

The perfect political storm? The Tea Party movement,  
the redefinition of the digital political mediascape,  
and the birth of *online politicking 3.0*

by

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## **Abstract**

This doctoral dissertation examines the growing impact of the two converging dynamics that are responsible for the reconfiguration of the online and, to some extent, real-world political communication, mobilization and organizing dynamic in the United States in recent years. These two converging dynamics, which constitute the core of the *online politicking 3.0* model, are the grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of digital politicking. It is argued in this dissertation that the Tea Party movement is one of the first large scale manifestations of *online politicking 3.0* in the United States.

In order to illustrate this point, this dissertation offers an extensive quantitative content analysis of slightly more than 1.7 million tweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag that were posted on Twitter's public timeline between December 9, 2009 and March 19, 2011, a time period roughly coinciding with the 2010 Midterm U.S. election cycle. A heuristic review of some facets of #teaparty tweets is also conducted in order to contextualize some of the quantitative data. This dissertation concludes that the the communication, organizing and organizing impact of the Tea Party is likely to be felt in the future. It is expected to have deep transformational effects on the structure of the political mediascape and, to a broader extent, on participatory engagement patterns in the United States and many other national contexts over the next decade.

**KEYWORDS:** Tea Party movement, Web campaigning, social media, Web 2.0, political movements, online politics, elections, United States, Twitter.

## Résumé

Cette thèse doctorale offre une analyse détaillée de deux dynamiques ayant un impact de plus en plus marqué sur la structure du paysage politique américain. Ces deux dynamiques, qui peuvent être définies comme étant la base du modèle «online politicking 3.0» sont la décentralisation non contrôlée et l'hyper-fragmentation des processus de communication, mobilisation et d'organisation politiques sur Internet. Cette thèse doctorale s'intéresse plus particulièrement au mouvement Tea Party qui peut être défini comme étant l'une des premières manifestations du modèle «online politicking 3.0» dans le paysage politique aux États-Unis.

Afin d'illustrer cet argument, cette thèse doctorale offre une analyse de contenu quantitative de plus de 1,7 millions de gazouillis contenant le mot-clic #teaparty à au moins une reprise qui ont été mis en ligne entre le début du mois de décembre 2009 et la mi-mars 2011. Elle comprend également une analyse heuristique de certaines facettes des gazouillis avec le mot-clic #teaparty afin de mieux contextualiser les données quantitatives. Les effets des pratiques de communication, mobilisation et d'organisation politique associées au mouvement Tea Party ne sont pas négligeables. Ils auront un impact important sur la structure du paysage politico-médiatique des États-Unis et de plusieurs autres pays. Ils contribueront également à la refonte des processus d'engagement politique citoyens.

**MOTS-CLÉS:** Mouvement Tea Party, communication politique sur Internet, médias sociaux, mouvements politiques, élections, États-Unis, Twitter

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## **Introduction**

On September 29, 2009, Glenn Beck, the host of the “Glenn Beck” weekday news show on the Fox News Channel, repeatedly criticized Chicago’s bid for the 2016 Summer Olympics and the involvement of the Obama administration to support its candidacy during an interview with Pat Caddell, a Fox News contributor. The following day, the White House blog was updated with a post entitled “Reality Check: Trying to Turn a Point of Pride into a Moment of Shame” rebutting four claims made on Beck’s show:

- ✓ Beck stated that Vancouver, British Columbia lost 1 billion U.S. dollars when it hosted the 2010 Winter Olympics;
- ✓ Caddell said that Valerie Jarrett, one of President Barack Obama’s senior advisors, participated in a National Endowment for the Arts conference call on August 10, 2009;
- ✓ Caddell argued that the Chicago municipal government was shutting down its operations several days per week due to a lack of funds;
- ✓ Beck and Caddell implied that Valerie Jarrett would benefit financially if Chicago was selected to host the 2016 Summer Olympics.

This blog post also featured three hyperlinks redirecting Internet users to external digital resources with content supporting and, in some cases, complementing its refutation of the assertions made on Beck’s program. Two of these resources were operated by offline news media organizations (St. Petersburg Times and CBS Chicago) while the third one was maintained by the organizing committee of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Over the next few days, several conventional media websites<sup>1</sup>, “meta- and comment sites”<sup>2</sup> and other alternative online media outlets offered news items and opinions addressing

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “conventional media” is used in this paper to replace “traditional media” and refers to offline journalistic organizations.

the controversial statements made by Beck and his guest as well as the White House response. A large number of ordinary citizens also chimed in this Internet-based micro discussion by sharing information and expressing their views on the matter through different social media channels, also known as “online social-interactive media (OSIM)” (Johnson and Perlmutter 2009: 375, 2010: 556), such as blogs, video-sharing sites, social networking services (SNS) and micro-communication platforms. Their contributions featured a diverse range of often cross-cutting political content, which fueled the diverse political debate (Hargittai, Gallo et al. 2008; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009; Mutz 2002). From a broader perspective, it can be argued that the statements made on Beck’s show catalyzed a highly decentralized, polarized and specialized conversation spanning across multiple digital media platforms and implicating a wide range of political actors with narrow political preferences, interests and objectives.

This chain of events constitutes a preeminent manifestation of the emerging trend linked to the redefinition of political information flows and social interactions on the World Wide Web over the last five years. In fact, the “Beck episode” can be seen as the embryo of the transformation of e-politicking in the United States, which will be extensively discussed in this dissertation. Specifically, three factors have played a key role in fuelling this phenomenon:

- ✓ the accelerating emergence and popularization of social media channels as political communication, mobilization and organizing channels;
- ✓ the emergence of post modern trends among predominantly younger segments of the U.S. electorate, which are encouraging them to actively engage in “informal, personal and fluid” (Putnam 2002: 411) political participation patterns on a wide range of media platforms with different structural and functional properties;

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<sup>2</sup> They can be defined as Internet-based publication channels specializing in critical “journalism about journalism” and often engaging in potentially partisan and consequently bias media watchdog-related activities (Deuze 2003: 210; Stroud and Reese 2009).

- ✓ the progressive reconfiguration of previously large and hierarchical formal and informal political organizations' internal structure and practices (Karpf 2009b; Bimber, Stohl et al. 2009; Putnam 2002).

This redefinition of e-politics is expected to have deep transformational effects on the structure of the political mediascape and, to a broader extent, on participatory engagement patterns in the United States and in many other democratic national contexts over the next decade.

This doctoral dissertation will examine the growing impact of the two converging dynamics that were at play during the “Beck episode” and that are directly responsible for the reconfiguration of the online and, to some extent, real-world political communication, mobilization and organizing dynamic in the United States. These two converging dynamics, which constitute the core of the *online politicking 3.0* model, are the grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking. Specifically, this dissertation will examine the online manifestation of a political movement that can be defined as one of the first large scale manifestation of this trend: the Tea Party movement (TPM). While most scholars anchor their work in one or several research question, the innovative methodological strategy that will be used to examine the Tea Party movement (big data) will warrant the use of an inductive approach to determine the validity of the online politicking 3.0 model.

It is worth noting that some political mobilization phenomena replicating the Tea Party blueprint in its entirety, or with some modifications, have gained varying levels of traction in different national contexts since early 2010:

- ✓ the Coffee Party movement, which was formed by people with progressive political views in response to the Tea Party movement in the United States (Mascaro and Coggins 2011a, 2011b, 2012);

- ✓ the transnational #Occupy movement (Gaby and Caren 2012; Caren and Gaby, 2011);
- ✓ the Quebec student strike in response to the university tuition hikes in 2012 (Sawchuk 2012);
- ✓ the #idlenomore movement in Canada.

The Tea Party movement emerged as a powerful player in the U.S. political landscape in early February 2009, following the Porkulus demonstrations instigated by Seattle-based conservative political activist and blogger Keli Carender, also known as “Liberty Belle”, and a rant by CNBC analyst Rick Santelli on the U.S. federal government’s response to the 2008 economic downturn (Disch 2011: 125-126). Some authors have argued that this movement is essentially an Astroturf political phenomenon essentially driven by a small number of elite political interests (e.g.: Hay 2011; Hay, Hall et al. 2013). It will be argued in this dissertation that it is in fact a hyper-decentralized and fragmented political movement. Indeed, a large number of elite-led and grassroots organizations, elected and non-elected politicians, influential political and media figures, informal networks of political activists and ordinary citizens with a wide range of mostly conservative or libertarian political dispositions and objectives have been involved in its activities over the last four years (Bailey, Mummolo et al. 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Courser 2011, 2012). It is credited for shaping the outcome of the special Massachusetts senatorial contest in January 2010 and the course of several congressional, senatorial and gubernatorial contests across the United States during the 2010 Midterm election cycle (e.g.: Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011; Disch 2011: 129).

This dissertation will be organized as follows. The first section, comprised of two chapters, will explore the theoretical background and historical context necessary to fully comprehend the emergence and early successes of the Tea Party movement. The first chapter will provide a discussion of the origins and particularities of early grassroots political

movements that have impacted the U.S. political landscape between 2004 and 2008. Specifically, it will define the unique political dynamic that surrounded the campaign of several Democratic and Republican regional and national contenders such as Howard Dean, Ned Lamont, Ron Paul and Barack Obama. Several authors believe that the open source e-electioneering strategy developed by the Dean campaign, which served as a roadmap for many contenders in midterm and presidential contests between 2004 and 2008, revolutionized cyber politics (e.g.: Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006; Hindman 2005). However, it will be demonstrated in this dissertation that this approach essentially constituted a transitional moment between top-down and truly bottom-up e-politicking. The second chapter will review the evolution of mass mediated politicking practices in the United States. First, it will provide an in-depth description of the evolution of the U.S. offline political mediascape since the emergence of television as a popular source of political information in the early 1960s. Second, it will offer a detailed characterization of the transformation of cyberpoliticking in the United States, particularly since the 1994 U.S. Midterm contest, which is considered by Xenos and Foot (2008: 57) as the “kitty hawk” moment of online political campaigning.

The two chapters that make up the second section of the dissertation will take an extensive look at the *online politicking 3.0* model and the Tea Party movement. They will also provide some context to the subsequent data analysis. The root causes of the grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization of e-politicking in the United States will be discussed in the third chapter. Its impact on the reconfiguration of formal political organizations’ internal structure as well as practices will also be defined. Additionally, this chapter will provide an in-depth characterization and analysis of the hyper-fragmentation of cyber political communication, mobilization and organizing in the United States. Specific *fracture points* will be analysed and their impact on the structure of the political audience will be detailed. The fourth chapter will look at the Tea Party movement and the role it played in the U.S.

political landscape during sensitive political moments such as the vigorous public debate on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act during the summer months of 2009, the January 2010 special senatorial elections in Massachusetts following the death of Democratic senator Edward M. Kennedy on August 25, 2009 and the 2010 Midterm election cycle.

The third section, comprised of three chapters, will present an empirical analysis of the manifestation of the grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking exemplified in the Tea Party movement's online presence. A novel methodological approach (both from a sampling and analytical perspective) will be used to examine the political communication, mobilization, and organizing patterns linked to the manifestation of Tea Party movement in the Twitterverse and will be discussed in the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter will feature a detailed presentation of the results of the data analysis while the seventh chapter will offer an extensive discussion of the findings of the investigation.

Finally, the conclusion will establish clear links between the findings of this dissertation and those of recent research that focused on other facets the Tea Party movement. For example, it will be shown that the conclusions of this research project complement those of Skocpol and Williamson (2012) who attended a large number of town hall meetings organized by adherent of the Tea Party movement in the United States. It will also provide a discussion of the implications of the results of this study for the future of political communication research and how social scientists may need to rethink their vision of e-politics. The conclusion will wrap up with a brief discussion of the challenges and opportunities of "big data" research (boyd and Crawford 2012).

## **1 Chapter: Origins and specificities of grassroots U.S. political movements**

Many grassroots political mobilization phenomena have impacted the U.S. political landscape since 2004, especially during the midterm and presidential election cycles. Four of them will be thoroughly reviewed in this chapter in order to isolate the lessons learned from their successes and failures:

- ✓ the presidential candidacy of Howard Dean during the 2004 U.S. presidential election;
- ✓ the senatorial candidacy of Ned Lamont in Connecticut during the 2006 U.S. midterm election;
- ✓ the presidential candidacy of Ron Paul during the 2008 U.S. presidential election;
- ✓ the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama during the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

Some authors have argued that these candidates developed e-politicking tactics that had profound transformative effects on the structure of the online political communication, mobilization and organizing environment in the United States. For instance, Kreiss (2011: 380) suggests that Dean's innovative use, in 2004, of digital media technologies for various campaigning purposes "reshaped the cultural grounds of Internet politics." More recently, Gibson (2012: 79) has pointed out that heavy use of social networking services by the Obama campaign for voter outreach during the 2008 presidential contest had "reprogramming" effects on the dynamics of cyber electioneering. While the political phenomena listed above did contribute to the reengagement of some segments of the U.S. public with the political process, it will be argued in this dissertation that they essentially form a bridge between the strict top-down e-politicking model that was favoured between 1996 and 2002 and the rise of the *online politicking 3.0* model along with the Tea Party movement in early 2009. Indeed,

they still followed an essentially centralized politicking model as they were driven by an influential political figure and their focus was limited to a relatively small number of broad-based issues.

### **1.1 The 2004 U.S. presidential campaign: Howard Dean**

Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 acted as a catalyst for the transformation of e-politicking through its innovative use of digital communication tools. According to Vaccari (2010: 334), the potential of the Internet as a transformative campaign tool "was widely regarded as dead and buried" before the Dean campaign. His pioneering use of the Web can be compared to the first advertising campaign on network television used by John F. Kennedy during the 1960 presidential elections, or Bill Clinton's innovative advertising strategy on cable television during the 1992 elections (Weinberg and Williams 2006: 47).

Many peripheral presidential hopefuls such as Democrats Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich as well as Ralph Nader, who represented the Green Party, also turned to the Internet during that election cycle to appeal to the general public and energize their supporters (Johnson 2007: 5; Trent and Friedenbergs 2008; McSweeney 2007: 114). Their candidacies were plagued by different elements such as dismal name recognition levels according to some national polls, unfavourable "opinions in national polls," low "ideological support among party identifiers," and limited human, financial and technical resources (McSweeney 2007: 114). These constraints prevented them from enjoying strong support from dominant political formations and being covered by offline journalistic organizations (McSweeney 2007: 114; Tedesco 2005: 188). However, their use of online communication channels during the election cycle enabled them to have greater exposure among some segments of the U.S. adult population and, by extension, bolstered their chances of getting public support throughout the electoral process (Latimer 2007: 84; Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004: 7).

The emergence of Howard Dean as a top-tier candidate during the Democratic primary signaled the rise of the Internet as a prominent force in the U.S. political mediascape. He efficiently utilized digital media tools to demonstrate the legitimacy and viability of his presidential candidacy and to garner public support, especially among young voters (Foot and Schneider 2006: 1; McSweeney 2007: 120-121). Howard Dean can be characterized as the first Internet candidate in the electoral history of the United States (Davis 2005: 241; Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006: 115). He was also the first U.S. politician to fully “integrate an Internet team with the more traditional campaign structure” (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 54). In previous years, Web teams worked exclusively on online political communication operations and had little-to-no input in the overall campaign strategy (Williams 2003; Williams and Gulati 2006: 7; Gaziano and Liesen 2008: 8). Moreover, unlike any other political campaign, the Internet division of Dean’s team was made up of paid consultants working alongside volunteers (Kreiss 2009: 287; Hindman 2005: 127). While many of the volunteers had limited political experience, they had in-depth “knowledge and skills relating to the Internet that were then applied to a political campaign” (Kreiss 2009: 285). Chadwick’s research (2007: 297) demonstrated that Howard Dean “suspended” the hyper-professionalized political campaigning model that governed e-politicking in previous years and adopted a hybrid approach usually employed by social movements.

There are three main instances in which Dean’s campaign contributed to the reconfiguration of e-politicking in the United States. First, Dean partly outsourced some of his voter mobilization operations by relying on third-party social networking platforms such as Meetup.com (Weinberg and Williams 2006: 46; Kreiss and Howard 2010: 1036; Johnson 2007). In fact, his campaign is partly responsible for the popularization of Meetup.com and contributed to its emergence as an influential political organizing tool during and after the 2004 elections (Williams, Trammell et al. 2005: 181; Wiese and Gronbeck 2005: 249). It can

be defined as a flexible open source digital community-building channel enabling geographically dispersed Web users with compatible preferences, interests or objectives to meet online and organize real-world events (Weinberg and Williams 2006: 46; Steger, Williams et al. 2010; Kreiss 200a: 289). It ultimately contributed to the development of “electronic-to-face (e2f)” social networks (Weinberg and Williams 2006: 47), also known as informal “meta-organizations” (Bimber, Stohl et al. 2009: 83), comprising individuals sharing specific and usually short-term political objectives (Chadwick 2007: 288; Hindman 2007: 183). Meetup.com attracted politically-savvy Internet users with a vastly different socio-demographic background than offline political activists. They were more likely to be younger, more educated, have higher levels of digital knowledge and skills, and have less crystallized political preferences than their real-world counterparts. Moreover, they were less likely to have participated in any type of traditional campaigning activities during past election cycles (Williams, Weinberg et al. 2004; Johnson 2004: 112; Steger, Williams et al. 2010).

Meetup constituted an effective mass political mobilization channel for several reasons. For instance, it favoured the strengthening of social ties between like-minded members of the electorate, thus potentially reinforcing their political preferences and attitudes. Thirty percent of Meetup attendees claimed they made at least one new friend and 25 percent made more than two during the summer months of 2004. Twenty-nine percent also reported meeting with their new friends outside Meetup events (Sessions 2010: 379; Sander and Seminar 2005: 34). Individuals who frequently attended Meetup gatherings were also more likely to donate money, volunteer time, or publicly express their support for a candidate than those who did not (Sessions 2010: 379; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 18). For example, 96 percent of individuals who attended a Dean-related Meetup event in Massachusetts expressed the desire to volunteer for the Dean for America campaign (Hindman 2005: 125). Moreover, 25 percent of donors who attended a Meetup event believed it motivated them to give money

to a candidate or a political group for the first time (Graf 2006: 39). Brown (2007: 22) argues that some of them, who were politically disengaged during previous elections, may have entered the “pool of recurring donors.” It should be noted that “Meetup or Meetup-like processes and campaign strategies” (Conners 2005) pioneered by the Dean campaign have been an important component of the political landscape during subsequent U.S. election cycles. More important, it can be argued that they have laid the foundations for the emergence of the Tea Party movement as a powerful force in the U.S. political landscape in early 2009.

Second, Dean launched an innovative online fundraising campaign which was a central component of his cyberpoliticking strategy. Unlike previous U.S. elections where candidates and political parties predominantly used online technologies for strict money transaction purposes, he used them to organize targeted online fundraising drives focusing on specific themes or objectives and temporarily hyper-mobilizing his supporters (Kreiss 2011; Postelnicu, Martin et al. 2006: 105-106). Moreover, Howard Dean adopted a transparent fundraising approach. He visually displayed his objectives by posting on his official website the image of an empty baseball bat that progressively filled up as he received money contributions. He also made several detailed fundraising appeals on his campaign blog, usually in response to an event such as a fundraising dinner held by his opponents. These initiatives helped to foster a perception of exigency among his supporters and encouraged them to donate money and volunteer for his campaign (Thornson and Watson 2007: 333; Stromer-Galler and Baker 2006: 115).

The Dean campaign also decentralized some of its fundraising activities by launching an online application allowing Web users to independently create and manage fundraising drives tailored to their personal preferences or goals. This tool gave them the capacity to solicit contributions from members of their immediate social environment such as family members, friends, and coworkers with whom they often shared similar interests (Kreiss and

Howard 2010: 1036; Kreiss 2011). This initiative enabled Dean to build a strong and lasting relationship based on openness and reciprocity with his donor base (Brown 2007: 22).

Howard Dean's run for the Democratic presidential nomination constituted the first national campaign in the United States in which a candidate raised the majority of his campaign funds from small contributions made online by individual donors (Herrnson, Strokes-Brown et al. 2007: 33; Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006: 115). Approximately 318,884 unique donors gave 52 million U.S. dollars to his campaign throughout his primary campaign. By the end of 2003, he had already received more than 41 million U.S. dollars (Hindman 2005: 124, 2007: 187; Berstein 2004: 1).

Third, Howard Dean "is credited with the American induction of the blog into the electronic campaign toolkit" (Trammell 2007: 1256). As of 2012, this social media platform constituted one of the central aspects of most national candidates' e-electioneering approach in the United States (Perlmutter and Schoen 2007: 38; Trammell, Williams et al. 2006: 22). Dean launched his main campaign blog on March 15, 2003 and was the first U.S. candidate to hire a blog master as a full-time campaign staff member (Johnson 2007: 5-6; Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006: 114). His official campaign blog served information dispersion and mobilization purposes:

- ✓ circulating political messages often focusing on specific issues (e.g. Iraq war, health care, etc.);
- ✓ promoting town hall meetings and other online and real-world campaign events;
- ✓ providing Web links usually pointing to digital resources often featuring favourable political content;
- ✓ motivating Internet users to becoming politically active by donating money, becoming volunteers, joining pro-Dean MeetUp groups, offering suggestions for

campaign activities, and providing advice on policy issues (Johnson 2007; Postelnicu, Martin et al. 2006; Lawson-Borders and Kirk 2005).

From a broader perspective, Dean progressively laid the foundations of a less hierarchical model of political campaigning that has become increasingly popular over the last nine years. He initiated the progressive transition process between “the traditional ‘War Room’ style (which places a premium on message control) and toward a more fluid and dynamic ‘networked’ style of campaigning” (Xenos and Foot 2008: 6). This is characterized by the decision of political players to partly renounce their quasi-monopolistic control over their campaign activities by entering into a more transparent and collaborative relationship with the electorate. Consequently, they provide resources and opportunities enabling members of the public to actively contribute to different facets of the electoral process that were previously closed or inaccessible to them (Haynes and Pitts 2009; Hindman 2007). This approach is designed to exploit the “huge, and largely unused, participatory surplus of people who are ready to contribute to efforts and causes larger than themselves” in often non-traditional ways (Blaser, Weinberger et al. 2009: 1). While stimulating political engagement within the electorate, it is also geared toward fostering a sense of intimacy and, to some extent, attachment between voters and candidates (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 58). According to several authors (e.g. Gibson 2012; Kreiss 2011, etc.), Dean’s innovative e-politicking strategy served as a roadmap for many candidates during subsequent election cycles and laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Tea Party movement as a powerful force in the U.S. political landscape.

## **1.2 The 2006 U.S. midterm campaign: Ned Lamont**

During the 2006 U.S. midterm contest, millionaire businessman Ned Lamont benefited from widespread support among the progressive netroots due to his positions on a relatively small set of policy issues such as the Iraq war and his vocal opposition to the Bush administration,

and as the incarnation of a new form of leadership. On August 8, 2006, Lamont narrowly beat incumbent Joe Lieberman, who had represented Connecticut in the U.S. Senate for 18 years, and won the Connecticut Democratic senatorial nomination. However, he ultimately lost the Connecticut senatorial contest on November 7, 2006 to Lieberman, who ran as an Independent and had the tacit support of Republican Party leaders (Lee and Park 2010: 32; Baum and Groeling 2009: 158).

Lamont adopted a distinctively insurgent cyberpoliticking approach tailored to energize specific segments of the electorate by enabling them to be involved in his campaign efforts. First, he granted exclusive interviews to several liberal political bloggers with large Connecticut-based or national audiences and treated them like journalists covering his campaign (e.g. access to press conferences, etc.). He also attended blogging events all over the United States such as “Blogosphere Day,” which was held at Yale University in July 2006 (Cohen 2008: 53, 2009: 13; Johnson 2011: 18; Pole 2009: 14). Many progressive bloggers in turn frequently posted on their blogs positive reviews of his policy positions and campaign activities as well as flattering excerpts of interviews with news media outlets. They also shared photos, audio clips and videos potentially embarrassing for his opponents (Gueorguieva 2008: 293; Burroughs 2007: 326).

Several bloggers were behind hyper-targeted mobilization and organizing efforts to help Lamont win the endorsement of influential political figures, civic groups, or action networks as well as to encourage his followers to take part in his campaign activities. Due to the structure and size of their readership, the content of their posts, and their notoriety in the U.S. political blogosphere, some of them had better results than others. For example, a typical publication without Web links on the multi-authored liberal blog Daily Kos typically generated “1.2 donations and about [...] 1,200 [U.S. dollars] (after converting the effects on the logged dependent variables to the corresponding effects on raw donations and dollars)”

(Sides and Farrell 2010: 10). Blog posts with at least one Web link were generally worth a bit more while those written by Markos Moulitsias, also known as Kos, generated an average of 1.3 donations and 1,500 U.S. dollars<sup>3</sup> in contributions (Sides and Farrell 2010: 10). These statistics demonstrate the fundraising power of some political blogs during the 2004 U.S. presidential contest.

Lamont's popularity among A-list political bloggers attracted the attention of many local, regional, and national news media outlets. They progressively intensified their coverage of his candidacy through the campaign, thus enabling him to have better reach among the mainstream public (Burroughs 2007: 326). However, there were many instances in which pro-Lamont bloggers not formally affiliated with his campaign were the source of negative publicity. For instance, Jane Hamsher posted a modified photo of Joe Lieberman in blackface on the multi-authored liberal political blog FireDogLake. While Lamont quickly distanced himself from her action, the picture was used by some of his adversaries to portray his campaign as racially-insensitive, negative, and as being driven primarily by extreme progressive "nutroots" (Davis 2009: 101; Malkin 2006). It should be pointed out that a certain portion of the excitement for the Lamont campaign in the U.S. political blogosphere was essentially artificial. Lamont hired at least four independent bloggers whose main objective was to generate support for his candidacy. He also employed a consultant whose primary role was to coordinate pro-Lamont bloggers' activities in order to attain specific goals (Gueorguieva 2008: 293).

Second, Lamont was present on several third-party social networking services which became instrumental components of his online campaign strategy. They served different purposes such as disseminating brochureware digital material to his followers or providing a platform to interact with them. Lamont was among the five most-popular politicians on

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<sup>3</sup> This fundraising phenomenon was more broadly known as the "Kos Bump" (Sides and Farrell 2010: 10).

Facebook during the 2006 midterm elections with more than 5,000 fans (Williams and Gulati 2007: 7; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 22).

Finally, Lamont's openness to collaborate with online activists, coupled with his views on polarizing policy questions, helped him secure the endorsement of many Internet-based progressive political interest groups, grassroots movements, and other civic organizations. Roughly 83 percent of *MoveOn.org*'s Connecticut-based members voted to provide strong "financial, logistical, and other" type of assistance to Lamont's campaign in a referendum conducted in the early months of the Democratic presidential primary (Pirch 2008: 283; Carty 2010a). Lamont was also backed by Democracy for America and other influential members of the left-leaning political blogging community (Pirch 2008: 283). These endorsements gave Lamont more credibility and notoriety "among the electorate at large and the mainstream media" (Pirch 2008: 283).

While Lamont's personal fortune allowed him to self-fund close to half of his primary contest (West 2008), donations from the netizenry were still instrumental in financing his operations. He collected more than 350,000 U.S. dollars in small financial contributions from 4,500 Internet users from within and outside the state of Connecticut during the first 45 days of the Democratic senatorial primary. The Lamont campaign also received a large percentage of its funding from websites which served as clearinghouses for collecting money from the public such as ActBlue. Close to 8,000 Web users used these fundraising channels to give Lamont approximately 453,000 U.S. dollars during the 2006 midterm elections (Pirch 2008: 284; Feld and Wilcox 2008: 136; Karpf 2009a, 2010a, 2010b). More broadly, about 26 million U.S. dollars were raised with the help of ActBlue to support progressive candidates or causes as of September 2007 (Feld and Wilcox 2008: 49; Burroughs 2007: 329). Finally, formal and informal political groups contributed close to 268,000 U.S. dollars to the Lamont campaign (Murakami 2008: 921).

Many social scientists believe that Ned Lamont was one of the U.S. politicians who benefited the most from “ideological money” and grassroots support in 2006 (West 2008; Boatright 2009: 6). His donor pool was mostly composed of citizens who were more likely to be politically and ideologically polarized than those who gave funds to Lieberman (West 2008). In the words of Johnson (2010: 903), candidates “who are less centrist are more appealing to a particular population of individual donors who [...] are likely to be motivated by purposive incentives.” In addition, Lamont’s online popularity allowed him to quickly assemble an army of dedicated volunteers that helped energize his politicking operations (Cohen 2008, 2009; Gueorguieva 2008).

Lamont’s success in winning the Connecticut Democratic senatorial nomination cannot be attributed only to the heavy support he received from the netizenry. His offline political campaigning strategy also helped him rally supporters of the Democratic Party around his candidacy. For example, he appeared on the fake news show *The Colbert Report*, which strongly appealed to younger left-wing voters. Democratic candidates who were guests on the *The Colbert Report* generally experienced a slight bump in the number of donations they received from public, a phenomenon known as the “Colbert Bump” (LaMarre, Landreville et al. 2009: 228; Sides and Farrell 2010: 9). Moreover, Lamont frequently appeared on local and national news shows on over-the-air and cable television channels. It should be noted that few House and senatorial hopefuls received this type of national news media coverage in 2006 (Burroughs 2007). Nevertheless, while Lamont was defeated in the general elections, his dynamic presence in the Web 2.0 mediascape played an important role in mobilizing his supporters and enabling him to secure the Democratic senatorial nomination in Connecticut.

### **1.3 The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign: Ron Paul**

Grassroots activists were a major driving force behind the presidential candidacy of Ron Paul, a Republican congressman for over 20 years and presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party during the 1988 U.S. elections (Chamberlain 2010; Haynes and Pitts 2009; Karpf 2008). He was initially a little-known outsider candidate who was not expected to play an important role in the U.S. political landscape. However, his staunch libertarian stances on a variety of political issues and his objectives, which differentiated him from most of his competitors, strongly appealed to narrow segments of the U.S. population.

Notwithstanding that some of Paul's views and goals had little resonance among prototypical Republican voters (e.g. his support of abortion rights, his desire to decriminalize the possession of small quantities of marijuana and other illegal drugs, etc.), they helped him garner significant momentum on the national political stage, especially during the first twelve months of the Republican presidential primaries (Christenson and Smidt 2011; Walker 2008: 1101). Vaccari (2010: 326) believes that this phenomenon suggested the presence of "a communality of values with social movements emphasizing 'do-it-yourself' citizenship and nonhierarchical [organizational] arrangements," two trends that are integral components of the *online politicking 3.0* model which will be discussed later in this dissertation. Many elements of the Paul campaign found their way into the most successful initiatives of the Tea Party movement.

Ron Paul developed a cyber electioneering strategy which had a strong social media component. In fact, he was one of the first U.S. politicians to heavily rely on third-party user-generated digital media services to reach out to voters (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 55; Towner and Dulio 2011: 167). His dynamic Web presence ultimately helped him become the candidate with the largest and most-dedicated Internet following during the 2008 U.S. presidential contest (Vaccari 2010: 326). First, while Ron Paul's official campaign site was

relatively basic compared to his opponents' sites, it featured several Web links redirecting Internet users to different commercially owned content recommendation channels such as Digg, Del.icio.us and StumbleUpon. These tools allowed Web users to independently flag digital material compatible with their interests or objectives and instantly share it with other Internet users (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 55; Johnson and Perlmutter 2009: 375; Karpf 2009a). He also integrated on his site a fundraising widget,<sup>4</sup> which visually displayed in real-time the name and geographical location of the latest donors and the amount of their financial contributions.<sup>5</sup> It sought to instill among Web users a sense of transparency and credibility by providing them with detailed information on his fundraising operations (Chamberlain 2010: 105-106).

Second, he exploited YouTube and other third-party video-sharing channels to disseminate his campaign message. He also used them to get feedback from audience members through comment functions and other participation tools such as video rating features (May 2010: 510; Haynes and Pitts 2009: 57). These media channels enabled him to reach out to an important portion of the online audience. By January 3, 2008, videos on his campaign's official YouTube channel were collectively viewed 8,517,624 times, more than any other presidential candidate at that time (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 57).

Third, while Ned Lamont's insurgent candidacy was supported by many progressive bloggers in 2006, Paul's elite-challenging stances alienated the support of a large number of the A-list conservative bloggers who preferred backing presidential hopefuls with a more mainstream political agenda or who had better chances of securing the Republican nomination. Many of them even criticized his policy positions and goals and refrained from linking to pro-Paul digital resources in their posts (Karpf 2008: 382). His campaign was much more popular among counter-elite and libertarian bloggers. While they generally had a small

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<sup>4</sup> A widget can be defined as "an element of a graphical user interface such as a button or scroll bar [displaying multidimensional information]; also, a module of software for a personalized Web page" (Chamberlain 2010: 105).

<sup>5</sup> Donors could opt out of sharing their identity through Paul's fundraising widget (Chamberlain 2010: 105-106).

readership and few connections to the A-list political blogging community, they still had a certain influence on the structure of the online political discourse and had the potential to mobilize a relatively large portion of the electorate (Karpf 2008: 382-383; Perlmutter 2008: 27; Pole 2009: 136). Paul's candidacy was also endorsed by a few widely-read progressive and moderate political bloggers who shared some of his concerns (Davis 2009: 51; Park 2009: 250). By the end of December 2007, he was the fifth most-discussed U.S. presidential candidate in the U.S. political blogosphere, behind Republicans Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney as well as Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. However, his popularity in the U.S. political blogosphere dwindled during the following weeks. His candidacy was mentioned in only 220 blog posts between January 1 and January 5, 2007, making him the eighth most-discussed presidential contender during this time period in the U.S. blogspace (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 56).

Fourth, Ron Paul launched public profile pages on several social networking sites to generate buzz around his candidacy and create new communication bridges or strengthen existing ones with and among members of the electorate. In fact, Stallings-Carpenter (2009) believes that Paul is the first U.S. presidential candidate to include a Facebook page in his digital political communication arsenal. Many Paul activists also used their personal SNS profile pages for partisan purposes during the 2008 U.S. presidential contest. For example, they posted content such as status updates, photos, or videos supportive of his candidacy in order to publicly show their political allegiances and encourage members of their immediate social network to contribute time and money to the Ron Paul campaign (Wilcox 2008). However, the excitement generated by Paul on social network sites and in the U.S. political blogosphere failed to make it into the mainstream political mediascape. This is considered to be one of the main causes of his weak showings in most of the Republican primaries and caucuses in 2008 (Haynes and Pitts 2009).

Much like Ned Lamont in 2006, Paul granted several exclusive interviews to Internet users who posted them on their blogs, personal websites, or third-party video-sharing channels (Gannes 2009: 149; Graf 2008). Many Paul activists also turned to YouTube and other similar digital resources to circulate fan-made mash-up videos promoting campaign events or contrasting his positions on specific policy issues with other candidates' views. In contrast, they also shared digital material critiquing his opponents. The Paul campaign sometimes linked to this user-generated digital material on its official website or to other digital resources in order to complement its own political communication operations (Serazio 2009).

These various e-politicking initiatives helped him raise large sums of money from the public. Notwithstanding the fact that some of his extreme views and goals prevented him from getting a lot of money from the mainstream Republican donor pool, Paul hauled in approximately 35 million U.S. dollars during the 2008 Republican primary (Weintraub and Levine 2009: 464). He collected a significant proportion of his money through digital fundraising channels such as his official campaign websites, third-party social networking services, blogs, and other Web 2.0 media tools (Johnson 2010: 891; Weintraub and Levine 2009; Magleby 2008: 5, 2010: 31). Ron Paul was among the few who relied heavily on small contributors to fund his electioneering operations (Magleby 2008, 2010: 13; Malbin 2009: 13). Paul also benefited from two intensive 24-hour fundraising efforts which were held during the last quarter of 2007 (Vargas 2007). One of these one-day fundraising drives, known as a "money bombs," was initiated and coordinated by music promoter and grassroots activist Trevor Lyman, who was not formally affiliated with the Paul campaign (Karpf 2008: 382, 2009a; Christenson and Smidt 2011: 5).

More broadly, the Paul campaign impacted the modern e-electioneering dynamic by hyper-mobilizing a very narrow and ideologically specific segment of the U.S. electorate. He

efficiently exploited first and second generation digital media tools to reach out to these voters and leverage their energy. It can be argued that, in many ways, several facets of the e-campaigning strategy developed by the Paul campaign served as a model for the Tea Party.

#### **1.4 The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign: Barack Obama**

Barack Obama is arguably the national politician in the United States who benefited the most from grassroots support in 2008. In fact, he is the first presidential hopeful in U.S. political history to enjoy electoral success while heavily relying on Web 2.0 technologies for electioneering purposes (Panagopoulos 2009: 309; Weintraub and Levine 2009).

The quasi-seamless integration of social media channels by the Obama campaign in its overall political communication, mobilization, and organizing operations constituted one of the main elements of its success in 2008. It closely coordinated its online and offline campaigning efforts in order to provide its supporters with coherent information acquisition and engagement opportunities. Meanwhile, many Democratic and Republican contenders opted for more compartmentalized politicking approaches. For example, many of them exploited social media technologies as mostly stand-alone top-down campaigning tools, which were not necessarily in line with their efforts on other political communication platforms (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 191).

It should be noted that Obama maintained a visible offline media presence throughout the 2008 election cycle. He spent a record-breaking 250 million U.S. dollars on television advertising alone, surpassing by close to 100 million U.S. dollars what John Kerry spent in 2004 (Kaid 2009: 418; Bennett, Freelon et al. 2010: 400). His campaign even produced a 30-minute infomercial, which aired on October 29, 2008 at 8 p.m. (EST) (right before the Baseball World Series) on three major TV networks (FOX, NBC and CBS) and four cable-based channels (MSNBC, Spanish-language Univision, BET and TV-One). This infomercial consisted of “pre-produced material that highlighted Obama’s life and experience and ended

with a brief live statement by Obama from a campaign rally” held in Sunrise, Florida (Kaid 2009: 418).

Unlike many candidates who heavily used Web 2.0 technologies without a clear strategy in 2008, Obama committed money and human resources to the planning of his social media operation several months before formally entering the presidential race. Early in 2007, he assembled a hybrid team of paid digital media consultants and volunteers and invested close to 2 million U.S. dollars in different research and development initiatives (R&D) to acquire cyber campaigning knowledge and capabilities (Towner and Dulio 2011: 166; Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 75-76).

His R&D staff worked simultaneously on projects focusing mainly on software. For example, it developed different social applications for smart phones to improve his ability to reach out to the growing proportion of U.S. voters who were regularly accessing the Web from mobile devices (Clayton 2010: 137; Towner and Dulio 2011: 166; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 189). Obama was ultimately the first U.S. presidential contender to launch an application for smart phones in June 2007. This app filled a predominantly unidirectional content dispersion role. It facilitated the delivery of short-form digital material such as updates about the campaign, news and background information about the candidate, position papers, video spots, and photos of campaign events (Seidman 2010: 12; Abrams and Lefebvre 2009: 418; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 203). It also exploited the global positioning system (GPS) capabilities of smart phones and other mobile devices when activated by users in order to notify them in real-time about Obama-related events or engagement opportunities near their geographical location (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 203). Finally, it comprised several Meetup-style features designed to stimulate different forms of offline political action. For instance, it allowed users to:

“rank-order the campaign phone calls that they should make to friends, based on whether their friends lived in swing states; it also

compiled millions of mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses to mobilize citizens for old-style, face-to-face politicking during the campaign and after” (Sander and Putnam 2010: 13).

Obama’s R&D team also developed technological support tools streamlining the acquisition and management of the mobile contact information of large numbers of individuals, thus enabling his staffers to carry out the first large-scale text-messaging campaign in the history of U.S. elections (Levenshus 2010: 322; Ford, Johnson et al. 2010: 471). By early November 2008, it had close to seven million cell phone numbers in its database (Kreiss and Howard 2010: 1043; Ford, Johnson et al. 2010: 471). Based on Shirky’s work (2008), it can be argued that Obama’s use of texting was part of a broader “superdistribution strategy.” It was characterized by the fact that when Short Message Service (SMS) messages were sent out, they were instantly rebroadcasted by his campaign staff and a large number of Web users through different Internet-based user-generated media channels, thus significantly augmenting their visibility.

Finally, shortly before entering the presidential contest, Obama set up teams of strategists dedicated to specific facets of his e-politicking operations such as the coordination of his digital fundraising or the management of his social media presence. They were integrated in his broader campaign command-and-control infrastructure, thus helping him to better coordinate his overall campaigning efforts (Bennett, Freelon et al. 2010: 400; Levenshus 2010: 322; Towner and Dulio 2011: 166). This helped Obama have the most dynamic and sophisticated social media campaigning operation in the United States’ political history. In fact, just like the Dean campaign, which inspired many candidates in 2006 and 2008, Obama’s Web 2.0-fueled run for the White House in 2008 has served as a roadmap for many candidates and political parties during the following years (Jackson, Dorton et al. 2010: 43, 50; Levenshus 2010).

The central role of Web 2.0 media in Obama's politicking strategy allowed him to efficiently exploit U.S. voters' "participatory surplus" in order to translate it into an election win. The concept of "participatory surplus" can be defined as a "huge, and largely unused" quantity of energy that people are ready to deploy in order to "contribute to efforts and causes larger than themselves" (Blaser, Weinberger et al. 2009: 1). In other words, Obama's efficient use of social media platforms enabled him "to tap into unprecedented levels of energies and resources" (Vaccari 2010: 323) by giving voters wide-ranging opportunities to be independently involved in formal or informal electoral processes. Specifically, it allowed him to conduct hyper-targeted political communication and mobilization campaigns designed to address the concerns of specific segments of the U.S. public. As noted by Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011: 201), Web 2.0 media tools "help[ed] the campaign to segment out its supporters and to provide targeted messages to unique and narrow constituencies and slices of their activist base." Comparatively, many Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2008 elections used these tools to address the electorate as a whole, just like they did on Web 1.0-style communication platforms such as campaign websites. Moreover, he adopted a personal or informal tone in his campaign communication that enabled him to establish with his audience on social media sites "a sense of 'digital intimacy,' the closeness one feels to another person by being near and therefore privy to his or her day-to-day activities and minutiae" (Jackson, Dorton et al. 2010: 44).

Obama's social media presence was multifaceted. He set up profile pages on at least 15 third-party community-building platforms compared to at least 6 for his Republican opponent in the general election, John McCain (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008; Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 75). Obama's social networking service (SNS) profile pages served two main purposes. On one hand, they served as information hubs by providing Web users with mix-media digital material on various aspects of his campaign:

- ✓ his personal and professional background;
- ✓ his campaign-related activities;
- ✓ his policy views and objectives (Towner and Dulio 2011; Pollard, Chesebro et al. 2009; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011).

On the other hand, they comprised interactive tools seeking to mobilize Internet users such as voter registration and fundraising widgets, volunteer sign-up tools as well as discussion boards and chat forums enabling them to interact with their peers and with members of Obama's staff (Towner and Dulio 2011: 173; Pollard, Chesebro et al. 2009: 584; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 201).

Social networking sites were also used by the Obama campaign to accomplish several secondary tasks:

- ✓ acquiring basic background information on individuals who friended him;
- ✓ fostering social relations between like-minded individuals not necessarily political in nature, but that could eventually lead to increased levels of political engagement;
- ✓ countering attacks from his opponents (Ancu and Cozma 2009: 567; Hanson, Haridakis et al. 2010: 587).

Barack Obama was the most popular presidential hopeful on most dominant third-party social networking sites during the 2008 U.S. presidential contest. Close to 5 million individuals openly backed his candidacy on these media platforms by either friending him, sharing content on these platforms, or joining groups focusing on his candidacy. By Election Day, it was estimated that approximately 25 percent of his supporters were "linked to him - and one another - through these" media channels (Han and Kim 2009: 18; Levenshus 2010: 323).

More than 500 pro-Obama Facebook groups not formally affiliated with his campaign were also launched throughout the 2008 election cycle (Abroms and Lefebvre 2009: 417).

They served as unfiltered media hubs facilitating the dissemination of “important information related to the candidates’ campaign, issues, and appearances rather than for social purposes” (Johnson and Perlmutter 2010: 556). While many of them had a relatively small membership and were not frequently updated, some others exceeded the 500,000 members mark and directly rivalled the size of many of the presidential candidates and political parties’ official Facebook groups (Soghoian, Friedrichs et al. 2008: 139; Liller and Jackson 2011: 107).

Obama also launched a profile page on MySpace and quickly gained a large following. He already had close to 169,397 friends in August 2007 (Han and Kim 2009: 17). By March 14, 2008, 320,522 individuals had friended Obama, up from 287,853 in February 2008, compared to 189,737 for Clinton and a mere 48,451 for McCain (Pollard, Chesebro et al. 2009: 583; Dalsgaard 2008: 12). Finally, Obama launched a profile page on the professional networking site LinkedIn in early September 2007. He ultimately garnered close to 13,000 connections by Election Day, more than any other U.S. presidential contender in 2008 (Halligan, Shah et al. 2009: 8; Johnson 2011: 19).

Obama did not rely exclusively on third-party social networking services. His campaign staff developed and launched its in-house social networking service, MyBarackObama.com (MyBO). This platform, which was heavily promoted across Obama’s digital communication infrastructures, enabled users to create a password-secure profile page and have access to and interact with a community of pro-Obama Internet users. It provided them with election-related digital material and interactive tools geared toward stimulating various forms of political action that were tailored to their geographical location, political preferences, topical interests, and objectives (Levenshus 2010: 324, 326; Towner and Dulio 2011: 175; Kreiss and Howard 2010: 1037). In other words, it could be seen as a suite of political engagement tools much like Microsoft’s Office suite or Apple’s iLife suite (Giardina 2010: 107). From a broader perspective, this media channel was explicitly seeking to capture

Obama supporters and quickly turn them into full-fledged activists (Lilleker and Jackson 2011).

This social networking service also enabled the Obama campaign to closely monitor its supporters' online activities and collect strategic information about them:

- ✓ their views of his policy positions and campaign message;
- ✓ their level of consumption of political content;
- ✓ their level of usage of different MyBO applications;
- ✓ the outcome of their involvement in campaign activities when available;
- ✓ the structure of their immediate social network on MyBO (Levenshus 2009: 324, 331; Kreiss and Howard 2010: 1037).

This gave Obama the ability to fine-tune his approach when needed in order to maintain or increase his electoral appeal while responding to his supporters needs or objectives (Kreiss and Howard 2010: 1037; Levenshus 2009: 324, 331). By the end of the 2008 U.S. presidential election cycle, close to two million individuals had at least one personal profile page on MyBO and engaged with varying levels of intensity in different political activities. The internal collaborative tools of this social networking platform also enabled users to organize close to 200,000 real-world events, 50,000 of which were held during the last three weeks of the election cycle, and set up 35,000 volunteer groups operating in specific geographical areas, close to 1,000 of them on February 10, 2007. Moreover, they published close to 400,000 posts on blogs that they could integrate on their personal profile pages (Vargas 2008). The MyBO digital phone application was used by users to make three million calls in the four days preceding Election Day to “ensure that people who favoured Obama actually got out of the house and voted” (Batra 2010: 91).

Additionally, Obama included in his social media politicking arsenal user-generated photo and video-sharing tools, such as Flickr and YouTube, which facilitated the

asynchronous dissemination of audiovisual campaign messages (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 201; Towner and Dulio 2011: 172). Unlike social networking services, video and photo-sharing services played a peripheral role in “connecting people, allowing individuals to communicate with friends, family, and coworkers” in 2008 (Towner and Dulio 2011: 173). They were primarily used for multidirectional content dispersion purposes and for engaging in limited text-based social interactions through, for example, comment or rating tools when available (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Hanson, Haridakis et al. 2010; Iyengar 2011).

On Flickr, Obama shared approximately 50,000 photos (e.g. photos from speeches, town hall meetings, debates, formal campaign events, etc.), often sorted and with a short descriptive caption, while McCain did not even have a presence on this social media site (Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 76; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 201). Many pictures were also posted on accounts owned by other political players, especially during sensitive political moments such as major campaign speeches or on election night when the Obama family was present in Grant Park in Chicago for the victory festivities (Harvey 2009: 211; Johnson 2011: 1).

The Obama campaign released 1,792 videos on YouTube during the electoral campaign compared to only 329 for the McCain camp. By the end of the presidential contest, the official Youtube account of the Obama campaign had 114,559 Web subscribers compared to only 28,419 for McCain’s channel (Kissane 2010; Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 76). It should be noted that the videos available on Obama’s YouTube channel collectively garnered more views than those of any other candidate in the United States during the 2008 elections (Kaid 2009: 419; Abrams and Lefebvre 2009: 416; Owyang 2008). The Obama camp posted three types of videos on its official YouTube channel:

- ✓ “live-streaming” videos generally featuring the totality or an edited version of formal or informal campaign events;
- ✓ “campaign-created” videos such as political ads or announcements carrying specific mobilization or persuasion objectives;
- ✓ “user-generated” videos produced by its supporters (Harfoush 2009: 149-150).

The Obama campaign also turned to micro-communication or status updating platforms like Twitter to rapidly circulate Web links, pointing to digital resources on wide-ranging issues or events, among the online public updates about the status of his campaign (less than 140 characters per post). To a lesser extent, it used these media channels to share photos, coordinate online and offline fundraising operations and short-term mobilization initiatives, and, to a much lesser extent, interact with Internet users (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 201; Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 76). Medvic (2011: 78) believes that the majority of candidates running for office used Twitter more as a tool for top-down press relations than to connect in a meaningful manner with the electorate during the 2008 presidential election cycle. The majority of political journalists had at least one Twitter account, which they used to follow candidates active in the Twittosphere (Medvic 2011: 78).

Obama was the presidential candidate with the largest following on this micro-communication site in 2008 (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 201). In early November 2008, 112,474 individuals were following his official Twitter feed (@barackobama) compared to only 4,603 for John McCain’s presumed feed (@johnmccain) (Abroms and Lefebvre 2009: 419; Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 76). It is important to point out that a politician’s number of Twitter connections has a direct effect on his capacity to disseminate his messages among users of this media platform. As noted by Glassman, Straus et al. (2010: 13), “[t]he effectiveness of using Twitter to communicate information is partially dependent on the number of ‘followers’ that have subscribed to an individual Twitter stream.”

The way the Obama camp used Web 2.0 technologies in its voter outreach activities reinforced the mantra of transformative change that was central to his political communication strategy. In the words of Cogburn and Espinoza-Vazquez (2011: 194), they had “a tremendous potential of empowering citizens and allowing them” to be directly engaged in the electoral process and potentially become “agents of change”.

Obama’s online and real-world fundraising efforts yielded around 750 million U.S. dollars during the 2008 presidential election cycle (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 203; Lipsitz and Panagopoulos 2011: 45). As previously mentioned, close to 66.7 percent of this amount, or 500 million U.S. dollars, came from three million unique online contributors who transferred money to his campaign close to six and a half million times, generally in increments of 100 U.S. dollars or less (Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 76; Giardina 2010: 109). Much like other Internet-savvy politicians such as Ron Paul, Obama benefited from several money bomb-type fundraising efforts. Moreover, many “online intermediaries” such as MoveOn.org and other “social movement organizations (SMOs)” organized short-term fundraising initiatives often tied to a specific political cause or event in support of Obama’s candidacy in 2008 (Carty 2010b: 155, 2011: 166).

While small donors were an important source of funds for the Obama campaign, it was still strongly supported by wealthier donors. In fact, it ended up shattering fundraising records established by John Kerry and George W. Bush in 2004 (Lipsitz and Panagopoulos 2011: 47). Close to 34 percent of the donations it received between the months of October and December 2007 were of 1,000 U.S. dollars or more, down from 60 percent between January and September of the same year (Malbin 2009: 12). Another study indicated that the campaign was the recipient of 76,701 large donations (exceeding 200 U.S. dollars) averaging 920.30 U.S. dollars during the invisible primary period compared to 71,936 contributions averaging

1,280.30 U.S. dollars for his main Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton (Christenson and Smidt 2011: 22).

Obama's dynamic presence on social media sites also helped him energize predominantly young and idealistic voters who heavily participated in mobilization and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) initiatives benefiting his campaign (Masket 2009: 23; Giardina 2010: 106). Many authors point out that Web 2.0 media channels played a vital role in his volunteer recruitment drive by enabling him to connect and maintain relationships with people sympathetic to his cause. His recruitment appeals on third-party social networking sites were successful despite the fact that this type of outreach was often perceived by some segments of the U.S. public such as university students as "less appropriate" than strict information dissemination efforts (Vitak, Zube et al. 2011: 112). As noted by Vitak, Zube et al. (2011: 112), "the norms of political activity on [social media platforms were still] [...] nuanced [and constantly evolving], and [...] personal expression [...] [was] seen as more appropriate than calls to action" at the time.

A large number of informal U.S. political players also encouraged their supporters and the public at large to throw their support behind the Obama campaign by volunteering time. For example, MoveOn.org formally endorsed Barack Obama's presidential candidacy in June 2008 and actively leveraged its digital infrastructure to support his cause during the following months. Specifically, it contacted its members through different online media channels and urged them to take part in mobilization efforts backing his bid for the White House. It also encouraged them to engage in discussions about election-related matters with members of their immediate social environment such as neighbours, co-workers, friends, and family members (Carty 2010a, 2011: 274). According to Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011: 205), more than 5 million individuals in the United States and in several other countries volunteered time and effort during the elections to help Obama get elected.

In summary, Barack Obama's social media politicking approach has contributed to the in-depth redefinition of political information flows and social relations in the United States. His campaign, which heavily invested in different research and development initiatives before the beginning of the presidential election cycle, efficiently leveraged the distinct structural and functional properties of Web 2.0 media platforms to attain a wide range of specific mobilization, fundraising and organizing objectives. In other words, the Obama campaign adapted its electioneering approach to fully exploit the distinct capabilities of social media channels.

Several social scientists have argued that some of the four grassroots political mobilization phenomena discussed in this chapter have contributed to the in-depth transformation of e-politics in the United States (Kreiss 2011; Gibson 2012). While they have helped to reengage some segments of the public in the political process, they have essentially followed a top-down approach as they were centered on an influential political figure and focused on a relatively small number of policy matters which had some traction among the public. In other words, they can be seen as a bridge between traditional elite-led politics and the emergence of the *online politicking 3.0* model. This argument will be substantiated in a later section of this dissertation with an in-depth quantitative content analysis of the presence of supporters and detractors of the Tea Party movement in the Twitterverse during the 2010 U.S. midterm elections.

## **2 Chapter: Evolution of the mass mediated political communication dynamic**

The political mediascape of many democracies has undergone a series of in-depth transformations throughout the last sixty years (Benoit and Sheafer 2006: 281; Plasser 2005: 52). Specifically, mass communication platforms with distinct structural and functional properties have successively moved to center stage of the media environment and contributed to the redefinition of broad-scoped deliberative and collaborative processes. In other words, “both message transmission and message reception” patterns have been altered by the emergence and popularization of specific content dispersion and community-building tools (Warren 2007: 2).

In order to fully understand the transformative nature of the *online politicking 3.0* model, it is important to contextualize it within the broader evolution of mass-mediated political communication, mobilization and organizing patterns in the United States. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the redefinition of the offline political mediascape since the early 1960s with the rise of television as an important source of political information for the public. It will also offer an examination of the reconfiguration of e-politicking since the 1996 U.S. midterm elections.

### **2.1 Evolution of the offline mass-mediated politicking dynamic in the United States**

The transformation of the political mass mediascape in the United States began in the early 1960s with television becoming an instrumental component of the political communication, mobilization and persuasion environment, coupled with the slow weakening of ties between political institutions and the citizenry (Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999: 255; Bimber 2003: 76; Schultz, Zeh et al. 2005: 61). These trends led to the progressive collapse of tribal-like party allegiances and formal political group membership (Bennett and Iyengar 2008: 723; Strandberg 2009: 836). More important, they contributed to the rapid intensification of the

mass-“mediation” and “mediatization” of politics (Couldry 2008; Cohen, Tsfati et al. 2008; Strömbäck, 2008).

Political mediation can be defined as the procedure by which mass media channels heighten their role in the political process by gradually becoming prominent sources of political information for members of the public and important communication bridges between it and the formal political sphere (Strömbäck 2008: 230; Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999: 249). The mediatization of politics refers to the ongoing development by formal political actors (e.g. political parties, candidates, etc.), with the help of in-house specialists and external consultants (e.g. political strategists, media experts, etc.), of communication and mobilization tactics tailored to exploit the structural and functional properties of dominant mass media outlets in order to attain their objectives (Brants, De Vreese et al. 2010: 30; Couldry 2008: 377; Gibson and Römmele 2009: 266). Ultimately, they seek to bolster their capacity to penetrate and manipulate to their advantage journalistic organizations’ political news coverage and analysis, thus maximizing the reach and persuasiveness of their messages and mobilization efforts (Albrecht, Lubcke et al. 2007: 505-506; Cohen, Tsfati et al. 2008: 232). Much like in the United States, the structure of the political landscape of many Western-style democratic countries has been deeply impacted by the growing role of mass media outlets in the political process during the last fifty years (Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999: 248; Cohen, Tsfati et al. 2008: 232), a phenomenon known as “Americanization” due to the global influence of innovative electioneering practices pioneered in the United States (Perlmutter and Golan 2005: 305; Gibson and Römmele 2009: 265).

Based on Strömbäck’s work (2008), it can be argued that the redefinition of the offline mass-mediated politicking dynamic in the U.S. has followed a four-step evolution process:

- ✓ mediation phase;
- ✓ “industrial shift”;

- ✓ “continuation and intensification” stage;
- ✓ mediatization phase.

### **2.1.1 The mediation phase**

The mediation stage in the United States was characterized by the widespread adoption by the public of impersonal mass media outlets such as radio, television, magazines and newspapers as important sources of political news and commentary (Strömbäck 2008: 236; Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999: 249). These platforms fostered the exposure of geographically dispersed and potentially less politically aware and energized segments of the public to a “unified, seamless, and clear-cut [...]” stream of political information (Blondheim and Liebes 2009: 183). This trend, which contributed to the “nationalization of the political discourse” (Graff 2007: 120), can be identified as partially responsible for the progressive “decline of direct linkages between citizens and parties and the rise of mediated linkages” (Norris, Curtice et al. 1999: 22). Indeed, political parties and candidates progressively decreased their reliance on parades and other types of events in local communities to reach out to voters. Conversely, members of the electorate were no longer obligated to “rely on the parties to signal who stands for what and to tell them what they should be for or against” because they had access to a wealth of political information through mass media channels (Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999: 256). According to Bimber (2003: 76), this period marked the “demise of party-based campaign[ing].”

The early years of the mediation phase, namely the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were marked by the emergence of a highly subsidized and partisan media system giving formal political players mostly unchallenged influence on journalistic organizations (Strömbäck 2008: 236-240; Groeling and Engstrom 2009: 1). In the words of Patterson and Donsbach (1996), “the nineteenth century press was rooted in partisan advocacy and supported by party patrons, in and out of government.” It was controlled in a quasi-

monopolistic fashion by a small number of elite political players who used them to distribute to a large audience mostly unfiltered partisan information packages (Laracey 2008: 10; Popkin 2007: 76).

The rise of television as a central player on the political scene marked the later years of the mediation phase. For example, 32 percent of the U.S. public considered television as their go-to destination for political news in 1952 (Bennett and Manheim 2006: 223). Twelve years later, 58 percent of citizens identified it as their political “medium of choice” (Bennett and Manheim 2006: 223). By 1972, two thirds (66.6 percent) of U.S. voters believed that television was the best media tool to keep up with “candidates for national office” and slightly more than 50 percent believed that its coverage of politics offered the “clearest understanding of the candidates and the issues in national elections” (Robinson 1976: 409). At the same time, formal political players started investing massively in their political communication activities on this media outlet. For example, the Democratic Party spent 68 percent of their “presidential campaign funds on broadcasting” compared to 50 percent for the Republican Party (Robinson 1976: 409).

The TV audience of this period could essentially be defined as captive and non-engaged (passive) due to the combination of several factors:

- ✓ the presence of a limited number of mass media outlets offering homogenous and highly controlled political programming;
- ✓ the dominance of political news shows across dominant networks during certain viewing hours (e.g.: evening news programs, etc.);
- ✓ dominant networks’ capacity to jointly suspend their programming during significant political moments (e.g. campaign debates, speeches, etc.);
- ✓ audience members’ “unwillingness to turn off the television” (Baum and Kernell 2006: 15);

- ✓ low levels of interactivity and control for audience members (Baum and Kernell 1999, 2006; Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008; Baum and Kernell 2006).

It can be argued based on Barzilai-Nahon's work (2008) that the few dominant journalistic gatekeepers of this period, which had in most cases strong partisan political dispositions, could frame audience members' mediated information intake and, by extension, understanding of their immediate political context. This non-engaged, information-deprived, and uninvolved mass audience was more likely to be persuaded due to its repeated exposure to homogenous political content reinforcing specific views and its incapacity to easily find dissonant or alternative viewpoints, a phenomenon known as the "trap effect" (Schönbach and Lauf 2004: 169).

Formal political players were predominantly in charge of the elaboration, coordination, and execution of political communication and mobilization operations during the mediation stage. They rarely sought advice or support from external professional consultants or media experts (Grossmann 2009b: 83; Karlsen 2009: 3). Additionally, they constituted journalists' primary source of political information. The news media organizations' role therefore revolved more around strict information relaying activities than on independent news-collecting and investigative work. In fact, they were perceived by the public more as partisan bullhorns disseminating partisan content in a mostly unidirectional fashion for formal political players than objective sources of information (Kahn and Kenney 2002: 383; Van Aelst, Maddens et al. 2008: 196). In other words, it can be argued that the majority of news media organizations operated under a strict "partisan logic" journalistic paradigm during the mediation phase (Van Aelst, Maddens et al. 2008; Laracey 2008).

### **2.1.2 The "industrial shift"**

The second phase, known as the "industrial shift" (Bennett and Livingston 2003: 359), spanned the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. It was marked by the steady "decline in partisan

sponsorship” (Callaghan and Schnell 2001: 184) and the development of the capabilities of existing mass media channels. In other words, it contributed to the expansion of mainstream news organizations’ political autonomy (Callaghan and Schnell 2001: 184; Strömbäck 2008: 236). Moreover, it led to the escalation of economic pressures on journalistic organizations’ operations, which were increasingly structured based on business-oriented concerns rather than political considerations. For instance, they began modifying certain facets of their activities in order to meet financial and expansion objectives. Profitability, ratings, and audience growth-related considerations became some of the guiding principles of their content production and circulation decisions (Strömbäck 2008: 236-237; Callaghan and Schnell 2001: 184; Bennett and Livingston 2003: 359; Baum 2007: 118-119).

Specifically, this period fostered the modernization of the previously dominant partisan media framework with the emergence of professionalized journalistic practices emphasizing a “more pragmatic and less sacerdotal” coverage of politics (Strömbäck 2008: 237). Most conventional media outlets were still influenced by dominant formal political players but included in their news coverage an increasing number of factual and issue-centered descriptive reports, which often featured toned down criticism of political parties and candidates (Krasnoboka and Brants 2002: 3; Esser, Reinemann et al. 2001: 16-17).

The rising interdependence between the mass media system and the formal political sphere forced politicians and other institutionalized political players, who were losing their control on the “content and style of [their mass-mediated] campaign messages,” to explore and implement new ways to shape mainstream journalistic organizations’ political coverage to their advantage (Schultz, Zeh et al. 2005: 59). They gradually developed news and crisis management as well as public relations techniques designed to influence journalists’ work (Strömbäck 2008: 237; Schultz, Zeh et al. 2005: 59; Blumler and Gurevitch 2001).

### **2.1.3 The intensification of the second phase**

The third stage of mass-mediated political communication and mobilization essentially consisted of the continuation and intensification of the second phase (Strömbäck 2008: 236-237). This stage, which spanned the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, led to the reinforcement of the “American model,” which was defined by journalistic organizations’ growing ability to conduct their daily operations with minimal to no interference from formal political players (Curran, Iyengar et al. 2009: 6; Strömbäck 2008: 236-237). They redefined their political news, analysis and opinion delivery practices by implementing a “strategy coverage” journalistic approach emphasizing the diffusion of horse race-type content<sup>6</sup> such as polls, politicians’ objectives and personality, controversies, confrontations and “dramatic news” (Brants, De Vreese et al. 2010: 26). This type of political journalism promoted a vision “of the candidates as strategic gamesmen, each trying to neutralize or overcome the opponent’s moves” (Iyengar, Norpoth et al. 2004: 158), which is known as “game schema” (Schulz, Zeh et al. 2005: 60).

The presence of horse race news on English-language television newscasts in the United States has rapidly grown since the mid-1980s (Iyengar, Norpoth et al. 2004: 158; Hahn and Iyengar 2002: 3). It increased from 27 percent to 35 percent from 1988 to 1992 while the coverage of policy questions or other specific issues, more broadly known as hard news, dropped from 40 percent to 33 (Cappella and Jamieson 1996: 74). By 1997, approximately two thirds of election news coverage in the United States focused on horse race or sensationalistic political news (Webb 2005: 639). More recently, 62 percent of news reports that aired on ABC, CBS and NBC during the 2000 U.S. presidential contest comprised campaign strategy-related news (Crowley and Potter 2005: 234). This trend marked the emergence of a growing adversarial or, to a lesser extent, tenuous relationship between news

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<sup>6</sup> Horse race political news can be defined as a “news story focused on winning or losing in the battle for votes” (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006: 138)

organizations and formal political actors (Hahn and Iyengar 2002: 5; Iyengar, Norpoth et al. 2004: 158).

Recent research has shown that political reporting emphasizing adversarial politics consistently draws a larger viewership than issue-based coverage (Dunaway 2008: 1193; Hahn, Iyengar et al. 2002: 3; Shah, Cho et al. 2007: 679). It also enabled the reconciliation of conventional media's economic ambitions with their "professional norms" because it was popular among the mainstream public and satisfied "journalist's needs for autonomy and objectivity" (Iyengar and McGrady 2007: 68-71). In sum, horse race political news represented a way for mainstream journalistic organizations to build and maintain a large audience in an increasingly commercialized and competitive media environment. It enabled them to monetize more efficiently their operations (Forgette and Morris 2006: 447; Mutz 2007: 623).

This period was also marked by formal political actors' growing consciousness of the pivotal role played by mass media organizations in the political process. Their previously rarely-challenged capacity to reach audience members in an unrestricted fashion was now limited by journalistic organizations' *modus operandi* (Strömbäck 2008: 236-237; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 212). In the words of Strömbäck (2008: 238), "no social actors requiring interaction with the public or influence on opinion [could] ignore the media or afford not to adapt to the media logic" during the continuation and intensification stage. While politicians were still mostly in charge of their political messaging activities through mass media outlets during the third phase, they frequently solicited the expertise of media consultants and other specialists in order to create message building and dissemination tactics exploiting the distinct capabilities of mass media channels (Karlsen 2009: 3; Strömbäck 2008: 240).

#### **2.1.4 The mediatization phase**

The mediatization phase was marked by the deep internalization of “media logic” by formal political actors who increasingly turned to media consultants for advice (Strömbäck 2008: 239; Cho, Shah et al. 2009: 256-257). These specialists provided candidates, elected officials, and other formal political groups with a diverse range of services (e.g. polling, marketing, speechwriting, etc.) in order to assist them in the elaboration and implementation of their mass-mediated politicking strategies (Walton and Weller 2009: 2; Panagopoulos 2006: 867). In fact, Karlsen (2009: 3) argues “it is not clear whether it [was] the politicians or the political consultants who [were] in charge.”

The contribution of these campaign professionals led to the development of positivistic message construction and dissemination approaches designed to alter voters’ political dispositions and engagement patterns in specific ways (Grossmann 2009a: 2, 2009b: 83; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 212; Karlsen 2009: 3). For example, media experts were mandated by politicians to evaluate the acceptability of political messages before they were broadcast to the public (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 213; Lilleker and Negrine 2002: 99). From a broader perspective, the mediatization phase, which spanned the 1990s, encouraged formal political players to shift into a permanent campaigning mode. This approach to politicking is characterized by their daily utilization of specialized human and technical resources in order to maximize the effects of their mass-mediated political communication operations (Strömbäck 2008: 240; Iyengar, Norpoth et al. 2004: 159).

The manipulative and often deceptive nature of formal political actors’ political communication operations induced news media organizations to incorporate more metacoverage-oriented content in their political reporting (De Vreese and Elenbaas 2008: 286; Tedesco 2002: 201). Indeed, journalists were increasingly aware that they were being manipulated (Esser, Reinemann et al. 2001: 16). For example, their coverage could have some

framing effects on audience members' perception of political situations (e.g. events, decisions, etc.) and, by extension, their understanding of the immediate political reality (D'Angelo and Esser 2003; D'Angelo and Lombard 2008: 2). Additionally, they constituted an instrumental component of "politicians' publicity efforts, including their advertising and public relations strategies [...]" (Esser and Spanier 2005: 30).

This period led to the development of an increasingly tense relationship between the mainstream press and the formal political sphere. It also contributed to the rise of political "unease, confusion and scepticism" among some segments of the audience (Blumler and Coleman 2010: 140). While remaining totally independent, formal political players and news media organizations were regularly dragged into "each other's [daily] routines and practices" (Esser and Spanier 2005: 37). The former were constantly seeking new ways to influence the public agenda in advantageous ways while the latter systematically countered their efforts (Esser and Spanier 2005; Blumler and Coleman 2010). Gurevitch, Coleman et al. (2009: 167) point out that the professionalization of politics can be seen as a "response and an adaptation to the challenges of professionalized political media [...]," which gradually emerged during the industrial shift.

The steady "professionalization" of politics through the four phases had deep reorganizing effects on formal political organizations' hierarchical structure and practices (Lilleker, Pack et al. 2010: 105-106; Zittel 2009: 305; Bimber 2008: 163). It cumulated during the mediatization stage with the adoption by most formal political actors of military-inspired politicking strategies emphasizing the concentration of decision-taking processes around a few members of the top leadership (Bimber 2008: 163; Negrine and Lilleker 2002: 310). This trend contributed to the centralization of the political mediascape, where controlled content flowed in a unidirectional and hierarchical way from formal political elites to members of the citizenry through mass media channels (Bimber 2008: 163; Delli Carpini 2000: 347). It also

contributed to the internal polarization of political elites throughout the last 40 years. For example, they adopted increasingly extreme and uncompromising positions on specific policy issues (Claassen and Highton 2009: 539; Koger, Masket et al. 2010: 34). In the words of Claassen and Highton (2009: 539), “[...] the parties are more internally unified and stand in greater contrast to one another than at any time in the recent past.”

### **2.1.5 The controlled heterogenization of the offline political mediascape**

As previously mentioned, there has been a rapid expansion and diversification of the offline political mediascape in the United States since the early 1960s. Originally, the U.S. media environment only comprised a limited number of mass media channels giving audience members “little diversity and choice” (Prior 2002: 10). For example, the typical U.S. household could only access seven different television channels in the late 1960s (Hamilton 2007: 13). In 1977, the three major U.S. national broadcasters (CBS, ABC and NBC) shared close to 90 percent of the audience during primetime viewing hours (Webster 2005: 366; Baum and Kernell 1999: 101). Dominant news media organizations avoided displeasing and, to some extent, offending any segments of the audience by crafting messages tailored to appeal to all segments of the mass audience (Jones 2002: 158-159; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 213). In other words, they were aiming for the “lowest common denominator” (Eveland and Scheufele 2000: 220). Mainstream journalistic organizations had few financial incentives to offer heterogeneous or alternative political content because it was considered risky and not economically profitable in a media context with little competition (Baum 2007: 118; Hamilton 2007: 13).

This situation meant that audience members were repeatedly exposed to predominantly homogeneous and standardized political news, opinion and analysis. This had decisive leveling effects on audience members’ political information acquisition processes. For example, television acted as an information distribution leveler, which contributed to the

reduction of the political knowledge gap between different segments of the U.S. electorate (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Eveland and Scheufele 2000: 220). Additionally, it fostered political moderation and conformity as well as relatively low levels of political polarization among the public instead of promoting political heterogeneity and, to some extent, extremism (Jones 2002: 159).

The offline U.S. mediascape has undergone an important restructuring since the early 1980s with the intensification of commercial competition due to several factors such as the emergence of cable and satellite-based television channels (Holtz-Bacha and Norris 2001: 123; Baum and Kernell 1999: 110; Tewksbury 2008). The development of 24-hour cable news networks and other mass media channels offering specialized content (e.g.: humour, reality TV, interviews, etc.) has caused deep structural shifts within the U.S. television audience. Some studies have indicated that an increasing number of politically-savvy citizens are turning to cable news channels such as Fox News, CNN, CNBC and MSNBC for political information and analysis. Meanwhile, previously-dominant news networks have seen their audience shares slowly shrink, thus diluting their previously-strong agenda-setting capabilities on the public political discourse. The flagship news shows of major television channels in the United States have lost approximately half of their viewership since the early 1980s while cable-based news networks have flourished (Prior 2007: 5; Curran, Iyengar et al. 2009: 6). Specifically, MSNBC's viewership nearly doubled from 2000 to 2004 while Fox News Channel saw its audience size nearly quadruple during the same period (Morris and Francia 2005: 2). In 2008, 39 percent of the U.S. population regularly watched cable news channels while only 29 percent preferred major news networks such as ABC, CBS or NBC (Morris and Francia 2010: 834).

The intensification of media competition, coupled with the “weakening of programme requirements on commercial broadcasters [...]” (Curran, Iyengar et al. 2009: 6), also caused

conventional media organizations to review their news gathering and broadcasting practices (Baum and Kernell 1999: 110; Hamilton 2007: 23). This induced dominant television “networks to reassess their willingness to surrender prime time to the president” (Baum and Kernell 1999: 110). It also pushed them to redefine their news delivery operations by including more diverse political information and adopting new formats in order to differentiate themselves from their competition (Hamilton 2007: 23; Curran, Iyengar et al. 2009: 6). They are more likely to engage in opinion mongering and to feature biased, adversarial, and heavily partisan or one-sided political news and analysis (Coe, Tewskbury et al. 2008: 2001; Rae 2007: 187). For example, the Fox News Channel specializes in edgy, patriotic and confrontational political news content reinforcing primarily conservative viewpoints (Chan-Olmsted and Cha 2008: 33; Bernhardt, Krasa et al. 2008: 1093; Turner 2007: 442). Conversely, MSNBC has intensified its promotion of left-leaning political views in its coverage of politics since its launch on July 15, 1996 (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). From a broader perspective, the U.S. mediascape has been shaped according to the “external pluralism” model where political diversity is achieved through “different media presenting different” perspectives (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006: 134).

In summary, the evolution of the offline mass media environment has contributed to the expansion and diversification of the U.S. political mediascape and, more important, has impacted in different ways the overall politicking dynamic. However, this transformation was for the most part driven by a small number of political and media elites such as political parties, conventional media organizations and other corporate players. As will be shown in the next section of this chapter, this dynamic has progressively changed with the rise of digital media technologies and the growing willingness of formal political players to adapt their strategies.

## **2.2 The progressive rise of e-politicking in the United States**

Digital communication technologies have emerged as increasingly integral components of the political mediascape in the United States since the mid-1990s. A growing number of individuals and organizations have turned to these tools to engage in a diverse range of political actions. In fact, they are now considered as a key feature of modern political life (Howard 2006: 17; Herrnson, Stokes-Brown et al. 2007: 31; Krueger 2006: 760).

There is an ongoing debate on the depth and scope of the transformational effects of online media tools on politicking. Sharp divisions remain “between the two opposing philosophical forces of stability versus change” (Dutta-Bergman 2004: 42). On one hand, social scientists adhering to the normalization hypothesis argue that digital media platforms are essentially replicating offline modes of political communication, mobilization and organizing (Druckman, Kifer et al. 2010; Lee and Park 2010: 33; Foot, Schneider *et al.* 2009). In fact, reinforcement theorists argue that they can, in some cases, strengthen them (Stanley and Weare 2004: 505; Norris 1999). These patterns are characterized by the top-down transfer of controlled digital material and mobilization initiatives from a limited number of dominant political elites to a mostly captive, information-deprived and non-engaged mass audience (Lee and Park 2010: 33; Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 148, 151-152; Schweitzer 2008: 450). It should be pointed out that most individuals and organizations occupying central positions in the offline political world usually refuse to give in to technological innovations, which can directly challenge their dominant status and their ability to unilaterally control political processes (Williams and Gulati 2006: 5; Blumler and Coleman 2010).

According to both normalization and reinforcement theorists, the online political mediascape is plagued by a deep asymmetry in the access to and utilization of political communication resources. It can be characterized as essentially “exclusive, elitist and far from ideal – not terribly different from the bourgeois public of the 17th and 18th centuries”

(Papacharissi 2002: 14). Many exogenous variables affect the distribution of resources among political players who are active on the World Wide Web such as “incumbency, type of political party, level of race competitiveness and office sought” (Foot, Schneider et al. 2003). This trend can have deepening effects on socio-political inequities and ultimately contribute to the accentuation of the democratic divide (Krueger 2002: 479; Johnson and Kaye 2004). The democratic divide can be defined as the gap “between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in” formal and informal political processes (Norris 2001: 4).

Normalization scholars’ beliefs are deeply rooted in the assumption that formal and informal political players adopt and maintain offline-inspired broadcast media tactics in their digital communication operations. Based on recent investigations (Schweitzer 2008: 450; Latimer 2007: 82), it is possible to identify four methodological constraints affecting their research work and, to some extent, distorting their conclusions, thus rendering them potentially unrepresentative:

- ✓ their investigations are predominantly “cross-sectional” (Schweitzer 2008: 450);
- ✓ most of their work has focused on U.S. electioneering practices;
- ✓ they tend to consider specific components of an online political campaign, such as a political website’s homepage, which can be unrepresentative of the broader Web-based political communication and mobilization dynamic;
- ✓ “they refer primarily [...] to the formal design and main functions of campaign websites, while the content-specific aspects of electioneering are seldom simultaneously taken into account” (Schweitzer 2008: 450).

On the other hand, cyber-optimistic scholars subscribing to the “equalization hypothesis,” also known as the “mobilization thesis” (Norris 2001), argue that online media platforms are contributing to the emergence and development of transformative forms of politicking (Ward

and Gibson 2009; Farrell, Lawrence et al. 2008: 2). According to this theory, technological innovations are the primary drivers of the transformation of social, economic and political entities, which are “no longer amenable to social control” (Wyatt 2008: 175).

Equalization theorists believe that low-cost Web-based communication tools have slowly permeated the online and, to a certain extent, real-world political mediascape in the United States during the last two decades (Park, Thelwall et al. 2005; Stallings-Carpenter 2009). They have collectively helped to lay down the foundations of a more inclusive and egalitarian information dispersion and social interaction environment by lowering the threshold for political participation (Zittel 2009: 301; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 13; Baym, 2007: 385; Howard, Carr et al. 2005: 60). For example, they have allowed deterritorialized networks of content creators to be involved in the production, coproduction and circulation of publicly available digital material (Dahlgren 2005: 153; Foot and Schneider 2006: 35; Chadwick 2009: 13). Conversely, they have directly challenged the capacity of the traditional “politician-journalist duopoly” (Gurevitch, Coleman et al. 2009: 171) and other influential political players to maintain and, in some cases, extend their control on public political agenda-setting and discourse structuring processes (Jacobs, Cook et al. 2009: 151; Blumler and Coleman 2010). As noted by Freelon (2010a: 4), digital media platforms have played a key role in the establishment of “[...] an impressive communicative [and participative] heterogeneity” that is conducive of a more representative political mediascape. They have the potential to significantly enhance the relevancy, transparency and, to some extent, quality of politicking (Albrecht 2006: 64; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011: 175; Boulianne 2009: 194-195).

Many social scientists (e.g. Xenos and Foot 2005; Gibson and Römmele 2005) have challenged cyber-optimist scholars’ overly positive vision of online communication platforms’ effects on politics. While the soaring popularity of the Internet may have redefined

existing politicking practices and led to the emergence of new ones, some authors believe that they have essentially retained similar goals, which are to “inform, persuade and mobilize support” (Norris 2003: 26). In other words, the Web is essentially “enact[ing] and extend[ing]” pre-existing offline political communication strategies (Foot and Schneider 2006: 5).

Also, some social scientists suggest that the Internet is simply expanding the political mediascape without necessarily restructuring or levelling it (e.g. Gibson and Römmele 2005: 283; Ferber, Foltz et al. 2008: 63). In the words of Ferber, Foltz et al. (2008: 63), it “appears to be reinforcing the contour” of the existing offline media environment. The flattening of the political playing field is strongly dependent upon socio-technical conditions such as the digital sophistication of Web users who need specific technical knowledge and skills to fully exploit digital media tools for political purposes. Finally, some authors believe that digital media platforms can have destabilizing effects on political content creation and dispersion as well as social interaction patterns by making them “harder to maintain or easier to destroy” (Shah, Cho et al. 2005: 532; Lupia and Sin 2003).

Several recent investigations have used either the normalization or equalization analytical framework to explain digital media technologies’ impact on political information flows and social relations. However, they have, in most cases, failed to take into account the presence of variables that can impact the structure of the political mediascape. According to Lee and Park (2010: 33), the relationship between the Internet and politics is:

[...] inextricably entwined with the social conditions existing in a given society, such as the achieved level of democratic and economic development, [the level of development of digital communication technologies with different publication capabilities,] institutional dynamics and offline political culture.

The consideration of both analytical approaches is essential in order to fully understand the dynamics of e-politicking (e.g. Lee and Park 2010: 33; Bimber 2000b: 331). For example, Bimber (2000b: 331) believes that the information circulated by politically-savvy individuals

and organizations constitutes one of the primary drivers of the transformation of socio-political processes. At the same time, he acknowledges that Web-based media tools can have important structuring effects on information flows and social relations.

It should also be noted that considering the Internet as a “single entity” is extremely misleading (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Kaye and Johnson 2004: 198). There is a wide range of first and second generation online media channels with distinct structural and functional properties enabling netizens to pose in a wide range of political actions. In other words, there is little homogeneity in the media experience of the online public, thus preventing researchers from considering the Internet has a monolithic political communication channel.

As will be discussed in a later section of this dissertation, second generation online media channels (Web 2.0), coupled with the emergence of postmodern trends among predominantly younger segments of the U.S. public, have played an important role in the decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of cyber politics. These two phenomena have been instrumental in the rise and popularization of grassroots political movements following the *online politicking 3.0* model such as the Tea Party movement. In other words, this dissertation will tend to support the equalization hypothesis.

The digital political communication, mobilization and organizing dynamic in the United States has gone through four distinct evolution phases since the mid-1990s:

- ✓ emergence phase;
- ✓ definition and diffusion, or maturation phase;
- ✓ maturity phase;
- ✓ post-maturity phase (Williams and Gulati 2006: 6; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 14-15).

These phases are characterized by the level of sophistication of the cyberpoliticking tactics of formal political players – political parties and candidates – during midterm and presidential contests.

### **2.2.1 The emergence phase**

E-politicking was a nascent phenomenon that had minimal effects on the U.S. electorate during the emergence period (1996 and 1998 U.S. election cycles). The 1996 U.S. presidential contest was marked by the limited role played by digital media platforms in formal political actors' overall campaigning strategies. Only a small number of generally technologically-savvy, politically-dominant and resource-rich candidates experimented with these tools, predominantly “at the margins of their campaigns” (Williams and Gulati 2006: 2). Specifically, “virtually every serious presidential contender” had an online presence which typically consisted of a basic campaign website with few interactive features (Benoit and Benoit 2005: 236). Meanwhile, 46.8 percent of Senate and only 16.1 percent of House hopefuls were active on the Internet (D'Alessio 1997: 491). Comparatively, almost no formal political organizations or candidates had an online presence during the two previous election cycles (D'Alessio, 1997; 2000: 556; Herrnson, Stokes-Brown et al. 2007: 32; Dulio, Goff et al. 1999: 53).

During the 1996 U.S. presidential contest, only a narrow segment of the public visited political websites. It generally comprised younger individuals, “biased toward upper educational and income groups,” who were already politically-knowledgeable due in part to their heavy consumption of political content from offline mass media resources (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 222). Only 4 percent of U.S. voters visited a political website at least once between the months of January and February 1996, a percentage that jumped to 6 and then 10 percent later that year (Williams, Aylesworth et al. 2002: 41; Just 1997: 100; D'Alessio 2000: 556). Another survey determined that 46 percent of American Web users engaged at least

once in one or more of the following activities on the World Wide Web during the 1996 presidential elections: “reading discussion boards, viewing political Web sites, or following 1996 election coverage via the Internet” (Thrane, Shelley et al. 2005: 25). While the Web was only used by a small number of voters for political purposes, it had strong effects on their behavior. Roughly 8.5 million individuals (9 percent of the U.S. adult population) believed that election-related content found online played a decisive role in their political decision-making processes (Benoit and Benoit 2005: 231-232).

The 1998 U.S. midterm contest led to the intensification and diversification of e-politicking, which was still under the heavy control of political elites. Close to 69 percent of House contenders, 75 percent of Senate hopefuls, and 75 percent of gubernatorial candidates had at least one campaign website in their cyber-politicking arsenal (Dulio, Goff et al. 1999: 53; Sadow and James 1999).

This electoral contest was marked by the introduction and expanding utilization by candidates and political parties of online communication and mobilization tactics inspired by real-world practices (Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 153; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 15). For example, the continuously climbing costs of political campaigning prompted many contenders to step up their online fundraising efforts (Williams, Trammell et al. 2005: 178; Banwart and Kaid 2002). Seventy-three percent of campaign websites included at least one fundraising component. Specifically, 29.9 percent enabled online contributions, 53.7 percent asked Internet users to mail in their donations, 47.8 percent encouraged supporters to send in their personal information as a campaign pledge, and 32.8 percent instructed potential donors to contact campaign staffers by email who would subsequently solicit their financial support through real-world mail (Dulio, Goff et al. 1999: 54-55; Foot and Schneider 2002: 225). While online fundraising technologies made soliciting funds easier, more efficient and less costly for political players, they were not widely used by the U.S. public due, in part, to

widespread fears over the security and privacy of Internet-based financial transactions (Norrander 2006; Williams and Gulati 2008; Panagopoulos and Bergan 2007: 485). It should be noted that several factors caused a spike in politicking costs. For example, the growth and heterogenization of the political mediascape and the sophistication of content dispersion channels required formal political players to invest more financial, human and technical resources in their campaigning operations (Rackaway 2007: 477; Dulio, Goff et al. 1999: 53).

From a broader perspective, the e-politicking strategies employed by the majority of candidates and political parties before the 2000 U.S. presidential contest strictly adhered to the “broadcast politics” model (Trippi 2004: 40). Most campaign websites, which favoured static media offerings and comprised few to no interactive features, could be defined as virtual yard signs strictly reproducing content originally created for real-world dissemination (Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 150; Jackson and Lilleker 2009a: 236). They followed a quasi-identical model that has been described by Orlikowski and Yates (1994: 543) as “a distinctive type of communicative action, characterized by a socially recognized communicative purpose and common aspects of form” and intent.

The typical campaign website of the emergence phase consisted of a homepage with introductory comments welcoming visitors and at least one picture of candidates often with their family or the flag, which showcased their family roots and patriotic values (Benoit and Benoit 2005: 236). It also featured a basic clickable menu with inbound hyperlinks redirecting Web users to candidates’ biographies, lists of endorsements, information on supporting organizations, press releases – often featuring positive news stories, voter registration information, and transcriptions of speeches. They also pointed to different thematic sections focusing on important issues such as the economy, health care, or defense. These links, which could be embedded in texts or images, mostly served navigational purposes within the confines of the campaign website. Some homepages also sought to get Internet users involved

in electoral processes by promoting various short- and mid-term mobilization initiatives or enabling them to donate money through fundraising platforms (Williams, Aylesworth et al. 2002; Benoit and Benoit 2005; Williams, Trammell et al. 2005; Foot, Schneider et al. 2009).

Certain campaign issues and events, which appealed to narrower segments of the electorate, were addressed in a more extensive manner online than offline. For example, political websites were more likely to discuss women-related matters such as abortion rights, “gender pay disparity, rape, sexual harassment [...]” than conventional media platforms throughout the 1996 elections (Klotz and Broome 1998). The propensity of candidates to include digital material on narrow issues or specific events on their campaign website can be defined as one of the first manifestations of the hyper-fragmentation of digital politicking.

Candidates did not fully exploit the social and content interactive capabilities of online communication tools during the emergence stage. In fact, many political strategists of this period did not believe they were “conducive to the objective of winning an election” (Stromer-Galley 2000b: 123). First, typical campaign websites during the 1996 and 1998 elections only featured primitive content interactive functions such as hyperlinks. The majority of them served navigational roles and pointed to digital resources available within the confines of campaign sites. This situation led Web users to be repeatedly exposed to homogenous political content and, conversely, enabled formal political actors to control and shape their information intake (Foot and Schneider 2002: 224; Hansen and Benoit 2005: 221; Norris 2003: 26). However, candidates and political organization progressively decentralized their linking practices in 1998. Close to 78 percent of campaign sites contained at least one outbound link generally redirecting audience members to Web resources operated by interest groups, offline-based mass media organizations, and candidates or political formations with compatible ideological leanings or objectives (Garrett 2000: 1060).

Second, social interactive features only played a peripheral role in formal political players' e-politicking strategy (Trammell, Williams et al. 2006: 23; Hansen and Benoit 2005: 221). In 1996, only two of the presidential primary campaign websites (Republican presidential hopefuls Lamar Alexander and Pat Buchanan) had at least one community building component enabling audience members to participate in asynchronous discussions and other forms of basic social interactions. Almost no candidates included tools designed to foster public discussion, preferring to selectively reply to specific email messages (Stromer-Galley 2002: Klinenberg and Perrin 2000: 28). In 1998, only two candidates' digital infrastructures could be considered "fully interactive" due to the availability of functions enabling Web users to engage in direct conversations with their peers (Stromer-Galley 2000a: 39; Kamarck 1999).

Digital politicking operations during the emergence phase targeted primarily politically-knowledgeable and energized members of the electorate. Candidates and political parties circulated talking points, newsletters and other campaign updates to supporters as well as memos on administrative matters to staff members of political groups with consonant objectives. They also distributed press releases and other campaign material to journalists (Agre 2002: 312; Druckman, Kifer et al. 2007a: 10). According to Miller, Andsager et al. (1998), these public relations initiatives succeeded at having a limited influence on conventional media organizations' campaign coverage.

In sum, the evolution of cyberpoliticking during the emergence phase contributed to the early validation of the normalization hypothesis. Formal political actors exploited digital media channels in ways mostly replicating and, in some cases, reinforcing offline unidirectional information flows and social interactions. Thus, the impact of these communication tools on e-electioneering was significantly "less 'revolutionary' than first" anticipated by many equalization theorists (Foot, Schneider et al. 2003).

### **2.2.2 The definition and diffusion, or maturation stage**

The second stage of the evolution of online politics was marked by the acceleration of the trends that gained some traction during the emergence phase. Specifically, the 2000 and 2002 U.S. elections led to the standardization of the static digital material available on campaign websites as well as their “general appearance, some features and functionality” (Williams and Gulati 2006: 6). Political parties and candidates also developed online voter activation approaches still mostly mimicking real-world tactics (Williams and Gulati 2006: 6). From a broader perspective, the World Wide Web was no longer regarded by the U.S. public as an emergent media platform but as a growingly mainstream component of the political mediascape (Williams and Gulati 2006: 6; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 16).

The extent of the cyber-sophistication of political actors during previous election cycles was severely limited due, in part, to the minimal digital knowledge and technical capabilities of the general public (Lewicki and Ziaukas 2000; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 16). The rapid popularization of high-speed Internet, coupled with the progressive digital sophistication of a sizable portion of the American population, provided strong incentives for political players to accentuate and diversify their digital electioneering activities (Lewicki and Ziaukas 2000; Serfaty 2010: 118). While major-party candidates were the primary sources of e-campaigning advancements before the 2000 U.S. midterm contest, peripheral political players quickly emerged as the primary drivers of innovation in subsequent election cycles. However, their initiatives were usually copied and eventually surpassed by their counterparts, who had access to better funding after a certain period of time (Graf 2008: 48; Williams and Gulati 2010: 4; Foot and Schneider 2002).

The 2000 U.S. presidential campaign is considered by several social scientists as the “first Internet election,” a situation that can be compared to the central role played by television as a source of political information for the U.S. electorate in the early 1960s (Foot

and Schneider 2006: 9; Rice and Katz 2004: 103). Close to 15 percent of U.S. citizens were going online at least once a day to seek election news and analysis from a variety of digital resources, while 33 percent of them did so at least once a week (Gilens, Vavreck et al. 2008: 1161; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2000).

Approximately 72 percent of Senate hopefuls and 55 percent of congressional candidates had at least one campaign website still emphasizing unidirectional flows of information during the 2000 U.S. presidential contest (Foot and Schneider 2006: 9). While third-party candidates were extremely active on the World Wide Web in 2000, major political players were still dominant in this media arena. Fifty-eight percent of third-party politicians or organizations had some form of online presence in 2000 compared to 93 percent of their major-party counterparts (Williams, Aylesworth et al. 2002: 41). In fact, most major-party regional and national candidates and political organizations had full-time staffers backed by consulting firms that were exclusively working on their digital electioneering operations (Williams 2003; Williams and Gulati 2006: 7).

The Democratic and Republican National Committees established detailed guidelines for the structure and content of candidates' websites in 2000 (Farmer and Fender 2005: 47). This initiative led to the launch of campaign websites that collectively "reached new levels of sophistication" (Farnsworth and Owen 2004: 416). For example, they provided digital material in an increasingly diverse range of formats such as multimedia presentations as well as audio and video clips (Farnsworth and Owen 2004: 416). While these formats offered new mobilization and persuasion possibilities, they had a limited effect on information delivery tactics. They still favoured "the style or sound of what counts as a well-spoken candidate" in the offline political world (Wiese and Gronbeck 2005: 227). Additionally, the interactive capabilities of campaign websites significantly expanded and improved in 2000, particularly in the areas of the mobilization of supporters and fundraising. Twenty-nine percent of

campaign websites allowed audience members to subscribe to an email distribution list, 68 percent solicited the participation of volunteers in online and real-world mobilization initiatives, 14 percent had at least one online poll, and 60 percent comprised fundraising tools (Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 151; Williams and Gulati 2006: 20-21; Wiese and Gronbeck 2005: 219).

At the same time, candidates and political organizations continued to diversify their linking practices, a process started during the 1998 elections. Forty-four percent of House and Senate hopefuls included at least one hyperlink redirecting audience members to digital resources maintained by conventional media organizations or groups with generally consonant political views and objectives (Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 151). In a smaller number of cases, candidates also embedded links pointing to political opponents' websites in order to contrast their arguments and positions or to bolster their own stances on specific issues (Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 151).

Some candidates and political parties tailored the content of their digital infrastructures to address Internet users' personal political interests or concerns based on different socio-demographic considerations (e.g. geographical location, gender, language, ethnicity, etc.). For instance, 72.2 percent of Democratic, 75 percent of Republican, and 28 percent of third-party Senate candidates provided some form of localized content on their campaign websites (Williams, Aylesworth et al. 2002: 47). Some candidates also offered Spanish-speaking Internet users the possibility of viewing either full or partial versions of their websites in Spanish (Len-Rios 2002: 888; Wicks, Souley et al. 2003: 191). This personalization of information affected the overall tone of some political players' political discourse. Indeed, they "were more likely to 'call for change,' use endorsements, 'address readers as peers,' and 'identify with the experiences of others' on their Websites than in their television ads," which were created for a mass audience (Trammell, Williams et al. 2006: 24). It can be concluded

that the 2000 U.S. presidential contest was marked by political actors' growing understanding of the capabilities of online media channels, which led them to develop politicking approaches tailored for the Internet instead of relying on broadcast media-inspired strategies. The 2000 elections can be considered as the first step towards the emergence of the *online politicking 3.0 model*.

The 2002 U.S. midterm contest was marked by the stabilization of e-electioneering practices introduced during the previous election cycle (Foot and Schneider 2006: 10). Roughly 63 percent of House and 73 percent of senatorial candidates had digital campaigning infrastructures during that election. Their level of sophistication varied greatly based on different factors such as the competitiveness of the electoral race or the socio-demographic makeup of the voting public (Foot, Schneider et al. 2003, 2009: 151; Xenos and Foot 2005: 174; Connors 2005).

Campaign sites were still treated by formal political actors as top-down information hubs where citizens, journalists and other members of civil society could acquire a wide range of election-oriented brochureware digital material. Ninety-two percent of House, senatorial and gubernatorial candidates' sites offered biographical profiles, 90 percent provided views on policy issues, 73 percent included news about the campaign, 46 percent featured pictures of political events, and 34 percent displayed a calendar listing candidates' campaign activities (Foot, Schneider et al. 2009; Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005; Endres and Warnick 2004). These elements were in fact considered to be staple features of a typical U.S. political site and their "absence from a campaign Web site was a noticeable omission" (Xenos and Foot 2005).

The majority of campaign websites comprised predominantly "campaign-to-user" interactive features designed to energize members of the online public and, at the same time, control their overall media experience (Jarvis and Wilkerson 2005; Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005). While hyperlinks served mostly navigation and information organization purposes on

campaign websites during previous elections, the 2002 midterm contest was marked by the growing presence of outbound hyperlinks. For example, 76 percent of campaign sites included at least one link pointing to external resources operated by civic or advocacy organizations, governmental agencies, news media organizations, political parties, office holders, or other candidates with usually consonant political views and objectives (Foot, Schneider et al. 2003, 2009: 154; Trammell and Williams 2005: 562; Conners 2005). Several motives prompted formal political actors to include outbound links on their sites. For instance, access to external resources enabled Web users to seek out additional information and ultimately acquire more extensive understanding of a political matter. It could also bolster a candidate's credibility among the electorate by, for instance, showcasing a desire to be transparent. However, Internet users' media experience was still heavily influenced by political actors who determined which external hyperlinks were present on their campaign sites (Trammell and Williams 2005: 562; Kim, Barnett et al. 2010).

According to *PoliticalWeb.info*,<sup>7</sup> approximately 84 percent of campaign sites in 2002 provided audience members with interactive tools enabling them to interact with candidates or members of their staff as well as to be actively involved in campaign activities. Close to 77 percent of them also included tools supporting online donations, 62 percent solicited the participation of Web users in campaign events, and 81 percent provided email addresses enabling them to contact candidates or their representatives (Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005; Foot, Schneider et al. 2009: 154). Many major congressional candidates also conducted surveys through interactive questionnaires on their campaign websites. This helped them in “the formulation of political platforms and policies” by allowing them to have a better understanding of voters' needs and preferences (Pollard, Chesebro et al. 2009: 577).

Lilleker, Pack et al. (2010: 111) point out that “campaign-to-user” interactive tools of this period only generated social interactions “between the party and visitors, but in a limited

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<sup>7</sup> This website is now offline.

form.” In the words of Chung (2007: 45), they created a “facade of interactivity through response feedback mechanisms that were built into the technology – actual human interaction was limited.” In fact, most of the interactive features present on campaign sites before the 2004 election cycle were “more illusion than reality” (Bimber and Davis 2003; 27), a phenomenon known as “perceived interactivity” (Newhagen, Cordes et al. 1995: 165). The majority of campaign sites in 2002 “rarely accomplished [their full] interactive, discursive potential” (Tedesco 2006: 188). It should be noted that several formal political players launched digital campaigning infrastructures to symbolize their “cutting-edge credentials” more than to establish meaningful channels of interaction with the public (Gibson, Margolis et al. 2003: 49; Gibson, Ward et al. 2003).

Many factors prompted formal political actors to resist the introduction of user-to-user social interaction capabilities and content customization features on their online portals before the 2004 U.S. presidential election cycle. First, these technologies had the potential to dilute their control over “the content of their sites and over the communication situation in general” (Stromer-Galley 2000b: 124). They enabled Web users to participate independently in public agenda-setting and discourse structuring processes, thus threatening politicians’ previously unchallenged capacity to control information flows and social relations on their websites (Thorson and Watson 2007: 335; Stromer-Galley 2000b: 111). In brief, they wanted to reduce the “ambient noise” as much as possible in order to ensure that their positions and goals were accurately conveyed to the audience (Gulati and Williams 2007: 446; Gibson and Römmele 2008). A heterogeneous, public political discourse had the potential to confuse voters and alienate their support (Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005).

Second, formal political actors strongly believed that the presence of user-to-user communication technologies on their sites could negatively affect their ability to maintain a state of “strategic ambiguity” in the political mediascape (Stromer-Galley 2000a: 53, 2000b:

111; Jackson and Lilleker 2009a: 241). Candidates regularly framed their positions and goals in vague ways, especially in the case of controversial issues. Political messages providing few specifics were more likely to be appealing to a larger percentage of the electorate while detailed messages had more potential to fuel disagreement or debate (Nimmo 1999: 207; Hayes, Murphy et al. 2008: 1). However, this strategy could have adverse effects. Politicians posting ambiguous content on their campaign website could be perceived as having no plans or being ill-prepared for holding an elected office. Moreover, their vague positions could be interpreted by audience members in unanticipated or erroneous ways (Stromer-Galley 2000b: 125; Wiese and Gronbeck 2005: 224).

Dominant political actors feared that social interactive technologies could allow Internet users to voice their concerns, identify inconsistencies or mistakes in their positions and, more important, directly question or challenge their views or objectives. This situation would force them to refine their positions and potentially lose the support of some groups of voters (Thorson and Watson 2007: 335; Higginbotham 2009). While many formal political actors have still turned to the “strategic ambiguity” strategy in recent election cycles, the growing capacity and ease of Web users to openly discuss political matters with their peers and be exposed to heterogeneous political content has significantly tempered its effectiveness.

Third, the management of user-to-user social interactivity was perceived by candidates as burdensome for several interconnected reasons. For instance, they believed it was a time-consuming task because it would require them to constantly monitor the structure and content of the public political discourse on the Internet and intervene if needed (Williams 2007: 320; Thorson and Watson 2007: 335; Endres and Warnick 2004: 325). The constant monitoring of online political conversations would also force politicians to dedicate even more financial, human and technical resources to their political communication operations (Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005; Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002). As previously mentioned, the rapid

intensification and diversification of the cyberpoliticking dynamic, coupled with the steady growth of the offline political mediascape, had already severely strained candidates during previous election cycles. Few formal political players had devised clear and precise approaches to efficiently deal with multidirectional information flows and social relations. According to Benoit and Benoit (2005: 232), “site developers were so mired in the broadcast model that they overlooked the extraordinary benefits of getting information from voters, thereby discarding the medium's greatest gift.”

Fourth, candidates limited their use of social interactive tools on their sites because they only had a basic understanding of the structure and composition of the online audience. Specifically, they had a limited understanding of the structure and composition of “their target audiences” due to the constantly evolving nature of the World Wide Web (Benoit and Benoit 2005: 232). According to Jarvis and Wilkerson (2005), the design of campaign websites must be tailored to the needs of their targeted audience. They must be “more in line with the potential the medium presents for the online public” in order to maximize their mobilization and persuasion effects (Jarvis and Wilkerson 2005).

As previously discussed, the structure of the offline political mediascape has contributed to the centralization of political information dissemination and social interaction processes. Indeed, television and other offline mass media outlets enabled dominant political elites to disseminate in a top-down fashion information packages created to persuade and mobilize the audience in usually strategic ways. However, later years led to the controlled decentralization and fragmentation of information flows, which were still influenced by the interests and objectives of a small number of elites (e.g. political parties, candidates, corporate interests, etc.). Based on the first sub-sections of this chapter, it can be argued that the Internet-based political mediascape has undergone the same evolutionary steps. Formal political actors still favoured offline-inspired modes of political communication, persuasion

and organizing dynamics during the first two phases of the evolution of e-politicking. However, the next e-politicking evolution stage was marked by a profound redefinition of this dynamic.

### **2.2.3 Maturity period of e-politicking**

The first chapter of this dissertation was dedicated to the discussion of innovative digital political communication, mobilization and organizing practices that were developed by four specific campaigns (Howard Dean, Ned Lamont, Ron Paul, and Barack Obama). They can be defined as the most technologically advanced of the maturity period. This section will look at more typical campaigning practices of this phase of the evolution of cyberpoliticking.

The rise of innovative political content dispersion and community-building processes increasingly exploiting the structural and functional properties of online media platforms marked the third phase of the evolution of cyberpoliticking in the United States (Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 15; Williams and Gulati 2006: 7). In fact, this dynamic can be viewed as the ancestor of the *online politicking 3.0* model, especially with the Dean campaign, which was discussed in the previous chapter. The online politicking 3.0 model will be detailed in the next chapter of this dissertation.

An overwhelming majority of dominant U.S. political actors had some form of Web presence during the 2004 presidential contest. All the presidential candidates had at least one campaign website during that election cycle (Foot and Schneider 2006: 10; Pollard, Chesebro et al. 2009: 578). Meanwhile, slightly more than 81 percent of major-party House candidates and 92 percent all of senatorial hopefuls had at least one website even though their digital campaign infrastructures were generally less sophisticated than those of presidential contenders (Druckman, Kifer et al. 2007b: 426; Conners 2005; Schneider and Foot 2004: 30). There was also a surge in the number of third-party candidates on the Internet. Indeed, 72.7 percent of Libertarian hopefuls running for a Senate seat had at least one political website

compared to 60 percent of Independent candidates, 57.1 percent of Green Party contenders, 50 percent of Constitution Party candidates, and 50 percent of Reform Party hopefuls (Conners 2005).

While candidates' online media platforms generally attracted politically-savvy Internet users already in agreement with their views and objectives during previous election cycles, the audience for political websites in 2004 consisted of a heterogeneous mix of "activists and curious observers" with less-crystallized political preferences or objectives (Williams, Gulati et al. 2009; Foot and Schneider 2006). In other words, 2004 was the year in which e-politics reached a demographically mainstream mass audience instead of only "being a bastion of [mostly] young, white, wealthy, well-educated males" (Jonhson and Kaye 2004: 626). Approximately 75 million Americans (37 percent of offline adults) went online to be involved in formal and informal electoral processes during the 2004 U.S. election cycle (Rainie, Cornfield et al. 2005: 3). Also, 21 percent claimed that the Internet was one of their main sources of political information, up from 11 percent in 2000 and 3 percent in 1996 (Williams and Trammell 2005: 560; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2004: 3).

As previously indicated, the first chapter of this dissertation has already taken a look at the more cutting-edge e-politicking strategies developed by four campaigns during the maturity phase. However, it should be noted that the presence of Howard Dean, Ned Lamont, Ron Paul, and Barack Obama on the digital political mediascape was atypical compared to other politicians and other political organizations of this period. This section of the dissertation will look at more archetypal forms of online campaigning during this period.

Political websites played the role of digital "campaign headquarters open 24 hours a day [...] [providing] voters with answers to the questions most important to them" in 2004 (Williams, Trammell et al. 2005: 178). Their primary function was still to relay substantive information to voters in order to educate them on different political matters, mobilize them,

and ultimately shape their voting decisions (Foot and Schneider 2006: 47; Tedesco 2005). First, the majority of major-party campaign sites in 2004 featured detailed sections focusing on different facets of candidates' personal and professional backgrounds as well as on important issues such as the economy, health care, environment, unemployment, military matters and terrorism (Postelnicu, Martin et al. 2006: 101; Trent and Friedenbergl 2008: 404). The average candidate "discussed or provided hyperlinks to an average of six issues [...] over which they felt most comfortable, and over which they could claim ownership" (Postelnicu, Martin et al. 2006: 101). Second, press releases were an important component of campaign sites in 2004. They were used by candidates to contextualize their views on specific political issues or situations, contrast their positions with those of their opponents, respond to attacks from their adversaries, promote campaign events, and define their policy objectives (Tedesco 2005).

Finally, endorsements by individuals with a high public profile, interest groups and other political organizations were displayed in varying ways on campaign sites in 2004. While some candidates would explicitly mention them on their websites, others would simply provide a Web link to the official announcement of the endorsing individual or group that was available on an external digital resource (Williams, Gulati et al. 2009; Schneider and Foot 2004). Endorsements served multiple functions such as informing voters on political actors' "ideological leanings and issue positions, their viability [...], and chances of being elected" (Williams, Gulati et al. 2009). This practice has gained significant traction among formal U.S. political actors since it first was used during the 2002 midterm contest (Pollard, Chesebro et al. 2009: 578; Johnson 2002: 215; Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005).

Many candidates and organizations also launched independent online information portals, known as "microsites" (Rackaway 2007: 469), or created sections within their websites targeting specific segments of the electorate based on variables such as age,

geographical location, socio-demographic background, or professional occupation (Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 16; Wiese and Gronbeck 2005). While main campaign sites served as general information hubs for median voters, these microsites were tailored to the preferences of narrow groups of citizens. They enabled political players to enhance their relevancy among some segments of the electorate, thus significantly augmenting their chances of mobilizing them and securing their support on Election Day (Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 16; Rackaway 2007: 469). From a broader perspective, this dynamic illustrated the growing willingness of formal political players to modify their mass politicking approach and engage in narrowcasting-inspired modes of political communication, mobilization and organizing. Again, it can be argued that this dynamic marked the beginning of the hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking processes which is an integral component of the *online politicking 3.0* model.

The 2004 election cycle was also marked by the quasi-ubiquitous presence of interactive features on presidential candidates' official campaign websites while they were present on the majority of campaign sites of candidates running for other regional elected offices (Trammell, Williams et al. 2006: 24; Berthon and Williams 2007). Many campaign sites included sophisticated "campaign-to-user" interactive functions giving Web users enhanced control of their information acquisition and consumption practices (Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005). First, 23.8 percent of House and 46.3 percent of Senate campaign sites had personalization features, which enabled audience members who disclosed some facets of their socio-demographic background to create messages more appealing to them, up from 19 percent and 16.9 percent respectively in 2002 (Druckman, Kifer et al. 2007b: 433). However, content personalization capabilities could have adverse effects such as leading audience members to acquire "a less coherent understanding of the candidate's overall goals and intentions" (Druckman, Kifer et al. 2007b: 428). From a broader perspective, it can be argued

that the personalization of politics constitutes one of the core components of the American electioneering model. Indeed, “the voter’s choice depends increasingly upon the voter’s [...] [ability to relate on a personal level] with the individual candidate” (Mancini and Swanson 1996: 14).

Second, most campaign websites feature hyperlinks pointing to external resources generally supportive of the positions or objectives of the candidates (Jackson, Lilleker et al. 2010). While the majority of hyperlinks available on primary campaign sites in 2004 redirected Internet users to internal content, outbound links still played an important role. For instance, close to 42 percent of them included at least one external Web link pointing to media articles by journalistic organizations and 32 percent linked to special-interest groups’ digital resources (Trammell, Williams et al. 2005: 180). The presence of outbound Web links on candidates’ digital communication infrastructures enabled them to penetrate constantly evolving networks of online media platforms maintained by a diverse range of political groups. They aimed to provide Internet users with a heterogeneous mix of digital material and ultimately persuade them to take part in the political process (Xenos and Bennett 2007; Thomson and Watson 2007: 324; Williams 2005: 251). Moreover, they could “encourage [Web users] to consider the connections between the bits on information” (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009: 193).

Finally, some candidates turned to online communication technologies to present complex campaign information in new interactive ways. For example, George W. Bush’s main campaign site featured a primitive game designed to entertain and, at the same time, inform voters on the impact of John Kerry’s proposed gas tax hike on the future cost of gasoline (Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 15). Online political games, which required Web users to actively engage with their content, could help audience members comprehend complex political issues or concepts by framing them in humorous ways or by simplifying

them (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009: 190; Neys and Jansz 2010: 238). They created an active learning environment by enabling Web users to process cognitively a large quantity of information, an approach known as “active pedagogy” (Bachen, Raphael et al. 2008: 300; Neys and Jansz 2010: 237). These ultimately had several positive impacts on the online population. For example, they could be the “source of substantial changes in [...] [audience members’] knowledge and opinion about the issue [they] addressed [...]” (Neys and Jansz 2010: 237). They could also positively affect political mobilization and levels of curiosity among the online audience and stimulate social interaction between Web users (Neys and Jansz 2010: 237). From a broader perspective, they served three distinct functions: inform, educate and mobilize the netizenry (e.g. Kann, Berry et al. 2007; Bachen, Raphael et al. 2008: 306).

Formal political players also intensified their use of different Web technologies to establish direct social interaction channels with Internet user. Emails served as important bidirectional communication bridges between formal political players and voters in 2004 (Thornson and Watson 2007: 323; Williams and Trammell 2005: 563). In fact, they were the “most important weapon in an eCampaign manager’s arsenal” (Looney 2004: 53) because they could be used to attain different campaign-related objectives:

- ✓ conducting viral marketing campaigns;
- ✓ transmitting information;
- ✓ seeking financial contributions or volunteers;
- ✓ promoting online and real-world campaign events;
- ✓ providing general election news;
- ✓ clarifying issue positions in response to attacks (Kim and Margolis 2005: 10; Panagopoulos and Bergan 2007: 484; Davis 2005: 243).

Moreover, several major-party campaign websites included communication tools such as chat rooms or instant messaging platforms, enabling audience members to interact synchronously with candidates and members of their staff (Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 15; Wiese and Gronbeck 2005: 236). These sites can be seen as more interactive than asynchronous modes of online communication such as emails due, for example, to the time delay in the social interaction (Kaye and Johnson 2006: 158; Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002).

The 2006 U.S. midterm electoral contest was marked by the further demonstration of the politicking capabilities of Internet-based media tools. While Ned Lamont pushed the innovation envelope, as discussed in the first chapter, other developments were also important. Approximately 84.9 percent of senatorial and 78.5 percent of House candidates had at least one campaign website (Gulati and Williams 2007: 449; Williams and Gulati 2007: 3). Brochureware digital material in different static formats such as texts, photos or graphics remained a central feature of most candidates' sites (Gulati and Williams 2007: 451; Trent and FriedenberG 2008: 402). A large number of senatorial campaign sites also contained rich digital content such as RSS feeds, audio and video clips, and downloadable packages comprising pamphlets, flyers, or posters that individuals could print and distribute offline (Trent and FriedenberG 2008: 400; Klotz 2010: 113).

There was broad standardization of "campaign-to-user" interactive features available on campaign sites in 2006. Sixty-four percent of U.S. senatorial campaign websites featured online volunteer registration forms, 89 percent provided email addresses that visitors could use to contact candidates or members of their staff, 53 percent enabled Web users to register to periodically receive e-newsletters, 8 percent had at least one online poll, and 74 percent accepted money contributions by credit card (Gulati and Williams 2007: 453). In fact, omnipresent online fundraising campaigns helped candidates as well as formal and informal

political organizations raise more than 100 million U.S. dollars (Cornfield and Rainie 2006; Gulati and Williams 2007).

While video content played a limited role in candidates' cyberpoliticking activities during previous elections cycles, it gained significant traction during the 2006 midterm elections. The rapid popularization of online videos among the U.S. public, which convinced many politicians to use them in their online communication activities, was fueled by different factors. A growing number of American Internet users of adult age were equipped with high-speed Internet connections enabling them to rapidly access this bandwidth-intensive digital material. For example, 42 percent of U.S. adults had a high-speed Internet connection at home in March 2006, up from 30 percent in March 2005 and 25 percent in February 2004 (Horriagan 2006: 1-2, 2008: i; Madden 2007: I; Gulati and Williams 2010). The development of electronic devices with wireless Internet capabilities such as laptops, mobile phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), MP3 players - which were "relatively inexpensive by 2005" (Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012) - as well as video-editing software also considerably lowered the costs of the production, dissemination and consumption of Web videos (Heldman 2007).

The launch of YouTube on February 15, 2005 and other video-sharing sites during the following months gave Web users greater access to digital video content (Gulati and Williams 2010). YouTube's audience expanded by approximately 300 percent during a six-month period in 2006 and reached 19.6 million members in July 2006 (Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 21). By the month of July in 2006, 649 million videos had been either streamed or download by 30 million Web users (Winograd and Hais 2008: 169; comScore 2006). Offline news media organizations and other mainstream content providers also made video material an increasingly central component of their digital communication infrastructures (Madden 2007: i; Stanyer 2009: 202).

Many candidates and formal political organizations turned to online videos to attain various communication and mobilization objectives in 2006. Specifically, 55 percent of senatorial candidates posted videos on their campaign sites compared to only 40 percent of congressional contenders (Gulati and Williams 2007: 451; Trent and Friedenberberg 2008: 401). Interestingly, few candidates had a presence on Youtube.com. Only 10 percent of individuals running for a Senate seat (13 candidates out of 130) had a YouTube channel while no congressional hopeful used this video-sharing service (Williams and Gulati 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009d).

Just like blogs and other user-generated media tools that emerged in 2004, YouTube had the potential to democratize many facets of the political campaigning process. Specifically, it fueled the reconfiguration of e-politicking in three distinct ways:

- ✓ it fostered the bottom-up diversification of the public conversation arena by enabling anyone with a camera, a computer, and a high-speed Internet connection to easily and rapidly circulate political videos (Klotz 2010: 111-112; Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012; Karpf 2010b: 158).
- ✓ it helped to energize previously disengaged members of the electorate, particularly minorities and young voters (Kann, Berry et al. 2007; Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012). YouTube and other social network sites eventually became an important political participation outlet for younger citizens in the following years (Baumgartner and Morris 2010: 24; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2008).
- ✓ it fueled the “informalization” of e-politics by giving netizens the capacity to actively confront and, to some extent, challenge formal political actors’ professionalized campaigning practices (Klotz 2010: 111; Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012). For example, candidates and formal political organizations’ campaign Web videos could “be [easily] altered, [deconstructed,] parodied, combined with other

videos, or critiqued by ‘everyday’ people” (Heldman 2007). In fact, a growing segment of the U.S. public was seeking “unfiltered, as opposed to ‘slick,’ information,” (Heldman 2007) especially male voters between 18 and 29 years of age (Church 2010: 138; Madden 2007: 9).

These dynamics played an important role in the progressive rise of *online politicking 3.0*. Indeed, Internet users increasingly exploited the distinct capabilities of social media channels in order to be involved in electoral processes on their own terms (e.g. preferences, interests, objectives, etc.). This point will be further discussed in a later section of this dissertation.

While research conducted in different European electoral contexts has shown that online videos have contributed to the reconfiguration of online politicking (e.g. Carlson and Strandberg 2008: 173; Kalnes 2009), their use by formal political actors in 2006 led to the reinforcement of top-down political communication (Klotz 2010: 116, 119-120; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 21). Political videos on YouTube usually featured television-style content such as speeches or interviews with candidates, long and short versions of offline political ads, clips from news conferences or entertainment-oriented programs, and news reports by offline news media organizations (Klotz 2010: 119-120; Davis, Baumgartner et al. 2009: 21). While YouTube’s structural and functional particularities enabled formal political actors to deploy new video-content genres, the overwhelming majority of their campaign videos still consisted of material destined for the offline audience (Klotz 2010: 113). In fact, Gulati and Williams (2010: 103) believe that YouTube was used by political players as “an additional medium for spreading communication already developed for television and archiving past advertisements.” It progressively became an important component of their offline political communication strategy and many “campaigns called press conferences to announce or unveil a new advertisement that had yet to air but was posted online” (Towner and Dulio 2011: 167).

Also, most election-related videos on YouTube in 2006 originated from formal political players such as candidates, conventional media organizations, political parties and interest groups (Klotz 2010: 117-118). In fact, ten out of the twelve most popular YouTube Senate campaign videos in 2006 can be attributed to members of the media or political elites (Klotz 2010: 115). Additionally, most political videos on YouTube adopted the television-style 30-second format which dominated “contemporary American politics [and was] [...] a product of the institutionalized media market” (Klotz 2010: 113). Most candidates and formal political organizations did not use YouTube to circulate longer, unfiltered, more substantive and, to a certain extent, more memorable political messages that could have stronger persuasive and mobilization effects on the electorate (Klotz 2010: 113; Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012). However, many factors such as audience members’ limited attention span encouraged political players to stick with the conventional format of political videos (Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012).

Finally, a large portion of election-related videos posted on YouTube during the 2006 midterm election cycle adopted an overly negative tone. In fact, 25 percent of the most-popular political videos consisted of attack ads that previously had aired on television (Klotz 2010: 115). The frequent re-use of political video content originally produced for the offline audience such as televised news reports or clips from interviews or debates was an important source of negativity on YouTube (Klotz 2010: 120; Ridout, Fowler et al. 2012). YouTube was also used by many formal and informal political players to broadcast negative ads featuring “accusations of candidates calling phone sex lines, visiting the Playboy mansion, having connections to a serial killer [...] [or] strangling their mistress” that were not suited for the offline political mediascape (Heldman 2007). In other words, it can be argued that some Web 2.0 media platforms were used to disseminate political messages that were not necessarily

adapted for the conventional media environment, a phenomenon that will be indirectly discussed in the analysis chapter of this dissertation.

Many candidates and other political groups integrated commercially-owned social media platforms into their online politicking toolkit in 2006 (Klotz 2010; Williams and Gulati 2007; Gulati and Williams 2010). The successful use of blogs by some candidates during the 2004 U.S. presidential contest prompted many formal political players to include them in their digital politicking activities in 2006 (English and Tedesco 2008: 3; Sweetser, Golan et al. 2008: 202). They were indeed the source of greater “political discussion, [...] [an enhanced] sense of community, and [more vigorous] political action” among citizens throughout 2004 (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009: 906). Forty-five percent of major-party and 31 percent of minor-party candidates maintained at least one blog in 2006. Some of them even gave Web users the capacity to launch and independently manage their own blogs on these campaign sites (Xenos and Foot 2008: 56; Trent and Friedenbergr 2008: 400; Gulati and Williams 2007).

Several political players outsourced some of their e-politicking operations to third-party social network services. While several social networking platforms such as Facebook.com or MySpace.com were in their early developmental stages in 2006, they constituted a growing popular destination for U.S. Internet users (Williams and Gulati 2007: 5, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Gueorguieva 2008). Facebook had approximately 15 million registered members and was visited by 15,000 unique individuals on a typical day during the fall months of 2006. Meanwhile, MySpace was accessed an average of 60,000 times every day for a total of 60 million visits during the same time period (Williams and Gulati 2007: 5, 2009c). Another study showed that this social networking service’ user population grew from 16.2 million users in 2005 to 46 million in 2006 (Gangadharbatta 2008: 5; Nielsen/Netratings 2006).

Facebook was the most-used online social networking platform by candidates during the midterm elections (Williams and Gulati 2009d; Gulati and Williams 2010: 94). In September 2006, it launched “Election Pulse,” a political portal within its main website comprising standardized profiles of all candidates running for congressional, local, regional and national elected offices in the United States. These contained baseline information such as the candidate’s full name, “office, state, and party affiliation” (Williams and Gulati 2007: 6, 2009b, 2009c). They could be taken over at any time by candidates who could then personalize them by posting digital material or integrating interactive features (Sweetser and Lariscy 2008: 182; Feezell, Conroy et al. 2009: 8).

However, the overwhelming majority of formal political actors’ SNS profiles replicated top-down communication patterns. They consisted of brochureware digital material such as “photographs, statements on policy positions, and qualifications for office” (Gulati and Williams 2007: 461). Moreover, most politicians engaged in conventional mobilization operations such as promoting voter registration, engaging in volunteer recruitment campaigns for online and offline activities and fundraising. In summary, candidates adopted campaigning tactics exploiting the distinct affordances of these media platforms (Gueorguieva 2008).

While there was rapid intensification and diversification of cyberpoliticking activities before the 2006 U.S. midterm contest, Gulati and Williams (2007: 46) believe that they may have “slowed and appeared at or near a plateau” during that election cycle.

#### **2.2.4 Post-maturation stage**

The 2008 U.S. presidential contest distinguished itself from previous election cycles by “the amount, intensity, and depth of online political engagement” from both the formal political sphere and, more important, the grassroots (Vaccari 2010: 319). Nearly all the regional and national candidates had an online presence, whether it was in the form of a basic campaign

site or through in-house or third-party social media channels (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 54; Robertson, Vatrapu et al. 2010: 11; Gaziano and Liesen 2008).

Again, an extensive discussion of the innovative e-politicking strategies developed by the Obama and Paul campaigns was conducted in the first chapter of the dissertation. This section will look at the more typical campaigning practices of this period. The average homepage of political sites during the 2008 U.S. election cycle featured introductory comments, mobilization tools, photos, and navigational tools such as hyperlinks pointing to issue-specific sections within the website (Gaziano and Liesen 2008: 12-13). In fact, the structure of most presidential campaign websites was somewhat similar to those of the previous election cycles (Gliem and Janack 2008). Specifically, an analysis of 36 campaign sites conducted during the 2008 U.S. elections showed that the overwhelming majority of them consisted of multidimensional substantive digital political material such as biographical profiles of candidates (91.9 percent), press releases (62.2 percent), endorsements (32.4 percent), accomplishments in the case of incumbents (16.2 percent), agendas listing scheduled campaign events (35.1 percent), and sections offering details on candidates' views or positions on different policy questions (56.8 percent). This information was available in a variety of formats. Indeed, 40.5 percent of sites had at least one photo gallery, 13.5 percent featured audio content and 40.5 percent had video material (Gaziano and Liesen 2008: 12-13; 31; Gliem and Janack 2008).

Top-down "campaign-to-user" interactive features constituted a central component of most campaign sites. All 36 presidential campaign sites allowed Web users to register in order to periodically receive email newsletters while 81.1 percent gave them the capability to make financial contributions through electronic payment systems and 65 percent included sign-up forms for people who wanted to volunteer. Different social interactive features were also present on many presidential campaign websites. Five percent of them had text-based

messaging platforms, 75.7 percent provided basic tools allowing Internet users to contact candidates or members of their team and 54 percent maintained at least one blog. Campaign weblogs generally featured informal updates on campaign activities or on mobilization and fundraising appeals. However, few of them enabled Web users to post comments or interact in a meaningful way with contenders or members of their staff (Gaziano and Liesen 2008: 12-13; Vargas 2008).

User-generated social networking platforms, which were in their infancy during the 2004 and 2006 election cycles, became instrumental components of the U.S. online mediascape in 2008 (Hanson, Haridakis et al. 2010: 585; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010: 609). Close to 30 percent of the U.S. public had at least one profile on a social network site in 2008 (Rainie and Smith 2008). Specifically, MySpace had 110 million members in January 2008 while 65 million Americans had a Facebook account in February 2008 and 2 million of them were present on Twitter in 2008 (Ancu and Cozma 2009: 568; Williams and Gulati 2010: 9). In November 2008, 9 percent of U.S.-based Web users went on Twitter or updated their social status online through other means, up from 6 percent in May 2008 (Lenhart and Fox 2009). Williams and Gulati (2009c: 2) note that “Facebook adoption diffused rapidly between 2006 and 2008, and at a steeper trajectory than did campaign web site adoption.”

Approximately 40 percent of U.S.-based Web users engaged in political activities on social networking sites in 2008 such as finding social contacts with compatible political interests or objectives (29 percent), acquiring news or commentary on the elections or on specific candidates (22 percent), or joining a political group (9 percent) (Robertson, Vatrappu et al. 2009: 6; Smith and Rainie 2008). This dynamic prompted many formal political players to intensify their political communication and mobilization operations on these media venues. Slightly more than 78 percent of Democratic candidates and 65.7 percent of Republican hopefuls maintained a politician’s page on Facebook during the 2008 presidential election

cycle (Williams and Gulati 2009b: 6). Interestingly, 51 percent of them embedded Web links pointing to their profile page on commercially-owned social networking services (Gaziano and Liesen 2008: 12-13).

Candidates and political organizations present on social networking services pursued two complementary goals. On one hand, they sought to energize users of these Web services and ultimately gain their support. On the other hand, they wanted to stimulate greater levels of political engagement among their supporters (Fernandes, Giurcanu et al. 2010). For example, they encouraged members of the netroots to self-organize by independently forming small groups or engaging in activities linked to specific issues or events, contributing time and money to their cause, as well as creating “personalized environments [...] that may engender a stronger sense of participation and ownership” (Robertson, Vatraru et al. 2010: 12).

In summary, the four evolution stages of e-electioneering in the United States were marked by the development and implementation by formal political players of e-politicking strategies that were tailored to the structural and functional particularities of emerging digital media platforms and the growing willingness of Internet users to use these tools for political purposes. The next section of this dissertation will provide an in-depth characterization of the ongoing post-maturity stage of the evolution of cyberpoliticking and, more important, the rise of *online politicking 3.0*, which is likely to have important effects on the structure of the political landscape of many democracies over the next decades.

The preceding overview of the evolution of online and real-world mass-mediated political communication patterns has shown three key dynamics that are important to better understand the context of the emergence of *online politicking 3.0*:

- ✓ despite the successive rise of media channels as important components of the political mediascape (from television in the 1960s to the Internet in the late 1990s and social media platforms in the mid-2000s), candidates and formal

political organizations have fought hard to retain control of the dynamic between them and the voters (“elite-to-mass” communication model (Jackson and Lilleker 2009a: 233));

- ✓ the 2008 U.S. presidential election cycle has demonstrated how difficult it will be for candidates and other formal groups to both exploit the vast possibilities of Web 2.0 media tools and retain control;
- ✓ it will most likely take an insurgent political movement driven in a truly bottom-up fashion to really show the *way ahead* for online politics.

### **3 Chapter: The rise of *online politicking 3.0***

This section of the dissertation will focus on the ongoing post-maturity phase of e-electioneering in the United States which has led to the emergence of *online politicking 3.0*. This model is characterized by the presence of technological and socio-political contextual factors that have shaped the course of cyberpoliticking in the United States in a new, truly bottom-up direction (Marien, Hooghe et al. 2010; Tapscott 2008).

From a strict technological standpoint, the post-maturity phase has been marked by the development and rapid popularization of Web 2.0 platforms. These have progressively become a fixture in the online political mediascape in the United States, especially since the second half of the 2004 presidential contest (Kaid 2009: 419). They have contributed to the formation of constantly evolving, geographically dispersed, socio-political communities, allowing multidirectional information flows and social interactions that “would have been unimaginable” (Coleman 2010: 493). The distinct “interactive, nuanced, and interdependent” nature of these media tools (Wattal, Schuff et al. 2010: 681) is expected to alter the online and, to some extent, offline public politicking dynamic in the U.S. during the next decades.

Second generation media channels have been used extensively by younger segments of the U.S. public to engage in various forms of political action in recent years. A November 2010 survey showed that 42 percent of Americans between 18 and 29 used at least one social networking site to be politically active during the 2010 U.S. presidential election cycle compared to only 29 percent of those between 30 and 59, and only 33 percent of those over 50. Specifically, 17 percent posted mix media political content such as status updates, pictures, or videos, 12 percent friended at least one political candidate, and 12 percent joined an issue-specific political group (Smith 2011b: 4, 7).

It can be argued that the rise of social media channels is responsible for creating a “second generation of digital natives which can be separated from the first due to their

familiarity and immersion in this new, web 2.0, digital world” (Helsper and Eynon 2010). However, other scientific investigations have determined that not all “young adults are universally knowledgeable about the Web” (Hargittai 2010: 109) and the structural and technical capabilities of user-generated media tools (Bennett, Wells et al. 2011: 835; Bennett, Freelon et al. 2010: 406-407). For instance, those who have a higher socioeconomic status (SES) – education, revenues, etc. – are more likely than those with a less-privileged background to have higher levels of social media technical knowledge and skills. Moreover, they tend to use Web 2.0 media tools more frequently and for a wider range of purposes (Hargittai 2010: 109; Kahne, Lee et al. 2012)

From a strict socio-political viewpoint, the post-maturity phase has been marked by the growing influence of postmodern trends, which are compatible with the interactive and participative capabilities of Web 2.0 media channels. Proponents of Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” argument (1995) believe that first generation digital communication channels fostered socio-political isolation, much like offline broadcast media outlets. In other words, they have depressed political engagement levels by emphasizing predominantly top-down transfers of controlled information and mobilization initiatives (e.g. Boulianne 2009: 193-194; Baumgartner and Morris 2010: 25). A growing number of Internet users have turned to social media channels in recent years to engage in activities usually generating few to no traditional political dividends (Baumgartner and Morris 2010: 27-28; Bachmann, Kaufhold et al. 2010: 36-37). While this trend has affected all segments of the electorate, it has been especially prevalent among “net geners” (Tapscott 2008), also known as “generation me” (Twenge 2006; 2008). These technologically-savvy young adults are more likely than their older counterparts to be heavy users of Web 2.0 technologies and less likely to engage in conventional modes of political participation such as attending campaign rallies or town hall events, volunteering for candidates, donating money, or voting (Baumgartner and Morris

2010: 27-28; Valenzuela, Park et al. 2009: 888). As demonstrated by Pasek, More et al. (2009: 199), younger segments of the citizenry are generally plagued “by lower levels of community involvement, interpersonal [and institutional] trust, and political knowledge” that can affect their willingness or ability to be involved in political processes. In fact, a 2008 survey revealed that U.S. citizens between 18 and 25 were the “least politically knowledgeable generation ever in the history of survey research” (Wattenberg 2008: 5).

The growing proficiency of Americans with Web 2.0 technologies, coupled with their adherence to postmodern political trends, may be progressively reversing this dynamic. Since 2001, there has been a sharp increase of U.S. college freshmen and high school seniors who are interested in politics. For example, the share of college freshmen who reported discussing political matters at least once during the last twelve-month period, which fell from 27 percent to 16 percent between 1968 and 2000, started increasing in 2001 and reached approximately 36 percent in early 2010. More important, between the 2000 and 2008 U.S. presidential contests, voting rates among Americans who are 29 years old or younger rose more than three times faster than those of U.S. citizens who are 30 years old or older (Sander and Putnam 2010: 11-12). This spark of interest in politics was initially attributed to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the following military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the rise of social media and the growing popularity of postmodern trends among some segments of the public have played an instrumental role in energizing some segments of the U.S. electorate in more recent years.

The growing influence of postmodern trends on Internet users has led them to engage more frequently in “informal, fluid, and personal” e-politicking (Putnam 2002: 411). Recent research has shown there are several constantly-evolving postmodern trends:

- ✓ openness to new political and media experiences (“extraversion”) (Correa, Hinsley et al. 2010: 251; Jackson, Dorton et al. 2010: 49; Kim, Kim et al. 2010: 1083);
- ✓ desire to be creative, innovative and autonomous (Correa, Hinsley et al. 2010: 250; Papacharissi 2010: 237);
- ✓ willingness to be self-expressive and socially-active (Kim, Kim et al. 2010: 1083);
- ✓ propensity for individualistic self-promotion through “affirmation and validation” (Patchin and Hinduja 2010b: 211);
- ✓ readiness for greater personal and collective transparency (Kavanaugh, Perez-Quinones et al. 2010: 289);
- ✓ openness to the playful nature of Web 2.0 communication tools (Blumler and Coleman 2010; Sledgianowski and Kulviwat 2009: 75);
- ✓ efficacy towards politics and digital media platforms (Gangadharbatta 2008: 7; Thornson, Ekdale et al. 2010: 326; Patchin and Hinduja 2010a, 2010b).

Many of these trends, which are anchored in values such as freedom, assertiveness, self-mastery and empowerment, are especially prevalent among individuals younger than 25 in the United States (e.g. Twenge 2006, 2008; Bennett, Wells et al. 2009; Papacharissi 2010: 237).

The emergence of these postmodern trends has directly contributed to the development of highly personalized digital political engagement patterns during the last decade. They can manifest themselves through netizens’ exploitation of Internet-based media channels to publicly showcase their “complex identities through personally resonant activities, [strategic development of social networks, media] consumption” and personal expression (Wells 2010: 422). These participatory patterns are predominantly driven by individual-based preferences, interests or goals that may not be intrinsically political in nature. They can be fueled by

ideological beliefs, specific issues or events, present or past social and recreational activities, entertainment choices, or other individual-based variables (Woolley, Limperos et al. 2010: 334; Hirzalla and Von Zoonen 2011: 4). In some cases, they can even be totally pointless (Christensen 2011b; Woolley, Limperos et al. 2010: 334).

Social media technologies are especially well suited for these self-instigated modes of political participation, also known as “micro-activism” (e.g. Christensen 2011b; Marichal 2010). They provide Web users with an autonomous self-publication and community-building arena giving them the ability and flexibility to engage in a wide range of political actions. Specifically, social networking services enable them to:

- ✓ establish and maintain virtual friendships with formal and informal political players like politicians, celebrities, or grassroots activists;
- ✓ advertise their support for causes, citizen-driven movements, or institutions;
- ✓ comment on other users’ publications or other virtual actions;
- ✓ cite journalistic organisations and other digital resources through hyperlinks;
- ✓ share political videos, images, or textual material on their personal profile pages in order to stimulate discussion (Brundidge 2010: 1067; Schlozman, Verba et al. 2010: 401).

This form of e-politicking is partly responsible for the rapid incubation of digital “hipster narcissism” or identity-centered egoism during the last five years (Chadwick 2009: 32, 2012; Malikhao and Servaes 2011: 69; Chi and Yang 2011; Serazio 2010: 425). Use of the concept of narcissism in this context refers to a culturally and technologically-induced state of “introspection and self-absorption that takes place in blogs,” on social network sites, and on other user-generated media platforms (Papacharrissi 2009b: 237).

This form of political engagement is inspired by the self-actualizing offline approach to politics, also known as “sub-politics” (Stolle and Hooghe 2009) or “lifestyle politics”

(Bennett 1998). It has manifested itself in mostly non mass-mediated ways throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Specifically, citizens intentionally engaged in a diverse range of real-world activities reflecting their personal political preferences and concerns such as wearing different types of clothing, joining issue-driven social groups or grassroots movements, engaging in specific product or service consumption patterns for specific social, ideological, political or ethical reasons (“political consumerism”), or attending entertainment-oriented events such as street demonstrations or music festivals (Wells 2010: 424; Bennett, Wells et al. 2009: 13).

In comparison, the dutiful or managed citizenship model is centered on old-school political engagement practices (Bennett, Freelon et al. 2010; Bennett and Wells 2009: 8). According to this approach, individuals are motivated “by a sense of duty to incur costs to participate for the good of society by voting and joining with others in sanctioned civic organizations that promote civic spirit” (Bennett and Wells 2009: 8). While this citizenship model is still widely popular in the U.S., it is increasingly incompatible with the postmodern trends that are influencing the political engagement preferences of future generations of citizens (Haste 2010; Bennett, Freelon et al. 2010). The analysis of the Tea Party movement will highlight the impact of two complementary phenomena – fueled by the rise of social media and the emergence of postmodern trends – on the reconfiguration of online and, to some extent, real-world politicking in the U.S. since the beginning of the post-maturity phase: the grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking, more broadly known as the *online politicking 3.0* model.

### **3.1 Grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization of e-politicking**

The decentralization of e-politicking has directly challenged the capacity of the dominant political elites to control public agenda-setting and discourse-structuring processes in a top-down fashion. Moreover, it has forced them to be more responsive to the preoccupations and

objectives of the public at large (Blumler and Coleman 2010; Papacharissi 2010: 241). However, they are still resisting this redefinition of information flows and social relations and trying to engage in offline-inspired voter outreach practices through social media channels. As noted by Gurevitch, Coleman et al. (2009: 172), they are deploying significant “efforts to monitor the blogosphere, control the content of wikis, and make their presence felt in unfamiliar environments, such as Facebook and YouTube.”

The concept of uncontrolled bottom-up decentralization can be defined as the diffusion of the initiative, the execution, and the control of digital political communication, mobilization, and organizing from formal political elites to a rapidly growing number of individuals and organizations with wide-ranging preferences, interests, and objectives. Because of this inherent impetus towards decentralization, it is not surprising that it would be a populist movement like the Tea Party which would capitalize on Web 2.0 media tools to promote itself and establish its influence. Three distinct yet complementary axes of decentralization will be identified and analyzed in this chapter:

- ✓ decentralization of digital political content production and sharing processes;
- ✓ decentralization of the overall structure of e-politicking;
- ✓ decentralization of formal and informal political organizational structures.

There were some levels of decentralization of communication, mobilization and organizing practices in the offline and Web 1.0 political mediascape between the early 1960s and 2008. However, it was essentially controlled by a limited number of influential political and media elites such as interest groups, political parties, conventional media organizations, and corporate interests. This section will focus on the truly bottom-up redefinition of politicking.

### **3.1.1 Decentralization of Web-based political content production and sharing processes**

Web 2.0 media technologies, which can be described as inexpensive, fast and inclusive in nature, have helped to significantly reduce the transaction costs associated to e-politicking.

First, while the exploitation of Web 1.0 media tools can lead to medium or large expenditures (e.g. technical services, bandwidth purchase, etc.), the minimal to nonexistent costs of creating and updating basic profile pages on most commercially-owned Web 2.0 channels have prompted many Internet users to have a presence on these platforms (Williams and Gulati 2009c: 3). In fact, several candidates and political parties with limited financial means have progressively shifted a sizable portion of their online campaigning operations from Web 1.0 to second generation media channels during recent elections in the United States (Vergeer, Hermans et al. 2011). Some third-party contenders for elected offices in the United States have even relied exclusively on social media services to promote their candidacy (e.g. Hendricks 2012).

However, recent investigations have found that the extent to which financial resources are available to formal and informal political players can directly affect how they exploit social media services. During the 2008 U.S. presidential contest, congressional hopefuls who had significant financial means generally uploaded more video content on YouTube than their financially poorer counterparts (Gulati and Williams 2010: 104). More recently, richer Senate candidates updated their Twitter feeds more frequently than their poorer counterparts during the 2010 midterm election cycle (Ammann 2010: 8). It is worth noting that many candidates running for elected office in recent U.S. election cycles have substantially increased the financial resources dedicated to their campaigning activities on social media channels due, in part, to the growing popularity of these tools among the mainstream public (Gulati and Williams 2011: 3; Williams and Gulati 2011).

Second, the relative simplicity of the visual design and internal function of most Web 2.0 tools has considerably reduced the level of digital expertise required to be politically active on the World Wide Web. While first-generation digital media tools required Internet users to possess a wide array of technical knowledge and skills in order to be utilized

efficiently, social media tools have enabled those with limited technological background to be present and actively involved in the online political mediascape (Williams and Gulati 2009c; Gulati and Williams 2010, 2011a:, 2011b).

However, Jackson and Lilleker (2009a: 239-240) point out that users with higher levels of digital skills are more likely to engage in more complex politicking activities than those with limited technical expertise due to their ability to fully exploit the different capabilities of Web 2.0 technologies. Conversely, users with low levels of social media literacy are often unwilling to exploit certain functions of Web 2.0 communication channels due, in part, to their uncertainty about some of their effects (Ellison, Vitak et al. 2011: 24). The utilization of certain social media tools can require more digital skills than others. Gulati and Williams (2011b: 8) point out that the exploitation of Facebook demands more technical skills than other platforms such as micro-communication sites due to the complexity of its diverse content-sharing and community-building internal functions. The constantly evolving nature of user-generated participatory media tools is expected to pose certain challenges to users who have a limited understanding of their capabilities.

Third, Web 2.0 channels have alleviated some of the time constraints associated with cyberpoliticking. Their overall simplicity has given formal and informal political actors the capacity to have a basic online presence in a relatively short period of time compared to most first-generation digital communication platforms. For instance, profile pages on social networking sites or micro-communication channels can be quickly set up by users who are asked to answer a small set of optional and mandatory predetermined questions upon their creation. Many social networking sites also enable users to rapidly launch and manage public, semi-private, or private discussion groups (e.g. Fernandes, Giurcanu et al. 2010; Woolley, Limperos et al. 2010: 634-635). Also, unlike the overwhelming majority of Web 1.0 media channels that require some lengthy periods of time to be updated, the rapidly modifiable

nature of profile pages on most social media services has enabled individuals and organizations to engage in various forms of political action in a quick and often unfiltered fashion (Gulati and Williams 2010, 2011a: 18, 2011b; Haynes and Pitts 2009: 56). As noted by Haynes and Pitts (2009: 56), YouTube allowed them “to respond quickly to issues, events, and opponent speeches or attacks”. More recently, many individuals and organizations have used Twitter to comment in real-time on news events such as press conferences or debates, a practice known as “live tweeting” (Burgess and Bruns 2012: 398). From a broader perspective, Web 2.0 media tools have contributed to the acceleration of the rhythm of e-politics.

Fourth, the different levels of anonymity and pseudonymity afforded by social media sites have played a central role in the uncontrolled decentralization of Internet-based political communication, mobilization and organizing. While many Web 2.0 tools such as the social networking sites Facebook and Foursquare can be defined as identity-centered communication services, others have enabled Internet users to be involved in the digital political mediascape without having to reveal central aspects of their identity. In other words, they do not require users to divulge detailed information about themselves to build a network of social contacts, “and thus [...] [focus] less on ‘who you are’ and more on what you have to say” (Hughes, Rowe et al. 2012: 562).

There are three levels of self-disclosure on personal profile pages of social media platforms:

- ✓ fully anonymous profile pages contain little to no “personally identifiable information” (PII) about their owner – PII can be defined as “information which can be used to distinguish or trace an individual’s identity either alone or when combined with other information that is linkable to a specific individual” (Krishnamurthy and Wills 2009);

- ✓ semi-anonymous profiles contain some information on the personal background of their owner, but not enough to make them fully identifiable;
- ✓ full-disclosure pages provide a detailed socio-demographic portrait of their creator by divulging central aspects of their identity.

However, Web 2.0 users can still reveal some facets of their real identity through the disclosure of personal information, discourse styles, issues discussed, or “subjective information such as thoughts, feelings, likes, and dislikes” (Kietzmann, Hermkens et al. 2011: 243).

The socio-demographic background of Internet users can have an impact on the extent to which they are ready to disclose personal information of their profile page. For example, “net geners” are generally more likely to divulge personally identifiable information on social media channels than their older counterparts (e.g. Nosko, Wood et al. 2010: 412; Morgan, Snelson et al. 2010). A survey of 205 U.S. students conducted in May 2007 indicated that 86.2 percent of them posted at least one picture of themselves on their SNS profile page, 81.8 percent provided their real name, 74.8 percent shared details about their personality, 49.1 percent posted their instant messaging contact information, 35.2 percent shared their email address, 9.4 percent provided their home address, and 9.4 percent included their phone number. Close to 73.6 percent of them also reported making their profile page available to the general public (Fogel and Nehmad 2009: 156; Morgan, Snelson et al. 2010). It can be argued that sharing personal information on the Internet, which can be seen as part of the previously described postmodern trends, is now part of the daily life of younger adults (Nosko, Wood et al. 2010: 412).

The partial or full anonymity and pseudonymity afforded by Web 2.0 media channels have also contributed to the decentralization of e-politicking by enabling a growing number of individuals and organizations to actively participate in the political process. They have

facilitated the establishment of flexible deliberative and collaborative depersonalized arenas where diverse political arguments can be widely circulated, discussed and judged “based on their own merits rather than based on cues related to” the socio-political status or competence of the person or organization emitting them (Mutz 2001: 235). In other words, the capacity of Web 2.0 digital media channels to provide different levels of anonymity and pseudonymity to their users, “both to each other and to the producers of [...] publicly conveyed messages” (Bohman 2004: 138), has enabled them to express themselves without facing discrimination and recrimination based on factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, sexual orientation, or social affiliations. They have essentially helped to flatten hierarchical structures among Web users (Papacharissi 2002: 16, Kim 2006: 38; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011: 172; Bohman 2004).

Web 2.0 users’ capacity to remain anonymous has also facilitated the establishment of a more relaxed political communication environment where unpopular, controversial, or otherwise socially undesirable matters can be openly discussed (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011: 172; Mutz 2001: 235). Finally, it has deeply modified the “expectation of communication” by blurring the previously clear-cut lines between content producers and audience members or “between those governing and those governed” in a multidirectional conversational context (Bohman 2004: 138; Delli Carpini 2000: 347; Kim 2006: 40).

However, the partial or full anonymity and pseudonymity provided by Web 2.0 media tools have several downsides. They can give Web users an artificial sense of empowerment - known as “online disinhibition effect” (Suler 2004) - that can lead them to express judgments and opinions without fully evaluating their social and political reach and repercussions (Papacharissi 2002: 16-17; Kennedy 2006: 864). Moreover, they can have hampering effects on Internet users’ “accountability and sincerity of the presentation of self,” which can in turn introduce uncertainty and, to some extent, disrespect in the online political mediascape (Lee

2005: 58). They can provoke Web users into engaging in activities with the “sole intent of antagonizing the entire community” (Wise, Hamman et al. 2006: 32), a phenomenon known as “trolling” (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011: 172). Finally, they can generate incivility and, in some cases, hostility and animosity in the digital political communication environment, a phenomenon known as “flaming”<sup>8</sup> (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011: 172).

The partial or complete anonymity or pseudonymity provided by social media platforms have impacted the level of confidence of Web users in online political information transfers and social contacts. Those where the real identity of the participants is not or is only partially known considered as significantly less trustworthy than those where the identity of the participants is fully known, particularly in text-based environments. The presence of identity markers on social media profile pages can help participants to fully evaluate each others’ level of competence and, by extension, credibility (Milliken and O’Donnell 2008). Indeed, individuals engaging in anonymous online conversations “may not experience many civic benefits,” a situation that can ultimately hurt their future political involvement levels (Shah, Kwak et al. 2001: 144).

Finally, Web 2.0 communication technologies have enabled formal and informal political players to circulate, in a fully- or semi-anonymous manner, information specifically designed to influence and ultimately shape, in specific and often motivated ways, political communication and mobilization patterns (Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002). However, it should be noted that online anonymity is increasingly challenged by the growing use of surveillance and data-mining technologies by formal and informal political actors (Howard, Carr et al. 2005: 59; Howard 2005: 165).

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<sup>8</sup> Flaming can be defined as the process which “includes the intentional creation, transmission, and interpretation of a message that is perceived from multiple perspectives as violating norms, and which can itself be the beginning of the norm, negotiation, evolution, and realignment process” (Woolley, Limperos et al. 2010: 638).

In sum, Web 2.0 media channels are rendering the electoral process more competitive and generating greater interest in political matters among the mainstream population. They are also enabling previously peripheral or inactive political actors to join the public conversation and challenge the dominance of more influential players in order to shape the political agenda and control the overall structure of the public media environment (e.g. Norris 2003: 25; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 217; Margolis, Resnick et al. 1997).

### **3.1.2 Decentralization of the structure of e-politicking**

The interactive nature of Web 2.0 platforms, coupled with the growing readiness of Internet users to be politically active on the Internet, has also contributed to the decentralization of the structure of e-politicking. As noted by Vitak, Zube et al. (2011: 113), the interactive capabilities of social media channels have encouraged “users to become more active political participants and possibly expand beyond basic [and often elite-controlled] forms of engagement to more vigorous and effective political behaviors.”

As previously discussed, there has been a progressive expansion of the role of content and social interactive technologies on political websites since the 2000 U.S. presidential contests. By the 2004 U.S. presidential contest, they were omnipresent on the main campaign site of presidential candidates and many contenders for local and regional elected offices integrated them on their digital campaigning infrastructures. While online interactivity is a constantly evolving phenomenon not yet completely understood (Kaid 2003: 679), scholars have developed several tentative characterizations of its effects on online political information transmissions and community-building patterns during the last thirty years (e.g. Tedesco 2007; Stromer-Galley 2004; Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996). From a broader perspective, it can be defined as “an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmission” (Rafaeli 1988: 111). It has also been

described as the “measure of a medium’s potential ability to let the user exert an amount of influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication” (Jensen 1998).

Stromer-Galley (2004: 392) has identified two distinct forms of online interactivity based on the examination of Web 1.0 media channels. First, “interactivity-as-process,” also known as computer- or network-mediated human interactivity, refers to the capacity of two or more Web users to interact with each other through networks of computers that enable the synchronous or asynchronous transfer of mixed-media digital material independent of barriers such as time or distance (Stromer-Galley, 2004: 392; Bucy, 2004: 374-375). Second, “interactivity-as-product” can be defined as Web users’ capacity to interact with digital material in order to personalize their content acquisition and consumption experience. Specifically, it can be described as the ability to control the “selection and presentation of online content, whether story text, audiovisuals, or multimedia, and other aspects of the interface” (Bucy 2004: 374-375). The failure to clearly differentiate these two facets of online interactivity can be the source of confusion and can ultimately “lead [...] to a failure to properly measure the interactivity of the situation” (Stromer-Galley 2004: 391).

McMillan (2002b) has also developed a three-part typology of online interactivity in the Web 1.0 media world. First, “user-to-system” interactivity, which is essentially similar to Stromer-Galley’s “interactivity-as-product” (2004: 392), refers to unidirectional interactions between Internet users and Web content that is accomplished, for instance, by downloading mixed-media digital material, participating in online polls, clicking on hyperlinks, or using content personalization technologies. Second, “user-to-user” interactivity, which is essentially “dialogic in nature” (Tedesco 2007: 1184), allows two or more Internet users to engage in synchronous or delayed information exchanges or social interactions in a one-to-one, one-to-few or one-to-many fashion. Finally, “user-to-document” interactivity refers to Web users’

capacity to participate in the production and, in some cases, co-production of digital material (Tesdesco 2007: 1184-1185; McMillan 2002a; 2002b).

Finally, Endres and Warnick (2004) have identified two distinct forms of Web-based political interactivity: “campaign-to-user” (or “user-to-campaign” interactivity) and “text-based” interactivity. “Campaign-to-user” interactivity refers to the functional components of a campaign website that are designed to establish and maintain a two-way communication bridge between members of political campaigns and the online public or, at least, to provide “the potential to do so” (Endres and Warnick 2004: 325). For example, mobilization tools such as volunteer registration forms or money contribution e-kiosks as well as other media tools like online polls, public forums and email links have been extensively used by candidates to reach out to voters and energize them. Conversely, they have enabled Web users to express themselves and, to a certain extent, be involved in varying ways in formal and informal political campaigning (Endres and Warnick 2004: 325; Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005).

“[T]ext-based interactivity” can be defined as the collection of “rhetorical techniques and features of the Web site text itself that communicate a sense of engaging presence to site visitors” (Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005). Specifically, it refers to two dimensions of campaign websites’ style:

- ✓ the “verbal style” dimension which refers to “the use of active rather than passive voice, first and second person rather than third person address, and embellishment”;
- ✓ the “visual display” dimension which refers to elements such as “captioned or alt-tagged photographs or quoted endorsements from third parties, and photographs showing the candidate in situ and talking with other people [...]” (Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005).

Many political actors have turned to these tactics during the last two decades to bolster perceptions of interactivity among the online audience while integrating a limited number of truly participative features in their digital campaigning platforms (Stromer-Galley 2000b: 111; Trammell, Williams et al. 2006: 27; Warnick, Xenos et al. 2005). The concept of “perceived interactivity” can be defined as “the psychological sense message senders have of their own and of the receivers' interactivity” (Newhagen, Cordes et al. 1995: 165). It has also been defined as the way in which Web “users perceive their experience as a simulation of interpersonal interaction and sense they are in the presence of a social other” (Thorson and Rodgers 2006: 36). Specifically, Wu (2005) has identified three facets of perceived interactivity:

- ✓ the “perceived control” component which refers to Web users’ perceived ability to be in control of their online navigation experience, their content or social interactions as well as their content selection choices;
- ✓ the “perceived responsiveness” component which refers to Internet users’ perceived relation with content producers, “navigation cues and signs” as well as other Internet users;
- ✓ the “perceived personalization” component which can be defined as Web users’ perception that a website is “acting as if it were a person,” “as if it wants to know the site visitor” and “as if it understands the site visitor” (Wu, 2005).

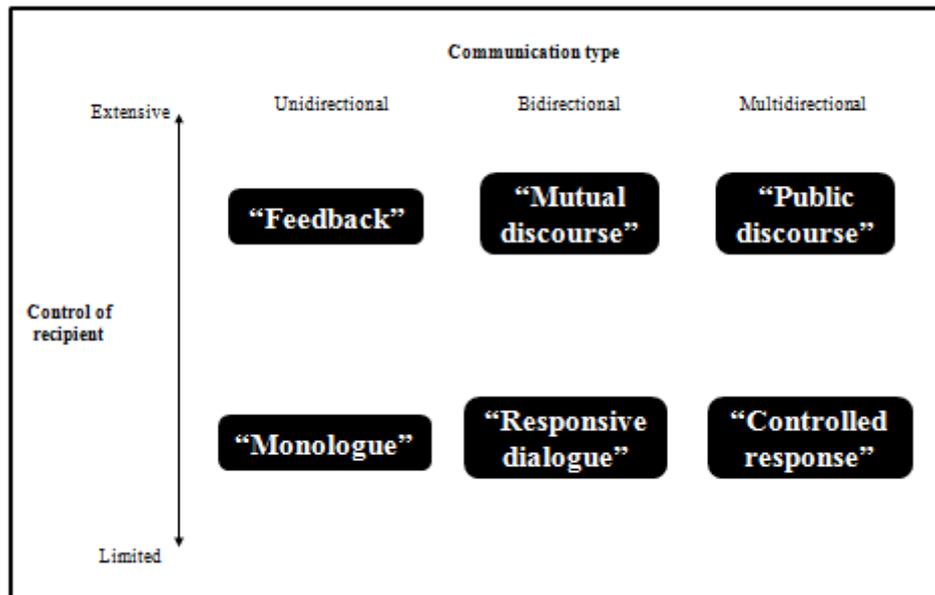
Several strategies have been developed by formal political actors to enhance Internet users’ perception of interactivity on their campaign sites during recent election cycles. As previously mentioned, some of them have embedded in-bound and out-bound hyperlinks, which foster active consumption of information through clicking and Web browsing (Chung and Zhao 2004). Others have relied on the publication of “textual encouragements of interacting” or short personal messages to foster feelings of intimacy and closeness among audience

members (Trammell, Williams et al. 2006). These measures have helped to cultivate a sense of “perceived relevance of - and involvement with” political messages among the online audience, thus rendering them more believable, trustworthy and persuasive (Sundar and Kim 2005).

The distinct structural and functional properties of Web 2.0 communication channels have enabled Internet users to independently engage in a wider range of public and private content and social interactive patterns (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; Trent and Friedenber 2008). Ferber, Foltz et al. (2007: 393) have developed a six-part model detailing the structure and directionality of human interactive patterns in the Web 2.0 political mediascape. While the previously defined typologies of online interactivity focus on bidirectional information flows and social interactions which were prevalent in the Web 1.0 world, their explanatory model of online interactivity provides a characterization of the variety of social interaction patterns in the Web 2.0 media environment. As noted by Jackson and Lilleker (2009a: 235), the first two stages of cyberpoliticking were more “about information provision and persuasive communication than public dialogue within a chaotic open-access environment.”

According to Ferber, Foltz et al.’s model (2007: 393), social media channels give two distinct levels of control to recipients of social interactions: low and high. They also allow three distinct forms of human interactions: unidirectional, bidirectional and multidirectional. For example, unidirectional interactions where recipients have little to no control on the interactive process are defined as “monologue” while those where they have high levels of control are known as “feedback.” Bidirectional social interactions where recipients have low levels of control are defined as “responsive dialogue,” while those where they have high levels of control are known as “mutual discourse.” Finally, multidirectional interactions where recipients have limited control are referred to by Ferber, Foltz et al. (2007: 393) as “controlled response,” and those where they have high control are defined as “public discourse.”

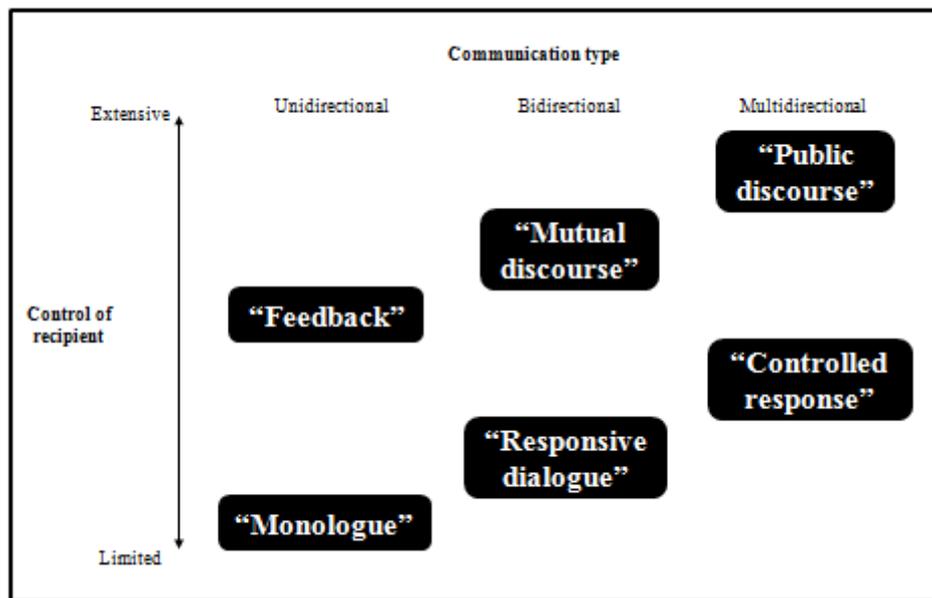
Graph 1: Model of cyber-interactivity



Based on Ferber, Foltz et al. (2007)

Jackson and Lilleker (2009a: 237) have refined Ferber, Foltz et al.'s (2007: 393) typology of online human interaction, which takes into account "the direction of communication (one-way, two-way, or three-way) and [...] the level of receiver control (on a scale of 1 to 10)" (Jackson and Lilleker 2009a: 237). According to their scale, "the minimum score is 1 (one-way with very low receiver control) and the maximum is 30 (three-way participatory dialogue with very high receiver control)" (Jackson and Lilleker 2009a: 237).

**Graph 2: Detailed user-to-user interactivity model**



Based on Jackson and Lilleker (2009a)

Few academic investigations have been conducted on human interactive patterns in the Web 2.0 political mediascape during the last five years. While some of them have adopted a predominantly macro-analytical framework to examine this phenomenon (e.g. Macnamara 2010; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010: 624), others have focused on some of the distinct structural and functional social media channels which enable users to engage in specific social interaction patterns. For instance, an analysis “of nine student Facebook groups from seven universities located in swing states” focusing on the Democratic and Republican presidential contenders (Barack Obama and John McCain) during the 2008 U.S. presidential contest revealed that they served predominantly unidirectional or monologue-inspired social interaction purposes (Fernandes, Giurcanu et al. 2010: 669). The majority of students used them to circulate campaign information in a one-way fashion, to promote different forms of formal and informal political action such as attending public gatherings, to participate in real-world rallies, or to share content publicly available on other digital resources (Fernandes, Giurcanu et al. 2010). As noted by Fernandes, Giurcanu et al. (2010: 670), they “rarely used the Facebook groups [...] for purely social purposes.”

Nielsen's (2011) study of regional and national candidates' campaigning practices on social networking sites during the 2008 U.S. election cycle indirectly echoes Fernandes, Giurcanu et al.'s findings. He determined that presidential contenders' official group walls on Facebook were utilized primarily as an outlet to mass distribute information about their positions on policy questions or their campaigning schedules, to publicize Web-based and real-world mobilization initiatives, and to motivate Web users to participate in them. Their posts usually generated few to no comments from members of their groups, thus indicating that they were not an important source of conversations among Internet users (Nielsen 2011: 765). In other words, they served the same top-down informational role.

Several social scientists have examined the structure of social interactions on Twitter in recent years (e.g. Tumasjan, Sprenger et al. 2011; Burgess and Bruns 2012; Conover, Conçalves et al. 2011). This Web 2.0 platform enables its users to publicly interact with each other with the help of two internal mechanisms: "@mention" or "@retweet." A tweet serving a @reply function (@ sign preceding a username in a tweet) is utilized by tweeters for direct communication purposes while a @retweet (RT followed by @ sign followed by a Twitter handle in a tweet) serves as a way for tweeters to re-publish a tweet originally posted by another user (Romero, Meeder et al. 2011; Conover, Ratkiewicz et al. 2011). According to Tumasjan, Sprenger et al. (2011) who studied 104,003 tweets mentioning either a candidate or political parties that were published in the weeks leading up to the German federal election on September 27, 2009 (between August 13, 2009 and September 19, 2009), 33.3 percent of them were part of a conversation, thus indicating that Twitter was not solely used as a tool for monologue-type forms of political expression. Another content analysis by Grant, Moon et al. (2010: 584) examined the structure of the Twitter discourse linked to the 2010 Australian elections between May 1, 2010 and February 28, 2010. They found that politicians who had public accounts were approximately 50 percent more likely to post tweets serving broadcast

politics objectives than conversational purposes and citizens with public accounts were 60 percent less likely to publish “broadcast tweets” than “conversation tweets” (Grant, Moon et al. 2010: 587).

The distinct structural and functional properties of social media channels have also given Internet users interactive content opportunities that were not present on Web 1.0 communication platforms. For example, certain social networking sites such as Facebook and photo-sharing platforms like Flickr give their users the capacity to identify individuals present in photos by digitally “tagging” them. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted between October 20, 2010 and November 28, 2010, 2,255 U.S.-based Facebook users of adult age reported tagging people in photos available on Facebook an average of 1.91 times per month and being tagged 1.92 times (Hampton, Goulet et al. 2012: 11). Facebook also enables its users to demonstrate their approval of content posted by other users by “liking” it. The previously-mentioned Pew survey showed that 13 percent of the respondents liked content published by their Facebook friends – either on their personal profile page or in public or closed groups – at least once every day, 20 percent at least once a week, 11 percent less than weekly, and 57 percent less than once per month. Conversely, 14 percent of them had content liked on Facebook at least once per day, 23 percent at least once a week, 12 percent less than once per week, and 51 percent less than once per month (Hampton, Goulet et al. 2012: 11). While some authors have briefly mentioned the unique content-based interactive capabilities of social media channels from a strict politicking perspective (e.g. Mascaro, Thiry et al. 2012; Macnamara and Gail 2011), few of them have conducted an in-depth analysis of how they have been utilized by formal and informal political actors and how they have affected the structure of the Web-based political mediascape.

### **3.1.3 Decentralization of formal and informal political organizational structures**

Web 2.0 media channels and the previously defined postmodern trends have fueled the progressive decentralization of large political organizations' internal hierarchical structure and practices (Latimer 2007: 83-84; Kreiss 2009: 293), a phenomenon also known as “radical decentralization” (Kreiss 2009: 293) or organizational hybridization (Chadwick 2007: 283-284; Rheingold 2008: 233).

The progressive decentralization of different facets of formal political organizations has affected the structure of e-politicking in the United States during the last fifty years. While political parties with mass appeal and other elite-led political organizations were central components of the U.S. political landscape before the early 1960s, they have progressively lost their relevance, credibility and traction among the electorate during the following decades. This situation has led them to undergo in-depth internal restructuring and, more important, has enabled new players to emerge and play a bigger role in the political landscape.

Several contextual factors have contributed to the gradual demise of traditional political formations and other established political organizations. First, the emergence of mass media channels has detrimentally impacted their capacity to reach out to the U.S. public. Indeed, while they were the primary providers of informational, educational and entertainment-related political material to the public before the 1960s, mass media channels have gradually replaced them as central political information and mobilization resources for voters during the following years (Rae 2007: 175; Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999: 256). Moreover, mass media channels' growing propensity to circulate non-partisan information has further hampered their previously quasi-unchallenged capacity to communicate, in a mostly unfiltered way, their positions and objectives to the population (Rae 2007: 175; Benson and Hallin 2007: 29; Callaghan and Schnell 2001: 184).

Second, the increasing suburbanization in the United States after the end of the Second World War has deeply reconfigured the public political dynamic and, more important, directly challenged the dominance of traditional political elites (Novotny 2000: 13; Rae 2007: 175). It contributed to the progressive dissolution of homogenous ethnic neighbourhoods in urban areas, which played an important role in the inner workings of political parties. It also led to the emergence of an educated and economically privileged middle class, which had socio-political dispositions that were mostly incompatible with the structure and objectives of traditional party politics (Rae 2007: 175; Sandman 1984; Fiorina 2002). It should be noted that a large proportion of suburban electoral districts in the United States had little to no “party history or active party organization” (Sandman 1984). Additionally, voters’ growing geographical mobility impeded the ability of political parties to connect and establish meaningful and durable ties with them (Novotny 2000: 13).

Third, traditional political parties’ control over two resources conferring them some influence in the political landscape, namely “patronage jobs” within the government and other “material benefits,” has steadily weakened since the 1950s due, in part, to a series of policy changes and the evolution of the economic context (Fiorina 2002; Rae 2007: 175; Reichley 2000: 325). Specifically, the rise of a “professional, tenured, merit-based civil service at all levels of government” and the steady unionization of the public sector workforce has limited the number of patronage jobs that political parties could use for a wide range of purposes such as political payoffs (Rae 2007: 175). Their control over a candidate’s “nomination process and the resources needed to mobilize large numbers of party workers behind their nominees” has also weakened due to implementation of various reforms such as the adoption of the direct primary electoral approach (Fiorina 2002). The passage of laws in response to political controversies has also negatively impacted political parties’ ability to access and manage

other resources such as contracts available to individuals holding an elected office, a phenomenon known as “honest graft” (Fiorina 2002; Rae 2007: 175).

Finally, the emergence of a new generation of politically-savvy citizens whose political engagement is increasingly influenced by the previously defined postmodern trends has detrimentally affected different facets of the internal structures and activities of political parties and other formal groups in the United States. For example, major political parties have seen the size of their membership shrink over the last three decades due, in part, to their hierarchical and rigid organizational structure which is not adapted to the expectations of younger segments of the U.S. electorate (Gunther and Diamond 2003: 174; Bennett, Wells et al. 2009: 25, 2011: 850). Indeed, younger citizens are “not inclined to enter into formal [and long-term] membership relations,” which often have different implications (Bennett, Wells et al. 2009: 25, 2011: 850). They prefer to be part of informal groups and be involved in ad hoc mobilization initiatives giving them more political engagement latitude (Bennett, Wells et al. 2009: 25, 2011: 850). Members of other segments of the citizenry have also deserted “the old-line oligarchic political organizations that mobilized them in the modernization era – but they are becoming more active in a wide range of elite-challenging forms of political action” (Inglehart 1997: 207).

User-generated information dissemination and community-building technologies have given political parties and other large hierarchical political organizations wide-ranging voter outreach opportunities. More important, their distinct structural and functional properties have indirectly forced them to adopt a growingly decentralized internal leadership structure and operational approach, known as the “post modern organizing model” (Carty 2010b: 161). Specifically, political parties and other large political organizations have progressively tweaked their highly centralized “command and control” (Wring and Ward 2010) approach to politicking and turned to strategies tailored to exploit the previously discussed postmodern

trends that are increasingly popular among modern citizens and the capabilities of Web 2.0 tools. For example, many political groups have given their supporters the ability to be involved in their decision-making or organizational processes. Additionally, formal political organizations have been aware of the importance of open source politicking, which relies on the decentralization of internal hierarchy and operations. Many decentralized organizations operating mainly online such as MoveOn.org, which have dropped “conventional civic missions” as well as rigid internal hierarchies, have increased their support within the general public in recent years. They have enabled their supporters to selectively participate in their activities based on their personal preferences or objectives (political engagement flexibility) (Bennett, Wells et al. 2009: 25).

Conversely, Web 2.0 media technologies have provided Web users with an alternative politicking outlet enabling them to bypass rigid institutionalized political engagement channels that can shape their involvement in specific and often unwanted ways (Gustafsson 2010: 5-6). In other words, they have enabled them to avoid bureaucratized and elite-controlled political action repertoires and have given them the capacity to adopt unconventional, unsolicited and potentially elite-challenging political engagement styles (Dalton 2006: 6, 2008: 86; Stolle and Hooghe 2004). The growing desire among U.S. citizens to be independently politically active through user-generated media platforms can be partly attributed to their rising scepticism in formal political, social and media organizations that control most traditional modes of political participation (Shah, McLeod et al. 2007: 220; Bennett 2008: 5).

### **3.2 Bottom-up hyper-fragmentation of formal and informal e-politicking**

Much like in the case of the grassroots-intensive decentralization of e-politicking, social media platforms and the growing traction of postmodern trends among a growing proportion of the U.S. public have played an instrumental role in the fragmentation of online politics

throughout the last decade. This phenomenon can be characterized as complimenting and, conversely, being complimented by the decentralization of cyberpoliticking.

The concept of political hyper-fragmentation can be defined as the progressive shattering of the collective political awareness, which is acquired through broadly shared political experience, knowledge, community-based interests and concerns, as well as the rise of constantly evolving personalized realities that are shaped by preferences, interests and objectives (definition based on Bennett's early work on fragmentation (1998: 741)). Some social scientists (e.g. Kim 2011; Bennett 1998: 741) believe that it can pose major challenges to the effective functioning of coherent societies and their leadership structures.

The phenomenon has progressively manifested itself over the last two decades through the emergence of a constantly evolving constellation of decentralized, user-driven, niche content dispersion and social networks, often partisan or ideological in nature.<sup>9</sup> Its influence has rapidly increased since 2004 with the rise of different social media services as important components of the digital political mediascape in the United States and the growing traction of postmodern trends among the public (Bimber 2005: 7; Baum and Groeling 2008: 346-347; Webster and Ksiazek 2012). This has enabled Internet users to tailor their political information intake and immediate social environment by accessing specialized digital resources catering to their interests and goals. In other words, it has given them the ability to create a highly customized "Daily Me"-styled immediate social and informational context for themselves (Stroud 2011; Nie, Miller III et al. 2010: 429; Freelon, Kriplean et al. 2012: 281). The "Daily Me" concept, first developed by Negroponte (1995), can be defined as a "communications package that is personally designed, with components fully chosen in advance" (Sunstein 2011: 389).

This trend has become increasingly popular among U.S. Internet users in recent years. A Pew Internet and American Life Project survey conducted among 2,259 U.S.-based adult

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<sup>9</sup> They are also defined as "cyber ghettos" or "voluntary communities" (Bimber 2005: 7; Dahlgren 2005: 152).

Internet users between December 28, 2009 and January 19, 2010 revealed that 67 percent of users only followed the news media coverage of issues or events that are of interest to them. Moreover, 42 percent believed that customization as one of the key features of the Internet and 28 percent reported customizing the content of at least one news Web page based on their preferences or interests (e.g. iGoogle: homepage of their browser, etc.) (Purcell, Rainie et al. 2010).

Another Pew study examined the online political information consumption habits of 2,257 U.S.-based adult Internet users during the 2010 midterm elections. It showed that 34 percent of users sought campaign news mostly supportive of their political beliefs, up from 33 percent in 2008, 28 percent in 2006, and 26 percent in 2004, while only 21 percent preferred news content differing from their personal viewpoints. Specifically, 44 percent of those who considered themselves as Republicans sought digital material comforting their personal political opinions on online media resources compared to 37 percent of those who were Democrats and 25 percent of those who were Independents. Conversely, only 18 percent of those who were Republicans looked for content directly challenging their political points of view while 23 percent of those who supported the Democratic Party and 22 percent of those who were Independents did so (Smith 2011b: 14).

Web users' growing propensity to expose themselves to political news catering to their preferences and objectives and to engage in social contacts likely to reinforce their dispositions has contributed to the emergence of a constantly-evolving constellation of "media enclaves and 'sphericules' that scarcely interact" (Webster and Ksiazek 2012: 39). It has also led many individuals to acquire a partial and possibly distorted or flawed perception or understanding of their immediate socio-political context (Bimber 2008: 157; Brundidge and Rice 2009: 151). According to Hindman (2007: 26-27, 2009), it is directly responsible for the

“missing middle” phenomenon, which has deeply affected the U.S. political landscape in recent years.

While it can be argued, based on some scholars’ work, that the hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking has helped to increase mobilization levels among some segments of the public (e.g. Freelon 2010a: 1180; Neuman, Bimber et al. 2011), others strongly believe it has had several detrimental effects (e.g. Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Jang and Park 2012). Specifically, they argue it has fostered the growth of narrow and homogenous socio-political communities, a phenomenon known as “cyberbalkanization” (Mossberger and Tolbert 2012: 202) or “cyberapartheid” (Hindman 2007, 2010: 9). In fact, recent research has shown that it may have played an instrumental role in the rapid growth of partisan polarization and, to some extent, political extremism levels among some segments of the U.S. population (e.g. Warner and Neville-Shepard 2011: 203; Stroud 2010: 569-570).

A 2012 Pew investigation has determined that the partisan gap between Democrats and Republicans nearly doubled between 1987 and early 2012 (from 10 to 18 percentage points). It should be noted that this gap has grown exponentially between 2004 and 2012 (14 percentage points to 18 percentage points), a time period coinciding with the rapid growth of social media channels (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2012). It is worth noting that this partisan gap can vary greatly based on political issues. This study indicated that Democrats and Republicans were more divided on themes such as the social safety net (41 percent in 2012, up from 23 percent in 1987), the environment (39 percent in 2012, up from 5 percent in 1987), or immigration (24 percent in 2012, up from 4 percent in 1987).

While little to no extensive research has been conducted on the hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking in the Web 2.0 mediascape in recent years, some social scientists have developed conceptual models over the last decade detailing the fragmentation of online

audiences (e.g. Napoli 2010; Garrett, Bimber et al. 2012). For instance, Webster and Ksiazek (2012: 42, 45) have found that there are three main axes of fragmentation:

- ✓ “media-centric fragmentation” (impact of media outlets or products on the fragmentation process);
- ✓ “user-centric fragmentation,” also known as micro-level fragmentation (impact of audience members’ personal preferences and media habits on the fragmentation process);
- ✓ “audience-centric fragmentation,” also known as macro-level fragmentation (impact of audience members’ selection on the fragmentation process).

This doctoral dissertation argues that an important number of factors – or *fracture points* – have guided, and still are guiding, the reconfiguration of Web-based and, by extension, offline politicking in the United States. They are expected to rapidly evolve in the next decade and new ones are likely to emerge with the projected expansion and complexification of the digital political mediascape and the evolution of the previously discussed postmodern trends.

Four main factors of hyper-fragmentation will be discussed in this dissertation:

- ✓ hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking based on political preferences;
- ✓ hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking based on issue preferences;
- ✓ hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking based on credibility perception;
- ✓ hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking along individuals’ socio-demographic characteristics.

### **3.2.1 Hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking based on political preferences**

The presence in the U.S. Web 2.0 mediascape of an increasing number of political players with wide-ranging ideological dispositions, coupled with the growing availability of mixed-media digital material focusing on a very large number of political matters, has directly impacted Internet users’ content consumption and social interaction decisions. Based on the

“anticipated agreement” hypothesis (Iyengar, Hahn et al. 2008: 186; Bennett and Iyengar 2008), they tend to restrict their political media diet to content generally comforting, complementing or strengthening their political dispositions and objectives. Conversely, they generally avoid digital material challenging them (“selective exposure”) (Hart, Albarracin et al. 2009: 583; Garrett 2009: 266; Iyengar and Hahn 2009).<sup>10</sup> As a result, they are repeatedly exposed to homogenous or attitude-consistent facts and opinions that can reinforce a potentially distorted and, by extension, unrepresentative perception of the political reality (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2011: 426; Taber, Cann et al. 2009: 153). Moreover, they are more likely to be involved in partisan socio-political communities that are contributing to the balkanization as well as polarization of the political environment (Kim 2009: 260; Feezell, Conroy et al. 2009: 6; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009: 42). As noted by Veenstra, Sayre et al. (2008a), networks with high levels of political homophily tend to “offer encouragement, reinforce partisan ideas, and serve as safe enclaves for expression of opinions that might not otherwise be heard”.<sup>11</sup> Political polarization is more likely to occur in social and informational contexts with high levels of “deindividuation influences” (Lee 2007: 399). Computer-mediated communication technologies, particularly in anonymous contexts, tend to encourage Web users to hide or suppress their personality-defining characteristics in order to conform to the pressures of dominant situational norms (Lee 2007: 399).

From a broader perspective, “motivated reasoning,” also known as “motivated processing” (Taber, Cann et al. 2009: 137) or “partisan processing” (Allen, Stevens et al. 2009), is characterized by “the discounting of information that challenges prior attitudes coupled with the uncritical acceptance of attitude-consistent information” (Kim, Taber et al. 2010). There are two main elements that can encourage individuals to engage in motivated reasoning:

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<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon is also known as “partisan selectivity” (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009: 40; Garrett 2009: 265).

<sup>11</sup> Individuals with specific preferences tend to hold politically-diverging opinions “to a higher standard” (Taber, Cann et al. 2009: 153).

- ✓ the “defense motivation,” which can be defined as “the desire to defend one’s existing attitudes, beliefs and behaviors”;
- ✓ the “accuracy motivation,” which can be described as individuals’ aspiration to independently “form accurate appraisals of stimuli” (Hart, Albarracin et al. 2009: 557).

According to the “defensive processing” thesis, Web users confronted with political information questioning or challenging their preferences or beliefs are also likely to protect themselves through different defensive mechanisms such as interpreting it in a way comforting to their dispositions, “counter-arguing, bolstering existing affect by retrieving congruent memories of the object, and denigrating the quality or source of the information” (Allen, Stevens et al. 2009).

However, it should be noted that Internet users “do not systematically avoid contrary information when they encounter it inadvertently” (Neuman, Bimber et al. 2011). In fact, some factors can motivate them to expose themselves to political dissonance such as their desire to directly confront their bias. “Biased-assimilation” theorists suggest that they are more likely to seek out and process political facts or opinions challenging their views and beliefs or to interact with individuals who have different ideological dispositions. Still, this can have polarizing effects on the members of the online audience, especially among those with strong opinions or extreme political views (Garrett 2009: 269; Wojcieszak 2010: 640-641).

The progressive polarization of political attitudes and beliefs has ultimately rendered members of the online public less flexible and tolerant (Utz 2009: 224; Lawrence, Sides et al. 2010). For instance, people who have specific political dispositions are more likely to “develop even more favorite attitudes, whereas opponents develop even more negative attitudes” (Utz 2009: 224). Additionally, the rise of homogenous socio-political clusters with

high levels of internal agreement has positively contributed to their members' involvement in ideologically specific political mobilization initiatives (Utz 2009; Lawrence, Sides et al. 2010). More broadly, this overall dynamic has ultimately emboldened the emerging state of "pluralistic ignorance." It is characterized by citizens' misconception "of the distribution of public opinion" which is partly rooted in the fragmented nature of the public conversation and deliberation arena (Banning and Sweetser 2007: 454; Veenstra, Sayre et al. 2008a, 2008b; Campbell and Kwak 2010).

This hyper-fragmentation process has detrimental effects on citizens' political cohesion as it progressively erodes their overall "sense of community and legitimacy," which is considered to be among the foundations of any democratic government (Tewksbury 2008: 3; Sunstein 2007). The lack of cross-ideological political deliberation is preventing Internet users from participating in a diversified and meaningful politicking arena where they can involuntarily encounter "both a range of common experiences and unanticipated, unchosen exposures to diverse topics and ideas" (Utz 2009: 223). As noted by Feldman and Price (2008: 64), political disagreement can be beneficial to netizens because it fosters "the kind of careful reflection needed to arrive at a reasoned opinion." Moreover, it "improve[s] opinion quality, encourage[s] social tolerance, and foster[s] participation" (Shah, McLeod et al. 2009: 104). However, other studies have shown that political disagreement can have negative effects on political participation levels among the citizenry (e.g. Mutz 2002; Campbell and Kwak 2010).

The meteoric growth of social networking services may have significantly increased citizens' involuntary exposure to challenging digital political material, thus potentially having depolarizing effects on the public conversation. For instance, leisure-oriented communication and community-building tools, which are extremely popular within some groups of Internet users, favour disagreeable political information exchanges and challenging social interactions

due to the heterogeneous nature of their content and user population (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009: 49). However, other investigations have shown that Web 2.0 media channels have heightened levels of political partisanship and polarization among American Internet users. After conducting an analysis of the posts on Facebook groups focusing on John McCain and Barack Obama during the 2008 U.S. election cycle, Woolley, Limperos et al. (2010: 648) have concluded that “although social media do indeed provide individuals a platform to express their beliefs, these expressions are often partisan and polarizing.” Conover, Ratkiewicz et al. (2011) have also found that the “retweet network” of the conversation focusing on the 2010 congressional midterm elections on Twitter between September 14, 2010 and November 1, 2010 showed high levels of political polarization.

### **3.2.2 Hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking based on issue preferences**

The increasingly diversified nature of the digital political mediascape, which features a steadily rising number of specialized media channels dedicated to narrow political matters (e.g. issues, events, etc.), also directly contributes to the hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking. Based on the “issue publics” theory, Internet users are more likely to access information resources or engage in social interactions on topics they find interesting or useful (Iyengar, Hahn et al. 2008; Farrell, Lawrence et al. 2008). Web users’ preferences for certain issues can ultimately have framing effects on their acquisition of political knowledge as well as on opinion formation and decision processes. For example, “issue ownership” scholars argue that specific issues, which are often associated with particular political organizations or candidates’ agendas or values, can play an instrumental role in influencing citizens’ understanding of the political world (Druckman, Hennessy et al. 2010; Hillygus and Monson 2007: 22; Walgrave, Lefevere et al. 2009). According to Kim (2008), the “issue public theory” rests on three main assumptions:

- ✓ individuals have limited resources and interest, preventing them from being fully aware and educated on all political issues;
- ✓ the overall cost of being fully informed is very high (e.g. time, resources, etc.), so audience members are obligated to make strategic choices when selecting information; specifically, they need to focus on a small number of issues that are important to them instead of exploiting the Web's quasi-limitless media offerings;
- ✓ audience members are only equipped cognitively to process and ultimately make decisions on matters that are meaningful to them.

It should be noted that, at times, Web users' issue likings can supersede their ideological preferences, thus showing that partisan considerations are not always the primary driving force behind their decision-making (Baum and Groeling 2008; Kim 2008). This process is also known as "micro-appealing" (Hart and Lind 2010: 357).

The hyper-fragmentation of e-politics based on issue preferences in the Web 2.0 mediascape has been indirectly examined in many studies throughout the last few years. Wilson (2011) has studied how hashtags have had structuring effects on the Twitter-based political conversation in Australia in recent years. Meanwhile, Bruns and Burgess (2011) have explored how hashtags have played an important role in the formation of "ad hoc publics" or "topical communities" in the Twittersverse during the 2010 federal Australian elections. The present study will further contribute to the understanding of the impact of Twitter on the structure of the online and, to some extent, real-world political communication, mobilization and organizing dynamic.

### **3.2.3 Hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking based on credibility perception**

The increasingly diversified and competitive nature of the digital political mediascape has also fueled the restructuring of the audience by favouring the emergence of a credibility divide between information resources. Web users are more likely to rely on media platforms

maintained by individuals or organizations they perceive trustworthy for political news items, opinions, or mobilization purposes than any other communication channels (Kim and Johnson 2009: 283). According to some social scientists (e.g. Zhu and He 2002), the multidimensional characteristics of an information resource such as its affiliation, “competence, expertise, [...] likeable personality,” as well as the “characteristics of media behaviors” and discourse practices such as objectivity, pertinence, verifiability, and open partisanship constitute two determinant considerations in audience members’ credibility determination process.

However, the credibility of digital material is increasingly hard to evaluate due to different factors such as the rise of user-generated online publication channels which can be used to circulate anonymous, unverified, or uncorroborated facts and opinions designed to influence public opinion formation processes in frequently specific and partisan ways (e.g. Ruggiero and Winch 2004). In sum, “there are no universal standards for posting information online, and digital information may be easily altered, plagiarized, misrepresented [...] under false pretences” (Metzger 2007: 2079).

There has been an important credibility shift in the online political mediascape since 2001. In fact, sizable credibility discrepancies between information resources on the Internet have also emerged during the last fifteen years. This period has been marked by the rise of weblogs and other social media channels that have gradually become credible and influential sources of political news and analysis while offline news media organizations have lost some of their credibility. Several research projects have demonstrated that offline news media organizations are now considered by the general public as significantly less trustworthy than Web-based media channels where facts, arguments and analyses that are “either ignore[d] or underplay[ed]” in mainstream media’s political coverage are frequently shared (Johnson and Kaye 2004: 624; Jones 2004: 65; Zhang, Johnson et al. 2010; Delli Carpini 2000). A 2009 survey determined that 63 percent of the U.S. population perceives conventional media’s

news stories as inaccurate while only 29 percent think they “get the facts straight,” down from 55 percent in 1985 (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2009).

Other studies have consistently indicated that blogs were considered more credible than any other Web-based information resources (e.g. Sweetser and Kaid 2008; Johnson and Kaye 2009). For instance, a survey of 1366 respondents determined that blogs were ranked as “the most credible source followed by issue-oriented sites” (Johnson and Kaye 2009). Interestingly, celebrity bloggers are considered by young Web users as equally or more credible than influential political figures and “independent groups” on political issues (Sweetser and Kaid, 2008: 73). Baumgartner and Morris (2010: 28) believe the consumption of soft news items comprising low levels of political content can serve as a gateway to higher levels of involvement for individuals who are disengaged politically. The rising popularity of Web 2.0 communication platforms is likely to modify citizens’ credibility perception of the digital political mediascape in the coming years. In fact, more in-depth scientific research is required to better understand the source of the credibility of Internet-based communication platforms.

#### **3.2.4 Hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking along individuals’ socio-demographic characteristics**

Several socio-demographic characteristics such as age, race, gender, income, profession, sexual orientation, and education can affect Internet users’ content consumption and social interaction preferences. For example, Tewksbury (2008: 6) argues that age “may be positively associated with interest specialization” while education is a good predictor of Web users’ digital skills, which can in turn can be seen as predictors of their capacity to efficiently use online communication tools to seek and evaluate political information and opinion (Van Dijk and Hacker 2003, 315; Quintelier and Vissers 2008: 421). Young and educated individuals tend to be part of the “[n]et-[n]ewsters” segment of the online audience which is characterized by its news-savviness and its high levels of multidimensional Internet activity (Baumgartner

and Morris 2010). It is important to note that many other socio-demographic characteristics can influence Web users' technical and cognitive capability and aggressiveness in pursuing online social interactions in the online political mediascape (Bimber 2000a).

### **3.2.5 Other *fracture points* of e-politicking**

While only four *fracture points* were discussed in this dissertation, there are several other factors that can influence the hyper-fragmentation of online cyberpoliticking:

- ✓ preferences for specific media features;
- ✓ preferences for specific information delivery practices;
- ✓ preferences for specific media experience;
- ✓ preferences for specific content genres.

Some of these *fracture points* will be indirectly addressed in the next sections of the dissertation, which will be devoted to the contextualization of the emergence of the Tea Party movement in the United States.

## **4 Chapter: The Tea Party Movement (TPM)**

It will be demonstrated in this chapter that the Tea Party movement, which emerged as an influential player in the U.S. political landscape in early 2009 (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 25; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 307-308), constitutes a sharp departure from existing political movements in general and from the previously-dominant grassroots-intensive politicking model in particular. Indeed, political movements that impacted the U.S. political landscape during the previous decades, including those which marked election cycles between 2004 and 2008 and had a strong Internet component, were usually inspired in a top-down fashion by a political figure or a small number of causes or themes. They were also generally confined to a short period of time linked to the formal political process, namely an election cycle.

While little to no comprehensive research has been conducted on the Tea Party movement since its emergence, this dissertation will argue that it differs in many ways from previous grassroots political movements, due in part to its distinct organizational structure and its manifestation in the online and, to some extent, political worlds. In fact, it will be shown that it has been fueled by two complementary phenomena, collectively known as the *online politicking 3.0* model, which have been extensively discussed in the previous chapter in this dissertation: the grassroots-intensive, uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking.

### **4.1 Contextualization of the rise of the Tea Party Movement**

Looking at the Tea Party movement poses challenges, especially since it continues to evolve. For the purpose of this dissertation, it will be examined from its inception in early 2009 up to mid-March 2011.

Three main factors have played an instrumental role in the meteoric emergence of the Tea Party movement as a major player in the U.S. political landscape since early 2009:

1. the 2008 economic crisis in the United States;
2. declining confidence in mainstream Republican politicians;
3. exacerbation of socio-demographic tensions within the U.S. population.

#### **4.1.1 The 2008 economic crisis in the United States**

The economic downturn that affected in the United States starting in mid-2008 is considered to be one of the main sources of the social and political instability that helped the Tea Party movement gain momentum among some segments of the U.S. public (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 26; Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 16; Rae 2011: 22). A survey conducted in mid-2010 revealed that close to 99 percent of Americans who considered themselves adherents of the Tea Party movement listed the economy as one of the main factors that encouraged them to support some of the ideals of this movement (Courser 2012). While the economic downturn affected all sectors of the U.S. economy (e.g. media, retail, etc.), it was particularly hard on certain fields of activity:

- ✓ the financial industry (Holbrook, Clouse et al. 2012; Swedberg 2010: 71);
- ✓ the auto industry (Fuchs, Schafranek et al. 2010: 195; Lucas and Furdek 2010: 10);
- ✓ the commercial and thrift banking industry (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation 2011).

The precarious state of the U.S. economy during the fall months of 2008 and early 2009 forced the government, under both the leadership of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, to implement a series of measures alleviating some of the short-term effects of the crisis. On September 7, 2008, the Bush administration prevented the collapse of the large investment firms Fannie May and Freddie Mac, which held close to 50 percent of outstanding U.S. mortgages collectively worth more than 5.75 trillion U.S. dollars, by granting them an emergency financial aid package of 200 billion U.S. dollars. Three days later, it authorized the takeover of their business activities by the Federal Housing Finance Agency (Lewis, Kay et

al. 2010: 83; Fuchs, Schafranek et al. 2010: 194; Holbrook, Clouse et al. 2012). It is believed that their failure would have caused a “systemic risk” that could have destabilized both the U.S. economy and the international economy (Guillén 2009: 7).

On September 16, 2008, the insurance firm AIG received a loan of 85 billion U.S. dollars from the U.S. government in exchange for an “80% equity stake in the company” to prevent its bankruptcy. It was increased to more than 123 billion U.S. dollars 21 days later (Hillygus and Henderson 2010: 242; Campbell 2011). On October 3, 2008, the U.S. Congress passed the 700 billion U.S. dollars Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). It aimed to provide short-term relief to struggling financial industry players by, for instance, buying back poor investments (Hillygus and Henderson 2010: 242; Johnson, Thorson et al. 2010: 277). A large number of commercial and thrift banks on the brink of failure were also taken over by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) in September and October 2008 (Campbell 2011; Johnson, Thorson et al. 2010: 277; Guillén 2009: 9).

Apart from the financial services industry, other sectors of the U.S. economy benefited from the assistance of the U.S. government. On December 19, 2008, the Bush administration rescued U.S.-based automakers General Motors (GM) and Chrysler, which were on the verge of bankruptcy, by giving them a bailout package worth 13.4 billion U.S. dollars and 4 billion U.S. dollars, respectively. In return, the U.S. government received a large equity stake in both companies (Fuchs, Schafranek et al. 2010: 195; Lucas and Furdek 2010: 10). The Obama administration later provided General Motors and Chrysler with additional loans (Horton 2010: 248; Lucas and Furdek 2010: 12). According to Klier and Rubenstein (2011), two main reasons motivated this bailout:

- ✓ it provided short-term relief to the national economy by stabilizing two companies that employed a large number of U.S. citizens and that were the main source of revenue for a large network of suppliers, often based in the United States;

- ✓ it had the mid- to long-term goal of bolstering the manufacturing capabilities of American companies (Klier and Rubenstein 2011).

The U.S. government also took many legislative steps to foster economic stabilization and, to a lesser extent, growth during this period. On February 13, 2009, the U.S. Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which was signed into law by President Barack Obama four days later. This economic program worth 787 billion U.S. dollars sought to further contain the effects of the economic downturn and support key sectors of the U.S. economy (Recovery.gov 2011).<sup>12</sup> By mid-2009, the total cost of the initiatives taken by the U.S. government in the wake of the economic downturn was estimated at approximately 2 trillion U.S. dollars (Courser 2011, 2012).

These interventionist policy initiatives by the U.S. government generated some discontent and, to some extent, frustration for some Americans (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 26; Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 16; Jacobson 2011b: 226; Panagopoulos 2010). They were perceived by many citizens as an inappropriate use of public funds mainly benefiting corporate interests, which were considered to be one of the root causes of the downturn. Others believed they contributed to the rapid expansion of the U.S. government's influence in the private sector, partly due to the takeover of many major companies (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 17; Courser 2011).

Specifically, many citizens opposing ARRA referred to this economic stimulus program as “porkulus,” a derisive term coined by conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh on January 28, 2009 (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011; Berg 2011b: 3, 2011c: 11). During the four months following its passage by the U.S. Congress, scores of small and medium-size porkulus rallies were held in major cities across the United States. But more than Limbaugh, Beck and other prominent commentators, it was little-known Keli Carender, a

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<sup>12</sup> It was revised to 840 billion U.S. dollars in 2011 “to be in line with the President's 2012 budget and with scoring changes made by the Congressional Budget Office since the enactment of the Recovery Act” (Recovery.gov 2011).

Seattle-based 29 year-old conservative blogger and activist, who provided momentum at the grassroots level. She organized several anti-Recovery Act rallies in the Seattle area, which received a lot of attention in both the online and offline mediascape (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 16; Berg 2011b: 4, 2011c: 11-12).

Social media platforms were extensively exploited by U.S. citizens to express their disapproval of ARRA. Several A-list conservative political bloggers used their blogs to criticize the structure and implementation of this legislation. Others raised funds to support porkulus activists and to promote anti-stimulus mobilization initiatives during the early months of 2009 (Karpf 2011: 17; Zernike 2010). Some conservative political commentators on offline news media outlets also fueled this outrage by heavily criticizing the U.S. government's reaction to the economic downturn. Many of them thought that the different measures taken by both the Bush and Obama administrations to jumpstart the economy had adverse effects and were, in fact, damaging because they rewarded the essentially bad behavior of individuals and organizations that were the recipients of bailout packages. In a five-minute speech on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, aired live on CNBC on February 19, 2009, financial analyst Rick Santelli denounced the U.S. government's decision to pass legislation designed to contain the effects of the economic crisis (Courser 2011, 2012; Deckman 2011; Burghart and Zeskind 2010).

Several other factors are responsible for the U.S. public's discontent with government reaction to the economic downturn. For instance, many Americans had a misinformed and, to some extent, distorted understanding of the measures taken in response to the economic downturn, due in part to their extreme complexity and the partisan discourse of formal and informal political actors in the wake of the 2008 U.S. presidential election cycle (e.g. Jacobson 2011b: 226; Ashbee 2011: 159). For instance, a CBS News/New York Times survey in September 2010 revealed that although ARRA lowered the federal tax rate for

approximately 94 percent of U.S. taxpayers in the months immediately following its adoption by the U.S. Congress, 33.3 percent of respondents believed it augmented the rate whereas 58.7 percent thought that it remained mostly unchanged. Only 8 percent of respondents were aware that the stimulus bill had, in fact, lowered the federal tax rate (Jacobson 2011b: 226; CBS News/New York Times 2010).

There was also widespread belief among some segments of the U.S. public that the policies implemented by the U.S. government failed to contain the economic crisis or contributed to its exacerbation. An ABC News/Washington Post poll in October 2010 revealed that 68 percent of the American public was convinced that ARRA did not limit the effects of the crisis (Campbell 2010; Polling Report 2010). To some extent, it can be argued that the public's deep misunderstanding of the effects of the economic measures taken by the government to counter the economic downturn contributed to the emergence of the Tea Party movement.

#### **4.1.2 Declining confidence in mainstream Republican politicians**

The growing discontent of some members of the conservative coalition (fiscal conservative, libertarian, Christian right and independent voters) with the personal and professional conduct of some Republican elected officials also played an instrumental role in the rise of the Tea Party movement. This phenomenon has manifested itself several times in the U.S. political landscape during the last twelve years, but not as intensely as with the Tea Party movement in 2009 (Courser 2011, 2012; Berg 2011c: 1). For example, many voters who typically backed the Republican Party decided to support the Reform Party during the 1996 U.S. presidential contest. On Election Day, its presidential candidate, Ross Perot, was the recipient of 8.4 percent of the vote (8,085,402 votes). Meanwhile, 49.2 percent opted for Democrat Bill Clinton (47,402,357 votes) and 40.7 percent for Republican Robert Dole (39,198,755 votes) (Courser 2011, 2012; Berg 2011a: 7; Kirby and Boaz 2010: 7-8). Some of the issues that were

prominent in Perot's campaign platform are relatively similar to those driving some factions within the Tea Party movement such as fiscal discipline, distrust of political institutions, rejection of the two-party system, and general political "outsiderism" (Janack 2006: 198; Courser 2011, 2012).

Three main factors have fueled the crisis of confidence in Republican politicians, especially over the last decade. First, fiscal conservative and libertarian voters have been increasingly doubtful of Republican politicians' commitment to work towards the adoption and implementation of fiscally responsible policies and to counter the objectives of more progressive elected officials. They have also been unsure about Republicans' dedication to promoting free-market principles, cutting down the U.S. debt and reducing the federal government's size (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 26; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 303; Boykoff and Laschever 2011). Moreover, they have been displeased by many policy proposals of the Bush administration that were passed by the U.S. Congress between 2001 and 2008 that did not respect conservative principles such as the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 or the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act in 2003 (Peele and Aberbach 2011: 3-4; Herbert 2011).

Members of the conservative coalition were irritated by several interventionist economic measures introduced during the fall months of 2008 by the Bush administration to counter the effects of the economic crisis. For instance, they were opposed to the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), which provided close to 700 billion U.S. dollars in financial assistance to banks and other major players in the financial industry that were on the verge of bankruptcy. They were also unhappy about the bailout packages that were offered to major companies in the auto and insurance industries (Karpowitz and Monson 2011: 306; Rae 2011: 15). In fact, a large portion of the U.S. electorate held the Republican Party partly responsible

for the economic downturn, mainly because of the legislative conduct of some of its members during the years preceding the crisis (Jacobson 2011b: 221; Rae 2011: 22; Ekin 2011: 10).

A large number of citizens with conservative and libertarian political views also disagreed with some foreign policy decisions taken by George W. Bush. They were critical of his management of military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They argued that they served nation-building purposes that were incompatible with conservative foreign policy principles, had straining effects on the U.S. military due to their length and resource-intensive nature, and contributed to the rise of the U.S. debt. They also disapproved the funding by the U.S. government of foreign military and development assistance programs (Peele and Aberbach 2011; Rae 2011).

Second, this crisis of confidence was heightened by the personal and professional misconduct, which received a lot of attention from the mainstream press, of several prominent Republican politicians such as U.S. congressional representatives Tom Delay of Texas, John Doolittle of California and Bob Ney of Ohio as well as U.S. Senator Conrad Burns (Campbell 2010; Cook Jr. 2010: 186). It is worth noting that the Republican Party's performance during the 2006 midterm election was negatively affected by several of its members' misbehaviour. It ultimately lost several congressional seats and, more important, control of the House (Baum and Groeling 2008; Cook Jr. 2010: 183).

Third, the inability of Republican senators and congressmen to block passage by the U.S. Congress of several progressive policy proposals, introduced by the Democratic Party after the election of Barack Obama, also generated widespread discontent among conservative and libertarian voters (Williamson, Skocpol *et al.* 2011: 25; Jacobson 2011b: 227, 2011c: 48). Specifically, they were critical of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act because it tightened the regulatory framework of the U.S. financial industry in the wake of the economic crisis, thus undermining free-market principles (Williamson,

Skocpol et al. 2011: 25; Jacobson 2011b: 227). The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into law on March 23, 2010 by Barack Obama, was also poorly received by conservative and libertarian voters. They believed that some of its dispositions, which lacked “serious cost controls,” would contribute to the mid- to long-term increase of the U.S. debt (Quirk 2011). They also argued that other facets of this legislation such as augmenting taxes on wealthier Americans or imposing new regulatory guidelines on health care industry players would have negative effects on the U.S. economy (Jacobs 2010: 619; Skocpol 2010: 1288-1289; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 306). A CBS News/New York Times poll in April 2010 revealed that 16 percent of respondents who backed the Tea Party movement cited health care reform as the main source of their dissatisfaction with the federal government (CBS News/New York Times 2010).

The emergence of the Tea Party movement, which was deeply rooted in growing frustration with the personal and professional conduct of Republican elected officials, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, coincided with the resurgence of extremely conservative ideological dispositions among some segments of the U.S. public (Abramowitz 2011; Langman 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). As noted by Abramowitz (2011: 13), adherence to a conservative political mindset was a “strong predictor of support for the Tea Party movement” between 2009 and 2010. However, others (e.g. Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011; Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74) believe that other variables caused individuals to adhere to Tea Party ideals such as anxieties about potential conspiracies and “fictitious dangers.” In other words, they argue that “pseudo-conservatism,” which can be defined as a paranoid and incoherent vision of the political reality that is mostly informed by conservative values, constitutes one of the primary drivers of the Tea Party movement (Courser 2012).

### **4.1.3 Exacerbation of socio-demographic tensions among the U.S. population**

Increasing levels of concern among many citizens regarding the demographic diversification of the U.S. population is also one of the main drivers behind the rapid popularization of the Tea Party. In the words of Williamson, Skocpol et al. (2011: 26), this concern emerged in a “context of anxieties about racial, ethnic, and generational changes in American society.”

Three main factors are responsible for heightening these feelings in the United States, especially during the last decade:

- ✓ the rapid socio-demographic diversification of the population (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 34);
- ✓ the historic nature of the 2008 presidential election cycle due to the diverse socio-demographic background of presidential contenders (Payne 2010: 159; Trent, Short-Thompson et al. 2010: 164);
- ✓ the precarious state of the U.S. economy (Holbrook, Clouse et al. 2012; Burghart and Zeskind, 2010: 73).

First, the progressive socio-demographic transformation of the U.S. population over the last decade has caused many people to adhere to the Tea Party movement’s ideals and objectives. Specifically, this has been marked by the rapid growth of ethnic, cultural and religious groups, which has sparked ontological uncertainties among some members of the U.S. public (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011). In the words of Disch (2011: 130), the Tea Party represents “a ‘white citizenship’ movement: collective political action in defense of material benefits that (while seeming neutral) have perpetuated race difference.” For instance, the size of several ethnic minorities in the United States has rapidly grown over the last ten years. A Pew Hispanic Center survey (2011) revealed that the number of U.S. Hispanics has risen by as much as 43 percent between 2000 and 2010 compared to 30 percent for Asian Americans, 11 percent for African Americans and a mere 1.2 percent for Caucasians, who still

represented 63.7 percent of the U.S. population as of 2010, down from 65 percent in 2008 and 85 percent in 1960. While a large proportion of Hispanics resided in Texas and California (46.5 percent in 2010, down from 50 percent in 2000), the growth of this ethnic group between 2000 and 2010 has been concentrated in southern states such as South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and North Carolina (Passel, Cohn et al. 2011; Tolbert 2010: 860). From a broader perspective, “[r]acial and ethnic minorities accounted for 91.7 percent of the nation’s growth over the decade” whereas non-Hispanic Caucasians “accounted for the remaining 8.3%” (Passel, Cohn et al. 2011). This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors such as high birth rates among minority ethnic groups and high levels of authorized and unauthorized immigration (e.g. Passel and Cohn 2010; U.S. Census Bureau 2012). It has been suggested, based on growth rate levels of ethnic minorities, that Caucasians will no longer be in majority in the United States by the year 2050 (Clayton 2010: 68; Tolbert 2010: 860).

There were also structural changes in the U.S. religious landscape during the same time period. An overwhelming majority of the American population (79.5 percent) adhered to religious faiths from the Christian tradition as of late December 2011, up from 78.4 percent in 2007 but down from 80 percent in 2003. (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007, 2010, 2011). Immigration is considered a key factor that contributed to the diversification of the U.S. religious landscape during the last decade (Skirbekk, Kaufmann et al. 2010: 293; Park 2008: 542). The modernization and personalization of religious traditions, which has affected their level of public appeal, has also played an important role in this process. The former can be defined as the way in which the belief system of a religion evolves in order to be more compatible with dominant social norms, which are often dictated by variables such as “modern science and secular rationality” (Conkle 2011: 1769). The latter refers to the development by people who adhere to a religion tradition of “their own understandings of [it]

[...], understandings that do not [necessarily] conform to the conventional beliefs and practices of any particular religious body or any particular religious faith” (Conkle 2011: 1769-1770). Based on Skirbekk, Kaufmann et al.’s (2010) statistical projections, Christianity is expected to remain the dominant religious tradition in the United States until at least 2043, but most likely “with a different ethnoreligious” make-up.

The negative media coverage of Islam and its adherents in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the U.S.-led military operations in several Middle Eastern nations have contributed to exacerbate religious tensions in the United States since 2001. Negative stereotypes and distorted views about Muslims have been widely circulated by mainstream and alternative news media organizations, thus sparking “fear[s] of the outsider other” among some U.S. citizens (Powell 2011: 108). As noted by Ibrahim (2010: 122), U.S. television news networks have frequently portrayed Muslims as “fanatic, irrational, America-hating and violent oppressors of women.” Conversely, they have glorified Christians and people with other religious affiliations (Powell 2011: 108), which has directly shaped the public’s understanding and perception of Islam. A 2010 survey showed that slightly more than half of the American population (53 percent) had an unfavourable opinion of Islam and 43 percent felt some levels of prejudice toward adherents of this religion. Specifically, 9 percent of them reported having “a great deal of prejudice” against Muslims while 20 percent said they had “some prejudice” and 14 percent felt “a little prejudice.” At the same time, only 18 percent of the U.S. public felt some prejudice towards Christians, 15 percent towards Jews, and 14 percent towards Buddhists (Gallup Center for Muslim Studies 2010).

This socio-demographic transformation of the U.S. population contributed to the deepening of the divide between two groups of citizens:

- ✓ those who are part of the “New America” who are generally “younger, [more educated,] more urban and ethnically diverse, more tolerant of differences”;

- ✓ those who are part of the “Old America” who typically live in small-scale and rural communities “where social [, ethnic, religious] and cultural norms [are] more homogeneous and less malleable” (Dionne Jr. and Galston 2010: 3).

Second, the rise of the Tea Party was fueled by the transformational nature of the 2008 U.S. presidential contest, which distinguished itself from previous election cycles due to the diversity of the socio-demographic background of many major-party presidential hopefuls. Specifically, while the candidates’ “age, religion, race, and gender have, from time to time, played positive or negative roles in earlier election cycles (mostly negative) [...] never before have all been wedded in one election” and played such a central role in shaping the broader campaign discourse (Trent, Short-Thompson et al. 2010: 164). Several prominent Democratic presidential contenders were part of minority ethnic groups that were rapidly growing and, by extension, having greater electoral influence. Barack Obama was the first African American candidate who “ran competitively” for the U.S. presidential office (Barreto and Segura 2009). He ultimately secured the Democratic presidential nomination after a long battle with Hillary Clinton, the first major-party female candidate who ran competitively for a presidential nomination.

The religious background of some presidential candidates also constituted an important component of the discourse during the 2008 election cycle. In the case of Barack Obama, a sizable portion of the U.S. population was under the impression that he was Muslim despite his “self-professed Christian affiliation” (Hollander 2010: 55). Several elements contributed to fuel this inaccurate belief about Obama’s religious background such as his Muslim-sounding middle name (Hussein), his father and stepfather’s ties to Islam, the four years he spent in Indonesia – a country with a large Muslim population – during his childhood, and the online rumors on his religious background (Kalkan, Layman et al. 2009; Kellner 2009: 722). As noted previously, there were high levels of distrust and, to some

extent, hostility towards Islam among the American population because it was “widely perceived as posing cultural, political, and theological threats to the ‘status quo’” (Pening 2009: 278). These dispositions were frequently exploited by political players opposed to Obama’s candidacy to “de-Americanize” him, thus making him less appealing to the electorate (Kalkan, Layman et al. 2009: 2).

The state of the U.S. economy, which reached “historically negative levels” during the months immediately preceding and following the mainstream rise of the Tea Party movement (Holbrook, Clouse et al. 2012), also exacerbated social, cultural and ethnic tensions among the U.S. public (Langman 2012; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 14-15; Berg 2011b: 20). A large portion of the American public reacted to the economic downturn in an ethno-political fashion by assigning the blame to members of minority ethnic and religious groups, who they thought were illegitimately profiting from the United States’ resources. They exhibited increasing levels of antipathy towards different segments of the population who benefited from large bailout packages.

- ✓ political elites;
- ✓ poor or “undeserving” people requiring governmental assistance;
- ✓ workers represented by labour unions;
- ✓ members of ethnic minorities;
- ✓ members of minority religious groups;
- ✓ illegal immigrants mainly from Mexico and South American countries

(Langman 2012; Berg 2011b: 20; Squires 2008: 3; Boehme 2011: 541-542).

Some segments of the general public had high levels of resentment towards Mexican and South American nationals staying illegally in the United States. This perception was influenced by the “Latino threat narrative” (LTN) (Stewart, Pitts et al. 2011: 9; Boehme 2011: 550-551), which is fueled by several assumptions:

- ✓ Latinos represent a “reproductive threat” that has the potential to redefine the demographic structure of the U.S. population;
- ✓ Latinos are “unable or unwilling to learn English”;
- ✓ Latinos have a cultural background that is static, thus unlikely to evolve in order to adapt to the American cultural context;
- ✓ Latinos, particularly those from Mexico, “are part of a conspiracy to reconquer the southwestern United States and return the land to Mexico’s control” (Stephen 2009: 213).

Many Americans were convinced that ethnic minorities played a central role in the collapse of some sectors of the U.S. economy. For example, they believed that the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act, which required financial institutions to provide low-cost loans, known as subprime mortgages, to members of minority social groups and low-income citizens in order to increase their home ownership levels, was one of the main causes of the U.S. economic downturn (Squires 2008: 3; Littrell and Brooks 2010: 422; Berg 2011b: 21, 2011c: 9). Others were under the impression that these loans, which had a narrow profit margin and one of the highest default rates in 2008, represented a financial burden for U.S. banks and precipitated the demise of some of them at the beginning of the economic downturn in mid-2008 (Squires 2008: 3).

#### **4.2 The emergence of the Tea Party movement**

Some scholars argue that several factors played key roles in energizing “ordinary” members of the U.S. public and influencing them to be actively involved in what would rapidly become the Tea Party movement. Specifically, some believe that comments made by CNBC correspondent and former hedge fund manager Rick Santelli to derivative traders that were broadcast live on February 19, 2009 were instrumental in mobilizing people who were frustrated with the state of the U.S. economy. He severely criticized some actions taken by the

U.S. government in response to the economic downturn in 2008. For example, he denounced the creation of the Homeowners' Affordability and Stability Plan, which provided financial assistance to homeowners struggling to meet their mortgage payments. He ultimately called for the organization of Tea Party-style demonstrations in Chicago in July 2009 (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74; Courser 2012). His criticisms were well received by a large portion of the American public because they echoed their growing frustration with the state of the U.S. economy and the federal government, as indicated in the previous sub-section of this dissertation.

Other social scientists believe that the "porkulus" rallies organized by Seattle-based conservative political activist and blogger Keli Carender, also known as "Liberty Belle", constituted the first real-world manifestation of the Tea Party movement. Her 2009 President's Day "Porkulus" demonstration on February 16, 2009, which is considered one of the key events that led to the rise of the Tea Party movement, attracted approximately 120 participants compared to 300 for another event seven days later and 600 for a "Tax Day" event on April 15, 2009 (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 15-16; Karpf 2011: 7; Disch 2011). It should be noted that while the real-world presence of the Tea Party movement was extensively covered by the mainstream press (Boykoff and Laschever 2011; Weaver and Scacco 2013), Web 1.0 and, more important, Web 2.0 media channels helped a large number of ordinary U.S. citizens who were supportive of Tea Party ideals and objectives to be politically active (Morone 2013; Mascaro, Novak et al. 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

The Tea Party movement frequently manifested itself through real-world events of varying size during the following months. The first series of events linked to the Tea Party movement were held on February 27, 2009 in cities across the United States and drew crowds ranging from dozens to hundreds of participants (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 26, 37; Courser 2011, 2012). The size and scope of Tea Party demonstrations rapidly expanded over

the following weeks. Over 750 Tea Party rallies, which mobilized approximately 300,000 people, were held on April 15, 2009 (“Tax Day” protests) (Courser 2011; Rae 2011: 12; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 39). According to Barreto, Cooper et al. (2011: 3), they “[...] marked the real explosion of the movement onto the national political scene.” Several prominent political figures helped generate excitement among the U.S. public during the weeks leading up to Tax Day protests. For instance, former Republican House speaker Newt Gingrich appeared on Fox News during primetime viewing hours on March 5, 2009 and asked Americans to take part in these rallies to show their opposition to the Obama administration and its handling of the economy (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 130).

The Tea Party movement intensified its activities throughout the summer months of 2009, thus further solidifying its presence in the U.S. political landscape. On July 4, 2009, many Tea Party members took part in Independence Day events across the United States (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 62; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 29). During the month of August 2009, Tea Party activists voiced their concerns and, to some extent, anger about some provisions of health care reform in town hall meetings organized by members of the U.S. Congress in their electoral districts all over the United States (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 37; Disch 2011: 13). While some protesters acted independently, others were helped by FreedomWorks and other conservative political groups that provided them with logistical and financial support as well as training on how to disrupt town hall meetings (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 20; Hay 2011: 663; Disch 2011: 127).

On September 12, 2009, more than 70,000 protesters attended the first national Tea Party event on the National Mall in Washington D.C., also known as the “Taxpayer March on Washington,” to denounce the economic policies of the Obama administration and to promote core conservative values (Courser 2011, 2012; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 37; Berg 2011a: 6, 2011b: 5). This event was organized by interest groups such as FreedomWorks,

political action committees like Our Country Deserves Better PAC, and Web-based activist networks like ResistNet. A plethora of local, regional and national Tea Party organizations, formed in the wake of the first Tea Party rallies in February 2009, also encouraged their members to be involved in this event (Williamson, Skocpol *et al.* 2011: 30, 37; Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 21; Langman 2012). Between February 4 and February 6, 2010, the Tea Party held its first national convention at the Gaylord Opryland hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. While it was only attended by 600 people, it was extensively covered by the mainstream press for several reasons such as the presence of high-profile speakers like Sarah Palin and former Republican representative Tom Tancredo (Berg 2011b: 5; Dimaggio and Street 2010).

The Internet has played an important role in different facets of the Tea Party movement since February 2009. A Pew poll conducted in November 2010 among 2,257 American adults showed that people strongly supporting the Tea Party movement “were especially likely to use the internet to learn about or follow a race outside of their local area” during the 2010 midterm election cycle. Also, 39 percent of Tea Party members who considered themselves frequent Internet users believed that political information they found online influenced their decision on Election Day in 2010 (Smith 2011b: 4). It should be noted that males, Caucasians, and people with strong views either for or against the Tea Party movement were more likely to do so than any other segments of the U.S. online public (Smith 2011b: 4).

Many national Tea Party organizations launched websites and other Web 1.0 digital communication infrastructures that served as unidirectional information dispersion hubs. They generally comprised mixed-media content regarding their positions on different policy issues, their objectives, their internal organizational structure, and news about their activities. They also featured limited interactive tools that enabled Web users to be politically active by, for instance, donating money, connecting with like-minded peers, joining their email distribution

lists, or signing petitions (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 114; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 28).

Second, individuals and, to a lesser extent, political organizations adhering to Tea Party ideals heavily used social media tools to attain a wide range of political communication, mobilization, and organizing objectives. As previously discussed in this dissertation, the structural and functional properties of these media platforms provided some flexibility with which to engage in wide-ranging formal and lifestyle-oriented forms of political action. In Bennett's words (2012: 28), they have fostered the "growth of dense and often intersecting social networks through which individuals join with others to share ideas, music, games, code, peer product ratings, and political protests."

Much like Howard Dean supporters in 2004, many adherents to the Tea Party movement turned to Meetup.com for the planning and coordination of events such as town hall-style meetings and demonstrations (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 28; Hay 2011: 663-664). As of July 2010, there were 16 Tea Party Meetup groups with at least 500 members, 250 groups with more than 100 members, and several hundred smaller groups (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011). More recently, a Washington Post study revealed that there were approximately 650 active Tea Party groups on Meetup.com in October 2010. It also found that 20 Meetup events associated with the Tea Party movement (e.g. fundraisers, barbecues, bake sales, discussion groups, etc.) were held on a typical day across the United States in 2010 (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 28). Interestingly, the geographical distribution of Tea Party Meetup events in 2010 indicated that supporters of this movement were generally concentrated in specific geographical areas. For instance, 23 events were held in the second congressional district of Arkansas in October 2010 while none were planned in the first, third and fourth congressional districts of that state between July and October 2010 (Dowdle and Giammo 2011: 157).

Tea Party members exploited different third-party social networking tools to connect with each other and organize different political mobilization initiatives. They were present on video-sharing sites such as YouTube where they posted slideshows and videos of rallies or speeches from political figures supportive of their cause. They were also active on social networking services such as Facebook or Ning and micro-communication platforms such as Twitter (Mascaro, Novak et al. 2012; Himelboim, McCreery et al. 2013; Bennett 2012; Zernike 2010). As of mid-2011, Tea Party Patriots had the most popular group linked to the Tea Party movement on Facebook with more than 847,000 members (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 218). The Tea Party movement also launched its own social networking platform in the wake of heavy mobilization of its adherents during the 2010 midterm election cycle. In February 2011, it created a “Facebook-esque social media site called the ‘FreedomConnector,’ which [was] used to mobilize more than one hundred thousand Americans during the” 2012 U.S. presidential contest (Obar, Zube et al. 2012: 2)

Many players in the conservative political blogosphere lent their support to the Tea Party movement between its inception in early 2009 and the end of the 2010 midterm elections. They engaged in different political actions:

- ✓ they expressed views and circulating content reinforcing Tea Party positions on certain issues;
  - ✓ they embedded links in their posts pointing to Tea Party resources online;
  - ✓ they encouraged their readers to donate money to fund its activities;
  - ✓ they encouraged their readers to be take part in Tea Party mobilization efforts
- (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 64; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 29, 31, 33).

According to Karpf (2011: 17), many A-list bloggers supportive of the Tea Party movement were eventually hired as political contributors by cable news networks to represent the Tea Party movement in the offline political mediascape. In summary, although the presence of the

Tea Party movement was not extensively covered by the mainstream press, it played an important role in the Tea Party's overall activities.

Several surveys have shown that conventional media channels have remained important information sources for adherents to the Tea Party movement. A CBS News/New York Times poll conducted among Tea Party backers in April 2010 indicated that 24 per cent of them identified the Internet as their primary source of Tea Party news compared to 47 percent for television, 8 percent for newspapers, and 11 percent for other media sources. Specifically, close to two-thirds of respondents (63 percent) mentioned frequently watching the Fox News Channel to remain informed about current events and politics compared to 11 percent for NBC, CBS and ABC, 7 percent for CNN, and a mere 1 percent for MSNBC. Comparatively, 23 percent of the U.S. public who were not Tea Party supporters in April 2010 considered Fox News their main source of political news whereas 26 percent relied on CBS, NBC and ABC, 17 percent on CNN, and 3 percent on MSNBC (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 29; CBS News/New York Times 2010).

As the Tea Party movement expanded its online and offline footprints, it garnered more coverage from offline news media organizations. An analysis of Tea Party coverage by five major television networks (ABC, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC and CBS) and four national newspapers (The Washington Post, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times) conducted between February 19, 2009 and November 30, 2010 identified several key trends. While the monthly number of television reports and newspaper articles on this mobilization phenomenon remained under the 100 mark before January (e.g. 28 in October 2009, 36 in November 2009, and 27 in December 2009), it rapidly grew during the following months, presumably because of the 2010 midterm election. Indeed, 544 news stories on Tea Party-related matters were either aired or published in October 2010, up from 489 in September 2010, 290 in April 2010, 237 in February 2010, and 73 in January 2010 (Boykoff

and Laschever 2011: 347-348). However, it should be noted that the Tea Party movement received a disproportionate amount of news media coverage in comparison to other political matters. For example, the “Tea Party Convention in Nashville, attended by 600 people got massive news coverage, while the US Social Forum in Detroit, attended by an estimated 12,000-14,000, got no mainstream coverage at all outside of Detroit” (Berg 2011c: 19).

### **4.3 The impact of the Tea party movement on the U.S. political landscape**

As the Tea Party movement gained traction with the American public, it exerted more influence in the U.S. political landscape. Based on a review of recent academic literature, it can be argued that this phenomenon manifested itself in three main ways. First, it played a prominent role in the Republican primaries during the special elections in 2009 and 2010 as well as during the 2010 U.S. midterm elections. In 2009, many individuals and groups supportive of Tea Party ideals publicly opposed the decision of Republican Party leaders in the state of New York to nominate Dede Scozzafava, a state legislator with positions considered too progressive, for the 2009 special elections in the 23rd Congressional District. They instead threw their support behind Doug Hoffman, the Conservative Party candidate, whose views and objectives were more in line with their positions. Hoffman was also endorsed by the national political organization Club for Growth, national politicians such as Tim Pawlenty, Sarah Palin and Fred Thompson, and conservative political action committees and citizen-driven groups. Scozzafava ultimately dropped out of the race on October 31, 2009 and endorsed her Democratic opponent Bill Owen, who beat Hoffman by a narrow margin of votes on November 3, 2009 (Berg, 2011b: 5; Rae, 2011: 14; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 38).

The Republican candidate selection process during the 2010 U.S. midterm election cycle was also impacted by the Tea Party movement. Many individuals running for the

Republican nomination affiliated themselves with the Tea Party in order to benefit from its growing influence among the voting public:

- ✓ they publicly declared their support for the ideals and objectives of this mobilization initiative;
- ✓ they signed the “Contract from America,” a twenty-point document introduced on April 15, 2009 during the nationwide “Tax Day” rallies, to demonstrate their commitment to core conservative social and economic principles;<sup>13</sup>
- ✓ they were identified as Tea Party adherents by news media organizations;
- ✓ they were endorsed by Tea Party groups or influential media and political figures (Courser 2011; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011; Burghart and Zeskind 2010).

Candidates in the Republican primaries formally endorsed by the group Tea Party Express and Sarah Palin generally received between 8 to 9 percentage points more than their opponents. Also, those who signed the “Contract from America” typically experienced a 20 percentage point spike in their share of the votes (Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 306). In the words of Karpowitz, Monson et al. (2011: 306), “either bearing a Tea Party stamp of approval or showing a willingness to affiliate with Tea Party principles clearly improved a candidate’s electoral prospects.”

A large number of incumbents and candidates supported by the Republican Party establishment were ultimately defeated by Tea Party-backed contenders in 2010. Specifically, they secured senatorial nominations in 11 states, congressional nominations in 137 districts, and gubernatorial nominations in 6 states (Kürschner 2011: 12-13; Rae 2011: 17; Berg 2011b: 5-6). Moreover, many Tea Party hopefuls who lost during the Republican primary still offered strong opposition to prominent incumbents. For example, John McCain was forced to adopt more conservative stances on several policy issues such as immigration to counter the popularity of J.D. Hayworth, one of his challengers who enjoyed strong Tea Party support.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Karpowitz, Monson et al. (2011: 309), 136 contenders signed this contract before the first Republican primary contest.

Hayworth was in favour of reducing the size of the legal and illegal immigrant population in Arizona through stricter enforcement of existing immigration laws and the passage of new legislative measures (Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 14; Bullock III 2011: 1; Zernike 2010).

However, the Tea Party movement's growing influence in the candidate selection process of the Republican Party compromised its chances to take control of the U.S. Senate during the general elections. For instance, Christine O'Donnell and Sharron Angle, the Tea Party-backed Republican senatorial nominees in Delaware and Nevada, respectively, proved unelectable partly due to their lack of qualifications (e.g. limited political experience, etc.) and some of their past statements (Bond, Fleisher et al. 2012; Ashbee 2011: 161; Berg 2011b: 5-6). The nomination of candidates with more moderate stances on social and economic issues would have significantly improved the Republican Party's appeal among Independents and Democratic voters in 2010 (Ashbee 2011: 161; Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 356). In other words, they argue that the nomination of Tea Party candidates amounted to sacrificing "electoral viability for ideological purity" (Reed 2011: 25).

Second, the Tea Party movement helped House and Senate Republican candidates defeat their Democratic opponents during the special elections in 2010 and during the 2010 midterm contest. In fact, during the 2010 elections, the Democratic Party lost the largest number of seats for any national political party in the United States since the 1938 midterm elections (Bond, Fleisher et al. 2012; Brady, Fiorina et al. 2011: 247; Courser 2011; 2012). FreedomWorks funded "opposition research, [mass] mailing, door-to-door and get-out-the-vote" operations in support of conservative candidates in 65 congressional districts that were identified during a strategy meeting, attended by 60 Tea Party leaders from 24 states, in Washington D.C. in January 2010 (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 21). Other organizations publicly endorsed Republican contenders and organized bus tours to promote their candidacy, thus helping them to garner some coverage from news media outlets. They also encouraged

their followers to donate money to these campaigns and participate in mobilization initiatives (Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011; Disch 2011; Burghart and Zeskind 2010). Several factors helped the Republican Party during the 2010 midterm elections such as high levels of dissatisfaction with Obama among the electorate and the weakness of the economy in the United States (Brady, Fiorina et al. 2011; Bond, Fleisher et al. 2012).

Close to two-thirds of congressional seats (42 out of 63) and slightly more than 83 percent of Senate seats (5 out of 6) captured by the Republican Party went to politicians with Tea Party ties during the 2010 midterm elections (Courser 2011; Bond, Fleisher et al. 2012). The level of electoral success of Tea Party-backed Republican contenders varied greatly and was based on the political makeup of their electoral districts. All of those competing in Republican-leaning districts were elected compared to 63 percent of those in tossup districts and only 9 percent of those in Democratic-leaning districts. Meanwhile, all Tea Party-backed Senate contenders won in Republican-leaning districts whereas 33 percent were elected in toss-up districts and none enjoyed electoral success in Democratic-leaning ones (Courser 2011, 2012; Bond, Fleisher et al. 2012).

Finally, the Tea Party movement has deeply affected the day-to-day political dynamic in the United States since early 2009. It led to the mobilization of the public in order to pressure elected officials into adopting certain positions or acting in specific ways. For instance, many organizations affiliated with this political movement played a central role in fueling the opposition against health care reform. They organized demonstrations of varying sizes during the summer months of 2009 (Hay 2011; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011). Many of them also engaged in more targeted campaigns. For instance, they asked their supporters “via e-mail blasts to write to their Congressmen and present the movement’s position” on specific political matters in the days immediately preceding important debates or votes in the U.S. Congress (Bailey 2012).

#### **4.4 Differentiating the Tea Party movement from previous U.S. grassroots phenomena**

The Tea Party movement can be differentiated from previous large-scale grassroots-intensive political movements, namely those that impacted the U.S. political landscape in varying ways between 2004 and 2008, because of its distinct structural characteristics.

##### **4.4.1 No formal or established leadership**

Unlike previous grassroots mobilization phenomena, the Tea Party has been essentially without clear leadership (Courser 2012: 52; Zernike 2010). In fact, a large number of influential figures from the political, economic, and media spheres, known as “symbolic leaders,” have been loosely tied to the Tea Party movement and have benefited from the enthusiasm of its supporters (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 342).

Scott Brown, who served as Massachusetts state congressman and state senator for approximately twelve years, is considered the first politician with ties to the Tea Party movement to be elected in the United States (DiMaggio and Street 2010). Surveys conducted in the early weeks of the Massachusetts special senatorial election indicated that he had gained little traction among the electorate compared to his Democratic opponent, Attorney General Martha Coakley (e.g. Suffolk 2009; Western New England University 2009). However, his strong stances on several political issues such as the Obama administration’s ARRA, coupled with his political-outsider status, appealed to individuals and organizations in agreement with Tea Party goals and ideals. They ultimately helped him gain political momentum during the last weeks of the campaign and beat Coakley on January 19, 2010 (Hay 2011: 662; Zernike 2010; DiMaggio and Street 2010).

In particular, several Tea Party-affiliated groups deployed significant effort to energize his campaign and generate excitement among Massachusetts voters, especially during the first weeks of January 2010. For example, the group Tea Party Express formally endorsed his senatorial bid and organized a series of events on his behalf. It spent 348,670 U.S. dollars in

support of Brown's candidacy by January 19, 2010 (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 52; Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 107). Brown also benefited from the financial and logistical backing of FreedomWorks. Although this group did not issue a formal endorsement of his candidacy, it coordinated several online money bomb-type fundraising efforts in support of his campaign. One of them yielded approximately one million U.S. dollars in less than 24 hours mostly from Internet users living outside the state of Massachusetts. FreedomWorks was also behind several get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts in the days preceding the election (Carty 2011: 279; Gleicher 2010). Local Tea Party groups also backed Brown's campaign by organizing small-scale mobilization initiatives (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 32; Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 142). In summary, many authors attribute Brown's electoral success to members of the Tea Party movement, which jumpstarted his campaign in January 2010 (e.g. Rae 2011: 19; Berg 2011: 19).

Brown's victory played a determinant role in the development of the Tea Party movement during the months following his election:

- ✓ the victory led to the rapid increase in the coverage of the Tea Party by news media, thus bolstering Tea Party visibility in the political mediascape;
- ✓ there were important mobilizing effects on Tea Party activists across the United States;
- ✓ Tea Party status as a "consequential electoral force" was established in the U.S. political landscape, thus prompting a growing number of politicians to seek its support and voters to throw their support behind the organization (Disch 2011: 126; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 3, 174; Courser 2012: 49).

Many Republican contenders in the U.S. midterm contest also emerged as influential figures within the Tea Party movement in 2010. On one hand, several male Republican politicians capitalized on the high levels of mobilization and excitement among Tea Party supporters.

Kentucky Republican senatorial candidate Rand Paul, who attracted the attention of national news media due to his vocal opposition to the Civil Rights Act and the social and economic policy proposals of the Obama administration, benefited from strong Tea Party backing during his primary campaign and the general election (Johnson 2011: 8; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 38). For example, independent online activists launched a 24-hour online fundraising initiative on June 28, 2010, known as the “Road to Victory Moneyblast,” encouraging Internet users to donate money to Rand’s campaign so that he could compete with his Democratic opponent, Jack Conway (Arnold 2010). Rand ultimately won the senatorial contest by a margin of 156,176 votes, or approximately 12 percentage points (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 290; The Washington Post 2010).

Florida Republican senatorial candidate Marco Rubio also quickly affiliated himself with the Tea Party in order to profit from the support of its sympathizers. A January 2010 poll revealed that close to 37 percent of voters in that state were strongly inclined to support any Tea Party candidate (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 187-188). However, some factions of the Tea Party movement were irritated by some of Rubio’s actions such as his decision not to meet with them (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 141-142). Although Rubio trailed establishment-backed former governor Charlie Christ during the early weeks of the primary contest, several Tea Party-linked organizations infused energy into Rubio’s campaign and helped him gain support among the electorate. He eventually secured the nomination on August 24, 2010 and went on to win the general election with 49 percent of the popular vote (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 38; Boatright 2011: 6; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 147).

South Carolina Republican senatorial candidate Jim DeMint quickly emerged as one of the leading voices of the Tea Party while maintaining relatively good relations with the Republican Party establishment (Rasmussen and Schoen 2011: 57; Ashbee 2011: 162). His actions during sensitive political moments in 2007, at the height of the economic crisis during

the fall months of 2008, and throughout the 2010 midterm election cycle strongly appealed to Tea Party members. In 2006 and 2007, he issued a series of public statements condemning the immigration reform proposal of the Bush administration, which he argued would lead to the creation of a legal “pathway to citizenship” for unauthorized immigrants. He also mounted a public campaign aimed at pressuring elected officials into reforming some federal spending programs (e.g. earmarks, etc.) (Vinson 2011). In September 2008, he posted on his website a video in which he denounced some facets of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act shortly before members of the House were first asked to vote on its passage. The video attributed the collapse of U.S. credit markets in 2008 on the Community Reinvestment Act, which was believed by many experts to force financial institutions to issue risky subprime mortgages. DeMint was ultimately endorsed by numerous conservative political organizations as well as Tea Party groups and won the election with close to 62 percent of the popular vote (Boatright 2011: 14; Berg 2011a: 3, 2011b, 2011c: 9).

During the midterm election cycle, DeMint formally endorsed several candidates who were not necessarily “the preferred choice of the party establishment” (Vinson 2011: 32) such as Senate contenders Christine O’Donnell in Delaware and Marlin Stutzman in Indiana (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 188-189; Boatright 2011: 7). His political action committee (PAC), Senate Conservatives Fund (SCF), also made substantial financial contributions to Tea Party candidates. According to the website OpenSecrets.org (2010a), it transferred 380,566 U.S. dollars to the Friends of Christine O’Donnell group, 365,154 U.S. dollars to Joe Miller for U.S. Senate, 354,552 U.S. dollars to the Friends of Sharron Angle group, and 312,693 U.S. dollars to Marco Rubio for U.S. Senate.

Many female Republican politicians also became leading voices within the Tea Party movement. Interestingly, a Pew survey conducted during the summer of 2010 revealed that 41.2 percent of Tea Party supporters were women, up from approximately 41 percent in April

2010 but down from 55 percent in March 2010 (Quinnipiac University 2010; Deckman 2011: 6; Montopoli 2010b). Moreover, many Tea Party community organizers were women who were involved in this movement mainly out of concern about the future of their children. In the words of conservative radio host Dana Loesch, “[m]otherhood is a political act. Women realize that their involvement with politics is part of motherhood” (Deckman 2011: 12). For example, “all of ResistNet’s leadership team [...] [were] women” as of late 2010 (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 30)

Michelle Bachmann, Minnesota’s sixth district congresswoman, founded the Tea Party caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives on July 16, 2010 in order to represent the interests of this mobilization phenomenon in the U.S. Congress (Deckman 2011: 2; Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 72). As of July 21, 2010, 52 members of the U.S. Congress had joined its ranks (Bailey, Mummolo et al. 2011b: 4; Berg 2011b: 15). According to Bailey, Mummolo et al. (2011a: 8), the Tea Party caucus represented the first “manifestation of the movement inside the institution of Congress.” As of 2010, 42 Tea Party members were also part of the House Immigration Reform Caucus led by Republican California Congressman Brian Bilbray, which comprised “the most steadfast opponents to any reform legislation that would include a pathway to citizenship for those without proper papers” (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 8, 72-73). Moreover, Bachmann regularly appeared on television news networks to represent the Tea Party movement. On January 27, 2010, she gave the first Tea Party response to a State of the Union address by a U.S. president, which was broadcast live by several cable-based news networks and later posted on video-sharing sites (Rae 2011: 20). She also frequently headlined Tea Party events, where she frequently gave speeches attacking the social and economic policies of the Obama administration (Zernike 2010; Montopoli 2010a).

Former 2008 Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin also emerged as a major force of the Tea Party mobilization phenomenon due, in part, to her views on the

economy, her vocal opposition to the policy proposals of the Obama administration, her position on key issues (e.g. drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve, reducing the size of the federal government, etc.), her self-professed respect for the U.S. Constitution, and her political maverick status (Larson and Porpora 2011: 762, 767; DiMaggio and Street 2010; Hart, Lind et al. 2011: 11). According to an American National Election Studies survey, approximately 77 percent of supporters of the Tea Party movement viewed Palin favourably in October 2010, up from 60 percent in March 2010 according to a Washington Post poll (Cohen 2010; Abramovitz 2011: 10, 21). However, she was disliked among some segments of Tea Party activists. For instance, “the mention of Sarah Palin brought grimaces to the face of a number of Tea Party activists” during a rally in Reading, Massachusetts (Williams, Skocpol et al. 2011: 32).

She played various paid and unpaid roles in Tea Party events across the United States between 2009 and 2011. Specifically, she was frequently involved in events organized by the Tea Party Express and was one of the keynote speakers at the Tea Party national convention organized by Tea Party Nation in Nashville, Tennessee in February 2010 (Zernike 2010; Berg 2011b: 13; Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 32).

She also endorsed a large number of candidates running for office in 2010. By the end of the Republican primary season, she had publicly thrown her support behind 34 individuals competing for the Republican nomination for various elected offices (Bullock III 2011: 7; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 309). During the general election, she endorsed 11 gubernatorial, 13 senatorial and 62 congressional hopefuls. Interestingly, she endorsed twice as many men as women (Bullock III 2011: 6-7). While some of her endorsees lost in the Republican nomination race or the general election, including senatorial candidates Tim Burns in Pennsylvania, Sharron Angle in Nevada, and Joe Miller in Alaska, many others such as gubernatorial contender Nikki Haley in South Carolina and senatorial hopeful Kelly Ayotte

in New Hampshire were successful (Hart, Lind et al. 2011: 16). In fact, candidates who received the endorsement of both Sarah Palin and the Tea Party Express typically garnered 8 to 9 percentage points more than those who were not endorsed by at least one Tea Party figure or organization (Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 306).

Several Republican female candidates competing in the 2010 midterm elections were especially popular among Tea Party adherents. Nevada Senate contender Sharron Angle benefited from their political fervor due, in part, to her strong conservative track record as a Nevada state assemblywoman and her views on sensitive political issues for Tea Party members such as unauthorized immigration, adoption by same-sex couples, and the reform of health care (Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 14, 16; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 38; Formisano 2012). She received the assistance of several key players within the Tea Party movement throughout the election cycle including the Tea Party Express, which gave close to 1 million U.S. dollars to her campaign. The strong backing she received from Tea Party adherents was instrumental in her ability to secure the Republican senatorial nomination on June 9, 2010. However, Angle ultimately lost the general election to Democrat Harry Reid (Zernike 2010; Abramowitz 2011: 8; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 38; Formisano 2012: 33).

Delaware Republican senatorial hopeful Christine O'Donnell also emerged as a Tea Party favourite in 2010. While some conservative organizations and Tea Party groups did not support her candidacy due to her positions of certain fiscal issues, many others supported her and helped her secure the Republican senatorial nomination on September 15, 2010 (Scala 2011: 27; Abramowitz 2011: 8; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 16-17). Specifically, the Senate Conservative Fund sought to raise 174,000 U.S. dollars "in earmarked donations for her campaign, the maximum in party-coordinated expenditures" (Reed 2011: 32). In the meantime, the Tea Party Express spent between 200,000 and 250,000 U.S. dollars according

to some estimates to organize mobilization initiatives on behalf of her campaign. It also used its money to produce and air political ads praising her candidacy and attacking her opponents on television stations and radio networks (Boatright 2011: 6-7; Reed 2011: 29, 35).

O'Donnell's run for the Delaware Senate seat garnered extensive coverage from offline news media outlets, especially during the fall of 2010, and was a popular topic among social media users (Rae 2011: 18; Reed 2011: 32). First, she had made several controversial statements in the decades before her campaign, which generated interest for her candidacy. For example, she advocated abstinence and claimed that masturbation represented a form of adultery in an interview that aired on MTV in 1996. She also made several outrageous statements on different subjects including science and religion in some of her appearances on the late-night show "Politically Incorrect," which aired on ABC between 1994 and 2002 (Reed 2011: 32; Rae 2011: 18; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 16).

Second, her extreme political positions such as her embrace of constitutional biblicism and her desire to abolish the U.S. Department of Education, which strongly appealed to conservative segments of the Delaware electorate, were frequently discussed on televised political news shows. Finally, she made a series of political gaffes that attracted the attention of the mainstream press and ultimately hurt the credibility of her candidacy. For example, she was forced to release a political ad denying the fact that she was a witch after a video of her stating that she had some experience with witchcraft surfaced on the Internet (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 358; Ashbee 2011: 158; Formisano 2012: 53; Reed 2011: 27). O'Donnell lost the election to Democrat Chris Coons (Bond, Fleisher et al. 2012).

Many personalities from the media world and leaders of interest groups also became important figures in the eyes of members of the Tea Party movement (Abramowitz 2011: 1; Rae 2011: 14). For example, Glenn Beck emerged as one of the leading voices of the Tea Party due, in part, to his personal background (e.g. reformed alcoholic, conversion from

Mormonism to Christianity, etc.), his distinct interpretation of U.S. history, his positions on specific issues (e.g. health care, business regulations, etc.), and his vocal opposition to the Obama administration (Rae 2011: 13-14; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 30-31). According to an April 2010 CBS News/New York Times survey, 49 percent of Tea Party adherents considered themselves libertarians and 67 percent of those who reported being conservatives viewed Glenn Beck favourably (Ekins 2011: 34).

Beck proved to be a mobilizing force within the Tea Party movement between 2009 and 2011. He rapidly became an important source of news and opinion for its supporters, mainly because he frequently discussed in a generally positive manner Tea Party-related issues and events on his radio and television shows (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 31; Skopol and Williamson 2012: 133). His Fox News Channel show drew a weekly audience averaging 9 million viewers throughout 2009. It is important to note that 57 percent of Tea Party libertarians and 67 percent of Tea Party conservatives considered Fox News Channel their primary source of information as well as 33 percent of Republicans and 8 percent of Democrats in 2011 (Sobieraj and Berry 2011: 24; Ekins 2011). It can be argued that this news network provided “much of what the loosely interconnected Tea Party organizations otherwise lack in terms of a unified membership and communications infrastructure” (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 30).

He also founded the group 9/12 Project on March 13, 2009 following the first large-scale Tea Party demonstrations in February 2009. Although it did not issue formal endorsements for candidates during the 2010 midterm election cycle, it worked in partnership with other groups to launch and coordinate various mobilization efforts (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 134; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 303). Spinoff groups and websites were created in the wake of Beck’s 9/12 Project such as the Sisterhood of Mommy Patriots

(also known as, As a Mom), the Wyoming 912 Coalition, and Daytona 912 (Zernike 2010; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 30).

Dick Armey, the Republican majority leader in the U.S. House from 1995 to 2003, also became an influential Tea Party player. He co-authored, with Matt Kibbe, the book entitled, *Tea Party Manifesto*, in 2010, frequently spoke at Tea Party gatherings across the United States, provided training sessions to Republican politicians on wide-ranging Tea Party issues (e.g. the Tea Party retreat in Baltimore in early November 2010, etc.), and consistently defended Tea Party ideals and objectives when appearing on televised news shows (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 55, 173, 227-228; Armey and Kibbe 2010). However, it should be noted that his position on immigration issues displeased some segments of the Tea Party opposed to the creation of a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants in the United States (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 72).

More important, Armey chaired FreedomWorks, a conservative political action committee (PAC) defined by journalists as a D.C.-based “nonprofit group that mounts grassroots campaigns” in support of personal freedom, fiscal austerity, and respect for the U.S. Constitution (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 353; Berg 2011b: 4; Disch 2011: 127; Courser 2011). It has been deeply involved in the activities of the Tea Party movement since its emergence in February 2009. This political organization will be discussed in the next section of this dissertation.

A Washington Post poll conducted in October 2010 among Tea Party sympathizers showed that 14 percent of them identified Sarah Palin as the national figure best representing the Tea Party movement while only 7 percent believed it was conservative commentator Glenn Beck and 6 percent thought it was Jim DeMint (The Washington Post 2010). Other surveys (e.g. the CBS News/New York Times poll in April 2010, the Cato Institute survey in October 2010, the Politico/TargetPoint poll in April 2010, etc.) showed that Tea Party

members were more likely to consider Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck or Texas Congressman Ron Paul their leader than any other conservative politician in 2010 (Ekins 2011: 9). In summary, there was no consensus among the U.S. public on the leadership of this decentralized political movement. For instance, 34 percent of the respondents to a survey conducted in 2010 did not believe that a single political figure could be defined as the uncontested Tea Party leader (Courser 2011; The Washington Post 2010).

It is important to point out that several non-prominent personalities also garnered a lot of attention and, in some cases, notoriety due to their work within the Tea Party movement, mainly at the grassroots level. Amy Kremer, a former flight attendant for Delta Airlines, emerged as a key figure within this movement. She became involved in the Tea Party through social media in early 2009. She eventually founded the first Atlanta Tea Party and acted as a national coordinator along with other Tea Party groups during the first round of demonstrations on the national level (Politico 2013; Burghart and Zeskind 2010). In fact, she is considered to be the “third original Tea Party Patriot national coordinator” (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 43). Kremer worked as an organizer with the Tea Party Patriots until she accepted the position of director of grassroots and coalitions with the Tea Party Express. She also frequently spoke at conferences across the United States (e.g. 2010 Values Voters Summit) (Wilson and Burack 2012: 189) and appeared on cable news networks to represent the Tea Party movement (Boykoff and Laschever 2011). In an interview on CNN’s “American Morning” on September 20, 2011, she argued that individuals and organizations adhering to the Tea Party movement “are focused completely on the fiscal aspect of the economy. We’re not focused on the social issues.” (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 354)

Atlanta native Jenny Beth Martin, a former consultant for the Republican Party, also became an important figure within the Tea Party movement due to her work as a grassroots organizer. She helped launch the Tea Party Patriots organization and acted as its chief

executive officer (CEO). On the local level, she was the co-chair of the Tea Party group in her hometown and frequently attended town hall meetings all over the United States (Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Deckman 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Several other individuals became leading voices in the Tea Party movement such as the Tea Party Patriots' national grassroots organizers Ryan Hecker and Mike Gaske, Chicago-based Tea Party organizer Eric Odom, and Dr. Rick Scarborough, who led the campaign entitled, Mandate to Save America, a project spearheaded by the S.T.O.P. Obama Tyranny National Coalition (Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

#### **4.4.2 Decentralized organizational structure**

Unlike previous political movements, which had relatively centralized command and control architecture, a decentralized and constantly morphing constellation of elite-led and grassroots political groups – often boasting decentralized leadership structures, Web-based action networks and ordinary individuals – were behind the activities of the Tea Party movement. Many of them were even at odds with each other because they had incompatible, and sometimes competing, interests and objectives (Pitney Jr. 2011: 132). In brief, this movement was by “its very nature [...] highly resistant to any kind of hierarchical leadership” (Rae 2011: 14).

As of late 2011, there were six core organizations that were the main drivers of the Tea Party on the national political stage in the United States (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 7):

- ✓ Tea Party Nation (TPN);
- ✓ Tea Party Patriots (TPP);
- ✓ 1776 Tea Party, also known as TeaParty.org;
- ✓ FreedomWorks;
- ✓ ResistNet (renamed Patriot Action Network in 2011);
- ✓ Tea Party Express (TPE), previously known as Our Country Deserves Better PAC.

Only FreedomWorks, Our Country Deserves Better PAC and ResistNet existed before Rick Santelli's rant on CNBC, which is considered one of the foundational moments of the Tea Party movement (Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 4). Table 1 provides an overview of the six core national Tea Party organizations.

There were many other national Tea Party groups, coalitions and action networks such as the National Tea Party Federation, Tea Party Students, TeaParty365, and the Nationwide Tea Party Coalition. However, they generally received much less coverage from news media outlets, had fewer registered members and, in most cases, played a more peripheral role in the U.S. political landscape than the six core organizations. Still, they were actively involved in Tea Party-related activities across the United States (Zernike 2010; Berg 2011b: 12).

**Table 1: Description of the six core Tea Party organizations**

Name of movement	Date of creation	Founders	Historical details	Core principles and concerns	Involvement in mobilization initiatives	Membership / Budget	Important elements
Tea Party Nation	April 6, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Judson Phillips (former assistant district attorney);</li> <li>✓ Sherry Phillips.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ First manifested itself as an online social networking service for Tea Party supporters;</li> <li>✓ Registered as a for-profit organization in Tennessee on April 21, 2009.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reduction of the U.S. national debt;</li> <li>✓ Limited government;</li> <li>✓ Free speech;</li> <li>✓ Gun rights;</li> <li>✓ Military;</li> <li>✓ Border security.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Revival rally in Nashville, Tennessee on July 6, 2009;</li> <li>✓ Event at the Cornerstone Church on July 31, 2009 in Nashville, Tennessee;</li> <li>✓ Tea Party convention in Nashville, Tennessee in early February 2010;</li> <li>✓ “National Tea Party Unity Convention” in Las Vegas, Nevada in July 2010;</li> <li>✓ Etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 39,487 registered members on April 1, 2011 according to its website;</li> <li>✓ 31,402 registered members on August 1, 2010.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ A large portion of its membership is based in the Nashville, Tennessee area;</li> <li>✓ Presence of small local chapters in electoral districts across the United States (e.g.: California, Florida, Texas, Nevada, and Illinois);</li> <li>✓ Heavy use of digital media tools for information dispersion and organization purposes (e.g.: email distribution list, etc.).</li> </ul>
Tea Party Patriots	March 10, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Jenny Beth Martin (former Republican strategist);</li> <li>✓ Mark Meckler (business attorney);</li> <li>✓ Amy Kremer (business attorney).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Tea Party Patriots website registered on March 10, 2009;</li> <li>✓ Incorporated as a 501(c)4 non-profit organization on June 1, 2009 in Georgia;</li> <li>✓ Registered with the U.S. Federal Election Commission (FEC) approximately in January 2010.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Fiscal responsibility;</li> <li>✓ Limited government;</li> <li>✓ Free market;</li> <li>✓ Private property.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Nationwide demonstrations against health care reform on July 17, 2009 in partnership with other core and peripheral Tea Party groups;</li> <li>✓ “Tennessee Tea Party Coalition Convention Inaugural Convention” in Gatlinburg in May 2010;</li> <li>✓ Training seminars for Tea Party activists.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 115,311 registered members on August 1, 2010;</li> <li>✓ 74,779 Web users were members of its profile pages on social networking services on August 1, 2010;</li> <li>✓ 3,000 chapters in electoral districts across the United States during the fall months of 2010;</li> <li>✓ 2,200 local chapters on August 1, 2010.</li> <li>✓ Raised 137,684 U.S. dollars in 2010, mainly in donations not exceeding 200 U.S. dollars;</li> <li>✓ Spent 105,018 U.S. dollars in 2010.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Members dispersed throughout the United States;</li> <li>✓ “[M]ost grassroots” of all the major Tea Party groups in 2010 according to Burghart and Zeskind (2010: 41);</li> <li>✓ Most active core Tea Party organization on the World Wide Web;</li> <li>✓ Did not endorse or transfer money to politicians or organizations involved in the 2010 Midterm elections;</li> <li>✓ Relatively small budget limiting its capacity to operate independently;</li> <li>✓ Staff of “modest size, with various ‘coordinators’ in different regions” (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012: 109).</li> </ul>
1776 Tea Party (TeaParty.org)	February 20, 2009	Dale Robertson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Founded in the wake of the decline of the Minuteman Project in 2007.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Christian values;</li> <li>✓ Immigration policy;</li> <li>✓ Unauthorized immigration;</li> <li>✓ Reduction of taxes;</li> <li>✓ Gun rights</li> <li>✓ Fiscal restraint.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Generally small gathering in local and regional political contexts (e.g.: Tea Party event in Houston on February 27, 2009);</li> <li>✓ Involvement in events organized by other core Tea Party groups such as Tea Party tours organized by Tea Party Express;</li> <li>✓ Etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 6,987 online members on August 1, 2010;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Smallest membership of all core Tea Party groups;</li> <li>✓ Members dispersed in the United States;</li> <li>✓ Small number of paid employees based in California;</li> <li>✓ Highly confrontational tone with political elites;</li> <li>✓ Strong ties with local, regional and national players in the anti-immigration movement.</li> </ul>

Sources: (Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Deckman 2011; Willey 2011; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2010; DiMaggio and Street 2010; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; McCafferty 2011; OpenSecrets 2010c; Zernike 2010; Bullock III 2011; Disch 2011; Bailey, Mummolo et al. 2011a, 2011b, 2012)

**Table 1: Description of the six core Tea Party organizations (continued)**

Name of movement	Date of creation	Founders	Historical details	Core principles and concerns	Involvement in mobilization initiatives	Membership / Budget	Important elements
Freedom Works	July 2004		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Group formed after the disbandment of Citizens for a Sound Economy (CSE) in 2003 due to internal dissension;</li> <li>✓ Group created by CSE defectors who launched the organization Empower America which changed its name to FreedomWorks in July 2004.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Privatization of social security;</li> <li>✓ Tax cuts for wealthier Americans;</li> <li>✓ Limits on lawsuit damages;</li> <li>✓ Deregulation;</li> <li>✓ Limited federal government (size and responsibilities);</li> <li>✓ Personal freedom;</li> <li>✓ Free trade;</li> <li>✓ Opposition to health care reforms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ “Taxpayers March on Washington” D.C. on September 12, 2009;</li> <li>✓ Tea Party bus tour between August 28 and September 12, 2009 (also known as Tea Party Express);</li> <li>✓ Tea Party leadership summit in Washington D.C. in January 2010;</li> <li>✓ Atlanta Tax Day Tea Party on April 15, 2010;</li> <li>✓ Etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 15,044 registered online members on August 1, 2010;</li> <li>✓ The broader FreedomWorks group had more than one million members in 2011.</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 13.8 million U.S. dollars raised in 2010;</li> <li>✓ 7.6 million U.S. dollars raised in 2009;</li> <li>✓ 4 million raised in 2008.</li> <li>✓ Between 15 and 20 per cent of funding coming from corporations in 2011;</li> <li>✓ Sectors of activity of most generous financial contributors:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Oil;</li> <li>✓ Insurance;</li> <li>✓ Health care.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Members concentrated in the Northeastern U.S. states;</li> <li>✓ Largest budget and staff of all core Tea Party groups;</li> <li>✓ 29 staff members on March 8, 2012 according to its website;</li> <li>✓ 13 staff members, some of which are located in North Carolina, Georgia and Florida, in February 2010;</li> <li>✓ Responsible for the “the bulk of the public relations[, promotion] and logistical work behind” the Tea Party movement alongside Americans for Prosperity, Tea Party Express, and Fox News Channel;</li> <li>✓ Provided financial, technical and logistical help to individuals and organizations supporting the Tea Party movement (e.g.: training seminars, etc.).</li> </ul>
ResistNet (Patriot Action Network)	Early 2009	Grassfire Nation (project of the for-profit corporation Grassroots Action)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Originally sought to provide citizens resources to be involved in electoral politics;</li> <li>✓ Renamed Patriot Action Network in 2011.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Individual liberties;</li> <li>✓ Opposition to the rise of a “brave new world’ of collectivism” (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010: 29).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ “Taxpayers March on Washington” D.C. on September 12, 2009;</li> <li>✓ First Tea Party bus tour organized by Tea Party Express;</li> <li>✓ Etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 142 chapters with a generally small membership in 34 states in late 2009;</li> <li>✓ 81,248 registered online members on August 1, 2010</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Established partnerships with many core and peripheral Tea Party groups;</li> <li>✓ Links with conservative organizations;;</li> <li>✓ Web-based action network playing a mostly peripheral role in the offline political landscape;</li> <li>✓ Deeply concerned about electoral politics;</li> <li>✓ Many members have extreme conservative views.</li> </ul>
Tea Party Express (TPE)	Summer months of 2009	Our Country Deserves Better PAC (political action committee formed in July 2008 by Howard Kaloogian, former California state assemblyman)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Opposition to health care reform;</li> <li>✓ Opposition to economic policies developed in reaction to the 2008 economic downturn.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Tea Party bus tour between August 28 and September 12, 2009 (“Tea Party Express”);</li> <li>✓ “Tea Party Express II: Countdown to Judgment Day” between October 25 and November 12, 2009;</li> <li>✓ “Tea Party Express III: Just Vote them Out” between March 27 and April 15, 2010;</li> <li>✓ Etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ No formal membership.</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Raised and spent approximately 2.7 million U.S. dollars during the 2010 Midterm elections;</li> <li>✓ Benefited from the financial backing of a small number of major players in the offline political landscape.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Relatively limited presence in the online political landscape;</li> <li>✓ Credited for much of “the groundwork attributed to the Tea Party movement” since February 2009 with FreedomWorks (Courser, 2012: 52);</li> <li>✓ Endorsed 138 Republican candidates during 2010 Midterm elections;</li> <li>✓ Provided assistance to many individuals and organizations tied to the Tea Party movement.</li> </ul>

Sources: (Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Formisano 2012; Center for Media and Democracy 2012a, 2012b; Disch 2011; Bazilian 2012; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011; DeMint 2011; Zernike 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Berg 2011c; Bailey, Mummolo et al. 2011a, 2011b; DiMaggio 2011; Scalla 2011; OpenSecrets 2010b)

Some of the six core national Tea Party groups were the source of unease and, in some cases, anger within the Tea Party ranks. First, there was widespread belief among Tea Party members that some of the groups had been “co-opted by existing powers,” partly due to their ties with inside-the-beltway organizations (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 351). For example, the Tea Party Express was labeled “Astroturf Express” by some Tea Party adherents because certain members of its leadership had a relationship with the Republican Party. Moreover, it received a large portion of its funding from influential groups in the mainstream political landscape (Zernike 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 139). Others have been critical of the Tea Party Patriots due to the close relationship some of its leaders maintained with the Republican Party establishment. They have also been uncomfortable with the fact that the group benefited from corporate money through its ties with FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, which were both heavily funded by influential political and economic players in the United States (Formisano 2012; DiMaggio 2011; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011).

Many Tea Party adherents have also denounced the for-profit nature of certain core organizations, including the Tea Party Nation and Tea Party Express, which is in direct contradiction of basic grassroots principles. For instance, approximately 41 percent of the more than fifty groups that were represented at the Tea Party Patriots American Policy conference in Arizona in February 2011 were “for-profit” (DiMaggio 2011: 216). Certain Tea Party leaders also benefited financially from their involvement in the Tea Party movement. For instance, the founder of the Tea Party Express, Sal Russo, earned close to 800,000 U.S. dollars in 2010 from his “Tea Party public relations and media-related activities” (DiMaggio 2011: 211). In addition, the president of this group, Matt Kibbe, made 300,000 U.S. dollars in 2009 for his involvement in the activities of the Tea Party Express and other affiliated groups (DiMaggio 2011: 211).

Many critics have argued that the Tea Party movement can be defined as a mostly “manufactured” grassroots mobilization initiative mainly driven by a small number of conservative media and political organizations with generally narrow interests and objectives, alternative media outlets, and influential individuals (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 344; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 112; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). While some of these players have been heavily involved in the visible facets of this political movement, many investigations have shown that they were only minimally or not at all involved in many other dimensions of its activities (e.g. Bode, Lassen et al. 2011; Rae 2011: 10-11). This study will reinforce this point by demonstrating that they were mostly absent from the #teaparty politicking dynamic in the Twitterverse between late December 2009 and mid-March 2011, a time period roughly coinciding with the 2010 U.S. midterm elections.

A large number of smaller Tea Party organizations were also present in socio-political communities across the United States. There were close to 2,800 community-based Tea Party groups affiliated with the Tea Party Patriots operating all over the United States in early 2010. Based on Courser’s work (2010), it can be argued that they were formed “in a spirit of decentralized, independent protest.” There was also a diverse network of political groups loosely affiliated with national Tea party organizations that were active in the U.S. political landscape (Boykoff and Laschever 2011; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Bailey, Mummolo et al. 2011b). Several organizations with interests or objectives compatible with those of the Tea Party have joined forces with Tea Party groups since early 2009 in order to further their cause. For instance, grassroots nativistic<sup>14</sup> organizations co-sponsored close to one hundred individuals and Tea Party organizations as well as the We stand with Arizona project that was launched by ResistNet in the wake of passage of the controversial Arizona immigration reform bill, also known as Arizona SB

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<sup>14</sup> Nativism can be defined as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state” (Mudde 2010: 3).

1070, which was signed into law on April 20, 2010 by Governor Jane Brewer (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 31).

Recent studies have indicated that these community-based Tea Party groups played a mostly peripheral role in the U.S. political landscape. For instance, 21 percent of respondents in a 2010 New York Times survey reported being aware of at least one Tea Party organization active in their immediate community. Moreover, an analysis of the Web presence of more than 150 local Tea Party groups in 2010 showed that few of them frequently promoted their activities in order to mobilize the public. Only 8 percent of them advertised “regular weekly or monthly meetings on their websites.” More important, 56 percent of those groups that were involved in the April 15, 2010 Tax Day demonstrations did not have a website (DiMaggio and Street 2010; DiMaggio 2011: 46, 77-78). Finally, Tea Party groups operating in densely-populated or metropolitan areas were generally more active than those in rural zones. Slightly less than 15 percent of them posted information about regular activities such as meetings on their official websites whereas the percentage was considerably smaller for organizations based in less-populated cities and municipalities (DiMaggio 2011: 46; Street and DiMaggio 2012).

Many digital-action networks sympathetic to the Tea Party movement like Smart Girl Politics (SGP), which was founded by Stacey Moth in June 2008 and had approximately 15,000 registered members on September 12, 2009, have also played an important role by reaching out and mobilizing members of the public through various digital and offline media channels. Since 2009, Smart Girl Politics has hosted annual political summits that have been attended by leading voices within the Tea Party movement. On July 30, 2011, it held the first presidential straw poll of the 2012 election season in St. Louis, Missouri that was narrowly won by Minnesota representative Michelle Bachmann (Deckman 2011: 11; Gelber 2011: 20).

#### **4.4.3 Hyper-fragmented interests within the Tea Party community**

Unlike previous grassroots political movements whose activities were typically centered on specific political figures, issues, or events, the Tea Party movement was different because its members displayed interest in a very wide range of social, economic and political matters, but generally from a similar ideological standpoint. Specifically, “a typical Tea Party group characterizes its mission as seeking” to support conservative or libertarian views and goals that are usually compatible with the principles embodied in the U.S. Constitution (Goldstein 2011b: 837).

First, adherents of the Tea Party movement have fomented and coordinated rallies denouncing the U.S. federal government’s overall lack of fiscal responsibility, which, as previously mentioned, is considered one of the key factors of the 2008 economic downturn (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 343; Herbert 2011: 153; Courser 2011). In fact, fiscal responsibility or conservatism has been among the core economic principles of the Tea Party, along with limited government, lower taxes and free markets (Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 2; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 6; Goldstein 2011a: 290). The notion of fiscal responsibility is also a central component of the agenda of a plethora of local Tea Parties operating across the United States (Maggiotto and Scheele 2011: 175).

Second, many Tea Party activists had deployed significant effort in collaboration with other players in the U.S. conservative political movement to promote the passage of laws further restricting legal and unauthorized immigration and to oppose the possible creation of a legal pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants in the United States (Ashbee 2011: 163; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 14; Mudde 2010). The 1776 Tea Party, the Team America PAC, the Minuteman Victory PAC, and other local and regional groups organized rallies on immigration-related issues between 2009 and 2011. Others, including Senate contenders Chuck DeVore in California and Sharron Angle in Nevada, during the 2010 midterm

elections, had thrown their support behind candidates with strong stances against people illegally residing in the United States (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 189; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011).

As previously discussed, there were widespread anti-immigration sentiments among Tea Party members who had “ontological insecurity and nativistic dispositions,” especially in states close to the border with Mexico (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 75; Langman 2012). A poll conducted in August 2010 showed that 82 percent of Tea Party adherents were concerned about illegal immigration, which they defined as a “serious problem,” compared to only 60 percent among the general public (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 34; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 14-15; Zernike 2010). Interestingly, the mainstream rise of the Tea Party movement coincided with the rapid increase in the number of extreme nativist groups opposed to immigration in the United States. Indeed, there were 319 active organizations in the United States in 2010, up from 309 in 2009 and 173 in 2008 (Belrich 2012). However, their numbers went down to 185 in 2011 (Belrich 2012), presumably due to the de-mobilization of many activists at the end of the 2010 U.S. midterm elections and after the defeat of many anti-immigration candidates.

Third, many Tea Party members with strong traditional values concerning family and personal liberty have engaged in activities that support conservative positions on a profusion of social matters (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 31; Zernike 2010). For example, 64 percent of Tea Party sympathizers were opposed to same-sex marriage, 59 percent thought that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, and 78 percent were in favour of the protection of gun rights (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2011a). However, some studies have shown that Tea Party supporters held progressive views on other social issues. A 2010 Washington University survey indicated that close to 69 percent of Tea Party supporters believed that homosexuals had the right to openly serve in the U.S. military and 69 percent

were in favour of the passage of laws protecting homosexuals against job discrimination (Courser 2012: 49). It should be noted that social matters were generally considered less important than economic issues among Tea Party supporters. An April 2010 survey revealed that 78 percent of Tea Party members believed that economic matters “should take precedence over social issues” whereas only 14 percent of them were convinced that social issues were more important (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 31).

Finally, a large portion of Tea Party activists were interested in very narrow political issues, thus reinforcing the hyper-fragmentation hypothesis of this dissertation. For instance, a Tea Party event was organized in Massachusetts during the 2010 U.S. midterm election cycle concerning “the possibility that the ‘SmartGrid’ (an infrastructure improvement to the electricity grid, a plan approximately as controversial as road repair) was in fact a plan that would give government control over the thermostats in people’s homes” (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 199). Other events on a variety of micro-issues such as the rise of communism in the United States, or government oppression, were planned across the country between 2009 and 2011 (Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

The hyper fragmented nature of the Tea Party movement’s agenda had several downsides, which have been largely ignored by the academic community. However, some scholars have hypothesized that the fragmentation of politics can lead to the dissolution of a unifying ideological framework, which can have negative repercussions on various aspects of the movement’s activities such as its capacity to establish priorities, its ability to circulate a coherent message to the U.S. public, the levels of cohesion and mobilization within its ranks, and its effectiveness in the formal U.S. political landscape (Willey 2011; Boykoff and Laschever 2011; Ashbee 2011). This aspect of the Tea Party movement will be examined extensively in this dissertation.

#### **4.4.4 Distinct socio-political profile of Tea Party members**

While a large proportion of Tea Party members had a demographic profile representing a cross section of American public between 2009 and 2011, some facets of their socio-political profile differentiate them from the rest of the U.S. population. First, individuals supporting the Tea Party's ideals and objectives had more pro-business political preferences that are in line with the positions of the Republican base. A Gallup poll in June 2010 revealed that 62 percent of them defined themselves as conservative Republicans and 17 percent as moderate Republicans or moderate Liberals. Comparatively, only 29 percent of U.S. citizens at large characterized themselves as conservative Republicans and 15 percent as moderate Liberals or moderate Republicans (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 27-28; Newport 2010).

Second, Tea Party supporters tended to have more authoritarian dispositions, which are often fueled by religious and family-oriented personal values, than the rest of the U.S. population (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; 52; Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74). According to Perrin, Tepper et al. (2011: 74), close to 81 percent of Tea Party adherents firmly believed "that it's more important that a child obey his parents than be responsible for his own actions" compared to only 65 percent among those who do not support this movement. The propensity for authoritarianism also manifested itself through their growing resentment of economic and political progressive elites, whom they considered enemies, as previously indicated in this dissertation. As well, it showed through their tendency toward organizing mobilization initiatives often featuring "long-winded 'presentations' about the importance of the Tea Party that were designed to sell" the ideals and the merits of the movement rather than to stimulate political activism (DiMaggio 2011: 81).

Third, pro-Tea Party Americans were more likely to be resistant and, to a certain extent, portray themselves as being victimized by social, political and cultural change (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74; Langman 2012; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 24). In fact, the Tea Party

movement at large cannot be considered a source of “ideas for social change” (Barnett 2011: 282). Perrin, Tepper et al.’s survey (2011: 74) revealed that 51 percent of Tea Party adherents were concerned about the “changes taking place in American society” in 2010 whereas only 21 percent of those who did not identify with this political movement were similarly concerned (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 26; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 8).

Fourth, individuals defining themselves as being in agreement with the principles and objectives of the Tea Party movement were more likely to hold libertarian and conservative political views than the rest of the public (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74; Bailey, Mummolo et al. 2011a: 29, 2011b: 21, 2012). Those with the strongest libertarian views were typically located in Western and North Eastern states and tended to “remain on the periphery of the activist base,” along with less-religious individuals (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 38). These libertarian dispositions have shaped the positions of many adherents to the Tea Party movement on a broad range of issues. For instance, they believed that there should be broad de-regulation of various spheres of U.S. society (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 36, 38). Specifically, they strongly supported freedom of expression, which is considered by many to be one of the most-important components of the U.S. Constitution (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74). They were also in favour of easing or eliminating “regulations on expressions such as clothing, television shows, or musical lyrics” (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74).

Finally, many Tea Party supporters had economic and nativistic dispositions,<sup>15</sup> which affected their views on various political issues such as national security, race relations, unemployment and immigration (Perrin, Tepper et al. 2011: 74; Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 69). However, some authors believe that these positions could be fueled by other factors such as the “social strains of urbanization and industrialization” as well as the difficult economic

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<sup>15</sup> Nativism can be defined as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state” (Mudde 2010a: 3).

conditions in the United States due to the economic downturn in 2008 (Jacobson 2008: 68-69; Brader, Valentino et al. 2009).

According to Burghart and Zeskind (2010: 69), these nativistic tendencies manifested themselves through different levels of social intolerance such as racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. A large number of Tea Party supporters partially attributed the economic crisis in the U.S. to the presence of large numbers of legal and unauthorized immigrants in the country. The study by Perrin, Tepper et al. (2011: 74) indicated that approximately 18 percent of Tea Party supporters held negative views toward immigration compared to only 12 percent of individuals who were not backing the Tea Party movement. Moreover, a University of Washington survey in March 2010 noted that Tea Party adherents were more likely than any other segment of the population to be intolerant toward ethnic minorities and groups they perceived as illegitimately profiting from resources in the United States (Courser 2012; Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011). It is important to point out, based on Rae's work (2011: 16), that "the overwhelming majority of Tea Partiers are not racist and also appear to give more priority to economic and size of government issues than social/religious conservatism." In fact, several authors (e.g. Boykoff and Laschever 2011; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010) believe that some liberal-leaning mass media outlets have been instrumental in shaping the public's perception of this political movement, which they frequently portray as racist and intolerant in nature.

This dissertation will take an in-depth look at the characteristics of the Tea Party movement through a quantitative content analysis and a heuristic review of its manifestation in the Twitterverse during a time period roughly coinciding with the 2010 midterm election cycle in the United States. It will ultimately help to better understand the structure of the Tea Party movement and identify the wide-ranging concerns and objectives of its adherents, which were only briefly discussed in this chapter.

## 5 Chapter: Methodological considerations

This dissertation will demonstrate that the manifestation of the Tea Party movement in the Twittersverse represents one of the first forms of grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of e-politicking in the United States. It will be argued that the vague nature of the Tea Party movement was the result of the largely populist and/or anti-establishment nature of the movement coupled with its understanding and use of the distinct capabilities of Web 2.0 media channels. In order to attain this research objective, an extensive quantitative content analysis will be conducted of all #teaparty tweets posted on Twitter's public feed between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011.<sup>16</sup>

This movement has been characterized by many scholars as a “genetically modified grassroots” political mobilization initiative, or Astroturf phenomenon, essentially driven by a small number of influential conservative and libertarian organizations and heavily promoted by the Fox News Channel (e.g. Hay 2011: 662; Hay, Hall et al. 2013). However, others argue that it has gained significant momentum due to Internet users' active presence in the Twittosphere and other social media environments. Indeed, a large number of individuals and organizations backing or opposing the Tea Party movement have turned to social media platforms to express themselves and be involved in the political process since early 2009 (e.g. Mascaro, Novak et al. 2012; Mascaro, Thiry et al. 2012). According to Bode, Lassen et al. (2011), “the Tea Party's success in 2010 arose from its ability to harness Twitter to promote a cohesive message [...]” and, by extension, retain high levels of internal mobilization. As stated by Rae (2011: 10-11),

“The advent of cable news channels, political blogs, and new social networks such as Facebook and Twitter that expedite communication between those of common interests and opinions, made the development of a new conservative, anti-Obama, political network somewhat easier than might have been envisaged.”

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 1 for a characterization of Twitter's structural and functional properties as well as its growingly important role in the U.S. electoral process.

## 5.1 Data sampling and acquisition

Since Twitter research is still in its infancy, there are no broadly accepted methodological approaches for sampling tweets. Researchers studying the manifestation of socio-political phenomena in the Twittersverse have developed different sampling tactics inspired by offline and Web 1.0 media research over the last three years. Some have opted for approaches simply consisting of archiving tweets shared on one or multiple Twitter accounts during a specific time period. For instance, Hemphill, Shapiro et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative content analysis of all tweets that were published by 24 Chicago municipal politicians on their verified Twitter accounts between June 14 and June 29, 2011. Also, Aharony (2012: 591-592) compared the tweeting patterns of three country leaders, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister David Cameron and President Barack Obama, by studying several dimensions of the entries posted on their respective accounts between August 2, 2010 and the end of October 2010.

Other scholars have based their sampling strategy on the consideration of tweets' internal characteristics such as their content (e.g. keywords that can be linked to specific themes, opinions or sentiments, hashtags, etc.) or their structural properties (e.g. presence of social interactive mechanisms, hyperlinks, etc.). For instance, Zappavigna (2011) analyzed 45,290 tweets with the word "Obama" that were posted during the 24-hour window immediately following the announcement of Barack Obama's victory in 2008. Mascaro, Black et al. (2012) examined 26,107 tweets with the #widebate hashtag, which focused on the two Wisconsin recall election debates between Republican Governor Scott Walker and his Democratic challenger Tom Barrett that were held on May 25, 2012 and May 31, 2012.

In order to examine the #teaparty dynamic in the Twittersverse, all tweets comprising one or more #teaparty hashtags that were available on Twitter's public feed between early December, 2009 and mid-March, 2011 were automatically collected and archived with the

help of the open-source data mining and archiving platform Twapper Keeper. A hashtag can be defined as a “community-driven [typographic] convention” (Small, 2011: 874) that has rapidly gained traction among tweeters since its first documented use during the 2007 San Diego area forest fires (#sandiegofires). It generally consists of a textual or numerical expression (without spaces between the letters or numbers) that is preceded by the pound (#) sign (Small 2011: 873-874). Due to the fact that it is “hyperlinked in the Twitter interface,” it enables users who click on it to automatically launch a search for all tweets with the same hashtag (Teevan, Ramage et al. 2011: 39). Based on a review of recent research, it can be argued that hashtags serve three main purposes:

- ✓ classifying tweets by associating them with a wide range of elements such as broad themes or narrow topics of interest, keywords, geographical locations, personalities, or events;
- ✓ helping to establish and coordinate decentralized conversations between tweeters who might or might not be connected to each other;
- ✓ allowing users to express themselves by issuing opinions or comments (Small 2011; Kwak, Lee et al. 2010).

With regard to this dissertation, other sampling approaches could have been employed to study the manifestation of the Tea Party movement in the Twitterverse. First, tweets containing keywords relating to the Tea Party movement could have been considered for this study:

- ✓ textual or numerical expressions such as “tea party” or “tea partiers”;
- ✓ full or partial names of politicians associated with this movement;
- ✓ full or partial names of media personalities linked to this political movement;
- ✓ names of groups, coalitions or action networks with ties to this political movement.

However, tweets with these keywords may not have pertained directly to the Tea Party movement in comparison with those having the #teaparty hashtag, thus negatively impacting the representativity and validity of the results of the analysis. For instance, tweets with the last name of Republican candidates during the 2010 U.S. midterm contest could have focused more on traditional political campaigning matters than Tea Party issues or events.

Second, micro-blog entries posted on Twitter accounts owned by individuals or organizations with ties to the Tea Party movement could have been archived and examined. Yet, they would have provided only a partial and potentially distorted portrayal of the manifestation of the Tea Party movement in the Twittosphere. Indeed, these tweets could have given only a representation of the movement through each of those perspectives and would have most likely been tainted by individual and organizational interests and objectives. The strict consideration of tweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag represents the best approach with which to assess the presence of the Tea Party movement in the Twittersverse.

The open-source platform TwapperKeeper, which was developed and launched by John O'Brien III in 2009, was used for the collection of many components of #teaparty tweets:

- ✓ identification number of the tweet;
- ✓ content of the tweet;
- ✓ username of the author of the tweet;
- ✓ identification number of the author of the tweet;
- ✓ identification number of the recipient of the tweet (when there is a direct interaction with another Twitter user through the @reply interactive mechanism);
- ✓ language of the tweet;
- ✓ online media platform from which the tweet was posted (e.g. Twitter.com, third-party applications such as Tweetdeck, Seismic Desktop, or Twiterrific, etc.);

- ✓ Web link pointing to the profile image of the author of the tweet at the time the tweet was posted;
- ✓ geographical coordinates (longitude, latitude) of the physical location of the author of the tweet when it was posted (geo-positioning function needed to be activated by the author);
- ✓ time of publication of the tweet (year, month, day and hour).

All data collected between late 2009 and early 2011 were downloaded on March 20, 2011 from the TwapperKeeper servers in a CSV (comma-separated values) format. It was then reorganized and imported into the data management and analysis software MySQL. While numerous software are equipped to study tweets, MySQL was selected for its capacity to handle big data and the properties of its analytical tools, which were well suited for the study of tweets. Interestingly, a review of recent academic literature revealed that a relatively small number of social scientists have exploited TwapperKeeper in order to archive tweets for research purposes in recent years (e.g. Wilson and Munn 2011: 1251; Larsson and Moe 2012).

There is no way to independently verify if all the #teaparty tweets shared on Twitter's public timeline during the time period considered for this investigation were archived by TwapperKeeper (Wilson and Dunn 2011: 1251). As noted by Wilson and Dunn (2011: 1251), who used this data mining tool to collect #jan25<sup>17</sup> tweets, "there is no definitive method for determining if the tweet set is complete." However, it can be argued, based on the large size of the #teaparty dataset, that even if some tweets were missed during the archiving process it would have minimal to no effect on the explanatory value of the conclusions of this investigation (Wilson and Dunn 2011: 1251).

## **5.2 Time period considered in this investigation**

This dissertation took into consideration all tweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag shared on Twitter's public timeline between Wednesday, December 9, 2009 at 22h41 +0000 and

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<sup>17</sup> The #jan25 hashtag referred to the Twitter-based discourse linked to the Egyptian protest (Wilson and Dunn 2011: 1251).

Saturday, March 19, 2011 at 15h40 +0000, a time period roughly coinciding with the 2010 U.S. midterm elections (including the Republican primary season and the special 2010 Senate election in Massachusetts). According to Perrin, Tepper et al. (2011: 74), the Tea Party movement was the main “story of the 2010 midterm elections.” Indeed, the capacity of Republican candidates who affiliated themselves with this movement “to build both enthusiasm and momentum [...] contributed to the GOP’s ability to win such a large seat margin in the House” (Carson and Pettigrew 2013). However, some Tea Party Senate candidates had a chilling effect on moderate members of the Republican electorate during the primaries in part due to their views on specific policy issues and because of their objectives, especially in states like Nevada (Sharron Angle) and Delaware (Christine O’Donnell) (Carson and Pettigrew 2013).

Selection of the time period in which #teaparty tweets were collected and archived was influenced by several variables. First, the second half of the month of December 2009 was marked by growing mobilization levels among individuals and groups sympathetic to the Tea Party movement and ahead of the 2010 midterm elections cycle. On December 30, 2009, FreedomWorks sent out a mass email to its supporters entitled, “The Freedom movement: A historic 2009 gives way to a busy 2010,” in which it promised to intensify communication and mobilization operations throughout 2010 in order to play an important role in policy debates and affect the course of the U.S. midterm elections (Kleefeld 2009). Many Tea Party activists and groups also launched political action committees (PACs) during that month to raise money before the 2010 midterm contest (Eggen and Bacon Jr. 2009).

Second, there was an intense public debate on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act during this time period. This legislation was vehemently opposed by a large number of Tea Party sympathizers mainly due to its incompatibility with their conservative social and economic principles. Other regional and national policy issues also had strong mobilizing

effects on Tea Party adherents such as the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which sought to tighten regulations in the U.S. financial industry, or immigration reform proposals in states such as Arizona (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 25; Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 306).

Third, although the U.S. midterm election was held on November 2, 2010, #teaparty tweets were collected until mid-March 2011 in order to gauge the effects of the end of the 2010 midterm election cycle on #teaparty tweeting. This approach was inspired by recent studies that have examined the public's reaction to televised political debates on Twitter (e.g. Mascaro and Goggins 2012: 10; Diakopoulos and Shamma 2010). Finally, several technical constraints linked to the utilization of the data acquisition and archiving technology of TwapperKeeper have affected the timeframe in which tweets were collected and archived. Specifically, the archiving process could not be launched before December 9, 2009 because of the author of this dissertation's unfamiliarity with TwapperKeepers' technical capabilities. As will be discussed in the next chapter of this dissertation, 1,747,306 tweets were ultimately collected with the help of this open-source platform.

Only a small number of scholars have studied the manifestation of politicking phenomena in the Twitterverse over the last three years.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, almost all of them have done so only during short periods of time (generally less than three months) or by considering a relatively small number of tweets (generally less than 125,000 tweets). Tumasjan, Sprenger et al. (2011: 406) conducted content analysis of 104,003 tweets discussing the 2009 German federal elections that were posted between August 13, 2009 and September 19, 2009.<sup>19</sup> They only considered tweets including either the name of one of the six German political parties that were represented in the Bundestag or the name of politicians affiliated with them. Meanwhile, Caren and Gaby (2011) studied the structure of the #Occupy movement-related

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>19</sup> The German federal elections were held on September 27, 2009.

discourse in the Twittersverse by analyzing #ows and #occupywallstreet tweets published between September 18, 2011 and October 17, 2011. While both studies are the source of valuable insights, the validity of their findings could be affected by their relatively narrow scope.

### 5.3 Analysis of the Twitter discourse

In order to meet the research objectives of this dissertation, a two-step quantitative content analysis approach was employed to study the #teaparty tweeting activity. First, its level of decentralization was evaluated through the consideration of specific dimensions of the #teaparty tweets archived for this dissertation:

- ✓ author of #teaparty tweets;
- ✓ integration of hyperlinks pointing to internal and external digital resources;

#### Illustration 1: Screenshot of tweet with a hyperlink



- ✓ social contacts between two or more #teaparty tweeters (@replies);

#### Illustration 2: Screenshot of a tweet serving @reply function targeting one tweeter



#### Illustration 3: Screenshot of a tweet serving @reply function targeting two tweeters



- ✓ tweets that are redistributed with or without modifications between #teaparty tweeters (@retweets either at the beginning or embedded within the tweet);

**Illustration 4: Screenshot of a tweet with @retweet (@RT)**



**Illustration 5: Screenshot of a tweet with an embedded @retweet (@RT)**

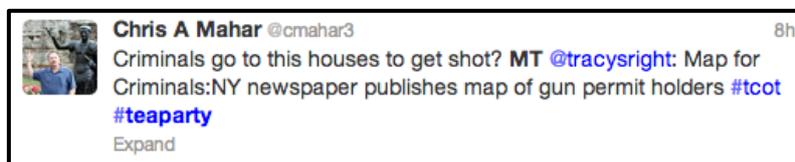


- ✓ tweets that are redistributed with modifications between #teaparty tweeters (modified tweets either at the beginning or embedded within the tweet).

**Illustration 6: Screenshot of a modified tweet (@MT)**



**Illustration 7: Screenshot of a modified tweet (@MT)**



The consideration of interactive mechanisms played a central role in the evaluation of the #teaparty dataset. As noted by Conover, Ratkiewicz et al. (2011), retweets, modified tweets, “[...] and replies may serve as a conduit through which users are exposed to information and opinions they might not choose in advance.” While some authors have studied @mentions’s effects on the political discourse in the Twitterverse (e.g. Larsson and Moe 2012; Conover, Ratkiewicz et al. 2011), these will not be considered in this dissertation for different methodological and practical reasons (e.g. no direct effect on the structure of the conversation, consideration of keywords, lack of space, etc.).

A network analysis of social interactions between #teaparty tweeters through @replies was conducted with the help of the open-source data visualization platform Gephi (version

0.8.1 beta). While other comparable software could have been used, Gephi was selected due to its “active and highly responsive open source development community,” the performance of its data manipulation and analytical functions, its overall user friendliness, and its ability to produce detailed visual representations of data (Bruns 2012). According to Bruns (2012), there are two main reasons for mapping social networks on Web 2.0 platforms:

- ✓ it provides valuable details in the layering of “human interactions with the technological platforms used to enable and support them”;
- ✓ it offers an often detailed assessment of the impact of social media sites on “the structure of the social networks which form around them, if not always in the ways intended by their designers.”

Only #teaparty tweets serving a @reply function posted during four specific weeks (Monday through Sunday) were considered for the network analysis: the week in 2009 with the highest volume of #teaparty tweets, two weeks in 2010 with the highest volume of #teaparty tweets, and the week in 2011 with the highest #teaparty post volume. Unlike 2009 and 2011, when only one week’s worth of tweets was taken into account in the analysis, two weeks were considered in 2010 because more tweets were posted per week in 2010 than during the two other years. Moreover, the entire year of 2010 was considered in this investigation while only a partial month was studied in 2009 and approximately two and a half months were taken into account in 2011.

All #teaparty tweets collected and archived with TwapperKeeper fulfilling a @reply function (starting with the “@” sign immediately followed by the username of a tweeter @username ABC) included the following elements: “from\_user\_id” (identification number of the account of the authors of the tweet) and “to\_user\_id” (identification number of the account of the recipients of a social interaction).

The analysis of the #teaparty dataset sought to answer several interconnected questions. Was the #teaparty tweeting dynamic driven by a small number of A-list tweeters? Did a large number of individuals, organizations and digital resources play an important role in shaping its structure and, by extension, the way it was perceived by the general public? Were formal political organizations and influential media and political figures at the center of #teaparty tweeting patterns? In other words, this study's findings have determined the validity of one of the main hypotheses of this dissertation, which suggests that there is a growing grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization of e-politicking in the United States.

Second, the level of hyper-fragmentation of #teaparty tweeting processes was evaluated through the consideration of the presence of hashtags referring to a wide range of elements such as policy issues, political organizations or coalitions, political action networks, events, influential media or political figures, mobilization initiatives, or geographical locations in #teaparty tweets.

**Illustration 8: Screenshot of a tweet targeting specific segments of the public with the help of hashtags**



This aspect of the content analysis will seek to isolate and provide a characterization of the micro-conversations present within the broader #teaparty tweeting dynamic. Specifically, it will answer several questions: How were some conversations interlinked by Twitter users who embedded two or more hashtags in their posts? Was the #teaparty tweeting dynamic actually composed of a large number of hybrid sub-conversations focusing on a wide range of political matters or was it primarily centralized around a small number of elements? While this overall analytical approach has not been utilized by many social scientists who have conducted Twitter research, it is expected to yield results that will have redefining effects on the broader understanding of some facets of contemporary e-politicking.

## 6 Chapter: Analysis

The Twapper Keeper data mining platform enabled the collection of 1,747,306 tweets, with at least one #teaparty hashtag, that were posted by 79,564 unique tweeters between Wednesday, December 9, 2009 at 22h41 +0000 and Saturday, March 19, 2011 at 15h40 +0000. Although TwapperKeeper was supposed to archive all tweets with the #teaparty hashtag, all tweets with a pound sign followed by the words “tea” and “party” – whether there were spaces between them or not and whether they were hyperlinked or not – were collected. This technical particularity of TwapperKeeper explains why 845 of the tweets collected for this study, or approximately 0.05 percent of the dataset, do not contain a hashtag, as defined in the previous chapter of this dissertation. As demonstrated in recent research (e.g. Larsson and Moe 2012), tweeters often make mistakes when writing their posts such as putting one or more spaces between a pound sign (“#”) and textual or numerical expressions (e.g. writing on a wireless device without the “autocorrect” feature enabled, typos, etc.), hence explaining why some of the tweets collected for this study did not respect the hashtag convention.

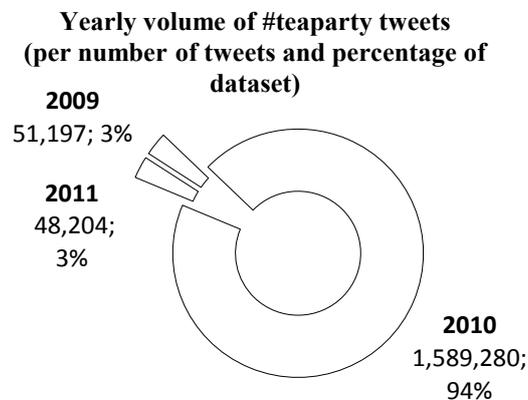
While the time of publication (year, month, day and hour) of 96.64 percent of the #teaparty tweets collected (1,688,681 tweets) was properly recorded by TwapperKeeper, a minor technical issue prevented the acquisition of this information for 58,625 tweets (3.36 percent of the tweet sample). This situation is unlikely to have a negative impact on the integrity of the analysis of the #teaparty politicking dynamic because it only affects a small portion of the dataset. The date and time of publication of these tweets cannot be recuperated through other means because of several factors such as the limited technical capabilities of other data mining technologies, the restrictive nature of Twitter’s data access policies, and the size and uniqueness of the #teaparty dataset.

## 6.1 Broad characterization of the #teaparty dataset

The overwhelming majority of the #teaparty tweets (with the date and time of publication) were published in 2010 (see Graph 3). That year was marked by various elements that mobilized Americans adhering or opposed to Tea Party ideals and objectives:

- ✓ the polarized nature of the public debate on the reform of the health care system;
- ✓ the state of the U.S. economy;
- ✓ the Republican primary season, which led to heated races between congressional and senatorial candidates backed by the Tea Party movement and more moderate contenders;
- ✓ the U.S. midterm election cycle (e.g. Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011; Jacobson 2011; Abramowitz 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

**Graph 3: Annual volume of #teaparty tweets**



The examination of the monthly #teaparty tweet volume (see Table 2) reveals that while tweeting levels remained relatively low before May 2010 (less than 70,000 tweets per month), they rapidly increased during the following months, presumably due to the intensification of political campaigning activities linked to the 2010 U.S. midterm elections. Interestingly, there was a sharp drop in the monthly #teaparty tweet volume after October 2010, most likely due to the end of the 2010 U.S. midterm election cycle and the victory of Barack Obama, which presumably demobilized some members of the Tea Party movement.

The rapid intensification of #teaparty tweeting in May 2010 can be attributed to several factors such as the heated Republican primary elections in several states that involved Tea Party hopefuls, Tea Party events such as the first Tennessee Tea Party coalition inaugural convention in Gatlinburg between May 22 and May 23, 2010, and the growing attention that this movement received from the mainstream press (Burghart and Zeskind 2010: 43; Boykoff and Laschever, 2011; Weaver and Scacco, 2013). As noted by Boykoff and Laschever (2011: 356), who studied the news coverage of the midterm elections between February 9, 2009 and November 30, 2010:

“Nearly, every article [with an “election impact frame”<sup>20</sup> that was published in major U.S.-based news sources such as ABC News, CBS News, CNN, FNN, MSNBC, The New York Times, USA Today, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal] after 1 May 2010 included some discussion of ‘Tea Party candidates’ or how TPM energy drove voter activity.”

The final days of April 2010 and the first weeks of May 2010 were also marked by the adoption of laws and other regulations in several states addressing the economic and social concerns of Tea Party adherents. For example, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law SB 1070 on April 23, 2010 and HB 2281 on May 10, 2010, which sought “to streamline undocumented migration and [...] [to essentially erase] La Raza and Mexican-American Studies at the Tucson Unified School District,” respectively (e.g. Torres 2012). A 2008 survey showed that close to 88 percent of Tea Party adherents believed that undocumented immigrants were stealing jobs from U.S. citizens compared to 44 percent among those opposing the Tea Party movement (Barreto, Cooper et al. 2011: 22).

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<sup>20</sup> The “election impact frame” refers to any “articles and reports portraying the movement as influential or important in elections, as a significant player in horse-race politics, or as playing a key role in legislative action” (Boykoff and Laschever 2011: 356).

**Table 2: Monthly volume of #teaparty tweets**

**Monthly volume of #teaparty tweets  
(per number of tweets and percentage of the dataset)**

<b>Monthly breakdown</b>	<b>Number of tweets</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
December 2009	51,197	3.03
January 2010	68,204	4.04
February 2010	60,405	3.58
March 2010	47,787	2.83
April 2010	50,349	2.98
May 2010	156,680	9.28
June 2010	129,215	7.65
July 2010	174,582	10.34
August 2010	181,122	10.73
September 2010	204,575	12.11
October 2010	275,408	16.31
November 2010	198,596	11.76
December 2010	42,357	2.51
January 2011	33,700	2.00
February 2011	3,113	0.18
March 2011	11,391	0.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,688,681</b>	<b>100.00</b>

A detailed review of the weekly breakdown (from Monday to Sunday) of #teaparty tweeting activities was also conducted<sup>21</sup> (see Table 3).

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<sup>21</sup> Due to the constraints associated with the time period selected for this investigation, the first week only comprises 5 days (from Wednesday, December 9, 2009 at 22h41 +0000 to Sunday, December 13, 2009 23h59 +0000) while the last week contains only 6 days (Monday, March 14, 2011 at 0h00 +0000 to Saturday, March 19, 2011 at 15h40 +0000).

**Table 3: Weekly volume of #teaparty tweets**

**Weekly volume of #teaparty tweets  
(per number of tweets and percentage of dataset)**

#	Weekly breakdown	Number of tweets	Percentage	#	Weekly breakdown	Number of tweets	Percentage
1	9-dec-09 to 13-dec-09	9,495	0.56	35	2-aug-10 to 8-aug-10	45,947	2.72
2	14-dec-09 to 20-dec-09	16,984	1.01	36	9-aug-10 to 15-aug-10	42,111	2.49
3	21-dec-09 to 27-dec-09	14,364	0.85	37	16-aug-10 to 22-aug-10	43,538	2.58
4	28-dec-09 to 03-jan-10	17,560	1.04	38	23-aug-10 to 29-aug-10	29,944	1.77
5	04-jan-10 to 10-jan-10	15,883	0.94	39	30-aug-10 to 5-sep-10	51,555	3.05
6	11-jan-10 to 17-jan-10	15,039	0.89	40	6-sep-10 to 12-sep-10	51,888	3.07
7	18-jan-10 to 24-jan-10	12,206	0.72	41	13-sep-10 to 19-sep-10	24,318	1.44
8	25-jan-10 to 31-jan-10	17,870	1.06	42	20-sep-10 to 26-sep-10	64,310	3.81
9	1-feb-10 to 7-feb-10	14,333	0.85	43	27-sep-10 to 3-oct-10	47,710	2.83
10	8-feb-10 to 14-feb-10	11,607	0.69	44	4-oct-10 to 10-oct-10	58,459	3.46
11	15-feb-10 to 21-feb-10	15,643	0.93	45	11-oct-10 to 17-oct-10	58,493	3.46
12	22-feb-10 to 28-feb-10	18,822	1.11	46	18-oct-10 to 24-oct-10	65,609	3.89
13	01-mar-10 to 07-mar-10	17,576	1.04	47	25-oct-10 to 31-oct-10	72,088	4.27
14	08-mar-10 to 14-mar-10	10,332	0.61	48	1-nov-10 to 7-nov-10	75,409	4.47
15	15-mar-10 to 21-mar-10	6,849	0.41	49	8-nov-10 to 14-nov-10	43,319	2.57
16	22-mar-10 to 28-mar-10	9,558	0.57	50	15-nov-10 to 21-nov-10	36,458	2.16
17	29-mar-10 to 04-apr-10	9,439	0.56	51	22-nov-10 to 28-nov-10	31,827	1.88
18	05-apr-10 to 11-apr-10	15,538	0.92	52	29-nov-10 to 5-dec-10	34,846	2.06
19	12-apr-10 to 18-apr-10	11,315	0.67	53	6-dec-10 to 12-dec-10	5,361	0.32
20	19-apr-10 to 25-apr-10	8,261	0.49	54	13-dec-10 to 19-dec-10	0	0.00
21	26-apr-10 to 2-may-10	18,709	1.11	55	20-dec-10 to 26-dec-10	9,728	0.58
22	3-may-10 to 9-may-10	35,136	2.08	56	27-dec-10 to 2-jan-11	5,184	0.31
23	10-may-10 to 16-may-10	34,006	2.01	57	3-jan-11 to 9-jan-11	10,731	0.64
24	17-may-10 to 23-may-10	39,426	2.33	58	10-jan-11 to 16-jan-11	10,813	0.64
25	24-may-10 to 30-may-10	35,274	2.09	59	17-jan-11 to 23-jan-11	4,237	0.25
26	31-may-10 to 6-jun-10	22,336	1.32	60	24-jan-11 to 30-jan-11	6,740	0.40
27	7-jun-10 to 13-jun-10	20,293	1.20	61	31-jan-11 to 6-feb-11	1,489	0.09
28	14-jun-10 to 20-jun-10	37,973	2.25	62	7-feb-11 to 13-feb-11	2	0.00
29	21-jun-10 to 27-jun-10	37,599	2.23	63	14-feb-11 to 20-feb-11	94	0.01
30	28-jun-10 to 4-jul-10	37,708	2.23	64	21-feb-11 to 27-feb-11	1,472	0.09
31	5-jul-10 to 11-jul-10	42,352	2.51	65	28-feb-11 to 6-mar-11	2,535	0.15
32	12-jul-10 to 18-jul-10	48,197	2.85	66	7-mar-11 to 13-mar-11	1,599	0.09
33	19-jul-10 to 25-jul-10	29,793	1.76	67	14-mar-11 to 19-mar-11	7,313	0.43
34	26-jul-10 to 1-aug-10	36,078	2.14	<b>Total</b>		1,688,681	100.00

The data in Table 3 shows that #teaparty tweeting reached its peak level during the two-week period immediately preceding the elections, which were held on November 2, 2010, and the entire week of the elections. On Election Day alone, #teaparty tweeters shared 16,613 micro-

blog entries, a number far surpassing the tweet volume observed during 30 of the 67 weeks considered for this study (44.8 percent). There were abnormally low #teaparty tweeting levels during three of the 67 weeks considered in this study (the weeks of December 13 to December 19, 2010, February 7 to February 13, 2010, and February 14 to February 20, 2011). This situation was caused by a minor technical issue linked to the archiving of the date and time of publication of 58,625 #teaparty posts, which was discussed previously in this chapter.

## **6.2 Level of activity of #teaparty tweeters**

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this chapter, 79,564 users engaged in #teaparty tweeting between early December 2009 and late March 2011. The majority of them (40,691 users or 51.14 percent of all #teaparty tweeters) posted only one tweet while 13.6 percent posted at least two tweets (10,388 unique users), 6.57 percent shared a minimum of three tweets (5,225 unique users), 4.03 percent published at least four tweets (3,208 unique users), and close to a quarter of them (25.2 percent) posted five tweets or more. Table 4 provides a detailed breakdown of the number of tweeters who posted between 1 and 120 tweets. One can argue based on these findings that the #teaparty tweeting activity did not revolve around a small number of influential political players. In fact, a large number of individuals and organizations were involved in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic, thus reaffirming the decentralization thesis, which is one of the two core premises of this dissertation. Even though slightly more than half of #teaparty tweeters only posted one tweet, their number far surpasses the number of tweeters who posted more than 50 tweets during the 67 weeks considered in this study.

**Table 4: Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters**

**Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters  
(per number and percentage of unique tweeters)**

<b>Number of tweets</b>	<b>Number of unique tweeters</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number of tweets</b>	<b>Number of unique tweeters</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1	40,691	51.14	31	141	0.18
2	10,388	13.06	32	132	0.17
3	5,225	6.57	33	130	0.16
4	3,208	4.03	34	129	0.16
5	2,215	2.78	35	126	0.16
6	1,704	2.14	36	116	0.15
7	1,288	1.62	37	78	0.10
8	1,080	1.36	38	89	0.11
9	865	1.09	39	108	0.14
10	762	0.96	40	92	0.12
11	650	0.82	41	79	0.10
12	551	0.69	42	98	0.12
13	470	0.59	43	81	0.10
14	442	0.56	44	77	0.10
15	413	0.52	45	71	0.09
16	373	0.47	46	81	0.10
17	369	0.46	47	81	0.10
18	271	0.34	48	78	0.10
19	287	0.36	49	77	0.10
20	264	0.33	50	67	0.08
21	245	0.31	51	57	0.07
22	224	0.28	52	69	0.09
23	229	0.29	53	78	0.10
24	222	0.28	54	48	0.06
25	199	0.25	55	55	0.07
26	187	0.24	56	61	0.08
27	177	0.22	57	54	0.07
28	136	0.17	58	55	0.07
29	130	0.16	59	49	0.06
30	151	0.19	60	57	0.07

**Table 4: Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters (continued)**

**Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters  
(per number and percentage of unique tweeters)**

<b>Number of tweets</b>	<b>Number of unique tweeters</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number of tweets</b>	<b>Number of unique tweeters</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
61	47	0.06	91	31	0.04
62	33	0.04	92	19	0.02
63	45	0.06	93	21	0.03
64	37	0.05	94	24	0.03
65	43	0.05	95	21	0.03
66	45	0.06	96	23	0.03
67	39	0.05	97	15	0.02
68	34	0.04	98	16	0.02
69	43	0.05	99	19	0.02
70	39	0.05	100	26	0.03
71	33	0.04	101	16	0.02
72	49	0.06	102	20	0.03
73	35	0.04	103	19	0.02
74	33	0.04	104	17	0.02
75	38	0.05	105	25	0.03
76	36	0.05	106	17	0.02
77	28	0.04	107	15	0.02
78	35	0.04	108	16	0.02
79	36	0.05	109	17	0.02
80	30	0.04	110	13	0.02
81	26	0.03	111	18	0.02
82	24	0.03	112	15	0.02
83	31	0.04	113	12	0.02
84	24	0.03	114	8	0.01
85	26	0.03	115	10	0.01
86	22	0.03	116	14	0.02
87	22	0.03	117	20	0.03
88	27	0.03	118	15	0.02
89	29	0.04	119	18	0.02
90	23	0.03	120	14	0.02

The 4,284 Twitter users who posted 50 #teaparty tweets or more during the 16-month period between December 2009 and March 2011 (5.38 percent of all #teaparty tweeters) can be defined as “vocal tweeters” (Mascaro and Goggins 2012). While they were heavily invested in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic, they were not likely to have a strong influence on its structure and overall agenda because their low-profile counterparts were collectively the

source of an extremely large volume of micro-blog entries, which mostly likely diluted the impact of vocal tweeter's contributions. In other words, non-vocal tweeters collectively had a bigger impact on the structure of #teaparty tweeting patterns than the minority of tweeters who were the source of more micro-blog entries.

A heuristic review of vocal tweeters' contributions to the #teaparty tweeting dynamic showed that many of them discussed matters not necessarily pertaining to the Tea Party movement. Specifically, several #teaparty tweeters denounced the behavior of other #teaparty tweeters who they believed were trolls, spammers, or, from a broader perspective, were participating illegitimately in #teaparty tweeting. For example, 1950Target (user ID: 8198885), who published well over 300 #teaparty micro-blog entries, posted a series of tweets in which he identified tweeters he believed were spamming #teaparty information flows and social interactions. The following three tweets were published on December 15, 2009 at 17h43 +0000, February 21, 2010 at 22h53 +0000, and February 23, 2010 at 19h24 +0000:

@roncozby #conservative TROLL ALERT @NewsApe if this troll tweets u REPORT FOR SPAM #nra #rkba #2nd #guns #libertarian #tcot #sgp #teaparty

Foulmouthed Spammer Troll @blackjedi47 ALERT VIA a couple of patriots <http://bit.ly/crMJyt> & <http://bit.ly/ab187k> #tcot #sgp #teaparty #ocra

POS liberallying spammer troll alert:Blast em where you find em @BonanzlePaceset #tcot #sgp #teaparty #iAMthemob #liberallies

Many tweeters embedded the #teaparty hashtag in tweets where they expressed their desire to have more followers. ekklesia7 (user ID: 65248549), who shared in excess of 100 #teaparty micro-blog entries during the 67 weeks considered in this study, shared the following posts on December 11, 2009 at 11h54 +0000, February 4, 2010 at 16h55 +0000, and February 16, 2010 at 12h25 +0000, respectively:

need 131 followers 2 brk twitter barrier #tcot #teaparty #iamthemob

63 more followers bfore I brk the 2000 ceiling so I can follow mor gr8t patriots need your support #tcot #ocra #teaparty #iamthemob

Just 3more followers so I can follower some more great patriots #conservative #teaparty #iamthemob #gop #sgp #tcot #tlot #prolife

Finally, a large number of #teaparty tweeters circulated conspiracy theories, opinions or unverified facts that were not necessarily relevant for the #teaparty audience. For, instance, 08hayabusa (user ID: 75699178), who posted more than 50 #teaparty tweets, tweeted the following on January 1, 2011 at 05h54 +0000:

RT @foundersweb: Stuxnet: It's Bush's fault! (american thinker) <http://bit.ly/fJpq48> #tcot #teaparty

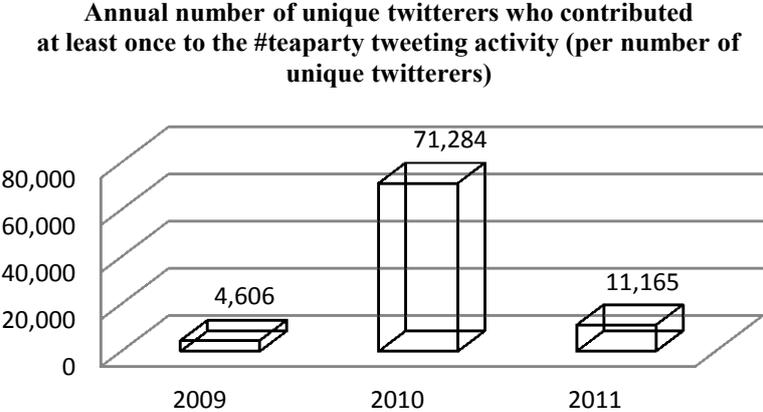
“Stuxnex” refers to a computer worm that was discovered in June 2010 and is believed to have been created by American and Israeli agencies to attack nuclear facilities (Farwell and Rohozinski 2011). The hyperlink points to a website maintained by Foundersweb, which is only accessible to computers with an authorized IP address. While the content of this tweet is not necessarily directly tied to the Tea Party movement, it is illustrative of the paranoid or incoherent vision of reality that, as previously discussed in this dissertation, drives some individuals and organizations that subscribe to the Tea Party movement.

There are some limitations to this type of analysis. Indeed, there are no broadly accepted approaches for analyzing the content of hyperlinks. In recent years, no research has been done using a qualitative content analysis approach to study the content of tweets linked to a socio-political phenomenon. In fact, the structure of tweets and the publication norms that are unique to the Twitterverse (e.g. hashtags, abbreviations, etc.) render this type of analysis extremely difficult to conduct. Still, a qualitative content review of the entire #teaparty dataset would provide more insight on the type of content that was circulated by tweeters. Some scholars have turned to other qualitative techniques such as conducting interviews and circulating online questionnaires to study the manifestation of socio-political phenomena in the Twitterverse over the past three years (e.g. Wilson 2011; Parmelee and Bichard 2012).

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the structure of #teaparty tweeting, an annual breakdown of the number of unique tweeters who shared at least one #teaparty post

was conducted (Graph 4). Much as in the case of the annual distribution of #teaparty tweets, more users engaged in #teaparty tweeting in 2010 than in 2009 and 2011.

**Graph 4: Annual number of unique tweeters who contributed at least once to the #teaparty tweeting activity**



The number of tweeters who contributed at least one #teaparty micro-blog entry was also examined from a monthly and weekly perspective. The monthly breakdown (Table 5) indicates that while the number of unique #teaparty tweeters never exceeded the 9,000 mark before May 2010, it gradually increased until it peaked in November 2010. After the elections, the number of Twitter users who took part in the #teaparty politicking dynamic sharply dropped. Again, it can be presumed that the previously discussed minor technical glitch in the data collection process may have affected the data for the months of December 2010 and February 2011.

**Table 5: Monthly number of unique tweeters who participated at least once in #teaparty tweeting activity**

**Monthly number of unique tweeters who participated at least once in #teaparty tweeting activity (per number of unique tweeters)**

Monthly breakdown	Number of unique tweeters	Monthly breakdown	Number of unique tweeters
December 2009	4,606	August 2010	13,359
January 2010	6,190	September 2010	16,485
February 2010	7,534	October 2010	19,435
March 2010	7,089	November 2010	19,581
April 2010	8,695	December 2010	5,862
May 2010	14,552	January 2011	7,820
June 2010	12,219	February 2011	1,596
July 2010	14,804	March 2011	4,002

The weekly breakdown of the number of users who were involved in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic reveals that, much as in the case of the analysis of weekly #teaparty tweet volume, the number of unique tweeters reached the highest levels during the two weeks leading up to the U.S. midterm contest and the week of the midterm elections, which were held on November 2, 2010 (see Table 6). The number of weekly unique tweeters never exceeded the 4,500 mark before the week of May 3, 2010 to May 9, 2010 and after the week of December 6, 2010 to December 12, 2010. Interestingly, 4,188 users posted at least one #teaparty microblog entry on November 2, 2010 alone. In fact, more #teaparty tweeters were active during that day than during the 35 weeks covered by this study. No less than 4,400 individuals posted at least one #teaparty tweet between the week of April 26, 2010 to May 2, 2010 and the week of November 29, 2010 to December 5, 2010.<sup>22</sup>

It can be inferred from these results and those of the previous sub-section that the #teaparty politicking dynamic was highly heterogeneous and, by extension, not necessarily driven by a small number of *A-list* tweeters. In other words, a large number of individuals and organizations with wide-ranging preferences, interests and goals posted at least one #teaparty tweet. Many other recent studies have examined the involvement of Internet users in political communication, mobilization and organizing phenomena in the Twittosphere and have found relatively similar results. For instance, Burgess and Bruns (2012) determined that 36,287 unique tweeters posted 415,009 tweets on the 2010 Australian federal elections (#ausvote) between July 17, 2010 and August 24, 2010. Likewise, Greenberg and Raynauld (2012), who studied the tweeting dynamic linked to the Ottawa mayoral elections in 2010, found that 1,344 unique Internet users published 9,409 tweets with at least the #ottvote hashtag between October 1, 2010 and October 25, 2010.

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<sup>22</sup> Again, the extremely low numbers of unique Twitter users during the weeks of December 13, 2010 to December 19, 2010 (no unique tweeters), February 7 2010 to February 13, 2010 (two unique tweeters), and February 14 2010 to February 20, 2010 (91 unique tweeters) could be attributed to the previously-described technical issue that affected the data collection and archiving process.

However, these two scientific investigations have several limitations which can negatively impact the validity of their results. Specifically, they have examined relatively short periods of time and a generally small number of tweets. While their findings may provide broad insights on Twitter-based politics, they fail to offer a detailed assessment of tweeters' publication patterns. In contrast, a growing number of social scientists are studying social and political phenomena in the Twitterverse either over a longer period of time or by collecting a larger number of tweets. For instance, Jacobson and Mascaro (2013) did a quantitative content analysis of 1,879,994 tweets focusing on the social movement Movember that were posted between October 31 and December 1, 2012.

In summary, this study supports the findings from previous investigations which suggest that a large number of individuals and organizations are taking part in social or political phenomena in the Twitterverse. In other words, this media platform is contributing to the uncontrolled hyper-decentralization of the political process. More important, the scope of this investigation, which spans 67 weeks and considers more than 1.7 million tweets, provides a more comprehensive evaluation of the modern Twitter-based political dynamic.

**Table 6: Weekly number of tweeters who were involved at least once in #teaparty tweeting activity**

**Weekly number of tweeters who were involved  
at least once in #teaparty tweeting activity (per number of unique tweeters)**

#	Weekly breakdown	Number of unique tweeters	#	Weekly breakdown	Number of unique tweeters
1	9-dec-09 to 13-déc-09	1,572	35	2-aug-10 to 8-aug-10	5,522
2	14-dec-09 to 20-déc-09	2,513	36	9-aug-10 to 15-aug-10	5,131
3	21-dec-09 to 27-déc-09	2,268	37	16-aug-10 to 22-aug-10	5,542
4	28-dec-09 to 03-jan-10	2,369	38	23-aug-10 to 29-aug-10	5,256
5	04-jan-10 to 10-jan-10	2,592	39	30-aug-10 to 5-sep-10	6,916
6	11-jan-10 to 17-jan-10	2,388	40	6-sep-10 to 12-sep-10	6,697
7	18-jan-10 to 24-jan-10	2,499	41	13-sep-10 to 19-sep-10	5,595
8	25-jan-10 to 31-jan-10	2,951	42	20-sep-10 to 26-sep-10	7,520
9	1-feb-10 to 7-fév-10	3,235	43	27-sep-10 to 3-oct-10	5,615
10	8-feb-10 to 14-fév-10	2,719	44	4-oct-10 to 10-oct-10	6,452
11	15-feb-10 to 21-fév-10	3,150	45	11-oct-10 to 17-oct-10	7,084
12	22-feb-10 to 28-fév-10	3,635	46	18-oct-10 to 24-oct-10	8,487
13	01-mar-10 to 07-mar-10	3,300	47	25-oct-10 to 31-oct-10	9,823
14	08-mar-10 to 14-mar-10	2,321	48	1-nov-10 to 7-nov-10	12,602
15	15-mar-10 to 21-mar-10	2,243	49	8-nov-10 to 14-nov-10	6,323
16	22-mar-10 to 28-mar-10	3,003	50	15-nov-10 to 21-nov-10	5,978
17	29-mar-10 to 04-avr-10	2,632	51	22-nov-10 to 28-nov-10	4,980
18	05-avr-10 to 11-avr-10	3,143	52	29-nov-10 to 5-dec-10	4,995
19	12-avr-10 to 18-avr-10	3,295	53	6-dec-10 to 12-dec-10	1,484
20	19-avr-10 to 25-avr-10	2,715	54	13-dec-10 to 19-dec-10	0
21	26-avr-10 to 2-may-10	4,416	55	20-dec-10 to 26-dec-10	2,152
22	3-may-10 to 9-may-10	6,083	56	27-dec-10 to 2-jan-11	1,537
23	10-may-10 to 16-may-10	5,405	57	3-jan-11 to 9-jan-11	3,968
24	17-may-10 to 23-may-10	7,059	58	10-jan-11 to 16-jan-11	3,604
25	24-may-10 to 30-may-10	5,957	59	17-jan-11 to 23-jan-11	1,463
26	31-may-10 to 6-jun-10	4,632	60	24-jan-11 to 30-jan-11	2,171
27	7-jun-10 to 13-jun-10	4,714	61	31-jan-11 to 6-feb-11	621
28	14-jun-10 to 20-jun-10	5,387	62	7-feb-11 to 13-feb-11	2
29	21-jun-10 to 27-jun-10	4,669	63	14-feb-11 to 20-feb-11	91
30	28-jun-20 to 4-jul-10	5,903	64	21-feb-11 to 27-feb-11	899
31	5-jul-10 to 11-jul-10	5,676	65	28-feb-11 to 6-mar-11	1,094
32	12-jul-10 to 18-jul-10	6,920	66	7-mar-11 to 13-mar-11	784
33	19-jul-10 to 25-jul-10	5,873	67	14-mar-11 to 19-mar-11	2,703
34	26-jul-10 to 1-aug-10	5,451			

### **6.3 Content and social-interactive components of #teaparty tweets**

This sub-section will be dedicated to the analysis of #teaparty tweeters' patterns of utilization of four distinct social and content interactive mechanisms in their tweets between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011:

- ✓ @replies;
- ✓ @retweets (RTs);
- ✓ modified tweets (MTs);
- ✓ hyperlinks.

The main objective of this facet of the analysis is to determine how #teaparty tweeters interacted with each other through their use of @replies, @retweets and modified tweets. Moreover, their use of hyperlinks in their posts will be investigated in order to determine how it affected the structure and orientation of their involvement in #teaparty information flows and social relations. In other words, this section will offer a quantitative demonstration that the #teaparty politicking dynamic during the 67-week period covered by this investigation was marked by high levels of decentralization.

#### **6.3.1 @replies**

@replies can be defined as a Twitter-specific practice enabling users to independently engage in social interactions with one or multiple tweeters. In the words of Hughes and Palen (2009), “a norm has evolved such that a sender can designate a tweet as a specific reply to another user, even when the tweets are publicly broadcast.” @replies targeting a specific user begin with the sign “@” followed immediately (without spaces) by the username of the recipient of the interaction followed by the content of the interaction (e.g. @username ABC). Those targeting multiple users begin with repetitions of the @reply formulation followed by the content of the interaction (e.g. “@username @username @username ABC” in the case of

@replies targeting three users) (Hughes and Palen 2009; Larsson and Moe 2012). @replies can serve wide-ranging content dispersion and social interaction functions:

- ✓ redistributing digital material (text, photos, videos, Web links, etc.) in a highly targeted manner;
- ✓ initiating public one-to-one, one-to-few, or one-to-many social contacts;
- ✓ fostering community-building initiatives by linking up Twitter users who might not necessarily be sharing direct social connections in the Twitterverse, but might have similar preferences, interests or objectives;
- ✓ creating new threads of discussion generally focusing on specific issues or events (e.g. Mascaro and Goggins 2012; Mustafaraj, Finn et al. 2011).

However, Larsson and Moe (2012) point out that more research is required to better understand the intricacies of the @reply mechanism, which has evolved significantly since Twitter's public launch in 2006 and is likely to continue to do so over the coming years.

The quantitative review of the 1,747,306 #teaparty tweets indicated that only 85,629 of them (approximately 4.9 percent of the dataset), which were posted by 11,296 unique tweeters, served a @reply function. The overwhelming majority of tweeters engaged in only one social interaction with one or multiple users (see Table 7). Interestingly, a small number of #teaparty tweeters were responsible for the bulk of @replies. For example, @koopersmith (user ID: 1213304) posted 406 tweets serving a @reply function such as the two entries below which were shared on December 31, 2009 at 19h48 +0000 and February 10, 2010 at 09h16 +0000, respectively:

@FactReal You're quite welcome - I only tell the truth #rushlimbaugh #tcot #teaparty #prayforrush

@WeThePeopleUSA BY THE WAY - IF YOU READ MY COLUMN ON TROOPS PATROLLING AMERICA YOU WILL KNOW ME BETTER #patriot #TeaParty #4liberty #NWO

In addition, @jowoe (user ID: 3819931) shared 367 @replies such as the two tweets below that were posted on June 28, 2010 at 20h44 +0000 and September 10, 2010 at 23h40 +0000, respectively:

@jay\_pe PHOTOS of #teaparty racism <http://huff.to/3BpdaO>

@Dufus 25% is a rather low number I would think. If 2/3 of America dislikes #TEAPARTY policy I would say at least 50% mock them! #tcot #p2

These findings suggest #teaparty tweeters were more likely to use Twitter to reach out to other users in a unidirectional manner to attain different top-down objectives such as mass circulating mix-media digital material or expressing themselves on various issues and events than to engage in meaningful social interactions. Still, Twitter has allowed peripheral political actors (e.g. individuals, coalitions, information action networks, groups, etc.) to achieve high recognition and to have an impact on the public political discussion. In other words, it can enable anyone to become an A-list player in the broader political process.

**Table 7: Number of #teaparty tweets serving @reply function posted by tweeters**

**Number of #teaparty tweets serving @reply function posted by tweeters  
(per number and percentage of unique tweeters)**

Number of tweets with @reply	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage	Number of tweets with @reply	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage
1	6,047	53.53	27	16	0.14
2	1,598	14.15	28	18	0.16
3	820	7.26	29	17	0.15
4	456	4.04	30	15	0.13
5	312	2.76	31	18	0.16
6	243	2.15	32	23	0.20
7	210	1.86	33	17	0.15
8	161	1.43	34	12	0.11
9	125	1.11	35	12	0.11
10	99	0.88	36	16	0.14
11	81	0.72	37	13	0.12
12	87	0.77	38	12	0.11
13	76	0.67	39	10	0.09
14	64	0.57	40	6	0.05
15	54	0.48	41	8	0.07
16	35	0.31	42	4	0.04
17	40	0.35	43	6	0.05
18	30	0.27	44	6	0.05
19	37	0.33	45	7	0.06
20	25	0.22	46	5	0.04
21	37	0.33	47	8	0.07
22	30	0.27	48	10	0.09
23	14	0.12	49	9	0.08
24	23	0.20	50	9	0.08
25	22	0.19	51 and more	273	2.42
26	20	0.18	<b>Total</b>	11,296	100.00

Further analysis was conducted to determine which #teaparty tweeters were the most popular recipients of @replies. It showed that 17,762 users were the recipients of at least one @reply. Specifically, three tweeters were the recipients of 1,000 @replies or more, while three were the recipients of between 500 and 999 @replies, 74 were targeted by between 100 and 499 @replies, and 1,414 were contacted between 10 and 99 times by other tweeters with this social interaction mechanism. Interestingly, 10,391 tweeters were the recipients of only one

@reply compared to two @replies for 2,501 tweeters, three @replies for 1,219 tweeters, four @replies for 674 users, and five @replies for 477 users (see Table 8). Elected and non-elected politicians, media personalities and formal political organizations are among those who were the recipients of the largest number of @replies (see Table 9). Still, these statistics clearly indicate that the @reply patterns were fairly decentralized because a large number of users were the sources and recipients of social interactions.

**Table 8: Recipients of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag**

**Recipients of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (per number of @replies)**

#	Recipient of @replies	Frequency	#	Recipient of @replies	Frequency
1	@glennbeck	2,757	26	@senate_gops	207
2	@sarahpalinusa	1,497	27	@tlw3	204
3	@koopersmith	1,202	28	@dmashak	202
4	@barackobama	574	29	@conservativeind	200
5	@christineod	515	30	@josephagallant	200
6	@gopleader	511	31	@slone	196
7	@maddow	424	32	@gopwhip	175
8	@gregwhoward	416	33	@jimdemint	173
9	@cspanwj	405	34	@michelebachmann	170
10	@pkatt	382	35	@obama_games	169
11	@sharronangle	368	36	@herfarm	163
12	@keitholbermann	335	37	@heytammybruce	156
13	@johnboehner	331	38	@whitehouse	155
14	@michellemalkin	323	39	@genetaylorusa	153
15	@pressec	320	40	@hcreminder	150
16	@andilinks	320	41	@foxandfriends	147
17	@joewmiller	298	42	@gretawire	146
18	@foxnews	267	43	@senjohnmccain	141
19	@theflacracker	267	44	@mikepfs	140
20	@andrewbreitbart	259	45	@seanbielat	134
21	@seanhannity	246	46	@_ccm	132
22	@scottbrownma	241	47	@cody_k	128
23	@csteven	240	48	@survivalstation	127
24	@thebighoot	233	49	@accesssonora	127
25	@karlrove	230	50	@slackadjuster	126

**Table 8: Recipients of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (continued)****Recipients of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (per number of @replies)**

#	Recipient of @replies	Frequency	#	Recipient of @replies	Frequency
51	@tpo_hissel	126	76	@naacp	105
52	@shoq	124	77	@ai_agw	104
53	@sunshineejc	124	78	@govbrewer	103
54	@resisttyranny	123	79	@dloesch	103
55	@tahdeetz	122	80	@ebertchicago	102
56	@marklevinshow	122	81	@exposeliberals	101
57	@welshman007	121	82	@speakerpelosi	101
58	@dailykos	121	83	@newtgingrich	100
59	@snapperhead	121	84	@allenwest2010	99
60	@jihadihunter	121	85	@megynkelly	98
61	@oxyconservative	120	86	@tweetcongress	97
62	@drrandpaul	120	87	@tricianc1	96
63	@cfheather	120	88	@katinindy	95
64	@56forfreedom	119	89	@pauline_ma	95
65	@genjunk	118	90	@jarjarbug	94
66	@klsouth	116	91	@dksithlord	93
67	@dhrxsol1234	114	92	@mi9rlaine	93
68	@marcorubio	114	93	@randybrogdon	92
69	@first_patriots	112	94	@grammy620	91
70	@gemimms	110	95	@swiftread	90
71	@stopobama2012	108	96	@greathairguy	89
72	@politicalwind	108	97	@rdickerhoof	88
73	@dasani_01	107	98	@reppaulryan	87
74	@alinskydefeater	105	99	@kriskxx	86
75	@blackjedi47	105	100	@efricke	86

Interestingly, the #teaparty social interaction dynamic was not centered on specific types of political players. As indicated in Table 8, many ordinary Twitter users were the recipients of a large number of @replies. However, many tweets targeted both Democratic and Republican elected officials who were not necessarily key players within the Tea Party movement such as Democratic California Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi (@speakerpelosi), Republican Arizona Governor Janice K. Brewer (@govbrewer), and Republican Arizona Senator John McCain (@senjohnmccain). Others were intended for important figures in both the mainstream and alternative media worlds such as Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly (@megynkelly) and

conservative media personalities such as Andrew Breitbart (@andrewbreitbart). Even the press secretary for the Obama administration (@pressec) was the recipient of a relatively large number of #teaparty tweets. This dynamic was indicative of the highly democratic nature of #teaparty social interactions during the period considered in this study.

To further understand the highly decentralized nature of #teaparty social interactions, a network analysis was conducted with the help of the data visualization platform Gephi. Its goal was to examine the structure of social contacts between #teaparty tweeters during a four week period, which was chosen based on factors discussed in the methodology chapter of this dissertation:

- ✓ December 14, 2009 to December 20, 2009;
- ✓ November 1, 2010 to November 7, 2010;
- ✓ October 25, 2010 to October 31, 2010;
- ✓ January 10, 2011 to January 16, 2011.

The multidimensional information of all @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag that were collected during these four weeks was imported into Gephi. Four graphs (one per week) were produced with the help of the force-based algorithm developed by Fruchterman and Reingold (1991). It determined the layout of nodes, which represent tweeters who engaged in social contacts through @replies (senders and receivers), and edges, which can be defined as social interaction links. According to this algorithm, nodes sharing links tend to be attracted to each other, while non-linked nodes tend to repulse each other much like electric forces with different charges. In the case of the four network graphs (Graphs 5, 6, 7, and 8) produced to illustrate the structure of #teaparty socio-interactional patterns, the repulsion strength of the force-based algorithm was set at 10,000.0 in order to expand the graph and better visualize the nodes while the attraction strength was set at 10.0. According to Hu (2006: 36), while the

force-based algorithm has many advantages (e.g. ability to display complex data, etc.), it has two main limitations:

- ✓ the graphical representation of the data is likely to have “many local minimums, particularly so for a large graph”;
- ✓ the relative “computational complexity of the standard force-directed algorithm.”

The structure of the graphs produced with the “force-based” algorithm can be characterized through the consideration of four elements:

- ✓ number of @replies;
- ✓ number of nodes;
- ✓ number of edges;
- ✓ average degree, which can be defined as the sum of all the connections to each node divided by the number of players in the network.

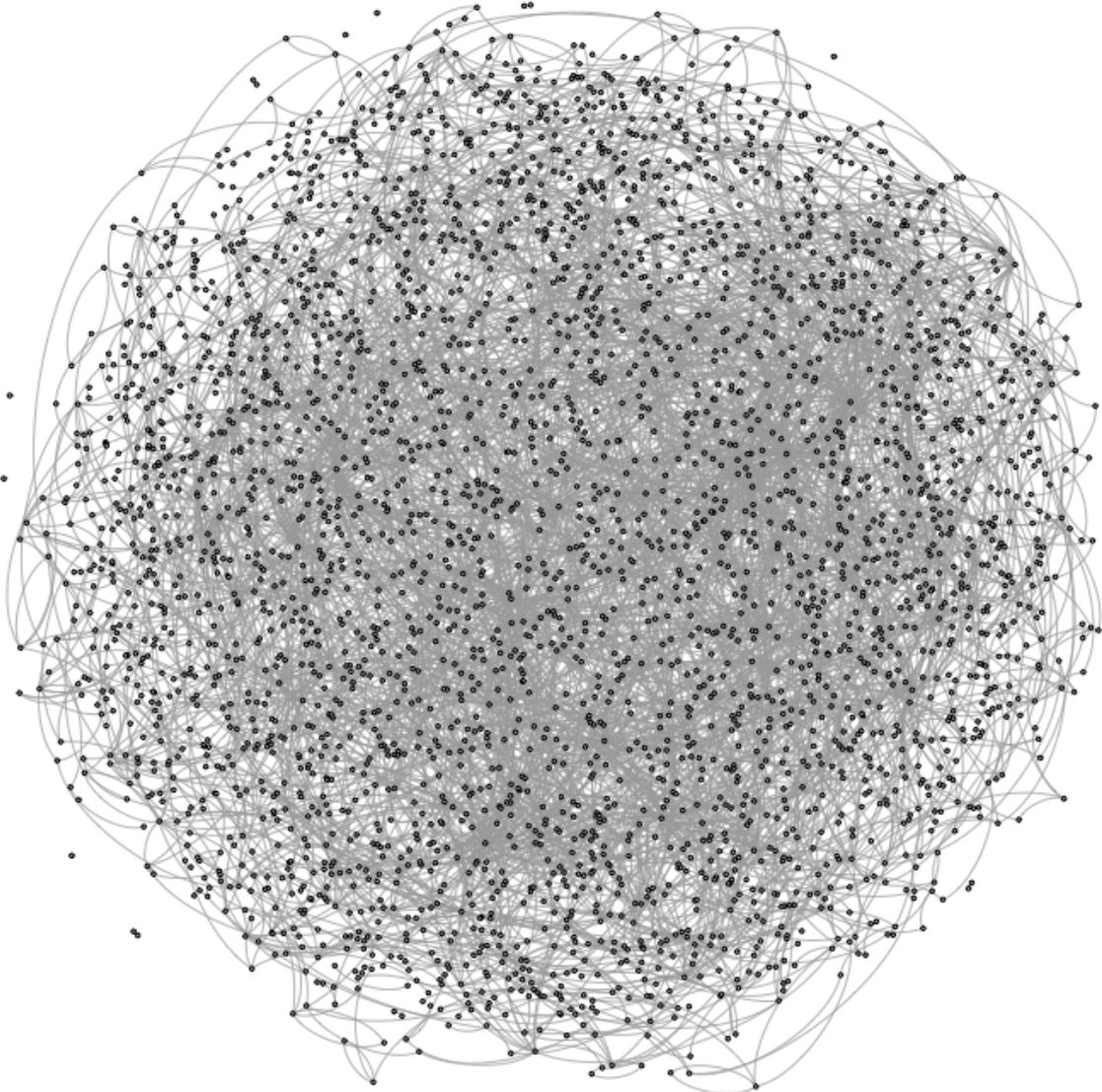
The graphs indicate that while some tweeters were involved in more social interactions than others and could therefore be defined as conversation catalysts (see Graph 7, which shows that some users attract a large number of social interactions), the #teaparty social interaction dynamic was, for the most part, highly decentralized.

**Graph 5: Network analysis showing @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (December 14, 2009 to December 20, 2009)**



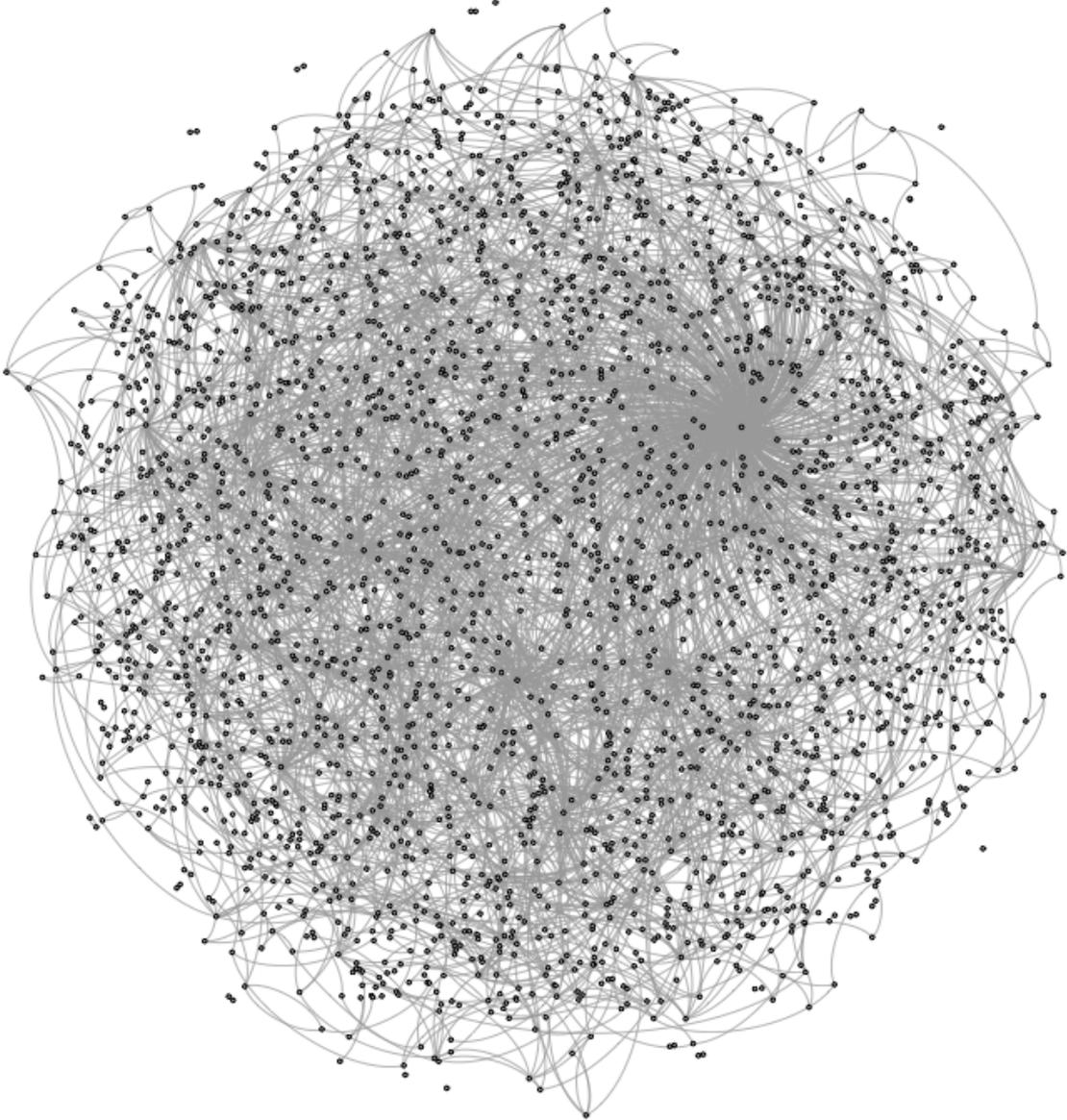
<b>Number of @replies</b>	877	<b>Number of edges</b>	648
<b>Number of nodes</b>	654	<b>Average degree</b>	0.991

**Graph 6: Network analysis showing @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (November 1, 2010 to November 7, 2010)**



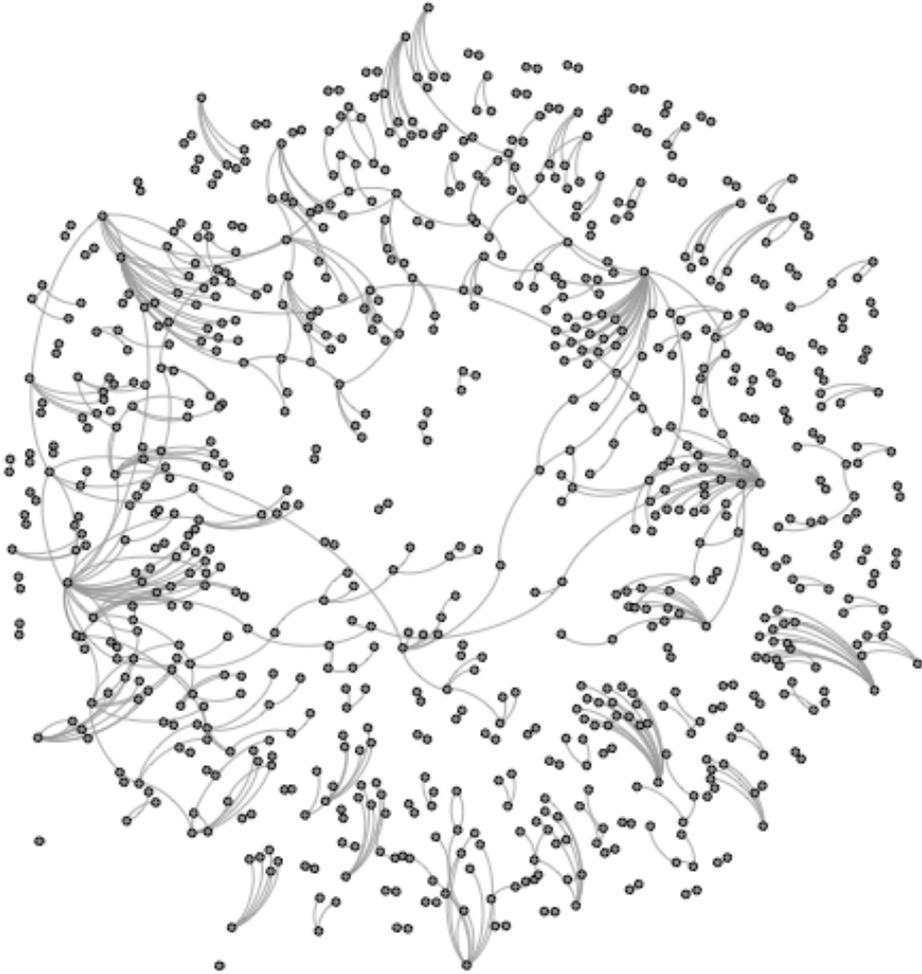
<b>Number of @replies</b>	4,424	<b>Number of edges</b>	3,542
<b>Number of nodes</b>	3,258	<b>Average degree</b>	1.087

**Graph 7: Network analysis showing @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (October 25, 2010 to October 31, 2010)**



<b>Number of @replies</b>	4,280	<b>Number of edges</b>	3,131
<b>Number of nodes</b>	2,630	<b>Average degree</b>	1.19

**Graph 8: Network analysis showing @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (January 10, 2011 to January 16, 2011)**



<b>Number of @replies</b>	688	<b>Number of edges</b>	624
<b>Number of nodes</b>	807	<b>Average degree</b>	0.773

**6.3.2 @retweets (RT) and modified tweets (MT)**

A @retweet can be described as a “simple yet powerful” mechanism enabling Twitter users to repost a tweet originally shared by other users, either in its entirety or in an edited form (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2012). Different reasons can compel a tweeter to redistribute an edited version of a micro-blog entry including the following:

- ✓ the inclusion of comments in order to contextualize the content that is being retweeted;

- ✓ the removal of some portion of the tweet that is being republished because it surpasses the 140-character limit with the addition of the @retweet formulation (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2012).

While there is no broadly accepted retweeting practice, it generally consists of the letters “RT” followed by the sign “@,” followed by the username of the author of the publication being retweeted, followed by the text of the tweet (e.g. boyd, Golder et al. 2011; Conover, Conçalves et al. 2011). According to boyd, Golder et al. (2011), the prototypical syntax of a @retweet is “RT @username ABC” “where the referenced user is the original author and ABC is the original tweet’s content.” However, other less common @retweet formulations have emerged and gained some traction in the Twitterverse in recent years:

- ✓ “R/T ABC”;
- ✓ “R/T @ABC”;
- ✓ “RT: @ ABC”;
- ✓ “Retweet @ ABC”;
- ✓ “RT (via @) ABC”;
- ✓ “HT @ ABC” (boyd, Golder et al. 2011).

Several factors have contributed to the popularization of alternative retweeting formulations during the last five years. Some tweeters have adopted certain syntaxes due to their utilization of third-party publication platforms which impose specific tweeting formats while others have opted for other formulations due to personal preferences (boyd, Golder et al. 2011). It should be noted that @retweets can be positioned either at the beginning of a tweet or be embedded within the text of a tweet, as shown in the two illustrations below.

**Illustration 9: Screenshot of retweet (beginning of the tweet)**



**Illustration 10: Screenshot of retweet (embedded within the text of the tweet)**



While the “actual meaning” or purposes of @retweets require some level of interpretation on the part of Twitter users (Larsson and Moe 2012), recent research has shown that they have been used to attain different goals:

- ✓ redistributing digital material to a broad public;
- ✓ providing exposure to specific tweeters;
- ✓ showing support or, inversely, opposition to something mentioned in a tweet

(Mascaro and Goggins 2012; Mustafaraj, Finn et al. 2011).

boyd, Golder et al. (2011) believe that retweeting can be compared to some Web 1.0-style communication practices such as email forwarding. For instance, @retweets “can be seen as analogous to email forwarding - a message is re-sent to others, verbatim, due to its unique content or insight” (boyd, Golder et al. 2011). In the case of the analysis of the #teaparty dataset, only two @retweet syntaxes will be considered: “RT @username ABC” and “RT@username ABC.”

“Modified tweets” (@MTs) can be defined as a community-driven practice on Twitter essentially serving the same function as @retweets. However, unlike @retweets, which can be used to repost tweets either in their entirety or in an edited form, modified tweets always consist of the redistribution of tweets that have been altered (e.g. inclusion of words, removal of words, etc.). This mechanism manifests itself in a tweet with the letters “MT” followed with the sign “@,” followed by the username of the author of the tweet that is being reposted, followed by the altered text of the tweet (“MT @username ABC”) (Eysenbach 2012). Much as in the case of @retweets, modified tweets can be located either at the beginning of a tweet or within the text of the tweet, as shown below:

**Illustration 11: Screenshot of modified tweet (beginning of the tweet)**



**Illustration 12: Screenshot of modified tweet (within the text of the tweet)**



In the case of the study of #teaparty tweets collected between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011, only the “MT@username ABC” and “MT @username ABC” syntaxes will be taken into account.

The quantitative content analysis of the dataset revealed that only 1,723 #teaparty tweets beginning with the “RT@username ABC” formulation (approximately 0.1 percent of the dataset) were shared by 628 unique tweeters. Comparatively, close to one third (33.03 percent) of the tweets in the dataset (577,216 posts shared by 54,174 Twitter users) started with the “RT @username ABC” formulation.

Much like @replies, most tweeters who reposted content with either the “RT@username ABC” or “RT @username ABC” syntaxes at the beginning of their posts did so only once or twice. For example, 69.27 percent of #teaparty tweeters who retweeted posts with the formulation “RT@username ABC” did so only once (435 unique tweeters) compared to 14.17 percent who did so twice (89 unique contributors) and 4.94 percent who did so three times (31 unique tweeters). Only 7 Twitter users posted 26 tweets or more starting with the syntax “RT@username ABC.” It is worth noting that these #teaparty tweeters, except for @JonevacToilets (user ID: 86107297), also posted a large number of tweets starting with the formulation “RT @username ABC,” thus indicating that their use of the syntax “RT@username ABC” could have been caused by a typographical error. In addition, 52.54

percent of the tweeters who shared posts beginning with the “RT @username ABC” formulation (28,464 unique contributors) did so only once, 13.34 percent did so twice (7,226 unique tweeters), 6.74 percent did so three times (3,653 unique Twitter users), and 4.01 percent did so four times (2,174 unique tweeters). Conversely, 3,623 tweeters shared posts beginning with the “RT @username ABC” formulation 26 times or more (6.69 percent).

**Table 9: Number of #teaparty @retweets beginning with the formulation “RT@username ABC”**

**Number of #teaparty @retweets beginning with the formulation “RT@username ABC”  
(per number of tweets and number and percentage of unique tweeters)**

Number of @retweets	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage
1	435	69.27
2	89	14.17
3	31	4.94
4	18	2.87
5	11	1.75
6	3	0.48
7	0	0.00
8	8	1.27
9	6	0.96
10	2	0.32
11	4	0.64
12	1	0.16
13	2	0.32
14	2	0.32
15	0	0.00
16	2	0.32
17	2	0.32
18	2	0.32
19	1	0.16
20	1	0.16
21	1	0.16
22	0	0.00
23	0	0.00
24	0	0.00
25	0	0.00
26 or more	7	1.11
<b>Total</b>	<b>628</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Table 10: Number of #teaparty @retweets beginning with the formulation “RT @username ABC”**

**Number of #teaparty @retweets beginning with the formulation “RT @username ABC”  
(per number of tweets and number and percentage of unique tweeters)**

Number of @retweets	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage
1	28,464	52.54
2	7,226	13.34
3	3,653	6.74
4	2,174	4.01
5	1,595	2.94
6	1,125	2.08
7	905	1.67
8	726	1.34
9	620	1.14
10	515	0.95
11	469	0.87
12	380	0.70
13	358	0.66
14	283	0.52
15	282	0.52
16	250	0.46
17	240	0.44
18	207	0.38
19	177	0.33
20	156	0.29
21	162	0.30
22	135	0.25
23	163	0.30
24	169	0.31
25	117	0.22
26 or more	3,623	6.69
<b>Total</b>	<b>54,174</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Second, the “RT@username ABC” or “RT @username ABC” formulations were much less frequently embedded in #teaparty tweets. The former was employed only 962 times in posts by 483 unique tweeters while 2,135 others used the latter 23,376 times in their tweets. In total, a mere 24,338 @retweet formulations were embedded in tweets published by 2,168 individuals and organizations during the 16-month window considered in this investigation.

It should be noted @retweet formulations can be present more than once in a single tweet. For example, many #teaparty tweets considered in this investigation were @retweets of

@retweets. For instance, @TheRaeAgape (user ID: 266998799) shared the following micro-blog entry on March 18, 2011 at 14h33 +0000:

RT @ScottWanker RT @EzKool: Scott Walker is the best labor organizer we've seen for decades! #p2 #tcot #tlot #tpp #obama #fb #news #teaparty”

Moreover, @marilynboostick1 (user ID: 245062485) tweeted the following on February 22, 2011 at 04h53 +0000:

RT @Blackjedi50: RT @slackadjuster: We have a message for the #TEAPARTY #TCOT @GovWalker #WI from the #WIUNION #P2 #HCR [http://youtu.be ...](http://youtu.be...)”

From a broader perspective, 578,939 #teaparty tweets (31.13 percent of the dataset) shared by 54,802 unique users (68.88 percent all #teaparty tweeters) served a strict @retweet function. These statistics clearly indicate that @retweets played an important role in structuring the #teaparty tweeting dynamic.

The quantitative review of the tweet corpus also indicated that the @MT function only played a peripheral role in the #teaparty tweeting activity. For instance, only 11 tweets by 11 unique contributors began with the “MT@username ABC” syntax (0.001 percent of the dataset) compared to 947 posts by 349 unique tweeters that started with the “MT @username ABC” formulation (less than 0.001 percent of the dataset). Moreover, the modified tweet function was embedded an even lower number of times in #teaparty tweets. Specifically, the “MT@username ABC” syntax was utilized only 10 times by 9 unique tweeters while 450 others embedded the “MT @username ABC” syntax 683 times in their publications.

A frequency analysis of @retweets was also conducted in order to determine which #teaparty tweeters’ micro-blog entries were reposted the most and, by extension, were more likely to have greater visibility among #teaparty tweeters than posts that were not redistributed. Again, the findings suggest that the retweeting dynamic was highly-decentralized due to the fact that it was not centered on a small number of individuals and organizations. According to a review of the dataset, 20,753 unique tweeters’ publications were retweeted with the help of the “RT @username ABC” or the “RT@username ABC”

syntaxes during the time period covered in this study. Specifically, while only @slone (user id: 17561562) was retweeted more than 10,000 times, the publications of only 102 tweeters were reposted between 1,000 and 9,999 times. In addition, the posts of 90 tweeters were reposted between 500 and 999 times while 624 users' tweets were redistributed between 100 and 499 times. Finally, 9,172 users' publications were retweeted only once compared to two times for 2,902 tweeters, three times for 1,511 tweeters, four times for 935 tweeters and five times for 624 users. In other words, it can be concluded based on these statistics that the #teaparty retweeting dynamic was highly decentralized.

Table 11 provides the list of the 100 Twitter accounts whose #teaparty publications were retweeted the most during the 67-week period considered in this study. It reveals that while some of them were maintained by elected and non-elected politicians as well as alternative media organizations, the overwhelming majority of them were operated by ordinary Internet users such as @slone (user id: 17561562), who, as previously mentioned, was retweeted more than 10,000 times. Such findings reveal the broad-based nature of the #teaparty tweeting dynamic.

**Table 11: Recipients of @retweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag**

**Recipients of #teaparty @retweets (per number of @retweets)**

#	Recipient of @retweet	Frequency	#	Recipient of @retweet	Frequency
1	RT@slone	12,010	26	RT@arizona_freedom	2,702
2	RT@hcreminder	7,519	27	RT@qstarweb	2,667
3	RT@tlw3	7,065	28	RT@sarahstormrpt	2,597
4	RT@dudge_report	7,010	29	RT@andilinks	2,563
5	RT@cmsteven	6,813	30	RT@ttjemery	2,557
6	RT@josephagallant	6,119	31	RT@new_federalists	2,498
7	RT@dmashak	5,695	32	RT@c0nservative1	2,479
8	RT@blogging_tories	4,827	33	RT@dhrxsol1234	2,405
9	RT@libertyideals	4,552	34	RT@56forfreedom	2,371
10	RT@gregwhoward	4,490	35	RT@heritage	2,335
11	RT@survivalstation	4,317	36	RT@joewmiller	2,320
12	RT@theflacracker	4,220	37	RT@crispix49	2,315
13	RT@michaeljohns	4,153	38	RT@pauline_ma	2,301
14	RT@thenewdeal	4,087	39	RT@bowlmeoverva	2,286
15	RT@resisttyranny	4,019	40	RT@cfheather	2,280
16	RT@herfarm	4,003	41	RT@southsalem	2,219
17	RT@ronpaulnews	3,963	42	RT@alipac	2,167
18	RT@first_patriots	3,673	43	RT@cody_k	2,164
19	RT@jihadihunter	3,653	44	RT@christineod	2,140
20	RT@grammy620	3,546	45	RT@obama_games	2,135
21	RT@welshman007	3,484	46	RT@shoq	2,121
22	RT@stopobama2012	3,376	47	RT@ronpaulnot4me	2,078
23	RT@mikepfs	3,255	48	RT@floridapundit	2,059
24	RT@thelookingspoon	3,225	49	RT@klsouth	2,019
25	RT@michaelemlong	2,809	50	RT@kasons4	1,950

**Table 11: Recipients of @retweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag (continued)**

**Recipients of #teaparty @retweets (per number of @retweets)**

#	Recipient of @retweet	Frequency	#	Recipient of @retweet	Frequency
51	RT@defendglenn	1,885	76	RT@tpo_hissself	1,273
52	RT@alinskydefeater	1,838	77	RT@gopwhip	1,254
53	RT@michellemalkin	1,838	78	RT@exposeliberals	1,248
54	RT@heyttammybruce	1,782	79	RT@conservativeind	1,227
55	RT@tx4obama	1,760	80	RT@genjunky	1,219
56	RT@scottwgraves	1,752	81	RT@davegj	1,204
57	RT@greekgirl	1,742	82	RT@bluegrasspundit	1,203
58	RT@c4liberty	1,726	83	RT@slimdbk	1,194
59	RT@csteventucker	1,709	84	RT@tcoamerica	1,184
60	RT@dataaide	1,665	85	RT@proctorshow	1,147
61	RT@rightnewsnow	1,662	86	RT@pari_passu	1,142
62	RT@triciancl	1,628	87	RT@glennbeckclips	1,128
63	RT@ezkool	1,612	88	RT@grivno	1,120
64	RT@conservative432	1,495	89	RT@infowars	1,115
65	RT@genetaylorusa	1,493	90	RT@rsmccain	1,115
66	RT@redostoneage	1,465	91	RT@slackadjuster	1,104
67	RT@postpolitics	1,459	92	RT@vannschaffner	1,102
68	RT@kalel194	1,433	93	RT@thebighoot	1,101
69	RT@tahdeetz	1,432	94	RT@tillerylakelady	1,100
70	RT@vfw_vet	1,424	95	RT@jarjarbug	1,100
71	RT@velvethammer	1,367	96	RT@politicalwind	1,078
72	RT@vfw91	1,343	97	RT@rightinillinois	1,071
73	RT@tcot_talk	1,318	98	RT@oxco	1,070
74	RT@thetwisters	1,306	99	RT@geoff9cow	1,053
75	RT@joekenha	1,302	100	RT@stansolomon	1,035

### 6.3.3 Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks pointing to digital resources available on the World Wide Web played a prominent role in #teaparty tweeting. The analysis of the #teaparty dataset indicates that they were extensively utilized by tweeters to attain a wide range of objectives such as contextualizing their posts, providing information to support their arguments, or redirecting their followers to media resources of interest. Due to the 140-character limit per post imposed by Twitter, many users turned to hyperlinkshortening services like Bit.ly, Goo.gl, or Tinyurl.com to compress

the Web links they included to their tweets. For instance, @DavidBWalls (user ID: 259375524) tweeted on March 18, 2011 at 14h11 +0000:

Krauthammer vs Lew on Social Security. Krauthammer wins (again) <http://bit.ly/ekN4YK> #teaparty #txgop

Similarly, @lilleth71 (user ID: 75139010) shared the following post on May 28, 2010 at 04h26 +0000:

“GOP challenger Larsen goes after 1 of the Cap&Tax 8 Lance (R-NJ, 7) <http://goo.gl/KQmB> #NJ #tcot #teaparty #gop”

As shown in Table 12, 1,179,742 #teaparty micro-blog entries (67.52 percent of the dataset) posted by 54,534 tweeters (68.5 percent of #teaparty tweeters) contained at least one hyperlink pointing to digital resources that were either internal or external to the Twitterverse. In addition, 17,993 tweets (1.02 percent of the tweet corpus) shared by 4,027 tweeters (0.05 percent of #teaparty tweeters) had two or more hyperlinks.

**Table 12: Minimum number of hyperlinks embedded in #teaparty tweets**

**Minimum number of hyperlinks embedded in #teaparty tweets  
(per number and percentage of tweets and per number of unique tweeters)**

Minimum number of hyperlinks per tweet	Number of tweets	Percentage of dataset	Number of unique tweeters
1	1,179,742	67.52	54,534
2	16,982	0.97	3,699
3	920	0.05	281
4	83	0.005	40
5	7	0.0004	7

The analysis of the #teaparty dataset also determined which websites were more frequently cited through hyperlinks by #teaparty tweeters. The results showed that 559,128 different hyperlinks were embedded in #teaparty tweets between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011. The overwhelming majority of digital resources were cited only once by Internet users. Table 13 provides a detailed breakdown of the 100 most popular hyperlinks featured in #teaparty tweets during the time period taken into account for this study.

**Table 13: Most-embedded hyperlinks in #teaparty tweets**

**Most-embedded hyperlinks in #teaparty tweets  
(per number of embeds in tweets)**

#	Hyperlink	Frequency	#	Hyperlink	Frequency
1	<a href="http://wp.me/pv8jp">http://wp.me/pv8jp</a>	3,794	39	<a href="http://bit.ly/9ollbk">http://bit.ly/9ollbk</a>	429
2	<a href="http://bit.ly/at3fzl">http://bit.ly/at3fzl</a>	2,906	40	<a href="http://bit.ly/cauhoy">http://bit.ly/cauhoy</a>	426
3	<a href="http://bit.ly/repek">http://bit.ly/repek</a>	2,191	41	<a href="http://bit.ly/avgb9l">http://bit.ly/avgb9l</a>	423
4	<a href="http://www.degoesred.com">http://www.degoesred.com</a>	1,472	42	<a href="http://bit.ly/3slwec">http://bit.ly/3slwec</a>	419
5	<a href="http://dailysok.com">http://dailysok.com</a>	1,330	43	<a href="http://wp.me/pjsyb">http://wp.me/pjsyb</a>	390
6	<a href="http://wp.me/pxg9z">http://wp.me/pxg9z</a>	1,297	44	<a href="http://bit.ly/chi5nc">http://bit.ly/chi5nc</a>	387
7	<a href="http://bit.ly/3kiuev">http://bit.ly/3kiuev</a>	1,255	45	<a href="http://www.recoveringfederalist.com">http://www.recoveringfederalist.com</a>	387
8	<a href="http://bit.ly/cbne6e">http://bit.ly/cbne6e</a>	1,219	46	<a href="http://bit.ly/b5xwev">http://bit.ly/b5xwev</a>	384
9	<a href="http://degoesred.com">http://degoesred.com</a>	1,197	47	<a href="http://bit.ly/a7rizk">http://bit.ly/a7rizk</a>	384
10	<a href="http://bit.ly/dwkqi9">http://bit.ly/dwkqi9</a>	1,057	48	<a href="http://bit.ly/bppqm1">http://bit.ly/bppqm1</a>	382
11	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/yhd7gr7">http://tinyurl.com/yhd7gr7</a>	855	49	<a href="http://bit.ly/cxzbnv">http://bit.ly/cxzbnv</a>	381
12	<a href="http://bit.ly/sdx7h">http://bit.ly/sdx7h</a>	833	50	<a href="http://bit.ly/5ehypg">http://bit.ly/5ehypg</a>	381
13	<a href="http://ff.im">http://ff.im</a>	830	51	<a href="http://twitpic.com/1zy7ej">http://twitpic.com/1zy7ej</a>	370
14	<a href="http://bit.ly/9nnz8r">http://bit.ly/9nnz8r</a>	736	52	<a href="http://wp.me/pbhxg">http://wp.me/pbhxg</a>	363
15	<a href="http://twitpic.com/2vs3ux">http://twitpic.com/2vs3ux</a>	724	53	<a href="http://bit.ly/d2yrqu">http://bit.ly/d2yrqu</a>	363
16	<a href="http://bit.ly/9amqoq">http://bit.ly/9amqoq</a>	651	54	<a href="http://twitpic.com/13uocz">http://twitpic.com/13uocz</a>	357
17	<a href="http://bit.ly/czvkgg">http://bit.ly/czvkgg</a>	636	55	<a href="http://bit.ly/cpsk4l">http://bit.ly/cpsk4l</a>	357
18	<a href="http://bit.ly/br2nmg">http://bit.ly/br2nmg</a>	619	56	<a href="http://bit.ly/1ebdnf">http://bit.ly/1ebdnf</a>	356
19	<a href="http://iamwindowman.com">http://iamwindowman.com</a>	616	57	<a href="http://bit.ly/cs0rbg">http://bit.ly/cs0rbg</a>	356
20	<a href="http://bit.ly/ddfrz9">http://bit.ly/ddfrz9</a>	588	58	<a href="http://bit.ly/bcy2eo">http://bit.ly/bcy2eo</a>	356
21	<a href="http://bit.ly/cokghb">http://bit.ly/cokghb</a>	576	59	<a href="http://www.sockittojoe.com">http://www.sockittojoe.com</a>	354
22	<a href="http://bit.ly/a6syg6">http://bit.ly/a6syg6</a>	544	60	<a href="http://nyti.ms/btta7o">http://nyti.ms/btta7o</a>	354
23	<a href="http://digg.com/u1bkxq">http://digg.com/u1bkxq</a>	520	61	<a href="http://bit.ly/903kef">http://bit.ly/903kef</a>	353
24	<a href="http://bit.ly/dalqgl">http://bit.ly/dalqgl</a>	501	62	<a href="http://bit.ly/cosorr">http://bit.ly/cosorr</a>	352
25	<a href="http://bit.ly/9tt6c5">http://bit.ly/9tt6c5</a>	501	63	<a href="http://bit.ly/cm3ddh">http://bit.ly/cm3ddh</a>	346
26	<a href="http://bit.ly/aj2mtc">http://bit.ly/aj2mtc</a>	491	64	<a href="http://bit.ly/bn7uyh">http://bit.ly/bn7uyh</a>	341
27	<a href="http://bit.ly/dkgswb">http://bit.ly/dkgswb</a>	489	65	<a href="http://bit.ly/b3s7hk">http://bit.ly/b3s7hk</a>	341
28	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3ywattk">http://tinyurl.com/3ywattk</a>	481	66	<a href="http://bit">http://bit</a>	338
29	<a href="http://bit.ly/al5wnm">http://bit.ly/al5wnm</a>	478	67	<a href="http://youtu.be.com">http://youtu.be.com</a>	338
30	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/yd3cn5e">http://tinyurl.com/yd3cn5e</a>	470	68	<a href="http://www.call2action.us">http://www.call2action.us</a>	336
31	<a href="http://bit.ly/ctj4lg">http://bit.ly/ctj4lg</a>	465	69	<a href="http://bit.ly/b4d75b">http://bit.ly/b4d75b</a>	332
32	<a href="http://bit.ly/az16tw">http://bit.ly/az16tw</a>	460	70	<a href="http://bit.ly/uv9py">http://bit.ly/uv9py</a>	332
33	<a href="http://bit.ly">http://bit.ly</a>	444	71	<a href="http://bit.ly/90dy1v">http://bit.ly/90dy1v</a>	331
34	<a href="http://iamwindowman.com">http://iamwindowman.com</a>	444	72	<a href="http://bit.ly/bgwq4b">http://bit.ly/bgwq4b</a>	330
35	<a href="http://bit.ly/alllists">http://bit.ly/alllists</a>	443	73	<a href="http://bit.ly/op414free">http://bit.ly/op414free</a>	328
36	<a href="http://bit.ly/crvqq1">http://bit.ly/crvqq1</a>	439	74	<a href="http://bit.ly/dagpj7">http://bit.ly/dagpj7</a>	326
37	<a href="http://bit.ly/9upmlx">http://bit.ly/9upmlx</a>	438	75	<a href="http://americanpatrol.com">http://americanpatrol.com</a>	324
38	<a href="http://bit.ly/2yqw3f">http://bit.ly/2yqw3f</a>	436	76	<a href="http://j.mp/bcbdea">http://j.mp/bcbdea</a>	321

**Table 13: Most-embedded hyperlinks in #teaparty tweets (continued)**

**Most-embedded hyperlinks in #teaparty tweets  
(per number of embeds in tweets)**

#	Hyperlink	Frequency	#	Hyperlink	Frequency
77	<a href="http://bit.ly/b7p9xc">http://bit.ly/b7p9xc</a>	314	89	<a href="http://bit.ly/dvbsaw">http://bit.ly/dvbsaw</a>	295
78	<a href="http://bit.ly/abmg2r">http://bit.ly/abmg2r</a>	313	90	<a href="http://bit.ly/bjll9j">http://bit.ly/bjll9j</a>	294
79	<a href="http://twitpic.com/1gsue4">http://twitpic.com/1gsue4</a>	312	91	<a href="http://bit.ly/cw3ufo">http://bit.ly/cw3ufo</a>	293
80	<a href="http://bit.ly/secretpolice">http://bit.ly/secretpolice</a>	309	92	<a href="http://lifeinshermanoaks.com">http://lifeinshermanoaks.com</a>	292
81	<a href="http://bit.ly/d8hxxb">http://bit.ly/d8hxxb</a>	309	93	<a href="http://j.mp/b8m1zz">http://j.mp/b8m1zz</a>	286
82	<a href="http://bit.ly/94u4hd">http://bit.ly/94u4hd</a>	309	94	<a href="http://bit.ly/cjaazh">http://bit.ly/cjaazh</a>	285
83	<a href="http://glennbeckclips.com">http://glennbeckclips.com</a>	307	95	<a href="http://bit.ly/aqkwyy">http://bit.ly/aqkwyy</a>	280
84	<a href="http://bit.ly/ajdrmg">http://bit.ly/ajdrmg</a>	302	96	<a href="http://bit.ly/bnessj">http://bit.ly/bnessj</a>	279
85	<a href="http://wp.me/p3bfs">http://wp.me/p3bfs</a>	298	97	<a href="http://bit.ly/7sl70m">http://bit.ly/7sl70m</a>	278
86	<a href="http://bit.ly/bkiedi">http://bit.ly/bkiedi</a>	298	98	<a href="http://bit.ly/cg4frq">http://bit.ly/cg4frq</a>	277
87	<a href="http://is.gd/9b7br">http://is.gd/9b7br</a>	297	99	<a href="http://bit.ly/ccat9u">http://bit.ly/ccat9u</a>	276
88	<a href="http://bit.ly/dlqfdk">http://bit.ly/dlqfdk</a>	295	100	<a href="http://j.mp/avqqkx">http://j.mp/avqqkx</a>	276

In order to gain a better understanding of the extent of the diversity of digital resources that were cited by #teaparty tweeters through Web links, a heuristic review of the hyperlinks embedded in #teaparty micro-blog entries posted between October 25 and October 31, 2010 was conducted (the full week preceding Election Day on November 2, 2010). This analysis revealed that #teaparty tweeters hyperlinked to content available on digital resources maintained by a large number of individuals and organizations with various interests and objectives as well as focused on wide-ranging matters not always linked to the Tea Party movement. Interestingly, while many hyperlinks were dead at the time of the analysis, some of them were from obscure sources, thus demonstrating the capacity of #teaparty tweeters to influence the tweeting dynamic in ways not necessarily compatible with the interests and objectives of more mainstream political players.

First, many #teaparty tweets featured hyperlinks pointing to the digital infrastructure of mainstream and alternative news media organizations. Txn\_1st (user ID: 65816601) posted the following micro-blog entry on October 29, 2010 at 02h20 +0000

RT @TriciaNC1: RT @KatyInIndy: Rasmussen: Buck +4 in #Colorado, Rossi +1 in Washington <http://is.gd/gpBgN> #tcot #gop #teaparty #sgp #C ...

It contained a hyperlink redirecting Twitter users to the article “Rasmussen: Buck +4 in Colorado; Rossi +1 in Washington” on the website of The Weekly Standard. It discussed the state of the senatorial contests in Washington and Colorado based on recent polling data.

FounderFire (user ID: 197203904) also linked to a publication on the blog “Political Insider by Jim Galloway,” which is part of the website of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, in a tweet shared on October 31, 2010 at 18h12 +0000:

“#teaparty #912 Your Sunday jolt: Tea party shirts, hats, buttons barred from Georgia voting site... <http://tinyurl.com/27z5g5g> #LIBERTARIAN”

The post, entitled “Your Sunday jolt: Tea party shirts, hats, buttons barred from Georgia voting sites,” talked about the decision of Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp to ban clothing such as shirts, hats, or buttons with the Tea Party logo from polling stations on Election Day.

Wisco (user ID: 5571722) tweeted the following on October 27, 2010 at 01h00 +0000:

Oh, the irony... <http://is.gd/gljmE> #p2 #tcot #teaparty #headstomp

The hyperlink embedded in this tweet pointed to the article “Rand Paul supporter who pinned down a woman before she was curb-stomped wore ‘Don't Tread on Me’ button” on the alternative media website Boing Boing.

Second, independent political blogs were frequently quoted by #teaparty tweeters with the help of hyperlinks between October 25 and October 31, 2010. For example, TheLookingSpoon (user ID: 23924532) published this micro-blog entry on October 26, 2010 at 04h15 +0000:

Does Biden Vindicate Dan Quayle? <http://j.mp/aXdToq> #tcot #teaparty #humor

The link in this tweet redirected Web users to a post on The Looking Spoon, a blog specializing in conservative political humour.

theCLproject (user ID: 19609117) also linked to a post a the conservative political blog, Chlorinated Liberty, in this tweet published on October 29, 2010 at 19h59 +0000:

Rising Tide Of Government Regulation Faces Rising Opposition From American People <http://bit.ly/cl09ow>  
#tcot #teaparty

This publication, entitled “Rising Tide Of Government Regulation Faces Rising Opposition From American People,” discussed the findings of a report by the Heritage Foundation, entitled “Red Tape Rising,” which showed that a large number of government regulations on different sectors of activity such as health care or financial services were implemented during the first two years of the Obama administration. Finally, SarahStormRpt (user ID: 61664536) linked to a post on a blog dedicated to Sarah Palin in this tweet shared on October 25, 2010 at 21h34 +0000:

PALIN BLOG: #tsot Lisa’s Gall vs. Miller’s Honor <http://dlvr.it/7XHjY> #912 #teaparty #tcot #palin12 #spwbt #sgp

Some #teaparty tweeters mentioned content from liberal blogs in their micro-blog entries. progBuzz (user ID: 192028387) shared this tweet on October 27, 2010 at 06h20 +0000:

Neocon Dreams of the Future" Jason Sigger CrooksAndLiars.Com #p2 #tcot #teaparty <http://bit.ly/9ukly5>

The hyperlink pointed to a post discussing the necessity of reviewing different facets of American global policies with the weakening of the supremacy of the United States on the international political landscape. It can be concluded based on the heuristic review of the #teaparty Twitter activity between October 25 to October 31, 2010 that offline news media organizations’ websites and independent political blogs constituted the two most popular destinations of hyperlinks in #teaparty tweets.

Third, many hyperlinks embedded in #teaparty tweets pointed to YouTube videos produced by interest groups, mainstream and alternative news media organizations, political parties and ordinary citizens. On October 25, 2010 at 00h00 +0000, TLW3 (user ID:

16305494) posted the following tweet, which featured a link pointing to a video from The Young Turks, a Web-based political news show:

Young Turks: Should We Have Private Prisons? Cenk Goes Off!!! <http://is.gd/ggHPZ> #p2 #dems #tcot #wc #tlot #teaparty #tpp #ocra #sgp

It featured a discussion between two news anchors on the need for prisons operated by private companies in the United States.

Fourth, many #teaparty tweeters embedded hyperlinks in their posts in order to promote political mobilization initiatives such as demonstrations, town hall events or fundraising campaigns typically in support of politicians, groups or causes linked to the Tea Party movement. For instance, angelfleming (user ID: 86031188) publicized a moneybomb-type fundraising effort in this tweet published on October 28, 2010 at 03h20 +0000:

[www.byebyebarney.org](http://www.byebyebarney.org) moneybomb ends MIDNIGHT!!! SEND BARNEY PACKING#byebyebarney @seanbielat #tcot #teaparty #scottbrownwho

Barney Frank was the Democratic contender in the 4th Congressional District during the 2010 U.S. midterm election cycle who was competing against Republican candidate Sean Bielat, who was supported by some groups within the Tea Party movement.

Fifth, many #teaparty tweets featured hyperlinks pointing to the websites of Tea Party candidates in the 2010 U.S. midterm contest or the digital infrastructures of conservative or libertarian organizations supporting them. TriciaNC1 (user ID: 83949216) published, on October 31, 2010 at 05h30 +0000, a tweet with a hyperlink pointing to a blog post on the official campaign website of Joe Miller, the Republican contender in the 2010 senatorial race in Alaska:

WHOA! BREAKING #AKSEN News: Journalists caught on tape plotting Joe Miller hit piece: <http://bit.ly/bH5hRh> #tcot #teaparty #AK #sgp #tpp

In his post, entitled “Accidental Voice Message Raises Questions,” Miller alleged that several journalists from television station KTVA in Anchorage, Alaska were planning to fabricate two news stories in order to undermine his campaign for the U.S. Senate.

On October 29, 2010 at 17h12 +0000, 1Sheyanne (user ID: 81987984) shared the following tweet:

RT @ChristineOD: Senate GOP Conference Chairman Alexander Backs Christine O'Donnell <http://bit.ly/abRzdP> #desen #tcot #teaparty

This hyperlink pointed to a press release on the Christine PAC website, which announced that Senate GOP Conference Chairman Lamar Alexander was formally endorsing Christine O'Donnell's candidacy for the U.S. Senate in the state of Delaware.

It is important to note that a plethora of other digital resources were quoted by #teaparty tweeters with the help of hyperlinks:

- ✓ websites of private companies (e.g. gun retailers, health care providers, etc.);
- ✓ websites of interest groups;
- ✓ websites of think tanks;
- ✓ profile pages on social networking sites;
- ✓ etc.

It should be pointed out that many hyperlinks embedded by #teaparty tweeters served spamming functions. For instance, Imwindowman (user ID: 75651225) shared this tweet on October 25, 2010 at 12h00 +0000:

THE PARTY: will install the same leaders whose policymaking helped bring about the #TEAPARTY VOTE to REMOVE them <http://imwindowman.com> #DEM

While the tweet seems to be legitimately discussing an issue of interest to Tea Party supporters, the Web link redirects to the website of Windowman, a Window-replacement company operating in cities located in U.S. states such as Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Portsmouth. In other words, Imwindowman attempted to penetrate the #teaparty tweeting dynamic in order to promote a company. Therefore, this tweet can be characterized as spam.

In sum, the heuristic review clearly indicates that a wide range of digital material from various sources was referenced with hyperlinks by #teaparty tweeters between October 25 and

October 31, 2010, thus further reinforcing the hyper-decentralization hypothesis of this dissertation. These findings stand in contrast to those of studies that have examined the hyperlinking dynamic in different Web 2.0 environments. For instance, Reese, Rutigliano et al. (2007) studied the linking patterns in the publications of 6 citizen political bloggers during the first full week of February 2005. They found that 33.5 percent of the links they embedded in their publications pointed to other blogs while 47.6 percent redirected audience members to Web platforms of offline conventional media organizations. These bloggers linked to few other types of digital resources during that week (Reese, Rutigliano et al. 2007: 249). More recently, an investigation of the linking practices of Norwegian politicians in 2009 and 2011 on their Facebook and Twitter accounts showed that they generally cited the digital resources of conventional media organizations as well as websites of other politicians and political groups generally supportive of their views. This strongly suggests that the Tea Party communication dynamic in the Twittersverse was vastly different. In fact, more research is required to better understand linking practices on Twitter.

#### **6.4 Patterns of utilization of hashtags in #teaparty tweets**

Hashtags played an instrumental role in structuring #teaparty information flows and social relations throughout the period considered for this research project. While 1,746,461 of the 1,747,306 #teaparty tweets (99.95 percent) included at least one hashtag (as defined in the methodology chapter), a large portion of them featured two hashtags or more.

Table 14 provides an assessment of the presence of hashtags in #teaparty tweets. While most of the tweets with more than one hashtag featured, in most cases, only different hashtags, some of them did include the same hashtags. While this could be intentional, it could also be the result of an oversight on the part of Twitter users or could be caused by the use of interactive mechanisms such as @retweets.

**Table 14: Minimum number of hashtags embedded in #teaparty tweets**

**Minimum number of hashtags embedded in #teaparty tweets  
(per number and percentage of tweets and number of unique tweeters)**

Minimum number of hashtags	Number of tweets	Percentage	Number of unique tweeters
1	1,746,461	99.95	79,259
2	1,659,232	94.96	68,964
3	1,420,075	81.27	58,128
4	1,071,054	61.30	45,983
5	737,793	42.22	35,029
6	526,123	30.11	26,855
7	364,357	20.85	19,182
8	238,340	13.64	13,454
9	122,593	7.02	8,890
10	70,183	4.02	5,629
11	38,275	2.19	3,333
12	22,987	1.32	2,053
13	9,443	0.54	1,100
14	4,216	0.24	585
15	1,979	0.11	317
16	750	0.04	169
17	347	0.02	72
18	175	0.01	40
19	89	0.01	16
20	11	0.00	8
21	5	0.00	3
22	2	0.00	2
23	2	0.00	2
24	2	0.00	2
25	1	0.00	1
26	1	0.00	1
27	1	0.00	1

#teaparty tweeters’ use of hashtags other than #teaparty in their publications indicates that they tried to associate their posts with micro conversations, or sub-information dispersion and social interaction dynamics, within #teaparty information flows and social relations, thus demonstrating the hyper-fragmentation of politicking in the Twitterverse. Several examples from the dataset illustrate this phenomenon. For instance, @Bill\_C\_Hughes (user ID: 6810881242) posted the following tweet on December 18, 2009 at 22h43 +0000:

Was it something we said? An Angry President Obama loses his cool as Copenhagen freezes - <http://shar.es/aDAQy> #tcot #ocra #teaparty

It contained, along with the #teaparty hashtag, the #tcot and #ocra hashtags, which referred to the “top conservatives on Twitter” and the “organized conservative resistance alliance,” respectively, which can both be defined as the Twitter-based decentralized networks of political activists. Bill\_C\_Hughes’ use of hashtags can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, it can be argued that by including these hashtags in his publication, he wanted to circulate his message among specific segments of politically-savvy tweeters.

In addition, @vetcoalition (user ID: 175255610) published the following tweet on September 2, 2010 at 15h19 +0000:

18 fallen heroes from war in #Afghanistan ID'd by Pentagon: <http://bit.ly/ajqDMZ> #veteran #teaparty #tcot

Along with the #teaparty and #tcot hashtags, the tweet also included the geographical and topical hashtag #Afghanistan, which is associated with a country and has some political connotations due to the involvement of the United States in military operations in that country. Moreover, it contained the #vetera hashtag, which could have been used to tag this tweet for specific segments of the Twitter audience such as users who have completed their military service or those who are interested in veterans’ affairs.

Finally, @DaveyHo69 (user ID: 76992333) tweeted about the state of the U.S. economy and its potential impact on the stability of the international socio-political environment on December 2, 2010 at 00h32 +0000:

US Inflation Could Spark Global Unrest: <http://bit.ly/g9JExt> #tcot #teaparty #economy #inflation #threat

It can be presumed that he included the topical hashtags #economy and #inflation to indicate that his post was discussing economic matters and the #threat hashtag in order to express his opinion about the state of the U.S. economy.

While several tweeters who shared micro-blog entries with a large number of hashtags (15 hashtags or more) wanted to contribute legitimately to the #teaparty tweeting dynamic, many others had different objectives. For instance, many individuals and organizations

infiltrated the #teaparty tweeting activity in the Twittosphere by including the #teaparty hashtag in their tweets in order to attain personal, political, or commercial objectives not necessarily linked to this movement. This tweeting practice has been observed by many social scientists who have studied the manifestation of socio-political phenomena in the Twitterverse in recent years (e.g. Greenberg and Raynauld 2012; Ratkiewicz, Conover et al. 2011). For example, an analysis of the discourse on the 2010 Ottawa mayoral elections in the Twitterverse revealed that 800 new Twitter accounts, many of which were operated by spammers, joined the #ottvote conversation during the last four days of the electoral campaign in order to influence its course in specific ways. In comparison, only 535 new accounts joined the #ottvote tweeting dynamic during the 20 days prior to that four-day period (Greenberg and Raynauld 2012). In the case of this study, the heuristic review of the #teaparty dataset did not allow for the quantitative assessment of the impact of spammers due to the distinct nature of hashtags, which can only be analyzed through the consideration of their context of use. An extensive qualitative review of all the #teaparty tweets would be required to evaluate the effect of spammers on the overall #teaparty information flows and social interactions.

While #teaparty tweeters frequently embedded more than one hashtag in their posts, they also utilized a wide range of hashtags. In fact, 49,796 different hashtags (excluding the #teaparty hashtag) were included in tweets posted during the 67 weeks considered in this investigation. Table 15 provides a detailed breakdown of the frequency of use by #teaparty tweeters of the 100 most popular hashtags during the 67-week period covered by this investigation.

**Table 15: Most-used hashtags in #teaparty tweets**

**Most-used hashtags in #teaparty tweets  
(per number of embeds in tweets and percentage of total hashtag use)**

#	Hashtag	Frequency	Percentage	#	Hashtag	Frequency	Percentage
1	#teaparty	1,748,677	21.71	26	#topprog	29,161	0.36
2	#tcot	1,315,981	16.33	27	#cspj	29,108	0.36
3	#p2	422,628	5.25	28	#rush	28,002	0.35
4	#sgp	413,721	5.14	29	#tsot	27,557	0.34
5	#gop	405,339	5.03	30	#palin12	27,443	0.34
6	#tlot	370,743	4.60	31	#majority	26,736	0.33
7	#ocra	241,688	3.00	32	#beck	26,347	0.33
8	#912	178,549	2.22	33	#rs	24,017	0.30
9	#twisters	100,263	1.24	34	#tweetcongress	22,819	0.28
10	#iamthemob	85,134	1.06	35	#912project	22,660	0.28
11	#tpp	84,789	1.05	36	#p21	21,273	0.26
12	#palin	83,508	1.04	37	#ampat	21,117	0.26
13	#ucot	59,796	0.74	38	#liberty	16,518	0.21
14	#hcr	57,111	0.71	39	#nra	15,851	0.20
15	#glennbeck	53,411	0.66	40	#desen	15,637	0.19
16	#dnc	50,428	0.63	41	#912p	14,943	0.19
17	#obama	50,150	0.62	42	#obamacare	14,663	0.18
18	#hhhs	44,827	0.56	43	#military	14,445	0.18
19	#libertarian	40,964	0.51	44	#wethepeople	13,468	0.17
20	#news	39,657	0.49	45	#asamom	13,426	0.17
21	#politics	38,210	0.47	46	#ff	12,898	0.16
22	#dems	37,512	0.47	47	#republican	12,760	0.16
23	#vote2010	34,532	0.43	48	#patriot	12,444	0.15
24	#spwbt	30,191	0.37	49	#cfl	12,339	0.15
25	#conservative	29,699	0.37	50	#sarahpalinusa	12,219	0.15

**Table 15: Most-used hashtags in #teaparty tweets (continued)**

**Most-used hashtags in #teaparty tweets  
(per number of embeds in tweets and percentage of total hashtag use)**

#	Hashtag	Frequency	Percentage	#	Hashtag	Frequency	Percentage
51	#dem	11,830	0.15	76	#democrats	6,909	0.09
52	#nvsen	11,699	0.15	77	#orca	6,818	0.08
53	#capandtrade	11,441	0.14	78	#israel	6,716	0.08
54	#az	11,080	0.14	79	#christian	6,681	0.08
55	#fail	10,664	0.13	80	#jcot	6,516	0.08
56	#tiot	10,592	0.13	81	#masen	6,208	0.08
57	#acon	10,452	0.13	82	#icon	6,056	0.08
58	#rnc	10,426	0.13	83	#politicalhumor	6,016	0.07
59	#phnm	10,145	0.13	84	#rememberinnovember	5,948	0.07
60	#immigration	9,944	0.12	85	#mn	5,781	0.07
61	#foxnews	9,869	0.12	86	#freespeech	5,647	0.07
62	#cbiz	9,858	0.12	87	#economy	5,547	0.07
63	#patriottweets	8,942	0.11	88	#pelosi	5,437	0.07
64	#usa	8,787	0.11	89	#freedom	5,367	0.07
65	#vote	8,734	0.11	90	#rightriot	5,340	0.07
66	#right	8,530	0.11	91	#qsn	5,319	0.07
67	#glennbec	8,391	0.10	92	#election	5,289	0.07
68	#antiobama	8,367	0.10	93	#arizona	5,221	0.06
69	#health care	7,780	0.10	94	#alaska	5,137	0.06
70	#oilspill	7,632	0.09	95	#congress	5,063	0.06
71	#pr	7,573	0.09	96	#roft	5,034	0.06
72	#humor	7,474	0.09	97	#patcot	4,930	0.06
73	#cnn	7,461	0.09	98	#socialism	4,885	0.06
74	#mob	7,458	0.09	99	#casen	4,783	0.06
75	#patriots	7,333	0.09	100	#killthebill	4,772	0.06

Table 16 provides definitions of the 100 most popular hashtags listed in Table 15. The signification of these hashtags was determined through the consultation of open-source websites such as Tagdef.com (a wiki-type digital resource), offline conventional media resources, and Internet-based alternative media sites.

**Table 16: Meaning of the 100 most-used hashtags in the #teaparty dataset**

**Signification of the 100 most-used hashtags in the #teaparty dataset**

#	Hashtag	Signification
1	#teaparty	Tea Party movement
2	#tcot	Top conservatives of Twitters
3	#p2	Progressives 2.0
4	#sgp	Smart girls politics which can be defined as a Web-based informal network of conservative women political activists
5	#gop	Grand Old Party, also known as Republican party
6	#tlot	“Top libertarians on Twitter”
7	#ocra	“Organized conservative resistance alliance” which can be defined as an Web-based decentralized group of conservative political activists
8	#912	The 9/12 project, a conservative political group
9	#twisters	Informal group of conservative women who consider themselves as sisters in the Twittersverse
10	#iamthemob	Anti-big government hashtag that was created after the Obama administration’s criticism of the Tea Party movement
11	#tpp	Tea Party Patriots, which can be defined as a conservative political organization that played an important role in financing and coordinating Tea Party activists at the local, regional and national levels (see previous section of this dissertation)
12	#palin	Palin, the last name of former Vice-presidential contender during the 2008 U.S. Presidential contest and former Alaska governor Sarah Palin
13	#ucot	United conservatives on Twitter, which can be defined as a Twitter-based informal group of conservative political activists
14	#hcr	Health care reform
15	#glennbeck	Glenn Beck, former Fox News anchor and commentator
16	#dnc	Democratic National Committee
17	#obama	Barack Obama
18	#hhrs	Hugh Hewitt Radio Show (Hugh Hewitt is a popular conservative talk-show host)
19	#libertarian	Libertarian political view
20	#news	News
21	#politics	Politics
22	#dems	Democrats
23	#vote2010	Vote 2010
24	#spwbt	Sarah Palin wants “boobie” transplants
25	#conservative	Conservative political ideology
26	#topprog	Top progressives
27	#cspj	Conservative spin on political journalism
28	#rush	Rush Limbaugh, a popular conservative talk-show host
29	#tsot	Team Sarah on Twitter which refers to Sarah Palin or “The sound of thudding” which is often used to characterize a tweet that fell flat
30	#palin12	Palin 2012, a political initiative of individuals in favour of Sarah Palin entering the 2012 U.S. Presidential race
31	#majority	Hashtag referring to the American majority which is opposed to big government as well as the restriction of individual liberty and free market
32	#beck	The last name of former Fox News anchor and commentator Glenn Beck
33	#rs	Real shit
34	#tweetcongress	Tweet Congress
35	#912project	The 9/12 Project
36	#p21	Progressives sans RWNJs (right wing nut jobs)
37	#ampat	American patriot
38	#liberty	Liberty
39	#nra	National Rifle Association
40	#desen	Delaware Senate race
41	#912p	The 9/12 Project
42	#obamacare	Obamacare, also known as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
43	#military	Military

**Table 16: Meaning of the 100 most-used hashtags in the #teaparty dataset (continued)**

**Signification of the 100 most-used hashtags in the #teaparty dataset**

#	Hashtag	Signification
44	#wethepeople	We the people, the first three words of the preamble of the U.S. Constitution
45	#asamom	As A Mom, a conservative political organization characterizing itself as a “sisterhood of mommy patriots”
46	#ff	Follow Friday (this hashtag is embedded in tweets usually posted on Fridays when tweeters recommend to their followers individuals and organizations to follow in the Twitterverse)
47	#republican	Republican
48	#patriot	Patriot
49	#cfl	Campaign for liberty, a conservative political group
50	#sarahpalinusa	Sarah Palin USA
51	#dem	Democrats
52	#nvsen	Nevada Senate race
53	#capandtrade	Cap and trade, an economic approach privileged by some adherents to the Tea Party movement
54	#az	Arizona
55	#fail	Fail, an expression used by tweeters to indicate failure.
56	#tiot	Top Independents on Twitter
57	#acon	African-American conservatives, an informal network of conservative African-Americans
58	#rnc	Republican National Committee
59	#phnm	Patriots Heart Network Media
60	#immigration	Immigration
61	#foxnews	Fox News
62	#cbiz	Conservative business owners, an informal network of conservative business owners
63	#patriottweets	Patriot tweets
64	#usa	United States of America
65	#vote	Vote
66	#right	Right
67	#glennbec	Glenn Beck
68	#antiobama	Anti Obama
69	#health care	Health care
70	#oilspill	Oil spill referring to the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico
71	#pr	Public Religion Research Institute
72	#humor	Humour
73	#cnn	CNN
74	#mob	Mob
75	#patriots	Patriots
76	#democrats	Democrats
77	#orca	Organized conservative resistance alliance, a Twitter-based informal network of conservative political activists
78	#israel	Israel
79	#christian	Christian
80	#jcot	Jewish conservatives on Twitter, an informal Twitter-based network of politically-conservative Jewish activists
81	#masen	Massachusetts Senate race
82	#icon	Independent conservatives
83	#politicalhumor	Political humour
84	#rememberinnovember	Remember in November, the month of the 2010 U.S. Midterm election
85	#mn	Minnesota
86	#freespeech	Free speech
87	#economy	Economy

**Table 16: Meaning of the 100 most-used hashtags in the #teaparty dataset (continued)**

**Signification of the 100 most-used hashtags in the #teaparty dataset**

#	Hashtag	Signification
88	#pelosi	Pelosi, the last name of Democratic congresswoman Nancy Pelosi who represents California's 8 <sup>th</sup> congressional district
89	#freedom	Freedom
90	#rightriot	Right riot, which can defined as textual expression serving as a mobilization cry for conservative political activists
91	#qsn	Star News or <i>Qstarnews.com</i> , a Web-based news media resource
92	#election	Election
93	#arizona	Arizona
94	#alaska	Alaska
95	#congress	Congress
96	#roft	Canadian conservative movement on Twitter, a Twitter-based informal network of activists based in Canada
97	#patcot	Pennsylvania top conservatives on Twitter, a Twitter-based informal network of conservative political activists based in Pennsylvania
98	#socialism	Socialism
99	#casen	California Senate race
100	#killthebill	Kill the bill, a political initiative launched by individuals and groups opposing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act for different political, economic and social reasons

Some of the 100 most popular hashtags essentially referred to the same element. For example, the hashtags #hcr and #healthcare were frequently added to tweets discussing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. However, the #healthcare hashtag was also embedded in tweets focusing on broader health care-related matters.

The level of use of different hashtags by #teaparty tweeters indicates that several factors had hyper-fragmenting effects on #teaparty information flows and social relations. For example, the extent to which the 99 most-used hashtags were utilized (excluding the #teaparty hashtag) shows that the #teaparty tweeting dynamic touched upon wide-ranging issues, events, political and media figures and, more broadly, ideas. For example, many of the hashtags in #teaparty tweets linked them to specific regions within the United States and, in some cases, other countries (e.g. #alaska, #mn, #arizona, #israel). Other hashtags associated tweets with specific political initiatives. For instance, the #killthebill hashtag was employed by tweeters who were opposed to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. For example, @FloridaPundit (user ID: 71850374) posted the following tweet on March 19, 2010 at 22h15 +0000:

Obama Doesn't Care If Congress Uses Unconstitutional Process to Pass Obamacare <http://om.ly/hHEe>  
#killthebill #teaparty #tcot #gop

@frayed666 (user ID: 90300384) also shared a tweet where he expressed his opposition to the health care reform act on March 29, 2010 at 17h04 +0000:

Know the facts! Don't let the bad guys make a fool of you <http://www.politifact.com/> #teaparty #killthebill  
#obamacare #tcot #hcr

Finally, many tweets featured topical hashtags referring to geographically-specific political contexts. In some cases, their content was targeting individuals or organizations that were involved in local electoral races during the 2010 U.S. midterm contest (e.g. #casen for the California Senate race, #desen for the Delaware Senate race, etc.). For example, @TeamHuckSC (user ID: 83897877) published this tweet on May 17, 2010 at 03h10 +0000:

RT @chuckdevore: Some great endorsers whom you may have missed: @GovMikeHuckabee #CASen #tcot  
#sgp #teaparty

In addition, @TMRNetwork (user ID: 17924595) shared the following post on July 7, 2010 at 02h11 +0000:

Don't allow @repmikecastle Vote for Cap & Trade Twice!!! <http://bit.ly/bBrbuL> Vote @ChristineOD in  
#Delaware #DESEN #tcot #teaparty

The use of the 49,797 hashtags (including the #teaparty hashtag) by #teaparty tweeters shows that the #teaparty political communication and mobilization phenomena in the Twittosphere was highly fragmented. While many recent investigations have examined political hashtag usage (e.g. Larsson and Moe 2012; Conover, Ratkiewicz et al. 2011), few have conducted an extensive analysis of their effects on the structure of political communication, mobilization and organizing patterns in the Twitterverse (Romero, Meeder et al. 2011; Bruns and Burgess 2011). In other words, only a small number of studies have examined the political hashtagging dynamic in the Twitterverse.

A review of hashtag combination patterns in #teaparty tweets comprising two or more hashtags was also conducted. It revealed that 267,644 hashtag combinations of between two and 27 hashtags appeared in the tweets collected during the 67-week period considered in this

analysis. Specifically, 138 hashtag combinations (5.16 percent of all combinations) were employed more than 1,000 times compared to 89 that were used between 500 and 999 times, 342 that were utilized between 200 and 499 times, 530 that were used between 100 and 199 times, and 12,019 that were included in tweets between 10 and 99 times. Again, it should be emphasized that the overwhelming majority of hashtag combinations were only used a small number of times by #teaparty tweeters. Indeed, 178,417 hashtag combinations were only used once whereas 38,051 were employed twice, 14,996 were utilized three times, and 3,369 were embedded four times in #teaparty posts. This indicates that many #teaparty tweeters came up with distinct hashtag combinations in order to reach a specific segment of the #teaparty tweeting community (hyper-narrowcasting).

As indicated in Table 17, which provides the 100 most popular hashtag combinations that were included in #teaparty tweets posted between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011, the most popular often referred to informal online networks of political activists (e.g. #tcot, #tlot, #sgp, #p2, etc.), important policy issues (#capandtrade, etc.), offline political organizations linked to the Tea Party movement (e.g. #nra, #tpp, etc.), and comparatively less to political and media figures considered leading voices within the Tea Party movement (e.g. #palin, #rush, #glennbeck).

**Table 17: Most-used hashtag combinations in #teaparty tweets**

**Most-used hashtag combinations in #teaparty tweets (per number of utilizations)**

#	Hashtag combination	Frequency	#	Hashtag combination	Frequency
1	#tcot #teaparty	123,922	26	#tcot #teaparty #tpp	5,181
2	#p2 #tcot #teaparty	46,288	27	#912 #p2 #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tpp	4,626
3	#sgp #tcot #teaparty	33,544	28	#912 #acon #cspj #ocra #tcot #teaparty #twisters	4,572
4	#gop #tcot #teaparty	31,710	29	#gop #tcot #teaparty #tlot	4,445
5	#912 #dnc #gop #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot #vote2010	28,720	30	#gop #libertarian #ocra #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot #ucot	4,381
6	#p2 #sgp #tcot #teaparty	25,210	31	#912 #glennbeck #liberties #teaparty	4,318
7	#palin #teaparty	25,072	32	#conservative #palin #politics #teaparty	4,307
8	#tcot #teaparty #tlot	18,709	33	#news #p2 #tcot #teaparty	4,072
9	#gop #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tlot	15,330	34	#912 #glennbeck #harryreid #teaparty	3,947
10	#gop #sgp #tcot #teaparty	14,045	35	#ocra #sgp #tcot #teaparty	3,888
11	#ocra #tcot #teaparty	10,002	36	#912 #righttowork #teaparty	3,845
12	#p2 #teaparty	9,606	37	#nra #palin12 #rs #sgp #spwbt #tcot #teaparty #tlot	3,723
13	#912 #libertarian #teaparty	8,713	38	#912 #glennbeck #pelosi #teaparty	3,659
14	#912 #palin12 #sgp #spwbt #tcot #teaparty #tsot	8,492	39	#p2 #politicalhumor #sgp #tcot #teaparty	3,658
15	#gop #sarahpalinusa #teaparty	7,216	40	#iamthemob #tcot #teaparty #tweetcongress	3,454
16	#gop #teaparty	7,180	41	#912 #freedoms #glennbeck #teaparty	3,420
17	#p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot	6,859	42	#rush #sgp #tcot #teaparty	3,380
18	#gop #p2 #tcot #teaparty	6,724	43	#sarahpalinusa #teaparty	3,360
19	#tcot #teaparty #twisters	6,040	44	#912 #tcot #teaparty	3,328
20	#sgp #tcot #teaparty #tlot	5,982	45	#hcr #tcot #teaparty	3,254
21	#glennbeck #gop #teaparty	5,749	46	#teaparty #tlot	3,070
22	#912 #freespeech #teaparty	5,330	47	#912 #glennbeck #tcot #teaparty	3,050
23	#912 #capandtrade #teaparty	5,308	48	#gop #libertarian #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot	3,010
24	#912 #capandtrade #glennbeck #teaparty	5,304	49	#gop #iamthemob #libertarian #ocra #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot #ucot	2,988
25	#news #p2 #qsn #sgp #tcot #teaparty	5,278	50	#desen #tcot #teaparty	2,977

**Table 17: Most-used hashtag combinations in #teaparty tweets (continued)**

**Most-used hashtag combinations in #teaparty tweets (per number of utilizations)**

#	Hashtag combination	Frequency	#	Hashtag combination	Frequency
51	#912 #dnc #gop #tcot #teaparty	2,967	76	#glennbeck #tcot #teaparty	1,969
52	#gop #libertarian #ocra #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot	2,965	77	#ocra #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot	1,910
53	#ocra #p2 #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tlot	2,956	78	#desen #sgp #tcot #teaparty	1,910
54	#ocra #tcot #teaparty #tlot	2,877	79	#gop #teaparty #tweetcongress	1,907
55	#gop #ocra #sgp #tcot #teaparty	2,798	80	#obama #p2 #tcot #teaparty	1,883
56	#ocra #p2 #tcot #teaparty	2,720	81	#ocra #tcot #teaparty #twisters	1,855
57	#hcr #p2 #tcot #teaparty	2,719	82	#gop #iamthemob #tcot #teaparty	1,845
58	#nra #palin12 #sgp #spwbt #tcot #teaparty #tlot	2,624	83	#912 #palin12 #sgp #spwbt #teaparty #tsot	1,817
59	#912 #palin12 #sgp #spwbt #tcot #teaparty #tlot #tsot	2,612	84	#hhhs #tcot #teaparty	1,788
60	#p2 #tcot #teaparty #topprog	2,456	85	#p2 #p21 #tcot #teaparty	1,782
61	#humor #satire #tcot #teaparty	2,433	86	#sgp #tcot #teaparty #tpp	1,751
62	#antiobama #beck #conservative #gop #palin #republican #rush #sgp #tcot #teaparty	2,429	87	#nygop #teaparty	1,737
63	#iamthemob #tcot #teaparty	2,427	88	#iamthemob #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tlot	1,729
64	#obama #tcot #teaparty	2,371	89	#ocra #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tlot	1,672
65	#ocra #p2 #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tlot #topprog	2,334	90	#p2 #tcot #teaparty #twisters	1,611
66	#912 #nvsenate #teaparty	2,332	91	#912 #dontgo #tcot #teaparty #tlot	1,606
67	#p2 #politicalhumor #tcot #teaparty	2,259	92	#gop #p2 #teaparty	1,586
68	#libertarian #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot	2,154	93	#glennbeck #nvsenate #teaparty	1,572
69	#gop2112 #sgp #tcot #teaparty	2,128	94	#sgp #tcot #teaparty #twisters	1,567
70	#ak #alaska #tcot #teaparty	2,119	95	#hcr #teaparty	1,564
71	#gop #ocra #tcot #teaparty	2,112	96	#jcot #jlot #p2 #sgp #tcot #teaparty #tiot #tlot	1,545
72	#912 #glennbeck #sharronangle #teaparty	2,057	97	#dems #ocra #p2 #tcot #teaparty #tlot #wc	1,535
73	#teaparty #voterfraud	2,009	98	#humor #tcot #teaparty	1,534
74	#orca #tcot #teaparty #ucot	1,976	99	#palin #tcot #teaparty	1,532
75	#gop #ocra #sgp #teaparty	1,969	100	#teaparty #toct #tpp	1,529

These results demonstrate that the #teaparty publication stream was marked by very high levels of hyper-fragmentation. The inclusion of several hashtags by Internet users enabled them to tag their posts in a very specific way, therefore allowing them to make their contributions appealing to narrow segments of the Twitter audience. In other words, it enabled them to engage in narrowcasting practices.

## 7 Chapter: Discussion

The findings of the analysis of the #teaparty tweeting dynamic between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011 suggest that the Tea Party movement constitutes one of the first large-scale manifestations of *online politicking 3.0* in the United States. In fact, it constitutes a sharp departure from the grassroots political communication, mobilization and organizing approach developed by the Dean campaign during the 2004 U.S. presidential contest, which was reused with some modifications by several Democratic and Republican politicians during subsequent electoral contests. Specifically, the Tea Party movement differs from previous grassroots political phenomena in several ways:

- ✓ activities are not centered around specific elected or non-elected political figures;
- ✓ activities are not driven by a small number of influential political or media organizations;
- ✓ concerns are not centered on a small number of elements such as policy issues, themes, or mobilization initiatives that may or may not receive a lot of attention from mass media outlets.

Chapter 7 of this dissertation will contextualize the findings presented in the previous section through the consideration of several factors:

- ✓ distinct structural and functional properties of social media tools;
- ✓ recent academic research on Web 2.0 politicking;
- ✓ progressive evolution of formal and informal political communication, mobilization and organizing practices in the United States;
- ✓ distinct nature of the Tea Party movement.

### 7.1 Validation of the grassroots-intensive uncontrolled decentralization hypothesis

The decentralization of political information flows and social interactions in the Web 2.0 mediascape has been examined by researchers who have adopted different theoretical or

analytical approaches over the last 5 years (e.g. Gibson and Ward 2012; Towner 2012; Dylko and McCluskey 2012). For instance, the way in which social networking sites and micro-communication services have contributed to the transformation of political campaigning practices has been examined by Vergeer, Hermans et al. (2011). Their analysis has focused mainly on how politicians have exploited these communication platforms for mostly top-down voter outreach purposes while largely ignoring how they have been utilized by the general public to engage in various formal and informal political actions. According to them, the highly “personalized, decentralized, and unsupervised” nature of these tools might have played a determinant role in the de-professionalization of cyber-electioneering in recent years. In other words, “[p]arty discipline – politicians conforming to the party standpoint – could [have been] [...] compromised” due to these technologies (Vergeer, Hermans et al. 2011).

Juris (2012) has published a lengthy reflection on the #occupy movement’s presence on the World Wide Web, mostly through user-generated content dispersion and community-building platforms. He believes that #occupy activists’ heavy use of social media has helped to strengthen existing modes of decentralized political organizing and, in some cases, develop new ones. For example, it has led to various bottom-up mobilization efforts such as “public education, community organizing, neighborhood meet ups, and electronic civil disobedience as well as marches, protests, and decentralized direct actions” (Juris 2012: 269).

Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen et al. (2012) have studied how the growing popularity among the public of second generation media channels has affected “individual level and structural level conditions for mobilization.” They have concluded that these platforms have significantly augmented political mobilization levels among some segments of the public. Indeed, they have modified “how individuals are informed and motivated to participate” and have contributed to the rise of “a new form of mobilizing agency that neither simply reflects nor crowds out existing formalized and established structures” (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen et al.

2012: 15). Finally, O'Callaghan, Greene et al. (2012) have looked at how some Web 2.0 platforms might be fueling the decentralization of right-wing political movements in several countries. Interestingly, they point out that political decentralization “should not be confused with disorganization or irrelevance” (O'Callaghan, Greene et al. 2012: 3).

Most of these studies have only provided a general characterization of the decentralization of cyberpoliticking, mainly from an offline-inspired, top-down perspective. This doctoral dissertation adopts another approach and offers a detailed portrait of the grassroots-intensive, uncontrolled decentralization of cyber politicking. This trend is expected to have strong effects on the structure of the political landscape of the United States and in many other national contexts during the coming decade, especially with the growing popularity of social media channels and the previously discussed growing traction of postmodern trends.

Several researchers have argued that the Tea Party movement is an Astroturf<sup>23</sup> political phenomenon essentially driven by a small number of political organizations and individuals with specific social, political, and economic interests and objectives (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 11-12; Cho, Gimpel et al. 2012: 108). Specifically, they believe that offline political organizations have been actively involved in different aspects of Tea Party activities since its mainstream emergence in early February 2009. For instance, the Tea Party Patriots (TPP) and Tea Party Express (TPE) have set up different Web 1.0 and 2.0 digital communication infrastructures in order to facilitate the circulation of information among Tea Party activists and promote a variety of mobilization initiatives. Moreover, they have endorsed and, in some cases, provided different levels of assistance to conservative candidates whose ideals and objectives were compatible with those of the Tea Party movement during the 2010 midterm elections (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011; Courser 2011, 2012). Certain researchers also suggest that some public figures from both the

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<sup>23</sup> Astroturf refers to “grassroots support that is artificial because it is manufactured and does not arise spontaneously.” (Klotz 2007: 5)

media and political worlds have played a central role in the Tea Party movement. For example, conservative commentator Glenn Beck, former Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, and the former Republican majority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, Dick Armey, were considered by many members of the U.S. public to be some of the leading voices of this movement (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Berg 2011b: 5).

The results of the quantitative content analysis of #teaparty information flows and social relations between early December 2009 and mid-March 2010 contradict the belief that the Tea Party movement is an Astroturf political phenomenon. In fact, the findings suggest that it was not centered on or driven by a small number of influential political players with specific objectives (e.g. interest groups, citizen-driven movements, candidates in the midterm elections, etc.). In fact, it mobilized a large number of Twitter users with a wide range of political preferences, interests and goals. In other words, the results confirm the grassroots-intensive, uncontrolled political decentralization thesis, which constitutes one of the two main theoretical premises of this dissertation.

First, whereas the majority of #teaparty tweeters posted only one tweet (40,691 unique tweeters or 51.14 percent), 25.2 percent of them (20,052 users) shared 5 tweets or more and 5.38 percent (4,284 users) fell into the vocal contributors category because they tweeted at least 50 times during the 67-week window covered by this investigation. The review of the dataset also indicated that 500 unique tweeters posted 500 or more micro-blog entries. In other words, the bulk of #teaparty tweets did not originate from a limited number of users, but from a large and most likely diversified pool of individuals and organizations, thus reaffirming the grassroots-intensive decentralization thesis.

Whereas some formal and informal organizations affiliated with the Tea Party movement were fairly active in the #teaparty publication stream, many others played a mostly

peripheral role. Tea Party Patriots posted 2,553 tweets with the #teaparty hashtag through its official Twitter account (user ID: 86177206) compared to only 105 tweets for Tea Party Nation (user ID: 11375834) and 5 tweets for FreedomWorks (users ID: 14730894). Despite the fact that they had been present in the Twitterverse since September 19, 2008 and July 23, 2009, respectively, the Tea Party Express and ResistNet did not participate in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic. It should also be noted that a large number of small and mid-size Tea Party groups did not participate in #teaparty tweeting. In fact, many of them such as the Tea Party Federation, Nationwide Tea Party Coalition, and TeaParty365 were not even present in the Twitterverse during the 67-week period covered by this study.

Political and media personalities considered to be leading voices within the Tea Party movement were also involved in #teaparty tweeting activity, but in an extremely marginal way. Few of them posted a relatively large number of #teaparty posts whereas most of them only shared a very small number of #teaparty tweets; many others did not engage in #teaparty tweeting even though they were present in the Twitterverse during the 2010 U.S. midterm election cycle. For example, Glenn Beck (user ID: 17454769) posted 12 tweets from his personal account and Judge Andrew P. Napolitano (user ID: 29216764), a conservative commentator on Fox News and Fox Business, published 35 posts. Many others did not take part in the #teaparty politicking dynamic. Sarah Palin did not post a #teaparty tweet even though she had had a Twitter account since August 13, 2009; she was the recipient of 1,497 @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag from 526 tweeters between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011. Also, Dick Armey, who personally joined Twitter on May 12, 2008, and conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh, who launched his personal Twitter account on February 26, 2009, did not contribute to #teaparty information flows and social relations.

Some congressional, senatorial and gubernatorial contenders in the 2010 midterm election cycle who had ties to the Tea Party movement engaged in #teaparty tweeting while

many others were not even present on Twitter. First, Tea Party congressional hopefuls such as Tim Scott in South Carolina, Michael Grimm in New York, and Kristi Noem in South Dakota did not contribute to #teaparty exchanges despite the fact that they had had Twitter accounts since October 9, 2009, February 18, 2010, and February 15, 2010, respectively. However, others were involved in #teaparty tweeting such as Renee Ellmers in North Carolina (user ID: 90324281), who posted 42 tweets, Mick Mulvany in South Carolina (user ID: 100362290), who published one post, and Michelle Bachmann in Minnesota (user ID: 18217624), who shared two micro-blog entries essentially serving top-down political communication purposes. She tweeted the following on July 29, 2010 at 20:37 +0000:

Democrats miss the mark with their latest messaging strategy: <http://tiny.cc/atlmr> #tcot #teaparty

She also published this tweet on November 29, 2010 at 16:08 +0000:

RT @rightnetwork: Michele Bachmann is on this week's Five 4 Friday <http://ow.ly/3fP9M> #tcot #gop #teaparty

Second, several Republican senatorial hopefuls backing the Tea Party movement engaged in #teaparty tweeting such as Sharron Angle in Nevada (user ID: 45528439), who tweeted 102 times compared to 168 for Christine O'Donnell in Delaware (user ID: 40745568), 921 for Joe W. Miller in Alaska (user ID: 24618431), 2 for Pat Toomey in Pennsylvania (user ID: 26062385), and only 1 for Jim DeMint in North Carolina (user ID: 9508922). At the same time, Rand Paul, Marco Rubio and Ken Buck, who were competing in Senate races in Kentucky, Florida and Colorado, respectively, did not participate in #teaparty tweeting activity even though they had had personal Twitter accounts since March 1, 2009, August 6, 2008, and April 26, 2009, respectively. Finally, several Republican gubernatorial hopefuls with ties to the Tea Party took part in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic. Carl Paladino, who was running for governor in the state of New York (user ID: 71010992), published only two tweets whereas Rick Scott in Florida (user ID: 131546062) shared 6 tweets. Nikki Haley in

South Carolina and Dan Maes in Colorado did not partake in #teaparty tweeting even though they had been active in the Twitterverse since May 4, 2009 and March 25, 2009, respectively.

While many of the public figures listed above were not involved in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic, most of them did publish at least one tweet during the time period considered in this study. It should be noted that most posts from leading Tea Party figures generally contained information on a wide range of social, economic and political issues that could be of interest to Tea Party adherents such as gun rights, race relations, health care reform, or taxes. They also sought to mobilize their followers by encouraging them to donate money to their own campaigns, or to take part in other campaigning efforts. For instance, senatorial hopeful Joe W. Miller in Alaska (user ID: 24618431) tweeted the following on June 15, 2010 at 16:39 +0000:

Today's Meet 'n Greet, 5-7 PM, #Alaska Cab, K-Beach, between Murwood & Trinity Greenhouse, #Kenai #teaparty Looking forward to meeting you.

Also, Nevada Senate candidate Sharron Angle (user ID: 45528439) posted the following on May 10, 2010 at 20:00 +0000:

Have you watched my latest YouTube videos? Hear my radio ads, how I can win & much more: <http://www.youtube.com/sharronangle> #tcot #teaparty

The review of the #teaparty dataset showed that the majority of tweets were posted by ordinary Internet users. Influential political or media figures, news media organizations, and political groups were not the source of a large volume of posts.

Analysis of the structure of social interactions between #teaparty tweeters through the examination of @replies suggests that this social interactive mechanism did not play a central role in the #teaparty politicking dynamic. As indicated in the previous chapter, only 85,629 @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (approximately 4 percent of the tweets in the dataset) were posted by 11,296 unique tweeters (close to 14.20 percent of all tweeters). More important, it indicates that the conversation did not revolve around a limited number of users.

The frequency table of the recipients of @replies shows that a large number of tweeters either posted or were the recipients of @replies during the period covered in this investigation.

Again, while many prominent Tea Party figures and organizations were the recipients of at least one @reply with at least one #teaparty hashtag, they did not command a lot of attention in the broader conversation. In fact, they represented a minority of the 17,763 tweeters who were the recipients of at least one @reply. Some of them were at the receiving end of more social contacts than others. For instance, Sarah Palin was the recipient of 1,497 @replies from 526 unique tweeters compared to 2,757 @replies from 2,578 unique Twitter users for Glenn Beck and only 7 @replies from 7 users for Dick Armey. The Tea Party Nation was contacted only 12 times by 8 unique tweeters compared to 52 times by 40 users for the Tea Party Patriots and 46 times by 30 unique contributors for FreedomWorks.

Many Internet users turned to Twitter to reach out to Tea Party contenders in the midterm elections. For example, 4 #teaparty tweeters posted 6 @replies targeting congressional hopeful Tim Scott whereas Michele Bachmann was the recipient of 170 direct social interactions from 117 users. Additionally, 68 Twitter users contacted senatorial hopeful Marco Rubio 114 times compared to 173 times by 113 users for Jim DeMint and a mere 7 times by 7 tweeters for Rand Paul. Finally, 23 #teaparty tweeters contacted gubernatorial candidate Nikki Haley 52 times while 6 others reached out to Rick Scott 9 times. Interestingly, many #teaparty tweeters posted @replies targeting prominent individuals and groups with ties with the Tea Party movement such as Sarah Palin or senate contenders Marco Rubio and Rand Paul even though they did not take part in #teaparty tweeting.

The review of the #teaparty dataset shows that mainstream Tea Party politicians and organizations initiated few direct social interactions with members of the public through the @reply mechanism. Most of them preferred to engage in using Twitter to attain top-down communication, mobilization and organizing objectives. Interestingly, many tweeters who

had little to nothing to do with the Tea Party movement were the recipients of a relatively large volume of @replies with a #teaparty hashtag including Daily Kos (@dailykos), a progressive group blog, and Roger Ebert (@ebertchicago), a film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Finally, the analysis of #teaparty retweeting patterns tends to support the grassroots-intensive decentralization hypothesis for several reasons. First, a large number of tweeters reposted publications originally shared by other users during the period considered in this study. Indeed, 578,939 #teaparty tweets (approximately 33 percent of the dataset) shared by 54,802 unique tweeters (slightly less than 69 percent of #teaparty tweeters) served a strict @retweet function because they began with either the “RT @username ABC” or “RT@username ABC” syntaxes. Moreover, 24,338 tweets (1.39 percent of the #teaparty dataset) published by 2,618 users (3.29 percent of #teaparty tweeters) contained at least one @retweet function with the RT @username ABC or the RT@username ABC formulation in their text. Interestingly, few influential political and media figures or political groups with ties to the Tea Party movement retweeted content during the time period considered in this study.

Second, the @retweet frequency table in the previous chapter shows that a large number of #tweeters entries were retweeted at least once throughout the time period covered by this investigation. While many ordinary Internet users’ tweets were frequently retweeted, the publications of Tea Party figures and organizations were not extensively reposted. For example, Sarah Palin’s tweets were retweeted a mere 260 times by 124 #teaparty tweeters who embedded the “RT @username ABC” or “RT@username ABC” syntaxes at the beginning of their retweets.

## **7.2 Validation of the hyper-fragmentation hypothesis**

A relatively small number of social scientists have examined the fragmentation of e-politicking in the Web 2.0 media world over the last five years. Freelon, Kriplean et al. (2012:

284) have studied U.S. Internet users' utilization of the Living Voters Guide, which can be defined as a Web 2.0-style interactive application designed to foster and coordinate online deliberation patterns of the 2010 Washington state ballot measures. This media platform comprised sub-sections enabling users to discuss specific policy issues:

- ✓ modification of certain rules of the Washington state legislature;
- ✓ repeal of amendments to state tax laws;
- ✓ adjustment of the state debt ceiling;
- ✓ augmentation of income tax rates for specific segments of the population (Freelon, Kriplean et al. 2012: 284).

The researchers concluded that “while users probably could not avoid accessing a few points from both sides on each initiative, they could opt to read, consider, or produce points from one side or from both” (Freelon, Kriplean et al. 2012: 293).

Owen (2012: 404) also investigated the online political fragmentation phenomenon in the U.S. with the rise of a growing number of Web 1.0 (e.g. specialized journalism websites such as Politico, etc.) and social media channels (e.g. blogs, Facebook, etc.) that are managed by individuals or “digital media era organizations.” She found that these communication platforms can provide Internet users with the capacity “to unite *en masse* around shared mediated political experiences” (Owen 2012: 412). However, she points out that they can also foster growing levels of political compartmentalization and, in some cases, polarization. Indeed, they can enable Internet users to tailor their political information intake and their exposure to social interactions to their personal preferences or objectives. In many cases, they can allow them to “avoid consumption of news and political information altogether” (Owen 2012: 412).

Finally, Feller, Kuhnert et al. (2011: 474-475) conducted an analysis of 69,318 tweets containing at least one hashtag referring to one of the six major German political parties or to

their leaders that were posted between August 13, 2009 and September 9, 2009, a time period preceding the 2009 German federal election that was held on September 27, 2009. They also examined the information available on the public profile page of 2,500 unique tweeters who participated at least once in the German election-related conversation in the Twitterverse. Their research showed that the discussion of the elections was marked by high levels of fragmentation along partisan lines and topics of interest. It also demonstrated that “users who support the same party tend[ed] to follow each others’ posts more frequently and, thus, form tight-knit clusters in the online community” (Feller, Kuhnert et al. 2011: 476). Finally, they indicated that “groups of ideologically similar microbloggers [were likely to] discuss different political topics more intensely” (Feller, Kuhnert et al. 2011: 476). Feller, Kuhnert et al. (2011: 476) concluded that “the data found in micro-blogging services like Twitter can be used to gain relevant insights into the political landscape offline.”

Most recent academic investigations discussing the fragmentation of e-politics have looked at this phenomenon from a top-down perspective and have only been the source of broad insights. The research approach utilized in this doctoral dissertation can be seen as a departure from those favoured in most scientific research projects conducted in recent years. Indeed, this study has examined the fragmentation phenomenon from a bottom-up perspective.

As indicated in the results chapter, major grassroots political phenomena that have impacted the mainstream U.S. political landscape between 2004 and 2008 were generally driven by specific formal political actors and were generally centered on a small number of political issues. For instance, Howard Dean gained significant traction among progressive segments of the U.S. electorate during the Democratic presidential primary campaign due to his stances on several political and policy matters such as the U.S. military involvement in Iraq, health care and, more broadly, his vocal opposition to some of the decisions of the Bush

administration. His supporters, who were energized by his positions, leveraged the power of user-generated digital information dispersion and community-building technologies to launch and manage fundraising campaigns as well as organize mobilization efforts to support his candidacy. During the 2006 U.S. midterm elections, Ned Lamont generated excitement among members of the progressive netroots with his views on specific policy issues which clashed with those of his adversaries. To a larger extent, his embodiment of a new form of leadership strongly appealed to liberal voters. Two years later, some presidential hopefuls like Republican Ron Paul and Democrat Barack Obama benefited from the strong support of specific segments of the U.S. voting public due to several factors such as their positions on key issues or their electoral promises.

The consideration of hashtag utilization patterns in the analysis of the #teaparty dataset indicated high levels of fragmentation along different lines, or *fracture points*. Indeed, 49,797 different hashtags referring to political issues, political action networks, elected or non-elected political figures, media personalities, formal and informal political organizations, geographical locations, or mobilization initiatives were used 8,056,285 times during the 67-week window covered in this study. The fact that a sizable proportion of #teaparty tweets featured two hashtags or more indicated that their authors sought to tag their content in very specific ways. In other words, the inclusion of two or more hashtags in a tweet results in more precision of focus.

Many hashtags were embedded in tweets in order to link their content to informal networks of political activists sharing ideological views or socio-demographic traits. For example, #tcot (“top conservatives on Twitter”), #p2 (“progressives 2.0”), #tlot (“top libertarians on Twitter”) and #ucot (“united conservatives on Twitter”), which were, respectively, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtags used by #teaparty tweeters, were embedded in tweets that were of interest to specific segments of the Twitter public with

specific ideological dispositions or objectives. For instance, @realchange2012 (user ID: 155905698) embedded the hashtags #tcot and #p2 in his tweet on October 1, 2010 at 10h27+0000:

Pelosi moral depravity <http://bit.ly/d3J5CM> #tcot #teaparty #p2 #politicalhumor

Also, @wethepeopleusa (user ID: 20111100) shared a tweet with the #ucot and #ocra hashtags that talked about people affiliated to the Illinois Republican Renaissance PAC on July 21, 2010 at 20h22 +0000:

Just talking to great ppl at the IRR-PAC. Wow, impressive conservatives #tcot #twisters #gop #ampat #ocra #ucot #teaparty #912

The hashtags #sgp (“smart girl politics”), which appeared 413,721 times in #teaparty tweets (4<sup>th</sup> most-used hashtag), and #twisters (informal group of conservative women who consider themselves sisters in the Twitterverse), which was embedded 100,263 times in #teaparty tweets, were inserted in posts that could be of interest to women with conservative political preferences and objectives. For example, @1ststarfighter (user ID: 19048266) shared a post discussing some aspects of the climate change debate with the #sgp hashtag on February 22, 2010 at 16h46 +0000:

More backing up Climate scientists withdraw journal claims of rising sea levels <http://is.gd/8WjDv> #tcot #teaparty #climate #912 #sgp

Also, @roosterpisces (user ID: 55931763) shared the following tweet with the #twisters hashtag on June 17, 2010 at 11h55 +0000:

Hey, AMERICA! Liberty called and she wants her cluckin freedom back! <http://www.twitpic.com/16k135> #tlot #tcot #twisters #teaparty #ocra

A large number of #teaparty tweeters also embedded in their posts hashtags referring to elected or non-elected politicians, news media personalities, and formal and informal organizations linked to the Tea Party movement. For instance, the #palin (Sarah Palin), #glennbeck (Glenn Beck), #beck (Glenn Beck), and the #rush (Rush Limbaugh) hashtags, which were utilized 83,508 (12<sup>th</sup> most-used hashtag), 53,411 (15<sup>th</sup> most-used hashtag), 28,002

(28<sup>th</sup> most-used hashtag), and 26,347 (32<sup>th</sup> most-used hashtag) times, respectively, in #teaparty tweets, were generally present in posts discussing matters linked to these high-profile personalities (e.g. previous statements, ideological views, etc.). For example, Sarah Palin headlined several Tea Party events such as the Tea Party Convention, which was held in Nashville in February 2010, or the Tax Day protest in the Boston Commons on April 14, 2010. She also publicly endorsed many Republican contenders during the 2010 U.S. midterm elections who had conservative political views and objectives that were in line with those of the Tea Party movement (Karpowitz, Monson et al. 2011: 306; Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 32). In addition, conservative commentators Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh frequently promoted Tea Party ideals and mobilization events through their respective television and radio shows (Williamson, Skocpol et al. 2011: 37; Rasmussen and Schoen 2010: 165).

On August 23, 2010 at 17h30 +0000, @FollowPalin (user ID: 112007790) discussed fundraising issues experienced by the Republican National Committee in this post with the #palin hashtag:

RNC Fundraising Comes Up Short Heading Into Midterm Elections - Death and Taxes <http://bit.ly/a2s9xs> #palin #teaparty

On August 30, 2010 at 23h42 +0000, @Carydc (user ID: 5950272) discussed the health care reform plan in this post with the #glennbeck hashtag:

#teaparty #glennbeck Why They Play the Game: ... the health care reform law, was a no on th... <http://tinyurl.com/2bdmuqe> #capandtrade #912

Finally, @retirepelosinow (user ID: 187028827) posted this tweet with the #rush hashtag on September 8, 2010 at 14h06 +0000 in which he criticized the Democratic-led House of Representatives:

Worst Congress in history lead by Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid! #tcot #sgp #teaparty #rush

Many hashtags were embedded in #teaparty tweets in order to link them to geographical locations or economic and political situations. Specifically, some hashtags referred to a

specific continent (e.g. #america was utilized 3,216 times [145<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #europe was used 223 times [950<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], etc.) while others were linked to a country (e.g. #usa was used 8,787 times [64<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #canada was utilized 627 times [486<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #greece was used 177 times [1,102<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #spain was used 157 times [1,191<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], etc.), to the entirety or a portion of a U.S. state (e.g. #delaware was utilized 2,955 times [155<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #nevada was used 1,556 times [259<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #south\_california was utilized 3 times [14,807<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #sofla [south Florida] was utilized 26 times [3,842<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], etc.), to a county (e.g. #orangecounty was used 8 times [7,707<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #cookcounty was utilized 7 times [8,395<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], etc.), or to a city (e.g. #philadelphia was utilized 2,453 times [180<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #boston was used 267 times [857<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], #sandiego was used 114 times [1,473<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], and #miami was utilized 37 times [3,006<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag], etc.).

For example, @1ecgoinguy (user ID: 32685547) publicized a Tea Party-related mobilization initiative in the state of Nevada in this tweet with the #nevada hashtag on December 22, 2009 at 00h11 +0000:

We need to rally <http://www.cc2009.us/aof/75-articles-of-freedom-preface/125-preface> #tcot #ocra #teaparty #iamthemob #tlot #sgp #nevada

Moreover, @inkabinkabonk (user ID: 174046229) shared a hyperlink pointing to a digital resource featuring documentation for Cook county voters in this post with the #cookcounty hashtag on October 28, 2010 at 16h09 +0000:

RT @ttjemery: Cook County Clerk's on-line Voter Guide <http://bit.ly/bTVfDM> #TCOT #OCRA #TeaParty #Christians #Church Please #CookCounty RT

Finally, @FloridaJayhawk (user ID: 16190478) shared the following entry criticizing Democrats in Florida with the #miami hashtag on September 12, 2010 at 02h51 +0000:

DON'T Let The DEMOCRATS , SINK FLORIDA #florida #sofla #miami #gators #canes #noles #tampa #palmbeach #gop #ind #teaparty #sgp #flgop #hello

Many #teaparty tweeters inserted in their posts hashtags referring to events or mobilization initiatives. For example, the #nashtea hashtag, which was created for the Tea Party convention that was held in Nashville, Tennessee in February 2010, appeared 42 times in the #teaparty tweets collected and archived during the 16-month window considered in this investigation (2,786<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag). It was mainly utilized by individuals and organizations that were either participating in the conference or discussing it. For instance, @linkspolitik (user ID: 89898175) expressed his opinion on the conference in this tweet posted on February 7, 2010 at 03h12 +0000

This is 600 ppl in the gaylord hotel, cnn. Not an actual, meaningful, party convention. #nashtea #p2 #teaparty

In addition, @loriguffey (user ID: 11881673) commented on Sarah Palin's speech at the convention in this tweet shared on February 7, 2010 at 03h18 +0000:

love how Sarah Palin's speech at #nashtea is making all the ppl discussing it on TV laugh out loud. did that even happen w/ W? #p2 #teaparty

Many tweeters opposed to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act inserted the #killthebill hashtag in their #teaparty posts. It ultimately appeared 4,772 times in the #teaparty dataset (100<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag). For example, @Teenytinyb (user ID: 22315423) promoted an offline demonstration against the health care reform in Washington D.C. in a #killthebill tweet published on March 19, 2010 at 22h01 +0000:

Tomorrow at Noon DC #killthebill Rally West Lawn of Capitol Saturday (Early arrivals starting at 10AM) #tcot #teaparty #gop #tlot #sgp

Moreover, @obamascare (user ID: 34126053) tweeted the following on April 7, 2010 at 04h14 +0000, roughly 16 days after the passage of the health care reform plan by the U.S. Congress:

Does your faith free you from forced #Obamacare? <http://j.mp/9Lwypm> #tcot #hcr #hc #teaparty #killthebill #health care #prolife

Several other formulations of the #killthebill hashtag appeared in #teaparty tweets posted during the time period covered by this study:

- ✓ #ikillthebill (2 occurrences);
- ✓ #Ikillthebill (2 occurrences);
- ✓ #killthebillesp (1 occurrence);
- ✓ #killthebillplease (1 occurrence);
- ✓ #fkillthebill (1 occurrence).

The #rememberinnovember hashtag was used by #teaparty tweeters who wanted to remind their followers about certain positions or decisions taken by local, regional and national elected officials ahead of the 2010 midterm elections in order to influence their voting decisions. The #rememberinnovember hashtag was finally used 5,948 times. For instance, @KristoferCowles (user ID: 51268700) reiterated the fact that Dennis Cardoza, the Democratic congressman representing California's 18<sup>th</sup> Congressional District and who was up for re-election in 2010, voted in favour of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in this post on August 20, 2010 at 02h34 +0000:

Hey! #RememberInNovember: Dennis Cardoza [D] from #CA18 voted for #Obamacare! #tcot #912 #teaparty #gop #dnc #vote #tlot #p2 #hcr

Also, @SAMMIESMILES8 (user ID: 68803674) sought to remind his followers about the U.S. national debt in this #rememberinnovember tweet posted on October 19, 2010 at 21h20 +0000:

RT @NationalDebt: \$13,668,894,473,093.42 (+) #nationaldebt #RememberInNovember #tcot #sgp #twisters #teaparty #iamthemob

Many other issues appealing to Tea Party members, especially in the context of the 2010 U.S. midterm contest, were discussed in #teaparty tweets that were identified with the help of specific hashtags. For instance, tweets discussing matters linked to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act often contained the #hcr (“health care reform”) or #Obamacare hashtags. In fact, they were featured 57,111 (14<sup>th</sup> most-popular hashtag) and 14,673 times, respectively, in #teaparty tweets. @cybold (user ID: 1523474) circulated among his followers the results of

a survey on the public's perception of the health care reform project in this tweet on February 26, 2010 at 05h26 +0000:

41% Favor Obama's Health Care Plan, 56% Oppose & 98% dont know anything about it. #heathcare #hcr #teaparty #mob #majority #tcot #gop #palin

Also, @Conservos (user ID: 99033169) shared a declaration made by Arizona Republican Senator and former presidential candidate John McCain on the health care reform plan of the Obama Administration in this tweet posted on February 26, 2010 at 15h08 +0000:

McCain on #hcr: 'Start Over or Don't do Anything' [bit.ly/a7wulH](http://bit.ly/a7wulH) #teaparty #tlot #tcot

As well, @es1999 (user ID: 51370040) reported on a Democratic lawmaker's position on the health care reform plan in this tweet featuring the #Obamacare hashtag posted on March 19, 2010 at 21h29 +0000:

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR) switches to 'No' on #Obamacare <http://ow.ly/IoEYk> #tpp #tcot #teaparty #handsoff #killthebill #health care #hcr

It should be noted that an avalanche of #hcr tweets flooded the Twittersverse in the weeks following the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. For instance, @Wmpear (user ID: 126202421) shared this tweet on July 18, 2010 at 00h10 +0000:

Make Congress Obey the Constitution -- Support the Enumerated Powers Act <http://tinyurl.com/yd3cn5e> #TCOT #TeaParty #The912 #hcr #Liberty

Moreover, @OBAMA\_GAMES (user ID: 59461030) criticized how Obama treated his supporters in this tweet posted on July 18, 2010 at 21h56 +0000:

<http://bit.ly/sdX7h> .OBAMA BITCH SLAPS HIS HEALTH CARE SUPPOTERS !! #gop #teaparty #tcot #tlot #hcr #p2 #politics #sgp #fail cnn bbc #cspj

Finally, @pugpugmom (user ID: 16223329) tweeted about an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on health care reform on July 25, 2010 at 13h45 +0000 (with the #Obamacare hashtag):

From WSJ by @jamestaranto: "A Commandeering of the People" <http://ow.ly/2genw> Handicapping #ObamaCare #tcot #tlot #teaparty

Multiple variations of the #hrc hashtag were used throughout the period considered in this study:

- ✓ #hcrfallout (42 occurrences);
- ✓ #hcrfail (23 occurrences);
- ✓ #hcrcostsjobs (14 occurrences);
- ✓ #hcreform (12 occurrences).

A wide range of other social, economic, legal and political issues addressing the preoccupations of Tea Party adherents and, to some extent, the general public were discussed in #teaparty tweets featuring these hashtags:

- ✓ #immigration (9,944 occurrences);
- ✓ #oilspill (7,632 occurrences);
- ✓ #economy (5,547 occurrences);
- ✓ #liberties (4,337 occurrences);
- ✓ #righttowork (3,872 occurrences);
- ✓ #climate (1,896 occurrences);
- ✓ #terrorism (1,550 occurrences);

Many #teaparty tweeters included in their micro-blog entries hashtags conveying their personal views or positions on an issue or an event. They also turned to hashtags to express their emotions or their states of mind in an often humourous, satirical, or vulgar fashion. For instance, the #imtiredof hashtag was employed 84 times by users who wanted to show their desperation about a range of situations. For example, @jjmann3 (user ID: 45469694) expressed his frustration with Nevada Democratic Senator and Senate majority leader Harry Reid in this tweet posted on January 11, 2010 at 00h48 +0000:

#imtiredof @SenatorReid raping our liberty and destroying USA! (#negro and #hcr) #gop #tcot #teaparty

In addition, @Spruce\_gum (user ID: 27077343) commented on the economic relationship between China and the United States in this tweet on May 8, 2010 at 22h32 +0000:

China sold USbonds-Nov,Dec,Feb not 'cause they need the money! #teaparty #liberty #tax #imtiredof #fed #debt #poor #tlot #obama #tcot #gold

It should be noted that a large portion of #iamtiredof tweets were posted by @Spruce\_gum (user ID: 27077343).

Additionally, the #idiot hashtag was employed 268 times by #teaparty tweeters who wanted to express their frustration about a specific situation. @Conservativeind (user ID: 60113766) defined Democratic Senator Harry Reid as an idiot in this post shared on July 29, 2010 at 01h08 +0000:

#HarryReid 'The Village #Idiot' <http://bit.ly/apsdpf> #nvnsen #twisters #tcot #ocra #teaparty #sgp

@KathyK55 (user ID: 83658470) also turned to this hashtag in a tweet posted on October 21, 2010 at 12h39 +0000 to comment on Barack Obama's college grades:

BREAKING: Obama got all C's and D's in college and law school: <http://t.co/kk0W71y> #tcot #TeaParty #ocra #tlot #Idiot #p2 #fail

Thus, hashtags were employed by #teaparty tweeters to associate their posts with various elements:

- ✓ religious affiliations (e.g. #christian, #jewish, etc.);
- ✓ physical locations of religious significance (e.g. #mosque, #churches, etc.);
- ✓ formal political affiliations (e.g. #democrats, #republican, etc.);
- ✓ political ideologies and beliefs (e.g. #conservative, #libertarianism, etc.);
- ✓ informal political movements (e.g. #birther, #truthther, etc.);
- ✓ conventional media organizations (e.g. #nbc, #foxnews, #pbs, etc.);
- ✓ local and regional electoral races during the 2010 U.S. midterm contest (e.g. #fl22 (Florida 22<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District), #nevnsen (Nevada Senate race), etc.).

In sum, the utilization and, more important, the combination of hashtags referring to a wide range of political elements by #teaparty tweeters clearly demonstrate that the conversation was hyper-fragmented. The #teaparty tweeting dynamic comprised a constantly-evolving network of interrelated micro-discussions focused on wide-ranging political matters that were of interest to very narrow segments of the online public.

## Conclusion

The two main conceptual premises behind this dissertation were developed through the observation of short-term digital politicking phenomena like the online debate sparked by declarations made on Glenn Beck's news program. In order to contextualize the growing importance of *online politicking 3.0* in the United States, a review of the evolution of mass mediated electioneering from the rise of television in the 1960s as a dominant political communication channel to the central role played by social media channels during the 2010 Midterm elections has been conducted with a special attention given to several key factors:

- ✓ the structural and functional properties of dominant information dispersion and social interaction platforms and, by extension, their impact on the political mediascape;
- ✓ the rise of social media as instrumental political communication, mobilization, and organizing tools;
- ✓ the emergence of new political engagement patterns;
- ✓ the reconfiguration of formal political organizations' internal structure and practices due to different social and technological contextual stimuli.

It was shown that the four-step evolutionary process of real-world politicking was marked by the successive rise of specific mass media outlets, which impacted in a top-down manner the structure of the political mediascape and contributed to the professionalization of politics. They ultimately helped to put in place highly centralized political information dispersion patterns in the United States where content flowed in a mostly highly hierarchical and controlled way from formal political elites to a mostly homogenous mass audience. However, the growth of commercial competition in the 1980s and the emergence of cable and satellite-based television channels in the 1990s has contributed to the relatively limited diversification of the political media environment (e.g.: rise of specialized television channels, etc.) and, by

extension, the fragmentation of the audience. Still, this process was controlled by members of the elites who had specific interests and objectives.

During the first two stages of the evolution of cyberpoliticking in the United States (1996 to 2002), most candidates and political parties still privileged top-down campaigning practices. While first generation digital media platforms' structural and functional properties gave them the capacity to provide members of the public with different content and social interactive opportunities, most of them did not exploit them in order to retain as much control as possible on their overall political communication, mobilization, and organizing activities.

The rapid popularization of user-generated content dispersion and community-building technologies and the growing traction of post modern political dispositions among the mainstream public between 2004 and 2008 played a prominent role in fuelling the decentralization and fragmentation of Web-based and, to some extent, real-world politicking. Specifically, this period led to the rise of grassroots political movements, which were generally driven by a limited number of political issues and centered on an influential political actor or organization.

Members of the U.S. public with progressive political views and objectives were energized by Howard Dean's presidential candidacy in 2004 due to his stances on certain policy issues, which diverged from those of many of his opponents, his vocal opposition to the Bush administration and his heavy utilization of Web 2.0 media channels for voter outreach. In fact, many of them turned to these communication channels to be involved in mobilization activities in support of his campaign. More broadly, the Dean for America campaign directly challenged offline-inspired campaigning approaches that were used by the overwhelming majority of formal political players on the World Wide Web before the 2004 U.S. Presidential elections. Many Democratic and Republican hopefuls modeled some aspects of their e-electioneering strategy after his approach to politics during subsequent election

cycles in the United States such as Ned Lamont in 2006 as well as Ron Paul and Barack Obama in 2008.

This dissertation demonstrated, through an analysis of slightly more than 1,7 million #teaparty micro-blog entries posted by 79,564 tweeters between early December 2009 and mid-March, that the Tea Party movement expanded on the lessons from the Dean campaign in 2004 as well as technologically-savvy grassroots campaigns during subsequent election cycles and fully embraced the potential of Web 2.0 media technologies. In fact, the Tea Party movement can be seen as one of the first large-scale manifestations of *online politicking 3.0* in the United States. The findings of this dissertation also contradict several researchers who have argued since 2009 that the Tea Party movement is an Astroturf or “genetically-modified grassroots” phenomenon (Hay 2011: 662; Hay, Hall et al. 2013) driven by a small number of political organizations and individuals with specific social, political and economic interests and objectives. These findings are likely to influence the research on the Tea Party movement and other comparable mobilization initiatives over the next five years.

First, the analysis shows the level of hyper decentralization of the #teaparty tweeting activity in the Twitterverse, thus revealing some insights on the overall structure of the Tea Party movement. Indeed, it was not driven by a small number of influential individuals and organizations with generally specific political interests or objectives. As demonstrated in this dissertation, the majority of prominent political and media figures (e.g.: elected or non elected politicians, media personalities, etc.) and formal and informal organizations (e.g.: interest groups, private corporations, citizen-driven groups, etc.) with ties to the Tea Party movement only played a peripheral and, in some cases, nonexistent role in #teaparty information flows and social relations. However, the analysis of the data showed that some public figures and organizations supporting the Tea Party movement did play an important role in #teaparty publication stream, but not in a way affecting its overall structure. Conversely, it mobilized a

large number of political players with different ideological dispositions (e.g.: libertarian, conservative, etc.), interests (e.g.: gun rights, healthcare, etc.) and objectives who contributed with varying levels of intensity in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic. In other words, the results validate the uncontrolled political decentralization thesis, which constitutes the first theoretical contribution of this dissertation.

Second, the findings of the analysis support the hyper-fragmentation hypothesis by showing that the #teaparty tweeting dynamic was not limited to a small number of themes. In fact, 49,797 hyperlinked hashtags referring to a wide range of elements often tied to Tea Party interests such as issues, opinions, mobilization initiatives, geographical locations, networks of activists, or personalities were embedded 8,056,285 times in 1,746,461 #teaparty posts. While many recent studies have provided some insights on political hashtag usage, this doctoral dissertation offers one of the first in-depth quantitative assessments of hashtags' multidimensional effects on the structure of information flows and social interactions in the Twittosphere. More importantly, this dissertation demonstrates that the Tea Party movement constituted a sharp departure from major grassroots political phenomena that have impacted the mainstream U.S. political landscape between 2004 and 2008. While they were generally fuelled by a small number of political issues, Tea Party supporters had wide-ranging interests and objectives that were not necessarily linked to specific public figures, organizations or mobilization initiatives. These findings validate the hyper fragmentation hypothesis, which constitutes the second theoretical contribution of this dissertation.

This dissertation makes other contributions to existing theoretical and methodological literature linked to the Tea Party movement, e-politics and social media research. First, it provides one of the first in-depth investigations of the Tea Party movement. Only a few studies have looked at this political movement from a mostly descriptive perspective in recent years. Second, it offers one of the first big data quantitative content analyses of a political

phenomenon in the Twitterverse. As indicated in chapter 7, while some studies examined Twitter-based information flows and social interactions linked to specific political events in recent years, they have done so by considering only small samples of tweets or generally short periods of time. Third, this dissertation refines through a in-depth theoretical discussion and the analysis of the #teaparty tweeting dynamic the concepts of decentralization and fragmentation which have been previously discussed by social scientists such as W. L. Bennett (1998) and Bruce Bimber (2005). In fact, it can be argued that these contributions are likely to affect how research on e-politics will be conducted in the near future. Fourth, this dissertation employs an innovative, bottom up methodological approach to study unfiltered political conversations in the Twitterverse, thus demonstrating the importance of adopting new methodologies and using new data sources. Finally, the research work conducting for this dissertation has broader implications for political engagement and democracy in relation to the Tea Party movement and Twitter which may be applied to and researched further in relation to other political movements and organizational forms. In fact, it can be seen as the stepping stone for future research on a wide range of topics such as e-politics, online activism and political engagement.

The Tea Party movement has remained a strong player in the U.S. political landscape through the 2012 U.S. Presidential elections, but it has lost some of its traction since December 2012. A July 2011 PEW study showed that 44 percent of Tea Party adherents were thinking a lot about the elections, compared to 30 of voters who are Republicans or leaning Republicans. Also, 36 percent of Tea Party adherents closely followed the news about the candidates and 83 were likely to vote in the Republican Primaries while 25 percent and 75 percent of Republican voters and those leaning Republican did so respectively (Kohut, Doherty et al. 2011). More recently, another PEW survey conducted during the summer months of 2012 revealed that only 15 percent of U.S. adults agreed with the ideals and objectives or the

Tea Party movement while 24 percent were opposed to them and 54 percent had no opinion (Smith 2013).

The analysis has some limitations. First, while it offers a detailed characterization of the structure of #teaparty tweeting (e.g.: @replies, @retweets, hashtags, etc.), it provides little to no details on its content partly due to different methodological constraints. For instance, open source and commercially-owned qualitative content analysis software do not have the capacity to deal with the particularities of the #teaparty tweets. Indeed, #teaparty tweeters adopted different strategies to convey ideas in their tweets in order to respect the 140-character limit such as compressing words in an often arbitrary fashion, embedding hashtags that could have various implications (e.g.: sarcasm, emotions, etc.), or using expressions that are only known by small segments of the online public. Developing analytical tools to mine the content of large datasets (“big data”) is an important challenge for future research.

Few social scientists have conducted qualitative content analyses of tweets in order to examine socio-political phenomena in the Twitterverse in recent years. For instance, a group of researchers - the Floating Sheep - recently examined 395 geo-coded tweets with “racist terms” linked to the re-election of Barack Obama that were posted between November 1 until November 7 2012. They found that tweeters located in states in the south eastern quadrant of the United States were more likely to post racist tweets than those in any other states. Specifically, most racist tweeters were based in Alabama and Mississippi, closely followed by neighbouring states such as Tennessee, Georgia, and Louisiana (Floating Sheep 2012). However, the Floating Sheep provided little to no details on the methodological approach they used for coding the presence of racism in tweets (e.g.: keywords, hashtags, etc.).

Second, the consideration of geographical coordinates of the location from which #teaparty tweets were posted (latitude, longitude) would have provided more insights on the structure of the conversation during the period considered for this investigation. For example,

it would have helped to have a better understanding of the factors that mobilized Internet users to join the #teaparty tweeting activity based on their immediate geo-political context. However, the data acquisition and archiving platform Twapper Keeper did not collect this information due to different technical reasons.

Nevertheless, the study contributes to the understanding of the emergent political practices fueled by the Web 2.0 media context. It also complements the work of other scholars who have examined the Tea Party movement in recent years. For instance, Skocpol and Williamson's (2012) found through their study of the political engagement of Tea Party members that they were heavily invested in highly fragmented and decentralized political debates that were often based on distorted facts and beliefs or, to a broader extent, conspiracy theories. For instance, they noted that some adherents to the Tea Party movement "made outlandish claims, ranging from the suggestion that the Obama administration plans to seize all 401K savings to pay off the deficit, to the prediction that federal authorities have plans to round up conservatives, seize their guns, and put them in concentration camps" (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 199).

The uncontrolled decentralization and hyper-fragmentation of politicking in the United States may be contributing to the creation of micro-political realities that can have wide-ranging effects on members of the public such as the reinforcement of political beliefs that are often incompatible or not representative of the broader political reality and the polarization of political attitudes. The model investigated in this dissertation has already been used in other circumstances. It is credited for the rise of several grassroots movement such as the #Occupy movement and the Quebec student strike. It is likely to be the source of political mobilization initiatives at the local, regional, and national levels in an increasing number of national contexts. Hence, this model should be further investigated in order to understand its ramifications and its potential to transform the structure of modern politics

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## Appendix A

The micro-communication site Twitter can be defined as a user-generated digital content dispersion tool with internal community-building capabilities sharing the same three broad traits with other social networking services:

- ✓ it provides geographically dispersed users the capacity to independently create and manage publicly available anonymous, semi-anonymous or full disclosure profile pages within the confines of an established system;
- ✓ it gives users the capacity to display publicly their ties with other users “within a bounded system” through constantly updated lists that can be accessed on their personal profile page (“following” and “followers” lists) when certain privacy settings are not activated (when the privacy settings are activated, the list of ties is not publicly available);
- ✓ it allows users to access and browse through “their list of connections and those made by others within the [bounded] system” when certain privacy settings are not activated, thus potentially helping to strengthen existing social contacts and develop new ones (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Papacharissi and Gibso, 2011: 77).

However, it has alongside other micro-communication channels distinct technical and structural properties. First, it only allows the publication of short-form textual messages (140 characters or less) often comprising hyperlinks pointing to publicly available digital resources. These posts, also known as personal and situational status updates when they focus on their author (e.g.: individual, organizations, etc.), are automatically redistributed to networks of subscribers. They are also available to the public at large through the Twitter public feed when certain privacy settings are not activated (boyd, Golder et al. 2011: 2; Gulati and Williams 2010: 4). It is worth noting that Twitter was originally designed as a SMS-type

message delivery system, hence explaining the 140-character limit per publication (boyd, Golder *et al.* 2011: 2).

Second, this micro-communication channel constitutes a quasi- instantaneous mode of content distribution and social interaction. The condensed format of tweets considerably reduces “users’ requirement of time, [technical resources] and thought investment for content generation” compared to other Web 2.0 channels such as blogs or user-generated photo and video-sharing services (Java, Song *et al.* 2007). Finally, it enables users to independently tailor their information intake by subscribing to specific accounts in order to be notified when new entries are posted (Small 2010: 39; 2011: 874; Java, Song *et al.* 2007).

Twitter has rapidly become an integral component of the global online mediascape since 2006. A 2010 Hubspot report found that its monthly user growth rate has risen exponentially since mid-2006. Specifically, it has gone from nearly 0.1 percent in December 2006 to slightly less to 0.5 percent in March 2007, close to 1.9 percent in April 2008, more than 3.5 percent in December 2008 and 13 percent in March 2009. However, it slowed during the following months to slightly less than 6 percent in May 2009 and 3.5 percent in October 2009 (Solis, 2010), presumably because it reached its peak penetration point among the online public. Another survey by Pingdom (2010) showed that the monthly tweet volume has increased from close to 20 million in July 2008 to slightly less than 100 million in February 2009, approximately 320 million in May 2009, close to 830 million in September 2009 and more than 1.3 billion in January 2010. As of January 1, 2011, close to 110 million tweets were posted on a typical day (Corrick 2011).

Twitter has also gained significant traction among American Internet users. A Compete study indicated that the U.S. traffic on *Twitter.com* has increased from 600,000 unique monthly visits in February 2008 to approximately 1.2 million visits in April 2008 (Freiert 2008). By June 2009, it was accessed by 20 million unique U.S. Internet users every

month, up from 9.3 million in March 2009 and 1.2 million in May 2008 (Braiker 2008; Schonfeld 2009; Case and King 2011). As of February 2012, 15 percent of U.S. adults who regularly went online reported using Twitter with varying levels of intensity (8 percent reported going on Twitter on a daily basis), up from 12 percent in August 2011 (5 percent doing so on a daily basis), 13 percent in May 2011 (4 percent doing so daily) and 8 percent in November 2010 (2 percent doing so on a daily basis) (Smith and Rainie 2010: 2-3; 2012: 2). More recently, slightly more than 107 million U.S. Internet users had at least one Twitter account on February 26, 2012 (Solis 2012).

This micro-communication service has emerged as an important player in the U.S. political mediascape during the 2010 midterm elections. While Tumasjan, Sprenger et al. (2011: 402) believe that it was “a legitimate and frequently used communication channel in the political arena as a result of the 2008 campaign”, other studies suggest it played a peripheral role in the e-politicking strategy of most candidates due to its limited reach within the U.S. population at the time. For instance, the Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama (@barackobama) had only 112,474 Twitter followers by November 3, 2008 while his Republican opponent, John McCain (@johnmccain), had a mere 4,603 followers (Abroms and Lefebvre, 2009: 419). McCain’s Twitter account was not created by his campaign, but by one of the founders of Twitter, Bizz Stone, in an attempt to “balance out Twitter Election Hub coverage” (Jaeger, Paquette et al. 2010: 76). Few scientific studies have examined the use of Twitter by local, regional and national contenders during the 2008 presidential contest. However, some investigations have found that only a small number of members of the U.S. House and Senate were present in the Twitterverse right after the elections. While less than 20 percent of them had at least one Twitter account in January 2009, they rapidly began adopting this media tool during the following months to establish communication bridges with their

constituents, presumably ahead of the 2010 elections (e.g.: Lassen and Brown, 2011; Chi and Yang, 2011).

During the 2010 midterm contest, 94.8 percent of major party senatorial contenders (73 out of 77), 74 percent of major party House candidates and 66 percent of gubernatorial hopefuls (47 out of 71) had at least one Twitter account that they used to reach out to voters ahead of Election day (Pole and Xenos 2011: 1; Bode, Lassen et al. 2011; Gulati and Williams 2011). In the case of gubernatorial contenders, some of them only tweeted “a handful of times,” generally during sensitive political moments like major mobilization events or important announcements. Meanwhile, others, known “super users”, frequently updated their Twitter feed throughout the election cycle (Pole and Xenos 2011: 1).

The rapid popularization of Twitter among U.S. politicians between 2008 and 2010 can be attributed to several factors. For instance, many challengers and open-seat candidates adopted Twitter to connect with electorate and increase their level of name recognition, due to the fact that a growing number of Americans were present in the Twitterverse (Gulati and Williams 2011; Williams and Gulati 2010). Close to 22 percent of U.S. adult Web users had at least one account on social networking services like Facebook or micro-communication platforms such as Twitter and utilized them to be involved in electoral processes during the 2010 elections (Smith 2011a: 2; 2011b: 7; Towner 2012). Williams and Gulati (2010: 11) also note that several incumbents with low levels of influence or name recognition among the U.S. public turned to Twitter, which held “promise of electoral reward.” Additionally, candidates who were active on other social media channels were more likely to adopt Twitter than those who relied more on offline and Web 1.0 communication tools for their campaigning activities (Gulati and Williams 2011: 16).

Finally, Twitter has become an integral tool for several grassroots political movements in different countries in recent years. For example, it has played a prominent role in the

#Occupy movement, which has impacted the political landscape of the U.S. and other countries in 2011 and 2012 (Juris, 2012: 259; Gaby and Caren, 2012). In fact, the #Occupy hashtag has been widely used “as a diacritic - not every occupier and supporter uses social networking tools and smartphones” (Juris 2012: 260). Many U.S.-based individuals and groups (e.g.: The Other 98%, Occupy Wisconsin, Occupy Maine, etc.) adhering to the #Occupy values and objectives have turned to Twitter to promote their social, economic, and political principles (e.g.: economic fairness, social justice, etc.) as well as to organize and coordinate mobilization initiatives (Caren and Gaby 2011; Gaby and Caren 2012).

Twitter has also played a prominent role in recent popular revolts in several Middle Eastern nations such as Iran, Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt. It enabled protesters to rapidly communicate with each other, coordinate demonstrations and other forms of political action, and spread news about their cause and activities to global audiences. Conversely, it allowed Internet users based in countries around the world to circulate information about these uprisings and express their opinions about them (Theocharis 2013; Lotan, Graeff et al. 2011). Specifically, Twitter was heavily utilized by political activists to denounce the results of the June 2009 Iran election. A Web Ecology Project survey determined through the consideration of specific keywords (e.g.: ahmadinejad, mousavi, gr88, etc.) and hashtags (e.g.: #iranelection, etc.) that 2,024,166 tweets discussing the Iran election were posted by 480,000 tweeters between June 7 and June 26, 2009 (Beilin, Blake et al. 2009). Another survey conducted during a longer time period found that 766,263 tweets with the #iranelection hashtag were shared by 73,693 unique tweeters between Election Day and October 24, 2009 (the overwhelming majority of them were posted between June 12, 2009 and July 3, 2009). However, a significant portion of these tweets originated from users located outside of Iran. There were a limited number of Twitter users in Iran as of 2009 (19,000 out of a population of approximately 80 million) and the Iranian government blocked the access to Twitter to its

population early in the revolt (Christensen 2011a: 238; Lotan, Graeff et al. 2011: 1379). In the words of Lynch (2011: 303), “the role of Twitter in organizing the Iranian Green Movement protests appears to have been greatly exaggerated, with its main impact being on external perceptions of the protest rather than on internal political organization or mobilization”. However, this media tool allowed users interested by the Iran protest to circulate information about it and interest with each other. Moreover, it can be presumed that Twitter helped to educate people not familiar with the political tensions in Iran and, to some extent, incite them to engage in political activities.

Twitter was also a popular media channel at the height of the protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt. For instance, 168,663 tweets containing either the keyword “Tunisia” or the #sidibouzyd hashtag, both linked to Tunisia uprising, were posted by 39,696 unique users between January 12 and January 19, 2011, while 230,270 tweets with the #jan25 hashtag or the keyword “Egypt,” which were associated to the revolt in Egypt, were posted by 62,612 unique users between January 24 and January 29, 2011 (Lotan, Graeff et al. 2011: 1381). Another scientific investigation indicated that 42,466 tweets comprising the #jan25 hashtag (all of them were in English except for three, which were in Arabic) were published during the two weeks after January 25, 2011 (Kurzman 2012: 162). Much like in the case of Iran, most of the tweets on the political revolt in Tunisia and Egypt were shared by Internet users in foreign countries. Twitter had penetration levels of only 0.34 percent per 100 inhabitants in Tunisia in 2001 compared to a mere 0.15 percent per inhabitants for Egypt (Kavanaugh, Sheetz et al. 2012: 3).