

A record-breaking 46% of Americans have already used internet for politics this election season and Obama backers have an edge

Political videos and social networking have taken off

The number of campaign donors on the internet has risen

Yet a majority of internet users believe that untrue information online is influencing voters

WASHINGTON, DC – Fully 46% of all Americans have used the internet, email or cell phone text messaging to get news about the campaign, share their views and mobilize others.

Further, the proportion of Americans going online on a typical day at the tail end of the primary season to get political news or information has more than doubled since a comparable point in the 2004 race—from 8% of all adults in spring 2004 to 17% of all adults in spring 2008.

These are among the highlights of a new national survey of 2,251 American adults by the Pew Internet & American Life Project between April 8 and May 11. The poll found, among other things, that younger voters are among the most active and intense internet users. These online voters are more likely to support Democrat Barack Obama and that means his partisans were significantly ahead of Hillary Clinton's supporters online in the endgame of the Democratic race. In addition, Obama backers have a higher profile in some online areas than supporters of Republican John McCain.

The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

The 46% figure was calculated by adding up the number of people who said had done at least one of the following activities:

- 40% of all Americans (internet users and non-users alike) have gotten news and information about this year's campaign via the internet.
- 19% of Americans go online once a week or more to do something related to the campaign, and 6% go online to engage politically on a daily basis.
- 23% of Americans say they receive emails urging them to support a candidate or discuss the campaign once a week or more
- 10% of Americans use email to contribute to the political debate with a similar frequency.
- 4% of Americans have exchanged political views via text messaging.

The figures above add up to more than 46% because many citizens said they were doing several of the activities.

Three online activities have become especially prominent as the presidential primary campaigns have progressed: First, 35% of Americans say they have watched online political videos – a figure that nearly triples the reading the Pew Internet Project got in the 2004 race.

Second, 10% say they have used social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace to gather information or become involved. This is particularly popular with younger voters: Two-thirds of internet users under the age of 30 have a social networking profile, and half of these use social networking sites to get or share information about politics or the campaigns.

Third, 6% of Americans have made political contributions online, compared with 2% who did that during the entire 2004 campaign.

A significant number of voters are also using the internet to gain access to campaign events and primary documents. Some 39% of online Americans have used the internet to access “unfiltered” campaign materials, which includes video of candidate debates, speeches and announcements, as well as position papers and speech transcripts.

“Many voters are now using the internet to move past traditional media gatekeepers to gain their own view of the candidates and the campaign,” said Pew Internet Project Research Specialist Aaron Smith, an author on the report. “This shows the appetite of engaged citizens to move beyond the sound-bite culture and make their own assessments of the meaning of political developments.”

He cited as an example, the survey finding that nearly one in five Americans (18%) has watched an online video that did not come from either a traditional news organization or the campaigns themselves.

Online activism using social media has also grown substantially since the first time we probed this issue during the 2006 midterm elections. Among the findings in our survey:

- 11% of Americans have contributed to the political conversation by forwarding or posting someone else’s commentary about the race.
- 5% have posted their own original commentary or analysis.
- 6% have gone online to donate money to a candidate or campaign.
- Young voters are helping to define the online political debate—12% of online 18-29 year olds have posted their own political commentary or writing to an online newsgroup, website or blog.

Led by young voters, Democrats and Obama supporters have taken the lead in their use of online tools for political engagement.

- 74% of wired Obama supporters have gotten political news and information online, compared with 57% of online Clinton supporters.

- In a head-to-head matchup with internet users who support Republican McCain, Obama's backers are more likely to get political news and information online (65% vs. 56%).
- Obama supporters outpace both Clinton and McCain supporters in their usage of online video, social networking sites and other online campaign activities.

Yet despite the growth in the number of people who are politically engaged online, internet users express some ambivalence about the role of the internet in the campaign. On one hand, 28% of wired Americans say that the internet makes them feel more personally connected to the campaign, and 22% say that they would not be as involved in the campaign if not for the internet. At the same time, however, even larger numbers feel that the internet magnifies the most extreme viewpoints and is a source of misinformation for many voters.

About the Pew Internet & American Life Project: The Pew Internet Project is an initiative of the Pew Research Center, a nonprofit "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. Pew Internet explores the impact of the internet on children, families, communities, the work place, schools, health care and civic/political life. The Project is nonpartisan and takes no position on policy issues. Support for the project is provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The Project's Web site: <http://www.pewinternet.org>
