



LUND UNIVERSITY

# CROWDSOURCING DEMOCRACY?

“AMERICANS ELECT” AND CITIZEN  
PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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## **Abstract**

As developed democracies experience a decrease in political engagement and a rise in the adoption of new communication technologies, new forms and models of citizen participation continue to emerge. This research paper has the objective of understanding how citizen participation is being affected by the widespread use of the Internet. In order to do so, a case study of the Americans Elect initiative is presented, using theories and concepts related to participation, including the public sphere, participation, voice, citizenship, deliberative democracy, democratic deficit as well as theories related to political communication. A discussion of these theories is presented with the aim of understanding whether and how they can be applied to the context of citizen participation and the Internet. This issue is further explored by focusing on Dahlgren's concept of civic cultures. The paper will also present a discussion on the concept of crowdsourcing, and how it can be applied to the Americans Elect initiative. Finally, considering the importance traditional media still has as an information provider, a discourse analysis of news stories related to Americans Elect is also presented.

Keywords: participation, democracy, crowdsourcing, Internet, elections, Americans Elect, media, citizenship

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	7
2. Research questions.....	9
3. Theoretical framework.....	10
3.1 Public sphere.....	10
3.2 Citizenship.....	12
3.3 Participation.....	13
3.4 Voice.....	14
3.5 Deliberative democracy.....	15
3.6 Democratic deficit.....	16
3.7 Civic cultures.....	17
3.8 Political communication.....	19
3.9 Importance of media.....	19
3.10 Importance of the Internet.....	20
3.11 Crowdsourcing.....	22
4. Methodology.....	24
4.1 Studying the Internet.....	24
4.2 The case study.....	25
4.3 Discourse analysis.....	29
4.4 Limitations.....	31
5. Case study: Americans Elect.....	32
5.1 An introduction to Americans Elect.....	32
5.1.1 The American electoral system.....	32
5.1.2 Predecessor.....	33
5.1.3 The project.....	34
5.2 Context.....	36
5.2.1 The use of the Internet in politics.....	36
5.2.2 Internet and the news.....	37
5.2.3 The debate over political participation and the Internet.....	38
5.2.4 Decrease in citizen engagement.....	40
5.2.5 Rise in Internet adoption and access.....	41
5.2.6 Crowdsourcing and politics.....	42
5.3 Analysis.....	45
5.3.1 The role of the Internet in Americans Elect.....	45
5.3.2 Americans Elect and the crowdsourcing model.....	56
5.3.3 Americans Elect and civic cultures.....	60
5.3.4 Americans Elect and traditional media.....	67
6. Conclusion.....	74
7. Executive summary.....	78
8. References.....	83
9. Annexes.....	89

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# 1. Introduction

Communication among people is fundamental for political activity to take place. Furthermore, “the nature of political activity varies according to the type and cost of the means of communications” (Rash, 1997, p.2.) The arrival and adoption of the Internet has brought along fundamental changes in both politics and communication, as separate entities but also in the way they relate to each other. As Western developed democracies face a decrease of engagement and participation among citizens at the same time as the widespread adoption of new communication technologies takes place, new forms of civic participation start to emerge. The Internet becomes a space where “high tensions between state-centric and democratic citizenship can be played out” (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.7.)

Although research on the political potential of the Internet has been discussed since the 1990s, with promoters and skeptics giving forecasts of what would and would not happen, it has not been until recent years that new initiatives have started to establish themselves and received attention from citizens and mainstream media alike. The current climate of political participation in advanced Western democracies such as the United States is characterized by the development of two trends that started emerging in the last century, the decrease in civic engagement among citizens, and the rise and fast adoption of new forms of media such as the Internet. In the particular case of the United States, this has resulted in the arrival of new citizen initiatives that aim to use these new technologies as a way to engage in political participation.

This thesis has the objective to use the concrete case of the Americans Elect initiative, as a way to understand more about the current state of citizen participation, and the role the Internet has in it. This will be done through a case study of Americans Elect,

which will be comprised of a contextual section, and an analysis of the initiative via existent theories on citizenship, participation and communication. Additionally, a special focus will be made on the concept of crowdsourcing, as a possible way to understand how the Internet is being used to foster participation among citizens with the use of new models that have been used in the Internet for purposes not related to politics. The role of traditional media in the coverage of these new initiatives will also be analyzed using the discourse analysis method, considering the influence it still has on the way citizens relate to politics.

## 2. Research Questions

This research project has the objective of answering four main questions:

1. What is the role of the Internet in the citizen participation initiative Americans Elect?
2. How is the process of crowdsourcing being used as facilitator for citizen participation in the Presidential elections in the United States, specifically the Americans Elect Initiative?
3. How can the concept of civic cultures enhance understanding of the Americans Elect Initiative and the wider context of citizen participation in media and democracy?
4. What is the role of traditional media in the coverage of the Americans Elect project?

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In order to understand the phenomenon of citizen participation, it is relevant to approach it to a defined set of theoretical concepts. For this particular case, the theories more relevant to the discussion of civic participation and the Internet can include the public sphere, participation, voice, citizenship, deliberative democracy, democratic deficit as well as theories related to political communication. The concepts of public sphere, participation, voice, citizenship and deliberative democracy are of importance to this project given that they can be considered elements of the process of participation, which have been studied by different authors, and as such, must be understood within a larger context. Democratic deficit is important because it can give a theoretical understanding to the phenomenon of decrease in political engagement. Political communication is useful for the study of the relation between traditional media and the political.

#### **3.1 The public sphere**

The study and debate on the relation between media and democracy has often been framed within the theory of the public sphere, developed by Jürgen Habermas in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Habermas defined the public sphere as “a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (1974 p.49-55, in Rheingold, 2008, p.101.) Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public “here is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public” (Rheingold, 2008, p.101). In the public sphere, citizens act as a public, with the benefit of not being subjected to threats or punishment, discussing issues of general interest. The public sphere thus becomes a space where citizens can get together and freely discussed ideas pertinent

to them.

The public sphere is also associated with themes such as communicative rationality, civil society, and deliberative democracy (Dahlgren, 2009, p.5), the latter of which has its own section in this theoretical framework. The debate of the public sphere is related to issues that affect democracy, whether by promoting it or threatening it. Dahlgren (2009, p.72) mentions that the political public sphere is perceived as made of universally accessible, institutional communicative spaces that facilitate opinion and discussion, through the unrestricted flow of information and ideas that are relevant for the public. Some public spheres can be informal and leaned towards discussion, while others can be made of stronger ties, and can give way to decision-making. According to Bennett (2005, p.107) the public sphere, in its most basic form, as Habermas first defined it, has experienced shrinkage with the development of the modern society. Part of the responsibility for this lies in the growth of personal communication technologies, which have replaced the need for physical spaces in which citizens gather and discuss. Instead of having to gather at a specific time in a defined, limited space, people can now express their views across time and space, in an almost immediate manner.

The concept of the public sphere itself has also been subject to criticism. Some observers have placed emphasis on some possible exclusionary characteristics of the public sphere. According to Coleman and Ross (2010, p.29) in the Habermasian sphere, the public is a homogenous entity, which doesn't take into consideration "disruptive social elements, such as foreigners, dissidents, and deviants". Other critics of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere include Nancy Fraser (1989, 1990), who mentions the fact that there is a gender blindness to his approach, while Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) discussed the possibility of an alternative public sphere, opposed to the one described by Habermas, which would include the proletariat.

According to Chadwick (2006, p.88) “most scholars have abandoned Habermas’ ‘empirical claims’ altogether and instead have used the concept of the public sphere as a normative ideal”, in which the communication structures of contemporary societies can be studied and discussed. Although the original descriptions of the public sphere might be difficult to replicate in present times, the concept itself can still be used as a starting point in the discussion of participation and democracy, at a moment where discussions and the flow of information, basic premises for a public sphere, can take place in many forms, either in the real or the virtual world.

### **3.2 Citizenship**

The role of the citizen has traditionally been closely linked to that of institutional politics. In fact, Carpentier mentions that citizen participation takes place only when it is discussed together with institutionalized politics (2011, p.16.) Some researchers, however, have found that as individual identification with common institutions becomes weaker, citizens become disaffected with the political institutions, such as states, parties or church religion. Instead, people increasingly prefer to vote for persons and their ideas rather than for political parties and their programs (Corner and Pels, 2003, p.7.) This gradual but notable change, has led to some observers become worried about the health of democracy, while other observers merely note that a change is taking place (Bennett, 2003, p.139.) Although citizenship is traditionally associated to institutions, the fact that new forms of participation take place outside of them should be also noted. This point will be further discussed in the Analysis section, in regard to the Americans Elect project.

Democracy, a key element of participation because of its ability to involve citizens in decision-making processes, is defined by three different factors, including “the variety

of democratic manifestations, the distinction between formal democracy and democratic culture, and the distinction between narrow political systems and broad political dimensions of the social“ (Carpentier, 2011, p.15.) This broad approach can also be used to interpret citizenship, making it a part of participation, not only within political institutions, but also beyond the traditional systems. This happens, at the same time as citizenship, now finds itself in a post-ideological moment, in which the political decisions people make are not as bound by ideology or other affiliations as before, and instead, favor “issue-specific and personality-bound forms of political recognition and engagement” (Corner and Pels, 2003, p.7.)

### **3.3 Participation**

If the public sphere then becomes the space where citizens gather to discuss, participation then becomes the act of taking part in this activity. Although participation is not an exclusive concept to the public sphere, they are nonetheless significantly connected. Theory on participation and its different manifestations has been researched by Nico Carpentier (2011, p.351), who mentions that the history of the democratic revolution is characterized by continuous attempts to increase levels of participation, through institutionalized channels at first, but also outside institutionalized politics, as well as the interconnections between them. These efforts have therefore given significance to the notion of struggle, and its complex dynamics. Participation, however, is not a fixed notion, as the ways and spaces in which it takes place find themselves in a continuum of change, inside or outside political institutions.

Just as political activity can go beyond institutionalized politics, the same can be said for participation, one of its key components. Such expansion came to be due to a growth in the different types of political practices that emerged from actors that were

outside the realm of institutionalized politics, such as activists, interest groups, or civil society. These new actors, by integrating themselves to political activity bypassing traditional, institutionalized politics, have not only opened the space of the political, but also made participation more heterogeneous and multidirectional (Carpentier, 2011, p.39.) There is however, still some skepticism in regard to the potential of participation in democratic processes. Although discussing formats more associated to media contexts than politics, they are significant to observe, considering how, this case relates to a media platform. Coleman and Ross (2010, p.63) mention how audience participation formats in TV shows fail to demonstrate how they could contribute to the development of a democratic public sphere, by among other things, failing to make a political discussion have impact beyond the show.

### **3.4 Voice**

As participation becomes the act through which the citizen tries to be involved in decision-making processes, this can only take place once by utilizing the voice.

Nick Couldry (2010, p.2), proposes a definition of voice:

I offer ‘voice’ here as a connecting term that interrupts neoliberalism’s view of economics and economic life, challenges neoliberalism’s claim that its view of politics as market functioning trumps all others, enables us to build an alternative view of politics that is at least partly oriented to value processes of voice, and includes within that view of politics a recognition of people’s capacities for social cooperation based on voice.

For Couldry, neoliberalism uses democracy as an instrument for achieving individual ‘freedom’; disregarding the social and political ends that democracy should have

(2010, p.66.) Furthermore, neoliberalism denies voice, is unsustainable as a culture within the economy and has a negative impact on democratic processes (p.135.) The author mentions that in “post-neoliberal politics”, no institution should have legitimacy if it prioritizes other values over the value of voice (p.136.)

Although Couldry acknowledges the dangers that democracies face in neoliberal democracies, it should be considered that they are not exclusive responsibility of the neoliberal model, but a series of more complicated factors that interconnect. Nevertheless, I believe that his definition of voice in terms of the citizen’s ability to bring change to political processes is very relevant for the purposes of this project.

### **3.5 Deliberative democracy**

Deliberative democracy emerges as a concept that fuses elements of political theory with perspectives on communication (Dahlgren, 2009, p.86). Deliberative democracy deals with civic agency and how it takes place in the form of communication. Built on the core principles of Habermasian theory, in a deliberative democracy everyone who has the ability to act and speak are allowed to discuss, ask and engage with each other in what is known as the “ideal speech situation”, (Habermas, 1990, p.86 in Carpentier, 2011, p.35.)

In deliberative democracy, participation, a concept that has been discussed in the previous section, takes a multidirectional mode given the dual trajectory in which public opinion is transformed into communicative power by the institutions, but also because of the strong emphasis on the “procedural-deliberative” (Carpentier, 2011, p.36.)

The concept of deliberative democracy has been debated among researchers, who have brought up arguments for it, while others have done so against. The arguments of those in favor of deliberative democracy, mention that having an open discussion of the issues that matter to the participants at different levels, gives them an exposure to different points of view, becoming beneficial for democracy. In addition, according to Habermas (1996) for deliberation to take place, four conditions must be met: individuals must be able to express their own ideas and criticize others', the concepts of force and power associated with social status must be eliminated, the arguments primarily based on dogma or tradition must be exposed, and truth is to be sought by seeking a consensus. (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.18.) On the contrary, those against deliberative democracy mention the difficulty of having groups of people separated by time and space having a conversation on a single topic of significance for everybody. Furthermore, according to Coleman and Blumer (2009, p.19), some democratic theorists have argued that the rhetoric of deliberative democracy is a “thin disguise for a range of culturally hegemonic practices which tend to keep the powerful and articulate on top and everyone else in their place.”

### **3.6 Democratic deficit**

Even if the conditions exist for a public sphere where individuals can have a voice in political affairs, against the backdrop of deliberative democracy, this does not necessarily mean that participation itself will rise by default. On the contrary, democratic spaces can also experience what observers have defined as democratic deficit.

Democratic deficit can be defined as “the failure of citizens to engage with them and of elected representatives to respond to those who do take the trouble to participate. Democracy is seen as suffering from a “deficit” that can be rectified by enhancing the

voices of the public and the listening skills of politicians” (Coleman, 2008, p.192.) According to Couldry (2010, p.64), the democratic deficit arises from the fact that democracy operates on neoliberal principles, leaving behind the notion that democracy should be a form of “social organization in which government’s legitimacy is measured by the degree to which it takes into account of its citizens’ particular voice.” While making the economic doctrine of neoliberalism responsible for the decline of democratic participation is debatable at best (a debate that will not take place in these pages), Couldry makes a resounding point in noting the importance of citizen participation in the legitimization of governments.

The phenomenon of democratic deficit arrives at point in time in which new opportunities for citizens to participate, engage and question their governments are more prominent than before. However, people express feelings of being ignored by the media and shunned by the elites, and frustration at the promises of democracy (Coleman and Ross, p.154.) Governments appear to be “remote, insensitive and untouchable”, making people disengaged from the institutions and processes of democracy (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.1.) Politicians, on the other hand, appear to see the public as “at best, otherwise engaged, and, at worst, irresponsibly apathetic.” (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.2.) While these groups seem to place responsibility on the other for the democratic deficit, the political system in Western democracies shows signs of exhaustion, as the ideological differences between parties decreases, and parties become more “voter-oriented rather than member-oriented, as citizens’ identification with specific parties has become looser” (Dahlgren, 2009, p.22.)

### **3.7 Civic culture**

As citizens look to participate in the political life, it should also be a matter of discussion and study how citizens engage in political processes. One of the ways in

which this can be done is via the concept of civic culture. Developed by Dahlgren, civic culture as an idea begins with the notion that citizens are social agents, whose cultural factors can have certain effects on the actions and communication of people within a political context (Dahlgren, 2003, p.152.) The concept of civic culture, is not considered by the author as a theory, as it does not search to fully explain citizen participation. However, it can still be used as a means to understand “human action and meaning-making in concrete settings. “(Dahlgren, 2003, p.153)

In order to understand civic cultures, it is important to understand what a culture is. According to Dahlgren (2003, p.153), cultures:

“Consist of patterns of communication, practices and meaning; they provide taken for granted orientations – factual and normative – as well 5 other resources for collective life. They are internalized, inter subjectively: they exist ‘in our heads’, as it were, guiding and informing action, speech and understanding.”

The concept of the civic culture is important and relevant for the objectives of this project. On one hand, it uses the citizen as its foundation. Civic culture, according to Dahlgren has a normative base, becoming a necessary element for democracy (Dahlgren, 2003, p.154.) However, civic culture can also be affected by different societal factors such as: the social structure, economics, education, organizational possibilities, infrastructure, and spatiality. However, there is another important factor that can shape civic culture, which is media. Dahlgren’s focus on media as a factor that can chance civic culture is the other reason why the concept is important for this research. In the analytical section of this work, the concept of civic culture will be further elaborated, and used to try to understand how citizen participation takes place in the Americans Elect project, given the importance the concept places on the citizen, but also on the different cultural factors that surround it.

### **3.8 Political Communication**

Traditional political communication research has focused on the communicative interaction between the formal actors that are part of the political communication system, such as the media, the citizens and the political actors and institutions, according to Dahlgren (2009, p.4.) Hill and Hughes (1998, p.22), on the other hand, state that political communication takes part among four actors: the public, the print and broadcast media, the government, and interest groups. The main differences between the two positions is that Dahlgren mentions citizens, while Hill and Hughes mention audiences, a subtle, yet significant difference, given that as it was mentioned previously citizenship involves participation, whereas audience can also include non-citizens.

### **3.9 Importance of Media**

In democracies, the media play an important role when it comes to politics. As citizens gather in a public sphere with the objective to participate in the discussion or relevant matters to them, in order to engage, debate and act, they need to be informed of what is happening. For this reason, information, which is presented via the media, becomes a crucial actor for the proper functioning of a working democracy. In order to have a thoughtful discussion, the citizens need to be knowledgeable and informed discussants. (Hill and Hughes, p.98, p.2)

The media is the way through which information is disseminated, but it can also be the space where the discussion takes place. However, in order for the media to be helpful to democracy, the content also needs to be of significance for the citizens. According to Herman and McChesney, (1997, p.4), the media:

are the preeminent vehicles of communication through which the public participates in the political process, and the quality of their contribution to the public sphere is an important determinant of the quality of democracy. If their performance is poor, people will be ignorant, isolated, and depoliticized, demagoguery will thrive, and a small elite will easily capture and maintain control over decision-making on society's most important political matters.

Together with the quality of the information that is disseminated, and how equally it is distributed, there are other factors that need to be considered when studying the importance of media in democratic processes, such as the fact that even if it has the potential to affect participation, it is not a guarantee that this will happen. In addition, it should be noted that media is not “a unified societal force, but are a complex set of institutions, diverse in the way that they operate and in the representations and communicative opportunities that they provide” (Dahlgren, 2009, p.3.)

### **3.10 Importance of the Internet**

The study of the Internet and its potential for participation in democratic processes could be inscribed within the frame of political communication. However, there are some characteristics to this medium that are important to understand separately. Studies on the relation between Internet and politics have begun to be carried out since the late nineties, with a mix of optimism (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.89) or altogether dismissal (Dahlgren, 2009, p.159.)

Kenneth Hacker and Jan van Dijk (2003) (cited by Chadwick, 2006, p.53) developed a definition of “digital democracy”:

“a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using information and communications technology or computer-mediated communication instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional (...) political practices.”

Even if the Internet has been radically transformed since the year 2000, this definition remains useful and relevant today, as it can be used to study events such as the Americans Elect project, considering how it is using Internet-enabled technologies as another way of taking part in traditional political practices, such as elections, with the added feature of bypassing geographical obstacles.

In the same year, Margolis and Resnick (2000, p.8) proposed a categorization for the different types of Internet politics: politics within the Net (which deals with the political life of cyber-communities), politics that affects the Net (public policy issues) and political uses of the Net (the activities of citizens, activists, parties and others, to achieve political goals having little to do with the Internet per se.) It is the last category, political uses of the Net, in which the Americans Elect project falls.

In terms of how the Internet has affected the public sphere, evidence appears to be “equivocal” and the conclusions tied to preconceived assumptions of democracy (p.160.) While authors like Benker (2006) and Ball (2005) (in Dahlgren, 2009, p.162) dismiss the potential of the Internet to alter the public sphere, Dahlgren states that the Internet does make a positive difference in terms of involvement (p.170.) These results, however, have not diminished the interest of researchers on the topic of Internet and democracy. Coleman and Ross (2010, p.113) mention that the arrival of the Internet has also been seen as a potential space for a “many-to-many deliberative

interaction” that has been missing in most political democracies. In addition, they say that the Internet can work for public deliberation, given its low-cost entry, large volumes of accessible information and asynchronous interactivity. On the other hand, Buskqvist (2010, p.208) reaches the conclusion in his study that even if the web can be used in a way that realizes some of the potential of the Internet, its mere existence does not create the ideal public space by itself. Furthermore, it is mentioned that in order to become an actual public arena, the Internet must be open, public and visible.

### **3.11 Crowdsourcing**

The concept of crowdsourcing will be used as part of this research project to identify ways in which the Internet is being used as an enhancer of participation in democracies. It should be noted that this concept does not come from the field of media and communication, or political science, but it can nevertheless be useful as a tool to analyze a particular event that is taking place, the Americans Elect project.

The term crowdsourcing is attributed to Jeff Howe, who published in June 2006 an article in Wired Magazine with the name of “The Rise of Crowdsourcing”. In this article, Howe described how different organizations outsourced tasks to an undefined group of people. Howe mentioned cases in industries as varied as the pharmaceutical or entertainment, in which people would collaborate in a project, without having to necessarily interact with each other. This phenomenon can take place either online, or offline, although Howe also indicates that by being connected to the Internet, users can participate in a crowdsourced project, regardless of their geographical location.

Howe later creates a “white paper” definition of crowdsourcing, which can be consulted on his website:

“Crowdsourcing is the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”

Crowdsourcing is also possible due to the reduction of cost barriers, especially in areas such as product design software or video cameras, making it easier for amateurs to join professionals and work as part of the crowd. “The labor isn’t always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees. It’s not outsourcing; it’s crowdsourcing.” (Howe, 2006.)

Although this concept was not developed for political purposes, some of its characteristics can serve as an analogy for the way certain participation projects are being developed, such as Americans Elect. A further discussion of this will be done in the Analysis section of this work.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Studying the Internet

In order to better understand the Americans Elect project, it is important to rely on a solid methodology. Given that one of the main characteristics of this project is that it is using citizen participation in the Internet, as the means to achieve a political objective, it is important to be aware of the impact the arrival of the Internet has had in research, not only as a topic of study, but on the way investigation is carried out as well.

The significant impact of the Internet in the way social science would be carried out has already been described by Fischer et al. (2008, p.519), who mention that it will help “advancing the scale of activities rendered feasible, significant changes in the kinds of research carried out and, importantly, the kinds of subject deemed ‘researchable’.”

According to Christine Hine (2005, p.1), a recognized researcher for studying issues related to research on the Internet, new technologies have brought with them new ways to discover and study interactions of a different nature:

The coming of the Internet has posed a significant challenge for our understanding of research methods. Across the social sciences and humanities people have found themselves wanting to explore the new social formations that arise when people communicate and organize themselves via email, web sites, mobile phones and the rest of the increasingly commonplace mediated forms of communication.

These new developments are now presenting both challenges and opportunities for researchers, as the possibilities to do investigation have expanded in topic and scope. This, in turn, has had an impact on research methods themselves, given that they have been traditionally been used in offline environments and there is hesitation as to how well they can work online, or what modifications would be necessary to use them, as “methodological solutions gain much of their authority through precedent, and it is not clear as yet just how far the heritage of research methodology applies to new media and what gaps in our understanding are still to be exposed” (Hine, 2005, p.1.)

Considering the aim of this study is to have a better understanding of the citizen initiative called Americans Elect, including the impact new technologies have on the promotion of participation, as well as the role that traditional media outlets play in this regard, it has been considered that the way to approach this is through a combination of the case study method together with discourse analysis.

## **4.2 The case study**

Americans Elect is a new initiative, with a particular set of characteristics, goals and context. For this reason, the case study method can be of help to have a deeper understanding of its functioning and its relation to theories of citizen participation. Yin (1985, p.18) mentions that “if you need to know “how” or “why” the program had worked (or not), you would lean toward either a case study or a field experiment.” As it can be seen from the research questions that have previously been discussed, the purpose of this research is to study the “how” and “why” of the initiative, and as such, case study fits this purpose.

Another two characteristics of the case study are the fact that it does not require control over behavioral events, and that it should focus on contemporary events. (Yin, 1985, p.17.) The Americans Elect project complies with both characteristics. First, in order to learn more about the relation of this project to theories on participation, there is no need for a researcher to control or manipulate specific or any other type of behavioral elements, as the focus will be on the structure of the program and the ways in which it relates to certain theories. Second, Americans Elect is a project that was created with the objective of bringing a third candidate to the Presidential election of the United States in 2012, making it thus a current event. In fact, at the moment this investigation is taking place, the Americans Elect project is also still in development. For this reason, this research is not studying the results or the impact of the project in the elections, but an understanding of the theoretical and sociopolitical context in which it came to be.

Case study, probably for not having a rigid structure or approach as other methods, as well as the fact that it fails to provide basis for scientific generalization, has been criticized or dismissed by other researchers. In response to this criticism, Yin (1985, p.21) argues that:

Case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a “sample,” and the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization.)

By means of this explanation it is possible to say that this project aims to draw conclusions that can be applied to the specific case of Americans Elect, the unit of analysis of the case (Yin, 1985, p.31), creating critical examination of the project.

According to Yin (p.100), there are two types of analysis strategies: relying on theoretical propositions, and developing a case description. In the first kind, which is preferred by Yin, the researcher follows “the theoretical proposition that led to the case study. The original objectives and design of the case study presumably were based on such propositions, which in turn reflected a set of research questions, reviews of the literature, and new insights”. In the second case, a descriptive framework for organizing the case study is needed. Using this approach, this research will use the “relying on theoretical propositions strategy” as part of its objectives is to understand more about Americans Elect in relation to theories of civic participation in political processes. Additionally, the steps taken to carry this research comply to those established by Yin.

Another researcher of case study methods is Berg (2007, p.283), who has developed the following definition:

A method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions.

Following this definition, it is also possible to determine that the case study approach, from the perspective of Berg, also makes this method suitable for the study of Americans Elect, as the aim is to understand how this particular group works. Other characteristics of the case study, according to Berg are “an approach capable of examining simple or complex phenomenon, with units of analysis varying from single individuals to large corporations and businesses; it entails using a variety of lines of action in its data-gathering segments, and can meaningfully make use of and contribute to the application of theory” (2007, p.283.)

Berg also states that there is an advantage to the case study method, which is that by focusing in one single event, group or phenomenon, the researcher looks to discover its “manifest interaction of significant factors characteristic” of it (Berg, 2007, p.284.) In this particular case, although there may be other groups or projects that may have similar structures or goals, by focusing solely on Americans Elect, this research has the objective of learning about the interaction between the Internet, citizenship and participation.

According to Berg, there are three types of case study: exploratory, explanatory and descriptive (2007, p.292.) For Americans Elect, it will be a descriptive case, as it includes a descriptive theory behind the project, which aims to understand more the concept on civic participation in democratic processes. As it has been mentioned in the theoretical framework section, the main concepts of citizenship, participation, voice, democratic deficit are explained, as a way to understand the background of this phenomenon. Additionally, this research tries to incorporate Dahlgren’s theory of civic cultures (2009) to this specific case, and analyze it.

Given that part of the objectives of this research is to learn more about the role of the Internet in the Americans Elect initiative, as well as understand how the process of crowdsourcing could be used as a facilitator for citizen participation, this research will use the website of Americans Elect ([americansselect.org](http://americansselect.org)) as one of its main sources of information, considering the website is being used in this case as a channel for the dissemination of information, but also as a medium where participants can interact with each other. In order to understand the impact of an online initiative had on youth participation, Miegel and Olsson (2010) carried out a research on this case which involved three components: an analysis of the producers behind the website, an analysis of the website’s content and an analysis of the website users. For this research, Miegel and Olsson’s analysis of the website will be used as a reference on how to do analysis for a website, considering that they also worked on a case study

with similar themes and objectives.

### **4.3 Discourse analysis**

As one of the research questions of this investigation deals with trying to find out how the American Elects project is represented in traditional media outlets, it is considered that a discourse analysis approach would be the appropriate one in this case.

One of the main investigators of discourse analysis is Teun A. van Dijk, who mentions that research method began to be studied as transdisciplinary field of study in the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s in different disciplines of the humanities and social sciences “interested in the systematic study of the structures, functions, and processing of text and talk 1991, p.109.) For this particular case, the discourse analysis will focus on news stories from traditional media outlets whose main topic is the Americans Elect project. Although the stories will be collected via Internet, they will come from the websites of major traditional publications in the United States, meaning publications that are also published in print, and not only exist on a web-based format.

The reason it is important to understand the way the Americans Elect project is portrayed via the study of news stories related to the topic, is that in spite of the technological shifts in information production and dissemination, news remain a major way in which citizens get informed, as it has been discussed in the Theoretical Framework and Context sections. As van Dijk states: “There is probably no other discursive practice, besides everyday conversation, that is engaged in so frequently and by so many people as news in the press and on television” (1991, p.110.) The discursive analysis of these stories can potentially give an important view on how traditional media sees online-enhanced citizen participation movements.

In order to carry out the discourse analysis of the selected news stories, the methodology will follow the analytical example described by van Dijk. In particular, a focus will be made in textual analysis. One of the characteristics of discourse analysis, according to van Dijk, is that it describes text and talk in terms of theories developed for different levels or dimensions of discourse. Discourse analysis can be studied using a textual understanding, which includes understanding the text semantics, the superstructures and the style and rhetoric of the text (1991, p.112.)

Text semantics include identifying the meaning of the text, what it discusses, and the implications it has in terms of language. In this instance, the researcher looks for “local coherence of the text (1991, p.112), which tries to see if the subsequent propositions of the text are bound together, via relations of time, condition, cause and consequence. In addition to finding out if the text is locally coherent, the researcher will look to see if it is also functionally coherent. This means that a proposition should have a function specification, paraphrase, contrast, or example, in relation to a previous proposition. According to van Dijk, it is possible to see that news stories are usually connected by a relation of specification in which “more general propositions are followed by more specific ones that give further details” (p.112.) Text semantics also involves two important characteristics. The global coherence of a text is described as semantic unity, in which it is possible to identify the main themes or topics (p.113.) The implications, on the other hand, involve what is not explicitly expressed in a text, or the analysis of the “unsaid”, which “is sometimes more revealing than the study of what is actually expressed in the text” (p.114.)

Besides the text semantics, in discourse analysis it is also possible to study the superstructures, which involve the way the topics are organized according to their function in the overall text. In the case of the news story, according to van Dijk, stories follow a “hierarchical schema, consisting of such conventional categories as

Headline, Lead, Main Events, Context, History, Verbal Reactions, and Comments” (1991, p.115.) According to van Dijk, style is “textual result of choices between alternative ways of saying more or less the same thing by using different words or a different syntactic structure (1991, p.115.) By studying the style of a text, the researcher aims to establish the social and ideological implications behind the choices made for writing the news story.

The combination of the case study method and discourse analysis has the objective of answering the research questions of this project. By using this mix, it is expected to have an approach to the discussion from different sides.

#### **4.4 Limitations**

This research project is being carried out at the same time as the Americans Elect project is taking place. For this reason, this paper will focus on how the structure of the initiative relates to previous theories on participation, and how this particular project is presented in traditional media, considering the importance it continues to have as an information resource for citizens. It should also be considered that this research project is not focusing on how the Americans Elect initiative is actually taking place, or its results. For further research, it could be relevant to do an evaluation of the results and the impact the project had, but this can only be done once the project has been declared finished.

## **5. Case study: Americans Elect**

### **5.1 An introduction to Americans Elect**

#### **5.1.1 The American Electoral System**

The electoral system in the United States places strong emphasis on the power of each state that makes up the federation that the country is. This applies for the presidential election as well, in which every state has different laws and rules that determine the way a person can appear on the electoral ballot the day of the election. This goes for candidates within one of the two main political parties (Republican or Democrat), but also for those with independent candidacies.

According to Richard Winger (1997), independent candidates usually have more difficult requirements to meet than candidates backed by a party, but this also depends on the laws of each state: “a candidate running as an independent in the general election in November, or a candidate running as the nominee of a new, or previously unrecognized, political party is usually required to obtain thousands of petition signatures in each state to be included on the general election ballot.” The main requirement to appear on a state ballot to as a candidate for the Presidency is to gather a certain amount of signatures from citizens who back the candidacy of the person. In the case of the main parties, they carry out “primary elections” in which each state picks a candidate. In the case of the Democrats, an “important” candidate, someone that is recognized by the media, must submit 26,000 signatures nationwide approximately to appear in all state ballots, while an “unimportant” one, someone that does not have this level of recognition, must submit 112,251 petition signatures. In the case of the Republicans, “important” candidates must submit 54,750 signatures,

while 141,001 signatures are needed for an “unimportant” candidate (Winger, 1997.)

Independent candidates and nominees of third parties must, however, comply with harder rules. Following the primaries, independent candidates and nominees of third parties must gain access to the general election ballot. In order to achieve this, approximately 750,000 signatures are needed to appear in the general election ballots of all states. For Democrats and Republicans, however, access is automatic. According to Winger, in 1924, third party presidential candidates needed only 75,000 signatures to be on the ballot of all states, but changes were implemented in the 1930s when major parties tried to discourage labor from starting its own party, and became even stricter in 1969-1975, following George Wallace's 1968 third party achieving a 13% vote in the elections. The Supreme Court has ruled that ballot access laws can require candidates to obtain the signatures of 5 % of the number of registered voters (Winger, 1997.)

### **5.1.2 Predecessor**

Before Americans Elect, another project of a similar nature was launched under the name of Unity '08, which was launched as an effort to bring a third candidate to the election of 2008 with the use of the Internet. The group had bipartisan leadership, including Democrats Hamilton Jordan and Gerald Rafshoon, as well as Republican Doug Bailey, and Independent Angus King (VandeHei, 2006.) Later on, Rafshoon and Bailey officially left the project in order to begin an unsuccessful campaign to draft New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg as an independent candidate in the 2008 presidential election. The group itself would later announced it was stopping its efforts, citing at the time the fact that they didn't have enough members or enough money to achieve ballot access in all 50 states, as well as disputes with the Federal Election Commission, which stated that the group could only receive \$5000 contributions from individuals, unlike the major parties, which could receive \$25,000

donations from individuals (Unity '08, 2008)

### **5.1.3 The project**

Americans Elect was established as a “a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political party, ideology or candidate.” (Americans Elect, 2012.) According to its main website, the group aims to use the Internet as a platform to nominate and select a candidate for the Presidential elections of the United States in 2012 via an online “convention” together with other participants. Americans Elect states that the voting process is open to any “qualified” candidate, regardless of political affiliation. The groups also states that they do not promote candidates or issues, and also that the funding does not come from special interest groups. Americans Elect maintains that in order not to be influenced by “big money” the group will refund participants who have made donations of over \$10,000 USD.

In order to participate, people need to register using their voter information on the Americans Elect website in order to become a “delegate.” Once registered, people can be part of the online process in different ways. One of them is by ranking their policy priorities, the issues that each user considers more important, and compare their results against those of other users and other candidates. Participants can also submit questions for the candidates to answer, or select those they consider more important, from a list of questions from other users. “Delegates” can also find candidates from the pool of contestants, or also draft someone as participant. This is followed by the actual voting, in which the “delegate” will select the running ticket for the Presidential election in 2012. Additionally, “delegates” are also invited to get involved in the project by donating money to the organization, or working as volunteers.

The candidate selection is done based on a process in which someone can nominate

him or herself, or draft someone else. In order for a candidate to compete, he or she must have the support of at least 1,000 people in 10 different states. Additionally, within the Americans Elect organization, there is an “independent committee” which is in charge of reviewing the candidates’ credentials in order to see if they meet certain qualifying criteria, as well as meeting certain background checks.

The election of the candidate begins with a series of two online caucuses if there are seven to nine certified candidates, or three if there are ten candidates. If there are less than six certified candidates, all will enter directly to the “national convention.” The caucuses will result in a group of six Presidential candidates. Then, each candidate will select a running mate who will be the candidate for Vice President, and must be an independent, or registered with a different party from the candidate to the Presidency. The six presidential tickets enter a “national convention” which will consist of another three caucuses and will result in the election of one ticket, which will appear in the ballots of the Presidential election.

## **5.2 Context**

In order to understand how an event like the Americans Elect project came to happen, it is important to learn more about the political and social context in which this is taking place. An overview of the predominant role that the Internet is acquiring in politics and in news media, together with a decline in citizen participation and a rise in Internet access, and the proliferation of political and policy uses of crowdsourcing can provide a reference for the further study of this case.

### **5.2.1 The use of Internet in politics**

Communications and politics, as it has previously been discussed, complement each other, as only via communication, citizens can receive information, discuss it and take part in political activity. At the same time, the type of communication that is used can have an impact on the way political participation takes place. Political activities carried out offline by political parties, special interest groups or other organizations, can also take place online, such as organization, recruitment, campaigning, lobbying and policy advocacy (Margolis and Resnick, 2000, p.14. and Carpentier, 2011, p.120) Also, organizations such as local groups can become part of international communities with similar objectives (Everard, 2000, p.115.) Additionally, the democratizing characteristics of the Internet, such as being comprised of active users, being inexpensive, and having peer-to-peer communication, (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.12) can facilitate the access to the Internet, and engage in political participation.

Americans Elect is an example of how offline political activities such as campaigning and recruitment, take place online. However, the way such activities take place is different from the “real world”, as the possibility to reach more people across a larger geographical space is bigger, while the costs to do so is lower.

### **5.2.2 Internet and the news**

The arrival and popularization of the Internet brought changes in different aspects of human interaction, including politics, where, as it has been previously mentioned, its role in regard to democratic participation and other political aspects is still debated. However, news-making, in spite of the growing public skepticism, is still the most important way to get issues on the public agenda, according to Bennett (2005, p.7) In this scenario, in which both traditional news providers and the Internet have an impact in political developments, it is important to discuss the way in which these two elements interact.

An example of this is the reliance on the Internet as source for news information. Following the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, an average of 11.7 million Americans visited online information services every day during the week following the tragedy. In comparison, only 6 million had done so during the previous week. However, most Americans also returned to traditional media such as television following 9/11, pointing to the fact that although the mass media age may be coming to an end, this does not mean that it is already over (Bennett, 2005, p.6.) This, however, does not mean that people do not use the Internet to receive news of a political nature. In 2004, an estimated 75 million Americans, or 37 percent of the adult population and more than 50 percent of American Internet users, went online to get information about the presidential campaigns (Xenos and Foot, 2008, p.51.)

In this context where people increasingly use the Internet to obtain political news, yet traditional media still is a source for the same type of information, helps to understand the importance of exploring how Americans Elect is represented in traditional media, as it still helps to shape the information engaged citizens have, which in turn can have an impact on the political decisions they make. Such analysis will be made in the Discourse Analysis section of this paper.

### **5.2.3 The debate over political participation and the Internet**

Although the possibilities for carrying out activities of a political nature can be identified with relative straightforwardness, the potential for this medium to enhance citizen participation in political activities, including democratic processes, continues to be the subject of a much thorough debate. From the earlier days of research on the impacts of the Internet on the political, two major sides have emerged, those who argue that the Internet does have a positive influence on participation, and those who deny this.

Some of the earlier skeptics of the potential of the Internet for civic participation include Hills and Hughes (1998), who mention that political science literature on democratization, at least up to the point when their research was carried out, offered few signs that a relationship between the level of democracy within a nation and electronic communications could exist (p.78.) With support from their own research, the authors note that they found very little data to support the assumption that the Internet can change people's minds politically (p.183.) On the contrary, they believe the expansion of the Internet is unlikely to change uninterested or uninformed citizens into informed and interested ones. In addition to the fact that this research was done in the late nineties, and could no longer be valid, the authors also appear to express appreciation to the fact that a future increase in the number of people with Internet access can dilute the political and demographic differences between those that are on and offline (p.183)

Margolis and Resnick (2000) argue that the Internet limits freedom and expression (p.5) limiting the potential for democratic participation, as web browsers make users more passive (p.6.) However, in spite of mentioning that other communications media had been previously attached with democratizing virtues (p.103), the authors also state that the web is likely to foster an electoral process that is likely to replicate real

world politics (p.57.) The authors mention that political websites will not be used by citizens (p.73), or that an increase in the number of Internet users will represent a paradigm shift in mass politics (p.207.) It is important to note, however, that in spite of this skepticism, the authors also mention the possibility of the emergence of alternatives to new parties or interest groups in the United States via Internet (p.18 and p.53), and also that “the future undoubtedly will bring some form of voting online” (p.207). The ambivalence of postures in the work of Margolis and Resnick shows how little could be predicted on the future of participation and politics just a few years back.

More recently, however, the limits of the Internet in regard to democracy have been mentioned by Morozov (2011, p.75) who is one the most prominent voices of skeptics in this issue. He mentions that “if anything, the Internet makes it harder, not easier, to get people to care, if only because the alternatives to political action are so much more pleasant and risk-free”, such as entertainment or consumption. He also argues, as Hills and Hughes previously did, that information abundance does not automatically lead to democratization.

On the other side of the debate, it is possible to find those who argue that the Internet can help make people more engaged in government-related matters. Academics in this group could be described as being part of what Morozov (2011, p.xiii) calls “cyber-utopianism”, which is described as the belief that the Internet can boost democratic participation, trigger a renaissance of moribund communities, or strengthen associational life.”

Rash (1997, p.169) also stated that the Internet could help other political parties and groups to be incorporated to the political landscape, due to a reduction in the price of entry. Additionally, he was a strong proponent that politics as usual would be

transformed as more people accessed the Internet, bringing down the dominance of traditional party organizations (p.170.)

Although Margolis and Resnick (2000) appeared to be skeptical of the capacity of the Internet as an enabler of participation, surprisingly, throughout their work they also point in the opposite direction. For example, they mention that voting via the Internet could increase not only the quantity but also the quality of participation (p.15.), the possibilities for online fundraising (p.18) and the opportunities for minor parties to present their political platforms to a massive audience (p.66)

#### **5.2.4 Decrease in citizen engagement**

Currently, there seems to be dissatisfaction between citizens and the governmental institutions that are supposed to represent them in a democracy. Some of the most established world democracies show signs of wear and parties try to reinvent themselves, according to Bennett (2008, p.1.) Even if his research focuses on youth engagement in civic life, his findings are relevant as they help to create a context to this case. Some of the reasons for this withdrawal from the political scene include the predominant negative campaigning, which according to the author, can turn off young voters.

In a similar fashion, Coleman and Blumer mention that the representative relationship is in “chronic despair” regardless of whether it is a new, old, parliamentary or presidential democracy (2009, p.69.) Except for a small number of highly politically involved people, most citizens only connect with politicians at exceptional moments of “personal crisis or public excitement” (p.71.) The authors call this a “crisis of public communication”, which can derive from developments in society, as well as the institutional responses to those developments (p.42.) According to surveys, data and other research the public “has had enough of representation and now wants to

make most or all political decisions for itself” (p.78.) In particular the United States, democracy, instead of being associated with political parties and civic participation, is often being perceived as a media game, in which politicians and interest groups play a game of political spin, which can lead to citizen disengagement, particularly in young people (Bennett, 2005, p.5.)

### **5.2.5 Rise in Internet adoption and access**

The expectations set upon new technologies to become enhancers or facilitators of participation in political processes is not exclusive of the arrival of the Internet. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, it was expected that cable television would provide the means to achieve participation of the public in democratic politics. (Margolis and Resnick, 2000, p.107.) However, the initial expectations that existed for television disappeared with the surge of the Internet as the main global computer network in the decade of the 1990s. (Herman and McChesney, 1997, p.117)

It is now the Internet the medium in which the potential for remote citizen participation is expected. As Bennett (2005, p.xviii) anticipated, the popularity of the Internet has changed the way citizens interact with politics, not only in the form of discussion, but also for other purposes such as voting: “The potential for computer voting seems far brighter than the antiquated procedures that plunged the 2000 Florida presidential contest into weeks of uncertainty, clouding the result.”

These possibilities can only happen, however, if the Internet is adopted by a majority of people. Back in the 1990s, studies were showing the speed at which Internet was being adopted in the United States. In 1996, it was expected that 25 percent of U.S. households would have Internet access by the end of 1997 and that the number would escalate to close to 45 percent by 2000. (Herman and McChesney, 1997, p.118.) In spite of this outstanding growth, the authors did not expect the Internet to become the

“full-blown ‘single media machine’ in the United States”, and certainly not in the rest of the world. (p.118)

Although in comparison to the rest of the world, where only 23 percent of the world’s population had access to the Internet in 2009, (Coleman and Ross, 2010, p.115) the fact that almost 23 percent of the population of the United States still has no access to Internet, also means that a significant part of the population could miss out on the opportunities for political participation that the new technologies can provide. In spite of this need to equitable access to the Internet, the policy issue that the digital divide is, is not part of the public agenda (Montgomery, 2008, p.38)

The importance of shrinking the digital divide is the fact that access to online computers can increase the level of information, knowledge and communication, among other socially valued benefits (which can help participation and democracy), decreasing the rates of computer illiteracy and also avoid a division of society between those who have the access and those who do not (Carpentier, 2011, p.114.) The digital divide becomes therefore an issue for citizen participation as well, when projects like Americans Elect, and others that could be created in the future, rely increasingly on access to the Internet. Citizens who have no access to this medium, could also be left out of political processes.

### **5.2.6 Crowdsourcing and politics**

As it was previously discussed in the theoretical framework of this work, the concept of crowdsourcing does not belong to the field of communication, politics, or any other social science. However, its core principles have been used as a foundation for different kinds of projects of a political nature as well.

Two of the first instances when the Internet was used to create political activism occurred several years before the term crowdsourcing was developed, although it includes its main principles. People used the Internet as a medium to organize protest movements against the consumer database known as Lotus Marketplace, and the Clipper chip, an effort of the Clinton administration that would allow the United States government alone to decode all the messages on the Internet. Both instances were successful, as Lotus Marketplace was cancelled and the Clipper chip project was eliminated. Laura Gurak (1997, in Poster, 2001, p.173) who studied both cases mentions that they are unique, given that protestors were able to achieve a community objective without having a common physical space, something close to what the definition of crowdsourcing entails.

Other efforts in which the Internet was used to enhance political activism, but this time focused on democratic processes include the Rock the Vote campaign, which targeted young people and used digital media as a tool for political mobilization and encourage voter registration (Montgomery, 2008, p.29.) The campaign proved to be a success as it brought a record number of young people to its Web site, with more than 45 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds visiting the site in the months ahead of the election. For that election year, online voter registrations totaled 1.2 million. (p.31.)

However, crowdsourcing, just as the Internet itself, and other communication media, can be used for political purposes that do not necessarily have to do with the enhancement of citizen participation in democratic processes. For example, Morozov (2011, p.104) mentions the case of Thailand, where in 2009, users could report links to any potentially offensive websites to the monarchy via the ProtectTheKing.net website. In Saudi Arabia, a group of two hundred Saudis monitor videos posted on YouTube that are related to that country (p.215.) The phenomenon also takes place in older Western democracies, such as Great Britain and France, which have similar

models based in the crowd, used to report illegal content. Morozov (2011, p.193) also argues that there are several specific conditions that should be met in order to actually have an effective political project using crowdsourcing, such as: the possibility to monitor and evaluate individual contributions, and the group members are aware that such evaluation is going on; the tasks that people are assigned to be performed are unique and difficult, etc. One difficulty that using these models brings is the difficulty to see how representative of the entire population the movements are (p.268), something of particular relevance for projects that deal with citizen participation and elections. The topic of crowdsourcing in regards to the Americans Elect project, and its particular characteristics, will be further analyzed in the section below.

As it has been seen in this section, the world is currently experiencing a set of phenomena that can help to explain more the context in which an initiative like Americans Elect can be developed. The use of Internet for politics and news, together with a decrease in political engagement, a rise in the adoption of the Internet, and the use of the crowdsourcing model for political purposes have helped to create a landscape in which a political participation initiative such as Americans Elect can be created.

## **5.3 Analysis**

### **5.3.1 The role of the Internet in Americans Elect**

In spite of the fact that the Internet is still a medium that is predominantly used for fields such as business, commerce, sports or entertainment (Margolis and Resnick, 2000, p.56.), it has also been used for political purposes, as it has been discussed in previous sections. At the same time, there is a sense of disengagement among voters in countries such as the United States, in which particularly young people, think that politics is an “insider game requiring money and connections, and, thus, not for them” (Bennett, 2008, p.20.) With the combination of these factors as a background, the opportunities and challenges presented by the Internet to shape and alter citizen participation are worth analyzing, including the different roles it takes.

The theories and concepts that were first discussed on a general level in the Theoretical Framework section, will be retaken and used to further analyze the Americans Elect initiative, from a theoretical perspective, as a way to understand how this project came to be, and the different components that can make it happen. The concepts that will be used include the public sphere, voice, participation, citizenship and deliberative democracy.

#### **Public sphere**

It has been more than a decade since Rash predicted that with the increasing accessibility of the Internet, the way politics are made would change, especially in regard to the influence of political parties in elections (1997, p.170.) Although the political landscape in the United States still presents two dominating parties whose members still make up for the vast majority of democratically-elected positions such

as the President, Senators, members of Congress and Governors, the arrival of Unity '08 and its successor, Americans Elect, show that there is a considerable number of people who are looking for alternatives beyond the two major parties. The rise of movements of this nature, however, does not imply that the traditional structures of politics in the United States have disappeared, or that they will. Just as new movements have done, traditional parties also use the Internet as a means to achieve their political purposes. Margolis and Resnick (2000, p.57) stated that the rise of the Internet was more likely to replicate the electoral politics of the “real world” into an electronic format. However, as it has been seen, the Internet has also allowed for innovative participation formats to be developed.

Unlike traditional media, which has counted on being the “gatekeeper” of information between the citizens and the politicians (Hill and Hughes, 1998, p.15), the Internet has allowed to bypass this interaction, and tried to engage directly with citizens. This, however, does not mean that traditional media has been relegated to a less important role. On the contrary, it still represents a source of information, and even legitimacy for the movement, which is used actively by the group. The importance that traditional media is given can be observed on the home page of the group, where towards the bottom it is possible to see the logos for The New York Times, CNN and Fox News, with quotes and links to stories describing the group in a positive light (see Annex 1.) Additionally, there is a “News” section (see Annex 2), which is updated almost on a daily basis, which includes a round up of mentions of Americans Elect in the media. In the second part of this research, the coverage of the Americans Elect by traditional media will be the subject of a short discourse analysis, in order to learn more about the interaction between the two entities.

By becoming a space where information of a political nature can be shared and discussed by concerned citizens, it would appear in principle that the Americans Elect website performs the functions of a public sphere. After all it aims to foster public

opinion among citizens who share a certain interest, which is an alternative ticket to the Presidential election, with a constant flow of information and without fear of punishment. “Delegates” can express the importance they give to certain topics and also ask questions to the possible candidates, or comment on those questions. However, the website does not allow “delegates” to have other form of communication with other users, limiting the possibility of discussion. Additionally, while it is possible that different features of the website are open to everyone who can access it, other functions and possibilities are only available for people who have already registered as “delegates.” Although the website can give way to decision-making, there are also lows of information are therefore restricted and the access is not universal, two basic characteristics of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2009, p.72.) The exclusionary dimension of the public sphere, one of the criticisms of Coleman and Ross (2010, p.29) can be seen in this project, given that the barrier entry is high: in order to participate, users must already be registered voters, with working access to the Internet. With a digital divide still present in the United States, the ability for Americans Elect to become an actual public sphere appears limited.

The fact that the structure of Americans Elect does not comply with all the characteristics of the public sphere should not mean that the project is not an enhancer for civic participation. After all, the concept itself is currently used among many scholars only a normative ideal (Chadwick, 2006, p.88), and it should not be expected to be replicated in real life, but can still nonetheless give an understanding of the opportunities certain spaces (virtual or real) can give for citizens to engage in political discussion. As Buskqvist mentioned (2010, p.208), “the mere existence of web technology does not create the ideal public spaces as such.” It is the way technology is used what can give way to these spaces where democracy can be enacted.

## **Voice**

As Americans Elect displays a website that provides a space for limited engagement, it is relevant to discuss the importance voice is given to citizens that are taking part in this project.

Voice, as defined by Couldry (2010, p.2), allows for the construction of an alternative view of politics, which can highlight the people's abilities for social cooperation based on voice. Couldry's acknowledgement that citizens have the capacity to have an impact in political processes can be seen in the Americans Elect initiative. According to Couldry (p.140) new technologies have brought with them new possibilities for participation: new voices, not only in quantity but also in the scope of their reach, mutual awareness of these voices, new scales of organization, new understanding of spaces and new intensities of listening. Americans Elect seems to give the concept of voice importance by clearly stating on their website that they are using the Internet to give "A greater voice for all Americans, no matter their party. You have the power to be heard" (Americans Elect, 2012.)

Following Couldry's definition of voice, it is possible to identify that Americans Elect has allowed new voices to be part of politics. In regard to the American political system, Americans Elect is aiming to make the voice of those who do not identify with either of the two main political parties to be heard. Inside the project, different voices also have a place. However, not all voices are given the same value. For example, in the case of the candidates, those who have served in certain positions, such as governors or ambassadors, require 1,000 support clicks in 10 different states to be considered officially as a candidate, whereas those who lack these qualifications need 5,000 support clicks in 10 different states, making their candidacy require more work. In addition, the voice of the Board of Directors, the Rules Committee, the Platform of Questions Committee, and the Candidate Certification Committee has a

different value than the voice of the average user, given that membership of these committees and boards is not open to the public, yet has a significant impact on the decisions made on the project. “The value of voice can also be interpreted as power” (Couldry, 2010, p.136), and as such, different voices are given different amounts of power. In this particular instance, the Internet does not alter, but reflect the power structures that were created in the real world.

## **Participation**

As one of the objectives of Americans Elect is to foster participation in the Presidential elections from people who do not identify with the main parties, it is important to compare this project against theories on participation.

Nico Carpentier (2011, p.351) mentioned that participation is not a fixed notion, but that it evolves together with the spaces and ways in which it takes place. Together with democratization, participation is also now taking place as much inside as outside of institutionalized politics. However it is important to see how the characteristics of these processes, as described by Carpentier (p.39) take place in the Americans Elect project. Although Americans Elect presents itself as an alternative to institutionalized politics, many of its main actors come from this field, such as the CEO Khalil Byrd, who in his short biography is presented as “a former Communications Strategist for Republican and Democratic candidates (see Annex 3.) He was also a former Communications Director for Deval Patrick for Governor” (Americans Elect, 2012.) Chief Legal Officer Daniel B. Winslow has been legal representative for current Republican candidate Mitt Romney and has been a state representative. The Board of Directors and the Board of Advisors, however, displays a corpus of members with a more diverse background that ranges from education, the corporate sector and citizen political initiatives. It is possible then to see that participation within Americans Elect comes from a mix of backgrounds in which new actors connect with traditional ones.

Carpentier (p.39) also mentions that new actors bypass institutionalized politics and work toward new political practices. In this case, we can see that the Internet is used as a means to avoid the traditional route of the party primaries to elect a candidate. Nevertheless, the purpose of the initiative is to use the Internet as a way for a new representative to be part of institutionalized politics. Americans Elect promotes participation outside traditional channels, but with an end goal of going back to them. Carpentier's classification of minimalist and maximalist democratic participation (p.17) is difficult to use on the context of Americans Elect. Although the initiative appears to lean more towards the maximalist model, given that it combines representation and participation (in the form of the caucuses to choose a candidate), and combines macro- and micro-participation (by using a closed initiative with possible impact in the wider, national political context), its proximity to institutionalized politics, as well as its unidirectional approach to participation (focus on a single, institutionalized goal) also give it characteristics of minimalist participation. This example shows how new models of participation, including those that rely on the Internet, may be closer to broader definitions of participation, but still borrow certain elements from traditional politics.

The type of participation that is taking place with Americans Elect can also be analyzed through the "e-democracy from below" concept developed by Coleman and Blumer (2009, p.117.) Some of these characteristics include "mechanisms of formalized central leadership", a characteristic that can be seen in the fact that the initiative counts with a central management group that resembles one of the corporate world. Additionally, the existence of the Board of Advisors and the Candidate Certification Committee are also displays of the centralization of leadership. Additionally, the group utilizes what is described as a "diverse repertoire of practices, sometimes acting as if they were ad hoc protest groups, at other times serving conventional political campaigns (p.119.) Americans Elect has made use of different

platforms such as social media, traditional media, as well as the use of local coordinators inside the states and also in university campus, replicating the activities of grass-roots movements, and thus extending participation beyond the realm of the virtual world.

Looking towards the future of the adoption of the Internet as a catalyst for citizen participation, there are also limitations that should be considered, which emanate from the limitations of the e-coordination from below, as defined by Coleman and Blumer (2009, p.135). One of them is the “disconnection of most online civic and political networks from institutional politics”, considering how power remains mostly inside traditional institutions. This represents a challenge for initiatives like Americans Elect in the fact that, as it has been seen, current laws to bring a third candidate to the Presidential race make it difficult for an alternative ticket to be elected. As Americans Elect finds itself outside institutionalized politics, it is up to the initiative to obtain legitimacy from the public. However, the fact that Americans Elect has the end goal of being part of institutional politics, by gaining a place in the Presidential election, makes this gap easier to narrow.

The second democratic limitation of online civic and political networks, according to Coleman and Blumer (2009, p.136), is “their sometimes elusive and ephemeral nature”, meaning that their actions are hidden from citizens and elites. This is not the case for Americans Elect, as the group has made a significant effort to display their group to a wider audience, something that can be seen in the different mentions the group has received in some of the main traditional news sources in American media (some of which are included in the Context section of this work.) Additionally, there is the potential exclusionary nature of some of these initiatives. The fact that there is still a digital divide, the relatively low number of registered voters in the United States, and the fact that it only appeals people who do not want to vote for the Republican or the Democrat candidate, makes this project less than inclusionary.

Nevertheless, Americans Elect has created a platform for participation that, even if is far from being over-reaching, it can still provide smaller spaces for participation.

The impact Americans Elect will have on the future of the use of the Internet for citizen participation in the United States remains to be determined. Other projects such as those mentioned in the Context section of this work, show that participation has successfully been enhanced via the Internet. However, the true political impact of Americans Elect will only be seen after the November elections.

### **Deliberative democracy**

Participation can also be closely associated to deliberative democracy. As it has been mentioned, the concept of deliberative deals with how civic agency takes place in the form of communication; as everyone with the ability to act and speak can engage with each other (Dahlgren, 2009, p.86.) The concept of deliberative democracy, as it has been mentioned, is also the subject of debate among researchers, given that while some favor this concept to study participation, others do not find it adequate. In the case of Internet-based projects such as Americans Elect, it is difficult to attach the concept of deliberative democracy to what the group is actually doing.

Those against deliberative democracy, point to the fact that it is difficult to have a conversation on a single topic with groups of people separated by space and time (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.19.) The Americans Elect initiative, by focusing on the election of an independent candidate for the Presidency of the United States, and using the Internet as a way to unite a group of people around an idea, regardless of their geographical situation. However, using the arguments of those who favor the concept of deliberative democracy, it is possible to see how the concept is difficult to apply to Internet-based participation initiatives.

According to Coleman and Blumer (2009, p.18), those in favor of the concept, mention that it gives way to an open discussion at different levels, which then gives an exposure to different points of view. In the case of Americans Elect, this can be seen in the Colors and the Debates section (see Annex 4 and Annex 5), where users can display the importance they give to different policy issues, and compare them against other users and candidates, as well as pose questions on such subjects for the candidates to answer. However, if other factors of deliberative democracy are also considered, it can be seen that deliberative democracy as such is hard to achieve. According to Habermas (1996, cited by Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.18) for deliberative democracy to take place, certain conditions must be met. Individuals must be able to express their own ideas and criticize others'. Users can comment and rank other users questions on the Debates section on the website. However, deeper discussion on these subjects is not possible. Another condition is that the concepts of force and power associated with social status must be eliminated. This condition is met, as the vote from each user has the same value, regardless of the background of the user. However, consensus is not used as means to reach a decision, on the different topics, and the validity of arguments is not particularly analyzed. For these reasons, Americans Elect is a platform where, even if certain forms of deliberation and democracy take place among users separated by time and space, the same cannot be said for deliberative democracy as such, as the discussion of topics and arguments is rather limited and constrained.

The potential of the Internet to become a democratic media space, according to scholars cited by Coleman and Ross (2010, p.94), can also help shed a light on the impact this medium has on Americans Elect. As it has been mentioned before, this project shows how “digital media make it easier than ever before for people to form and join dispersed communication networks”, which in this case is represented by the different groups of people across the United States. Also, the possibility for “information abundance” that allows for a wider range of knowledge and information,

has made it possible for a project like Americans Elect to happen. This however is done indirectly. While there is a “News” section in the Americans Elect website, the candidates running for the independent ticket also have websites where they present more in depth their platforms; an asset considering how traditional media tends to focus more on the candidates from the two main parties. Nevertheless, while Coleman and Ross go as far as to say that the Internet has the potential to “create spaces of public deliberation in which positions are not merely articulated and advocated, but revised and even integrated in response to exposure to others”, (2010, p.94), the same does not apply to the platform that Americans Elect presents, given that, although a very basic form of discussion is presented, in which users can identify their positions and establish questions, actual deliberation does not take place. The “many-to-many deliberative interaction that has been so conspicuously missing from most political democracies” (Coleman and Ross, 2010, p.113), and which was expected to arrive along with the Internet, has yet to appear. Although Americans Elect as a platform falls short of being a space where deliberative democracy appears as such, provides a new model for participation, whose contribution should be acknowledged, and possibly used as a model for other projects of a similar nature.

## **Citizenship**

The concept of citizenship has traditionally been associated to institutionalized politics. According to Carpentier, participation only takes place when it is discussed together with institutionalized politics (2011, p.16.) However, the disengagement of citizens to traditional political groups such as political parties, which has led to individuals becoming more responsible for the production and management of their own social and political identities (Bennett, 2008, p.13), has led to the search of alternative, which in turn shows how citizenship, just as participation, can no longer be confined to the limits of institutionalized politics. The Internet, via initiatives like Americans Elect, becomes a facilitator for people to actively pursue alternative ways

to participation. Furthermore, the fact that people increasingly prefer to vote for persons and their ideas rather than for political parties and their programs (Corner and Pels, 2003, p.7.) makes this initiative fertile ground for citizenship. Americans Elect, additionally, appears to be a reflection of how people now favor “issue-specific and personality-bound forms of political recognition and engagement” (Corner and Pels, 2003, p.7.) As it can be seen from the Candidates section (see Annex 6), the personality and the issues that they present takes priority over their traditional political affiliations.

These developments, however, do not imply that there is a new type of citizenship, in which institutionalized politics no longer have influence. On the contrary, citizenship still has an institutional component (such as the fact that users are expected to vote in the national election), but that there is an evolution in citizenship in which both the institutional and the trans-institutional play active parts.

### **Americans Elect and the crowdsourcing model**

Americans Elect's ability to use computer-mediated communication, not as a substitute, but an addition to other political practices, with the objective of increasing participation where geographical limits become redundant, falls in line with what Kenneth Hacker and Jan van Dijk's (2003 in Chadwick, 2006, p.53) define as "digital democracy."

Additionally, just as the Internet has allowed for the customization of consumption, something similar has happened in the realm of politics, where individuals, can customize their political interest (Scammell, 2003, p.129), while physical and geographical limits have become secondary, with the objective of enhancing participation. These characteristics, which are present in the Americans Elect initiative, appear at first glance to have similarities to the concept of crowdsourcing, a concept that is used mostly outside the fields of social and political science, but used in other areas such as management, computer science or pharmaceuticals. The use of this concept to understand more about how political participation takes place in the Internet, and in particular with the Americans Elect project, can be helpful to learn more about these developments, its potentials and its challenges.

According to Jeff Howe, who is acknowledged to be the creator of the term, crowdsourcing "is the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call." Although Howe coined the term "crowdsourcing" in 2006, the political potential for projects with Internet-based initiatives that shared its main characteristics had already been discussed years before, with a degree of accuracy. In 2000, Margolis and Resnick (p.18) mentioned "if the Internet were to provide a significant boost to nonparty political activism, the traditional American political parties, already in decline, might be further weakened."

Although it might be too soon to tell if American political parties will experience such weakening, Americans Elect does show an increase in the aforementioned nonparty political activism. Further predictions made by the authors that “the United States could see a flowering of new parties and interest groups that could break the dominance of the major parties and established interests” (Margolis and Resnick, 2000, p.53), is also of significance, as it anticipated the arrival of groups that could challenge the status quo. While Americans Elect is not a political party, and it tries not to be identified as an interest group, it nonetheless displays an interest in breaking with traditional politics.

Following Howe’s definition, it can be said that Americans Elect is aiming to do the “job” of choosing a candidate for the Presidential elections of the United States. Traditionally, this task has been done by a group of people within a party with certain ideologies, who may leave behind the interests of people who do not coincide with them, or also, as the group mentions, the influence of interest groups and other associations, tries to exert influence in this decision, and instead of being a democratic process, becomes the decision of a powerful few. This task is later transferred to the participants of the project, who are an “undefined, large group of people”, given that the only requirement to take part is to be a registered voter in the United States, and the crowd can be considered to be “generally large” considering the condition that in order to take part of the internal elections, candidates must have the support of at least 10,000 supporters for those candidates with recognizable experience, or 50,000 in the case of those whose experience is not as known. This process takes place in the form of an “open call”, in which the Internet and traditional media outlets are used to promote the initiative and invite registered voters to join.

Additionally, according to Howe, crowdsourcing is also possible due to the reduction of cost barriers, which is possible thanks to developments in technology (2006.) This essential characteristic of crowdsourcing relates to what the Internet in general, and

Americans Elect in particular, have done for citizen participation, create a space where active users can have inexpensive peer-to-peer communication (Coleman and Blumer, 2009, p.12.) This decrease in costs comes from the fact that the project does not rely on the physical elements associated with campaigns and elections, such as ballots, polling booths, or transportation costs, but uses technology to reach a variety of users. Candidates also reduce the money necessary to campaign, as the Americans Elect website provides them with a channel to reach possible voters. Paradoxically, although reduction costs are reduced due to the possibilities of crowdsourcing, it can also be said that this same technique is used to raise funds for the project. As it is possible to see from their website (see Annex 7), Americans Elect is using the “online solicitation of funds also can substitute donors’ money for the scarce time and effort of activists” (Margolis and Resnick, 2000, p.18.)

According to Morozov, however, there are certain setbacks for the use of crowdsourcing for political purposes. For an actual version of crowdsourcing to take place, very specific conditions must be met, he says, such as the possibility of monitoring and evaluating individual contributions, and that the group members are aware that such evaluation is going on, or that the tasks to be performed by participants are unique and difficult. Morozov says that it is certainly possible for a group to meet all these conditions, but that “it often takes a lot of effort, leadership, and ingenuity” (2011, p.193.) In the case of Americans Elect, given that the main task of picking a candidate is the one that is outsourced, it can be said that there is no need to evaluate such contribution, given that it is basically a direct one-step process. The fact that the task of voting can be considered as neither unique nor difficult would make it seem as if crowdsourcing is not taking place, if following Morozov’s specifications. Americans Elect shows that, while Morozov’s specifications may contribute to an understanding of how crowdsourcing can take place in politics, they are not absolutely indispensable, given that the core elements of crowdsourcing, as

stated by Howe, do take place (assigning a crowd to do a specific task, regardless of geographical circumstance.)

Further discussing crowdsourcing, Morozov mentions that it is “difficult to judge whether the segments that we happen to see are representative of the entire population” (2011, p.268.) In the case of Americans Elect, depending on what one defines as population, different answers can be obtained. If by population one thinks of the American electorate as a whole (as the name Americans Elect would imply), then the representative capability of the project could be questioned. If, however, by population one understands the segment of the American electors that do not identify themselves with a political party, or who look for an alternative ticket, Americans Elect could be considered to have a (not necessarily statistical) representation of the population, especially considering the fact that the chosen candidate must have a certain number of supporters in at least 10 states.

### **5.3.3 Americans Elect and civic cultures**

In order to understand how the Internet can enhance citizen participation in political processes, the concept of civic cultures can be useful to the Americans Elect initiative. As it has previously been mentioned in the Theoretical Framework section of this work, Peter Dahlgren developed the concept of civic culture, which states that “citizens are participants with agency who can make decisions, and whose cultural factors can have certain effects on the actions and communication of people within a political context” (Dahlgren, 2003, p.152.) Additionally, the civic cultures concept, by being developed as an analytical concept (p.155), can help understand more Americans Elect in regards to theories on participation.

Cultures are patterns of communication, practices and meaning. Their importance for participation lies in the fact that they help guide action, speech and understanding (p.153.) Civic culture aims to identify the possibilities of people when acting as citizens. With the objective of using it as a tool to study the factors that have an effect on citizen participation in a democracy, Dahlgren developed a civic culture circuit, which has a particular focus on media (2009, p.102), with the aim of explaining “human action and meaning-making in concrete settings. “(Dahlgren, 2003, p.153.)

The civic cultures concept assumes that civic agency can be accomplished in different ways (Dahlgren, 1009, p.103.) Americans Elect can be considered a real life manifestation of this, as participation in alternative political projects, as well as Internet participation are new forms of exercising such agency. Furthermore, as civic cultures are influenced by traditional and interactive media (p.105), the case of Americans Elect can be used as a way to understand more this relationship. The concept of civic cultures is framed within a circuit that explains empirical entry points to study citizen participation, via six different dimensions.

## **Knowledge**

In order to participate politically, citizens need to be informed. Specifically, according to Dahlgren, “people must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, and debates about current affairs if they are to become civically engaged” (2009, p.108) Furthermore, the capacity to acquire knowledge is just as important as having it (p.108.)

In the case of Americans Elect, knowledge and information appear to be an important component of their website. On their News section, the group often posts stories related to the development of the project, but also makes reference to other news stories where people or studies present postures against bipartisanship. This way, Americans Elect makes use of its platform to distribute knowledge that favors their posture and their organization. Candidates also post information on their postures and links to their websites to give users more knowledge on their positions on different issues. Knowledge therefore becomes a key component for the encouragement of participation. However, it should also be considered that although users are invited to learn more about the candidates, information about the project itself is limited to what the group decides to post. If citizens want to learn more about the way the project is being carried out, or other issues related to the initiative, users must leave the website to find this information. This represents an interesting development, given that although Americans Elect does not facilitate that users share information among themselves, or discuss ideas regarding the project, users are still able to use the Internet to do all these things. Knowledge can still be created, gathered and shared, but it might require a couple more steps.

### **Values: substantive and procedural**

According to Dahlgren (2009, p.110), “democracy will not function if such virtues as tolerance and willingness to follow democratic principles and procedures do not have grounding in everyday life.” The author points to the fact that a core group of values associated to democracy, are necessary to resolve conflicts without violence, and fostering compromise when consensus cannot be achieved. Such values, according to Dahlgren are of two different kinds. Substantive values include those such as equality, liberty, justice, solidarity and tolerance, while procedural values include openness, reciprocity, discussion and responsibility or accountability. The author also mentions that in order to make sure that these values are observed, a set of procedural mechanisms and rules are then necessary, especially when it comes to groups or individuals with different opinions or points of view.

For a group like Americans Elect, maintaining a set of values which can be used as a reference point to solve conflict should be of importance, considering the different political voices that can be gathered within an organization that aims to bridge the gap created by the bipartisanship divide. The division that Dahlgren makes between substantive and procedural values is one that should be given special consideration, especially in regard to how each category is noticeably different reflected in this initiative. On one hand, substantive values appear to be given importance by the group, as it claims to give equal opportunity for citizens and candidates to elect and be elected, in an environment of justice and liberty, where factors such as money from interest groups do not influence the outcome. On the other hand, however, there seems to be a contradiction when it comes to the procedural values, given that the group has also received some criticism for apparently not being open or accountable when it comes to financing, given that the group does not display who its main donors are. Such seeming contradiction should be of particular interest in a country like the United States, where, according to Dahlgren, democracy in that country has

increasingly developed a rights-based dimension importance of institutional frameworks. If such frameworks based on values are then bent, the credibility of a group like Americans Elect, and in consequence, the possibilities for citizen participation via the Internet, can be the subject of scrutiny.

### **Trust: optimal and directed**

Democracy, according to Dahlgren (2009, p.112), relies on trust as a key component, in which the citizens have an important role, as they are its bearers, while the objects of trust are institutions or representatives of government. In particular for the civic cultures circuit, the author states that trust is important among or between groups of citizens. Dahlgren also defines thin trust as the “generalized honesty and expectations of reciprocity that we accord people we don’t know personally but with whom we feel we can have a satisfactory exchange” (p.113.) However, due to the fact that politics involves a struggle for power among opposing sides, an excess of trust might not be the best position to take. Therefore, a balanced approach to trust, or “trust with a built-in antenna for skepticism” (Dahlgren, 2009, p.114), seems like the effective approach for this level of the circuit.

In the case of Americans Elect, there are two dimensions in which it is possible to understand the concept of trust. Strictly following Dahlgren’s stance that trust relates to institution and government representatives, it could be said that the group of citizens behind Americans Elect has not enough trust in current institutional groups, such as political parties, to resolve the most pressing issues affecting the United States, yet there is enough trust in the government as an institution that the group aims to have an impact within them. However, trust should also be understood beyond institutionalization. Americans Elect makes a strong emphasis on the trust users can have on the organization, by saying that the elections are done in a secure environment, with a technological platform developed for this process, which aims to

secure votes as well as users information. In order to become delegates, users must provide sensitive information such as the social security number. In this case, it should be considered whether these security measures can be considered by users as obstacles and in turn, discourage them from taking part in the project, and be detrimental for political participation.

### **Spaces: communicative access and contexts of action**

According to Dahlgren, in order for democracy to take place, citizens must have the possibility to interact with each other: “They need access to each other to develop their collective political efforts, and contexts in which they can act together” (2009, p.114.) Spaces can be used by citizens to get in touch with their representatives, and to discuss policy-making (p.115) The media, according to Dahlgren, allows for these spaces to multiply, and has also allowed people that are not in the same physical spaces, to have a sense of co-presence. Dahlgren mentions that the Internet allows for the construction of new spaces, such as websites, blogs, discussion forums and wikis. Citizens are not constrained to one single space, but thanks to the Internet, can move freely among different spaces in what is described as “interspatiality” or even promote offline political activities.

In the case of Americans Elect, the Internet is used as the main space in which the project takes place, both as a means to recruit participants, but also for the actual voting. This medium is unique in its ability to allow users to switch spaces, from an “official” one, which is the main website of Americans Elect, to the candidates’ personal websites, or news websites where users can gather more information on the project or the candidates. The concept of “space” as presented by Dahlgren, strikes similarities to that of the public sphere, which has been previously discussed as a concept in the theoretical framework of this work, and its relation to the Americans Elect project in a previous section of the case study. As with the public sphere, the

space for deliberation and discussion in Americans Elect appears to be rather limited, as users can only make small comments on other users questions, and other possibilities for interaction among them are not possible.

### **Practices: embodied agency and skills**

Practices help generate meaning to the ideals of democracy. They are learned and often require specific skills including communicative competences, such as reading, writing and speaking (Dahlgren, 2009, p.117.) Users can engage in civic talk, which does not necessarily have to involve formal deliberation, but also other types of practices. Networks are important for civic engagement, as people can connect around issues that are pertinent to them, and therefore enhance participation.

Americans Elect can be said to use a network model to engage users to connect with potential participants. In this case, users are gathered around one single issue, which is the lack of identification of American voters with the two main political parties in the country. It is important to consider that the issue users revolve around in this case is one that is not traditionally discussed among the main parties, yet manages to gather a group of people around it with one objective. In addition, it should also be considered that users are allowed to gather around other policy issues that are traditionally discussed, such as immigration, the economy and healthcare, but they are limited to show the importance they give them. Users cannot propose policy or discuss these issues more in depth.

### **Identities: heterogeneity, empowerment, community**

Identities are considered by Dahlgren to be the centerpiece of civic cultures, in which the other five dimensions contribute reciprocally, to shaping the conditions of its existence (2009, p.119.) Identities relate to how people see themselves in regard to

citizenship and their involvement in democracy. According to Dahlgren, civic identities in modern democracies are challenged by identities related to consumption and “the salience of civic identities can vary enormously among individuals, but for most people it is low” (2009, p.119.) Civic identity therefore represents a small part of their overall identities. Furthermore, according to Dahlgren, the most fundamental source of civic identity for most people does not come from themselves but from “received citizenship”, which is formal membership of recognizing someone as a citizen (p.120.) Dahlgren proposes two other components to civic identity that can enhance citizenship. One of them is empowerment, which is subjective but must be meaningful for the citizen, and the other one is membership in one or more political communities, creating collective activity, people working with one another.

The issue of identity in the Americans Elect initiative is one that is important to analyze, considering that it especially invites citizens that identify themselves as independent to make their voices heard. An “independent” can be considered an example of received citizenship, as this category is a consequence of having two main parties, Republican and Democrat, and those who do not subscribe to either, are therefore conferred this characteristic.

### **5.3.4 Americans Elect and traditional media**

As it has been discussed in the Theoretical Framework section of this paper, even with the rise of new technologies and ways for people to exchange information of a political nature, traditional media is still influential in the way citizens still gather information, in order to make decisions. As Hills and Hughes mentioned (1998, p.2), “in democracies (...) information, which is presented via the media, becomes a crucial actor for the proper functioning of a working democracy. In order to have a thoughtful discussion, the citizens need to be knowledgeable and informed discussants. According to Herman and McChesney, (1997, p.4), the media “are the preeminent vehicles of communication through which the public participates in the political process, and the quality of their contribution to the public sphere is an important determinant of the quality of democracy.” In particular, news coverage by traditional media of politics and the Internet can be traced to the rise of the popularity of the web. In the 1996 presidential elections, interest in on-line activity increased, when a “number of political sites on the Internet became the subjects of newspaper and television stories on what political organizations were doing on the nets” (Rash, 1997, p.124.)

In order to understand how Americans Elect is portrayed in traditional media, a discourse analysis of different news stories on the initiative, presented traditional outlets will be made, using Teun A. van Dijk’s approach to this method. Each of the news stories that will be gathered from the website of a different American news outlet which is not primarily web-based, or that did not start out as a news website (The Christian Science Monitor switched from being a daily newspaper to a weekly magazine in 2008.) Also, the stories that are presented were written specifically for this medium, and not from news wire services. Each story also comes from a different

time of publication, going from the summer of 2011 when the initiative was presented, to March 2012, when the project was already active.

**Story 1: Americans Elect seeks to upend primary system (Annex 8 ) – Los Angeles Times – July 28, 2011**

Text semantics: This news story discusses the Americans Elect initiative as an alternative in the Presidential election, its relation to the state of California, where Los Angeles Times is based, and also makes a strong emphasis on the structure of the group and the people behind it, especially the way it is financed and the implications it has. The language that the author uses is clear and basic, similar to that of many news stories. In terms of local coherence, the story makes use of relations of condition and cause and consequence, especially when describing the people that organized Americans Elect, their relation to industries such as finance, and the implications that not disclosing who have contributed to this project financially can have. In terms of functionality coherence, this text makes use mostly of examples although also a bit of contrast, when making a transition from one paragraph to the other. However, the text does not have a general-to-specific coherence throughout the text, possibly because it deals with different main themes (disagreement with current political status quo, structure of the group, financing controversy.)

Global coherence and implications: The news story presented by the Los Angeles Times includes a strong global coherence, as it focuses mainly on the people behind Americans Elect. However it should be noted that the focus of the story is different from the one in the headline, which refers to the issue of bipartisanship. It can also be said that the implications of the story can be related to the impact that having investors in the project that are not publicly identified can have on the credibility of the project.

Superstructures: The topics in this story are clearly organized according to their function in their overall text, which begins with an overview of the initiative Americans Elect, followed by a description of how it started and the people behind, and then the implications that this can have. The story also follows a hierarchical schema, normally associated with news stories. The headline of the story presents the main topic, but does not mention the issue of financing, something that is assigned to the lead. The story does present a clear context and history of the initiative, and also includes comments and reactions from people inside the organization, such as the Chief Operating Officer, but also skeptics.

Style: Although the story presents two sides on the issue of who the main sponsors of the organization are, and its possibilities for success, it places strong emphasis on the side of those who are skeptics. The story also has a California angle at the beginning of the story, which is probably due to the fact that the newspaper is based in Los Angeles, but this angle seems to be not as important in the rest of the story. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the story does not seem to focus on the bipartisanship issue, in spite of the headline, the fact that it is using the Internet as a way to solve this, which is mentioned in the official Americans Elect website, or the new possibilities for citizen participation.

**Story 2: Don't like how we elect a president? Americans Elect offers alternative (Annex 9) – The Christian Science Monitor – November 16, 2011**

Text semantics: This story places a strong emphasis on the citizens, their dissatisfaction with the current state of politics, and the possibility of having a Presidential candidate directly nominated by a group of people instead of a party. The article has local coherence in regard to relations of time, when it discusses some historical facts, but also cause and consequence, when explaining how the nominating

process would take place. The article is also functionally coherent, by making use of the traditional general-to-specific approach between paragraphs.

Global coherence and implications: In this story, the main themes are possible to identify, giving global coherence. The story starts by focusing on the dissatisfaction of the people, the initiative, the financing issue, how it works, and the implications it has for citizen and participation. As for the implications, the story does not go deep into the hurdles Americans Elect could face, but gives a few subtle hints in this regard, but are mostly for the reader to identify and analyze.

Superstructures: The topics in this story are organized in a way that helps the author to discuss the issues behind the emergence of Americans Elect, the way the platform works, and also opinions on the potential success of the initiative. The story makes use of a hierarchical schema that includes the headline and lead making a clear focus on the issue of bipartisanship, which is also discussed in context and history. The story also makes use of verbal reactions and comments from members of media and politics, but especially with the interview with the COO of the initiative, who was also the person that spoke on the record in the Los Angeles Times. Additionally, this story makes use of data and studies to show how the public is dissatisfied with the current political choices.

Style: The style in this story seems to be one of support for the arrival of an initiative such as Americans Elect, considering the use of quotes and the people that were quoted. Although the support for Americans Elect is not direct, in its subtleness it can be also perceived in the fact that it supports the ideological position that bipartisanship seems to be affecting the United States.

**Story 3: Group Clears Path for a Third-Party Ticket (Annex 10) – The New York Times – December 16, 2011**

Text semantics: This story discusses the Americans Elect initiative as a solution to the longstanding issue of bipartisan politics in the United States. It is mentioned that within the context of dissatisfaction, the “dream” of an alternative is possible. However, while it mentions that Americans Elect is a real platform, the possibility of an independent candidate remains in the “dream” stage. It should also be noted that although this story is presented within the New York Times political blog, the post is presented and structured as a news story with interviews and statistics. In terms of local coherence, the text uses relations of time in order to discuss previous efforts of independent candidates to run for presidency.

Global coherence and implications: The text has global coherence, as it uses the theme of bipartisanship and the disappointment of people as the driving topic throughout the news story. While it also makes reference to other issues such as financing, the story does not stray far from the main topic. As for the implications, the final paragraph of the text, which states that the ticket itself remains in the dream stage, is a subtle nod to the fact that the campaign might not be successful.

Superstructures: The topics in this story are organized in a clear manner, by first raising the issue of bipartisanship, the possibilities of Americans Elect as a platform and not as a third party. The story also raises the issue of ballot access, which is considered one of the main reasons independent candidates cannot compete against those of traditional parties. The story also presents context, history, and several verbal reactions and comments, again from the COO of Americans Elect, but also from the former governor of New Jersey who supports the project, and an aide of President Obama, who raises the issue of transparency.

Style: The choice of words, especially those like “dream” can give the impression that, although the story is presented as a traditional news story, the reservations of the

author in regards to the possible success of the initiative are also stated, even if not very directly.

**Story 4: SXSW Interactive Goes Political: Americans Elect Wins 2012 People's Choice Award (Annex 11) – TIME – March 14, 2012**

Text semantics: The language used in this news story shows that it is not a traditional news story on politics, but that the focus is on the technological aspect of Americans Elect. This article discusses the initiative in the context of the South by Southwest Interactive festival, and the positive reception it had among participants. This article is functionally coherent, as it uses the success in the festival to explain what Americans Elect is about, using specifications and examples between propositions.

Global coherence and implications: The text does not appear to have global coherence, as the main issue of Americans Elect is omitted in the second half of the story, which gives way to the presentation of other initiatives that were also successful at the festival. The implications of the article, however, seem to point that the initiative has been very successful with American citizens and that it can have an impact in the Presidential elections.

Superstructures: The way the topics are organized in this article is not clear, and their function in the overall text seems to be confusing. Although the news story contains elements of the traditional structure of news articles, such as providing context, history, and verbal reactions, the headline and the lead give the impression that the story is about Americans Elect and its impact at the festival. However, the story is more of a roundup of the festival, missing to go further into detail on other aspects of Americans Elect, or its reception at the festival, or especially, telling the story from the perspective of the technology beat.

Style: The style used in this story is more similar to what news stories on technology are, than those of politics. This can also be seen in the choice of quotes, where the Chief Technology Officer is the one quoted, instead of the Chief Operations Officer, who was quoted in the other three stories. Furthermore, this story is not trying to discuss Americans Elect in terms of politics or citizen participation, but on the popularity it had at the festival, and the success it has had in terms of the number of visitors to the website.

This small sample of news stories gathered from different traditional media outlets across a time lapse of nine months, has shown that coverage of Americans Elect in such media has focused on the doubts that are had about the project to succeed. It is also interesting to note that, in regards to citizen participation, little is mentioned about its potential to change the way people engage in politics, or the fact that the Internet is used as the catalyst that allows people to take part in these processes, which so far has been the focus of this research project.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to use the concrete case of the Americans Elect initiative, as a way to understand more the current state of citizen participation; especially the role the Internet has in them. This has been done through an analysis of this initiative via existent theories on citizenship, participation and democracy. Additionally, a special focus has been made on the concept of crowdsourcing, as a possible way to understand how the Internet is being used to foster participation among citizens. The role of traditional media in the coverage of these new initiatives has also been analyzed, given the influence it still has on the way citizens relate to politics.

Although research on the political potential of the Internet has been discussed since the 1990s, with promoters and skeptics giving forecasts of what would and would not happen, it has not been until recent years that new initiatives have started to establish themselves and received attention from citizens and mainstream media alike.

The current climate of political participation in advanced Western democracies such as the United States is characterized by the development of two trends that started emerging in the last century, the decrease in civic engagement among citizens, and the rise and fast adoption of new forms of media such as the Internet. In the particular case of the United States, this has resulted in the arrival of new citizen initiatives that aim to use these new technologies as a way to engage in political participation.

Citizens identify and maximize the unique characteristics of the Internet, such as cost reductions, or the capacity to unite people around a common interest, regardless of geographical position, to develop projects such as Americans Elect, in which the use of the Internet is a significant component to achieve the project's goals.

The role of the Internet in the Americans Elect initiative takes different forms. On one hand it serves as a space for interested citizens to gather. In the case of Americans Elect, such space is provided. However, the ability for citizens to engage in discussions on these topics can also be limited, as users are not allowed to have meaningful discussions on these topics, but rather just declare very basic positions and priorities. Although such characteristic prevents the initiative from being a public sphere, in the purest Habermasian sense, it nonetheless shows the potential for the Internet to be a space for participation.

The Americans Elect project also shows how the Internet can bring new voices, as defined by Couldry, to political processes. However, this project also shows that different voices have different value. While Americans Elect allows for any registered voter to be a candidate, those that have already been in politics have fewer requirements than those that could be considered as outsiders.

Participation and citizenship have been traditionally defined in relation to institutionalized politics. Americans Elect has come to demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case, especially when it comes to initiatives that are forged using the Internet. Participation can no longer be confined to the traditional political institutions, as citizens are using new technologies to gather around issues, or even candidates, and not institutions such as political parties. The understanding of participation and citizenship should go beyond institutions and be understood also in terms of what citizens do to promote participation in democratic processes, and other cases of the political life. The fact that citizens embrace participation outside institutions does not necessarily mean that they are rejected or dismissed. As in the case of Americans Elect, these alternatives are used as ways of engaging with established institutions, such as governments, just starting from the outside.

Civic cultures, a concept developed by Dahlgren, can also help to understand more the way citizen participation is taking place with the new forms of media. The circuit of civic cultures, which places emphasis on identities and how they relate to knowledge, values, practices, spaces, and trust, gives a different perspective to participation than the concepts that are traditionally used. This is of particular relevance to the case of Americans Elect, which is using new forms of media as a means for engagement.

The concept of crowdsourcing can be used to understand more the phenomenon of citizen participation in the Internet, considering how it is a process in which a crowd is assigned the specific task. In the case of Americans Elect, the task of picking a candidate is given to those who want to take part of the project, regardless of their geographical location or political affiliation. With this idea in mind, the core principles of the crowdsourcing model can be used to generate or study new forms of political participation, using the advantages brought by the Internet, including a reduction in costs.

In spite of the new paradigms in the understanding of citizen and political participation that the Internet can bring, such as the use of concepts like civic cultures, or the use of new models for participation, the role of traditional media continues to be one of importance in shaping the way citizens acquire information and engage in political processes. Although traditional media shows interest in projects such as Americans Elect for their potential to change politics as usual, the coverage of these projects appears to limit to issues such as financing and politics, and not a lot of importance is given to citizen participation, or the way the Internet can become an agent of disruption in traditional politics.

This research project was carried out at the same time as the Americans Elect initiative was taking place. For this reason, this work has focused on the structure of

the project and its potential to alter citizen participation using concepts and theories related to this concept. Although the definitive results of this particular initiative are not yet known, it can be said that the adoption of new technologies will continue to influence and alter the way political participation, as it had been traditionally understood, has been transformed. New models and approaches to the study of citizen participation should be promoted and studied, in order to complement those already existing, in order to have a full understanding of how these initiatives take place, in the context of societies that are in perennial evolution, thanks to changes in technology, and people as well.

## 7. Executive summary

The aim of this research paper is to have an understanding of how citizen participation is taking place, with the adoption of new technologies, especially the Internet. The focus of this study is in the United States, with the particular case of the Americans Elect initiative, whose objective is to bring an alternative candidate to the Presidential elections in November 2012, a candidate that does not rely on the support of the main two parties of that country, and who has been elected via a process of direct nomination, which would take place completely online. This case has been chosen as it could be an example of how new technologies are being used to foster citizen participation, especially in developed democracies like the United States, where political engagement and participation among citizens has increased, together with the discomfort with the current political options that citizens have.

In order to have a stronger understanding of this case, existing theories of citizen participation are used, especially using the concepts of citizenship, participation, voice, deliberative democracy and public sphere. Such concepts are used as a theoretical background for the paper, in a way to understand how these concepts relate to each other, and especially how they have been understood and studied by scholars previously, before the arrival of the Internet.

### **Theoretical framework**

A case study of the Americans Elect initiative is presented, using theories and concepts related to participation, including the public sphere, participation, voice, citizenship, deliberative democracy, democratic deficit as well as theories related to political communication. A discussion of these theories is presented with the aim of understanding whether and how they can be applied to the context of citizen

participation and the Internet. This issue is further explored by focusing on Dahlgren's concept of civic cultures. The paper will also present a discussion on the concept of crowdsourcing, and how it can be applied to the Americans Elect initiative. Finally, considering the importance traditional media still has as an information provider, a discourse analysis of news stories related to Americans Elect is also presented.

### **Research questions**

The research questions that guide the investigation are the following:

1. What is the role of the Internet in the citizen participation initiative Americans Elect?
2. How is the process of crowdsourcing being used as facilitator for citizen participation in the Presidential elections in the United States, specifically the Americans Elect Initiative?
3. How can the concept of civic cultures enhance understanding of the Americans Elect Initiative and the wider context of citizen participation in media and democracy?
4. What is the role of traditional media in the coverage of the Americans Elect project?

The four questions tackle the issue of citizen participation in regards to the Internet from different perspectives, which can only help to understand more this concept, and especially how it relates to the Americans Elect initiative. As it can be seen in the research questions, the main focus of this research is understanding more about how the Internet can affect citizen participation. This is done from a theoretical standpoint, as previous theories on participation are used to compare to the actual event of Americans Elect, as a way to understand whether and how such theories can still be used in initiatives that are primarily Internet-based. Additionally, a strong focus is

made on the concept of crowdsourcing, which has been developed to understand how the Internet facilitates the assignment of specific tasks to a group of people, the crowd, who can be located in different geographical spaces, but who all have in common a certain task. Although the concept of crowdsourcing is used mostly in other areas such as management, or information technologies, in this paper the term is borrowed from those fields in order to understand whether a phenomenon like Americans Elect can be said to be using a form of crowdsourcing for a political purpose.

Another strong emphasis that is done in this research is on the concept of civic cultures. After having explored different concepts and theories that are associated with citizen participation, the concept of civic cultures is studied more in detail, given its structure of the civic cultures circuit. This circuit has been developed as a way to understand more the way certain cultural factors can also influence citizen participation and identity.

Furthermore, this investigation also aims to understand how traditional media is portraying the Americans Elect initiative. This is done as a complement to the other research. Although the main focus of this research project is understand citizen participation in the context of the Internet, given the fact that traditional media is still a main source of information for citizens, it is important to learn more about how such initiatives are presented, the focus that is made, and what they are trying to achieve.

## **Methodology**

Given the fact that this research investigation is primarily Internet-based, much like the Americans Elect project itself, it is important to have an understanding of how research in the Internet, and on the Internet takes place, including its advantages and limitations. Furthermore, this research project focuses on a case study methodology,

considering that its objective is to understand the “how” and the “why” of a certain event, in this case, Americans Elect. The type of case study that is made here is a descriptive case study, because it focuses on the structure of the Americans Elect organization, in regards to citizen participation. As it has been mentioned previously, it is also important to understand how traditional media portrays this initiative, and for this reason, a discourse analysis of four news stories from traditional media outlets will be presented, with the objective of seeing what the focus of the media is in regards to the project, and also to citizen participation.

### **The case study**

The case study of the Americans Elect begins with a main description of the American electoral system, previous initiatives similar to Americans Elect, and a main description of the initiative, including its structure and main rules. After this, the case study of the initiative is divided in two. The first part is a contextual section of the case, and the second one is an analysis of the initiative via existent theories on citizenship, participation and communication, crowdsourcing, and the portrayal of traditional media.

In the contextual section of the case study, a description and analysis of current trends in society that can have an impact on the way citizen participation takes place, is discussed. Some of the main topics that are mentioned as possibly having an impact on citizen participation include the use of the Internet in politics and media, a decrease in political engagement, and a rapid adoption of the Internet.

This context is used to frame the following discussion, which aims to answer the research questions of this project. An analysis of the main theories of citizen participation is made, and are compared against the case of Americans Elect. While it has been possible to see that some of the predictions that were made about

participation and the Internet, have not happened, others are closer to what movements like Americans Elect aim to do. Concepts such as participation, citizenship and the public sphere remain relevant in present times, but the Internet has made necessary some adjustments as to how they are interpreted. The concept of crowdsourcing can also be used as a way to understand citizen participation. A discourse.

A discourse analysis of news stories presented by traditional media about Americans Elect, shows that there is an interest on behalf of media on initiatives like this. However, the focus of these stories is not the potential impact of new technologies on citizen participation, but the political implications this project has, especially from two angles: the issue of bipartisanship and how it can be solved, and also the financial aspect of the organization, and the potential implications this can have on the credibility of the project.

## **Conclusions**

Citizen participation is can no longer be confined to the realm of institutionalized politics. New initiatives that have been possible thanks to the adoption of the Internet, show that traditional structures can be challenged by citizens. Although traditional theories and concepts on citizen participation remain relevant to some extent, and can help understand it in the context of new technologies, innovative approaches such as the civic cultures circuit, or the crowdsourcing model, can also be considered in order to understand these movements, which are in a constant mode of evolution, just as technology itself.

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## 9. Annexes

### 9.1 Annex 1

AMERICANS · ELECT 2012

ABOUT COLORS DEBATES CANDIDATES CAUCUS

“ Make way for the radical center ”

“ An unprecedented national online primary ”

“ This grassroots movement is really catching fire ”

feedback

### 9.2 Annex 2

AMERICANS · ELECT 2012

ABOUT COLORS

ABOUT US WHO WE ARE NEWS OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS BOARD DECISIONS MEDIA

### 9.3 Annex 3

**KAHLIL BYRD**  
Chief Executive Officer  
**STAFF SPOTLIGHT**

**ELLIOT L. ACKERMAN**  
Chief Operating Officer  
**STAFF SPOTLIGHT**

Kahlil was a former Communications Strategist for Republican and Democratic candidates. He was also a former Communications Director for Deval Patrick for Governor.

Elliot served as a Marine Corps Infantry Officer for eight years. He is a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where he served multiple tours of duty.

### 9.4 Annex 4

AMERICANS · ELECT 2012

ABOUT COLORS DEBATES CANDIDATES

#### RANK YOUR PRIORITIES

Drag the sliders to tell us what you think are the crucial issues facing our nation.

Least important Most important

**HEALTHCARE**

**FOREIGN POLICY**

**EDUCATION**

**IMMIGRATION**

**ENVIRONMENT**

**ENERGY**

**SOCIAL ISSUES**

**REFORM**

**ECONOMY**

### 9.5 Annex 5

AMERICANS · ELECT 2012

ABOUT COLORS DEBATES CANDIDATES

#### SHAPE THE DEBATE LEARN MORE

**1**

You pose the critical questions facing our nation

**2**

You and other delegates decide which questions are most important

**3**

The best questions will shape the final platform candidates must answer

[HIDE THIS](#)

#### TOP QUESTIONERS

David W

Jack P

Steve S

#### FEATURED QUESTION

Will you compromise with fellow lawmakers on important issues like taxes and our growing national debt?

**ECONOMY** Delegate 1 month 3 weeks ago

#### NATIONAL PRIORITIES

- 1 **ECONOMY** | 5681 QUESTIONS
- 2 **EDUCATION** | 1961 QUESTIONS
- 3 **ENERGY** | 1261 QUESTIONS
- 4 **HEALTHCARE** | 1487 QUESTIONS

## 9.6 Annex 6

The screenshot shows a website interface with a navigation bar at the top containing 'DISCOVER', 'VIEW ALL', 'DRAFT YOUR OWN OR DECLARE YOURSELF'. Below the navigation bar, there is a 'View by' section with tabs for 'DECLARED', 'DRAFT', 'RECENT', 'YOUR SUPPORTS', 'YOUR MATCHES', and 'A-Z'. A search icon and 'SEARCH' text are also present. The main content area displays two candidate profiles:

- Buddy Roemer**: Former Governor of Louisiana, DECLAIMED CANDIDATE. Highest Priority ECONOMY. Your Match: --. Supporters: 6293.
- Rocky Anderson**: Former Mayor of Salt Lake City, Utah, DECLAIMED CANDIDATE. Highest Priority ECONOMY. Your Match: --. Supporters: 3390.

## 9.7 Annex 7

The screenshot shows a campaign page titled 'GIVE TO AMERICANS ELECT'. It features a 'LEARN MORE' button in the top right corner. The main content area includes:

- IN THE 2008 ELECTION**: the political parties spent over \$5 billion promoting THEIR choices. This election, Americans Elect only needs \$30 million to put YOUR choice on the ballot.
- But we need your help—because we don't accept money from candidates, special interests or political parties.**
- Why I Gave**:
  - No money goes to supporting any candidate or political party
  - No money goes to supporting any issue or other political purpose
  - No individual may contribute more than \$10,000

At the bottom, there is a 'SUGGESTED DONATION' section with a 'GIVE A' button and a 'WHY I GAVE' section with a testimonial: 'I HAVE SEEN THE CORRUPTION OF OUR POLITICIANS EXTORTING'.

## 9.8 Annex 8

LOS ANGELES TIMES - Americans Elect seeks to upend primary system  
*It hopes to select an alternate presidential ticket through an online, open convention. Its status as a social welfare group has enabled it to keep private its financiers even as it tries to qualify as a new party.*

July 28, 2011 | By Matea Gold, Washington Bureau

Reporting from Washington — County registrar offices across California on

Thursday will begin receiving the product of an audacious enterprise — nearly 1.6 million signatures collected by Americans Elect, a group attempting to ride exasperation with the nation's political leaders into a place on the ballot in all 50 states by 2012.

Its mission is to upend the traditional party primary process by selecting an alternate presidential ticket through an online, open nominating convention.

The goal is bold, but the manner in which Americans Elect is pursuing its aims is highly unorthodox. Although it is attempting to qualify as a new party in California and other states, the group's legal designation is that of a nonpolitical, tax-exempt social welfare organization.

Under that designation, Americans Elect has been able to keep private its financiers, raising questions about what forces are driving the massive undertaking. The group has labored largely under the radar for the last 16 months, raising \$20 million while successfully gaining ballot access in Arizona, Alaska, Kansas and Nevada. It is seeking certification in Michigan, Hawaii, Missouri and Florida besides California, with an additional 18 states in the pipeline before the end of the year.

Gaining 50-state ballot access is no easy feat — independent presidential candidate H. Ross Perot managed to do so in 1992 and 1996, whereas Ralph Nader got on only 45 state ballots during his fifth presidential bid in 2008.

But Americans Elect is bringing considerable might to the effort. In California, where it hopes to join the six currently recognized political parties, its tally of signatures could come close to the more than 1.6 million that triggered the 2003 gubernatorial recall. (The secretary of state has until Sept. 25 to verify the petitions and certify Americans Elect as a party.)

Leaders of the organization say that they are motivated solely by the desire to open the political process to more voices, a compelling message at a time when partisan gridlock has triggered rampant public disgust.

"The only political philosophy we have is that people should be greater than parties," said Elliot Ackerman, the group's chief operating officer.

Still, many of the group's experienced political operatives hail from centrist circles: Chief Executive Kahlil Byrd is a GOP strategist who worked for Massachusetts' Democratic governor, Deval Patrick. Pollster Doug Schoen worked for Hillary Rodham Clinton's Democratic presidential campaign, as well as for New York Mayor

Michael R. Bloomberg, an independent.

One of the main financial backers is Elliot's father, Peter Ackerman, a private investment executive who made tens of millions of dollars working with junk bond trader Michael Milken in the 1980s. He alone has given at least \$1.55 million to Americans Elect, according to tax documents the group filed last year while it was briefly organized as a political organization. In October, it changed its designation to a 501(c)4 social welfare group, as first noted by blogger Jim Cook, who has been tracking its activities.

Together, between 300 and 400 donors have given Americans Elect \$20 million, according to Byrd, with no contribution exceeding \$5 million. The major donations are technically low-interest loans, the bulk of which the organization says it intends to pay back as it widens its contribution base. Eventually it hopes to limit individual donations to no more than \$10,000.

## 9.9 Annex 9

**Christian Science Monitor** - Don't like how we elect a president? Americans Elect offers alternative.

**To combat discontent with the political climate, Americans Elect aims to put the first directly nominated nonpartisan presidential candidate on the ballot, decided by an online convention.**

By Andrew Mach, *Contributor* / November 16, 2011

Is it time for an extreme make-over of how [America](#) arrives at its presidential nominees?

A grass-roots effort to do just that is under way – with the intent of bypassing the traditional party-based primary and caucus process that begins Jan. 3 in Iowa.

The nonprofit Americans Elect aims to take party politics out of this method by putting a directly nominated nonpartisan presidential ticket on the ballot in 2012.

No, it's not a third party, says Elliot Ackerman, chief operating officer of AmericansElect.org, but rather a second way of nominating someone to be the country's next leader. This alternative, he says, "puts the people ahead of the parties" – and it is being carried out entirely online.

"Politics is one of the few places where you still have to accept Brand A and Brand B,

so at Americans Elect we want to leverage our newest technologies to get us back to our oldest values, which is letting every voter participate in a meaningful way," Mr. Ackerman says.

If the group has its way, it will hold the first-ever nonpartisan online nominating convention, and the political ticket that emerges from it will be on the ballot in all 50 states.

But first there's a long row to hoe. Americans Elect must collect 2.9 million signatures, representing every state, from people who want such a nonpartisan ticket to qualify for the ballot. The drive, if successful, would mark the first time a presidential candidate nominated directly by the American people achieved ballot access. So far, 1.9 million people in 24 states have signed the petitions.

The as-yet-to-be-named ticket has already qualified for the ballot in seven states, including four swing states – [Florida](#), [Michigan](#), [Nevada](#), and [Ohio](#) – and volunteers are gathering signatures in 13 others, says Kahlil Byrd, AmericansElect.org's chief executive officer. Americans Elect is waiting to hear if its signatures are sufficient to make the ballots in [Arkansas](#), [Hawaii](#), [Utah](#), and [California](#). In California, organizers submitted 1.6 million signatures in early October, more than for any single initiative in state history.

Financial backing for the endeavor is a mystery. Americans Elect is funded exclusively by some \$20 million in contributions from unnamed individuals, says Mr. Byrd. The group's website says it intends to repay the initial financiers so that no single individual will have contributed more than \$10,000.

Here's how the process works: Any registered voter, regardless of party, can sign up online to be a delegate (more than 200,000 people already have). First, delegates take an online survey that defines their core political views by ranking their priorities on a host of topics such as foreign policy, the economy, the environment, and social issues.

Next, delegates can submit questions of their own that they'd like prospective candidates to answer. Collectively, delegates will later decide the most important questions, which the eventual Americans Elect candidates will have to answer.

Later this year, the website will even match delegates to leading political figures – such as current and former presidential candidates, members of Congress, governors, and business leaders – on the basis of the delegates' own profiles and the prospective candidates' positions. Each delegate can then draft a candidate of his or her choosing, or any interested candidates (constitutional requirements withstanding) can throw their hat in the ring and seek the nomination for themselves.

Ackerman says several politicians and other potential candidates have expressed interest in the Americans Elect online convention but wouldn't reveal who or how many. The nominee would be selected at an online convention in June.

Finally, the nominated candidate must pick a running mate from a party that is not his or her own. The candidate can run a campaign unencumbered by the constraints of primary election rules and party affiliation, says Byrd.

"Candidates are not putting down the beliefs of their party," he says. "But they are reaching across the aisle for the opportunity to authentically focus on the issues people care about, not the ideology of their party."

Alternative candidates face daunting hurdles in the general election. [Ross Perot](#) won nearly 19 percent of the popular vote in the 1992 presidential election, but no other third-party bid has since come close to matching him.

The folks at Americans Elect, however, are not deterred, insisting the time is ripe for change. Some analysts agree.

"Conditions now are more fertile than ever for something politically disruptive to happen," argued Republican strategist [Mark McKinnon](#) at a public forum about Americans Elect at [Harvard University](#) in Cambridge, Mass., in early November.

Nearly 70 percent of Americans hold a negative view of government, according to an [ABC News/Washington Post](#) poll released last month.

"[Americans Elect] is attracting a lot of [ideologically] center, center-left voters who are disenfranchised and not happy with Obama," says Mr. McKinnon. "And no matter what happens in the Republican [presidential] primary, there will be people who aren't happy with that outcome either."

Washington Post political reporter [Karen Tumulty](#), also at the Harvard forum, makes a similar point.

"People are feeling really uncertain about the future, and they've lost confidence in the system," she says. "The volatility of the political climate suggests that voters are not very patient about what's happening in [Washington](#)."

Byrd and Ackerman hope their movement can help to restore faith in Washington.

"The real benefit of Americans Elect is that candidates are not beholden to the traditional ways of running for president," Byrd says. "Candidates can compete with authentic campaigns, not just with the party faithful but with the rest of America."

## 9.10 Annex 10

THE NEW YORK TIMES

December 16, 2011, 12:52 PM

Group Clears Path for a Third-Party Ticket

By RICHARD W. STEVENSON

To those who bemoan the lack of better choices in presidential elections, third-party fantasies come easily at this stage in a campaign. End hyper-partisanship and Washington dysfunction: Vote Bloomberg-Petraeus in 2012!

Those dreams are even more vivid than usual this time around, and not just because polls show striking levels of discontent within both parties about politics as usual.

The most immediate practical impediment to independent and third-party bids has always been the difficulty of getting on the ballot in all 50 states, a complex process that requires substantial time, money and organization. Ross Perot managed it in 1992 and got almost 19 percent of the popular vote despite dropping out at one point; Ralph Nader was on 44 state ballots in 2000, including, fatefully, Florida, where the election was decided in George W. Bush's favor by 537 votes.

In 2012, courtesy of a group called Americans Elect, some lucky independent candidate will have the chance to enter the race all but guaranteed nationwide ballot access. And as that fact — or threat — has begun to dawn on the Democratic and Republican establishments, it is setting off new chatter about the prospect for a high-profile unity ticket, or at least about someone emerging to play the role of national gadfly and potential spoiler for one party or the other.

“I think what is clear is they'll be on the ballot in most of these states, and it's going to be something we have to deal with,” Jim Messina, President Obama's campaign manager, said of Americans Elect at a briefing this week on the White House's re-election strategy.

So far, Americans Elect has won ballot approval in 11 states and says it is within days of completing the process in California, the biggest electoral prize. It expects to complete gathering the necessary signatures by Dec. 31 for ballot petitions in all 30 of the states that allow the process to be completed this year; it anticipates no problem meeting the requirements in the remaining states next year.

“We're removing the barrier to entry, which is 50-state ballot access,” said Elliot

Ackerman, chief operating officer of Americans Elect.

Mr. Ackerman and other backers of the group said they were not out to help or hurt one party or the other. They said this is neither an effort to torpedo Mr. Obama by siphoning away moderates and independents nor a ploy to help him by splitting the anti-Obama vote. The group has no specific agenda other than offering voters a wider choice of candidates, its backers say, and is not a third party but a nominating process.

By its own account, the group is driven by civic-minded citizens who feel that moderates and independents have been disenfranchised by the tendency of the two parties play to their bases, especially in primaries, when independents cannot vote in many states. Its practical goal, beyond ballot access, is promote the selection of a presidential ticket via an online convention in June; the ticket would have to include a Democrat and a Republican, or a member of one party and an independent.

Those who have lent their names to the effort include Will Marshall, the president of the Progressive Policy Institute, the centrist Democratic research group; Christine Todd Whitman, the former governor of New Jersey and one of a dwindling band of moderate Republicans; Mark McKinnon, the strategist who guided Mr. Bush's message in 2000 and 2004 but backed Mr. Obama in 2008 and now says his interest is "anything that disrupts the current system," and Doug Schoen, a pollster who worked for Bill Clinton in the 1990s but is now frequently critical of Democrats.

"This is an effort to empower people," said Ms. Whitman. "This ticket could win, but at the least it could drive both parties toward the center."

But to some members of both parties, Americans Elect is a shadowy cabal financed by hedge fund money and undisclosed donors who could have a secret agenda to tilt the election one way or the other.

While some of the big initial backers, including Mr. Ackerman's father, Peter Ackerman, a wealthy investor, have publicly acknowledged their contributions to the initial \$35 million budget, others have not. And while the selection of a ticket will play out transparently via the online convention, the process also includes a provision for a committee to screen candidates who do not have traditional credentials in politics, business, the military and other fields, leading to accusations of potential skulduggery.

"It's kind of like uberdemocracy meets back-room bosses," said David Axelrod, Mr. Obama's campaign strategist.

Among Republicans, the feeling that Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney would both be

flawed candidates against Mr. Obama has led to another round of speculation about a late-entering candidate or a third-party bid. But even as they begin to pay more attention to Americans Elect, leaders in both parties are playing down the idea of a third-party candidacy.

“I don’t expect a third-party campaign or candidacy in this election,” Mr. Romney said in an interview with The New York Times on Wednesday. “There is such a feeling that President Obama has to be removed from the White House and we have to have someone who believes in American principles there again, that we’ll come together.”

Of course, Americans Elect could be wholly successful in creating the opportunity for a new, centrist ticket to emerge but still run into the difficult reality of convincing candidates of real stature and appeal to step forward and run against an incumbent Democratic president and the full force of a highly motivated Republican Party.

Officials of the group say quiet outreach has begun to some potential candidates, and the names of some usual suspects are popping up. They start with Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York, and Jon M. Huntsman Jr., the Utah Republican, should his bid for his party’s nomination fail. But the only candidate to declare a public interest so far is Buddy Roemer, a former governor of Louisiana whose effort to start a bid for the Republican nomination has faltered.

So while the process to enable creation of a centrist ticket is very real, the ticket itself remains very much in the dream stage.

## 9.11 Annex 11

### TIME

SXSW Interactive Goes Political: Americans Elect Wins 2012 People’s Choice Award

*In a year of few hot new tech launches, it was the third party-minded online organization Americans Elect that took home the top award*

**By STEVEN JAMES SNYDER | @thesnydes | March 14, 2012 |**

Between grumbles in Austin that the 2012 South By Southwest Interactive festival had come and gone without any standout debuts or surprises, there was a steady drumbeat of curiosity, inspiration and support being expressed for AmericansElect.org – an organization and website devoted to popularizing a third-party candidate in this November’s presidential election. (See TIME’s complete

coverage of SXSW 2012)

Late Tuesday night, during the annual awards ceremony, this popular platform was bestowed with one of the festival's top honors – the “People's Choice Award,” which last year went to Groupon. Within minutes, Americans Elect had sent out a triumphant press release, moving to capitalize on this trendy prize: “This award confirms that Americans Elect is not just a growing political movement, but also a groundbreaking and innovative tech startup,” said Joshua Levine, the organization's chief technology officer. “We're honored to be recognized alongside so many other companies at SXSW using technology to empower people and improve the world around us.”

The primary agenda of the AmericansElect.org website is the hosting of the first online presidential primary this spring, which will be open to any registered voter in the country. Every candidate will make a pitch to the Americans Elect delegates, now numbering at more than 400,000, who will in turn choose and advocate for a presidential ticket that will appear opposite President Obama and the chosen GOP candidate on ballots this November. The countdown is already well underway; the first Americans Elect caucuses are set to begin in roughly 50 days.

Beyond the popularity of the raw concept, the numbers show that Americans Elect has thrived in its execution: There have already been more than 2.8 million visitors to the AmericansElect.org site since its launch in July, all logging more than 32 million page views.

Other top awards of the evening went to Pinterest (Breakout Digital Trend), the pinboard-styled social photo sharing website that has shown an explosive growth in users over the past year (see TIME's 16 Pinterest boards), and Take This Lollipop (Best of Show), the creepy viral Facebook app that employs users' Facebook data and photos to create a brief online horror film starring themselves. The message behind Take This Lollipop: Be careful about how much information you're sharing with the world. You never know who might be watching.

The 15th annual SXSW Interactive Awards dished out more than a dozen prizes Tuesday – to categories as wide-ranging as Activism (SlaveryFootprint.org), Social Media (Storify) and Music (Obsessed With Sound). To see the full rundown of the honored sites, programs and concepts, visit the South By Southwest website.

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