

A report on the proceedings of POLITICAL Tech Summit

Held at the Heeresdbäckerei, Berlin on 25th January 2025

See <https://www.politicaltech.eu/>

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Abstract

I attended Political Tech 25 in Berlin in January. The slides and videos are sadly not yet ready but here is a reflection from my notes. I spent the first part of the morning in the plenary hall, and then visited the break out rooms. These notes cover insights into “elections and electioneering”, and “IT, Social Media and Persuasiveness”; I also cover a presentation from the Labour Party about their successful campaign in a separate document but include a short summary from that presentation.

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Campaigning, elections and electioneering

The first session was a panel consisting of Alexis Crews, Necati Özkan, and Sebastian Rodriguez. The session was called, “Political Tech lessons from the world’s biggest election year”.

The organisers said, “ ...This panel brings together leading experts and campaign strategists to analyse the most impactful technological innovations and lessons learned from this unprecedented global experience. ...“

My takeaways from this session were surprisingly old school,

- The message is the key.
- Rapid Rebuttal, which Labour used very successfully back in 1997, and called pre-bunking by Ms Crews was an important tactic for the Democrats
- Rallies can reinforce the base, and create a foot print, perhaps Labour, which didn’t do them in 2025 is still suffering from Kinnock’s Sheffield rally.
- Don’t forget old tech; emails, SMS and [tele-]doorknocking still work, but this is about GOTV. I suggest no-one knows how to persuade people to change their mind.
- Again, in the US, the right are very good at grass roots organising. (As opposed to say Labour in the UK, I saw very few posters in the UK general election in ’24.)
- In the US, the use of the social media platforms is deprecated; too much data is given away to the platform, it is best to develop alternatives.
- In the US, the Democrats did not use AI for voter message design, again, the platforms learn a lot about your thinking; mind you, who provides the storage for the campaign team.

- Explaining how to vote is important, (which in the UK means maintaining the voter registration, maintaining the postal vote registration, and running two GOTV campaigns, one aimed at when the PV's go out and one aimed at election day itself).

The second speaker in this session was Necati Özkan, a consultant to Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul for his re-election campaign. This would be easier to talk about if I had access to the slides, but as I said the videos are not yet available and while I have written to him, asking for the slides, he's probably a bit busy at the moment. Aljazeera, [reports on the 2024 election](#) and their impact on Türkiye's national politics. The [Guardian also reports](#) on the election.

My notes on this presentation are a reflection on the importance of messaging and slogans. It is necessary to design the messaging and have a strategy. The CHP's was based on "Istanbul Succeeds", they were very political and included a strong (women's) equality message. i.e. no triangulation here.

Engagement in Politics

The second session was called "Political Tech to Reimagine our Digital Public Squares" and was a panel led by Beth Goldberg and Alicoa Combaz.

It was advertised with the following text, "How might technology enable more constructive participation in today's volatile public squares? Innovations in AI offer new channels for public voice and democratic deliberations, from AI-enabled platforms that crowdsource community input on policies to models that find common ground between warring groups in peace negotiations. These innovations also require adaptive new guardrails for ensuring the integrity, accuracy, and privacy of information exchanged. The keynote will spotlight cases where AI is being used to find common ground, from bridging systems in

comment spaces to local deliberations for urban planning. These stories show how today’s public squares can evolve to leverage AI for inclusive deliberative discourse, at scale.”


Here’s what made me sit up, I paraphrase, the drive for revenue leads to the social media companies encouraging dissent and abuse. It can be better than that!


I was expecting the video availability to be quicker than it’s been, and so some of my notes are markers to remind me what to look for, but my notes capture the following bullets.


- How to give agency?
- In Digital Squares, how can we depolarise the debate?
- And as above, they’re built for profit not for debate, their design rewards engagement, social norms are set by provocation.


This is an extract from [Goldberg’s linkedin article](#), which is a pretty effective summary, of her paper, [AI and the Future of Digital Public Squares](#) by Goldberg and [many] others (Goldberg, Acosta-Navas & Bakker 2024).

“We agreed there is vast, unrealized potential for the internet to democratize decision making and meaningful participation. We zeroed in on four ways LLMs and #genAI pose a paradigm shift for our digital public squares that could serve – or further imperil – more pluralistic societies:

 *Collective Dialogue Systems apply deliberative tech that enable people to express themselves and deliberate collectively, simplifying how we can solicit collective intelligence and find common ground.*

 *Bridging Systems in public squares can change today’s incentive structures that reward moral outrage, redesigning to promote connection and understanding between people with different views and identities.*

 *Community-driven moderation affords communities the customizable tools to tailor moderation to their own needs.*

 *Proof-of-Humanity Systems are critical for more sophisticated, adaptive ways to distinguish between humans and bots.*

In her Berlin speech, Goldberg made much of “Bridging” and Goldberg, Acosta-Navas & Bakker 2024 references, [Bridging Systems: Open Problems for Countering Destructive Divisiveness across Ranking, Recommenders, and Governance](#) , by Aviv

Ovadya, Luke Thorburn also at the Cornell Archives. Bridging systems may well be a good place for further research possibly in conjunction with the Mastodon code base which is both open source and, I believe, curated in Europe.

She spoke about twitter's community notes, but possibly it's just more of the same but we can note that community votes (& citizens' assemblies) are bridging mechanisms although with a winner take all result culture, I am unclear how voting can be a bridging mechanism. Parliaments/Committees can compromise, Presidents, Mayors and Referendums cannot.

Some further bullets,

- The "Stories not promises" mantra is anti-political.
- She argued that lived experience IS expertise; this confuses me, but the argument for citizen's assemblies is that lived experience is an important input to the effectiveness of citizen's assemblies
- A deliberation is NOT direct democracy
- People don't want the toxicity
- The consensus tool, pol.is and the Taiwanese traffic planning exercise was quoted, but this required moderation and an acceptance that consensus was the best way to decide. Again Goldberg, Acosta-Navas & Bakker 2024 talks about human intervention in moderation.

Somewhere in me is an essay about consensus, voting and decision making. Are there types of decisions where consensus i.e. veto works better than a voting system. As I say, I am convinced that Parliaments/Committees can compromise, whereas Presidents, Mayors and Referendums cannot and that compromise builds a better more tolerant and livable society.

Make.Org's CEO was planned to speak, Alicia Gomez but I believe she had to offer a substitute. Anyway, the speaker spoke of compassion in politics which we could do with

more of, but also suggested Bluesky as the alternative to Twitter/X. Why at a European conference, a US corporation, which can be bought as was the case with twitter, or blown of course, as has been the case with Open AI, which is no longer a not for profit, when mastodon is open source and curated in Europe.

Further bullets from my note,

- With respect to AI moderating, do we just end up with programs arguing with each other as was the case with copyright infringement where MPAA's search robots generated take down requests to google who automatically processed them.
- Technology is a tool, but expensive technology can only be used by the rich
- The year of elections will have been used for ai training.
- New technology changes the buy vs build choices, adoption is easier and buy becomes rent.
- Opensource changes the monetisation strategy, I think that's me.

And on campaigning,

- Don't forget old school techniques, SMS & email, and rallies
- AI makes time for politicians
- You still need people
- We are going to be glad of the GDPR.

I attended sessions given by newspeak house and hate aid. The newspeak house presentation was an exposition of a course offered by them and I asked how theoretical it was, in particular whether it covered social choice theory, which it does. Hate aid's CEO Spoke of their work pursuing the social network platforms, including unexpectedly, given the conference focus, Airbnb, using the Digital Services Act; in Germany they may well not have legislated, unlike in the UK, to exclude legal standing from NGOs who can thus pursue GDPR breaches on behalf of citizens.

I have reported on the Labour Party's presentation in a separate document. Some key lessons from this presentation reinforce much of what was said elsewhere, prepare early, enable local with local content that is both local and authentic and so again AI was avoided. In Labour's case they were very concerned that local and national content was not contradicted and is/was as immune as possible to their opponents' attack lines.

Additional important points from the Labour Party were, there was a very limited use of AI. The presenters emphasised velocity which is why their technology selections were important and their design and approval process was optimised for speed. The big lessons in using SMS and Email were that, scale beats targeting and authenticity beats quality.

Big Lessons

The summary lessons, apart from the possibly that collective ideas about technology and political campaigning in the UK may be amongst the best in the world are as follows,

1. Don't rely/campaign on the social media platforms, you give too much away.
2. Old school tactics work and are effective
3. How to vote material is useful and important
4. There is an argument that "Scale beats targeting" which reinforces 1. above.
5. AI is not in use for content generation, both due to its lack of authenticity and that the outputs are available for re-use by the AI and their customers.