

REVOLUTION IN POLITICAL AFFAIRS

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The 1960 US Presidential debates between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy have often been referred to as the pivotal events in the eventual election of the Massachusetts Senator over his Republican rival. The first Presidential debates ever to be televised saw the younger, tanned and relaxed Kennedy dominate his older, paler and tired competitor, in effect harnessing a new communications medium to push his political agenda. While the final vote was close – at the time the closest in American history – Kennedy won office and decreed a new era in American politics had begun.

It's not difficult to draw comparisons between Kennedy's use of television as an electoral tool and Barack Obama's embrace of the internet during the 2008 US Presidential campaign. Like Kennedy, Obama faced an older rival seemingly out of touch with new communications technologies; indeed, the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, was ridiculed by his Democratic rivals for not knowing how to send a message by email. Also like Kennedy, Obama and his campaign team was able to harness the power of a new communications technology to successful political ends, culminating in Obama's elevation to the same office Kennedy had won some 50 years before. The internet, like television before it, has clearly had an effect on winning a mandate from the American people.

Yet while the American example – driven as it is by the world's most expensive electoral politics – is perhaps the most prominent of this new communications medium affecting politics, it is not the only state in which the internet is having a profound effect on political realities. States as diverse as Australia, Canada, China, Estonia, Malaysia and the United Kingdom have all experienced political evolution arising from the nexus between the internet and domestic political processes. Whether those states have embraced e-government, are trialling e-elections, are thriving or suffering from internal and external e-advocacy efforts or are

choosing to erect nationwide firewalls to censor free speech online, the internet is changing politics and the practice of politics all over the world.

The internet, too, is changing the way that scholars of politics are approaching and examining their subject. Searching through shelves of hard-bound journals for individual articles, knowledge gaps between researchers in different countries and continents and research manuscripts lying unavailable and therefore unread in local university collections are almost anachronistic as libraries and scholars embrace the power of the internet to deliver information from almost anywhere in real time. No longer do political scientists lack access to the work of colleagues on the other side of the world, no longer do they wait months or even years for data sets to be shared between researchers due to time, size and problems related to the physical transfer of reams of paper, boxes of punch cards or magnetic tape. The political scientist of the twenty-first century needs little more than a notebook computer and an internet connection to access scholarly works on almost any subject from almost any period in history within seconds. A positive change, to be sure, but one that is also hanging fundamentally the practice of political science and the research that political scientists produce.

Recognising the marked impact of the internet on both practical politics and the practices of political scientists, it is not too large a step to paraphrase the US Department of Defence and decree the internet a Revolution in Political Affairs. Akin to its military phrase mate, the internet is effecting all areas of political discourse, exchange and public policy while, at the same time, forcing those who study and theorise politics to change their existing ways of thinking, working and imagining their chosen field. In this Special Issue of the *Central European University Political Science Journal* we publish five papers that demonstrate not only the breadth and depth of the impact of the internet of local, domestic and international politics but also the ways in which political scientists have embraced new technologies to embark on thought-provoking and challenging research.

Nicole Goodman's article, 'The Experiences of Canadian Municipalities with Internet Voting', opens the issue with fundamental research on the practical aspects of e-elections. Faced with both high internet connectivity rates and low voter turnout at polling stations, Goodman recounts how the embrace of e-voting has allowed for greater exercise of citizen franchise while avoiding the assumed pitfalls relating to potential voter fraud. From her studies of disparate municipalities experimenting with e-voting in Canada, Goodman identifies five factors that are associated with the successful implementation of an e-voting system. In her exploration of online voting, Goodman also concludes that e-voting can lead to increased turnout, greater participation in the democratic process and the engagement of habitual non-voters.

Minhua Lin is also concerned with the effect of the internet on national politics. Her article, 'What are the Impacts and Limits of e-Advocacy in China', reveals a side of Chinese politics not often revealed: a grassroots lobbying movement embracing a strictly censored internet platform to push for reforms from a central, single-party government. Lin's three case studies of aspects of the e-advocacy movement demonstrate that there is real potential to effect change in China using the internet. At the same time, however, she notes that for all the promise of e-advocacy, the lobbying movement is as much held back by its participants as it is by the government it is trying to influence.

Ellen Hallams' article, 'Digital Diplomacy', considers the impact of the internet on politics at the international level. Focussing on US public diplomacy efforts in the Islamic world, Hallams' article describes and explains how the internet has come to play a role in national security, winning 'hearts and minds', building and utilising soft power, countering terrorist propaganda and driving foreign policy in the post-9/11 world. Her article contrasts the digital diplomacy of the George W Bush administration with that of the current Obama administration, concluding the latter is clearly more engaged and willing to draw on the potential of the internet to develop and drive public diplomacy efforts, though there remains significant room for improvement still.

Alec Charles' article, 'The Politics of Facebook Friendship', takes a meta-view of the impact of the internet on politics, in particular when it comes to issues of trust and notions of friendship in online social networks. The centrepiece of Charles' article is a practical experiment on the popular social network, Facebook. By inventing a Facebook profile and issuing random 'friend' invites, Charles' was able to track the various levels of trust that exist in online networks. Applying the theory of Jacques Derrida to his results and extrapolating hypotheses for the likely impacts on Western-style democracy, Charles submits that sites like Facebook and the invasive nature of such social networks in the daily life of millions is redefining the nature of friendship, and by implication the nature and strength of democratic systems.

Finally, Kevin Fernandez's article, 'The Two Waves of Cyberpolitics in Malaysia', moves examination of the internet and politics from the municipal to the national level. He tracks the rise of the internet as an alternative media source and the importance that internet-fuelled media played during the post-Mahathir *reformasi* period of Malaysian politics. Fernandez notes the significance of the internet in Malaysian political discourse in recent years, particularly in the period leading up to the 2008 election, and argues that incumbent politicians made grave errors in underestimating the impact of the web in fighting for their seats. In particular, Fernandez highlights the significance of the Malaysian blogosphere in driving a new wave of cyberpolitics in the south-east Asian state.

The scope of the impact of this Revolution in Political Affairs, then, is clearly immense. Whether discussing electoral reforms in small Canadian municipalities or e-advocacy in the world's most populous state, whether dealing with the Malaysian blogosphere, British social networking or the public diplomacy efforts of the sole remaining superpower, the internet has intruded on, impacted on and forced change in disparate political systems, up to and including the international political system itself. These five articles provide a taste of the cutting-edge research that is describing, explaining and predicting this phenomenon and I am proud to have played a part in bringing these examinations of

CEU Political Science Journal. Vol. 5, No. 4

twenty-first century politics at every level to the *Central European University Political Science Journal*.