

YOUNG VOTERS and the WEB of POLITICS

Pathways to Participation in the Youth Engagement and Electoral Campaign Web Spheres

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which youth engagement sites (such as Rock the Vote) and election campaign sites (for house, senate and governor) appeal to young voters and offer them pathways for involvement in the electoral process. We examined archival web records of candidate and youth engagement sites in the 2002 elections for the nature and frequency of appeals to young citizens on various issues, as well as interactive communication features that enable visitors to different sites to communicate and stay involved. The ways in which young citizens can travel within the youth sphere and across the two spheres are also examined through detailed analysis of site links, and the presence or absence of features on youth engagement sites that may help visitors search for campaigns that match their political preferences. The general findings suggest that there is much more that both campaigns and youth engagement organizations can do to attract young citizens and assist them in finding meaningful paths to voting. Campaigns still offer relatively few appeals directly to young voters, compared, for example, to appeals to senior citizens. And there are no links out from campaigns to the sphere of youth engagement sites, missing opportunities to connect voting to surrounding political experiences in society. As for the youth engagement sphere, there is surprisingly little observable cooperation among the various sites established by foundations and NGOs, resulting in missed opportunities to create interest networks among young citizens. Our network mapping analysis shows that the existing networks of youth sites could be much more easily traveled; the experience is more commonly that of isolated, proprietary islands. Though some groups are making attempts to reach out to other sites within the youth web sphere, we believe that a good deal more linking, as well as more prominent placement of links pages, would better enable youth engagement groups to successfully tap the networking power of the internet. Perhaps more importantly, there were no observed efforts to match the youth oriented political preferences that are clearly signaled in the youth engagement sites with specific electoral campaigns that may make similar issue appeals in the election sphere. What currently pass for pathways from youth engagement sites to election sites are links to voter registration information and to generic search engines (such as that run by the League of Women Voters) that only provide general lists of campaigns and candidates by geographic region. The potential of the web to create hyperlinked pathways between these two political spheres -- or even within the youth engagement sphere-- has not as yet been developed. At present, young people cannot travel easily in the political web sphere.

INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The crisis of youth participation in American politics has become well known. The low voter turnout rates for 18 to 25 year olds, compared to those of the rest of the population, stand atop the list of youth engagement concerns. Although it is impossible to identify true turnout rates by age group in any given year, Levine and Lopez estimate that in the 2000 national elections only 37% of Americans aged 18 to 25 cast ballots, compared to the national average of 51%.¹ In the off year elections of 2002 and 1998, only 17 % of young Americans voted -- significantly lower than the national turnout rate.² For the 2004 election cycle, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center earlier this year showed that over two-thirds of those under 30 were not even somewhat interested in news about the Democratic primary campaigns, while a majority of those 30 and older reported some or a great deal of interest in the race. Further, little evidence favors wishful thinking that young voters are simply too busy with education or starting careers to get involved with politics, and that they will participate at the rate of earlier generations as they get older and their lives begin to intersect more with government policies. Compared to American youth of past decades, the current younger generation also comes up short on a number of civic engagement indicators (Putnam 2000). Ever since achieving the franchise in 1972, voter turnout among the youth has steadily declined

(Levine and Lopez 2002), and research on political socialization suggests that rates of participation (and political apathy) established during the early years of adulthood more often than not translate into lifelong patterns (Crystal & DeBell 2002, Putnam, 2000).

A NEW GENERATION COMES ONLINE

On the optimistic side, there is some indication that a distinct new generation of citizens may be entering public life. Called the DotNets by the authors of a Pew/CIRCLE report on the civic health of the nation, these young Americans born after 1976 differ from their Generation X predecessors in terms of strong collective identification as a generation, more positive attitudes about the role of government, and greater appreciation of diversity (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins, 2002). However, the voting profile of this generation continues the path of historic decline, pushed, perhaps, by the failure of candidates and campaigns to ask these young citizens to vote on terms that matter to them. As young Americans point to a lack of attention to youth concerns by political elites as a key factor in non-participation, and political campaigns (under the direction of professional consultants) expend energy on demographic groups with much higher turnout rates, the situation has become a vicious circle.

Against the backdrop of these disturbing patterns, however, two key factors point to the internet as an important tool that could hold great promise as a pathway to greater youth political engagement, particularly in the area of voting. First, although 18-25 year olds may be the age group most disconnected from campaigns, elections, and politics in general, they are among the most wired populations in the country. Though older demographics have demonstrated higher rates of internet use in recent years, Americans aged 18-29 have remained near the top of usage statistics (Cole et al. 2003) and have distinguished themselves as early-adopters of interactive technologies like instant-messaging and chat from the beginning stages of internet growth (Madden 2003). Indeed, studies estimate that more than 80% of 18-29 year-olds use the internet, as compared to estimates of

¹ As Levine and Lopez (2002) note, official Federal Election Commission data on ballots cast do not contain information on the age of voters. Thus, any estimate of turnout by age must be derived from survey data. Though such data are notorious for their inflation of voter turnout, the Census bureau data used by Levine and Lopez are collected within two weeks of each election and are thought to contain only a modest 10% over reporting rate. Further, despite the debates over appropriate measures of overall voter turnout (c.f. McDonald and Popkin), Levine and Lopez conclude that youth voting rates are low "by any measure."

² 2002 data from <http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org/>, 2000 data from Levine and Lopez (2002).

between 58-64% for Americans aged 50-65, and 22-34% of those 65 or older (Fox 2004, Cole et al. 2003). Moreover, data from January 2004 suggest that one-in-five young Americans, again more than any other age group, turned to the internet specifically as a source of news about the 2004 elections (Pew Internet and American Life Project Tracking Surveys 2004). The second key factor is that political actors are also increasingly turning to the internet. Candidates, political parties, interest groups, and other central actors in the political process have all increased their web presence dramatically in the last decade (Bimber & Davis 2003, Foot et al. 2003, Margolis & Resnick 2000). In 2002 over two-thirds of all House, Senate and Gubernatorial candidates fielded a functional, stand-alone website (Foot & Schneider 2002). Despite the eventual collapse of Howard Dean's presidential campaign, the use of the internet by Dean and other Democratic primary candidates has led some to pronounce online campaigning as an essential component of the American political scene (Carlson 2004). Moreover, important efforts to seize the potential of the web have been made by foundations that have invested considerable resources in creating a host of youth-oriented political portals, such as RockTheVote.org, and DemocracyMatters.org. The major political parties have also launched sites connected with Young Democrat and Young Republican organizations.

STUDYING ELECTORAL AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WEB SPHERES

In this study we seek to understand how the increasing use of the internet as a medium of political communication and civic engagement can help reverse the declines in voting among American youth.

Other researchers have already begun to examine the potential of the internet for stimulating political engagement at the individual-behavioral level. Studies of the effects of interactive web communication have demonstrated the potential of the internet to generate interest in political campaigns, candidates, and information, as well as its ability to stimulate greater participation (Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002, Sundar et al. 2003,

Iyengar and Jackman 2004). While this literature identifies the potential benefits of online political communication directed at young people as a medium, we undertake a comprehensive content analysis of political information on the World Wide Web as it addresses youth participation in elections. Our study examines both candidate campaign sites as well as non-campaign youth engagement sites that were posted during the 2002 elections, all of which were inventoried for the issues and topics discussed, as well as the presence of youth appeals and interactive features. The goal of this study is to assess whether the youth mobilizing potential of the web is being widely realized, and to identify critical areas where it can be better achieved.

The comparisons that we draw are aimed at understanding the messages, features, linkages, and disconnections between what we refer to as the Electoral Web Sphere (comprised of campaign websites produced by candidates) and what we call the Youth Engagement Web Sphere (comprised of non-campaign political engagement and voting sites explicitly targeted at younger age groups), following the conceptualization of Web sphere analysis offered by Foot and Schneider (2002). We are interested in the degree to which the explicit appeals to young people found on youth engagement sites differ from or correspond to the content and features found in the Electoral Web Sphere. In addition, we want to document the nature and extent of direct and indirect linkages between the two spheres that may provide young citizens with meaningful pathways to engagement with electoral politics and the expression of their preferences through voting.

In developing this analysis, we explored three research questions. **First, what is the nature of the youth engagement web sphere?** Answering this question entailed identifying the key political issues and discourses on the youth sites, along with inventorying the interactive features used to attract and retain young visitors and to facilitate political participation both on- and offline. **Second, to what extent does the electoral web sphere speak to the interests and sensibilities of younger Americans?** In keeping with our goal of identifying points of overlap and difference between the two web spheres, we again begin with an analysis of

the key political issues discussed on the sites of political candidates, and move on to analyze the way in which these issues are targeted to younger or older demographic groups, and the ways in which these election sites incorporate interactive features. **Finally, what are the linkages or navigational paths within the youth political web sphere and between that sphere and the electoral web sphere?** Here we look both for indirect content-related connections such as similarities in issue agendas and definitions, as well as more direct connections such as links in the youth web sphere that help young voters register or find campaigns that match their political interests.

DATA AND METHODS

To address these questions, we conducted comprehensive content analyses on archival copies of political engagement sites aimed at young people and campaign sites produced by candidates, collected during the 2002 U.S. elections. For both sets of websites, data collection and content analysis proceeded through two steps. First we produced the (hyper-textual) lists of sites from the youth engagement and electoral web spheres that would later be content analyzed using processes of site-identification for the youth engagement sites and, in the case of the candidate sites, sampling. Secondly, we developed and administered coding schemes designed to detect and document the presence of issues, features, and age-related rhetorical appeals relevant to our research objectives. We also conducted network analyses of the live youth engagement web sphere after the 2002 elections. The following sections explain the development of these methods.

SITE IDENTIFICATION AND SAMPLING

The collection of youth-oriented political engagement websites was generated using a combination of techniques. First, a series of Google searches were conducted using descriptors such as "youth," "political," "politics," "elections," "citizenship," and "civic." The site URLs generated

in this process were then used to create a "seed list" that was then fed into the iCrawler tool developed by Richard Rogers (2001). This crawler identifies networks of sites that link to and from an original list of sites. The crawler was also instructed to find and identify the sites that link, in turn, from those second tier sites. By adjusting the network parameters (starting the network mapping from different beginning lists of sites, setting the depth of link detection to three pages deep in each site, and collecting sites up to two links removed from each set of starting points, we were able to gather what we believe to be a reasonably complete network of youth engagement sites. This iterative series of exploratory crawls was used to arrive at the final list of sites that comprise what we consider to be the youth political web sphere for 2002. (We have also subsequently identified the 2004 youth sphere, and hope to produce a comparative analysis to track changes in youth appeals and pathways to engagement).

Through each iteration of crawling, the goal was to identify portal sites focusing generally on political issues (rather than narrowly on one issue, or one set of issues) and oriented toward the 18-24 year old demographic. We deleted from our analyses sites from interest organizations that did not display a clear youth engagement program. We also added sites that were identified by other researchers working on youth engagement that did not emerge from the automated crawling process that generated our initial list. At every turn, we sought to create the most inclusive and exhaustive collection of websites providing political content directed primarily at younger citizens. Ultimately, this list included some 24 sites (see Appendix A for a complete list). Due to the relatively small size of the youth political web sphere, we were then able to conduct our content analyses on what we believe is the full universe of youth political portals that operated in the 2002 cycle. After the universe of sites was identified, we conducted a final series of iCrawler analyses designed to assess whether the collection of sites we created could be considered a cohesive network, as part of our investigation into the nature and structure of the youth political web sphere. We describe the principles of network

mapping in more detail later in this report, in conjunction with presenting our analysis of the cohesion of the youth sphere.

The set of candidate sites was drawn from the archival collection of all of the 2002 House, Senate, and Gubernatorial candidate websites, produced by Webarchivist.org and available at the Library of Congress under the Mapping the Internet Electronic Resources Virtual Archive (MINERVA, <http://www.loc.gov/minerva/>), as well as through Webarchivist's public scholarship site, <http://politicalweb.info>. At the height of the campaign season in late October 2002, over 1600 individuals officially competed for House, Senate, and Gubernatorial office, and nearly two-thirds of them fielded a functional, stand-alone campaign website (Foot et al. 2002). Over the course of the entire election season, including the primaries, close to 1200 websites were present at some point, and were included in the Election 2002 Web Archive. Lacking the resources to conduct coding on the full universe of campaign sites from 2002, we randomly sampled 200 of the sites listed in the archive and anticipated that we would lose roughly ten percent of that sample due to archival access issues described below. Analysis of the sample on the basis of site characteristics, including partisanship of candidate and campaign intensity (based on Cook's Political Report ratings), revealed no significant differences between our sample and the universe of cases available in the archive. From the initial sample of 200, 23 sites were eliminated from coding due to one of several archive access factors: exclusion of the actual site contents by the campaigns themselves³, problems with archival availability of the sites⁴, and in a few cases the mistaken inclusion in the archive of sites that were not official campaign sites.⁵ Thus a total of 177 archival website impressions comprised our hypertext corpus -- meaning that the documents in our sample were dynamic or navigable -- for the candidate site content analysis.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Coding was carried out on archival renderings of the websites, as they appeared at the height of the 2002 campaign season, and all archival impressions were either drawn from the Election

Web Archive, or from the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>). For the youth sites, we typically coded impressions captured in late October or early November, and for the candidate sites, we examined the candidate's latest period of active involvement in the campaign.⁶

The coding scheme developed for the youth

³ Candidates were, and are, able to remove their records from the archive collection in two ways; Candidates may "opt out" of the archive officially, or they may have included technical features on their sites (the robots.txt exclusion) that disable automated collection techniques, such as those used in the creation of the archive.

⁴ Though the technology has come a long way, Web archiving continues to be a complex endeavor. As a result of the many variations in site design, layout, organization, and construction, as well as the occasional contingencies of the Internet itself, 100% reliability remains on the horizon. We believe, however, that exclusion from our analysis on the basis of these factors exhibits no underlying systematic bias.

⁵ For example, a few candidates listed personal or professional Web pages in their campaign documents - such as Martin Lindstedt, Republican Senatorial candidate for Missouri, whose archived site is not primarily dedicated to his Senatorial campaign.

⁶ Archival rendering allows one to view a site more or less exactly as it was rendered during the time period specified. When a site is collected into the archive the files associated with that site are captured and stored electronically. Each time this is done, an archival "impression" is made of the site for that point in time. For example, most of the campaign sites used in the study were captured on a daily basis. Thus one can select a specific date from index pages at politicalweb.info or MINERVA at the Library of Congress and view the impression of the site, which reproduces it as it was seen by Web surfers on that particular day.

⁷ To assess intercoder reliability we calculated both Cohen's Kappa and percentage agreement for each individual coding item and also for each separate coding scheme. By and large the scores for both measurements fall within reasonable range. However, we report percentage agreements here based on two considerations. First, unlike coding involving Likert scales or other continuous variables, in most instances we were primarily concerned with either the presence or absence of certain types of content or features. As Neuendorf notes, percent agreement is particularly appropriate in such instances, "wherein each pair of coded measures is either a hit or a miss" (2002, p. 149). Second, many of our measures were distributed such that negative codes far outnumbered positive codes. Such a distribution exerts a strong downward influence on the calculation of percent agreement beyond chance, even when coding is reasonably reliable (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Nevertheless, even by the downwardly biased Kappa

political sites probed for the presence or absence of 16 distinct political issues, and 15 specific features. The list of issues was developed on the basis of polling data from 2002 identifying the political issues

Table 1 lists the specific issues and features included in the coding scheme, and corresponding inter-coder reliability statistics for each item.⁷ A team of graduate and undergraduate researchers conducted

Table 1. Issues and Features Coded for the Youth Political Web Sphere, and Inter-Coder Reliability Scores Reported as Percentage Agreements

Issues		Features	
Education	.90	Voter Registration	1.0
Health Care	1.0	News/Press Releases	.90
National Security/Terrorism	.95	Photos	1.0
Taxes/Government Spending	.95	Endorsements	.95
Economy/Jobs	.80	Email Signup	1.0
Social Security	.85	Contact Officials	.90
Environment	.90	Participation/Mobilization	.90
Gun Control	.90	Multimedia Content	.80
Crime/Violence	.90	Send Links	.90
Abortion	.95	Message Board or Blog	.95
Campaign Finance Reform	.90	Interactive Polls	1.0
Minority Rights/Recognition	.85	Contact Media	.85
Politics/Government Changes	.85	Personal Login	.90
Censorship/Free Expression	.95	Onsite Information on the 2002 Elections	.90
National Debt	1.0	Links to Information on the 2002 Elections	.90
Gay Rights	.85		

Overall coder reliability for youth website coding, Cohen's Kappa = .79

salient to voters during the time period for which we coded the websites. These "most important problem" data included traditional national samples, as well as samples of voters in the 18-25 year old age group. The list of features was developed on the basis of prior research on the 2002 candidate websites (Foot and Schneider, 2002), as well as exploratory analyses of the youth sites themselves.

calculations, our estimates of overall reliability are in the "fair to good" range for candidates and in the "excellent" range for youth sites (c.f. Landis and Koch 1977), and we report these beneath each table.

⁸ Seven of the 15 features in our analysis were coded in another study (Foot et al. 2002) on the basis of an even larger sample of candidate sites, and we used their estimates for these items.

the coding using a web-based survey tool, which facilitated data transfer during the coding process.

In keeping with our goal of identifying patterns of similarity and difference in issue and feature content between youth and candidate political websites, our coding scheme for the candidate sites included items tapping the presence or absence of the same 16 issues and enabling comparison of the same 15 features included in the youth site coding scheme.⁸ In order to fully assess the extent to which candidates reached out to youth sensibilities in 2002, we also included a number of items probing for the presence of age-related appeals within both the issues content, and the features employed on the candidate sites. For example, for each issue identified on a site, we asked coders to further probe

for the presence of either implicit or explicit appeals to younger citizens. Implicit appeals were defined as the presence of photographs or other images that either featured individuals resembling members of the 18-25 year old age group, or symbolized that group. For example, coders looked for photographs of young workers on pages related to the economy and college students on pages related to education. Explicit appeals were defined as direct, textual references to younger voters, where younger voters were clearly part of the intended audience. To illustrate, a candidate's page featuring text decrying the flight of young people from her rural district would not be coded as an explicit youth appeal on economic issues, whereas a candidate's page including calls for greater funding for student loan programs that benefit college students would be coded as an explicit youth appeal on education. In our final analysis, however, both implicit and explicit appeals to young people were so infrequent that we combined both into a single measure of the presence of youth appeals in issue content, and inter-coder reliability was calculated on the basis of this simpler measure. As a point of comparison, we also coded for the presence or absence of appeals to another age-based demographic, senior citizens, using the same procedures.

With respect to youth appeals in feature content, we examined four distinct facets of the typical campaign website; we looked for explicit or implicit youth appeal or representation in the following areas: a) mobilization/participation features (such as a campaign calendar featuring events held on college campuses), b) photo galleries, c) news-items listed in a press-release or newsroom section of a website, and d) endorsements (e.g. from the local College Republicans or Democrats). Table 2 lists the issues and features included in our coding scheme for candidate sites, and corresponding inter-coder reliability statistics for each item.

RESULTS

Our analyses of the youth engagement and electoral web spheres in 2002 revealed that the vast potential of the internet as a tool for mobilizing youth political engagement has largely gone

unrealized. The general pattern throughout the major sites in the youth engagement web sphere is that they tackled issues important to young people (which include the top issues identified by most Americans) and deployed sophisticated interactive features and techniques. However, these sites as a whole seldom featured a stand-alone menu of political issues. Moreover, we found a surprising disconnect among the youth engagement websites, meaning that visitors interested in finding other sites that might stimulate their interest had to return to a basic search process. We also found a lack of passageways leading from these vibrant youth political portals directly to candidates and campaigns that might enable young voters to match their political interests to election choices.

As for the House, Senate, and Gubernatorial sites in the election web sphere, they addressed a number of topics and issues that young people care about, but they were much more likely to include appeals on those issues to older rather than younger voters -- despite the fact that close to four times as many young people use the internet compared to seniors. The campaign sites also used interactive features substantially less often than the sites in the youth engagement web sphere.

Beyond these findings, however, our analysis also revealed a handful of innovative youth and candidate sites that give hope for the potential of the internet as a tool for stimulating greater youth political participation. We illustrate these innovative sites with screen shots later in the report, and in a separate folder of webscapes that accompanies this report.

I. THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WEB SPHERE

The Issue Formats of Young Citizen Sites. We began by examining the issue content of sites in the youth political web sphere. Only eight of the 24 sites we examined featured a distinctive menu-driven section

⁹ The eight youth sites featuring distinctive issues sections in 2002 were: Rock the Vote, Youthnoise, Millennial Politics, Generation Vote, Youthlink, Democracy Matters, Republican Youth Majority, and Youth Democrats of America.

Table 2. Issues and Features Coded for the Electoral Web Sphere, and Inter-Coder Reliability Reported as Percentage Agreements

Issues	Issue Presence/Absence Reliability	Youth Appeal	Senior Appeal
Education	0.813	0.938	0.875
Health Care	0.688	0.938	0.938
National Security/Terrorism	0.875	0.938	0.938
Taxes/Government Spending	0.688	1.000	1.000
Economy/Jobs	0.750	0.938	1.000
Social Security	0.750	0.875	0.688
Environment	0.938	1.000	1.000
Gun Control	0.813	.938	1.00
Crime/Violence	0.875	1.000	1.000
Abortion	0.875	1.000	1.000
Campaign Finance Reform	0.938	1.000	1.000
Minority Rights/Recognition	0.625	1.000	1.000
Politics/Government Changes	0.875	1.000	1.000
Censorship/Free Expression	0.875	1.000	1.000
National Debt	0.938	1.000	1.000
Gay Rights	1.000	1.000	1.000
Features	Presence/Absence		
Biography	.882		
News/Press Releases	0.882		
Photos	0.765		
Endorsements	0.882		
Message Board or Blog	0.941		
Youth Participation	1.0		
Youth in Photos	0.941		
Youth News Items	0.941		
Young Voter Endorsements	1.000		

Overall coder reliability for issues, Cohen's Kappa=.56.

Overall coder reliability for features, Cohen's Kappa=.66.

devoted to discussion of political issues in 2002.⁹ These pages typically included a number of issues mentioned atop the national “most important issue” polls (e.g. education, environment, economy/jobs and healthcare), along with others that seemed disproportionately targeted to younger citizens (e.g., gay and lesbian rights and civil rights in general). Figure 1 displays the menu of issues featured on the Rock the Vote website during the 2002 campaign season. The presence of national “most important issues” no doubt reflects trends revealed in research showing that young adults tend to care about the same issues as older Americans

(CIRCLE National Youth Survey 2002). The number of issues that seemed more distinctive to the youth sites – censorship and free expression, the rights of gays, lesbians, and racial and ethnic minorities, as well as political and governmental reforms – suggests that the youth sites are also providing distinctive youth-oriented political content. In the next section we report that such issues received far less attention by political candidates in 2002. Table 3 reports the presence of each of the 16 issues we coded for as a percentage of the eight sites featuring distinctive issues sections in 2002.

Figure 1: Rock the Vote Issues Screenshot

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window displaying the Rock the Vote website. The address bar shows the URL: http://wasearch.loc.gov/e22k/20021015123553/http://www.rockthevote.org/issues_education.html. The page content includes:

- A banner with images of Bonnie Raitt, Beck, Everclear, Michael Stipe, and George Clinton.
- An "Issues: Education" section with text: "Class size, financial aid, school vouchers, segregation, affirmative action, ethnic studies, student rights. Does your school have all the books, teachers, computers, and classes that you need? [Knowledge is power](#). Use your power to guarantee your right to an education."
- A large graphic with the word "ISSUES" and a list of issues: EDUCATION, VIOLENCE, HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT, DISCRIMINATION, MONEY, FREE EXPRESSION.
- An "ACTION ALERTS" section with the date [01.14.02] and the title "Help to Make Financial Aid Available to those Who Need It". The text discusses the Higher Education Act and its revision in 1998.
- A link to <http://wasearch.loc.gov/80/e22k/20021015123553/http://www.raiseyourvoice.com/>.
- A "CURRENT NEWS" section with the date [01.28.02].
- Two side images: one of R.E.M. with the caption "R.E.M. has been Rockin' the Vote since 1992." and another with the text "HOW CAN YOU ROCK THE VOTE? CLICK".

Table 3.
Issues Discussed on Youth Political Web Sites
That Featuring Distinct Issues Sections, N=8

ISSUE	Presence on Youth Sites
Education	75.0
Politics/Government Changes	62.5
Campaign Finance Reform	62.5
Crime/Violence	62.5
Environment	62.5
Gay Rights	50.0
Minority Rights/Recognition	50.0
Abortion	50.0
Gun Control	50.0
Economy/Jobs	50.0
Taxes/Government Spending	50.0
National Security/Terrorism	50.0
Health Care	50.0
Censorship/Free Expression	25.0
Social Security	25.0
National Debt	12.5

Features of the Youth Political Web Sphere.

In addition to documenting the issue content of the 2002 political youth web sphere, we also examined the kinds of features producers of these political portal sites deploy in their efforts to keep the interest of their young visitors. Many researchers have identified the interactive and information dissemination capabilities of web-based communication as a great potential for more vibrant political spaces, qualitatively different from those encountered offline (Foot & Schneider 2002; Hill & Hughes 1998; Norris 2001). In documenting the presence of information-based and interactive features on youth political websites, we identify the extent to which such potential is being realized on the sites directly targeting American youth. Among the most common features we found on these sites were those enabling visitors to sign up for an email newsletter alerting them of new issues and updates to the site (65% of sites), news sections featuring current events content presented from a youth perspective (61.1% of sites), and extensive use

of photographic images (half of the sites coded). Other features that were more interactive and unique to the web environment, such as multimedia content, message boards or blogs, and interactive polls were present on a number of sites, though they were surprisingly not the norm. Figure 2 displays an example of an interactive message board found on GenerationVote.com, featuring statements on a variety of political issues and a posting platform allowing visitors to see how many others have responded to the post, and to post a response themselves. Though survey research indicates that younger citizens are especially interested in and adept at interacting with these features, they tended to appear on only a handful of the most elaborate sites. Table 4 reports the presence of each of the 15 features we coded for as a percentage of the youth sites archived in 2002.

Figure 2. Interactive message board on GenerationVote.com

GenerationVote.com - Viewpoints - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Forward Stop Home Search Favorites Media Print Copy Paste

Address http://www.generationvote.com/vnews/display.v/SEC/Viewpoints

Google Search Web Search Site 924 blocked Options


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Viewpoints

More Gore



While waiting in line at Al and Tipper Gore's book signing in Raleigh, NC, I over heard a woman tell a reporter she cried when Gore announced he would not run for president in 2004. Though I was not brought to tears, Gore's Dec. 15 announcement disappointed and surprised me. First, I did not expect any decision to be made . . . [read more](#) [9]

President Bush's Environmental Jihad (Dec 11, 2002)
If ever there was an ultimate weapon of mass destruction, it is the Bush Administration's environmental agenda. As this . . . [read more](#) [9] 1

Why the Delay on Iraq? (Oct 09, 2002)
Republicans are gaining from the moves against Iraq. Is it planned or coincidental?
Let me begin by saying that I am in full support of pursuing regime change in Iraq through whatever means necessary. In light of . . . [read more](#) [9] 2

The United States Loses to India (Sep 29, 2002)
The displays of patriotism across America have shown up on "USA" t-shirts, posters and bumper stickers, and will hopefully show . . . [read more](#) [9] 2

Second Amendment: Locked, Loaded and Lethal (Sep 29, 2002)
Aah, Amendments, how do we interpret thee? Though revolutionary, the U.S. Constitution -- the playbook for our government, our . . . [read more](#) [9]

War, What is it Good for? (Sep 29, 2002)
It seems once again that W. has not heeded the lessons that history has so aptly provided. In flagrant violation of international . . . [read more](#) [9] 3

The Personal Meaning of September 11th to America (Sep 06, 2002)
As the first anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks approaches, it is hard to imagine life before heightened . . . [read more](#) [9]

Reigning in a Ruthless Second Amendment (Nov 01, 2002)
When is enough enough? When do the promulgators of a flawed argument reach that threshold when the statistical and anecdotal . . . [read more](#) [9] 1

Journalism For a Junk-Food Generation (Sep 06, 2002)
Every journalist yearns to be a Woodward or a Bernstein. All secretly ache to dash across a newsroom on deadline or coerce an . . . [read more](#) [9] 1

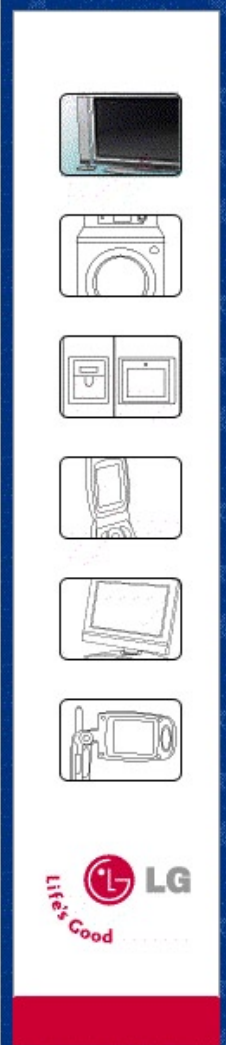
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Start

www.civicyouth.org 12

Table 4.
Features on Youth Political Web Sites

Feature	Presence on Youth Sites	N
Email Signup	65.0	20
News/Press Releases	61.1	18
Photos	50.0	18
Contact Officials	36.8	20
Multimedia	25.0	20
Message Board or Blog	15.8	19
Login	15.8	19
Interactive Polls	15.0	20
Send Links	10.0	20
Contact Media	10.0	18
Endorsements	5.0	20

Ns (sites coded) vary based on archival availability.

Table 5.
Issue Discussion on Candidate Web Sites With Distinct Issues Sections

ISSUE	Presence on Candidate Sites	N
Education	80.9	129
Health Care	75.2	129
National Security/Terrorism	61.8	129
Taxes/Government Spending	59.7	129
Economy/Jobs	57.4	129
Social Security	55.0	129
Environment	51.5	130
Gun Control	31.0	129
Crime/Violence	30.5	128
Abortion	28.9	128
Campaign Finance Reform	21.4	131
Minority Rights/Recognition	19.4	129
Politics/Government Changes	18.8	129
Censorship/Free Expression	14.8	128
National Debt	9.4	128
Gay Rights	6.2	129

Ns vary based on archival availability.

II. THE ELECTORAL WEB SPHERE

Issues Discourse on Candidate Sites.

By identifying the issues discussed by candidates on their campaign websites in 2002 we are able to make a direct comparison of the topical and rhetorical composition of issues between the Electoral Web Sphere and the Youth Engagement Web Sphere. Not surprisingly, the top issues discussed by candidates in 2002 approximate a much closer fit with opinion data on the national agenda from the same time period. The top five issues found on candidate issues pages were education (80.9%), health care (75.2%), national security and terrorism (61.8%), taxes and spending (59.7%), and the economy and job creation (57.4%). Social security was a close sixth at 55%. Table 5 reports the presence of each of the 16 issues we coded for as a percentage of candidate sites featuring a distinct issues section (comparable to our inventory for youth sites) archived in 2002.

With respect to the question of overlap and difference between the agendas of candidates in 2002, and the agenda represented on youth political portals in the same time period, our data suggest a mixed picture. Figure 3 provides a graphical summary of these points of overlap and divergence. With the exception of Social Security, virtually all of the top issues discussed on candidate sites are also prominently featured in the youth political web sphere. And yet there are significant disparities in the relative emphasis on issues such as gun control, crime and violence, government reform issues, and the rights of gays and lesbians as well as other minorities – as is seen in the lower half of Figure 3.

Figure 3.
Issue Discussion on Youth vs. Candidate Web Sites

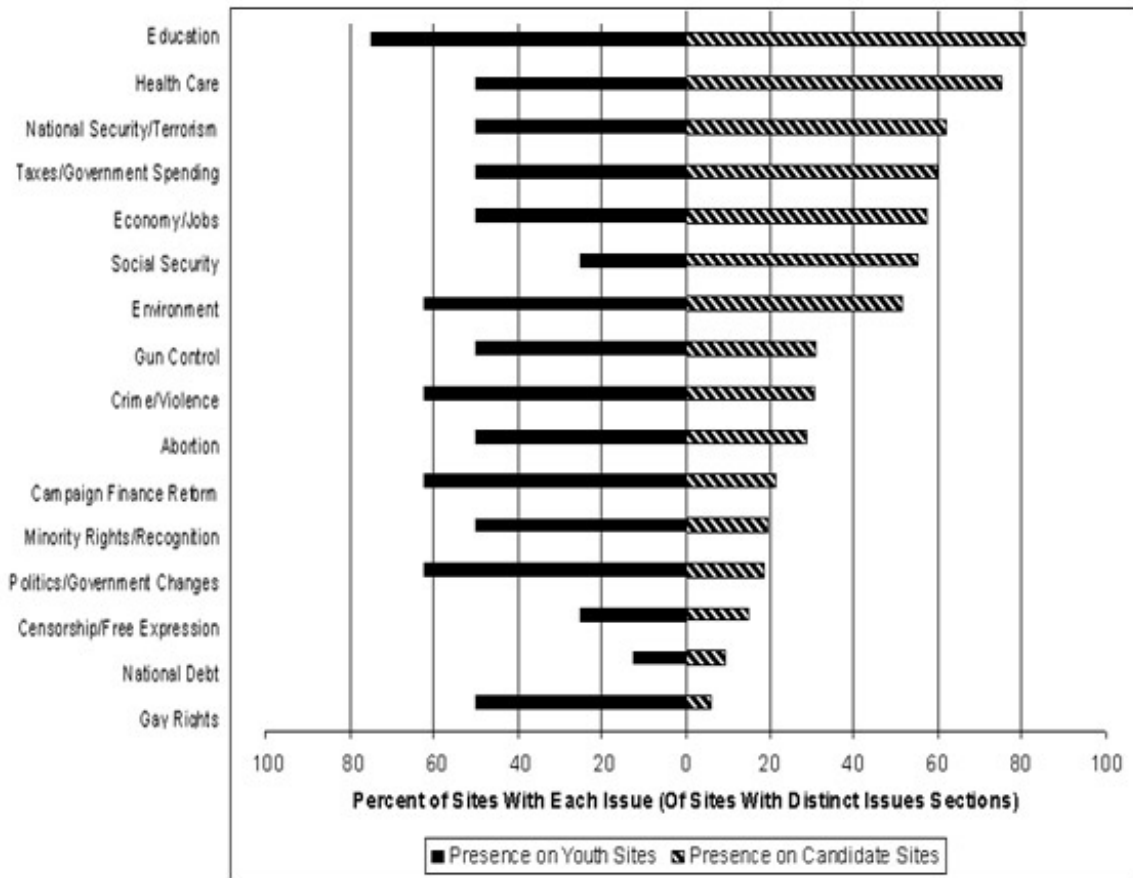
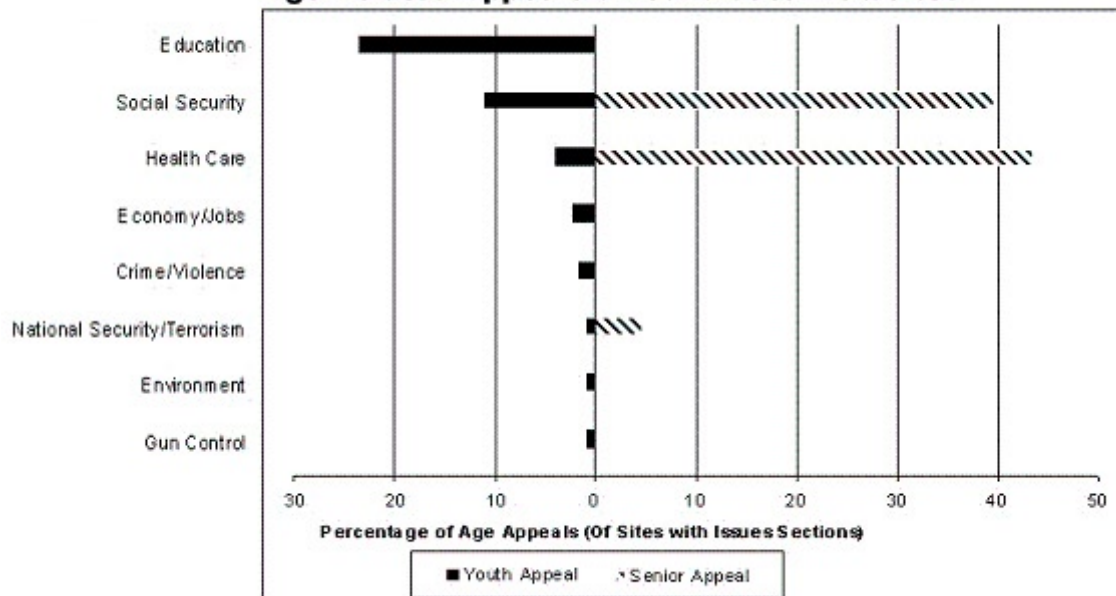


Table 6.
Age-related Appeals on Candidate Sites With Distinct Issues Sections

ISSUE	Youth Appeal	Senior Appeal	N
Gun Control	0.8	0.0	128
Environment	0.8	0.0	128
National Security/Terrorism	0.8	4.7	129
Crime/Violence	1.6	0.0	129
Economy/Jobs	2.3	0.0	129
Health Care	3.9	43.4	128
Social Security	10.9	39.5	131
Education	23.3	0.0	129

Ns vary based on archival availability.

Figure 4.
Age-Related Appeals on Candidate Web Sites

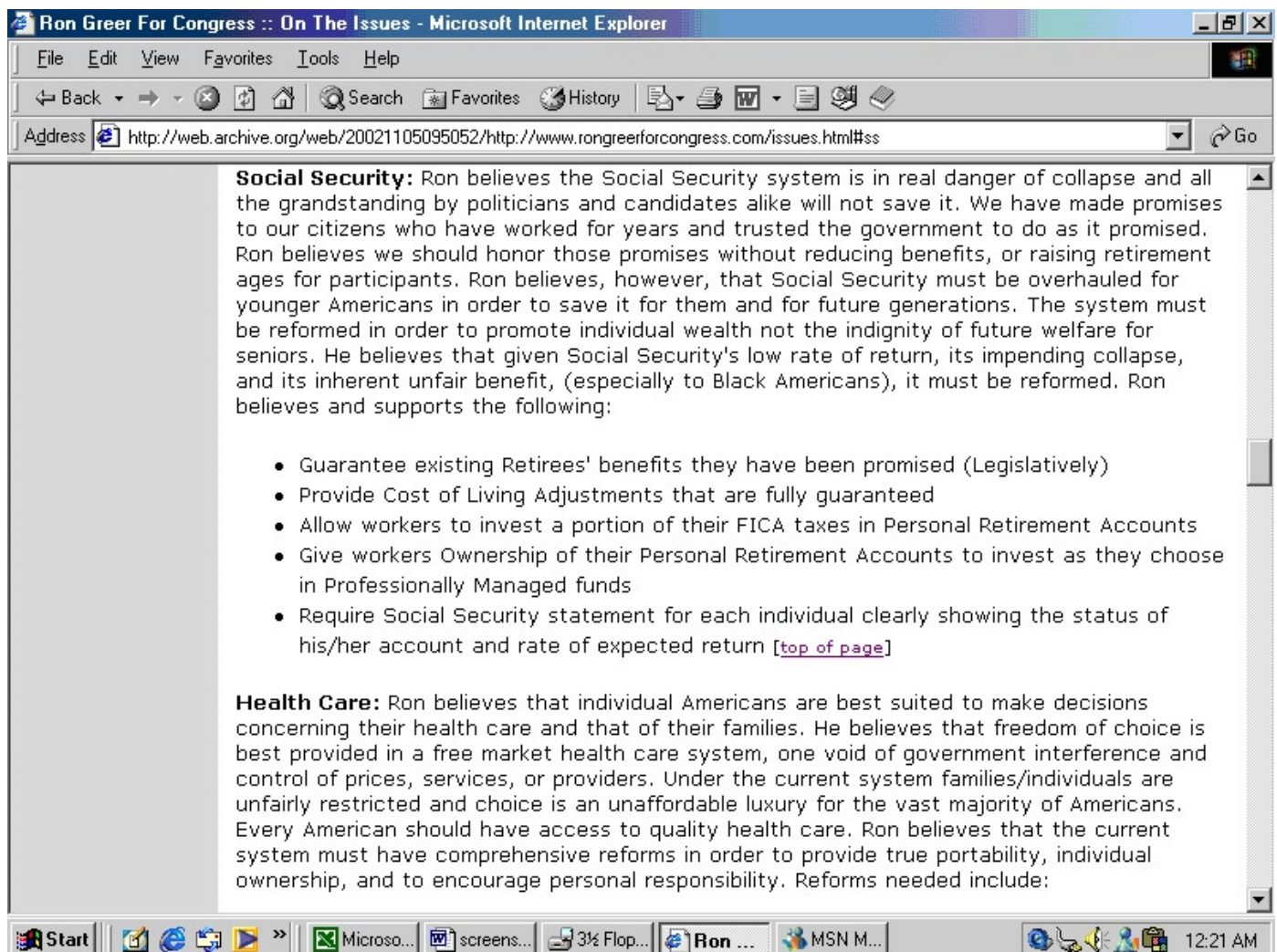


In some sense, one may easily explain these disparities on the basis of the strategic interests of candidates, as compared to the youth portals. While the portals that make up the vast majority of the youth political web sphere can offer non-partisan or at least balanced information on virtually any issue, candidates are limited to their political preferences, which they have a strategic interest in obscuring in

many cases (Simon 2002, Page 1978).

At first glance, it may appear that the basic (top of the menu) issue offerings on candidate sites should appeal to young voters. However, if one asks whether the candidates speak to issues of distinctive concern to young voter the answer is largely negative. The degree of issue address to young voters becomes even dimmer when we look

Figure 5: A Candidate Reaches Out to Young and Old on Social Security



at how candidates frame the issues rhetorically. The next section shows that even the issues that overlap younger and older demographic groups are often presented in terms more likely to appeal to seniors than young voters.

Youth Appeals on Candidate Websites. Despite indications that young voters are the group most likely to go online to seek political information, particularly in contrast to senior citizens, we found that in 2002 the candidates rarely phrased or framed issues in ways that directly addressed young people.

Though we did find a large number of issues on which candidates made no age-related appeals, our results suggest that candidates often opt for an

age-specific format in issue discourse. As a point of comparison we identified whether issue appeals on sites either directly or indirectly appealed to another age-based demographic, that of senior citizens, and found that candidates reached out to this group far more often. Of the 16 issues included in our study, half contained at least some appeal on the basis of age. The issue of greatest age specific appeal to young voters was the obvious issue of education, but even here, there were age specific appeals only in 23.3 percent of the cases. Appeals to young people were all but non-existent on most of the other issues. Table 6 reports the results of these analyses for each of the eight issues for which we found at least one age-based appeal, and Figure 4 provides a more easily interpreted graphical representation.

Table 7.
Features on Candidate Web Sites

Feature	Presence on Candidate Sites	N
Biography	87.6	177
News/Press Releases	57.1	177
Photos	52.3	176
Voter Registration	26.0	328
Endorsements	36.7	177
Email Signup	35.0	328
Contact the Candidate	33.0	337
Multimedia	8.0	428
Send Links	7.0	428
Message Board or Blog	5.1	176
Interactive Polls	5.0	428
Contact Media	2.0	428
Login	0.2	428

*N*s vary based on archival availability, and data sources. Data for Email Signup, Contact the Candidate, Multimedia, Send Links, Interactive Polls, Contact Media and Login are from Foot and Schneider (2002).

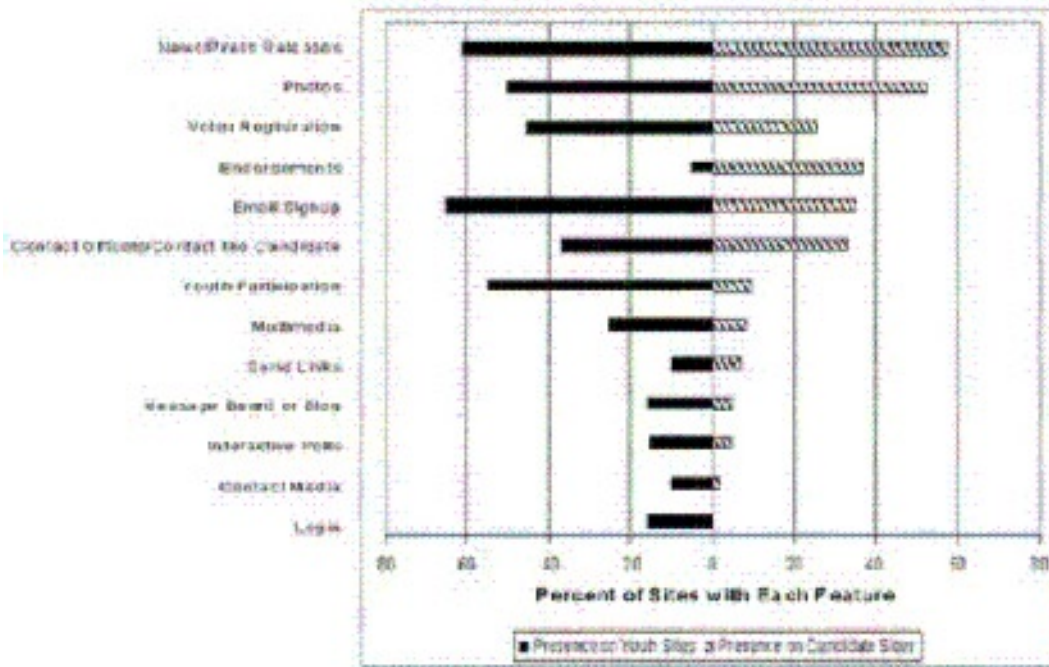
The specifics of some of these issues may drive some of our results. For example, the prominence of issues related to prescription drug coverage for seniors in 2002 certainly accounts for disparities on health care, and one would be surprised to find a high volume of senior appeals on education. However, the differences between senior and youth appeals on national security/terrorism and even Social Security are less straightforward. Many young people were concerned about national security and the war on terror in 2002, and the implications of significant military actions for young service men and women, reserves, and others are obvious. In the case of Social Security, the future solvency of the system clearly stands to impact today's 18 to 24 year olds, and a significant number care about the issue specifically in those terms. Indeed, a handful of candidates did take advantage of this very opportunity to reach out to younger voters on Social Security; Figure 5 provides one example. However, such appeals are highly infrequent in the electoral web sphere.

Overall, we believe these findings speak

clearly to the question of the extent to which candidates appear to be reaching out to younger voters in their online issues communications. The resounding answer is again in the negative. Despite the fact that there appear to be no strategic costs associated with including youth appeals in candidate statements on issues such as the environment, crime and violence, and economic growth and job creation, candidates in 2002 almost universally did not do so, reinforcing the common sentiment that younger voters who ignore politicians largely do so because politicians largely ignore them. Figure 5. A Candidate Reaches Out to Young and Old on Social Security

Features on Electoral Sites. Though much recent attention has been showered on the innovative and path-breaking use of internet strategies and interactive technology by candidates for the 2004 Democratic presidential primary such as Howard Dean, our analysis reveals that the majority of candidates running for non-presidential offices (the

Figure 6.
Features on Youth vs. Candidate Political Web Sites



bulk of all candidates nationwide in any election cycle) used very little of the interactive capacities of the web to reach voters in 2002. Candidates used interactive features much less often than producers of youth-oriented political websites. Indeed, our results are consistent with previous studies suggesting that candidates are much more likely to use the web as an efficient way of distributing basic information than they are to take advantage of its interactive and multimedia capabilities (Stromer-Galley 2000, Foot et al. 2002).

The most common features on candidate websites in 2002 were candidate biographies (87.6%) and pages devoted to news items and press releases (57.1%). Just over a third (35%) offered an email newsletter. Multimedia content, message boards, and interactive polls were found on fewer than ten percent of the candidate sites we coded. Table 7 reports the presence of each of the features we coded as a percentage of the candidate sites we sampled that were available from the archive.

In terms of the overall differences, we see

Table 8. Youth Appeals in Candidate Features

Feature	Percent of Sites Featuring	N
Youth Participation	9.7	176
Youth in Photos	17.1	170
Youth News Items	10.0	170
Endorsements from Youth-Related Groups	4.2	168

that with the exception of endorsements, which are found much more frequently on candidate sites, the key points of divergence are precisely in the areas of interactive and multimedia features. Simply put, young voters visiting candidate sites in 2002 were not likely to find the same kind of interactive environment they might have been accustomed to through exposure to political websites more directly targeted toward them. Though such features were not widespread among the youth political sites, they were certainly more common than in the mainstream political web. For example, youth sites featured online forms and other pages facilitating visitor communication with media (e.g. writing letters to the editor) five times as often as candidate sites, and the youth sites featured interactive polls, multimedia content, and message board features three times as often as candidate sites. In the features dimension, our conclusion is clear: candidates in 2002 used the interactive and multimedia features unique to the web environment much less frequently than the producers of youth political websites. Figure 6 provides an illustration of these key points of divergence.

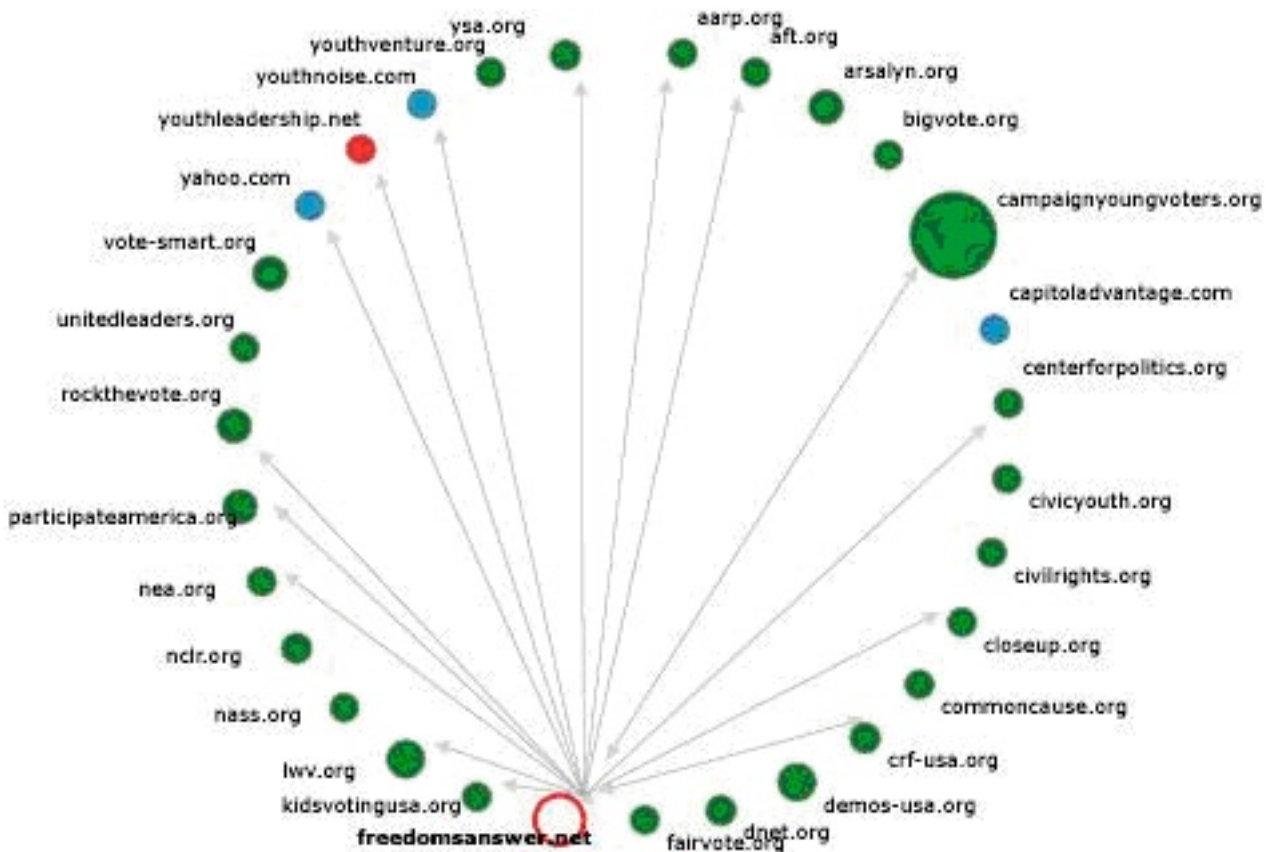
¹⁰ The specific parameters of our iCrawler analyses were as follows. For all our crawls, we set the number of iterations performed by the crawler to 2 (the default setting). We set the crawler's page-depth sensitivity (the number of layers into each site it would look for links) to 2. Co-link analysis was specified to be performed at the page level (also a default setting) in order to maximize detectable co-links. Due to its exploratory nature, we did not instruct the crawler to privilege the starting points (or seed URLs) for the initial crawl. For the second crawl, a number of settings were attempted, and all yielded un-mappable results. For the final crawl, we privileged the starting points, since by that stage we were dealing with what we considered a cohesive set of initial websites. For a detailed description of the purposes and implications of various strategies of setting iterations see Rogers (2001).

and campaigns that match their interests and preferences. Again, though we found a modicum of encouraging signs, the bulk of our analyses suggest that much work remains to be done if the internet is to be used as effectively as possible to help increase youth involvement in politics and elections.

Network Analysis of the Youth Engagement Web Sphere. In assessing the structural qualities of the youth engagement web sphere, we approached the youth sites as other researchers have approached comparable collections of websites that share common interests and political goals. By examining the structural relationships (if any) between the sites in cyberspace – essentially mapping the architecture of how one can get “there” from “here” through hyperlinks – we can begin to understand whether and how groups are using the networking

capabilities of the internet to connect people and information in working toward a common goal. As mentioned earlier, we used the iCrawler tool to carry out our examinations (Rogers, 2001). These analyses suggest that the network qualities of the youth engagement web sphere are highly contingent, and have yet to reach the levels of sophistication displayed by other political groups working toward shared goals. Despite the efforts of some groups to establish virtual ties with others working toward the goal of increasing youth political engagement, many of the sites we examined are the proverbial cul de sacs on the information superhighway. That is, rather than providing ways for visitors to move freely from their sites to similar sites working toward the goal of increasing youth political involvement and a sense of being part of a larger movement or network, some site producers

Figure 8.
Link Structure: Freedom’s Answer
Freedom’s Answer www.freedomanswer.org

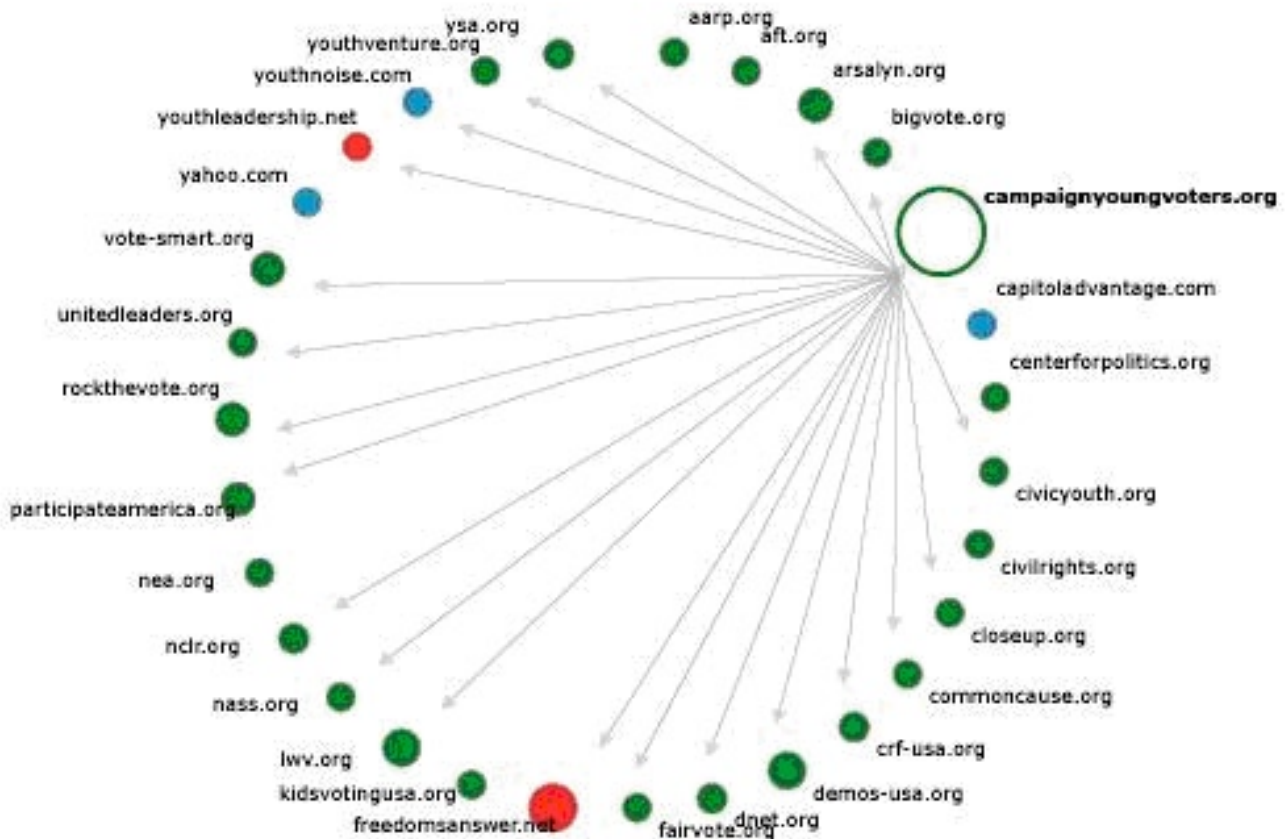


in the youth engagement arena seem to aspire to be one-stop-shopping destinations for young people seeking political information. A relatively outlink-free site architecture such as this (at least with respect to counterpart actors) may be rational for political candidates, who are in direct competition with one another and typically do not wish to direct potential voters to other political sites beyond their control (cf. Xenos and Foot forthcoming). However, in the youth sphere, where each group works toward the public good of increasing youth political participation, this pattern reveals a great, unrealized potential of the networking and coordination capacities of web communication.

Recall that one begins an iCrawler analysis by feeding an initial list of URLs into the crawler's interface. The crawler then looks through them for hyperlinks to other websites. The crawler then follows

these links looking for more hyperlinks. Next, it compiles a list of the sites it has visited and looks for sites that give and receive links from the other sites on the list. At the outset, the researcher specifies a number of parameters to govern these processes; for example specifying the number of iterations of the process requested, how deeply within each site to probe for links, and other factors.¹⁰ The results of the network analysis are most efficiently viewed using the iCrawler's mapping function, which locates those sites contributing most to the cohesion of the network in the "center" ring, and sites merely associated with the network through fewer links in the outer "periphery" (Rogers 2001). Sites that meet the required link threshold gain a place on the map. Finally, the crawler can in some instances fail to produce a map at all, as when too few connections are present to comprise a network. For example, if

Figure 9.
Link Structure: Campaign for Young Voters
Campaign Young Voters www.campaignyoungvoters.org



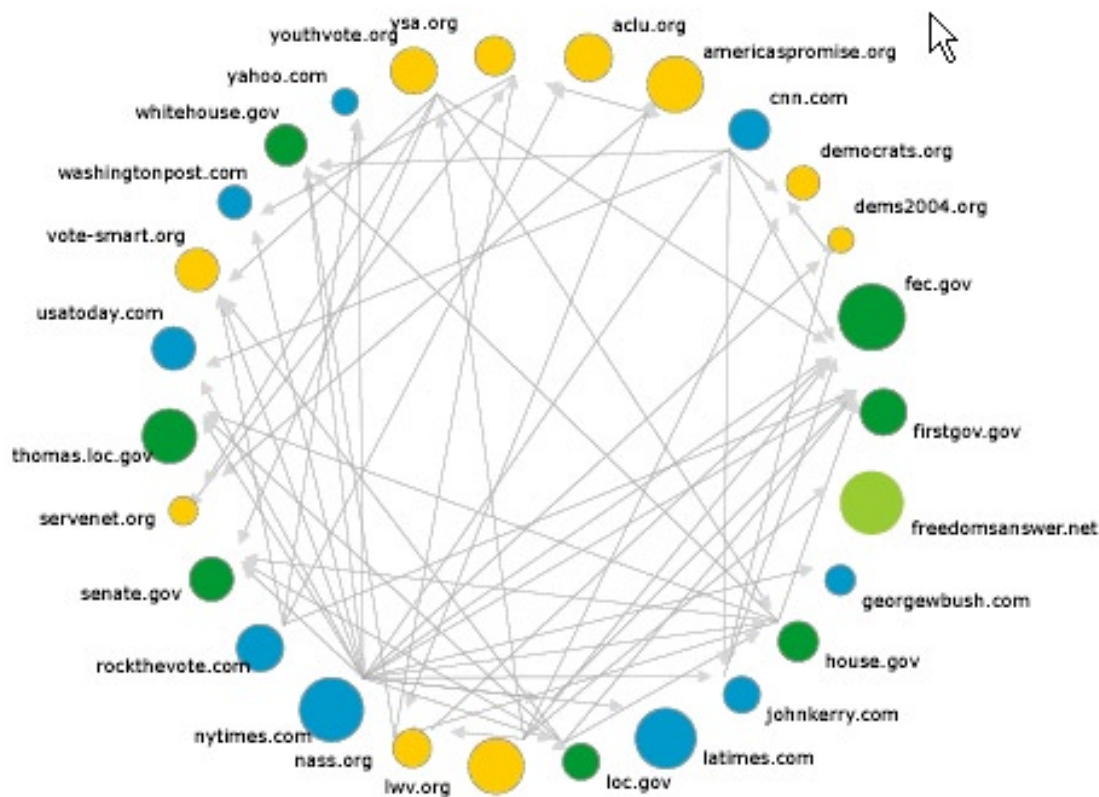
"the starting points are unrelated, unlinked, and/or non-linking URLs, the prospect of finding a network lessens considerably" (Rogers 2001).

The youth engagement maps shown here were produced during the summer of 2003 and the spring and summer of 2004, based on a seed list of URLs collected through the search processes outlined earlier. The results of these crawls were highly variable, though the overall pattern does seem to trend positive. The initial crawl, conducted at the outset of our study in July of 2003, produced a picture of a fledgling network. A second crawl conducted in May of 2004 turned up too few links to even render maps. A final crawl conducted just as the 2004 presidential race began to heat up produces a picture of a burgeoning network, though the findings still suggest that many of the youth engagement websites we have examined fall far

short of using the networking capabilities of the internet to the extent that other public-minded organizations have.

Naturally, the heart of networking on the internet springs from its quintessential feature, hyperlinks from one site to another. Compared to other web spheres, the youth engagement web sphere contains few links and often the links provided reside beneath the most visible surface pages of a site. Further, the youth web sphere has very few co-links. A co-link occurs when site A links to site B and site B links back to site A. Co-links are important to network formation because of the mutual recognition they entail. A site cannot be a network player if it does not acknowledge other actors in the network, or if other network actors do not acknowledge it, or sites linked to it. In a strong network, users can easily follow a path of

Figure 10.
Map of the Youth Engagement Web Sphere, July 2004

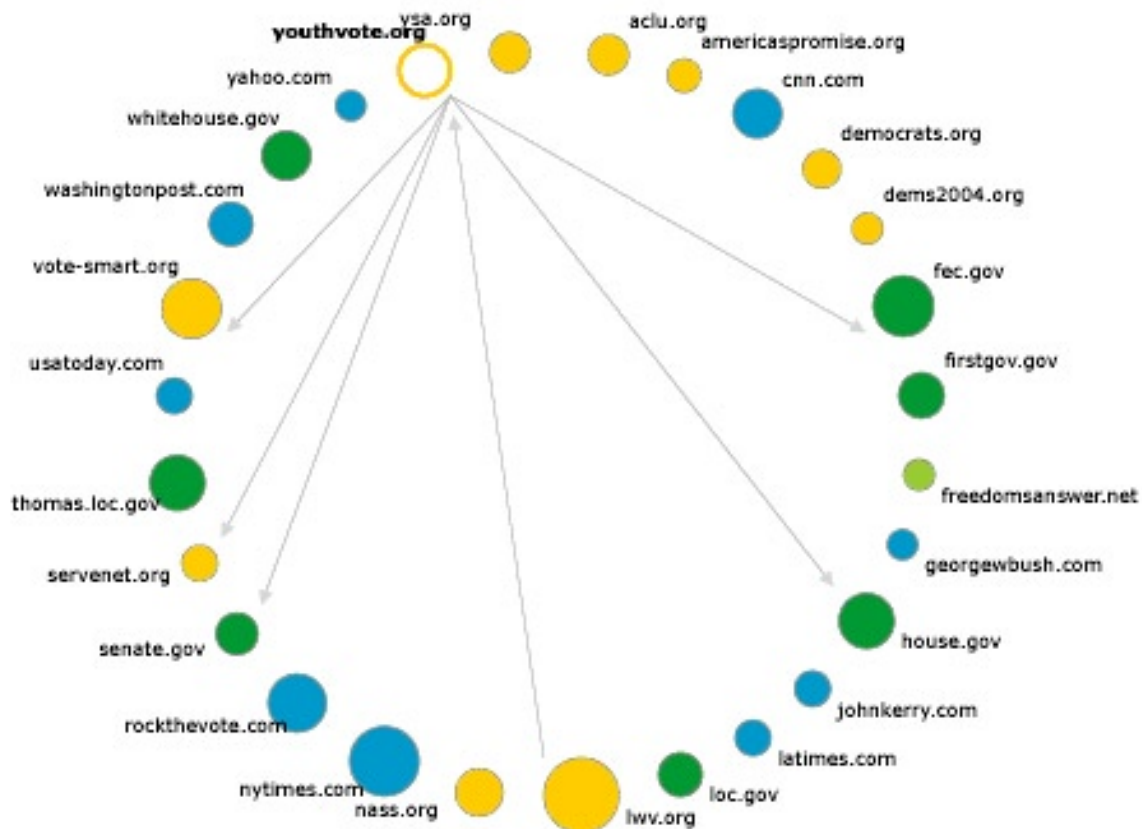


hyperlinks from any starting point to any other site in the network. This is not the case with the youth web sphere. As such, in our research it was at times a stretch to even call the Youth Engagement Web Sphere a network.

A simplified map of our initial crawl of the youth engagement sphere is seen in Figure 7. Sites less connected to the overall network and thus in the "periphery" of the map are omitted from this view. Though one sees a number of lines connecting the central sites shown in this map, a closer look (see Figures 8 and 9) reveals that the fledgling network is held together largely by just two sites within the center of the linking environment. At the time of the crawl, those two sites happened to maintain large link lists detectable at a depth of two pages, or clicks, and one of those sites was not even a youth engagement site.

Based on analyses of Figures 8 and 9, we conclude that the youth engagement web sphere, as studied in 2003 fell short of status as a solid network. Figure 8 shows that much of the link structure in the map in Figure 7, was contributed by a single the youth engagement organization, Freedom's Answer, a high school-based organization that asks students to vote in an effort to honor to US service members overseas. Yet there are only three co-links associated with Freedom's Answer. Looking closely at the map, co-links are represented by double-headed arrows. There is one between Freedom's Answer and Campaign for Young Voters (not exactly a youth engagement web portal, but more of a campaign service center focused on youth engagement), a second between Freedom's Answer and The Constitutional Rights Foundation and a third between Freedom's Answer and Participate America

Figure 11.
Link Structure: Youth Vote Coalition
Youth Vote Coalition: www.youthvote.org



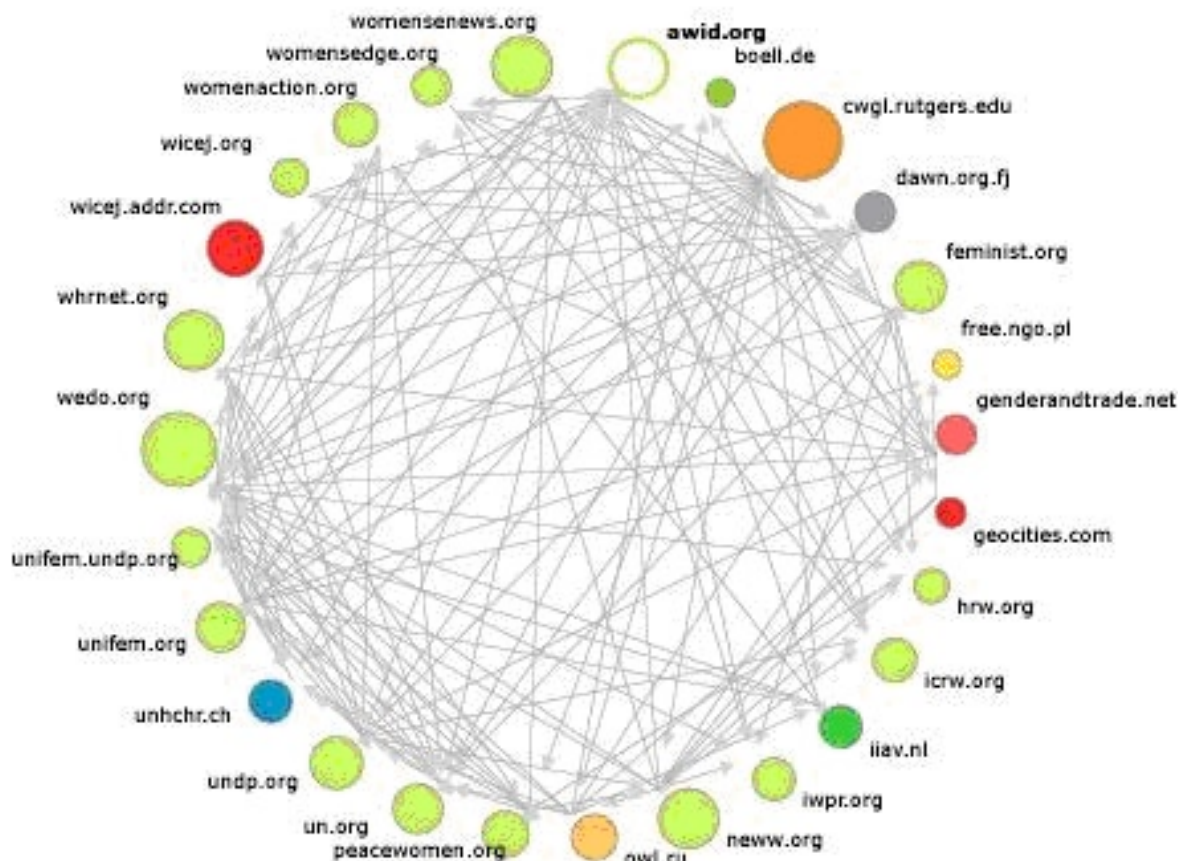
(Participate America encourages voter turnout but is not aimed specifically at youth, and thus does not qualify as a core youth engagement organization). Thus, only one of the three sites that return links to Freedom's Answer is a youth engagement site: The Constitutional Rights Foundation, a youth education drive. In sum, the link list on the Freedom's Answer site, with its 15 out-links, provides many of the links in the overall network, but it only receives only one return link from another youth engagement organization, meaning that it is by no means a network hub. This view of the co-links present within the youth engagement sphere suggests that even the few mutual connections do not represent much networking.

When we turn to the other major source of links on the map in Figure 7, we find the Campaign for Young Voters, which is a campaign service

operation that targets campaigns, providing tools and information to help them reach out to young voter, but does not at all target youth directly. Their youth site link list is informational to clients, and is even less reciprocal than Freedom's answer.

A second crawl was launched in the spring of 2004 to provide another point of reference in our analysis of the cohesiveness of the youth engagement web sphere. As noted, this analysis failed to detect enough co-links to even render a map. Finally, at the close of our analyses, and the beginning of the presidential campaign season of 2004, we ordered a third crawl of the youth political web sphere. This final crawl paints a picture of a network that has become stronger over time, but could still be strengthened by an increase in the number and prominence of links to other youth civic engagement organization websites. The network

Figure 12.
Network Map for International Organizations Concerned about Women and Development Issues (for comparison purposes)



map for this crawl is depicted in Figure 10.

the Vote site in the summer of 2003, and wanted to visit other sites active on the same issues, they would most likely have needed to actively navigate to those other sites. All too often a similar pattern is

Table 8. Youth Appeals in Candidate Features

Feature	Percent of Sites Featuring	N
Youth Participation	9.7	176
Youth in Photos	17.1	170
Youth News Items	10.0	170
Endorsements from Youth-Related Groups	4.2	168

To be sure, this more recent map suggests a healthier online network than that depicted in Figures 7-9. However, a closer look again reveals that the large number of arrows seen in the center of the map does not necessarily reflect a fluid virtual space in which prospective young voters might easily travel from one youth-oriented political content area to another. In this instance, consider for example the Youthvote.org site. As seen in Figure 11, the Youthvote site contains a fair number of outlinks to other sites in the center of the map. Yet none of the other central sites in the network linked to by Youthvote is a youth engagement website (indeed, most are mainstream political portals), and the only link to Youthvote by another website in the center of the map is from the League of Women Voters, another non-youth oriented political website. Again, the maps and analyses presented here only reflect links and co-links located within the first two layers of any given page that enters the crawler's analysis. If additional linkages exist, they are beyond a level at which we believe easy passage through the network is facilitated.

What is missing in each of these maps is prominent co-linking at or near the top of the page structure among the better-known youth engagement sites. For example, in the initial map Rock the Vote receives four links from other sites on the map and nine from the periphery, but does not give any, making it a cul-de-sac that is not conducive to network navigation. If someone visited the Rock

found among youth sites in our most recent crawl as well, with a few exceptions.

To further illustrate this point we compare our network map results in the youth arena to those from analyses of another online network related to a different sort of common political or public interest. Again, at the most basic level, one can assess the quality of any online network by the greater density of connections between sites in the center of the network. Healthy networks resemble balls of yarn tied together with many co-links, such as the international women's organization network shown in Figure 12. One can easily move about from site to site within this network, making it a vibrant and dynamic political space, primarily because of the common practice among site producers to place pathways to "links" pages on their homepages. Visitors can thus arrive at most websites within the network and easily find their way to other sites within a larger coalition. For example, visitors to the website of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (www.wedo.org) can find links to no less than 67 other websites affiliated with women's organizations or women's issues simply by clicking on the "links" button located on the group's homepage. In contrast to this "yarn ball" of links and coalition ties, we find the youth network to be relatively underdeveloped.

[Navigating from the Youth Sphere to the Election Sphere.](#) After analyzing the pathways within the

youth engagement web sphere we inventoried the sites for features that would enable young visitors to travel from the targeted domain of the youth sites to find information and opportunities for involvement in the electoral sphere. Specifically we documented the presence of three sorts of pathways: 1) voter registration features, 2) information and links to information about the 2002 elections, and 3) features promoting and facilitating offline political action. Though many of the youth sites provided some pathways to engagement with electoral politics in 2002, as is seen in the earlier network maps, they most often led only to sites general catalogues of candidate or campaign information and did not enable potential young visitors to go directly to races, candidates, and or find information relevant to their issue preferences once they entered the electoral web sphere.

Table 8 reports our findings with regard to the specific pathways between the youth and electoral web sphere we investigated. Though one might expect the figures to be higher, we found that less than half of the youth sites featured links to voter registration materials or information and just over half publicized opportunities for youth political participation. With respect to information about the 2002 elections, we found it to be much more common for youth sites to link to independent sites for such information than to present it on their own. Given the self-serve nature of the sites typically linked to in these instances (League of Women Voters, Project Vote Smart), such a finding suggests that though they are directed to the electoral sphere by the sites such as Rock the Vote, young voters must expend considerable energy, once there, in identifying information directly relevant to their interests and preferences.

CONCLUSIONS

It is tempting to consider the tech-savvy nature of our current younger generation, along with the high-profile web strategies deployed by recent presidential candidates, and imagine the web as an appealing technological fix for the crisis of youth disengagement. But our analyses of online political content in 2002 suggest that the potentials of digital

technologies as media for greater youth mobilization have yet to be fulfilled. To be sure, a great wealth of stimulating content is provided to American youth through youth portal sites that offer discussion of critical political issues. Such sites present political information in the language of young voters, and use the interactive capacities of the web that young Americans have come to expect and incorporate into their daily lives. With some notable exceptions, however, most political candidates avoid using the internet in ways likely to reach our most wired generation. Furthermore, sites operating with the explicit goal of enhancing youth participation and engagement have yet to tap the networking capacities of the internet to coalesce and provide more robust pathways into the larger electoral web sphere.

From the perspective of a would-be young voter in 2002, our analyses suggest that going online to gather political information on upcoming elections could have been much more efficient and rewarding. Young voters seeking out youth-oriented political portals would have found navigation awkward between them, requiring repeating their searches and bookmarking each site. There was roughly a fifty percent chance she or he was presented with an easy link to voter registration information. She would very likely be able to find a link to an organization such as the League of Women Voters or Project Vote Smart, but would have had considerable difficulty locating information on candidates relevant to her issue preferences if she possessed the average level of political knowledge for her age group. Finally, once in the electoral web sphere she would likely find a web environment lacking in the interactive features she is accustomed to. And the online electoral content was far more likely to resonate with her grandparents than with herself.

This picture of the underdeveloped potential of the internet emerges from an aggregate mean approach to the features and qualities we consider in this report. At the tails of our distributions lie a number of prime examples and demonstrations of how the great potential of the internet can be realized, and with minimal cost. Further, our network analysis reveals that the youth engagement sphere, while short of a robust network, could begin

to resemble healthier online issue networks if only one or two youth sites stepped into network hub positions by aggressively maintaining and seeking out co-links with other youth organizations.

The 2004 presidential primary campaigns raised significant interest in the mobilizing capacities of the internet, particularly for younger voters. Whether this exemplar of online engagement will result in a generally more vibrant and engaging online experience for young voters seeking political information during future elections --particularly non-presidential contests -- remains to be seen.

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