

The Effects of Internet Usage on Voter Choice in the 2012 United States Presidential Elections

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The purpose of this study is to see the effects of Internet on modern day presidential elections. By testing Internet usage in 4 different ways, I am able to identify which behaviors influence voter choice in the 2012 Presidential Elections. Results suggest that those who visited a candidates Presidential website during the campaign were more likely to vote for Barack Obama in 2012, while specific types of Internet usage were less reliable predictors of the vote.

Introduction:

The successful use of social media in the US presidential campaign of Barack Obama has established Twitter, Facebook and other social media as essential parts of the political campaign process. Many would say that Obama's victory in 2008 as well as 2012 was aided greatly by his online strategy. Shortly after his victory, Obama used Twitter to let the web community know how he felt, tweeting "This is history." Mary Joyce (2010) argues that the Internet is a significant part of the many factors that enable a candidate to win a Presidential election. And while social networking surrounds us now more than ever, it is becoming a movement that is beginning to define this generation; helping to shape and mold the future's events. The World Wide Web is a technological advance that has changed the way politics is perceived and acted upon. Due to its fairly recent arrival, research in this field of study is limited so it is difficult to fully understand the kind of effect the Internet and its forces are having on politics, more specifically, voting behavior in the 2012 US Presidential Elections.

This study will look at political participation and voter choice on the basis of whether or not respondents from the 2012 Election voted for the Democratic nominee Barack Obama or the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney. The survey questions were drawn from the 2012 American National Election Study. The respondent's vote will be compared to their Internet usage- including social media usage through certain questions asked in the survey. This study makes for important research due to the increasing use of the Internet among many and its growing role in our everyday lives, including the realm of political knowledge and participation. This branch of research also serves well for upcoming presidential elections and for those who are running for an elective office.

Literature Review:

Barack Obama and the Democratic Party have taken the innovation of the Internet to the next level. Not only did the 2008 campaign raise even larger sums from small donors, it used online media and emerging technology in new ways to organize volunteers, to inform and inspire voters, and to turn out supporters in caucuses, primaries and general elections and the results were impressive. (McGrath 2011). Obama and his campaign team

executed one of the most well planned campaigns of the modern era. The campaign made substantial use of new media and new technologies to mobilize large numbers of supporters (Hurme 2009). Hurme claims that an influential factor in campaign strategies in 2008 was candidates' personalities and attitudes towards the Internet. McCain for instance was supposedly unable to even check his own e-mail, while Obama was glued to his mobile Blackberry device. Obama's powerful attitude towards the Internet trickled down to his supporters. Hurme's research was designed to show the extent to which voter engagement with campaign websites fostered candidate support (Hurme 2009). Using Pew Research Center's Political Survey, a comparison of several variables were used to understand the effect of the Internet on voter preferences in the 2008 Presidential election. **With the use of a** logistic regression model, results indicated that there was a huge increase in the likelihood of Democrats choosing Obama, based on whether Democrats viewed a campaign Website or not (Hurme 2009).

As to address the role of liberals and technology, it seems as though they are much more efficient than others. For example, Democratic candidates as a group were quicker to use the Internet than their Republican counterparts in recent congressional elections (Hurme 2009). Best and Kreuger (2005) ran a study using two classic evaluative techniques to analyze the representativeness of Internet political participation patterns. The results indicated that online participators hold more liberal attitudes even after controlling for demographic characteristics. Online participators also tend to hold more liberal attitudes more consistently and more strongly than offline participants. Kreuger (2002) agrees with the idea that liberals are more likely to be using the Internet as opposed to anyone else. Part of this reason may stem from the age group of voters online, most of which are a younger population who are more prone to use the Internet more often. These young voters have been statistically found to have more liberal views than those who are older; therefore most participants of the Internet would be more likely to vote democratic.

Metzgar (2009) explains that the one-way model of mass media, in which the voice of one authority is broadcast to the masses who receive it unquestioningly, is fading with the advent of interactive media technologies

that allow the audience to play a more active role. There are structural reasons for differences between the Democratic and Republican parties' usage of social media in the general election. Structurally, history suggests that the Republican Party is typically a more top-down, hierarchical organization. That is the kind of organization that functions well with dictates from above, with a single leader, a single message and a comprehensive organization for distributing that message. On the other hand, the Democratic Party is a more heterogeneous group, more comfortable with ceding control to others outside the formal party hierarchy. One suspects it was largely that approach which led to more widespread use of social media tools by the Democrats. Social media's strength lies in its communal nature and lack of strict hierarchies. Scholars have argued that the Internet is a democratizing medium for its capacity to provide increased access to information and interaction, bringing individuals into the political process (Delli Carpini, 2000; Morris, 1999). Moreover, the open and participatory nature is compatible with fundamental Democratic values (Kushin 2010).

The positive relationship between Internet use and political self-efficacy and situational political involvement may also translate to social media. Past studies have reported that political use of social network sites and blogs is positively related to political efficacy, political participation, and online political behaviors such as online political discussion and online participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2009; Kim & Geidner, 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Attention to social media would be positively associated with political self-efficacy, because use of media-rich social media applications for political information such as microblog updates and streaming live video of campaign events would give users the perception of increased engagement with preferred candidates or parties.

The increasing spread of information and communication technologies has led to questions about and research on how time spent online may be related to youth political engagement. Of particular interest has been the potential of the Internet for increasing youth political participation given that members of a young age group are most likely to be online and spend more time on the Web and using social media tools than other cohorts (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010). The media consumption behaviors of young people differ significantly from those

of people less than a generation ago; very few young people watch the evening news as their parents once did, and even fewer read the newspaper. Traditional Internet sources rely predominantly on paid professionals, whereas social media rely primarily on interaction among users which is heavily made up of young adults (Kushin 2010). This huge new online presence prompts questions of whether this new outreach tactic reaches young voters and provides the information they need to raise their political information efficacy, leading them to vote (Hayes 2008). The basic goal of any Web site is to provide information, though Lupia and Philpot (2005) found that Web sites are only useful if they provide information effectively and efficiently, and we cannot underestimate the value of information to the political process. Providing information to young voters is of paramount importance, as those who do not feel well-informed are less likely to vote than those who feel more confident in their knowledge (Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco, 2007), and many young voters are not confident that they can make sense of the amount of information available to them (Hayes, 2008). For young voters to process information, it has to be present and easily accessible, free from interruptions and the clutter and filler (the old “fluff over substance” charge) that we so often see in the traditional news media (Lupia and Philpot, 2005).

There are two competing perspectives of the roles of the Internet in democracy. Some consider the Internet a democratizing medium, as it can increase information access and allow citizens to voice and exchange their opinions (Morris, 1999). From this perspective, the Internet brings more citizens into the political process and may be particularly effective at engaging young people (Delli Carpini, 2000). A persistent theme in the study of American politics is that political behavior is deeply rooted in social interaction. Decades of research suggest that social interaction has important consequences for opinion formation and voting behavior (Sokhey 2008).

Of especially great concern to parents and social observers alike, is the overnight popularity and lasting appeal of many social networking sites (SNS) among young people. Seemingly all too obsessed with creating and maintaining their online personas and social networks, many worry that today's youth are so deceived by the false sense of social connection that they indeed care less and less about what's going on in the real world. Yet, the year of 2008 has witnessed a surprising marriage between the innovative use of SNS and youth voter turnout (Jinsi

2009). Attention to social media would also be positively associated with situational political involvement, because social media offer users new channels for political information. Young adults rely heavily on friends and the Internet for political information (Wells & Dudash, 2007). As political communication sources, social media are a recent phenomenon. Nearly all major party candidates used social media during the 2008 campaign (Hayes, 2008), with some beginning their use in the 2006 midterm election (Gueorguieva, 2008). Attention to social media for campaign information was significant during the 2008 campaign, particularly among young adults (Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008). For example, 27% of adults younger than 30 reported obtaining campaign information from social network sites compared to 4% of adults age 30 to 39 and only 1% older than 40 (Kohut, 2008).

The last school of thought focuses on a subgroup of young adults; college students are known to be among the most Internet-connected subgroups of the population and frequent users of e-mail (Jones, 2002). Universities today have largely increased their use of the Internet for educational purposes. This causes students to be using the Internet for classes more often than not. This usage then transfers over to their use of social media at the same time, especially during campaign season. It is safe to assume that most college students, due to their age, tend to vote for liberal candidates, but we can now also test that with the possibility of more education comes more Internet and social media usage and therefore a more Democratic Vote.

There is still much more work to be done in this field. The difficulty with this area of research lies in the sense that data available to the public on the opinions and ideas of those who voted in the 2012 Presidential Elections is quite sparse. Studies parallel to this one will always be limited due to the fast changing and rapid growth of the Web and all of its tools available. Social media are constantly evolving, and the boundaries between the cognitive and behavioral aspects as well as those between social media and traditional Internet sources may become less distinct as new applications are developed and implemented. Therefore, future studies should continue to explore the dimensionality of political Internet use (Kushin 2010).

Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Those who visited a President's website during the 2012 Presidential Campaign were more likely to vote Democrat.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Those who had signed an Internet petition on a political or social issue within the past 4 years were more likely to vote Democrat.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Those who used the Internet to sign up for information or alerts from a party or candidate prior to or during the 2012 Presidential Campaign were more likely to vote Democrat.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Those who used social media (Facebook or Twitter) within the past 4 years to post about a political issue were more likely to vote Democrat.*

Data and Methods:

In order to test all of the discussed hypotheses, I assembled a data set using survey information from the American National Election Survey 2012. This panel study interviewed the same group of respondents two months prior to the 2012 elections and were followed by post-election re-interviewing beginning November 7, 2012. The survey was conducted by telephone and supplemented with additional data collection. It asks various questions on topics ranging from candidate choice to party identification to media exposure. The survey consists of a total of 5,914 survey candidates, a large N size, though not every respondent answered every single question.

My dependent variable was whether or not the respondent had voted for the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate, measured by whether or not they voted for Barack Obama or not. I had four independent variables that were used to explain the vote: 1) whether or not the respondent visited any presidential candidates' websites about the campaign on the Internet, 2) Whether or not the respondent has signed an Internet petition about a political or social issue within the past four years, 3) whether or not the respondent has ever sent a message on Facebook or Twitter about a political issue within the past 4 years and 4) whether or not the respondent used the internet to sign up for information or alerts from a party or candidate prior to or during the campaign. I also controlled for four variables, those of which include: gender, party identification, age and race.

My first step was to generate and rename each variable. I then proceeded to recode all of my variables starting with my dependent variable. I recoded it to 1 as voting for the Democratic candidate and 0 for the Republican candidate. Because my dependent variable was dichotomous, I had to use Logistic Regression as my model of choice for this study. Independent variables were recoded as follows: *visitpreswebsite* was recoded from 1 and 2 to 0 and 1, 1 being “visited website” and 0 being “did not visit,” *Internetpetition* was recoded from 1 and 2 to 0 and 1 with 1 being “have done this” and 0 being “have not done this,” *socialmedia* was recoded from 1 and 2 to 0 and 1 with 1 being “have done this in the past 4 years” and 0 being “have not done this in the past 4 years,” and *Internetalerts* was recoded from 1 and 2 to 0 and 1 with 1 being “yes” and 0 being “no.” Control variables were recoded as follows: *Gender* was recoded from 1 and 2 to 0 and 1 with 1 being “male” and 0 being “female,” *Partyid* was recoded from 1-4 to 0 and 1 with 1 being “Democratic Candidate” and 0 being “Republican Candidate,” *Age* was recoded from 1-4 to 0-3 with 0 being “age 18-34” and 3 being “age 65+” and finally, *Race* was recoded so that all other races were combined into “Other” as 0 and “Black” as 1. Controlling for African American/Black voters is associated with the logical thought that a large population of African Americans voted for Barack Obama in 2012. After recoding, the next step was to summarize my variables to show the mean and the standard deviation for each independent variable, referenced in Appendix 1. I then proceeded to run a correlation table between all my variables (Appendix 2). My findings and analysis are discussed in detail below.

Findings/Discussion

After running a Logistic Regression model complete with all four explanatory and control variables, my findings show the respondent vote in the 2012 Presidential Election as seen below.

Table 1
Respondent Vote in 2012 U.S Presidential Election

Visited Pres. Website	.907(.350)*
Internet Petition	.052(.270)
Social Media	-.273(.266)
Internet Alerts	-.094(.320)
Gender	-.059(.361)
Party Identification	.248(.260)
Age	-.152(.097)
Race	.806(.342)*
Constant	.741(.351)
-2 Log likelihood	-210.1693
N size	352

Note: These are logistic regression coefficients with the standard errors for each explanatory variable in parentheses. Variables with a * are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Variables with a ** are statistically significant at the 99% confidence interval.

Table 1 represents the findings from the logistic regression model from the respondent vote in the 2012 Presidential Election. We can observe that the only explanatory variable that is statistically significant is *visitpreswebsite* at the 95% level (P=.05). The -2 Log likelihood for the first model is -210, almost half of the observation size, which means the model was a moderate fit. The N size is 352 observations, a number much smaller than the initial 5,914 due to the fact that many respondents refuse to answer certain questions or were not asked. Because *visitpreswebsite* had statistical support, I proceeded to run the margins command, in order to predict the probabilities at different levels while holding the other values constant at the mean.

	Margin	Std. Error
visitpreswebsite		
0	.647278	.0307918
1	.8195316	.0463747

In this case, it showed the predicted probability that if a person visits either candidate's presidential website during the campaign, there is an 82% chance they will vote for the Democratic candidate but if they do not, there is an 65% they will vote for the Democratic candidate, therefore supporting Hypothesis #1. Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 are

not supported due to no statistical significance.

Of the four variables I controlled for, only of them had statistical support. Table 1 points out that *Race* is statistically significant, supporting the theory that African Americans were more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, in the 2012 Presidential Elections.

Throughout the journey of this study, many challenges were faced, all due to issues with the data; even though there was a large N size, most people refused to answer many of the questions, or just didn't know the answer and therefore would bring down the N size after running different commands in STATA. Finding usable data for a study such as this is an obstacle on its own. This may be for the obvious reason that it is a new phenomenon and therefore no legitimate datasets have been established for those interested in research in this area. The other reason may have something to do with party competition. Now that the Internet is considered an everyday use, both the Democrats and Republicans must invent strategies to help their side flourish, especially during campaign season. Because of the competition, these strategies will remain mostly secret and not available to the public for research. Although the process has been regrettably more difficult than planned, this study is a small step in the right direction as it makes use of the best available data that ANES provided for those interested in this field.

Conclusion:

The importance of Internet usage and its effects on politics today is one that is a growing curiosity among many people, not just in the United States, but all around the world. This study will undoubtedly be furthered in the near future, hopefully with better data that uses better questions in regards to internet and social media usage. An interesting way to further future research would be to compare Internet and Social Media usage between 2008 and 2012, both of which Barack Obama and the Democratic Party won.

Appendix 1 Summary Table

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Respondent Vote	4532	.5789938	.493775	0	1
Visited Pres. Website	2051	.858118	.3490142	0	1
Internet Petition	5614	3.728536	2.745655	0	7
Internet Alerts	4379	2.629139	1.271298	0	4
Social Media Use	5767	1.488816	2.510575	0	7
Age	1725	1.554783	.6820847	0	3
Race	1908	.2903564	.4540458	0	1
Party Identification	5914	11.85678	9.713446	0	1
Gender	2054	.4313535	.4953858	0	1

Appendix 2 Correlation Table

	Respondent Vote	Internet Use	Internet News	Attention to political Internet News	Social Media Use	Education	Age Group	Race	Family Income	Gender
Respondent Vote	1.000									
Visited Pres. Website	-0.0983 0.0003	1.000								
Internet Petition	-0.0212 0.1629	.	1.000							
Internet Alerts	0.142 0.4037	.	-0.2098 0.000	1.000						
Social Media Use	0.0811 0.0000	0.1690 0.0000	0.1193 0.0000	0.0047 0.7580	1.000					
Age	-0.1173 0.0001	0.0390 0.1057	-0.0200 0.4444	-0.0161 0.6018	0.0048 0.0846	0.0191 0.4289	1.000			
Race	0.4378 0.0000	-0.0380 0.0972	-0.0231 0.3512	0.0165 0.5738	0.0601 0.0111	-0.0890 0.0001	-0.0547 0.0288	1.000		
Party Identification	-0.1727 0.000	0.2193 0.0000	0.1846 0.0000	0.0101 0.5023	-0.0475 0.0003	0.3663 0.0000	0.0797* 0.0009	0.1732 0.000	1.000	
Gender	-0.0875 0.0012	-0.2666 0.2282	0.1141 0.0000	-0.0542 0.0546	-0.0563 0.0138	-0.0200 0.3674	0.0018 0.0942	0.0515 0.024	0.0504 0.0225	1.000

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