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- ▶ [In This Issue](#)
-
- ▶ [Features](#)
-
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-
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-
- ▶ [Consultant Sign Ups](#)
-
- ▶ [Movers and Shakers](#)
-
- ▶ [Voting Matters](#)
-
- ▶ [Opinion](#)
-
- ▶ [Online Campaigner](#)
-
- ▶ [Consultants' Corner](#)
-
- ▶ [International Politics](#)
-
- ▶ [Editor's Note](#)
-
- ▶ [Letters](#)
-
- ▶ [Campaign Doctor](#)

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- ▶ [Political Pages](#)
-
- ▶ [On the Record](#)
-
- ▶ [Political Oddsmaker](#)
-
- ▶ [The Political Jobline](#)
-
- ▶ [Events](#)
-
- ▶ [Political Trivia](#)
-
- ▶ [Books](#)
-
- ▶ [Off The Record](#)

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C&E

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Opinion: The Meetup Presidency

By :- Jesse Gordon and Christine B. Williams

An organizing tool guaranteed to triple donations. Proven to increase campaign volunteers by 30 percent monthly. Ready-to-use in all 50 states. Another McCain-Feingold loophole? No, it's Meetup.com, the source of Howard Dean's and Wesley Clark's grass roots Democratic presidential primary surges, now poised to do the same for John Kerry in the general election.

The Internet came of age in the 2004 Presidential nomination contest. And it was not in the expected role of a new medium of communication destined to supplant television. Instead, the Internet proved its worth as the high tech equivalent of pre-television one-on-one campaign techniques long used by political parties to mobilize support for their candidates, largely through Meetup.com

We surveyed 1,500 attendees at Meetups from October 2003 through April 2004 to investigate how Meetups might work for Kerry.

How Meetups helped Dean and Clark

Meetups are Internet-organized volunteer-run meetings of people who share a common interest, arranged through the Web site www.Meetup.com. The Dean campaign was the first presidential campaign to extensively use Meetup.com, beginning in December 2002. The Draft Clark movement and several other campaigns soon followed. Since then, "Politics and Activism" has become Meetup's largest category by far, with more than 60,000 people attending monthly at the

peak of the primary season.

Dorie Clark, a press secretary for the Dean campaign, summed up the benefits.

"Meetup gets people invested in the campaign. They're not just passive supporters; they're active participants," she said. "The more connected people feel to a Dean community, the more likely they will volunteer, and the less likely they will be to change allegiance to another candidate."

John Hlinko, founder and leader of the "Draft Wesley Clark" movement, credits Meetup with allowing growth from one campaign Web site to 100 local chapters in 90 days. Kerry's Meetup numbers similarly increased fourfold from the time of the Iowa contest to the nomination wrap up in mid-March.

Meetups provide a link between the formal campaign and local grass-roots politics. Most people first attend Meetups and then become involved with the campaign, providing a local means to get further involved with the national campaign.

"Over 200,000 Americans have expressed interest in meeting with their neighbors to plan for an election many months away," William Finkel, Meetup's outreach manager, said. "That shows that Americans do care about their government."

The general election, Meetups and Kerry

Steve Grossman, former chair of the Democratic National Committee and national finance chair of the Dean campaign, said he sees significant opportunity in Meetup.

"Meetup can be used by the Democrats to level the playing field ... and truly bring back a commitment to participatory politics in America. That's the hallmark of the Democratic Party. Adapting Meetup as an organizational tool of choice addresses our core strengths and values."

The top three Meetup political categories are Democracy for America (the post-Dean organization), the Kerry campaign and the Democratic Party. A large majority of the political Meetups are for Democratic campaigns or liberal causes.

The majority of Meetup attendees first found their local Meetups because of campaign home page links. Local political Web sites could similarly direct viewers to their upcoming local Meetups, which would increase attendance and thereby increase support for Kerry.

Grossman said the Internet is a powerful tool, but must be used carefully.

“You can’t simply look at the Internet as a fund-raising tool. For example, you can buy names to build your e-mail lists, and your campaign will still fall flat if you don’t get those people on-board as stakeholders. Meetup is a tool for grass roots organizing, and small-donor fund-raising is a natural by-product of a Meetup-based campaign.”

What type of people attend Meetups? Demographically, the profile of these survey respondents is mostly white, middle-class and older than the average Internet user.

While Meetups primarily reach one side of the digital divide, they should be considered a means of creating Kerry recruiters, not just creating Kerry voters. Most attendees (79 percent) invite others to attend subsequent Meetups.

“In addition to the monthly national action item of generating letters to early primary state voters and elected officials, Meetups were a springboard for the birth of hundreds of local and state Dean organizations,” said Michael Silberman, who was Dean’s national Meetup director.

Can the success of Dean and Clark Meetups be replicated for the Kerry campaign? Yes, if attendees feel empowered to take grass roots action and if the Meetup hosts receive appropriate support (supplies, tasks, campaign materials) from the campaign. Local Kerry organizers should draw on the large base of Meetup hosts who were formerly Dean and Clark supporters, and encourage them to lead Kerry Meetups and Democratic Party Meetups.

From anecdotal evidence, the Kerry campaign has not heavily focused on Meetups as a recruiting tool, and the Democratic Party Meetups are even less organized.

Meetup hosting is a relatively small investment with a potentially large return. Plan on some introductory activities

and on addressing new supporters separately from those already onboard.

“When there’s lots of new folks coming, they expect to be wooed for a bit, and to have a little cheerleading and fun before some real action items later on,” Hlinko said.

How Meetups will change politics

Meetup.com includes Senate, House and gubernatorial races. While the non-presidential Meetup listings remain small (the largest, Barack Obama, the Democratic U.S. Senate nominee in Illinois, boasts 1,300 registrants), registrations continue to grow, and Meetup.com anticipates wider use in 2006.

Survey respondents said they expect of Meetup usage primarily by future grass roots campaigns, as well as issue campaigns and statewide campaigns. We surveyed how Meetups would be useful to future campaigns. Attendees had three basic categories of motivation:

1. Information-seeking.

Respondents came to Meetups “to learn more about the candidate and to see who else is interested in him. Also to learn what else we could do to get involved locally.” Meetup hosts should provide information about the candidate’s background, and make campaign materials readily available.

2. Social interaction or community building. The need for building “social capital” as expressed in books like “Bowling Alone,” is the goal of Meetup.com’s founders. Many respondents wrote comments like, “I like the informality and also the flexible, yet helpful structure provided by the host.”

3. Empowerment and task orientation. The Dean campaign used Meetups for direct volunteer tasks such as writing personal notes to voters in other states, telling them why they supported Dean, or urging officeholders to endorse Dean. The monthly Meetups provide the only regular meeting-place for casual volunteers. One response: “Coming together with other concerned voters gives me a sense of community, empowerment and hope. It also directs our energies toward specific events for which we

can volunteer.”

By the November elections, perhaps a million people will have attended Meetups, and a cadre of several thousand will have hosted Meetups. The positive experience of these hosts and participants lead them to expect they would be repeat attendees.

Christine B. Williams is professor of government at Bentley College in Waltham, Mass. Her current research focus and publications examine the Internet as a tool for political campaigns, grassroots organizing and issue advocacy.

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