PoliticWiki: Exploring Communal Politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the methodology and results of an attempt to use a wiki web site for political collaboration. Recruited through gateway contacts for online political organizations and publications, participants in the PoliticWiki project were asked to create a political platform from scratch. Foundation content was copied from 3rdParty.org to seed the wiki. Of the 78 surveys collected, eight members were responsible for 96% of all content changes. This study identifies obstacles to participation on a point-of-view wiki and explores its function as both a political forum and a vehicle for participatory design.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.3 [**Group and Organization Interfaces**]: Collaborative computing, Asynchronous interaction, Computer-supported cooperative work, Organizational Design, Web-Based interaction. J.1 [**Administrative Data Processing**]: Government.

General Terms

Management, Documentation, Design, Experimentation.

Keywords

Wiki, third party politics, online collaboration, participatory design, debate, consensus.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks in large part to the popularity of Wikipedia, Ward Cunningham's 1995 invention – the wiki – has pushed into the mainstream. Internet communities, IT departments, customer service centers and individuals with projects in development have found the collaborative medium useful. New uses for wikis are being explored every day.

With its emphasis on establishing a *neutral point of view* (NPOV), traditional Wikipedia philosophy might predict failure for a wiki aimed at discussing politics. A large part of the success of Wikipedia may be due to the editing protocols that strip out bias and present each encyclopedia entry with dispassion. *Edit wars*, periods of frenetic and conflicting changes to a single page by two or more authors, often occur

where bias is introduced into the content. Yet, the core function of a wiki – the ability for many people to change shared content easily – seems to match well with the goals of Direct Democracy (a theory of civics that grants sovereignty to the masses) [4] and other initiatives that seek to make politics transparent.

This paper details the results of *PoliticWiki*, a six-month study that asked participants to collaborate on the construction of a new political platform using a wiki web site. After reviewing relevant background on political uses of the internet, this paper presents the methodology behind PoliticWiki and the results of the surveys, interviews and content analysis conducted of its content.

PoliticWiki explores the potential for wikis to play a prominent role in online political activism. The goal of this study is not to map out a definitive formula for success, but to reveal insights that can contribute to better political collaboration in the future.

2. BACKGROUND

Politics in America is polarized. Partisanship, election ballot controversy, and a general sense of disenfranchisement leaves citizens jaded. Yet they are energized, too. In 2003, 109 million Americans contacted the government for reasons not related to taxes, and almost half went online to do it [9]. More and more, the Internet is also becoming an outlet for political frustration.

Options are not plentiful for voters under the current practices that determine national leaders in the United States. The *two-party system*, in which elections are dominated by the Democratic and Republican Party candidates, is a conscious effect of changes in election policies in the 19th century. Party primary elections typically discourage challenges within the same party to an incumbent and all but guarantee that there will be only one member of each party campaigning for election. Party control over electorates decreases the chances that *faithless electors* – electorates who cast their Presidential votes for an unexpected candidate – could act of their own accord and determine an election. The *winner-take-all* system, used by all but two U.S. states, grants all electoral votes to the one candidate who wins the state [11,14,20].

These forces act to make it implausible for alternative parties and candidates to become established at the national level. Third parties receive the bulk of their support from citizens who feel disenfranchised by the two-party system. Many political organizations feed on this dissatisfaction as well, taking advantage of the inexpensive access to members through electronic mail and the World Wide Web.

The Internet has become a haven for political activism. The recent Presidential election years of 2000 and 2004 have

seen the World Wide Web and e-mail assume a prominent role in campaign and donation strategies, most notably by former Governor and current Democratic Party Chair Howard Dean. The political foothold in cyberspace came much earlier, however, during the impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton in 1998. Two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, started MoveOn.org to encourage Congress to vote to censure the President and "move on." The political action committee is still tackling a largely Democratic agenda supported by an online constituency of 3.3 million members [13].

Direct Access Democracy, a variant of direct democracy, seeks to use technology to empower a constituency [6]. By giving everyday citizens access to power through ballot initiatives, referenda and the recall of elected officials, the disconnections voters currently experience – like the one in 2000 that saw one candidate winning the popular vote and the other moving into the White House [11] – can be offset by a sense of tangible civic control. Technology assists direct democracy by creating communities and disseminating information.

Wiki technology has been around since the mid-1990s, when it was created by Ward Cunningham to facilitate work for a community of programmers interested in pattern language [5,7]. It wasn't until recently, however – with the rise of Wikipedia, a free encyclopedia authored by thousands of contributing members - that wikis have gained a foothold in the regular vernacular of the Internet. MediaWiki — a freely distributed software released under GNU Free Document License [12] — arguably is the most widely recognized and distributed wiki application in the world. Since its creation in June 2003, the Wikimedia foundation has overseen several open content wiki projects that include a dictionary, quotation reference, books, file resource, news service and their famous encyclopedia [23].

The idea of using a wiki to construct political positions was first attempted by the Green Party of Canada (GPC) in 2004. The GPC, a fast-growing federal party, created the Living Platform in an attempt to motivate Canadians to participate in the annual update of their political platform. Based on a TikiWiki engine (http://tikiwiki.org) and supplemented by a Yahoo email group, the Living Platform at the start of 2005 boasted 866 registered users – 50 of whom were considered active – generating 1024 pages [15,18].

Analysts of the Living Platform found mixed results, recognizing the high degree of efficiency and accessibility for potential contributors but noting the wiki's inability to facilitate discussion. Wikis present technological and philosophical barriers for new users; It is difficult to accept shared authorship when living in a proprietary world. Indeed, as an author of "How to Converse Deeply on a Wiki" observed: "Good wiki conversation requires a kind of discipline and cooperative spirit that very few people are willing to play along with. [10]"

Other recent political wikis include the Platform For Pittsburgh (http://Platform.For-Pgh.org) and the short-lived NOLA-Intel wiki, which published information of New Orleans in the early aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The former, a political diary and knowledgebase for Libertarian candidate, suffers from having too few authors and a local base of elderly voters who prefer the printed page [17]. The latter was a public service, transcribing radio transmissions and relaying news that mainstream media was not reporting. The politics in this case interfered with that mission, as in-fighting for control of content, structure and policy caused NOLA-Intel to implode completely off the the Web [3,21].

These three examples of political wikis illustrate a few principle issues with the medium: discussion, critical mass and point of view.

2.1 About the PoliticWiki study

A six-month study was undertaken to assess the potential for wikis to contribute to political activism. Beginning in July 2005 and running through the following January, participants were asked to use a MediaWiki web site (http://www.mediawiki.org) to collaborate on the construction of a political platform. This directive echoes the mission of 3rdParty (http://3rdparty.org), a grassroots organization trying to reach across ideological barriers and build political consensus [1]. 3rdParty.org, online since 1998, currently relies on an Ultimate Bulletin Board (UBB) forum to manage discussion.

2.1.1 Research Questions
PoliticWiki attempted to answer three primary questions:

1. What attracts people to the participatory design of politics?

2. What obstacles to participation exist in a political point-of-view wiki?

3. How does discussion materialize on a wiki?

What attracts people to the participatory design of politics?

PoliticWiki is a design opportunity. The future of political wikis resides beyond any consensus achieved through the shared authorship of participants in this study. Early concepts need continued iteration to further development of tools facilitating interaction among amateur politicians. It is vital, therefore, to solicit help from the population most likely to participate.

Typically, designers recruit specific individuals exhibiting appropriate interests [19]. In this study, design partners come to the project and make themselves known through their interaction with the web site. In a manner not evident through an initial screening process, PoliticWiki may identify power users from those interested in online political collaboration. Later phases of forum design could then leverage the shared experiences constructed here.

This study explores the factors that might make this kind of project enticing to potential design partners. What are the hooks that draw people to political collaboration, and what must be considered in order to sustain that interest?

What obstacles to participation exist in a political wiki?

Neutral voice is a wiki convention that arises from early conflicts over published content and Wikipedia's practical need for objectivity [24]. There is nothing inherent in the medium to prevent a point of view from being expressed. Divisive and opinionated articles, though, may prevent a wiki from being an effective collaboration tool.

The presence of opinioned content could affect the generation of community protocols and tasks assigned to member roles within the community. Since strong opinions can invoke solidarity and rejection, this study examines how

existing members incorporate new arrivals into the wiki mission.

PoliticWiki did not begin as a blank slate. The web site design was modeled after the 3rdParty.org template and included wiki versions of that web site's essays and organizational information. PoliticWiki, therefore, had an identity before the first survey was completed. A few pages were purposely edited to include typos, with the expectation that well-meaning members would correct them. Although no planks were defined, the structure for Domestic and Global Policy issues were provided as links to empty pages. How would that structure evolve over the course of six months of collaboration?

PoliticWiki is an opportunity to examine the effects on collaboration of the process and difficulties that accompany published opinion.

How does discussion materialize on a wiki?

In many wikis, discussion begins as an attempt to apply traditional conventions to a new medium. That means posts will be sequential with the most recent comment added to the end of the thread. Over time, as this model confuses the communication process, members may adapt and create new conventions, overcoming the perceived weaknesses of a wiki. The act of editing itself may be construed as a form of discussion. As a result, political discourse may be constrained.

As with any political discussion, the quality of the conversation depends upon its participants. Incidents of vandalism or editing wars between authors will likely be reflected in the posts in the *Talk* namespaces, wiki pages designated for comments. Likewise, positive contributions may be noted. Will the medium allow other members to responds to published comments, or will participants seek external channels (email, instant messaging, other online forums, etc.) to carry on discussion about the project?

Published in PoliticWiki was very limited instruction about what participants should do, both in terms of building a political platform and interacting within the wiki. Some basic help pages containing formatting examples were supplemented by links into MediaWiki's help pages. Behavioral guidelines, therefore, should largely reflect those brought to the community by individuals with prior collaborative, political or wiki experiences. Protocols should emerge from member interactions, covering such issues as editing content on other user pages, or communicating with an unseen administrator.

In this study, member discussion is observed in an attempt to understand how these rules for the community evolve.

3. METHODOLOGY

Participation in PoliticWiki consists of four components: an entrance survey; a six-month collaborative project; an exit survey; and an optional follow-up interview by phone or instant messaging chat. The amount of time and effort invested in the wiki content is left to the each individual, but the main goal remains the same for everyone: build a consensus political platform.

3.1 PoliticWiki Setup

PoliticWiki began as an extension of the 3rdParty.org web site. Essays, resources and the visual identity of 3rdParty.org were adapted to the wiki – a modified MediaWiki web site installation (version 1.4.4) – to serve as seed content. Initial help files and empty platform planks were also configured prior to participation. MediaWiki was selected as the wiki engine in the hope that users familiar with Wikipedia would be able to adapt to the site easily.

Participants in the study established membership by following a path through a consent form and a 25-question entrance survey. Quantitative data in the survey was associated with the participant's user account and wiki activity. The MediaWiki engine was modified to disallow any other form of registration – the ability to create new accounts was removed. Content could be viewed by anyone stumbling across the site, but only authenticated members who completed the entrance survey were allowed to edit articles.

3.2 Data

Potential participants were recruited through public contact points for a variety of political organizations. Recruiting later focused on email discussion list managers, authors of political blogs and academic heads of political science departments. This strategy was selected primarily to respect the privacy of list managers and party officials charged with protecting their own agendas. Recruitment proved troublesome, though, as PoliticWiki fell short of the goal of 100 members.

An email to Jpoehlmann, the primary contact for 3rd Party,[1] initiated the project on July 27, 2005. Each successive contact was asked to distribute to their constituency a recruiting message that included a link to the consent form. A *nudge message* was distributed to registered members on November 27 to remind participants that the six-month study would conclude near the end of January.

The entrance survey asked 25 questions about the participant's demographics, ideology and collaborative practice (see Appendices). Ideology was determined through self-disclosure and by selection of agreement with political statements, culled from the Republican and Democratic Party platforms and speeches. These statements were not attributed, leaving the participant to respond to the ideas and not the affiliation with a party line. The survey also asked each user to identify the means by which they were referred to the PoliticWiki project.

Survey data and wiki content were collected in a MySQL database, a modified version of the default schema created during a MediaWiki installation. Both the surveys and the wiki were available online at http://www.politicexchange.org.

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[1] To maintain objectivity, this author's participation in 3rdpary.org and other political organizations was temporarily halted. Jpoehlmann was the representative of 3rd Party for the duration of this study.

Table 1. Talk and Content categories used in content analysis.

Category	Criteria	Type
Reporting	This is what I did.	Talk
Inquiry	This is what I want to know or ask you to do.	Talk
Critique	This is what is wrong or right about something.	Talk
Response	This is what I'll say to the previous author.	Talk
Observation	This is what I noticed.	Talk
Exclamation	This is how I feel or what I believe.	Talk
Publication	This is a new idea.	Content
Revision	This is a new meaning of an existing idea.	Content
Improvement	This improves the expression of an existing idea.	Content
Deletion	This idea has been removed.	Content
Re-organization	This is a change to the order of content.	Content
Formatting	This is a change to the presentation.	Content

3.3 Analytical methods

Data collected during the six-month study was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. This analysis focused on the participants and how they interacted with PoliticWiki and its community. No effort was made to assess the political value of the content.

The entrance survey was analyzed to show frequencies of the demographic, political and experiential characteristics of the participant population. Survey results, tagged with a new login ID at the point of submission, were used to correlate active members with wiki activity. Data collected through the exit survey was discarded, due to technical difficulties in administering the online form.

Throughout the study, weekly statistics were collected to measure the progress of the site in generating membership and edits to wiki pages. New page creation was monitored separately from revisions, relying on both the cumulative MediaWiki statistics tracked by the application and raw queries to the database. At the conclusion of the six-month study, additional data was mined to analyze the distribution of political topics and contributing authors.

To supplement the quantitative data, thirteen people were interviewed, including nine participants in PoliticWiki. These interviews were conducted via telephone and instant message chat, asking the same core questions of each subject. In some cases, relevant wiki experiences external to this study were explored. Interviews were used to add insight into motivation and predisposition toward participation in the study

A content analysis was also conducted of published pages in the wiki. Each of the 989 edits logged in database was examined separately and categorized based on the kinds of changes made. The twelve categories that resulted (see Table 1) were not exclusive. A given edit could and often was associated with more than one category, provided the changes showed evidence of that kind of interaction.

The twelve categories were classified into two types of edit, Talk and Content. *Talk* changes – Reporting, Inquiry, Critique, Response, Observation and Exclamation – are instances of discussion between authors and about the collaboration. *Content* changes – Publication, Revision, Improvement, Deletion, Re-organization and Formatting – are about the expression of collaborative ideas. The results of this analysis formed the *talk-to-content ratio* (ttc), a new measure for the level of conversation needed to generate content. Higher ttc ratios could be an indicator of more controversial topics.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Entrance Survey

Seventy-eight surveys were collected through distribution of a URL to political organizers throughout the country.

4.1.1 Demographics of PoliticWiki participants

Participants in PoliticWiki were predominantly male and college educated, but not affluent. The majority completing the survey was male (87%), and almost all had taken at least some college or advanced study (90.9%). About half of this group (49.4%) held a college degree, yet more than half (51.9%) disclosed an annual income of less than $30,000. A quarter of participants claimed at least three dependents. Only twelve of those taking the survey boasted an income over $75,000.

Naturally, this is a politically active group. Two-thirds vote in every election and about the same number were authors of political work. Only about one-third (32.5%) had never even written a letter to the editor. Politics is not a universal interest, however. Twelve do not vote at all and discuss politics on less than a weekly basis. 37.7% were referred to PoliticWiki through 3rdParty.org. Another thirteen arrived after conducting a web search for a political topic.
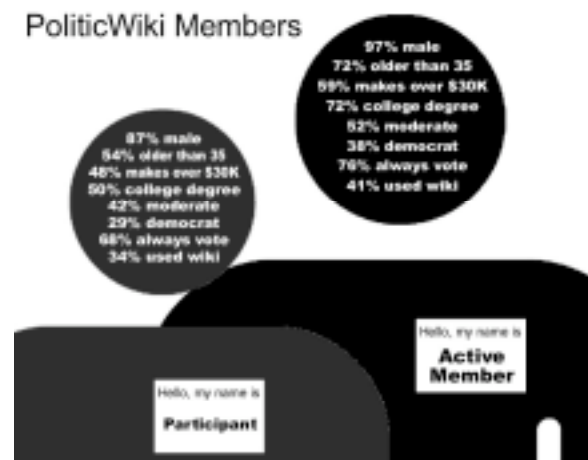

Figure 1. Demographic differences between all respondents and active members.

Table 2. Percentage agreement with political statements in survey by PoliticWiki members

Topic	Party Statement	All Members	Active Members
Security	Democrats	76.6%	72.4%
	Republican	6.5%	3.4%
	Not Sure	15.6%*	20.7%*
Energy	Democrats	63.6%	44.8%
	Republican	22.1%	27.6%
	Not Sure	13.0%*	24.1%*
Economy	Democrats	59.7%	58.6%
	Republican	22.1%	20.7%
	Not Sure	15.6%**	17.2%*
Health Care	Democrats	59.7%	58.6%
	Republican	22.1%	24.1%
	Not Sure	16.9%*	13.8%*
Reproductive Rights	Democrats	54.5%	55.2%
	Republican	29.9%	27.6%
	Not Sure	14.3%*	13.8%*
Education	Democrats	20.8%	34.5%
	Republican	50.6%	31.0%
	Not Sure	27.3%*	31.0%*
Foreign Policy	Democrats	41.6%	44.8%
	Republican	37.7%	31.0%
	Not Sure	18.3%**	20.7%*

One respondent did not answer this survey question
**Two respondents did not answer this survey question*

Moderates account for 41.7% of the ideology base. Just over half of respondents claimed affiliation with one of the major political parties, with slightly more Democrats (28.6%) than Republicans (23.4%). When identifying with political statements made by each party, Education was the only topic where the Republican statement was preferred (50.6%), with about one-fourth (27.3%) not sure which statement they preferred. For all other topics, the Democratic position was favored by a majority (see Table 2).

When gauging upon registration their likelihood to actively participate in the project, 68.9% indicated they would be at least very likely to contribute. For the majority of PoliticWiki members (53.2%), the most important objective was to create a quality work. 23.4% sought first to have a meaningful experience, regardless of outcome. Prior to joining PoliticWiki, one-third of participants had used a wiki.

4.1.2 Active Members
To qualify as *active*, a participant had to generate database evidence of interaction with the web site. Of the 78 people who completed the survey, 29 participated in some tangible manner. That participation ranged from watching a single page for changes to dominating the organization and editing efforts on the site. Compared to the larger group of survey respondents, this smaller segment differs in noticeable ways.

While only one participant made extensive use of the *watchlist* feature of PoliticWiki – which allows a member to tag articles and provide a custom list of pages to track – 41.4% of this group watched at least one page. The majority (58.6%) made more than one edit during the course of the six-month study.

Active members were a little more likely to be male, older, more educated and wealthier (see Figure 1). 41.4% were between ages 36 and 45, with a decline in the youngest age group (18-25). 72.4% of active members held a college degree, and no one lacked college experience. There was also about a 10-point drop in the percentage of those earning less than $30,000 annually.

The ideology of this smaller group shifts to the left. The majority is moderate, and fewer claim no allegiance to either major party. While Democrats gain about ten points (39.7%) of the percentage of membership, Constitutionalists and Conservatives drop from 23.4% of entire population down to 6.9% of active members. This shift left materialized in changes in political statement preferences for Education and Energy. The Democratic position on the latter lost almost 20 percentage points (63.6% down to 44.8%) with very little of that lost support turning into the Republican perspective.

A higher percentage of active members had previously used a wiki (up to 41.4%), and three-fourths vote in every election. 86.2% indicated that they were at least very likely to contribute in this wiki; 82.8% of active members actually did make an edit. More than half, though, indicated they would feel most productive if at least six other authors were contributing as well.

The most important change, however, may be that half of all active members (51.7%) originated from the 3rdParty.org community.

4.2 Wiki Interactions
Recruitment affected the activity on PoliticWiki, both in terms of total number of participants and frequency of activity. Beginning November 2, when a few dozen mid-sized political blogs were contacted to spark participation, the trajectory of growth climbed for views, edits and new pages. Eighteen surveys were collected over the next two weeks, including that of Pchoate (November 16), who became the second biggest contributor behind Freetrader for the final half of the study.

There were three periods of reductive editing, where the net character content of PoliticWiki declined. The first came in late September, following the final recruitment from political parties and email groups. The second came in mid-December, two weeks after the nudge message was sent to the registered membership to remind them that the project would end in two months, and the final period of major reduction came as the study concluded in late January.

Individual contributions were largely minimal and confined to a single editing session. More than half completed all of their edits, if they had any, on a single day in less than two hours, and 37.9% showed interest in just one page. Most (55.1%) contributed content to two or fewer pages in the wiki. Only five of active participants did not make any content contributions.

The bulk of the activity was due to a handful of members. Two participants – Freetrader and Jpoehlmann – accounted for more than 100 edits each. Freetrader was responsible for 61.8% of all character changes but just 46.7% of visible content, both tops among members. This was due to the latter's penchant for deleting large segments of discussion text when the pages became too big. The top eight contributors accounted for almost all of the content changes (95.8%), and seven helped author 11 or more pages.

In the end, only five members spent at least a dozen days and more than six hours each making contributions to the wiki.

4.3 Participant Interviews

Thirteen people were interviewed, including the top four contributors to PoliticWiki – Freetrader, Jpoehlmann, David A Prinz and Pchoate. The interviewees also included people with prior wiki experience dating back to the original Ward's Wiki. Viewed together, their responses offered insight into the motivation and quality of experience in the project. The following is a summary of those interviews.

Among those interviewed, there was a high level of interest in the concept of PoliticWiki. People were interested in the medium, perceiving this as an unusual use of a wiki, as well as the political content. PoliticWiki was an opportunity to help manufacture something concrete. The most negative reactions to the experience were a reflection of the content outcome. Time was also cited as the biggest inhibitor to more participation.

The initial impetus to edit the wiki came from either an attraction to a specific issue or the desire to affect the organization of the site. Often the initial edit was a response to existing content. Many early edits were small changes to words, grammar or formatting. However, published content was also seen as an obstacle when a potential author assumed a contradictory opinion would not be welcome, or if published authors were presumed to know more about a subject. Fear existed that one voice dominated the content and conversation, driving potential members away from PoliticWiki. There was also a general apprehension about editing someone else's work that contributed to initial hesitancy.

Participants tended to contribute to the content or discussion of a platform plank in the areas for which they expressed most interest. Cited topics included Education, Economics, Foreign Policy, and Security. Three other areas – Environment, Civil Rights and Foreign Relations – were identified as topics of least *and* most interest. Some were mostly interested in *meta* topics, such as how the wiki organizes and how content evolves into something useful. These members did not participate at the same level as those citing specific political domains of interest.

The most enjoyable and frustrating moments dealt with collaboration on content. When negotiations with other authors produced an article that reflected, in some part, everyone's views, the experience was very satisfying. That process proved aggravating to others when the quality of interaction with other members deteriorated. The learning curve to navigate the wiki, both in terms of editing skills and site design, offered fewer moments of frustration.

Discussion of political issues was moved off of the wiki with a posted request to do so by early community leaders. While conversation about PoliticWiki content and edits remained primarily within the Talk namespaces, other political discussion was directed away from the wiki to the 3rdParty.org forum, the Convention Floor. Interviewees also noted that a few emails were exchanged with others about this project, mostly in the form of questions to the administrator or promotion of the site with friends.

Interviewees suggested improvements to PoliticWiki, which centered on organization, community and tools. By making the issues smaller and separate from opinions, the opportunity to find a place to lend a voice to the project increases. Discussion might be made less confusing by allowing for contextual comments, attached directly to places in the content. There were also calls to have stronger and more focused leadership in the project, citing specifically disappointment in the distant role played by the site administrator.

Those interviewed indicated participation is likely to increase with more personal connection between the issues being discussed and the authors interested in contributing. Focused activities and improved accountability within the community, as well as a significantly larger marketing campaign to spread awareness of the project, would likely bring in a larger and more diverse membership. Finally, better social structure and hierarchies may suitably combat perceived imbalance in the published politics of the site.

4.4 Content Analysis

Existing content was seen by some participants as an inhibitor to discussion, particularly from those outside the 3rdParty.org community. Pages that were published on the wiki prior to the start of the study were rarely edited or emulated. No essays were referenced, copied or adjusted, despite the ability for any author to do so. The only changes of such content came in the form of corrections to a published list of other wikis and edits to the FAQ about the project.

The resulting political platform was a 67,587-character document spanning 30 pages when transferred into Microsoft Word. Topics were re-organized in alphabetical order, and several new political planks surfaced: Accountability, Agriculture, Corporate Welfare & Pork Programs, FCC and Broadcasting, Immigration, Labor and Employment Issues, Welfare Reform, and Secrecy. A Civil Rights plank, initially part of the empty platform structure, was removed from the topic menu. Introductory pages were also added to the platform, including political philosophy and instructions on how to contribute to a plank.

Freetrader was responsible for about three-fifths of all content and discussion on PoliticWiki. It was common practice to remove recent text from a plank article, particularly when the other author did not explain why changes were made. Freetrader took responsibility for cleaning up the discussion pages when conversations became too bulky for a wiki page. He deleted and reorganized large sections of talk comments, posting suggestions to use the article history as a means of reviewing past comments. He also added a disclaimer, formatted as a wiki table, to every platform page to indicate the content was in development. In all, Freetrader contributed to 74 wiki pages for a total of 625 edits (63% of total edits for the PoliticWiki community).

4.4.1 Talk-to-Content Ratio

The six-month history of PoliticWiki edits was analyzed to determine the quality of each change. The size and scope of a given edit ranged wildly during the course of the study. Some were very simple corrections, while others incorporated many different kinds of changes to content. Two major types of changes, *Talk* and *Content*, were tallied (see Tables 1 & 3).

Overall, the talk-to-content ratio (ttc) is .328 for the 989 edits. There were 81 edits that contained only talk, and 691 edits that contained only content. The remaining 217 edits displayed a mix of both types.
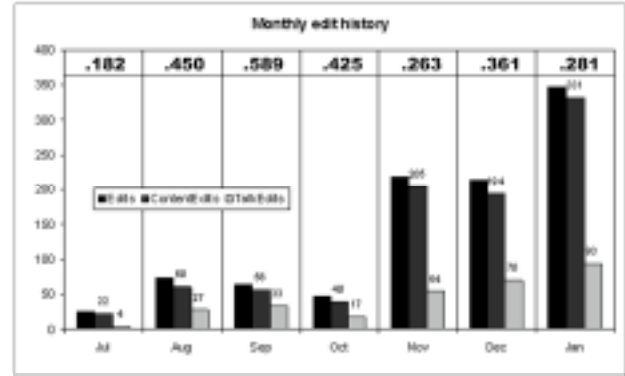
Table 3. Instances of Talk and Content edits.

Category	Type	Edits
Publication	Content	316
Improvement	Content	305
Formatting	Content	273
Critique	Talk	171
Re-organization	Content	161
Inquiry	Talk	160
Exclamation	Talk	155
Revision	Content	150
Response	Talk	133
Reporting	Talk	132
Deletion	Content	128
Observation	Talk	112

Figure 2. Monthly Talk-to-Content editing ratios.

The 46 wiki pages created in Talk namespaces tallied 903,272 character changes. Of the 352 edits in these wiki pages, 267 exhibited evidence of talk and 281 were content adjustments, for a ratio of .950 ttc. The remaining namespaces, meant for content rather than discussion, contained 53 articles that were edited 637 times with 374,773 character changes. These pages experienced only 31 talk edits. All but 10 (627 edits) were content type changes, for a ratio of .049 ttc.

A total of 33 political topics were part of the platform development, with another 23 titles – mostly user pages – supporting that mission. Of the latter group, the organizing pages (Introduction, Overview and menu of planks) merited 107 edits. The top ratio for those topics was .220 ttc, indicating that more work went into editing content than discussing the changes. Platform planks were edited 804 times, led by work on the Environment (85 edits), Medical Care (61), Defense and Treaties (53), and Immigration (46). Each had at least 50,000 character changes. Education merited the least discussion, posting a .225 ttc, but the other six topics had higher-than-average ratios. In particular, Science and Culture (.629 ttc) featured a sometimes contentious debate over the merits of animal rights.

In the examination of edits for each month, the ratio peaked in September at .589 ttc. December was the month with the most total character changes (327,057) affecting 53 articles and requiring 214 edits with .361 ttc. The first half of the study posted a .455 ttc with just 210 edits on a maximum of 27 pages. The second half of the study saw the authored pages jump to 56, drawing 779 edits and a lower .297 ttc (see Figure 2).

5. DISCUSSION

PoliticWiki is by no means a finished application, but there are useful lessons to be learned from experimentation. The results of this study inform in a practical sense a course of action for the next design iteration. Recruitment strategies should be opened to have a chance at obtaining critical mass to sustain collaboration. Community building must take into account the obstacles to participation arising through structure and bias of existing content. Answers to the research questions are considered before exploring the next steps in the evolution of political wikis.

5.1 Research Questions Revisited

5.1.1 Attraction to political participatory design

PoliticWiki served as a lightning rod for *amateur politicians*. These people, who devote their spare time to the pursuit of political activism, are diverse and find many different ways to stay involved with politics. The members of this user group most likely to become active leaders in collaborative forums are drawn to the project, creating opportunities for participatory design.

This study was effective in identifying and recruiting active participants, who are now familiar with the strengths and limitations of a wiki. They chose to participate in PoliticWiki because of interests in either the political mission or the implementation of wiki technology to this end. Follow-up interviews and continued activity on the web site since January 2006 indicates a sustained interest in helping this project evolve.

The duration of the project may have contributed to author fatigue. A few of those interviewed indicated that time was a factor in deciding to limit involvement, and it is notable that editing of PoliticWiki completely halted after its scheduled end on January 27. Activity only resumed after follow-up interviews began a few weeks later. The length of the study made inclusion in weekly focus groups too burdensome, even though individual interviews allowed issues of presentation, structure and functionality to be discussed. Had this been a series of shorter studies, the initial recruitment could well have produced a strong group for participatory design. Time will tell whether future iterations of PoliticWiki will be able to maintain the interest of this group and benefit from their wiki experiences.

Currently, there are few options for such political collaboration using wikis. Sites like Living Platform and

Platform For Pittsburgh are not plentiful enough to present members with other outlets for this interest. The ability to use this kind of online event as an attractor for design partners may change as the online political landscape evolves.

5.1.2 Obstacles to participation in a POV wiki?

Wikipedia's preference for Neutral Point of View [24] is tied to the implementation of their wiki, not the medium itself. A wiki's strength is collaboration on shared content. That could include articles that lean toward either objectivity or a variety of positions. Political communities need to be aware of the obstacles created from either approach to content generation.

On a certain level, it is mystifying why the 3rdParty.org content on the wiki did not spark more interaction. The essays were not edited, nor were they emulated by those with opposing viewpoints. Wikis allow this. Neither did the content prompt discussion. Rather, it seemed to dampen involvement. If one factors in the lack of leadership to clarify its presence on the site and an inherent reluctance to edit another's work, it is safe to assume that other factors must work to counteract the negative impact of biased content.

Only a few pages of original content were changed. Typos, intentionally placed on these pages as bait for changes, were partially corrected. It took twenty edits and over five months before one of the four typos was corrected on the platform planks menu. The FAQ and Wiki information pages were modified slightly by authors who did not contribute significantly elsewhere.

Editing style, aggressiveness of debate and bias in previously published content can all become inhibitors to future participation, particularly among new authors. They can also become an asset, if given a proper place within the forum structure. There was not enough activity on PoliticWiki to definitively declare which role position-based content plays. However, we can examine user cases and get a sense that point-of-view contributed in both a positive and negative manner.

MarkDilley was disappointed to arrive and find PoliticWiki endowed with an ideological identity, through the presence of 3rdParty.org content. His involvement in the mission lessened as a result. Pchoate arrived halfway into the study and found content built by Freetrader and others to be intimidating, assuming a greater sense of historical debate. After spending some time on the site, Pchoate became more involved, citing the presence of opinions counter to his own as a catalyst for action. His contrary view led to several lengthy discussions and a few brief edit wars.

Political point-of-View wikis may have issues to address in order to be effective, but the medium has the potential to work well for political content.

5.1.3 Discussion on a Wiki

The emergence of protocols helps determine the success in negotiating content. In this case, the two members contributing the most content (Freetrader and Jpoehlmann) helped establish rules for content editing, discussion and procedure for reporting pending changes. Some of these choices may have prevented collaboration, such as the "gentleman's agreement" to truncate platform changes with several weeks left in the study. Edits were encouraged, but changes were frequently edited back if they were not accompanied with an explanation in the corresponding Talk page. Discussion about 3rd Party politics and political issues in general were ushered off-site to the Convention Floor forum, making the wiki appear less active and open.

When discussion did occur on the wiki, it was difficult to follow. Authors mixed sequential posts at the end of a Talk page with content-specific responses littered throughout the article. Periodically, one member would prune long pages, referencing revision histories as the source to review old discussions. A more experienced wiki author might have modeled the use of subpages and indenting to capture old conversation and clean up pages. A few such members did try to instill some wiki convention – such as calling for proposals, using signatures for accountability in posts, and pruning text in some non-platform articles. Beyond that, not much was researched by new members and brought into community practice.

The act of editing might be considered a form of discussion since it can follow a pattern of individual responses to previous action, and a record of these responses is maintained for every wiki page in the form of revision history. Early on, however, protocols were established and adopted by authors to require reasons for an edit be posted in the Talk channels accompanying each article. There was very little evidence of authors communicating through action alone, and others chastised those who deleted content without commenting.

There were no instances of vandalism during the study, due in large part to the administrative choice restricting the path to a new account. Prospective members had to submit a consent statement and entrance survey before entering any account information. There were many instances, however, of editing wars, in which one author would delete the content of another. On a few occasions, the discussion surrounding the edits threatened an endless cycle of replacing deleted text, but those cycles never went beyond the restoration (the same content was not deleted again and again). Freetrader and Pchoate had some heated discussions about gas taxes and animal rights, bringing Pchoate to the brink of dropping out of the conversation. With some help from Jpoehlmann's mediation, the tone changed at this point in the discussion, and both remained active authors.

Compare this to Ben Kovitz's "How to Converse Deeply on a Wiki," which highlights the standards needed for discussion on a wiki [22]. The PoliticWiki community did make an attempt to keep talk and content separate, and attribution was used by most members. However, several other wiki behaviors were violated. With just one page for each political topic, there was a constant mixture of concept and argument, and edits were less about improving wording and more about changing meaning. The protocols that required reporting of each edit also ran counter to the concepts of steer quickly and teach wiki technique by editing, minimizing the number of published comments.

In the absence of tacit knowledge about wiki protocols, members of PoliticWiki created a workable set of communal behaviors that leveraged the wiki's best feature: the ability to have multiple authors for a single page. The protocols established to govern discussion used the authoring process (rearranging and deleting text, relying on revision history for context). Edits also served as the triggers for member

participation, both in terms of the politics of a statement and the act of publishing those ideas to the wiki.

5.2 Future Design

Several design concepts have arisen from the PoliticWiki project that could enhance the quality of online political discussion.

5.2.1 Integrated Media

The Living Platform opted to use TikiWiki as their wiki engine because of its out-of-the-box integration with other forums [15,18]. That project also utilized email groups to facilitate voting on planks of the Green Party platform and suffered from a different set of challenges as a result of their decisions. However, the reason behind that choice is sound: the wiki is a difficult medium for discussion.

PoliticWiki explored similar integrations using MediaWiki. At present, this wiki engine does not offer an easy road to integrate with other kinds of media. However, the strength of that community of developers gives hope that user-inspired collaborations with other open source tools (like PHPBB and WordPress) are on the horizon.

In some sense, "wiki-ness" is challenged by this multi-channel concept. However, this is a case of using the right combination of tools for one's intended purpose. As the medium most effective for collaborative writing, wikis clearly have a place at the table for political discussions.

5.2.2 Small Group Dialogue

One problem PoliticWiki never had to face is what happens when the community grows too large. Wiki communities have proven very resilient to the downside to growth, vandalism, by fighting back with sheer numbers. Malicious edits rarely last long on a well-watched wiki. For a political wiki, though, an even greater danger is inaccessibility to the discussion.

By taking a federated approach to organization, a community can benefit from the diversity and load-sharing of a large population without sacrificing the ability to establish trusting relationships in small groups [16]. In the late 1990s, Web Lab – a non-profit organization exploring ways to improve online conversation – developed Small Group Dialogues (SGD) [2]. These special forums were lightly moderated, intentionally diverse, restricted to a few dozen members, and limited in duration. These properties helped to create an environment where accountability, empathy and trust materialized in a meaningful way.

Imagine a point of contention arising on a hot-topic issue, such as abortion. A PoliticWiki author could move easily from the collaborative writing to call for a small group dialogue with other members. The same protections (limited access, diverse membership and limited duration) would create an optimal environment to discuss issues and reach understanding, if not consensus.

5.2.3 Local-National exchange of content

Most political debate on the internet is about issues of national or international scope. Yet, very few people have access to influence the people making decisions at that level. On the other hand, it is relatively easy to gain the ear of a local councilperson or district superintendent. There is very little political discussion online about issues of local importance.

By turning PoliticWiki into a wiki farm, discussion could focus on local topics where participants could enjoy tangible impact. At the same time, those efforts at defining issues, generating position statements and arriving at consensus will have an opportunity to be re-used elsewhere in the larger PoliticWiki network.

Shared content, as well as shared research efforts, allow local successes to be duplicated and failures to be avoided. Deep discussion about local events has the win-win effect of helping those most concerned with the outcome now while also becoming a part of the greater political consciousness of PoliticWiki.

5.2.4 OpenPolitics.ca

The future of political wikis may be in a site currently in development in Canada. OpenPolitics (http://openpolitics.ca) is considered the second iteration of the Living Platform, following much of the latter site's mission while attempting to correct its shortcomings.

OpenPolitics uses an Issue-Position-Argument (IPA) model that tries to create short, 100-word issue definitions and relate them to position statements and other issues. Comments are gone – they are static, with limited shelf life and are quickly out of date with the ever-changing content in a wiki article. In fact, all rhetoric is eliminated. "Rhetoric and deliberating are mutually exclusive," claims Michael Pilling, a leader in the OpenPolitics project. "Good wiki editing erases rhetoric. [15]"

It may be idealistic to eliminate rhetoric from political discussion. A strategy for PoliticWiki might seek to direct rhetoric to other channels, maintaining a place for the "A" in IPA. Even more likely, efforts in this arena can be pooled, allowing communities to work together.

6. CONCLUSION

This study might be best viewed as a *proof-of-concept* experiment that presents an argument for future iterations. The implementation of a sustainable political wiki requires deeper investigation into other areas, such as achieving critical mass and the effects of uncooperative contributions. However, the lessons learned from PoliticWiki include the identification of several factors to attract potential partners in participatory design and obstacles a point-of-view wiki presents in encouraging sustained contributions. This study confirms the difficulty of conversing in this medium but does show a resilience of members to use the available tools to communicate with each other.

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9. APPENDICES

9.1 Entrance Survey Questions

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

2. What is your age?
   - 18-25 years old
   - 26-35 years old
   - 36-45 years old
   - 46-55 years old
   - 56-65 years old
   - over 65 years old

3. What is the highest level of education have you attained?
   - Did not receive High School diploma or equivalent
   - High School diploma or equivalent
   - Some college or advanced study
   - Undergraduate Degree
   - Some post-graduate study
   - Post-graduate degree

4. What is your current annual income?
   - Less than $30,000
   - $30,000-$45,000
   - $45,000-$60,000
   - $60,000-$75,000
   - More than $75,000

5. How many dependents do you have in your immediate family?
   - One
   - Two
   - Three
   - Four
   - Five
   - More than five
   - Not sure

6. How long have you been using the Internet on a regular basis? (Select the best answer to describe your experience.)
   - Since before 1998
   - Since 2000
   - Since 2002
   - Since 2004
   - I do not use the Internet on a regular basis
   - Not sure

INTEREST IN POLITICS

7. How frequently do you participate in political discussions, either remotely through the Internet or in person? (Select the best answer to describe your experience.)
   - Every day
   - Several times per week
   - About once per week
   - Less than once per week
   - Never

8. How frequently do you write a letter to the editor of a print or electronic newspaper? (Select the best answer to describe your experience.)
   - Every day
   - Several times per week
   - About once per week
   - Less than once per week
   - Never

9. Have you ever authored an essay, article or researched paper expressing a political opinion?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

10. Which statement best describes your frequency of voting in local, state and national elections? (Select the best answer to describe your experience.)
    - I vote in every election
    - I vote in national election years only (every other year)
    - I vote in Presidential election years only (every 4 years)
    - I vote only if a candidate is of interest and has a chance to win
    - I vote only if a political issue is of interest
    - I rarely vote in elections
    - I used to vote regularly, but now I do not
    - I never vote

11. Do you currently or have you ever held an elected public office?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

12. If limited to the two major political parties, Republican and Democrat, with which do you find yourself most closely aligned?
    - Republican
    - Democrat
    - Neither
    - Not sure

13. What do you consider to be your general ideology?
    - Progressive
    - Liberal
    - Moderate
    - Conservative
    - Constitutionalist
    - Something else conservative
    - Something else liberal
    - Something else moderate
    - Not sure

14. Reflecting on the following issues, with which statement do you most agree? ... Energy
    - Make sure that the environment is such that the entrepreneurial spirit remains strong.
    - Achieving energy independence will improve our ability to protect our values and interests in the world.
    - Not sure

15. Economy
    - Give states more flexibility to fill high growth jobs with skilled American workers, and to hold states accountable for employment results.
    - The opportunity for work, the rewards from work, and the dignity of work have made Americans successful and America strong.
    - Not sure

16. Foreign Policy
    - The only possible path to victory will be found in the company of others, not walking alone.
    - Provide our troops with whatever they need to protect themselves and successfully complete their mission.
    - Not sure

17. Health Care
    - Put doctors and nurses back in charge of making medical decisions with their patients – instead of allowing HMO bureaucrats to decide what a patient needs.
    - Allow individuals to buy the best coverage they can find anywhere in the country.
    - Not sure

18. Reproductive Rights
    - Support family planning and adoption incentives. Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare.
    - Promote a culture of life in which every person is valued and every life has meaning.
    - Not sure

19. Security
    - We must win the war on terror without losing the values of freedom and justice for all that make us so proud to be Americans.
    - We have been relentless, and we will continue to be relentless in our mission to secure the people of this country.
    - Not sure

20. Education
    - Using unique state-designed accountability plans, schools are measuring the progress of student achievement, keeping parents informed of student and school progress, identifying schools in need of improvement, and providing support for these schools and districts.
    - The quality of a child's education depends on the wealth of that child's neighborhood.
    - Not sure

COLLABORATION EXPERIENCE

21. Have you ever used a wiki or other multi-author collaborative applications before?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not sure

22. For you to feel most comfortable in a discussion, how many maximum participants should be part of your conversation?
    - I do not feel comfortable in any discussion
    - Two people (myself and another person)
    - Three people, including myself
    - Four people, including myself
    - Five people, including myself
    - Six to 10 people, including myself
    - More than 10 people, including myself
    - Not sure

23. For you to feel most productive in a discussion, how many maximum participants should be part of your conversation?
    - I do not feel productive in any discussion
    - Two people (myself and another person)
    - Three people, including myself
    - Four people, including myself
    - Five people, including myself
    - Six to 10 people, including myself
    - More than 10 people, including myself
    - Not sure

24. When entering a collaborative project, what is the most important objective for you?
    - Finish the project on time
    - Create a quality work
    - Have my personal views and opinions reflected in the final work
    - See that everyone has a chance to participate
    - Have a meaningful experience, regardless of outcome
    - Not sure

25. If there is sufficient group activity on a collaborative project, how likely are you to contribute?
    - Not at all likely to contribute
    - Somewhat likely to contribute
    - Very likely to contribute
    - I will definitely contribute
    - The level of group activity has no effect
    - Not sure

26. How did you hear about the PoliticWiki project? Please briefly describe

9.2 PoliticWiki Membership Activity

Table 2. Active Members with at least one page watched, created or edited.

Member	Watched Pages	New Pages	Authored Pages	Days Editing	Hours Editing	Total Edits	Net Change	Total Change
Freetrader	0	39	74	75	268	625	363,594	789,892
Jpoehlmann	36	12	57	19	44	103	90,772	102,100
Gage	1	4	14	14	17	40	77,205	100,415
David A Prinz	0	12	33	24	28	65	72,174	78,310
Pchoate	0	2	11	12	22	46	62,923	65,681
Stringerusa	0	2	5	5	6	19	31,557	35,309
Griffbos	2	3	12	2	4	13	28,835	28,835
Sammy	3	0	11	5	5	16	23,728	24,008
ArtfromMI	0	2	5	4	5	7	15,204	15,204
Maggiehatter	1	1	3	3	5	6	2,328	10,064
Nic	0	1	2	1	2	2	7,262	7,262
Raptur Talon	0	0	1	1	1	1	-6,925	6,925
MarkDilley	0	2	6	5	5	18	2,505	3,725
Thomaslknapp	0	3	4	2	3	7	724	2,908
Prodigal Sol	0	0	1	1	1	1	2,190	2,190
Idealpragmatist	0	0	2	1	2	2	1,772	1,772
Rauterkus	0	2	4	1	2	7	-4	776
Robsaxon	0	1	1	1	1	2	695	713
Vegedoc	0	0	1	1	1	1	609	609
Mgcawley	0	1	1	1	1	1	487	487
Wedeservebetter	2	1	1	1	1	1	385	385
Ishmael	1	0	1	1	1	1	366	366
Keje	0	0	2	1	1	2	-21	23
Ernest Grobian	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
BillG	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aveybaby	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northstorm	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Glennb6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eiswolf	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Watched Pages – A MediaWiki convention, allows a member to tag articles and provide a custom list of pages to track

New Pages – Total number of pages created by this author

Authored Pages – Total number of pages created or revised by this author

Days Editing – Total number of days spent editing the wiki

Hours Editing – Total number of hours spent editing the wiki

Total Edits – Total number of page edits recorded in PoliticWiki by this author

Net Change – Reflects the net number of characters changed by this author

9.3 Collaborative Political Platform

The final version of the Political Platform created by participants of the PoliticWiki study, from July 27, 2005 through January 27, 2006, can be found at http://www.politicexchange.org/politicwiki/studyplatform.pdf