Meetup, Blogs, and Online Involvement:
U.S. Senate Campaign Websites of 2004

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Abstract

This paper discusses technological developments within U.S. Senate campaign websites in 2004, the extent to which they were used, and their potential utility. Specifically, linking to Meetup groups, the use of blogs on campaign websites, and specific online elements of interactivity were assessed. While the 2004 presidential election was first noted for many of these resources, this study finds they are making their way into Senate elections, are generally used more by Democratic candidates than Republicans, and the use of some online opportunities correlate with others in political campaigns.

What we might call an "early" study of the use of campaign websites (Faucheux, 1998) found a variety of reasons local and state political campaigns were not online. Some of these reasons included a lack of financial resources, a lack of significant competition in the race, a lack of time, lack of expertise, and an unwillingness to do so if opponents did not.

While political campaign websites have continued to evolve, and increase in content and technological sophistication, these problems continue to present themselves for what appears to be a shrinking proportion of candidates. We have seen an increasing rate of the use of campaign websites, from estimates of one-third of Senate campaigns in 1996 (Kamarck, 1999), increasing to 63% in 1998 (D'Alessio, 2000). In 2000, 88% of major party candidates had online campaigns (Puopolo, 2001), and when considering minor party candidates as well, 77% of all candidates for the U.S. Senate had campaign websites (Schneider, 2000). Foot, Schneider, and Xenos's (2002) study of campaign websites in 2002 found 73% of all Senate candidates were online. From these findings, it appears that the adoption of campaign websites by political candidates has leveled off, but candidates are taking advantage of the technological advancements of the worldwide web in varying degrees.

In concluding his 1998 study of campaign websites, *Campaign & Election*s editor-in-chief Ron Faucheux states "more creative Internet strategies will be hatched and more 'bells and whistles' will be explored and employed over time" (p. 24). This paper examines developments of some recent online campaign "bells and whistles," and how they may contribute to political campaigns and engagement with voters.

One technological development online that has evolved greatly since the 2002 elections is the use of Meetup groups, used most noteworthy by Howard Dean in the 2004 democratic primaries. This study will examine to what extent this popular resource at the presidential campaign level has been adopted by U.S. senate campaigns. Weblogs are another development of growing popularity in the online sphere; while most online blogs are not politically oriented or sponsored by political groups, they offer the potential to political campaigns of another vehicle to convey messages to prospective supporters. While we have seen their use in presidential campaigns (Williams, Trammel, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005), it is not yet clear how state level races have utilized blogs in political campaigns. Additionally, the current status of interactivity in campaign websites, as a potential source for voter involvement and engagement, will also be examined in this analysis.

Literature Review

Meetup Groups

Meetup groups saw considerable growth in 2004 campaigns. Founded in June 2002, www.meetup.com claims 400,000 people have attended a politically motivated Meetup event offline, and the organization became the focus of national news attention with their connection to the Howard Dean campaign in 2003 and 2004 (Williams, Weinberg, and Gordon, 2004). In their analysis of presidential primary candidate websites, Trammel et al (2004) and Williams et al (2004a, b) found half of the primary candidate websites linked externally to Meetup.

As Williams, Weinberg, and Gordon (2004) acknowledge, Meetup does not fit neatly into a conception of online community, as it provides online connections to meet with others in person. Meetup may indeed offer the best of both worlds: to offer an opportunity for online community, as well as the physical connection with others who share interests. Such face-to-face connection may reinforce online community building.

In-person gatherings of interested voters provide not only the opportunity to discuss shared political interests, but also to organize political campaign activities. Williams and Gordon (2003) report of letter writing activities, and idea generation for further campaigning opportunities at Meetup sessions of Howard Dean supporters, as well as soliciting donations to the campaign.

While Meetup members may appear to be campaign activists, Williams, Weinberg and Gordon (2004) found those first involved in politics through Meetup were different from "traditional" campaign activists. Specifically, they found when comparing Meetup activists to traditional campaign activists (those involved in political campaign activities prior to Meetup involvement) Meetup members were less strongly committed to a political party, and were also younger than traditional campaign activists.

It is no wonder why presidential campaigns found Meetup involvement appealing, given Williams, Weinberg and Gordon's (2004) findings regarding Meetup attendees. They found frequent Meetup participants "donated more, volunteer more, express stronger support for the candidates, and are more likely to advocate that others work for the candidate" (p. 16) than those attending one Meetup session.

Given recent popularity of Meetup groups at the presidential level, do U.S. Senate candidates see their potential, and promote such offline communities via their campaign websites? Given their popularity in presidential politics, such an organizational structure may present an appeal and potential success in state level races as well.

Campaign Blogs

While other forms of online involvement have existed in campaign websites, such as campaign donation and volunteer recruiting, 2004 saw the use of additional tools for possible involvement with voters. One resource used in campaigns of 2004 was the campaign blog. McKenna and Pole (2004) describe the majority of blogs as "rebuttals to assertions made by journalists, politicians and other public figures. Links are provided to other blogs, to speech transcripts, academic studies and articles in the mainstream press. Some posts merely excerpt a passage from an article and speech with only a note to their readers to check it out. Other posts are full essays." (p. 4)

Beyond the realm of specifically campaign blogs, McKenna and Pole (2004) suggest that blogs can facilitate participation, by inviting readers to comment and engage in political discourse. Drezner and Farrell (2004) also acknowledge the potential influence of blogs in framing political debates and focusing attention on issues for the media and public. Both studies note the case of bloggers sustaining attention on Trent Lott's inflammatory comments at Strom Thurmond's 100th

birthday party in 2002, to the point that the mass media attention to the controversy increased as well, which all lead to Lott's resignation as Senate majority leader.

Campaign blogs are written by the candidate himself or herself, ghostwritten for the candidate, or authored and identified by another member of the campaign staff. Some campaign blogs invite comments from readers as a form of two-way communication, while others provide one-way communication from the campaign to prospective voters (Trammel, 2004). As found with Meetup groups, Howard Dean's 2004 campaign for the presidency was also unique in its involvement in blogging, with BlogforAmerica, masterminded by Joe Trippi.

In their analysis of presidential primary websites, Williams et al (2005) found more than half of primary candidates had election blogs. They note Dean's blog as unique for offering more features than other candidates, including inviting visitor comments, offering syndication of the blog, and categorizing blog posts by subject. Wesley Clark's blog was also noted for a high degree of interactivity, thanks to his hiring of a well-known blogger, Cameron Barrett, early in his campaign. Many presidential blog posts offered hyperlinks to campaign contributions, although Williams, et al acknowledge neither Bush nor Kerry's campaign used blogs as a major opportunity for fundraising in the 2004 presidential election.

Online involvement

Online involvement is used here to conceptualize a variety of approaches that might reflect interactivity between campaigns and voters, and the increased opportunity for voter engagement. Endres and Warnick (2004) would call this responsiveness, which they suggest is demonstrated in campaign websites by offering an email address for the campaign on the candidate's website, inviting comments to be sent directly to the campaign, and emailing citizens in the form of newsletters and updates.

Managers of early campaign websites conveyed uncertainty in the needs for interactivity, as Sadow and James (1998) found that one-fourth of political campaigns did not think that interactive elements would be effective or efficient for campaigns. However, campaign websites in 1998 already reflect a high degree of interactivity with users. The Democracy Online Project (2000b) found in their analysis of 161 U.S. Senate, House and gubernatorial candidate websites in 1998 that 84% had some form of visitor engagement, involvement elements such as having an email address link on the homepage, customized email, audio or video, downloads, shopping, or games. Bimber and Davis (2003) identify a number of approaches to interactivity with voters of the 2000 presidential campaign, including instant messaging and online live chat for Gore supporters, and walking supporters through the voter registration process.

"When a campaign extends interactive features to the public, it signals a willingness to listen and learn from the people" (Democracy Online Project, 2000a, p.6). Indeed, many campaign websites may offer true interactivity with voters, but other approaches may offer that perception without true interactivity. Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002) studied how voters perceived interactive attempts by political campaign websites. They suggest that while campaign websites may present to users a variety of experiences, online interactivity actually masks the lack of user

control, but still has the ability to allow citizens to see themselves as participants in political campaigns.

Foot and Schneider (2002) examined a number of factors of the 2000 campaign websites that would be encompassed in the conceptualization of involvement here. Foot and Schneider say "coproduction" may involve links to other sites, perhaps important issues to the candidate, sources of additional information, etc. Foot, Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos and Larsen (2003) found congressional campaign websites in 2002 linked most often to government sites, one's political party, mass media, and civic and advocacy groups. Foot and Schneider's (2002) conceptualization of "mobilization" also encompasses variables of candidate promotion such as signs, downloading icons, backgrounds and banners to post on one's own computer or website, sending of e-cards to friends, etc.

Beyond campaign websites, candidate email sent directly to voters has also been assessed in recent research (Trammel & Williams, 2004). While such messages likely reinforce key ideas from campaign website and other activities, it is interesting to note that Trammel and Williams found email messages often did not mention one's opponent in email from Florida gubernatorial candidates, and when an opponent was mentioned, a neutral rather than a negative tone was most often used.

Given the variety of approaches to involvement identified in past research, this study will designate two approaches to involvement: supporter involvement and social involvement. *Supporter involvement* involves interactivity with voters for communication with campaigns, making campaign contributions, and volunteer activities. *Social involvement* reflects the elements of interactivity to engage online visitors and perhaps entertain them. The theory behind this type of engagement is to keep users online to a campaign website longer, offering the campaign more time to convey key messages to potential voters, even in less than serious venues.

Current study

A content analysis of campaign websites for U.S. Senate candidates was conducted to assess the factors discussed above. Campaign websites for U.S. Senate candidates were identified and accessed through Project Vote Smart links, and were coded between October 1 and November 1, 2004. While some past analyses only examined major party candidates (Poupolo, 2001), this analysis also includes third party candidates running for U.S. senate, as others have acknowledged as relevant for political communication research (Xenos & Foot, 2005). This inclusion allows for assessment of campaign website factors by political party, and the extent to which approaches are used by major as well as minor party candidates. Thirty-four U.S. senate races, and the corresponding candidate websites, were analyzed in this study.

Campaign website support of Meetup groups was assessed by the presence of links to Meetup on the candidate homepage or within the campaign website, as well as additional detail provided to users about Meetup groups. Campaign use of blogs was assessed by examining campaign websites for links to a blog or log from the campaign that may have gone by another name.

Online involvement was examined by the presence or absence of a number of different elements in campaign websites. For supporter involvement, websites were assessed for presenting candidate or campaign email addresses prominently, offering online links for making campaign contributions, as well as signing up online to volunteer for a candidate in a variety of activities. Social involvement was assessed in campaign website interactivity through the use of links to other websites, downloads, shopping opportunities, games, and the invitation for direct feedback from users.

Results

Of 139 major and third party candidates for the U.S. Senate, 74.8% had campaign websites, while 25.2% did not. When considering major vs. minor parties, we find major party candidates represented to a much greater degree via campaign websites: 93.8% of Republican candidates were online, 91.9% of Democratic candidates, while only 61.7% of third party candidates had an online campaign presence (Chi-square 18.54, p=.000).

It appears that online campaigning in U.S. Senate races may have reached a plateau. The proportions reported here for 2004 are consistent with Schneider's (2000) assessment of 2000 Senate campaigns, as 97% of Republican candidates were online, 86% of Democratic candidates, and 57% of third party candidates. They are also similar to Foot, Schneider and Xenos' (2002) assessment in 2002, with 92% of Republican candidates for U.S. Senate online, 88% of Democratic candidates, and 55% of third party candidates.

Of third party candidates, Senate candidates from the Libertarian party were most involved online, consistent with Greer and LaPointe's (2001) findings of 2000 Senate campaign websites. Of Libertarian candidates for the Senate, 72.7% of candidates had a campaign website in 2004, compared to Green Party candidates (57.1%), Constitution Party candidates (50%), Reform Party candidates (50%), and Independent or nonaffiliated candidates (60%).

Meetup Links

Of the candidates with campaign websites, 16.3% had links within their site to Meetup.com. Democratic candidates appeared to be more involved in offering such connections, as 14 of candidates with Meetup links were Democrats, while only 2 were Republicans. Many candidates' sites offered a Meetup link on their home page, or on a list of "get involved" links along with making campaign donations, or volunteering. For example, John (D-LA) offered a page of information regarding details on Meetup groups, as did Mikulski (D-MD).

Campaign Blogs

Campaign blogs were more common in 2004 senate campaign websites than linking to Meetup, as 26.3% of candidate sites contained a blog. Democrats were again more involved in this form of online communication, composing 17 of the 26 candidates with blogs, while 3 were Republican candidates, and 6 were third party candidates (4 Libertarian, 1 Green, 1 Reform).

Authors of campaign blogs varied wide. Eight blogs (30.8%) were written in the first person, as if coming from the candidate him or her self. These very well may have been ghost written by campaign staff members, even in the case of the identity of the author of the blog posting being the candidate personally. Twelve blogs (46.1%) were not authored by the candidate; most of these were completed by a campaign staff member, although the blog on Van Dam's (D-UT) website was apparently authored by his wife. Dodd's (D-CT) blog invited voters to post as well, rather than simply respond to postings from the campaign. While she did not have her own campaign blog, "Granny D" Haddock (NH) was noted in her campaign website as being a guest blogger on Lawrence Lessig's blog, as presidential candidates Howard Dean, John Edwards, and Dennis Kucinich had also participated.

The content of campaign blogs, as might be expected, varied as well. Some blogs appeared to be little more than campaign calendars of events, or abbreviated press releases, while others summarized campaign events or attempted to motivate voters to take action (donate, register to vote, attend events, etc.). Many provided links to news coverage of the campaign or one's opponent.

Online Involvement

Supporter involvement elements are clearly quite entrenched in campaign websites of the 2004 senate candidates. Nearly all campaign websites posted campaign email addresses on the home page or a "contact" page, with 95.9% having an address posted.

Not all campaign websites invite online donations, as 80.6% had links for online donations. When considering this statistic in the context of candidate party, 96.7% of republican candidates invited online donations, and 97.0% of democratic candidates, while only 60.7% of third party candidates offered online donations (chi-square=20.77, p=.000).

Nearly three-fourths of campaign websites invited volunteers to sign up online, often in the form of a checklist of various volunteer opportunities. Again, substantial differences existed between the proportion of major party candidates offering online signing up for volunteers (93.3% of republican candidates, 100% of democratic candidates) while only 35.7% of third party candidates offered such an opportunity for citizens to sign up online to assist the campaign (chi-square=42.69, p=.000).

Social involvement elements, which have evolved considerable since early online campaigns, are clearly still developing. Links to other websites, which may have included political parties, news links, sites of interest to the candidate on issues or interests, were present in 54.1% of campaign websites

A variety of downloads were available in 2004 Senate candidate websites, present in 19.4% of sites. While many campaigns offered downloads of flyers for voters to print, many also included screen savers, candidate banners to place on one's own website, and even candidate related icons to use for instant messaging.

Retail opportunities were available through 11.2% of campaign websites, offering citizens the chance to purchase campaign gear, including T-shirts, caps, etc. Games or puzzles were quite rare in campaign websites, appearing in only 2 campaign websites. One game was oriented toward children on who signed the U.S. constitution, and the other a link to what was called the "world's smallest political quiz." Inviting direct feedback from voters, by offering a comment box online, was available on 22.7% of campaign websites.

Multiple Online Activities

When assessing these three patterns of campaign websites, promoting Meetup groups, blogging to voters, and a variety of types of involvement and interactivity, when campaigns are involved in one, they're likely trying out other approaches as well. Campaigns that linked to Meetup groups were also likely to have a campaign blog (r =.486, p=.000); of the 16 candidates with links to Meetup groups, 12 also had a campaign blog. Campaigns promoting Meetup groups were also involved in traditional involvement online (r =.264, p=.009), and other social involvement opportunities as well (r =.292, p=.004). There were, however, no significant correlations between senate campaigns that included blogs and those that were involved in either traditional or social involvement activities.

Online Involvement and Political Party

When comparing involvement activities by political party, third party candidates trail Republican and Democratic candidates considerably. A scale was formed of the three supporter involvement activities, ranging from zero to three; a score of three indicates a campaign website offered an email address to the campaign, a link for online donation, and online volunteer signup. Democratic candidates led the way in supporter involvement with a mean score of 2.97 (s.d.=.18), followed by Republican candidates (Mean=2.87, s.d.=.43), and then third party candidates (Mean 1.93, s.d.=.76) (F=24.936, p=.000) A scale was also created to sum the five social involvement activities described above. Democratic candidates for the U.S. were also more active in social involvement online (Mean=1.42, s.d.=.94) compared to Republican candidates (Mean=1.17, s.d.=.87), and third party candidates (Mean=.78, s.d.=.75) (F=4.175, p=.019)

Discussion

It appears that campaign websites have saturated major party campaigns for the U.S. Senate, as the overall proportion of adoption of a campaign website has remained flat since the 2000 election cycle. The factor that may lead to this proportion increasing in the future, besides a few remaining democratic and republican candidates going online, will be the growth of third party candidates going online with their campaigns. While discussions of campaign websites in the 1990s considered an online presence to offer an opportunity to balance the campaigns of major and minor party candidates, the escalating sophistication and related costs of campaign websites may continue to result in the disparity between major party candidates and third party candidates in their online presence.

Howard Dean's success with Meetup groups in 2003 and 2004 may provide an explanation for the disparity between Democratic and Republican Senate candidate involvement in linking to Meetup groups from campaign websites. Former Democratic National Committee chair (and co-chair of Dean for America) Steve Grossman has said "Meetup can be used by the Democrats to level the playing field – and truly bring back a commitment to participatory politics in America. That's the hallmark of the Democratic Party." (Williams and Gordon, 2003, p. 7) Not only did campaign managers of Democratic candidates witness and follow Dean's success online, but there may have been more concerted and organized efforts to get Democratic candidates thoroughly involved in Meetup groups by the Democratic Party. It is likely we will see Meetup proliferate state level elections in the future, given their success in the 2004 presidential election. "Meetup, or any Meetup-like process, will now, arguably, be a key element in future presidential nomination processes and campaign strategies" (Williams, et al, 2004, p. 3)

While blogs from individuals have the ability to contribute individual opinion into the public sphere, which may garner media attention as well, political candidates already have access to public discourse through mass media attention toward their campaign, as well as their own campaign communication through advertising and events. Compared to the potential influence bloggers have on media agendas that Drezner and Farrell acknowledge, it is not clear that campaign blogs in U.S. Senate races offered anything unique from other campaign communication vehicles.

The potential does exist, however, for blogs to be utilized by campaigns to provide messages through alternative channels. Perhaps campaigns should consider operating a blog independent of the campaign website, maybe authored by a campaign staffer that could reinforce key messages of the campaign, but be perceived as separate from the candidate. Many voters might find blogs clearly authored by the candidate himself or herself appealing, to provide background information and insight into a candidate's character. Such blogs would offer the opportunity for voters to feel they connect with the candidate personally, and also to personalize candidates who come across publicly lacking in charisma or enthusiasm. Finally, as with other campaign information sources, such as press releases, or links to news coverage, blogs can "show their age" if not regularly updated. If campaigns are not committed to maintaining a current blog along with a well-updated website, it might be best to concentrate attention on other interactive opportunities for communication with supporters.

Regarding online involvement, this study finds campaign websites quite uniform in offering email addresses, online donation opportunities, and volunteer signup links. While e-donation does cost campaigns to establish, the results have proven so fruitful for campaigns that it may perhaps be considered a necessity for campaign websites in the 21st century. Concrete lists of volunteer opportunities presents supporters with a wide variety of activities they can choose from, to allow them to control their degree of involvement from posting a sign in their yard to hosting a neighborhood meeting. While we see a variety in the use of social involvement elements in senate campaign websites, what may be perceived as less essential factors should not be dismissed too quickly. Linking to outside sources does risk the user to leave a campaign site in search of other information, but it also presents a broader picture of information to voters. Downloads and retail opportunities can aid a campaign in convey their message through other vehicles by supporters, and can generate revenue as well. Inviting users' feedback directly does

present users with the image of direct input into a campaign, but also offers the campaign with direct feedback from voters with very little effort involved.

For those who question the use of websites by political campaigns and are suspicious of these online developments and what they offer for voter engagement, scholars continue that debate. Davis (2005) suggests civic engagement in the form of electoral turnout may have been a "happy byproduct" (p. 243) of online campaigns. While turnout from the 2000 to 2004 election increased 9%, we cannot conclude to what extent the Internet may have contributed to this increase. Rather, Davis says the online strategy of political campaigns was "to connect money, to turn out votes for the party, and to win." (p. 243).

Being online does not necessarily equate to a precise number of votes, but for some voters these additional resources may confirm their decision, and get them more involved in a political campaign. Recent communication research suggests the potential influence a voter's experience with a campaign website may have. Hansen (2000) and Hansen and Benoit's (2002) research has found when users view a candidate website, liking for that candidate increased. Tedesco and Kaid (2002) found in the 2000 presidential campaign, those exposed to campaign websites exhibited lower levels of political cynicism. While these studies do not find "direct effects" of campaign websites on voter decision making, they do contribute to a positive climate that may lead to voter decision for a particular political candidate.

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