

the politics of small things, left and right

Small personal interactions can have big political effects. In the 2004 campaigns, this process worked well for Howard Dean, but it worked even better for the Christian Right.

On February 15, 2003, large antiwar demonstrations occurred throughout the world. At the epicenter of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the city where the twin towers once stood, 400 thousand people marched in the streets, and nearly 10 million people joined them in marches that spanned the globe. The demonstrators revealed another side of globalization: the capacity to democratically challenge the global superpower. A small number of people, using the Internet, rapidly coordinated a global citizen's response to the impending invasion of Iraq. This was a network for what I call "the politics of small things," a postmodern alternative to both the globalization of empire and the postmodern totalitarian movement of terror. MoveOn.org was an important virtual space for this political form.

On March 16, a month after the first demonstration, another protest revealed how the Web could be used in a creative fashion. At dusk, a wave of candlelight vigils moved westward around the earth. One million people, in more than six thousand ceremonies, in 130 different countries, took part. This action was organized in only six days by five staff members of MoveOn.org. One participant, Andrew Boyd, describes his involvement:

The day before that Sunday in March, I went to the MoveOn Web site, entered my ZIP code, and learned that three vigils had been scheduled in my neighborhood of Park Slope, Brooklyn, including one outside the apartment of prowar Senator Chuck Schumer. The Web site told me how many of my neighbors had signed up for each. It was already well into the hundreds, and I made it one more. ... That Sunday evening, I joined 1,500 of my neighbors. Someone handed me a candle and lit it for me; at some point a rabbi and a pastor spoke to the crowd. But otherwise, there was no obvious leadership, and it didn't seem to matter. There had been no meetings, no leaflets, no clipboards, no phone calls—we were all there, essentially, because of an e-mail we trusted.

This was one of many antiwar initiatives by MoveOn. It raised millions of dollars online to finance antiwar ads on television and in print. It presented a petition with one million signatures critical of the war to the UN Security Council. Founded as a response to the impeachment campaign against President Clinton, it has been involved in electoral and congressional politics and the antiwar movement ever since. It is a new form of political mobilization, a globalized alternative to global terrorists and state antiterrorists. As its campaign director, Eli Pariser, noted, "You could say that MoveOn has a postmodern organizing model. ... It's opt-in, it's decentralized, you do it from your home."

But it is a mistake to view this form of postmodernism as an automatic affair, just a matter of technology. It is a socially constructed form of political power. In *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times*, I maintain that this type of power has long been with us. It is the neglected political side of what W. I. Thomas called "the definition of the situation." If the participants in a situation define something as real, it is real in its consequences. The simulation of social reality very much makes reality, and this making is a form of political power. In our recent past this power of simulation, available to those who are usually considered powerless, has become a crucial progressive political form, not well recognized, but shaping our world nonetheless.

This power emerged on the global stage in 1968, when the most effective way to oppose the communist authorities first became apparent on the streets and in the private apartments in Warsaw. It made possible the fall of the Soviet Empire and shaped the democratic aftermath in 1989, and it was the failure to appreciate this power that looms behind the great tragedy of the events of 2001 and their aftermath.

This form of politics plays a pivotal role in our political life today. When people talk to each other, defining a situation in their own terms and developing a capacity to act in concert, they constitute a democratic alternative to terror and hegemonic force. We know too well how the powers use

the electronic media to make it seem they are the only game in town, and we are learning all too clearly how the dramatic gestures of terrorism are amplified by global media. But “the politics of small things + the Internet = alternatives.” This was evident in the antiwar movement and then in the 2004 Howard Dean campaign.

howard dean

The meeting tool used by MoveOn, which made it possible for Andrew Boyd to meet his neighbors and participate locally in a global demonstration against the war, has been commercially developed by Meetup.com. The same software was crucial to the candidacy of Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination, as a complex interaction between the virtual and the embodied developed. People would meet on discussion threads on Web sites, then arrange to meet face to face to support political candidates and work on preparing political demonstrations. They would monitor and discuss reports in conventional media, radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, and respond to them with letters and petitions. The conventional media would respond and report these activities. A large public space, constituted by both embodied and virtual interactions, emerged. These interactions created alternatives. The antiwar demonstrations were spectacular, confirming a new capacity to organize and coordinate a global public, even if they did not prevent the Iraq war. For Democratic Party Politics, this power had even greater consequences.

All conventional understandings of American politics suggested that Howard Dean had the makings of an also-ran in the presidential campaign of 2004. He was from a small state in New England. He had no national experience. His strong antiwar stance and distance from the power brokers in the Democratic Party meant he had no support from major party donors, which made even Dean believe that his campaign would be minimally funded. His harsh criticisms of the president in a time of war, coupled with his sometimes even harsher criticisms of his colleagues in the leadership of the Democratic Party, made him appear too angry to be a significant force in the primaries.

Yet, in a relatively short time, Dean became the frontrunner. Observers soon understood that he was the first serious candidate to harness the power of the Internet in

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presidential electoral politics. If Roosevelt was the first radio president and Kennedy the first television president, it seemed for a while that Dean might be the first Internet president. Though his campaign failed, the way a new type of political power put Dean on the map is a major political innovation, in my view—an electronic form of the politics of small things. With Dean, the medium was the political message. Although he did not win the nomination, Dean’s emergence signaled the power of this new form of campaign.

Clear if not completely formalized links existed between MoveOn, the Dean campaign, and Meetup. In the summer of 2003, MoveOn held a primary of sorts on its Web site. Dean won 44 percent of the 317 thousand votes cast, about twice as many as runner-up Dennis Kucinich. A centrist governor from a small state outstripped a well-known, left-wing member of Congress on a leftist Web site. According to its rules, MoveOn did not endorse any candidate (a 50 percent vote was required), but links were forged between the site and the candidacy. Internet activists, not the organizers of MoveOn or the Dean campaign, built these links. Bloggers associated with the Dean campaign were linked with bloggers friendly to MoveOn, making it easy for Dean’s supporters to vote in the MoveOn poll. They were encouraged to do so, and they prevailed.

People met each other on the Web. They posted their messages and responded to each other, got to know each other, and coordinated their actions. They redefined the situation, and the situation changed according to their definition. Dean admits: “We fell into this by accident ... I wish I could tell you we were smart enough to figure this out. But the community taught us. They seized the initiative through Meetup. They built our organization for us before we had an organization.”

The notion that Dean was the Internet candidate misses an important point. It makes it seem that the Internet was simply his instrument, which he used with mixed results. This overlooks the rich interconnections between media forms, especially the way that social interactions facilitated by different media create political power. The power created by Dean’s campaign grew out of a layered, differentiated, but common dimension of power, political power as the capacity for people to meet, speak, and act in the presence of others, developing a capacity for concerted action.

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political agency

The politics of small things is about the power of defini-

tion. When people meet and talk with each other, they must define the terms of their meeting, and they can change the world in the process. MoveOn's international demonstrations presented an alternative definition of the situation after the attacks of 9/11. The terrorists defined the situation as being one of jihad. The antiterrorists spoke about the axis of evil. The movement facilitated by MoveOn, probably the largest antiwar demonstration in history, defined the situation in more diverse but generally less apocalyptic ways.

No single manifesto united all the demonstrators. The common commitment was minimal: a worldwide "no" to the war on terrorism, as defined by George Bush and his allies and as extended to the war in Iraq. Some believed that this was the latest instance of American imperialism, a new operation of empire, seeing a definite continuity with the foreign adventures of the Cold War era and even of the Clinton administration. Others were struck by the break

Photo courtesy of Democratic National Committee



from policies supporting human rights in recent years. Some supported an Arab nation and its sovereignty, a Muslim nation against the demonic West. Others thought this war of liberation was miscalculated, lacking the support of the international community, the people of the region, or the Western democracies. Many opposed the war, not because it was a manifestation of globalization, but because it was not sufficiently globalized. Such diversity among the protesters limited the possibilities for common action.

Dean's campaign provided a format for the politics of small things to develop more fully. When compared to global communications of print, film, radio, and television, the interconnectivity of the Web is impressive, as exemplified in the antiwar movement. But the Dean campaign went further, showing how the Web can lead to a fully developed political effort.

Fund-raising capacity is only the most apparent and significant result. Other political candidates have used the Internet to tap small contributors, as John McCain did in 2000. But Dean revealed what might be called the mirror image of the principle of taxation. Given the shape of the

U.S. income distribution, it is not the rich but those in the middle who provide the solid base for government revenues. Dean raised funds following the same pattern, using the broad support of many small contributors to free his candidacy from dependence upon the wealthy. Given that campaign contributions have undermined American democracy, this change in fund-raising has enormous implications for democracy in America. Financial support yields political influence.

More significantly, the Dean campaign was organized around small social interactions. When Dean explained that he was a product of his supporters' activities, not they a product of his campaign strategy and organization, he was expressing a truth that goes beyond the usual gestures of democratic leadership. It was discreet, small, virtual interactions among people on the MoveOn site and independent bloggers that turned Dean into the major antiwar candidate. The campaign flourished because his supporters were actively involved with the Dean Web site.

People were just preaching and speaking to the converted, according to critics. Competing positions were not being confronted. Bruce Bimber, a scholar of online campaigning, asserted in a remark reported in the *New York Times*, "Democracy has been defined as a process of discussion. ... The Internet's tendency to fragment people into like-minded groups is something those of us who study these things are worried about." Activists and observers alike feared that the Internet was balkanizing political discourse and undermining democratic capacity.

But this misses a crucial point. Discussions on the Dean Web sites and other partisan Web sites were not the general public sphere, conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas, where all citizens discuss the problems of the day, reason together, and come to understand each other, seeking the public good. Rather, these were places for the politics of small things, where people met each other, came to know and trust each other, and developed a capacity, through a shared definition of the situation, to engage in a common course of action. It is this "speaking to the converted" that makes it possible to go beyond the "no" of the antiwar movement, to raise money, plan a political campaign in a decentralized way, and monitor the mass media. The interaction was virtual, but often quite familiar, even, in a sense, intimate.

When the politics of small things went beyond the power of saying no, when it became the grounds for Dean's candidacy, it had large consequences. Dean's appealing assertion that he was from "the democratic wing of the Democratic Party" expressed the dismay of many Democrats that their party had lost its way. It had not effectively challenged the neoliberal, anti-statist, domestic agenda of the right wing of the Republican Party for a long time, in some

ways since the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan, and it was not challenging the militarized antiterrorist campaign of George W. Bush.

Dean's candidacy, as an outgrowth of the antiwar movement, changed this. He forthrightly opposed Bush's policies on terrorism and Iraq, and the developing antiwar virtual public adopted him. His message and the formation of a social movement using the politics of small things made him a political force. On domestic issues, he boldly criticized Bush's tax cuts that overwhelmingly favored the wealthy and ignored the poor. The cuts, combined with increased military expenditures on the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the general war on terrorism, created huge federal deficits that undermined the possibility of addressing pressing problems in education, health care, and poverty. The Democrats in Congress were timid in addressing these issues in the midterm elections of 2002. Dean addressed them and forced all the candidates running for president to address them.

alternative visions

Dean's campaign points to the most striking achievement of the politics of small things: a new political discourse for the age of the war on terrorism, following the collapse of previously existing socialism. When communism disintegrated, systematic criticism of the truisms of the Right became difficult. As socialism, the alternative to capitalism, came to appear unworkable, and as the welfare state revealed its own problems, the neoliberal Right seemed to make more sense than the Left. It was not that neoliberalism was the only way or the best way to proceed, nor did history really come to an end, as the turmoil of recent years has shown. Rather, no one articulated clear alternatives to neoliberalism or, for that matter, to the fundamentalism that resonated with a broad public.

In the United States, this was the case until Dean came on the scene. And even though his personal quest failed, he helped redefine the Democratic Party. It is now more clearly the party concerned with social justice for the poor. This was the thrust of the candidacy of John Edwards. It is the party that confronts the militarized approach to the war on terrorism. This was the position of all the Democratic candidates during the primaries, other than Joseph Lieberman, and it was the central appeal of John Kerry and Wesley Clark, along with Dean. It is the party that promotes reform of medical insurance. All the candidates promoted this posi-

tion, although it was the special claim of Dean and Dick Gephardt. And it is the party that fundamentally questions the way the war in Iraq was declared and the conduct of the American occupation. Again, this was the position of all the candidates but Lieberman.

The United States has long been without a political alternative to the positions of the neoliberals and the fundamentalists. The liberal Democrats have been marginalized as self-identified centrists moved the party away from basic alternative principles. The alternative now exists because of Dean's candidacy, or more precisely, because of the way the politics of small things created space for political freedom and redefinition in the American political landscape. People met and talked to each other, often virtually, and developed a capacity for concerted action. They redefined the situation, and generated power. A renewed democratic voice could be heard. A more serious dialogue about pressing issues of the day became part of mainstream politics, the politics of the two-party system. The Dean campaign generated a politics that went beyond Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. Ordinary people had a sense that there was now a real difference between the Republicans and the Democrats, and that they were responsible for making this difference.

They were the authors of a new "Democracy for America" (the new name of the Dean Web site as he continued his political activity after losing the primary).

Yet the critical voice was not heard clearly enough or, at least, was not accepted by the majority of the American electorate. The immediate reason for overlooking the virtual politics of small things constituted by antiwar and Democratic

activists is that it did not prevail in the general elections. In fact, parallel micropolitical activities on the right simply proved more powerful.

the right

The Internet mobilization and fund-raising drives of the antiwar movement and the Dean campaign had their mirror images in the churches and other institutions of the Christian Right. On the left, Rock the Vote and similar projects sought to move young voters who were likely to be against Bush. On the right, Redeem the Vote supported the Christian president. Both of these organizations were officially nonpartisan enterprises, affiliated with other nonpartisan organizations. Yet Rock the Vote was headed by a former Democratic National Committee director, with the support of such organizations as the Service Employees

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International Union, a progressive union. Redeem the Vote was staffed by students from the extremely conservative Patrick Henry College and endorsed by key figures of the Religious Right. Its partners included the Christian Broadcasting Network, Focus on the Family, and Fox News. Major pop artists with clear political agendas supported Rock the Vote, such as the Dixie Chicks and Public Enemy. Christian rappers and rockers supported Redeem the Vote. Both efforts were directed to getting out a partisan portion of the youth vote, using the expressive appeal of celebrity.

On the right, major nationwide organizations challenged the popular antiwar movement and the Dean campaign. The organizations of the right and left were similar even in form. The Christian Coalition advertised itself as “America’s Leading Grassroots Organization Defending Our Godly Heritage.” Just as MoveOn and similar organizations helped organize the left around some general principles, providing an alternative to the foreign and domestic policies of the right, the Christian Coalition and similar organizations formulated their position in opposition to the godless tendencies they see in American society. It opened its Web site with a call to action:

Today Christians are playing an active role in the government again by uniting and standing up for people of faith. Hundreds of pro-family political leaders have been elected to local and state and federal office. Pro-family activism is changing policy and influencing decisions from school boards all the way to the U.S. Congress. You can help by joining us. ... Add your voice to the millions across America who have said it’s time for people of faith to speak up and become involved. With your help, innocent human lives will no longer go unprotected by our laws, more public schools will meet minimum standards, and fewer of our young people will be snared by drugs, violence and sexual promiscuity. ... Your becoming involved means that Christian Coalition of America can distribute more voter guides and scorecards, train more activists, and sway more critical votes in Congress and the states. By joining us, you won’t just sway one vote—you will impact America forever.

The Web site highlighted three ways to make a difference: being a role model by becoming a “prayer coordinator,” praying for the nation daily; starting a Christian Coalition chapter; or simply joining a chapter. In their daily lives, the coalition maintained, people can easily and effectively make a difference.

This suggested activism resembled the virtual activism of the antiwar movement and the Dean campaign, with an important difference. The link between the individual and the large-scale movement had a specific local setting: the

church and affiliated organizations. As Kimberly Conger put it, “[A]ctivists on the religious right have known each other for years and likely live in the same town, sit together on mission boards, have children who go to the same Christian schools and Christian colleges, and support the same charitable organizations. These people are friends, and they are connected to each other in ways that go far beyond politics.”

This grounding in local, everyday practices was an important strength of the Christian Right and gave them real tactical advantages during the elections. The Republicans mobilized through friends and neighbors; Democrats did so through strangers. When Democratic campaign workers organized through meet-ups approached potential voters, they probably did not know the people they were meeting. Republicans were likely members of the same church and community organizations. As thirty years of research into social movements would predict, the personal networks produced better results.



Photo by AP/Wide World

Doing politics?

politics or religion?

The community ties of the right, however, challenge democratic ideals. The political mobilization was embedded

in and directed from institutions that are not democratic in principle or in practice. Religious leaders were key actors in the movement and claimed a superior authority when it comes to God. The ministers' position in their communities as dominant, authoritative figures challenges democratic principles.

When people came together in churches and did politics large and small, the authority of revelation threatened to replace democratic interaction. Consider the following media report: "Religion and politics sit side by side on a table outside the sanctuary at Akron Baptist Temple—a book on 'The Passion of Christ' next to a stack of election voter guides. From the pulpit, Reverend Dallas Billington had a message for the faithful. 'Vote your Bible.'" The pastor joined the religious message of the church and the politics of the Republic, guiding his flock not only religiously but also politically. People interacted on matters of political concern, defined the situation, and voted Republican. They acted together and got out the vote. They acted together and demonstrated for issues of common concern, against "the homosexual agenda," for "family values," against abortion, for the war on terrorism, and so forth. They did so with the guidance of their ministers.

Thus, the face-to-face interactions in churches were embedded in a system of support and coordination. Social movements, such as the Christian Coalition, tried to mobilize individual and group support for their specific religious and political agenda, which was primarily articulated locally in churches by religious leaders. Political support for specific politicians was interpreted as a religious and moral duty. Invoking the religious mandate ended political debate. And then political operatives such as those in the Bush/Cheney reelection campaign used this religious mandate to mobilize voters.

These interactions on the right matched and ultimately bested the mobilization capacity of the left in 2004. There was a high turnout, and despite the commonsense assumption that this would aid the Democrats, the Republicans prevailed, winning Congress and the White House. But this victory overshadowed a long-term consequence of the local mobilizations in the churches, which were connected to the broader mobilizations of the Republican Party and related social movements. They have changed political discussion in the United States: they have given voice to the Christian Right on cultural matters, from the hot campaign issues of abortion and gay marriage to the issue of broadcasting decency and the insertion of a religious sensibility into public life. Christian and other conservatives have articulated their concerns about such matters and put them on the public agenda. The Christian Right found its voice and was heard, and its significance for democracy is a critical matter.

democratic prospects

Motivated by both theoretical and normative concerns, I began to explore the politics of small things as a study of the small things that added up to the large transformations of 1989. The attacks of 2001 changed the project. My investigation became a desperate attempt to understand how those little things might still matter, how what I was describing as the politics of small things might present a critical alternative to the tragic struggles between the terrorists, the antiterrorists, and the anti-antiterrorists. Armed as they were with grand narratives of Islamic jihad, the war against evil, and struggles against globalization and empire, it seemed to me that they all forgot that democracy is in the details. I think I have had some success in working toward this new goal, but as I was concluding my research, I faced a serious theoretical problem. If the politics of small things offers an alternative to the dominant grand narratives and their coercive projects, how should we understand a micropolitics that extends these narratives, such as the micropolitics of the V Right?

Theoretically, I understand that the politics of small things is as open to those who support the status quo as to those who wish to change it. Indeed, my appreciation of this dimension of politics builds on the writings of Hannah Arendt (and, incidentally, Erving Goffman) and her understanding of politics, which is drawn from her reflections on the defense of the free polis in antiquity, basically a conservative project. And the defense of freedom is one of the ways that the Christian Right understands its politics. But there still seemed to be something wrong. When I looked closely at the Christian Right, I realized what it was.

These conservatives preached to the converted, or the born again, and substituted preaching for politicking as a matter of principle. Their "truth" was the direct opponent of politics, of political contestation. Opinion was tightly closed. Political position was defined by religion. This is the same conflation found among the Islamic terrorists and the crusading antiterrorists (21st-century echoes of 20th-century totalitarianism). In supporting Republican candidates, the Christian Right was following religious principles, not engaging in partisan politics, as they themselves strongly argued in trying to maintain their churches' tax-exempt status. The alternatives they presented did not emerge from a free politics of small things, but from a common commitment to religious revelation. This contributed to an electoral victory, but it unsettled democratic principle.

I realize that this judgment of the politics of the Christian Right is certainly a political one, but it is based on theoretical insight and not only partisanship. I am concerned, perhaps more than many Americans, about the infusion of reli-

gious rhetoric into American public life. In the 20th century, "truth" substituted for politics in the modern tyrannies based on the "sciences" of race and class, as Arendt has shown. In the 21st century, the new truths of totalitarianism are based on religion (attached to a variety of religious traditions). On the central political stage, the declared war against the axis of evil seems to me to resemble too closely the religious fundamentalism of the jihadists. The politics of the Christian Right, off center stage, as it mobilized support for Republican candidates and the Republican Party, likewise substituted religious truth for political opinion.

As they created an electoral power that has changed the political map, those in the Christian Right have confused their truth with commitment to the open quality of American politics. They know as a matter of faith the connection between past, present, and future. They have supported a political regime that uses torture as a conventional instrument of its foreign policy and is willing to compromise basic liberties domestically. They use the lie in politics in a distinctively modern way, lying not only to enemies, but, more significantly, to themselves. The inner circle knows as a matter of faith, as the "reality-based community" proceeds with archaic concerns about the messy details of human experience outside the ideological script. All of this repeats the cultural pattern of 20th-century tyranny.

The struggle against fundamentalism, of both the terrorists and the antiterrorists, both foreign and domestic, is not primarily about the left and right, or about a clash of civilizations. It is a struggle for democratic principles, and this holds true off the center stage, in the meet-ups and the churches. It is not primarily about progressives versus reac-

tionaries or Democrats versus Republicans. It is about democracy itself.

recommended readings

Hannah Arendt. *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin Group, 1989). This collection of Arendt's essays is an excellent introduction to the full range of her thought and her understanding of politics; see especially "Truth and Politics," which reveals the normative dimensions of the politics of small things.

Randall Collins. *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton University Press, 2004). Develops the theoretical significance of the micro-interactive component of social life.

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Harvard University Press, 1994). A classic work on television's contribution to the constitution of the social order, demonstrating how media are woven into the fabric of society.

Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Knopf, 1972). Anticipates the full range of Goffman's distinctive sociology, revealing the interactive creation of "the politics of small things."

Howard Rheingold. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Basic Books, 2003). An exploration of the political consequences of the new mobile electronic media, pointing toward new ways in which small things have big consequences.

Percentage of Americans who believe gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly in the military: 58. Percent strongly opposed: 15.