



Facebook, MySpace Aid Presidential Candidates

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Presidential candidates for the 2008 election are using social networking Web sites as a new tool to do everything from generating support among undecided voters to raising money.

Democratic Senator Barack Obama of Illinois and long-shot Republican Representative Ron Paul of Texas may not be leading all national polls, but their use of social networking Web sites tops their presidential rivals.

Obama has more Facebook and MySpace "friends" than the other presidential contenders: 250,000, which is about 100,000 more than his main Democratic rival Senator Hillary Clinton, N.Y., who leads in traditional voter polls.

Almost every major Democratic and Republican candidate has personalized Facebook and MySpace profiles, adding information ranging from lists of their favorite books to campaign promises.

Will online success mean election success?

While gauging a candidate's success in online fund raising is possible, with Obama again leading the pack, predicting whether having the most online "friends" will translate into support next year is still in question in the presidential race.

"The Holy Grail in politics currently is how to convert online enthusiasm into off-line action which results in votes," said Andrew Rasiej, a political analyst who runs the Web site techPresident.com, a site that tracks how candidates use the Web and how Internet users are affecting the elections.

"There's no demonstrative data that proves that online fervor is precipitous in any way."

Every campaign has staff members monitoring their Facebook and MySpace pages, and the major candidates "have one or two staff members paying attention to [their profiles] full time," Rasiej said.

And Facebook recently added a mechanism that allows users to build applications, or new features, on their profile pages, potentially expanding candidates' ability to contact supporters.

Different campaigns, different styles

Campaigns appear to be approaching social networking differently.

Joe Rospars, Obama's director of new media, recently posted on the campaign's Web site that the senator is taking the new medium seriously, using it to attract and organize volunteers.

"We decided to make the attempt to combine the organic support and community-building of [an online] grassroots effort with the official campaign outreach efforts," Rospars wrote on the Web site. The campaign is hoping to reply to every person who sends a message via the social networks.

Ron Paul, who has become known for his strong online support, takes a more laissez-faire approach.

According to Jesse Benton, Paul's communications director, the congressman's profiles are maintained by his grandchildren, which he said adds a personal touch. Benton said the campaign also tries to respond to each message but does not attempt to organize volunteers, target a specific audience, or use the number of friends as an indicator of voting patterns.

"We're not really trying to tightly manage how these social networks are used," Benton said. "We're kind of letting these tools shape as the Internet and our supporters demand. We're just putting it out there and whoever is attracted [by] our message and wants to network and talk about Ron Paul is welcome."

Paul leads his fellow Republican candidates in both Facebook and MySpace friends.

Using Web sites to generate money

Meanwhile, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, one of the leading Republican candidates, is looking to Facebook and MySpace to raise money.

Stephen Smith, director of online communications for Romney, said in a June 8 NewsHour report that the campaign is banking on users learning about the former governor and then making an online donation.

Visitors to Romney's site "have the means right here, from that very moment, of connecting with him, either learning more about his message, or MySpace has a donation which it builds in right into the page so they can start the contribution process with one click," Smith said.

Rasiej also said social networking has the ability to generate significant revenue for campaigns but not just by adding a donation button to their Facebook or MySpace pages.

"Online fund raising is a complete misnomer. Money is a byproduct of online communities, not the product, and social networks are representative of the online communities," he said.

"If you want to raise money online by tapping into the fervor of these online communities, then you should do everything you can to bolster or nurture the community. It's so ludicrous that campaigns are not paying more attention to the social networks."

-- *By Brian Mason, NewsHour Extra*

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