

## **The Internet and Voter Decision-Making**

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The 2010 midterm elections witnessed the growth of online campaign media in scope and prominence. Social media applications that debuted during the 2008 presidential contest became commonplace, and new developments, such as the more prolific use of Twitter and micro-blogging sites, emerged. While voter attention to the midterm elections was lukewarm,<sup>1</sup> stories about the campaign began to appear online more than a year in advance of the elections. The midterm contests dominated the news agenda during October 2010, when campaign coverage constituted 57% of the newshole for the week that included Election Day (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010a). The symbiotic relationship between the established press and digital media became more pronounced. Information disseminated through social media gained attention in newspapers and on television. The Tea Party movement, in particular, used social media to rebuke the establishment press, while at the same time drawing mainstream media attention and setting the news agenda (Willey, 2011). State and local candidates were featured in national news reports, which caused voters to follow campaigns online in states other than their own.

The Internet offers substantial resources to voters seeking to make up their minds about candidates in elections. There is an almost overwhelming amount of news and information about candidates, issues, and parties available online. Opportunities to engage interactively during elections have expanded massively over the past two campaign cycles, allowing citizens to do everything from lurk on a message board to create their own print and video reports that are posted to major news sites. Voters can connect readily with other voters, campaign organizations, news media, online information providers, and political groups. They can form political networks that link family and friends or bring together remote associates.

This paper examines the extent to which voters felt that information they obtained online influenced their decision to vote for or against a candidate in the 2010 midterm elections. It addresses the following research questions: Does Internet use influence voter decision-making in elections? And, what are the characteristics of voters whose candidate preference is shaped by information obtained online?

The potential for Internet media to influence voter decision-making has intensified in recent elections. The amount of campaign information available online has grown dramatically, and it is accessed by an increasing number of voters. Online niche media representing polarized political positions have developed devoted followings who may take their voting cues from these offerings. More people are making use of interactive online features and social media to engage more fully with campaigns. This type of engagement renders online sources more credible and compelling to users (Greer, 2003; Banning and Trammell, 2006; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, and Wong, 2007). At the same time, traditional cues, such as party identification, hold less weight in the voting calculus for some people, especially younger voters.

The 2010 midterm elections are a relevant context for examining the Internet's role in voter decision-making. Midterm election campaigns are typically characterized as low interest, low information contests that appeal primarily to dedicated voters. There often is less information available to voters, and it is not always easy to compile. Local newspapers and television news coverage of midterm contests differs widely. Some local news organizations fail to give sufficient coverage to statewide and district elections, while others become a source for national print and television news stories as well as prolific online coverage. Thus, the Internet offers convenient resources for voters who are looking for information in an off-year contest when news coverage is generally less prominent than during a presidential election.

## **The Internet as a Source of Election Information**

The Internet's role in campaigns has grown with each contest electoral contest since its advent in the 1992 presidential election. In the 2010 elections, almost 55% of the public stated that they used the Internet in some way to engaged with the campaign (Smith, 2011). The Internet has gone from a supplementary resource for election information to a main source of news for more than a third of the public during presidential elections and a quarter of the public during midterm campaigns. As Table 1 illustrates, use of the Internet as an important news source in presidential elections has climbed from 3% in 1996 to 36% in 2008. Television remains the main source of election news for most people in presidential elections, although viewership has declined from 82% in 1992 to 68% in 2008. The use of print newspapers for presidential campaign information has dropped markedly from a high of around 60% in the 1990s to 33% in 2008. The reliance on print news magazines, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, has all but disappeared in the Internet era, as these publications struggle to exist and have moved much of their content online. Radio as a source of presidential election information has increased somewhat since 1992, as talk radio has established a firm niche audience (Barker, 2002; Jamieson and Cappella, 2008).

The underlying the trends in audience media use in midterm elections differ somewhat from those observed in presidential campaigns. People are gravitating away from the traditional sources of television and print newspapers and moving to the Internet for their presidential campaign news (Owen and Davis, 2008). During midterm campaigns, however, voters appear to be adding Internet media as a new source of information rather than drifting away from traditional sources. Reliance on television and print newspapers is lower during midterm elections than during presidential contests. However, reliance on these sources has remained comparatively stable for midterm elections, with a slight decline in print newspaper use in 2010

as more people accessed newspapers online. This relatively steady trend is likely due to the fact that local newspapers and television news programs are a key source of midterm election information. At the same time, the percentage of respondents citing the Internet as a main source of midterm campaign news grew from 7% in 2002 to 24% in 2010. When asked to name their number one source of information in the 2010 midterm elections, 66% of the public listed television, 15% named newspapers, 13% identified the Internet, 6% specified radio, and less than 1% chose magazines.

Table 1  
Main Source of Election News

<b>Presidential Elections</b>					
	<b>Television</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Radio</b>	<b>Magazine</b>	<b>Internet</b>
<b>1992</b>	82%	57%	12%	9%	---
<b>1996</b>	72%	60%	19%	11%	3%
<b>2000</b>	70%	39%	15%	4%	11%
<b>2004</b>	76%	46%	22%	1%	21%
<b>2008</b>	68%	33%	16%	3%	36%
<b>Midterm Elections</b>					
<b>2002</b>	66%	33%	13%	1%	7%
<b>2006</b>	69%	34%	17%	2%	15%
<b>2010</b>	67%	27%	14%	2%	24%

Source: Pew Research Center, November 13, 2008; Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 17, 2011

Note: Respondents could volunteer more than one main source

Coinciding with the increase in audience share, the quality of the online election experience has changed markedly. The amount of campaign information available online has grown exponentially with each election cycle, and the mode of transmission has evolved from being heavily text-based to include the extensive use of audio and video formats. News and information platforms have proliferated, and host an overwhelming amount of election-related material. The websites of print and television news organizations not only contain original

reporting, but have become delivery systems for a wealth of content created by other information providers, including bloggers and average citizens (Owen, 2011a). Campaign websites have come a long way from the basic brochure-ware of the early 1990's (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Foot and Schneider, 2006). They are now full-service platforms that provide voters with updated news, vast information, commentary, interactive forums, advertising, event details, volunteer opportunities, and links to extensive information networks, including social media. The use of social media within the election context, which facilitates peer-to-peer sharing of election information, provides voters with new avenues for engaging actively with other people during a campaign.

#### VOTER DECISION-MAKING

Research on the Internet and elections has focused on the content of communication, candidates' use of the Internet and social media, voters' attention to and engagement with the election online, and the relationship between Internet use and voters' political attitudes, orientations, and knowledge (Druckman, Kifer, and Parker, 2010; Williams and Gulati, 2007; Bivings Group, 2011; Howard, 2005; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Xenos and Moy, 2007; Gueorguieva, 2007; Owen and Davis, 2008). Study findings should be considered in relation to the status of the medium at particular points in its political evolution, especially given new developments that coincide with election cycles. Early research produced mixed findings, at best, about the connection between Internet use and campaign knowledge, interest, activation, and vote choice (Bimber, 2001; Weaver and Drew, 2001). More recent work links exposure and access to online media to higher levels of electoral engagement and turnout (Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Williams, Weinberg, and Gordon, 2004; Tolbert and Mcneal; Kenski and Stroud, 2006, Wang, 2007). However, the effects may not be overwhelming (Boulianne, 2009). The online

environment may be most relevant for people who already are predisposed toward political engagement (Park and Perry, 2008, 2009). The use of social media, which began to take hold in the 2006 midterm contests and became more apparent during the 2008 presidential campaign, does not necessarily increase political participation, although it has a positive influence on civic engagement, such as community volunteerism (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard, 2010; Baumgartner, 2010).

Fewer studies have focused on the Internet's effect on voter decision-making, especially online media's influence on candidate preference. Media effects on vote choice are often subtle and are notoriously difficult to isolate from other factors, such as party identification, issue position, and candidate character (Cho, 2005). Internet research from an earlier era indicates that voters selectively used information obtained from campaign websites primarily to reinforce their political predispositions and to justify their vote choice (Mutz and Martin, 2001). This study seeks to determine, at a basic level, whether voters use online information in determining candidate preferences, as well as to identify the types of people who are the most inclined to use online information in their campaign decision-making.

### *Young Voters Online*

It stands to reason that the Internet is likely to play a role in the electoral decision-making processes of young voters, especially those under age 30. This cohort came of political age during the Internet era, and online media use for information-seeking and engagement is a way of life for many of its members. Unlike older voters who established their campaign media habits when print and television dominated, this generation has embraced the election online from the outset. In fact, some young voters ignore election coverage in traditional print and broadcast media in favor of digital sources (Lupia and Philpot, 2005). Young voters have been at the forefront of innovation with new media in campaigns, especially during the 2008

presidential election when they helped to pioneer social media applications. They are the most inclined to engage with campaigns through the interactive features of digital media (Owen, 2008-09). Further, their conversations about elections are as likely to take place via social media as through interpersonal discussion. Online political information may become an integral part of young people's electoral decision-making due to the frequency of exposure, trust in the source, and intensity of the experience.

Further, young people are less likely than older citizens to have adopted non-media cues that they use consistently to guide their voting decisions. Young people are willing to affiliate with political parties, but their allegiances can be fleeting. The number of 18 to 29 year olds who identified with a major political party increased notably in 2008, as 16% called themselves Independents, down from 23% in 2006; 47% identified with the Democratic Party and 28% with the Republican Party (Lake and Tarrance, 2008). In 2010, the number of Independents among 18 to 29 year olds increased to 29%, with 35% of young people affiliating with the Democratic Party and 26% with the Republican Party (Lake and Tarrance, 2010).

### *Partisan Factors*

Early limited effects models posited that partisanship eclipsed the media's influence on voter decision making (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Klapper, 1960). Partisanship remains a central factor in determining vote choice for many people, even as media use conditions the criteria—candidate personality factors and issues—that people employ to arrive at that choice (Cho, 2005). However, individuals rely heavily on media and interpersonal discussion for campaign information (Beck, Dalton, Greene, and Huckfeldt, 2002) that can shape their voting intentions beyond partisanship, especially as discussions increasingly are facilitated through mediated platforms. People who lack meaningful



partisan attachments may depend on media as a resource when making their voting decisions. Lacking partisan voting cues, Independents may be more inclined to use online media to arrive at their candidate choice than those who affiliate with the Democratic and Republican parties.

The presence of the Tea Party movement gave the 2010 midterm elections a unique partisan profile. The movement backed Republican candidates, many of whom were not well-known to the electorate prior to the campaigns. The Tea Party developed a prolific online presence as a result of its strategy of openly shunning the mainstream media while turning to websites, blogs, social media, email, and Twitter (Lepore, 2010). Its self-appointed leaders during the campaign period, especially former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, generated considerable press coverage for the movement. Discourse surrounding the Tea Party that spanned the ideological spectrum and presented positive and negative views of the movement and its candidates was prominent on the Internet. For a week in October of 2010, 17% of all political blog links were to discussions about Delaware Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell, a Tea Party-backed Republican (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010b). Tea Party supporters expressed a strong dissatisfaction with the mainstream Republican Party and its leadership (Gardner, 2010). It may be the case that Republicans exploring Tea Party alternatives to mainstream Republican party candidates consulted online media when making their voting decisions. Similarly, a high level of awareness of the Tea Party may correlate with using online information to vote for or against a candidate.

### *Echo Chamber Online*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century campaign environment is characterized by the diversification, fragmentation, and polarization that now is the hallmark of American media. Niche sources that disseminate extreme ideological messages have cornered a significant portion of the political

media market. These sources appeal to individuals who hold strong political predispositions. They also attract audience members who are drawn to charismatic hosts and entertaining political banter. Niche media that originated with talk radio and cable television have online counterparts that can live on even after the hosts have been dismissed from the airwaves. There also are abundant niche media, including partisan blogs, websites, and social media sites, that exist only online. The abundance of sources makes it possible for voters to tailor their media consumption to conform to their personal tastes. While people who rely on niche media for political information are exposed to other sources, a growing segment of the political news audience consumes ideologically polarized media to the exclusion of sources that engage in a broader, more moderate conversation (Chalif, 2011; Owen, 2011a). The echo chambers created by niche media produce enclaves of energized supporters of who follow the lead of like-minded leaders and community members (Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). Niche news can help people to connect with political issues and ideas with which they agree, which can mobilize them to take action (Stroud, 2011).

Media in the 2010 elections reflected this volatile communications environment. Campaign coverage was highly negative and politically polarizing (Owen, 2011b). Close to 70% of nightly news coverage was negative (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2010). This negative coverage carried over to the online world, as the blogosphere was ripe with personal attacks on candidates, vitriolic commentary, and uncivil arguments about issues. In this environment, we might expect people who attend to niche media to be more inclined than those who get their political news from less polarized sources to state that their vote choice was influenced by information they gained online.

### *Online Engagement*

At a basic level, online campaign information-seeking is distinct, especially from television information-seeking, in that it requires people to access the Internet and actively choose from a surplus of sources. While incidental exposure to online political content occurs, the impetus for going online for election information largely rests with the voter. People's motivations for accessing online sources of electoral information include surveillance, guidance, entertainment, and social utility in that they anticipate conversations with others about the campaign (Kaye and Johnson, 2002). People also may go online for election information because of the convenience, or because they are dissatisfied with offline sources. They may seek information that supports their voting inclinations (Mutz and Martin, 2001).

The online electoral experience varies vastly from voter to voter. For many, the online media environment is simply an extension of the offline media world, as they primarily access digital versions of traditional media sources. Others consume online election media as a supplement to traditional television and print sources, occasionally making use of the innovative and interactive features of the Internet, such as video sharing and opportunities for online opinion sharing. At the far end of the spectrum are people for whom the online environment has become a sophisticated alternative electoral space where they engage the campaign vicariously through an ever-increasing array of digital media tools.

Studies have found that engagement in campaigns through online platforms can heighten political activation. Participation in online discussions about election issues can foster greater political and community involvement (Price and Cappella, 2002). Interactive features on campaign websites can increase the amount of time users spend on websites as well as their ability to accurately recall information, such as candidates' stands on issues. An excess of

interactivity and novel features, however, can interfere with users' ability to recall site content (Warnick, Xenos, Endres, and Gastil, 2002). Still, voters who use the interactive features of the Internet may be more inclined to consult online media when making their vote choice than people who do not use these innovations.

#### HYPOTHESES:

This study seeks to identify characteristics of voters who reported that they used information gathered online to decide to vote for or against a candidate in the 2010 elections.

The following hypotheses will be tested:

H<sub>1</sub>: Young voters will be more likely to indicate that their candidate choice was influenced by online information than older voters.

H<sub>2</sub>: Independents will be more likely to indicate that their candidate choice was influenced by online information than Democratic and Republican partisans.

H<sub>2a</sub>: People with greater familiarity with the Tea Party will be more likely to indicate that their candidate choice was influenced by online information than those who are unfamiliar with the Tea Party.

H<sub>3</sub>: Voters who regularly accessed information from niche media sources online will be more likely to indicate that their candidate choice was influenced by online information than those who did not engage with online media.

H<sub>4</sub>: Voters who actively engage with Internet media during the elections will be more likely to indicate that their candidate choice was influenced by online information than those who did not engage with online media.

#### DATA AND MEASURES

The Internet and the Campaign 2010 data set collected by the Pew Internet and American Life project is used here to examine the Internet's influence on voters' decision-making in the

2010 midterm elections. This post-election telephone survey of a sample of the general population was fielded from November 3-23, 2010. The survey instrument includes extensive batteries of items pertaining to the respondents' media and Internet use in the 2010 midterm campaigns, a more limited number of questions ascertaining their political identifications and orientations, and demographic indicators.

### *Dependent Variables*

The data set includes two questions pertaining to voter decision-making and online media in the 2010 election. The question that is of primary interest for this study asks specifically about whether the Internet influenced voters' candidate preference in the 2010 midterm elections: Did any of the information you read online about the 2010 elections make you vote FOR or AGAINST a particular candidate? A question that taps the Internet's effect on voter turnout also was asked: Thinking about all of the news, information, email and other material you saw or read online this year, did this online information ENCOURAGE you to vote in the Nov. 2 elections, did it DISCOURAGE you from voting, or did it have no impact on your decision about whether to vote? While turnout is not the main focus of this study, the response to this item provides some additional evidence that online information played a role in voter decision-making in the campaign.

These variables are limited in the extent to which they measure respondents' decision-making in the elections. The items are rough measures based on self-reports of whether people used online information to decide to go to the polls and to choose a candidate. The vote choice indicator does not specify how heavily the respondent relied upon online information for decision-making, nor does it state what aspect of online content—news sites, blogs, candidate websites, social media, or other sources—was most influential. It also gives no indication about what specific type of information, such as news, commentary, or discussion, was relevant for

decision-making, or why online information might have mattered more or less than other cues. Further, the measure does not convey whether online media were used alone or in conjunction with other resources, such as television media or interpersonal discussion, for decision-making. The item does not tap into what motivated people to use online information to arrive at a candidate choice. Finally, the measure does not indicate whether the information was used to arrive at a candidate choice or to reinforce a decision that was already made.

### *Independent Variables*

To test the hypotheses, the study uses variables indicating the respondents' age, partisan identification, use of a variety of online media sources, and participation in election-related activities via the Internet. A basic measure of party affiliation that separated respondents by their self-reported identification as Republicans, Democrats, and Independent was employed.<sup>2</sup> The survey included two indicators that tapped into people's familiarity with and attitudes toward the Tea Party. One item asked whether respondents had heard a lot, a little, or nothing at all about the Tea Party which had been involved in campaigns and protests over the past year. The other measure asked respondents if they agreed, disagreed, or had no opinion about the Tea Party movement.

Respondents' media reliance in the 2010 election is measured by a question that asked them to name the number one source that they used for campaign news and information—television, newspapers, radio, magazines, or the Internet. Respondents were asked to identify specific news and information websites that they used during the campaign. The variables representing these responses are examined in an attempt to assess whether voters who go to niche news sources consult online media when making their voting decisions. Included are the websites of cable news outlets (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, MSN), news sites (New York Times, Huffington Post), and news aggregator sites (Google, AOL, Yahoo, Drudge Report). Cable news

platforms host niche programs, such as Bill O'Reilly on Fox and Rachel Maddow on MSNBC, and their websites feature related content. A dichotomous measure of news website use indicating whether or not a respondent had used any of these sources during the campaign was constructed. However, these platforms also accommodate news and information content that is not politically polarizing. Better measures for testing the niche news hypothesis would assess voters' use of the websites associated with particular media and political figures, candidates, parties, and organizations, including liberal and conservative blogs.

The data set included eleven questions that asked respondents about their interactive online engagement during the 2010 elections. These items measured if people used the Internet to organize or get information about in-person meetings, sign up to receive campaign updates, share photos, videos, or audio files, research or fact-check, look for information about candidates, watch online videos, send campaign-related email, reveal their vote choice online, volunteer in campaign activities, take part in an online discussion, and contribute money. These items were combined to form an additive index of online campaign activity that ranges from zero to eleven.<sup>3</sup>

Another set of indicators related to an individual's active online engagement measured their use of social media during the elections. Respondents were asked if they used social media to start a political group, discover who their friends' candidate preferences, get campaign for candidate information, sign up as a 'friend' of a candidate or group, post campaign-related content, and join a political group. An additive index of social media use was created that ranges from zero to six.<sup>4</sup> A battery of questions measuring respondents' use of Twitter during the campaign also was analyzed.

## ANALYSIS

Evidence from the Internet in Campaign 2010 survey suggests that the Internet was a factor in decision-making for a substantial number of voters during the 2010 midterm contests. 26% of Internet users reported that news, information, email, and other material they accessed online influenced their decision to turn out or not to take part in the elections. The vast majority (22%) stated that online information had encouraged them to vote, while only 4% stated that online communication discouraged them from turning out (Allen, 2011).

A higher percentage of people indicated that online information shaped their vote choice than reported that it influenced their decision to turn out. 35% of Internet users who voted claimed that information they accessed online shaped their voting decision. This question was asked by Pew only once previously in a midterm campaign in 2002; 25% of Internet users replied in the affirmative. At the time of the 2002 midterm contests, 62% of Americans were online compared to the 72% who were regular Internet users during the 2010 study. The vote choice item has been included in presidential election studies since 1996. The 2010 midterm election findings are consistent with the general pattern in presidential elections, where 25% to 43% of Internet users claim that online material influenced their vote.<sup>5</sup>

### *Young Voters*

While young voter participation in presidential elections has been on the rise since the 2000 campaign, young voter turnout in the 2010 midterm elections was depressed. Approximately 23% of eligible 18-29 year olds voted in the midterm contests (CIRCLE Staff, 2010) and constituted only 11% of the electorate compared to 41% of the general population (McDonald, 2011). Young voters, who were optimistic about the future following the 2008 presidential election, were disillusioned by the perceived failure of the government to deal immediately with complex issues. Eighteen to 29 year olds who turned out in 2010 were far less



supportive of Democratic candidates than they had been in 2008. Young voters supported Barack Obama by a margin of 34 percentage points; in 2010, the Democratic edge had dropped to 16 percentage points (Bacon, 2010). Given this context, young people who turned out in the 2010 elections exhibited fairly high levels of political interest, civic duty, and political efficacy, at least compared to their nonvoting colleagues, including those who turned out in 2008. Young voters may have been inclined to seek information about candidates in order to cast a vote that reflected their feelings about the state of political affairs.

As hypothesized, young people were more likely to report that their vote for or against a candidate was influenced by online information than older people (see Table 2). The trend is most pronounced for 18 to 24 year olds, 51% of whom indicated that the Internet affected their voter preference. The propensity to state that their vote choice was influenced by online information is less apparent for 25 to 30 year olds (39%) and those over age 30 (34%). The youngest age group also was the most inclined to seek election information online and to use the Internet to engage with the campaign. Table 2 also depicts the percentage of people who stated that they were encouraged or discouraged to turn out to vote based on information they accessed online. While the findings are less striking than for vote choice, 18-24 year olds were slightly more inclined to be encouraged and less likely to be discouraged to turn out as a result of online information than older people.

Table 2  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice and Turnout by Age

	<b>18-24</b>	<b>25-30</b>	<b>31-45</b>	<b>45+</b>	<b>Sign. <math>\chi^2</math></b>
<b>Online Information Influenced Vote Choice</b>	51%	39%	35%	32%	.00
<b>Vote Choice: Encouraged</b>	22%	16%	18%	18%	.00

<b>Discouraged</b>	2%	5%	4%	4%	
<b>No Impact</b>	76%	79%	78%	79%	

Note: Sample of Internet Users

There are a few noteworthy differences in responses to the vote choice variable that are based on demographic factors other than age. Men (38%) were slightly more inclined to report that their voting decision was influenced by online information than women (33%). White (37%) and Asian American (34%) voters were more likely to state that the Internet shaped their vote than black (25%) or Hispanic (27%) voters. People with a high school education or less were not as likely as those with at least some college or technical school background to report that they were influenced by online information.<sup>6</sup> There is no discernable pattern based on income.

*Partisanship*

Partisanship is related significantly to the Internet’s influence on vote choice. As Table 3 illustrates, Independent voters (42%) were the most likely to state that online information influenced their voting decision as hypothesized. Republicans (37%) were more inclined than Democrats (28%) to use online sources for campaign decision-making. Familiarity with the Tea Party also was significantly correlated with the vote choice variable (Smith, 2011). People who had read or heard a lot about the Tea Party (40%) were more likely than those who had read only a little about the movement (31%) or nothing at all (21%) to state that Internet information had shaped their candidate preference. The vote choice of people who had strong feelings either in favor of or against the Tea Party was more likely to be influenced by online information than that of people who had no opinion about the Tea Party. It appears that the Tea Party may have been a catalyst for online information-seeking that translated into voting for or against a candidate.

Table 3  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice by  
Party Identification and Tea Party Variables

	<b>Internet Influenced Vote</b>	<b>Sign. <math>\chi^2</math></b>
<i>Party Identification</i>		
Republican	37%	.00
Democrat	28%	
Independent	42%	
<i>How much, if anything, have you heard or read about the Tea Party movement that has been involved in campaigns and protests in the U.S. over the past year?</i>		
A Lot	40%	.00
A Little	31%	
Nothing at All	21%	
<i>From what you know, do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the Tea Party movement, or don't you have an opinion either way?</i>		
Agree	40%	.00
Disagree	39%	
No Opinion	30%	

Note: Sample of Internet Users

#### *Online Media Reliance*

It is not surprising that people who relied primarily on the Internet for information during the 2010 midterm elections were the most inclined to state that their decision-making was influenced by online sources. Table 4 depicts the percentage of Internet users who stated that their vote choice was influenced by online information categorized by their primary source of campaign information. A majority of people (60%) who relied on the Internet as their primary source of midterm campaign news indicated that they voted for or against a candidate based on information they had accessed online. A similar majority of the miniscule number of Internet users who named magazines as their main source also stated that their vote choice was influenced by online information, which is likely due to news magazines' digital presence. Those who relied primarily on television for campaign news were the least inclined to be influenced by online information (30%). Similarly, those whose primary sources were

newspapers and radio were less likely to report that their vote was swayed by online material than those who primarily used the Internet for campaign information.

Table 4  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice by  
Primary Source of Information in the 2010 Midterm Elections

<b>Primary Source</b>	<b>% of Internet Users</b>
Television	30%
Newspaper	36%
Radio	35%
Magazine	58%
Internet	62%

$\chi^2$  sign.=.00

Voters used a range of Internet sources to obtain information about the campaign. These sources include the online sites of cable news organizations, including CNN and MSNBC, news sites associated with print publications, such as the New York Times, online news sites or blogs, such as Huffington Post, and news aggregator sites, like Google and the Drudge Reports. Cable television news programs broadcast polarizing political content that is featured on their websites, especially as they sponsor talk programs led by vocal hosts with strong political leanings. While not all content on cable news is politically charged, there is carry-over from the talk programs that influences the presentation and tone of news coverage. Fox News’ conservative outlook and MSNBC’s liberal orientation is evident on their websites (Chalif, 2011).

Audiences for political news websites tend to cluster around the same handful of sites that are referenced by search engines (Hindman, 2009). CNN.com was the only site in the study referenced by a substantial number of respondents (24%). The other sites each were used by 5% or less of the study participants. The findings in Table 5 suggest that people who gained information from cable news websites, especially CNN and Fox News, as well as the New York Times and Huffington Post were inclined to state that they used online sources for decision-

making. This trend is evident for news aggregator sites with the exception of the Drudge Report, which attracts a very small audience. These results indicate that people used specific online information sources when deciding to vote for or against a candidate. However, a more direct test of the niche news hypothesis requires variables that measure attention to sites fully devoted to disseminating ideological and partisan messages.

Table 5  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice by  
Use of Online Media Site

	<b>Yes</b>	Sign. $\chi^2$
<b>Cable News Sites</b>		
CNN	70%	.00
Fox News	63%	.00
MSNBC	51%	.00
MSN	55%	.00
<b>News Sites</b>		
NY Times	64%	.00
Huffington Post	65%	.00
<b>News Aggregators</b>		
Google	56%	.00
AOL	46%	n.s.
Yahoo	46%	.00
Drudge Report	32%	n.s.

Note: Sample of Internet Users

### *Interactive Engagement*

The ability of users to engage interactively is a distinguishing feature of the Internet in elections. The percentage of people who take advantage of the Internet's interactive elements has increased with each election cycle, but remains relatively small. The use of social media in the 2008 campaign was far less extensive than the media hype surrounding it would suggest. Few people took advantage of the novel opportunities for engagement offered online, such as posting information, taking part in online discussions, sending and receiving campaign-related emails,

and exploring election volunteer opportunities. Most voters treated the online information environment primarily as an extension of traditional media (Owen, 2009; 2011b).

The situation is similar for the 2010 midterm elections. The options for online engagement as well as the sophistication of digital electoral applications increased. Yet, those who engaged in election activities via digital media were a small subset of the people who went online during the campaign, most of whom used Internet sources primarily for news and information seeking. A small percentage of Internet users went online to organize (7%), participate in a campaign-related discussion (6%), sign up for digital campaign updates (8%), share photos or videos (8%), or take part in online volunteer activities (5%). Less than 6% of the public used Twitter to follow candidates or the election. Voters who used the most interactive and sophisticated online applications tended to engage in multiple activities across more than one platform. 50% of people who used social media to participate in the 2010 elections took part in two or more distinct activities. 82% of Twitter users during the campaign also connected with the election through other forms of social media.

People who used the Internet to engage actively in the campaign were more likely to state that their vote choice was influenced by information gained online than those who did not participate electronically. As Table 6 indicates, 60% of people who used the Internet to organize or get information about offline meetings stated that online media influenced their decision to vote for or against a candidate. Nearly 60% of those who signed up to receive election updates, shared campaign-related photos, videos, and audio files, and used the Internet to “fact check” claims indicated that online information affected their vote choice. The candidate preferences of 50% or more of Internet users who looked for candidate information online, watched online campaign videos, sent campaign-related emails to associates, revealed their vote choice online,

participated in online volunteer activities, took part in online discussions, and contributed to a candidate online were shaped by online information.

Table 6  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice by  
Online Campaign Activities

	Engaged In Online Activity		Sign. $\chi^2$
	Yes	No	
Organize or get information about in-person meetings to discuss political issues in the campaign (7%)	60%	33%	.00
Sign up online to receive updates about the campaign or the elections (8%)	59%	33%	.00
Share photos, videos or audio files online that relate to the campaign or the elections (8%)	58%	33%	.00
Use the internet to research or “fact check” claims made during the campaign (28%)	57%	23%	.00
Look for information online about candidates' voting records or positions on the issues (35%)	55%	21%	.00
Watch video online about the candidates or the election (31%)	54%	25%	.00
Send email related to the campaign or the elections to friends, family members or others (16%)	53%	31%	.00
Reveal online which candidates you voted for this year (12%)	53%	33%	.00
Use the internet to participate in VOLUNTEER activities related to the campaign – like getting lists of voters to call, or getting people to the polls (5%)	52%	34%	.00
Take part in an online discussion, listserv or other online group forum like a blog, related to political issues or the campaign (6%)	51%	34%	.00
Contribute money online to a candidate running for public office (4%)	49%	33%	.00

Note: Sample of Internet Users

The findings are similar for people who engaged specifically in social networking activities related to the campaign. The more actively people used social networking sites to

engage with the 2010 elections, the more likely they were to report that their vote choice was influenced by online information. As Table 7 depicts, 66% of voters who started a political group on a social networking site during the campaign stated that the Internet had shaped their voting decision. The trend is apparent for getting campaign information through a social network site, ‘friending’ a candidate or political organization, posting political content, and joining a political group.

Table 7  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice by  
Social Networking Activity

	Engaged In Social Networking Activity		Sign. $\chi^2$
	Yes	No	
START a political group, or group supporting a political cause on a social networking site? (2%)	66%	39%	.00
Discover on a social networking site which candidates your friends voted for this year? (18%)	60%	35%	.00
Get any campaign or candidate information on social networking sites? (15%)	54%	37%	.00
Sign up on a social networking site as a 'friend' of a candidate, or a group involved in the campaign such as a political party or interest group? (11%)	54%	38%	.00
Post content related to politics or the campaign on a social networking site? (13%)	54%	37%	.00
JOIN a political group, or group supporting a cause on a social networking site? (10%)	54%	38%	.00

Note: Sample of Social Media Users

Twitter use is an exception to the trend of online activity’s relationship to the Internet’s influence on vote choice. As Table 8 shows, voters who used Twitter to follow candidates and the elections, get campaign information, and who included links to political content in their own tweets were not more inclined to vote for or against a candidate based on online information.



This finding is noteworthy, as high profile candidates and partisan politicians drew attention to their use of Twitter as an alternative to the mainstream media. Press accounts emphasized the more prominent role that Twitter was playing in the 2010 elections compared to the 2008 presidential contest. Content from candidate and political organization tweets featured prominently in some aspects of campaign coverage, especially stories about the Tea Party and eccentric candidates. Candidates used Twitter to organize “tweet-ups” to draw supporters to offline and online events.

There are a number of explanations for this finding. Information conveyed through election-related tweets is limited by their brevity—a 140 character limit—and style. Campaign tweets often are designed to create an informal, more personal connection between candidates and voters. Tweets are expressed in an entertaining style or shorthand, and the content runs the gamut from serious to vitriolic to silly. Issue information, when conveyed at all, takes the form of superficial sound bites. While many candidates had Twitter accounts in the 2010 election, not all were well-managed, as tweets were posted intermittently. The reliability of the campaign information available on Twitter was called into question by voters. Only half of the Twitter users in the Pew sample felt that they could trust election messages disseminated through the platform. Only a quarter of users stated that they paid attention to most of the campaign information they received on Twitter. Voters followed the election through Twitter because it was entertaining, they found the information interesting, and it provided a personal connection to campaigns.

Table 8  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice by  
Twitter Activity

	Engaged In Twitter Activity		Sign. $\chi^2$
	Yes	No	
Use Twitter to follow the election results as they were happening? (12%)	41%	41%	n.s.
Include links to political content in your tweets? (9%)	40%	41%	n.s.
Follow a candidate, or a group involved in the campaign such as a political party or interest group on Twitter? (11%)	36%	42%	n.s.
Get any campaign or candidate information on Twitter? (16%)	35%	43%	n.s.

Note: Sample of Twitter Users

*Multivariate Analysis*

A binary logistic regression analysis was performed to predict whether online news and information influenced a person's vote for or against a candidate based on age, party identification, attitude toward the Tea Party, Internet as a primary source of campaign information, use of news and information websites, online campaign activity, and social media use. The results are presented in Table 9, and generally confirm the findings of the bivariate analyses. The relationship for age is statistically significant only for 18 to 24 year olds, the youngest group of voters. Party identification predicts online information influencing vote choice, but only for Independents. Agreement with the Tea Party is a stronger indicator than disagreement with the movement; both relationships are statistically significant. The use of Internet media, and especially accessing online news and information websites, is strongly related to the vote choice variable. Finally, using the Internet to engage interactively with the campaign is a significant predictor of using online media for decision-making, while social media use is not.

Table 9  
Binary Logistic Regression Analysis  
Online Information Influenced Vote Choice

	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>Sign. Wald</b>
<b>Age</b>			.000
18-24	.871	.163	.000
25-30	-.014	.149	.927
31-45	-.052	.097	.591
<b>Party Identification</b>			.000
Republican	.121	.103	.241
Independent	.559	.113	.000
<b>Tea Party</b>			.011
Agree	.382	.127	.003
Disagree	.215	.113	.057
<b>Internet</b>	.424	.133	.001
<b>Online Sites</b>	.869	.098	.000
<b>Online Activity</b>	.329	.024	.000
<b>Social Media Use</b>	.060	.044	.177
Constant	.587	.305	.054
Omnibus $\chi^2$ sign. .000			
Cox and Snell $R^2$ =.187			
Nagelkerke $R^2$ =.257			
72.5% of cases correctly classified			

## CONCLUSION

The analysis suggests that online information is relevant for voters' decision to turn out in an election and to vote for or against a candidate. Almost a quarter of the electorate in 2010 stated that material accessed through digital sources encouraged or discouraged them to vote. A third of voters reported that information gained online influenced their candidate preference. The online environment's effect on candidate choice is most pronounced for young voters, political independents, people who rely on the Internet as their main source of campaign information, and individuals who engage actively with online election media.

The finding that young people are the most inclined to use online media to inform their candidate preferences has a number of implications. Consulting online media during campaigns is an extension of young people's general media use habits. Young voters are fairly skilled at navigating the online media environment and accessing content from a range of platforms. They tend to go to different websites for their campaign information than older voters, and seek information that they perceive to be accurate, non-partisan, and easy to use (Lupia and Philpot, 2005). They also are more inclined than older adults to engage the interactive features of campaign media. These orientations toward electoral communication are likely to persist over the life course. As new cohorts reach voting age, we might expect online media to become the main source of campaign information for a higher percentage of the electorate. This trend may fundamentally alter the way that campaigns are waged by candidates, reported, and experienced by voters.

The fact that a higher percentage of Independents than partisan identifiers made use of online media in determining their vote choice is not unexpected, given that Independents lack party cues to guide their decision-making. The finding that Republicans consulted online media more than Democrats when choosing candidates may reflect the specific context of the 2010 election. The extensive coverage of the Tea Party in print, on air, and online was particularly relevant for Republican voters who were considering candidates backed by the movement. The Tea Party's anti-mainstream media rhetoric may have driven some voters to seek information from online sources, such as candidate websites, Tea Party sites, social media sources, and friendly blogs.

People who engaged the interactive features of the online campaign experience were more likely to use online sources when making their voting decision. In some cases, this

interactivity represents an investment in the campaign, as voters contribute online content, make donations, and volunteer through digital platforms. Interactive engagement also makes information more relevant and memorable. These special features of the Internet render the medium a potentially powerful conduit for voters seeking to feel more actively connected to campaigns.

This study suggests that voters consult Internet sources when evaluating candidates and determining their vote choice. It has identified particular types of voters who are disposed to using online media for electoral decision-making. Further research should explore more fully voters' motivations for using online media when considering candidate choices. The conditions that are conducive to voters using the Internet for decision-making as well as the specific sources they consult also should be examined.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 30% of the public followed news about 2010 congressional elections closely a week before Election Day compared to almost 60% of the public who followed the 2008 presidential election closely during this same week (Pew Research Center, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> An analysis was performed to determine if conservative, liberal, or moderate ideological orientation was related to the use of online information to decide on a candidate, and there was no relationship.

<sup>3</sup> The online campaign activity index reliability is .771 (Cronbach's alpha).

<sup>4</sup> The social media index reliability is .736 (Cronbach's alpha).

<sup>5</sup> The percentage of Internet users who responded that online information influenced their vote for or against a candidate in a presidential election year is 31% in 1996, 34% in 1998, 43% in 2000, and 27% in 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The chi square for all of these relationships is statistically significant at  $p \leq .05$ .