-mass media era during the decades before and after the turn of the nineteenth century. The primary political style of this era entailed a politics of organization, personalization, and social attachment.³² The Tammany leader and former New York State Senator George Washington Plunkitt understood and articulated the importance of blending machine politics with a deep knowledge of his constituents. Plunkitt described how:

Tammany Hall is a great big machine, with every part adjusted delicate to do its own particular work. . . . Take me, for instance. My district, the Fifteenth, is made up of all sorts of people, and a cosmopolitan is needed to run it successful. I'm a cosmopolitan. When I get into the silk-stockin' part of the district, I can talk grammar and all that with the best of them. . . . As for the common people of the district, I am at home with them at all times. . . . So you see, I've got to be several sorts of a man in a single day, a lightnin' change artist, so to speak. But I am one sort of man always in one respect: I stick to my friends high and low, do them a good turn whenever I get a chance, and hunt up all the jobs going for my constituents.³³

Plunkitt's views were the object of much scorn among the reformers of his era.³⁴ That said, as the historian Terry Golway's sweeping history of Tammany Hall reveals, during the first decades of the 1900s Tammany provided essential social services, jobs, training in political activism, and ultimately political power for the destitute, primarily immigrants, of New York City.³⁵ While these may have been the latent functions of machine politics, the historical evidence suggests that it was a deeply social and personalized form of political representation, premised on deep knowledge of constituents. Speaking of the party services that Tammany provided, Plunkitt noted, "the Tammany district leader reaches out into the homes of his district, keeps watch not only on the men, but also on the women

and children; knows their needs, their likes and dislikes, their troubles and their hopes, and places himself in a position to use his knowledge for the benefit of his organization and himself.”³⁶

While explicit patronage is (largely) a thing of the past, at least in the United States, the idea of striving to know whole citizens, their needs, likes, dislikes, troubles, and hopes, and strategically leveraging that knowledge for electoral gain, is resonant in our own time. Contemporary campaigning is not so much an embodied or organization-based practice on the order of Tammany, as an attempt to use digital observational technologies and databases developed over the past two decades to reveal and leverage the psychological dispositions and social lives of citizens for electoral purposes. To leverage these tools, however, requires combining and integrating data across the many different applications and data stores that offer only partial, fragmented views of individuals.

This attempt of the political field to create whole citizens in data is nicely captured in the NGP VAN Next presentation from August 2014, the Silicon Valley-esque rollout of the firm’s new platform and APIs detailed in the previous chapter. NGP VAN developed APIs so that multiple vendors could access their clients’ data, and developed its “relay” algorithm so that data could be moved across systems to create a “unified view” of people, in essence putting the fragmented data pieces of individuals together (see Figure 7.2). In the words of John Lee, the chief

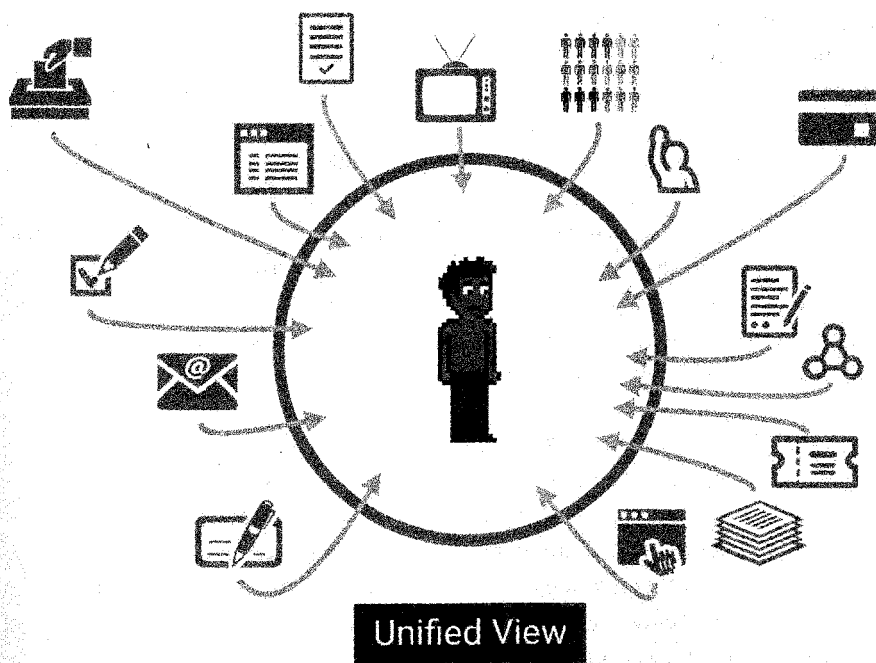


Figure 7.2 THE UNIFIED VIEW. Screenshot from the NGP VAN Next Presentation, August 20, 2014, <http://next.ngpvan.com/>.

technology officer, the firm sought to reveal “a person in their whole, in all their glory,” for its progressive political clients.³⁷

The idea behind this is twofold. First, fragmented data, or data from a single source, tells practitioners little about who people actually are and how they live their lives. As Michael Slaby concisely put it, all of the identity resolution work on the Obama campaign in 2012 was “just a way of seeing a person as a person.”³⁸ Second, creating a unified view of individuals across the many applications, platforms, and databases used by campaigns would enable practitioners to leverage this information to a much greater extent and to create truly relational forms of strategic political communication. Some of the examples listed in the NGP VAN Next presentation included sending direct mail and running online advertisements to individuals who did not answer their door during a canvass; showing television ads to people who tweeted about particular issues; personalizing and customizing websites based on offline engagement; and, finally, emailing supporters who tweeted about a candidate to enlist them in doing rapid response around political events.

These multiple sources of data do not reveal the world as it really is, and the picture they create is much cruder than the deep contextual, embodied knowing of Plunkitt. The data that campaigns use renders certain aspects of the world visible, perform the world in particular ways, and provide a baseline for action within the broader context of a goal-driven focus on electoral victory.³⁹ Campaign staffers are well aware of the shortcomings of all methods of collecting data, which is why they use different sources for different purposes. The Obama campaign in 2012, for instance, triangulated between national and state polling, online panels, and data produced through field calls. According to the Obama 2012 director of opinion research David Simas, the campaign not only conducted more quantitative research than any other in history—which received the bulk of attention in the media and among scholars—it also generated more qualitative research than any campaign in history.⁴⁰ The campaign used qualitative research such as focus groups to develop the very messaging that would later be the subject of quantitative testing. In general, campaigns have a deeply pragmatic set of working relationships with data given their need to make it actionable in rapidly unfolding contexts before all the empirical returns come in. For example, as Lundry argued, focus groups:

help humanize the data. You know one of the things that I make all of our staff do, is I make them listen in to survey calls because you get back this data set and it is nice and neat and clean and you think “oh yeah sure this person said I somewhat agree with legislation X and it seems so perfect” and then you listen in to the call and you realize how messy it is and how there are human beings on the end of this. . . . So like we are in a messy data collection business and so to ignore the qualitative I think is foolish because even the quantitative is pretty qualitative.⁴¹

Networked Ward Politics

This discussion of the search for the whole citizen in the data that campaigns gather brings me to what I call “networked ward politics,” a data-driven, personalized, and socially embedded form of campaigning that parties and campaigns, especially the Democrats, developed through prototypes as they contested elections and responded to changes in American culture, social structure, and communication technologies.⁴² In essence, what I refer to as networked ward politics is the high tech form of the personalized and socially embedded campaigning that Plunkitt practiced in his district. Campaigning is newly “personalized” in a three-fold sense: first, in terms of campaigns leveraging “people as media” in the course of field canvassing and social media appeals; second, in terms of campaigns meeting citizen expectations to determine their own levels of often highly temporal political engagement; and third, in terms of campaigns increasingly appealing to citizens as individuals and not as representatives of demographic groups.⁴³

While networked ward politics is unevenly realized across the political field, the concept ties together the various strains of mediated electoral practice revealed in this book. The first aspect of personalization relates to how campaigns seek to leverage citizens and their social relationships as the strategic implements of campaign communications. The broader shift toward what Rasmus Nielsen has called “personalized political communication” involves not only field canvassing but also the 2012 Obama campaign’s work to transform supporters into the conduits of strategic communication to their social networks. This form of personalization often entails extensive data and analytics work at the back end. In the field, data is about maximizing the efficiency of voter contacts and probabilistically increasing the likelihood that people will be persuaded by appeals from fellow citizens (whom campaigns often try to pair with voters that share the same geographic ties, affiliations, or demographic characteristics).⁴⁴ On social media platforms, campaigns use data and analytics to identify their supporters, determine their influence, and track their engagement. Campaigns urge their supporters to share political content and make personal appeals to their friends on these platforms. As Bryan Whitaker described the rationale behind the workings of NGP VAN’s social organizing tool, which the firm launched in July 2012, “Organizing is valuable when you have a trusted validator talking to another person in their family or friend group, what we call a social graph, because they are able to relate to that individual based on history and context.”⁴⁵

In other words, campaigns yoke data to networked sociality to engage in strategic, targeted, and tailored communications for persuasion and mobilization purposes, which is especially important in a world of geographic mobility and where people have dispersed and increasingly voluntaristic social ties made visible and often communicatively held together through platforms such as Facebook. Data has grown more important in electoral politics because it is more difficult

for campaigns to break through the noise and distractions and find and gain the attention of voters, engage them in politics, and make them care.⁴⁶

The second sense of personalization refers to the ways that campaigns have been responsive to citizens having new expectations to set their own terms of political engagement. As political scientists Bruce Bimber, Andrew Flanagan, and Cynthia Stohl argued, citizens not only have more options to participate, they increasingly expect personalized opportunities to volunteer on their own time and according to their own expressive needs.⁴⁷ Campaigns need massive amounts of volunteer labor to make voter contacts across platforms.⁴⁸ The expectations of citizens and the needs of campaigns have given rise to the new ways in which staffers work to become responsive to supporters, including using what political scientist Dave Karpf has called "passive democratic feedback," which broadly means listening and learning through digital data.⁴⁹ Staffers use passive democratic feedback to learn about the thoughts and desires of supporters, which is important in an era of highly voluntaristic engagement.⁵⁰ The Obama campaign's use of social media metrics, user behavioral data, and technologies of listening, detailed in Chapter 5, should be read on these terms.

The third sense of personalization lies in the ways that campaigns strive to represent and appeal to whole citizens. David Simas echoed Plunkitt's words when he described the re-election effort as engaging in "retail politics at a distance"; Obama's staffers "ran their national campaign like a ward fight, [the campaign] can have personalized and relevant conversations" with citizens across its media platforms and in its ground operations.⁵¹ Simas described how the campaign used data and digital technologies to have more personalized communications with individual members of the electorate, including through targeted online advertising and outreach through social media. While this is an overstatement given how challenging the campaign's data integration problems were, the impossibility of creating such finely grained content and measuring its effectiveness, and the fact that the social graph aspect of Dashboard never quite came together, Simas's statements should be understood in aspirational terms. Campaigns leverage data and analytics in the attempt to identify and make personalized and social appeals to voters in the new mediated contexts within which they live out their social lives.

Digital campaign communications are an important and comparatively new part of electoral campaigning, and are premised on technology, data, analytics, and media. Unlike retail politics of the past, it is a technology-intensive, not labor-intensive, practice, and there is no enduring social, on-the-ground knowledge that comes through physical presence. Campaigns use technologies such as online advertising and cable set-top box targeting to find and speak to voters distributed geographically. Meanwhile, as communication scholar Jessica Baldwin-Philippi has extensively documented, campaigns use social media as a form of "digital retail politics," or "the online reproduction of the campaign standby of face-to-face retail politics marked by campaign stops in diners, kissing babies or signing

autographs on a rope line. . . .⁵² Digital retail politics and behind the scenes mediated looks at campaigns are means of extending the performances of candidates outward across the vast physical, ideological, and cultural distances that define American society, even as they provide opportunities for candidates to adopt the "home styles" that foster communion with citizens.⁵³

Meanwhile, campaigns use technology to try to fashion their supporters into the stewards of their own networked wards that they themselves cultivate. These wards are networked because they are constituted through technology. While the "wards" of the past were defined geographically and at times as legal units of political representation, today they are expansive spaces of mediated social relations that encompass the geographic communities, families, professional and identity affiliations, and acquaintances of supporters.⁵⁴ The sociologist Anthony Giddens argued that it was a condition of modernity that individuals create and cultivate their social lives, affiliations, and identities themselves, rather than rely on the received identities of religious and other institutions.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, media theorist José van Dijck has argued that social connectivity is increasingly constructed through media practice and socio-technically shaped, in the sense that the affordances of different social media platforms shape the forms of sociality and communication that take shape within them.⁵⁶

Campaigns want supporters to fashion their mediated social ties into networked wards and cultivate them for electoral purposes. Campaigns increasingly see citizens as implicitly and explicitly cultivating their social lives on social media in ways that have deep political implications, even if citizens do not always intend them. Citizens cultivate their social relationships, sharing the details of their lives and engaging in all sorts of discourse with people important or simply technically present to them. For the majority of citizens, very little of their social lives are expressly oriented toward institutional politics, as a number of scholars have pointed out.⁵⁷ Even more, "context collapse" on social media may lead to self-censorship with regard to the posting of political content.⁵⁸ That said, everyday discourse on social media is often explicitly *political*, just not in ways that people ordinarily think of. These quasi-public spaces are constituted through the casual relations of everyday life and shaped through the affordances of social media platforms.

Campaigns want to influence the discourse in these quasi-public spaces because they are often the way to reach those citizens who are less attentive to politics. Our highly complex, hybrid media environment is increasingly integrated through social media. Social sharing is becoming the primary means of receiving political information and supports the "inadvertent exposure" to politics that political scientist Marcus Prior argued we lost with the proliferation of cable channels in the 1970s.⁵⁹ Parties and campaigns take strategic symbolic and social action on social media platforms, seeking to influence their supporters so they can indirectly connect with citizens in these mediated and networked spaces

through a trusted validator. Electoral politics provides the ritualized occasions, and parties and campaigns provide the symbols for their supporters to share in their social networks that signal their political affiliations, identities, and values. Campaigns seek to leverage context collapse by generating symbols and content that supporters can convene around and share in their own networked wards of social attachment, which include things such as logos, infographics, and images. Campaigns believe that supporters share this content because they find it compelling, want to help a candidate or cause, or want to signal their identity. Campaigns also create social systems such as Dashboard to help supporters signal publicly what they are doing for a cause. Unlike the returns of the old ward politics, which were transactional and included things such as patronage jobs, the returns of networked ward politics come in less tangible forms of identity and expression, and ultimately of helping to elect a candidate and party to govern (which is no small thing in an age of significant philosophical, value, and policy differences between the two parties).⁶⁰

Communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi has argued that these new personalized and identity-based forms of political engagement are now a primary mode of democratic life.⁶¹ As such, campaigns look for metrics of engagement on social media platforms (likes, shares, retweets) to assess their work, even if it is difficult to map them directly onto electoral outcomes. Campaigns seek their strategic political communication to radiate outward through the mediated social networks of their supporters, and they are guided in doing so by the data and analytics that shape their understanding of the citizens they should target, what they should say, and how they should reach them. Networked ward politics entails campaigns strategically, and on the basis of data, asking supporters to be visible and carry the torch, to make the message part of their identity, and to weave the candidate's symbols and the election's meaning into the fabric of their mediated social lives.