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WEB SCOUT

# Where the youth vote is: MySpace, Facebook

Virtual 'primaries' are popular with users, and campaigns take note.

By David Sarno, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
January 13, 2008

NOT only are we going to Iowa, we're going to New Hampshire and South Carolina and Oklahoma and MySpace and Facebook . . . YEEAEEAAAHH!!

Exciting, isn't it? In yet another sign that politics is going digital, two of the Internet's largest states have played host to online presidential primaries -- and more than a few citizens showed up to vote.

On Jan. 1 and 2, MySpace welcomed more than 150,000 users to its virtual polling booths -- one ballot per user, of course, and no robots allowed (yet).

The results were released the day of the Iowa caucuses. Barack Obama took 46% of the Democratic vote, handily beating Hillary Rodham Clinton (31%) and absolutely dusting John Edwards (8%). On the Republican side, it was young-folk favorite Ron Paul (36%) doubling Rudy Giuliani (18%) and Mike Huckabee (16%).

No one's yet saying that a candidate's momentum online can carry him to victory at the polls -- Obama's win streak ended in New Hampshire, and Ron Paul's never began. Even so, there's a growing recognition that social networks, invested with the power of peer influence -- marketing's most sought-after quantity -- are a campaigning tool like none before.

"Every campaign wants to get a yard sign on that house on the corner that everyone sees," said Jeff Berman, a senior public affairs executive at MySpace. On MySpace, those sought-after yards are owned by the social influencers who have hundreds or thousands of friends.

In the days following the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries, voter enthusiasm has bloomed online. On MySpace, many more user profiles are suddenly adorned with campaign buttons and bumper stickers, and on Facebook, you can't go an hour without a friend announcing to everyone that he is "following politics like it's sports!"

Several other friends, Facebook's news feed notifies me, have answered poll questions asking them how certain they are about whom they'll vote for (very), whether they agree with Obama that Clinton is "likable enough" (yes), and how much confidence they have about the economy in 2008 (not much).

Facebook's news feed is usually crammed with banal or absurd notices, as when a friend "just took a movie quiz!" or when a second friend "has thrown a donkey" at a third friend.

But when you begin to receive a steady stream of information about the

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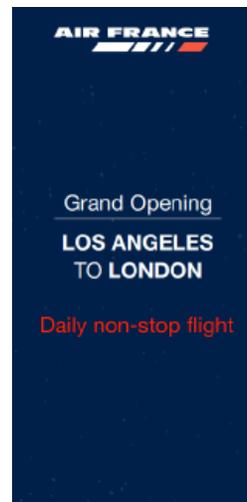
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developing political preferences of dozens of people you actually like or respect or both, you can feel yourself receiving some kind of signal -- maybe even an important one -- that you might otherwise have filtered out along with all the other cultural noise.

It's word of mouth marketing, just without spoken words or mouths -- there's nobody accosting you with annoying phone calls or inundating you with impersonal e-mails. All you're doing, really, is checking out what your friends are doing.

On Facebook, a second monthlong primary is being sponsored by MoveOn.org and the League of Young Voters, an organization that seeks to promote political activism across racial lines. So far, Obama leads all comers with 46% of the vote, followed by Edwards with 16%, followed by Clinton with 12% -- Paul is the only GOP candidate in the top 5. Since this contest began a week ago, a more modest 20,000 users have participated, partly because the primary was not designed or promoted by Facebook itself.

What the young social network has done, however, is partner with ABC News to develop a flashy, real-time polling application that was featured during ABC's broadcast of the New Hampshire debates last Saturday. Twice during the coverage, Diane Sawyer threw it over to the formidably named Facebook Command Center, from which anchor Bianna Golodryga offered periodic reports of Facebookers' opinions on the candidates' performances.

Dan Rose, Facebook's vice president of business development, called it "an incredible night" -- with more than 88,000 users participating in online discussions during the televised debate.

A major feature of Facebook's polling application is the "Election Pulse" chart, which tracks the number of Facebook users who have declared their support for a particular candidate by "friending" him or her.

Obama has over 210,000 supporters, dwarfing Clinton's 62,000 and Paul's GOP-leading 68,000.

It's not clear whether these numbers have any predictive power. You needn't be an American citizen to support a candidate on Facebook, for instance, and on MySpace U.S. users of any age could cast votes.

As John Horrigan of the Pew Research Center pointed out in a phone interview, in order to draw inferences about trends in any poll or primary, you need to know a lot about the people who are voting. Exit pollsters intercept voters on their way to the parking lot and barrage them with questions. But there are no parking lots in MySpace.

Yet even in the absence of voter profile data, Horrigan said, the online primaries could be "a meaningful indicator of enthusiasm for certain candidates."

The old etiquette of keeping your vote to yourself may be out the window along with other aging notions of privacy. Facebook users who vote in the League of Young Voters primary get a shining gold badge proclaiming not just who they voted for, but why.

If taking stock of whom your friends are voting for in order to make your own decision doesn't seem like the soul of civic responsibility, consider the alternative. For a long time now, much of our political input has come from talking heads and million-dollar TV commercials.

Facebook and MySpace may not exactly be the town center where the polis gather to kick around issues. But it's not a bad start.

[david.sarno@latimes.com](mailto:david.sarno@latimes.com)



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