

Chapter 10

24–7 Government, the Permanent Campaign, and e–Democracy: Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick’s Interactive Website

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ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the evolution of Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick’s website through content analysis of its features and functionality, participation rates and website traffic data, reactions of legislators, media and public, and interviews with the site’s designer and director of the Governor’s political committee. The chief attributes of the permanent campaign, polling, fundraising and public posturing, are all in evidence on the site. Devalpatrick.com provides informative resources on a variety of policy questions that are designed to promote his legislative agenda. It also supports features that allow visitors to interact with the Governor’s team, such as posts and contributions, although visitors cannot contact the Governor, state or local officials, or other political entities directly from the site. Although devalpatrick.com is not able to deliver on high level e-participation goals, the level of citizen engagement it does offer is unique among U.S. elected officials.

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, a businessman, political newcomer, and long shot candidate for the governorship of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick ran a successful, innovative, technology savvy, grassroots campaign that secured his place in history as the second African American

to be elected governor of an American state. Writing for the *Boston Globe*, Frank Phillips observed,

Patrick’s willingness to shelve the advice of experienced political figures underscores his unconventional approach to politics. It also reveals a key part of the strategy that lifted him from obscurity... to enter the field for governor having never held,

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or even run for, public office, and win. (Phillips, 2006, p. B7)

His online campaign network helped generate enthusiasm and contributions, and created the infrastructure for ‘meet Deval’ events all over the state. Phillips attributes their high turnouts to the efforts of fervent online supporters who persuaded friends and neighbors to attend. The campaign’s email list numbered over 40,000 who passed each blast onto at least 10 others, thereby reaching an estimated 400,000 field volunteers, supporters and potential supporters. A few months after the election, Deval Patrick’s political committee made the campaign website permanent, turning it into a vehicle for facilitating dialog with constituents through tools that help them identify and organize around issues to which he will respond.

In an hour long interview conducted for this study, Charles SteelFisher, Director of New Media for the Governor’s campaign and current website’s designer, explained the transformation. “During the campaign we made the decision to invest heavily, not monetarily, but in terms of presentation and resources in the Deval Patrick concept, into online organizing, and empowering people” (C. SteelFisher, personal communication, May 11, 2007). The online tool for organizing caucuses on the ground evolved into the community tool, which allows people to identify common interests, talk to each other, and organize.

Why should a sitting Governor be so fearful of engaging his populace after he or she wins? So we started to play around with the idea.... creating structures that allowed people to feel connected with each other, with the administration, without having to have him on the campaign trail all the time. (C. SteelFisher, personal communication, May 11, 2007)

BACKGROUND

The Permanent Campaign

The ‘permanent campaign’ is a term coined by pollster and strategist Pat Caddell in 1977 and documented by Sidney Blumenthal (1982), to describe the blurring of the line between campaigning and governing. Its chief attributes, a preoccupation with polling, fund-raising, and public posturing, have been studied in both the U.S. (Ornstein and Mann, 2000) and UK (e.g., Franklin, 1994). Comparing communications strategies of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, Needham (2005), however, sees a distinction between the role of office-seeker and incumbent. The latter one must provide ‘post-purchase’ reassurance and maintain his or her winning coalition of voters until the next election ‘sale’. Politicians can preserve loyalty and create trust by highlighting a positive brand that is simple, unique, reassuring, aspirational, credible and value-based. The danger, warns Menefee-Libbey (2001), is that the permanent campaign systematically advantages a polarized, winner-take-all politics as well as people and interests that few would want controlling government. *An initial research question, then, is how does devalpatrick.com conform to, or depart from, these characterizations of the permanent campaign?*

Research Studies of Political Websites

Research studies of legislative, political party and candidate campaign websites in the U.S. and Europe show several trends. First, all actors have increased their web presence in recent years and second, content and functionality (tools) are becoming standardized. For example, nearly all sites include information about their producer: biographies, contact numbers and/or email addresses, speeches, press releases, and the like (Berntzen, et al., 2006; Gibson, et al., 2003; Wil-

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