Political activism in the digital age: The use of the internet for political engagement among meetup attendees

Francisco Seoane Pérez (University of Leeds)[1]
Steve Jones (University of Illinois at Chicago)

Abstract
Research on attendees of political 'meetups' (local gatherings organized through the Internet) has shown that around half had not been previously involved in politics, and that a majority came to know about meetups through the internet, without any personal mediation. This study inquires whether the internet has allowed for the active political engagement of regular citizens by observing and interviewing attendees of political meetups. The internet was found to play a fundamental role in the self-recruitment of inexperienced volunteers, although face-to-face campaign activities explained the maintenance of political commitment in the long run. Three metaphors are suggested to explain the role of the internet in political engagement: The anchor, the oracle, and the chorus.

Keywords: political engagement, political activism, meetups, internet.

Introduction
Since the success of Howard Dean's 2004 U.S. presidential campaign at harnessing the internet as a fund-raising and volunteer recruitment tool, candidates across the United States and around the globe have tried to mimic what came to be known as the paradigm of the 'internet campaign.' Indeed, Dean's bid for the Democratic nomination in 2004 is seen today as the equivalent of the Nixon-Kennedy TV debates of the 1960s: a point of no-return in the political importance of a new medium. With half of its donations collected online, and with more than 200,000 citizens attending its online-organized meetings (Teachout & Streeter, 2007), the Dean campaign marked the coming of age of the internet as a tool for political communication.

Campaign managers eager to know whether they can replicate Dean's raise from an obscure governor to a presidential front-runner should be aware of the particular social context that witnessed Dean's ascension: a country at war with most of its political elites foreclosing any alternative discourses to those of the Bush presidency. The Howard Dean campaign was as much about the social opposition against the war in Iraq as about the internet. It was also as much about traditional campaigning (door-to-door canvassing) as about online political marketing. Yet, despite these warnings that aim at subduing the techno-euphoria that blinds some commentators, there is an unavoidable internet-related fact that gathers the attention of campaign managers and communication scholars alike: Dean's campaign managed to attract

citizens with no previous political experience, and it did it almost entirely through the internet. This contradicts extant knowledge on political activism and the web, for it had been supposed the internet only worked to further engage the already engaged. Trying to find an explanation of this phenomenon was what motivated us to observe and interview the attendees of the Democracy for America meetups, the online-organized local meetings of the movement that spun off the Howard Dean campaign. Our aim was to know what relevance these activists attributed to the internet in their engagement with politics, both at the initial moment of (self) recruitment, and at the later phase of their ongoing involvement in political activism.

The evidence from our research offers a counter-argument to those who claim the internet does not make any difference for politics. It does make a difference, especially in the initial phase of recruitment. We found the internet was used as an anchor (as an instrument with which to cling to a particular issue –a candidate and his campaign, in this case– seen in some other media such as newspapers or television) and as an oracle (search engines like Google were queried for means of finding a way of getting involved in politics). But, interestingly, the face-to-face activities performed during a political campaign, and the feeling that such activities were making a difference, were found to be more relevant for the maintenance of political engagement among activists than any internet-related activity. However, even in this second stage of sustainment of activism the internet plays a role: It acts as a Greek chorus. As it happened in Classical Greek theatre, a set of characters (in this case, progressive bloggers) tell the audience (the activists) about the ideal ways of getting involved into a play (the quest for a more progressive Democratic party and a Democratic presidency). The progressive blogosphere informs local activists about the races across the nation to which they can contribute their money and/or time, and it also narrates the epic successes of these same activists. By this way, we claim, the Internet has made all politics national, at least in the United States.

The anchor, the oracle, and the chorus. These are the three metaphors we suggest to explain how the internet can become a path for political engagement, and how it can work to keep the flame of activism alive. But even acknowledging this relevant role of the internet for politics, we also call for a cautious assessment of the enabling potential of the new medium. It was the particular social climate of a country at war and not the internet that radicalised previously unengaged citizens. And it is the very old and traditional outdoor campaign activities and not political blog readership that keeps most activists involved in politics.

Meetups: Engaging the unengaged?

"I can really imagine the Dean campaign without all these [internet-related] things, except perhaps Meetup", writes Zephyr Teachout, the director of online organizing for the Howard Dean campaign (2007: 73). The meetups, monthly local gatherings among people sharing a common interest, were popularized by the Dean campaign as a convenient organizational tool for political action. Visitors of Meetup.com would enter a topic of their interest (from role-playing games to knitting to politics) and their postal (ZIP) code, and then a list of monthly meetings would show up on their screens. These gatherings came to be known by the name of the website, 'meetups', and were one of the main points for the entry of spontaneous volunteers into the Howard Dean campaign. Meetups are usually held at public venues such as restaurants and cafés, contributing to an informal, non-threatening environment for political meetings. Had these assemblies been mostly attended by old political activists who knew about them through their personal networks of contacts, meetups would have been just

an interesting example of how the internet can be used for local organizing, and of how politics can be made 'fun' by holding meetings at pleasant places. But surveys conducted among the attendees of the Dean meetups revealed two startling features: Nearly half of them had not volunteered for any campaign before, and most of them (above 60 percent) had found out about the meetup through the internet (mainly through a candidate's website). Those who had arrived to a meetup after a recommendation from a friend were a minority (Williams & Gordon, 2003; Williams, Weinberg & Gordon, 2004). The internet, it appears, is instrumental in the recruitment of inexperienced potential activists, who would remain as loyal attendees in the subsequent monthly meetings. We thought the best way to know what role the internet had played in the political involvement of previously unengaged citizens was to ask meetup attendees directly, to observe them and to join them in the political activities they performed between the meetups.

In August 2005, we logged on to Meetup.com to find Dean activists in the Chicago area. The Dean campaign was long gone, but its spin-off movement, Democracy for America (DFA), was alive and well. DFA is a political action committee that supports "socially progressive" and "fiscally responsible" candidates running for local and national offices, as can be read on the homepage of their website, www.democracyforamerica.com. After some serendipitous searching, we found three meetup groups of activists who were supporting Christine Cegelis, a Democratic candidate running for an open seat in the 6th Congressional District of Illinois. Two of these gatherings were organized by two local DFA groups, and received the name of 'linkups', since this is the denomination that DFA gave to meetups when the organizing tool was adopted for their own website. A third monthly meeting, sponsored by the Cegelis campaign itself, was organized through the traditional Meetup.com website. For the sake of clarity, we will refer to the three meetings as 'meetups.'

Cegelis had been endorsed by Howard Dean in her previous bid for the same office in 2004. With the retirement from active politics of the late Republican Congressman Henry Hyde, the Congressional seat of this district in Chicago's West suburbs was, apparently, up for grabs. The Democratic Party establishment decided to support its own candidate, the Iraq war veteran Tammy Duckworth, who enjoyed the endorsement of such venerable figures as Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Unintentionally, our case study came to present an Internet-grassroots campaign, built on the effort of former Dean volunteers, against a traditional well-resourced top-down campaign with enough money for direct mailing, TV ads, and robo-calls. Cegelis eventually lost in the primaries of March 2006, although the narrow difference in votes (4 percentage points, slightly more than a thousand votes more for Duckworth in a three candidate election)[1] still makes us wonder whether nothing can compete with a well-funded campaign, or if three enthusiastic meetups were about to win over an all-star electoral machine.

The three meetup groups supporting Cegelis allowed us to attend their meetings from September 2005 to May 2006. We joined them in their outside activities (petition-drives, canvassing sessions, Get-Out-The-Vote efforts) from the beginning to the end of the campaign. Also, fourteen of these meetup volunteers granted us in-depth conversations on their own stories of political involvement.

DFA activists as enraged 'monitorial' citizens

Our main focus of attention was DFA activists who had not volunteered for a campaign before attending a meetup. Their own stories of political engagement seem to put them in the position of an enraged 'monitorial' citizen. Suggested by scholar Michael Schudson (1998), the monitorial citizen concept refers to a new and less demanding ideal of citizenship. Instead of asking them to be fully-informed and politically active individuals, contemporary citizens should be asked to monitor their environment so that they can be aware of any potential threat that may require their intervention in public life. When telling us how they became political activists, some of our interviewees described themselves as attentive citizens who followed the news but rarely had gone beyond casting a vote in the periodical elections:

> "I was part of those normal people who listen to the news and complain about George Bush."
> (Female, 39 years old)

> "I've always followed politics in newspapers, but never got involved myself other than be sure to vote every time."
> (Male, 40 years old)

> "I've always followed politics in the news and had political opinions. Just seemed natural."
> (Male, 69 years old)

The Iraq war could easily be defined as the threat that made these previously inactive citizens get involved in politics. And the war was, indeed, the major issue that radicalised them. But if one listens carefully to their motivations, the war is linked to other over-arching threats to their civil liberties and to what they see as inalienable democratic rights:

> "I viewed the war as a surrogate for the civil liberties issues that no one was really talking about but that I considered more important."
> (Male, 69 years old)

> "His [Bush'es] assault on civil rights is absolutely unconceivable; his record on the environment and, what is worse is his blatant disregard for the Constitution."
> (Female, 35 years old)

> "I think it was partly the Bush administration, and certainly the war in Iraq, but I think that's more under the umbrella of the feeling that government was really running astray of general public interest."
> (Male, 38 years old)

And here's when the internet enters the scene. Once a citizen is radicalised, enraged, alarmed by a threat, where does he/she go to find a solution, or a way of contributing to respond to that menace? From what the Cegelis activists told (some of them had been Dean supporters before), there were two ways by which they came to know about Dean or the DFA meetups. That is, there were two paths by which an individual would use the Internet in search for political engagement.

The first path could be explained by the metaphor of an anchor. In a situation of moral drift, the enraged monitorial citizen may happen to read, hear, or see a candidate or a political group that might provide a meaningful way of acting to respond to the perceived threat. One of our interviewees said he knew about the meetups from a *New York Times* report, and then he went online to find out more. As Bimber & Davis (2003) had discovered in their studies of the 2000 presidential election, "a minor-party candidate can benefit from even limited

exposure in traditional media if curious voters then turn to the candidate's website for information" (p. 163). Here's an example from one of our interviews:

> "I saw Dean for the first time in a debate on C-SPAN. I don't know if I heard him saying "Go to DeanforAmerica.com" or if I Googled him, I don't remember… Somehow I found out about that [the meetup], I found what was going on there… I was trying to find where there was a local meeting. So it was not through the Internet that I found it, but it was through the Internet that I was able to get involved. If it wasn't that, it would have been much more difficult."
> (Male, 27 years old)

In his analysis of the key features in the Dean campaign, Streeter refers to this "complex, interactive relationship developed between the [Dean] online efforts and mainstream media coverage." (2007: 9) The journalistic coverage of a candidate and his campaign is what encourages curious citizens to look for more information on the internet. Jerome Armstrong, the founder of the political blog MyDD.com, an early Dean supporter and advisor, and a key figure in the progressive blogosphere, tells how Google was used to look for more information about a candidate that had been met, most probably, through the traditional media: "The referral logs show a large number of Google queries about Dean's position on Iraq and the Bush tax cuts. Clearly it isn't just bloggers but also web surfers in general who are putting 2 and 2 together." (Armstrong, 2007: 45).

The second road to political activism does not involve traditional media: The internet is the first and single entry for political engagement. In this second way, web search engines are not anchoring what has been known somewhere else. Instead, they act as a kind of Delphic oracle. The radicalised citizen asks Google, through different keyword queries, how to get involved in political action for change:

> Question - Do you remember precisely what did you do on the Internet to find the group? Answer - I did a search on Google for "Democratic or Democrat political activism… or political activism groups"… I don't remember the specific search. After looking at different links, it took me about 20 or 25 minutes to find (the) DFA link. I had a look at it and saved the link.
> (Male, 38 years old)

> I probably put in a search for "Presidential Candidates" or "Democratic Presidential Candidates" and when that, when you do that, you end up sort of looking through a lot of things… […] and I just remember being very stoked by Howard Dean. He sounded like he was very clear in his opposition to what was happening in Iraq. So, because I was able to find that information on the Internet, I was motivated to continue to pursue that in some form or another.
> (Male, 39 years old)

This second path seems to be more in line with the serendipitous nature of the Internet (Weinberger, 2007), with the world of intentional and unintentional connections. The mainstream media coverage about Dean is the result (the response of the oracle) and not the starting point of the user web queries.

Meetups: "The internet is only a part of the equation"

Meetups were the main point of entry in a candidate's campaign for those who were new to political activism. For anybody wanting to fight politically against the Bush administration, the first step was not the local office of the Democratic party, but a restaurant or café. One could show up at one of these venues, ask for a drink, and look at those who were 'meeting up' and talking about politics in a nearby table. If convinced, one could sit down and introduce oneself. If the first meetup was not satisfying, the newcomer could avoid attending any further gatherings. Not unlike joining an online community, the initial investment can be minimal, and it is possible to "cut one's losses" easily and quickly, without great risk of losing face (Jones, ed., 1995).

The DFA meetups usually consisted of planning outdoor activities in support of a local candidate. In the particular case of Cegelis, she was a local candidate running for a national office (Congress), so any activity performed at the district she would represent would have a national influence: Were she to become a member of Congress, Cegelis would be a progressive politician who would make the Democratic party more 'democratic' and would contribute to achieve a left-leaning majority in Congress.

Armed with data provided by the campaign, meetup attendees would gather on Saturday mornings to travel to the nearby district where Cegelis was running as a candidate (in the West Chicago suburbs) and would knock on the doors of Democratic registered voters, who would be asked to vote for Cegelis at the party primaries.

These outside activities were found to be more engaging than any internet-related activity. Although all DFA groups have a blog where their attendees can write up comments and ideas, these websites were hardly visited. Each of the three meetup groups had an internal listserv to which members would post messages. When we analyzed the content of the messages sent to each of those listservs, we found that references to the blogosphere were negligible, and definitely far behind the references to mainstream media articles. The majority of the messages sent to the respective lists were concerned with calls for canvassing.

Indeed, as Teachout & Streeter (2007) argue, the core of the Dean campaign was very traditional, in the sense that it was mostly about petition drives, door-to-door canvassing, and phone-banking. Attendees themselves explained that they liked meetups and outdoor activities because they were opportunities to persuade those who did not hold their same ideological positions, or "to preach outside the choir", as one of our interviewees said. They were aware of the self-referentiality of internet political blogs and websites, so they found that one of the best ways of having some political influence was by going outside and reaching out to those who would not bother about internet politics. Furthermore, they acknowledged that face-to-face dialogue, either among themselves or with voters in the districts they canvassed, allowed for a more civilized conversation. Without the internet the meetup activists would not have met each other, but without the face-to-face meetings and the outside activities, their activism would probably have waned over time, according to their own words:

> "I feel like there is a little bit of a distancing aspect to the Internet in terms of personal communication. One of the nice things about the meetups is that allows that face-to-face aspect of politics to continue…"
> (Male, 34 years old)

> "The Internet is only a part of the equation. That's why things like the meetups are so important, because you actually get to meet people in person. When we were having the

canvassing a few weeks ago, I actually got to meet somebody who had blogged in favor of Duckworth, and we had an interesting conversation. It's the kind of conversation that on the blogs would degenerate into screaming, but in person, you know, that changes.
(Male, 40 years old)

Q - Do you think that if meetups didn't exist you would have gotten involved in the same way that you are now?
A - No, I don't think so.
Q - Although you were also active on the Internet…
A - Yeah, but doing that Internet stuff and the blogs would have got me involved writing stuff in response to things online, but it wouldn't have necessarily led me to think: "Oh, I gotta go out and work on a campaign." Which campaign? How do I contact? Going to a meetup or to some place where they are already doing it made it much easier to get involved. You see people already doing that, and you have a person to ask how to get involved. There's something to be said about seeing an actual person face-to-face, rather than just an anonymous person online.
(Male, 41 years old)

Attending meetups and participating in the activities scheduled at them provided these attendees with political education and a sense of empowerment. These gratifications explained in great part the maintenance of their political engagement.

If for de Tocqueville the political groups of 19th Century America were "the great free schools to which all citizens come to be taught the general theory of association" (de Tocqueville, [[1835, 1840] 2000: 522), meetups could be deemed as the great fee schools for the 21st Century for those interested in getting practical, first-hand knowledge of the nuts and bolts of a political campaign. Meetups, and especially the activities organized between them, could be understood as political literacy workshops. As a matter of fact, one of the attendees of one of the meetups we observed eventually ran for a local office in Chicago.

The sense of empowerment came from the perception that their groundwork was crucial for the success of the campaigns they supported. One of our observed groups knocked on 3,000 doors for Cegelis. When the campaign was over, they compared the votes the candidate had received in 2004 with the votes she got in 2006. They analyzed the effectiveness of their action and found, with great pride, that they had increased the turnout in those townships they canvassed for the candidate. If Cegelis had any chance of ever winning the Democratic nomination in the Sixth District of Illinois against an 'establishment' candidate supported by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, they reasoned, it was because of their efforts. Whether this perception is close to reality or not is secondary. As a pragmatist would argue, if beliefs have real consequences, beliefs are real.

The chorus: Making all politics national

An old adage in American politics says that "all politics are local." National or state races, this saying implies, are won at the local level, after fighting for every vote on the ground. The old adage encapsulates two aspects ingrained in American democracy: The love of grassroots mobilization and local government.

The meetups enjoy the taste of the myth of local politics - they are, in a sense, small assemblies of politically activated citizens – but the scope of these gatherings is mostly

national. "Until now all politics was local," said one of the DFA meetup attendees we observed. "But since Dean all politics are national."

Although the DFA groups are increasingly getting involved in local races, the motivation for their attendees was, and still is, related to national politics. Fighting the Bush administration and supporting an outsider candidate, Howard Dean, who went against the perceived indulgence of the Democratic Party, was what drove disenchanted liberals to the Dean meetups. Furthermore, the disappointment with the results of the 2004 presidential election attracted new members to the DFA gatherings.

The DFA and Cegelis supporters that we observed and interviewed were supporting a candidate who ran for a district in which they didn't live. But they were backing her because of her progressive policies and because she was running for an open seat formerly occupied by a Republican. Therefore, supporting her was a way of getting into the battle for the seats, a way of contributing to a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, a means of "taking back the Congress," to use their own rhetoric:

> Q - Why did you support a candidate, Cegelis, who does not live in your district?
> A - I think that type of thing is… there are two reasons for that. One, her politics and my politics are really close. I agree with her more than I agree with my Congressman. I want somebody there [in the House of Representatives] who agrees with me. Two, it's another Democrat, it's another vote for Nancy Pelosi for speaker of the House, to take control of the House of Representatives.
> (Male, 30 years old)

Although, as discussed, web-based communication was secondary to face-to-face interaction among meetup attendees, the internet had the virtue of making their local activism nationally relevant. The Cegelis fight against an establishment candidate was narrated by the chorus of progressive bloggers, who gave other DFAers across the United States the chance of knowing about a local race that would make a difference nationally. In a reverse way, Cegelis supporters would also know about similar races in other parts of the country to which they could contribute with online donations or phone calls on behalf of the candidate.

The 'netroots' and the DFA meetup activists, we argue, acted as a Greek chorus in the drama of progressive politics. The function of the chorus in Ancient Greek drama was double: To help the audience follow the play by introducing background information and commenting on the action of the players (to narrate), and to represent the reactions of an ideal public, therefore contributing to the integration of the spectators into the dramatic play. In some plays, the populace represented by the Chorus would be a player within the drama. The blogging elite would be the Chorus as narrator. The DFA activists around the country would be the Chorus as public, both in its version as spectator and as actor.

The constellation of progressive blogs, with Daily Kos and MyDD at the top, were among the national narrators of the Cegelis drama. The DFA activists who contributed to those and other blogs, who sent online donations from distant states, and who placed phone calls on behalf of a candidate who was running for a district that was hundred or thousands of miles away from their home, were the members of that chorus who shifted between the roles of actor and observer.

The Internet is in this way nationalizing politics in the United States. It is allowing people interested in making a difference at a national level to intervene in the formal political

process, by finding a local meeting where groundwork can be performed, or by finding other distant candidates who can be helped with cash contributions or distant voluntary work (phone-calling):

> Q - Do you check the DFA website to know about other progressive candidates around the country?
> A - Yeah, even through other websites besides DFA, I've learned about other candidates who need help and are progressive. I've definitely looked for that and I would support financially some of them.
> Q - Have you already done that?
> A - I did it once.
> Q - Can you tell me about that candidate?
> A - Oh, she's Francine Busby, in California. She's running in the district of a Republican congressman who was caught up in a corruption scandal.
> Q - How did you know about that candidate?
> A - Mostly through those blogs: Democratic Underground, MyDD.com, Daily Kos…
> (Male, 41 years old)

The Cegelis case is exemplifying. The candidate was helped by remote DFA and other progressive activists and, as can be seen by the testimonies we gathered, the Cegelis supporters themselves supported other candidates around the country who can help fulfill the objectives of the meetup activists: To advance progressive politics and to fight the Republican dominance in Congress.

Implications for networked politics and 'netroots' campaigns

This research has shown two ways by which an enraged monitorial citizen can use the internet to enter political activism. First, it anchors what this individual has learned elsewhere (usually the mainstream media) and finding more information on an issue of special interest (a candidate, a campaign). Second, it permits use of search engines as a kind of Delphic oracle, asking, for example, Google for a meaningful way of responding to the alarm that has spurred the individual into political action. At the same time, we have explained that a long-term engagement with politics is better sustained by the face-to-face interaction provided by meetups and by the activities scheduled at these gatherings. The fact that most contemporary candidate websites ask visitors to provide an e-mail address and a postal code (the same two bits of information asked by Meetup.com) is the best proof that meetups have been one of the best inventions to attract and engage potential supporters with little experience in politics. By being held in public places usually linked with leisure, meetups have also brought politics closer to the everyday life of new (and old) political activists. The internet, then, is crucial at the initial phase of self-recruitment (otherwise the potential supporter would have more difficulties to find a political action group close to home), but face-to-face interaction (both at the meetups and at the subsequent campaign activities) reveals itself more relevant than any internet-related activity for the medium to long-term political engagement of meetup attendees. In fact, we found that the blogs available at the meetup groups' respective websites were barely used, and that most of the topics discussed in their e-mail lists rarely mentioned the blogosphere. This is not to say that we did not find any political blog readers among meetup attendees. We found them, and we realized they acted as information-brokers among their less tech-savvy fellows, indicating opportunities for involvement in other national races that could make a difference for achieving a Democratic majority in Congress. Hence our claim that the blogosphere acted as a kind of Greek chorus, narrating the action of ground-level activists and facilitating the entrance onto the stage of progressive politics.

At first sight, the Dean and DFA campaigns offer hopeful signs for the recovery of civic society in America. Norris' (2001, 2002) and Bimber & Davis' (2003) findings on the enabling potential of the Internet for insurgent candidates and curious voters were confirmed through the course of this study. Organizations like DFA, with a national scope, with hundreds of chapters across the nation, and with regular face-to-face meetings, can bring back to the 21st Century the virtues of he old federal associations that were common in the United States a hundred years ago. Precisely, one of Skockpol's (2003) proposed remedies to heal America's presumed civic malaise was to mix politics and other civic and entertainment activities. The meetups, held at restaurants, intertwined with the rest of other social activities going on at those dining places, are in many ways the realization of a dream; they prove that the internet can foster old-fashioned civic and political engagement.

However, some cautionary concern is needed to keep scholars vigilant from becoming too optimistic when it comes to assessing the role of new media in political activism. Howard (2006) has warned about the existence of Astroturf campaigns, social movements that are carefully controlled remotely by interest groups or even political parties. Taking advantage of the many trails of data unwarily left behind by thousands (if not millions) of citizens, these groups can target very narrowly-defined demographic segments of the population that might be likely to join an apparently citizen-driven campaign.

The latest developments in American politics show that the Howard Dean phenomenon has not been easy to replicate. Ned Lamont, a netroots-supported anti-war candidate who managed to win the Democratic nomination in the Massachusetts 2006 primaries against Joe Lieberman, was later defeated by Lieberman himself in the general election. The former candidate for the vice presidency of the United States in 2000 eventually ran as an independent candidate and made observers wonder whether the internet grassroots were empowering a set of radicals who were largely unrepresentative of their own Democratic party. More recently, Libertarian presidential candidate Ron Paul managed to have more meetup supporters and more YouTube subscribers than any of his rivals in the 2008 election, but he never achieved any significant position in public opinion polls. Dean translated internet support into popular support, at least for some time (by the end of 2003 he was the Democratic front-runner, with more popular support than the eventual nominee, John Kerry); Paul looks more like an internet-only phenomenon, although the thousands of meetup attendees he gathered are difficult to neglect.

An important matter for scholars to address is whether there is an "digital divide" element to internet use for grass roots mobilization. Hindman (2005) noted that there may be connections between political attitudes and attitudes toward technology:

> Dean's candidacy is thus the best evidence to date that the Web matters for politics. His example makes it doubly important to understand how this resource is distributed, and it highlights important ideological gaps in who uses the Web for politics. The digital divide is not just about access, user skills, or even what Pippa Norris labels a "democracy gap" between the engaged and the politically indifferent (Norris, 2001). For practical politics, the most crucial divide concerns the attitudes of those who frequent political Web sites. Disproportionate liberal use laid the groundwork for everything Dean accomplished and ensured that the online political audience would be particularly receptive to his message. Much of the future of online politics depends on how persistent this liberal-conservative gap proves to be. (2005, p. 127)

Consequently, new internet technologies (such as the much lauded "Web 2.0" phenomena) may play easily into the scenarios we have described, or they may be differentially adopted, particularly by monitorial citizens, in ways that will make it difficult for campaigns to know whether and how to deploy such technologies themselves. It is quite likely, for instance, that social networking sites will entwine with meetups specifically and politics generally. As Chadwick and Howard (2008) note, "The next two web 2.0 themes – the creation of small scale forms of political engagement through consumerism and the propagation of political content across multiple applications - are more specialized but still reveal important aspects of the new politics." However, it is almost certain that Web 2.0 themes will not be taken up equally among campaigns or even among political parties.

The use of communication technologies for political empowerment is a fascinating research topic for scholars in the social sciences. Our study has shown the internet can facilitate the entry into active politics of formerly non-politically active citizens. However, the motivations and the social environment that radicalizes individuals is largely independent from the technology they eventually use to access political activism. In this regard, the internet could be thought of more as the gunpowder rather than as the spark.

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[i] The final results of the 2006 Democratic primary election in the 6th Congressional District of Illinois were the following: 14,283 votes for Duckworth, 13,158 votes for Cegelis, and 5,133 votes for Lindy Scott.