Can the Internet Help Outsider Candidates Win the Presidential Nomination?

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Introduction

The 2004 American presidential nomination campaign will distinguish itself by its formal brevity. Under rules proposed by the Democratic National Committee, states can hold their primaries as early as February 3, 2004, seven days after the New Hampshire primary. This change is likely to accelerate the recent trend whereby more delegates are selected in the weeks immediately following the New Hampshire primary. Since 1988, the Democrats have selected more than 40% of their delegates within the first month of the primary season (Hagen and Mayer 2000).

At the same time, the actual campaign will take at least two years, as candidates try to acquire as many resources as possible for the short primary season. Such front-loading of the primaries is likely to favor either a well-established candidate who has out-raised and out-organized his opponents in the months leading up to the campaign, as George W. Bush did in 2000, or a fast-rising candidate who can take advantage of momentum generated in Iowa or New Hampshire, as Jimmy Carter did in 1976. The 2000 campaign provides impressionistic evidence that a heavily front-loaded schedule allowed Al Gore to dispatch quickly of Bill Bradley's challenge and provided a significant obstacle for John McCain's attempt to overtake George W. Bush. Furthermore, some scholars (e.g., Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller 2001) argue that front-loading is the deliberate attempt of party leaders to structure the process to favor insider candidates.

If this is the case, one might reasonably ask whether momentum-based strategies (Gurian 1986) have become obsolete.[1] That is, if the party leaders have structured the process to favor insider candidates with great resources, is there any way that outsider candidates can reduce an insider's advantages and win the nomination?

In the past, two changes have allowed outsider candidates an opportunity to compete: rules changes and communications technology changes. The nomination campaigns of George McGovern and Jimmy Carter succeeded because of changes in the rules governing nomination procedures and federal election laws (Polsby 1983). But an earlier change, the growth of television, allowed candidates to appeal directly to voters to build support in the primaries. Estes Kefauver, for example, utilized the new influence of television to enhance his standing and favorability leading up to the 1952 Democratic Convention, even though rules allowed party leaders to deprive him of the nomination. In the 2004 campaign, the rules allow voters to determine the nominee. The question for outsider candidates is whether or not the Internet will help them obtain the resources necessary to attract voters' support.

We examine this question in three ways. First, are there differences between voters who use the web and those who do not that could have implications for these candidates' ability to build support? Second, how extensively do these voters use the web to obtain information about candidates? Finally, does the use of the web to raise funds favor some candidates over others? We conclude the paper with a short discussion of our findings and their implications for the 2004 race.

The Internet as a Campaign Resource

A front-loaded nomination process may favor insider candidates because they possess the resources, money, media attention, and organization to prepare simultaneously for numerous primaries. Outsider candidates, by contrast, struggle to obtain these resources and, as a result, concentrate them in early states, hoping that success will provide them with the momentum to compete effectively in subsequent contests. The problem in a front-loaded nomination season is that candidates have little time to convert momentum into usable resources. So even if momentum raises an outsider's expectations, the window of opportunity for capitalizing on these resources may pass quickly as the early favorite regains momentum.

The potential (and particular) value of the Internet in American presidential nomination campaigns is that it allows outsider candidates to use web sites to offset the disadvantages they face in getting exposure, building an organization, and raising money.[2] On their web sites, candidates can supply voters with information for a fraction of the cost of televised ads. Likewise, web sites allow campaigns to mobilize their workers and contributors, especially those who have not been active previously and are, therefore, less likely to be

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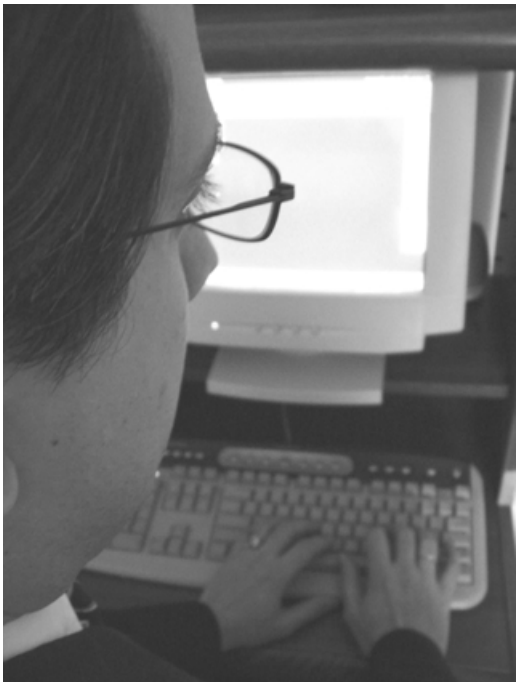

One Click. The Web may provide a means for individuals to learn more about candidates, but Paolino and Shaw note that individuals appear to go to the web sites of their preferred candidates, rather than looking around. Photo: istockphoto.com/Sharon Dominick.

contacted by campaigns (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). As early resources become more valuable to candidates in increasingly front-loaded nomination contests, the web might allow candidates to gather otherwise elusive resources to increase the competitiveness of an increasingly uncompetitive nomination process (Hagen and Mayer 2000). This view echoes the more sanguine perspectives on the Internet as both a means to level the participatory playing field (e.g., Barber 2001; Rash 1997) and to improve the quality of interaction among voters, issues, and candidates (e.g., Gilder 2000; Rash 1997; Rheingold 1992; Schwartz 1996).

Another view, however, holds that the Internet cannot actively perform the tasks of a regular campaign organization. People attracted to candidates' web sites may be those who are already likely to get involved or who support insider candidates. And while the Federal Election Committee's decision to allow credit card contributions through web sites allows for quick fund raising, candidates are still likely to raise the bulk of their money in traditional ways. Finally, if people are reluctant to comply with a request for money from a real person, they should be less likely to do so through an impersonal machine. For these reasons, it is quite possible that the Internet's impact upon nomination campaigns is severely limited.

These caveats notwithstanding, the Internet clearly provided the presidential candidates in 2000 with unprecedented opportunities to reach supporters, particularly in the pre-primary period. John McCain, for example, used the web to raise more than $1 million in financial contributions before the end of 1999 and to help him get on the Virginia primary ballot (*The Atlanta Journal and Constitution,* December 29, 1999). To evaluate the merits of these competing views, we examine how voters responded to the Internet in the 2000 campaign.

Who Accessed the Internet and Candidate Web Sites in 2000?

One caveat to any study of the Internet and campaigns is that there are still some people who do not have any access to the Internet. All that has been written on the "digital divide" (Norris 2000; Wilhelm 2000) leads us to expect that people without access are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic groups than those with access, however, it is possible that candidates' opportunities to use the web to build campaign support might be limited by the characteristics of both their real and prospective coalitions. To understand which candidates the Internet might help, we need to understand, first, whether or not Internet users are different from the people most likely to participate in campaigns and, second, if they possess characteristics that may predispose them to favor insider or outsider candidates.

To determine the proportion of people who had access to the web in 2000 and the proportion who visited a candidate's campaign web site, we examine an October 1999 CBS Marketwatch poll regarding Internet use and attitudes about the stock market.[3] Looking at a poll conducted during the pre-primary period is important because this is when candidates must build their resources for the coming sprint for delegates.

Table 1 presents several pertinent marginal results from the survey, and shows that while a majority of people (55.5%) have

Table 1
Internet Access and Visits to Campaign Web Sites

	Internet Access		Visit Web site	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
By Party Identification				
Republicans	59.8% (327)	40.2% (220)	14.1% (46)	85.9% (281)
Democrats	53.0% (303)	47.0% (269)	8.6% (26)	91.4% (276)
Independents	56.0% (242)	44.0% (190)	12.8% (31)	87.2% (211)
Others	44.6% (45)	55.5% (56)	20.0% (9)	80.0% (36)
Total	55.5% (917)	44.5% (735)	12.2% (804)	87.8% (112)
By Candidate Supported				
Gore	45.6% (89)	54.3% (106)	13.5% (12)	86.5% (77)
Bradley	62.8% (113)	37.2% (67)	9.7% (11)	90.3% (102)
Bush	59.8% (174)	40.2% (117)	20.1% (35)	79.9% (139)
McCain	56.3% (27)	43.8% (21)	29.6% (8)	70.4% (19)

Note: Data from 1999 CBS Marketwatch poll. Percentages may sum to more than 100 because of rounding error.

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Table 2
Multivariate Model of Internet Access and Visits to Campaign Web Sites

	Internet Access	Visit Web site
Education	.376** (.044)	.096* (.054)
Income	.338** (.043)	–.069 (.059)
Age	–.022** (.003)	.002 (.004)
Female	.067 (.086)	–.252** (.127)
Married	.021 (.107)	–.192 (.141)
African-Am.	–.400** (.157)	.223 (.276)
Hispanic	–.014 (.202)	–.235 (.291)
Constant	–1.17** (.204)	–1.12 (.303)
N	1498	880
Chi-square	264.9	11.7
Psuedo-R^2	.22	.02

Note: Data from 1999 CBS Marketwatch poll. Entries are MLE probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. **p < .05 *p < .1.

access to the Internet, only 12.2% of those respondents reported visiting a candidate's web site. While this poll was taken relatively early in the campaign, data from a July 2000 survey conducted by the Republican National Committee (RNC) show that a similar percentage report visiting a candidate's web site (10%).[4] Further analysis by respondents' party identification and candidate supported shows only small differences between the parties and the candidates' supporters, with the exception that Gore's supporters were less likely to have access to the web, but slightly more likely to visit candidate web sites.

To get a more rigorous look at Internet usage, Table 2 offers a multivariate probit analysis of the data and demonstrates that access is greater among people who are more educated, have higher incomes, and are younger. Of these characteristics, only the young are less likely to participate politically, so this suggests that the web has some potential to expand the electorate with group members who have often supported outsider candidates, like Eugene McCarthy and Gary Hart. Analysis of candidate web site visitation in Table 2, however, offers less hope in this regard. The parameter estimates indicate that age is not significant, meaning that the web does not appear to be mobilizing this more passive segment of the electorate. Rather, demographic characteristics associated with political interest (such as education) and time spent on the web (such as gender; males spend more time on the Internet than females) are significant.[5]

Beyond these relationships, the Internet's value as an outsiders' tool depends on the political preferences and predispositions of voters who have access to and visit campaign web sites. To examine this we estimate vote choice models in Table 3, using preference for the insider candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore, as the dependent variables. For the most part, these results do not indicate that the web hurts insider candidates. While Gore's supporters were (significantly) less likely to have access to the Internet, those who visited candidate web sites were not less likely to support the frontrunners, Gore and Bush. And while Bradley could have benefited from the fact that minorities on the downside of the 'digital divide' were more likely to support Gore, there is no indication that more frequent campaign web site visitors (or even the more highly educated) were more likely to support him over Gore. On the Republican side, the only relationship that could have helped outsider candidates was the fact that men, who are significantly more likely to visit web sites than women, were also relatively more likely to support outsider Republicans than George W. Bush. By and large, there is no support for the hypothesis that the digital divide replicates the cleavages within the parties between the supporters of insider and outsider candidates. For this reason, we do not find evidence that the web currently has great potential to reduce the traditional advantages insider candidates have for obtaining the resources for a front-loaded campaign.

These results, however, do not rule out the possibility that the Internet *could* have helped outsider candidates. If people visit a variety of web sites, they may gain exposure to candidates that lead them to switch to an outsider candidate. In our data, we have a measure not only of whether or not respondents reported visiting a political web site, but also whose sites they visited. If voters use the web to get exposure to candidates that receive less coverage from the mainstream media, defection to outsider candidates could happen very rapidly, helping them quickly obtain the resources to be competitive in a front-loaded primary season.

Table 3
Internet Access and Visits to Campaign Web Sites and Support for Insider Candidates

	Support for Gore		Support for Bush	
Access	–.460** (.208)	—	.132 (.191)	—
Visited Site	—	.007 (.372)	—	.318 (.217)
Education	–.091 (.082)	–.052 (.111)	–.085 (.074)	–.154* (.091)
Income	–.042 (.088)	–.089 (.099)	.004 (.084)	–.009 (.101)
Age	–.005 (.005)	–.007 (.007)	.009 (.005)	.009 (.007)
Female	.259 (.182)	.212 (.217)	.240 (.161)	.358* (.193)
African-Am.	.478* (.244)	.860** (.339)	—	—
Hispanic	.634* (.337)	.002 (.504)	–.238 (.480)	.432 (.555)
Conservatism	–.322** (.134)	–.177 (.645)	.095 (.119)	.099 (.141)
Constant	1.31** (.543)	.715 (.645)	–.227 (.500)	.042 (.608)
N	330	193	407	250
Chi-square	27.4	13.2	8.7	11.4
Psuedo-R^2	.10	.07	.02	.04

Note: Data from 1999 CBS Marketwatch poll. Entries are MLE probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. **p < .05 *p < .1.

Unfortunately for lesser-known candidates, web site traffic differences are not in their favor. In the RNC poll, more people visited the Bush and Gore sites than the McCain and Bradley sites, respectively.[6] Moreover, individuals appear to go to the web sites of their preferred candidates, rather than looking around. Of the 73 individuals who reported visiting Bush's or McCain's web sites, only 5, or 6.8%, reported going to both. The results for Democrats are similar. Only 1 of the 43 respondents who visited Gore's or Bradley's web sites reported visiting both.

Furthermore, respondents who reported visiting a candidate's web site saw that candidate more favorably than those who did not visit. People visiting a candidate's web site, on average, rated that candidate

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one point higher (on a five-point scale) than individuals who did not visit the site. While this could reflect the persuasive nature of those sites, we believe it is far more likely that these individuals visit the candidate's site because of an existing predisposition. If the reverse were the case, we would expect to find great incidence of respondents visiting several candidates' sites. In fact, a large majority of respondents, 131 (77%), who visited any candidate's site reported visiting only that candidate's web site. Overall, this analysis supports the view that the web serves primarily to reinforce insiders' existing information and mobilization advantages, rather than help outsiders overcome those advantages.

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Moreover, the Internet does not seem to be a place where outsider candidates are likely to gain tremendous benefits for fund-raising. Results from the RNC survey indicate that only 1.2% of the respondents reported contributing money to a political campaign through the Internet. There are several reasons why even fewer people give money over the Internet than give to a candidate through other means. First, the fact that the Internet requires individuals to take the initiative, rather than complying with a personal request, reduces incentives for contributing. Second, many people still doubt the security of Internet transactions. Almost 80% of the respondents in the Marketwatch poll did not believe that it was safe to give out personal financial information over the Internet. Multivariate analysis (results available from authors) shows that the web could have some (differential) impact, as individuals who are wealthier, and therefore more likely to donate money (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), are more likely to believe in the Internet's security while older respondents are less convinced. At the margins, the Internet could help outsider candidates raise funds, but the overall level of concern about the security of the web certainly limits its efficacy for this purpose.

Lessons From 2000 (And What They Mean for 2004)

Data from the 2000 campaign show that the potential for the Internet to help outsider candidates is currently limited. Those who access the Internet are slightly more educated and affluent than those who do not, but these tendencies are not as striking as might have been expected. Furthermore, there is little indication that younger citizens disproportionately dominate Internet access. Instead, people accessing the Internet in general, and candidate web sites in particular, are a lot like the people who traditionally participate in primary campaigns—they are more interested in politics, more partisan, and more educated and affluent.

So what conclusions can we draw from 2000 that may inform our understanding of the 2004 nomination campaign? The opportunities the Internet presents for the 2004 Democratic nomination contests are particularly interesting given the cleavages within the Party's coalition. In his analysis of the 1984 Democratic nomination struggle between outsider Gary Hart and insider Walter Mondale, Popkin (1991) argues that Hart's rise was fueled by his ability to exploit a rift within the Democratic coalition between traditional, New Deal Democrats and younger, higher socioeconomic status Democrats. In a particularly innovative analysis, Popkin suggests computer usage and foreign car ownership (1991, 202) as critical variables distinguishing these different wings of the Party. Had the Internet been developed more thoroughly in 1984, the web could have allowed Hart's more affluent base of support to provide the outsider candidate with a slight edge over the insider, especially with the longer primary season.

In 2000, coalitional tensions that could have replicated these battle lines were muted by the fact that both Gore and Bradley possessed characteristics that made them attractive to higher SES web users at the same time that they used rhetoric aimed at more traditional Democratic constituencies. As our analysis shows (Table 3), while Gore was more successful in attracting support from minority voters, neither Bradley nor Gore had a significant advantage among the types of new Democratic voters most likely to have access to the Internet.

Looking to the potential effect of the Internet in 2004, let us assume the field will include current Democratic presidential aspirants Joseph Biden, Christopher Dodd, Howard Dean, John Edwards, Richard Gephardt, Bob Graham, John Kerry, Joseph Lieberman, and Al Sharpton.[7] While it is unlikely that any candidate will be as favored as heavily as Gore was in 2000, Gephardt and Lieberman qualify (and will probably run) as insiders who would be able to rely upon traditional means to generate resources. Among these candidates, Gephardt is linked most closely to traditional Democratic constituencies—minorities and labor respectively—that are less frequent Internet users.

On the other side, Biden, Dean, Dodd, Edwards, Graham, Kerry, and Sharpton could all position themselves as outsiders, relying upon insurgent tactics to build support. Furthermore, setting aside Sharpton's rather unique bid, each of these candidates might appeal to new Democratic voters of varying hues and in so doing might benefit from the web in a race against Gephardt or Lieberman. Of these, Dean would probably have to rely most heavily upon non-traditional methods, such as the Internet, for building his campaign because (1) he is a governor and, as such, not associated with Washington, DC or the federal government, and (2) his position as governor of Vermont has not afforded him much opportunity to generate widespread name recognition. From this, we would expect the strongest test of Internet influence in a front-loaded primary season to occur in a race where Dean and either Gephardt or Lieberman broke from the pack, but there are other combinations that could provide interesting tests of the web's ability to influence the nomination process.

What is clear from our research is that irrespective of which candidates emerge, all campaigns will develop and maintain a web presence in 2004. This means that while outsider candidates, like Howard Dean, may be able to recruit volunteers and raise money over the web, so will insider candidates such as Gephardt and Lieberman. Further, these insider candidates will also simultaneously accumulate resources via traditional routes. And to the extent that our analysis suggests that the Internet possibly reinforces insiders' advantages, we expect that outsiders, like Dean, still face an uphill battle even if the Internet does become a resource more widely used by voters in 2004. Thus, because insider, front-running candidates have more money and because there are few significant coalitional differences with respect to Internet access, technological change is not likely to reduce the advantages that the big names are likely to have in 2004.

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Notes

1. Momentum-based strategies, however, could remain useful for lesser-known candidates gaining stature that would allow them to become the insider candidate in a future nomination contest.

2. A similar argument has been advanced that the Internet could aid minor party candidates in U.S. general elections. Klotz (2001) finds little evidence for this.

3. The Marketwatch poll of 1,652 respondents was conducted by CBS News from September 29–October 3, 1999. The data were made available through the ICPSR (study no. 2850). The Consortium bears no responsibility for errors in the analysis of these data.

4. The poll encompassed a random sample of online registered voters conducted by Market Strategies, Inc. for the Republican National Committee. Respondents were selected randomly from a pool of online respondents identified in Market Strategies' national samples from 1999–2000 and interviewed over the telephone. The overall pool contained 6,773 individuals. The survey was in the field from July 12–19 and the total sample size is 1,000 (margin of error = +/–3.1 points at the 95% confidence level). This poll contains items not only on political opinions and candidate preferences, but also on how these respondents view and use political information on the Internet.

5. Results from a Heckman selection model reveal no differences between the conditional and independent models.

6. Not surprisingly, the tendency of individuals to be relatively more likely to visit front running, insider candidate web sites (as opposed the sites of also-rans) is more pronounced as the certainty of victory increases, according to the RNC's July 2000 survey.

7. This assumption rules out Evan Bayh, Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, and Tom Daschle, each of whom has said they will not run in 2004.

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