How does the US Measure up?
Web use by political candidates in the US versus those around the world

Starting as early as 1995 in Japan, politicians have shown significant interest in utilizing the Internet for the promotion and advancement of their campaigns. Many American politicians have accrued significant amounts of campaign donations, support, and publicity directly resulting from their "cyber-campaigns". The 1996 presidential campaign was marked by the high profile websites of candidates Bob Dole and Bill Clinton, while throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s candidates have been able to use the Internet as a significant source of campaign fundraising. Al Gore reportedly raised $1.6 million in 2000 through the Internet, while John McCain succeeded in receiving upwards of a half million dollars in the Republican primaries.[1]

Political use of the Internet reaches far beyond raising funds, however. The success of Jesse Ventura in the 1999 Minnesota gubernatorial race showed that the Internet, and particularly email, can be an effective way to build support, especially among young voters. Similarly, Howard Dean in 2003 was credited with "taking cyber-electioneering to a new level", when he used websites to facilitate online chats between supporters, and a blog to establish the "Dean Defense Forces", attempting to create positive and rapid responses among leading bloggers in regards to criticism or negative media attention.[2] In her 2004 article in the *Asia-Pacific Review,* Rachel K. Gibson quoted Simon Rosenberg, president of the New Democrat Network in saying, "What JFK was to television, and Goldwater and McGovern were to direct mail, Dean is to the Internet". This trend has continued through the current election cycle, with Kinky Friedman in Texas using his website to get almost 170,000 signatures on a petition for him to appear on the 2006 governor ballot as an Independent.[3]

Internet use in political campaigns is not limited to the United States, however. The campaign of current South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, dubbed "the Asian Howard Dean" by Gibson, was able to build up a solid reputation through email and a unique website so that he was able to make a successful run for president in 2002, despite a failure to be elected to the National Assembly in 2000. This *Nosamo*, or political "fanclub" was able to corral support for President Roh among the young South Korean voters over the Internet and mobile phone networks in order to defeat Lee Hoi-chang, a more conservative candidate with an older demographic of supporters.[4] Other notable "cyber-successes" are Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia.[5]

These are just a few examples of politicians that have been able to use the Internet to promote their campaigns. Today, politicians everywhere are using the Internet by creating personalized

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[1] Rachel Gibson, "Web Campaigning from a Global Perspective", *Institute for International Policy Studies*, 2004, 97-98.
[2] Gibson, 99.
[3] http://www.kinkyfriedman.com/2006/05/kinky_rolls_169574_signatures.html
[4] Wikipedia.org : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nosamo
[4] Nicholas Thompson, "The Internet and Political Campaigns", *TheGlobalist.com,* June 16 2003: http://theglobalist.com/DBWeb/printStoryId.aspx?StoryId=3249

campaign websites where supporters can donate money, perform research about the candidate, follow news coverage, and even sometimes form teams and track fundraising progress. Hillary Clinton currently has one of the most developed campaign websites in the United States, which offers a significant amount of user interaction through downloads, multimedia, and various team tools.

The Internet offers political candidates several advantages that make the World Wide Web a valuable resource for campaign promotion.

- **The Internet allows a candidate to bypass the media.** When using more traditional forms of media to communicate with voters, such as television or radio, politicians are in a sense at the mercy of the media, and are limited by their advertising budgets. The media have the ability to regulate political messages, filter content, and create candidate perceptions. This is especially pronounced in the United Kingdom and Germany, where politicians have little control over the amount or type of media representation they receive. By using the Internet and campaign websites, candidates can avoid media intervention and gain the ability to communicate directly with voters, sending whatever message they choose.
- **The Internet has interactive potential.** Via email, chat rooms, blogs, podcasts, and other Web tools, candidates can create an interactive atmosphere on their websites, allowing two-way communication and feedback from voters. Most campaign website are aimed at supporters, who use it to mobilize people to attend events, write op-eds and letters to editors, and to convince friends to join the campaign trail.
- **The Internet is cost-efficient and user-friendly.** A basic website can be relatively inexpensive to create when compared to the costs associated with television and print advertising. Even the most elementary websites have the ability to communicate a large amount of information to a massive audience. In addition, most Web tools are incredibly easy to create, maintain, and activate, so that anyone with an Internet connection can create and use a website. This, combined with the low-cost of advanced website creation, makes the Internet a particularly attractive option for candidates with limited campaign monetary and personnel resources. The technology used to create websites gets cheaper and better every year. This is a trend that will grow globally.
- **The possibilities are endless.** With new technologies and web techniques constantly being developed, the options presented to candidates are incredibly flexible. Video, audio, text, and interactive features are all readily available in the creation of campaign websites, thus giving politicians the ability to communicate with their voters in whatever method they prefer.

Because of these and other advantages associated with the use of the Internet, the use of the Web for political campaigns is increasing. In a study recently completed by The Bivings Group, data showed that 96% of candidates running in the 2006 Senate election maintain active websites. This is a dramatic increase from the 55% of candidates that maintained websites in 2002. Due to the prominence of the Internet and the growing number of Web users throughout the world, this form of campaigning simply cannot be ignored. It is important to analyze, however, how candidates are using this technology. The same 2006 study from The Bivings Group showed that while more and more candidates may be using the Internet for political campaigns, these candidates are failing to take advantage of all that the Web has to offer. Only three percent of

the 77 websites studied offered tools for the creation of teams, and only 5 percent offered podcasts. On a more basic level, only 14 percent had Spanish alternatives to their websites, clearly illustrating that these candidates were under-utilizing, or even misusing, the Internet in their political campaigns.

How do these statistics measure up to trends spotted in other countries? Is this underutilization of the Internet pandemic, or specific only to the United States? Do candidates in other countries value the Internet as a viable tool for political campaigning? What dichotomies exist between regions, political parties, and party size? To answer these questions, we researched studies conducted in other countries that examined the use of the Internet in political campaigns. There was a large amount of literature on the topic, and in this paper we will conduct comparisons with the United Kingdom, Australia, Hungary, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Belarus.

Findings

One major difference between Internet use for political campaigns in the United States versus Internet use in other countries is that in the United States, candidates maintain their own campaign sites. However, in countries with parliamentary systems where people largely vote for a specific *party* as opposed a specific *candidate*, such as Great Britain, Hungary, Germany, and Australia, it was much more common to find campaign websites maintained by parties, not by candidates. For example, according to a study conducted by Danyi and Galacz, in the 2004 Hungarian parliamentary elections, all of the parties had established websites prior to the elections. However, only 9 of 323 parliamentary candidates maintained websites, with many of these being inactive.[6] In these systems, because candidates are inherently linked to the parties which they represent, party websites tend to contain candidates' contact information, biographies, and information about platforms.

Despite this fundamental difference, the focus of political websites was remarkably similar throughout the countries we examined. When considering the capabilities of websites, most parties and candidates placed the highest value on the ability to disseminate information about issues. In a survey conducted of campaign websites in Finland, 77 percent of candidates' websites in the 1999 parliamentary election valued the Internet as an important source for disseminating information about candidates' stance on issues as well as the candidates' overall image as perceived by voters.[7] This is consistent with statistics from the UK and Hungary, where 89% of MP/party websites offered biographical information[8]. In Germany and Australia, candidates ranked provision of information to the public as a 4 and a 3.2, respectively, on a four-point scale measuring the importance of various website functions.[9] In Sweden as well, data

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[6] Endre Danyi and Anna Galacz, "Internet and elections: Changing Political Strategies and Citizen Tactics in Hungary", *Information Polity* 10 (2005): 223.

[7] Tom Carlosn and Goran Djupsund, "Old Wine in New Bottles? The 1999 Finnish Election Campaign on the Internet", *Press and Politics* 6, 1 (2001): 77.

[8] Colin Challen, "Think global, Talk Local: Getting the party political message across in the age of the Internet", *Journal of Public Affairs* Vol. 1, No. 3 (2001): 258; Danyi and Galacz, 225.

[9] Rachel K. Gibson, Andrea Rommele, and Stephen Ward, "German Parties and Internet Campaigning in the 2002 Federal Election", *German Politics*, Vol 12, No. 1 (April 2003): 94. AND Rachel K. Gibson and Stephen Ward, "Virtual Campaigning: Australian Parties and the Impact of the Internet", *Australian Journal of Political Science,* Vol 37, No. 1 (2002): 116.

obtained from both major political parties indicates that political Internet strategy revolves around providing party information to voters.[10] In a recent TBG study completed assessing the use of the Internet by 2006 Senate candidates, biographical content and contact information were the two most common features included on candidate websites, with 90 and 93 percent of websites, respectively, offering this information. This shows that even as Internet strategies and technologies evolve and the web tools available to candidates become more creative, the basic provision of information has been and still remains the most important use of the Internet by political candidates all over the world.

In addition to providing traditional campaign materials and information, or "old wine in new bottles", as Tom Carlson and Goran Djupsund explain, the political websites through our sample of countries was surprisingly lacking in interactivity. In the 1998 study of the Finnish elections, data show that only three percent of candidates' websites were fully interactive (meaning that a full two-way dialogue between candidate and voters is possible). Seventy five percent of these sites were partially interactive (allowing indirect communication, such as through bulletin boards and other postings), with the most commonly offered feature being email to a general campaign email address. Even more surprising is that almost a quarter of these websites were not interactive at all, lacking any method of communication, including email forms. Carlson and Djupsund note that "a possible explanation for the absence of real interactivity on the sites is that the candidates may fear losing control of the message in on-line discussions with voters, not all of them being sympathetic toward the candidate in question."[11]

While email played an important role in the 1998 elections in Sweden, voter and user feedback was still not valued as much as the ability to provide information.[12] The 2002 study conducted by Gibson and Ward regarding Australian political parties showed similar results. On a scale of importance ranging from 0 to 4 (four being the highest), political parties rated "gaining member/voter feedback" as an importance level of just 2.1, ranking lower than "increasing votes", "recruiting members", and "providing information".[13] In Germany in 2002, feedback ranked even lower in importance, with member feedback earning a score of just 1, and voter feedback earning a zero, meaning that gaining feedback from websites was of little to no importance to German political candidates.[14] Hungarian websites in 2005 were also lacking, with just 67 percent of candidate websites offering contact information, and only 44 percent offering a forum for discussion. No other interactive features were included in any candidate websites.[15] Results were particularly surprising from the 2001 United Kingdom study, which showed that 80 percent of websites included email within the MP's websites, just 6 percent offered email distribution or chatrooms.[16]

While these international cases consider information from previous elections, these results were echoed in The Bivings Group's 2006 study of Senate candidates. While almost all campaign

[10] Alan Frisk, "Virtual Campaigning: The Use of the Internet by (s) and (kd) in the 1998 Elections to the Swedish Parliament.
[11] Carlson and Djupsund, 80.
[12] Frisk, 9.
[13] Gibson and Ward, 110.
[14] Gibson, Rommele, and Ward, 94.
[15] Danyi and Galacz, 225.
[16] Challen, 258.

websites included contact information such as phone numbers and email addresses, only 23 percent of websites included blogs, a newer and more sophisticated form of communication and interaction. When examined even closer, even many of the blogs are limited in their interactivity: only 61 percent of candidate blogs showed user comments, and in only about half the cases (56 percent) did candidates actually post blog entries themselves. It appears that candidates today share some of the same fears felt by 1998 Finnish candidates, as explained by Carlson and Djupsund. Based on this information, it is clear that despite new developments in Web strategies available to politicians, political websites remain "top-down" in format, with politicians sticking to tried and true methods of campaigning. Perhaps this is because candidates or parties worldwide are hesitant to invest portions of their limited resources into yet unproven methods of campaigning.

In nations with multiparty systems, particularly those throughout Europe, the Web has become a kind of "equalizer" between large and small parties in the campaign world. In many of these countries, television and radio advertising time is doled out by the government according to a party's popularity, and additional paid ads cannot be bought.[17] This makes some traditional forms of mass advertising inaccessible for smaller political parties. For these smaller parties, the Internet can be of infinite value, as it does not face the regulation of TV or radio, can reach a massive audience with a low financial threshold, and gives less established parties a forum for advertising their campaign. In the analysis of the 2002 German election, smaller parties indicated that the labor-saving and efficiency gains from maintaining a website were the biggest advantages to using the Internet for campaigning.[18] Smaller parties can use the Internet to convey messages and information that they would otherwise have to express via mass mailings and telemarketing, which require a large staff and ample resources. The Internet is also valuable for smaller parties in that it can be used for internal organization and communication, decreasing the importance placed on establishing a headquarters. In the study of 1998 elections in Sweden, the smaller of two political parties examined, the Christian Democratic Party (kd), made it clear that the party maintained "a clear interest in low-cost, interactive mass media that gave them opportunities to reach potential voters equal to those of larger parties with larger resources".[19] The Internet proved to be a perfect tool for this purpose.

In addition, Gibson and Ward note in their study of Australian parties that "the audience for [minor parties'] message may be greater in cyberspace, since overall it does appear to be more attractive to independently minded and younger voters who are more likely to be tired of politics as usual and looking for an alternative".[20] Most studies found that the websites of major parties were more sophisticated and creative than minor parties, probably due to major parties maintaining larger pools of funds to dedicate to the creation of their websites. However, on a basic level, the Internet allows minor parties the chance to broadcast their message and to reach audiences that would otherwise be untouchable.

Because the United States has two major parties, there is no clear "major" or "minor" party. However, similar to studies in other countries that found that liberally-swayed parties used the

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[17] Gibson, Rommele, and Ward, 83.
[18] Ibid, 97.
[19] Frisk, 16.
[20] Gibson and Ward, 103.

Internet to attract younger voters, our study at The Bivings Group found that in 2006, Democrats were more likely to use interactive tools such as blogs, RSS, volunteer forms, downloads, and Spanish versions of websites than their Republican counterparts. Thus, while some dichotomies exist between parties based on party goals, it seems that the Internet may be a balancing force in political campaigns, as it is accessible and usable to all parties, regardless of their resources.

Despite the advantages that can be accrued through using the Web for political campaigns, there are several barriers that prevent politicians and political parties from taking full advantage of Internet campaign strategies. Alan Frisk highlights two such barriers in his discussion of the 1998 Swedish election. The first barrier to "cyber-campaigning" is Internet access. It was clear from the various studies that varying degrees of Internet access and usage from country to country affects the degree to which politicians pursue cyber campaigns. According to the International Telecommunications Union, the penetration of Web access is more highly pronounced in Scandinavia, the UK, the US, and Australia than Germany, Hungary, and Belarus. This will most definitely impact how politicians use the Web in their political campaigns. While Web use in countries like Hungary and Belarus is increasing, it is still low compared to more advanced societies. For example, with populations of just around 10 million people, Hungary and Belarus have fewer Web users per capita than in the US or Scandinavia. Per every 100,000 people, Hungary has 27,000 Internet users and Belarus has 24,000. In comparison, with populations of 295 million and 60.4 million, the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, have 55,000 and 62,000 Internet users per every 100,000 people. Thus, it is evident that politicians in the US and UK would be more likely to incorporate "cyber-campaigning" as part of their election strategies than candidates in smaller countries with lower rates of Internet penetration, such as Belarus or Hungary.[21]

A second major barrier explained by Frisk is lack of voter initiative. Regardless of how many people have access to the Internet, it is practically impossible to judge how many of these Internet users will actually visit politicians' campaign websites. Unlike more traditional forms of media campaigns, "cyber-campaigns" require voter initiative in order to be successful. People actually have to choose to visit a politicians' website, seek it out on the Internet, and participate in services offered for a campaign website to have any effect at all. "Parties and candidates cannot push their message onto voters as they can on other media like television; they must sit and wait for visitors to find them".[22] In the study of the 1998 Swedish election, data showed that campaign websites were unlikely to "persuade voters to choose a particular political party".[23] However, American candidates have had significant fundraising and volunteer success through their websites for years, as illustrated by the campaigns of Howard Dean, Jesse Ventura, and others. This leads us to believe that while campaign websites may be unlikely to attract new voters or to inspire voters to change their minds, they will in fact attract people who are already supporters of a particular party or candidate and excited about participating in a campaign. Thus, the Internet can be an effective method for organizing and corralling pre-existing advocates, creating concentrated and potent support for a candidate's campaign.

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[21] Population and Internet Penetration Statistics from Nationmaster.com. See http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-T/int_use_percap and http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-T/peo_pop
[22] Gibson, 110.
[23] Frisk, 15.

Although the Japanese were the first politicians to show an interest in "cyber-campaigning", with campaign websites emerging as early as 1995, it was the 1996 election cycle in the US that truly initiated Web campaigning into the realm of campaign advertising and publicity.[24] This trend has continued ten years later, with the US acting as the leader of cyber campaigns worldwide. Despite the high penetration of the Internet in Scandinavian countries such as Finland and Sweden, it seems that American politicians' focus on fundraising and the highly individualized and candidate-centered nature of American politics has caused the United States to assume the role of trendsetter when it comes to utilizing the Internet for politics. These trends are contagious and US Web campaign techniques are likely to continue to spread to other countries. This has already happened in the UK and Israel, where Tony Blair and other politicians hired Clinton campaign pros to consult on their campaigns and website creation. Due to new Internet strategies and the development of new Web techniques for campaigning, the Internet has cemented itself as a key campaign tool that candidates around the world simply cannot afford to ignore.

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[24] Gibson, 96.

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