

Key Campaign Tech Trends For 2026

— Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Center for Campaign Innovation

Covering campaign tech is difficult. The flashy, frightening story inevitably makes for good headlines but fails to capture what's really happening within campaigns. The real developments are quieter, more operational, and more consequential.

Each trend below is framed the same way: **the Hype** that dominates coverage, then **the Reality** on the ground – with the sources worth reading next.

Artificial Intelligence in Campaigning

THE HYPE

Realistic deepfake videos will deceive voters and swing the outcome of a race.

THE REALITY

The real value of AI for campaigns is volume. It's not the single video that swings the outcome, but the ability to remix and reuse content. With AI, campaigns can generate endless variations, flooding the zone, which is exactly what social media algorithms reward.

One analysis this summer captured the asymmetry: "Republican campaigns are producing more AI content faster, and Democratic campaigns are governing it more carefully." The moral panic around deepfakes has soaked up the oversight attention while the actual trend – the collapsing cost of producing content at scale – goes uncovered.

Further Reading

[AI Ethics Questions Campaigns Are Asking in 2026](#) – Campaign Trend

[Imagining The Positive Possibilities Of Political AI](#) – Center for Campaign Innovation

[Even With AI, We Still Have To Poll Humans](#) – Eric Wilson on Substack

[The partisan divide in campaign AI use: Republicans generate more content, Democrats govern it more](#) – Anchor Change

[TikTok Shows 3x More AI Slop Than YouTube, Report Finds](#) – Search Engine Journal

Social Media

THE HYPE

2026 is the [platform name] election.

THE REALITY

Campaigns follow eyeballs, and right now short-form vertical video is where the mass audience actually lives: TikTok, Reels, and Shorts. Substack and podcasts are real, but they're low reach and elite – channels for talking to insiders and donors, not for finding undecided or infrequent voters.

Coverage chases the new app, the buzzy platform, or the trendy format because that's where other journalists are. Voters are increasingly becoming news avoiders, so if campaigns want to reach them, they need to go elsewhere.

Further Reading

[5 Social Video Templates Every Campaign Should Be Using](#) – Campaign Trend

["Cord Nevers" and Disengaged Voters Are Key To Winning In 2026](#) – Center for Campaign Innovation

[Social media creators to overtake traditional media in ad revenue this year](#) – The Guardian

[1 in 5 Americans now regularly get news on TikTok, up sharply from 2020](#) – Pew Research

[The Role of CTV in 2025 Political Campaigns](#) – AdImpact

Influencers & Creators

THE HYPE

A new class of online kingmakers can deliver an audience no campaign can reach on its own.

THE REALITY

Appearing alongside content creators can help campaigns reach voters in much the same way that going on TV or speaking at an event might. It's simply a matter of shifting media behaviors. Just because an individual makes their living as an influencer doesn't mean their audience votes in lockstep.

Perhaps the greater challenge is the fragmentation of their audience and the lack of scale. An incredibly popular creator with millions of followers may still only reach a few hundred voters in a given district.

Further Reading

[Get The Most From An Endorsement](#) – Campaign Trend

[Why \(And How\) Campaigns Should Incorporate Paid Incentives To Voters](#) – Center for Campaign Innovation

[How Much Do Political Influencers Actually Influence Politics?](#) – Searchlight Institute

[Why Your Creator Program Isn't Working](#) – FWIW

[Influencers Embrace Push to Add Disclaimers on Paid Political Content](#) – NOTUS

Online Fundraising

THE HYPE

Dueling investigations into ActBlue and WinRed could keep money from reaching campaigns.

THE REALITY

Both Republicans and Democrats have alternate payment processing infrastructure. Accepting credit cards isn't the hard part. The challenge is finding donors, connecting with them, and earning a contribution.

For every \$100 a campaign raises, \$38 is spent raising that money. The growing cost of fundraising is the real story to keep an eye on. For some candidates, the costs have become so prohibitive they are priced out of digital fundraising, exactly the opposite of what grassroots fundraising was supposed to do.

Further Reading

[Everything You Need To Know For Recruiting Fundraising Email Surrogates](#) – Campaign Trend

[Democrats' Edge In The Partisan Email Divide](#) – Center for Campaign Innovation

[The Fundraising-Industrial Complex Is Eating American Politics](#) – On Data And Democracy

[ActBlue CEO Invokes Fifth Amendment Repeatedly in Testimony to Congress](#) – New York Times

[GOP-Led Hearing on ActBlue Reaches Tense Standstill](#) – Campaigns & Elections

The "Online" Candidate

THE HYPE

Virality is the new viability. The most electable candidates are the always online, meme-fluent posters.

THE REALITY

Attention is not turnout. The fundamentals of campaigning remain the same – building name ID, raising money, earning votes, and knocking your opponent off his or her game. Campaigns cannot be built for eyeballs only.

Yes, it's fun to cover the Spencer Pratts and the Hasan Piker-backed candidates, but the ultimate question is, does this campaign have the discipline to go the distance and turn out voters? Can they convert attention into organization? That's harder to tell from the outside, but signs of activity in real life offer clues.

For example, Zohran Mamdani's campaign often featured photos and videos of crowded rallies and volunteers canvassing voters.

Further Reading

[Can Spencer Pratt Actually Win?](#) – Campaign Trend

[The Data-Backed Way To Write The Perfect Campaign Website Bio](#) – Center for Campaign Innovation

[Spencer Pratt's LA Mayor Campaign Is Optimized For Attention, But Will It Get Votes?](#) – Eric Wilson on Substack

[What Spencer Pratt's Rise Can Teach Both Parties About AI-Age Campaigning](#) – Semafor

[Talent + Reps = Dynamite](#) – Doomscroll