

Using the internet to stay informed about government and politics

Why it's important to understand the internet in politics: According to a study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2004, 75 million Americans used the Internet to get political information.

The internet offers us unique tools to quickly learn about issues before the country and in the news. When used well, it increases citizen access to information, makes it easier for leaders to communicate with the public, and helps citizens hold government accountable.

Here I will use the immigration debate happening in Congress in late April as my focus and walk you through the internet sources I use to get up to speed on this debate. When trying to get a handle on an issue, I ask four questions: what is the law now, what are past and proposed changes? What are the facts that will help me decide my own stand on this issue? What does the public think about the issue and the debate about it?

1. **What is the law now** (the status quo) and the rules governing the process of immigrating and becoming a citizen?

Exercise: find the answers to these questions at:

<http://www.usimmigrationsupport.org>

2. **What are past proposals and proposed changes?**

In Congress:

Exercise: find out about legislation on immigration now before Congress

As the website indicates, "THOMAS was launched in January of 1995, at the inception of the 104th Congress. The leadership of the 104th Congress directed the Library of Congress to make federal legislative information freely available to the public. Since that time THOMAS has expanded the scope of its offerings to include the features and content listed below.

- [Bills, Resolutions](#)
- [Activity in Congress](#)
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- [Committee Information](#)
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<http://thomas.loc.gov>

Exercise: See if you can find a position by the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and the White House on immigration. Does the President have a proposal? If so, since President Bush is a Republican, you would expect the Republican Party to endorse it. This doesn't mean that all Republicans will agree. To find out which Republicans disagree with the President, check news. Once you have identified the key members of Congress (including Democrats) who have offered alternatives, go to their websites to locate their proposals.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

<http://www.gop.com/>

<http://www.democrats.org>

3. What are the facts?

Featured in news:

My pick: Google News reports that it “gathers stories from more than 4,500 English-language news sources worldwide, and automatically arranges them to present the most relevant news first. Topics are updated every 15 minutes, so you're likely to see new stories each time you check the page. Pick the item that interests you and you'll go directly to the site which published that story.

Google News is a highly unusual news service in that our results are compiled solely by computer algorithms, without human intervention. As a result, news sources are selected without regard to political viewpoint or ideology, enabling you to see how different organizations are reporting the same story. This variety of perspectives and approaches is unique among online news sites, and we consider it essential in helping you stay informed about the issues that matter most to you.”

Exercise: conduct a Google news search to find out what major news outlets have reported on the immigration debate in Congress and in California.

<http://news.google.com/news>

Summarized by independent government organizations

My pick: The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is, as its website reports, “an agency that works for Congress and the American people. Congress asks GAO to study the programs and expenditures of the federal government. GAO, commonly called the investigative arm of Congress or the congressional watchdog, is independent and nonpartisan. It studies how the federal government

spends taxpayer dollars. GAO advises Congress and the heads of executive agencies (such as Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, Department of Defense, DOD, and Health and Human Services, HHS) about ways to make government more effective and responsive. GAO evaluates federal programs, audits federal expenditures, and issues legal opinions. When GAO reports its findings to Congress, it recommends actions. Its work leads to laws and acts that improve government operations, and save billions of dollars.”

Exercise: Find a report on the numbers of immigrants in the U.S. Search for GAO report at <http://www.gao.gov/>

Offered by watchdog groups

MY PICK: Factcheck.org is “a nonpartisan, nonprofit, "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. It monitors the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases. The Annenberg Political Fact Check is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.”

Exercise: As Congress considers changes in the laws governing immigration, ads favoring the varying positions of both major political parties are airing. Hear the ads and see what FactCheck.org says about their accuracy by going to

<http://www.factcheck.org/>

4. What does the public think about the issue? The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (<http://people-press.org/>) is a non partisan center that conducts well-respected polls on national issues. Polling questions usually reflect the key arguments in a debate. This means that reading the questions is a good way to get a sense of the important areas of disagreement on an issue. And the results of the poll provide a sense of the public’s opinion on the day the poll was taken.

Exercise: Locate the Pew poll on immigration. From it, determine three areas of disagreement in the immigration debate. Then determine which proposals had the widest public support on the days in which the poll was conducted.

Classroom resources on the nature and impact of the internet

- I. Pew Internet and American Life Project
A website including reports on the impact of the Internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, etc.