# PIONEERS IN ONLINE POLITICS

## Nonpartisan Political Web Sites in the 2000 Campaign

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# Pioneers in Online Politics:

**Nonpartisan Political Web Sites in the 2000 Campaign**

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# Acknowledgments

# Preface

In the 2000 election nonpartisan political Web sites were heralded as an opportunity to engage Americans in politics as never before. Web sites such as Voter.com, Freedom Channel and Web White & Blue were introduced with great fanfare and attracted much media attention. As an alternative to 30-second political commercials and sound bites, they offered in-depth political information and the promise of a more informed electorate.

Despite the initial excitement, these Web sites failed to meet expectations. Internet traffic was generally low, and after the election many sites could not raise enough money to continue. Political observers saw online politics as a bust. In the aftermath the Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned this report to examine what happened and to plan for the future of nonpartisan political Web sites.

These Web sites appeared in the 2000 election because of a convergence of technology, available funding and an entrepreneurial, innovative spirit. The political and economic context was key, particularly the rapid diffusion of politics online and the economic "bubble" of the late 1990s. By late 2000 the bubble had burst and the market was in decline, which was likewise key to these Web sites' demise.

We believe that the potential of nonpartisan political Web sites was overstated, and their failure overblown. We believe these sites still have a role within the community of online political information because of their nonpartisan emphasis and the credibility that engenders. We are concerned that an online commons for nonpartisan political information has not yet been clearly defined. And we recommend an approach that emphasizes portal agreements, a local focus, public-private partnerships and a more coherent overall plan to provide online political information.

In light of the dramatic transformation in the political use of the Internet in the past year, now is an opportune time to examine the failures and successes of these Web sites, which were pioneers in the field of online politics.

In drafting this report we have aimed for readability and brevity. Most supporting material appears in footnotes or appendices. To understand our approach to the data analysis, readers should consult the note on web traffic and financial data in Appendix A.

We consider this report part of an ongoing dialogue and continuing research into online political information. We welcome your comments and opportunities for discussion.

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# Pioneers in Online Politics:

## Nonpartisan Political Web Sites in the 2000 Campaign

### Executive Summary[1]

**T**he 2000 elections were heady with the prospect of online political information engaging more citizens in politics, more than ever before. Pundits predicted we were on the cusp of great change; political power in America would rest with the people, better educated and more engaged in political action. The influence of consultants, professional campaigners and political elites would wane.

Nearly four years later, the Internet in American politics is less a means to educate or engage the general public than a vehicle to mobilize political activists and collect their money. In this sense the Internet has certainly helped empower voters. It has made small donors, people who donate less than $200, more important, and has made local activism easier to organize. But the Internet's potential to educate and engage a broader audience — especially non-voters — has not been realized.

### Introduction

Publicity surrounding nonpartisan political Web sites created much excitement in the 2000 campaign. These sites published candidate information, online debates, videos, political news, campaign gossip, databases for researching candidates and even tools to determine which candidate's views matched your own. Most sites were nonprofit enterprises, although the best-known were private businesses. The organizers of sites such as DNet, Freedom Channel, Grassroots.com, Voter.com and Web White & Blue intended nonpartisan political Web sites to provide credible information to voters, fostering a more educated, engaged electorate.

At the end of the 2000 campaign many of these sites closed. Their failure attracted a lot of media attention, particularly the closing of Voter.com and the loss of tens of millions of dollars invested in it. Internet traffic to these sites was lower than expected, especially compared to mass media sites. The media generally painted nonpartisan political Web sites with a broad brush of failure. As one writer put it, "The most notable thing about the Internet's much-heralded effect on politics has been its failure to live up to its billing."[2]

In response, in 2003 The Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned this study to write a postmortem. Carnegie helped fund several nonpartisan political Web sites and wanted an assessment of the efforts in 2000 and future prospects. The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet undertook this project. To write the following report, we interviewed dozens of people in the online political community, reviewed hundreds of news and scholarly articles and analyzed years of Internet traffic data.

The past year has changed our view of this project. First, the Howard Dean campaign focused political use of the Internet on raising money and organizing. Second, Web logs, or blogs, have caught the attention of journalists and campaigns, and have prompted us to consider nonpartisan political Web sites as only one source of political information interconnected with the online political community. Third, in the 2004 election a lot of political information has moved to large portals, and this information is now more concentrated within a few commercial and nonprofit Web sites. Finally, nonpartisan political Web sites have re-emerged in 2004.

### Politics Online in the 2000 Election

In the 2000 election, one analysis found about 5,000 political Web sites.[3] Most candidates had campaign Web

sites, but campaigns viewed the Internet as a small part of their campaign machinery, supplementing traditional media.

There were several dozen serious nonpartisan political Web sites. Most were founded in 1999 or later, entering the field less than two years before the election. Most were nonprofits, funded by their organizers and foundations, but only a handful received significant nonprofit funding. The few for-profit sites, such as Voter.com, were among the most prominent and received the most traffic. Nonpartisan political Web sites attracted a fair amount of press attention.

## The Dot-com Boom and Its Effects on Political Web sites

The Internet stock boom of the late 1990s helps explain the availability of nonprofit funding and the willingness of foundations to fund new ideas and unproven online projects. From roughly 1998 to 2000 some foundations were flush with cash from rising stock portfolios.

Many commercial sites were founded by entrepreneurs who considered them speculative businesses. They had no clear plan for generating revenue, but sought to carve out market share or attract an audience. Organizers believed that they could then leverage those assets into some means of turning a profit in the future.

To some degree nonprofit Web sites adopted this mindset. The Internet boom encouraged them to emulate Internet entrepreneurs, not caretakers of sustainable nonprofits. For example, some Web sites did little to develop a loyal constituency, but instead saw themselves as a broadly defined public service, which left them with no one to turn to for sustainable funding. Nonprofit sites devoted resources to building assets such as databases of users that would have been a more sensible tactic for a profit-driven company. Finally, organizers did not tap into expertise in the nonprofit community.

After the dot-com bubble burst in early 2000, foundations were reluctant to continue funding. Foundations

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Foundations that might normally take months or years to consider new ideas suddenly had to spend money for tax reasons.

In one respect, nonprofit funding is not unlike venture capital: It is susceptible to trends and hot ideas, and in the late 1990s civic engagement projects online were hot. Foundations were attracted by the prospect of breaking new ground and embarked on untested ventures.

While nonprofit funding increased, however, it never approached the amount of money available from the private sector. The booming market created a flood of money from venture capitalists willing to invest, even to speculate, in unproven business models. The boom also explains the unusual valuations of Internet businesses, both in the size of the valuations and in *what* was considered valuable. Databases and lists of subscribers were considered assets and were grossly overvalued, as were domain names and projected revenues from online advertising.

wanted tangible results and Web traffic, and there was little evidence of either. Some nonprofit funders decided their future should be in areas other than online political information. Commercial ventures found that funding dried up in mid 2000.

The crash hit Internet advertising especially hard, and Web sites that had hoped to sustain themselves by online advertising failed. Funders retreated from any plan that proposed raising money with online advertising.

## The Aftermath

Many political Web sites closed after the 2000 election. The closing of Voter.com and the loss of tens of millions of dollars invested in it received a great deal of publicity. Several other for-profit Web sites stopped providing nonpartisan political information online, changed their business plans and became consulting or communications companies.

Web traffic to nonpartisan political Web sites was

generally seen as low. More important, the media portrayed these sites as failures. In their view, politics online in the 2000 election was a bust.

While nearly all for-profit sites and some nonprofit sites closed, many are back in 2004.

## Assessment

New nonprofit organizations, like new for-profit businesses, typically fail in large numbers, especially in their first few years. Dot-coms in particular failed in large numbers after the stock market decline in 2000.

Organizations that were already well established — both nonprofit and for-profit organizations — had greater success than organizations founded solely to create political Web sites for the 2000 campaign. Their success was both in their ability to survive and in their presentation and management of the Web sites, which looked more professional and were easier to use.

The nonprofit foundations' investment in nonpartisan political Web sites was not large compared to other project areas and certainly not compared to the venture capital investment. Nonprofit funding for these sites was less than for other foundation initiatives in politics or civic engagement.

Most of the major foundation Web site initiatives did not survive. Freedom Channel, DebateAmerica and Web White & Blue spent more than $5 million in foundation grants. While all attracted some media attention, none had significant user traffic. This may have influenced the failing grades given to nonpartisan Web sites after the election, and discouraged foundations from continuing support.

Nonpartisan political Web sites offer benefits that may not encourage membership fund-raising. These sites offered what economists call "public goods" — such as a more informed electorate or more democratic discussion. Unfortunately, public goods may not be enough incentive for most people. One's personal benefit from the site is very small, and because everyone shares in the "public good" of free political informa-tion, the individual has little incentive to contribute. Also, the public benefit appears only at election time. Finally, nonpartisan political Web sites that ask for dues or contributions are asking for money from an audience used to getting Internet information for free.

Throughout the campaign many political Web sites looked like works in progress. Sites such as Voter.com, which appealed to candidates for information, were unprepared when they failed to do so. Grassroots.com depended on advocacy groups to submit their Web sites and users to form chat groups. Without a critical mass of users, discussants or user-created content, those site features had little value. Some smaller sites looked amateurish. Technology often failed.

Some nonprofit organizations and their Web sites lacked clear focus. Sites seemed to compete with each other or with the media. They duplicated efforts, divvied up a small online audience, and made little attempt to carve out a niche or to document their successes. This hurt their potential for future funding. (This competitive approach also suggests that organizers saw themselves as competing businesses, not part of a nonprofit community.)

The introduction of nonpartisan sites as for-profit businesses had several effects. When foundations saw that a business could offer political information, they reconsidered their funding, thinking their projects would be eclipsed by a new for-profit industry.

The introduction of for-profit businesses also raised the question of whether nonpartisan political information online should remain in the realm of the for-profit or the nonprofit. Many major foundations have stopped funding these projects, and at least one indicated it is not interested in doing so again.

One of the reasons businesses failed was because of business plans that placed high value on market share, user lists, databases and speculative assets. They also overemphasized the potential for online advertising. Venture capital disappeared when the bottom dropped out of online advertising and investors became highly sus-

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pect of any business built on that model.

In 2000, Web sites relied on the cooperation of candidates that may be less likely in 2004. Efforts to put video and candidate debates online relied on the political connections of the organizers, the novelty of a new technology and media attention in order to coax candidates to participate.

Both for-profit and nonprofit sites generally did not add much value to information obtained from candidates or campaigns, other than by organizing it in one location and categorizing it by issues or races.

## Web Traffic

Traffic was generally low throughout the 2000 campaign. However, a dozen of the most popular nonpartisan political Web sites grouped together attracted a total audience of about one million in October 2000. An additional 800,000 visited Voter.com and Vote.com.[4]

Nonetheless, there was a broad perception that traffic was low, and this mattered in several ways. Journalists reported this low traffic and dubbed these Web sites failures. Nonprofit funders saw low traffic and grew less inclined to continue funding. The perception also mattered because site organizers thought it mattered.

Although organizers hoped to educate the general public, visitors to nonpartisan Web sites were generally engaged and highly partisan. Site organizers felt their audience was more educated, politically involved and

before sharing their opinions with others (step 2). Organizers of nonpartisan political Web sites and observers assessing the impact of these sites need to look not just at how many people visit the site. We think their interpersonal networks have an important role in realizing the Internet's potential for education.

## Summary
- The development of nonpartisan political Web sites in the 2000 election was a rare convergence of available funding, an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit in the late 1990s, and a new technology that provided unusual opportunities for individual publishers.
- Many sites were operated by small organizations with little overhead.
- Large foundations and venture capital were willing to fund innovative, untested programs.
- A number of Web sites entered the field late. They had no opportunity, for example, to cover a mid-term election before the 2000 presidential election.
- Ready funding prompted greater experimentation in both for-profit and nonprofit projects.
- Nonprofit funding generally went to a few large projects and was not a long-term sustained effort. Foundations have made such sustained efforts in the past, such as campaign finance reform.
- Venture capitalists vastly outspent foundations, and the presence of for-profit businesses caused founda-

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technologically adept than the general public.

Communicating with political elites or influentials is one strategy that we consider in assessing these Web sites and planning for the future. "Influentials" is a term coined to describe the most politically influential citizens, whose opinions matter to their peers in everything from politics to food or fashion. People who access political information online are most likely influentials, and influential among their peers.[5] We view communication as a two-step process. The information from nonpartisan political Web sites flows through influentials who view the Web site (step 1)

tions to balk at continued support. Foundations feared that a new business arena would outmatch nonprofits and their investments would be lost.
- Coordination among sites was poor, and many duplicated efforts. Many sites did not add much value to the information they presented.
- There was often poor business planning. Businesses had no clear idea where sustaining revenue would come from; instead, they intended to carve out market share in the belief that revenue streams would appear.
- The collapse of the dot-com boom diminished future

funding for both nonprofit and for-profit Web sites. Internet advertising declined as a revenue source.

- Nonpartisan political Web sites that survived were well-established before 2000. Many had business models they adapted to the Internet, rather than being start-ups focused on Internet applications alone.
- Web sites with political information are offering a "public good" that may give users no incentive to fund, especially as Internet users receive most information free.
- Web traffic to these sites was low, but we believe the criticism is unfair because (1) these sites generally had little paid promotion, (2) the potential audience is small because few people are interested in politics, and (3) while some sites were interlinked, only a few sites were able to use large Internet portals to direct traffic to their sites.

- Nonpartisan Web sites need to reconsider their target audience and perhaps concentrate on influentials. An influential audience would then pass along the information it receives and influence others.
- Negative advertising online and e-mail may offer an opportunity for nonpartisan political Web sites. Many newspapers and researchers conduct "ad watch" programs to refute false claims in campaign advertising, but such monitoring is less likely for online advertising. Such projects dovetail with "ad watch" projects that some foundations pioneered.[6]
- Nonpartisan political Web sites must make portal agreements or take other measures to gain visibility. This has become even more important in 2004 because political Web sites will not have available promotional techniques or media attention they received in 2000.

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## Looking Ahead

- Visibility for nonpartisan political Web sites is more difficult in 2004. Many inexpensive methods of promotion in 2000 have become less effective, and few sites can spend much on promotion. The novelty of nonpartisan political Web sites is gone, along with the press attention and free promotion that went with it.
- The proportion of the electorate online has increased. The demand for online political information in 2004 will be greater than in 2000, and the Internet is an even more important source of information.
- The 2004 campaign will see the introduction of large efforts at negative advertising online.
- Future projects to provide political information online cannot rely on support from campaigns or candidates, even the weak support received in 2000.

## Recommendations

- Future efforts to build nonprofit organizations for online political information must access resources from the nonprofit community, focus on long-term sustainability and bring on board personnel with nonprofit expertise.

- Some local sites have succeeded, and local is better in many ways. Often local political Web sites are more clearly focused. Because local politics receives sparse coverage in the media, but Internet users have a variety of sources on national politics, there is a local online opportunity.
- Campaigns' reluctance to participate meaningfully means nonpartisan political Web sites must harvest information from candidates or other sources.
- Nonprofits should further investigate public/private partnerships to ensure that diverse, comprehensive nonpartisan political information remains online. These efforts can harness the efficiency and resources of the private sector with the socially beneficial goals of the public sector.
- The potential of online video has only just been discovered. Archiving political video and partnering with local television may be successful.
- Syndication models are promising, although not all have been self-sustaining.
- Interesting projects now underway in open source software could change how organizations communicate with their audience and each other, making political information online more easily available.

## Conclusion

Just as Internet politics was hyped before the 2000 election, its aftermath was also overblown. Too much was expected in 2000 and too much made of the washout afterwards, a logical consequence of inflated expectations.

We believe that current technologies, markets and government approaches are doing an inadequate job of providing nonpartisan political information online. Society has responded to these needs through, for example, funding for the arts or public education. These needs are widely recognized and the responses widely accepted.

The need for greater civic information and education is not nearly so widely accepted, and responses to this need have been uneven and poorly coordinated. Aside from some programs in public schools, programs to promote civic education and involvement have largely been left to non-government and non-business organizations such as nonprofits, advocacy groups and political parties. As efforts to educate and involve citizens move online, it seems reasonable to expect that these same organizations will continue to play a role. Nonprofit organizations have a special place among these groups because of their emphasis on nonpartisan information.

We would like to see the Internet evolve in accord with the democratic value of broad participation from an informed electorate. There is an important public interest here that has not been treated as such. It has been left to the whims of the market or the priorities of the major parties. Online political information, which is critical to our democracy, is left unplanned and unsupported.

The efforts in 2000 by both entrepreneurs and non-profit foundations were a good beginning, and in some cases bold and interesting experiments. Now, with that knowledge in hand, we should make conscious choices about what we want political information on the Internet to look like.

## notes

[1] For readability we removed from the executive summary most footnotes except those absolutely necessary, such as direct quotations. The main report is fully footnoted.

[2] Thompson, Nicholas. "Machined Politics: How the Internet is really, truly — seriously — going to change elections." *Washington Monthly*, May 2002, 28.

[3] MacPherson, Karen. "Need Another Political Fix? Try the Web." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 October 2000, 1.

[4] Grouping together sites like this is problematic because of the possibility of users accessing several of the sites. We discuss this more fully in the main report.

[5] Graf, Joseph, and Carol Darr. "Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign." Washington, D.C.: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, The George Washington University, 2004, Keller, Ed, and Jon Berry. *The Influentials*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.

[6] For example, see www.factcheck.org.

# Introduction

I t already seems a cliché to point out how much politics has changed in the last few years. Politics in America has moved online with astounding speed. Just about 10 years ago the White House unveiled its e-mail address and a few candidates set up rudimentary Web sites. In 2004, online activists fund and rally around elaborate online campaigns. Candidate e-mail messages are directed at an audience with high-speed connections and high expectations about online political information. The campaign of 2004 seems a millennium away from 1994.

As online politics has flourished, our historical perspective has shrunk. It is difficult to recall how differently we saw online politics just four years ago. Part of this short-term memory is due to the speed with which new ideas become commonplace. Campaign Web sites, an innovation just two election cycles old, are typical today. A can-

Clark. In the general election the Internet is being used in the same way — to continue to raise money and to coalesce the party faithful.

Since 2000 other innovations have become commonplace in online politics.

- Information is immediately and perpetually available in electronic archives. Political journalism has changed because of it. Online databases mean that stories about campaign fund-raising, in particular, are routine. Political journalists spend a quarter of their workday online, contact and interview sources by e-mail, and keep current by accessing campaign and news Web sites.[8] Candidates and organizers of political Web sites seeking to put information online can also mine this massive archive.

- Web sites have proliferated as campaign tools, and those sites have become increasingly sophisticated.

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didate without one is out of touch. Our assumptions about online politics have changed, too. The 2004 campaign has been an example of the power of a few ideas and trends pushing out the old ideas of 2000.

The 2000 presidential election was heady with the prospect of online political information engaging more citizens more actively in politics. Commentators predicted we were on the cusp of great change, where political power in America would rest with the people, educated and mobilized on the Internet. The influence of consultants, professional campaigners and political elites would wane.[7]

Few of those changes occurred. Nearly four years later, instead of a means to educate or engage more citizens, the Internet in American politics is a vehicle to mobilize party activists and collect their money. In the 2004 Democratic primaries, the Internet helped raise massive sums to mobilize activists in insurgent campaigns, particularly for Howard Dean and Wesley

No viable national candidate can run without a Web site. Raising money online has become the most valued use of the Internet, allowing candidates to raise more money faster than ever. More importantly, candidates use the Internet to broaden their donor base, and more people are donating than ever.

- Online activism has grown dramatically, via devices such as petitions and e-mail campaigns. Many advocacy organizations concentrate their efforts online. This has been made more practical and efficient by the professionalization of providing online political information. New businesses provide software, databases and services to link their clients with their members and elected officials in more efficient ways.

In a sense the Internet has helped empower American voters, especially by attracting the small donor, someone who donates less than $200. It has become worthwhile for campaigns to pursue these donors because of the drop in overhead costs. The Internet also fosters

local activism through efficient, inexpensive communication. This was particularly evident in the Howard Dean campaign, but other campaigns have also seen online activists make an enormous difference.[9] But the potential of the Internet to educate and engage a broader audience — especially non-voters — has not been realized.

The appearance of nonpartisan political Web sites generated much excitement in the 2000 election. They published candidate information, online debates, videos, political news and gossip, databases with which to research candidates and even tools to determine which candidate to vote for. Most sites were nonprofit enterprises, and the largest were funded by foundations. The best-known sites were private businesses funded by venture capital. Dozens of Web sites appeared, including well-known sites such as DNet, Freedom Channel, Grassroots.com, Voter.com and Web White & Blue. Organizers of these nonpartisan sites intended to provide political information, and the result would be a more educated, engaged electorate.

At the end of the 2000 campaign many of these sites closed. Their failure attracted a lot of media attention, particularly the closing of Voter.com and the loss of tens of millions of dollars invested in it. Foundations saw the closing of several foundation-supported efforts that were given millions. Traffic to these sites was lower than expected, especially compared to high traffic mass media sites. The media generally painted these nonpartisan political Web sites with a broad brush of failure. Online politics was seen as a bust, both in terms of its effects on the electorate and the money lost when Web sites closed. As one writer put it, "The most notable thing about the Internet's much-heralded effect on politics has been its failure to live up to its billing."[10]

Thousands of political Web sites appeared online in the 2000 campaign, although many were amateurish. We compiled a list of prominent nonpartisan political Web sites, and their history since November 2000 is a mixed bag.

## Among for-profit Web sites:
- GoVote was acquired by Speakout.com.
- Grassroots.com re-tooled into a consulting and political communications firm.
- Politics.com, the only publicly traded political Web site, went out of business. It is back online, although in a much less ambitious format.
- Speakout.com became a nonprofit and is operational.
- Vote.com, remains as a polling site.
- Voter.com, closed.
- VoxCap, was acquired by Speakout.com.

## Among nonprofit Web sites:
- The California Voter Foundation has re-tooled to focus more on the use of technology in democracy. The site still provides voter information.
- DebateAmerica closed.
- The Democracy Network (DNet), which was a nonprofit, is now part of a business. Although the League of Women Voters still helps gather data, the site is part of Capitol Advantage, a for-profit business.
- Freedom Channel closed.
- Web White & Blue closed.
- Several nonprofit sites remain in something close to their 2000 versions. Among them are E-thepeople, EasyVoter, Issues2000 (now OnTheIssues), Minnesota E-democracy, Smart Voter and Vote Smart.

In response to the fallout, in 2003 the Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned this study to write a post-mortem on nonpartisan political Web sites in the 2000 election. Carnegie helped fund several nonpartisan political Web sites and wanted an assessment of those efforts and an analysis of the future of such sites. The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet undertook this project. For this report we interviewed dozens of people in the online political community, reviewed hundreds of news and scholarly articles and analyzed years of Internet traffic data.

Nonpartisan political Web sites generally share common characteristics:
- They make an effort to be nonpartisan, which means they do not support a political position. Some sites appeared one-sided because they may have offered more information about one candidate or another, but this was the result of information availability and the uneven cooperation of candidates. A defining characteristic of these sites was their effort to treat each party and candidate equally and fairly.
- Most Web sites we considered were national in scope. One of our recommendations is that site organizers think local, but in 2000 most built Web sites dedicated to the national campaign. (There were several exceptions, such as Minnesota E-Democracy and Smart Voter, which have been successful.)
- Most sites were nonprofit, or became nonprofit.

There were important for-profit examples, however, and a few of them received a lot of attention.

- Their shared goal was civic engagement through political education. Although the Web sites were very different, most saw their goal as broader, more active participation in the political process.

The past year has changed our view of this project. This is mostly because of the insurgent campaign of Howard Dean, who came from political obscurity to raise more money more quickly than any previous presidential candidate, and without the benefit of a party machine.[11] As John Kerry and George Bush hurtle toward the first $1 billion political campaign, the Internet has been an important factor in explaining not just the amount of money raised but the dramatic increase in the number of people who donate.[12] Dean's campaign was also tremendously successful in using the Internet and services such as Meetup.com to organize supporters. Dean's campaign on the Internet was characterized by an energized group of activists who used Web logs, discussion groups and e-mail to organize, meet and raise money. While Howard Dean did not do well in the early primaries and caucuses, the impact of his campaign is evident in the new emphasis on using the Internet to raise money and organize.

This project has been influenced by the attention given Web logs, or blogs, which have caught the attention of journalists and campaigns. Only a small proportion of the public visits political Web logs, but political observers, journalists and even candidates are writing Web logs to connect with their audiences while broadening the scope and immediacy of commentary and journalism. Web logs have prompted us to consider nonpartisan political Web sites as just one source of political information in the community of online political information.

In the 2004 campaign a lot of political information has moved to large portals. The major news media link to election information, and this information has become more concentrated with a few businesses and nonprofit Web sites. Campaign and party Web sites play a greater role. They garner much more traffic than in 2000, and serve as focal points for their campaigns. Both campaigns are using their sites to organize volunteers, provide them with information and materials, and to solicit money.

Finally, nonpartisan political Web sites have re-emerged in 2004, and these sites are again trying to educate citizens and encourage them to get involved in civic life. Their emphasis on nonpartisanship differentiates them from much of the online political community. While this report may cast doubt on the effectiveness of these Web sites in 2000, we do not doubt the value of their goals. Nonpartisan political Web sites serve to point out the potential of political ideas in the big-money Internet politics of the 2004 campaign.

## notes

[7] Morris, Dick. *Vote.com*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999.

[8] May, Albert L. "The Virtual Trail: Political Journalism on the Internet." Washington, D.C.: The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, The George Washington University, 2002.

[9] Farhi, Paul. "Small Donors Grow Into Big Political Force; Both Parties See Number Of Contributors Soaring." *The Washington Post*, 3 May 2004, 1.

[10] Thompson, Nicholas. "Machined Politics: How the Internet is really, truly - seriously - going to change elections." *Washington Monthly*, May 2002, 28.

[11] Anderson, Nick. "Dean a Resounding Winner in 'Money Primary'." *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 2004, A11. Since then the money-raising record has already been broken. Getter, Lisa. "Bush, Kerry Awash in Money; With donors giving like never before, the race to the White House could become the first $1-billion political campaign, experts say." *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 2004, 1.

[12] Getter, Lisa. "Bush, Kerry Awash in Money; With donors giving like never before, the race to the White House could become the first $1-billion political campaign, experts say." *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 2004, 1.

# Politics on the Internet
# 1990-1998

In a very short time most Americans have adopted the Internet, and its influence is comparable to that of television. It has had a dramatic impact on our commercial, social and political lives.

In 10 years it has become a key source of political information, and political campaigns have moved online. Online politics was only a footnote to any campaign in 1990, and the potential audience was very small. Only about 15 percent of Americans even owned a computer in 1990, and very few people had online access. By one estimate, at the start of 1993 about a million computers were attached to the Internet.[13] By 1994, the graphical browser was just beginning to popularize the World Wide Web, and the Internet was of little real use in politics.

In the 1990s, first computers and then the Internet diffused at a remarkable rate. (See Figure) Internet adoption was more rapid, to the point where today "getting a computer" usually means also getting Internet access. In 1995, 24 percent of American homes had a computer. In 1998, 37 percent had a computer and about half of those homes had Internet access. In August 2000, just before the November election, more than half of Americans had computers and about 44 percent used the Internet. By September 2001, about two-thirds of all Americans used a computer from home, school or work and more than half of all homes had an Internet connection. We estimate that between 65 and 70 percent of Americans will be online in the 2004 election, and an even higher percentage of voters will be online.[14]

The Clinton White House began using e-mail in early 1993, soon after the administration moved in. Messages were collected on floppy disks at several commercial services, put in envelopes and mailed or sent by courier the last mile to the White House. If you wanted a response you had to include a postal address: The White House did not respond by e-mail. In June 1993 the White House unveiled e-mail addresses of the president and vice president with the whitehouse.gov domain. The House of Representatives announced an e-mail pilot program the next day. But sending a message to the seven members with e-mail addresses was not easy because members of Congress were fearful of being deluged with e-mail. You first sent a postcard to your representative, and only after it was confirmed that you were a constituent could you register and contact your representative by e-mail. The House system quickly proved unwieldy.[15]

Before the 1996 campaign almost no political candidates used the Internet much.[16] It appears that candidates in the 1994 congressional campaigns in California were among the first to create campaign Web sites.[17] In February 1995 Lamar Alexander announced his candidacy for the presidency to a group of supporters in an online chat room.[18]

Minor parties were the first to use the Internet for organizing and informing their members, initially through Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists. The advent of the World Wide Web with graphical browsers made it easier for users to access information. By 1996 the sophistication and presentation of the major parties' Web sites generally surpassed other party sites. Site organizers realized that maintaining good Web sites required expertise and money. In addition, the early lead of third parties in the number of Web sites disappeared as the number of major party sites exceeded them.[19]

During the 1996 election cycle, candidates for public office began more aggressively using the Internet. All serious presidential candidates had Web sites by the fall of 1995, but only about a third of candidates for Congress had Web sites, and those who did posted little more than digital yard signs. There was little interactivity or opportunity for communication with members of Congress. Many of the presidential sites were largely static and rarely updated. The online presence was spotty: U.S. Senator Bob Dole had a groundbreaking Web site for his presidential campaign but no site for his Senate office. Republican presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan perhaps focused more energy and resources on his Internet campaign than did other candidates, reflecting the greater emphasis minor candidates placed on the Internet.[20]

Traffic was generally low, although it could be spurred by a mention in the major media. After Dole

## Figure 1: Percent of Households with a Computer and Internet Connection, 1984-2003
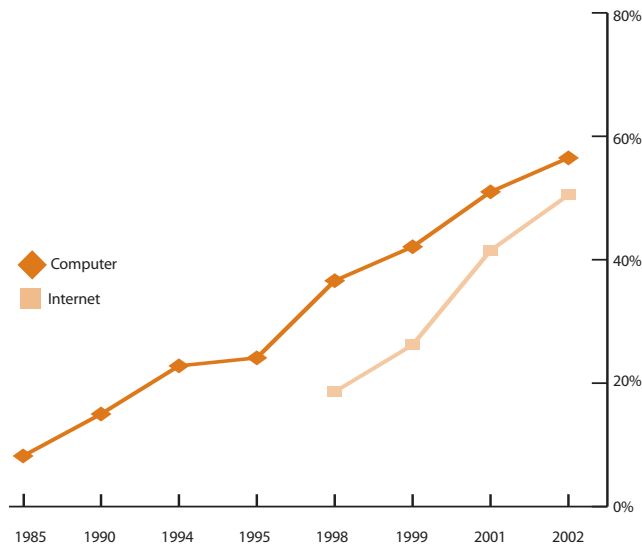


Source: U.S. Department of Commerce. "A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002.

## Figure 2: Percent of Adults Online, May 1999-August 2003
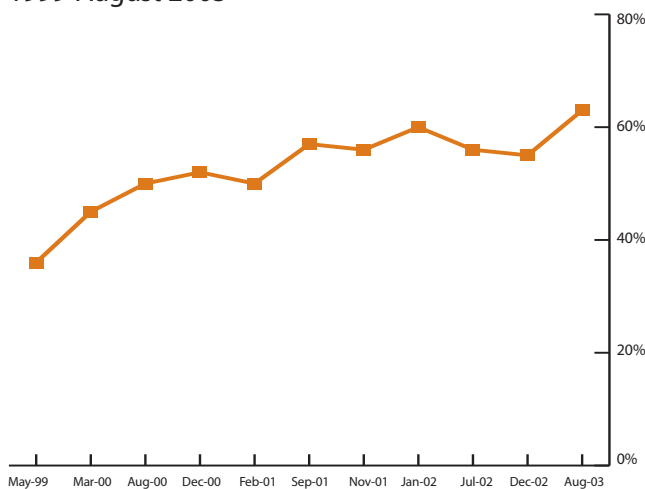


Source: Madden, Mary. "America's Online Pursuits: The changing picture of who's online and what they do." Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003.

gave his site address (albeit incorrectly) in the first presidential debate, the site received two million hits in 24 hours.[21] While the Internet may have been a factor in several close races in 1996, most observers argue it played a minor role in the elections.[22]

By the 1998 general election 72 percent of major party Senate candidates and 35 percent of major party House candidates had Web sites.[23] Many were built in the six months before the November election. These sites were often difficult to find and drew little traffic. Three-quarters of the congressional candidate Web sites in 1998 tried to solicit contributions, but only a third used secure transaction technology to allow users to donate online. They basically asked donors to mail in money, which failed to exploit the advantages of online fund-raising: easy accounting, low transaction costs and immediate availability of funds. It is difficult to determine how much money was raised online from 1992 to 1998, but anecdotal evidence suggests it was not much.[24]

Challengers for political office were the early innovators online, and in some cases they were the impetus for incumbents to begin using the Internet.[25] In other words, innovation online first appeared outside of established politicians, prompted by challengers outside the system. (This trend persisted well into the 2000 campaign.)[26] It is interesting to note that anecdotal evidence suggests that the online innovators themselves were often young technologists hired by the campaigns or working on their own, not political consultants, hired advisers or elected officials themselves.

There were few interactive features of these Web sites, which one writer called "digital yard signs."[27] There was little communication between campaigns and constituents, partly due to the belief that once the floodgates opened, the tide of e-mail would be unmanageable. Early plans for constituent e-mail reflect this fear and general anxiety about information overload. There was also little online discussion between the candidate and the public, or forums fostering discussion among site visitors. Such features and online discussions were seen as burdensome, difficult to control and potentially creating ambiguity in the candidate's message.[28]

The lack of a graphical browser and the technical expertise necessary to get online hampered the early development of online political information. Popular usage was hindered by slow connection speeds, especially from the server or router to the user, sometimes

called the "last mile" of the Internet. Most Internet connections were by modem. Online video was, as a practical matter, not viable. Finally, finding Web sites remained slow and difficult. This improved dramatically with the introduction of Google in 1999, much faster and more efficient than previous search engines.

## notes

[13] U.S. Department of Commerce. "A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet.". Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002.

[14] Ibid. Estimates of the percent of Americans online are from Madden, Mary. "America's Online Pursuits: The changing picture of who's online and what they do." Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003. The higher socioeconomic level of voters suggests that they are more likely to be online.

[15] Burgess, John. "Clinton Goes On-Line with E-Mail; His Electronic Address Plugs Computer Users Into White House." *The Washington Post*, June 2 1993, 3, Casey, Chris. *The Hill on the Net: Congress Enters the Information Age*. Boston: AP Professional, 1996, Reid, T.R. "Writing Letters to the White House, the High-Tech Way." *The Washington Post*, August 16 1993, 16. The Senate followed suit several months later with less publicity.

[16] Davis, Richard. *The Web of Politics*: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. The Clinton campaign placed some information online, but there was little notice.

[17] The Web site established to support the Congressional candidacy of Jerry Estruth, a Democrat from California, may have been the first campaign site in U.S. history. Both candidates in the race eventually had sites. D'Alessio, Dave. "Adoption of the World Wide Web by American Political Candidates, 1996-1998." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44, no. 4 (2000): 556-568. One newspaper at the time said that Sen. Dianne Feinstein was the first candidate to post a site in 1994. See MacPherson, Karen. "Need Another Political Fix? Try the web." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 October 2000, 1.

[18] Hunter, Christopher D. "Interaction and Political Party Web Pages: An Invitation to Participate." Paper presented at the Eastern States Communication Association Conference, Baltimore 1997.

[19] Margolis, Michael, David Resnick, and Chin-chang Tu. "Campaigning on the Internet: Parties and Candidates on the World Wide Web in the 1996 Primary Season." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 2, no. 1 (1997): 59-78. Margolis, Michael, and David Resnick. *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000.

[20] Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla. "Political Campaigning on the Internet: Business as Usual?" In *Governance.com*: *Democracy in the Information Age*, edited by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 81-103. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002, Thompson, Nicholas. "Machined Politics: How the Internet is really, truly - seriously - going to change elections." *Washington Monthly*, May 2002. Casey, Chris. *The Hill on the Net: Congress Enters the Information Age*. Boston: AP Professional, 1996, Tedesco, John C., Jerry L. Miller, and Julia A. Spiker. "Presidential Campaigning on the Information Superhighway: An Exploration of Content and Form." *In The Electronic Election: Perspectives on the 1996 Campaign Communication*, edited by Lynda Lee Kaid and Dianne G. Bystrom, 51-63. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.

[21] Hunter, Christopher D. "Interaction and Political Party Web Pages: An Invitation to Participate." Paper presented at the Eastern States Communication Association Conference, Baltimore 1997.

[22] For possible examples of the influence of the 1996 election see Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla. "Political Campaigning on the Internet: Business as Usual?" *In Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age*, edited by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 81-103. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002. Browning claims it may have made a difference in several state elections. See Browning, Graeme. *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Transform American Politics*. Medford, N.J.: CyberAge Books, 2002.

[23] Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla. "Political Campaigning on the Internet: Business as Usual?" *In Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age*, edited by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 81-103. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002.

[24] Casey, Chris. *The Hill on the Net: Congress Enters the Information Age*. Boston: AP Professional, 1996, Dulio, David A., Donald L. Goff, and James A. Thurber. "Untangled Web: Internet Use during the 1998 Election." *PSOnline* (1999): 53-59. Both Casey and Dulio et al recount that incumbent U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat, raised $25,000 online in 1998 and her challenger, Republican Matt Fong, raised about the same. This was less than 1 percent of total spending in the race.

[25] See D'Alessio, Dave. "Adoption of the World Wide Web by American Political Candidates, 1996-1998." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44, no. 4 (2000): 556-568. He found that incumbency was a strong predictor of a candidate NOT having a campaign Web site.

[26] Third-party and smaller congressional or local campaigns were often more innovative than larger campaigns. See White, Ben. "The Cyber Stump; The Web Provides a Closer Link Between Candidates and Voters, But There Are Potential Dangers, Too." *The Washington Post*, 17 May 2000, 18.

[27] Casey, Chris. *The Hill on the Net: Congress Enters the Information Age*. Boston: AP Professional, 1996.

[28] Stromer-Galley, Jennifer. "On-Line Interaction and Why Candidates Avoid It." *Journal of Communication 50, no. 4 (2000): 111-132.*

## Figure 3: Percent of Major Party Senate Candidates with Web Sites, 1996-2000
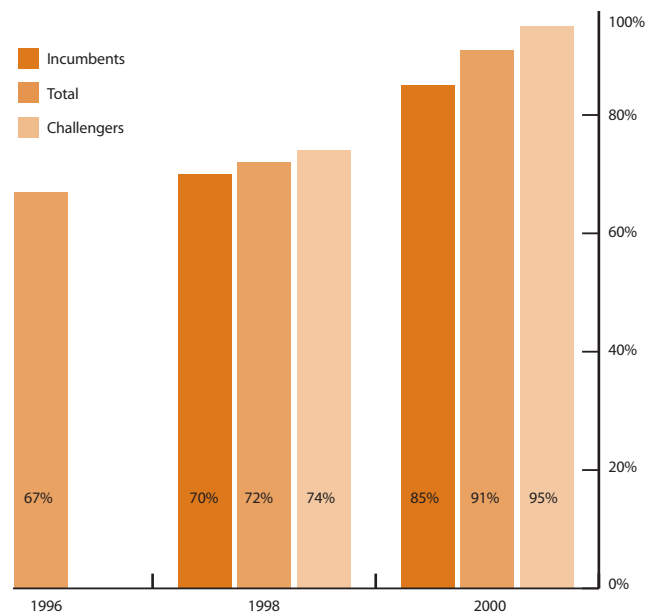


Source: 1996 data are from D'Alessio, Dave. 2000. Adoption of the World Wide Web by American Political Candidates, 1996-1998. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44 (4):556-568. 1998 and 2000 data are from Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla. "Political Campaigning on the Internet: Business as Usual?" In *Governance.Com: Democracy in the Information Age*, edited by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 81-103. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002.

## Figure 4: Percent of Major Party House Candidates with Web Sites, 1996-2000
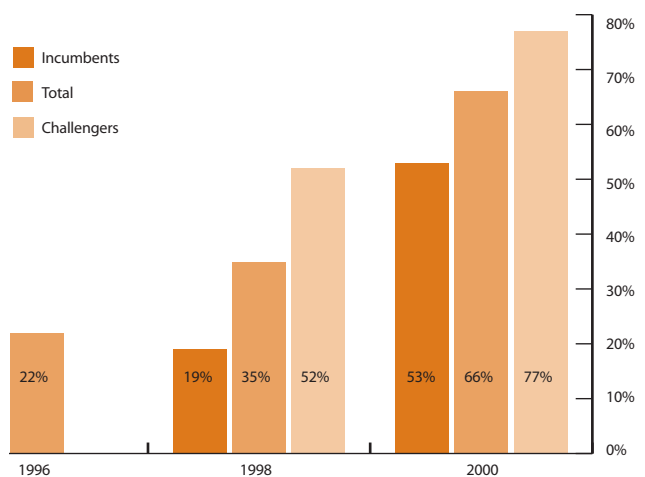


Source: 1996 data are from D'Alessio, Dave. 2000. Adoption of the World Wide Web by American Political Candidates, 1996-1998. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44 (4):556-568. 1998 and 2000 data are from Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla. "Political Campaigning on the Internet: Business as Usual?" In *Governance.Com: Democracy in the Information Age*, edited by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 81-103. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002.

# Politics on the Internet 2000

## The Political Scene

**B**y the 2000 general election every presidential candidate sponsored a campaign Web site. More than 90 percent of major party Senate candidates and more than half of House candidates had campaign sites. Many sites were adding features that increased their interactivity and allowed users to contact the candidate, donate money and volunteer. Sites were more likely to be found in competitive races, as determined by *Congressional Quarterly*, and less likely to be found among third party candidates. This is somewhat surprising considering the early innovation by some third parties and the emphasis on the potential of the Internet to highlight campaigns that get little attention.[29]

All serious presidential candidates had Web sites that were becoming more sophisticated, including using video, audio and the means for visitors to sign up for campaign updates. To a lesser degree, the sites offered ways for activists to get involved by signing up as volunteers, donating money and promoting local events. The least likely features of campaign sites involved encouragement of voter participation, such as voter registration assistance and reminders to vote on polling day.[30] Such "participatory" aspects of campaign Web sites would become more common in the 2004 election.

Campaigns saw the Internet as only a small part of their machinery, supplementing traditional media. First, campaigns viewed the Internet as secondary to traditional media for campaign advertising and reaching voters. Second, campaigns believed that voters largely used the Internet to supplement traditional media.[31] Candidates and their political strategists approached the Internet as a means to strengthen relationships with current supporters and activists, not to convert new supporters or recruit new activists. Candidate Web sites also generally favored presenting their candidate in a positive light rather than attacking their opponent. Attack advertising, a staple of political advertising, had not yet made its way to Web sites.[32]

The 2000 campaign saw the potential of online fund-raising for the first time after the New Hampshire Republican primary in February. After Arizona Senator John McCain won the primary, within two days donors had pledged more than $1 million on his Web site. His Web site organizers said that the average donation was $105 in the first few days, and many of those donors had never before given to a campaign. McCain would see similar surges in online fund-raising after winning later primaries. Both of these points — the potential for fund-raising online and the emergence of small donors — were a prelude to the fund-raising successes of 2004.[33]

The number of political Web sites exploded in 2000. One search engine count found about 5,000 political Web sites, including sites for campaigns and parties, interest groups, news media and nonpartisan political information. Most of these were unaffiliated with a candidate, party or media outlet.[34] They were typically established by a few people or a small organization, usually had lots of links and little original content, and most focused on national politics.

There were several dozen serious nonpartisan political Web sites. Most were national in scope and founded in 1999 or later, so they generally entered the field less than two years before the election. Most were nonprofit, funded by their organizers and grants from nonprofit foundations. However, only a handful of sites received significant nonprofit funding. We estimate that fewer than 10 received more than $500,000. A few sites were for-profit, and these were among the most prominent and received the most traffic. Sites such as Voter.com and Grassroots.com hoped to become political portals or primary destinations for Internet users. Nonpartisan political Web sites and their funders received a fair amount of press attention because of their educational goals and the novelty of online politics.

## The Economy

To understand nonpartisan political Web sites in the 2000 election we must consider the important effects of the Internet stock market boom of the late 1990s. Economic investments that seem ludicrous today were made by people hoping for a share of the billions of dollars made in the Internet investment boom that ended in the months leading up to the 2000 election.

The boom helps explain the availability of funding from nonprofit foundations and their willingness to fund unproven models for online projects. Rapid growth in foundation funding also may have led to less foundation oversight than usual. Likewise, the for-profit sector enjoyed an influx of capital from private investors willing to put money into unproven business models and even speculation. The Internet boom also explains the unusual valuations placed on Internet businesses, both in terms of the size of the valuations, which were often excessive, and in *what* was considered something valuable. Databases, lists of subscribers and lists of Web site visitors were considered assets and were grossly overvalued, as were domain names and the potential revenue from online advertising. These valuations affected both for-profit and nonprofit Web sites.

The Internet bubble also affected how nonpartisan political Web sites were managed. Internet entrepreneurs who founded many for-profit sites looked at their endeavor as a speculative business. (Several Web sites

not pan out. Or sites devoted resources to developing assets such as databases of users that would have been a more sensible tactic for a profit-driven company. Few sites recruited and used boards of advisors, which is common among nonprofits for guidance, fundraising and local visibility. The Internet boom encouraged nonprofit Web sites to adopt the mindset of Internet entrepreneurs rather than caretakers of nonprofit organizations.

With the introduction of a graphical Internet browser, Mosaic, in 1993, the Internet exploded as a place to visit and invest money. The Internet introduced potential business models as Internet providers (AOL, Compuserve) and search engines (Yahoo!, Lycos), and commercialization of the Internet really began about 1994. Finally, in the late 1990s the Internet became dramatically more usable with the introduction of the Google search engine and refinements in other search engines. The story of Silicon Valley is told elsewhere, but here we want to emphasize the rapid growth in stock share prices and overblown valuations of many Internet

One of the results of the Internet stock boom was a huge growth in venture capital…Nonprofit organizations were also enjoying the munificence of foundations flush with cash from their stock investments.

— including GoVote.com and Issues2000 — were originally conceived as businesses, but ended up as nonprofits or part of other nonprofits.) We use the phrase "speculative" because some of these businesses had no clear plan for how they would earn a profit, but were instead interested in carving out market share or attracting an audience. Their goals were to get into the market early and quickly gain market share. Organizers believed they could then leverage those assets into some means of turning a profit.

We believe that to some degree nonprofit Web sites adopted this mindset. Some typical objectives of nonprofit organizations were left by the wayside. For example, some of these Web sites did little to develop a constituency for their sites, but instead saw themselves as a broadly defined public service, which left them with no constituency to turn to for sustainable funding or expert advice. Sites may have focused on online advertising, but then had no other source of revenue when advertising did

companies.[35] There was a climate of speculation and get-rich-quick investment that affected nonprofits as well as businesses.

One of the results of the Internet stock boom was a huge growth in venture capital. In 1996, the venture capital industry had 458 firms managing about $52 billion. In 1999, the industry had grown to 779 firms managing $164 billion. In 1996, these firms gave $11.2 billion to 2,123 new ventures; in 1999 they put $59.4 billion into 3,957 new ventures. The average investment in 1999 was about $15 million. For-profit online ventures, including political Web sites, now had access to abundant funding, and entrepreneurs with a business plan found it "absurdly easy" to raise money for Internet startups in the fall of 1999.[36]

Nonprofit organizations were also enjoying the munificence of foundations flush with cash from their stock investments. Nonprofit foundations manage enormous endowments and are required by law to dis-

## Figure 5: Market Value of Pew Charitable Trusts Assets, 1996-2002 (in millions of dollars)



| Year | Value |
|------|-------|
| 1996 | $4,037 |
| 1997 | $4,537 |
| 1998 | $4,748 |
| 1999 | $4,894 |
| 2000 | $4,801 |
| 2001 | $4,309 |
| 2002 | $3,753 |
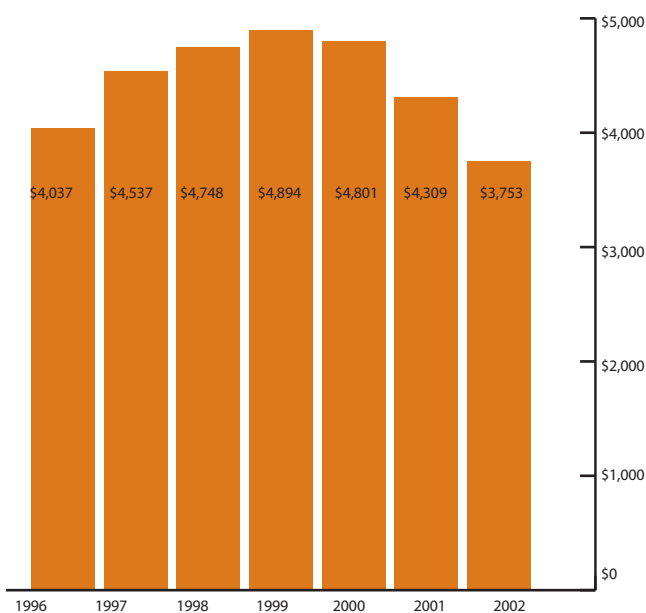
Source: Pew Charitable Trusts. Fiscal year during this period ended Dec. 31

burse five percent of their total assets each year. Many give out a larger percentage. Foundations that may take years to consider project ideas, in the boom environment, suddenly had money they had to spend quickly. "Our problem was we had more than we knew where to spend and by law we had to spend it," said one program officer. "Literally, we could not get rid of the money fast enough."[37] While nonprofit funding increased, however, it never approached the amount of money available from the private sector. Venture capitalists could always outspend the large nonprofit foundations.

The Internet bubble did not burst overnight, even if there were days when that seemed the case. A better metaphor is a balloon with the air slowly escaping for months. From March 10 to April 14, 2000, the NASDAQ index declined more than 34 percent from its all-time closing high of 5,048. On April 14, "Black Friday," it declined 10 percent in one day at the end of its worst week in history.[38] The decline continued well through the 2000 election and, in fact, the NASDAQ index did not bottom out until the fall of 2002. (The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, also had a strong and lasting negative impact on the markets.)

Some foundations were hit much harder than others because of differences in investment strategies. While foundations use accounting and reporting methods that help even out the ups and downs of the stock market, the decline still had an impact. More aggressive investment portfolios, especially those with large technology investments, took a harder hit. The Pew Charitable Trusts, for example, had a comparatively aggressive investment strategy and lost nearly 23 percent of the $4.9 billion market value of its endowment from 1999 to 2002. That translated into cuts of proposed and existing programs. Pew was also a strong supporter of politics online projects, including the DebateAmerica Web site and the Democracy Online Project.[39] Other foundations saw a similar decline in the market value of their assets.

Nonprofit ventures, including some still trying to get off the ground, found that foundations were reluctant to continue funding. Foundations wanted tangible results and Web traffic, and there was little evidence of either. Some funders lost interest in the field and believed their future projects should return to areas other than online political information.

Funding for for-profit ventures dried up in mid-2000.

Venture capitalists changed their stance dramatically, growing far more conservative with their funding. For-profit ventures such as Voter.com came up empty when they sought additional funding.

Many Web sites of all kinds (for-profit and nonprofit) hoped to sustain themselves by online advertising. Even in late 1999 some believed that this might work. Advertising revenue for political Web sites in 1999 was low, even though rates were "hyperinflated because of the dot-com boom," but the lure was the prospect of revenue doubling every few weeks as the number of online users soared.[40] The crash hit Internet advertising especially hard. Many dot-com businesses built on the prospect of online advertising failed.

The major political campaigns in 2000 never used the Internet as a serious advertising outlet, despite early publicity from advertising online. Some political experts attribute this to the tendency for advertising buyers, like everyone else, to be susceptible to trends, and online advertising was suffering. Campaign organizers were also wary of using a medium with such a select audience when other media, particularly broadcasting, were seen as far more effective. There were also concerns about privacy. Campaigns were wary of a backlash to online advertising that sometimes surreptitiously collects user information. Even though grossly inflated advertising rates were dropping during the 2000 campaign, the campaigns could not be induced to buy many ads.[41]

The Economist magazine wrote that:

> *Internet advertising has a lot to answer for. Thousands of dotcoms saw it as a substitute for a business plan, a blithe answer to the question of how to make money from the traffic on free websites. … And it has largely failed, generating only measly returns for advertisers and publishers … When the Internet bubble burst, investors saved the harshest punishment for dotcoms built on advertising.[42]*

## notes

[29]Puopolo, Sonia "Tita". "The Web and U.S. Senatorial Campaigns 2000." *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 12 (2001): 2030-2047. Schneider, Steven M. "Congressional Candidate Web Sites in Campaign 2000: What Web Enthusiasts Wanted, What Candidates Provided." Philadelphia, Pa: The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, 2000. Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla. "Political Campaigning on the Internet: Business as Usual?" In *Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age*, edited by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 81-103. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2002, Williams, Christine B., Andrew Aylesworth, and Kenneth J. Chapman. "The 2000 e-Campaign for U.S. Senate." *Journal of Political Marketing* 1, no. 4 (2002): 39-63.

[30]Schneider, Steven M., and Kirsten A. Foot. "Online Structure for Political Action: Exploring Presidential Campaign Web Sites From The 2000 American Election." *the public* 9, no. 2 (2002): 1-18. Williams, Christine B., Andrew Aylesworth, and Kenneth J. Chapman. "The 2000 e-Campaign for U.S. Senate." *Journal of Political Marketing* 1, no. 4 (2002): 39-63.

[31]See Davis, Richard, and Bruce Bimber. "The Internet in Campaign 2000: How Political Web Sites Reinforce Partisan Engagement." Santa Barbara, Calif.: Center for Information Technology and Society, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002, Williams, Christine B. "An Assessment of Candidate Web Site Performance and Effectiveness." Paper presented at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 2003. The opinions of online campaign strategists are surveyed in the annual reports of the E-Voter Institute, including Jagoda, Karen A.B., Nick Nyhan, and Brent McGoldrick. "E-Voter 2001: Dawning of a New Era," 56. Washington, D.C.: E-Voter Institute, 2001.

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[33]Davis, Steve, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher. *Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002. Glass, Andrew J. "Money flows online to McCain." *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 4 February 2000, 17.

[34]MacPherson, Karen. "Need Another Political Fix? Try the web." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 October 2000, 1.

[35]One very helpful history to the dot com bubble is Cassidy, John. *dot.con: the greatest story ever sold*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

[36]Ibid, 236-237.

[37]Treglia, Sean. Telephone interview with Sean Treglia, former program officer, Pew Charitable Trusts, 30 July 2003.

[38]"Black Friday: Dow Down 618 Points NASDAQ Down 355 Points." *The Daily News*, 15 April 2000, 1, Fuerbringer, Jonathan, and Alex Berenson. "Stock Market in Steep Drop as Worried Investors Flee; NASDAQ has its Worst Week." *The New York Times*, 15 April 2000, 1.

[39]The Democracy Online Project became the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, of which The Pew Charitable Trusts remains a primary funder.

[40]Gordon, Jesse. Telephone interview with Jesse Gordon, organizer, Issues2000.org, 24 April 2003.

[41]Cornfield, Michael. *Politics Moves Online: Campaigning and the Internet*. New York: Century Foundation Press, 2004.

[42]"Banner-ad blues." *The Economist*, 24 February 2001, 43.

# Nonpartisan Political Web Sites

This report is not a comprehensive history of all nonpartisan political Web sites, but because the community of nonpartisan players is not large the scope of our research included most of the major non-partisan sites online in 2000. We have tried to capture the major models for these sites, and if we omitted a Web site it is because that site's lessons were better illustrated by other examples. Nonetheless, our choice of examples is selective, so this history is necessarily incomplete.

Nonpartisan political Web sites first appeared from nonpartisan political efforts conducted offline. Project Vote Smart began as a telephone phone bank for the

compared to much better funded nonpartisan Web sites (See Figure). GoVote.com was a one-man operation, maintained from his home, and it too drew high traffic for a short time.

Established nonprofit organizations sponsored several sites that were often more successful than others. The League of Women Voters helped sponsor DNet, and several state leagues sponsored Web sites, such as Smart Voter. Several sites began as for-profit businesses, such as Voter.com and Grassroots.com. These businesses were almost universally unsuccessful as political information sites, although to remain in business several have re-tooled into consulting, survey research or communications firms. Their introduction into the field

> Several scholars have noted this optimism for the democratic potential of a new technology. The introduction of television, radio and the Internet all prompted an enthusiastic hope that they would educate the public and renew our democracy.

1992 election. Voters could call with questions or to request information, and the group eventually moved its databases online (although it still maintains a telephone hotline). The Democracy Network went online after experimenting in how to improve democratic debate with interactive television.[43] The League of Women Voters took the logical step of moving online its informational and get-out-the-vote projects. Capitol Advantage, a for-profit business, moved its databases of elected officials and contact information from conventionally published form to the Internet.

Joining these efforts were Web sites from a variety of sources. Several nonprofit nonpartisan political Web sites were mostly the efforts of a handful of individuals with shoestring budgets. Minnesota E-Democracy began with initial efforts by just a few people and began putting political information online in 1994. Issues2000.org, begun as a for-profit business, was operated by only a few people with several thousand dollars in funding and garnered a respectable audience

of online political information had important effects.

Most nonprofit nonpartisan political Web sites were conceived to inform and engage the general public. (For-profit sites wanted to do so while making money.) Several scholars have noted this optimism for the democratic potential of a new technology. The introduction of television, radio and the Internet all prompted an enthusiastic hope that they would educate the public and renew our democracy.[44] Web site operators generally saw their role as providing information about the campaign that would eventually encourage users to become more politically engaged, mainly through voting. Many sites had lists of candidates and position papers (DNet, Vote Smart) or news synopses and links to the news (Issues2000, GoVote). One site created a forum for a monthlong debate between the presidential candidates (Web White & Blue). Another approach was to provide forums for discussion, either locally (DebateAmerica, Minnesota E-Democracy) or nationally (E-thepeople). Finally, one site introduced an

online video library of candidates that users could access to hear stump speeches and issue positions (Freedom Channel).

Nonpartisan political Web sites received a large amount of media coverage leading up to the 2000 election. In 2000, we found that 20 well-known nonpartisan political Web sites were mentioned in 15 large national and regional newspapers more than 300 times. Some sites worked hard to attract media attention, and all generally benefited from the media's interest in the novelty of politics online. Voter.com, in particular, enjoyed a lot of media coverage, partly because of its sponsorship of the Battleground Poll. In 2000 Voter.com was mentioned in 15 prominent newspapers more than three times more often than the next most mentioned site, Speakout.com.[45] Despite the press coverage illustrated here (see Figure), some observers and organizers complained that press coverage was inadequate and disappointing.[46] Press coverage clearly peaked in August 2000 and has remained comparatively low since then.

As the campaign continued, sites began to try specializing somewhat, to carve out a unique niche. A few sites tried to emphasize their analysis of the campaign. A few sites added polling features. These were intended as gimmicks to boost interest or "stickiness" on the site, a means to allow users to better understand their own positions in relationship to others, and to help users align themselves with a candidate whose views reflected their own.

### notes

[43]Docter, Sharon, William H. Dutton, and Anita Elberse. "An American Democracy Network: Factors Shaping the Future of On-Line Political Campaigns." *Parliamentary Affairs* 52, no. 3 (1999): 535-552.

[44]Abramson, Jeffrey B., F. Christopher Arterton, and Gary R. Orren. *The Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics*. New York: Basic Books, 1988. Margolis, Michael, and David Resnick. *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000.

[45]See Appendix B for more information on how press mentions were calculated.

[46]Schmitt, Mark. Telephone interview with Mark Schmitt, director of policy and research, U.S. Programs, Open Society Institute, 14 July 2003.

## Figure 6: Projected Audience for Issues2000, DNet and Voter.com, August-October 2000
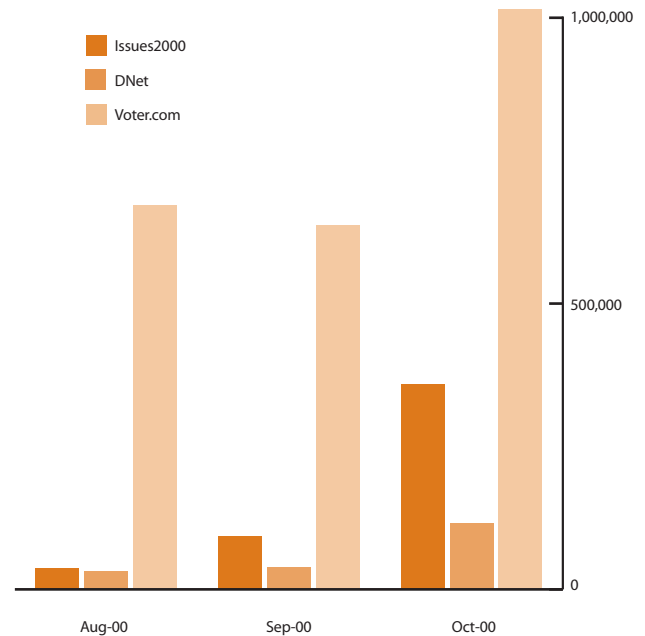


Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work. In general, data from 2000 must be considered broad estimates. See Appendix A for methodology.

## Figure 7: Nonpartisan Political Web Sites in the News: Number of Press Mentions of 20 Web Sites, 1998-2002
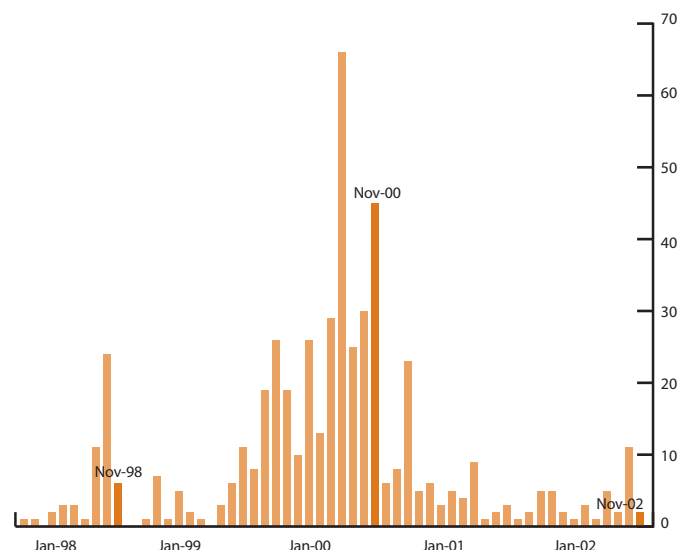


Note: Bars show the number of times 20 nonpartisan political Web sites were mentioned in 15 major U.S. newspapers each month. See Appendix B for more information.

# Web Site Case Studies

**S**everal brief case studies illustrate interesting aspects of nonpartisan political Web sites and give a flavor of how they worked during the 2000 election. They appear below:

- **DebateAmerica** was a well-funded nonprofit program intended to create local discussion forums for local issues. The site never really got off the ground before funding ran out.
- **DNet** (**The Democracy Network**) is one of the oldest and best-known providers of nonpartisan political information. It is operated by the League of Women Voters under a public/private partnership with the firm Capitol Advantage, which provides content distribution. It is the most widely used source of online political information.
- **E-thepeople** is a nonprofit online discussion Web site that aims to build a sustainable model via user fees and syndication of its content and software to local media. The site is operational, although not yet self-sustaining.
- **Freedom Channel** was a nonprofit effort to post online video of candidates discussing issues. The site had substantial foundation funding. Connection speed and technological problems probably discouraged users and the site did not attract much traffic. Freedom Channel exemplified an online political project that is difficult to sustain without the efforts of a small group of influential political organizers.
- **GoVote** was a small one-man Web site with political news, links and discussion. Its introduction of a "votematch" program was very successful, and its owner sold out just before the dot-com crash.
- **Grassroots.com** was a venture capital startup that quickly realized being an online portal would not cover costs, particularly because advertising revenue was low and generating content was expensive. After the election, the site retooled into a political consulting and communications company.
- **Project Vote Smart** is a long-term successful nonprofit that has built a sustainable model on membership donations and foundation support. Vote Smart has built an important database of candidate and issue information, but like other sites it struggles with candidate cooperation.

- **Voter.com** was the best funded for-profit political portal. The site hired well-known talent to produce content, but never generated much revenue and lost tens of millions of investors' money. It closed a few months after the election.
- **Web White & Blue** was a well-funded nonprofit that sponsored the Rolling Cyber Debate between presidential candidates. Organizers linked to the site through a consortium of portal Web sites that reached 85 percent of all Internet users. Traffic was nonetheless low.

## DebateAmerica

DebateAmerica launched in fall 1999, aiming to foster public debate in a group of local online forums. The site attempted to "bypass journalism" and put public discussion into the hands of citizens so they might propose solutions to local problems. DebateAmerica saw itself as a "community-focused" alternative to politics centered on candidates and campaigns.[47]

Users could log in to their local version of the main Web site and explore community issues. There was background information about the issues and moderated debates. The discussion was framed by the users, not site managers, the press or politicians. Organizers adopted guidelines — such as moderators and rules of usage — that they hoped would keep discussion civil and productive, not degenerating into rants or hate speech. The site tried to meet a need that one organizer thinks still exists: "The growth of blogs and the attention that blogs are getting (in the 2004 election) suggests that there is kind of a hunger for this kind of space out there, but administering it is very tough."[48]

DebateAmerica proposed Web sites for a group of pilot cities, including Seattle, Baltimore, Charlotte and Pittsburgh. Each city's DebateAmerica homepage offered a brief summary of local developments and links to discussion topics. Anyone logging in could establish a "debate" about a local issue. By emphasizing local issues not tied to an election, organizers hoped that the site traffic and public attention would fluctuate less during the election cycle.

The project relied entirely on grant funding, and

organizers never pursued other sources of revenue, such as advertising, until it became clear foundation funding would run out. The primary funder, The Pew Charitable Trusts, eventually stopped funding the project and organizers could not find other support. Soliciting local funding from organizations and foundations in each pilot city was expensive and time consuming, compared to support from a single large donor.

Usage was never very high. Few discussions took place, and the total number of users was never more than a few thousand.[49] The site closed in early 2001.

## DNet (The Democracy Network)

DNet is one of the oldest and best-known providers of online political information. It has operated for most of its history under the auspices of the League of Women Voters. However, rising costs pushed the league to twice strike partnerships with commercial businesses for technical and financial support. DNet's content currently is the most widely used database of election information, and its current agreement with Capitol Advantage is an example of a public/private partnership that appears to work. Traffic is fairly high. One continuing problem is nonparticipation by candidates.

a decision that some observers found surprising. Critics called the sale the "commercialization of politics," but others saw the rising costs of running a Web site, particularly if it draws a lot of traffic. The league was unwilling to permanently shoulder the costs for the Web site, and foundations were wary of continuing to support nonprofit political Web sites after commercial enterprises entered the field.[51] In the new agreement, the league continued to provide content while Grassroots handled the technical aspects, improving the site and providing an infusion of cash.

League volunteers in every state gather data for the site, and this corps of volunteers remains one of the key assets of DNet. Generating content is an expensive proposition, and the ability to do this for thousands of races is essentially what the League brings to the table in its partnerships. Many candidates are unwilling to cooperate by completing questionnaires or offering information. League volunteers provide needed labor for gathering that information. The cachet of the League of Women Voters helps volunteers convince campaigns to participate. In some cases, volunteers gather candidate information and input it themselves.[52]

Grassroots changed its business focus (see below) and

> We were really focused on people being able to communicate with government, mostly at a local level, because that's where letters and petitions can have the most impact.

DNet was founded in the mid 1990s by the Center for Governmental Studies, a nonprofit think tank in California, and began covering some political races in the 1996 election. The League of Women Voters Education Fund became interested in the project in the 1998 mid-term elections, and after the election a formal partnership was established between the League and the center. The center provided technical support and the league provided content.[50]

While the Web site had provided election information for several election cycles, including coverage of every state in 1998, the 2000 election was still seen as a major launch for the joint effort.

In mid 1999, as for-profit companies began taking an active interest in online political information, several businesses made inquiries about purchasing the site. The site was sold to Grassroots.com in February 2000,

transferred ownership of the site back to the league in early 2001. In May 2003 the league struck a second partnership with Capitol Advantage. The league continues to gather data, which are made available on the Congress.org Web site, part of the Capitol Advantage Web site. The league's election information is organized along with the company's database of political information. The additional resources are an important draw to users looking for election information and the League's name gives it credibility. What Capitol Advantage offers is distribution through its placement on hundreds of portals and major Web sites.

## E-thepeople

E-thepeople is one of only a few Web sites that have survived with a model of user-generated content — online discussion forums. While many nonpartisan

political Web sites found that user-generated content fails to draw traffic and is difficult to control, E-thepeople developed a usable set of guidelines for user-content and fostered an audience that wants to see it. The site was founded in 1999 as a for-profit and became nonprofit after the election.

Alex Sheshunoff founded E-thepeople in 1998 with a coast-to-coast bus tour to win publicity and sell the product to local media outlets. The site had three areas: letters, petitions and a discussion forum. In January 2000 it added the online ability to pay parking tickets and speeding tickets with a credit card, linking through local partners, usually local newspapers. This is one example of how E-thepeople attempted to concentrate locally by offering practical tools, which organizers hoped would keep the site relevant between elections. The site still saw more traffic during the campaign.

> *For the most part, we were really focused on people being able to communicate with government, mostly at a local level, because that's where letters and petitions can have the most impact. … Our feeling at the time was that a petition with a 100 signatures to a senator urging a reform of healthcare is not going to have the same kind of impact as a petition getting a stop sign installed next to a school would to a city council member. So, that's where we placed our emphasis.*
>
> *Our vision at the time was that you would read an article about an overpass construction. At the end of that article, you could then e-mail the mayor and tell him what you thought about it. … It was just making a process easier and with the expectation that more people would then do it.[53]*

Initial investment came from family, friends and a few investors, totaling roughly $3 to $5 million. The business model was basically syndication through local newspapers. Revenue came almost entirely from advertising, although e-commerce fees from tickets paid online yielded another small revenue stream. The Internet emphasis at the time was market share, so the site concentrated on signing up affiliates as quickly as possible with an eye toward moving them to a paid product sometime in the future. The more than 1,000 syndication partners were viewed as one of the company's key assets.

Interestingly, E-thepeople may have tapped into a somewhat different audience than those who usually visit political Web sites. Some of the site's early research found that its users were older, poorer, less educated and more rural than typical Internet users.

While their product focused on citizen to government communication, the company felt pressured by e-government sites. It negotiated for a buyer for a long time, but failed to reach an agreement. Sheshunoff wanted to continue the site, but doubted its business model. He met the organizers of Quorum.org, which had launched in August 2000, liked them and liked the idea of the site becoming a nonprofit. In early 2001 both sites merged into a single nonprofit.

E-thepeople focuses on user-generated content, most of which is postings in a variety of online forums. Users can rate each posting, and the site lists those ratings, giving smart or well-written comments higher ratings and making them more likely to be seen. Close to 1,000 newspapers link to E-thepeople's content engine and get a customized discussion forum portal for local discussions. Newspapers drive about 40 percent of the traffic to the site, and Google hits account for another 25 to 30 percent.[54]

The site has a budget of only about $450,000 and is funded by foundation grants, individual donors, user donations, and syndication fees for use of their technology by the syndication partners. The site hopes to increase and emphasize syndication fees and push a greater percentage of costs to its users, and would like users to eventually contribute 30 to 40 percent of the budget. In the last month of the 2000 election site traffic was about 100,000 unique visitors a month. In 2003 the site received about 150,000 unique visitors each month and listed 11,000 registered users.[55]

E-thepeople has focused on user discussion and developed a community of users who keep the discussions alive. While such forums have proven unworkable elsewhere, the site's laser focus on this aspect of online communication appears to have succeeded. This is done through careful monitoring, required registration, guidelines for posting and responding to comments, and an online community where greater tolerance is expected. This organization's expertise at managing online forums is a key selling point to media outlets unwilling to devote resources to manage an online discussion, or fearful that arguments will rage out of control.

The site has survived on the strength of a dedicated group of organizers, and the infusion of technology and content from the 2001 merger. The syndication model, although promising, does not yet fund the site.

## Freedom Channel

Freedom Channel launched in late 1999 as a nonprofit site providing political video on demand. It was one of the more unusual and expensive efforts to provide political information online, but the site did not draw much traffic and could not convince foundations to continue funding after the election, when the site closed. The site highlights issues of technology in the 2000 election and the role of a few prominent political players in putting together an experiment that may not recur.

The site gave voters free access to videos of candidates, political parties and issue groups presenting their cases about leading issues. The idea was the brainchild of veteran political consultants Doug Bailey and Roger Craver and arose from efforts to develop a similar project on cable television. Their idea was "convergence," and whether the videos were online or via cable was ancillary. The organizers believed they were ahead of their time in focusing on video-on-demand, seeing it as sort of C-SPAN on the Internet.

online candidate television advertising.

Freedom Channel won cooperation from candidates early in the campaign. The organizers' personal influence was key — "They were almost exclusively done through the connections Doug (Bailey) had," said one site organizer.[56] Bailey and Craver had enough political acumen, experience and reputation in the political community to assemble a project that would probably not have been possible otherwise. They raised money from major foundations because of their position in the political community. They were able to appeal to both major parties. Most important, they also had sufficient stature and contacts to reach candidates and persuade them to take part. Freedom Channel worked because of organizers with political clout and the wherewithal to make it happen. Several observers said that in retrospect they do not believe a similar project could take place again without such well-connected organizers.

According to one report, the site logged between 130,000 and 150,000 sessions a month in the summer

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> Freedom Channel's idea was "convergence," and whether the videos were online or via cable was ancillary. The organizers believed they were ahead of their time in focusing on video-on-demand, seeing it as sort of C-SPAN on the Internet.

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Candidates could use the Freedom Channel's facilities at two locations, one on Capitol Hill, to prepare a video, or they could prepare their own video according to Freedom Channel's specifications. Each video had to be 90 seconds long. Candidates could produce videos for many different issues, and the presidential candidates did just that. Nearly all the videos avoided negative comments or attacks on opponents.

Organizers thought the videos would erode the culture of political sound bites. Instead of trying to devise a catchy slogan for a two-second sound bite, candidates could explain their position and viewers would have longer to watch. This would discourage negative advertising, they thought, because candidates would have no incentive to be provocative or entertaining. Candidates would also be required to deliver statements themselves, which would also discourage negative comments. Freedom Channel eventually collected more than 1,000 tapes, and it also made available

of 2000. The average session was 12 minutes, quite long in comparison to visits to other nonpartisan political Web sites.[57] However, one organizer said it was never clear how much traffic the site was really receiving, and data gathered by Nielsen//NetRatings show a very low number of unique visitors. There was no budget for promotion, although Bailey was able to garner some media coverage and Freedom Channel was promoted on the Web site of *National Journal*, which was founded by Bailey and Craver.

Convergence has not developed as many people expected, which was a problem for Freedom Channel. While today the Internet features narrowcasting through directed advertising and directed e-mail, it has not yet made it to video. In addition, online video in 2000 was technically difficult for most users. Video, slow and glitchy with many dial-up connections, plays much better with broadband.

Organizers never wanted to make the site self-sustain-

ing either through advertising or charging users. "The only goal that we had was to utilize the 2000 experience to convince the cable industry or others (such as a technology association) to pick up the ball and run with it," Bailey said. Foundation sponsorship was also a possibility.

"What the Freedom Channel attempted to demonstrate was possible in 2000 can be, and should be, a sort of standard service that is available to the public, provided by somebody," Bailey said.

## GoVote

GoVote was a small one-man nonpartisan political Web site that reaped the rewards of entering the market early. The founder, Paul Hrabal, also enjoyed the benefits of leaving early, selling his Web site before the election and just before the Internet bubble burst and destroyed its sales value. GoVote illustrates the rapidly escalating values of Internet properties, even political properties, whose value was based on domain names, subscriber

Figure 8: Visitors and Page Views for GoVote, December 1999-February 2000



Source: Hrabal, Paul. Telephone interview with Paul Hrabal, founder, GoVote, 19 May 2003. Statistics are monthly and were collected by the Web site provider. Visitors are not necessarily unique visitors.

lists and name recognition. It exemplifies what one non-profit leader calls "a lot of insanity" in potential funding and site valuations in early 2000.[58]
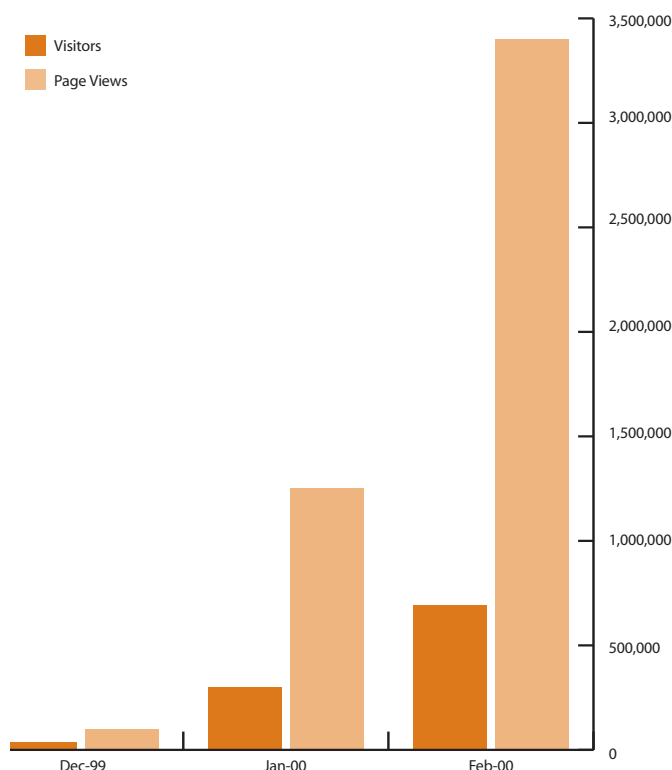
In August 1999, Hrabal was retired from Dell Computers when he decided to put together his own political Web site. He saw it has a hobby, just a sideline, and although he did strike some partnerships to provide some content for GoVote, it was predominantly a one-man operation. Hrabal invested $70,000 to $80,000 of his own money over the life of the site, and he intended it to become for-profit through advertising sales.

Hrabal wanted a site that offered neutral content balanced between Republicans and Democrats. The site provided general political news and sections on Congress and the 2000 presidential election. A database of elected officials and voting records was provided by Capitol Advantage. Viewers could also find the status of bills and the schedules of Congressional hearings. One of the site's most popular features was a series of links to political news and commentary, and Hrabal also began daily and weekly e-mail newsletters that were predominantly links to political items. Discussion forums were available on the site. By early December, he felt the site was starting to "click" — traffic and newsletter subscriptions were increasing.

The headline for the story of GoVote was something called Votematch, a quiz feature. Users would answer 20 questions about their political views and the Web site would tell them which candidate matched their views on social issues, economic issues, and an overall rating. The quiz took less than 10 minutes. Hrabal believes he was the only one doing anything like this at the time, although AOL quickly followed suit and began its own candidate matching features. "In the end, Votematch was the site," Hrabal said. "That was the important thing that nobody else but AOL had and people loved it and they told their friends about it and it just took off like wildfire — viral marketing."[59]

By early 2000 it became clear that the site's revenue would not cover costs, despite the fact that GoVote was then one of the most visited political Web sites. One rating service placed GoVote in the top 10 of all news and media Web sites in early 2000, counting 84,000 unique visitors in February 2000.[60] However, as traffic grew, server costs rose. Technical problems became more frequent. Hrabal was working long hours, getting bored and burned out maintaining the site. He e-mailed his 30,000 subscribers — about 1,000 a day were now reg-

istering online — and told them he was pulling the plug.

To his surprise, within two hours three competitors had contacted him about purchasing the GoVote site. Within two weeks he closed a cash and stock deal with Speakout.com. Hrabal will not disclose the purchase price, but two Web sites valued the GoVote assets at more than $1 million, although their offers included cash and stock. Much of the site's value was in lists of newsletter subscribers and site users.

GoVote demonstrated the power of a new idea — the voting match programs — and early entry into the market, but it also shows the shelf life of such ideas. Voting match programs are now common, generate little buzz

DNet had a database of political information and an organization of volunteers committed to keeping the database current. In return, the League received partial ownership of the company.

The company focused on creating and sustaining an audience. It assumed that a means of attracting revenue would present itself after finding an audience. This business model evolved week by week as the company tried to find its footing. According to Grassroots President Arvind Rajan:

> Back in the late 1990s companies were being valued simply on having an audience. Remember there were companies that were going public and were

> Back in the late 1990s companies were being valued simply on having an audience. The vision being that if you could create an online audience people would eventually figure out ways to monetize it.

and attract few users. The site also reflects the unusual economic and technological climate that made it possible for a single operator to quickly gain attention. According to Hrabal:

> The big one that was getting a lot of traffic besides GoVote was Voter.com, and they had like $30 million in venture capital funding. And here we were getting as much traffic as them for, you know, the $100,000 that I had put in and I'm doing it all from my home.[61]

## Grassroots

Grassroots.com launched in February 2000 as a for-profit business to be an online political community where users could interact and get information about political issues. Visitors could find petitions, volunteer opportunities and political information, and the original focus was to stay local. Site features were free to users, but politicians, lobbyists and groups would pay to put their materials on the Web site. Revenue would also come from advertising and a share of online fund-raising.

The company moved very quickly, securing funding in late 1999 and launching the site just a few months later. In early 2000 Grassroots acquired DNet, the League of Women Voters' Democracy Network, a site offering candidate and issue information. Most important,

> being valued at somewhere between $100 and $200 per member, without really any revenue stream behind it. The vision being that if you could create an online audience people would eventually figure out ways to monetize it and until then you had value that you were creating and in a sense that the market was recognizing.[62]

It was apparent very early in the campaign that the revenue was not covering costs. Three months after launch, the principals knew they would have to fundamentally change their business. Advertising rates were dropping, but customer acquisition costs — the cost of signing up another user — were rising. Organizations were not interested in their services, and campaigns did not much value a Web presence, so they had no interest in hiring someone to build a site for them. Traffic to the site was very low.[63] Company officials began talking and retooling, although the change in direction for Grassroots was not announced publicly until after the election, when former Clinton press secretary Mike McCurry took over as chief executive officer.

After the election Grassroots tried to reposition itself as a service provider to the political industry, such as advocacy organizations and lobbying groups. Grassroots provides a means to communicate with and mobilize members using a software platform somewhat

## Figure 9: Projected Audience for Project Vote Smart, 2000-2002
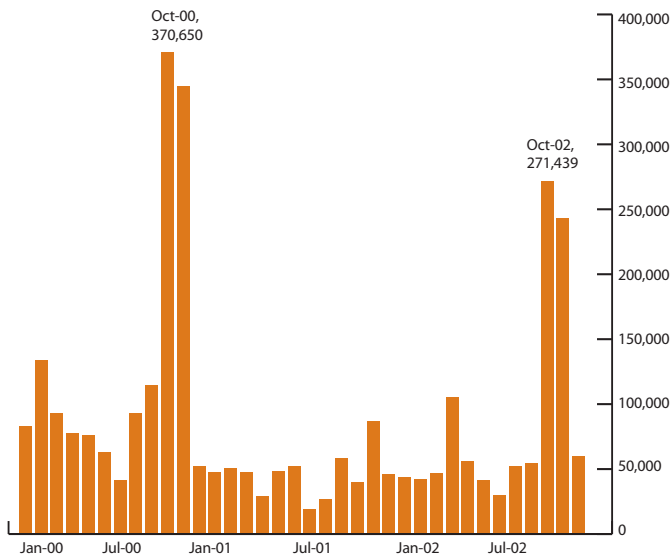
Oct-00, 370,650

Oct-02, 271,439

Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work. In general, data from 2000 must be considered broad estimates. See Appendix A for methodology.

## Figure 10: Comparison of Press Mentions of Voter.com and 19 other Nonpartisan Political Web sites, 1998-2002

All others
Voter.com

Source: Bars show the number of times Voter.com and 19 other prominent nonpartisan political Web sites were mentioned in 15 major U.S. newspapers. Voter.com was launched in November 1999. For more information see Appendix B.

like a customer management system. Organizations can use the technology to communicate with their members and to facilitate communication between those members and office holders.

As the company moved away from providing online content, in early 2001 it spun off DNet back to the League of Women Voters.
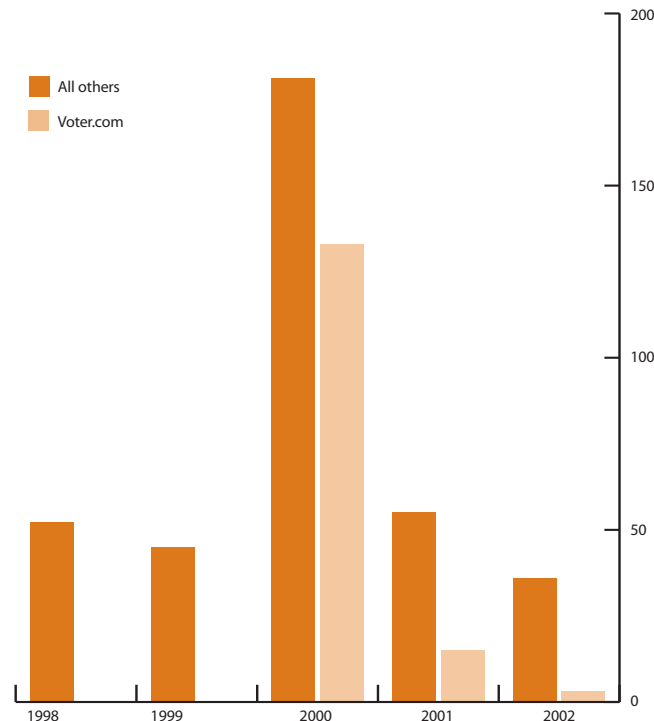
## Project Vote Smart

Some of the earliest nonpartisan political Web sites were offshoots of existing organizations that simply expanded their operations to the Internet. One of the best-known examples is Project Vote Smart, which was founded in 1992 and continues today. It is operated by the Center for National Independence in Politics, originally based at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Ore., and later moved to a rural area near Philipsburg, Mont. Vote Smart exemplifies a nonpartisan political Web site that appears to have solid financial footing, a viable business plan and a constituency of both funders and users. It has carved out a role as an online information provider. It faces the continuing challenge of candidates increasingly reluctant to respond to its candidate surveys and for-profit businesses gathering and offering the same information.

A large blue-ribbon group of national political leaders, including former presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, and more than a dozen other legislators founded the center. But the driving force is Richard Kimball, a former state legislator from Arizona who founded the nonprofit center and remains its president. Its objectives are to inform citizens by providing a database of information about political candidates. The center combats what it sees as misinformation propagated through the mass media by candidates and professional campaign practitioners. Its political database includes biographies, voting records and campaign finance information, as well as candidate statements and ratings by interest groups. It also has classroom and library outreach programs, and publishes a resource guide for political journalists and a voting manual that includes contact information and voting information about elected officials.[64]

The center zealously claims to be impartial and independent, accepting no support from political parties, lobbyists, corporations, businesses or government organizations. Nor does it lobby or endorse candidates. Funding comes mostly from individual memberships and private donations (70 percent of the budget in

2002) with the remainder coming from foundation grants. Vote Smart raised $1.5 million for the 1992 election and is one of only a few organizations that has been successful in cultivating and sustaining a donor base, claiming 26,000 members in 1992, 44,000 in 1996 and more than 45,000 today. Its annual budget generally runs between $1 and $1.5 million. Most of the work is done by unpaid interns with several dozen paid employees receiving token salaries.[65]

The center had a "trial run" in 1990 but only began full operation for the 1992 elections, when its toll-free phone bank received more than 200,000 calls, including 34,000 on Election Day. One newspaper reported that "Many of the calls in the days before the election came from undecided voters angry about what they believed were misleading television ads."[66] The center continues to maintain its hotline, but most traffic quickly gravitated to the Web site.

Vote Smart has enjoyed frequent positive media coverage and strong public support from other nonprofit groups and journalists. Its funding structure appears stable, and it has been able to cultivate a constituency of dues paying members. It has also built a database of political information — candidate statements, funding, biographies, etc. — that may have historical value.

Vote Smart drew comparatively high traffic. One telephone survey using random sampling methods projected that two percent of all American adults saw the site during the 2000 campaign. This was dramatically higher than two other sites in the survey (Freedom Channel and DNet) and about half the percentage of people projected to have seen the campaign Web sites of George Bush (five percent) or Al Gore (four percent).[67] Traffic appears to spike with the election cycle.

Vote Smart relies heavily on candidates and their organizations to provide candidate information for its database. This has been a continuing problem. More than half of all candidates for national political office now decline to complete the Vote Smart questionnaire. Political candidates and their organizers have complained that the questionnaire is too long, poorly written — for example, one candidate complained that the questions are multiple-choice — and that they prefer to not so closely define their positions.[68]

The center's approach has been to put public pressure on candidates — "to make candidates regret ducking the questionnaire" — and to encourage news media outlets to do the same.[69] Numerous newspapers across the coun-

try have editorialized against candidates who decline to complete the Vote Smart questionnaire. The staff at Vote Smart will complete the information for major candidates by scouring their public statements and campaign literature, but they are unable to do that for every candidate who declines to participate. As recently as January 2004, even President George W. Bush and former Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean had declined to complete the Vote Smart surveys.

## Voter.com

Voter.com raised and lost more money than any other for-profit nonpartisan political Web site, and it garnered by far the most press attention. This was because of determined efforts to attract publicity and the sponsorship of the BattleGround Poll, which got the site a lot of mentions in the press. However, the site also was one of the most-visited campaign and election sites late in the

Figure 11: Projected Audience for Voter.com, February 2000-March 2001
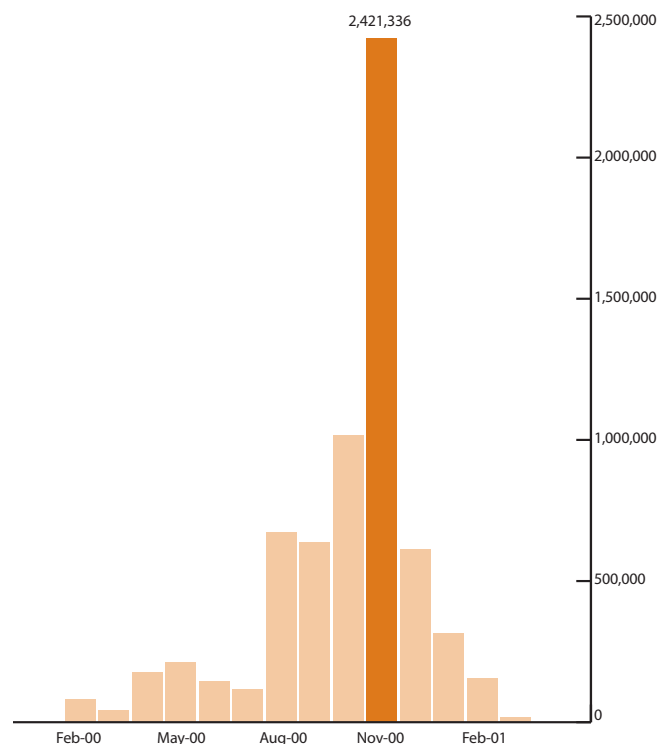


Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work. In general, data from 2000 must be considered broad estimates. See Appendix A for methodology.

campaign. The site's founders were able to take advantage of the climate of eager venture capital and the exaggerated hopes for online advertising, but despite high numbers of users, Voter.com closed about four months after the 2000 election.

Voter.com is the quintessential dot-com bust among nonpartisan political Web sites. Its failure received a lot of publicity, and an enormous amount of money was lost. Its business model was based on assumptions of value during the economic boom that did not pan out when the boom ended. Voter.com also tried to generate original content, and its example illustrates how expensive that can be.

Voter.com launched in November 1999 and at one point seemed to have everything a dot-com needed to survive. At its peak it had about 100 employees in offices in Boston and Washington. Its business model called for raising money from general online advertis-

$70,000 a month. At some points the site's burn rate was more than $1 million a month.

Voter.com tried to make the transition to a lobbying and political services firm but was unable to close the financing and deals that were required. In mid November 2000 the company laid off about half its employees. When no other investors could be found, the site shut down in February 2000. One report put the loss at $22 million, but several observers say it was much more.[71]

According to organizer Justin Dangel:

*Voter.com accomplished much of what we originally set out to do. By November we were regularly attracting millions of users to our site and had built a large database. … In the exuberant financial markets of the late '90s, this execution would have left us well positioned to finance continuing growth.*[72]

Voter.com at one point had extraordinary Web traffic,

ing, such as banner ads, and targeted online political advertising by campaigns and candidates. Voter.com wanted to rent lists of users to candidates for targeted e-mail messages. The site also considered selling ads in online newsletters. Voter.com signed deals where advocacy groups supplied the site with content in return for increased traffic. The site spent liberally on staff and promotion, including hiring journalist Carl Bernstein at $185,000 a year and sponsoring a massive cocktail party at Union Station in Washington as well as mounting a large presence at the political conventions. "It was all about building the name brand, and you could worry about profitability later," said one political observer. "It was a period when a dot.com could do no wrong."[70]

Early on advertisers became unhappy with the traffic being driven to their sites. While there was some consideration of scaling back newsgathering, which proved expensive, to focus on political services, the site never turned fully in that direction. Voter.com began to develop and sell software for Web site creation and online petitions, but revenue from those sales never topped

but it was heavily concentrated in the days leading up to polling day and in the flurry of the contested presidential election afterwards. In the uncertain days that followed, while the drama in Florida played out, Voter.com claimed a million people an hour were viewing the site. On Election Day and the day after, the site recorded 25 million page views.[73]

## Web White & Blue

The Markle Foundation launched Web White & Blue as an online political directory in 1998, just before the November mid-term election. The site became a more diverse political portal that sponsored an online debate between the presidential candidates for the 2000 election. The Web site was notable for this Rolling Cyber Debate and its use of a consortium of portals linking to it for maximum visibility. Web White & Blue enjoyed the benefits of high-profile, politically-connected organizers who were able to get the project off the ground and convince the campaigns to participate. Web White & Blue was one of the best-funded sites. Markle spent more

than $2.6 million on it over four years.

Web White & Blue in the 1998 election provided links to other political Web sites, as well as information on election results and an e-mail newsletter. Its focus was on branding nonpartisan political sites with an icon that would mark information sources as worthwhile and nonpartisan.

In 2000, the site continued this syndication model of distribution with different content. The site had links to news stories and other nonpartisan political Web sites, but its primary content feature was the Rolling Cyber Debate, the first online presidential debate. Web White & Blue was syndicated through a network of 17 Web sites that were primary portals and Internet news sources, including America Online, Excite, Yahoo!, FoxNews.com, NYTimes.com and washingtonpost.com. These portals reached 85 to 90 percent of Internet users.[74]

In both 1998 and 2000 Web White & Blue promoted its site and launched main features in October, just before the election, rather than trying to sustain a Web site during the off-election season.

The Rolling Cyber Debate launched October 1, 2000, and ran until Election Day. Questions were chosen from thousands submitted by users and the candidates responded to one each day (33 questions total) along with presenting their own "message of the day." Topics ranged from education to the Supreme Court and police brutality.

The candidates' comments were generally not very provocative and attracted little media attention. For example, one question posed was about the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, and the response from Al Gore was indicative of what candidates offered.

*Question: "Did President Clinton commit perjury during the Lewinsky investigation? If you had been in Congress, would you have voted to impeach him? And, most importantly, will you pardon Clinton if you are elected president?" Submitted from James of Camarillo, California through washingtonpost.com (10/10/00)*

*Answer from Al Gore:*

*"Priorities For The Future: This election is not about the past. It is about the future, and it is important that we remain focused on the future.*

*I'm focusing my campaign on plans to help parents and strengthen families. I want to make sure that our current prosperity and surplus benefit not just*

*the few, but all families."[75]*

User traffic was very low before the debate began, and while it increased in October traffic was never high. About 40 percent of the site's traffic came through one of the 17 portal sites; another 15 percent was referred by online news articles.

Both major presidential candidates participated for the entire debate, an impressive amount of work for the campaigns to prepare and vet a message and a question response each day. The broad syndication of the Web site may have helped convince campaigns to participate. Like several for-profit Web sites, Web White & Blue enlisted blue chip political heavyweights to add cachet to their project, and these advisors may have helped convince campaigns to take part. Despite the obvious similarities between online and off-line debates, the Rolling Cyber Debate did not coordinate its activities with the Commission on Presidential Debates, which organized the television debates.

The response of the 17 portals to the project, which required no resources on their part, was overwhelmingly positive. Unfortunately, despite a hope that this collaborative network could be maintained, organizers did not do so for the 2004 election.[76]

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64 For more information and a position statement of Project Vote Smart, see the Web site at http://www.vote-smart.org/index.htm and Project Vote Smart. 2002 Voter's Self-Defense Manual Project Vote Smart, 2002 [cited 26 April 2004]. Available from www.vote-smart.org/.

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# Epilogue

**W**thin days of the November 2000 election, despite a close race that was drawing huge news audiences, some for-profit Web sites were already down to skeleton crews. For many, the writing had been on the wall for months. Grassroots.com had begun to retool during the campaign as executives realized Internet advertising would not support the business. At Politics.com, whose stock had sunk below 20 cents a share, only a single employee updated election night results, and it closed soon thereafter.[77]

In October 2000 the projected monthly audience at Voter.com was roughly a million people, making it by far the most accessed nonpartisan political Web site and one of the most popular political sites. (Voter.com's projected audience skyrocketed in November, but

Internet users report that they often check news online during the day, typically while at work, and traffic to news Web sites is heaviest during the workday.[80] We believe that this pattern of usage to nonpartisan political Web sites is probably about the same, although little supporting data are available.

Several organizations spent lavishly to promote their sites at the political conventions, particularly at the first convention, the Republican meeting in Philadelphia that began in late July. But traffic to nonpartisan political Web sites during the conventions was disappointing. This is not surprising because the conventions were not exciting news events, as shown by their low television ratings, and the networks had also cut back coverage. Web sites saw this cutback as an opportunity to fill the demand for news, but little demand materialized. The number of online visitors to

> The conventions were not exciting news events, as shown by their low television ratings, and the networks had also cut back coverage. Web sites saw this cutback as an opportunity to fill the demand for news, but little demand materialized.

mostly during the disputed post-election ballot count.) By comparison, CNN.com had a monthly audience of between 10 and 18 million in October and November.[78] Other media sites such as washingtonpost.com and NYTimes.com drew between four and seven million in October and November. (All three were among the top 10 media sites at the time.) In December 2000, Internet traffic at all these sites dropped off.

Traffic throughout 1999 and 2000 was fairly volatile, so a major news event, a highly successful promotion or the newest online gimmick could dramatically drive traffic. GoVote saw huge increases in traffic from its VoteMatch program in early 2000. In the days following the disputed 2000 election traffic shot up sharply, setting new records as people logged in to read the latest developments on media and politics Web sites.[79]

the top four news sites actually fell 14 percent during the first week of the Republican convention. There were fewer online journalists and a smaller online presence at the Democratic convention two weeks later.[81]

Leading up to the election, traffic to many nonpartisan political Web sites increased at a rate faster than that of mass media Web sites (see Figure). Though traffic to nonpartisan political Web sites was far less than traffic to media sites such as CNN.com or washingtonpost.com, the increase in traffic just before the election was disproportionately larger at nonpartisan sites. After the election, mass media sites — though not nonpartisan sites — continued to enjoy very high traffic into November as the controversy in Florida played out. One explanation of this is that users looking for candidate or voting information went to nonpartisan sites before the election.

## Figure 12: Projected Audience for NYTimes.com, washingtonpost.com and CNN.com, 2000
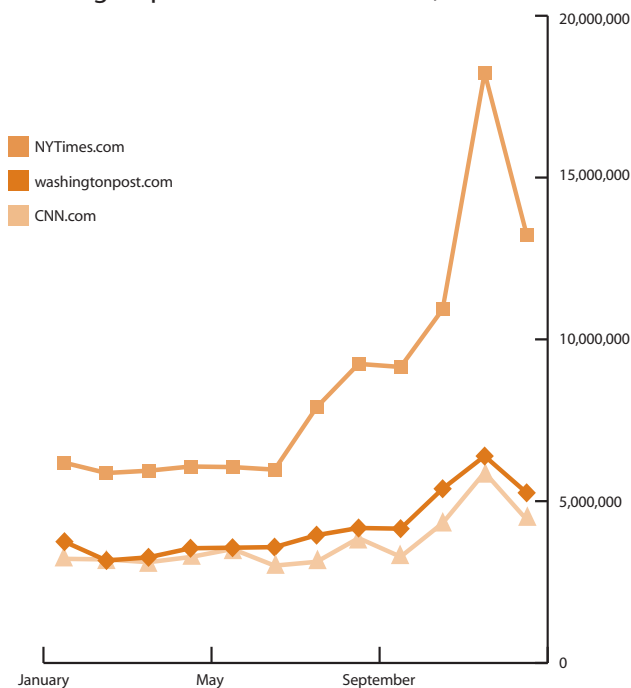


Legend:
- NYTimes.com
- washingtonpost.com
- CNN.com

Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work. In general, data from 2000 must be considered broad estimates. See Appendix A for methodology.

## Figure 13: Percent Monthly Increase in Projected Audience for Various Web sites, September-November 2000

| WEB SITE | SEPTEMBER % | OCTOBER % | NOVEMBER % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vote Smart | 24 | 224 | -7 |
| CalVoter | 325 | 29 | 44 |
| Politics.com | 17 | 297 | -1 |
| DNet | 22 | 204 | 6 |
| Web White & Blue | 187 | 631 | -65 |
| Issues2000 | 152 | 284 | -23 |
| Speakout.com | 56 | 123 | -6 |
| | | | |
| NYTimes.com | 0 | 30 | 19 |
| CNN.com | 36 | 19 | 67 |
| washingtonpost.com | -48 | 32 | 36 |

Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work. In general, data from 2000 must be considered broad estimates. See Appendix A for important considerations about methodology. Percents calculated as the monthly increase over the previous month.

After they had voted, they went to news sites for election updates and commentary.

Throughout the campaign many political Web sites looked like works in progress. Sites such as Voter.com, which appealed to candidates for information, were unprepared when candidates failed to respond. Grassroots.com depended on advocacy groups to submit their Web sites and on users to form groups. Without a critical mass of users, discussants or submitted user-created content, those site features had little value. Some sites looked amateurish. Technology often failed. Freedom Channel had bigger technology challenges than other sites because it relied more on video. Only users with very fast connections could reliably and efficiently access videos. At the Republican convention, which was expected to showcase Internet politics, photographs online were grainy and slow to download. Live convention chat rooms failed to work.[82]

These organizations and their Web sites can be criticized for their frequent lack of focus and uncertain goals. As it became clear that advertising would not support the business model, they failed to seek additional revenue. Coordination among the Web sites was poor or nonexistent. In some cases, sites did not link to similar sites because they saw them as competitors. Sites duplicated efforts, and made little attempt to carve out niches or to document their successes. (The competitive attitude we observed also suggests that organizers saw themselves more as entrepreneurs than part of a nonprofit community.) Nonprofit foundations are less likely to fund duplicative efforts, and were looking for more bang for their buck through projects with documented, visible effects, especially after the dot-com collapse reduced the market value of their endowments. Duplication of effort divvied up an already small online audience for political information. (Similarly, the small pie of political advertising space was divvied up among too many sellers.)

Sites also generally did not add much value to information obtained from candidates or campaigns, other than organizing it in one location and categorizing it by issues or races. Sites were generally not selective in their choice of candidate information, and they did not attempt to edit it. This is largely due to their efforts to remain nonpartisan,[83] but also to the labor and cost of generating original content. The sites also tended to under-emphasize issues and independent comparisons on issues by third parties (although there were excep-

tions to both of these observations).[84]

Many sites we studied also did not recognize and exploit for more serious purposes the entertainment aspect of American politics. One of the most interesting elements of the 2000 campaign online was what some scholars call the "carnival" aspect of political Web sites, which reflects the subversive nature of the Internet, and encompasses satire, parody, insults and violating social norms. One example was a parody site of George W. Bush's environmental record in Texas sponsored by the Democratic National Committee (iknowwhatyoudidintexas.com). Another example was "slap sites," where users could click a button to slap a candidate's face on a cartoon body. Scholars have argued that these examples of political carnival online may spur citizen engagement.[85] These sites probably shied away from humor because of the threat of appearing partisan. In addition, as we noted, sites often got information from the campaigns that was staid and conventional (Voter.com at one point charged parties to post information).

## notes

[77] Kirby, Carrie. "The Party's Over; Even with a presidency at stake, political Web sites didn't generate much interest." *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 November 2000, D1.

[78] This data is from the Nielsen//NetRatings home and work panels and is an estimate. See Appendix A for details about our estimates of 2000 Internet traffic.

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[81] Reinert, Patty. "Internet picks up where TV leaves off; Lack of public interest opens other, more innovative channels to explore." *The Houston Chronicle*, 30 July 2000, A29. Some observers have argued that little public interest in the conventions is due to the lack of television coverage. See Lambrecht, Bill. "As TV tunes out of convention coverage, dozens of Internet outlets sign on." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 30 July 2000, A7. Convention web site traffic is from Martinson, Jane. "American eye: Online politics proves a turn-off." *The Guardian*, 28 August 2000, 30.

[82] Cornfield, Michael. "The Internet and the 2000 Republican Convention: An Appraisal." Cambridge, Mass.: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, 2000, Jalonick, Mary Clare. "Making Sense of Political Portals: Deconstructing Grassroots Voter Sites." *Campaigns & Elections*, May 2000, Wayne, Leslie. "Online Coverage Fell Short of the Hype." *The New York Times*, 19 August 2000, 12.

[83] Despite the slipperiness of a concept such as "nonpartisan," it is remarkable how easily nonpartisan political Web sites were able to work with it. We encountered very few complaints of unfairness or partiality leveled against these Web sites.

[84] Davis, Richard, and Bruce Bimber. "The Internet in Campaign 2000: How Political Web Sites Reinforce Partisan Engagement." Santa Barbara, Calif.: Center for Information Technology and Society, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002.

[85] Foot, Kirsten A., and Steven M. Schneider. "Online Action in Campaign 2000: An Exploratory Analysis of the U.S. Political Web Sphere." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 46, no. 2 (2002): 222-244.

# Assessment

**M**argolis and Resnick offer an insightful characterization of the evolution of politics online.

> *Political life on the Internet has moved away from fluid cyber-communities, in which civic life centers around free discussion and debate. It has entered an era of organized civil society and structured group pluralism with a relatively passive citizenry.*[86]

This "organized civil society and structured group pluralism" refers in part to the commercialization of political information and the increasing dominance of portals and political groups. Political information online has moved from an election cycle of experimentation into a new phase marked by several broad changes. Technology has advanced and more people and more organizations are online. Both Internet availability and broadband service have grown, which has greatly improved the usability of the Internet. Broadband users spend more time on the Internet and tend to use it for more things.[87] Broadband also makes possible new forms of video and online advertising.

Online politics has followed the pattern of political television use and become professionalized. More firms of political consultants and campaign organizers specialize in politics online, and other indications of the field's growing professionalization are clear. There is a growing body of literature as well as more professional organizations and meetings. We are also seeing the maturation of a multimillion dollar industry engaged in disseminating political and election information, and in facilitating communication within organizations and between those organizations and government. These businesses make it easier for advocacy groups to contact their members, keep records of those contacts, and facilitate communication with elected officials.

The Howard Dean campaign directed the energy of online politics to "social networking" with its possibilities for energizing and directing a political campaign. Supporters of the Dean campaign extensively used online discussion groups, Web logs and e-mail. Starting from scratch with little name recognition, Dean raised more money more quickly than anyone before, much of it online and much of it from small donors. One result of this network of volunteers was a sense of empowerment and involvement among its members, and the potential to quickly raise millions of dollars.[88] Database technology and nearly costless communication make it financially worthwhile for candidates to appeal to small donors, and donors can instantly give in response to an advertisement or political speech. The early stages of the 2004 campaign saw a dramatic increase in the number of small donors.[89] This may be the most significant longlasting impact of the Internet on politics — potentially reducing the political power of big money donors.

The early stages of the 2004 campaign saw a dramatic increase in the number of small donors. This may be the most significant longlasting impact of the Internet on politics — potentially reducing the political power of big money donors.

The earliest nonpartisan political Web sites came from two different sources. The first was organizations already engaged in providing political information in other ways, which simply moved their resources and activities online. The second was a group of early innovators, including some genuine visionaries in online politics. Most early sites were nonprofit. Our research shows that already-established organizations — both nonprofit and for-profit organizations — were more successful in putting political information online than were organizations founded solely to create a nonpartisan political Web site. That success was both in the presentation and management of the Web site and in the established organizations' ability to survive.

Before the 2000 election nonprofit nonpartisan political Web sites enjoyed the benefits of a period of liberal funding for nonprofits. Many nonprofit funders such as The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Carnegie Corporation and the Markle Foundation invested

heavily in projects to enhance democracy. These were voter participation projects, youth vote projects and nonpartisan political projects, most tied to the Internet in some way. Nonprofit funding is like venture capital in one respect: It is also susceptible to the allure of trends and hot ideas, and citizen engagement projects online were hot. Foundations saw unique projects and were attracted by the prospect of breaking new ground. The entrepreneurial fever that led to the founding of many dot coms together with the unusual availability of funding prompted people in the nonprofit world to embark on untested ventures.

In a few cases, such as with DebateAmerica, funding was cut at least in part because of declining foundation resources, before the project was really off the ground. DebateAmerica organizers have argued that the project did not have adequate time or funding to prove itself.[90]

New nonprofit organizations, like new for-profit businesses, typically fail in large numbers, especially in their first few years. After the dot-com crash there was a significant shakeout among online nonprofits of all types. Part of this was due to the slow adoption of online fundraising for nonprofit organizations, the weak online advertising market, and startups without viable business plans.[91] Nonprofit organizations are only beginning to tap online fund-raising and have high hopes for its potential.

The sum that nonprofit foundations invested in nonpartisan political Web sites was not large compared to other project areas and certainly not compared to venture capital funding. Four of the largest nonprofit foundations in this area dedicated between $9 and $10 million between 1999 and 2001 to projects that were either nonpartisan political Web sites or projects to assess online efforts to improve democracy.[92] The nonprofit money for nonpartisan Web sites funded relatively few projects, and major efforts took the bulk of the funding. For example, the Markle Foundation devoted about $2.6 million to the Web White & Blue project, more than half of what it spent in this area. Freedom Channel gathered millions in grants from a variety of foundations. The Pew Charitable Trusts devoted more than $2.5 million to two large assessment projects. By comparison, one analysis of five prominent for-profit Web sites estimated their total investment in 1999 and 2000 at $69 million.[93]

While $10 million is a lot of money, nonprofit funding for these sites was less than for other foundation

## Figure 14: Percent of Adults with Broadband Internet Access at Home, June 2000-February 2004
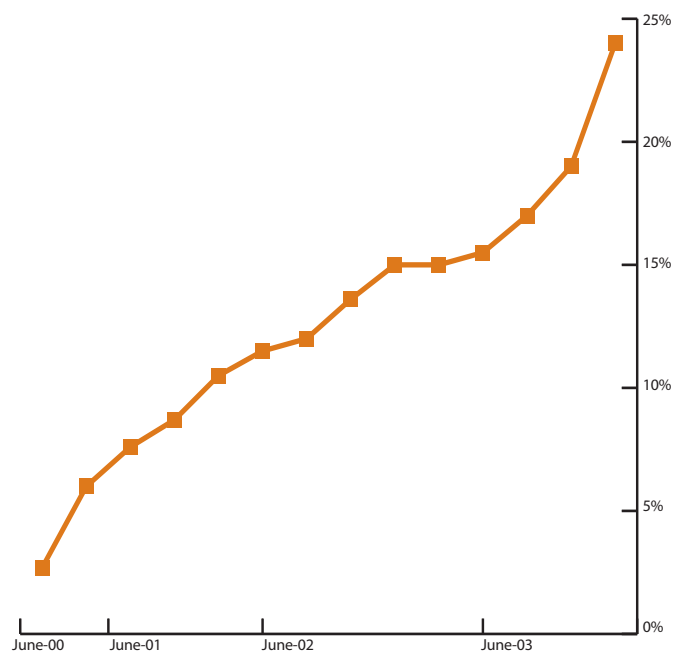


Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

initiatives. Campaign finance reform was a priority for many years for several large foundations, which gave projects addressing finance reform more than $65 million between 1996 and 2001.[94] The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act was passed in early 2002. (Perhaps importantly, passage of the act provided a tangible, well-publicized result for the foundations' efforts, which did not follow upon their funding of nonpartisan political Web sites.)

Most major foundation initiatives online did not survive. Freedom Channel, DebateAmerica and Web White & Blue spent more than $5 million in foundation grants, and while they all attracted some media attention, none drew significant user traffic. This may have influenced the failing verdict given nonpartisan Web sites after the election and discouraged foundations from continuing work in this area. One foundation officer pointed out that these were intended as demonstration projects to test new ideas and were nor necessarily expected to be self-sustaining. While this is true, we do not believe this lessened the criticism when they closed. In speaking with observers and Web site organizers, few took this into account when passing judgment on the 2000 election.

In our interviews with these organizers of nonprofit sites, many saw themselves as Internet innovators or political operatives, not as custodians of nonprofit organizations. There are all sorts of resources for nonprofit organizations, such as funding and organizing expertise and membership associations. Yet most of our interviewees were unaware of these resources and generally did not see themselves as having the same concerns and priorities as other nonprofit organizations. Nonpartisan political Web sites are organizations dedicated to a particular goal that happen to use the Internet. By viewing their projects as Internet innovations or vaguely defined dot-com projects, organizers did not focus on meeting the goals they had set or the sustainability of their projects. We believe that Web sites tapped expertise and experience in politics and technol-

ogy, but largely overlooked expertise in nonprofit management. Future efforts need to access these resources and bring on board experienced staff in this field who understand working toward long-term sustainability.

Nonpartisan political Web sites have a particular problem that other nonprofits do not. They offer benefits that are not conducive to membership fund-raising. These Web sites offer what economists call "public goods" — such as a more informed electorate or more democratic discussion. Unfortunately, public goods are pretty much all that they offer, and such goods are not the kind of valuable membership benefit that most people expect from a nonprofit organization that asks them for money. If you join AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), you gain a voice in collective action — lobbying efforts — and all sorts of services such as newsletters, magazines and cheaper insurance. You receive "private goods." If you become a dues paying member of a nonpartisan political Web site, however, your only benefit is the knowledge that you are contributing to a public good. Your personal benefit from the site is small, and because everyone shares in the "public good" of freely available political information, you have little incentive to contribute.

Many other nonprofit organizations that trade in public goods either have a highly motivated constituency or offer other incentives to their members. For example, organizations that raise money for medical research rely on people touched by the affliction in some way. People whose lives are touched by cancer donate to cancer-fighting nonprofits, and the fund-raising appeals for these organizations are built around suggesting that everyone is a member of the constituency because of the prominence of the affliction.

Because these Web sites are nonpartisan, members and visitors do not share the benefits of engaging in a common political purpose. These are benefits one obtains from joining a political party or lobbying organization. Benefits can also attach to shared animosity or opposition, such as joining an anti-union

organization or a pro-campaign finance reform organization. The very nature of nonpartisan Web sites, which cannot rely on either shared solidarity or any emotional benefit except democratic principle, seems to undermine this means of attracting membership and convincing members to pay dues.

Nonpartisan political Web sites that ask for membership dues or contributions are also asking for money from an audience that is used to getting its Internet information for free. News media Web sites have had little success in persuading people to pay for access. Slate.com tried charging users, but was forced to return to a free model. The strongest, most visible exception is the Wall Street Journal, which charges users for online access, but has a unique high-income audience that highly values access to the Journal's content.

One solution to this problem has been to make available to contributors of these Web sites some sort of "private good," or some other benefit. Some sites have worked on this, but with limited success. E-thepeople

ders felt that if sites became commercial, the foundations should bow out. While foundations had millions of dollars for these projects, they were dwarfed by the potential funding venture capitalists could raise. Foundations reconsidered their funding, thinking they were about to be eclipsed by a new for-profit industry.[95]

One of the reasons for-profit businesses failed was because their business plans placed value on market share, user lists, databases and speculative assets. This was not unusual to the business of online politics. In 1994, one Internet service provider had a stock valuation of more than $2,000 per subscriber, each of whom paid about $20 a month for service.[96] The potential for making money in online politics may also have been hyped by examples such as GoVote, whose founder got in early, used new features to quickly attract a large audience, left before the crash and walked away with a huge profit. Some online politics firms had no business plan at all.[97] Again this was not unusual among all sorts of Internet businesses begun during the highly specula-

> One of the reasons for-profit businesses failed was because their business plans placed value on market share, user lists, databases and speculative assets. This was not unusual to the business of online politics. In 1994, one Internet service provider had a stock valuation of more than $2,000 per subscriber, each of whom paid about $20 a month for service.

members gain greater access to the site (the right to post). We believe, though, that it will be difficult to make a user-pay model work.

Project Vote Smart is an exception to this. Vote Smart now claims more than 45,000 dues paying members. (However, anyone may use the site and access the databases.) Vote Smart offers tangible donor benefits, such as affiliation with a well-known organization and several publications (although they are also available free online). The organization has extended its reach by convincing libraries and media outlets to link to and promote the site, and it has been more successful than most other sites in garnering press coverage.

The entrance of for-profit enterprises into the marketplace of nonpartisan political Web sites had several effects. Nonprofit organizers feared that funding would dry up if foundations saw that for-profit businesses could successfully offer political information. Some fun-

tive late 1990s. Venture capital to sustain these businesses disappeared, however, when the bottom dropped out of online advertising and investors shunned any business built on that model.

The nonpartisan political Web site businesses that survived were well-established before 2000. In fact, like a few successful nonprofits, they had adapted existing business models to the Internet, rather than focusing on Internet applications alone. A few surviving nonpartisan Web sites re-tooled into consulting and communications businesses. Most of them have left the business of providing political information to a general audience.

At least two sites spun off from a for-profit business back into a nonprofit, E-thepeople and the League of Women Voters' DNet (which eventually moved its site for a third time back to a for-profit business, Capitol Advantage). Within the nonprofit community this was not an unusual move after the dot-com crash.

Several for-profit environmental and health Web sites, for example, determined a nonprofit structure better fit their goals.[98] We found no examples of nonprofit political Web sites moving to a for-profit model.

The entrance of for-profit businesses raised the question of whether nonpartisan political information online should remain commercial or nonprofit. Many major foundations have stopped funding these projects, and one indicated it is not interested in doing so again. Nonetheless, a variety of current nonpartisan Web sites are nonprofit organizations. A few (Vote Smart, The California Voter Foundation, E-thepeople) appear to have built sustainable financial models, and they continue to rely — and receive — support from nonprofit foundations. Several organizers said they have better luck soliciting foundation support for special initiatives or one-time projects, not continuing operations.

The major for-profit player is Capitol Advantage, which operates the Congress.org site. Its association with the League of Women voters is essentially a public-private partnership, with the League adding election content and Capitol Advantage providing distribution. Congress.org is not a self-sustaining for-profit enterprise (although Capitol Advantage is). Campaign issue information for the site is gathered by volunteers for the League of Women Voters Education Fund, and the data are organized along with Capitol Advantage's database of elected officials. Although the service dovetails with Capitol Advantage's other products, the company operates the Congresss.org part of its Web site at a loss.[99] Gathering issue information for the site is a labor-intensive process conducted by League volunteers, and they encounter the common problem that candidates fail to respond, so information for some races is spotty.

The content of Capitol Advantage includes information on elected officials, voting records, current legislation and even the media. A user can input a ZIP code, for example, to get names and contact information of elected officials and local media. The Congress.org site makes money through advertising, charging for hand-delivered messages to elected officials and charging individuals or organizations a nominal fee to post information in a "Soapbox" section. Capitol Advantage became an important Internet destination for political information because of its strategy of distributing its content through other major portals and on Web sites visited by people interested in political information, rather than

trying to make itself a portal, which was the tactic of Voter.com, Grassroots.com and others. The core of the Capitol Advantage business is distributing this political content and providing software platforms and expertise to organizations, such as advocacy groups and corporations, which enable them to better communicate with constituents and with government.

Some observers think that nonpartisan political information should not be entrusted to a for-profit enterprise.

> *A deeper problem is that all commercial firms must settle conflicts between profits and civic values in favor of profits. Nonprofit groups can, on the other hand, pursue their own understandings of the public's interests and obligations. … Managers of a business cannot put any conception of the public good ahead of their private goals.[100]*

The introduction of for-profit dot-coms was criticized as "the commercialization of democracy."[101] When Grassroots.com took control of the League of Women Voters' DNet in early 2000 the deal was derided as "auctioning off control of the public agenda" by giving control of election information to a commercial enterprise.[102] (When DNet was transferred to Capitol Advantage in 2003 there was no public complaint.)

Other observers suggest that the profit motive may not always be consonant with democratic ideals. For example, if costs for obtaining information about third-party candidates rise, should for-profit businesses absorb those costs in order to present information about all candidates? Should they be expected to? Ralph Nader has evoked this issue in 2000 and 2004 by insisting he is a viable candidate and should be treated like the major party candidates. Other observers argue that particular concerns arise from political information Web sites operated by businesses or advocacy organizations (such as AARP or the National Rifle Association). These concerns include *opacity*, which is "blocking or obscuring information about the motivations, biases and policies that guide the sites' production," and *redlining*, which is "declaring some candidates, issues or positions 'out of bounds' and not providing coverage for them."[103] For-profit businesses which need to sustain a profit and organizations whose goal is issue advocacy may be particularly at risk of opacity and redlining.

Several nonprofit organizers assert that nonpartisan political projects such as the Web sites we reviewed, which are intended to foster a public good, should not

have to be self-sustaining. Fostering or promoting civic life is not a for-profit endeavor, nor should we expect it to be one. While these projects need to do a better job of finding funding, they argue, foundations should accept the long-term commitment to finance nonpartisan political information online in the same manner in which they finance other projects.[104]

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## notes

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[93] The sites were Voter.com, Vote.com, SpeakOut.com, Grassroots.com and Politics.com. See Kirby, Carrie. "The Party's Over; Even with a presidency at stake, political Web sites didn't generate much interest." *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 November 2000, D1.

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# Web Traffic

This report has not dwelt on issues of Web traffic, partly because of incomplete data and the debate over which measure is most appropriate, whether it is unique visitors, pages viewed or something else. We consider the basic facts regarding Web traffic in 2000 fairly clear. Although a few nonpartisan sites drew much higher traffic than others, traffic overall was much lower than media sites and lower than what was expected. It was disappointing throughout the campaign, even during conventions saturated with media attention. Traffic was at its highest in October, right before the election.[105]

We can view Web traffic differently by aggregating the audience across groups of sites, which suggests that the audience for nonpartisan political information is perhaps not as small as is generally argued. We find that between 1.5 and two million people a month accessed eight nonpartisan political Web sites in October and November 2000, not including Voter.com. Voter.com had a 637,000 in September, 1 million in October and 2.4 million in November. Voter.com and Vote.com provided news and election information, which may have made these sites more attractive in the days after the election, when public interest was very high. Traffic to the campaign sites was roughly comparable, rising from one to three million from September through November. The projected audience for three mass media sites — CNN.com, NYTimes.com and washingtonpost.com — rose from 16.6 to 30.5 million from September to November.

There is a methodological problem in looking at the data like this. Users who visited more than one site may have been counted more than once. There is some evidence that people who visit one news site visit others as well, and it is logical to assume that people who visit one nonpartisan political Web site will have visited others. On the other hand, the lower profile of these sites suggests that may be less likely than, say, someone visiting both CNN.com and NYTimes.com in the same month.

We suggest that we should consider the entire audience for nonpartisan political information online, and that this audience was larger than generally believed in the months before the election. In October 2000, 1.9 million people visited these eight nonpartisan political Web sites. (Of course, there were also many others.) About one million visited Voter.com, and more than 20 million visitors hit three major media sites, sites that enjoyed much greater name recognition, publicity and access from major Internet portals. Most are really portals themselves.

There was a broad perception that traffic was low, however, and this mattered in several ways. First, journalists reported traffic as low and dubbed these Web sites failures.[106] Second, nonprofit funders saw the low traffic results and were less inclined to continue funding.[107] Third, this perception mattered because site organizers thought it mattered. There may be other means by which these sites could have measured their success, but no one proposed another yardstick.

Although the data are still spotty in 2004, it appears that the number of visitors to nonpartisan political Web sites through March 2004 is equal to or greater than traffic in 2000 (see Figure). Throughout 2003, a non-election year, this group of eight Web sites attracted between 250,000 and 750,000 users a month. Traffic appears to be increasing through the campaign.

However, traffic to nonpartisan political Web sites seems likely to fall far behind traffic to the candidate's Web sites, which have become hubs for the campaigns, and even further behind the traffic collected by Capitol Advantage's distributed content. Both major party campaign sites in 2004 have attracted large numbers of users. The campaigns work hard to direct traffic to their sites with e-mail newsletters and online advertising, and fund-raising clearly accounts for a fair amount of the traffic.

Criticism of low user traffic to nonpartisan political web sites is not necessarily valid. One of the major changes in 2004 has been the surge in grassroots organizing of political activists. Howard Dean built a presidential campaign on grassroots mobilization, and Moveon.org and similar groups are wielding political power by using the Internet to inform and mobilize their members.

We suggest that communication be seen as a two-step process. A strategy of communicating with activists or influentials is one that Web site organizers should consider in planning to present political information online and in assessing success. Visitors to nonpartisan Web sites were highly partisan, and most had already decided whom to vote for when they visited.[108] Site organizers say they felt their audience was clearly more educated, politically involved and technologically adept than the general public. Influentials is a term coined to describe the most politically influential citizens, who have great influence over their peers in matters from politics to fashion to recommendations for local restaurants.[109] People who access political information online are, most likely, disproportionately influentials. These people are then influential among their peers. Viewed this way, the influence of nonpartisan political Web sites extends not only through people who view the Web site (step 1), but through people who view the Web site and then pass along their opinions on to others (step 2). Therefore, organizers of nonpartisan political Web sites and those trying to assess the impact of these Web sites need to look not just at how many people use the site, but at who those people are, and take into account their social networks.

## notes

[105] Voter.com was the exception. Its traffic doubled from October to November, but the site also offered election news.

[106] Kirby, Carrie. "The Party's Over; Even with a presidency at stake, political Web sites didn't generate much interest." *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 November 2000, D1.

[107] Schmitt, Mark. Telephone interview with Mark Schmitt, director of policy and research, U.S. Programs, Open Society Institute, 14 July 2003.

[108] Davis, Richard, and Bruce Bimber. "The Internet in Campaign 2000: How Political Web Sites Reinforce Partisan Engagement." Santa Barbara, Calif.: Center for Information Technology and Society, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002.

[109] Keller, Ed, and Jon Berry. *The Influentials*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.

Figure 15: Projected Audience for Voter.com and Eight Other Nonpartisan Political Web Sites, September-November 2000
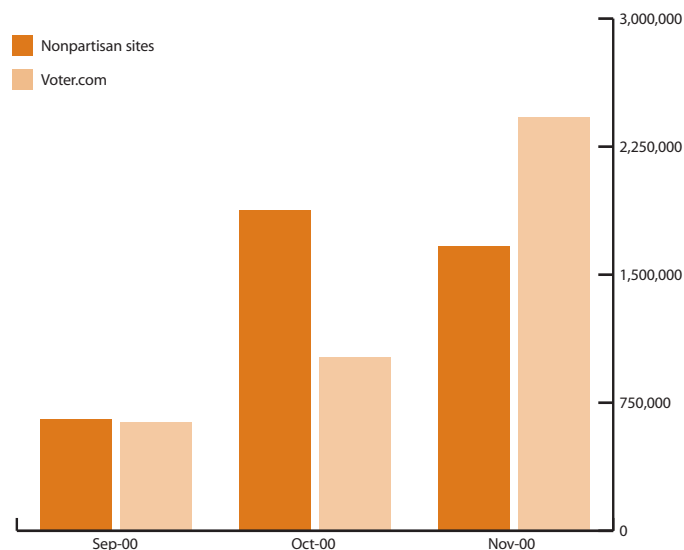


Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Eight nonpartisan political Web sites were selected because data were available: Vote Smart, Calvoter, Politics.com, DNet, Web White & Blue, Issues2000, Speakout and Grassroots. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work. In general, data from 2000 must be considered broad estimates. See Appendix A for methodology.

Figure 16: Projected Audience for Candidate and Party Web Sites Combined, January 2003-April 2004
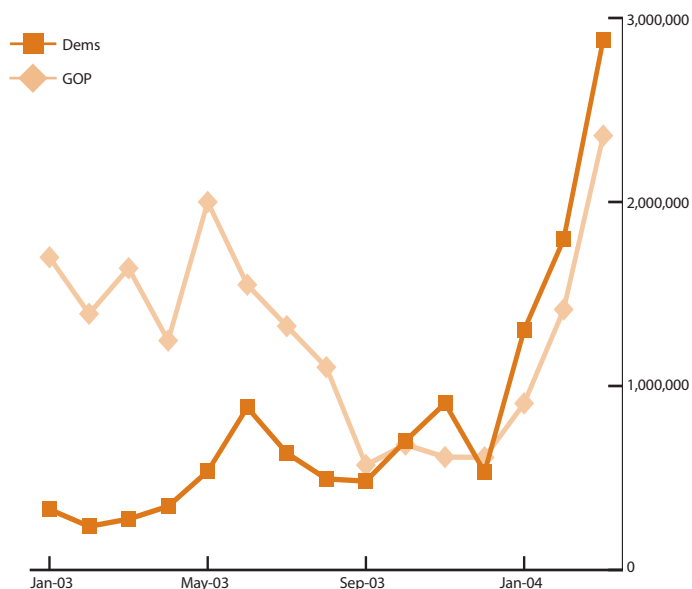


Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at both home and work. Projections are the total of the campaign site and party site for each party. See Appendix A for methodology.

# The Demand for Political Information

**W**e live in a nation where a small group of people show a high demand for political information, while most citizens have little interest in politics. Interest can spike dramatically during times of national crisis, but usually most people do not care much about politics in the United States.

In 1996 about 12 percent of those 18 and over said they got some political or policy news online, and about four percent said they got information about the presidential election.[110] In a study of Internet users, between 20 and 25 percent said they visited Web sites with campaign information, read discussion group postings about the election, and read election news

source for election news, but for most people the Internet supplements other media use. During the 2002 election, an off-presidential year, 11 percent of Internet users said the Internet was their primary source of election news.[112] Going to the Internet for political news is a purposive act, unlike watching television, which is often background noise to our lives. Because of that, the Internet may be a more valuable source of political information than these numbers suggest.

Internet users were generally more interested in issue information than in personal information about candidates, and critics faulted nonpartisan political Web sites for failing to cater to this interest.[113] We believe that Internet users also have high expectations of finding online all the political information they want.

> We live in a nation where a small group of people show a high demand for political information, while most citizens have little interest in politics.

online during the 1996 campaign.[111] These users were a highly educated and well-paid elite, and they were huge news consumers.

The Internet is becoming an increasingly important source of news in a fragmented news landscape. Television is still dominant, but its audience share is decreasing. The Internet is a source of political news on par with public television, political news programs and weekly news magazines. About a third of Internet users went online for election news in the 2000 presidential election, which amounts to about 18 percent of the general public. There is a small percentage of the general public who consider the Internet the primary

### Figure 17: Do You Go Online for Election News?
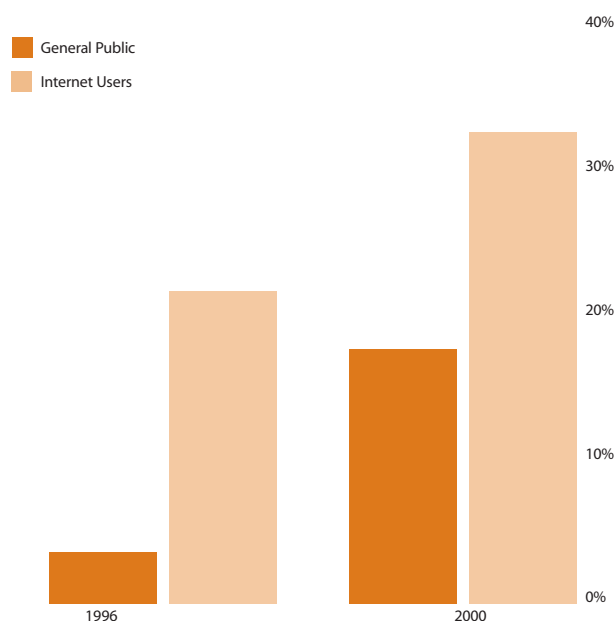


General Public
Internet Users

Source: "Political Sites Gain, But Major News Sites Still Dominant: Modest Increase in Internet Use for Campaign 2002." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003.

Advances in search engine technology, especially Google, and the increasing availability of other government and political information online have raised expectations. People seek out political information online because it is convenient and not found elsewhere, and they overwhelmingly look to media Web sites first. The traffic for the major news media Web sites dwarfs that of any political Web site. More than half of Internet users list national media Web sites when asked where they go for election news online; another 30 percent list other news sites. Only 20 percent say they use political or issue-oriented Web sites when looking for election news. In another study, only 14 percent of Internet users in 2002 said they visited nonpartisan political Web sites, and 12 percent said they visited partisan Web sites.[114]

The audience for political information will grow in 2004. Roughly half of American adults were online in November 2000, and we estimate that close to 70 percent will be online in November 2004. Broadband

## Figure 18: Reasons for Going Online for Election News, 2002



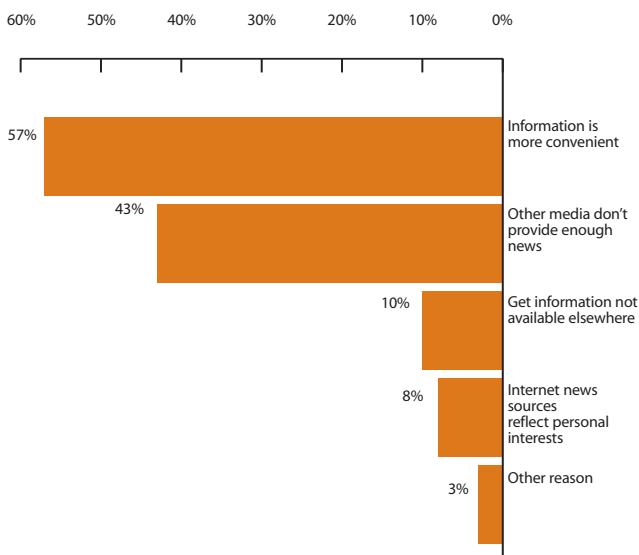| | |
|---|---|
| 57% | Information is more convenient |
| 43% | Other media don't provide enough news |
| 10% | Get information not available elsewhere |
| 8% | Internet news sources reflect personal interests |
| 3% | Other reason |

Source: "Political Sites Gain, But Major News Sites Still Dominant: Modest Increase in Internet Use for Campaign 2002." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003. Responses are based on those who go online for election news. Numbers may add to more than 100 percent because respondents could give more than one reason.

## Figure 19: Election News Sources Online, 2002



| 2000 | 2002 | |
|---|---|---|
| 47% | 52% | National news sites, like CNN or NYT |
| 12% | 18% | Local news sites |
| 27% | 19% | News sites on commercial online services |
| 6% | 12% | State/local government sites |
| 7% | 11% | Candidate sites |
| 7% | 10% | Sites that specialize in politics |
| 4% | 9% | Issue-oriented sites |
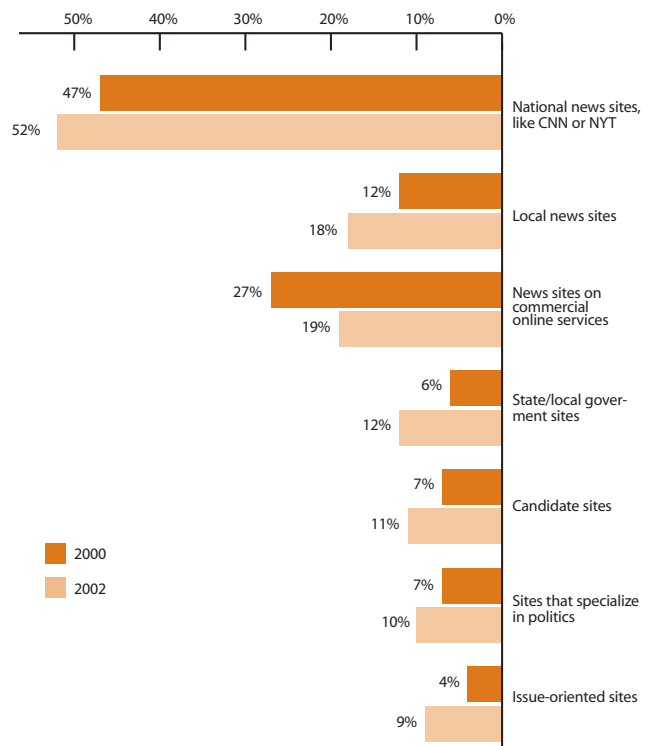
Source: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Political Sites Gain, but Major News Sites Still Dominant." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2003. Responses are based on those who go online for election news. Numbers may add to more than 100 percent because respondents could list multiple sources.

access has grown tremendously, and it is associated with users spending more time online doing a wider variety of activities. People who visited campaign Web sites and nonpartisan political Web sites in 2000 were knowledgeable about politics and high consumers of news. The new adopters of the Internet are less so. Thus, we suspect that, while online sources of political information will draw larger audiences, the rate of growth will be less than the overall increase in Internet diffusion.

Candidate sites have helped fill the demand for political information online. More people said that they visited campaign Web sites in 2002 than in 2000.[115] Traffic to campaign sites early in the 2004 campaign is dramatically higher than it was at the same period in 2000. Even taking into account measurement differences, both campaigns are receiving many times the number of hits they got in the first quarter of the election year.[116]

## Figure 20: Projected Audience for NYTimes.com washingtonpost.com and CNN.com, January 2003-April 2004
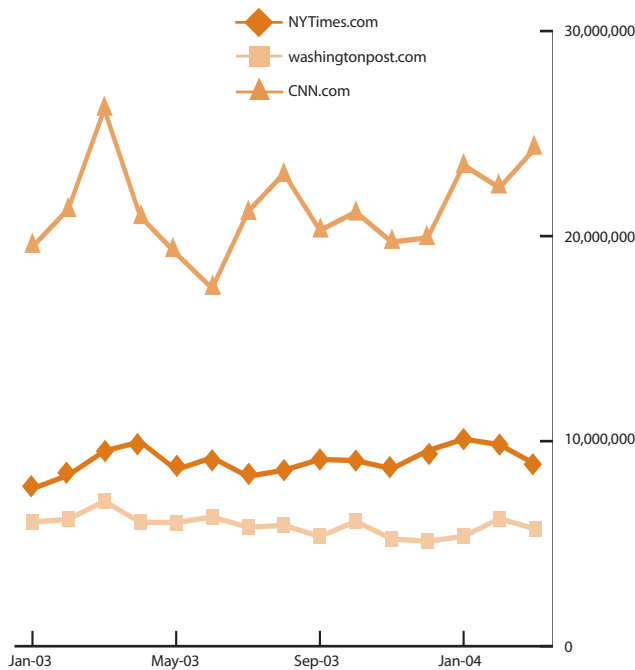


Source: Nielsen//NetRatings. Data are projections derived from Internet users at home and work.

## notes

[108] Davis, Richard, and Bruce Bimber. "The Internet in Campaign 2000: How Political Web Sites Reinforce Partisan Engagement." Santa Barbara, Calif.: Center for Information Technology and Society, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002.

[109] Keller, Ed, and Jon Berry. *The Influentials*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.

[110] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. News Attracts Most Internet Users: One-in-Ten Voters Online for Campaign '96 16 December 1996 1996 [cited 22 April 2004]. Available from http://people-press.org/.

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[112] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center For the People and the Press, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Political Sites Gain, But Major News Sites Still Dominant: Modest Increase in Internet Use for Campaign 2002." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center For The People and The Press, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003.

[113] Several Web site organizers said that issue information was key to driving Web traffic and increasing the amount of time someone spent on the site. Survey data also showed this. See also Davis, Richard, and Bruce Bimber. "The Internet in Campaign 2000: How Political Web Sites Reinforce Partisan Engagement." Santa Barbara, Calif.: Center for Information Technology and Society, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Political Sites Gain, But Major News Sites Still Dominant: Modest Increase in Internet Use for Campaign 2002." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center For The People and The Press, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003.

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[116] For example, according to Nielsen//NetRatings, the Bush/Cheney campaign Web site had a unique home-user audience of 483,000 in February and 909,000 in April 2004, compared to 210,000 in February and 246,000 in March 2000. Among users at work the results are similar. While this comparison suffers from methodological problems, it is clear that traffic is much higher in 2004. See "Kerry Overtakes Bush Online, According to Nielsen//NetRatings." New York: Nielsen//NetRatings, 2004.

# Summary[117]

- The development of nonpartisan political Web sites in the 2000 election was a rare convergence of available funding, an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit in the late 1990s, and a new technology in its infancy that provided unusual opportunities for individual publishers.
- Many sites were operated by small organizations with little overhead.
- Large foundations and venture capital were willing to fund innovative and untested programs.
- A number of Web sites entered the field late. They had carving out a piece of the market with the belief that revenue streams would appear as the field developed.
- The collapse of the dot-com boom diminished future funding for both nonprofit and for-profit Web sites. Internet advertising was no longer a potential source of funding.
- The nonpartisan political Web sites that survived were well-established before 2000. Many had business models that they adapted to the Internet, rather than starting their business during the dot-com boom focused on Internet applications alone.

The development of nonpartisan political Web sites in the 2000 election was a rare convergence of available funding, an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit in the late 1990s, and a new technology in its infancy that provided unusual opportunities for individual publishers.

no opportunity, for example, to cover a mid-term election before the 2000 presidential election.
- Ready funding prompted greater experimentation in both for-profit and nonprofit political projects.
- Nonprofit funding generally went to a few large projects and it was not a long-term sustained effort. Foundations have made such efforts in the past, such as for campaign finance reform.
- Venture capitalists vastly outspent foundations, and the presence of for-profit businesses caused foundations to balk at continuing to fund projects. Foundations feared that if a new business arena was developing nonprofits would be quickly outmatched and their investments lost.
- Coordination between sites was poor, and many sites duplicated efforts being made elsewhere. Many sites did not add much value to the information they presented, they merely offered links to media or other sources.
- There was often poor business planning, albeit not unusual in the economic climate of the late 1990s. Businesses had not clear idea where sustaining revenue would come from, but were instead interested in

- Web sites with political information are offering a "public good" that users may not be willing to fund, and a good that Internet users are also accustomed to getting free. Thus, user-funded models will be difficult to sustain.
- Web traffic to these sites was low, but we believe the criticism is unfair because (1) these sites generally had little paid promotion, (2) the potential audience is small because few Americans are interested in politics, and (3) while some sites were inter-linked, only a few sites could take advantage of large Internet portals to direct traffic to their sites.
- The demand for online political information in 2004 will be greater than in 2000, and the Internet will become an even more important source of information. Party and candidate Web sites are playing a more substantial role in the 2004 campaigns and getting more traffic.

notes

[117] This is similar to the same section in the executive summary.

# Looking Ahead

**V**isibility for nonpartisan political Web sites will be lower in 2004 as the novelty of online politics wears off and promotion becomes more difficult and expensive. Political Web sites will not have available the promotional techniques of 2000, especially free media publicity and the management of search engines. Some sites in 2000 had tremendous success getting attention and then web traffic despite spending nearly nothing on promotion. The novelty of GoVote.com attracted media attention, E-thepeople attracted hundreds of local news stories with

that relies almost exclusively on the Internet for news.

In the last few weeks before an election, traffic to political Web sites dramatically increases as people go online for information. We expect that 70 percent of the public will be online in November 2004 and perhaps half of Internet users will look for some political information online at least once.

Some sites are preparing for tremendous traffic this election. The Congress.org Web site is part of Capitol Advantage and has strong portal placement at many major sites, including media sites such as NYTimes.com and portals such as AOL. Capitol

> Visibility for nonpartisan political Web sites will be lower in 2004 as the novelty of online politics wears off and promotion becomes more difficult and expensive.

a cross-country bus tour, and Issues2000.org could finagle the search engine rules to obtain prominent placement for its site. But the novelty is gone. Nonpartisan political Web sites no longer attract press attention and free promotion. (See Figure.) In 2003 nonpartisan political Web sites dropped off the media's watch list. This source of free publicity will not come back.

Not a penny was spent on promotion by the organizer of Issues2000.org — "The entire ad campaign was be clever about how I got on to Yahoo! and Google."[118] The effects of catering to search engines are not temporary, like advertisements, and it is free. But while managing search engine placement still helps, this method of promoting Web sites is less successful than it was when search engine policies and businesses were less mature. It will grow more difficult as more Web site operators manage placement and search engines attempt to raise money by selling placement in search results.

**At the same time, the proportion of the electorate online has increased, so while it may be more difficult for Web sites to get noticed, there is a larger potential audience online.** The Internet is becoming a more important source of news, comparable to news magazines or public television, and there is a small minority

Advantage estimates it will receive 150 to 300 page views in the final month of the campaign.[119]

**We believe that the 2004 campaign will see the introduction of large online efforts at negative or attack advertising.** Public interest groups and academic researchers have yet to try monitoring online political campaigns with the same attention they pay to television and print advertising. Many newspapers and researchers conduct "ad watch" programs to refute false claims in campaign advertising,[120] but such monitoring is far less likely online. One explanation may be the public's greater tolerance for negative comments made online; further, attack messages can be sent to a narrow, often receptive audience.

Monitoring political messages through e-mail is difficult because of the personalization of e-mail lists and the large number of sources sending e-mail. National political television advertising often comes from just a few sources and can be recorded, but e-mails about the campaign come from nearly every state party and a host of other sources, making them hard to monitor. As the campaign progresses we believe the harshest negative campaign messages will be delivered online. Negative advertising online was already evident early in the 2004 campaign.[121]

There also may be more types of online mischief. The threat of fakery with false Web sites or pseudo e-mail addresses appeared in earlier campaigns, and a few cases received a lot of attention. There have also been a few cases of fake e-mails as part of smear campaigns.[122] Savvy computer pranksters have dropped "Google-bombs," or manipulated the most popular search engine so that queries lead to unexpected results. For example, early in 2004 President Bush's critics rigged Google so the phrase "miserable failure" directed users to his online biography.[123]

**Future efforts to offer nonpartisan political information online cannot rely on support from campaigns or candidates, even the weak support received in 2000.** The problem of nonparticipation from candidates will get worse. In the 2004 campaign political Web sites will have a more difficult time trying to gather information from candidates or convince them to complete candidate surveys. The proportion of candidates who respond to requests for information has declined, and even prominent candidates decline to respond to some questionnaires. With fewer nonpartisan political Web sites, and hence fewer questionnaires to campaigns, there is some hope that responsiveness will increase. Information-gathering of this kind is concentrated among a few businesses and Web sites, such as the non-profit Vote Smart and the for-profit Capitol Advantage (via DNet). The prominence of a few sites may put greater pressure on candidates to participate.[124] Unfortunately, we are not optimistic about this, and we foresee that more candidates will decline to respond.

From the candidates' perspective, the number of questionnaires has proliferated. "You get nothing but questionnaires — every union, every citizen group has a questionnaire. You are always responding to things," said one former policy director for Bill Bradley. Campaigns may feel that the possibility of losing control of the content poses a risk to the candidate that is too high compared to the potential benefit. Questionnaires from interest groups get a higher priority because they have the potential to garner endorsements.[125]

There is one other element to the participation of candidates and campaign organizers. During the 2000 election online politics was a greater novelty than in 2004. Novelty and concomitant publicity helped to win cooperation. In particular, candidates in 2000 were convinced to take part in an online debate (Web White & Blue) and to submit video position statements and

Figure 21: Press Mentions of 12 Nonpartisan Political Web Sites, January 1998-April 2004
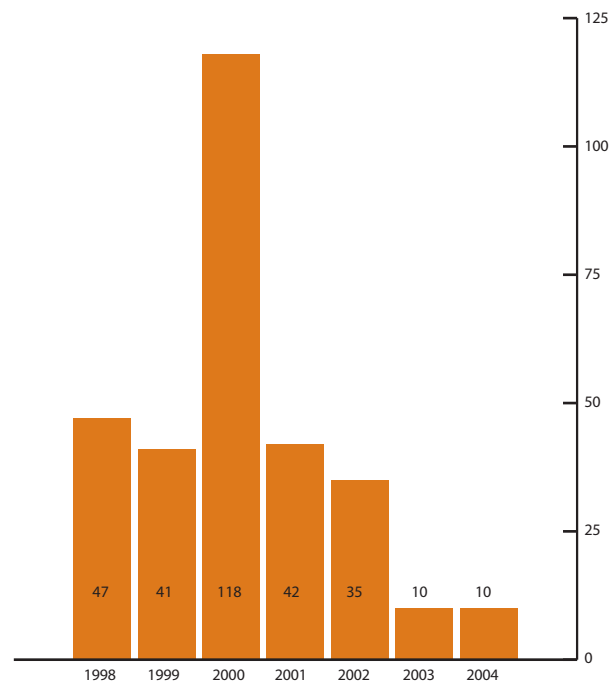


Note: Bars show the number of times 12 nonpartisan political Web sites were mentioned in 15 major U.S. newspapers through April 2004. (The remaining eight Web sites included in figure 7 were no longer available in 2004 and removed from the analysis.) See Appendix B for more information.

campaign advertisements to an online video library (Freedom Channel). The novelty of these projects has worn off, and with it the impetus for many candidates to get involved. In addition, some organizers for these projects were prominent political insiders, and their influence was clearly felt in getting cooperation from the candidates. Without such influence it is likely these projects will not win much future cooperation from candidates.[126]

Finally, political candidates and parties cannot be expected to use their growing Internet influence to further the cause of nonpartisan political information. Campaign and party Web sites are becoming increasingly important, both because they are hubs for the campaign and because they are getting increasing Internet traffic. Site organizers will not link to outside political Web sites and risk that users will leave their Web site.

**Web logs will become more important gatekeepers.** Web logs have become increasingly popular, especially among journalists and the political community. We have also seen cases of where Web logs have prompted news stories or kept stories alive. While their influence on the general public is limited, they bear close watching in the 2004 campaign.

## notes

[118] Gordon, Jesse. Telephone interview with Jesse Gordon, organizer, Issues2000.org, 24 April 2003.

[119] Rooney, Kevin. Personal communication with Kevin Rooney, senior vice president, Capitol Advantage, 16 July 2004.

[120] Numerous newspapers publish ad watch analysis, and ad watch programs are also conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania (www.factcheck.org).

[121] Anderson, Nick. "Internet the Back Alley of Choice for Bare-Knuckle Political Brawls." *Los Angeles Times*, 1 July 2004.

[122] For example, a fake campaign Web site for Bob Dole in 1996 claimed to receive 33 million hits. See Glass, Andrew J. "On-line Elections: The Internet's Impact on the Political Process." *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1, no. 4 (1996): 140-146. And fake e-mails have appeared. See Raney, Rebecca Fairley. "Politicians Woo Voters On the Web." *The New York Times*, 30 July 1998, 1.

[123] Sidener, Jonathan. "Dropping 'Google-bombs': Political mischief-makers turn search-engine results into insults." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 14 June 2004.

[124] Hansan, Bob. Personal interview with Bob Hansan, founder and president, Capitol Advantage, 6 August 2003. Hansan points out that many of the Web sites asking candidates for information have disappeared, and he argues that as the number of sources of information has shrunk, candidates will feel more public pressure to respond to fewer requests for information and may be more likely to respond.

[125] Schmitt, Mark. Telephone interview with Mark Schmitt, director of policy and research, U.S. Programs, Open Society Institute, 14 July 2003.

[126] Bailey, Douglas. Personal interview with Douglas Bailey, founder, Freedom Channel, 8 July 2003. Among the political insiders were Michael McCurry, former White House press secretary for President Clinton, and political consultants Doug Bailey and Roger Craver.

# Recommendations

**F**uture efforts to build nonprofit organizations for online political information must access resources from the nonprofit community, focus on long-term sustainability and bring on board personnel with expertise in the field. Organizers of nonprofit organizations must recognize that they are nonprofits first and must plan for sustainability. Organizations that existed before the dot-com boom were more successful in moving their work online than organizations that began only as political Web sites. Organizations that saw

overt political stance many Web logs take, but a nonpartisan analysis of campaign advertising could be a good role for a Web log.

**Nonpartisan political Web sites must make portal agreements or take other measures to gain visibility.** Many sites have already done so, and Capitol Advantage, a for-profit business, has established strong portal placement for its services and the DNet election issues data. In many cases, the content is syndicated to portals and major Web sites so users can access the Capitol Advantage data without realizing it. Portal

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themselves as dot-com projects were less successful than those that recognized they were nonprofit organizations first and looked to nonprofit resources for help.

**Nonpartisan Web sites need to reconsider their target audience and perhaps concentrate on influentials.** Influentials are already online, and they are far more likely to view political information online. Their influence among others in the electorate may be significant, projected through a two-step flow of information as they take what they learn online (step 1) and pass it along to others (step 2). They are also an audience that is very likely to be online and very interested in online politics.[127]

**Negative online advertising and e-mail may offer an opportunity for nonpartisan political Web sites.** Many newspapers and researchers conduct "ad watch" programs to refute false claims in campaign advertising, but such monitoring is much less likely for online advertising. This sort of project dovetails with "ad watch" projects that some foundations pioneered; extending this responsibility to those established projects may be a logical fit. There may be a niche here for Web logs, many of which already monitor political journalism and advertising. One problem might be the

placement has become even more important in 2004 because political Web sites will not enjoy the kinds of promotional techniques or the media attention they received in 2000.

At the same time, Web White & Blue in 2000 had strong portal placement and user traffic was disappointingly low. Content clearly matters, and the online debate forum was not appealing. Despite portal placement that ensured a majority of Internet users would have ready access to the Web site, few people clicked in.

Internet users look to media Web sites for election information. Nonpartisan political Web sites did not go to where the Internet users were congregating, but instead hoped they could use promotion to get users to come to them. Or even more unlikely, they hoped to convince users to use their sites as portals. Nonpartisan political Web sites that did not link from high-traffic news sites essentially made themselves inaccessible to all but a fraction of the online population.

**Some local sites have succeeded, and local is better in several ways.** Often local political Web sites are more clearly focused. Local politics receive spare coverage by large media outlets, so whereas Internet users have a variety of information sources for national politics,

there are few places for local politics. We investigated several successful sites that focused on local issues such as judicial reform or local campaign finance. Just as Yahoo! gives local weather and scores of local teams, a political Web site can offer information on local races that is linked to information or voter registration resources. Users will be looking for local political information from local news sites, which suggests that local political Web sites link to local news media.

Likewise, large online discussion forums often do not work, and we are not convinced they have added much to democratic deliberation, civil engagement or educa-

media companies contributed some capital and access to traffic on their Web sites. Web White & Blue claimed that the participating sites reached more than 85 percent of U.S. Internet users. Traffic was low, however, and although most candidates agreed to participate, including Al Gore and George W. Bush, the content of the debate was weak.

Such partnerships, with the private sector providing primarily distribution, have been used in other formats. Some children's television programming is produced by a nonprofit foundation but distributed by major cable providers. Another example is C-SPAN, a cable televi-

> **Nonprofit foundations should further investigate public/private partnerships to ensure that diverse, comprehensive nonpartisan political information remains online. These efforts could harness the efficiency and resources of the private sector to the socially beneficial goals of the public sector.**

tion. Smaller discussion groups whose membership is more closely defined have worked better. They often appear focused and productive. Discussion forums that maintain a degree of civility follow guidelines for online discussion, such as requiring users to register and using moderators.

**Campaigns' reluctance to participate meaningfully means nonpartisan political Web sites must themselves harvest information from candidates or other sources.** Even though generating content is expensive, the success of political information online depends on the value that site organizers can add to it. This might mean organizing, fact-checking or giving some comparative context to the information. DNet has done this successfully for years with its Issues Grid, where the candidates' positions can be compared side-by-side.

**Nonprofit foundations should further investigate public/private partnerships to ensure that diverse, comprehensive nonpartisan political information remains online.** These efforts could harness the efficiency and resources of the private sector to the socially beneficial goals of the public sector.

In the 2000 election, the Web White & Blue project offered an example with mixed results. The idea originated in the private sector, but the initial organizers needed public sector cooperation in order to gain the participation of other major portals.[129] The project was coordinated by the Markle Foundation, and major

sion public affairs channel funded through a consortium of cable companies that contribute a portion of cable subscription payments to fund the network. The Capitol Advantage/DNet partnership operates in a similar way; DNet provides election content that is unprofitable to collect, and Capitol Advantage offers distribution.

The public part of these partnerships brings to the table an emphasis on socially beneficial goals. While for-profit ventures certainly can meet these goals in accordance with the profit motive, we believe that ultimately a nonprofit presence is required to ensure that public goals are met.

**The potential of online video has only just been discovered.** The campaigns have just begun to post online video advertising. In 2004, groups such as Moveon.org have conducted contests where members submitted their own video advertisements. These attracted tremendous attention to Moveon.org, which was one of the main points.

Videos of candidates, such as Freedom Channel offered, might be more apt on the Web sites of local television stations. To connect candidates' video libraries with video news sites seems an obvious partnership. Users of such sites would visit in order to watch video, and local broadcast stations could promote their Web sites. A local television station could bear the costs of hosting the videos and would enjoy free promotion from providing a public service online. Video of candi-

dates would also be more valuable in local races, where relatively unknown candidates find it far more difficult to get television coverage. (Some news media Web sites already include political advertising.)

There is a great attraction to video that the organizers of Freedom Channel recognized but were unable to tap in to. However, the Freedom Channel format of giving politicians a short amount of time in a carefully prescribed format was misguided. Television is not a means to flatly and unemotionally convey political information, it is visceral and creative, and politicians should be given time to present themselves however they see fit. The role of a nonpartisan Web site should be collecting such material and allowing responses from opposing candidates, but not dictating how those responses are made.

**Syndication models are promising, although not all have been self-sustaining.** E-thepeople syndicates its forums to newspaper clients, although this does not generate enough revenue to support the site. Syndication models for content may be more successful. Web White & Blue syndicated its content to 17 Web sites, most of them major news media sites. These site partners generally praised the syndication model and seemed committed to participating in future elections (although the project was not revived in 2004).[129]

Similar to syndication is the effort at "branding" links and Web sites so that a name and image can mark a site as reliable, informative and nonpartisan.

The only significant for-profit player in nonpartisan political information, Capitol Advantage, has been tremendously successful with a syndication model. The business has thrived with a strategy of content distribution on other Web sites instead of trying to create its own destination site. The Capitol Advantage databases, including election information collected through its partnership with DNet, are accessible both at their own site (Congress.org) and distributed via other portals. An organization such as AARP can purchase Capitol Advantage services and build into its Web site access to the databases and other online tools. A visitor may never know he or she is visiting Capitol Advantage. The result has been broadly accessible information and huge traffic.

**Interesting projects now underway in open source software could change how organizations communicate with their audience and each other.** The precursor to these projects was the Howard Dean campaign. The

"DeanSpace" project developed a set of Internet application tools that any Dean group could use to organize online. The goal was to make the tools interoperable and open source, so all groups could connect with one another.

Many such online tools are already available to well-funded political candidates and organizations, some offered by political consulting businesses. The democratization of these Internet tools as they spread into the nonprofit and activist communities may increase the number and sophistication of political Web sites. The tools let users share data, create Web logs, move files, collaboratively edit documents, poll members and easily contact each other. A Web site that provides, for example, environmental ratings of candidates could quickly and easily "syndicate" its material to any other site.[130]

Efforts such as this require software that is very flexible and "open" in allowing connections to data and Web sites. Although software could theoretically be either open source or proprietary, efforts by former Dean campaign workers and the progressive community have so far focused on open source software.[131]

Nonprofit funders should recognize the potential of open source tools. Many of the innovations of online politics in the past few years, such as more efficient organizing and money raising, would well serve the nonprofit community. For one thing, nonprofits have not tapped into online fundraising as successfully as political campaigns. Further, interlinked data through a syndication or distributed model would give any Web site immediate value by making available the resources of every other Web site that contributes information. At the same time, syndication would give greater distribution to a Web site that gathered or organized its own data. Each site with new information would increase the usefulness of the whole network.

notes

[127] Graf, Joseph, and Carol Darr. "Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign." Washington, D.C.: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, The George Washington University, 2004.

[128] Bollier, David. "In Search of the Public Interest in the New Media Environment: A Report of the Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society." Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2002.

[129] Lupia, Arthur. "Evaluation: The Web White and Blue Network 2000." San Diego, 2001.

[130] Rosen, Zack. Telephone interview with Zack Rosen, founder and director, CivicSpace Labs, 30 June 2004.

[131] For example, see work being done by The Association for Progressive Communications (www.apc.org).

# Conclusion

Our approach in this report has been broad. We tried to place the 2000 election in context, and we generally argue that this context is important to understanding what happened to nonpartisan political Web sites in that election. We have also tried to consider broadly the entire community of political discourse online. Nonpartisan political Web sites are part of the online political sphere, which includes campaign sites and political media sites, discussion groups, Web logs and other online outlets. It is difficult to differentiate many of these online spaces because they share goals and features. Perhaps more important, users do not always make this

new take on an old game.

Despite our criticisms we admire the many civic-minded efforts undertaken during the 2000 election. Many of these innovations remain alive in slightly different versions. Nonpartisan political Web sites used many new techniques that have been adopted online today, such as e-mail newsletters, vote match programs, video, polls and discussion forums. The second wave of innovation has refined and improved many of these features. In many respects, online organizers were ahead of their time in 2000, and their ideas are coming back around in 2004.

Just as Internet politics was hyped before the 2000 election, its aftermath was hyped as well. Too much

> The positive effects of technology on our democracy may appear only if it is implemented in accordance with democratic values. Without those underlying principles online politics is a new take on an old game.

distinction: They go "online" for information, wherever that might be. We have tried to think broadly about all kinds of political information online. If Web logs or chat rooms or some other feature of the Internet serve our goals of civic education and involvement then we think those features should be embraced. The public goals of nonpartisan political Web sites are most important, however they can be implemented.

We firmly believe in the potential of online political communication to foster a richer democracy. This potential is not simply due to new communication technology. We are not technological determinists: There is nothing inherently democratic about the Internet. New technology may simply reinforce the status quo, deliver negative advertising more efficiently, elevate the role of big money and special interests in elections, or allow campaigns to target narrow appeals to our basest political instincts. The positive effects of technology on our democracy may appear only if it is implemented in accordance with democratic values. Without those underlying principles online politics is a

was expected in 2000 and too much made of the washout afterwards, a logical consequence of inflated expectations. Part of this was due to a lot of media coverage, both positive and negative, and the poor showing of several well-funded foundation projects. Foundations put millions into a few projects that were interesting and even groundbreaking, but which did not lead to high user traffic, clear changes in the campaign, or other tangible results. While some nonpartisan political Web sites closed after the election, many continued to publish. It is important to note that many of the organizers of these sites in no way see their work as a failure, but instead value the innovation they introduced and are less critical of the inability to attract a larger audience.

The Internet boom was important to understanding what happened in 2000, but we also believe that many mistakes were made. Web site organizers did not pay close attention to long-term sustainability. Resources for nonprofits were ignored. Too many organizations saw themselves as Web sites rather than information

providers. No political Web site successfully made itself into a Web portal, and few linked from the big portals themselves. Internet traffic is congregated at these portals, and nonpartisan political information online must go to the portals rather than hoping users will come to them.

Web traffic was a disappointment for most sites, and even those sites that attract large numbers of users today are unable to sustain themselves. Capitol Advantage, which is clearly attracting the most traffic through many portals, nonetheless earns its money from its online tools, not election information. Portals and public/private partnerships are key. At the same time we want to urge an outlook that is not centered on Internet traffic alone. Nonpartisan political Web sites should see their audiences as the influentials they really are, and develop strategies to extend their online information through influentials to the broader public. This could be achieved, for example, by appealing to local leaders, journalists or political activists.

The efforts to create political portals was a fundamental misunderstanding of how people use the Internet and where they go for information. Internet users access primary Internet portals such as Yahoo!, MSN and AOL, and major media Web sites such as MSNBC.com, NYTimes.com and FOXNews. To reach large audiences purveyors of political information must go to these sites, not try to create an alternative.

We agree with the point of view that current technologies, markets and government approaches are inadequate to serve many important public needs. Society has responded to these needs through such things as arts funding, public education or programs for the disadvantaged. These needs are widely recognized and the responses widely accepted.[132]

The need for greater civic information and education is not nearly so widely accepted, and responses to this need have been uneven and poorly coordinated. Aside from some programs in public schools, promoting civic education and involvement has largely been abandoned by government and business and left to nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups and political parties. If efforts to educate and involve citizens move online, it seems reasonable to expect that these same organizations will continue to play a role. Nonprofit organizations have a special place among these groups because of their emphasis on nonpartisan information.

In many other developed democracies, governments much more aggressively foster online political information. Great Britain has seen efforts to mount local online "commons," which include Web logs, message services and local discussion forums, in an effort to better link citizens to their government.[133] In our research, most experts we interviewed doubted the possibility of U.S. government support of nonpartisan political information online. This is the political climate in which we live. Nonetheless, there remain policy avenues that could improve online information. Broadcasters still have some public interest responsibilities that they could meet through sponsorship of Web sites, and there have been proposals to fund public interest projects through the sale of radio spectrum rights.[134] There may also be local governments interested in funding civic Web sites.[135] Perhaps most importantly, in other countries there is ongoing discussion underway about government support or direction for online efforts to improve civic life. That is a discussion that should occur in the United States.

We are also excited about the potential of distributive information across Web sites, which will probably (though not necessarily) be done via open source software. If a Web site develops information that users want it could get access to a huge potential audience. Such an approach is being tested by developers who cut their teeth in the Howard Dean campaign. However, for an open format like this to succeed, it requires not just the software but site organizers committed to making their content available. As we pointed out, competition among nonprofit political Web sites duplicating efforts only split a small audience and discouraged funders.

We generally believe that experimentation such as these open source efforts is more likely to come from individuals or small groups, just as innovation online frequently began with Web sites operated by individuals or unaffiliated with a candidate or party. Campaigns are inherently conservative unless forced to experiment. This is especially true of incumbents, and moreso with unchallenged incumbents. The most interesting, edgy and subversive political Web sites were created and maintained outside of the major political parties. The innovations of the Dean campaign are an example of innovation taking place outside the establishment. We expect these individuals and groups to continue to innovate.

Important public interests are at stake here, and those interests should not be buffeted by governmental regu-

lation or the whims of the market. Citizens should make conscious choices about what civil discourse on the Internet should be. We hope that this report and the work of the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet can continue to push the discussion toward the big democratic ideas envisioned in 2000. We are intensely interested in the online fund-raising and organizing of 2004, but we remember the unfulfilled promise of popular education and involvement attached to the nonpartisan political Web site experiments of 2000. The efforts in 2000 by both entrepreneurs and nonprofit foundations were a good beginning, and in some cases bold and interesting experiments. Now, with that knowledge in hand, we should make conscious choices about what we want political information on the Internet to look like.

## notes

[132] Bollier, David. "In Search of the Public Interest in the New Media Environment: A Report of the Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society." Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2002.

[133] Blumler, Jay G., and Stephen Coleman. "Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace," edited by Damian Tambini. London: Citizens Online, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2001, Blumler, Jay G., and Michael Gurevitch. "The New Media and Our Political Communication Discontents: Democratizing Cyberspace." *Information, Communication & Society 4*, no. 1 (2001): 1-13.

[134] These include projects such as the Digital Promise Project (www.digitalpromise.org).

[135] We are indebted to Steven Clift of Minnesota e-Democracy and Mike Cornfield for their suggestions on this topic.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Note on Web Traffic and Financial Data

Several issues about Web traffic and financial data are important. For readability, the text does not include detailed web traffic data nor a discussion of how such data have been obtained. Web traffic can be collected in many ways. Some Web sites relied on data from their Internet provider while others used data from ratings services such as Nielsen//NetRatings. The technology and methods for tracking Internet traffic were not nearly as sophisticated in 1999 and 2000 as they are today, so the data are less reliable. Even major ratings services such as Nielsen were not fully operational before the 2000 election, and their data are incomplete. For some low traffic Web sites Nielsen often could not count enough users to make its data statistically valid. For other ratings services the metric is not clear. Some sites counted "hits" while others used "unique users" or "pages viewed."

We do not believe these distinctions matter much for the purposes of this report. We present data in many figures to illustrate broad points, usually the rapid growth in traffic over time or broad comparisons among sites. For example, we present data from an Internet provider to illustrate the rapid growth in traffic for GoVote.com in early 2000 and data from Nielsen//NetRatings to show the traffic growth at Project Vote Smart in November of election years. The exact numbers are less important than the point that traffic during these periods rose dramatically. Trying to standardize these comparisons or delve into a debate about which type of data is better is ancillary to our central arguments.

There are two additional considerations in using Nielsen//NetRatings Internet traffic data. First, as we stated above, data from the 2000 election are incomplete. Nielsen monitors panels of Internet users who access Web sites from work or home. For a projection of total Internet use, both panels are combined and duplicate users removed so people accessing sites from both work and home are not counted twice. Typically, the combined projection is slightly less than the sum of the work and home panels. Unfortunately, Nielsen did not have its combined projection available before the November 2000 election. (Techniques of monitoring Internet use at many organizations were still being developed.) In a few figures, we combine the home and work panels ourselves. Therefore, we believe that Nielsen//NetRatings projections before the 2000 election are slightly inflated. Nielsen//NetRatings data for 2004 are more complete, and the 2004 combined panel is not an inflated estimate.

In some cases we aggregate Nielsen data across many small Web sites. This approach runs the risk of counting a single unique user more than once. In other words, the same user might access several small Web sites and when we aggregate the data we overstate the projected audience. This is a valid concern that we keep in mind in discussing the data.

Nielsen declines to project audience size when the sample of users it measures is not large enough to be statistically valid. We include in our report several examples of Nielsen data with a low sample size. When we do so, our intention is to illustrate the range of audience sizes at several sites. Comparisons between sites with fewer than 300,000 unique users per month are not valid. Instead, these figures should be read as gross estimates of a group of sites.

We also encountered some difficulties with financial data. In our interviews we received differing estimates of the capital raised and lost by some for-profit Web sites. We cite our sources throughout and note discrepancies in estimates when they are clear. Nonetheless, we also believe those discrepancies are irrelevant to this report. It is clear that tens of millions of dollars were invested in for-profit sites, and much less (although millions) in nonprofit sites. Whether the amounts were $40 or $50 million certainly matters to the investors, and we do not belittle their losses, but that difference is not important to the overall conclusions drawn here.

## Appendix B: Methodology for Press Mentions Graphics

The charts of press mentions illustrate the number of occasions nonpartisan political Web sites were mentioned in a sampling of U.S. newspapers.

For Figures 7 and 10 we searched the Lexis-Nexis database for the names of 20 prominent nonpartisan political Web sites from 1998 to 2002. The search was made through five major national newspapers and 10 large regional newspapers. The 20 Web sites included were DNet (The Democracy Network), DebateAmerica, Freedom Channel, Smartvoter, Voter.com, Web White & Blue, California Voter Foundation, EasyVoter, E-thepeople, GoVote, Grassroots.com, Issues2000, Minnesota E-democracy, Netelection.org, Politics.com, Savvy Voter, Speakout.com, Vote Smart, Vote.com and Vox Cap.

The newspapers searched were *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal - Constitution*, *Hartford Courant*, *Newsday*, *San Francisco Chronicle, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, Seattle Times, Chicago Sun-Times, Baltimore Sun, San Diego Union-Tribune* and *Miami Herald*.

For Figure 21, which shows the decline in press mentions from 1998 to 2004, we chose only those 12 Web sites still online in early 2004 in order to make a more fair comparison. The sites were DNet (The Democracy Network), Smartvoter, California Voter Foundation, EasyVoter, E-thepeople, Issues2000 (OnTheIssues), Minnesota E-democracy, Politics.com, Savvy Voter, Speakout.com, Vote Smart, and Vote.com. The same newspapers were searched as above.

## Appendix C: A Review of Nonpartisan Political Web Sites in 2004

We have collected here some of the most interesting, important nonpartisan political Web sites in the 2004 election. We have confined the list to a few prominent sites that offer election issue information or links to that information.

In 2004, the Web sites of the candidates also offer a great deal of information (www.johnkerry.com, www.georgewbush.com).

## National Web Sites

### Democracy Net (DNet)
*http://www.congress.org*
*The League of Women Voters and Capitol Advantage*

The Home Page is highly interactive. A series of boxes and graphics allow visitors to gain election information in the following ways:

- Enter a ZIP code to find information about political races in your area and election information about your state. Select your state in a drop-down box to register to vote or browse the site by state, candidate's last name, or other criteria.
- Click on a map of the United States to view information by state.
- Click on a picture of a presidential candidate to learn about the candidate. Buttons on the candidate's page enable the visitor to e-mail the campaign, visit the Web site, donate, volunteer or meet with other supporters.

### e.thePeople
*http://www.e-thepeople.org/*
*Democracy Project*

The Home Page is divided into sections intended to help people do different things. It is more focused on doing things, particularly fostering discussion, than learning or getting information about candidates and elections:

- "Conversations" is a discussion board that allows people to "connect with your neighbors" on various topics. This includes some apolitical categories, such as book reviews, eating, and the information age, along with election-related discussions on democratic renewal and the 2004 races. The page updates people on recent discussions and contains a Community Stats graphic that shows the number of postings that change over a two-week period.
- "Letters" allows you to click on a political/elected position or enter your ZIP code to find your officials in order to send them e-mail directly from the site. The letters page also allows people to click on a map of the country to get information about their state, and it has directories of elected officials. The page includes a box offering letter-writing pointers from Advocacy Guru.
- "Petitions" gives you the opportunity to sign a petition on a variety of topics or start one of your own.
- "Issues and Action" lets people select an issue area in a drop-down box to learn more about current legislation in that area. It also offers action alerts from other organizations.
- "Polls" lets people answer questions about current events, see results and view other polls.

### OnTheIssues
*http://www.ontheissues.org*

The organization puts a lot of information tools on the home page of its Web site. The focus of the site appears to be politicians' stances on issues. Other information sources are also available.

- A large interactive map of the United States takes up most of the screen on the home page. People can click on a state to learn about their elected officials' positions.
- The Issues section lets visitors click on issues to read what officials and candidates say about each issue. Alternatively, people can click directly on the candidates' names. A "Topics in the News" section allows people to click on various topics to learn about what political leaders say on the topics.
- There is a list of recent political books, with brief descriptions of the political leaders mentioned, and links to Amazon book reviews.
- The Recent page includes snippets from some of the most recent articles about political leaders' policy decisions.
- A Grid page ranks issue positions for each political leader using a series of "Political Diamond" signs signifying whether that position is centrist, libertarian, liberal, populist, conservative, etc.
- A series of 20 question quizzes match your answers to the issues stances of famous political leaders or candidates.

### Project Vote Smart
*http://www.vote-smart.org*

Site focuses on giving visitors information about elected officials and candidates, including:
- Background information
- Contact information
- Issues positions
- Voting record
- Campaign finances
- Speeches and public appearances
- Interest group ratings.

Visitors can search for information in many ways: ZIP code, state, candidate or official's last name, etc.

The site also has voter registration, contact information for state and local election offices, polling locations and absentee ballot information, descriptions of ballot measures and links to federal and state agencies, political parties, and interest groups.

### Democracy in Action
*http://www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html*

This site stands out because it offers more than just links to other sources. It contains analysis, offering background and context to help people understand how elections work.

- Graphic boxes on the home page allow visitors to do different things, such as click on an interactive map, learn about campaign finance, or view an election calendar.
- The Presidential Campaign Newsroom section contains interesting information, such as surprise photos, information on the battleground states, links to TV ads and a book page that lists books by and about the candidates as well as other campaign resources.
- A Top Links box on the home page gives visitors a condensed list of top links to candidates, parties, news sources and online reports.
- A series of additional pages offer a timeline of what occurs in the election.
- Candidates and their Campaigns — background information, speeches, links and reading and resources for each candidate.
- Media — Analysis about the role media plays in the election, background information and links.
- Political Parties — Lists both national and state parties and includes photos.
- Interest Groups — Analysis of the role interest groups play in elections and links.
- The Electorate — Analysis of why the American electorate does what it does, charts on voter turnout, and links to voter information sites.

## Regional Web Sites

### E-Democracy
*http://www.e-democracy.org*

While the site is mostly related to Minnesota politics, it also contains information on the presidential election in the form of well-organized links.
- The site lists general election sites, including a "top blogs to watch" section, which includes only a few Web logs but promises more.
- For each presidential candidate, the site has deep links to topic-specific locations within their official sites, as well as links to related supporter sites, audio and video clips, news, opposition and satire.

*Smart Voter*
*http://www.smartvoter.org/*

State-specific election information site sponsored by the California League of Women Voters that focuses on giving people basic civic information and demystifying the election process.

- "Find My Ballot" section prominently displayed on home page allows people to plug in their own information to find polling locations, contests, candidates, ballot measures and election results. It also shows visitors a sample ballot.
- "Upcoming Elections" lets you find out about upcoming elections in California and Ohio.
- An election archives.
- A Guide to Government is available for a few counties in California.

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In the spring of 2002, the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet at the Graduate School of Political Management was chartered by The George Washington University. Formerly called the Democracy Online Project, the Institute is funded primarily by grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The mission of the Institute is to promote the development of U.S. online politics in a manner that increases citizen participation and upholds democratic values.

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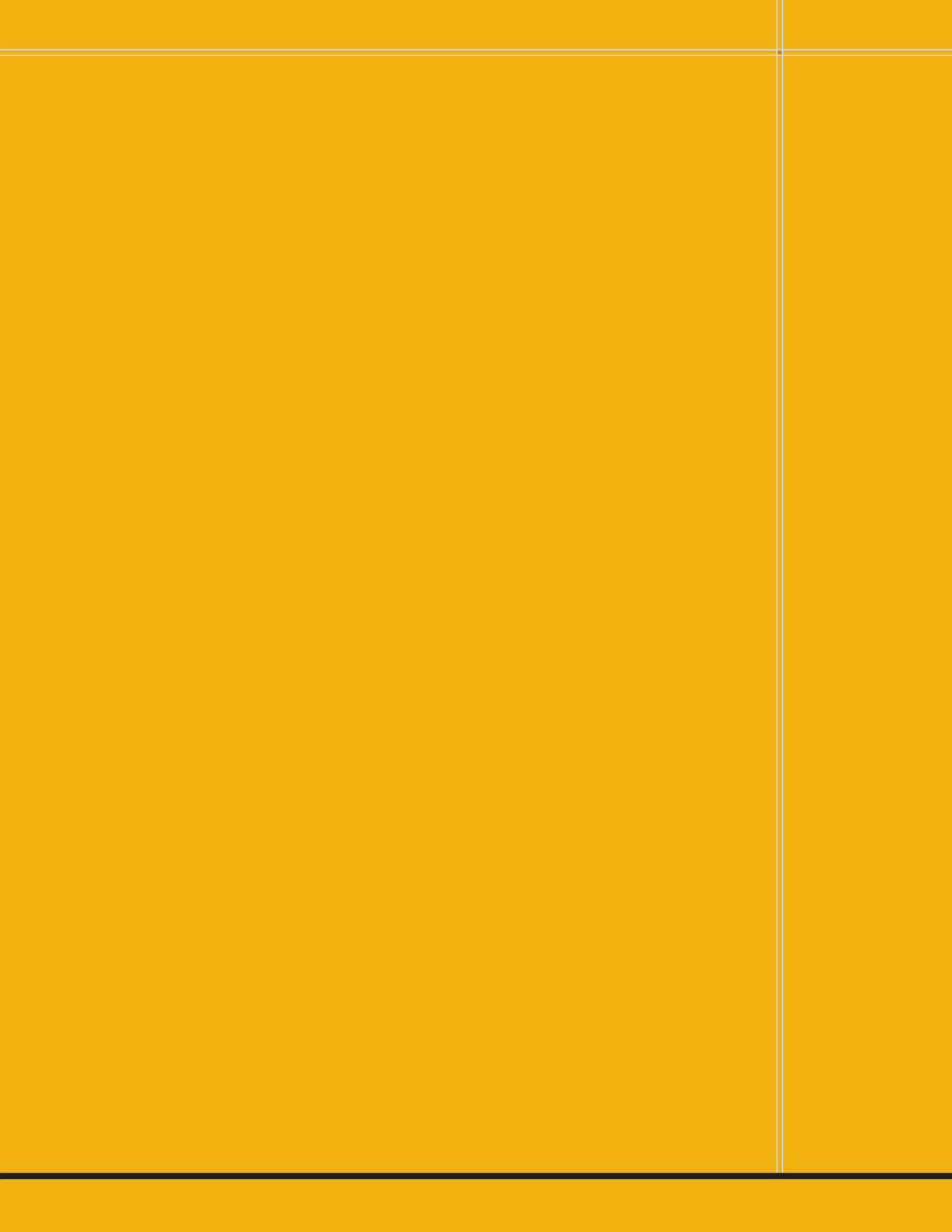
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