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**Exclusive articles on state policy, politics and trends from the staff of Stateline.org**

Tuesday, October 10, 2006

## **State politicians discover YouTube**

**By Philip Ewing, Special to Stateline.org**

The video-sharing Web site YouTube, perhaps best known as the home of cats performing “Hamlet” or the explosive results of dunking Mentos into Diet Coke, also has become the showcase for another type of spectacle – politics.

Across the country, prominent and not-so-prominent political campaigns are taking advantage of YouTube’s free video hosting to disseminate messages too expensive or too controversial for broadcast television. The site appeals to campaigns because it can help preserve opponents’ gaffes, provides independent candidates access to a big set of viewers, and gives political amateurs the ability to say something about their local candidates and campaigns.

Some uses of YouTube are orthodox extensions of typical campaign strategy: The Web site lets candidates re-show TV spots they’ve already produced without the expense of broadcast airtime. But it also gives them a new tool to embarrass their opponents. For example, in Illinois, Republican gubernatorial candidate Judy Baar Topinka’s campaign posted a video of her opponent, Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, cornered by reporters asking about a fund-raising scandal. Blagojevich’s campaign YouTube site contains footage of Topinka.

“If there’s ever a gaffe that’s caught in video, it’s going to end up on YouTube,” said Steven Clift, chairman of Minneapolis-based e-democracy.org, a Web site devoted to the interactions between the Internet and democracy.

Others uses are decidedly less conventional, as when Minnesota gubernatorial candidate Peter Hutchinson, an independent, used his YouTube page to criticize major-party opponents when they refused to debate him. In the video, Hutchinson gives a speech standing between two people in giant duck suits and denounces the

other politicians for “ducking” the debate.

YouTube also enables political amateurs – opinionated enthusiasts unaffiliated with parties or candidates – to share homemade videos that comment on issues or races. In one such clip, a beanpole-thin caricature of Idaho Interim Gov. Jim Risch (R) disco-dances with cartoon “fat cats” as a stream of pennies flies into their pockets – a protest of the state’s recent 1-cent sales tax hike. Another lambastes Georgia Republican Gov. Sonny Perdue, up for re-election in November, for neglecting Atlanta’s mass transportation system.

To be sure, Internet video today plays a minor role in political campaigns compared with other uses of the digital superhighway – including general Web sites and e-mail advertisements – and with uses of traditional media, such as broadcast TV spots and direct-mail advertising. But online video in general, and YouTube in particular, are being used more than ever before.

One recent high-profile demonstration of YouTube’s ability to affect politics was a video that showed U.S. Sen. George Allen (R-Va.) calling a Democratic volunteer “macaca,” a word that can be interpreted as an ethnic slur. The video appeared online. Anyone surfing the Internet could see it, and the moment gained national prominence, erasing Allen’s lead in polls over his opponent, former Navy Secretary Jim Webb.

YouTube is one of the 10 most popular destinations on the Internet, according to the traffic-ranking service Alexa.com. The Bivings Group, a Washington, D.C., Internet and new media-monitoring firm, estimated at the end of September that people had spent a total of 9,305 years watching YouTube videos since the site went live in 2005. YouTube’s enables political campaigns to reach an enormous audience – or a choice sliver of one – for almost no cost, and with a minimum of technical fuss.

“It’s a very easy way to take almost any form of video, get it up into a Flash format, which is very accessible, and get it onto the Web,” Cliff said. The Wall Street Journal reported Friday that the Web search giant Google was in talks to buy YouTube for as much as \$1.6 billion.

That ease of use is what led Arizona state Sen. Ed Ableser, a Democrat, to use his YouTube site to take viewers along on a typical day in his life. In his video, Ableser plays foosball with young boys and girls, meets with constituents, and generally represents himself as a forthright man of affairs. But it also shows him jogging, playing with his dog, and out on a date with his girlfriend, Erin. (“He even has time for romance,” reads the caption, displayed with video of them smooching in a restaurant.)

The video is shaky and at a low resolution, shot by a campaign volunteer and edited by Ableser on his computer. Still, he said he was satisfied with it.

“Everyone loved it, even though they said, sure, it was cheesy at times,” Ableser said. “But it was raw, natural. It showed me being myself, rather than something contrived.”

Ableser' campaign accepts public financing, so saving money was another factor in deciding to make the YouTube movie.

"This is the new type of campaigning," he said. "The Internet's become so instrumental for getting our voice out and our message out. [Another video] is our next step, something more specific, on message."

Low cost and ease of use is also what enabled software engineer Roger Goun, a self-described "geek volunteer," to start ListenUpNH.org, a nonpartisan project in which he films New Hampshire political candidates and posts their videos on his Web site and YouTube.

Goun will make a free video of any politician who asks, irrespective of their party or the office they're seeking. The videos are quite different from typically polished, heavily edited campaign ads. The ListenUpNH candidates sit in front of a plain curtain and speak straight into the camera for four or five minutes, talking about themselves and their platforms.

"One of the things that amazes me about this project is how quickly things get cheaper and easier to do," Goun said. Last winter he bought a high-definition video camera and a few lights for his amateur studio. "This was \$100,000 worth of equipment five years ago, but now it's well within the reach of somebody's credit card."

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Wednesday, October 11, 2006

## Medicaid growth slows, for a bit

By Daniel C. Vock, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Medicaid spending increases slowed to one of the lowest levels ever last year, giving states a quick breather after a decade when the growth rate of the taxpayer-funded health program constantly outstripped growth in state revenues.

In a report released Tuesday (Oct. 10), the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured found that Medicaid spending rose by 2.8 percent in the year ending June 30, down from a peak at 12.4 percent four years ago. Last year, state revenues increased 3.7 percent.

The combination of healthy revenue increases and slower Medicaid spending has "fundamentally changed the atmosphere in which Medicaid policy-making has occurred," said the report's chief author, Vernon Smith of Health Management Associates.

"For the past four or five years during the economic downturn, states could only play defense. Now states can

also play some offense,” he said.

The better conditions made it easier for Illinois this year to start offering health insurance for all children, primarily through Medicaid, and for Massachusetts to pass a new law requiring all adults to obtain health insurance, Smith said.

It also means good news for businesses and the patients they treat.

Only three states plan to hike co-payments for services next year, and only nine plan to reduce benefits – substantially fewer than in recent years. And, for the first time in at least six years, no states plan to cut the rates they pay hospitals, doctors, nursing homes or managed-care organizations, Smith noted.

Several factors were at work in putting the brakes on Medicaid spending, according to the report.

First, the number of people on Medicaid leveled out. Medicaid rolls have swollen by 40 percent since 2000, but an improving economy helped slow the increase last year to just 1.6 percent.

Medicaid covers poor children and their parents, plus low-income seniors and the disabled. Because eligibility is based on income, fewer people qualify for Medicaid when the economy improves.

The second factor is a major change in who pays for prescription drugs for poor seniors. Until January, Medicaid footed the bill for those medicines, accounting for 6 percent of the total cost of the program. This year, though, Medicare, the federal health-insurance program for senior citizens, started paying for most of those prescriptions.

There is a catch for states, though. Instead of pocketing the money they saved from senior citizens’ drug bills, states must give most of it back to the federal government in “clawback” payments. If the states were allowed to keep that money instead, the increase in Medicaid expenses would have been even lower – 1.7 percent instead of 2.8 percent, according to the Kaiser report.

The third major reason for the slowdown of Medicaid costs is the cumulative effect of cost-cutting measures states took over the past five years, when Medicaid expenses ran rampant.

For example, some states made it more difficult for patients to get brand-name drugs, and others rolled out programs to coordinate care for patients with chronic health problems.

There is some bad news for states in the report, too. State officials are girding for another surge in Medicaid costs, budgeting for 5 percent increases in the program’s expenses this year.

Also, the amount of money states are paying for Medicaid is increasing at a faster pace than the cost of

Medicaid overall.

Medicaid is a program run jointly by state and federal governments. The federal government pays for roughly 55 percent of the bills. The exact amount varies by state and is determined by a law that weighs a state's economy against the nation's.

But in the last two years, 37 states have received a smaller matching rate from the feds. Of the 13 that saw no reduction, 12 were already receiving the minimum 50-50 rate. Only Georgia saw its matching grants increase both years.

Medicaid reimbursements are the largest source of federal funds for states, accounting for 44 percent of the money the states receive from Washington, D.C. – more than transportation, education and welfare combined.

The Kaiser report is based on interviews and data obtained from the Medicaid directors of all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

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Thursday, October 12, 2006

## Florida charts future after Jeb Bush

By Linda Kleindienst, Special to Stateline.org

Democratic candidate for Floridagovernor Jim DavisRepublican candidate for Floridagovernor Charlie CristTALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- After eight years of dominating Florida's political scene, Republican Gov. Jeb Bush is being forced out by term limits, setting the scene for the state's first gubernatorial battle in two decades in which there was no clear favorite.

Republican Charlie Crist, the state's popular attorney general and winner of two previous statewide races, so far has the upper hand in fund raising and TV air time, enabling him to woo crucial independent voters in his race with Democrat Jim Davis, a lesser-known five-term congressman.

The contest for leadership of the nation's fourth-most-populous state largely is being fought over Bush's education legacy and skyrocketing property insurance premiums in the wake of the eight hurricanes that raked Florida in 2004 and 2005. But outside the state, Floridas pivotal place in presidential elections gives added weight to which party wins the governors office. Florida is one of 10 states this year in which the governors race has no incumbent on the ballot; nine of those seats currently are held by Republicans.

Crist, 50, has consistently led in the polls. He handily defeated his primary opponent, his campaign coffers are

bulging, and he has been engaged in a full-scale media assault on his Democratic rival since the day after the primary. He's hoping to become the first Republican in Florida since Reconstruction to succeed another Republican governor.

Davis, 49, elected to Congress in 1996 after serving as a state legislator from Tampa, is trying to put the governor's office back in Democratic hands to offset continued Republican control of both houses of the Legislature. He won a bruising primary battle and has been struggling to raise money to pay for the TV ads crucial to any statewide campaign in Florida.

Crist, who backed out of face-to-face forums with his Democratic rival on health and children's issues, has had limited campaign appearances around the state. He's relying on his TV campaign to label Davis as a tax-and-spend liberal Washington, D.C., insider who wants to raise taxes while he portrays himself as a consumer advocate and civil rights champion.

Davis is crisscrossing the state, holding town meetings, press conferences and forums, trying to energize the Democratic base – especially in South Florida and in black communities. He picked a black former state senator from Miami as his running mate and is hoping to capitalize on voter disenchantment with Jeb Bush's education reforms, which Crist has promised to continue.

Florida is considered a "red" state -- having twice elected Jeb Bush with overwhelming margins and given President George W. Bush his hairsbreadth win in 2000 followed by a solid victory in his 2004 re-election bid – but Democrats still hold a slight edge in voter registration. In statewide elections, it still can swing either way. The growing number of independent voters holds the key to most statewide elections. While independents still like Jeb Bush personally, they join Democrats in being unhappy with how education has fared over the past eight years.

Polls have shown Crist with a lead ranging from 6 to 21 percentage points. The most recent poll released this week by Quinnipiac University shows Davis trailing by 10 points. While it may be Crist's race to lose, pollsters say Davis faces a tough, yet-not-insurmountable task. His problem is that many Floridians still don't know who he is – a result of his inability to launch a major TV offensive against the well-established Crist.

Education, especially public school funding, is among the overriding concerns of voters. Both candidates have promised to pour more money into building more classrooms to meet tough limits on class size that take effect in 2010, when kindergarten through third-grade classes will be capped at 18 students, grades four through eight at 22, and high school at 25 students. Both also have plans to increase the pay of teachers, who earn about \$5,000 below the national average, although Davis is seeking an across-the-board pay hike while Crist wants to reward the top-performing 25 percent of the teaching corps.

Crist has promised to carry on with Bush's education policies, which include continuing with one controversial and unpopular annual exam that is used to grade schools, financially reward the best schools and teachers

and decide which students get promoted and graduate. He also wants to resurrect a private school-voucher program killed by the state Supreme Court.

Davis, who opposes vouchers, wants to put more money into operating the schools and has sharply criticized Florida's low rankings in per-pupil spending, graduation rates and college entrance exam scores. He also wants to stop using the state exam as the sole decider of how good a school is, saying Florida should consider other indicators such as class size, discipline and graduation rates.

Both candidates also are trying to placate angry homeowners faced with huge insurance premium hikes after two devastating hurricane seasons wreaked \$40 billion in damage to insured property.

Davis accuses the Republican Party of being too cozy with insurance lobbyists who have successfully pushed industry-friendly bills through the GOP-controlled Legislature. Crist wants to put more pressure on Congress to establish a national catastrophe fund.

Both political parties are turning to their national big names, including several presidential aspirants, to lure campaign donations and energize their voter base. Looking ahead to the presidential race in 2008, each party realizes how helpful it can be to have a governor on its side.

Crist has barnstormed the state with Republican U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a popular GOP figure among the tens of thousands of Empire State retirees now living in Florida.

Davis has campaigned alongside Democrats such as U.S. Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, the unsuccessful 2004 presidential nominee; U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois; former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner; and former U.S. Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina. Plans are to bring in former President Bill Clinton, one of the party's most prolific fund-raisers and a perennial favorite in the Democratic stronghold of South Florida, and U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York.

Democrats also calculate that one of the best things they have going this fall may be Katherine Harris, a Republican who was Florida's secretary of state and chief elections officer during the 2000 presidential debacle.

Currently a congresswoman, Harris is running for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Democratic U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson. Democrats are banking that her presence on the Nov. 7 ballot will unleash a torrent of emotions from voters still angry over the bungled 2000 election that gave George W. Bush Florida's electoral votes and the presidency by a razor-thin 537-vote margin.

If Davis does get elected governor, he would have a tough time getting his agenda through a state House and Senate expected to stay solidly Republican. Crist, who picked his running mate from the ranks of the conservative House leadership, likely would have a better relationship with legislators – although it's doubtful

he would be as successful as Jeb Bush, a hands-on manager who has run government like a business executive and whose star-like quality has won him friends at every level of government. Comment on this story in the space below by registering with Stateline.org, or e-mail your feedback to our Letters to the editor section at [letters@stateline.org](mailto:letters@stateline.org).

Linda Kleindienst is Tallahassee bureau chief for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

Friday, October 13, 2006

## Cal. law blocks transfer of 'lemon' teachers

By Rita Beamish, Special to Stateline.org

SAN FRANCISCO -- If a teacher doesn't measure up, should he or she jump over other applicants for a job at a different school? Not anymore, at least not in California's neediest schools. A new state law bars school districts from forcing principals at low-scoring schools to hire teachers who transfer from elsewhere in the district.

In a move watched by educators across the nation, California's Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) concluded that the preference system had allowed transferring teachers, often with weak records, to bump newer teachers from schools that needed them most, even when the principal preferred the newer teacher.

Schools that got stuck tended to be urban, poor schools with less job competition than those in affluent neighborhoods. They had to accept teachers transferred by administrators who -- rather than issue a negative evaluation -- simply took the easier option "to gently push the person out the door," said state Sen. Jack Scott, a Pasadena Democrat who passed the reform over opposition from powerful teachers' unions. If the teacher didn't succeed at the new school either, he or she transferred to yet another post -- "the dance of the lemons," critics called it.

James Dierke, an award-winning principal in San Francisco, said he had strong new hires and had stemmed a high teacher turnover at Visitacion Valley Middle School only to then have priority transfer teachers show up. Some were reshuffled to him because of declining enrollment elsewhere -- a factor not addressed in the new law -- and others were weak teachers transferring from other schools.

“My new teachers, who were all energetic and wanted to teach, got bumped. I got people who ... didn’t really want to be in my school,” he said. “As a principal in a lower-performing school, I’m charged with bringing up the test scores. It’s difficult to do that when you don’t have a winning team.”

Now principals like Dierke at low-performing schools can refuse teachers they don’t want. And all schools must meet an April 15 annual deadline for teacher transfer decisions. After that, any transfers join the mix with all other applicants.

Scotts bill was fueled by the national nonprofit group, New Teacher Project, which surveyed five large urban school districts, including San Diego, and found 40 percent of vacancies went to teachers transferring between schools. Not all were so-called lemons, but nearly two-thirds of principals said they ended up with at least one transfer they didn’t want.

“We’re just in this business for students. We’re not in this business for employees,” Scott said. He targeted schools ranking in California’s bottom three categories for academic achievement because they tend to have economically stressed and immigrant families who aren’t as aggressive about challenging teacher performance as are parents in affluent schools, he said.

Teacher unions say the changes sidestep the real problems and undercut collective bargaining.

“The wrong answer for a very complex problem,” said spokeswoman Sandra Jackson of the California Teachers Association (CTA), one of Sacramento’s most influential lobby groups. “What it does is blame teachers for the problems that exist in the lower-performing districts and blames teacher transfer rights.” She said smaller class size, high-quality instructional materials, parent involvement, and principal support are fundamental to securing high-quality teachers for the neediest schools.

Fred Glass, the California Federation of Teachers communication director, said the new, “one-size-fits-all”

approach undermines local decision-making as well as teacher's job security and collective-bargaining rights. "Teachers often feel they have very little power over their work day. And this will simply reinforce that feeling, and it will drive creative teachers out of the profession," he said.

Scott's lopsided margin of victory raised eyebrows among Capitol watchers used to seeing teacher unions get their way with the Democratic-controlled Legislature. The measure passed the state Senate 33-1 and the Assembly 59-12. Scott's stature as education committee chairman and former community college president, and his bipartisan coalition including minority legislators and advocacy groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), helped pull it off. Schwarzenegger signed the legislation in September.

"We have a hope it will be a great tool for principals wanting to fill out their faculties with teachers who want to be there and who will be a good fit for their students," said Francisco Estrada, MALDEF's director of public policy. Low-income schools serving limited-English speakers, he said, "need a little more attention if we're ever going to overcome this achievement gap between Latino and other students."

The New Teacher Project, based in New York, said nearly half of principals surveyed admitted hiding their vacancies into the summer to avoid having transfer teachers forced on them. By then the good applicants also had slipped away to other jobs, including Estrada's own daughter, who had hoped to teach at a low-performing public school. He said she ultimately took a charter school post rather than be left hanging while the transfer jockeying dragged into the summer.

The New Teacher Project expects to identify five states for similar legislative efforts, said the group's president, Michelle Rhee.

"There were a lot of other states watching how this played out," she said. "Because the CTA is so strong and has in the past been able to block legislation, the fact that we were able to get this legislation passed has given other states a great deal of hope that they could do something similar."

Principals with "lemon" experience nationwide are encouraged by the authority they could gain under a California-type solution, said Dierke, a board member of the American Federation of School Administrators.

“They are all looking at California because, once again, teachers have tenure, superintendents have contracts and principals have their good looks,” he said. Rita Beamish is a California-based journalist. Comment on this story in the space below by registering with Stateline.org, or e-mail your feedback to our at Letters to the editor section [letters@stateline.org](mailto:letters@stateline.org).