

The first Snapchat election: how Bernie and Hillary are targeting the youth vote

Bernie Sanders is winning the Snapchat election – at least on the follower count.

“We do have the largest – and I’ve heard by far – the largest one,” said Hector Sigala, a digital media director on the Sanders campaign.

Snapchat doesn’t offer its data publicly, but didn’t dispute claims that Sanders has the most people watching. One hundred million people use Snapchat daily, 86% of whom are under 35. Twice as many 18-24-year-olds watched the first GOP debate on Snapchat as opposed to TV. For candidates, it’s a critical platform.

You could call 2016 the “first Snapchat election”. In the early days of the campaign race, the Republicans were very active snappers, but as candidates have dropped out, the Democrats have been left nearly all by themselves on the app (Ted Cruz and Donald Trump both have accounts, but post only occasionally). Sanders and Clinton are a tale of two Snapchats – both with very different posting styles and strategies on how to use it to nab the youth vote.

So what do they post on the social media platform that, according to Nielsen, reaches 41% of all 18-34-year-old Americans on any given day?

“We definitely treat it as a different medium,” said Sigala. “For Snapchat we do try to give our supporters a very behind-the-scenes-type look, something you don’t get on other social media platforms. Our supporters feel a very deep ownership on this campaign and it’s kind of like they’re checking in on their investments.”

Campaign managers upload videos or photos into their candidate’s personal “story”, which lasts 24 hours before disappearing. Text, emojis, drawings or filters can be added, creating mini films and photo galleries of life and events on the trail, a backstage pass never previously on offer.

For example, Sanders’ Monday snap story showed Sunday evening’s rally at the University of Wisconsin, with speeches from actress Shailene Woodley and Rosario Dawson, activist Linda Sarsour and the band Leisure Cruise playing. On Monday, Snapchat showed Sanders speaking at a town meeting in Janesville, Wisconsin, cut to a quick shot of an airplane, and then Tim Robbins speaking at a rally in Green Bay.

This is standard fare for Sanders' snaps – crowds at rallies, surrogates pledging their allegiance, a line from a speech, Sanders saying hi to the overflow crowd, media interviews and him getting on board a plane somewhere.

The idea behind Sanders' Snapchat stories is “give the experience of what Bernie is like on the trail”, said Sigala. The majority of it is filmed over Sanders' shoulder, by his deputy senior adviser, Shannon Jackson, who spends most days directly next to the Vermont Senator and snaps his shock of white hair eating dinner, greeting voters and travelling.

Knowing what to snap from an event can be hard, says Sigala. “Bernie's been saying the same thing for 30-40 years, it's tough to find the right 10-second snippet that people haven't yet heard,” he said.

The most popular Sanders' snap by a mile, says Sigala – as judged by the amount of screenshots and mainstream media pick up it got – showed the presidential wannabe shooting some hoops with his grandkids after winning New Hampshire.

Plus, the Sanders campaign has purchased many “geofilters” – a mini ad any Snapchat user can put on top of their own photos, only available in a specific geographical area – from a New Hampshire bus countdown, to numerous “feel the Bern” and mini cartoon Bernie filters.

“We don't do like ‘check these cool hip pictures of Bernie’. We'll do very issue-orientated language,” said Sigala. “We don't do emojis, we don't do slang, we like to keep it about the issues.”

That's a bit of a dig at the Clinton campaign, which does use emojis and other Snapchat slang in its stories. Clinton's staff says that users don't want to see candidates making the same speeches every day.

“We can do the same thing a million times, show Hillary at rallies, or we can switch it up,” said Emmy Bengtson, deputy social media director for the Clinton campaign.

Clinton's Snapchat content, is less casual and more highly planned. Her snaps feel like marketing spiels based around policies or big-name supporters. She hasn't purchased any sponsored geofilters, the location-based cartoon ads users can add to their own snaps, although a Clinton-aligned Super Pac bought a “deport Trump” one.

One weekend in the lead-up to Iowa, her husband Bill took over her Snapchat, where he told “three fun facts” to the cameras as the car drove through Iowa, including that his wife campaigns well in cold weather cause she eats a hot chili pepper every morning and that she believes the Chicago Cubs can win a World Series. After a day of Bill drinking coffee and making speeches, the couple met up and posed for a selfie together.

On Halloween, Clinton’s Snapchat offered up “dress as Hillary” Halloween costumes, from Hipster Hillary in the 1970s to pink power suit 80s First Lady Clinton. At a Sioux City rally in Iowa, Clinton staff did a Snapchat tour of Hillary T-shirts in the crowd, accompanying them with emojis.

However, the Clinton campaign has cut down dramatically on its Snapchat posting in the last two months, only posting a handful of times in that whole period rather than nearly every day. The campaign denies there has been a specific decision to stop using Snapchat, instead saying they update when relevant and interesting new issues appear.

“People love to see rallies and backstage. But people on Snapchat are still interested in issues,” said Bengtson. “Snapchat is more fun, platform-wise, and logistically we think of how we can break down messages in more digestible ways.”

So last week when GOP frontrunner Donald Trump said women should be punished for accessing abortions if outlawed, the Clinton campaign sprang into action, uploading a story to Snapchat using Trump’s famous red “Make America Great Again” caps to outline his policy ideas and declare the abortion plan “unacceptable”.

As Democrats continue to focus on the platform in the lead-up to the election, the question is, to what end? It’s hard to tell what the impact will be at the polls, but with so many millennials using Snapchat every day, it seems obvious that having a presence is better than not at all.