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New group promises Internet presidential candidate

By Jim Nowlan

I'm a sucker for new approaches to practicing democracy, so here is a rundown on a little known but well-funded effort to nominate a presidential candidate via the Internet and place him or her on the ballot in all 50 states, no mean feat.

Americans Elect is a non-profit group with \$20 million in contributions from investment bankers and others. The group claims it wants nothing more, nor less, than to provide an electronic forum for people like you and me to nominate a credible presidential ticket via a vetting and winnowing process conducted wholly over the Internet.

Operating from comfortable offices in D.C., the group's 50 employees are leading efforts to garner enough signatures to qualify for the ballot in all 50 states. Americans Elect has 1,500 paid petition circulators working to come up with 1.6 million signatures in California, which it plans to submit soon, according to a Los Angeles Times article.

The group has already qualified for the ballot in four states and is working in many others. I have not had a response to my press inquiry to Americans Elect as of this writing, so I don't know about activities in Illinois, if any.

The group received a major boost in mid-July when New York Times columnist Tom Friedman wrote a favorable piece about Americans Elect, saying that because of the group's efforts, "a viable, centrist, third party presidential ticket, elected by Internet convention, is going to emerge in 2012."

I believe that success in politics requires the interplay of three factors: money, credibility and visibility. Each reinforces the other. That is, raise lots of money and you gain some credibility, which in turn generates visibility, such as Friedman's piece. Or, have the credibility of prominent, respected backers and you can raise money, which in turn earns you more visibility in the press, and so on. Americans Elect appears to be raising the money; now it has to leverage that into credibility and visibility. Time is short.

The group has some high profile backers, but they are not lacking in controversy. Peter Ackerman is a prime engine behind the effort; his son Elliott, a decorated Iraq War veteran, is the chief operating officer of Americans Elect. Senior Ackerman piled up hundreds of millions in the 1980s selling junk bonds with convicted financier Michael Millken. Ackerman has since become a public policy activist and board member of elite groups like the Council on Foreign Relations.

The group promises openness, yet it has organized in such a way that contributors are not required to disclose their participation.

Former FBI and CIA chief William Webster, who served under both Carter and Reagan, and GOP strategist Mark McKinnon are on the 50-member board of Americans Elect.

As presented at the website www.americansselect.org, voters of any stripe may sign in and give their views on a range of topics, from education to foreign policy. According to the group, everything will be decided by the input of people via the Internet, and not by the organizers.

But this is where things become murky. According to Friedman's take on the process (I couldn't find this on the website), "any presidential nominee must . . . be considered someone of similar stature to our previous presidents." So if Internet voters select a little known but impressive small city mayor will he or she pass muster, and from whom?

In April 2012, the candidate pool will be reduced to six after several rounds of voting. The six will have to name their running mates—from the other party, that is, a Republican would have to select a Democrat as his or her vice presidential candidate.

This could be a fascinating process to follow, and participate in, and all from your smart phone. And all without giving up your rights to participate in the Democratic and Republican presidential processes as well.

This is uncharted territory, but as the Americans Elect website observes: "Won't we all vote this way someday?"