

The media has often been referred to as an integral part of the “fourth branch” of government. Traditionally, the media’s role in the political process has been to educate the general population in the hope of creating a better informed electorate, the theory being that once the voting public knows the pertinent facts, they will be able to make educated choices when it comes to candidates and policy issues. In the past the majority of political information was disseminated by newspapers, radio broadcasts, and television news programs. These media outlets reported the news with a high degree of impartiality. This did not, however, stop politically minded individuals from seeking out sources of information that conformed to their own political views. In a study on the impact of selective exposure published in 1967, David Sears and Jonathan Freedman found extensive evidence that individuals who engage in information seeking are more likely to actively seek out information sources which support their already existing biases (Sears and Freedman). In 2008, Natalie Stroud revisited this concept as it relates specifically to political information seeking. Stroud’s research also found ample evidence of selective exposure, and since her study occurred almost 40 years after Sears’ and Freedman’s study, she was able to view the concept of selective exposure in the context of the modern media environment in which information seekers only have to turn to a specific cable news network or search partisan internet sites to find information that reinforces their existing beliefs. Stroud concluded that, due to the ease at which individuals can expose themselves to like minded sources of information, the public will not only have their differing opinions on political topics reinforced, but they will also have a differing opinion on what is factually accurate (Stroud).

There have also been numerous studies which demonstrate that the media can have a profound impact on the opinions of the information seekers who are exposed to its message. In a 1999 study, David Barker found that individuals who regularly listened to conservative radio

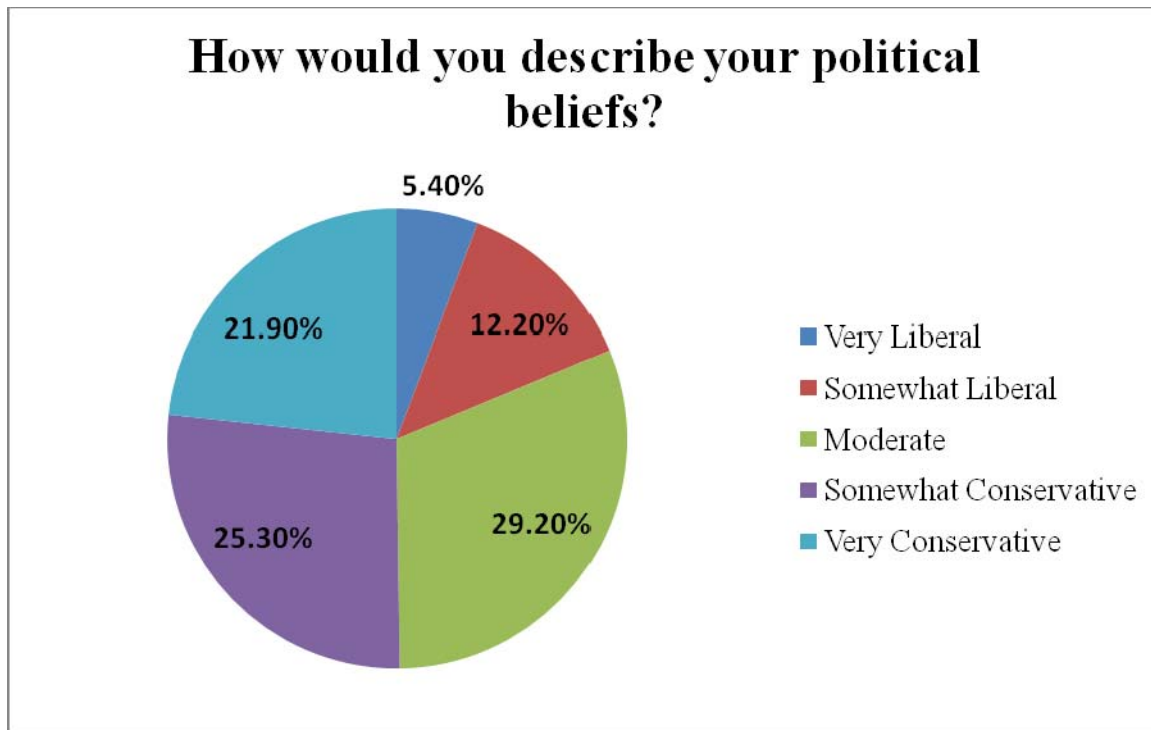
host Rush Limbaugh were more likely to vote for candidates who were endorsed on Limbaugh's program than were individuals who have similar ideologies but were not regular listeners (Barker). Given that these previous studies show that there is a propensity for individuals to not only be influenced by the media but to actively seek out media sources which complement their opinions, one would expect to see a correlation between partisan opinions and media usage. If individuals are practicing selective exposure, then a higher degree of information seeking should show a positive correlation to a higher degree of partisanship in their political attitudes. This idea can be written as the following equation: *Partisanship + Selective Exposure to Media = Stronger Partisan Opinion*

I will use data collected from a Winthrop University telephone survey of 837 South Carolinians aged 18 years and older and review the data for evidence of this theory, using the respondents' answers to questions regarding their use of the internet to obtain political information as well as their opinions of President Barak Obama. The data was collected between February 6, 2010 and February 21, 2010 using random digit dialing and wireless phone number sampling. Data which utilizes all respondents has a margin of error of plus/minus 3.39 percent at the 95 percent confidence level (The Winthrop Poll, 2010). I expect to find a higher degree of partisan attitudes reflected in the respondents' political opinions when an individual who already identifies with a particular ideology uses the internet for political research.

The first variable examined is the partisan ideologies of the respondents to the survey. Individuals who agreed to take the survey were asked to assign one of the following labels to their political beliefs: Very Liberal, Somewhat Liberal, Moderate, Somewhat Conservative, or Very Conservative. 5.4% of the respondents considered themselves very liberal, 12.2% considered themselves to be somewhat liberal, 29.2% stated that they were moderate, 25.3%

considered themselves to be somewhat conservative, and 21.9% considered themselves very conservative. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of this data. Respondents who answered “not sure” to the partisan ideology question or refused to answer are omitted.

**Figure 1.**



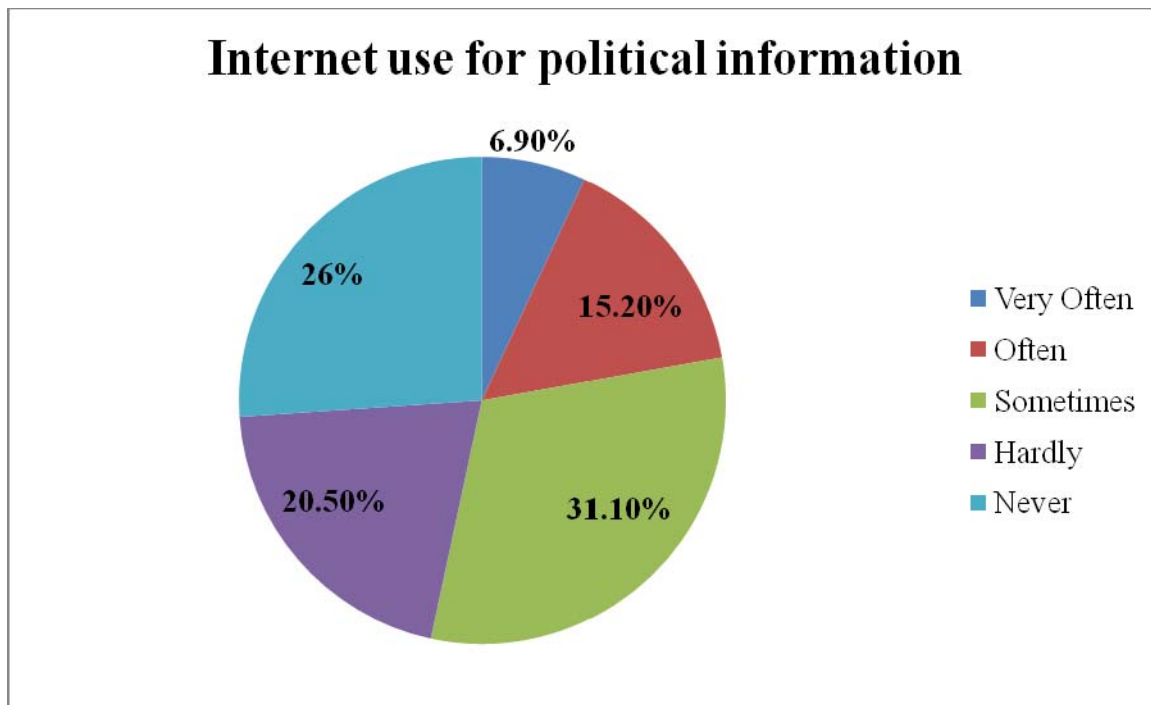
The majority of the respondents (76.4%) fall into the moderate to very conservative belief set with only a 7.3% difference between the number of respondents who identified themselves as moderates and who identified themselves as very conservative. A plurality (47.2%) of respondents labeled themselves as either somewhat or very conservative. Only 17.6% identified themselves as liberal. The mode response for this question was “moderate” at 29.20%. Based on this sample data, it can be inferred that the majority of citizens in South Carolina consider themselves to fall into the moderate to very conservative range.

Respondents were also asked if they had internet access in their homes and if so, whether or not it was considered high speed internet (DSL, cable modem, etc.). 75.8% of those who

answered the survey stated that they had internet access at home, and 86.5% of those that had internet access had some form of high speed internet. The respondents were also asked several questions regarding how they use the internet, one of those questions being “How often do you use the internet to look up political information about candidates or politicians?” Respondents were given choices to answer very often, often, sometimes, hardly at all, or never.

Figure 2 is a graphical representation of the answers by percentage. Respondents who refused to answer or answered “do not know” are excluded.

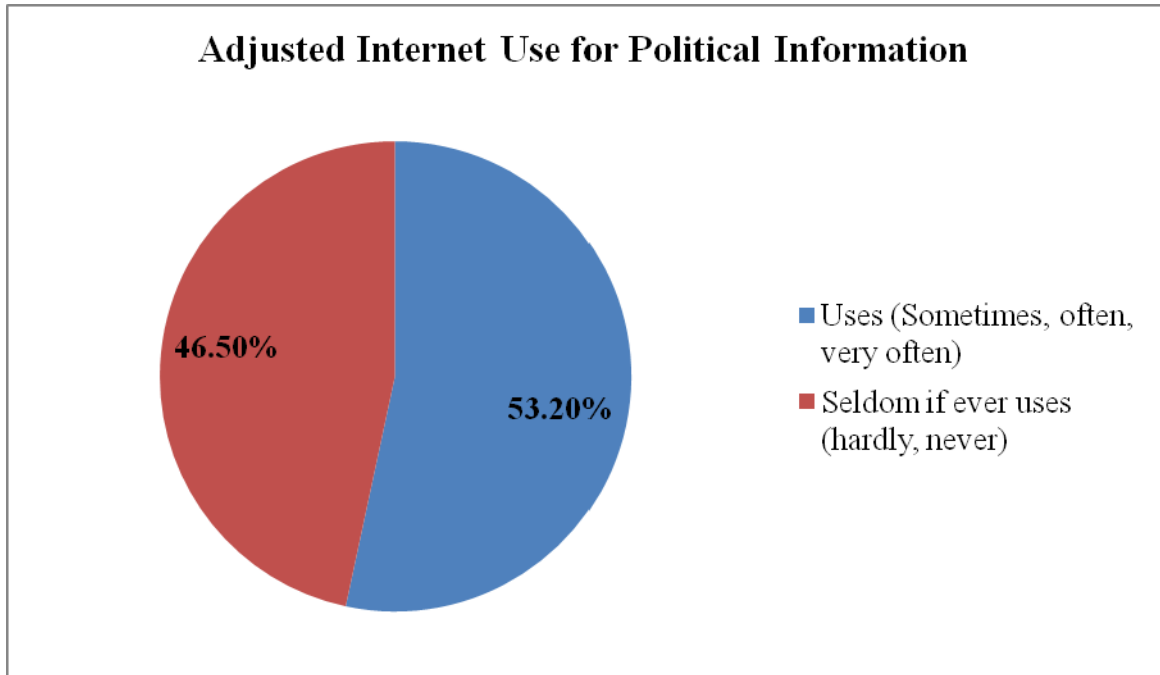
**Figure 2.**



22.1% of respondents answered that they looked up political information very often or often, 31.1% stated that they looked up political information sometimes, and 46.5% of respondents stated that they seldom, if ever, look up political information on the internet. For the sake of defining the term internet usage for the remainder of this report, respondents will be

grouped by those who use the internet (answered sometimes, often, or very often) and those who rarely if ever use the internet. This is represented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.**



By running a cross tabulation of the respondents' partisan identification with their propensity to use the internet for political research, we can see if there is a correlation between the two variables. This data is based only on the sample which responded yes or no to the question regarding whether or not they used the internet for political research and does not take into consideration whether or not the respondents answered that they had internet access at home. For example, when asked if they had internet access at home, 108 of the liberal respondents answered in the affirmative and 32 answered that they did not. These 32 respondents are not included in the total who do not use the internet for political research because they may use the internet in someplace other than the home. Respondents who refused to answer answered "not sure" to the partisan ideology or to the internet usage questions are not included in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.**

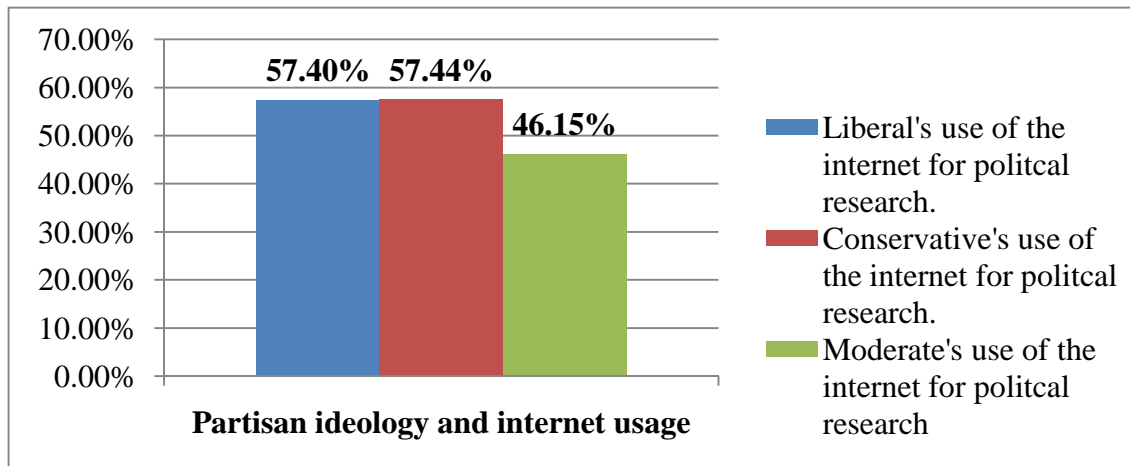
**Internet Used for Political Research and Partisan Ideology**

	<b>How often do you look up political information about candidates or politicians on the internet?</b>				
<b>Partisan Ideology</b>	<b>Very Often</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Hardly at all</b>	<b>Never</b>
<b>Very Liberal</b>	0.00%	23.33%	26.67%	10.00%	40.00%
<b>Somewhat Liberal</b>	12.82%	14.10%	33.33%	15.38%	24.35%
<b>Moderate</b>	3.84%	9.34%	32.96%	25.27%	28.02%
<b>Somewhat Conservative</b>	6.50%	18.30%	32.26%	20.91%	22.22%
<b>Very Conservative</b>	10.85%	19.37%	27.90%	20.15%	20.93%

Comparing the extremes at either end of the partisan spectrum, exactly half (50%) of respondents who identified themselves as very liberal use the internet for political research sometimes, often or very often, and a majority (58.12%) of respondents who describe their beliefs as very conservative use the internet for political research sometimes, often or very often. At the next level of ideology, the somewhat conservative and somewhat liberal respondents, 60.25% of the “somewhat” liberals used the internet for political research sometimes, often or very often compared to 57.06% of the somewhat conservative respondents. 46.14% of those surveyed who identified themselves as moderate used the internet for political research sometimes, often or very often. The mode across all partisan ideologies is “sometimes” with 179 respondents out of 507 giving this answer. When we place this information into the context of the previous studies done by Sears and Freedman and Stroud respectively, we can assume that each ideological group is searching for and using information which supports their pre-existing belief set. When the respondents are grouped solely by the indicator of liberal, conservative, or

moderate, there is only a .04% difference between liberal's use of the internet (57.40%) to conservatives use (57.44%). Moderates trailed both groups at 46.15%. This is represented in Figure 5.

**Figure 5.**

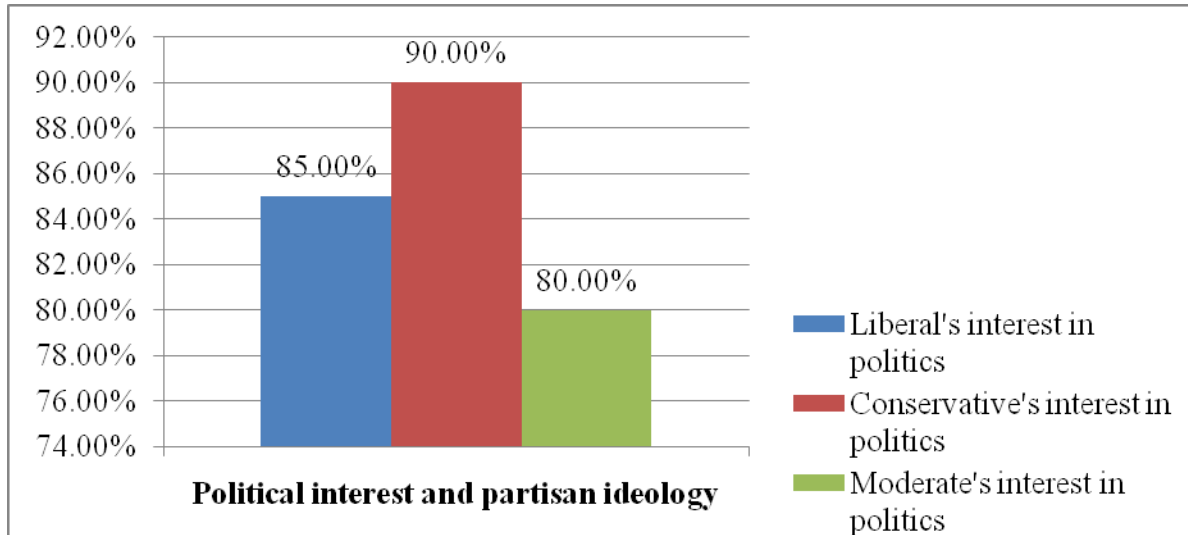


An explanation for the higher degree of internet usage for political research for respondents who identify as liberal or conservative could be that individuals with a partisan bias feel that the more traditional or mainstream outlets for political information are in some way biased, and they use the internet to find more agreeable sources of information. In a study conducted in 2002, Paul Allen Beck, Russell J. Dalton, and Robert Huckfeldt found that individuals with a strong partisan bias are more likely to view non-biased information as being biased against their partisan beliefs. This phenomenon could also contribute to the information seeking patterns shown in Figure 5.

A cross tabulation was also run to compare the level of interest in politics and partisan ideology. This is important because it will help demonstrate if the difference between partisan's (liberal and conservative) and moderate's use of the internet for political research is correlated to a higher degree of interest in politics. Respondents were again grouped into three categories-

liberal, conservative and moderate. Figure 6 shows the percentage of times that the respondents stated that they followed what was going on in politics most of the time and some of the time.

**Figure 6.**

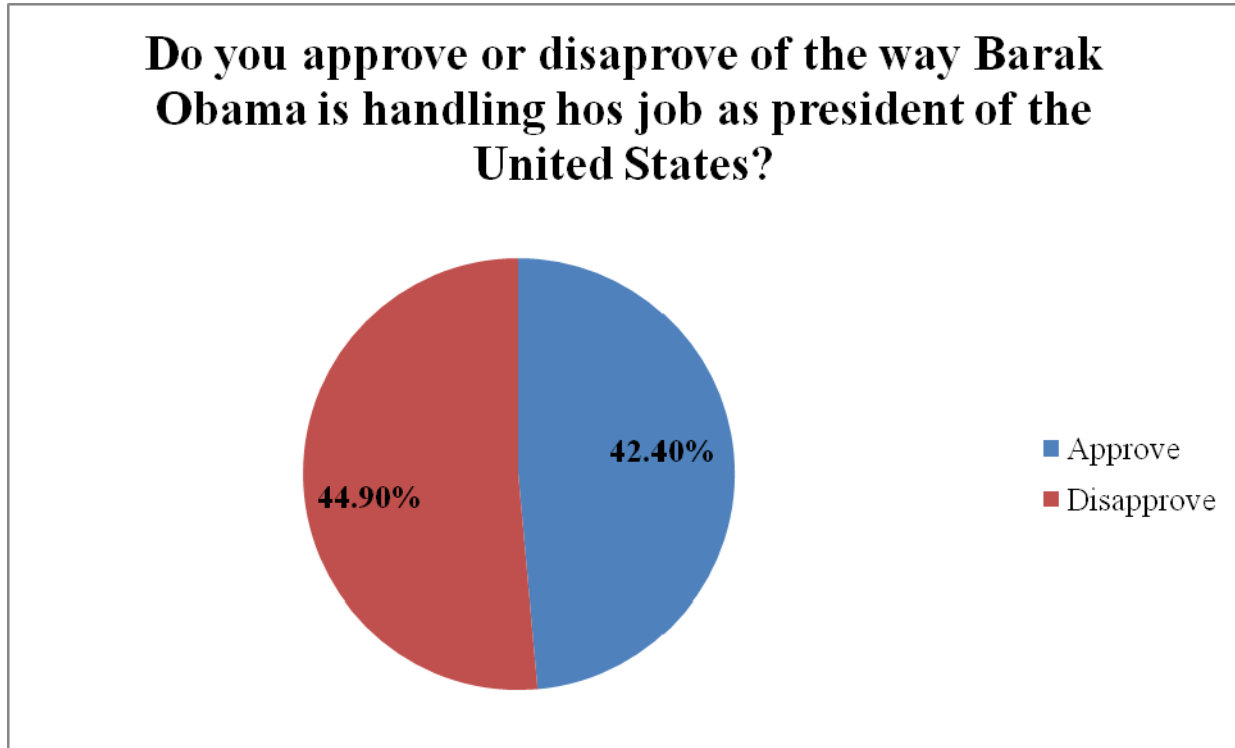


85.31% of liberal respondents stated that they followed what was going on in politics most of the time or some of the time compared to 80.08% of moderates and 90.31% of conservatives. The mode of this sample is “most of the time” with 502 out of 807 (62.20%) respondents providing that answer. This shows that the most respondents across the partisan spectrum consider themselves to be interested in politics, with conservatives being most likely to follow politics. Although there is roughly a ten percentage point range between the three groups, it is safe to say that there is a high degree of political interest among the respondents.

One way to gauge the impact that selective exposure to political information on the internet may have is to look at the approval ratings of the President of the United States. President Obama is a Democrat who was elected in November of 2008. Figure 7 shows President Obama’s overall approval among respondents to Winthrop’s survey. Those who refused to answer or answered “not sure” are omitted.



**Figure 7.**



As of February 21, 2010 President Obama’s job approval rating in South Carolina among respondents to the poll was 42.4% and 44.9% disapproved of the way he was handling his job. When a crosstab is run showing the President’s job approval numbers and partisan ideology, there is more variation in the data. Respondents who answered “not sure” or who refused to answer the partisan ideology question are omitted.

**Figure 8.**

**Presidential Job Approval and Partisan Ideology**

<b>Partisan Ideology</b>	<b>Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barak Obama is handling his job as president of the United States?</b>	
	<b>Approve</b>	<b>Disapprove</b>
<b>Very Liberal</b>	70.45%	20.45%
<b>Somewhat Liberal</b>	73.73%	15.15%
<b>Moderate</b>	54.66%	30.50%
<b>Somewhat Conservative</b>	28.78%	59.02%
<b>Very Conservative</b>	17.51%	75.70%

The President’s job approval breaks down as expected by ideology with 72.72% of respondents who identified themselves as very or somewhat liberal approving of his job performance and only 23.56% of those who identified as very or somewhat conservative approving of his job performance. 54.66% of moderates approve of the way that the president is handling his job and 30.50% of moderates disapprove. 16.78% of liberals (somewhat and very) disapprove of his job performance while 66.75% of conservatives (somewhat and very) disapprove. Among the most partisan respondents, 70.45% of the very liberal approve of his job performance while 75.70% of the very conservative disapprove of his job performance. This data indicates that a respondent’s opinion of President Obama’s job performance can be correlated with their partisan views.

Finally, to review data as it pertains to the president’s job approval and the propensity to use the internet for political research, another crosstab was run with these two sets of variables. If partisans are using the internet to research President Obama and they are biased towards seeking information which already mirrors their partisan views, then one would expect to see an increase in partisan attitudes in the respondents who use the internet for research versus those that seldom or never use the internet. This is shown in Figure 9.

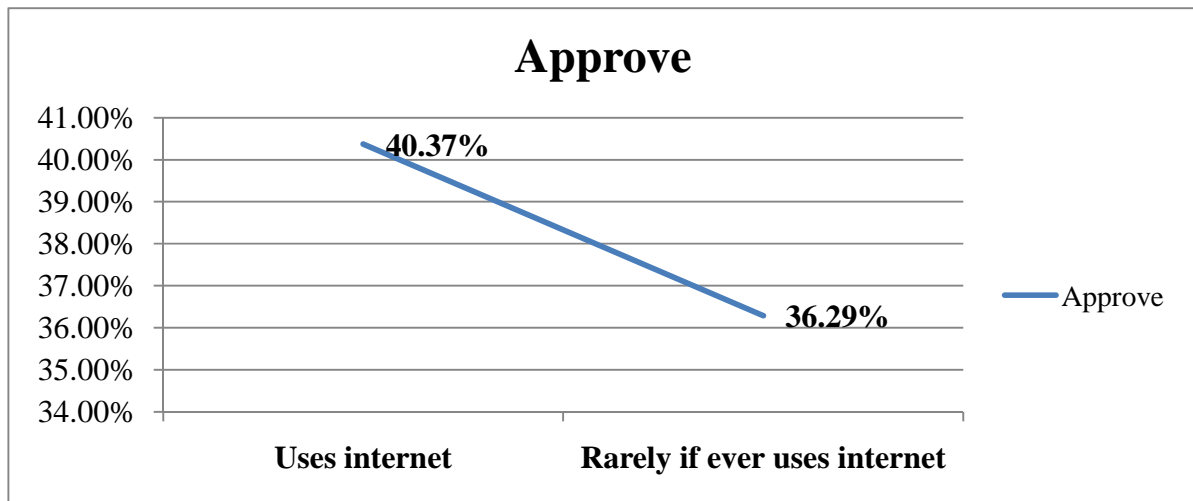
**Figure 9.**

	<b>How often do you use the internet for political research?</b>				
<b>Obama's job approval</b>	<b>Very Often</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Hardly</b>	<b>Never</b>
<b>Approve</b>	38.09%	35.86%	43.08%	37.90%	35.03%
<b>Disapprove</b>	54.76%	57.61%	50.00%	47.50%	44.60%

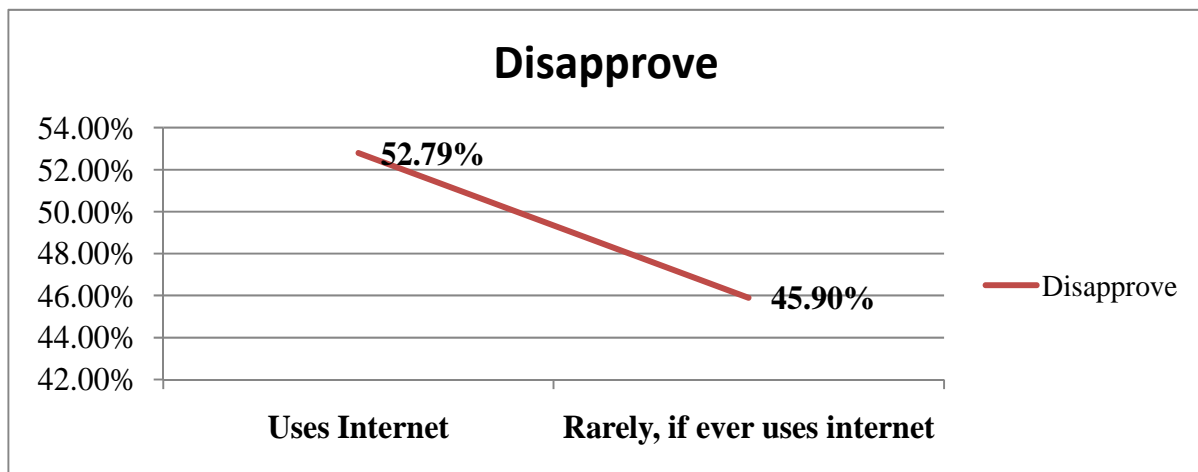
The president’s job approval rating was 40.37% for those individuals who stated that they used the internet sometimes, often, or very often for political research. 52.79% of individuals who used the internet for political research disapproved of the president’s job performance.

Among those respondents who rarely if ever used the internet for political research the president's approval numbers were 36.29% approve and 45.90% disapprove. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate this information. The respondents are grouped by those who use the internet for political research (sometimes, often, and very often) and those who rarely, if ever, use the internet for political research. For the sake contrast, those respondents who approve of the President's job performance are graphed together and those who disapprove are grouped together.

**Figure 10.**



**Figure 11.**



The respondents who reported using the internet to conduct political research had a 4.08% higher job approval rating of the president and 6.89% higher disapproval rating than those who rarely or never used the internet. There appears to be a slight increase in the strength of opinion about the president by those respondents who reported using the internet to conduct political research.

In conclusion, there appears to be a correlation between the level of partisanship in political beliefs and the propensity to use the internet among individuals who are more or less equally interested in politics. Respondents to the survey who identified themselves as liberal or conservative were more likely to use the internet than those who labeled themselves as moderate. There is a correlation between partisan identification and presidential approval rating, so this can be used as an indicator of partisan opinions in this sample. Finally, the data indicates that individuals who use the internet for political research have stronger opinions on the job performance of the president. This is not to say that any of these numbers are statistically significant or to assign causality to any of the data presented here. This data is also a survey of only one state and the results cannot be extrapolated to other states without further research. This report is simply illustrating that there is a correlation between partisan attitudes and information seeking for participants in the survey as is described in the studies on selective exposure referenced earlier.

## Works Cited

Barker, David C. 1999. "Rushed Decisions: Political Talk Radio and Vote Choice, 1994-1996."

*The Journal of Politics* 61(2): 527-539.

Beck, Paul Allen, Dalton, Russell J., Greene, Steve, & Huckfeldt, Robert. 2002. "The Social Calculus of Voting: Interpersonal, Media, and Organizational Influences on Presidential Choices." *American Political Science Review* 96(1): 57-73.

Sears, David O., & Freedman, Jonathan L. 1967. "Selective Exposure to Information: A Critical Review". *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 31(2): 194-213.

Stroud, Natalie. 2008. "Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure." *Political Behavior* 30(3) 341-366.

2010 "The Winthrop Poll Findings" February. <http://www.winthrop.edu/uploadedFiles/wupoll/feb2010WinthropPollResults.PDF> (November, 10 2010)