# I weeting the Election

Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites could be a powerful force in the 2012 elections.

# BY MEAGAN DORSCH

rinking coffee with supporters, kissing babies and debating opponents over social and political issues are key activities for any candidate. But they're just so ... analog. In 2012, candidates also are making sure they

tweet events, post campaign messages and photos to Facebook, allow supporters to check in at rallies on Foursquare and air campaign videos on YouTube.

In less than one presidential election cycle, social media sites have become a key tool for campaigns at the local, state and federal levels.

"Now it is part of the national consciousness," says Chris McCroskey, co-founder of the website TweetCongress, which collects Twitter feeds from member of Congress, allowing the public to find their congressional representative on Twitter. "It is something politicians cannot separate themselves from. I think from here on out, this is what you will see."

Voters saw the Obama campaign and Democrats use online and social media tools effectively during the 2008 presidential election, although many were still relatively unpopular.

"I think that is why you saw a surge in Republicans adopting things like Twitter after 2008 because of how effective the Obama campaign had been," says McCroskey.

By the mid-term elections in 2010, Republicans and members of the Tea Party had caught up to, if not exceeded, the number of Democrats using social media; and so had the American public. Almost a quarter of online adults used Twitter, Facebook or MySpace to connect to campaigns in 2010 or the election,

according to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project.

Although younger voters tend to be "digital natives," McCroskey cautions, older voters still are split between traditional and online media. Candidates who throw all their resources into social media tools could run the risk of missing some voters on the campaign trail.

#### Friends, Followers and Circles

In 2012, the use of social media in campaigns is expected to continue, increase and evolve.

"People don't realize how important it is to have an online presence. They think it is important, but not necessary," says South Dakota Senator Dan Lederman (R). "I think it is the other way around."

Lederman created a social media strategy that included a blog and Facebook page in 2007. He carried those tools onto the campaign trail in 2008 and has since incorporated Twitter, Foursquare,



Dan Lederman South Dakota (R)

YouTube and Flickr. The reason? To save money and reach more constituents than any direct mail campaign Lederman says

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he has used in the past.

"It's not just about broadcasting a message, it's about making a connection with voters," says Lederman.

Idaho Senator Nicole LeFavour (D) used blogs, Facebook and Twitter in her bids for the Idaho Senate in 2008 and 2010. These tools allowed her to mobilize supporters, send announcements and recruit volunteers.



Nicole LeFavour Idaho (D)

"It is difficult to reach a lot of people without it, and in some ways, that is sad," says LeFavour. "It's hard to reach everyone face-to-face, but this comes close."

"Candidates want to be able to organize, call on these people,

have supporters show up, instead of the vast network you would have had to get on the ground just a few years ago to pull this off," says McCroskey.

While there is no playbook on how to use social media during a campaign, candidates are creatively borrowing ideas from one another, and are willing to experiment with new and unique ways to harness the power of these tools.

### **Tweeting for Dollars**

One of those ways is using social media to raise money. Lederman is using his arsenal of social media tools and mobile constituents to raise money not only for his own campaign, but also for other Republican candidates in the Rushmore state.

The use of the Internet and social media to generate campaign contributions is surpassing traditional methods and traditional media, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Experts expect candidates in the 2012 election to heavily use Facebook, Twitter and even texting to raise money. For now, California is the only state that allows people to contribute to political campaigns via text. Maryland lawmakers were considering similar legislation at press time.

"The regulation of Internet campaigning lags far behind how campaigns are using the Internet and new media in most states," says Jennie Bowser, elections expert for NCSL. Bowser notes campaign finance laws in most states are written to address the more traditional avenues of campaigning, which include mail, television, radio and phone.

Jon Heining, general counsel for the Texas Legislature, agrees. He told legislators and staff at NCSL's Fall Forum last year that it can be difficult to comply with state statutes because it is not always clear how social media can be used in campaigns.

"Current state laws really do not apply to modern political campaigns," says Bowser. "States are working to make sure campaign laws are flexible so they can address ever-evolving technology. Facebook is not the be-all, end-all. It's really just the beginning."

## Tweeting Beyond the Election

Legislators caution that use of social media has to extend beyond the campaign trail.

"Our constituency will require us to have a presence on social

islative activity. "It's hard to reach everyone face-to-face, but "I'm not always looking for people, most of the time, they Steve Harrelson this comes close." Senator Nicole LeFavour (D) message.

media," says Arkansas Senator Steve Harrelson (D), who uses his blog and Facebook account to keep his constituents informed of his votes and leg-

> Candidates are going digital because that's where their constituents are. According to Pew, half of all adult Internet users now have a social networking site on Facebook, MySpace or even



Senator Arkansas (D)

are looking for me on these sites," says Lederman.

Outside of her campaign, LeFavour has found social media is an important tool to connect with constituents, have conversations about issues and broadcast information and ideas. "I try to put a piece of myself up there so people get to know me," she says.

> While data are incomplete, NCSL has identified more than 530 legislators on Twitter. Not only elected officials are using social media. NCSL has tracked 48 legislatures that currently use some form of social media, ranging from Facebook and YouTube to Blogs and Twitter.

McCroskey warns that using social media to interact with voters only during an election could send a mix

"You want to be in contact with me when you want my vote and money," he says. "But when you are supposed to be working for me, you don't want to communicate. That is not a good thing."