The Revolution will be Engineered:
An assessment of the present and possible future of Net-based political tools
by Britt Blaser

There's a power grab going on in our Republic, and it isn't pretty.

I'm not talking about the constant struggle in Washington, but the powerful engagement by software experts inspired by the Dean campaign, up to their elbows in the messy process of imagining and designing a new way for political campaigns to engage voters. The Internet design and engineering community is learning how politics work and has glimpsed how it might improve. That knowledge creates an obligation on those who can make a difference. The obligation is to design accessible political choices at every level of the political process. We can only empower broad participation in politics by making participation as convenient as web browsing and Instant Messaging.

What's the problem with politics and how might engineering help?

A Lever Long Enough to Suppress the World

Archimedes famously said that if you gave him a long enough lever and a place to stand, he could lift the world. Well, it works both ways. Using the long lever arm of mass media, a tiny core of politically powerful people controls the rest of the population's choices, economics and future.

Systems design is the study of how to balance inputs into and outputs from a dynamic process so that it optimally serves the needs of the highest possible number of users of the process. From a systems design standpoint, American politics is a disaster:

The Data (*official 2000 election)
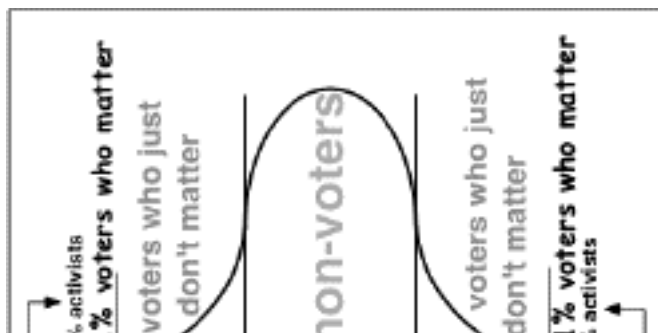

286,196,812 Americans*

184,744,527 non-voters*

100,000,000 voters who don't matter

2,000,000 voters who matter

50,000 political activists

5,000 political power elite

About a third of Americans vote, but most vote so consistently that their votes, needs and opinions are inconsequential. Just a few "swing" voters are the target of politicians' attention and advertising, the only voters who matter. In the 2000 election, Gore received 50.5% of the popular vote, while losing 3 states–41 electoral votes–by a total of *6,611* votes.

There's only a tiny sliver of the population zealous enough to be active in politics, and it even takes a kind of zealotry to get out and vote. I don't have the figures, but do any states have more than 1,000 full time activists? Sure, there are a lot of political hobbyists who will canvass occasionally or show up at a state convention and perform as directed, but by activists I mean those who live for or off of politics and do their party's bidding whenever asked. My working hypothesis is that there are no more than 50,000 active political foot soldiers at any one time, less than.02% of Americans. Even if you think there are double or triple the number, the fraction is still vanishingly small.

In turn, those few activists are manipulated by a tiny political elite which is probably no more than .002% of the population–5,000 politicians, lobbyists, journalists and business leaders according to Joe Trippi. Generally, Americans aren't chatting each other up to get out the vote, but rather responding to the unfolding media messages in the same passive way they might discuss episodes of *Friends* around the water cooler.

It's even worse than it appears. This tiny group of power brokers drives the agenda for a nation that the rest of the world depends upon for its very existence, in a protection-racket kind of way. This is a system that no conscientious systems architect would sign off on, but which most Americans meekly accept as how things have to be.

Paul Boutin pointed out in an enlightened Slate article that attracting new voters is the secret sauce for any winning candidate, and that's what the Dean campaign did well, though no one has the statistics to prove it. Dean's coterie of new activists were an energizing force that establishment Democrats cynically shut down as fast as they could:

> *Recent polls showed Kerry and Bush at a dead heat. But it's not so much a 50-50 split as 25-25—half the voting-age population has failed to show up in recent elections. Bringing in new voters—if you could find a way to do it—would swing an election much more easily than converting the people who already plan to cast their ballots for the other guy.*

Real world evangelism is the part the Dean campaign didn't get right in time to empower its true believers to evangelize ever larger circles of new true believers.

Campaign In A Box I anticipate the emergence of an open standard and set of software tools, a campaign distro, that is available to any campaign at any level. Since all campaigns have the same challenges, but with varying populations, a single toolkit can serve all, just as MS Word can be used to write a book or a memo, or Linux can power a Tivo or Google. This integrated suite will be geared to two kinds of customers, the people running a campaign and the voters they hope to attract. As with all software and web services, the user experience is crucial. Potential candidates and their teams must be able to immediately "get" how the tools can be used and how to set their goals and message. Their potential supporters must be able to immediately "get" how this candidate improves their lot, and why and how to help the candidate serve the voters' collective self-interest.

The 10 Step Campaign Guide, 2004

During the last half of 2003, I spent two years of my life working on the Dean campaign, but I'm not complaining. Few of the several hundred thousand Dean volunteers regret the time and energy invested. We were instrumental in launching beta socialware that worked, not perfectly, but better than expected.

The unheralded secret sauce of the Dean campaign was that, like so many web sites, it asked interested web surfers to *register* as members of the campaign. When this membership meme crossed over into politics-as-web-application, a powerful idea was born and the clear line between who was part of the campaign and who was its target changed forever:

When supporters of a campaign register as members they become insiders

Howard Dean's Campaign Manager, Joe Trippi, was the visionary who saw that the key to growth was to let go of the traditional command and control campaign model and put the campaign in the hands of whoever wanted to work hardest.

Was the Dean campaign a success? Conduct your own thought experiment. Imagine a survey of the 280 political races of national significance in 2004 (235 congressional races, 34 senators and 11 Governors = 5-600 campaigns). Ask the campaign manager for each of those campaigns if s/he'd like to use the socialware tools that Dean had. If the majority of your imaginary respondents say yes, the Dean campaign was a success.

Dean-like Campaign tools you can use today

If you are a thought leader or decision maker for any campaign at any level, you should make sure your online tools are optimized because it's a more basic process than organizing in the real world. With the emergence of the Internet as a measurable force in campaigning, you can now design and maintain your message, your outreach and do it more directly than ever before. That's the good news. The bad news is that you can only control your destiny by letting your constituents control your message.

This is a summary of the online mechanisms that seemed to have worked well for the Dean campaign and ideas for the next generation of tools that seem necessary. For starters, let's review the toolkit you'll want if you're going to conduct a successful campaign in 2004. Rule 1 is to never invent software but to use off-the-shelf solutions wherever possible.

1. Campaign management (Convio.com now, perhaps DeanSpace when available)	Use Convio's tools to process contributions and generate reports: • Web site content server • Team Raising • Email grouping and targeting • Event management • Contribution management • Constituency data
2. Meetup.com	Set up a program for your candidate at meetup.com
3. Campaign Blog	Use off-the-shelf blogging software so your candidate and key staff can speak directly to your constituents and listen to their comments.
4. Campaign Materials	Provide campaign materials for your supporters to print at home.
5. Viral email design	Email is the "killer application" on the Internet. Steal from the best.
6. P2P hierarchal linking	Your constituents already know each other.
7. "Get Local" tools	Help your supporters reach out to each other in the real world.
8. P2P policy engagement	Give your constituents an authentic voice in ~~your~~ *their* campaign.
9. Voter File management	The voter file is the nervous system of the campaign
10. Get Out The Vote	GOTV *is* the campaign.

1a. Convio Campaign Management

This might sound like a pitch for Convio, Inc. of Austin, TX, but it's a pitch for getting your campaign up and running as fast as possible. Convio is the system used successfully by the Dean campaign, so I'm most familiar with it.

Here in the spring of 2004, it's hard to imagine a quicker, easier and more cost effective way to get your campaign up and running than by using the systems at convio.com. Although there are competing systems (e.g., kintera.com and getactive.com), I believe that Convio is at this writing the Google of campaign management systems, and it's unlikely to be eclipsed before the end of 2004.

Here's a depiction of the Convio components:
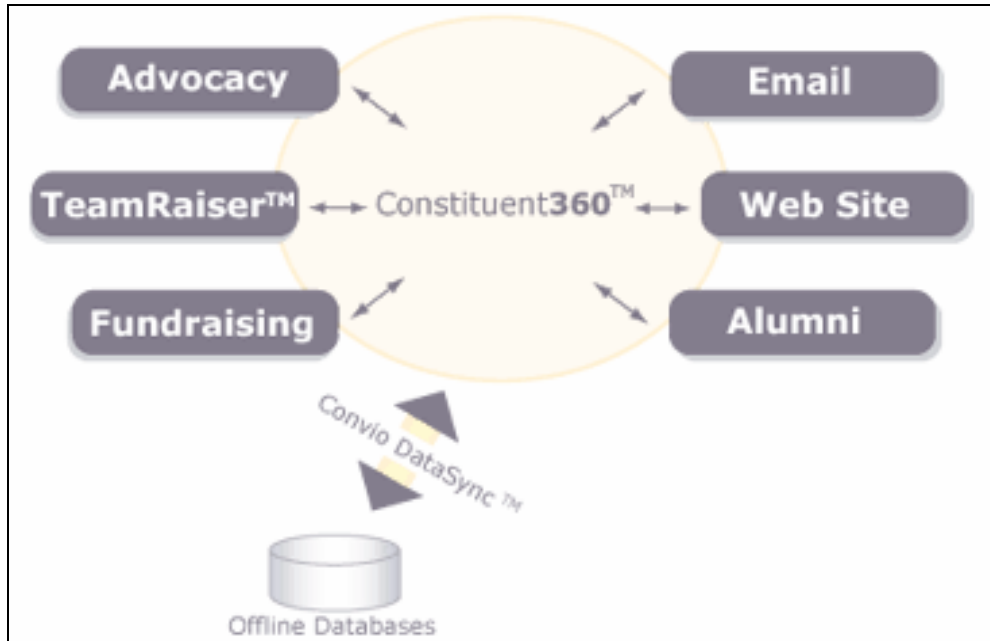
Convio.com Services

Convio is an Application Services Provider, or "ASP". This means that it works like software you run on your computer, but it appears in your web browser. That gives you a world of security and convenience. It means every authorized member of your formal or informal staff can access your campaign tools from anywhere, generate emails to constituents and every other matter that you normally need to do on paper.
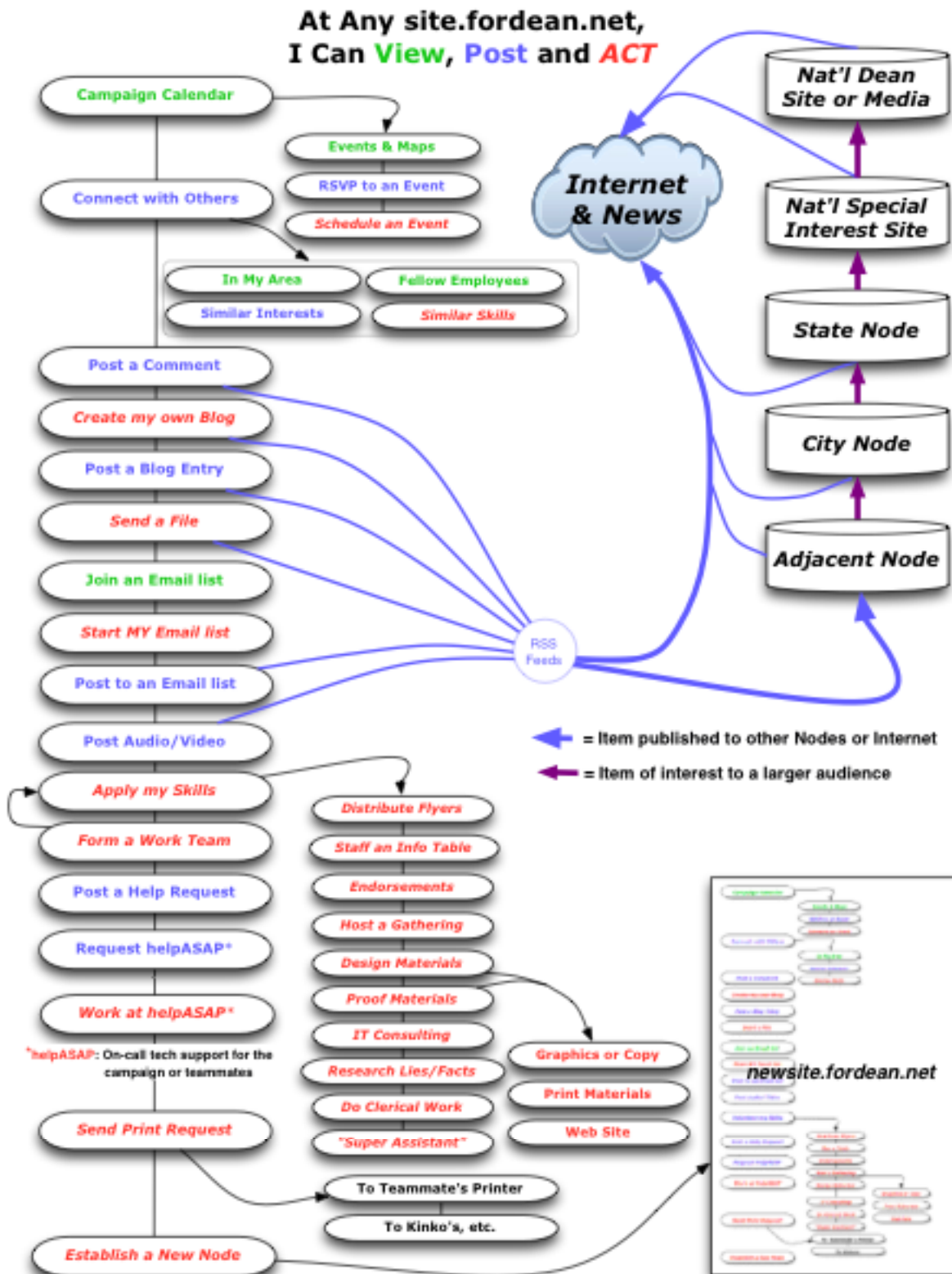
(Convio's *Alumni* module looks extraneous if you're running a political campaign, but there's a great deal that campaigns can learn from any alumni office, which cannot afford to throw away any alumni the way that companies routinely discard customers by ignoring their needs.)

1b. DeanSpace Campaign Management The DeanSpace project (deanspace.org), developed by volunteers, gained a lot of visibility and was widely deployed. DeanSpace is a series of modules that extend the Drupal content management system to function as a political campaign site.

There's a list of Dean sites at *http://deanspace.org/sites*, and an online DeanSpace guide at *http://deanspace.org/development*.

The virtue of DeanSpace is that it's free and supported by a small army of dedicated volunteers. At this writing, at least one campaign, Miles Nelson running for Congress in New Mexico is a DeanSpace site: *http://www.nelsonfornewmexico.com*. However, it is not obvious how to set up and configure a DeanSpace site. If you're going to use it, you'll need a lot of help from one of the DeanSpace volunteers or a technical person who's a fast learner.

Here's a depiction of the DeanSpace system as conceived in the summer of 2003:

At Any site.fordean.net, I Can View, Post and ACT

- Campaign Calendar
  - Events & Maps
  - RSVP to an Event
  - Schedule an Event
- Connect with Others
  - In My Area
  - Similar Interests
  - Fellow Employees
  - Similar Skills
- Post a Comment
- Create my own Blog
- Post a Blog Entry
- Send a File
- Join an Email list
- Start MY Email list
- Post to an Email list
- Post Audio/Video
- Apply my Skills
  - Distribute Flyers
  - Staff an Info Table
  - Endorsements
  - Host a Gathering
  - Design Materials
  - Proof Materials
  - IT Consulting
  - Research Lies/Facts
  - Do Clerical Work
  - "Super Assistant"
  - Graphics or Copy
  - Print Materials
  - Web Site
- Form a Work Team
- Post a Help Request
- Request helpASAP*
- Work at helpASAP*

*helpASAP: On-call tech support for the campaign or teammates

- Send Print Request
  - To Teammate's Printer
  - To Kinko's, etc.
- Establish a New Node

Internet & News

RSS Feeds

Nat'l Dean Site or Media

Nat'l Special Interest Site

State Node

City Node

Adjacent Node

= Item published to other Nodes or Internet

= Item of interest to a larger audience

newsite.fordean.net

2. Meetup The power of Meetup is revealed by an anecdote: The first Meetup that Howard Dean attended was in New York. When he arrived, the waiting line wrapped around the block even though no one knew him well enough to recognize him when he arrived. Governor Dean asked a cop what the commotion was. "It's a meeting to learn about Howard Dean." Was the cop there to keep order? "Nah. I'm here to see Dean."

Here's how your Meetup will look to your constituents:

Zephyr Teachout, Director of Dean's Grassroots effort, told Baseline's Ed Cone that she could imagine the campaign without the official blog, but not without Meetup.

Every Presidential campaign sponsored a Meetup, and your campaign needs one too. Just go to http://www.meetup.com/suggest/topic to set up your monthly Meetups.

3. Campaign Blog The Dean campaign's web log put the campaign on the map, because it's a vibrant community of staff blog entries and constituent responses. Because the comments feature is turned on, anyone can comment. These comments became the community's means for blogging to each other.

You build an effective blog by commenting on what you are experiencing, in your own words, or saying what you want your supporters to do, worded clearly and thoughtfully.

Create your campaign blog using off-the-shelf software or a subscription-based Web service. The cost ranges from free to very low. The Dean campaign uses Moveable Type blog software, available at *http://www.movabletype.org/*. The official Dean blog is not hosted by Convio.

4. Campaign Materials One of Joe Trippi's favorite stories describes a handout they customized for al 50 states. As an old time organizer, Joe was blown away by the realization that a piece of campaign literature could be two things:

> 1] Free
>
> 2] Designed, produced and on the street in 1 day.

But it gets better. Within an hour, someone from Puerto Rico commented on the blog that they too deserved a customized handout. It was ready for download within 5 minutes, a level of responsiveness never before possible. When an expatriate in London chimed in, a 52nd version was put up, earning thanks from an American in Paris.

5. Viral Email Design If you send a compelling email to a dozen friends there's a chance that three of them will forward it to another dozen friends. If the cycle continues, it becomes a viral email. The compounding math makes peer-to-peer email the most powerful tool in politics. It works because each message comes directly from an acquaintance and because it's so easy–I've already entered my friends' contact data into my computer's rolodex. It's every campaign's job to get friends' contact data from supporters and use it in an effective, responsible way. If your use of personal data is not responsible, it's probably not effective.

Most people who vote have access to email including (perhaps especially) grandparents, who love to stay connected to their families. A well-worded email message can be powerful, but it takes skill to do it right. One cardinal rule is that the message is never about money. It must be about an opportunity. Perhaps the opportunity involves an investment by your supporters, but money must never be the main point of the message.

Avoid web-based mail forms. Those are the forms in your web browser that encourage your constituent to enter the email addresses of their friends to receive your message. That seems like a great idea, since it allows the campaign to harvest new email addresses, but the problem is that the message is not from their friend, and they know it. Moreover, your constituents are accustomed to reading and forwarding email using their preferred email client software.

When you want to start a viral email cycle, send a short, urgent message to your known supporters with a link to a web page to take action. Ask your supporters to forward the message to their friends, which they can do without re-typing addresses.

- If your message is compelling, they'll forward it.
- If it's not compelling, why send it?
- If you can't tell if a message is compelling, why be in politics?

6. Peer-to-Peer Hierarchical Linking Here's something you can do better than the Dean campaign. If your campaign catches fire, you will not be able to keep up with all the people who want to talk to you, give advice, get a job or change the world. That's a high class problem but it can degrade your efforts into a nightmare of unmanageable expectations, which is one of the limitations that prevented the Dean campaign from leveraging its passionate supporters into more votes.

If a campaign is willing to listen, *really listen*, to its supporters, it will attract friends of the supporters it engages.

The primary driver of a campaign's success is its responsiveness to supporters.

Any user of the World Wide Web knows that the user experience is everything. With an obsession for the customer experience, Amazon became the world's bookstore first, then a community talking about books, then a purveyor of most durable goods and now has become, literally, an operating environment for the moving of goods and money over the

Internet. During this election cycle, Amazon created a service to allow its customers to "1-Click" a contribution to their preferred Presidential candidate.

To its online supporters, the Dean campaign was essentially a web service. The campaign's unprecedented success started a dialogue about the role of web services in political campaigns.

In web design, there's a lot of attention to the Graphic User Experience (GUI). Obviously you'll want to pay as much attention to design as the Dean campaign did. But campaigns depend also on their Conversational User Interface (CUI). You'll win your campaign if your CUI attracts enough new, vocal supporters who get what they seek from the campaign: an authentic voice in policy direction and the campaign's message.

The Dean campaign hit a wall at about 150,000 active, registered supporters, though four times as many were in its database. (Surprisingly, there were thousands of active supporters who chose not to get involved with the campaign's web site.) How might the campaign have scaled its conversational throughput to a high enough level that it would get the votes it needed?

The solution is to see that there's no clear dividing line between "the campaign" and "the supporters." Every campaign has volunteers working at headquarters and in the field. Are those people inside or outside the campaign? Does it matter?

Crystal Blue Persuasion When someone associated with the campaign is responsive to a supporter, it can be as powerful an involvement as if the supporter had engaged directly with an "official" campaign staffer. Here's the structure needed to build winning associations:

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

It looks like a crystalline structure and, if those associations are updated on the campaign web site as it grows, the participants will see that their involvement is as real as a more formal campaign organization. Indeed, it might seem *more* real because of its dynamic, just-a-click-away representation, like seeing real friends in your contact file. A tool to develop such a self-propagating structure has been developed as a DeanSpace module. Here are the steps to getting your most active supporters to attract and mentor new supporters. It starts when one of your supporters identifies a group of her existing contacts as potential supporters of the campaign:

1. Your supporter saves the selected contact records as a single text file.

2. The contact file is uploaded to the host DeanSpace site.

3. The site emails each contact with a link to their personal, online record.

4. The proposed new supporter follows a sequence they may halt at any time:

    a. Will you share your data with the campaign? If so,

    b. Will you make a contribution of any size? If so,

    c. Will you become a full member of our effort and:

        i.   Tell us your policy preferences

      ii.   Invite your friends to join the campaign

This explicit mentorship model captures the vertical and lateral relationships among the campaign's supporters. Armed with that data, the campaign can empower its members to maintain the kind of tree structure that every organization must have to be viable and to grow as fast as people's appetite to wield real political power.

7. "Get Local" Tools One of the Dean campaign's greatest successes was its ability to inspire activism among people who had no prior interest in the political process. A key to this was the Get Local toolset hosted at its web site a kind of *ad hoc* expression of what Meetup arranges monthly. Supporters were able to find each other in their community, plan events and mutual support, be welcomed to house parties at strangers' homes, wave banners at passers-by and master those staples of retail politics, "flyering" and "tabling" – handing out flyers and sitting with literature at card tables at public events.

DeanSpace sites are also a way to organize locally, since they let your supporters find each other, become members of the campaign and reach out to their social network.

8. P2P Policy Engagement Peer-to-Peer (P2P) is an organizing force powerful enough to connect people on several continents to serve a common purpose. Other factors equal, any campaign that harnesses P2P power will defeat a campaign that does not. When supporters become members–campaign insiders–you need to give them what they want, and what they want is a voice in policy.

This was probably the Dean campaign's greatest failing. Although there were discussion forums and cross-comments on the blog, there was no systematic approach to seeking policy input from the campaign's members. It was a goal but not a priority, and there was a lot of discussion about how to so engage the campaign's members. Nicco Mele, the campaign webmaster, had reserved the domain *opensourcepolicy.org* with the expectation that it might be the right vehicle. Nicco and Mat Gross, chief blogger, and I discussed the structure at some length. I can only describe what I thought was the right solution. Until it's tried, it's impossible to know:

People-Powered Policy Preferences

Every computer program lets you set your preferences for how it operates. Now it's time for our nation to respond to your policy preferences.

When you declare your choices in the Policy Matrix, your policy prefs are combined with those of others who have real ideas on real issues. Every night, the latest Policy Prefs data is transmitted to *your* Campaign.

The following list is alphabetical. Declare your priorities by checking the SIG box to indicate that it's important enough for you to be involved in working to give that policy area more study and weight.

ISSUE	SIG?

Agriculture ☐ SIG

family farms• 1 ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ 10 • corporate farming

Comment on Agriculture

Campaign Financing ☐ SIG

more reform • 1 ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ 10 • less reform

Comment on Campaign Financing

Your Recommendations for Campaign Strategy

Advertising

issues ads only • 1 ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ 10 • attack ads

Comment on Campaign Advertising

Bulk Mail and Phone Banking

volunteers only • 1 ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ 10 • flood em!

Comment on Bulk Mail and Phone Banking

Example of explicit and generalized policy preferences

This is scary stuff. Policy experts don't like the idea of voters like you and me–the great unwashed–actually getting involved with policy. Once the voters make their wishes explicit, the politicians may feel required to listen to the people's will, which is not their notion of leadership. However, once the campaign compiles its members' preferences, it has a database of nuanced opinion that it can use to hold the kind of conversation that the public actually seeks, rather than an inflexible message, which the public avoids. Doc Searls maintains that there's no market for messages, and it's as true for voters as for Tivo owners.

9. Voter File Management A voter file is a contact file summarizing a voter's registration record and which elections were voted in. Voter files are the nervous system of a campaign. The source data are maintained by election officials and are supposed to be reported by counties to the Secretary of State. The data can be obtained at a nominal fee directly from the Secretary of State or enhanced versions can be purchased by companies that correlate voter data with other sources to give a more complete view of the voter's likely behaviors. We can call this an *implicit* view of a voter.

But in 2003, with its accidental transformation of *supporters* into its formal *members*, the Dean campaign introduced the possibility of building an *explicit* forecast of voter behavior. We can start to imagine a movement so sweeping that a large percentage of voters become members of a particular campaign and therefore enter into a kind of contract to vote for their candidate. If you can make the movement large enough, explicit enough, it's possible that you'll know more about the outcome than the pollsters.

But it will take some experience before people get past the disappointments of the Dean campaign, where exuberance and record contributions did not translate into votes.

There are at least two DeanSpace modules to manage voter files, and a number of commercial services.

10. Get Out The Vote (GOTV) GOTV *is* the campaign. If you know who's going to support you and you know where they live, the job is to remind them to get out and vote. This is where the Internet-enabled cascade of online activity may be as powerful as putting a committed supporter in your car and driving together to the polling place.

1. Meetup.com	Potential campaign members meet in the real world and discover their shared interests.
3. Campaign Blog	Campaign members learn what's happening and post comments that become a conversation as immediate as any other.
4. Campaign Materials	Materials printed at home reach more deeply into the community than any centralized distribution plan.
5. Viral email design	One begets three begets nine, if your message deserves it.
6. P2P hierarchal linking	When you know who recruited whom, you can let your campaign's members build your campaign structure for you.
7. "Get Local" tools	Your supporters reach out to each other in the real world.
8. P2P policy engagement	Your constituents hijack your campaign and make it *their* campaign.

GOTV has always been a mechanical process of calling and knocking on doors–the people who physically bring others to a caucus, a primary or a polling place are often called "draggers." They have only an implicit understanding with their passenger, certainly not a meaningful meeting of the minds–there's no guarantee what their rider's vote will be. But when a community forms around a compelling candidate, they create explicit, published relationships and a mesh of interlocking expectations that can strengthen over time into tangible commitments and votes the campaign can count on.

The means to compile and document our mutual promises will be developed as they become effective as a GOTV function. Zephyr Teachout, Dean's Director of Grassroots outreach said it best: "The campaign's out there!"

The 2006-08 Vision

The pressure to build a 2004 Campaign In A Box is urgent and short term, a patching together of beta tools to do the best we can during this election cycle. The thrill of this dramatic transition is in glimpsing vistas never imagined; the frustration is knowing we could do so much more. A comprehensive vision for the future of populist politics requires a comprehensive vision and long term effort.

The Internet, our Great Disruptor, is woven more tightly into our choices each year. In the same way that it disintermediates bookstores and recording labels, it threatens the historic franchise of political parties and politicians and media voices accustomed to having their way with power and money, telling the rest of us how things are and how they

must be. Those people will not go away quietly but they can't help being hostages to the choices made by the voters and to those best equipped to communicate with the voters.

The tools for structural political evolution will, like blogging and Google and RSS, become a constant part of our infrastructure, not the intermittent activities of campaigning and voting.

Let's imagine the attributes of a culture equipped to govern based on its members' needs, rather than the model we've inherited from monarchy, based on the "divine right of thugs," as John Perry Barlow called it.

Our cultural landscape is changing even as our political mechanisms evolve: Blogs alone curtailed Trent Lott's career. A fundamental change in politics will be the evolution of the evidence on which we base our political choices. Political reporting increasingly describes the nature of the reporting itself, but innuendo and vagueness is still the norm. This is likely to change.

Evidence-based reporting Some cultures require their citizens to reveal their sources linguistically:

> "*New Scientist* Magazine: Imagine how different politics would be if debates were conducted in Tariana, an Amazonian language in which it is a grammatical error to report something without saying how you found it out."

> Alexandra Aikhenvald: "In some languages, including Tariana, you always have to put a little suffix onto your verb saying how you know something - we call it 'evidentiality'. I would have to say: 'I talked to Adrian, non-visual,' if we had talked on the phone. And if my son told someone else, he would say: 'She talked to Adrian, visual, reported.' In that language, if you don't say how you know things, they think you are a liar."

> "This is a very nice and useful tool. Imagine if, in the argument about weapons of mass destruction, people had had to say how they knew about whatever they said. That would have saved us quite a lot of breath."

How could the nature of reporting be affected by a development effort aimed at political tools? It could because the Internet allows us to imagine such detailed attribution. I suggest that an RSS standard could help us compare the assertions in article A to those in article B and to any other RSS feeds in which, for example, the protagonist in articles A & B is also tagged as a significant actor. Any editor or reviewer could add assertion tags to a body of text, even if the author is disinclined to annotate them.

It would take a while, but some day the lack of attribution may be an impediment for serious consideration. An aid to evidentiality might be specialized RSS feeds that characterize the sources and kinds of assertions contained in an article, a service I call an Assertion Processor.

Voter Policy Profiles and Legislative Accountability The Policy Preferences profile described in step 8 above could be as useful for governance as for building consensus behind a candidate. Politicians take advantage of the disinterest most people feel in staying on top of their representatives. While the old saying is that we get the government we deserve, one can't escape the sense that politicians revel in a system that's impenetrable to any but the most zealous activist. Like the rest of these recommendations, I rely on the universal virtue of transparency for progress.

Suppose I have been inspired to assert my policy preferences by selecting my position on, for example, Campaign Financing:

If I declare my preference here and on a dozen other issues, I've built a profile of my personal preferences. That's the quantitative side of my declaration, but it shouldn't stop there. I'm also invited to comment on my position and I'm surprisingly likely to do so, perhaps because we've become so accustomed to typing our thoughts into emails and instant messages. Or perhaps it's not so surprising, from an educated populace tired of reading such shallow articles in the press. Naturally, a community web site eliciting comments from its participants would learn to build a web log for its respondents, and allow its participants to comment on each others entries as they're transformed into blog posts.

The profile shouldn't stop there. The **SIG** checkbox invites the respondent to join a new or existing Special Interest Group around this policy area. It means little unless the web site has a means to put its respondents in touch with each other, which is a fine-grained expression of the proven meetup model: similarly inclined people should have the means to convene in their real and virtual worlds and discover their own ways to express their political power.

While these are simply software tools to enhance collaboration, acquaintance and expression, they are also gateways into a larger world of political power. Like the skeletal HyperText Transport Protocol compounding its possibilities into a Mandelbrotian web of diversity, complexity and brilliance, so should we expect political expression to thrive in the virtual nutrients of preferences, comments, gatherings and collaborative expression.

If I and millions like me see that our preferences are expressed in combination, we no longer feel powerless. Unlike zealots, we probably don't mind being single voices among many, because most people don't seek dominance, simply parity.

If enough voters express their policy profiles, any of us can compare our profile against a meaningful sample of the populace, but it goes deeper than that, perhaps to the sinews of the body politic.

Every law expresses a policy profile, as does a proposed law or proposed amendment. A politician's voting record expresses a policy profile, as does a political party. Once we compile and aggregate policy profiles, we can compare them, and begin to understand the relationship of a politician's expressed preferences compared to those of the constituents. That's where the going might get ugly for self-satisfied manipulators of power in the absence of a clear mandate.

The Case for Hope

The Age of Enlightenment rested on a flimsier foundation of caffeine, conversation and small printing presses. We should have high hopes for an outpouring of good sense and political power among a better educated population, leveraging a collaborative web undreamt of by even Vannevar Bush, much less Samuel Johnson.