

Political Match Maker

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Abstract

In the 2000 presidential election, only fifty-five percent of eligible citizens exercised their right to vote. This poor turnout and the widespread apathy and lack of understanding present in today's voters are two of the many reasons our group decided to create a website to assist, encourage, and facilitate individuals who would like to learn more about the political process and the current candidates. The Political Match Maker website was designed to introduce uninformed citizens to the political process by providing a multitude of factual information about candidates vying for specific offices. Hopefully the website will promote an increase in the number of voting Americans and decrease the number who votes "blindly." The scope of this paper is on the Presidential election. Even with this limited scope, the website will contain all information an individual needs to successfully register, learn about the issues, and make an informed vote when an election approaches.

Motivation

We were given the task to pick an original, creative, interesting topic that could be implemented via the web. After bouncing ideas back and forth among fellow students and performing some research, our group decided the topic would pertain to the political process. Our main goals were to provide as many facts as possible about the process, match candidates with people that best fits their views, and encourage non-voters to vote. Throughout the project we gathered ideas, discussed these ideas amongst each other and with our professor and implemented them into our website. Near the end of the project, our professor was more concerned with the ideas that we discovered during the project than the implemented website due to inadequate time to create a well-designed website. Because of this, we turned in a paper to him and only implemented a skeleton version of the website which is not currently viewable via the Internet.

After the end of the course, we continued collecting and redefining ideas that would improve the website. The new ideas are included in this paper. The first section provides a brief overview of the political process and the information necessary for any voter to understand it. Following this section is our original website before the end of the project. It describes the breakdown of the website and implementation. The next section discusses the challenges faced during the course of the project, and how we remedied them. Following the challenges are the improvements we discovered during and after the completion of our project. The last section recaps the important topics discussed throughout the paper.

Basic Information on the Political Process

During the presidential election years, candidates compete in a number of events to get their respective parties' nomination. This is not required, but a majority of United States' presidents are the nominees of their party. Republican and Democratic parties hold national conventions in order to choose the candidate which they will nominate. Some of these conventions are televised so voters can see how candidates address specific current topics. In order to win a party's nomination, candidates must win delegates by carrying enough votes in their respective states. These nominating conventions do not start until February of the election's year; however, part of the candidates' election strategy start at least a year before the actual conventions and efforts are made to raise money for the campaign. These conventions are held in each state, starting alphabetically with Alabama and ending with Wyoming. In order to win, the candidate must get a majority vote. At this time the presidential candidate announces who he/she wants as his/her Vice President. The same process is completed for the Vice President, but delegates are expected to choose the Vice President that the presidential candidate prefers.

For an individual to express whom he/she wants as his/her President and Vice President, the person would need to cast a vote. In order to vote, the citizen must register or in cases of changed residency re-register. The registration form can be located in a local library, post office, or depending on the state the Department of Motor Vehicles or Bureau of Motor Vehicles. The last day a person can register to vote is twenty-nine days before the election. There are two statewide elections on even years: one in the spring and the other in the fall. When the appropriate time arrives, the registered person will receive information on when and where he/she will vote depending on the location of the person's address.

Our Website

Through our perspective, many people who choose not to vote seem to be either intimidated by voting, or they are unsure of how their vote affects politics. In order to increase the number of voters, there needs to be unbiased information available which will educate Americans on the importance of voting, the process of voting, and alerting them that their individual votes do make a difference. After investigating many different ideas involved in the political process, we chose to give information as current and factual as possible. Our site was divided into four major branches. The first branch discussed the general information on the political process. The other three branches contained information on the candidates running for the President's office, a quiz, and a query search.

The aforementioned political process section was a portion of the general information on the Political Match Maker. This section included opinionated responses about why one should vote and the importance an individual can make by casting his/her individual vote. Along with the previously stated information, there was general material describing how a person could register locally, voter registration applications in PDF form for each state, and telephone numbers to receive additional assistance in registering and finding the voting locations.

The second webpage section described each candidate running for a given position. Assuming all of the candidates' material was available, the information provided includes the following: biographical information, voting records, information about family, and opinions on issues. As of January 2004, we began collecting data from the five presidential candidate websites and then accessing different websites such as Vote-Smart to gather voting records. After collecting the data, we organized and stored the information onto our website. This section was not dynamically created (a search and an analysis of the collected data through an intelligent algorithm is not performed automatically). A user was needed to input information on each candidate running for a specific office.

After the candidate information web section was the quiz. The quiz asked the user multiple choice questions concerning their views on certain general issues. After the quiz the answers given by the users were compared to responses given by the running candidates. Using a comparison algorithm, the website presented the user with the candidate most likely to fit his/her views. Each candidate's viewpoints were preprogrammed, but eventually the website will dynamically search specific websites and return the candidates with the views of the person. If successfully implemented, this will be a great advancement of the web since most websites use a database of information rather than dynamically finding out specific data. When some candidate's views change or more information is provided for a specific candidate, no additional effort is needed to update the Political Match Maker website. The main goal for the quiz section was for the quiz results to help the user to identify which candidates, regardless of their party, share the same views, and not the party the candidates represent.

The final section involved a search query. The user was able to select a candidate from a list of candidates running for a particular office and an issue from a general issues list. With this combination the user was able to collect more information on the selected candidate's viewpoint over the issue. The combination was inputted into Yahoo!'s search engine, and after submitting the information, a list of URLs was displayed on the screen.

Challenges

Like many starting ideas, challenges were uncovered during the beginning stages of developing our website. At the initial phase of our project, we decided what ideas to include on educating people about the political process, the candidates running for their designated offices, and encourage these eligible citizens to cast their vote. After performing research via the Internet, we have accumulated a list that needed to be more clearly defined and organized in an easily understood format. After our organization process, our first version of the Political Match Maker website was created.

After designing the website, data was needed to describe each part of the website. The data used to calculate quiz results were the answers the candidates gave for quizzes at different websites. We included a quiz which would recommend the individual the candidate that best fits the user's views, but we found that the quizzes already implemented on other websites did not help. These websites included the "other" option where candidates fill in their own response based on their interpretation of the questions. Many candidates choose to answer most of the quiz questions with the other option and

gave their own response. Other candidates decided not to take the quizzes on the websites. For the Political Match Maker's quiz to function properly, the participating candidates need to complete quizzes that do not contain "other" as a selection option.

There are many possible reasons for the candidates to not answer the quiz questions with the predefined answers. This helps the candidates in their campaign since they will not be narrowing down their opinions on any current issues and help to avoid alienating any prospective voters. Others left their opinions to be defined by their speeches and websites. Unfortunately, candidates following this strategy made it more difficult for the voters to understand what each candidate represents and distinguish them from their running mates. This also made it more difficult to form a comprehensive quiz to distinguish the candidates, since it would largely be based on our subjective interpretations of the candidate's positions and views.

Another challenge was finding useful information on candidates whom never held a political office. So far the only solution we have devised is for the unknown candidates to present their own speeches and statements and provide more information about issues they believe is important. More responsibility will be given to these candidates to provide the necessary material for the voters.

Even though the parties contain a variety of personalities, another problem which arose was the extent of the similarity between the two major parties and the candidates themselves. The two parties agree over a wide range of issues, but largely disagree on what actions to take. Politicians spend millions of dollars to deliver stump speeches and buy commercial time, but they take far less effort to inform people of the issues being discussed and distinguish themselves from their counterparts. This gives the typical unobservant person who belongs to a certain party more of a reason to blindly vote straight party rather than finding out about the issues and cast an informed vote. Again, more effort is needed by voters to determine which candidate fits their beliefs.

Improvements

Although we have a basic start on the project, there are some steps needed in order for the website to be successful in both advancing the web and increasing the voting population. A great advancement for the quiz is to provide pointers for the users on how to collect the necessary material to help them decide on the priority of current issues, what their impression is on the current issues, and what needs to be done about the issues. Finding out more information on the current laws and any controversial topics that directly affect the current issues will also help in the decision making process.

Our current website uses a specific and narrow searching capability. The goal was to keep the viewers from leaving the Political Match Maker website using this search engine; however, this searching feature will either need to be improved in some way or eliminated. It takes time for the searching feature to pass the information to Yahoo!'s search engine, calculate the query, pass the information back to the website, and have the website compile the data. The searching criteria were also limited to the five Presidential candidates. We suggest in either using other current search engines or make the Political Match Maker's searching feature more robust and quicker in response time.

Even with the best ideas to encourage people to vote, a contemporary website with a catching design would help present these ideas. A well implemented navigational

system will be crucial to the success of the Political Match Maker. These uniquely designed layouts will better advertise the importance and goals that we want to express in our website.

In addition, more features could be added to allow for interactivity between the users of the site. During some of our discussion groups, we debated that this idea should be implemented into our website. A way to encourage people to vote is to increase this interactivity during the political process. This will make people more aware of the current events and running candidates. From this collaboration people will have a better understanding and be more likely vote for the politician that best fits their views. We concluded that we wanted to present as many facts as possible while filtering out any biased opinions about candidates; therefore, this topic was not implemented. After reflecting on our original design of the website, this interactivity might still be needed. People will have a chance to share some of the information they gleaned about a candidate, pass along their own thoughts, or use the website to organize their efforts and bring together like minded people over an issue. In the 2004 election, the internet played a significant role in many candidate campaigns, and the internet may be able to play an increasing role in politics if it brings in people who might otherwise be disinterested. If someone had the ability to join, create, or support an interest group online, it could possibly improve their involvement in the political process. The one major disadvantage of this feature is that it allows users of the website to be overrun by political activists for a specific candidate's campaign.

One helpful tool that could be implemented in the general political process section is a search query that will provide the addresses where one could find additional registration information and the location where the user will cast his/her vote locally. All the user needs to input is the zip code or the city and state of residence. Some potential drawbacks are the maintenance of this section of the website and a requirement of implementing a database to store the addresses of all the voting locations.

The ability of any politician to use the website would make the website more robust and widely acceptable. It is easier to find information on candidates who are running for national offices as opposed to state or local government positions and adding this feature would greatly improve the candidate's success along with informing the voting population. To accomplish this task, the politician would send a request, resume, and/or his/her biographical information to the website coordinators on the position he/she is applying for and whatever factual information he/she wants to say that helps in his/her campaign. How this can be done is either by the candidate sending the material to the website maintainers via email or regular mail or either entering in the information through an online request form. Either way, this will help the politician make him/her more well-known and for the voters to collect this information.

Conclusions

We believe the Political Match Maker has the potential to influence the way people interact with the political process by utilizing the enormous source of information available on the web. Relating to politics, the web is able to bring people together from all over the country to discuss issues in a way that might not be able to happen in real life. But for such a web-based tool to succeed, it would need to be supported by politicians

willing to do more to establish their positions and spend more time articulating policy differences, and prove to the voters what really sets them apart. Most of the candidates seem to spend much of their time talking past each other and saying similar ideas but proposing different degrees of solutions.

What we have accomplished is showing how the web can be used to get information about a candidate, giving people a place to start learning about a candidate, presenting a quiz that helps identify some areas in which candidates differ on their public policy, and creating an interactive search to enable people to see more information over the candidates and their issues. After uncovering many challenges and discovering some new ideas, we believe the project would best be served by extending it to cover more elections at the state and local level, interacting with the campaign offices and encouraging politicians to make use of the web, and becoming more of a forum for interaction between interested people, new voters, or users filled with curiosity about politics.

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