APPENDIX 2. TIPS FOR NON-PARTISAN POLITICAL WEBSITES

Based on

Non-Partisan Political Web-sites: Best Practices Primer. Handbook for individuals and small organizations publishing political information online. Institute for politics, democracy and the internet in conjunction with the Pioneers in Online Politics Project.
http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/nonpartisan_political_websites.pdf.

GOALS and DESIGN

Building a nonpartisan political Web site should not be a daunting task, but it requires a clear plan. We recommend *user-centered development principles* that suggest five steps to developing a Web site (outlined briefly in the box at right). In general, these guidelines suggest that, above all, the site is built with the user in mind and in accordance with regular feedback from users. Under these guidelines, a Web site is never really "completed," but always in the process of reassessment and reconsideration. Listen to your users and adjust your site to suit their needs.

What are the goals of your site? The best Web sites are those with clear goals and a clear vision of their audience. Draft a short statement defining your audience, and refer back to it frequently. If you intend your site to be helpful for disenfranchised voters in Mogilev, then include polling places, bus routes and the names of organizations that drive people to the polls. If your site is dedicated to political insiders, then how to get to the polls is less important. Having a clear vision of your goals and audience will dictate the content and design.

Don't build a political Web site in isolation from your organization. Use the Web site to further the goals you have already established, and to fill the needs of the audience members you already have (as well as attracting more). If your organization already has a purpose, use the site to reflect and enhance that purpose

Try to find a niche. For example, there are sites that already provide basic information about state and local candidates, so if you wish to do that you may struggle to find viewers. More importantly, you will be duplicating efforts already underway. We recommend site organizers:

> **User centered development principles**
> 1. Draft a clear vision of who your site will serve and what you want to do. If you can clearly describe your users and predict their needs, you can cater to them.
> 2. Consult with your stakeholders, which in most cases will be users, campaigns and local officials. Talk to as many as possible.
> 3. Plan your site with these comments in mind.
> 4. Build the site.
> 5. Evaluate and update. Your site should be under constant reassessment and renewal. Solicit feedback and act on it.

• Think local. Local politics is an underserved niche.
• Stay focused on your audience. Keep in mind what they need and provide that.

We outline three design approaches to a political Web site, and we do this primarily to help sort out an overall point of view and to help you stay on track. Most nonpartisan political Web sites are a hybrid of the three approaches.

- The first is an **information gateway or clearinghouse**, which organizes information into categories, and provides documentation and links to outside sources of information. Your emphasis here is on editing, annotating and organizing, rather than original content. Generating original content is difficult and expensive. OntheIssues.org (www.ontheissues.org) and Democracy in Action(www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.html) are information gateways, with links to office holders, issue positions and campaigns.

> After you choose your audience and format, you can specify your goals. In most cases those goals will be to:
> Post relevant political information
> Draw users to your site
> Engage your users
> Offer means for civic involvement

- The second approach is a **news collective**, which provides summaries of news items and links to news. This kind of Web site organizes and presents news on the Web. Several nonpartisan Web sites incorporate links to media and current news stories. The need to constantly update and check links means this design requires a daily commitment to maintain the site.

- The third form is an **online community**, which focuses on discussion forums, mailing lists and community generated content. Online communities foster discussion as the primary means to inform and motivate citizens. While there are several sites that are dedicated to online discussion the discussion forums are often only part of larger sites with a more broad approach. The most likely model for a nonpartisan political site is a combination of the information gateway or clearinghouse. The news collective and the online community designs require greater commitment to regularly update content and links. A news collective is more focused on news from the mass media, not generalized political information, and political news portals have already carved out a niche as news collectives. We will suggest later that an online community can be impractical and difficult to manage.

> **Funding**
> Most successful nonpartisan political Web sites that are nonprofit have followed several patterns:
> Stay small, at least early on. Keep your staff small. Keep your overhead low.
> Build your site on the back of an already-established organization, with clear goals and volunteers already in place.
> Adopt a mixed business model, especially if you hope to return in coming elections. Seek out funding from grants, partnership fees, advertising, individual donations and sponsorships. By not relying on a single revenue stream this mixed approach may offer the greatest chance for sustainability
> Your best approach is to try to secure in-kind or indirect funding in the form of technical resources (server space) and expertise.
> You should NOT expect to gather much funding through advertising or subscription fees.

This does not preclude you from using elements from other models, but it is offered as a means to keep you focused in designing your site.

CONTENT

Knowing what information to put online requires that you know your audience, but it also requires a little understanding of how people search the Internet. You will attract some viewers who are Web browsers, people who happen to come across your Web site, but most will be searchers, those who deliberately seek out your site for the information you offer or who were enticed to visit from some offline communication. Your first goal is to provide information which engages both types of users so they remain on the site. In other words, you want to *provide attractive information, which immediately strikes viewers as worth their attention*, and adjacent information, which tells them what else is on site, and what your site can do for them. Users will only come to your site if they think you have something they want. They will only come back if you actually do. They do not want promotions for your site, but information they

can use. Your site will have greater appeal with substantive information. Users say they favor a depth and breadth of political content, and sites with more information attract more return users. You can generate content yourself or generate content "indirectly" by organizing and presenting public content available elsewhere. Be wary of trying to generate a large amount of original content, which will absorb a lot of your time and may require updating. Highlighting resources on other Web sites is a sound way to begin, rather than attempting to gather, confirm and post a great deal of original information. Nonetheless, some original information is probably required, depending on your goals. Take the low-hanging fruit first. Community organizations often have access to local political information. For example, if you are devising a local voter's guide, access the old voter's guides your organization has produced and post the past positions of candidates. There is great information readily available that is made more useful and accessible when organized and presented clearly on a Web site.

Collaborate with others. Let other Web sites know what you are doing and what content you need. By the same token, be willing to share your material with others. Obtaining information from candidates has been difficult for some organizations and we believe this problem is going to get worse. Candidates, especially incumbents, do not always see an advantage in providing information and in fact may believe they have something to lose by doing so. While we believe candidates have an obligation to provide information about their positions, we recognize that many campaigns are inundated with these requests. Be aware of this and plan accordingly. This is another incentive to stay local, where candidates are less able to get much media coverage and often more willing to participate to get their word out.

> **Naming your Web site**
> Choose a short, easily recognizable name.
> The name should describe the site. It should be logical enough so browsers will find your site. Many users will first try to search for your site based on a name, so let your Web address be your name. For example, if your site is called "PoliticalExpert" make your address www.politicalexpert.org.
> Use redirect sites so someone who types in "politicalexpert.edu" or "politicalexpert.com" will be directed to the correct address of www.politicalexpert.org.

You should be polite but persistent in dealing with campaigns. *Be flexible in how you can obtain information*. If you can gather policy positions from campaign materials, do so, and don't ask for a new statement on a policy that is already publicly available. Often a candidate's speaking record is available, and you can cull from it position statements.

If you are following a political campaign, *establish relationships with campaign officials* and convince them you are serious in your work and that it is to their benefit to provide candidate information. This is easiest early in the campaign, before the race gets more harried and while campaign organizers are still anxious for visibility. Finally, make certain that questions you pose do not unfairly characterize a candidate. For example, do not require yes or no answers to complex questions, and give candidates time and space to respond. Allow candidates to modify their statements as their positions evolve.

Keep your Web site simple and easy to use. Beware of putting too much online or trying to do too much. There is nothing wrong with starting small

Keep your Web site simple and easy to use. Beware of putting too much online or trying to do too much. There is nothing wrong with starting small.
Adopt a flexible site design, one which you can easily adjust and add to. Maintain a consistent display style throughout your site. For example, develop a logo or choose some design colors and then stick to them. Create a single page template and copy it for each page (which can also help in catering to the search engines, which we describe below).

Our general recommendation for new site designers is to skip fancy graphics, lengthy java script, or other complex features. These only add to the cost of producing your Web site and may cause the site to load slowly (although this is less of an issue with broadband). Avoid using cookies. If a user has disabled cookies in their Web browser they may have trouble accessing the site. Many users also consider cookies to be annoying or a violation of their privacy. Inexperienced site designers should not try to require visitors to set up a user name or password to use the site However, java script or cookies may be useful to more experienced designers. More expert designers may wish to recognize users in order to personalize content. For example, in order to provide a local ballot you need to identify the users by their location. This technology should only be used when it serves your objectives.

Sites with more features are also more appealing to users. At the same time, the time spent at your site is a function of its design. Sites that are easy to navigate keep people longer. If you publish reports, long lists or other lengthy information, include a link to a "printer friendly" version or a downloadable version for easy printing.

Tips for displaying your information

• Avoid cover pages. Put information on your first page, so viewers immediately see what they are looking for.

• Be systematic in displaying information. Information should be logically grouped.

• Organize by issue, not type of document. Some sites put all the candidates' speeches in one area and ads in another, but readers are interested in issues and want to find them grouped together. They should not have to jump from screen to screen to do so.

• Database formats seem to be popular. Users enjoy using the database, which is more conducive to research and comparison between candidates.

• Avoid small text and small line spacing. Small text discourages users and effectively bars those with poor vision. (It is remarkable how many Web sites use small text. A full page of small text is an instant turnoff for many users.)

• Use black text on white background whenever possible. Make sure text is a printable color (and never white).

• Use consistent navigation aids throughout the site. Put the same list of choices in the same place on each page.

• Make the meaning of your links clear from the portion of highlighted text. Do not use common words like "click here" or "this" as the linking words. Instead use words that describe the information, such as "candidate data" or "staff photos." This makes your site more accessible and is a rule of good design.

• Follow the three-click rule. Visitors should be able to get from any one page on your site to any other page within three clicks.

Video

For new sites with non-professional Web masters, we recommend avoiding video (or flash video). Bandwidth for many users makes video downloads slow and, in some cases, impossible. Storing and making video accessible is a drain on server resources. However, if you have the resources for incorporating online video into your Web site, follow these guidelines.

If you post video, make certain the video is worthwhile, interesting and serves the goals of your site.

Be prepared for technical problems and have expertise on staff to address them.

You should provide links to online video programs, such as Quicktime or Real Player.

Warn your users that video is available, and never introduce video unexpectedly. Dialup users forced to view an introductory video will not return. They should have the chance to opt out of viewing.

You should put the size of the file next to it, which enables users to decide for themselves whether their connection can handle the bandwidth

WRITING FOR THE WEB

Writing for the Web is not the same as writing for broadcast or print.

When people look at Web sites they tend to immediately scan them, so make certain your design is pleasing. Write so that users can scan the information and do not need to read a long, continuous block of text. You can provide a link to more in-depth readings, but at the beginning

keep it simple. The presence of hyperlinks means reading can be nonlinear, which means that users may access information in any order they choose. Practically speaking, this means you should provide multiple points of access. Divide your text into smaller, stand-alone pieces, and index them separately. So, for example, if you include information about the candidates, link directly to that information – issue positions, biographical information and contact information. An article on gun rights on your site should link to those positions for the candidates on your site.

MAKE CERTAIN YOUR WEBSITE IS ACCESSIBLE

Building accessible Web sites is not difficult, particularly if you are starting from scratch. Following every guideline for an accessible Web site may be cumbersome, but even a few measures can make your site dramatically more accessible. On the other hand, re-designing an old site to make it accessible can be difficult and time-consuming.

Some guidelines:

• Label everything with descriptive tags in the html code. Visitors who have poor vision may use screen reading programs, which means they will only be able to access the text. Use short, clear descriptions on all non-text content (graphics, photos, buttons, form fields and menus). Graphics that are used as links should include text that explains what the graphic links to.
• Images should have alternative text that describes them. Charts and graphs should have alternative text that fully explains their meaning. Non-informational graphics (decoration) should have null text codes so screen readers skip over them.
• Screen reading programs work from left to right, top to bottom, so make sure tables make sense read in that order. Frames and pop-up windows that are based on JavaScript commands are confusing to text-based browsers and should be avoided. If important information is conveyed using Java, include the text.
• Convey information in multiple formats. For example, screen reading programs cannot access documents in PDF format.
• Pull-down menus and some other navigation elements rely on using a mouse, which is difficult for some people. Avoid them if possible.
• Use a large text size (at least 12 point). Avoid fixed width fonts so your users can increase the text size.
• Make sure all information is clear even if the user cannot differentiate color. Colorblind users have great difficulty on some Web sites that use many similar colors.
• Use descriptive links rather than "click here" to insure that links make sense out of context.
• Clearly identify the target of each link. Use the following techniques to make your work accessible to those with language difficulties.
• Be wary of intimidating weak readers with long columns of text.
• Use headings to tell the readers what is coming and break up text.
• Present only the most important information, or at least present the most important information early and in its own section. That way weak readers can absorb the key points.

- Use short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Use concrete examples.
- Repeat new or unfamiliar information to help learning.
- Avoid clichés or jargon.
- Write in the positive, not the negative. For example, write "This is the correct way to vote" rather than "This is not an incorrect way to vote."
- If possible, provide a two-language content

LINKING TO ORTER SITES

Too many sites link to everything. Take seriously your role as editor. Find what you think is the best and only link to that, then succinctly tell your user why you link and what is there. If you feel you must link to a broad array of material, pick the best and highlight it. Your goal is to help your user find the best material. Second to that, you can be a clearinghouse of links, but do not post them prominently on your site.

Dead links irritate your users and look unprofessional. They also hurt your credibility. Check your links regularly.

DISCUSSION FORUMS

The prospect of discussion forums was one of the driving ideas behind nonpartisan political Web sites a few years ago. Many organizations and the Web sites they developed included discussion forums. Some sites focused exclusively on discussion. Discussion forums remain a part of some sites.

While we recognize that some sites have been able to foster worthwhile online discussions and that discussions can draw Web traffic, our recommendation to new site organizers is to avoid large national discussion forums.

Discussion forums require a commitment from the users and the site owner. Many users who are simply looking for information will not dedicate the time and mental effort to post on a discussion forum. For organizers, discussion forums can be difficult to monitor and control. They can become heated, angry and dominated by a small group of users. It can be unclear who is posting comments, and forums that become heavily partisan can threaten the nonpartisan tenor of your site or discourage partisans from the other side to visit.

Successful forums follow several rules.

Stay focused on topics. Stay local.

Users must register.

Forums must be moderated.

Users may not post anonymously, or with pseudonyms. They must sign their posts with their real name, e-mail address and general location (usually city and state).

Limit the number of times a user may post, perhaps to two messages a day.

Posts must be on topic.

Rules of conduct must be developed and enforced. Users must be encouraged to respect others in the forum and direct their comments to the entire group, not another user

PROMOTING WEB SITE

Promotion is vital to the success of a Web site. You may find you spend as much time on promotion as you do on content development and fundraising. There are cheap and effective ways to promote your Web site online, from simply tailoring your Web site to the search engines to more traditional forms of promotion.

Master street-level promotion, particularly if your site is locally oriented. Post flyers. Hand out bumper stickers. Print your address on pens or coffee mugs. Make certain your Web site address is on everything your organization produces: posters, signs, advertisements, letterhead – everything.

Work with local businesses by appealing to their civic spirit to include your site address or help promotion.

Tailor your Web site to search engines

Perhaps the most cost-effective means of promoting your Web site is tailoring your site to search engines. (There are software programs you can purchase to create Web pages to improve search engine positioning.)

• Submit your site to each search engine. You must be sure to submit your site to the correct section, follow the submission guidelines carefully, and you may have to wait several weeks for a site to be accepted.

• Use the meta tags for titles, keywords and description in the html headers of your pages. Create one good meta-tagged Web page and then use it as a template for your other pages. Some search engines use these to rank content.

• Use good, descriptive titles for your site and individual pages.

• Use keyword-rich content. In other words, use words that aptly describe your site, so a searcher using those words will find you.

• Get other similar sites to link to yours.

Google, in particular, gives better placement to sites which are linked from others. Some other Google tips:

• The more relevant your pages, the better the chance people will find them. Use keywords in your text that describe your site content accurately, and you should use similar keywords as page labels. Keep all pages near the top level of the directory. In other words, do not have pages that are "deep" in the site and require clicking through many other pages to access. (Remember the three-click rule.)

• Each page should contain at least 100 words of relevant text.

• The more links you have to a page the better. Google counts links like votes. It will also analyze the page that links to you in order to rank your page. Links from pages that are themselves heavily linked and accessed are ranked more highly.

Use the media

Press coverage is the best and most effective way to promote a Web site and to get the ball rolling with other forms of promotion. However, press attention can be difficult to get, and it has become more difficult as the novelty of online politics wears off.

Contact journalists individually for stories, and bring them into the fold as part of your press network. Pick the most prominent and influential journalists for your audience, and keep them posted about unusual and interesting things happening on your Web site.

Offer news on a slow news day. Be flexible. Have your information confirmed, double-checked and ready to go. And call journalists back immediately.

• Consider creating a virtual press room, where you can distribute information about your organization.

• Write a script for a 30-second public service announcement about your Web site and ask radio stations to air it leading up to the election. If possible, produce your own public service announcement. Political organizers say it is well worth spending the money on a professional PSA, which broadcasters are much more likely to use. (However, professionally produced PSAs can be expensive.)

• Link to the Web site on all press releases.

Encourage other sites to link to yours

This often serves to both direct traffic to your site and promote your site with search engines that

Build e-mail lists

E-mail may be just as important as a Web presence. E-mail newsletters can direct traffic back to your Web site and inform your readers of important election deadlines or campaign events. • Don't advertise a newsletter as *regular* (i.e. weekly, monthly, etc.) unless you can make it a regular part of your workload. Newsletters take time to make worthwhile. Unless you have the time to keep your schedule, don't start.

• Keep it short, scannable and relevant. Subscribers did not sign up for your comments, book reviews or jokes.

• Link to your Web site.

• Make it easy to subscribe and unsubscribe.

• Be very careful about collecting and using e-mail addresses. Nothing destroys your credibility more quickly than being seen as spamming your users. Make certain anyone who submits an e-mail address knows what they will be receiving and how you will use their e-mail address. reward linked Web sites. Request reciprocal links from similar organizations or political groups

What you must do to make your Web site succeed

Recognize that the labor of maintaining a good Web site is often much more than people expect.

If you do not have the time to frequently update your site, then avoid material that requires frequent updates. Complex site design and features may look good, but they may require more attention than you can give. Begin simple. As the site grows you can better gauge the time commitment you and your organization can make.

You MUST keep the site up-to-date. Updated pages will prompt return visitors to spend time on your site. (Up-to-date sites also enhance your credibility. See below.) At the same time, keep careful track of what needs to be updated. If possible, keep pages that need to be updated close together, or grouped in a manner to make updating easy. Do not scatter throughout your Web site isolated references that must be constantly updated.

> **Tips for successful promotion**
> Cater to the search engines.
> Use the media.
> Build and use e-mail lists.
> Link to other, good sites and get them to link to you. (Choose your link partners wisely.)
> Keep the Web site up-to-date.
> Establish partnerships.

Consider establishing partnerships to share the workload and take advantage of content someone else has created. Several Web developers told us that partnerships are a key to success. They can be a cheap way to build a base of visitors and obtain content. You can provide local content. Your partners can provide traffic and additional tools, such as search engines, databases or moderated discussion forums.

You can partner with other civic organizations, and this may be as simple as posting their voting information and providing a link to the organization. Use the same partners your organization already uses.
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Protect your credibility

Protect your credibility. Concern about impartiality is a big reason why people turn to nonpartisan political Web sites. There are a variety of measures you can take that researchers have found help make your site more believable.

• Make it easy to verify the accuracy of the information on your site. Provide references for your information and, if possible, links to the original source.

• Show that there is a real organization behind your site. List an offline address and contact information. If you list a phone number, make sure someone answers it.

• Highlight the expertise in your organization.

• Use a professional looking site design.

• Make your site easy to use.

• Update your content. People assign more credibility to sites that show they have been updated or reviewed recently.

• Be careful with promotional content. Ads may hurt credibility, and should be clearly marked as advertisement. Avoid pop-up ads.
• Avoid errors of all types, no matter how small. Typographical errors and broken links hurt your credibility and turn off users.