



## **Limits and Opportunities of Campaigning on the Web**

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## Abstract

The rise of new media has transformed campaign communications. Virtually all campaigns now launch websites, post on Facebook, “tweet,” and send e-mails. How do campaigns view these technologies? What are the implications for the content of communications? The researchers address these questions with a focus on United States congressional candidate websites. They argue that, on the one hand, campaigns face clear limits since they cannot control who *visits* their sites; yet, on the other hand, campaigns can control the *content* posted. Thus, they expect homogeneity, across campaigns, in terms of target audiences, anticipated visitors, and the portrayal of overall campaign strategy, but variation when it comes to content (e.g., going negative, information about the candidate’s background, fundraising appeals etc.). Consistent with prior work, the key to this content variation lies in the candidate’s incumbency status. The researchers test their expectations with unique data from surveys of those involved with the creation and maintenance of congressional campaign websites between 2008 and 2014. The data strongly support their predictions. These results offer the first definitive portrait of how campaigns view and use websites, and what this means for congressional campaign communication.

The rise of new media has transformed campaign communications. Campaigns, particularly at the congressional level, have gone from dabbling with websites in the early- to mid-1990s, to now routinely launching sites, posting on Facebook, “tweeting,” and sending emails (see D’Alessio 1997; Williams, Aylesworth, and Chapman 2002; Williams 2003; Foot et al. 2009; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2014). Campaigns have fully integrated these technologies into their overall communications strategies—complete with dedicated new media staff—and research shows that websites in particular have influenced voters and, thus, potentially election outcomes (see, e.g., Gibson and McAllister 2006; Tewksbury 2006). The 2008 campaign was an important turning point in this process as candidates at various levels harnessed the power of the web and new communications tools to reach a growing and increasingly engaged online political audience (see, e.g., Smith 2009). Online campaign tools, including campaign websites, have become a significant part of congressional campaign communications, and thus a reliable source of data for analyzing campaign communications in general (Bimber and Davis 2003; Foot and Schneider 2006; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009).

Despite the prevalence of new media in campaign communications, scant research explores how campaigns *themselves* view various technologies and how they purport to use them. We fill this gap—focusing on United States congressional campaign websites—by addressing two basic questions about web campaigning. First, how do campaigns *view* their websites as a mode of strategic communication? What audiences do they have in mind, whom do they expect to visit, and how does the website compare to other media in terms of capturing the campaign’s overall message? Second, what do campaigns *do* on their websites? Specifically, what kind of content do they prioritize, how frequently do they “go negative,” and how much influence do they give staffers, consultants and volunteers over the website?

We begin in the next section by examining how campaigns might view their websites, noting the opportunities and constraints presented by the nature of political campaigns and websites as a medium. Although websites present opportunities to post extraordinary amounts of information, *all* campaigns must tread carefully as they lack control over who accesses the site. This leads us to expect homogeneity in how campaigns view the potential reach of websites as a strategic communication tool. Yet, we also recognize that campaigns have significant control over how they use their websites. Campaigns have direct and complete control over the information they post online. We therefore expect more explicit strategic considerations to drive the informational content, particularly stemming from the candidate's status as an incumbent or not. We test our expectations with data from a novel series of surveys, collected from those involved with the creation and maintenance of congressional campaign websites between 2008 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> These data are particularly valuable in that they can offer new insights and corroboration when compared to past findings from research based on content analyses of these sites (e.g., Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009; Foot and Schneider 2006). We conclude by discussing the implications of what this new understanding means for the place of websites in electoral campaigns.

### **Congressional Campaign Websites as Strategic Communication Platforms**

Like other platforms for strategic campaign communication, websites provide opportunities to reach voters; however, campaigns also develop and administer their websites with certain constraints in mind. Our first research question considers perceptions of the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Our work follows others that have conducted similar surveys (e.g., Stromer-Galley et al. 2003; Foot and Schneider 2006); however, we present a more updated and larger data set with a distinct focus.

<sup>2</sup> Our focus is variation across *candidates*, and thus it may be that in more competitive races, there are generally more frequent visits by all potential audiences but the relative proportion of visits by audience will remain the same.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, this does not mean that the inherent capacities of websites free campaigns from rhetorical and political constraints, just that they are more likely to see their websites, as compared to other media, as a better venue for promoting their overall campaign message, especially to a general audience of voters.

campaign websites in terms of overall strategy. This involves consideration of the website's target audience, perceptions of who is most likely to visit, and the extent to which websites represent the overall strategy of congressional campaigns.

Access to a website requires a deliberate choice and action on the part of the user, and thus, a website's audience is an exogenous element over which campaigns have limited control. Unlike e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter, for example, campaigns cannot simply post a message and know certain individuals will receive it (Smith 2011; Zickuhr 2013). This is a challenge faced by *all* campaigns, and several implications follow. First, the frequency with which particular groups visit the site is outside the campaign's control and therefore creates a constraint on the online audiences the campaign will likely reach. Regardless of the individual candidate (e.g., incumbent status, gender, party), the relative frequency with which different groups visit the site is likely to be perceived as the same across campaigns. For example, engaged and supportive voters, and perhaps journalists, will visit more often than voters in general because more engaged voters and journalists will seek out information while supporters will be apt to seek out material that reinforces their beliefs (see Taber and Lodge 2006).<sup>2</sup> In sum, we hypothesize that, all else constant, campaigns, regardless of their characteristics, will view engaged and supportive voters, and then journalists, as more likely to visit their websites, compared to voters in general (hypothesis 1).

Second, we suspect that campaigns will nonetheless recognize the critical distinction between the frequencies with which particular groups visit and the target audiences of the websites. Even though highly engaged voters likely visit more frequently, any voter can visit, and journalists may visit the site with some frequency, using the information they obtain to write

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<sup>2</sup> Our focus is variation across *candidates*, and thus it may be that in more competitive races, there are generally more frequent visits by all potential audiences but the relative proportion of visits by audience will remain the same.

stories that reach broad audiences (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003: 68-72; Semiatin 2005: 166-167). Consequently, any information posted could reach *all voters*, meaning there is a risk of posting material aimed toward very specific groups and alienating other potential audiences. We suspect that campaigns recognize this risk and are averse to it (McDermott, Fowler, and Smirnov 2008). Thus we predict that, all else constant, all campaigns will target their content, first and foremost, to general audiences and undecided voters, and then, with decreasing frequency, to engaged voters and supportive voters (and other more targeted groups) (hypothesis 2) (see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009, 2010, 2014). While the targets will be the same across campaigns (i.e., we suspect target audiences to have the same relative importance regardless of the party, gender, candidate status, etc., of the candidate), the content of what is communicated will vary, as we discuss in the next section.

Third, given the goal of targeting voters in general and the infinite informational space of websites, we suspect campaigns will view websites as an ideal way to communicate their overall campaign message to voters. This is a characteristic unique to websites since other forms of campaign communication (e.g., television ads, direct mailings, candidate speeches, informal conversations with voters, etc.) can be more directly targeted toward specific audiences and are limited in terms of informational content. Moreover, when compared to coverage that candidates can expect in the news media, websites have the advantage of being unmediated. Websites simply provide more opportunities to communicate the campaign's overall message, and thus we hypothesize that, all else constant, all campaigns will view websites as the best overall representation of their campaign strategy, relative to other media (hypothesis 3).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, this does not mean that the inherent capacities of websites free campaigns from rhetorical and political constraints, just that they are more likely to see their websites, as compared to other media, as a better venue for promoting their overall campaign message, especially to a general audience of voters.

## **How Congressional Campaigns Use the Web**

Lack of control over the audience for campaign websites limits how any campaign can use the web as a strategic tool. Yet, given those limits—which we suggest will generate a focus on voters in general despite the fact that such individuals do not frequently visit the sites—campaigns still maintain the ability to control the *content* posted. It is with respect to content that we expect differentiation based on the type of candidate, in contrast to the homogeneity in how campaigns view the strategic opportunities of the web. Campaign communications must be concerned with motivating voters to cast their votes in favor of their preferred candidates. In order to serve the candidates and their campaigns, strategically targeted communications highlight their preferred considerations so that citizens will use them to make their voting decisions (Druckman 2004). It is from this underlying idea that we construct our framework, building on a few basic premises about congressional elections.

First, most voters pay little attention to congressional campaigns, and, consequently, often base their decisions on cues such as political party or incumbency status (Druckman 2004; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Second, when it comes to U.S. congressional campaigns, incumbency is a particularly accessible basis for vote choice. In fact, “incumbency is a dominant consideration because incumbents are so consistently successful in winning election—and everyone involved in politics knows it” (Jacobson 2013: 29). All else equal, voters favor incumbents (Gronke 2000: 140-141). This manifests itself in providing incumbents with up to a 10 percentage point advantage (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2004: 487; Abramowitz et al. 2006; Jacobson 2013; for more fine-tuned estimates, see Hainmueller, Hall, and Snyder 2014). The incumbency advantage largely stems from candidate background characteristics in that voters

find incumbents appealing because they possess experience in office, are familiar (e.g., have ties to the district), and have provided benefits for the district or state (e.g., organizing events concerning a local issue, casework, pork barrel projects) (e.g., Fiorina 1989; Gronke 2000: 142; Jacobson 2013). These assumptions imply that incumbents will emphasize aspects of their *background*, including their experience, their familiarity, and what they have done for the district, all else constant (hypothesis 4).

In response, non-incumbents face the challenge of getting voters' attention to minimize their reliance on the incumbency cue. One way to do so is by "going negative." Evidence on the attention-grabbing nature of negativity comes from political psychology research (Marcus et al. 2000; Druckman and McDermott 2008), as well as a long line of work in psychology showing that individuals pay more attention and give more weight to negative than to positive information (e.g., people attend more when told of 5% unemployment than when told of 95% employment) (e.g., Baumeister et al. 2001). Thus, we expect incumbents to report that they "go negative" on their websites with less frequency than non-incumbents, all else constant (hypothesis 5).

Attention is not enough, however; non-incumbents must also provide voters with distinctive information to dislodge them from the incumbency bias. They, therefore, will provide more issue information and make more attempts to persuade voters to use distinct information, all else constant. Whereas incumbents are expected to provide limited information, non-incumbents are motivated to give voters more reason to think about going against the status quo. We expect this also means, all else constant, that non-incumbents will have to use rhetoric to recruit and coordinate volunteers, and that they are also more likely to use the website to raise funds as they build campaign organizations. In short, we expect that non-incumbents will



provide more information (other than background information; see hypothesis 4) and campaign more actively on their websites than incumbents (hypothesis 6).

Incumbents are also much more likely to have well-developed campaign organizations than either challengers or open seat candidates. Important aspects of the incumbency advantage include, after all, the resources that come from being established representatives of their districts, including the ability to fundraise more easily than potential challengers (Jacobson 2013). This dynamic leads to an expectation that, all else constant, incumbents will be more professionalized in so far as they will have more paid staff members and will rely on professionalized staffs in designing campaign material. On the flip side, non-incumbents will be left relying more on volunteers to cover the significant costs of website development and maintenance (Parkin 2010) (hypothesis 7).<sup>4</sup> Finally, we do not expect any of these dynamics to change over the period of our study because, although technologies may have evolved, the constraints and opportunities on campaigns have remained fairly constant over time (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2014).

Our theory is consistent with past work that uses content analysis data from congressional candidate websites to understand campaign communications (e.g., Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009; Foot and Schneider 2006). However, here we want to see if campaigns *themselves* see and act in ways that are consistent with past results. As such, we attempt to test an established theory with data that comes directly from those involved with the day-to-day operation of congressional campaign websites.

### **Campaign Survey Data**

We test these predictions with data from a series of surveys conducted during each campaign between 2008 and 2014. During each election cycle, we identified potential

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<sup>4</sup> Our predictions echo extant work by identifying incumbency-challenger status as a critical determinant of campaign behavior over a range of strategies (Jacobson 2013: 105-113; Trent and Friedenberg 2008: 86-118).

respondents by first creating a list of all active, general election, major party congressional candidates. We then searched for their websites and, on these sites, for contact information, such as the names, emails, and phone numbers of possible respondents. In mid-October, we sent an email request either to the specific contact or to the campaign more generally asking for someone “involved in creating and updating the [campaign] website” to complete a brief, confidential survey via Survey Monkey or email.<sup>5</sup> We repeated our request up to three more times either by email or phone (when available), including a final request in the days immediately following the election.

We sought to contact every campaign over the course of four election cycles. We managed to contact (to our knowledge) the 3,060 campaigns that provided a workable email address or online inquiry form (we exclude those that could not be contacted from our response rate calculation). We received a total of 500 responses from the 3,060 campaigns, leading to an overall response rate of roughly 16%, which is not far off the typical range for these types of web surveys (see Couper 2008: 340). In our analyses, the Ns are smaller due to item non-response. Also, three of our items, which we note below, were only asked on our 2014 survey. It is important to reiterate that all of the responses were given on the promise of anonymity, so we have no way to know exactly which campaigns responded. This means that we are unable to match individual survey results to other measures such as measures of actual website content, fundraising data or district partisanship.

Our survey asked questions about the campaign for which the respondent worked, including the candidate’s office level (House or Senate), party, gender, and incumbency status. We also asked the respondent to rate the race’s competitiveness—specifically whether the race

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<sup>5</sup> In cases where we could not locate contact information, we would—if available—submit a message directly to the campaign on its website (i.e., an online inquiry).

was a toss-up, leaning or likely to be in favor of one of the candidates, or solidly in favor of one of the candidates. Table 1 shows that our sample reflected the population of campaigns fairly well in terms of office level (14.84% Senate), party (58.78% Democratic), candidate gender (75.05% male), race competitiveness (43.85% solid) and incumbency status (52.64% challengers).

To confirm that we received answers from appropriate individuals, we asked respondents an initial screening question in which they indicated the extent to which they were informed about how the content of the site was determined, with higher scores indicating more knowledge. The average response was 6.51 (standard deviation = 0.97; N = 494) with 69.43% of respondents rating themselves at the very top of our seven-point scale.

**[Table 1 Here]**

Our surveys also contained the measures used to test the aforementioned hypotheses. The full questions and related hypotheses are listed in Table 2. The survey asked respondents to indicate their perception of how often an average member of each group (e.g., undecided voters, supporters, journalists) visited the site, on a seven-point scale, with higher scores indicating more frequent visits. Respondents used a similar scale to rate the priority of several groups (e.g., undecided voters, supporters, journalists) in terms of each being a target audience of the website, with higher scores indicating higher priority. We also asked respondents to assess, again with a seven-point scale, how campaign websites compared to other communications (e.g., direct mailings, television ads, candidate speeches) in terms of “capturing the campaign’s overall strategy,” and to rate the importance of various content goals for the site (e.g., persuading undecided voters, increasing awareness of issue positions, fundraising). Respondents also noted whether their site included any negativity aimed at issues and/or personal characteristics. (We recoded this into a dichotomous measure with 0 for no negativity and 1 for any type of

negativity.) We added a new question to the survey in 2014 that asked about the influence that volunteers, staff, and consultants had on website development and maintenance.<sup>6</sup> Our survey included a variety of other items tangentially associated with our hypotheses, including the extent to which the site was used to communicate with voters, the frequency with which the site was updated, the perceived originality of the site, and whether the opponent's site contained negativity.

**[Table 2 Here]**

## **Results**

Our analysis progresses in two parts. In the first part, we focus on how campaigns *view* their websites by testing hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. We then analyze how campaigns *use* their websites, testing hypotheses 4 through 7.

In Figure 1, we present the averages and standard deviations from our questions about the frequency of website visits and the primary target audience (across all years). As predicted by hypothesis 1, respondents believe that highly engaged voters and, to a lesser extent, journalists, supportive voters, and supportive activists, will access the site most often, while voters in general and undecided voters visit less frequently. In fact, respondents recognize that voters in general and undecided voters visit less frequently than all other groups with the exception of the opponent's voters and non-voters (e.g., comparing "undecided voters" to "bloggers" gives  $t_{417} = 6.906$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test).

**[Figure 1 Here]**

The figure also supports hypothesis 2. Those involved in the creation and maintenance of congressional campaign websites view voters in general and undecided voters as their desired

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<sup>6</sup> Other potential sources of influence include state parties, national parties, or other politicians, but we did not measure these.

audiences, even though they are not the most likely to visit. These two groups register significantly higher priority scores than all other groups, including highly engaged voters, journalists, and those who support the campaign (e.g., comparing “undecided voters” to “highly engaged voters” gives  $t_{457} = 6.272$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test). This echoes existing research showing that undecided voters have been a top-rated audience for congressional campaign websites (Stromer-Galley et al. 2003; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009). This result does not mean, however, that campaigns completely ignore other groups, only that these other groups are seen as significantly lower priorities when crafting the campaign website’s content.

This mismatch between primary targets and likely visitors accentuates the importance of not confounding the frequency with which particular voters visit websites with the intention of those designing the sites. Certain groups may be more important even if they visit less often (cf. Trent and Friedenbergl 2008: 402-404). This strategy also seems to recognize the potential danger of targeting supporters with websites that might alienate some other crucial group of voters. Focusing the website on a broad audience may do little to fire up the base, even if they visit frequently, but it ensures that potentially persuadable voters will not be turned off, even if they do not visit as often. As explained, the importance of journalists is noteworthy given that they may often visit campaign websites to obtain information, which they then translate to broader audiences through news stories (see, e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003: 68-72; Semiatin 2005: 166-167).

To test hypothesis 3, we asked respondents to rate how well various forms of communication “capture the campaign’s overall strategy.” We present the averages and standard deviations in Figure 2, which shows that—as predicted—respondents rated their websites as significantly more representative of their overall strategy and message than all other media,

including candidate speeches, informal conversations, television ads, direct mailings, and media coverage (e.g., comparing “website” to “candidate speeches” gives  $t_{410} = 3.309$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test).<sup>7</sup>

**[Figure 2 Here]**

While a campaign’s website may be ideal for presenting an overall strategy, it still is constrained in terms of reach, especially to all voters. This is clear in the responses to a question we asked in 2014 about the extent to which campaigns use different media to communicate with voters (on a 1 to 7 scale, with 7 being “used extensively”). The results in Figure 3 show that websites ranked above the midpoint on our seven-point scale, indicating more than “moderate” use, but that they came in significantly lower than Facebook, Twitter, and email in terms of communicating with voters online (e.g., comparing “website” to “email” gives  $t_{85} = -3.477$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test). The distinction appears to be that campaigns see their websites as the place to present broad messages to their target audience—i.e., voters in general—while Facebook, Twitter, and email are used to communicate more directly and extensively with those who have “friended,” “followed” or signed up with the campaign—i.e., those who are more likely to be supporters or journalists/bloggers following the campaign closely. As such, campaigns tend to see their websites not so much as a direct communications or messaging tool *per se*, but more as a general presentation medium.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We also asked respondents how often other campaign material included the site’s URL. We find that respondents estimated that an average of 91.26% of other campaign material (e.g., television ads, direct mailers) included the campaign website address. This further suggests that campaigns see their websites as an informational hub and ideal place to present their overall message to voters at large. Campaigns continue to drive traffic to these general sources of campaign information.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say, however, that campaigns see their websites as static or unoriginal “brochures” (see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007; Foot et al. 2003). To assess this, we also included measures that gauged how often the websites were updated and assessed the originality of the websites (the latter was asked only on our 2014 survey). We find that the majority of campaigns view their websites as fairly dynamic, updating information every few days (35.73%) or even daily (27.84%). The vast majority (72.62%) of our 2014 respondents also described their campaign websites as more than moderately original or unique (when asked to rank them on a seven point scale

**[Figure 3 Here]**

In sum, we find that those involved with the development and maintenance of congressional campaign websites tend to see voters in general and undecided voters as their primary targets, although they recognize that others, particularly supporters and journalists, are more likely to visit. They also view their websites as a good place to present their overall campaign message—better than television ads, direct mailers, or speeches—although they are perhaps not the most ideal channels for sending direct messages.

Recall that we predicted these results should be uniform across all types of candidates. To test this, we conducted a series of 19 ordered probit analyses using the measures described in Table 1 as our independent variables. The results show that there are very few factors that cause campaigns to view their websites differently (see Tables A1, A2 and A3 in the Appendix). The only statistically significant relationships we uncover suggest that Democrats and incumbents are less likely to target opposition voters, Senate candidates are more likely to expect journalists to visit, and race competitiveness is positively associated with targeting journalists and with expecting journalists, engaged voters, and supportive voters to visit.

We also find that our control variables for individual campaign years are occasionally significant. For example, campaigns targeted engaged voters more in 2012 and 2014 than they did in 2008, while they thought that bloggers visited their sites more often in 2008 than in any other campaign year under investigation. This makes sense given the increased popularity of blogs in 2008 and the turning point that election represented in use of the Internet for presidential and congressional campaigns (see, e.g., Smith 2009). Still, these are the only statistically

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from “not at all original” to “very original” the average is 4.34, standard deviation = 1.52, N = 84). All of this suggests that campaigns have a specific way of looking at their websites when it comes to presenting information and communicating with voters. They typically see their websites as a platform for presenting an original and dynamic overview of their campaign message while relying more heavily on social media for direct communication to those who have established a connection with the campaign.

significant relationships in what is otherwise a vast sea of insignificant results, showing that campaigns clearly have a fairly uniform impression of their websites. The overall point is that campaigns generally target a broad audience, recognizing that they are constrained by the fact that they have almost no control over who will actually visit.

This does not mean, however, that all campaigns *use* their websites in the same way. We predicted that incumbency would be the key driving force when it comes to the content goals of the websites and the propensity to “go negative.” We also posited that candidate status would drive the relative influence given to staff, volunteers, and consultants.

We first look at the general informational goals of the websites. In Figure 4, we plot the average and standard deviations of the importance of each goal.<sup>9</sup> The results show that congressional campaigns generally use their websites as mechanisms to inform and reach undecided and independent voters. Indeed, the highest rated goal is to provide information on the candidate’s issue positions, and this significantly exceeds all other goals (e.g., comparing “increasing awareness of candidate’s issues positions” to “increasing awareness of candidate’s background” gives  $t_{433} = 5.853$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test).

**[Figure 4 Here]**

The next most important goal—increasing awareness of the candidate’s background—does not significantly differ from persuading undecided voters, but there is significantly less priority given to any goal that may involve mobilization efforts, including raising funds, signing up volunteers, publicizing campaign events, getting out the vote, or distributing material (e.g., comparing “persuading undecided voters” to “fundraising” gives  $t_{432} = 3.608$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test). We then see another significant drop down to coordinating volunteers, providing

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<sup>9</sup> Figure 4 does not include the goal of “collecting data for analysis of campaign goals and strategies” since we only collected data on that goal in 2014. In 2014, the mean value for that goal was 4.49 (standard deviation = 1.92;  $n = 183$ ).



information on the opponent's issue positions, and providing information on the opponent's background (e.g., comparing "distributing campaign material" to "coordinating volunteers" gives  $t_{427} = 4.891$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test).

These results, while perhaps surprising given how critical web-based mobilization has become for presidential campaigns, cohere with the prior research on congressional races, where it was found that "information was the most prevalent practice and mobilization was the least prevalent practice" (Foot, Schneider, and Dougherty 2007: 94; also see Cardenal 2001; Klotz 2003; Stromer-Galley et al. 2003; Foot and Schneider 2006; Norris 2006; Gulati and Williams 2009; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2014). They also are consonant with the narrative presented above in that campaigns do not appear to primarily view or use their websites as a tool for targeting supporters. Their primary goal is to provide information and possibly persuade undecided voters rather than mobilizing voters *per se*, despite the reality that undecided voters are less likely to visit than engaged observers and supporters. This is not to say that mobilization is irrelevant, but only that our survey results suggest that those who design and maintain congressional campaign websites do not count it as a primary goal for this particular campaign tool.

Of more direct interest to us is whether there is variation in these goals. Recall we predicted in hypotheses 4 and 6 that incumbents would differ in terms of their goals. To test this, we again conducted a series of probit analyses (see Table A4 in the Appendix). The results support our expectations. Specifically, incumbents are much more likely than non-incumbents to rank increasing awareness of the candidate's background as "very high importance," while non-incumbents are significantly more likely to prioritize other goals. Figure 5 presents the predicted probabilities of selecting the highest priority on our seven point scale for incumbents and non-

incumbents across all website goals.<sup>10</sup> It shows that incumbent campaigns have a 48.5% chance of ranking the promotion of the candidate’s background as “very high” compared to a 37.1% probability for non-incumbent campaigns, while the chances that non-incumbent campaigns max out the scale are higher for all other goals, including increasing awareness of issue positions (61.0% to 47.6%), persuading undecided voters (38.4% to 28.3%), signing up volunteers (22.8% to 15.1%), and fundraising (36.9% to 23.8%).

**[Figure 5 Here]**

Our theory focused on information, persuasion, volunteer coordination, and fundraising; yet, there is a logic to the fact that non-incumbent campaigns place a higher priority on *every* website goal, with the exception of candidate background promotion. Consistent with our explanation of the incumbency advantage, incumbents generally have less incentive to actively campaign (see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009: 344). In this case, it appears as though campaign website designers follow this logic and believe that it is probably enough for incumbents to remind voters of their background. Non-incumbents, on the other hand, have to make significantly higher priorities of other goals, such as promoting issue positions, persuading undecided voters, fundraising, volunteer recruitment *and posting any other campaign information* (e.g., distributing material, mobilizing messages).

Aside from the informational content goals, we also predicted that incumbents would be less likely to “go negative” (hypothesis 5). When asked, 63.0% of respondents told us that their campaign website included negativity focused on personal characteristics, issues, or both. However, non-incumbent campaigns were significantly more likely than incumbent campaigns to use their website to attack their opponent, according to our probit analysis (see Table A5 in the

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<sup>10</sup> To compute these values, we set all other independent variables to their mean and re-ran our models using *Clarify*.

Appendix).<sup>11</sup> In fact, non-incumbents have a 77.5% chance of posting negative comments about their opponent on their websites, compared to a 50.0% chance for incumbents.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we asked respondents in 2014 to rate, using another seven-point scale, the influence that volunteers, staff, and consultants have on the development and maintenance of their campaign websites. Results show that staff members (5.22) have significantly more influence than either consultants (4.73) or volunteers (2.44) (e.g., comparing “Staff” to “Consultants” gives  $t_{77} = 2.294$ ,  $p = .012$  in a two-tailed test). However, we find once again that incumbent campaigns differ dramatically from non-incumbent campaigns (hypothesis 7). Specifically, incumbent campaigns give significantly more influence than non-incumbent campaigns to staffers and consultants while giving less control to volunteers (see Table A5 in the Appendix).

The different probabilities of ranking each group as “highly influential” are graphed in Figure 6, where non-incumbent campaigns appear to be much more egalitarian than incumbent campaigns when it comes to producing and maintaining websites. Whereas each of the three groups has a roughly equal, albeit relatively low, probability of being ranked as “highly influential” on non-incumbent campaigns, volunteers have almost no chance of being seen as “highly influential” on incumbent campaigns. As we expected, incumbent campaigns appear to have a much more professionalized approach to using their websites.

**[Figure 6 Here]**

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<sup>11</sup> Logically, we also find that respondents from incumbent campaigns are more likely (82.88%) than those from non-incumbent campaigns (53.38%) to complain about negativity on their opponent’s website.

<sup>12</sup> We also find that race competitiveness is associated with a greater probability of going negative. Here we see that negativity has a 97.7% probability of showing up on candidate websites in toss-up races, compared to a 79.7% probability in leaning races and a 36.0% probability in races solidly favoring one party or the other. Both of our negativity findings follow past research on the content of congressional campaign websites and reconfirm that, unlike candidates who are relatively safe (often including incumbents), those who are coming from behind or find themselves in tight races are more likely to draw contrasts with their opponents (see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2010).

## **Conclusion**

This study, which is the first to extensively analyze what campaigns say about their websites, shows that those who work on congressional campaigns have a fairly uniform view. Campaigns generally target a broad audience while recognizing that highly engaged voters and “experts” (i.e., journalists and bloggers) are more likely to visit. They also recognize that their websites are better at presenting the campaign’s overall message to this general audience than they are at communicating direct messages to those who have established a tighter connection with the campaign. At the same time, campaigns use their websites in different ways depending on their candidate’s status in the race. While incumbents are content to promote their background, non-incumbents more actively pursue all other website goals, including issue promotion, fundraising and volunteer recruitment. Non-incumbents are also motivated by political realities to “go negative” more often on their sites, and they give volunteers relatively more control over the site.

Our results have additional face validity because the perceptions of the respondents cohere with content analyses of actual congressional campaign websites. For example, incumbents emphasize their backgrounds while non-incumbents focus on issues and “go negative” (e.g., Foot and Schneider 2006; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009, 2010). Unlike that work, however, we are able to move beyond what is posted, isolating how campaigns themselves perceive their websites and how they are strategically motivated to use them. As such, we add a new, but consistent, element to our understanding of congressional campaign communications on the web.

These results also highlight the fact that no mode of political communication is limitless in the opportunities that it provides. As we have shown, campaigns are constrained by political realities that keep their web-based communications in line with their regular rhetorical patterns. Nearly all campaigns share the same view of targets and likely visitors, and yet they differ dramatically in how they use their sites based on conventional political motives. Despite the promise of their limitless opportunities, campaigns tend to treat their websites in much the same way they treat other campaign communication strategies.

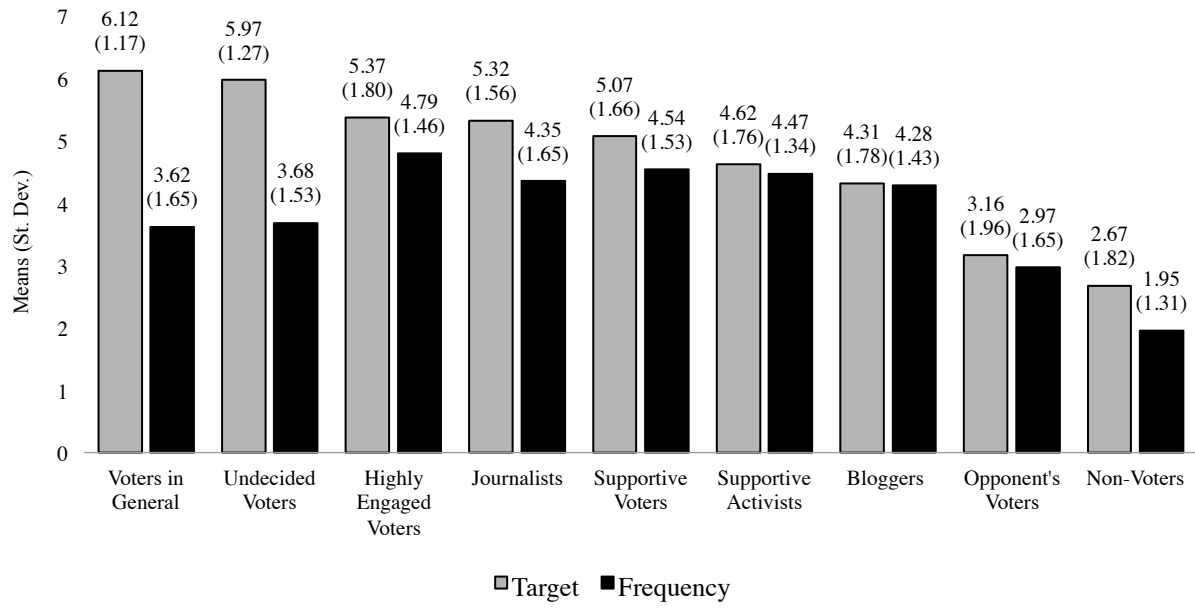
**Table 1: Campaign Features**

		<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>Office Level</b>	House	85.16	419
	Senate	14.84	73
<b>Candidate Party</b>	Democrat	58.78	288
	Independent	0.20	1
	Republican	41.02	201
<b>Candidate Gender</b>	Male	75.05	364
	Female	24.95	121
<b>Race Competitiveness</b>	Solid	43.85	214
	Leaning	36.07	176
	Toss-Up	20.08	98
<b>Candidate Status</b>	Incumbent	32.52	160
	Challenger	52.64	259
	Open Seat	14.84	73

**Table 2: Survey Measures, Hypotheses and Questions**

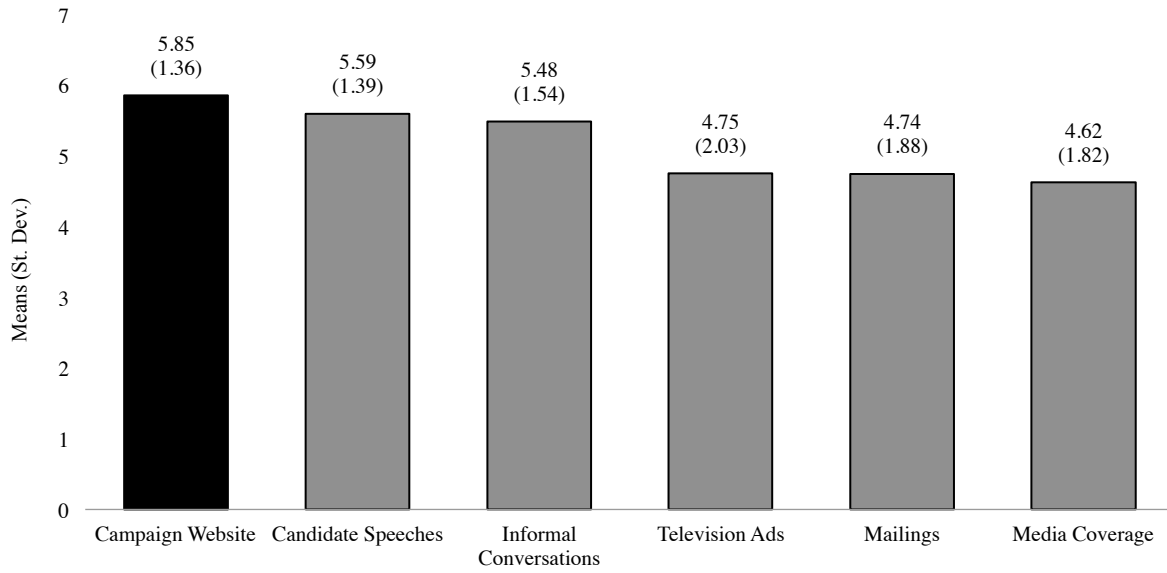
Measures and Hypotheses	Questions
<b>Visit Frequency (H1)</b>	“Please rate the frequency with which your campaign believes a typical member of <u>each</u> of the following groups visits your website. Please enter a number between 1 and 7 where 1 = never; 4 = once a week; 7 = nearly daily.” The groups rated included voters in general, undecided voters, highly engaged voters, journalists, voters who already support the candidate, supportive political activists / strong partisans, bloggers or other on-line activists, voters who already support the opponent, and non-voters.
<b>Website Target (H2)</b>	“Please rate the priority of <u>each</u> of the following groups in terms of it being a target audience for your campaign’s website. Please enter a number between 1 and 7 where 1 = very low priority; 4 = medium priority; 7 = very high priority.” The groups rated included voters in general, undecided voters, highly engaged voters, journalists, voters who already support the candidate, supportive political activists / strong partisans, bloggers or other on-line activists, voters who already support the opponent, and non-voters.
<b>Medium Captures Overall Strategy (H3)</b>	“Please rate the extent to which <u>each</u> of the following forms of communication captures your campaign’s “overall” strategy (e.g., the message your campaign hopes to relay to voters at large, as opposed to more targeted messages). Please enter a number between 1 and 7 where 1 = does NOT capture overall strategy; 4 = moderately captures overall strategy; 7 = fully captures overall strategy.” The media included television ads (if any were produced), mailings, website, candidate speeches, media campaign coverage, and informal conversations (e.g., between candidate and voters).
<b>Website Content Goals (H4 and H6)</b>	“Please rate the importance of <u>each</u> of the following goals for your campaign’s website. Please enter a number between 1 and 7 where 1 = very low importance; 4 = medium importance; 7 = very high importance.” Goals included increasing awareness of the candidate’s issue positions, increasing awareness of the candidate’s background, soliciting donations / fundraising, persuading undecided voters, publicizing campaign events, distributing campaign material, signing up volunteers, getting out the vote, coordinating volunteers, providing information about the opponent’s background, and providing information about the opponent’s issue positions.
<b>Going Negative (H5)</b>	“Does your campaign’s website contain any negative content aimed at the opponent? If so, does it focus on issues, personal characteristics, both, or something else? (Please place an X next to only one choice.)” Answer options included no negative content, negative content focused on issues, negative content focused on personal characteristics, negative content focused on both issues and personal characteristics, and negative content focused on something else.
<b>Personnel (2014 only) (H7)</b>	“Please rate the influence that each group has had on the development and maintenance of the campaign website. For each group, please enter a number between 1 and 7 where 1 = no influence at all; 4 = moderate level of influence; 7 = a very high level of influence.” Answer groups included volunteers, staff, consultants, and other.

**Figure 1: Website Targets and Visitor Frequency (2008 - 2014)**

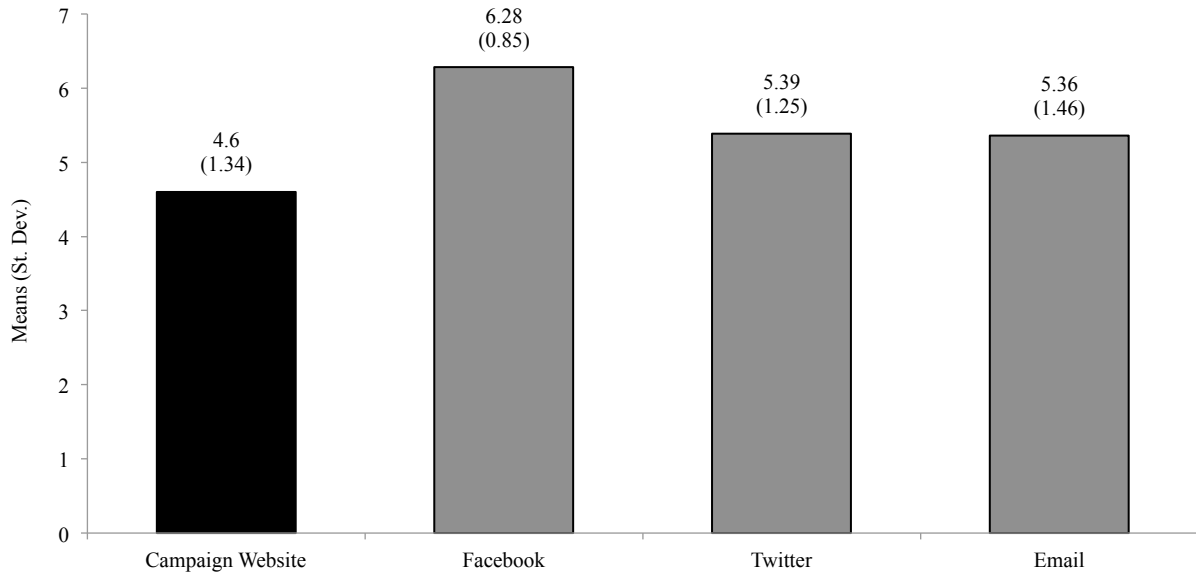




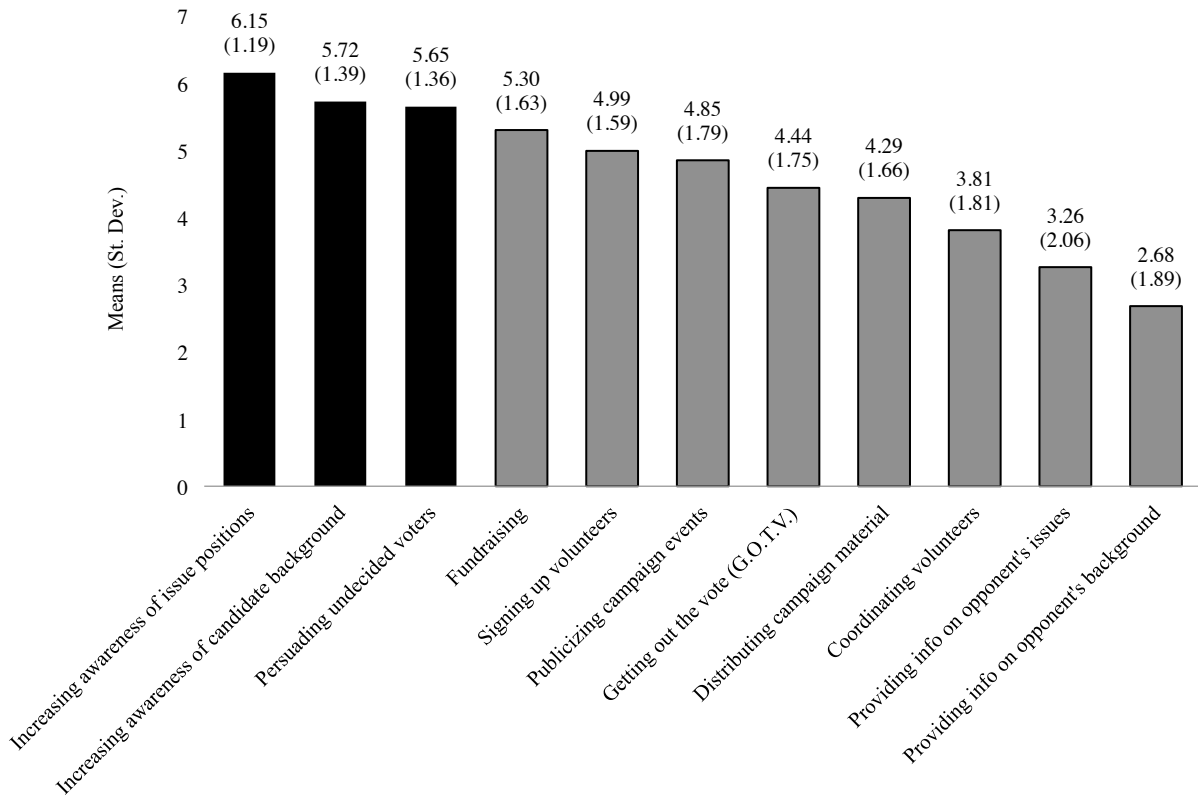
**Figure 2: Communicating the Campaign's Overall Strategy (2008 - 2014)**



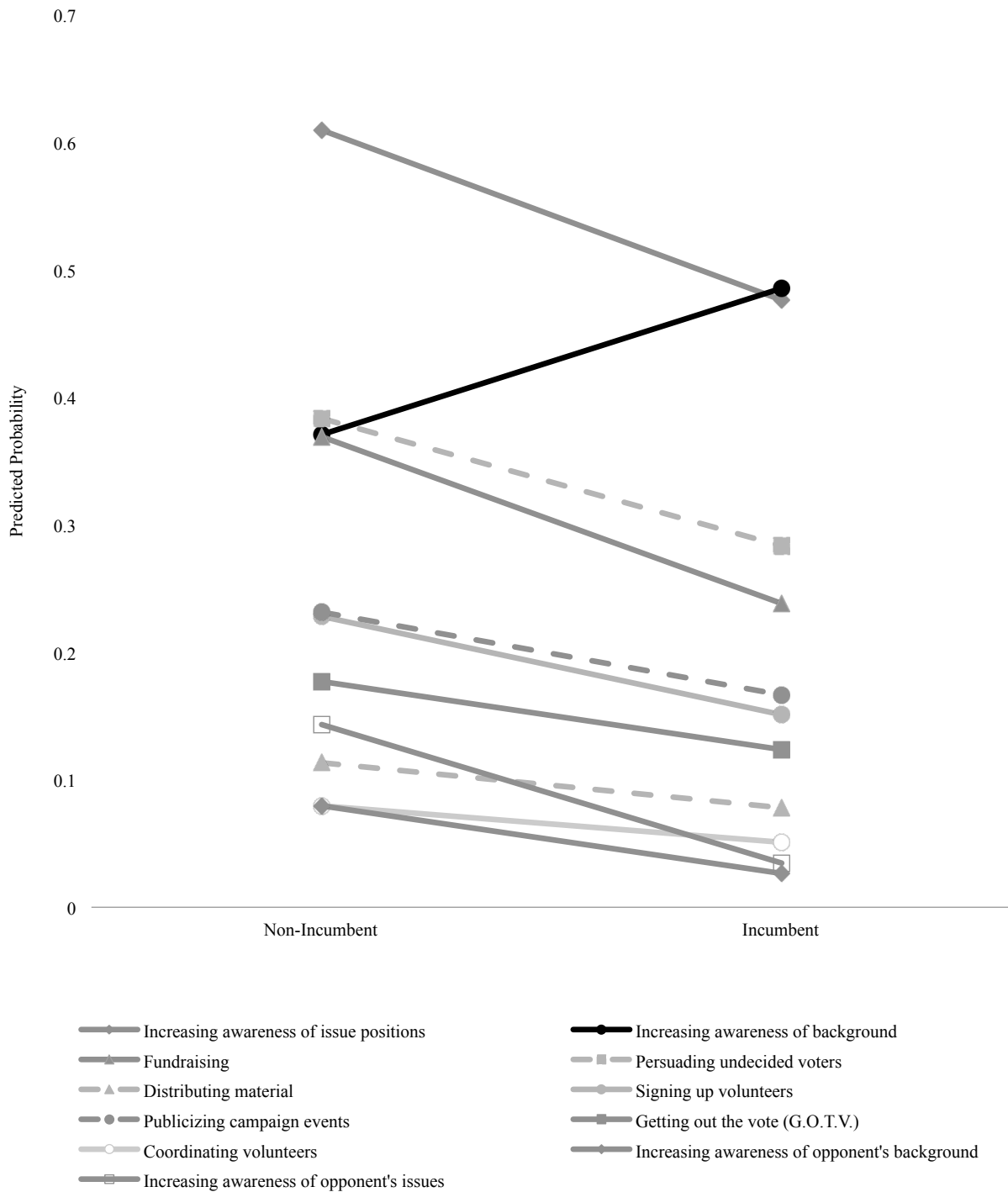
**Figure 3: Communicating with Voters**



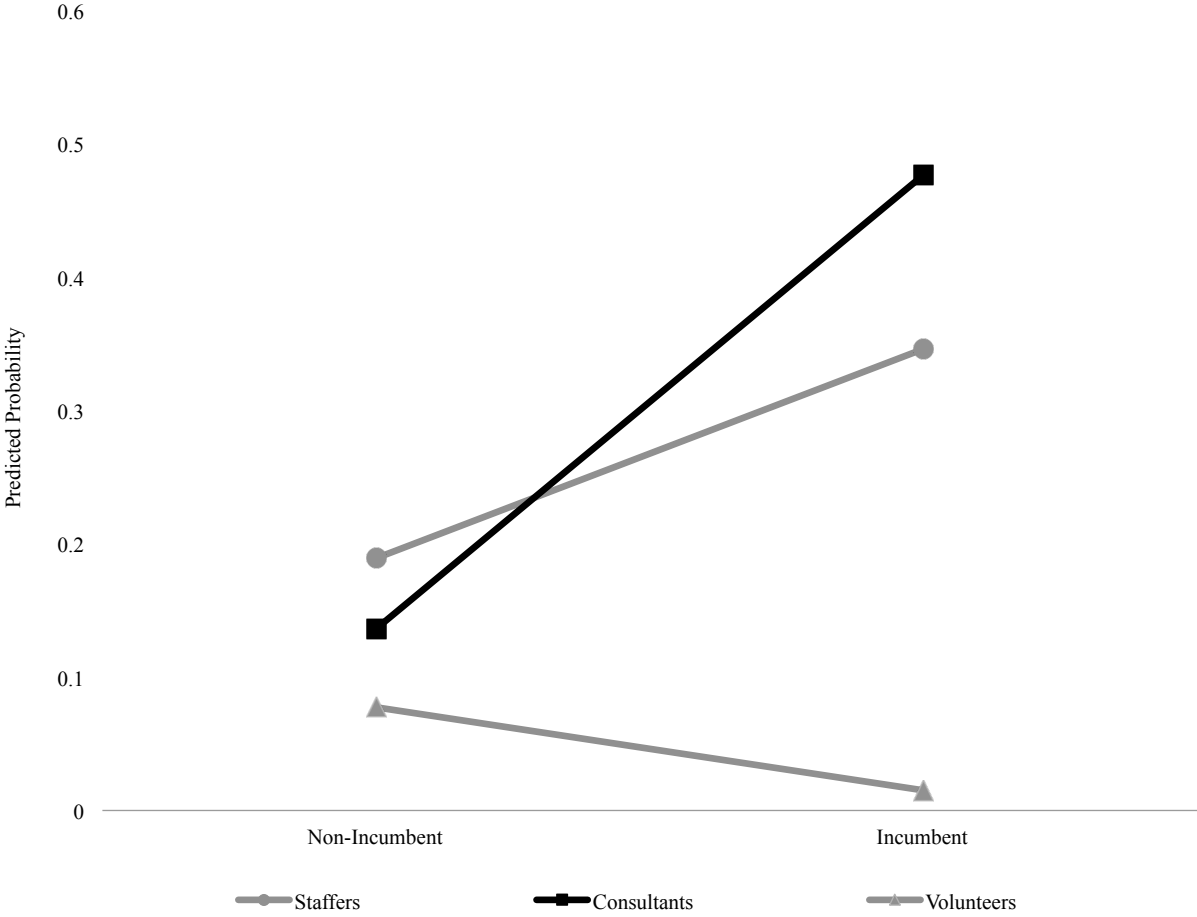
**Figure 4: Campaign Website Goals (2008 - 2014)**



**Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities of "Very Important" Goals**



**Figure 6: Predicted Probabilities of "Very High" Influence**



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**Table A1: Campaign Website Targets**

	<b>Voters in General</b>	<b>Undecided Voters</b>	<b>Engaged Voters</b>	<b>Journalists</b>	<b>Supportive Voters</b>	<b>Supportive Activists</b>	<b>Bloggers</b>	<b>Opp. Voters</b>	<b>Non-Voters</b>
<b>Incumbent</b>	-0.149 (.116)	-0.093 (.115)	-0.146 (.111)	.066 (.109)	.109 (.109)	-.150 (.107)	-.096 (.107)	-.217** (.110)	-.086 (.111)
<b>Senate</b>	-.004 (.153)	-.028 (.154)	-.020 (.148)	-.099 (.142)	-.202 (.143)	-.202 (.141)	-.124 (.142)	-.223 (.146)	-.041 (.146)
<b>Female</b>	-.061 (.021)	.062 (.127)	-.083 (.122)	.134 (.120)	.141 (.120)	.032 (.117)	.041 (.117)	-.009 (.120)	-.046 (.121)
<b>Democratic</b>	-.125 (.112)	.043 (.110)	.080 (.107)	.141 (.104)	.120 (.104)	.097 (.103)	.062 (.102)	-.173* (.105)	-.006 (.107)
<b>2010</b>	.144 (-0.87)	-.138 (.143)	.016 (.135)	.006 (.134)	-.015 (.132)	-.004 (.131)	-.162 (.131)	-.123 (.136)	.0383 (.138)
<b>2012</b>	-.118 (.154)	-.165 (.153)	.530*** (.149)	-.130 (.142)	.096 (.142)	.186 (.140)	-.054 (.140)	.230 (.143)	-.087 (.149)
<b>2014</b>	-.055 (.159)	-.229 (.157)	.283* (.151)	-.201 (.147)	.212 (.149)	.077 (.145)	-.237 (.146)	.272* (.148)	.156 (.151)
<b>Competitiveness</b>	.066 (.074)	.105 (.073)	-.101 (.070)	.128* (.068)	-.004 (.068)	-.084 (.067)	-.008 (.067)	-.006 (.068)	.071 (.070)
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-573.733	-606.797	-740.173	-761.227	-778.314	-830.732	-843.439	-812.480	-747.357
<b>N</b>	450	450	451	451	445	450	448	450	444

Note: Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* p < .10 for two-tailed tests. The coefficients and standard errors for  $\tau_1$  through  $\tau_6$  are (reading across the table): for model 1, -2.895 (.369), -2.417 (.258), -1.981 (.217), -1.166 (.192), -.699 (.188), -.117 (.187), for model 2, -2.432 (.273), -2.242 (.245), -1.755 (.207), -.931 (.189), -.428 (.186), .063 (.185), for model 3, -1.765 (.197), -1.281 (.187), -1.071 (.185), -.675 (.182), -.168 (.179), .273 (.178), for model 4, -1.810 (.209), -1.208 (.185), -.855 (.180), -.317 (.176), .196 (.175), .889 (.177), for model 5, -1.819 (.206), -1.279 (.185), -.781 (.177), -.176 (.174), .276 (.174), .767 (.176), for model 6, -1.773 (.189), -1.209 (.179), -.760 (.175), -.248 (.173), .334 (.173), .777 (.174), for model 7, -1.550 (.184), -1.088 (.177), -.623 (.175), -.018 (.173), .470 (.173), .943 (.177), for model 8, -1.773 (.189), -1.210 (.178), -.760 (.175), -.248 (.173), .334 (.173), .777 (.174), for model 9, -.244 (.181), .300 (.182), .634 (.183), 1.123 (.186), 1.373 (.189), 1.647 (.194).

**Table A2: Campaign Website Visitors**

	<b>Voters in General</b>	<b>Undecided Voters</b>	<b>Engaged Voters</b>	<b>Journalists</b>	<b>Supportive Voters</b>	<b>Supportive Activists</b>	<b>Bloggers</b>	<b>Opp. Voters</b>	<b>Non-Voters</b>
<b>Incumbent</b>	-0.069 (.112)	-.108 (.111)	.044 (.111)	-.013 (.111)	-.168 (.111)	-.033 (.112)	-.032 (.111)	.140 (.112)	-.180 (.123)
<b>Senate</b>	-.076 (.145)	.038 (.144)	-.049 (.144)	.292** (.144)	-.159 (.143)	.062 (.144)	.041 (.143)	-.025 (.144)	.001 (.156)
<b>Female</b>	-.112 (.122)	-.122 (.122)	-.101 (.121)	.012 (.120)	.002 (.120)	.056 (.121)	.050 (.121)	.048 (.122)	-.036 (.132)
<b>Democratic</b>	-.158 (.107)	-.121 (.106)	-.152 (.107)	.053 (.106)	-.103 (.106)	-.148 (.106)	-.145 (.106)	-.040 (.107)	.071 (.117)
<b>2010</b>	-.154 (.136)	-.126 (.135)	-.403*** (.136)	-.145 (.135)	-.403*** (.135)	-.406*** (.136)	-.537*** (.137)	-.083 (.136)	-.076 (.148)
<b>2012</b>	.165 (.149)	.290* (.149)	-.055 (.149)	-.217 (.148)	-.217 (.147)	-.142 (.148)	-.401*** (.148)	.022 (.149)	-.229 (.164)
<b>2014</b>	-.051 (.153)	-.182 (.152)	-.267* (.153)	-.120 (.152)	-.367** (.152)	-.462*** (.153)	-.543*** (.153)	-.013 (.153)	-.056 (.165)
<b>Competitiveness</b>	.047 (.070)	.101 (.069)	.159** (.070)	.279*** (.070)	.145** (.070)	.069 (.069)	.099 (.069)	.093 (.070)	.100 (.075)
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-704.015	-700.666	-703.479	-750.043	-730.575	-687.017	-704.480	-715.407	-542.653
<b>N</b>	413	413	414	414	416	414	414	415	413

Note: Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* p < .10 for two-tailed tests. The coefficients and standard errors for  $\tau_1$  through  $\tau_6$  are (reading across the table): for model 1, -2.006 (.211), -.638 (.182), .071 (.181), .653 (.183), .885 (.185), 1.183 (.188), for model 2, -1.892(.210), -.722 (.181), .093 (.181), .798 (.183), 1.084 (.186), 1.477 (.192), for model 3, -2.885 (.360), -1.607 (.195), -.903 (.184), -.181 (.180), .469 (.181), 1.014 (.185), for model 4, -1.593 (.208), -.541 (.181), -.004 (.180), .524 (.182), 1.096 (.184), 1.700 (.190), for model 5, -2.510 (.250), -1.374 (.187), -.815 (.126), -.122 (.181), .473 (.181), 1.080 (.185), for model 6, -3.044 (.352), -1.656 (.194), -.953 (.185), -.127 (.181), .577 (.182) 1.274 (.190), for model 7, -2.655 (.253), -1.506 (.190), -.851 (.184), -.063 (.181), .613 (.182), 1.190 (.189), for model 8, -.834 (.185), .349 (.1071), .204 (.182), 1.110 (.188), 1.413 (.191), 1.814 (.200), for model 8, .116 (.198), .785 (.201), 1.186 (.205), 1.746 (.215), 2.113 (.232), 2.281 (.246).

**Table A3: Overall Strategy**

<b>Capture Overall Strategy</b>	
<b>Incumbent</b>	-0.085 (.118)
<b>Senate</b>	.015 (.153)
<b>Female</b>	.032 (.129)
<b>Democratic</b>	-.053 (.114)
<b>2010</b>	-.140 (.145)
<b>2012</b>	.019 (.160)
<b>2014</b>	-.143 (.161)
<b>Competitiveness</b>	.036 (.074)
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-600.730
<b>N</b>	411

Note: Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$  for two-tailed tests. The coefficients and standard errors for  $\tau_1$  through  $\tau_6$  are -2.386 (.254), -1.986 (.219), -1.567 (.204), -1.014 (.198), -.531 (.196), .101 (.194).

**Table A4: Campaign Website Content Goals**

	Promote Issues	Promote Background	Fundraise	Persuade	Distribute Material	Sign Up Volunteers	Publicize Campaign Events	G.O.T.V.	Coord. Volunteer	Opp. Background	Opp. Issue
<b>Incumbent</b>	-.339*** (.120)	.296** (.117)	-.385*** (.113)	-.284** (.115)	-.223** (.111)	-.292*** (.111)	-.231** (.111)	-.232** (.110)	-.231** (.111)	-.537*** (.119)	-.759*** (.118)
<b>Senate</b>	-.068 (.157)	.066 (.151)	-.349** (.146)	-.129 (.147)	.0524 (.144)	-.186 (.144)	.010 (.143)	-.036 (.143)	.009 (.142)	.227 (.146)	.156 (.145)
<b>Female</b>	-.157 (.131)	.089 (.126)	.140 (.123)	-.130 (.122)	.093 (.119)	-.014 (.119)	.110 (.120)	-.024 (.118)	-.082 (.119)	-.094 (.124)	-.102 (.123)
<b>Democratic</b>	-.103 (.117)	-.073 (.111)	-.053 (.108)	-.069 (.109)	-.077 (.105)	-.048 (.106)	-.142 (.106)	-.183* (.105)	-.159 (.106)	-.095 (.111)	.043 (.109)
<b>2010</b>	-.084 (.149)	-.171 (.140)	-.017 (.138)	-.087 (.139)	.035 (.133)	.021 (.134)	-.058 (.134)	.078 (.133)	.171 (.133)	.022 (.141)	.010 (.138)
<b>2012</b>	.067 (.167)	-.154 (.154)	.115 (.153)	-.191 (.152)	-.197 (.146)	.194 (.149)	-.119 (.148)	.044 (.147)	.161 (.147)	.185 (.154)	-.035 (.153)
<b>2014</b>	-.181 (.164)	-.118 (.157)	-.056 (.152)	-.235 (.154)	-.226 (.148)	-.150 (.149)	-.051 (.149)	-.048 (.149)	-.078 (.149)	.028 (.157)	-.026 (.155)
<b>Competitiveness</b>	.054 (.077)	.021 (.072)	-.013 (.071)	.085 (.072)	-.051 (.069)	.010 (.069)	.032 (.069)	.064 (.069)	.017 (.069)	.110 (.072)	.107 (.070)
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-522.553	-638.936	-706.893	-649.791	-774.199	-745.644	-775.791	-787.347	-794.413	-698.148	-754.589
<b>N</b>	425	424	423	425	423	424	424	423	420	422	422

Note: Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* p < .10 for two-tailed tests. The coefficients and standard errors for  $\tau_1$  through  $\tau_6$  are (reading across the table): for model 1, -2.839 (.310), -2.500 (.259), -2.127 (.229), -1.367 (.205), -.864 (.200), -.345 (.197), for model 2, -2.855 (.366), -1.890 (.216), -1.427 (.198), -.853 (.189), -.278 (.186), .248 (.186), for model 3, -2.329 (.224), -1.693 (.197), -1.307 (.190), -.692 (.184), -.217 (.182), .276 (.182), for model 4, -2.688 (.277), -2.074 (.216), -1.715 (.202), -.952 (.189), -.414 (.186), .232 (.185), for model 5, 1.788 (.194), -1.211 (.185), -.851 (.183), -.090 (.180), .429 (.180), 1.027 (.184), for model 6, -2.067 (.209), -1.589 (.192), -1.059 (.184), -.469 (.180), .082 (.179), .722 (.181), for model 7, -1.726 (.194), -1.107 (.183), -.593 (.181), .002 (.179), .467 (.179), .951 (.181), for model 8, -1.286 (.186), -.697 (.181), -.181 (.179), .307 (.179), .683 (.181), 1.407 (.191), for model 9, -.302 (.185), .298 (.187), .669 (.188), .949 (.188), 1.241 (.190), 1.616 (.196), for model 10, -.616 (.184), -.214 (.184), .235 (.184), .591 (.184), .890 (.185), 1.268 (.188).

**Table A5: Negativity and Influence**

	<b>“Go Negative”</b>	<b>Staffers</b>	<b>Consultants</b>	<b>Volunteers</b>
<b>Incumbent</b>	-.750*** (.155)	.478** (.242)	1.061*** (.255624)	-.806*** (.255)
<b>Senate</b>	.250 (.221)	.035 (.331)	.218 (.325)	.185 (.334)
<b>Female</b>	.011 (.181)	-.104 (.268)	.267 (.284)	-.200 (.282)
<b>Democratic</b>	-.002 (.155)	-.247 (.248)	-.034 (.260)	.112 (.254)
<b>2010</b>	.370* (.200)			
<b>2012</b>	-.119 (.202)			
<b>2014</b>	-.060 (.211)			
<b>Competitiveness</b>	1.192*** (.119)	.383** (.160)	.029 (.160)	-.030 (.158)
<b>Log Likelihood</b>	-193.585	-131.661	-138.673	-120.854
<b>N</b>	434	83	81	83

Note: Entries are probit (for “Go Negative”) and ordered probit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* p < .10 for two-tailed tests. The coefficients and standard errors for  $\tau_1$  through  $\tau_6$  are (reading across the table): for model 2, -.923 (.386), -.831 (.380), -.673 (.372), .033 (.362), .770 (.375), 1.366 (.385), for model 3, -.693 (.379), -.506 (.374), -.100 (.371), .377 (.373), .787 (.379), 1.263 (.392), for model 4, -.641 (.366), -.008 (.361), .645 (.370), 1.232 (.401), 1.339 (.410), 1.462 (.421).