

The effect of the internet on voting behavior

The internet can reduce political participation and thus affect legislation in labor and other areas

Keywords: internet, voting behavior, mass media, information, social media

ELEVATOR PITCH

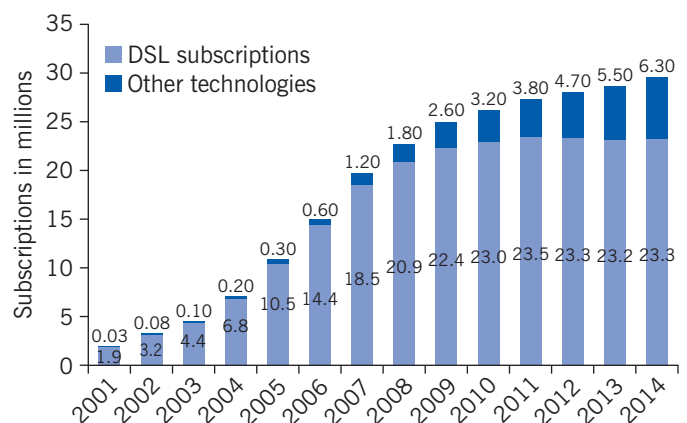
The internet has transformed the way in which voters access and receive political information, such that it has circumvented the filtering of information previously undertaken by editorial offices. Consequently, consumers have had to learn how to filter relevant information themselves. The introduction phase of the internet coincided with a decreasing voter turnout, possibly due to “information overload” or less-focused political information. However, the subsequent rise of social media may help reverse the negative effect on turnout. But this poses challenges for regulatory policy. Understanding the internet’s effects on the consumption of information is also relevant for how voters view labor policies.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ The internet can provide direct and cheap access to a large pool of information.
- ⊕ More information can lead to users making better-informed decisions.
- ⊕ Low entry costs facilitate the dissemination of information, foster competition, and increase the variety of information.
- ⊕ More competition in the media market might imply less filtering by editorial offices and less pre-selection of information.
- ⊕ The emergence of social media has created new participation and dissemination platforms.

Development of broadband subscriptions in Germany



Source: Bundesnetzagentur (2010), (2015). Online at: http://www.bundesnetzagentur.de/EN/Home/home_node.html

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Cons

- ⊖ Users have to learn how to filter online information efficiently, which takes time.
- ⊖ If consumers cannot filter the relevant information they may face an information overload and consequently make ill-informed decisions.
- ⊖ Internet-based technologies, such as search engines, help filter information but may also introduce a new source of bias.
- ⊖ The crowding-out of traditional media may lower the quality of information online.
- ⊖ There is competition from alternative uses of time spent online, e.g. on entertainment.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

The internet is the new mass medium that affects many aspects of everyday life. Empirical evidence during the initial phase of the internet suggests that a “crowding-out” of political information occurred, which affected voter turnout. The introduction of interactive social media and “user-defined” content appears to have reversed this, but there is a downside: voters can now be personally identified and strategically influenced by targeted information. Regulating the internet may be necessary, but it can also stifle innovation. Therefore, policymakers should consider introducing measures to educate voters to become more discriminating in their use of the internet.