



How the Internet Is Changing Political Campaigning

If the presidential election were held in cyberspace, [Ron] Paul would probably win hands down.
— Clarence Page, *Chicago Tribune* syndicated columnist

When Texas Congressman Ron Paul's name is brought up in conversation, more often than not, the typical response is, "Who's that?" This is reminiscent of the "Jimmy who?" refrain that one often heard in the early months of the 1976 U.S. presidential campaign. For younger readers, the reference was to Jimmy Carter, who overcame seemingly impossible odds and went on to become our 39th president. Ron Paul's polling numbers are about the same as Jimmy Carter's were at this point in their respective presidential campaigns. But unlike Carter, who was helped along by a supportive mainstream media and early membership in the Trilateral Commission, Dr. Paul (he's an obstetrician who has delivered more than 4,000 babies) is being virtually ignored by the press. However, Dr. Paul is enjoying phenomenal success in a realm of the media that did not even exist in Carter's day: the Internet.

To get an idea of the extent to which the mainstream media is blocking out news about Ron Paul, consider the *Washington Post* article reporting the results of the August 11 Iowa Straw Poll. After proclaiming that Mitt Romney was the winner, the *Post* went on to comment on the closely trailing finishers:

Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee finished second with 18 percent of the 14,302 votes cast, and Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas ran third with 15 percent. Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado, the most outspoken opponent of current U.S. immigration policy, finished fourth with 14 percent. Former Wisconsin governor Tommy G. Thompson was sixth at 7 percent.

Blatantly omitted was the fifth-place finisher, Ron Paul, who received nine percent of the votes cast. That in itself was a major story, as a poll of Iowa voters just six days earlier had placed Dr. Paul back in eighth position, with just two percent. And yet, his name was never mentioned anywhere in that *Washington Post* article.

On the other hand, when 10-term Congressman Paul is given an occasional bit of attention by mainstream news journalists and broadcasters, he is often derided. For example, in a recent interview with Dr. Paul, the host of ABC's *This Week*, George Stephanopoulos, asked the candidate for his definition of success. Paul predictably responded that it was to win. "That's not going to happen," Stephanopoulos bluntly informed him. Ironically, this is the same George Stephanopoulos who was working on Bill Clinton's presidential campaign back in 1991, when Clinton's chances of winning anything were being rated as slim to none (though Clinton was already a member of the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations).

Even among Republicans, Dr. Paul and his supporters are often ridiculed. While introducing Ron Paul at the Iowa Straw Poll, Master of Ceremonies Laura Ingraham referred to Paul's cheering fans in front of the stage as "inmates" who had "left the asylum." Ingraham remarked that Congressman Paul had recently proposed that President Bush allow private citizens to go after Osama bin Laden (an obvious reference to Congress' power to grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, a decree authorized in Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution that would allow private sources or bounty hunters to pursue bin Laden). She then mockingly inquired if anyone in the audience would like to volunteer, and went on to add that the Discovery Channel would soon be broadcasting a new show called *Ron Paul: Bounty Hunter*.



Written by [Brian Farmer](#) on October 1, 2007

Following that disrespectful introduction, candidate Paul launched into a 15 minute speech, during which he declared, “Our campaign is all about freedom, prosperity, and peace.”

As Paul’s “mosh pit” spectators filed out of the Hilton Coliseum to make way for the next candidate’s cheering entourage, Ingraham obviously had that speech line in mind when she derisively stated, “The peace train is leaving the arena.” President Ronald Reagan once noted that the 11th commandment was to never criticize a fellow Republican. Notably, Ingraham actually worked as a speechwriter in the White House near the end of the Reagan administration.

With such headwinds to fly against, one might think that Ron Paul would find it almost impossible to get noticed on anybody’s radar screen — until one goes to the Internet. Then one gets the impression that he is some kind of superstar, moving through cyberspace like a titan. Despite the fact that the mainstream media is treating Ron Paul virtually as a nonentity, a growing number of Americans are learning about him through the Internet. Many of them like what they are finding out and are supporting his candidacy. This prompted *Wired* magazine to run a commentary on its website entitled, “Ron Paul: How a Fringe Politician Took Over the Web.” Consider the following:

Debate Polls: After the first five Republican debates on national television, four mainstream news channels featured online polls asking the American people who had won. After the first debate on May 3, MSNBC ran a poll, which had obtained over 72,000 responses, showing that Ron Paul was the most convincing candidate, receiving 45 percent of the vote. Fox News ran a poll after the second debate on May 15 and, with over 40,000 votes, Ron Paul came in a close second with 25 percent of the vote. MSNBC also ran a poll about that debate and discovered that Ron Paul was, again, the most convincing candidate, with 64 percent of the more than 25,000 responses. After the third debate on June 5, CNN’s poll of over 25,000 respondents showed that Ron Paul had won with 60 percent of the vote. An ABC News online poll showed that Ron Paul decisively won the fourth debate on August 5, receiving almost 59 percent of the more than 36,000 votes cast. Finally, a Fox News text messaging poll following the fifth debate on September 5 put Ron Paul first with 33 percent.

Meetup Groups: Meetup.com is defined as “an online social networking portal that facilitates offline group meetings in various localities around the world.” Meetup.com allows people to find and join groups that are unified by a common interest, such as politics, careers, hobbies, etc. Users enter their ZIP code and the topic they want to meet about, and the website helps them arrange a place and time to meet up with others who have the same interest. Meetup Groups interested in promoting Ron Paul are springing up like mushrooms all over the country. At the time that this article was being written, there were 37,423 members in 867 Meetup Groups, with an additional 5,143 people on a waiting list looking for a Ron Paul Meetup Group to join in their area. Trailing far behind in second place among presidential contenders was Barak Obama, with 4,188 members in 67 Meetup Groups, and 1,621 waiting for a Meetup Group to join.

YouTube Viewings: YouTube.com is a video-sharing website where users can upload, view, and share video clips. A recent analysis of the presidential candidates’ videos on YouTube, prepared by Professor Edward Lee of the Ohio State University and based on data up to August 6, 2007, made the following observations:

Among all the candidates, Ron Paul’s popularity on YouTube stands out. Paul ranks No. 1 in three of the four categories measured. By a wide margin, Paul has the most views on average per video (nearly 85,000) and the most subscribers on YouTube (nearly 25,000) — more than doubling the numbers of the closest competitor from any party. He also has the most number of views total on



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YouTube (over 2.8 million), having gained 1.2 million views in the past month (which more than doubled the increase in views of each of the other candidates during that time period). The one category in which Paul does not lead the other candidates is the Single Most Viewed Video on YouTube, a category in which Paul places no better than most of the other candidates. The data suggest that Ron Paul's popularity on YouTube comes from a consistent and respectable number of views for all or most of his videos, instead of one "big hit" video.

However, on August 15, it was reported that "the #1 most viewed, top rated, most discussed, and top favorite News and Politics video on YouTube" was Ron Paul's speech at the Iowa Straw Poll.

Facebook Supporters: Facebook.com is a social networking website that is particularly popular with college students. The name of the site refers to the facebook depicting members of the campus community that U.S. colleges give to students at the start of the academic year, with the intention of helping students get to know each other. The Ron Paul campaign has more than 100 Facebook.com student groups with more than 24,000 members, more than any other Republican candidate. Here are the figures as of September 10:

- Ron Paul: 24,068
- Mitt Romney: 17,403
- Fred Thompson: 13,962
- John McCain: 10,250
- Mike Huckabee: 4,847
- Sam Brownback: 2,699
- Rudy Giuliani: 1,838
- Tom Tancredo: 854
- Duncan Hunter: 657

MySpace Friends: MySpace.com is described by Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, as "a popular social networking website offering an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos internationally." Many 2008 presidential candidates have set up MySpace profiles, presumably in an effort to attract younger voters. These profiles feature photos, blogs, videos, and ways for viewers to get involved with campaigning. Thus far, Ron Paul has more than 60,000 MySpace friends, which puts him ahead of any other Republican candidate. Here are the figures as of September 10:

- Ron Paul: 60,636
- John McCain: 39,584
- Mitt Romney: 29,873
- Sam Brownback: 11,104
- Rudy Giuliani: 7,813
- Mike Huckabee: 6,832
- Fred Thompson: 6,815
- Duncan Hunter: 6,794



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Tom Tancredo: 3,787

Fundraising: The bulk of Ron Paul's campaign contributions (around 80 percent, according to his national campaign headquarters) comes from online donations, because the Internet is where he is best known, and that is where his support base lies. As reported on [LewRockwell.com](#):

On July 15th, the Federal Election Commission announced the 2nd-quarter fundraising totals for each presidential candidate. In the Republican field, Ron Paul's \$2.4 million placed him:

- 3rd in total receipts for the quarter
- 4th in total receipts to date
- 3rd in total current assets (ahead of former front-runner John McCain, and just \$800,000 behind Mitt Romney)

Thus far, 47% of the contributions made to Ron Paul's campaign are donations of under \$200 from individuals (John McCain's 17% is the second-highest percentage). This is a telling statistic, as it highlights the fact that most other candidates rely heavily upon donations from corporate interests and political action committees (PACs) (i.e., moneyed, influence-seeking sources who can readily afford to contribute large sums). Since Congressman Paul has always voted against special favors and privileges for anyone, special interests know they have nothing to gain by stuffing Ron Paul's campaign coffers.

Straw Polls: An online straw poll, conducted by the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which closed on July 16, yielded the following order of finish (depicted in a bar graph with no totals or percentages):

1. Fred Thompson
2. Ron Paul
3. Rudy Giuliani
4. Mitt Romney
5. Tom Tancredo
6. Mike Huckabee
7. John McCain
8. Sam Brownback
9. Duncan Hunter
10. Tommy Thompson

And on the USA Election Polls website, one can still vote on the question, "Who do you want to see as president? (Reps and Dems)." At the time that this article was being written, Ron Paul was leading all presidential candidates with 8,772 votes, which amounted to 58 percent of the total votes cast.

Dr. Paul's straw-poll success online is being translated into straw-poll success offline, as well. As reported on his official campaign website, "Congressman Ron Paul has finished in the top 5 in 16 of the last 17 straw polls and can claim 1st place victories in New Hampshire, North Carolina, Washington, and Alabama. In comparing results head-to-head, Congressman Paul has blown away most of the field, defeating Rudy Giuliani in 15 of the 17 polls and John McCain in 15 of the 16 [sic] polls." Since that



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commentary was posted, five more straw polls have been staged and Dr. Paul's tally now stands as follows:

First Place: 9 times

Second Place: 4 times

Third Place: 4 times

Fourth Place: 3 times

Fifth Place: 1 time

Sixth Place: 1 time

To what can this incredible grass-roots support be attributed, particularly on the Internet? There are a number of plausible reasons for Ron Paul's online success. Most importantly, the Internet is the primary source of information about Dr. Paul. The mainstream media and major-party establishments have already anointed the top six Republican and Democratic candidates (Giuliani, McCain, Romney; Clinton, Edwards, Obama). As a result, countless opinion makers have informed Americans that these six politicians complete the list of the so-called "viable" presidential contenders. The pundits are saying, in effect, "There is no need to look any further; we have already done your thinking for you."

Each of the already-anointed presidential candidates has received regular, daily coverage for many months (in some cases, for several years). Although Dr. Paul has benefited from a smattering of media attention since his "blowback" exchange with Rudy Giuliani in last May's debate, people who are curious about Paul's track record and platform *must* turn to the Internet. And when people first learn of Dr. Paul's track record, they apparently want to know more, because they like what they see. For example, as his campaign literature points out, Ron Paul has:

- never voted to raise taxes.
- never voted for an unbalanced budget.
- never voted to raise congressional pay.
- never taken a government-paid junket.
- never voted to increase the power of the executive branch.
- not participated in the lucrative congressional pension program.
- voted against regulating the Internet.
- repeatedly been named the "Taxpayers' Best Friend" in Congress.

Dr. Paul has been a critic of the Iraq War from the outset, because there was no declaration of war, and that has made him very unpopular among the neoconservatives in the Republican Party. But as Paul puts it, "If you give up one part of the Constitution, you give up the whole thing, because it becomes arbitrary for the executive branch and the judicial branch and the legislative branch. And that's where we are — we are an arbitrary government today. The government does what they please with no restraint."

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that, based on the July 2007 Quarterly Finance Reports to the Federal Election Commission, Ron Paul is now first among *all* presidential candidates in total donations from military personnel and veterans. And this leads to another plausible explanation for Dr.



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Paul's online popularity: It's younger people who are most against the Iraq War, and it's the younger generation that is most savvy about using cyberspace. However, when students talk with their parents and grandparents, the older generations learn more about Ron Paul. (For instance, an article in the *Des Moines Register* just before the Iowa Straw Poll referred to Internet-savvy kids telling their parents about Ron Paul.) As a result, his campaign has been able to attract people from all across the political spectrum. As Paul sees it, "There is only one thing — the Constitution and freedom — that brings people together. And it's not divisive. We are not confrontational and we're very tolerant of other people's views. That's why individuals can come no matter what views they have."

Ron Paul's political philosophy seems unconventional by today's standards, but it represents the political philosophy of the framers of our Constitution. And yet, as out of step as he may appear to be, especially as portrayed in the conventional press, he has been able to win reelection time after time. If Dr. Paul can bring his message and appeal at the district level up to the national level, and can bring his Internet popularity to the masses — helped along by his fiery rhetoric in the Republican debates, which is forcing the mainstream media to give him increasingly more attention — then we may be in for a very interesting presidential primary season.



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