

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (2000) "Fighting for the online vote," The Irish Times 21 August, 12

Fighting for the online vote

Within minutes of Al Gore's announcement of Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate in November's US presidential election, the story had topped major news websites around the world. Within hours, his choice was being debated in hundreds of online discussion groups.

The Internet has changed forever the fabric of US election campaigns, although it remains an open question whether the technology can usher in a new political culture.

The Gore and Bush sites are being used by strategists to respond rapidly to opponents' spins and to reach out to potential supporters. Al Gore's site features a digital city hall-type exchange in which a Virtu-Al responds to a sanitised selection of readers' questions.

George W prefers a more folksy approach, with a daily trivia question along the lines of: "Where did George W Bush and his future wife Laura Welsh go on their first date together in 1977?" No need for a postcard for these answers - and prizes include a George W Bush coffee mug.

Politicians are particularly interested in the Internet because of the demographics of users. The "digital divide" in America means that users are more wealthy than average. In major cities, more than 60 per cent of households with incomes more than \$75,000 have an Net connection, compared to only 15 per cent of households with incomes less than \$25,000.

One of the great hopes for the Internet is that the technology will encourage political participation, especially among the 18-34 age range, which has very low voting rates. More than 40 per cent of this age group do not use traditional news outlets and many believe that a technology popular with young people can be used to encourage voting and revitalise the political culture.

The Internet made history in March when Arizona became the first state to make online balloting available for the Democratic Party's presidential primary. Al Gore won this first binding online election. Of the 60,000 Democrats given passwords to vote online, more than 35,000 used the Internet to cast their vote, with the turnout triple that of Arizona's previous primary.

Election.com, the company that developed the software for the Arizona ballot, is also organising the world's first national online voting - a voluntary and unofficial election by US students a week before the presidential election day on November 7th. The idea is that the "You-the-vote" project will encourage students to become future voters and inspire their parents to vote on election day.

However, concerns about online voting are slowing its development. The California Internet Voting Task Force issued a report earlier this year which outlined a number of security problems to be worked out and recommended that Internet voting be phased in very slowly, with an initial phase of Internet voting taking place alongside paper-ballot voting in established polling places.

Major concerns with Internet voting are privacy, voter authentication and ballot integrity - making sure that the vote really is cast by the person it is registered to, and that it has not been tampered with. Aside from the technical challenges of online voting, there remains the social issue of the digital divide: will Internet voting increase the political participation of the most elite members of society and lead to further alienation of the socially excluded?

The digital divide itself is an election issue. George W Bush has promised to create an Access to Telecommuting Fund, spending \$20 million to enable Americans with disabilities to buy computers and communications equipment. He will also ask Congress to make computers and Internet access a tax-free benefit.

Al Gore has called for the creation of a new global information infrastructure to expand access to basic phone service and communications and improve delivery of education and health care. His website claims that "Al Gore is working toward a 21st Century where a child can reach across a computer keyboard and read any book ever written, see any painting ever painted, and hear any symphony ever composed".

He will have to wait and see if his vision is realised.

Related links:

Official Al Gore site: www.algore2000.com (*not available anymore*)

Official George Bush site: www.georgewbush.com (*not available anymore*)

ABC News: www.abcnews.com

CNN News: www.cnn.com

Youth-e-vote: www.youthevote.net (*not available anymore*)

California Internet Voting Task Force: www.ss.ca.gov/executive/ivote