PREFACE

The news in presidential politics early in the summer of 2003 caught many people by surprise. The leading candidate for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination was an obscure former governor from a tiny state with a reputation for offbeat politics, a man with no personal fortune to spend and no organized or identity-based constituency to count on as a base of support. Howard Dean was nevertheless anointed by the national news media as a serious contender. Unlike Jimmy Carter, a candidate with a similarly slender political base, Dean had not prevailed in the Iowa caucuses to make the covers of *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News & World Report.* That first vote in the race for convention delegates was still half a year away. Instead, Dean had finished ahead of his competitors in the "MoveOn.org primary" and "the money primary." Tens of thousands of his supporters were congregating at monthly "Meetups," and conversing in "discussion groups" and "blogs." Over a quarter of a million people had given the Dean campaign their "e-mail" addresses.

Blogs? MoveOn.org? As recently as a decade ago, these achievements would have struck even the most sophisticated observers of the race for the presidency as political science fiction. What they represent, instead, is the flowering of campaigning on the Internet, or online campaigning—the roots of which are described and analyzed in this book.

THE NET AND THE WEB

The Dean phenomenon cannot be fully appreciated without a somewhat arbitrary yet necessary distinction between "the Net" and "the Web." In common parlance, the two phrases are interchangeable. Many people also use the term "Web site" as a synonym for a campaign presence on the

Internet. Yet the Dean campaign Web site, www.deanforamerica.com, provides the slightest of clues to the campaign's success. It has the same format and kinds of information as the Web sites for Dean's competitors and, indeed, most campaign Web sites at the statewide or federal levels. But there is more to the Net than just the Web, let alone a particular Web site.

Focusing on a single Web site reflects a mass communications mentality oriented to the sequential consumption of individual media products. A book is a media product read from cover to cover; a television show is watched from start to finish; advertisements placed in a profusion of places and formats entice people to read the book and watch the show. Beginning, middle, end, go to the next one; beginning, middle, end, go to the next one: for people over thirty, this is a mass media consumption rhythm inculcated since early childhood. A newspaper, magazine, CD, or DVD comes closer to the Net/Web experience. These mass media products have numbered pages or segments that indicate a main sequence to be followed, but their modular structure permits consumption out of sequence.

In contrast, the ease with which Internet users flit from product to product, and from page to page within a product, suggests that understanding communications in this medium requires a reorientation. One must focus on the connections as much as the contents. The Internet, or Net, is an electronic platform for establishing social connections. Campaigns turn to the Net and the myriad of distribution channels, interactive forums, and message formats it houses—Web sites, yes, but also e-mail, instant messaging, discussion groups, blogs (a sort of diary that permits others to comment), pop-up advertisements, searchable databases, and so forth—in order to win an election. The more voters a campaign establishes connections with, the better it will fare. More important, in these early years of online campaigning, the more activists a campaign ensnares in its network-on-the-Net, the more money and volunteer hours it will collect, and the more voters it will be able to reach through mass media and physical contacts.

Like most campaign Web sites, Deanforamerica.com contains an assortment of promotional material, digital versions of the stuff that has lain on candidate display tables for decades. The first paragraphs of news releases and position papers run down the center column of the home page. Biographical material about the candidate and photographs from the campaign trail may be accessed from the left-hand column, while the right-hand column features sign-up boxes for petitions, volunteer work, contributions, and voter registration, along with a link to the online store where buttons and bumper-stickers may be purchased. None of this

would startle the political sophisticate from the recent past. And none of it would knock an online campaign specialist, or dot-pol, for a loop. A dot-pol would regard much of Deanforamerica.com's contents as "brochure-ware," yesterday's formats transposed to today's new medium, vaudeville skits on television.

For an appreciation of the political power that the Dean campaign has extracted from its Internet presence, one must be alert to the structural significance of a quartet of simulated file folder tabs running along the top of the Deanforamerica.com home page. "Contribute" opens a virtual door to electronic donations, either on a one-time basis or through an installment plan that deducts a designated amount from a credit card account every month until the donor has reached the legal maximum. "Get Local" brings the site visitor to a database of upcoming campaign events, searchable within one hundred or the visitor's choice of miles from any zip code in the nation. This tab also features a toolkit to help volunteers plan events and a link to MeetUp.com, a company that uses the Internet to arrange monthly gatherings of people with common interests at coffeehouses, restaurants, and other public locales.

"DeanLink" provides a means for individuals to put together their own networks through e-mail, instant messaging, and dedicated pages on the Dean Web site. An imitation of Friendster, a commercial online dating service, DeanLink relies on the desire for social contact as a springboard to campaign involvement. Access is screened and monitored through password-entry software. The preeminent DeanLinker as of October 12, 2003, was Jonathan Kriess-Tomkins of Sitka, Alaska. The Web page about him provided links to pages about the 447 persons linked to the Dean campaign through him, a list of his interests, a link to his personal home page, and a photograph of him holding an ice-cream cone. (Jonathan is fourteen years old.)

"Official Blog" leads to blogforamerica.com, a parallel Web site to that of the campaign. The middle column contains diary entries from a handful of Dean campaign managers in reverse chronological order; the top entry is usually no more than a few hours old. A blog reader can send any entry to a friend, trace it back through preceding entries to which it is intimately related, or follow it through to comments posted by other readers. In this way, visitors to blogforamerica.com pick up threads of monologues and conversations, as though they were wandering through a campaign headquarters. The right column reprises calls to action posted on the regular campaign Web site and catalogs the blog entries by the time and day they appeared and by category. The left column consists of

hundreds of links to Dean-related activity elsewhere on the Web, mostly run by supporters with no official ties to the campaign. Deanybopper clips articles from major newspapers. The Dean Defense Forces call talk shows and write editors to correct what they perceive as unfair coverage. Switch To Dean, imitating an advertising campaign of Apple Computer, collects and displays homemade Web videos with testimonials from erstwhile supporters of other candidates who have now committed to Dean. The Dean Corps puts volunteers to work in local communities in Iowa, cleaning up rivers and collecting supplies for schools and food banks.

Other campaigns have established similar features. But the Dean campaign has assembled by far the biggest and most active online campaign network. On October 15, 2003, according to the campaign, there were 466,884 people on the e-mail list, 123,331 had signed up to attend a Meetup, 78,330 had attended at least one of 6,177 events organized through the Get Local feature, and 168,000 had donated an average of $73.69 in the July–September 2003 quarter for a total of $14.8 million. That set a record for quarterly fund-raising by a Democratic presidential candidate, and brought the total raised in 2003 to $25.3 million. (In the same third quarter, the Bush reelection campaign raised $49.5 million and touted the 145,000 contributions of less than $200.)

The average amount of a Dean donation was as remarkable a tribute to the strength of his support network as the amount the campaign raised. According to the Campaign Finance Institute, 70 percent of all individual donations to major-party presidential candidates in the first nine months of 2003 came in contributions of $1,000 or more. The comparable statistic for 1999 was 67 percent. But Dean raised 55 percent of his millions in donations of $200 or less.[1] The Dean network also has contributed tactical intelligence. The campaign took the advice of a supporter in deciding to solicit handwritten letters from MeetUp attendees to uncommitted voters in Iowa and New Hampshire.

What this means in terms of delegates and votes remains to be seen. But Dean has used his online network to help him win at two new stops on the campaign trail, which also would not be conceivable without the Internet. The MoveOn.org primary was a straw poll staged by an online activist group described in Chapter 5. Dean won 139,360 votes, 44 percent of the total; more significant, he reaped 54,730 volunteer pledges, 49,132 financial pledges, and 77,192 additions to the campaign e-mail list. The money primary, detailed in the same chapter, is a veritable straw poll created by a confluence of online activities by political campaigns, journalists, and the Federal Election Commission.

Even if the Dean campaign sputters or collapses before Iowa, it has left a legacy for dot-pols. It has shown them, and the entire community of professional politics, that the experiments in online campaigning conducted around the turn of the millennium have borne fruit. For all campaigners, the year 2004 looms as the year 1 A.D.

PROFESSIONAL CAMPAIGNING

This report focuses on what campaigners in the United States did with the Internet in the years 1999–2002. By campaigners, I mean those who, in classic Weberian terms, live for or make a living off politics: candidates; issue advocates; government, party, and interest group officials, their staffs, and their consultants.[2] Those campaigners with a special interest in adapting the Internet to their work will be referred to as "dot-pols"; they are change agents who constitute a critical subset of the campaigning community. Online and off-line, campaigners initiate the bulk of political action in the public square, which elicits reactions from journalists, citizens, and policymakers. Policymakers are, of course, often the same people who campaign. But the two modes of operation are different and create dilemmas of priority. Whereas policymakers seek above all to govern, that is, to steer the ship of state on the basis of legal authority, collaborative negotiations, and deliberative dialogue, the primary objective of campaigners is to win an upcoming vote by an electorate, legislative, or other decisionmaking body.[3]

Since the late 1960s, campaigning has been increasingly dominated by a blend of marketing and military techniques known as the "professional" style. The professional campaign is by now distinctive and pervasive enough to be disparaged abroad as the "American" campaign. Its communicative core consists of for-hire specialists directing politicians in the repetition of carefully designed statements, or messages, to carefully specified audiences, or targets. The conventional channels for targeted messages are broadcast and cable television (the locus of the "air war"); rally sites, meeting halls, mall entrances, and residential doorsteps (the "ground war"); and radio, telephone, bulk or "direct" mail, and graphic displays (not called the "war at sea," but no less essential for lacking a metaphorically apt nickname).

Professional campaigners take an elaborate approach to political communication, known as message development. A message is the central

rationale and motivation the public must accept in order for it to act as the campaign desires. It may be thought of as the words that complete the sentence that begins, "Vote for us because. . . ." Because it's the economy, stupid. Because we have a Contract with America. Because we'll build a bridge to the twenty-first century. Because if the glove don't fit, you must acquit. Because we are compassionate conservatives. Campaign professionals ask clients what they want and guide them in the articulation of a message that will win them the support they need to prevail with a decisionmaking body. Message development is not rocket science, but it is not as obvious as the best practitioners make it look, for it is embedded at every stage—research, creation, testing, and release—in complex, expensive, and customized uses of technology.

The consultants and staffers who direct the production and distribution of campaign communication are preponderantly white, male, young, well educated, and ideologically moderate.[4] They love the all-consuming, historically and ideologically tinged competition of politics, so much so that the most successful ones forgo or curtail steadier, more lucrative jobs in public relations and advertising, which campaigning resembles in many respects. There are fundamental differences though between selling candidates and selling cars. A campaigner's "products" need far more than market share to be considered successful, and they are not available for sale every day. The product features of politics consist of issue positions and character traits, which are harder to define than a commercial good. Like the car sellers, however, the basis of the campaigners' power resides in the perception among their clients that they possess expertise in how to use communications technologies in ambiguous and often volatile situations.

These political clients fall into two basic categories, according to their electoral or policy orientation. In the former, more visible category, campaign professionals are hired by candidates for office and the political parties that nominate and funnel money to them. In the latter, more stable category, corporations, interest groups, trade associations, unions, and coalitions thereof contract with campaign professionals to help them win a decision before a government body and, more generally, to "manage issues," that is, maintain a good public image with respect to affairs in which they have a stake. Issue management occurs every day of every year and sometimes consists of forestalling votes instead of trying to win them. So it comes as no surprise to learn which campaign category is larger: In 2000, approximately $4 billion was spent on electoral campaigns in the United States, $3 billion of it at the national level.[5] The

policy campaign market that year was estimated at $35 billion.[6] These figures may seem large. Campaign finance reformers often make them seem so. But while the business of campaigning rose sharply during the 1990s, it represents a mere 1–2 percent of the polling, advertising, telemarketing, and public relations markets.[7]

Campaigners are not full professionals, like doctors, lawyers, and architects. They do not need a license, verified mastery of a codified body of knowledge, and pledged fealty to a code of ethics in order to sell their services. Rather, like journalists, campaigners are semiprofessionals, in that they are imbued with a sense of public service that complicates and can even override their business commitments to their clients. It runs against the popular stereotype to speak of campaign professionals as political idealists. But very few of them will work for very long on behalf of clients who do not share their dreams for American politics. It is an unspoken and nearly unbreakable rule in the vocation that Democrats work for Democratic clients and Republicans for Republican clients. Many policy consulting firms are bipartisan ventures, with a star from each party on the nameplate to maximize the client list without violating the precept.

The Internet presented professional campaigners with a subtle and sizable challenge. At first glance, the new communications technology resembled many of the media channels and devices that campaigners used to win votes and earn a living. A campaign Web site was like the reception area of a headquarters, a place for brochures and other publicity materials. The rest of the Web was analogous to a library in one sense, and to a grid of streets and highways in another: the places where one did research and put up billboards. E-mail was a fabulous melding of the telephone, fax, and postal service. Instant or text messaging could be understood as enhanced pagers. And computerized databases corresponded to the file cabinets in the back of the headquarters.

But there the analogies ended. Each of these components of the Internet were intimately connected through the electronic network. Each could be used by many persons at every minute of the day from every spot on earth, some accessing the system according to plan but some randomly, some anonymously, and some surreptitiously. Messages could move at the speed of light, and they could also stay within reach for years. Connection lines, traffic patterns, and message components could all be analyzed and automatically improved by computer programs. And every day, it seemed, a better version of one aspect of the technology hit the market, making it a constant effort to stay on the cutting edge and, more important, to stay connected to as many people as possible.

The arrival of the Internet in American society thus meant several things at once to the professional politicking community. It was a threat to business as usual, an opportunity for new firms and new divisions of established firms, an unknown factor in an already complicated communications milieu, and an object of fashionable curiosity.

OVERVIEW

To determine what was happening in e-politics, I relied on journalism and word of mouth within the nascent online politics community to find the best instances of online campaigning that I could. I watched these campaigns from afar (the Internet was, of course, wondrously helpful on this score), read numerous periodicals, conducted more than fifty interviews, and attended dozens of meetings of online politickers. In my capacity as research director for the Democracy Online Project (now the Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet), I commissioned and supervised a series of nine case studies of online campaigning in municipal elections in 1999, several surveys in the 1999–2002 time period, and a questionnaire for campaign managers in 2002. I have drawn on technology studies to give a sense of the range of possibilities for Internet use and upon social science to ferret out empirically unsupportable bits of conventional wisdom. I also have sought perspective from recent studies of professional campaigning.[8]

My methods and approach have limitations. Except for the survey research, I could not ascertain the representativeness of the evidence and testimony I encountered and collected. In “hanging out” with members of a community, I was susceptible to the biases attendant on “going native.” However, if the objective is to take stock of online politics, one had better spend time watching and listening to those in the campaign vocation. They will have a greater say in determining the application of networked technology to this field than any other force, simply because they engage more in politics. For the same reason, they are critical in shaping how democratic the character of public discourse will be online.

The first chapter looks at how the late 1990s and early 2000s represented a time of discovery and experimentation in online campaigning. From the start of the World Wide Web, a few in the politics vocation began to fiddle with the technology, endeavoring to apply it to message

development. By Election Day 2000, approximately one thousand people were working in online politics in the United States.[9] They had, by that biggest of "sale days," battle-tested some techniques that could be replicated, integrated, and applied to most election and advocacy campaigns.

Chapter 2 looks at research, the most common use of the Internet in online campaigning. The Internet brings a cornucopia of information to everyone connected to it, citizens as well as campaigners. However, the democratization of political research is not the revolutionary spark some might think. Because professional campaigners conduct more political research, of higher strategic quality, and in a timely fashion, they and their clients retain an edge in the political power that information can confer.

Chapter 3 explores campaign Web sites. Their properties are intrinsically fascinating and have received much attention from political observers because they are easily inspected. But professionals learned early on that a campaign Web site is only as useful as the publicity pathways built to it, as well as out from it. They also recognized the risks in posting information readily available to all for a long, long time. At the conclusion of this transitional phase, they sensed that solutions to the publicity and visibility problems of campaign Web sites might be found through better use of e-mail. But at that point, they had made limited progress in deploying e-mail to good effect.

The dismal state of online advertising helps explain this limited progress. Online advertising, both for sheer publicity and for raising money, languished in the period under study. Chapter 4 examines the perplexing interplay of obstacles retarding the growth of raising and spending campaign money online (advertising being a mainstay of campaign spending). It contends that the ultimate value of the Internet for exposure and fund-raising depends on the development of negotiating protocols, measurement formulas, message formats, and pricing mechanisms that political professionals, the advertising industry, the regulatory commissions, and the online public all can accept. The bet here is that campaign money will circulate as commonly online as it does off-line, but the set of standards and practices making that practical may be as much as a decade away.

Chapter 5 consists of case studies of online campaigning. The first reviews the growing sophistication that the Bush-Cheney campaign brought to its use of the Net in 2000. Next comes an analysis of the spectacular results of the McCain online campaign after the New Hampshire primary and of the less appreciated work that went into it. The third case

study, probably the most important, details the innovative influence of MoveOn.org, the only online political entity to date to succeed twice at the national level. The next serves up lessons from the civic network Web White and Blue for online political debates and related campaign forums. Finally, the chapter offers reflections on online polls and ratings systems, and what they reveal about the potential of the Internet for direct democracy.

The concluding chapter takes stock of this transition period from several perspectives. It reviews speculative literature on online politics from the 1990s and contends that not much of what was forecast has been either confirmed or contradicted by the record to date. There is no revolution, but there is no triumph of the status quo, either. It analyzes the state of online politics from the perspective of technological diffusion theory. Finally, the chapter predicts that the Internet will become essential to successful campaigns for public support as a command-and-control center. Dot-pols will sit before a computer console through which all campaign communication will be integrated and fine-tuned. The advent of online campaigning makes clear that all successful campaigns are network-based; therefore, all campaigns should make use of the Internet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much of the research for this report was funded by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, which established the Democracy Online Project at the George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management, where I served as research director. I am grateful to Sean Treglia of Pew and F. Christopher Arterton of the Graduate School for underwriting my work. Thanks also go to Ruy Teixeira and Thad Hall of The Century Foundation for commissioning the report, to Julie King, Christine McConville, Akis Skertsos, and Ryan Thornburg for research assistance, to Thomas Mann and Joel Swerdlow for editorial suggestions, and to Beverly Goldberg and Steven Greenfield for patient and careful editing of the manuscript.

My parents, Dr. Maurice B. and Gloria Cornfield, passed away during the period explored in this work. Both cared about the quality of American politics. Neither ever went online. My son Matthew was born during this same time span; at two years old, he is already playing on Web

sites. I suspect that these family events inclined me to emphasize the transitional aspects of online campaigning. To the extent that there is any stability in this account of a milieu where everything seems in motion, I owe that to my wife, Kathryn Mimberg.