E-journal

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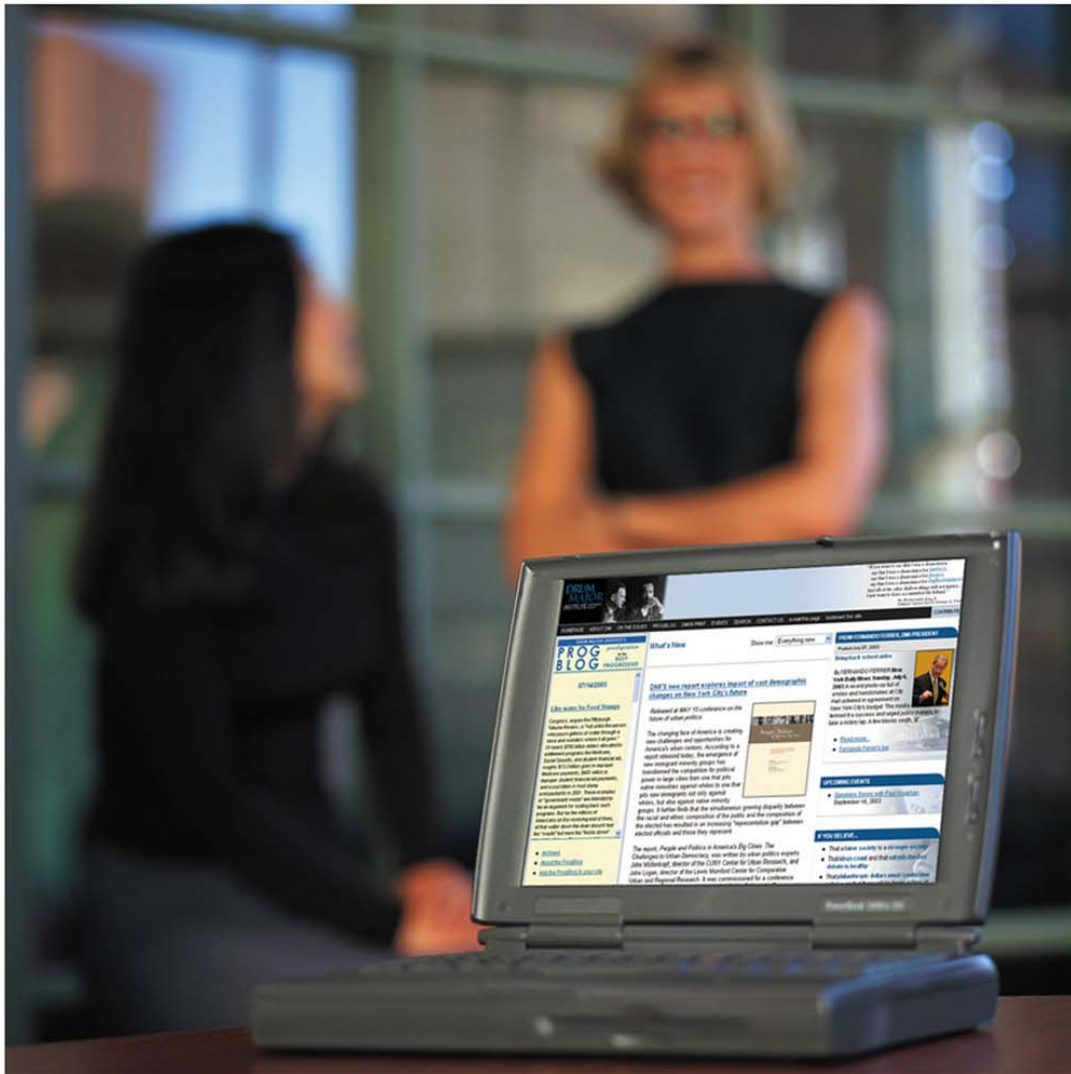
DMI E-JOURNAL IN PRINT

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*The Drum Major Institute E-Journal is an on-line hybrid – part public policy report, part op-ed – offered free of charge to the Drum Major Institute's several thousand registered online subscribers and visitors to our daily-updated website, **www.drummajorinstitute.org**.*

From non-citizen voting to the dangers of broadband politics and business outsourcing to indigent criminal defense, the DMI E-Journal tackles the issues Americans are talking about, offering a new progressive perspective on public policy-as-usual, in a style that is as informative as it is accessible. At the same time, DMI's E-Journal offers a critical platform to progressive thinkers and practitioners.

Broadband Politics

BY ALONDRA NELSON /NOVEMBER 2003

Other than presidential aspirant Rev. Al Sharpton's sharp-witted quips, Campaign 2004 will remain memorable among recent contests for the Democratic nomination for the ascendancy of the Internet as a major feature of U.S. political culture. From the hotly debated prospect of e-voting to the demonstrated success of on-line fundraising, we've entered the era of broadband politics.

No presidential contender has been more successful with this new form of hi-tech campaigning—and more closely aligned with its ground-breaking potential—than former Vermont governor Howard Dean. Dean is a paragon of virtue to many on the political left: He has been among the few public figures to consistently condemn U.S. aggression in Iraq. As the governor of Vermont, Dean signed landmark civil union legislation into law that extended legal protections and benefits to same-sex couples in the state. More recently, the physician-cum presidential hopeful increased his standing as a progressive icon when he entered the realm of digital politics, marshaling tens of thousands of supporters from far outside the beltway.

In partnership with websites MoveOn and Meetup, the Dean campaign has succeeded in using the Internet as a fundraising and mobilizing tool—in the process besting even Democratic Party cash cows. In September, for example, Dean raised a staggering $4.8 million on the Internet in just nine days, bringing the campaign's total take to more than $25 million. In a political system overrun by corporate interests and $10,000 per plate dinners, Dean's coffers were, for the most part, filled with small contributions from individual Internet donors. Amidst the continued incursion of big money into all levels of American politics, this success using technology to shore up the backing *and* bucks of big D democratically-inclined everymen and -women—in an era in which politicians have concentrated on large donors—has been hailed as nothing short of revolutionary.

But even as the Dean campaign was patted on the back for being in the vanguard of 21st century democracy—and as the Wesley Clark and John Kerry camps imitated its broadband strategy—others cautioned that, despite the hype about the democratization of information, the potentially ubiquitous Internet still has a limited range. The enthusiastic but uncritical adoption of information technology as the *modus operandi* of American politics, skeptics claim, might have a more exclusionary than inclusionary effect on the democratic process. *Mother Jones* magazine, for example, suggested that the Dean campaign's preoccupation with technology has propelled the "digital divide" into a new domain of American life.

The term "digital divide" was coined in the mid-1990s to describe the new forms of social inequality that accompanied the technology boom of the time. While disparities in access to computer technology and the Internet has decreased, a recent [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#) report confirmed that significant gaps remain. The Pew study found the largest disparities in access were based on race: 60% of white Americans have Internet access compared to only 45% of blacks. This considerable inequality—as well as others that are based on class, age and region—are clear obstacles to the creation of the robust, inclusive grassroots constituency envisioned in the promise of a new era of broadband electoral politics.

Documentation of a black-white digital divide provides a meaningful measure of disproportionate access to the Internet, but it obscures the important fact that, according to the Pew study, a not insignificant percentage—more than 40%—of all Americans use the Internet irregularly or not at all. *Mother Jones* correctly diagnoses the "digital divide" as a serious ailment of the 2004 campaign season—because the current emphasis on Internet-driven elections disproportionately excluded African Americans, the elderly, rural citizens, and others without access to computer technology from the political process. Even, across and beyond these divides, the diffusion of Internet access is not as extensive as some technology boosters would have us believe.

Given the conclusions of the Pew report, the recent enthusiasm for Internet politics will only compound the "digital divide," and in the process have a disproportionately negative effect on some of the Democratic Party's core constituencies, as well as decreasing the participation of a significant swath of the larger American polity. These sobering facts make it all the more urgent that progressive politicians, activists and concerned citizens take a step back from the seductive promises (and admittedly flashy results) of broadband politics and critically assess its capability to exacerbate inequality and to stratify the electorate.

The Future of Voting
Recent debates about Internet voting have highlighted concerns about the convergence of the digital divide and the democratic process. On the heels of the controversial 2000 presidential election, during which the supposedly objective process of voting was laid open to subjective assessments of "hanging" and "dimpled" chads, many called for the rapid deployment of new voting technologies as a way to restore confidence in the electoral process and prevent similar crises in the future. It seemed logical that the answer to the problems produced by antiquated voting technology was the introduction of new and better tools.

Prior to the Florida electoral crisis in 2000, the Arizona Democratic Party sponsored the first official Internet election in the nation with a precedent-setting primary vote. In the days leading up to the historic Arizona election, several black and Latino/a voters tried unsuccessfully to block it in court on the grounds that e-voting extended convenience to some citizens and not to

others. The multiracial coalition also objected that Internet voting discriminated against minorities and the poor who were less likely than white and middle-class Arizonans to have access a computer or the Internet. The claimants failed to block the e-vote, but succeeded in having their concerns recognized: Although the presiding judge gave the go-ahead to the Arizona e-vote, he cautioned that the digital divide might have a discriminatory impact on the election.

In the end, Arizona voters were provided with three voting options. Members of the electorate with access to technology were able to log-on and vote from a location of their choosing at the Election.com website over a three-day period. Voters were also given the option of using interactive voting booths or conventional ballots at voting sites on the day of the election. This experiment in e-voting was dogged by technical glitches—many voters complained that they had difficulty loading or logging-on to the site. These problems notwithstanding, the 2000 Arizona Democratic primary became the nation's first binding Internet election.

The Arizona decision illuminates the ultimate irony of broadband politics. On the one hand, the court acknowledged that the digital divide currently militates against the democratization of the political process via technology. On the other hand, some progressives hold such blind faith in the Internet that they are willing to overlook discrimination against some of the people who have been their longest and most faithful supporters as a minor inconvenience on the path to democratic utopia.

The criticisms that dogged Arizona's shift to e-voting foreshadowed many of the concerns raised as the Internet became central to other aspects of U.S. electoral politics. In the intervening three years several other states have attempted e-voting. Perhaps most well known is the Michigan Democratic Party's plan to allow voters to cast their ballots in the state's upcoming presidential caucus election via the Internet. Al Sharpton, impassioned opponent of the plan, has argued that the Michigan proposal was inherently biased against citizens lacking access to the Internet and amounted, in effect, to a "high-tech poll tax." The stakes of the Michigan e-vote are high because the state holds a hefty number of delegates and thus will play a significant role in determining the Democratic presidential nominee.

Defining the Grassroots in the Information Age
How is it that the Democratic Party, which represents itself as the voice of the common man and woman, is in the forefront of incorporating technologies that are unavailable to the underprivileged and the underserved? And, what does this contradiction suggest for the future of progressive politics? Does the provision of diverse ballot formats meet the threshold of the constitutional right to vote if not all formats are universally available? Does the progressive turn to broadband politics promise to shift influence from large interest groups to middle-class, cyber-savvy elites at the cost of the Democratic Party's traditionally inclusive constituency? Does the

turn to broadband politics mean that the Democratic Party has begun to take for granted solid bases of support like African Americans?

One way to approach this complex of questions is to look more closely at how progressive office-seekers and strategists are re-defining "their grassroots" in the context of Internet politics to mean Internet users. The re-definition of the term grassroots gives the appearance of the overturning of politics as usual, even as segments of progressives' constituencies are marginalized.

Howard Dean's Internet mobilizing and organizing success is a watershed moment of grassroots politics. The origins of the Dean campaign's strategy—and its particular understanding of "the grassroots"—bear further scrutiny and can shed some light on the larger progressive shift to broadband politics. According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager and the architect of his outreach efforts, was inspired in his hi-tech political strategy by his exposure to Internet culture while on hiatus from his job as a Democratic strategist in Washington. Trippi was particularly enthused by the example of the community of devotees, numbering in the millions, that sprung up around the computer operating system Linux. Unlike Microsoft Windows, the programming details or "source code" of the no-cost Linux operating system have remained available or "open" to a global network of users who can modify it and improve upon it since its creation in 1991. The Linux philosophy has become as significant as the software itself. Because the "open source" program proliferates through the volunteered expertise and labor of true believers, it quickly came to symbolize radical democracy and a critique of big business.

Dean strategist Joe Trippi envisioned similar possibilities for political organizing in the grassroots success story of the Linux operating system. Partnering with MeetUp and MoveOn, he devised a similar formula of common cause and connectivity to assemble backers for the Dean candidacy. But while Linux is a heartening counterbalance to the near monopoly of the Microsoft corporation—a David to Bill Gates' Goliath—the collaborations inspired by the software are not models for democracy, but for grassroots trust-busting, and an inadequate paradigm for the transformation of Democratic party politics to the Internet. Linux democracy is embodied by a rarified grass roots community comprised of a relatively small number of elites with leisure time, readily available technology, computer skills, and interest in refining the computer program. Unfortunately, the Linux democracy does not a *political* democracy make.

Seduced by information technology and the convenience it offers to their campaigns and some voters, politicians who rely excessively on Internet outreach confuse the democratic potential of information technology with the bigger task of reaching out to all constituencies and creating a democracy that includes those without access or interest in information technologies, who also deserve representation. Linux as a paradigm for the Dean campaign, and of broadband politics

more generally, demonstrates the danger of leaving behind liberal ideals of representative democracy and its concern for the common good and replacing it with the libertarian ideologies that still circulate in tech circles well after the decline of the Internet boom.

The underlying philosophy attendant to the tech revolution was an ideal of libertarianism, more specifically cyberlibertarianism. Langdon Winner, a scholar who studies the social impact of science and technology, defines cyberlibertarianism as "a collection of ideas that links ecstatic enthusiasm for electronically mediated forms of living with radical, right wing libertarian ideas about the proper definition of freedom, social life, economics, and politics in the years to come." As such, progressive broadband politics runs the risk of conflating radical democracy and concern for the common good that is its hallmark with a philosophy of freedom that values individual liberties—in this case the choice to vote or mobilize via the Internet is one has the resources to do so—above all else.

While the Linux paradigm does embody a limited conception of the larger social good, it remains a woefully inadequate political philosophy for progressives and is at odds with political ideals that include issues of access, inclusion and empowerment. The grassroots of progressive politics must continue to include all members of its base, it must be broader and more inclusionary in its vision. As Washington Post tech analyst J.P. Gownder reminds us, "the Internet can't become a substitute for the gritty, difficult work of true grass-roots campaigning in diverse ethnic and socio-economic communities." If progressives are truly to remain the voice for all of its constituencies, we cannot afford to let our conception of the grassroots slowly slip into one adopted from Internet culture no matter how seductive it's wrapping.

As the Dean campaign has successfully shown, broadband politics is a radically new and effective means of reaching out to, broadening, and energizing certain progressive constituencies. But excessive reliance thereon,--even more dangerous, a redefinition of "grassroots" politics in light thereof—means giving up the core values of the progressive movement—concern for and representation of all its constituents. If we are not careful, the shift will not just be one of old tools for new, but a change in the very concept of inclusive community that progressives hold dear.

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