Web Campaigning by US Presidential Primary Candidates in 2000 and 2004

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Introduction

As the Internet, and in particular the Web, has emerged into the mainstream of American society, candidates have increasingly sought to capitalize on the opportunities offered by this emerging medium to facilitate their campaigning efforts. In 1996, for most candidates, merely being on the Web, or demonstrating knowledge of the Web, was Web campaigning. Most of the contenders for the contested Republican presidential nomination established Web sites during the campaign, including Bob Dole, Steve Forbes, Lamar Alexander, Phil Gramm, Dick Lugar, Arlen Specter and Pat Buchanan. Alexander actually announced his candidacy on America Online, even though 88% of the American households did not have access to the Internet, and 70% of the households did not even have a computer in their home (Institute for Politics Democracy & the Internet, 2004; LaPointe, 1999). By the time of the general election in 1996, both major party and several minor party presidential candidates had Web sites, as well as nearly half of the Senate and about 15% of the House candidates (D'Alessio, 2000; Kamarck, 1999). Bob Dole, the Republican nominee, attempted to plug his campaign site at the end of his closing remarks during the first presidential debate. Unfortunately for Dole, he missed the final “dot” in his attempt to say www.dolekemp96.org, perhaps creating frustration for the mostly inexperienced group of Web users at the time (Besag, 2001; Kamarck, 1999; LaPointe, 1999). In 1998, although the percentage of candidates with Web sites increased significantly (Kamarck, 1999), scholarly analyses concluded that most continued to served as “virtual billboards” or “brochureware,” simply replicating in electronic form materials already distributed in print (D'Alessio, 2000; Kamarck, 1999; LaPointe, 1999; Sadow & James, 1999). In general, Web campaigning prior to 2000 was largely seen as a gimmick, or at best an ancillary to “real” campaigning.

This is a study of the development of Web campaigning practices among candidates seeking elected office in the United States, as manifested in the Web sites of those candidates competing in the presidential primary elections of 2000 and 2004. Presidential primary campaigns in the United States provide an excellent laboratory to observe the evolution of Web campaigning. In most primary campaigns, at least one of the two major parties features a spirited competition for the nomination; thus we have more than two candidates competing for a single office, allowing us to hold office constant and have multiple cases. US Presidential primary campaigns are organized around a long run-up to multiple electoral events (primaries and caucuses), providing both an opportunity and incentive for campaign organizations to develop Web sites featuring state-of-the-art practices. At the same time, given the structure of the campaign (e.g. the focus on Iowa and New Hampshire), multiple campaigns are competing on the same playing field at the same time. US presidential primary campaigns also function as a kind of clearing-house for political professionals seeking to burnish their skills and credentials for the political marketplace in the coming general election featuring gubernatorial, Senate and House
campaigns. For these reasons, it is reasonable to assume that primary election campaign Web sites, especially as viewed in a common time frame just prior to the New Hampshire primary, should function as a particularly good window through which to view the state of the Web campaigning at a particular point in time.

In this study we focus on the Web campaigning practices of the campaign organizations associated with candidates for major party nominations for president in both 2000 and 2004. Our research question is to what extent did the Web practices adopted by presidential primary campaign organizations evolve from the 2000 to the 2004 elections in the United States? Our analysis of the Web campaigning practices of campaign organizations is based on observations of the campaign Web sites launched by contenders for major party nominations for President in the period just prior to the first primary, New Hampshire, in 2000 and 2004. To observe Web campaigning practices we systematically evaluated the Web sites produced by campaign organizations that share a common operational perspective. Each of the campaign organizations analyzed shared (at least in theory) a common purpose: to secure one of the two major party nominations for the US presidency for its candidate. Each of the campaign organizations also shared a common environment: all were engaged in competition for the nomination with other candidates, and all developed a presence on the Web as part of their competition. Taking each set of sites produced for a presidential primary election as a case, we analyze comparatively the 2000 and 2004 presidential primary election cases. By holding the office and competitive level constant, and varying the time across two election cycles, we are able to gauge the evolution or development of presidential campaigns’ use of the Web. In comparing the extent to which each set of primary campaigns engaged in various Web campaigning practices, we are able to assess the development of presidential campaigns’ use of the Web as a strategic resource during this time period. We suggest that developments in Web campaigning by U.S. presidential campaigns be viewed as harbingers of developments in Web campaigning by other federal and state-level campaigns in the U.S., and in some other elections outside the U.S.

Theorizing Web Campaigning

Our analysis is grounded in a form of theory development called practice-based theorizing. Using this approach, we seek to understand the evolving relationship between the Web and electoral politics by investigating the Web production practices of campaign organizations. Although we take up questions of why (some) campaigns employ Web practices to varying extents, and offer some potential explanations, we do so through an empirically grounded account of the techniques employed in four Web campaigning practices: informing, involving, connecting and mobilizing. The conceptualizations of these practices, and the techniques that constitute them, provide conceptual frameworks that may be useful in examining other dimensions of the relationship between electoral politics and the Web.

Web production practices both reflect existing offline structures and prior practices and result in a particular online structure. These acts of making in turn enable and constrain
actions in ways that may shape future iterations of practices, and thus the evolution of structures, both online and offline. More specifically, the Web practices of campaigns (and other political actors) are shaped by existing (offline) structures and cultural resources in that they reflect political strategies and campaign practices developed over decades of electoral activity. They also manifest technology adoption patterns within socio-technical organizations or networks that may have deep historical and/or cultural roots. Concurrently, campaigns’ Web practices instantiate an emergent and evolving set of norms, and create online structures for political action, some of which may be quite innovative (Schneider & Foot, 2002). We conceptualize an “online structure” as a (co)produced electronic space, comprised of various html pages, features, links and texts, providing users opportunities to associate and act. On the Web, relations between Web producers, as well as between producers and users, are enacted and mediated through online structures. Furthermore, each online structure enables and constrains the potential for various kinds of political action, both online and offline.

Web Campaigning Practices

Although electoral campaigns vary considerably in their size, funding, status, and internal structure, as a type of organization they share several characteristics. All have an outward orientation, in that their success depends on informing, persuading, and involving others in the promotion of a candidate. All employ some type(s) of information and communication technology in those actions, whether hand-written flyers, radio advertisements, or Internet applications such as the Web. To understand how Web campaigning developed between 2000 and 2004 we engage in a close analysis of four specific types of practices on presidential primary sites — informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing — suggesting that each practice involves a distinctive type of relationship between campaign organizations and other political actors. Campaign organizations engage in the practice of informing when online structures are created to support the campaign in presenting information to potential “consumers” or “users.” This practice invokes the classic transmission models of communication, in which a communicator or producer transmits a message to a receiver or recipient (Lasswell, 1948). Informing was the first campaign practice adapted to the Web as evidenced scholarly characterizations of campaign sites produced prior to 2000 as “brochure-ware” (Kamarck, 1999) and “virtual billboards” (Sadow & James, 1999). Providing basic issue information, such as candidate biography, issue statements and news or press releases, exemplify engaging in the Web practice of informing.

Campaigns also engage in the practice of involving, in which the organization provides the online structure facilitating a connection between the user and the campaign. Involving as a campaign practice concerns the opportunity to establish interaction between users and campaign organizations; campaigns would usually employ this practice to cultivate supporters. Involving practices on the Web include allowing users to sign up to receive email lists or to contribute funds to the campaign. The relationship between the producing organization and the actor using the site is reminiscent of the
swapping between roles of source/encoder and receiver/decoder envisioned by Schramm (Schramm, 1954) in his model of communications (McQuail & Windahl, 1981).

The Web practice of connecting involves a campaign in the creation of online structure that serves as a bridge between the user of the site and a “third” political actor. In other words, the campaign organization uses its Web presence to “connect” a site user with another political actor, such as a press organization, political party, government agency or even an electoral opponent. In social network theory, these bridges are the ties between nodes of the network (Granovetter, 1973); in our analysis, any other political actor, whether offline or online, constitutes a node to which a campaign Web site may be connected, and the online structure facilitating the connection acts as the tie between nodes. The practice of connecting on the Web is most familiarly invoked using the technique of linking, but our conception is considerably broader, in that we suggest campaigns create both cognitive and transversal bridges between users and third actors. Transversal connections provide the online structure to facilitate movement through cyberspace, from one place (e.g. a Web page) to another (Saco, 2002), while cognitive connections provide only the mental or psychological bridge, relying on users to complete the connection through either online or offline action.

Additionally, some campaigns engage in the practice of mobilizing—providing online structure facilitating a user’s efforts to involve another actor in the goals and objectives of the campaign, mostly to recruit other citizens to support the campaign with funds or votes. In this type of practice, the campaign has moved beyond involving itself with the user and beyond making it possible for the user to become connected with a third party actor. Mobilizing practices include structures allowing individuals to send Web pages to friends, print campaign brochures for offline distribution, and obtaining names and telephone numbers of potential supporters to be telephoned or emailed.

In summary, these four practices can be viewed as supporting a variety of relationships among three political actors: the site visitor, the campaign organization, and “third” actors such as political parties, news organizations and other citizens. The practice of informing is a one-way relationship in which the campaign organization functions as the sender, and the site visitor functions as the receiver; no exchange relationship is invited or intended. The practice of involving is an attempt to establish interactions between the campaign organization and the site visitor. The practice of connecting positions the campaign organization as a facilitator attempting to establish some form of communication between the site visitor and third actors. The practice of mobilizing takes this one step further, and positions the campaign organization as a facilitator attempting to establish some form of communication between site visitors and potential supporters of the campaign.

**Methods**

Our aim in this analysis was to assess the extent to which campaigns engaged in each of the four Web campaigning practices during competitive 2000 and 2004 US Presidential primary elections. Other analyses of campaigns’ use of the Web in recent elections have proposed and employed various typologies of Web site features and content for
cataloging the range and distribution of such elements on campaign sites (Benoit & Benoit, 2000; D'Alessio, 2000; Kamarck, 1999; Puopolo, 2001). In contrast, we seek to move beyond description of campaign Web site elements by proposing that the features deployed on sites constitute evidence that campaign organizations are engaging in the specific Web campaigning practices we are exploring.

This research builds on and expands our previous assessments of Web sites produced by campaign organizations. We used a grounded theory method to assess features found on campaign Web sites in the 2000 election (Foot & Schneider, 2002; Schneider & Foot, 2002; Stromer-Galley, Foot, Schneider, & Larsen, 2001), generating a list of features associated with various types of online structures facilitating political action. Drawing on our initial work as well as research assessing candidate Web sites in the 1998 and 2000 elections completed by other scholars (Kamarck, 2002; Puopolo, 2001), we analyzed 1,168 Web sites produced by campaign organizations competing in races for House, Senate and Governor in 2002. Our analyses, based in part on an assessment of the presence or absence of features that we anticipated finding on the campaign Web sites, include examinations of issue-position taking on campaign Web sites (Xenos & Foot, 2005) and campaign organizations’ patterns of linking to other political sites (Foot, Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos, & Larsen, 2003).

In this study, we examine two sets of campaign Web sites: those produced by the official campaign organization associated with each significant candidate competing in the two major party Presidential primary campaigns in 2000 and 2004. “Significant” candidates were those identified as candidates on the Web sites produced by established press organizations (Washington Post, New York Times and CNN). Candidates were considered to be “competing” if more than one significant candidate was included on the ballot. In the 2000 campaign, a total of eight candidates with campaign Web sites were identified: Gary Bauer, Bill Bradley, George W. Bush, Steve Forbes, Al Gore, Orren Hatch, Alan Keyes, and John McCain. In the 2004 campaign, a total of nine candidates with campaign Web sites were identified: Wesley Clark, Howard Dean, John Edwards, Dick Gephardt, John Kerry, Denis Kucinich, Joe Lieberman, Carol Moseley Braun, and Al Sharpton.¹ Web sites were identified by examining listings published by established press organizations (Washington Post, New York Times, CNN). In 2000 presidential primary only one campaign (John McCain’s) produced more than one site, where as in 2004, all of the presidential primary campaigns produced at least two sites per campaign. For the purpose of comparing campaigns’ Web practices between 2000 and 2004, we based this analysis on the “main” Web site produced for each candidate in both 2000 and 2004. We archived the presidential campaign sites regularly between January and March, 2000 and January and March 2004, which enabled us to analyze them retrospectively. Versions of the campaign Web sites posted on the Web just prior to the January primary in 2000 and 2004 were evaluated using a coding protocol developed for use on the 2002

¹ The Web site produced by the campaign organization of George W. Bush in the 2004 Republican primary elections was excluded, as no other candidates competed for the Republican presidential nomination.
campaign sites, as discussed above. Trained research assistants were employed to evaluate the sites, and measures were used that had undergone extensive reliability testing. Research assistants were instructed to evaluate the front page of each site, and all pages linked from the front page and the first level of internal pages, to determine the presence or absence of 22 different features on the sites. Each of the 22 features included an explicit operational definition that was provided to the site analysts. For example, the feature labeled “issues” was defined as the presence of an identified section of the Web site that presented the candidate’s assessment of which issues were relevant for the race and/or the candidate’s goals pertaining to those issues. The feature labeled “offline distribution of online materials” was defined as an explicit effort on the part of the campaign to encourage and enable site visitors to distribute site materials to media and other outlets in the visitors’ communities. (See Appendix 1 for the operational definitions of the 22 features assessed in this study.)

This study is based on an assumption that campaigns’ practices are inscribed in particular Web site features. Our mapping of practices to features is presented in Table 1 below. While this mapping of practices to features is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive – we certainly recognize that other features could have been identified and/or associated with the practices under review, and that some of the features could arguably be said to be indicators of practices other than those we have suggested – we believe our mapping to be a useful starting point to assess the extent to which four Web campaign practices were during the presidential primary campaigns in 2000 and 2004. The number of features present on a Web site that were associated with a particular practice was used as an indicator of the extent to which a specific campaign engaged in that practice. Campaigns whose Web sites had none of the associated features were determined to have not adopted the practice. Campaigns that produced Web sites including any of the associated features but missing two or more were labeled as emergent adopters of the practice. Those campaigns with Web sites including all or all but one of the associated features were determined to be established in their use of the practice.

In addition to assessing the extent to which individual campaigns have engaged in specific practices, we have also assessed the extent to which the campaign organizations as a group engaged in these practices in each campaign year. We calculate a cross-site index by dividing the sum of features present across sites for a given campaign by the product of the number of features observed and the number of campaign Web sites examined. For example, if every Web site examined for a given campaign was found to have each feature associated with a given practice, the cross-site index would equal 1.0. The cross-site index is most useful in a comparative context, when sets of sites across two or more elections are assessed.

**Results**

Our analysis of campaign Web sites, showing specific features grouped by Web campaigning practice and indicating the level of adoption of the four practices by individual candidates and the combined sets of candidates from 2000 and 2004 is presented in Table 1. The presence or absence of each of the 22 features assessed is indicated for the eight Web sites produced during the 2000 campaign, and the nine sites
produced during the 2004 campaign. The density of features present across all four practices clearly increased from 2000 to 2004. In addition, the density of features present is most prominent for the practice of informing and least prominent for the practice of mobilizing.

[Insert Table 1 here]

There is limited variance across the 17 campaign Web sites evaluated in the level of adoption of the four campaign practices. All but one of the campaigns that established the practice of mobilizing (indicated by the dark shaded cells in Table 1) had established the practices of involving and informing as well. In addition, all but one of the campaigns that established the practice of involving had also established the practice of informing. Six of the 17 campaigns established the practices of informing and involving, and were emergent in the practices of connecting and mobilizing (indicated by the light shaded cells in Table 1). An additional five campaigns had established the practices of informing, involving and mobilizing, and were emergent on the practice of connecting. The remaining six campaigns had idiosyncratic patterns of adoption.

Table 2 provides a summary of this data across the four practices and the two campaign years examined. Overall, across all four practices, the level of adoption increased from 2000 to 2004. In the 2000 election, all of the campaigns were at least emergent adopters of the practices of informing, involving and connecting. This pattern continued in the 2004 campaign. In addition, in 2004 all campaigns were also at least emergent adopters of the practice of mobilizing. In sum, across the 17 Web sites examined in the two campaigns, all but one of the sites had adopted each of the four practices.

[Insert Table 2 here]

A close look at the extent to which each of the practices was emergent or established provides an indication of the development of Web campaigning between the two campaigns. Recall that an emergent practice is indicated by the presence of at least one feature associated with the practice, while an established practice is indicated by the presence of all or all but one feature associated with the practice. The practice of informing was established in all but two of the sites in 2000, and all but one of the sites in 2004, a slight increase. The cross-site index, a measure of the dispersion of features across all sites, increased marginally from .84 to .88, again indicating a slight shift in the extent to which this practice was part of Web campaigning.

The extent of the practice of involving indicates a sharp increase moving from 2000 to 2004. In 2000, five of the eight sites observed had established the practice of involving, while in 2004 all of the sites had done so. Involving is the only practice that became ubiquitous among presidential campaign primary sites. The growth in the cross-site index from .6 to .98 is indication that not only is the practice widespread, but the implementation of the specific features associated with involving is nearly ubiquitous as well.
There was only a slight increase from 2000 to 2004 in the proportion of campaign organizations engaging in the practice of connecting. In 2000, all of the campaigns were emergent with respect to this practice. One of the campaign sites had established the practice of connecting in 2004, while the remaining eight sites were emergent. The considerable rise of the cross-site index, from .31 to .56, indicates an increase in the number of connecting features deployed, even though the patterns of adoption of this practice changed only marginally.

The most development across the four practices was related to mobilization. In 2000, one site included no features associated with mobilization, and six of the eight sites observed were emergent on this practice; only one campaign had established the practice. In 2004, mobilization was at least emergent on all sites observed, with four of the nine campaigns having established the practice. The cross-site index more than doubled, from .28 to .64, providing further evidence of significant growth in the instantiation of this practice.

Implications and Conclusions

Clearly, campaigns’ level of engagement in each of these four practices of Web campaigning increased between the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential primary elections. In 2004, a greater proportion of campaigns established their use of each of the four practices examined on campaign sites than during the 2000 campaign. The cross-site index, measuring the dispersion of features across campaign sites, increased for each of the four practices as well. By 2004, all or nearly all of the campaign sites were fully engaged in the practices of informing and involving, and half were engaged in the practice of mobilizing using the Web. Still, the practice of connecting remained emergent for nearly all campaigns, having been established on only one campaign site in 2004. In this concluding section we consider possible reasons why informing and involving became so well established, and why connecting and mobilizing remained mostly emergent in 2000 and 2004.

Informing and involving are core practices for campaigns, and campaigns incur minimal cost and risk in adapting them to the Web. Although there was significant variation in the breadth and depth of information provided within each informing features on campaign sites within each election and across election years, all 17 campaigns provided at least half of the informing features we looked for, and most provided all of them. The use of metaphors such as “brochure-ware” and “digital yard signs” in the studies of campaign sites in the 1996 and 1998 U.S. elections cited above demonstrate that informing was the first campaign practice adapted to the Web, and it is certainly the easiest from a technical perspective. Public perception of the Web as an information source may also help explain why campaigns engage extensively in informing.

Similarly, the practice of involving is a long-standing campaign strategy, and adapting it to the Web does not require a rethinking of campaign organization or a release of control. The ubiquity of involving by 2004 may also reflect the donor-driven political culture of electoral politics in the U.S. The contributions of volunteers, both financial and in labor, are fundamental to the life of an electoral campaign in the U.S. Offering email updates to site visitors allows a campaign to collect e-mail addresses and often other kinds of
personal information from site visitors. This information enables campaigns to tailor future requests for donations and volunteer labor in ways that might increase their persuasive power. Thus development of Web site features associated with informing may represent investment in the campaign, whether for the present or the future.

Connecting and mobilizing, on the other hand, represent the emergence of more innovative forms of Web campaigning. We suggest that the extent of connecting remained relatively low in 2004 for several reasons, including campaigns’ desire to maintain control of site traffic and presentation, concerns about repurposing of materials by opponents or even supporters, legal concerns, and a general aversion on the part of campaigns to risky behavior. Campaigns are likely to desire to maintain site “stickiness” (Lewin, 2003), based on the sense that site visitors, once captured by a specific site, are too valuable to “give away” to another site via a link. It is also conceivable that from a campaign’s perspective, connecting to other political actors gives rise to the possibility that the material ultimately viewed by site visitors clicking on the link will not be the same as was intended when the connection was created. The uncertainty created by a link to another political actor’s site may be sufficient to discourage its implementation by some campaigns. Also, the practice of connecting through the technique of linking can place campaign organizations on somewhat uncertain legal terrain. Some campaigns may be wary of copyright infringement, either on their own part or on the part of those organizations to which they connect. Connecting to organizations whose tax status prevents political activity could lead to questions and allegations threatening the independence of those organizations. The possibility of providing links to organizations that may be registered as lobbyists for foreign governments is another legal barrier.

A significant reason for campaigns’ wariness in regard to both connecting and mobilizing may be that these practices are perceived by some campaign organizations as risky. Campaigns are inherently risk-averse organizations (Selnow, 1998). This risk-aversive behavior is particularly applicable to environments in which the opportunities for rewards are perceived as low. Given a lack of perceived rewards, campaigns have been cautious in their experimentation with connecting and mobilizing. The presidential primary campaign of Howard Dean seemed to have changed this calculus. One of the lasting outcomes of the phenomenal success Howard Dean’s campaign experienced online in the lead up to the 2004 primary may be its catalyzing of both connecting and mobilizing. The online component of the Dean campaign was created as a distributed Web presence, involving multiple sites, many of which were produced by people outside of the official campaign. For example, one part of the Dean campaign Web presence, the fordean.org network of sites, included a single site that connected more than 500 discussion groups, state and local Dean action coordinators, and Dean supporter Web sites. This extensive use of connecting and mobilizing as Web practices set a new standard for Web campaigning that was, in part, emulated by other campaign organization in the 2004 presidential primary, and which we should anticipate being replicated in future campaign cycles.

In the future, we expect that informing, involving and mobilizing to become ubiquitous practices among all candidates, not only those running for president, but also those running in other federal, state and local elections. These practices are natural extensions
of traditional campaigning onto the Web, and thus more likely to be adopted broadly across campaigns fairly quickly. However, the adoption of connecting is likely to lag behind until candidates become more comfortable with it and/or develop risk-management strategies.

References


