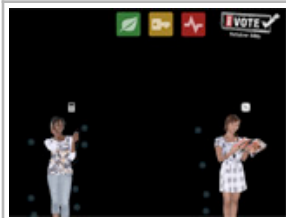




Candidates use Facebook to pull in young voters



The Liberals' ispeakto.ca site is loaded with Facebook and other networking apps.

Caroline Shaheed, Special to CTV.ca

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Young voters are statistically the hardest cohort to get to polls, so the parties have turned to Facebook for a new kind of Ontario election campaign.

Rini Ghosh, a 27-year-old NDP candidate for Willowdale, says Facebook is a "really good place," and she has reached potential voters and volunteers through the social networking site.

"I have gotten about 10 volunteers from Facebook," Ghosh says. "I have three high school students that saw me on Facebook and came in and joined my team."

The Ontario Young Liberals are using Facebook to drive users to its website, www.ispeakto.ca. They are using it to discuss issues rather than recruit.

"We had about 2,000 hits early last week," Jacob Mksyartinian, 24, president of the Ontario Young Liberals said. "We gave it a huge push end of the week and over the weekend, so I think were somewhere around 4,000 now."

Most candidates for the three major parties have their own Facebook profiles, then there are discussion groups within the system.

As of Monday on Facebook:

- The Ontario Young Liberals had about 1,000 members in its group ispeakto
- The Ontario Progressive Conservative Youth Association had about 475
- The Ontario New Democratic Party had 635 members.

Each party also has several offshoot groups with members ranging from three to 1,500, and the numbers are growing.

"Facebook has become a political forum, because you can communicate your message widely," Mksyartinian said. "I believe in the connector theory, and Facebook is the connector. You update your picture, your profile and everybody all of a sudden knows there is some change somewhere."

The parties are also using YouTube and blogs to appeal to the group that is typically labelled unengaged and apathetic.

Andrew Brander, 22 and the President of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Youth Association, says it is no surprise the youth aren't turning up at the polls.

"As an overall trend I think it's because youth are generally just frustrated with the process. They feel their vote doesn't make a difference in the grand scheme of things," Brander said.

The OPCYA is trying to encourage youth involvement in politics with fun events and tri-party debates. Brander notes the hardest part is getting people out.



NDP supporters and organizers are posting their photos to Facebook.

"Once we get them out, it is much easier to talk to them and get them involved with the issues, and make a difference in the community," Brander said.



Conservative Leader John Tory has a video blog on his website.

There are 1.2 million people in Ontario between the ages of 18 and 24. Statistics aren't available for provincial votes, but traditionally only 25 per cent of people in that age group turn out in federal elections.

Why youth don't vote

Chris Cochrane, Ph.D candidate in political science at the University of Toronto specializing in public opinion and voting, is studying the issue of voter participation.

"One of the questions we have had for the last 10 to 15 years, or longer than that, is the question of whether it was apathy," Cochrane told CTV.ca.

"And it is apathy," Cochrane said.

"The one variable that really seems to stand out is the declining sense of duty in young people to go out and vote," Cochrane said.

Iлона Dougherty, 27, says the youth are unengaged for a number of reasons. She is the executive director of Apathy is Boring-- a national non-partisan organization that focuses on getting youth to the polling stations.

"Young people feel really disconnected from traditional institutions, they don't feel like the people in power represent us, and we don't see ourselves reflected in those institutions. I feel as though there has been a shift, and a lack of civic education and really identifying as having a civic responsibility," Dougherty said.

Dougherty and her cofounders began Apathy is Boring in 2004 and launched the website last October. Since the website's inception, Apathy is Boring sends a monthly newsletter to approximately 4,000 young people, and has just as many new visitors to the site.

The Internet has not replaced door-to-door campaigning, but it has proved to be a valuable campaign tool that all parties are relying on.

"We feel like we can communicate with (youth voters) best online. And that with a new interactive website, very multi-media focused, we would be able to get to people who tend to sit in front of a computer all day, or who surf the net or who are more avid email checkers," Mksyartinian said.

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