

# Book Review: Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama

by Blog Admin

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Through a detailed history of new media and political campaigning, *Taking Our Country Back* contributes to an interdisciplinary body of scholarship from communication, sociology, and political science. The book theorizes processes of innovation in online electoral politics and aims to give readers a new understanding of how the internet and its use by the Howard Dean campaign have fundamentally changed the field of political campaigning. Reviewed by **Paul Brighton**.



**Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama. Daniel Kreiss. Oxford University Press.**

## Find this book:

No, this is not the first “instant” book on the 2012 Election, and the return of Barack Obama. Nor is it just another book on the ground-breaking 2008 poll, which lifted Obama to the Presidency first time round. Rather, it tells the story of the evolution of the role of the Internet in American elections since 2000. However, the book’s clear focus is on the two campaigns which most obviously heralded breakthroughs in the deployment of the Internet in presidential elections: namely the ultimately unsuccessful Howard Dean campaign for the Democratic nomination in 2004; and the triumphant Obama campaign first for the nomination, and then for the White House itself, four years later.

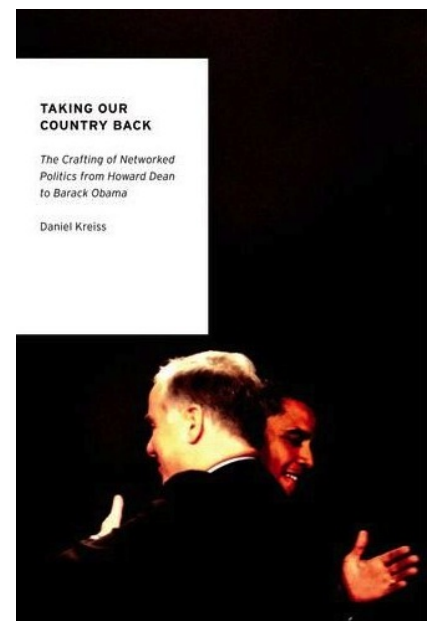
We already have excellent insider accounts of the Dean campaign by Joe Trippi (*The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*) and David Plouffe’s definitive view from within the Obama camp (*The Audacity to Win*). **Daniel Kreiss** takes a more scholarly overview of the nature of Internet activity, and at how emerging technology was harnessed to make the campaigns able to benefit from it.

A lot of people, one suspects, will be surprised how little of all this activity related to persuading prospective voters of the strength of the arguments. Indeed, that is not the main point of the exercise at all (though obviously it comes into it a bit at the margins). No, the central point of Internet campaigning is summarised in the three Ms: money, message and mobilisation.

This became crucial during the early campaigning for 2008, as the insurgent Obama took on the establishment candidate Hillary Clinton. Kreiss quotes an unnamed insider describing Hillary as “not the internet candidate”. Hillary’s campaign instead regarded internet campaigning as just another form of message campaigning; or, as Kreiss puts it, the Clinton campaign saw “new media as an implement of communication, not field or finance strategy.”

The irony of all this lies in the fact that internet campaigning is now seen as the sexy “new politics”, while conventional campaigning is “old school”. And yet it is the far less obviously sexy nuts and bolts that Internet works on: raising money, mobilising supporters to recruit other supporters, and organising voter registration drives ahead of polling day.

There seems a real tension here between the Internet’s colonisation of what might, in an earlier age, have



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been termed “machine politics” and its own new, hip, trendy image as a vehicle of communication. Some might feel that, while the old media deployment of attack ads for television might seem old hat, it’s still the creative side of campaign activity; while new media is inherently sexier, but actually has rather less creative jobs to do. While Kreiss doesn’t address this as such, it may come to be an increasingly important phenomenon as the internet becomes more fundamental to campaigning.

That’s not to say that Kreiss doesn’t tell us about the somewhat more “creative” sorts of new media activity. Some were tasked with maintaining a regular email flow, in the “voice” of Barack or Michelle Obama, or even David Plouffe. (Perhaps thankfully, the line was drawn at emails from Sasha and Malia!). And the campaign bloggers also came into prominence: though here, too, perhaps more attention could be focused on the tension inherent between “staying on message” and finding an authentic blogger’s voice.

The Obama campaign of 2008 had the advantage, denied to Dean four years earlier, of access to Facebook, Yahoo! and Google Groups: but again the main emphasis was on getting “everyone’s email lists and everyone’s activities and everything through [[MyBarackObama.com](http://MyBarackObama.com)].” Here too the implied tension between 100 flowers on the one side, and message discipline on the other, appears as one of the emerging themes of the extraordinary marriage of new media and electoral politics at the highest level.

Of course, Kreiss is quick to point out that internet innovation may now be a necessary condition of success, but it is certainly not sufficient. He rightly points to other “insurgent”, anti- party establishment candidates who have effectively embraced new media, but failed nonetheless. Think General Wesley Clark for the Democrats, and Ron Paul for the Republicans. Howard Dean himself, for all his innovation and early status as pre-primary front-runner, was soon swept aside by the much more conventional but well-funded campaigns of John Kerry and John Edwards. Obama was the first to tap into an “edgy” zeitgeist, running as an outsider, while using the internet extremely thoroughly in order to gain and retain access to the financing of a front-runner and establishment favourite. As Kreiss reminds us, it is still extraordinary to recall how Obama was able to beat both Hillary Clinton and then John McCain as a fundraiser; leaving aside any other considerations like campaign themes and likeability.

Political candidates’ readiness to accommodate new media has been part of the thread of political history in the USA and the UK. FDR with radio and JFK with television are the examples that are always trotted out. But also recall LBJ with the Daisy Girl ad, the most extraordinary political commercial of all time; Reagan’s mastery of the photo op; Bill Clinton’s use of under-the-radar political advertising long before Bob Dole was even nominated: all marked important milestones. Obama’s first (and, surely, second) campaign point the way into the next generation of that story, and Kreiss charts the dynamics well, in a book which combines a good political nose with enough techno-speak to satisfy most web enthusiasts!

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