YouTube shows have become a secret weapon for rising politicians



On August 6th, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) showed up somewhere you might not expect: *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Rogan, a stand-up comic and podcaster, brings guests like Alex Jones and Elon Musk on his show to talk about everything from simulation theory to DMT. Rogan kicked off the show by asking Sanders whether he hates the debate format. “What they are is a reality TV show in which you have to come up with a soundbite, and it’s demeaning,” Sanders responded. “It’s demeaning to the candidates, and it’s demeaning to the American people.” But unlike at the debates, Sanders had all the time he wanted on the podcast — time he used to dive into income inequality, health care, and the media at large.

In a press call with reporters after the show, Bernie 2020 campaign advisers explained that the YouTube podcast format itself was one of the major reasons they wanted Sanders on Rogan’s show. “We’re looking for opportunities to reach a

broader audience. Too often politicians try to reach people through political channels," senior adviser Jeff Weaver said. "It is always good practice to try to reach folks outside of the normal political conversation, particularly in formats that allow a more free flow and longform answers."

Weaver continued, Sanders "is much more comfortable in that environment."

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But it's not just Sanders. Over the past few months, candidates Andrew Yang and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) have also appeared on YouTube podcasts with some of the platform's most popular creators. All three have appeared on *Rogan*, with Yang also speaking with conservative commentator Dave Rubin and Ethan and Hila Klein from the *H3 Podcast*.

It's a relatively new format for YouTube, mirroring the style of talk radio programs like *The Howard Stern Show*. Instead of spending a few minutes with Chuck Todd or Tucker Carlson on television, rattling off talking points, these free, easily accessible YouTube shows allow candidates to discuss policy in a relaxed setting with someone who feels like a friend to their audiences. That has made YouTube one of the more rewarding places on the internet to campaign.

Part of the benefit is the audience that candidates are able to reach. According to *Politico* polling, people in the 18–29 and 30–44 age brackets are far more likely to support Sanders and Yang. YouTube claims to reach more of those voters in an average week than every cable network combined, citing Nielsen data. By 2020, those age brackets (millennials combined with Generation Z, roughly) will be the largest voting bloc in America.

Then there's the simple math of audience and runtime. Podcasts like *The Joe Rogan Experience* and *H3* reach millions of people

every week and typically last around an hour in length. That's more air time than any candidate traditionally receives on the debate stage, Sunday morning news shows, or even in blips on popular television talk shows. Bernie's appearance on Rogan even rivaled the CNN Democratic debate in terms of viewership. According to *Variety*, the second night of the debates brought in 8.7 million viewers, which is only a few hundred thousand more viewers than Rogan's show.

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The *H3 Podcast* has become a home for audiences to catch up on both current events and internet goofs in a variety show format, which is a far cry from the dry urgency of cable news. Sanders and Yang's willingness to go on that kind of creator-driven platform could give them an air of authenticity with viewers, which is an increasingly rare commodity for campaigns.

So far, those interviews are still the exception to the rule. The majority of 2020 Democratic candidates are spending most of their time on traditional television and radio interviews. Candidates like former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) already have political clout and don't have trouble getting interviews on *The View* or *Meet the Press*.

But for lesser-known candidates, fringe media can be a powerful boost. Andrew Yang's first major interview came on Joe Rogan's podcast last February. *The Joe Rogan Experience*'s channel has over 6 million subscribers, and Yang's episode surpassed a million views only a few days after it was uploaded to YouTube. After that, Yang's political profile skyrocketed. In a blog post after the show went up, Yang said the campaign received "thousands of new supporters" and "tens of thousands in new donations" in the wake of the appearance.

"One friend of mine joked that there will be a 'BR (Before Rogan)' and 'AR (After Rogan)' phase of the campaign," Yang

wrote. “He’s likely right.”

He was. After Rogan, Yang quickly qualified for the summer debates. After months of lurking in alternative media like Rogan’s show and *The Rubin Report*, more mainstream outlets started reaching out for interviews, and his poll numbers started to creep upward.

As the fall debates approached with even more challenging polling and donor requirements, Yang needed another boost to qualify. Earlier this month, he went on the *H3 Podcast*. It was another long-winded campaign platform discussion, but with two immensely popular creators with over 8 million subscribers across their two channels.

That same week, Sanders had his first YouTube appearance this election cycle with Rogan. In the few days since the episode’s been up, it’s received over 8.5 million views, and the comments are full of praise for Sanders, which is surprising for a podcast with a largely right-leaning audience. Outside of podcasts, Sanders has started to appear on Twitch streams with his staff as yet another avenue to reach younger voters.

“Whether it’s on a creator’s channel or their own social channels, candidates will need to strike the right balance between showing up somewhere interesting or unexpected, but in a way that is authentic to who they are and how their audience perceives them,” Joanna Rosholm, Michelle Obama’s former press secretary and deputy communications director, told *The Verge*. “What works for one candidate or political figure may not work for another.”

“Millennials have an incredible read on authenticity,” she continued.

It’s part of a larger trend in political communications, as media options broaden and candidates are forced to more specific channels to find an audience. Throughout the tail end of the last century, television was king, and it was easy for

candidates to appear on a handful of news shows and reach audiences of millions. As cable television became increasingly popular and audiences grew more niche, candidates began to go on a wider range of non-political shows, touting their authenticity and marketing themselves as not only solid politicians, but genuine people.

Most notably, former President Bill Clinton took advantage of that trend by appearing on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992 in an appearance that "blew people away," Rosholm said. "It opened the door for candidates to focus less on news media – where they would be covered anyway– and instead go straight to the younger voters they were targeting, in an unexpected yet authentic way."

Over the course of the last few presidential election cycles, candidates have regularly appeared on shows like *The View*, *Ellen*, *Steve Harvey*, and *Saturday Night Live* to get their messages out to voters. These shows had smaller (albeit still large) audiences with specific demographic breakdowns; if you wanted to reach middle-aged women, go talk to Ellen DeGeneres. But that trend was inevitably leading candidates to smaller and more personal channels, like those on YouTube. In 2014, President Obama gave YouTube its own "Arsenio moment" when he made an appearance on Funny or Die's YouTube channel in a *Between Two Ferns* interview with Zach Galifianakis.

"TV once provided a more concentrated, captive audience. Before cable TV rose in popularity you could have an audience in the tens of millions – there was less content to contend with. More people watched fewer things," Rosholm told *The Verge*. "Today, content is limitless and tailored for niche audiences, which likely means you are going to see more candidate interviews than ever to cover as much ground as possible." If candidates really want to cover that ground, they're going to have to go on YouTube.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/8/20/20812826/youtube-politics-v

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