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Social Media Use in the Massachusetts 2010 Senate Special Election
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Executive Summary

In the Massachusetts Senate Special Election, Scott Brown (R) has overcome an early fundraising disadvantage and lack of name recognition to draw even in polls with Democratic nominee Martha Coakley (D), due in part to his more effective social media strategy. While it is not yet known if Brown's clear advantage in responsiveness and intensity of online support will translate directly into more votes, the grassroots support he has received via these networks is indicative of the growing importance of social media as a campaign tool.

- Brown received 10.6 times more Facebook fan page interactions and views of uploaded videos on YouTube than Coakley.
- While a larger percentage of Coakley's Twitter followers actually live in Massachusetts (24 percent to 17 percent), Brown's total Twitter following in both the state and outside is dramatically higher.
- Social media outreach has increased Brown's name recognition among likely voters. Only 51 percent had heard of Brown in a Nov. 12 survey; his name recognition was up to 95 percent in a Jan. 14 survey.
- The candidates feature different communication methods in their home page designs. Brown prominently highlights social networking channels; a Twitter feed dominates his home page. Coakley emphasizes a blog on the home page, and gives social networks less prominent real estate.
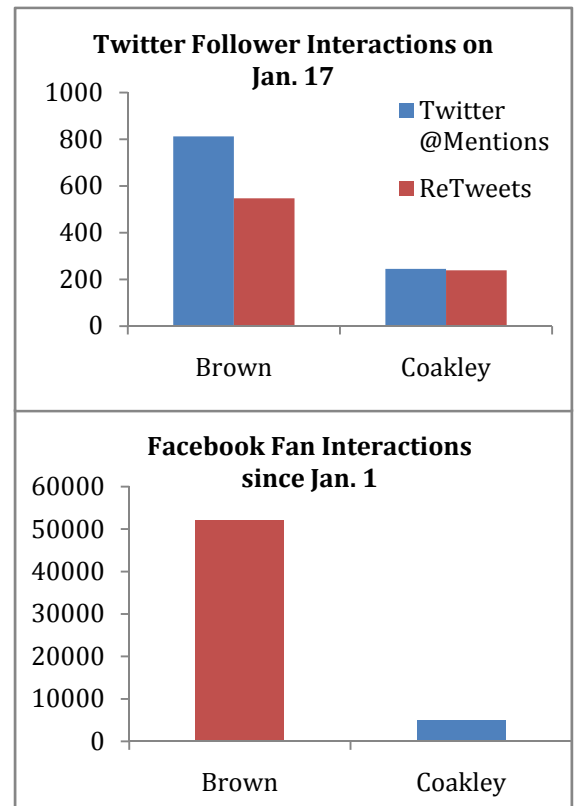
Intensity Index

While the traffic to Martha Coakley and Scott Brown's campaign websites is nearly equal, Brown has a clear advantage in the actions and sizes of his social media communities.[1] The activity and responsiveness of social media communities provides a sense of the intensity with which a candidate's supporters are advocating for the candidate.

Intensity can be determined by measuring the size of a candidate's communities, their responsiveness, and the traffic to a candidate's website where donations are collected. The intensity of response translates into more valuable election-focused offline activities, such as higher volunteer rates and volume of phone bank calls.

The number of members in a candidate's social networks indicates the breadth of response the candidate can anticipate from online fundraising and involvement initiatives. For example, Scott Brown sent multiple messages out across his social media networks publicizing a "money bomb" fundraising blitz on Jan. 11 that raised $1.3 million, according to the campaign.[2]

Twitter Follower Interactions on Jan. 17

Legend: ■ Twitter @Mentions ■ ReTweets

(Bar chart with y-axis 0 to 1000: Brown — @Mentions ~810, ReTweets ~550; Coakley — @Mentions ~250, ReTweets ~240)

Facebook Fan Interactions since Jan. 1

(Bar chart with y-axis 0 to 60000: Brown ~52000; Coakley ~4500)

Brown has five times as many Facebooks supporters and three times as many Twitter followers as Coakley. Even controlling for the number of supporters, a Brown Facebook Fan is twice as likely to interact with the Brown Fan page than a Coakley supporter is to interact with the Coakley Fan page.[3] Interactions on Facebook pages include commenting on a candidate's posts or indicating support for a post; interactions on Twitter include "ReTweeting" a candidate's message (which amplifies the message to a person's own followers) and mentioning the candidate's Twitter account in a message using the @ symbol.

Though only 17 percent of Brown's Twitter followers and 24 percent of Coakley's followers actually live in Massachusetts, both candidates have called on out-of-state supporters to make "get out the vote" calls and donations.[4] Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell had a smaller share of in-state followers than challenger Creigh Deeds did in their 2009 race (27% to 38%), but larger absolute numbers. McDonnell won the election.

While Coakley has not generated the same sized communities on major social networks as Brown has, her campaign spokesperson Alex Zaroulis said Coakley is running an aggressive campaign on Twitter and Facebook. "And what's really great is that all of our online activists are working to get out the vote over the coming days knocking on doors and making phone calls to voters across Massachusetts," Zaroulis wrote. "Social media has been a great tool for us to communicate with our supporters and with voters..."[5]

Facebook Fans of MA Senate Candidates


Twitter Followers of MA Senate Candidates

Comparison of Social Media Strategy

Brown and Coakley have produced similar amounts of material for their social media networks, with the notable exception of Facebook. Brown has posted 125 times to his Facebook page since January 1, while Coakley has only posted 58 times.[6] The candidates also use Twitter for different purposes. Brown sent twice as many news-related messages as Coakley while Coakley repeated followers' messages via a ReTweet twice as often as Brown. Thus, while the candidates had the same frequency of tweets, Coakley's Twitter feed offered less original content. Additionally, she sent more personal updates than Brown.[7] In previous races, the EMRC has observed stronger user engagement with candidates who mainly send calls to action or news announcements in tweets, rather than personal messages. While each candidate has tweeted their followers roughly the same number of times, Brown drew a more engaged response.

Tools to Watch

The Brown campaign uses the emerging social utility Ning, a platform that allows businesses and campaigns to construct branded social networks. The "Brown Brigade" on Ning has 6,000 members, and the platform is used to announce events, organize outreach, and compile blogs about his campaign.[8] The level of customization makes Ning an attractive choice for campaigns that want to develop an individual presence outside the bounds of Facebook.

Coakley has featured a blog as a central part of her website homepage, while Brown has not established a blog on his campaign website, instead devoting more than 50 percent of homepage space to social media tools. Coakley has used her blog to cover campaign events, such as rally appearances by President Barack Obama and President Bill Clinton, and to give general updates to supporters.[9] Most of her posts in January received only a handful of comments from readers.
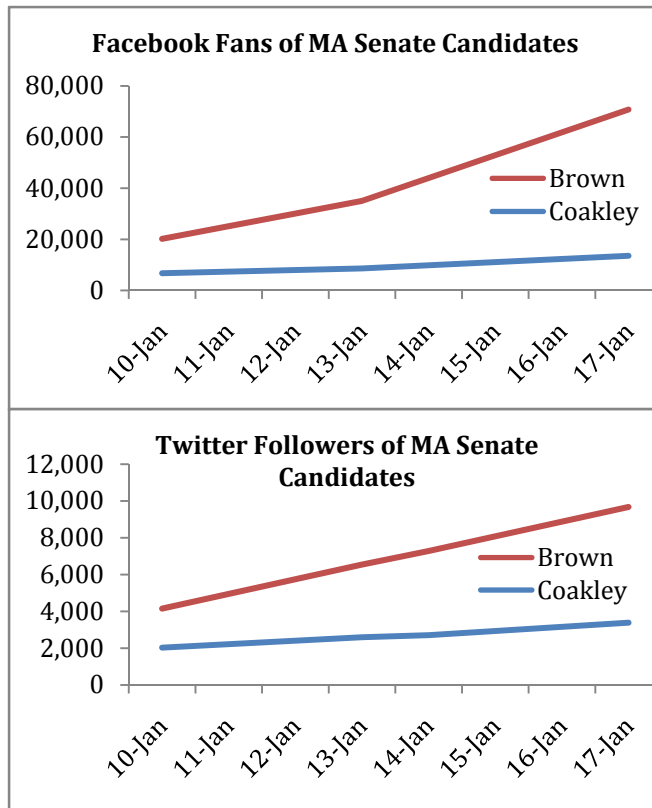
Summary of Social Media Statistics

Activity	Brown	Coakley	Brown-Coakley Ratio
Facebook Posts (since Jan. 1)	125	58	2.16
Facebook Fans	70,800	13,529	5.23
Tweets (since Jan. 1)	142	144	0.99
Twitter Followers	9,679	3,385	2.86
YouTube Videos (total)	57	52	1.10
YouTube Videos Views	578,271	51,173	11.30

Sources Cited and Considered

[1] Compete.com data.
[2] Scott Brown for Senate web site, January 12, 2009, http://www.brownforussenate.com/red-invades-blue, accessed January 2010.
[3] Emerging Media Research Council analysis.
[4] Emerging Media Research Council analysis.
[5] Alex Zaroulis, "Response to Comment about Social Media Strategy," e-mail message to Peter Wylie, Emerging Media Research Council, January 18, 2010.
[6] Emerging Media Research Council proprietary analysis of Facebook activity of Scott Brown and Martha Coakley, 1/1/10 – 1/17/10.
[7] Emerging Media Research Council proprietary analysis of Twitter activity of Scott Brown and Martha Coakley accounts, January 2010.
[8] "Brown Brigade," January 18, 2010, http://brownbrigade.ning.com/, accessed January 2010.
[9] Martha Coakley for Senate, "Blog," January 18, 2010, http://www.marthacoakley.com/blog, accessed January 2010.

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