

**WHAT VOTERS WANT, WHAT CAMPAIGNS PROVIDE: EXAMINING  
INTERNET BASED CAMPAIGNS IN CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS**

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To my wife Bonnie, whose support and patience  
made this thesis possible.

## **Abstract**

This paper examines differences between what voters want from a campaign website and what political parties are actually providing on their campaign websites. A series of focus groups were conducted and the results of those discussions provided insight into what potential voters wanted from a campaign website. Analysis of the Conservative, Liberal, Bloc Quebecois, Green and New Democratic Party campaign websites was then conducted, and the results provided a glimpse at what the political parties were providing during the 2004 federal election campaign. The results of this research show that is a significant imbalance between what the political parties in Canada were providing and what the focus groups mentioned they wanted from a campaign website. The participants wanted more engaging and mobilizing features, while the campaign websites used during the 2004 election lacked these types of features.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In the last couple of Canadian and American elections, the Internet has captured the attention and the imagination of both the individual voter and the political parties. For many parties and voters, the Internet has become another avenue by which they can accomplish their particular goals. For the voter, the Internet has provided a wealth of information which they can use to make an educated decision on Election Day. For the political parties, the Internet has provided a unique and powerful vehicle with which they can accomplish specific campaign functions online. While implementation and integration of the Internet has taken a much stronger and more meaningful role in the American political system, it is nonetheless an important part of how political parties communicate with voters in Canada.

Since the rise of Internet campaigning, researchers have tried to measure, analyze, and report the role of the Internet during a modern political campaign. At the core of these studies has been a desire to understand the underlying structures and mechanics of the campaign website and to fully understand what a typical campaign website looks like. Vast amounts of data have been collected on nearly everything that is visible on a campaign website, with particular attention paid to the implementation of, or lack of, individual features like volunteer sign-up forms, donation forms, interactive elements, contact forms, issue and policy statements, etc. This intense research focus on the content and structure of campaign websites has unfortunately been undertaken at the expense of research on the actual website users. For example, dissecting those features of a campaign website that are associated with collecting campaign donations does little to answer the question of whether website users are interested in contributing via their credit

card or some other form of payment. Therefore, it is important to try to understand how the campaign website is viewed from the perspective of the individual voter and how these views match, or do not match, what is currently being provided by a political party during an actual campaign.

In this thesis, I explore the differences between what voters want from a campaign website and what political parties are actually providing on their campaign websites. This examination was achieved by conducting a series of focus groups with eligible Canadian voters over a four week period roughly three months prior to the 2004 federal election in Canada. The data that resulted from those groups gave an interesting insight into what the average voter was looking for in a campaign website and provided a valuable contrast to what we already know about campaign websites. I then examined the campaign websites of the political parties involved in the 2004 Canadian federal election. The websites of the Conservative, Liberal, Bloc Quebecois, Green and New Democratic Party were examined and the results were closely compared to what the focus group participants stated they wanted from a campaign websites. The evidence resulting from this comparison shows that while the political parties in Canada have improved their online presence over the past three elections (Small 229) in which the Internet was used in the campaigns, the parties have failed to provide all the content and features that many of the voters stated they wanted from a campaign website. According to the results, there was an imbalance between what the political parties were providing and what the voters wanted from a campaign website. Some reasons for this imbalance are then explored and some conclusions are provided as to the direction that research into Internet campaigning should now take.

## **Chapter Two: Theory and Past Research**

Recent developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have led to revolutionary changes in how we approach our democratic and civic responsibilities. These technological developments follow a long evolution of communication between the voter and the political party over the years since Canada's Confederation and represent a significant opportunity to improve political participation amongst the electorate. These opportunities include the ability for political parties to improve top-down communication between themselves and the electorate and bottom-up communication from the individual voter to the political party. The campaign website, email, instant messaging, chat rooms, news groups, weblogs, etc. have all contributed to an explosion in the use of the Internet to facilitate communication and action between political parties and the electorate.

These developments have caused a great deal of discussion about the implications of ICTs on party campaign communication and the individual voter. While some theorists are excited about the Internet's potential to reverse recent trends like low voter turnout, others claim the Internet will simply reinforce the technological inequalities present amongst the electorate. The jury is still out on whether technology will ultimately have a positive or a negative impact on political participation. However, the debate highlights some of the Internet's most significant characteristics.

Research studies concerning the impact of ICT on political communication are a relatively new sub-field of political science, which means there are certain aspects of this relationship that are either under researched and or not studied at all. The reasons for this lack of research are two-fold; first, the Internet is a reasonably new communication



technology when compared to more traditional forms of media like television, radio and print and its acceptance and integration into our everyday lives has been astonishingly quick. By comparison, “the telephone took close to 75 years to reach 50 million users worldwide, and television took 13 years, but it took only four years for the Internet to reach the same number” (Norris, Digital Divide 32). It is unreasonable to expect the research to keep pace with such explosive developments.

The second reason for a lack of research in Canada, and in some incidences the United States, is that political parties have been slow to adapt to using the Web as a legitimate form of political communication. In Canada, research has shown that while many of the national party campaign websites are improving with each election, when compared directly with American websites they consistently trail when considering the websites sophistication and overall impact (Small 229). However, both reasons are slowly becoming trivial as the Internet continues to develop into a mature medium. Increases in Internet use and the overall acceptance amongst the general public and the business community are quickly closing the gap between the traditional media outlets and the Internet. As the gap closes, the relative importance of using this new form of media for political communication will increase and more political parties will begin to further integrate the Internet into their own political campaign strategies.

The first part of this chapter will explore the debate and the research behind the consequences of the Internet on political participation. I will then investigate how the spread of the Internet and other digital technologies is affecting the “digital divide” between the technological haves and the have-nots. After examining how the Internet may affect political participation, both in terms of the political party and of the individual

voter, I will outline the historical evolution and impact of technology on external party communication. I will then close this chapter with a section detailing the ways in which the research can be categorized, revealing where the majority of the research has been focused over the years.

### **The Internet and Political Participation**

The evolution of the Internet as a communication medium confronts researchers with a number of interesting questions relating to the overall effects of the Internet on users. One of the most fundamental questions facing researchers is the effect of the Internet on political participation. It is a common understanding that political participation by the mass public in both electoral (e.g. voting, campaigning) and non-electoral (e.g. social activism, protests, etc) movements is the lifeblood of a successful democracy. However, electoral participation in North America, in the form of voting turnout rates, has been falling drastically over the years. With only half of the eligible American public bothering to vote in the last presidential election and only sixty percent of Canadians voting in the last general election, observers are questioning the consequences of this disturbing trend on democracy in North America.

Some researchers claim that the move away from interpersonal communications (kissing babies, door-to-door canvassing, public speeches, etc) towards mass communications (television, radio, direct mail, etc) is one of the main reasons for the decline in electoral participation. Historically, parties valued personal contact and interaction between the candidate and the voter and would implement those values into their communication strategy. Today, parties have significantly reduced the amount of

personal interaction between the candidate and the voter and instead seek mass exposure through outlets in several different media. This change in campaign strategy reflects the evolving approach to campaigning that has been brought about by technological advances. The general flow of information has become unidirectional, flowing from the top down, rather than bidirectional, flowing freely up or down. While it is debatable whether this new approach can be labelled as negative, one thing is certain – political parties have placed a high degree of reliance on the media outlets to disseminate their message. This reliance on mass media outlets has effectively reduced the general public to passive receivers of information (Davis, The Web of Politics 3).

The Internet, however, has been cited as the communication medium that could help slow or even reverse the disturbing trend that has been set in place. Some researchers report a link between Internet use for political information and political participation and donating money (Bimber, Information and Political Engagement; Tolbert and McNeal 175-185). Earlier studies on civic engagement have not always been conclusive. For example, Bruce Bimber, using a national representative sample from the 1998 American National Elections Survey (NES), found that access to the Internet had virtually no impact on voter participation. The behaviour of those who had access to the Internet and online political information did not differ from those who did not use or have access to political information on the Internet. One limitation of Bimber's research was that it only reported on the 1998 midterm election. Other research, covering political participation in the U.S. presidential elections, found promising results. Using National Elections Studies (NES) survey data from 1986-2000, Tolbert and McNeal (175-185) discovered that access to the Internet and online political news significantly increased the

likelihood that users would vote in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, but not in the 1998 midterm election – which was consistent with Bimber. The authors also found that individuals viewing online political information were significantly more likely to talk to others about candidates or parties, display buttons or signs, work for the party of a candidate, attend rallies, and give money to candidates, parties, and interest groups (Tolbert and McNeal 175-185).

Survey results from the 2004 presidential election in the United States were even more promising. According to a study released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, *The Internet and Campaign 2004*, 52 percent of Internet users, or about 63 million people, said they want online to get news or information about the 2004 elections. Of those, 27 percent said that the political information obtained online allowed them to make the decision to vote for or against a particular candidate (Rainie, Cornfield and Harrigan ii). This evidence suggests the use of the Internet for political information increases the probability that users will engage in political activity, vote in an election and/or contribute to a political campaign.

Actual political participation can come in many forms. Schneider and Foot, in their paper *Online Structure for Political Action: Exploring Presidential Campaign Websites From the 2000 American Election* explored in detail the different types of online and offline political action generated by a campaign website in the 2000 presidential election. After analyzing the site's contents, the authors were able to identify a list of actions that were "invited, enabled, and/or otherwise facilitated through the features, texts, and links on these sites" (Schneider and Foot 5-7). This type of categorization of political action is valuable because it aids in the understanding of the

different kinds of political action generated by campaign websites and provides a deeper understanding of what political participation looks like in practice. Schneider and Foot categorized the political actions in the following six ways: information gathering and persuasion; political education; political talk; voter mobilization; candidate promotion; and finally, campaign participation (6). All six categories of potential political action were readily available to candidates, but surprisingly only two, information gathering and persuasion and campaign participation, were used with any high degree of consistency across the presidential websites (11). The remaining four - political education, political talk, voter mobilization and candidate promotion remained underutilized by the majority of candidates.

The connection between political participation and the Internet has long been a preoccupation of researchers. Historically, the debate surrounds the issue of whether cyber-optimists like Rheingold are correct when they herald the democratic potential of the Internet (Rheingold 13). Other theorists like Negroponte, Grossman, and Rash similarly “extolled the seemingly limitless possibilities of the Internet for forging new and stronger form of political engagement by citizens” (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2). Their reasoning for this limitless potential of the Internet was that traditional methods of communication, such as radio, television and print, often alienate certain groups in society due to the relative costs of exploiting such technologies. The Internet, with its relative low cost of entry, was seen as a democratizing force that could help bridge the gap between these minor groups and their advantaged competitors. The significance of the Internet “lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps revitalize citizen-based

democracy”(Rheingold 13). Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe, in their paper, *Party Competition on the Internet in the United States and Britain*, called this enormous communication potential the “inherent-equalization hypothesis” (Margolis, Resnick, and Wolfe 24-47). The authors claimed that the Internet “is a network that purportedly has no privileged center” and that “every ‘netizen’ has the means to create and distribute information, not just to consume it” (Margolis, Resnick, and Wolfe 24-47).

Cyber-pessimists were quick to point out that there was very little data to support the “inherent-equalization” hypothesis of the Internet. In fact, many cyber-pessimists argued the opposite, stating the “normalization hypothesis” is more likely to be continued. The normalization hypothesis asserted that “rather than transforming society, the Internet would at best produce little or ‘no change’ to existing patterns of participation. At worst, it would actually reinforce the existing participatory biases toward elite socioeconomic groups in society” (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2). Gibson, Lusoli and Ward in their paper, *Online Campaign in the UK: The Public Respond*, attempted to “re-examine the normalization hypothesis in the context of the UK public and particularly organisational campaigning on the net” (2). The authors found strong evidence suggesting the normalization hypothesis was a reality and that the United States was a good example of this reality. Generally, the Internet was an “exclusionary medium – those using it tend to be from the more elite sectors of society. Thus, it reinforces barriers to participation among the less advantaged groups in society” (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 5). However, the evidence was not all discouraging as the study found some encouraging results among the younger generation. Young people were “actually more

likely to engage in information gathering and contacting online than they would be using traditional methods” (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 4).

When examining the participation of political parties on the Internet, researchers found evidence that supported the normalization hypothesis. According to studies conducted in the United States, major political party candidates that have a greater presence on the Web deploy more sophisticated features, get more visitors, and have larger more complex websites than minor party candidates (Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe 24-47; Klotz, Positive Spin 482-486; and Williams, Aylesworth and Chapman 39-65). It would seem that minor parties in the United States were being left behind in terms of campaign efforts on the Web. The results in Great Britain, while slightly less exaggerated, were similar to the results found in the U.S. The two major parties, the Conservative and Labour parties, made up the majority of the websites and garnered the most attention in the media and from the public (Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe 24). Basically, digital parties represent “politics as usual” and nothing has really changed as a result of the new technology (Margolis and Resnick).

Other studies conducted across the world found results typical of those found in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the study, *E-Campaigning in the 2001 Italy’s Election*, Sara Bentivegna concluded the normalization thesis was taking place during the general election in Italy. Bentivegna found that while campaign sites had a relatively limited presence (only 17 percent of House candidates and 10 percent of Senate candidates had a website) major party candidates often had the richer more attractive sites than that of the minor party candidates (8). Bentivegna concluded that “major political subjects, richly funded, and with larger grass roots, replicate in the virtual world the same

equilibria encountered in the real world” (15). Basically, minor parties ignored the Internet’s ability to increase their visibility amongst the larger more established political parties.

Similar results were found earlier in New Zealand, where a unique electoral situation evolved resulting in over 22 different political parties contesting the 1996 election.<sup>1</sup> It was thought that, due to the overwhelming number of parties running in the election, many of the minor party candidates would capitalize on Internet’s unique capabilities. In order to gain any seats in the parliament, a party would have to either cross the threshold of 5 percent of the total votes or win one electoral seat, in which case the party would be allocated a percentage of seats equal to the percentage of votes they won. The sheer number of competing parties led many to believe that the Internet would be crucial in the campaigns. But when campaign managers were asked for reasons why they set up a campaign site the researchers were surprised at the answers given. Many of the campaign managers responses were: “We have to be seen to be keeping up with the technology” and “the site cost so little to set up” (Roper 69-83). Basically, little or no attempt was made to harness the potential of the Internet, outside of just placing simple brochure websites that met the “me too” requirement (Selnow 88).

Following up with more results from Europe, Pippa Norris in her paper, *Preaching to the Converted: Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites*, sought to explain how party websites around the world contribute to communication pluralism and how they facilitate opportunities for citizens to participate within political parties. According to Norris, both participation and pluralism are “core values” (1) in democracy,

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<sup>1</sup> The New Zealand elections in 1996 were the first election under a system of proportional representation (mixed Member Proportional System, or MMP).



and while party websites may have failed to alleviate “the multiple hurdles facing minor and fringe parties,” (23) they are not simply replicating what Margolis and Resnick claim is ‘politics as usual’ (Margolis and Resnick 5). Norris suggests that party websites play a substantial role in the process of political communications, thereby strengthening representative party government (22).

The study focused on the 15 member states of the European Union (EU) and attempted to provide “reliable and well-tested generalizations about party Websites” (Norris 28). One hundred and thirty four political party websites were identified and coded following a strict set of criteria that attempted to provide a better understanding of the information the site contained and the forms of interaction the site employed. The study then looked at the European public’s use of party websites by analyzing the results from a public opinion survey called, Eurobarometer. The survey included a pool sample of 16,078 cases in the 15 EU member states, including a group of 3,602 Internet users. The results of the comparison between the content of the party websites and the general public’s use of the party websites largely confirmed that, few substantial differences in the contents of party websites among major, minor and fringe parties existed; party websites reflected a ‘top-down’ function; party websites reflected the particular form of technology and internal democratic traditions of the parties; and party websites attracted politically interested and active more than the apathetic. Overall, Norris concluded that party websites have a greater impact on communication pluralism rather than on strengthening participation amongst disaffected groups (10).

As seen from the literature above, the study of the Internet’s impact on political participation is a massive research field spanning a wide range of different topics. It is

important to remember that while research on the Internet's impact on political participation is important, it should not be the only focus. While research on the Internet's impact on political participation is important our next topic, the Digital Divide, has equally important implications.

### **The Digital Divide**

ICTs have become increasingly important for the encouragement of “participation in mainstream social, economic, and political life” and the “differential levels of access to these technologies can be a significant source of inequality, forming a digital divide between those that have access and those that do not” (Barney 154). The term digital divide was coined to describe this technological inequality and its effects have been extensively studied in both Canada and the United States.

Recent attempts to measure the digital divide in the Canada and the United States have produced interesting results. One of the first high profile studies conducted on the digital divide was produced by the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in mid 1995. The study attempted to identify and measure the extent of digital inclusion by looking at households and individuals that had a computer and a modem in the United States (McConnaughey, Nila, and Sloan, Survey of the 'Have-Nots'). The results of the study revealed that access to digital technologies like computers, telephones and the Internet were related to socioeconomic and geographical factors, with the “information disadvantaged” or “have-not” groups disproportionately located in rural and central cities (Shade 1; McConnaughey, Nila, and Sloan, Survey of the 'Have-Nots' pars. 6). The NTIA would later follow its original study with *Falling*

*Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide* (McConnaughey, Nila, and Sloan, Falling Through the Net).<sup>2</sup> This next report found that more Americans were connecting to the Internet than ever before. At the end of 1998, 40 percent of Americans owned a computer and 25 percent had access to the Internet. However, a digital divide still existed for certain demographics and for some it had actually expanded. Race was still a factor with Black and Hispanics less likely to have access to the Internet compared to whites. Education was also a factor as individuals with a college degree were more than 16 times as likely to have home Internet access as those without a degree. Geography and income were also important as Americans with lower household incomes and those living in rural areas were consistently behind wealthier Americans and those living in urban centres (excluding central cities) in terms of access to digital technologies.

The final report *Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion*, was released in October of 2000, and was similar to the first three reports, except they also measured access to high-speed Internet and access for people with disabilities (Levy et al.). The results were promising as they discovered that digital inclusion was increasing rapidly amongst most demographic groups in the United States, regardless of race, age, gender, location, education, or income. The report also found that the share of households with Internet access had soared to 58 percent of the population and more than half of households had a computer. However, while digital inclusion was rising for all groups of Americans, the report did “show that noticeable divides still exist between those with

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<sup>2</sup> *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide* was actually the third in a series of four studies on the digital divide in the United States. The second study, *Falling Through the Net II: New Data on the Digital Divide* was not mentioned because it only updated data regarding household telephone and computer ownership. They refined the data slightly by focusing on household on-line access instead of modems, but the results were the same as the first study. While computer had increased nation-wide, there was still a significant “digital divide” based on race, income, and other demographic characteristics (NTIA <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/net2/>).

different levels of income and education, different racial and ethnic groups, old and young, single and dual-parent families, and those with and without disabilities” (Levy et al.).

In Canada, the digital divide has been studied by a number of researchers and the results have been similar to the United States. One such study titled, *The Dual Divide: The Information Highway of Canada*, by Andrew Reddick, examined the digital divide and concluded that, “it is a complex phenomena which involves not only users and non-users, but two groups of non-users: those that are not able to connect because of socio-economic particulars, and those that have opted not to connect, because they are simply not interested” (Shade 8). According to Reddick, and similar to the research conducted in the United States, this “dual divide” was the result of many different factors relating often to the socio-economic characteristics of Internet users. The research showed, “[from] 1997 through 1999, higher-income households were three times more likely than lower-income households to have home access. By 1999, about two-thirds of upper-income households had access from home, as compared to about one in four low-income Canadians” (Reddick, Boucher and Groseilli pars. 1).

Another research study conducted by Statistics Canada and published in 2001 concluded that education and income were the largest factors determining the likelihood someone would have access to the Internet (Dryburgh). Non-users tended to be older individuals who were more likely to have less education and lower household incomes than regular Internet users. Additionally, Francophones were less likely than Anglophones, and those living in rural areas were less likely than those in city centres to

use the Internet. When the non-users were asked what the largest factor was affecting their ability to use the Internet, two reasons were cited: cost and access to a computer.

Looking at these results, we can see that not only should governments be concerned about the impact of the digital divide, but political parties and candidates should also be aware of its consequences. If Internet users are largely drawn from one segment of society then they must be aware that they are not reaching all available voters. A campaign strategy that places too much of an emphasis on the campaign website, at the expense of other communication technologies like television, radio and print, could mean that certain segments of voters could be alienated from the campaign.

There is another dimension to the digital divide, and that involves the divide between certain candidates and political parties. As argued in a recent study by Paul Herrnson and Atiya Kai Stokes, *Politics and the Digital Divide: District Characteristics and Candidate Internet Use in State Legislative Campaigns*, the “birth of the Internet gave rise to two digital divides – one within the public and the other among politicians”(2). Herrnson and Stokes were particularly interested in studying the degree of “digital divide” that existed amongst politicians. To complete the study, Herrnson and Stokes sent 6,647 questionnaires to a random sample of state legislature candidates across the United States and asked questions related to their campaign websites. They were attempting to understand the impact district characteristics had on candidates’ campaign websites. The results of the study confirmed “the same characteristics that influence campaign strategy have a significant impact on state legislative candidates’ use of the Internet” (10). More precisely, the authors found that the presence of a large minority population does not have a large impact on a candidate’s tendency to campaign online.

However, it found that candidates running in districts comprising of younger, more college educated voters are more likely to use the Internet for campaigning than a candidate in a district consisting of mainly uneducated, older voters.

### **The Impact of Technology on Party Communication**

The Internet and its accompanying technologies<sup>3</sup> present a unique challenge to the organizational structures of political parties in Canada. Many of these challenges are similar to what the parties faced when television, radio and opinion polling were introduced. The parties that were able to adapt to these new challenges saw the greatest amounts of successes. Looking back through Canada's electoral history, we see that the party system has gone through many changes since confederation. These changes have had a profound effect on Canada's party system and have resulted in four different models of party government. One of the catalysts for transition in the four party systems was a change in the communication technologies available to the political parties and the media outlets. The introduction of new communication technologies altered the character of electoral competition and resulted in a shifting of the party systems. The following is a quick walkthrough of the impact that new communication technologies have had on party systems in Canada.

The first party system was dominated by the partisan press and generally lacked any national focus. The vast and rugged geography of Canada was a great obstacle for the technology available to the media outlets. Therefore, politicians relied heavily on

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<sup>3</sup> Too often, researchers equate the publicly viewable website and its communication abilities as being the de facto Internet, while completely ignoring the fact the Internet is more than what can be seen through a conventional web browser. In reality, the Internet is a mixture of technologies that make up a complex communication medium whose capabilities go unrivalled by technologies like television or radio.

personal contact and spent a great deal of their time speaking at public engagements and dinners. The partisan press provided the means to which the party could speak with its supporters and served a purpose similar to that of the “contemporary party newsletter” (Young, Carty, and Cross 181). These circumstances created a genuine disconnection between the voter and the parties and resulted in a high degree of voter volatility. Therefore, it became the responsibility of the local notables to gather up voters in support of the party. It also provided the parties with the opportunity to deliver highly personalized messages directly to the voters.

The second party system saw the introduction of the radio and a move away from the partisan press. The radio allowed the parties to broadcast their message over much great distances and meant that voters from different regions had the ability to hear the leader speak from the comfort of their own home. The deliver of the same speech to different regions, possibly even different provinces, meant that leaders were now addressing more regional and national issues in their speeches. The wide appeal of radio and the manner to which it conveyed the leader’s personality became an important factor to the party’s success. How the voting public would perceive the party leaders became an important consideration for the parties. This focus on the party leaders would lead to the addition of image and advertising consultants to the party’s campaign teams.

Widespread use of television and of opinion polling leads us into the third party system. The trend towards placing greater emphasis on party leaders and their particular image that began with radio, continued with the introduction of the television in the late 1950s. The problems inherent with broadcasting television and radio signals over the vast distances across Canada were also being solved and with that came a more national

pan-Canadian approach to politics. The parties began to shift their focus from regional to national and further distanced themselves from a constituency-based emphasis (Carty 24). The party was no longer encumbered by the limitations of the communication medium, which had in the past kept their messages local rather than national. At this point the parties were prepared to leverage the public's support over the particular appeal of their leader. This level of personal coverage of the leaders through their many battles over leadership and policy would further strengthen their control over the party and would lead to even greater alienation of the caucus from the national limelight.

Public opinion polling had also come of age and was being used with much greater frequency and accuracy. Parties were much more prepared to accurately measure the particular opinions of their constituents and would use this information to formulate policy. However, the use of polling replaced the historical position of the caucus and the constituency association as the feedback mechanism to which information from up to the leadership. By removing this responsibility from the members of parliament and the local party organization the party and the leader was removing an important link between the national party organization and the local party organization. This, however, was simply another step in the increasingly nationalized nature of Canadian politics.

The Internet, while not being able to claim any direct responsibility for the massive electoral realignment that led to the fourth party system,<sup>4</sup> does have considerable impact on how political parties communicate. The communication potential of the Internet raises the question of how local and national party organizations will cope

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<sup>4</sup> In 1993, the year of Canada's largest electoral realignment in history, only 3 million people worldwide were connected to the Internet. In 1999, approximately 200 million people worldwide were online, in 2004 over 934 million. For more information, visit:  
<http://www.clickz.com/stats/sectors/geographics/article.php/151151>



with this new communication functionality. There is also some question as to some of the challenges faced by the party organization when attempting to implement that Internet into their organizational structures and political campaigns.

### **Categorizing the Research on Internet Campaigns**

To understand how researchers have approached the study of political campaigning on the Internet, I have created three simple categories in which we can place the majority of the studies that have been conducted over the years. The *content-focused* category is the largest category and contains studies that are concerned with analysing the specific features and characteristics of the campaign site. The second and somewhat smaller category is the *user-focused* category, which contains studies that are primarily concerned with evaluating how the specific user interacts and relates to the campaign website. The third and smallest category is the *strategist/developer-focused* category, containing studies that analyse the specific challenges of the campaign strategists and website developers who promote the party and or candidate through the Internet. These categories should not be considered exclusive or exhaustive because a number of studies incorporate elements from one or more of these categories or some may not fit at all. At this point, it is important that the specifics behind these differing types of research are explained in detail, and that some of the major studies in each category are identified.

#### ***Content-Focused Research***

The vast majority of the research conducted on political campaigning falls into the content-focused category. There are several reasons for this dominance. First, you do

not need special equipment or expertise to survey the contents of a website other than a keen eye, a web browser and access to the Internet. Hence, the availability of the data and the ease with which it can be collected serve as an invitation to anyone interested in studying campaign websites. Second, when confronted with a new area of research, researchers often seek to take a more descriptive approach to their research subject. Confirming and recording the many different features that exist on a campaign website and the methods in which they are employed online helps to further the understanding of what an actual campaign website looks like and how it should perform. This descriptive approach is a vital first step before researchers can move on to conduct more focused research involving more specific questions and hypotheses.

Two of the more widely cited researchers in the content-focused research category are Elaine Kamarck and Pippa Norris. Kamarck is known for the study, *Campaigning on the Internet in the Elections of 1998*, which surveyed campaign websites of the mid-term congressional elections in the United States. According to Kamarck, the study was designed to “be the first comprehensive look at the political use of the Internet in a national election cycle and to collect simple, basic data about how politicians were using this new medium” (Karmack pars. 4). Norris is known for a series of papers and books that address the importance of political parties and their contribution to the digital divide. In the paper, *Digital Parties: Civic Engagement and Online Democracy*, Norris examined 339 party websites in 179 countries worldwide and attempted to decipher what parties were online, what impact they had on party competition and civic engagement, and how websites provided opportunities for interactive communication.

Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider conducted one of the largest and most elaborate content-focused studies titled, *2002 Candidate Web Sphere Analysis*. The study sought to explain how “candidates for House, Senate and Governor used the Web in the 2002 campaign to facilitate civic engagements, establish connections to other political Websites through links, and provide various types of information to site visitors” (2002 Candidate).

While content-focused research is valuable to the researcher who is interested in getting a better understanding of how candidates use the Web to accomplish their specific campaign goals online, it certainly cannot be expected to answer all the questions. This is the reason why the second largest category, user-focused research, must be explored.

### ***User-Focused Research***

User-focused research studies are primarily concerned with evaluating how the user interacts and relates to the campaign website. These types of studies approach the research from the demand side, how the public responds to the site, as opposed to the supply side, which examines the specific contents of the site (Norris, Preaching to the Converted 4). This can provide insight that is often unavailable in other types of research such as, content-focused research. Rather than analyzing the content and style of a campaign website, the researcher surveys the potential and actual users of campaign websites and seeks to understand their activities and motivations.

Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Kirsten Foot’s study, *Citizens Perceptions of Online Interactivity and Implications for Political Campaign Communication*, is a good example of a user-focused study. Stromer-Galley and Foot examined the interactive components

of campaign websites during the 2000 presidential primary election. The authors conducted focus groups in New Hampshire prior to the primaries, and asked participants to view candidate websites and to discuss what they saw. Stromer-Galley and Foot would later team up with Steven Schneider and Elena Larsen to produce another excellent example of user-focused research with, *What Citizens Want, Where they Went, and What they Got Online in the U.S. Election 2000*. This time, however, the authors would be taking a “tripartite methodological approach” by integrating the focus group research collected earlier (data collected during Stromer-Galley and Foot) with other survey results and content-focused research.

Another example of user-focused research is the work done by Rachel Gibson, Wainer Lusoli and Stephan Ward in their paper, *Online Campaigning in the UK: The Public Respond?* The study attempted to provide an “in-depth analysis of the effects of the Internet on individual behaviour in the UK” and to “examine the extent to which political organizations such as parties, pressure groups and protest networks are using the Web and email to promote themselves and mobilise support” (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 1). The study used data from a national opinion poll survey of 1,972 adults from the United Kingdom and asked participants questions relating to their participation on the Web. This research was particularly interesting because it broke away from the norm of using the United States as the research subject.

### ***Strategist/Developer-Focused Research***

Strategist/Developer-focused studies take a completely different approach to researching political campaigns by focusing on the developers, designers and strategists

of the political campaigns and campaign websites. The value of this research is that it provides important insight and perspective into the specific challenges and issues faced by those responsible for the Internet campaign and website. This type of research is very rarely conducted without some element of content or user focused research being studied alongside. It is important that some of the studies that provide good examples of this type of research be identified.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project and the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, published one such study that contained a developer-focused competent. The study, *Untuned Keyboards: Online Campaigners, Citizens and Portals in the 2002 Elections*, attempted to explain the “phenomenon of online politics” from all three research categories perspectives outlined above (Cornfield and Rainie 1). The study contained data from a survey of American adults, a questionnaire answered by managers and communication directors of campaigns in closely contested races, and the content analysis of campaign information from both, major Internet portals (AOL, MSN, and Yahoo) and 102 political candidate websites. The developer-focused portion of the study was conducted by interviewing campaign staff two weeks following the 2002 general election in the U.S. The campaign staffs from 33 contested races for governor, Senate and U.S. House of Representatives were questioned about the “Internet’s utility as a campaign tool” and then the data was integrated with results found from the other research perspectives (Cornfield and Rainie 5).

The study of Internet campaigns has been an ongoing endeavour ever since political parties begun experimenting with the Internet for their campaigns in the mid 1990s. Looking back at the research, we can see that a fair amount of it has been centred

on the impact the Internet has on political participation and the digital divide. Scholars in the United States lead the world in the amount of research conducted, and countries like Canada have a considerable ways to go to catch up. Because of the unique differences between the Canada and the United States, any lessons learnt or interesting conclusions arrived via the research done in the US cannot always be directly applied to Canada. Therefore, it is vital that Canadian researchers cover some of the unbroken ground that lies between Canada and the United States. The next chapter will focus in on the importance and the history of the campaign website and attempt to justify the study of these communication devices.

## **Chapter Three: The Campaign Website**

### **What is a Campaign Website?**

A campaign website can be many things to many different people, but at its core it is simply a communication device used to distribute information to a mass audience on the Internet. The Internet, and by extension the campaign website, is a combination of previous advances in technology. It is a unique mixture of print, audio, and visual elements into a personal and mass medium. By combining these communication media's in such an attractive and accessible manner, the Internet represents a medium with a tremendous potential to disseminate and mobilize. It is no surprise then that political parties would turn to the Internet and campaign websites to increase their ability to compete in a competitive political environment.

Looking closer, we see that campaign websites generally contain a wide range of features. This includes volunteer information and signup forms, candidate biographies and issue positions, event schedules, donation forms, contact information, along with a wide variety of interactive and multimedia components. Combining all these features into an easily navigable and attractive website provides the campaign with an incredibly powerful communication device that disseminates a vast amount of information at a relatively low cost.

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages to having a campaign website is the ability for the party to "communicate directly with voters without the filtering, framing, and interpretation that is the price of delivery through mass media outlets" (Alexander 470). This independence from the traditional media outlets and the low cost of developing and maintaining the campaign website provides those parties and candidates who suffer from

a lack of resources, both in terms of manpower and cash, a considerably attractive alternative. This brings us to the next logical question, what are the core functions of a campaign website and how have they been used in the past?

### **Functions of a Campaign Website**

The unique aspect of the campaign website is that its core functions mirror those of the modern election campaign. Finding and organizing campaign volunteers, accepting donations, recruiting and mobilizing supporters, and communicating the central themes of the candidate or the party are all examples of functions that are essential to any successful political campaign. If we examine the potential capabilities of a modern campaign website we can see that many, if not all of these campaign functions, can be directly applied to the website. A campaign website, as will be demonstrated in the sections below, can do far more for the campaign than most communication technologies like television, radio and print. This is because the Internet is more than just a simple communication medium, it is a complex mixture of unique technologies specifically designed to provide interaction beyond the one-way communications of the past. Television and radio were never designed to expand beyond the requirements of the broadcast model (i.e. top down information flow from broadcaster to listener or viewer). You can see an example of this by examining today's radio and television – they are essentially the same in form and function, as they were when they were first invented. The same cannot be said for the Internet. The Internet is constantly evolving to meet the demands of both the audience and the developer and it will continue to be reinvented by those who are willing to push the envelope of what is possible.



When examining these campaign website functions closer, we can see that they can be grouped together into three core functions: communication, mobilization, and solicitation. The following section will outline the importance of each of these functions and how the campaign website can be applied to accomplish each of them.

***Mobilization:***

Mobilization is about getting people to commit themselves to a particular cause. In the case of political campaigns, mobilization is about encouraging people to volunteer their time and resources to help a candidate or political party become elected. In the past, mobilizing a large group of campaign volunteers meant a great deal of time and money would need to be invested in recruitment, training, and management of the volunteer workforce. This costly investment meant that only those candidates who could afford such luxuries would benefit from the helpful hand of a willing volunteer. The Internet however, provides candidates and political parties with the means in which to cut some of those investment costs. Utilizing a website, the campaign cannot only recruit, train, and manage volunteers, but it can also perform these vital mobilizing tactics with far greater ease than ever before, both in terms of time and money invested.

Perhaps one of the greatest assets of using the Internet to mobilize support is the Internet's ability to connect like-minded individuals together. By enabling individuals to connect and communicate through various channels on the Internet and the campaign website (i.e. online forums, email lists, chats, etc.), the campaign can encourage those individuals to focus their energy on constructive tasks valuable to the campaign. One

excellent example of this type of mobilization was the *Dean for America* campaign website. This website was the driving force behind an attempt to nominate Howard Dean for President of the United States.

Howard Dean was a little known Governor from Vermont whose popularity exploded into the Democratic primaries with his innovative and influential Internet campaign strategy. Using a variety of tools, from email lists, web journals (or weblogs), and social networking sites, the Dean campaign propelled Howard Dean into the limelight and at one point the lead, to become the President of the United States. Early in the primaries, the Dean campaign was able to collect a substantial amount of email addresses and online contributions and was able to leverage the power of various online social networking services to build an army of supporters across the United States.

Central to Dean's campaign strategy was reaching out, mobilizing and then engaging supporters towards a common goal. Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager stated, "[w]e want to let [grassroots volunteers] have control, let them help the campaign how they want to help the campaign" (Cone pars. 8). In this way, the Dean campaign downloaded much of the work and expense of managing and disseminating the campaigns core message to its growing army of supporters and activists. This allowed them to compete against better-funded competitors who were more established inside the party elite.

***Solicitation:***

Solicitation in the context of political campaigning is raising donations by appealing to supporters. Traditionally, collecting donations required the campaign to

spend money to make money, meaning that many of the solicitation techniques required the candidate and or the party to spend a portion of the donations collected on the collection method. An example of this spend money to make money dilemma is the method of soliciting donations through a direct mail campaign. A direct mail campaign requires the candidate and or the party to obtain the mailing addresses of their supporters and then send a request for donations through the postal service. While certainly an effective way to solicit campaign contributions in the past, it has a significantly lower return on investment (ROI) ratio when compared to online solicitation. For example, it costs around 90 cents per dollar raised to contact potential donors via mailing lists and 70 cents per dollar using telemarketing (Coleman 51). Online fundraising can lower that ROI ratio to less than 3 cents per dollar raised (VandeHei and Edsall pars. 10), which can represent a significant advantage to a campaign which finds itself behind in fundraising when compared to other candidates in the same race

One of the first real successes of online solicitation occurred during the 2000 primaries in the United States. Democratic presidential candidate, Bill Bradley and Republican presidential candidate John McCain turned to the Internet to help them compete against better-funded opponents. Bradley was not as successful at attracting contributions from wealthy supporters as his opponent, Al Gore. He had to find an innovative, non-traditional way of raising funds. Bradley quickly turned to the Internet and by promoting his campaign website and encouraging his supporters to donate online he was able to raise over \$770,000 by October of 1999 (Kelley B4). Later in the same primaries, John McCain would run into similar funding problems when completing against the heavily funded and favoured candidate, George W. Bush (Johnson 419).

Following a surprise victory in the New Hampshire primary, McCain's campaign coffers were nearing empty. It was at this point that McCain appealed to his supporters for additional contributions. In the following ten days, McCain's campaign reportedly received over \$3 million in contributions through his campaign website (Nickens pars. 27). The speed in which the money flowed in took many by complete surprise.

Recent fundraising successes during the 2004 presidential election in the US reinforce the importance of online donations. Several candidates attracted an unprecedented amount of donations through their campaign websites and used this money to further their campaign goals. For example, Democratic candidate Howard Dean managed to raise \$20 million through the Internet, accounting for 40 percent of the total amount of money raised by his campaign. Republican candidate George W. Bush raised \$14 million online, or almost 5 percent of total funds raised. John Kerry amassed an impressive \$82 million through online donations, nearly 33 percent of total funds raised for his campaign (Rainie, Cornfield and Harrigan 1).

***Communication:***

The third, and often considered the most important, function of any political campaign is the communicative function. It would be difficult to imagine a campaign being successful if it did not attempt to communicate with potential voters. This is because communication is a core function to which an entire campaign revolves. Without it, how would the voter know what the specific positions of the candidate or the party were, and what would be their incentive to vote for the candidate or the party? Campaigns in the past have used a number of different methods to get its particular

message to the voter. The most common of these methods was door to door canvassing, direct mailings through the postal service, radio, television, and or print campaign, etc..

While many of the more traditional methods of communicating with potential supporters are expensive, particularly those messages sent through radio, television, print outlets; the Internet can bring a welcome relief to an overburdened communication budget. While communicating through a website is not exactly free, the overall costs pale in comparison to traditional media outlets.

A campaign website can also provide something that most mass media outlets cannot, and that is the ability to move beyond an outlet for simple campaign messages, and into being an information rich resource voters can immerse themselves into. As was demonstrated by the *Dean for America* campaign, communicating your message to as many like-minded individuals as possible while at the same time giving them the tools to further communicate the message to their friends and family, will in the end provide a relatively cheap alternative to the traditional media outlets.

The largest difference between the Internet and the many other communication medias is that the Internet is a “solicited method of communication”, meaning you cannot deliver a campaign website into a voters home (Dorsey and Green 62-65). Whereas with television, radio and to a lesser extent print, you can purchase advertising time or space and expect your message to be delivered to the eyes and ears of potential supporters. Whether your supporters actually chose to read, watch or listen to your message is difficult to ascertain, but you can be assured that it will be available for their consumption if they so choose. A campaign website, must rely on the ambitions of the individual voter

to seek out and engage the website through an Internet browser. This unfortunate reality means that many of the visitors to a campaign website will likely already be supporters.

The common theme running through all these functions is that the Internet can significantly lower the amount of money and effort involved in performing these three vital functions. Knowing this, we can see that the Internet is more than simply an extension of the campaign but it has the potential of being the center of a campaign.

### **Brief History of American and Canadian Campaign Websites**

Over the past decade, campaign websites have evolved from simple text based publications available only through a web browser to complex multimedia rich productions available through not only your web browser but also your cell phone, PDA, email, and even your television set. This evolution has increased the overall importance of the campaign website in terms of both the voter and the political party and has set in motion a trend towards increased amounts of communication between candidates and the individual voters. Nowhere in the world has this evolution had a larger impact than in the United States.

### ***Historical Background – The United States***

The first use of the Internet during an election campaign came during the 1992 presidential race in the United States. The Clinton campaign placed full text of the candidates' speeches, biographical information, advertisements, and policy and issue papers (Electronic Government). The reaction to this information was minimal, as very few people actually knew what the Internet really was in 1992. In fact, only a few

million people worldwide had access to this new communication technology, and most were academics and researchers who used the Internet to share and distribute academic research. The following mid-term elections were equally disappointing as only a few congressional candidates bothered to build campaign websites and widespread usage of the Internet was still a couple of years away.

By 1996, the Internet was starting to come into its own, with the number of companies and organizations launching their own websites increasing drastically. Many of these companies were part of what many call the dot-com boom, which saw an incredible amount of investment and diversity in the types of companies that were attempting to capitalize on the emergence of the Internet as a modern communication technology. Higher modem speeds, the existence of commercial Internet service providers and the proliferation of the desktop computer provided an environment which not only attracted businesses, but also political parties.

It was during the first leadership debate in the 1996 presidential race that the Internet achieved its first milestone. Republican presidential candidate, Bob Dole, made history by plugging his website's address during his concluding remarks of the first presidential debate. This was the first time in either Canada or the United States that a political candidate mentioned their campaign website during a televised event. The mere mention of the site resulted in more than two million hits in the first 24 hours following the debate and significantly increased the amount of visitors who visited his campaign website in the follow-up to the election (Lewicki and Ziaukas). This was an important milestone for the Internet as an election tool, as it showed a candidate using a traditional media outlet as a means to advertise his Internet presence. It also provided campaign

websites and Internet campaigning with an amount of legitimacy and attention that was not afforded to it before.

Many of the websites created during this period were simple creations that closely resembled the look and the feel of other off-line campaign materials. Indeed, many of the websites used the same graphics and written copy that was produced for other areas of the campaign and laid the website out in a fashion similar to a brochure. Very little content on these websites was geared for the repeat user and therefore, once a voter had visited the site, there was very little need for them to return.

When looking at many of the websites, you get the distinct impression that many of the candidates understood the importance of being on the Internet, but many were unsure of what to do once you were there. This new technology was on one hand very useful in the sense it could provide a campaign with an additional communication outlet through which they could disseminate important information, but on the other hand, it caused a certain amount of confusion as to where exactly the website fit in the overall campaign structure. Was the campaign website just another communication tool like television, radio and print; or was it something that went beyond the traditional broadcast model?

However, not all the campaign websites were boring, uncreative, static online reproductions of off-line materials. Both the Dole and the Clinton campaigns experimented with features that went beyond “electronic brochures” (Kamarck). The Clinton-Gore campaign allowed visitors to send electronic post-cards to friends, while the Dole-Kemp campaign provided digital campaign paraphernalia. One of the core reasons why the presidential candidates were able to produce innovative websites, as compared to



the congressional candidates websites produced during the same period, was that their overall campaign were far larger in terms of organizational support and cash reserves. This factor afforded these campaigns with certain luxuries beyond the reach of other, less funded candidates.

Email was also becoming an important organizational and communicative tool utilized by many of the campaigns in 1996. Both the Clinton-Gore and the Dole-Kemp campaigns invested a considerable amount of time and effort into collecting email addresses from supporters. The hard work resulted in the Clinton-Gore campaign collecting over 10,000 email addresses, while the Dole-Kemp campaign collected an incredible 75,000 addresses (Benoit and Benoit pars. 4). It soon became apparent to many campaigners that email could help the campaign communicate their message far quicker and cheaper than other traditional off-line methods. This was of particular interest to those candidates whose campaigns were run through small campaign budget.

Traditional media outlets were another important player to enter the Internet age during the 1996 election. Television, print media, and to a lesser extent radio, all built comprehensive online portals that provided important information for the voter. There were also a number of commercial and non-profit organizations that sprang up to provide voters with valuable information. The interesting thing about the increased media involvement on the Internet was that many times, the Internet was the story. Simply having a website was often enough to get a news story on a candidate or an organization. The traditional media outlets were beginning to generate excitement around this new medium and campaigners were more than happy to provide the traditional media outlets with an interesting story.

Following the 1996 presidential election, there were significant expectations that the Internet was going to revolutionize the way political parties campaign and the way the individual voter would seek out political information. The fervour of the dot-com bubble was certainly heating up, as proponents of the Internet started to dream of the wonderful ways in which the Internet was going to revolutionize campaign communication. Those dreams involved the promise that the Internet would level the playing field for those political parties, candidates, civic groups, and news organizations that were previously underrepresented in terms of broadcasting their message. Cyber-optimists, as one influential researcher called them, pointed out that technological innovation was going to vastly improve the ability of different groups and ordinary individuals to participate in democracy directly (Norris, The Digital Divide 40).

This wide-eyed optimism would continue to accelerate as the 1998 congressional election rolled around. According to Elaine Kamarck, in *Campaigning on the Internet in the Elections of 1998*, nearly all the gubernatorial candidates, almost three quarters of all Democratic and Republican Senate candidates, and just over half of all the candidates for the House of Representatives had campaign websites (Kamarck). The American public was also beginning to go online in huge numbers with just slightly less than one third, or 79 million, Americans online as of August 1998 (NUA Internet).

Campaign websites in 1998, while an improvement over their 1996 counterparts, were still lacking those features that would take this new medium to the next level. One survey of campaign websites during the 1998 congressional election showed that 97 percent of websites provided biographical information and nearly 90 percent provided issue papers and policy statements (Johnson 419). However, only half provided an

interactive communicative element, and even fewer (38.2 percent) provided electronic volunteer recruitment or fundraising (Johnson 419). Kamarck described many of the campaign websites used during the 1998 campaign as brochure-ware; that is more or less electronic versions of the off-line pamphlets used prior to the Internet.

One campaign that attracted particular attention for its innovative use of the Internet during the 1998 mid-term elections was the campaign for state governor by former pro-wrestler, Jesse Ventura. Ventura, who was a relative newcomer to state politics, was able to use the Internet to win 37 percent of the vote, winning the governorship of the state of Minnesota. As Ventura was a Reform party candidate whose campaign was consistently low on cash reserves, the Internet provided him with an opportunity to react to, and compete with the more established and better-funded candidates from the Democratic and Republican parties (Wattson). Ventura was able to raise a significant portion of his campaign budget (\$500,000) through his website, [jesseventura.org](http://jesseventura.org) and his 3,000-member email list, called "JesseNet" (Raney). Ventura's innovative use of the Internet helped him rally support from across the state and helped the campaign communicate directly to its existing supporters (Miller 3). This direct communication helped the campaign bypass the more expensive (and less cooperative) traditional media outlets and gave the campaign the ability to counter any rumours or bad press against the campaign or Ventura himself (Clift; Buie). When asked about the role the Internet played in the Ventura campaign, Phil Madsen, the online coordinator for the Ventura campaign commented, "While it is true that we could not have won the election without the Internet, we did not win the election because of the Internet" (Clift). Therefore, the Ventura campaign still required sound and reasonable policies along with

a solid group of supporters; the Internet just helped coordinate and communicate Ventura's campaign messages to his potential supporters.

By the start of the congressional and presidential elections in 2000, hopes and expectations for the Internet were running extremely high. According to the study, *Falling Through the Net: Towards Digital Inclusion*, more than "116.5 million Americans were online at some location" during 2000 and an increasing percentage of those online were looking for political information. By the summer of 2000, approximately 33 million voters were using the Internet to research political information. By November, that number had increased to 46 million (Cornfield and Rainie 4). The two core benefactors of this migration to the Internet for political information were the websites of the traditional media and the website of the individual candidate. A majority (50 percent) of the traffic went to the large media outlets like CNN, MSNBC and other television and political portals while individual candidates and interest group websites attracted around 16 percent of the traffic. (Potter and Manatt 30)

Breaking these numbers down further, we see that 20 percent of all Americans used the Internet to collect political information during the campaign and over 43 percent of new users said that the information they found online directly influenced their vote on Election Day (Potter and Manatt 30). While the number of voters who use the Internet to collect information during a campaign pale in comparison to those who use the traditional mediums such as television, radio and print media, the overall numbers using the Internet begin to carry more weight when you consider that Internet users tend to be, "better educated, better informed, more opinionated" and are more likely to vote than users who do not use the Internet (Breslau pars. 4). Internet users also spend a great deal of time on

the websites they visit. For example, visitors to the McCain website in the 2000 presidential campaign “spent an average of eight minutes on his website – far exceeding the length of the average website visit or television news report, much less than the average 30-second TV spot” (Potter and Manatt 30). David Dulio and Erin O’Brien in their study, *Campaigning with the Internet: The View from Below*, discovered similar results when they described Internet users as being “disproportionately young, well educated, male, and wealthy” (117).

Political campaigns were also beginning to amass large networks of volunteers and supporters through their online campaigns. Steve Forbes’ Webmaster commented that, “we’re not just posting a webpage, we’re launching a huge communication network for current and prospective Forbes supporters” (Bimber and Davis 42). Using targeted advertising crafted through many different traditional mediums and the Internet, many of the candidates were able to mobilize extremely large swaths of supporters to aid in the volunteer work both in the off-line and on-line campaign (Bimber and Davis 38).

Email had also become widely used with many of the campaigns sending out hundreds of thousands (and in a few cases, millions) of emails during the course of the campaign. By communicating with and activating many of the supporters that provided their email addresses to the campaign, candidates were able to engage many of these online supporters with an ease that could never be reached offline. By keeping supporters “in the loop” with news of the campaign, candidates could ensure that there would be a receptive audience if they ever needed additional volunteers or financial aid (Casey 11).

The election in 2000 also became known for the dramatic increase in the amount of donations that were received online. In June 1999, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) issued an Advisory Opinion to the Bill Bradley for President Committee allowing for credit card contributions collected on the Internet to be eligible for federal matching grants (Thomas). This move by the FEC certainly provided a major incentive for many of the candidates and parties who needed to extend their solicitation efforts into the online arena. All of the presidential campaigns in 2000 benefited from this important decision – most notably the campaigns of Nader, McCain, and Bradley. By the end of the campaign, over \$50 million was raised online (Pressman).

One interesting example of how online fundraising made a fundamental impact on American politics in the 2000 presidential election occurred due to the presence of Ralph Nader in the race. Nader, the Green Party's presidential nominee, was able to use the Internet, through his website and email campaigns, to raise sufficient funds to enable him to remain on the ballot box in a few critical states. The one state in which his presence may actually have decided the outcome was the state of Florida. Republican nominee, George W. Bush won the decisive state of Florida by 537 votes and many argue that Nader's presence in the campaign siphoned enough support away from Democratic nominee, Al Gore, to ensure the victory for Bush. Post election surveys indicated that Nader supporters would have voted for ideologically similar candidate Gore, by a 2-to-1 ratio in a two-candidate race (Decision 2000; Hersh). However, no one is able to say with certainty that the presence of Nader cost Gore the election. However, this incident proves that minor candidates can use the Internet to enable them to campaign for far longer and with more impact than what was possible before.

By the 2002 mid-term congressional elections, a rather gloomy mood had descended upon many of those optimists that had touted the Internet as the instigator in the communication revolution. The dot-com bubble had burst and many of those companies and organizations that were positioning themselves to franchise the electoral under-dogs using the Internet were either bankrupt or had changed their business model to reflect a more conservative approach to the Internet. Congressional candidates were still turning to the Internet in large numbers, and the number of Americans with access to the Internet was still rising, but the enthusiasm and excitement around the Internet that was present during previous election campaign was replaced with reserved acceptance of the Internet as an important, but not necessarily revolutionary, communication tool.

Any campaign that did not employ a campaign website during this time was in the minority, as were those Americans who did not have access to the Internet. According to one study, over 65 percent of House, Senate and Gubernatorial candidates managed to provide functional campaign websites (Xenos and Foot 169-185). The number and sophistication of the website features had also improved since the last election. One researcher noted that several traditional practices were manifested on the websites of the vast majority of candidates for House, Senate and Governor (Foot, Schneider, and Xenos). Website features such as, biographical and issue sections, contact information and information on donating to the campaign, campaign news and volunteer signup forms, were all employed on a majority of the campaign websites (Foot, Schneider, and Xenos 8).

The rather gloomy mood that set in after the post dot-com bubble burst would soon be lifted, as the 2002 mid-term election ended and the 2004 congressional and

presidential election begun. With many of the lessons learnt and mistakes corrected from past election campaigns, the next major battle ground would be the Democratic Presidential nominations and then the widely anticipated presidential race. With Internet usage in America hitting higher and higher levels each year, and the economic recovery of the technology industry almost completely, the conditions were right for an exciting Internet campaign.

Perhaps the biggest story of 2004 was the hotly contested race for the Democratic presidential nomination. The race, consisting of a number of Democratic hopefuls, was fought not only through the conventional media, but also with a heavy focus on the Internet. While all the leadership candidates had campaign websites of varying levels of sophistication, the one candidate who took the Internet campaign to the next level and seemed to understand the importance and potential of the Internet was Howard Dean. Dean, the relatively unknown governor from Vermont, used the Internet to heighten his exposure nationally and tap into the growing grassroots opposition to the Bush administration.

Much of Howard Dean's success, similar to the earlier successes of Jessie Ventura in Minnesota, is attributable to the campaign's ability to use the Internet to engage and empower their supporters while at the same time using the communication and solicitation functions of the Internet to compete with more established competitors. In the case of Dean, the campaigns of his Democratic competitors, particularly John Kerry and John Edwards, and certainly the campaign of his Republican opponent, President Bush, were initially more established in terms of media exposure. However, Dean showed early on in the primaries, that his campaign would be a force to be



reckoned with. One example of this took place in the early stages of his campaign when he released his second-quarter fundraising figures. Dean reportedly raised \$7.5 million, doubling what he took in during the first quarter and drawing more than 4 million of it directly from the Internet (Edwards pars. 2). These figures, particularly the amounts raised online, moved Dean and his campaign up in terms of media exposure and had many pundits considering his chances of winning the nomination. However, by the time the Iowa caucuses were finished, the wheels of the Howard Dean campaign had begun to fall off.

The trend towards increasing amounts of Americans using the Internet also continued, as more than 75 million Americans – 37 percent of adult population and 61 percent of online Americans – used the Internet to get news, discuss candidates, and to participate directly in the political process (Rainie, Cornfield and Harrigan 2). One of the places people went on the Internet to write about and discuss political information during the election was the political weblog community. A weblog is an online publication consisting primarily of periodic articles posted in chronological order. The weblog community, which had existed in one form or another since the late 1990s, had slowly grown over the years to become a powerful medium for political discussion.

According to research conducted in 2003, 11 percent of American Internet users read weblogs, one third of those having posted directly on a weblog (Lenhart, Horrigan and Fallows 3). These numbers improved drastically in 2004 when another study reported that 27 percent of Internet users said they read weblogs – translating into 32 million weblog readers in the United States (Rainie, Cornfield and Harrigan 1). When narrowing these numbers down to readership of political weblogs, we see that 9 percent

of Internet users said they read political weblogs “frequently” or “sometimes” during the 2004 election (Rainie, Cornfield and Harrigan 1).

Political parties have also seen the potential power of the weblog and had been aggressively promoting and utilizing their own campaign blogs during elections. One of the most successful campaign blogs this period was Howard Dean’s *BlogforAmerica*. The Dean campaign maintained the weblog during Howard Dean’s run for the Democratic presidential nomination. Over the course of 2003, the Dean campaign managed to post over 2,910 entries and they received over 314,121 individual comments to the BlogforAmerica weblog (Cornfield 2). The Dean campaign used the weblog as a means to communicate and interact with those supporters as well to solicit donations and mobilize supporters.

When it came to fundraising, the 2005 election really turned up the heat on Internet campaign contributions. The extent in which the Internet was being used to solicit large amounts of small donations – donations under \$200 – was far larger than in previous elections. The campaigns of the John Kerry and George W. Bush, used the “strengths of the Internet’s instant turnaround capacity” to fund and accomplish short and long term goals of the campaign quicker than ever before (Cornfield 1). The Kerry campaign, possibly learning some online fundraising lessons from the campaign of former Democratic competitor Howard Dean, managed to collect over \$83 million of its \$249 million online, while his Republican opponent, George W. Bush, only managed to \$14 million of its 273 million collected online (Online Fundraising pars. 2).

Even since the early days of the Internet, political parties in the United States have been on the leading edge of the technology when it came to campaigning on the

Internet. Their appetite for technology and the ability to implement that technology into their political campaigns has been matched by American voters' willingness to engage in political activism on the Internet. While Canadian political parties have been slow to capitalize on the Internet, they have been making important advances.

### ***Historical Background – Canada***

The first election where the Internet was even remotely utilized by the political parties in Canada was the 2000 federal election. This was the first election in which the majority of Canadians had access to the Internet and the all of the major and minor political parties had established a web presence. It was also an interesting time for national party politics, as the regionally based Reform Party had recently transformed itself into the Canadian Alliance. The following section will attempt to outline the brief history of Internet campaigning in Canada. However, it should be noted that due to a lack of research in this area, there is very little to report. In fact, between 1997 and 2004 there were only two small chapters and one academic paper written on the topic of federal campaign websites. This lack of documentation means that only a partial view of campaigning in Canada can be undertaken and any comparison on the use of the Internet during campaigns between Canada and the United States over the past decade will be suggestive at best.

With the political parties and candidates in the United States overwhelming turning in Internet to aid in their campaigning, Canadian candidate and their parties where subdued in their online endeavours. The first campaign websites in Canada appeared during the 1997 federal election. In that election, all the major federal parties

constructed campaign websites of varying levels of complexity to aid in their election campaign. Preston Manning, following in the footsteps of his American counter-part, Bob Dole, was also the first Canadian party leader to mention his party's website during a national televised leader debate. Very few Canadians took notice, however, as less than one-third of Canadian households contained a regular Internet user (Household Internet Use).

By the time the 2000 federal election was called the situation in Canada had improved somewhat. Once again, all the major parties were able to construct campaign websites and now a majority (57 percent) of Canadians were accessing the Internet (Canadian Internet Commerce Statistics). Research during this time showed that the campaign websites of the five major federal parties: the Progressive Conservative, Liberal, Canadian Alliance, New Democratic, and the Bloc Quebecois closely resembled each other in terms of website structure and each provided relatively the same sections and website features (Christensen and McCormick). However, that same research stated that much of the content used for the campaign websites originated from other broadcast mediums like print and television and most of this content had been dumped on to the website without much thought as to whether it actually belonged there. According to Christensen and McCormick, "Canadian political parties have not yet developed Internet specific campaign strategies. With a few exceptions, the general strategy for posting information to the websites seemed to be 'Put everything we have up.'"

In terms of solicitation, only the New Democratic, Alliance and the Progressive Conservative parties allowed contributions to be collected online after the writ was dropped; with the Liberal party adding this functionality only late in the campaign period

(Christensen and McCormick). The exact amounts collected online by the major political parties, are unclear, as no in-depth research has been undertaken in the area of solicitation. However, Alan Whitehorn reported that about \$2,000 per day was collected on the New Democratic Party website over the course of the campaign (126).

The traditional media outlets were also getting in to the game, as the two national newspapers and many of the national and regional television networks vamped up their Internet presence to cover the election online. Their coverage certainly reflected the heightened expectations of the technological capabilities of the Internet for not only the political parties and their candidates, but also for the voters looking for additional political information. Jon Pammett and Christopher Dornan in their book, *The Canadian General Election of 2000* stated, “[in] many ways the election 2000 demonstrated that the fragmented niche market of Canadian political news consumers is large enough to justify the development and provision of specialized news products” (227). While political parties were struggling to find a foothold in the vastness of the Internet, the media outlets were quietly staking out their respective territories amongst themselves.

With the call of the 2004 federal election, significant progress had been made in terms of website sophistication and overall Internet access amongst Canadians. By January of 2004, 64 percent of Canadian households were using the Internet regularly and all the major and minor federal parties, including a wide range of fringe parties and groups, had built campaign websites of varying complexities (Small 205). Media outlets and some independent media publications had also expanded on their original online election coverage to include features and information never seen before in Canada. At

first glance, it appeared that the news media and political parties were finally catching up to their neighbours to the south in the arena of online campaigning and election coverage.

When examining the individual particulars of the major federal parties, we see that all of the parties attempted to solicit campaign contributions directly on their website. Research has shown that all the parties employed a secure server for the online transactions and many of the parties placed text and graphics asking for donations in highly visible areas of the website (Small 222). The parties were also diligent about recruiting volunteers, as all the major parties except the Bloc Quebecois provided the ability for interested supporters to submit their information directly to the campaign via the campaign website.

Viral marketing, the campaigning technique that is characterized by exploit pre-existing social networks to produce exponential increases in brand awareness, also started to make an appearance during the 2004 campaign in Canada. While none of the parties went as far as the Dean campaign in terms of the viral campaign, many of the parties encouraged certain activities that would aid in recruitment and solicitation. For example, the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Bloc Quebecois all used the “send to a friend” feature that enabled the user to send an email to their friends and family encouraging them to visit the campaign website (Small 223). The New Democratic Party also provided an interesting feature late in the campaign. On day twenty-fourth of the campaign, the NDP launched the NDP e-Campaign. The e-Campaign provided individual NDP supporters the ability to login into the party’s national campaign website and have access to “simple web and email tools” enabling them to “create and send messages to [their] friends, family and colleagues, inviting them to join and in [and

support] the NDP in the coming election” (Small 224). Clearly, some of the major federal parties recognized the power of viral marketing during the 2004 election.

### **Why Study Campaign Websites?**

Over the past decade the Internet has grown from a few networked computers linking research facilities in the United States to a global communication phenomenon connecting millions of different people across the globe. The impact of this communication revolution on political parties, their candidates and the voter has been substantial and will only increase as the Internet further entrenches itself in our lives. The study of how the Internet impacts each of these political actors is therefore vitally important.

There are two core reasons for studying political campaign websites. The first reason is to get a better understanding of how political parties are using the Internet to accomplish certain goals. In the case of the Internet, political parties have constructed campaign websites in an attempt to capitalize on a technology that could improve their chances at getting elected. By using the Internet to communicate with their core and potential supporters, parties have ensured that they will remain relevant and competitive when compared to their competitors. In the past, researchers have attempted to identify and measure the impact of these technologies and explore how parties were using these technologies to accomplish their particular goals. Perhaps one of the largest studies focused on recording and analyzing how political parties were using the Internet was undertaken by Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider. The study titled, *2002 Candidate Web Sphere Analysis*, sought to explain how, “candidates for [United States]

House, Senate and Governor used the Web in the 2002 campaign to facilitate civic engagements, establish connections to other political Web sites through links, and provide various types of information to site visitors” (2002 Candidate Web Sphere Analysis). Considering that 1,631 candidate websites in 505 races were under observation by this study, the scope and the depth of the data is impressive.

A second reason for studying campaign websites is to get a better understanding of how voters use and interact with campaign websites during an election campaign. Voters today have more choices for researching issues and parties available to them than ever before. These new choices, particularly when considering the information available on the Internet, provide the voter with a vast amount of information that can be used to influence their voting behaviour. The campaign website can also provide a wealth of opportunities to engage and mobilize potential supporters. Researchers have conducted a number of studies to explore the extent to which the campaign websites influences the actions of the individual voter. One example of this type of research is the work done by Rachel Gibson, Wainer Lusoli and Stephan Ward in their paper, *Online Campaigning in the UK: The Public Respond*. The study attempted to provide an “in-depth analysis of the effects of the Internet on individual behaviour in the UK” and to “examine the extent to which political organizations such as parties, pressure groups and protest networks are using the Web and email to promote themselves and mobilise support” (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward). The study used data from a national opinion poll survey of 1,972 adults from the United Kingdom and asked participants questions relating to their participation on the Web.



### **Problems with the Current Research**

The vast majority of the research on political campaigning on the Internet is concerned with the impact that Internet has on political participation and democracy. The theoretical nature of this research limits the researcher's ability to study the impact of the Internet on those who actually practice political campaigning. For example, candidates are more likely interested in whether the campaign site provided any measurable results - i.e. was the campaign site a success or failure - than whether their campaign website increased civic participation amongst voters or facilitated any sort of democratic exercises. Campaigners and candidates are more interested in the practical applications that are made possible by the Internet; whereas researchers are often more interested in the theoretical questions that arise due to the use of the Internet. These competing interests represent a real divide between the researchers and the practitioners and represent the largest challenge facing both groups.

Another inherent weakness in the research that has been conducted on political campaigning on the Internet is the failure to focus any attention on the individual website user. While there has been a mountain of research examining the specific details of the campaign website, there have been very few studies which make the actual website user the focus. Reporting and analyzing the features and structure of a typical website is undoubtedly valuable, it does not however, provide any insight into how the individual user may use the website or how they perceive the usefulness of the actual campaign website. If one were to make an analogy, it is like trying to study the impact of the automobile on the lives of the average North American by carefully examining and reporting on the individual nuts and bolts of the automobiles produced in North America.

Without consulting the drivers themselves – by allowing them to express their thoughts and opinions on the automobiles and everything associated with the technology - how are the researchers expected to fully understand and appreciate the automobile's real world impact?

A large part of this reluctance to study campaign websites from the perspective of the voter is due to the difficult nature associated with collecting such data. Conducting large household surveys and or arranging a long series of focus groups can be both an expensive and time consuming venture. Another problem associated with surveys and focus groups is the difficulties related to attaining meaningful sample subjects. For example, if a researcher is interested in studying the online behaviour of a typical Internet user who uses and interacts with campaign websites, he or she must first find a research subject willing to participant. Finding a large enough statistical sample of potential research subjects with the appropriate type of experiences could become considerably difficult because only a certain portion of the Canadian public would fulfill your requirements. When considering that only a portion of Canadians are of voting age and of those Canadians who can vote, only a portion of them use the Internet, you can see that in order to find a sufficient number of Canadians who share your research requirement, you would need to drastically increase the overall sample size.

Another barrier to this type of research is the fact that the Internet is a relatively new technology and campaign websites, particularly in the case of Canadian campaign websites, tend not to be a constant fixture on the Internet. The vast majority of campaign websites appear relatively quickly before an election and then abruptly disappear after the election - with little, if any evidence that there had ever been a website there. The fact

that elections in Canada can be called at any time – as compared to the regularly scheduled elections in the United States – means that researchers interested in studying campaign websites in Canada need to be constantly ready to observe, record and analyze the Internet campaigning techniques of the political parties at a drop of a hat. This lack of preset elections also means the political parties in Canada have less time to plan and prepare the Internet strategies and that voters may not even be aware of a party's campaign website until near the end of the short campaign writ period.

As was witnessed in this chapter, the campaign website is an enormously complex application that has seen an incredible evolution in the United States, and to a lesser extent Canada. While campaign websites have grown in complexity, the Internet audience had grown with it. For the most part, Internet users are now sophisticated groups of individuals who are increasingly turning to the Internet to augment their quest for political information. As these voters turn to the Internet, they bring with them unique needs and desires that will help shape the way political campaigning is conducted on the Internet. It is now time to turn our attention to those Internet users, and examines the campaign website from the perspective of the individual voter.

## **Chapter Four: The Voter and the Campaign Website**

This chapter is broken up into two parts. The first part examines the campaign website from the perspective of the individual voter. A series of focus groups were conducted to examine voter's insights and opinions on campaigning on the Internet. The data was collected in such a way as to encourage the participants to explore issues such as, would they or had they already visited a campaign website, what type of website features were they interested in using, and whether they thought using a campaign website would be advantageous to the individual voter. The answers given provide a fascinating insight into how voters perceive the online campaign and provide a helpful backdrop to the second part of this chapter, an examination of campaign websites.

The campaign websites, which were examined during the 2004 federal election in Canada, provide interesting examples of how the Internet is being used for campaigning purposes in Canada. The websites of the Conservative, Liberal, Bloc Quebecois, Green and New Democratic Party, were examined and analyzed over the course of the writ period. The information collected was used to not only draw conclusions about the level of importance Canadian political parties are placing on their Internet campaigns, but also to make comparisons between what the voters want from a campaign website and what they actually got from the political parties.

### **Focus Groups with Potential Voters**

#### ***Data and Methods***

This portion of the research used a series of focus groups as its primary method of data collection. There were a number of important reasons for using focus groups. The

first reason was that there have been very few studies that used this particular type of data collection. While quantitative research methods such as household surveys and opinion polling along with detailed analysis of the structure and functions of campaign websites, have been investigated in the past, the actual examination of a campaign website in the context of a group environment has been largely overlooked. This represents an interesting and important opportunity to study how potential voters perceive a campaign website and what motivates their actions online.

The second reason focus groups are used for data collection is that due to the resources available at the University of Lethbridge, they were relatively easy to conduct.<sup>5</sup> While each participant was offered a small monetary incentive to participant and a moderator was required to be present during the discussions, the overall investment in terms of money and time were significantly lower than what would have been required from other more intensive data collection methods like one-on-one participant interviews, or a household survey.

The third reason for using focus groups is the potential to collect data and explore topics that might have been overlooked by the other data collection methods. When the priority is to explore new avenues of thought and not repeat the current wisdom in a field, focus groups can provide an outlet for new ideas and research directions (Morgan 21). This ability to break down some of the procedural barriers when exploring research topics is largely based on the unpredictableness of the group environment. By their nature, focus groups are unpredictable and the discussions that flow from such groups can

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<sup>5</sup> By moderating the groups myself, limiting the size and number of groups, borrowing the appropriate equipment (a microphone, audio recorder and a transcriber), and using the facilities available at the University of Lethbridge, I was able to keep costs low enough to allow me to actually use this type of data collection.

quickly become trivial and off-topic. This unpredictable nature however, can be a valuable asset to a researcher who can properly moderate the group's discussions towards examining topics that are of interest to the researcher. In this case, the use of focus groups provided a means in which I could ask questions and explore topics that would simply not be possible through other research methods.

There are however, a number of drawbacks and weaknesses related to using focus groups as a technique for collecting quantitative data. Because of this, it is important that problems be identified and discuss how they were minimized. The first weakness is the fact that focus groups are not based on natural settings. Most focus groups, including the ones used in this study, require participants to sit in a room and discuss their opinions and feelings in an environment unfamiliar to them. The concern is that by conducting the discussions in this way, the participants will not provide sincere responses. This concern is nominal as the topic of the discussions, in this case, campaign websites, was certainly within the comfort levels of the participants.

Another weakness is the potential loss of control over the data that is collected. Focus group participants are unpredictable, and therefore researchers can never be certain that the participants will respond to the questions asked and not stray off-topic. This concern was something that I had to constantly be aware of during the discussions, as nearly every participant, at some point during the discussions, drifted off-topic. This was quickly rectified by either interjecting with a question or statement that would guide the discussion back on topic or by simply ending the discussion and moving onto another topic.

A third weakness is the claim that group behaviours may not reflect individual behaviours. In this case, the concern is that the opinions of an individual made during a one on one interview may be different than those expressed during group discussion. This would perhaps be more of a concern for those focus groups that were dealing with sensitive topics such as sex or race. In this case, it is doubtful that campaign websites incite any emotion strong enough to motivate individuals to be anything other than honest. In fact, at no point in any of the discussions, did anyone express discouragement or frustration at what was being discussed.

A fourth weakness is the relatively small size of the focus groups and the fact that most participants were from a similar geographical location. The concern is that because the sample sizes of focus groups are a fraction of the size of household surveys, they cannot be reliably used to generalize about the given topic. While this is a legitimate concern, the size and number of focus groups were subject to budget constraints. Another problem revolves around the fact that it is difficult to ensure that certain minorities are represented in the data set. In the case of this study, certain groups such as women, and visible minorities were under-represented and therefore unable to provide their perspective on the issues raised. When collecting and preparing the names of potential participants, an attempt was made to ensure that minorities were represented. However, budget constraints made it difficult to seek out and approach different minorities.

The groups were conducted at the University of Lethbridge during the first two weeks of April 2004. Recruitment of participants required the assistance of my friends and colleagues at the University of Lethbridge who provided names of individuals they

felt would be willing to participate. By utilizing a purposeful sampling technique, I was able to recruit twenty volunteers to fill three separate focus groups. The groups were held in a conference room on the University of Lethbridge campus and the participants spent roughly two hours discussing various topics related to their experiences with and opinions of political campaign websites.

Because my research funding would only allow three separate focus groups, the need to find insightful participants became a large priority. This unique situation meant that in order to ensure high quality discussions, a purposeful sampling technique would need to be employed. This required a modest survey to be administered to the potential participants prior to their involvement in order to gauge their level of Internet usage, political knowledge, and other personal information. Once the participants had completed the telephone survey, their answers were quickly codified and then placed on a spreadsheet to assess whether they would be invited to participate. Incidentally, none of the individuals who participated in the telephone survey were actually turned away due to their responses. This was because all participants met the minimum requirements of having at least some experience with using the Internet and they all expressed a willingness to discuss issues in a group environment. The telephone survey was simply a way to eliminate those individuals who had no experience using the Internet and those who were not willing to participate.

Using a standard audiocassette recorder, the discussions were recorded and each focus group was asked roughly the same series of questions. An attempt was made to let the participants fully explore each topic that was given to them and the moderator only interjected when he felt the group was either drifting too far off topic or when he felt the



topic had been thoroughly discussed. Due to the group dynamics and the unpredictable nature of the groups, questions were not asked in a linear fashion and if a particular question was explored in the process of answering another question, the moderator would avoid asking that question again. After the discussions were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed and coded thematically in order to identify specific patterns and motivations of the focus group participants. Those patterns and themes are summarized and analyzed through the many excerpts and quotations in the first half of this chapter. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used in all discussion excerpts and comments by the moderator are noted with the abbreviation "Mod."

When examining the demographics of the focus group participants closer, we can see according to the telephone survey given to the participants prior to the focus group discussions, that only one participant had not attended college or university. This represents a ninety-five percent education rate; significantly higher than the 33 percent average for Canadians (CDN 1986-2001 Census). Another limitation was that university students were significantly over represented in the data set. Ten out of the twenty participants (50 percent) were currently students at the University of Lethbridge. This large percentage of students also meant that a considerable portion of the participants were under the age of thirty. Thirteen of the participants were under the age of thirty, with the average age of the participants being thirty-one. Women were also underrepresented, as only six participants were female. The vast majority, eighteen out of the twenty participants used the Internet every day and the remaining two participants admitted to using the Internet several times a week.

When considering the high level of education amongst the participants, the high level of internet usage, the rather youthful age and the overrepresentation of men, one might conclude that these four groups of participants could not be considered representative of the general public and anything they might have to say would reflect a distorted view of campaign websites. However, in order for focus groups to be effective, the researcher must select participants based on the purpose of the study. This is because the researcher must seek out participants who have special knowledge or experiences that are helpful to the study. Therefore, in this research study I was looking for participants who were familiar with the Internet and were reasonably interested in political participation. In this case, random sampling of the general public would have been a waste of time and resources, as it would have likely produced groups of participants unprepared to discuss such topics. By choosing an educated and youthful group of participants with Internet experience, I was ensuring that each of the participants would have something valuable to say.

### ***Focus Group Results***

Much of the discussions during the focus group sessions centered on the two main actors involved with a campaign website - the candidate and the website user. Participants recognized that both these actors had distinct advantages and disadvantages when it came to using the Internet to accomplish their goals. When questioned about the specifics of these advantages and disadvantages, participants were effective in providing input into not only their own perspective as a website user, but also input into the candidate's perspective. The participants were also able to identify and discuss those

fundamental qualities they felt a successful campaign website should employ. A successful campaign website, according to many of the participants, was a website that struck a balance between the needs of the website user and the needs of the candidate. The following section outlines some of the major themes that were explored during the focus group discussions and details how these themes correlate between the distinct advantages and disadvantages associated with campaign websites for both the candidate and the website user.

### **Credibility**

Most of the focus group participants agreed that when assessing the character of a candidate for public office, credibility was high on their list for important factors to consider. The ability of the candidate to elicit strong feelings of trustworthiness and sincerity was important because, according to many of the participants, they would only vote for those candidates who they felt would uphold those qualities. The Internet however, poses some interesting challenges to those candidates who wish to use a campaign website to address the issue of credibility. The reason for this is simple; the Internet removes some of the important activities, such as, face to face interaction, which traditionally aid in providing the voter with some evidence that the candidate is a serious contender. Because, in most cases, the campaign website is a static representation of the candidate, the interested voter does not get a chance to see the candidate's personality first hand and must infer the quality and the credibility of the candidate from the limited resources available on the website. Therefore, candidates must use a number of different approaches on the website to establish and to reinforce their credibility.

Nearly all the focus groups participants were confident that the absence of an official campaign website would be detrimental to the overall credibility of the candidate or party. Participants also commented that candidates would be more likely to have a campaign website if other candidates running in the same race employed them. One participant mentioned, “the fact that you don’t have one says something about you” and described a candidate who had a campaign website as someone, “who is with the twenty first century.” In this case, being a candidate that was technologically savvy enough to have a website was an important trait for the candidate.

The focus group participants also stressed that the site content should be thorough and well written. According to the participants, poorly written copy that lacked depth would reflect poorly on the candidate in the eyes of the website user. One participant commented that weak content, “touches on your credibility” as a political contender. Credibility, according to many of the participants, was gained when candidates provided substantial website copy that was written to be highly readable on a computer screen and clearly stated the candidate’s positions on issues that were important to the individual voter.

The focus on credibility cropped up again when participants were discussing the importance of the visual appearance of a campaign website. Participants were quick to point out that visual appearance of the actual website was essential to their overall opinion of the candidate or the party:

*Mary:<sup>6</sup> It looks professional, it looks clean. Like you say, ok, these people know what they are doing.*

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<sup>6</sup> The names of the focus group participants have been changed.

*Mod: So Mary, are you saying that the website is a good indicator of the professionalism of the overall campaign, maybe even the party?*

*Mary: It may not be a reflection, but people will interpret it as such. They'll think that if you spend money to have a good website, you want to be professional. Like if we go to ...*

*Mod: You'll be taken seriously.*

*Mary: Ya, it doesn't mean that they are not serious, but often perception is often the reality and yet the site has to look like you're a top notch candidate.*

*Bill: It extends credibility.*

Similar to not having a campaign website, according to the participants, the candidate's credibility is challenged when the candidate fails to provide a campaign website that appears to be professional. In this case, participants agreed that having a campaign website that was visually appealing and professionally designed was an important feature for an effective campaign website. The comment that "people will interpret" a poorly designed website as being a measure of the "seriousness" of the candidate is important because it indicates that potential supporters take things such as the overall quality of the website into consideration. It also indicates that website users appreciate that you have to "spend money to have a good website". Unfortunately, there were no specific comments on what the participants actually thought was attractive other than simplistic statements like, website should be "colourful and attractive", "appealing to the eye" or "pretty".

Participants also discussed the view that an in-depth and informative campaign website would reflect positively on the candidate. Credibility, according to the discussions, was directly tied to whether candidates provided substantial policy and issue information directly on the campaign website. According to one participant, the website should provide detailed overviews of important issues and plenty of links to in-depth

information because, “you don’t want your website to be surface.” Many of the participants stressed that the purpose of a campaign website is to disseminate “clear” and easily readable information to potential voters and interested web users.

The idea of providing substantial policy and issue statements was cautioned by one participant who felt that some restrictions should be placed on what is stated on the website:

*Steven: I would make sure that we are not writing cheques that our body can’t cash if our party got elected - because those things can come back to bite you.*

The participant’s comment, “writing cheques that our body can’t cash” is a warning that candidates should avoid making statements or promises that they do not intend to honour or will not be able to honour if elected. Other participants agreed it might be prudent to avoid publishing untrue and or unrealistic content on the website. One participant responded that this was in fact a “reassuring thing” for website visitors,

*Hanna: [The] Internet offers its own checks and balances through what we were talking about before about... how there are archives. Because it is right there, you can go back and throw it in their face if they are not credible.*

Participants seemed to understand that once something was published on the Internet, that it could be difficult to retract. By publishing their policies live on the Internet, the ability of the candidate or the party to claim that any of their policies were misquoted or misrepresented would become difficult.

Participants also pointed out that if voters use the Internet to research political parties and their candidates, they would need to be wary of certain individual’s ability to spread “myths and mistruths and general mischief” on the Internet. Participants acknowledged that nearly “[anyone] can make a webpage”, and that because of this, some users may find it difficult to differentiate between “some guy in his basement

making a webpage” and a legitimate campaign website. In this case, credibility, according to many of the participants, would be attributed to those candidates who made it clear that their campaign website was indeed the official campaign website. How exactly the candidate could differentiate themselves from those other mischievous individuals was unfortunately not explored by the participants.

### **Facilitating Action**

Another theme identified as being advantageous to the voter and or candidate was the ability of the website to facilitate action. According to one researcher, the Internet and the accompanying intranets created by political parties are an important tool because not only is it an additional channel for the distribution of material and a medium for campaign management, but it also allows region-wide mobilization of the party supporters (Gibson and Römmele). Certain tasks such as volunteer signup, donor solicitation, voter mobilization, and internal party communication have been substantially simplified and their capabilities enlarged by the advent of Internet. The development of these Internet based tools help parties organize and manage their affairs more efficiently. One participant had this to say about using the website as an organizational tool:

*John: As an organizational tool, I think it is really effective in getting people that are interested in it, like you guys are saying, to become active in it. Because it is really easy to access it and if you're going there and you're already interested in it.*

This comment reflects the general consensus of many of the participants that the Internet could make it easier for individuals to “become active” in the campaign; particularly those who were already visiting the campaign website on a regular basis. This idea was further explored from the perspective of the candidate when some of the participants

mentioned that the campaign website could improve the candidate's ability to "increase the number of volunteers" available to the campaign team. This in turn could save the candidate money by allowing potential supporters to "sign up for the party" and "get involved" in the campaign directly by visiting the campaign website.

While most of the participants agreed that a campaign website would be an excellent means by which the candidate could mobilize support, both in terms of volunteers and donations, some participants did not feel the website would be effective in attracting undecided or the non-voting<sup>7</sup> public.

*Keith: I'm not saying that the conservative party won't be able to sign up people who don't already vote – they can do that. But I don't think that is what the Internet's big value is. I think that big value of the internet is getting people who are already conservative out there and organized on a campaign so that they can go out and persuade liberal voters or people who didn't vote in the past to vote conservative. I don't think the Internet itself gets those people, I think it takes people who already vote conservative and gets them to go out and do the leg work.*

Many participants agreed with Keith's assertion that a campaign website was capable of signing up and recruiting the undecided and non-voter groups, but its real strength lies in its ability to mobilize already existing support. When asked why the website might have difficulty recruiting the undecided and the non-voting groups, many participants mentioned the need for users to actively seek out campaign websites. Unlike passive participation when a voter sees a commercial promoting a political candidate or reads a brochure left on the door step by a volunteer, voters are responsible for seeking out a political party or candidate's website on their own volition. The active participation that is required of Internet users highlights an important question and the next major theme; are political parties simply preaching to the converted?

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<sup>7</sup> Non-voters refers to voters who are currently of age to vote, but have chosen, for whatever reason, not to vote.



## Preaching to the Converted

Browsing the Internet requires the user to become an active participant and the same goes for users who visit and interact with campaign websites. Unlike television, radio and other conventional forms of communication, the Internet relies on the individual to search out and request additional information. This requirement has caused some researchers to speculate whether campaign websites are simply attracting those users who already support the candidate. Pippa Norris in her paper, *Preaching to the Converted?*, wrote, “Among the electorate, campaign websites serve primarily to activate the active, rather than reaching the apathetic” (2). This theory has also been discussed by Bimber and Davis, in their book, *The Internet Comes of (Voting) Age*. Bimber and David wrote that campaigns “figure that voters' choices about which candidate to support would for the most part already have been made by the time they arrived at the site,” and therefore are nearly “always preaching to the converted” (qtd. in Lurie pars. 13).

When asked if the active participation required of Internet users meant only those website users that supported the candidate would be the ones actually visiting the campaign website, one participant had this to say:

*Mod: ...the fact that you have to seek [campaign websites] out, are they only preaching to the converted?*

*Jessie: I kind of agree with that actually, because it takes a little bit of effort to go on the Internet to look for a campaign website or a political party website. I mean you're really only going to do that if it's a school project or you're actually really interested.*

Other participants agreed that for the most part, a campaign website was indeed preaching to the converted or at least attracting, “people that are close enough that you

can swing their opinion.” When questioned further, many of the participants stated that it was unlikely that they would ever visit a campaign website of a party or a candidate they did not support. One participant commented that they would not have the “desire or the energy or time” to invest in researching another candidate or party; while another simply stated, “I really just don’t care and I’m not going to a website and say, oh hey, look a conservative - I’m going to be one.”

The investment of time and resources involved with researching the various positions of different candidates was considered to be the major reason why campaign websites only attracted those voters who already share the same views at the candidate. One participant complained that it was “difficult to find neutral information” related to issues that arose during a campaign. Because of this situation, voters would need to invest a considerable amount of time poring over “different viewpoints on every topic” in order to come to reasonable conclusion on an issue. This was not something that many of the participants felt was a reasonable expectation of the average voter.

Many participants did not consider the fact that the campaign websites were preaching to the converted to be a negative feature. According to many of the participants, the attraction of existing supporters to the campaign website meant that candidate would have access to a captive and willing audience. While the campaign website may be limited in its ability to attract and recruit new supporters online, it could provide existing supporters with the tools and the information to attract and recruit new supporter’s offline. One participant described it this way:

***Keith:** I think the real benefit of [a campaign website] is, finding people who agree with you already and getting them to become active in the party. A lot of people already vote for the conservative party, so it isn’t about getting more people to vote conservative through the website, it is about getting people who*

*already vote conservative to go out and help the campaign in its normal, more traditional type of campaigning - getting more people to sign up to help the party.*

## **Website Content**

Website content is one of the most important features of any campaign website. It would be difficult to have a successful and effective website – or any website for that matter - that did not contain a minimum level of meaningful content. During the focus group discussions, participants typically agreed that the more useful and interesting content the campaign website had, the more successful the website would be. The comments made by the participants relating to the content of a campaign website fell roughly into the following categories; writing format, currency of information, and clarity of the policy.

As was mentioned in the credibility section of this paper, according to the participants, the content of the campaign website needed to be thorough and well written. Participants stressed the website copy needed to be “specifically written for the web,” and it had to be laid out in such a manner that those wanting more information could easily find it. This according to the discussions meant that the website developers would need to separate the website content into shorter more straightforward paragraphs and utilize formatting features such as bulleted lists to highlight important passages and keywords. Participants also mentioned the importance of “providing archives” for users who were interested in “tunnelling down” through the websites content for more detailed information.

Another important feature relating to the website content mentioned during the discussions was the importance of keeping the information on the campaign website up to

date. Participants stressed that the information on the campaign website should be responsive to the issues and developments brought up during the campaign. The consequences of not keeping the campaign website updated and current was going to cause users to stop returning to the site; as described by one participant, “if people keep coming back to the same website - exactly the same every single day, and you never change anything on there, then they are not going to come back.”

When discussing the quality of the content on the website, participants were also confident that the candidate should provide “straightforward” policy and issue statements. They also stated that these statements should be customized towards those groups the candidate was trying to attract. If the candidate was trying to appeal to students, then he or she must provide policy positions on the issues that are relevant to a student, i.e. the “candidates stand on university funding” or “education issues.” Participants were aware that marketing the website to only one particular group could in turn alienate another group.

When the participants were asked whether this would be a problem for candidates, one participant had this to say,

*Mod: Do you see any problems with that, say if you had a specific strategy to appeal to younger voters – is it going to turn off older voters?*

*Jeff: There are a lot of people that are older that don't use [the] Internet at all. So how many people are you going to actually lose by putting a game on the website.*

In this case, the participant was referring to the use of a game on the campaign website as a way to possibly appeal to a younger generation. The participant also commented that the target audience of a campaign website should be the group that is the most likely to actually use the Internet. In this case, many of the participants were aware that Internet

usage was highly dependant on the age of the user, and it was the younger generation that was more likely to use the Internet. This suggestion however, was countered by another participant who cautioned against overuse of games and other entertainment:

***Brian:** And this is where you have to be careful with the fun and games. If you're sitting there and you've got games all across the front of your, whatever ... or cartoons all across the front of your webpage, people are going to be like, who is this guy?*

While some of the participants mentioned “fun and games” and “cartoons” as possible attractions for younger voters, others were weary about having too many things detract from the websites main goal. According to a couple participants, one excellent example of a website that employed a game was flyourflag.ca. Flyourflag.ca was a creation of the federal New Democratic Party, and was launched soon after Paul Martin become the leader of the federal Liberal Party. The site contained a contest that involved asking website visitors to choose which “flag of convenience” they thought Prime Minister Paul Martin should fly from the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill. The website was aimed at attacking Prime Minister Paul Martin for registering his former company’s shipping vessels under foreign “flags of convenience.” The site also provided the names of all the countries that Prime Minister Martin’s former shipping company sailed under, and provided some explanations of why these countries should not be considered a respectable place to do business. According to the participants, the satirical website was a fun way in which website users could be involved and educated on an issue the party felt was important.

While most participants expected a high level of tangible and consistent policy and issue statements on the campaign website, some participants were skeptical of whether a candidate should actually provide such information. The reason for this,

according to a number of participants, was because the campaign website was a “recruiting tool.” Therefore, candidates would want the website to “appeal” to broadest range of potential supporters. This meant that the simple act of trying to appeal to a broad range of supporters would require the candidate to avoid any controversial policy positions. Another participant commented that candidates would want to “avoid upsetting” potential supporters by “blending” their policies to the “right” or “left” of the political spectrum in an attempt to moderate their policies. In this way, some of the participants recognized that a certain level of ambiguity could enable the candidate to appeal to a broader range of potential supporters. This position, however, seemed to be at odds with some of the other participants’ insistence that candidates provide extensive policy positions.

### **Accessibility**

The Internet provides a unique way for candidates and parties to communicate with and attract supporters. This uniqueness, while certainly valuable to someone who understands and can correctly apply the technology, comes with its own set of difficulties. In the same way that television advertising can generally only reach those who own or watch television, a campaign website can only reach those who own a computer and actively use the Internet. This restriction is further compounded by the relative high cost of a computer and Internet access along with the requirement of the user to actively seek out the information on the Internet.

When the focus group discussions turned to accessibility, participants mentioned the importance of providing users with the ability to find information quickly and easily

regardless of their level of experience and expertise with using the Internet. Level of experience, according to the participants, was highly dependant on the age of the user. One participant described it is being a “generational” issue and was skeptical of whether campaign websites would be as effective to an older generation. Other participants saw this as an opportunity for campaign websites in the future. As one participant stated, “as the young people, who are approaching the age of majority, come into the voting pool - it’s going to be huge.” One participant provided a possible middle ground that would allow certain sections of the website to appeal to different potential supporters; by providing “archived content that is different, that is more up tempo, has games in it” for a more youthful crowd in one section, while providing “policy wonks” - those who are more interested in a more mature policy based approach – with their own section. As long as the website was, “consistent in its appeal” to different groups, the candidate’s website would attract potential supporters from different groups.

### **Website Promotion**

Simply building an attractive website and filling it with interesting and engaging campaign materials does not guarantee anyone will visit. Due to the unique nature of the Internet, candidates cannot build a website and expect people to visit. This is due, in part, to the fact that a website only truly exists in a virtual sense, and in order for a user to access it, they must actively search out and request the websites location through online services like search engines or directories. Whereas lawn signs, television, radio and print advertising all allow someone to inadvertently stumble across an advertisement, a website can remain isolated if not publicized effectively.

When discussing how a candidate might encourage potential supporters to visit a campaign website, one participant had this to say:

*Henry: The web is a wonderful tool; the only problem is that you've got to get people there. Which means you ultimately put up a billboard or put an ad in a magazine or run it on a radio, or whatever. Because people need to be driven to the website and that is where your advertising in non-internet media kicks in.*

Other participants agreed that in order to “get the word out” about a campaign website, candidates will need to utilize “other mediums such as television and radio.” By directly linking the campaign website to advertisements on the television, radio and print media, candidate could encourage potential supporters to visit the website if they had any questions or wanted to follow-up for more details. According to one participant, “even if [the candidate] had enough money to buy all the advertising they want, they are limited by time or space constraints in a newspaper article or on TV or radio”. Therefore, by providing the website’s Universal Resource Locator (URL) in the advertising, the candidate can increase the chance that potential supporters will visit the website and will learn more about his or her policies. Many of the participants were actually surprised that candidates had not included the URL on lawn signs and campaign advertisements in past elections.

When discussing the lack of exposure for the website in the conventional media, one participant was surprised that they had never seen any online campaign advertisements. The participant commented that while he was an experienced “web surfer,” he had yet to see any “pop up ads” or “audio ads” that encouraged him to visit the campaign website of a candidate. In this case, the “pop up” ad described by the participant is an advertisement that is located in a browser window and which pops up



inadvertently when the web user visits a particular website. An “audio ad,” according to the same participant was an advertisement that delivered their message through “your speakers” on the computer. The topic of pop-up advertisements and other forms of online advertising went relatively unexplored, and when participants were further questioned about other methods of publicizing a campaign website, participants neglected to explore this topic further.

### **Website Domains**

Perhaps one of the more unexpected comments made by the participants during the discussions was their observations about the use of domain names for campaign websites. A domain name is a unique name of a computer on the Internet that allows it to be distinguished from other systems on the Internet. If one were to make an analogy, a domain name is basically the online equivalent of a street name. The domain name assists the Internet user in finding the campaign website amongst the maze of other websites on the Internet. The domain name can be a name, word or phrase (or a combination of all three) and in the case of campaign websites, it is often the name of the candidate or the political party.

The topic of domain names sprang up during a discussion of the Conservative Party of Canada leadership race between Stephen Harper, Belinda Stronach, and Tony Clement. Most of the participants remembered certain details from the race, and a few of the participants had even visited the campaign websites of the each of the candidates. Much of the discussion centred on the particular wording of the leadership candidates’ domain names. For example, Belinda Stronach, a relative newcomer to politics and the

Conservative Party, choose to use only her first name for her domain name – Belinda.ca. Tony Clement, a former Ontario Progressive Conservative cabinet minister, choose to use his full name as his domain name – Tonyclement.com. Stephen Harper, former leader of the Canadian Alliance, chose to use a phrase, *One Conservative Voice*, as his campaign website domain name – oneconservativevoice.com.

When the participants were asked which domain strategy appealed to them and why, many of the participants explained that the domain name should be “short”, “catchy” and “[easy] to remember”. They also stressed that the choice of whether to use the candidate’s name as the domain or a meaningful phrase associated with the candidate or the campaign depended on a number of important factors. These factors, according to many of the participants, depended largely on what type of election race the candidate was running in and what type of strategy the campaign was using to promote the candidate. According to the discussions, the use of the candidate’s name was a strategy for a candidate who wanted the website user to identify the website directly with the candidate. In this case, the domains of both Belinda Stronach and Tony Clement would fall into this category. One participant claimed that because both Belinda Stronach and Tony Clement were relatively new to federal politics and were “promoting themselves as challengers” to Stephen Harper, they would need to encourage the website user to identify the website with them personally. Stephen Harper on the other hand, had a relatively high profile both nationally and within the Conservative Party, therefore his central campaign theme of *One Conservative Voice* would be better suited as his domain name. There were some participants who felt that using a phrase rather than a name would only work if the phrase was publicized enough so that when people heard the

phrase, they would immediately associate it with the candidate or the party. In the case of Stephen Harper, many of the participants felt that using a phrase worked because it was a leadership race for a political party that had recently formed from the merger of two different conservative political parties.

Looking back on the results above, you can see that the participants provided a wide range of perspectives and were able to discuss the various advantages and disadvantages of having a campaign website for both the candidate and the individual voter. Considering that no visual examples of campaign websites were made available to the participants prior to or during the discussions, the depth and level of sophistication of their responses was certainly refreshing. The participants were able to break many of the fundamental qualities of a campaign website down and discuss them from the perspective of the individual voter and the party candidate. While the participants were certainly not exhaustive in the examination of campaign websites, they did provide some excellent comments to which we can analyze in the next chapter.

## **Analysis of 2004 Campaign Websites**

### ***Data and Methods***

The data for this section was collected during the 2004 federal election in Canada. Midway through the campaign, the websites of the major federal political parties were downloaded and archived so as to provide a digital snapshot of each of the websites as they existed during the campaign. The open source software, *HTTrack Website Copier* was used to download the publicly viewable sections of the campaign websites surveyed

in this research.<sup>8</sup> The data was archived to ensure that analysis could be conducted after the election period ended. The data in this section also borrows heavily from Tamara Small's chapter in the book, *The Canadian General Election of 2004*. The book, edited by Jon Pammett and Christopher Dornan, covers a variety of topics related to the 2004 federal election. Small's chapter, *The Internet and the 2004 Cyber-Campaign*, examines the websites of five major federal parties in the 2004 election and draws some conclusion as to the extent and the sophistication of online political campaigning in Canada during the 2004 election.

### ***Website Analysis Results***

As was detailed in the previous chapter on campaign history, the 2004 federal election in Canada was the first election in which the Internet played a serious role. While still lagging behind their counterparts in the United States, all of the major federal political parties in Canada attempted to use the Internet to their advantage during the campaign. Each of the political parties built a campaign website and used various other Internet technologies to augment and assist their conventional campaigns. The following section will analyze the campaign functions that were employed on the campaign websites of the Liberal Party, Conservative Party, New Democratic Party, and the Green Party. Due to a technical glitch with the website copier, the campaign website of the Bloc Quebecois was not downloaded and therefore could not be analyzed as thoroughly as the

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<sup>8</sup> The website copier function was only configured to download those sections of the website that could be viewed without registering and logging into the campaign website. As will be described in the following sections, certain campaign websites had the capability to provide additional information and features to those visitors who registered and were then provided with a unique username and password to access certain sections of the website. Those sections were still explored and analyzed, but backups were not made. Htrack can be downloaded for free from, <http://www.htrack.com>.

websites of the other federal parties. Whenever possible, Tamara Small's analysis is used for discussing the Bloc Quebecois use of the Internet during the campaign.

### **Party Platforms and Issue Statements**

The Internet is about communication, and in the case of the campaign website, one of the core functions is communicating information and ideas to the potential voter. Providing access to the candidates and or the parties' platforms and issue statements has always been an important strategy in both Canada and the United States. It is doubtful any candidate or party that did not provide such important materials would be successful. As was examined in the historical review of campaign websites in Canada and the United States in *Chapter Three*, many of the websites contained their party platforms and issue statements. In fact, party platforms and issue statements should be considered one of the more common elements of the modern campaign website. However, other than whether they are included in the website, it is important to note how the parties display these important sections on the website. Simply recording whether these campaign websites actually contain policy platforms and issue statements is no longer valuable. The question has now become, are they useful and accessible to the visitor?

All the political parties provided their campaign platforms directly on the website. The Bloc Quebecois and the Greens provided their policy platforms even before the election was called, while the Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic Party released their platforms shortly after they launched their platforms off-line (Small 211). The platforms were primarily provided in two formats, PDF and HTML and in a few cases, were accompanied by condensed versions of the platforms. The Green's platform section

of their website provided a number of different ways to access their policies. On top of providing their platform in the usual HTML and PDF formats, they provided a general overview of their policies, a thematically based breakdown of their policies, and a breakdown of their platform based on ten key themes. It appeared that the Greens were far more interested in using the website to publicize their policies than the other federal parties. The sheer amount of content and the multiple methods of presentation meant that visitors would be able to find a wide range of policies arranged and explained in a variety of ways. They also provided the user with the ability to rate each of their policies with a feature called, “Rank a Plank” – the details of this innovative feature will be discussed later in this chapter.

The other parties’ approaches to their platforms were certainly more subdued. The Conservative, Liberal, New Democratic Party and the Bloc Quebecois all failed to provide anything close to what the Green Party provided. In all four cases, the platforms were provided in roughly the same way their platforms were laid out in the PDF versions. They all provided a table of contents and a link to the appropriate sections of their platforms, but failed to provide any additional resources or explanations. With the exception of the New Democratic Party – which provided a small list outlining their eight policy commitments - there was no attempt to provide additional overviews or detailed explanations of their policies outside of what was contained inside the policy platform. This would likely be considered a disappointment to those voters who visited the website looking for a more detailed explanation of a specific policy in the platform or were looking for the party’s position on an issue that was not contained in the platform.

When dealing with the website section that outlined those issues important to the party, all the parties except the Liberals provided a list of issues. The Conservative Party outlined twenty key issues they wanted to focus on, but unfortunately only provided roughly two sentences per issue. The New Democrats were considerably more generous, providing more than thirty detailed PDF fact sheets directly on NDP.ca. They unfortunately only provided this information in PDF form, making it difficult for users who are, for whatever reason, unable to download a PDF. The Green Party also got into the act, by providing a section titled, “Green Values,” which outlined sixteen issue areas and further information on each area. The Bloc Quebecois had six extensive pages on issues, providing fact sheets, the party’s stance, and links to related websites (Small 212).

As you can see, none of the parties missed the opportunity to post their policy platforms directly on their website. In fact, many of the parties went out of their way to make sure that links to the party platform were highly visible on their homepage. However, there appeared to be little thought into how the policy platforms would fit into the overall site structure. Only the Green Party provided any substantial alternative to official party platform, and while a few of the other parties provided short fact sheets and issue pages, they did not link directly to the policy document and failed to provide any correlation between the two. This indicates a lack of vision in how the platform should be treated on the website and showed a lack of commitment to providing visitors with extensive background information.

## **Solicitation**

The lifeblood of any political party is the monetary contributions of its supporters. Without contributions, political parties would be severely limited in what they could accomplish. In the past, money was often sent to the campaign via the telephone or through the mail, making it a rather tedious and sometimes expensive endeavour. With the advent of the Internet, contributions could be given by credit card via the campaign website, making the funds accessible to the campaign nearly instantly after they were given. This represents a significant cost savings to the party and an important method in which political parties can raise more money with a smaller initial investment.

When examining the solicitation techniques of the parties during the 2004 election, one can see that every party attempted to raise donations on their campaign website. All the parties accepted credit cards online and provided the user with a secure donation form. The secure donation form encrypted the potential donor's information, particularly their credit card numbers, while being transmitted over the Internet. Two of the parties, the Conservative and the Green Party chose to send the potential visitor to a different web address to collect the donors' personal and financial information. In both cases, the design of the website located at the separate web address was similar to the original campaign website, but there were some small differences. In particular, the design of the websites located at the separate web addresses were scaled down versions of the main campaign website. Also, for the Conservative party, the root of the web address where the donation form resided was *magma.ca*, which was the domain of the company that was hosting the Conservative party's campaign website. The root of the



web address for the Green Party was *gifttool.com*. Gifttool.com was a third party credit card processor which was separate from their web host, Xeropolis.com.<sup>9</sup>

The location of the link to the donation forms varied for each of the campaign websites. For the Liberals, the donation link was located on the main left navigation bar and was clearly labelled, “Contribute.” They also had a link to the donation form in the footer of each page. The Conservatives had their donation button located on the top navigation bar, and it was labelled, “Donate.” They also had a button on the lower right hand sidebar that was labelled, “Make a Donation” and another link in the footer labelled, “Donations.” The New Democratic Party’s website also had a link to the donation form in their right sidebar titled, “Donate!” and provided another link in their Get Involved section of their website. The Greens placed their donation link in a highly visible area of the homepage – located in a box titled, “Get Involved!” and had another link located on the upper right hand side of the page in the Platform section of the campaign website.

It appears that soliciting donations on a campaign website has become as common as providing biographical and contact information. While we do not have the exact figures for how much was raised by each of the parties, we can assume that visitors were providing enough donations to make it worth including on future campaign websites – with the initial investment so low, even a few small donations would pay for the feature. Perhaps what was most interesting about the donation forms included on the five websites was the method used by the Conservatives and the New Democrats of sending the contributor to a separate website and domain to process the credit card. Considering the stigma of the Internet being an unsafe place to use your credit card is still prevalent

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<sup>9</sup> A Domain Name System (DNS) search during the campaign confirmed that conservative.ca was being hosted at Magma Communications. Email communications with the New Democratic Party on August 25, 2005 confirmed the web host for ndp.ca was Xeropolis.com.

amongst certain Internet users, it is doubtful that sending the user to a separate website (with a completely separate domain) would instill any confidence in the user about the security of the contribution.

### **Interactivity**

Interactivity, in many ways, is the defining feature of the Internet. While much of the Internet is dominated by websites filled with photos and text, the truly impressive websites are those that attempt to engage the user with some type of interaction. Defining exactly what interactivity is can be difficult. However, one researcher considered “the underlying quality that makes something interactive is whether there is feedback” (Stromer-Galley and Foot pars. 10). When the receiver (website user) takes on the role and becomes the sender, then feedback occurs and interactivity becomes possible.

The only interactive features common to all sites were the feedback form (the Green Party excluded<sup>10</sup>) and the email newsletter. All the parties seemed to take a different approach when it came to requesting additional information on the feedback forms. Whereas the Bloc Quebecois only asked for the email of the person sending the feedback, the Conservatives asked for the first and last name, city, e-email, telephone and postal code. The New Democratic Party asked for the same as the conservative minus the city of the person sending the feedback. The Liberal party lead the pack with the amount

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<sup>10</sup> Instead of a contact form, the Green Party provided an email link. While similar in the sense it provides the user with the ability to contact the campaign, it can be difficult for the user who is accessing the website from a public terminal. This is because when the user selects the email link, the link launches the default email client on the computer. If the user is indeed at a public terminal, the likelihood that the email client is configured properly to send and receive email for the user is low. In order for the user to send an email to a campaign that provides only an email link, the user must copy and paste the email link directly into a Internet based email service (e.g. Hotmail, Gmail, etc.), or they must write the email down until they are using their own properly configured Internet terminal - which may be more than a visitor is willing to do.

of information collected by asking for the first and last name, address, city, province, postal code, telephone, fax, and email address.

Signups for the email newsletters were also highly visible on the front pages of the campaign websites. Small reports that the Liberals lead the parties in the amount of newsletters that were sent out over the course of the campaign. According to her research, the Liberals sent out forty-one newsletters focused on topics such as, daily news releases, campaign stories, and the Prime Minister's upcoming events. The New Democratic Party followed next with seventeen mailings containing items such as, press releases, notices of new videos and photos from the campaign trail. Fourteen newsletters were sent out by the Green Party, with much of the info centred on campaign information and press releases. Next in line was the Bloc Québécois, which sent out thirteen newsletters, most of them originating from the youth wing of the party and containing info on upcoming events and multimedia messages from the party leader. The Conservatives were certainly the worst at sending out information via their newsletter, with only five newsletters being sent over the course of the campaign. The focus of these five mailings were centred on getting people motivated and involved in the campaign and soliciting donations.

The two most interactive features available during the campaign were provided by the Bloc Québécois and the Green Party. The Bloc provided the user with the ability to comment on campaign stories as they were posted on the campaign website. The "Réagissez" feature was modestly successful, as over 1000 comments were recorded on the site over the course of the campaign (Small 218). The next example was from the Green Party. The Green Party, in the spirit of "grassroots democracy", "engaging the

public” and doing “politics differently” provided users with the ability to debate and decide the parties actual platforms (Welcome to the Green Party). Through a feature titled, “Rank a Plank” the Green Party allowed users to give a thumb up or a thumb down to any plank of the official platform. According to the Greens, mid-way through the campaign, they had received over 57,000 votes (Small 219).

Interaction can be a difficult thing to achieve on a campaign website and this shown by the relative lack of interactive features available on many of the campaign websites. While the Bloc Québécois and the Green party both provided interesting interactive features, the other three parties seemed reluctant to venture too far into the give and take world of interactivity. The primary reason behind party’s reluctance to allow interactivity on a campaign website is the lack of control. A determined group of dissidents could potentially abuse any feature that allows users to submit comments or opinions to a website. This means any discussions, comments or inputs could be overwhelmed and manipulated to the point where the meaningful contributions are marginalized. However, neither the Green’s nor the Bloc Quebecois seemed affected by this concern over control and neither feature appeared to be the target for any abuse.

### **Volunteer and Engagement**

If money is the lifeblood of a political party, then volunteers are certainly the heart. Without the tireless support of those who donate their time and personal resources to the political party, the parties would not likely be able to function as they do now. Much of the party structure, from the national party campaigns, to the individual candidates running for local office, are staffed and supported by a large team of

volunteers who provide the party and the candidate with an invaluable amount of work. The Internet has the potential to provide the campaign with another avenue to recruit, mobilize and direct a large team of supporters and can transform a small under-staffed campaign into a much greater force.

Looking at the campaign website in 2004, we see that all the parties provided visitors to their campaign websites with the ability to donate their time to the campaign. Both the Liberals and the Conservatives dedicated a portion of their websites to highlighting the contributions made by their volunteers. The Conservatives featured a new volunteer profile for each page of their site, while the Liberals provided nineteen different volunteer profiles over the course of the campaign (Small 222). In both cases, the profiles contained the name of the volunteer, a small photo, and a brief caption. Interestingly enough, the Greens, like every other party during this campaign, provided a detailed HTML form to allow the potential volunteer to provide those details on themselves and how they would like to volunteer. It is puzzling why they would provide the HTML form for the collection of volunteer information but not for the purposes of communication directly with the campaign.

Providing visitors with the opportunity to actively campaign on behalf of the party was also a goal of a few campaign websites used during this election. By encouraging their supporters to use certain tools and functions of the website, the party could greatly expand the communication ability of the overall campaign. As was explained in chapter three of this paper, the viral campaign has been used extensively in the United States by certain high-profile candidates like Howard Dean. By making it easier for website visitors to pass on positive information about the campaign to their friends and family,

the campaign can build a network of supporters who will promote the party through person-to-person interaction.

One specific feature employed by some campaigns was the “send to friend” feature. This feature was used by the Conservative, Bloc, and Liberal parties. The Conservative “Refer a Friend” feature sent a simple text-based email to a friend of the user inviting them to visit the campaign website and encouraged them to get involved with the campaign (Small 223). The Bloc allowed users to send five graphically based e-postcards to friends. On the Liberals website, visitors could send any page of the website, including video clips, to their friends. The emails that were sent never contained the actual website pages or video clips, but rather the email contained a link to the appropriate page on the campaign website.

On day twenty-four of the campaign, the New Democratic Party launched the NDP e-Campaign. The e-Campaign was an attempt by the NDP to turn ordinary website visitors into party activists. In the same spirit of many of the viral campaign techniques attempted in the presidential campaigns down south, the NDP built a tool that would provide them with the ability to tap into the communication capabilities of its wide network of supporters. To use the e-Campaign, visitors were required to register on the site. After that was completed, they were able to use “simple web and email tools, [to] create and send messages to [the e-Campaigners] friends, family and colleagues, inviting them to join [the e-Campaigner] in supporting the NDP in the upcoming election” (Small 224). However, even this feature was not without its faults. The biggest drawback of the e-Campaign was the relative narrowness of its intended goals. If one wanted to be accurate, this feature should have been named, the “e-Fundraising” campaign, as the only

really function of the e-Campaign was to solicit donations from a supporter's network of friends and family. The NDP appeared to be missing an opportunity to turn motivated supporters into more than just online fundraisers. Even without changing the current feature set of the e-Campaign, the party could have provided additional information that would have assisted the e-Campaigners efforts in not only collecting donations, but also increasing memberships and knowledge about the NDP's platform and policies. This could have been done by providing the e-Campaigner with a list of talking points on the NDP platform, which could have been amended to suit the needs of the e-Campaigners network of family and friends. It could also mean providing the e-Campaigner with up to date campaign news and information that could be used by the e-Campaigner to initiate other helpful mobilizing activities such as, organizing get out the vote and membership drives. The idea here is to improve the communication link between the national party and its membership through the network of hardworking and resourceful volunteers.

Another interesting feature used by the New Democratic Party was the use of online digital paraphernalia. The feature, "web badges" allowed supporters to show their support of the NDP by placing a graphic that contains the NDP.ca logo on their personal website. The supporter would simply have to cut and paste some code provided on the campaign site into the code of their personal website and the graphic would become a digital version of the traditional yard-sign. The web badge linked back to the main NDP.ca website and provided the campaign website with additional traffic and visibility free of charge.

The Green party encouraged their supporters to perform certain campaign activities. Shortly after the campaign got underway, the Green's encouraged their

supporters to aid in the effort to include the Green Party's leader, Jim Harris, in the televised leadership debates. On May 30, a new section titled, "Green Party Excluded from Leader's Debate" appeared on the Green Party's homepage (Small 224). The section contained a short letter from Jim Harris addressed to the broadcasting consortium that outlined his reasons why he should be included and a list of things that Green Party supporters could do to help the cause. Supporters were encouraged to sign an online petition in support of Jim Harris's inclusion in the debate. They were also encouraged to email many of the television networks and pass a letter of support to their friends and family. While they were not successful with their campaign to get Harris on the televised debate, they were able to gather almost thirteen thousand signatures on a petition.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the Liberal campaign website we see that they included a section titled "Be Heard" and provided website visitors with the contact information of major media outlets across the country. Unfortunately, they failed to encourage the supporter to actually call or write the media outlets, instead simply implying that this would be helpful with the statement, "This election is important. The choice has never been more stark. Make sure your voice is heard." This poorly executed media campaign certainly contrasts to what has been done in the past during elections in the United States. One such example of a campaign website that encouraged its supporters to contact media outlets and speak positively about the candidate was the Media Corps section on John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign website. By providing a comprehensive guide, complete with writing examples and resources, the Kerry campaign was ensuring that the letter sent by their supporters would have a better chance of being published than those sent without the aid of the guides and resources.

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<sup>11</sup> To view the petition, visit: <http://www.petitiononline.com/6549875/petition.html>



As we can see from the above evidence, voter engagement and mobilization can be as easy as asking your supporters for their help in accomplishing a specific task. However, it can also be a difficult thing to achieve if the campaign is unwilling to allow the individual website users some degree of autonomy. In the case of the New Democrats e-Campaign, they were providing their supporters with a fair amount of autonomy to recruit, communicate with, and solicit campaign contributions from other New Democrats across the country. Many of the other parties seemed reluctant to provide their supporters with too much power.

### **Weblog Communication**

Weblogs, which have become an important communication tools for companies and individuals all over the world, would not make much of an appearance during the 2004 campaign. A weblog is an online publication consisting primarily of periodic articles posted in chronological order. Many weblogs also provide visitors with the ability to post comments below each posting, which can often lead to a community developing between the authors of the weblog and the commenters.<sup>12</sup> In the past couple of years, weblogging tools had been developed, providing the average person the ability to weblog without the knowledge of programming. In addition, the relatively low cost of operating a weblog coupled with the ability to communicate with a massive global audience, means what was once the domain of only the largest of the media outlets is now possible to nearly anyone with an internet connection and some time on their hands.

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<sup>12</sup> Commenter is a word for someone who comments on a weblog. Six Apart, a leading weblog publishing company, uses the word, commenter, repeatedly to describe someone who comments on a weblog on this guide to comment spam: [http://www.sixapart.com/pronet/comment\\_spam](http://www.sixapart.com/pronet/comment_spam)

The Conservatives attempted a weblog on their campaign website, but it was consistently underutilized and failed to employ most of the features generally associated with a modern weblog. Features such as Trackbacks or Pingbacks<sup>13</sup>, visitor comments, Blogrolls<sup>14</sup>, etc were all missing from the weblog. Although there was a weblog posting for each day of the campaign, the posting was written by an unnamed campaign staffer who never wrote more than a few generic lines about the day's activities. It was generally used to provide a quick synopsis of the leader's activities for each day of the campaign.

All the parties missed an opportunity to heighten the communication capabilities of their website by not providing a campaign weblog. The most recent example of a campaign website using a weblog was the leadership campaign for the Conservative party of Canada. Belinda Stronach – then a candidate for the conservative party – chose to use this innovative new technology on her personal campaign website, Belinda.ca. The weblog, combined with what some commentators called her “youthful, vibrant, [and] progressive image,” provided some positive reviews of her approach to campaigning (“Belinda Stronach” [Wikipedia](#)). In this case it would have been a wise decision for all the parties to maximize their exposure by appealing to those users who would find a weblog interesting and informative.

## **Multimedia**

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<sup>13</sup> Trackbacks and Pingbacks are a method used by weblog software to notify other weblogs when a link has been established between the two weblogs - specifically if a link was made between two weblog postings. This feature enables weblog authors to keep track of who is linking to, or referring to their articles.

<sup>14</sup> A Blogroll is a collect of links to other weblogs. Generally, Blogrolls are grouped together by subject or theme and are often displayed prominently on the front page of the weblog.

As more Internet users migrate towards broadband and more campaigns become aware of the Internet capabilities, you can expect the use of multimedia elements like flash animations, video footage, live web casts and other media rich components to take a stronger and more prominent role on the campaign website. This is because multimedia provides the campaign with another avenue in which they can communicate their message. It also has the potential of making the campaign website more engaging for the website user (Small 226). While the use of multimedia in the 2004 election was not nearly to the level that one would witness in a major national election in the United States, many of the parties did provide significant amounts of video, audio, and photo archives.

One of the most popular multimedia features was the campaign photo gallery. All the parties except the Conservatives provided a wide range of photos taken during the campaign and uploaded them to their campaign websites.<sup>15</sup> The New Democratic Party provided a long list of photos taken during the campaign, while the Liberals provided over a hundred photos in their gallery and an underutilized photo slideshow – it only contained four photos. Interestingly enough, the Bloc Quebecois provided individual website users the ability to not only view photos taken during the campaign but to also upload their own to the website. Surprisingly, Small reports that only one visitor took the time to submit their photo (Small 226).

Video footage was another popular feature among the parties. On the Conservatives homepage, the Conservative had a “Video of the Day” located on their homepage. The Video of the Day changed periodically through out the campaign and

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<sup>15</sup> The Conservative Party did post images from various events during the campaign on the sidebar of the campaign websites and provided some of its photos in its campaign coverage section of the website. However, they did not provide a photo gallery that contained all the photos in one place.

users were able to send a link to the video to their friends. The Liberals had twenty-four total videos in their “Video Footage” section of the websites, while the Bloc Quebecois provided over twenty-five videos (Small 227). The videos were various formats, with the New Democrats providing their videos in QuickTime, Windows Media, and RealPlayer, the Liberals provided, QuickTime and Windows Media, and finally, the Conservatives just offered Windows Media.

When reflecting on the amount and type of multimedia that was available on the campaign websites, there were a few problems to consider. The first one was with the Bloc Quebecois photo upload feature; one has to question the wisdom of allowing anonymous website visitors to upload their own photos. What would happen if someone were to upload a photo that was inappropriate? The Liberals photo gallery was also not without its faults. They provided a considerable amount of photos of Prime Minister Martin on the campaign trail; however, none of the photos had any captions. For most of the photos, it was nearly impossible to determine what exactly was important. One photo showed Prime Minister Martin in front of what looked like a demolished church – are voter to believe that if Prime Minister Martin was elected, he would tear down more churches? If that was not the message he was trying to send – and I doubt it was – it is hard to tell from the photo.

The Conservatives preference of placing a number of different photos on each of their pages on their website also caused considerable troubles with the actual downloading of the website. While the action shots of their leader Stephen Harper on the campaign trail among other photos posted on the website over the course of the campaign were not the only problem (poor design, and overuse of graphics were also to blame),

they certainly did not help. Understanding that a campaign website needs some degree of glitter, the website was unfortunately burdened by it. At one point in the campaign, the main page alone had over 104 separate images files totalling more than 313,268 bytes of data (or 2.39 megabits). That would mean it would take over a minute and a half to load on a 56k dialup modem. These large download times could mean that those visitors who lacked a high-speed broadband connection could have abandoned the website before it fully loaded.

## **Conclusions**

Looking back the 2004 federal campaign, we see that all the parties made a reasonable showing on the Internet. The New Democrats, with their e-Campaign feature, Greens with their Rank the Plank feature, and the Bloc Quebecois Réagissez feature, all tried something that was rather unique to political campaigning on the Internet in Canada. Each of these features was an attempt to reach out to their supporters and engage them directly in the campaign. The Liberals and the Conservatives, while lacking a definitive feature like those employed by the three previous examples, did provide reasonably effective campaign websites. Looking back at the party campaign websites created in 2000 campaign, we can see that the campaign websites employed during the 2004 election were certainly an improvement. However, looking at the campaign websites of the presidential and congressional candidates in the United States, we can easily say they still have a long ways to go.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **What Voters Want, What Campaigns Provide**

Looking at the results from *Chapter Four*, we can see that the greatest challenge to candidates who are interested in using a campaign website to appeal to supporters and potential voters was to strike a balance between the needs of the candidate and the needs of the voter. Participants made it very clear during the discussions that they expect certain things to be present on the website; things like thorough and precise policy and issue statements, detailed biographical information, volunteer and donation forms, cartoons and or games, dated archives, amongst many other important features. They also recognized that the site should be promoted and designed in such a manner as to cater to different voter demographics. According to the participants, different age groups were interested in different topics and features of the campaign website; therefore, it is in the best interest for the candidate to provide targeted website features and to facilitate the actions of each of these different groups.

Participants were also aware that some of the features they discussed as being important for the voter were not always in the best interest of the candidate. One example of this imbalance was brought up during the discussions on providing thorough and precise policy and issue statements. Some of the participants were skeptical of whether a candidate would provide clear-cut policy and issue statements because, as one participant explained, making a particularly decisive statement for a short-term goal could “come back to bite you in the long term.” In this case, that participant was arguing that if a candidate provided a principled position on an issue or a policy on their campaign website, it could cause a problem if in the long term the statement became a

liability to the candidate. Therefore, a certain level of ambiguity when considering the policy and issue statements made on the campaign websites could be in the best interest of the candidate.

Another example of the imbalance between the needs of the voter and the candidate was raised during the discussions on providing policy and issue statements on the campaign website. Many of the participants felt that it would be helpful if they could compare the candidate's positions on certain issues or policies with the other positions made by candidates running in the same election. Candidate comparisons would allow the individual website user to see exactly where each candidate in the election race stood on a specific issue or policy. This position, however, was not shared by all the participants. According to a few of the participants, if a candidate provided the names and the policy positions of his or her competitors, they were basically providing those competitors with "free advertising." Even if a candidate was critical of his or her competitors, it was still publicising their positions, and according to one participant; "all publicity is good publicity."

Applying the astute comments of the focus groups to the existing campaign websites reviewed in the latter half of *Chapter Four*, we begin to see more examples of the imbalance witnessed during the focus groups discussions. For example, many focus groups participants were certain that the target audience of the campaign website should be the candidates' or the political parties' existing supporters. This was repeatedly mentioned as an important factor because many of the participants felt it was unlikely that a voter who did not already support a candidate would visit the website of that candidate. The participants considered this "preaching to the converted" situation to be

to the advantage of the candidate, as they could use this “captive audience” to increase the mobilization potential of the conventional campaign. The participants also mentioned that campaign websites should concentrate their efforts towards mobilizing existing supporters online to aid in the efforts of recruiting and mobilizing offline supporters. However, as witnessed in the latter half of *Chapter Four*, the target audience for the federal parties appeared to be the undecided voter - or at least there was some confusion as to what should have been the target audience. Other than the send to a friend feature and the volunteer submission forms, there was only one example of a feature that attempted to mobilize existing support online. As was described in the previous chapter, the New Democrat’s e-Campaign provided individual New Democratic supporters with the ability to organize and launch their own personal fundraising drive for the party.

The Green Party did attempt to engage their supporters directly on their campaign website with their Rank the Plank feature. However, this feature failed to turn a potential supporter’s enthusiasm into something particularly helpful for the campaign. Asking website visitors to rank the parties official party platforms is a rather unusual undertaking considering the feature was employed during an election campaign. Assuming the election period is a time to promote your policies, not highlight the unfavourable ones; this interactive and engaging feature may in fact have contributed to some ambiguity related to their policies. It was also fairly susceptible to abuse from those website visitors who were not party supporters and were simply ranking policies in an attempt to distort the results. We should also consider the fact that at no time during the discussions did focus group participants consider it important that they have the ability to rank a party’s policies.



Looking back at the results, did the 2004 election campaign websites provide what many of the focus groups participants mentioned as important? Considering the participants overwhelming agreement on the need to see thorough and concise policy and issue statements, most of the parties fell considerably short. Only the Green Party provided anything close to the level of detail and multiple levels of access that was asked for in the focus groups. The rest of the parties seemed content to upload their policy platforms in PDF format and forget the matter completely. In terms of donation and volunteers forms, all of the parties provided the minimum to their visitors. Only the New Democrat's went out of their way to create features (e-Badges and the e-Campaign) that encouraged the visitor to take some initiative and campaign on behalf of the party. The Liberals also balked at their attempt to engage their supporters to promote the party through the various media outlets with their "Be Heard" section of their website. The lack of instructions in the "Be Heard" section leaves the impression that they apparently understand the concept of encouraging their supporters to participate in the dissemination of positive information, but failed to follow through completely with the feature.

This lack of "following through" is a good explanation for much of what occurred on the Internet during the 2004 election. Whether it was the Conservatives under-utilized weblog, the New Democrat's late arriving e-Campaign, the Liberals lack of encouragement related to their "Be Heard" media section or the Green's over-ambitious Rank a Plank policy experiment, each of the political parties' attempts to offer the website user with something interesting and engaging was weakened by their failure to follow through with the feature. In most cases the campaign website features appeared under-developed and disconnected from the actual campaign. Perhaps if the parties

would have understood the potential of these features, they would have been able to achieve great success online.

For the Conservatives, this means realizing the challenge for a newly formed political party is communicating their policies in a way that is easily understood and direct. The weblog should have been the logical method to not only announce the policies of the new party, but to also pull together all of the important information that the party was trying to communicate to its supporters. It also could have been an effective responder to the many rumours and conjecture that was being spread by the party's opponents. The so called, "hidden agenda" attacks that centered on the idea that the Conservatives were not being entirely forthcoming in their agenda for the country was used by many in the media and in the other parties to attack and criticise the Conservatives policies ([ctv.ca](http://ctv.ca) pars. 1). The lack of thorough policy and issue statements on their website did little to silence those who used this particular type of attack and in some cases may have actually confirmed this belief in some website visitors. Remember, credibility for many of the focus group participants was "gained when candidates provided substantial website copy that was written in such a way as to be highly readable on a computer screen and clearly stated the candidate's positions on issues that were important to the individual voter." The Conservatives failed to provide what would be considered "substantial website copy" and lacked a "highly readable" format for the copy that was actually displayed on the website.

For the New Democrats, the e-Campaign was the closest any party has come to duplicating some of the viral capabilities often exhibited in many of the campaigns engineered down south. However, the New Democrat's underestimated the potential of

their supporters. If you are going to give the keys to the fundraising engine to your supporters, at least make sure they are aware of its power. Providing supporters with detailed information on how they might go about recruiting more members and soliciting donations – or even allowing them to share and exchange ideas about specific techniques – would without a doubt provide far more memberships and donations than if they left the e-Campaigner to figure it out themselves. The focus groups participants were certain that campaign websites should provide supporters with the ability to “get involved” and to aid in the campaign. The New Democrats had achieved the hardest part; they had built the infrastructure to allow such interaction and engagement, they simply failed to provide the supporter with everything they would need to make this feature a success.

In the case of the Green Party, they failed to make their innovative ranking feature applicable to the task of campaigning. The feature attracted considerable attention with over 57,000 votes being recorded, but unfortunately there was very little interaction and engagement once the user had completed the ranking. Besides recording 57,000 votes, the feature did little to encourage the visitors to “get involved” with the campaign. Perhaps linking the ranking feature with a more inclusive registration process might have yielded a response that accomplished more than just anonymous ranking. Requiring users to register their name and email address before being able to rank a policy might have also eliminated a lot of the non-supporter distorting of the results and would have given the Green party a massive list of Green Party supporters. That list, which would likely be populated with motivated Green party supporters, could then be used to mobilize other supporters both online and offline. Realistically, the Rank a Plank feature was an excellent way to attract and retain existing supporters. However, if the party

would have considered other ways in which they could use the feature to assist the mobilizing, soliciting and communication capabilities of the campaign, they may have found that the end results would have been more rewarding than simply ranking policies.

In the end, none of the political parties provided everything that the focus group participants wanted. However, as a group they did fairly well. If one were to take the mobilizing e-Campaign feature of the NDP, the thorough policy and issue explanations of the Green Party, the campaign weblog of the Conservatives, the Be Heard engagement feature of the Liberals and the Réagissez feedback feature from the Bloc Québécois, and mixed it together with the core fundamentals of a modern campaign website (biographies, volunteer and donation forms, etc.), you would certainly have something close to what many focus group participants wanted. However, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, there may be justifiable reasons for this imbalance between what is wanted and what was provided. It maybe the case that a well funded and well intentioned campaign may choose to avoid certain website features.

### **Reasons for the Imbalance**

We know from the evidence gathered in this paper that many of the focus group participants wanted a campaign website that was more engaging in terms of content and that could be used to channel the efforts of a party's existing support. We can also see from the results above and in *Chapter Four*, the many of the parties during the 2004 election either failed to provide these sought after characteristics, or chose to downplay both the content and mobilizing features. The reason for this imbalance between what is wanted and what is provided can possibly be attributed to three factors.

First: The individual voter and the political party may in fact have different goals on the Internet. While it may be in the best interest of the voter to have as much information at their finger tips in order to allow them to make the best decision on Election Day, the party may benefit from limiting the type and amount of information that the voter has access to. For example, a policy may be more popular and appealing in one region over another region. In this case, it may be in the best interest of the party to play down this specific policy in the region where it is unpopular, and play up the policy in the region where it is popular. The Internet, much like television and radio, is a technology that appeals to those communication strategies with a pan-Canadian message. Whatever the party chooses to place on the campaign website to appeal to residents of Vancouver, must also be reasonably acceptable to residents of Halifax, as residents of both cities will have the same opportunity to view those regionally specific materials. Therefore, political parties may be reluctant to use the campaign websites to publicize regional specific policies and may choose to display only those policies and issues which are complimentary to their pan-Canadian message.

As reported in *Chapter Four*, and briefly discussed in the first part of this chapter, the idea of withholding or limiting the amount of definitive policy and issue statements was also discussed by the focus groups. The participants recognized that a certain amount of ambiguity would be advantageous to the candidate, particularly if they were stating on the website what they, the candidate, would do if elected. On the surface, it appears they are advocating the practice of limiting the amount and the extent of the policy and issue statements on a campaign website. However, the discussions in the groups focused on the point that candidates should not commit to policies “they do not

intend to honour or will not be able to honour if elected.” This is considerably different than the candidate or the party intentionally withholding policy and issue statements in an attempt to remain completely ambiguous. The focus groups participants recognized the advantages of a candidate or party not committing to a policy position that was unrealistic; however they still demand a reasonable amount of policy and issue statements.

These different goals could also mean that political parties may have had different target audiences for their websites. Small, Taras and Danchuk in their paper, *From Electronic Brochures to E-campaigning: Party Web Sites during the 2004 Canadian Federal Election*, described the campaigns websites used during the 2004 election as becoming, “multi-media platforms that were used both to showcase their parties to the general public and send customized messages to targeted audiences” (23). Each of the party’s website designs and strategies, as was described in *Chapter Four*, could have been the result of an attempt to speak to a certain target audience.

Second: The short writ period and lack of pre-election preparation time in Canadian Federal politics due to the instability of Parliament and or ability of the Prime Minister to dissolve Parliament, means political parties simply do not get enough notice or lead time to properly prepare their Internet campaigns. As was mentioned in *Chapter Four* as one of the reasons for the lack of research in the area of political campaigning on the Internet, political parties just like researchers often have a difficult time accurately determining the date of the next election. This means that some political parties will inevitably be unprepared, both in terms of resources and cash, to properly build a professional campaign when the writ is dropped. While it may be true that not all federal

elections are surprises, this potential for unpredictability still represents a major challenge for all political parties.

In the United States, the preset election schedule makes it rather easy for campaigners to prepare for the coming elections. In fact, most campaigns launch months, and in some cases years, before the “official” campaign period begins. This means most campaign apparatuses are built, tested and re-tooled, before being launched. Campaigns can also build momentum up as they approach the election deadline and can plan the complex logistics of a physical and Internet campaign with an eye on Election Day. This planning allows the campaign to maximize their returns and minimize the amount of surprises that can occur during the campaign. In Canada, this level of foresight and planning is difficult to arrange and finance as it could mean that a campaign could sit idle for months, possibly even years, waiting for the moment in which it can be launched. This also means that the same campaign could be caught completely unprepared with a quick election call, leaving it no choice but to campaign without a solid plan on how to win the election.

This lack of prep time means political parties in Canada must devise an Internet campaign strategy that is flexible enough to allow a quick launch. The relative speed in which the parties were able to launch their websites in 2004 gives some indication to the preparedness of the campaigns in 2004. However, the fact that certain features were either launch late in the campaign (the NDP e-Campaign), or were significantly under-developed (the Liberal’s Be Heard section), lends some creditability to the position that many of the parties were not as prepared for the campaign as they would have like.

Third: The lack of research on the effectiveness of Internet campaigning in Canada means there is very little evidence to make the case for increasing the amount of investment into the Internet made by the parties. Simply put, why would parties invest in an unproven technology? While there is a great deal of evidence and examples of successful research available on Internet campaigning in the United States, not all conclusions reached from those studies can be directly applied to the Canadian model. The differences in political systems, campaign financing, political culture, among many others, make it difficult to apply any lessons or conclusions between the two countries. Simply deconstructing the American Internet campaign experience and then applying what works and what does not work to Canadian elections may not necessarily provide a positive result. Or perhaps it would. We simply do not know what the result would be of such an experiment.

This lack of evidence means those party campaigners who favour an increased role for the Internet face a rather difficult fight if they cannot prove how a campaign website will be advantageous to the candidate and or party. While the argument can often be made that just having a simple website cannot hurt the campaign, it becomes particularly difficult for those same campaigners to convince the candidate or the party to undertake a website feature that requires considerable amount of resources and cash. While the cost of launching and maintaining a campaign website can be kept to a reasonable level if those involved with the campaign are familiar with the technology and can provide some degree of technical support, however, any advanced features would likely require outsourcing of the development and maintenance of the site. Convincing cash strapped campaign team to undertake an unproven and expensive feature, while



there are other time-tested conventional campaign techniques already available, could be an insurmountable barrier.

This unfortunately could mean that only those parties that can afford to invest in such unproven technologies will be the ones incorporating them into their campaigns. This reality is particularly striking for minor parties who may not have access to the resources of the major parties. Minor parties, as was discussed in *Chapter Two*, have often been considered to be at a disadvantage compared to major parties, considering the relative costs of the modern campaign. The Internet, claimed many cyber-optimists, has the potential to balance out the inequality in communication capability between major and minor parties. However, when examining the websites of the parties competing in the 2004 election, it would be difficult for someone who was unfamiliar with the status of the five parties to definitively select which ones were in fact major and which were the minor parties. In this case, all the parties built campaign websites that were close in form and function. However, only the New Democrats and the Green Party choose to implement innovative features and the traditionally dominate (in terms of seat share in the House of Commons and popular vote), Conservatives and Liberals choose to proceed with a more “conservative” approach to internet campaigning.<sup>16</sup> This may indicate a willingness on behalf of those parties unlikely to obtain governing status to embrace innovative and experimental website features.

Considering the findings from *Chapter Four*, we can certainly expect to see campaign websites continue to grow in importance. This growth however seems to be

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<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to make the case that the New Democrats is a minor party in the same sense that one can call the Green Party a minor party. The New Democrats have historically occupied a minor position in terms of seat share and popular vote relative to the Conservatives and the Liberals. Considering the Green party only recently achieved a 4.31% in the 2004 federal election, and previous elections was never able to achieve anything better than 0.81% of the popular vote, they will be considered a minor party.

handicapped by certain factors relating to the unique, and often conflicting, needs of the candidate and the voter. The growth also appears to be slowed by the limitations imposed by the parliamentary system in Canada. Whether political parties and their candidates are able to overcome these obstacles and eventually provide a campaign website that provides what the focus groups participants wanted is a difficult question to answer. However, it will be a question that Canadian researchers will hopefully be able to answer in the future.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

### The Future of Internet Campaigning

In the future, any party choosing to ignore or under-utilize the Internet will do so at their own peril. Much like radio and television before it, the importance of the Internet will continue to rise to the point where it will become a common fixture in the campaigns of all the political parties and nearly all levels of government. The Internet stands to not only compete for campaigns resources and attention with traditional medias like print, radio and television, but it has the potential to overcome these technologies in terms of importance to the overall campaign. As was described in *Chapter Three*, the functions of the modern campaign website mirror the functions of the modern campaign. As certain functions of the campaign are moved to the Internet the line between the Internet campaign and the physical campaign will become blurred. One example of this would be a campaign that chooses to accept donations only through their campaign website. Rather than renting and being responsible for a manual credit card machine (and incurring the costs of such a machine, rental of an additional phone line, bank merchant account charges, etc), the campaign could refer all inquires for donations to their online credit card submission form. In fact, the campaign could use the online donation form for all credit card donations provided either in the campaign office (via the telephone or in person) or on the campaign trail. The only change that would occur is that instead of running credit cards through a machine in the office, the online submission form would be used.<sup>17</sup> This also represents an opportunity for campaigns to collect contributions

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<sup>17</sup> While there are costs involved with accepting donations through an online payment gateway, they are generally smaller due to lower overhead costs. Typically, online payment gateways charge a small

through alternative electronic payments methods (PayPal<sup>18</sup> for example) and could greatly expand the ways in which donors could contribute.

Done properly, these alternative methods of collecting donations could mean that the campaign would incur lower processing costs and could provide the campaign with the contributed funds immediately. It also means the distinction between funds collected through the online campaign, and those collected through traditional (off-line) methods would become blurred, as all donations would flow through the campaign website. This example illustrates the importance of the Internet to future campaigns. It also illustrates a change in the way a campaign will approach certain campaign functions in the future.

What this means for actual political campaign is still relatively unknown. However, this blurring of the Internet and physical campaign will only increase when the younger generations – those youngsters that grew up with the Internet – reach voting age. The Internet campaign may in fact become synonymous with the actual campaign.

### **Looking Back at the Research**

Looking back at the above paper, we can see that I attempted to examine the use of the Internet by voters and political parties during an election campaign. In *Chapter One*, I provided a backgrounder on the past research studies concerning the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on the political process. From there, I was able to concluded that American and Canadian researchers (although mostly American researchers) have conducted research on the impact of the Internet on political

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transaction fee and a percentage of the overall transaction. For example, PayPal charges 1.9% - 2.9% of the total plus \$0.30 USD per transaction. The sender of the contribution is not charged, only the receiver.

<sup>18</sup> PayPal allows users to transfer money between email users and merchants without the need for credit-cards, cheques, or money orders. For more information visit: <http://www.paypal.com>

participation and the consequences this might have on the digital divide. Canadian researchers, as we saw in *Chapter Two* and *Chapter Three*, have unfortunately not been as diligent as their American counter-parts in examining the broader implications of this new technology on political participation. After highlighting some of the leading research in this area, I then turned to the issue of how technology has impacted the organizational structures of political parties in Canada. It seems that while the impact of the Internet has been under-researched, the impact of its technological precursors, television and radio, have not. We can appreciate that while the Internet certainly has the potential to be a revolutionary force; its overall impact on Canadian political system is still somewhat unknown. From this chapter I concluded that research on the Internet's impact on political participation, particularly in Canada, has a long way to go before anyone can definitely answer the question of whether the Internet has any a measurable impact on electoral results in Canada.

In the next chapter, I focused more closely on the actual campaign website. After describing what a typical campaign website was, I claimed that the unique aspect of a campaign website was that its core functions mirror the core functions of the modern election campaign. The functions, mobilization, solicitation, and communication can all theoretically be achieved through the proper use of a campaign website. After tackling the specifics of each campaign function, the history of campaign websites in both the United States and in Canada was described. The campaign website history provided further evidence of the lack of research on and implementation of the Internet during Canadian political campaigns. Some of the reasons for studying campaign websites and the problems that have plagued past research were also outlined.

Following that, I analysed voter opinions and motivations towards campaign websites and then compared those results to actual campaign websites used during the 2004 federal election. Through this analysis, I concluded that while the participants wanted a campaign website that provided thorough and concise policy and issue statements and which mobilized current supporters easily, most of the campaign websites were characterized as having a more “conservative” approach. Other than a few isolated features, the party websites lacked any engaging and mobilizing functions. Those features the websites did have, failed to turn motivated visitors into useful online campaigners. Considering the results from *Chapter Four*, all the federal parties could have been given a passing grade for providing the standard campaign website functionality (biographies, simple policy statements, contact and volunteer forms, etc), but nearly all the websites fell short in terms of mobilizing and engaging features.

In the first half of the Discussions Chapter, I examined the imbalance that existed between what the focus group participant wanted and what the political parties actually provided. The imbalance generally centered on the previously mentioned issue of website content and the mobilizing function of the campaign website. The focus group participants were clear they wanted thorough website copy and they felt the real strength of a campaign website was in its ability to mobilize existing supporters. A few examples were given for some ways in which the campaigns could have improved the websites. Attention was given to those website features that already existed on the websites but were under-utilized and poorly executed.

This study attempted to unravel some of the differences and inconsistencies between the two main actors involved with a campaign website - the candidate (or the

party) and the website user. The focus groups did a reasonably good job of representing the needs and wants of the voter, and the analysis of the campaign websites provided an examination of how the political parties during the 2004 election were conducting their online campaigns. While there were some website features that the focus groups participants would likely have considered attractive and beneficial, there were also some glaring holes in terms of what the participants wanted. The reasons provided at the end of *Chapter Five* are only the tip of the “iceberg” in terms of an examination about why these inconsistencies exist. It will take more research to provide a clearer picture of the extent and the reasons for these inconsistencies.

### **The Next Step in the Research**

This particular study did a good job of allowing voters to vent their frustrations about campaign websites and to provide some ideas of what they would like to see on a campaign website. However, there are a few questions that arise from this research.

The first question is, “How specific do we expect the observations of focus groups discussions to be?” Considering the results of the focus groups most of the participant’s comments lacked detail when discussing the features they wanted on a campaign website. The reason for this lack of detail is that the original aim of this research was to examine voter’s insights and opinions on campaigning on the Internet, not to examine the specific features of a campaign website. Therefore, it would be interesting to report what the participants would comment if they were asked to focus their discussions on specific functions and features of a campaign website. Perhaps a series of focus groups

specifically on each of the three functions of a campaign websites as outlined in *Chapter Three*.

The second question to arise from the research is, “Would the participant’s conclusions have been any different if they had been given some examples of campaign websites to view?” Would this have been helpful? The participants might have some interesting things to say about whether they would use a feature like the New Democrat’s e-Campaign. They might also suggest some ways in which specific features it could be made more user-friendly. By providing a campaign websites for the participants to discuss, it would allow the groups to examine the merits of a campaign website and would allow them to settle on which features they felt were more attractive and which accomplished their particular goals online.

The third question is, “Would separate focus groups form different demographics produce different results?” The fact that groups were predominately young, male and educated meant that certain segments of the popular were under represented. Expanding the dataset so that it closely represents the current population might provide results which could address some of the issues relating to the digital divide. It would be particularly interesting if the participants could be separated into their respective age groups. The results of each age group could then be compared and conclusions could be drawn between the different needs and wants of each group. Comparing the next generation of potential voters with the current generation would be particularly helpful in gauging the importance of the Internet to future campaigns. It could also provide some indication of whether campaigns are ready to meet the needs of the future voter.



The fourth question is, “What would a group of campaign organizers have to say on this topic?” As was reported in *Chapter Two*, there have been few studies that have involved discussions with managers and directors of political campaigns. Any results from this type of research would be invaluable in terms of collecting information about the challenges of the Internet from the perspective of the candidate and the campaign team. It is difficult to draw any conclusions about the motivations of a campaign on the Internet without first talking with those who are conducting the campaign. It would be interesting to contrast what would be said by the organizers with what was said by the potential voters.

The above questions and the evidence presented in this paper confirm that Canadian researchers have a lot of work ahead of them if they are to properly document and analyze the evolution of the campaign website from sideline of the current campaign to the frontline of the future campaign. In order for researchers to understand the impact of campaign websites, they must seek out individual website users and analyse their actions and motivations when interacting with the campaign website. For this to happen researchers will need to conduct more user-focused research and will need to be prepared to deal with the fast paced environment of Internet and its growing audience. As was witnessed in the campaign website history section of *Chapter Three*, the Internet is not going to wait for researchers to catch up. In fact, the uniqueness of the Internet and its ability to quickly disrupt and replace older technologies means the Internet may become even more difficult to research. This should not however, been seen as a barrier but rather as a unique challenge to be undertaken by researchers.

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## Appendix A: Discussion Group Questions

\*Note: some questions may be excluded if time run out.

### **Opening Questions:**                   *(2-5 minutes)*

- 1) Tell us who you are, what you do for a living, and what you enjoy most about the Internet.

### **Introductory Questions:**       *(5-10 minutes)*

- 1) What are some of the political websites that you use frequently?
  - a. Why haven't some of you visited a political website?
- 2) How important is the Internet for finding political information?
- 3) Have you ever used the Internet to collect information during a political campaign?

### **Transition Questions**               *(7-10 minutes)*

- 1) During the 2000 federal election and the 2001 Alberta provincial election, did anyone here use the Internet to research issues that were important to them?
- 2) What are some of our experiences with using the Internet during a political campaign?
- 3) Has anyone here viewed a campaign website?

### **Key Questions:**                   *(20-30 minutes)*

- 1) Lets brainstorm some things that you think should belong on a political campaign website
- 2) Imagine for a moment, that you are a political campaigner and you've been given the responsibility of building a campaign website for your candidate. What kind of things would you put on the site?
- 3) Let's name the features of a successful website. Lets rank them now.
- 4) What might be some of the reasons political parties don't implement certain features on their websites?

### **Ending Questions:**               *(5-10 minutes)*

- 1) Suppose that you had one minute to explain to a political campaign manager the important features that you think should be part of a campaign website. What would you say?
- 2) Considering all the things that we've discussed today, what do you think is the most important part of a campaign website?

**Summary Question:** (2-5 minutes)

- 1) Did I adequately summarize what was said today?

**Final Questions:** (5-7 minutes)

- 1) Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn't?
- 2) Before we finish up, is there anything anyone would like to add?
- 3) This is your last change to talk, is there something I've failed to bring up?

## Appendix B: Preliminary Filter Questions

- 1) How often do you use the Internet?
  - a. *Daily*
  - b. *A few times a week*
  - c. *Once a week*
  - d. *Less than once a week*
  - e. *Never*
- 2) Do you have access to the Internet at home?
  - a. *Yes or No*
- 3) How often do you read the newspaper?
  - a. *Daily*
  - b. *A few times a week*
  - c. *Once a week*
  - d. *Less than once a week*
  - e. *Never*
- 4) How often do you watch the news on television?
  - a. *Daily*
  - b. *A few times a week*
  - c. *Once a week*
  - d. *Less than once a week*
  - e. *Never*
- 5) Can you name the Premier of Alberta?
  - a. *Ralph Klein*
- 6) Who is the leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada?
  - a. *Jack Layton*
- 7) What political party recently won the Ontario provincial election?
  - a. *Liberal party of Ontario*
- 8) Who is your Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)?
- 9) Who is the Chief Justice of Canada's Supreme Court?
  - a. *Beverly McLachlin*
- 10) Many voters for a variety of reasons were unable to vote in the last federal election. Were you able to vote in the 2000 federal election?
  - a. *Yes or No*
- 11) Did you vote in the last Alberta provincial election in 2001?

*a. Yes or No*

12) Are you currently a member of a political party?

*a. Yes or No*

13) Have you ever worked on a political campaign?

*a. Yes or No*

14) If Yes, - In what capacity?

15) What year were you born?

16) Are you a Canadian citizen?

*a. Yes or No*

17) What is the highest education level completed

*a. Some High School*

*b. Completed High School*

*c. Some University or College*

*d. Completed University or College*

18) What is your postal code?

## Appendix C: Telephone Dialog

**Greg:**

Hello, my name is Greg Farries and I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge. I got your name from your friend/colleague \_\_\_\_\_. I was explaining to \_\_\_\_\_ about a research project that I'm conducting at the University of Lethbridge and \_\_\_\_\_ mentioned that you might be interested. The research study is part of my Masters thesis and your participation will involve answering a short survey of questions relating to politics in Canada. Would you be willing to help? - There are only eighteen questions and it will only take two to three minutes.

*If no:*

**Greg:**

Thank you for your time. Goodbye.

*If Yes: -*

Just so you are aware, the information collected will be reported in general terms and will not include specific references.

*Ask questions:*

**Greg:**

I really appreciate you taking the time to share your responses with me.

I will be conducting a series of focus groups in the next couple of weeks and the research collected from these groups will also be used for my Masters thesis.

Would you be willing to participate in a focus group?

The groups will be informal and all I am looking for is some observations and insight into a number of political topics. A small monetary incentive and refreshments will be provided to everyone who participates.

*If No:*

**Greg:**

Thanks for taking the time to respond to my questions. Goodbye.

*If Yes:*

**Greg:**

Great! The exact dates of the discussion groups have not been set yet, but if you give me your home address I will send you the date and times the groups will be conducted. The discussion groups will take place at the University of Lethbridge and I will include directions and a room number in the package I'll send in the mail.

If you have any questions or comments you can call me at the office at 329 2286 or on my cell at 634 8888.

Thanks again,

**Appendix D: Research Participant Consent Form**

Date April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Dear Research Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a study relating to the Internet and political campaigns. This study is being conducted by Greg Farries under the supervision of Dr Harold Jansen and Dr Peter McCormick of the Political Science department at the University of Lethbridge. This study seeks to understand voters' perceptions and motivations when seeking political information on the Internet during a political campaign. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to take part in a group discussion with other participants. Participation in this study is expected to take one hour of your time and will only involve you contributing your opinions, experiences and ideas relating to our research topic. The information that is collected during these group discussions will be reported in general terms and will not include references to specific individuals. You are free to withdraw from the discussions at any time

The results of this study will be available in the early months of 2004. If you would like a copy of the results, please feel free to contact me.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Lethbridge Human Research Subject Committee. If you have questions about the study, please call me at the University of Lethbridge [phone: 403.329.2286].

I look forward to hearing what you have to say,

Sincerely,

Greg Farries

-----Tear Along Line-----

I agree to participate in a group discussion on the Internet and political campaigns at the University of Lethbridge. I understand that Greg Farries will moderate the discussions and the data produced will be used in a report, which will be available in the early months of 2004.

I grant permission for the discussions to be tape recorded and transcribed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: