

Social Media Activity Among Candidates for Statewide Office in Illinois

Michael R. Cheney, Ph.D.
Senior Fellow
Institute of Government and Public Affairs
University of Illinois

The Presidential campaign of Barack Obama made extensive use of social media in organizing the campaign from the preprimary period through the primaries and then through the general election. The campaign was credited with setting the standard for how social media can be used for political campaigns. As another campaign cycle is starting for 2010, the question to be asked is “how active and effective will social media be in campaigns for statewide office in Illinois?”

Research Study – December 2009

Throughout the 2010 Illinois primary and general election campaign, researchers at the Institute of Government and Public Affairs are studying the role of social media in all statewide campaigns. Specifically, the four main social media used in political campaigns – campaign websites/blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels – are being monitored.

Campaign website activity is tracked using statistics available through the Alexa Web Information service, with the major focus on the page views of each campaign website. This statistic presents the average of the number of pages viewed on a campaign website, divided by the number of individual visitors to that site over a period of time.

Twitter accounts allow candidates to present microblog entries -- or Tweets -- of 140 characters or less that are sent to people following a particular account. For this ongoing research study, all Twitter accounts for statewide office seekers are tracked for the number of tweets, as well as the individuals who follow the candidate and are being followed by the candidate via Twitter.

Facebook pages give candidates a forum where supporters can come together and candidates can share campaign events and issues. For this first report, Facebook pages were reviewed for the number of supporters/fans for each candidate.

YouTube/Vimeo channels let campaigns present videos of campaign events, commercials, and personal comments on the activities for the campaign. For this report, data were gathered regarding the number of views of a candidate’s videos and the number of individuals who opted to subscribe to that channel, and thus receive an email notice that new videos have been posted.

Using these statistics, Senior Fellow Michael Cheney analyzed the data in terms of social media presence – what percentage of candidates use a particular social medium? – and

social media activity – what was the total social media activity in one or more areas and what percentage of that total was represented by a particular candidate?

Data for this report was collected from the period of December 14-18, 2009.

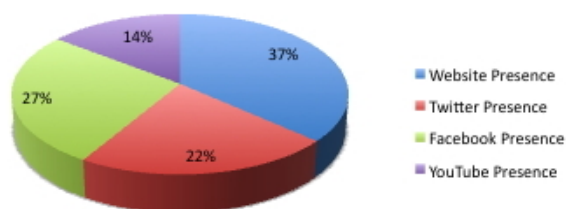
Research Findings

As outlined above, this report focuses on social media presence and social media activity amongst all candidates for statewide office.

Social Media Presence

As should be expected, not every candidate has the full complement of social media – website, Twitter account, Facebook site, YouTube/Vimeo channel – for a campaign presence. The first question asked was “how do the four media break out among the statewide contests?”

At the time of the study, 37 percent of social media presence was with campaign websites, 22 percent was with Twitter accounts, 27 percent with Facebook sites, and 14 percent with YouTube channels.



In looking at each social medium – 83 percent of all statewide campaigns have campaign websites/blogs, while 50 percent of the campaigns have a Twitter account, 61 percent have Facebook pages and 33 percent have You Tube/Vimeo channels. When one separates out these numbers by the two major parties – for Republican statewide candidates, every campaign has a website, 67 percent have Twitter accounts, 74 percent have Facebook pages, and 44 percent have You Tube/Vimeo channels. In comparison, Democratic candidates have websites for 84 percent of the campaigns, 60 percent have Twitter accounts, 64 percent have Facebook pages, and 44 percent have You Tube/Vimeo channels.

While the effectiveness of these social media for the current campaign are still being documented with supporters, donations and voters, there does seem to be a fairly serious commitment among the major parties and their candidates to having a social media presence.

Social Media Activity

A quick review of the various social media for each of the statewide candidates shows that some have an ongoing level of activity, while others have a presence, but nothing beyond a few postings or Tweets or videos. To document these differences, figures for each candidate were compiled and then analyzed in terms of each social medium, as well as the aggregate activity for each campaign.

Social Media Rating

The Social Media Rating is the composite score for each candidate's total social media activity, which represents the percentage of all social media activity for the particular candidates. (The total of all candidates' percentages will equal 100 percent.)

Looking at the current statewide races, in terms of individual candidates, Thomas Castillo (D-Lt. Gov.) and Adam Andrzewski (R-Gov.) have the highest percentages for social media activity with each having a rating of 10 percent. Pat Quinn (D-Gov.) was third with 8 percent and then Dan Proft (R-Gov.), Mark Kirk (R-U.S. Senate) and Alexi Giannoulas (D-U.S. Senate) were all tied with 6 percent.

Web Site Rating

The Web Site Rating is the percentage of page views each candidate has of the total page views for all candidates' websites.

For this report, Ed Scanlan (D-Gov) had 7 percent of the total page views, while John Arrington (R-U.S. Senate) was second with 6 percent, Kirk Dillard (R-Gov.) was third with 4 percent, and Matt Murphy (R-Lt. Gov.) and Scott Lee Cohen (D-Lt. Gov.) were tied with 3 percent.

Twitter Rating

As noted at the outset, a little more than half of the campaigns that have websites also have Twitter accounts, meaning some campaigns either find it not necessary or have not figured out how Twitter blends into their overall campaign strategy.

During the period of this report, Thomas Castillo had 22 percent of all Twitter activity, while Adam Andrzewski had 14 percent, followed by Kirk Dillard at 7 percent, and Dan Proft and Mark Kirk at 6 percent.

Facebook Rating

One of the hallmarks of the Obama campaign was the way it leveraged its Facebook presence and encouraged others to create more localized sites for the campaign. For

statewide office seekers, as documented earlier, Facebook was the social medium that had the most involvement outside of a campaign website.

In terms of a Facebook rating, Pat Quinn led with 18 percent of the Facebook activity, while Alexi Giannoulias was second with 10 percent, followed by Jim Ryan (R-Gov.) with 8 percent and Dan Rutherford (R-Treasurer) with 7 percent.

YouTube Rating

During the 2008 campaign, presidential campaigns used YouTube and other video channels as a way to send out commercials, fundraising appeals, and personal appeals for volunteers. Yet for the current statewide races, video channels are only a small part of the overall picture.

In terms of a YouTube rating, Pat Quinn led with 16 percent of the activity, while Alexi Giannoulias had 13 percent and Adams Andrzewski, Dan Hynes (D-Gov.) and Dan Proft each had 10 percent.

Conclusions

The influence that social media will have in the 2010 Illinois primary contest is still evolving and the overall impact will not be known until February 2, 2010. There are those who believe that social media are a key part of political campaigns, while others contend that in a statewide race, given the dynamics of a crowded primary field, the presence and activity for social media is overrated.

Recent public opinion polls show that some of the candidates rated high in terms of social media presence and activity are also fairing well in statewide polls. Yet there are also candidates who have less involvement with social media who were doing well in recent polls.

Against these differences of opinion is the fact that the real intensity of the campaigns will increase in January and then the ability to quickly reach supporters will likely be of more value than might currently be perceived.

The current study will continue through the February 2 primary and during the next month, research questions will focus on the dynamics of the social media communication between candidates and supporters, and an analysis of the content of that communication.