

Social media companies 'friend' politics

October 11 2011, By BETH FOUHY , Associated Press



In this April 20, 2011, file photo, President Barack Obama, accompanied by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, speaks during a town hall meeting to discuss reducing the national debt at Facebook headquarters in Palo Alto, Calif. Social media companies have “friended” the 2012 presidential contest at a level almost unimaginable just four years ago, hosting debates and sponsoring presidential town halls while remaining indispensable tools for candidates looking to connect with voters in the digital sphere. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

(AP) -- Social media companies have "friended" the 2012 presidential contest at a level almost unimaginable just four years ago, hosting debates and sponsoring presidential town halls while remaining indispensable tools for candidates looking to connect with voters in the digital sphere.

Giants like Facebook and [Google](#) cast their involvement as civic engagement, saying they are eager to help facilitate the national political conversation and encourage people to vote. But their stepped-up political

presence comes as those companies and others hire lobbyists, form political action committees and nurture their relationships with lawmakers whose [policy decisions](#) affect the companies' bottom line.

"The exposure - being branded as `the' place to go for social media - has huge [economic consequences](#) for these companies," said Heather LaMarre, a journalism professor at the University of Minnesota who studies politics and the Internet. "When they appear to be socially active and engaged in democracy, they develop a vast well of good will with the political elites who have the ability to make or break them in the future."

Facebook, by far the largest and most influential of the [online social networks](#), formed a PAC this month to make contributions to candidates. The company also spent \$550,000 for 21 lobbyists in the first half of this year to help it navigate potential legislative battles over privacy, patent and regulatory issues. That figure is small compared to other media companies of its size, but well on its way to double the \$350,000 it spent in all of 2010, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which studies political money and influence.

At the same time, Facebook has boosted its visibility in the presidential contest. The company is scheduled to co-host a Republican primary debate in New Hampshire with NBC's Meet the Press show days before that state's first in the nation primary. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg interviewed Obama at the company's Silicon Valley headquarters last April.

The company is stocked with political veterans. Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, worked for then-Treasury Secretary Larry Summers under President Bill Clinton. The company also recently hired Joel Kaplan, a former domestic policy adviser to Republican President George W. Bush, to head its public policy office in Washington.

Showcasing both sides of the political divide has helped Facebook stress its neutrality. "The color of the site is blue, but the color of the company is definitely purple," Facebook spokesman Andrew Noyes said.

Google, the leading Internet search company, has spent \$3.5 million on lobbying so far this year while its PAC contributed \$345,000 to candidates in 2010. It, too, has become a prominent player in the presidential race, cohosting a GOP primary debate with Fox News in September and planning another with public television and the Des Moines Register before the Iowa caucuses.

Paid political advertising on Google, already popular in 2008, surged in 2010 after Republican Scott Brown's strategic use of Google ads helped fuel his upset victory in a special election to replace the late Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy.

Google, like [Facebook](#), does not want to be viewed as partisan. "Our products aren't political, it's about connecting voters to information," spokesman Jake Parrillo said.

YouTube, the popular video sharing site owned by Google, has also boosted its political profile. The company this week launched a dedicated politics channel where users can watch campaign-related videos and compare candidates' statistics, like which one has the most video views, subscribers and shares.

Ramya Raghavan, news and politics manager at YouTube, said viewers can expect candidates to do more live streaming of campaign events on the site and posting episodic content, almost like a television series.

Twitter, barely a player in the 2008 campaign, has become a go-to digital hub for political conversation in 140-character bursts.

Obama and all the GOP presidential candidates have Twitter accounts, as do 85 senators and at least 360 House members. Former New York Democratic Rep. Anthony Weiner even saw his career unravel over Twitter, after sending a sexually suggestive photo to a woman using the site.

Twitter does not lobby yet or have a PAC, but has begun to ramp up its political and policy presence in Washington. The company recently hired Colin Crowell, who recently worked as senior counsel to Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski, to run its global public policy division. Adam Sharp, a former Democratic staffer on Capitol Hill, has worked with members of Congress to use Twitter more effectively.

Twitter recently began to accept paid political advertising, which will appear in users' Twitter feeds with a purple icon that includes information about who purchased the ad.

Twitter's political influence was all but cemented in July when Obama sat for a live Twitter town hall at the White House. He began by tweeting a question - "In order to reduce the deficit, what costs would you cut and what investments would you keep?" and replied to questions submitted to him through the site.

LaMarre of the University of Minnesota noted that a presidential visit to Twitter or Republicans participating in a Facebook-sponsored debate was essentially "picking winners and losers in the industry."

She added, "It's not intentional, they're the popular sites and it's where the people are now. But there are hundreds of social networking sites out there. By partnering with the big ones, politicians reinforce these companies as institutions."

Sam Weston, a digital communications specialist who has worked in Democratic campaigns, said social network sites were interested in presidential politics as much for the coolness factor as for business reasons.

"For all these companies, the primary reason is cultural relevance," Weston said. "This will be one of the most discussed topics of the next year. It makes sense for them as they pursue their own agenda, to be the primary place where people talk about politics."

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Citation: Social media companies 'friend' politics (2011, October 11) retrieved 21 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-social-media-companies-friend-politics.html>

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