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## Column: Social networking tools playing expanded role in politics

BY [RIC ANDERSON](#)

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For years, Jake Lowen told anyone who would listen that the minimum wage in Kansas was a disgrace.

He and others who supported an increase in the wage lobbied legislators to raise it.

They held rallies. They sent out news releases.

And they got nowhere. The wage remained stuck at \$2.65 an hour, where it had been set in the 1980s.

“We thought we were really fortunate if we could get a committee hearing,” said Lowen, director of the Wichita Labor Federation and president of the Kansas Action Network. “We were coming up against a dead end.”

The proponents needed new tools to break through the walls of opposition and indifference in the Legislature.

This year they got them, Lowen said. By learning to use Twitter, Facebook and other social networking services to their advantage, he said, proponents helped push through legislation to raise the wage to \$7.25 effective Jan. 1.

“Especially in a legislative session, this is the first time we’ve seen these tools transform from being used for social networking to being used for social activism,” Lowen said.

Lowen said the innovations allowed activists to reach new pockets of supporters efficiently and mobilize their network at a moment’s notice. Before spring break of the regular session, Lowen said, proponents were communicating regularly with 663 supporters on Facebook.

In previous years, organizers might have waited until a day or two before a key event, such as introduction of a bill or the start of a committee hearing, before sending a mass e-mail or mounting a calling campaign asking proponents to press lawmakers for support.

This year, proponents kept supporters engaged through frequent Twitter tweets, Facebook posts and other blog updates. Lowen said the approach generated regular calls and e-mails to lawmakers.

“Instead of saving your resources for one big push, which the legislators know is a push, it’s a constant stream,” he said. “We talked to a lot of legislators who were previously opposed, and in a couple of situations they said, ‘We had to support it because we were getting pressure from

people back home.’ ”

Not everyone will agree that Twitter and Facebook made the difference. Some observers said the measure’s opponents had decided that since the state wage applied to only about 20,000 workers, fighting it was no longer worth the political flak they were taking over it.

But for political activists, there are clear benefits to using social networking tools. They won’t replace meetings, rallies and door-to-door campaigns, Lowen said, but they’re are an effective way to bring together like-minded people in pursuit of a common goal.

“I’m very adamant that you still have to form relationships,” he said. “But the question is, how are you going to maintain and develop those relationships? And that’s where these tools are so valuable.”

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