

## NEW REPORT: The rise of the Internet initially reduced voter turnout but the introduction of Social Media seems to have reversed this effect

In the run-up to the US presidential election, [IZA World of Labor](#) is publishing a timely study by economist Stephan Heblich of the University of Bristol showing how the rise of the internet and social media has affected voting behavior

The internet has transformed the way in which voters access and receive political information. It has allowed politicians to directly communicate their message to voters, circumventing the mainstream media which would traditionally filter information. Heblich presents research from a number of countries, comparing voting behavior of municipalities with internet access to the ones without in the early 2000s. It showed that municipalities with broadband internet access faced a decrease in voter turnout due to voters suddenly facing an overwhelmingly large pool of information and not knowing how to filter relevant knowledge efficiently. Similarly, the internet seemed to have crowded-out other media at the expense of information quality.

However, the introduction of interactive social media and “user-defined” content appears to have reversed this effect. It helped voters to collect information more efficiently. Barack Obama’s successful election campaign in 2008 set the path for this development. In the so-called “Facebook election,” Obama successfully employed Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder, to lead his highly effective election campaign. Using a combination of social networks, podcasts, and mobile messages, Obama connected directly with (young) American voters. In doing so, he gained nearly 70% of the votes among Americans under the age of 25.

But there is a downside: voters can now be personally identified and strategically influenced by targeted information. What if politicians use this information in election campaigns to target voters that are easy to mobilize? According to Heblich, there is a thin line between desirable benefits of more efficient information dissemination and undesirable possibilities of voter manipulation. Therefore, policymakers need to consider introducing measures to educate voters to become more discriminating in their use of the internet.

Economist Stephan Heblich says:

*“To the extent that online consumption replaces the consumption of other media (newspapers, radio, or television) with a higher information content, there may be no information gains for the average voter and, in the worst case, even a crowding-out of information.”*

*“New social media applications help to structure the information access and dissemination process. This has implications for the relevance, quality, and focus of the information that is available to users and, consequently, their voting behavior.”*

*“One potential risk relates to the increasing possibilities to collect personal information known as “big data.” This development could result in situations in which individual rights are violated, since the personal information could be used, for example, to selectively disseminate information in election campaigns and influence voters strategically.”*

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Notes for editors:

- IZA World of Labor (<http://wol.iza.org>) is a global, freely available online resource that provides policy makers, academics, journalists, and researchers, with clear, concise and evidence-based knowledge on labor economics issues worldwide.
- The site offers relevant and succinct information on topics including diversity, migration, minimum wage, youth unemployment, employment protection, development, education, gender balance, labor mobility and flexibility among others.
- Established in 1998, the Institute for the Study of Labor ([www.iza.org](http://www.iza.org)) is an independent economic research institute focused on the analysis of global labour markets. Based in Bonn, it operates an international network of about 1,300 economists and researchers spanning more than 45 countries.