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YOUTH POLITICAL WEBSITES COME OF AGE IN 2004

CAMPAIGN WEBSITES MAKE MODEST IMPROVEMENTS IN REACHING OUT TO YOUNG VOTERS

Increasingly, people are turning to the internet for quick and accurate information about politics and political campaigns. This is especially true for young people. Estimates suggest that in 2004, almost a third of 18-29-year-olds were getting most of their information on campaigns from the internet (Pew Research Center, 2004).¹

A new CIRCLE Working Paper (#42) by Lance Bennett and Michael Xenos explores the extent to which the internet can create opportunities to engage young people into the political process. The authors examined 2004 election campaign sites (for candidates for the House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, and Governor) and youth civic engagement sites of organizations such as Rock the Vote and New Voters Project to determine how these sites appeal to young people on various issues. Additionally, they compared the changes in these Web sites between 2002 and 2004.

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The research suggests that young voters who went online in 2004 found more political information and resources than in 2002. According to Dr. Bennett, "We believe that the period between 2002 and 2004 was one in which the youth engagement Web sphere 'came of age.'" While youth political sites improved in size, function and content, campaign Web sites made smaller but promising efforts to reach out to young voters.

2004 WITNESSES GROWTH IN YOUTH POLITICAL WEB SITES

The study focuses on two areas, termed "Web Spheres." The first, the "Electoral Web Sphere," is "comprised of campaign Web sites produced by candidates." The second, the "Youth Engagement Web Sphere," is "comprised of non-campaign political engagement and voting sites explicitly targeted at younger age groups."

¹ Pew Research Center (2004). "Young People More Engaged, More Uncertain, Debates More Important to Young Voters." Released September 30, 2004. www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_2004_Campaign.pdf

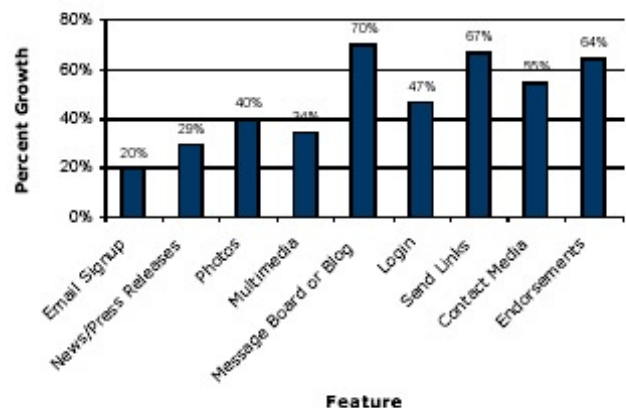
Several methods were used to gather data: the authors catalogued the political context and features of each Web site, used data compiled by Webarchvisit.org, and used iCrawler to gather data on network properties.

According to the study, three major trends stood out when comparing the 2002 and 2004 youth Web sites. First, the sheer number of youth political Web sites identified increased from 22 to 35 between 2002 and 2004. Second, the amount of political information and the sophistication of site features increased. For example, there was a 70 percent growth in the number of sites that contained message boards or blogs. Finally, more youth sites were linked to each other, thus increasing the network of youth engagement sites and the information these sites provide. Dr. Bennett notes, "Youth political Web sites revealed a much more densely networked environment than we found in our prior investigations."

In addition to the three major trends, Bennett and Xenos find that youth political Web sites included improvements such as:

- greater information about the current elections;
- greater information about voter registration;
- greater information about offline political events and opportunities for political participation; and

Graph 1: Growth in Features on Youth Political Web sites: 2002-2004



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- more email alerts about new site content and news/press release pages.

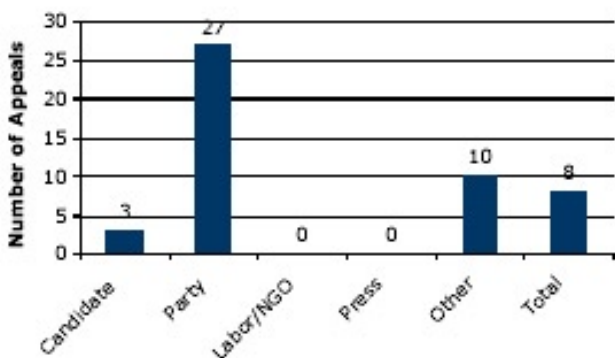
ELECTORAL WEBSITES MAKE SMALL BUT PROMISING CHANGES

While the Web sites of the two major presidential candidates made a substantial effort to reach out to young voters, the researchers found that candidates for lesser offices as well as sites produced by political and media groups made very few changes to increase their youth audience. Overall, only eight percent of these sites featured some type of appeal to young voters.

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One group of Web sites, political party sites, however, did make substantial efforts to court young voters. Bennett notes, "Political party Web sites did feature youth-targeted content at a non-trivial rate of 27 percent, suggesting that mainstream political actors

Graph 2: Youth Appeals on Sites in the Electoral Web Sphere, 2004.



Graph 2 Source: Foot, K. A., S. M. Schneider, M. Dougherty (2005). "Web practices of political actors in the 2004 U.S. congressional election Web sphere". *International Communication Association*, New York. May 28.

may be making greater efforts to communicate with young people through the Web."

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH IN POLITICS THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Bennett and Xenos offer two suggestions for drawing more young people into the political process via the Web. First, one relatively easy change that youth-oriented sites could make is to increase the number and prominence of organizational links they provide. The authors maintain that the current Youth Engagement Web Sphere can continue to draw more young voters if more youth-oriented sites provide hyperlinks.

Second, the authors recommend that more interactive features be added to Web sites. They showcase www.indyvoter.org as a prime example of a site that successfully used innovative features to draw young people into the political process. According to the authors, "The indyvoter site used features similar to those found on more popular dating and social networking Web sites to help connect younger citizens with those sharing common interests and preferences. The indyvoter site featured a system through which 'joining' the Web site and obtaining a login also involved creating a user profile, complete with photos and general statements. Users could use the profiles to contact each other to share information and coordinate offline political actions, and were encouraged to create their own personal or collective 'voter guides,' which were then made available to all other members."

The full CIRCLE Working Paper (#42), "Young Voters and the Web of Politics 2004: The Youth Political Web Sphere Comes of Age" can be found at http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm ■