

## Politics 2.0 Pros and Cons and Ethics of Political Campaigning on the Internet

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No discussion of this topic can be without reference to the recent US election and the demands of a change from cyber-candidate to cyber- president.

*President Obama created a friendly beast that roared for him... now he has to feed the hungry cyber-masses with the impression of involvement.*

*Taming the cyber-beast Matt Frei The Guardian Weekly 30 January 2009*

Democracy takes as many different forms as there are democratic countries. Citizens of a representative democracy such as the United States delegate decisions to elected representatives. In a direct democracy, citizens, without the intermediary of elected or appointed officials, participate in making public decisions. One thing remains constant, however: a respect for all citizens' right to participate in decisions about how they are governed.

Citizens in a democracy have not only rights, but also the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.

The US election was a watershed in interactive and social marketing but despite the success in raising campaign funds it did not significantly increase voter participation, the discharge by eligible citizens of their right to vote.

	Pop'n	Voters	
<b>2008*</b>	<b>231,229,580</b>	<b>132,618,580*</b>	<b>56.8%</b>
<b>2004</b>	<b>221,256,931</b>	<b>122,294,978</b>	<b>55.3</b>

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html>

On the other hand the cyber-candidate Barack Obama had a huge success in raising money, mainly by turning initial small donors into repeat givers and persuading the 52.9% of 69,456,897 Americans who voted to support him at a cost of USD 7.39 per vote.

["Financial Summary Report Search Results".](http://query.nictusa.com/cgi-bin/cancomsrs/?_08+00+PR) fec.gov. [http://query.nictusa.com/cgi-bin/cancomsrs/?\\_08+00+PR](http://query.nictusa.com/cgi-bin/cancomsrs/?_08+00+PR). Retrieved on 2008-12-22.

With his money, Obama almost tripled McCain's advertising expenditures as Election Day drew near: he more than doubled McCain's spend on staff salaries, opening the traditional field offices and building a get-out-the-vote operation.

But the campaign also asked supporters to give more than just their time and money. Users of Facebook and MySpace were asked to donate their "statuses". Causes, a Facebook and MySpace application, uses a member's "status" to promote viral donations of time and money and recruitment of supporters for charities and nonprofits. In this campaign users who donated their "status" allowed it to be changed to a link for the delivery of a message to

promote an issue in the election or the election itself. Third party endorsement at the click of a mouse!

The campaign also saw the spread to the Internet of the anonymous and semi-anonymous smear campaigns traditionally done with fliers and push calling. YouTube made it possible for us globally to share the moment when the Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin came face to face with her impersonator and nemesis Tina Fey. A blurring of the boundary between political reality and comic fantasy it is almost impossible to remember where the one ends and the other begins. Another video clip credited with playing a role in sparking a "media blow-up" was the one raising the issue of the number of houses owned by John McCain.

Despite this the principal role the internet played in the cyber-candidate campaign was in recruiting and mobilizing foot soldiers to be active in promoting the candidate: not just to endorse the candidate, not just to donate money, but to be activists. Now the challenge for the winning cyber-candidate is different, to repeat the words quoted above it is *to feed the hungry cyber-masses with the impression of involvement*.

That is the thing about voters - ask them for their opinions and they are likely to give them. It is too early to judge the cyber-president but perhaps there's a lesson here from my home country about feeding the hungry cyber-masses.

In the United Kingdom there is a long tradition of delivering petitions to the Prime Minister by post or direct to the door of Number 10 by hand. Now it is possible to create and sign petitions on any issue on the prime minister's own website, giving the opportunity to reach a potentially wider audience and to deliver the e-petition directly to Downing Street.

Currently the five most popular open petitions are

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to...

- [Instruct water companies to return to charging churches as charities rather than as business premises.](#) (40973 signatures)
- [Protect the RNLI from paying licence fees for using Maritime radio frequencies.](#) (26632 signatures)
- [Remove the unfair and unjust retrospective Vehicle Excise Duty levy \(back to 2001 year vehicles\) as announced in the Budget on 12/3/08](#) (25775 signatures)
- [Stop ISP's from breaching customers privacy via advertising technologies.](#) (20369 signatures)
- [Save Bletchley Park](#) (18422 signatures)

Few signatures perhaps in a country with 45 million electors. But an e-petition against National road-pricing did attract 1.8 million signatures. This was how the then Prime Minister responded.

22 February 2007

According to Downing Street sources, the Prime Minister (Tony Blair) will not "capitulate" to demands for the scheme to be scrapped.

16 October 2007

The (Gordon Brown) Government has bowed to the groundswell of opposition which saw 1.8 million people back a Downing Street petition calling for the proposals to be ditched.

“If 1.8 million people can be bothered to go onto the Downing Street website calling for a policy to be scrapped, it is a brave – perhaps rash – politician who ignores them”.

Rash or not, despite bowing to a groundswell of opposition to a national road pricing scheme the government is now seeking to introduce it piecemeal, not always with success.

10 December 2008

Today the people of Greater Manchester delivered their verdict on proposals to introduce a congestion charge in their city. The result was an overwhelming "NO" to the road pricing scheme in all ten council areas, with a clear majority of the population voting.

What lessons can we draw from this? Is the experience of a country with internet penetration of 72.3% relevant to Bulgaria with 55.1% in which voting is also not compulsory?

<http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm>

Perhaps the simple lesson is this: political candidates in representative democracies give the impression of listening most before elections, and the noise that can be created around new communication technologies can serve their purpose well. But in office it is just as easy to turn a deaf ear to cyberspace as it is to ignore the loud media campaign, the vocal street protest or the e-petition with a million signatures. Until, that is, the next election.

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