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Change.gov

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Change.gov

Change.gov was a website created by the Office of the President-Elect, Barack Obama, “to lay out the agenda and priorities for the Obama Administration.” The site was operational November 5, 2008 to January 20, 2009. Information was provided on this website to keep the transition process transparent. It has been repeatedly noted that President Barack Obama won the presidency because of his use of social media and social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. His use of these tools did not end after Election Day – November 4, 2008, but continued throughout the transition. Change.gov was a transitional site that was used to continue President Elect Obama’s digital presence and keep his millions of online followers engaged in the process.

The United States General Services Administration manages presidential transitions - (the time between election day and the inauguration of the President-Elect) - as outlined by the Presidential Transition Act of 1963 (P.L. 88-277), 1998 (P.L. 100-398) and 2000 (P.L. 106-293). Before 2008, much of the transition occurred behind closed doors with prominent appointments to cabinet positions announced via news media – television, radio or newspapers. Change.gov marked the first time that citizens were not only kept abreast of the transition, but also invited to become involved in the transition in an effort for government transparency.

The campaign of 2008 was a campaign of firsts. The first African American President was elected. He was the first candidate to use social media and web 2.0 tools during the campaign to raise funds, organize grassroots communities and mobilize an unprecedented number of young voters. He was also the first President to select a Chief Technology Officer to the cabinet, signifying plans to continue using technology in government.

Overview of the Site

The goal of social media and web 2.0 tools is to provide a mechanism for collaboration and conversation that builds a community without limits or restrictions of location and time. Change.gov utilized this by allowing users to ask questions of the newly elected administration. Change.gov featured a *Newsroom* with a blog and press room where ideas were shared and questions answered; a *Learn* section with information about the transition, the administration and inauguration and biographical information about the President-Elect and Vice-President Elect; and an *Agenda* section which featured major policy issues – the same issues that were presented during the campaign. To continue the encouragement of public involvement, the site also featured an area for citizens to share their *Story* and *Vision* as well as submit their ideas to the President via the *Citizen’s Briefing Book*. It also featured links to *America Serves*, which asked Americans to serve as volunteers in their communities by signing-up on the site, and *Jobs*, where applicants could submit their personal information as a first step in applying for a position. By the end of December, only two months after the election, the site had received over 140,000 job applicants, and by Inauguration Day had received 400,000. The site provided a link to USAjobs, a government site for federal employment, which received an additional half-million visits (from 2.3 million weekly visits in summer 2008 to 2.8 million during the time Change.gov was active). *Your Seat at the Table* allowed citizens to see the groups meeting with the transition team. In keeping with the sharing quality that is common of most social media tools, Change.gov changed

its traditional copyright notice to include a Creative Commons license which allowed users to share and repost the content.

YouTube Presidency

Another first with Change.gov was the medium used to deliver the weekly presidential address. Not only did President-Elect Obama deliver the usual radio address, he used YouTube and other video platforms to post a video of the address on the transition website. As of August 2012, his first address [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd8f9Zqap6U>] on November 15, 2008, has been viewed 1,082,502 times on YouTube. YouTube was also used to generate discussion and answer questions posed by citizens. Another feature of Change.gov was *Join the Discussion*. The policy team shared videos and requested feedback from citizens. This may have been appealing to users as it had the same structure of a Facebook post with threaded comments. Another feature of the website was *Open for Questions*. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs responded to the most popular questions via a video post using YouTube and other video platforms.

The Controversy

Open for Questions asked citizens to submit questions to the administration. The most popular questions would be answered and would be determined by the number of votes garnered. One question asked if the administration would investigate the “gravest crimes” of the Bush administration. Initially, it was ignored and later it was erroneously posted that the question had been previously answered. This response was featured on other websites and noted by political commentators. As a result, President-Elect Obama was asked this question during an interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC’s *This Week*. This controversy shows how social media can referee open government. The transcript of that question and the rest of the interview were posted on Change.gov.

The Numbers

The numbers during the transition shows that the interest from the public continued after the presidential election. Transitional sites such as Change.gov have been visited by 15% of all Americans including 10% of McCain-Palin voters. About 27% of Obama voters went online to either participate in the transitional process or learn more about the transition. More than 4,000 users participated in the health care discussion on Change.gov. During the first round of open questions on Change.gov’s *Open for Questions*, 20,000 users submitted 10,000 questions and 1,000,000 votes. The second round of open questions generated 76,031 questions from 103,512 users with 4,713,083 votes.

Summary

Change.gov showed that despite security and legal issues, social media can be used to promote government transparency and a more democratic form of government through citizen participation. Change.gov was a website used to keep citizens apprised of developments of the transition and involved in that transition. The site and its premise set a precedent that will likely continue. Because social media happens in real-time, it must be noted that the transitional site of Change.gov ended at 12:01pm of Inauguration Day – a minute after the President-Elect became the residing President. It was replaced by Obama’s WhiteHouse.gov.

See also: 2012 Campaigns, Activists and Activism, Innovation and Technology, International Online Communities, and International Revolution.

Further Readings

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