

THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN POLITICS: BATTLEGROUNDS
TEXAS AND THE MOBIUS STRATEGY IN THE 2014 ELECTION

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the strategy and impact that the Political Action Committee Battleground Texas had in the 2014 election. The goal of the study was to answer three research questions: 1) What process did Battleground Texas have for a digital communication strategy? 2) What role did the Mobius Strategy play in Battleground Texas' work as the coordinated campaign in Texas? 3) How did the digital focus of Battleground Texas affect voter registration and voter turnout? The research questions were examined using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research. In-depth interviews and participant observation were combined with analysis of voting registration and voting patterns to formulate the results. Results indicate that the methods used by Battleground Texas were good models for future campaigns, and that the change was incremental, but there was a difference.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Political campaigns in the United States have been engaging in digital communication since at least 2000 (Towner & Dulio, 2012). However, like virtually all realms of digital communication, it is constantly changing and evolving. Every election cycle sees new and interesting things tried, abandoned, succeed, and copied. Test groups dictate what emails should be sent, what language should be used, what personalization should be added, and what techniques should be replicated. Campaigns will send out different email donation requests to smaller groups and decide based on which email format does better to send to the mass email list. This has led to campaigns moving from general websites and email mailing lists, to very targeted voter persuasion techniques online.

Texas politics have also evolved digitally. When then Texas Governor George W. Bush ran for president in 2000, he had very little online presence. By the 2006 election, Governor Rick Perry's website listed all of his endorsements. In 2010, the Dallas Morning News called Perry's reelection campaign "more text than talk" in reference to his burgeoning online communication department (Jeffers, 2010).

During the 2014 midterm election, there was a sudden influx of using O's instead of zeroes in numbers. Apparently, the heading "Donate \$100" looks better and attracted more attention than the "Donate \$100" counterpart. Either a focus group may have decided the style of using O's looked better, or a campaign might've tested an email with competing subject lines and saw a larger donation response from one with O's (Gomez,

personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014). This is one of many examples of new tactics used in 2014 alone.

One such group utilizing new digital political communication strategies was Battleground Texas (BGTX). The Political Action Committee (PAC) founded in 2013 acted as the coordinated campaign front for many candidates running on the Democratic ticket during the 2014 gubernatorial campaign in Texas. Working out of an office in Fort Worth, BGTX worked hand-in-hand launching the Wendy Davis gubernatorial campaign. BGTX focused on voter registration, voter turnout, and voter protection as three of their chief goals. In order to do this, BGTX used micro-targeting of possible voters, digital and social media outreach to the Democratic base, and data-mining of content in order to help figure out which voters to target.

Since the launch of the PAC, BGTX has helped fundraise and organize for all the Democrats running in Texas. Expanding on tactics used by the Obama campaign in 2012, BGTX utilized a new framework for the 2014 midterms: the Mobius Strategy (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014). The purpose of this research is to explore the Mobius Strategy and the impact it had on the 2014 election in Texas.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet and Political Campaigns

The 2004 presidential primaries saw the first emergence of political campaigns utilizing the Internet (Cesare, 2011). Although Republican presidential candidate John McCain used the Web to help fundraise and rally support in 2000 (Towner & Dulio, 2012), it wasn't until 2004 when Democrat presidential candidate Howard Dean used the Internet to strategize and for grassroots fundraising and social networking that Web-based political campaigns took off. Unfortunately for Dean, this Internet community he helped to build was also his downfall. On January 19, 2004, Howard Dean enthusiastically yelled into the microphone during the Iowa Democratic caucus about moving forward from the defeat of the evening to the next state. At the end of his overeager rant he let out a "barbaric yawp" that ended up spreading throughout not only television and radio, but also the Internet community Dean had helped to grow (Cesare, 2011, p. 105). The clip of the "Dean Scream" went viral, an Internet term basically following the same concept as a virus itself. The content spread from user to user, much like a cold would spread between people. Content and information get passed from user to user with ever-increasing speed and reach (Botha & Reyneke, 2013). Much like a contagion, going viral involves rapid spreading among influential people (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie, 2013).

As seen in Fig. 1, the "Dean Scream" turned into just such a contagion that spread quickly across the Web. Dean's campaign was already faltering, but this incident proved

too difficult to recover from (Cesare, 2011). What followed the “cracked falsetto ‘Yaaaah!’” was a quick and terminal end to the campaign (Cesare, 2011, p. 105).

Figure 1: The infamous “Dean Scream”

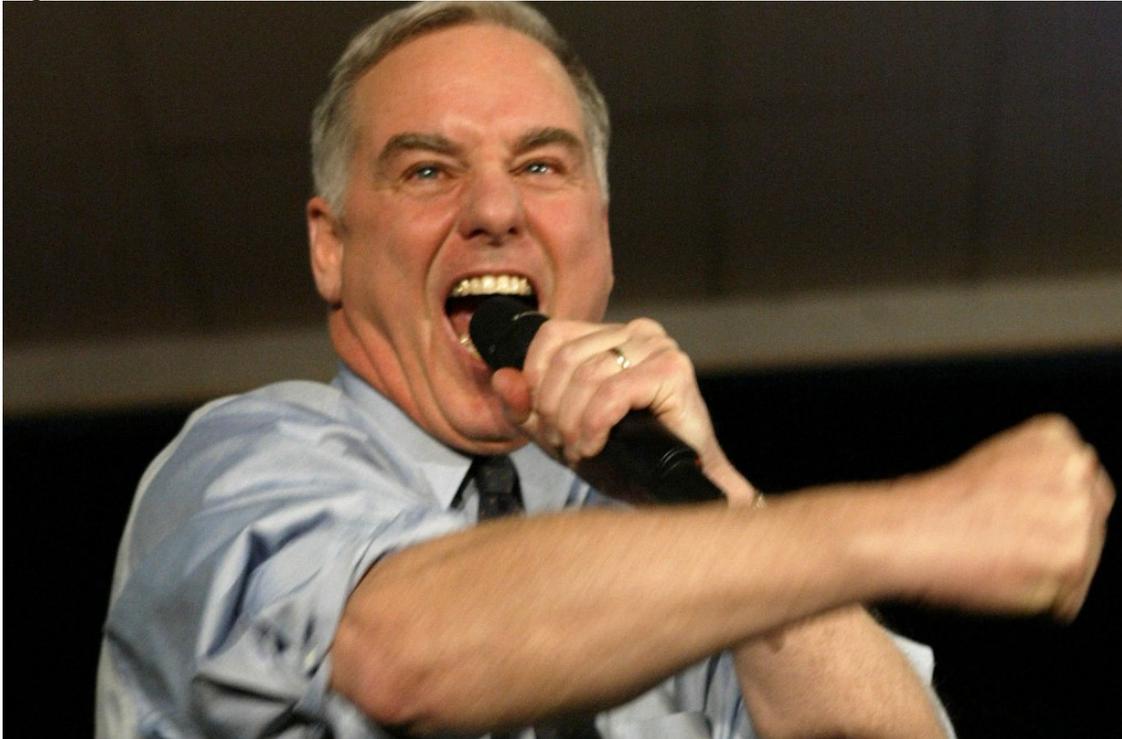


Photo courtesy of AP/Paul Sancya

The next presidential campaign cycle utilized a much larger influx of digital media. Democrat Barack Obama used an unprecedented and untested strategy against his Republican opponent John McCain in the 2008 presidential election (Abroms & Lefebvre, 2009). The Obama campaign utilized the concept of new media when strategizing for the election. Cindy Royal described the idea of new media:

The Internet, now driven by Web 2.0 technologies that enable collaboration and sharing, has fostered a new age of participation. Blogs, social networks, photo and video sharing sites, and online virtual worlds provide unique opportunities for individuals to communicate and contribute to the creation of culture. Consumers

are producers, and traditional media companies are searching for ways to capitalize on the collective production of the masses. (2008, p. 414)

The Obama campaign recognized the significance of the development of such new media and utilized this network to reach out to their supporters, engaging with them and inspiring them (Abroms & Lefebvre, 2009). They specifically focused on “the use of digital technologies such as the Internet, digital video, and mobile devices” to their advantage (Abroms & Lefebvre, 2009, p. 415).

The Obama campaign used a cutting-edge technological campaign in 2008, utilizing Twitter, Facebook, and smart phones, none of which were widespread and mainstream at the time (Scherer, 2012). The staff for Obama’s digital team was nearly 100 in 2008, whereas McCain had less than 20 (Kaye, 2009). The Obama campaign utilized these technologies for engagement and get out the vote, but a huge component of the online campaigning was donations. In 2008, the Obama team raised almost \$500 million from online donations alone (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

As strong as the Obama campaign was during the 2008 election, their digital presence and dominance only increased in the 2012 presidential cycle. The Obama team trained a large staff for digital organizing during the 2008 election, and used that platform to build an infrastructure that continued to turn out digital organizers each year following the election (Delany, 2010). This ever-increasing digital team increased the campaign online donations by nearly \$200 million to \$690 million in 2012 (Fitzpatrick, 2012). It was not just in monetary measures that the Obama campaign was so dominant, either. In September of 2012, less than two months before the election, the Obama campaign held a clear digital victory over Republican challenger Mitt Romney. The share of voice, or

number of clicks on a website, for Obama in September was a staggering 93.3% over the top 20,000 publishers on the Web (Delo, 2012). Romney's 6.7% share of voice was directly reflected in the number of creatives, basically all parts of an advertisement: visuals, text, audio, etc., that his team displayed across the Web in the same month: 90 compared with Obama's 497 (Delo, 2012). "The scale and sophistication of the Obama campaign's digital ad operation should come as no surprise given its well-documented track record of organizing and fundraising online" (Delo, 2012, p. 1).

Similar studies by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism came to the same conclusion: Barack Obama dominated the digital landscape (Moore, 2012). Again, the disparities found were staggering. During a two week time period in June of 2012, Pew examined the Romney and Obama campaigns' presence on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and the candidates' own websites. In that timespan the Obama campaign published 614 times, or posts, whereas the Romney team only published 168 times (Moore, 2012). The largest disparity was seen on Twitter, where Obama tweeted an average of 29 times per day, compared to Romney's single, solitary daily tweet (Moore, 2012). These disparities were not accidental, but a definitive part of the Obama strategy.

Although during the 2008 election Twitter was seen as "a geek's pastime" (Scherer, 2012, p. 25), by 2012 it had become much more. When looking at Twitter, it is worth investigating it as more than just a social media network, but as a legitimate source of news. Consumers of media take multiple forms, including newspapers, radio, and television. Twitter has become another media source, and with the use of retweets, the act of a Twitter user reposting someone else's post to their own timeline, information can,

and does, spread through various social networks (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Viewing Twitter as a source of news, then the difference between sending out a single tweet per day versus sending 29 messages is not only a large difference, but also seemingly a very poor strategic mistake. Since campaigns are often about disseminating one's message to the public, ignoring a news outlet that would allow for the dissemination of a candidate's message is an additional strategic mistake.

A candidate getting his or her message out to voters is the most difficult challenge (Spanje et al., 2013). This reason is a major factor as to why candidates place so much money and emphasis on television ads, and why political ads skyrocket before an election (Kaid, Gobetz, Garner, Leland, & Scott, 1993). The main goal for a campaign is effectiveness, and utilizing media effectively is a great benefit to campaign effectiveness (Spanje et al., 2013). Candidates not utilizing social media, a new medium to get a political message out, are clearly missing a huge opportunity to increase their voter recognition.

The Obama camp looked at the digital world as a crucial aspect of the 2012 election. They went to Silicon Valley and hired technologists, like a chief technology officer from an online T-shirt company and a technology director from Pixar Animation, to design and code their websites (Fitzpatrick, 2012). This digital planning paid off, and not just in dollars. The 2012 election saw the Obama campaign have 34 million Facebook fans, with 1.2 million of them active in their Facebook app (Fitzpatrick, 2012). The most absurd statistic, though, was the percentage of American Facebook users who were friends with an Obama fan: 98% (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

This online presence paid massive dividends, financially. The team, which was given large amounts of freedom to design their own work, was responsible for 404 fundraising emails in 2012 (Fitzpatrick, 2012). In addition to the financial successes, they also greatly increased their reach. While half of their targeted 18-29 voting demographic was unreachable via phone, 85% of them were connected to an Obama Facebook app user (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

The online disparity was a clear contributor to the electoral victories at the polls. The Obama campaign utilized the Internet, digital video, and mobile devices to “gain supporters and to mobilize them into action in ways that were unprecedented and untested in political campaigns” (Abroms & Lefebvre, 2009, p. 415). Whereas many campaigns have discussed the fact that digital media should have a seat at the table, the Obama 2012 campaign gave them two: one for digital, and one for technology and analytics (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Jeremy Bird was the National Field Director for the Obama campaign in 2012. He was the Ohio Field Director of the Obama campaign in 2008, and after that election he moved to Chicago and started working on Obama’s reelection, where he ran the entire Obama ground game for 2012 (Lizza, 2012). Jenn Brown replaced Bird in Ohio as the Field Director for the Obama campaign in 2014, and is credited for keeping the state firmly locked in Obama’s column (Burns, 2013). Their first endeavor after the 2012 election was to move to Texas.

Texas Politics

The state of Texas has long been a strongly held Conservative state. Most elections come and go with very little fanfare, as the Republican candidates are seen as a

lock to win. Texas hadn't seen a Democratic governor since 1992 with Ann Richards, and hadn't voted Democrat in a presidential election since Jimmy Carter in 1976. Bird and Brown did not see things this way, however. After running arguably the best campaign in political history, certainly from a digital perspective, Bird and Brown brought their talents to Texas and formed Battleground Texas (BGTX), a Political Action Committee (PAC) aimed at turning Texas blue sometime in the next few election cycles.

A Political Action Committee is a political organization that raises and spends money to help support candidates or ideals in an election. PACs range in ideology and goals as much as candidates seeking office ("What is a PAC?" n.d.). BGTX, like any PAC, raises and spends money in an attempt to further their ideological agenda. BGTX is structured in many departments, but this research focuses on the digital department. Christina Gomez is the head of the digital department with five people under her, including Grant Fuller, Tyler Evans, and Jessica Adair.

Their first hire was Christina Gomez as a Digital Director to round out the top three members of BGTX. Bird had learned that a strong digital campaign is essential, and hired Gomez as the Digital Director with the intent of building a PAC that was digital oriented from the get-go. Texas had not elected a Democrat to a statewide office since 1994, so BGTX was facing an uphill battle (Richter, 2013).

Gomez was the Creative Strategist for the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in 2012, and Battleground hired her as their Digital Director. Her responsibilities for the DNC were to identify "digital strategy and brainstorming digital products to amplify the President's message, define Republicans, raise the DNC's national profile, and to raise money" (Gomez, personal communication, Dec. 2, 2013). Bird and Brown

recognized that grassroots organizations needed a strong digital presence. The idea that used to permeate politics that “the future was giving digital a seat at the leadership table” has been replaced by recognizing that “digital is the table” (Gomez, personal communication, Dec. 2, 2013).

With the acknowledgment of the importance of digital media in politics, BGTX has continued the work that started under the Obama campaign. BGTX was looking for similar success from Gomez when they hired her as the Digital Director. Allowing a wide swath of control, Gomez developed the Mobius Strategy as the main thrust for the digital arm of BGTX. The Mobius Strategy encourages volunteers that have expressed interest in the campaign to get offline and come to an event. This is where normal digital strategy in campaigns ends. The Mobius Strategy, however, encourages those people to get back online and encourage their online communities to also participate in offline campaign activities. This becomes a perpetual motion machine for political action, where a volunteer is in a Mobius of action, going from online to offline to back online and starting over. A Mobius is an infinite loop, one that connects in on itself so that it never ends, so the Mobius Strategy attempts to replicate that endless loop in the political cycle.

We will eventually break down any barrier between your online life and your offline life. Those will be incredibly seamless because I don't think that people are two different people online and offline. I think that you are this one person who also has an online presence, maybe on your Facebook, and then you have friends that are offline and we want you to be able to engage both. (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014)

Seemingly, the original ideal scenario was to turn Texas to a Democratic state by the 2016 presidential election (Burka, 2013). Even Brown recognized how long this fight might take, “If 2020 is the year we turn this state around, that is OK with me” (Rapoport, 2013). However, Texas politics threw a wrench in those plans.

In June of 2013, State Senator Wendy Davis successfully stopped an anti-abortion bill. Her Twitter followers exploded during and after the 13-hour filibuster. At the beginning of her filibuster, Davis had 6,000 Twitter followers. This jumped eight-fold to 48,000 by the end of the day even though she hadn’t posted a single tweet during the course of her filibuster (Kelly, 2013).

The newfound fame for Davis led to her gubernatorial bid. Her national exposure, including frequent television appearances and the September cover of Vogue magazine, prompted an outpouring of support, both financial and political (Richter, 2013). Once Democrats had their first nationally recognized candidate in years, the Battleground folks jumped on board as well. They launched a partnership with the Davis campaign, throwing their full weight and support behind the Democrat. Brown recognized the precarious nature of such a high-profile campaign, but felt it was unavoidable. “It was a tough decision and the state was not quite ready, but we knew with a candidate like Wendy, we could make more progress in a year than we ever could have otherwise” (“Stakeholders report,” 2015, p. 2).

With Davis’ celebrity came new opportunities for fundraising, both from within and outside of Texas, which was unlike anything Democrats have seen for quite some time. From January 24 to February 22 of 2014, Davis outraised Abbott \$2.85 million to \$2.45 million (Davidsen, 2014). Although Abbott still had a significant cash supply, his

cash on hand almost triple what Davis had, out-fundraising a Republican in Texas was unheard of (Davidsen, 2014). Democrats were certainly mobilized and ready to fight (Schultheis, 2013).

The outcome of the 2014 election, however, was anything but a victory. There was a national trend of massive Republican victories in even typical Democrat states. Illinois' incumbent Democratic governor lost, and the traditionally Democratic stronghold of Maryland saw a Republican governor elected (Jacobson, 2014). Virtually every Democratic possible office was lost to Republicans nationwide (Logiurato & Walker, 2014). This trend of a sitting president's party getting trounced in a midterm election is not new. In fact, since 1876 only three midterm elections saw an increase in the president's party in the House of Representatives: 1934, 1998, and 2002 (McGhee, 2014). Although the exact cause of this "presidential midterm slump" is up for debate, the phenomenon "is one of the most regular and salient features of U.S. elections" (Folke & Snyder, 2012, p. 931). This consistent phenomenon was true for Texas as well. Davis lost to Abbott by approximately 283,000 fewer votes than the Democratic candidate lost by in 2010 (Thorburn, 2014).

Mobius and Two-Step Flow

The Mobius Strategy of creating opinion leaders out of volunteers holds its roots in the two-step flow theory, first conceptualized by Paul Lazarsfeld in 1940. Using two-step flow in the digital media realm means BGTX took a very old theoretical approach to communication and modernized it. Although there has been research done on two-step flow and digital media, such as Twitter, BGTX is taking two-step flow and adapting it for

their own purposes. Making it so the steps lead back into themselves, they are attempting to make a perpetual digital motion machine from the two-step flow principle.

During the 1940 presidential campaign, researchers in Erie County, Ohio tried to determine from which medium people received their information about the candidates. Expecting most people to list radio, newspapers, or magazines, since television was not yet widely available, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his team began asking hundreds of people how they learned about Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Wendell Wilkie. The results, however, were not what researchers were expecting. Rather than the traditional media sources, many people listed “other people” as their source for information (DeFleur, 2010).

Propaganda theorists had believed that mass media was a powerful indoctrinating tool that would directly influence people’s voting choices, buying decisions, and other behaviors (Rogers, 1994). Researchers realized there was a flaw in this original theory, and they adapted and began researching interpersonal communication (DeFleur, 2010). What they found was that certain individuals, labeled as opinion leaders, paid very close attention to the media and then used their personal influence to disperse out the information to people in their social circles (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Then, in the 1950s, Elihu Katz joined with Lazarsfeld to further cement the two-step flow theory (DeFluer, 2010).

Lazarsfeld took the work with the two-step flow and established university research institutes, the emphasis on his methodology, which he considered his greatest addition to communication research (Rogers, 1994). This institutional focus led to many

years of research in communications, with the two-step flow theory playing a significant role.

This theory has been developed and modified since the 1940s, naturally. In 1976, John Robinson found that many social networks between friends were organized in a much more horizontal fashion than what the original two-step flow theory had posited (Robinson, 1976). Capitalizing on Everett Rogers' diffusion process, in which information is slowly diffused throughout a populous, Robinson theorized that opinion leaders conversed between themselves, and that any influence shared between them would not constitute the dissemination from mass media (Robinson, 1976). Other studies helped confirm this multi-step flow process in which information traveled in different directions, and the multi-step flow process has been a dominating factor in research into information and influence since Robinson published his study (Stansberry, 2012).

The evolution of this theory has continued to embrace the digital component. Some research has pointed to a one-step flow model, where media targets their audience so skillfully and directly that they are disseminating information without the process of opinion leaders (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). In this model, information flows directly to the intended audience with no intermediaries through the advent of social media and other technologies (Stansberry, 2012).

However, not all focus of current research looks at communications as a one-step process, rather a lot of focus has been placed on digital opinion leaders, as researchers look at the role platforms like Twitter play on spreading and sharing information such as climate change (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, opinion leaders are people “who exert influence on the opinions of others” (Hellevik & Bjorklund, 1991, p. 158). Specifically, opinion leaders are seen as reliable and credible because they have a knowledge base derived from position or experience that consumers find trustworthy (Tripathi, 2014). The traditional model for opinion leaders is out of date, however. Because of digital technologies, access to information has increased greatly. These technologies also allow for more dissemination of information more easily (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014). Studies have been conducted trying to define this new world of easily accessible information. Since it isn’t just an elite group that controls access to information, new metrics have to be measured, like number of followers, interaction within a social network, and influence based on the spread of a given message (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014).

Even though social networks like Twitter have leveled “the playing field in political discourse, elite groups of journalists and institutions continue to dominate online discourse” (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014, p. 1281). Although this is the case, regular citizens “such as bloggers and activists can emerge as opinion leaders when they share valuable information,” especially during initial stages of discussion (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014, p. 1281). There are also wider studies that look at opinion leaders on Twitter, where a staggering 50% of URLs that people clicked on were generated by 20,000 elite users (Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). These elite users were easier to measure because of their reach several years ago, but technology and metrics have allowed for much wider studies to be conducted, which has led to an increase in being able to measure someone’s reach based on interaction and influence (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014).

The design behind the Mobius Strategy, developed by Gomez for BGTX, is a strong reliance on the two-step flow model of communication. The theory, which posits that ideas flow from media to opinion leaders and then out to the population at large, is exactly what the Mobius Strategy capitalizes on. First, the campaign uses social and traditional media to distribute its message, for example, the campaign is hosting a block-walking canvassing event. These are events where the campaign sends volunteers door-to-door to talk to potential voters or donors. Those volunteers are split into teams usually from a central location and dispersed throughout the city. As will be discussed later, BGTX has a targeting system of hyper-localization, so their volunteers would attend canvassing within a few miles of their homes. Different canvasses have different goals, but commonly they are used to identify supporters, recruit volunteers, and remind people when Election Day is. BGTX would broadcast their block-walking information on digital channels, and in the old method of digital communication, they get some people that are interested and then they get those people to attend the block walk. In a normal political communication model, that cycle would now be over, bringing someone online to an offline event is the ultimate goal. However, the Mobius Strategy then utilizes the person's role as an opinion leader to go back online and recruit his or her friends to attend future events. At BGTX, these people that attended events were trained in order to be opinion leaders online. As activists with valuable information, it doesn't matter that they aren't an elite journalist or political operative; they still fit into the defined category of opinion leader. Once these friends have attended future events, they are encouraged to go back online and act as opinion leaders and recruit more friends to attend events. This process allows for new recruitment of volunteers, which would allow for larger block walks, and

lead into larger recruitment, and so on. The Mobius System looks to develop perpetual motion in the form of recruitment. These volunteers would then be able to reach out to more and more possible voters, in the ultimate hopes of increasing voter turnout.

Research has shown that increased spending and campaign activities increase votes received during an election (Spanje et al. 2013).

In creating a two-step flow process for digital political communication, BGTX is making a giant leap forward in the way digital will be handled in politics.

The questions to be answered by this research are:

RQ1: What process did Battleground Texas have for a digital communication strategy?

RQ2: What role did the Mobius Strategy play in Battleground Texas' work as the coordinated campaign in Texas?

RQ3: How did the digital focus of Battleground Texas affect voter registration and voter turnout?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study used a combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews as well as quantitative analysis of voting registration and voting patterns of newly registered voters from Battleground Texas.

Participant observation was done at the Fort Worth campaign headquarters on several occasions before the election, including election night to witness how the digital team responded and reacted to news on election night. This observation ranged from late August through early November 2014. I gained access through a previous connection with the Digital Director, Christina Gomez. Gomez and I met in 2011 after I had spent time working at a political opposition research firm in Austin, Texas. I hired her to build my first website, and we have maintained a friendship since then.

Another portion of this study came from in-depth interviews conducted with members of the BGTX digital team. These interviews included their Digital Director, Deputy Digital Director, Graphic Designer, and intern. These interviews were conducted over several sessions over the several months of participant observation. These interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length. The questions were designed to be open-ended so that the subject could give open-ended answers. Some of the questions asked were:

- What is your role at BGTX?
- What role do you see for digital in politics?
- How important is digital at BGTX?
- What role does digital play in BGTX?
- What impact does digital have in politics?

There were also post-election interviews in the BGTX Austin offices to reflect on how the digital process worked and what could have been more effective. The interviews also looked ahead to future plans for the digital communication process, as well as the future of BGTX. These interviews were approximately 20 minutes in length. Some of the questions asked were:

- Were there any positive takeaways from the 2014 election?
- What are the plans for BGTX moving forward?
- How did digital impact the 2014 election?

Finally, Battleground Texas voting registration was compared to previous years of voting registration, with a focus on the midterm election of 2010. Coupled with this, voting patterns of these newly registered voters was compared to other voters.

Voter registration numbers were acquired from the Texas Secretary of State's website. The numbers from the 2014 and 2010 elections were compared, because they were non-presidential election years and therefore offered a more fair comparison. 2014 and 2010 were also gubernatorial election years in Texas as well, so the comparisons are more logical than a presidential election year. The difference between a presidential and midterm election is typically 30% lower turnout during midterm elections, so midterm election years were specifically selected for comparison.

The Battleground Texas Stakeholders Report was also used to gather data. This in-house review provided data on number of volunteers, effectiveness of digital communication, and specific voter registration numbers. Whereas the Texas Secretary of State only has general voter registration numbers, BGTX has very specific numbers for voters that they registered and the effectiveness of those registrants in voting turnout.

The Stakeholders Report also had data on down-ticket races that BGTX had focused a lot of resources on, with a direct comparison between districts in 2010 and 2014.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to look in-depth at the digital communication used by Battleground Texas during the 2014 election and the impact it had in the 2014 election using a two-step flow model for its digital communication basis. This study was conducted to answer three research questions: 1) What process did Battleground Texas have for a digital communication strategy? 2) What role did the Mobius Strategy play in Battleground Texas' work as the coordinated campaign in Texas? 3) How did the digital focus of Battleground Texas affect voter registration and voter turnout?

Digital Communication Strategy

To answer research question 1, I used a combination of information gathered from in-depth interviews and from participant observation at the campaign headquarters. From the very beginning, Battleground Texas was designed to be a PAC that focused heavily on digital. The commitment was not only apparent from the beginning when Christina Gomez was the first hire as Digital Director, but also the amount of freedom she was given. Jenn Brown let Gomez take the reins to design a digital program that she wanted. Although there were meetings daily, I saw Brown give Gomez a great deal of freedom when it came to message and delivery for online content. Gomez took her favorite parts of the Obama digital campaign from 2012, but added to it:

When I did digital before, digital existed as a department. ... You talked about likes and shares, but it stopped there. And the way that we run our program is online to offline to back online. So the goal of our program is to push people to take offline behavior. (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014)

This model for an integrated digital program is one that was of the utmost importance to BGTX. As the election moved closer in 2014, this structure took hold within all departments of BGTX:

We've built a team that I think works well together, but foundationally they understand that digital plays a role in a lot of the different departments. So there's a digital field aspect; there's a digital data aspect; there's a digital organizing aspect. You don't have to make your case as to why your departments are important – we just all work together. So it allows for a lot of really seamless coordination. (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014)

This idea of digital integration within the organization is one that the whole team shared. Grant Fuller, the Deputy Digital Director, believed that digital also was an essential part of the campaign process. “We can't just keep field and digital completely separate and autonomous. We have to work together. We are at our best and most effective when we work together” (Fuller, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014).

The digital team at BGTX was completely central to the innovation behind the Mobius Strategy. The freedom allowed to Gomez developed the environment in which she was able to capitalize on previous digital work and advance it.

Role of the Mobius Strategy

A Mobius is an infinite loop, one that connects in on itself so that it never ends. This was the goal of BGTX, to create a Mobius of political engagement because the differences between the normal digital strategy and the BGTX digital strategy didn't end at a more integrated digital department. The Mobius Strategy was also a departure from normal campaigns. Gomez designed the Mobius Strategy to be different than her

previous work in digital. “We’re the only group that is really executing on what I think is going to be the way that digital organizing is done in the future, which is online to offline and then back online” (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014).

The Mobius Strategy takes the normal digital strategy, which is usually getting an online supporter to come to an offline event, and adds a recurring step. Once that supporter has completed their offline event, they are encouraged to go back online and tell their online friends. Since this strategy capitalizes on the two-step flow theory, this means that BGTX is creating opinion leaders to influence their friends. That online community is encouraged to come to offline events, and then sent back online to tell their respective online communities. It becomes an infinite loop, or Mobius, in which supporters continuously go online to offline to back online and repeat. This advancement on the 2012 digital process may seem like a natural step, but Gomez says that BGTX is ahead of the game. “We’re the only group that is really executing on what I think is going to be the way that digital organizing is done in the future” (personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014). Fuller also thinks BGTX is ahead of the game:

I think what we try to do here and what a lot of other organizations should or could try to do is innovate more and sort of try different things because I feel like a lot of the best practices of 2012 after awhile get to be overdone and can seem stale. (Fuller, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014)

The reason BGTX is advancing this style of digital communication is simple: it’s a much bigger deal to have supporters actively engaged. Active, engaged supporters equals increased voter turnout.

It's a really passive level of engagement to retweet or favorite or share something online. And it's extraordinarily active to get skin in the game – to go knock on doors. And we know that the more people get involved, the more likely they are to turn out. (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014)

This idea, that digital should increase field participation, which in turn should increase digital, is the basis for the Mobius Strategy. Jessica Adair, a volunteer with the digital department, also understood that “anyone who works on digital on a campaign who's worth their salt knows that at the end of the day, no matter what you do online, what really matters is what happens on the ground” (Adair, personal communication, Nov. 3, 2014).

One of the best ways to increase supporter engagement is from word of mouth of supporters who have already participated in an offline event. The Mobius Strategy takes this idea of word of mouth, but trains its volunteers to engage in spreading the campaign's message beyond just typical word of mouth. After volunteers finished at an event, like block-walking, they were instructed on how to go back online and encourage their friends to attend a different event. Volunteers were given examples of effective posts and encouraged to make similar statements online. In effect, the volunteers were now trained as campaign staff would be, but on a smaller scale. Having volunteers get online and tell their online communities about their volunteering experience increases the typical word of mouth communication range. Whereas the usual word of mouth is constricted to just those within a social circle of an individual, the expanded online word of mouth allows for a much larger spread of a message. When digital and field were two distinct departments, field would typically keep supporters offline once they had them.

This new strategy is because BGTX is interested in volunteers “influence their online community” (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014).

This approach to get volunteers to participate in online activity makes sense as more and more adults turn to social networks. Pew research has shown that 60% of adults used social networking sites in 2012 (Rainie, 2012). Among these users, 66% of them have participated in political engagement via social media (Rainie, 2012). BGTX is targeting this growing population of adults who are politically active on social media. Training the adults to be opinion leaders increases their effectiveness at spreading their political message.

Voter Registration and Turnout Effect

Unlike some states, voter registration in Texas does not include party affiliation, so voter registration cannot be qualified as either Democrat or Republican. Therefore, voter registration can only be looked at as a whole. The total number of registered voters during the 2010 midterm election in Texas was 13,269,233. During this election cycle, 2014, that number grew 5.70% to 14,025,441, while the voting age population of Texas only grew 0.6%.

Compare that to the previous break between midterm elections: population in Texas grew a staggering 12.94% in voting age population, but voter registration only increased 1.49% between 2006 and 2010. Between the 2002 midterm and the 2006 midterm voter registration did increase 4.07%, but voting age population also increased 7.23% (See Table 1).

Voter registration increased an average of 1.84% between all elections since 2000 through 2014. On average, voter registration increased 3.64% between presidential

elections, 2000-2004, 2004-2008, and 2008-2012, while voter registration only increased an average of 0.49% between midterm elections. In fact, voter registration actually decreased by 0.12% between 2004 and 2006 and decreased 2.25% between 2008 and 2010. The only other time there was an increase in registered voters following a presidential election into a midterm was 2000 to 2002, which also saw a voting age population increase of 7.15% (See Table 1).

By contrast, the only decrease in voting age population between any election occurred between 2010 and 2012, when the voting age population decreased by 2.71%. In 2014, the voting age population had rebounded and increased 3.48%.

Table 1. Voter registration increase since 2000, all elections.

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Registered Voters	12,365,235	12,563,459	13,098,329	13,074,279	13,575,062	13,269,233	13,646,226	14,025,441
Voting Age Population (VAP)	14,479,609	15,514,289	16,071,153	16,636,742	17,735,442	18,789,238	18,279,737	18,915,297
Percentage of VAP Registered	85.39%	80.97%	81.50%	78.58%	76.54%	70.62%	74.65	74.15%
Increase In Registered Voters		1.60%	4.26%	-0.18%	3.83%	-2.25%	2.84%	2.78%
Increase in VAP		7.15%	3.59%	3.52%	6.60%	5.94%	-2.71%	3.48%

During the 2014 election cycle, Battleground Texas registered 97,145 voters. This represents 0.69% of all registered voters in Texas in 2014. However, when looking at the increase in registered voters, these 97,145 voters account for 12.85% of the increase in registered voters between 2010 and 2014, and 25.62% of the increase in registered voters between 2012 and 2014.

These newly registered voters also voted at higher rates than their counterparts who weren't registered by BGTX. New BGTX registrants voted 5% higher than sporadic voters, or voters who vote in some elections but not all. BGTX registrants also voted 5% higher than other newly registered voters ("Stakeholders report," 2015). And since, as Gomez described the integrated team that "there's a digital field aspect; there's a digital data aspect; there's a digital organizing aspect," the successes of higher rate of voting is one of the aspects of digital involvement (Gomez, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2014).

The results of the study indicate there is a significant impact from BGTX in voter registration and voter turnout. Looking at the numbers from either midterm to midterm or from presidential to midterm, 2014 had an aberrant increase in voter registration, especially when coupled with voting age population growth. The trend since 2000 was for declining voter registration following a presidential election year. 2002 saw 1.6% growth, 2006 saw a decline of 0.18%, and 2010 saw a decline of 2.25%. This trend would've indicated 2014 should've seen a good size decline in voter registration. However, there was a 2.78% increase in voter registration from 2012. With BGTX's 97,145 registered voters, that accounts for 25.62% of the increase in registered voters.

This focus on voter registration was also impactful when comparing midterm elections. Although it is typical for there to be an increase in registered voters between midterms, the largest increase came in 2014. This happened simultaneously with the smallest percentage increase in voting age population. While 2006 saw a 7.23% increase in voting age population and 2010 saw a 12.94% increase in voting age population, 2014's voting age population only increased 0.67%. BGTX's 97,145 registered voters accounted for 12.85% of the newly registered voters between midterm elections.

Unsurprisingly, years with presidential elections saw a much larger turnout, which is typical nationally (McDonald & Popkin, 2001). However, BGTX's registered voters did turn out at 5% higher rates than other newly registered voters, and 5% higher than sporadic voters, who would be the easiest in which to compare these new voters (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The effectiveness of voter registration and voter turnout was a direct result of the Mobius Strategy implemented by the digital team. Hyper-localized targeting allowed for BGTX digital to keep volunteers and registered voters involved. 78% of people contacted by BGTX had events within 3 miles of their homes. BGTX organized 18,537 events during the 2014 election season.

I think a lot of people talk about digital replacing face-to-face contact, but I think that's a false choice between the two. Digital can actually increase face-to-face contact. The ability to micro-target people in a certain geographic area who have similar interests, to then get them to come to an event is pretty amazing and can only really come from digital. (Adair, personal communication, Nov. 3, 2014)

Hyper-local targeting allowed for BGTX to avoid the large, citywide events that other campaigns employ. This strategy was to capitalize on one of BGTX's main goals going forward: local involvement and activism.

On the Republican side they do a lot of catchall, where they're like, "Here's the Austin block walk. Here's the San Antonio block walk," and they do these kind of mega-events. What you saw is stuff that is hyper-local because you're much more likely to know where the Starbucks on Oltorf and 35 is if you live in that neighborhood, ... than sending you to one central place that might take you 45 minutes to get there. (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015)

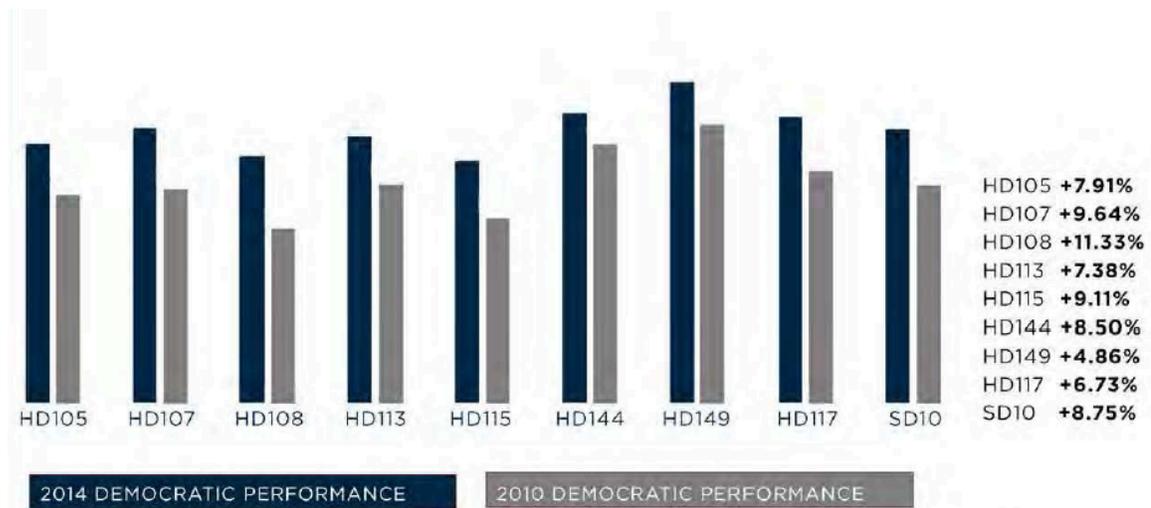
All of this hyper-local targeting means that BGTX isn't sending strangers into neighborhoods to try and convince voters to turnout, they're sending in neighbors and community members to interact with the other members of this community. This localization tactic was effective in turnout.

7,451,995 was the number of people that we attempted on doors and phones, and what's interesting about that is that people that were contacted by Battleground Texas turned out at 6% higher rates than people with similar voting history that weren't. (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015)

Although Republican Greg Abbott won the governor's race with 59.3% of the vote compared to Democrat Wendy Davis' 38.9% of the vote ("2014 Elections," n.d.), which was an even larger victory than Republican Rick Perry had over Democrat Bill White in 2010, where Perry took 55.1% of the vote to White's 42.4% ("Election 2010," n.d.), there were positive signs for Democrats in 2014. Battleground Texas had targeted districts that were down-ballot from the major statewide races. These targeted races,

called the Blue Star Project, were prioritized by BGTX as possible Democratic inroads. Although only 1 of 9 candidates won their race, the Blue Star Project did see significant increases in Democratic turnout. The 2014 election was described as a “bloodbath” for Democrats, where virtually all competitive seats went to Republicans (Logiurato & Walker, 2014). This certainly was true in Texas, including the Blue Star Project seats. However, there was a marked increase in Democratic voting in these targeted districts compared to the 2010 midterm. The smallest increase was in House District 149, which saw a 4.86% increase in Democratic voting. The largest increase was in House District 108, which saw an 11.33% increase. On average, the Blue Star Project districts saw an increase of 8.25% of Democratic voting in 2014 compared to 2010 (See Table 2).

Table 2. Democratic performance in BGTX targeted districts.



The Blue Star Project saw this benefit because of the hyper-localized campaigning. These were the 11 districts that BGTX specifically targeted for down ticket help. Although only one of the 11 candidates won their election, there were marked improvements in Democratic turnout from 2010, unlike the top of the ticket. “When you

take off the top of the ticket, we were able to raise the floor pretty substantially, and make districts that were once solidly red to be swing districts for next year” (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015). These districts saw an average increase of 8.25% Democratic turnout from 2010. By contrast, the top of the Democratic ticket saw a decrease of 3.5% in Democratic votes from 2010 to 2014.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

With nearly \$700 million raised for President Obama online in 2012, digital politics has cemented itself as a mainstay of the contemporary campaign (Fitzpatrick, 2012). However, Battleground Texas' future is not as clear. Republican Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared that his electoral success in 2014 "put the last nail in the coffin of Battleground Texas" (Evans, 2015). BGTX does not share Abbott's sentiment, not surprisingly. Executive Director Jenn Brown said that BGTX was "building an infrastructure that will exist in 2016, 2018, 2020. You're not going to win every election" (Chozick, 2014).

This attitude of incremental, long-term change is one that the digital staff is strongly committed to as well. BGTX sees the work they started in 2014 as foundational. "That stuff lives on in perpetuity. We have all of these emails and addresses, and we know where they are, so that we can get them involved in their local races" (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The 2014 election, as discussed earlier, was a staggering loss for Democrats, but there are positive takeaways that BGTX is focusing on. Although it may be political posturing, the incremental change that BGTX is focused on does appear to be real. The increase in voter registration in a midterm election does indicate a higher interest in voting participation. BGTX also had 33,930 volunteers complete a volunteer shift. "Those aren't online supporters ... these are actually people that put skin in the game. And 43% of them have never volunteered on a political campaign at all" (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The mood in the BGTX headquarters on election night in 2014 was not one of excitement or positivity, but the PAC has not packed up and quit, as many pundits predicted. There is no doubt that the 2014 election did not go as hoped, but BGTX is still in the game. “It’s incremental change, but it is real change” (Gomez, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Limitations and Future Research

This study only looked at one PAC and its digital processes in one election. It also only did in-depth interviews with those designing the digital content, not those receiving the content. Moving forward, research on the topic should expand to see results in upcoming elections and compare other PACs to see if they are adopting the Mobius Strategy. Future studies should heavily focus on the Blue Star Project districts to see if there is a shift in voting demographics in 2016 and beyond. Other studies could also conduct interviews with opinion leaders and field directors to get more of a variety on the response to the Mobius Strategy.

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