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## THE YOUTH FACTOR

### INNOVATIVE ELECTION CAMPAIGN METHODS IN THE USA AND THEIR TRANSFERABILITY TO GERMANY

*Stefan Burgdörfer*

How did Obama manage it yet again, and with such a margin? The interpretation of the election results, which saw U.S. President Barack Obama returned for a second term in November 2012, soon homed in on one decisive factor both in the U.S. media and in the reporting in Germany: the youth vote. According to the reports, Obama had been more skilled in mobilising young people to cast their vote than his Republican challenger. This had been achieved once again through innovative campaigning. While Obama's 2008 campaign had gone for social media in a big way and thereby won the election, "big data" had been the key to success this time, i.e. the collection of data about the electorate and the crafting of customised messages for different voter groups.

Some German media already appeared to be convinced of the potential that consistent use of the Internet also held for election campaigns in Germany after Obama's first election campaign. "Learning from Obama means learning to win", was the belief that inspired many op-eds to be written, lectures to be held and even a PhD thesis to be published – as if technical, political and social conditions were of no consequence so that an election could be won just by copying Obama's methods.<sup>1</sup> Those who argue in this vein may be surprised to learn that the campaign methods used in the U.S. elections, which have been amply commented on, are only playing a minor role in the 2013 election campaign for the German parliament, the Bundestag, which has just got underway. This is partly due to

1 | Jan Philipp Burgard, *Von Obama siegen lernen oder 'Yes, We Gähn!?' Der Jahrhundertwahlkampf und die Lehren für die politische Kommunikation in Deutschland*, Nomos, 2012.

the great differences in funding – Obama’s 2008 campaign cost 745 million U.S. dollars; during the election campaign for the Bundestag one year later, the SPD is estimated to have spent 29 million euros and the CDU/CSU 26.5 million euros.<sup>2</sup>

Quite apart from the funding, the strategies chosen by the German parties are also understandable when one considers the crucial voter groups in Germany. Even if a party were to use its limited funds entirely for addressing young people using online methods, it would not win the election in Germany even if it was successful in its efforts.<sup>3</sup> Due to the demographic makeup of the USA, young people can tip the balance in the U.S. elections.<sup>4</sup> Due to different demographics, this is not possible in Germany.

**Due to the demographic makeup of the USA, young people can tip the balance in the U.S. elections. Due to different demographics, this is not possible in Germany.**

When one takes a closer look, it was ultimately not the youth vote that determined the outcome of the elections in the United States either. During the 2012 elections, the Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, actually gained five percentage points in the 18-29 group compared to the Obama election in 2008. One contributing factor was,

- 2 | Andreas Jungherr and Harald Schoen, *Das Internet in Wahlkämpfen. Konzepte, Wirkungen und Kampagnenfunktionen*, Wiesbaden, 2013, 124.
- 3 | “Even if Bündnis 90/Die Grünen were able to mobilise all voters in the 18 to 21 group, for instance, – but only the voters in this age group – they would not get into the Bundestag, because they would fail to reach the five per cent threshold. But a party that would be able to mobilise all voters over 70 alone would actually attract 18.9 per cent of the votes. This means that losses among the older voters count more and cannot be compensated for easily by gains among the young.” In: Sabine Pokorny, “Junge Wähler: Hoffnungslos verloren? Das Wahlverhalten der Generationen”, *Forum Empirische Sozialforschung*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Sankt Augustin/Berlin, 2012, 6.
- 4 | In his second presidential election campaign, Barack Obama received less support from young voters than in the first one. But in some swing states, the young voices did contribute to or even facilitate the victory. “Young Voters Played Critical Role in Obama Re-Election Despite Dip in Support”, *PBS NewsHour*, 26 Nov 2012, [http://pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec12/youth\\_11-26.html](http://pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec12/youth_11-26.html) (accessed 4 May 2013); cf. “Young Voters Supported Obama Less, But May Have Mattered More”, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 26 Nov 2012, <http://people-press.org/2012/11/26/young-voters-supported-obama-less-but-may-have-mattered-more> (accessed 4 May 2013).

however, that Obama's campaign and the reporting on it created the impression that the U.S. President and his camp were more innovative and dynamic than their counterparts. This "narrative", which was adopted by most of the German media, was written to a very large extent by the election team itself.

### **U.S. ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AS PLACES OF INNOVATION**

Campaign strategists have sought inspiration from U.S. innovations from the very start of the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, albeit with a time lag. Following John F. Kennedy's example, for instance, Konrad Adenauer also drove through the crowds in an open-top car. The idea to print the picture of a politician on an election poster instead of an electioneering message was also adopted from the USA, in conjunction with an increasing personalisation of the election campaign. The first candidates debate between a U.S. President and his challenger, Nixon versus Kennedy, took place back in 1960 – four decades before the first German TV debate (Schröder versus Stoiber). Joint appearances with the candidate's spouse or with the entire family were also amongst U.S.-inspired innovations, as were rolled-up shirt sleeves, without which you could not imagine any campaign appearances taking place in the USA these days and which Gerhard Schröder also liked to sport. In the more recent past, the same has applied to campaign formats such as the town hall meeting, where a candidate faces questions by a selected audience, and of course to the use of social media.

**The first candidates debate between a U.S. President and his challenger took place back in 1960 – four decades before the first German TV debate.**

The online campaigns of the U.S. have not been equalled, either in their impact or with respect to their funding. The same applies to the mobilisation of young people in particular as campaigners at grassroots level. The "ground game", i.e. taking the election campaign to the doorstep, as opposed to the "air game" via the mass media, is conducted to a very large extent by young volunteers. Campaign observers came to the following conclusion: "The fixation with the use of whichever was the latest communication technology distracted from the other, probably more important side of the Obama campaign both in 2008 and 2012: the traditional, almost old-fashioned election

campaign with countless offices, vast numbers of paid staff and volunteers, who are glued to the telephone, knock on doors, stick up posters and distribute stickers.”<sup>5</sup> But this is a short-sighted view, because the activities on the ground are planned in great detail at a national level and are only effective in conjunction with technical tools. Even if the activities of volunteers represent a grassroots movement – and particularly the German media like to adopt this representation – the initialisation and coordination come from the top.

It was the campaign teams themselves that kept drawing attention to the dynamics and innovative approach of their campaign. After the elections, the media in Germany and in the USA only occasionally posed the question as to whether the impact of the campaigns might not have been overestimated. Scientific political studies, which had examined Obama’s first presidential election campaign, had already put forward this conclusion without the public taking any notice. The 2008 campaign did have the support of over 700 campaign offices, great numbers of them in the swing states. But this probably contributed less than one per cent to the election outcome. “Obama very likely would have won the national contest without these field offices.”<sup>6</sup> The *National Journal* came to a very similar conclusion with respect to the November election: The forecasts of the TV network ABC and of the well-respected Pew Institute had Obama winning by three points – “and that was the result. The results in nearly every target state matched within a point the reliable polls before Election Day. Again, when compared with the country as a whole, President Obama did not overperform in states where his team conducted significant turnout operations.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, it was actually just shifts in

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5 | Matthias Rüb, “Obamas Wahlkampf. Schuh- und Mundwerk”, *FAZ.net*, 8 Nov 2012, <http://faz.net/themenarchiv/politik/-11954926.html> (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

6 | Seth E. Masket, “Did Obama’s Ground Game Matter? The Influence of Local Field Offices During the 2008 Presidential Elections”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No. 5, 2009, 1023-139, 1024.

7 | Matthew Dowd, “The Mythic Narrative of the 2012 Election”, *National Journal*, 19 Nov 2012, <http://nationaljournal.com/politics/the-mythic-narrative-of-the-2012-election-20121119> (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

the electorate, which had been going on for quite some time, that were responsible for Obama's election victory and for the continuing losses of the Republicans. "This is not a problem of turnout operations or bad campaigns or bad candidates. The Republican Party increasingly doesn't reflect the American demographic."<sup>8</sup>

**Focusing on the methods and technologies means neglecting the element that should be crucial to the election outcome according to the principles of democratic theory: the issues.**

It is indeed appropriate to question the simplistic causal explanation "good campaign, good outcome" critically. Focusing on the methods and technologies means neglecting the element that should be crucial to the election outcome according to the principles of democratic theory: the issues. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* recently used an image to describe the correlation between politics and coverage, which can also be applied to the story of the innovative campaign team, namely the image of the rainmaker: "He dances, it rains. The rainmaker asserts and possibly even believes that his dance had caused the rain to fall. His fellow Indians also believe it and back it up with stories; [...] but the rainmaker cannot make rain for all that. But as long as nobody says so, the rainmakers retain their power."<sup>9</sup> The story of Obama as the successful campaigner makes him the successful campaigner. No doubt young voters did have an impact on the election outcome, but that does not prove that innovative campaigning methods were responsible for their support.

### **TAILORING YOUR MESSAGE TO THE VOTERS: MICROTARGETING**

"Even before I entered my e-mail address and zip code on the homepage, my browser alerted me. Obama had just placed twenty-one cookies on my computer, ten times the number of an average website."<sup>10</sup> This is how a journalist describes the experience he had with the Obama campaign. Internet specialists, who the U.S. President's campaign team had recruited a long time before the actual election

8 | Ibid.

9 | Volker Zastrow, "Das Amalgam", *FAZ.net*, 28 Jan 2013, <http://faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/-12040680.html> (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

10 | Jean-Michel Berg, "Cookies vom Präsidenten. Datensammler im US-Wahlkampf", *Bayern 2*, 26 Oct 2012, <http://br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/zuendfunk/politik-gesellschaft/us-wahlkampf-microtargeting100.html> (accessed 21 Mar 2012).

campaign, used every occasion when interested citizens made contact online to collect information about them. The more data on socio-demographic characteristics, interests and political preferences they could assemble, the better they would be able to tailor the campaign messages to the target group. This meant not only that voters could be addressed with messages that were more or less customised for them, but also that they might not be contacted again at all because the campaign teams had identified them as Republican sympathisers. Instead of targeting all citizens with an identical campaign statement or squandering their own resources in a futile effort to convince political opponents, the U.S. campaign teams started by identifying their target group on the basis of a huge volume of data.

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The underlying principle comes from the advertising sector: "The technology that makes such customized advertising possible is called microtargeting, which is similar to the techniques nonpolitical advertisers use to serve up, for example, hotel ads online to people who had shopped for vacations recently."<sup>11</sup> Many Internet users assume the ads they see on websites are aimed at all users of the particular site, in the same way that a newspaper advert reaches all readers equally. The opposite is actually the case. The ads each user sees are personalised, as are their search results in Google. This is facilitated by cookies, which online suppliers place on users' computers. It is therefore not the case that online contents are available for free; they do have their price, which consists of personal details the user divulges voluntarily, albeit often unwittingly.<sup>12</sup> The German media regard the fact that the Obama campaign used these methods not as a scandal but as innovative.

The systematic collection and analysis of data on voters and sympathisers started among the Democrats in 2004 when Howard Dean took up the post of Chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Dean, who had

11 | Tanzina Vega, "Online Data Helping Campaigns Customize Ads", *The New York Times*, 10 Feb 2012, <http://nytimes.com/2012/02/21/us/politics/campaigns-use-microtargeting-to-attract-supporters.html> (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

12 | Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble. What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, New York, 2011, 6 et seq.

been unsuccessful in his attempt to become the Democrats' presidential candidate, but set standards in online campaigning even before Obama, gave instructions to set up a voter database as well as an organisation and information platform for exchange processes within the party.<sup>13</sup> The aim was to identify street blocks and city districts, whose residents were receptive to the views promoted by the Democratic campaign, which meant that the campaign would not need to waste energy on convincing citizens who were sceptical or hostile to their views. "The Party manages a database centrally, defines data standards and makes a common user interface available" – this "facilitates the identification of potential voters and provides support for the route planning for doorstep campaigning and for compiling call lists".<sup>14</sup>

**The parties now increasingly purchase data wholesale, partly from commercial providers, to gain information about the socio-demographic characteristics.**

While the data was initially generated from party contacts with voters and sympathisers, the parties started using a different approach a few years ago and now increasingly purchase data wholesale, partly from commercial providers, to gain information about the socio-demographic characteristics as well as the ideological preferences of the residents of specific areas. The following remarkably frank statement appeared in the "Targeted Victory" blog, data collector of the Romney campaign: "The Romney campaign has focused on reaching voters through Facebook by buying sponsored results and marketing messages for voters on Facebook mobile."<sup>15</sup> The parties use the knowledge gained in this way not only for their campaigning via the mass media but also for the door-to-door campaign, the "ground game".

13 | On the importance of Howard Dean and his innovations for Barack Obama's election campaigns cf. Daniel Kreiss, *Taking Our Country Back. The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

14 | Jungherr and Schoen, n. 2, 99.

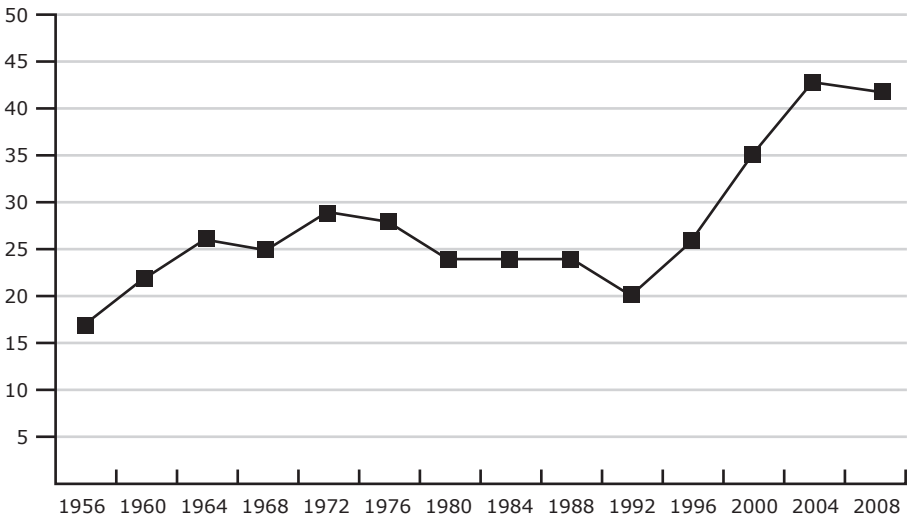
15 | Rebecca Hucker, "Targeted Victory in the News: Sponsored Results and Search Advertisements", *Targeted Victory*, 5 Nov 2012, <http://targetedvictory.com/2012/11/targeted-victory-in-the-news-sponsored-results-and-search-advertisements> (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

## YOUNG PEOPLE AS CAMPAIGNERS: THE GROUND GAME

At first glance, the door-to-door campaign looks almost antiquated compared to the possibilities of addressing people in a targeted manner over the Internet. But this is a deceptive impression, because the “ground game” is actually also conducted on the basis of collected and purchased data. The mostly young campaigners – who are considered volunteers, but receive expenses – make an important contribution to the election campaign and have gained increasingly in importance over the last few decades (Fig. 1). Over 100 million registered voters were contacted in person during the 2008 election campaign. In view of the efforts required to reach such a large number of people in person, it features remarkably little in the reporting, for instance compared to election debates, whose impact on the election outcome is highly controversial.

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Fig. 1  
**Proportion of voters contacted in person  
in U.S. election campaigns 1956-2008**



Source: American National Election Studies; Nielsen, n. 21.

The Obama campaign benefited from the fact that it had been involved in collecting and analysing data for longer and more intensively than the Republican opponent. Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum, which



offers services at the interface between technology and politics, describes the advantage as follows: "when you're building big data resources, the longer you're collecting data, the longer you're analyzing data [...] the smarter the data becomes over time."<sup>16</sup> The campaign organisers prepared their volunteers in such a way that they had the appropriate message to hand on each doorstep.

The results from decades of scientific communication studies show the effort is worthwhile. Personal contact demonstrably influences voter behaviour more than the mass media. Not only has this finding from pioneering studies of election campaign research conducted in the 1940s<sup>17</sup> been confirmed time and time again over the years, it was also found to apply across national borders. An analysis of the 2004 elections for the Landtag in the German *Bundesland* North Rhine-Westphalia yielded the following finding: "Other people are much more influential than the formal media when it comes to whether or not individuals vote.

**If a campaigner going from door to door manages to persuade one family member to go and vote, there is a good chance that other family members will follow their example.**

Unlike television and the press, their impact is largely direct. Other persons' normative expectations are important cues that may drive citizens to the polls, but only if they originate from family members."<sup>18</sup> If a campaigner going from door to door manages to persuade one family member to go and vote for their candidate, there is a good chance that other family members will follow their example. Investing campaign funds "more in shoe leather"<sup>19</sup> rather than in TV advertising may also make sense because personal contact has an impact that advertising messages propagated by the mass media can hardly achieve: "greater individual involvement in politics, increased neighbor-to-neighbor contact, the education of volunteers and contacted citizens about the issues of the day, and increased feelings of efficacy among participants".<sup>20</sup>

16 | Jennifer Martinez, "Data drove Obama's ground game", *The Hill*, 9 Nov 2012, <http://thehill.com/blogs/hillicon-valley/technology/266987> (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

17 | Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice. How the Voter Makes Up his Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, New York, 1944.

18 | Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck and Christian Mackenrodt, "Social networks and mass media as mobilizers and demobilizers: A study of turnout at a German local election", *Electoral Studies*, No. 29, 2010, 392-404, here: 402.

19 | Masket, n. 6, 1024.

20 | Ibid.

Performing this persuading activity where it has the greatest impact requires enormous human and logistical resources. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, a Danish scientist working in communications research who followed two campaigns of the U.S. Democrats for research purposes, illustrates the dimensions of the ground game: "The average district has a population of about 700,000 and between 300,000 and 400,000 registered voters. With high turnout expected in a presidential election year [...] the staffers working at the two campaigns I followed aimed at contacting more than 100,000 people at home. [...] these campaigns got through to an estimated 20 per cent of the electorate at least once, generating about 100,000 door knocks and around 150,000 phone calls [...]"<sup>21</sup> The visits to people's homes served three purposes of equal significance: convincing undecided voters, mobilising sympathisers and, an important point, collecting additional information about the electorate.



Young campaigners in Chicago: They are absolutely essential, but so are data and central coordination. | Source: Angela Radulescu, flickr (CC BY-NC-SA).

*The Washington Post* describes this approach by the example of Richard Russo, a volunteer campaign manager in Alexandria in the 2012 election campaign. Russo "gave five to six hours a week to the campaign for much of the year, making calls, knocking on doors and delivering the message

21 | Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Ground Wars: personalized communication in political campaigns*, Princeton University Press, 2012, 10.

that organizers told him to deliver. Through the evolution of those instructions as the year progressed, Russo could see the methodology that went into the field operation. Early in the year, he called voters simply to verify the accuracy of the list: were they [the voters] registered, were they likely to vote, which candidate did they lean toward? Over the summer, the script changed to persuasion; Russo's lists featured undecided voters open to supporting Obama. [...] Over the course of the campaign, those voters were contacted an average of seven times – often by the same volunteer."<sup>22</sup>

To be able to conduct such an election campaign requires the unwavering commitment of the young helpers. But in addition, it also requires willingness on behalf of the parties to surrender a little of their responsibility, writes Kleis Nielsen: "Campaign organizations have a fairly standardized and institutionalized form, the wider campaign assemblages formed around them less so, build as they are in a much more contingent, modular, and ad-hoc manner."<sup>23</sup> Thousands of young volunteers, who established personal contact with voters without being party members themselves or having proved that they identify with the party through previous involvement – which German political party would see the opportunities in such a deployment rather than the risks?

## AIR GAME AND NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

**The large number of niche channels via cable and satellite allows to reach specific social groups in a relatively precisely targeted manner.**

Data acquired through microtargeting is not only used in the ground game but also in the air game. The latter term refers to campaigning via the mass media, i.e. all the channels that are "on air". The large number of niche channels via cable and satellite allow campaign strategists to reach specific social groups in a relatively precisely targeted manner. Political campaigns, "which have borrowed tricks from Madison Avenue for decades are now fully engaged on the latest technological frontier in advertising: aiming specific ads at potential supporters based on where they live, the

22 | Amy Gardner, "Obama's field operation came down to 'press on'", *The Washington Post*, 8 Nov 2012, [http://washingtonpost.com/195c27a8-28fe-11e2-b4e0-346287b7e56c\\_story.html](http://washingtonpost.com/195c27a8-28fe-11e2-b4e0-346287b7e56c_story.html) (accessed 29 Apr 2012).

23 | Nielsen, n. 21, 175.

Web sites they visit and their voting records.”<sup>24</sup> Election advertisers are more likely to reach Republicans through sports programmes, while Democrats prefer sitcoms. Republican humour is more in line with “America’s Funniest Home Videos”. The best medium to reach undecided voters is the local news.<sup>25</sup>

Before the systematic collection and analysis of data had started, the news broadcasts of the local TV channels were the main vehicle for U.S. election campaign adverts. As different advertising spots were distributed across different programmes and formats, the number of spots increased considerably. This has pushed up the costs for the campaign teams, but it has probably also increased efficiency. A whole-page advert for Porsche in the German tabloid *Bild*, for instance, reaches more readers than the same advert in a yachting or hunting magazine. But the wastage is probably lower in the latter case because there are fewer potential buyers among *Bild* readers than among the readers of these magazines. By the same token, it is more efficient to target different voter groups with varying messages in the ad breaks of different TV programmes than targeting all voters with the same spot during the main news broadcast. However efficient it may be, there is a problem in terms of democratic principles. If you only address those voters who have already made up their mind, the politically interested are no longer presented with any deviating opinions. The campaign managers made the decision up front: not in favour of finding the common ground and appealing to all voter groups but in favour of confrontation and the exclusive mobilisation of their own followers.

**It is more efficient to target different voter groups with different messages in the ad breaks of different TV programmes than targeting all voters with the same spot during the main news broadcast.**

To this end, the U.S. election campaigns are relying to a large extent on so-called negative campaigning, the function of which is to make the political adversary appear in a bad light. Until the end of September 2012, TV advertising for Obama and Romney had related almost exclusively to misjudgements and misconducts of the opposing candidate

24 | Vega, n. 11.

25 | Travis N. Ridout, Michael Franz, Kenneth M. Goldstein and William J. Feltus, “Separation by Television Program: Understanding the Targeting of Political Advertising in Presidential Elections”, *Political Communication*, 2012, 29:1, 1-23.

and his camp. Only eight per cent of the spots had praised the good points of their own candidate.<sup>26</sup> During the latest presidential election, both campaigns used the Internet to test the impact of their negative messages and attacks, reported the political scientist Mark Hauptmann, who conducted research on negative campaign advertising in the USA.<sup>27</sup> "As young people use social media more extensively than other groups, they come into greater contact with negative campaigning and also propagate these messages more quickly."

### **TRANSFERABILITY FROM THE U.S. TO GERMANY**

"Where the collecting of data and money is concerned as well as the identification and addressing of target groups, the campaign organisers have risen to technological heights that we can doubtlessly not reach here in Germany. There is no point in trying to imitate them!" writes Ralf Gülden-zopf, an expert on U.S. elections. "But that does not mean that we can no longer learn from them. On the contrary. Time and again, the USA provides a best case for the strategies and objectives of political communication."<sup>28</sup> So which strategies and methods can be transferred to the German election campaign? This is not only hampered by obstacles in terms of manpower and funding but also by legal restrictions and an understandable reluctance on the part of the parties, which are very much aware of the demographic mix and the concerns of their electorate.

The journalist and political scientist Jan Philipp Burgard reports on his involvement in Obama's first election campaign. He called potential voters and tried to convince them of Obama's qualities and to motivate them to promote the candidate among their circle. An elderly lady replied that she was not able to go door to door because she was bedridden. But she was happy to give a donation. Burgard did not just record her willingness to make a donation. The lady's state of health also entered into the campaign database.

26 | "The ads take aim", *The Economist*, 27 Oct 2012.

27 | Cf. Mark Hauptmann and Daniel Schmücking, "Vorsicht vor dem Bumerang", *politik & kommunikation*, Mar 2012, 56-58, [http://www.lib.uni-jena.de/download/Negative\\_Campaigning.pdf](http://www.lib.uni-jena.de/download/Negative_Campaigning.pdf) (accessed 8 May 2013).

28 | Ralf Gülden-zopf, "It's the Data, stupid!", *politik & kommunikation*, Aug 2012, [http://politik-kommunikation.de/artikel/its\\_the\\_data\\_stupid](http://politik-kommunikation.de/artikel/its_the_data_stupid) (accessed 29 Apr 2013).

It is highly unlikely that the German public would accept German parties collecting – and using! – such data. Germans are generally not keen on being contacted by phone. The prohibition of cold calls in the law on unfair competition (Gesetz gegen den unlauteren Wettbewerb, UWG) thus is far stricter than the wording in the corresponding EU directive. Commercial providers must reckon with a penalty of up to 50,000 euros if they contact a person by telephone who had not given their prior explicit consent. Whether this prohibition also applies to political parties is a controversial question. After all, they do not make any commercial propositions. The prohibition explicitly does not apply to another type of non-commercial actor, namely opinion research institutes, which carry out anonymised surveys. However, the parties are reluctant to use this tool, fearing negative press as a result of a telephone campaign and possible complaints. “The opportunity of having the issue settled legally ahead of the Bundestag elections was squandered”, said election campaign expert Güldenzipf. If there had been legal action and a court case in response to the use of telephone advertising during a local election, the question would have been decided by now. But for understandable reasons, none of the local candidates wanted to subject their campaign to a court case.

**Germans are generally not keen on being contacted by phone. The German parties are reluctant to use this tool, fearing negative press as a result of possible complaints.**

The parties actually possess data, with which they would be able to operate. The CDU, for instance, has since 2005 been using a Customer Relations Management system, the CRM system from Microsoft that is also used by large and medium-sized companies to manage their customer relations. In the 2011 annual report of the Konrad-Adenauer-Haus (CDU headquarters), the Federal General Manager reported that there had been “an interface between CRM and the ZMD (central members file) for almost four years. [...] That way, the CRM system is providing a significant contribution towards making further improvements to the database for future campaigns and towards guaranteeing modern communication. CRM represents a valuable tool that will be available for upcoming election campaigns.”<sup>29</sup>

29 | Report by the Federal Central Office, appendix to a report by the Secretary General, CDU, 2011, [http://kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Bundesparteitage/2011-11-13-15\\_Bericht\\_24.Parteitag\\_Leipzig.pdf](http://kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Bundesparteitage/2011-11-13-15_Bericht_24.Parteitag_Leipzig.pdf) (accessed 28 Apr 2013).

But it is likely that the parties represented in the Bundestag will only make very sparing use of "big data" considering the reservations of the German public with respect to sharing personal information. Nor would there be sufficient funds to use this data to produce advertising spots and online campaigns tailored to small segments of the potential electorate. Such increased and more personalised online engagement would be necessary if the parties were intent on winning the youth vote. Still, contrary to the USA, this is not a priority objective in Germany. And the reasons for that are demographic.

During the 2008 U.S. elections, there were more voters in the 18-29 age group than voters over 65 for the first time in 20 years.<sup>30</sup> Obama benefited more from this situation

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that his Republican opponent John McCain, winning 66 per cent of the votes in this age group. The trend towards increased numbers of young voters continued during the presidential elections in 2013. 19 per cent of voters were under 30, one per cent more than four years previously. In Germany, though, only 16.4 per cent of registered voters were under 30 in the Bundestag elections, and due to the different demographic development there is a downward trend here.<sup>31</sup> Almost half of the German voters, 49.8 per cent, were over 50. Furthermore, older people in Germany are also easier to mobilise than the younger ones. 80 per cent of registered voters aged between 60 and 70 cast their vote in 2009. The average was lowest amongst those aged 20 to 25. It was 59.1 per cent.

Two up and coming young politicians from the two large popular parties confirmed this finding during a podium discussion in Berlin in 2012: "Forget the youth vote" – this was the advice given to the campaign strategists at the party central offices whenever they played host to external pollsters. The young were not going to help win an election. In Germany with a population that is aging at a significantly increasing pace, a party that relied mainly on the

30 | Jungherr and Schoen, n. 2, 103.

31 | Federal Returning Officer, "Wahlbeteiligung nach Geschlecht und Altersgruppen seit 1983", [http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/bundestagswahlen/BTW\\_BUND\\_09/veroeffentlichungen/repraesentative](http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_09/veroeffentlichungen/repraesentative) (accessed 28 Apr 2013).

Internet would even run the risk of alienating older voters. This was illustrated by the displeasure incurred by the SPD Party Chairman Sigmar Gabriel last year. Influenced by the success of the Pirate Party, which is strong on transparency and participation, Gabriel suggested that the SPD's candidate for chancellor should not be determined by the delegates or, as was the case with the candidates for the top posts in the Green Party, by all members, but to let all citizens have a say in the matter. His suggestion failed not least because of the fact that the party members, a majority of them being of relatively advanced age, opposed it. The young Social Democrat politician reports that these people would have wondered why they had attended meetings, organised events and paid membership fees for years if votes from outside the party, including those from people who were not necessarily close to the SPD, counted just as much. The young CDU politician confirms that without a doubt the party grassroots would not have welcomed such an opening up.



Big Dat, not billboards: Campaign expert Chris Kofinis interviewed by the author. | Source: KAS.

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK: DIFFERENT WORLDS

“Skip the billboards”, was the advice that Chris Kofinis gave to the assembled communications experts and campaign managers in Berlin in October 2012.<sup>32</sup> The former professor

32 | He was speaking at the 10th International Conference for Political Communication at the Academy of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, cf. “Kampagnen-Trends 2012”, KAS-Veranstaltungsbeiträge, Berlin, 16 Oct 2012, <http://kas.de/wf/de/33.32414> (accessed 21 Mar 2012).



at California State University provides assistance to the Democrats' election campaigns. According to him, billboards no longer play a role any more as they have proved to be ineffectual. "After all, it is unrealistic to assume", said Kofinis, "that I drive to work in the morning, see a politician on a billboard and spontaneously decide: Oh yes, I'll vote for him". As a campaign strategist, he still has to explain to politicians, who like to see themselves on billboards, why the campaign should not rely on this old-fashioned method. Amongst experts, though, it is obvious that the era of the billboard is over.

This year, the German public will experience an election campaign the likes of which the USA has not seen for some time. Of course there will be billboards; no candidate will want to do without them. "Negative Campaigning", a key-stone of the U.S. election campaign, will be used to a far lesser extent by the German parties because the voters do not like it. Instead, there will be television advertising, strictly regulated in terms of frequency, length and broadcasting location, plus newspaper adverts, mailshots and campaign stands. Doorstep campaigning with large numbers of volunteers and campaign messages tailored to the regional and socio-demographic conditions will remain the exception. The reasons are partly to be found in the parties themselves. If they were to hand over responsibility for their campaign communication to that degree, they would lose some control.<sup>33</sup> That applies to the ground game on the one hand, particularly as this throws up the mobilisation question even if the required funds were available. But it also applies to the use of the Web 2.0, because although a higher degree of interaction would increase the credibility of the campaign, it would also make it more difficult to control. "Dynamics, diversity, paradoxes and polyphonic criticism"<sup>34</sup> – these are characteristics of the Web 2.0 that German parties, unlike their USA counterparts, view as risks rather than as opportunities. But surrendering a small

33 | Cf. Nathalie Knuth-Hahndorf, *Online-Campaigning dargestellt an den Wahlen zum deutschen Bundestag 1998-2009 im Vergleich zum US-amerikanischen Online-Campaigning im Rahmen der Präsidentschaftswahlen 2000-2008*, dissertation, Heidelberg University, 2010, 353.

34 | Ingo Caesar, *Social Web – politische und gesellschaftliche Partizipation im Netz. Beobachtungen und Prognosen*, Berlin, 2012, 55.

amount of control might well pay for the German parties. It may be a way of winning over young voters. Still, contrary to the USA, the youth vote will not make a crucial difference in Germany for the foreseeable future. That is why the parties are well advised to utilise their modest resources in a measured way.