munication on a larger and more intense scale, and this enables information to flow from one to many in an attempt to shape and manipulate voters rather than allow more participation. The global scale of the Internet also raises a serious question about outsider influence on campaign politics, because it allows individuals outside geographic areas to participate, and exert influence, electronically. The Internet also makes a certain kind of anonymity possible, a kind of anonymity that can encourage socially beneficial activities but that also creates problems in accountability. Whether or not the Internet is effectively used for campaign politics will depend on achieving a balance of anonymity and identity that is conducive to democratic politics. The reproducibility of communication on the Internet challenges traditional notions of property and privacy. It makes possible an unprecedented degree of surveillance that could threaten democratic processes and the integrity of information on the Internet.

These threats may be addressed with new technologies, but they will not be addressed unless euphoric beliefs in the democratic potential of the Internet are exchanged for sober acceptance that the Internet is a malleable technology and is socially shaped. It can be shaped for more or for less democracy.

Notes

Cautious Optimism about Online Politics and Citizenship

DAVID M. ANDERSON

This chapter seeks to eliminate some misconceptions that might prevent people from using the political Internet to its fullest potential. Much of the discussion is conceptual, as the chapter tries to clarify what online politics is and can be, but part of the discussion is empirical, as it presents encouraging data about the role the Internet is playing in the lives of citizens. Throughout the chapter, an effort is made to show that cynical arguments about the democratizing potential of the Internet are problematic; in place of cynicism, I set forth a path of cautious optimism.

Navigating Your Way around Political Web Sites

Moving around the world of politics by car, airplane, ship, cab, and subway is complicated enough; moving around the online political world is even more complicated because you can pay a productive visit to three or four completely different kinds of political organizations in a matter of minutes. The speed of the online world can make it difficult to know where you are.

For all newcomers to the civic web, and even for some veterans (those who went to political sites as early as 1996 or 1998), it is useful to separate different kinds of political web sites, because without a clear sense of the different kinds of sites, it becomes difficult to evaluate a host of criticisms concerning online politics. Distinguishing the different kinds of sites does not in itself settle any moral debates, but it does facilitate critical understanding and create a shared vocabulary for discussion.

I want to briefly present a taxonomy for classifying what I regard
as the four main kinds of political web sites. The taxonomy is composed of two cross-cutting distinctions:

1. nonpartisan vs. partisan
2. nonprofit vs. for-profit

The two distinctions can be combined to create four possibilities:

a. nonpartisan/nonprofit political web sites (usually dot-orgs)
b. nonpartisan/for-profit political web sites (usually dot-coms)
c. partisan/nonprofit political web sites (usually dot-orgs)
d. partisan/for-profit political web sites (usually dot-coms)

These four possibilities, with some examples of sites that were prominent in the 2000 election cycle, are shown in table 2.1.

As the framework illustrates, there are both not-for-profit and for-profit versions of nonpartisan web sites; these sites are heavily focused on voter education. Thus, there are nonpartisan political dot-orgs (the not-for-profit sites) and nonpartisan political dot-coms (the for-profit sites). The same holds at the level of partisan sites: there are partisan political dot-orgs and partisan political dot-coms.

Note that federal election law prohibits corporations from having partisan political web sites, but it does not prohibit limited liability partnerships and sole proprietorships from having partisan web sites. The partisan political dot-coms that I refer to are not corporate sites.

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<th>Nonpartisan/Nonprofit</th>
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<td>Project Vote Smart</td>
<td>Vote.com</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benton/Debate America</td>
<td>Voter.com</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy Project</td>
<td>SpeakOut.com</td>
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<tr>
<td>FreedomChannel.com</td>
<td>GrassRoots.com</td>
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<td>California Voter Foundation</td>
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<th>Partisan/Nonprofit</th>
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<td>Candidate sites</td>
<td>Democrats.com</td>
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<td>Incumbent dot-gov sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some issue advocacy sites</td>
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The Democrats.com site, to take one example, is a partisan political dot-com because it is a for-profit organization that promotes the ideas and ideals of democrats. These partisan political sites, it is also important to note, are not legally permitted to engage in express advocacy for a candidate. They can, however, engage in issue advocacy. Some partisan sites, then, are express advocacy sites (e.g., candidate sites that advocate for themselves), and some partisan sites are not express advocacy sites (although they can be partisan toward a party and, by implication, its candidates).

It's Too Soon to Criticize Commercial Nonpartisan Sites

We can now briefly address a concern raised by many during the 2000 election cycle, namely that online politics, like the Net overall, is becoming overly commercialized. For citizens and social commentators who are already cynical about politics, the nonpartisan political dot-coms—companies like Vote.com, Grassroots.com, SpeakOut.com—add fuel to the fire. Some people balk at the idea of a company taking on the task of educating the public about elections and issues. Because some political dot-coms are seeking to promote voter deliberation, education, and even communication with government officials, the concern has been raised that we should not let profit-making organizations get involved in these democratic endeavors. In his contribution to this volume, Peter Levine discusses some of the main objections to the nonpartisan political dot-coms. These include the objection that for-profit organizations will cater to the interests of the most well-funded supporters of their organizations and, in the process, will marginalize less well-funded, probably more extreme, political positions.

Cynicism about commercial political sites, while not groundless, is not justified. For one, the political dot-coms (I'll focus on the nonpartisan variety, as the partisan ones are few in number) are not receiving enough traffic to be doing much harm. They still are a very young breed. Second, the political dot-coms, especially those that seek to promote voter education and deliberation, have many of the same stated aims as nonpartisan political dot-orgs. Because they are explicitly nonpartisan sites, people need to give these sites (or future sites of this kind) the benefit of the doubt. Third, the nonpartisan political
dot-coms have developed sites with many customizing interactive features that could engage the citizenry in more effective ways than do the nonpartisan political dot-orgs, which tend to provide information in more straightforward ways. Dot-com sites may possess the excitement that is needed to bring politically disengaged citizens to politics. Through them, citizens who have passionate commitments to particular values and issues may find that the Net creates channels for their passion.

But even if we welcome a diversity of political sites into the online political world, we must ensure that the dot-com sites do not force the dot-org sites out of existence, a fear expressed by many during the 2000 cycle. History to date actually suggests that the political dot-org sites are more stable than the political dot-com sites, which rely heavily on venture capital and advertising income.

We must also be vigilant about protecting citizen privacy. The commercial political sites—like any commercial web sites—are inclined to sell sensitive voter information because they must make a profit to survive. And although political dot-org sites (especially candidate sites) were criticized for their poor privacy policies—or their lack of privacy policies altogether—in the 2000 cycle, the profit motive makes the political dot-com sites especially vulnerable to criticism. Still, it is an interesting question whether selling voter lists to make a profit is a more ethically questionable activity than selling (or even sharing) voter lists to win an election. At this early stage in the development of online politics, the political dot-coms should be watched carefully but any deep cynicism about them seems misplaced.

TV and the Net Are Not Analogous

A second cynical argument concerning the democratizing potential of the Internet concerns an analogy drawn between the Net and television. At its inception, television (like radio before it) was hailed as a new communication technology that would lead to better-informed, engaged voters, but it failed to live up to that democratizing potential. The question now is whether the Internet will have the same fate.

Attempts to draw a comparison between the Internet and television are relying on one of the most common forms of analogical reasoning: Object A has properties 1, 2, 3, and 4. Object B has properties 1, 2 and 3. Therefore, Object B, because it is analogous to Object A, also has property 4. As analogical arguments are inductive (as opposed to deductive) arguments, their conclusions can never be necessarily true. Inductive arguments generate conclusions that are more or less probably true, depending on how much evidential support the premises provide for the conclusions.

A standard discussion about the television/Internet analogy becomes an analogical argument with the following problem. Television has properties of being electronic, being capable of reaching a mass audience, being a one-way form of information and communications technology, and not leading to more politically engaged citizens. But the Internet does not actually have the same first three properties; instead, it has the three properties of being electronic, being capable of reaching a mass audience, and being a two-way form of information and communications technology. The third property of the Internet is different from the third property of television: television is a one-way information and communications technology, and the Internet is a two-way information and communications technology. Although television and the Internet both provide information to viewers, the Internet allows users to make purchases, communicate with others, organize events, and donate money. Television does not.

This two-way property of the Internet, moreover, is very relevant to the question about political engagement, because the very interactivity of the Internet is what has made many people think that it might lead to more political interactivity in our society. Thus, the inductive inference to the conclusion that the Internet “will not lead to more politically engaged citizens” is weak, because the third property of the Internet is relevantly dissimilar to the third property of television (and radio for that matter).

An analogical argument, as already explained, is stronger or weaker to the extent that the evidence in the premises supports the conclusion. No one could reasonably argue that there is not any possibility for the Internet to play a critical role in an era of political reform, because inductive arguments can never show anything with absolute certainty. But even those who make the previously outlined inductive analogical argument about television are not in a strong position, because the two technologies people are comparing have one very significant difference that could have a major bearing on the technologies’ roles in our society.

My main point is that we have good reasons to question the induc-
tive strength of any argument that draws an analogy between television and the Internet. We should be skeptical about these arguments. This does not mean that we have reason to believe that the Internet will lead to an era of political reform; what it means is that we do not have good reasons to be cynical about the future of the Internet and our democracy.

Some Encouraging Data
Although many Americans still neglect Net politics the way they neglect politics in general, there is nevertheless increasing interest in Net politics. Signs are that interest will continue to increase. A 2000 Yankelovich/American University poll showed that 29 percent of online Americans (who represented 49 percent of the public) “access information about politics, candidates, and political campaigns” and that 51 percent of the public overall believes that the Internet is a “very important” or “somewhat important” source of election information. Ron Faucheux interprets these findings as an “indication of the potential growth explosion ahead.”

A 2000 poll by the Pew Center for the People and the Press reported that one-third of Americans get news from the Internet on a regular basis and that 46 percent of America’s youth get news from the Internet at least once per week. The poll also found that regular viewers of television network news have dropped from 60 percent of the public in 1993 to 30 percent in 2000. The poll also showed marked increases in viewer attention to cable television. Michael Kelly interprets this to mean that “customized news” and information—whether from cable television or the Net—is where the action is. “The Internet,” he said, “is the coming thing.”

A 1999 Democracy Online Project poll, coordinated by Lake, Snell, and Perry and the Tarrance Group, showed that the online electorate wants more information on the following topics: candidate issues and voting records (77 percent); community problems (76 percent); government programs (68 percent); candidate biographies (63 percent); issue and ballot initiatives from nonpartisan sources (63 percent); and voter registration information and polling locations (62 percent). It also found that 75 percent of the online electorate “find candidate information on the Internet very or somewhat accurate.” That so many online Americans trust the Net for political information is a very good sign. Compare the 75 percent figure to Americans’ trust in the federal government to do the right thing most or all of the time: 21 percent in 1994 (though up to 40 percent by 1998).

With regard to the Internet in general, a 2000 poll commissioned by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government “shows that people overwhelmingly think that computers and the Internet have made Americans’ lives better.” There are definite areas of concern, especially regarding inequality (the “digital divide”) and content (dangerous online material, including strangers contacting children). But Americans are basically very bullish about the Net.

If you add this encouraging data to the weak arguments about cynicism toward the Net, you should arrive at a place of skepticism, if not cautious optimism: We really do not know how the Internet is going to affect politics and society in the United States. Thus, we should not assume that things will stay the same or that they will get worse. An attitude of cautious optimism seems to be appropriate, as there are many signs that things could be different with the Net. Moreover, an attitude of cautious optimism is much more likely to generate positive change than extremely optimistic or utopian approaches.

Two Misconceptions about Net Politics
In order to replace cynicism with cautious optimism, it will help to remove some additional misconceptions about Internet politics. Two of the main ones are addressed here.

Misconception #1: Net Politics Is Essentially about Campaigns and Elections
The first misconception is that politics is essentially about campaigns and elections. Many citizens believe this because they think that citizenship is essentially about voting. Because citizens see campaigns and elections as the essence of politics, they are inclined to see Net politics in the same way. It is understandable that considerable attention is focused on campaigns and elections during presidential election years, but even in nonelection years, citizens and most journalists still associate Internet politics with campaigns and elections more than anything else.
From the standpoint of citizens’ political participation, it is a misconception to think about citizenship in terms of voting or, more generally, in terms of campaigns and elections. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady explain their approach in their massive study on political participation:

Americans who wish to take part in politics can be active in many ways. Studies of political participation traditionally have begun with—and too often ended with—the vote. Although voting is an important mode of citizen involvement in political life, it is but one of many political acts. In this study we move well beyond the vote to consider a wider range of political acts, including working in and contributing to electoral campaigns and organizations; contacting government officials; attending protests, marches, or demonstrations; working informally with others to solve some community problem; serving without pay on local elected and appointed boards; being active politically through the intermediary voluntary associations; and contributing money to political causes in response to mail solicitations.14

The same point applies to Internet politics. Whenever I tell people I am involved in an Internet and politics project, they ask me when voting will be done online. Their next question is about some aspect of election politics. Little interest is shown in the other areas of political participation. So, online voting has a greater presence in the minds of most citizens than other areas of politics.

Misconception #2: The Internet Is Essentially about Information

The second misconception is about the Internet itself. I have argued elsewhere that it is a mistake to assume that the Internet is essentially about providing information and also that it is a mistake to assume that the purpose of providing information is to enable individuals to make decisions.15 Although it is, of course, true that web sites can and do provide information for individuals to make decisions, the mistake is to assume that this is all the Internet does. Donating money online, volunteering for a candidate online, and raising questions to a candidate in an online interactive forum are all examples of online activities that are not best understood as decisions based on information.

The Internet is essentially about relationships—interactions between individuals and individuals, individuals and organizations, and organizations and organizations. The relationships can be personal, commercial, or political. The interactive nature of the Net makes these relationships possible. If we think in terms of information and decisions, then we distort the action-oriented nature of this highly interactive medium. We think of the Internet as an encyclopedia of facts rather than a medium that connects people and organizations in a great range of ways.

Consider two reasons why the information/decision model is misleading. First, information that is acquired from the Internet might satisfy a need without leading you to make a decision. For example, you might gain valuable medical information from a web site or a chat room, information that provides emotional relief from some health-related worry. There is no decision to be made after you experience the relief. Not every line on the Internet, indeed not every human utterance, is designed to elicit a decision from someone else.

Second, what is often considered information is not information. A discourse about or from cancer sufferers, although it contains factual claims, is in most cases emotive discourse and not factual or informational discourse. Likewise, requests for campaign volunteers, campaign contributions, and campaign questions are not best regarded as information. A request is not a fact. Neither is an expression of pain. It is a fact that a request is made and that pain is expressed, but making the request and expressing the pain do not state facts about the world.

As Wittgenstein and Austin demonstrated fifty years ago, we do things with words other than report states of affairs about the world. We grossly distort human communication if we group all utterances under the category of descriptive or factual claims. Certainly, numerous moral claims cannot be subsumed under a general category of factual informational discourse without distorting the nature of moral deliberation and moral argument. When every possible human utterance is regarded as information, this narrows our view of the range of capacities that are related to communication.

The Upshot

The upshot of the two misconceptions is as follows: If you think that politics is essentially about campaigns and elections, and if you think
that the Internet is essentially about information that is supplied for individuals to make choices, then you probably think that Internet politics is essentially about acquiring information to make choices in elections. Although the (deductive) inference is valid because the conclusion follows logically from the premises, the argument is unsound because both premises are false: Politics is not essentially about campaigns and elections, and the Internet is not essentially about information supplied to individuals in order for them to make choices. As most people tacitly accept these two premises, they are led, quite logically, to conclude that Net politics is essentially about acquiring information to make choices in elections.

Moreover, this leads people to think about citizenship in terms of well-informed or ill-informed voters. Thus they probably infer that Net politics will be successful when we have well-informed voters in the voting booths. Although this may be one of the signs of a successful Internet politics, it would certainly not be the only one, especially if voter turnout does not increase.

It is also worth noting that the very notion of the informed citizen, as Michael Schudson has argued, is largely a product of the progressive era. He distinguishes four models of citizenship that correspond to the founding era, the nineteenth century, the progressive era, and the contemporary period: models (or ideals) of republican virtue, party loyalty, informed citizenship, and rights-conscious citizenship. The informed citizenship model is “the most honored notion of citizenship,” but our task today is to seek a synthesis of all four. Schudson's historical, sociological, and moral arguments for why the “informed citizen” notion has been given too much emphasis in our efforts to build a society of good citizens provides additional support for common citizen misconceptions about online politics.

Where Citizens Should Go for Net Political Participation

Conceptually, we have seen that it is easy to think of Net politics as centering around the concept of the well-informed voter and the whole area of election politics. This way of thinking severely limits the possibilities of democratic renewal. Election politics is sure to play an important role in any long-term process of political transformation, but the area of politics that is most likely to hook citizens into the political process is issue politics. Some Internet politics observers have already predicted that the ultimate value of the Net for politics will lie less in candidate campaigns than issue campaigns. The “real revolution” in Internet politics, as Colin Delany puts it, may be in issue advocacy. He writes:

But most articles about politics and the Internet have missed a part of the story that will linger beyond the periodic frenzy of campaign seasons: organizations and corporations across the country are learning to use the Internet for campaigns about issues rather than about candidates. This could well be the real Internet political revolution: a nonstop online campaign, launched from thousands of sources targeting hundreds of issues across the country and around the world.  

Delany explains how the Internet provides organizations with “major advantages over traditional media.” A “credible web site” is much cheaper than a professional brochure or a series of television ads. An issue campaign can be launched almost instantly on the Internet, in comparison to the weeks it would take using phones, faxes, and mail. The Net also removes intermediaries like the press from the organization’s effort to issue official communications such as press releases, issue papers, and speeches. Likewise, the Internet gives the organization the ability to target potential followers according to interest rather than geographical location.

Issue campaigns occupy 365 days of the year, but candidate campaigns occupy an average of six months every two or four years. Whether the issue is gun safety locks, prescription drug programs, school construction, child care, or elder care, citizens can find opportunities online to make their voices heard. A number of major political protests in the past few years have relied heavily on the Internet, including the Million Mom March (for gun safety) and the IMF/World Bank Protest for Global Justice.

Pam Fielding and Daniel Bennett of E-Advocates explain the core principles of cyberadvocacy in their book, The Net Effect: How Cyberadvocacy is Changing the Political Landscape. They discuss a number of cybercampaigns, including the Save the E-Rate campaign, which Fielding led when she was at the National Educational Association. The Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) has led numerous
online campaigns, most notably the Anti-Communications Decency Act campaign (especially with the help of Jonah Seiger and Shabir Safdur). This campaign included the Paint the Web Black protest when the coalition of organizations and individuals blacked out their web pages after President Clinton signed the Communications Decency Act. CDT’s Jerry Berman and Deirdre Mulligan discuss this and other online campaigns in their contribution to this volume.21

Jim Bule identifies twenty-two examples of online citizen activism in a recent essay, including efforts launched by citizens without the help of cyberadvocacy firms or interest groups.22 His examples include Jody Williams’s successful cyberadvocacy campaign to ban land mines in eighty-nine countries, the Advocacy Institute’s successful cyberadvocacy campaign to block the Smoker’s Bill of Rights tour by Phillip Morris, and the Protect Our Heritage Forests campaign to protect the wild forests; this campaign generated 150,000 postcards to Vice President Gore.

Citizens should not underestimate the opportunities for political engagement in issue advocacy campaigns. Moreover, they should not underestimate their opportunities to respond to requests for public opinions about critical issues being considered by federal agencies. Barry Rubin argues that this is the most effective way that citizens are communicating with government today.23 The possibilities for new coalitions in issue advocacy campaigns are endless when you consider how the Internet facilitates communication among people who would otherwise have difficulty finding each other. In the same way that persons with illnesses can find emotional support in online chat rooms, persons with commitments to social ends can make their connections through the Internet. Even wide generation gaps can be overcome online: there are already interesting examples of younger and older citizens working together, via the Internet, to bring about legislative changes at the local and state levels.24 As grandmothers are sending instant messages to their grandchildren to keep in touch, so, too, are seniors sending instant messages to students for political purposes. Imagine the possibilities for intergenerational issue advocacy campaigns—grandparents to grandchildren—about such important topics as gun safety, tobacco, and drugs and alcohol.

If citizens go to the Net for issue advocacy politics, then this will surely affect election politics in the future. The polarized politics that E.J. Dionne, Jr. and others have discussed for years could yield to a politics that addresses issues in ways that speak to a new center for American politics.25 The content of American elections would be improved if citizens bring more content to our issue advocacy campaigns. Issue politics could motor, or indeed “hard drive,” this transformation.

Conclusion: Responsibility, Citizenship, and Issue Politics

In concluding, I wish to raise a point about political cynicism that is rarely addressed. It concerns citizen self-deception. Discussions about political cynicism are usually discussed in a vacuum. People talk about Watergate, Vietnam, campaign finance, and character scandals but ignore nonpolitical sources of cynicism. It seems reasonable to speculate that, for many citizens, cynicism about politics is based as much or even more on their cynical feelings about their family relationships and business relationships (say, if they have been victims of adultery, domestic violence, child abuse, desertion, downsizing, and sexual harassment) as it is about the misconduct on the part of politicians and political consultants. Cynicism, like anger, can have many roots.

It is unrealistic to think that the distaste that so many Americans have toward politicians and political consultants is derived entirely or even primarily from the politicians’ actions and/or inactions. It is because the media cover the failed efforts and personal misconduct of politicians and political consultants in more detail than that of bosses and spouses and parents that we channel our anger and cynicism toward politicians and political consultants. It is easier to blame people you do not know and will probably never meet than it is to blame people you do know and do not want to confront. Clicking onto political sites and engaging in deliberations with like-minded others would be a fast and effective way to “own” some of the distrust citizens have foisted onto politicians. This would certainly apply to persons whose cynicism is entirely or partly misplaced.

The moral psychology of a nation as large as the United States is a very complicated matter. But any number of important books and social movements have found their origins in key sentiments or insights that were brought to the public, and often these sentiments and insights helped people understand things they felt and believed but could not fully articulate. The time is right for a new era of citizen
activism. The Internet, especially with respect to issue politics, could help bring about that era. It could energize offline politics by creating a new offline-online connection.

Yet the technology alone will not move people, and a call for political participation combined with the new technology will not move them either. Citizens armed with self-knowledge, innovative technology, and passion for issues would be in a position to best influence the institutions that tend to ignore their voices.

Moreover, to the extent that government services go online—and the current pace is picking up—citizens could find many of their frustrations with bureaucratic features about government will diminish. Thus, citizens, with a lot less frustration, would be more likely to think about relating to government in ways that go beyond finding out information and having more efficient relationships with government.

Even individuals who do not have computers and Internet access can get involved at a community site. Many cities provide free computers and Internet service in public libraries and community organizations. The digital divide must be overcome. And major institutional changes, especially corporate changes, are necessary in the United States in order for our society to be free and fair. But even the Divide as it exists today, closing doors to about half of the public, should not stop any American who wants to take a few steps in the direction of becoming a better citizen.

Notes


2. The distinction between express advocacy and issue advocacy is implicit in several FEC advisory opinions and a Supreme Court decision. FEC Advisory Opinion 1997–16 (herndon3.sdrc.com/ao/ao/970016.html) determined that a corporation could not make a list of federal candidate endorsements available on its web site because this would be an example of an express advocacy message directed at the general public. In response to a request by representatives of the George W. Bush campaign, FEC Advisory Opinion 1999–17 (herndon3.sdrc.com/ao/ao/9900017.html) determined that if a site does not charge for a link, that link is not considered a contribution. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, 2 USC Sect. 441b, generally prohibits corporate contributions to federal
elections. I am in debt to Neil Reiff and Bob Fertik for very helpful discussions about these points.

3. See Peter Levine’s chapter, “Online Campaigning and the Public Interest.”


6. Deductive arguments can be valid or invalid and sound or unsound. A sound deductive argument meets two conditions: (1) it has true premises, and (2) it is valid, which basically means that the conclusion follows logically (or necessarily) from the premises.


12. National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, Survey Shows Widespread Enthusiasm for High Technology, press release, Tuesday, 29 February 2000, 4 P.M. EST.

If Political Fragmentation Is the Problem, Is the Internet the Solution?

WILLIAM A. GALSTON

The thesis of this chapter may be briefly stated: A central problem—perhaps the central problem—of contemporary American politics is the proliferation of single-interest groups and the simultaneous weakening of the institutions and processes needed to balance and integrate the interests these groups represent. And unless current trends are reversed, Internet-mediated politics is more likely to accentuate than to cure this problem.

My argument for this thesis runs as follows:

During the past generation, unfettered individual choice has become an increasingly dominant norm in American culture.

Scholars in a range of disciplines have traced the rise of choice as a core value. Daniel Yankelovich suggests that what he calls the “affluence effect”—the psychology of prosperity that emerged as memories of the Depression faded and as the middle class expanded—has weakened traditional restraint:

People came to feel that questions of how to live and with whom to live were a matter of individual choice not to be governed by restrictive norms. As a nation, we came to experience the bonds of marriage, family, children, job, community, and country as constraints that were no longer necessary.¹

In Alan Ehrenhalt’s account, the new centrality of individual choice is a key explanation for the transformation of Chicago’s neig