The Internet Electorate

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Abstract:
The 2008 Presidential election offers evidence that the Internet is evolving as both a major source of political information and an instrument of political expression.

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Introduction

The Internet was a prominent fixture in the most recent Presidential election, regularly noted for its role in the Obama campaign’s successful fundraising and supporter-mobilization efforts [9], and for its widespread use by interested voters [16]. Here we report on a national telephone survey designed to assess how American’s experience of elections is changing in response to the increasing ubiquity of the digital communication network. The Internet has long been heralded as an efficient means of acquiring political information [2], but the emphasis on user-created content (e.g., Web 2.0) has meant that the network is now also becoming a more viable mode of political expression [3]. In this paper, we examine these complementary roles, exploring how Americans used the Internet during the 2008 election to learn about the campaign, to share political information, and to voice their own opinions, and we analyze who was most likely to do each. We conclude by briefly examining the influence that these practices have on citizens. These analyses are based on a national random-digit dial (RDD) telephone survey of 600 adult Americans. The survey was conducted in the two weeks immediately following the 2008 election (from November 6 through 20), and had a response rate of 26.2%.

Campaign information consumption continues to move online

The Internet was a major source of political information about the U.S. election in 2008. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) got campaign news online during the election season (see Figure 1), a marked increase from 2004 when only about one in four (27%) Americans said they got campaign news online [13]. Equally notable is the fact that in 2008 two-fifths (38%) of respondents reported seeking online campaign news almost every day. Citizens’ use of online sources is now only slightly lower than their information seeking on radio and even newspapers, although it continues to be a far less pervasive than television news (96% use and 83% use almost daily).

1 The response rate is calculated using AAPOR method two (RR2) and treating non-English speakers as ineligible.
What online sources do citizens utilize?

Figure 2 provides evidence for five broad findings about online sources of political information during the 2008 election period. First, about half (49%) of all Americans utilized web sites associated with the major news organizations for information about the campaign. This appears to be a technological update of the traditional approach to seeking information about the election from credible, established media institutions (especially television networks and major newspapers). In contrast to many other types of Web-based information sources, these major media outlets are not primarily defined by their online presence. The Internet represents just one of several modalities by which these organizations disseminate news and information, and the routinized use and reliability associated with their offline outlets probably contribute to their success online.

It is noteworthy that most citizens accessed the online versions of these mainstream news outlets rather than the more partisan alternatives available online. A number of scholars have expressed concern that as Americans turn to the Internet for their political information needs, they will gravitate to partisan sites in order to reinforce their existing views and to filter out contact with political ideas with which they might disagree, thereby abandoning broad, less biased news outlets [1, 20]. Yet compared to the
49% who used mainstream news sites, only 14%—about one in seven Americans—used explicitly partisan information sites (either liberal or conservative) during the 2008 election cycle. This proportion is slightly higher, but statistically indistinguishable from the 11% of Americans who sought information from partisan sites during the 2004 election. Indeed, given that more than twice as many individuals sought campaign information online in the most recent election cycle, it is arguably the case that there was a shift away from partisan online sources. The proportion of Americans utilizing partisan sites appears to be leveling off despite continued growth of mainstream news audiences.

Figure 2. Seeking political information online

Second, it is striking that the proportion of individuals (53%) who reported that email from friends and family was a source of political information during the 2008 campaign is even higher than the proportion using major new sites online. As might be expected, a large number of individuals (38%) reported that they employed both friends and family and national news media to learn about the campaigns. And some, perhaps most, of the information circulating via these online friends-and-family sources can be traced back to mainstream sources. For example, people often forward news stories that they consider important. Despite the use of mainstream outlets, however, these informal social networks, which are based on friendship and familial bonds, constitute a very different relationship between the person
sending campaign information and the person receiving it than is found between a mainstream broadcast sender and the news reader. A message traveling over a social network has been customized in the sense that it has been selected by a significant other and targeted to the recipient. Thus it is not the product of an information-seeking activity and, although it may have originated on a broadcast medium, it has heightened salience to the recipient because it comes via a personal connection.

This pattern of information sharing is consistent with one of the classic findings of opinion research – that individuals receive a significant share of their political information through a “two-step flow” of communication, wherein an opinion leader selectively identifies and communicates relevant information to the recipient [15]. But several aspects of this digitized version of the communication process are notable, and perhaps new. Senders do not need to absorb, synthesize and restate information in order to transmit rich and detailed content, because they can easily forward the original content or an electronic pointer. Also, senders can transmit information to multiple recipients with minimal effort, and they do not need to establish a synchronous face-to-face connection to do so. And further, the recipient has near-instant access to a vast and diverse array of related information resources. The recipient, if interested, can not only consume the recommended information, but also can actively pursue the topic more extensively using online tools such as search engines. When the recipient takes a more active role in processing and exploring an online political message, the impact of the message can be significantly enhanced [12].

The third broad finding regarding online campaign information is that a substantial proportion of individuals (32%) received online information from political groups and the candidates themselves. This is indicative of the extent to which formal political organizations are adopting and routinizing the Internet as a means of reaching a large population. Online media offer some clear strategic advantages to political actors: lower expense per contact; the capacity to customize specific messages to target groups; the ability to integrate interactive technologies; and the opportunity to encourage the recipients to recirculate campaign information to large numbers of people via their friends-and-family networks. These features are of enormous potential benefit to a political organization and it is reasonable to predict that such online communications will be increasingly utilized by campaign organizations.

Fourth, among the “alternative” online news outlets, both partisan and nonpartisan sites were consulted by sizable audiences. As noted above, about one in seven (14%) people used a partisan news site from
either side of the political spectrum, with a greater proportion of respondents seeking information from conservative sites (11%, e.g., NewsMax.com) than from liberal sites (7%, e.g., DailyKos.com). In fact, non-partisan sites were even more widely utilized than partisan sites. Non-partisan voter information sites, including the rumor checking site FactCheck.org and Project Vote Smart, were used by about one in five (19%) individuals. And independent (non-major) political news organizations such as RealClearPolitics.com were used by about one in six (15%) citizens.

Sites that aggregate news and information from across the web, such as Google News and Digg, provide another avenue to political content. Although not entirely comparable to the alternative news sites above (because they do not generate their own content), these services create opportunities for people to encounter crosscutting ideas because, in contrast to one-sided partisan sites, they explicitly seek to provide content from a diverse range of sources. In fact, news aggregators are used more widely than any of the alternative outlets: 29% of respondents used them. Use of these news aggregators as alternatives to the mainstream news media suggests that when citizens sought other sources of political information, most valued diversity and less bias.

And fifth, the most “populist” modalities of the online world have also penetrated political campaigns. In particular, more than one in four Americans got campaign information from video sharing sites, such as Google’s YouTube. Some of the independently produced videos, such as Obama Girl’s “Crush on Obama,” achieved national notoriety. That video has been viewed more than 14 million times and earned invitations for its star to appear on The Bill O’Reilly Factor and Saturday Night Live. Other videos captured revealing comments by campaigners and were often circulated by opponents to undermine the candidate’s credibility and support. As one might expect, younger people were the heaviest users of these video sharing sites, but this was not solely the domain of the young. In fact, the average age of individuals who reported getting campaign news from online video sites on a daily basis was 40 years old.

**Who acquires political information online?**

Having characterized the extent to which Americans are turning to various online sources, a related question is: what distinguishes these information consumers from others? Individual attributes
associated with other types of Internet use are also important here: lower age, greater income, and higher education level are each positively associated with acquisition of political information online. (See the online appendix to this article for supporting data.) These online information consumers are also more extensive users of offline news sources. Several explicitly political factors play a unique role in shaping online political information acquisition, which is greater among those with stronger partisan ideology and those engaged in more extensive political activity. Finally, those who distrust the mainstream media are more likely to turn to Internet-based sources. Thus characteristics representing the intersection of greater Internet use, political engagement, and particular attitudes towards the media have a significant influence on this online behavior.

**Political expression takes root online**

The Internet plays a key role for millions of Americans who seek political information online. But the 2008 election exemplifies the growing importance of another use of the Internet by the electorate: *political expression*. That is, the Internet is a resource not only for those who seek and consume political information but also for those who produce and disseminate such information. It serves as a conduit through which citizens share information and opinions, and thus it is a form of political expression and, potentially, persuasion. Figure 3 suggests at least five forms of such online political expression.
Figure 3. Sharing political information online

How do citizens express themselves online?

Email is the dominant Internet technology for the expression of political ideas, as it was for acquiring political information. Thus the first mode of online political expression is the use of email to forward political messages or share political news stories with others. About one-third (34%) of respondents used this mode during the 2008 campaign, and more than one in five (21%) sent political information multiple times. While most of the information shared in this way has been produced by others, it has presumably been extracted from online sources, thereby increasing the centrality of the Internet to the circulation of political information. Moreover, what is especially significant about these activities is that (in terms of the two-step communication flow) the individual is using the Internet to enable himself/herself to act as an opinion leader—as the disseminator of information. This is a far more active role for the individual than that of being a recipient of political information or even of being an information seeker. Potentially, this role as an online disseminator of political information should engage and mobilize the individual more extensively in the world of politics.

A second form of political engagement facilitated by the Internet is the use of email to communicate with political leaders. About one in five individuals (19%) sent email to an elected official or a political
candidate during the 2008 campaign. Contacting a political actor has consistently been interpreted as one of the most important forms of citizen engagement in a representative democracy [4]. There is also evidence that the Internet is a mode of contact with elected officials that has encouraged political communication from individuals who previously did not engage in such contacts [14].

A third form of Internet-based political expression is signing an online petition, an action reported by one in seven (14%) respondents, most of whom signed more than one. Online petitions have become an integral part of many protest sites [6] and constitute another means of communicating a political opinion to public officials and candidates. Because digitally signing such a document takes very little effort, online petitions are sometimes viewed as having less impact on decisionmakers than hand-signed offline petitions. However, there is empirical evidence that online petitions are influential in some cases [10] and that the act of signing can contribute to the formation of issue-based communities through the recognition of shared political interests [7]. At the very least, these petitions have symbolic communicative importance to the signer, enabling him or her to signal the salience of an issue to a political actor.

Fourth, an explicitly public form of political expression is posting a comment online in response to political content authored by someone else. Nearly one in eight individuals (13%) posted a public comment on the Web at least once during the 2008 campaign season. This includes about one in nine individuals (12%) who posted a comment on a news site, and one in twelve (8%) who posted a comment on a political blog or discussion board. This is a particularly interesting form of dialogic communication because of the level of commitment to political expression that it represents. Moreover, research evidence suggests that some individuals view their participation in online political discussion as an opportunity to engage with those with whom they disagree and that they often value the diversity of views they encounter in the discussion [19]. Empirical analyses demonstrate that political discussions occurring via blog posts regularly cross ideological boundaries and that substantive exchanges are a central aspect of these crosscutting discussions [11]. Thus it is perhaps encouraging to advocates of deliberative democracy that so many individuals are engaging in this mode of political expression.

Finally, only a tiny proportion of respondents (3%) shared their political views by creating a political video that they posted online. Yet these individuals might represent the cutting edge of online political expression, where early adopters experiment with technologies that more Americans will embrace over
time. YouTube, the first user-created video site to achieve a national audience, was only established in 2005. After just a few years, millions of Americans are using it to express their political opinions. From serious critiques to humorous homage, hundreds of political videos were posted in the lead up to the 2008 election. As noted above, this is a potentially powerful form of populist political expression. Political organizations and major news organizations have been quick to recognize the political potential of YouTube. In 2007, for example, CNN invited viewers to submit questions for a series of Presidential debates via the service [8]. It will be interesting to track the evolution of political expression utilizing such user-created online media as video and social networking services.

**Who expresses political opinions online?**

Can we characterize those who are most engaged in online political expression? The use of online news is the strongest predictor of online political expression, but political information acquisition and information sharing via the Internet are not perfectly correlated. There are other factors that have a distinct influence on online political expression. After controlling for their level of online news consumption, people who are older, have less money, and are more politically active are more likely to express themselves online. (See the online appendix for supporting data.) Those with strongly held ideological beliefs are also marginally more likely to engage in online political expression than those who are less committed to their ideology.

**Electoral consequences of Internet use**

The analysis of behavior from the 2008 election indicates that the Internet is becoming an important part of the contemporary political communication environment. A crucial question is whether the online political communications described here have tangible *electoral* consequences? Our data reveal that use of the Internet to acquire political information and to express political opinions is significantly associated with voting. Voters sought political information from online news sources more often than nonvoters ($t=2.21$, $p<.05$), and they were much more likely to express their opinions online ($t=4.0$, $p<.001$).

These correlations are partially explained by the fact that online political activity and voting share a common set of underlying causal factors. To demonstrate this, we use logistic regression, a statistical technique that allows us to account for a variety of factors including age, interest in the election,
political activity, income, race, offline media use, and online political activity when predicting whether or not an individual voted (see the online appendix for model coefficients). As expected, the relationship between online expression and voting is unchanged under conditions of multivariate control. Individuals who engage in online political expression are more likely to vote (see Figure 4a). But, surprisingly, the direction of the association between acquiring campaign information online and voting is reversed when we control for political expression. Greater use of the Internet for political information acquisition without a corresponding increase in Internet-based information sharing actually reduces the likelihood that an individual will vote in the election (see Figure 4b). Thus, in an unexpected finding, people consume more political information online but who do not also express themselves online were less likely to cast a vote in the 2008 election than those who encounter online information less often.

Figure 4. Probability of voting by online political activity

(a) Probability of voting by online opinion expression

(b) Probability of voting by online information acquisition

Note: (4a) Online opinion expression is dichotomous and assumes average online news use. (4b) Online information acquisition ranges from no use to two standard deviations above the mean value, in the absence of online opinion expression. Both figures assume typical values for demographic characteristics.
It is intriguing to speculate briefly about what might be driving this pattern. One explanation springs from Anthony Downs’ [5] classic model of voting behavior. Downs postulates that individuals seek information to guide a well-reasoned vote choice as long as the perceived benefits from acquiring additional information outweigh the costs of gathering and managing it. Perhaps individuals continue to acquire political information online because they remain uncertain about whether and how to cast their ballot. However, even at the point where the vote must be cast, they are still uncertain and thus do not vote.

A second explanation of the negative relationship between voting and greater online political information exposure is based on a more dysfunctional version of the Downsian voter model. Downs assumes that the individual is strategic, and will abandon the information search when costs outweigh benefits, but individuals might fail to accurately assess the costs of additional online information. First, some individuals are unable to self-regulate their use of the Internet, transforming online information seeking from a purposeful activity into something more problematic [17]. If online political information seeking becomes habitual, or even addictive, extensive activity might no longer function to increase the individual’s knowledge or motivation regarding voting. Second, our results suggest that online political information exposure was not heavily focused on content that reinforced the user’s partisan viewpoint. Although an individual’s exposure to a diverse marketplace of ideas has many desirable consequences in a democracy, it can also produce political ambivalence [18]. Thus, although individuals may seek information with the intention of casting a more informed vote, the additional information could actually increase their uncertainty, ultimately reducing their likelihood of voting.

A third plausible explanation for the finding relates to the individual’s motivations for seeking political information online. We reported above that the negative relationship between online campaign information exposure and voting only holds when we control for factors such as political expression and campaign interest. Perhaps increased online political information seeking that is not accompanied by these forms of political engagement is indicative of non-vote-related motivations. It might be that some individuals are more interested in being entertained by online political information than they are in using it to shape a more informed vote choice. Thus some political junkies may view politics as a blood sport, and they seek news about politics in the way that others attend to the sports pages. And others might view online political information as a compelling form of infotainment, seeking it for the same reasons that some people read the latest rumors and news about Hollywood celebrities. Dedicated
political sites such as Politico—which offers exhaustive political coverage but sometimes emphasizes political game-playing and Beltway gossip over serious discussions of issues and candidates’ positions—could serve this style of online political information consumption. Individuals who are especially interested in being entertained by politics are arguably both more likely to consume substantial amounts of political information and less likely to cast a ballot. While our data do not allow us to test these alternative explanations, the decline of voting among a significant group that encounters more political information online merits further exploration.

Conclusion

Reliance on the Internet as a conduit of political information has grown steadily over the past decade. Our data on the uses of the Internet during the 2008 election campaign in the United States reveal that there are two different and important modes of use. First, there is a growing presence of online information exposure activities. About two-thirds of Americans used the Internet as a source of political information during the campaign period, which is comparable to the usage levels of such traditional sources as newspapers and radio. We highlighted several particularly interesting aspects of this online information seeking. Networks of friends and family are a key source of online political information, creating a significant and novel form of the classic “two-step information flow.” Also, online information from the more established media is much more extensively utilized than that from nontraditional sources. Among the latter, nonpartisan sources are used more than partisan ones.

We have labeled the second mode of Internet use online political expression. In the most recent national election, millions of Americans used email and the Web to share political information and opinions with others, and even to create their own online political media. Thus, the Internet is becoming an important avenue for political expression that has the potential to facilitate a much more democratic dissemination of information and to empower individuals as information sources. People who engage in these practices might have found other ways to be politically involved without these technologies, but our analysis indicates that the Internet is now a significant medium, both reinforcing existing patterns and also opening new lines of political communication.
We also examined the linkages, at the individual level of analysis, between these two modes of Internet use and the probability of voting (in the 2008 presidential election). While more activity in each mode is correlated with a higher probability of voting, the introduction of controls revealed a more subtle and even surprising set of linkages. We offered some possible explanations for the lower probability of voting among those who were more active in online political information seeking, given controls on online political expression and conventional predictors of voting behavior. The Internet electorate is still in its infancy, but this research suggests that an increasing proportion of Americans will utilize these communicative capabilities and will rely more upon them. Thus the patterns of both political information seeking and exposure and also of political expression within the Internet electorate will continue to evolve and contribute in significant ways to the democratic process.

References


