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# Facebook and Youth Mobilization in The 2008 Presidential Election

*by Angela Sanson*

*In political life, an organized minority is always stronger than a disorganized majority. And organizing is easier on the Internet.*

--Andrew Rasiej, founder of The Personal Democracy Forum.

**Abstract:** *Unlike generations of the past, today's youth build relationships in communities that transcend cultural, temporal and geographical boundaries and membership in these communities provides for a civic engagement that is more connected than ever. The Millennial generation is emerging in the political forefront in the 2008 presidential election, and technology is helping engage and drive them to the polls. The 2008 cycle marks the first presidential campaign defined by new media, whereas it is both the medium and the message. Among these driving forces is the social networking website, Facebook. Facebook provides users with motivation, ability, and opportunities to become engaged, through peer-to-peer, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many communications and shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest-based, while blurring distinctions between types of mediums, such as print, visual and audio. Campaigns are similarly capitalizing on the interactive nature of Facebook by identifying the producers and consumers of information and targeting young influential supporters.*

## Introduction

The ongoing debates about the war in Iraq, the economy, healthcare and immigration have divided the U.S. electorate over the past eight years, and are once again being thrust into the national conversation. Add a highly compressed and front-loaded primary schedule and a horse race between three historic Presidential contenders, and you have all of the ingredients that make for a fascinating election season.<sup>54</sup> What makes the 2008 Presidential election most compelling, however, is the new generation that is emerging in the political

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forefront, and the technology that is helping engage and drive them to the polls.

Consisting of nearly 50 million potential voters, or slightly less than 25 percent of the electorate, 18-29 year-olds have already significantly influenced the 2008 election. The Millennial generation, born between 1978 and 1996, amount to an estimated 82 million and represent the most tech-savvy, diverse, educated and interconnected generation in American history.<sup>45,20</sup> Millennials are defined by the fact that they have grown up online, having had access to computers and the Internet for most of their lives. Unlike generations of the past, today's youth build relationships in communities that transcend cultural, temporal and geographical boundaries. Membership in these communities provides for a civic engagement that is more connected than ever.

The very technology that has characterized this generation has transformed political campaigns. The 2008 cycle marks the first presidential campaign defined by new media, where it is both the medium and the message.<sup>20</sup> Four of the most powerful tools in this new era of politics are cell phones, online video, blogs and social-networking sites such as Facebook. The combination of these tools and the empowerment they provide to participate in the national political discourse in the 2008 election is creating a playing field where the establishment will have the least power and control of any U.S. election in history. The game of politics no longer belongs solely to the professionals; politics is now in the hands of ordinary voters, those who know how to best use this new infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> The medium that rose to the forefront of this dispersal of power and mobilization of active political engagement among Millennials in 2008 is Facebook.

### **Facebook & Politics**

**F**ounded in February 2004, Facebook is a social networking website that facilitates interaction among like-minded people by sharing information through the digital mapping of real-world social connections.<sup>18</sup> Facebook is a website, but in a sense, it is an Internet within the Internet, one that is many things that the larger Internet is not.<sup>22</sup>

All that is required to join Facebook is a valid email address. Upon registration, users can join networks that reflect their real-life communities and connect with, and learn about, the people who work, live and study around them. Facebook communities are made up of these networks, each based around a company, region or school.<sup>18</sup> Built around a technology that reflects the social interactions people have in the real world, Facebook enhances people's capacity to efficiently communicate with others.<sup>29</sup>

Facebook's navigation gives users easy access to core site functions and applications. At the top of the website are links to the pages that make up the foundation of the user experience – the "Profile," "Friends" and "Inbox." Facebook applications like "Photos," "Notes," "Groups," "Events" and "Posted Items" are displayed on the left side bar, along with any third-party applications a user adds to their account.<sup>18</sup> The Facebook profile is where users can create a digital representation of themselves for other people to see, and communicate in a person-to-person way that is observable and measurable.<sup>29</sup> Here, users can declare their sex, age, whereabouts, romantic status, institutional affiliations and political views. Additionally, Facebook users can post pictures of themselves and their friends, and join and form groups with others who share hobbies, interests and beliefs.

Members can communicate with each other via "messages" or publicly post comments on other members' "walls." Other features include "Groups" and "Events," each with homepages that display descriptions, pictures, and a message board. "Groups" can be public with open membership, public with closed membership or private, and group administrators can send messages to all of the members in a group. Events allow members to invite others to participate in activities such as rallies, parties or meetings. Both groups and events allow members to come together around a shared cause, belief or experience.<sup>57</sup> In short, identity is not a performance on Facebook; rather, it is a fixed and orderly fact, and relationships are real.<sup>22</sup>

With about 70 million members and growing, Facebook is the sixth-most-trafficked website and the second most trafficked social media site in the world.<sup>19,41</sup> As this technology has become increasingly ingrained in the fabric of the daily lives of young Americans, it is only natural that politics would find a home in this burgeoning online world.<sup>3</sup> The potential of Facebook as a political tool comes from its power in people-to-people communication.

Facebook is an asset to political mobilization and organization because the power of the “network” is at its heart. However, from a campaign’s perspective, unless the campaign knows who is in its network and, more importantly, what those members can offer the campaign, then members are of little use.<sup>20</sup> These digital technologies make it possible to track users, compile information from personal profiles and aggregate that data across platforms and over time.<sup>36</sup> This medium offers a central online location to the campaign for the storage, retrieval and automation of vast quantities of information. It also allows for the targeting of individual voters and geodemographic data mining. Essentially, Facebook is doing the old jobs of the campaigns, only smarter and faster.<sup>2</sup> Still, creating a social networking page does not immediately tap a candidate into the youth agenda; it simply enables them to engage in the conversation.

**T**oday’s youth build relationships in communities that transcend cultural, temporal and geographical boundaries, all providing for a civic engagement that is more connected than ever.

From a user’s perspective, Facebook gives amateur activists an easy way to connect with other citizens around the globe and helps them push their collective concerns to the top of political agendas.<sup>16</sup> Facebook’s lack of geographic boundaries makes it easy for like-minded individuals to form large-scale communities, while technological advancements make it possible for nontechnical people to take a larger role in organizing and running such communities.<sup>20</sup> As a political tool, Facebook is part deliberative town square, part raucous debating society, part research library, part instant news source and part political comedy club, all while connecting voters to a wealth of content and commentary about politics and to each other.<sup>6</sup>

While Facebook users have shared their political affiliations and opinions since the site’s inception, Facebook first began adding politicians to the site during the 2006 mid-term election.

In early September, Facebook emailed representatives at the Democratic and Republican national committees with log-in information and passwords, which they could forward to the candidates, who would then be responsible for managing their profiles for the rest of the campaign.<sup>59</sup> Once the candidates registered with the site, they could personalize their profiles in the same way other members did. Politicians can now post photographs, list their accomplishments and qualifications and note their favorite television programs, movies, books, music and other interests.<sup>59</sup> Facebook profiles also give candidates a platform to publicize their support for a number of existing political groups, causes and other candidates. In addition, they can post notes to their supporters and respond to comments on their wall. Facebook users are able to “friend” any candidate they liked by linking to a profile as they would a friend, classmate or coworker.<sup>46</sup>

In response to the growing popularity of the site as a political forum, Facebook created a complementary section within the main site called “Election Pulse.” This feature provided standardized profiles of candidates running for a congressional or gubernatorial seat, with the candidate’s name, office, state and party affiliation posted to the profile.<sup>59</sup> A listing of candidate profiles grouped by states and congressional districts is also provided so that specific candidates can be easily located by members.<sup>59</sup> On each profile, Facebook displays the number of supporters for each candidate and provides a continuous snapshot of each candidate’s percentage of votes in his or her respective race.<sup>49</sup>

A 2007 Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) poll indicated that candidates who communicated with young voters through Facebook in 2006 had a measure of success.<sup>41</sup> According to virtually all of the respondents of the poll between the ages of 18 and 24, the best way to contact them was via the Internet. While e-mail was the number one means of access – with 84 percent saying that was the best way to reach them – Facebook came in second, with 44 percent, for those enrolled in four-year colleges.<sup>41</sup>

Today, more than 500 U.S. politicians have Facebook pages where users can declare their support for candidates, learn more about them and communicate with them. These include the three presidential candidates, most members of Congress and many state governors who are connecting to the 86 percent of college students

who have Facebook accounts. Additionally, 37 percent of these politicians have used it to promote another candidate or issue.<sup>43</sup>

### The 2007-2008 Election Cycle

Building on this success, in 2007 Facebook took steps to expand its functionality by allowing outside developers to create applications that integrate within its pages.<sup>22</sup> These Facebook platforms are an extension of the site that allow third parties to incorporate applications within users' profiles, making profiles customizable. These applications are deeply integrated into Facebook and have access to Facebook users' data. This technology allows users to learn how many of their friends use an application, for example.<sup>51</sup> To add an application, users select an application, agree to the terms of service, customize the application and then use it. There are two possible outcomes. In one, the application is added to the user's profile. In the second outcome, the user becomes a member of the application, but it is not added to their profile. Therefore, the user can still interact with the application, but it is less public.<sup>51</sup> These applications are meaningful in campaigns on two levels. First, they enable individuals to make identity statements through their profiles and associate with a campaign, and second, Facebook serves as the gateway for candidates to leverage user data and microtarget their networks.<sup>51</sup>

Although many political applications have been released since Facebook launched the platform, last July Facebook rolled out a new "U.S. Politics" application in collaboration with ABC News. The politics application gives users the ability to support their favorite politicians, view each politician's profile and learn which candidates their friends support. The application also allows users to take a position on key issues and register to vote. Some of the other features of the application are "Debate Groups" and "News." Debate Groups is an area where Facebook users can take a position and discuss their views on the campaign's key issues. The News portion of the application gives users up-to-the-minute political news and video from the campaign trail, as reported by the ABC News political team, with dispatches from ABC News reporters assigned to the candidates. By encouraging users to interact with reporters, users can send private messages directly to reporters or can post them on the reporters' public Facebook pages, allowing reporters to engage in dialogues with other Facebook users.<sup>32</sup> Also included is the Facebook/ABC News "Election Pulses," Facebook polls about hot political topics, as well as the latest Facebook supporter counts for each presidential candidate.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Facebook did not automatically register users to the application as it did with previous features such as the Notes application.<sup>38</sup> Still, more than one million users have added the application and 300,000 have participated in at least one Debate Group.<sup>17</sup>

On January 5, 2008, Facebook took its collaboration with ABC one step further by co-sponsoring the Democratic and Republican debates in New Hampshire, three days before the state's primary.<sup>32</sup> During the televised debates, Facebook users were able to participate in Debate Groups to express reactions to the candidates' performance and post their thoughts on a live Soundboard. They could also view behind-the-scenes videos, photos and notes posted by ABC News reporters at the debates, and review the results of Facebook polls about various aspects of the presidential race.<sup>17</sup>

The televised debates drew on the activity taking place on Facebook during the analysis segments before, between and after the debates. ABC News correspondent Bianna Golodryga reported on the most interesting Debate Groups and user Soundboard submissions on Facebook. Golodryga noted that Facebook users wanted to hear more about the economy from each of the candidates. From there, the ABC cameras cut back to the normal broadcast, at which point the announcer let the candidates know that Facebook users wanted to hear more about the economy.<sup>40</sup> The goal of this exercise was to give moderator Charles Gibson access to the issues discussed on Facebook to use in forming his questions to the candidates during the debates.<sup>17</sup> ABC was not prepared, however, to effectively filter the content in such a short amount of time. During the debates, there were more than 35,000 comments posted by Facebook users. At the end of the debates, the program cut to an ABC staff member who had the dubious task of summarizing how the debates were shaping up on Facebook.<sup>40</sup> From this standpoint, the partnership between Facebook and ABC News was not an overall success.

Nevertheless, the partnership was successful from a branding perspective. For Facebook, ABC added an authoritative, credible source and provided fresh content for the site's Politics application, while lending social networking credibility to the old media network and visibility to ABC News with 70 million active members. Overall, the event was a statement of how highly active Facebook's U.S. Politics application can be. Furthermore, ABC's partnership offered a kind of endorsement of how the social networking site had changed in the minds of many from a whimsical communication tool to a legitimate media behemoth. The television exposure also introduced Facebook to a broader demographic, potentially expanding its growing membership with this branding bonanza.

## Facebook Profiles

Of the three presidential candidates in contention for the Democratic and Republican presidential nomination, Senators Barack Obama (D-Ill.), Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.), all have active Facebook profiles.

As of May 1, 2008, John McCain's Facebook profile has garnered 121,152 supporters. With links to seven websites, his profile cross connects users to <http://www.johnmccain.com>, and its subsites: phonecalls.johnmccain.com, store.johnmccain.com, events.johnmccain.com, and johnmccain.com/Informing/Calendar. Additional links are provided to McCain's MySpace page and his YouTube channel. Listing his birthday as August 29, 1936, the "conservative" lists his interests as sports, hiking, fishing, boxing, basketball, football, baseball and history. According to his profile, he is a member of the North Phoenix Baptist Church and his favorite movies include "Viva Zapata," "Letters From Iwo Jima" and "Some Like It Hot," while his favorite book is *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. McCain's favorite television shows are also listed, as "24" and "Seinfeld." McCain's profile cites previous work experience in the U.S. Navy, Congress and the Senate.

The site includes an e-mail contact at [info@johnmccain.com](mailto:info@johnmccain.com) and the phone number to the "John McCain 2008" office. McCain's profile includes a news feed, 108 posted items and 79 notes, as well as listings for upcoming events, a photo album, and four fan videos. McCain's wall has accumulated 13,704 wall postings, and his discussion board has 679 postings. In addition to all of this, his profile has 10 videos that include television ads, television news clips, and the "Causes" application. The causes McCain supports are John McCain for President, with 993 members and \$35 donated, and John McCain 2008 Presidential Campaign with 2,339 members and \$301 donated.

Following the relatively uniform profile style, with few applications and alterations to the standard profile style, McCain's job description for the U.S. Congress lists: "Elected to the United States Senate to take the place of Arizona's great Senator Barry Goldwater. Senator McCain is currently the senior senator from Arizona." By incorporating few applications and writing in the third person, McCain's campaign is choosing a less conversational Facebook approach compared to his Democratic opponents.

Born October 26, 1947, Hillary Clinton's profile lists her favorite music as Carly Simon, Aretha Franklin, The Rolling Stones and U2, and her favorite TV show as "American Idol." According to her profile, Clinton's other interests include reading, speed walking, doing crossword puzzles, movies and spending time with friends and family. Providing a standardized campaign biography, the Wellesley and Yale alum's profile gets more personal by including anecdotal stories about how her tastes in movies have changed over the years.

As of May 1, 2008, Hillary Clinton's Facebook profile has collected 153,719 supporters, uploaded 451 notes, a wall that has acquired 317,620 wall posts, and an incorporated YouTube box with 13 videos. Clinton's profile links to <http://www.hillaryclinton.com>; its subsite, [contribute.hillaryclinton.com](http://contribute.hillaryclinton.com); [hillblazers.com](http://hillblazers.com); and her YouTube channel. Her profile also incorporates a Hillary Clinton for President Widget, and a MyFlicker box showing 10 different photos of the Senator, selected at random from the Flickr photo sharing site with the tags Pennsylvania, Indiana, North Carolina and Kentucky. Clinton also created a "Hillary Gifts" box application that allows users to send "Hillary Gifts" to friends. Instead of a traditional photo, her profile includes the image of a large t-shirt, inviting supporters to click on the link to [hillaryclinton.com/tshirt](http://hillaryclinton.com/tshirt) to design her next campaign t-shirt.

Barack Obama's profile lists basketball, writing and loafing with his kids as interests, while his favorite music is Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bob Dylan, Stevie Wonder, Johann Sebastian Bach and The Fugees. According to his profile, the Senator's favorite movies include "Casablanca," "Godfather" I & II, "Lawrence of Arabia" and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." His favorite books are *Song of Solomon*, *Moby Dick*, *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, *Parting the Waters*, *Gilead*, *Self-Reliance*, *The Bible* and *Lincoln's Collected Writings*. Obama cites his work experience in the Senate as well.

The member of the United Church of Christ lists SportsCenter as his favorite TV show and his favorite quote as, "The Arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," by Martin Luther King Jr. Obama's profile links to his MySpace page, the Facebook group "Students for Barack Obama," and his wife Michelle Obama's Facebook page. His profile also includes the phone number to the "Obama for America" office, a YouTube box with 13 videos that include personal videos of Obama, television news clips, campaign ads and music videos. Obama's Facebook page also has 10 photo albums, 1648 notes 21 posted items, listed upcoming events and a wall with 186,728 posts. In addition, his profile includes the "Obama" application. The application has 614 daily active users (608 more than the Hillary Clinton for President widget). The "Obama" application allows users to add the application to share and read news items, blog posts and speeches, and watch imbedded videos.

Just days before the Iowa caucuses, Obama's campaign put its Facebook page to new use. Supporters of Obama received a message asking them to remind their friends in Iowa to caucus. The message, titled "3 Days to Go," directed supporters to a page with all of their friends who had some connection to Iowa. Supporters could check off the friends they wanted to invite to the caucus and then send them a reminder to caucus on January 3rd.<sup>58</sup>

With his 807,061 Facebook supporters and tactics like this, Barack Obama has had the strongest Facebook presence of all of the candidates this election cycle. This is likely due in a large part to the fact that Obama hired Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes to oversee the campaign's social networking sites.<sup>47</sup> What has made the Obama campaign's use of Facebook most successful is its creation of groups as a means for education, mobilization and fundraising.

### **Facebook as a Mobilizing Tool**

The greatest benefit that Facebook has provided to candidates thus far is the means to mobilize and organize thousands of supporters, and some of the most effective organizers on Facebook are not directly affiliated with any campaign.

In January 2007, Farouk Olu Aregbe, the coordinator of student government services at the University of Missouri-Columbia, started the "One Million Strong for Barack" group on Facebook. Within twenty-four hours, the group passed the thousand-person mark, and by May of that year, the group had about 325,000 members – groundbreaking, because the un-funded Facebook group was actually larger than most presidential candidates' e-mail lists ever get, and it had happened nearly a year before the 2008 election.<sup>20</sup> The growth of groups like this is in part due to the viral nature of the Facebook "News Feed." After attracting members in a network of contacts, it can be listed in the feed, raising awareness of the group to others in the network.

After experiencing a surge of growth, its administrators wanted to expand the scope and impact of the group. They wanted to encourage members to volunteer, donate and spread materials about the campaign. Whereas before the group site had been a simple set of goals and deadlines for growing the number of members, the goals were taken down and replaced with calls to action.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after the launch of the official Obama campaign website on February 10th, Tamer Abouzeid, a student in Chicago, used the personal fundraising feature to create a group fundraising page for the One Million Strong for Barack group. He then posted a discussion thread.<sup>15</sup> The response was nearly immediate. By February 27th, two weeks later, the Facebook group had raised \$10,000, with an average donation of about \$30. By the end of the fundraising quarter, they had raised \$15,000.<sup>15</sup>

As of May 1, 2008, "One Million Strong for Barack" had accumulated 523,552 members. Like all groups,

One Million Strong for Barack is laid out in group information, contact information, recent news, photos, videos, posted items and discussion board. Under the group information subcategory, the group offers its members ways to learn more, get the latest news and share information with friends. Included in this is a link to Barack Obama's website about phonebanking from home and a link offering solutions for members to get out the vote in their communities. The group also offers links to a brief video to "Meet Barack," the official campaign blog and a link to a page offering explanations on Obama's positions on a variety of issues. Additionally, the group offers a link to Obama's website's "Factcheck," Obama's YouTube channel and a link to receive text updates on member's mobile phones. The group gives suggestions and links on how members can organize online and in their local communities, through local groups and events, supporter created blogs and information about starting one independently, and a link to Obama's "Invite your Friends" site option. Furthermore, the group links to Obama's national call team, a site to print posters, fliers, and fact sheets, and a link to other communities of online supporters of Obama.

Under the "Recent News" subcategory of the group are additional links to watch Obama's victory speech from Iowa, and several links that open as new Facebook discussion board windows. These links include the topics, Obama events, Obama news, t-shirts and merchandise, rules for the group, Obama TV and videos, and more in-depth campaign information. Additional links include one to donate to the Obama campaign and three links to websites outlining Obama's stance on issues. The group also boasts 2001 photos, 16 posted items, 26,388 discussion topics, and a spin-off website, <http://www.onemillionstrong.us>. To fundraise, the group offers several links for its members to choose from. Such pages include Obama's personal fundraising page, his "Match Someone's Donation" page, and the Obama campaign store. To date, the group has raised \$22,620 from 771 people.

In addition to fundraising and information posting dispersal, a benefit of Facebook groups like One Million Strong for Barack is the "Message All Members" feature, by which group administrators can reach out to entire membership rolls at any time. They can send out messages to members regarding meetings or campaign updates, creating a de facto contact list of voluntary supporters, proving a potent means of organizing large-scale political and social movements.<sup>48</sup> Members can also invite friends to join a group or forward messages from campaigns. Furthermore, political organizers use these groups to troll through Facebook profiles, looking for students who list themselves as "liberal" or "conservative," whom they can then contact to volunteer for campaigns.<sup>57</sup> It is this sort of profiling that has contributed to Obama's success with Facebook as a campaign medium.

### **Microtargeting**

**M**icrotargeting is a sophisticated marketing tactic used to identify and motivate new voters to cast their ballot in favor of a desired candidate. The strategy, usually reserved for consumer profiling and customer segmentation, involves finding out which factors, values and behaviors are common to groups (in this case, voters) and using this information to reach out to the undecided in upcoming elections. By layering typical demographic data with psychographic data, microtargeters identify those likely to vote for a candidate with near certainty.<sup>14</sup> After identifying those voters, they are matched up with people like them from the campaign to convince them to support the candidate. Microtargeting is made possible by huge databases of voter information, like those used by major corporations to track consumer spending and retail habits. Analysts look at the habits of groups to see where they might overlap with other groups, and pinpoint specific messages designed to appeal to those demographics.

In 2008, microtargeting techniques are more refined than ever, and the software has been improved with more powerful hardware. Standard laptops can quickly churn out results that previously could be done only with bulkier computers, allowing databases to be mined more efficiently. As a result, campaigns can go beyond direct mailing to, for instance, the Hispanic or Muslim community, and instead figure out what John Doe at 123 Main Street is thinking.<sup>28</sup>

With the help of the microtargeting firm Strategic Telemetry, the Obama campaign has used Facebook

profiles, groups and applications to successfully microtarget and rally its base. By extracting data from profiles, such as age, gender, universities attended, address, phone number and political affiliation, Obama's campaign has been able to learn exactly who its potential voters are and how many local events or house parties volunteers are organizing for a candidate in a particular zip code or geographic area.<sup>49</sup> The Obama campaign then uses sophisticated targeting tools that let them send specially tailored campaign materials to each voter. Firm supporters get a different email than those on the fence.<sup>5</sup>

Facebook helps to further facilitate this targeting through its Social Ads, a feature introduced in late 2007. Facebook Ads launched with three parts: a way for businesses to build pages on Facebook to connect with their audiences; an ad system that facilitates the spread of brand messages virally through Facebook Social Ads; and an interface that gathers insights into people's activity on Facebook.<sup>23</sup> These ads allow campaigns to segment the Facebook community by selecting users based on age, gender, education, interests, relationship status, keywords, and political views. As campaigns manipulate the criteria within the Choose Audience Screen, the number of individuals your ad is targeted to reach adjusts in real-time.<sup>26</sup> All of this gives campaigns valuable metrics about their presence and promotion on Facebook, data on user activity, supporter demographics, ad performance and trends that better equip marketers to improve custom content on Facebook and adjust targeting. Since the introduction of this feature, the advertising tool has been made public, allowing anyone, regardless of their intent to buy ad space, a chance to look at the Facebook demographic statistics.

The Obama campaign has used this technology to mobilize the youth vote. The campaign has been able to specifically target young influential supporters and encourage them to talk to those with similar experiences, interests or friends about the campaign.

This word-of-mouth marketing works best among Millennials because they trust one another more than they trust sources like the mainstream media or government officials.<sup>14</sup> A 2007 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey about teens' use of social media revealed that the youths that are most active online – content creators – are also more likely to spend more face-time with their friends.<sup>27</sup> By tapping into this group's word-of-mouth networks, the Obama campaign harnessed the youth who are most savvy at, and the most likely to help campaign online. They are using the very people who are most influential among their peers and the most likely to get their peers to the polls.<sup>14</sup>

These appeals and microtargeting to Millennials have paid off in 2008. Support for Obama has been strong among Millennials who voted in the real-world primaries and caucuses. According to The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), 67 percent of Democratic voters under 30 in South Carolina cast their ballots for Obama. In Iowa, 57 percent of Democrats under 30 voted for Obama, while 51 percent voted for him in New Hampshire.<sup>33</sup> This trend has remained consistent throughout the primary season. A national online survey conducted by Harvard University's Institute of Politics (IOP) between March 11 and April 1, 2008 found that 18-24 year-olds who plan to vote for the Democratic candidate in November strongly prefer U.S. Senator Barack Obama over U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton, 70 percent to 30 percent. The poll also found a majority of likely young voters favor Obama with 53 percent in a hypothetical head-to-head contest against U.S. Senator John McCain with 32 percent, but give Clinton a much smaller lead, 44 percent to 39 percent, when matched up against the Arizona Senator.<sup>43</sup>

Still, a continued focus on the Millennial generation through new media technologies like Facebook will be essential for all of the candidates through the rest of this election cycle, as young voters are set to play a decisive role in the nomination and election processes. According to CIRCLE reports, more than 3 million Millennials participated in the Super Tuesday primary contests. Of the eight states that were also part of Super Tuesday in 2000, seven saw increases in youth turnout, and in some of these states, youth turnout tripled or quadrupled.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas all reported a youth voter turnout that tripled the numbers from their respective 2004 primary results. Louisiana and Massachusetts saw youth turnout numbers double, and Tennessee's youth turnout quadrupled. Furthermore, Maryland's youth turnout rose from 2004's 11 percent to 15 percent, California was up from 13 percent to 19 percent, and Connecticut's youth voter turnout was up to 12 percent compared to 7 percent in 2004.<sup>53</sup> As the 2008 primary season progresses, all

signs point toward a continuation of these trends in youth engagement.

### **Motivation, Ability & Opportunity**

In many ways, this increase in youth voter turnout can be attributed to new media technologies like Facebook, which offer motivation, ability and opportunity. According to Michael X. Delli Carpini, Director of the Public Policy Program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, and former Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, young people choose to become engaged in public life when they have the motivation, opportunity and the ability to do so. The motivation to participate can come from a number of sources, like a sense of responsibility, a sense of satisfaction derived from participation, an identification of a public problem that affects voters, and the belief that involvement makes a difference.<sup>12</sup> To take advantage of this motivation, citizens must have the ability to do so. The specific abilities necessary to participate vary depending on the kind of participation in question, but can include time, money, information and certain kinds of organizational or communications skills. Finally, motivation and ability alone do not assure engagement. Young citizens must also have the opportunity to become involved in public life in meaningful ways. Opportunities are determined by the civic infrastructure.

As Carpini notes, motivation for civic engagement can be attributed to an identification of a public problem that affects them or people they know personally, and the belief that their vote will make a difference.

Three events unfolded during the young adulthood of the Millennials that served as the catalysts for this civic participation.<sup>7</sup> The first of the events was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For older Millennials, the attacks instilled in them a sense of patriotism and the desire to sacrifice for their country, while for the younger members of the generation, it was the first event in their political and historical consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The attacks helped to develop a personal, emotional involvement in the political landscape in the generation that did not previously exist. The Iraq War was the second formative moment, and it drove many Millennials to reject unilateral foreign policies.<sup>7</sup> Spurred by watching their peers go to war, a heightened sense of political involvement from September 11, and the emerging social media, Millennials had access to varying viewpoints, and a newfound passion for questioning the political status quo. The final influential moment in the Millennials political consciousness was Hurricane Katrina, which affirmed in them the belief that it is the responsibility of government to protect and provide opportunity for all its citizens.<sup>7</sup> These events helped to create a civic motivation among Millennials, contributing to a collective desire to change the political issues they deem problematic. These factors have motivated Millennials to yearn for relevant leadership.

Millennials are more optimistic than the generation that came before them. According to a March 2008 Rock the Vote poll, 80 percent of 18-30 year-old respondents are paying attention to the Presidential election and 88 percent agree that young people have the power to change this country. Of those polled, 75 percent agreed that they personally have the power to change the country and 78 percent agreed that this year their vote will count. Finally, 75 percent of respondents agreed that young people are making more of a difference than usual this year.<sup>8</sup>

As Carpini attests, with this motivation, Millennials must have the ability to participate civically. Through Facebook, young citizens can improve the quality and increase the types of activities they engage in at no cost. Through candidate profiles, Facebook users have an easy way of obtaining information about the platforms of the candidates, watch campaign ads, find out about upcoming events and donate money. Facebook applications, like "US Politics," provide online voter registration and allow members to participate in political discussion with others. Furthermore, groups can provide Facebook users with a range of additional information, from

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identify voting locations to volunteer opportunities. In many ways, ability for civic participation through Facebook can be attributed to the consolidation of information gathering and transmittance, the wealth of information that is easily accessible, and the flexibility users have in when information is accessed.

Finally, Facebook provides Millennials with meaningful opportunities to become engaged. These opportunities come from Facebook's capacity to provide greater opportunity and mixes of interactivity through peer-to-peer, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many communications. Additionally, Facebook shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest-based, and blurs distinctions between types of mediums, such as print, visual and audio by allowing users to combine video, audio, text, and photos in a single platform. Facebook challenges traditional information gatekeepers and authoritative voices by blurring the lines between producers and consumers of information. Through these characteristics, Millennials can use Facebook to enhance their motivation, ability and opportunity to become engaged in public life.<sup>12</sup>

### **Peer-to-Peer Campaigning**

**W**ith all of the motivation, ability and opportunities for youth engagement and mobilization that Facebook presents, tremendous power lies not as a tool of mass communication, but in its ability to connect people one-on-one. Peer-to-peer is a campaign technique that simply means young voters energize and mobilize their peers. Yale political science professors Don Green and Alan Gerber, the authors of several randomized experiments comparing peer-to-peer contact efforts to non peer-to-peer techniques, concluded that a peer-to-peer contact raised youth turnout by an astounding eight to twelve points among registered voters.<sup>56, 42</sup> The scholars argue that the more closely the individual making the contact emulates the persons he talks to in race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status, the more credibility he has.<sup>56, 41</sup> Evidence indicates that the message – whether positive, negative or partisan – has far less of an impact on Millennials than how it is delivered. This argument is built on the hypothesis that voting is a social endeavor; one wants to get others to vote because one wants to be a part of the winning coalition. Bringing others into the political fold can amplify their votes and, in turn, increase the probability that “their” candidate will win the election. This suggests that, in a politically charged social environment, Millennials will vote if they are asked to do so by their peers.<sup>56</sup>

As a political tool, Facebook can empower constituencies with the tools to connect to individuals, both for organized political campaigns and advocacy groups, and for individual political activists. Facebook gives users the ability to hold events in their communities, motivate others to take action, and press their elected representatives to take a stand, not by simply being another name on a list, but to be a hub in an ever-expanding network.<sup>11</sup> Facebook's core functions revolve around these individual conversations between individual people. Although features like “Mini-Feeds,” the “Wall” and various applications create social connections and social spaces, the mass-messaging features included in “Groups” and “Fan Pages” are limited and have the feel of afterthoughts rather than core functions.<sup>11</sup> This structure has the unrealized potential for campaigns and individuals to canvass supporters or like minded individuals in a unobtrusive way. Facebook allows Millennials to communicate with one another about issues and the campaigns in an unprecedented way.

### **Conclusion**

**T**he new technology that has given birth to Facebook is a defining feature that is changing the way the Millennial generation votes. Through a combination of circumstance, timing and temperament, this generation is constructing a new type of politics, one that is responsive, inclusive and dialogic.

Playing a role in this new political atmosphere is Facebook, which serves as a digital reflection of real-world social interactions. It has the potential to serve as a conduit through which a free flow of messages and information from one person to another is transforming the electoral process for both the voters and the candidates.

Facebook has the power to mobilize, educate and reflect the interests and excitement of its users. Though it cannot be assumed that Facebook is responsible for driving the Millennial generation to the polls, its ability to

spread messages from person to person has had an undeniable ability to spark an interest in politics among the previously disenfranchised. At the same time, politicians, through Facebook, can observe and participate in a dialogue with a younger generation like never before. Facebook has proven to be a valuable campaign asset.

Facebook has the power to revolutionize the way political and social actions are organized and executed. Undeniably, it has changed old models of how volunteer lists are amassed, funds are raised and messages are honed and delivered. Most importantly, Facebook has the potential to put power back in the hands of voters.

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