How Political Ads and Video Content Influence Voter Opinion

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There are so many major moments that lead up to Election Day: debates, caucuses, primaries. But the moments that matter most won't make major headlines. They'll happen quietly and quickly in micro-moments, when undecided voters become decided voters, often by going online.

think with Google

V oter decisions used to be made in living rooms, in front of televisions. Today, they're increasingly made in micro-moments, on mobile devices. Election micro-moments happen when voters turn to a device to learn about a candidate, event, or issue.

Today's voters want a quick way to catch up on the latest elections buzz and they've found it in online video. Since April 2015, people have watched more than 110 million hours of candidate- and issues-related content on YouTube. That's 100X the amount of time it would take to watch all content ever aired on CNN, C-Span, MSNBC, and Fox News combined.[1] Whether voters are looking for a debate sound bite, instructions on how to vote, or Stephen Colbert's latest burn, they turn to YouTube.

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In fact, searches for election-related content on YouTube have grown by nearly 4X since presidential candidates started making their announcements last April.[2] And voters of all ages—not just young people—turn to YouTube in their I-want-to-know moments. While 59% of people who turn to online video to learn more about the candidates are under the age of 35, one in four are over the age of 45.[3]

So, how can candidates win these micro-moments to win in November? As the season heats up, here are three ways all candidates—whether they're running for a local seat, Congress, or the presidency—can meet voters in their micro-moments:

1. Be there: What online video trends reveal about voter micro-moments

[Being there](#) for voters in critical micro-moments means knowing what they're looking for. To get a map of voter wants and needs when it comes to video, we use [Google Trends](#) and [filter by YouTube](#).

Here's a look at the trending topics since the presidential candidates launched their campaigns in April 2015 and how much search volume has grown on those topics.

Top Video Search Trends for Political Issues

Political Issue	Increase in searches since April 2015
Refugees	+224%
Immigration	+51%
Gun Control	+27%
Economy	+22%
Health Care	+10%

As you look at what voters want, ask yourself: Do I have the video content to answer their queries? Are my videos showing up for voters experiencing micro-moments on YouTube?

In Nevada, Hillary Clinton's campaign answered "yes" to both of those questions. First, her campaign created a moving video ad about the second issue on the list above: immigration. Then, the campaign used standard targeting features to try to reach voters who might be interested in the issue:

Thanks to the TrueView "skip" button, campaigns can get immediate feedback: Did viewers skip the ad, or choose to watch it? Based on that feedback, campaigns are able to adjust TrueView ads midflight. As The Wall Street Journal noted recently from the perspective of the Ted Cruz campaign, TrueView ads "offer the closest parallel to the power to persuade voters offered by classic TV ads, but allow for much better targeting."

2. Be useful and quick: How candidates' video content helps when micro-moments happen

Timing is everything when it comes to micro-moments. Voters don't just want the right content—they want it right now. While micro-moments can happen at any time, we see spikes in interest around key decision-making moments. Take the Iowa caucuses, for example, when voters went to YouTube to get informed: Watch Time Trends for Videos Related to the Iowa Caucuses

Watch Time Trends for Videos Related to the Iowa Caucuses

Video Watch Time

Iowa caucuses: Feb. 1

1/15/16   1/20/16   1/25/16   1/30/16   2/5/16

The chart above shows watch time before, during, and after the Iowa caucuses. The first major spike was driven by people coming to YouTube to catch up on video of recent debates and town halls. The second was driven by people watching Donald Trump's caucus speech. Both are micro-moments experienced by voters en masse.

But it's not just political events, like debates and caucuses, that are shaping election watch time trends. Timely, cultural conversations spark voter micro-moments, too. For example, the week after same-sex marriage was legalized, watch time for related videos grew by 23X compared to the average of the three weeks prior: Watch Time Trends for Videos Related to Same-Sex Marriage

Watch Time Trends for Videos Related to Same-Sex Marriage
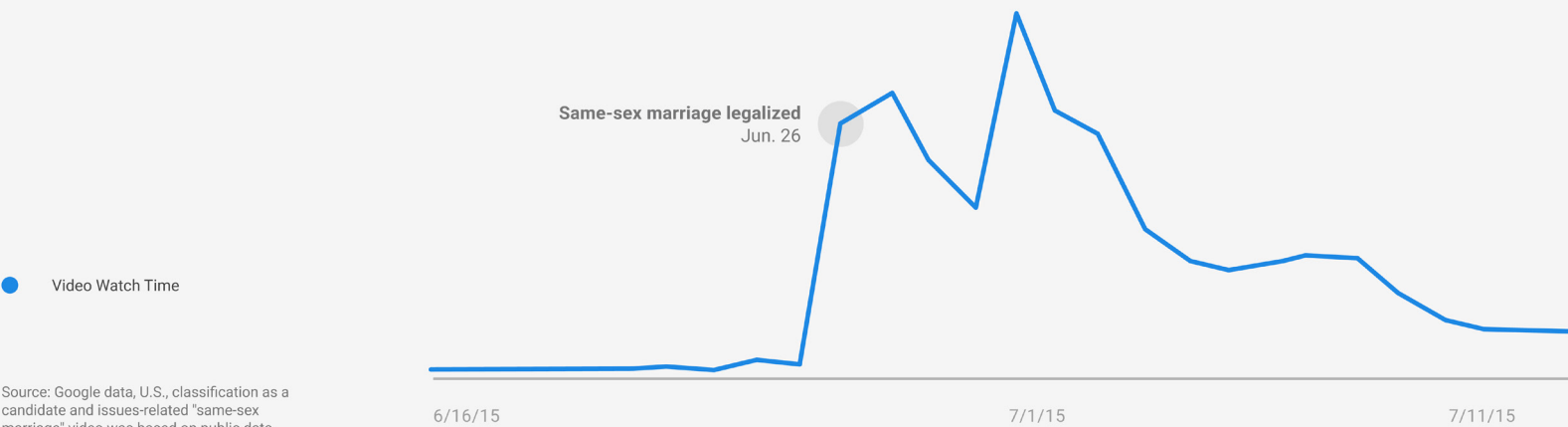
Same-sex marriage legalized
Jun. 26

● Video Watch Time

6/16/15   7/1/15   7/11/15

Some candidates are getting out in front of these micro-moments with event- or issue-related content, combined with more targeted ads. In an effort to get out the vote, Donald Trump's "Find Your Iowa Caucus Location" video and Bernie Sanders' "How to Caucus in Iowa" explained to Iowans how to register and caucus:
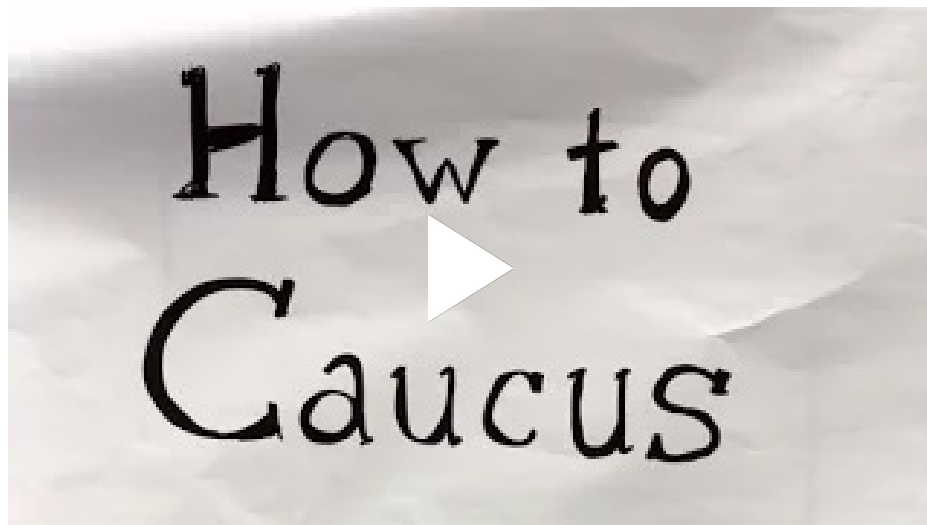
The Trump and Sanders campaigns knew voters would head to YouTube to ask "how to caucus" ahead of Iowa, and they were ready with two simple videos that offered step-by-step instructions. Talk about a decision-making moment: These videos could have meant the difference between showing up for your candidate on caucus day or staying home.

3. Be Influential: Who influences voter opinion in micro-moments

We've talked about understanding what voters are looking for in election micro-moments and when those moments occur most. But who carries the most sway in these moments? More than half of daily YouTube users ages 18–49 say their personal opinions (including politics) have been influenced by YouTube creators.[4]

Savvy politicians have taken advantage of YouTube creators' influence, taking interviews with them or partnering on videos to share in the dialogue. Six YouTube creators interviewed President Obama after his last two State of the Union addresses. And this election season, politicians are acting more like creators themselves. For example, Marco Rubio published several videos that are more in the style of creator Casey Neistat's "Ask Me Anything" videos than typical campaign TV ads:

Creators are, ultimately, master listeners. The most influential creators on YouTube listen for audience questions and create content that answers them. The most influential politicians on YouTube do, too.

At a time when politicians and pundits are asking, "Do Political TV Ads Still Work?," YouTube trends show that online video is now table stakes for political campaigns. In our connected world, video works hardest when it answers a need or want that voters experience in election micro-moments.

These micro-moments might occur before, during, or after a debate or in reaction to a cultural event. They might happen when voters need a question answered fast, like "how to caucus in Iowa." Politicians can have extra influence in micro-moments by working alongside creators or taking a page out of their playbooks, as Marco Rubio did.

Micro-moments are shaping the electorate in 2016. I, for one, can't wait to find out which candidate won the most micro-moments—who met the most voters in their decision-making moments on YouTube. We'll find out on November 8.

Dive into the data to learn more about voter micro-moments with The Presidential Elections on YouTube - Trends Report 2016.

Sources

1 Google data, U.S., classification as election "candidates" and "issues" was based on public data such as headlines and tags, and may not account for every such video available on YouTube. Content broadcast by CNN, C-SPAN, Fox News, and MSNBC was estimated by adding the number of days since their first broadcast. April 2015–February 2016.

2 Google data, U.S., YouTube search interest related to election candidates and issues, April 2015–February 2016.

3 Google/Ipsos Connect, Google Elections Omnibus, U.S. adults 18+, n=2,022, January 2016.

4 Google/Ipsos Connect, "The YouTube Generation" study", U.S., 18–49 year-olds, n=1,125, November 2015