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Political campaigning was once universally described as being technologically behind the curve. While many major retailers were developing sophisticated models for collecting and analysing the data of their customers, while NGOs were developing ways of delivering targeted messages, and while citizens were creating and sharing content, electoral political organisations languished in an era of non-interactive, mass communication (Webster, 2001). Incrementally this imbalance has been redressed over the last decade and a half, and US election campaigns have led the way in demonstrating how to integrate the tools and concepts of Web 2.0 into strategic communication (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). The revolution is not in the take up of Facebook and other social platforms as other works have explored; rather it is innovation in the backstage infrastructure where Kreiss sees the emergence of a new prototype for campaigning. It is backstage where data is collected, assembled and analysed in order for a strategy to be developed for strategic message dissemination, fundraising and media buying. It is the ebb and flow of innovations 2004-14 that this important work carefully documents. Whether the description of how technology becomes embedded and adapted to the service of the campaign as ‘prototype politics’ is useful is a moot and unimportant question, what is important is how Kreiss maps the process that embed and perpetuate innovation between parties across contests.

One of Kreiss’ key observations is that innovation comes from outside of an organisation and is a process of transferring ideas and skills from other domains. Historical party network processes, which govern who an organisation can connect with, are thus deemed very important. The more insular an organisation is, relying purely on traditions of thinking and practice, the more it stagnates. Due to high levels of cognitive diversity the Democrats developed new thinking around campaigns. The critical shock of defeat led to innovation by the Republicans in the run up to the campaigns of 2000 and 2004, however the advantages were lost as Kerry’s 2004 defeat coupled with Dean’s achievements led the party to reform processes and build a team to innovate in time for 2008. Unlike their rivals, Democrats had access to a “liberal data analytics ecosystem” (p. 20) and the party had a culture permitting their expertise to be valued. The intellectual freedom and autonomy to innovate placed clear blue water between the Democrats and the Republicans, long term investment in technology permitted an ongoing advantage.

The failure by Republicans to innovate is symbolic of the deeper structural problems the party has. Five chapters compare the structures of the parties and the impact on their electoral campaigns. The team around Bush-Cheney 2004 developed a model for crunching data, recruiting supporters and cross-platform campaigning capable of personalising messages that fed the ground campaign, but victory led to stasis. As Democrats invested and activated their “hybrid party network ecosystem” (p. 62), the Republican party placed the onus on individual candidates leading to a series of insular and unstable systems to be developed. As McCain’s defeat was seen as purely the result of socio-political factors there was no “desire for true innovation” in 2008 and the gap remained vast in 2012. The reasons
are that the Republican party undervalued technology so failed to invest or to develop a culture of innovation. The party also lacked an supportive ecosystem, rather innovation was nurtured by a liberal-progressive coalition (see also Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012). These factors resulted in a less-developed infrastructure, either physical or technological with few staffers to develop the tools that facilitated strategic collection and use of data analytics. The failure to invest, coupled with Obama’s incumbency advantage, impeded progress for the party or Romney in 2012. From early in 2012 Obama re-energised his supporters launching an aggressive social media campaign to rebuild his base. Once activated, the campaign “asked supporters to become conduits of strategic campaign communication to their social ties” (p. 149). Analytics identified well-connected supporters and used them as credible advocates to target hard to reach citizens. The inefficiency and election day collapse of Romney’s ORCA data analytics system became symbolic of the imbalance in investments, infrastructure and resources between the parties.

The launch of the Growth and Opportunity Project in the wake of the 2012 defeat has highlighted weaknesses in the areas of data capture and analytics. Any innovation in these areas could be crucial, particularly given that the Democrat party network is seen to be going through something of an existential crisis. Equally, Democrat advantages in 2014 did not stem the tide of opinion so there are a multitude of opportunities for both parties. As Kreiss notes, technological innovation is no more than a single contributory factor towards electoral success. Arguably the factor was not even a pivotal one. Oprah Winfrey and not Facebook was probably more responsible for making Obama a credible candidate in 2008, similarly ill-advised remarks about the 48% who were written off by Romney may well have pushed some floating voters in key swing states into the Obama camp. Therefore one might ask why this book is important for understanding election campaigning and its effects in the US. Kreiss’ research details not only technological innovation, but also the party culture and infrastructure that facilitate putting in a strong electoral performance. Whether a party has a targeted strategy for using Facebook is immaterial, but if it does not it is indicative of the fact the party is out of touch with the modern media environment and is standing outside of the political ecosystem where they may interact with and learn from consultants, experts, enthusiastic amateurs and the everyday folk. In other words we find that being networked facilitates innovation that can contribute to victory, lacking a network leads to stasis and insularity which can lead to a multitude of forms of errors in strategizing and implementing election communication. Whether it be harnessing support online or harnessing support through a campaign on the doorsteps, the party needs an infrastructure and a network. It is in these crucial areas that the Republican party has failed over recent contests.

The story of the 2016 campaign infrastructures is yet to be told. The campaigns front ends are highly traditional, seeking sign-ups, promoting their candidate and attacking the opponent. All candidates have a presence across social media, largely appearing to broadcast their messages into their respective ecosystems. To what extent these are built upon data analytics is a question for to raise to experts in the aftermath. The candidates are converting some supporters into “stewards of their own networked wards” (p. 219), extending the reach of campaigns to some extent, whether either campaign has a culture in which innovation is thriving is a bigger question. But this returns to an extent to the question of whether it matters. Despite sophisticated analytics, is it possible for communication to break out of a partisan ecosystem and reach the politically uninterested, mobilise the typically non-voting citizens and engage them with the campaigns. Do innovations, or even
the cultures within party organisations, matter or is it legacy media narratives which
determine election outcomes. It is not the intention of this book to raise those issues,
however they are very important for considering how technological innovation is impacting
not just on the election campaigns of candidates but also on the democratic engagement of
citizens and the democratic institutions of a nation. The book demonstrates one party to be
more insular the other more open, perhaps reflecting an ideological schism. But is this a
permanent schism or was Democrat party culture at this crucial time spearheaded by Dean
as chair 2005-9, Obama as incumbent from 2008 and through the 2012 contest. In other
words is a culture of innovation the preserve of the liberal progressive political schema or will
we see ebb and flow across parties as we move forward. This maybe the next story for
Kreiss to tell, and it would be welcomed, as well as research on how technological
innovations contribute precisely to election outcomes. This book offers significant insights
into internal machinations which shape culture and electoral contests as well as mapping
research processes (in a rich Appendix) and is of significant value for understanding how
parties approach electoral contests, implement strategies of innovation and so how they
attempt to build support.

Bibliography


In Prototype Politics, Daniel Kreiss argues that contemporary campaigning has entered a new technology-intensive era that the Democratic Party has engaged to not only gain traction against the Republicans, but to shape the new electoral context and define what electoral participation means in the twenty-first century. The book discusses the importance of infrastructure, the contexts within which technological innovation happens, and how the collective making of prototypes shapes parties and their technological futures. Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy, Daniel Kriess, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 291, £18.99, $27.95. Review author: Dr Darren G. Lilleker, Associate Professor in Political Communication Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, UK. Email: dlilleker@bournemouth.ac.uk. Political campaigning was once universally described as being technologically behind the curve.