



What Marketers Can Learn From the Latest Data About Voter Behavior Online

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Voters make decisions before they're in the booth—by going online. To understand the influence of digital media and online video in the 2016 elections, Google partnered with two leading political consultants to survey primary voters. Here, they discuss what the results mean for marketers.

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This election cycle, people are increasingly going online before going to the polls. In the first two months of the year, the average registered voter gearing up for Super Tuesday researched the primary election online 85 times.¹ And in just the last year, people have watched over 110M hours of candidate- and issues-related video on YouTube.²

To learn more about how registered voters educate themselves on the facts, candidates, and issues before the primaries, Google partnered with political consultants Julie Hootkin and Dr. Frank Luntz. As executive vice president at Global Strategy Group (GSG), Julie has been a consultant to members of Congress, governors, and mayors across the United States, and leads her firm's corporate impact practice, which helps businesses navigate the issues of the day. A preeminent pollster, Frank has been featured on major broadcast networks and is the founder of Luntz Global Partners, which consults Fortune 500 companies and political campaigns alike.

Recently, I spoke with Julie and Frank about key findings from this research and the implications for both political and brand marketers.

How is voter behavior in this election cycle different from four years ago?

Frank: As of this year, people are spending 40% more time online than on TV.³ Think about that. They know that digital platforms, whether desktop or mobile—from news websites to Google Search to YouTube—deliver far more convenience than traditional media.

In political campaigns, television is still powerful, but voters believe it provides too much spin, too many half-truths, and too little detail. Digital empowers voters to find the precise information and facts they're seeking. They decide the search terms, the content, the time, the length, and well, everything else. As one Iowa Republican voter in our focus group said, "We're more informed than we've ever been because of the internet."⁴

We also see this in campaigns for consumer products, financial services, and every other category brand marketers care about.

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Julie: We're living in an on-demand world. With just the touch of a button, we can watch a movie, order groceries, and hail a cab. Just as easily, we can visit a candidate's website, watch a campaign video on YouTube, and fact-check a candidate's position on Google.

People are "on" 24/7, thanks in large part to their smartphones. For political campaigns, this means today's voters are more connected than ever before. They are spending more time online, almost two hours for every hour spent watching TV,⁵ and they are increasingly relying on their mobile devices to provide them with answers to their questions in real-time. Almost 60% of elections-related searches are now coming from mobile devices, representing nearly 3X growth since the last presidential election cycle.⁶

As a result, campaigns—and brands—have an unprecedented number of opportunities to inform, engage, and persuade voters through digital communications.

How are voters engaging online vs. with traditional media?

Julie: Sometimes it feels like we are trapped in a debate that pits traditional against digital, but the truth of the matter is, it's not a zero-sum game. This goes for both political campaigns and brand marketing: TV is good for some things, and digital is good for others.

TV continues to play an important role in introducing candidates to voters, particularly early on in the campaign cycle. But as voters move through the decision-making process and Election Day approaches, digital plays

an increasingly important role. Why? We heard from a lot of voters that they don't feel like they get the full story from TV—anyone who's ever written an ad script can tell you, you can only fit about 76 words in a 30-second spot. Voters want more, and they find it [online](#).

People will watch content that matters to them—regardless of length.

Frank: Voters generally dislike and distrust the over-the-top negative political ads they see on television. Don't get me wrong—they still make an impact. But the 30-second or 60-second spot is not as persuasive and informative as it once was. As an Iowa Democratic voter in our focus group put it, "TV ads don't tell you enough. They're a good starting point, but they're not a good way to make a decision."⁴

That's why voters turn to search, news sites, candidate sites, and YouTube to find the full, unedited story and unbiased facts for themselves.

What kinds of videos resonate with voters—and with viewers in general?

Julie: On the internet, viewers give you license to ignore the traditional guidelines that are often associated with campaign content. It's not just the 15-second, the 30-second, or the 60-second ad. It could be a two-minute, a six-minute, or even an eight-minute video. When it comes to content, authenticity is paramount for all types of campaigns, for both brands and candidates. Voters in particular really want to see the behind-the-scenes stuff that ended up on the cutting room floor.

Frank: The most engaged voters are seeking out more information, not less. But campaigns must capture voters' attention within the first 5-10 seconds—or, like viewers do with television advertising for any type of brand—they'll move on. But if it's credible, if it's interesting, people will watch [content that matters to them](#)—regardless of length.

Any other important takeaways for marketers?

Frank: Whether you're pitching a candidate or company, a politician or a product, you have to engage people where they are. Traditional platforms are on the decline, but digital is thriving. That's where consumers spend most of their time. It's where they turn to for facts, reviews, and information. Marketers must meet their consumers where they actually are at those critical campaign moments—not where they hope they'll be.

Julie: The marriage of business and politics has given marketers an opportunity to expand their communication channels, connect with consumers on new terrain, and get credit for it. According to [our study](#), 78% of Americans say corporations should take action to address issues facing society, and 88% believe that corporations have the power to influence social change. So brand marketers, get online and join the conversation. Your customers will thank you for it.

For more of Julie's and Frank's perspectives, especially about the similarities between brand marketing and political campaigns, check out ["Letter From the Guest Editors: Julie Hootkin and Frank Luntz."](#)

Sources

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