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“Technology Wins in a Landslide:

The Transformation of the Political Battlefield through Social Media Networking”

*Iowa Senator*[*Chuck Grassley is tweeting*](http://www.switched.com/2010/09/14/senator-chuck-grassleys-campaign-ad-lauds-mad-tweeting-skills/)*! So are* [*James Inhofe*](http://twitter.com/#%21/jiminhofe)*and*[*Nancy Pelosi*](http://twitter.com/#%21/nancypelosi)*!*It seems now that everyone, including elected officials, is trying to keep pace with technology that has revolutionized how we communicate throughout our communities, our nation, and the world. Many elected officials now have Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts to broadcast personal and campaign information to the public. Across the political spectrum officials are rejecting forms of traditional media and taking up newer communications technologies as the next generation of political campaigning emerges.

Just as television gradually altered political campaigning in the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence and widespread use of internet-based social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube has swiftly revamped modern electoral politics. The use of social media to raise funds and engage voters has progressed from a grassroots strategy utilized by Obama campaign officials in 2008 to an institutionalized approach among successful candidates in the 2010 mid-term congressional elections (Nisbet, 2010).

 In this analysis I will first discuss social media’s early stages of development and then present more recent strategies commonly employed by congressional candidates. As the use and reliance on social media continues to grow politicians must leverage these platforms to ensure successful campaigns.

**2009 - The Virginia Contribution:**

By 2009, political scientists and operatives had begun to study the pioneering social media strategies of the Obama presidential campaign. In the off year Virginia gubernatorial election, Republican candidate Bob McDonnell adopted and refined these social media strategies first employed in 2008. McDonnell leveraged Facebook and other social media platforms to raise funds and political awareness; he used Facebook to connect with not only traditional Republican voters, but with independent voters of all ages including those who had voted for Obama the previous year.

 The driving force behind McDonnell’s success was his personalized approach using Facebook. The McDonnell campaign was the first of its kind to make strategic use of Facebook, beyond its basic functions, in order to create a sense of personal interaction and engagement between the candidate and his supporters. The campaign strengthened McDonnell’s digital presence through the use of “pushes,” or releases of new or updated material on Facebook, that developed and maintained his online fan base (Harris, 2010). Daily pushes included status updates, McDonnell’s schedule, fundraising events, and opportunities to volunteer. Pictures of McDonnell were frequently updated to appeal to either a general audience or specific voter groups. Supporters were encouraged to check a box to indicate whether they “like” a particular event, candidate position or activity. Additionally, when supporters commented on the campaign’s Facebook page, staffers promptly responded as they would to traditional constituent mail (Harris, 2010).

This recurring interaction fostered a sense of commitment among supporters prompting them to spread the word to their own personal networks of family and friends. According to the McDonnell campaign, the use of Facebook doubled the number of supporters weekly (i.e. from 5,000 to 10,000, 10,000 to 20,000, etc) (Harris, 2010). McDonnell’s successful campaign demonstrated that social media can be used effectively in campaigns regardless of political party or agenda.

**2010 – Social Media Ascendency**

The 2010 congressional elections are the most recent examples of how the social web is driving change in electoral politics. As recognition of the value and risks associated with social media spread, campaigns began to hire experts in the use of social media as consultants. “The day is fast approaching when you can win your election on the basis of a really good social media campaign,” said Matt Lira, the director of new media for Republican Whip Eric Cantor; Lira claimed that members must “build genuine connections with [their] constituency, authentically engage with them, and [then they would be able to] earn their support” (Kuhn, 2010).

According to CNN, candidates who have more fans on Facebook win on election night. Almost every winner in 2010 election primaries garnered more support via Facebook than their opponents. CNN conducted a study to determine the relationship between campaign Facebook use and primary winners; researchers detected a strong correlation between the two in national, state and local elections. In Washington, D.C.'s mayoral primary race, for example, City Council Chairman [Vince Gray's Facebook](http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/09/15/candidates-with-more-facebook-fans-win-big-on-tuesday/www.facebook.com/grayformayor%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) page has twice as many fans as [Mayor Adrian Fenty's page](http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/09/15/candidates-with-more-facebook-fans-win-big-on-tuesday/www.facebook.com/FentyReelect%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), 4,523 to 2,008 (Kuhn, 2010). “In the Delaware Republican Senate primary race, [Christine O'Donnell's Facebook page](http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/09/15/candidates-with-more-facebook-fans-win-big-on-tuesday/www.facebook.com/supportchristine%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) had four times more fans than [Rep. Mike Castle's page](http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/09/15/candidates-with-more-facebook-fans-win-big-on-tuesday/www.facebook.com/MikeCastle2010%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), 9,883 to 2,453 (Kuhn, 2010).

Like McDonnell, Christine O'Donnell leveraged the Facebook platform more effectively than her opponent by frequently posting campaign updates and voting information.

The use of social media in the 2010 election cycle demonstrated a growth in strategic development and an emphasis on both quantity and quality of networking platforms. Numerous candidates similarly applied the Facebook strategies employed by O’Donnell on a smaller scale. For example, though New York Congressman Charlie Rangel secured his win with only 273 Facebook fans, he posted more frequently than his opponents with similarly small fan bases (Kuhn, 2010).

**Power of Social Media in Political Campaigns**

Like television before it, the social web will radically alter who is electable and how campaigns are carried out in the coming years (Silverman, 2010). The advent of television dramatically influenced who decided to run for office; some predict that social media’s effect will be no less dramatic (Silverman, 2010). Lira draws the comparison between the emergence of social media and an era when campaigning on TV was viewed as a gimmick and often delegated to young staffers. “Over time,” he noted, “television asserted itself as the dominant form of political communication — remaking our nation’s politics in the process.” We are reliving this transformation today (Kuhn, 2010). If used appropriately, forms of social media such as Facebook and Twitter can be powerful and effective tools to organize, finance, and conduct successful political campaigns.

**Social Media and Democracy – Implications for the Future**

Social media’s rapid influence in political campaigns has surprised most political scholars and practitioners. In only three election cycles, many long-accepted forms of candidate outreach have been challenged or overtaken by creative uses of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. New regulations need to be established to help guide and inform candidates and voters on new campaign communications opportunities. Politicians must fully embrace social media as an effective avenue to get their message heard.

What does the ascendancy of the new social media in political campaigns portend for the future of our democracy? Some say nothing, claiming that this endless information flow will create unmanageable political noise; such noise may at best create weak ties between candidates and voters, and at worst lead to civic disinterest altogether (Gladwell, 2010). Others, such as Adam Conner of Facebook, view new forms of social media as essential components of democracy. Conner asserts: “It would make no sense to cut out 50 percent of the country. It's better for us to have as many points of view [as possible]. Facebook is not a partisan platform" (Shapira, 2009). However, Conner notes that the democratic force of Facebook is dependent on the quality of its management: "Authenticity is what's helping to carry the day," Conner stressed, citing how candidates who personally tweet about themselves end up building the strongest connections with followers (Carr, 2010). The best use of social media for a party or political candidate is to actively engage online stakeholders; by cultivating a sense of empowerment among supporters, campaigns encourage voters to rally support within their personal social networks.

The long-term effects of social media in campaigns have yet to be determined at the macro-level. Regardless, the rapid transformation of the media landscape and a growing reliance on interface communications indicates that social media has staying power in electoral politics. As Facebook spokesperson Andrew Noyes said in an e-mail to CNN, “Voters increasingly expect to be able to interact with and examine candidates on Facebook and tell their friends who they are supporting" (Kuhn, 2010).

Social media networks provide the candidate-voter connectivity required to expand the number of citizens participating in the electoral process and heighten the enthusiasm of civic participation. Traditional methods of constituent outreach have become insufficient and even wasteful in comparison to new forms of networking. As constant innovators, platforms like Facebook and Twitter continue to appeal to the national electorate for their social and political utility. When administered effectively, these networks will facilitate America’s transition toward a more progressive representative democracy.

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