

Will social networking sites impact the 2008 presidential campaign?

A study of the 2006 congressional elections points to a connection between campaign activity on Facebook and electoral success.¹

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Online Social Networks introduced as 2006 Election Tool

Facebook launched its *Election Pulse* feature in September 2006, providing generic profiles to candidates running for a congressional or gubernatorial seat. Each profile included the candidate's name, office, state and party affiliation. The candidates were provided with log-in information and passwords, which allowed them to manage their profiles during the campaign.

Once the candidates took possession of their sites, they could personalize their profiles in the same way open to any member. They could post photographs, summarize their qualifications for office and major accomplishments, list their favorite television programs, movies, books and other interests. Facebook profiles also provide the capability for the candidates to publicize their support for a number of existing political groups, causes and other candidates, post notes to their supporters, and post and respond to comments on their wall.

- Facebook's efforts with *Election Pulse* and its streamlining of the process for connecting candidates and supporters seemed to encourage a substantial number of candidates to incorporate the site into their online presence.
 - 32% of candidates running for the Senate updated their *Election Pulse* profile in some way over the course of our study.
 - 13% of candidates running for the House updated their profile.
- Although MySpace and YouTube received considerably more press coverage and hype in 2006, the candidates clearly directed more of their attention to Facebook when considering how to use online social networking sites to mobilize supporters.
 - Only 21% of the Senate candidates and only 2.7% of the House candidates had profiles on MySpace. Excluding profiles created by someone not officially affiliated with the campaign suggests that, at best, only 12% of Senate candidates and 2.3% of House candidates had a legitimate campaign on MySpace.
 - Even fewer candidates campaigned on YouTube. Only 13 of 130 Senate candidates created their own "channels," where the candidates could post videos and allow "subscribers" to their channels to share videos with other supporters. Not one of the 1,102 House candidates had their own channel.

¹ The results reported here are extracted from our recent paper "Social Networks in Political Campaigns: Facebook and the 2006 Midterm Elections," presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. The full study can be accessed at: http://www.bentley.edu/news-events/pdf/Facebook_APSA_2007_final.pdf.

On each profile, Facebook displayed the number of supporters for each candidate and provided a continuous snapshot of each candidate's percentage of "votes" in his or her race. Candidates need not have accessed their profiles to gain supporters.

- Most Democratic and Republican Senate candidates had supporters in the triple digits with an average of 2,146 supporters.
 - Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) had the most support among Senate candidates, with 12,038 Facebook users having registered themselves as supporters by October.
 - Four other Democrats—Bob Casey (PA), Harold Ford (TN), Sherrod Brown (OH), and Ned Lamont (CT)—exceeded 5,000 supporters. Nine of the top 10 candidates were Democrats.
 - The most successful Republican candidate and sixth overall was Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA), who registered support from 4,981 Facebook members.
- The average number of supporters for Democratic and Republican House candidates was 125. As was the case for the Senate, House Democratic candidates were more popular than Republican candidates with the Facebook community.
 - Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) had the most support among House candidates, with 913 members registered as supporters even though she had not personalized her profile by October.
 - Rep. Dennis Moore (D-KS), Patty Wetterling (MN), Rep. Dennis Kucinich (OH), and Rep. Marion Berry (AR) also were among the most popular House candidates on Facebook.
 - The Republican with the most support and ranked 9th overall was then-Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL), with 580 supporters.
- In general, the decision to campaign with Facebook reflects a partisan difference in mobilization strategies that finds Democrats more eager than Republicans to use the Internet as a way to communicate with their supporters.
 - 61% of Democratic Senate candidates updated their Facebook profile, but only 39% of Republican candidates did the same.
 - Among House candidates, there was no statistical difference between the two parties: 17% of Democrats and 14% of Republicans updated their Facebook profile.
 - In both Senate and House races, minor-party candidates lagged behind the major-party candidates.

Which candidates were more likely to use Facebook?

- Among House candidates, the most likely to update their Facebook profile were:
 - challengers
 - better-financed candidates
 - candidates running in competitive races
 - candidates running in districts with a higher percentage of college graduates
- Among Senate candidates, the most likely to update their Facebook profile were:
 - Democrats
 - candidates running in competitive races

Did Facebook Matter in 2006?

- Incumbents who updated their Facebook profile did not perform any differently in terms of final vote percentages than incumbents who did not update their profile.
- Incumbents who ran against challengers who updated also did not perform any differently in terms of final vote percentages than those who did not.
- The number of the incumbents' Facebook supporters and the challengers' supporters indicates that a candidate's Facebook activity had a significant effect on the incumbent's final outcome.
 - A 1% percent increase in number of Facebook supporters for incumbents increased their final vote percentage by .011. Put another way, an incumbent who had 100% more supporters than another incumbent (i.e., twice as many supporters) would have finished with a vote share that was 1.1% higher than the other incumbent.
 - A 1% increase in the number of Facebook supporters for challengers reduced incumbents' vote percentage by .015. In other words, if the incumbent's opponent had twice as many supporters as the other incumbent's opponent, he or she would have finished with a vote share that was 1.5% lower.
- Social networking sites had an even larger impact in open-seat races:
 - open-seat candidates who updated their Facebook profile had a 3.8% higher vote share than candidates who did not update their profiles.
 - open-seat candidates who doubled the number of supporters (i.e., increased their support by 100%) increased their final vote share by 3%.
 - open-seat candidates running against challengers who doubled the number of their supporters saw their vote share decrease by 2.4% . votes.

- These results suggest that Facebook is one more tool that candidates can use to connect with voters and make a favorable impression.
- While Facebook has a potential impact on vote share, it is important to note that there is a diminishing return associated with adding more supporters.
 - For example, increasing the number of supporters for an incumbent from 100 to 200, would add 1.1% to an incumbent's vote share. But to add another 1.1%, 200 more supporters would need to be added. Another 1.1% increase would require 400 additional supporters.
 - Moreover, no candidate is adding supporters in a vacuum. Presumably, the challenger also is adding supporters, reducing the net effect.

Methodological Note

To address our first research question and explain why some candidates were more likely than others to update their Facebook profile in 2006, we first viewed the Facebook profiles of every Senate and House candidate during the week of October 9. We then estimated a logistic regression model of Facebook presence for all Senate candidates and a second model for all House candidates. The dependent variable—*Facebook Activity*—was coded as a “1” if the candidate accessed and updated his or her profile in any way and coded a “0” if s/he did not. Since Facebook initially created profiles only for candidates nominated by established political parties and prominent independents, we directed our analysis to Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians and Greens.² This provided us with 88 cases to analyze for the Senate model and 946 cases for the House model.

Our independent variables in the model predicting which candidates update their profile included four electoral characteristics and four indicators of constituency-demand, all of which have been linked both theoretically and empirically to the presence of campaign web sites in previous studies (Gulati & Williams, 2007). Party was measured as a series of dichotomous variables for Republicans, Libertarians and Greens, with Democrats serving as the reference category. Dummy variables also were constructed for challengers and candidates to open seats, with incumbents serving as the reference category. Our indicator for the campaign's financial resources is the natural log of the total net receipts collected between January 1, 2005 and December 30, 2006.³ Our fourth electoral variable is the competitiveness of the race. A race was coded as competitive if it had been designated as a toss-up or only leaning toward one party by the *Cook Political Report* on October 4, 2006.⁴

² Since Joseph Lieberman (ID-CT) began the campaign as a Democrat and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) had pledged to caucus with the Democrats as he did when he was a House member, we coded both as Democrats. We estimated a model that excluded them from the analysis and obtained results that were nearly identical to the model that included them as Democrats.

³ Data on campaign contributions were obtained from the Federal Election Commission: <<http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/ftpsum.shtml>>.

⁴ See <http://www.cookpolitical.com/races/report_pdfs/2006_house_comp_oct4.pdf>.

The indicators that we used to account for constituency-demand were: (1) the percentage of residents over 24 with a college degree, (2) the percentage of residents classified as white, (3) the percentage residents under 65, and (4) the percentage of residents living in urban areas.⁵

We assessed the impact that a Facebook campaign had on the election outcomes in 2006 in two ways. First, we regressed the dependent variable—the candidate’s final vote percentage—on both the candidate and opponent’s updating of a Facebook profile, controlling for other variables that have been shown to affect the outcomes of congressional elections (Herrnson, 2004; Jacobson, 2004). Second, we regressed the final vote on the natural log of the number of Facebook members who registered as a supporter of the candidate and the natural log of the number of members who registered as a supporter of the opponent.⁶ Because the explanatory model for races with an incumbent running is different from races where there is no incumbent, we estimated one set of models for incumbents who ran for reelection and had a major-party opponent and another set of models for all major-party candidates running for open seats.⁷ We also focused solely on House races since there were only 29 Senate incumbents running for reelection and 8 major-party candidates running in open seats. Although we could have simply folded these races in with the House races, we rejected this strategy because of past research indicating that there is a different model for Senate races.

For the incumbent models, the control variables were (1) the incumbent’s partisan advantage in the district, (2) the incumbent’s voting record relative to the district’s preferences, (3) a scandal associated with the incumbent, (4) the presence of a quality challenger, and (5) the ratio of challenger-to-incumbent net receipts.⁸ We also expected that running as a Republican would be a liability because of the unfavorable poll ratings registered by President Bush and the Republican-led Congress throughout the fall. Thus, we included a dummy variable for party, with Republicans assigned a “1” and Democrats assigned a “0.” For the open seat models, the controls were (1) party, (2) the candidate’s ideological advantage in the district, (3) the ratio of candidate-to-opponent net receipts, and (4) relative experience.⁹

⁵ These data are from the 2000 Census and were obtained from the U.S Bureau of the Census.

⁶ We used the natural log transformation because we assumed a non-linear relationship between the votes and number of supporters, with diminishing returns for each additional supporter (Kutner et al., 2004).

⁷ Data were obtained from CNN: <<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/house/>>. CNN continued to update results until 100% of precincts had been reported and recounts completed.

⁸ The incumbent’s partisan advantage is the average of their party’s presidential candidate’s vote in the district in 2000 and 2004 and then subtracting the average of the opposing presidential candidate’s vote in the district from the same two years. Incumbents’ voting record relative to their districts’ preferences is estimated with the residual from the regression of the average of their 2005 and 2006 ADA ratings on the 2004 Democratic presidential vote. A list of incumbents associated with a scandal was obtained from the November 7, 2006 edition of the *Hotline*. A quality challenger was defined as one who had previously been elected to the state legislature, had been elected Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General in their state, or was a previous member of Congress.

⁹ The candidate’s ideological advantage in the district is the 2004 presidential vote of their party’s candidate minus the 2004 presidential vote of the opponent party’s candidate. To measure relative experience, this variable is coded a “1” if the candidate is a quality challenger and the opponent is not, a “0” if both are quality challengers, and a “-1” if the candidate is not a quality challenger but the opponent is.
