

**Case Study of my.barackobama.com: Promoting Participatory Democracy?**

Master's Thesis Presented By:

**Rachel Baarda**

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate of Postdoctoral Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Communication

Department of Communication  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ottawa

**Supervisor:** Dr. Rocci Luppicini

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### **Abstract**

An ongoing debate surrounds the question of whether digital media can promote participatory democracy. A qualitative case study was conducted on Barack Obama's campaign social networking site, my.barackobama.com, in order to investigate the ways in which the website promotes or discourages participatory democracy. For a rich analysis, the case study drew on various relevant theoretical perspectives, including the concepts of participatory democracy and digital democracy. The case study included a content analysis of the website and interviews with members of groups on the site. The study found that my.barackobama.com promoted political knowledge and non-electoral participation, but failed to promote political discussion and community. Consequently, the recommendations highlighted the importance of an online public sphere. The findings of this case study add to the research literature about the political use of digital media, and they also add new information about Barack Obama's digital media strategies.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	1
1.1. Background: Classical and Liberal Democracy	1
1.2 Participatory Democracy	2
1.3 Digital Democracy	3
1.4 Digital Democracy in the United States	4
1.5 Barack Obama and the Participatory Internet	6
1.6 Case Study: A Qualitative Approach	8
1.7 Structure of the Thesis	9
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>	11
2.1 Participatory democracy	11
2.1i Arnold Kaufman	12
2.1ii Students for a Democratic Society	12
2.1iii Carole Pateman	16
2.1iv C.B. Macpherson	19
2.1v Jane Mansbridge	22
2.1vi Benjamin Barber	25
2.1vii Participatory democracy conclusion	29
2.2 Digital democracy	30
2.2i Digital democracy and democratic crisis	31
2.2ii Digital democracy as educative	32
2.2iii Digital democracy and political participation	35
2.2iv Digital democracy and community	42
2.2v Digital democracy and political deliberation	45
2.3 Conclusion	48
2.4 Theoretical framework: Online public sphere	53
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b>	54
3.1 Case study research	54
3.1i Case study background	54
3.1ii The case: my.barackobama.com	54
3.2 Research questions	54
3.3 In-depth interviews	55
3.4 Content analysis	58
3.5 Role of the researcher	59
3.6 Interview participants and sample	60
3.6i Interview population	61
3.6ii Participant recruitment	61
3.7 Interview data collection	61
3.8 Content analysis sample	63
3.9 Interview data analysis	64
3.10 Content analysis recording and reducing	67
3.10i Content analysis recording	67
3.10ii Content analysis reducing and summarizing	69
3.11 Trustworthiness	70
3.11i Triangulation	70
3.11ii Research notes and records	70

<b>Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations</b>	72
4.1 Interview findings	72
4.2 Content analysis findings	93
4.3 Advanced analysis and interpretations	104
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion</b>	127
5.1 Lessons learned	127
5.2 Limitations	129
5.3 Recommendations	131
<b>References</b>	141
Appendix A	155
Appendix B	157
Appendix C	158
Appendix D	160
Appendix E	161
Appendix F	162
Appendix G	166

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In November 2008, Barack Obama's election as president of the United States was heralded as the beginning of a new era of citizen participation in American politics (Carpenter, 2010; Marks, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). Writers attributed Obama's victory to his use of the Internet, which he used to engage and mobilize supporters and raise funds (Scherer, 2009; Talbot, 2008). Theorists also argued that Obama's use of digital media allowed citizens to participate in politics as never before. In 2008, Marc Ambinder wrote in *The Atlantic*: "Obama clearly intends to use the Web, if he is elected president, to transform governance just as he has transformed campaigning... What Obama seems to promise is, at its outer limits, a participatory democracy in which the opportunities for participation have been radically expanded." Andrew Raseiej, co-president of techpresident.com, declared shortly after Obama's victory: "there's a newly engaged and empowered citizenry that is ready, able, and willing to partner with the Obama administration on rebooting American democracy in a 21st-century model of participation" (Marks, 2008).

Based on the widespread claims about a new age of citizen participation under President Obama, this study explores the use of digital media to promote participatory democracy. More specifically, the study examines the ways in which Obama's social networking site, my.barackobama.com, influences participatory democracy. The study draws on interviews with members of my.barackobama.com, as well as the text of the website itself.

### *1.1 Background: Classical and Liberal Democracy*

The word “democracy” is derived from the ancient Greek words: “demos” (people) and “kratia” (rule or authority). Democracy can thus be literally translated as “rule by the people” (Dahl, 1989). In ancient Athens, the birthplace of classical democracy (Gobel & Leininger, 2011), the *demos* ruled themselves in a number of ways: all free adult males were eligible to participate in the assembly of the people, and almost a quarter of the citizens participated in public office each year (Fuchs, 2007).

Modern democracy, also known as liberal democracy, emerged in the Western world during the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions (Gobel & Leininger, 2011). Because of the change in scale from the Athenian city-state to large nation-states, modern democracies like the United States are representative democracies: the people “rule” by selecting representatives, rather than directly participating in government (Dahl, 1989; Fuchs, 2007; Gobel & Leininger, 2011).

### *1.2 Participatory Democracy*

In the 1960s and 1970s, young student activists and political theorists began to question the democratic character of liberal democracy (Kaufman, 1960; Hilmer, 2010). They observed that modern democracies limited political participation to voting, and they felt that democracy should be characterized by much broader participation by the people (Miller, 1987; Pateman, 1970). They also suggested that democracy could be more than a means of protecting private interests and stabilizing society: participation in democracy could actually transform human nature (Kaufman, 1960; Miller, 1987). These thinkers called their vision of democracy “participatory democracy” (Miller, 1987).

Participatory democracy has been defined as a democratic system which “involves extensive and active engagement of citizens in the self-governing process; it means government not just for but by and of the people” (Barber, 1995, p. 921). Common themes in participatory theory include the ideas that liberal democracy is in crisis; that increased democratic participation can educate and transform humankind; and that people should participate more directly not only in government, but also in the workplace and other spheres of society (Barber, 1984; Kaufman, 1960; Miller, 1987; Pateman, 1970). Participatory theorists also emphasize community over individualism, and they highlight the importance of public debate and deliberation (Barber, 1984; Mansbridge, 1983; Miller, 1987).

### *1.3 Digital Democracy*

In the 1990s, with the advent of the Internet, some theorists began to argue that electronic technology could create participatory democracy through digital communications media (Budge, 1996; Dahl, 1989; Hague & Loader, 1999). “Digital media” describes media types, like film and audio, which “traditionally were accessed in analog format, but...are being converted to a digital format” (Dillon & Leonard, 1998, p. 72). Digital media includes both offline and transmitted media (Feldman, 1997). Digital media transmitted over the Internet is expected to enhance democracy.

The use of digital technology to revitalize democracy is called e-democracy, also known as digital democracy, teledemocracy, and cyberdemocracy (Hague & Loader, 1999). The UK Hansard Society, which promotes increased political participation, offers one definition of e-democracy: “The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with

their representatives via new information and communication technologies” (Hansard Society, as cited in Chadwick, 2006, p. 84).

Dahl (1989) argues that digital technology can prompt a “third democratic transformation” which will restore the characteristics of the Athenian participatory democracy. Digital democracy is expected to create participatory democracy by educating citizens, encouraging citizens to become more engaged in politics, creating communities among citizens, and bringing citizens together to discuss politics (Budd & Harris, 2009; Chadwick, 2006; Fuchs, 2007; Bryan, Tsagarousianou, & Tambini, 1998).

#### *1.4 Digital Democracy in American Politics*

The United States has been a forerunner in the political use of digital technology. For example, in the 1990s, the United States was an early proponent of e-government. E-government refers to government efforts to improve public service delivery and information provision by making these processes electronic (Budd & Harris, 2009; Orihuela & Obi, 2007). In America, the e-government movement coincided with the National Performance Review, a program of administrative reform that began in 1993 under the Clinton administration (Chadwick, 2006).

The National Performance Review called for the use of electronic technologies not only to make government more efficient, but also to empower citizens by treating them as customers with significant influence over government services (Chadwick, 2006). As part of Al Gore’s vision of a “National Information Infrastructure”, the Clinton administration created an information portal, FirstGov (Chadwick, 2006), and the official White House



website, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), which became one of the most-visited websites on the Internet (Owen & Davis, 2008).

In addition to government websites, the Internet allowed American political candidates to use online technology for campaigning. The use of the Internet for political campaigns began during the 1992 presidential election, when some political candidates placed a small amount of information online and used e-mail networks to co-ordinate and inform their supporters (Bimber, 2003; Chadwick, 2006). By 1996, all the major presidential candidates had candidate web sites (Bimber, 2003). Candidate campaign websites during the 1996 presidential election mostly followed the “brochureware” model: they acted as online versions of printed campaign brochures, instead of offering interactive features (Chadwick, 2006; Davis, 1999).

By the 2000 U.S. primary elections, campaign websites regularly acted as a means of engaging supporters, mobilizing volunteers and raising funds (Bimber, 2003; Chadwick, 2006). During the 2000 elections, candidate websites no longer acted as brochureware; instead, they included interactive elements (Chadwick, 2006). Interactivity is defined as “the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many) both synchronously and asynchronously and participate in reciprocal message exchanges” (p. 379). In 2000, interactive features on campaign websites included citizen-to-citizen discussion forums and online chats with candidates (Chadwick, 2006).

When the 2004 presidential campaign began, the Internet not only allowed campaign supporters to chat online, but also to meet offline. Howard Dean’s campaign used the

website Meetup.com to allow supporters to find other Dean supporters in their location and gather in real-world political meetings (Chadwick, 2006). Panagopoulos notes, “the 2004 Dean campaign...recognized the power of the Internet and tools like blogging and social networking to create a grassroots movement previously unseen in presidential elections” (p. 12). Nevertheless, Howard Dean did not ultimately win his campaign.

### *1.5 Barack Obama and the Participatory Internet*

Barack Obama is the first presidential candidate whose victory has been attributed to his use of the Internet (Carpenter, 2010). Obama not only used familiar Internet campaign strategies such as a candidate website; but he also expanded the social media campaigning strategies that had begun with Howard Dean (Evans, 2008). Social media has been defined as “the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities” (Dewing, 2010).

Barack Obama used prominent social media tools such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter to engage and mobilize supporters (Panagopoulos, 2009). The Obama campaign also created a social networking site, my.barackobama.com, to accompany Obama’s campaign website (Panagopoulos, 2009). My.barackobama.com allowed Obama supporters to “connect to one another, recruit friends, organize meetings, rallies, and fund-raising drives, and offer feedback to the candidate” (Panagopoulos, 2009, p. 10).

Many of the features on my.barackobama.com that allow users to connect to the campaign and to each other are characteristic of Web 2.0. Since 2004, academics have used the term Web 2.0 to describe the features of the Internet that involve social networking,

interactivity, and user creation of content (Graham, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005). Theorists have argued that Web 2.0 can create a new, participatory political culture:

Election campaigning tends to be synonymous with top-down, persuasive and propaganda-style communication which aims to win the support of voters crucial for the victory of a candidate or party. While this remains as the dominant paradigm for understanding campaigns...[e]merging in 2005, Web 2.0 has heralded a networked, participatory culture to be observed online (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010)

According to Carpenter (2010), the political use of Web 2.0 “suggests devolution of power from the government to the citizenry as well as a paradigmatic shift toward the reformation of the traditional methods of U.S. politicking”.

This research project was prompted by these kinds of claims about the participatory potential of Web 2.0, as well as claims about the ability of digital technology to promote participatory democracy. The researcher wanted to explore the ways in which online political campaigning might promote a “paradigmatic shift” towards citizen-centred participatory democracy; or, alternately, how candidate websites might perpetuate the status quo of top-down political communication. Barack Obama’s social networking site, my.barackobama.com, presented an ideal subject for analysis. While the site had many similarities to candidate campaign websites, it also included cutting-edge social networking tools. Furthermore, writers argued that Obama’s use of digital media could promote participatory democracy (Tapscott, 2009; Carpenter, 2010); and Obama himself appeared to advocate participatory democracy, emphasizing the power of the ordinary citizen in his speeches (Obama speech, 2008) and on my.barackobama.com itself.

Based on the researcher's preliminary review of the research literature, few articles presently discuss Barack Obama's use of digital media. The research literature does not yet contain any in-depth interviews with Obama's online supporters, nor does it include any detailed examination of the claims that Obama's website can promote participatory democracy, especially after his inauguration as president. The study will help fill these gaps in the research literature, and it will hopefully provide a framework upon which to build future research.

### *1.6 Case Study: A Qualitative Approach*

This study seeks to answer the central research question: "How does Obama's website, my.barackobama.com, influence participatory democracy?" The objective of the research is to gain insight into the question of how political digital media encourages or discourages participatory democracy. The findings of this study add to the research literature and provide recommendations for future research and theory development.

In this study, the researcher uses case study research. "Case study" has been defined as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73) In this particular study, the website my.barackobama.com is the case under investigation. The study uses two sources of information: in-depth interviews with the members of my.barackobama.com; and a content analysis of the website's messages from the 2012 Obama campaign.

The study uses these two data sources because modern, interactive political websites include "one-to-many" communication, as well as "many-to-many" and "many-to-one"

communication (Chadwick, 2006; Endres & Warnick, 2004). A content analysis of online campaign messages shows how the Obama campaign uses one-to-many communication to share information with supporters; while interviews with Obama's supporters reveals how members of my.barackobama.com use "many-to-one" and "many-to-many" communication to interact with the campaign and with each other.

Case study research can be a qualitative or quantitative research method (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) explains that qualitative research is conducted "because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (p. 40). He also suggests that qualitative research is best used "to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining" (p. 40).

As Creswell suggests, this qualitative case study provides a detailed, complex picture of the website my.barackobama.com. Furthermore, at the time this case study was conducted, the researcher's preliminary review of the research literature on digital democracy found only a few references to my.barackobama.com and no in-depth interviews with Barack Obama's online supporters. By using an exploratory, qualitative approach, this case study provides a basis for future theories about the use of social media in Obama's campaign and other recent political campaigns.

### *1.7 Structure of the Thesis*

The research study is organized into five main sections: the introduction, the literature review, the methodology, the findings, and the conclusion. After this introductory chapter, the second chapter contains a review of relevant research literature as a background

to the research study. The literature review explores the topics of participatory democracy, digital democracy, digital democracy in the United States, and finally, includes a brief discussion of Barack Obama's use of digital media.

The third chapter of this study explains the methodological approach used in the study. Drawing on Creswell (2007) for support, the chapter introduces and reviews the qualitative case study approach, as well as the use of in-depth interviews. Guided by Krippendorff (2004), the chapter also explains the use of content analysis in data analysis as part of the case study method. The chapter also explores the role of the researcher as an instrument of data collection. After an introduction of the methodology, the chapter presents the research questions. Next, the chapter explains the steps taken to collect interview data and to perform a content analysis of my.barackobama.com. The chapter then examines the participants and sample, and explains the methods of coding and analyzing the data. Finally, the chapter reflects on the trustworthiness of the study.

The fourth chapter in the study describes the results of the in-depth interviews and content analysis. The researcher's general findings are followed by an analysis and interpretation of the findings, as well as a discussion of the implications of the research.

The final chapter of the study, the conclusion, reviews the previous chapters, revisits the findings, and notes the limitations of the study. It then proposes recommendations for future research and theory development on the topics of political participation, digital democracy, and candidate campaign websites.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This review of relevant literature is divided into three main sections. The first section outlines the theory of participatory democracy, as described by some of its most prominent theorists: Arnold Kaufman, Students for a Democratic Society, Carole Pateman, C.B. Macpherson, Jane Mansbridge, and Benjamin Barber. After reviewing each theorist's description of participatory democracy, the researcher suggests five central characteristics of the theory.

The second section of the literature review outlines the theory of digital democracy. In five sub-sections, the literature review explains how digital democracy is expected to promote each of the characteristics of participatory democracy, describes in the first section. The third section of the literature review briefly outlines the development of digital democracy in American politics, with an emphasis on candidate campaign websites. The final section describes Barack Obama's use of online technology during the 2008 presidential campaign.

### *2.1 Participatory democracy*

While the concept of participatory democracy is broad and often difficult to define, in general, participatory democratic theorists envision a government in which people are able to participate in political decision-making not only through the election of representatives, but also through directly influencing government decisions (Barber, 1995; Dahl, 1989). Participatory theorists also emphasize the importance of a citizenry that has become well-informed through debate and deliberation. Barber says, "Participatory government is thus understood as direct government by a well-educated citizenry" (1995, p. 923).

The term “participatory democracy” originated in 1960, in an essay by Arnold Kaufman. Besides Kaufman, the most influential modern participatory democratic theorists include Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Carole Pateman, C.B. Macpherson, Jane Mansbridge, and Benjamin Barber. Each of these theorists develops a slightly different aspect of participatory democratic theory.

### *2.1i Arnold Kaufman*

In his 1960 essay, “Human Nature and Participatory Politics,” Arnold Kaufman suggests that scholars have overlooked democracy’s potential to promote human self-development. Kaufman divides political theorists into two groups: those who believe human weaknesses are remediable, and those who believe that humans have an inherent predisposition to evil. Those who are pessimistic about human nature emphasize democracy’s ability to protect and stabilize society. Kaufman, on the other hand, argues that democracy can not only be protective; it can also transform human nature. Drawing on Rousseau for support, Kaufman declares: “Underlying Rousseau’s classical defense—a very great faith in the power of participation to effect personal development” (p. 185).

### *2.1ii Students for a Democratic Society*

Kaufman was a professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, which was the birthplace of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). His description of participatory democracy inspired the members of the New Left student movement of the 1960s (McMillan & Buhle, 2003). Tom Hayden, a prominent member of SDS, later explained: “One phrase that a university professor in Ann Arbor, Arnold Kaufman, kept referring to—participatory



democracy—struck me as a good phrase to describe what we were trying to accomplish” (Garvy, 2007, p. 13).

Students for a Democratic Society originated as the “Intercollegiate Socialist Society” in 1905. Later, it became the “The League for Industrial Democracy” (LID) (Miller, 1987). The LID had a student branch, the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), which eventually changed its name to “Students for a Democratic Society” (SDS) (Miller, 1987).

SDS held its first official convention in 1960. At the convention, its president, Alan Haber, discussed the sit-ins against racism that were taking place in the Southern United States, and the sympathy pickets that were being organized in the North. Haber noted that students in the North were not motivated to discuss many of the social problems of their day or to take action against them. He recommended treating political participation as “a continuing educational process”, which would utilize the Northern students’ talents for “discussion, research, and debate” (Miller, 1987, p. 40).

Tom Hayden, editor of the University of Michigan’s student newspaper and later a member of SDS, also addressed the subject of youth participation. Hayden suggested that the majority of students were politically inactive, selfish, and disillusioned about their ability to change society. Hayden suggested, however, that political action was crucial, because of the chaos in the modern world: “It is a world apparently without leaders, a world of vast confusion, changing cultures, strained by the nearness of total war” (Miller, p. 51). Hayden argued that a new generation must rise up and fill the vacuum of leadership, even though there were no moral signposts to follow.

Tom Hayden also argued that students, administrators and faculty members needed to work together more closely: “the University must work relentlessly at being a face-to-face, rather than a mass society...if decisions are the sole work of an isolated few rather than of a participating many...the University will be just that: a complex, not a community” (Miller, 1987, p. 53-54). Hayden explained: “democracy is based on the idea of a ‘political’ public—a body that shares...an image of themselves as a functioning community” (Miller, 1987, p. 69).

Hayden and Haber’s theories about participation began to coalesce around a new vision of democracy: “participatory democracy” (Miller, 1987, p. 61). The SDS members decided to hold a SDS convention where they would draft a political manifesto for the Left. In preparation for his manifesto, Hayden accumulated a bibliography that included books by C. Wright Mills, Robert Dahl, and John Dewey, among many others (Miller, 1987).

C. Wright Mills was a particular source of inspiration for Hayden. Mills differentiated between a “mass” and a “public.” He suggested that opinions were formed through face-to-face discussion, and he criticized the mass media for manipulating consent (Miller, 1987). Mills also discussed the impersonal nature of American politics and the problem of powerless citizens. He called for a “free and knowledgeable public” (as cited in Miller, 1987, p. 80), yet he suggested that knowledge was not enough: “the basis of our integrity can be gained or renewed only by activity, including communication” (as cited in Miller, 1987, p. 80).

Hayden’s theory of participatory democracy, derived from Mills and other writers, did not include any specific political or economic strategy. Instead, Hayden intended to

unite people of different political stripes under the banner of “democratic values.” He wrote, “Our stress on democratic values should be in terms of broad consensus rather than formal doctrine” (Miller, 1987, p. 104).

At an SDS convention in Port Huron in 1962, seminar groups gathered to discuss Tom Hayden’s draft manifesto. Three days of debate resulted in “The Port Huron Statement.” A paragraph in the statement describes the concept of participatory democracy:

As a social system we seek the establishment of a participatory democracy, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation. (The Port Huron Statement)

Over the years, the Port Huron Statement has remained one of the most well-known descriptions of participatory democracy (McMillan & Buhle, 2003).

Despite the manifesto, all of the participants at the convention, in later years, had different definitions of participatory democracy. Tom Hayden mentioned the importance of political action, saying that voting was too passive (Miller, 1987). He also said that the activists wanted “a resurrection of the decentralized democracy or the direct democracy or the town-meeting democracy” (Garvy, 2007, p. 13). Sharon Jeffrey said, “Participatory meant ‘involved in decisions,’ while Bob Ross said that participatory democracy was simply “socialism in an American accent. To this day I know that this is what I meant and I thought it was what my colleagues meant by participatory democracy” (Garvy, 2007, p. 144).

Richard Flacks suggested that participatory democracy “meant extending principles of

democracy from the political sphere into other institutions, like industry, like the university” (Garvy, 2007, p. 145). All these definitions, in fact, still describe important aspects of participatory democratic theory.

Nevertheless, Miller notes that Hayden tended to gloss over or ignore the radical implications of his concept of participatory democracy. Participatory democracy’s affiliation with socialism raises the question of whether a truly participatory democracy could be established in capitalist America. Furthermore, America was founded as a republic, or simple democracy. In order for the United States government to become more participatory, would America not need a new Constitution? In his manifesto, Tom Hayden failed to address such questions, presenting participatory democracy simply as a renewal of an old ideal (Miller, 1987).

#### *2.iii Carole Pateman*

Although SDS and the New Left were short-lived, the concept of participatory democracy became a theme in American politics and political science during the late 1960s and 1970s (Hilmer, 2010). The first political scientist who devoted a book to participatory democracy was Carole Pateman (Hilmer, 2010) in *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970).

Pateman argues that contemporary political scientists are skeptical about increased political participation for two reasons. Firstly, modern democratic theorists tend to reject older theories of democracy, known as “classical theories,” that emphasize widespread participation. Secondly, modern democratic theorists fear totalitarianism and are mainly

concerned with the stability of the political system, rather than any other benefits of democracy (Pateman, 1970).

Pateman blames Joseph Schumpeter, author of *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, for a hostile attitude towards political participation. Schumpeter claimed that the “classical doctrine” of democracy advocated an unrealistic level of participation by the people. According to Pateman, Schumpeter and other theorists outlined the “contemporary theory of democracy” (Pateman, 1970). The “contemporary theory” defines democracy as an institutional arrangement; portrays competition for votes as the chief “democratic” element in the system; and defines ‘participation’ as participation in selecting decision-makers. From the perspective of the “contemporary theory”, the main function of participation is protective, to guard the private interests of the individual and protect him or her from irrational leaders. According to Pateman, the “contemporary theory” of democracy rejects the earlier “classical theory” of maximum participation as unattainable.

Pateman suggests, however, that the “classical theorists” actually presented two different theories about democracy. Some classical theorists, like Bentham and Mill, emphasized the participation of all the people because they believed that individual interests were best protected when all the classes participated. Other theorists such as J.S. Mill and Rousseau, however, argued for widespread participation not only to protect the political system, but also to raise human beings to their full potential. Pateman calls these men “theorists of participatory democracy”, because they advocated “not just a set of national representative institutions but what I shall call a participatory society” (Pateman, 1970, p. 20). Pateman calls Rousseau “the theorist par excellence of participation” (p. 22) and

declares that Rousseau's *The Social Contract* outlines the foundations of a theory of participatory democracy.

According to Pateman, Rousseau did not believe citizens should simply be equal and independent; they should also be interdependent, submitting themselves to the “general will”, which can also be interpreted as the rule of law. This law would emerge from the participatory process, which would involve the contribution of each equal, independent individual. Pateman notes that Rousseau interpreted participation as participation in decision-making.

Other early theorists on the subject of participatory democracy, according to Pateman, included J.S. Mill and G.D.H. Cole. Mill supported socialist economic practices, just like the New Left; and he believed that worker participation in industry could be educative. Drawing on Mill, Pateman argues:

industry and other spheres provide alternative areas where the individual can participate in decision making in matters of which he has first hand, everyday experience, so that when we refer to ‘participatory democracy’ we are indicating something very much wider than a set of ‘institutional arrangements’ at national level. (p. 35)

G.D.H. Cole was another early democratic theorist who supported this “wider view of democracy”. Cole distinguished between representative government, which existed at the national level; and “democracy”, which consisted of individuals participating in local associations that directly affected them.

Cole's hypothetical society, the Guild Socialist system, emphasized citizen participation in the workplace. He advocated "the socialisation of the means of production under a Guild Socialist system" (p. 39). Pateman uses Guild Socialism as an outline for a "participatory society." She notes the grassroots nature of its organization: "The Guild Socialist structure was organised, vertically and horizontally, from the grass roots upward and was participatory at all levels and in all aspects." (p. 41)

From readings of Cole, Rousseau, and J.S. Mill, Pateman devises a "participatory theory of democracy" (1970, p. 42). She notes several important elements of a "participatory society": participation at the local level rather than simply the national level; participation as educative; the democratization of all social systems in order to create a truly democratic citizenry; and the classification of all societal spheres, including industry, as political systems.

### *2.1iv C.B. Macpherson*

Other theorists after Pateman also expanded on the topic of "participatory democracy." One of these was C.B. Macpherson in *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977). Macpherson focuses on liberal democracy's association with a capitalist economic structure. He argues that liberal democracy is not inherently linked with capitalism: instead, it merely happened to originate in early 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalist market societies.

Macpherson outlines four historically successive models of liberal democracy: protective democracy; developmental democracy; equilibrium democracy; and finally, participatory democracy. He calls Bentham and Mill theorists of "protective democracy,"

which emphasized the accumulation of material wealth and power struggles among people to maximize their wealth. Macpherson suggests that these theorists saw the democratic system as the only way “to protect the governed from oppression by the government” (1977, p. 22).

On the other hand, later theorists were more aware of the injustices of capitalism. Macpherson calls such thinkers theorists of “developmental democracy.” They were dissatisfied with the vision of man as power-hungry consumer, and they believed in the power of democracy to improve humankind. Like Pateman, Macpherson identifies John Stuart Mill as such a theorist.

Many theorists of developmental democracy believed that democracy was capable of solving the problem of class division (Macpherson, 1977). Macpherson argues, however, that the party voting system only appeared to solve this problem. In reality, the party system “reduc[ed] the responsiveness of governments to electorates, and so prevent[ed] class division from operating politically in any effective way” (1977, p. 71).

Developmental democracy was followed by a more pragmatic model, “equilibrium democracy”. This model is similar to Pateman’s “contemporary theory of democracy”, since Macpherson suggests that equilibrium democracy was first formulated by Schumpeter. Macpherson argues that the equilibrium model lacks a moral dimension, requires an element of apathy to function, and reduces the democratic process to an oligopolistic market system where voters act as consumers choosing among a few select political parties. While this model is mostly realistic, it is not fully democratic, because only a few parties supply political goods to the masses. This reduces the citizens’ selection options and therefore reduces their sovereignty. Macpherson suggests that acceptance of the “equilibrium model”



will only continue “as long as we in Western societies continue to prefer affluence to community” and view totalitarianism as the only alternative (1977, p. 91-92). According to Macpherson, Western citizens are beginning to question this perspective, which may finally allow a new political model to emerge.

This new political model is “participatory democracy.” Unlike Pateman, Macpherson does not explore local participation, but rather examines the potential for greater participation at the national level. He evaluates the idea that advances in telecommunications will enable direct democracy, but concludes that policy formulation is simply too complex to allow direct democracy. Macpherson argues, however, that participatory democracy is possible if corresponding changes in society take place.

Macpherson describes two prerequisites for a participatory democracy. The first is “a change in people’s consciousness” from viewing themselves as consumers, to “exerters and enjoyers of the exertion and development of their own capacities” (1977, p. 99). This “self-image brings with it a sense of community” (p. 99). The second prerequisite for participatory democracy is “a great reduction of social and economic inequality, since that inequality...requires a non-participatory party system to hold the society together” (p. 100).

Macpherson argues that proponents of participatory democracy need to look for “loopholes” in society: “changes already visible or in prospect either in the amount of democratic participation or in social inequality or consumer consciousness” (1977, p. 101). One such change is a reanalysis of the costs of economic growth, including its effects on the environment. Another change is the realization that citizen apathy allows the corporate system to override citizens’ rights. These “weak points,” according to Macpherson, create

conditions where decreased consumer consciousness and decreased class inequality—the prerequisites for participatory democracy—can emerge.

Macpherson presents two potential models for a participatory democracy. He admits that on the national level, a participatory system must involve indirect or representative government instead of direct, face-to-face democracy. His first participatory model is a “pyramidal” system which begins with “direct democracy at the neighborhood or factory level—actual face-to-face discussion and decision by consensus or majority, and election of delegates who would make up a council at the next more inclusive level” (1977, p. 108). Macpherson admits, however, that the party system is unlikely to disappear. Consequently, he suggests that the pyramidal system might include a continuing party system where the parties themselves could develop a pyramidal participatory structure. A pyramidal-style participatory democracy would be a continuation, not a replacement, of liberal democracy.

### *2.1.v Jane Mansbridge*

After Macpherson’s discussion of participatory democracy, “participatory democracy began to be eclipsed by liberal minimalist, deliberative, and agonistic theories of democracy” (Hilmer, 2010, p. 47). Nevertheless, other writers, including Jane Mansbridge and Benjamin Barber, continued to explore participatory democracy alongside these other theories.

In *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, Jane Mansbridge (1983) distinguishes between the modern notion of “adversary democracy”, and an older vision of democracy called “unitary democracy”. She defines adversary democracy as a “combination of electoral representation, majority rule, and one-citizen/one-vote” (1983, p. 3) and unitary democracy as “consensual, based on common interest and equal respect. It is the democracy of face-to-face relations”

(1983, p. 3). Mansbridge's central argument is that both adversary and unitary systems are appropriate in different circumstances.

Mansbridge says that unitary democracy is based in friendship, because friends are regarded as fundamentally equal and can reach consensus because they share common interests. She calls ancient Athens the "classic balance" between unitary and adversary democracy. According to Mansbridge, however, capitalism resulted in an "adversary revolution." Advocates of an adversary democratic system included Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and James Madison.

Mansbridge notes two problems with adversary democracies: firstly, they suggest that each vote should have equal power, which resulted in an extension of the vote to as many people as possible. Unfortunately, "even an equal vote cannot guarantee equal power" (1983, p. 18). Secondly, adversary democracies emphasize competition among selfish desires, an idea that Mansbridge claims "verges on moral bankruptcy. It accepts, and makes no attempt to change, the foundations of selfish desire" (p. 18).

According to Mansbridge, Rousseau was a forerunner of the anti-adversary reaction: he believed that democracy should be direct, rather than representative, and he formulated the idea of the "general will", a unitary concept. Still, unitary democracy was mostly rejected until the 1960s and 1970s, when citizens began to lose confidence in the institutions of adversary democracy, and scholars and politicians began to promote unitary democracy. Mansbridge describes SDS and the New Left movement as the most influential proponents of unitary democracy, because they actually established many New Left collectives. Even though the New Left literature did not overtly promote "unitary democracy", the New Left

collectives, or “participatory democracies,” were governed by face-to-face, consensual procedures.

Mansbridge states that firstly, members of a unitary democracy should have common, though not necessarily identical, interests. Secondly, they must have equal respect and equal status, rather than the equal power and equal protection of interests emphasized by adversary democracies. Thirdly, unitary democracies should operate by consensus rather than majority rule. Finally, unitary democracies should involve face-to-face contact, instead of a secret ballot.

Mansbridge devotes the second half of her book to exploring two separate “unitary democracies,” based on real institutions, but with fictional names and some fictional details. The first is a small town in Vermont named “Selby”, where citizens govern themselves in face-to-face town meetings once or more per year. The town-meeting system works well at times, but also has some weaknesses. Mansbridge concludes that the Emersonian ideal of town hall democracy may never have existed, and that in modern America, the workplace may be the best place to implement unitary democracy.

The second “unitary democracy” Mansbridge examines is a workplace collective, a crisis centre which Mansbridge calls “Helpline.” Helpline was established in a city that boasted a wide variety of experimental institutions and collectives “attempting to govern themselves as radical ‘participatory’ democracies” (p. 140). Helpline used a combination of representative and direct democracy, with a consensus process to decide on conflicting issues. Mansbridge uses Helpline to explore the ideals of political equality, consensus, and face-to-face assembly.

Mansbridge ultimately argues that face-to-face contact can only take place in small political units, and that people in smaller polities are more likely to share common interests and have greater levels of unanimity. She concludes, therefore, that “the larger the polity, the more likely it is that some individuals will have conflicting interests” and “the more individual interests come in conflict, the more a democracy encompassing those interests must employ adversary procedures” (1983, p. 293).

As a result, Mansbridge concludes that large modern nation-states must primarily remain adversary democracies. Still, she encourages the use of unitary procedures on the local level; while on the national level, citizens can agree on common ideals and pursue common goals at times. Nation-states can also try harder to equally protect the interests of all and implement a more cooperative, less competitive economic system. Mansbridge concludes by calling for “a mixed polity—part adversary, part unitary—in which citizens understand their interests well enough to participate effectively in both forms at once” (p. 302).

#### *2.1.vi Benjamin Barber*

Shortly after Mansbridge’s book, in 1984, Benjamin Barber published *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. This book “remains the most comprehensive statement of participatory democracy to date” (Hilmer, 2010, p. 47). Barber suggests that liberal democracy is experiencing a crisis in the mid-1980s: the world appears ungovernable, liberal institutions are failing, and voter turnout has reached an all-time low. Barber rejects liberalism and representative democracy and claims that “strong democracy is the only viable form modern democratic politics can take, and that unless it takes a

participatory form, democracy will pass from the political scene along with the liberal values it makes possible” (p. xxxiv).

Barber depicts liberal democracy as “thin democracy,” a theory “whose democratic values are...means to exclusively individualistic and private ends” (1984, p. 4). According to Barber, “thin democracy” discourages communal participation, claiming that too much democracy is dangerous and results in totalitarianism. Barber suggests, however, that this perspective is flawed, especially because thin democracy actually lies at the root of some of the problems generally attributed to direct democracy: “By failing to provide healthy forms of social interaction, [liberal democracy] has inadvertently promoted unhealthy ones” (1984, p. 101). Barber recognizes that liberal democracy has achieved more freedom and material security for the Western world than any other form of government. Nevertheless, he argues that “strong democracy” is a superior democratic form.

Barber defines strong democracy as a modern form of participatory democracy. His description of strong democracy is characterized by dialecticism: Barber suggests that strong democracy is skeptical about human nature, yet believes in human promise; and he argues that strong democracy is a new democratic form, yet depends on conflict, pluralism, and the division of private and public.

Barber argues, however, that strong democracy deals with conflict in a uniquely constructive way. He suggests that in the face of conflict, representative democracies always defer to some “independent ground” (absolute truth or moral principle), whether that be authority, the judiciary, or the idea of the autonomous individual. According to Barber, reliance on an independent ground prevents true freedom. On the other hand, unitary

democracies rely on consensus to make decisions. Barber believes that the consensus process is also flawed, referencing concepts like the Aryan Race and the communal will to argue that in large unitary democracies, individual interests are subsumed under the will of the collective.

Instead, Barber argues for strong democracy, emphasizing that strong democracy can turn conflict into co-operation. In a strong democracy, citizens do not rely on any independent ground. Instead, they create and reshape their own values through public talk and deliberation. Political judgment is formed through “public seeing”—a kind of “common consciousness” (1984, p. 173). Common consciousness in a strong democracy is created through political talk, public decision-making, and common action.

In his discussion of political talk, Barber argues that representatives do not listen enough, and they use speech as a form of power. Strong democratic talk, on the other hand, “entails listening no less than speaking; second it is affective as well as cognitive; and third, its intentionalism draws it out of the domain of pure reflection into the world of action” (1984, p. 174). Barber names nine functions of strong democratic talk: articulation of interests through bargaining and exchange; persuasion; agenda-setting; exploration of mutuality; affiliation and affection; preservation of autonomy; witness and self-expression; reformulation and reconceptualization; and community building. Strong democratic talk supposedly creates a public who can work towards a common future.

Barber also discusses public decision-making and common action. He argues that political decisions should be conceived of as “willing” rather than “choosing”, because “will” is concerned with communal experience. Barber references Rousseau and Kant, who

desired to “will a common world” (1984, p. 200). He explains how the method of “willing” can overcome private interests for the common good: “I may want a big, fast, lead fuel-powered automobile, but I may not be prepared to will into existence a world with polluted air...so as a citizen I may act contrary to my private preferences” (p. 201). Barber also calls for common action, such as citizen service at both the local and national levels.

Citizenship in a strong democracy contrasts with citizenship in representative and unitary democracies. In a strong democracy, citizens are neighbours (rather than legal persons or brothers) bound together by common participatory activities (rather than contract or blood). They relate to government as active participants (rather than subjects or a corporate body) and have dialectical (rather than vertical or horizontal) ties with the government (Barber, 1984).

Barber admits that strong democracy faces certain limitations. He notes the problem of scale; but he suggests that political size is relative. Technology can broaden the possible size of the polis, and interactive communication methods can allow direct communication across a wide distance. Increased local participation can also bind citizens together. Like other participatory theorists, Barber observes that capitalism may interfere with strong democracy. He suggests that the corporation can be defeated through worker’s participation, worker democracy, and economic policies.

To implement strong democracy in the real world, Barber calls for a “systematic program of institutional reforms.” He claims that strong democracy should fit with representative institutions and preserve the American constitution, rather than creating an entirely new system. Barber argues that neighborhood assemblies, television town meetings,



an emphasis on civic education and equal access to information, and representative town meetings can all promote strong democratic talk. Other reforms can promote strong democratic decision-making, including “a national initiative and referendum process” (1984, p. 281) and electronic ballots. Finally, Barber calls for action-oriented programs, including a universal citizen service, neighborhood volunteer programs, and workplace democracy.

## *2.Ivii Participatory democracy conclusion*

Though all these depictions of participatory democracy are quite different from each other, several commonalities also emerge. Firstly, participatory democratic theorists argue that modern democracies are experiencing a crisis of apathy, greed, and a lack of moral leadership; and that participatory democracy is a solution to these problems (Barber, Macpherson, Mansbridge, Miller). Secondly, participatory democratic theorists suggest that modern liberal democracy is based on a pessimistic vision of human nature in which humans are self-interested and competitive, and democracy exists to protect individual interests (Macpherson, Mansbridge, Pateman). Participatory democratic theorists, on the other hand, share an optimistic vision of human nature in which humans are capable of moral and intellectual transformation through democratic participation (Barber, Kaufman, Miller, Pateman). Thirdly, participatory theorists criticize liberal democracy’s reliance on capitalism (Barber, Mansbridge, Macpherson). They call for a more socialist vision of democracy in which the people participate more directly not only in politics, but also in the workplace and other spheres of society (Macpherson, Miller, Pateman). Fourthly, participatory theorists emphasize community and consensus over individualism and individual voting (Barber, Mansbridge, Miller). Finally, participatory theorists highlight the importance of debate and deliberation as a means to creating community, establishing

consensus and building a participatory society (Barber, Mansbridge, Miller). These five themes are the salient characteristics of participatory democracy in the literature.

## *2.2 Digital democracy*

Electronic democracy, or e-democracy, is also known as digital democracy, teledemocracy, and cyberdemocracy (Hague & Loader, 1999). In this study, the term “digital democracy” will be used, to emphasize the role of digital communications media. The UK Hansard Society, whose goal is to improve citizen participation in government, offers one definition of e-democracy: “The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies” (Hansard Society, as cited in Chadwick, 2006). Like participatory democracy, e-democracy can be traced back to the 1960s (Bryan et al., 1998), when political theorists envisioned technological Utopias that would revolutionize democracy.

E-government is a more recent, but related concept (Lenihan, 2002). Broadly, e-government refers to government attempts to improve public service delivery and information provision by making these processes electronic (Budd & Harris, 2009; Orihuela & Obi, 2007). The concept began with a public sector reform movement in the OECD countries in the mid-1990s, which looked to the private sector for ways to improve public service delivery (Chadwick, 2006; Lenihan, 2002). In the United States, this movement coincided with the National Performance Review, a program of administrative reform that began in 1993. It was led by Bill Clinton and Al Gore, who advocated for the increased use of information technology in government (Chadwick, 2006). Proponents of e-government

argue that it will reduce administrative costs, improve co-ordination among government agencies, and increase public sector effectiveness (Chadwick, 2006).

Since the information revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of participatory democracy have turned to digital media as a means of fostering citizen participation in government (Fuchs, 2007). Digital democracy theories have five characteristics that, in some ways, parallel the characteristics of participatory democracy theories. Firstly, digital democracy can supposedly reverse declining trust in political processes and institutions and voter apathy (Hague & Loader, 1999). Secondly, digital media can supposedly create a more educated citizenry (Budd & Harris, 2009; Hague and Loader, 1999). Thirdly, digital technologies are expected to allow citizens to participate more directly in politics and other areas of society (Fuchs, 2007; Malina, 1999). Fourth, digital technologies can create virtual communities and an online public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Rheingold, 1993); and finally, digital technologies are expected to encourage debate and deliberation (Hague & Loader, 1999; Bryan et al., 1998).

### *2.2i Digital democracy and democratic crisis*

Firstly, like the literature on participatory democracy, the literature on digital democracy cites “a growing perception that current political institutions, actors and practice in advanced liberal democracies are in a frail condition and are held in poor public regard” (Hague & Loader, 1999, p. 4). Digital democratic theorists believe that the current democratic crisis is a crisis of representative democracy: representatives have displayed elitism and have failed to represent the will of the people; and politicians have been morally

discredited by “allegations of sleaze, corruption, self-seeking behavior and sound-bite politics” (Hague & Loader, 1999, p. 4).

Since the 1960s, studies have charted growing voter apathy and even hostility towards politics (Bryan et al., 1998). This apathy and hostility is reflected by declining voter turnout and decreasing political participation in the United States and the U.K., especially among young people between the ages of 18 and 24 (Hale, Musson & Weare, 1999). Theorists of digital democracy present the Information Age as an opportunity to “rethink and, if necessary, radically overhaul or replace those [liberal democratic] institutions, actors and practice” (Hague & Loader, p. 4) that are causing the crisis of participation.

#### *2.2ii Digital democracy as educative*

Just as participatory democratic theorists argue optimistically that democratic participation can educate and transform the participants, the literature on digital democracy is filled with utopian claims that digital media can improve and transform human abilities (Dahlberg, 2001; Rheingold, 1993; Tapscott, 2006). Don Tapscott (2006) writes that mass collaboration through the Internet “can empower a growing cohort of connected individuals and organizations to...reach unprecedented heights in learning and scientific discovery” (p. 15). While participatory democratic theorists argue that participation can educate citizens, digital democratic theorists emphasize the idea that democratic participation cannot take place without an educated public (Dahl, 1989; Simmons & Grabill, 2007). Digital technologies are expected to help educate citizens on political issues (Budd & Harris, 2009; Hague and Loader, 1999).

Some studies support the idea that digital technologies can inform citizens. Owen & Davis (2008) note that in the 2008 American presidential election, 24% of voters relied mainly on online media for information, a percentage that rose to 42% among 18-29 year-olds. Sources of online political information include government websites (Owen & Davis, 2008), candidate websites (Dadas, 2008; Endres & Warnick, 2004), online newspapers, blogs (Owen & Davis, 2008) and social networking sites (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Internet networks like UK Citizen's Online Democracy (UKCOD) and the U.S. Democracy Network (DNet) are also designed to provide citizens with up-to-date information on political candidates, parties and issues (Aikens, 1999; Coleman, 1999).

Studies have shown, however, that the internet may not be as successful at informing citizens as its advocates hope. Chadwick (2006) cites a study by Tewksbury (2003) which found that during the 2000 U.S. primary campaign, over half of the internet users in Nielsen Internet web logs "did not access any public affairs news online...but much preferred sports, financial, and entertainment news" (p. 171). Furthermore, some information sources may be more successful at educating citizens than others. For example, Baumgartner and Morris (2010) found that social network website users were more interested in socializing than reading news or seeking out diverse sources of information. Even when people do read political information online, they may simply use this information to bolster their original views. Hill & Hughes (1998) note: "reading Web pages seems to be an act of self-selection; people go on-line to find out more information about a subject, not to be transformed" (p. 183).

Candidate campaign websites are particularly relevant to this thesis, which explores Barack Obama's campaign social networking site, my.barackobama.com. Endres and

Warnick (2004) explain that candidate campaign websites not only provide information to citizens about the campaign, but are also “widely used by the press to identify candidates’ stands on issues” (p. 322). The content of candidate campaign websites includes information traditionally found in campaign brochures, including “candidate biography, issues section, information about making campaign donations, an email address for the campaign, and the ability to indicate an interest in being a campaign volunteer” (Foot, Schneider & Xenos, 2002).

Hill and Hughes (1998) and Endres and Warnick (2004) argue, however, that campaign websites must be more than “static campaign flyers” or “brochureware;” they should also include interactive features. “Interactivity” has many definitions (Quiring, 2009). Kiouisis (2002) defines interactivity as “the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many) both synchronously and asynchronously and participate in reciprocal message exchanges” (p. 379). Endres & Warnick (2004) suggest that text-based interactivity is particularly important for engaging and informing citizens. It differs from actual interactivity in that it is “a rhetorical construct that engages users through emulation of dialogue between Web users and members of the campaign” (Endres & Warnick, 2004, p. 326). Drawing on Walter J. Ong (1982), Endres and Warnick suggest that text-based interactivity may be a form of secondary orality enabled by the Internet. According to Ong, “this new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of communal sense, its concentration on the present moment” (1982, p. 136). Text-based interactivity is dialogic or heteroglossic and inclusive of different viewpoints (Endres & Warnick, 2004). It is expected to inform users because “its inclusion

of alternatives opens up a deliberative space and engages readers and listeners to think alongside the message” (Endres & Warnick, 1984, p. 328).

Overall, the data on campaign websites is mixed; some studies show that parties with websites receive more votes and more positive reactions, while other studies have found that websites do not influence citizens’ level of political knowledge (Latimer, 2008). Warnick, Xenos, Endres & Gastil (2006) found that “both text-based and campaign-to-user interactivity increased the amount of time users spent on the site and their accurate recall of candidates’ issue stances.” When both forms of interactivity were present, however, the users were less able to recall issues, “confirming earlier findings that too much interactivity can interfere with user recall of site content” (Warnick et al., 2006).

### *2.2iii Digital democracy and political participation*

Besides informing citizens, digital democracy is expected to allow citizens to participate more directly in government. Some theorists argue that the internet can facilitate direct democracy by allowing electronic referenda on many government decisions (Fuchs, 2007; Malina, 1999). Documented examples of successful e-democracy experiments include Minnesota E-Democracy and the UK’s “Modernizing Government white paper” initiative (Aikens, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998), which allowed citizens to learn about and vote on government proposals through digital media.

Theorists have also noted some possible weaknesses of direct electronic democracy, however. Firstly, citizens may simply not be interested in or motivated for sustained participation in direct democracy (Fuchs, 2007; Malina, 1999; Nixon & Johansson, 1999). Secondly, new digital technologies may reduce complex decisions to simple electronic votes

(Barber, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998) and spur emotional, “populist” reactions without adequate reflection or accountability (Moore, 1999). Thirdly, Internet voting can create security and privacy concerns (Bimber, 2003); and finally, electronic direct democracy could benefit the powerful, such as those who design the “ballot-box” questions, at the expense of the less powerful (Malina, 1999).

Nevertheless, like the participatory theorists, theorists of digital democracy do not confine political participation to voting. Just as the participatory theorists suggest that a more socialist, “participatory” economic structure goes hand in hand with participatory democracy, some digital democracy theorists suggest that the Internet can transform the economy. Describing Web 2.0, the new interactive Internet, Tapscott (2006) claims that “profound changes in the nature of technology, demographics, and the global economy are giving rise to powerful new models of production based on community, collaboration, and self-organization rather than on hierarchy and control” (p. 1). While the Internet’s ability to transform the economy is outside the scope of this thesis, digital democratic theories also suggest that the Internet empowers citizens to self-organize and participate in politics beyond voting. Don Tapscott writes, “this new Web has opened the floodgates to a worldwide explosion of participation” (p. 19). He

Firstly, digital democratic theorists argue that the Internet enables bottom-up, many-to-one communication and many-to-many communication, instead of limiting communication to top-down messages from the government (Chadwick, 2006). Orihuela and Obi (2007) argue that e-governance refers to the use of digital technologies to give citizens “a channel to ‘hear their voice’ in a dynamic process of continuous feedback” (p. 29).



In conjunction with the idea that the Internet allows citizens to express their voice, digital democratic theorists believe that the Internet allows the government to better respond to the needs of citizens. The e-government and e-governance movements emphasize client-centred service delivery (Chadwick, 2006; Lenihan, 2002). Fountain (2002) explains that e-governance involves the “substitution of bottom-up control, that is, control of officials in their day-to-day work by these officials’ “customers”, the citizens whom they serve” (p. 126). Instead of withholding information from citizens, institutions in the age of e-government are supposedly characterized by transparency and openness (Fountain, 2002; Tapscott, 2006).

Digital tools that have allowed citizens to communicate their opinions to the government include consultative models of e-democracy such as the e-rule-making program in the U.S. federal government (Chadwick, 2006); government websites (Owen & Davis, 2008); and candidate campaign websites (Dadas, 2008; Endres & Warnick, 2004). The White House website, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), is an example of a government website that encouraged bottom-up communication. The Clinton government encouraged visitors to email the administration, while the Bush administration implemented an “Ask the White House” forum, an option to ask a question of a political leader, and a live chat with a government official (Owen & Davis, 2008).

Nevertheless, the government may not be as responsive to the needs of citizens as participatory theorists wish. For example, when the Clinton administration allowed citizens to send emails on [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), the administration received a flood of emails to which it could not respond, except to acknowledge that the message had been received. In order to curb the number of emails, the Bush administration decided to purposely limit the

interactivity of [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), making emails to the president more complicated by requiring visitors to fill out a detailed form beforehand (Owen & Davis, 2008).

Furthermore, “both online question-and-answer forums and live chats provided a filtering option that limited interaction to those the White House chose to answer or include in the discussion” (Owen & Davis, 2008).

Candidate campaign websites, once again, are particularly relevant to this thesis. They allow users to publicly express their voice in a number of different ways. Endres & Warnick (2004) suggest that the responsiveness of a campaign website is “the extent to which mechanisms for feedback between users and website authors are constructed in to the Web site” (p. 330). Such mechanisms could include candidate contact information, opportunities to contact the candidate through email or other forms, and opportunities to receive campaign updates (Endres & Warnick, 2004).

Nevertheless, campaign websites may fail to use two-way communication methods, or may use them in ways that do not benefit citizens. Stromer-Galley (2000) observes that politicians often seem reluctant to use two-way communication between candidates and citizens for fear of losing control of the campaign. Chadwick (2006) notes that campaign websites often do not include citizen-to-candidate discussion. Panagopoulos (2009) finds that concerns about the competitiveness of a race may cause candidates not to use two-way communication: candidates who are far ahead or far behind in the polls are more likely to use two-way communication than those in close races.

Even when they include forms of user-to-campaign communication, campaign websites may be less responsive to users than they appear to be. Dadas (2008) notes that

John McCain's campaign website had a poll about the worst examples of pork barrel spending. After completing the poll, users were invited to submit their contact information, but the website offered no explanation of how the poll results might influence the campaign. Furthermore, on McCain's campaign site invited users create their own websites, but in order to do so, they were required to share their demographic information. Dadas (2008) observes that the website did not explain what the campaign might do with the information.

In fact, the possibility that governments and parties could use demographic information to manipulate public opinion is a central concern of digital democracy. When citizens share information online, campaign consultants and professionals can exploit the data to help political parties target audiences according to their psychological and demographic characteristics, a form of communication known as "narrowcasting" (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Chadwick, 2006) or "micro-targeting" (Panagopoulos, 2009). For example, with increased demographic information, parties can send targeted emails to members of a specific demographic (King, 2002). Websites which appear to allow citizens to express their opinions to government, therefore, may actually sell the data to political campaigns which can exploit the information (Howard, 2006). As Panagopoulos explains, "Campaigns realize it is crucial to provide information to voters, but it is also useful to absorb it from them as well" (2009, p. 12).

Finally, digital democracy is expected to encourage civic engagement. Park and Perry (2008) use the term "civic engagement" interchangeably with "political participation" (p. 239). They define civic engagement as "citizens' individual and collective involvement in public affairs" (p. 238) and divide it into the categories of electoral vs. non-electoral engagement and deliberative engagement vs. action-oriented engagement (p. 239).

Deliberative engagement will be examined later in this literature review. Park and Perry (2008) suggest that electoral action-oriented engagement includes “attending political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners and giving money to a political party and candidate” (p. 240). Non-electoral action-oriented engagement includes “contacting government officials to express personal views on public issues and working with other people to deal with community issues” (p. 241).

Bimber (2001) notes that many people, including technologists, media professionals and political consultants, believe “the Internet will ‘cause’ an increase in the political engagement of ordinary citizens’ ” (p. 54). Digital technologies are thought to facilitate action-oriented engagement by providing citizens with information that encourages them to become involved in political life (Bimber, 2001; Norris, 2001; Park & Perry, 2008). Weber et al. (2003) found a significant positive relationship between online activity and political participation such as letter-writing and attending rallies. Park & Perry (2008) studied surveys of the use of the Internet for political information, and found that “citizens who have seen political information on the Internet are 4-5% more likely than nonusers to attend a rally and give money to a candidate” (p. 253). Internet users were also more likely to contact government officials and work with others on community issues (Park & Perry, 2008). Park & Perry (2008) note that the Internet appears to have a greater influence on non-electoral civic activities than on electoral civic activities. Nevertheless, Bimber (2001) found that obtaining political information online influenced the likelihood of donating money to a candidate, party, or group.

In the same study, however, Bimber notes that obtaining political information online did not appear to influence other forms of political participation, such as voting or other

forms of civic engagement (2001). Other studies, in fact, have suggested that the Internet “reinforces rather than transforms existing power relationships and patterns of political participation” (Park & Perry, 2008, p. 241). A 2000 study of European Internet users found that Internet users belonged to groups who were already knowledgeable and inclined to participate through conventional means such as voting (Norris, 2001). Internet users were also more likely to discuss politics, regularly read print newspapers or tune in each day to the radio (Norris, 2001). In a study of online community networks and civic engagement, Kavanaugh (2002) found that those who participated more in community life as a result of the Internet tended to be significantly more educated and more involved in their community than those whose engagement did not change. This “normalization thesis” (Park & Perry, 2008) suggests that the Internet is perpetuating current patterns of political involvement, instead of engaging disengaged citizens.

Candidate campaign websites are seen as particularly important tools for encouraging civic engagement. Panagopoulos (2009) notes that campaign websites are useful for assembling and motivating voters and volunteers. They can make campaign supporters feel involved through encouragements to donate money; a volunteer form; and invitations to subscribe to an e-newsletter or receive e-mail updates from the campaign (Panagopoulos, 2009, p. 61). Park and Perry (2009) list six types of electoral civic engagement: e-mails asking people to vote; attendance at a rally; e-mail solicitations; in-person solicitations; financial contributions; and voting. Using data from a 2004 post-election Internet tracking survey, Park & Perry (2008) found that use of campaign websites appeared to have a negligible impact on voting, but positively influenced all the other types of civic

engagement. For example, Howard Dean's online campaign helped him break fundraising records (Chadwick, 2006).

Theorists note, however, that campaign websites share the weaknesses of other online attempts to promote civic engagement. King (2002) explains that campaigns can skillfully identify potential supporters through advanced Internet tools such as targeted web searches for specific keywords. Campaigns can then send targeted emails and create campaign sites perfect for narrowcasting (King, 2002). In other words, campaigns may not be encouraging the voluntary participation advocated by the participatory theorists. Schier (2000) explains: "Contrary to 'mobilization'...when parties were active and U.S. voter turnout high, 'activation refers to the methods that 'candidates employ to induce particular, finely targeted portions of the public to become active in elections, demonstrations and lobbying' " (p. 174). Janack (2006) notes that candidate campaign websites do not actually seek to reinvigorate democracy, but to recruit support for a candidate.

### *2.2iv Digital democracy and community*

Chadwick (2006) notes that in addition to its ability to promote civic engagement, digital democracy is seen as a means to implement theories of participatory democracy, including "strong democracy", because of its perceived ability to enhance community (Chadwick, 2006). Internet technologies are expected to build community through boosting social capital, which Robert Putnam (1995) defines as "the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). Putnam (1995) suggests that involvement in civic associations creates social capital. He blames a post-World War II decline in participation in civic associations for a

decline in social capital. Theorists believe the Internet can reverse this trend by building community through such tools as online community networks and virtual communities (Chadwick, 2006),

Online community networks are “computer-based system(s) or set(s) of systems designed to meet the social and economic needs of a spatially defined community of individuals” (p. 90). Examples of successful online community networks include the Blacksburg Electronic Village and the Camfield Estates MIT Creating Community Connections Project (Chadwick, 2006). Studies of the Camfield Estates Project suggest that it helped to increase social capital: residents interacted more often and became more involved in politics, and social networks appeared denser (Chadwick, 2006). In addition to online community networks, the Internet can create virtual communities, “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough...to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. xx). Rheingold praises his own experiences with the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), and he suggests that the community helped increase aspects of social capital, such as trust (p. 191). Some theorists suggest, in fact, that digital technologies can renew the historic ideal of the American town hall (Hill & Hughes, 1998).

Thomas Bender (1982) discusses town life in 19<sup>th</sup> century America and offers a definition of community (Galston 1999). Galston (1999) compares four crucial elements of this definition – “limited membership, shared norms, affective ties, and a sense of mutual obligation” (p. 51) with online communities. By contrast, Galston observes that in online communities, membership is fluid and weakly controlled. Consequently, members are more likely to respond to conflict by exiting the group, rather than working through differences.

Online communities do have shared norms, but they lack face-to-face communication and may experience uncivil discourse (Galston, 1999; Rheingold, 1993). Finally, online communities may lack a sense of mutual obligation: groups based on common interests “need not develop obligations because by definition the interest of each individual is served by participating in the group” (Galston, 1999, p. 55). Members of such communities may also become isolated from those with other interests (Hill & Hughes, 1998).

Campaign websites are not typically known for their tendency to encourage community. Candidates often fail to include discussion forums on their websites due to the fear of losing control of their message (Chadwick, 2006; Park & Perry, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Nevertheless, campaigns have begun to tap into the power of social media to allow supporters to build community both on and off-line (Panagopoulos, 2009). Dewing (2010) defines social media as “the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities.” Social media can include blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, social network sites, and more (Dewing, 2010). Slotnick (2009) observes, “The similarities between campaigning and virtual social networking are startling (at their core, they both rely upon constant communication and creating a platform for making this communication as seamless as possible)” (p. 252).

Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign is an early example of social networking in campaigns. Dean used Meetup.com, a website which allowed people to congregate in local groups designed around their interests, to organize face-to-face neighbourhood meetings of political supporters (Chadwick, 2006). In 2008, not only did Barack Obama develop a presence on social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook (Slotnick,



2009), but he also created his own social networking site, My.BarackObama.com, which is the subject of this research.

Social media are considered to be a helpful strategy for campaigns because of their ability to attract supporters and donations (Talbot, 2008; Panagopoulos, 2009). Nevertheless, some theorists question whether social media helps form new communities among the politically disengaged, or whether it simply brings together people who are already interested and engaged in politics. In a survey of Dean Meetups, William and Gordon (2003) found that 89% of the participants had voted in 2000, suggesting that the Meetups did not draw previously disengaged voters. Williams and Gulati (2009) also observe that social media may help campaigns mobilize supporters rather than attract grassroots support: “we see in these networks a new frontier for cultivating social capital, which candidates, elected officials, and civic leaders can tap when they want to mobilize citizens for political action” (p. 287-288).

### *2.2v Digital democracy and political deliberation*

Finally, in addition to community, digital media is believed to facilitate political debate and decision-making. Theorists have argued that the Internet can renew Habermas’ ideal of the public sphere (Chadwick, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001). Habermas (1962/1989) argues that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the middle class formed a “public sphere”, where public opinion was shaped through rational-critical deliberation about political issues. The public sphere was separate from state control and relied on the free flow of information by a privately owned press (Habermas, 1962/1989). Habermas’ focus on debate and deliberation has made him a founder of the theory of deliberative democracy (Chadwick, 2006), which considers rational-

critical deliberation and consequent decision-making to be one of the most significant aspects of citizen participation (Fuchs, 2007). Deliberative democratic theory is strongly associated with participatory theory and is sometimes even thought to have replaced it (Hilmer, 2010). Deliberative theorists believe the Internet can facilitate deliberative democracy because it is “uniquely suited to providing multiple arenas for public debate that are relatively spontaneous, flexible, and above all, self-governed” (Chadwick, 2006, p. 89). The Internet is thought to transcend the limits of time and space that make it difficult for citizens of modern democracies to meet in person (Fuchs, 2007; Hill & Hughes, 1998) and to connect people of diverse backgrounds, renewing the egalitarian discourse of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001).

Successful examples of online deliberation include UKCOD, “Britain’s first national online democracy information and discussion service” (Coleman, 1999, p. 203) and the UK Hansard Society, which attempted to integrate deliberative forums with government policy discussions (Chadwick, 2006). Dahlberg (2001) uses Habermas’ theory to derive a list of requirements for a public sphere. These include: “exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims”; “reflexivity”; “ideal role taking”; “sincerity”; “discursive inclusion and equality”; and “autonomy from state and economic power” (p. 623). Dahlberg suggests that through Usenet groups, forums, and chat groups, the Internet easily enables the exchange of reasoned validity claims (2001), though not the other criteria for a public sphere. Dahlberg also compares Mn-Politics Discuss (MPD), Minnesota E-Democracy’s forum, with the set of requirements, and concludes that the forum fulfills many of the characteristics of the public sphere through e-mail lists, formalized rules, careful management, and self-moderation (2001).

Nevertheless, Dahlberg (2001) admits that in general, online deliberative forums do not successfully extend the public sphere. People in online forums often fail to use reflexivity (critical examination of cultural values and assumptions) (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 623) and fail to listen respectfully (Dahlberg, 2001). Online chats tend to lack thoughtful discussion (Hill & Hughes, 1998) and may include rude or deliberately irritating posts, known as “flaming” and “trolling” (Chadwick, 2006). Sincere, credible discussions on the Internet are also difficult to achieve because there is no face-to-face discussion and online identities cannot be verified (Dahlberg, 2001; Fuchs, 2007). Furthermore, both Hill and Hughes (1998) and Dahlberg (2001) observe that online political forums, including those of Minnesota E-Democracy, are dominated by males and privileged members of society. Finally, online forums may not meet the public sphere criteria of “autonomy from state and political power” (Dahlberg, 2001). Chadwick (2006) notes: “many government sites are more geared toward legitimizing government decisions and operate much more stringent forum policies as a result” (p. 108).

Still, political campaigns can facilitate deliberation in various ways. Endres & Warnick (2004) define citizen-to-citizen communication on candidate websites as “user-to-user interactivity”. One means of user-to-user interactivity is internet bulletin boards or “web boards”, which allow citizens to communicate with each other about the campaign. Web boards were used on the websites of two gubernatorial candidates in the 1998 U.S. midterm campaigns, attracting many discussions (Stromer-Galley, 2000). One of these candidates, Jesse Ventura, won his campaign in a surprise victory that has been partly attributed to his use of discussion forums (Chadwick, 2006). During Ventura’s final weekend tour of Minnesota, his campaign organizers used the board as the only means of

announcing Ventura's next stops (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Besides discussion boards, campaign websites can promote discussion through weblogs that have interactive capabilities (Janack, 2006).

Nevertheless, theorists have noted that campaigns rarely utilize user-to-user interactive features (Endres & Warnick, 2004; Foot & Schneider, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Stromer-Galley (2000) notes that campaign websites rarely use citizen-to-citizen interactive features for at least three reasons: "they are burdensome to the campaign, candidates risk losing control of the communication environment, and they no longer can provide ambiguous campaign discourse" (p. 122). In a study of *Blog for America*, a blog on Howard Dean's campaign website, Janack (2006) found that although citizens could post their thoughts seemingly free from campaign influence, the forum was moderated, and criticisms and questions about issues and policies seemed noticeably infrequent. Furthermore, participants themselves manipulated the discussion to keep it focused on the goal of Howard Dean's election, using ad hominem attacks against those who criticized Dean's campaign, and ignoring or minimizing questions about Dean's stance on issues. Janack concludes that the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere may not be possible even under conditions that facilitate rational-critical debate, simply because citizens are motivated by "political interests and power relations" (p. 297) that interfere with their rationality.

### *2.3 Conclusion*

Digital technology is viewed as a means to implement the theories of participatory democracy that began with Arnold Kaufman and the SDS in the 1960s. This literature review has outlined the most significant literature on participatory democracy, and noted five

characteristics of the theory. These include: a belief that democracy is experiencing a crisis that can be resolved by increased participation; an emphasis on moral and intellectual transformation through participation; an emphasis on participation that extends beyond voting to all spheres of society; an appreciation for community and consensus-building; and a belief in the importance of debate and deliberation. In the section on digital democracy, this literature review has attempted to show how digital technologies are expected to facilitate each of those five characteristics of participatory democracy: reviving enthusiasm for democratic participation, educating citizens, fostering civic engagement, building community, and promoting discussion and deliberation.

While the literature on digital democracy often discusses the ways that the Internet can engage and inform citizens, it often fails to integrate this discussion with the original theory of participatory democracy. Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign has been frequently cited as a successful example of the use of the Internet to promote democratic participation (Evans, 2008; Panagopoulos, 2009; Talbot, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). In 2009, Don Tapscott suggested that if Obama continued to use "internet-enabled ways to engage America", "we would take a step away from broadcast and toward participatory democracy" (x). Because of such claims, Obama's campaign social networking site, my.barackobama.com, is an ideal subject for an analysis of how digital technologies may promote participatory democracy. This literature review provided the theoretical background for this research project and suggested the best questions to ask the research participants.

#### *2.4 Theoretical Framework: Online Public Sphere*

The literature review also provided the basis for a theoretical framework to guide the case study research. The theorists of participatory democracy and the theorists of digital democracy both call for a participatory society in which political participation extends beyond voting; and they both emphasize political debate, discussion, and the formation of community. These aspects of political participation are central to Jurgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere. Like the theorists of participatory democracy, Habermas describes a participatory society. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989), Habermas describes an Enlightenment-era bourgeois public sphere that held governments accountable and shaped political opinion: "through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society" (31). Habermas also emphasizes community and rational-critical debate: the public sphere has been described as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment" (Hauser, 1998).

In recent years, theorists have expressed hope that the Internet might revive Habermas' ideal of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Poor, 2005). From Habermas' theory of rational communication, Dahlberg (2001) derives six normative conditions for an online public sphere. These conditions are: autonomy from state and economic power; exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims; reflexivity; ideal role taking; sincerity; and discursive inclusion and equality. Dahlberg suggests that the more effectively online media facilitate these conditions, the better they promote the public sphere of rational-critical deliberation.

Janack (2006) modifies Dahlberg's first condition, autonomy from state and economic power, by suggesting that campaign websites should be evaluated not on the basis

of whether they provide autonomy from state power, but whether they use interactivity as much as possible to stimulate discussion. He explains that since campaign sites “do not seek to reinvigorate democracy, but seek to get a candidate elected....inquiry has turned to how candidates and others take advantage of the unique features of the online environment, interactivity, multimedia, and lack of regulation that could enable a free flow of ideas” (p. 284).

The second condition for an online public sphere, according to Dahlberg, is “critique of critizable moral-practical validity claims,” which Dahlberg (2001) defines as “a lively exchange of opinions” “that clearly parallels the rational, dialogic form of conversation required within the public sphere.” Campaign websites may prevent this type of communication by censoring discussion (Janack, 2006). Even when campaigns do not censor discussion, however, discussion participants on campaign websites may purposely ostracize those with opinions that differ from the central campaign message. Janack (2006) explains: “Campaigns are still structured to craft an image and a message, and the participants in the emerging online forum tend to engage each other in a way that supports the crafting of that image and message with minimal prompting and training from the campaign” (p. 297).

Reflexivity is Dahlberg’s third requirement for an online public sphere, and it is defined as “the process of standing back from, critically reflecting upon, and changing one’s position when faced by ‘the better argument’ ” (Dahlberg, 2001). Modern political campaigns tend to use marketing tactics, rather than rational arguments, to change voters’ minds and persuade them to elect a candidate (O’Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2002). Nevertheless, Dahlberg (2001) writes, “Reflexivity...is largely an internal process and

changes in people's positions take place over long periods of time." Because reflexivity is a slow process, individuals who are persuaded by reasoned arguments may eventually become more reliable supporters than those who are briefly lured by appealing rhetoric.

Dahlberg's fourth requirement for an online public sphere is ideal role-taking, "in which interlocuters respectfully listen to one another in spite of, and because of, their social and cultural differences" (Dahlberg, 2001). In addition to ideal role-taking, Dahlberg (2001) suggests that a fifth condition of an online public sphere is sincerity: "Intentionally misleading others about one's claims, including...one's identity, undermines the whole deliberative process."

Finally, Dahlberg suggests that an online public sphere must involve "discursive equality and inclusion" in which all social groups are included in discussion. Dahlberg (2001) offers Minnesota E-Democracy as an example of how websites can encourage broader participation. Methods include "offering subscribers equal opportunity to post, explicitly censoring direct abuse...and utilizing user friendly technology (such as e-mail)".

Dahlberg's six conditions for an online public sphere, derived from Habermas' work and supplemented by authors such as Janack (2006), provided a theoretical framework for this research study. In Chapter 5, the concept of the online public sphere is used to interpret, synthesize, and analyze the research findings that appear in Chapter 4.



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter thoroughly details the methods the researcher used to conduct the primary research. It explains the reasons for utilizing this particular research approach, and it fully explains each step of the research process. In the following section, the chapter describes why a qualitative case study approach was chosen.

#### *3.1 Case Study Research*

##### *3.1i Case Study Background*

This thesis uses case study research. According to Creswell (2007), “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 73). This particular study explores a single bounded case, Barack Obama’s website (my.barackobama.com) from December 2010 to August 2011. The website was studied during this time frame because the time period followed the 2010 midterm elections for Congress and the Senate, which took place on November 2, 2010 (Gill, 2010) and preceded the 2012 presidential election, which is scheduled to take place on November 6, 2012 (de Voogd, 2011).

Case study research was useful for this research project because it offered the opportunity to explore my.barackobama.com thoroughly, using multiple information sources, including in-depth interviews and a content analysis of the website. Qualitative research was also a useful research approach for this study. Berg (1998) explains, “Qualitative procedures provide a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about the actual people researchers observe...qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and

perceptions of others” (p. 7). The qualitative interviews in this study allowed the researcher to gain insight into member perceptions and experiences of my.barackobama.com, and how these have affected their political participation. Furthermore, the theories of participatory democracy and digital democracy emphasize the social nature of political participation (Barber, 1984; Chadwick, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001).

### *3.1ii The Case: My.barackobama.com*

Although Barack Obama has a presence on many social networking sites, only the website my.barackobama.com, will be studied. This site is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, when my.barackobama.com was launched as a branch of the main Obama campaign website in February 2007 (Arrington, 2007), Obama was not “the only potential candidate to utilize social software”, but he was “the first to create a fully fledged social networking site of [his] own” (O’Hear, 2007). Most importantly, however, my.barackobama.com is known for encouraging more active participation in the Obama campaign than any of his other social networking pages. Franklin Hodge, employee of Blue State Digital, which helped set up the database system for Obama’s campaign, explains, “Facebook is great for broadcasting yourself to friends, but it’s not very action oriented. There are few features at My.BarackObama.com for broadcasting yourself in the abstract—instead, it’s geared to getting people to take action” (Cone, 2008). During Obama’s campaign, my.barackobama.com was instrumental not only in attracting supporters, but also in encouraging them to donate, volunteer, and create their own political events (Cone, 2008; Talbot, 2008).

## *3.2 Research Questions*

The central research question of this thesis is: How does Barack Obama's website, my.barackobama.com, promote or discourage participatory democracy? Drawing on the theories of participatory democracy (and its emphasis on non-electoral participation, decision-making, and an informed citizenry), and digital democracy, the research attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

**RQ1:** In what ways do members of my.barackobama.com believe the website has influenced their levels of non-electoral political participation (for example, through such activities as donating or canvassing)?

**RQ2:** How do members of my.barackobama.com believe the website has influenced their ability to contribute to political decision-making?

**RQ3:** In what ways do members believe the website has influenced their levels of political knowledge and interest?

**RQ4:** Drawing on the theory of deliberative democracy, in what ways do members believe the website has provided opportunities for them to discuss and debate ideas with their peers?

**RQ5:** In what ways do members of my.barackobama.com believe the website has influenced their sense of belonging to a community?

**RQ6:** How does the written content of my.barackobama.com promote or discourage non-electoral citizen participation in politics?

### *3.3 In-depth Interviews*

In-depth interviews were chosen as one of the two sources of information for this case study. Creswell (2007) explains that interviews are a common, useful source of information for case studies, which seek to build an in-depth picture of a case. In-depth

interviewing has been defined as follows: “a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation” (Boyce & Neal, 2006, p. 3).

In-depth interviews are considered appropriate when the researcher is seeking “detailed information about a person’s thoughts and behaviours or...to explore new issues in depth” (Boyce & Neal, 2006, p. 3). For this particular research study, in-depth interviews were seen as suitable because the topic of my.barackobama.com and political participation had not yet been researched in detail. Furthermore, the theories of participatory democracy and digital democracy emphasize the social nature of political participation (Barber, 1984; Chadwick, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001). As a result, the researcher wanted to explore the thoughts and perceptions of members of my.barackobama.com. As Boyce and Neal suggest, in-depth interviews seemed to be the best way of gaining detailed insight into the opinions and perspectives of members of my.barackobama.com.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and conducted by e-mail, due to the fact that the researcher lived in Canada and the members of the groups were residents of the United States or other countries. Creswell supports the use of e-mail interviews, explaining, “In recent years, new forms of data have emerged such as...using text from e-mail messages” (1998, p. 120). E-mail interviews and recruitment from websites fall into the category of computer-mediated communication, and researchers note that CMC introduces unique challenges to the research process.

Computer-mediated communication has been defined as: “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 1996, p. 1).

Some of the limitations of computer-mediated communication research include: a lack of non-verbal cues; longer, more drawn-out interviews; difficulty of maintaining confidentiality (because the researcher sees the respondent's e-mail address).

The apparent disadvantages to email interviews can actually be advantages, however. The drawn-out, asynchronous nature of e-mail interviews allows respondents to reply on their own time, thinking through the questions more fully and giving more thorough responses (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Lack of verbal cues may also make respondents feel more comfortable about sharing their "innermost thoughts" without feeling shy or judged for their looks, gender or race (Selwyn & Robson, 1998; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). CMC research also allows researchers to overcome geographical and temporal constraints, reduces costs, and provides a ready-made transcript of interview data (Selwyn & Robson, 1998). The advantages of e-mail interviews arguably outweigh the disadvantages, particularly since the disadvantages can be creatively overcome.

Because the study involved human subjects, it followed the University of Ottawa ethics procedures (University of Ottawa, 2009b), and received approval by the ethics review board. The interview respondents were e-mailed a consent form that outlined the purpose, procedures, and benefits of the study; it also clearly stated that participation was voluntary and that respondents had the right to withdraw. Respondents were then permitted to ask the researcher questions about the study.

Once they were willing to participate, the respondents provided their informed consent to the research. One of the disadvantages of e-mail interviews is the difficulty of obtaining informed consent, because signatures cannot be affixed to e-mails. Drawing on a

method used by McCoyd and Kerson (2006), the researcher asked the respondents to type out their statement of consent as a prefix to their first e-mail response. In some cases, the respondents did not initially follow this procedure in the manner requested, but after the researcher clarified the instructions by e-mail, all the respondents provided their consent in a typed statement before receiving the interview questions.

The researcher protected the anonymity of the participants by removing identifying information from the data, transferring the e-mails to a password-protected computer document, and deleting the original e-mails with the accompanying e-mail addresses. By not sharing the data with others, respondent confidentiality was also protected.

### *3.4 Content Analysis*

Content analysis was chosen as the second source of information for this study. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18).

An analysis of the text on my.barackobama.com is important for this study, because the theory of participatory democracy emphasizes the importance of communication, and theories of digital democracy discuss political communication through digital media. Krippendorff also suggests that content analysis is most useful for focusing on facts that “are constituted in language”, such as “social relationships”; “public behaviours”; and “institutional realities” such as government (2004, p. 75). Participation in politics can fall into all three of these categories. As a result, content analysis is a suitable research technique for this study.

### 3.5 Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2007) and Hatch (2002) explain that in qualitative research, the researcher is a key instrument of data collection. The researcher of the study is a Canadian citizen who has never spent more than a few days in the United States. She has not conducted any previous research on American politics, participatory democracy, or digital democracy. The researcher has a B.A. in English and has studied Communications with a focus on media studies. She has also worked as a market research interviewer, conducting political and business surveys over the telephone. Because of her educational background in English, the researcher was used to studying and analyzing text for meaning; and because of her employment background, she was also familiar with different interview techniques. On the other hand, the researcher was not especially knowledgeable about American politics and digital media. During data analysis, this relative lack of knowledge may have caused her to miss details that more knowledgeable researchers might have noticed.

The researcher first developed an interest in the link between new media and participation in 2006, after reading Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*. The researcher was intrigued by Toffler's suggestion that new technology could create "prosumers", consumers who participated in the production of their own goods. Communications courses that discussed Web 2.0, the participatory Internet, also contributed to the researcher's interest in new media and participation.

During Barack Obama's campaign for president in 2008, the researcher observed the optimistic media coverage of the ways Obama promoted political participation through

online tools. As a result, the researcher decided to study my.barackobama.com and the ways it contributed to participatory democracy.

Creswell (2007) notes: “Qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. The researchers’ interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understanding” (p. 39). Because this study takes a qualitative approach, the researcher had to acknowledge her biases as a preventative measure against their intrusion into the study. The researcher had read many enthusiastic portrayals of digital media and their ability to promote participation, both in *The Third Wave* and in communications literature, and in the media during Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign. As a result, the researcher actually tended to be skeptical about new media and political participation. In the section describing limitations of the research, the researcher discusses any biases that she believes may have influenced the study.

### *3.6 Interview Participants and Sample*

#### *3.6i Interview Population*

The interview participants consisted of members of groups on Barack Obama’s website, my.barackobama.com. The “group” feature on my.barackobama.com was accessible only to those who joined the website; so the researcher joined the website in order to recruit participants. After logging in, members of the 2010 version of my.barackobama.com could see a sidebar and a series of links at the top of the page that displayed features such as “my groups” and “my neighborhood”. By clicking on “my groups”, a member of the site could see six different categories of groups listed under the



headings: campaigns, issues, national, interests, local, and people. It was also possible to search for groups according to keyword, zip code, or state, or by other categories such as size or creation date. Members of the site could choose to join any of these groups, or start a group of their own. After joining a group, members of the group could see a list of other members, and send and receive mass messages among the whole group. They could also send and accept requests for personal “friendships” with individual group members. Furthermore, group members could create and/or participate in online fundraising campaigns, as well as real-life events and volunteer campaigns with other members of their group. In other words, groups on my.barackobama.com facilitated a variety of interactions, both online and in the real world, bringing people together through interests and issues as well as through region and location.

### *3.6ii Participant Recruitment*

Interview subjects for this study were chosen through criterion sampling. Respondents were selected from groups on my.barackobama.com whose descriptions identified an interest in one of the significant election issues in the 2008 presidential campaign and/or the 2010 midterm election. “Significant election issues” were determined from two Gallup polls. The first Gallup poll, conducted between October 23-26, 2008, presented respondents with a list of election issues. The poll asked, “As I read each one, please tell me how important the candidates’ positions on that issue have been in influencing your vote for president – extremely important, very important, somewhat important, or not important?” (Saad, 2008). The second Gallup poll, conducted between August 27 and 30, 2010, similarly asked respondents, “How important will each of the following issues be for your vote to Congress this year?” (Jones, 2010). For each poll, the researcher ranked the

issues according to the percentage of respondents who had identified the issue as “extremely important.”

From these polls, the researcher created a list of “most important” election issues, with the “most important” 2010 election issues alternating with the “most important” 2008 election issues. The final list had 12 issues in total: the economy, jobs, federal budget deficit, corruption in government, terrorism, federal spending, energy/gas prices, healthcare, Iraq, immigration, taxes, and Afghanistan.

The researcher used the search tool on my.barackobama.com to find groups whose descriptions mentioned the election issues on the list. The groups were then ranked according to the number of members in each group, in order of descending size. Some election issues were discussed by many groups with many members, while other issues were discussed by few groups with fewer members. For example, health care appeared to be a very popular issue: in January 2011, there were 10 healthcare-related groups with over 100 members each, as well as many smaller groups. On the other hand, the issue of terrorism was discussed by only one group with 93 members.

The researcher joined the largest groups on each election issue and sent a recruitment e-mail to all members of each group, using the group e-mail address provided on my.barackobama.com. If the researcher received responses from multiple groups on a single issue, the researcher selected the first respondent from each of the three largest groups on that particular issue. The researcher selected a maximum of three respondents from each election issue, until there was a list of twelve potential interview participants. Because the researcher had a list of twelve election issues, but selected as many as three respondents from

each issue, the list of respondents did not include representatives from a group for every election issue on the list.

Consent forms were then e-mailed to the potential interview respondents. When participants responded with their statements of informed consent, the interview questions were e-mailed to them. The interview questions were typed in the body of the e-mail and also attached as a document. Participants were told that they should spend 30-45 minutes replying to the interview questions, and were asked to respond to the questions within a week. After a week, a reminder e-mail was sent to participants who had not yet submitted their responses.

Some potential participants did not reply with their statement of informed consent, and a few participants did not complete the interview questions or did not complete them on time. As a result, the researcher returned to the list of group members to recruit more participants. In the end, the researcher received 15 statements of consent and 13 interview responses. The interview respondents came from the following groups: 3 respondents from groups that discussed the economy; 2 respondents from groups that discussed jobs; 3 respondents from groups that discussed energy; 3 respondents from groups that discussed healthcare; and 2 respondents from groups that discussed immigration.

### *3.7 Interview Data Collection*

The interviews consisted of eleven open-ended interview questions that were e-mailed to potential respondents between January 25, 2011, and February 23, 2011 (see Appendix C). The researcher initially planned to conduct twelve e-mail interviews, but because some participants who had provided consent (see Appendix A) did not respond to

the e-mail questions, several additional participants were contacted. As a result, thirteen e-mail responses were received between January 25, 2011, and February 27, 2011. One e-mail response was mostly incomplete and was discarded, leaving the researcher with twelve e-mail responses to study.

After completing a review of the literature, the researcher realized that the interview questions had not addressed one of the main aspects of participatory democracy: the topic of community. The researcher's initial questions about political discussion had also failed to illuminate how the website promoted political discussion, since the questions focused on the respondents' political discussions with family and friends. As a result, on June 3, 2011, the researcher e-mailed all the interview participants two follow-up questions about the ability of my.barackobama.com to promote community and political discussion (see Appendix D). Seven respondents replied to the follow-up questions, between June 4 and June 14, 2011.

### *3.8 Content Analysis Sample*

Krippendorff (2004) suggests that both quantitative and qualitative content analysis involves several steps, including unitizing, sampling, recording, reducing, inferring, and narrating (p. 86-87). The first step, unitizing, includes both sampling units and recording/coding units. According to Krippendorff (2004), sampling units are "units that are distinguished for selective inclusion in an analysis" (p. 98). For this study, the sampling units consisted of posts on my.barackobama.com, written by Obama's campaign staff and volunteers. The sampled posts were drawn from the entire population of posts, which consisted of all entries on my.barackobama.com from the launch date of the 2012 campaign website (April 4, 2011) to the date the sample was drawn (July 23, 2011).

The researcher used a systematic sampling strategy, which involves selecting units from a population at fixed intervals (Krippendorff, 2004). Systematic sampling “is favored when texts stem from regularly appearing publications, newspapers, television series, interpersonal interaction sequences, or other repetitive or continuous events” (p. 115). Since Obama campaign staff and volunteers posted daily updates on my.barackobama.com, the website’s text fell into the category of “repetitive or continuous events.”

In the last week of July, 2011, the researcher drew a sample of posts from my.barackobama.com. Between April 4, 2011 and July 23, 2011, the Obama campaign staff had posted a total of 320 entries on the website. There were exactly 10 posts on each web page of my.barackobama.com, and the researcher sampled every 5<sup>th</sup> post, sampling two posts from each web page. To ensure a rich qualitative analysis, the researcher drew a total sample of 75 posts. The sampled entries were posted between April 4, 2011 and July 22, 2011.

### *3.9 Interview Data Analysis*

Interview data analysis followed the case study data analysis procedures recommended by Creswell (2007). Creswell (2007) suggests that case study researchers should first read through their data and make initial codes, and then use categorical aggregation to establish themes (p. 157). Qualitative researchers can also use qualitative computer programs to analyze their data; but the researcher chose not to use these programs, because the body of data was not extensive and some of the features of qualitative analysis programs (such as the “ability of the program to input quantitative data; and its support for multiple researchers and merging different databases” (Creswell, 2007, p. 173)) were not

necessary for this research. Instead, the researcher used the functions in Microsoft Word to code and categorize data.

After receiving all the interview responses and follow-up responses, the researcher cut and pasted the e-mail transcripts into Microsoft Word documents and reformatted the transcripts to standardize them. The researcher then read through the transcripts, before reading through the transcripts a second time and applying initial codes to the data. The data was coded sentence by sentence, since each sentence in the interview transcripts generally represented a separate answer to a question or an elaboration upon a previous answer. The researcher used the comment function in Microsoft Word to label each sentence with a code, which was written in the “comment bubble” next to the coded sentence. Some codes were *in vivo* codes, labels based on the exact words used by the participants (Creswell, 2007), such as “Supported Obama”. Other codes were an attempt to summarize general themes expressed by several different participants. For example, the sentence, “I really don’t believe the government takes into account any opinion that is not bought” and the sentence, “It was clear that information was not of interest to them, and that offering it was a futile gesture,” were both coded under the label: “Administration does not listen to people.”

Ultimately, 60 initial codes of information were created from the interview database. Creswell (2007) recommends 25-30 initial codes, and suggests that 100-200 codes are too many. Because the interview questions covered such a wide range of topics (community, deliberation, and other forms of political engagement), it was difficult to limit the number of codes to the recommended number; however, the researcher still attempted to keep the number of codes within a manageable limit.

After creating codes, Creswell (2007) suggests that the researcher should “use categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns” (p. 156). To aggregate the codes, the researcher listed all the interview codes in a separate Microsoft Word document. The researcher carefully reviewed the codes to identify common themes among them, and then used the Microsoft Word “highlight” function to highlight the codes in different colours according to themes. For example, the codes, “Wanted to discuss political issues” and “Wanted to counter criticism of Obama” were highlighted in the same colour to show that they shared the theme, “Desire to participate in politics outside of voting.”

Creswell (2007) suggests creating “five to seven general themes” from the data (p. 153). The researcher found that five themes worked best to summarize the data: “Previous political participation”; “Support for Obama”; Website’s influence on political participation”; “Feelings about democratic participation”; and “Desire to participate in politics”. Creswell notes that themes can be divided into subthemes and sub-subthemes. In this case, the researcher gave each of the themes two or three subthemes, and in one case, the researcher also created several sub-subthemes. These themes and subthemes will be explored further in the following chapter, the “Findings” section.

### *3.10 Content Analysis Recording and Reducing*

#### *3.10i Content Analysis Recording*

Krippendorff (2004) describes recording/coding as the next step in a content analysis, after sampling. He explains: “recording takes place when observers, readers, or analysts interpret what they see, read, or find and then state their experiences in the formal terms of an analysis” (p. 126). For a qualitative or interpretative content analysis, Krippendorff

suggests that the researcher may start by exploring “apparent intertextualities: quotes, references, overlaps, rearticulations, elaborations, sequential orderings” (p. 341).

Krippendorff also explains that “recording units” “are units that are distinguished for separate description, transcription, recording, or coding” (p. 99). For the content analysis of my.barackobama.com, the researcher chose to use sentences as recording units, analyzing the data sentence by sentence. As in the interview data analysis, the researcher created various codes to describe each sentence.

To perform the content analysis, the researcher first copied every 5<sup>th</sup> post on the my.barackobama.com 2012 campaign blog into a Microsoft Word document. The researcher printed out the copied material, and read through each post, jotting down notes and suggestions for codes in the margins. Then the researcher returned to the Microsoft Word document. As with the interview coding, the researcher used the Microsoft Word comment bubbles to label each sentence with a code.

Some codes described the apparent purpose of the sentence, such as “encouragement to participate in campaign”, or “encouragement to share links,” or “reasons to support Obama,” themes that were often rearticulated on the website. Other codes summarized the content of the sentence, such as “description of Obama’s activities”, or “announcement about website changes”. Some codes noted the subject of the sentence: for example, general announcements or descriptions of campaign events were coded under labels like “Day of Action” or “Grassroots planning sessions.” Other sentences appeared to perform a mostly rhetorical function, since they were rearticulated (with small differences) throughout the blog. These sentences were coded with *in vivo* codes such as, “Campaign belongs to



people”, “campaign wants to hear from you,” “ordinary people have power,” or “people are donating.” Finally, some sentences linked to material outside the website, and were given codes such as, “Link to campaign Facebook” or “link to campaign Twitter.”

Some sentences contained material that originated from an author other than the main 2012 campaign bloggers. These sentences included text from Obama’s speeches, quotes from campaign volunteers, stories from campaign field directors, and tweets from a state campaign or individual supporter’s Twitter feed. These sentences were coded with prefixes such as “text from Obama speech,” “quote from supporter,” “story from campaign”, or “Tweet from campaign Twitter.” The sentences were then given one of the codes listed in the previous paragraph, so that the code might read: “quote from supporter: campaign belongs to people,” or “story from campaign: people are donating.”

### *3.10ii Content Analysis Reducing and Summarizing*

After recording the data, Krippendorff (2004) suggests that the researcher should reduce the data for analysis. In qualitative research, this means “a reading of texts for the purpose of summarizing what the texts collectively mean to the analyst, what they denote, connote, or suggest, or how they are or could be used as a whole” (p. 341).

After reading through the coded sentences, the researcher created seven categories for the codes. As with the interview coding, the researcher used the Microsoft Word “highlight” function to highlight the codes according to different themes. These themes were: “stories and quotes from supporters,” “stories and quotes from campaign,” “encouragement to participate,” “motivational rhetoric,” “information about campaign activities and website,”

“news about Obama and the government,” and “reasons to support Obama.” The researcher will explore these categories further in the “Findings” section.

### *3.11 Trustworthiness*

#### *3.11i Triangulation*

One of the ways case study research can validate findings is through triangulation, or the use of multiple sources of evidence. This case study used two sources of information, in-depth interviews and a content analysis of the website. In addition, the case study has a detailed theoretical background, which adds yet another source of evidence to the case study.

According to Lindlof and Taylor, if “data from two or more methods seem to converge on a common explanation, the biases of the individual methods are thought to ‘cancel out’ and validation of the claim is enhanced” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In the next chapter, the data from the interviews will be compared and contrasted with the data from the content analysis. Together, these two different sources of data strengthen the research study and help to increase its validity.

#### *3.11ii Research Notes and Records*

The in-depth interviews were conducted by e-mail, providing a written transcript of each interview which was sent back to each respondent for verification and additional feedback. This member-check system provided another method of validating the research. Also, the researcher noted her opinions and observations before, and during, the process of coding data from the in-depth interviews and the website. By taking note of details throughout the research process, the researcher was less likely to forget information over

time; and she could also draw upon a rich store of observations when analyzing the data.

The researcher's note-taking helped to ensure a more credible analysis.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

### 4.1 Interview Findings

The researcher coded 60 initial themes from the interview data, which were then grouped into five categories, with two or three subcategories each. These were as follows: 1) previous political participation; 2) support for Obama; 3) website's influence on participatory democracy; 4) feelings about democratic participation; and 5) desire to participate in politics. The categories will be introduced here in the order in which they tended to emerge in the interview questions. These questions were arranged to elicit a chronological narrative of the respondents' experiences with political participation, beginning with their previous political participation, then exploring their experiences with the website, and finally examining their current feelings about political participation. The categories will be presented here in the same chronological order.

The first category is *previous political participation*. This category covers the answers to the interview question, "Would you say you participated in politics in any way before joining the group?" This category was divided into two subcategories: "was already engaged in political participation beyond voting" and "was politically disengaged."

The second category is *support for Obama*. The researcher found that when discussing their political participation, many of the respondents mentioned their support for Obama. References to Barack Obama were so frequent throughout the interviews that the researcher created a separate category for descriptions of support for Obama. This category is divided into three subcategories: "supported Obama", "volunteered for Obama", and "current level of support for Obama."

The third category is *website's influence on participatory democracy*. This category addresses respondents' experiences with the website, and is divided into two subcategories and five sub-subcategories. "Website influenced participatory democracy" and "website did not influence participatory democracy" are the two subcategories. The subcategories are further divided into four sub-subcategories each, to describe specific aspects of political participation. These sub-subcategories are: intellectual development; political participation outside of voting; community; and debate and discussion.

Next is the category, *feelings about democratic participation*. This category has two subcategories: "has faith in democratic participation" and "disillusioned about democratic participation." The fifth and final category is *desire to participate in politics*. This category is divided into two subcategories: "desire to contribute ideas," and "desire for administration to listen to people."

### **Category A: Previous Political Participation**

The first category explores the subject of previous political participation among the interview respondents. Since digital democracy is expected to promote greater political participation among disengaged citizens, the researcher wanted to find out whether members of my.barackobama.com had participated in politics outside of voting before joining the website.

The first subcategory is "was already engaged in political participation beyond voting." Out of the twelve respondents, nine respondents said that they had participated in politics outside of voting before joining my.barackobama.com. Many of the respondents mentioned an extensive history of political participation, including working for political

parties or campaigns, lobbying and attending rallies, and keeping up-to-date on political issues. One respondent described a 40-year history of political involvement that included working on political campaigns, holding various Democratic Party offices, and serving on the boards of local governments. The same respondent was also politically well-informed: “I have a degree in Political Science and consider myself well read. I read 4 newspapers, 2 news magazines and follow all three news networks daily” (Interviewee 1 excerpt). Another respondent described a long history of political activism: “In my youth I was fairly activist, doing peace and civil rights marches as a child and environmental publicity events and lobbying later” (Interviewee 2 excerpt). Overall, nine respondents wrote twenty-two sentences that were coded as “was already engaged in political participation beyond voting”, suggesting an extensive history of political involvement among most of the respondents.

By contrast, the second subcategory is “was politically disengaged before joining website.” Three respondents said that they had not participated in politics outside of voting until they joined my.barackobama.com. Each of the respondents gave a different reason for their lack of political participation. Two respondents had been skeptical that ordinary citizens could influence politics, while a third respondent admitted to being politically apathetic: “I suppose I was lazy and wasn’t unhappy enough with our current government to change it” (Interviewee 5 excerpt).

### **Category B: Support for Obama**

The second category is “support for Obama.” While the researcher wanted to explore the influence of digital media and my.barackobama.com on participatory democracy, she found that she could not ignore the role of Obama himself. Several respondents suggested

that their support for Obama influenced not only their decisions to join the website, but also their level of political engagement. This category of “support for Obama” has three subcategories: “supported Obama”, “volunteered for Obama”, “current level of support for Obama.”

The first subcategory is “supported Obama.” Several respondents indicated that they supported Barack Obama as a presidential candidate for various reasons, and that this support prompted them to join the website. One respondent wrote: “I’d read both of his books and believed he would be the best President our country has had in my lifetime” (Interviewee 5 excerpt). Other respondents used less superlative language, but still indicated support for Obama: “I had seen Senator Obama speak in Seattle...and was impressed by his political gifts and his willingness to speak out against the latest War” (Interviewee 11 excerpt).

Some respondents had believed that by joining the website, they could either help Obama get elected or display their support for Obama in some way. One respondent joined the website because “I was interested in becoming part of the process of having Obama get elected and how the whole internet campaign worked” (Interviewee 7 excerpt). Another respondent lived in Europe and joined my.barackobama.com as a means of showing his support for Obama, in lieu of voting for him.

The second subcategory is “volunteered for Obama.” Several respondents indicated that they had not only supported Obama, but had also volunteered during the 2008 election campaign. Respondents described volunteering for Organizing for America, making phone calls, and participating in political events. One respondent had been politically disengaged,

but during Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, the respondent "became very actively involved, starting several groups, organizing events, making phone calls and [becoming] a leader in the community for the campaign" (Interviewee 5 excerpt).

While several respondents indicated that they had supported and/or volunteered for Obama during the 2008 campaign, respondents also mentioned their current feelings about Obama. The third subcategory in this section is "current levels of support for Obama."

While eleven out of twelve respondents said that they had supported Obama and/or volunteered for his campaign in the past, only one respondent described support for Obama in the present tense; and even this respondent qualified his support with complaints about the website and the Obama administration, which will be examined further in another part of this Findings section. This respondent said, "My support for Obama remains. But if the Democratic party has zero interest in listening to those who work hard to support Obama on this website, I will probably...leave this website" (Interviewee 3 excerpt).

Two other respondents also mentioned their current feelings about Obama, and in each case, these feelings involved disappointment with Obama. One respondent wrote, "Since President Obama has shown nothing but contempt for the people who elected him and violated so many campaign promises, my attitude toward the U.S. government has deteriorated considerably since joining the website" (Interviewee 12 excerpt). This latter statement demonstrates that the respondents' level of support for Obama influenced their feelings towards the Obama administration (the U.S. government). Throughout the interviews, the respondents' references to Obama demonstrated that the relationship between citizens and political websites is not only a two-way relationship, but is also influenced by a third factor: the citizens' feelings about the political candidate.



### **Category C: Website's Influence on Participatory Democracy**

The next category is “website’s influence on participatory democracy.” Since the literature review described five main aspects of participatory democracy; the interview questions were designed to address each of these aspects. The category “previous political participation” explored the first characteristic of participatory democracy, a belief that modern democracy is experiencing a crisis of apathy and declining participation. This category encompassed questions about previous political interest and engagement. The other four characteristics of participatory democracy—intellectual development, political participation outside of voting, community, and political discussion—are examined here as sub-subcategories under the two subcategories: “website encouraged participatory democracy” and “website did not encourage participatory democracy.”

The first subcategory, “website encouraged participatory democracy,” describes the various ways that my.barackobama.com developed the characteristics of participatory democracy. Theorists of digital democracy believe that political websites can make citizens more well-informed; and several interview respondents stated that my.barackobama.com had, indeed, increased their level of political knowledge. The first sub-subcategory therefore, is “website promoted intellectual development.”

Six out of twelve respondents suggested that they had gained political knowledge from using the website. One respondent, who was a member of a group devoted to energy policy, wrote that he had learned more about energy policy from the group. Other respondents mentioned that they had gained general political knowledge from being members of my.barackobama.com. One respondent wrote: “I became more aware of

process, ie. how legislation moves through Congress” (Interviewee 6 excerpt), while another respondent wrote, “I have learned more details about the political process in America and the American people in general” (Interviewee 13 excerpt).

When asked why they believed the website had increased their level of political knowledge, respondents cited two main reasons. The first reason was that the website itself was informative. One respondent described the website as a thorough source of political information: “The website was filled with information on every issue and cited original sources for that information” (Interviewee 5 excerpt).

Secondly, respondents explained that their membership in groups on the website, and their experiences volunteering for the campaign, had prompted political discussions with others. Through these discussions, respondents had gained access to different perspectives. One person wrote, “Access to differing personal views has broadened my outlook” (Interviewee 1 excerpt), while another respondent explained, “My understanding of how American people look at various issues has increased” (Interviewee 3 excerpt). Therefore, through browsing the website, joining groups on various issues, and volunteering with the campaign, members of the website felt that they became more knowledgeable about politics.

The second sub-subcategory under “website encouraged participatory democracy” is “website encouraged political participation outside of voting.” Out of the twelve respondents, seven respondents indicated that the website had prompted some kind of political participation outside of voting. These respondents said that since joining the website, they had been involved in a variety of political activities, including lobbying, protests, volunteering and donating money. One respondent wrote, “During the health care

reform movement efforts, I literally stalked my Congressman, encouraging him to consider a Single Payer solution...I was involved in several protests and even was arrested in the effort to have the viewpoint considered (Interviewee 6 excerpt).”

Three respondents mentioned some aspect of self-organizing as one way that the website encouraged participation. One respondent explained, “The feature to form groups and create events are most empowering and easy to use” (Interviewee 5 excerpt) while another respondent wrote that the most outstanding feature of the website was the “personal fund raising feature” (Interviewee 10 excerpt).

Several respondents indicated that the website had prompted one type of political participation in particular: the tendency to communicate opinions to government. These respondents stated that since joining the website, they were more likely to contact their senators or congressmen to express opinions about legislation. One respondent summed up how the website changed people’s feelings about expressing their opinions to government: “It woke up the populace to the reality that one can be in their home and voice an opinion that will be heard. Individuals now think in terms of ‘let me see what my congressman or senator is doing so let me go to the website’ ” (Interviewee 9 excerpt). In various ways, therefore, respondents indicated that my.barackobama.com had encouraged them to participate in politics outside voting.

Besides political participation outside voting, and besides intellectual development, theories of participatory democracy emphasize the importance of community. Therefore, the third sub-subcategory of “website encouraged participatory democracy” is “website promoted community.”

The questions about community were asked as a set of follow-up questions to the interview. Seven out of the twelve respondents replied to the follow-up questions; and out of these seven people, three indicated that the website had created community in some way. Two other people suggested in other parts of the interview that the website had promoted community to some extent.

Three respondents explained that the website gave them a way to connect to other Obama supporters and like-minded people. Two of these people mentioned feeling “isolated” before joining the website. One of these people explained, “What encouraged me was that I always felt somewhat isolated in my political views...and the website connected me with like-minded individuals” (Interviewee 6 excerpt).

The follow-up questions about community asked people if the website had created offline or online community, or both. Out of the seven people who responded to the follow-up questions, two people said that the website had only created online community, while one respondent said, “Both. Because while I may have initially connected with these folks online, I eventually met most of them at house parties” (Interviewee 5 excerpt). The website thus created community for some of the respondents, but not the majority of respondents. Where the website created community, it tended to be an online community that connected like-minded people, rather than an offline community.

The fourth and final sub-subcategory for “website encouraged participatory democracy” is “website encouraged political discussion.” Like the questions about community, questions about political discussion were added in the follow-up interview questions. Out of the seven people who replied to the follow-up questions, only one

indicated in the follow-up questions that the website had promoted political discussion. Two other respondents mentioned political discussion elsewhere in the interview. Altogether, three different respondents mentioned that they were more likely to discuss politics after joining the website.

Those who said that the website had promoted political discussion mentioned that they were more likely to participate in political discussions with their peers. One respondent explained, “I have become more vocal about politics among family and friends, not necessarily in a confrontational way, but in the effort to inform and persuade others into action towards getting their voices heard” (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Since the 2008 version of my.barackobama.com did not have any forum for political discussion, it is not surprising that only a few people suggested that the website had encouraged political discussion. The limited role of political discussion on my.barackobama.com will be explored further later in this Findings section.

The second subcategory under “Website’s influence on participatory democracy” is “Website did not encourage participatory democracy.” The first sub-subcategory again discusses intellectual development: “website did not promote intellectual development.” Out of twelve respondents, five respondents said that their level of political knowledge had not changed since joining my.barackobama.com.

For the question about whether their level of knowledge had changed since joining the website, respondents were only asked to elaborate on their answers if their level of knowledge had changed (they were asked “If so, why?”). As a result, most respondents simply answered “no” to the question, without elaborating. One respondent did explain,

“No, I always stay informed. I do not depend on one medium only, one must extend one’s horizon and the use of media on many levels” (Interviewee 13 excerpt).

The next sub-subcategory is “website did not encourage political participation outside of voting.” Five out of twelve respondents indicated that the website had not prompted political participation outside of voting. If there had been no change in their political participation since joining the website, respondents were not asked to elaborate. One respondent did elaborate, describing a negative change in political participation. This person wrote, “I have stopped being [politically] active since June 2010” (Interviewee 7 excerpt). When asked for the reasons for the change, the respondent wrote, “Mostly feeling like the democratic leaders are not doing as much to move things forward for the middle class—I am burned-out” (Interviewee 7 excerpt). Disappointment with democratic participation in general, and the Obama administration specifically, will be addressed in more detail under the category, “Feelings about democratic participation.”

One aspect of non-electoral political participation is communicating opinions to government. On this topic, two respondents said there had been no change in their tendency to communicate opinions to government, because they had always felt able to contribute opinions to government officials. One respondent wrote, “I could’ve sworn I was living in America—since...I arrived here my understanding was that we always expressed our voices” (Interviewee 9 excerpt). One respondent, however, described a negative change in communicating opinions to government. This person explained, “I always try to communicate directly through e-mails and web contact forms. But, I’ve never received a serious reply from a real person...Frankly, I do it less now since again, I’ve not seen it have

any impact on anything” (Interviewee 4 excerpt). Once again, the idea that the administration was unresponsive will be addressed later in the Findings section.

The third sub-subcategory of “website did not encourage participatory democracy” is “website did not promote community.” Six out of the seven respondents to the follow-up questions suggested that overall, the website had not created community, although two people suggested that the website had created community initially.

Respondents who elaborated on their answers offered two reasons for why the website had not created community. Firstly, some respondents said that instead of embracing people with different views, the website was devoted to campaign spin, which prevented a real sense of community. One person explained in detail:

Part of the Obama phenomenon was that...it was easy to feel that there was a broad group of people united in supporting “someone who is not Bush” and a fundamental set of American values that had been violated...Unfortunately, the relatively heavy-handed tactics of the site masters undercut the ability to build on that. Rather than feeling like one was part of a concerned community unleashed and involved to try to find the path back to the America we loved, we quickly became subjected to the agenda of political spin. (Interviewee 2 excerpt)

Another respondent wrote, “I do not feel I was part of the community because I did not talk the ‘party line.’...Although I was kept up to date about events, no one expressed an interest in discussing any ideas with me that were not in line with ‘the agenda’ ” (Interviewee 6 excerpt).

Another reason the website did not create community, according to two respondents, was that it promoted online community but failed to develop offline, face-to-face contact. One respondent explained, “For me being part of a community involves communication and contact, and I personally prefer physical contact and a vis-à-vis conversation over “impersonal” internet connections” (Interviewee 13 excerpt). Respondents’ feelings towards community on the website were, therefore, often mixed. Those who felt that the website created community initially were sometimes later disappointed by its adherence to campaign talking points; while those who felt that the website created online community were sometimes disappointed by the lack of opportunities for face-to-face contact.

The fourth and final sub-subcategory of “website did not encourage participatory democracy” is ‘website did not encourage political discussion.’ Again, questions about political discussion were found in the follow-up questions. Out of seven respondents to the follow-up questions, five people said that the website did not promote political discussion.

Most respondents simply wrote that the website did not change their tendency to discuss political issues one way or another. One of the respondents, however, wrote a more detailed explanation of why the website had not promoted political discussion, arguing that the website did not provide a discussion forum that fit the needs of the American people: “There is not, in short, a real forum for grown-up conversations that would harness the broad knowledge and imagination of the American people to address the important issues before us...I still think there is a broad feeling that people want such a thing...But, this forum didn’t fit the bill” (Interviewee 2 excerpt).



It is understandable that most people felt that the website had not prompted political discussion, since the site did not actually have a discussion forum at all. The only opportunities to discuss political issues would have been through joining the different groups on the website, which allowed e-mail discussions.

#### **Category D: Feelings about Political Participation**

Next is the category, *feelings about democratic participation*. This category encompasses all the answers that described respondents' current feelings about democratic participation. It has two subcategories: "has faith in democratic participation" and "disillusioned about democratic participation."

Out of 104 coded sentences that described respondents' feelings about democratic participation, only 5 sentences described the idea of having faith in democracy. Just two respondents suggested that they currently had faith in democracy. Both respondents mentioned that since joining the website, they felt that the government was more likely to consider their opinions. One of these respondents wrote, "The way Obama was elected gave the impression that I can be heard" (Interviewee 10 excerpt) and added that since joining my.barackobama.com, "I feel like I am part of [something] huge, something way bigger than me" (Interviewee 2 excerpt).

On the other hand, many more respondents suggested that they were now "disillusioned about democratic participation." This category includes complaints about the website, complaints about the Obama administration and descriptions of disillusionment with democratic participation in general.

Altogether, seven respondents mentioned that they were disappointed with my.barackobama.com. By far, the most common complaint about the website was that it existed for campaign spin, rather than as a tool for democratic participation. Fifteen sentences in the interviews were coded as “website exists for campaign spin”. Respondents suggested that the Obama campaign asked for participation, but was really only interested in sending its own messages. The interview questions noted: “On my.barackobama.com, there are quotes such as “nothing is more powerful than your voice in your community” and “now, in this crucial time, our voice once again has extraordinary power. What does the concept of expressing your voice mean to you?” One person wrote in response: “I now see them as meaning that they want me to spin for them; that is, to tell everyone I know how wonderfully the administration is doing” (Interviewee 11 excerpt). Respondents especially mentioned the role of campaign spin in discussions conducted in groups on the website. They felt that when they expressed opinions that did not toe the “party line”, their ideas were rejected. One respondent wrote, “I was chastised for even suggesting that we discuss ideas for how the hoped-for new Administration might address the key issues of the day and informed that the intent of the groups was to spread the word about the campaign’s proposals and to speak in favor of them” (Interviewee 2 excerpt).

Respondents also suggested that my.barackobama.com was designed mainly to encourage donations, rather than other types of political participation. These respondents often argued that the website was manipulative, promoting opportunities for participation as a ploy to attract donations. One respondent wrote that the website “is a fundraising vehicle and a charade...we were welcome to contribute cash to this particular political organization, but we were not being invited to engage in the beginnings of a restorative social revolution”

(Interviewee 2 excerpt). Other respondents also described the website as a type of charade: one described the website as a “very manipulative venture” designed to raise money and “fool people into believing Obama was connecting to them on a deeper level” (Interviewee 6 excerpt).

The interview respondents also noted a few other reasons for dissatisfaction with the website. One respondent noted that he was frustrated by the website because of the “trolls” and people who attacked Obama, and he argued that most people had left the website because of these antagonistic visitors. Another respondent explained that the website tended to encourage centralized power, rather than the creation of a genuine grassroots movement: “It’s designed to draw all energy and power to the center; what I would like to see it do is actually enable the building of a movement that was not centred on a single person or administration” (Interviewee 11 excerpt).

Four respondents suggested that because of their disappointment with the website and/or the Obama administration, they had abandoned or might abandon the website. In explaining why they would abandon the website, they cited the website’s adherence to political spin and the administration’s lack of willingness to listen to the people. One respondent wrote, “I rarely visit the website any longer...The last time I used it was several days ago when Kathleen Sibelius held a teleconference. I felt like the whole conference was staged beforehand” (Interviewee 6 excerpt).

In fact, nine out of twelve respondents – three-quarters of the interview respondents— described a sense of disappointment with the Obama administration. The most common complaint about the Obama administration was that the administration did not

listen to the people. Altogether, twenty-four sentences in the interviews were coded as “administration does not listen to the people”. This code appeared more frequently than any other codes in the interviews. Seven out of the twelve respondents felt that the Obama administration did not listen to the people. In response to the question, “What does the concept of expressing your voice mean to you?”, one respondent wrote, “In the context of my.barackobama.com, it means wasting my time expressing my anger to someone who is not going to listen” (Interviewee 12 excerpt).

Respondents offered different explanations for why the administration was not listening to public opinion. Some people assumed the administration was not listening because they had never received a response when they communicated opinions to the administration, whether through my.barackobama.com or another means. Other respondents offered a more nuanced explanation for why the administration was ignoring their opinions. One respondent felt that the administration collected public opinion merely to “gauge opinion rather than consider opinion” (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Another respondent explained that the administration never seemed to implement any ideas offered by the people: “There are continuing features asking for input and ideas and putting on a participatory democracy show, but one NEVER sees any actual absorption of suggestions by anyone” (Interviewee 2 excerpt).

While the idea that the Obama administration did not listen to the people was by far the most common complaint about the administration, respondents also argued that the administration served economic interests and powerful people instead of the ordinary people. One respondent summed up the idea that the Obama administration failed to serve the people: “If they fought harder for the blue collar people I would be happy to support them...I

did not abandon [Obama], he abandoned his base” (Interviewee 7 excerpt). Respondents who suggested that the Obama administration did not serve the people often argued that the administration served economic interests instead. One respondent wrote, “My voice is not powerful and will not be unless I come up with hundreds of millions of dollars to spend to bribe officials” (Interviewee 12 excerpt). Other respondents did not single out economic powers, but suggested that the administration catered to anyone who held power. One respondent declared, “I also learned that the average citizen is not always treated with as much respect as lobbyists... Washington has become a sort of private club for elected and the lobbyists” (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Feelings of frustration, anger and disappointment ran through the respondents’ descriptions of the Obama administration. One respondent, who mentioned repeated requests for donations, wrote, “It feels like you are being scalped” and also felt “betrayed” by Obama and his government (Interviewee 7 excerpt).

Since respondents experienced such strong feelings of frustration and betrayal, it is not surprising that two people said they were disillusioned with political participation altogether since joining my.barackobama.com. One respondent wrote, “Getting close enough to the brute control of the campaign spin doctors was educational... I had wanted to believe that some outsider might come in to change that. I now believe that that is extremely unlikely” (Interviewee 2 excerpt). Another interview respondent, in answer to the same question, was “tired of the whole thing” and “frustrated and less willing to actively engage in any Obama campaign”, especially because of the administration’s lack of responsiveness to the middle class (Interviewee 7 excerpt).

As shown in this category, respondents who mentioned their current feelings about democratic participation were mostly frustrated and disappointed with the website and/or the

Obama administration. Nevertheless, some of the respondents still expressed a desire to participate in politics even after their disappointing experiences, as will be described in the next category.

### **Category E: Desire to Participate in Politics**

The final category is “desire to participate in politics.” This category is divided into two subcategories: “desire to contribute ideas” and “desire for administration to listen to people.” Several respondents wrote that they had joined my.barackobama.com because they wanted to express their ideas to the government and/or to other people. After joining the website, many respondents felt frustrated and disappointed with the website, the Obama administration, and democratic participation in general (as described in the previous category). Nevertheless, some of these respondents still demonstrated a continuing desire to express their political ideas, if the administration were only willing to listen.

The first subcategory is “desire to contribute ideas.” Two respondents said that they had joined my.barackobama.com because it would help ordinary people to participate in political decision-making. One respondent mentioned the concept of participatory democracy specifically: “The site offered the concept of participatory democracy, indicating that the Obama organization was interesting [sic] in harvesting the collective wisdom of the population” (Interviewee 2 excerpt). A second respondent did not mention participatory democracy by name, but described several characteristics of participatory democracy: “The website offered an alternative to apathy, an opportunity for the many to exert influence to oppose the undue influence of the few, and a chance to restore intelligence to collective decisions mediated poorly by the so-called free market” (Interviewee 11 excerpt). Three

respondents, including the first respondent quoted above, also said that they had joined the website specifically so that they could contribute ideas and opinions to the government. One respondent wrote, “I wanted to have an impact on policy at potentially a very high level” (Interviewee 4 excerpt).

Other respondents indicated that when they had joined the website, they had wanted to discuss political issues and/or share their ideas and opinions with other people. One respondent was particularly concerned with finding the best way to influence political discussions: “If you want to shift the debate, you have to hang out bits of knowledge where the blog leaders will find it...which will then start to nudge the conventional media” (Interviewee 2 excerpt).

Respondents who expressed a desire to share ideas with the government and with other people often felt strongly that they were well-informed on particular issues, and that they needed to share that knowledge and correct misinformation. One respondent wrote that when discussing politics with others, “I try to be respectful, stick to the facts and cite my most credible sources for that information. It is usually trying to dispel some bad information” (Interviewee 5 excerpt). Another respondent would go online to counter unfair statements about Obama with carefully researched facts.

As described under the previous category, respondents also wanted to share their facts and ideas with the government; but they often felt frustrated that the administration did not seem to listen. However, some of them were still willing to offer suggestions for how the administration could better respond to the people. These suggestions fall under the second subcategory, “Desire to be heard by administration.”

Three respondents suggested that they wished the administration would build a grassroots organization of citizens, using citizens' knowledge, instead of making all decisions from the top. One respondent articulated this idea quite clearly:

In the population, there is generally a group of about 10% that figures out what needs to be done about 20 years before everyone else gets there...If the Administration would listen to those voices, tap their demonstrable knowledge, and flow that knowledge back out to the general population, they could be successful. Sitting in their little closed White House spinning webs, they will fail. (Interviewee 2 excerpt)

Respondents particularly wanted the administration to work harder at soliciting contributions from the public. Fourteen sentences in the interviews were coded as "administration should ask for people's opinions." Respondents offered various suggestions for how the administration might receive. Two people raised the idea of a questionnaire. One respondent wrote, "I'd post specific survey questions...And let people vote...And, when the pres. gives a speech on it, he should say, he has a place where people can go to cast their vote on the issue" (Interviewee 4 excerpt). Respondents wanted the government to actively seek out their opinions, or at least make it easier for respondents to share their opinions with the government. One respondent who volunteered for the Obama campaign recommended that the website should have a "policy suggestion button" (Interviewee 5 excerpt), since constituents repeatedly called to ask for one.

Respondents also simply wished the administration would acknowledge that it had received their opinions and suggestions. Again, respondents offered recommendations for how the administration might acknowledge contributions: "The site should really reach out



to people who participate. Every day, they should say – so and so, had this great idea. Thanks for posting that” (Interviewee 4 excerpt). Another respondent wrote that the website should at least acknowledge that information had been received. Members of my.barackobama.com, therefore, felt frustrated with a seemingly unresponsive administration; but they were still hopeful that in the future, the administration might find a way to really listen to the people.

#### *4.2 Content Analysis Findings*

After conducting interviews with members of my.barackobama.com, the researcher also performed a content analysis of the website. This analysis took place in July 2011, after the 2008 campaign website had been completely remodeled and turned into the 2012 campaign website. Consequently, the researcher performed a content analysis on a site with a very different format from the one discussed in the interviews. The researcher will discuss the implications of this circumstance later in the Findings section.

As the 2012 campaign site, my.barackobama.com offered opportunities for visitors to enter their email address and become members of the website. The website also displayed links to events, groups, and fundraising and volunteering opportunities. The main written content on the website, however, was a series of blog-style posts, accompanied by the date of the post and the name of the poster. Often, the contributions were written by campaign staff; but sometimes the posts were written by volunteers and supporters, and sometimes the posts were quotes from Obama’s speeches or from the campaign Twitter feed.

The researcher drew a sample of these posts; then, as with the interview coding, the researcher coded each sentence according to different categories. These categories were:

“stories and quotes from supporters,” “stories and quotes from campaign,” “encouragement to participate,” “motivational rhetoric,” “information about campaign activities and website,” “news about Obama and the government,” and “reasons to support Obama.”

### **Category A: Stories and Quotes from Supporters**

More sentences fell under the category “stories and quotes from supporters” than any other category. This category encompasses quotes by summer organizers and other supporters, stories written by them, and Tweets from their Twitter feeds.

The stories and quotes by supporters sometimes simply expressed enthusiasm about volunteering. One post quoted a summer organizer who had just been accepted to the summer organizing program: “I feel like I won something...I’m overjoyed and elated to be part of the program.” One summer organizer apparently felt so passionately about volunteering, that this person told campaign staff: “I sold everything I own to afford to get here for this.”

Other quotes by supporters and volunteers explained why these people supported Obama. One respondent was inspired by the tone of Obama’s presidency and the way he gave her hope: “The tone of his presidency is a different one—it’s one I’ve been waiting for my whole life...knowing that he’s in charge of what’s happening gives me a little hope about where we’re going.” Other quotes cited more specific reasons for supporting Obama, such as education policy or what he could do for their home state. Quite a few quotes described why supporters were donating to the campaign. For example, the website displayed quotes by supporters who had participated in a donor matching campaign. One donor wrote, “My wife is battling cancer. Because of people like you and me pulling together, my wife will

never be denied health insurance once she beats this thing. Thank you for supporting progress. Thank you for helping President Obama continue his service to our country.”

Many other quotes seemed to argue that people should support Obama, because his campaign belonged to the people and ordinary people could make a difference. For instance, in a story about a volunteer, the volunteer was quoted as saying, “This is really the people’s campaign. Everyone has a fair shake and opportunity to shape this campaign.” Another post displayed a captured image of a discussion on the campaign’s Facebook site. Supporters were discussing the campaign’s first financial report. One supporter commented: “I saw on the news this morning this came from over 500,000 contributors and the average donation was \$69. He’s still the People’s President!” Other supporters on Facebook echoed this excitement that ordinary people could influence the campaign.

In addition to descriptions of excitement about the campaign and explanations of why they supported Obama, the quotes by supporters sometimes simply described successful campaign events. One supporter shared a story about her experiences as a summer organizer, describing a house party and telling how the guests bonded through sharing personal stories: “In my short experience so far as a summer organizer, exchanging personal stories has been one of my favorite parts. Last night I found myself in a basement bonding over the Recovery Act and the President’s achievements.” Therefore, when supporters were quoted about their experiences with the campaign, the quotes tended to describe rewarding or productive campaign activities.

### **Category B: Stories from Campaign**

The second category is “stories and quotes from campaign.” This category includes all the stories, updates, and quotes about the campaign posted throughout the website. There were three main types of stories from the campaign: stories from the campaign, stories about supporters and summer organizers, and Tweets from the campaign’s official Twitter feeds in different states. All of these types of stories about the campaign shared similar themes, which often echoed the ideas found in the “stories and quotes from supporters.”

Firstly, the stories from the campaign often suggested that everyone involved with the campaign was enthusiastic. One post described a special campaign event: “Everyone is excited by the campaign here in California. You could really feel the enthusiasm and the energy of folks at a special event with the President hosted by Jamie Foxx at Sony Studios.”

Secondly, stories from the campaign also emphasized that campaign activities were successful and that volunteers were productive. The post about the special campaign event continued: “It was a great night—over a thousand people signed up, not counting those who had already signed up online.” Other posts stated that volunteers were busy and were achieving results. A Tweet copied from a campaign Twitter feed stated, “Really proud of our new organizers. Great weekend. This group is unstoppable.” The stories about the campaign, therefore, emphasized not only the volunteers’ enthusiasm, but their productivity and the success of campaign events.

Like the “stories and quotes from supporters,” the stories from the campaign also described different reasons to get involved with the 2012 campaign. Sometimes, the stories mentioned reasons supporters were volunteering for Obama. For example, one story told of a summer organizer who

saw a need in her community. She noticed that her neighborhood was changing, and not for the better. People were so busy with their own lives that they didn't know one another anymore...Char knew she had to do something to keep her neighborhood a community. She didn't know how to get started, but she believed in the power of a single voice to make a difference.

Other stories from the campaign suggested that volunteering for the Obama campaign would be worthwhile, because the campaign staff wanted to listen to the people. One of the campaign's field directors described how the campaign staff was conducting "one-on-one" conversations with their supporters: "We're reaching out and building relationships with folks... across the country staff and volunteers are reaching out to supporters asking them to be part of the 2012 campaign." Statements like these offered further reasons for supporters to join the Obama campaign.

### **Category C: Encouragement to Participate**

After the stories by supporters and stories about the campaign, the third most common category in the content analysis was "encouragement to participate." Any sentence inviting visitors to participate in politics or in the campaign was coded as, "encouragement to participate."

A few of these sentences just encouraged electoral political participation by reminding respondents to vote in special Congressional elections. For example, one post told readers: "There are only a few hours left until the polls close in today's special election for New York's 26<sup>th</sup> Congressional District...If you're a NY-26 voter, find your polling place

and vote before the polls close at 9:00 p.m. ET.” The words “find your polling place” linked to polling information.

Mostly, however, the website encouraged visitors to participate in politics outside voting. Respondents were encouraged to volunteer for the campaign, to self-organize, to petition, to recruit voters, to communicate with other supporters, and to donate. For example, the first post on the upgraded 2012 website told visitors to “take a bit of time to explore the organizing resources here on the site. You can sign up to be a volunteer in your community, connect with other supporters, and find campaign events near you.” Some of the phrases in this post were hyperlinks to pages where visitors to the site could find events or connect with supporters. The website also encouraged non-electoral political participation by thanking voters for their contributions. For example, the site posted a special Father’s Day message from Michelle Obama, which concluded by thanking supporters for participating in the campaign.

Not only did the website encourage traditional forms of non-electoral participation, like volunteering and donating; but it also encouraged members to specifically participate in campaign events and to become actively engaged in activities on the website. Posts encouraged visitors to share links, leave and rate comments, share photos, and enter a draw for a dinner with Obama. For example, this post introduced the “Comment of the Day” feature: “As you’re reading through the comments, make sure you click the ‘like’ button to vote up those you and enjoy and appreciate. We’ll look at the most popular comments first in our search for one to feature.” Posts like this one emphasized the idea that the campaign valued supporters’ contributions and wanted to create new ways for supporters to share their ideas on the website.

### **Category D: Motivational Rhetoric**

The fourth category that emerged from the content analysis was “motivational rhetoric.” This category included many rhetorical statements that did not encourage supporters to make any specific contributions, but just emphasized certain characteristics of the campaign.

The most common type of rhetorical statement emphasized that ordinary people could play an important role in the campaign. Such statements included the ideas that the campaign belonged to the people, that the campaign and Obama himself needed the people, that the campaign wanted to hear from the people, and that ordinary people have power. Some of the rhetorical statements came from excerpts from Obama’s speeches, which were posted on the website. For example, one post included part of a speech that President Obama made to supporters in May: “I don’t want our campaign to only be hearing from pundits and lobbyists and political insiders...I want to be hearing from you...the same ordinary people who did extraordinary things the last time around.”

Another type of rhetorical statement used specific phrases to emphasize the ways that people were participating in the campaign. These statements were often paired with statements encouraging supporters to participate in the same way. For example, one early post on the website invited visitors to click on the words “I’m In”, to join the website and the campaign. The post read, “If you haven’t already, take a moment now to say, ‘I’m In’, and invite your friends to join you via email, Facebook, or Twitter.” A subsequent post stated, “Since the campaign launched this morning, tens of thousands of folks have signed up to say, ‘I’m in.’ ” These kinds of posts repeated phrases like “I’m In” to motivate people to

participate, by showing them ways they could get involved and by emphasizing the idea that other people were participating, too.

Finally, some rhetorical statements described characteristics of the campaign. For example, a common theme in the posts was that the campaign would start small and grow. This idea was reflected in statements like, “As the campaign gets off the ground, we want to start small—online and off—and develop something new in the coming weeks and months.” A later post expressed the same idea: “It’s a long journey that starts small and will build over time.” By repeating the idea of “starting small” and “growing” or “building”, the posts reiterated a key idea about the 2012 campaign.

### **Category E: Information about Website and Campaign Events**

Another category that emerged from the content analysis was “information about website and campaign events.” Some sentences on the website provided updates about changes to the website, while other sentences provided information about upcoming campaign events and activities.

Since the website had recently been upgraded to the 2012 campaign website, some posts, especially right after the upgrade, explained the changes to the site. This post clarified the website’s commenting policy: “We’ve updated our commenting policy. You can see the new version here...Maintaining an open commenting policy requires a commitment from you to abide by the site rules, and a commitment from us to enforce them when they’re broken.” This post included a hyperlink to the updated commenting policy. Other posts included hyperlinks to other pages related to the campaign, such as the online campaign merchandise store or the campaign Facebook page. Over time, other posts introduced new



features on the website, such as the “Comment of the Day” feature or the “Link Roundup” feature, which aggregated links to recent campaign news and other news stories.

Besides offering information about the website, some sentences provided specific information about campaign programs and events. These included one-on-one meetings between campaign staff and supporters; a grassroots fundraising campaign; grassroots planning sessions; and a draw to win a dinner with Obama. The following post combined information about the dinner with Obama with a new contest, the “President’s 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Challenge”:

Do you think you can bring 50 new people into this campaign for President Obama’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday on August 4<sup>th</sup>?...Once you start reaching out to people, we’ll help track your progress for you, invite you to a conference call to share tips and encouragement, and let you know as you reach milestones on the way to 50. When you reach your goal of 50 new people, we’ll enter your name into a drawing [sic] to join the President, his family, and other supporters at his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in Chicago next month.

Posts like these not only provided information about new campaign events and features, but promoted them at the same time, by offering rewards for participation.

### **Category F: News about Obama and the Government**

Some of the posts on the website were not directly about the campaign at all, but contained links to news stories about Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, or the government. Some posts also contained the text of Obama’s speeches or links to videos of these speeches.

The news stories about the U.S. government in general tended to involve significant, headline-making events such as the final flight of the Space Shuttle Endeavour. Like the flight of the space shuttle, news stories tended to involve broadly popular topics that were optimistic in tone. For example, despite a shaky American economy, the 2012 campaign site posted hopeful economic stories, such as this story in a “Link Roundup” from May: “A car rolls off the production line every minute at the GM plant in Lordstown, Ohio. CBS news takes a look at this remarkable recovery, speaking to autoworkers who were laid off 18 months ago and now have a job again.”

Like the news stories about the government, news stories about Obama often involved significant events such as an appearance on Oprah, the G8 conference, a state visit to the UK, or an announcement about the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Other stories, though, emphasized Obama’s humanitarian side and his ability to connect with ordinary people. For example, the “Link Roundup” from July 19<sup>th</sup> included hyperlinks to two stories that demonstrated Obama’s concern for ordinary people:

- President Obama announced [four new initiatives yesterday](#) to ensure a competitive American workforce by supporting the nation’s lowest-performing schools and investing in technology in the classroom.
- And finally, read the [President’s personal response](#) to a sixth-grader who wrote a letter about cuts to funding for his school.

The links to news stories about Michelle Obama also emphasized occasions when she showed concern for ordinary people, such as at a meeting with schoolgirls in England where she told the girls that they could fulfill their dreams, regardless of their backgrounds.

### **Category G: Reasons to Support Obama**

Finally, the website offered various reasons to support Obama. Perhaps surprisingly, fewer sentences were coded with this category than any other category. Out of more than 500 coded sentences, only 20 were placed in the category, “reasons to support Obama.” Some other sentences mentioned reasons to support Obama, but these had been coded as stories from the campaign or quotes from supporters, because the sentences seemed to primarily emphasize the campaign stories or the supporter’s thoughts. However, the website did include some posts that described reasons to support Obama, in more specific ways than rhetorical statements like “the campaign serves the people.”

Reasons to support Obama were often related to his economic plan and policies. For example, the website presented an infographic that portrayed President Obama’s energy plan and how it would protect citizens from increasing gas prices. Another post presented quotes from a speech by Obama, in which he outlined his fiscal plan: “This is my approach to reduce the deficit by \$4 trillion over the next twelve years. It’s an approach that achieves about \$2 trillion in spending cuts...And it achieves these goals while protecting the middle class, our commitment to seniors, and our investments in the future.”

Other reasons to support Obama included his plan for immigration reform, his policies in general, and a past history of support for Obama. In general, however, policy-related reasons to support Obama were few and far between on the website, unless they were found in quotes by supporters who supported specific policies.

#### *4.3 Advanced Analysis and Interpretations*

From the integration of the interview findings and the content analysis, several key findings emerged which helped answer this study's original research questions. From the interviews and content analysis, four key findings emerged as answers to the research questions. Firstly, the research found that my.barackobama.com generally developed political knowledge and encouraged non-electoral political participation; but secondly, the interviews showed that the website was not likely to promote political discussion or community. In addition, the content analysis echoed the interview findings by showing that Barack Obama's 2012 campaign site appeared to promote community, but was actually mainly focused on promoting campaign participation and informing citizens. Finally, the research findings revealed that a majority of respondents had grown disillusioned about democratic participation.

According to many of the interview respondents, my.barackobama.com increased their political knowledge and promoted political participation. Six out of twelve interview respondents suggested that their experiences with my.barackobama.com increased their levels of political knowledge, and seven out of twelve respondents said the website had encouraged political participation. In the interviews, one member of my.barackobama.com expressed enthusiasm about both the website's ability to provide information and its ability to promote political participation. This person wrote, "When I called someone on the phone for the campaign and they had a question about something that I didn't know right away, I could usually find the answer in mere moments on the website" (Interviewee 5 excerpt). The same respondent wrote that the website also promoted political participation: "I became very actively involved, starting several groups, organizing events...I continued on to travel to several other states volunteering and working for the campaign before returning home, and

became the Regional Field Director for the campaign in my home region” (Interviewee 5 excerpt).

The idea that the website provided political information echoes findings from other studies of campaign websites. Foot, Schneider and Dougherty (2007) suggest that internet campaigning involves four “web production practices”: informing, involving, connecting and mobilizing (p. 94). According to Foot et al., “informing” means that candidate websites provide information about the candidate, the issues and the campaign. Bimber and Davis (2003) found that political websites are often used as a source of information: in their study, the most common reason for repeat visits to a website was “to learn about issues” (p. 130). In a laboratory experiment measuring subjects’ political knowledge before and after they browsed candidate websites, Bimber and Davis also found that “19% of research subjects...increased their level of political knowledge by viewing candidate Web sites” (p. 131), while 57% of the subjects increased their knowledge after browsing state campaign sites. Clearly, my.barackobama.com is not unique among other campaign websites as a source of political information.

Scholars claim that another purpose of candidate campaign websites is to promote political participation. Bimber and Davis (2003) explain that “in a nutshell, the strategies of candidates can be described as taking the stream of interested supporters arriving at the Web site and providing the right menu of issues and ways of becoming involved to engage as many of them as possible” (p. 48). Foot et al. (2007) suggest that campaign websites accomplish these strategies through the “web production practices” of “involving” and “mobilizing.” “Involving” includes features like an “invitation to join the organization; e-mail list subscription; opportunity to sign up to volunteer; request for financial contributions;

and discussion forum” (p. 94). “Mobilizing” helps supporters advocate for the campaign by sending information to friends, printing and distributing brochures, or accessing promotional items online (p. 95). My.barackobama.com offered a variety of opportunities to become involved and mobilize, except for a discussion forum, the absence of which will be examined later in this section.

Studies have suggested that campaign websites are often successful at persuading visitors to become involved and to mobilize. From a survey following the 2004 and 2006 U.S. elections, Park and Perry (2009) concluded that use of campaign web sites influenced the likelihood that people would donate money, attend a political rally, solicit votes and send e-mails urging others to vote. The interview findings in this research study suggested that my.barackobama.com was effective at encouraging all these different types of political participation; and other studies have echoed this finding. For example, Panagopoulos (2009) notes the website’s success as a fundraising vehicle: “Twenty-eight million of the record-breaking \$32 million Senator Obama raised in January 2008 was raised online (M. Sifry 2008), with more than 85 percent of the money donated via MyBarackObama.com (Melber 2008).”

While the interviews with members of my.barackobama.com confirmed the idea that the website was successful at informing visitors and encouraging political involvement, the second key finding from the research was that my.barackobama.com was not so successful at encouraging community or political discussion. The 2008 version of my.barackobama.com did not have a discussion forum, although it did allow users to create blogs and join e-mail discussion groups. Members of the website also had the opportunity to contact the administration: after Barack Obama’s election as president, when the researcher first began

studying the site, a contact form on the website directed respondents to [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), the Obama administration's website. In addition, members of the website had the opportunity to build community with each other in e-mail groups, and during the campaign, they had opportunities to meet offline. Nevertheless, out of the seven respondents who answered the follow-up interview questions about political discussion and community, six people said that my.barackobama.com had not created community, and five people indicated that the website had not promoted political discussion.

Three respondents said that they had not felt part of a community because the website was too focused on campaign spin, and three respondents suggested that the website had promoted online but not offline community. One respondent wrote that other members of the group rejected her because she did not agree with the party line: "I was (still am) a huge proponent of Single Payer health insurance. The members of the group distanced themselves from that idea and me" (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Another respondent wrote, "For me being part of a community involves communication and contact, and I personally prefer physical contact and a vis-à-vis conversation over "impersonal" Internet connections" (Interviewee 13 excerpt).

Respondents also indicated that the website had not promoted political discussion among citizens and also had not helped citizens to communicate with the government. One respondent gave ambivalent responses that were somewhat typical of the other responses about political discussion: "The e-mail group was pretty much a disappointment. Not really much came of that" (Interviewee 4 excerpt). This respondent added, "I don't really think joining barackobama.com changed my participation in political discussions. I did that before and after joining the website. Maybe it developed it slightly" (Interviewee 4 excerpt).

Furthermore, respondents said that my.barackobama.com did not help them communicate their opinions to the government. One respondent wrote, “I must say I agree with this concept of being heard, yet I have reservations about the website and its responsiveness...I seriously doubted it was responding to opinion, but merely collecting them” (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Most interview respondents suggested that my.barackobama.com did not really promote interaction among citizens, or interaction between citizens and the campaign (or administration).

These findings are foreshadowed by other studies on campaign websites. Various studies, including Endres and Warnick (2004). Stromer-Galley (2000) found that candidate campaign websites rarely offer opportunities for human-to-human interaction, such as “electronic bulletin boards, chat forums, or e-mail addresses to the candidate” (Stromer-Galley, 2000, p. 122). According to Stromer-Galley (2000), campaigns believe human interactivity is burdensome to manage, it may lead to loss of control, and it may lead to a loss of ambiguity in campaign messages. In fact, the Institute for Politics Democracy and the Internet (IPDI) tells candidates to use caution when implementing user-to-user interactivity on their websites (Endres & Warnick, 2004, p. 325). Fear of risk may explain why my.barackobama.com did not include discussion forums.

While the lack of bulletin boards and chat forums might partly explain why the interview respondents felt that the website did not promote political discussion, members also complained that the website was controlled by campaign spin, which prevented the formation of community. This finding corroborates research by Janack (2006), who found that bloggers on Howard Dean’s campaign website “created a self-disciplining system on the campaign site that maintained control over the campaign’s message and muted the potential



for meaningful online political deliberation and citizen participation.” Because campaign sites by their nature are focused on the election or re-election of a candidate, the discussion on campaign websites often becomes a form of “persuasion” to support the candidate. Schneider and Foot (2002) connect the concept of political persuasion to Benjamin Barber’s idea of strong democracy: “When political talk is limited to persuasion, it serves what Barber (1984) describes as “thin” democracy; when political talk provides opportunities for individuals to set and control the agenda and express themselves without constraint, “strong” democracy is possible.” The interviews in this research study suggest that even when political talk did take place on my.barackobama.com, the discussion was often limited to “persuasion” instead of letting individuals “express themselves without constraint”. This reality may have curbed the potential for “strong” or “participatory” democracy on my.barackobama.com.

Campaign spin, however, was not the only reason members of my.barackobama.com felt the website did not promote community. Some members suggested that the website had promoted online community, but not offline community, or they felt that online community did not fit their definition of true community. Although members did have the opportunity to create events such as house parties and attend these events, not everyone took advantage of the opportunity to meet in person. Three out of the seven people who replied to the follow-up questions felt the website did not promote offline community. One person “was suspicious of the meet-ups aspect”, while two other people had not met anyone offline, but did not explain why. Further research might be necessary to determine why some respondents did not meet anyone offline. One of these respondents did express a preference for face-to-face interactions, and suggested that online community did not really fit the

definition of a “community”. The other two respondents indicated that they were ultimately even disappointed by the online community, because the online interactions were controlled by campaign spin and/or never really created a strong community.

A recent study by Cullen and Sommer (2010) suggests that online communities are often not as robust as offline communities. Cullen and Sommer surveyed people who were involved in both online and offline community groups, such as environmental or community action groups. They found that the online respondents had “less sense of cohesion and achievement” (p. 151), and appeared to get less personal fulfillment from their involvement” (p. 151). The offline group of respondents “indicated more positive motivation based on fulfillment, friendship, and their contribution to society” (p. 151), and was “more confident that their contributions to public debate will be acknowledged and taken account of” (p. 152). According to Cullen and Sommer, offline groups are much better at encouraging Robert Putnam’s (1995) concept of social capital, “the features of social organization...that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). Cullen and Sommer conclude:

The Internet does not appear to replace normal social intercourse and the interpersonal rewards that citizens gain from participation in civil society, but simply to add another communication channel. This is an important lesson for the government. Politicians and policy makers alike...would be well advised to resist the temptation to shift the majority of their communication, and especially their consultative processes online. (p.153)

Cullen and Sommer's warning is notable in light of the reality that campaign websites, like my.barackobama.com, are often expected to include consultative processes.

Campaign websites are expected to encourage consultation between citizens and the campaign because they can enable campaign-to-user and user-to-campaign interactivity (Endres & Warnick, 2004, p. 325). This kind of interactivity "includes any feature that enables campaigns and users to communicate with each other" such as links to volunteer and contribute, and opportunities to sign up for campaign newsletters (Endres & Warnick, 2004, p. 325). Endres and Warnick (2004) evaluated user-to-campaign interactivity on the basis of "responsiveness". Examples of a high degree of responsiveness, according to Endres and Warnick, included contact information for the campaign and opportunities to contact the campaign or candidate through online forms. Schneider and Foot (2002) suggest that these opportunities are a type of "political talk."

Members of my.barackobama.com, however, had access to many links allowing them to volunteer and contribute, and they even had opportunities to contact the Obama administration online; but most members did not feel that these opportunities constituted "responsiveness." In fact, the interview respondents often complained that the administration was unresponsive; one of the recurring themes in the interviews was that the "administration does not listen to the people." Website members felt that the administration did not listen to the people because members did not receive a response to their messages, and because the administration did not make policy changes that would show it took citizens' suggestions into account.

Researchers have noted that campaigns and presidential administrations may simply not have the resources to respond to the flood of responses they receive when they allow online contact forms (Owen & Davis, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Stromer-Galley (2000) interviewed Bob Dole's web creator and Bill Clinton's website overseer after the 1996 presidential election. Both men explained that the presidential candidates "had neither the staff nor the time to handle the potential bombardment of e-mail messages, which is why they chose not to put an e-mail address up at all...A lack of response to an e-mail message could be more damaging and alienating than not providing an e-mail address at all" (p. 131). The findings from the in-depth interviews in this research study seem to confirm that opinion, since respondents were upset when they communicated their opinions to the government but did not receive a response. The interviews suggest that political supporters see responsiveness as more than the opportunity to click on links and even more than the opportunity to communicate their opinions to government: they want the government to respond to them in tangible ways, using both actions and written words.

Overall, the in-depth interviews with members of my.barackobama.com suggested that the website promoted certain aspects of participatory democracy, such as informing and engaging citizens in political participation; but the website did not promote other aspects, like promoting political dialogue and building community. The interviews discussed the 2008 version of my.barackobama.com, but by the time the researcher performed a content analysis of the site, it had been remodeled and turned into the 2012 campaign site. The lapse in time between the interviews and the content analysis offered a unique opportunity for the researcher to learn whether the 2012 campaign website offered more potential for participatory democracy than the 2008 version of the website.

In fact, the findings from the content analysis turned out to be surprisingly similar to the in-depth interview findings. Although the 2012 version of my.barackobama.com appeared to mainly promote community, it actually primarily encouraged political participation, and secondly offered information. The majority of the content on my.barackobama.com was coded as “stories and quotes from supporters”, and “stories from campaign”, suggesting that the website promoted community and interaction between the campaign and citizens. The third and fourth most common codes on the website were “encouragement to participate” and “motivational rhetoric”, describing content that encouraged political participation. Finally, the rest of the posts were coded as “information about website and campaign events”, “news about Obama and the government”, and “reasons to support Obama”. All these types of posts provided political information. Because the most frequent posts on the website were stories and quotes, they gave the impression that the website mainly promoted discussion and interaction. Nevertheless, a second look at these posts shows that the content of these posts was often similar to the posts encouraging political participation and providing information.

For example, the website included several quotes from Obama supporters on Facebook. These quotes included these statements: “What’s more wonderful than the amount he’s raised so far is that most of the money comes from folks like us in smaller donations, which just goes to prove that big corporations and all their cash can’t buy everything they want. Hooray for us!” Another quote from the Facebook page declared: “President Obama 2012! Another 4 yrs, let’s get out and vote...i am loving this president.” At first glance, these quotes could be taken as a representative set of quotes from the campaign’s Facebook page. On a second glance, though, the quotes seem to perform a

similar function to many other posts on the website. The first quote mimics motivational rhetoric by suggesting that the campaign belongs to ordinary people; and the second quote encourages participation by urging supporters to vote.

Like the quotes on the website, the stories from the campaign initially appear to promote community and political dialogue, but they actually perform other functions. One story from the campaign told of “Jeanne”, a supporter in Pennsylvania. The story explained,

Jeanne voted for President Obama in 2008 because, as a young scientist studying cell biology, she wanted to see a change for the better in the way America approached science...Jeanne’s father works in construction and her parents have been very proud to be able to send Jeanne and her two sisters to college—something they’ve been better able to afford because of the student loan reform President Obama introduced.

A quote from Jeanne added: “My sister’s student loan repayments are now much more manageable. It means as a family we’re no longer drowning under the burden, and can afford to send my younger sister to college.” While Jeanne’s story and quote seems to show that my.barackobama.com wants to include the voices of ordinary people, Jeanne’s anecdote also echoes other posts on the website by providing reasons to support Obama.

According to Endres and Warnick (2004), the inclusion of different voices on a website is an aspect of text-based interactivity. Text-based interactivity includes dialogic rather than monologic expression, which “manifests a diversity of characteristics, speech styles, and even languages” (p. 328-329). As an example, Endres and Warnick cite Stan Matsunaka’s campaign site, where “one hears the voice of the candidate, his supporters, his father’s fellow soldiers, and his father” (p. 329). Since my.barackobama.com includes the

“voices” of campaign volunteers and supporters, it incorporates dialogized expression.

Endres and Warnick hypothesize that because campaign websites rarely allow discussion boards, text-based interactivity may act as a substitute for actual human interaction “through emulation of dialogue between Web users and members of the campaign” (p. 326). On my.barackobama.com, stories and quotes from supporters might simulate dialogue in the absence of other opportunities for discussion. Since interview respondents said that my.barackobama.com did not promote dialogue or community even in its e-mail groups, though, text-based interactivity seems unlikely to promote the kind of political dialogue or community necessary for participatory democracy.

Furthermore, the stories and quotes on my.barackobama.com seem to encourage political participation or provide reasons to support Obama, rather than promoting open debate. In fact, most of the content on my.barackobama.com implicitly or explicitly encourages political participation or provides information about the campaign. After stories and quotes from supporters and stories from the campaign, the most common code in the content analysis was “encouragement to participate”. This content generally involved links to volunteer, donate, or support the campaign in some way. The next most common code, “motivational rhetoric”, also encouraged participation more indirectly. The last three codes involved informational content. According to Bimber (2003), information provision is one main goal of campaign websites; the other goal is engaging supporters. Candidates expect their campaign sites to be “providing a variety of means for citizens to become engaged, such as volunteering, donating, or subscribing to e-mail lists” (p. 48). Stromer-Galley (2000) notes that by encouraging citizens to become engaged through donating and volunteering, campaign sites may actually create

a façade of interaction with the campaign and the candidate through media interaction...If citizens can donate money or sign up to volunteer their time for the campaign, the campaign benefits from this and presumably citizens have an increased opportunity to get involved. Moreover...the candidate provides information and through these devices suggests that the candidate and the campaign are open, accessible, and inclusive. (127)

Stromer-Galley adds, however, that this type of interaction does not promote democracy: “The real work of democracy...is in human-human interaction...A democratic system in which campaigns close themselves off from engagement with citizens is less democratic” (p. 128).

In light of Stromer-Galley’s warning, it is interesting that many of the interview respondents in this study had become disillusioned about democratic participation. Several respondents complained that the website only existed for campaign spin and donations. One interview respondent mentioned both those two common complaints about the website:

I have heard that the ability to raise money in small amounts from many people has made it more difficult for big oil to bribe the media and buy candidates, but after the election, when the website became more directive than interactive, and seemed to be more about spin than substance, I became disaffected. (Interviewee 11 excerpt)

Interview respondents also mentioned that the administration did not listen to the people and only served economic interests and power. One respondent declared: “The political system seeks to control and direct me and harvest my money, not to listen to me or to anyone else



who is not rich” (Interviewee 2 excerpt). Overall, since joining my.barackobama.com, respondents seemed to feel more disillusioned than optimistic about democratic participation.

These findings are at odds with the idea that the 2008 Obama campaign successfully engaged voters through the “participatory Internet” (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Levenshaus, 2010). Scholars have argued that through my.barackobama.com, the Obama campaign developed a formidable network of supporters, many of whom became actively engaged in the campaign in various ways (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Levenshaus, 2010). Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) suggest that Obama could use this network of supporters during his presidency: “Our findings suggest that a new social movement was formed out of the Obama ’08 campaign...thus far, there is substantial evidence that the networked nominee is transforming government to lead the networked nation we predict.” Based on interviews with the campaign staff and analysis of [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com), Levenshaus (2010) also concluded that the Obama campaign team built strong relationships with its grassroots supporters.

These ideas, however, contradict this study’s findings. The in-depth interviews with members of my.barackobama.com show that many Obama supporters were less supportive of Obama, and less inclined to participate in politics, than they were before joining the website. The researcher can suggest two possible reasons for the gap between the appearance of participatory democracy and the respondents’ feelings of frustration with participation.

Firstly, the respondents felt that the social media tools on my.barackobama.com failed to live up to their grassroots potential. Instead of helping them participate in politics,

respondents felt that the website existed for campaign “spin”, to win support, and to gain donations. One respondent called the website “a remarkable way to raise money and fool people into believing Obama was connecting to them on a deeper level” (Interviewee 6 excerpt), while another respondent explained, “It seems like it’s really more a way to give the façade of involvement in hopes that people will give money because they feel involved” (Interviewee 4 excerpt).

In an interview with Levenshaus (2010), a member of Obama’s campaign staff insisted that the campaign encouraged grassroots participation, empowering supporters by giving them access to voter files: “I think every campaign values volunteers...I don’t think every campaign empowers them” (p. 329). Levenshaus (2010) optimistically argues that “by building and investing in the infrastructure at the top and giving the tools and access to the grassroots at the bottom, campaign managers created a partnership that they credited with increasing online and offline activities like donating, volunteering, and voting” (p. 331). Certainly, my.barackobama.com appeared to offer more opportunities for grassroots participation than previous campaign websites. Dadas (2008) suggests that my.barackobama.com had a “robust participatory interface” characterized by an “emphasis on allowing users a great deal of agency in customizing both the website itself and their interaction with the campaign” (p. 422). Levenshaus (2010) notes that the campaign did not even censor critical comments on the website. Nevertheless, from the interview responses, it seems that ultimately, voters saw my.barackobama.com as a typical campaign website focused on attracting decided voters and mobilizing them to action in order to win elections.

Bimber (2003) explains that campaign websites have several main purposes: opinion reinforcement, activism, donating, and voter registration and mobilization (p. 48). Bimber

explains, though, that even opportunities to participate by donating and mobilizing are really methods of reinforcing the support of decided voters: “The primary intended audience consists of supporters, who need to be reinforced in their choice and mobilized to action...The main message of candidate Web content is reinforcement” (p. 144). Both the interviews and content analysis in this research study suggest that, despite its openness and interactivity, the primary goals of my.barackobama.com were reinforcement and mobilization, just like any other campaign site. These main objectives may have created several obstacles to true grassroots participation.

Firstly, while the Obama campaign prided itself on empowering supporters, supporters eventually concluded that the real purpose of the website was to win votes and donations, rather than to hear supporters’ opinions. Secondly, Bimber notes that reinforcing support on campaign websites sometimes results in campaign spin (2003, p. 49). The interview responses show that campaign spin can frustrate voters who want open debate and unbiased information. Thirdly, because campaign websites are designed mainly for supporters rather than undecided voters, they risk becoming closed communities where only supportive opinions are welcome. Galston (1999) notes that virtual communities in general tend to bring like-minded people together, which may alienate people with differing views. Foot et al. (2007) argue that by merely involving people in the campaign, instead of connecting them to other sites and organizations, campaign websites may become “gated communities.” Foot et al. ask, “Will citizens as producers increasingly seek to differentiate themselves and form *ad hoc* communities, or will campaigns and organizations increasingly structure the online democratic activities of citizens?” (p. 102).

Certainly, website members often felt that my.barackobama.com structured their online democratic activities, which contrasts with the Obama campaign's claims that it encouraged grassroots participation. The website members' feelings raise the question of whether campaign websites can ever truly encourage "grassroots" participation. Openness and opportunities for interactivity may benefit both campaigns and citizens in the short term, when the campaign attracts supporters who agree with the candidate and his message; but interactivity by itself does not satisfy citizens when they start to disagree with the candidate's message or politics. When citizens disagree with the campaign message and the campaign does not seem responsive to the citizens' opposing views, citizens will soon begin to feel that the campaign has taken advantage of them to win support.

Lack of responsiveness, in fact, seemed to be the second main reason why website members felt frustrated about democratic participation. Website members were disappointed with the Obama administration because they felt it did not listen to the people and only listened to the rich and powerful. One respondent wrote, "A lot of talk about 'the middle class'...does anyone in the Obama camp really talk to anyone in the middle class?? It is obvious our leaders have no intention of serving the public and would rather remain accountable to economic powers in this country" (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Another respondent wrote, "President Obama's actions since being elected are almost the opposite of the promises he made during the campaign. At least his promises to those who joined mybarackobama.com, perhaps not his promises to the Wall Street billionaires who actually funded his campaign" (Interviewee 12 excerpt). Not only did respondents feel like the administration did not listen to them, but, as the last response above shows, respondents felt

as though Barack Obama had betrayed promises he made to them, such as a promise to represent the middle class.

O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg (2002) suggest that modern election campaigns are characterized by a political marketing approach, which involves various election promises. Henneberg (1996) writes that political marketing is an attempt "to establish, maintain, and enhance long-term voter relationships at a profit for society and political parties... This is done by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises" (777). Farrell and Wortmann (1987) suggest that the promises offered on the political market include more than just specific election promises: "The 'sellers' offer representation to their 'customers' in return for support... They market their particular styles of representation and specific intentions for government as a 'product' which composes party image, leader image, and manifesto proposals or selected images" (p. 298).

The members of my.barackobama.com seemed to feel that they felt they had been offered a "product" in the political market which failed to materialize. One respondent declared, "Since President Obama has shown nothing but contempt for the people who elected him and violated so many campaign promises, my attitude towards the U.S. government has deteriorated considerably since joining the website" (Interviewee 12 excerpt). Naurin (2011) observes that a common narrative in representative democracy is the idea that politicians always break their promises. However, data from multiple surveys in multiple countries demonstrates that elected representatives actually keep a majority of the promises they make during election campaigns (Naurin, 2011, p. 4). Still, most citizens in representative democracies think politicians usually break their promises, and this belief is distinct from a general distrust of politicians (Naurin, 2011). Based on in-depth interviews

with Swedish citizens, Naurin (2011) hypothesizes two reasons for the difference between citizens' opinions and statistical reality. Firstly, she suggests that there is a social narrative about the "promise-breaking politician": "people create their perceptions of politics and politicians by repeating simplified images and stories about how the political world functions. And the image of the promise-breaking politician seems to fit quite well into such an interpretation" (p. 122). Additionally, though, Naurin hypothesizes that citizens hold a broader definition of election promises than scholars do, consider promises that take place in between elections as well as during campaigns, and only feel that a promise has been fully achieved when they "feel the effects of decisions" (p. 142).

The interview respondents in this study may have felt betrayed by the Obama administration for all these reasons. For example, respondents may have hoped to "feel the effects" of Obama's economic policies, and may have been disappointed when the economy did not substantially improve after Obama took office. One respondent wrote, "I am less engaged in politics as the country is not changing much under this administration in the ways I had hoped for" (Interviewee 7 excerpt). The main reason for respondents' dissatisfaction with the Obama administration, though, seems to be Naurin's first explanation: citizens define election promises more loosely than scholars do. Naurin explains, "The notion of election promises can be used to denote a broader kind of responsibility of the representatives. Common visions or goals of society can also be defined as election promises" (2011, p. 151). In other words, more than just fulfilling specific electoral promises, citizens may expect their representatives to realize a particular vision of society.

This theory is particularly relevant to an explanation of disillusionment with Barack Obama's administration. During his campaign, Obama presented a vision of democracy in

which communal participation in politics could transform America (Jenkin & Cos, 2010; Sweet & McCue, 2010). According to Sweet and McCue (2010), “Obama’s rhetoric is an attempt to reconstitute the U.S. electorate’s understanding of ‘the people’ and of their collective agency as citizens capable of self-governance” (p. 603). Levenshaus (2010) notes that my.barackobama.com offered the same “you-centred” discourse of citizen participation that Obama presented in his speeches. In a personal interview, one of Obama’s campaign staff explained, “In everything we did, the narrative, the underlying expectation or message was that you have the power to affect the course of the campaign” (Levenshaus, 2010, p. 325). The Obama campaign thus offered citizens vague but optimistic promises that if they united in self-government, they could create a new future for America. In his speeches and on his website, therefore, Barack Obama presented a discourse of participatory democracy. Not only did he tell his supporters that they were “agents of change” (Jenkins & Cos, 2010, p. 191) who could collectively take charge of America’s destiny, but he also suggested that if they did so, they could help fulfill the American Dream (Jenkins & Cos, 2010). Although this message was obviously not a specific campaign promise, it was still an implied promise that support for Obama could help create a participatory democracy that would lead to national transformation and renewal.

Moreover, Obama portrayed himself as a co-collaborator in the process of transforming America. Jenkins and Cos (2010) explain that in his speeches, Obama presented himself as the authorial persona and Americans as the “second persona” (p.191); but he also suggested that he was united with Americans: “Obama touched on his authorial persona and that of the American people as agents of change, the second persona, to describe the ‘whole’ of America...Thus, it is clear that ‘he’ was not in this battle alone” (Jenkins &

Cos, 2010, p. 191). Jenkins and Cos (2010) add that Obama connected with Americans by sharing personal stories: “Obama presented himself as an average American whose story was part of the larger American story” (p. 195). Obama thus presented himself as a representative for all Americans, portraying himself as “one of them”, and someone who could participate with them in the work of self-governance. Naurin (2011) explains that, “when they accept being a representative, politicians somehow also accept carrying the unrealized wishes and hopes for all society, and these unrealized wishes and hopes can be summarized under the expression ‘broken election promises’ when citizens give words to them” (p. 152). In his speeches, in the content of his website, and in his website’s opportunities for interactivity, Barack Obama took Americans’ hopes on his shoulders more fully than many other political candidates. He marketed himself as the representative who would help ordinary, middle class Americans realize their unspoken hopes and wishes.

Not surprisingly, when Barack Obama failed to make life demonstrably better for the middle class, some of his supporters felt that he had broken faith with them. One respondent declared,

If I could change anything about the website, I would change it to be about a candidate who is actually honest and believes in the American people, not just the corporations, the military industrial complex and the international bankers...I am thoroughly disgusted by Barack Obama, his marketing, his lies and everything about him. (Interviewee 12 excerpt)

Members of my.barackobama.com were more than just disillusioned with Barack Obama, however. In his rhetoric and on my.barackobama.com, Obama had promised that ordinary



Americans could make a difference and participate in the work of governing America. When his supporters noticed that the website seemed to exist for campaign spin and donations, they felt as though the campaign did not genuinely care about their participation. Moreover, supporters watched the Obama administration after the election for signs that it would continue to promote participatory democracy. Naurin (2011) notes that as part of citizens' broader understanding of electoral promises, citizens see representation as a more ongoing process than just winning an election: "Elections do not get the same attention in citizens' perceptions of politicians as they do in the scholarly discussion about representative democracy...the process of representation is seen as a continuous process rather than as elected terms linked together in a chain" (p. 153). After the election, when the Obama administration failed to respond to the people or incorporate their suggestions into policy, Obama's supporters felt disillusioned about the ideal of participatory democracy and even democratic participation in general. One respondent said that the experience with the website had "soured me completely on the Democratic Party and I know [sic] longer believe there is any purpose in engaging in electoral politics at the national level...I no longer believe there is any chance they will take my views into account" (Interviewee 12 excerpt).

Nevertheless, some supporters still felt that citizens could make a difference in politics, even if the Obama administration was unresponsive. Another member of the website acknowledged disappointment with my.barackobama.com, yet remained optimistic about democratic participation:

It became clear quickly that MyBarackObama was NOT interested in participatory democracy...Since this was billed as the brave new experiment in participatory democracy, I concluded that there would not actually be any such thing in my

lifetime...so if I wanted to try to make myself useful I would need to figure out how to do so despite the system rather than through it. (Interviewee 2 excerpt)

This quote expresses a common theme in the interviews: although my.barackobama.com had failed to realize supporters' hopes for participatory democracy, some of them still hoped to make a difference in politics. Drawing on the respondents' feelings of both optimism and discouragement with democratic participation, the conclusion of this research study will explore the lessons that can be learned from my.barackobama.com and will present some recommendations for the future.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The researcher's interest in Web 2.0, the "participatory Internet", during of Barack Obama's presidential campaign, led her to conduct this study on the ways my.barackobama.com promoted participatory democracy. The introduction to this study provided some theoretical background to the study and explained that the study included in-depth email interviews with members of the website, and a content analysis of the 2012 campaign site. In Chapter two, a literature review summarized the relevant literature about participatory democracy and digital democracy, and it provided a research background for the rest of the study. For the study's methodology, the researcher drew on Creswell (2007) and Krippendorff (2004), as described in Chapter three.

Chapter four presented the research findings in detail. The research resulted in four main research findings: that the website often promoted political knowledge and political participation; that the website rarely promoted political discussion or community; that the 2012 campaign site appeared to promote political discussion and community, but actually promoted political knowledge and involvement; and that many website members were disillusioned about democratic participation.

### *5.1 Lessons Learned*

The research findings show that my.barackobama.com was successful at promoting certain aspects of participatory democracy, including political knowledge and non-electoral political participation. However, like other political websites in the past, my.barackobama.com failed to promote political discussion and community. This failure contributed to members' eventual disillusionment with democratic participation.

The study also highlights the role of political leaders in promoting or discouraging participatory democracy. This study suggests that in 2008, Barack Obama and his campaign team created such high hopes of participatory democracy that it was almost impossible for the administration to live up to the expectations it had created. When members of my.barackobama.com realized that the administration had not lived up to its implied promise of participatory democracy, they ended up losing faith in democratic participation.

While the research sheds light on the way my.barackobama.com influenced participatory democracy, it also illuminates the relationship between participatory democracy and political digital media in general. Many scholarly books and articles claim that digital media will promote participatory democracy, but the findings of this study suggest that this may not happen easily. Firstly, as writers like Jane Mansbridge (1983) admit, implementing true “participatory democracy” with direct democratic participation by the people is nearly impossible in large nation-states. Because of their size, nation-states like the United States use representative systems, and in representative democracies, digital media cannot implement direct democracy; it can only encourage greater democratic participation. If the leaders of representative democracies suggest that ordinary people will have more influence in political decision-making than is possible, the people will undoubtedly be disappointed and disillusioned by the reality.

Secondly, this research study illustrates the importance of human interaction in participatory democracy. While political websites often do a good job of providing political information and offering opportunities to participate in politics, they may be less successful at promoting interaction among citizens and between citizens and the government; yet for citizens, human interaction is essential to the concept of participatory democracy. Citizens

want a place where they can discuss and debate political issues without feeling ostracized by others for having different views; and they also want opportunities to share their ideas with their political leaders and representatives. For citizens, “being heard” by government means more than the opportunity to express their opinions to the government; it means receiving an acknowledgement that the government has really listened to their opinions, and that leaders will take their opinions into account when making decisions.

### *5.2 Limitations*

Both the content analysis and e-mail interviews in this study had several limitations. One of the limitations of the e-mail interviews was the lack of face-to-face contact, which Selwyn & Robson (1998) note as one of the limitations of computer-mediated communication research. Another limitation of e-mail interviews is asynchronous communication (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). In this research study, asynchronous communication may have resulted in less detailed interview responses, since the researcher could only ask follow-up questions after receiving all the interview responses, instead of in the course of the interview. Still, the follow-up questions helped compensate for the asynchronous nature of the communication by allowing the researcher to ask questions after receiving the initial responses.

The length of time that had elapsed between the 2008 campaign and the interviews may also have limited the quality of the study. The interviews were conducted in February 2011, more than 2 years after Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration. By this time, many of the original members of groups on the website might have left the groups or changed their email addresses, so that they would not have received the invitation to participate in the

interviews. Therefore, the sample of interview respondents may not have been representative of the original members of groups on my.barackobama.com.

Another significant limitation of the interviews was the imbalance of groups on the website. Before searching for groups on the website, the researcher created a list of the most important 2008 and 2010 U.S. election issues, according to respondents in two Gallup polls. The researcher then searched for groups discussing these election issues. She found that some issues were discussed by more groups than others, and these groups had far more members than others. For example, in January 2011, there were 10 healthcare-related groups with more than 100 members each, and many smaller groups. On the other hand, there were few or no groups on other issues, such as federal spending or corruption. Naturally, more participants responded from larger groups discussing more popular issues, such as health care. Because of the imbalanced nature of the groups, the interview respondents have been relatively representative of the groups on my.barackobama.com, but they may not have been representative of visitors to the website in general.

Finally, a limitation of the email interviews was the disparity between the number of respondents who provided consent, and the number of respondents who actually participated in the interviews. Fifteen people provided consent, but only thirteen participated in the interviews.

Despite the limitations of the email interviews, for this case study, the advantages of email interviews outweighed the disadvantages. Since the researcher was in Canada and most of the respondents were in the United States, the e-mails allowed the researcher to overcome geographical and temporal constraints. This flexibility is one of the advantages of

computer mediated communication research (Selwyn & Robson, 1998). Also, the drawn-out, asynchronous nature of e-mail interviews allows respondents to provide more thorough responses with more depth of thought (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

The content analysis of the website also had some limitations. The most significant limitation was that the interview respondents described the 2008 campaign site; but by the time the researcher performed the content analysis in July 2011, my.barackobama.com had been upgraded to the 2012 campaign site. Therefore, the website described by the interview respondents was different than the one studied in the content analysis. Because of this, the content analysis was not as useful as it could have been as a method of triangulation to complement the interview findings. Instead, the researcher mainly used the content analysis to examine whether the nature and purpose of the website had changed since the 2008 campaign site. As with the time elapsed between Obama's election and the in-depth interviews, the change in website format showed the researcher the importance of timeliness in conducting research on contemporary communications issues.

Finally, due to the limited size and scope of this research study, the content analysis did not include an analysis of comments on the 2012 campaign site, although each post included comments by visitors. A sampling of the comments could have added another dimension to the content analysis findings and provided another perspective from website users.

### *5.3 Recommendations*

From this study, the researcher can propose recommendations for the future use of digital media to promote participatory democracy. Perhaps the most significant finding in

this research study is that citizens see political discussion and community as two of the most important aspects of participatory democracy. Political discussion and community are central to Jurgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere. This study's interview responses suggest that members of my.barackobama.com yearned for a type of online public sphere. As one respondent explained,

Our country is faced with many intractable problems, but there are many smart people out there with a wide variety of experiences, and it seemed like a good idea to have a forum where persons of goodwill could get together and float serious ideas as to how a new administration could go about trying to have a real impact on the issues of the day. (Interviewee 2 excerpt)

While this research study demonstrated citizens' eagerness for an online public sphere, the study also revealed the difficulty of promoting political discussion and community online.

Dahlberg's six normative conditions for an online public sphere are: autonomy from state and economic power; exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims; reflexivity; ideal role taking; sincerity; and discursive inclusion and equality (2001). The findings of this study suggest that my.barackobama.com could have more successfully nurtured these conditions of the online public sphere.

Firstly, as a campaign website, my.barackobama.com did not provide full autonomy from state power. Because campaign websites by their nature are not autonomous from state power, Janack (2006) suggests that campaign websites should be evaluated instead on whether they use interactivity as much as possible to stimulate discussion. Many scholars have noted that campaign websites do not take full advantage of the Internet's potential for



interactivity. In particular, campaign websites tend to prohibit discussion forums (Stromer-Galley, 2000). My.barackobama.com was no different: although it allowed members to create blogs, the website did not offer a discussion forum. Understandably, campaigns are reluctant to use discussion forums because they fear losing control of their message (Stromer-Galley, 2000). At the same time, however, if campaigns want to advertise the potential for participatory democracy—as the Obama campaign did—they should promote participatory democracy not just in rhetoric, but in practice, by permitting discussion forums on their websites.

Even when websites allow discussion forums, however, the discussions often fall short of the requirements of the public sphere. The second condition for an online public sphere, according to Dahlberg, is “critique of critizable moral-practical validity claims,” which Dahlberg (2001) defines as “a lively exchange of opinions” “that clearly parallels the rational, dialogic form of conversation required within the public sphere.” Campaign websites may prevent this type of communication by censoring discussion (Janack, 2006). My.barackobama.com did not censor critical comments (Levenshaus, 2010), yet interview respondents still complained that the website existed for campaign spin. One respondent wrote, “Although I was kept up to date about events, no one expressed an interest in discussing any ideas with me that were not in line with “the agenda” (Interviewee 6 excerpt). Dadas (2008) notes that while the 2008 Obama campaign site “takes great strides toward fostering a meaningful dialogue among users, it does not represent dissenting voices...Because of this, it does not fully enable the kind of participation outlined in Hauser's vision of public spheres. Including dissenting voices would allow Obama's website to more fully match the criteria for a robust participatory website.”

One way for campaign websites to encourage divergent viewpoints would be to include links to external information, which could enhance debate not just by providing different perspectives, but by providing factual sources. Dahlberg (2001) notes that “exchange of validity claims” should be accompanied by “reasoned justification”, such as information from web sites and published research. Foot, Schneider & Dougherty (2007) describe a specific “web practice” known as “connecting”, which involves linking “a site user with another political actor, such as a campaign, press organization, political party, government agency” (p. 99). Foot et al. note, however, that campaign websites are unlikely to use “connecting” features. Indeed, my.barackobama.com only included links to social media sites affiliated with the Obama campaign; it did not offer links to other sources of political information.

Campaigns are “inherently risk-averse organizations” (Foot et al., 2007, p.101), and links open up campaign websites to the free flow of information, including ideas that may contradict campaign messages. At the same time, the literature suggests that participatory democracy requires a well-informed citizenry (Barber, 1984; Kaufman, 1960; Pateman, 1970). If campaigns truly intend to use campaign websites to promote participatory democracy, they should incorporate “connecting” features into the websites, in order to encourage site users to seek external sources of information. Campaigns that include links may risk losing control of their message, but they may also enhance viewers’ understanding of political issues and thereby encourage a more nuanced political discussion that considers alternative viewpoints.

Including links to external political actors may also encourage reflexivity, Dahlberg’s third requirement for an online public sphere. Reflexivity is defined as “the process of

standing back from, critically reflecting upon, and changing one's position when faced by 'the better argument' " (Dahlberg, 2001). The Obama campaign relied heavily on rhetorical promises of participatory democracy to persuade people to support Barack Obama (Jenkins & Cos, 2010; Levenshaus, 2010; Sweet & McCue, 2010). While this rhetoric may have contributed to Obama's election as president, the unrealistic promises in the rhetoric also contributed to citizens' eventual disillusionment with the Obama administration. One interview respondent in this study's explained that before the 2008 election, "I had seen Senator Obama speak in Seattle with Senator Cantwell and was impressed by his political gifts" (Interviewee 11 excerpt). This same respondent added, however, that "after the election, when the website became more directive than interactive, and seemed to be more about spin than substance, I became disaffected" (Interviewee 11 excerpt).

Responses like this suggest that while supporters may be initially attracted by a candidate's rhetoric, they eventually look for more substantial reasons to support the candidate. If campaign websites include links to alternative political information, their rhetorical strategies may initially become less effective, as site users find alternative information that casts doubt on campaign promises. Over a longer period of time, however, links to alternative information may result in more realistic campaign promises, as an increasingly informed group of supporters holds campaigns accountable for their rhetoric.

Dahlberg's fourth requirement for an online public sphere is ideal role-taking, "participants attempting to put themselves in the position of the other so as to come to an understanding of the other's perspective" (Dahlberg, 2001). The interview responses in this research study suggest that the Obama administration was ineffective at ideal role-taking, since it failed to adopt the perspectives of ordinary citizens. Again and again, respondents

declared that the administration that was only interested in the rich and powerful, not the needs of the middle class. One respondent wrote, “I think the Obama administration quite listening to the base completely” (Interviewee 7 excerpt). Because the administration did not respond to their suggestions, either in words or through demonstrable policy changes, respondents assumed that the administration was not listening to them. As one respondent wrote,

In the response to the financial crisis...what the government has done does not square with what anyone I know, Democrat, Republican, or Independent, thought should be happening, and...the various ideas that regular people had and commonly expressed in conversation were basically absent from the media and from comments by politicians of any stripe (Interviewee 2 excerpt)

As described in Chapter 4, campaigns and government administrations may not send a response to citizens’ suggestions because they do not have the staff or the resources to answer the overwhelming number of messages (Owen & Davis, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Campaigns and administrations are aware that failing to respond to messages may damage their reputations, so presidential campaign teams may not include an e-mail address on their candidate’s website at all (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Certainly, the respondents in this study were upset when the administration did not respond to their messages.

Nevertheless, members of my.barackobama.com also offered alternatives to e-mail forms as suggestions for how the administration could improve its communication with citizens. Two respondents suggested a survey tool and opportunities to vote on specific issues. One of these people wrote, “I’d post specific survey questions like: do you think we

should have a 5 cents per gallon gas tax...And let people vote. Encourage even Republicans to join in” (Interviewee 4 excerpt). The other respondent suggested that citizens’ contributions be catalogued in a “laundry list of crystallized submitted ideas, with the Administration’s thoughts regarding the plusses and minuses of each” (Interviewee 2 excerpt). Respondents also suggested that the administration verbally acknowledge citizens’ suggestions and thank them for their contributions. One respondent wrote, “Even an auto-response would be better than not really knowing if anyone ever reads [policy suggestions]” (Interviewee 5 excerpt).

While campaigns and administrations understandably lack the time and resources to provide individualized responses to citizens’ e-mails, the suggestions offered by this study’s interview respondents show alternative methods that campaigns and administrations can use to communicate with citizens. Dahlberg (2001) explains that ideal role-taking involves “ongoing, respectful listening”. Campaigns and administrations can foster this type of listening through survey tools, reports that aggregate respondents’ opinions, and reports about actions the campaign or administration is taking to implement respondents’ suggestions.

In addition to ideal role-taking, Dahlberg (2001) suggests that another condition of an online public sphere is sincerity: “discursive participants must make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires.” The groups on my.barackobama.com appeared to promote sincere interactions. Respondents registered in the groups under their real names, provided legitimate e-mail address through which they could be contacted, and used the groups to openly express their interests and intentions for joining the website. On the other hand, group members felt that Barack

Obama had not been sincere in his own claims. One respondent wrote, “If I could change anything about the website, I would change it to be about a candidate who is actually honest and believes in the American people, not just the corporations, the military-industrial complex and the international bankers” (Interviewee 12 excerpt).

As discussed in Chapter 4, respondents’ disillusionment with Obama and his administration was not merely disappointment with specific broken campaign promises. Respondents felt that Barack Obama had promised to create participatory democracy by working with and representing ordinary people, and they felt betrayed when this type of participatory democracy failed to emerge under his administration. Barack Obama’s soaring rhetoric about the resurrection of the American Dream and a transformation of American democracy (Jenkins & Cos, 2010; Sweet & McCue, 2010) undoubtedly contributed to respondents’ disillusionment with his administration. While many politicians tend to make soaring promises about their future governments, the gap between politicians’ promises and reality contributes to citizens’ sense of politicians’ insincerity and their lack of trust in democratic institutions. Although candidates in the modern political environment may believe that they cannot be elected without making improbable promises, if they want to be seen as sincere proponents of participatory democracy, they must moderate their rhetoric to portray reasonable possibilities for increased democratic participation, instead of creating false hope for an ideal participatory democracy.

Lastly, Dahlberg calls for an online public sphere in which all social groups are included in discussion. The researcher in this study did not analyze the social composition of groups on my.barackobama.com; but the interview respondents were equally split between men and women. A cursory examination of the interviews suggests that many of the

respondents were politically well-informed and had been involved in non-electoral political participation for years, indicating that the website may have been more likely to attract politically involved, well-educated American citizens, than those with fewer opportunities to become involved.

While Dahlberg only discusses online community, campaign websites can also make more effort to promote offline community. Most interview respondents in this study indicated that they had not participated in offline meetings, even though the website allowed members to arrange offline meetings. Campaign websites intending to promote participatory democracy should recognize the importance of community, and offline community in particular, to citizens' experiences of participatory democracy. Future campaigns should build on Barack Obama's pioneering use of social media (Panagopoulos, 2009), by using the ever-expanding capabilities of digital technology and the interactive potential of Web 2.0 to encourage offline meet-ups.

Ultimately, however, campaigns and candidates can only make part of the contribution to a more participatory democracy. As Janack (2006) explains, "Although Habermas' visions of the public sphere may be utopian, online campaign sites are squandering any potential to inch closer to that ideal...the reason for that failure rests in part with the citizen-users themselves, rather than the campaign or technology" (p. 297). Citizens, just as much as candidates, need to work at fostering rational-critical debate, listening to alternative positions, evaluating information critically, adopting the perspectives of their leaders, and welcoming members of different social groups.

As Bimber & Davis (2003) explain, “Campaigning is a process of communication...the fabric holding [campaign strategies] together is communication” (p; 44). Web 2.0 has been praised for facilitating communication, not just from government to citizens, but from citizens to government and from citizens to other citizens. A healthy participatory democracy can only emerge when both candidates and citizens use these communicative tools not just to serve their own interests, but to understand and serve the interests of each other. Used effectively, the participatory Internet has the potential to enhance democracy by providing more opportunities for citizens to participate in government, and by giving governments more opportunities to listen to citizens. As this study shows, however, Web 2.0 can also be used to create a temporary swell of support for a candidate under the banner of participatory democracy, that later gives way to disillusionment and betrayal when, instead of establishing the awaited era of participatory democracy, the new government merely reprises the same power dynamics as before.



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## APPENDIX A

### Consent Form

#### Case Study of my.barackobama.com: Promoting Participatory Democracy?

Researcher: Rachel Baarda  
Department of Communication  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Telephone: X  
E-mail: X

Supervisor: Prof. Rocci Luppigini, Ph.D.  
Department of Communication  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Telephone: X  
E-mail: X

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Rachel Baarda and Prof. Rocci Luppigini, Ph.D.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to explore the use of digital media in promoting participatory democracy. The study will include interviews with members of groups on mybarackobama.com, as well as an examination of the textual content of the website.

**Participation:** My participation will consist of responding to a series of opinion questions about my involvement in politics and the website, my.barackobama.com. The interview will be conducted by e-mail, between January 24, 2011 and January 31, 2011. A set of questions will be e-mailed to me, and I am expected to e-mail my responses back to the researcher within one week from the date I receive the questions. The interview responses should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. I will also be asked to review my responses for accuracy and additional feedback.

**Risks:** My participation in this study involves personal reflection about my involvement in politics and the website my.barackobama.com. The study will require me to volunteer personal information and opinions. I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I share will be kept confidential and anonymous, and my interview responses will only be used for the purposes of this Master's thesis.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the use of digital media to promote participatory democracy. My participation will also provide information about Barack Obama's specific use of digital media, and may contribute to the literature on best practices for political websites, as well as directions for future research.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the creation of a Master's thesis and that my confidentiality will be protected by the fact that only the researchers will have access to the data. Anonymity will be protected by the removal of any identifying characteristics from the data during the analysis and reporting stages.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected, including digital and print versions of e-mail interviews, as well as all electronic and print notes, will be kept by the researcher in a secure manner. The electronic data will be stored on a USB drive and both the drive as well as the printed materials will be kept in the supervisor's office. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the data, and the data will be conserved for 5 years. The data will be used strictly for the Master's thesis and any related reports and publications.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted and/or destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Rachel Baarda of the Department of Communication, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, which is under the supervision of Prof. Rocci Luppigini, Ph.D.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Letter of Recruitment**

Hello,

You are invited to participate in research conducted by Rachel Baarda, under the supervision of Prof. Rocci Luppigini, Ph.D. at the University of Ottawa.

The purpose of this research is to explore the use of digital media, with a specific focus on the website my.barackobama.com, in promoting participatory democracy. Interviews will be conducted with members of groups on my.barackobama.com, in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which the website is being used to promote or discourage participatory democracy.

Each participant will be asked to respond to a series of questions about their involvement in politics and the website my.barackobama.com. The interview will be conducted by e-mail. Participants are expected to submit their responses to the researcher within a week of receiving the interview questions, and the interview responses should take 30-45 minutes to complete. Following receipt of the interview responses, the researcher will send the responses back to the participants and ask them to review their responses and provide any additional feedback or comments. The data you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the use of digital media to promote participatory democracy. Your participation will also provide information about Barack Obama's specific use of digital media, and may contribute to the literature on best practices for political websites, as well as directions for future research.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you initially wish to participate and change your mind, you will be able to remove yourself from this study. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the information you provide.

If you wish to participate or have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Please let me know in your email which group message you are responding to, as this email has been sent to several different "groups" on my.barackobama.com.

Thank you,

Rachel Baarda

E-mail: X

Phone: X

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Questions

- 1) What are the reasons you joined my.barackobama.com? Explain some of the reasons for your interest in the website.
- 2) Would you say you participated in politics in any way before you joined the group on the website?
  - 1) If so, in what ways? Describe in as much specific detail as possible.
  - 2) If not, why not?
- 3) Do you think your participation in politics has changed since joining the group?
  - 1) If so, in what ways? Describe in as much specific detail as possible.
  - 2) What do you think are the reasons for this change?
- 4) Do you feel your level of knowledge about political issues has changed since you joined the website?
  - 1) If so, in what ways? Describe in as much specific detail as possible.
  - 2) Why do think that your level of knowledge has changed?
- 5) When you want to discuss political issues, who are the people you talk to (for example, family, friends, other members of the group)?
  - 1) What are the primary mediums of communication you use to conduct these discussions? (eg. in person, by e-mail, telephone)
  - 2) How would you characterize the quality of the discussions with each group of people?
- 6) Do you think your tendency to communicate your opinions to the government has changed since joining the website?
  - 1) If so, in what ways? Describe in as much specific detail as possible.

- 2) What do you think are the reasons for this change?
- 7) On my.barackobama.com, there are quotes such as “nothing is more powerful than your voice in your community” and “now, in this crucial time, our voice once again has extraordinary power.”
  - 1) What does the concept of expressing your voice mean to you?
  - 2) Do you feel that the concept of having a powerful voice accurately describes your current experience of political involvement?
  - 3) In what ways, if any, has your experience with my.barackobama.com influenced your feelings about your ability to express your voice in politics?
- 8) Since joining the website, do you feel differently about the government’s tendency to take your opinions into account when making decisions?
  - 1) If so, in what ways?
  - 2) What do you think are the reasons for this change?
- 9) What features of my.barackobama.com, if any, stand out to you? If you used the website before his election, what aspects of the campaign website stood out to you then?
- 10) What aspects of the website do you like? Dislike? What would you change about the website if you could?
- 11) Is there anything you would like to add?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Follow-Up Interview Questions**

12) As a member of a group on the website my.barackobama.com, would you say that you felt part of a community?

a) If so, would you consider this community to be an “online community,” based on interactions with people over the Internet; an off-line community, based on face-to-face meetings; or both? Please explain in as much detail as possible.

b) Why do you think the website created a sense of community?

13) Do you believe that your tendency to discuss and debate political issues with others has changed since joining the website my.barackobama.com?

a) If so, in what ways? Please describe in as much detail as possible.

b) What do you think are the reasons for this change?

## APPENDIX E

### Interview Respondents

<b>January 25, 2011</b>	Interviewee 1: economy group
<b>January 26, 2011</b>	Interviewee 2: jobs group
<b>January 27, 2011</b>	Interviewee 3: economy group
<b>January 28, 2011</b>	Interviewee 4: energy group
<b>January 28, 2011</b>	Interviewee 5: health care group
<b>February 1, 2011</b>	Interviewee 6: health care group
<b>February 1, 2011</b>	Interviewee 7: health care group
<b>February 1, 2011</b>	Interviewee 8: energy group
<b>February 3, 2011</b>	Interviewee 9: jobs group
<b>February 5, 2011</b>	Interviewee 10: immigration group
<b>February 15, 2011</b>	Interviewee 11: energy group
<b>February 25, 2011</b>	Interviewee 12: economy group
<b>February 27, 2011</b>	Interviewee 13: immigration group

### Follow-up Interview Respondents

<b>June 4, 2011</b>	Interviewee 12: economy group
<b>June 5, 2011</b>	Interviewee 13: immigration group
<b>June 6, 2011</b>	Interviewee 4: energy group
<b>June 7, 2011</b>	Interviewee 2: jobs group
<b>June 13, 2011</b>	Interviewee 7: health care group
<b>June 13, 2011</b>	Interviewee 5: health care group
<b>June 14, 2011</b>	Interviewee 6: health care group

**APPENDIX F****Interview Coding*****Category A: Previous Political Participation (9 codes – 27 instances)***

<b>Was already engaged in political participation beyond voting (6 codes – 22 instances)</b>	<b>Was politically disengaged (3 codes – 5 instances)</b>
Worked for political party or campaign 9	Did not participate in politics outside of voting 2
Was activist 6	Did not have faith in democracy 2
Was already politically informed 2	Was politically apathetic 1
Participated in local politics 2	
Was always interested in politics 2	
Worked for government 1	

***Category B: Support for Obama (6 codes – 31 instances)***

<b>Support for Obama (5 codes— 25 instances)</b>	<b>Disillusioned with Obama (1 code –6 instances)</b>
Supported Obama 12	Disappointed by Obama 6
Volunteered for Obama campaign 7	
Supports Obama 4	
Fundraised for Obama campaign 1	
Was activist during Obama campaign 1	

***Category C: Website's influence on participatory democracy (18 codes – 79 instances)***

<b>Website encouraged political participation (9 codes – 43 instances)</b>	<b>Website did not influence political participation (7 codes—36 instances)</b>
Website gave access to different perspectives 9	Website did not create community 12
Website created community 6	Website did not prompt political discussion 7
Website prompted political participation outside of voting 5	Website did not increase political knowledge 5
Website increased political knowledge 5	Always felt able to communicate opinions to government 5
Website created ability to self-organize 4	Website did not prompt political participation outside of voting 5
Website prompted political discussion 4	Website decreased tendency to communicate opinions to government 1
Website increased tendency to communicate opinions to government 4	Website will not create political change 1
Website was informative 4	
Website increased political transparency 2	

***Category D: Feelings about political participation (18 codes – 104 instances)***

<b>Has faith in democratic participation (2 codes—5 instances)</b>	<b>Disillusioned about democratic participation (16 codes—99 instances)</b>
Gained faith in democracy 3	Administration does not listen to people 24
Administration listens to people 2	Website exists for campaign spin 17
	Became disillusioned about ability to participate in politics outside of voting 9
	Administration does not serve people 7
	Website focused on fundraising 6
	Abandoned or may abandon website 6
	Disappointed by website 6
	Administration serves economic interests 6
	Administration serves the powerful 6
	Website filled with trolls 3
	Website did not promote participatory democracy 3
	Website filled with people against Obama 2
	People have abandoned website 1
	Website is used to gauge opinions 1
	No longer politically active 1
	Website is top-down 1



*Category E: Desire to participate in politics (9 codes – 49 instances)*

<b>Wanted to contribute ideas (6 codes—22 instances)</b>	<b>Wishes the administration would allow citizens' contributions (3 codes—27 instances)</b>
Wanted to discuss political issues 6	Administration should ask for people's opinions 14
Wanted to communicate ideas and opinions to government 5	Administration should listen to people 7
Wanted to spread ideas and information to others 5	Administration should use collective wisdom of people 6
Website promised participatory democracy 3	
Wanted to counter criticism of Obama 2	
Observed decreased citizen participation 1	

**APPENDIX G****Content Analysis Coding**

<b>Category A: Stories and Quotes from Supporters</b>	<b>121 instances</b>
<b>Category B: Stories from Campaign</b>	<b>105 instances</b>
<b>Category C: Encouragement to Participate</b>	<b>98 instances</b>
<b>Category D: Motivational Rhetorical</b>	<b>77 instances</b>
<b>Category E: Information about Website and Campaign Events</b>	<b>68 instances</b>
<b>Category F: News about Obama and the Government</b>	<b>46 instances</b>
<b>Category G: Reasons to Support Obama</b>	<b>20 instances</b>