

Candidates Missing Privacy Concerns of Independent Voters

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At this rate, 2004 won't be the year that the privacy debate helped determine the leader of the free world. Less than a month before Election Day, neither presidential candidate has articulated a position on this defining issue of the Information Age. Why does this matter? Because the candidates are missing a golden opportunity to sway independent-minded Americans whose votes may determine the outcome of this election.

For his part, John Kerry is missing in action on the privacy issue. A visit to his Web site, johnkerry.com, doesn't reveal what the challenger believes about data privacy. His actions in the Senate are similarly unclear. Kerry co-sponsored a Web privacy bill three years ago, but he has also voted for greater governmental surveillance powers. Typing "John Kerry" and "data privacy" into the Google search engine won't generate a single quote in the top 50 hits.

How about President Bush? He has presided over the creation of the popular do-not-call registry, the enactment of the CAN-SPAM Act, the Federal Trade Commission's crackdown on identity theft, and the implementation of the HIPAA health privacy regulations. Bush clearly isn't opposed to moderate privacy restrictions on business. But what are Bush's views on protecting the privacy of innocent citizens amid the hunt for terrorists? You won't find those views on the Web.

So, why are the candidates mostly silent on an issue that hits the headlines on a regular basis?

Ask their campaign advisers. They would say it's all about the polls. Every time Americans are asked about what issues are most important to them, privacy never makes the Top 10 list. And it's really the top three issues—Iraq, the war on terror and the economy—that are the focus of both campaigns.

But what if the election really does come down to a few thousand independent votes in a handful of swing states? Second-tier issues like data privacy may end up tipping the balance toward the candidate with the most clearly articulated vision.

What do these independent voters think about privacy? There's really only one organization that knows: Privacy & American Business. Founded by America's first privacy officer, Alan Westin, P&AB has been tracking American views on privacy for many years.

P&AB's most recent survey found that American adults have become steadily more concerned about their privacy since 9/11. Among those who say they're politically independent, the concern is even higher. P&AB classifies 42% of independents as "highly concerned" about privacy, seven points higher than the average survey respondent. P&AB says the "highly concerned" respondents are those most likely to take action to regain their privacy.

Well, a significant action awaits them this November.

But what is at the root of independents' fears? Eighty-four percent of independents agree with this statement: "Consumers have lost all control over how personal information is collected and used by companies." This number compares with 76% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans.

So, how does a candidate translate these concerns into a coherent vision for the future? By offering a simple, sweeping plan for both government and business uses of personal information.

What Americans want to hear most is that we won't lose our freedom or our privacy as the government hunts down the terrorists among us. What we'd like to hear is a candidate promise something like a Citizen's Bill of Privacy Rights (see graphic). We need to know where the boundaries are for what the government can and can't do.

As consumers, we want to regain a sense of confidence that we're in control of our own information. The most simple and effective way for a candidate to deliver this confidence is to commit to vigorously enforcing existing laws. Our current privacy laws already provide for the essential privacy protections that Americans want. As a consumer, what I want is a single 1-800 number I can call in the nation's capital if I believe a business has misused my information. I want a memorable and responsive outlet for my concerns. The missing gap today is a coordinated federal effort to uphold today's privacy laws.

And what do corporate donors to campaigns want to hear about privacy? That Washington will vigorously promote the free flow of information worldwide. Businesses want our elected officials to fight foreign efforts to use privacy as an excuse for trade protectionism. The growth of jobs both here and abroad will increasingly depend on it.

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