



TEACHING AN OLD WORLD NEW TRICKS

DISCUSSION PAPER FOLLOWING THE SEMINAR

“CAMPAIGNING FOR THE FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF CAMPAIGNING”

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INTRODUCTION

Saint Gilles is an old working class borough of Brussels with a longstanding socialist tradition going back to the 19th century. Like many comparable areas around Europe's cities, it has had its problems too, as industrial decline and urban decay breed social alienation. It also shares with many of these areas the more recent process of gentrification, with an early wave of aspirant hipsters followed by an increase in prices for property, foodstuffs and the all-important marker of living costs in Belgium: beer.

The difference with Saint Gilles, however, is the more obvious diversity of the place. In the trendy bars around the Parvis de Saint Gilles, you will find groups of Belgians congregating in Brasserie de l'Union, newcomer Eurocrats escaping from the institutional life in Brasserie du Parvis, and Portuguese blue collar workers in Pub Euro Portugal, Moroccan and Algerian families in Aux Délices de Meknès. Here you find the European public sphere, or a version of it. Upon the last vestiges of old solidaristic foundations, one sees an edifice of individualistic confidence of a young educated cohort, but an edifice that is precarious in its construction. Having eschewed the old infrastructure of Belgian and European social solidarity, the often oblivious clientele blog, tweet, share, post and "like" through the various social media at their disposal in establishments with such unabashedly partisan names as Bar Liberté, Bar Égalité, Brasserie de l'Union and Maison du Peuple. The feeling has not gone away, but the message has changed.

On 4 November 2008, the Maison du Peuple lived up to its name as the "House of the People" as the multitudes gathered to witness, to hope for and to celebrate what would become colloquially known as "Obama Night". Amazingly, this was the house in which Lenin addressed a crowd of proletarian revolutionary activists in 1924 and which had served the needs of trade unions and other civil society organisations ever since. But the people present were not looking to the past. Both Lenin and Obama would be insulted by the idea that the people present in the House of the People in 1924 and 2008 were looking for the same things. To the social democratic left in Europe, who can usually be found somewhere between these two men on the political spectrum, this might be presented as a problem, but it need not be. The message is the most important thing, but the manner in which it is delivered, the context of the time and the character of the messenger matter a great deal too.

Thus we come to the practical elements of what we must learn from those outside of the European Union's political system(s). I was recently lucky enough to attend a seminar in Washington DC, organised by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Center for American Progress Action Fund, entitled "Campaigning for the Future and the Future of Campaigning". Having been re-elected in November 2012, President Obama is obviously doing something right, and this seminar

sought to bring strategists from President Obama's campaign team together with their European social democratic counterparts in order to facilitate progressive political outcomes on both sides of the Atlantic.

Amid the frenzy of media commentary on social media in the Obama campaign, one could be forgiven for thinking that it is possible to tweet the path to elected office. Yet even the welcome speech from the CAP exhorted us to not "learn the wrong lessons" from the US elections. Rather, it behoves us to look at what is actually transferrable to the European context. While Lenin might have believed his model of revolution in Tsarist Russia would be transferrable to the workers of Saxe-Coburg Belgium with its corporatist model of governance, thankfully he was wrong. Let us recognise the same when we seek our own European "Obama Night" in 2014. Unlike the US, the member states of the EU employ parliamentary systems for the most part. While party leaders and candidates for the premier positions in government (Chancellor, Prime Minister, Taoiseach etc) are very much to the forefront, aside from France and Cyprus, European political systems generally do not have an executive head of state. At European level, it is less clear again. To date, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission have been selected through procedures more akin to the conclave to select the Catholic Pontiff than to the direct elections of America's First Citizen, even with the mitigation of the Electoral College.

Essentially, in Europe the political process is boring and slow. This has not always been a bad thing (teenagers often see their parents as boring, no matter how benevolent their intentions). In the post-war years it brought stability, prosperity, greater equality and social mobility, and peace. Yet as the present crisis continues, the gears of the machine grind ever slower. While the cool Uncle Sam has some manoeuvrability to actually deal with the problems of a nasty financial crisis, Europe shows lethargy. To mirror this, European election campaigns are lethargic, mired in circular arguments and too easily present the electorate with a compromise before the argument has even begun. If we are to invigorate politics and public life, we must engage the citizens more effectively. This means more than voter mobilisation at election time. It requires real empowerment. To do this we must empower our own political machinery in the social democratic parties and the "progressive infrastructure" by accessing the most effective resources. The approach should be three-pronged: information, mobilisation and message.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER? WELL, IT HELPS!

Data and analytics provide us with a better understanding of the electorate. In the US context, very expensive technology was used to find trends and map those trends using complex mathematical algorithms. Certain data were purchased for transient groups such as students. This was added to the “vote builder” which collected voter information locally and aggregated it centrally. In spite of the overall expense, which would be prohibitive under most EU electoral laws, practitioners emphasise that the Democrat Party had begun developing this technology since Al Gore’s ill-fated election campaign in 2000. They advise party nerve-centres and strategists to start small, prove their value to the grassroots, manage stakeholders and educate campaigners. These days, there is a plethora of free software available online that can be utilised by creative campaigners and analysts.

The 2012 campaign did not, however, rely solely on the quantitative analyses mentioned above. In order to shape their message and link it to the concerns of the electorate, they carried out ethnographic studies and focus groups. One of the notable realisations was that the US was, and still is, undergoing a reorientation in terms of economic thinking. The paradigm is shifting from the abject individualism of the post-Reagan era to one which expects reciprocity and fairness in economic relations. President Obama’s campaign could point to measures already implemented to associate themselves with this paradigm shift. Furthermore, they could point to their opponent as a representative of predatory economics rather than the reciprocity the electorate craves.

In terms of the ways in which information can be collected, Europe has much stricter privacy and spending laws, and for very good reasons. Even if this means that campaigning in Europe could not reach the level of sophistication of our American counterparts, there are still many lessons to learn. Many of the methods used were incredibly innovative and a significant amount of them are adaptable to the European context. For one thing, much information is given voluntarily and there must be ways for parties to access these without breaching data protection laws. Information volunteered by voters (such as through the “Quick Donate” button on the Obama 2012 website) allowed strategists to micro target the various messages of the campaign using the aforementioned algorithms. The quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research they carried out complemented each other.

MOBILISATION

There has been a great deal of commentary on the use of social media in political life since 2008. In this narrative, President Obama's campaign apparatus emerges as a vanguard of this trend, with the 2012 campaign as the pinnacle to date. However, the strategists at the centre of this operation warn against an overarching focus on social media. We should not use them for their own sake; rather, they are a tool to be put at the service of the overall campaign. Having said that, the use of "targeted sharing" on Facebook, and the creative use of Twitter, can significantly bolster the potential for exposure and the capacity for mobilisation among certain demographics and cohorts. The key to its successful utilisation involve creating enough space for creative people who are not completely built into the political process. It is important in this context to have people who think outside the box of traditional political parameters, in what are non-traditional media.

There are great opportunities to link this to the broader progressive infrastructure. Civil society organisations, NGOs and trade unions are the original social networks. They serve as great sources of information and platforms for the mobilisation of activists. In the US context, unions like the AFL-CIO used incentives to encourage activists to continue their valuable work. However, these went beyond material gifts and went to the heart of the campaign. Thus, through a credits based system, activists could influence which campaign ads were chosen and felt central to the overall campaign. The 2012 campaign adopted a philosophy of "Respect. Empower. Include. Win!" as the basis for its grassroots organisation, which was then organised on a "snowflake model" through which national aspirations were translated into local action and vice versa.

While people point to the paucity of resources at the disposal of European strategists when compared to our American counterparts, the emphasis should be on adequately prioritising resources. The electoral process in both places is still based on a competition for the attention and the votes of the electorate. There is therefore no difference in the necessity to find the most effective route to acquiring someone's vote. Likewise, it helps to find out where are we most likely to achieve the most votes. Effective quantitative research can determine where the candidate spends most of his/her time while nuanced qualitative analysis can cater the message to the individuals and groups in question. This can also be taken into account by the proposed Commission President candidate. Mobilisation is about talking to the right people and talking to plenty of them. For an electoral campaign to be successful, it must include a huge volume of direct conversations with the electorate, either through the candidates in person or through the field campaign teams.

In order to be operable, the party apparatus must build a comprehensible strategy and adequately educate the campaign team on how this will work. This is at the core of the motto "Respect. Empower. Include. Win!" Of course, in the European case, we also face the problem of running 28

separate electoral campaigns under the guise of one election. However, a clear, common message among progressives can serve the purpose of unifying the units of mobilisation in advocating a single European message.

MESSAGE AND NARRATIVE

Just like the mechanisms for mobilisation, the message and narrative of the Obama 2012 campaign were drawn from an effective combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Using this arsenal, they were able to control the context of the campaign, which was absolutely necessary given the incumbency of President Obama. As such, the message was delivered that the problems the US faced could not be fixed overnight. Romney presented himself as a successful businessman who could get things done. To counter this, President Obama's team inferred that Romney was a risk candidate who could be detrimental to the interests of ordinary Americans. Essentially, the Obama campaign sought to own the middle class. While Romney had considerable success, it was often at the expense of ordinary workers. What was to stop him furthering this predatory agenda at the helm of government?

Here we see how the Obama campaign sought to define Romney early in the race, before he could define himself. In this sense, we are on the back foot in Europe. Just like in the US, the financial crisis has a direct impact on economic and social relations, and on the political landscape. The complacent among us might assume that this would herald a return to the centre left view of economics that comes with it. Yet complacency is just a couple of degrees short of hubris. There has been no swing to the left in Europe because the conservatives have taken the initiative in defining this crisis. For progressives to have any hope of emerging in a leadership position, it will be necessary to take ownership of the narrative and present it effectively to the electorate.

It is important to establish a link between citizens' aspirations and values and our overall narrative. Rehashing old ideological arguments in their abstraction is from an ivory tower does little for the bread and butter concerns of the average voter. This does not mean treating voters like they are stupid. Effective leaders acknowledge the difficulties of those they lead and successful candidates must do the same with those they purport to represent. Link those difficulties into the overall narrative to give a sense of empowerment to the act of voting. In this the tone is all-important.

The role of the party strategist is highly important in establishing this narrative. However, the day of political gurus like Karl Rove is gone. Data analysts provide information necessary to forming the overall content and context of the campaign but there is no substitute for an effective narrative that

appeals to people's values. Again, this needs to be addressed to people in everyday language and appeal to genuine concerns of people. There is no more space for the clichés and hollow rhetoric that exemplify the distance between elites and the masses. Such language is redundant, remote and, frankly, idiotic.

CONCLUSION

The United States and the European Union have separate political cultures but the obsession with the two Obama campaigns among both political hacks and the population in general shows a desire for a similar type of mobilisation in political life. There is no need to change the whole electoral system to accommodate this desire. However, it should be and it is possible to remove the European public sphere from the remoteness in which it now finds itself. EU level politics are, for many, even further removed from everyday life than national parliamentary politics, in spite of the daily application of the laws made in Brussels. The legislative process is technocratic, the legislation technical and dense, the institutions are aloof and the practitioners come in a bubble-wrapped package derogatorily called "Brussels".

If nothing else, the historic role of progressives, of whatever hue, has purported to be one of empowerment. Thus, in facing the electorate, the task of European progressives must be to open up and move on from a system that is often seen as protective of insiders. Of course, when utilising the American example, there are obvious practical impediments related to data protection and funding restrictions, and long may those impediments exist! There is also the fact that Europeans operate in parliamentary systems, in most cases with list-based voting. Yet this is neither here nor there. We can learn the lessons that are relevant, from utilising smart phone apps on the doorstep to aggregate voting to the ancient art of door-to-door canvassing.

As the political focus now turns to 2014 and the European Parliamentary elections, the ultimate task is to return the electoral process to a position as a basis for empowerment. It is true that the European parties have committed themselves to the idea of each having a single candidate for the position of European Commission President too. Unless this process has, at its heart, a message of empowerment and of connectivity between citizens and institutions, it will be doomed to fall flat. Progressives cannot rely on others to do this for them and this will be a major challenge in the year ahead to take the leadership in this process of mobilisation.