

Battling for Votes: The Ascent of the Permanent Campaign in Canada

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This paper describes a recent shift being seen in Canadian politics. By studying the concept of the permanent campaign, it can be seen that voters are involved in politics in a new way. The permanent campaign is characterized by how it increasingly uses recent and new technologies in a sophisticated manner. This includes what is known as Web 2.0, which is seen with the broader widespread usage of the internet as well as social media platforms. Web 2.0 makes practices of data collecting possible, such as microtargeting and narrowcasting. The permanent campaign is also evident in the changing landscape of news media. These various techniques of using technology in Canadian politics shapes the way that the electorate receives messages. There are differing opinions as to whether this shift is positive or negative for Canadian politics. Journalists tend to view the permanent campaign as harmful while some authors view things like social media as more participatory.

Introduction

Canada is currently experiencing the rise of what is known as the permanent campaign. The permanent campaign can be described as the “persistence of partisan electioneering by political parties and elected officials, even during governance periods between elections.”¹ In this paper I will argue that the rise of the permanent campaign has created a Canadian political landscape in which various new technologies have opened up ways to shape how the electorate is involved in politics and more significantly, how messages are received by voters. In exploring some specific changes that have taken place during this modern era of political communication, various opinions on the topic can be found. Different authors argue on the effectiveness of new communication strategies and whether the general nature of this type of communication is good or bad for Canadians. This paper will describe the most widely used forms of political communication found in today’s party system. This includes the news media which has shifted away from complex story reporting, raising great concern with journalists as it has created a more restricted and less democratic reporting landscape. The permanent campaign also adapts to the widespread use of the internet by what is known as Web 2.0, which encompasses things such as social media and related platforms. Web 2.0 and sophisticated databases make the practices of microtargeting and narrowcasting possible.

¹ Alex Marland, “Political Communication in Canada.” in *Canadian Politics*, ed. James Bickerton and Alain-G. Gagnon. (Peterborough: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 309.

News Media and Communication Management

With the rise of the permanent campaign comes changes in the way that information is distributed. An explanation of how the permanent campaign came to be is due to years of minority governments and continuous campaigning. This resulted in federal politicians acting like they are “child soldiers in a war-torn African country: all they know how to do is to fire their AK-47s.”² This paints a portrait of exacerbated competition. The permanent campaign features various newly advanced tactics, including intensified and urgent media coverage. The most significant change that news media has gone through is the decreased degree of control it now has. Alex Marland defines Canada as a mediated democracy. This means that information about elected representatives is learned through the media, “rather than through personal interactions.”³ The politically informative nature of media did not fully emerge until the 1970s. The rise of the television in the homes of Canadians eventually led to the importance of “images, emotion, personalities, soundbites, symbols and “cues” in politics.”⁴ In turn, this increasingly resulted in shifts of how parties operated, notably in “connecting with potential voters and in determining and allocating political priorities.”⁵ Consequently, media outlets do not get the chance to discuss important, complex topics in depth. In a present-day environment of heightened competition to capture an audience’s attention, media outlets are encouraged to “adopt an accelerated pace and offer easily intelligible content.”⁶ A problem arises from this as politics often cannot be explained in a quick and snappy manner. Information on television tends to be quick and flashy, not giving the time for people to truly grasp what is being covered. Consequently, this affects the way in which the electorate interacts with politics on a daily basis. This style of reporting may influence voters’ understanding of politics. In other words, this new way of communicating aims to “shape how citizens feel and think about political issues and leaders.”⁷ This is accomplished by increasing the use of strategies such as pseudo-events for the sole purpose of creating image bites and new regulations in the press gallery.

The relationship between news media outlets and the government has changed. Newsrooms have to deal with the changes of more limited information and make use of information subsidies that are provided by political communication personnel, such as “news releases, opinion pieces, written quotes instead of interviews, and other free content, including postings on social media.”⁸ The people that have the biggest issue with this is understandably, journalists. Marland uses the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) as an example. They claim that there is a deterioration of democracy, quoting their concern that “genuine transparency is replaced by slick propaganda and spin design to manipulate public opinion” which results in contempt and suspicion of government.⁹ Jennifer Ditchburn discusses

² Tom Flanagan. “Something Blue: The Harper Conservatives as Garrison Party.” in *Conservatism In Canada*, ed. James Farney and David Rayside. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 89.

³ Marland, “Political Communication in Canada,” 313.

⁴ Marland, “Political Communication in Canada,” 316.

⁵ Brad Walchuk. “A Whole New Ballgame: The Rise of Canada’s Fifth Party System,” *American Review Of Canadian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2012): 421.

⁶ Richard Nadeau and Frédérick Bastien. “Political Campaigning.” in *Canadian Political Parties in Transition. Recent Evolution and New Paths for Research*, ed. Alain-G. Gagnon, and Brian Tanguay. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 16.

⁷ Marland, “Political Communication in Canada,” 309.

⁸ Marland, “Political Communication in Canada,” 310.

⁹ Marland, “Political Communication in Canada,” 311.

government news management, using the following definition, “a strategic variant of public information whereby political actors manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda.”¹⁰ As a result, politicians now “take intensive training in voice, hand gestures, and other body language.”¹¹ This exemplifies the focus on the image more than ever, while restricting access to those can provide more substantial information to the public at the same time. The Harper government is seen as especially private and inaccessible as “the search for better control over “the message” resulted in considerable tension with journalists of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery in Ottawa” through various changes to rules.¹² A concern among reporters is that the poor quality and quantity of information provided is harmful to both the reporter and audience. If a journalist is not given enough information to fully explain an issue in the first place, it is unlikely the audience will be able to understand it either.¹³

The internet and news media can certainly interact with each other in the era of the permanent campaign in a codependent relationship. Some journalists attempt to place their own agency into their stories. More precisely, a media outlet’s agenda does not always align to a party’s so “journalists can choose to substitute other frames to replace those selected by parties.”¹⁴ Parties begin to find ways to get around this. A party website can be an efficient and important tool for reaching voters but also the media. An author describes how “one of the primary audiences of campaign websites is the media.”¹⁵ A political party can choose what campaign news stories to feature and in result, hence, the website provides access to what journalists will end up focusing on. The internet is certainly notable for the role it has in “the co-operative relationship between parties and the media.”¹⁶ The permanent campaign creates this environment of never-ending competition of holding the top story of the day. This may influence the perception of politics as chaotic and aggressive. Similar to news media, there are many different viewpoints on the new role of the internet in political communication.

The Role of Web 2.0

The internet has offered many people quick and easy access to information, more than ever before. However, social media is not exactly the ideal platform to comprehensively discuss politics. Similar to the current nature of news media, Web 2.0 saw its beginnings during the fifth party system. Walchuk explains how the “participatory and democratic potential of Web 2.0” is relatively new, even just compared to the end of the fourth-party system.¹⁷ Beginning in 2000 the use of internet was known as Web 1.0, though it was nowhere near as influential as it is now. During that time, most parties had

¹⁰ Jennifer Ditchburn. “Journalistic Pathfinding: How the Parliamentary Press Gallery Adapted to News Management Under the Conservative Government of Stephen Harper.” (Master’s Thesis, Carleton University, 2014) 10.

¹¹ Shannon Sampert, et al. “Jumping the Shark.” *Journalism Practice* 8, no. 3 (2014): 282.

¹² Nadeau and Bastien, “Political Campaigning,” 19.

¹³ Ditchburn, “Journalistic Pathfinding.” 117.

¹⁴ Nadeau and Bastien, “Political Campaigning.” 16.

¹⁵ Tamara A. Small. “Equal Access, Unequal Success – Major and Minor Canadian Parties on the Net,” *Party Politics* 14, no. 1 (2008): 59.

¹⁶ Tamara A. Small. “Canadian Cyberparties: Reflections on Internet-Based Campaigning and Party Systems,” *Canadian Journal Of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (2000): 654.

¹⁷ Walchuk, “A Whole New Ballgame,” 423.

their own website but they were “electronic brochures,” rather than a real tool for interaction.¹⁸ In 2004, sites began to play a larger role in party campaigns and attempts to engage online visitors were really made.¹⁹ In this changing landscape, the Internet went “from web content as the outcome of large up-front investment to an ongoing and interactive process; and from content management systems to links based on ‘tagging’.”²⁰ Elmer and Langlois specifically discuss the rise of Web 2.0 in a study of “traffic tags.” This describes the way that specific words are used in order to gain traffic on webpages. For instance, a party would use strategic words that would gain greater Google-visibility in the ranked results list.²¹ More generally, under the leadership of Jack Layton, the NDP employed a permanent team that included fifteen people responsible for their Web campaign.²²

What all the different social media platforms have in common is the reliance of users to “share and circulate [content] across friends’ networks of like-minded individuals and groups.”²³ Social media is known to be widely used among the youth population. This raises an interesting discussion as youth are generally disengaged from politics. Walchuk describes how in the 2011 election, all five party leaders used social media to interact with potential voters more than ever.²⁴ He measures their statistics through “likes” on Facebook and “followers” on Twitter. Perhaps it may seem inconsequential to study levels of political communication through these means but he reassures that they “allow parties and leaders to connect with supporters and potential supporters.”²⁵ This still rings true today in 2015 as the party leaders have many more followers than they did a few years ago. In particular, Justin Trudeau has over one million Twitter followers as of November. However, with the proliferation of social media and the never-ending lists of followers, friends, etc., there are questions as to what weight these connections can really hold. Front page feeds or dashboards are overflowed with information and many people may scroll past things posted by parties and politicians like they would scroll past an advertisement. Some do not see these platforms as useful to politics at all. Solberg argues that social media users do not influence party and government issues and agenda as much as people think, nor do politicians and political parties influence the public via social media.²⁶ This view is ultimately about how involvement in social media will not result in an individual voting. Although people use the internet to communicate more than ever, the 2011 election featured one of the lowest voter turnouts in Canadian history and among youth (aged 18-24) 37.4 per cent voted.²⁷ There is a major distinction between mere communication and a real connection. Walchuk points out that Web 2.0 has the possibility of allowing politicians to connect with the millennial generation but again, they are those who are “the least likely to vote and participate in traditional forms of political activity.”²⁸ As another author finds, not only do youth not participate in traditional forms of political activity (such as voting and joining parties), youth also do not “shift towards alternative avenues

¹⁸ Walchuk, “A Whole New Ballgame,” 423.

¹⁹ Small, “Canadian Cyberparties,” 644.

²⁰ Walchuk, “A Whole New Ballgame,” 423.

²¹ Greg Elmer and Ganaele Langlois. “Networked campaigns: Traffic tags and cross platform analysis on the web,” *Information Polity: The International Journal Of Government & Democracy In The Information Age* 18, no. 1 (2013): 46.

²² Nadeau and Bastien, “Political Campaigning,” 20.

²³ Elmer and Langlois, “Networked campaigns,” 48.

²⁴ Walchuk, “A Whole New Ballgame,” 423.

²⁵ Walchuk, “A Whole New Ballgame,” 425.

²⁶ Monte Solberg. “In Social Media: Content is Still King,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 36, no. 2 (2013): 2.

²⁷ Solberg, “In Social Media,” 3.

²⁸ Walchuk, “A Whole New Ballgame,” 425.

of political action.”²⁹ There are certainly issues get a lot of social media attention but Solberg states that users “either parrot a point of view on Twitter or sign a Facebook petition believing they are participating in democracy.”³⁰ Nevertheless, this view denies any influence social media may have over a person and implies that things such as awareness and exposure to new issues have no significance to those that may not have had such information the first place.

There are concerns about the accessibility and actual degree of openness of the internet. Since the internet itself has little financial costs and is decentralized, cyber-optimists would argue that all parties have the same chances and opportunities to make use of the capabilities of web 2.0. On the contrary, others could argue that the internet does not offer a level playing field. Major parties dominate the online sphere similar to the other spheres of everyday media outlets, stating that politics within the cyber-sphere is “politics as usual.”³¹ The internet may appear to be easily accessible but it is not without financial costs. It requires money (and tech-savviness) to make a fancy looking website that users will be inclined to stay on and return to. Small discusses the 2004 election and parties’ websites and finds that while all sites provide plenty of relevant information, minor parties use the technology for dialogue among supporters much more often, they are more stale and text-based.³² The main disadvantage that minor parties face is how the internet requires users to somehow come in contact with content themselves. A major party is more likely to have a popular website than a minor party. The internet is a special advancement to political communication as other mass media outlets do not have the same ability of this type of direct interaction. Most notably, this information can be “transmitted in many directions.”³³ Small makes an argument that many other have made as well, that the major Canadian parties use the Internet as “an instrument of power-seeking and controlled communications, not one of democracy.”³⁴ While the internet provides a new form of political communication for parties and the electorate, many have doubts about the real effects it can have. A study finds that “only 23% of Canadian users agree or strongly agree that the Internet helps them have more political power.”³⁵ In a more cyber-optimist view, Small argues that internet-based campaign communications is “more transparent and centralized,” in response to an argument that believed these communications are “regionalized, targeted or private.”³⁶ The internet is used to carry out functions that have always been necessary in campaigning but technological advancements have also been used for specific purposes related to target messaging.

²⁹ L.S. Tossutti. “Voluntary Associations and the Political Engagement of Young Canadians,” *Journal Of Canadian Studies* no. 1 (2008): 103.

³⁰ Solberg, “In Social Media,” 3.

³¹ Small, “Equal Access,” 52.

³² Small, “Equal Access,” 58-61.

³³ Small, “Equal Access,” 60.

³⁴ Small, “Equal Access,” 66.

³⁵ Charles Zamaria, et al. “Executive Summary” in *Canada Online! A Comparative Analysis of Internet Users and Non-users in Canada and the World: Behaviour, Attitudes and Trends 2004*. (Toronto: Ontario Media Development Corporation, 2005), 10.

³⁶ Small, “Canadian Cyberparties,” 640-1.

Political Communications and Microtargeting

The era of the permanent campaign saw the rise of databases. Databases collect various tidbits of information about voters that can then be neatly gathered into groups. This information is used in a practice called microtargeting in which the purpose is “getting the right message to the right people.”³⁷ These techniques of data collection are connected to how parties attempt to “focus the debate on issues for which they have a positive image, in order to convince voters to view these issues as being important.”³⁸ In order to do this, parties must attract voters’ attention to certain issues in which they can convince voters that the party is best equipped to deal with an issue, which can eventually result in a vote.³⁹ The Conservatives were the first party to use a national database. By 2011, NDPVote was created for party use and expressed “the culmination of the NDP’s adoption of marketing practices.”⁴⁰ The NDP employed a team that was responsible for “micro-targeting polling and communication activities aimed at demographic groups prevalent in specific neighbourhood.”⁴¹ To illustrate, the database was used by tracking the neighbourhoods where residents paid highest cellphone costs which revealed the homes that would be “most receptive to demands from Layton to bring down the cellphone charges.”⁴² Even more significant, in 2015, the NDP had dramatically sophisticated their system practices with the assistance of “270 Strategies Inc., a consultancy with ties to the Obama presidential campaigns.”⁴³ Around the same time, the Liberals also developed their own database named “Liberalist.” Liberalist was also created with the help of a system connected to the Obama campaign.⁴⁴ The open access online tool is presented as an “identification and relationship management system” that allows users (party personnel) to carry out “targeted communication and mobilization activities.”⁴⁵ An author finds that the Liberal’s use of their databases has “paid off in terms of the party’s ability to marshal both funds and workers for a number of federal by-elections in 2013 and 2014.”⁴⁶ All these advancements in database usage has made communication to specific voters very easy. It is argued that this leads to parties being “less responsive to the demands of citizens” as the electoral system allows them to “target a much smaller body of movable voters through increasingly sophisticated techniques.”⁴⁷ The largest concern is that these divisions have led to politicians abandoning “the art of political persuasion and the hard work of building a broad consensus on a national vision.”⁴⁸

³⁷ Steve Patten. “Databases, Microtargeting, and the Permanent Campaign: A Threat to Democracy?” ed. Anna Esselment et al. 3.

³⁸ Nadeau and Bastien, “Political Campaigning,” 2.

³⁹ Nadeau and Bastien, “Political Campaigning,” 5.

⁴⁰ Alex Marland and Thierry Giasson. “From brokerage to boutique politics: Political marketing and the changing nature of party politics in Canada.” in *Canadian Parties in Transition: Recent Evolution and New Paths for Research*, ed. Alain-G Gangnon, and Brian Tanguay. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 15.

⁴¹ Nadeau and Bastien, “Political Campaigning,” 20.

⁴² Marland and Giasson, “From brokerage to boutique,” 15.

⁴³ Patten, “Databases, Microtargeting,” 6.

⁴⁴ Marland and Giasson, “From brokerage to boutique,” 14.

⁴⁵ Marland and Giasson, “From brokerage to boutique,” 14.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Brooke. “The Liberal Party of Canada: Fading or Resurgent?” In *Canadian Parties in Transition: Recent Evolution and New Paths for Research*, ed. Alain-G Gangnon, and Brian Tanguay. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 23.

⁴⁷ Richard Nimijean. “Elect Us™: Values politics, branding, and the 2015 federal election campaign,” *Catholic University Law Review* (May 2015): 30.

⁴⁸ Patten, “Databases, Microtargeting,” 13.

A technique related to micro-targeting is narrowcasting. Narrowcasting is known as “the practice of sending particular political messages to particular people and ensuring that supporters or constituents receive the campaign messages.”⁴⁹ Through social media and the employment of permanent teams that specifically work with aspects of the permanent campaign, distinct opportunities are offered to parties to reach specific people in extremely particular ways.⁵⁰ This means that websites can focus on the general mass of internet users but also on individual users or particular groups. Audiences can be spoken to as regional and/or private ones. This is relatively new compared to the previous format of television which only allowed parties to speak to national audiences.⁵¹ An author describes this technique in relation to the idea of “brand politics.” That is, parties that emphasize values instead of ideas. Intense connections are played upon with the hopes that narrowcasting messages can result in “the same emotional relationship with a leader and party as they do their car, mobile phone...”⁵²

Conclusion

Although there are many different views on what effects the permanent campaign has had in Canadian politics, a conclusion that can be made is that advancements have changed the political landscape. There are more methods for parties to communicate with the electorate, which includes the new ways that messages are delivered to voters. However, it is difficult to measure exactly how much influence the tactics of the permanent campaign has on the electorate. Although not the main focus of this paper, the 2015 election featured the use of the social media as a communication platform more than ever. Parties used social media platforms to get out a message via social media networks. A rather large question some authors pose is how much influence social media really has, especially when a large amount of social media users are a group who tend to not vote very often. It is worth questioning how influential these sites will be in the future, especially when the youth voters will be those who have never known a life without social media.

⁴⁹ Philip N. Howard. “Deep Democracy, Thin Citizenship: The Impact of Digital Media in Political Campaign Strategy,” *Annals Of The American Academy Of Political & Social Science* 597, (2005): 158.

⁵⁰ Elmer and Langlois, “Networked campaigns,” 43.

⁵¹ Small, “Canadian Cyberparties,” 645.

⁵² Nimijean, “Elect Us,” 31.

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