Society Online

The Internet in Context

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ISBN - 0-7619-2708-5

2004

SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks ▪ London ▪ New Delhi

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The Internet and Political Involvement in 1996 and 2000

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The internet promises to transform the nature of political participation and expression. Some say that the internet has or will become enormously beneficial for democratic processes in particular and for society in general. Others argue that the internet will be either harmful or ruinous. Another possibility—seldom considered—is that the internet will have only minimal impact (Katz & Rice, 2002). The stakes riding on the political impact of the internet are enormous. The technology could potentially affect the democratic nature of American society, the global human and natural condition, and the ability of special interests to capture billions of taxpayer dollars.

Despite this, until recently, few investigators have provided substantial empirical information about the internet's nascent political consequences (Bimber, 2002). Prior to the 2000 election cycle, there appears to have been only one national random survey of political participation comparing users with nonusers (Katz, Aspden, & Reich, 1997).

The situation was markedly different in 2000. Many pundits proclaimed that 2000 would be "the year of the internet." Millions of dollars of governmental and private foundation-sponsored research was being conducted, and tens of millions

of dollars of venture capital was being pumped into making the prophecy of the pundits come true (although, of course, that was not the reason for the investments). For example, in terms of the national party conventions, online portal services that were freely available included live streaming video, moment-by-moment and in-depth online reporting, and reams of retrievable documents, position papers, speeches, and statements.

The current study is in the unique position of being able to report analyses of historically relevant internet use data from the 1996 and 2000 national elections. This research is part of the Syntopia Project (2002). The project's aim has been to create, through random digit dialing phone surveys as well as case studies, in-depth observations, focus groups, and Web site analyses, a multiyear program charting social aspects of Americans' mediated communication behavior on the internet and Web and through mobile telephones.

Sources of Data

The Syntopia data come from a series of national representative telephone surveys in 1995, 1996, 1997, and 2000 designed by the chapter authors but administered by commercial survey firms. The sample sizes were 2,500 for October 1995, 557 plus a supplemental sample of 450 users for November 1996, 2,148 plus a supplemental sample of 153 users for November 1997, and 1,305 for March 2000. For 1996 and 1997, the analyses reported population estimates of internet use from the initial unaugmented samples but used the combined (regular and augmented) samples for comparing relative distributions of variables. The percentage of respondents who indicated that they were using the internet rose from 8.1% in 1995 to 18.8% in 1996, to 30.1% in 1997, to 59.7% in 2000.

This study also analyzes some data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project election survey in 2000, which included all cases of completed surveys (from adults over 18 years of age) by Princeton Survey Research Associates from October 1 to November 26, 2000.

Both sets of surveys followed rigorous sampling protocols and used random digit dialing to produce statistically representative samples of the adult U.S. population. The following analyses of the Syntopia and Pew data do not use weighted responses. Of course, all of the standard disclaimers about survey and opinion research apply to this research as well (Fisher & Katz, 2000).

Summary of Digital Divide Trends and Influences: 1992 to 2000

Before delving into the detailed results of the political aspects, this section briefly summarizes results concerning the "digital divide" (America Online, 2000; Katz & Aspden, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Katz & Rice, 2002; Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; McConnaughey, 2001; "Net Users," 2001; Norris, 2001; Walsh, Gazala, & Ham, 2001; Wresch, 2002).

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES BY SURVEY YEAR AND BY USER COHORT

The percentage of users who were female went from 46.4% in 1996 to 45.0% in 1997 to 50.6% in 2000 (the 1995 percentage was 62.5%, clearly an example of high variability in small samples). The percentage of users age 40 years or over increased from 34.8% in 1995, to 37.7% in 1996, to 42.2% in 1997, to 44.4% in 2000. The percentages of users with an income of more than $35,000 were 69.3% in 1995, 62.8% in 1996, 78.8% in 1997, and 77.0% in 2000. The percentages of users without a college degree were 48.0% in 1995, 52.4% in 1996, 51.2% in 1997, and 56.0% in 2000. And the percentages of African American users were 6.0% in 1995, 5.1% in 1996, 7.5% in 1997, and 9.1% in 2000. (Census figures for 1998 or 2000 for each demographic category were as follows: female, 51%; at least 40 years old, 55%; less than $35,000 income, 44.6%; less than a college education, 71.9%; African American, 12.7% [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001].)

Each of the Syntopia national surveys also asked users the year in which they started using the internet (referred to as "the internet, also known as the Information or Electronic Superhighway"). This allows analysis of cohorts of users—those starting in 1992 or before and those starting in each subsequent year. Across the cohorts of users, the proportion of female users increased, new internet users were proportionally more female, and new users were more likely to be female overall. The proportion of users age 40 years or over increased, and new internet users in a given year were older than the average age of all users in that survey year, but they were still well below the proportion age 40 years or over in the general population (approximately 55%) (and this disproportion is extreme for respondents over 65 years of age). The proportion of new internet users with a household income less than $35,000 increased slowly, although those with a lower income were more likely to stop being internet users. The proportion

of non-college graduates was 28% for those users who started in 1992 or before and rose to 67% for the 1999–2000 cohort. The proportion of African Americans using the internet rose and then declined a bit over both of the cohort years.

INTERNET DROPOUTS

The Syntopia analyses identified a second digital divide, that is, dropouts (i.e., those who used the internet at one time but no longer did so as of the survey year). The percentages of dropouts were 7.8% in 1995, 11% in 1996, 10% in 1997, and 11.5% in 2000. Dropouts were significantly younger, less affluent, and less well educated than were users, but they were not more likely to be female or African American. Details on reasons that dropouts gave for no longer using the internet were reported elsewhere (Katz & Aspden, 1998; Katz & Rice, 2002).

AWARENESS OF THE INTERNET

This research identified a third digital divide, that is, relating to awareness of the existence of the internet (defined by the question "Have you heard of the internet or the Information Superhighway?"). The percentage of the samples who were not even aware of the internet dropped from 15.2% in 1995, to 10.1% in 1996, to 9.9% in 1997, to 8.3% in 2000. The percentage of respondents who were aware of the internet but who still were not users dropped from 69.1% in 1995, to 59.8% in 1996, to 50.2% in 1997, to 21.4% in 2000. Of those who were aware of the internet, the percentage of women rose from 45.5% in 1995 to 53.3% in 2000, the percentage of those age 40 years or over rose from 47.9% in 1995 to 50.2% in 2000, the percentage of those earning less than $35,000 per year fell from 52.1% in 1995 to 33.5% in 2000, the percentage of those with less than a college education dropped from 70.6% in 1995 to 64.9% in 2000, and the percentage of those who were African Americans rose from 7.2% in 1995 to 10.5% in 2000. Thus, the awareness divide seems to have largely disappeared according to gender, age, and race but seems to be increasing by income and education, implying a persistent and troubling problem with reaching the most disadvantaged.

COMBINED INFLUENCES ON INTERNET USE

In 1995, significant regression predictors of being an internet user were as follows: male, young, greater income, and higher education (16% variance explained, $n = 1{,}676$). In 2000, significant regression predictors of internet use were as follows: young, greater income, and higher education (45% variance explained, $n = 924$). Once awareness was achieved, there was no digital divide in 2000 based on gender or race.

Issues of Internet and Political Involvement

A central issue, also discussed elsewhere (e.g., Katz & Rice, 2002; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002), is whether internet involvement decreases community involvement, political participation, social interaction, and integration (Katz & Aspden, 1997c; Kraut et al., 1998; Putnam, 2000; Rice, 2001; Selnow, 1994) and destroys "authentic" social interaction (Turkle, 1996; Wynn & Katz, 1997) and meaningful interpersonal social networks. Even before the internet was invented, voter participation was a hotly contested issue in terms of its meaning both as a collective action and as a summary statistic of social involvement (Winders, 1999).

Social scientists exploring this topic have formulated strong opinions about the nature of these changes (Browning, 2002; Davis, 1999; Gronlund, 2002; Grossman, 1995; Hague & Loder, 1999; Norris, 2001; Rash, 1997; Wresch, 2002), although they remain sharply divided as to the direction and magnitude of these changes (Rice, 2002). Some argue that lack of access to internet resources by various groups in society, relative to traditional outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television and the self-reinforcing use of the internet by small, "net-savvy," special interest communities, would translate into a narrowing of the basis of political participation and legitimacy of government (Starobin, 1996; White, 1997). Some theorists have argued that the internet is destroying community groups and voluntary associations, or is diverting the citizenry away from traditional political processes, that are necessary for the democratic process to succeed (Carpini, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Rash, 1997; Turkle, 1996). On the other hand, some argue that involvement can create alternative communities that are as valuable and useful as our familiar, physically located communities and perhaps more involved in democratic debate and diversity (Baym, 1995; de Sola Poole, 1983; Kapor, 1993; Katz & Rice, 2002; Rice, 1987a, 1987b, 2002).

Internet Use and Offline and Online Political Activity: 1996 Syntopia Survey

OFFLINE POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Table 7.1 provides the percentages of the 1996 Syntopia survey respondents indicating that they participated in a variety of offline and online political

Table 7.1 Questions About Offline and Online Political Activity, and Political Importance of Media: 1996 Syntopia Survey (percentages)

	Yes
I am going to ask you about some political activities and whether you did any of them in the past year: ($n = 1{,}008$)	
Attend any political rallies	10
Make phone calls on behalf of candidates	5
Write or fax any letters to elected officials	13
Give money to a political cause, committee, or campaign	14
Have any face-to-face or phone discussions with friends/family about the 1996 political campaign and election	69
Watch the Republican convention on television	55
Watch the Democratic convention on television	54
Vote in the November general election earlier this month	73
Thinking back to the period since the beginning of October, in terms of your online activities and the 1996 election campaign, did you: ($n = 549$)	
Have any e-mail exchanges or chat room discussions or postings with friends or family about the 1996 political campaign and election?	17
Read any bulletin board or discussion group postings about the campaign or election?	22
Receive any e-mail about the campaign or election?	15
Send or receive any e-mail to or from a government official, candidate for office, or political campaign committee?	8
Send any e-mail to others about the campaign or election?	10
Visit any Web sites with campaign-related information?	23
Follow any part of the election by reading the news online?	24
Follow the voting on Election Day from your computer?	10
View information online about the election after it was over?	21

activities. In terms of offline political activities, only about 1 in 10 respondents engaged in overt political activity, ranging from making phone calls on behalf of candidates (5%) to giving money to a political cause, committee, or campaign (14%). However, more than two thirds did discuss the political campaign and election either by phone or face-to-face (69%), and more than half watched the Republican or Democratic convention on television. Nearly three quarters of the respondents said, within a few weeks of the 1996 general election, that they had voted. (The actual percentage of eligible citizens who voted was 49.1% in 1996 and 50.7% in 2000 [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001]. There is a perennial bias in surveys toward reporting socially approved behaviors, such as going to church, contributing to charities, and voting [Fisher & Katz, 2000].) The respondents

tended to rate various media as of either medium or high importance, from national and local television shows (86%), to newspapers (81%), to television (79%), to campaign commercials or leaflets (38%).

There seems to be one dimension of *offline political activity* consisting of whether the respondents attended any political rallies, wrote or faxed letters to elected officials, made phone calls on behalf of candidates, and/or gave money to a political cause (18% variance explained, scale alpha = .59). There are two dimensions of the importance of traditional forms of *political media activity.* "Reading" consisted of the importance of leaflets and magazines, news/opinion magazines, and newspapers in the 1996 campaign (16.6% variance explained, scale alpha = .57). "Television" consisted of the importance of national and local television shows, television, and television interview shows in the 1996 campaign (15.0% variance explained, scale alpha = .46).

Table 7.2 shows cross-tabulations among respondents' political activity, demographic measures, and internet use. Those who reported that they were registered to vote and did vote in the 1996 presidential election were more likely to be married, have a lower income, and be older (only for being registered). Internet use alone, or even the extent of internet use (e.g., times per month, recency), was not associated with registration or voting during this early period of internet use.

Regression analyses included two dependent variables—*voting* and *offline political activity*—with income, education, marital status, gender, age, race, and whether one was a current internet user or not (and, if the respondent was a user, number of hours of internet use during the past week) used as predictors. (For this analysis, all respondents under 18 years of age were deleted because they could not vote, and internet dropouts were not included.)

Concerning both users and nonusers, those reporting having *voted* in the 1996 election and those reporting having engaged in more *offline political activity* were more likely to be married (2% and 1% variance explained, standardized betas = .47 and .11, $p < .05$ for both regressions, n's = 672 and 647, respectively).

Concerning users only, *offline political activity* was only slightly more likely for males than for females (3% variance explained, beta = .05, $p < .01$, $n = 405$) but was not otherwise explained by demographics or level of internet use. The importance of *print media* for political concerns was slightly predicted by being single, but again no other factors were influential. The political importance of *television* was unexplained by the demographics and internet use variables. Put differently, for the 1996 election, being registered to vote, voting, and the

Table 7.2 Political Activity by Demographic and Internet Variables: 1996 Syntopia Survey (percentages, except figures in "total" columns)

	Internet Users Only					
	Registered to Vote		*Voted*		*Users vs. Nonusers*	
Question	*Yes*	*Total*	*Yes*	*Total*	*Users*	*Total*
Overall, how satisfied are you with the way your life is going?						
Satisfied	86.4	25	77.3	25	17.5	126
Dissatisfied	72.0	22	64.0	22	10.1	248
Chi-square		1.4		1.0		4.1*
Gender						
Male	75.0	32	68.8	32 8	5.0	376
Female	84.6	52	75.0	52	16.0	326
Chi-square		1.2		0.4		9.2***
Do you have any children under 18 years of age now living in your household?						
Yes	72.2	36	63.9	48	12.2	295
No	87.5	48	79.2	36	11.8	407
Chi-square		3.1		2.4		0.0
Marriage status						
Not married	66.7	33	54.5	33	10.3	320
Married/Cohabiting	90.2	51	84.3	51	13.4	382
Chi-square		7.2**		8.9**		1.5
Work						
Full-time	86.7	45	80.0	45	11.7	383
Other	73.7	38	63.2	38	12.2	311
Chi-square		2.2		2.9		0.0
Income						
< $35,000/year	100.0	20	90.0	20	6.9	290
> $35,000/year	76.4	55	67.3	55	17.7	310
Chi-square		5.7*		3.9*		16.1***
Age						
18–39 years	72.9	48	68.8	48	14.5	331
40–65+ years	91.7	36	77.8	36	9.7	371
Chi-square		4.7*		0.8		3.8*
Education						
Less than college	75.0	36	69.4	36 7	5.0	477
College or more	85.4	48	75.0	48	21.3	225
Chi-square		1.4		0.3		27.6***

(Continued)

Table 7.2, Continued

	Internet Users Only					
	Registered to Vote		*Voted*		*Users vs. Nonusers*	
Question	*Yes*	*Total*	*Yes*	*Total*	*Users*	*Total*
Race						
White	80.0	70	70.0	70	11.8	591
Black	100.0	6	100.0	6	10.0	60
Chi-square		1.5		2.5		0.2
Internet user						
Yes	81.0	84	72.6	84		
No	80.4	618	71.2	618		
Chi-square		0.01		0.07		
Internet users only:						
How often do you go online?						
20 times/month	76.9	52	67.3	52		
20 times/month	85.2	27	81.5	27		
Chi-square		0.8		1.8		
When did you first start going online?						
Within past year	86.0	43	74.4	43		
More than a year ago	75.6	41	70.7	41		
Chi-square		1.5		0.1		
Interactive online political activities						
None	84.2	38	78.9	38		
Any	42.9	7	42.9	7		
Chi-square		5.8**		3.9*		
Browsing online political activities						
None	86.5	29	79.3	29		
Any	62.5	16	62.5	16		
Chi-square		3.4		1.5		

NOTE: Total *ns* in columns are the sums of "yes" and "no" or "user" and "nonuser" responses. Percentages reported are only those for "yes" or "user." Analyses exclude respondents under 18 years of age and internet nonusers.

$^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

importance of print and television for political information were equally likely for internet users as for internet nonusers. Being a more extensive internet user was not associated with offline political activity (although being female was slightly associated).

ONLINE POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

As Table 7.2 also shows, up to one quarter of internet users engaged in some kind of online political activity, ranging from sending or receiving e-mail to or from a government official, candidate for office, or political campaign committee (8%), to reading election news online (24%), to visiting campaign-related Web sites (23%), to reading bulletin board or discussion list postings about the campaign or election (22%).

There were two dimensions of *online political activity.* Online political *browsing* included reading bulletin boards or discussion groups, visiting Web sites with political information, following the election online, following the Election Day online, and viewing information online after the election (26% variance explained, alpha = .72). Online political *interaction* consisted of participating in electronic discussions; receiving e-mail concerning the election; sending or receiving e-mail to or from a government official, candidate for office, or political campaign committee; and sending e-mail to others concerning the election (24% variance explained, alpha = .70). Nearly half (46%) of internet users engaged in some kind of browsing, whereas just over a quarter (28%) of internet users participated in at least one of four online political activities. All scales were computed as the means of the sets of variables.

Internet Use and Online Political Activities. As Table 7.2 shows, those respondents engaged in interactive online political activities were less likely to be registered to vote or to actually vote. The sample sizes are extremely small, however. Summary results from logistic regressions show that, concerning users only, online political browsing and online political interaction both were predicted by more hours spent using the internet during the prior week (3% and 5% variance explained, standardized betas = .15 and .20, respectively, $p < .001$ and $n = 405$ for both regressions). So, whereas during the early years of internet use, those who engaged in online interactive political discussions may have participated less in offline political activities, those who have used the internet more recently engage a bit more in online political activity. This runs counter to the critique that internet use reduces political interest and participation.

PERCEIVED IMPACT OF INTERNET USE

Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with a variety of statements about the ways in which their online activities affected them. The following percentages of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed (as opposed to somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed) that they can follow subjects that interest them in great depth (84%), they can participate in issues with people around the world (72%), their quality of life has improved (62%), their personal privacy is at risk when they go online (56%), their online activities made them more aware of issues in the world (55%), their online participation has been important to their personal growth (51%), they have learned useful information about politics online (35%), their sources of information about the world have narrowed (23%), it is easy for the government or businesses to monitor the activities of people online (17%), and information they have found or received online has changed their political opinions (17%) (*ns* = 484 to 531). Two items in particular related to political information: "learned useful information about politics online" and "information I have found or received online has changed my political opinions." A scale derived from these two measures was associated in a regression with more online political browsing, more online political interaction, less offline political activities, and greater importance placed on political reading but not number of hours of internet use during the prior week (13% variance explained).

Related Results From the 2000 Pew Survey

This section summarizes some results of a Pew report (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000) that compared measures from Pew's 1996 and 2000 election surveys. The section also provides new cross-tabulation and regression analyses of the 2000 data that compare internet nonusers to internet users, and across internet use levels, with respect to political and demographic measures. The 1996 Syntopia survey and the 2000 Pew survey did not include all of the same variables. However, the 2000 Pew data, when comparable, were recoded and dichotomized to match the Syntopia 1996 data.

USE OF THE INTERNET FOR ELECTION NEWS

The percentage of Americans reporting they went online for any news about the presidential campaign (from less than weekly to several times a day) rose from about 10% in 1996 to 25% in 2000. In 2000, 12% of Americans used the internet for political news on Election Day and 18% used it the day after. Fully 79% of election news consumers sought information about the candidates'

positions on the issues, and 38% sought background on candidates' voting records. Comparing Pew 1996 and 2000 results, the reasons why users went online for election news included the fact that information is more convenient (45% vs. 56%, respectively), other media do not provide enough news (53% vs. 29%), they can get information that is not available elsewhere (26% vs. 12%), and internet news sources reflect their personal interests (24% vs. 6%). For those who advocate the internet as a way in which to foster political activism, it is interesting to note that 45% of all internet users (but more of experienced internet users) said that they encountered election news inadvertently, that is, when they had gone online for other purposes.

SOURCES, BROWSING, AND INTERACTION

A small subsample of internet users were asked whether they ever went to specific sites to get election news (similar to the online browsing political activity noted previously), ranging from Web sites of broadcast television networks (23.0%), to national newspapers (19.3%), to MSNBC.com (28.0%) or CNN.com (28.4%), to special interest groups (11.9%), to a specific candidate or campaign (15.8%). Summing these browsing online activities, 43.4% visited up to three of them, whereas 56.7% went to at least four of them.

Again, a small subsample of users were asked whether, when they went online to get information about the election, they did a variety of what could be considered more interactive online political activities: participated in online discussions or chat groups (9.9%), registered their opinions in an online poll (38.2%), got information about a candidate's voting record (38.5%), got information about when and where to vote (15.7%), received or sent e-mail supporting or opposing a candidate for office (29.8%), contributed money through a candidate's Web site (7.9%), or looked for more information about candidates' positions (79.2%). Summing these interactive online activities, 60.1% participated in one or two of them, whereas 39.9% participated in at least three of them.

OFFLINE POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Table 7.3 shows cross-tabulations of media use, offline political activity, demographics, and levels of internet use. The minimal measures of political activity used here were (a) being registered to vote in the 2000 election (81.6% said that they were) and (b) planning to vote in the 2000 presidential election (71.1% indicated that they were absolutely certain they would vote, 15.7% were

Table 7.3 Political Activity by Demographic and Internet Variables: 2000 Pew Survey (percentages, except figures in "total" columns)

	Internet Users Only					
	Registered to Vote		*Plan to Vote*		*Users vs. Nonusers*	
Question	*Yes*	*Total*	*Yes*	*Total*	*Users*	*Total*
Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country today?						
Satisfied	83.9	454	73.5	456	59.3	777
Dissatisfied	84.1	271	77.4	270	51.1	534
Chi-square		0.0		1.2		8.3**
Just thinking about *yesterday*, did you get a chance to read a daily newspaper or not?						
Yes	89.0	327	81.8	329	56.9	580
No	79.1	446	69.0	445	53.7	843
Chi-square		12.4**		15.5**		1.3
Did you watch the news or a news program on television yesterday or not?						
Yes	86.0	456	80.2	459	54.9	841
No	79.5	317	66.0	315	55.3	580
Chi-square		5.2*		18.9**		0.0
Gender						
Male	81.4	387	72.9	388	58.1	465
Female	85.3	387	76.0	387	52.1	750
Chi-square		1.8		0.8		4.9*
Are you the parent or guardian of any children under 18 years of age now living in your household?						
Yes	89.1	331	78.8	330	64.8	512
No	79.2	442	71.3	442	49.3	908
Chi-square		12.8**		5.2*		31.2**
Marriage status						
Not married	75.5	306	65.4	306	50.2	621
Married/ Cohabiting	88.4	464	80.4	464	49.3	791
Chi-square		20.9**		21.2**		10.2**
Work						
Full-time	84.7	511	76.0	508	65.4	784
other	80.5	261	71.5	263	42.3	629
Chi-square		1.9		1.6		74.6**
Income						
< $40,000/year	76.3	228	65.0	226	44.6	514
$40,000/year or more	87.9	396	79.5	396	71.8	554
Chi-square		13.3**		15.1**		80.8%
Age						
18–44 years	77.6	517	67.1	517	69.2	756
45–65 + years	95.2	249	89.5	248	39.2	638
Chi-square		36.2**		42.9**		124.8**

(Continued)

Table 7.3 Continued

	Internet Users Only					
	Registered to Vote		*Plan to Vote*		*Users vs. Nonusers*	
Question	*Yes*	*Total*	*Yes*	*Total*	*Users*	*Total*
Education						
Less than college	76.5	439	66.7	439	46.0	969
College or more	92.2	333	84.4	333	75.5	441
Chi-square		32.3**		29.9**		105.0**
Race						
White	85.3	618	75.8	619	55.7	1,120
Black	81.8	77	80.3	76	45.8	168
Chi-square		10.8**		15.5**		5.4*
Internet user						
Yes	83.3	774	74.5	775		
No	79.4	631	66.9	628		
Chi-square		3.6*		9.7**		
Internet users only:						
How often do you go online?						
Less than once a day	83.1	267	71.4	269		
At least once a day	84.2	467	76.6	465		
Chi-square		0.1		2.2		
When did you first start going online?						
Within past year	76.0	221	65.8	225		
More than a year ago	86.3	548	78.0	545		
Chi-square		11.3**		11.8**		
General online activities						
1–2 activities	82.7	196	77.8	198		
3–5 activities	74.0	100	62.6	99		
Chi-square		2.6		6.9**		
Interactive online political activities						
1–2 interactive	90.0	100	83.0	100		
3–7 interactive	91.0	67	89.4	66		
Chi-square		0.0		0.9		
Browsing online political activities						
1–3 browsing	90.1	121	80.8	120		
4–14 browsing	87.3	142	83.1	142		
Chi-square		0.3		0.1		

NOTE: Total *n*s in columns are the sums of "yes" and "no" or "user" and "nonuser" responses. Percentages reported are only those for "yes" or "user." Analyses exclude respondents under 18 years of age and Internet nonusers.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***p .001.

fairly certain or not certain, and 13.3% were not planning to vote [these last two categories were combined]).

Being registered to vote in the 2000 election and being absolutely certain about planning to vote were positively associated with reading a daily newspaper or watching television news the day before, beginning to use the internet more than a year ago, having children in the house, being married, having a household income greater than $40,000, being age 45 years or over, having a college degree, and being white.

Internet users were more likely to be satisfied with the way things were going in the country, be registered to vote, plan to vote in the November election, be more liberal, be male, have children in the household, not be currently married, work full-time, earn more than $40,000 per year, be under 40 years of age, have graduated from college, and be white. Recent internet adopters were more likely to be registered to vote and plan to vote in the November election, and those engaged in fewer general online activities were more likely to plan to vote in the November election.

A first set of two summary logistic regressions identified the significant predictors of being registered to vote as being an internet user (standardized beta = .4), having children in the household (.79), being over 45 years of age (1.4), and having a college degree (1.1) (14% variance explained, $p < .01$, $n = 1{,}369$). The same variables predicted planning to vote (11% variance explained, $p < .01$, $n = 1{,}366$).

The second set of logistic regressions included only users. Significant unique predictors of being registered to vote and planning to vote in the November election were first going online more than a year earlier (standardized beta = .71), having children in the household (1.03), being over 45 years of age (1.8), and having a college degree (1.0) (21% and 16% variance explained, $p < .01$ for both regressions, n's = 758 and 768, respectively). So, internet users and long-term internet users were more likely to register to vote or to intend to vote in the November election, controlling for major demographic variables.

PERCEIVED IMPACT OF INTERNET USE

The Pew survey indicated that online election information had a substantial impact in 2000 in that nearly half (47.1%) of a small subsample ($n = 187$) of election news consumers reported that it affected their voting decisions ("made you want to vote for or against a particular candidate"). This compares with 31% reported in the 1996 Pew survey.

Conclusion

Based on these analyses, it seems that the internet had a mild positive impact on political activity during the 1996 and 2000 elections. Neither internet use/nonuse nor frequency of internet use was associated with many online or offline political activities or with perceptions of the importance of print media or television for political issues. However, a large percentage of internet users did participate in some kind of online political activity. Moreover, some reported a considerable effect on their voting decisions in the 2000 election. And both users and long-term users were more likely to register to vote and to plan to vote in the November elections in 1996 and 2000. Thus, rather than the internet diminishing traditional forms of political activity, it is associated with somewhat greater traditional as well as new political activities.

The internet appears, at least based on the Syntopia 1996 survey and the Pew 1996 and 2000 presidential election surveys, to be a way in which to expand political involvement without sacrificing current modes of political activity. Contrary to the oft-repeated fears of some, the data showed no support for the notion that there would be mass political defections or that the internet would lead people to "tune out" politics. If anything, the opposite was the case. There were some modest associations of internet use with political activity, especially in 2000, and there were some respondents who reported that their opinions had changed due to their online involvement. On the other hand, the data do not suggest that the internet was a source of radical change in people's political activities and access to political information. The unique significant predictors are still age, education, and income. The situation is likely to change only incrementally as the Syntopian integration of various communication technologies with facets of real life continues.

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