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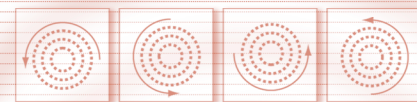
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NONPARTISAN POLITICAL WEB SITES:  
BEST PRACTICES PRIMER

A handbook for individuals and small organizations  
publishing political information online

Published in conjunction with the Pioneers in Online Politics Project



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL MANAGEMENT

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  

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WASHINGTON DC

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## Preface

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We are pleased to publish *Nonpartisan Political Web Sites: Best Practices Primer*, a primer for individuals and small organizations that wish to publish political information online. This booklet was produced by the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet ([www.ipdi.org](http://www.ipdi.org)) in The Graduate School of Political Management at The George Washington University.

The mission of the Institute is to foster the political use of the Internet in ways conducive to democratic ideals. Since its founding in 1998 (as the Democracy Online Project), the Institute has used its publications and conferences to promote best online practices for candidates, activists and political professionals.

This primer is our first effort to address the civic activists who operate nonpartisan political Web sites. Hundreds of these sites were online during the 2000 campaign to promote voter education and involvement, and 2004 is little different. Despite the closing of several highly visible political Web sites after the 2000 election, we believe the Internet remains a boon to those who wish to pursue such goals. The goal of this primer is to help civic activists use the Internet to engage citizens in politics, particularly at the local level.

Local activists and their organizations have built Web sites such as:

- OnTheIssues.org ([www.ontheissues.org](http://www.ontheissues.org)), which provides national election information
- Rough & Tumble ([www.rtumble.com](http://www.rtumble.com)), a daily rundown of California politics and public policy
- EasyVoter ([www.easyvoter.org](http://www.easyvoter.org)), a how-to guide for marginal or new voters in California
- The Web site for The North Carolina Center for Voter Education ([www.ncvoterred.com](http://www.ncvoterred.com)), dedicated to improving North Carolina's election system
- DCWatch ([www.dcwatch.com](http://www.dcwatch.com)), a political magazine and resource for civic activists in the District of Columbia,
- The Web site for The League of Women Voters of New Jersey ([www.lwvnj.org](http://www.lwvnj.org)), which offers a state elections guide
- E-democracy ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)), dedicated to improving online democracy and governance and focused on Minnesota politics.
- X-Pac ([www.x-pac.org](http://www.x-pac.org)), focused on local civic activists and politics in Oregon
- And many more.

This primer is intended to address political information online, not the general task of building a Web site. It is also focused on Web sites that attempt to be nonpartisan, which means they do not support candidates or parties, and treat each party and candidate equally and fairly.

We welcome any comments about this work at [ipdi@ipdi.org](mailto:ipdi@ipdi.org).



## Acknowledgements

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This primer would not be possible without the generosity of many Web site organizers who agreed to be interviewed and provided documentation and advice. Many of these activists maintain Web sites or work for civic organizations for little compensation.

One section of this primer borrows from “How to Make an Online Voter Guide,” published by the California Voter Foundation and used here with permission. The California Voter Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes the responsible use of technology to improve the democratic process. We thank foundation president Kim Alexander and executive director Saskia Mills for preparing the voter guide and discussing it with us.

The primer also borrows from *Online Campaigning 2002: A Primer*, written by Michael Cornfield and others and published by the Institute.

This is part of the Pioneers in Online Politics project, funded by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York ([www.carnegie.org](http://www.carnegie.org)). The main report, *Pioneers in Online Politics*, is available from the Institute and is a useful overview for civic activists online.

Justin Germany provided research assistance and a careful reading of the primer. Stephanie Craig also provided research assistance. Julie Barko, Michael Cornfield, Carol Darr, Kathy Goldschmidt, Jack I. Powers, Jonah Seiger and William F. Trezevant read this primer and offered comments.

This primer was written by Joseph Graf, project director at the Institute. The Institute director is Carol Darr and the principle investigator is F. Christopher Arterton, dean of The Graduate School of Political Management.

Graphic design was created by Kristen Ratzel, <http://www.kristenratzel.com>.



## INSTITUTE FOR POLITICS DEMOCRACY & THE INTERNET

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The Institute was founded in October 1998 as the Democracy Online Project at The Graduate School of Political Management of The George Washington University.

Funded by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the mission of the Institute is to promote the development of U.S. online politics in a manner which upholds democratic values. The Institute has served as a base for research on online politics and has helped to devise and promote standards of practice for online campaigning.

Much of the Institute's work would be useful to organizations publishing political information online. Some of the most recent publications available on our Web site include:

- *Pioneers in Online Politics: Nonpartisan Political Web Sites in the 2000 Campaign*, by Joseph Graf
- *The Political Consultants' Online Fundraising Primer*, edited by Julie Barko and Kevin Wells
- *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign*, by Joseph Graf and Carol Darr
- *The Net and the Nomination*, by Michael Cornfield and Jonah Seiger
- *Online Campaigning 2002: A Primer*, by Michael Cornfield
- *Privacy, Security & Trust on the Political Web: Factors that Influence the Willingness of Internet Users to Provide Sensitive Personal Information to Political Web Sites*, by Jonah Seiger
- *Untuned Keyboards: Online Campaigners, Citizens, and Portals in the 2002 Elections*, by Michael Cornfield and Lee Rainie
- *The Virtual Trail: Political Journalism on the Internet*, by Albert L. May

Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet  
805 21st St., NW, Suite 401  
Washington, D.C. 20052  
T (202) 994-6000 – toll free (800) 367-4776  
F (202) 994-6006  
www.ipdi.org



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## Introduction

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Nonpartisan political Web sites have a mixed track record. A variety of interesting and useful sites were launched for the 2000 election, and innovators broke new ground in how political information could be presented online. Unfortunately, several of the most prominent commercial Web sites closed after the election, costing their investors millions of dollars. Nonpartisan political Web sites generally were unsuccessful as commercial businesses and did a poor job in attracting users.

Nonetheless, we remain hopeful about the potential of these sites to inform the public and engage people in civic life. Web sites have unique advantages.

- They can inform citizens on issues that do not attract much media attention, such as ballot measures or local issues.
- They are available when users want them. They are particularly helpful to voters who decide late in the campaign, when printed voter guides have been discarded.
- They are easily updated, cheap to distribute and can include much greater detail than printed materials.
- They offer opportunities for grassroots organizing that can connect local political organizers to local citizens and give those citizens a chance to interact with each other.

The online political community is enormous and growing. Every viable candidate is online, and some are dedicating tremendous resources to their online presence. Web sites for members of Congress and national candidates receive significant user traffic. In addition, political discussion groups and Web logs are receiving greater attention.<sup>1</sup>

But there are trends that are even more encouraging for civic activists. More and more people say they are getting political information online, and they complain they are not getting enough. They trust nonpartisan Web sites more than they trust campaign Web sites, and about as much as they trust media Web sites. Users are becoming more adept at using the Internet and more likely to have fast broadband access, which increases the amount of time users spend online and the number of activities they engage in.<sup>2</sup>

In short, we believe there are great opportunities for effective civic action on the Internet through nonpartisan political Web sites. We think individuals or organizations can get online at a reasonable cost and make a difference in politics, particularly at the local level.

Our goal is to make this process easier. We plan to point out some of the pitfalls site organizers have encountered and share some of their advice.





This booklet will address plainning, proposed content and how to display it. We will then discuss how to promote your Web site and some legal issues. Finally, we will propose a set of Best Practices for nonpartisan political Web sites.

These guidelines follow the example of the Best Practices for online political campaigns proposed by the *Institute in Online Campaigning 2002: A Primer*. The Best Practices guidelines encourage campaigns to produce Web sites that are accessible, transparent in their sponsorship, respectful of users' privacy and conducive to fair, issue-oriented political debate. Our goal is to show candidates the intersection of smart politics and good civic practices.

We encourage the same guidelines for nonpartisan political Web sites, which will protect their credibility, protect the rights of their users and promote a fruitful exchange of information and ideas.

The Best Practices guidelines for nonpartisan political Web sites are:

1. Provide nonpartisan information
2. Do not charge fees for users
3. Make the site accessible to everyone
4. Be open and transparent
5. Develop, post and live by a privacy policy

These guidelines are fully outlined at the end of the primer.

## **Nonpartisan Web Sites since 2000**

In the run-up to the 2000 election there was great excitement about the potential for the Internet to inform and motivate voters. Nonpartisan political Web sites proliferated. These Web sites broke new ground in a variety of ways, from posting video of political candidates (Freedom Channel) to hosting online political discussion (DebateAmerica) and hosting an ongoing debate between the candidates (Web White & Blue).<sup>3</sup> Their common goal was to foster political education, discussion and civic engagement.

After the 2000 election many of these sites re-tooled or shut down completely. Most of the commercial ventures into nonpartisan politics closed, and the collapse of these ventures garnered a great deal of media attention.

However, nearly every Web site that arose from an established nonprofit organization returned in 2004 in some form or another, such as DNet ([www.Congress.org](http://www.Congress.org)) and Vote Smart ([www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)).<sup>4</sup> A variety of nonpartisan political Web sites with small organizations and small groups of dedicated organizers will also return, such as Issues2000 (renamed as OnTheIssues at



[www.ontheissues.org](http://www.ontheissues.org)), the California Voter Foundation ([www.calvoter.com](http://www.calvoter.com)) and e.thePeople ([www.e-thepeople.org](http://www.e-thepeople.org)). Worthwhile state and local nonpartisan Web sites are operating in California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon and elsewhere.

The audiences for these sites generally remain small. Major media outlets had millions of users in the fall of 2000, but nonpartisan political Web sites had only a fraction of that. While nonpartisan Web sites should not be assessed only by their ratings, they must do better at attracting an audience.

A lot of national political information has moved to large portals, and this information is now more concentrated within a few commercial and nonprofit Web sites. In particular, Capitol Advantage, a commercial business, has been successful in widely distributing its political content through a variety of popular sites, such as news media sites ([www.NYTimes.com](http://www.NYTimes.com) and [www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)) and large portals (AOL and Yahoo!). Capitol Advantage has a partnership with the League of Women Voters, which helps provide election content for the site ([www.Congress.org](http://www.Congress.org)). While there remain many other valuable nonpartisan political Web sites, the Capitol Advantage content attracts enormous Internet traffic.

Other sites are seeking to carve out a niche online by providing unique information or services. We provide numerous examples throughout the text.

Nonpartisan political Web sites are an important effort toward fostering a good democracy, and they could play an important role in the future. The goal of these sites should be to inform and engage voters in an era of declining political participation. In particular, there remains a lack of information about state and local politics online, and local activists can fill this void within a reasonable budget. In an age of instant online information about stock markets, sports and news, citizens should be able to find online information they need about political issues, candidates and elections.



# Thinking about and designing your site

Building a nonpartisan political Web site should not be a daunting task, but it requires a clear plan. We recommend *user-centered development principles* that suggest five steps to developing a Web site (outlined briefly in the box at right). In general, these guidelines suggest that, above all, the site is built with the user in mind and in accordance with regular feedback from users. Under these guidelines, a Web site is never really “completed,” but always in the process of reassessment and reconsideration. Listen to your users and adjust your site to suit their needs.

## Develop goals for your Web site

What are the goals of your site? The best Web sites are those with clear goals and a clear vision of their audience. Draft a short statement defining your audience, and refer back to it frequently. If you intend your site to be helpful for disenfranchised voters in Chicago, then include polling places, bus routes and the names of organizations that drive people to the polls. If your site is dedicated to political insiders, then how to get to the polls is less important. Having a clear vision of your goals and audience will dictate the content and design.

Many Web site organizers cannot answer the simple question “What is my goal?” Define your goal, then remain true to it.

Don’t build a political Web site in isolation from your organization. Use the Web site to further the goals you have already established, and to fill the needs of the audience members you already have (as well as attracting more). If your organization already has a purpose, use the site to reflect and enhance that purpose.

There are several important things to keep in mind. Try to find a niche. For example, there are sites that already provide basic information about state and local candidates ([www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org) or [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)), so if you wish to do that you may struggle to find viewers. More importantly, you will be duplicating efforts already underway. We recommend site organizers:

- Think local. Local politics is an underserved niche.
- Stay focused on your audience. Keep in mind what they need and provide that.

### User centered development principles

1. Draft a clear vision of who your site will serve and what you want to do. If you can clearly describe your users and predict their needs, you can cater to them.
2. Consult with your stakeholders, which in most cases will be users, campaigns and local officials. Talk to as many as possible.
3. Plan your site with these comments in mind.
4. Build the site.
5. Evaluate and update. Your site should be under constant reassessment and renewal. Solicit feedback and act on it.

*Don’t build a political Web site in isolation from your organization. Use the Web site to further the goals you have already established*



## Design

We outline three design approaches to a political Web site, and we do this primarily to help sort out an overall point of view and to help you stay on track. Most nonpartisan political Web sites are a hybrid of the three approaches.<sup>5</sup>

### OnTheIssues

([www.ontheissues.org](http://www.ontheissues.org)) is an information gateway that links to resources in national politics.

### Democracy in Action

([www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html)) is the work of just one person. It, too, is an information gateway with links to everything from the news media to how an inauguration is conducted.

News collectives include sites such as Rough & Tumble ([www.rtumble.com](http://www.rtumble.com)), Political News Today ([www.politicalnewstoday.com](http://www.politicalnewstoday.com)) or Political News Daily ([www.politicalnewsdaily.com](http://www.politicalnewsdaily.com)).

The first is an **information gateway or clearinghouse**, which organizes information into categories, and provides documentation and links to outside sources of information. Your emphasis here is on editing, annotating and organizing, rather than original content. Generating original content is difficult and expensive. OntheIssues.org ([www.ontheissues.org](http://www.ontheissues.org)) and Democracy in Action ([www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html)) are information gateways, with links to office holders, issue positions and campaigns.

The second approach is a **news collective**, which provides summaries of news items and links to news. This kind of Web site organizes and presents news on the Web. Several nonpartisan Web sites incorporate links to media and current news stories. The need to constantly update and check links means this design requires a daily commitment to maintain the site.

The third form is an **online community**, which focuses on discussion forums, mailing lists and community generated content. Online communities foster discussion as the primary means to inform and motivate citizens. While there are several sites that are dedicated to online discussion the discussion forums are often only part of larger sites with a more broad approach.

The most likely model for a nonpartisan political site is a combination of the information gateway or clearinghouse. The news collective and the online community designs require greater commitment to regularly update content and links. A news collective is more focused on news from the mass media, not generalized political information, and political news portals have already carved out a niche as news collectives. We will suggest later that an online community can be impractical and difficult to manage.

This does not preclude you from using elements from other models, but it is offered as a means to keep you focused in designing your site.



After you choose your audience and format, you can specify your goals. In most cases those goals will be to:

- Post relevant political information
- Draw users to your site
- Engage your users
- Offer means for civic involvement

## Funding your Web site

One longtime Web organizer estimated that a project can be up and running for \$10,000 to \$25,000, but that is a barebones estimate.

Others say startup costs should be at least \$50,000, especially if you attempt to promote the site. Several Web sites that recorded tens of thousands of unique users operated for less during the 2000 election, and in some cases those costs were mostly carried by the site organizer and a small group of supporters. Generally speaking, operating a Web site for less than \$25,000 requires in-kind donations of expertise or technical capability (such as server space, which may be provided by an organization's current Web site or donated by another organization). Keep in mind too that as traffic increases your costs will typically increase.

Unfortunately, the feeling among many organizers of nonpartisan political Web sites is that large foundations are much less interested in funding these efforts than they were in 2000. Begin looking for foundation support first with state and local foundations. National foundations are less likely to fund and may require more oversight. Corporate funding is still available. Both foundation and corporate funding require a lead time (perhaps as long as six months), so these sources are not available for organizations seeking to raise money quickly.

Most successful nonpartisan political Web sites that are nonprofit have followed several patterns:

- Stay small, at least early on. Keep your staff small. Keep your overhead low.
- Build your site on the back of an already-established organization, with clear goals and volunteers already in place.
- Adopt a mixed business model, especially if you hope to return in coming elections. Seek out funding from grants, partnership fees, advertising, individual donations and sponsorships. By not relying on a single revenue stream this mixed approach may offer the greatest chance for sustainability.

One of the most active online communities is at e.thePeople ([www.e-thepeople.org](http://www.e-thepeople.org)), where members discuss a wide range of issues.

E-democracy ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)) has successfully conducted online political debates and discussion forums.

Both sites post their guidelines and other rules in order to keep discussions civil and productive.

*Generally speaking, operating a Web site for less than \$25,000 requires in-kind donations of expertise or technical capability*



Your best approach is to try to secure in-kind or indirect funding in the form of technical resources (server space) and expertise. You should NOT expect to gather much funding through advertising or subscription fees. These models have not proven viable. A few Web sites that tried to charge candidates for publicizing their information failed.

#### **Case study**

EasyVoter ([www.easyvoter.org](http://www.easyvoter.org))

Easy Voter is an online voting guide in California intended to be accessible to those who have difficulty reading English.

The site is simple and focused on its goal of presenting the voting guide online to a unique, clearly defined audience. The organizers take advantage of their expertise and partner with a nonprofit with similar program goals for server space.

Site organizers have acquired experience and expertise, and have planned to expand into other states.

The site has clear goals. Site design is dictated by its audience (which requires an easy-to-use format). The funding is flexible, and organizers use available resources (such as server space) and expertise.



# Content

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Knowing what information to put online requires that you know your audience, but it also requires a little understanding of how people search the Internet.

You will attract some viewers who are Web browsers, people who happen to come across your Web site, but most will be searchers, those who deliberately seek out your site for the information you offer or who were enticed to visit from some offline communication. Your first goal is to provide information which engages both types of users so they remain on the site. In other words, you want to provide attractive information, which immediately strikes viewers as worth their attention, and adjacent information, which tells them what else is on site, and what your site can do for them.

Users will only come to your site if they think you have something they want. They will only come back if you actually do. They do not want promotions for your site, but information they can use. Your site will have greater appeal with substantive information. Users say they favor a depth and breadth of political content, and sites with more information attract more return users.

You can generate content yourself or generate content “indirectly” by organizing and presenting public content available elsewhere. Be wary of trying to generate a large amount of original content, which will absorb a lot of your time and may require updating. Highlighting resources on other Web sites is a sound way to begin, rather than attempting to gather, confirm and post a great deal of original information. Nonetheless, some original information is probably required, depending on your goals.

Take the low-hanging fruit first. Community organizations often have access to local political information. For example, if you are devising a local voter’s guide, access the old voter’s guides your organization has produced and post the past positions of candidates. There is great information readily available that is made more useful and accessible when organized and presented clearly on a Web site.

Collaborate with others. Let other Web sites know what you are doing and what content you need. By the same token, be willing to share your material with others.

## Case study

North Carolina Center for Voter Education ([www.ncvoterred.com](http://www.ncvoterred.com))

The Center is a state-focused nonpartisan political organization that has been at the forefront of campaign finance and then judicial reform in North Carolina. It now includes a voter information component.

The organization was originally funded by a state foundation (The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation) and has been able to expand their sources of foundation funding. They also accept member contributions.

The organization fit a need seen by the foundation and prominent jurists and politicians in the state. It tapped those jurists and politicians, as well as local civic leaders, for advice and membership on its board. It has stayed local, focused on a few goals, with a small organization with low overhead.



### **Campaign finance information**

Campaign finance information is not used enough on nonpartisan political Web sites. Most sites posted little or no financial information in 2000.

This information is increasingly available in easily understood formats, and would be a good addition to any Web site focused on a campaign.

Information for national races is available at the Federal Election Commission ([www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)), which also has links to state agencies that provide state-level campaign finance information.

Download the information, sort it by your local races and post. (When you post finance information, include the link to the original source, so your users can check for themselves.)

Opensecrets.org is a great resource of campaign finance information, mostly at the national level. You can also download data and sort donations by location and election year ([www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)).

Obtaining information from candidates has been difficult for some organizations and we believe this problem is going to get worse. Candidates, especially incumbents, do not always see an advantage in providing information and in fact may believe they have something to lose by doing so. While we believe candidates have an obligation to provide information about their positions, we recognize that many campaigns are inundated with these requests. Be aware of this and plan accordingly. This is another incentive to stay local, where candidates are less able to get much media coverage and often more willing to participate to get their word out.

You should be polite but persistent in dealing with campaigns. Be flexible in how you can obtain information. If you can gather policy positions from campaign materials, do so, and don't ask for a new statement on a policy that is already publicly available. Often a candidate's speaking record is available, and you can cull from it position statements.

If you are following a political campaign, establish relationships with campaign officials and convince them you are serious in your work and that it is to their benefit to provide candidate information. This is easiest early in the campaign, before the race gets more harried and while campaign organizers are still anxious for visibility. Finally, make certain that questions you pose do not unfairly characterize a candi-

date. For example, do not require yes or no answers to complex questions, and give candidates time and space to respond. Allow candidates to modify their statements as their positions evolve.

## **Naming your Web site**

Choose a short, easily recognizable name.

- The name should describe the site. It should be logical enough so browsers will find your site.
- Many users will first try to search for your site based on a name, so let your Web address be your name. For example, if your site is called "PoliticalExpert" make your address [www.politicalexpert.org](http://www.politicalexpert.org).
- Use redirect sites so someone who types in "politicalexpert.edu" or "politicalexpert.com" will be directed to the correct address of [www.politicalexpert.org](http://www.politicalexpert.org). You do this by purchasing variations of the name domain.
- If possible, leverage your brand name, such as state chapters of the League of Women Voters, which prominently display their league logos. If your organization is trusted, display the





organization logo on your site and take advantage of the good will you already have. (Note: Always obtain permission before using someone else's logo, but this need not be a contract drafted by a lawyer. A short letter or even an e-mail may be sufficient. What is important is that you ask and then abide by the wishes of the organization.)

## A checklist of information you can provide

Remember that content is dictated by the audience and its needs. If your organization already has a purpose, your Web site should reflect and enhance that purpose. Do not get sidetracked!

This list may be useful as an initial guide.

- Basic information about the Web site
  - Information “about this site,” such as your organization and contact information, including a phone number
  - The dates when the site was updated
  - Means for user feedback through e-mail or message boards
- Election information
  - Candidates
    - Candidate information and biographies
    - Links to official candidate sites
    - Voting records, by candidate
    - Descriptions of issue positions
    - Endorsements or ratings by organizations or groups
    - Campaign finance information
  - Lists of ballot initiatives or referenda on the ballot
    - Full texts of those measures
    - Links to sites in opposition or in favor to those measures
    - Ratings by organizations or groups, and candidate positions on referenda
  - Issue information
    - Background articles on the issues
    - Candidate voting records, by issue
  - Contact information and links to county and state election offices
- Voting information
  - The dates of the elections (primary, general and other elections)

### Content Options

Developing original content can be expensive and time-consuming. Remember to find a niche for your site, and avoid rebuilding resources that are already online. (This is one reason we urge activists to think local.)

Two options are to (1) purchase information and services or (2) to link to other sites.

- You can purchase content and server service from commercial providers. The primary commercial political information provider is Capitol Advantage ([www.capitoladvantage.com](http://www.capitoladvantage.com)).
- You can link to sites that already gather political information, such as Vote Smart ([www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)), a nonprofit organization.

Another resource is a political Internet search service offered by PoliticalInformation.com ([www.politicalinformation.com](http://www.politicalinformation.com)).

### Link to or use official voting guides

Many states produce voting guides, so don't duplicate their work. Unfortunately, they often do a poor job of promoting those guides or, in some cases, do not put them online.

Making an already available guide more readable, more easily accessible or more prominent may be an opportunity for your local organization.



- Instructions for how to register to vote, with links to local election boards
- Deadlines for registration
  - Link to the National Mail Voter Registration Form at the Web site of the Federal Election Commission ([www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)).
- Instructions for how to request an absentee ballot
- Polling locations
- A description of how a polling booth works, and instructions for using voting equipment
- Contact information for organizations that help people travel to the polls
- Political information
  - Links to party Web sites
  - Links to political news stories
  - Links to other political Web sites or Web logs
- Links
  - Secretary of state
  - Local election board
  - Web sites of groups making endorsements
  - E-mail addresses for campaigns and legislators

The challenge for Web designers is to create Web sites that are “sticky,” or that keep users on the site, looking through information. Web site organizers tell us there are some things that help. People like to “do” something, such as voter match up programs (see box at right).

Online polls, while scientifically useless, engage users. They are a simple and immediately

#### **Online activities lure users**

Before the 2000 election, Paul Hrabal introduced a voter matching program on his Web site, [GoVote.com](http://GoVote.com). Users could answer questions about issues and be matched to a candidate. After introducing VoteMatch, [GoVote's](http://GoVote.com) hits shot up tenfold.

While voter matching programs are now fairly common, [GoVote's](http://GoVote.com) example shows the impact of a new idea that engaged users and put [GoVote](http://GoVote.com) on the map.

It also illustrates that Internet users like to DO something. Puzzles, games or other interactive features are often popular.

rewarding task, so display the results immediately to reward the user. Be careful to offer nonpartisan polls. For example, you could poll users about debate formats and candidate Web sites, or more fun topics such as candidates' wardrobes or media coverage.

Some examples:

- [OnTheIssues](http://www.ontheissues.org) ([www.ontheissues.org](http://www.ontheissues.org)) has a CelebrityMatch quiz where you can find out which celebrity's views most closely match your own.
- Provide a “Guess who said this?” feature. Have users match a candidate with their quote or position paper.
- Post candidate trivia or questions about a candidate's past.
- Post local historical or election trivia (but do not veer from your site goals).



## Displaying content

Keep your Web site simple and easy to use. Beware of putting too much online or trying to do too much. There is nothing wrong with starting small.

Adopt a flexible site design, one which you can easily adjust and add to. Maintain a consistent display style throughout your site. For example, develop a logo or choose some design colors and then stick to them. Create a single page template and copy it for each page (which can also help in catering to the search engines, which we describe below).

*Keep your Web site simple and easy to use. Beware of putting too much online or trying to do too much. There is nothing wrong with starting small.*

Our general recommendation for new site designers is to skip fancy graphics, lengthy java script, or other complex features. These only add to the cost of producing your Web site and may cause the site to load slowly (although this is less of an issue with broadband). Avoid using cookies. If a user has disabled cookies in their Web browser they may have trouble accessing the site. Many users also consider cookies to be annoying or a violation of their privacy. Inexperienced site designers should not try to require visitors to set up a user name or password to use the site

However, java script or cookies may be useful to more experienced designers. More expert designers may wish to recognize users in order to personalize content. For example, in order to provide a local ballot you need to identify the users by their location. This technology should only be used when it serves your objectives.

Sites with more features are also more appealing to users. At the same time, the time spent at your site is a function of its design. Sites that are easy to navigate keep people longer.

If you publish reports, long lists or other lengthy information, include a link to a “printer friendly” version or a downloadable version for easy printing.

### Tips for displaying your information

- Avoid cover pages. Put information on your first page, so viewers immediately see what they are looking for.
- Be systematic in displaying information. Information should be logically grouped.
- Organize by issue, not type of document. Some sites put all the candidates’ speeches in one area and ads in another, but readers are interested in issues and want to find them grouped together. They should not have to jump from screen to screen to do so.



- Database formats seem to be popular. Users enjoy using the database, which is more conducive to research and comparison between candidates. Both DNet and OnTheIssues have employed “issues grids” of the candidates (available at [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org) and [www.ontheissues.org](http://www.ontheissues.org)).
- Avoid small text and small line spacing. Small text discourages users and effectively bars those with poor vision. (It is remarkable how many Web sites use small text. A full page of small text is an instant turnoff for many users.)
- Use black text on white background whenever possible. Make sure text is a printable color (and never white).
- Use consistent navigation aids throughout the site. Put the same list of choices in the same place on each page.
- Make the meaning of your links clear from the portion of highlighted text. Do not use common words like “click here” or “this” as the linking words. Instead use words that describe the information, such as “candidate data” or “staff photos.” This makes your site more accessible and is a rule of good design.
- Follow the three-click rule. Visitors should be able to get from any one page on your site to any other page within three clicks.

## Quirky or offbeat information can draw users

Quirky, humorous or offbeat information or presentation is very good at attracting an audience and improves the “stickiness” of the site.

- Democracy In Action ([www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html)) annotates reviews of the candidates’ many books, and keeps track of the publishing schedule for those in the works.
- CalVoter ([www.calvoter.org](http://www.calvoter.org)) has a “Proposition Song.”
- Games and humor are a great help. About.com lists sites of political humor ([politicalhumor.about.com](http://politicalhumor.about.com)).
- Candidates have taken the same advice, and offer offbeat information to keep users online. For example, Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) posts her recipe for crab cakes ([mikulski.senate.gov/crabcake.html](http://mikulski.senate.gov/crabcake.html)).

### Usability advice

You can find more usability advice at [usability.gov](http://usability.gov) ([www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov)), which is an effort by the National Cancer Institute to provide design guidelines for health-related Web sites.

Another site is Usability First, a Web site consulting and design company that offers free information on its site ([www.usabilityfirst.com](http://www.usabilityfirst.com)).

Jakob Nielsen, a well-known expert, writes about usability at [useit.com](http://useit.com) ([www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)).

## Video

For new sites with non-professional Web masters, we recommend avoiding video (or flash video). Bandwidth for many users makes video downloads slow and, in some cases, impossible. Storing and making video accessible is a drain on server resources.



However, if you have the resources for incorporating online video into your Web site, follow these guidelines.

- If you post video, make certain the video is worthwhile, interesting and serves the goals of your site.
- Be prepared for technical problems and have expertise on staff to address them.
- You should provide links to online video programs, such as Quicktime or Real Player. (Accessibility experts consider this necessary, and federal accessibility guidelines require it.)
- Warn your users that video is available, and never introduce video unexpectedly. Dialup users forced to view an introductory video will not return. They should have the chance to opt out of viewing. You should put the size of the file next to it, which enables users to decide for themselves whether their connection can handle the bandwidth.

**Hint: Scorecards**

Consider a downloadable election “scorecard,” particularly if your local ballot is a long one. (Some state ballots can be more than a hundred pages.)

Your users can download and print the scorecard, review your Web site and mark their choices, then take it with them to the polls. This feature may be particularly useful for older voters or voters with disabilities.

## How to write for the Web

Writing for the Web is not the same as writing for broadcast or print. When people look at Web sites they tend to immediately scan them, so make certain your design is pleasing. Write so that users can scan the information and do not need to read a long, continuous block of text. You can provide a link to more in-depth readings, but at the beginning keep it simple.

The presence of hyperlinks means reading can be nonlinear, which means that users may access information in any order they choose.

**Hint: Writing for the Web**

The most essential point to understand when writing for the Web is that users immediately scan the page. They do not read: They scan.

You must design the page and write the text with that in mind. Put important information first. Keep it brief. Make your links clear and immediately available.

Practically speaking, this means you should provide multiple points of access. Divide your text into smaller, stand-alone pieces, and index them separately. So, for example, if you include information about the candidates, link directly to that information – issue positions, biographical information and contact information. An article on gun rights on your site should link to those positions for the candidates on your site.

## Tips for writing online

- The magic word is brevity. Be brief in every aspect of your work. Write short, simple sentences. Combine them in small, focused paragraphs.



- Web users would rather click than scroll. Don't make your pages overlong.
- Internet surfers are impatient. You must quickly get to the point.
- Don't write clever headlines; Write clear headlines.
- Write meaningful subheads that describe the content and allow the readers to jump into the text at many points.
- Use bulleted lists.
- Place links at the end of a section of text. Links within a sentence pull your reader away.
- Consider a question and answer format, such as an FAQ.
- Consider highlighting key words in your text.
- Consider writing a short summary at the top of a long section of text.

## Make certain your site is accessible

More than 50 million Americans have some sort of disability. Building accessible Web sites is not difficult, particularly if you are starting from scratch. Following every guideline for an accessible

### Assessing accessibility

The Web Accessibility Initiative provides a great deal of information and resources ([www.w3.org/WAI](http://www.w3.org/WAI)).

There are free software programs that will examine your Web site and look for accessibility problems, such as Bobby ([bobby.watchfire.com](http://bobby.watchfire.com)). Bobby is designed to help show barriers to accessibility on Web sites and test for compliance with government standards.

Web site may be cumbersome, but even a few measures can make your site dramatically more accessible. On the other hand, re-designing an old site to make it accessible can be difficult and time-consuming.

Accessibility standards and usability standards go hand in hand. A good site designer can build an attractive and dynamic site that is also usable and accessible.

The Institute takes the position that Web site organizers should make sites accessible to everyone for ethical reasons. These are spelled out in our Best Practices.

Some guidelines:

- Label everything with descriptive tags in the html code. Visitors who have poor vision may use screen reading programs, which means they will only be able to access the text. Use short, clear descriptions on all non-text content (graphics, photos, buttons, form fields and menus). Graphics that are used as links should include text that explains what the graphic links to.
- Images should have alternative text that describes them. Charts and graphs should have alternative text that fully explains their meaning. Non-informational graphics (decoration) should have null text codes so screen readers skip over them.
- Screen reading programs work from left to right, top to bottom, so make sure tables make sense read in that order. Frames and pop-up windows that are based on JavaScript



commands are confusing to text-based browsers and should be avoided. If important information is conveyed using Java, include the text.

- Convey information in multiple formats. For example, screen reading programs cannot access documents in PDF format.
- Pull-down menus and some other navigation elements rely on using a mouse, which is difficult for some people. Avoid them if possible.
- Use a large text size (at least 12 point). Avoid fixed width fonts so your users can increase the text size.
- Make sure all information is clear even if the user cannot differentiate color. Colorblind users have great difficulty on some Web sites that use many similar colors.
- Use descriptive links rather than "click here" to insure that links make sense out of context.
- Clearly identify the target of each link.

**Accessibility Tip:**

**Careful with Color**

Did you know that more than 20 million Americans are colorblind? They can only see certain colors or have difficulty discerning between some colors. Using colors that are confused by colorblind people will exclude a significant percentage of the population. You need to keep this in mind when designing your Web site.

Use dark text (preferably black) on a white or very light colored background. Do not use similar colors to differentiate buttons, bars or other navigational devices.

Use the following techniques to make your work accessible to those with language difficulties.

- Be wary of intimidating weak readers with long columns of text.
- Use headings to tell the readers what is coming and break up text.
- Present only the most important information, or at least present the most important information early and in its own section. That way weak readers can absorb the key points.
- Use short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Use concrete examples.
- Repeat new or unfamiliar information to help learning.
- Avoid clichés or jargon.
- Write in the positive, not the negative. For example, write "This is the correct way to vote" rather than "This is not an incorrect way to vote."
- If a significant portion of your audience does not read English, provide an alternative language version of your site.

Some design issues that ease reading strain:

- Use an unjustified right margin.
- Use larger type (at least 12 point).
- Do not write in all capitals.
- Use adequate amounts of white space.



## Linking to other sites

Too many sites link to everything. Take seriously your role as editor. Find what you think is the best and only link to that, then succinctly tell your user why you link and what is there. If you feel you must link to a broad array of material, pick the best and highlight it. Your goal is to help your user find the best material. Second to that, you can be a clearinghouse of links, but do not post them prominently on your site.

*Dead links irritate your users and look unprofessional. They also hurt your credibility.*

Dead links irritate your users and look unprofessional. They also hurt your credibility. Check your links regularly.

## Discussion forums

The prospect of discussion forums was one of the driving ideas behind nonpartisan political Web sites a few years ago. Many organizations and the Web sites they developed included discussion forums. Some sites (DebateAmerica, VoterVoices) focused exclusively on discussion.<sup>6</sup>

Discussion forums remain a part of some sites. While we recognize that some sites have been able to foster worthwhile online discussions and that discussions can draw Web traffic, our recommendation to new site organizers is to avoid large national discussion forums.

Discussion forums require a commitment from the users and the site owner. Many users who are simply looking for information will not dedicate the time and mental effort to post on a discussion forum. For organizers, discussion forums can be difficult to monitor and control. They can become heated, angry and dominated by a small group of users. It can be unclear who is posting comments, and forums that become heavily partisan can threaten the nonpartisan tenor of your site or discourage partisans from the other side to visit.

Despite these misgivings, there are sites that successfully conduct user forums. The most noted national political discussion forum is e.thePeople ([www.e-thepeople.org](http://www.e-thepeople.org)). E-democracy ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)) has had success with state and local candidate discussions and ongoing user forums. Both sites offer good advice.

If you opt to include a discussion forum, successful forums follow several rules.

- Stay focused on topics. Stay local.
- Users must register.
- Forums must be moderated.





- Users may not post anonymously, or with pseudonyms. They must sign their posts with their real name, e-mail address and general location (usually city and state).
- Limit the number of times a user may post, perhaps to two messages a day.
- Posts must be on topic.
- Rules of conduct must be developed and enforced. Users must be encouraged to respect others in the forum and direct their comments to the entire group, not another user.

#### **What makes a BAD Web site?**

- Confused design.
- Unclear authorship.
- Frequent dead links.
- Frequent popup advertising.
- Failing to provide what your audience is expecting.
- Slow loading graphics or features.
- Messy, cumbersome graphics.
- Small or difficult to read text.
- Too many layers of information, forcing users to click many times to reach their destination.

It is remarkable how many Web sites still have these problems. Any of these will drive users from your site.



# Operation

## Promoting your Web site

### Hint: Get listed!

In addition to general search directories like Google, get your site listed in directories of non-profit political Web sites. The following sites will consider other nonpartisan political Web sites for their links pages.

- Minnesota e-democracy ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org))
- Getvoting411.us ([www.getvoting411.us](http://www.getvoting411.us))
- Democracy in Action ([www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html))

Promotion is vital to the success of a Web site. You may find you spend as much time on promotion as you do on content development and fundraising. There are cheap and effective ways to promote your Web site online, from simply tailoring your Web site to the search engines to more traditional forms of promotion.

Master street-level promotion, particularly if your site is locally-oriented. Post flyers. Hand out bumper stickers. Print your address on pens or coffee mugs. Make certain your Web site address is on everything your organization produces: posters, signs, advertisements, letterhead – everything. Work with local businesses by appealing to their civic spirit to include your site address or help promotion.

## Tailor your Web site to search engines

Perhaps the most cost-effective means of promoting your Web site is tailoring your site to search engines. (There are software programs you can purchase to create Web pages to improve search engine positioning.)

- Submit your site to each search engine. You must be sure to submit your site to the correct section, follow the submission guidelines carefully, and you may have to wait several weeks for a site to be accepted.
- Use the meta tags for titles, keywords and description in the html headers of your pages. Create one good meta-tagged Web page and then use it as a template for your other pages. Some search engines use these to rank content.
- Use good, descriptive titles for your site and individual pages.
- Use keyword-rich content. In other words, use words that aptly describe your site, so a searcher using those words will find you.
- Get other similar sites to link to yours.

Google, in particular, gives better placement to sites which are linked from others. Some other Google tips:

- The more relevant your pages, the better the chance people will find them. Use keywords in your text that describe your site content accurately, and you should use similar keywords as page labels.



- Keep all pages near the top level of the directory. In other words, do not have pages that are “deep” in the site and require clicking through many other pages to access. (Remember the three-click rule.)
- Each page should contain at least 100 words of relevant text.
- The more links you have to a page the better. Google counts links like votes. It will also analyze the page that links to you in order to rank your page. Links from pages that are themselves heavily linked and accessed are ranked more highly.

#### **Guides for Promoting your Web Site**

Minnesota E-democracy/E-Democracy.org has published a very useful guide for promoting and operating a political Web site. It can be found at [www.e-democracy.org/us/promote.html](http://www.e-democracy.org/us/promote.html).

In addition, the E-Democracy.Org Web site generally offers other good advice for the online political community ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)).

## **Use the media**

Press coverage is the best and most effective way to promote a Web site and to get the ball rolling with other forms of promotion. However, press attention can be difficult to get, and it has become more difficult as the novelty of online politics wears off.

Contact journalists individually for stories, and bring them into the fold as part of your press network. Pick the most prominent and influential journalists for your audience, and keep them posted about unusual and interesting things happening on your Web site.

Offer news on a slow news day. Be flexible. Have your information confirmed, double-checked and ready to go. And call journalists back immediately.

- Consider creating a virtual press room, where you can distribute information about your organization.
- Write a script for a 30-second public service announcement about your Web site and ask radio stations to air it leading up to the election. If possible, produce your own public service announcement. Political organizers say it is well worth spending the money on a professional PSA, which broadcasters are much more likely to use. (However, professionally produced PSAs can be expensive.)
- Link to the Web site on all press releases.

#### **Online Political Journalism**

The Internet has become vital to covering politics, from using Web sites to conducting interviews. Journalists need information fast, and their favorite Web sites give them the information they need in an easily understood manner.

Read more about politics online and where journalists go online in “The Virtual Trail,” published by the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet.

Available free at [www.ipdi.org](http://www.ipdi.org)

## **Encourage other sites to link to yours**

This often serves to both direct traffic to your site and promote your site with search engines that reward linked Web sites. Request reciprocal links from similar organizations or political groups.



You can use Google to find out which sites are linking to yours. The command is “Link: <web-site>”. So for example, by typing “Link: <http://www.ipdi.org>” you can find out which sites link to the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet.

## Build e-mail lists

E-mail may be just as important as a Web presence. E-mail newsletters can direct traffic back to your Web site and inform your readers of important election deadlines or campaign events.

- Don’t advertise a newsletter as *regular* (i.e. weekly, monthly, etc.) unless you can make it a regular part of your workload. Newsletters take time to make worthwhile. Unless you have the time to keep your schedule, don’t start.
- Keep it short, scannable and relevant. Subscribers did not sign up for your comments, book reviews or jokes.
- Link to your Web site.
- Make it easy to subscribe and unsubscribe.
- Be very careful about collecting and using e-mail addresses. Nothing destroys your credibility more quickly than being seen as spamming your users. Make certain anyone who submits an e-mail address knows what they will be receiving and how you will use their e-mail address.

### Managing e-mail lists and newsletters

The Congress Online Project ([www.congressonlineproject.org](http://www.congressonlineproject.org)) has produced several excellent reports on managing newsletters.

## What you must do to make your Web site succeed

Recognize that the labor of maintaining a good Web site is often much more than people expect. If you do not have the time to frequently update your site, then avoid material that requires frequent updates. Complex site design and features may look good, but they may require more attention than you can give. Begin simple. As the site grows you can better gauge the time commitment you and your organization can make.

*Recognize that the labor of maintaining a good Web site is often much more than people expect.*

You **MUST** keep the site up-to-date. Updated pages will prompt return visitors to spend time on your site. (Up-to-date sites also

enhance your credibility. See below.) At the same time, keep careful track of what needs to be updated. If possible, keep pages that need to be updated close together, or grouped in a manner to make updating easy. Do not scatter throughout your Web site isolated references that must be constantly updated.



Consider establishing partnerships to share the workload and take advantage of content someone else has created. Several Web developers told us that partnerships are a key to success. They can be a cheap way to build a base of visitors and obtain content. You can provide local content. Your partners can provide traffic and additional tools, such as search engines, databases or moderated discussion forums.

You can partner with other civic organizations, and this may be as simple as posting their voting information and providing a link to the organization. Use the same partners your organization already uses.

### Our tips for successful promotion

- Cater to the search engines.
- Use the media.
- Build and use e-mail lists.
- Link to other, good sites and get them to link to you. (Choose your link partners wisely.)
- Keep the Web site up-to-date.
- Establish partnerships.

### Protect your credibility

Protect your credibility. Concern about impartiality is a big reason why people turn to nonpartisan political Web sites. There are a variety of measures you can take that researchers have found help make your site more believable.<sup>7</sup>

- Make it easy to verify the accuracy of the information on your site. Provide references for your information and, if possible, links to the original source.
- Show that there is a real organization behind your site. List an offline address and contact information. If you list a phone number, make sure someone answers it.
- Highlight the expertise in your organization.
- Use a professional looking site design.
- Make your site easy to use.
- Update your content. People assign more credibility to sites that show they have been updated or reviewed recently.
- Be careful with promotional content. Ads may hurt credibility, and should be clearly marked as advertisement. Avoid pop-up ads.
- Avoid errors of all types, no matter how small. Typographical errors and broken links hurt your credibility and turn off users.

#### Search engine placement

People have written books on the science and art of promoting your Web site with search engines. You don't need to buy a book, but if you wish to boost your search engine placement, here are a couple sources of information online. (Stick with the free sites and information sources until you really find your footing as a Web developer.)

- Web Developer's Journal ([www.webdevelopersjournal.com](http://www.webdevelopersjournal.com))
- Dynamoo ([www.dynamoo.com](http://www.dynamoo.com))



## Avoiding legal problems

Nonprofit organizations must be mindful of the need to remain strictly nonpartisan in their voter education efforts. Nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organizations that use charitable resources in a partisan way risk losing their tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service.<sup>8</sup>

Below are some steps Web site operators can take to avoid legal problems:

- Make sure all campaigns and candidates are given an equal chance to be featured in your voter guide.
- Include a disclaimer in your guide stating that all candidates have been invited to participate in your project.
- Leave the door open for candidates to add links and other information to your guide after its debut and design your Web pages in a way that leaves a place for new information to be added at a later date.
- Link to campaign Web sites and e-mail addresses only, and avoid linking to incumbents' official Web sites. Incumbent candidates with government-funded Web sites are prohibited from using such government resources for campaign purposes. (A link to a government-funded site is appropriate in a section that links to office-holders, but may not be appropriate in a section dedicated to a political race.)
- Make certain your staff understands that the Web site is nonpartisan and not a partisan platform. One misstep and your credibility is lost.

## Where to go for ideas and advice

### Nonpartisan political sites

These Web sites are full of good design and good ideas. They are also good choices for links.

- The California Voter Foundation ([www.calvoter.org](http://www.calvoter.org)) – The California Voter Foundation Web site provides a voter guide, campaign funding disclosure and an archive of politicians' campaign promises. In particular, check out the useful “How to Make an Online Voter Guide” available at [www.calvoter.org/manual/quicktips.html](http://www.calvoter.org/manual/quicktips.html).
- DNet and Capitol Advantage ([www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org)) – This is a longtime voter information site originally sponsored by the League of Women Voters Education Fund. It contains information about candidates and ballot propositions in most states. There is a candidate lookup feature and an Issue Grid, which allows users to find candidates and position information obtained by league members.
- e.thePeople ([www.e-thepeople.org](http://www.e-thepeople.org)) – e.thePeople is one of only a few Web sites that have been able to successfully focus on discussion and debate. The site is highly user-centric and



hopes to evolve to a model directed and funded in part by its users. E.thepeople syndicates its forums to other online media outlets.

- IssuesPA ([www.issuespa.net](http://www.issuespa.net)) – IssuesPA is a nonpartisan Web site that conducts research in an effort to raise awareness of important issues to Pennsylvania's economy.
- Minnesota E-democracy ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)) – E-democracy is another longtime player in online politics and government. The site centers on Minnesota politics, but organizers have pioneered many different innovations and provide a lot of information for civic activists.
- Smart Voter ([www.smartvoter.org](http://www.smartvoter.org)) – Smart Voter is a California voter guide sponsored by the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund.
- Vote Smart ([www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)) – Project Vote Smart is a nonprofit organization that provides nonpartisan information about candidates and political office holders, including biographical information, voting records and campaign contributions. This is a tremendous resource, accessible online or by telephone.

**Think local! Here are some sites with state political information**  
Publius ([www.publis.org](http://www.publis.org)) - Michigan  
VoteUtah ([www.voteutah.org](http://www.voteutah.org)) - Utah  
Smart Voter ([www.smartvoter.org](http://www.smartvoter.org)) – California and Ohio  
Wisconsin Democracy Campaign ([www.wisdc.org](http://www.wisdc.org)) – Wisconsin  
Eagleton Institute of Politics ([www.njvoter-info.org](http://www.njvoter-info.org)) – New Jersey  
Iowa E-Democracy ([www.e-democracy.org/ia](http://www.e-democracy.org/ia)) – Iowa

Also look up the League of Women Voters chapter in your county and state.

### Other sites

These are resources from other fields, particularly civil society organizations (CSOs).

- Contentbank.org ([www.contentbank.org](http://www.contentbank.org)) – This site is intended to help non-profits serving low-income communities develop online content. It contains a variety of interesting Web development tools and advice. Much of it is readable and aimed at a lay audience.
- Techsoup ([www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org)) – A resource of content and Web development tools for the nonprofit community. There is advice here for funding, technology questions and operating a nonprofit.
- ITrainOnline ([www.itrainonline.org](http://www.itrainonline.org)) – ItrainOnline is a joint initiative of six organizations with expertise in Web technology. Its goal is to train nonprofit organizations in Web use, particularly in developing countries, and provides online technology training for nonprofits.



## Learn from Congressional Web sites

The Congress Online project has identified five aspects of successful Web sites of members of Congress.

These tenets apply here.

1. Audience. The Web site conveys a clear sense that the office has clearly defined its Web audiences, both those seeking information from the office and those that the office wants to target, and has methodically built the site around those audiences.
2. Content. The site provides up-to-date content that is specifically targeted to meet the needs of the defined audiences. This information attracts new visitors, and will support the goals of the office.
3. Interactivity. The Web site offers its visitors opportunities to express their views and fosters on- and off-line communication.
4. Usability. The design and information architecture of the Web site provide quick and easy access to information and services.
5. Innovations. The site employs creative features to enhance a visitor's experience on the site by making it more interesting or easier to use.

Source: The Congress Online Project ([www.congressonlineproject.org](http://www.congressonlineproject.org)).





# Best practices for Nonpartisan Political Web Sites

The Institute recommends these guidelines for all nonpartisan political Web sites, derived from its Best Practices Pledge for campaign Web sites.

## 1. Provide Nonpartisan Information

Nonpartisan means you use content that is explanatory and informational and not promotional. Adhere to the logic of nonpartisan presentation of information, and to a commitment to accuracy. This requires:

- An equal opportunity for all sides to present their arguments.
- Providing information on all candidates, and treating candidates of all parties fairly.
- If you link to resources provided by outside groups, make certain the link is clear so it is not confused with your site. Explain the site and its political position.
- If you link to partisan information about a candidate, such as an organization's ranking of a candidate, make that clear.
- That you do not take positions on candidates, issues or ballot questions.

## 2. The site should be freely available

Political information should be free for all, and the easy display of information should be free to the candidates. Do not charge users to access your site, and we do not recommend you require site registration. (This can be seen as just another way of charging admission.) Candidates cannot be charged a fee for having their information posted on the site.

## 3. Make your site accessible to everyone

The Web site should be accessible to the broadest possible audience. This means making the site accessible to citizens with disabilities and marginal voters, such as those who have difficulty reading or those for whom English is a second language and who have difficulty with English. Half of all Americans read below the tenth grade level, and more than 27 million adults are functionally illiterate. These numbers are disproportionately higher among minorities and immigrants.

While we should not write down to people, we should build Web sites keeping in mind the difficulties many people face reading. Many of these tips and suggestions are also basic rules for clear, concise writing.



### **Our Privacy Policy**

The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet shares the concerns that many people have about privacy on the Internet. We do not collect any information about visitors to this site, unless they supply it knowingly and voluntarily in places such as the response page or the e-mail update registration page.

The Institute will only send e-mail to persons who requested that it be sent, and if a recipient decides to stop receiving updates or news from us, there will be a simple and straightforward way to unsubscribe.

If you have any questions about this privacy policy, please e-mail [ipdi@ipdi.org](mailto:ipdi@ipdi.org).

## **4. Be open and transparent**

We urge site organizers to make clear their position as a nonpartisan Web site and make public their sources of funding, both direct donations and in-kind donations, and the names of site organizers or any supporters who contribute to the site. Any supporting organization should be identified and background information about the organization provided. Contact information for site organizers and organizations must be provided.

## **5. Develop, post and live by a privacy policy**

You need an explicit privacy policy to reassure site users that their privacy will be respected. You should also use your privacy policy as a constant reminder to workers and volunteers with access to your site about proper handling of user information. Unethical breaches of privacy take place when people deliberately use private information,

but they also take place when people are simply unaware of the guidelines. This is a particular issue in organizations without Internet professionals or that use volunteers.

A privacy policy is especially important if your Web site collects e-mail addresses or other user information, or if your site uses cookies or other means to track users. If you do not collect information or track users, your privacy issues are less complicated.

- Develop a policy (or use the boilerplate policy we provide).
- If you collect user data, secure it. It should not be publicly available and should only be accessible by supervisors in your organization.



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- <sup>3</sup> All these sites have closed. Freedom Channel and DebateAmerica can be viewed at the Internet Archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)) at the addresses of [www.freedomchannel.com](http://www.freedomchannel.com) and [www.debate-america.org](http://www.debate-america.org). Web White & Blue maintains a Web site address at [www.webwhiteblue.org](http://www.webwhiteblue.org).
- <sup>4</sup> DNet now has its content distributed by Capitol Advantage, a commercial business.
- <sup>5</sup> Surman, Mark. *Understanding Civil Society Portals* [Online report.]. Commons Group, 18 September 2002 [cited 4 February 2004]. Available from [www.commonsgroup.com/](http://www.commonsgroup.com/).
- <sup>6</sup> Both are now defunct. They can be accessed through the Internet archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)).
- <sup>7</sup> For more information see Stanford Web Credibility Research (<http://credibility.stanford.edu>).
- <sup>8</sup> This section borrows from "How to Make an Online Voter Guide." August 2002. Davis, Calif.: The California Voter Foundation, September 2003 ([www.calvoter.org/manual/quicktips.html](http://www.calvoter.org/manual/quicktips.html)).



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The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet  
The Graduate School of Political Management  
The George Washington University  
805 21st St., NW  
Suite 401  
Washington, DC 20052  
1.800.367.4776 toll free  
[ipdi@ipdi.org](mailto:ipdi@ipdi.org)