

## 2012: The Social Media Election? (Opinion)

Steve Towns | June 29, 2012

Speaking at a Southern California media conference earlier this year, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo predicted that 2012 will be a “Twitter election” — and he may well be right. The 6-year-old microblogging platform, once dismissed as frivolous, has become a vital tool for political candidates to reach voters and react to events in real time.

Similarly, Facebook — with its 900 million users — is a key platform for engaging and organizing political supporters, not to mention a gold mine of data that savvy campaigns are using to create highly specific profiles of potential voters. Throw in the exploding use of mobility — along with complementary tools like geolocation — and the popularity of YouTube, and you can make the argument that 2012 is the year that social media becomes an integral part of the election process.

That’s why, as the 2012 election season heats up, we dedicated this issue to exploring how these technologies are changing the way candidates outreach to voters and how voters choose candidates.

It’s hard to find a better example of this shift than Newark, N.J., Mayor Cory Booker, who’s interviewed extensively in this month’s cover story. A bonafide Twitter phenomenon, Booker’s sophisticated use of social media contributed to his landslide win in the city’s 2006 mayoral election and his re-election in 2010. But what also stands out is his use of social media not just to campaign, but to govern. Booker, who gained attention for personally responding to a constituent’s tweet for help shoveling snow after a 2010 snowstorm, says social media lets elected leaders build long-term relationships with citizens.

“It eliminates the old, ‘You just come around to talk to me at election time’ issue,” he said.

Along with creating closer ties between leaders and citizens, political professionals predict (or maybe hope) that social media will become a counterbalance to big-money political donors — in essence, injecting more democracy into the democratic process. For instance, George W. Bush’s campaign adviser Mark McKinnon, writing for *The Daily Beast*, said “Technology and social media have brought power back to the people. ‘We the people’ can now compete against the near-deafening influence of unlimited campaign contributions.”

It’s naive, of course, to expect social media to cure all the ills of modern campaigning, and not all of its uses will be so high-minded. But if Web 2.0 tools can help leaders engage more closely with constituents and give everyday citizens a bigger voice in the political process, then we should welcome them to the party.