

Executive Summary

Background on Web White and Blue

“Web White & Blue 2000, a project of the Markle Foundation, was a non-partisan consortium of 17 of the largest Internet news and news organizations who came together to highlight the potential of the Internet to expand citizen participation in our democracy.

A centerpiece of Web White & Blue 2000 was the first-ever online presidential debate which ran from October 1 through November 8, 2000 and was carried simultaneously on the 17 sites on the Web White & Blue network. The presidential campaigns of George W. Bush, Al Gore, Pat Buchanan, Harry Browne, Howard Phillips and John Hagelin participated in this historic Internet event. The debate exchanges contained two parts: a Message of the Day from the campaign and a response to a Question of the Day submitted by an Internet user. Responses could take any form (video, audio, text, or links to a candidate's web site), and were not limited in length. Each campaign was permitted a rebuttal to their opponent's message of the day and question of the day responses.

In addition to the Rolling Cyber Debate, Web White & Blue 2000 featured a daily selection of links to online political information from the 17 charter sites known as the Best of the Best, a Featured Non-Profit Site of the Week, and a directory of state-by-state election information.”

From the “WWB Traffic Report” by Jonah Seiger

The Charter Sites of the Web White and Blue Network

- ABCNews.com
- America Online
- Excite
- CNN.com
- FOXNews.com
- I-Village.com
- MSN.com
- MSNBC.com
- Netnoir.com
- MTV.com
- NPR.com
- The New York Times on the web
- Oxygen.com
- PBS.com
- WashnigtonPost.com

- USAToday.com
- Yahoo.com

Web White and Blue is a Markle Foundation attempt to use the power of new and emerging communication for the public good. Like its other projects, Markle pursues this goal through a range of activities including analysis, research, public information and the development of innovative media products and services. Web White and Blue is but one example of a project that Markle has created and operated - using not only grants but also investments and strategic alliances with non-profits and businesses to accomplish its desired ends.

To manage Web White and Blue, Markle assembled a bi-partisan team with diverse talents. Leading the team are Zoë Baird, Markle Foundation President, who helped to conceptualize and implement the project; Markle Foundation Chief Strategic Officer and Managing Director Julia Moffett, who assembled the management team; and Markle Foundation Director of Project Development Barbara Fedida Brill, who serves as the Web White and Blue Project Director. The outside members of the team include seasoned political veterans such as Grassroots.com CEO and former White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry, a Democrat, and Doug Bailey, a Republican and founder of FreedomChannel.com and The Hotline. Jonah Seiger, co-founder of Mindshare Internet Campaigns LLC, manages Web White & Blue's Internet strategy. During the 2000 election cycle, Peter Orvetti, formerly of National Journal's Cloakroom and National Journal's Technology Daily, oversaw the editing of Web White & Blue content. Steven Clift leads Web White & Blue outreach and site recruitment efforts.

Evaluation Goals and Components

The Markle Foundation, Web White and Blue's management team, and Web White and Blue's 17 charter sites put substantial effort into building and maintaining the Web White and Blue network. To better understand the effect of this collaboration and to build a strong foundation for future efforts, the Markle Foundation engaged in a multi-faceted evaluation of Web White and Blue 2000. The evaluation was conducted with the following questions in mind:

- How did participation in the WWB network affect the charter sites?
- Did the WWB network affect the expectations or behaviors of those who used it?
- Where do users and the charter sites want WWB to go from here?

Answers to these questions serve several purposes. First and foremost, it provides data critical to determining how to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of Web White and Blue endeavors. Second, the evaluation fills a critical gap in scientific knowledge about what and how citizens learn about politics from the Internet. As a result, the evaluation is designed to provide broad audiences with new insights on how the Internet changes politics.

The evaluation has five main components:

- Web White and Blue network usage statistics,
- a voluntary user survey,
- in-depth interviews with representatives of the charter sites,
- Internet-based interviews with a random sample of Americans that gauge the effect of particular web sites across broad populations, and

- laboratory experiments that reveal how differences between web sites affect the extent to which they change users’ political beliefs and behaviors.

Each component of the evaluation provides a key piece of information regarding how the Web White and Blue network affected the charter sites that contributed to it or citizens at large. Some of these components, such as usage statistics and the voluntary user survey on webwhiteblue.org, are standard fare for evaluations of Internet entities. Other components, such as the Internet-based interviews and laboratory experiments, add innovative social scientific methods to this evaluation. Collectively, the five components clarify the impact of the Web White and Blue network. They reveal which aspects of Web White and Blue boost user confidence in the quality of political information online, raise user interest in the campaigns, and spur political learning. They also show which aspects of the site were most successful in the eyes of the charter sites. This executive summary lays out the main themes of the evaluation and highlights a few of its findings.

Charter Site Interviews

A critical component of the evaluation is to learn about Web White and Blue from the perspective of its 17 charter sites. Barbara Fedida and Michael Cornfield interviewed representatives from Web White and Blue network Charter Sites. The interviews, designed to be 45-60 minutes in length, cover four main areas – *Working with WWB*, *Effect of the Partnership*, *Rolling Cyber Debate and Best of the Best*, and *The Future*.

The following headlines emerge from the interviews:

- The charter sites expressed universal praise for the syndication model, Mindshare's performance, and the WWB mission. The WWB brand is “established”

as far as the charter sites are concerned and chances are excellent they will continue to participate.

✿ The charter sites see little-to-no downside to participating in Web White and Blue so long as the content is free and non-partisan, requires no labor from the participants, and viewers remain on the charter sites. They are amenable to other public service applications of the "plug and play" format within WWB's syndication model.

✿ Traffic was very, very low, both within the charter organizations (i.e., charter site employees made limited use of WWB) and with their audiences. However, most charter site representatives attributed this to the candidates' performance in the Rolling Cyber Debate, not to Markle's efforts or WWB generally.

✿ There were three types of charter members: news organizations (e.g. CNN), specialty portals (e.g., I-Village), and content aggregators (e.g., Yahoo). While all voiced support for the public service mission behind WWB, each brought distinctive desires to the project. News organizations were most concerned about competition, and wanted, above all, breaking news such as the Rolling Cyber Debate was designed to generate. The specialty portals sought credibility with their target audiences, news organizations, and political elites; consequently, they wanted debate topics that spoke to these identities. The content aggregators wanted visitors to stay a long time and return regularly, so the more content WWB generated, including "Best of the Best" and other features, the better.

✿ The willingness of charter participants to promote WWB and the Rolling Cyber Debate seemed more closely tied to the content (and their distinctive content needs) than to the interactive features. That is, they were more interested in promoting the candidates' debate answers (tying them to their own content) than a question from someone using their site.

✿ In considering possible applications of the WWB network to other aspects of public affairs, there was more enthusiasm for special events (i.e. a town meeting or debate on an urgent issue featuring officials from the White House and minority party Congressional leadership) than for ongoing events (i.e. an interactive adjunct to the weekly radio addresses, featuring the same types of speakers).

MAIN IMPLICATION: WWB found a way to attend to, and reconcile, participation incentives for citizens, media enterprises, and politicians. These interviews suggest that the WWB network can continue to serve as a unique and valuable public affairs forum that benefits both the charter sites and the growing universe of WWB network us.

Usage Statistics

Mindshare Internet Campaigns LLC developed and maintained the Web White & Blue web site, its content syndication system, and its Rolling Cyber Debate technology platform. They also tracked patterns of usage to the Web White and Blue site (<http://webwhiteblue.org>; henceforth referred to as WWB.org). These patterns reveal interesting trends – changes in how viewers used the site as the election approached. Chapter 2 contains a full account of what we learned. Headlines from this data are as follows:

- From its launch on June 28, 2000 through November 8, 2000, WWB.org received a grand total of 7,518,608 page views.
- Between October 1, 2000 and November 8, 2000, the Web White & Blue Rolling Cyber Debate received 737,944 page views.
 - Of these, 43% (314,833) were through the 17 Charter sites.
 - The remaining 57% (423,161) were through WWB.org, in part because America Online linked to it for the first 10 days of the debate.
- The Best of the Best feature received 3,919,214 page views.
 - Of these, 56% (2,197,226) were before the launch of the WWB Rolling Cyber Debate, when Best of the Best was on the WWB.org homepage.
 - The remaining 44% (1,721,988) took place from October 1 through November 8, when Best of the Best was housed on an internal page.

● The state-by-state election directory received 732,621 page views from its launch on September 15, 2000 through November 8, 2000.

Voluntary User Survey

Usage statistics provide valuable information about the frequency and timing of traffic to webwhiteblue.org. Frequency and impact, however, may be two different things. As a result, it is important to supplement usage statistics with users' views of the network. For that reason, I asked that a voluntary user survey be added to WWB.org. The survey joins questions about viewers' Internet habits and prior interest in politics with questions about how they judged WWB.org, its Rolling Cyber Debate, and its links as informative, useful, and trustworthy. The survey was added to the site on October 11, 2000 and over 3000 viewers completed it. With so many responses, we can identify how and why users differed in the parts of the site they liked. Chapter 5 contains a full account of what we learned.

Headlines from this data include the following:

● We asked participants to “tell us what you think of the Web White & Blue site.

Did you find the site: easy to use, comprehensive and frustrating.”

- 81% of participants found the “easy to use.”
- 79% of participants found the site to be “comprehensive.”
- 11% of participants found the site to be “frustrating.”

● To gauge the effect of the network, we asked: If you were looking for specific election information on this site, did you find it or do you expect to find it by following our links to other election sites?

● 31% chose the response “yes, I found what I was looking for.”

● 24% chose the response “yes, I expect to find it.”

● 20% chose the response “No, I did not find it.”

● The remaining 24% responded that they were “not looking for specific information.”

● In short, over 70% of participants who were on the site looking for something specific were able to, or expected to, find it on the network.

● In three separate questions, we asked participants if they found “links from Web White and Blue to other election related sites” to be *useful*, *informative*, and *trustworthy*. In each case, at least 75 % of participants gave positive answers.

● Users who were in their first year of using the web to access election information, roughly 70% of our participants, were more positive about link quality. For each of the three categories, no less than 78% of these Internet rookies gave positive answers.

● More experienced users had more varied opinions with 73% responding positively to questions about link usefulness and informativeness and 68% responding positively to a question about the links’ trustworthiness.

- In two separate questions, we asked participants if they found “Web White and Blue’s Rolling Cyber Debate to be” *useful* and *informative*. In each case, at least 74% of participants gave positive answers.

- Again, new users were more enthusiastic. 77% gave positive responses to the *useful* question and 79% gave positive responses to the *informative* question.

- The equivalent statistics for more experienced users were 65% and 66% respectively.

The user survey, by allowing users to express their views about various aspects of Web White and Blue, provides a clearer view of how the WWB network affected users than would usage statistics alone. However, such responses – as is true of the responses to most published Internet evaluations – must be understood for what they are. The people who take such surveys are not representative of broader populations. They are the select few who are so interested in news and politics that they found WWB.org and stayed on it long enough to answer questions about it. While there is no reason to doubt that the survey tells us about *their* experiences with Web White and Blue, a firm understanding of its effect requires additional kinds of data.

Internet-based Interview Headlines

To clarify the Web White and Blue network’s affect on users, we needed a way to compare data such as that collected in the voluntary user survey with data on how the network affected the people who were not be inclined to fill out such a survey. Internet-based interviews, therefore, became a critical part of the evaluation. Such interviews

resemble telephone-based public opinion polls. Participants are recruited via telephone. They are asked if they want a free personal computer and/or Internet access in exchange for agreeing to participate in web-based interviews. The advantages of such interviews over telephone polls are numerous and include the fact that images, audio, and streaming video can be sent to respondents during questioning – which widens the kinds of Internet-related hypotheses analysts can test.

We contracted with Knowledge Networks of Menlo Park, CA – the Industry leader in Internet-based interviewing -- to administer this part of the evaluation. I presented the firm with a new research design. In it, subjects are presented with a seemingly standard interview about their Internet usage. Then, the interview is interrupted and subjects are sent to one or two web sites of our choosing for five minutes each. Some of the sites are members of the WWB network, while others are not. After time is up, the interview resumes, with respondents answering questions about what they saw. A week later, all respondents are contacted for a brief follow-up interview. Between October 13 and November 6, 2000, we interviewed a random, and quite diverse, sample of 1199 Americans.

This way of examining a web site's impact produces interesting findings. One such finding focuses on WWB.org and is displayed as Figure 1. Chapter 6 contains findings on other sites as well as a more detailed explanation of the storyline that follows.

Figure 1 depicts the effect of WWB.org from the respondents' perspective. The first bar shows responses to the question "Have you ever heard of webwhiteblue.org?" Only 1% of the randomly selected respondents were initially aware of the site. Since

WWB.org was not designed as a destination site and did not engage in extensive self-promotion, such numbers are not unexpected.

This numbers seems to suggest that WWB.org had little or no effect on citizens. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the general public’s lack of awareness of this and most other political sites we tested implies that the sites had no effect. To better gauge the effect, it is important to determine whether those who viewed the site were changed by it. So, after interrupting the interview and bringing respondents to the site, we then continued the interview by asking them to judge what they saw. We asked respondents to “agree” or “disagree” with statements such as:

- I can use the site to find information that is accurate and non-partisan.
- I can use the site to get the information I want quickly and easily.

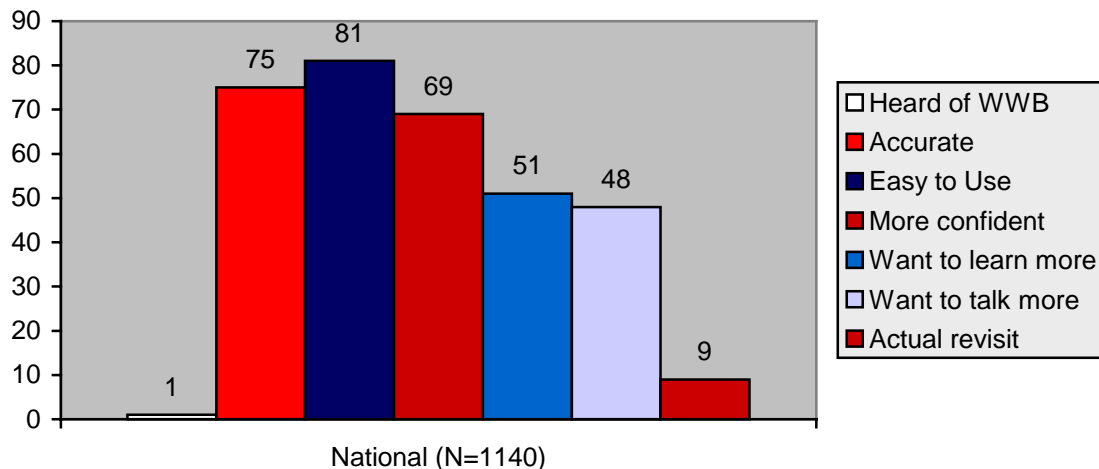


Figure 1. Percent responding yes to WWB questions.

As Figure 1 shows, webwhiteblue.org was judged “accurate” and “easy to use” by an overwhelming number of respondents -- about 99% of whom were viewing the site for the very first time. 75% judged it to be “accurate” and 81% responded that it was “easy to

use.” To gauge how viewing webwhiteblue.org would affect citizens’ subsequent political beliefs and behaviors, we then asked the respondents a series of questions about themselves. Among the things we asked was for respondents to reply “agree” or “disagree” to the following statements:

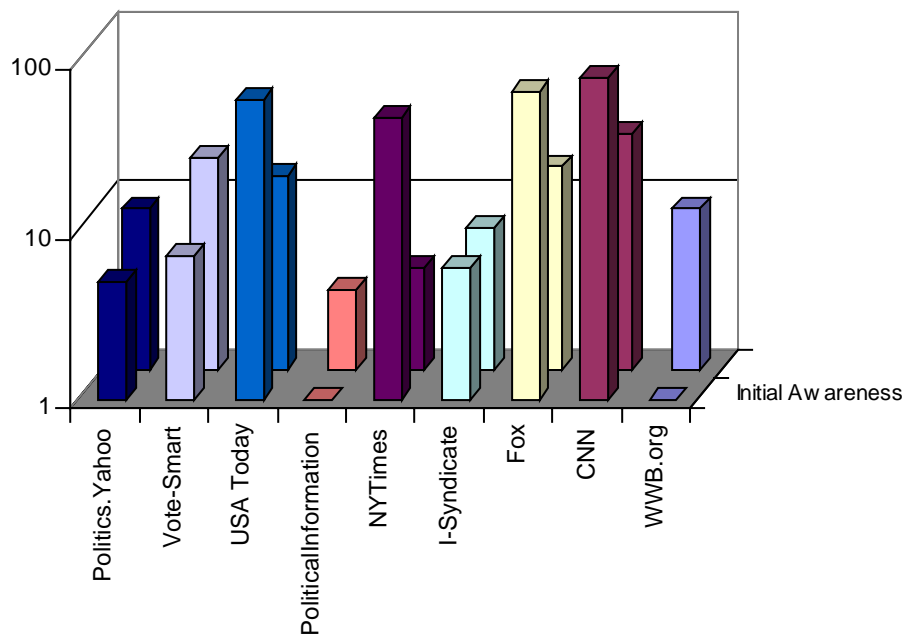
- The site makes me feel more confident about the quality of political information available on the Internet.
- The site makes me want to learn more about politics.
- The site makes me more likely to talk about politics with others.

As Figure 1 shows, here too, a single five minute viewing period changed how these new viewers would next engage the political process, with 69% expressing greater confidence in the quality of political information on the Internet, 51% wanting to learn more, and 48% more likely to discuss politics with others.

To further gauge the effect of a single exposure to a particular web site to a broad population of Internet users, we contacted all respondents a week after their initial interview. 9% revisited webwhiteblue.org. In other words, a single exposure to webwhiteblue.org by members our respondent pool, most of whom were not very interested in the political side of the Internet, induced a near ten-fold increase in the number of people visiting that site. Such results are very suggestive of the impact that a well-conceived web site can have.

Indeed, revisitation rates provide a firm measure of how a site affected individuals because there is an important difference between feeling good about a site after viewing it and actually taking the time to revisit it later. Revisitation suggests a level of interest so

large that a respondent would choose to view that site over all of the other things that he or she could do. Figure 2 documents revisitation rates for other news and information sites. As a benchmark for evaluating the extent to which the single site view during the interview could have prompted the revisit, we also include the sites' initial awareness numbers in the figure (they are the bars in front.)



	Initial Awareness	Revisit
■ WWB.org	1	9
■ CNN	80	25
■ Fox	66	16
■ I-Syndicate	6	7
■ NYTimes	46	4
■ PoliticalInformation	1	3
■ USA Today	59	14
■ Vote-Smart	7	18
■ Politics.Yahoo	5	9

Figure 2. The Impact of Exposure

Before drawing conclusions from this figure, it is worth noting that the numbers in the two columns are not strictly comparable. Brand awareness does not constitute

evidence of prior use. And just because 80% are aware of CNN does not mean that we should expect 80% to use the site within a given week. With those caveats in mind, here is how to read the figure.

Three of the four sites for which respondents were most aware before the viewing periods are also the ones that respondents were most likely to visit afterwards (CNN, Fox, and USA Today). The site for which this pattern does not hold is the New York Times site. Taking the Times' place among the top four revisited sites is Vote-Smart, the site that respondents regarded as best on several qualitative dimensions (see Chapter 6).

Respondents made other distinctions as well. Of the two least known sites initially, politicalinformation.com and WWB.org, the percentage revisiting WWB.org was more than triple the percentage revisiting politicalinformation.com. It is also true that a higher percentage of respondents ranked WWB.org higher than this commercial version of a syndicated content site on every qualitative dimension that we measured. Yahoo's political site, also consistently evaluated more favorably than politicalinformation.com, was also far more likely to be revisited.

With the revisitation statistics presented, we can see that respondents' site evaluations impact not only their feelings about the political process but also at least one of their subsequent politically oriented behaviors. When users identified sites that they regarded as inferior in terms of performance, such as the New York Times and PoliticalInformation.com sites, they refused to revisit – a justifiable choice given the presence of numerous other sites providing similar information. Similarly, when users found sites they regard as accurate and easy to use, such as Vote-Smart, WWB.org, and the other news-based dot-coms, they returned voluntarily.

Laboratory Experiment Headlines

Laboratory experiments provided our final venue for evaluating the effects of the WWB network on users, both current and potential. The experiments address the main problem associated with drawing causal inference from more commonly available types of Internet usage information (hits, page views, time spent on a page). The problem is *self-selection*. Specifically, people who view one political web site are likely to view many others of the same kind (e.g., a randomly selected user who views CNN is more likely to also view other news sites – i.e., the New York Times site -- than is a randomly selected viewer who does not view CNN.) As a result, it can be difficult to determine whether a user's exposure to *a particular site* caused them to change their beliefs or behavior.

The experiments address self-selection problems by varying the extent to which users can experience other web sites. Specifically, we asked some subjects to restrict their attention to only one site, others we asked to view only two sites, others were asked to view only three, others were given very long lists of sites to view, and some were given no instructions at all. By varying subjects' exposure and access to WWB.org and other web sites, we can obtain a much clearer view of what happens to users of the Web White and Blue network.

Our experiments were run in a lab designed to record every aspect of a person's Internet viewing behavior. The lab generates data that shows us why people choose one web site over another. Such comparisons provide information critical to understanding what aspects of the Web White and Blue network were most effective. They can also prove insightful to a broader range of current and future Internet entrepreneurs.

We conducted the experiments at the University of California, San Diego from October 16 through November 4, 2000. Among the headlines emerging from the experiments is the Internet's power to affect citizens' evaluations of presidential candidates. After viewing various web sites in our laboratories, we asked all 428 of our experimental subjects the following true/false question.

● [Site X] makes me think about at least one of the candidates in the presidential election in a new way.

316 of our subjects viewed webwhiteblue.org and were asked this question about it. Figure 3 summarizes their responses. Approximately 50% of the subjects reported a change in how they viewed at least one of the candidates, with an even split in whether these revised evaluations were more positive or negative.

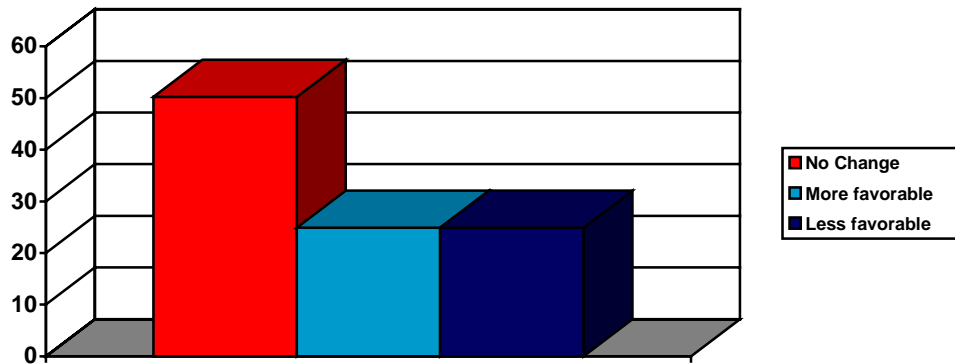


Figure 3. How one exposure to WWB.org affected candidate evaluations.

To see that this high rate of change is unlikely to be an artifact of how the site was presented to subjects, and to preview the fact that many political web sites had such an effect, Figure 4 shows how responses to WWB.org and CNN.com varied over a range of experimental treatments.

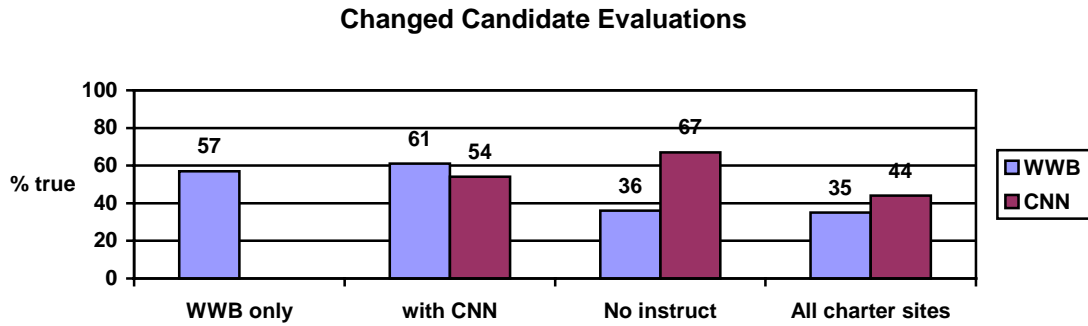


Figure 4. How the Effect Survives Varied Experimental Conditions

The bar to the left shows that 57% of the subjects who viewed WWB.org -- in an experiment where we asked them to view *only* that site -- changed their evaluation of at least one presidential candidate. The second set of bars shows an equivalent statistic for an experiment where subjects were asked to view WWB.org and CNN.com. The third set of bars shows an equivalent statistic for an experiment where subjects were given absolutely no instructions about which sites to view. The right-most set of bars gives the same statistic for an experiment where subjects were given a list of all the Web White and Blue charter sites.

While many interesting conclusions can be drawn from the data, two lessons of Figure 4 should not be overlooked. First, as subjects are given an increasing number of options from which to choose, the effect of any particular web site on someone who actually views it decreases. This is not surprising, the more sites that people are encouraged to view the less likely it is that any particular one could cause a change as important as a candidate evaluation. Second, many site-specific effects do not disappear; even when users have many sites from which to choose, certain sites leave distinct impressions. Indeed, subjects report that viewing one of these sites changed their view of a candidate even when given long lists or no lists at all. In sum, introducing numerous

other viewing possibilities did not eliminate how many of these sites affected people who viewed them.

The exact meaning of these findings is the subject of ongoing analyses. For example, we find that as the number of options people have increases, or if no instructions are given, respondents are increasingly likely to view only sites with established brand names. This suggests that the lure of brand names is quite high in the political part of the Internet and, as a result, that the barriers to success for new political Internet efforts can be quite high. Another caveat to keep in mind is that many of our subjects had not before used the Internet to learn about the election – so the effects we witness are partially attributable to the fact that some of our subjects were really thinking deeply about the candidates for the first time.

In general, however, these findings also suggest just how powerful Internet presentations can be and how their power might grow as more people turn to the Internet for news and information. Indeed, comparing responses over the wide range of circumstances in which subjects are placed in the experiments and Internet polls provides a rich picture of what attracts users to any particular political web site, what aspects of the site are most likely to encourage return visits, and what types of changes are most likely to increase the site's reach and influence.

Implications

It has become increasingly fashionable to claim that the Internet did not have an important effect on the 2000 elections and has only limited potential for affecting politics in the immediate future. But what does it mean to say that the Internet has had little or no effect? In a year where the presidential election was determined by a few hundred votes

in the state of Florida and where the balance of power in the U.S. Senate was determined by a similarly close margin, it was possible for even a small Internet effect to change electoral history.

A problem with debates about the Internet's political impact is that systematic data about its effects is difficult to come by. Hit counts can reveal who saw a web site, but they provide little credible evidence about the extent to which a web page or web site changes users' behaviors or beliefs. This evaluation of Web White and Blue reduces doubts about the Internet's political impact by documenting and analyzing how an innovative Internet entity affected its contributors and its real and potential client base.