The NetRoots Narrative:
The Evolution of Liberal Candidates from 2004 to the Present

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I. Introduction

Approximately twelve years after its debut in political campaigns, many still question the implications of the Internet on social capital. Despite the proliferation of unique political communication and interactivity dubbed “Web 2.0”, cyber-pessimists fear that the Internet inhibits the growth of meaningful face-to-face interactions. Indeed, scholarship has mixed findings about digital connectivity resulting in meaningful offline relations. Based various case studies present in the evolution of the liberal blogosphere from 2004 through 2008, this paper argues that the Internet can and does lead to meaningful social capital and offline social networking. It describes the Web as an agent of social change for the Democratic Party, and identifies social capital as an important part of the party’s digital timeline.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with campaign staff members and volunteers participating in the Howard Dean, Ned Lamont and Barack Obama campaigns, as well as Republican bloggers, this work illuminates how the intersection of offline and online social networking has become a hallmark of Democratic Party digital strategy. Through grounded theory analysis of seventeen in-depth interviews, it is argued that four main characteristics of Democratic Party campaigns serve as the commonality that allowed social capital to form from their online supporters. These characteristics are valuing a Web presence, embracing interactivity, empowering the liberal blogosphere, and maintaining relations with blog
supporters. It is also described how candidates who take a conservative, non-interactive approach to online campaigning have struggled to attain such social capital.

This research suggests that, while it may not be the finite solution for scholars who argue that they see a decline in deliberative democracy and social capital over time, the Internet does have the power to play an important role in the revitalization of American society. Considering the evolution of the liberal blogosphere since Howard Dean, this paper offers perspective and encouragement on how social capital can be built online and maintained for the future. An emerging pattern of social mobilization and empowerment of the average citizen exists. President Obama’s campaign may have proven to be the much needed evidence for doubters of the ability for politicians to garner social capital online.

II. Background and Significance

A. Recent Political Candidates and the Internet

The Internet began to take its place in candidate’s repertoires during the 1996 election cycle (Casey, 1996; Rash, 1997). A presidential election year, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole both utilized the Web in creative new ways that set a standard for online politics (Margolis et al., 1997). Other down ballot races did show signs of Web-based campaigning, but this was far from commonplace. Campaign Web pages were typically very bare, offering no interactivity, limited information, and very few media images (Stone, 1996). Often all one would find is a single photograph, contact and biographical information, and brief policy positions (Gibson & McAllister, 2005). Scholars believe this was likely because campaigns were still stuck in the broadcast media model, neglecting to consider the great potential benefits of the Internet as a new communications medium (Selnow, 1998).
The coming of the 1998 cycle saw more than two-thirds of open seat House and Senate candidates using the Internet as a medium for campaign communication (Dulio et al., 1999). As opposed to 1996, where campaign Web pages provided little more than very basic information, great advancements in contribution solicitations, interactivity, and communication forums became a hallmark of online campaigning during the 1998 election cycle.

Independent Minnesota gubernatorial candidate Jesse Ventura proved to be one of the first cases where the Internet flexed its muscles in its ability to influence U.S. elections (Gibson & McAllister, 2005). Fineman (1999) describes how Ventura’s usage of the Internet, most specifically e-mail capability, assisted him in what turned out to be a very tight election. A reform party candidate, Ventura deeply embraced the Internet as a communication medium, likely because of his limited campaign budget (Raney, 1998). His campaign site offered the capability for followers to submit their e-mail address and be added to a list-serve known as “JesseNet”. During the last week of the campaign, an e-mail was sent out to this list-serve asking supporters to come out in force to help get out the vote. The tactic paid off, with 250 people showing up to help coordinate Ventura’s tour of Minnesota during the last 72 hours of the campaign (Raney, 1998). Ventura went on to win the election by a margin of three percentage points over Republican Norm Coleman.

With the coming of the new century, Web pages became increasingly complex, using HTML language and multimedia flash to create impressive graphics and aid in the construction of interactive features. One of the biggest developments in the 2000 election cycle was Republican presidential candidate John McCain and his utilization of the Internet for fundraising purposes (Fritz, 2000). His online fundraising success was critical during the primary season, with estimates indicating he raised an unparalleled $500,000 after the New Hampshire primary.
He also raised multiple millions of dollars from that point through the conclusion of the campaign (Birnbaum, 2000).

2004 brought the Howard Dean campaign, a phenomenon that transformed online American politics as we know it. Dean embraced the Internet as a central part of his campaign strategy, bringing political Web interactivity to a whole new plateau. He creatively reached out to constituents all over the country, using new digital technologies such as Meetup.com, interactive live blogs, and DeanTV. His interactivity and openness to constituent uploads proved to be an inspiration and template for many liberal candidates in 2006, particularly Democratic U.S. Senate challenger Ned Lamont.

The election cycle of 2006 saw the explosion of third-party media pages such as YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook.¹ The development of such sites allowed for constituents to play a much larger role in uploading video and public commentary on file-sharing Web pages in 2006. Due to the growing prevalence of such file-sharing outlets, candidates have to be careful of what they say and where they go. A development in 2006 was campaigns hiring workers, often referred to as “trackers”, to follow their opponents around with video cameras knowing that this tactic could potentially produce content showing the opponent in a negative light (Brody, 2006). Now, any comment or action a candidate makes may very well end up on the Web and viewed by millions of people across the world. People everywhere became familiar with candidate mishaps, most notably, George Allen’s usage of the word “macaca”.

Finally, 2008 proved to be an outstanding year for Internet politics. Through his highly interactive Web site and personalized log-in features, Barack Obama was able to draw great attention to his candidacy. The Obama staff was able to streamline volunteer efforts by putting

information online, items such as personalized undecided voter call lists. Many of the respondents for this project discussed Obama as having a complete integration of digital technology into his campaign.

The looming question is if this “integration”, which many argue started back in 2004 with the Howard Dean campaign, leads to meaningful social capital. Are campaigns able to take advantage of their relationships with others? Does this network of people remain even after the election cycle is over? By examining the digital campaigns of select liberal candidates in the 21st century, these are questions that this paper attempts to address.

B. The Creation of Networks

Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000) documents the decline of social capital in American society. He defines social capital to mean the trust, reciprocity, and feelings of connectedness that stem from face-to-face interactions (Putnam, 2000). Looking at multiple measures of connectedness, from memberships in organizations such as the World Wildlife Federation and trade unions to participation in civic groups and social clubs such as bowling leagues, he finds a steady downward trend in social capital. As the title of the book suggests, people are increasingly “bowling alone”, deserting once highly popular leagues and organizations and thereby cutting any resemblance of interconnectedness. The older generation, Putnam argues, was the foundation of these organizations. As their participation has dwindled, the younger generation has failed to fill in. As mediums for social connectedness die off, the maintenance of this capital will become increasingly harder, and eventually, non-existent. This work embraces Putnam’s definition of social capital, the benefits that come from interaction between people.
An additional component in the social capital framework that this paper embraces is the concept of maintenance, working to maintain the capital so it does not deplete. Interviews for this project reveal how important bloggers believe maintenance to be. A concept coined by Cote & Healy (2001), progressive candidate supporters seek to create and maintain a “social ozone” for the continuation of their social network. They create this ozone through a strong sense of community and altruism, which is a crucial foundation for bettering relations between people. Without its renewal, as articulated by Coleman (1988, 1990), social capital faces the prospect of total depletion. This concept is also mirrored in the works of Putnam (1993, 2000). Putnam argues the more individuals decide to come together, relying on each other, the more production of social capital increases. Conversely, the less people come together, the less social capital will be created. Indeed, social connectedness does not simply exist. As with intimate relationships that one has with other people, we as a society must work at maintaining a sense of trust and altruism. We can apply this to Internet politics by saying that simply having a Web page is not enough to build social capital. As we will explore in the context of the various progressive candidate online campaigns, empowering and maintaining relations with Web users forms the building blocks of a meaningful relationship.

C. Social Capital and the Internet

Much research has been conducted on the impact of the Internet on the creation of social capital, with the results being substantially mixed. On one side of the literature academics argue that the Internet leads to the destruction of social capital, loss of community, and decreasing amounts of social connectedness (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000). Another camp of literature has found just the opposite, stating that the Internet is a great medium for the creation of social connectedness, increasing sense of altruism and community and allowing for the greater
sharing of resources (Kazmer & Haythorhthwaite, 2001; LaRose, Eastin & Gregg, 2001; Pew, 2000, 2001). As predictable with any highly polarizing issue, some scholars have taken the middle road, arguing that the Internet neither increases nor decreases social capital creation, and instead is just an intricate part of our daily lives that maintains the status-quo (Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001). This paper describes how progressive candidates, using digital connectivity as the backbone, have been able to create connectedness both in the online and offline worlds.

Scholars who point to the Internet as a major culprit towards the decline in social capital fear the decreasing presence of face-to-face interactions. By increasing alienation and decreasing social relations, this camp of thought states that the Internet does not foster face-to-face relations, and instead boosts feelings of loneliness among users (Kraut et. al, 2002). Kraut et al. (1998) argue that although we do see increased online relations, the Internet is a cause for weaker offline interaction. Nie (2001) also argues that because the Internet consumes so much of people’s time, the amount of time spent in face-to-face interactions becomes limited. His later work, co-authored with Hillygus, further builds on this argument by concluding that family bonds are diminished when an individual spends a substantial amount of weekend time online (Nie & Hillygus, 2002).

Analysis of the in-depth interviews for this project will show that online interaction can and does lead to powerful offline interaction. Online and offline interactions are not always separate from one another. We see that previous authors tend to treat interactions as things that stay in the same mode indefinitely. This case study shows us that interactions can move between modes almost seamlessly, offline and online. It is not an either/or dichotomy.

III. Methodology
This paper takes a qualitative approach to understanding how, increasingly, liberal candidates have been able to successfully build social capital through online interactions. Drawing on in-depth interviews with seventeen respondents, nine Democratic Party campaign staff members, six liberal bloggers, and two conservative bloggers, we will explore an important network that helped to solidify Howard Dean’s online legacy, help give Ned Lamont a tremendous victory in the 2006 Connecticut Democratic Party Senate Primary, and help lead Barack Obama to a presidential victory; a network of regular citizens that came together for a common cause over the Internet.\(^2\)

A. The Case Study: The Value of Dean, Lamont, and Obama

Scholars may be quick to dismiss the findings presented here because it focuses on three specific case studies. Quantitative analysis is privileged for this exact reason. Since one can generalize from the results of most quantitative studies, qualitative research can easily be overlooked, particularly when the N is in the single digits or case study of one. However, political scientists remind us that a case study of one holds substantial value. Most notably, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) offer:

“…a single observation can be useful for evaluating causal explanations if it is part of a research program. If there are other single observations, perhaps gathered by other researchers, against which it can be compared, it is no longer a single observation” (211). Analysis of the presidential contests of 2004 and 2008, as well as the 2006 Connecticut Senate race case study, is offered in hopes that it encourages others to bring new examples of social capital in action to the social science literature. We already see such research on select candidates and social movements, but more is needed.

\(^2\) Staff members were employees of the Dean, Lamont, and Obama campaigns.
The Dean, Lamont, and Obama campaigns were selected for a number of reasons. The primary reason is because locating staff members and bloggers associated with the three campaigns was easier than locating staff members of more remote campaigns. Many of these individuals are still working in Democratic Party politics. Second, these three campaigns truly represent major forward thinking in the history of Internet campaigning. Their contributions are immense, as will become evident in the course of this paper.

Each campaign represents one blip in the historical timeline of Internet campaigning. Pundits will undoubtedly look back on the Obama campaign a few years from now and feel that the Web strategy used by his staff is seemingly outdated. However, we will likely see that high-profile candidates in the future will not only replicated many of the Obama strategies, but will them to the next level. That is the nature of digital campaigning. With that said, we must judge this and every other case study, specifically its significance, in its appropriate political and social context. The Dean, Lamont, and Obama campaigns were revolutionary in their respective times. Together, they are illustrative of a remarkable timeline of digital politics. The fact that strategies from 2004 and 2006 are being built upon today is very telling.

B. In-Depth interviews

In-depth interviews provide a unique lens through which to view political and social issues. All too often, due to their lack of generalizability, they are overlooked as a valuable research tool in the social science disciplines. It is important to remember that we can utilize in-depth interviews to inform quantitative analysis, and vice versa.

Analysis of the seventeen interviews was conducted via grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1976). An inductive method, grounded theory allows researchers to tackle specific

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3 Interviews lasted between fifty-five minutes and one hour and fifty minutes.
aims of a project without any preconceptions or hypotheses.\textsuperscript{4} Through the use of constant comparisons between interviews, researchers can extract sensitizing theoretical concepts, major themes that appear repeatedly (Glaser, 1992). Through this method, four sensitizing concepts arose addressing the question of how contemporary progressive campaigns are able to build their extensive social capital networks.\textsuperscript{5}

IV. Analysis

Four key behaviors common to the Dean, Lamont, and Obama campaigns were identified through grounded theory analysis. The four key behaviors identified as sensitizing concepts were embracing interactivity, empowering the liberal blogosphere, maintaining relations with the blogosphere, and valuing a Web presence. We can consider each of these four points individually.

A. Embracing Interactivity

It is clear that Democrats typically embrace a different online strategy than their Conservative counterparts. This is evident when we compare Howard Dean to George W. Bush, Ned Lamont to Joe Lieberman, or Barack Obama to John McCain. In a quick glance, the digital approach taken by Democrats and Republicans may seem more similar than different. All of the aforementioned Republican candidates maintained up-to-date Web pages from very early dates. They also both offered press releases, stances on issues, a substantial amount of photographs,......
and quotes from supporters. The major area where the campaign sites for these individuals differed from that of their Democratic rivals, something that could easily be overlooked at first glance, was in their implementation of interactivity on their respective Web sites.

While vying for the 2006 Connecticut Democratic Party nomination for Senate, Joe Lieberman kept a very up-to-date, professional campaign home page that offered virtually no interactivity. There was no blog, no streaming video, and no personalized interactive feature. As noted by Ray, a blogging supporter of the Lamont campaign, “Before the primary, his Web page was a joke. It was not interactive. It just had a few articles that were updated, no blog.”

The closest thing a Web site visitor could do to be “interactive” was to submit a story on how Joe’s work in the U.S. Senate impacted his or her personal life. This feature was a far cry from his challenger’s interactive features.

With only a few weeks remaining until the general election, the Lieberman campaign added a blog. This blog allowed for communication to be posted by the campaign staff for others to read. Such non-interactive blogs are not unique. Fellow Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd created the “Dodd Blog” on his 2004 re-election page. The blog was similar to Lieberman’s in that it only permitted staff members to create a post. “Blogs” of this nature allow the campaign to fully control the discourse of the site. Considering such blogs indicates that people should be cognizant of the distinction between this type of internal campaign journaling and interactive blogging. There is a big distinction in terms of what these two entities mean for free political discourse.

Fast forwarding to 2008, a republican blogger interviewed for this project noted how the Republican National Committee had plans to implement a counter to Barack Obama’s “My Barack” feature, “My McCain”. This idea was shot down by people within the McCain for

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President camp. This blogger noted that there were many ideas for interactivity that ultimately never got implemented because the McCain camp wanted to spend that money on advertising.

It was clear that the Dean, Lamont, and Obama teams felt comfortable taking the risk of having a truly interactive blog on the campaign Web page. Unlike Lieberman, Lamont’s blog could be accessed and added to by any Web page browser. It encouraged open discussion and allowed for questions and answers to be posted. Lieberman’s blog could only be added to by members of his own campaign staff. A tone set by Dean in 2004, openness was a hallmark of all three liberal candidates.

Along with having an actual interactive blog on his site, Lamont placed hyperlinks to other third-party blogs throughout his campaign page. This is a potentially dangerous move for a candidate because one is leading site visitors to a third-party page in which he or she has no control over the discourse. It is also risky because it is encouraging the Web browser to leave the campaign page with the potential of not returning. Lamont’s staff took this risk, feeling that offering open discourse was more important than controlling it. This risk paid off. As the primary campaign heated up, these third-party blog sites became an additional campaign resource. Having a blog on his page, coupled with links to other active blogs, made for an interconnected network of highly interactive virtual spaces.

B. Empowering the Liberal Blogosphere

Having this interactive space is a good step towards building a social capital network. Supporters can identify one another, learn about events, and share ideas with other like-minded people. While networking is invited simply by having this virtual space, there are additional things candidates can do to help these supporters feel empowered. We can point to Dean,

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7 A basic level of policing did take place on the blog. In his interview, Tim noted that he deleted comments that contained certain curse words.
Lamont, and Obama as candidates who went out of their way to make the bloggers feel not only welcomed, but also needed, both before and after his campaign.

One of the first steps Dean, Lamont, and Obama took towards empowering the bloggers was to continually vocalize their importance to their campaigns. This happened in the context of television interviews, newspaper quotations, and even on the liberal blogs themselves. Recognizing the Internet’s role in constructing a more deliberative democracy, these candidates continually offered bloggers verbal support. In an interview at “Blogosphere Day” held at Yale University, Ned Lamont stated

“I am happy for blogosphere day. I will be there any way I can ‘cause you guys were there for me at the beginning and helped us, and as I told people here this evening, helped to get a lot of interest and excitement and grassroots in this campaign early on, and I think this is something we can replicate around the country, where you get grassroots people energized and you have primary and challenges like this, and you can’t have too much democracy in our system” (Jane Hamsher, interviewer).  

Lamont was particularly unique in that he empowered the blogosphere by giving them his time, both in person and on the net. He conducted numerous exclusive interviews with blog supporters, and importantly, they were granted the same campaign access as traditional media reporters. During the primary election return party, multiple interview respondents discussed how the bloggers, just like members of the mainstream media, were given their own dedicated space to blog at the hotel. They bloggers about the returns and the atmosphere of the campaign at the primary night party as it was occurring. This was a new phenomenon, a trend that will continue at the Democratic Party Presidential Convention.

Bloggers also empowered and united themselves by posting videos on YouTube, or in the case of Dean, on the campaign homepage through DeanTV. In the 2006 and 2008 election cycles, bloggers would bring cameras to campaign events for both parties and post home videos

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8 Video can be viewed at: http://youtube.com/watch?v=SgPoEFqqiiQ
online. One of the most powerful examples of this came in the Jim Webb versus George Allen 2006 Virginia Senate race. Many believe that the “macaca” incident cost Allen re-election.

Respondents for this projected cited Ctblogger, CTBob, and TrueBlueCT as some of the most prominent pro-Lamont posters of videos. As Tim explains, bloggers would also go to events and report back on their blogs

“They also did a great job on their own, without us giving them information or us telling them to do something, did a great job of telling the story about the campaign. There were bloggers that actually went to events and videotaped them, you know, interview Ned, [Tom] Swan, or myself, or go to a Lieberman event and try to ask questions. They did a great job of telling the story of the campaign, not just to their readers, but to people across the country following this race who only had access to one article in the Hartford Courant every day or every other day…they did a great job of giving people a window into the campaign that they couldn’t get anywhere else” (Tim interview).

As Tim describes, blog supporters empowered themselves by conducting research about Lieberman without direction from the Lamont campaign. As will be discussed in more detail later on, when the Lieberman campaign accused Lamont’s blog network of hacking into his Web site the day before the primary, the bloggers conducted independent research to help identify what the issue was with Lieberman’s page. They broke the story on a fact that became very useful for the Attorney General, who ultimately determined that there was no foul play in the malfunction of the Senator’s page. Below, two bloggers discuss this experience in a post-election interview with Ned

Lamont: “Did bloggers hack into Joe Lieberman’s web site just seemed to list forever, which was just sort of a trivial nonsense story that had no fact basis to it at all.

ConnecticutBob: “Not only no facts, but we found proof on our own the reason why Lieberman’s site crashed, and yet it took the Justice Department and the FBI and whoever else investigated it until well after the November election to let us off the hook, and, I mean, it had to occur to you that maybe they were dragging their feet for a specific reason, maybe there was some kind of, uh…”

9 The online profiles of these three bloggers can be viewed at http://youtube.com/user/TrueBlueCT, http://youtube.com/user/ctblogger, and http://youtube.com/user/CTBob.
Lamont interrupting: “Well, on issues like that, the Lieberman campaign played them like a violin and the mainstream media followed right along” (YouTube Interview, 2006)

Supporters posted these and other YouTube videos documenting their research experience. Other videos included supporters at parades, events where Lamont made appearances, and home-made videos of why they supported Ned. This video uploads were not limited to those who were active bloggers, though bloggers certainly had a prominent role.

Bloggers became an empowered group very early in the campaign. Tim describes how they found there place in national politics well before the primary

“You had local bloggers who would ask local elected officials whether or not they would support the winner of the democratic primary. We called it “one simple question”. The first one that got on board was Mayor Malloy, who was running for governor, and he did it in the comments of a chat on Myleftnutmeg [].com, and as soon as we got him to say that he was on board, we used that piece to get Mayor Destephano on the record as well […] Then we used those to push that information out to the traditional media […] we used it as a way to put pressure on Senator Lieberman not to run in the general election if we had won in the primary, to let him know very publicly that all of these people were going to abandon him that endorsed him in the primary. So, from there the effort spread outward with national bloggers getting U.S. Senators on the record, like Hillary Clinton […] just having the bloggers call up their legislative staffs just like they were a blogger from the New York Times trying to get an answer to the question, and getting lots of people to call” (Tim interview).

This empowerment was all part of a larger strategy on behalf of the campaign. All of the interviewees who worked with the Lamont campaign described a clear lineage from blogging news to mainstream news. Local Connecticut bloggers would write about the race. These stories would be elaborated on by the national blogs, such as Dailykos.com. In this day and age, traditional media reads the national blogs on a daily basis. This gave online supporters a clear window of opportunity to make national headlines. They were able to capitalize on more than one occasion.

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10 This video in which the interview text appears can be viewed at: http://youtube.com/watch?v=iUed_izULAE
The Lamont campaign clearly reached out to people without blogging interests. They attempted to empower supporters by giving them tasks that could be completed via the Internet. One of the most revolutionary inventions of the election cycle was a digital feature called “Friends, Family, and Neighbors”.\textsuperscript{11} This allowed online visitors to create virtual cards that would be printed at the expense of the campaign and mailed in hard copy to people of the author’s choosing. This was the first feature of its kind. In 2008, Barack Obama furthered this concept with his campaign log-in feature “MyBarack”. This allowed supporters to get customized information, including ways to get involved with the campaign. Features included the construction of an individual call sheet, where the supporter could call undecided voters, lists of local house parties, and other creative tools.

\textit{C. Maintaining Relations with the Blogosphere}

If candidates are truly creating social capital, these networks, as well as the benefits that arise from them, should exist well after the election is completed. This may serve as one of the best tests in gauging the strength and existence of this social capital. In the case studies presented here, we see that both the candidates themselves and their respective support groups have worked to maintain the value of the social capital network. Lamont’s Web page, nedlamont.com, is still a fully-functional site to this day. It allows for site visitors to stay connected by signing up for e-mail updates, forward the new site to a friend, read about other candidates Ned is supporting, and link to liberal blog sites. A highly interactive feature allows for site visitors to identify local and national newspapers by typing in their zip code, then composing a letter to the editor stating what the campaign has meant to them. The site automatically e-mails the letter to the editor of the newspaper one selects. Barack Obama’s campaign homepage is now “Organizing for America”. It serves as a center of information for

\textsuperscript{11} This concept was created by the Internet Director for the Lamont campaign, Tim Tagaris.
Obama’s health care reform initiative. MyBarack is still a fully functional feature, allowing supporters from the presidential campaign to still retain relationships with other Obama supporters. By comparison, John McCain’s URL from his presidential Website, now serves as his Senate re-election site. There is no visible attempt to maintain communication with his online supporters.

Dean, Lamont, and Obama have worked to keep their presence known throughout the liberal blogosphere. On June 1st, 2007, Lamont held a Liveblog on MyLeftNutmeg.com. During his online conversation there were 51 comments, questions, and answers posted between Lamont and the citizen bloggers Lamont has continued this discourse through his Web site. He writes one year after his primary victory

“One year after the primary, so many of you are staying active and continuing to challenge the status quo when it needs challenging.

In this spirit, we have relaunched NedLamont.com as a place where you can keep up to date on my political activities and stay connected.

To start, you can write a letter to the editor about what last year’s primary victory meant to you, sign up to stay connected via email updates, read some of my reflections from the campaign trail, take action to help defeat the Republicans up for re-election who have been blocking bipartisan progress on Iraq, or find out what I’ve been up to since November” (Nedlamont.com).

Given that social capital is two-way street, as Putnam suggests, we would expect to see the bloggers also working to maintain the relationship. Indeed, the bloggers themselves have taken numerous steps to keep the network alive. First, they have worked to maintain access to blogs central to the 2008 election. In addition to keeping the liberal blog spots alive, these individuals have also maintained an active YouTube presence. This also happened in 2006, when two of the most prominent bloggers, ConnecticutBob and Spazeboy, conducted an in-depth interview with Lamont four months after the campaign. They posted the interview on YouTube, offering 33

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12 This online conversation can be found at: http://www.myleftnutmeg.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=7085
13 For full text of this letter, see http://nedlamont.com/
minutes and 19 seconds of coverage. This is a unique attempt to show the strength of the network in the post-2006 election era.

D. Valuing a Web Presence

While it may seem intuitive, the simple act of valuing ones Web presence in a campaign is a solid first step to building social capital networks online. Valuing a Web presence is much greater than simply having a presence. Valuing digital space means putting thought, energy, and resources into the online campaign. Designing a digital self in line with the campaign is not something that happens easily. It has the potential to be a very challenging task to bear, and even in the context of state-wide elections, may be pushed to the wayside or significantly compromised in favor of other priorities.

The 2006 Connecticut Senate election between Ned Lamont and Joe Lieberman is a particularly interesting case for this topic. There are multiple pieces of evidence from the Lieberman camp that, when put together, indicate that the campaign could have done more to show a valuing of its digital presence. The first piece of evidence stems from a critical malfunction in the operation of the Lieberman campaign Web page. A topic that made national news, Lieberman’s page went down during a period that included the day before, of, and after the primary. His campaign was very vocal in blaming Lamont and his online supporters for the malfunction. Through content analysis of the Lieberman page over a period of nine months, Cohen (2007) revealed that the Senator’s Web page went down at least two times prior to the primary escapade. Since this prior research called for archiving the Lieberman page once a week, it is possible the page went down, or was hacked or hijacked, additional times between the weekly Web archiving.

14 Video can be viewed at: http://youtube.com/watch?v=U9Sh3moiPwE
With Lieberman and Lamont clawing for primary votes, the 72-hour site malfunction surrounding the primary became the center of a heated political battle. The Lieberman campaign accused Lamont supporters of intentionally disabling his Web page the day before the primary. Ray describes how the Lieberman campaign was quick to point fingers at Lamont supporters

“[Lieberman] screamed about being hacked, he mentioned that the bloggers did it, which is the most ludicrous thing in the world. Nobody I know who’s worked close to the campaign would even know how to do that…so that was like the first big hit. He made us seem like we were nefarious forces attacking his Web site” (Ray interview).

The Lieberman campaign accused Lamont’s supporters of inflicting what is known as a “Distributed Denial of Service” attack, or DoS. This type of Web-based attack occurs when a hacker wants to have a specific Web page unavailable to online browsers at a particular point in time. It is executed by attacking the Web server such that it cannot adequately communicate with the site browser’s computer (Carnegie Mellon University, 1997). It is considered a cybercrime to initiate Dos attacks, and as a result, the Lieberman campaign asked the Connecticut Attorney General’s office to launch a criminal investigation.¹⁶

The evidence tends to support the fact that the Lamont campaign, as well as its supporters, played no role in the disabling of the Lieberman Web page the day before the primary. Multiple sources confirmed that the Lieberman used a very low budget Internet host, paying $15 a month. The bloggers were instrumental in uncovering this fact and alerting the press.¹⁷ By comparison, the Lamont campaign was paying $1500 a month to have their Web page hosted online. On December 20, 2006, the Connecticut Attorney General concluded that no criminal activity had taken place in the disabling the Lieberman Web page. It was determined that the server could not handle the traffic seen surrounding primary day.

¹⁶ For the Attorney General’s Office press release, see http://www.ct.gov/AG/cwp/view.asp?A=2341&Q=318548

¹⁷ For a blog posting on the subject, see http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2006/8/8/153827/3493
One may be quick to question why the Lieberman team blamed Lamont’s online supporters for the hack. Melissa gives us interesting insight into this question, theorizing that her negative feelings about bloggers dates back to his experience running for president in 2004:

“With the blogs, I think it was genuinely held that we were all yelling, screaming left-wing whackos, and I think this comes from the presidential election of 2004. I think that’s where it really comes from, Dean. I think Joe was the frontrunner. You have to look back at the 2004 stuff, because Joe was the frontrunner. Gore took his time deciding if he was going to run in the election. He ended up endorsing Dean, he didn’t endorse Joe, and I think Joe felt just so betrayed by that…he always had this idea as bloggers being this evil force of the party. I think he took that with him into this campaign, and it had a lot to do with why he made such poor online decisions. And it had a lot to do with why he didn’t want to get involved online. I mean, he had nothing online before the primary, and after the primary it was a very cynical attempt, but it was successful. It was his online presence as he saw us, purely attack and nothing else. But he didn’t need that, because he had 70% of the Republican vote, and no Republican candidate” (Melissa interview, 2008)

Melissa’s insights demonstrate the importance of a candidate’s political history in current campaigns, and provides potential insight as to why Lieberman started his online campaign so conservatively. Even though the presidential election of 2004 may be a distant memory for many Connecticut voters, its influence is still with us. As a candidate, Lieberman carries that losing experience with him. This political history has a place in the 2006 election. It may have influenced how the Lieberman campaign handled its relations with the liberal blogosphere.

V. Conclusion

Since its inception into American society, the Internet has been a great source of scholarly debate. Questions of if, how, and when the Web assists in the construction of social capital has been one of the most active debates in the social sciences. Scholars can now turn to examples in the history of the liberal blogosphere and liberal candidates to shed some light on this and other inter-related questions. In this article, we have explored four key factors that led to Dean, Lamont, and Obama’s success in creating a vital social capital network online. We
have also seen how political history may play a role in determining how a candidate chooses to use the Internet in future elections. It is clear that a meaningful connection is being made between candidate and supporter. Candidates are now attempting to keep the network of supporters alive and active well after their election cycle has ended.

We must consider the Internet in the context of the larger political climate. It is just one piece of the campaign puzzle. Some pundits argue that, even if he didn’t spend a dollar on his Internet campaign, Barack Obama would still be present. Despite the backing Dean had on the Web, it wasn’t enough to help him overcome his Iowa “scream”. Finally, the general disapproval of President Bush and his agenda in Iraq described in the early pages of this work played a significant role in Lieberman’s defeat in the primary. As exemplified by “the kiss” float, a float that creatively brings attention to Lieberman’s support of Bush, was a key aspect of ripening his campaign for an upset.  

This is, however, only part of the story. In this case, however, beneath the surface of war politics and Lieberman’s alignment with the Bush agenda, we see a fascinating story of how Web technology came to change the face of this election. The same sentiment applies to Dean and Obama; when we pull back the layers of bitter politics, we see a situation where candidates were able to use the Internet to mobilize and empower dedicated supporters. Even with a major issue looming in the background, people still need a vehicle for mobilization. The Web serves a key vehicle in that fleet.

Further considering the larger political context, timing is a very influential factor in electoral success. For Dean, his Iowa speech was bad timing. At a point where he needed to capitalize on positive free media, the major news networks had something else in mind. With Lamont, all of the respondents who worked on his campaign spoke about how the timing of the

18 For more information on the float, see http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/25/nyregion/25lieberman.html?_r=1&oref=slogin
general election was influential. Nothing was going on politically, be it on the local or national level, in August of 2006. The media was in need of a story. Had there been more campaign activity from other races to draw on, the national media may not have covered this race as much as they did. Consequently, some may be apt to argue that if there was more going on politically, people may not have gotten involved in this race with the intensity that they did. With Obama, some may say that he came on the political scene at just the right time. After the George W. Bush era, America was hungry for a new style of progressive politics. Timing was on his side.

While timing is important, I feel that such an argument does not negate the underlying concept that meaningful capital was created in the cases of Dean, Lamont, and Obama. Just because something is not covered by the mainstream media does not mean that activities are not going on. Indeed, what media stations consider to be “news” is very subjective. The reality is that people got together for the purposes of bettering society, and meaningful relationships were built.

Despite the inspiring story presented in this work, many will argue that the Dean and Lamont campaigns were a failure. After all, there is no President Dean or Senator Lamont in American history. In politics, success is measured by electoral victory, a threshold that Lamont did not obtain in the general election, and Dean did not obtain in the primary. However, one must reflect on their definition of political success. How much credit can we give to a campaign that comes close to victory, yet fails electorally? When does a campaign become a movement? Many argue that Dean and Lamont’s campaigns fundamentally changed the shape of Internet politics in the United States. They were a crucial part of a long timeline that led to increasing digital interactivity. Both Barack Obama and John McCain had interactive blogs.19 Barack

19 It should be noted, however, that these sites required some searching to actually find the interactive discussion. The actual “blog” page is nothing more than a campaign diary written by staffers. For all three candidates, web users must click on additional hyperlinks called “comments” to find the interactive discussion embedded in the Web site.
Obama had, and still has, an Organizing Fellows Program to help organize grassroots support. During her primary campaign, Hillary Clinton had a HillRaisers team. These are all interactive ways to get people involved. This participation begins online, and leads to the construction of offline social capital. The campaigns of Dean Lamont served as the framework for the ideas we see today. Many of their ideas, such as submitting videos to campaign Websites, have now been replicated by candidates nationwide. So, while these two candidates may not have achieved electoral victory, their contribution to democracy was substantial.

The next step in this line of research is to attempt to quantify the tangible impacts these social capital networks had for Dean, Lamont, and Obama, and will have for candidates and social movements in the future. How many new people got involved in politics? How many people were involved in the campaign both online and offline? Will these people participate in the future? These and other questions are in need of answers.

Another area of future research is to investigate what this network of individuals will do for democratic politics in the future. Ned Lamont and Barack Obama’s Web sites are still active, and they still have the e-mail list and contact information for all of their supporters. In 2008, Barack Obama was labeled the “Democratic Party Power Broker” for having such a list (Stern 2008). He has a database with the names of over two million supporters. How will this list be utilized in the future? Will the Democratic Party attempt to take control of this list? Will these lists lead to Obama and Lamont becoming more powerful within the Democratic Party? These are fascinating, cutting-edge areas of future research.

Moving forward, one can clearly see that the Internet is fast becoming a highly influential sphere of interaction in the arena of political elections. It brings a newness and excitement to the political system and furthers the relationship between online and offline action. As we see more
people getting involved, we can see that there are significant qualitative changes taking place in
the political arena. At times, it seems like America has been moving away from a truly
democratic state. Voices are not heard. When candidates like Dean, Lamont, and Obama come
around and enthusiastically welcome the input and participation of the average citizen, one
begins to see evidence of democracy and equality waving their way into the political
organization and culture of the United States.
WORKS CITED


