

Chapter 11

Using Presidential Popularity for Understanding the Relationship between President Bush and Congressional Republicans' Online Campaigning: A Preliminary Examination of Representative Websites for the 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008 Elections

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an assessment of the growing use of the Internet by congressional campaigns in the United States to determine whether candidates' Websites are affected by presidential popularity. There is previous research linking low public opinion of a sitting president with a negative impact on members of his political party running for election, particularly during the midterm, but very little analysis examines this phenomenon online. The chapter examines the 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008 House Republican campaign Websites to see if there is a relationship between presidential popularity and congressional online campaign behavior. An examination of Republican campaign Websites was coded based on whether President Bush was present in picture form. The authors demonstrate that there is a correlation between President Bush's popularity and his presence on these Republican congressional Websites in general and more prevalent in different regions of the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Voter evaluations of presidential performance play a significant role when they assess congressional incumbents during an election. The research investigating whether low public opinion of a sitting president has an impact on members of his own political party in congressional elections, particularly during the midterm is significant (Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Campbell 2008; Gronke 2000; Jacobson 2004; Kahn and Kenney 2009; Lee and Oppenheimer 1999). This connection is usually based on evaluation of the policies and programs that the current administration accomplished or failed to complete. Representatives therefore have to walk a fine line when deciding whether to run a reelection campaign with or against the current president of the same party. This also includes a relatively new tool for campaigning, namely the use of a candidate Web site. The question for this preliminary analysis is whether there is a correlation between presidential popularity and whether a candidate of the same political party chooses to have a photo of the president on his/her campaign Web site. The study examines the 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008 House Republican campaign Web sites to see if there is a relationship between presidential popularity and congressional online campaign behavior. An examination of Republican campaign Web sites was coded based on whether President Bush was present in picture form. We demonstrate that there is a correlation between President Bush's popularity and his presence on these Republican congressional Web sites in general and more prevalent in different regions of the country.

The use of new technology has become an increasingly important aspect of American electoral politics. With the advent of mega storage capacities on base servers, quicker Pentium computers, twitter, social networking sites and faster online connection speeds, these technolo-

gies increase the connections we make and the speed with which we deliver massive amounts of information. Campaigns have also begun to expand their use of technology to better communicate and disseminate information on various issues. A candidate's Web site is used during a political campaign to interact with voters, potential supporters, and the media to help disseminate the information of a campaign. Campaign Web sites have also been used to raise millions of dollars and recruit thousands of volunteers that participate at events or entirely online through e-mails, discussion groups and instant messages. An analysis of the potential impact of public opinion on those candidates utilizing the Internet must include an examination of these campaign Web sites. The affects of the Internet on politics is generally unexplored, as scholars are just beginning to answer numerous questions about its potential.

The goal of this analysis is to study the online campaign behavior of House Republicans running for election during the 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008 elections. We would like to determine whether representatives from the same political party as the president will change their online campaign behavior due to an increasingly unpopular president on their campaign Web sites. President Bush has experienced historic highs (86%-89%) in public opinion after 9/11 and significant lows (30%-32%) due to the War in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina and the economic meltdown (www.Pollingreport.com). These events also led to the Democrats regaining control of the Senate and House of Representatives in 2006. This dichotomy presents researchers with a unique opportunity to examine how public opinion impacts political campaigning online. A careful analysis of presidential approval in relation to these campaign Web sites will further our understanding of public opinion, political campaigns and the use of information technologies for political purposes.

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