

# Rally 'Round the Web

Local Howard Dean supporters use website to come together.

Eugene's Espresso Roma was simmering with political activity June 4. Packed into the brightly painted campus coffeehouse was a group of locals, most of whom had only met previously online. What brought this group together in the stuffy back room was a website called [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) and a common interest in politics.



Richard Soderberg, an LCC student, has never before been involved in a political campaign. Now, he is regular Meetup attendee. "I came into Meetup through the blog community," he said, and his circumstances are not uncommon.

Meetup.com is a for-profit site whose stock in trade is connecting people. Everyone from bottle cap collectors to Harry Potter addicts to political activists can sign up for a Meetup group made up of other people in their area. Once the group is established, they use the website to communicate and arrange events. Meetup makes its money by charging \$3 for individual "premium memberships" (benefits include getting to vote on venues) and charging fees to venues listed on their site.

One Meetup group in particular has been garnering loads of media attention for the role it has taking in American politics. This group is devoted to supporting former Gov. Howard Dean, one of the Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination. Dean has been campaigning heavily in preparation for the upcoming Democratic primary. One thing that makes his campaign noteworthy, however, is its significant presence on the Internet.

"[Dean] is very clever to use a pre-existing technology," says local Meetup member Ted Ellis. Ellis has been involved in Meetup for almost three months and says Dean is the first candidate in a decade that he is excited enough about to get involved in the campaign. What makes Meetup such a useful tool, Ellis says, is "the ease with which you can contact other people locally."

A crowd of 3,200 turned out in Austin, Tex., on June 9 to cheer Dean as he stepped off the airplane. Dean's vast grassroots base, including Meetup, was considered responsible for that rallying power.

Much like TV revolutionized politics in Kennedy's time, the Internet has proved an invaluable resource for Dean's campaign.

Three months ago, Sharon Wetterling went online to scope out the candidates. "It didn't take me long," she said, and she was soon "captivated." Wetterling signed up for the Meetup list and read it for a while before throwing herself into the fray. "It's very energizing," she said on her way home to type up the notes from that evening's Meetup to share.

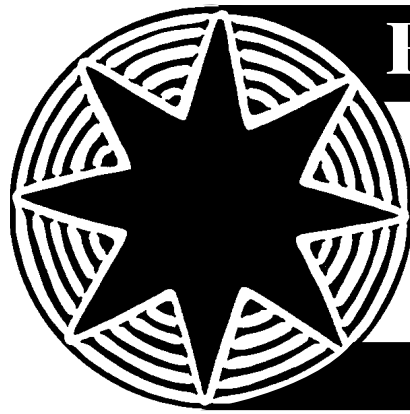
Now, still months before the primary, Dean has more than 35,000 captivated supporters signed on with Meetup.com. Once a month, in bars and coffee shops all over the world, those supporters meet to discuss Dean over a pint of beer or a mug of coffee. Word of mouth and e-mail exchanges have expanded the groups beyond Meetup memberships.

Of the 100 Dean supporters signed up in Eugene, 37 appeared at Espresso Roma in early June. Dragging in chairs from the patio outside, they sipped lattes and set to work answering this question: What can we do to help get Dean elected?

Suggestions included letter writing campaigns, public relations events, a student organization, participation in the Eugene Celebration Parade, and outreach efforts to retirement homes.

Students, older couples and families turned out for a variety of reasons, whether it was Dean's relatively conservative stand on gun control or his progressive track record with health insurance (every person under 18 in his home state of Vermont now has health insurance, as do more than 92 percent of the adults).

More information on the Dean campaign can be found at [www.dfa.convio.net](http://www.dfa.convio.net) or [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) or e-mail Ted Ellis at [tjell2@yahoo.com](mailto:tjell2@yahoo.com) **ew**



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