

Mouse Pads, Shoe Leather, and Hope
2004 and the New Politics of Online Empowerment

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By Michael Sherrard

Committee:

Prof. Robert Rakoff, Chair

Prof. James Miller

Prof. Marc Lendler (Smith College)

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Introduction

We are the great grassroots campaign of the modern era, built from mouse pads, shoe leather and hope. Like MoveOn.org, we seek to build a community of millions and strengthen the voice of the people. And like the founders of our republic, we seek change.

– Gov. Howard Dean¹

On December 1, 2004, approximately eighty people, mostly strangers to each other, crowded into the basement of the Seattle Labor Temple for a freewheeling and wide-ranging political discussion. Still reeling in response to President Bush's re-election a month prior, topics ranged from winning over Republican voters in the rural heartland to complex proposals for regulating electronic voting equipment. Attendees ranged from twentysomething computer professionals to a prominent member of the county council. They were united only in their contempt for the Bush administration and support for a presidential campaign which had collapsed eleven months prior. Tens of thousands more did the same in hundreds of “Meetups” all over the country, from Burlington, Vermont (estimated attendance of 76) to Santa Monica, California (48) to Augusta, Georgia (8).² In every case, the event was organized, publicized, and coordinated entirely through the use of a single website whose largest constituency two years prior was practicing Wiccans.

On December 9, Eli Pariser, a 23-year-old with barely two years of experience in professional politics wrote an e-mail message attacking the leadership of the Democratic Party:

For years, the Party has been lead by elite Washington insiders who are closer to corporate lobbyists than they are to the Democratic base. But we can't afford four more years of leadership by a consulting class of professional election losers. In the last year, grassroots contributors like us gave more than \$300 million to the Kerry campaign and the DNC, and proved that the Party doesn't need corporate cash to be competitive. Now it's our Party: we bought it, we own it, and we're going to take it back.³

His comments immediately resulted in a story by Associated Press, which called his seven-year-old organization, MoveOn.org – which lacks even a central office – a “liberal powerhouse.”⁴

Democratic leaders could scarcely afford to fire back, however; a week earlier, again with a single e-mail, MoveOn had raised \$250,000 for the Washington state party to help pay for a hand recount of the contested gubernatorial election – a recount which overturned the original results and gave the governor's mansion to the Democratic candidate.

Meanwhile, as the mainstream press was focused on a crisis of electoral fraud in Ukraine, hundreds of commenters on Daily Kos, the Internet's most popular Democratic weblog, were busily swapping stories about alleged improprieties in the counting of votes in Ohio.⁵ Though the blog's creator and primary author – a Gulf War veteran and dotcom refugee from Berkeley – seemed to have little interest in the discussions, which frequently veered toward conspiracy theory, the topic remained a hot one for many weeks. Conversation focused especially on an obscure investigation organized by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), which ultimately became the basis for a formal challenge (unprecedented in the modern political era) to the acceptance of Ohio's presidential electors in a joint session of Congress. The challenge took most reporters by surprise, but for many in the liberal “blogosphere,” it was a triumph.

Each in its own unique way, these events were the culmination of a campaign cycle in which the Internet, after a decade of breathless predictions, finally seemed to emerge as a key medium for American political campaigning. Moreover, it did so in a way that ran counter to many of the dominant political trends of the last few decades. While campaigns have become increasingly polished and professionalized, the most successful political efforts online in 2004 were frequently unsightly and amateurish. While scholars bemoan increasing disengagement on the part of the electorate, the Internet facilitated the involvement of hundreds of thousands of new political donors and volunteers. And while Republicans now outnumber Democrats at all levels of government, it was the Democrats who, on the whole, seemed to be ahead on the net, raising millions of dollars and volunteer hours from hundreds of thousands of new partisan activists. It should come as no great shock that the American Association of Political Consultants, in

announcing its coveted annual “Pollie” awards, unanimously named the Internet the Democrats’ “Most Valuable Player”; in 2000, the honor went to Hillary Clinton’s communications director.⁶

Nevertheless, the 2004 election was, by any yardstick, a major setback for the Democrats, who not only failed to unseat the most conservative president in decades, but lost seats in both houses of Congress. The Internet undoubtedly proved to be a godsend for Democratic fundraising, which many expected to be crippled by recent campaign finance reform legislation; the percentage of Democratic voters who gave money to their party’s candidates tripled from 2000 to 2004,⁷ netting an unprecedented \$82 million for John Kerry through online donations.⁸ Educated estimates suggest that approximately ten million Americans are now subscribed to receive e-mails from the leading Democratic and Democratic-leaning organizations.⁹ But there is little evidence that the computer-facilitated grassroots activism of the party’s liberal base had any meaningful impact on Election Day. That something big – in purely quantitative terms – happened through the Internet in 2004 is undeniable, but it is far from clear whether and how that will translate into ongoing effective political action.

To enthusiasts, however, online politics as practiced in the 2004 election cycle was the dawn of a revolutionary transformation of the Democratic Party, electoral campaigns, and ultimately the entire American political process. Political intermediaries – journalists, consultants, interest groups – are being bypassed by increasingly capable and sophisticated individual activists taking action in concert with those of like minds. A losing political party is being revitalized by angry loyalists who demand an effective counterweight to the recklessness of the Bush administration. Political communication is moving away from polarizing television soundbites towards nuanced conversations among grassroots journalists and activists. On the Internet, a new progressive movement is forming which will not only go toe-to-toe with the dominant conservative coalition, but will restore Americans’ sense of community and faith in democracy. As Micah Sifry wrote in *The Nation*:

New tools and practices born on the Internet have reached critical mass, enabling ordinary people to participate in processes that used to be closed to them. It may seem like cold comfort for Kerry supporters now, but the truth is that voters don't have to rely on elected or self-appointed leaders to chart the way forward anymore. The era of top-down politics—where campaigns, institutions and journalism were cloistered communities powered by hard-to-amass capital—is over. Something wilder, more engaging and infinitely more satisfying to individual participants is arising alongside the old order.¹⁰

Embedded in such rhetoric are two distinct but closely related claims about progressives' use of the Internet:

First, online enthusiasts believe they are sparking grassroots activism among ordinary citizens in an era of growing political apathy and civic disengagement, most famously described in Robert Putnam's oft-cited *Bowling Alone*. They promote their efforts as an antidote with the potential to rebuild American civil society. And where Putnam prizes decentralized, face-to-face social-networks, they extol the virtues of unstructured collaboration among disparate individuals — what Sifry and others (in an analogy to software development) term “open source politics.”

Second, they see such activism — which admittedly failed to achieve its central goals in 2004 — as the beginnings of new progressive movement, much as the New Right's early political failures prefigured a dawning conservative backlash. Specifically, many see the “netroots” filling a comparable role to the Christian right in providing a grassroots activist base for a new progressive movement — a notion which fits in well with the growing calls among Democratic Party elites to mimic conservatives' movement- and institution-building activities over the last few decades.

My purpose here is to evaluate both claims. My perspective is a fundamentally sympathetic one, owing both to my own participation in the Dean campaign and to a fervent desire to see the American left revitalized by grassroots activism. But it is also hesitant and skeptical, owing to the technological and political infancy of these nascent trends.

Yet even in that infancy, we can begin to reach some tentative conclusions regarding the potential of the Internet both for progressive electoral victories and civic revitalization. The

experience of 2004 demonstrates the capability of a variety of online tools to capitalize on partisan anger on an unprecedented scale. But fetishizing those tools – or even glorifying, in isolation, the activists who make use of them – misses the point. New technologies unquestionably offer new opportunities to movement organizers, but they are unlikely to single-handedly transform undirected activism into a cohesive political force.

To briefly use the vocabulary of social movement scholars, the success of such efforts depends not just on available political opportunities, but also on creating mobilizing structures (actually-existing organizations and networks) and framing processes (unifying lenses through which activists view the world and thus approach political action). Thus, if today's political entrepreneurs want to revitalize Americans' political participation and build a long-term progressive movement – as opposed to episodes of mile-wide, inch-deep activism – they eschew national organization and collective vision at their peril.

In the next chapter, I will expand on that argument in analyzing various popular and academic theories of civic engagement and online communications. In the two that follow, I examine the grassroots activism of Howard Dean supporters – focusing especially on Washington state – whose successes and failures underscore the importance of effective political leadership and organization. In concluding, I return to historical comparison in discussing the parallels between Internet-facilitated activism circa 2004 and the rise of the New Right, emphasizing again that the success of a political movement rests on much more than the technological tools it deploys.

Civic Engagement and the Control Revolution

As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found one another out, they combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions serve for an example, and whose language is listened to.
– Alexis de Tocqueville¹¹

At least since Tocqueville's day, Americans have been a “nation of joiners” – eager participants in an array of civic organizations which have traditionally formed the bedrock of our social and political life. But as evidence mounts that such organizations have atrophied over the past few decades, scholars and pundits have increasingly turned their attention to theories of civic engagement. The most prominent of these has been political scientist Robert Putnam, who has popularized the concept of social capital in emphasizing the tangible and intangible benefits of social networks for individuals and societies.

Meanwhile, the explosive growth of the Internet has provoked often-hyperbolic theorizing about the social impact of telecommunications by a new generation of anti-establishment technological enthusiasts. The tendency of this inchoate band of techno-pundits has been to view the Internet as a unstoppable force for individual empowerment. Through anarchic and voluntary collaboration, the theory goes, ordinary computer users are bypassing existing social institutions to redefine business and communications on their own terms.

The 2004 election cycle saw the intersection of these two schools of thinking, as many progressives participating in online political efforts viewed themselves both as budding social capitalists and as insurgent torchbearers of a revolutionary new age of technological empowerment. That optimistic view incorporates important insights about the condition of American civil society and the character of the Internet as a communications medium, but it must be contextualized. A more nuanced look at history and political theory suggests that the actions of formal organizations and institutions – including the state – are a critical factor in determining the

impact of new communications media and in the development of participatory political organizations.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

There is perhaps no more enthusiastic evangelist for the political power of the Internet than Joe Trippi, a veteran campaign operative who spent much of the nineties consulting for technology firms in Silicon Valley before becoming Howard Dean's campaign manager. As a long-time technophile who oversaw presidential politics' most successful experimentation with the Internet to date, he is understandably enamored of the medium, which he believes “builds communities and brings people together, providing the first reversal of trends reported in Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* - the isolation of Americans, the death of participatory politics, and the unraveling of the fabric of critical social and civic structures.”¹²

Putnam's bestselling *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* marshals a mountain of statistical evidence to argue that Americans are far less engaged in the life of their communities than they were just a few decades ago. His argument – and the communitarian political emphasis underlying it – became foundational for the campaign. As Samantha Shapiro wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*:

The campaign sees political involvement in the way “Bowling Alone” does, as related to participation in civic organizations – to people getting together socially. People at all levels of the Dean campaign will tell you that its purpose is not just to elect Howard Dean president. Just as significant, they say, the point is to give people something to believe in, and to connect those people to one another. The point is to get them out of their houses and bring them together at barbecues, rallies and voting booths.¹³

In short, the Dean campaign sought to promote social capital, which Putnam formally defines as “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹⁴ Among a host of other major benefits, “the performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital.”¹⁵

Although Putnam is quick to include various aspects of American social life – from

recreational sports to church-going – in his thesis, political participation is undoubtedly his foremost concern. In *Bowling Alone*, he turns to the subject immediately after his introduction, offering an instructive sketch of the decline in voter turnout (which peaked in at 62.8% in 1960 and by 1996 had fallen to 48.9%)¹⁶ and basic political awareness.¹⁷ More relevant for a study of political campaigns, however, he offers a striking paradox: “while the parties themselves are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer and fewer Americans participate in partisan political activities.”¹⁸ The explanation, he argues, is that:

Less and less party activity involves volunteer collaboration among committed partisans. More and more involves the skilled (and expensive) techniques of effective mass marketing. This trend goes hand in hand with the explosive growth of direct-mail fundraising and political action committees (PACs) formed to channel financial support to party organizations. During the same period that citizen involvement in party activities was slumping by more than half, spending on presidential nomination and election campaigns exploded ... The bottom line in the political industry is this: Financial capital - the wherewithal for mass marketings - has steadily replaced social capital - that is, grassroots citizen networks - as the coin of the realm.

... Since their “consumers” are tuning out from politics, parties have to work harder and spend much more, competing furiously to woo votes, workers, and donations, and to do that they need a (paid) organizational infrastructure.¹⁹

Putnam makes a similar criticism of new advocacy groups whose “members” consist entirely of direct-mail donors and whose organizations have little tangible presence outside of Washington, D.C. Building on the research of his colleague Theda Skocpol, he argues that such “tertiary associations” do not promote civic engagement:

For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check ... Few ever attend any meetings ... and most members are unlikely ever knowingly to encounter any other member. The bond between any two members of the National Wildlife Federation or the National Rifle Association is less like the bond between two members of a gardening club or prayer group and more like the bond between two Yankees fans on opposite coasts...²⁰

But *Bowling Alone* is far from the first work to argue that American democracy and civil society have atrophied since the 1960s. Whatever disagreement may exist over Putnam's conclusions, no one questions that voter turnout and party loyalty – the two most obvious

benchmarks to measure political engagement – have declined steeply over that period; indeed, a whole body of political science literature has sprung up attempting to explain why. And any number of writers have bemoaned the growth of elite-dominated, Washington, D.C.-based interest groups and think tanks as primary players in advocacy and policy-making. So Putnam's unique contribution is to connect (or, in the eyes of his critics, erroneously conflate) these developments with a broader trend toward interpersonal disconnectedness in order to paint a picture of declining social capital.

That picture begs an immediate question: why? What has driven Americans away from one another and from the political process? Here, we again find Putnam's resonance with online campaigners, in indicting television as the primary culprit for civic decline. As Joe Trippi puts it:

In my lifetime, television has become the dominant force in American life, affecting every part of our culture. At the same time, it began to erode some of the political and social underpinnings of the greatest civilization in history. If the Greeks were a people destroyed by hubris, the Aztecs by brutality, and the Romans by arrogance, Americans at the turn of the twenty-first century were a culture in danger of being ruined by *Must See TV*. Television's impact has been so overwhelming, so insidious, that it is impossible for some people to imagine a world not dominated by it, to believe that something new could rise up and break TV's fifty-year spell of cynicism and powerlessness.²¹

Once again, he is repeating (in more hyperbolic terms) an argument that Putnam develops empirically in *Bowling Alone*, where he indicts television as the primary culprit in the decline of social capital:

Americans at the end of the twentieth century were watching more TV, watching it more habitually, more pervasively, and more often alone, and watching more programs that were associated specifically with civic disengagement (entertainment, as distinct from news). The onset of these trends coincided exactly with the national decline in social connectedness, and the trends were most marked among the younger generations that are ... distinctively disengaged. Moreover, it is precisely those Americans most marked by this dependence on televised entertainment who were most likely to have dropped out of civic and social life ...²²

The prevailing resentment of “broadcast politics” among online enthusiasts can be seen as a specific application of this general critique. If political campaigns have become a cynical exercise

in televised mudslinging, as so many complain, then the fault lies with the disengaging character of the medium. According to Trippi:

If you make these short, reductive cynical spots for a living, you begin to see the audience not as people organized into communities, with jobs and families and concerns, but as a series of effects you're trying to create, numbers to be moved, prejudices to be mined.²³

Wes Boyd, the president of MoveOn.org – and a relative newcomer to politics – presents his concerns in similar terms:

... the entire 20th century, in many ways, was dominated by broadcast everything, including broadcast politics. TV, radio, print even is about narrative, it's about storytelling and so the political culture reflects that very directly. There are heroes. There are villains. There's conflict. There's fight. There's attack. There's defend. And that's what it's all about.

And, naturally, that led to people not participating but people watching. It led to cynicism. Why would I want to be part of democracy? It is a mess and all it is is these people fighting on TV. ...

So we see this mean posturing. We see this fight. We see this disconnection from reality that leads to cynicism. It leads to passivity. It leads to a sense of democracy being hollowed out.²⁴

In sum, then, the new brand of left-leaning online campaigners see themselves as not just providing support for their preferred candidates, but filling a void in the life of the nation by bringing people together in an age of social disconnectedness bred by television.

THE INTERNET AS A FORCE FOR INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT

But what cause is there to believe that the Internet will prove to be any different than the communications media which have preceded it? Put another way, what are the distinguishing social features of online communication?

To many, the most salient feature of new communications technologies is that they empower individuals to make their own social, political, and economic decisions, allowing them to bypass existing institutions. Such thinking has deep roots. Futurist Alvin Toffler began speaking of a “de-massified” society – characterized by heterogeneity and individualism – in his 1980 work, *The Third Wave*. Such a vision of the future has held great appeal for certain libertarians and

conservatives anxious to proclaim the obsolescence of “big government.” Newt Gingrich is a friend and admirer of Toffler's, and in 1994 a Gingrich-founded think tank published an essay, co-authored by Toffler, entitled “Cyberspace and the American Dream”:

The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of nations, wealth – in the form of physical resources – has been losing value and significance. The powers of mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things. ...

Cyberspace is the land of knowledge, and the exploration of that land can be a civilization's truest, highest calling. The opportunity is now before us to empower every person to pursue that calling in his or her own way. ...

Turning the economics of mass-production inside out, new information technologies are driving the financial costs of diversity – both product and personal – down toward zero, “demassifying” our institutions and our culture. Accelerating demassification creates the potential for vastly increased human freedom.

It also spells the death of the central institutional paradigm of modern life, the bureaucratic organization. (Governments, including the American government, are the last great redoubt of bureaucratic power on the face of the planet, and for them the coming change will be profound and probably traumatic.)²⁵

Similar language was taken up less than two years later by John Perry Barlow, an online pioneer and a former lyricist for the Grateful Dead, in his famous “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. ...

We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. ...

Your increasingly obsolete information industries would perpetuate themselves by proposing laws, in America and elsewhere, that claim to own speech itself throughout the world. These laws would declare ideas to be another industrial product, no more noble than pig iron. In our world, whatever the human mind may create can be reproduced and distributed infinitely at no cost. The global conveyance of thought no longer requires your factories to accomplish.²⁶

That such bold talk should be treated with a high degree of skepticism is probably obvious from its hyperbolic tone. The notion that the Internet constitutes a new frontier which somehow transcends (or even obsoletes) material reality and should be exempt from any form of regulation is particularly absurd. (Even the early adoption of “cyberspace” as a metaphor by techno-libertarians

is odd; the term was coined by novelist William Gibson in his portrait of a *dystopian* future characterized by corporate tyranny and technology-gone-mad.)

But for all their bluster, such writers' focus on individual empowerment was prescient and influential. The short history of the Internet is full of innovations, from Napster to weblogs, through which the actions of ordinary users have undermined traditional “brick and mortar” institutions. A more balanced and comprehensive treatment of that phenomenon can be found in Andrew L. Shapiro's *Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know*. Shapiro, who calls himself a “technorealist,” argues that:

... new technology is allowing individuals to take power from large institutions such as government, corporations, and the media. To an unprecedented degree, we can decide what news and entertainment we're exposed to, whom we socialize with, how we earn, and even how goods are distributed and political outcomes reached. The potential for personal growth and social progress seems limitless.²⁷

He offers a nuanced argument involving a myriad of the technological, social, cultural, and psychological factors driving this trend, but three developments are particularly valuable for studying the Internet's political impact.

First, the Internet is an interactive medium which replaces one-to-many broadcasts with many-to-many conversations. Quoting A.J. Liebling's famous quip that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one,” Shapiro notes that “now owning a 'press' is within almost everyone's reach,” pointing to the success of online gossip-monger Matt Drudge.²⁸ Today, the explosion of blogging seems to bear out this observation. As of April 2005, tracking service Technorati reports that there are at least 9 million blogs²⁹ – a figure which has been doubling once every five months over the last two years³⁰ – and Jay Rosen, a well-known professor of journalism (and an avid blogger), recently wrote: “Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one, and blogging means practically anyone can own one. That is the Number One reason why weblogs matter.”³¹

But while anyone online is empowered to publish, they can do so only to a self-selected

audience. Internet users have the capability to personalize the information they receive to an enormous degree. MIT Professor Nicholas Negroponte famously predicted that our daily newspapers will be eventually replaced with *The Daily Me*, delivering to our personal computers only the news which each of us is individually interested in.³² But the power of personalization, Shapiro notes, extends beyond just our news-gathering habits, or even our product-purchasing decisions. At a social level, “you can form online relationships that are based on common interest rather than the happenstance of geography,” and even “online communities” which are “havens for anyone who relishes the opportunity to interact with others who are similar,” “suggest[ing] the possibility of a whole new forms of social life and participation.”³³ And for political activists, “the ability to control information and experience ultimately means the ability to create new forms of social life and political power.”³⁴ Shapiro points to an anti-online censorship petition which garnered a then-staggering 112,000 signatures; today, MoveOn.org's petitions regularly receive more than 300,000.

Finally, the Internet is a vehicle for disintermediation, a word

... used to describe this circumventing of the middleman. Generally, it is associated with the ability to engage in commerce directly without brokers, retailers, and distributors. But the concept can be usefully expanded to describe the way that technology allows individuals to bypass editors, educators, and other gatekeepers who stand between us and whatever it is we seek. The control revolution allows us to take power from these intermediaries and put it in our own hands.³⁵

“Politically, disintermediation is a close cousin to decentralization,” which “attempts to bring decision-making power closer to the individual.”³⁶ Most of Shapiro's subsequent discussion of this conclusion focuses on the unlikely prospects for directly disintermediating elected officials, but the concept can also be applied to the campaign process. Presidential campaigning in particular is a process full of gatekeepers: in a series of “invisible primaries,” presidential hopefuls compete for contributions from a select group of donors, services from a select group of consultants, endorsements from key figures in the party, and coverage from major media outlets. The Dean

campaign succeeded remarkably in circumventing these middlemen, winning the support of most important players in the Democratic Party only after building an online juggernaut made up primarily of political newcomers scattered all over the country.

FROM *DAILY ME* TO “WEB PUBLIC”

It should come as no great surprise, then, that Trippi and others have embraced commentators who see the Internet as a revolutionary tool for community-building. While implicitly accepting that individual empowerment and disintermediation are fundamental characteristics of online communications, some commentators have focused on the Internet's role enabling direct interpersonal conversations across social and geographic boundaries – conversations which they see as a refreshing and authentically human antidote to an impersonal culture dominated by the hollow language of broadcast media and corporate advertising. Though their excited tone sometimes seems to echo the overwrought hyperbole of early techno-libertarianism, their vision of a brave new online world tends to be less atomistic and more communitarian.

Perhaps the most seasoned of these writers is Howard Rheingold, whose 1993 work, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, reported on the emerging trend of computer-mediated communications. Based in large part in his experience on The WELL, a legendary online discussion forum which was founded as a dial-up bulletin-board system in 1985, Rheingold was among the first to see in online communications the possibility to politically empower ordinary citizens by connecting them to one another:

The political significance of [computer-mediated communication] lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy. The way image-rich, sound-bite-based commercial media have co-opted political discourse among citizens is part of a political problem that communications technologies have posed for democracy for decades. The way the number of owners or telecommunication channels is narrowing to a tiny elite, while the reach and power of the media they won expand, is a converging threat to citizens. Which scenario seems more conducive to democracy, which to totalitarian rule: a world in

which a few people control communications technology that can be used to manipulate the beliefs of billions, or a world in which every citizen can broadcast to every other citizen?³⁷

At a time when most regarded online communication as a peculiar plaything for the maladjusted pocket-protector crowd, Rheingold emphasized that participation in virtual communities frequently led to very deep social ties, a point which was driven home when one of the most prolific posters to The WELL committed suicide – and many of his “virtual” acquaintances traveled to attend his very real funeral.³⁸

Similar themes were taken up in 1999, at the height of the dotcom boom, in *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, a Luther-esque set of 95 theses announcing that the Internet had changed the rules of business by allowing users (both customers and employees) to speak directly to one another in an authentic way:

1. Markets are conversations.
2. Markets consist of human beings, not demographic sectors.
3. Conversations among human beings sound human. They are conducted in a human voice.
6. The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media.
7. Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy.
9. These networked conversations are enabling powerful new forms of social organization and knowledge exchange to emerge.
10. As a result, markets are getting smarter, more informed, more organized. Participation in a networked market changes people fundamentally.
14. Corporations do not speak in the same voice as these new networked conversations. To their intended online audiences, companies sound hollow, flat, literally inhuman.
38. Human communities are based on discourse – on human speech about human concerns.³⁹

Though *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, which eventually became a book of the same title, was positioned as specifically addressing the concerns of business and marketing, it had a wide influence in technology circles which outlived much concomitant rhetoric about the revolutionary impact of the Internet. However self-righteous in tone, *Cluetrain* helped to turn the focus of Internet enthusiasts away from the gee-whiz appeal of flashy websites and towards its power as a

tool for facilitating decentralized conversations.

One of the *Cluetrain* authors, David Weinberger (a philosopher by training), went on to write *Small Pieces Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of Web*, which argues in more nuanced terms that the significance of the Internet lies in the subtle but profound ways it “gives us an opportunity to rethink many of our presuppositions about our nature and our world's nature.”⁴⁰ Among these is how we interact with each other on a larger scale, a theme he explores through the prism of September 11:

During that horrible day, I felt I was participating in two publics. As members of the broadcast public, we sat facing the television screen while news anchors presented images and explanations, performing well under inhuman circumstances. But as members of the broadcast public, we are invisible to one another and to the person talking to us; we are a faceless mass. As members of the Web public, we talked through our keyboards to people with names, points of view, and sometimes deep knowledge of topics that mattered. They weren't broadcasting to an anonymous, faceless mass; they – we – were conversing. We may not have been in the same room, but we were in some real sense face to face.⁴¹

Weinberger's comments are an eloquent, perhaps even quintessential, summation of a certain view of the Internet as a force for rebuilding social relationships frayed by the impersonal and distant character of contemporary society and mass media. It may be over-optimistic and over-simplified, but it is in the ascendancy, as even venture capitalists look to social network-based services as the next dotcom fad. But more importantly, it is a view that frames how online campaigners see their efforts. In many cases, this is explicit: Joe Trippi names Rheingold, Cluetrain, and Weinberger (who served as a campaign advisor) as key influences for the Dean campaign.⁴² But even when such writers are not named, the permeating influence of the perspective they have helped to advance is often clear, as with MoveOn's constant use of words like “engagement,” “grassroots,” and “community.”

INDIVIDUALISM AND CYBERBALKANIZATION

What are the implications of individual empowerment for civic engagement? Andrew Shapiro is somewhat skeptical, worrying about the potential downsides of excessive

personalization and disintermediation. He cites Putnam's work on declining social capital, and warns that the control revolution could worsen the situation:

... As we take advantage of alluring opportunities to participate in idiosyncratic online communities and to expose ourselves only to the information we want, we could unintentionally build barriers between ourselves and those who live among us. The uniqueness of face-to-face contact - with friends, neighbors, teachers, coworkers, fellow citizens - may be forgotten, as may the subtle pleasure of serendipitous encounters.

There are real dangers here to the integrity of communities and perhaps even nations. ... With fewer shared experiences and information sources, citizens may feel less of a connection with, and less of an obligation toward, one another.⁴³

Putnam himself is a cautious skeptic when it comes to the Internet. Noting that most early predictions about the social impact of the telephone were wildly off the mark, he warns that “both utopianism and jeremiads are very likely misplaced.”⁴⁴ He does, however, appear very sympathetic to a theory known as “cyberbalkanization,” which sees online communities as socially divisive: “Real-world interactions force us to deal with diversity, whereas the virtual world may be more homogeneous, not in demographic terms, but in terms of interest and outlook,” thus presenting a threat to bridging social capital.⁴⁵ In other words, if we communicate only with those who share our own interests – as the Internet definitely allows – we run the risk of becoming an even more polarized and isolated from one another.

The fullest articulation of communitarian anxieties about the Internet, however, comes from legal scholar Cass Sunstein. Building on Shapiro (and, to a lesser degree, Putnam and the cyberbalkanization critique), Sunstein argues in *Republic.com* that the possibility of “unlimited filtering” (personalization) is antithetical to the democratic ideal for communications and deliberation.⁴⁶ In his view, public forums, including traditional media outlets (what he terms “general interest intermediaries”) are seen to fill an important function by providing a range of common experiences and by exposing citizens to information they might not seek out on their own, which in turn promote social cohesion and deliberative democracy.

And while Sunstein does not broach the topic, there is no particular cause to believe that

progressives would have the upper-hand in a political system lacking his “general interest intermediaries.” Indeed, much of the right's media successes in recent years have been built on attacking any respected outlet which professes to practice objective journalism. And while conservatives have not had great successes in fundraising or volunteer mobilization online, they have had enormous successes using online media to affect the national political debate, most recently in the “Rathergate” scandal. So long as they have the best-organized and funded message machine, conservatives have the most to gain from a media environment dominated by partisan voices.

But Sunstein's argument, while intriguing, is far from ironclad. There is essentially no attention paid to the notion that traditional mass media might not intermediate the general interest so much as play to the lowest common denominator, sidelining democratic deliberation in favor of content with more commercial appeal. Moreover, Sunstein – who published *Republic.com* in 2001, shortly before the explosion of blogs, with their incestuous linking and open commenting – seems not to have considered the possibility that the “anyone can own a printing press” phenomenon might lead to wider participation in democratic deliberation.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

There is an odd assumption about civic engagement built into the thinking of many of the writers discussed thus far. Whether optimistic or pessimistic about the Internet's civic impact, they assume that civil society is “bottom-up” in character: constituted of a variety of interpersonal social networks which exist apart from institutional political life. They are not unique in taking this view – as Theda Skocpol writes:

For some years now, America's most visible and loquacious politicians, academics, and pundits have proclaimed that voluntary groups flourish best apart from active national government - and disconnected from politics. The downplaying of the governmental and political wellsprings of civic engagement is subtle among academics and middle-of-the-road commentators but quite blatant among conservative pundits. As Christopher Beem shows in a wide-ranging review, contemporary writers of all stripes focus on local community and consider

“governmental actions, and the actions of large political organizations ... at best irrelevant to, and, at worst, inimical” to a healthy civil society.⁴⁷

Clearly Joe Trippi and his ilk cannot be accused of being apolitical. But for political actors engaged in electoral campaigns and policy advocacy, they display surprisingly little concern with major political institutions. Though the Dean campaigners and MoveOn.org have unquestionably spilled a great deal of (virtual) ink challenging the policies of the Bush administration, the antidote is invariably a grassroots collection of loosely-connected individuals, rather than a formal, chapter-based, membership organization. Meanwhile, some progressive bloggers have become skeptical or downright hostile towards all large organizations, even progressive ones. Chris Bowers, of the popular blog MyDD, writes:

... civic engagement itself has changed. Specifically, individual engagement in the public sphere is now driven primarily by small, self-starting, disparate collectives rather than by participation within large, centralized, mass membership, civic organizations. Despite this shift, ... we simply apply the new resources we have toward replicating older models of political influence through voter contact structures that no longer match the way individuals connect to the public sphere. The wave of new activists who became interested and engaged in the political process through small, self-starting collectives were turned into old-school representatives of large, centralized organizations ... The wave of new money collected from [sic] small donors was used to make even larger television ad buys than ever before, even though everyone knows such ad buys are becoming less effective by the day. In other words, we took people [who] became interested in the political process through the new public sphere and directed them to engage in the very activities that had been so ineffective in reaching them for the past few decades...⁴⁸

Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, better known as Kos, is less verbose but oddly celebratory in discussing the decline of traditional left-leaning organizations: “Once upon a time, party officials feared NARAL, they feared the unions, they feared the Sierra Club, they feared trial lawyers, they feared NOW, they feared the NAACP, they feared Latino groups, and so on. For the first time, it looks like they're starting to fear people, not special interest groups.”⁴⁹

It can be argued that much of this attitude traces back, perhaps indirectly, to Robert Putnam. In Skocpol's words, he “privileges interpersonal ties above all other forms of social and

political activity, because he believes such interactions uniquely foster trust and cooperation.⁵⁰

While they might disagree about whether such ties can be developed online,⁵¹ Robert Putnam and most of the Internet enthusiasts discussed here are clearly united on this point. In their interest in decentralized and unstructured civic formations, they echo the conventional wisdom about an earlier era of civic life, as described by Theda Skocpol:

Imagining that U.S. civic society was local and intimate, [scholars and pundits] envision voluntary groups as originally bottom-up and scattered creations, fashioned here and there in relatively bounded communities by immediate neighbors and personal friends. According to accepted wisdom, voluntary groups once had room to flourish in the absence of supralocal governance.⁵²

The problem, in her view, is that such conventional wisdom is false:

I present systematic evidence that classic American civic associations were large and translocal networks, not self-enclosed bodies restricted to particular places ... Classic voluntary associations ... were usually federations that brought citizens together across class lines while linking thousands of local groups to one another and to representatively governed centers of state and national activity.⁵³

The technophiles and skeptics discussed previously are also relatively united on a further point: the decline in civic engagement, or at least the related phenomenon of social alienation, is primarily the result of social and cultural forces – specifically, exposure to broadcast media. But a growing body of academic literature criticizes social capital theorists for the emphasis placed on such forces at the expense of formal political institutions. Sheri Berman argues:

We need to shift our focus back ... from looking at how social context shapes the performance of political institutions to looking at the crucial role played by political institutionalization in shaping the character of civil society and its impact on political development. The most important difference between civil and uncivil polities and well-functioning and problematic democracies, I contend, is not to be found in an analysis of social and cultural factors, but rather in an examination of political institutions.⁵⁴

For her part, Skocpol emphasizes the role of government in shaping American civic life. Federal investment postal service, she argues, were particularly important in enabling groups to cooperate across great distances,⁵⁵ a situation not dissimilar to federal investment in developing the Internet. In charting the same decline in civic organizations discussed by Putnam, she suggests that

changes to organizational life “did not happen incrementally,” “nor did they simply bubble up from below,” but were the result of various institutional forces (including governmental action).⁵⁶

The contrast between the two views of civic engagement comes into even sharper relief when we consider the rise of the Christian right, to which many progressive online activists compare themselves. MoveOn.org brags that they have more “members” (e-mail subscribers) than the Christian Coalition did at its peak. And just after Dean captured the DNC chairmanship, *The Boston Globe* ran a curious story:

Fourteen years after the Rev. Pat Robertson's failed Republican presidential bid morphed into the Christian Coalition, Dean copied the TV evangelist by launching a political action committee [Democracy for America] to field and financially support scores of like-minded candidates across the country, for offices from town clerk to Congress.

Now ... the Dean team hopes the candidates he backed in 2004 can seed a movement to tug his party away from the center, as evangelicals succeeded in doing inside the GOP in the early 1990s.⁵⁷

Nearly a month earlier, a long-time Dean volunteer in Seattle had explained the work of Dean activists in almost exactly the same terms:

I think there's a sense among the Dean community that taking the country back means doing what the Christian Coalition did on the right, on the left: making the Democratic Party, at a national level, answer to grassroots activists, in one way or another. I mean, like it or not, we're in a place where we're mentally matching the Christian Coalition. We used to think of them as Nazis, but now we have to understand that they were grassroots activists ... And so I think there's been a lot of looking at that, and seeing how they moved their party to the right.

It is unquestionably true that the Christian Coalition, and the Christian right more broadly, gradually developed a highly-mobilized and politically effective grassroots base. But once again, the implicit notion that they have done so in a decentralized, spontaneous manner does not square with reality. The Christian right is grounded in the preexisting, tight-knit organizational structures of evangelical churches. It has always been organized and led by televangelists and New Right elites, who work closely with local leaders (especially clergy) to coordinate activities, particularly in election years.

The grassroots of Democracy for America, meanwhile, consists almost entirely of people – many of whom lack tight-knit social networks – who came together only through supporting the Dean campaign. As we will see, they are provided with very little direction from the organization's leaders, and are encouraged to act on their own initiative to develop their own totally autonomous local organizations.

Thus, history and political theory suggests that without translocal confederation and national leadership, 2004's Internet-organized political efforts are unlikely to grow roots. The Internet has been an immensely valuable tool for bringing together passionate political newcomers, a role it is likely to continue to play in the future among any constituency frustrated with their exclusion from the national debate. But that alone is not enough to win election victories or re-energize the civic life of the nation.

In the pages that follow, I chronicle and analyze the impressive efforts of the community of activists brought together by the Dean campaign in Washington state. Motivated by a deep sense of civic duty, they have come together – sometimes in the tens of thousands – in a valiant effort to take their country back from the recklessness, selfishness, and militarism of the Bush administration. And much like the conservative activists of forty years ago, the only fruit their efforts have borne so far is growing influence in a fractious and nearly-powerless political party.

The Dean Campaign in Washington State

The real innovation was [Howard] Dean's use of the Internet to build a core of grassroots activists and donors. Dean and his followers are correct to regard this as an historic achievement and to believe that building upon it is essential. Where they go wrong is in believing that the movement was particular to Dean. Fundamentally, the liberal grassroots was awakened not by the former Vermont governor but by the radicalism, partisanship, and mendacity of the Bush administration. This movement coalesced around Dean at first because he positioned himself as the candidate who would stand up to Bush. But it outlived his campaign precisely because he was merely its vehicle rather than its inspiration.

– *The New Republic*⁵⁸

That the leading journal of American centrism would feel the need to hail the grassroots activism of Howard Dean's presidential campaign as it futilely editorialized against his candidacy for chair of the Democratic National Committee is just one sign of the importance many Democrats are assigning to the so-called Deaniacs.⁵⁹ Another is that Bob Borosage and Katrina vanden Heuvel, writing in *The Nation*, would explicitly claim the constituency for their own left-leaning coalition, arguing that the party must pursue the “potential for building powerful movements based upon citizen involvement and small-donor support ... if the debate is to break out of the narrow constraints of the Clinton years.”⁶⁰ For his part, Dean, in accepting the chairmanship, demanded that his party “recognize that [its] strength doesn't come from the consultants down, it comes from grassroots up.”⁶¹

If Democrats' internecine battles in recent years have been fought over how Bill Clinton won in 1992 (and Al Gore halfway-lost in 2000), those emerging today are in part over how Howard Dean spectacularly failed to even win the nomination in 2004. Everyone knows his campaign raised tens of millions of dollars from hundreds of thousands of political newcomers using the Internet, but the consensus ends there, diverging into competing narratives centering on the power of technology, the importance of grassroots organizing, or various targets of insurgent political anger. Most such narratives reflect more on the political positions of their proponents than on any observed reality of the Dean phenomenon.

Nevertheless, despite deep divisions among differing elements of the Democratic Party, there exists a basic consensus (ultimately affirmed by the DNC chairmanship) that the party needs the continued loyalty of Dean supporters moving forward. This, more than anything, is why the Dean campaign is worthy of study: as an insurgent primary candidacy, it was exceptional only in the spectacular nature of its fall. But by the time the campaign crashed in Iowa for fairly traditional reasons (from rhetorical gaffes by the candidate to a nasty television ad war), a new breed of political activist – mobilized almost exclusively through the Internet – had emerged.

Ray Minchew is perhaps the ultimate example of such an activist. A little more than two years ago, he was an administrative assistant at Microsoft with a fierce but undirected anger at the Bush administration. A little more than a year ago, when Howard Dean chose Seattle as the venue to announce the formation of his new political organization, Democracy for America, it was Ray who introduced him. Today, as the head of one of Washington state's newest political organizations, Democracy for Washington, Ray is one of the more visible progressive activists in the state.

His narrative of his own political mobilization goes something like this:

A political greenhorn (excepting a brief bit of volunteering for Clinton in 1992), Ray decided in late 2002 to become involved in the upcoming presidential campaign, both because of his anti-Bush feelings and his regret at having not been involved in Bill Bradley's 2000 primary campaign. His first stop was Politics1.com (a popular non-partisan clearinghouse for political information) where he noticed Howard Dean listed among the likely candidates for the Democratic nomination. Ray remembered that he had admired Dean's signing of the nation's first same-sex civil unions bill in 2000, and decided that he would support Dean while keeping an eye out for a more viable option in the expectation that the fledgling campaign would go nowhere.

Then, on February 21, 2003, as the Bush administration moved rapidly towards war, Dean addressed the DNC at its semiannual meeting. After a cursory note of thanks for his advance team,

he immediately went in for the kill:

What I want to know is why in the world the Democratic party leadership is supporting the president's unilateral attack on Iraq?

What I want to know is why are Democratic party leaders supporting tax cuts? The question is not how big the tax cut should be, the question should be can we afford a tax cut at all with the largest deficit in the history of this country?

What I want to know is why we're fighting in Congress about the Patient's Bill of Rights when the Democratic party ought to be standing up for health care for every single American man, woman, and child in this country?

What I want to know is why our folks are voting for the president's No Child Left Behind bill that leaves every child behind, every teacher behind, every school board behind, and every property tax payer behind? [from the audience: "I want to know, too!"]

I'm Howard Dean and I'm here to represent the Democratic wing of the Democratic party.⁶²

By the end of the now-famous speech, he was practically roaring:

My political career is about change, and this campaign is about change. And what we're going to do here is we're first going to change this party, because this party needs to look in the mirror and ask itself, is this party about the next election or is it about changing America?⁶³

Watching at home on C-SPAN, Ray was electrified. Within fifteen minutes, he had set up an online discussion group and registered a new domain name ("wa4dean.com"), and he was off to the races, quickly becoming an acknowledged leader in the Washington state Dean campaign, eventually joining the campaign staff and spearheading the organizing of his fellow Dean enthusiasts after the campaign collapsed.

There are several interesting features to Ray's story: his unbridled enthusiasm for his chosen candidate, his instinctive use of the Internet, his personal initiative in the absence of a formal mobilizing structure, and so forth. But perhaps the most important of these is that it is, in a few important respects, inaccurate.

The reality is that by the time he saw that speech, Ray was already among the small fraction of Americans actively attentive to the Democratic presidential primary campaign and the handful who were enthusiastic supporters of Howard Dean. I know this because I checked the dates – he started the Yahoo! group on February 2, and purchased the domain name on February

17. By the time Dean launched his fiery attack at the DNC meeting, Ray had already attended the campaign's first Seattle Meetup and was in communication with other grassroots enthusiasts about how to get efforts underway in Washington state. Moreover, Ray had been participating in a Democratic Party Yahoo! group for over a year – offering comments which revealed an usual savvy about local, state, and national politics and an eagerness to use the online forum as a springboard for political organizing. He may not have been a political player before Howard Dean, but he was a bystander looking for a good opportunity get on the field.

I do not offer these details to allege deception on Ray's part – I have no doubt that the chronological inaccuracies in his account were completely unintentional. My point here is a more fundamental one. All communities tell stories about themselves to emphasize important aspects of their common identity and purpose. But for this group of activists, the construction of a metanarrative, enabled in part by the never-ending networked conversations of the blogosphere, has become a uniquely immediate and urgent undertaking, in part because everyone from *The New Republic* to *The Nation* wants to do it for them. For Ray, that construction includes reflexively portraying himself as more politically naive than he was, and falsely centering his own mobilization on a speech which came to be seen as a watershed moment for the Dean campaign (and is widely cited in the personal narratives of Dean supporters). This tendency presents a significant challenge in attempting to piece together the reality of the Dean phenomenon from the observations offered by its participants (including my own), but it strongly suggests that the task is a valuable one: no one bothers to contest the meaning of events which they consider insignificant.

WHY SEATTLE?

On the eve of the November election, Sandeep Kaushik, a reporter for a Seattle alternative weekly and one of the first journalists in the nation to cover the Dean campaign in any depth, made the seemingly provincial claim that “if John Kerry wins next week, he will owe this city his thanks because of, not in spite of, Seattle's long flirtation with Dean.”⁶⁴ Kerry's alleged debt to Dean

referred to the notion, widely expressed (even by many prominent Democrats) that Dean's tough rhetoric helped the party find its voice in the 2004 cycle.

But Dean's clear debt to Seattle has been the subject of far less comment. He carried Seattle when Washington Democrats caucused on February 7, and the state sent more Dean-pledged delegates to the Democratic National Convention than any other (including Vermont, the only one Dean carried). My own rudimentary analysis suggests that, on a per capita basis, Seattleites gave more money to the Dean campaign than New Yorkers or Angelenos. In absolute terms, the Seattle metro area gave over a half million dollars – more than the Las Vegas, Houston, Miami, Cincinnati, and St. Louis areas combined.⁶⁵

Yet Kaushik did not point to any of these conventional yardsticks. Instead, he described attending a campaign Meetup in April 2003:

As American armor rolled toward Baghdad—and the cringing Chihuahuas of the American media yapped their approval of the Bush administration's John Wayne-style determination to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction—close to 200 sad, angry, frightened, determined, Bush-loathing Seattle liberals gathered for an Internet-organized meetup [sic] in support of former Vermont Governor Howard Dean's presidential bid. The small room was packed. The crowd overflowed into the entryway, where people strained to hear what they could not see.

John Taylor, a city hall central staffer at the time, spoke that night. He had previously worked for Dean in Vermont, and had signed on as the volunteer Washington State director of the Dean campaign. Taylor vividly recalls how overwhelming the experience was, as the audience pummeled him with questions, both broad and narrow—How are we going to get the country to wake up? Where do I get Dean yard signs?—for which he had no answers. “It was an amazing night,” he remembers. “I’ll never forget that.”⁶⁶

In retrospect, it should not have been surprising that Seattle so quickly proved to be fertile ground for Howard Dean. The region has a tradition of liberal anti-war politics, which has dominated the state Democratic Party organization at least since the nuclear freeze movement in the 1980s. (The state platform, which invariably embraces such causes as death penalty abolition, single-payer healthcare, and marijuana decriminalization, is an object of quadrennial scorn from *The Seattle Times*.) But the state also has an independent populist streak which goes back to its

founding, and has most recently continued with voters' flirtation with John Anderson (10.6% in 1980), Ross Perot (23.7% in 1992), and Ralph Nader (4.1% in 2000), even as the state has moved more safely into the Democratic column. The city was a hotbed of anti-war sentiment in the run-up to the Iraq war: a neighborhood-based protest coalition organized enormous street protests and blanketed the city with red-white-and-blue "No Iraq War" signs.

But the mere presence of a dedicated liberal base cannot explain why Dean took off in Washington. For one thing, strong anecdotal evidence suggests that the dedicated volunteer backbone of the Dean campaign was mostly new to political organizing, a subject to which I will return. Many of the most committed peace activists embraced Dennis Kucinich's candidacy. But more fundamentally, there would have been no way for disgruntled liberals in early 2003 to find Howard Dean, much less wage a largely autonomous political campaign on his behalf, without the Internet.

As it happens, the Pacific Northwest is the most net-connected region of the country. According to an August 2003 report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 68% of adults in Washington and Oregon use the Internet, well above the national average of 59%.⁶⁷ Moreover, the region has long been a national leader in Internet use, making for "the most experienced regional user population in the country."⁶⁸ Compared to Internet users nationally, those in the Pacific Northwest are better educated, whiter, older, and slightly more male.⁶⁹ They are more likely to go online in the average day and appear to be more efficient,⁷⁰ frequently spending less than 30 minutes online and being much less likely than their national peers to do so for no particular reason.⁷¹ The report also finds that, in a decline from previous years, "the rate at which users access the Internet from work is the lowest in the country,"⁷² which I strongly suspect can be attributed to high levels of unemployment in the high-tech sector during the 2002 survey period, a situation which may have also played a role in the Dean phenomenon.

The portrait of social capital in the Seattle area is considerably more complex than that of

its political ideology or Internet-connectedness. Seattleites like to think of themselves as more civil, literate, and thoughtful than the rest of the country, notions which the local press and popular culture often encourage them in, and which would seem consistent with a high level of social capital. Education is by far the best predictor of civic engagement, and residents of King County, which includes Seattle, are much better educated than the nation as a whole: 42.2% of those over 25 have a bachelor's degree, next to 26.5% nationally.⁷³ Robert Putnam's social capital index – combining measures of “community organizational life,” “engagement in public affairs,” “community volunteerism,” “informal sociability,” and “social trust”⁷⁴ – ranks Washington tenth,⁷⁵ the only state in the top ten dominated by an urban population.⁷⁶

Beneath the surface, however, there is cause to question the accuracy of the portrait of Seattle as a thriving civic community. Most of Putnam's measures appear to be averages running from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, which may obscure huge socioeconomic changes that have occurred in the state over the last few decades, such as the collapse of the timber economy, the loss of Boeing manufacturing jobs, massive migration from out of state, and the growth of the high-tech sector, each of which must have disrupted social networks to some degree. Unlike their more forward-thinking counterparts in neighboring Oregon, policymakers in Washington have done little to curtail explosive suburban sprawl or develop mass transit, incurring what Putnam calls a “sprawl civic penalty.”⁷⁷ King County residents (and Dean supporters, according to a Pew study discussed in the next chapter) are also slightly more likely to have been born after WWII than their national counterparts,⁷⁸ a demographic which Putnam argues is uniquely responsible for declining civic engagement.⁷⁹

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is reason to believe that residents of the region are less-connected to the tight-knit social networks of kith and kin than their national counterparts – what social capital theorists call “bonding social capital.” Only 42.6% of King County residents were born in Washington state, whereas nationally almost 60% of Americans were born in their

current state of residence.⁸⁰ Religion continues to be the single largest source of social capital in the United States, and the Pacific Northwest continues to be the least-churched region of the country. Only 31.8% of Washingtonians claim membership in a Christian church, the third-lowest rate in the nation and well below the national figure of 47.4%.⁸¹

From all of these disparate indicators, a picture (consistent with the Pew study) begins to emerge of a specific population in the Puget Sound region – politically independent-minded, anti-war, well-educated, Internet-savvy middle-aged people who care about their community but lack the well-developed social networks which are typically key to political mobilization – which was to prove a critical one for the Howard Dean campaign. In early 2003, as a popular president and a bipartisan congressional majority marched unrestrained towards war, an unlikely collection of such Seattlelites logged on the Internet in search of political redemption for a nation which suddenly seemed very foreign to them. What they found, more than anything, was each other.

BEGINNINGS

Joe Trippi recounts Dean's May 2003 appearance in Seattle as something of a turning point:

That early in a campaign ... it was notoriously hard to gather people for a campaign event. ... Here we were trying to get a crowd with no food at an event in a state that wouldn't be on the table for months. ...

But we did have the Internet. Meetups were spreading, and that was good, but it was also only one day a month. A campaign is ten years of events, meetings, and rallies compressed into one year's time. So whenever we had an event, we turned to the best organizing tool we had: the Internet. In Seattle, for instance, we had sent out about two hundred e-mails to our supporters in the local Dean organizations, hoping they could help us raise a decent crowd, maybe even get a few hundred people without having to resort to free bacon.

“Well?” I asked.

There was a pause. “Good Lord, you're not going to believe this,” the governor said. “There have to be a thousand people here.”

There were, in fact, *twelve hundred* people waiting for him at Town Hall in Seattle that day. They had to close the doors and turn people away. ...

What had happened – what would happen for the rest of the campaign – was that in Seattle, those two hundred people became little campaign managers, putting up signs and posting flyers, arranging media, and passing the word on to their friends.⁸²

No doubt not all two hundred e-mail recipients became “little campaign managers,” but

Trippi's analysis is apt. If anything, his description underestimates the scale of the then-nascent autonomous campaign effort in Washington, which had begun with a perhaps two dozen people at a Meetup in February – what Ray Minchew self-deprecatingly describes as “random nutjobs supporting a guy with no chance.” By March, at the urging of Burlington, Ray had organized two simultaneous houseparties which raised \$5,000 for the campaign, a remarkable accomplishment for a political novice who describes himself as “not a sociable person.”

Meanwhile, the campaign attracted some more established political players, including John Taylor, the above-mentioned former Dean staffer who was then working in City Hall; Greg Rodriguez, the (volunteer) chair of the King County Democratic Party; and Betty Means, an old political hand with more than two decades of experience in state politics. None were working officially for the campaign, but all were on the host committee for Dean's May appearance, as was Ray, who, before the details were even settled, wrote to the Yahoo! group he had created to spread the good news, adding “Get your signs, get prescription bottles filled with coins, get buttons and hats and shirts, and be ready to follow him around making a ruckus for the cameras when he’s in town! Woo hoo!”⁸³

The week after, in an e-mail to the *Democracy in Action* website, Taylor described the Washington effort:

The Dean Campaign has no paid staff in Washington state. It is an entirely volunteer grass roots [sic] effort... With that said, the campaign has been able to organize volunteers so that we were able to host a 1200-1400 person rally for Governor Dean's visit to Seattle last week, and we have a presence at state-wide events... We are a grass roots campaign, which is highly dependent on the internet. The national campaign is using the internet, particularly Meetup.com, to identify activists and integrate them into the campaign structure. We have over 1000 volunteers state-wide in Washington as a consequence of Meet-up [sic].⁸⁴

Indeed, Meetups continued to be the heart and soul of the campaign, drawing supporters by the hundreds and quickly pressing the technical and organizational limits of the New York-based service, several times directing hordes of people into ridiculously small or poorly located venues.

However, the precise purpose of the Meetups, beyond connecting supporters with one another, was never exactly clear.

This was in evidence at the first Meetup I attended that August. By then Meetup.com had the location issue slightly better under control, and I had a choice of two public libraries on the Eastside (a collection of affluent suburbs across Lake Washington from Seattle). The general tone and structure seemed to resemble a twelve-step meeting or a religious revival as much as a presidential campaign. After a brief introduction, an obviously overwhelmed Ray, following the official agenda from Burlington, asked if anyone wanted to share why they'd become involved in the Dean campaign. What followed was a remarkable outpouring of emotion and personal stories. The details differed, but nearly everyone expressed a profound anger at the Bush administration and a sense of exhilaration in finding like-minded souls determined to channel that anger into effective political action.

Others were hungry for information and a plan of action and anxious to begin preparing for the caucuses (which were still six months away). Burlington supplied stationery for Meetup attendees to write letters to undecided voters in New Hampshire, having done the same in Iowa at the previous month's Meetup (and claiming, at least publicly, to have seen a positive impact in their polling). For his part, Ray recalls being frustrated with the self-congratulatory nature of the Meetups by that point, and personally anxious for a concrete plan of action.

Meanwhile, the more traditional and official aspects of the campaign continued to expand. When Dean officially declared his candidacy in late June, Burlington paid to rent a conference room for supporters to see the speech replayed and hear from state campaign leaders, including King County Councilmember Dwight Pelz, who was one of the campaign's earliest local endorsers and strongest supporters. That organizers were in fact serious about organizing for the caucus could be seen in the presence of detailed precinct maps at the volunteer sign-up table. By mid-August, Betty Means had been officially hired as the Washington state director.

Nationally, the campaign was gaining strength in a major way. It shattered the online fundraising records set by John McCain and the Democratic ones set by Bill Clinton. Dean appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. And then, in what many now look back on as the highpoint of the campaign, he came to Seattle on his whirlwind four-day ten-city “Sleepless Summer Tour.” Joe Trippi writes:

... But as great as those early stops were, it was when we landed in Seattle that I knew that this thing was huge, that it was bigger than even I had imagined.

As the *Seattle Weekly* later reported, the event there was planned with “little advance buzz or advertising,” nothing more than a stage thrown up in front of the Westlake Mall for a little afternoon rally. We pulled up and I wasn't sure I was seeing right. I climbed up on the stage and my jaw dropped. The crowd filled the courtyard and just kept going – *more than ten thousand people* – around trees and across streets, blue Dean signs as far as the eye could see, an army of people of every age and income and ethnicity, chanting the campaign's *real* theme: “I AM Howard Dean!” In what may be the most unbelievable thing that happened in the campaign, I was at a loss for words. (Other than “holy” and “shit.”)⁸⁵

It was a spectacular coming out for a largely autonomous campaign which by then had become a local grassroots juggernaut – concrete proof that beneath all the hype lay a large, enthusiastic, passionate group of true believers. I have attended dozens of political rallies of various sorts in downtown Seattle, many of them in precisely the same location, and this dwarfed all except the famous WTO demonstrations in 1999. The chair of the Washington State Democratic Party, Paul Berendt, was on hand to offer his official endorsement, a risky decision which resulted in cries of foul play from supporters of other candidates, including at least one of the state party's wealthiest and most generous donors.

THE CAMPAIGN TAKES SHAPE

The unlikely ascendancy of the Dean campaign, both nationally and locally, soon meant that it was no longer merely the domain of enthusiastic novices gathering in coffee shops. The relatively early date of Washington's caucuses and the support of much of the state's Democratic Party establishment ensured that the campaign went from an ephemeral social and online phenomenon to an established organizational effort in a way that it never did in much of the

country. A relatively large campaign office, in a prime location close to downtown, was opened in October. On the other hand, Washington's caucuses were not quite early enough to make Washington a sustained focus of attention and resources from Burlington. The result was a campaign that seemed to be operating at several levels – a semi-traditional field effort aimed at mobilizing supporters to win the caucuses, a grassroots movement driven by social networking technology, and a locus for party insiders jockeying for position on what looked increasingly like the winning horse.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this made for a rather intense degree of internecine conflict. Various factions formed among the staff and steering committee, vying for leadership and control. Burlington sent at least two experienced campaign professionals to the state, each of whom was forced to give up and go home, the victim of various machinations and power plays. Finally, at the end of their rope, they hired Bill Trezevant, a lawyer and political pro from Buffalo, New York, as Deputy State Director. He later explained his view of the situation:

They had tried to solve the problem from Vermont, a number of different times doing a number of different things. At its core, I think that there were people in Vermont who just didn't understand campaigns. They had sent multiple people into Washington State and all these people came from the outside. Those people came in, and tried to superimpose, or had a very different notion of what was going on. All that stuff did not work and the state-based campaign was literally about to implode, and there was a very nasty fight going on.⁸⁶

Bill did not solve the problem entirely – various levels of infighting continued, even beyond the campaign's official demise – but he did manage to survive, navigating the personal and political conflicts of the office and implementing what he called “yes-based management” to handle the sometimes overwhelming passion of the grassroots enthusiasts.

And they were legion. Most campaigns have regular volunteers – mostly senior citizens, stay-at-home parents, and the occasional high-school or college student – who stop by for an hour or two of office work a few times a week. The Seattle Dean office had hundreds of such people, and more than a dozen full- or part-time unpaid “staff” (many of them skilled professionals), who

handled everything from constituency outreach to database troubleshooting. (In fact, it was often unclear who was on the payroll or held any kind of official position.) Few had any apparent campaign or political experience and most by that point were accustomed to the entrepreneurial campaign encouraged by the campaign's "you have the power" message and facilitated by online tools such as Meetups and Yahoo! Groups. The volunteers Trippi praised as "little campaign managers" were often poor at following instructions, extremely demanding of campaign staff, and likely as not to spend more time distracting each other with chatter about the campaign blog than calling likely caucus-goers.

They were also full of ideas for creative and unusual projects, one of which ultimately became something of an obsession for Bill. Senior staff on most campaigns would probably not prove particularly receptive to a random volunteer seeking a hundred dollars to produce a cardboard cutout of the candidate from a graphic found on an unofficial website. For Bill, however, that was part of "yes-based management." "Flat Howard" was positioned immediately inside the office front door, and Bill accosted everyone who walked in with a Polaroid camera and took a picture to put up on the wall. He later opined:

It had two effects. New people that were coming in could look at this wall and see all these other different people here, whether they knew them or not, no big deal. But then they'd want their picture taken and their picture up on the wall. The second thing is, it reinforced what we were trying to say about this campaign. That this campaign was about people-to-people - and getting local - and yes based management.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, the personal and organizational dynamic of the office was often more than a little tense, often in ways which a lowly intern such as myself failed to grasp. Betty was officially in charge, and did in fact manage much of the public side of the campaign, speaking to the press and courting local political leaders. But at least by the time I came to the office, Bill was in charge of day-to-day operations, at least to the degree that anyone was. His seemingly touchy-feely talk about empowerment notwithstanding, Bill was a demanding manager with a hard-nosed East Coast

style which bordered on brusque and did not always mesh well with the more relaxed ethos of Pacific Northwestern liberalism. Moreover, the contentious office politics often meant undertaking many activities – some mundane, some strategically critical – in secret in order to avoid likely internal conflicts.

Into this unusual environment stepped David Bailey, a committed socialist and former professional chef with a seemingly infinite well of energy but no experience working in political campaigns. David had attended a few campaign events and began volunteering at the campaign office before unexpectedly finding himself hired as the office manager by Bill when the latter had a falling out with the previous one. David looks back on his experience with a certain degree of amazement, comparing the chaos of the campaign office to that of restaurants which fold on their opening weekend and reporting, with a certain hint of glee, that campaign stress increased his blood pressure enough for his physician to suspect amphetamine addiction.

David, when not attempting to navigate the turf wars, was slavishly devoted to and fascinated with Meetups. By the end of 2003 there were about fifty of them statewide, including more than a dozen unofficial gatherings in Seattle as a response to overcrowding at the two official venues. David spent much of his time on the phone helping to coordinate Meetup hosts with the official campaign, and when inclement weather put a damper on many January Meetups, he spearheaded the organizing of special “Mid-month Meetups,” apart from Meetup.com, as a way of bringing Dean supporters together to regroup and recharge before the final push for the caucuses on February 7. Another intern and I wound up with the somewhat frustrating task of convincing the already-overcommitted Meetup hosts to participate in the venture. Managing a shifting list of hosts, dates, and locations gave me a new appreciation for the logistical challenges faced by Meetup.com, but the events' success was hard to gauge; by the time they were actually held, the Iowa collapse had put a significant damper on Dean's base of support.

Meanwhile, the official message from Burlington to supporters was that Washington was to

serve as a “firewall” of support in the event that Dean's support began to unravel in previous primaries (presumably those on February 3, in states more conservative than Iowa and New Hampshire). It was never clear, however, exactly how much strategic importance was placed on Washington state, or even how attentive Burlington was to the details of the Washington campaign. There were occasional signs that it was operating with an exceptional degree of autonomy, such as my being tasked with drafting talking points for supporters to use in criticizing other candidates at their precinct caucuses. If Burlington had wanted us using such a document, they certainly would not have entrusted writing it to an intern in a state office.

Amidst all of the chaos, however, there was a semi-traditional field operation underway. Primarily, that meant calling known Democrats to identify likely Dean supporters in advance of the caucus. As with much of the rest of the campaign, however, this phonebanking program was decentralized to supporters using an online tool. Instead of gathering volunteers to make calls from campaign offices or union hall basements (where they could be closely supervised) using printed lists, they were given accounts to access the campaign's voter file through the web, enabling them to make calls to voters in their precinct from the comfort of home.

The system, which was developed by a Dean supporter in Arizona, was an innovative one (similar tools were used by MoveOn.org and others to make calls to swing states before the general election), but it was not without its drawbacks. It required several full-time staff to run the system, train the volunteers in using it, and provide tech support. In some cases calls were made at too slow a pace, or not by made at all, a situation which was difficult to deal with remotely from the campaign office. Finally, the preponderance of Seattle volunteers meant that assigning them nearby voters left large chunks of the state poorly covered. For this reason, a relative handful of office volunteers used computer-generated lists of voters in rural and eastern Washington, which was fairly slow going.

THE MOMENT OF RECKONING

In the end, all of it made little difference. The national campaign, nearly out of money after losing in Iowa and New Hampshire, made a strategic decision to dedicate its few remaining resources to a long-shot chance for victory in Wisconsin's February 17 primary. Some who worked in the Seattle office are convinced that the campaign would have stood a better chance betting on Washington but that the national campaign leadership was skittish about investing in the state because of the history of intense infighting there. In any case, no amount of grassroots effort on the part of Dean enthusiasts stood much chance of reversing Kerry's enormous momentum, especially without significant spending on paid broadcast media. (An independent group, which was later to claim credit for Dean's surprise victory in Vermont after officially dropping out, did spend \$15,000 – a relative drop in the bucket – on radio ads.)

In previous years, Washington state had held a presidential preference primary, which – unbeknownst to most voters – the Democratic Party did not actually use to allocate delegates. Because of this, and because there was no race on the Republican side, the state legislature canceled the 2004 primary to save money. That cancellation, undoubtedly amplified by a rising tide of partisan anger at the Bush administration, made for a record caucus turnout, far beyond the limited list of known Democrats the campaigns were working from (Washington has no registration by party). And while Howard Dean loyalists did in fact turn in force to carry the city of Seattle, he did not fare so well outside it; Kerry won every county in the state. Even the city's Eastside suburbs, which are dominated by high-tech firms and supplied many of the campaign's volunteers (including Ray Minchew to myself), went for Kerry. The prevailing mood at the caucuses, according to many, was a desire to see a winning candidate; many Kerry supporters claimed to have been inclined towards Dean prior to Iowa.

Howard Dean withdrew from the race after losing the Wisconsin primary ten days later.

LIVING TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY

But then something remarkable happened – most of the committed Dean supporters

showed little interest in going back to life as usual. Many continued posting on blogs and Yahoo! groups – a new one of which was created to communicate with Dean delegates elected at the precinct level. Kelley Bevans, a long-term volunteer who eventually became the regular host for the primary Seattle Meetup, remembers a month-long period of great intensity, as campaign volunteers attended as many events as possible, seeking a vehicle to carry on the work of the campaign. Ray, who had surreptitiously obtained a large database of Dean supporters in the state, was committed to keeping them together in some way. Convinced that there was a need for “a place for people to go,” he organized a forum for Dean supporters to meet the three Democratic gubernatorial primary candidates (though he backed off an initial plan to vote on an endorsement), which received enough press coverage for the Republican candidate to complain of his exclusion.

Then, in March, Dean chose Seattle as one of the venues to announce the launching of a new grassroots organization, Democracy for America. Though he was fairly short on specifics, it was enough to inspire a cadre of committed supporters, now mostly over their post-campaign bouts of depression, to create their own new organization, Democracy for Washington (DFW), complete with a logo and website. Ray, whose stock as an acknowledged leader of the community had only risen when he was selected to introduce Dean at the podium, became the organization's executive director. DFW had limited success with a fundraising appeal for the state Senate Democratic Campaign Committee which drew a few hundred dollars, but was otherwise mostly inactive through the Spring. Meetup participation also gradually declined.

Meanwhile, individual Dean supporters went on to a variety of political projects, some of them totally independent and entrepreneurial. One, who had spearheaded regular public appearances for “Flat Howard” (a cardboard cutout of the candidate) around Seattle during the campaign, filled his RV up with Democratic campaign paraphernalia and spent the next several months with his family distributing it in swing states. Others focused on registering voters in Seattle, setting up tables at street festivals and other public places. Some became involved in “Run

Against Bush,” a national effort for recreational runners to go on weekly jogs sporting anti-Bush apparel.

Perhaps more significantly, dozens became heavily involved in local Democratic Party organizations (organized by state legislative district), which are traditionally dominated by an aging cadre of self-important party loyalists. Since the earliest days of the Dean campaign, supporters had been encouraged to attend these meetings and to sign up as “precinct committee officers” – an elected office, mandated by state law, which often sits vacant. Many continued in this role, and still others filed to appear on the September primary ballot. (Nearly a year later, when all the local party organizations in the state elected new officers, many found themselves as chairs and vice-chairs for their legislative districts.)

On the recommendation of John Taylor, Ray was hired by U.S. Senator Patty Murray's reelection campaign to work on their Internet strategy, an experience he found very different from the free-form character of the Dean campaign. Like many Democratic campaigns, the Murray staff was impressed with the online fundraising success of the Dean campaign and eager to imitate it. They were not, however, interested in imitating the Dean campaign's unconventional approach to message and organization. Though their effective and textbook approach to message discipline won respect from political professionals and helped neutralize what could have been a serious Republican challenger, it often conflicted with Ray's instinctive approach to online organizing, which depended on immediate, open, and free-flowing communication with and among grassroots supporters.

Many of Ray's suggestions – using Meetup.com, creating an official blog with comments, purchasing fundraising ads on other blogs – were ultimately adopted, but with a hesitancy and a lack of organizational support that limited their effectiveness. By late that Summer, the official campaign blog featured little besides a daily news update. In another attempt to build online enthusiasm, Ray began posting “insider” updates on Daily Kos, a practice which landed him in hot

water with superiors when Google added Daily Kos to its news section; he continued posting such updates, replacing “Patty Murray” with “the senior senator” so as to avoid showing up on searches.

RAISON D'ETRE?

The precise function of Democracy for Washington, however, remained unclear. The challenge was a peculiar one: most political organizations begin with a fairly clear mission and struggle to attract a large base of supporters, but DFW faced exactly the reverse situation. An energetic group of prolific e-mailers discussed the latest campaign news on a Yahoo! group. In June, Ray and David hit upon the brilliant idea of buying out a showing of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* on opening night as a fundraiser; the response was so overwhelming that they bought and sold out a second screening as well, for a total of 1,600 attendees. But even enthusiastic “Dean Democrats” gradually became frustrated with the perceived lack of responsiveness on the part of the party establishment – unreturned phone calls, slighted volunteers, and so forth.

Meanwhile, at the national level, Democracy for America was raising millions of dollars and boasting of a serious investment in electing “socially progressive, fiscally responsible candidates” at the state and municipal level. There was a disconnect, however, between the rhetoric and the reality, as the organization sent out e-mails appealing for donations to a seemingly haphazard collection of candidates, many of whom stood no serious chance of winning (while others, such as Barack Obama, obviously did not need the help). Furthermore, the practice of delivering the lists in sets of twelve – a “Dean Dozen” – without any kind of repetition for individual candidates, virtually guaranteed that they would raise a relative pittance.

The Dean Dozens ultimately included two candidates in Washington state. The first was a smart and obvious choice: Tami Green, a registered nurse and SEIU activist who had narrowly lost a bid for the same state legislative seat two years prior. The second was less so: Laura Ruderman, an ambitious state representative who gave up her seat to wage a quixotic challenge against the

incumbent Secretary of State, a liberal Republican who had already embraced her signature campaign issue (paper audit trails for touchscreen voting machines). But DFA sometimes seemed hesitant, or perhaps incompetent, in its efforts to engage with Washington State supporters. They selected an official “state contact” who lived far outside Seattle and had not been particularly visible during the campaign. Ray and others in DFW sought support and guidance from DFA, but got little response.

By late Summer, there was a prevailing feeling of frustration among many in the Dean community, both with the lack of direction from Burlington and the lack of welcome from some of the more traditional Democratic campaigns. Meanwhile, I had returned home to Seattle and was beginning an internship with Progressive Majority, a national political action committee focused on electing a “farm team” of progressive candidates at the state and local level. Through a partnership formed at the national level, all of Progressive Majority's candidates were also endorsed by Howard Dean and DFA, so this seemed to be a perfect opportunity to connect former Dean volunteers with state legislative candidates who needed their help.

For the most part, that never happened. Burlington never seemed to figure out how to effectively encourage supporters to connect with campaigns, though they did make significant direct financial contributions. Howard Dean did hold a press conference to endorse Progressive Majority's candidates when he came to Seattle, but other plans were scaled back in favor of a joint fundraiser for DFA and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which was announced as his only public appearance in the city. A minor public relations fiasco ensued when the state Democratic Party advertised their own fundraiser with his name attached, resulting in sniping local press and angry Democrats (Dean ultimately did make an appearance at the event).

Also, by that point in the campaign cycle, some former Dean volunteers had found their own local candidates to support. But particularly outside the immediate Seattle area, many of these candidates were guaranteed losers running in safely Republican districts. It was enormously

frustrating to see enthusiastic, hard-working volunteers latch onto candidates which we knew were guaranteed to lose while we struggled to attract grassroots interest for good candidates in tight races.

PICKING SIDES

For others, heeding Dean's continuing call to “take back the Democratic Party,” insurgent primary challengers held great appeal. One such opportunity presented itself in Seattle's 36th legislative district when the Service Employees International Union backed a primary challenge to Rep. Helen Sommers, the powerful chair of the State House Appropriations Committee. Sommers is a longtime Democratic incumbent with deep roots in her district, but she had run afoul of the union by opposing a wage increase for home health care employees in a tight budget year. For many former Dean supporters, challenger Alice Woldt, a community activist with a record of grassroots anti-war politics, was the obvious choice.

Less obvious was the progressive choice in the state's gubernatorial primary. The surprise retirement of incumbent Gary Locke, whose centrist record had alienated much of the party's liberal base, created a seemingly open field. That vacuum was quickly filled, however, by the state's ambitious attorney general, Chris Gregoire. If anything, Gregoire was more centrist than Locke, but she won important early endorsements and led in fundraising from the very beginning. Initially, many progressive activists looked to former Supreme Court justice and political gadfly Phil Talmadge (who had entered the race even before Locke announced his retirement) but his campaign sputtered for lack of funds and he eventually withdrew from it entirely for medical reasons. The only option left, then, was King County Executive Ron Sims. Sims is articulate, charismatic, and African American, and he ultimately decided to run to the left, championing a comprehensive overhaul of the state's notoriously regressive tax system and publicly expressing his support for legalizing gay marriage. However, a mixed record as county executive, where he sometimes alienated key constituencies, hobbled his effort to establish himself as a viable

alternative to Gregoire.

Both candidates drew significant support from former Dean supporters. Dean Democrats helped torpedo a proposed Sommers endorsement by the 36th District party organization, and many appealed to DFA to include Woldt in one of the national Dean Dozen lists. Burlington, wary of delving into a provincial dispute which deeply divided the state's progressive community, did not do so, though they did make a campaign contribution and send a “letter of support” signed by Howard Dean – which conveniently arrived too late for the campaign to publicize it.

The core members of DFW, anxious to make their mark on the election and facing a short timetable in which to do it, decided to endorse both Woldt and Sims barely two weeks before the primary. The endorsements, announced only via the DFW Yahoo! group, ultimately carried very little weight, beyond a \$500 donation to the Woldt campaign, but there was intense backlash from those who disagreed and felt that they had no voice in the decision – including at least one member of the state legislature who had been a strong Dean supporter. Ray and others quickly felt the heat and realized they had made a mistake, but the incident was yet another reminder of the fierce degree of loyalty and sense of ownership many felt to the “Dean movement,” in whatever organizational form it took.

Meanwhile, at Progressive Majority (which stayed out of both primary races), we were still looking for opportunities for ways to tap into the constituency which had produced Howard Dean. I built a new website for the organization in the state, featuring a blog reporting on our endorsed candidates. We began regularly e-mailing our own meager list of a few hundred supporters in Washington. While such efforts are now beginning to pay off (today the website attracts more than a thousand visitors a month and the e-mail list has nearly tripled in size), developing a significant online following from scratch halfway through a campaign cycle was next to impossible. We continued to be unable to meaningfully tap into the existing Dean constituency, and an earlier pledge from MoveOn.org to send an e-mail on our behalf also failed to pan out (apparently due to

legal concerns about campaign finance rules).

But as Election Day neared, with the presidential race still a dead heat, the attention of many – including much of the former Dean cadre – turned to the elector-rich swing states on the other side of the country. David Bailey, the Seattle office manager, and Julie Goldberg, the state campaign's webmaster, both went to semi-rural Pennsylvania to work on the Kerry campaign, and found themselves in a totally unfamiliar political environment. Julie found the database systems being used by the campaign to manage voter files and supporters so primitive and unwieldy that she wound up developing a customized solution based on open-source tools originally developed during the Dean campaign. David was shocked at the traditional and hierarchical nature of the Kerry field effort – and the contempt with which former Dean supporters were treated.

DEALING WITH DEFEAT

And then Election Day came, and the results were devastating. In Washington state, Democrats regained control of the state legislature, and eventually narrowly held on to the governor's mansion, but gains at the state level were a small consolation for those who had hoped so desperately to be rid of George W. Bush. The whole city seemed to be in an emotional state of shock.

Kelley Bevans was no less upset with the results than anyone else, but as she was driving home from work the next day, she decided to stop by the Meetup venue to see if anyone had bothered to show up for the regular monthly gathering. She was shocked to find fifty people – two-thirds of whom she had never seen before – jammed into the small coffee shop, and did her best to facilitate a heated and sometimes emotionally raw discussion about the election results and what to do next.

I was not at that Meetup, but I had gone to the one before it – a low-key affair with perhaps a dozen people, many of them pursuing their own eccentric campaign-related activities. So I was shocked, attending the December Meetup, to find myself among eighty people jammed into the

meeting room Kelley had reserved. Though she wanted to steer the meeting towards organizing concrete activities, that was not in the cards. But a month's time did make for a somewhat more focused discussion of “what next?”

A few loud voices were anxious to advocate unusual single-bullet solutions to the Democrats' electoral failure, most of which echoed ongoing online efforts. The first of these was fairly straightforward, if maddeningly naive: boycott businesses whose employees contribute heavily to the Republican Party. At least one person came armed with lists of “blue” companies to patronize and “red” firms to punish, a concept which eventually became the basis of a popular website, BuyBlue.org.

Others, however, had a single-minded focus on claims of voting machine fraud, especially in Ohio. Based in part on very valid technical and security concerns, fears that paperless touchscreen systems could be nefariously hacked had been swirling for some time. Before the polls even opened, some were arguing that Bush had stolen the election – a claim which many became irreversibly convinced of when official election tallies failed to match up with initial exit poll data. Various solutions to this alleged theft were proposed, from mass protests to overturn the results to an amateurish ballot initiative to impose new regulations on voting machines in the state.

A more widely shared concern, however, was with the perceived political and organizational failings of the Democratic Party. By that point, the possibility of Howard Dean running for chair of the Democratic National Committee had become a matter of some media speculation, and many present were excited about the possibility and ready to begin lobbying DNC members. Closer to home, Greg Rodriguez had announced his candidacy for chair of the state of the Democratic Party, taking on incumbent Paul Berendt.

The dynamics of that contest proved unique. While Rodriguez had been among the earliest and strongest Dean supporters in the state, Berendt had also joined the campaign in the summer of 2003, so there was really no room for ideological or political objections to his leadership. Instead,

Rodriguez argued that the party needed to have a stronger focus on grassroots activism and make better use of the Internet. That message resonated with many of the most visible activists from the Dean campaign, some of whom complain that the state party is too organizationally insular and unresponsive to grassroots Democrats. That was not enough, however, to seriously threaten Berendt (one of the country's longest-serving state party chairs), who ultimately won re-election by an overwhelming margin.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Meanwhile, Ray turned to solidifying Democracy for Washington as an enduring organization. Though he personally endorsed Rodriguez for party chair, he gave up on plans for an online vote of DFW members to endorse in the state chair's race (after technical concerns were raised about the integrity of the “membership” list). DFW held its first-ever general meeting in January, which drew several dozen people on a Saturday morning despite snow showers, an inconvenient location, and a \$10 suggested donation. But after the initial speeches, including a conference call from Tom Hughes of DFA and a rousing call-to-action from Phil Talmadge, the meeting quickly devolved into hours of parliamentary purgatory, debating the finer points of the proposed bylaws before deciding to adopt the draft version on a tentative basis and entrust the matter to a ad hoc subcommittee.

In the weeks since, Ray and others have worked to solidify DFW as an organization: signing up more than fifty dues-paying members and traveling around the state to meet with grassroots activists. Plans are in the works for a state convention in May, and Ray hopes to sign up 300 members and raise \$20,000 by the end of the year.

What remains unclear, however, is DFW's exact function, beyond serving as an organizational umbrella for former Dean supporters, a self-identification which will presumably decline in importance as the next presidential election cycle begins to heat up. In his March report to the organization, Ray writes the following under the heading “What We Do”: “DFW supports

the grassroots. We are working every day to provide the information and tools needed to get progressives elected at all levels of government around the state, and keep people involved in the political process.” He goes on to list the organization's use of Yahoo! groups, the web, e-mail, and participation in various events.

As I explore in the next chapter, this is an unusual approach to political organizing, in which social capital formation (“supporting the grassroots”) becomes an end in and of itself. After more than two years of working closely together in a variety of political efforts, Dean activists in Washington state are understandably focused on finding ways to stay together and remain active, but the absence of a clear political program begs a question: active doing what?

Making Sense of the Dean Phenomenon

The power of Dean's campaign does not come from his appeal to Net users as an interest group but from a fateful concurrence of other forces: a strong antiwar message; a vivid, individualist candidate; a lucky head start with Meetup; an Internet-savvy campaign manager in Joe Trippi; and, most important, a willingness to let a decentralized network of supporters play a tactical role.
– Gary Wolf, “How the Internet Invented Howard Dean,” *Wired Magazine*⁸⁸

Wolf lists several of the political, social, and technological factors most frequently cited in explaining the Dean phenomenon. There is undoubtedly some degree of truth in each, but teasing them apart is no small feat. Nor is determining which are distinctive to a fleeting political moment and which may be indicative of enduring transformations in the functioning of the republic – or at least effective tools for future presidential hopefuls. Thus, Clay Shirky, a leading authority on social software, began his own postmortem campaign analysis with a “caveat that a political campaign strategy is so absurdly multi-variate that certainty is impossible” but that nevertheless “those of us who care about the use of the internet in politics need to talk about how to use those tools better than the Dean campaign did.”⁸⁹

At the same time, though, it is necessary to re-assert a seemingly obvious fact about the Dean campaign – it was, fundamentally, about attempting to elect Howard Dean to the presidency. New tools and innovative strategies were deployed in pursuit of that goal, but they did not supersede it:

... the stupidest thing I've said on this issue was in [an earlier blog post]:
“...the most salient characteristic [of the campaign] is the style of engagement, including the use of social software.” Dumb.

The most salient fact of Dean's campaign was Dean himself. Whatever conversation we have about the use of internet tools, Dean himself was the most important factor in the losses.⁹⁰

In this sense, the title of Wolf's *Wired* article was dead wrong; the Internet no more invented Howard Dean than the television invented John F. Kennedy. A political candidate is defined by the words said by and about him, regardless of the medium through which they are

communicated. What happened in the 2004 primaries was that those campaigning for Howard Dean – from Joe Trippi to Ray Minchew – invented a new way to do so using the Internet.

As we have seen, that included developing social networks which have outlasted his candidacy. But contrary to much of the hype, those decentralized networks (the so-called “netroots”) did not supplant a more traditional campaign structure; such a structure, however dysfunctional, existed in a very real and obvious way in Burlington and in the early primary states, including Washington. Thus, the interaction between the “netroots” and the “official” campaign is must be considered.

Moreover, we must consider the efficacy – and potential future efficacy – of the Dean movement. A vibrant social network formed for the purpose of volunteer mobilization undoubtedly has the potential to become a political force and a locus for civic engagement. But that does not necessarily mean that Dean activists have realized that potential, or that they ever will.

In short, then, I seek to answer these questions:

- Who are the Dean activists, demographically and politically?
- What drew them to Howard Dean?
- Why and how did they use the Internet for social capital formation and collective action?
- How did that grassroots activism, catalyzed by the Internet, interact with the “official” brick-and-mortar campaign?
- Have Democracy for America and Democracy for Washington been effective in their primary stated goal – electing progressives to office? What are their prospects for success in the future?

A NEW BREED OF ACTIVIST

Most press coverage of the Dean campaign vacillated between dumbstruck awe at supporters' financial generosity and crude caricature of their status as disgruntled political outsiders. Journalists have given little sustained attention to their demographic and political makeup, much less the forces which led them to connect with the campaign. One exception is

conservative columnist David Brooks, who has used Theda Skocpol's research to argue that Dean supporters are a “university-town elite” whose growing influence in the Democratic Party is cementing class divides caused by the collapse of civic organizations and thus weakening the party's core populist appeal.⁹¹ Skocpol has strenuously objected to his interpretation of her work and blasted him for hypocrisy in ignoring the elitism of the GOP,⁹² but Brooks's polemics do get at an essential truth: Dean supporters are a relatively privileged and isolated social group, and they are fast becoming what he calls the “money base” of the Democratic Party.

<u><i>Demographics of Dean Supporters</i></u>				In fact, according to a recent study by the Pew Center for the People and the Press (sampling Democracy for America's online supporter database), Dean activists are extremely privileged, especially compared to other Democrats. They are overwhelmingly white, well-educated, non-Christian, and upper-income. ⁹³ While media reports and campaign rhetoric sometimes emphasized the role of young people in the campaign, Pew finds that Dean supporters were very similar in age to Democrats generally (with something of an additional bulge among baby boomers). ⁹⁴ And, unsurprisingly, they are avid Internet users – 77% report going online several times a day, and 83% have been using the Internet for more than five years. ⁹⁵
	<i>Dean activists</i>	<i>All Democrats</i>	<i>General Public</i>	
White	92%	68%	79%	
College graduates	79%	25%	26%	
Protestant or Catholic	44%	80%	79%	
Household income > \$50k	65%	31%	36%	

But they are also newly mobilized activists, still on the outside looking in. For 42% of respondents, Dean's was their first presidential campaign, and an additional 36% who have been involved in a prior campaign report being more involved in this one.⁹⁶ In Skocpol's words, “I think there are still a lot of Americans who think that no one is listening to them,” creating an opportunity online for

the liberal side of the spectrum, where you have a lot of college-educated people who are not connecting to politics through church networks or their workplaces or professional associations, where open partisanship is frowned upon, and where the

Democratic Party has fallen into dealing with people as disaggregated individuals, followers or clients, rather than participants.⁹⁷

WHY DEAN?

On the surface, there is seemingly little to say on why left-leaning activists latched onto Howard Dean. Ray Minchew puts it simply: “I really, really don't like George Bush.” Indeed, what Dean offered, more than anything, was red-meat anti-Bush rhetoric at a time when most Democratic leaders were cautiously navigating a seemingly hostile political environment, especially on foreign policy. Dean's outspoken opposition to the war in Iraq was thus especially important in a field dominated by Members of Congress who had voted to authorize the use of force; 66% of those surveyed by Pew cite the war in Iraq as the most important issue in deciding to support Dean.⁹⁸

Some critics, therefore, have sought to portray Dean as a kind of pied-piper for anachronistic left-wing peaceniks. As Newsweek wrote, “the greatest fear among certain Democrats is that if Dean does win the nomination, his liberal supporters will put their Birkenstocks on the gas pedal and drive the party right over the cliff, a la George McGovern in 1972.”⁹⁹ The portrait of Dean as a liberal in the McGovern mold is unquestionably inaccurate – he was something of a cautious centrist as Governor of Vermont – but the ideological character of his appeal is not entirely clear. Many supporters and sympathizers have attempted to argue that Dean's message was merely an aggressive partisan one; after Dean's election to DNC chair, *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman wrote that “Deanism isn't about turning to the left: it's about making a stand.”¹⁰⁰ Ray, who identifies ideologically as a moderate, argues that the Dean message was a “pragmatic progressive” one, and bemoans what he sees as fringe leftism on the part of some of his fellow Dean supporters.

But regardless of Dean's own political track record, his campaign struck an unashamedly liberal note, at least relative to the rest of the field. On most issues (health care and trade policy

being notable exceptions), he took official positions further left than any of the other viable candidates, and won endorsements from many of Congress's most liberal members. My own discussions with Dean enthusiasts, both during the campaign and after, leave me convinced that most are far further left than their candidate, frequently embracing causes and positions which their candidate did not. The Pew study reports that 82% identify as “liberal” or “very liberal,” and 10% admit to having voted for Ralph Nader in 2000, a figure almost four times higher than Nader's overall performance.¹⁰¹ Even Ray speaks with disgust of the Democratic Leadership Council, which he views as having moved further right over the last decade, chasing a nonexistent political center in an era of growing GOP dominance.

Indeed, the other core element of Dean's message was a strident attack on the Democratic Party itself, seeming to suggest a left-wing insurgency bent on recapturing the party for its traditional base. There was perhaps no better indicator of this ethos than his repeated use of Paul Wellstone's signature “Democratic wing of the Democratic Party” line. But particularly after the campaign ended, Dean and Democracy for America began to speak of taking back the party less in terms of message and policy and more in terms of organization and support for local candidacies. Dean became a vocal advocate for the party dedicating more resources to candidates in Republican-dominated regions, and for making the party more responsive to “the grassroots.” He was invariably referring to his own supporters, many of whom – judging local and state party organizations unresponsive – took up both calls. Daily Kos has helped spread the adoption of “Reform Democrat” as a supposedly ideologically-agnostic label denoting one's commitment to reform in party strategy along the lines suggested by Dean. Locally, this could be seen in Greg Rodriguez's campaign for state party chair, challenging incumbent Paul Berendt despite the latter's early and consistent support for Dean. Asked who the Dean Democrats want to take their party back from, Kelley Bevans points to “a bloated professional class that has succeeded in losing several elections.”

The matter is complicated by the relative naivete of many Dean supporters about the roles of various organizations within the Democratic orbit. In conversation, many of them will lump together the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Leadership Council, suggesting both that the DNC provides political leadership for the party and that the DLC dominates it for the purpose of advancing its feckless centrism. Neither notion is accurate, and both ignore the DLC's growing political irrelevance, having failed to meaningfully influence either the selection of the party's nominee or his message in the general election.

But beyond questions of partisanship and the political spectrum, there is some reason to suspect a communitarian impulse in supporters' attachment to Dean. On the stump, Dean often spoke not in the language of anti-corporate populism (favored by the party's left-labor wing) or free-market centrism (favored by New Democrats), but of civic obligation and political participation. The entrepreneurial grassroots energy of the campaign demonstrates that many took the “you have the power” talk very seriously and set about applying it given the tools available.

USE OF ONLINE TOOLS

The most important of these was unquestionably Meetup.com, which has served a key role in the Dean phenomenon by bringing supporters together consistently for solidarity, reinforcement, and (sometimes) organizing. Zephyr Teachout, the campaign's national director of Internet organizing, has spoken of Meetups as the “ritual” element of the Dean campaign, noting: “It's like church, the central place where people go to get inspired.”¹⁰² In fact, the religious analogy is a common one: Kelley describes Meetups as akin to conversion experiences, and notes that it seems to serve a particularly powerful social function “for those of us who don't attend church or synagogue.”

Almost every Dean supporter has a story to tell about her first Meetup, and for Seattleites it usually involves a crowded summer evening at the Uptown Espresso. People often speak of Meetup in glowing terms; Kelley asks “why is life in America not like a Meetup?” In large part,

the joy of the experience was (and perhaps still is) in finding others of like minds just as desperate for a path to political salvation. But it also lies in the discovery of a politicized place, a direct physical manifestation of the public sphere which has often seemed beyond reach in elite-dominated politics-by-television.

What is less clear, however, is whether the Meetups have spawned anything enduring beyond their own repetition. Kelley, who has been attending the Seattle Meetup for more than eighteen months and has hosted most of them since the campaign's official end, reports that she has never recognized more than half the people at a Meetup – a level of turnover which makes sustained planning from month-to-month difficult. Almost from the beginning, the free-form nature of the gatherings has been a source of complaint from those looking for concrete organizing opportunities. Writing in a local alternative weekly after the caucuses, one supporter described her first Meetup as “packed, thrumming with energy, and hopelessly chaotic.”¹⁰³ As of late, the feedback section of Meetup.com for the Seattle area has been filled with comments like these:¹⁰⁴

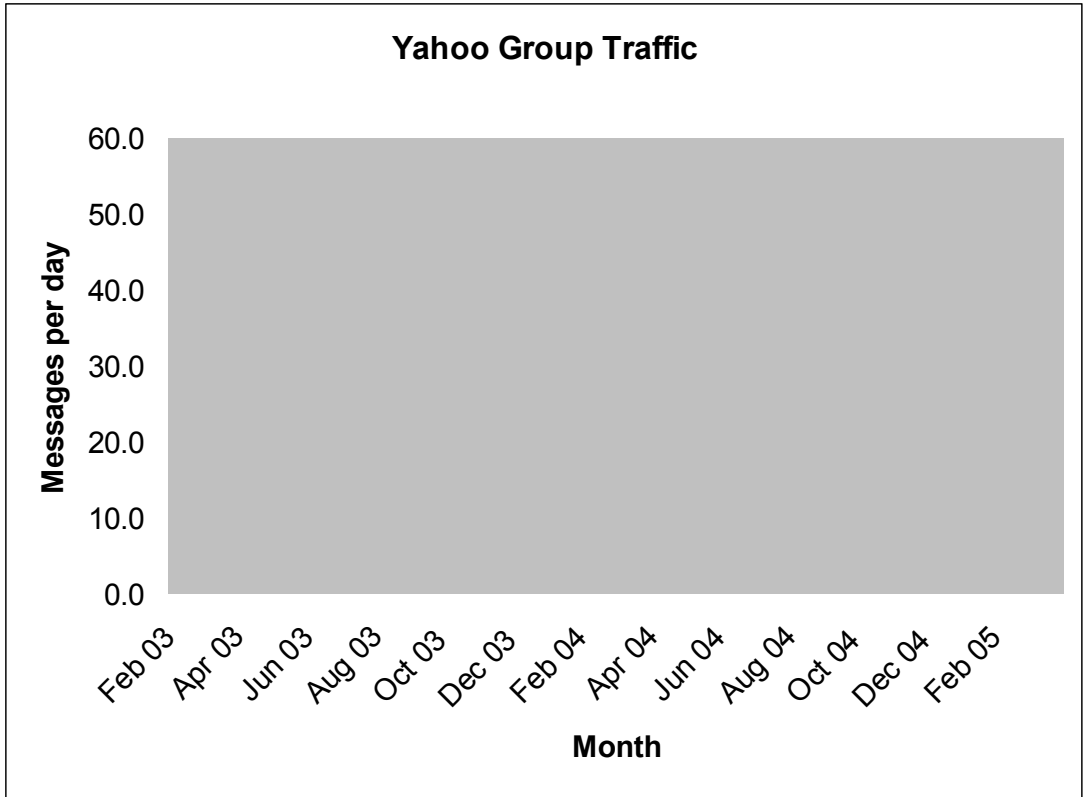
Everytime [sic] I attend something like this I realize why the Republicans are in control. I'm action-oriented. I like an agenda and some focus or I feel like I'm wasting my precious time. I recommend that the group decide what it wants to achieve: is it a venting session, a social group, or does it have some larger purpose? How does this group relate to DFA and to the Democratic Party? If we are gonig [sic] to get stuff done, then let's get stuff done. Tonight I felt we put together a plan for a plan. Another meeting like this and I probably won't come back.

The people there were articulate and passionate, but I was disappointed by the lack of organization and forward movement on the topics discussed. Getting ideas out is good, but if they go nowhere or don't result in an action, then the movement goes nowhere. I also was hoping to see an agenda presented or at least agreed upon.

Paradoxically, interest in Meetups seems to spike precisely when people are feeling most politically adrift – at the campaign's outset as Bush administration rushed to war with Iraq, as the campaign imploded, and again after Bush was re-elected. This did not seriously hamper the campaign's effectiveness in its early days, when virtually any grassroots activity, especially fundraising, was enormously helpful. In the Summer of 2003, Burlington helped address the

events' directionlessness with a letter-writing program to Iowa and New Hampshire votes. But Meetups have never been inherently well-suited to provide political direction, especially to an ever-shifting group of individual activists with little in the way of shared experience or a common organizing culture. That effect has only been compounded by the lack of guidance from Burlington, which has only once provided concrete activities for Meetup groups (a DVD featuring progressive “framing” guru George Lakoff) since the campaign's official end.

Yahoo! Groups, which reach a smaller but still significant niche of Dean supporters, follow the same pattern as the Meetups: supporters make the most use of them when there is the least political direction available nationally. As the graph shows, traffic dropped sharply after the Seattle office opened in October 2003 and peaked *after* the caucus in February 2004. On balance, however, these groups do not appear to be effective tools for producing any tangible offline organizing, at least beyond their infancy. The open-posting format quickly leads to a deluge of forwarded material with intermittent open-ended discussion of current events and political strategy among a dedicated core of correspondents. It is probably for this reason that Ray today regards enthusiasts of these groups with a certain amount of disdain, even though they appear to have been his own path to political activism.



In contrast, weblogs have not played a significant role in bringing Dean supporters together on a local or even regional basis. The campaign's official Blog for America was widely read and continues to attract a significant following. Along with the ritual role of the Meetup, the campaign blog helped to establish a common identity for Dean supporters – offering glimpses into life on the campaign trail, the latest official announcements, and a constant stream of you-have-the-power rhetoric. The comments section of the blog, which was read by senior campaign staff, provided an open forum for discussion, and some Seattleites were among the frequent participants. But it never really brought supporters together for locally-focused activities in the way Meetups did.

With political blogging just beginning to take off at the campaign's outset in 2003, there were a few national blogs with significant audiences, such as Daily Kos, that helped provide key early support for the campaign. But at that time there were essentially no blogs that were locally or even regionally focused. That has gradually changed, and there are now a variety of blogs – both liberal and conservative – focused primarily on Washington state politics. And in the aftermath of

the campaign, Daily Kos became an important online gathering place for former Dean activists, and has even begun to include some reader-contributed local content, such as Ray's postings about the Patty Murray campaign.

To the activists themselves, these and other online tools has become second nature; they frequently respond “everything” when asked what they use the Internet for; the Pew study indicates that 93% use the Internet at least once a day. And while they use different language in discussing the importance of the Internet to the campaign, there seems to be a consensus that the lasting impact of the campaign was in the social networks it built. Few have read Putnam, but many are familiar with, and sympathetic to, his basic argument.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING

Kelley, the Meetup host, is a case in point. Asked about Trippi's claim that the “candidate lost, but his campaign won,” she replies that “he's wrong if he thinks that was because of the Internet thing – it was because of the social thing.” “The net is good for making initial contact,” she says, “but the lasting value is of social networks.” Speaking about the early days of the campaign, she says: “It was like the entire country had gone bizarro on us. [The campaign] was one place where you could maybe find five people who had a similar point of view to yours. If volunteering was what it took to stick around with these folks, that's what you were going to do.” Echoing *Bowling Alone*, she describes a sense that American life is “becoming abnormally small,” and reports that in the two years since she first became involved with the Dean campaign, her social network has “exploded”; she received more holiday cards this year than ever before. Moreover, she sees that similar experiences have “happened to a lot of people, and no one wants to give it up.”

The Pew data confirms her observations. 59% of those surveyed agreed “a lot” with the statement “I felt empowered, like my voice really mattered.”¹⁰⁵ 71% say they met new people through the campaign (with a median response of fifteen new people) and 45% have stayed in

contact with people they met,¹⁰⁶ leading the Pew authors to conclude that the “campaign formed the basis for an extensive - and enduring - social network.”¹⁰⁷

For his part, David Bailey argues forcefully for the revolutionary impact of the Internet as a community-building mechanism:

That was the tipping point issue for me: just to see the Internet community building. I'm one of the people who've come to believe that's transformative in and of itself. That Internet politics in and of itself is the transformative part.

Q: And when you say “Internet politics,” what do you mean by that?

I mean mainly, in my view, the left collecting on the Internet, and going from a balkanized group that is for every little interest that asserts itself – any third world country, any law, anything, any sexual persuasion, we're for them – as opposed to getting together and prioritizing what's important. ...

The non-hierarchical inclusive principle is an end in and of itself. It is a good in and of itself, because it creates better politics. ... When I saw that happening, that's enough for me. I don't need Democrats to be for what I'm for. I want to be for this inclusiveness. That's enough. That's all I need.

Q: You think that's important for the party organization?

I think that's important for the world. I mean, honest to god, it is literally a political and virtue and goal in and of itself. If it happens, it will change the world, change America in and of itself.

David is very clearly aligned with the notion that so-called virtual communities have the possibility to replace “dying” organizations, such as labor unions, that have traditionally formed the core of the Democratic Party. “The same forces that are growing exurbia are what requires Democrats to get online,” he says, arguing that the Internet is the only way to reach out to individual partisan loyalists who are no longer part of the social networks characteristic of rural or urban life.

Moreover, he posits a “psychological reward structure” for Internet-based campaigns, in which such partisans find a political message they agree with, and then encounter an online community made up of others of like minds – allowing them to move from “isolated frustration” to “common identification.” Such nascent activists are then eventually drawn into offline activities – including volunteering at a brick-and-mortar campaign office – which solidifies their social connection to the campaign, and inculcates a sense of themselves as effective political actors.

While David's specific theory is a novel one, he is far from alone in emphasizing “the community” as the driving force behind an effective net-savvy campaign. There is a widely-held faith among enthusiasts that grassroots activists – once they are probably connected together – are capable of performing virtually all traditional campaign functions autonomously. That faith emanated from the top: describing Howard Dean's first appearance in Seattle, Joe Trippi wrote: “I said later that the biggest myth of the 2004 election was that Joe Trippi was managing Howard Dean's presidential campaign. *They* were managing the campaign. It wasn't headquartered in Burlington, it was *out there*. Anything we could do, *they* could do better.”¹⁰⁸ *The New York Times Magazine* described his approach to campaign management this way:

Joe Trippi ... says the campaign's structure is modeled on the Internet, which is organized as a grid, rather than as spokes surrounding a hub. ... Trippi likes to say that in the Internet model he has adopted for the campaign, the power lies with the people at “the edges of the network,” rather than the center. When people from the unofficial campaign call and ask permission to undertake an activity on behalf of Dean, they are told they don't need permission.¹⁰⁹

This is a very real departure from most modern political campaigns, which are carefully orchestrated by experienced professionals and seasoned political consultants. As one textbook on the subject puts it:

Coordination is crucial. The overall image of the candidate is created largely by the general strategy of campaign media. ... To build a coherent image, a campaign must commit itself to consistency, efficiency, proper timing, effective packaging, and a well-played expectations game. ... Consistency is demanding. A campaign's theme must be communicated up and down the chain of command. Typically, only designated staffers speak for the campaign - the candidate, the campaign manager, and the press secretary or communications director.¹¹⁰ (Shea 153-154)

THE TWO CAMPAIGNS

Once again, however, the reality is more complicated than the obvious rhetorical contradictions. While Joe Trippi and Zephyr Teachout would have us believe that the Dean campaign forwent hierarchy and message discipline, the very fact that they have our attention demonstrates that it did not do so completely. What actually occurred was a creative tension

between a traditionally organized campaign and an inchoate community of grassroots activists. The situation was confused further by the dysfunctional character of the official campaign structure, reflected in various media accounts of the campaign after its collapse and in my own experience in Washington state.

This complex relationship took a variety of forms. Experienced campaign staff tolerated, and sometimes actively encouraged, activities – such as producing “Flat Howards” – which were unlikely to have any demonstrable role in winning votes. Supporters expected to have a high degree of input into campaign decision-making. The high volume of comments to the official blog was one result, as word traveled (usually in reverent and amazed tones) that Joe Trippi actually read them. One typical comment, posted after Dean's official candidacy announcement, read:

A powerful message. Dr. Dean and his staff now must build on this energy by refining and polishing his personal demeanor and appearance. An ironed shirt, crisp tie, no stray facial expressions or gestures - simple things that are expected of a president. This is the true challenge - the unspoken and subtle qualities that can make or break a candidate.¹¹¹

Often it was difficult to distinguish devolved decision-making from publicity stunt. When it became clear that the campaign stood a real possibility of raising more than federal spending limits attached to matching funds allowed, campaign leaders held an online vote of supporters on whether to reject those funds. While Burlington promoted the vote as a revolutionary exercise in grassroots democracy, they conducted the poll with the full knowledge that loyal supporters would vote for the option they suggested – which they did, by an overwhelming 85%-15% margin.

That loyalty, built on a collective sense of political affinity and meaningful participation, propelled the campaign's fundraising and volunteer mobilization. But even as supporters responded to requests for their time and money, they did not always seem fully integrated into the conventional campaign plan which of course called for heavy broadcast advertising and a staff-organized field effort in early primary states.

Instead, they have often seemed to see themselves, or at least their social networks, as the

appropriate arbiter of campaign strategy and political effectiveness. “The candidate,” David Bailey says, “must trust the community to understand who they are,” because the candidate's strengths are those which attracted devout supporters in the first place. Others do not make such sweeping pronouncements, but nevertheless implicitly substitute themselves for the voting public, assuming that persuadable voters view political actors and communications in the same terms they do. This may take a variety of forms: rightly looking down upon some of the Dean campaign's shoddily-produced television ads in Iowa, foolishly assuming that whether the state Democratic Party returns individual phone calls is a reflection on its electoral vitality, and so forth. However, it is almost certainly not a formula for persuasive political communication.

Political professionals may frequently be arrogant and overpaid, but they have access to a wide range of skills and resources which are unavailable to even the savviest of self-organizing volunteers. Among the most critical of these is polling data, which continues to be the most effective method by which to gauge the mood of the electorate and the saliency of campaign issues. For less prominent races, the lack of public polling data may mean that it is only political insiders who are aware of which candidacies are viable; in Washington, this led some Dean supporters to devote a great deal of energy to losing campaigns for the state legislature. Moreover, as the Pew data conclusively demonstrates, Dean activists do not resemble the electorate ideologically or demographically. In particular, education and income play important roles in political socialization and hence voting behavior, and they are far better educated and have much higher incomes than the overall electorate. The simple fact of being more politically attentive also adds a significant bias.

That having been said, the notion of making political campaigning more participatory and inclusive has a strong appeal, especially in the light of critics' claims that one-to-many broadcast politics has a numbing impact on the electorate. But the contradiction posed by this idealistic desire and the realities of the modern campaign environment will likely continue to prove difficult

to reconcile. One partial solution might be the creation and support of programs and institutions which aim to train individual activists so that they are more able to make informed judgments about campaign strategy and message.

In fact, campaign leaders did make some efforts to train supporters in these basics. In November 2003, they held a series of “grassroots summits,” at which they distributed a “Field Organizing Guide”:

This document is intended to provide you with some insight as to how Dean for America field staff approach organizing a state. It will explain how to prioritize your time and resources by highlighting the different kinds of attention you should give to Dean supporters whom you know will go to the polls, swing voters, and other groups. ...

There's no question that we have put together the greatest grassroots campaign in history. But what will determine the winner of this election in your state will be the candidate who gets the most votes. The winner will NOT be determined by who had the most supporters, the most money, or who the pundits said were going to win. It all comes down to which candidate gets the most supporters to the polls or to the caucus.¹¹²

In the aftermath of the presidential campaign, however, Democracy for America has largely turned its back on any kind of overarching guidance or leadership for supporters. Rather than creating a formal structure to confederate supporters on a local and regional basis, it has encouraged individual activists to develop “coalition groups,” which operate with no formal connection to Burlington (in part due to campaign finance law). A guide for coalition groups, published in March 2005, strikes a very different tone from the campaign's field organizing guide:

The suggestions in this guide are based on recent experiences and the wealth of information that has been shared among the committed grassroots activists but also recognize that one-size-does-not-fit-all. In other words, your specific organizational goals and where you want to place your energy may differ from others, and, for that reason, some of these suggestions may apply to you and others may not. It's up to you to decide how to grow to the next level. DFA can try and help you achieve this, but we certainly cannot tell you what to do.¹¹³

As we've said, DFA cannot dictate to you the answers to your organizational decisions. You and your organization will become an important part of the DFA community, but your group will also be legally independent from DFA. That means that we can share information, successes, ideas, and the like with each other, but that we have no formal relationship with or authority over one each other.¹¹⁴

While DFW has not sought to maintain such a high degree of organizational distance from local groups – and has indeed been frustrated by a lack of responsiveness from Burlington – its nebulous purpose and structure reflect a similar desire to somehow let grassroots activism develop organically: Ray Minchew does not speak of providing leadership, or even representation, for the grassroots – only generic “support.”

JUDGING SUCCESS AND PROSPECTS

This notion makes it difficult to meaningfully assess the successes of DFA and DFW. Both have a stated goal of strengthening the Democratic Party from the bottom up, by electing progressive candidates to state and local office. Nationally, DFA claims credit for dozens of victories in the November elections, but these range from races of national significance where they played a minor fundraising role to ultra-local races in which a handful of local volunteers may have made the difference. As I have already indicated, in Washington their involvement was limited almost exclusively to direct financial support. DFW did relatively little of that – its two formal endorsements went to losing primary candidates, and campaign finance records show only two other minor contributions, to Progressive Majority-endorsed state legislative candidates.

Outside of the formal auspices of these organizations, however, countless Dean supporters obviously engaged in a host of campaign-related activities, from summer RV travels in swing states to paid positions in professionally-run campaigns. And while it is common for staff and volunteers from losing primary campaigns to find other work in the general election, there is some reason to believe, based both on anecdotal experience in Washington and on the Pew data, that Dean activists did so on an exceptionally wide scale:

The survey also finds that Dean's supporters were not discouraged by his campaign's demise or Kerry's general election loss, but instead constitute an engaged group of citizens who intend to remain active in the Democratic Party and exert significant influence over its future direction. After Dean dropped out of the race, most worked hard on behalf of Kerry (66% donated money to Kerry) and virtually all of them (97%) voted for him. Half (51%) say that Bush's reelection motivates them to be even more politically active in the future.¹¹⁵

Many of these individuals will undoubtedly continue to play a growing role, whether as party leaders or grassroots volunteers, in state and local politics. And they may continue to maintain social ties and some common identity as former Dean supporters. But without a unifying and compelling political vision, a capable leadership, and a structured organization, their efforts seem unlikely to coalesce into an enduring political movement.

Conclusion

It was something more than just finding ideological soul mates. It was learning how to *act*: how letters got written, how doors got knocked on, how co-workers could be won over on the coffee break, how to print a bumper sticker and how to pry one off with a razor blade; how to put together a network whose force exceeded the sum of its parts by orders of magnitude; how to talk to a reporter, how to picket, and how, if need be, to infiltrate - how to make the anger boiling inside you ennobling, productive, *powerful*, instead of embittering. How to feel bigger than yourself. It was something beyond the week, the year, the campaign, even the decade; it was a cause. You lost in 1964. But something *remained* after 1964: a movement. An *army*. An army that could lose a battle suck it up, regroup, then live to fight a thousand battles more.

– Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*¹¹⁶

To many in the self-styled centrist wing of his party, Howard Dean – with his anti-war politics, insurgent style, and rhetorical gaffes – brings back visions of Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, and Walter Mondale. To them, the Dean strategy for the party is nothing more than a warmed-over appeal to an aging, out-of-touch liberal base. As Al From and Bruce Reed of the Democratic Leadership Council wrote in May 2003:

What activists like Dean call the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party is an aberration: the McGovern-Mondale wing, defined principally by weakness abroad and elitist, interest-group liberalism at home. That's the wing that lost 49 states in two elections, and transformed Democrats from a strong national party into a much weaker regional one.¹¹⁷

The intent behind the historical comparisons From and Reed offer may be polemical, but that does not mean they are unworthy of consideration. Dean's call to take back the party through online organizing – what some bloggers and others have begun to call the “new politics”¹¹⁸ – has obvious echoes of an earlier era when a generation of political newcomers sought to turn the Democratic Party against another disastrous war halfway across the globe. Growing out of the campus anti-war movement, they too called their movement the New Politics. And while going “clean for Gene” in 1968 failed to deliver an anti-war nominee, their efforts paid off four years later, when liberal George McGovern captured the nomination – and proceeded to lose in a

landslide.

But while the New Politics helped to briefly shift the Democratic Party leftwards, conservatives were steadily moving the Republican Party in the opposite direction. The New Right grew in large part out of Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, in which a new generation of conservative activists found themselves having seized control of the previously centrist Republican Party – only to see their strident, tough-talking candidate overwhelmingly rebuked by voters. But in losing, those activists set themselves on a path which put a dedicated conservative in the White House sixteen years later and transformed American politics. They did so in large part by founding and growing a wide range of institutions and organizations designed to further their agenda, many of which were key to organizing a theretofore under-mobilized demographic which today forms much of the base of the Republican Party: white evangelical Christians

Increasingly, progressive Democrats say they aspire to do the same thing, mimicking the right's political infrastructure and long-term strategic perspective. The popularity of this historical consciousness has grown significantly in recent years, and the re-election of President Bush has only heightened its appeal. Paul Waldman's comments are typical:

But those of us who want 2004 to be “our 1964” aren't really talking about abject electoral failure, we're talking about a kind of mindset that came out of it. ... Goldwater's troops were true believers. After 1964, they forever disabused themselves of the notion that any particular politician would bring about the achievement of their ideological goals. They decided that building a movement came before winning elections. They set about creating strong institutions that would push their agenda. They were patient - instead of wondering which of their beliefs should be modified to suit prevailing opinion, they thought about how to bring the public around to their way of thinking, even if they knew it could take decades. And they gradually took over the Republican Party.¹¹⁹

Such language is not limited to political elites – in part thanks to blogs, the same basic strategic approach has trickled down to grassroots activists, especially in the Dean campaign. Over and over again, I have heard Dean loyalists speak about the importance of Democrats thinking long-term, sticking to their principles, and focusing on grassroots organizing. And as I have

already emphasized, many see themselves as a grassroots counterweight to the religious right.

As it happens, there are striking parallels between the progressive electoral activism of 2004 and the early activities of the New Right, including the Goldwater campaign. Both mobilized a socially-elite activist core whose views were markedly out-of-step with the political consensus of their day. Both coalesced around presidential candidates – Barry Goldwater and Howard Dean – who emerged in the wake of national tragedies and ultimately became political punchlines. And, most important for our purposes, both made innovative use of new communications technologies: direct mail for the New Right and the Internet for today's “new politics.”

While he is not the first to make the Dean-Goldwater comparison, E.J. Dionne perhaps enunciated it mostly clearly in a column near the campaign's peak:

Dean's signature exclamation to his supporters is: “You have the power!” It is a revivalist's promise. While the other candidates build themselves up, Trippi says, Dean builds up his supporters by saying: “Look at you. Aren't you cool? Aren't you amazing?”

Battered Democrats are hungry to hear that. So were the conservatives, then isolated from power, who flocked to Barry Goldwater in 1964. It is the Goldwater campaign, not George McGovern's 1972 antiwar crusade, that Dean's movement most resembles. Goldwater was not about “new ideas.” He was about preaching the full conservative gospel and giving his followers a vehicle through which they could organize and put it into practice. Goldwater had his share of verbal gaffes. His supporters found them endearing. “Moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue,” Goldwater said. You could imagine a Dean supporter saying that.

Goldwater and his legions built a mighty movement that changed the country and affects politics to this day.¹²⁰

But there is little use to this historical analogy if the Goldwater campaign is viewed in isolation – conservatives did not appear out of thin air in 1964, nor did they win the presidency sixteen years later through sheer willpower. Both the reconstruction of conservative ideology that preceded Goldwater's campaign and the institution-building and grassroots organizing that succeeded it played a crucial role in transforming a futile burst of energy in 1964 into an enduring political movement. It is through these lenses that we can begin to put 2004 into perspective.

IDEOLOGY AND MESSAGE

While Democrats weary from almost two decades of internal factional strife may not like to be reminded of it, virtually any enduring political movement must possess a coherent ideological framework from which to argue. Conservatives have one: in the 1950s, thrown into disarray by the overwhelming political sea change of the New Deal and the new geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, they set about on an intellectual project of developing a sustained critique of the post-war liberal consensus. What emerged was a core set of beliefs: “economic libertarianism, social traditionalism, and militant anticommunism.”¹²¹ As Jerome Himmelstein writes:

American conservative ideology in the 1980s, as exemplified in Ronald Reagan's speeches and in the writings of his followers, developed in the 1950s and early 1960s. ... however much has changed since the 1950s in its strategy, its sources of support, and its propensity to compromise on one issue or hew strictly to principle on another, its ideology has remained fundamentally the same.¹²²
Reconstructing conservative ideology was the first act in the drama of the rise of the Right in America. From the 1950s into the 1960s, conservatives reworked the terms in which they understood and justified their case against collectivism, both foreign and domestic, to fit new political realities.¹²³

The quarter-century since modern conservatives first took control of the White House has arguably provided as much of a shock to traditional liberals. The apparent success of Reaganism has seemed to vindicate the conservatives' embrace of interventionism and rejection of the welfare state. Today, the left (however broadly defined) has been buffeted by the social turmoil of the 1960s, the total collapse of the New Deal coalition, and the “third way” politics of Bill Clinton, leaving it with little in the way of a unified political vision (except a half-hearted defense of atrophying New Deal and Great Society programs and a lukewarm embrace of certain new social movements).

Many of today's progressives understand this. At one Meetup I attended, those present grappled with the subject, noting that conservatism is synonymous with small government, lower taxes, and a strong defense, whereas their own political affiliation connotes little more than a laundry list of disconnected programs and policy positions. Beyond picking a handful of these to emphasize more strongly, there are few obvious solutions to this problem. Some have embraced

cognitive linguist George Lakoff's call for progressives to better "frame" their language, but he contributes little in the way of fundamental political principles, beyond claiming that the left's unconscious "conceptual system" stems from a "Nurturant Parent" model (in contrast to the right's "Strict Father").

But while there is no comprehensive ideological framework on the horizon, some Democratic rhetoric 2004 suggests an intriguing new communitarian approach to political messaging, in which the emphasis on political participation, which we have already seen, is combined with an attack on modern conservatism as fundamentally selfish and divisive. Elements of this embryonic framework could sometimes be seen in Howard Dean's rhetoric on the stump:

Today, our nation is in crisis. At home, this crisis manifests itself in this President's destruction of the idea of community. This President pushes forward an agenda and policies which divide us. ...

This campaign is about more than issue differences ... It is about something as important as our children. It's about who we are as Americans. ...

It is that ideal, the ideal of the American community, that we seek to restore.

An America where it is not enough for me to want health care for my family – but the obligation, and responsibility of every one of us as American citizens to insure that each one of us has health care for our families. ...

An America where it is not enough to proclaim the words freedom, self-government, and democracy, but where it is a duty and a responsibility to participate together in common purpose with the sacrifice required of each of us to give those words meaning.¹²⁴

However, it reached its crescendo in Barack Obama's speech to the Democratic National Convention:

For alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga.

A belief that we are connected as one people. If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandmother. If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties. It's that fundamental belief – I am my brother's keeper, I am my sisters' keeper – that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family. "E pluribus unum." Out of many, one.

Yet even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well,

I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America – there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America.¹²⁵

Such language also conveniently dovetails with the work of some recent political theory which emphasizes communal obligation over liberal individualism, including the “civic community” of Robert Putnam (with whom Obama has collaborated) and the “strong democracy” of Benjamin Barber (who serves as an advisor to Dean).

But, more importantly, it leads naturally to a patriotic call for civic activism; as Obama asks, “do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope?” This, I believe, is an important part of why Dean and Obama (who was named as the Daily Kos “patron saint”) have found such strong support online, among budding activists seeking not only electoral victory but also meaningful democratic participation. While much of Dean's appeal can be explained by the frustrated partisanship of his supporters, there is also something deeper than that – a profound anxiety, among many, about the future of American democracy and society. Calls to civic renewal (whether in the form of Dean's “you have the power” or MoveOn's “democracy in action”) resonate as an answer to that anxiety, particularly in combination with the immediacy offered by online political action.

Yet whatever there is to be said for this nascent communitarian approach, it is far from the fully-developed conservative ideology that Goldwaterites inherited – a full-throated critique of “collectivism” which drove their policy positions on everything from arms control to entitlement programs. Whether progressives can develop such a comprehensive and animating framework out of a subtle shift in election-year rhetoric obviously remains to be seen.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND LONG-TERM ORGANIZING

As much as it is worth underscoring the importance of a common ideological foundation for any enduring political movement, that alone does not result in political efficacy. Again, the

case of modern conservatism is instructive in demonstrating the need to engage in long-range organizing projects:

The term *New Right* refers to these leaders and the strategy and network of organizations they created. They agreed that conservative failure lay not in a lack of opportunities but in a failure of leadership, organization, and effective outreach to new constituencies. The established leadership of the conservative movement, [Richard] Viguerie proclaimed, “didn't know how to lead”; they “had no stomach for a hardnosed fight”; they were “defensive and defeatist.” As a result, conservatives in the early 1970s had “no organized, continuing effort to exert a political influence on elections, on Capitol Hill, on the news media and on the nation at large.” They needed an autonomous, variegated network of organizations to make the conservative presence felt. By stressing independence, the New Right did not at all want a divorce from the Republican party [sic] but simply a more equitable relationship: its leaders wanted their own independent clout so as better to influence party and politics.¹²⁶

The result of these efforts was a whole slew of new and strengthened organizations – from think tanks to political action committees – devoted to fighting the conservative battle on all the fronts Viguerie mentions. While these organizations were mostly not formally connected, and a few were regional in scope, the overall project was clearly one initiated and coordinated by movement leaders at a national level – and funded by conservative foundations and corporations with a long-term agenda.

Much has been made lately of this strategy by Democratic Party elites, many of whom have begun studying it carefully and modeling their own organizations after conservative ones. In late 2003, John Podesta, a former chief of staff for Bill Clinton, raised millions from major donors such as George Soros to start the Center for American Progress, fashioned after the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, and similar think tanks on the right. A few months later, Air America Radio – a talk radio network featuring left-leaning celebrities such as Al Franken – went on the air as an answer to Rush Limbaugh and other right-wing talkers. Even Progressive Majority's state and local candidate recruitment program – briefly known as PROPAC – has been modeled after the right-wing training organization GOPAC, made famous by Newt Gingrich.

Matt Bai's July 2004 *New York Times* magazine story, “Wiring the Vast Left-Wing

Conspiracy” casts some light on this trend, discussing the activities of a handful of major Democratic operatives and donors who have made a study of the conservative movement and are now aiming to build their own political infrastructure on the left.¹²⁷ As venture capitalist Andy Rappaport puts it:

Our political power has been diminishing, and it's become common knowledge that the conservative movement has established a very strong, long-term foundation, whereas we've basically allowed our foundation, if not to crumble, to at least fall into a state of disrepair. So there are a lot of people thinking, What can we do about this?¹²⁸

But according to Bai, “No one expects the new progressive organizations that [Rappaport's group] backs to look like mirror images of the Heritage Foundation or other conservative behemoths. The goal, instead, is to find the equivalent of these 1960's political models for a faster-moving online world.” For that reason, many have been especially keen on Internet-based efforts – Soros and others have poured millions into MoveOn.org, while Rappaport has focused on smaller-scale endeavors, largely growing out of the Dean campaign. Virtually all are organizationally independent from the Democratic Party – in part thanks to campaign-finance law, but also because of the conservative example of organizing autonomously in order to impact the party from the outside.

While many of these projects owe much to the techniques and tools pioneered by the Dean campaign (and many of their architects and funders were themselves Dean supporters), they reflect a level of coordination, national leadership, and long-range planning which the Dean movement itself has often myopically eschewed. In this regard, such organizations – especially those not tied to election cycles – are more likely to endure (assuming that major donors follow through on their long-term commitments).

That does not mean, however, that they necessarily promote civic engagement or constitute a new form of social capital. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the conservative organizations which they seek to counter are elite-dominated and not particularly participatory in structure: there is no

grassroots component to the Heritage Foundation.

That is not to say that the New Right was financed entirely by deep pockets and drew support only from a small core of elites. On the contrary, direct mail emerged early on as a key mechanism for reaching out to ordinary conservatives and raising funds from them. Richard Viguerie, mentioned above for his complaints about the Old Right, emerged as a key leader precisely because of his skill as a direct-mail fund-raiser, beginning with the Young Americans for Freedom¹²⁹ and then capitalizing on a list of 12,500 donors to the Goldwater campaign to gradually build his own fundraising empire.¹³⁰ Though certain liberal candidates and interest groups have had great success with direct mail, it was the New Right which most successfully used the technique to build a base of small-dollar donors for political candidates and projects.

The simple act of writing a check or signing a petition, however, is hardly a form of sustained civic engagement. Given that history, the recent success of progressives in raising funds over the Internet can hardly be seen – at least in isolation – as an indicator of civic renewal on the left. It may be perfectly possible to continue raising large sums of money online, as John Kerry did, without any significant investment in encouraging grassroots activism.

OUR OWN CHRISTIAN COALITION?

Whatever else can be said of it, the right has certainly developed its own grassroots army of highly-engaged citizen activists: politicized white evangelical Christians. As Robert Putnam puts it, “religious conservatives have created the largest, best-organized grassroots social movement of the last quarter century. It is, in short, among evangelical Christians ... that we find the strongest evidence of an upwelling of civic engagement ...”¹³¹ Putnam rightly emphasizes the role of congregational social networks in this development, but Theda Skocpol adds that this political mobilization “is due as much to the leadership strategies and the construction of the Christian right associations beyond churches as such as it is attributable to the simple existence of grassroots church networks.”¹³² Sara Diamond writes that it “has been the result of astute planning by

movement leaders and the commitment of tens of thousands of adherents, who draw strength largely from sources outside the formal halls of power.”¹³³ And Jerome Himmelstein comments that “as television preachers and other evangelical leaders became politically active ... New Right leaders helped channel their efforts,”¹³⁴ while at the same time acknowledging that the Christian right “grew as well from the dense organizational infrastructure of an evangelical and fundamentalist subculture that had been growing for several decades.”¹³⁵

This scholarly consensus has important implications for online-savvy activists who fashion themselves the progressive counterparts to the Christian Coalition. Neither the Dean campaign nor MoveOn.org grew directly out of existing local social networks. The extent to which their participants have developed their own networks through Internet-enabled collaboration is impressive, but loose-knit gatherings at the local coffee shop are hardly equivalent to religious congregations. To truly live up to the legacy of broad-based civic life described by Skocpol, activists must expand such networks beyond the privileged and relatively homogeneous demographic which participated in politics through the Internet in 2004. Reaching beyond that demographic is also critical for progressive movement-building, if for no other reason than the current base of progressive activists is remarkably distant from those whose votes it needs on Election Day.

But the “netroots” are unlikely to rise to this – or any – challenge if organizers do not step forward to provide leadership, guidance, and structure to grassroots activists, similar to that offered by leaders of the Christian right. This is no small challenge – the temptation for many organizations will be to leave supporters to themselves (at least until their donations are next needed) or to follow the “membership to management” trend and consolidate activities in a distant staff apparatus. Either course could easily lead to their gradual extinction.

What would then be lost? Saul Alinsky, the grandfather of community organizing, once warned that “the separation of the people from the routine daily functions of citizenship is

heartbreak in a democracy.”¹³⁶ While the online political mobilizations of 2004 can point to few concrete achievements, they did reduce that separation for millions of Americans, giving them a brief taste of grassroots participation in an age of political apathy. And despite the many challenges they face, there is great potential – with the right combination of opportunity, vision, organization, and outright luck – for such efforts to coalesce into a meaningful political force that could live up to the highest aspirations of its participants.

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- ¹² Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet and the Overthrow of Everything* (New York: ReganBooks, 2004) 226.
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- ¹⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) 19.
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- ¹⁶ Note, however, that "for several reasons, this widely reported fact understates the real decline in Americans' commitment to electoral participation. For most of the twentieth century, Americans' access to the voting booth was hampered by burdensome registration requirements. ... [Also,] for much of our history, many people in the South, especially blacks, were disenfranchised. ... [The] influx of new voters [due to the Civil Rights Movement] partially masked the decline in turnout among the rest of the American electorate." *Ibid.*, 32-33.
- ¹⁷ Unlike the decline in voting turnout, the available data on political awareness does not show an absolute decline, but a growing generational gap, especially once adjusted for education: "The average college graduate today knows little more about public affairs than did the average high school graduate in the 1940s." *Ibid.*, 35.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39-40.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ²¹ Trippi, *Revolution* 3.
- ²² Putnam, *Bowling* 246.
- ²³ Trippi, *Revolution* 36.
- ²⁴ Wes Boyd, address, Take Back America Conference, Campaign for America's Future, Wardman Park Marriott Hotel, Washington D.C., 2 Jun. 2004, 24 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.ourfuture.org/document.cfm?documentID=1608>>
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- ⁴² Trippi, *Revolution* 202-203.
- ⁴³ Shapiro, *Control* 120.
- ⁴⁴ Putnam, *Bowling* 179.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ⁴⁶ Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001).
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- ⁴⁸ Chris Bowers, "How Democrats Can Seize the New Civic Space," *MyDD* 21 Feb. 2005, 24 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.mydd.com/story/2005/2/21/18279/6244>>.
- ⁴⁹ Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, "They Finally Fear Us," *Daily Kos* 31 Jan. 2005, 24 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2005/1/31/11563/0004>>.
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- ⁵¹ Putnam, *Bowling* 172.
- ⁵² Skocpol, *Diminished* 17.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20.
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- ⁵⁷ Nina J. Easton, "For Dean's Movement, an Unlikely Inspiration," *Boston Globe* 11 Feb. 2005, 24 Apr. 2005 <http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2005/02/11/for_deans_movement_an_unlikely_inspiration/>.
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- ⁶⁴ Sandeep Kaushik, "Strange Trip," *The Stranger* 28 Oct. 2004, 24 Apr. 2004 <<http://www.thestranger.com/2004-10-28/feature2.html>>.
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- 80 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2003 Survey Tables, generated by Michael Sherrard using American FactFinder, 24 Apr. 2005 <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>.
- 81 U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2004-2005* 56, Table 69. 24 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/04statab/pop.pdf>>. The state is also less Jewish than the nation, 0.7% vs 2.2%, a figure which includes those who identify themselves as such culturally.
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- ¹²⁶ Himmelstein, *To the Right* 80-81.
- ¹²⁷ Matt Bai, “Wiring the Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy,” *New York Times Magazine* 25 July 2004.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁹ Perlstein, *Before* 162
- ¹³⁰ Himmelstein, *To the Right* 69.
- ¹³¹ Putnam, *Bowling* 162.
- ¹³² Skocpol, *Diminished* 225.
- ¹³³ Sara Diamond, *Not By Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford, 1998) 1.
- ¹³⁴ Himmelstein, *To the Right* 83.
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ¹³⁶ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (1971; New York: Vintage, 1989) xxvi.