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PQMA Response to Dr. Diana Owen's Lecture "New Media and Politics"

Problem:

The two-party political system in the United States is no longer sufficient in representing the political desires of the American people. To solve this problem there is talk of a third party emerging. Studies show that a third party is supported by the majority of Americans (Jones 2011), but this support is fragmented across the country with no clear path towards organization.

Question:

What type of media campaign would be most effective in organizing the support that already exists for a third political party in the United States?

Method:

There are two types of media campaigns that can be deployed, which when deployed in concert can both disseminate information to the largest audience and get that audience to organize. The first campaign method is through “conventional communication channels” like television (Bennett and Iyengar 2008, 717), using television advertisements or “spots” to disseminate information. The second method is through “New Media, New Politics 2.0” as described by Dr. Diana Owen (Owen 2012, 4; Owen “New Media”), using social media that encourages “information sharing, engagement, networking, collaboration, and community building” (Owen “New Media”).

On May 9, 2011, Gallup published a poll that showed that 52 percent of Americans thought that a third party was necessary because neither the Republican nor Democratic parties were doing “an adequate job of representing the American people” (Jones 2011). While this illustrates that a third party would be supported by the majority of the U.S. population, the members that would comprise this third party will have a hard time organizing since a third party is not an established part of the American political system with established leadership. Furthermore, the “cost” (physical, emotional and financial) of organizing such a large group is too high for individuals to take organizational leadership (Shirky 2008). What social media is able to do is lower this cost (Shirky 2008).

In his book *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky argues that organization by non-mainstream groups can be harder than organization by mainstream groups because people simply do not know how to find each other (200) and that “modern life has raised transaction costs so high” that coordination of large groups is nearly impossible (281). Shirky writes that social media sites allow groups that “have no support from the broader U.S. culture” (198) to

organize by “taking the burden of coordination off the hands of the potential users” (196) and lowering the cost of organization to levels that people can manage.

Social media has become an expected part of any successful modern-day media campaign, however, television remains the most popular source for election news (Owen 2012, 6; Owen 2011, 3; Owen “New Media”). During the 2010 midterm elections, 66 percent of the public named television as their number one news source versus 13 percent who named the Internet (Owen 2011, 4). Even while younger voters who grew up in the age of new media are more likely to take into account political information disseminated through new media than through traditional forms of media (Owen 2011, 7), television seems like the most effective way to disseminate political information to the largest audience.

All of this taken into consideration, the best method would be to launch a media campaign that incorporates both conventional and new media communication methods. The television spots will reach more people interested in organizing around a third party than new media will, but the new media portion of the campaign, such as a website with a chat room and a blog, a YouTube page, Facebook page and Twitter account, will actually provide a direct path towards organization. Social media will provide interested individuals with the interactive mediums necessary to communicate, support each other and bolster support for a third party. Incorporating both methods successfully would require a braiding of these methods, using the television spots to promote the social media pages and encourage people’s activity on these pages while the social media pages should display the television spots via YouTube videos.

Answers/Analysis

To measure the effectiveness of this type of media campaign, researchers could conduct interviews with a cross section of the U.S. population to find out the extent of people’s knowledge about a third party and how they obtained their information. A more quantitative research approach would be to analyze the same information using a survey. Another good way to analyze the organization of third party support would be to monitor the media coverage of a third party option, since with our new technology it is no longer the news media setting the news agenda as much as the public doing so (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). If public support and organization for a third party grows, the public will make sure that the news media reports on it.

Works Cited:

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- Owen, Diana. 2012 (in press). "New Media and Political Campaigns," in Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication Theory and Research* (New York: Oxford University Press), Chapter 53.
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- Shirky, Clay. 2008. *Here Comes Everybody*. New York: Penguin Group.