

The electoral college, political parties, and elections

Sites to help you through the voting process

by Beth Jane Toren

The December 2003 Pew Internet Report found that 63 percent of Americans 18 and older are online.¹ These Internet users have unprecedented access to information on the electoral college, elections, political parties, and candidates. They can read up-to-the-minute news stories on political issues or visit Web sites that check the facts from political advertisements and candidates' statements and speeches.

Americans watched their presidential election process thrown into sharp relief during the protracted 2000 election, which practically ended in a tie. Public awareness of the electoral college increased. Electoral college Web sites most frequently contain lengthy explanations of processes and contingencies, providing examples from history at the critical points. The next most pervasive theme is the calls for reform throughout history, which have had a renewed urgency following the 2000 presidential election. For example, the League of Women Voters "believes strongly that the Electoral College should be abolished" and outlines on the league site the history of their efforts beginning in 1970.²

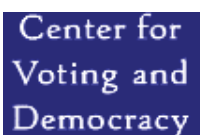
Most political party sites have two main themes, information and action. They provide information about the party platform, history,

and news, and they offer opportunities to get involved in the action by volunteering, contributing, joining, and telling friends.

This article contains annotations to selected free sites and Internet resources that provide information about the electoral college, political parties, and the 2004 federal elections.³

The electoral college

- **Center for Voting and Democracy: The Electoral College.** A center for election reform, the center's site begins with an analysis of



"How the Electoral College Works Today." It emphasizes how the system is set up to handle events when it doesn't work smoothly.

The site provides a detailed description of the history of controversial presidential elections and "Faithless Electors." It continues with "Concerns," "Reform Options," and an "FAQ." The site also includes two provocative articles calling for reform from Alan Morrison and John B. Anderson. Access: http://www.fairvote.org/e_college/index.html.

- **Federal Election Commission of the United States of America: About Elections and Voting.** This site includes "How the Electoral College Works," "Distribution of

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Electoral College Votes among the States,” and “A Brief History of the Electoral College” (a 20-page PDF document). These are among many informative and educational links to topics that include election results, 2000 presidential primary election results by state, voter registration and turnout statistics, historical demographic statistics, questions and answers about state voting procedures, absentee voting (including state-by-state cutoff dates, notarization and witnessing, when absentee ballots are counted and by whom), registering to vote, and more. *Access:* <http://www.fec.gov/elections.html>.

- **HarpWeek: Hayes vs. Tilden: The Electoral College Controversy of 1876–1877.** This is a free feature provided by *Harper’s Weekly*. The site lets users become familiar with the historic events surrounding the 1876 election. Users can follow events day by day, acquire a more in-depth understanding by reading the overview, or gain insight into the press’s coverage by looking at the numerous period cartoons (most by Thomas Nast), along with corresponding explanations of their historical meaning. *Access:* <http://www.elections.harpweek.com/9Controversy/overview-controversy-1.htm>.

- **Howstuffworks “How the Electoral College Works.”** This encyclopedic entry provides a clear and objective introduction to how the electoral college works. Section topics include “The Founding Fathers’ Idea” and “The Present View” and links are provided to election sites. “When the Electoral College Counted” outlines the circumstances of the six presidential elections where either the candidate who led the popular vote did not win the office or neither candidate won enough electoral votes to win and the House of Representatives decided who would be president. *Access:* <http://www.howstuffworks.com/electoral-college.htm>.

- **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA): Federal Register: U. S. Electoral College.** NARA’s Electoral College site assembles a variety of information and statistics on presidential elections, past and present, and includes an excellent FAQ section and a Procedural Guide to the Electoral College. *Ac-*

cess: http://www.archives.gov/federal_register/electoral_college/.

- **Presidential Elections and the Electoral College.** This sub-site is a special presentation from the Library of Congress’ American Memory Historical Collections for the National Digital Library. It includes the digitized “Proceedings of the Electoral Commission of 1877,” found in the Congressional Record - Volume 5, Part 4. Pages have been scanned and are hard to read on the screen. Links to useful searches for related key terms are provided, along with links to “Today in History” pages from the memory project pertaining to presidential elections and the electoral college. *Access:* <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwec.html>.

Political parties

Major parties

- **Democratic National Committee (DNC).** Founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1792, the DNC is the national party organization for the Democratic Party of the United States. Its site includes opportunities for users to make secure contributions online; become “e-patriots” by creating Web pages and rallying friends to donate to the party; subscribe to e-mail updates and action alerts; tell stories or read those from others about how the Bush presidency has “failed Americans from all walks of life”; read a calendar of special events; contrast Democrat and Republican stances on important political issues; register to vote; read about the party platform, the history of the party, the charters and bylaws, biographical information of the DNC leadership, and frequently asked questions. The site also includes a Spanish-language version, photo gallery, store, and job board. *Access:* <http://www.democrats.org/index.html>.

- **Republican National Committee.** The Republican Party was born in the early 1850s by anti-slavery activists, and Abraham Lincoln was the first Republican to win the White House. The GOP site outlines the party’s agenda; provides a nicely centralized news, press, and speech section; information about the history of the party and the current leadership; and, in this election year, devotes almost half its content to campaign issues. The site also includes a store, a Spanish-language section, the opportunity to begin voter registration online, a photo album, political cartoons, ways to make donations or get active in the party, and information about the 2004 convention. *Access:* <http://www.gop.com/>.



Third parties

In the 2000 election, these five parties had ballot status for their presidential candidates in states with enough electoral votes to have had a chance, theoretically, of winning the presidency.

- **Constitution Party (formerly the U.S. Taxpayers' Party).** The ultra-conservative Constitution Party began in 1992 and, in 1995, became the fifth political party to be formally recognized by the Federal Election Commission as a national political party. Its Web site offers ways to become informed and get involved. Users can read the party's platform, press releases, history of the party, and more. They can also request information, make a contribution, volunteer, send a friend a form e-mail about the party and the site, or register to attend the national convention. *Access:* <http://www.constitutionparty.org/>.

- **Greens.** Beneath the tabs on the Greens site, keywords read "ecology, social justice, grassroots democracy, nonviolence." The Greens site provides links to its program and platform, and users can also sign up for e-mailed updates on issues and activities. The site provides links to publications, articles, and issues, and gives users information about contacting, joining, organizing, and donating. This site may have the lowest production values of the political party sites reviewed here, but it also offers merchandise. *Access:* <http://www.greenparty.org/>.

- **Libertarian Party.** The Libertarian Party was formed in December 1971 and is America's third-largest and fastest-growing political party. Libertarians seek to reduce the size and intrusiveness of government and cut all taxes. The Web site is especially clean and professionally designed. Information provided on the site includes news and events, positions, and platform. At the "action center" users can request information, join the party, contribute, volunteer, tell a friend, or follow links to take action on several hot issues like ballot access and gun rights. *Access:* <http://www.lp.org/>.

- **Natural Law Party.** The Natural Law Party was founded in 1992 to "bring the light of science into politics." Along with contact information for users who want to get involved at the state level, the site provides an e-mail subscription service for news and updates and a place to get information on becoming a candidate. Users can also make a contribution, find out

more about candidates, and link to "Mothers for Natural Law" to become informed about the lack of mandatory labeling for genetically engineered foods. *Access:* <http://www.natural-law.org/>.



- **Reform Party.** The National Reform Party was officially formed in 1997, on the strength of Ross Perot's showing (9%) in the 1996 election. The party's history, as read on the site, is a rocky one, but the party's call for reform, especially fiscal responsibility, in government is clear. The Reform Party's site aims at justifying its existence by attacking "politics as usual." It provides the principles, mission, history, etc. of the party, along with opportunities to get involved by contributing, signing up to meet other reformers in your area, or hanging its printable flyers. The site design could be made easier to use and more professional, and the content is somewhat dated. *Access:* <http://www.reformparty.org/>.

Political party metasites

- **Politics1 Directory of U.S. Political Parties.** Ron Gunzburger's Politics1.com site calls itself the "most comprehensive online guide to American politics." One thing the site provides is less-than-objective (part of the fun of politics), yet useful and interesting, information about and detailed descriptions of more than 35 alternatives to the two major parties in the United States. An entertaining as well as informative take on political parties, the site also provides links to related sites and many interior links to a broad range of political topics, such as ideologies, issues, and the presidency. *Access:* <http://www.politics1.com/parties.htm>.

- **Political Resources on the Net.** This site provides listings of political sites available on the Internet (sorted by country) with links to parties, organizations, governments, and media from all around the world. It has an excellent and up-to-date list of links to American political parties, including some state and city sites listed under broader headings such as "Communist/Marxist" and "Nationalist." In addition, it provides political information links to oft-neglected (on other election sites) U.S.-associated places,

such as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Access: <http://www.politicalresources.net/>.

United States 2004 Presidential Election

- **CNN.com: AMERICA VOTES 2004.** This site's primary offering is a concise overview of the 2004 Presidential candidates' views on issues; their campaign finances; position in the polls; and educational, employment, military, and political backgrounds. Users will also find the latest election-related headlines under the "Campaign Buzz" section and university-related political news under the "Campus Vibe" section. Other options for users include choosing among political topics for e-mail alerts, viewing an election calendar, or reviewing the 2004 primary elections. This site serves well as an introductory survey of candidates and the race for president. Access: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/>.

- **FactCheck.org: Annenberg Political Fact Check.** If a user has a question about the accuracy of something they heard in a political television ad, debate, speech, interview, or news release, they can check the facts here. This site describes itself as "a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 'consumer advocate' for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics." The site provides original articles, with summaries and sources, analyzing factual accuracy in political speech. FactCheck is "holding politicians accountable," for "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts." The site is searchable and comes from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. Access: <http://www.factcheck.org/>.

- **Project Vote Smart.** Formed in 1992, Project Vote Smart is a "voter's self-defense system" that provides detailed factual information about candidates and elected officials in five areas: biographical information, issue positions, voting records, campaign finances, and interest group ratings. Covering local to presidential elections, users will find this a comprehensive campaign information site. Access: <http://www.vote-smart.org/>.

- **U.S. Elections 2004.** This government publication is for audiences unfamiliar with the American political system. On the site, "primaries, political party conventions, polling techniques, media issues, campaign finance, and other aspects of the American elections process are discussed and elucidated by ex-

perts." The site includes a glossary, calendar of events, bibliography, and a list of Web sites. Access: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/election04/>.

Notes

1. America's Online Pursuits: The changing picture of who's online and what they do. December 22, 2003. <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=106>.

2. The League of Women Voters, www.lwv.org/. ■

Letter to the editor

In her recently-published essay on "Assessing Student Learning" (*C&RL News*, May 2004), Amy E. Mark referred to the Educator's Reference Desk (www.eduref.org/) as "the new ERIC Web site" (p. 254). It is important to note that the ERD is *not* part of the "new ERIC," nor is it sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.

ERD is a new home on the Web for many of the resources that had been collected over a decade by the staff of the now-defunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology as part of the AskERIC service. AskERIC and its resources were specifically excluded from the information resources that the U.S. Department of Education chose to support in the recent overhaul of the ERIC system. The very name "ERIC" remains the intellectual property of the U.S. Department of Education, which is one reason why the word does not appear in the name of the new resource.

ERD represents a new collaboration between the staff of the Information Institute of Syracuse and a host of librarians who came forward at a meeting sponsored by ACRL's Education and Behavioral Sciences Section at the 2004 Midwinter Meeting to declare their desire to help support the continuation of the pioneering work represented by AskERIC. A report on that meeting and a call for volunteers to help maintain ERD can be found in the most recent issue of the EBSS Newsletter at www.lib.msu.edu/corby/ebss/newsletter/spring2004.pdf.

The Educator's Reference Desk is a key Web-based information resource for information on student assessment, as Mark noted, but, as importantly, it represents a new approach to supporting education information needs in a professional environment radically reshaped by the end of the ERIC system that was the backbone of national education information services for over 35 years. I hope that interested readers of *C&RL News* will visit the site, explore its resources, and help to support this important project.—Scott Walter, Chair, EBSS (2003–04), swalter@wsu.edu