



The New Political Machine

[David C. King](#)

Associate Professor of Public Policy
Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government
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Point your Web browser to Congressman Dennis Kucinich's official government site (<http://www.house.gov/kucinich>) and find RealAudio clips of polka music, including comedian Drew Carey singing "Too Fat Polka" with the great Frank Yankovic. After that, click on the government's server for "The Beer Barrel Polka." Entertaining stuff. With publicity about Congressman Kucinich's site in *USA Today*, *The Associated Press*, and on *National Public Radio*, the U.S. House was inundated by curious music fans and, presumably, occasional legislative inquiries.

Thousands of Web sites are coming on line every day, and it is easy to dismiss the Internet as just so much noise. But politics will never be – or sound – the same again. The Web's penetration now stands at about a third of U.S. households, representing almost half of America's likely voters. In less than a decade, the Internet will be ubiquitous, merged with the television's next generation, and the much-discussed digital divide will be an anachronism.

If the Internet is to play a central role in a healthy democracy, its reach and availability should not reflect the biases of a moneyed culture. We know that traditional forms of political participation – voting, volunteering, and complaining through official channels – are strongly correlated with class, race, and age. What of the Internet?

By early 2000, Internet usage emerged as less biased than traditional political participation. Indeed, many markings of the digital divide disappeared even before President Clinton called for billions in funding to narrow the gap. Today – not tomorrow – women are just as likely as men to report using the Internet. Controlling for income and education, whites are no more likely than non-whites to be web users. Older folks are less likely to be web-literate than baby boomers and their children, but even that has narrowed significantly. January 2000 ushered in the strongest-ever sales of computers to retired persons, many who intentionally waited for the Y2K scare to pass.

In all likelihood, historians will look back on the 2000 elections as a watershed for the political Internet, much the way 1960 marked the political coming of age for television. Grand advances in "pull" technology will characterize the 2000 elections. The political Web is pulling "eyeballs" to sites with fancy press releases and clever links. Once at the site, users are asked to volunteer, can listen to speeches, participate in on-line debates, and (no surprise) contribute money.

Drew Carey and "The Too Fat Polka" pulled many to Congressman Kuhnich's site, and that is unabashedly good for the folks in his district who learned more about the issues and who had an opportunity to plug in with their member. In a more sophisticated move last December, Alabama Republican Congressman Bob Riley e-mailed constituents a video greeting, inviting them to visit his site and respond to an on-line survey. Typical mail surveys from legislators yield a one to two percent response rate. Riley's electronic outreach – in a district ranked near the bottom for Internet penetration – brought a twenty-percent response.

Political web sites are more likely to attract eyeballs after the traditional media highlight them. In the days following John McCain's surprisingly big victory in New Hampshire, his campaign site took in more than \$18,000 in contributions *per hour*. Conservative estimates are that candidates on the Internet will raise at least \$20 million during 2000 alone. The overwhelming majority of that money, however, will not be from new contributors. Rather, the 2000 political Internet is likely to pull in traditional voters, armed with credit cards and happy to save the cost of a first class stamp.

Raising money is important not simply for the dollars involved but for the commitment implied. A five-dollar credit card gift means little to a campaign's coffers, but the contributor is likely transformed into a booster, psychologically hooked in by the small gift. Once identified as a contributor, the political Internet can keep in regular contact with the new supporter not for money, but for general support. The brass ring: campaign volunteers.

"Campaign organization" is a notorious oxymoron. Schedules (and personnel) change rapidly. New issues and events emerge, and the higher the office sought, the more complicated the internal communication. While we have not seen much of this in 2000, the political Internet will also structure the *internal* communication within a campaign. Password protected sites will enable volunteers to update a candidate's staff instantaneously. Scheduling changes can be quickly communicated throughout the organization. And within a campaign, local volunteers may be made to feel a more integral – and perhaps appreciated – part of a campaign.

If the 2000 political Internet marks the rise of "pull" technology, we should look soon for "push" sites, or clever marketers who find voters and volunteers *for* candidates. Remember the old political machine, members of which met new immigrants in big cities, registered them to vote, helped them get jobs, and infused them with the spirit of American political culture? Politics back then was truly local, with voters and likely voters well known at the precinct level. Yes, there was corruption, and there still is corruption in U.S. campaigns, but the old political machine had the levers and pulleys for bringing voters to the polls.

With the Internet, we are witnessing the creaky beginnings of a new political machine. Like the organizing tools of yesteryear, the political Internet will narrowcast, focusing on individual interests and aspirations, exploring bloc by bloc the virtual precincts of local issues. We can expect ward healing on the Internet. Push technology will help

tomorrow's political organizers identify and communicate with finely drawn slices of the electorate. How?

Anyone who has worked in a campaign remembers purging and scoring voter lists. It is a monotonous process, but it is critical to identify quickly the subset of constituents who are likely to vote in primaries. Nation-wide, congressional primaries average about 18 percent turnout, and candidates are careful not to "waste" time and money on the overwhelming majority of unlikely voters.

The political Internet will be able to identify likely issue-level voters without resorting to voter lists. Unless there is a quick change in electronic privacy laws, one can easily imagine a candidate or interest group finding the e-mail address of everyone in a district. Better yet, one can easily imagine finding the e-mail addresses of everyone in a district who read a specific story in an on-line newspaper, or used a Web search engine to look for sites related to "horses," or entered a response in a newsgroup about adopting babies from China. Imagine a world in which interest groups, parties, and candidates know what kinds of articles you read on the web, what sites you search, what products you buy – and all that information can be linked to your e-mail address.

Do such fine-grained tracings of one's activity on the web exist? Some do, and the technology is here to build much more sophisticated profiles. It is simply a question of acquiring and merging various lists of Internet user characteristics. Push technology is just beginning to be used by e-businesses. Commercial vendors are on the bleeding edge of Internet technology. The sophisticated ways they are reaching consumers today will be standard practice in the 2004 campaigns, when push technology will emerge on the political Internet.

The standard polka two-step (two hops to the right, two hops to the left) favors neither the left nor the right. It is the same with the political Intranet. A few years ago, the web was derided as the "World White Web." Noting that young male hackers were disproportionately Libertarian, many worried that a Limbaugh crowd was rushing the web: anti-government, white, suburban, and male. Those days are over, as today's Internet users look a lot more like America, and the web leans no further to the right than it does to the left.

Expect the new political machine to play all types of music and make lots of noise. Linked, as all successful political organizations must be, to local interests, can that polka masterpiece, "Roll Out the Pork Barrel" be far behind?