

Turning to Twitter: Social media forces politicians to get to the point

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By

With messages limited to 140 characters or less, Twitter does not give politicians leeway to say much.

But elected officials are using the popular networking media site — as they have with Facebook, YouTube and Flickr — like never before to connect with people they have never reached.

Wednesday, Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), who is running for re-election, was the latest to hold a so-called "Twitter Town Hall" — one of a growing number of politicians embracing Twitter to reach potential voters.

"People get information and have conversations in new and different ways than they did five years ago — even a year ago," said Tricia Enright, a spokeswoman for Menendez. "You have to listen to your constituents in the way they communicate."

Twitter has especially revolutionized political communication. Invented as an innocuous way to communicate quickly and directly online, Twitter was deployed in the national Occupy Wall Street movement and the international Arab Spring, and is now a staple of politicians young and old, local and national.

President Obama hosted the first presidential Twitter Town Hall in July 2011. In New Jersey, U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone (D-6th Dist.) was apparently the first Garden State politician to hold one when he addressed constituent concerns over health care legislation in December 2009.

For its part, Twitter provides a potentially huge audience — the site reportedly has 500 million users. But with "tweets" limited to 140 characters or less, it does not leave much room for nuance, Rutgers University political scientist David Redlawsk said.

"Using Twitter has its advantages," said Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll. "You reach a new audience. You don't have to go anywhere. And it gives a politician the chance to say, 'I'm with it. I know what's going on.'"

POTENTIAL RISKS

But at the same time, he said, communicating in bursts of 140 characters is potentially risky.

"Everything you say is in writing and many people are not used to talking in 140 characters," he said. "There is no room for nuance and backtracking. It's easy to go wrong."

It also can provide new fodder for the opposition.

State Sen. Joseph Kyrillos (R-Monmouth), who is seeking the GOP nomination to challenge Menendez in November, quickly responded to the Menendez Twitter event by turning it into a digital debate on his own Twitter site — giving his own answers to the same questions, which focused on energy and gas prices.

"Why did you vote against the Keystone pipeline when gas prices are going through the roof?" asked one tweet.

Menendez — who responded to questions in a live video feed from his website, and then gave shortened, edited answers through Twitter — said: "I support #KeystonePipeline as long as it receives enviro permits, bans exporting that oil & uses domestic materials 2 build."

Kyrillos immediately replied on his Twitter page: "We need 2 streamline permit approval process. (Obama plan would delay permits until 2017)."



File photo

Sen. Robert Menendez will host his first Twitter Town Hall at 3:30 Wednesday, and will take questions on rising gas prices

The Twitter format seemed largely incidental for Menendez, whose staff collected questions submitted throughout the week and "in the spirit of Twitter" shortened them to a 140-character limit, said Enright, who moderated the discussion.

But if his questioners went a little over the limit, Menendez was downright verbose by Twitter standards. One of his shorter answers weighed in at 92 words or 398 characters. One of the longer responses ran 252 words and 1,074 characters. All were translated into Twitter by an off-screen staff member.

Online Town Hall meetings are generally a win-win for politicians, according to a 2009 report by the Congressional Management Foundation, the Harvard Kennedy School, and Northeastern University.

The report examined online town halls conducted by 12 U.S. representatives and one U.S. senator and found that the format boosted immediate overall approval ratings for politicians as well as their approval ratings on specific issues.

The report said the online exchanges can offer a more meaningful dialogue between constituent and representative than public addresses, which are often tightly stage-managed.

YOUNGER AUDIENCE

Brigid Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair State University who has studied the impact of social media on campaigns, said Twitter underscores the generational divide in how people participate in politics.

"Menendez, I think, has always prided himself on this 'cool and hip' image, and this is one way he can tap into a younger constituency," she said.

Menendez has 16,391 followers on his Twitter account — more than Kyrillos, at 318, and far more than many other New Jersey elected officials.

Gov. Chris Christie, an early adapter of social media, has 103,717 followers nationally. The Obama White House has 2.8 million followers.

Harrison said Twitter is still more novelty than election tactic.

"I don't know that it is enormously effective in generating votes right now, but it's on the cutting edge of becoming effective," she said.

That could change. Facebook four years ago was an afterthought to most campaigns. Now, she said, it is an essential component in how politicians run.

By Ted Sherman and David Giambusso/Star-Ledger Staff

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