The Role of Internet in Elections

(A case study of the Presidential Election of the USA in 2008)

Mohammad Taghi, Delforooz

PhD Candidate of Political Science in Tehran University

Abstract: Internet has found an increasing role in the politics, during the last decade. Today, terms like digital democracy, Internet elections, Internet advertisements (propaganda, social- political Web logging in the internet has become common terms. Internet is getting replaced for the traditional media in politics. The interactive characteristic of this media has changed it to an unrivaled instrument for political propaganda and spread of supporters. One of the most important domains getting influenced by this media is the election. Parties and candidates have inclined to use this instrument to succeed in the elections. Because of this importance, researchers in politics are also, increasingly investigating on the effect of this media in politics. Presidential election of the 2008 of the America is considered as a turning point because of its use in propaganda and election preparation. In this article an attempt is made to explore how Obama used this media, purposefully, to get over his republican competitor.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Internet, Election Propaganda, Internet Propaganda, Political Mobilization.

Introduction

When in the last decade of the 1970's internet entered the world of media, nobody thought it would grow to the extent that it has today, as its growth has doubled for every 9 to 14 months. In 1981, only 213 computers were connected to the internet. To 2000, this number increased to more than four million, and to the end of 2005 its users increased to one billion. According to the last census up to the end of March 2009, about one billion five hundred and ninety six million individuals had been using the internet, in the world, from among whom, most of the number of users belonged to China, the United States of America and Japan, respectively (see http:// internetstatstoday.com).

In Iran, also along the world trend in using the internet, the number of Internet users, has increased tremendously, and according to the census of 2006 eighteen million users come from Iran, and the country is placed at the rank of sixteen among other countries. The mean of the internet influence in the Middle East is 17.4 percent and in Iran it is 27.5 percent. The place of Iran in the Middle East is after Israel, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and before Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Amman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen. It is interesting to note that the internet growth rate in Iran was the highest among all countries in the Middle East between the years of 2000 to 2007(see, http://internetworldstatd.com). To about October 2005 there were about 700 thousand Iranian weblogs (out of 100 million

Corresponding Author: mdelforooz@yahoo.com

weblogs in the world), from among which 40 thousand to 100 thousand weblogs were operational. The weblogs ran by Iranians residing in other countries outside Iran are excluded. Internet as a media which has taken away the concept of time and space has had tremendous effects on economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of people's life. The effects have been so decisive that some have divided the history of the world to two periods of before the internet and after the internet (see, http://en. wikipedia. org/wiki/iranian-blogsh2007).

Internet has also been effective in international and external policies of nations and has developed many concepts in the science of politics such as security, governance, power and their mechanisms from the very basic roots. Today, the concept of digital democracy is developing very fast and a large body of works has been produced in this field. Governments and political agents are practicing modern shapes of cooperation on the basis of the internet. One of the main areas in politics which is tremendously affected by the internet is the elections. Both candidates' competitors and voters use the internet for election purposes. More advanced governments use mechanisms like internet voting with the hope of increasing the participation in elections. Parties and candidates also try to attract more supporters and increase their chance of victory in election by using diverse internet possibilities. An investigation being conducted in this area to find out how much they have been successful in achieving their goals is a new trend, but one of the powerful hypotheses is that "access to internet and online election information have increased awareness and political interest of citizens and encouraged them to participate more and more in elections". In Iran investigations in this field is in the very primary levels, and the researchers' attention have not that much been attracted to this field. In this article, attempt is made to attract the attention of audience to the importance of this medium's increasing role in elections

by surveying the role of internet in the victory of Barak Obama in 2008 presidential election of the U.S.A. the hypothesis of the present article is that the use of Internet as a communicative instrument has had an effective role in the victory of Barak Obama.

Three Stages of Election Campaign

The western democracy, especially that of the United States has passed three stages on the way of its professionalization. This has occurred more or less in other places of the world, with some modifications and in later times: at the first stage, communication occurred through the parties press, posters and widespread meetings and propaganda house to house. At this stage, there were great uses of party official systems and party volunteers, and emphasis was mostly on local propaganda with little central coordination. The party leaders took trips to empower their local campaigns and participated in election meetings. At this stage, also, each party oriented its propaganda on specific groups, depending on its objectives and procedures (Farrel & Webb, 2000: 4).

The second stage is recognized with the appearance of television. Among important characteristics of this stage were using propaganda procedures indirectly, using counselors and propaganda institutes, to a large amount, directing and coordinating propaganda from the party headquarters, emphasizing on the leader, sending unified message to all parts of the country, and attempting to collect votes from all groups of the society (Ibid). From important characteristics of this stage which are mostly criticized are the decrease in face to face propaganda, as, according to some critics, instead of giving principle information about candidates and their programs, Radio and television mostly spent their time giving very superficial information, like guessing about the those who will win, closeness of competition and choosing suitable strategies to increase the chance of competitors to win (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003: 178).

The third stage, in the process of professional election campaign, however, begins with the improvement of telecommunication technology (wire technology, satellite and internet) in the process of professional election campaign. The United States as the pioneer of this trend started this stage since 1998. The main characteristics of this stage include using (more direct) approaches of communication which were applicable by wired televisions and, following that, which led to the more complex campaign technology and sever dependence of election organizations on professional experts of election propaganda. Internet based propaganda is a customer- oriented one and not producer oriented one. In other words, since voters can now make a short way through traditional channels of information, and use internet as an interactive medium, communication gets away from one way state and election activists should recognize the needs and requirements of different groups of people, rightly, and present suitable propaganda for each. Along with change in the election campaigns of parties, voters are also attracted toward new informative sources, increasingly, in a way that although television is still considered as the most important source of information, internet with a great difference has taken precedence over some resources, in a very limited time and is trying to decrease its distance from the TV (Farrell & Webb, Op, Cit: 5). For instance, in the census of the year 1996, only 24 percent of Americans had access to the internet and among them only 7 percent of users could gain political information from the internet. To 1998, the percentage of people having access to the internet reached 43 percent and that of those who could benefit from online information, reached 10 percent. In 2000, 63 percent of respondents to a questionnaire said that they had access to the internet, 29 percent of whom could access political information. In 1992, also, 55 percent of respondents to questionnaire in the US indicated that television was the main source of their informa-

tion for the presidential election, and 57% considered newspaper as their information source. To the year 2000, these figures decreased to 22 percent for television and 39 percent for newspaper and, for the internet, it reached to 11 percent in 2000, after a very small figure in 1992 (Tolbert & McNeal, Op,Cit) Winner Lusoli, after studying the election of 2004 of the Europe parliament in 25 European countries, considered internet as a second hand medium election as an information source, but he considers that political activists pay increasing attention to this medium, in all countries, and more over believes that the degree of attention in these 25 countries has strong and weak points, depending on different factors. For example in Hungary, Netherlands, Finland, and Denmark he considers the role of internet more important than in other countries (Lusoli, Wainer, 2005: 247-265).

It is important to note that the three stages mentioned are not based on the facts, and they are, only a general trend which are taken, generally, from the United States and were followed more or less in other countries. In other words, although not all countries following this trend are not at the same level, in all countries these three stages are present to different degrees. Generally speaking, the use of internet as a new instrument for voting, election propaganda, for attracting participation of politicians, and also as a new source of information for voters in all countries is accepted as a principle.

The Different Uses of Internet in Elections

- Internet Voting

This is one of the approaches followed during the recent years with the concept of "digital democracy" specifically in the U.S.A., to facilitate the action of voting and as a result, to increase the cooperation. Of course, this type of voting, is being used, experimentally, in some of the states for the less important elections, and is not yet well established as an approach, because of the security

of the votes in election sites. About the effect of this type of voting on participation, some researchers like Sloop reason that it could be used as a motivator for more participation of voters (Carter, 2006), while other like Alvarez and Nagler believe that because of unequal access of the different groups to the internet, this type of voting can widen the gap between voters; as an example the gap between the rich and white people who are traditionally more participant and the poor and colored whose participation is not high enough, will increase. This phenomenon is called "digital gap" (Ibid: 85). In fact, it could be reasoned that inequality of access to the internet between the poor and minorities and rich group causes the rate of participation in elections more to the benefit of rich and white people.

• **Transference of Election Information**

Internet as a new, powerful and attractive communication institution can help candidates, parties, and other election activists to make relations with the audience and to send messages and information. These encompass a widespread area of information. Official election institutes use internet to present information at different stages of election and their timings. Candidates and parties, also, make use of this instrument to convey their own schedules to their audience, to answer the opponents, to collect census, and the like. The election sites progress day by day and benefit from inventions like sound clips of candidates speeches to picture clips of conferences and candidate meetings in virtual environment, sometimes even directly. Discussions in the chat rooms especially about elections and candidates increase the audience's motivation to raise the level of their cooperation. According to the census in one of the greatest internet service companies under the name of American Online, among top ten chat rooms in the U.S., 7 of them were political ones (Tolbert & McNeal, Op,Cit:177).

• **Political Mobilization**

Researches indicate that face to face Communication has an important role in encouraging people to participate, politically, and the presence of mass media instruments like television, electronic mail, and telephone banking deteriorated this type of communication and consequently decreased their participation. In spite of the sharp increase in the media covered elections, because of withdrawal of voters the degree of participation in recent thirty years has continuously been decreasing in the west. The reasons is that, because of widespread progress in the mass media, the political communication has changed from interpersonal to mass communication, the information current has become one- way and voters have changed to passive receivers of information. But should internet be considered as other mass media? Some, however, believe that the internet possibilities like e-mails, chat rooms, giving ideas on news and interpretations in social networks are similar to face to face communication and enjoy potentiality for motivating individuals to participate more and more. Internet communication can easily and fast change to a chain of relationships, and mobilize a great number of users in support or opposition to the specific subject or individuals.

• **Financial Aid Channel to Help Election Propaganda**

One of the great challenges for the election candidates, today, is increase in propaganda expenses. This issue had made dependence of many candidates to influential groups and benefiters, and it has provided negative outcomes for their independent activities, in Future. According to investigations, using internet has increased the possibility of specifying financial aids to election campaigns. Because of this, using media to collect money can help candidates' independence (Ibid).

The Effect of Internet on the Degree of Partici-pation

Do these specific activities have effects on the degree of participation? About the effect of Internet on the participation in the West, especially, in the U.S. there are two general insights. According to the first insight, which is known as reinforce-ment, internet is a new instrument which has been used by people who have already been involved in, and been active in politics, and in this way caused an increased participation gap among dif-ferent groups of people. Their reasoning is that, the high- income group and the educated vote more than other people, and, possibly only these two groups have more access to the internet, and, on the contrary, the low- income group less edu-cated and minority groups who vote less than oth-ers, have less access to the internet. This digital gap leads to increased participation gap (Tolbert& McNeal, 2001: 3-4).

According to the second notion, or mobilization insight, there is a positive relationship between the use of internet and the participation of all groups of the society. They believe that the internet gives political information to people, easily, detailed, fast, and cheap, and encourage them to vote. Tol-bert and Mc Neil in a research found that the pos-sibility of the participation of those who had access to online political information and the in-ternet, in the presidential elections of 1996 and 2000 in the U.S., was greatly more than that of those who did not have access to these two possi-bilities. Their finding indicates that the possibility of participation of those who used internet to ex-change the information was much more than those who used internet for recreational purposes. For example, white women who didn't have access to the internet, the possibility of their participation in election was 64 percent, while this figure for the white women who had access to internet was 86 percent. About racial-ethnographic groups, also, access to the internet increased the chance of their

participation to 20 percent. The researchers, also, reason that the composition of internet users is rapidly changing and is expanding to include low-income and less-educated groups. In this way, in-ternet can, gradually, increase the rate of election participation(Ibid: 18-21). The other point is that, according to sociological studies in the U.S., the youth are among groups who traditionally have low level of participation in elections. But, since this group has a high level of access to the inter-net, the possibility of their participation in the election has increased in comparison to the past.

The Case of the U.S. 2008 Election

By reference to what was mentioned, many be-lieve that the recent American presidential elec-tion has been a focal point in the internet role playing, and providing virtual atmosphere in the domain of election and has been indicative of the mobilization theory. A number of topics in the articles and reports which were distributed after the primary and final elections of the America, reflect this subject. Some of those topics are as follows:

- Did Internet Cause the Victory of Barak Obama?
- Internet as Power in Politics: Obama could not succeed without Internet.
- The Important Role Internet Plays in the America Elections.
- How Did Internet Election Campaigns Led by Obama, Change the Domain of Politics.
- The Victory of Obama and the Power of Network Designing.
- Strategy of Social Networking Sent an Unknown Senator to the Gates of White House.
- Progressed Technology as one of the Fac-tors in Osama's Victory.
- Obama Owes His Victory to the Internet.

In all these articles and reports, it is reasoned, in one way or another, that if Obama did not have access to internet strategy, his chance for winning in the primary and final elections would decrease, tremendously. John Hillman from among experts in American press believes that internet played the same projective role in the winning of Obama that television debates did in 1960 in the victory of Kennedy. In fact, at that period the growth of television as a new medium and the downfall of radio provided great changes in the election campaigns. At that time, Nixon refused to appear in the debates with made up face and because of that his face was unshaved, tired and sweated, while Kennedy used makeup and was more organized and smart. Although the deep, powerful and attractive talks of Nixon, at the beginning stages of the election campaign on radio, made him override Kennedy, the television debates changes the condition, altogether (Arrington, 2008).

Internet, at his time, played the same role in the victory of Obama, but how? Its role can be categorized in to the following:

- ✓ Internet functioned as a very effective instrument to help election campaigns, financially. Arena Huffington founder of the Huffington Post Magazine believes that one of the reasons for the victory of Obama was using the internet to collect money. This role was observed in both primary and final elections. In the primary election, while Hilary Clinton had collected a large sum of money from rich financial supporters, the shortage of financial sources made her to limit her campaign to a special States. It was when the absorption of internet financial helps by Obama, permitted him to be active in most of the states. In the final election, also, Obama received 150 million dollars in September, a large part of which was delivered by small groups of generous people, each of whom had donated even

less than 100 dollars to him, through the website. Because of unprecedented use of the internet, Obama could, to some extent, attract 632 thousand financial supporters. According to some estimation, the election campaign of Obama since two years before the beginning of his election campaign to the actual time of election could attract more than one billion dollars, and this figure was ten times that collected through the internet by John Kerry in his four year competitions (Goldberg, 2008).

- ✓ Networking and making a net of supporters: According to Newsome network making is a powerful instrument, because it makes possibilities for real communication between candidates and voters (Arrington, op, Cit). Network making through the internet is a key factor to relate candidates with the supporters, and stabilize this relation and develop it. In general, internet can help network making in the following ways:

- Making relations between candidates and people.
- Making relations among people
- Giving possibilities to people to get involved in the election campaign.

Propaganda team of Obama benefited from the network making to the most extent. In fact, what was effective in the decision made by Obama to enter the election was that his supporters had designed a propaganda page on the site of 'my space", which could collect 160 thousand signatures to his benefit, although the formal election campaign had not yet started (Schifferes, 2009). Actually this rush of very great number of volunteers to Osama's website made him confident that he had the luck to win Hillary Clinton. As an example, while Hilary Clinton had 20 thousand volunteers in the Texas primary

election, Obama could get 104 thousand volunteers at his service (Talbot, 2009). With the spread of online networks, Obama could achieve a casting vote in the primary stage of election and could make use of thousands of volunteers. Millions of volunteers who were mobilized through the internet helped collecting votes for Obama and enlisting new voters.

According to the investigations of the Study Center of PU, the volume of information transference in Osama's website was three times that of McCain's site. In the famous social network of "face book" Obama had 200 thousand supporters, and McCain had 745 thousand. In the site of 'My space" Obama had 588000, and McCain had 188000 supporters. The team of Obama who made internet Frameworks used different informative instruments, like e-mail, SMS, video pictures and even video games to attract supporters (Goldberg, Op, Cit). As Trippy, one analyst says, Obama could organize his supporters by the help of internet, where such an activity needed an army of volunteers and organizers who had to be paid if under normal conditions (Miller, 2008).

Moreover, it was through this network making that Obama could receive millions of dollars from his supporters, He could also spend this money on his propaganda itself and his headquarter personnel instead of employing local propagandists (Raymond, 2008). Consequently, Obama could attract many young people, who were, traditionally indifferent to politics, through making social networks (Schiferes, Op, Cit).

✓ Propaganda and Informing processing through the Internet, Using internet Facilities:

The propaganda team of Obama under the directorship of a 24 year old man called Kris Hague, one of the founders of the "face book" Could use all internet capacities for propagating and giving information, and providing interaction among people.

Joy trippy, the last director of the election campaign of Howard Dean indicates that during the election season, half a million hour program about Obama was observed by American spectators on the site of "you tube". If these fourteen and half million hours were broadcasted on T.V., it would provide 47 million dollars of expenses, and this amount was half the money McCain could receive from the Federal Government for his campaign (Ferraro, 2009).

The other point mentioned by trippy and Huffington was that the common media like television was defeated in the domain of politics, because it, merely, reported what candidate stated, without dealing with the rightness and wrongness of their statements, while web loggers could, in a better way than other media, explores carelessness of the candidates in their talks (Arrington, Op, Cit). Internet could, also, allow citizens to check the previous talks of candidates and politicians and catch the lies in their speeches. For instance, citizens could get informed of one of the lies stated by Sara Pailin the deputy the first of McCain, or when wrong statement were assigned to Obama about racial issues, people could refer to his 37 minute speech in "You Tube" that was stated in response to that conviction and could indentify its false origin. Six million and seven hundred thousand watched this speech (Miller, Op, Cit). In other words, internet because of its various interests

has achieved preference over other traditional media, because of many respects including its interactive nature.

Conclusion

Although during more than a last decades, internet has gradually established itself as an effective media in the domain of politics and especially in elections, and has taken precedence over other media except television; its role in the election of 2008 of America is regarded as a focal point. At this period people could use internet more than other media like radio and television to receive news and one way reports. They could access different reports in the shape of voice, picture, or writings about the issues of election and could make two way and interactive relations among themselves and between candidates and them through interactive instruments like chat rooms, e-mails, weblogs, and especially social networks. In this way they could participate as active, rather than passive actors and ones who just were receivers of information in a one way approach, but as active agents who participated in elections and were encouraged to do so. Among candidates, also, Obama's use of internet as a propaganda instrument, a means for collecting money and mobilizing supporters was very outstanding. Although these facilities were available for all his competitors, he focused on the internet as an axis for his propaganda and in this way could benefit from it more than others did. According to Huffington, "lack of understanding the internet potentials by republicans was the main cause of their defeat. The problem of McCain was not his age, but his old campaign ideas (Ferraro, Op, Cit). Probably these statements seem a bit more exaggerating, and the effectiveness of internet on Osama's victory needs more investigations, but what is certain is that from that time on, internet has changed to be an unavoidable instrument in elections.

References

Arrington, Michael, internet as a force in politics: obama would not have won without the internet, http://www.vator.tv/news/show/2008-11-07.

Carter, Lemuria D.(2006), Political Participation in a Digital Age: An Integrated Perspective on the Impacts of the Internet on Voter Turnout, http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-04252006- /unrestricted/LCarter Dissertation edv3.

Farrel, David and Webb, Paul(2000),Political parties as campaign organizations, http://www.geser. net/par/Farrel-Webb.

Ferraro, Nicole, did the internet elect arak obama, http://www.internetevolution.com/author.asp?section_id=466&doc_id=167572

Goldberg, Andy, Internet plays increasingly important role in American election, http://www.indiaenews.com/america/20081023/152976.htm

http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/iranian-blogsh2007

http://internetstatstoday.com

http://internetworldstatd.com

Lusoli, Wainer(2005), A second-order medium? The Internet as a source of electoral information in 25 European countries, Information Polity, Volume 10, Number 3-4, 247-265

Miller, Claire Cain, How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics, http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/

Raymond, Duane, Obama's Win and the Power of Networking, http://fairsay.com/blog/2008/11/05/obamas-win-and-the-power-of-networking

Schifferes, Steve, Internet key to Obama victories, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7412045.stm

Talbot, David, How Obama Really Do It? The social-networking strategy that took an obscure senator to the doors of the White House, http://www.technologyreview.com/Infotech/21222

Tolbert, C. J. & McNeal, R. S (2001) Does the Internet increase voter participation in elections? Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. San Francisco, California. http:IOS press. metapress. com/app/home.

(2003) Unraveling the effects of the Internet on political participation? Political Research Quarterly, 56 (2).

Mohammad Taghi, Delforooz
Is a PhD candidate of Political Science in Tehran University and Researcher for Internal Ministry Political Studies Bureau.