

Politics 2.0

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Ever since Howard Dean's 2004 Internet-driven presidential campaign ended, many observers concluded that the Internet was not really changing anything in politics -- other than making fundraising easier. It couldn't alter the agenda of an election, and it certainly couldn't decide who wins. Well, a closer look at the 2006 midterm election reveals that bottom-up political action using the Internet is dramatically altering campaign dynamics.

As we head into 2008, one big question is who will have the upper hand: top-down campaigns that see technology as a tool to better game the existing system or grass-roots activists who have discovered their power to change it.

Some examples of the net's impact in 2006 are well-known: Sen. George Allen's "macaca" moment was posted on YouTube, fatally wounding the Virginia Republican's re-election bid. Michael J. Fox's moving 30-second ad for Missouri Democratic Senate candidate Claire McCaskill, in which he pleaded for expanded federal stem-cell research funding, was viewed online more than 2 million times, affecting several other races. McCaskill won her race narrowly. Chris Bowers, of the progressive-populist blog MyDD.com, rallied "bloggyists" (blog lobbyists) to goad cash-rich Democrats in uncontested districts to share their wealth with Democratic challengers; in less than a week, the bloggers pried loose more than \$2.3 million from previously cash-rich but stingy incumbent lawmakers.

More important for the Democrats, the Web has enabled a vibrant inter-networking of activists, leaders, staffers, pundits and plain old citizens through MyDD and other blogs, plus less visible listservs, which function as sieves, spurs and switching stations for moving money, ideas and people. Volunteers made more than 7 million get-out-the-vote calls through MoveOn's "Call for Change" program, which allowed anyone in the country to phone bank from their home. And ActBlue, an innovative Web site that enabled anyone to form his own mini-PAC, channeled \$16.5 million in small donations, averaging \$110, to a plethora of candidates.

None of this happened because national Democratic leaders organized it. Rather, people used the new tools to organize themselves and spread the messages that they liked the most. This new force, the so-called "net-roots," is revitalizing the Democratic Party's previously hollow infrastructure and proving to be an able counterweight to the Republican base in talk radio; and for the most part it's really bottom-up, not top-down.

What's next? After a decade of political use of the Internet, two very distinct schools of thought are emerging. In one, traditional institutions -- including political parties, elected officials and organizations like think tanks and PACs -- use technology to hold on to power and maintain top-down control. This model has its place, and no one has done it better than the GOP, which uses its sophisticated voter files to provide thousands of volunteers with precise walk lists of people to contact in their own neighborhoods.

What's developing now, in contrast, is a more net-centric approach that values open collaboration, participation and decentralization -- and it's why the net-roots are so potent. We're seeing an explosion of voter-generated content alongside the old top-down stuff. If you go to Myspace.com's groups home page, you'll find 24,000-plus groups on "government and politics." More than 63,000 people belong to the Myspace Democrats group -- five times as many as a year ago.

Savvy political organizers are busy learning how to make this "power of many" work for their causes. For example, in Colorado, an organization called ProgressNowAction has built an online platform that enables its more than 300,000 members -- nearly 10 percent of the state's voting age population -- to start groups, hold house parties, raise funds, petition and blog about local political issues. The key to its growth has been its willingness to connect members to each other and get out of the way.

Over time, online strategies that shift power to networks of ordinary citizens may well lead to a new generation of voters more engaged in the political process. That, in turn, could make politicians more accountable, creating a virtuous circle where elected officials who are more open and supportive of lateral constituent interaction, and less top-down, are rewarded with greater voter trust and support.

If you're a smart politician (or work for one), you'll stop worrying about losing control of your message and instead figure out how to embrace this change. As the 2006 election has shown, it is now possible for grass-roots activists to be much more directly involved in the political process. Better to catch and ride that wave instead of being swamped by it.

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