

SOCIAL MEDIA, YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION & ELECTIONS

In 2008, social media and technology tools were heavily utilized by grassroots organizations. With the 2012 elections approaching, it is important to understand how social media has evolved and how it is being used by campaigns and youth organizers. CIRCLE staff spoke with Sam Patton, the Associate Director at the League of Young Voters Education Fund (LYV) — a non-profit that engages youth in the political process- to learn how the LYV and political candidates are using social media and technology as part of their larger outreach strategy.

Presidential campaigns are using social media more now than they did in 2008. First, candidates and parties recognize that Facebook and Twitter determine what is considered popular in current events. A single high-profile story, such as the Trayvon Martin shooting, can appear in numerous sources that reach various age groups. According to Patton, Presidential campaigns need to use social media to keep their target audiences aware of what they are doing and their policy positions.

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Several former Republican candidates have used social media to reach out to youth. Herman Cain and John Huntsman both used video media to promote their messages and candidacy. Additionally, youth were engaged via Twitter, both in the Republican debates in late 2011, and by President Obama in late spring 2012, who tweeted live.

“Twitter is the primary way to get young people involved in our online events,” says Patton, suggesting it is an integral component of the LYV social media strategy. Patton has encouraged all its affiliates to use this platform as it is a means of communication

amongst national organizers. For the League, Twitter works well because it provides them an opportunity to conduct outreach with limited resources. Patton elaborated on this, saying that Twitter provides “social income for volunteers via Tweets,” in that a tweet that mentions someone, especially if it comes from a high-profile person or a celebrity, can lead to more resources and networking that will benefit their work. LYV also “pushes their content towards new Twitter users,” in order to get more and new youth involved.

LYV’s strategic plan includes turning to celebrities in order to promote their work. For example, LYV is known for their mixtape collaborations with various musicians to bring attention to issues. Though the LYV is “one of the major organizations that focus on political and current issues,” they have limited resources to reach out to their constituents on a cultural topic. A “shout out” or mention of the LYV from a celebrity or high-profile person to LYV has shown to be an effective promotion strategy. LYV also organizes webcasts that discuss politics, society, and culture; the most recent one featured Dr. James Peterson, a professor at Lehigh University and the founder of Hip-Hop Scholars - he discussed race and gender as factors in the 2012 elections. Youth were able to submit their questions and comment on the webcast via Twitter.

Over the years, Information has become more accessible with major advancements and usage of the Internet. The proportion of adults who use the Internet has risen from 47% in 2000 to 78% in 2012; for 18-29 year olds; it has risen from 61% in 2000 to 94%. Furthermore, 63% of adults and 88% of 18-29 year-olds use the Internet on their phones. Smart phone technology (which offers access to the internet) gives young people opportunities to be involved in community affairs and politics in various ways. For instance, Android smart phones have an application called GeauxVote Mobile that allows eligible voters in Louisiana to see where they must go to vote. Sites like GottaRegister.com and Rockthevote.com allow people to easily access, fill out, and print out registration forms. The LYV uses TurboVote, an online application that assists in the voter registration process.



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With more people relying on their phones for internet service, new social media tactics are being used; young people, minorities, citizens with no college experience, and citizens with low-income are most likely to use their phone as their source of information and internet access as compared to the general population. Knowing this, campaigns would be wise to include smart phone outreach plans in their media strategies. “Campaigns and candidates need to ensure that they are up to speed on making their sites mobile-friendly,” Patton said. For Patton, this strategy is based on his work with the LYV, where he has seen an increase in mobile activity on the LYV website. Both Obama’s and Romney’s campaigns have now made their websites user-friendly for smart phones, tablets, and computers, to ensure that volunteers can work from their mobile devices. Additionally, Obama’s campaign team is designing a computer modeling program that analyzes data to generate information to personalize every interaction with supporters, whether it be via Facebook, Twitter, or by mobile phone.

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Will social media and Internet applications become the main methods to reach out to youth voters? Patton and the LYV think so - and even after the elections will integrate their online and offline work to keep youth engaged. Campaign strategists should follow their lead if they want to get the youth vote. ★

NEW CIRCLE FACT SHEET EXAMINES THE IMPACT OF AMERICORPS ON VOTING, FINDS NO EVIDENCE THAT AMERICORPS MOBILIZES YOUNG PEOPLE POLITICALLY

In a new fact sheet entitled “The Impact of AmeriCorps on Voting,” Andrea K. Finlay, Constance Flanagan and Laura Wray-Lake find that young adults tend to become more civically engaged during their twenties, regardless of whether they serve in AmeriCorps. The report shows that AmeriCorps has no independent effect on the chances that disengaged youth will start voting, but it substantially broadens the civic engagement of those who do vote. They become involved in their communities in non-political ways.

The authors used data from a nationally representative, eight-year, longitudinal study of more than 3,000 people, comparing those who enrolled in AmeriCorps with those who indicated interest in the program but did not enroll.

Peter Levine, Director of CIRCLE, noted that the relationship between federal service programs and political engagement has been controversial in recent years.

“Some conservative critics have argued that programs like AmeriCorps could encourage young people to take political action in favor of liberal causes or Democratic candidates,” Levine said. “Other critics have worried that the program, which promotes volunteering and has strict rules against political activity, may divert young people toward uncontroversial service and away from electoral politics.”

Levine continued, “In fact, non-voters are substantially more likely to enroll in AmeriCorps, and there is little evidence that the program channels engagement away from politics. Specifically, the report shows that active voters who enroll in AmeriCorps will become more broadly active in community affairs eight years later.”

