

ONLINE ORGANIZATION:

DEAN, KERRY, AND INTERNET POLITICKING IN THE 2004 IOWA CAUCUS

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Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean took to the stage defeated on Jan. 19, 2004 after having reportedly led into battle the largest Internet army ever assembled in politics. If the “Dean Scream” he let out was any indication, online organization’s perceived potential to transform American politics took a lashing in the 2004 Iowa Caucus. But was it really online organization that was defeated on that Caucus night, or rather the hype around Dean’s Internet crew?

It is clear the Internet played a crucial role in helping Dean raise upwards of \$50 million when in the grip of his early e-mentum, and in enabling Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., to raise \$26 million in the two months after his Iowa Caucus victory as well.² It’s also clear that online fundraising was already having a significant impact as early as 2000, when Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., rode an electric surge out of New Hampshire that ultimately shorted out before he could reach the nomination.

This chapter relies on the analysis of an earlier paper by the author, “e-Organization: The Role of Online Organization in the 2004 Iowa Caucus” (conference paper, Midwest Political Science Association, Section 12: Elections and Voting Behavior, Panel 5: Candidate.com: Campaigning on the Internet, April 15, 2004, and American Political Science Association Political Communication Pre-Conference, Chicago, Ill., September 1, 2004).

² Jim VandeHei and Thomas B. Edsall, “Kerry Capitalizing on Party Resources to Fill Cooffers,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2004, A6. Note that March 4 was two days after Super Tuesday, not the next day.

But what about Dean's vaunted online organization? Did it desert him in the first battle it faced?

This chapter will explore that question empirically, attempting to tease out the various Iowa Caucus impacts of basic website visits, campaign email contact, signing up as a supporter online, using the Internet to read articles on a candidate, and Dean's online tool of choice, MeetUp.com.

I. Literature Review: Old and New Tactics

As we have seen, a number of excellent empirical studies have fixed especially on a "voter's-eye view" of the Iowa Caucus, with a view to discovering what motivates caucus-goers' vote choice (Stone, 1982, Stone and Abramowitz, 1983; Abramowitz and Stone, 1984, Stone, Rapoport and Abramowitz, 1992, Mayer, 2000). Advocates of Iowa's role in the primary process have pointed to the importance of "time on task" in person, pressing the flesh, in boosting Iowa outcomes.³ And of course, there are the discussions in the main, overarching work on the Caucus of how organization tends to dominate Caucus outcomes (Winebrenner, 1998).

³ "Time on task" in the Caucus is the term used by David Yepsen of the Des Moines *Register*.

But what about the role of the Internet in retail politics, in Iowa and elsewhere? Did 2004 demonstrate that Iowa's old-style political machinery overpowered the nascent online political revolution? Or did other less-hyped online organizations help other candidates keep up? And more specifically, what role did different Internet tactics play in Caucus success, controlling for the old-style organization of rallies, phone banks and canvassing, as well as press, television ad spending, number of days spent in Iowa, and other factors we would expect to influence Caucus outcomes?

What makes the Caucus a perfect testing ground for online organization is the weight given old-style grassroots organization in winning it. Based in part on those studies, it is worth applying our "candidate's-eye view" model of the Caucus to the further question of how new Internet tactics are affecting its outcomes.

II. Data and Variables: Adding Internet Factors to the Picture

The bulk of the Internet data below come from an original survey conducted by the author in the month leading up to the 2004 Iowa Caucus. The survey asked active Iowa Republicans and Democrats (former Caucus-goers and those voting

in the last two primary elections, respectively) for each 1996, 2000 and 2004 candidate:

- Whether they had signed up online as a supporter of the candidate
- Whether they had been received an email from the candidate
- Whether they had visited the candidate's website, and
- Whether they had read an Internet news story or commentary on the candidate

Looking back to 2000 and 1996 is admittedly suspect. On one hand, Internet data from those years - especially 1996 - is rarer than hen's teeth, to adopt the Iowa argot. Finally, asking Republicans about the 2000 cycle in 2004 makes some sense, since it was the latest Caucus race for them, and around Caucus time 2004 for the Democrats they would naturally have it on their mind again.

Finally, I also gathered publicly-available MeetUp.com data on supporters in the 13 Iowa communities where the website facilitates local meetings to the database.

III. Analysis: The Evolution of Iowa Caucus Internet Activity since 1996

How active an online campaign have Caucus candidates run in the past, and how has that evolved through 2004? Before we ask what precise role each Internet tactic had in influencing Caucus performance, let us look back at the

evolution of Internet activity to the extent we have data on it, and then examine more closely what each 2004 candidate did online.

Comparing the Democrats in 2000 and 2004 and the Republicans in 1996 and 2000 can give us some useful insights. For instance, the average percentage of candidates' supporters signing up online actually declined from 2000 to 2004.

However, this is mainly because in 2000 only two Democratic candidates contested the Caucuses, Vice President Al Gore and former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley. In 2004, there were eight major Democratic candidates on the ballot on Caucus day, and of those three did not seriously compete in Iowa, namely Gen. Wesley Clark, Rev. Al Sharpton and U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman. Clark's Iowa supporters actually had a relatively deep reach into his Internet organization, but Sharpton and Lieberman's total lack of effort on that front pulls down the overall number below the 2000 average. (Chart 7-1)

For the same reason, it is remarkable that the percentage of supporters receiving email dropped only slightly, while the percentage of supporters gathering news about their favored candidate online and those visiting their candidate's website increased significantly.

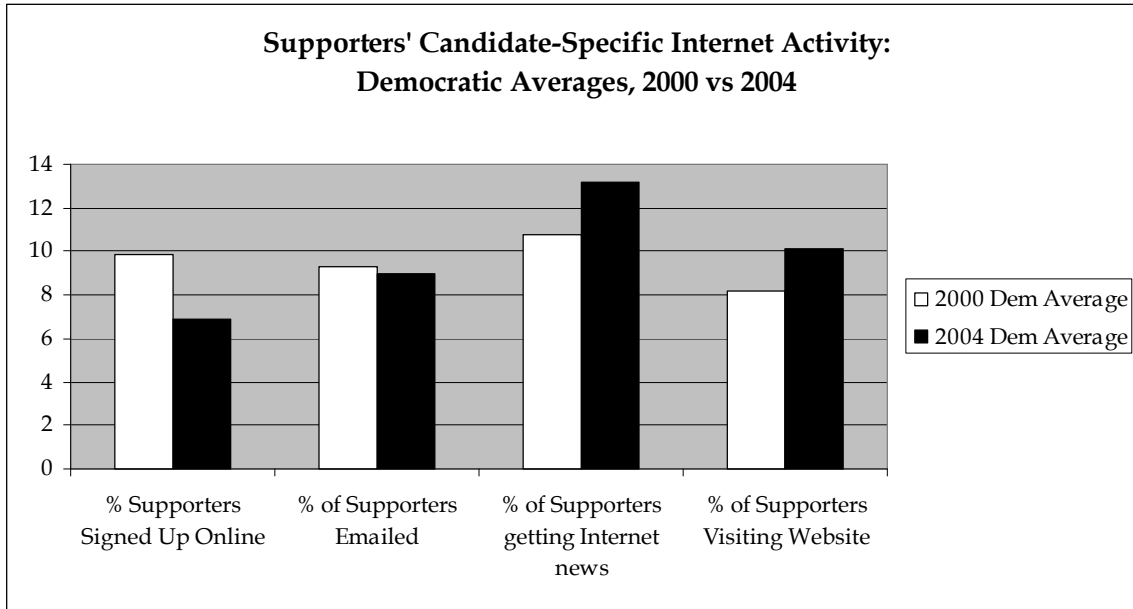


Chart 7-1: Comparison of Iowa 2000 and 2004 Candidate Supporters' Single-Candidate Internet Activity.

Average percentages of 2000 and 2004 Democratic candidates' supporters in the survey reporting that they signed up online as the candidate's supporters, received email from the candidate, read Internet news articles on the candidate, and visited the candidate's website.

Internet activity among all the party activists surveyed shows an even starker pattern. (Chart 7-2). Average percentages of all partisans signing up for *each candidate* is unsurprisingly much lower in 2004 than it was in 2000. This makes sense if only because the field is broader, so the pool of partisans would be split eight ways, rather than two, in contrast to supporters who are united behind their candidate.

That said, note the increase in the three non-mutually exclusive Internet activities. The survey suggests a 31% increase in the average proportion of party activists getting email from a given candidate, despite the fact that again several

candidates did not actively compete in Iowa. Likewise there appears to have been a 28% increase in party activists getting news on any given candidate, and a 34% increase in visiting any given candidate’s website. These figures suggest important increases in Internet activity among Iowa’s Democratic activists.

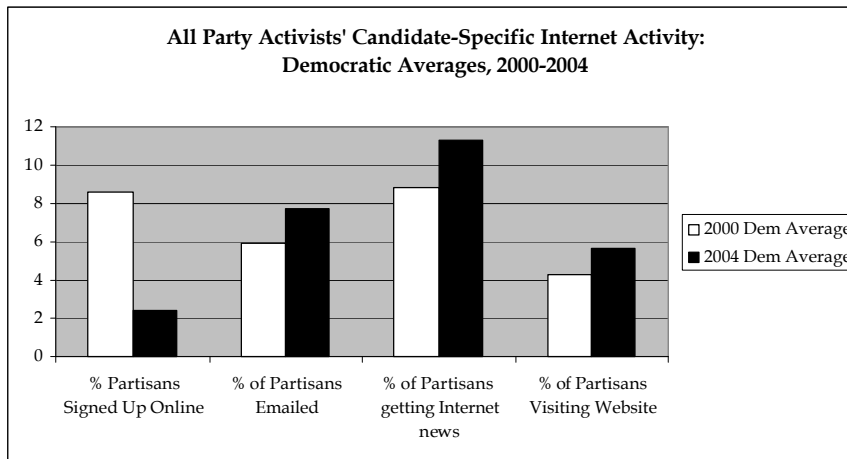


Chart 7-2: Comparison of Iowa 2000 and 2004 Party Activists’ Single-Candidate Internet Activity.

Average percentages of those surveyed in 2000 and 2004 reporting that they signed up online as a candidate’s supporter, received email from the candidate, read Internet news articles on the candidate, and visited the candidate’s website.

Of course, the 1996 to 2000 change in Internet activity which took place is far greater. As noted above, it may be that these differences are because of simple lack of recollection, as well as fundamental differences in how candidates used the Internet between the two cycles. Regardless, the differences are substantial, and worth examining.

The number of candidates works in the opposite direction for the GOP – since there were six candidates in 2000 as opposed to nine in 1996, we would expect that signing up online, the mutually-exclusive factor, would increase

proportionately more between the two years. We would also expect that the lower-tier candidates in 1996 would pull the overall average down. So let's take a look at just the top six candidates in 1996 against the candidates in 2000, to have a more level playing field. (Chart 7-3)

The increases in supporters' Internet activity were dramatic between 1996 and 2000. The average percentage of supporters who signed up online spiked 318%. The average proportion of supporters saying they were emailed by their favored candidate shot up 280%. Those who reported finding news articles online about the candidate they backed increased 106%, while the average proportion of supporters reporting having visited the candidate's website swelled 162%.

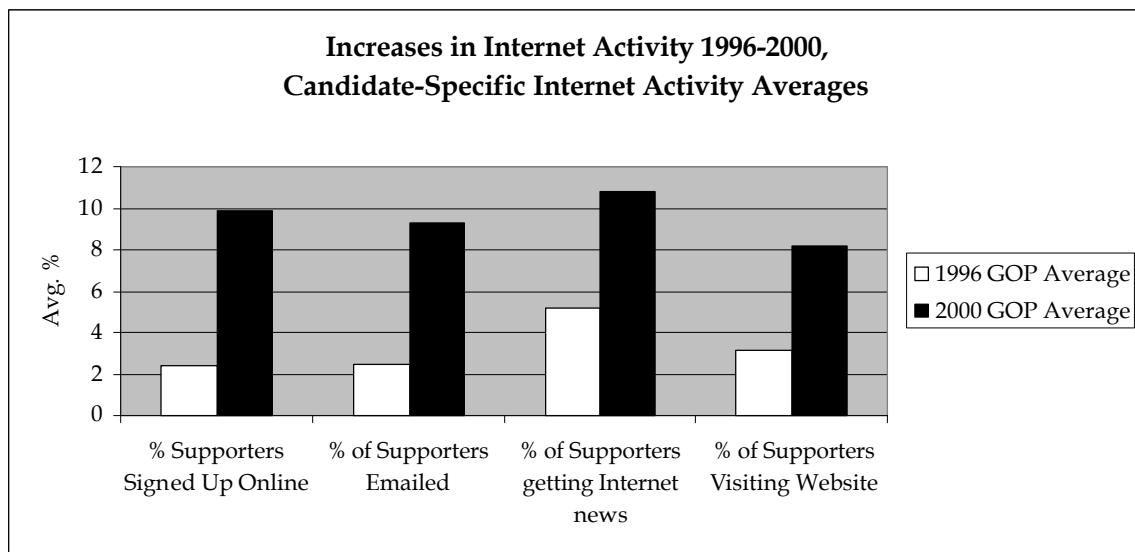


Chart 7-3: Iowa GOP Candidate Supporters' 1996 and 2000 Internet Activity, eliminating bottom three 1996 candidates.

Average percentages of 1996 and 2000 Republican candidates' supporters in the survey reporting that they signed up online as the candidate's supporters, received email from the candidate, read Internet news articles on the candidate, and visited the candidate's website.

But the 1996-2000 increases in party activist penetration of average candidate-specific Internet activity are startling. The average percent of all partisans reporting that they signed up *for each given candidate* – not the total percent signing up for any candidate – exploded by 2276%. (Chart 7-4)

That is, Y2K GOP candidates had 22 times the average percentage of all Iowa Republican activists who had signed up to support just them relative to candidates in 1996. The average percentage of activists saying they had been emailed by a given candidate increased 1081%, the average proportion of activists who sought out information on a given candidate online went up 525% and the average percentage visiting each candidates’ website rose 885%.

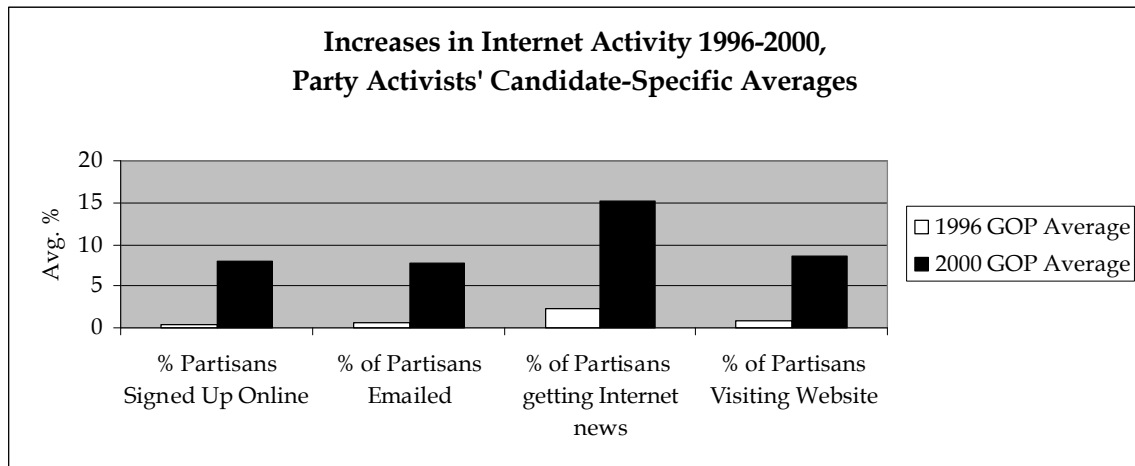


Chart 7-4: Iowa GOP Party Activists’ 1996 and 2000 Single-Candidate Internet Activity, eliminating bottom three 1996 candidates.

Average percentages of 1996 and 2000 Republican candidates’ supporters in the survey reporting that they signed up online as a candidate’s supporter, received email from the candidate, read Internet news articles on the candidate, and visited the candidate’s website.

Here is the grain of salt, revisited. We cannot tell how much of the difference between 1996 and 2000 is real, how much is faulty memory, and how much is a transformation in the political role of the Internet between the two cycles. It will be crucial to approach the 1996 with great care when estimating Internet effects on candidate performance.

Regardless, the hoary, old-school Iowa Caucus has sparked a digital revolution along with the rest of the nation. It is difficult to describe the degree to which the last eight years have changed the amount of e-politicking going on in the Hawkeye state.

IV. A Snapshot of 2004: Dean's Internet Army was Defeated by Other Online Forces

From an Iowa Democrat's point of view, what did things look like online in 2004?

First of all, available to the public was the MeetUp.com data showing that Howard Dean was building a massive online organization. On MeetUp, activists for a panoply of causes organize themselves by locality. The website allows them to choose from a limited set of official MeetUp locations and set a date and time for anyone interested to gather up and help out. Dean's website explicitly drove supporters to MeetUp to organize themselves, pushing power down out of the campaign and into the hands of his supporters at the local level.

Anyone can go to MeetUp and see the exact number of supporters signed up to be notified of meetups on every given cause in a given locality. Using that information, the news media could see that Dean's organization had swelled far beyond that of his competitors. Gathering this data for the 13 localities Iowa and adding them together gives one a precise picture of how much MeetUp organization each 2004 candidates had. (Chart 7-5)

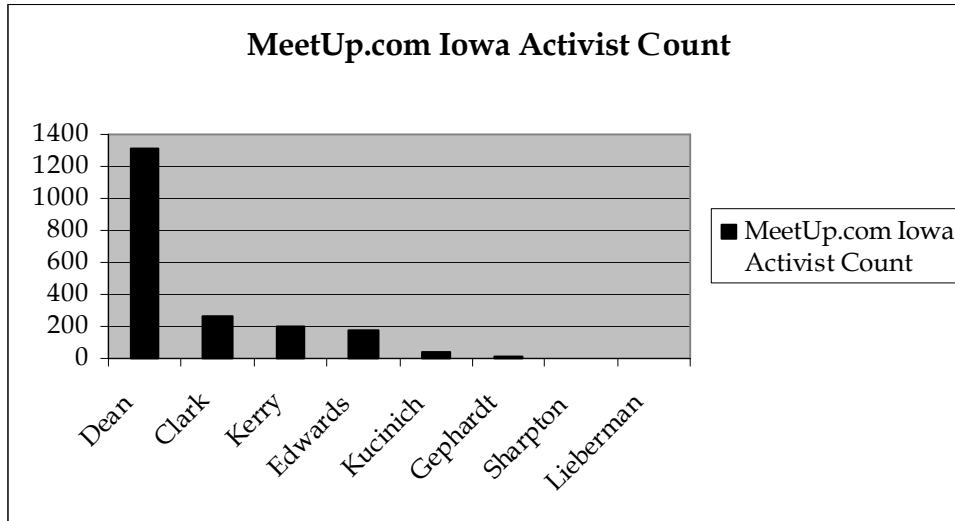


Chart 7-5: 2004 Democratic candidates' MeetUp.com Iowa activist count, total among 13 communities.

Total number of members of candidates' MeetUp.com groups in the 13 communities where MeetUp.com operates in Iowa.

Obviously Howard Dean was far out in front of the rest of the 2004 candidates in using MeetUp. But the survey of activist Iowa Democrats found that Dean's Internet activity, while substantial, was not unchallenged. As Chart 7-6

demonstrates, both Kerry's and Clark's pool of supporters had a level of Internet activity rivaling Dean's (though not surpassing it).

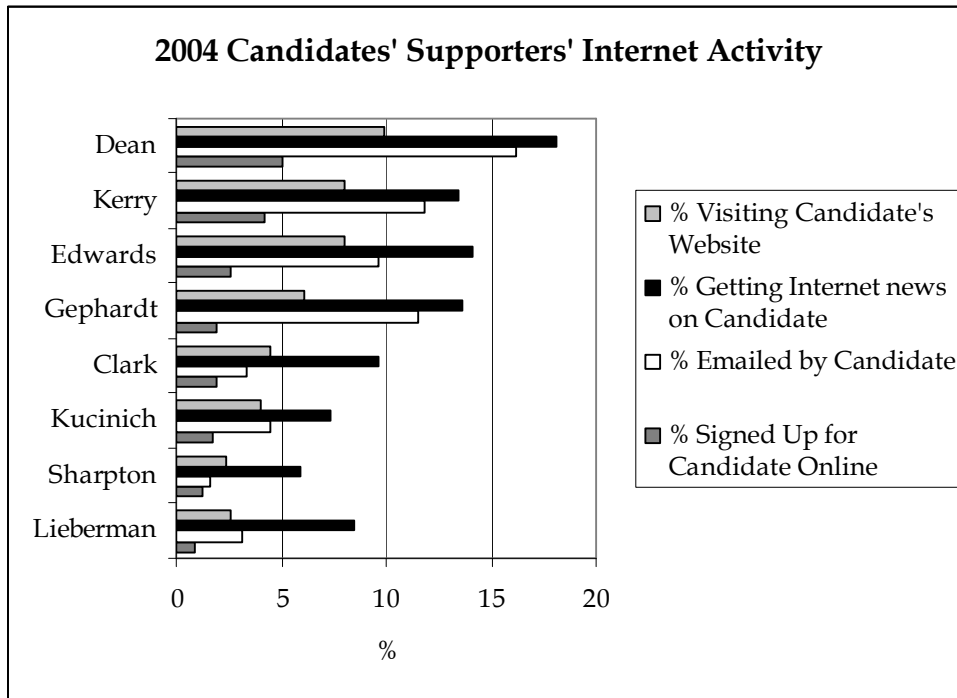


Chart 7-6: Candidates' Supporters' Internet Activity, 2004. Percentages of 2004 Democratic candidates' supporters in the survey reporting that they signed up online as the candidate's supporters, received email from the candidate, read Internet news articles on the candidate, and visited the candidate's website.

A higher proportion of Clark's (few) supporters had visited their candidate's website (23.5%) than Dean's supporters (16.3 %). The Kerry campaign had emailed nearly as many of its supporters (16.5%) as Dean's had (19.8%). Only with respect to signing up online did the Dean camp (16.3%) badly outdistance supporters of Clark (11.8%) and Kerry (9.2%).

Clark supporters' Internet savvy, evidenced by their lead in percentage of getting online news on their candidate, was not translated into much impact because of their tiny numbers, of course. When comparing the Internet activity of all Iowa Democrats surveyed, it becomes clear that Dean's lead was trailed meaningfully only by Kerry and the dark horse candidate (and second-place Iowa finisher) John Edwards, though Dick Gephardt had a respectable showing (Chart 7-7).

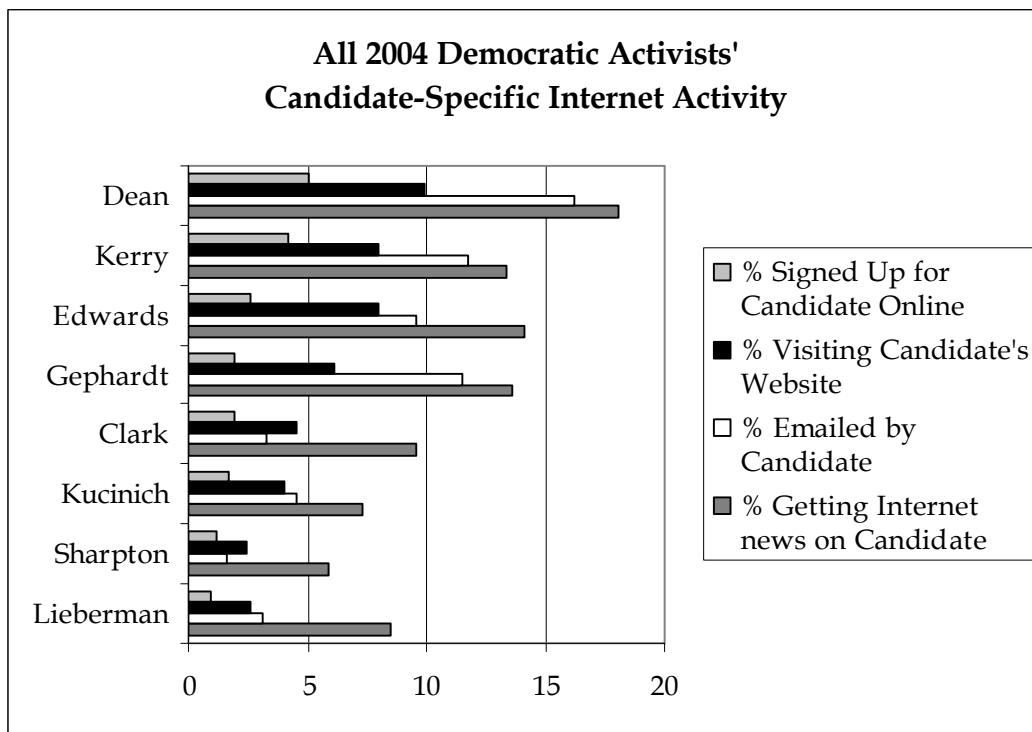


Chart 7-7: All Surveyed Iowa Democrats' Internet Activity, 2004
 Percentages of those surveyed in 2000 and 2004 reporting that they signed up online as a candidate's supporter, received email from the candidate, read Internet news articles on the candidate, and visited the candidate's website.

Fully one in 20 of the activist Iowa Democrats surveyed had signed up as an online supporter of Howard Dean, a pretty remarkable figure – yet John Kerry's online effort was not that far behind, 4.2% to Dean's 5%. Just under one in ten

had visited Dean's site (9.9%), but nearly as many had visited Kerry and Edwards' (8% for both). Dean had more aggressively reached out to Iowa Democrats on email, with 16.2 percent of surveyed saying they had been contacted by the Vermonter. That said, Kerry and Gephardt also spammed Iowa, with 11.8% and 11.5% of those surveyed saying those campaigns had been in touch with them via email.

The bottom line is that Dean did not walk away with the Internet organization prize in 2004, contrary to popular belief. It is correct that he won it, but it is entirely incorrect to assume other campaigns were inactive online. Before we estimate what impact online organization had on the 2004 Caucus, we would be wise to jettison the misperception that Dean's loss was also a loss for Internet organizing writ large.

And the Hawkeye state saw a lot of Internet organizing in 2004. Nearly one fifth of all Iowa Democrats surveyed had signed up online as a supporter of one candidate or another. The survey sample admittedly was of active partisans – Democrats who had voted frequently in recent elections. However, considering that Caucus turnout normally peaks at 10% of registered partisans, and that most Iowa party activists are older and less Internet-savvy more generally, 20% of Democrats surveyed is a lot of Iowa Internet activists.

V. Discussion: Some Tentative Conclusions about Online Organization

We now have a clearer understanding of how Dean lost Iowa, given a presumably valuable online organization. It appears as though, rather than having unquestioned superiority online, Dean had serious Internet rivals pressing to surpass him. Though his online organization was stronger than any other candidate in the field, the differential was not large enough to lift him closer to the front of the pack. Caucus victor John Kerry was busily building quite an online organization himself, for instance.

Howard Dean had every reason to howl on that stage in Iowa. Having raised a bumper crop of cash and amassed an online army, he still went down to defeat. But other candidates, including the eventual nominee, had reason to howl, with glee, since their online organizations served them in good stead.

Dean's defeat notwithstanding, online organizational activity seems to matter, even when tested in an old-style retail politics state like Iowa. It may be worth more investigation when considering future models of electoral performance.

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