The Internet and Politics

Inquire: How Has the Internet Changed the Political Landscape in America?

Overview
The Internet — is it the biggest blessing or the biggest bane in the history of American politics? Campaigns can easily and quickly deliver their message to voters through a variety of mediums, and the public can log on to the candidate’s website to gather information. Yet, everyone with a phone has a camera, and a candidate’s personal and private remarks can be shared and accessed in a moment. Embarrassing moments are suddenly and instantaneously blasted across the Internet to the entire world.

In the right hands, instant news and ease of communication is a candidate’s dream come true. Congressmen, and even the president, can communicate directly to the world and the public. But, in the wrong hands, the wrong communication can drive a person from office or derail a very promising campaign.

Big Question: How do candidates and politicians use this new tool called the Internet?

In a CNN interview in 1999, then Vice President (and presidential candidate) Al Gore, when asked to describe what distinguished him from his challenger for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey, replied (in part):

“During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet. I took the initiative in moving forward a whole range of initiatives that have proven to be important to our country’s economic growth and environmental protection, improvements in our educational system.”

From that statement came countless jokes and comments about Gore’s claim to have created the Internet.

Gore was, in fact, not claiming to have invented or created the Internet. He simply claimed to have been an innovative senator who helped create the environment for those who did create, build, invent, and work to make the Internet a reality.

Nonetheless, for a number of years, Gore’s statement was the Internet’s largest impact on the American political landscape. However, in the 2004 election, this began to change. Candidates used the Internet to raise money and tap into new resources. In 2008, Obama’s connection to his Blackberry made news. In
the 2016 election, Trump tweeted multiple times a day. And now, as shown by President Trump’s continual — almost constant — use of social media, the Internet has become part of the fabric of the American political experience.

Where does the Internet go from here? Truthfully, no one really knows. Very few people could have predicted in 1999 that the president would be personally communicating his thoughts in a consistent and uncensored manner in 2016. The communication, and even research, tools available in the next 15 years or so are impossible to predict.

However, it is possible to anticipate that there will be even more transparency as the ability to access information becomes even more universal. It is possible to anticipate there will be even less privacy for candidates and public figures, as phones and other recording devices become even more sophisticated.

What all of this will mean to the U.S. political system is unknown. But, one thing is for sure: the shape of the modern political campaign, the life of the modern politician, and the knowledge base of the modern voter have all changed radically. And, we all owe it to Al Gore — for creating the Internet!

Read: The Internet and New Media in the 21st Century

New Media Trends

The invention of cable in the 1980s and the expansion of the Internet in the 2000s opened up more options for media consumers than ever before. Viewers can watch nearly anything at the click of a button, bypass commercials, and record programs of interest. The resulting saturation, or inundation, of information may lead viewers to abandon the news entirely or become more suspicious and fatigued about politics.

This effect, in turn, also changes the president’s ability to reach out to citizens. For example, viewership of the president’s annual State of the Union address has decreased over the years from 67 million viewers in 1993 to 32 million in 2015.

Citizens who want to watch reality television and movies can easily avoid the news, leaving presidents with no sure way to communicate with the public. Other voices, such as those of talk show hosts and political pundits, now fill the gap.

Electoral candidates have also lost some media ground. In race coverage, modern journalists analyze campaigns and blunders of the overall race, rather than interviewing the candidates or discussing their issue positions. Some argue that this shallow coverage is a result of candidates’ trying to control the journalists by limiting interviews and quotes. In an effort to regain control of the story, journalists begin analyzing campaigns without input from the candidates.

The use of social media by candidates provides a countervailing trend. President Trump’s hundreds of election tweets are the stuff of legends. These tweets kept his press coverage up, although they were also problematic for him at times. The final days of the contest saw no new tweets from Trump as he attempted to stay on message.
The First Social Media Candidate

When President-Elect Barack Obama admitted an addiction to his Blackberry, the signs were clear: a new generation was assuming the presidency. Obama’s use of technology was a part of life, not a campaign pretense. Perhaps for this reason, he was the first candidate to embrace social media fully.

While John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, focused on traditional media to run his campaign, Obama did not. One of Obama’s campaign advisors was Chris Hughes, a cofounder of Facebook. The campaign allowed Hughes to create a powerful online presence for Obama, with sites on YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and more. Podcasts and videos were available for anyone looking for information about the candidate. These efforts made it possible for information to be forwarded easily between friends and colleagues. It also allowed Obama to connect with a younger generation that was often left out of politics.

By Election Day, Obama’s skill with the web was clear: he had over two million Facebook supporters, while McCain had 600,000. Obama had 112,000 followers on Twitter, and McCain had only 4,600.

The Impact of Social Media

The availability of the Internet and social media has moved some control of the message back into the presidents’ and candidates’ hands. Politicians can now connect to the people directly, bypassing journalists. When Barack Obama’s minister, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was accused of making inflammatory racial sermons in 2008, Obama used YouTube to respond to charges that he shared Wright’s beliefs. The video drew more than seven million views.

To reach out to supporters and voters, the White House maintains a YouTube channel and a Facebook site, as did former Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner.

The “Citizen Journalist” - Everyman with a Camera

Social media, like Facebook, also placed journalism in the hands of citizens: citizen journalism occurs when citizens use their personal recording devices and cell phones to capture events and post them on the Internet. In 2012, citizen journalists caught both presidential candidates by surprise. Mitt Romney was taped by a bartender’s personal camera saying that 47 percent of Americans would vote for President Obama because they were dependent on the government.

Obama was recorded by a Huffington Post volunteer saying that some Midwesterners “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them” due to their frustration with the economy.

More recently, as Donald Trump attempted to close out the fall 2016 campaign, his musings about having his way with women were revealed on the infamous Billy Bush Access Hollywood tape. These statements became nightmares for the campaigns. As journalism continues to scale back and hire fewer professional writers in an effort to control costs, citizen journalism may become the new normal.

Soft News Shows for the Generation X and Millenial

The shift in news media is a change in viewers’ preferred programming. Younger viewers, especially members of Generation X and Millennials, like their newscasts to be humorous. The popularity of The Daily Show and The Colbert Report demonstrate that news, even political news, can win young viewers if delivered well. Such soft news presents news in an entertaining and approachable manner, painlessly
introducing a variety of topics. While the depth or quality of reporting may be less than ideal, these shows can sound an alarm as needed to raise citizen awareness.

Viewers who watch or listen to programs like John Oliver’s Last Week Tonight are more likely to be aware and observant of political events and foreign policy crises than they would otherwise be. They may view opposing party candidates more favorably because the low-partisan, friendly interview styles allow politicians to relax and be conversational rather than defensive.

Because viewers of political comedy shows watch the news frequently, they may in fact be more politically knowledgeable than citizens viewing national news. In two studies, researchers interviewed respondents and asked knowledge questions about current events and situations. Viewers of The Daily Show scored more correct answers than viewers of news programming and news stations.

That being said, it is not clear whether the number of viewers is large enough to make a big impact on politics, nor do we know whether the learning is long term or short term. Regardless, this is where a large percentage of these generations are acquiring their news.

Reflect: How Do You Connect?

Poll: Was Reconstruction Effective?
The Internet and social media present an ever-changing environment. From simple emails to Facebook to Instagram and on and on. Usually the younger crowd is more in tune with the latest innovations, and the older crowd sticks with what they know, which means candidates and politicians must remain both on the cutting edge and with the tried and true to reach more people.

Which of the following have you used?
- Facebook
- MySpace
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Snapchat

Expand: Politics Online

Discover
Not since television has an innovation had the potential to impact politics greater than the Internet. With more and more Americans getting wired, the ability to reach millions of voters will be a lure no politician can resist.

The Evolution of Internet Politics
In the year 2000, the Internet had not eclipsed the influence of newspapers, radio, or television. However, cyberspace has an advantage over the older news sources. The Internet is an interactive medium, allowing citizens to send information as well as receive it — in real time.

In 1996, all major presidential candidates developed websites to support their campaigns. Newsgroups have been created to cover the entire political spectrum. Interest groups have reached new audiences on the web creating the potential for an even greater influence in Washington. Fringe organizations on the far
left and the far right have used the relatively unregulated medium — free from profit motive or government control — to broaden their support networks.

The Power and Capabilities of the Internet

Given its interactive capabilities, why not let citizens vote directly online? Two states already experimented with this in the presidential primaries in the 2000 contest. A voter could register online and later cast his or her vote into cyberspace.

The original idea of direct democracy was to let all citizens vote on all issues. With a nation as large as the United States, it became infeasible to assemble the citizenry for such direct involvement to take place. The Internet could turn that impossibility into a reality. Rather than letting the Senate and House of Representatives vote on an issue, why not create a national referendum and permit Americans to voice their opinions in an online vote? Supporters and opponents of a bill could post information pertinent to the issue on a web page. Debate could take place informally in chat rooms. Optimists point to the potential of the Internet to create a more democratic America.

The Downside of the Internet

Use of the Internet in this fashion has critics as well. Fears of a malicious hacker breaking into a voting site and shutting it down or tampering with the results have led most states to proceed cautiously. A technological gap still exists between connected Americans and those without the financial means to own a computer or pay for Internet service.

Some intellectuals question the expertise of the average American to cast important votes on policy matters. Until these questions get resolved, the use of the Internet in the political arena remains mostly potential. But, at the dawn of the 21st century, even the naysayers see the revolutionary changes on the horizon introduced by this exciting new medium.

Regardless, the Internet is already a powerful tool for delving into political issues and delving into the history of the United States. After all, it is the medium you are currently using.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Media Institution: Crash Course Government and Politics #44
  ● A Crash Course Government video covering the role of media in politics
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F0g4N415uw

We the Voters: How does social media change the election?
  ● A short video explaining the effect of social media on politics today, and how to get the most accurate news
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftjJfUfE4Xc

How the Internet is Changing Politics | Vinay Nayak | TEDxKingsCollegeLondon
  ● A TED Talk video talking about the Internet and politics
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrvpD-5zwqk
Check Your Knowledge

1. Which of the following is an issue that hinders the U.S. from voting online?
   A. the costs of creating online voting sites
   B. the complexity of creating online voting sites
   C. the fears of malicious hackers shutting down a voting site or tampering with results
   D. the Constitution forbids online voting

2. True or False: The availability of social media and the Internet has given presidents and candidates more control over the messages they want to convey.
   A. True
   B. False

3. True or False: A large percentage of the younger generation acquires news only through Facebook and Twitter.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

Lesson Content:
Authored and curated by Jay Reynolds, J.D. for The TEL Library. CC BY NC SA 4.0

Adapted Content:
Title: American Government – 8.2 The Evolution of the Media – New Media Trends: Rice University, OpenStax CNX. License: CC BY 4.0
http://cnx.org/contents/5bcc0e59-7345-421d-8507-a1e4608685e8@15.8

Title: The Internet in Politics (2018): U.S. History Online Textbook, DOA. License: CC BY 4.0
http://www.ushistory.org/gov/5e.asp