

## A Brief History of Internet Campaigning

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The first web browser, aptly named The WorldWideWeb, was created in 1990 by a guy named Tim Berners-Lee. In order to access any site on the internet, all a user would need is a URL, short for *Uniform Resource Locator*, which became the standard address for a new, completely digital landscape of communication. I want to focus on how people began to engage in politics through the internet because the web browser radically altered how communities create history. Although it may seem mundane, being able to view text and images together on websites from anywhere in the world has consequences Berner-Lee could have never anticipated. In this essay, I will break down the specific and quirky history of how presidential campaigning and internet fundraising became crucial to U.S. politics.

The story begins in the wake of 9/11. A guy named Matt Meeker was given \$15 million from AT&T to make a small device people could use to read emails and text messages. Unbeknownst to him, Blackberry had already beaten him to the chase, and his project collapsed. Scrambling for new start-up ideas, (including a luxury cereal restaurant!) he and a former colleague, Scott Heiferman, decided to make a website. Meeker claims they were inspired by the book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam which chronicles a collapse in community in America. After 9/11, many of the topics covered in the book took on a new urgency and Meeker began to [notice](#) that "there was a yearning for community [...] people seemed suddenly aware of each other." The website they created, Meetup.com, had community in mind, so it should be unsurprising that it became a crucial tool for a presidential campaign.

The same year Meetup was created, Howard Dean, the Governor of Vermont for 12 years, decided to run for president. He was not expected to even come close to winning, but as the 2004 election grew nearer, he became a subject of media scrutiny because, using Meetup and Email lists, he managed to surpass all the other campaigns in fundraising and became an internet icon. His political messaging created a buzz on the internet because he had fresh perspectives on the Democratic party. He confidently critiqued Democrats for supporting the invasion of Iraq, strongly believed in universal healthcare, and wanted to lower taxes for the middle and lower class while raising them for the wealthiest. He never fully planned to gain so much attention from the internet, since it was such a new platform, and has [stated](#), "I wish I could tell you we were smart enough to figure this out. But the community taught us. They seized the initiative through Meetup." His campaign noticed supporters organizing their own campaign events through Meetup, and gleefully encouraged them to continue. At the onset of this new political tactic, a group for amateur witches had five times more active people on Meetup than Howard Dean. Soon, though, Dean for America membership surged and became the largest active group on the site, which directly corresponds to massive fundraising gains. In the third quarter of 2003 Howard Dean broke Bill Clinton's 1995 record for most fundraising in one quarter (by \$5,000,000), even though Clinton had no primary opponent and Dean had eight. Howard Dean didn't win, but by the end of his campaign he had raised \$50 Million, [forty percent of which was raised through the internet](#).

Unsurprisingly, many of the folks responsible for this massive fundraising success went on to work on other large political projects. Most notably, Obama's 2008 campaign was full of former Dean for America staff, and even though five years had passed and a lot had already changed, they were still among the only people with expertise in internet campaigning. At the time, Facebook was rapidly rising in popularity, social media companies were growing (although they'd yet to develop any robust advertisement infrastructure), Youtube had just begun organizing a small amount of live

streaming events, and the [top social media platform](#) by unique visitors was Blogger, [followed by Facebook, then MySpace](#). Nevertheless, by 2008, 55% of the entire adult population used the internet in some form to participate and learn about the presidential election. This was the first time in history that [more than half the voting-age population](#) found themselves relying heavily on the juncture between internet and campaigning.

The internet changes fast, which makes it crucial for politicians to hire innovative thinkers. In fact, it's the speed of change itself that makes not just tech-savvy, but creative digital analysts, strategists, and producers subjects of legends. The Dean for America campaign made history by demonstrating that, through the internet, average folks could contribute to massive fundraising landmarks without help from political elites. As a result, according to Clay Johnson, the lead programmer for Howard Dean's campaign, "if you look at where Dean people are compared to the people who worked for other losing candidates, Howard Dean was the best losing candidate to work for in the history of politics." However, just as quickly as the landscape of media changes, so too do the roles these technology wizards take on.

The 2008 Obama campaign was a direct legacy of the Dean for America campaign, but still managed to innovate by expanding the capabilities of internet strategy. A co-founder of Facebook, Chris Hughes, joined the 2008 Obama campaign immediately after leaving Facebook and made Obama open a Facebook account (!), helped him create [a neat website](#) for campaign promises, blog posts, and email lists, and worked alongside former Dean for America staff to quickly analyze the data they collected. This was the first instance where a campaign relied on and altered course based off data they collected from the internet. This is also the first time a campaign provided users across the country with the opportunity to download canvassing materials and provide feedback. According to a [blog post](#) written by Hughes, at the end of the campaign, "millions of individuals" had used the website and "created more than 35,000 local organizing groups, hosted over 200,000 events, and made millions upon millions of calls to neighbors about this campaign." These staggering numbers are why the Obama campaign is also considered a pioneer in digital strategy.

So to talk about social media in presidential campaigning is to talk about turning the idea of a campaign and its goals into a material force. This is primarily done by gathering large donations, but for Bernie Sanders, who has consistently critiqued the influence wealthy political elites have over U.S. politics, small donations from the internet became the lifeline of his campaign. Bernie Sanders' speeches and campaign messaging rejected the use of so-called 'super-PACs', which are expenditure-only Political Action Committees that bypass laws regarding direct donations by corporations to politicians by fundraising separately, but on behalf of a campaign. In 2012, Priorities for America, a super PAC affiliated with Obama's reelection campaign, gathered upwards of \$65 Million in support of the incumbent. The following election cycle, the same super PAC gathered \$133 million in support of Bernie Sanders' main political opponent, Hillary Clinton. Since these super PACs were primarily funded by wealthy Americans and corporations, Bernie Sanders seemed to have no shot at meeting his opponent's fundraising numbers. For this reason, the Bernie Sanders campaign doubled down on the internet in order to ignite a passion for his message and gather donations. They would utilize a new technology as well, live streaming, alongside all the previous methods, in order to keep the momentum going.

Bernie Sanders would stream his appearances on Twitch, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. When he had a heart attack, he would live-stream to over 600,000 viewers just to say that he would return. In 2016, his campaign organized spaces for supporters to meet up in person, just to watch him stream in on a screen. These sorts of large-scale streaming events indicate more

than a lucrative campaign strategy: they demonstrate the extent to which former methods of communication have limitations that can be broken by innovation. As we approach the next election, we should continue to expect innovation, and considering the past, we know it will probably come from a campaign that, to some extent, rejects traditional fundraising and has to look elsewhere.