

**THE INTERNET AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The past eight years have seen a great increase in Internet usage in American culture and politics. It would seem that, in our digital age, the Internet has exercised strong effects on political behavior and even on legislators. This thesis explores the variety and intensity of these effects, finding them to be substantial and growing, although not yet robust.

The main influences the net has exerted on American politics take place predominantly within two areas: political campaigns and online political interest groups. Activists are certainly using the Internet for political causes, but this sort of Internet usage is really just an extension of previous activism. The Internet does not create new habits; it simply offers a more convenient method of reading the news, communicating to others, or performing other activities we have already been inclined to perform. Even those Internet users who access political web sites are shown preeminently to be those who have otherwise accessed political information in other ways such as newspapers or televised news.

So far the Internet has made campaign donations easier for people who are comfortable surfing the World Wide Web. But there is little evidence to show that these people would not have otherwise donated to the campaign by more traditional methods. The Internet has made political activism easier, but people who are not politically active will not suddenly change simply because the Internet offers itself as an expedient, inexpensive tool. We have seen, however, with groups like MoveOn.org, that activists are rallying, communicating, and demonstrating more efficiently than ever before. The political parties or groups that can most effectively use the Internet to mobilize voters and affect public opinion will greatly benefit themselves.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Internet exerts a substantial effect on American political activity today. Interest groups and activist entrepreneurs have turned to the Internet in greater numbers to advance causes and mobilize electoral support. Online political sites have become more popular in campaigns and the Internet has also become a new source of political information for a growing number of citizens (Bimber and Davis, 2003). This thesis explores what effects the Internet has exercised on politics since 1996, when the Internet was becoming more popular. My hypothesis asserted that increased Internet activity causes greater civic involvement. The findings, however, reveal that the Internet has not had a robust effect on American political activity and does not show much promise of beginning a new era of increased, widespread civic engagement. Many have predicted that the Internet would spur major increases in voting and civic engagement. Higher civic action is actually already a trait of many Internet users. The Internet will merely provide a more convenient forum and mode of communication for those interested or somehow involved in the political process already. We will study differences between Internet users and non-users, especially with regard to users accessing web sites for political purposes. This thesis will also examine the extent of any social or political influence the Internet may have on its users. As of 2003, sixty-seven percent of Americans were surfing the net (Klotz, 2004) for reasons ranging from checking email to visiting chat rooms, to buying products from online stores like EBAY. The Internet is becoming more popular, but is essentially serving to widen the gap between the politically informed and those with less knowledge.

Online political campaigning has become commonplace for candidates since 2000 (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Campaigning is, in its simplest definition, the process of winning votes to attain public office and there are many ways to go about such a process. For campaign teams, the primary goal is to inform the electorate of one's candidate in an appealing way, whether by stressing his or her issue positions, character, personality, or a multitude of other features. Some tried and true principles apply even to the present day, and will apparently always apply, even in the age of the Internet. Dick Morris pointed out in his campaign strategy book *Power Plays* that a candidate, or any political actor for that matter, greatly benefits himself to use a new technology.

But what are we to make of Internet usage in the political realm? Television easily remains the most dominant form of media. Although Internet use has been on the upsurge every year thus far, it does not compete with the heavyweight ratings pulled in by television. In 2000, the Gore camp spent 40 percent of its campaign funds on television advertising while the Bush campaign spent 58 percent on the same (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Nevertheless, there are some notable differences between Internet usage and television viewing. Watching one's television is a passive process with up to hundreds of channels available at most. The World Wide Web communicates, as its name suggests, to a global audience where literally millions and millions of web sites are available for viewing, each full of its own web pages.

Web site viewing is different from TV viewing because visiting web sites is a more purposive action. In other words, surfing the net is far different than channel surfing. If we are watching NBC, for instance, and a negative ad comes on bashing President Bush, we have had almost no say in seeing the ad. We can change the channel as quickly as we can find the remote, but we did not deliberately choose to see the commercial. When we visit a web site, on the other

hand, we carefully and intentionally type in the URL address and hit “Enter” or “Go.” We find the information we wish to see, whether we know the web address off hand or if we perform a quick search on Google.

Internet usage goes beyond accessing news candidates and its utility for campaign teams. Political interest groups like MoveOn.org have used the web to their advantage by facilitating more opportunities to acquire volunteers, rally support for a plethora of causes, and of course, to receive donations. MoveOn.org already represents more than 1,700,000 activists all across America ([www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org).) Like other online activist groups, MoveOn effects political change by building electronic advocacy groups. By simply visiting the site one can see how MoveOn organizes grass roots political activity. MoveOn, a more ideologically liberal online group, informs site visitors of recent political news events, stokes their partisan inclinations, and encourages them to email others (including legislators with online petitions.) For those who leave their email address, MoveOn gives specific information on ways just one person can make a difference in the political arena. The site is building such a large base of supporters that legislators, officials, and the media are paying closer attention to its messages, including the expensive anti-Bush commercials aired during the Super Bowl. Sites like MoveOn.org and MeetUp.org encourage visitors to form groups in their local area for random political purposes including rallies or protests. MeetUp.org, which can be used for groups as wide-ranging as witch guilds to Democrats, has proved an amazing tool for orchestrating rallies in support of presidential candidate and one-time frontrunner Howard Dean. Three hundred or so supporters greeted him at an airport much to Dean’s surprise simply because some of his more avid supporters possessed the moxie and foresight to arrange a rally. Other web sites like MoveOn.org, which originated during the Clinton sex scandals, have provided a litany of



political information of the more liberal persuasion. We will delve deeper into the effectiveness of online political interest groups in chapter two.

Candidate web sites appear, largely, to be preaching to the converted. As we will see in chapter one, the great majority of those visiting Candidate X's web site are those already supporting that candidate. Still a candidate web site is an excellent way to expound more in depth on issue positions as many candidates have. Candidates can also reach supporters through mass email lists, encouraging them to take family and friends to the polls with them, as Bush's site did in 2000. Gore's Webmaster, Ben Green, arranged for "instant messaging" to take place between supporting visitors of Al Gore's web site. Green said it gave them a "means by which the people could communicate with each other, identify each other, and organize together completely independent of the campaigning's formal apparatus" (Bimber and Davis, p. 53, 2003). All the 2000 candidates had volunteer opportunities touted online that included handing out leaflets, arranging rallies, putting up yard signs, or just sticking a bumper sticker on one's car. Some campaigns even encouraged certain email subscribers to monitor different chat rooms so as to counter any negatives information being circulated online about their candidate.

The home pages of candidates are intriguing to compare on the basis of content analysis because they give site visitors the first impression of the online campaign. Some web sites, like Bush's, are more hierarchical and formal, while Gore's was a litany of color portraying excitement and energy (Bimber and Davis, 2003). One's design preference aside, it seemed that the Bush site in 2000 embodied a relaxed confidence while Gore's web site tried to convey a sense of immense activity to capture the White House against all odds. It is wise also for a candidate to emphasize his campaign slogan on his site's front page. In his ill-fated bid for the Missouri Senate, John Ashcroft chose the slogan, "Missouri Values" as his campaign theme.

Although he would go on to lose to a deceased opponent, he at least communicated his online campaign message clearly. As a matter of fact, Mel Carnahan also highlighted his theme online, “Fighting for Missouri’s Working Families” (Bimber and Davis, p. 78, 2003). Ralph Nader, in his bold if not hopeless bid for presidency, enjoyed many hits on his web site in 2000 stressing the words “Government of, by and for the People...Not Monied Interests” (Bimber and Davis, 2003). This slogan headlined the top of every single page at Nader’s site.

Although not many Americans are accessing the web for political purposes, it is still informative to recognize the net’s growing effect on these users and to examine how candidates are optimizing their web sites. Certain campaign fundamentals apply in almost every situation. And, as a general rule, what does not work in offline campaigning will almost certainly not work well on the Internet. Republican Strategist David Horowitz warned of the dangers of being overly negative (Horowitz, 2000). Newt Gingrich went that route during the Clinton Administration and we saw Clinton’s poll numbers improve while Gingrich’s own ratings plummeted. Unfortunately, Steve Forbes did not learn from Gingrich’s mistake. His web site was harshly critical of his fellow rightwing competitors and yet he failed to make a valid, positive case for his own candidacy. The Internet, by and large, has not been used for negative campaigning.

Internet campaigning is still not potent enough to replace traditional means of receiving donations. It has, however, certainly been an effective supplement for fundraising. It will be illuminating in chapter three to compare the different web sites of this election season to see which have been more effectively and professional composed as opposed to those lacking the capability for online credit card donations. Some candidate sites were busier than others. Some

had a readily apparent donation button in bright red at the top of the page; others were more elusive.

One would be surprised to find that, despite the professionalism and experience of the eight presidential candidates running, their web sites were certainly not beyond reproof. Some, like Howard Dean's and John Kerry's, are very user-friendly, including obvious, bold-faced links to numerous issue positions and a campaign calendar, whereas others do not even have somewhat attractive pictures to offer the sites' viewers. Each site seems to have its own style. Bush chose to stress education, tax proposals, and integrity as his main selling points. Gore's web site was much busier, replete with links to draw the attention and support of the viewer. The McCain team creatively integrated fundraising with the Internet by allowing \$100 dollar donors to chat online with John McCain. Such an added incentive was sure to increase donations as 500 people did so. Bimber and Davis provided helpful data in their book *Campaigning Online* by surveying Internet users and critiquing the online activity of campaigns even at the state level. It will be interesting to see how candidate web sites develop just in the next twenty years. We will examine these candidate web sites in fuller detail in chapter three.

We will see, throughout this thesis, that the Internet is a helpful tool for mobilizing and informing people already interested in politics. In the case of MoveOn.org, people with similar convictions are being united in ways that, before the popularity of the Internet, would have nearly been geographically impossible. Those who donated to Howard Dean online were most likely following the Vermont Senator on television before they visited his web site. But we will explore what social and political effects the Internet exercises on its audience.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Internet is young and the number of Internet users surfing the web for political purposes is relatively small, but this bloc of users have been shown to vote in high numbers and to be more politically knowledgeable than the average citizen (Bimber and Davis, 2003). While it takes a more politically savvy individual to have the desire to use the Internet for political purposes, it is also worth studying the effects the Internet may have on these individuals. Sites like MoveOn.org attract the more politically interested and exert their own effects on these users.

The television is a dominant medium that first attracted only high-income families. Now TV is a common fixture in low-income houses and the television audience has certainly become more egalitarian. Internet usage has also steadily become more commonplace in America (Ireland and Nash, 2003). We will explore the effects television applied on its viewers and compare it to the effects of the Internet on its audience. First, some historical perspective on burgeoning technological media is in order.

This past century brings to light two cases in particular where employing a new technology has effectively served political purposes (Morris, 2002). Franklin D. Roosevelt masterfully employed the radio for his “fireside chats” in the 1930s. His soothing, fatherly voice reached the living rooms of millions of Americans, comforting them during a time of great trial in our country. He was able to convince droves of voters that many of his programs for government involvement and employment were imperative in lifting the nation from the Great Depression. One quarter of America was unemployed and had plenty of time to listen to these addresses. In effect, FDR frequently and passionately conveyed his message of hope to millions

thanks in large part to the radio. Already a skilled orator, he used the radio as a vehicle of persuasion (Morris, 2002). He would go on to win an unprecedented four presidential elections.

Televisions began springing up in the homes of ordinary Americans in the 1950s. This caused a more candidate-centered approach to campaigning. The televised media, for better or worse, focus inexorably on images and sound bites. This could explain the low levels of citizens' political knowledge (Zaller, 1992) as more and more people are coming to rely on late night talk shows, for instance, for their campaigning information. Nevertheless, largely because of television, a handsome or pretty candidate has the edge over an ugly candidate. Steve Forbes, despite all his campaign expenditures, was not able to buy good looks (although his incessantly negative online campaign that failed to highlight his own qualities as a candidate may have also had something to do with his loss.) It may sound shallow, but looks do matter when running for an office as grand and awe-inspiring as the president of the United States.

John F. Kennedy emerged on the political scene at just the right time. Handsome and young, his presence lit up the attention of any TV viewer. Our country's first televised debate featured a sweaty, pallid Nixon hammering away at a charming, charismatic (and well-tanned) Kennedy. Those who heard the debates on radio thought Nixon had surely prevailed. But the great majority of those who watched on television insisted that Nixon looked like an uneasy bully whose clothes were not even well-suited for the occasion, strangely blending with the set backdrop to produce a sort of fuzzy static appearance (Morris, 2002). Looks indeed mattered and John F. Kennedy profited from expressing himself in a polite, smooth manner. The television cannot help but hone in on the visual and we as viewers are inevitably affected not only by what a candidate says, but *how* he says it. Nowadays the campaign team needs not only

a winning message, but a candidate with some sort of stage presence. Kennedy used television to his advantage. Today candidates must do the same with the Internet.

This is not to say, however, that issues have become irrelevant in campaigns. Issue positions are crucial in winning elections. In fact, the use of the Internet by campaign teams has increased the role issue positions play in elections. Now, the electorate need no longer rely on traditional forms of media, such as newspapers or television, to search out candidate viewpoints. Simply by visiting [Deanforamerica.com](http://Deanforamerica.com), for instance, we can see exactly where Howard Dean stands on issues such as abortion, tax cuts, or the War in Iraq. Furthermore, one exciting aspect of Internet campaigning is the opportunity candidates have to reach their audience directly, unencumbered by any media outlet. There is no ticking clock either, as there is in the world of television, so candidates can expound as much as they like, for pages and pages, in describing their exact perceptions on the issues.

News articles, online or off, are normally very broad in their depictions of a candidate's views on the issues. Magazines, although they include special, "in-depth" coverage pieces, cannot delve as far as the campaign websites on any number of issues, for as long as the web surfer cares to read. We will examine candidate websites in detail in chapter three. It appears that most candidates, although they could expand even further on their issue positions, at least include a sizable body of writing describing their respective platforms. The Internet is an informational tool that, as we will learn, is not taken up suddenly by the uninformed, but used by the previously informed citizens as a more convenient extension of their news sources (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

In the online world, all a candidate's substantive opinions are aired in the open so as to not allow any surprises further down the campaign trail, (that is, unless a candidate later back-

pedals on a position or changes his mind.) This particular result of Internet campaigning could serve to hurt or help a campaign. Those candidates who rely on waffling on issues will have some explaining to do on their Web page. If the Web site is vague and lacking depth, it will reflect poorly on the candidate. An advantage, however, of making full use of one's Web site is to provide a descriptive biography, complete with photos of a candidate's wife and children. Voters have always been very much concerned with how down-to-earth a candidate comes across. Candidates should feel free to mention their hobbies and simple pleasures in life, as John Kerry expressed his love for reading in his spare time while John Edwards prized time spent with his children watching Scooby Doo.

But what are we to make of Internet usage in the realm of politics? Television easily remains the most dominant form of media. Although Internet use has been on the upsurge every year thus far, it does not compete with the heavyweight ratings pulled in by television. In 2000, the Gore camp spent 40 percent of its campaign funds on television advertising while the Bush campaign spent 58 percent on television advertising (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Nevertheless, there are some notable differences between Internet usage and television viewing. Watching one's television is a passive process with up to hundreds of channels available at most. The World Wide Web communicates, as its name suggests, to a global audience. Furthermore, there are literally millions and millions of Web sites, each full of their own pages. Web site viewing is different from TV viewing because visiting Web sites is a more purposive action. In other words, surfing the Net is far different than channel surfing. If we are watching NBC, for instance, and a negative ad comes on bashing President Bush, we have had almost no say in seeing the ad. We can change the channel as quickly as we can find the remote, but we did not deliberately choose to see the commercial. When we visit a Web site, on the other hand, we

carefully and intentionally type in the URL address and hit “Enter” or “Go”. We find the information we wish to see, whether we know the web address off hand or if we perform a quick search on Google.

So what type of person would search out such online political information? Surveys conducted by Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis reveal that most of these web surfers are those strongly set in their political convictions (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Strong Republicans make up the bulk of those who visited Bush’s web site in 2000, just as Al Gore’s Web site online audience vastly consisted of devout Democrats. Some of the visitors are moderates, but not to any degree as yet that would make online campaigning a major means of converting a substantial amount of undecided voters. Interestingly enough, the undecided voters who do visit campaign sites are the ones reading the issue positions at length (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Strong supporters of Kerry, for instance, have little reason to pore over his stances on gun control and healthcare. They generally know his positions or like him enough personally to trust his platform. It is the undecided voter who is uneasy enough in his indecision to aggressively seek out that kind of information. By 2008, the number of moderates viewing Web sites will grow, but figuring whether or not that will reach a substantial amount would be speculation. Unless more undecided voters begin using the Internet (which online trends point towards) the underdog challengers will remain on a lower playing field than their incumbent opposition. Although building and maintaining a Web site is relatively inexpensive, Internet use is still in its early stages, not reaching a great mass of voters at this point. But the online audience is indeed growing and so-called Webmasters have become a common fixture in the modern campaign.

The main effect Web sites are currently exerting on voters is reinforcement (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Since most political Web site visitors are already strongly liberal or conservative,



the online content is just strengthening those pre-existing beliefs. Of the small but nontrivial amount of undecided voters logging on, only a small portion had actually been persuaded to vote a certain way simply due to a candidate's web site. This number could certainly increase in the future as the Internet is here to stay. It was also encouraging to find that visiting web sites promotes voting. About 49 percent of visitors to the Bush site and 35 percent of visitors to the Gore site said they were more likely to vote after visiting the site (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Internet usage is a growing trend and its unique traits are again worth noting. Not only is Internet usage more purposive than television viewing or even newspaper reading, but it also allows campaign teams to reach a large audience, free of any media filter, and specialized to whatever particular message the campaign desires to convey. The costs for communicating via the web are infinitesimal when compared to the costs of television or print media. One scholar estimated that "a month's tab for the Web could tally less than the [campaign] staff's monthly tab for donuts and coffee" (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

Within the online campaign, voters are much more receptive to comparative information about candidates (Bimber and Davis, 2003). It is much wiser for a candidate to rise above the fray and let partisan Web sites do the negative bickering since it is their area of specialty. If one wants negative information on President Bush, look no further than MoveOn.org or another leftist site like TalkLeft.com. If a Web surfer desired disparaging words on leftist candidates like John Kerry or Howard Dean, he might pay a visit to Frontpagemag.com or Newsmax.com. George W. Bush seemed to take Horowitz's advice (and not just because Horowitz pamphlets of *The Art of Political War* were passed out at his Victory 2000 conventions) when he stressed his central theme as being a "compassionate conservative." As Horowitz points out, politics is a war of position. The Democratic Party is pleased to peg certain, if not all Republicans, as being

heartless rightwingers bent on taking away old age pensions and gutting healthcare (Horowitz, 2000). Bush's campaign team did not just sit back and let this image set in. "Compassionate conservative" and "No child left behind" were posted all over their campaign work, offline and online. Bush emphasized his issue positions by providing links, explaining that he supported welfare with reasonable limits and tax breaks for the middle class, not just the wealthiest one percent. Bush Jr. is one candidate who did all he could in campaigning to bring forth a positive image, online and offline, to optimize his chances of being elected. Chapter three has been dedicated to observing more specific usage of the Internet by political campaign teams.

It was very informative, as we will see in more detail later, how much money was raised through online donations. Fundraising is an integral part of politics as the average Senate incumbent raised \$1.8 million to win in 2000 and the House incumbent spent nearly \$850,000 to win in 2000 (Fonder and Shaffrey, 2000.) Howard Dean certainly made a name for himself in this respect, but Bush and Nader raised a significant amount of funds over the Internet as well. Bill Bradley had raised upwards of \$600,000 through his site by the fall of 1999. McCain pulled in \$1 million in one week in New Hampshire while the Bush campaign averaged \$250,000 just after each emailing (Bimber and Davis, 2003). The following graph provides data helpful to learning how many online campaign dollars candidates and 2000 pulled in.

**Table 1: Money Raised Online by 2000 Presidential Candidates**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Online raised through 12/31/99</b>	<b>Online Contributions through 02/15/00</b>	<b>Total contributions through 02/15/00</b>	<b>Online Contributions as % of Total Contributions</b>
Bill Bradley	\$ 1,200,000	\$ 1,700,000	\$ 28,000,000	6.1
John McCain	\$ 1,000,000	\$ 4,300,000	\$ 17,000,000	25.2
George W. Bush	\$ 180,000	\$ 350,000	\$ 68,000,000	0.5
Al Gore	\$ 910,000	\$ 1,100,000	\$ 31,000,000	3.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$3,290,000</b>	<b>\$7,450,000</b>	<b>\$144,000,000</b>	<b>5.2</b>

Source: [http://campaignsonline.typepad.com/campaigns\\_online/campaign\\_websites/](http://campaignsonline.typepad.com/campaigns_online/campaign_websites/)

What demographics are more likely to seek out political information on the Internet? As we will see in chapter one, it is a myth that rich urban whites are the only people signing on in significant numbers (Ireland and Nash, 2003). In chapter two we will examine the effects the Internet has exercised on its users. More and more voters from every demographic are using the Internet every day. The number of people seeking out information on candidates and campaigns has risen nearly 50 percent since the 2000 elections (Pew Research, 2004). In line with such facts, online campaigning has become a standard practice for the serious, professional campaign team. For instance, as recently as last year, three-quarters of the candidates in the Senate used the Web to communicate their messages (Bimber and Davis, 2003). The 2000 election was the first ever in which half of Americans were Internet users who spent a significant amount of time online. It is true that the more affluent and educated tend to be online more often. This also happens to be the demographic that votes more. Although the population of Internet users poorly reflects America's population at large, it is composed of a noteworthy pool of voters that is

growing every day. As time goes by, this growing and significant number of Web users will make the Internet an increasingly important political tool for winning votes as well as informing and mobilizing the public.

### **CHAPTER 3: INTERNET AUDIENCE**

Roughly half of America has been using the Internet since 2000 (Klotz, 2003). The base of the Internet audience is in fact becoming more egalitarian every day as the World Wide Web is becoming more popular and accessible. In this chapter we will present more information about the demographics of Internet users and answer some questions about why people go online in the first place, let alone for political purposes. We will also discuss the reasons campaigns and political groups are using the Internet as a supportive tool in mobilizing support from citizens. The small but substantial amount of people who visit political websites is growing and they are finding new and creative ways to be politically active.

Many scholars have discounted the effects the Internet may produce in the American political process since its usage depends largely on socioeconomic status. It is true that the more affluent and higher educated are logging on in greater numbers, but the so-called “digital divide” has actually been shrinking notably over the last few years (Ireland and Nash, 2004). The Census found that the less affluent and less educated are accessing the Internet more in public places (Klotz, 2003). For instance, among those making \$25,000 to \$35,000 a year, the percentage of Internet users increased from 17 percent in 1997 to a remarkable 44 percent in 2001 (Klotz, 2003). In addition, the price of computers has decreased 19 percent every year since 1954 (Nye, 2000). Internet usage has increased significantly since half of Americans were online in 2000. In this chapter, we will explore voters who are logging on to the Internet, especially for political purposes.

### **A Growing Trend**

The year 2000 marked a new era in Internet activity as the number of Americans going online surpassed 50 percent. That level has since risen to 67 percent of Americans going online in 2003 (Klotz, 2003). These numbers are quite impressive, especially in light of the fact that only 50 percent of Americans actually vote on Election Day. Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis revealed in their study of Internet Campaigning, *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections*, that the majority of those visiting political Web sites are those strongly set in their partisan perspectives. John Zaller asserted in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* that the greater a person's political attentiveness or knowledge is, the more likely that person is to receive messages from a given medium (Zaller, 1992.) This premise also appears to stand online. Moreover, strong Republicans are more likely to get their online news from conservative sites like FreeRepublic.com or the DrudgeReport.com. Likewise, Democrats are more likely to visit more liberal sites, including candidate Web sites like JohnKerry.com or DeanforAmerica.com. Democrats and Republicans visiting a political site in 2000 registered at about 46 percent whereas only 27 percent describing themselves as moderates visited a campaign site that year. For a closer look at these numbers, see Table 1 (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

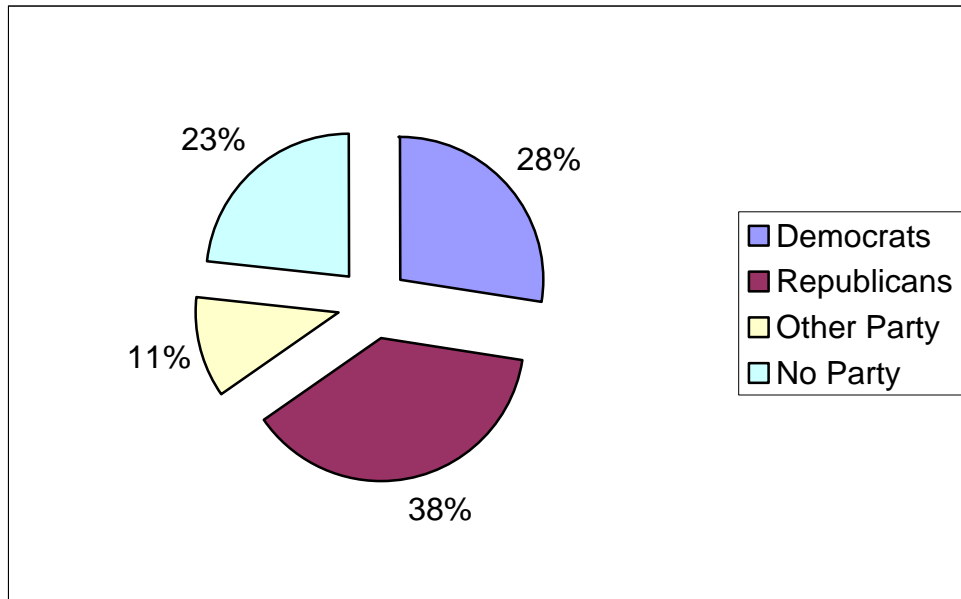
**Table 2: Demographics and political orientation of people visiting campaign websites in 2000**

<b>Saw a National Election Site</b>	<b>Did Not See a National Election Site</b>	
Female	38%	52%
College Degree	46%	23%
Median Income	\$57,000	\$43,000
White/non-Latino	78%	72%
Average age	38	44
Party identification		
Republican	47%	41%
Democrat	45%	46%
Independent	8%	13%
Political ideology		
Liberal	31%	21%
Moderate	27%	41%
Conservative	41%	38%

\* Source: Bimber and Davis, national web audience survey. N=2,020.

Figures show fractions for each row. All differences between columns are Statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Eight percent of Independents, who could arguably be included among moderates, also saw a national election Web site in 2000. Steve Davis et al provide a helpful pie chart that breaks down information concerning online partisanship.



**Figure 1: Partisanship of Internet Users**

Thirty-seven percent of those online during the 2000 election were Republicans, whereas 28 percent were Democrats; only 12 percent were categorized as “Other Party Affiliation.”(Davis et al, 2004). A partisan Internet audience says a lot about the purposes Web sites fulfill in campaigns. Since, for instance, about 69 percent of visitors reported that they were supporters of Bush before visiting his Web site, we can safely say that the site did not change the minds of many visitors (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Instead, the campaign site was used, at least in 2000, for reinforcing the preexisting political beliefs of the site visitors. Those with higher degrees of political awareness are the ones accessing the political information online (Zaller, 1992). Webmasters understand this and use their sites accordingly, as we will see in the following chapter.

The astute student of Politics and Campaigning will then wonder why we should even worry about Internet campaigning if so many partisans are visiting political web sites and so few



moderates. It is true that winning a sizable portion of moderates or undecided voters is crucial to winning elections. However, Internet usage is on an upward trend and this trend could bring more moderates into the fold. Of course it will bring more Republicans and Democrats, too, and more people visit campaign web sites as Election Day draws near (National Annenberg Survey, 2004). It is also true that those who will seek out political information online tend to be those who already seek out such information offline (Bimber and Davis, 2003). But, as Dick Morris points out in his provocative book *Vote.com*, it is important to study how these small but growing numbers of Internet users are being affected by Online Campaigning. It is these well-read, partisan Web surfers who are more likely to vote in the end. Aside from Internet users consisting of demographics that, on the whole, are more likely to vote, an SPSS crosstabulation demonstrates how much more likely politically-inclined Internet users are to vote than those who do not use the Internet for political purposes.

**Table 3: Turnout in the 2000 election, by whether respondent learned new political information on WWW**

Vote in 2000 election?	Learn new political info on WWW?		Total
	Yes	No	
Voted (N)	140	90	230
Percent	<b>87.5%</b>	<b>72.0%</b>	<b>80.7%</b>
Did not vote (N)	20	35	55
Percent	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>28.0%</b>	<b>19.3%</b>
	160	125	285
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: 2002 General Social Survey.

The independent variable used did not just constitute a vague, broad category of mere Internet users who could just be using the net for email purposes. These more sophisticated users claim to have learned new political information from the World Wide Web. Those who did in fact learn new political information online voted in greater numbers than those who did not learn such information online. But it is worth pointing out that these variables could indeed be acting on each other. Political Internet usage does not necessarily cause one to vote. Voting (or civic activity) could be what causes the usage of the Internet for political purposes. Moreover, the table does not show why these respondents went online for political purposes to begin with. It is doubtful that merely possessing Internet access causes one to become more civically active. We will explore the effects of the Internet on its users more in chapter two. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to say that those who go online, especially for political purposes, are voting in higher numbers than those who do not.

Although the number of online voters who frequently visit political Web sites is small at the time, it is growing and certainly not trivial. Furthermore, in Bimber and Davis's national Web audience survey, they found that 5 percent of the population visited George Bush's campaign site in 2000, while 4 percent visited Gore's (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Let us remember also that online citizens are much more likely to vote than those citizens who are offline. In the study of Politics it is common knowledge that the more affluent and educated vote more. Not only is the online crowd more apt in that demographic, but those seeking out political information online are more interested in the political process to begin with. Furthermore, aside from online citizens exhibiting demographics conducive to voting more often, online users planned to vote in greater numbers than those not online. (Davis, 2004).

In the future, it is also very likely that technology will advance in a way that integrates our televisions with our computers (Morris, 2002). Computers already have video streaming ability in real time along with the ability to display movies and play music. In essence, the Internet is a combination of all our traditional technology and media. Although widespread online voting someday seems bleak due to the incidence of hackers and viruses, it is possible to eventually combine the passive experience of watching television with the ability to actively link to relevant Web sites about present day news and politics. Some authors have overestimated the role of the Internet, believing it would greatly reduce the role money plays in politics (Morris, 2002). Even in 2004, we see no signs that the importance of money is declining. Although it is true that the costs of creating and maintaining a Web site are negligible when compared to TV costs, a vast amount of financing is still required to run a modern campaign. Political ads, organize rallies and fundraisers, mass mail, and do a variety of other things that the Internet has not usurped. The Internet, it has been predicted, would level the playing field for candidates

with less funds who face richer opponents. As we will see in chapter two, this leveling effect has not occurred.

### **Demographics**

The Internet audience is not just rich, white males. Since Internet usage has burgeoned in the late nineties, the face of the online audience has begun to look more like the face of America. People of all races and incomes are starting to surf the Internet in impressive numbers.

Although males had a slight upper hand in Internet use in the nineties, that difference has disappeared since 2000. Now males and females access and use the Internet equally. As far as racial demographics are concerned, 60 percent of whites log on compared to 40 percent of blacks (Klotz, 2003). As Robert Klotz points out in his analysis, this disparity is not rooted in race differences per se, but in the economic discrepancy already existent between whites and blacks. It is true that the average black family earns significantly less income than the average white family. It is encouraging to note however, that the number of blacks surfing the net jumped from 13 percent in 1997 to 40 percent in 2001. Make notice of the chart on the following page that portrays online usage according to socioeconomic traits.

**Table 4: Trends in percent online by socioeconomic characteristics**

	1997	2001
All Americans	22	54
Gender:		
Male	24	54
Female	20	54
Ethnicity:		
White	25	60
Black	13	40
Hispanic	11	32
Asian	26	60
Annual Household Income		
<\$15,000	9	25
\$15,000-\$24,999	12	33
\$25,000-\$34,999	17	44
\$35,000-\$49,999	23	57
\$50,000-\$74,999	32	67
\$75,000 +	45	79
Last Year of Education		
<High School Graduate	2	13
High School Graduate	10	40
Some College	25	62
College Graduate (B.A.)	41	81
Graduate School	52	84
Age:		
9-17	33	69
18-29	30	65
30-49	27	64
50-64	18	51
65-79	4	22
80 +	1	8

\*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "CPS Computer and Internet Use Supplement," Data Sets; Department of Commerce, *A Nation Online* (2002).

The number of online Hispanics also surged, as did the number of Asians online, increasing over 100 percent and now matching the number of whites online. It is also worth noting that even 40 percent of those with only a high school diploma were online in 2001. Internet users scored well on tests of political knowledge, as the average Web site users correctly answered 4 out of 6 questions compared to 5 out of 6 for those who visited a campaign Web site (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

Two popular independent variables, education and income, both show a gradually depleting effect on Internet use in the previous table. The digital divide does remain as higher educated, better paid individuals are more likely to use and access the web. But the gap has diminished greatly and the Internet have-nots, so-to-speak, are becoming more of a rare species. Replicating Bimber and Davis’s statistical findings with GSS data, the results confirm that education and income are not so strong in determining Internet use.

**Table 5: Political Use of the Internet by Highest Degree**

Use WWW for political info last 12 mos.	LT High school	High school	Junior college	Bachelor	Graduate	Total
Yes (N)	10	147	41	105	53	356
Percent	<b>20.8%</b>	<b>30.2%</b>	<b>38.3%</b>	<b>47.3%</b>	<b>42.1%</b>	<b>36.0%</b>
No (N)	38	339	66	117	73	633
Percent	<b>79.2%</b>	<b>69.8%</b>	<b>61.7%</b>	<b>52.7%</b>	<b>57.9%</b>	<b>64.0%</b>
Total (N)	48	486	107	222	126	989
Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: 2002 General Social Survey.

**Table 6: Political Use of the Internet by Income**

			Income: 3 categories			
			<\$25,000	\$25,000-\$49,999	>50,000	Total
Use WWW for political info past 12 months?	Yes	Count	62	86	188	326
		% within income: 3 categories	32.5%	33.2%	39.4%	36.2%
	No	Count	129	173	289	591
		% within income: 3 categories	67.5%	66.8%	60.6%	63.8%
Total		Count	191	259	477	927
		% within income: 3 categories	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The dependent variable used for Table six, those who have used the Internet for political purposes in the last twelve months, suits our study much better than to merely explain casual online surfing. We see that, of those with college Bachelor’s degrees, 47 percent have gone online somewhat recently for political reasons. And 30 percent of the people surveyed with only a high school education went online in the last year for political purposes. A 17 percent difference is substantial and the digital divide does still exist, but, as Bimber and Davis also showed, that rift has been diminishing in recent years. When all is considered, a college education is not much more likely to cause one to go online for political purposes. In fact, the table shows that those with a graduate degree are even less likely than those with a Bachelor degree. The next table reveals that, so far as income is concerned, there is indeed an upward trend relating Internet use with higher incomes. However, those making \$25,000 to \$50,000 a

year all had about the same likelihood of using the net politically in the last twelve months. Moreover, of those surveyed making over \$50,000 in income, only a 5 percent increase in users was displayed. These tables replicate and buttress Bimber and Davis's data by showing that, although higher education and income do lead to more Internet use (even for political purposes), they do not strongly correlate. In this way the "have-nots" and "have-littles" are nearly as likely to use the Internet as the higher educated and well-off in our society.

Much has been said in the media and in scholarly circles about the prevalence of young people online. The most likely users of the Internet are between the ages of 9 and 17 (Nation Online, 2004). Even so, however, it might be surprising for many to learn that 64 percent of those aged 30 to 49 are logging on to the Internet, as are 51 percent of those aged 50 to 64 (Klotz, 2003). And of course the young are getting older and, with time, the age of the average Internet is likely to rise. Eighty year-olds do not make up a significant online presence because they are content with traditional forms of media they grew up with, such as newspapers and nightly television news. As America's youth grow older and come to possess a more mature appreciation of politics, they will increasingly turn to the Internet as a political news resource.

A recent study performed by the Pew Research Center shows that young people are turning more to the Internet and, interestingly enough, comedy shows for campaign news (Pew Research Center, 2004). The table below reveals that 20 percent of young people, aged 18 to 29, go online to read up on campaign information.



**Table 7: Young People Turning to the Internet**

Young People Turn to Internet, Comedy Shows for Campaign News			
<b>Regularly Learn</b>	<b><u>18-29</u></b>	<b><u>30-49</u></b>	<b><u>50+</u></b>
<i>Something from...</i>	%	%	%
Local news	29	42	49
Cable news networks	37	37	40
Nightly network news	23	32	46
Daily newspaper	23	27	40
TV news magazines	26	19	30
Morning TV shows	18	18	24
Talk radio	16	18	18
Cable political talk	17	15	13
National Public Radio	11	15	14
Sunday political TV	10	9	19
<b>Internet</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>
Public TV shows	7	10	14
Web sites of news orgs	15	13	8
News magazines	9	9	11
News pages of ISPs	15	13	5
Late-night TV shows	13	7	8
C-Span	11	7	7
Comedy TV shows	21	6	3
Religious radio	3	3	9
Online news magazines	5	2	1

\*Source: Pew Research Center, *Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented News Universe*.

The number of Americans who claimed to have learned something about a candidate or campaign jumped from 9 percent in 2000 to a substantial 13 percent in 2004, topping the most improved list of all media outlets in the last four years as a study by the Pew Institute for the People and the Press recently revealed. This number can only grow as Internet usage grows.

### **Why People Are Going Online**

Why are so many people logging on to the Internet? Survey data from Robert Klotz's book tells us that email is far and away the most common purpose for using the Internet with 93 percent of online users claiming they send and receive email-- 49 percent of those polled claimed they had used email in the last 24 hours (Klotz, 2003). Some candidates take advantage of email usage-- some to their aid and others to their detriment, as we will see later. Two major political reasons for Internet usage that polled in strong numbers were obtaining news, with 71 percent, and visiting a government site with 56 percent. Specifically seeking out political news or information pulled in an impressive 40 percent of Web surfers, while the last reason strong enough to rank was visiting a dating Web site, capturing 10 percent of the online audience.

Do people go online, in any significant amount, to become more civically active? We must first examine civic participation in general before we study its presence in the online world. There will always be a substantial number of citizens interested in politics since politics can be seen essentially as the manipulation of power (Arterton, 1984). The methods of civic engagement vary from picketing, protesting, and voting to joining a Political Action Committee, writing one's congressman, or even just displaying a bumper sticker. But who are more likely to engage in these activities? Higher socio-economic status is directly proportional with feelings of political efficacy. In other words, the more money one has, the more likely that person will feel like he or she makes a difference in the political world today. Perhaps people with less money are too busy struggling from paycheck to paycheck to worry about which economic policy is represented by which candidate.

Sidney Verba and Norman Nie describe four modes of political participation (1972): a voting mode, a campaigning mode, monetary contributions, and political discussions. Politically

interested individuals can participate in these four ways. Voting on the Internet is at best, a long ways away. But people can be encouraged to vote via the Internet as MoveOn.org and other online groups are doing. Candidates are campaigning on the web through their web sites and email, but other activist organizations can also trump certain causes and politicians online as well. Monetary contributions are actually more easily accomplished online than through the postal service. Political discussions are prevalent from opinionated web sites to chat rooms to email chains that are exchanged and circulated. More and more people are keeping up with political news through the Internet whether by visiting certain sites or receiving email from activists (who normally have their own sites.)

Simply reading political information is likely to lead to more civic involvement. But newspaper readers are more likely, again, to be more politically learned and to have a higher income. It is difficult to tell which is the dependent variable and which is the independent variable. We do, however, notice a consistent relationship, that higher SES individuals read the paper more and view the news more often. Reading political information is much more convenient online, but if that initial desire has not been in place, it will not suddenly appear with the advent of a computer in the household. But if a person's primary interests can become politicized, he is more likely to read about or even act on the issue (Dahl, 1970). Primary interests normally include food, sex, love, family, work play, shelter, friendship, and social esteem (Batstone, 1958). When these subjects are directly at stake in a political issue, people tend to pursue those issues more actively. Reading about the issue online would be one of the several ways a citizen could actively engage himself on the issue. Do users of the Internet, on the whole, value certain primary interests more than non-users?

The fact that government and political purposes is our fourth most common use for the Internet speaks well of our online civic virtue. It is interesting to observe, however, that after email, entertainment is the second most common online activity. “In short, people go online for pleasure” (Klotz, p. 33, 2003). The most common search term on the popular Yahoo engine is “sex.” This explains the prevalence of pornographic material online. However, reports that claim over 80 percent of the Internet consists of X-rated material are overblown and mythical (Klotz, 2003). Purposes of pleasure certainly distract Web users from more civic pursuits online. Apparently other Web surfers can find pleasure from other subjects, including politics. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that a candidate site did turn into a porn site on one strange occasion. Oddly, no complaints were issued to the campaign team. Republican Assemblyman Gary Finch of New York found that his candidate site, GaryFinch.com, had somehow become a porn site for a few days. Those who saw the site said the front page began with the message, “Hi there, my name is Bob and this is my guide to porn.” The campaign managers blamed hackers (perhaps of the anti-conservative variety) and had the site changed back from porn directory to candidate home site (Fort Myers News-Press, 2004). Perhaps there was no citizen uproar because, if presidential candidate sites are only seen by a small part of the American population, then even fewer visit state or local sites.

More important for our purposes is the question of why Internet users visit political Web sites in particular. The following table, based on Bimber and Davis, shows that the most common reasons is “just browsing” (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

**Table 8: Main reason for visiting a candidate’s campaign site for the first time**

	<b>Bush</b>	<b>Gore</b>	<b>Nader Buchanan</b>	
Just to browse with no specific purpose	31%	26%	23%	25%
Learning about the candidate’s issue stance	29%	30%	32%	15%
For general information on the campaign	16%	23%	24%	15%
Because I like the candidate or party	8%	12%	12%	11%
Learning about the candidate as a person	5%	3%	1%	0%
Because of the design of the site or Some unique feature of its content	5%	2%	1%	2%
Obtaining news about the candidate	3%	3%	2%	3%
Donating or volunteering	1%	0%	1%	0%

\*Source: *Campaigning Online*, authors’ national web audience survey. N=1,020.

A browsing visitor may choose to actually read some of the candidate’s issue positions or may be just there to poke fun at some of the more awkward photographs. A close second reason for visiting political Web sites was to learn about the candidate’s issue positions. One of the most important facets of the online campaign is that issue discussion and explanation is virtually limitless. Candidates can dedicate as many pages they want to developing their arguments and fleshing out their underlying points. As we will see in chapter three, candidates do seem wary of laying all their beliefs and ideas on the table, but the Internet is a very convenient way to become familiar with candidate platforms. Just ten years ago, if we were unsure about even a candidate’s position on welfare or abortion, we would have to find a printed article or rely on news coverage or an informed friend to eventually enlighten us. Now we can log on and find out exactly what a

candidate thinks about a great number of specific issues. As we will see in chapter three, however, candidates could expand even further on their issue positions. About 30 percent of those visiting Bush and Gore's site in 2000 said this was their main reason for signing on. In fact, 40 percent of undecided voters visited Gore's Web site to read his issue positions (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

In this chapter we became more familiar with what demographic made up the Internet audience and we saw the it is becoming more egalitarian every day. Although a small amount of people are logging on for political purposes, that number is certainly not trivial. These online users are likely to vote and let us not forget that the upsurge of online users has been growing significantly since the late nineties. The portion of the American electorate that access the Internet for political purposes is substantial and worth capitalizing upon, as we will see with online campaigns and MoveOn.org.

## **CHAPTER 4: EFFECTS ON THE INTERNET AUDIENCE**

In this chapter we will examine the social and political effects the Internet has exercised on its audience. We will explore the dual nature of social online activity; namely, its tendency to isolate people and yet its unique ability to bring people of like interests together. Political organizers now use the Internet to find and unite supporters who can then work together. Whether they work online, signing electronic petitions and pressuring lawmakers, or meet offline to perform functions like rallies, protests, or fundraisers, the Internet can be a helpful tool in mobilizing political action. We will study MoveOn.org in depth, since that online interest group has most impressively pioneered the World Wide Web for its political interests. We will also analyze the effects specific campaign sites exert on their viewers. Are these political websites persuading moderates? What do these site visitors believe they are learning from viewing such sites? The Internet has proved a helpful tool for better mobilizing groups of citizens to take action in their democracy, whether by volunteer work or by donating to candidates via their websites.

### **Bowling Alone but Surfing Together**

There is some debate about the social effects of Internet usage. Studies like the Carnegie Mellon Study have shown that increased time spent online leads to loneliness and depression (Klotz, 2003). The authors of the study stated their finding, “The paradox we observe, then, is that the Internet is a social technology used for communication with individuals and groups, but it is associated with declines in social involvement and the psychological well-being that goes with social involvement.” If people use the Internet as a sort of social crutch, it could

significantly decrease the amount of time spent with friends in face-to-face meetings. But the early evidence of the Internet suggests, like the history of the telephone, that computer-mediated communication will complement and not replace face-to-face communities (Putnam, 2000).

Television viewing has been shown to be positively correlated with civic disengagement (Putnam, 2000) and a great summation of TV's probable effects on its viewers was cited from an Amish community in Pennsylvania:

We can always tell if a change will bring good or bad tidings. Certain things we definitely do not want, like the television and the radio. They would destroy our visiting practices. We would stay at home with the television or radio rather than meet with other people. The visiting practices are important because of the closeness of the people. How can we care for the neighbor if we do not visit them or know what is going on in their lives?

We should not, however, be so quick to compare the television with the Internet. The Internet is a combination of technological innovations; it is a television, radio, newspaper, etc. all in one. The user almost solely determines what information or entertainment will be accessed. We do not communicate with anyone via the TV, but a great majority of people use the Internet to email their friends and stay in contact. So increased Internet usage will not necessarily result in declined social involvement. Those who use the net for hours a day will certainly be sacrificing time they could otherwise have used more sociably. But those who use the Internet more as a supplement to their social lives, and not so much a basis or replacement for social activity, could even ignite more social interaction through their online connections.

It was enlightening using NES data to observe the relationship between social activity and Internet use. With Internet usage as the independent variable, we can see in the chart below



what kind of social behavior is more associated to those who use the Internet for more than just email purposes.

**Table 9: Level of social activism, by use of WWW for other than email**

Level of social activism	Use WWW other than email?	
	Yes	No
None	271	60
	<b>32.2%</b>	<b>49.2%</b>
One act	184	31
	<b>21.9%</b>	<b>25.4%</b>
Two acts	185	19
	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>15.6%</b>
Three or more acts	202	12
	<b>24.0%</b>	<b>9.8%</b>
Total	842	122
	100.0%	100.0%

Source: 2002 General Social Survey.

We can see that the category with the greatest number of respondents (271) surfing the net are those who claim to engage in no social activities at all. But the category with the next greatest amount of respondents surfing is the category of those who are the most socially active with 202 respondents. In this way, the Internet has proven to be a haven for the most socially withdrawn as well as the most socially involved people. The Internet appears to be a tool that can be used by any type of person, whether that person has cultivated a habit of being more outgoing or even reclusive. It is also evident that those who are moderately socially active use the Internet in rather high amounts, too, as Internet usage is growing within the population.

Chat rooms and instant messages have become quite popular on the Internet. One encouraging point remains: by and large, people do not meet online for the sole purpose of meeting online. If people like each other enough online, it only makes sense that they will eventually at least make efforts to meet in person. An avid net surfer's social skills will not necessarily diminish if he keeps up with, at some time or another, physically meeting these online friends. If people are careful to keep up in face-to-face interaction, which is inherently richer and more satisfying than cold, mundane instant messages, (a form of communication lacking in verbal and visual cues), then the computer will not have such an isolating effect on the user. Although studies have shown a direct proportion of time spent on the Internet increasing with feelings of isolation, a study conducted by Steve Davis, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher shows more positive results. In their interviews of more than 200 Internet users who used the net for political purposes in 2000, they found that,

“The exchanges that occurred between people on the Internet showed evidence of honesty, trust, and reciprocity, and the individuals involved often expressed heartfelt attachments to each other. The resulting relationships yielded tangible benefits to both the individual and the group and in many cases had some notable political outcome. Since these relationships usually involved many people (in a few cases numbering in the thousands) we call them *communities*” (Davis et al, 2004).

It is true that some relationships online can foster the above-mentioned qualities of honesty, trust, reciprocity, and the like. However, a relationship that does not include face-to-face interaction may lack the bonding, intimacy, and greater trust that can be achieved in person. Online relationships will not be able to build on such qualities very effectively as long as they involve an intermediary like a computer's Instant Message screen within the communication.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam shows how fewer people are engaged in civic activity from the 1970s throughout the 1990s (Putnam, 2000). During this time Putnam (2000) reveals there is also evidence of less informal or casual engagement between individuals, such as playing cards or other social outings. He cited the difficulty of building goodwill and trust in cyberspace and the prevalence of “drive-by relationships” online. It would be interesting to see, in future data, how many lasting, steady relationships have been originated on the Internet.

It is an intriguing question among political scholars as to whether the Internet is encouraging more civic involvement. The Internet is really another tool for doing the same things we have habituated ourselves to do already. The availability of news and political information online is more convenient, but does not cause people to go to these sites in the first place. The people who will be visiting ABCnews.com are largely going to be people who frequently watch the news. Those who visit NewsMax.com are going to be those who have first trained themselves to read such literature offline first. It is a question of the will. Even those web surfers who “crossed over”, so to speak only did so for recreational purposes on the whole. Their opinions or partisanship remained unaffected as Zaller’s thesis again holds up in the online world: “The greater a person’s level of [political] awareness, the more likely she is to be able...to resist information that is inconsistent with her basic values or partisanship” (Zaller, p. 266, 1992). Bimber and Davis put it effectively, “Technological change creates new opportunities for human action. It permits citizens to do what they might not have been able to do before, but it hardly compels them to act in new ways. The choices they make and the patterns of behavior that emerge are the products of psychological habits and tendencies that are little affected by new technology” (Bimber and Davis, p. 153, 2003).

Political communities can be established online that promote civic action. This does not, however, involve forming new habits. It just gives those who have always desired to be a part of larger civic duties the opportunity to do so with a group of likeminded individuals. Steve Davis et al discusses in his book *Click on Democracy* how an anti-Bush protest was organized online and eventually carried out by 150 protesters. Brown University student Zeke Spier took advantage of the Internet as a fast and inexpensive way to bring together such a group and protest the Republican meeting taking place in Philadelphia in 2000 (Davis et al, 2004). As the authors pointed out, “Many of the individuals may have taken to the streets regardless, but there would have been fewer of them, and they would have possessed less common understanding of their purpose and their tactics” (Davis et al, p. 166, 2004). Groups like MoveOn.org are able to unite people of similar convictions in a highly efficient way for political causes. MoveOn, in particular, is an online political group that “acts as a catalyst for a new kind of grassroots involvement ([moveon.org/about/#s1](http://moveon.org/about/#s1).) MoveOn presently networks more than 1,700,000 online activists. The more popular online advocacy groups like MoveOn.org become, the more effective they will be in rallying likeminded supporters.

Those retrieving political news will be, on the whole, the same citizens who have nurtured that habit with traditional forms of media before the advent of the Internet. But since creating a website is relatively cheap, we could expect that the dominant media will run into stiffer competition from lesser known news sources. This has not been the case, however, as major media networks like ABC and NBC are still the favored media outlets online. It seems that credibility is hard to come by on the World Wide Web. Self-publishing has allowed the Internet to be a forum for just about anyone who has something to say. Surfers cannot rely on just any website for credibility, but can trust websites from major media conglomerates like

FoxNews or CNN since they have to maintain their journalistic standards in publishing cyber literature. The media elite are still prevalent. Concerning elitist and other effects of the Internet, Public Opinion scholar John Zaller had the following to say in a personal email response:

“It seems to me that the Internet (as it now exists, anyway) will be important mainly for communication among elites, activists, high involvement types, and small groups of like-minded people. For one example, it is sometimes important for communication among journalists that affects what stories becomes news. For another, it made it easy for you to find me. The Internet’s most “mass” impact so far has perhaps been on the Howard Dean candidacy. He would probably have remained a minor candidate except for his ability to use the Internet to reach and solicit money from a large fraction of his natural constituency at a time he was not otherwise widely known. It is interesting and perhaps significant that the Dean candidacy collapsed once a large number of voters got involved in the nomination process. Yet it is, on the other hand, possible that the Internet will become important to future factional candidates in the early phase of presidential nominations, and to relatively small groups of activists and ideologues more generally.”

### **Effects of Political Web Sites**

So in what way, if any, are online voters being affected by political Web sites? The table from Bimber and Davis’s survey brings to light how much of this Internet audience is comprised of repeat visitors to political sites (Bimber and Davis, 2003). The Bush web site had the highest percentage, 57 percent. Gore’s site was not far behind with 48 percent. These figures indicate more than just a passing interest in the campaign among the visitors. Something is pulling them back to the Web sites-- whether it is to see how often the site is updated, if new photos have been

posted, or to read further about the issue positions of a candidate. In fact, reading issue positions was found to be the number one reason people returned to a candidate Web site (Bimber and Davis, 2003). “Learning about issues” led with roughly 50 percent claiming it as their primary reason for revisiting, while the second most popular reason was “obtaining news about the candidate”, with 20 percent. Browsing was a close third with 19 percent.

It does appear that reinforcement is the largest effect the Internet has on the electorate. Nevertheless, it will not suddenly cause more citizens to access political news and campaign information. The Internet is, not to understate its influence, merely a new opportunity for citizens to access political news in a way they have not before. In the same way Bimber and Davis showed political Internet usage to reinforce partisan inclinations, it also reinforces one’s tendency to be politically active. Those who have sought out such information before the advent of the Internet will now, by and large, seek it out online. An SPSS crosstabulation that was run buttresses these assertions.

**Table 10: Level of political interest, by learning new political Information on WWW**

Level of political interest	Learn new political info on WWW?		Total
	Yes	No	
Low (N)	7	33	40
Percent	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>24.1%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>
Medium (N)	34	30	64
Percent	<b>20.1%</b>	<b>21.9%</b>	<b>20.9%</b>
High (N)	128	74	202
Percent	<b>75.7%</b>	<b>54.0%</b>	<b>66.0%</b>
Total (N)	169	137	306
Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: General Social Survey, 2002.

We see from this table that those with high levels of political interest are much more likely to learn new political information from the net. Those who have not been interested in civic knowledge will not suddenly hunger for it online because the Internet does not create new citizens. The Internet acts as a great reinforcer, allowing a more convenient outlet for one to carry on those habits already cultivated offline.

So far as online campaign news goes, some reinforced partisans are still checking out the sites of other candidates. This phenomenon is referred to as “crossover viewing” of Web sites in Bimber and Davis’s study. Thirty-seven percent of the Bush site visitors, 49 percent of the Gore audience, and 50 percent of the Nader audience “crossed over” online (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Only 21 percent of this significant minority of cross-over visitors claims to be strong Republicans or Democrats. Other Web sites are more likely to persuade voters who are not

strongly set in their predispositions. This occurrence allows the online campaign to help in winning over moderates, a crucial part of any election. While it is likely than many strong partisans visit opposing Web sites to poke fun at the opposition, many moderates have the opportunity to review the biographies, issues positions, and even voting record of any given candidate.

Another online trend is the tendency for more community-based groups and action to take root. Moveon.org is an obvious first example, serving as an online headquarters for political action. Meetup.org also unites people of similar political beliefs to gather for protests, marches, rallies, or other political functions. Kevin Matthews started “PetitionOnline” as an online political organization (Davis et al, 2004). His first petition was directed to Ralph Nader. Matthews’s site encouraged people to sign their names on the list and forwarded email to interested liberals to sign. The petition basically asked Nader not to campaign in swing states so as not to undermine the Gore campaign. More than 16,000 people signed by Election Day. And, with the debacle in Florida, Matthews created another petition that acquired 20,000 signatures urging Bush to concede to Al Gore.

Traditional media exerted more control over opinion dynamics of the mass public. On the Internet we exercise greater control over the stories we will come across. On the net, we can search out specific stories at any time, whereas, on the television, we at least have to wait until the certain program is broadcast. It is true that Internet pop-up ads, whether commercial or political in nature, are beyond much of our control. But, like spam, most Internet users find these ads very annoying and promptly click out of them (Bimber and Davis, 2003). There are two ways that television, radio, or the printed word influence what we think about and even how we think: agenda-setting and priming. Agenda-setting involves choosing what news stories are



covered and also which are not covered. A news outlet that wanted thought and debate on education issues could, for instance, start airing stories about failing inner-city schools and the controversy over school vouchers. In this way, the major media influence not so much how we think, but what we think about (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). This tells us in a roundabout way which issues are the most pressing, the most worthy of our immediate attention and analysis. A conservative news outlet would be likely to proffer news stories of the kind mentioned earlier, to spark debate about the possibility of increasing vouchers. A more liberal media outlet would be more tempted to concentrate on stories showing the successes of more government-involved solutions that have worked for public schools. We must at least acknowledge that journalists' ideological leanings might affect which stories they cover and even how they present such stories.

Agenda-setting setting has enabled certain causes and groups to gain publicity and even popularity. Many grassroots campaigns have caught widespread fire by exploiting media coverage of a certain event. It is easier for a gay rights group to get more attention when the media pays more attention to the issue of gay marriages, for instance. But what about the many groups across America that spearhead other issues? If the media, on the whole, ignores issues of the effects of gas emissions from SUVs on the ozone layer, those groups will not be able to generate more support for their cause or even achieve better name recognition. In the same way, local groups representing any issue, such as the problems with illegal immigration, will not receive nearly as much additional support if the media never makes note of negative stories or criminal activity linked to illegal aliens. If major media paid more attention to stories sympathetic to a fledgling group's message, more people would rally to its cause. More people would cite the problem and gain knowledge of groups abroad that are uniting to speak out and

take action on these social and political issues. One would think the Internet, with its myriad of news outlets, would fill more citizens in on the stories that major media allow to fall through the cracks. This is not necessarily the case however as the world wide web, though touted as an information superhighway, can be more akin to an “information superwilderness.” With all the news sources available, the average net user can easily become overwhelmed by the information overload. Who can we trust with all the self-publishing prevalent on the net? As it turns out, on the Internet, the news sites receiving the most hits are the sites of the major media that otherwise dominates mainstream press. It is true that people who are specifically interested in a certain issue like school vouchers or SUV environmental concerns can seek those out in a more convenient and easy way online. However, more people would be sparked toward interest if major media networks covered stories invoking these controversial issues.

Priming is another power the media elite exert on its mass audience. Priming refers to the media’s way of affecting how we judge candidates based on certain issues or criteria. Priming is tied to agenda-setting in that, if an issue is largely ignored in the media, it will not be fresh in the public’s mind to evaluate a candidate with. When George Bush Sr. ran for re-election in 1992, the economy started to dwindle in the months preceding the election. The media brought this to the public’s attention and the people began to think Bush Sr. was therefore performing poorly in the domestic realm. So we see priming in action when the public uses the economy or some other issue like education to determine how effectively the president is performing. The Internet, with its numerous news sources and websites, brings a fuller litany of issues to the publics’ mind. However, we must remember that only a small proportion of Americans go online for purposes of reading news. The television is still far more popular and can inundate us more easily and powerfully with issues it sees as the most relevant for our times.

Some Internet users will find other issues online, but compared to the many that do not use the Internet for political purposes or who just go to news sites owned by traditional media like the Associated Press, the effect would be negligible. Major media still dominate online and, thereby, still determine to a large degree what issues we think about and, in effect, which issues we use to judge job performance of candidates.

Television continues to be the most popular form of media so priming and agenda-setting will still affect web users. In this day and age, however, the Internet allows even more avenues of receiving information. When an American was beheaded by Iraqi guerillas, it could be found on certain web sites where many Americans viewed the ghastly murder. Only fifteen years ago, such mass information was unthinkable. If the TV did not cover it, it simply was not covered. That is the case no longer. Also, as aforementioned, the web sites we visit are likely to get their news from the Associated Press as does Yahoo.com and many other online news outlets. ABCnews enjoys high traffic on its site because its TV channel is so established and popular. Even Internet users are still vulnerable to thought influence by way of priming and agenda-setting in the media.

Many scholars have lamented that American politics has become more about personality and party and less about the ideals and issues a candidate stands for. The Internet can help American politics become more concerned with issue positions. “Overall, about 19 percent of research subjects in our laboratory settings increased their level of political knowledge by viewing candidate Web sites” (Bimber and Davis, p. 131, 2003). It was also found that people who came away from a Web site liking a candidate more or less were also the ones who learned something from the Web site (Bimber and Davis, 2003). If the number of online voters returning to sites increases, it will likely show an increasing interest in political platforms. As the number

of Internet users swells, the Internet will establish itself better as a source of campaign news for the public.

### **Political Interest Groups Online**

The Internet has increasingly been employed as a vehicle for political mobilization by online interest groups. Moveon.org is the most popular one to date. These groups like to effect political change by building electronic advocacy groups. Lately MoveOn, for instance, is encouraging its base of 1.7 million supporters to pressure law-makers by signing a petition to censure George W. Bush over the war in Iraq. Each online political group can have varying methods of garnering interested parties for their cause, but some methods are universal. As observed by David B. Truman, “almost invariably one of the first results of the formal organizations of an interest groups its embarking of a program of propaganda” (Davis, p 65, 1999). Just by informing people of recent political events, an activist online group can stoke the flames of partisanship enough to rally support. These online groups are normally partisan and are likely to convey breaking stories in a way that is slanted to the left or right. A Republican interest group for example could list liberal voting records of certain members of Congress on their site or email supporters with that information. Online visitors who sign up for the email list are encouraged to spread word of mouth or email about the online political group. This way spam can be avoided and a more sympathetic audience can receive MoveOn email or even respond to a call to action.

Online political groups have the power to influence legislators. Each time CNN or USA today mentions the activities sparked and carried through by Moveon.org, the Web site gains more prominence. Legislators are beginning to recognize that the site, although partisan, does

represent a large number of online voters who, as we saw earlier, are very likely to vote. Online petitions can be signed by thousands and thousands online and be sent to representatives all over the country. Moveon.org will pick an issue, such as the environment. Then they email the representative with the petition claiming that if he fails to vote a certain way, they will do everything in their power to oust him from office. They can do this by starting up protests and encouraging their online supporters to start groups that will mobilize liberal voters come Election Day. Other group sites besides MoveOn give advice on how to become more involved. The National Coalition for the Homeless, for example, offered tips on how to write or call members of Congress or federal bureaucrats (Davis, 1999). Just about any professional interest group has an online presence by now they use as a tool for information dissemination and mobilization. Moveon.org is becoming more renowned, especially via their commercials which have even enjoyed air play during the Super Bowl. But politicians need not tremble at threats from this organized online group. Republican politicians, for instance, do not depend on the votes of strong liberals, likely to be the crux of MoveOn's support base. MoveOn.org represents a significant amount of likely voters, but they are not presently so strong that they can singularly sway a public official to change his mind on an issue. MoveOn has become well known enough to influence politicians to change positions only with the assistance of other pressure groups such as the ACLU or NEA. Although MoveOn.org is not a lone warrior, it can certainly play a helpful role as an independent variable in explaining aspects of legislative and political change.

The kinds of people who access political information, as discussed earlier, are strongly set in their beliefs and go to sites for reinforcement of previously held beliefs. Moderate liberals tend to not go out of their way to sign up and support liberal causes since they are not as adamant in their political leanings. If Moveon can continue to grow in membership, winning over even

the more moderate liberals to their site, then their presence will become more formidable to politicians who do not espouse more liberal views. Right now it is safe to say that Moveon significantly influences liberal politicians because angering a substantial bloc of core liberal voters is the last thing a Democrat would want to do. The site could spread the message that Candidate X is too conservative on certain points and that a “real liberal” needs to replace him. As the site adopts new members, its influence will only grow in strength.

Interest groups and even campaign teams have used Meetup.org to organize volunteers and political rallies. Howard Dean went through Meetup.org, which is available for any group from a witches guild and Star Trek fans to animal rights activists, to meet up for a common cause. Watching the progress of the Howard Dean campaign throughout December of 2003 and the following January, one could easily have been surprised by all the rallies taking place in different states, seeking Dean votes. Not only did Howard Dean successfully raise large amounts of money on the web, he also organized volunteers to cheer for him in different cities he happened to be passing through. This grassroots support spread because the Internet makes it convenient to organize people throughout America. One can only contemplate how expensive and laborious such a process would have been in the pre-Internet era. Mass mailing or mass calling would have had to take place, which no challenger could afford, at least not in the volume managed by the Dean campaign over the Internet. Not only is setting up a Web site much cheaper, but winning one supporter can, in turn, win many more. One faithful disciple on the Internet can email many friends who then can email others to ignite political activity. Gore’s 2000 Web site even asked supporters to go into chat rooms and persuade people of Gore’s platform.

### **How MoveOn.org Works—My Experience**

By signing up personally for Moveon.org contact information, I was eventually given the email address of a lady who was holding a Dean rally in Orlando only ten miles away. The next logical step would be to email her and ask how many volunteers she had mustered so far. Then everyone would meet, on a curb for instance, and pass out bumper stickers and hold up signs endorsing Dean's candidacy. The Internet makes rallies and volunteer activities so easy compared to the past year. Even if the money was found to mass-call people, it would annoy them more than just leaving a letter in their email box. Email provides a convenient way for people to connect and organize action in the least intrusive way. Not only is email much cheaper than traditional snail mail, but it is much quicker. By emailing enough people in an area, one devoted volunteer for Dean or Moveon.org can gather enough people to perform an impressive rally for support or even protest against a politician.

There are of course conservative interest groups online but none with the presence or popularity MoveOn has managed. MoveOn sends members manuals on specific ways a person can effect political change in our current system. Online interest groups would do well to imitate MoveOn. Groups like MoveOn send members manuals on how they can effect the most political change themselves with their Congress rep etc. there's a keep me posted list I signed up for. There's an action list too. They told me their movement is based solely on word of mouth so its vital we spread the word. MoveOn.org gives people a voice in shaping the laws and policies that affect our lives. You can sign online petitions on timely issues like responding to terrorism, energy policy, and campaign finance reform, or you can just sign up to receive email alerts, all for free. One of the best things about MoveOn.org is that each of us can help decide what issues the organization stands for, using a unique, online discussion forum. Everyone can post

suggestions, and everyone can rate all the other suggestions. Those that receive the highest ratings can become the focus of MoveOn.org's action campaigns. It's a promising idea: choose our priorities collectively, then act on them collectively. MoveOn's founder, Wes Boyd, calls it "network democracy."

One can propose ideas and strategies which are looked over by the online groups staff and other site visitors. The best ideas are refined, combined, and eventually rise to the top. Some of these ideas are actually used by MoveOn in their drives. In this way individuals' ideas shape MoveOn's actual campaign. Then they provide a direct link in their email to get involved in the recent conversation. The day I visited, the conversation was on Bush allegedly misleading us into the Iraq War. By visiting the site, one can see this is the preeminent issue on the frontpage. The next email came a few days later. They prompted supporters to call CBS to complain for not running a MoveOn commercial about children suffering at the hands of George W. Bush. They gave out the number and email address of the company. Their next email praised MoveOn members for their response in the effort to censure George W. Bush. In just days, 250,000 people joined their call. Tomorrow they said they would be presenting the campaign to Congress at a press conference in Washington, D.C. They want more than 300,000 signatures by the next day and provided a link for email recipients.

The next email described a powerful commercial that required money to be raised in order for it to be aired. MoveOn described it eloquently, The power of *Polygraph* comes from its use of a simple visual metaphor: the polygraph machine. On the audio track, we hear an actual recording of George Bush saying three things that later turned out to be untrue: that Saddam Hussein had an "advanced nuclear development program," that he "sought significant quantities of uranium from Niger," and that he "aids and protects terrorists, including members of al



Qaeda." As each statement is uttered, the needles on the polygraph machine erupt in motion, indicating that the statement is untrue. The commercial ends with a punch, as the words "Americans are dying . . . for the truth" appear on the screen.

Yet another email from MoveOn came the next day (February 13, 2004). They congratulated supporters on their efforts which allowed one of their 30-second TV ads, *Child's Play*, to receive air time in states across the nation. For thirty dollars, one could buy a video collection of anti-Bush commercials performed by Hollywood personalities like Janeane Garofalo, Michael Moore, and Al Franken. There are 56 commercials in all, available on VHS and DVD. And every cent, we are told, is used for getting the commercials on air.

MoveOn is quite tireless in their message circulation as the following email also came the next day. In this email they were stressing how strong the movement is in passion and in number (MoveOn pointed out how today MoveOn has more members than the Christian Coalition at its peak.) The prevailing message of the email was, with MoveOn, "you're changing American Politics." These emails are helpful because people already have a tendency to feel as though they are not making a difference when involved in larger groups (Olson, 1965). The right really needs a group like this and would do well to mimick some of the strategies taken up by MoveOn.org. Such an online support group will come in handy when the next Democratic president is elected. The right does have its share of online political groups such as the American Conservative Union. Although it does not share the popularity of MoveOn.org it serves certain helpful functions for the Republican Party. For example, the ACU targets one or more congresspersons who take stances on issues opposite its own planks. The groups urges site visitors to send email to the legislator and conveniently offers an email link on the same page. Often, under a site section entitled "Latest Conservative Outrage," the ACU asks supporters to

email members of their own party who have recently voted liberally on a particular issue (Davis et al, 2004). Emails of encouragement are also of much use as they not only fill people in on future political endeavors but praise the successes of the campaign so far. MoveOn told its online audience,

And what we're doing together is even more exciting. For decades, parts of our political system have been sold to the highest bidder, with corporate donors winning out over the public interest. But on Friday, we finished our \$10 million Voter Fund grassroots fundraising campaign without a dime from corporations or special interests. In the end, over 170,000 people opened their checkbooks and contributed an average of about \$60 to put ads on the air that challenge Bush and his corporate backers. The impact of this campaign shouldn't be underestimated: it clearly demonstrates that real people still matter in American politics. And the folks in Washington know it (MoveOn.org.)

Other groups have been online for a few years as well, such as the Christian Coalition, the League of Women Voters, and the National Funeral Directors Association (Davis et al, 2004). These groups all have messages and are wisely using the web to convey them. MoveOn has even recently published a book, *50 Ways to Love Your Country*, which includes a compilation of letters from ordinary citizens describing innovative, helpful ways the average person can influence politicians. Not all of the methods involve the Internet. Some just reminded readers to meet with their representatives, to write hand-written letters to editors of newspapers, or by participating in a phone bank.

An email from MoveOn came just a few days after the last asking for support of Lloyd Doggett, called in the email "one of the most progressive leaders in the House." The letter claimed that Tom DeLay was attacking him and that Doggett needed support. A directly link to a donation page was then provided for Doggett at the end of the letter. Some more emails were sent generally criticizing Bush and his politics. MoveOn's audience is small in proportion to the

population but is growing in significance as its member base grows. MoveOn of course accepts donations itself. Through the MoveOn.org Political Action Committee, more than 10,000 everyday Americans together contributed more than \$2 million to key congressional campaigns in the 2000 election, and more than \$3.5 million in 2002 election . MoveOn says it raised \$3.5 million for congressional candidates in 2002 through its web site.

Interestingly enough, in a recent email dated February 26, 2004, MoveOn headed a call for “Geek Organizers,” trying to gather gifted communicators who want to connect and mobilize people over the Internet. MoveOn described such movers and shakers as people “with the leadership and communication skills of a political organizer with the technical skills of a computer nerd.” MoveOn was benevolently trying to match people with such skills to progressive jobs the community. Setting up connections between people in this way only increases a citizen’s ability to act, not just in one instance of rallying together, but in a day-to-day occupational interaction. This type of interaction is a smart and likely way to set up lasting and steady progressive civic action. But just banding likeminded individuals for volunteer purposes and the exchange of ideas makes online political groups substantially effective.

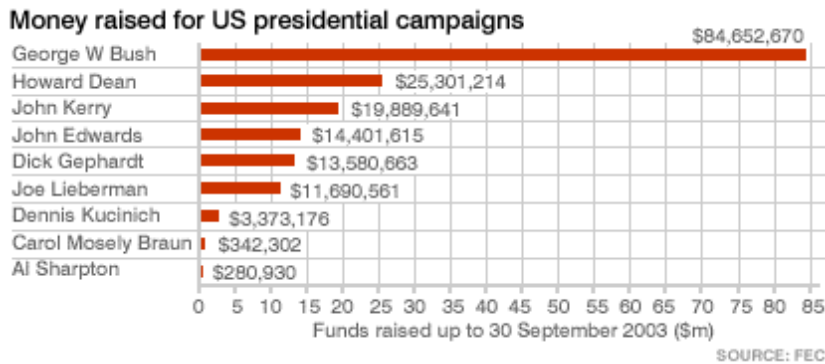
Groups like MoveOn.org can certainly make a difference in American Politics. As other groups rise to prominence online to represent over one million voters, as does MoveOn, these online advocacy groups will garner influence with legislators and the media. MoveOn does not hesitate to spread the word about politicians and policies they despise and lionize causes and officials they favor. Today MoveOn significantly affects voters, the media, and the government. Other political interest groups should learn from MoveOn because, as more people join behind a cause, its influence will strengthen and eventually amount to influencing legislation and policies.

## CHAPTER 5: QUALITATIVE ANALYSES OF ONLINE CAMPAIGNS

Thus far we have studied what types of people are accessing the Internet, especially for politically related information or activities. In this third chapter we will examine more in depth the specific web sites of candidates, namely, six of the Democrat contenders vying for their party's presidential nomination in 2004. Howard Dean's web site will be of special interest since it lifted him from virtual obscurity to long-time frontrunner in the race. There is no universal standard, so to speak, of what constitutes a well-done, effective web site, but we will be able to compare the sites viewed in this section and come to some idea of which sites are more user-friendly or professional. It can be painfully obvious, as we will see later, whether or not a campaign's web site took advantage of the ability to express more fully the candidate's issue positions. One notable feature of candidate's web sites is how much more convenient they have made fundraising. Supporters are actually just a few clicks away from online credit card donations or even electronic checks. In this chapter we will explore different candidate web sites to see in what ways these candidates may be helping or hindering their political ambitions online.

Let us first examine the official web site of the Howard Dean campaign, DeanForAmerica.com. Immediately upon visiting the site, we are greeted with a great array of colors, suggesting excitement and momentum. Along the stars and bars located on the top of the page, there are four links to click on. It is no accident that the "Contribute" link is the only link gleaming in gold lettering—the others appear in white. As simple as it sounds, it is worth stressing that the contribution links should stand out on the web page. Some candidate sites have more obvious contribution links than others. In actuality, it would not be ridiculous for a candidate to have a contribution link on every page of his web site. But on the home page the

contribution link should be readily apparent. The millions Dean raised online stand to convince us that his web site made the contribution link apparent enough. Even in just the few days after his Iowa loss to John Kerry, Dean raised half a million dollars. We can see in Figure 2 how much money presidential candidates raised as of September 30, 2003. Howard Dean started out with a mere \$157,000 dollars in the bank but grassroots donations from the Internet would greatly benefit him later.



**Figure 2: Howard Dean leads the Democratic Challengers**

Most web sites, especially political sites, seem to be divided into three sections. The middle column is the largest of the sections, drawing the most attention and likely to have pictures of the candidate shaking hands and kissing babies. The left and right-hand columns normally have links with brief descriptions as to their content. On the left-hand column of Dean’s page, links such as Dean’s biography, one called “About the Issues,” and a variety of other links are waiting to be clicked on. This is the pattern with most candidate web sites as the left-hand column seems to have the monopoly on learning about issue positions, volunteer opportunities, or even ways to contact the campaign team. I am yet to receive a personalized

email response from a campaign team, whether from the campaign manager or the candidate himself. See Figure 3 to observe a glance of Howard Dean's home page.

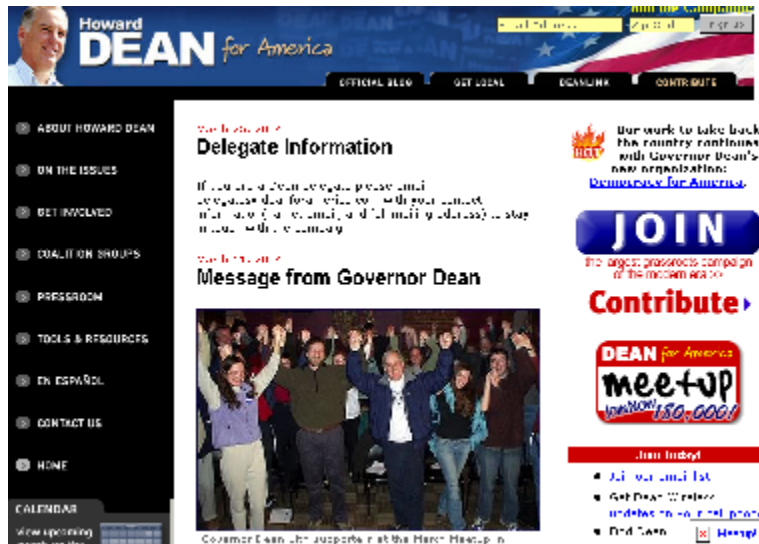


Figure 3: Howard Dean Home Page

Dean's, like the other Democratic presidential contenders' web sites, responds with an auto-response that informs the reader how busy the campaign team is and that it appreciated any comments or suggestions. Apparently presidential candidates are not the only busy ones. Bill McCollum, once a Congressman who is now running for the U.S. Senate. Emailing the campaign proved rather fruitless as there was not even an auto-response rendered. McCollum's web site is also less substantive, as is to be expected, than the presidential web sites. The issue positions were only two sentences at length on the average. Since, as Bimber and Davis showed us with John Ashcroft's web site, less people visit non-presidential candidate web sites, perhaps the candidates do not see the online campaign as an integral part of their electoral strategy. This makes sense because those visiting the sites, especially on this level, appear to be those already

in favor of the candidate. They do not need to be convinced through long descriptions of issue positions. However, as more people are accessing the web for general and political purposes, it would not hurt the online campaigners to at least provide a link that delves into the specifics of those issue positions. It is fine for McCollum to say he is for Defense spending. But what exactly does he want to spend the money on and for what purposes? A clearer, fuller explanation of the issue positions online could only help a campaign in the long run.

The headline shouting for the most attention on the home page is a selected cover story concerning Howard Dean recently in the news. A litany of other articles were available by hyperlink as one scrolled down the middle of the front page. Of course, only positive articles were chosen for the site and displaying one's candidate as having high media coverage makes the candidate seem more popular and electable. With the possible exception of John Kerry, Howard Dean provided the most exhaustive description of his issue positions. Policy wonks need only consult Dean's official candidate site to see his true platform colors. Dean averaged about 500 words worth of explanation per issue position. The twelve issue positions he covered on his site included agriculture, education, and the economy. If you clicked on "education," for instance, his description page came up and even a record of his education policies record in Vermont to the right of the page. The more politically savvy site viewers will want proof of Dean's convictions, not just trumped up plans and opinions on the subjects.

An inventive measure taken on Dean's "On the Issues" section was a link allowing readers to send Dean's take on the issues to friends via email. This is a creative and smart way to spread one's message without spamming recipients. People generally know which of their friends will at least be interested in reading Dean's specific views on the economy, for instance. Most of the other candidates for president did not have this online option. Campaign managers

would be wise to study Dean's web site as it was full of helpful information on the candidate and ways to volunteer. As the online campaign becomes more sophisticated, it is likely that most if not all candidate web sites will have a convenient link for one to send issue positions to interested parties. Let us not forget that those who are impressed with a candidate's ideas in an email are likely to subsequently spread the fact by word of mouth. This kind of positive publicity comes rather cheap on the Internet compared to other devices of communication.

After returning to the site two days later (on January 22, 2004,) the site looked dull but probably due to a technical malfunction. Curiously, the feature picture was blank with a red X at the top right, indicating that the picture was not loading on the page. It is likely that others saw the same effect and that the web designer was called back immediately. (By the next day, I rechecked the site and the featured picture was viewable.) Sometimes, every web site will experience some technical difficulties. Wesley Clark, for example, has forgotten to blog on occasion. However, at a time when Dean just lost a crucial Iowa caucus to John Kerry, he needed to come off in the best light. Perhaps a photo of the candidate calm and composed, poised to continue in his bid for the presidency, would have rallied some of his online supporters to remain steadfast. A picture of Dean's infamous shriek would not have benefited his cause, however. Since that mistake, voters and the media have largely abandoned him and even questioned his state of mind.

Today Dean's web site is not as busy and pumping with energy like, say, John Edwards's is. Perhaps this was a last-minute effort to appear composed and elude any further questions of mental instability after the Iowa scream. The site is more clear today and easier on the eyes. The large font "Rally with Dean" attracts more attention today probably for lack of the site's main picture. In the past months Dean has been successful rallying supporters to greet him in



different cities or just for the sake of old-fashioned curbside campaigning. Underneath that font, it was interesting to see a “Women for Dean” web site link. More feminist voters would be glad to check out the site and read its endorsement for Howard Dean. A Republican would be wise, for instance, if desiring the more rightwing base of voters’ support, to include an obvious link to the NRA’s endorsement on the home page. Dean was the only candidate of those studied in this chapter to highlight such an endorsement this effectively. The ideal sites to link to are one’s that will hyperlink back to one’s own site or at least not lure one away from revisiting one’s original web site. So we can see why candidates can be wary of providing too many links to other web pages.

Dean’s site appears to offer the widest range of volunteer opportunities to supporters. Dr. Dean gives his basic pitch for his vision of a better America in the center column. But just below it one will find many ideas and ways to help Dean win his party’s nomination. Some of the ideas mentioned were writing a letter to someone in New Hampshire for its upcoming primary or, for Dean’s more die-hard fans, actually travelling to one of the upcoming states to meet the candidate with cheers. Even Dean’s more enthusiastic followers are more apt to help the campaign through an online donation. In the 2000 election contest, Al Gore encouraged his supporters to get creative with helping his campaign. Online, voters were told they could email friends about why they favor Gore and his policies. Gore even advised his supporters to visit political chat rooms to rebut any haranguing of the former vice president. Dean did take advantage of MeetUp.org to organize and stoke his followers in different cities, as we will see later.

Many political web sites encourage visitors to contact the campaign in some way or at least sign up for its email list. After signing up for Dean’s list, I received many emails from the

campaign. A national Dean meet up was being held on February 4<sup>th</sup> in up to 600 cities. The minimum amount of people meeting up was arbitrarily if not leniently set at five and was arranged through MeetUp.com. The next email came the very next day and for the next few weeks the Dean campaign would persistently email every two or three days. The present email asked interested supporters to write on Dean's daily web site blog. Any topics were encouraged as long as they were appropriate and politically relevant. Dean also encouraged, in this email, for recipients to write on issues they were truly passionate about. This undoubtedly made his supporters feel important or at least like their voice mattered in Dean's bid for the White House. Dean, like MoveOn.org, was considering the best and brightest ideas and issues brought to mind by blogging, online supporters.

At this time Dean's popularity was dwindling and so the next email was wise to be one of encouragement. The campaign preached that Dean's candidacy had been underestimated before and that they were gaining momentum. They asked for help in the New Hampshire primary and called for donations. The email even specified for what purposes it needed set amounts of money. That has a way of making the average reader feel as though he or she is in the Dean War Room. It personalizes the call for donations and gives possible donors a better understanding as to why the money is needed. This much more likely to increase fundraising and Dean would raise nearly one million dollars before the New Hampshire Primary had begun. One of the reasons cited in the email was calling 400 volunteers to remind them to help out in whatever way they could, whether buying a bumper sticker or even engaging in door-to-door campaigning.

After another email meant for boosting morale, the following email was more issue-oriented, criticizing Bush's tax cuts and his "No Child Left Behind" program.

DeanForAmerica.com would send about a dozen more emails, but Dean's standing in the polls

continued to slump and sputter. One particular email gave this attempt at revitalization:

“Imagine if ordinary Americans were to stand up for Dean one neighborhood at a time.” Many of the subsequent emails had this kind of theme. Dean tried to sound positive and visionary. One could only wonder how many Dean supporters were still planning on going through with the MeetUp plans. In Orlando, the set location was a Natura Coffee café and a woman’s email address was provided for directions. But at this time in the election season people were more likely to meet up for John Kerry as he enjoyed a steady, convincing lead in the polls. Dean’s next email was more like a cry of desperation entitled “We Must Win Wisconsin.” He wanted to raise \$700,000 dollars by Sunday and his campaign had blasted by that mark well before deadline. Dean boldly asked for \$700,000 more and thanked his faithful followers heartily. Carol Darr, Director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet at George Washington University, had this to say on Dean’s online fundraising ability, “Dean has taught the world how to do it. He has changed two of the most important aspects of politics: Fundraising and grass-roots involvement.” USA Today’s Susan Page also praised his efforts, saying, “Dean has transformed the race. Dean’s demonstration that the Internet could raise millions of dollars in small donations at minimal cost could help level the playing field with Republicans.”

One of Dean’s more inventive email messages told supporters to throw a house party in honor of Susan B. Anthony’s upcoming memorial day just days before the vital Wisconsin Primary. Apparently not enough house parties were thrown and Dean lost again to Kerry. After a few more emails of encouragement where he stressed his personal experience in the healthcare industry, Dean, on February 18<sup>th</sup>, announced he was no longer actively pursuing the presidency. Nonetheless, the millions raised by Dean on the Internet attracted a great amount of media attention that helped boost Dean to the frontrunner position for months.

Dennis Kucinich's web site was not as clearly laid out as Dean's, but Kucinich's greatest setback was personal obscurity. Dean was at least a Vermont Governor with years of political experience, not to mention a four-month darling of the media. The online campaign stands to help those candidates who already have some degree of electoral viability. The Internet serves as a tool for candidates, not a cure-all. Kucinich's web site breaks an online campaign rule from the start by using a dot-U.S. domain name rather than the more mainstream and recognized dot-com address. In fact, he was the only presidential candidate studied to use the dot.U.S. name. This goes against the advice of campaign professionals such as Emilienne Ireland and Phil Nash in their book *Winning Campaigns Online*. Upon visiting the site, however, one's attention is brought immediately to Kucinich's campaign slogan appearing on the upper right section of the home page. It reads, "All young people deserve a world without end, not a war without end." Right beside the quote is a picture of Dennis with a young boy beside him holding the peace symbol. The picture and quote gave one the feeling that Kucinich is compassionate, anti-war, and cares enough about our America's youth to put an end to the Iraq war.

A blue and red link to the right of the page exclaims loudly, "CALL NEW HAMPSHIRE VOTERS! DOWNLOAD YOUR CALL LIST NOW." After clicking the link, one is taken to a page that asks whether we wish to download a list of New Hampshire voters' phone numbers or provide one of our own. This sort of campaigning could backfire as telemarketing has been known to heavily annoy many people. After leaving my contact information, I was emailed a week later with contact information on how I could receive my call list.

One can see why so many liberal policy wonks would be attracted to Kucinich. Of all the presidential candidates, Kucinich's issue coverage stands out as the most extensively covered, in its number of issues cited and its specific descriptions. Each issue position is described and

explained for nearly three pages worth. Ten key issues are initially highlighted and then an astounding 71 issues are located on the right of the page, most of which are well explicated. Most campaign sites only deal with twelve to fifteen issues so this is very impressive. Although Kucinich has been raking in a measly one percent of each primary election, it is clear he is a candidate of ideals. Liberals, especially those who crave expansive, substantive policy content, will be stirred with Kucinich's online campaign. It is likely, however, that many voters are simply not visiting Kucinich's web site. Only a small, but nontrivial amount of the voter public visit even the major candidates' web sites as we saw earlier. But it only helps a campaign to clearly advertise the web site, whether on their campaign signs as John Edwards does, or even in primary victory speeches as John Kerry does.

Comparing Dean's model site with Dick Gephardt's, brings attention to the fact that serious candidates make the donation button very obvious on the web site. On Gephardt's site, the donation button stands out as a large, red button on the top right of the home page. Dean, Kerry, and Gephardt were the most effective at drawing attention to this critical fundraising link. Gephardt's biography in addition to his issue ideas and news pieces were located at the top of the page. The middle of the page, like Dean's, scrolls down with news articles concerning the candidate next to a wider, more specific list of issues on the left. Scrolling down, visitors could clearly see to the right that a fundraiser was coming up that would be hosted by comedian Al Franken, author of *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*.

An advertisement for Gephardt gear blinked on the right, catching the eye right away. But Gephardt would have helped himself to include a link, even if at the end of the page, where one could email friends about Gephardt's ideas and qualifications. His issue position arguments

were more pithy than most candidates', whereas Dean's issue explanations were essentially small essays.

Al Sharpton's web site was pretty straightforward, although a credit card donation section was not added until around mid-February. There was an electronic check option for donation on the site, but those are not as widely used or even convenient as credit card donations. The contribution link did not stand out very much, especially compared to Gephardt or Dean's site. This should be one of the most critical priorities in designing one's candidate web site, but here it seemed somewhat ignored. Sharpton's red, white and blue sign shouting, "VOTE!" attracts the most attention on the page and it helps people register to vote online. Sharpton's link to voter registration was the most obvious of all the candidates. This makes sense when considering that his key block of supporters, the black community, has had low registration and turnout since the 1960s. Even John Kerry's link for voter registration was located farther down the page after some scrolling and searching.

Sharpton's news clips section is kind of hidden on the bottom right of the page in a small font size. This section should be more pronounced. Sharpton needs to take every opportunity to prove to voters the viability of his candidacy. Appearing in the news helps a candidate appear important, talked-about, and in reasonable contention for the presidency. It would help in Sharpton's struggle, very similar to that of Dennis Kucinich's struggle or even Carol Mosely-Braun's, to appear beyond the no-name candidates which pundits claim have next to no chance of winning the nomination. To Sharpton's credit, his site did include some video clips of the candidate in the news. But even these were not very apparent, located on the very bottom of the page. At least, however, Sharpton included video clips on the home page. No other presidential contender included such a feature on the home page. While the television is still, far and away,

the most powerful medium in America, it should be integrated with candidate web sites as much as possible. MPeg computer clips bring a sort of action and excitement much needed in campaigns that the written word or even pictures cannot as effectively convey.

On the whole, the format of Sharpton's page is user-friendly. The three links at the top of the page offer "contribute," "calendar," and "contact us." Volunteer archives are found on the left side along with other tabs including, "polls archive," "platform," and "picture gallery." Inside the photo gallery was a charming picture of Al with his two daughters, but the rest of the pictures were curiously missing. The featured article on the home page had a picture of Sharpton with some supporters around him on a D.C. street and the article stresses how well he is doing among black voters. This is a helpful feature on the page as Sharpton's campaign needed a lot of encouragement, raking in less votes than Kucinich and even less in donations. An original item on the site was a poll on the immediate right of the home page asking Americans what issues they found the most important at the present time. This was similar to Dean's persuading his supporters to blog their ideas and concerns on his web site. Lastly, Sharpton was wise to appeal to the Internet browsers who want quick information with his "Top 10 Reasons I am Running for President." This allows net surfers to get a quick glimpse as to what Sharpton stands for without even having to scan his section on issue positions.

JohnKerry.com had a very large picture of himself on his site. It was an energetic picture of Kerry, arm outstretched, with the large caption "America Rocks the Vote" underneath it. Although the more driven donors would have no problem finding a way to donate on the site, the contribution hyperlink is not as distinguished from the rest of the links. The site does give one ample opportunity to leave an email address so as to stay informed about the campaign. The site is like other the other sites in that articles featuring the candidate in the news are located in the

middle of the page as one scrolls down. One different part about Kerry's web site was a link to Amazon.com about midway down the page where John Kerry's recent book was available. This examination of Kerry's site took place in November of 2003. JohnKerry.com in late January of 2004 painted a slightly different picture. A more sedate, head-and-shoulder shot of John Kerry headlined the front page. A picture of Tom Brokaw was placed next to him with the title, "John Kerry Responds to the State of the Union." After clicking on the video underneath, an MP3 plays where John Kerry criticizes the president's address to the nation. The clip lasted about five minutes. Some of Kerry's arguments were that the economic recovery was not really a recovery; many jobs were yet to be created. Furthermore, he stated that big interests were having their way with the Bush administration.

The titles "contribute," "meet up," "volunteer," and "blog" are noticeably clickable on the right hand column. The left-hand column attracts less attention with ways one can become more politically informed and read up on the issues stressed by the Kerry campaign. Those who desire to delve into the issues will not need such an obvious link—they will search it out anyway. A picture of Kerry with his Iowa supporters is placed in an inconspicuous area of the page to the top right. A more visible tab is located just under this picture as the "issues" link is the only awakened icon. In the middle of the page, in typical candidate site form, the news events of John Kerry are located as one scrolls down the page. One link includes a speech Kerry is to give the next day in Nashua, New Hampshire.

Kerry's page had many links and messages but were set up in a more organized and clear manner than, for instance, John Edwards' busy web site. Exploring the site further, one comes across a Blog section with an article submitted by Dick Bell. It essentially disparaged the George Bush speech from the night previous, claiming it was "sickening" to watch Republicans



leap to their feet for another “phony standing ovation.” John Kerry’s welcome message was located directly under the four main labels mentioned above. In it he stressed his aversion to big interests and his love for the working man of America. Other issue topics were found under his quotes such as the economy and jobs, education, and healthcare. One can find out what issues really matter to a candidate on the candidate’s web site. Some major issues like the ones just mentioned come standard on a candidate web site. However, by viewing the volume of literature spent to explain candidate’s answers to these issues, one can tell how much a candidate cares about education or the environment, or any other issue. In Kucinich’s web site, we noted he covered a total of 71 issues. Most of these issues were well expounded on. But some issues obviously did not merit much concern from the candidate as they only included short excerpts from stump speeches.

Exploring Kerry’s issue topics more, when one clicked on “economy” the link brings the visitor to a page with four paragraphs (a total of roughly 500 words) on Kerry’s economic plans and criticisms. Then some links were provided for more specific plans for different sectors of the economy. Some of them were “Reviving American Manufacturing,” “Opening the Doors of College for All,” and “Earned Legalization.” All of these topics were about one paragraph in length or over 100 words. Although not exhaustive, these issue explanations were informative and specific. For instance, on the issue of cutting taxes for middle class families, Kerry’s site stated that he wanted to keep the present middle class tax cuts in place, but increase taxes on the wealthy. More specifically, he wants to protect the increases in the child tax credit, the reduced marriage penalty, and the new tax bracket that helps people save \$350 on their first level of income. Kerry strongly disagrees with Democrats who want to repeal these tax cuts because it would cost a typical middle-class family with two children an additional \$2,000. One would be

hard-pressed to learn such detailed information as this if it were not through a political web site. Information like this, on just one issue position on the site, is normally covered much more broadly in magazines or newspapers. Candidates do communicate these precise plans in televised debates or in-depth interviews. But the in-depth interviews are not commonplace in the media, even with the major candidates. On the web site, the material to read is always there and available at any time to check out, making access to a candidate's specific ideas and convictions much more convenient.

The last presidential candidate web site examined was [JohnEdwards2004.com](http://JohnEdwards2004.com). Immediately upon visiting the site, the eyes are immersed in patriotic colors and busy activity. Edwards's is the only site with a streaming banner at the top of the page discussing Edwards in the news that day. With graphics and script meant to resemble a post-it note, an online chat featuring John himself was highlighted. One had to pay a fee to take part in the discussion so that truly interested parties would be involved. Also, too many users on one server could crash and reflect badly on Edwards's campaign.

Edwards could have made his contribution link a little more showy as it lacks zest especially when compared to his energetic home page. Below the contribution link and in the center of the page a few articles are located accenting some of Edwards's issue positions. But the web designer would be wise to delegate a separate link for the candidate's political platform as Dean and the other candidates had. Edwards's news articles did not cover any real specifics of his issue ideas and this could hurt the effectiveness of his web site. People wishing to know more about Edwards's political plans and values need more than just news articles. A link specifically dedicated to that purpose would benefit the candidate. As we saw earlier, Kerry included both these features on his home page. To this web site's credit, however, Edwards's

upcoming events was the most apparent of any candidate's, arranged in calendar fashion and very easy on the eyes.

Upon revisiting the web site a few weeks later, on January 21, 2004, one's attention was grabbed straight away by a handsome and youthful picture of John Edwards at the top center of the page. Confetti graphics were sprinkled all over the site as the picture captured Edwards celebrating with gleeful supporters in Iowa. This was after Edwards had beat Dean in this most critical first primary and came second only to John Kerry. The caption boasted, "On to New Hampshire" and effectively conveyed a feeling of momentum in Edwards's campaign. Topics align at the top of the page but one's attention is drawn toward the dark blue on the left-hand column. There one can read about John's biography and, directly under that in a more subtle manner, is an icon allowing one to donate contributions. A section in glowing yellow asks supporters to give their email address and zip code. This attempt at an email list draws more attention than the attempts of the other candidate sites studied in this chapter. A ring-the-bell icon has recently been added near the donations icon, keeping with the youthful, energetic appearance of the web site.

The middle of the page scrolls down to a series of speech transcripts. The first paragraphs are quite general in their policy plans as most speeches are, but do not fail to criticize Bush in a way that will reinforce the beliefs of site visitors. Jobs, education, security, and healthcare are explicitly cited under the issues section. Edwards is the first to wisely bring such attention to the issue of security, which stands as a major issue for the 2004 election in light of September 11, 2001. More issue topics are available but one is inclined to notice that Edwards's issue positions are not as well fleshed out as those of Dean or Kerry. Edwards's stance on national defense was quite vague and clipped, offering only excerpts from speeches at the

paragraph's end. His ideas for education were more informative, however. He believes in giving students a first year in college free in order to circumvent the initial financial scare that cause many students to never enroll. Creative, innovative ideas such as these would benefit any candidate web site.

In summary, our qualitative candidate web site analysis has allowed us to learn a number of specific ways candidates can appeal to voters via the web site. To begin with, candidates would do well to include a large, attractive donation hyperlink. This icon should be readily noticeable as on Dean and Kerry's home page. Candidates should also take advantage of the Internet's ability to steadily convey a message. The Internet is not a theater of competing sound bites like television and so candidates should explain their issue positions specifically and extensively. In this way candidates can prove to voters they have a true and detailed vision for America. The web site is a convenient opportunity for candidates to provide a litany of information about themselves and their campaign through biographies, pictures, news articles, speech clips, and even Mpeg movie clips. The movie clips should be used more on web sites as only Kerry and Sharpton seemed to take advantage of this technological integration. Candidates should make sure that, in providing all this information, they do not clutter their sites. Edwards's site, for example, was not as clear and organized as that of Dean's or Kerry's. We have seen throughout this chapter, in exploring and comparing these presidential candidate web sites, the specific ways candidates attempt to mobilize support, whether in organizing rallies or calling for volunteers and donations. Candidates should view sites like [DeanForAmerica.com](http://DeanForAmerica.com) and [JohnKerry.com](http://JohnKerry.com) to ensure any and all online resources are being used to creatively and effectively appeal to voters.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In this study of the Internet's effects on American political behavior, we have learned much, to begin with, about the Internet audience itself. More than half of the American population uses the Internet and that number is only increasing (Klotz, 2003). We saw that it is, therefore, not merely rich, white people logging on in significant amounts. It is true that 60 percent of whites go online but it is also true that 40 percent of blacks do, along with 32 percent of Hispanics as of 2002 (Klotz, p. 22, 2003.) In addition, the Internet is becoming a more common fixture even in elementary schools across the nation as home internet access is also growing strongly.

We found in Bimber and Richards's survey data that a small but nontrivial portion of the population went online for political purposes, whether for reading the news or viewing a candidate web site. Nevertheless, we also found that Internet users were more likely to vote than those who did not go online. It would only benefit a candidate to appeal to this group of voters online and even build grassroots support through online fundraising as we saw with Howard Dean's web site.

In chapter two we examined the effects of the Internet on its audience, especially in the case of political web sites devoted to political interest groups and campaigns. Although, again, the portion of voters logging on for political reasons is small at the present time, it is still substantial. The great majority of those seeking political information online have been found to be quite partisan in their political leanings. Forty-one percent of respondents who claimed to have seen a political web site in 2000 were conservatives. Thirty-one percent were liberal and 21 percent described themselves as moderates (Bimber and Davis, 2003). These figures still

leave room for a significant amount of moderates to be influenced via the Internet. But we also saw that the Internet has been primarily a tool of reinforcement when it comes to influencing political viewpoints. Sixty-nine percent of those who viewed George W. Bush's web site in 2000 were conservatives before they saw the site (Bimber and Davis, p. 110, 2003.)

Online interest groups have been taking advantage of partisan politics over the Internet. We saw how MoveOn.org, a leftwing online group, has united liberals across America. Not only does MoveOn.org draw up and finance commercials that have even played during the Super Bowl, but it uses its popular support to praise or censure legislators. Through online petitions that are backed by thousands and thousands, MoveOn can exert considerable influence on politicians to vote in certain ways. If the politicians refuse, they risk hurting their reputation with what has become the most popular online interest group of late.

The candidate web site has become a fixture of the modern political campaign. As we observed in chapter three, candidates use their web sites in different ways to appeal to voters. Some fundamentals seem to apply to all sites, however. Although it is up to the candidate what image he may want to project online, whether youthful and energetic like John Edwards's or more calm and sophisticated like John Kerry's, it is important that a candidate take advantage of the unique opportunity to fully expound on issue positions. It is so inexpensive and expedient to maintain a web site and yet it reaches a worldwide audience. If candidates do not include specific policy ideas on their web pages, the more politically interested voters online (who do vote) will notice this shortcoming. It would appear as though a candidate lacks fresh, innovative ideas if no specific policies or plans have been posted for voters to see.

My hypothesis was in error. The Internet has not exerted a strong effect on the American political system. It nevertheless has had a significant effect. The number of Internet users is

growing and becoming more egalitarian and the demographic of those accessing the Internet for political reasons is conducive to voting. The Internet is being used to reinforce previously held beliefs. Those who already cultivated the habit of reading political news are now doing so online as well. But the convenience of Internet information has not shown itself to spark new habits in people. MoveOn is capitalizing on this fact by uniting citizens that otherwise were unlikely to have ever come together, especially through such inexpensive and efficient means. Candidates would be wise to use the Internet as a tool to reinforce the beliefs of those visiting their web sites. So far, a campaign's likelihood of winning over moderates through the World Wide Web looks dubious. The Internet, as we saw in chapter three, is a medium that allows extensively substantive messages to be communicated from a campaign team. Candidates and political interest groups should use the Internet as a tool to help mobilize base support and win the appeal of American voters.

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