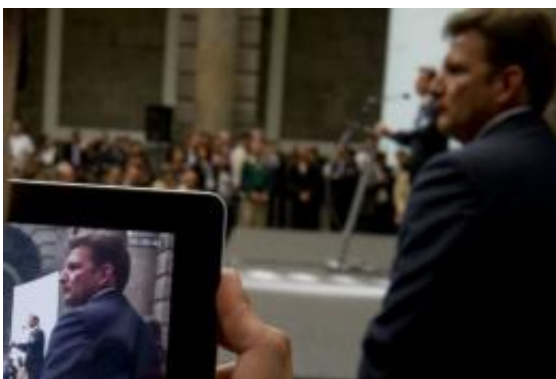


# Social networks play emerging role in Mexico election

May 28 2012, by Sofia Miselem

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Mexican presidential candidate for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Enrique Pena Nieto is seen on an iPad during his speech during the First Citizen Summit organized by Civil Society in Mexico City on May 22. Online social networks, a newcomer in Mexican elections, are making a mark on the presidential campaign, forcing candidates to respond to issues and protests enabled by the Web.

Online social networks, a newcomer in Mexican elections, are making a mark on the country's presidential campaign, forcing candidates to respond to issues and protests enabled by the Internet.

"If it wasn't for the social networks, the campaign would be really boring," said Roy Campos, head of the polling company Mitofsky.

Enrique Pena Nieto, the candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary

Party, has a seemingly insurmountable 15 point lead over his nearest rival in the presidential race.

With little [public debate](#) among the candidates and rigid controls imposed by election authorities, social networks have take on a crucial role in engaging the public, and the candidates have taken note.

"There is a parallel campaign on the network," said Campos, adding that "its influence is such that they are now setting the agendas of the campaign."

Pena Nieto, in particular, has faced flash demonstrations organized over the Internet.

A week ago, 50,000 students marched through [Mexico City](#) against against Pena Nieto after PRI leaders criticized students at a private university for harshly questioning the candidate, and suggested they weren't really students.

The students then posted videos of themselves on You Tube holding out their student identification cards.



Mexican presidential candidate for the National Action Party (PAN), Josefina Vazquez Mota (R), leaves at the end of the First Citizen Summit organized by

Civil Society in Mexico City on May 22. Online social networks, a newcomer in Mexican elections, are making a mark on the country's presidential campaign, forcing candidates to respond to issues and protests enabled by the Internet.

On Wednesday, thousands more students protested in Mexico City and other cities around the country against an alleged pact among Mexican media to swing its support behind the PRI.

The PRI, which dominated Mexico for most of the 20th century, has been out of power since 2000 but appears to be making a comeback.

[Political communication](#) expert Octavio Islas suggested the social networks could foster a "Mexican spring," like those in the Arab world, with [online tools](#) empowering citizens against entrenched political interests.

Not to be left behind, the candidates supporters appear to be engaging in cyber tactics to inflate the number of followers they have or to attack their [rivals](#), according to Islas.

Josefina Vazquez Mota, the candidate of the ruling National Action Party, added 350,000 followers in three days, while Pena Nieto has teams of experts scouring the web to sabotage critics, he said.

Experts are divided, however, on the tangible influence online organizing will have on the outcome of the presidential vote, with Pena Nieto's lead so great.

The number of Twitter accounts in Mexico doubled over the last year, and while the numbers are large -- some 10 million accounts -- only a fraction, around two percent, are geared towards politics and the

election, Campos said.

But the direct impact of Internet networks, argues Islas, is also difficult to measure -- and could have a wider impact than just influencing people who themselves participate in the online debate.

"Students who take part in protests could influence their families, their circle of friends" in choosing a candidate to support, Islas said.

The July 1 vote will elect a new president for a six year term beginning in December, taking over from outgoing President Felipe Calderon, of the center-right National Action Party.

It will also renew the lower and upper houses of the Mexican Congress and select governors in six states, the Mexico City mayor and local legislative bodies.

Trailing Pena Nieto in the presidential race are leftist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and the PAN's Vazquez Mota.

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