COMMUNICATION IN THE 2008 U.S. ELECTION

DIGITAL NATIVES ELECT A PRESIDENT

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The Election of a Lifetime

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"The most important election of our lifetime" was a claim heard repeatedly throughout the 2008 campaign from candidates and media pundits, to citizens of all ages. While many presidential elections become nothing more than a mere footnote in history, the 2008 campaign and election changed history. Certainly, Barack Obama's nomination and eventual election as the nation's first black president was a momentous feature of the historic 2008 campaign. Yet, beyond Obama's election as the 44th president of the United States, other important elements of this historic electoral contest are worth noting, and—for students and scholars of political communication—worthy of careful examination. For example, candidate gender played a significant role in campaign 2008, including Hillary Rodham Clinton's primary candidacy that resulted in "18 million cracks in that highest, hardest glass ceiling" (Millbank, 2008), as well as Sarah Palin's vice presidential candidacy—only the second time in U.S. politics that a major-party ticket included a female candidate. Even John McCain's selection as the Republican presidential nominee was historic, as McCain, had he been victorious in November of 2008, would have become the oldest person ever inaugurated president of the United States.

As if this litany of firsts were not enough, the electoral performance of young citizens provided yet another history-making element to campaign 2008. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) reports that approximately 51% of young citizens (18- to 29-year-olds)

cast a ballot in 2008, the third highest rate of participation by young voters in a presidential election since 1972 (New Census Data Confirm Increase in Youth Voter Turnout, 2009).[1] In fact, the 2008 election is the third presidential election in a row in which the percentage of young voter turnout has risen (with a 40% turnout of 18-to 29-year-olds in 2000 followed by 49% in 2004). While young voters increased their 2008 turnout, the rate of older citizens voting (those 30 and over) actually declined from their 2004 level of participation—the very first time since 1972, when 18-year-olds first voted in a presidential election, that young voter participation rose while older citizens' participation decreased. Finally, in 2008, 18- to 29-year old African American voters achieved the highest turnout ever recorded (58%) by any racial or ethnic group of young citizens; and 2008 was the very first time the percentage of registered young African American voters outnumbered young white voters (New Census Data Confirm Increase in Youth Voter Turnout, 2009).

Young voters' overwhelming support for the Democratic candidate Barack Obama offers yet another notable feature of the 2008 vote. Across all age groups (*see figure 1*), young citizens provided Obama with his widest margin of support as these voters, by more than two to one (68% to 32%), chose Obama over John McCain. What was it that attracted so many of our youngest citizens to Barack Obama? Indeed, throughout the election much was made of team Obama's ability to identify with, organize, and turn out this generation of "digital natives"—citizens for whom digital technologies have been part of their entire lives—by devel-
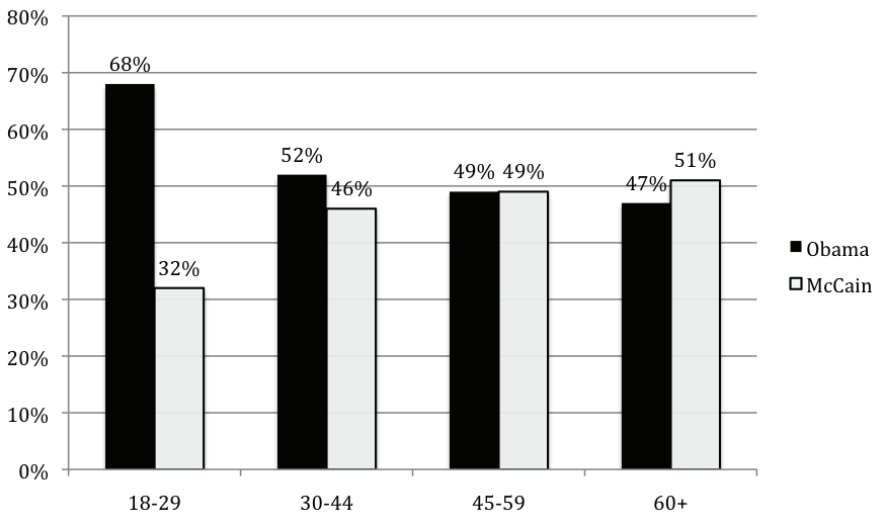

Figure 1: Voter Preference by Age
Source: Young Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election (www.civicyouth.org)

oping campaign messages and appeals that used the very communicative practices and language of these young citizens (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). *The New York Times* went so far as to label his loyal following "Generation O" (as in Obama). The multitude of young Obama supporters exhibited a seemingly personal relationship with their candidate, forged by a steady stream of digital communication as typified in the exchange that took place just seconds after the networks called the election for Barack Obama. Even before he addressed the nation and the world to herald his historic victory, the president-elect first texted his throng of digital followers with a text signed simply "Barack" and informing them "I'm about to head to Grant Park to talk to everyone, but I wanted to write to you first. All of this happened because of you . . . we just made history" (Cave, 2008).

From YouTube to Twitter, to blogs, texting, and social networking, a variety of new forms and channels of communication emerged as a key feature of campaign 2008. Historian Max Friedman (2009, p. 343) concluded, "this was the election in which new media played a more important role than ever before in American history." The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) found that nearly half of all Americans (46%) reported using the Internet to get news about the 2008 campaign. Clearly, in the emerging era of digital politics, this election demonstrated that candidates' campaign communication must now meet the expectations and communicative practices of a growing number of netizens whose political engagement is increasingly performed through various forms of digital messaging. In describing the leading candidates' "technologized" images, Friedman (2009) suggests we might best comprehend the public's 2008 presidential decision by understanding:

> . . . the hip sensibility of Obama's campaign versus the old-school consultants around the Clinton machine, and it becomes clear why the leading Democratic campaigns were sometimes compared to the clash between Apple and Microsoft. Obama was the Mac, of course: youthful, creative, nimble, forward-looking, and sleekly stylish; Clinton was the PC—massive, corporate, sitting atop a huge pile of capital and a legacy of brand recognition and market share that favored a conventional, risk-averse strategy struggling to patch over the basic flaws in its original design. John McCain, though . . . who had never sent an e-mail . . . was an IBM Selectric. (p. 344)

The central thesis of this book is not to suggest that Barack Obama became president of the United States simply because he was more skillful than his opponents in adopting the Internet and digital technologies as a campaign communication tool. Presidential campaigns are won and lost based on a myriad of reasons, including, among other factors, candidates' abilities to successfully frame

their message (the crafting of a vision and development of image) while also attempting to frame their opponent in desired ways, the ability to strategically craft and target appropriate messages for particular audiences, the ability to mobilize one's base supporters, and, of course, the ability to raise the hundreds of millions of dollars now needed to wage a successful presidential campaign. We hope it is clear that our conceptulazation of a presidential campaign is grounded in communication, a process that includes communicator (candidate) crafting persuasive appeals (message/image) for desired audiences (targeted voters) and delivered via appropriate communication channels or media. In the end, we do believe that winning and losing an election has much to do with a candidate's ability to communicate effectively—or not.

As one traces the history of American campaigning and elections, a parallel history of the development of communication media and technologies is useful (see, for example, Schudson's *The Good Citizen*, 1998). From handbills and broadsides, to party parades and the rise of the partisan press, to Lincoln and Douglas debating, FDR's radio chats, Eisenhower's televised campaign spots, Kennedy and Nixon's televised debates, to Bill Clinton's boxers or briefs on MTV and saxophone and shades on Arsenio Hall, political leaders and candidates have long sought innovative ways, often adopting the latest in communication media and technologies, to reach the public with their pleas. Our abbreviated chronicling of these few high—and perhaps some low—points in political communication history demonstrates the evolutionary nature of political campaign communication. We realize, too, that the arrival of the so-called "digital revolution" in political communicating did not instantaneously emerge in campaign 2008. For well over a decade, the Internet and so-called "new" digital technologies were evolving as an increasingly important part of our political communication landscape.

After very limited use of the just emerging Internet during his 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton launched the first White House web site in 1994 (Whillock, 1997); and within the next few years, and certainly by 2000, web sites and e-mail lists were common communication tools and practices for political office holders and candidates at all levels. Perhaps as a prelude to campaign 2008, Howard Dean's 2004 Democratic presidential primary bid demonstrated the Internet's social networking utility for political campaigning as thousands of supporters were organized through "meet ups" and mobilized as Dean campaign volunteers. The Dean campaign also established the Internet's effectiveness as a tool for raising campaign cash (Trippi, 2004). Finally, before "Obama Girl" went viral in 2008, or even before Hillary Clinton's primary campaign was spoofed in 2007 with the "Hillary 1984" Apple parody ad (titled Vote Different), the power of citizen-generated video in political campaigns was discovered by U.S. Senate candidate George Allen in 2006 when he was filmed at a rural Virginia campaign rally by

a staffer working for his opponent who uploaded Allen's "macaca" moment to a video-sharing web site that had been in existence for just over a year, YouTube.

Thus, by 2008, the "digital revolution" in presidential campaign communication was ripe, and BarackObama.com was there to lead the revolution. Friedman (2009, p. 345) provides this description of Obama's digital campaign operation: ninety paid staffers on the Obama Internet team, who built a 13 million address e-mail list, sending out more than 1 billion e-mail messages by election day, maintaining an Obama presence on fifteen different social networking sites—such as MySpace, Facebook, and BlackPlanet—with over 2 million supporters' profiles created on MyBarackObama.com, with these volunteers organizing approximately 200,000 "meet up" events, and, on election day alone, Obama's Facebook friends sent over 5 million messages reporting they had just cast their ballot for Barack Obama and urging their friends to do the same.

Our focus on Barack Obama's use of digital technologies in campaign 2008, and his apparent success in attracting young voters to his cause, serves as illustration to support the two central themes developed throughout this volume of campaign communication studies. First, the 2008 campaign, we feel, provides an excellent case study—perhaps something of a turning point in campaign communication—for us to carefully examine the emerging role of digital political media. Second, as documented earlier in this chapter, available data also suggest a continuing renewal in young citizens' electoral engagement. Again, after young citizens recorded their lowest level of voting in 1996 (at 39%), we've now witnessed three successive presidential elections in which the number of young citizens who vote has increased; and, during this same period, the gap between more older vs. fewer younger citizens voting has diminished with each election since 2000 (New Census Data Confirm Increase in Youth Voter Turnout, 2009).[2]

Thus, with more young citizens voting, particularly during the emerging era of digital politics, can we conclude that this revival of young citizen engagement is fueled by our first generation of digital natives responding to political campaigning that utilizes this generation's common communicative practices and language? In fact, we have little empirical evidence to help us understand *if*—and perhaps even more importantly *how*—various forms of digital campaign communication might work to engage young citizens in the electoral process. The research studies that follow examine the content and effects of various sources of political information, with particular emphasis on the wide range of political digital media and how such campaign communication influences young citizens.

The book's first section—**Communication for & by Digital Natives in Campaign 2008**—features a series of studies examining various forms of digital campaign communication as well as the communicative behaviors of young citizens. In Chapter 2, *The Complex Web: Young Adults' Opinions about Online Campaign Messages*, John Tedesco reports the results of an experimental study

evaluating the effects of specific Internet web and video campaign messages on young citizens' political information efficacy and political engagement; in Chapter 3, *Viral Politics: The Credibility and Effects of Online Viral Political Messages*, Monica Ancu, also through experimental analysis, assesses the perceived credibility of YouTube viral political videos, and determines how viral Internet ads affect viewers' perceptions of political candidates; in Chapter 4, *Talking Politics: Young Citizens' Interpersonal Interaction during the 2008 Presidential Campaign*, Leslie Rill and Mitchell McKinney report the results of a longitudinal study examining young citizens' political talk throughout the 2008 campaign season, including how often individuals engage in political talk during the ongoing presidential campaign, with whom they most frequently talk politics, and the relationship between these young citizens' political media diet and their political talk behaviors; in Chapter 5, *A Different Kind of Inter-media Agenda Setting: How Campaign Ads Influenced the Blogosphere in the 2008 U.S. Election*, Sumana Chattopadhyay and Molly Greenwood compare the issue agendas of traditional and digital campaign media, including campaign issues featured in Barack Obama and John McCain's YouTube ads, the issues discussed by the candidates during their televised presidential debates, and campaign issues discussed by citizens' posts to partisan Internet blogs; and, finally, in Chapter 6, *Political Advertising, Digital Fundraising and Campaign Finance in the 2008 Election*, Clifford Jones provides a detailed case analysis of Barack Obama's digital fundraising operation that resulted in Obama raising more than $745 million, an unprecedented amount in presidential campaign history.

While a major focus of this book is an examination of digital campaign media, more traditional modes and forms of campaign communication continue to be an important element of candidates' campaign communication repertoire. The studies found in section two, **Candidate Messages & Images in Campaign 2008**, analyze both content and effects of presidential advertising, debates, stump speeches, and news coverage. In Chapter 7, *The Cumulative Effects of Televised Presidential Debates on Voters' Attitudes across Red, Blue, and Purple Political Playgrounds*, Yun and colleagues analyze assessments of Obama and McCain's debate performances and, utilizing experimental data collected nationally, they investigate the influence of debate viewers' geopolitical status—whether one hails from a battleground (purple), Obama (blue) or McCain (red) state; in Chapter 8, *Political Engagement through Presidential Debates: Attitudes of Political Engagement throughout the 2008 Election*, McKinney and colleagues report the results of a panel study that first tests the effects of young citizens' exposure to presidential debates, and then tracks these same citizens and their attitudes of democratic engagement throughout the course of the 2008 campaign; in Chapter 9, *Can YOU Hear Me Now? Identifying the Audience in 2008 Primary and General Election Presidential Political Advertisements*, Jerry Miller content analyzes several hundred

(*n = 374*) primary and general election presidential ads from the 2008 campaign, examining the extent to which these ad messages contribute to a dividing of the electorate through the "rhetoric of othering;" in Chapter 10, *Talking to Millennials: Policy Rhetoric and Rhetorical Narratives in the 2008 Presidential Campaign*, Alison Howard and Donna Hoffman examine the campaign speeches of John McCain and Barack Obama and the specific rhetorical strategies and appeals used to target young citizens; and, finally, in Chapter 11, *"Snap" Judgments: A Study of Newsmagazine Photographs in the 2008 Presidential Campaign*, Karla Hunter and colleagues conduct a visual content analysis of nearly 700 photographs from major U.S. newsmagazines, evaluating the media's visual portrayal of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain and examining the extent to which visual bias was present in the media's photographic coverage of the leading presidential candidates.

As we noted earlier, candidate gender played a significant role in campaign 2008, including Hillary Rodham Clinton's primary candidacy, as well as Sarah Palin's vice presidential candidacy. Section three, **Female Candidates in Campaign 2008**, features three studies that focus on candidate gender. First, in Chapter 12, *Running Down Ballot: Reactions to Female and Male Candidate Messages*, Benjamin Warner and colleagues study young voters' evaluations of female and male congressional candidates' campaign ads, specifically examining how these voters' sexist beliefs, identification with one's own gender, and identification with the gender of the candidate influence their evaluations of the candidates; in Chapter 13, *Videostyle 2008: A Comparison of Female vs. Male Political Candidate Television Ads*, Dianne Bystrom and Narren Brown continue Bystrom's longstanding content analytic work examining candidates' political advertising "videostyle"— an ad's verbal, non-verbal, and film/video production techniques—analyzing 236 campaign ads from mixed gender (male and female) races as well as races featuring two female candidates, with specific attention given to the videostyles used by candidates in four notable 2008 campaigns, including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama's Democratic presidential primary contest, Elizabeth Dole and Kay Hagen's North Carolina U.S. Senate race, Jeanne Shaheen and John Sununu's New Hampshire U.S. Senate race, and Beverly Perdue and Pat McCrory's North Carolina gubernatorial campaign; and, finally, in Chapter 14, *Motherhood, God & Country: Sarah Palin's 68 Days in 2008*, Julia Spiker explains the role played by Sarah Palin in the McCain presidential campaign, and through rhetorical analysis of Palin's key campaign speeches describes Palin's rhetorical style and most common appeals incorporated in her campaign discourse.

The last section of this book, **International Perspectives on Campaign 2008**, recognizes that the election of a U.S. president, and particularly the 2008 Obama–McCain contest, is an event heard 'round the world. The four studies in this section provide analysis of international media's coverage of the U.S. election,

international citizens' perceptions of the U.S. and its 2008 presidential candidates, and also a case study of international journalists' coverage of the U.S. presidential election. In Chapter 15, *Perceptions of the U.S. and the 2008 Presidential Election from Young Citizens Around the World*, Lynda Kaid and colleagues report the results of their multi-country (18-nation) survey of young citizens' attitudes toward the U.S. and also these citizens' evaluations of Barack Obama and John McCain; in Chapter 16, *International Media's Love Affair with Barack Obama: Anti-Americanism and the Global Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Campaign*, Jesper Strömbäck and colleagues examine how the world's press covered the 2008 U.S. presidential election, providing results of their content analysis of election stories found in the leading newspapers of 10 nations characterized by their varying levels of anti-American sentiment; in Chapter 17, *German Press Coverage of the 2004 and 2008 U.S. Presidential Election Campaigns*, Christian Holtz-Bacha and Reimar Zeh compare German press coverage of the last two U.S. presidential campaigns, with content analysis of election reporting from Germany's two most important daily newspapers, the liberal *Süddeutschen Zeitung* and the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; and, finally, in Chapter 18, *The Emerson Election Project: Indonesian Journalists Visit the U.S. during the 2008 Presidential Election*, J. Gregory Payne and Efe Sevin provide a case study of the Emerson Election Project, a public diplomacy program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, in which prominent journalists from Indonesia—where Barack Obama lived and attended school for a short period during his youth—came to the U.S. during the final weeks of the presidential election and filed news reports for Indonesian audiences from several battleground states and major cities while they "shadowed" U.S. journalists.

The wide-ranging studies that make up this book provide a comprehensive examination of a truly historic political campaign and election. While findings from the numerous empirical analyses offer revealing answers regarding the content and effects of various forms of political campaign communication, many more questions and possibilities for future research are raised. We know that today's "new" modes and practices of political communication will soon be replaced by tomorrow's "newest" innovations in campaign communication. This, of course, is what makes our work both challenging and exciting. Indeed, we look forward to many more elections of a lifetime!

Endnotes

1. When 18-year-olds were first allowed to vote in 1972, young voters (18 to 29) achieved their "high-water mark" of electoral participation at 55.4%. In 1992, with an increase in young citizens turning out to vote for Bill Clinton, youth voting was at 52% (New Census Data Confirm Increase in Youth Voter Turnout, 2009).

2. In 2000, voter turnout for 18- to 29-year olds was 40.3%, compared to 54.6% for citizens 30 and older (a 24.3% gap); in 2004, younger voters' rate of voting was 49%, compared to older voters at 67.7% (an 18.7% gap); finally, in 2008, younger voters recorded a 51.1% rate of participation, compared to older voters' 67% (a gap of 15.9%).

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