

This is the text of the round two proposal to the first Knight News Challenge - <http://newschallenge.org> – that was *not* funded. In short, it wasn't local.

It is being released to encourage better online candidate debates. The author, Steven Clift did win with a different News Challenge submission and will be an ideas blogger bridging the online engagement and online news worlds. Stay tuned at <http://e-democracy.org/blog> and <http://dowire.org>

Name: E-Democracy.Org

U.S. Employer Identification Number (if you are U.S.-based organization): 41-1835917

Business Mailing Address: 3211 E. 44th Street

City: Minneapolis

State: MN

ZIP Code or Postal Code: 55406

Country: USA

Phone: 612-822-8667

Fax: 612-605-0137

Web site: <http://e-democracy.org>

Name of primary contact: Steven Clift

Title or position of primary contact: Board Chair

Primary contact's e-mail: team@e-democracy.org

Purpose of proposal (in one sentence, please): Host a pre-primary U.S. Presidential E-Debate in November 2007 that turns the broad Internet into a participatory audience and inspires e-debates at the state and local level in 2008.

Total estimated cost of proposal:

Project duration (in years): 1+

I am applying for an award in the following category: (Please either highlight or underline your selection.)

1. Open – Truly original concepts that defy being put in any single category.

1. Project title: US Presidential E-Debate – Pre-Primary Fall 2007

2. Describe your project. (What will you do and how will you do it?)

Let’s see the presidential candidates really mix it up online.

In 2008, we can demonstrate that the Internet in elections is about more than just raising money and organizing activists for campaigns. The challenge to effectively promote informed voting and greater scrutiny and awareness of candidate positions can be met with an online presidential campaign debate.

E-Democracy.Org hosted the only statewide candidate e-debate in 2006. It built on our e-debates, which started in 1994. Review the recent E-Debate: <http://e-democracy.org/e-debates>
Watch our opening statement via YouTube: <http://e-democracy.org/edebatemn06/?p=9> .

To generate public interest and direct candidate involvement, the Presidential E- Debate will require mandatory video and audio elements along with text. In 2006, we successfully deployed optional video opening statements via YouTube and audio rebuttals submitted via telephone.

We propose an e-debate over the course of two weeks in November 2007. Pending candidate agreement to the rules of debate, Republican and Democratic (on the ballot/with an office in 4 of the 5 first primary/caucus states for their party) candidates will debate major themes with simultaneously released responses and rebuttals. Answers to numerous short answer questions will spice up the event daily.

Presidential E-Debate – Pre-Primary Fall 2007					
E-Debate lasts 10-12 asynchronous days, Themes central to “time-based” debate					
Secure Candidates Media Partners	?s from voters	Opening Statements Video/Audio/Text	Themes 1-4 In-depth, deliberative - 2 days per theme with responses and mandatory rebuttals Video/Audio/Text	Closing Statements Video/Audio/Text	On-Demand Access
		Launch Publicity Syndicated CC, Blog Widget	Short Answer Questions ~3 released each day - Text	Proposed Real-Time “Scrum” Teleconference, w/chat/web	
		Real-Time Candidate Q&A X cand. per day, time selected by lottery			
Voter Voices – “Web 2.0” turns broad net into participatory audience, includes Local E-Debate Parties					

For an *optional* 20 minute “screencast” or web movie on this proposal, visit:
<http://e-democracy.org/movies/presidentialedebate.html>

Most people turn to the Internet when there is a scarcity of political news and information in the mass media. While a general election e-debate in late 2008 should follow a successful 2007 e-debate, a general election e-debate alone will not generate the deep candidate involvement required. A wide open field of candidates seeking attention where there is still some scarcity of detail on candidate positions represents an ideal use of the Internet in elections. An early e-debate creates reusable substance for the rest of the campaign.

Voters will be asked to submit questions, rate responses, perhaps vote for a debate winner (after reviewing a minimum amount of the debate or perhaps cumulative response ratings if we add this option), and submit their own response or rebuttal via video, pictures, etc. using our Voter Voices "mash-up" concept - <http://e-democracy.org/voices> as well as discuss the debate at local e-debate parties (online or offline).

3. What unmet need does your proposal answer?

The problem:

- Candidates – Use the Internet primarily to organize core supporters and raise money. While extensive issues position information is often available, it does not reach undecided/persuadable voters who don't visit candidate websites. From experience, these voters are looking for less biased places to make quick comparisons online.
- Media – The online sections with election news from major media organizations are typically insider focused with a horserace-oriented perspective from the primary season through the general election.
- Blogs – The political blogosphere is highly partisan and strategy-based. It is a great place to support your chosen candidate or spread dirt. Also, the sheer number of blogs make navigation cumbersome to the casual political observer.

We need:

- A strictly non-partisan, neutral point of view platform to engage all major candidates and build the trust among voters that the e-debate is not skewed toward one candidate or end of the political spectrum.
- To allow the public to ask debate questions.
- To mix video, audio, images, and text and make relevant content available on-demand for anywhere, anytime public use.
- To create a semi-protected "online debate stage" with a well structured format to secure candidate participation. Open ended online engagements (like real-time chats/interviews, blog guest visits with open comments) will only attract the rare candidate one at a time.
- A number of short answer questions providing a window for diverse voter questions with a good percentage never asked previously in a candidate forum.
- To time when candidates are aggressively seeking voter attention before the voting/caucusing starts. Candidates need the time to participate even if our proposed format deliberative limits the amount of time-pressured/time-certain content (rebuttals within X hours of viewing other candidate initial responses, proposed real-time one-at-a-time candidate interviews, and proposed live "scrum" after closing statements.

- To establish citizen generated content, linking, rating of content, and “tagged” content early in the election season (Voter Voices). By promoting “geo” tagging, we can create localized views of this content using maps and other tools to navigate.
- Break through debate/online fatigue among candidates by creating a compelling media partnership that can secure most if not all candidates based on the e-debates reach. Small scale online news efforts might be able to generate text written exclusively by campaign staff, while our video/audio aspects will demonstrate authenticity.
- Local media partners in the first 5 to 10 caucus/primary states with a focus on ways to extend re-use of e-debate content through their mass media channels.
- To Syndicate the e-debate (so it appears on multiple sites) with key candidate responses shared via Creative Commons to promote active reuse.

4. What specific, unique opportunity do you see that will make this project more successful than others trying to fill that general need?

By building a number of major media partnerships with both national media and online news sites in the early primary/caucus states, we will host a compelling large scale event. Specifically:

- We have the experience required.
- Based on public questions (many in video), we will craft major themes for the in-depth e-debate theme and select a range of short answer questions (the public could vote on the top X questions from a large list of vetted questions).
- We will leverage our investment in an open source platform to encourage e-debates down the ballot.
- We envision local e-debate parties online/offline – a fit with the local geographic goals of both the News Challenge and our own local online Issues Forums (currently in seven cities and we want many more).
- We are a trusted, neutral host, with a track record going back to the world’s first election-oriented website in 1994.
- We will feed e-debate excerpts via RSS and blog sidebar “widgets” and use the Creative Commons (to the greatest extent possible as agreed with our media partners) to reach the maximum number of voters.
- We will promote the e-debate to high school and college classrooms.

Our draft \$500,000 budget illustrates our unique approach expected activities:

- 75K – Partnership Building, Candidate Outreach, Coordination
- 125K – Open Source Technology Platform, Specification, Training
 - Leverage free/inexpensive tools, Module w/OS content management system(s)
 - Must securely handle source video/audio and feed into sites like YouTube, iTunes video podcasts, etc. in an integrated fashion to reach maximum audience
 - Make tool available, convertible to other online “townhall” events and e-debates.
 - Create training materials, document “how to” to encourage independent online news hosted e-debates down the ballot (potentially “renting” our platform)
- 150K – E-Debate Execution
 - Candidate coordination, daily communication with campaigns during debate
 - Question solicitation, outreach to diverse audiences such as New Americans, Youth/Young Voters, Rural America, etc.

- Promotion, including some travel to early primary states
 - Partner coordination and content syndication
- 100K – Voter Voices – Turn broad Internet into participatory e-debate audience
 - Organize Local E-Debate Parties – Online and off-line opportunities to connect with other voters in your area to discuss the presidential election early.
 - Leverage blogosphere, web 2.0 to aggregate e-debate/presidential election response – This stream would continue past the e-debate through the election.
 - Establish “tagging” trends for citizen-driven “channels” of aggregated content
 - Integrate “mashup” concepts with “Digg” like recommend engine in e-debate and across aggregated content to show value-added view of user-generated content.
 - Possible partnership with J-Schools in up to five states for part-time student employees in the summer/fall to execute this section cost effectively.
- 50K – General Election Extension, Evaluation
 - Promote candidate e-debates down the ballot with training events
 - Plan innovative general election options, including possible general e-debate
 - Fund evaluation and some independent research

5. Who are the potential users?

- **Voters** - Primary voters nationally will have access to substance. Voter questions will feed into major debate themes and selected short answer questions. We have held votes to determine final questions in past debates. With state primary turn-out the lowest in years in 2006, efforts which make presidential primaries/caucuses compelling and relevant to general voters, particular party leaners and people who normally view themselves as independents and exclude themselves from the primary process, are vital.
- **Candidates** - Voters choose which candidates to click on - candidates at this stage seek any opportunity to "click" with voters.
- **Media, Key Online Partners** – provides visibility and content to a partnership of media organizations and local media partners.,
- **Political Bloggers** – From generating questions and commentary to carrying e- debate headlines through "sidebar widgets," bloggers can play an important role.
- **Political Activists Nationally** – With candidates focused on the first 5 to 10 caucus/primary states, voters can get to know the candidates more intimately. A national e-debate will be one of the only neutral forums where a presidential campaign has to pause for the national equivalent of an in-person state-level candidate forum.
- **Journalists** – The substance of the e-debate will provide unique fodder for the media. In one of our U.S. Senate pre-caucus e-debates, our content formed to base of a voter guide issues grid printed in the StarTribune.

6. Why are you the best person or organization to develop this project?

E-Democracy.Org, a 501c.3 non-partisan, non-profit organization, is the recognized expert of e-debate implementation and management..

Our very successful 2006 e-debate received accolades from the candidates, voters, the media, bloggers, and our funder. See this post for video interviews and blog commentary:

<http://www.dowire.org/notes/?p=296>

This effort will be led by Steven Clift. Inducted as an Ashoka Fellow - <http://www.ashoka.org> - in November 2006, E-Democracy.Org's founder and chair, received a three year stipend to expand E-Democracy.Org. Ashoka's in-depth review process to discover and support "social entrepreneurs" is extremely thorough. He is a recognized "e- democracy" expert and public speaker - see <http://publicus.net>.

In 1998, as a consultant, Steven Clift was a founder of the Markle Foundation's award-winning Web White and Blue initiative. In October 2000, Web White and Blue hosted the general election Presidential Rolling Cyber Debate. See <http://www.webwhiteblue.org>. The successful e-debate appeared on 18 of the largest websites from CNN and Yahoo to PBS and AOL through syndication A number of E-Democracy.Org volunteers provided consulting services for Web White and Blue and we can easily tap the talent required to cost-effectively pull this off.

This rare national e-debate knowledge is available through E-Democracy.Org.

7. What do you guarantee will happen if you complete the activities in this proposal?

With the significant budget proposed, a number of deliverables must be produced:

- Debate content will be available to compare and contrast candidate information throughout the full election cycle
- Citizens will be able to ask their questions of the candidates.
- Create partnership with major media groups and potentially search/portal companies
- Host a pre-primary Presidential E-Debate – this will require negotiation with the leading campaigns in order to secure their involvement.
- Launch the national “Voter Voices” effort and promote it through the general election. This will jump start Internet-wide efforts to aggregate and drive traffic to user-generated content (multi-media in particular) about the election.
- Release a “how to guide” with document templates to assist state and local e-debates.
- Create a platform using open source tools to the greatest extent possible that allows use to securely gather (and keep secure until released) candidate video and audio responses so they mat be repurposed for YouTube, iTunes video/audio podcasts, Blip TV, Google Video, etc..

- Explore ways to allow media groups and others to host future state and local e-debates using the platform. This may require future funding or fee-for-service.
- Extend outreach in an inclusive manner that brings in voter questions from diverse communities.
- Treat candidates in both major political parties equally to ensure outreach across the political spectrum. Our inclusion policy will be clearly stated up front. A space for interaction among “major minor” parties will be considered.
- Establish the standard by which future online candidate debates are judged.
- Document our process and important communication products to make state and local level replication easier.
- Create a fall-back insurance plan should the major candidates not agree to an interactive “debate” format. Roughly, I envision securing a collection of on-demand candidate video statements/clips with time-based release for extensive public response. The Voter Voices elements could lead to a roving virtual audience for a number of the in-person candidate forums.

8. What potentially bigger thing might happen if everything went perfectly and the stars all aligned?

A number of “big” things:

- Debate content generates real news not just coverage of the fact that the e-debate is happening. For example, a television news show host quotes a candidates e-debate statement and asks them a follow-up question on-air.
- Partnership with large media reach formed such that the e-debate content reaches a million viewers/listeners/readers.
- Hundreds of blogs and smaller sites display e-debate headlines.
- Blogosphere debates the best questions to ask, deep links to candidate responses.
- Campaigns drive people to e-debate hoping it will help them “win it.”
- Partnership with J-Schools secures student employees, intern assistance, and class project involvement to generate voter questions, produce quality public service announcements/banner ads, and create daily “best of” e-debate coverage we can forward to an opt-in e-mail newsletter list.
- Local e-debate parties take off in each state and scores of local communities. This seeds interest in local forums with E-Democracy.Org or helps build awareness of existing local online news/citizen media online discussions and blogs about elections/politics (presidential/local/etc.).
- Outreach to diverse communities generates compelling questions and creation of grass roots “user-generated” content aggregated in Voters Voices.
- High school and college classroom participation leads to ongoing relationship between E-Democracy.Org and civic education community.
- Thousands join the e-mail opt-in option for the delivery of the e-debate. We leverage this relationship with non-partisan citizen-centered “how you can use the Internet to be an informed voter” e-mail newsletter.

- Interest in local e-debates spawned by the Presidential E-Debate fostered. Successful training program in early 2008 meets strong demand.
- Successful e-debate leads to more citizen-focused online innovations than just a call to repeat the e-debate in the general election. The nature of the Presidential general election is extremely unfriendly to an in-depth format that attempts to compel direct candidate involvement. That said, connecting online participation officially with one of the debates hosted by the Presidential Commission on Debates should be explored as well as options that highlight candidate video clips stating issue positions in order to generate a critical mass of Voter Voice responses.
- The U.S. e-debate inspires our UK based-local groups to work with partners in the UK to host a party e-debate in the next UK general election. Other countries launch similar e-debates.

9. How will people learn about what you are doing?

Millions of voters will likely hear about the e-debate through mass media coverage. The real challenge will be to get a good percentage of them to visit the e-debate online. We will do this through:

- Media partners
- Media coverage
- On-demand e-debate content will be likely rank high in search results
- Online word of mouth, tell a friend
- Blogosphere buzz
- E-mail listserv outreach
- Diverse community outreach and general online outreach
- Select in-person “ask a question” and launch events likely in early primary/caucus states
- Via public library public access terminals – we need to explore a partnership with American Libraries Association to promote such linking and create the template to tent cards that may be printed locally
- Radio public service announcements, pro-bono banners ads, apply for non-profit Google Ads/other ad networks
- Dissemination of training materials, possible state/local e-debate trainings
- Research and evaluation materials

10. How will you be able to measure whether or not your project has really made a difference?

Going beyond a check list of accomplishing what we set out to do, we will evaluate whether the e-debate really mattered through the following items:

- Viewer/listener/reader comments and feedback
- Responses gathered through a short user survey asked a random selection of users
- Media coverage – themes and short answer question responses become part of mainstream campaign coverage approaching a major in-person candidate forum

- A number of blogs deep link to specific candidate responses
- At least 30% of the short answer questions generate completely new candidate statements not covered in other major candidate forums
- Web traffic statistics on the main site and across the partner network are significant and continue through election cycle with on-demand access
- Demand for and resources to support innovative general election activities/appropriate general election e-debate version/possible connections to live general election debates generated.
- Feedback from candidates and campaigns – despite the work we generated for the campaigns, we received extremely positive comments about our Minnesota Gubernatorial E-Debate - we would hope to receive this from the Presidential campaigns

11. Do you have any other funding or investment? We're interested in knowing who else is interested in your project.

No other funding sources at this time.

The ease of access provided by the News Challenge letter of inquiry process is the reason this completely original proposal is before you.

See #12 for developing major media/portal connections.

E-Democracy.Org has invested a considerable level of resources, mostly volunteer, into building the most effective e-debate model to date.

12. Are you working with anyone else to complete this project? If so, please give names and what they would do?

Confidential information removed.

13. Who else is working in this area? How does your work fit into the larger context of work in this area?

In 2004, the bulk of online election season innovation was on the campaign side of the equation. Other than FactCheck.Org, both the media and non-profit election information community stagnated online. Already, we see the exploratory candidates using web video, even live online events such as Senator Hillary Clinton's "Conversations" as sign that competition for votes will drive further innovation. Leaving such advancements only to the candidates without media and non-profit innovation would be highly unfortunate.

We do expect a number of sites – from blogging networks to major media sites - to propose or attempt small scale candidate Q and A sessions, live moderated candidate interviews, and perhaps true "debate" among some but probably not all major candidates. We are skeptical that anything other than a large balanced partnership with a significant potential audience will be able

to engage all the major candidates from both major parties in an online event. We also have not seen attempts to create an open source platform for such online events down the ballot or efforts to aggregate “Voter Voices” by tapping Web 2.0 concepts.

It should be noted that the day after we publicly announced that we were invited into your second round and posted our letter of inquiry text on our blog, Reuters reported an interview with representatives of the Huffington Post expressing their interest in online candidate debates. It is possible that higher traffic blogging/commentary sites on the right and left will attract candidate participation similar to their ideological placement.

In terms of online content about the presidential election, all major media and portal sites will have dedicated 2008 sections we should leverage. While no media outlet would expect an exclusive one radio/one television/one newspaper partnership in the general election, this appears to be the style for in-person primary candidate forums. We will need to navigate this space carefully if we are placed in a position of strength with major Knight Foundation support.

Finally, it is important to note the online activities of the League of Women Voters (which seem scaled back from their DNet partnership days), the long-time Project Vote Smart, and note that e-thepeople.org have a proprietary voter guide development tool that a number of media outlets use. We will seek to engage as many non-partisan, non-profit election participation projects as possible in this project. We will also look for opportunities to help promote their important work.