

## INTERNET TIME

**D**uring the last days of the 2000 presidential campaign, a flurry of incidents signaled the arrival of online technology in mainstream American politics:

- In an ingenious end run around the major parties, several Web sites sprang up and offered to match supporters of Gore and Nader from strategically selected states. By consummating mutual promises to vote for their Net-partner's candidate, citizens could work to realize a scenario in which Gore would win the election and Nader's Green Party would attain 5 percent of the vote and be eligible for public funding in 2004.<sup>1</sup> Tens of thousands visited these "vote-trading" sites before several Republican secretaries of state moved to shut them down, squelching the experiment in distributed deal making.
- In a demonstration of both how important and how vulnerable online campaigning could become, on Election Day 2000 someone defaced one of the home pages of the Republican National Committee, and another intruder disrupted the e-mail system of the Democratic National Committee.<sup>2</sup> Both security breaches were repaired swiftly. However, both were easy fixes. Election Day looms as a plump target for online attacks since it lasts a short number of hours, and get-out-the-vote operations by campaigns during those hours can make a difference.
- The N.A.A.C.P. relied on the Net and sophisticated software to re-adjust the telephone calling schedules of its get-out-the-vote (GOTV) coordinators every thirty minutes, based on early returns in pivotal precincts. This system proved its worth when polling stations in

St. Louis were reopened late in the evening by court order. The cyber-network adjusted, contributing to (deceased) Missouri governor Mel Carnahan's narrow Senate victory over the incumbent, John Ashcroft.

- Early in the morning after Election Day, the Gore inner circle relied on the Net to learn that Bush's lead in Florida had collapsed from thousands to hundreds of votes, prompting the Democrat to reverse his concession and challenge the result. The Florida secretary of state's Web site posted real-time returns, in a sharp technological contrast to the performance of some of the state's voting machines.
- As the electoral dispute unfolded, partisans intent on collecting testimony from aggrieved Florida voters discovered that some of them had already posted complaints via e-mail. The Net had given citizens an easy way to bring problems to the timely attention of political authorities and advocates.
- The Internet also enabled political authorities and advocates to communicate among themselves more efficiently as a preface to concerted action. The transcontinental teams of lawyers assembled by Bush and Gore used the Net to research and write their court briefs. While they worked out of public view, an e-mail from a Chicago lawyer to thirty friends, urging them to "bombard the news media" with demands for a Gore concession, snowballed into thousands of messages in a few days' span to newspaper editors whose e-mail addresses were included in the lawyer's missive.<sup>3</sup> Some of these editors told their readers that the online lobbying did not affect their views of the election controversy. But these public denials were belied by their decisions to treat the "snowball" as news.

These political activities occurred at the end of a decade in which the Internet made its debut beyond narrow, specialized circles of Americans. A combination of economic, governmental, social, and technological forces drove the rapid diffusion of the new medium. The World Wide Web, a system for delivering and displaying multimedia documents on the network of computers known as the Internet, made its public debut in 1991, followed two years later by the appearance of Mosaic, a method to "browse" the Web. These innovations sparked interest in the Internet beyond its original users in academia and government.

In 1994, commercial sites arose online. The following year, the U.S. government turned much of the Net over to private businesses and consortia. That year, as civic activist Tracy Westen notes, three milestones were passed: Americans bought more computers than television sets, sent more e-mail (which does not require Web access and skills) than surface mail, and transmitted more data messages than voice messages.<sup>4</sup> Bill Gates noticed the trend and voiced his concerns in a memo about the threat posed to Microsoft by Netscape, the company that devised a popular Web browser. In 1996, the federal government deregulated telecommunications to spur competition for phone and cable service, two principal conduits of Internet traffic. Venture capital firms stepped up their staking of “Internet start-ups,” to the point where the phrase became shorthand in the late 1990s for a vogueish place to work. The Y2K scare punctuated the decade of the broad introduction of the technology, as fears of what would happen to computer networks and databases when some terminals failed to distinguish between 1/1/(19)00 and 1/1/(20)00 pushed many organizations to upgrade their computer equipment, thereby improving their access to the Internet.<sup>5</sup>

The world of campaigns, elections, and issue advocacy orbited far from the high-tech sun but still felt its pull. Dot-pols, campaigners with a special interest in the potential uses of the Internet in campaigns, emerged at the same time as digital communication pioneers focusing on other matters. In 1993, Ken Deutsch put a Web site together for the “Baby Bell” regional phone companies to advocate in the area of telecommunications policy. Dan Carol built the first campaign Web site, for California senator Dianne Feinstein, in 1994. Steve Clift and Scott Reents of Minnesota E-Democracy sponsored the first online candidate debates that year. In 1995, both Phil Gramm and Lamar Alexander laid claim to being the first presidential candidate to open a Web site. That same year, Phil Noble launched PoliticsOnline, a consulting firm that offered specialized news about online campaigning as well as software and services. Shabbir Safdar of Voters Telecommunications Watch teamed up with Jonah Seiger and Jerry Berman of the Center for Democracy and Technology and staged an online protest when the Communications Decency Act was signed into law in 1996.<sup>6</sup> Bob Dole, the Republican nominee in 1996, referred to the Web site that Robert J. Arena built for his campaign at the conclusion of the first presidential debate in the fall. Dole gave out a slightly incorrect Web address, yet the site recorded more than two million hits in the ensuing twenty-four hours.

These campaign firsts went largely unnoticed in the public square.<sup>7</sup> When Jesse Ventura won the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial race as a third-party candidate, the three top U.S. newsweeklies lavished attention on the victor. But these bellwethers of the mainstream national media did not report on the role played by “the JesseNet,” Ventura’s online campaign operation, in the upset. In 1999, they tuned into the story. “In the ever-accelerating world of the Internet,” wrote Howard Fineman in *Newsweek*, “e-campaigning has gone from novelty to necessity in less than a year.”<sup>8</sup> By this time, Rebecca Fairley Raney (who did report on the JesseNet) had developed online campaigning into a beat for the *New York Times*. Two online publications, *Slate* and the *Industry Standard*, joined with reporters at the *Washington Post* to publish a frequent column called “Net Election.” “Net Election” ran regularly in the three online outlets and occasionally in the print versions of the *Industry Standard* and the *Post*.

The surge of news media interest in online campaigning coincided with the apogee of the NASDAQ boom and the onset of the 2000 presidential race. On the sound logic that presidential election years are prime times to introduce new political products and services, dozens of online politics initiatives materialized in (or were beefed up for) the 2000 election cycle, which began in 1999. Political entrepreneurs, some with millions of dollars in venture capital stakes, counted on public predictions that 2000 would be “The Year of the Net” and publicized themselves through that slogan. But by the time of the Republican and Democratic conventions, it was clear that expectations would not be met. No speaker at either convention invited the television audience to visit a Web site. The only time George W. Bush referred to the Internet during his acceptance speech was to gibe at his opponent for being the reputed “father” of the medium. The line got a huge laugh, yet there was no concerted online follow-through. Al Gore did not attempt to refute or otherwise turn the tables on Bush. The online bubble, lacking news and political networking to sustain it, collapsed.

The protracted election dispute gave online public affairs companies, divisions, and projects one last shot at making good on the “Year of the Net” prediction. News media portals, notably CNN.com and MSNBC.com, enjoyed unprecedented traffic spikes in November 2000 as millions of people checked the sites throughout the deadlock for the latest numbers and commentary. Alas, history is merciless to those who peg political predictions to the calendar. The year 2000 became the Year of the Chad, not

the Net.<sup>9</sup> The collapse of the NASDAQ spoiled the triumph of the news media portals, which had to lay off employees despite record volume. In a final and ironic rebuke to those who had banked on 2000 being the Year of the Net in public affairs, the cause of online voting was initially advanced by the breakdown of voting equipment in Florida, only to suffer a mighty setback. Companies vending online voting systems were confronted by opinion poll and expert panel majorities who questioned the security, equity, verifiability, privacy, and general rationale for their product.<sup>10</sup> The companies retreated and began to push computerized, but not online, equipment. VoteHere.Net changed its name to VoteHere, just as Grassroots.com, a political start-up, became Grassroots Enterprises.

## **THE SCOPE AND PACE OF CHANGE**

So much, it would seem, for the prophecies of the Internet spurring great change at a dizzying pace. If there was a digital revolution going on, it was not triggering an upheaval in politics. The Internet was not used to shift power among nations, classes, social types, or age groups.<sup>11</sup> The Berlin Wall fell before, not after, the Web arose, with the help of the videocassette, satellite television, and the fax machine.

On a lesser but still significant level of change, the Internet cannot be associated with any shuffling of the issues on the national public affairs agenda. It is true that, because of the Internet, more Americans express concern about corporations and governments gathering personal information without their permission and about the commercial and pornographic solicitations that appear, unbidden, on their computer screens. But Net-stimulated privacy concerns have yet to crystallize into a political movement on the scale of, say, abortion, guns, taxes, or the environment, issues candidates ignore at their peril. Using still another dimension of change, it would be an exaggeration to claim that online campaigning tipped the presidential election or any other contest in 2000, with the possible exception of the Missouri Senate race.

Yet, if the forecasters made a mistake in the 1990s, it was one of proportion, not direction. American politics has irreversibly crossed an important threshold. The race for the presidency is the most prominent political process in the world, a floodlighted and often supercharged sequence of events that brings special attention to campaign practices. Many people saw for the first time in 2000 how the Internet can work in

politics. They did not have to be among the 102 million Americans with Internet access at that time to do so, since Internet politics was covered as a story in off-line media. However, increasing numbers of Americans have learned about online campaigning through direct experience.

What one may label the “online citizenry,” an intersecting subset of the online and adult populations, continues to expand. More Americans are turning to the Internet for news or information about politics. The ranks of this online citizenry increased while the high-tech economy boomed and even after it collapsed, during midterm as well as presidential election years. In the summer of 2000, approximately 33 million Americans viewed political information online. In November 2002, the population of the online citizenry stood at 46 million. There is little reason to expect a reversal of this trend. Its primary propellants—the increased sophistication of Net users, the spread of broadband (high-speed, high-volume connections), and the periodic eruption of big news stories—do not need more technological breakthroughs and subsequent sales hype to be sustained.<sup>12</sup>

What has the online citizenry seen? And what has it done politically, the Internet being a medium for campaign action as well as news and education? The Internet has had an impact on voting and persuasion, the two activities most people associate with conventional politics. In 1998, 34 percent of the online public said that information it received about the elections through the Internet swayed the decision to vote for or against a particular candidate; in 2000, 43 percent said it had been so influenced, and the comparable figure was 25 percent in 2002.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to discern a trend in these numbers, especially given the ever-expanding population from which they are drawn. It is impossible to tie the survey data to an electoral contest, or group of contests, or segment of the electorate where the influence has been most acute. But it is undeniable that the Internet has become part of the media mix that animates politics.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, on the supply side, dot-pols have begun to incorporate the Internet into the myriad of campaign activities in which politicians engage as they seek public support for elections and policies: research, publicity, advertising, press relations, organizational management, fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and volunteer/voter mobilization. The potential applications are as wide as can be imagined. Because the Internet supports mass communication (few-to-many), interpersonal communication (few-to-few), and interactive communication (many-to-many), there is scarcely an aspect of campaigning that cannot be conducted through it. Kissing babies does come to mind as an exception.

Technologically inspired political change may not be occurring on “Internet time,” as the 1990s buzz term put it. There has been no shake-up in the distribution of political power. Nevertheless, the scope of Net adoption is comprehensive: from protesters to public relations, from zoning commissions to presidential races, from the momentarily curious and concerned to those who strive with every waking breath to have a successful career in public life. The Internet’s time has, in fact, arrived in politics.

