



## Catching Voters in the Web

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The U.S. Congress, center of power and money in Washington and the brunt of countless jokes, has seen 21 decades of social and technological change in America. Now comes the Internet, still in its infancy, less than a decade old. Is the Internet good for Congress and will it fundamentally change the ways that politicians run for office?

If it is healthy for a democracy when citizens see, unmediated by the news industry, how public policy is made and how political coalitions are formed, then modern communication technologies are welcome. Public access to Congress improved tremendously with the emergence of C-SPAN television coverage in 1979 and through Speaker Newt Gingrich's efforts to put House proceedings and documents on the Internet in 1995. The Senate followed suit, and today meaningful images of Congress are easily transmitted throughout the world. Because the Internet is asynchronous, it is easy to use in a democracy. Not everyone has to be in the same room at the same time. In 2000, civic site Freecomchannel.com, for example, made space on its server for candidates to upload 90-second answers to any question, and that proved immensely popular.

The congressional galleries, balconies that ring the House and Senate chambers, are guarded and subdued, as they have been since the 1800s. Observers in the galleries may not take notes; pencils and pens can be confiscated; photographs are forbidden. And audience noises of approval or complaint can result in closing the galleries, as House Speaker Carl Albert did in May 1972 while presiding over Vietnam War debates. Speaker Albert's reasoning was that the Congress could not deliberate in front of a mob without the threat of being ruled by the mob. That worry, that an unfettered public may turn into a mob and diminish the quality of deliberation, is still expressed on Capitol Hill. The Web has made it easier, though, to watch Congress at work. With television and Internet access, electronic galleries give citizens a better view of Congress than the physical galleries ever could.

### **The Internet in Congress**

Today the institution of Congress uses the Internet as a tool for broadcasting proceedings and publishing documents. House.gov and Senate.gov are gateways to Capitol Hill. Every congressional committee has a web site, and historic documents are available through official web sites of the House Clerk and the Senate Historian. Unlike public forums, however, information from the Internet in Congress flows in one direction, from

the Capitol to remote users. While almost every member of Congress has an e-mail address, e-mail messages are widely discounted by legislators as being less important than phone calls and postage mail, because e-mail is essentially cost-less to send. E-mail also has minimal impact because many lawmakers believe that they are already inundated with information and opinions from nearly every social cranny.

To the extent that Congress is a deliberative assembly that closely examines issues from various perspectives, the institutions that support deliberation tend to be deeply rooted in tradition. Committees hold hearings, as they have since the late 1700s, with witnesses carefully selected well in advance. Executive branch officials are routinely called to Congress, as they were in President George Washington's time. Interest groups from around the world send lobbyists to meet regularly with legislators and their staffs, and support agencies like the General Accounting Office, the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office provide valuable expertise.

Accurate and timely information is the currency that gains one access on Capitol Hill. The Internet helps congressional staffers, lobbyists and agency officials gather information for Congress, but legislators do not use the Internet for public debate and deliberation. Indeed, many legislators are loath to rely on Web-based deliberations because legislators worry about how biased the Internet may be since Web users are slightly more likely to be white and upper-middle class. Many digital divides do exist, and one of the more interesting political imbalances is that younger people are on the Internet in far greater proportion than older people are. Lawmakers are right to pay attention to digital divides and how they influence who contacts them on-line, but one should acknowledge that today's digital divides are less pronounced than the political ones that already exist. Fewer than one in five eligible citizens vote in congressional primaries, yet more than half of Americans report having regular access to the Internet.

One should not expect Congress to become an Internet well of public dialogue anytime soon. To the extent that lawmakers continue to feel that "too much" information and "too many" opinions are already available to them, Congress will continue using the Internet as a fancy all-hours viewing gallery in which citizens constitute the audience and little else.

### **The Internet in Congressional Campaigns**

While Congress as an institution is unlikely to change fundamentally because of the Internet, congressional campaigns will never be the same. The Internet makes it easier for campaigns to succeed at three critical tasks. In campaigns, politics is marketing, and politicians can learn a lot about Web marketing from General Motors and Nabisco. More important than displaying the product, marketers need to know who the consumers are likely to be, the preferences of their consumers, where the consumers are, and how to motivate the consumers to buy. How can the Web do all this for political campaigns? There are time-tested ways of getting voters to the polls, and in a Darwinian way losing strategies (and candidates) are quickly discarded.

The keys to the future of the Web in campaigns are evident in Elaine Kamarck's chapter in this book. These include the importance of competition to innovation, the use of the Web to solicit campaign resources, the interactivity of the Web, and the Web's potential to knit together the internal organization of campaign staffs.

In 1998, congressional candidates used the Web almost exclusively as an outlet for traditional campaign materials: press releases, nice candidate photos, and basic contact information. These fit nicely into any traditional campaign, but the Web coordinator of tomorrow's campaigns will be at the heart of any election strategy, and on-line resources such as PoliticsOnline.com and Campaigns and Elections magazine are poised to play a central role. The first campaign cycle in which the Internet is likely to sway voters in a sizable number of districts may be 2004, when Internet penetration is expected to be above 75 percent of the population and a wealth of new voters, weaned on the Web, can come to the polls.

In 2000 the Web was widely used by congressional candidates for raising money, but the cluster of traditional advisors working on campaigns for Governor George Bush and Vice President Al Gore did not enthusiastically embrace the Internet. During the 2000 election cycle, the Republican Party raised nearly \$250 million Dollars, yet just 2 percent of that was raised on the Web. In six hours of presidential debates, neither leading candidate mentioned his Web site even once. Still preferring direct mail, the Republicans' direct mail efforts were run by companies that have run direct mail campaigns for years. Untutored in Web-based campaigns, Republican mail efforts did not even ask respondents for their e-mail addresses, which compelled the nascent Web campaign team to buy e-mail lists from the private market. Republicans gathered 950,000 e-mail addresses by the end of the campaign, but more than half of those were acquired after August 2000 when partisans had already made up their minds on how to vote.

Candidates for congress fared somewhat better using the Web in 2000. In her study of Senate campaign web sites, Tita Puopolo found near universal use of the campaign web sites as places to recruit volunteers in 2000. Every Republican candidate with a web site recruited through the Internet, and all but one Democrat did, too. Likewise, all but one Republican and two Democrat Senate candidates raised campaign Dollars on their web sites. In contrast, fewer than 1 out of ten Senate candidates conducted "town hall" meetings through their web sites, and barely 1 out of 10 used their sites to broadcast, in real-time, campaign events. Successful and web-savvy campaigns of tomorrow will incorporate more Web-casting and will deploy e-mail lists targeted at narrow slices of the electorate. As with product innovations in the private sector, Web-based campaign innovations will emerge through the magic of political competition.

In his classic 1968 Candidates for Office, John Kingdon found that winning candidates for Congress congratulated themselves upon making good strategic moves in a campaign (overestimating their own importance) and losing candidates rationalized their losses as the results of factors outside their control. This makes winning candidates (incumbents in the next election) more likely to follow strategies from previous campaigns, while challengers prove more likely to innovate and to take risks. It is through political

competition that campaign innovations take hold, and these innovations are tested first by challengers.

Data on Internet innovations in political campaigns follow the Kingdon story closely. In 1998, Elaine Kamarck tracked the Web presence (and absence) of 1,366 candidates (921 from the two major parties and 445 minor party and independent candidates). Among Democrat and Republican candidates, Web usage was twice as likely for challengers and contestants in open seats than it was for incumbents. Fifty-three percent of challengers and open-seat contestants had a Web site in 1998 while just 26 percent of incumbents adopted the new technology. In a similar study of congressional campaign sites in 2000, Steven Schneider found Web sites to be more prevalent among challengers and in competitive races, again demonstrating that competition spurs innovation in political markets.

In the 2000 congressional campaigns, 52 percent of House incumbents and 85 percent of Senate incumbents had web sites. Those are striking increases over the 1998 numbers, in which 19 percent of House and 70 percent of Senate incumbents had campaign sites. Incumbents learned about the power of the Internet through the proliferation of Congress-subsidized home pages, which are were maintained by their own offices for communicating with constituents. In 1998 fewer than two dozen members of the House had office web sites; by 2001 fewer than two dozen did not.

Some of the Web sites proliferating on Capitol Hill are surprisingly engaging. For example, Ohio Representative Dennis J. Kucinich's official site boasts audio clips of polka music, including comedian Drew Carey singing "Too Fat Polka" and the great Frank Yankovic's "Beer Barrel Polka." Shortly after going on-line in 2000, the site was inundated by curious music fans and, presumably, occasional legislative inquiries. In a more sophisticated web maneuver just before Christmas 1999, Alabama Republican Representative Bob Riley e-mailed constituents a video greeting, inviting them to visit his site and to respond to an on-line survey. Typical congressional surveys yield a one to two percent response rate. Riley's electronic outreach brought a 20 percent response in a district ranked near the bottom for Internet penetration. Congressman Riley was the first, but by summer 2001, e-mailed greetings were in widespread use on Capitol Hill, proving far less expensive than bulk mail, although legislators continue sending mail in order to maximize the number of constituents they reach.

Capitol Hill may be the center of power in Washington, but it is easy to overstate and over-interpret signals from the Hill. Legislators owe their existence to politically active clusters of voters "back home." The average member of the House of Representatives spends 172 days every year back home, and most lawmakers have developed personal and political networks specifically attuned to finding out what their voters are thinking. To this end, the Internet may be one of the best networks conceivable. Once this country had hundreds of local political machines. Machine politicians met immigrants in big cities, registered them to vote, helped them get jobs, and infused them with the spirit of American political culture? Politics was truly local, with voters well known at the precinct level.

With the Internet, we hear the creaky beginnings of a new political machine. Like organizing tools of yesteryear, the political Internet will narrowcast, focusing on individual interests, exploring bloc by bloc the virtual precincts of local issues. As members of Congress will quickly learn, the Internet can help political organizers communicate with finely drawn slices of the electorate.

For good or ill, the new political machine will bring us a new politics, too. The standard polka two-step (two hops to the right, two hops to the left) favors neither direction. It is the same with the new political Internet machine. Expect it to play all types of music and make lots of noise. Electronically linked to local interests, can that polka masterpiece, "Roll Out the Pork Barrel" be far behind?

Using the Web, political organizers will identify and mobilize voters likely to support certain viewpoints without resorting to voter lists. Today, candidates and interest groups can find e-mail addresses of everyone in a congressional district.

Under current privacy laws, one can buy the e-mail addresses of everyone who read a story in an on-line newspaper, or used a Web search engine to look for sites related to "pollution." Did someone read a review or buy a copy of Girl Interrupted on the Web? A mental health interest group may want to know. Indeed, a security breach in summer 2001 made available the e-mail addresses of about 600 people who use the anti-depressant drug Prozac. Similarly, if someone bought heart medication on-line lately, that person's e-mail address will be a prized commodity the next time medical research funds are debated on Capitol Hill.

The upshot is a world in which interest groups, parties, and candidates know what kinds of articles people read, what sites they search, what products they buy -- all of that information linked to e-mail address. Do such fine-grained tracings of activity on the web exist? Some do, and the technology is here to build much more sophisticated profiles. It is simply a question of acquiring and merging electronic lists. Some of these lists are explicitly political, such as the information that thousands of users voluntarily provided to now-defunct Voter.com in 2000. That information was put up for sale in 2001, although most of the users were already politically active and engaged. More intriguingly, highly effective political profiles can be drawn from information about consumer preferences. From a list of fifty movie titles, pick your five favorites. With that information, today's political analysts can make good predictions about whether you will vote and what characteristics you would like to see in a candidate. Interest groups would love that kind of information, because "Top Gun" fans are of a certain ilk, and "Othello" aficionados are another type altogether.

If all of this sounds frightening, perhaps it should, but to date Americans have shown little reluctance about giving information on their buying patterns to supermarkets and video stores. Discount cards for purchases at supermarkets have proliferated, replacing coupons for most Americans and buying habits are, where possible, linked to e-mail addresses that can be bought and sold. It is as if we want our preferences known and acknowledged and accounted for. This may not be a bad thing. For example, on-line

bookstores routinely make recommendations based on past reading patterns, and the majority of consumers say that they appreciate the suggestions, which build customer loyalty. Can campaign Web sites be tailored to the interests of voters in similar ways?

The future of Web usage in campaigns will employ techniques that monitor voter preferences, mobilize selected voters around local issues, and build brand loyalty for elected representatives. Such loyalty used to be engendered with distinctly low-tech approaches when political parties were organized block by block and politicians regularly knocked on doors. As legislative districts have grown dramatically, doubling in size over the last 60 years, and as neighbors have become increasingly disconnected from each other, the Web may be used to facilitate political communities once again.

Doug Bailey, dean of Washington pundits and founder of the political newsletter "Hotline," argues that the Internet "can reestablish personal contact, which is what successful campaigns are really all about. Young people today, 11 to 16 year olds, live this way. They live on the Internet. And if the parties are to get young folks involved, they will have to reach them through the Internet. That is the voting group that will dominate the politics of the future. This is a generation that is now coming that is going to change our politics in fundamental ways." Bailey's strategy is to move from high-tech to high-touch, with campaigns mobilizing not only their usual supporters but a cadre of Web-savvy young politicians, too.

As an example for ways that a Web-savvy campaign might use the Internet, consider how we might have run a campaign for my friend (and non-candidate) David Hart.

### **David Hart for Congress**

Mike Capuano won the 1998 Democratic primary after Joe Kennedy (D-MA-8) retired. This being Massachusetts, Capuano captured the general election with only nominal Republican opposition, so the primary proved critical. Capuano (and his fellow challengers in the primary) had a Web site that almost perfectly matched Kamarck's description of the 1998 offerings. It was little more than an electronic brochure. Much of the information was out-of-date, and while it solicited volunteers, those solicitations were in no way targeted for specific kinds of voters.

Imagine that it is May 1998 and David Hart, a liberal Democrat in his late-30s, decides to enter the crowded primary, jumping in as the 11<sup>th</sup> candidate. With such a crowded field, we can expect that just twenty percent of the primary vote could win the Democratic nomination, but Hart faces four especially tough opponents: Ray Flynn (the former Boston mayor who has great grass-roots "get out the vote" skills), Marjorie Clapprood (who is well known as a radio personality), Chris Gabrielli (who has money to burn on TV and radio but no neighborhood operations), and Mike Capuano (the wildly successful Somerville mayor who is not known outside of his town). Hart needs to identify and mobilize a niche of the Democratic Party that has not already been successfully targeted by his 10 opponents. The Web can help.

*Identifying Likely Voters.* Anyone who has worked in a campaign remembers purging and "scoring" voter lists. It is a monotonous process, but it is crucial to identify quickly the subset of constituents who are likely to vote in the primaries. Nation-wide, congressional primaries averaged just 17.4 percent turnout in 1998, and candidates are careful not to "waste" time and money on the overwhelming majority of unlikely voters. Seeing who has voted in the past identifies likely voters, so every candidate in the 8<sup>th</sup> district is working from virtually identical lists. With the Web, David Hart can do better.

Hart can begin by contacting the major Web search engines (Google, Yahoo, Lycos, Excite, and Infoseek) and purchasing information about citizens within the 8<sup>th</sup> district zip codes. In early 1998, these search engines began offering free e-mail, as a way of enticing users to yield their home addresses. (In 1997, identifying home addresses off Web traffic was very difficult. No longer.) Hart could purchase, for example, the names, addresses, and e-mail addresses of every "Web registered" 8<sup>th</sup> district citizen who has recently searched for "Ray Flynn" or "Marjorie Clapprood" on the Web. For a small fee, a Web portal (or search engine) could identify registered users who visited virtually any political Web site in the world, including very narrowly defined interests. If, say, Hart wants to target environmentalist voters, he could identify 8<sup>th</sup> district Web users who searched for "The Sierra Club," "Ducks Unlimited," and so on.

Second, Hart should contract with Townonline.com, the online service of Community Newspapers – which has local papers in Watertown, Belmont, Cambridge, Brookline, and Boston. On-line readers are encouraged to sign the site's "guest book." This allows Townonline.com to identify specific users – and their usage patterns – anytime they re-enter the site. Register once, and the user is automatically identified in subsequent visits. For a small fee, David Hart could buy the names, addresses, and e-mail addresses of every Townonline visitor who read any particular story. Does Hart want to do a targeted Belmont mailing about the incinerator controversy? Then simply identify who has been reading about the incinerator on-line. This may be a little disconcerting to people who care about their privacy, but *if* one is a registered user, one has almost no privacy. I registered to read the Associated Press Online through the Los Angeles Times. In theory, someone at the LA Times could identify every article I've read in the last 6 months and how I (and many others) surfed from one type of article to another. And through experiments on the Associated Press website, the AP can identify what kinds of headlines attract more readers and how readers link from one subject to another.

In 1998, David Hart had a new book about the development of technology policy in mid-century. It is called Forged Consensus, and Hart could potentially pay on-line book retailers for the names, addresses, and e-mail addresses of everyone in the 8<sup>th</sup> district who bought his book on-line. (It would be a very small list.) Through several on-line bookstores, Hart could also conceivably purchase information about everyone buying "environmental" books in the 8<sup>th</sup> district over the last 6 months. The Belmont book buyers might be a perfect audience to hear about Hart's concerns over the incinerator.

After identifying likely voters and acquiring their e-mail addresses, candidate Hart could build a sense of community through the e-mail users by asking them to become involved

in campaign events very close to their homes. People like to be asked for favors from politicians if they have an issue or personal background in common. There is an old adage in campaigning; "It is better to receive than to give." Ask for someone's help in a campaign, and the candidate has likely received a vote, too, because the person who gives time to a campaign invests in having that candidate win. In campaigns, small commitments of time or money are exceptionally valuable, and the carefully constructed e-mail lists can help someone like David Hart identify whom to ask for help.

*Recruiting Campaign Resources.* As we have seen virtually all US Senate candidates with Web sites in 2000 used the web to solicit funds and recruit volunteers. Campaign contributors know no boundaries, and the Web makes identifying potential issue-specific donors fairly easy. Again, with a Web search engine, one could do a *free* targeted search of all Web sites mentioning various words. For Hart, we might search for "Incinerator" AND "Environment" AND "Against." When I performed that search in July 1998, I found 203 separate Web sites mentioning those three words in combination. They were all potential Hart allies. Since 1998, of course, the number of Web sites has mushroomed. The identical search for "Incinerator" AND "Environment" AND "Against." Conducted in July 2001 yielded 26,400 Web sites mentioning those three words in combination.

For a simple fundraising gambit, David Hart could send a mass mailing to every "David Hart" in the phone book nationwide. Using Switchboard.com in July 1998, I found over 1,600 David Harts, with addresses and phone numbers, in under 20 seconds – and for free. Four11.com quickly identified 659 separate e-mail accounts registered to "David Hart" worldwide, and we could do a targeted e-mail to that list in less than 20 minutes. There are 37 David Harts in Massachusetts alone, many who would be thrilled to send \$20 to their namesake for Congress.

It takes far less than a \$20 contribution to catch a voter in the Web. Once a person contributes any small amount, say \$5, that person makes a psychological commitment to seeing the candidate win. In most campaigns, \$5 matters little, and a solid House campaign would cost David Hart more than \$500,000. The importance of the small campaigns is in mobilizing voters and making them psychologically invest in the outcome.

Where do the Web viewers come from who might make small contributions? They are not likely to stumble across the site, and Web pollution is becoming more and more severe. Rather, David Hart has to send highly selective potential voters links to his Web site, using the identifying techniques discussed above. The more exclusive and "by invitation only" the site appears, the more likely Web weary voters are to tune in.

*Communicating within the Campaign.* David Hart's campaign is ahead of its time; so in addition to a state-of-the-art narrowcasting Web site, he maintains a separate Web site for his own campaign volunteers and coordinators. This site may prove critical in coordinating events across the district and in quickly sharing strategic information.



For campaign workers on the bottom rung, working for a candidate can be solitary and alienating. Volunteers go door-to-door answering scattered questions from voters, though these volunteers may never have met the candidate and often use obsolete campaign materials. With a campaign Intranet, the huge gulf between door-knocking volunteers and the candidate can be bridged. Volunteers can be included in discussions and can share observations up the hierarchy much more quickly than in past campaigns.

That is David Hart's plan. His Web Intranet (password protected and with increased security the closer one gets to strategic documents) is updated daily with information about his campaign. Campaign schedules are modified almost hourly, so his staff can see when he'll arrive at schools, picnics, and the like. From his volunteers, he tracks the placement of signs in neighborhoods and quickly thanks volunteers for every door knock and campaign rally. It is not so much that David Hart forges a consensus within his campaign early and then sticks with it. Rather, he continually updates his strategy and personnel to gauge the consensus in his campaign and keep spirits high. By 2004, congressional campaigns will deploy volunteers into the field for the usual door-knocking, but those volunteers will hold Palm Pilot or other small data organizers that will be linked to the Internet, showing maps for walking and texts for talking.

David Hart did not run for Congress in 1998 and probably never will. Still, his could have been a model campaign. Some campaigns, notably Tom Campbell's race for the U.S. House in California and Jessie Ventura's gubernatorial run in Minnesota, used the Web's full potential. The Web itself is always changing, and its "full potential" will grow with each election cycle.

We owe Elaine Kamarck a debt for detailing the beginning of the political Web, noting not only the percentage of campaigns using the Web but, more importantly, how the Web was used in 1998 and 2000. The "electronic brochure" is the dominant image in her 1998 benchmark, but we have seen rapid innovations since then. Many of those innovations are detailed at [PoliticsOnline.com](http://PoliticsOnline.com) or recorded in the Library of Congress-sponsored campaign archive at [Alexa.com](http://Alexa.com).

While the Web is unlikely to change how members of Congress deliberate, it is already changing the ways they run for office. By 2008, the Web will be ubiquitous in congressional campaigns as candidates follow the lead of retail marketers in identifying specific voters, narrowing their messages, and communicating within their campaign organizations. Today a typical campaign's organization chart includes a campaign manager, treasurer, press manager, and volunteer coordinator. Tomorrow a new position will be listed among the campaign's leaders: Web coordinator. The Web will be that central to tomorrow's campaign, and we will come to think of the computer – with its dynamic links to data and voters – as the new "political machine."