



# A NEW POLITICS FOR THE NEW CENTURY?

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To reach voters in an era of low turnout and close races, political campaigns are combining new technologies and time-honored grassroots tactics

American politics is in the midst of one of the most competitive eras in the nation's history. The 2000 presidential election was decided by a handful of votes in a relatively small number of states. A switch of only 2,100 votes would have given Iowa to George W. Bush in 2000; a change in 270 votes would have given Al Gore the popular vote in Florida. The Senate remains closely divided between the two parties (51 for Republicans, 48 for Democrats); small shifts in a handful of seats in the House can tip the balance to the party out of power. Given the turmoil of the closure of the 2000 election, when Bush after the Supreme Court decision had secured only one electoral vote beyond the minimum, the expectation is that small swings in voter turnout and candidate preference will matter. Hence the new technologies those campaigns are employing this year.

The fierce competition over the institutions of government, at both the state and federal level, has been accompanied by a growth in outside involvement. Campaigns, once the exclusive domain of the candidates, now find themselves competing with political parties and interest groups to disseminate their messages. Research shows that in some races the spending by outside entities (political parties and interest groups) actually exceeds the money spent by candidates. In the most competitive contests, political parties and interest groups are now on equal footing with candidates in their level of spending and involvement in the election.<sup>1</sup> Both the candidates and the outside groups seem to have vast stakes in the outcomes of these elections. The high stakes in turn fuel hefty spending, much of it driven by new technology

<sup>1</sup> David B. Magleby and J. Quin Monson, eds. *The Last Hurrah? Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2002 Congressional Elections*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

that has changed the face of elections and makes it possible for them to prevail in these contests.

The 2004 elections will be known for the development and advancement of a whole new range of technologies. These technologies have revolutionized the ways in which candidates, interest groups, and professional consultants think about campaigning. From fundraising on the Internet, to contacting citizens and showing them ads with a handheld device, to the management of sophisticated databases, effective campaigns rely on technologies that were unthinkable only two decades ago. In this article we look

#### THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR USE

The new technologies can be used to complete a variety of tasks. In a large and diverse nation, one of the most difficult tasks is the identification and mobilization of constituencies that can turn out and vote. Old-style grassroots mobilization relied on an army of volunteers who could fan out across neighborhoods and persuade their fellow citizens to vote. Then with the rise of television advertising in campaigns, grassroots mobilization faded in importance. It was much easier to reach a mass audience by purchasing large blocks of advertising during

the right time slots. Even today the largest expenditure in most campaigns is television advertising. However, the death of grassroots mobilization has been grossly exaggerated. In fact, grassroots

mobilization is in the midst of a huge resurgence in recent elections.<sup>2</sup> The intense competitiveness has combined with the impersonal touch and a sensory overload felt by voters in many high-spending mass media campaigns to force campaigns to look for new ways to communicate and connect with voters.

For example, the 2002 U.S. Senate election in South Dakota was ultimately decided by only 524 votes. Democratic incumbent (and eventual winner) Tim Johnson and Republican challenger John Thune each spent \$6 million, mostly on television advertising. Noncandidate groups, mostly funded by the

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at the use and impact of some of these new technologies. While the new technologies require new sorts of professionals and large sums of money, the overall impact of their use remains unclear. Some of the new professionals and practices make it much easier to raise money. Other developments hold out the promise of delivering new voters to the polls. In the end, some of the new technologies work much better than others. However, one thing is certain: the trend toward a more technological and expensive campaign will be with the American political system for some time to come.

<sup>2</sup> J. Quin Monson. "Get on TeleVision vs. Get on the Van: GOTV and the Ground War in 2002" in *The Last Hurrah?* (see note 1).



national parties, matched the candidates' spending for a total campaign bill of \$24 million, or about \$70.50 per vote.<sup>3</sup> In a small and inexpensive television market like Sioux Falls, the combination of a very pricey Senate race with very competitive elections for U.S. House and governor translated into wall-to-wall campaign advertising throughout the summer and fall. The constant barrage of slick advertising and the impersonal touch of the typical mass media campaign turned off many voters. Sensing a need to reach out to voters in a more personal manner, political consultants have seized on the new

technologies that make it easy to identify and to track voters.

The resurgence of grassroots voter mobilization is being led by the political parties and other outside groups and is driven by technology. At the center of the grassroots revolution are sophisticated efforts at building voter databases filled with information that can be used to direct increasingly personalized messages to smaller groups of voters. For the 2004 election, both the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee have constructed voter databases called "Voter

<sup>3</sup> John Bart and James Meader. "The More You Spend, the Less They Listen: The South Dakota U.S. Senate Race" in *The Last Hurrah?* (see note 1).

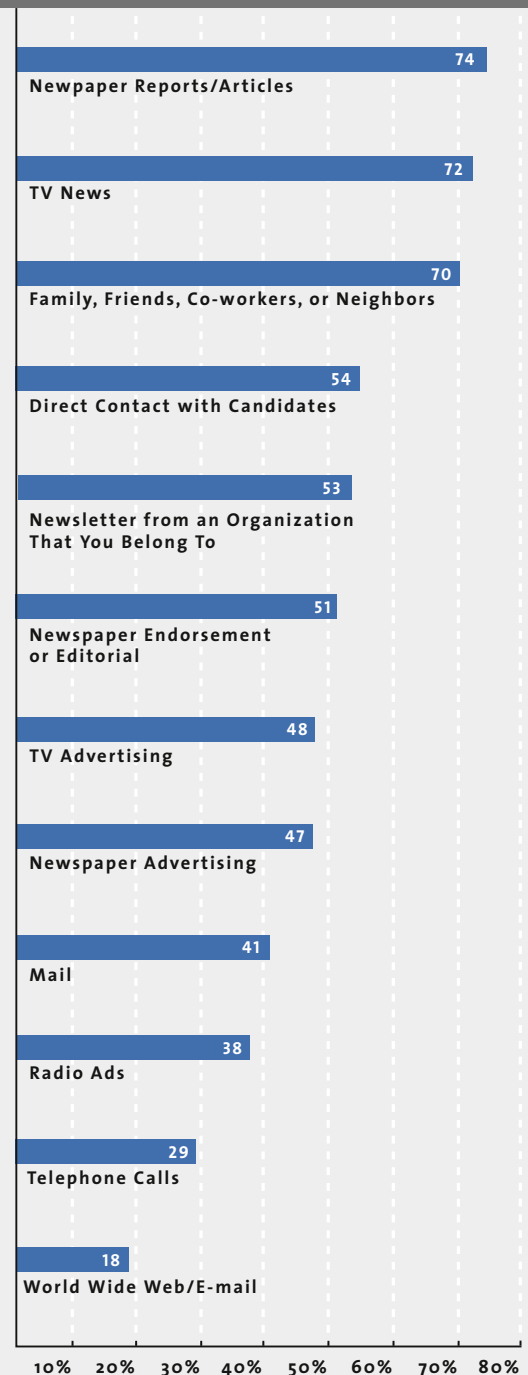
<sup>4</sup> Jon Gertner, "The Very, Very Personal Is the Political," *New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2004, 44; Joyce Purnick, "Data Churners Try to Pinpoint Voters' Politics," *New York Times*, April 7, 2004; Paul Farhi, "Parties Square Off in Database Duel," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2004.

Vault" and "Datamart," respectively. The compilation involves high-tech database tools and data mining techniques that have long been a part of market research and are now being adapted by the national political parties.<sup>4</sup> The databases are built from voter registration lists obtained from state and local government lists of registered voters. These lists are notoriously inaccurate and must be cleaned up so that they reflect current registered voters with accurate contact information. The data are then matched with a variety of commercial databases on magazine subscriptions, membership lists of allied groups, and so on. The parties are also undertaking extensive "voter ID" operations, in which people on the list are contacted by telephone or in person and asked questions that help classify the likely supporters and swing voters together with issues that are important to them.

The leaders in the resurgence of grassroots campaigning are the labor unions, led separately by the efforts of the AFL-CIO, and the Republican National Committee. Both groups have conducted extensive experimental research efforts to determine what works. Both groups have discovered that multiple contacts with potential supporters over time, using messages on issues of importance to them, combined with methods of personalized contact, are most effective. These notions have been buttressed by academic research as well.<sup>5</sup> In 2004, the labor union effort has been broadened to a large coalition of groups under the name America Coming Together (ACT). The mission of ACT is to use the grassroots mobilization tools perfected at the AFL-CIO to reach beyond

<sup>5</sup> Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber. *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

CHART 1: MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF POLITICAL INFORMATION (2002)



Source: Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy (CSED), Brigham Young University

<sup>6</sup> Matt Bai, "The Multilevel Marketing of the President," *New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 2004, 43.

union members in a mobilization campaign in seventeen presidential battleground states. ACT volunteers meticulously canvas likely Democratic neighborhoods using software in handheld Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) that enables them to ask questions and enter data instantaneously. PDAs are also used to show brief video clips right on the doorstep as a means to gain the trust of strangers and begin a conversation about politics. The information entered into the database is then used to make contacts through the mail and telephone specifically about the issues of most concern to the voter. ACT's Web site also provides an efficient methodology for managing volunteers; the Web site will display the meetings occurring near them and information about the activities (such as door-to-door canvassing).

The Republican National Committee (RNC) is using Web technology to aid its grassroots efforts in 2004 by recruiting thousands of "Team Leaders" through e-mail and the RNC Web site. Team leaders are provided with tools that allow them to add team members below them; the program is modeled on the multilevel marketing techniques of companies like Amway.<sup>6</sup> As new team leaders join, they are asked to communicate with friends who are then added to their "team." The program even includes a point system where team leaders can earn points by recruiting new members and reporting other election-related activities via the RNC Web site, then redeem the points for Bush campaign paraphernalia.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis, *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> John C. Green and Nathan S. Bigelow, "The 2000 Presidential Nominations: The Costs of Innovation," in *Financing the 2000 Election*, ed. David B. Magleby (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

The Internet as a campaign tool goes well beyond its uses in grassroots mobilization. Campaigning online has come of age in recent elections with notable examples of successful online fundraising. John McCain raised \$1.4 million online in the three days following his victory over George W. Bush in the New Hampshire Republican primary in 2000.<sup>7</sup> Overall, McCain raised more than \$5 million online, a little more than 10 percent of his total fundraising.<sup>8</sup> John Kerry has been even more successful. In recent months, Kerry has been raising more than \$10 million a month on the Internet, for a total of more than \$65 million so far.<sup>9</sup>

Campaigns are not widely using the Internet and World Wide Web as a tool to persuade undecided voters. The Internet is used mostly as a tool to provide information

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that reinforces the views of voters who already support the candidate. Thus, traditional forms of campaign communication, such as television ads or direct mail, often provide a URL that serves to drive a small proportion of interested voters to the campaign's Web site. There they are provided with information to reinforce already held opinions, help them become engaged and active in the campaign, solicit their donations, and provide them

<sup>9</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, James V. Grimaldi, and Alice R. Crites, "Redefining Democratic Fundraising," *Washington Post*, July 24, 2004.



with reminders and other tools for voter registration and mobilization.<sup>10</sup>

The low importance of the Internet for most voters is supported by surveys of voters who routinely list the Web and e-mail at or near the bottom of the list of potential sources of information. For example, in a postelection survey of voters in four statewide races in the 2002 election conducted by the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy (CSED) at Brigham Young University, we asked survey respondents, “Often people use a variety of sources when deciding to vote. How important was each source of campaign information to you?” Respondents were

then queried about twelve potential sources of information (see table). Combining both “very important” and “somewhat important” replies reveals that both newspaper and television news, as well as personal contact with family, friends, co-workers, or neighbors, are at the top of sources of information used in the actual voting decision. The World Wide Web or e-mails are at the bottom of the selections with only 18 percent listing them as important sources of information about the vote decision. (*See Chart 1*)

While the evidence is not strong that the Internet is an important source of political information, there is survey data suggesting

<sup>10</sup> Bimber and Davis (see note 7), 48–67.

that persons in Internet households are more interested in politics. In a Knowledge Networks survey conducted of 25,000 adults since 2002, 27 percent of respondents in Internet households reported they were very interested in politics, compared to 19 percent of those not having Internet access at home. Persons with home Internet access also place a higher priority on staying informed about politics. In the same survey, 67 percent of respondents in Internet households versus 57 percent without home Internet access agreed with the statement, “It is a citizen’s duty to keep informed about politics, even if it is time consuming.” The Internet is a technology favored by citizens more interested in politics and political information.

#### CUSTOMIZING AND MOBILIZING

This country has clearly embarked on a new era in campaigning. The significant developments in technology that have revolutionized areas of business, commerce, and medicine now seem poised to alter the ways in which citizens connect to the candidates. The major developments have occurred in the ability of parties, candidates, and interest groups to reach out to their base, solicit funds, and communicate ideas. Future developments are likely to include more reliable means for tracking the voting habits of citizens and even more detailed knowledge of their likes and dislikes. Political candidates and groups will utilize this knowledge to develop more sophisticated fundraising tools with messages customized to the individual voter. Political information sent to the voter will be similarly customized. While

these technologies will make it possible to communicate more effectively and efficiently with voters, the revolutionary impact should not be overstated. Gaps will remain between those connected to the Internet and those not connected. Furthermore, the technologies at this time seem better suited to mobilize individuals already disposed to hear a message rather than actually converting those individuals to new positions. There will be obstacles to political participation that even the new technologies will be hard pressed to overcome. For example, voters may tire of information that seems too “slick” or too “packaged.” Voters may also become overloaded if the technology makes communicating too cheap and easy. Nevertheless, we will all be touched by the use of the new technology in this election cycle and beyond. ■

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