BOOK REVIEW

The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy

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The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy

David Karpf

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Much has been said about the power of new and emerging technologies, particularly the Internet, to reshape politics, from its impact on vital democratic processes, such as political participation and deliberation, to its mobilizing function in large-scale social movements. Considerably less attention has been paid to the role of the Internet in changing the very fabric of the political organizations that can foster such outcomes. It is this organizational layer of American politics that David Karpf sets out to explore in The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy. In particular, the author seeks to understand how political organizations emerging in the early 2000s have harnessed technological affordances for political mobilization.

The book is conceptually divided into three parts. The opening chapter introduces broad assumptions about Internet effects on politics, and briefly describes the emerging online ecology of American political organizations. The next three chapters offer detailed insights into three distinct models of Internet-mediated political organizations, or “netroots”, and their use of technology via representative case studies. The last three chapters are devoted to exploring “netroots infrastructure organizations,” or the organizations that provide netroots with infrastructure support, as well as the perceived gap between liberals and conservatives in organizational infrastructure. Concluding thoughts

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concerning the problematic aspects as well as the hopeful prospects of the Internet’s role in politics are presented in the end.

In order to clearly position the main thesis of *The MoveOn Effect*, Karpf starts out by debunking two of the most prevalent myths about online politics—that the Internet has enabled “organizing without organizations” (i.e., formal organizations are no longer needed when every single individual is granted the opportunity to be a publisher and political organizer online) and, conversely, that the Internet has in fact left major organizations in American politics intact (i.e., major organizations remain unchanged because few voices can actually be heard, despite anyone’s ability to speak online). In contrast to these myths, Karpf posits that changes in information and communication technology have spurred profound transformations in the very organizational layer of American politics and thus, the real impact of technology comes through new models of organizing, or organizing with different kinds of organizations.

The bulk of the book then delves into a rich description of these novel kinds of organizations. Specifically, the book explores three distinct models of netroots—the so-called Internet-mediated “issue generalists” (e.g., MoveOn.org), online communities of interest (e.g., DailyKos), and neo-federated organizations (e.g., Democracy for America). Via a mix of qualitative techniques that includes key informant interviews, ethnographic observation and detailed content analysis, supplemented by two large-scale datasets, the book takes the reader on a journey through these organizations’ daily activity, with an eye towards their use of technology.

Throughout this description, we are reminded that in spite of the distinctions among them, all netroots follow the MoveOn recipe for defining membership and engaging fundraising. That is, regardless of type, netroots consider everyone on their e-mail list as a member. More or less “headline chasers,” these organizations are, as a result, able to reach the broadest possible audience and target their fundraising appeals to salient issues in political debates at any given time. Moreover, new technologies afford all netroots dramatically lower overhead costs compared to their legacy counterparts. As a result of their leveraging new technological tools, their operations are significantly less resource-intensive.

*The MoveOn Effect* further details the somewhat varying tactical repertoires of these organizations, partly in order to refute some critics’ view of them as mere “clicktivism.” The author warns that while e-petitions are of minimal value in and of themselves, they can be a very powerful tool as part of a comprehensive strategic repertoire that mixes a range of online and offline mobilization efforts. He concludes that such a repertoire is necessary for sustained political action.

Towards the end of the book, Karpf addresses the reasons for the apparent gap between liberals and conservatives in netroots infrastructure. While he entertains several possible explanations, Karpf makes the strongest case for what he coins as “the outparty innovation incentives.” According to this perspective, it is groups affiliated with the party not in power that take the most advantage of opportunities presented by new media technology. Consistent with this reasoning, he argues, “the MoveOn effect” occurred because several important technological developments unfolded right at the time when liberals were engaging in counter-mobilization. Whereas nascent organizations are born all the time, the author notes, it is primarily during periods of oppositional politics that they fully leverage technological affordances to build a large membership, sustainable fundraising, and reputational authority.

Case in point, Karpf suggests that netroots infrastructure organizations, a class of organizations which restrict their activity to providing technical infrastructure and operations support to new Internet-mediated political grassroots nonprofits, are a direct outcome of the progressive counter-mobilization efforts in the aftermath of the 2000, 2002, and especially the 2004 elections. Motivated by perceived infrastructure deficits compared to conservative organizing efforts on the media, policy,
and electoral fronts from the 1970s to the early 2000s, these supporting organizations, as indicated, seized opportunities presented by the changing media environment to aid the fledgling network of progressive political organizations in the early 2000s. Providing various forms of enabling infrastructure ranging from highly tangible infrastructures—online fundraising portals, website design, analytics-based testing, and email programs support, to intangible infrastructures—Internet-mediated community building and backchannel communication (i.e., private communication occurring in semi-visible Google Groups), they became indispensable to the progressive Internet-mediated advocacy organizations detailed in *The MoveOn Effect*. Of course, it remains to be seen how “the out-party innovation incentives” thesis plays out in conservatives’ counter-mobilization efforts that are likely to emerge in the aftermath of their historically significant losses in the 2012 election cycle, as well as of their shifting constituency.

Throughout the book, which provides a generally favorable account of the new organizational layer of American politics, the author maintains a poised and sensible tone, at times even striking a cautionary note. Despite concluding that the changes in American politics that *The MoveOn Effect* represents are dramatically consequential for democratic participation, Karpf readily acknowledges the limitations of the Internet “revolution,” imposed at once by the confines of the Internet medium and the American political system alike, as well as by the limited scale of civic engagement in the U.S.

Karpf further does not shy away from situating his largely descriptive discussion of new political organizations within some of the more controversial realms of political communication research. For example, the author adeptly invokes his observations regarding netroots’ use of technology to weigh in on the ongoing debate about the role of the Internet in revitalizing political participation and deliberation. Based on these observations, he resolutely suggests that the Internet is better suited for partisan communities of interest rather than for deliberation that cuts across party lines.

One of the strengths of Karpf’s pioneering work is undoubtedly fueled by his professional background. Because of his roots in both political advocacy and academia, Karpf offers a uniquely and richly nuanced account of the changing political organizations landscape, infused with a mix of practical and theoretical insights. The book is thus highly relevant not only to political scientists and pundits, but to grassroots political activists and Internet democracy advocates seeking to rally citizen support. In the face of the many divisive issues in contemporary society, *The MoveOn Effect* is no doubt a timely and valuable contribution to our understanding and practice of political organizing in the 21st century.

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