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Technology-Intensive Campaigning

I was like, what is the plan, because at that point I knew he [Obama] was going to run and you know he asked me to help come up with a plan, right. Like what should we be doing, how should we be thinking about it, what is different, should we just stand up '08 and do it all over again? The answer is clearly no—there were things about the campaign that weren't perfect the first time and the world moves on us and so we need to sort of be thoughtful about setting up a campaign to win 2012.

—Michael Slaby, chief integration and innovation officer Obama 2012,
chief technology officer, Obama 2008⁶

Michael Slaby's quote captures how Obama's re-election team approached the 2012 campaign. In the years after Barack Obama's successful bid for the presidency, veterans of that effort who reconvened around the re-election bid saw themselves operating in an entirely different technological context. To take but one example of these changes, the 2008 Obama campaign's tweet announcing victory was re-tweeted (or shared) 157 times in the days immediately after the election. In 2012, by contrast, the Obama campaign's tweeted photograph the evening of the election of the president embracing the First Lady received more than 800,000 retweets in less than three days. Meanwhile, entirely new sites such as Pinterest, as well as social media platforms with growing user bases and ever changing affordances, such as Facebook, have changed the context within which campaigns seek to commune with voters.

Continual changes in communication technologies and how people use them make for a highly dynamic environment that campaign staffers and consultants have to navigate and innovate in for competitive electoral advantage. While campaigns have long had to adapt to changing media environments, the pace, scale, and social consequences of change are qualitatively different in an era of rapid shifts in the application layer of the Internet.⁷ As political scientist Dave Karpf has compellingly argued, "The Internet is unique among Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) *specifically because* the Internet of 2002 has important differences from the Internet of 2005, or 2009, or 2012. . . ."⁸ In this context, bringing a campaign's digital platforms and communication strategies and genres in line with ongoing changes in media, social structures, and cultural practices and creating and adopting new technologies enable practitioners to more efficiently and effectively reach citizens in the media contexts that shape their daily lives.⁹

This book identifies a broad contemporary shift toward *technology-intensive* campaigning, and charts the ways this shift has sweeping implications for the people who practice politics, the work of campaigns and parties, and the ways that citizens engage in democracy.¹⁰ The political scientist Pippa Norris has charted the development since the 1950s from "labor-intensive" campaigns premised on the contributions of party officials and amateurs to "capital-intensive" campaigns waged by paid professionals and predicated on large-scale investments in broadcast advertising and public opinion polling that turned citizens from active participants into passive spectators.¹¹ Norris argued that we are now in a "post-modern" campaign era, characterized by "politicians as essentially lagging behind technological and economic changes, and running hard to stay in place by adopting the techniques of political marketing in the struggle to cope with a more complex communication environment, rather than driving these developments."¹²

This book, by contrast, argues that contemporary campaigning has entered a new technology-intensive era where parties and campaigns have invested considerable resources in technology, digital media, data, and analytics to not only keep

pace with these changes, but also actively shape technological contexts and define what twenty-first-century citizenship looks like. While there are exogenous pressures on candidates to adapt to the new dynamics of hybrid media environments, campaigns and parties have also adopted strategies to both navigate and shape the technological contexts within which they act.¹³ The move to technology-intensive campaigns has significant implications for what constitutes political work in the twenty-first century, as well as the people who perform it. In contrast to the widespread assumption of the increasing “professionalization” of campaign staff and practice across much of the political communication literature, this book reveals the at times deliberate deprofessionalization of campaign staff in the attempt to spur knowledge transfer into politics from the technology and commercial sectors and technological innovation.¹⁴ The book also reveals the increasing and rapid specialization of technological work within parties and campaigns, and the fluid careers of staffers who engage in this work.

At the same time, technology-intensive campaigning looks far different from the idea of parties being locked into permanent campaigns. Technology-intensive means parties devoting significant resources and attention to the comparatively mundane, behind-the-scenes work of infrastructure building—the production of technologies, organizations, trained staffers, knowledge, and practices in between elections that affects the technology, digital media, data, and analytics resources that future campaigns can draw on.¹⁵ Many of the technologies that populate this book, such as the parties’ database and interface systems, are not simply available “off the shelf” from commercial providers, and they cannot be assembled quickly. Even more, they are inextricably intertwined with the broader infrastructures of the parties as well as the expertise the parties have for maintaining them, and they must be institutionalized and cared for over time or they break down or disappear.

Indeed, parties have struggled with this infrastructure-building work given precarious resource flows and leadership changes. Parties struggle to find the resources to keep staffers with expertise employed and to improve the technological infrastructure that will provide a competitive electoral advantage. As case after case in this book demonstrates, the scholarly emphasis on the most visible aspects of contemporary campaigning—such as social media, email, online advertising, and websites—generally overlooks the ways that technology-intensive campaigning has reoriented parties and campaigns to the backstage infrastructural technology, data, and analytics work that shapes all of electoral strategy and political communication from field campaigning and social media use to fundraising and media buying. This infrastructure-building work also shapes the future media and technological contexts that campaigns and parties will act within.

Technology-intensive campaigning has not only meant changes in the types of people who work in politics and what they do. There have been shifts in how practitioners conceptualize citizens through various sources of data and call upon them

to engage in electoral processes. Organizations give rise to and structure political engagement. With technology-intensive campaigning there has been a broad shift toward personalized and socially embedded forms of electioneering that blend data, technological platforms, and what communication scholar Rasmus Nielsen has identified as practices of using “people as media.”¹⁶ Practitioners seek to be able to represent “whole citizens” through data as a way of relating to and leveraging their media use, psychological dispositions, and social relationships for electoral ends. Campaigns work to cultivate their supporters and mobilize them to engage their social networks in strategic and even targeted political communication. This work has increasingly defined what electoral participation means, in the process turning those spectators of the capital-intensive broadcast era back into participants, albeit in ways that are highly instrumental.

While we are in an era of technology-intensive campaigning, this does not mean that the two parties and their campaigns have equal capacities to leverage technology, digital media, data, and analytics for electoral purposes. Parties and campaigns in the United States encounter the same exogenous media and technological environments, but as a number of journalistic accounts—as well as research produced by the political consulting industry and the parties themselves—have documented, President Obama’s re-election bid was far more sophisticated in its use of technology, digital media, data, and analytics to communicate with voters and mobilize supporters than its Republican rival.¹⁷ Even more, the Republican Party’s own internal Growth and Opportunity Project report, a comprehensive assessment of the party’s technological systems and comparison with its rival, notes not only Obama’s advantages over Romney, but differences between the two parties as a whole in their uptake of new technologies. With respect to the 2012 election, which prompted much Republican soul searching, the report stated:

Democrats had the clear edge on new media and ground game, in terms of both reach and effectiveness. . . . The president’s campaign significantly changed the makeup of the national electorate and identified, persuaded, and turned out low-propensity voters by unleashing a barrage of human and technological resources previously unseen in a presidential contest. Marrying grassroots politics with technology and analytics, they successfully contacted, persuaded and turned out their margin of victory. There are many lessons to be learned from their efforts, particularly with respect to voter contact.¹⁸

That these differences exist poses a puzzle for much of the existing political communication literature. For example, rational choice perspectives on campaign strategy suggest that any differences between the two parties and their campaigns, especially at the presidential level, would be both minimal and short-lived. As political scientist Larry Bartels has argued, “In a world where most

campaigners make reasonably effective use of reasonably similar resources and technologies most of the time, much of their effort will necessarily be without visible impact, simply because every campaigner's efforts are balanced against more or less equally effective efforts to produce the opposite effect."¹⁹ Meanwhile, political communication scholar Bruce Bimber argued that "[a]t the presidential level, where the resources dedicated to campaigning are enormous, innovations in any one electoral cycle are typically matched soon in subsequent cycles, as happened with radio, television, and direct mail."²⁰

And yet, the fact that the GOP Growth and Opportunity Project report found significant differences between the Obama and Romney campaigns reveals that the parties have diverged in their uptake of technology, digital media, data, and analytics, and this has persisted over the course of two presidential election cycles. Instead of conceptualizing individual campaigns as rational actors that operate in discrete electoral cycles, scholars need to look at the ways the histories of parties as institutions affect the differing ways in which they, and their campaigns, contest elections.²¹ For example, through analysis of primary historical data, political scientist Daniel Galvin demonstrates that there were significant differences between the two major US political parties with respect to presidential "party-building" from the administrations of Eisenhower to G. W. Bush (with Republicans engaging in comparatively more of it).²² Galvin explains this by demonstrating that presidents who perceive their party's competitive standing to be weak build institutions to change the political environment so that they are able to grasp a future advantage. As Republican presidents engaged in party-building in an attempt to create political majorities in Congress, future presidents inherited the fruits of this labor and built on what came before. In the long run, Galvin argues, what Republican presidents inherited (and Democratic presidents failed to) shaped their capacities to act electorally and legislatively. Other recent work has similarly identified the importance of institutions and time in the context of the evolution and diffusion of campaign strategies. Political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jacob Montgomery argued that consultants diffuse campaign strategies through party networks over time, "playing a key role in the process of 'organized trial and error' by which ideas and approaches are developed and spread within parties."²³ The "party networks" these scholars detail encompass many different party actors, including candidates, campaigns, party organizations, and party-aligned consultants (who generally work on only one side of the aisle).

While these scholars do not specifically address the technological basis of campaigning, their ideas of looking at institutional and network processes over time hold clues for how we might explain differences between the two parties and their campaigns, specifically in the highly technical areas of technology, digital media, data, and analytics. In the pages that follow, first I turn to the question of how technological innovations occur before looking at how they transform parties over time.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS, AND PARTY NETWORKS

Campaigns need new forms of knowledge and expertise to adapt to changes in media environments and create innovative new technologies and practices that provide competitive advantage. For example, during the question and answer session after the keynote panel of the 2014 political communication pre-conference of the American Political Science Association, an aspiring undergraduate asked Zac Moffatt (the digital director of Romney 2012) and Michael Slaby what she should do career-wise to attain a similar job to theirs, and specifically if she should consider working on Capitol Hill. Moffatt and Slaby both responded with a resounding “no!” Despite their different partisan affiliations, the two embraced the idea of leaving politics to work in industry for a while, or joining an innovative campaign outside of the settled ways and consultant culture of D.C., as a path to career success at the cutting edge of digital and technology on campaigns.

Moffatt and Slaby’s response captures a key dynamic that organizational sociologists argue creates the conditions for innovation. While innovation is under-analyzed in the political communication literature, there is a vibrant interdisciplinary research tradition that has sought to explain how innovations arise and organizations emerge in domains ranging from the biotechnology industry to state formation. Sociologists John Padgett and Woody Powell, in their edited volume *The Emergence of Organizations and Markets*, defined “innovation” as “something neither present nor anticipated by anyone in the population. . . . *Innovations* improve on existing ways (i.e., activities, conceptions, and purposes) of doing things, whereas *inventions* change the ways things are done.”²⁴ In Padgett and Powell’s account, network folding (or recombination) describes the processes through which innovations, inventions, and new organizations emerge. Network folding “involves transposing social relations from one domain into another” through biographies that cross domains or through strategically placed people who reconfigure networks across domains and thus create the possibilities for innovative and new technologies and practices.²⁵ As Padgett and Powell detailed:

[W]e often observe organizational innovation triggered by unanticipated transpositions of people from one domain to another, who carry with them production skills and relational protocols that mix with and transform skills and protocols already there. Organizational invention, following such innovation, is usually the slower process of the new innovation percolating around the networks in which it is embedded, tipping them into new topologies and interactional forms along the way. More radical episodes of this process lead to “innovation

cascade.” Restructured biographies are the medium through which network spillover is transmitted.²⁶

There are a number of examples of such transpositions of staffers across domains and the subsequent mixing of knowledge, skills, and practice to create political innovations. As I documented in *Taking Our Country Back*, the programmers, open source idealists, dot.commers, and technically skilled college students who migrated to the Howard Dean and Wesley Clark campaigns in 2004 helped forge a new set of innovative technologies and digital organizing practices, and after the election founded new organizations that diffused them across the Democratic Party network. A former Facebook cofounder, Chris Hughes, helped fashion the 2008 Obama campaign’s My.BarackObama.com platform into a potent organizing force, while a former Google staffer, Dan Siroker, devised many of its analytics practices.²⁷ On the 2012 Obama campaign it was Carol Davidsen who drew on her data analysis skills gained from years spent in the telecommunications and cable industry to devise an innovative and efficient cable set-top box advertising targeting system called the Optimizer, a set of technologies and practices completely new to the political field. Slaby’s work in Silicon Valley venture capital and at the global public affairs firm Edelman between election cycles shaped his approach to the 2012 campaign and his decision to recruit and hire technology industry staffers such as former Threadless chief technology officer Harper Reed.

At the same time, organizational sociologists have also found that successful innovation is premised on hybridity with respect to new inter-field knowledge (such as from the technology industry) mixing with established field knowledge (such as from electoral politics). In their study of innovation in the video game industry, Mathijs de Vaan, David Stark, and Balazs Vedres argue that what is important are the sites of intersection between different groups of people and the cognitive distance between these groups (in terms of their expectations, understandings, skills, etc.). The teams that achieve critical success (defined in terms of winning the acclaim of the field) are made up of cohesive groups that have both overlapping ties (“structural folds”) and are diverse in their ideas and insights (“cognitive diversity”).²⁸ As de Vaan, Stark, and Vedres argued:

The analyses indicate that creative success was facilitated when cognitively distant groups were socially folded. Yes, something must be shared. But it is not necessarily mutual understanding. In the dynamics that we suggest are at play, social intersections between groups do not immediately resolve a tension or create an instant comprehension. It creates a workable space where some misunderstanding is tolerated in the interest of creating a new creole that can escape the limitations of the mutually untranslatable.²⁹

As such, what is important with respect to successful political innovation are the points of intersection between and among people who cross fields to enter politics and groups of comparatively more experienced campaign veterans. Indeed, Obama 2012 campaign manager Jim Messina's citation of advice from Google Chairman Eric Schmidt that "[y]ou do not want political people, you want smart people who you are going to draw what you want and they're going to go build it," simultaneously vastly understates the importance of seasoned political practitioners on the campaign and overstates what those coming from industry were able to achieve on their own.³⁰ For example, a group of 11 individuals who worked together on the 2008 campaign in technology, digital, data, and analytics subsequently went to the Democratic Party or its Organizing for America during the midterm cycle in 2010 and then carried their experiences and shared set of cultural-cognitive understandings and skills to the re-election bid (an additional 22 people who did not work on the 2008 campaign went from the Democratic Party and Organizing for America in 2010 to the 2012 campaign). It was there that members of these groups met with 2008 alumni returning to the re-election bid after pursuing political consulting and commercial ventures during the off election years, as well as people entering electoral politics for the first time from different fields such as the commercial and technology sectors. The gathering of these disparate groups created the "cognitive diversity" that de Vaan, Stark, and Vedres cite, while the intersections between them generally resulted in the productive clash of multiple political and technology industry knowledges on the campaign.³¹ All of this was also held together by individuals such as Michael Slaby who had multiple ties across these diverse groups, experiences in different sectors, the ability to speak the languages of different fields and broker relations between them, and, importantly, the organizational authority to manage this cognitive diversity.

Given the well-documented differences between the two parties in their uptake of technology, based on these theories of innovation, there should be differences in their hiring patterns and numbers of field crossers joining their campaigns over the past decade. Democratic Party campaigns should both hire more staffers in the areas of technology, digital media, data, and analytics, and more should come from the technology and commercial industries. This is precisely the case. University of North Carolina graduate students Scott Brennen and Christopher Jasinski and I built an innovative data set on the hiring patterns of every Democratic and Republican primary and general election presidential campaign from 2004 through 2012 as well as the firms and organizations founded after these bids (for the methodology, see the Appendix).³² We paired Federal Election Commission and other data, including from the nonprofit Democracy in Action site, with LinkedIn data to trace the hiring patterns of campaigns and professional careers of every technology, digital media, data, and analytics staffer we could identify

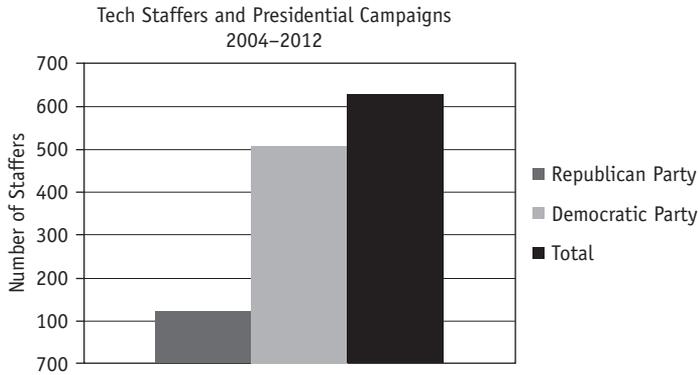


Figure 1.1 TECH STAFFERS AND PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS, 2004–2012.

during these cycles ($N = 629$). We found that Democratic Party campaigns hired 507 individual staffers in the areas of technology, digital media, data, and analytics, compared with 123 Republican staffers during this time period (one staffer worked on both sides of the aisle; see Figure 1.1). The total number of staffers hired by presidential campaigns is higher given that a number of staffers worked on multiple presidential bids. Democrats also had considerably greater numbers of staffers in these areas with their primary employment experience in the technology and commercial industries, precisely the hires that would likely enable campaigns to navigate and be innovative in a changing media environment (see Table 1.1).

Democrats also had much higher rates of firm and organizational founding after presidential elections by these technology, digital, data, and analytics staffers, which is also what we would expect from Padgett and Powell's theoretical account of innovation.³³ From 2004 through May 2014, 65 Democratic staffers in these domains founded 67 firms and organizations, compared with 14 staffers founding 15 firms and organizations on the Republican side of the aisle (see Figure 1.2a and b).³⁴ To take but one example of these firms and the role they play in the diffusion of campaign strategies and technologies, the Obama 2012 chief analytics officer Dan Wagner founded the data and analytics firm Civis Analytics after the election, and was joined by over one-third of the 54-person analytics team on the campaign. Civis Analytics offers a host of applied data science services, including market research, predictive modeling, and an analytics platform, for a range of Democratic Party-affiliated political clients and commercial firms.³⁵ This matters because parties have limits on what they organizationally and legally are set up to do. As Bryan Whitaker, the former chief operating officer of NGP VAN (the party's premier financial reporting and voter database and interface firm) and director of technology at the DNC during the 2012 cycle,

Table 1.1 Employment Backgrounds of and Organizational Founding by Technology Staffers on Select Primary and General Election Campaigns, 2004–2012

	<i>Obama 2012 (D)</i>	<i>Romney 2012 (R)</i>	<i>Romney 2012* (Primary)</i>	<i>Obama 2008 (D)</i>	<i>McCain 2008 (R)</i>	<i>Obama 2008* (Primary)</i>	<i>Clinton 2008* (Primary)</i>	<i>Kerry 2004 (D)</i>	<i>Bush 2004 (R)</i>
Campaign, Political, or DNC/RNC	73	17	4	26	5	15	7	9	1
Commercial	58	34	8	11	1	4	0	5	1
Journalism or Entertainment	34	1	0	13	2	5	0	0	0
Technology or Data/ Analytics	48	7	0	11	0	4	1	1	0
Education or Legal	17	4	1	5	0	2	0	0	0
Government	16	8	0	10	2	4	0	2	2
Mixed or N/A	96	16	10	55	5	20	1	17	2
Total Staffers	N = 342	N = 87	N = 23	N = 131	N = 15	N = 54	N = 9	N = 34	N = 6
Total Staffers with Previous Campaign Work	72	22	10	14	5	11	4	5	0
Organizational Founders	24	3		15	2		1	7	2
Unique Organizations	19	3		16	3		3	6	2

* For the primary campaigns of eventual nominees, people were listed only when it was clear that they worked during the primary season. This meant that they listed the primary campaign on their LinkedIn profile, the timeline they provided matched the primary season, or they were listed as working during the primary in the Democracy in Action data.

Note: Coding is for the *primary* field of employment of these staffers prior to each campaign. For presentation purposes, we combined categories here.

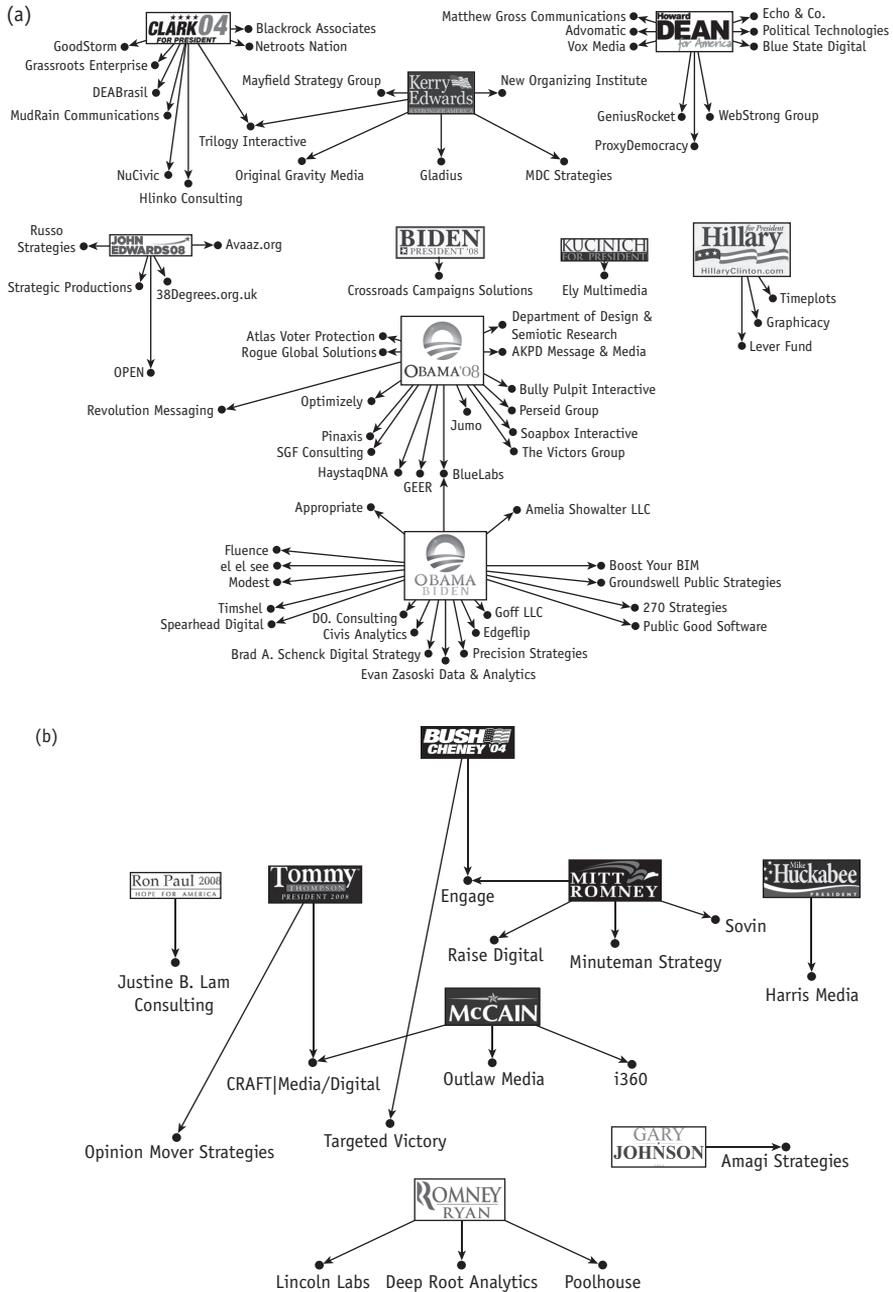


Figure 1.2a and b ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDING BY DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN TECHNOLOGY STAFFERS ON PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS FROM 2004–2012.* Images created by Adam J. Saffer, Ph.D., using NodeXL Pro.

*Presidential campaigns are connected to organizations when at least one staffer founded the organization. We coded a presidential campaign as having a connection to an organization based on the founder's most recent presidential campaign work prior to the founding of the organization.

explained, “Whenever possible, it’s wise to develop tools through a software as a service [SaaS] firm. . . . It democratizes the tools so that they can then be applied to, sold to, or licensed to down-ballot campaigns to be able to benefit from innovations as well. My understanding is the DNC isn’t able to license these tools, charge for them, and use that money to reinvest in those tools, even though everything that OFA [Obama for America] and the DNC built lives at the DNC.”³⁶

The circulation of staffers to other sites in party politics after elections and the founding of political consultancies and other organizations are the mechanisms through which the knowledge, practices, and technologies forged on campaigns diffuse to other sites and in turn give rise to future campaigns. Over time, these dynamics transform parties in ways that shape their relationships to technology. As Padgett and Powell argued, adopting a fundamentally biological and evolutionary perspective on social science, to analyze innovation and invention scholars need to chart contingent change over time, as opposed to seeking to uncover universal laws of social life akin to those of physics:

In the short run, actors create relations; in the long run, relations create actors. The difference between methodological individualism and social constructivism is not for us a matter of religion, it is a matter of time scale. . . . To understand the genesis of objects, we argue, requires a relational and historical turn of mind. On longer time frames, transformational relations come first, and actors congeal out of iterations of such constitutive relations. If actors—organizations, people, or states—are not to be assumed as given, then one must search for some deeper transformational dynamic out of which they emerge.³⁷

For example, on a longer time scale, we can see campaigns as the *outcome* of historical party network processes. Over the past decade, a number of political scientists have re-conceptualized political parties as networks of ideologically aligned, yet autonomous, actors that pursue power. Parties are “decentralized, nonhierarchical, fluid systems with porous boundaries among a wide array of actors” that “include interest groups, social movements, media, political consultants, and advocacy organizations, in addition to the usual suspects of elected

We opted to include all organizations founded after a founder’s presidential campaign work, regardless of the timing or subsequent non-presidential work. As a general approach, organizations founded closer to the electoral cycle appear to the left or right of the campaign logo. Organizations positioned below the campaign’s logo were generally founded later after the cycle. Due to layout limitations, firms and organizations could not be positioned spatially according to the years they were founded. Organizational founding data is current through May 2014. For a full list of organizations and years they were founded, see <http://danielkreiss.com>. Lines from two campaigns to one organization (e.g., Engage or BlueLabs) indicate two founders on different campaigns.

officials, party officials, and citizen-activists.”³⁸ Meanwhile, following a broad “material turn” across much scholarship that explicitly seeks to take account of the role of technical artifacts in shaping social practices, organizations, and forms of communication, technologies such as the party-maintained databases that candidates use and the suite of tools built around them are also a part of party networks.³⁹

Party networks form a large part of the infrastructure, or the background context of available resources, that candidates have at their disposal as they organize campaigns for office. Campaigns must assemble and coordinate particular configurations of component parts effectively in order to maximize their chances for success. In the context of political technologies, this means that campaigns seek to assemble tools such as canvassing applications and databases that are largely built within the political field and are provided by parties and party-aligned consultancies, as well as take up commercially available platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As importantly, campaigns must gather together staffers who know how to wield these tools, or must hire outside consultants to do it for them. There are a number of different assembly options for campaigns as they draw resources from their party network, such as hiring staffers internally versus outsourcing operations to consultants, all of which have implications for political communication.

Over the last three presidential cycles, the Democrats have created a much more robust extended network of staffers, technologies, firms, and other organizations that institutionalized the innovations of their presidential campaigns and carried them across electoral cycles and to down-ballot races. Democratic campaigns at all levels of office have emerged from this robust party network, as they take up party-provided technologies and assemble party-network resources, including the hiring of staffers and consultants with specialized technical expertise who value technology, digital, data, and analytics in the context of electoral strategy. To return to the example that began this book, the Obama campaign in 2012 was in part the *outcome* of the work of the extended Democratic Party network in between cycles as actors crafted a new data architecture, new analytics practices, and technologies such as Pollwatcher, all of which staffers deployed on the re-election bid.

POLITICAL PROTOTYPES AND PATH DEPENDENCE

The question is what set off this historical dynamic so that it was the Democratic Party that invested comparatively more resources in technology since 2004? This question is even more perplexing given that, despite the trends in the Republican Party through 2012, political practitioners widely acknowledge that it was the re-election campaign of George W. Bush that had more sophisticated

field efforts, far better voter data and more robust systems for analyzing, managing, and storing data, and more advanced Internet operations than John Kerry's campaign. Even more, the Republican Party was even the "out-party" from 2008 through 2012, which a number of scholars have argued creates incentives to innovate.⁴⁰

The answer to this question lies in the parties' respective paths of development, and specifically the ways that Democrats experienced a critical event in John Kerry's loss that produced new actors within the party and changed the symbolic valuation of technology, digital media, data, and analytics within it. Scholars use the idea of path dependence to conceptualize how organizations become locked into routines and lose flexibility and adaptability over time, until some event triggers a new direction. For example, organizational scholars Jörg Sydow, Georg Schreyögg, and Jochen Koch sketch a process-oriented model of path dependence:

Starting (Phase I) with contingency, a critical event (decision, accident, etc.) favors a solution leading unpredictably to a critical juncture. If it triggers a regime of positive, self-reinforcing feedback, this solution progressively gains dominance (Phase II). This pattern is likely to become persistently reproduced and to crowd out alternative solutions to an extent that it gets locked in (Phase III) and is accompanied by immediate or future inefficiency. In short, organizational path dependence can be defined as a rigidified, potentially inefficient action pattern built up by the unintended consequences of former decisions and positive feedback processes.⁴¹

As these scholars argue, stasis or inertia will occur over time until a triggering event spurs subsequent organizational processes along a new path. These scholars draw on a number of studies of technological development and organizational decision-making to illustrate that random and small things can prove transformational over time. In addition, critical events can be the products of intentional and strategically motivated action: "since organizations are social systems and not markets or natural entities, triggering events in organizations are likely to prove to be not so innocent, random, or 'small.'"⁴²

This book demonstrates that critical events in politics occur when a party loses an election that actors within it believed they should have won (or, in the case of Bush 2000, when a candidate *almost* loses and practitioners come to believe that their party underperformed). Election postmortems are a collective process of meaning-making in which party actors and journalists work through, debate, deliberate, and strategically vie to define the reasons for victories and losses (quite apart from the empirical causes that political scientists seek to understand;

social science accounts, while grounded in rigorous evidence, are often not useful to practitioners precisely because they provide little room for action given their structural determinants of election outcomes.) At times, such as after John McCain's 2008 bid, party actors collectively conclude (often in line with political science) that there was little that would have changed the outcome of an election given the dynamics of the economy, incumbency, and the makeup of the electorate. At others, however, parties lose elections they believe they should have won, and craft reasons why. The will to believe that the outcome could have been affected by a different campaign is great because it provides space to act for the future. Perceptions of what one *can* and even *must* do necessarily come prior to action.⁴³

During and after elections, particular campaigns are transformed through meaning-making processes into "prototypes" for some actors, a model for future campaign practice, and a set of claims about the world that are actionable for practitioners.⁴⁴ I define "prototype" here in the colloquial sense captured in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "[t]he first or primary type of a person or thing; an original on which something is modeled or from which it is derived; an exemplar, an archetype."⁴⁵ Cultural historian Fred Turner argued that prototypes are both artifacts and stories that "make a possible future visible."⁴⁶ Party actors and others engaged in interpreting electoral politics, such as journalists, symbolically transform campaigns into prototypes when they appear to disclose an entirely new way of electioneering.

Campaigns can become prototypes during cycles themselves, drawing new actors to politics and giving rise to innovations in electoral practice. For example, once staffers and journalists narrated and performed the Dean campaign as a prototype of a new, radically democratic, digitally enabled campaign, it was able to convene a host of young, technically skilled staffers and field crossers coming from the technology industry who were enthralled by the image of a possible future and brought their expertise and skills to bear on politics for the first time.⁴⁷ The Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012 were prototypes for many who worked on them (and those inspired by these campaigns) in similar ways, bringing newcomers to the political field through their disclosure of a seemingly new way of practicing politics. The idea of prototypes helps explain why individuals cross fields or get involved in politics in the first place. While ideology and working to elect the first African American president was obviously a draw in 2008, for many staffers it was also the possibility of working on new technological projects in politics that could potentially transform democracy.⁴⁸ As Chris Hughes told me about his decision to take a leave from Facebook to bring his skills to the Obama campaign, "Something about Obama in particular just really, really resonated with me. . . . And my question was, well there are some obvious things that you can do on Facebook but it is really a larger question of how you are using the participatory web or networking technology

for the campaign. . . . That spiraled into conversations [with the campaign] of ‘OK what would that look like’ and one thing led to another and I was like ‘I am really excited about this.’”⁴⁹

While they may attract newcomers to politics, prototypes only become transformative of party networks after elections when actors collectively decide that they need to take a new approach to electoral campaigning, seek out models for a new way of doing things, and determine that a prototype discloses an innovative and efficacious way of practicing electoral politics. The power of prototypes lies in their potential ability to reshape party actors’ definitions and understandings of the world and what constitutes competitive electoral advantage. While Dean opened the field to outsiders, it was only after Kerry lost that the wider party network saw the campaign as a prototype in ways that spurred new investments around a shared vision of a new technological future for the party and oriented it in new ways toward technology, digital, data, and analytics. For example, after the election Dean’s former staffers (as well as those of the other innovative technological efforts of the cycle, the Draft Clark movement and Wesley Clark campaign) had extraordinary market opportunities to launch new firms and organizations specializing in digital campaigning given their cultural validation as the arbiters of a new form of politics. Thirteen former staffers launched an incredible 18 different firms and organizations after these bids, many of which are now prominent in Democratic politics.

In sum, critical events are often cultural phenomena. When parties lose campaigns they believe they should have won, or actors perceive that they underperformed vis-à-vis their rivals, they seek out reasons why and look to both the winning campaign and the other campaigns of the cycle for clues to understanding the outcome as well as to find models for future action. In essence, this is a dynamic of learning and strategic action to gain competitive parity and advantage, but one that is fundamentally driven by cultural processes as opposed to the structural positions of parties, such as which is the “out-party” or has the power of the presidency.⁵⁰ If actors come to collectively recognize a campaign as a prototype and seek to take up its elements in whole or in part in response to an election, it changes their understandings as to what is electorally advantageous, spurs investment across the party network in new technologies, and creates market opportunities for new types of organizations and staffers. The prototype campaign then becomes the catalyst for the diffusion of its innovations in tools and practice through the political field as its former staffers pursue subsequent work and found new firms and other political organizations. While campaigns mimetically borrow innovative elements from one another during cycles all the time, such as the adoption of particular technologies, by the idea of a “prototype” I mean an entire cluster of innovations on the order of Dean’s organizational, cultural, and technological uptake

of the Internet in 2004 and Obama's melding of digital, data, analytics, and technology in 2012.⁵¹

Taken together, the theoretical model of political innovation and party networks is as follows. Party networks and campaigns that are able to generate field crossing from the technology and other industries into politics give rise to innovations and new organizations. Organizational innovations and inventions trigger significant transformations in the technological capacity of party networks over time. Campaigns are, in part, the outcomes of party networks that change, or fail to, over time and produce particular types of staffers and organizations, shape the knowledge, skills, and strategies that are valued in electoral politics, and influence the structure and workings of campaigns.⁵² Extraordinary events, such as when a party loses an election people believe they should have won, can change the path of a party network and tip it in a new direction by changing perceptions as to what offers competitive electoral advantage.

I now turn to the historical argument of the book. While there are many complicating and contingent factors that I outline throughout this book, generally I show how on the Democratic side of the aisle the Dean campaign became a prototype that spurred party actors to invest in new technologies, setting into motion the historical party dynamics that helped produce the comparative technological, digital, data, and analytics sophistication of Obama's 2012 bid. Conversely, I show how after Bush's re-election victory in 2004 the Republican Party slipped into comparative stasis that only began to change when Romney lost an election that party actors believed he should have won and saw Obama's re-election bid as a prototype for a new type of politics. Drawing on this historical data, I show how the infrastructural workings of party networks shape the organizational dynamics of campaigns and their ability to raise money through things such as small-dollar online fundraising, and demonstrate how these factors interact with specific features of the cycle, such as the electoral context and incumbency, to shape the ability of campaigns to be technologically innovative.