DOES THE INTERNET REINFORCE AMERICA’S PARTISAN DIVIDE?

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study used data from the 2008 United States Presidential election to investigate the relationship between the Internet and electorate polarization. The Internet offers Americans a myriad of choices for both entertainment and news, making information on almost any topic cheaper to consume and more accessible than ever. This increased choice may not be without cost, however. Research suggests that strong partisans seek out information online with which they agree, possibly resulting in a more polarized electorate; Americans today are more evenly divided along partisan lines than in the past. This study tested whether Internet users had more polarized views of the two presidential candidates and whether they were more or less likely to cross party lines when voting. Internet use was found to have no significant effect on polarization levels. Interestingly, Internet users were found to be approximately 9% more likely to cross party lines when voting than non-users. Thus, the Internet may be providing people with the power to seek out information that informs their decisions, decreasing the importance of party affiliation and overwhelming any effects of partisan information-seeking.
Thanks to the faculty and staff of the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, my advisor John Christian, and the students in my thesis seminar, for their help in completion of this thesis. Special thanks to my wife for her support and willingness to play wordsmith.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction ................................................................. 1
Chapter 2. Literature Review .......................................................... 3
  Competing Theories About the Internet’s Effects on Democracy .......... 4
  Today’s Media Environment—An Abundance of Choices ............ 6
  Link to Polarization Still Tenuous ............................................ 10
Chapter 3. Conceptual Model .......................................................... 14
Chapter 4. Research Design ............................................................ 18
Chapter 5. Results .................................................................. 25
  Further Interpretation .............................................................. 28
Chapter 6. Conclusion ................................................................. 32
References ........................................................................ 34
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Internet Use by Various Demographics ..............................................21
Table 2: Party-Line Voting Dependent Variable ..............................................22
Table 3: Summary of Variables .........................................................................24
Table 4: Ordered Logit Regression on Polarization .........................................26
Table 5: Logit Regression on Party-Line Voting ..............................................27
Table 6: Probability of Party Line Voting in 2008 ..........................................28
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents by Polarization Dependent Variable ..........22

Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents by Partisanship Strength .....................23

Figure 3. Partisan & Party Affiliation ..............................................................23
Chapter 1. Introduction

Americans today live in an increasingly fractured media environment, with an
ever-growing number of choices for where to get the news and a greater ability to filter
through those choices to find news that best satisfies each individual’s interests. Cable
television and the Internet have steadily eroded the market share of mainstream media.
Moreover, these new media outlets appear to provide a forum for some of the harshest
political rhetoric and debate. False stories about Barack Obama’s alleged Muslim
religion and viral YouTube videos of Reverend Jeremiah Wright are just two of many
examples that demonstrate how the Internet shaped headlines during the 2008 election
cycle (Calvera, 2008; Organize, 2007).

These examples raise questions about the effect of the Internet on political
discourse, especially in a political environment that is increasingly polarized. Political
scientists agree that the party elite in American society is more deeply divided today
along ideological lines than it was decades earlier. While the general public’s
ideological and policy positions have changed to a much lesser degree, Americans have
nonetheless sorted themselves into two distinct partisan camps, resulting in an evenly
but not deeply divided electorate. The percentage of people self-identifying with one
party and expressing a dislike of their opposition has increased steadily since the 1970s.
The importance of party identification on voter choices has increased over that same time period (Fiorina, 2006; Prior 2007).

The role of the Internet in the 2008 presidential campaign suggests that it may reinforce America’s partisan divide. This thesis uses data from the 2008 election to test whether Americans who use the Internet were more divided along partisan lines during the campaign than those not online. It will also test whether Internet users were more or less likely to cross party lines when voting. The literature review below provides a general overview of the role the Internet plays as a source of political news, discusses the theoretical link between Internet use and polarization, and examines empirical evidence supporting this theory.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

The percentage of Americans online continues to grow and the Internet now serves as a primary source of political news. According to data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 77% of American adults were online in 2008, compared to roughly 50% during the 2000 presidential election. There has been an even more dramatic increase in the number of Americans who used the Internet to obtain news and political information. 55% of the adult population went online to get information about the campaign in 2008 and the overall size of the online audience for political news has more than doubled since 2000. Perhaps most significantly, the importance of the Internet for election news has increased relative to other sources. The number of adults who got their news from the Internet in 2008 nearly equaled the number who got it from newspapers and was double that of those who turned to the radio (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2004; Smith, 2008).

With more Americans going online for news and political information, campaigns have increasingly used the medium to engage voters. Bill Clinton first began to use the Internet to distribute campaign information in 1992. By 1996 nearly half of the candidates running for Senate seats used the Internet to campaign and every major-party Senate candidate in 1998 had a Web site (Bimber & Davis, 2003). Nevertheless, these early forays into Internet politics had a limited impact, in part
because voters simply were not yet using the medium as a primary news source.

Despite more than a decade of online campaigning, it was not until 2004 that a real proof-of-concept emerged of the role of the Internet in politics—Howard Dean’s presidential bid. Dean used innovative social networking tactics, participated in an online primary, and broke records for online donations (Hindman, 2005). President Obama’s campaign in 2008 used similar online tactics to even greater effect.

**Competing Theories About the Internet’s Effects on Democracy**

As the role of the Internet in democracy has continued to evolve, academic theories about its effects have fallen into two camps that posit different causal links between information, communications, and government (Bimber, 1998 & 2001; Norris, 1999). Norris (1999), in her study of virtual democracy in the U.S and Western Europe, described these competing theories as *mobilization* versus *reinforcement*. Mobilization theories focus on the democratizing effects of the Internet resulting from the decreased cost and increased accessibility of information. The Internet has the potential to empower voters, cut out media and political intermediaries, and undermine traditional political interests to the benefit of more locally based community groups. For example, it can provide greater information about a candidate’s positions and voting record, while the mainstream media and political parties sometimes emphasize personal narratives and the horse race character of campaigns. Online forums can also
serve as open platforms for political debate, connecting individuals who otherwise would never have exchanged ideas. Mobilization theory predicts a more engaged and knowledgeable electorate, greater participation among those who would not otherwise have been active in politics, and ultimately an increase in voter turnout on Election Day. Indeed, studies have found a causal link between Internet access and likelihood of voting (Tolbert & McNeal, 2001; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003).

Reinforcement theories instead argue that the Internet may strengthen the current political order (Norris, 1999). They highlight two troubling characteristics of the medium. First, the Internet could exacerbate current gaps in political participation because increased access to information benefits the well educated and upper class while disadvantaging minorities and the less educated who lag behind in Internet access. Second, the abundance of choices on the Internet may allow people to filter out views with which they disagree, segregating people along political, ethnic, and economic lines and resulting in a less tolerant and more balkanized society. These two theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive—a voter with Internet access might be both more engaged and more isolated from other voting blocks. Mobilization theories, however, tend to highlight the egalitarian effects of the Internet, whereas reinforcement theories are pessimistic about its effect on democracy.
Today’s Media Environment—An Abundance of Choices

Sunstein is one of the most forceful advocates for the view that increased Internet access may actually weaken democracy and polarize the electorate. In his book Republic.com, he cited two preconditions for democracy: “People need to be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance,” and “most citizens should have a range of common experiences” (Sunstein, 2001, p. 8 - 9). Our growing ability to personalize news consumption has made it more difficult to satisfy these preconditions. The number of sources of information online and new technologies that allow Internet users to filter those sources for what suits their interests may limit exposure to competing ideas. As a result, Sunstein argued, moderates in the electorate may filter out political information and opt for entertainment while more extreme politicos may seek out information that supports their established views.

Selective exposure and accidental exposure are the two mechanisms identified in media consumption literature that underlie Sunstein’s hypothesis. Selective exposure is the term used to describe the tendency to consume information that matches already held beliefs. The concept was originally proposed half a century ago but was difficult to demonstrate outside of lab experiments because Americans lived in a broadcast environment with only three television channels from which to choose (Barlett, Drew, Fahle, & Watts, 1974).
Evidence of selective exposure has grown in recent decades. With the advent of cable TV and specifically the growth of Fox News, research has demonstrated that partisans gravitate towards news sources that support their political views and less towards sources that challenge their ideas (Iyengar & Hahn, 2007; Stroud, 2007). Research on selective exposure on the Internet was initially inconclusive, probably because Americans have not used the Internet as a primary news source until recently (DiMaggio & Kyoko, 2003). A growing body of research has now demonstrated that people’s political views inform the partisan news sources they visit online (Inoue, 2003; Johnson, Zhang, & Bichard, 2008). Moreover, selective exposure has been shown to increase with partisanship. The more extreme a Democrat or Republican, the less likely they are to seek out information online that challenges their beliefs (Stroud, 2007).

The tendency for online sources to attract stronger partisans has shaped the way political campaigns use the Internet to appeal to voters. In their analysis of the Internet in U.S. elections, Bimber and Davis (2003) noted that campaign Web sites in 1996 and 1998 initially parroted general campaign themes intended to target moderates and undecided voters. These efforts failed and campaign strategists concluded that the Internet is a better tool for organizing and turning out a candidate’s base of support than for attracting undecided voters. By 2000, “attempting to engage supporters
through reinforcement, solicitations for activism, donations, and mobilization on election day dominated candidates’ use of the Internet” (Bimber & Davis, 2003, p. 67). Hindman (2005) similarly concluded that the Internet appears better suited for backend campaign functions and attributes part of Howard Dean’s success to his ability to engage with supporters and party activists online.

Whereas selective exposure focuses on whether people will encounter political information that challenges their beliefs, accidental exposure focuses on whether people will encounter political information at all (Mutz, 2006). In Post-Broadcast Democracy, Prior (2007) argued that both disinterested Americans and news junkies were previously trapped on three television channels and essentially forced to watch the nightly televised news cast. This resulted in greater accidental exposure for those who would not otherwise have consumed political information, narrowing a knowledge gap between moderates and party activists. This increased knowledge caused greater political participation among moderates. Prior’s analysis of the high-choice, post-broadcast media environment suggested that cable and Internet access have decreased accidental exposure and allowed moderates to choose entertainment over news. He noted that while aggregate levels of political knowledge within the electorate have remained steady, decreased accidental exposure appeared to cause gaps in knowledge and gaps in voter turnout between moderates and activists (Prior, 2005 & 2007).
The combined effects of increased selective exposure online to information that matches pre-established beliefs and decreased accidental exposure of moderates to political information might result in a more polarized electorate. However, research has highlighted a number of countervailing trends online that may result in greater exposure to dissenting opinions. While partisan Internet users do appear to seek out information that supports their opinion, they do not systematically avoid information that challenges those opinions (Garrett, 2006). Stronger partisans are also more confident in their beliefs and may therefore be more comfortable engaging in debate and consuming information that challenges their ideas (Stroud, 2007).

Much of the research on selective exposure studies the partisan leanings of consumers of partisan media rather than studying moderates consuming information from less biased sources. Not surprisingly, Fox News watchers tend to be Republicans, Democrats mostly went to see Fahrenheit 9/11, and partisans are more inclined to visit the Web site of their party’s candidate (Iyengar & Hahn, 2007; Stroud, 2007). What are less clear are the news consumption patterns of nonpartisans and the extent to which the broader electorate consumes information that reinforces beliefs. The research may therefore overstate Internet users’ tendency to consume information with which they agree. Stroud (2007), for example, found that 72% of respondents who consume political information online said they visited non-partisan and non-political
websites, but she did not thoroughly explore the relationship between these
respondents’ political leanings and their media consumption.

Most studies also focused on people’s selective exposure to politics and news
instead of looking at accidental exposure taking place on apolitical forums. A recent
study of online forum participants found that 45% of survey respondents participated in
forums focused on hobbies and that 50% of those people reported encountering
political information on their hobby forums (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). These sites
were also the most likely to expose participants to ideas they disagreed with. This
compared to only 10% of respondents who participated in political forums and
encountered political information that typically matched their beliefs nearly 100% of
the time.

The news consumption patterns of non-partisans and exposure to political
information on apolitical forums could mitigate the effects of partisan information
seeking. The next section will examine the evidence that patterns of information
consumption online actually result in a more polarized electorate.

Link to Polarization Still Tenuous

Despite a body of research showing that strong partisans consume information
online that they tend to agree with, evidence supporting Sunstein’s hypothesis and
demonstrating the link between Internet use and polarization within the electorate
remains limited. The tendency to seek out information that matches one’s beliefs does not necessarily translate into more extreme views. Moreover, if selective exposure research has in fact focused too much on partisans’ information consumption rather than moderates’ information consumption, then the effect of the Internet on the broader electorate might be less significant.

Stroud (2007) examined data from the 2004 Presidential election and found evidence that selective exposure did result in more polarized views of John Kerry and George Bush. She constructed a partisan media exposure variable by looking at whether a survey respondent’s partisan affiliation matched the partisan leaning of the news sources they used. This variable had a statistically significant relationship with favorability rates of the two presidential candidates. A person who was strongly predisposed to consume information that matched his or her party affiliation was more likely to have a polarized view of the two candidates. Stroud’s study considered information taken from the Internet, radio, newspapers, and cable television but did not disaggregate the effects of different media types.

Prior (2007) carried out the most thorough examinations of this issue and concluded that the growth of cable TV and the Internet has in fact increased partisan polarization by changing the composition of the electorate. He argued that the Internet does not so much reinforce partisan views as it does change the proportion of
moderates and extremists who turn out to vote. Moderate “entertainment seekers” with greater choices about media consumption are likely to become less knowledgeable about politics and therefore are less likely to vote. Strong partisans are likely to consume more political information and will vote more reliably. Prior explored this theory by examining the relationship between cable TV penetration in different media markets and the percentage of the vote won by the Democratic candidates for President and for the House of Representatives from 1970 to 1990. He found that as cable access increased, the share of the vote won by the candidate for President became a stronger determinant of the share of the vote won by the candidate for Congress. This suggested that people living in areas of greater cable access were more likely to cast straight-ticket party-line votes. This led Prior to hypothesize that the same relationship exists between the Internet and partisan voting, but he did not carry out quantitative analysis on the subject.

Bimber and Davis (2003) specifically examined the effect of the Internet on voter turnout and voter choice and produced mixed results. While partisans were more likely to consume information they agree with, their research found little support for the argument that the Internet might have a significant effect on voting or partisanship. Data from the 2000 Presidential election showed that campaign Web sites had a limited effect on visitors’ feelings towards the candidates. Further, when comparing survey
respondents who said before the election that a Web site made them more likely to vote for a candidate to those who said it had no effect, they found an absence of any difference in voting trends on Election Day. Bimber and Davis concluded that Web sites’ tendency to preach to converts and the Internet’s role as a supplement instead of replacement for traditional media limits its impact on the broader electorate.
Chapter 3. Conceptual Model

The analysis presented here extends the work cited above by using data from the 2008 presidential election to examine levels of polarization within the electorate resulting from Internet use. With the Internet now playing an important role in elections and increasingly supplanting old media, any link between Internet use and electorate polarization should be evident in the data used here. The literature yielded the following testable hypothesis:

\[ H_1: \text{Internet use, which provides moderates with alternatives to political news while allowing activists to consume information they agree with, is associated with greater levels of polarization within the electorate.} \]

To operationally define polarization, this study constructed an ordinal variable using favorability ratings of Obama and McCain. Survey respondents were asked to rate the candidates on a scale from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like). The affective polarization variable was constructed by taking the absolute value of the difference between the two favorability ratings. For example, a person who strongly likes Obama and rated him as a 10 and strongly dislikes McCain and rated him as a 0 received a value of 10. A person who rated Obama as a 4 and McCain as a 6 received a value of 2. Taking the absolute value was necessary to standardize this variable across parties, so that polarized Democrats and Republicans both received high scores instead of one group receiving a 10 while the other received a -10.
Party-line voting was used here as a second dependent variable and alternative indication of polarization. If Internet users were consuming information they agreed with and becoming more polarized, then one might expect them to be less likely to cross party lines when voting. Democrats and Republicans were coded as a 1 if they voted for their party’s candidate and a 0 otherwise. Respondents also identified the candidate they voted for in 2004, providing a means to control for previous party-line voting. By controlling for party-line voting in 2004, this model eliminated any omitted variable bias and allowed this study to draw a stronger causal link between the Internet and party-line voting. This construction, however, had two drawbacks. Only Democrats and Republicans who claimed to vote in 2004 and 2008 were used in the regression, decreasing the sample size significantly. These variables also likely had some slight measurement error because survey respondents sometimes lie about whether or not they voted and because respondents were only asked for their 2008 party affiliation, not their party affiliation in 2004.

This study used two different independent variables for Internet use. The first identified whether the survey respondent had Internet access. Using this variable eliminated reverse causation problems because people’s level of polarization was unlikely to effect whether they had Internet access. A second variable identified whether the respondent used the Internet to obtain news about the campaign. This
variable was of more interest because the literature cited above suggested users seek out news with which they agree. However, inclusion of this variable also raised more methodological concerns about reverse causation—polarized individuals may have been more likely to seek out political news on the Internet. Further, this variable probably had greater measurement problems because people are likely to over report the extent to which they read the news. For the purpose of robustness, this study used two specifications with these different Internet variables.

Partisanship strength served as a second independent variable that interacted with Internet use. The literature cited above suggested that strong partisans were more likely to practice selective exposure, so any polarizing effect of the Internet was likely to be more pronounced among extreme conservatives and extreme liberals, while the Internet’s effect on moderates’ polarization levels should have been less significant. This partisanship variable was measured on a four-point scale based on whether the respondent self-identified as a moderate, slight conservative/liberal, conservative/liberal, or extreme conservative/liberal.

This study also constructed two party affiliation dummy variables. These party variable may have had some measurement error—a recent poll found that only 20% of Americans identified themselves as Republicans compared to 33% who called themselves Democrats. Data used in this study showed that more Americans in 2008
called themselves conservatives rather than liberals, suggesting that respondents for this survey might have under reported their Republican affiliation. Despite this measurement error, this study elected to use party rather than partisan affiliation because literature suggested that party affiliation is a better predictor of voting behavior and because party affiliation was already used to construct the party-line voting variables.
Chapter 4. Research Design

Data for this study was taken from the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2008 Time Series Survey. The ANES was founded by the National Science Foundation in 1977 to serve as a resource for research on US elections. Prior to that time, the survey was conducted by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, providing survey data on every national election going back to 1952.

The ANES data was ideal for this topic because the survey includes questions about both media use and about political opinions and participation. It began asking questions about Internet use in 1996. Because of the broad scope of the survey, the data did not provide a large amount of granularity on any specific issue. Most variables about media use lacked specificity and the survey did not distinguish between different types of Internet use—email, social networking, Web sites, or blogs. Nor did the survey provide a lot of detail about different media outlets (cable channels, different newspapers, and so forth). As a result, the independent variables used here had to be a very general reflection of where respondents obtained their news—the Internet, television, or print media.

The ANES sample was taken from all 48 contiguous states and Washington DC. The sample was randomly selected from smaller and smaller census blocks, with
the probability of selection equal to the relative size of the population in the block, until a cluster of household units was identified. A total of 2,323 interviews were conducted before the election and 2,102 participants were reinterviewed after the election. The first sample used in this study included non-voters. Survey respondents who did not vote were an important source of variance because the literature suggested less politically active people were less likely to practice selective exposure on the Internet. Moreover, according to Prior’s analysis, moderates with Internet access were likely to have less political knowledge and were therefore less likely to vote. Non-voters were eliminated from the model that uses party-line voting as the dependent variable because only respondents who voted for or against their party’s candidate were included in the sample.

**Method:** This study used ordered logit regression to test the hypothesis identified above. Ordinary least squares regression is sometimes sufficient for ordinal data when the variable takes on a larger number of values at discrete increments. An ordered logit model was more appropriate in this case because the polarization variable was not discrete and took on a very limited number of values. This model included an array of control variables for age, education, income, gender, and race, and political affiliation. Studies found a relationship between these controls and both Internet use and voter turnout, suggesting they belonged in a model for the Internet’s effect on
polarization as well. As noted earlier, this study also used two specifications with different independent variables for Internet use. Table 3 provides a summary of the variables and controls. The formal model used in this analysis was:

\[ P(\text{polarization}) = \Phi (\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Internet} + \beta_2 \text{PartisanStrength} + \beta_3 \text{Internet} \ast \text{PartisanStrength} + \beta_4 \text{Democrat} + \beta_5 \text{Republican} + \beta_6 \text{Age} + \beta_7 \text{Income} + \beta_8 \text{Education} + \beta_9 \text{Race} + \beta_{10} \text{Gender} + \epsilon) \]

The second dependent variable used in this analysis required a slightly different model and regression technique. Party-line voting was a binary variable, so regular logit regression sufficed. Because the entire sample was composed of Democrats and Republicans, these variables were dropped from the model. Party-line voting in 2004 was also added as a control variable.

\[ P(\text{partyline2008} = 1) = \Phi (\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Internet} + \beta_2 \text{PartisanStrength} + \beta_3 \text{Internet} \ast \text{PartisanStrength} + \beta_4 \text{partyline2004} + \beta_7 \text{Age} + \beta_8 \text{Income} + \beta_9 \text{Education} + \beta_{10} \text{Race} + \beta_{11} \text{Gender} + \epsilon) \]

Table 1 shows data from the ANES on the two measures of Internet use—the key independent variables of interest in this analysis—broken down by different demographics. Roughly 70% of respondents had Internet access and 42% used the Internet to find news about the campaign. Whites were 13% more likely to have Internet access than non-whites and men were slightly more likely to have access than women. The ANES data also indicated that Internet access declined significantly with
age and increased with income and education. Republicans were more likely to have Internet access and to use the Internet to find political information, which was likely a result of their education and income levels.

Table 1
Internet Use by Various Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internet Access</th>
<th>Internet Campaign News Consumption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entire Sample</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-whites</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 shows the distribution of people in the sample according to their levels of polarization. The data showed that most respondents had moderately polarized views of Barack Obama and John McCain, with a mean affective polarization value of 4.7. Of note, the data showed a decline in the number of people towards the more polarized end of the spectrum and then an uptick at the end of the number who expressed a strong dislike of one candidate and a strong like of the other. Further analysis of the data indicated Democrats with highly polarized views of the two
candidates were largely responsible for this uptick, suggesting that party affiliation
would have significant explanatory power in the model.

![Bar chart showing the distribution of respondents by polarization dependent variable.](image)

**Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents by Polarization Dependent Variable, n = 2063**

Table 2 shows the number of respondents who crossed party lines when voting in 2004 and 2008. A large majority of Americans, 92.61%, voted with their party during the last election.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Opposition Candidate</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Party Candidate</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures 2 and 3 provide data on partisanship strength and party affiliation.

Most respondents identified themselves as moderates, slight partisans, or partisans. Only 9.3% of respondents identified as extreme conservatives or extreme liberals. While respondents broke roughly equally into liberals, moderates, and conservatives, only 19% of respondents self-identified as Republicans, compared to 43% as Democrats.

![Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents by Partisanship Strength](image1)

![Figure 3. Partisan & Party Affiliation, n = 1587 & 2287 respectively](image2)
### Table 3
Summary of Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Variable</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent Variables:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Polarization</td>
<td>Ordinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Line 2008</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Variables:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet News</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Access</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship Strength</td>
<td>Ordinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control Variables:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Line 2004</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Binary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5. Results

Table 4 shows the results of the ordered logit regression on polarization, using both Internet access and Internet news as dependent variables in the analysis. Neither of the Internet variables nor the interaction with partisanship strength are significant in either specification of the model. As one would expect, partisanship strength is statistically significant at the 99% level and related to higher levels of polarization. Democratic party affiliation appears to be the most significant determinant of polarization, confirming the descriptive statistics noted earlier that Democrats had more polarized views of the two candidates.

The lack of any significance on the interaction term is somewhat surprising in light of research cited earlier that strong partisans practice selective exposure online and Stroud’s (2007) findings that those who practice selective exposure have more polarized views. Nonetheless, there is a large amount of unexplained variance in the polarization data, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions based on the regression. While the first model is significant at the 99% level, the Pseudo R-squared indicates it only explains 2.77% of the variance. There appears to be a visceral aspect to people’s favorability ratings of the two candidates that cannot be explained easily by party, partisanship, and basic socio-economic factors. Identifying and controlling for other
factors offers a further area of research that might allow clearer identification of the effect of the Internet on polarization.

Table 4
Ordered Logit Regression on Polarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Specification 1 coefficient (standard error)</th>
<th>Specification 2 coefficient (standard error)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>.229 (.275)</td>
<td>- .023 (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet news</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partisanship strength</td>
<td>.405 (.094)***</td>
<td>.299 (.069)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access x partisanship strength</td>
<td>- .098 (.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use x partisanship strength</td>
<td></td>
<td>.667 (.097)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>- .313 (.11)***</td>
<td>- .318 (.11)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>.000 (.003)</td>
<td>.001 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income</td>
<td>- .006 (009)</td>
<td>- .007 (009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>- .049 (.022)</td>
<td>- .057 (022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>- .309 (.098)***</td>
<td>- .306 (.098)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>democratic</td>
<td>.925 (.115)***</td>
<td>.918 (.115)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>republican</td>
<td>.126 (.131)</td>
<td>.117 (.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num of Obs = 1393</td>
<td>Pseudo $R^2 = .0277$, Prob $&gt; \chi^2 = 0$</td>
<td>Pseudo $R^2 = .0277$, Prob $&gt; \chi^2 = 0$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01, ***p < .001

The results of the logit regression on party-line voting tell a more compelling and unexpected story about the effects of the Internet. Table 5 shows that the coefficients on Internet access and Internet news are both negative and Internet news is significant at the 95% level, meaning that people who consume political information online are more likely to cross party lines when voting. The interaction with partisanship strength is significant in both specifications and the coefficient is positive,
indicating that strong partisans with Internet access and those who use the Internet to find news about the campaign are less likely to cross party lines when voting compared to moderates who use the Internet for the same purpose. The model is significant at the 99% level. The Pseudo R-squared is still low but has increased to .1176. These results are fairly robust; using two different Internet variables eliminates reverse causation concerns and including the party-line 2004 variable avoids omitted variable bias problems.

Table 5
Logit Regression on Party-Line Voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Specification 1</th>
<th>Specification 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coefficient (standard error)</td>
<td>coefficient (standard error)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>-1.108 (.838)</td>
<td>-1.648 (.776)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet news</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.648 (.776)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partisanship strength</td>
<td>-.183 (.264)</td>
<td>.04 (.227)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access x</td>
<td></td>
<td>.839 (.348)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partisanship strength</td>
<td></td>
<td>.839 (.348)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use x</td>
<td></td>
<td>.624 (.335)+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partisanship strength</td>
<td></td>
<td>.624 (.335)+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>-.635 (.376)+</td>
<td>-.588 (.376)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>-.008 (.011)</td>
<td>-.018 (.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income</td>
<td>-.029 (.032)</td>
<td>.011 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>-.054 (.068)</td>
<td>-.01 (.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>-.061 (.339)</td>
<td>-.089 (.339)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party-line vote - 2004</td>
<td>1.726 (.376)***</td>
<td>1.856 (.377)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num of Obs = 666</td>
<td>Pseudo R² = .1176</td>
<td>Pseudo R² = .1080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prob &gt; chi² = 0</td>
<td>Prob &gt; chi² = 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+p < .10, *p < .05 **p < .01, ***p < .001

The most striking results of this model are that the negative coefficients on the Internet variables are larger than the positive coefficients on the interaction terms. This
would suggest that the Internet has a largely moderating effect but that strong partisans
do seek out information online with which they agree, limiting the Internet’s impact on
that subset of the electorate. Table 6 shows the predicated probability of voting for
one’s party candidate, broken down by Internet news—the variable that had both a
significant effect and significant interaction with partisanship strength—and holding all
other variables at their means. The probability of voting the party line decreased by
9.35% for those who used the Internet to find news about the campaign. The effect of
the Internet decreases with partisanship—strong partisans who used the Internet to find
news about the campaign were only 8.84% less likely to vote for their party’s
candidate.

Table 6
Probability of Party Line Voting in 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet Campaign News Consumption</th>
<th>By Partisanship Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>97.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>88.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>9.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further Interpretation

These findings are somewhat consistent with research on selective exposure
indicating that partisans are more likely to consume information online with which they
agree and may therefore be more polarized. However, these findings also suggest
concerns that consumption of online news might reinforce partisan views are
significantly overstated. People who use the Internet to find information about the campaign were roughly 9% more likely to cross party lines when voting. This would seem to indicate that a large group of less partisan voters are using the Internet to find information about the candidates and to inform (not reinforce) their views. As a result, these online news consumers are likely to vote based on facts about the candidate rather than the candidate’s party. Research has found that people who use the Internet are more politically knowledgeable (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Wakao, 2006). This increased knowledge may be overwhelming any effects of partisan online news consumption.

These results suggest that research studying strong partisans’ consumption of information from partisan online sources might miss a broader segment of the electorate that is consuming information differently and from less biased sources. The recent growth in online political news consumption may also explain the moderating effects found here. Research on selective exposure was performed at a time when fewer Americans were going online for political information. Early adopters who used the Internet to find information about campaigns were likely more partisan than those who consumed information through more traditional mediums. Any polarizing effects of the Internet, therefore, may have been more pronounced on this partisan subset of voters. The way in which a larger and more moderate group of voters consumed
These findings are inconsistent with Prior’s research which showed that in media markets with higher cable penetration, the share of the vote won by a Democratic presidential candidate became a stronger determinant of the share won by the Democratic Congressional candidate. If those who use the Internet to find news about the campaign are more likely to cross party lines when voting, one would expect the share won by a Democratic presidential candidate to became a weaker determinant in areas of greater Internet use. This might be explained by the different ways people use the two mediums. Internet users are not passively consuming information like they are with cable television. Therefore, a higher number of news outlets available online might allow people to actively seek out information that can inform their decisions, resulting in a different effect compared to a high-choice cable environment. In fact, Prior found that for the subset of prospective voters who prefer news over entertainment, Internet use increases levels of political knowledge.

These findings are silent regarding Prior’s broader hypothesis that a high-choice media environment might result in a more polarized electorate by changing the turnout rate between different groups of prospective voters. Because the second model used here is restricted to self-identified Democrats and Republicans who claimed to vote in
2004 and 2008, these individuals are unlikely to be the type of entertainment seekers whom Prior is concerned might vote less often. In fact, the interpretation described above is consistent with his hypothesis—one group of engaged voters sampled here might be using the Internet to become more knowledgeable while another group excluded from the regression becomes less knowledgeable and less politically engaged.

It might be the case that the Internet has a moderating effect on those interested individuals who vote consistently (as these results suggest) even while it has a broader polarizing effect on the electorate by causing other moderate, less politically interested people to disengaged entirely when they are offered greater media choice.

Disaggregating the effects of Internet use on voter turnout between different levels of political interest offers a further line of research that could test this theory.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

A 2010 *New York Times* editorial about the polarized state of American politics argued that, “We live in a country in which many people live in information cocoons in which they only talk to members of their own party and read blogs of their own sect” (Brooks, 2010, para. 12). In fact, this does not appear to be the case. This study finds no significant relationship between Internet use and favorability ratings of the 2008 presidential candidates. With a majority of Americans now consuming political information online, if such a relationship existed, it likely would have been found here. Moreover, people who used the Internet to find information about the campaign were 9% more likely to cross party lines when voting.

With the Internet now supplanting other media as a source of news and political information, its role and impact on elections has become more apparent and aspects of both mobilization and reinforcement theories are coming to fruition. Some strong partisan Internet users are consuming information that matches their beliefs. But a large number of less partisan voters appear to be using the Internet to make more informed voting choices, decreasing the importance of political party affiliation. There are almost certainly other important causal links between the Internet and partisan politics. User-generated content is exerting a greater and greater influence over the news cycle, empowering disparate voices and amplifying partisan rhetoric. The
Internet might be contributing to partisan politics by changing the type of political news that is produced rather than changing the way in which political news is consumed. But on the consumption side, the benefits to society in terms of voter education appear to outweigh any effect of partisan information seeking.

One clear trend from the literature is the Internet’s ability to stump political scientists during each presidential election. Early prognostications from the mid-1990s about the effects of the Internet, which predicted a new wave of direct democracy, appear to have been overstated. Bimber's (2003) analysis of the Internet in the 2000 election concluded that a renewal of citizen engagement with democracy was not occurring and instead argued that the Internet would play a limited and largely supplemental role in electoral campaigns. This predication appears similarly premature. The role the Internet plays in the 2012 election will almost certainly be different than the role it played in 2008. New technologies that evolve over this quadrennium will change how Americans produce and consume political information. The effects of the Internet in 2008, however, should provide us with clues. To the extent that these new technologies better educate the voting public about candidates and their positions, they will have a moderating effect and may counteract other factors contributing to a harshly partisan environment.
References


Organize for America (2007, November 12). Obama has never been a muslim, and is a committed Christian. Retrieved February 5, 2010 from http://www.barackobama.com/factcheck/2007/11/12/obama_has_never_been_a_muslim_1.php


