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### Panorama

## In Obama's Online Footsteps: Web Election Campaigns in Germany



Winning elections through the **Internet: American President** Barack Obama has led the way. But it doesn't always work. Web activists find the German boring and inefficient.

Internet election campaigns impressum wiki best of über u

At the first German "political camp" in Berlin in May 2009, politics and Web 2.0 met one another. About 600 politicians and web users swapped ideas about the participative possibilities of the Internet. At the so-called "heavyweights session", online campaign managers from the CDU, SPD, FDP, the Greens and the Left Party sat at the podium.

There was only one non-party representative among the panel, Markus Beckedahl, author and operator of the blog netzpolitik.org. He is regarded as one of the German pioneers of political Internet communication. "Sometime, I thought, we should let the curtain down, use a voice distorter and let the public guess which party is now speaking", recalls Beckedahl. The strategies presented seemed to him to be chosen at random and interchangeable. "Everyone wanted to try the Net, create participative offerings and in this way somehow take a dialogue oriented approach."

## "The participative offerings make a strained impression"

In the style of Obama's platform mybarackobama.com, all German parties now offer their own online communities, so-called social election networks: meinespd.net, myfdp.de, wurzelwerk.gruene.de, linksaktiv.de and team2009.de, die CDU-Version. Beckedahl remarks that he himself, as a voter, hardly feels that he is



being addressed by these endeavours. "The participative offerings of all the parties are fairly boring, make a strained impression, and all look nearly the same. The hoped-for broad effect has failed to materialise: "It appears that at these sites mainly party members network with each other," says Beckedahl. "There is little engagement to be seen from voters who want to participate."

Blogger Beckedahl compares the party web sites to election campaign offices: "No voter goes there voluntarily and collects a flyer. The parties know that. They and their candidates therefore go to virtual places where voters gather - in social networks, on You Tube and Twitter".

# "The Net doesn't yet decide elections"



The interest in the Net displayed by politicians has led to a competition amongst the communities. This has been shown by the fifth short study Politics in Web 2.0 by netzpolitik.org from July 2009. For example, in the summer of 2009, StudiVZ, a social networking platform for students, started an "election central", offering

politicians a "high-quality profile" for their self-presentation. The German network now has more party supporters on its platform than its rival Facebook, where practically all German politicians also have a profile. This has had no influence, however, on the number of supporters for the top candidates of the CDU and the SPD: "Angela Merkel continues to lead a trump with her Chancellor bonus, leaving Frank-Walter Steinmeier ever farther behind her", the study sums up.

Though the political interest in the Net generally rose with the European elections of 2009, the degree of virtual mobilisation for the federal election remains slight: "The few thousand supporters of the parties and top candidates in the social networks are a very small group compared with the 60 million eligible voters", notes Beckedahl. "The net doesn't yet decide elections."

# "Political parties have to change their form of communication"

In order to be as successful as Obama on the Net, the German parties have to change their form of communication", says Patrick Brauckmann. He is a freelance editor at the web site politik-digital.de, runs the blog kampagnen-fabrik.de and is currently writing a dissertation on Online Communities and the 2009



Federal Election at the University of Leipzig. "As in 2005, the Internet still serves the parties only as an information platform. They attempt to impose their classical PR strategies on the Net", says Brauckmann, "but that doesn't work". Social media are oriented to dialogue and participation. "The accustomed one-way communication of the parties is incapable of motivating anybody to become politically engaged."

His advice to the parties: "Don't try to use all possible tools, but rather really adapt your own communication strategy to the Internet". Fear of losing control often hinders the parties from taking this step. "The big question is how campaigns can be controlled when voters participate in them directly", says Brauckmann. Obama led the way - even in the case of a law that a group of Internet users opposed, "Obama sought a dialogue, defended his view and finally sold it to them".

What is important, according to Brauckmann, is to take Internet users seriously and to give them a signal that their opinions are being included in the process of political decision making. Beckedahl agrees: "The parties should understand their campaigns as a controlled form of losing control, in which the election workers are underway as motivated ambassadors, but also co-define the campaign".

# Politics independent of election campaigns



Internet users who don't want to wait for a new form of communication culture to descend upon the political parties can already lay claim to political participation at abgeordnetenwatch.de. The platform sees itself as the long arm of the voter in parliament. The concept: citizens ask, MPs answer - and answer publicly. In this way, unanswered questions become as well

known as attempts to duck clear statements. The participative portal, which was founded in 2004 from the ranks of the association "More Democracy", wants to create transparency and grass roots politics. "We understand ourselves as a dialogue platform", explains Martin Reyher, editor at abgeordnetenwatch.de. By such means, Net users can influence politics independently of

elections. For example, when the of the parliamentary leaders of the CDU and the SPD agreed to a further raise in expense allowances, this led to a storm of indignation at abgeordnetenwatch.de. There were hundreds of questions from citizens for their MPs. In statements at the web site, many parliamentarians distanced themselves from the plans. The dialogue is documented in the site's archives, the "voter's digital memory", and available to everyone. In the end, the parliamentary leaders failed to achieve a majority in their own ranks. The raise in expenses was dropped.

has a diploma in sociology and is a freelance journalist living in Cologne. Among other assignments, he works for the Internet editorial staff of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

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