Feature Article—
Internet Resources for American Politics and Public Opinion*

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In their informative *PS* article, Anne Permaloff and Carl Grafton (1994) described the five commercial online services and suggested a number of useful reference books to guide the novice internaut around the daunting world of cyberspace. This article is meant to complement their work by drawing attention to the vast wealth of free online resources available to those of us who study American politics and public opinion. While the commercial online services such as their information files, the U.S. federal government has been the clear leader in this movement. Because of this, the resources available to students of American politics are some of the richest and most comprehensive anywhere.

The new wealth of Internet resources means that we are no longer tied to Lexis for obtaining the text of Supreme Court decisions or our campus libraries for looking up the latest federal budget numbers. This should be welcome news to researchers and teachers alike. By eliminating the need to rely on fee-based data services, the Internet greatly enhances the the resources that are available to us for purposes of research, teaching, and even personal enjoyment.

Types of Internet Resources

Internet resources are developed and sponsored by a variety of governmental, academic, non-profit and commercial organizations. Because many online databases are costly to produce and maintain, sponsoring organizations may reserve full access privileges for those who pay membership or other fees. But even when the general public is only allowed limited access, most sponsoring organizations will grant full access on a temporary basis to those who might be interested in becoming regular subscribers. Fortunately, these sorts of commercial databases are still relatively uncommon on the Internet. Most Internet resources are available free of charge, and the Clinton administration is pushing to make all new governmental databases available without cost to the general public. In lieu of payment, it is a common courtesy to let

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CompuServe, America Online, and Prodigy make available many databases and other resources on a pay-per-use basis, there are also a number of free online resources that match and often surpass the quality of those provided by commercial services. This article

will highlight some of the these jewels and explain how to find them on the Internet and the Worldwide Web.

Although many important governmental databases are still maintained by commercial vendors, there has been exponential growth over the past two years in the number of online resources made available to the general public. The rich availability of online resources for American politics is due largely to the lobbying efforts of public-interest organizations coupled with the Clinton Administration's willingness to increase citizen access to government information. There were relatively few publicly-available political resources on the Internet until the end of 1992. But, the new Administration's attitude toward online access caused a dramatic change of scenery; by the end of 1994 nearly every department and bureau of the federal government was making information available to the general public over the Internet.

This tide has also swept the states, and now state government information is increasingly available online. While international organizations and some foreign governments have begun to support Internet access to
sponsors know how much you enjoy and value the resources they provide.

There are three kinds of American politics resources on the Internet. The most common are text files originally distributed as printed material and subsequently made available 'as is' on the Internet. This category includes White House and Congressional press releases, numerous books and historical documents, Census reports, the U.S. federal budget, and Supreme Court decisions. The main advantage of online text files is ease of access: there's no photocopying or making special trips to search through library stacks. Most of the files are available online long before they make it to your campus library. They can be accessed around the clock and downloaded directly to your home or office computer. Moreover, you can use these files to do things that you could never do with paper and ink. For instance, you can download the Federalist Papers and use your word-processor to find every occurrence of the word "faction."

A second kind of online resource is made up of text files loaded into a database system that makes them more flexible and useful than printed text. Not only can these database systems organize information in meaningful ways, but they also provide powerful tools for searching through and retrieving text files. For instance, the House of Representatives provides a service that allows you to conduct a full-text keyword search of all bills introduced since 1992. This search serves up a collection of files that you can download at your convenience. Likewise, you can run full-text keyword searches through, among others, the Federal Register, White House press releases, and abstracts from the Vanderbilt Television Archives.

The third sort of online resource is that which is available only in "cyberspace"—the world that has no real physical location but exists only in the electronic ether. These "native" resources are often the most useful and powerful of all those available on the Internet. For instance, if you missed one of President Clinton's Saturday radio addresses, you can obtain a digital recording directly from the White House and play it on your home computer. Perhaps you want to follow the progress of a bill through the Senate: the Library of Congress's SCORPIO database will tell you which subcommittee is currently reviewing which bills. You can download digital pictures of the White House porcelain used during the Reagan administration just as easily as pictures of Clinton's inaugural ceremony. Or you can run a keyword search of the General Social Surveys and come up with the question wording and marginal frequencies for any item asked since 1972. Some of the kinds of Internet resources that are available for people interested in elections, public opinion, and voting behavior include the following:

Elections, Campaigns and Speeches

1992 Presidential Campaign. A great deal of information on the 1992 campaign is archived at several academic sites. You can browse and run keyword searches through the position papers and speeches of all the major candidates, as well as access document archives kept on each of the major parties.

PAC Contribution Data. Federal Election Commission data on PAC donations to Congress is available for the 1992 and 1994 election seasons. Separate files for each member of Congress show the names and amounts given by major contributors.

Political Speeches. Online collections include examples of campaign oratory, the inaugural addresses of various presidents from Adams to Clinton, and all State of the Union addresses given since the end of the Second World War.

Candidate Information, Ratings and Vote Scores. Biographical data and interest group evaluations are available for state and federal candidates from a wide variety of sources. The best of these is Project Vote Smart, an online enterprise that maintains extensive
information files on state governors and U.S. senators and representatives. Each file includes biographical information, addresses and phone numbers, performance evaluations by scores of interest groups, campaign finance histories, key votes, and stances on important issues. All of this data is also available as comma-delimited files.

Political Parties

Although the major parties have been slow to get on the Internet — unlike the Libertarian party, which maintains an active online presence — party platforms from the 1992 elections are available along with a smattering of platforms from other election years and from minor parties. You can also download important party documents such as the Republican "Contract With America."

Political Communication, Journalism and Public Opinion

Telecommunication Policy. A great deal of information is available on various aspects of telecommunication policy. Several commercial organizations maintain policy-oriented gopher sites, as does the Federal Communications Commission and the federal and private sector organizations contributing to the National Information Infrastructure program.

Public Opinion Resources. The best public opinion resources relating to American politics are the IRSS Public Opinion Data archives and the National Election Studies online archives. The University of North Carolina's IRSS archives allow users to retrieve the question wording and frequency marginals for all questions asked in Harris surveys since 1960, the General Social Surveys since 1972, and in USA Today polls since 1985. The IRSS archives, which can be searched by keyword, date and sponsoring organization, also index a rich variety of questions asked in state polls. The University of Michigan's National Election Studies archive contains announcements, new developments, over-time comparability studies and indexes of technical and pilot study reports for every NES survey ever conducted.

Mass Media Organizations. Lists of e-mail addresses and conventional contact information are available for a variety of journalists and mass media organizations. Several news organizations, among them PBS, C-SPAN, Voice of America, and the Detroit Free Press, maintain gopher servers containing a variety of administrative, programming, and general-interest information.

Vanderbilt Television Abstracts. The online version of this well-known resource is comprehensive and updated daily. You can search story-level descriptive summaries of evening network news broadcasts from as far back as 1983 by date and keyword—a big improvement over the printed version. A number of special news collections are also maintained, including one on the Persian Gulf War.

Online Indexes to Communication Journals. Conserve's Communication Citation Index lets you track articles that cite particular authors in 27 serials and annuals. Conserve's Electronic Indexes to Communication Serials allow you to run keyword searches of 49 core serials and annuals in communication studies and related fields. The Journalism Periodicals Index at the University of Western Ontario provides a cross-referenced subject index of 40 trade, professional, and academic journals related to journalism and mass communication.

Data Resources

Besides those already mentioned above, there are several online sites that offer free access to data sets and analytical information relevant to U.S. politics. Among them are the following:

Economic Resources. Several sites contain exhaustive information on U.S. economic performance and trade measures, notably the Federal Reserve Board gopher, which includes tables charting the flow of funds since 1952 as well as data on interest rates and industrial production and capacity utilization, and the U.S. Department of Commerce gopher, which includes the National Trade Data Bank and the outstanding National Economic, Social and Environmental Data Bank. Also available are corporate filings and index files from the Securities and Exchange Commission (EDGAR) gopher.

ICPSR Gopher. One of the most useful sites for quantitative political scientists, this gopher posts research bulletins, staff contact and data processing information, and lists of serial collections maintained by the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research. Best of all, this gopher allows you to run full-text keyword searches.
though the ICPSR's citation index and extensive holdings catalogue.

U.S. Census Information. The Census Bureau's gopher carries a wide range of information from county business patterns to financial data from state and local governments to county and city data books. You can access statistical briefs, summaries by state, and even an online version of the Statistical Abstract for the United States. Besides current and projected population information, this gopher maintains news reports and analysis from the Center for Economic Studies as well as "We the People," a series of subject-oriented demographic and economic reports written for non-specialists. Another good site for demographic information is the University of Pennsylvania's Population Studies Center gopher, which features survey data from the Current Population Studies and the National Survey of Families and Households, birth rate and mortality data, and access to the Urban Underclass Database.

Conclusions

Internet resources have several advantages over printed information and pay-per-use resources available on the commercial services. For one, Internet resources are eminently convenient. Most Internet resources grant unlimited public access without charge. So long as you have access to the Internet, you and your students can reach these resources 24 hours a day from home, office, or your academic computing center.

Better still, Internet resources are often superior to their printed counterparts. Many kinds of Internet resources free you from buying your own copies of political documents or waiting several months for your library to get copies: important government documents generally are put online within days or at most a few weeks after publication. Online textual resources are often more flexible, useful, convenient and up-to-date than printed material. Some of the best Internet resources may only be available online.

Internet resources like those that I have described are almost always very easy to use. However, you do have to know where to find them along the "information superhighway." In order to help you with your search, I've included a list of public opinion-related materials that can be found on the Internet, along with their respective addresses. If you've been hesitating about exploring the world of cyberspace, there's never been a better time to start than the present. Good luck "surfing the 'net!"

* Thanks to Jim Strider for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Reference


Appendix: Some Public Opinion Resources on the Internet

This document gives Uniform Resource Locators (URLS) for resources located on the World Wide Web. Host machine addresses are given for File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and Telnet resources, along with relevant login information for the Telnet sites. For Gopher resources, host names are given (followed by a port number, as appropriate) along with any relevant path information.

Telnet

Iowa Political Stock Market
IRSS Public Opinion Archives (TN3270)

ipsm.biz.uiowa.edu
uncvm1.oit.unc.edu

Login: IRSS1 through IRSS12
Pwd: IRSS

FTP

National Election Studies
FTP Server

ftp.nes.isr.umich.edu
Gopher

- C-SPAN Gopher: c-span.org
- Congressional Quarterly Gopher: gopher.cqalert.com
- Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research: gopher.icpsr.umich.edu
- Project Vote Smart: gopher.neu.edu

World Wide Web

- Gallup Organization Home Page: http://www.gallup.com/
- Hermes Project (Survey of WWW Users): http://www.umich.edu:80/~sgupta/hermes.htm
- Information Headquarters for the 1996 Republican Primary: http://www.umr.edu/~sears/primary/main.html
- National Election Studies Home Page: http://www.umich.edu/~nes/
- SURVEY-NET: http://www.wisdom.com/sv/
- Voter Online Information and Communication Exchange (VOICE): http://www.oclc.org/VoteSmart/lwv/lwvhomex.htm
- ECONsult's International Directory of Market and Opinion Research: http://infobase.internex.net/econsult/ec_dir.html
- Mouse Tracks—Marketing Activities and Resources: http://nsns.com/MouseTracks/
- Values and Lifestyles Program at SRI International: http://future.sri.com/vals/valshome.html

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