

# APP.com

## Christie proves adept at using social media

By CHRISTOPHER SCHNAARS • STAFF WRITER •  
January 22, 2011

As a candidate 18 months ago, Gov. Chris Christie had relatively few fans on the Internet.

Now, Christie has amassed tens of thousands of Internet followers who could bolster a 2013 re-election bid or a run for the White House, but his support on the Web pales in comparison with other Republican stalwarts.

As candidate Barack Obama showed in 2008, social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook allow a politician to bypass traditional media filters and communicate directly with millions of followers.

That communication can backfire, too. Earlier this month, Sarah Palin, a possible contender for the 2012 GOP presidential nomination, was widely criticized after she posted a video on Facebook following the Jan. 8 shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz.

In the video, Palin offered her condolences, then lashed out at critics who said she showed poor judgment in posting an online map with gun sights over the districts of Giffords and 19 other Democrats who supported President Barack Obama's health care plan. That map was posted before Giffords was shot.

Palin accused those critics of "blood libel," a term used in the past to disparage Jews by accusing them of killing Christians to use their blood for religious rituals. Giffords is Jewish.

But while an Internet presence can cut both ways, can a state or national candidate win an election these days without it?

Christie has followers on social media Web sites Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Social media sites allow people to share and discuss information, often for free.

"Social media is just one more tool in his tool box to influence public opinion, and to date, he's been quite successful," said Joseph Marbach, provost and political science professor at La Salle University in Philadelphia. "The relative popularity he enjoys

given the budget cuts he's pushed through . . . it's really remarkable."

On Twitter, for example, a user posts short messages forwarded to all the user's followers. YouTube allows people to post videos that can be viewed by anyone online. Facebook lets users post and share information, such as pictures, links to Web sites and comments.

Christie has more than 24,000 followers on Twitter — comparable to fellow Republican Mitt Romney but dwarfed by others such as Newt Gingrich (1.3 million followers). Christie also has nearly 30,000 Facebook fans and more than 175 videos on YouTube that collectively have been viewed 2.2 million times.

That's nowhere near the viewership for prime-time television, Jay Leno or David Letterman but easily bests the number of viewers who catch TNT's Conan O'Brien, ABC's Nightline or Comedy Central's The Daily Show with Jon Stewart on a given night.

Use of the Internet and social media in political campaigns was virtually unheard of a decade ago. Nowadays, they're a standard and indispensable tool for any serious political candidate.

In February, Christie hired former campaign staffer Patrick Jones as his director of new media to work with bloggers and promote the governor's social media sites. Jones is paid a state salary of \$60,000 a year.

It's unclear how much personal involvement Christie

# APP.com

has with social media versus relegating those functions to his staff, though Jones has said in the past that Christie writes his own Twitter messages. Christie's press secretary, Michael Drewniak, did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

Christie has repeatedly denied any plans to run for president in 2012, but some political observers say Christie's efforts to campaign for other Republicans across the country during the 2010 election could indicate an intention to seek national office.

While other nationally known Republicans have many more followers than Christie, some analysts say it's too early to write off the governor.

"Just having lots of followers doesn't necessarily translate into votes, and the number of fans you have doesn't necessarily translate into how popular your platform is going to be," said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that studies the social impact of the Internet.

Political strategists develop plans to get a candidate's message out through various media, including television, direct mail and newspapers. Nowadays, those strategies include a separate plan targeting social media.

"It's becoming more and more of a factor, especially in communicating with younger voters," said Steve DeMicco, a partner with the Message & Media political consulting company in New Brunswick. "So there's no question that social media in general is becoming not only a convenient medium for candidates, but also in some cases it's necessary if you want to reach out to younger voters who are used to using those media as opposed to traditional media."

Besides serving as a vehicle to reach younger voters, social media give politicians like Christie the means to tightly control their message and communicate directly with the public without having journalists filter and pick apart that message.

"It could help people feel less alienated from their government, which is a good thing," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "There's a risk on the other side that distinguishing what's false from what's true may become harder for people."

Dave Fleet blogs about social media and

communications, and he is vice president of digital in the Toronto office of Edelman, a multinational public relations firm. He said that while political communications often make politicians seem distant and detached, Christie's use of social media humanizes the governor by tying his personality to his political message.

"He can take a position, which has no personality in and of itself, and add some of his personality to that," Fleet said. "I think that's highly effective in the political landscape because that's what's missing in a lot of political communication nowadays."

Voters who follow Christie on Twitter, read his Facebook page and watch his YouTube videos may be strong supporters or fierce opponents already, but communicating with those followers has a ripple effect that helps shape the opinions of undecided voters.

"It gives them talking points, and that's really the key," Marbach said of Christie's social media followers. "They're going to convince others."

Christie's strong social media presence now also gives him time to win over more supporters.

"Social media is a long-term communications channel," Fleet said. "You can't just build up an audience overnight the way you could with advertising, so if you want to have influence in social channels in a few years' time, you need to do it now."

And that fan base can lessen the sting of negative

# APP.com

publicity from political defeats such as the loss of \$400 million in federal money for education; failing to push all of his property tax, pension and other reform measures through the Legislature; and sparring with Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., over the scrapped rail tunnel to New York City.

The use of social media in politics is a relatively new development. Barack Obama used it to build a huge following during his presidential campaign. In 2004, Howard Dean used the Internet to raise millions of dollars and prolong his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

It can have negative effects, too. During his 2006 re-election campaign in Virginia, Republican Sen. George Allen referred to a man of Indian ancestry who was filming one of Allen's campaign stops as "macaca," a racial epithet. That gaffe dogged Allen throughout his campaign, and he lost the election.

While social media allow politicians to engage directly with large numbers of voters, some experts say Twitter, Facebook and YouTube can't replace other forms of communication needed to reach voters who don't use social media or don't follow the politician.

"You can't just treat it on its own," Fleet said, "and that's why I don't think social media is the end-all be-all of communications."

**Christopher Schnaars: 732-643-4220;**  
**[cschnaars@app.com](mailto:cschnaars@app.com); [twitter.com/CSchnaarsAPP](https://twitter.com/CSchnaarsAPP)**