The 1996 'Net Voter

by Douglas Muzzio and David Birdsell

The 1996 campaign notched several firsts for the Internet. Never before had a presidential candidate announced his World Wide Web site in a presidential debate—not surprising, since no candidate ever before had had one. This year the Clinton and Dole campaigns were both on-line, as were the Republican and Democratic national committees. Major news organizations—including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and CNN, to say nothing of cyber-collaborations such as *PoliticsNow* and *MSNBC*—posted breaking news to the Internet from the Iowa caucuses through Election Day.

Their audience? The 30 to 50 million Americans who have become Internet users over the past four years, a significant number of whom turned out to vote on November 5. Twenty-four million voters in the 1996 presidential election—26% of the electorate—were regular users of the Internet, according to Voter News Service (VNS) national exit poll data.[1]

> ***"The 'Net voter was the same person we've met in other analyses of the Internet: an upscale male from a big city or suburb. This voter was slightly more liberal than voters in general, and a bit more optimistic about his financial situation, but he did not otherwise differ significantly from the non-user standing behind him at the voting booth."***

Now that the voting is done and the candidate Web sites have posted their thank-you notes, the question is, did the Internet matter? Who was the 1996 'Net voter, and how did he or she differ from voters who did not use the Internet? The short answer is that the 'Net voter was the same person we've met in other analyses of the Internet: an upscale male from a big city or suburb. This voter was slightly more liberal than voters in general and a bit more optimistic about his financial situation, but he did not otherwise differ significantly from the non-user standing behind him at the voting booth.

Demographics of 'Net Voters

Men made up 55% of 1996 'Net voters; women 45%. Of the 48% of the national presidential electorate who were men, 30% were regular users of the Internet. Of the 52% of all voters who were women, 22% regularly used the Internet.

'Net voters were wealthier than non-users; nearly half (48%) earned more than $50,000 annually compared to 32% of non-'Net voters. This disparity was even more pronounced further up the income scale. One in seven 'Net voters (14%) earned more than $100,000 per year compared to one in 16 (6%) of non-'Net voters. Not surprisingly, 'Net voters were also more optimistic about their finances. Thirty-nine percent felt that their financial situations had improved over 1992, compared to only 29% of non-users. About equal percentages from each group, 22% of 'Net voters and 21% of non-users, thought that their financial situations had worsened.

The younger a 1996 voter, the more likely he or she was to use the Internet regularly; 38% of presidential voters aged 18 to 29 were regular 'Net users, compared to 30% of 30 to 44 year olds and 26% of those aged 45 to 59. Only 11% of those 60 and older used the 'Net regularly.

More 'Net voters were found to live in the suburbs (43%), in medium sized cities of 50,000-500,000 residents (23%), and in large cities of 500,000 or more (11%) than non-'Net voters (39%, 20%, and 9%, respectively). Non-'Net voters were more likely to live in rural areas (22% vs. 15%) and just as likely to live in large towns and smaller cities. (9% vs. 10%).

There were no racial or ethnic differences: whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians used the Internet in almost the exact proportions they represent in the general electorate—83% white (vs. 84%), 9% black (vs. 9%), 5% Hispanic and 1% Asian.

Politics of 'Net Voters

Internet users were not significantly more likely than non-users to have voted for Bill Clinton over Bob Dole in 1996. Clinton won Internet users 49% to 40% while non-users went for the President 48% to 43%. Perot got 9% of users and 8% of non-users. There was also little difference between the two groups in voting for the House. Fifty-one percent of "Net users voted Democratic vs. 47% who voted Republican, while non-users split evenly 49% to 49%.

Ideologically, 'Net voters were somewhat more liberal than non-users: 24% characterized themselves as liberal vs. 17% of non-users, while 31% called themselves conservative vs. 36% of non-users. There was less variation in the middle, with 45% of 'Net voters and 47% of non-users calling themselves moderate. There were virtually no differences between 'Net users and non-users in their party identification. Thirty-eight percent of 'Net users were

Democrats compared to 40% of non-users; 35% of users were Republicans as opposed to 34% of non-users; and 21% of both groups identified themselves as independents.

Comparison with Earlier Studies

Although data from the VNS exit polls show some differences from earlier surveys of Internet users, the results are generally consistent. In a Baruch-Harris pre-election survey fielded from September 26-30, 1996, men made up 57% of Web users and women 43%, percentages virtually identical to the VNS results.[2] The September study found a smaller percentage of Democrats (28%), a larger percentage of independents (30%), and about the same percentage of Republicans (36%).

Voter News Service did not ask voters whether they used the Internet to obtain political information. However, the Baruch-Harris Survey found that politics was a hot topic on the Web. Some 8 million adult Americans nationally had used the Web to get information about politics. Survey respondents said that they had increased their Web use throughout the month of September.

Seven in 10 (69%) Web users in the Baruch-Harris survey said they were very likely to vote in the November election; two-thirds (66%) said that they voted in 1992. Those who got political information from the Web were even more likely to vote—three-quarters (76%) said they were "very likely" to cast a ballot in November (vs. 51% of non-users). Some of the differences in profiles from the two surveys could result from the difference between voting and non-voting Web users.

Just as politics is a hot topic on the Web, so too is the Internet a hot topic among voters. The Baruch-Harris survey found that 18% of the general population access the Internet, while fully 26% of VNS's voters are Internet users.

Conclusion

Some analysts see the Internet as a panacea for what ails democracy; others think that it's the kind of medicine that kills the patient. Neither extreme will find much support in the 1996 VNS results. The Internet does remain something of a privileged enclave, but the privilege seems to be eroding. The Internet gender gap, though still large enough to make the 'Net a predominately male medium, has narrowed by 15 percentage points since September 1995. CommerceNet/Nielsen found that while 'Net users are still younger than the general population, some of the more recent expansion in the user base has taken place among older groups of Americans, pushing the average age closer to the population at large.[3]

Most significantly, 'Net users do not appear to be marching in lock-step with one another, nor are they significantly different from their unplugged neighbors. If anything, they are less likely to exhibit the qualities of alienated, angry voters than are non-users, cutting against the image of the Internet as a seedbed for radically antisocial individualism. We must caution, however, that the Internet is still a very young medium that continues to experience explosive growth. With a user population that has doubled over the last year and likely to double again within 12 months, the characteristics of Internet users and of their Internet use can be expected to change significantly.

"*'Net users do not appear to be marching in lock-step with one another, nor are they significantly different from their unplugged neighbors. If anything, they are less likely to exhibit the qualities of alienated and angry voters than are non-users, cutting against the image of the Internet as a seedbed for radically anti-social individualism.*"

If the Internet has not fully arrived as a means of campaign communication, it certainly has a foot in the door. Politicians and news organizations launched a big effort on the Internet this year without really knowing how many people would tune in. Now that we know that a quarter of the electorate is on-line, with more to come, we can expect an even more vigorous effort to woo 'Net voters in 1998 and 2000.

Endnotes

1 VNS reported results from 3,573 respondents who answered the item, "Do you regularly use the Internet?".

2 Results of the nationwide Baruch-Harris survey of 1,032 adults were presented at the October 1996 meeting of the New York Chapter of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and released on October 11, 1996; see Douglas Muzzio et al., "World Wide Web Snaring More Users: Politics a Hot Web Topic and Web Users Are Voters," The Harris Poll 68. The Baruch-Harris Survey Unit's previous studies on the issue are discussed in David S. Birdsell et al., "A New Political Marketplace: The Web Snares Voters," *Public Perspective* (June/July 1996), 33-36.

3 CommerceNet/Nielsen, "The CommerceNet/Nielsen Internet Demographics Recontact Study," Executive Summary, March/April 1996.

Douglas Muzzio is professor and David Birdsell is associate professor, School of Public Affairs, Baruch College, CUNY