



POLITICAL CANDIDATES RIDE THE YOUTUBE, MYSPACE WAVE

Candidates preparing for the Nov. 7 midterm elections are discovering the benefits and drawbacks of online video posting and social networking Web sites.

Politicians are using YouTube, MySpace and Facebook Web sites for everything from recruiting volunteers and spreading the word about their campaigns, to embarrassing and trying to discredit their opponents.

The fact that these sites are free and can reach millions of people, especially young voters, has made them especially attractive to campaign managers, who are used to spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on 30-second television ads.

Much at stake in November

There is a lot at stake for both parties in this year's election. President Bush's low approval ratings and public dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq threaten Republican leadership in Congress.

Several close races throughout the country mean that Democrats could reclaim a majority in the House of Representatives.

There are 435 House seats and the Democrats need to add 15 seats to win a majority. In this environment, candidates tend to use any tool to try to expand their support and win voters.

The double-edged Internet

While the sites can be used to reach voters who normally would not watch a debate or news program on television, it is hard for candidates to control information about them.

Supporters and opponents alike have made profile pages for candidates without their authorization.

Even on authorized pages, online "friends" can post messages that might be offensive to some voters.

YouTube, which attracts 20 million visitors a month, provides unprecedented access to campaign videos, events and debate footage, but it also provides an international platform for embarrassment.

When Montana's Republican Sen. Conrad Burns fell asleep during a farm bill hearing, a worker for the opposing campaign caught the nap on tape. It was immediately posted on YouTube.

Sen. George Allen, a Republican from Virginia, landed in hot water after calling an opponent's staff member a derogatory term, although the senator later said he meant something else. That video also made it to YouTube and got national attention.

Now campaigns are sending staff members to tape opposing candidates at events in the hopes that they will make a mistake worth posting.

The youth vote

It's too soon to tell whether this focus on technology will help close the gap between young people and politics. Young voters are often viewed as apathetic toward politics and have the lowest voting percentages of any age group.

Only 22 percent of voters between the ages of 18 and 24 voted in the last midterm elections in 2002, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

There was a surge in youth voting for the presidential election in 2004 -- the percentage went up to 47 -- but voters typically have higher turnout during presidential election years.

Politicians seeking 'friends'

However it's viewed, technology has helped engage young people at the grassroots level.

"It is proving to be a very effective way of getting volunteers," said Hans Riemer, political director of the youth voting organization Rock the Vote.

"If you're looking to find somebody who's going to spend 22 hours putting up signs for you, I'd go to MySpace," Phil Noble, who runs the PoliticsOnline consulting firm, told the Associated Press.

Facebook has set up profiles for 1,600 candidates and invited them to use the site.

Phil Angelides, the Democratic candidate for governor of California, has a Facebook page with 2,500 supporters where he posts responses to questions students leave on his message board.

Aaron Coleman, a student at the University of California, San Diego, was impressed by the effort and posted the comment, "A real Facebook profile? Obviously a man for education ... see you at the polls Phil."

Kinky Friedman is an independent candidate running for governor of Texas who has made it a point in his campaign to try to motivate young voters. He has over 30,000 "friends" on his MySpace page. The page outlines his campaign agenda and he even produced and posted animated shorts on the site to illustrate why voters should choose him.

While Friedman is still a long shot to win, the online support is enough to make any opponent take notice.

Friedman's challenge, like all candidates capitalizing on the new technology, will be to translate that support into votes on Election Day.

-- *Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra*

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