

New technologies make campaign more personal, analyst says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A political scientist at Montana State University believes that technological advances have made the political campaign process more personal than any campaign for more than a century.

David Parker, a political science professor at MSU and author of "The Power of Money in Congressional Campaigns, 1880-2006," a book published by the University of Oklahoma Press earlier this year, says that the current presidential campaign, which has employed the Internet, e-mail, online blogging and phone text messaging, is akin to door-to door campaigning of earlier times.

"The Internet is making politics personal, like it was in the 19th century," Parker said. "In the 19th century parties knocked on the door to campaign. New technologies like the Internet and text-messaging makes it possible for candidates to not only knock on people's doors, but to get into their inboxes and cellphones with very particular messages crafted to match individual interests."

Parker said this is a switch from the decades when campaigns were conducted on television and the radio.

"TV and radio are essentially passive forms of campaigning," Parker said. "Modern technology, in some ways, has revived old-time politics, old techniques."

In fact, Parker said, you'd have to look at the campaign of 1896 to see a

paradigm shift as large as the current change in campaigning techniques.

"Usually it is the GOP that's more technically innovative, but this year it's the Democrats," Parker said.

Parker said there is longstanding evidence that voters who are contacted physically, for instance by door-to-door campaigning, are more likely to turn out and vote. He said political scientists are now researching the effect of modern technologies and early evidence suggests that phone text messages reminding people to vote positively affect the turnout by 4 percent, which Parker said is a small but significant impact.

While Parker spends most of his time researching congressional campaigns, he thinks the techniques and devices used by Obama's campaign will soon trickle down to all campaigns, particularly because they have been so successful attracting donations. Obama's viral campaign techniques have resulted in record campaign donations from an unprecedented number of people, many coming from individual donors who made small donations on the Internet.

"Usually it is the Republicans who have more campaign money, but this year the Democrats have caught up, and in some cases, have surpassed the Republicans," Parker said.

He said Obama's financial success translates to his ability to open offices and travel to states with smaller populations, such as Montana.

The Obama campaign's skill with technology has also made him the pick of the "outsider" voter and the student voter, Parker said.

"Usually younger voters are not settled, move frequently and are hard to keep registered," Parker said. "They are busy building lives and are not engaged. But in 2008 something is going down. Students are more

engaged and excited."

Parker points out that these categories of voters usually don't have land phone lines, the traditional method used by pollsters to gather data for their polls. For that reason, Parker suspects that current polls aren't accurate and won't be until the pollsters are able to access these voters.

For all its advances, Parker said it is too soon to tell whether Obama's innovative and technically savvy campaign geared will be successful pitched against McCain's well-targeted but traditional campaign that is likely to appeal to older voters, who historically turn out in greater numbers.

"The three best predictors of whether someone will turn out to vote are age, education and income," Parker said. "Part of the reason Republicans tend to do well is that older voters are educated and better off financially and show up. Traditionally, younger voters don't show up. But, Obama is using all the techniques that he can to drive up that demographic and make a difference."

There's also another underlying issue essential to the upcoming campaign, Parker believes.

"I think the general election will come down to one question and how voters perceive themselves in regards to that question -- are you better off now than you were four years ago?"

Parker calls the new campaign dynamics "cool stuff," and "really exciting," not just to politicians, but to the general American public.

"It should be a very interesting campaign," he said.

Provided by Montana State University

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