LIKE a lot of great performances, many important discoveries are improvised.

Emmy Award-winning actor **Bradley Whitford** did both recently and, as a result, he may have handed Hollywood a whole new kind of political leverage.

Whitford, a Democrat best known for his role as the president's deputy chief of staff on "The West Wing," decided to put together a short video for the Courage Campaign opposing a California proposition that would alter the state's electoral map and would likely benefit Republicans.

There was no set designer, no fancy music, no high production values, no crew. Courage Campaign Chairman **Rick Jacobs** arrived with a camera at Whitford's house last week. By Monday, their video, which calls on voters to fight the Republican-backed initiative, was up on YouTube, collecting a steady stream of hits.

"I think there was one cut in it," said Whitford, who called it one of the easiest productions he's ever done. He joked, "During the entire video I was wearing neither socks nor shoes."

Consider the possibilities for actors with a message:

Remember the Obama girl? What if **Jessica Alba**, dancing around in a tight "I love Barack" T-shirt, did a similar video? There would be more takers on that than **Paris Hilton**'s bootlegged sex tapes -- well, almost as many.

And what if **George Clooney**, looking soulful and scruffy, decided to slip into war-torn Darfur with a hand-held camera and then uploaded his footage directly onto YouTube? His groupies alone could account for 500,000 hits.

In many respects, YouTube has become the Wild West of digital communication. Anybody can post, but being discovered is usually a matter of luck. Politically active stars have a clear advantage: They're bound to get noticed simply on name recognition alone. More interesting, they can do so almost totally beyond the reach of campaign finance and contribution laws, as well as candidates and parties themselves.

"It's a full-service way of expressing yourself on camera politically," said Whitford, one of the first stars to capitalize on the new medium.

A year ago, he said, he didn't know that YouTube existed.
"I went to my college reunion and everyone was talking about how their kids were watching YouTube," Whitford said. "I said, 'What's YouTube?'"

It didn't take him long to get up to speed. He had made a mock presidential ad for George Bush during the 2004 election. It turned into a large undertaking that required help from the "West Wing" crew. Location trucks lined his street.

He filmed the segment outside his large Spanish-style house. "Welcome to my home," he begins. "I'm very fortunate to be working on a television show right now. In this age of terror and soaring budget deficits, when our president has proposed cuts in veterans' benefits and funds for children, I got a tax cut of over $100,000. Support the Hollywood elite. Please reelect George Bush." The ad was picked up by a few political blogs, but it didn't get much traction.

In the YouTube video, he urges California voters to act to stop the proposition, which would change the way the state awards its electoral votes.

Currently, California, with 55 electoral votes, has a winner-takes-all system. But under a proposal now being circulated for signatures to place it on the June ballot, the electoral votes would be divided according to the winner of each congressional district. (Maine and Nebraska use similar systems.)

That means that some of California's electoral votes, which in recent elections have gone solely to the Democrats, would likely go over to the Republicans. The proposed ballot measure is already creating a furor in liberal circles, with columns and blogs denouncing it as a stealth way to get electoral votes.

Whitford admits that he usually cringes when he hears celebrities talking about politics. But, in this case, he had to get involved. "I feel like my children's future is at stake," he said.

He and Jacobs shot the video in his living room in an afternoon. "I realize this whole YouTube style is based on some quirky shut-in staring straight into the camera," he said. "It's interesting stylistically addressing the camera."

In a way, it's liberating. Without all the trappings of a Hollywood production, he delivered a simple message right into the lens. "You can't out-hypocrite a Republican," he said bluntly on the video.

Now it's up to the YouTube audience to decide if it agrees.

"There are pendulum swings in the new media," Whitford said. "It's truly democratization by letting millions of individuals express themselves."

Some expressions are bound to be more equal than others. And if Whitford's example succeeds, there will be a lot more YouTube time in political Hollywood's future

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