

Politics As Usual, or Politics Unusual?
Position-Taking and Dialogue on Campaign Web Sites in the
2002 U.S. Elections

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Abstract

Many consider the Web to be nothing more than an additional medium alongside others in which established patterns of political behavior and information flows are played out anew, while others contend that the special characteristics of the Web hold the potential to produce fundamentally different patterns of political behavior than those found offline. This article sheds some light on this debate by analyzing the occurrence of position taking and issue dialogue on campaign Web sites associated with a random sample of 200 races from the U.S. 2002 election cycle. Though we find some similarities between online and offline campaigning, we also identify a number of ways in which the individual messages and overall political information environment created by candidates and available to voters through the Web in 2002 did not conform to the usual patterns found in the offline world of print and broadcast communication.

In the 2002 elections, scholarly and casual observers of online politics noted the extent to which Internet campaigning had become familiar and widespread. Throughout the midterms, familiar as well as innovative uses for campaign sites were extended and developed. For example, candidates such as Gray Davis posted multimedia versions of campaign advertisements for visitors to view on demand, while Connie Morella offered pages in Spanish. Kay Granger even offered her recipe for shrimp Vera Cruz to those visiting her campaign site, which promoted her bid to represent Texas' 12th District. Overall, House, Senate, and Gubernatorial candidates in 2002 provided fully functional, stand-alone campaign Web sites at a rate of 65%, and a set of campaign site "staples" has begun to emerge, including candidate biographies and issue sections (Foot, Xenos, & Schneider, 2003). As the use of the Web by candidates increases, so too does the significance of scholarly debates over whether it is having a discernable impact on the political behaviors of office seekers and voters, and by extension, on the public sphere.

Participants in these debates generally fall into one of two camps. Some consider the Web to be nothing more than a new medium in which old patterns of political behavior and information flows are played out anew (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000), while others contend that the special characteristics of the Web hold the potential to produce fundamentally different patterns of political communication than those found offline (Foot & Schneider, 2002; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Norris, 2001). Although some expect candidates to engage in a highly strategic style of campaigning online, others expect online campaigning to result in the more deliberative discourse scholars such as Simon (2002) find only in the most democratically vibrant races.

Fortunately, the growing prevalence of candidate Web sites also increases our ability to test these competing claims on the basis of structured observation of politics online.

In this paper we present findings from the most comprehensive analysis of U.S. campaign Web sites conducted to date to shed additional light on the debate over whether the Web is changing campaigns and the public sphere. Specifically, we focus on how candidates discuss political issues on campaign Web sites. By looking at these campaign practices, rather than focusing on technical features of campaign sites as has been done in other studies (W. L. Benoit & Benoit, 2000; D'Alessio, 2000; Schneider & Foot, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003), we provide an analysis of whether and how universal campaign elements such as message construction and issue selection are adapted to and/or (re)created online. To address the question of whether patterns of Web-based campaign communication merely mirror traditional campaign tactics we identify key patterns and characteristics of offline issue discussion and then explore the extent to which online candidate issue statements behave in similar fashion. Based on the centrality of these behaviors to traditional campaigning, as well as the volume of data we were able to collect, we believe this study provides a unique insight into whether the Web is changing political campaigns.

We begin with a more detailed discussion of candidate issue discussion, identifying the ways in which these traditional campaign tactics are instantiated by candidates on the Web. We then briefly review the grounds on which many scholars argue that the Web will do little to change politics, teasing out a number of predictions we believe such a perspective implies for patterns in online candidate issue statements. In doing so, we also consider the arguments provided by scholars who believe the unique

capabilities of the Web might lead to a politics *unusual* rather than “politics *as usual*” (c.f. Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Based on our content analysis of online candidate issue statements we then document the extent to which online candidate issue discourse did, and did not, conform to patterns other scholars have identified offline. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for the future of online politics research, as well as research on political campaigning.

Concepts and Theory

The fundamental currency of candidate issue discourse, position taking involves articulating statements of advocacy or opinion on political issues of public concern. For example, in appearances, press releases, and advertising, candidates make statements on issues that they believe will win them votes. Simon (2002) refers to instances of opposing candidates directly referencing each other, and each other’s positions, in the course of position taking as campaign issue dialogue. For our purposes, we view issue dialogue as either “direct dialogue,” which engages political opponents through explicit reference (e.g., “unlike my opponent, Dale Democrat, I will not take your gun away”), or “indirect dialogue,” in which candidates offer comments or statements on the same issue(s) as their opponents, enabling voters to compare the candidates on those issues. Position taking and direct and indirect dialogue serve as the principal ways that candidates transmit policy-relevant information about themselves to the electorate, enabling voters to make informed decisions.

Online instantiations of position taking and issue dialogue take a variety of forms. Consider the online position taking and dialogue seen in the South Dakota Senatorial race between Tim Johnson and John Thune. Position taking could be easily identified on

Johnson's site, which provided visitors with a statement of his advocacy of lowering prescription drug costs for senior citizens, as well as information on the Rx Relief for Seniors Act, a bill he introduced. Johnson also posted information about his positions on other political issues such as agriculture and national defense. John Thune, Johnson's opponent, used his site to take positions on various issues, including some of the same issues raised on the Johnson site. Thune also provided a two-column table directly comparing the positions of himself and Johnson on taxes, defense, (right to) life, gun owners' rights, and seniors. Thus, according to our definition, the Johnson/Thune race included online position taking, as well as both direct and indirect online issue dialogue.

Margolis and Resnick's (2000) "normalization thesis" contends that contrary to predictions that the Internet would revolutionize our everyday lives, expansion of the Web has done little more than provide a new medium through which established patterns in all aspects of social life (e.g., commerce and social interaction), and by deduction political life, can be and are merely recreated in virtual form with little change. Particularly as the Internet of old (the world of "gophers" and Usenet mainly inhabited by a coterie of educated progressives) has turned into a mass medium accessible to average users, Margolis and Resnick contend that visions of a sweeping transformation of everyday life by the Internet have become unrealistic. Instead they posit that the spread of the Web will reinforce rather than reinvent traditional patterns of social and political life. Other contemporary scholars of online politics, such as Bimber and Davis (2003), and W. L. Benoit et al. (2003) offer a similar interpretation of the emerging world of Web campaigning. These researchers point to the high production values, or bells and whistles, of campaign sites produced by major party candidates and their familiar look

and feel as evidence that the Internet is changing politics far less than many expected. Overall, the implication is that we should expect the behaviors of candidates and voters, as well as resource inequalities and their implications for campaign dynamics, to remain more or less unchanged as online campaigning proliferates.

To evaluate the normalization thesis with respect to online campaigning in 2002, we compare patterns of online candidate position taking and dialogue we observed there, to those found offline by traditional campaigns and elections scholarship. Our assumption is that online patterns should parallel those found offline if Internet politics is indeed politics as usual. In other words, if the normalization thesis is correct, we should see patterns in *online* candidate position taking and issue dialogue on campaign Web sites similar to those reported in research on *offline* campaign communication.

Four principal patterns and relationships related to position taking and dialogue as we have defined them here emerge from traditional research on campaigns. Underlying each is an assumption that candidates behave in a highly strategic fashion regarding all issue discourse. The foremost goal of candidate strategy is to maximize votes in order to win elections (Downs, 1957). Based on this assumption, researchers have documented the incentives for candidates to remain ambiguous in their issue stances (Page, 1978), and to carefully choose when or whether to associate themselves with controversial issues that polarize the electorate (Stokes, 1963). Alongside basic campaigning (increasing candidate visibility and turning out the votes of supporters) taking positions on issues is one of the primary means by which candidates construct pluralities of voters that will send or return them to office.

The first clear pattern in offline campaigning is that direct and indirect dialogue are quite rare. Models of campaign discourse cast the decision candidates face in the following way. Seeking to maximize votes, candidates have strong incentives to focus voters' attention on issues for which the candidate's position is popular. Assuming that issues favoring one candidate work to the disadvantage of other candidates and that both major candidates approach issue selection strategically, one would expect candidates to discuss issues *not* discussed by their opponents much more frequently than issues that both candidates provide statements on. We would further expect candidates to avoid direct mentions of political opponents in their public communications, since mentioning an opponent increases his visibility, and works against the fundamental goal of vote maximization (W. L. Benoit et al., 2003; Simon, 2002). Indeed, a key finding of Simon's (2002) content analysis of issue statements appearing in newspaper articles related to campaigns for U.S. Senate in 1988 through 1992 was that rational candidates avoided issue dialogue of both forms whenever possible.

A second pattern is the effect of campaign intensity on the quantity of position taking and dialogue in campaigns. Intensity research looks to the context of campaigns to explain variations in the behaviors of candidates, the press, and voters. Based on the distinction between "hard fought" races in which candidates are well-known and outcomes are uncertain, versus "low key" races between poorly matched candidates where the victory of the stronger candidate is all but a foregone conclusion, such research has demonstrated that intense campaigns produce more, and more widely publicized, public position taking among candidates (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Simon, 2002; Westlye, 1991). As the competition for a plurality of votes becomes fiercer, candidates make more

appeals to different slices of the electorate to edge out their opponents. Further, despite strategic motives for candidates to emphasize issues on which they enjoy a clear advantage, such an environment also produces noticeable jumps in levels of indirect dialogue among candidates, as a function of the larger number of distinct issues discussed in such campaigns (Simon, 2002). Researchers further speculate, however, that this indirect dialogue is often colored by the strategic framing of issues in order to distinguish candidates and maximize the strategic effect of integrating each message into the overall campaign communication stream (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Simon, 2002).

Third, incumbent candidates tend to behave differently than challengers in their selection and discussion of issues. This is intuitive given the typical position of incumbents in relation to challengers and the strategic dynamic of issue selection introduced earlier. Often possessing a greater history of performance in office and a significant visibility advantage, incumbents tend to focus more on issues of character, including competency, seniority, and integrity, relative to challengers. More often than not, messages concerning overall candidate character tend to benefit the incumbent (especially one matched against a relatively unknown challenger), and thus are more strategic for sitting officeholders than messages related to a specific policy domain (Bradshaw, 1995; Fenno, 1996; Herrnson, 1995). Conversely, a popular approach for challengers is to simultaneously build a coalition *and* leverage supporters away from the incumbent using a carefully chosen set of issues designed to take advantage of parts of the incumbent's record related to key groups within the district or state (Herrnson, 1995). As a result, empirical investigations of offline candidate discourse suggest that incumbent candidates tend to discuss policy issues less frequently than challengers.

Fourth and finally, the traditional campaign information environment is also dominated by the major parties. Such a pattern mirrors the privileged position of the two major parties throughout the American political system (Rosenstone, Behr, & Lazarus, 1984). In fact, within the campaign setting, third party communication is viewed as so insignificant on the whole that major studies of campaign dynamics in political science routinely avoid substantial discussion of the campaigning behavior of third-party candidates (c.f. Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Simon, 2002; Westlye, 1991). Often relatively unknown, and only rarely possessing reasonable chances of electoral victory, third-party candidates are virtually invisible in offline issue discourse surrounding most elections. To date, much research suggests that these dynamics of offline campaigning are precisely what we should expect to find in the political Web sphere. Analyzing the Web sites of presidential candidates in 2000, W. L. Benoit et al. (2003) found them to “in many ways resemble other campaign message forms” (p. 82). Bimber and Davis (2003) argue that online campaigning reinforces rather than renews offline electoral politics. And, Margolis and Resnick (2000) look to the differences between major and third party campaign sites as further evidence that online campaigning follows the patterns of the offline world.

Other strands of online communication research, however, provide reasons to believe that in terms of the dissemination of basic political information (rather than production values), the spread of Web campaigning may have discernable effects on candidate behavior that alter the campaign dynamics just discussed. The first of these concerns is the dramatically different cost structure of Web communication. Benoit et al. (2003) point out that once a candidate site is created, large quantities of issue content can

be added for little additional cost. Indeed, Hill and Hughes (1998) have established that Web-mediated communication involves lower transaction costs than any other media, contending that this dramatic reduction in communication costs produces a town hall environment accessible to a broad range of political actors, including independent candidates and minor political parties. They, along with Norris (2001), observe that the Web enables campaigns to circumvent the gatekeepers responsible for filtering and agenda-setting in traditional broadcast and print media. These considerations lead us to look more skeptically at the prediction that major/third party and other resource-based disparities would be as pronounced in Web-based campaigning as they are in the traditional campaign communications stream.

Secondly, research on the emergence of distinct and identifiable genres of Web sites also provides a basis for expecting position taking and dialogue to be different online than they are offline (Crowston & Williams, 2000). Borrowing Orlikowski and Yates' (1994, p. 543) definition of genre as "a distinctive type of communicative action, characterized by a socially recognized communicative purpose and common aspects of form," we suggest that campaign Web sites are now a recognizable genre. This is evidenced by a range of studies demonstrating the prevalence of particular kinds of features and content types on campaign Web sites produced for U.S. elections between 1996-2002 (e.g. W. L. Benoit & Benoit, 2000; D'Alessio, 2000; Foot et al., 2003; Puopolo, 2001; Schneider & Foot, 2002). Although online campaigning still varies significantly, biographical information about the candidate and information on the candidate's issue stances were observed on over eighty percent of federal and gubernatorial campaign sites in 2002 (Foot et al., 2003). The prevalence of these

elements renders them part of the “common aspects of form” of the campaign Web site genre; the absence of one of these elements from a campaign Web site is a noticeable omission. Since position taking is a key part of this emerging genre, we expect little to no difference between amounts of online position taking engaged in by major party versus third-party candidates, candidates in more or less intense races, or by incumbents versus challengers, as seen in traditional offline campaigning. In other words, if most candidates follow the established format of a campaign Web site, we expect a more uniform distribution of online position taking rather than variations based on party, race, and candidate characteristics.

Finally, scholars such as Wilhelm (2000) and Norris (2001) have demonstrated that research on the Internet’s role in politics must take into account the level of technological diffusion in society. One reason for this is that the relative size and socio-economic composition of the online population in a particular geo-political area may have bearing on the ways political actors such as candidates use the Web. Variation in position taking and issue dialogue may be explained by factors other than those driving traditional campaign dynamics. If such a pattern does exist, it suggests that a simple model of online campaigning taking into account only those factors known to account for variations in offline campaigning behavior may be under-specified.

To evaluate these competing sets of claims, we derived the following five hypotheses regarding position taking and issue dialogue from the normalization thesis and traditional research on political campaigning. The principal underlying assumptions of all are that candidates behave strategically, and that candidates with greater resources will pursue strategic campaigning more vigorously than those with fewer resources.

H1: Online position taking will be observed in significantly greater frequency than both direct and indirect online issue dialogue.

H2: Major party candidates will engage in more online position taking and direct issue dialogue than third party candidates.

H3: Campaign intensity will be positively associated with online position taking and direct and indirect online issue dialogue.

H4: Incumbent candidates will engage in online position taking and direct and indirect dialogue less frequently than challengers.

H5: The online presentation of issues by candidates engaging in indirect dialogue will show the marks of strategic framing.

Methods

To test these hypotheses, we conducted quantitative and qualitative content analyses of candidate Web sites associated with a random sample of 200 out of the 507 House, Senate, and Gubernatorial elections in 2002. The largest sample of political candidate Web sites subjected to systematic content analysis to date, our sample of races comprises nearly 40% of the total universe of statewide and federal political races in 2002, and the Web sites included in the sample comprise over 40% of the total number of sites associated with these races. Initial analyses revealed no significant differences on key variables, such as campaign intensity, offices sought, and partisan representation, as compared to the full universe of races.

From our initial data gathering, we created three separate data sets designed to shed light on our key dependent variables of position taking, direct dialogue, indirect dialogue, and strategic framing. The first took individual sites as the unit of analysis and

focused on position taking and direct issue dialogue involving direct references to opponents and other political actors. The second uses the race as the primary unit and was designed to capture the occurrence of indirect dialogue. Finally, the third consists of individual issue mentions and was based on qualitative analysis of the titles associated with each online issue statement provided by candidates in races where some indirect dialogue occurred. A team of paid undergraduate coders performed coding of content associated with the first two data sets. To estimate inter-coder reliability we also conducted separate analyses of the coding schemes, or templates, used to generate these data sets, and where calculable, percent agreement for these analyses ranged from 80 to 100.¹ The authors conducted the qualitative analyses of online issue title texts using the Atlas.ti textual analysis program.

The individual candidate site data set consisted of 402 individual Web sites produced by all major party candidates and a randomized selection of those for third party candidates running in the sampled races. The coding template for this data set probed for the presence of any provision of issue statements provided by the candidates, and also included questions tapping the presence or absence of references to a list of eight specific issue areas we selected by combining the most commonly cited issues in a variety of “most important problem” polling results released by individual polling firms during 2002. We coded for mentions of these issues as well as direct references to political opponents within the mentions. For example, if a candidate provided issue statements on education, the economy, and healthcare, and in doing so contrasted her education stance with her opponent’s, her site would be coded positive for mentions on education, the economy and healthcare, as well as positive for direct dialogue on

education. Later, we constructed variables for the presence or absence of any mentions or references, as well as total mentions or references (out of a maximum of eight). We also collected the titles associated with issue statements provided by each candidate in an open-ended Web form, in order to capture mentions of issues not included in the “top 8” list of issues. Subsequent informal analyses of these data suggest that the vast majority of candidate discourse found on the sites in the sample indeed concerned the “top 8” issues we identified through our survey of “most important problem” poll results.²

The race dataset was constructed as follows. Where available, each record included the official candidate sites for one or both of the major party candidates running in each race. The coding template for this data set consisted of a single substantive item. While viewing the issue statements provided by the Democratic and Republican candidates on their respective campaign sites side-by-side, coders were asked to identify the number of issue areas discussed in common between the two candidates, to tap indirect issue dialogue.³ For example, if Candidate A provided statements on the issues of crime, the economy, gun control, and abortion, while Candidate B provided statements on the environment, civil unions, health-care, and abortion, the race would receive an indirect dialogue score of 1, based on the commonality between the lists on abortion. Had Candidate B mentioned crime, the indirect dialogue score would have been 2. Since there are no studies of offline indirect issue dialogue among third-party candidates, we omitted them from our analysis here, though our individual data set allows us to explore direct dialogue among third party candidates.

We also included variables related to candidate and race characteristics in both of these data sets. The most straightforward of these variables were incumbency and major

party status. We constructed indicators of whether each candidate was affiliated with one of the two major parties and their incumbent status. Races could then be identified as including an incumbent or not, and as including online campaigning by one or more third party candidates. We also measured campaign intensity using a combination of the competitiveness rating assigned to the race by the Cook Political Report and the per-capita spending of the major party candidates in each race, scaling each of these measures 0 to 1 and averaging the two scores. Research on campaign intensity has demonstrated the advantages of combining indicators in this fashion (Sulkin, 2001). Finally, we also included a measure of the percentage of the population in each state with access to the Internet in order to improve the overall explanatory power of our models, and to provide a simple test of some of the claims advanced by scholars with more sanguine expectations concerning the effects of the spread of politics online with respect to campaign behavior.⁴

Last, in order to measure strategic framing, we analyzed the texts of headings associated with issue statements provided on campaign sites involved in indirect dialogue, creating the third data set. Coders cut and pasted all of the issue titles found on each campaign site in the individual site data set into a textbox from which we could export them to text files. We then created files for each race containing all the headings from each site. Using Atlas.ti, we identified issue titles for which there was a topical correspondence between at least two candidates within the race, defining them as cases of issue title dialogue, and coded them by general topic, (e.g., economy or healthcare). We then selected the four issue topics with the greatest rates of indirect dialogue, and did a secondary coding of all titles related those topics, tracking whether the issue title had

been used by a Republican or Democratic candidate, and whether the title language was either generic or strategic, i.e., whether the title simply oriented the reader to the general topic or also indicated the candidate's position. For example, issue titles that pertained to healthcare but included some term or phrase in addition to or in lieu of "healthcare," such as either "prescription drugs" or "patient rights," were coded as strategic.

Findings

To test the first hypothesis, which predicts that candidates will strategically favor position taking to both direct and indirect dialogue, we compared the mean frequencies with which candidates engaged in online position taking, and direct as well as indirect dialogue. The results for position taking versus direct dialogue support the normalization thesis in that while 69 percent of candidates engaged in basic position taking (in the form of an issues section), only 8 percent engaged in direct dialogue. Therefore, with respect to basic position taking, and direct issue dialogue, candidates in 2002 appear to retain the basic strategic emphasis on position taking and avoidance of direct engagement of opponents. Evaluating the prediction that position taking will also be more frequent than indirect issue dialogue, however, can support either a politics as usual or a politics unusual interpretation depending on how one constructs the analysis. If we consider only the frequency with which *all races* are found to contain any instances of position taking or issue dialogue, the results are similar to those found for direct dialogue. While 84 percent of our 200 races contained at least one issue statement by at least one candidate, only 32 percent of the races saw at least one instance of indirect issue dialogue. Yet looking only at the 73 races in which both major party candidates are fielding Web sites, we find percentages of both position taking and indirect dialogue in the mid to upper 80s.

All mean differences were significant at the $p < .000$ level. Thus while it is true that the overall information environment in 2002 was little changed by the Web with respect to position taking and indirect dialogue, we find substantial indirect dialogue in cases where both candidates are fielding campaign Web sites.

We tested hypotheses two, three, and four, concerning the co-variation of position taking and issue dialogue with other political contextual variables using standard multiple regression techniques. We began with analysis of the individual site data set, regressing the total number of the “top 8” issues mentioned by the candidates on major party affiliation, campaign intensity, incumbent status, and the percentage of the population in each candidate’s state with Internet access. These results are reported in the first column of Table 1, and provide support for both proponents as well as critics of the “politics as usual” interpretation of online campaigning. For example, the significant positive coefficient related to campaign intensity (1.82, $s.e. = .62$, $p < .01$) is consistent with offline position taking research, and confirms the expectation that candidates will engage in more frequent online position taking as campaign intensity increases. From these estimates, we would expect candidates in the most intense races to mention between one and two more issues on their Web sites than contenders in the least competitive contests. Further, position taking also appears to be unrelated to Web penetration.

However, the remaining coefficients also fail to conform to offline campaigning patterns, suggesting that these traditional political forces do not explain variations in online position taking. In this analysis, candidates affiliated with major parties did not provide significantly more elaborate Web sites than those affiliated with third parties, at least at the level of simple issue information. The analysis is also unable to distinguish

from zero the effect of incumbent status on the number of positions taken. Given our sample size, and conservatively assuming a small to medium effect size of these variables, power calculations predict a one in one chance we would detect such effects if they were present.⁵

We further analyzed the presence or absence of position taking and direct dialogue through two logistic regression models. Logistic regression was employed at this stage due to the relatively low frequency and skewed distribution of occurrences of direct issue dialogue. The results of these analyses are presented in the second and third columns Table 1. Overall, these models provide only tepid support for a “politics as usual” reading of online campaigning. Again there is a significant and positive coefficient for campaign intensity with respect to the mere presence of issue statements (2.18, *s.e.*=.85, $p<.01$) and a modest negative coefficient for incumbent status (-.59, *s.e.*=.30, $p<.05$). For opponent references, we find a significant, if small, effect of web penetration (.02, *s.e.*=.01, $p<.05$), and no effects for major party status, intensity, or incumbency.

Aspect of our hypotheses regarding indirect dialogue were tested using the race dataset via regression of indirect dialogue levels in each race on campaign intensity, the presence of an incumbent in the race, and state population online. In races where fewer than two candidates produced a fully functional, stand-alone Web site, the number of issues discussed in common online was set to zero. Since all the sites analyzed for these data belonged to major party candidates, major party status was omitted from the model. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 2. Again, we see a mixed pattern of findings. Again, we find a significant positive effect for campaign intensity (.82,

s.e.=.16, $p<.000$), and we find no relationship between the web penetration and the level of indirect dialogue, though the coefficient for the presence of an incumbent in the race is significant, and in the opposite direction predicted under a “politics as usual” interpretation (.74, *s.e.*=.30, $p<.05$). Contrary to what one might expect given what is known about how incumbents typically campaign offline, in the online environment incumbents appear to be drawn into policy discussions regularly, even while controlling for the effects of campaign intensity.

Finally, we conducted qualitative analyses of the titles associated with issues statements provided by the candidates in our sample to more fully test hypothesis five. Specifically, we sought to explore whether candidates engaging in indirect dialogue through their campaign sites did so in a strategic manner as predicted by Simon (2002) and Kahn and Kenney (1999). We found that the top four topics on which issue dialogue occurred were the economy, defense/security, healthcare, and taxes/spending/budget, and we examined the extent to which Republicans and Democrats engaged in strategic framing of their positions on these issues. Our assumption was that the use of any term(s) in issue titles other than or in addition to these four topic headings constituted a campaign’s attempt to frame strategically the candidate’s position on the topic. Our findings on the prevalence of strategic versus simple descriptive framing of issue positions on Republican and Democratic campaign sites are presented in Figure 1.

These findings demonstrate that the practice of strategic framing of issue positions varies across issues. Although the major party candidates in our issue titles sub-sample engaged in strategic framing frequently on issue positions related to the economy (70 and 90 percent for Republicans and Democrats respectively), the prevalence

of strategic framing for issue positions on healthcare were significantly lower (10 to 20 percent, again mean differences are significant at the $p < .000$ level). Party differences were apparent as well. Although overall Republicans and Democrats engaged in similar levels of strategic framing on their campaign sites, democrats were more likely to frame their issue positions on the economy healthcare, and taxes/spending/budget strategically, whereas Republicans were more likely to employ strategic framing of their positions on defense/security.

Conclusion

Overall, we found that a portion of the position taking and issue dialogue behaviors we observed on candidate Web sites in 2002 were consistent with expectations we derived from the normalization thesis as it relates to these specific campaign activities. Specifically, we found moderate support for hypotheses regarding the relative frequency of position taking to issue dialogue, and the effects of campaign intensity on each. Carrying at least some traditional offline campaigning principles into the world of Internet politics, candidates are much more likely to provide basic issue stance information online, while avoiding both direct and indirect forms of issue dialogue. Further, we also found that campaign intensity has similar effects on Internet campaigning as other researchers have found offline. In the races we analyzed, intensity was associated with a larger menu of issues on which candidates offered statements, and a higher frequency of both direct and indirect dialogue. Finally, though the results were mixed, we also found that candidates appear to strategically frame their presentation of issues stances in some circumstances, as a traditional view of campaigning would predict.

However, our findings also present substantial challenges to the notion that online campaign practices are essentially isomorphic to those found in traditional offline campaigning. Specifically, our analysis reveals three patterns inconsistent with predictions derived from a politics as usual perspective. First, though it is the case that major party candidates tend to produce campaign Web sites more frequently than third party candidates (Foot et al., 2003), we did not find a significant relationship between major party status and the amount of issue content on candidate sites. Second, though incumbents were slightly less likely to offer issue content on their sites, we found that incumbent status was not associated with volume of issue information, and that incumbent-challenger races were characterized by significantly more dialogue than other contests. Rather than avoiding the policy issue areas we focused on in our analysis, incumbent candidates may have used the Web in 2002 to take positions on these issues roughly as often as challengers, and may have been drawn into indirect dialogue in a significant number of cases.

Third, though candidates and their staffs are clearly exhibiting a number of familiar patterns as they transfer basic elements of political campaigning into cyberspace, we contend that the peculiar aspects of the medium itself, particularly the tendency for types of Web sites to coalesce around distinct genres with identifiable and regular patterns, introduce new wrinkles into the broader campaign information environment. For example, the campaign site genre entails a format wherein candidates are expected to provide basic biographical information along with issue positions (Foot et al 2003). Thus previously variable and dynamic aspects of campaigns may experience some regularization through the process of being rendered online. For voters with access to the

Internet, this means that the familiar information flow of campaigns, characterized by a dynamic stream of paid political advertising and stories about the campaign appearing in news media, is now supplemented by an easily accessible stock of basic candidate information. Further, it appears that third party candidates are much more visible in this new information environment. Once initiated into the political Web sphere, third party candidates tend to follow the basic genre of campaign sites, providing relatively comparable basic issue content to that offered by major party candidates. If basic access to the resources required for fielding a functional stand-alone campaign Web site continues to spread, online campaigning may virtually raise the baseline of basic political information available to citizens for all candidates.

The emergence of the campaign site genre also creates an environment in which it is more noticeable if a candidate, such as an incumbent, does not provide such basic issue content. A regularized form of basic campaign information presentation on the Web may also serve to alter the dynamic sense in which campaign messages evolve over the course of the election season. For example, whereas the traditional development of campaign messages tends to move from simple recognition and introductory messages, (like the familiar biographical advertisements that appear early in a campaign), toward strategic issue-related appeals later on, the genre of Web campaigning may force candidates to make some aspects of all of these types of communication available at all times during the campaign, thus diluting the agenda-setting effects created by strategic timing of paid advertising and other communications.

These findings entail at least two implications for theorizing about the role of the Internet in campaign communication. First, the conclusions of earlier studies that the use

of the Web by political candidates has no discernable impact on the public sphere were perhaps reached too soon, or were based on insufficient data. By identifying a number of unusual aspects of online campaigning, the findings and interpretations we offer here highlight ways in which a definitive understanding of online campaigning and its political implications remains on the horizon. In particular, they highlight the value in focusing on the simple transmission of information, independently of technical features and production values, for determining the true impact of online campaigning on the public sphere. Second, our finding that incumbents engage in a significant level of issue dialogue online implies that traditional conceptions of campaign strategy should be rethought in a way that recognizes the pressure to conform exerted by the emerging genre of campaign Web sites and ways this may change overall campaign information environments.

Further research is needed to enable a more robust theoretical understanding of the emergent patterns of online campaigning. In particular, we believe future studies should enable direct comparison between online campaign strategies and offline communication, such as candidate statements, paid media, and press coverage. Studies of this kind would enable scholars to establish more concretely the ways in which office-seekers are using the Web to campaign in ways that differ from their use of more traditional paid commercials and their strategies for securing favorable coverage in news outlets. The observable patterns in online campaigning we have analyzed suggest the need for such further research in view of the inconsistencies they exhibit with predictions extrapolated from extant knowledge of offline campaign practices.

Table 1.
Position Taking and Direct Issue Dialogue as a Function of Political Structural Variables.

Predictors	Number of Issue Titles	Presence of Issue Titles	Presence of Opponent Reference
Major Party	-.16(.31)	-.16(.38)	.45(.56)
Incumbency	-.02 (.27)	-.59(.30)*	-9.11(26.67)
Campaign Intensity	1.82(.62)**	2.18(.85)**	.95(1.20)
Percent State Population	.01(.01)	.02(.01)	.05(.02)*
Online			
Constant	1.37(.83)	-.541(.951)	-6.41(1.87)**
<i>Chi Square</i>	---	15.64**	23.10***
<i>df</i>	---	4	4
<i>R</i> ²	.02	.08	.20

N=402. Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors appear in parenthesis. *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$.

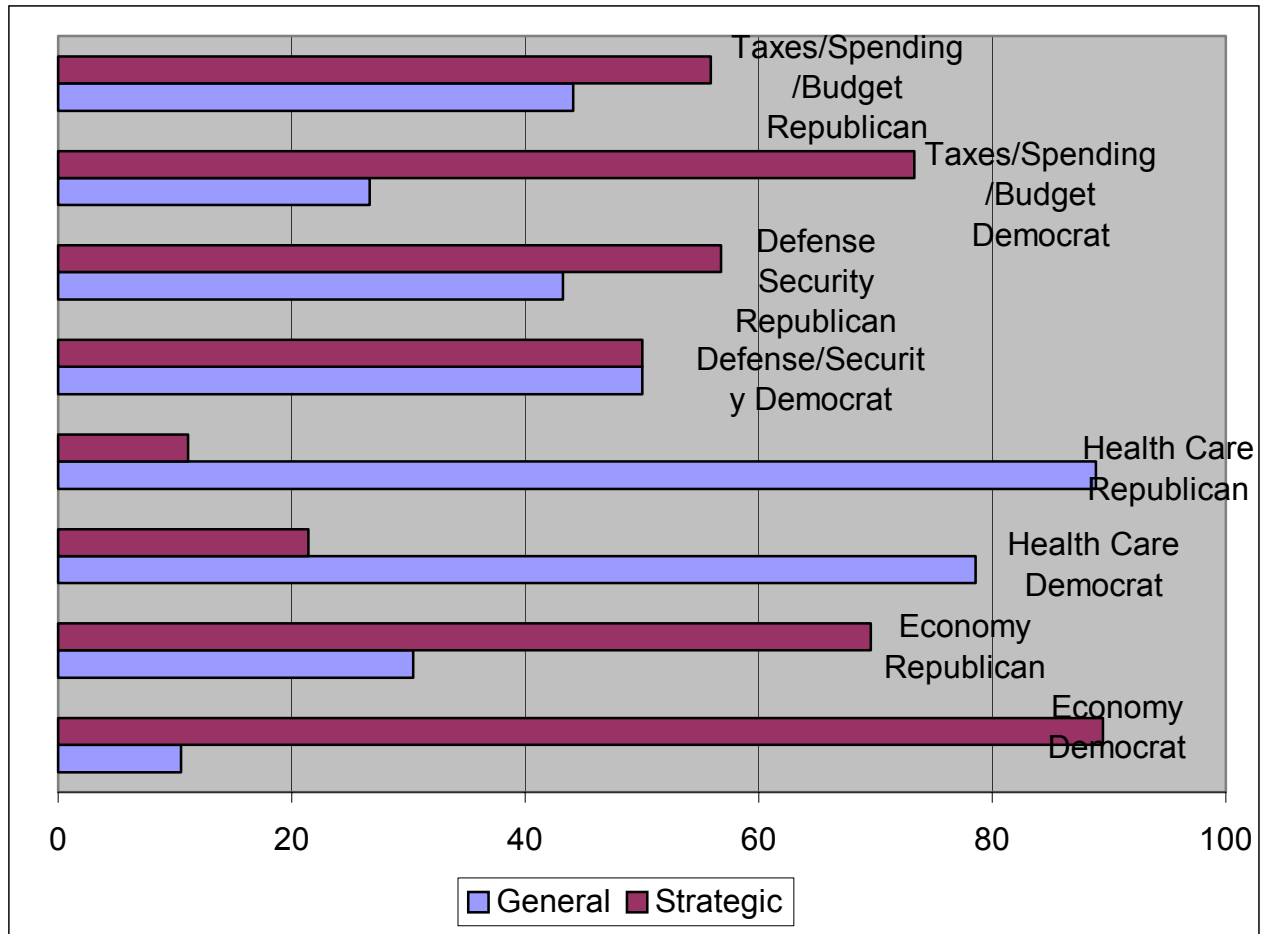
Table 2.

Indirect Issue Dialogue as a Function of Political Structural Variables.

Predictors	<i>B</i>
Campaign Intensity	.82 (.16)***
Incumbent in Race	.74 (.30)*
Percent State Population Online	.01 (.01)
Constant	-.83 (.10)
R^2	.12

$N=200$. Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors appear in parenthesis. *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$.

Figure 1.

*Strategic Versus Generic Issue Framing in Cases of Dialogue: Percentages of Issue**Mentions*

$N=261$. There were 66 races in which at least one instance of issue dialogue occurred.

The highest levels of issue dialogue occurred in regard to these four issues. There is a different total number of mentions for each pair of red/blue bars.

Taxes/Spending/Budget: 64 mentions; Defense/Security: 41 mentions; Health Care: 81 mentions; Economy: 75 mentions.

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Footnotes

¹We chose to evaluate intercoder reliability using percent agreement based on two important characteristics of the data. Unlike coding involving Likert scales or other continuous variables, in most instances we were primarily concerned with either the presence or absence of certain types of statements. As Neuendorf notes, percent agreement is particularly appropriate in such instances, “wherein each pair of coded measures is either a hit or a miss” (2002, p. 149). For the indirect dialogue measure, and number of issue titles measures, we again chose percent agreement, this time based on the distribution of indirect dialogue, which, consistent with expectations, is highly skewed. Such a distribution exerts a strong downward influence on the calculation of percent agreement beyond chance, even when coding is reasonably reliable (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Specific simple agreement rates for the presence of position taking, presence of each of the eight “top issues,” opponent references for each of these, and indirect dialogue are as follows: Presence of position taking: 93%, Education: presence 98%, opponent reference 99%; Economy presence 92%, opponent reference 85%; Social Security: presence 96%, opponent reference 94%; Medicare presence 99%, opponent reference 100%; Affordable health care presence 87%, opponent reference 87%; Campaign finance reform: presence 100%, opponent reference 100%, Taxes presence 85%, opponent reference 100%; Terrorism/Iraq war items were combined, yet all had agreement above 80%, Indirect dialogue 80%.

²Though Benoit et al. (2003) found low correlation between the ranking of issues by voters and the number of mentions of those issues on presidential candidate sites in 2000, we focus on the mere presence or absence of an issue topic on federal and

gubernatorial candidate sites in 2002. Benoit and his co-authors' analysis of the Bush and Gore candidate sites revealed that one candidate site addressed seven of the eight highly ranked issues, and the other site addressed all— our findings are consistent with this.

³Since there are no comprehensive studies of issue dialogue behavior among third-party candidates, we did not explore the prevalence of indirect dialogue among third-party candidates through their campaign Web sites.

⁴Although district level data on Internet access would have been preferable, since different districts within states obviously display variation in rates of Web penetration, collection of data at this level was not possible.

⁵ Statistical power was calculated using the Power And Precision statistical package. The political contextual variables of major party status, incumbency, and campaign intensity were treated as a set of variables, alongside our additional covariate of state population online. The effect size assumed for the equations was between small and medium ($f^2=.07$), and the *alpha* was set to .05.