

# Foreword

Electronic democracy was not at the center of attention in Washington, or even on the periphery, until the end of 2000.

True, some candidates looked over their shoulders at Jesse Ventura and wondered whether his election was an Internet-enabled glitch or an Internet-powered glimpse of their futures. But most senior politicians seemed to be aware of the Net less as a tool for incumbents, challengers, and citizens and more as a target for anti-porn laws.

Most elected officials in Washington were delegating e-mail to staff assistants, and those were the capitol's digerati: others who would never let their office telephones ring unanswered never replied at all to constituent e-mail. The Internet, many argued, was nothing more than the CB Radio of the 1990s.

Meanwhile, political consultants were holding conferences through the late 1990s trying to puzzle through the new medium—and learn how to control it. And grassroots organizers were starting to learn the levers of electronic democracy, leverage that was put to effective use most frequently by challengers with limited resources.

Third parties embraced the Net. The Libertarians were so voluble online during the 1996 campaign that media site Webmasters began trading tips on how to deal with the flood of third-party political messages. Then came Jesse Ventura, whose online third-party campaign attracted wide interest—especially after he won.

But it was Florida and the 2000 vote that changed everything. Voters and candidates alike learned how creaky the paper and machine-age tools of democracy really are, how blunt their instruments have become, and approximate the results of what we had believed were simple tallies of votes.

From coast to coast came the call for solutions, remedies more often than not based in electronic democracy. To most it all seemed so new, mysterious, and unknown. But electronic democracy, although still new, has a history. And while much is still unknown, there is much that is already established. Even electronic voting is

emerging from an early conceptual stage, with early documented strengths and weaknesses.

The first broad acceptance of the World Wide Web and its unlocking of a popular Internet in the mid '90s, the first digital campaigns of 1996 and 1998 were showing the way, marking milestones in politics and media, starting to map the digital political landscape and compiling directories of useful information in sites from [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) and the Starr Report to THOMAS and EDGAR. Political party and media sites alone proved an invaluable resource.

Rather than the CB Radio of the '90s, the Net turned out to be the most powerful research and information tool ever invented. The riches of the world's libraries and the sum total of human learning, or as close as we can come now, are at the fingertips of anyone in the world. And with PCs now costing as little as TVs, and Net access cheaper than cable TV, a majority of Americans have been able to log on, whether from home, school, office, or public library. They may or may not be part of the information economy, but they do have access to a wealth of information on a scale unimaginable even ten years ago.

That means they can register to vote online, sign petitions online, organize online, and vote online—at least in federal and state tests conducted around the country. And they can and do flood sites from AOL to CNN looking for information, especially during debates and on election night. In 1996, 1998, and again in 2000, predictions of traffic to political sites were usually too low when tens of millions of voters logged on to learn the winners and losers and to access political information.

But with information comes disinformation, and the deliberate spread of false information was brought to the surface during the fighting in Kosovo, with dueling dispatches from NATO and Serb Web sites. A short time later it surfaced in political sites, more satire than malice, but Graeme Browning details what could become the dark side of cyberpolitics.

And there are the notable digital myths, such as Bill 602P, an Internet-rumored piece of legislation that would require a five-cent fee for every e-mail message. This and similar rumors demonstrate again and again that on the Net, no one knows you're *\*not\** a dog—or not a law.

And while not even the most expert Web wonks know what really could elect the first cyberpresident, there are early indications of what

can work and what cannot—or at least what did work in the first few Internet campaigns and what did not.

We also know the Internet played a critical role in Florida in the late hours of election night 2000: Vice President Gore, projected by all of the television networks as the night's loser, was seconds away from his concession address, when an aide logged on to the Florida state election site and discovered the networks were at least premature. So instead of conceding on election night, the vice president stepped back, voters watched as the recount of a statistical tie stretched into days and then weeks.

Electronic democracy may be the answer that many now seek, or at least part of the answer. Florida, California, and other states are aggressively pursuing digital solutions. But to understand the foundations of what we are building, to get behind the headlines and breaking news stories, it is essential to understand the foundations and the brief but intense history in *Electronic Democracy*.

Adam Clayton Powell, III  
Vice President, Technology and Programs  
The Freedom Forum