

A bulwark against the Super PACs: The Internet

Money and politics have always gone hand in hand. But this year, we are witnessing the first presidential election in which big corporations can contribute unlimited funds to media campaigns that directly support or attack candidates. In this brave new world, big money donors are coloring voters' views of candidates which can make or break political careers at an unprecedented scale. The influence of big money interests continues once candidates are elected, with all of the access money can buy.

We must work to fix the massive structural issues that have allowed big money to distort our political landscape. But in the meantime, we also need to find ways to level the playing field for everyone. And that means protecting today's greatest equalizer: the Internet.

Now more than ever, Internet access is critical to ensure that everyone can participate in our flawed but salvageable democracy. While most of us can't afford to start a Political Action Committee (PAC) and fund an attack ad, with Internet access we can register to vote and obtain information from a diverse set of perspectives to educate ourselves about candidates and the issues we care about. The Internet also provides unprecedented opportunities to interact directly with candidates and policymakers, voice opinions without a filter and form grassroots movements. On August 29, over 200,000 people logged on to the popular site Reddit to watch President Obama field questions about the corrupting influence of money in politics and Internet freedom, among other topics, in an "Ask Me Anything" session.

Unfortunately, many people have been left out of the digital revolution. The Federal Communications Commission recently announced that 19 million people in the United States still lack broadband Internet access, with those hardest hit living in rural areas, on Tribal lands or in economically challenged urban areas.

We've seen just how big a role the Internet can play in amplifying voices that would otherwise go unnoticed. By mobilizing support online through websites like Change.org, over 2.2 million people came together to demand an investigation into the Trayvon Martin case – which sparked a national conversation about “Stand Your Ground” policies across the country.

There is, perhaps, no greater example of the power of the Internet as a tool for people to create change than this year's battle against Internet censorship. In January 2012, millions of people across the country joined in a protest to defend freedom of speech on the Internet by opposing censorship bills pending in Congress. The bills – the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) – would stifle free online speech, burden startups with unnecessary legal costs and hobble the Internet economy. More than 7 million people signed online petitions and sent over 2 million tweets to voice concern. The results were decisive: resistance to these bills increased threefold, with more than 100 members of Congress voicing their opposition after just one day of mass online action. As a result, votes on the bills were tabled.

When it comes to civic participation, it's not just advocacy efforts that have been transformed by the Internet. The relatively unfettered Internet we enjoy in the United States today allows for an unprecedented degree of direct, unfiltered communication between everyday people and the highest branches of our government. Politicians now routinely take questions from YouTube and Twitter, with more and more of the political debate occurring online.

But all of these ways in which technology is further democratizing political engagement are only available to those that have Internet access. The unfortunate truth is that those who live in rural and low-income communities, or are among ethnic and racial minorities, are far less likely to have reliable Internet access. According to the Department of Commerce, 72 percent of Caucasians have Internet access at home, compared to only 55 percent of African-American and 57 percent of Hispanic households. And only four out of every 10 households with incomes below \$25,000, and 50 percent of rural residents have wired home Internet access.

We need fair and equitable policies that extend Internet access so that everyone in the United States can actively engage in the debates that affect

their lives. In the past few years, we've seen powerful examples of what can happen when people are able to participate online. As corporations and the super rich continue to amass staggering amounts of political influence, we must protect our democracy and ensure everyone has an equal say in government by extending Internet access to everyone. As the next presidential debates approach, the one question we'd like to hear the candidates answer is 'What will you do to make sure that no American is shut out of our political process because they can't connect to the Internet?'"