

Misty Smith Goes to Washington

the problem Imagine you're Misty Smith's brother-in-law. Misty's the popular and effective mayor of Ames, Iowa who's being encouraged to run for congress against an entrenched incumbent. The problem is that Misty's party's apparatus in the district has atrophied over the incumbent's eight terms in office. You're a well-connected attorney and Misty asked you to look into a congressional race for her and make a recommendation. If she runs, you know she'll ask you to manage her campaign. It's an assignment you wish would go away, but Misty's as persuasive as you are loyal. Where do you start?

some hope After a little research, you discover that there's a non-partisan, apolitical service called NewGov that hosts a comprehensive collaborative web site for every congressional district and senate seat. You're surprised to learn that there's an active conversation on the site dedicated to your congressional district and that anybody can use it at will to create an activist web site. It seems too good to be true.

revolution 2.0 You're a lawyer, so you're convinced that anything that's too good to be true, is. But you dig into the details and discover that some people actually believe that free and effective online activism is the key to the next phase of the great American experiment in democracy. They also believe that, even as printing presses and post roads enabled the first American revolution, so might Internet communications leverage the power of people to combine their ideals so that their millions of voices and small contributions aggregate into a force that drowns out the obsolescing grip of broadcast politics on the voting public.

campaign in a box What's interesting about the effort is that all the online tools are free for you to use. At <http://ia.NewGov.US/4cd>, the home of Iowa's 4th Congressional District, you can set up an entire web site so Misty and her close supporters can reach out to find new supporters, attract their contributions, discover their most strongly felt opinions and send her to Washington using her unique unfair competitive advantage over her aloof opponent – a weapon called "Listening". You see how online collaboration can lead directly to campaign contributions, as it did for Barack Obama. In five minutes, you set up <http://ia.NewGov.US/4cd/mistysmith>.

renaissance of hope After this cascade of revelations, you feel like a 16-year-old with a new driver's license. Is it possible that someone who is as clearly "unqualified" as Misty – eight years of experience revitalizing her city, beloved by her constituents, articulate, educated and wise – could actually have a chance against her more qualified opponent who has mastered pork barrel programs, influence and wealth for a decade and a half? You hardly dare to hope but you see there is a way.

the user experience You're a lawyer, not a geek, so you've never heard of "the user experience" or "work flow" or "use cases", but you've suffered through plenty of bad ones. You learn that NewGov is designed around you and Misty because everything that happens in government is the result of a campaign, conducted by non-technical people with an incomplete set of skills and experience. NewGov serves any campaign, whether for an issue or a candidate, with tools that lets you understand what to do and when, with the least possible confusion and angst. You know that any challenger's campaign is about issues.

You're up 'til 3:30 discovering what's almost automatic that had never before been imagined.

You also learn that NewGov is focused on another user experience, which is the one where Misty's clients—voters—visits the campaign web site and discovers a chance to be heard, to learn, to meet like-minded others and to grow the hope that there may be a way to deliver at least one congressional district from the desiccate cynicism of politics as usual.

And you learn about NewGov's Facebook services so Misty's supporters can start sending several different messages to the incumbent that change is possible, and invite their friends to join in.



1. Voter home page, with politician action panels
2. Candidates for each office you vote for.
3. Dashboard: Politicians you've "touched" in any way.
4. Vote and Money Pledge manager.
5. Vote bombs: Vote challenges you've issued or supported.
6. Causes: the Facebook Causes you've sent to politicians.
7. Invite Friends to join the NewGov project.

You go to bed energized by what's possible rather than depressed by what's inevitable. You even remember why you went to law school, so many disillusionments ago.

You can't wait to accept Misty's invitation to run her campaign.