

The 2012 Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs Election Survey

Social Media and Candidate Support

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Executive Summary:

- While the Obama campaign's dominance in social networking is well established, it does not necessarily translate into voter support among young voters.
- There is no statistically significant difference between Obama and Romney support among likely voters between the ages of 18 and 34 who use social networking as a source of political news.
- Even when heavy users of social media and those who "like," "follow," or "view," are assessed, there is no meaningful difference in support across the two candidates.

A great deal of attention in the presidential election campaign of 2012 has focused on the use of social media by candidates. The Obama campaign has been declared the "winner" in social media use, surpassing the Romney campaign in "digital effort" with more platforms, posts, and tweets.¹ While much has been made about the use of social media in this campaign, there has been less attention on whether or not social media use translates into votes. The Public Policy Research Lab at Louisiana State University conducted a national survey of 1,009 registered voters about their sources of political information, their use of social networks, and their likely support of the candidates. The results of this survey indicate that the digital advantage for Obama may not translate into a vote advantage.

Both the Romney and Obama campaign websites tailor information to particular constituency groups, and both campaigns use age as part of their constituent groupings. The Obama campaign has information targeted to young Americans and seniors while the Romney campaign targets young Americans only. The results of the PPRL survey indicate that the focus on young voters by both campaigns is well worth the effort.

The internet was the second most popular source of information and news about the election. Just over 31% of all survey respondents indicated that their news and information about the election came from the internet. When respondents are broken down by age, the internet was the most popular source of news and information for respondents ages 18 – 24. Forty-seven percent of respondents ages 18 to 24 use the internet as their primary news source. The internet was even more popular as a news source among those ages 25-34 with nearly 50% of respondents reporting the internet as their source of campaign information.

When respondents were asked how many days in the past week did you get news or read news headlines on Facebook, Twitter, or some other social networking site, nearly 65% of respondents

¹ Project for Excellence in Journalism, Pew Research Center: Analyzing the Digital Campaign: Obama Outpaces Romney in Direct Voter Communications on Web, Social Media (August 2012).

reported that they did not access a social networking site for that purpose. However, an examination of respondents by age reveals an incredible amount of variation. Just over 67% of 18 - 24 year olds and nearly 55% of 25-34 year olds report using social media as a news source. Nearly a third of 18 - 24 year olds reported accessing social networking sites for news coverage at least 7 times week.

Clearly, the use of social media for information about the presidential campaign is highest among the youngest registered voters. What we don't know is whether this social media use by younger voters translates into candidate support. The PEW Report on the digital campaigns concludes "Compared with 2008, the Obama campaign has made its digital messaging more targeted and it has reduced the role of the traditional press." Has the change paid off for the Obama Campaign?

To assess whether or not social media use is associated with a higher level of support for one candidate or another, we limited the assessment to registered voters between the ages of 18 to 34 since these respondents are more likely than other age groups to rely on social networks for news and campaign activities. In addition, the analysis is limited to those who indicated a preference between Obama and Romney. Overall, 51% of respondents in this group of young voters indicate that they plan to vote for Obama compared to 49% who plan to vote for Romney.

When it comes to social networks as a news source, there is no statistically significant difference in likely Obama and Romney supporters across social media use. Respondents who indicated using social media as a news source for the 2012 presidential election information are not more likely to indicate they plan to vote for Obama rather than Romney in the 2012 presidential election.

In order to investigate the possibility that heavy users of social networks as a news source might matter across the candidates, support for Obama versus Romney was assessed across young voters who indicated heavy use of social networks (seven or more times a week). Again, there is no statistically significant difference in Obama and Romney supporters and heavy use of social networks.

According to the Pew Report, when it comes to "followers," "views," and "likes," Obama outpaces Romney 13:1. Among 18-34 year olds in this survey, this does not translate into a clear Obama advantage in terms of likely votes. There is no statistically significant difference across Obama and Romney support and respondents who indicated that have ever liked or followed a political candidate on Facebook, Twitter, or some other social networking site.

The one area in which social networking activities appears to vary across likely supporters for one candidate over another is the viewing of political ads online. Just under 50% of 18-34 year old respondents reporting viewing a political ad on line, and 33% indicated they were Obama supporters compared to just 16% for Romney.

While the news media has created quite a stir regarding the heavy use of social media in the 2012 presidential campaign and their assessment indicates this is an area where Obama is outperforming Romney, the results of this survey indicate that the digital advantage may not translate into a vote advantage. Descriptive analysis indicates that there is very little difference between likely Obama and Romney voters and social networking use.

About the Survey:

From April 20th to June 17th the Public Policy Research Lab at Louisiana State University talked to 1,009 randomly selected registered voters nationwide. Voters who reported voting for the 1st time in 2008 were oversampled, resulting in the relatively lengthy field time of two months. Specifically; 511 2008-1st time voters were interviewed and 498 other voters were interviewed as a control.

Posted Questionnaire:

Just thinking about news and information about the (2012 presidential) election, which one source would you say you get most of your information from?

	All Respondents Proportions	Ages 18-24 Proportions	Ages 25-34 Proportions
Television	.4486	.4164	.3496
Newspapers	.0887	.0480	.0997
Radio	.1287	.0566	.0515
Internet	.3151	.4696	.4998
Don't Know	.0189		
Refused			
Number of Obs.	997	299	108

How many days in the past week did you get news or read news headlines on Facebook, Twitter, or some other social networking site?

	All Respondents Proportions	Ages 18-24 Proportions	Ages 25-34 Proportions
Zero	.6468	.3214	.4245
One	.0297	.0514	.0428
Two	.0577	.1078	.0492
Three	.0250	.0507	.0787
Four	.0140	.0612	.0592
Five	.0335	.0642	.0258
Six	.0079	.0165	.0437
Seven	.1749	.3243	.2487
Number of Obs.	996	299	108

Now, suppose the 2012 presidential election were being held TODAY and you had to choose between Barack Obama, the Democrat, and Mitt Romney the Republican candidate, who would you vote for?"

	Repondents Ages 18-34
Obama	.5591
Romney	.4409

Number of Obs. 407

Used a Social Media Site for News At Least Once a Week	Presidential Vote		
	Romney	Obama	Total
No	.1729	.2215	.3944
Yes	.2763	.3293	.6056
Total	.4492	.5508	1
Number of obs.	404		
Pearson: Uncorrected chi2 (1)=	.1246		
Design-based F(1, 402)=	.0312	P=.8598	

Used a Social Media Site for News Seven or More Times a Week	Presidential Vote		
	Romney	Obama	Total
No	.3320	.3920	.7240
Yes	.1090	.1670	.2760
Total	.4409	.5591	1
Number of obs.	404		
Pearson: Uncorrected chi2 (1)=	1.3388		
Design-based F(1, 402)=	.3525	P=.5530	

Have you ever liked or followed a political candidate on Facebook, Twitter, or some other social networking site?

	Presidential Vote		
	Romney	Obama	Total
No	.3308	.3904	.7213
Yes	.1097	.1690	.2787
Total	.4405	.5595	1
Number of obs.	406		
Pearson: Uncorrected chi2 (1)=	1.4046		
Design-based F(1, 404)=	.3785	P=.5388	

How often, if ever, do you watch video advertisements from political candidates or political groups online?

	Presidential Vote		
	Romney	Obama	Total
Never	.2273	.2284	.5057
At least once	.1637	.3306	.4943
Total	.4409	.5591	1
Number of obs.	407		
Pearson: Uncorrected chi2 (1)=	19.4728		
Design-based F(1, 405)=	5.5111	P=.0194	
