Campaigns Online
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James Madison said, "A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both." Without adequate voter information, democracies become arbitrary and capricious, and citizens become suspicious.

A 1996 Washington Post public opinion poll reported that Americans who knew the least about government were the most likely to be mistrustful toward it. For these cynical citizens, ignorance had, quite literally, bred contempt.

Voters today are immersed in a flood of omnipresent media. Ironically, they too often cast their ballots in substantial ignorance. Hundreds of thousands of candidates for lesser--known offices--school board, judge, community college district, county supervisor, state assembly, treasurer, and lieutenant governor--appear on ballots every year but lack the ability to inform voters about their candidacies.

Can the Internet change this?

Candidates are rapidly adopting the Internet to disseminate information. During the 1992 national election, none of the major Presidential candidates had World Wide Web sites. By 1996, and 2000, all of them did. Today, about 72% of Republican candidates nationwide have websites, as do 63% of Democrats and 36% of third-party candidates.

Voters are also turning to the Internet. Eighty percent of online Americans are registered voters, and nearly a quarter of Americans now receive at least some of their campaign news through the Internet. A 1996 poll reported that two-thirds of all Americans would use the Internet to find out more about political candidates if the information was available.

But voters don't have the time to visit dozens or hundreds of candidate and ballot measure sites. Fortunately, the Internet's unique power has a solution. News, electronic commerce and special-interest websites are aggregating otherwise disparate information. Political websites are also beginning to accumulate all the relevant campaign, voter and election information into one convenient location and format as well.

DemocracyNet (www.grassroots.com or www.dnet.org), a partnership between Grassroots.com and the League of Women Voters, is a landmark attempt to provide voters with instant access to accurate candidate information in thousands of federal, state and local races–all on one convenient website. Voters entering their zip code can instantly review biographies and dozens of issue statements provided directly by

candidates in many races on their ballot. As of September 2000, DemocracyNet of Grassroots.com had over 10,500 participating candidates, and thousands more are joining every week.

DemocracyNet allows candidates and ballot measure committees to submit a statement of up to 1,000 words on any issue of their choosing. A large red check mark automatically appears in the public portion of the Issue Grid, indicating that the candidate has submitted a position on that issue. At the same time, the words "No Comment" appear under names of the candidate's opponents, and those opponents are notified of the new issue by e-mail or fax. Candidates can then rebut or add new statements on issues as many times as they wish.

Voters can view the candidates' full statements, review biographical and endorser information, e-mail or fax candidates comments on their positions, or ask candidates why they have not taken a position on a particular issue.

The Issue Grid creates new incentives for candidates to debate each other. Because DemocracyNet is free and easily updateable at all times, candidates find it easy to respond to opponents' arguments. Voters can watch the debates unfold over time.

More importantly, DemocracyNet's usage suggests this new approach to electoral information may even improve the nation's political discourse.

(1) Broader Range of Issues. Television is costly. It forces candidates to limit their advertising budgets to a few central, hot button issues ("education," "social security," etc.) and ignore many others. By contrast, DemocracyNet encourages candidates to address a much wider array of issues, or risk receiving a "No Comment" indication opposite their name.

In one Los Angeles State Assembly special election, the front-runner initially placed no issue statements in DemocracyNet's Issue Grid. A challenger then added five positions, leaving the front-runner with five "No Comments." Within days, the front-runner responded by adding his own positions on all five issues. By the election, the candidates had engaged each other on eight substantive issues. The front-runner would not have addressed these issues without DemocracyNet's "issue challenge" from his opponents.

(2) More Substantive Discussions. Candidates using television tend to avoid taking detailed positions on specific issue, since this may risk losing voters who may disagree. DemocracyNet, however, rewards candidates who provide voters with specificity.

In New York's US Senate race, Hillary Clinton posted no statements until Rick Lazio entered his opening statement. Clinton posted her opening statement the very next day. In a Los Angeles City election, the leading candidate initially submitted a vague and generalized position on a local zoning issue. When the challenger rebutted with a far more specific issue position, the front-runner responded with a detailed accounting of her record, listing all her significant accomplishments. DemocracyNet's format encourages

candidates to present their messages directly, and in sufficient detail, to hold the voter's attention. The result is an enhanced dialogue between the competing candidates.

(3) Fewer Negative Messages. Candidate television ads are often "negative." Research shows that viewers remember a negative message longer and more vividly that a positive one. Candidates using DemocracyNet, however, confront a significantly different audience—voters actively seeking information on the candidates' positions. These voters are impatient with generalities, evasions and negative attacks. They want to understand the candidates' positions on issues, not to watch them attack others. For this reason, candidates using DemocracyNet have primarily submitted positive and not negative statements for the Issue Grid.

(4) Reduced Campaign Finance Disparities. A candidate's ability to communicate to voters generally turns on the size of that candidate's campaign budget. Candidates with personal wealth or superior fundraising abilities can transmit more information to voters.

Because DemocracyNet is free to candidates, third party and lesser-financed candidates can reach the voters without time-consuming fundraising. More importantly, DemocracyNet tends to diminish fundraising disparities between candidates. On television, money determines the number of voter impressions. On DemocracyNet, voters themselves control the number of "hits" or page views.

(5) Improved Debate Stimulated by Lesser-Known Candidates. Television debates often exclude third-party candidates—such as Reform Party's Pat Buchanan and Green Party's Ralph Nader—who are thought not to have a realistic chance of winning. This deprives third-party candidates of their traditional role: prodding the leading candidates to address new issues that they might otherwise avoid.

DemocracyNet gives all third party and lesser-known candidates an equal opportunity to present their views alongside the visible leaders. This year, DemocracyNet even contains positions from candidates for Mosquito Control District in Florida.

(6) Increased Use of Multi-Lingual Messages. Voters rarely see messages in languages other than English, particularly on television, because the cost of producing them is often higher than the anticipated returns. Access to DemocracyNet, however, is free to candidates, and it contains virtually unlimited digital storage capacity. Candidates can place statements in the Issue Grid in multiple languages. In one current Florida senate race, candidates have placed statements on "education," "guns" and "home ownership," "anti-drug war" and "campaign finance reform" in the Issue Grid in Spanish.

(7) Promise of Additional Benefits. The DemocracyNet also promises many additional benefits:

- It allows voters more easily to review the qualifications of women and minority candidates who, historically, have had greater difficulty raising money to buy their way into the electoral debate.

- It allows voters to compare the views of candidates in new ways—one candidate on all issues, all candidates on a single issue.
- It allows voters to review candidates' positions when they want—not leaving them dependent on the timing of television commercial.
- It will eventually allow voters to view candidates' positions in alternative formats—text, audio and video—thus attracting those voters who prefer to take the measure of a candidate in a more personal and direct way than text;

Online voter information systems like DemocracyNet do have disadvantages. They require users to seek out political information—instead of having radio, television or direct mail deliver it unsolicited into their homes. They are only accessible to voters with computers and modems. And they may encourage the electorate to exercise ultimate political control instantly via ballot initiatives, referenda and other forms of future "electronic direct democracy."

But interactive communications technologies offer significant hope for revitalizing American democracy. In a world of escalating campaign contributions, increasingly negative television commercials and growing cynicism toward candidates and government officials, new technologies can encourage broader issue discussions, greater specificity in candidate positions and positive messages over negative ones. New communications systems can begin to uncouple wealth from voter impressions, make candidate messages available in multiple formats and languages and encourage two-way communications—from candidate to candidate, from voter to candidate and from voter to voter.

To the extent democracy needs "saving," the new generation of interactive digital communications technologies have arrived—just in time to help.

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See http://policyworks.gov/intergov