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Knight Lab mines social media data to aid Illinois primary voters

Illinois voters have more insight into congressional candidates this year thanks to a new tool that mines social networks and other data sources for candidate information.

The tool, called Congressional Primaries 2012, culls data from Twitter and Facebook, news stories and the Federal Election Commission to compile profiles of candidates seeking a congressional office in Illinois. The technology was developed at the Knight News Innovation Lab at Northwestern University and has been deployed at CongressionalPrimaries.org and on select media partner sites around the state.

“This technology gives voters additional insight into candidates’ priorities and focus,” said Michael Silver, Knight Lab executive director. “The abundance of data on the web – not only about candidates, but also about people who are engaged with them – is really incredible. We’ve used that data to help voters decide who to support in this month’s primary elections.”

Congressional Primaries 2012 gives voters four primary insights into a candidate’s campaign, including:

- The candidate’s priorities and focus based on an analysis and categorization of candidate Twitter feeds.
- An analysis of what a candidate’s Twitter followers tweet about and how their priorities and interests change over time.
- Aggregated news coverage on specific congressional candidates drawn from across the web.
- Campaign contributions that shows voters where a candidate’s donors are based – in-district/out-of-district, in-state/out-of-state.

Elements of the service—either as complete pages or widgets—are incorporated into many other web sites. Daily newspapers incorporating elements into their web sites include the Chicago Sun-Times, the Daily Herald, the Northwest Herald and the Quincy Herald-Whig. Broadcasters include NBC5 Chicago, WTTW Chicago, WBEZ, WREX and KHQA. Community sites include The Gate Newspaper (Back of the Yards), The Times Weekly (Joliet), Progress Illinois, Chicago Talks and Evanston Now.

The technology to develop Congressional Primaries 2012 grew out of a collaboration between Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications and Robert R. McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science. Journalists and computer scientists worked together on the project, which contributed to its success.



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"By combining the technical skill of computer scientists and news savvy of journalists, Congressional Primaries 2012 has been able to uncover stories that may have otherwise remained hidden in the data," said Owen Youngman, a Knight Lab executive board member and Medill's Knight Professor of Digital Media Strategy.

Work on the Congressional Primaries 2012 project began in earnest last November and builds on technology from various initiatives at Northwestern – including projects that originated in undergraduate classes, the work of computer science Ph.D. students, and professional staff within the Knight Lab.

CongressionalPrimaries.org will be available to voters through the Illinois primary election on March 20.

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About the Knight News Innovation Lab

Established in 2011 with a \$4.2 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Knight News Innovation Lab is a joint initiative of Northwestern University's Robert R. McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science and Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. The Lab's mission is to accelerate the transformation of the way news is discovered, analyzed, presented and delivered by introducing smart and practical technology innovation. In partnerships built across the Chicagoland region — from neighborhood bloggers to large media companies — the Lab invents, improves and distributes technology that helps build and sustain a better informed citizenry and a more innovative publishing environment.