

By Katie Kennedy

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. -- For college students today, the way to experience elections is: opening up your Facebook page and finding yourself immediately bombarded with presidential election statuses and postings. Scrolling your page to find "Condescending Wonka" memes and photos of President Barack Obama riding in his presidential limousine with his lovable dog Bo. Perusing through the newsfeed to find a plethora of postings and tweets over the controversy of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's dog, Seamus, riding atop of his car.

If the political campaigners have it their way, this tactic of virtual becoming personal will exponentially increase over the next election cycle.

In the United States, young voters ages 18 to 29 make up 21% of the voting population. And over the past several election cycles, youth voting has been on the rise. Last November's election showed a higher percentage of college-aged voters going to the polls to elect their next president than in any previous election.

Many campaign workers believe that the use of social media has played a significant role in enticing the young demographic to go to the polls. With the constant postings of political jargon, photos, and comments, political operatives from both parties are looking for the best way to hold the young voter's attention.

"If you can find a way to join the conversation [with young voters] – especially through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media – campaigns can reach younger voters," said Paul Begala, a chief strategist in the 1992 Clinton and Gore campaign, and now a political consultant and commentator.

For the next election, it will be a daunting task for political consultants to stay ahead of the curve when it comes to constantly changing popular social media sites. If they don't, they could easily appear "lame" or "out of touch" to college students – and even risk losing their vote, say pundits. The first step to staying ahead of the curve political insiders say, is to understand the way in which college students and young voters experienced this past election, whether from the right click of a Twitter update, the lens of an Instagram snapshot, the post of a Facebook status, or a scroll through a Tumblr blog.

Conducting interviews with dozens of students around Virginia, launching an informal internet poll of 20 individuals, and conversing with political commentators unveiled a consistent trend: for young voters this past election was one that was personal, interactive, and directly targeted to them.

If the advent of television in campaigns took political races from a personal level to a more interactive one, the adaption of social media has incorporated the interactive, states Professor Clay Clemens, Chancellor Professor of Government at The College of William and Mary.

“Social media... are most useful when they are integrated into other things like getting people out to vote, getting face-to-face contact – television is an alternative to that,” Clemens says.

This means that with just a click of a button, college students can gather all the information they need to be informed about a candidate. They can be as interactive or inactive as they wish. They can enter forums and discussion through social networking sites and voice their opinion freely and immediately.

“College students have little time to sit in front of a television screen,” says Emily Dunn a Junior at The College of William and Mary. They now have access to unlimited information via computer; being able to get every question answered at a rapid pace.

Due to this interactive capability, a majority of college students believe that social media is more likely to influence their votes than traditional politicking.

Jack Byers, a student at The University of Virginia, said he changed his mind about his vote for president after logging onto Twitter and scrolling through the tweets of New Jersey Gov. Christopher Christie. At first, Jack was leaning towards casting a vote for Romney, but after reading through Christie’s tweets, his vote was locked for Obama. According to Byers, although Christie is a Republican, he tweeted his personal impressions about Obama that were positive, sincere, and ultimately persuasive.

Although Byers said that in social media a key rule is that “you don’t trust people you don’t know,” when someone like Christie, who has an 80 percent approval rating, posts on Twitter, there is “a perceived honesty” that will make a voter trust what they have to say. Through following Christie on Twitter, Byers felt that he knew him well enough to trust his opinion more than a face on the television.

Social media lures college students to the polls. According to Pew Internet Project’s research related to social networking, 92 percent of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 are actively engaging with social networking sites. In the same survey, 30 percent of registered voters were encouraged to vote for Obama or Romney by friends and family through postings on the social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. Individuals stay connected to people they know through social networking sites: there is more trust in postings of friends and family on social networking sites than listening to a two-dimensional figure on the television.

On the day of the election, logging onto Facebook, a user was immediately propelled into a whirlwind of social activity. With posts of who voted and a Facebook banner set as a reminder to cast a vote, there was no way to shirk exercising civic responsibility.

There is also risk in campaigning with social media. Too much political activity on social networking sites can turn potential voters away from candidates – or even voting overall.

“People could get annoyed and eventually become less interested in participating in the election, due to the fact that too many people were posting via Facebook and Twitter,” says Washington DC lobbyist Alex Vogel.

With much political activity on social networking sites, potential voters could stay away from voting. Vogel says that people could become annoyed and eventually be less interested in participating in the election due to the fact that there were simply too many postings via social media.

Indeed, many students talked about virtual fights breaking out on Facebook and Twitter when there was disagreement in the run-up to this last election. Vicious comments were made, and blocking and unfriending began. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, approximately one-fifth of people have admitted to blocking, unfriending, or hiding someone due to their postings on political views.

To be successful in the next election, political commentators believe strategists will have to identify the delicate line between the proper amount of information and over-saturation – and use that line to their advantage.

Talking with a handful of college students, there was one general consensus: social media is the best way to reach college student voters. Though social media is on the rise and it keeps students engaged in the campaign, a sense of the old-fashioned campaign techniques is still desired. Everyone wants face-to-face encounters with the president or future president, but perhaps a quick snapshot of Romney’s family playing Jenga would suffice.

Obama’s victory post was the most “liked” photo ever posted on Facebook. Over four million Facebook users showed their “cyber support” to the world, and felt part of an historic presidential election. A status and tweet update or an Instagram shot being posted keeps the lives of those nearly untouchable presidential candidates at only a quick click away.