

US politicians seek to connect with voters online

March 18 2011, by Chris Lefkow

American voters are going online more than ever to engage in politics, and their elected representatives are seeking to meet them there -- with mixed results.

According to a report by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project released on Thursday, more than half of American adults went online for political activism and to seek information during November's election campaign.

The study found that 54 percent of voting-age Americans used the Web for political purposes during the 2010 midterm vote, going online for election news or to take part in campaign-related activities.

"These online spaces are a meeting place where politically engaged Americans of all stripes -- young and old, conservative and liberal -- can come to catch up on the latest events, share their thoughts on the political news of the day, and see what their friends have to say," said Aaron Smith, the report's author.

As voters spend more time on the Internet, politicians are following and there has been an explosion in the number of members of Congress with Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and YouTube channels.

President Barack Obama outdueled Republicans online during his White House campaign, using the Internet for organizing, fundraising and communicating, but Republicans have caught up -- and may even have

surpassed the Democrats online.

"Social media and networking is the way America communicates so it's really important for us to engage the people of this country," House majority leader Eric Cantor, a Republican from Virginia, told AFP.

Cantor, who has 33,550 followers for his Twitter account @EricCantor, has launched an online initiative called YouCut which allows visitors to vote on which programs they would like to see eliminated from the federal budget.

"The YouCut program has been tremendously successful in engaging people," said Patrick Ruffini, a Republican political strategist.

Representative Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from Maine, is an avid user of Twitter, where she has attracted over 3,760 followers, and she said the use of the micro-blogging service is growing in the halls of Congress.

"Some members, they get into contests to try to get more followers," Pingree said.

If it were a contest, Senator John McCain wins by a mile. The Republican from Arizona has 1.7 million followers on Twitter, many of which he picked up during his failed 2008 presidential bid.

Pingree said Twitter allows her to connect directly with constituents.

"Twitter is sort of the beginning of the chain," she said. "It's one way for me to easily send out a piece of information.

"It doesn't have to be my staff, it doesn't have to be a press release," she said. "It's just 140 characters and I tell people what I'm thinking and what's going on."

Obama may have been the pioneer in using the Internet to energize [voters](#), but Pingree said Republicans have turned the tables.

"I do think more Republicans are using social media than Democrats," she said. "Who knows why we're behind?"

Ruffini, the Republican strategist, said that while more politicians are adopting social media "many candidates are still making very basic mistakes."

"They allow word to spread in the press that they are running for something when they don't even have a website up," Ruffini said.

"If you've launched a campaign be ready, be ready with a website, be ready with a Facebook presence, be ready with a YouTube video explaining why you're running," he said.

Ruffini also said not enough members of Congress are personally engaging with social media.

"There's still a very small handful of people who are actually doing it themselves," he said. "Many members of Congress, many political candidates prefer to have a staff member tweeting on their behalf.

"They're afraid of potentially making a mistake."

Ruffini said some [politicians](#) were also treating Twitter as a "one-way medium" instead of engaging in a conversation with constituents.

"You have the ability to answer and respond to questions in real-time," he said. "That's the way the smart people are using it."

At the same time, Ruffini said, "we've made progress."

"I remember being on political campaigns when it was a struggle to just put up a blog," he said.

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