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THE INTERNET IN CAMPAIGN 2000

HOW POLITICAL WEB SITES REINFORCE PARTISAN ENGAGEMENT



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THE INTERNET IN CAMPAIGN 2000

HOW POLITICAL WEB SITES REINFORCE PARTISAN ENGAGEMENT

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THE ISSUE

At the outset of the new millennium, the Internet and associated technologies have become an important presence in a majority of American homes as well as a regular part of democratic processes. What these extraordinarily rapid developments mean for the health of American democracy has been the subject of a great deal of speculation, especially in light of chronic problems in the US of low voter turnout, mistrust of the democratic process, and the disengagement of youth. The central issue is: ***To what extent will new technology lead toward political renewal and to what extent toward reinforcement of Americans' political habits?***

THE PROJECT

We conducted a major, multi-method study during the 2000 elections aimed at providing systematic evidence about how the Internet affects the relationship between candidates for elective office and citizens. Focusing on the presidential race, we asked three specific research questions aimed at the central issue above:

A. *What strategies do major candidates for office use in presenting themselves via the web, and in particular what kind of messages do they seek to convey to which audiences?*

B. *Which citizens visit candidate web sites and why, and what effect do their visits have on their knowledge and political attitudes?*

C. *How do major non-partisan voter information sites compare with candidate sites: which citizens visit such sites and why, and what are the effects of such sites compared to candidates' own sites?*

Will new technology lead toward political renewal or reinforcement of Americans' political habits?

This report provides a description of the study and an overview of major findings. A longer, book-length report of the study by the authors will be published in about eighteen months by Oxford University Press. That volume will provide more in-depth discussion and the results of further analysis of data.

SOURCES OF EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

- A systematic examination of select candidate web sites through content analysis and campaign staff interviews.
- Four national surveys: a random telephone survey producing a probability sample of a thousand people who visited a presidential or major non-partisan web site during the campaign season; a survey producing a probability sample of a thousand people who did not see a campaign web site; and two panel surveys after the election following up on people interviewed during the campaigns.
- Laboratory experiments in San Diego, St. Louis, Charlotte, and New York in which 200 people viewed campaign web sites and answered questions about the experience.

We employ bi-variate and multi-variate statistical modeling and significance testing throughout.

SYNOPSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our findings lead us to one overriding conclusion: ***In 2000, campaign web sites served mainly reinforcing functions for supporters of candidates, rather than serving to mobilize non-voters or assist undecided voters in making electoral choices.*** Most people visiting political web sites are politically knowledgeable and have fairly strong candidate preferences from the outset in favor of the sponsor of the web site. A majority of visitors to candidates' sites return for subsequent visits following their first.

Most people visiting political web sites are politically knowledgeable and have fairly strong candidate preferences from the outset in favor of the sponsor of the web site. A majority of visitors to candidates' sites return for subsequent visits following their first.

Some citizens did view web sites of candidates whom they did not support, and this practice is tentatively hopeful from the perspective of democratic theory and deliberation. However this phenomenon is limited and did not appear to fit the motive of cross-candidate comparison and we find little evidence that web sites are leading to substantial, sustained increases in knowledge or to thoughtful changes in public opinion or political preferences.

Non-partisan political information web sites did attract less well-informed and less politically sophisticated citizens than did candidates' own sites, but these too tended mainly to serve reinforcing functions for citizens' predispositions.

Without a doubt, the content available at candidate and non-partisan web sites could be useful to otherwise uninformed and disaffected voters. These sites generally provide richer, deeper and more informative content than most other forms of candidate advertising and communication of traditional news coverage. The problem is that less informed, less engaged voters — who some

would say need it most — are least likely to make the decision to visit such sites and to partake of their informational bounty. The most fundamental political difference between the web and television, particularly advertising, is that the element of purposive choice, plays the key role in limiting the effects of the Internet on this segment of the population.

The fact that Internet can strengthen the connection between candidates and partisans is an attractive development running against the trend of recent history, in which broadcast media have tended to weaken the connection citizens feel to candidates and public officials. Internet content can create new forms of grassroots engagement and can, in some cases, sustain it over time. Intensifying the relationship between active, politically knowledgeable citizens and candidates for office is a good thing by itself, even if it is not the same as renewing the citizenship of the disaffected.

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Section 1: Research Topic

REINFORCEMENT OR RENEWAL?

In 1996, less than one-half of the voting age population participated in that year's presidential election — the lowest turnout for the selection of a president since 1924 and a record low worldwide among modern industrialized democracies. At the same time that voter participation in elections has declined in the US over recent decades, mistrust of politicians, the political process, and the mass media have risen dramatically. The problem is now so well entrenched that the persistent lamentations of scholars and journalists over the health of democracy sometimes have grown worn and stale.

Enter the communications revolution at the end of the millennium. Without a doubt, new media associated with the Internet are different from traditional media, offering challenges and possibilities that are unquestionably novel. The new media are thoroughly political. By 2000, virtually all candidates for national and state-wide offices had web sites as well as e-mail operations, on top of traditional communications technologies. Widespread access to the Internet in the US by the turn of the century gave citizens the potential to gather political information, take political actions, and express political opinions in ways that are qualitatively different from what went before. About 59 percent of people with access to the Internet used the web to gather political information or discuss politics with others in 2000.¹

It is not simply that the volume of information available to citizens has exploded or that its accessibility has soared. At least three new developments make political communication potentially different structurally. First, the number of *sources* of political information and news readily available to citizens has multiplied virtually beyond counting. The citizen sitting before the Internet has access to a fundamentally larger and different set of information sources than the citizen reliant exclusively on traditional media — especially in the days of three major television networks.

How do citizens use their opportunities for more information, more control, and new forms of political expression?

The citizen also has a level of *control and selectivity* unlike what went before. Obtaining news and political information through the Internet is not like watching television, because for the most part citizens must take intentional, positive actions in order to obtain information through the Internet.

And no less importantly, the new media are *multi-directional*. Fundamentally unlike most traditional media, new information technology permits citizens to convey information outward, whether by filling in a web form, sending e-mail, or posting a web site of their own.

These and other properties of the Internet have given rise to much optimism about possible renewal of citizenship and reverses in the trends toward citizen mistrust and withdrawal. The basic premise of many observers, which often remains implicit, is that more sources of information, more control, and new opportunities for expression in the hands of citizens are likely to remedy some of the long-standing problems in American citizenship.

Intuitive as it may be, the idea of a linkage between information, control, and expression on the one hand and renewed citizenship on the other ignores some very important though sometimes subtle aspects of political behavior. Studies of media and political communication have shown that people are highly selective in their exposure and acceptance of information. Those people with the most political knowledge and strongest interest in public affairs are the most likely of all citizens to expose themselves to political information; on the other hand, they are the least likely of all citizens to be affected by it because of their strong prior convictions. Citizens who know the least and have the weakest connection to public life stand to gain the most from new sources of information, but they are the least likely to expose themselves to news or other sources of knowledge in the first place.² These studies have also shown that from the barrage of news directed at citizens through television and newspapers, people tend to select out for attention those stories and claims that confirm their existing beliefs and pre-dispositions. And when confronted with news or other information that tends to conflict with their assumptions about public life, people are especially likely to disbelieve what they see or hear. These political habits call to mind lyrics to Paul Simon's 1970 song entitled *The Boxer*: "a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

How these features of political psychology will play out in the realm of the Internet and new media are not yet entirely clear. However they provide good reasons to hypothesize that the Internet will tend to reinforce Americans' political habits — both good and bad — more than change them. For example, the availability of more information to citizens may be as likely to widen gaps between the well informed and the poorly informed as to narrow them. More citizen control over information may permit citizens to narrow and fragment the information to which they are exposed rather than broadening it. Multi-directionality too may as likely lead citizens into fragmented enclaves of communication as toward a national or global "village." And a larger number of sources of information and news may be just as likely to convince citizens of the relativity of political "truth" and pervasiveness of disagreement as to permit them to escape the dominance of a few mainstream media businesses.³

The central question about new information technology and citizens' political engagement is therefore:

To what extent will new technology lead toward political renewal and to what extent toward reinforcement of Americans' political habits?

So far, little systematic evidence has been available about this question. While empirical studies are slowly emerging, what is not known far outweighs what is.⁴

The present study is addressed to that void in knowledge. Our goal is to understand the impact of the Internet in electoral politics in the year 2000. We are particularly interested in the relationship between campaigns and citizens, and in how new media might reinforce or renew that relationship. Our focus is therefore on ***candidate-sponsored and non-partisan web sites in election campaigns.***

To do this, we employed a multi-method study, as follows:

➤ We conducted content analysis of campaign web sites and interviews with campaign webmasters in order to reveal how candidates seek to portray themselves on the Internet and what audiences they are trying to reach with their web sites (undecided voters, supporters, new voters, potential donors, potential volunteers, the press, interest groups, etc.).

- We employed several surveys and an experiment to reveal who visits campaign web sites, what draws them there, what they learn, and under what circumstances campaign sites affect voters' choices.
- Our surveys included a national probability sample of 1000 respondents collected through random telephone dialing and comprised entirely of people who reported having seen one of seven web sites associated with the election: those of presidential candidates Al Gore, George Bush, Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan, and those of three non-partisan voter information organizations, Project Vote Smart, Freedom Channel, and Democracy Net. We surveyed these people during the heat of the general election campaign, in October and early November, 2000.
- Following the election, we re-surveyed two randomly chosen panels of 300 from the original survey, in order to see how citizens' recall of the web experiences fared over time, and to gauge how many people who originally told us they intended to vote later reported actually doing so. We conducted the first of these panel surveys in the days immediately following the election, and the second three months after the election.
- During the campaign, we also surveyed another 1000 people who told us they did not see one of the web sites of interest to us, either because they did not have Internet access or because they just never chose to do so. We used the responses of these 1000 people in a variety of comparisons with our sample of 1000 members of the web site audiences.
- Our experiments took place in four cities chosen for regional variation: San Diego, St. Louis, Charlotte, and New York. In each city, we used random telephone techniques to draw an average of 50 people to a laboratory facility where we gave them a questionnaire about their political knowledge and inclinations, asked them to browse three of the web sites of interest to us, and then fill out a follow-up questionnaire. This technique complemented our surveys by providing us direct measures of how 200 people respond to web sites.

Web Sites and Audiences Studied in this Project

Presidential Candidate Sites

George Bush
Al Gore
Ralph Nader
Pat Buchanan

Non-Partisan Sites

Project Vote Smart
Freedom Channel
Democracy Net

Details on the study methodology can be found in the Technical Appendix and Notes section of this report.

STRATEGIES AND MESSAGES OF CANDIDATES

A. What strategies do major candidates for office use in presenting themselves via the web, and in particular what kind of messages do they seek to convey to which audiences?

FINDING 1: Candidates approached the web as a supplement to traditional media rather than as a replacement for them.

Nearly universally, candidates assumed that new information technologies do not replace the functions of broadcast and print media. They adopted strategies that employed the Internet to work with and around mass media rather than to substitute. To be sure, maintaining a web site has technical, financial, and strategic advantages over traditional media. Web sites are relatively low in cost, they can be dynamic (with ever changing content), and the information there is not filtered through journalists and editors before reaching citizens. The respective campaign webmasters told us in our interviews that they believed visitors spent an average of ten minutes at Bush's site and twenty minutes at Gore's. While we could not independently verify these claims, it is clear that web sites provide opportunities to citizens for in-depth exploration that substantially exceed other sources, especially broadcast media. At the same time, candidates are far better able to manage the kinds of information that reach citizens through their web sites. As one observer writes, "The key selling point of the web to election campaigns is the opportunity [for the candidates] to control their messages and thus their images."⁵

Two facts stand out as central to the strategies of candidates: mass media reach a vastly larger audience, and mass media command and direct political attention in a way that the web does not.

Traditional mass media command and direct public attention in a way that the web does not.

Some of the candidates we spoke with experimented in a very small way with banner advertising on the Internet, which is the closest analogue to broadcast

political advertising because it is inadvertent from the citizen's perspective. For technical reasons, among others, these were ineffective in attracting citizens to the web sites.

FINDING 2: In choosing between an audience of supporters and an audience of undecided voters, candidates nearly universally gave priority on the web to communicating with their supporters.

Given the fact that web-site audiences are comprised of people who chose to visit, it comes as no surprise that most candidates approached new media as a way of intensifying their relationship with supporters and volunteers, rather than as a means for persuading undecided citizens to vote for them. This strategy entailed many sub-goals: sustaining the interest of supporters throughout the campaign in order to boost supporter turnout on Election Day; converting supporters into volunteers or donors; and communicating with workers and volunteers, among other goals.

One presidential campaign manager from the 2000 election acknowledged that "more than anything, we used [the web site] for keeping the troops informed in the field."⁶ This constant contact with the faithful over the Internet is accomplished in two ways: through the images and substance of the web site itself and through e-mail lists of supporters.

To reinforce the attitudes of supporters, candidate web sites sometimes include sections devoted to countering opponents' attacks. One example is the Bush site's home page feature "Setting the Record Straight," which included responses to criticisms of Bush's policy proposals. Another example is the common practice of updating viewers on the candidates' campaign activities. The Buchanan site featured an "On the Trail" section where site visitors could be kept "informed of the latest news, anecdotes, and photos direct from the campaign trail!" The content of the main page is frequently updated to attract attention. As on campaign official put it, "If people went there on Monday, and went back on Friday and saw that the content on the front page was completely different, that would motivate them to check back again the next Monday."⁷

Section 2: Research Findings

Beyond varying the content of the site to attract repeat visitors, some candidate sites allowed visitors to create personalized sites based on their issue interests or group affiliations. The Gore campaign urged visitors to “Build Your Own Campaign” while the Bush campaign called its comparable feature “My George W.” We found this practice to be especially intriguing because it creates the potential for candidates to present varying images of themselves that are customized and tailored literally at the level of the individual voter.

Candidates also place a high emphasis on reinforcing support among citizens through regular e-mail contact. Vast e-mail lists are compiled by soliciting information from site visitors, and these contacts are then encouraged to expand the network by forwarding messages on to others. One webmaster explained the purpose of these e-mails: “We tried to give a headline, then one sentence, and then a link back to the site... You want to get them back onto the web site, where they’re a click away from doing something.”⁸

Despite the reluctance of Internet users in general to divulge personal information, substantial numbers of visitors signed up for these e-mail updates. The psychology of support for a favored political candidate appears to include relaxed inhibitions on the part of citizens about revealing contact information over the Internet. The Bush campaign reported that its e-mail lists grew from 120,000 early in the primary season to over 400,000 subscribers during the general election.⁹ The Gore campaign similarly claimed about 400,000 e-mail subscribers by the end of the campaign.¹⁰

The campaigns all felt a strong need for judiciousness in the use of these lists. “If you start to flood them with e-mails, explained Cliff Angelo, Bush campaign webmaster, then pretty soon they unsubscribe and they don’t want to hear from you ever again.”¹¹

As a result, some sites asked e-mail subscribers to designate how often they wanted to be contacted. This represents another innovative step in personalizing and individualizing political communication. Not only does new technology permit candidates to ask citizens *what* they would like to hear about, but also *how often* they want like to hear about it.

Al Gore’s campaign experimented with instant messaging chat groups organized through their web site, thus allowing supporters to reinforce each other and even organize together to carry out informal campaigning outside the view of the campaign organization. Gore webmaster Ben Green called instant messaging the “single biggest technological development of the 2000 campaign.”¹²

Not only does new technology permit candidates to ask citizens what they want to hear about, but also how often they want to hear about it.

In addition to reinforcing supporters, candidates attempt with varying success to use their web sites to turn supporters into activists. The main pages of candidate sites scream with calls for immediate action: “What You Can Do Today” (Nader), “Your Participation is Critical to Our Campaign, Choose A Way to Take Action” (Gore), “Help Pat, Help America. Click Here” (Buchanan). Citizens were variously asked to volunteer to do such things as hand out leaflets, put up campaign signs, host candidate parties, write letters to editors, and visit other online discussion groups to promote the candidate. In some cases, literature and signs could be printed from the web site. The Bush campaign offered a weekly literature piece and encouraged visitors to print off copies and “drop them off at your neighbor’s house, your friend’s dorm room, or any place they will make a difference!”

For the most part, these recruiting activities were modestly successful. For instance, in our interviews with campaign officials, the Nader campaign reported to us that their web site recruited 40,000 volunteers, a respectable number if true.¹³ We were able to check this self-reported figure using our survey methods, since our survey inquired about volunteering activity at each web site. The result matches up quite closely to the campaign’s own figure.¹⁴

These lists were also used to monitor the opposition's activities. For example, some Bush campaign e-mails included the following request: "If you receive a phone call attacking George W. Bush or his proposals please record it or make note of the attack and report it by calling 1-800-878-9374."

A particularly prominent way in which candidate web sites encouraged visitor activism was through the solicitation of donations. The Nader campaign advertised the site in most speeches that he gave, and whenever he did so, online contributions increased "tenfold," according to the campaign.¹⁵ In 2000, online fund-raising netted tens of millions of dollars for candidates, which far exceeded the totals from 1996 presidential race when the Clinton campaign site brought in only an estimated \$10,000.¹⁶ The amount of funding flowing through web sites received a good deal of media attention, some of it misplaced. Substantial fractions of donations received through the web were simply gifts that would otherwise have reached candidates in traditional ways. "Organic" funding, as one campaign official described Internet donations that would not likely have been received in any other way, was significant but well below the overall figures reported by the campaigns as "Internet donations."

Portions of candidate sites were also typically devoted to mobilizing supporters on election day. Site visitors who joined the e-mail lists were further encouraged to vote through e-mail reminders. The Bush campaign sent over 600,000 e-mail messages a day during the last days of the campaign and finally recommended taking "your family and friends to the polls today."¹⁷ The Gore campaign used e-mail solicitations to urge recipients to bring ten voters to the polls.

Another featured element of most candidate sites that is likely designed more for undecided voters than supporters is the candidate biography. For example, the Gore site prominently displayed photos of Gore and Senator Joseph Lieberman and their spouses and invited site visitors to "get to know us." Visitors could read a short biography of each individual, learn more about Gore's family and his "road to the White House," or even watch a campaign video about Al Gore.

FINDING 3: Candidates overwhelmingly favored positive self-presentation over attacks on opponents.

Given the frequency of attack advertising and negative campaigning in broadcast media, it comes as a welcome surprise that candidates' web sites are comparatively free of such tactics. The web in 2000 was not an arena for serious negative campaigning in the races we examined.

Candidates do on occasion attempt to define their opponents. In the 2000 election, all of the major presidential candidate sites mentioned other candidates, and the Bush and Gore campaigns freely referred to each other. For the most part, such references to other candidates focused on issue positions and substantive differences rather than providing negative character portrayals or other features of attack advertising. The comparisons made on these sites were predictable.

The Nader site strongly criticized both Gore and Bush, but particularly Gore since their constituencies overlapped. The Nader site home page offered a prominent link to "Gore's Broken Promise of the Day." Similarly, Buchanan's web site targeted Bush for criticism. The Bush campaign site urged visitors towards a section titled "debatefacts.com," where Gore's debate statements, called "inventions" on the site, were juxtaposed with "facts" by the Bush campaign.



Section 2: Research Findings

FINDING 4: Compared with communication through traditional media, candidate web sites tend to provide larger volumes of issue information in addition to traditional personal campaigning.

It comes as no surprise that a good deal of campaigning on the web is personal: candidates use the web to present themselves as individuals and to tout their personal qualifications and attractiveness as candidates. Al Gore's online bio began: "From the simple lessons about work and responsibility he learned from his parents, to his strong, life-long partnership with his wife Tipper, to their four children—Al Gore's family is his proudest accomplishment of all." Ralph Nader's biography portrayed him as a dedicated public crusader and included this self-description: "When asked to define himself, he always responds, 'Full-time citizen, the most important office in America for anyone to achieve.'" Such framing of the candidate's personality can also be accomplished through pictures. One example is Al Gore's online response to his reputation for having a "wooden" demeanor. The Gore campaign attempted to blunt that image by featuring photos of Gore in less formal settings. This kind of message is a direct translation of styles of campaigning from broadcast media.

In addition, however, we found that candidates exploited the web to provide far more substantive information about issues than is typically possible through television or radio advertising. They did so in two senses, by providing detail and background on issues, and by covering a comparatively large number of issues. All of the candidate sites we examined had sections where issues were discussed, typically at some length. The number of issues discussed varied among presidential candidates, with Buchanan and Hagelin covering the fewest (23 and 24 respectively) while Bush, Gore, and Nader dealt with the most (31).

The importance of issue sections of web sites is one area where campaign staff appear to have

misjudged citizen interest. While all campaigns featured issue sections, campaign staff did not emphasize these in their discussions of political strategy. Presentation of issue information had an almost obligatory character, detailed as it was, compared with the much more enthusiastic and strategic character of mobilization and e-mail list activities. Yet, as Finding 7 below from our surveys show, obtaining issue information was the most common substantive reason people cited for visiting campaign web sites. Moreover, as Finding 14 shows from our experiments, the extent to which web sites can reveal differences between candidates on issues is key to whether citizens learn from the sites.



AUDIENCES AND THEIR REACTIONS

B. Which citizens visit candidate web sites and why, and what effect do their visits have on their knowledge and political attitudes?

FINDING 5: We estimate from our survey that about 9% of American adults saw at least one of the seven national web sites in our list, with the Bush site outpolling Gore's in number of unique visitors, and both major candidates outpolling the minor party candidates and the non-partisan sites.

Other national surveys have asked citizens whether they obtained any political information through the Internet during elections, from any source. In our surveys, we asked specifically whether citizens had seen by name each of the sites of the presidential candidates and the three major non-partisan information sites of interest to us.¹⁸ This permits us to make statistically sound estimates of the number of unique visitors to such sites that are impossible from any other source of evidence, especially the notorious "hit logs" and online, self-selected surveys.

We estimate that a total of about 9% (+/- 3.5%) of adults saw at least one of the seven sites on at least one occasion. Of that 9%, 54% had seen the Bush site, 44% the Gore site, and 18% the Nader site. We note in particular that this means roughly one-in-twenty to one-in-twenty-five American adults saw either the Bush or Gore site, or both.

Estimated Fraction of All U.S. Adults Who Saw the Web Site of:	
Bush	5%
Gore	4%
Nader	2%
Buchanan	0.05%
Project Vote Smart	2%
Freedom Channel	0.04%
Democracy Net	0.05%

FINDING 6: People viewing the 2000 election web sites are, as one would expect, socio-economically exclusive. They were more affluent, better educated, and more likely to be Caucasian than people who did not view a site.

It comes as no surprise that the general audience for election information on the Internet differs socio-economically from the rest of the population. This is to be expected for several reasons: because access to the Internet is stratified by education and income, as well as age, and because engagement with politics is also a function of age and education. In generating expectations about the Internet, it is important to note that the audience for many traditional media is imbalanced in one way or another. Among those who read newspapers, for example, men outnumber women.

Our surveys permitted us to compare people nationally who had seen one of the seven major web sites with those who had not, either because they did not have access to the Internet or simply because they never chose to visit a site. What we found is that the election site audience in 2000 was indeed more male, better educated, and wealthier than those who did not see one of the web sites.

- 62 percent of the election site audience was male, compared with 48 percent of those not viewing a site.
- 46 percent had a college degree, compared with about 23 percent of those who did not see a site.
- The median income of the election site audience was about \$57,000 per year, compared with \$43,000 for those not seeing a site.
- Racially and ethnically, 78 percent of the web audience was non-Latino white, compared with 72 percent of others.
- The average age of the web audience was 38, compared with 44 for who did not see a site.

The age finding bears some discussion. While one would expect Internet users to be younger than the population as a whole, the fact that the average age is nearly 40 may come as a surprise. In general, use of the Internet is indeed higher among younger people, declining with age. On the other hand, engagement with politics and news-reading increases with age. When these two opposing age trends interact with one another, as in measures of

Section 2: Research Findings

use of the Internet for politics, they nearly cancel one another out, so to speak. The result is that while slightly skewed toward youth, the age profile of political Internet users is closer to that of the general population of adults that generally assumed.

Demographics of Web Site Audiences		
	2000 Election Site Audience	People Not Viewing a Site
Male	62%	48%
College Degree	46%	23%
Income	\$57,000	\$43,000
White, Non-Latino/a	78%	72%
Average Age	38	44

Note: All differences statistically significant at .01 level.

FINDING 7: Among nine possible reasons for first visiting a candidate's web site, the most common were learning more about the candidate's issue positions and simply browsing with no particular purpose in mind.

We asked people in our surveys an open-ended question about why they had first visited any of the web sites they had seen. This question permitted the respondents to provide whatever answer came to mind. We then developed categories for classifying the nearly 1000 responses, adding and collapsing categories until the smallest two contained 2 percent or less of the responses. This technique produced nine unique categories. These categories and the fraction of visitors to the Gore and Bush sites who described each as their chief reason for first visiting the site are shown in the box.

As the figures show, the most common reasons for visiting sites were just browsing and learning about issue positions. In a second tier was obtaining general information about the campaign and visiting the site "because I like the candidate" or the party. Following in a distant third tier are all other reasons, including learning about the candidate as an individual, obtaining news, and so on.

However, the reason mentioned for first visiting did vary by strength of presidential preference. *Citizens whose preference for a candidate was weaker tended to be even more likely to name learning about positions as their first priority on an initial visit.* About 45 percent of respondents with a weak preference for president named learning about issue positions as the reason for their visit, compared with just 26 percent of those with a strong presidential preference.

Reason for First Visiting a Candidate's Web Site	
Just to browse with no specific purpose in mind	31%
Learning about the candidate's issue positions	27%
To obtain general information about the campaign	17%
Because I like the candidate or party	12%
Learning about the candidate as an individual	4%
Because of the design of the site or some unique feature or content	4%
Obtaining news about the candidate	3%
To obtain campaign paraphernalia	2%
Donating or volunteering	1%

FINDING 8: People who viewed election web sites were politically better informed than those who did not.

At the time that we surveyed them near the end of the election season, visitors to election sites were better informed politically than those who had not visited one of the sites. We measured objective political knowledge in our surveys using an adaptation of a standard measure involving factual questions about American democracy

that respondents either answered correctly or incorrectly. Those who had seen a web site scored an average of 5.3 on our index, meaning that they correctly answered an average of four questions and missed two. Those who had not seen one of the sites scored an average of 4.1 on our index, meaning that they answered three questions correctly and missed three.¹⁹ This difference is substantively and statistically meaningful.

FINDING 9: The large majority (about 2/3) of visitors to the major party candidates' web site were already supporters of the candidate when they made their first visit; this was not true of visitors to the minor-party candidates, who tended neither to support nor oppose the candidate.

Consistent with the premises and strategies of the campaign staff who created the sites, the bulk of people who visited a candidate's web site were supporters to begin with. About 69 percent of people reported that they were supporters of Bush when they first visited his web site, compared with 63 percent for Gore. For Bush, 21 percent neither supported nor opposed him at the time of their first visit, compared with 19 percent for Gore.

The situation is quite different for the Nader and Buchanan sites. Nader had the smallest fraction of opponents visit his site, only about 5 percent. Buchanan had the largest number of first-time visitors report that they opposed his candidacy, 30 percent, which was roughly the same as the number who supported him. Like Nader, Buchanan had a comparatively large fraction of uncommitted visitors, about 41 percent.

About 69 percent of people reported that they were supporters of Bush when they first visited his web site, compared with 63 percent for Gore . . . About 48 percent of first-time Nader visitors neither opposed nor supported him and about the same number were supporters.

Party identification data are consistent with this picture. Among first-visitors to the Bush site, 88 percent were Republican, compared to 7 percent who were Democrats. On the other hand, 70 percent of visitors to the Gore site were Democrats and 24 percent Republicans. Among the sites we examined, Bush's stands out for its more exclusive appeal to citizens of the candidate's own party.

FINDING 10A: About 56 percent of people who visited a candidate's web site once went back for at least one more visit. As a general rule, these repeat visitors comprise a hard-core group of knowledgeable, ideological, and slightly older supporters of the candidate looking for more issue information.

FINDING 10B: There are a few important differences among candidate sites in repeat visiting, with the Nader site drawing college educated people back more strongly, and the Gore site drawing women back more than other sites.

The strategy of campaigns to appeal chiefly to supporters through their web sites is entirely consistent with the actual behavior of citizens. In general, those who returned for more than one visit to a particular site also were more politically knowledgeable, scoring higher on our knowledge index by an average of one-half question out of six. In addition, we found the following.

- Repeat visitors to a site are more strongly committed ideologically than those who visit only once.
- Repeat visitors have stronger presidential references.
- Repeat visitors in general pay closer attention to the campaign through the web.

Repeat visits to candidates' sites varied somewhat in subtle ways. Across all four presidential web sites, by far the most frequently named reason for repeat visits was learning about issue positions, a reason named by just over half of repeat visitors. The second most important reasons for returning was to obtain news about the candidate and to browse with no specific reason, with about one in five respondents mentioning these. While there were no important differences in *reasons* for going

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back to a site, two demographic factors among repeat visitors varied by site.

- People without a college degree were far less likely (30 percent) than those with a degree (47 percent) to return to the Nader site, which was the only campaign site to exhibit a statistically significant education effect associated with repeat visits.
- Women were substantially more likely (55 percent) than men (45 percent) to return to the Gore site, which was the only site with a statistically significant gender effect associated with repeat visits.

Surprisingly, there were no important differences across candidates in the reasons for return visits.

Characteristics of the Party Cross-Over Audience		
	Cross-Over Viewers	Party Consistent Viewers
Age	36	39
Strongly Partisan	29%	79%
Strong Presidential Preference	84%	94%
Pay Close Attention to Campaign on Web	58%	45%

Note: All differences statistically significant at .05 level.

FINDING 11: Four factors predict cross-over viewing by citizens of web sites belonging to candidates from a party other than their own: age, partisanship, amount of attention to the campaigns on the web, and strength of presidential preference.

We call the minority of the web site audiences who identified with a party other than the candidate's own "cross-over" viewers. Cross-over viewing is a potentially interesting and relevant phenomenon from the perspective of democratic theory, because it involves the potential

for learning about political differences and heightened possibilities for opinion change. Cross-over viewers were very different from party-consistent viewers, and it is important to answer the following question about them: are they visiting sites of candidates from another party because they are contemplating a cross-over vote, or because they are simply curious or hungry for information? We find the following:

- Cross-over viewers of candidate web sites tended to be younger than party-consistent viewers, with an average age of 36 compared to 39 for party-consistent viewers.
- Cross-over viewers tended by an enormous margin to be less strongly partisan in their outlooks. Only 29 percent of cross-over viewers reported having a "strong" preference as Democrats or Republicans, compared with 79 percent of party-consistent viewers.
- Cross-over viewers tended to pay more attention to the campaigns on the web in general.

Cross-over viewing is an activity conducted by people who are strongly committed to vote for a particular candidate but are not strongly partisan, who are young, and who tend to spend a lot of time in general obtaining political information on the web.

As is true of repeat visitors, we also found that cross-over viewing varied by candidate.

- Republican men in our national sample (28 percent) were more likely than Republican women (18 percent) to view the Gore site, which was the only site with this gender effect on cross-overs.
- Republicans with a college degree (29 percent) were also more likely than those without (20 percent) to view the Gore site, which was again the only site with this effect.
- Democrats who viewed the Bush site were younger than Republicans and Independents who saw the Bush site, by a difference in average age of 34 to 39.
- Democrats viewing the Bush site tended to be less politically knowledgeable than Republicans and Independents viewing that site, whereas Republicans viewing the Gore site tended to be more knowledgeable by a comparable margin.

We interpret these findings as an indication that cross-over viewing is largely a function of curiosity or desire to increase political knowledge generally in the absence of strong partisan commitments, rather than a precursor to a vote switch or change of heart about a candidate.

Cross-over viewing is an activity conducted by people who are strongly committed to vote for a particular candidate but are not strongly partisan, who are young, and who tend to spend a lot of time in general obtaining political information on the web.

FINDING 12: A modest fraction of people react to web sites with a change in feeling toward the candidate or a change in perceptions of differences between candidates, but these modest changed feelings do little to change overall levels of support for candidates; the only candidate's site to produce a substantial feeling effect was that of Nader.

Candidate web sites matter when they affect visitors in some way – by adding to citizens' knowledge, changing their attitudes or feelings about candidates and issues, or affecting their subsequent political actions. We approached the challenge of measuring the effect of sites on citizens in two ways. In our surveys we asked people to recall their reactions to the sites and whether the sites affected their feelings toward the candidates. This technique has the advantage of measuring persistent real-world reactions, but is subject to the vicissitudes of recall in the survey setting.

In our experiment, we directly measured people's feelings toward the candidates before and immediately after viewing the sites. That technique is not subject to recall problems, but is limited by the fact that it measures short-term reactions to sites in a highly constructed context.

The surveys and experiment both show that a minority of people respond to web sites with some self-reported change in perception or feeling. For the Gore and Bush sites, about 17 percent of people we spoke with claimed that viewing the site changed their attitudes toward the candidate. For Nader the figure is 31 percent, and for Buchanan 25 percent.

With the exception of Buchanan, these changes occurred in all directions, with a few people moving from being undecided to supporting or opposing, some opponents becoming undecided, and so on. In Buchanan's case, none of the web site visitors changed from opposing to supporting the candidate on the basis of the web site. The overall trend is to leave the level of support for major candidates largely unchanged.

In our experiment, we approached the same topic somewhat differently, asking people whether they perceived substantial differences between the candidates. We found that about 27 percent of respondents' assessments of whether there were significant differences between the major candidates changed as a result of viewing the web sites in the laboratory conditions. In the experiment, neither strength of presidential preference, education, age, nor gender had any effect on change in perception in differences. The only predictor of changes in perception was race, with white respondents significantly less likely (20 percent) than others (39 percent) to change their perceptions.

FINDING 13: About one in five people report an increased interest in volunteering or becoming involved because of the experience of visiting a campaign web site; those most likely to be affected are strong partisans and ideologues, rather than moderates or Independents.

Our surveys show that about one in five visitors to the major candidate sites reported that the experience increased their interest in volunteering or otherwise becoming involved. Three quarters or so of visitors report no change in such interest, while a few percent report a decrease in interest. The strongest predictors of increased interest in being involved are ideology and partisanship, with Republicans and conservatives most likely to respond to the Bush site with an increase in interest, and Democrats and liberals responding similarly to the Gore site. It is clear that whatever mobilization effect candidate sites have is mostly likely to affect those who are already strongly committed.

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There are a few differences among the sites in this effect however. For instance, the Gore site had a differential effect on women. About 25 percent of women who visited the Gore site reported an increased interest in being involved, compared with 15 percent of men. The Bush site did not have this differential effect.

FINDING 14: Just under a third of people experience measurable gains in knowledge from visiting a web site under laboratory conditions; this knowledge gain is tied to perceptions in differences between candidates.

We measured whether people learned from their experience visiting web sites using our experimental method. In their pre-web questionnaires, we asked them a battery of simple factual questions about the election, including how many weeks it would be until the election took place, whether a Senate election was occurring in the person's state, what the names of the Senate candidates were, whether there was a governor's election in the state, what the names of the candidates were, and how many years Al Gore had been Vice President. Following their visits to web sites, we included the same questions again in the post-test questionnaire. We then compared each individual's aggregate scores on the questions.

About 31 percent of people posted a gain in their score on these simple questions. There were no differences by age, gender, education, or inclination to vote between these 31 percent and the majority of participants whose score did not change.

The perception of differences when making explicit mental comparisons between candidates appears to be a key factor in how citizens learn political information from web sites. The only factor that predicts gains in knowledge involved the perception of differences between the candidates. People whose perception of the existence of meaningful differences between candidates changed through the web site experience also increased their scores on these factual questions.

People who experienced changes in their perception of meaningful differences between candidates also increased their scores on these factual questions.

FINDING 15: For most citizens, the web supplemented television and newspapers rather than displacing them.

We were interested to discover whether people using campaign web sites for information might be abandoning traditional media in favor of the Internet. To test this, we asked people in our surveys about their overall extent of media use of various kinds. We found that those who followed the campaign on the web from any source were likely to have also followed it on television and in the newspapers.

Of those who followed the national campaign closely on the web, 62 percent also followed it closely on television and 41 percent also followed it closely in newspapers. Of the same group of close followers of information on the Internet, only 10 percent did not follow the campaigns at all on television and 26 percent did not follow them in the newspapers.

We were interested in learning more specifically about those citizens who had seen one of the election web sites but who were low users of traditional media. About 34 percent of respondents fell into this category. We found that five characteristics are associated with using the Internet for political information while avoiding traditional media: having low interest in campaigns in general, finding the Internet easier to read than newspapers, trusting the Internet more than television, having little history of engagement in politics, and being male. That is, the small number of citizens who are likely to see an election web site but not pay attention to politics in newspapers or on television are likely to be males who are comfortable with the Internet but disinterested in politics. They are no different from others in terms of age, education, political ideology, or knowledge.

FINDING 16: In retrospect, citizens in our sample did not judge the Internet to have been particularly memorable or helpful in making their electoral choices; three months after the election, most citizens could no longer recall having seen a site that they had described to us previously during the campaign season.

Our main surveys of visitors to web sites took place during the heat of the campaigns, when we estimated that recall of online experiences would be freshest and strongest. We also wanted to know how people would look back on the Internet as an electoral tool *after* the campaigns were over. In order to accomplish this, we conducted two “panel” surveys, which involved going back and re-interviewing about 300 of our national respondents the week after Election Day and another similar group about three months after Election Day. We found that three months after the election, only 16 percent of people who had earlier reported having seen the Bush site could remember having done so; just 11 percent of Gore viewers could recall the experience.

About 10 percent of people who had earlier reported having seen a web site said that the Internet had helped them in their decision, compared to 43 percent who said television in general was helpful, 31 percent who felt they were helped specifically by the televised presidential debates, 18 percent who thought they were helped by television and radio news, and 15 percent were helped by members of their community.

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NON-PARTISAN VOTER INFORMATION SITES

C. Who visits non-partisan voter information sites, and what effect does that exposure have on their knowledge of, interest toward, and participation in the election?

A number of groups created non-partisan voter-information web sites to offer electoral information for the 2000 campaign. We studied three of the most prominent — Democracy Net, Freedom Channel, and Project Vote Smart. Because these sites were devoted to the common mission of voter education, they shared many characteristics (though their specific presentations differed). Each site projected images of legitimacy and neutrality, encouraged interactivity with site visitors, sought to mobilize voters, and provided information about candidates and issues. We were interested in the sites for their own sake, and for the contrast they could potentially provide with the candidate-sponsored sites. We included these in both our surveys and the experiment.

FINDING 17: By assiduously attempting to remain neutral, non-partisan voter-information web sites served mainly as centralized conduits for candidates' own campaign communication.

A prominent concern for these voter-information sites was that they maintain an image that visitors would respect. More specifically, they sought to establish themselves as a credible and unbiased sources of information. A primary way to gain credibility is through disclosure of one's motives and objectives. All three of these sites contained information about themselves as organizations, including a statement of purpose. For instance, Project Vote Smart declared "We are simply a national library of factual information on political candidates and elected officials. We do not lobby, support or oppose any candidate or issue.... We are staffed by both conservatives and liberals ... in order to help you get the facts about candidates instead of just the rhetoric." These sites also prominently featured information about their sponsors. These sponsors were typically groups that are self-identified as being non-partisan — such as the Carnegie Corporation and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Obviously, the voter-information sites hoped to be associated with their sponsors' reputations. Project Vote Smart also chose to focus on the small contributions of "thousands of members" and on its impressive founding board, "as diverse as Goldwater and McGovern, Carter and Ford, Newt Gingrich and Geraldine Ferraro."

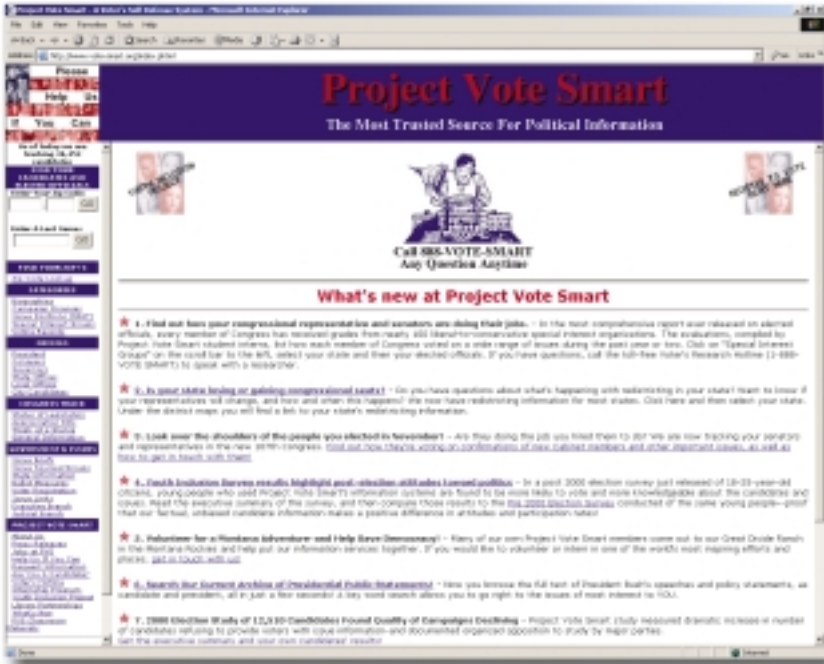
This meant that the sites operated mainly as clearinghouses for candidates' own messages, with comparatively little value-added by sponsors, aside from the function of organizing information in one place.

All candidates were welcome to post their views to these sites, in the races the sites covered, as long as they met minimal criteria. For example, Freedom Channel opened its site to any "candidate for President, Senate, House or Governor ... who has received or expended \$5000 for purposes of nomination or election." By opening their sites to as many candidates as possible, these sites fostered the perception that they were not captured by any particular political interests.

This enormous and admirable effort at neutrality led the sites largely to avoid making editorial judgments or being selective when presenting information about candidates. As a result, the sites tended to permit the candidates to speak for themselves by simply collecting and organizing information produced by the campaigns. This meant that the sites operated mainly as clearinghouses for candidates' own messages, with comparatively little value-added by the sponsors, aside from the function of organizing information in one place.

FINDING 18: In their focus on providing candidate-structured information, the non-partisan voter web sites tended to under-emphasize issues and the issue basis for political choices.

In our judgment, these voter-information sites were not particularly helpful for those seeking issue-based information or general information in connection with races. They were instead focused on assisting visitors who brought a specific interest in a particular candidate or race. Help sections, general search engines, and site maps generally took a back seat to facilities for searching for candidates by state and zip code, or in the case of two sites, by name.



We note in particular that out of concern with non-partisanship, none of the sites attempted to provide an independent comparison among candidates as to issue position. Project Vote Smart supplied voting records of incumbent legislators, while Freedom Channel supplied links to *Almanac of American Politics* entries for many candidates.

Freedom Channel's site did include a summarized political news update section, drawn from various sources, and links to many local news sites. Whatever strategy was used by its editors for selecting news events, it appeared that this function was not a high priority. In addition to linking to general news sources, these non-partisan sites also provided access to more specialized, and in some cases quite partisan, sources of information. The most neutral of these alternative sources were other non-partisan sites. Both Freedom Channel and Democracy Net linked to other voter-information sites. For example, Freedom Channel linked to both Democracy Net and Project Vote Smart, among over 25 such non-partisan voter-information sites. But most of the alternative sources were partisan. Freedom Channel and Project Vote Smart also linked to interest groups and political party sites. These links were an eclectic mixture, intended to be as inclusive as possible. As an example, Project Vote Smart even included a link to the "Pansexual Peace Party." In addition to Freedom Channel and Project Vote Smart linking to interested groups, all three sites also linked to the official sites of candidates and campaigns. Project

Vote Smart did not provide any links to general news. In general, these arrangements were in keeping with the overall tendency of these sites to serve as passive conduits of information.

The only source on any of the three sites for gaining independent background on major issues was Project Vote Smart's issue briefs, which were drawn from *The Reporter's Source Book*. While this information was potentially of great value to a visitor who was trying to become informed on a given topic, the information may not have been accessible to many visitors—because it was contained in a dense document not easily accessed from the site.

In contrast, our surveys showed that citizens are generally more interested in issue information from web sites than personalized candidate information. Visiting a web site in order to learn about issues and candidates' views on issues was a much more common motivation than visiting to learn personal or biographical information. The major non-partisan sites missed an opportunity in 2000 to add value to the presentations of issues made by the candidates themselves.

The major non-partisan sites missed an opportunity in 2000 to add value to the presentations of issues made by the candidates themselves.

FINDING 19: Like candidate web sites, the non-partisan voter information web sites tended to avoid opportunities for citizen interaction and communication that they could not control.

These sites avoided chat rooms and message boards. While an important element of their mission is to provide citizens an alternative to the filtering and editorial effects of traditional mass media, the operators of the sites did not extend their open-forum concept to voters themselves.

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They provided an unfiltered conduit for campaign information from candidates to voters, but did not provide for open discussion or exchange by voters.

FINDING 20: Compared with visitors to campaign sites, visitors to non-partisan sites were less politically knowledgeable and less engaged in democratic processes.

Some people in our sample visited both campaign sites and the non-partisan information sites. Some, however, visited exclusively the non-partisan sites. We compared these citizens to the rest in the sample, to see whether it is possible to identify distinguishing characteristics. We found the following.

- People who visited only non-partisan web sites scored about a half-point lower on our 6-point index of political awareness than visitors to candidate sites, meaning they are slightly less knowledgeable about the democratic system in the US.
- People who visited only non-partisan sites were younger, with the average age of 35.
- People who visited only non-partisan sites were less intensive watchers of television; for instance, 38 percent of candidate web site viewers followed the campaigns closely on television, compared with 25 percent of non-partisan site viewers.
- People who visited only non-partisan sites were also generally less attentive to politics, less likely to vote, and less interested in politics.
- There were significant differences between the audiences for the three non-partisan information sites we examined. In particular, visitors to the Freedom Channel site stood out: they were less politically attentive, less knowledgeable, and substantially younger (average age of 30) than the audience for the other two sites. Freedom Channel may have been more attractive to a younger audience due to its more visual and interactive content.

FINDING 21: Like the candidate’s own sites, Project Vote Smart and Democracy Net tended to attract citizens who had already decided whom they would vote for in the presidential election; this was not true of Freedom Channel.

We asked all people who reported that they had seen any of the three non-partisan sites if they had already decided whom to vote for in the election. About 64 percent of Project Vote Smart visitors and 75 percent of Democracy Net visitors reported they had already been decided, compared with 48 percent of Freedom Channel visitors.

FINDING 22: Project Vote Smart had by far the largest number of unique visitors of the three non-partisan sites we examined, and was most likely to attract repeat visitors.

About 18 percent of people in our sample who had seen any of the national-level web sites reported having seen Project Vote Smart, compared with about 6% for Democracy Net and 4% for Freedom Channel. Because the content of the three sites was so similar, we attribute much of this difference to the association between Project Vote Smart and such media giants as CNN and NBC, as well as with hundreds of libraries around the country in a position to promote it. This media association likely helped steer citizens to the Project Vote Smart site and increase the likelihood that those who had seen it would recall the “brand” name when asked in our interviews.

This phenomenon is an example of the general principle that the attention citizens give to “new” media in the free-wheeling world of the Internet can be highly dependent upon the actions and messages of the traditional “old” mass media.

It is also important to observe that about 50 percent of Project Vote Smart visitors returned more than once, with 17 percent visiting more than three times. Just under 40 percent of Freedom Channel visitors returned, and 22 percent of Democracy Net visitors. These differences are less likely to be attributable to awareness effects than to site layout and content.

FINDING 23: Following election day, people were more likely to forget their visits to non-partisan information sites than to candidates' own sites.

The generally positive attitudes towards these sites during the campaign surprisingly faded very quickly following the Election Day. Our follow-up panel surveys done in the days and weeks following the election found that only a small fraction of visitors to these non-partisan voter-information sites could recall their visits three months later. Any effect of these sites likely was very temporary.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Though the Internet has been hailed for its potential to renew citizenship by creating a more well-informed and responsible electorate, our surveys, experiment, and analysis of web sites lend little support to that thesis. We find instead that in the 2000 election, candidates' use of the web as well as online efforts by non-partisan groups served primarily as supplemental information channels for those already politically interested and, for the most part, already politically committed.

Our interviews with campaign staff and our review of their web sites provided little evidence that presidential candidates attempted to reach out to new voters, to youth, or to the disaffected through the Internet in any major way. Our surveys with citizens around the country confirm that the audience for these efforts was indeed mainly partisans and the engaged rather than the undecided or the disengaged.

Without a doubt, the content of candidate and non-partisan web sites could be useful to otherwise uninformed and disaffected voters. The problem is that they - who some would say need it most - are least likely to visit such sites and to partake of their informational bounty. As enthusiasts for the technology observe, new media offer unprecedented new capacities: for the multiplication of sources of political information, for citizen control over information, and for citizen expression. On the other hand, the psychology of political learning and attention to public affairs explain why these new capacities do not revolutionize patterns of citizenship at the individual level. In the relationship between candidates and voters, the Internet reinforces to a far larger extent than it renews.

To be sure, there are a few signs of new dynamics in our findings. We are particularly heartened by three trends. First, we are encouraged by the small but non-trivial amount of cross-over viewing of web sites. We find it only positive that at least a few members of one party would view the web sites of candidates from another. This is not because we think partisanship is bad. On the contrary we think that partisanship is a useful organizing structure for democracy and that it is strengthened by a deliberative understanding of the positions and ideas of those with whom one disagrees. Political disagreement in the context of mutual understanding is often positive, as the founders of American democracy believed.

Second, we are pleased to see that although most people do not go to web sites to learn or to decide, at least a very small number may. This is as one would expect, especially in the context of high-profile, media-saturated presidential elections where obtaining adequate information and voting cues from the traditional media is hardly difficult. We suspect that the Internet may be more useful democratically at lower-level, lower-profile races with less attention from traditional media.

Third, those most likely to be attracted to candidates' web sites and most likely to be affected by them are partisans and followers of the candidate. We view this as a fine development that certainly does not harm the political system. On the contrary, it can strengthen aspects of democracy. A great variety of factors have, over the last hundred years, served to weaken the relationship between candidates, parties, and voters. For the most part, this has diminished democratic processes rather than strengthening them, and technology in the form of television has been one of the chief culprits. Our finding that the Internet might strengthen the level of engagement between candidates and partisans runs against the trend of history.

These three factors are encouraging and can not be dismissed, even if they are largely overshadowed by the evidence of reinforcement of past trends in electoral behavior. They cause us to be supportive of carefully crafted Internet initiatives in politics and skeptically optimistic that new media can in certain places and in certain ways improve the relationship between candidates and citizens — especially citizens with a strong interest in public affairs.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: OVERVIEW AND PERSONNEL

A. Personnel

This project has two principal investigators - Richard Davis of Brigham Young University (BYU) and Bruce Bimber of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Davis is the author of *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System* and co-author of *New Media in American Politics*, both from Oxford University Press. Bimber is Director of the Center for Information Technology and Society at UCSB, and has conducted survey and experimental research about the Internet in politics since 1996. He is author of *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press, and of numerous articles on technology and politics.

The principal investigators were assisted by several research assistants. At BYU, Vincent James Strickler, Michael Dorrrough, Audrey Williams, Rachel Kirkland, Gretchen Carr, Steve Bitner, Linsey Sommers, Jim Jeffries, and Diane Parker assisted with content analysis and report preparation. At UCSB, four doctoral students worked on the project: Lia Roberts and Robert Hinckley assisted with statistical analysis of the quantitative data, and Diane Johnson and Eric Patterson assisted with interviewing. Rob Patton, Program Director of the Center for Information Technology and Society at UCSB managed production and distribution of the report in print and on-line at www.cits.ucsb.edu.

B. Methodology: Web Site Analysis, Surveys, Experiment

Studying the question of renewal and reinforcement in electoral politics requires systematic evidence about both the strategies and choices of campaigns who create and use web sites and the response of potential voters to those sites. Simply put, one must study both web sites and citizen reactions to web sites if one is to understand this topic.

(1) Web site Analysis

(A.) Web site Content

Content analysis is one of the best known and most widely utilized methods of studying mass communication.²⁰ Content analysis has certain advantages: unobtrusiveness in the communication interaction, replication, and relatively

low cost for gathering data.²¹ It allows us to make inferences about what messages candidates seek to tell voters by directly examining the content of their web sites.

In this study, our unit of analysis was the candidate web site. The major presidential campaign sites (Bush, Gore, Nader, Buchanan, and Hagelin) were coded for components of the candidate's self presentation. Since candidate sites typically change during the course of the campaign (particularly in high profile campaigns), each site was archived twice during the course of the fall campaign for subsequent coding. These downloads occurred in mid-October and the day before the general election. The purpose of the second was to chart changes in the sites over that period of time. Although the content of some sections changed (such as news releases or texts of speeches), there were in general only minor changes in the structure of the sites between the two dates.

This finding confirmed that the sites remained largely intact during the period of our study — mid-October until early November. As a unit of analysis, "the candidate web site" constitutes a coherent and stable phenomenon. This finding helped reassure us that in our surveys, citizens' descriptions of their reactions to a particular candidate's site were not confounded by when the citizen had seen the site.

We assessed the content of web sites using an exhaustive coding instrument. This instrument examined not only the existence but also the placement of various aspects of the candidates' web presentations. We coded for the presence and placement of, as well as salience accorded, facets such as the candidate's personal background presentation, issue substance, group/media endorsements, graphic design, negative campaigning, interactivity with users, identification of volunteers, solicitation of financial contributions, links to other sites, etc.

Each site was coded by three coders. The composite reliability score for the three coders exceeded 0.80, when "agreement" was defined as unanimous agreement across all three coders. When "agreement" was defined as 2/3 agreement, the score rose to 0.96.²² These are highly reliable figures for the coding, particularly for objects as complicated and varying as are web sites.

Section 3: Technical Appendix and Notes

(B.) Campaign Staff Interviews

The web sites that candidates present to the public are the result of decisions made by campaigns regarding Internet use. We wanted to determine what those decisions were and why they were made, and how these web sites fit into the candidates' larger campaign strategies. As one communications scholar has noted, "the Internet does not exist in isolation."²³ The best sources for that information were the creators of those web sites—the campaign webmasters—and other campaign staffers who understood the role of the web and e-mail in fulfilling the objectives of the campaign.

Therefore, we conducted telephone or in-person interviews with these campaign staffers during and soon after the November elections. These interviews were conducted with staff including webmasters, campaign managers, communication directors, and press secretaries who oversaw or managed Internet strategy in their respective campaigns. Staff interviews were conducted with staffers for the major presidential campaigns—Bush, Gore, Nader and Buchanan.

To provide perspective for the use of the Internet in the 2000 general election campaign, we also interviewed others who had been involved in Internet usage by candidates during the 2000 primaries and the 1998 elections. These included personnel involved with the presidential campaigns of Bill Bradley and John McCain, including Senator McCain himself.

(2) Survey Research

To assess the response of citizens to the campaign-related sites, we employed a national random-digit-dial survey technique. This technique is superior to other possible survey techniques for several reasons. Though measuring "hits" and posting online surveys at web sites are common research techniques for determining Internet usage, they are of limited value scientifically. Hit counts and even logs of the host names of visitors to web sites can provide little information about the identities of users, and nothing about their experiences or reactions to the site. Posting online surveys is very inexpensive and can allow detailed and even quite sophisticated question techniques, but it produces non-random samples. Those who choose to take online surveys differ in systematic and relevant ways from those who do not, so the kinds of inferences that can be made from such surveys are limited.

The standard in modern scientific survey research is the

random-digit-dial phone survey, which allows the creation of a virtually random (and therefore representative) group of respondents, often called a probability sample. Surveying Internet users by this technique is methodologically straightforward but time-consuming. After reaching randomly chosen respondents, the surveyors screen out those who do not use the Internet, and in our case, also screen those who have not seen one of the web sites of interest to us. A large number of phone calls is required to reach the target audience, which raises the cost of the survey, but which does little to undermine its methodological soundness.

From National Election Studies data for 1996 and 1998, and from our own past survey research, we estimated in advance the fraction of adults who might visit (and recall having visited) at least one of the presidential sites we were studying during the 2000 general election campaign. Our working figure was 5% of all adults, and on that basis we designed and budgeted for the survey operation to produce a target sample size of 1000. (The final figure of 9% was a pleasant surprise from the logistical perspective.)

We created a survey instrument designed to answer a wide variety of questions about respondents' use of the Internet and other media for campaign information and vote choice, as well as permitting us to inquire about their reactions to various web sites.

Our survey questionnaire contained batteries of questions as follows:

1. Demographics (including race, ethnicity, age, gender, occupation).
2. Annual Household Income and Marital Status.
3. Political Identification and Interest (including party identification, political ideology, and level of interest in the campaign).
4. Vote Choice (including awareness of candidates and intended vote).
5. Exposure to Traditional Media Campaign Coverage (including attention to television news, magazines, newspapers, and paid political advertisements).
6. General Internet Use (amount of use, length of time online, and usage for political information).
7. E-Mail Use (including amount and volume of personal e-mail and political email).
8. Exposure to Candidate Web Sites (including which sites visited and how often).

9. Response to Campaign Sites (including motivation for first visit, motivation for return visits, knowledge about the candidate, candidate preference, usefulness of site, knowledge about content of site, effect of site on decision to vote, donate money, volunteer, or vote for the candidate, and comparison of the site to other sources of information).

The survey was fielded by a sub-contractor, Wirthlin Worldwide, a leading commercial survey research firm specializing in political subject matter. Survey phone calls were made during the period of 12 October — 4 November 2000. Over 142,000 phone calls were made, (including multiple call-backs to the same numbers) and about 15,000 households contacted where an adult spoke to an interviewer. Of those, 1399, which is about 9%, had Internet access *and* reported recalling having seen at least one of the presidential candidate sites or voter-information sites. We completed 1020 interviews from that list.

We also drew a control group consisting of a random sample of 1000 respondents who had not seen one of the target web sites, either because they did not have Internet access in the first place, or because they simply had not chosen to visit one of the sites.

We chose to focus on the web sites of presidential candidates because they represent the common experience for voters across the nation. Every voter interacts with the presidential candidates at least through the decision making process that results in a vote choice. Since the 2000 presidential election included two well known minor party candidates (Ralph Nader of the Green Party and Patrick Buchanan of the Reform Party) - and the party of one of those candidates had polled nearly nine percent of the popular vote in the last election, while the other candidate polled above five percent in some national surveys in the fall - we chose to include them in our study. The content analysis also included the other contender for the Reform Party nomination, John Hagelin, who ran as well on the Natural Law party ticket. However, Hagelin was not included in the survey.

We included neutral “voter-information” web sites in our national study, in order to generate findings on these potentially important sources of information and in order to make comparisons with the candidate sites. These were the sites for Project Vote Smart, Democracy Net, and Freedom Channel.

As a supplement to the large national surveys, we also conducted two follow-up panel national surveys. One was

conducted on 8 and 9 November and included 301 respondents from the national survey. Follow-up questions dealt with such things as turnout and vote choice, as well as what sources (including web sites) influenced the vote decision. Then, three months following the election, we conducted another follow up national survey. Again, the participants in the initial national survey (exclusive of those included in the first panel) were re-contacted to achieve a sample of 339 participants. Questions asked in this survey included attention to the Florida election story, the actions of the new administration, and activities of the new Congress.

(3) Experiment

In addition to the random digit dial surveys, we employed a major experiment involving exposure to candidate and voter-information web sites under controlled, laboratory conditions. For understanding the effects of media use, experimental research in the laboratory can be a powerful complement to survey research. The chief strength of proper survey research is external validity, or generalizability, since it employs representative samples. Its chief shortcomings involve accuracy of recall on the part of respondents and challenges in isolating the phenomenon of interest from the many other factors in people’s lives, also known as internal validity in this context.

Experimental research has roughly the opposite set of strengths and weaknesses — strong internal validity and weaker external validity. Under laboratory conditions, participants can be exposed directly to the phenomenon of interest, in this case viewing web sites. Any changes in knowledge or attitudes can, in principle, be measured directly using before- and after-questionnaires, and can be reliably attributed to the phenomenon of interest. On the other hand, it is more difficult to generalize from laboratory experiments because sample sizes are typically small, and because experiments are, by design, partly artificial.

Employed together however, survey research and experimental research make a powerful combination. Consistent findings from dual-method studies are especially persuasive, but obstacles of cost and logistics make such combination studies rare.

In our design for the experiment, we employed several techniques to make the results as solid and complete on their own as possible. The first involved the location of the experiment. It is extraordinarily rare to assemble in a laboratory a sample of citizens drawn nationwide for an experiment; maintaining representativeness through

Section 3: Technical Appendix and Notes

randomization in such efforts is virtually impossible. We believe our technique is far superior to most experiments in this regard, which are typically conducted in one locale and which often rely exclusively on student subjects. We ran the experiment in four cities across the country, in order to draw include a variety of populations. We chose New York City to represent the Northeast, Charlotte to represent the Southeast, St. Louis for the Midwest, and San Diego for the West.

In each city we drew random samples using random digital surveying techniques, and invited people to participate in our study for an honorarium of \$50.

We invited only people who had access to the Internet, who used the Internet at least on a weekly basis, and who were registered to vote.

Third, we compensated for “response bias,” because the people who agreed to participate were somewhat different demographically than those who turned us down. As the pools of participants in each city filled up, we selectively rejected people in order to maintain a representative balance of men and women, college educated people, and partisans. We examined a total of 210 people in the experiment.

Our quotas were 52 percent (+/- 5 percent) women, 35 percent (+/- 10 percent) college educated, and 40 percent Republicans, 40 percent Democrats, and 20 percent Independents (+/- 5 percent). In each city, each respondent came by appointment to an office facility operated by our subcontractor, Wirthlin. At the facility, the participants were given a privacy-and-consent statement, and were then designated to view a selection of the three candidate sites or the three voter-information sites.

Each filled out a pre-test before visiting their first site, permitting us to measure their attitudes toward the various candidates and the election, as well as their objective knowledge of election facts. After the pre-test, each spent up to 15 minutes at their discretion viewing the designated sites. Following the site viewing, each filled out a post-test that repeated some of the questions from the pre-test and that asked new questions inquiring into their reactions to the sites. This permitted us both to make objective measures of changes in knowledge or attitudes as well as to measure subjective reactions to the sites.

C. State-level Analysis: Missouri

Presidential races differ from others in several important ways. Their higher visibility and intensive coverage by mass media can provide for somewhat different dynamics than in lower-level state and local races. Because state

and local races often feature candidates who are less well known and whose efforts are covered less intensively by traditional media, there are reasons to expect that the effects of the Internet may be different in these races than in presidential campaigns.

In order to explore these possibilities, our project included a state-level component. Ideally one would study many states or even all states in such an analysis. Logistically and financially that goal is extremely difficult, especially in survey research. The science of sampling requires at least 500 to 1000 respondents in each population that one wishes to study if useful statistical inferences are to be made, so analyzing a dozen states requires a dozen samples of this size rather than a single national sample dis-aggregated by state. For these reasons, surveys and polls simultaneously studying and distinguishing all states or even most states in a statistically meaningful way are rare.

Our approach was to select for study a single state that would provide for as much generalization as possible. We chose Missouri for several reasons. Missouri is a bellwether state in American politics. Over the past quarter century, Missourians have delivered their electoral votes to such diverse candidates as Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton. In the same time, remarkably, Missouri has always supported the winning presidential candidate. In addition, it was one of only a few states with competitive Senate and Governor’s races in 2000, which meant active efforts to use the Internet by all four major party candidates among these two races. Missouri, with its 11 electoral college votes, is neither a very large nor very small state, and can be electorally significant. Had Missouri’s electoral votes gone the other way in 2000, of course, Al Gore would have been elected president. Missouri contains a good deal of demographic variation, with large urban areas (St. Louis and Kansas City), suburbs, and rural communities. Finally, Missouri is not an outlier in terms of media and computer industries and intensiveness.

We archived for analysis select statewide major party candidate sites in Missouri. These included the U.S. Senate candidates, the gubernatorial candidates, and the secretary of state candidates. We also conducted interviews with staffers for the Missouri candidates - gubernatorial candidates Jim Talent and Bob Holden and Senate candidates Mel Carnahan and John Ashcroft. We also interviewed the webmasters for the candidates for Missouri Secretary of State—Matt Blunt and Steve Gaw

For the Missouri survey, calls were made between 20 October and 6 November. Over 59,000 calls were made and about 6,000 households were contacted where an adult spoke with the interviewer. About 690—11.5% had Internet access *and* had seen at least one of web sites. Of these, we completed 500 surveys.

The tragic and unexpected death of Democratic Senate candidate Governor Mel Carnahan on 16 October 2000 required modification of our plans. We modified our questionnaires to be sensitive to the loss felt by the state, and in our experiment in St. Louis (discussed below), we replaced web sites for U.S. Senate candidates with those for candidates for the Secretary of State race.

Findings of the Missouri component of the study are not described here, but will be reported in a forthcoming book by the principal investigators.

SUMMARY OF DATA SOURCES

1. Interviews

Transcriptions and notes from interviews with campaign officials. Content analysis of national and state-level web sites.

2. National Web site Survey

N=1020; Random-digit-dial national phone sample comprised exclusively of people who saw a target web site (Bush, Gore, Nader, Buchanan, Project Vote Smart, Freedom Channel, Democracy Net).

3. National Control Survey

N=1000; Random-digit-dial phone sample of people who did not see a target web site.

4. National Panel-Back Surveys

N=301, N=339. Re-interviews of National Website Sample respondents a few days and three months following election day.

5. Missouri Web site Survey

N=500; Random-digit-dial phone sample comprised exclusively of people in Missouri who saw a target web site (Bush, Gore, Nader, Buchanan, Project Vote Smart, Freedom Channel, Democracy Net, Talent, Holden, Any Senate Candidate).

6. Laboratory Experiment

N=210; Representative quota-samples drawn from four cities (San Diego, St. Louis, Charlotte, New York).

D. Notes

¹ Includes all sources of online political information. Source is *American National Election Studies, 2000*. For more information, see: Bruce Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.)

² For an introduction to these findings and literature, see John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Milton Lodge, Charles Tabor, and Aron Chase Galonsky, "The Political Consequences of Motivated Reasoning: Partisan Bias in Information Processing," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, 1999.

³ See Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bruce Bimber, "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism," *Polity XXXI:1* (1998), pp. 133-160; and Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴ For an introduction to the small but growing literature on the subject, see: Scott Althaus and David Tewksbury, "Agenda Setting and the New News: Patterns of Issue Importance Among Readers of the Paper and Online Versions of the New York Times," *Communication Research 29: 2* (2002), pp. 180-207; Bruce Bimber, "Information and Civic Engagement in America: The Search for Political Effects of the Internet," *Political Research Quarterly 54:1* (2001); Richard Davis and Diana Owen, *New Media and American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Dhavan Shah, Nojin Kwak, and R. Lance Holbert, "Connecting and Disconnecting with Civic Life: Patterns of Internet Use and the Production of Social Capital," *Political Communication 18* (2001), pp. 141-162; and Anthony Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁵ Dave D Alessio, "Adoption of the World Wide Web by American Political Candidates, 1996-1998," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 44* (2000): p. 566.

⁶ Personal interview with Tim Haley, campaign manager for Buchanan—Foster 2000, Nov. 20, 2000.

⁷ Personal interview with Ben Green, webmaster for the Gore/Lieberman campaign, March 1, 2001.

⁸ Quoted in Don Lewicki and Tim Ziaukas, "The Digital Tea Leaves of Election 2000: the Internet and the Future of Presidential Politics," *First Monday, 5* (December 2000), at http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue5_12/lewicki/index.html.

⁹ Telephone interview with Cliff Angelo, webmaster for the George W. Bush for President campaign, December 22, 2000.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Ben Green, webmaster for the Gore/Lieberman campaign, March 1, 2001.

¹¹ Personal interview with Cliff Angelo, webmaster for the George W. Bush for President campaign, October 18, 2000.

¹² Personal interview with Ben Green, webmaster for the Gore/Lieberman campaign, March 1, 2001.

¹³ Personal interview with Jonah Baker, webmaster for Ralph Nader for President, Nov. 17, 2000.

¹⁴ We perform the calculation as follows. A) Our surveys found that 2% of adults in the US saw the Nader web site. B) The 2000 Census shows 209 million people aged 18 and older, so 2% of these is 4.2 million people. C) Our surveys also found that on average about 1% of visitors to web sites reported that they volunteered in some way as a result. So, 1% of Nader visitors produces 41,800 volunteers, remarkably close to the figure of 40,000 reported to us directly by the Nader campaign.

¹⁵ Personal interview with Jonah Baker, webmaster for Ralph Nader for President, Nov. 17, 2000. The figure of "tenfold" may be an exaggeration, but we accept the basic claim that mass media events drive web site activity, including donations, because the same phenomenon was reported in all the campaigns.

¹⁶ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Politics Finding a Home on the Net," *Washington Post*, November 22, 1996, p. A4.

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Cliff Angelo, webmaster for the George W. Bush for President campaign, December 22, 2000.

¹⁸ Our procedure for asking respondents whether they had seen the sites involved several steps. We first asked if they had seen the official web site for a particular candidate, and recorded a "yes," "no," "I think so," or "I don't know" answer. Comparatively few people (<2%) responded "I think so," but for these we asked a follow-up question inquiring whether they were "pretty sure" they had seen the site or "not sure" they had seen it. Respondents were roughly evenly divided between these categories, and we scored "pretty sure" responses as "yes" and "not sure" as "no." We then proceeded to ask about the next site on our list, working through the list of sites to the end.

¹⁹ Our measure of knowledge is adapted from the test known as the "Delli Carpini and Keeter Five." The questions were: (1) What job or political office is now held by Al Gore?; (2) What job or political office is now held by William Rehnquist?; (3) Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not. Is it the president, Congress, or the Supreme Court?; (4) How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and House to override a presidential veto?; (5) Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the election this/next month?; (6) Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level?; If so, which one? Differences on our index between the two samples are statistically significant at the .05 level.

²⁰ For a discussion of the content analysis method as a social science research tool, see: Ole R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969); Thomas F. Carney, *Content Analysis: A Technique for Systematic Inference from Communications* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972); Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980); and Arthur Asa Berger, *Media Research Techniques* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).

²¹ Berger, *Media Research Techniques*, pp. 28-29.

²² For a discussion on the computation of a composite reliability coefficient, see Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*, pp. 137-138.

²³ Steve Jones, ed., *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), p. xii.