

**Cleveland Plain Dealer Poll**  
**Fall 2011**

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## **Executive Summary**

The Bliss Institute with coordination from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* conducted an opinion poll of online news story readers from September 9, 2011 to September 24, 2011.

***Only a handful of people are habitual commenters.*** The study found that the majority of respondents comment a few times a year. While a small minority of people consistently comment multiple times in a day, or once a day.

***Comments after news stories are for diverse reasons.*** Readers comment for diverse reasons, but generally to respond to the views of others, or to make their opinions known.

***Respondents get their news from a variety of sources.*** Respondents overwhelmingly reported they get their news from the newspaper. Cable and network news were also commonly selected as sources of news for the respondents.

***Respondents are mostly middle aged and well educated.*** The data showed some distinct demographic patterns; first, the survey takers were largely middle-aged and male, about two-thirds of the respondents were male and nearly half were between 45 and 64. Second, compared to the general population, the survey respondents reported having a much higher than average level of education. Lastly, just under half of the respondents reported making between \$50,000 and \$100,000 a year, which is significantly higher than the general population.

***Most respondents self reported being liberal and Democrats.*** Respondents reported a wide range of political views. While most respondents reported being liberal and Democrats, the frequency of posters was balanced across all ideological and party backgrounds.

***Respondents feel there is a liberal bias in the news media.*** About one-half of the respondents see a liberal bias in the media. About one-fifth believe that there is a conservative bias in the media.

***Incivility in Ohio politics is a major problem.*** Respondents reported being generally concerned about incivility in politics. An almost even one-half of respondents feel that the ability to comment after online news stories has no effect on civil discourse.

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## The Survey

This report is based on a volunteer survey of *Plain Dealer* online readers. As such, the survey was not a random sample of all readers of the *Plain Dealer*, those who read the paper online or even of those who post comments in response to stories. The responses reflect only the views of those who were willing to participate in the survey, and the results are not generalizable to any larger group. The survey is meant to provide exploratory information about those who post comments online, such as general demographic information as well as the attitudes and political opinions of the people who post comments on online news stories. The survey was conducted completely anonymously. The Bliss Institute used the University of Akron's survey hosting software *Checkbox* to host the survey. The *Plain Dealer* placed the survey in its "Open Politics" section at the request of the Bliss Institute. The survey was up for two weeks (September 9, 2011 to September 24, 2011) and during that two-week window we received 361 usable responses. It is important to note that this survey was not conducted as a scientific poll; all results should be interpreted with this caution in mind.

## Detailed Findings

**Table 1: What news stories interests you the most?**

| Category                | Percent | Percent of Cases |
|-------------------------|---------|------------------|
| Politics/Government     | 30.5    | 64.9             |
| Business/Economy        | 10.0    | 21.3             |
| Local News/Crime        | 22.0    | 46.9             |
| Sports                  | 10.0    | 21.3             |
| National News           | 6.9     | 14.6             |
| Opinion/Human Interests | 7.9     | 16.7             |
| Other                   | 12.6    | 26.8             |

Note: Percent column totals to 100%.

Table 1 shows the distribution of news articles that the respondents find most interesting. The data is skewed towards the politics/government category due to the survey being placed on the Politics Open page of Cleveland.com. The largest category is politics/government with 64.9% of respondents saying these types of stories interest them the most. Local News/Crime is the next most common type of story that interests people garnering 46.9% of respondents saying they find these stories most interesting. It is important to note that 26.8% of people selected other; this category is a mixture of topics such as weather, science, and education.

**Table 2: How frequently do you post comments on news stories?**

| Category             | Percent |
|----------------------|---------|
| More than once a day | 2.6     |
| Daily                | 7.6     |
| Weekly               | 21.1    |
| Monthly              | 9.9     |
| A few times a year   | 58.7    |

Note: Due to rounding column total does not equal 100%.

Table 2 shows the distribution of self-reported frequency of commenting. Most respondents indicated that they are infrequent commenters. Nearly three-fifths stated that they post only a few times a year, while 21.1% say they post on a weekly basis. Only a small proportion appears to be habitual commenters, with about 2.6% reporting they post once a day or more.

**Table 3: What are the reasons that people post comments online? (Multiple Response Variable)**

| <i>Variable</i>                          | <i>Percent of all choices</i> | <i>Percent of Respondents</i> |
|--|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| To respond to some aspect of a newspaper | 14.6                          | 38.5                          |
| The issue or story topic                 | 14.6                          | 38.5                          |
| To make my opinion known                 | 18.5                          | 48.5                          |
| To respond to other users' comments      | 21.5                          | 56.7                          |
| To participate in online discussions     | 9.3                           | 24.4                          |
| To learn more about the news             | 3.0                           | 7.8                           |
| To express my frustrations               | 13.9                          | 36.7                          |
| Other                                    | 4.5                           | 11.9                          |

Note: "Percent" column sums to 100%.

Respondents reported a wide variety of reasons they post on online news stories. The most common reason was to respond to other user comments, with nearly 57% of respondents listing this as a reason for why they post comments online. In addition, 48.5% of respondents reported making their opinion known as a reason they post comments online. User comments were also driven by story content; over one in three respondents listed some aspect of a story's content as a reason for posting. Participating in online discussions and learning more about the news were less commonly cited.

**Table 4: What sources of news or information have you used to learn about politics?  
(Multiple Response)**

| <i>Variable</i>            | <i>Percent</i> | <i>Percent Cases</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Newspaper                  | 20.9           | 81.5                 |
| Talk Radio                 | 10.3           | 40.3                 |
| Internet Blogs             | 8.1            | 31.5                 |
| Social Networks            | 7.8            | 30.6                 |
| Cable News                 | 9.3            | 36.4                 |
| Daily Show, Colbert Report | 6.6            | 25.8                 |
| Network News               | 14.8           | 57.9                 |
| Cable Networks             | 16.9           | 66.1                 |
| Other                      | 5.3            | 20.9                 |

Note: "Percent" column sums to 100%.

Table 4 shows what the respondents stated as being their major source of information and news on politics. The percent cases (people) shows the percentage of cases that selected the specific response for one of the places they get their news from. The percent column shows the total number of responses against 100% of the value. Respondents largely obtained their news from television. The majority of respondents selected network or cable news as a source of information for politics. Not surprisingly, most respondents (80%) reported the newspaper as a source of political information. Blogs, social networks and talk shows were less frequently selected as a source of political information. Taken together, however, the responses show that readers obtain political information from a diverse set of sources.

### **Respondent Demographics**

Our survey also tracked basic demographic information. Frequency of posting did not vary much by demographic type. Men were a bit more likely to post frequently but both groups

largely reported rare or occasional posting. High income and low income respondents were more commonly frequent posters than middle income groups. Education was negatively related to frequency of posting; habitual posters were more likely to have less than a college degree than rare or occasional posters. There was little in the way of a relationship between marital status and frequency of posting. Older users tend to be more frequent commenters than younger respondents.

**Table 5: Demographics**

| <b>Trait</b>          | <b>Category</b>                | <b>Percent of Sample</b> | <b>Post Rarely</b> | <b>Post Sometime</b> | <b>Post Frequently</b> |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Gender</i>         | Male                           | 65.2                     | 58.2               | 29.1                 | 12.8                   |
|                       | Female                         | 31.1                     | 57.5               | 35.8                 | 6.3                    |
| <i>Income</i>         | Less than \$30,000             | 9.6                      | 62.1               | 20.7                 | 17.2                   |
|                       | Between \$30,000 and \$50,000  | 16.6                     | 56.5               | 37.0                 | 6.5                    |
|                       | Between \$50,000 and \$100,000 | 43.3                     | 54.3               | 36.4                 | 9.3                    |
|                       | More than \$100,000            | 30.6                     | 62.2               | 24.4                 | 13.4                   |
| <i>Education</i>      | High School Degree             | 4.3                      | 36.4               | 45.5                 | 18.2                   |
|                       | Some College/Associate         | 19.8                     | 41.0               | 39.3                 | 19.7                   |
|                       | College Degree                 | 34.1                     | 63.7               | 27.5                 | 8.8                    |
|                       | Post-Graduate                  | 41.8                     | 64.4               | 28.8                 | 6.8                    |
| <i>Marital Status</i> | Single                         | 27.1                     | 57.3               | 31.7                 | 11.0                   |
|                       | Never Married                  | 57.1                     | 58.1               | 30.6                 | 11.3                   |
|                       | Married with Children          | 32.6                     | 58.9               | 28.4                 | 12.7                   |
|                       | Divorced, Widowed or Separated | 15.8                     | 59.1               | 31.8                 | 9.1                    |
| <i>Age</i>            | 18 to 35                       | 22.9                     | 66.7               | 29.2                 | 4.2                    |
|                       | 36 to 45                       | 18.6                     | 60.0               | 30.9                 | 9.1                    |
|                       | 46 to 64                       | 48.6                     | 50.0               | 35.7                 | 14.3                   |
|                       | 65 and older                   | 8.9                      | 76.0               | 16.0                 | 8.0                    |

Note: Row percentages sum to 100% across categories of frequency of posting.

Table 5 reports the demographics of users; it also contains additional information on how frequency of commenting varies across groups. In general, the respondents were mostly well-educated middle-aged males earning above average annual incomes. Two-thirds of respondents were men and only one in four respondents reported an income of less than \$50,000 a year. Over 75 percent of respondents reported having at least a college degree and over half were over 46 years old.

**Table 6: Employment Situation**

| Category                              | Percent of Sample | Frequently | Sometimes | Rarely |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------|--------|
| Employed full-time, 35 hours or more  | 64.3              | 9.6        | 29.3      | 61.2   |
| Employed part-time, 34 hours or fewer | 8.7               | 11.5       | 42.3      | 46.5   |
| Retired, student, homemaker, other    | 23.3              | 9.1        | 33.3      | 57.5   |
| Unemployed (including disabled)       | 3.7               | 25.0       | 25.0      | 50.0   |

Note: Row percentages sum to 100% across categories of frequency of posting.

Table 6 shows the employment situation of the survey takers. Of the respondents 64.3% reported they are employed full-time and 8.7% of the people are employed part-time. Only 3.7% of the people who took the survey are unemployed—a significant difference than the state average of 9.1%. Two-thirds (66.1%) stated that no one has been unemployed in their household and 33.9% say that either they have been or someone in their household has been unemployed in the past 12 months. Just over eight in ten (82.4%) of the respondents reported not belonging to a labor union, whereas 17.6% say that either they or their spouse belongs to a labor union. In sum, those who work less than full-time and those who are unemployed were more likely to post frequently compared to those who work full-time or those who are not in the workforce.

**Table 7: What is your religious tradition?**

| <b>Question</b>     | <b>Category</b>  | <b>Percent of Sample</b> | <b>Frequently</b> | <b>Occasionally</b> | <b>Rarely</b> |
|---------------------|--|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| <i>Denomination</i> | Catholic   | 39.4                     | 12.6              | 27.9                | 59.5          |
|                     | Protestant (Baptists, Lutheran, Non-denominational)    | 31.1                     | 10.0              | 37.8                | 52.2          |
|                     | Other Christian (Jehovah, Latter Day Saints, Orthodox) | 1.9                      | 20.0              | 0.0                 | 80.0          |
|                     | Jewish   | 4.1                      | 20.0              | 20.0                | 60.0          |
|                     | Other  | 4.1                      | 15.3              | 46.6                | 38.5          |
|                     | Agnostic, Atheist, Nothing                             | 19.4                     | 1.7               | 32.8                | 65.5          |
| <i>Born Again</i>   | Born Again   | 9.6                      | 3.6               | 39.3                | 57.1          |
|                     | Not Born Again   | 90.4                     | 11.4              | 30.3                | 58.3          |
| <i>Attendance</i>   | Attend at Least Monthly                                | 41.4                     | 9.4               | 29.1                | 61.5          |
|                     | Attend Rarely or Never                                 | 58.5                     | 10.9              | 33.3                | 55.7          |

Note: Percentages for frequency of posting sum to 100% across.

Table 7 shows the statistics of the various religions of people who responded to the survey. The majority of respondents (39.4%) stated being Catholic, and in close second (31.1%) respondents identified as being protestant. While 1 in 10 (10.2%) respondents say that they have no religious or spiritual beliefs, 3.5% stated beliefs in another religion not listed above. All other smaller religions including Judaism and Muslim made up the remaining 15.8% of the respondents.

Table 7 also shows the frequency in which the respondents attend worship services. Of the respondents 24.3% stated they attend worship services once a week. While 22.4% stated they attend worship services just a few times a year. A small number of respondents, 2.8%



stated they attend worship services several times a week. Close to two out of ten (16.8%) respondents stated they never attend worship services. In general, the patterns were not detectable by frequency of posting and religious views. Those who did not identify themselves as members of a specific religious tradition were less frequent posters, while Catholics were relatively more active than other groups we tracked in the survey.

## **Political Views**

We also sought to understand the respondent's political views. Table 8 provides the results of a standard set of questions on citizen political values. The results reveal that the political views of news readers are mixed. The plurality of readers are liberal Democrats. The results are not highly skewed with the respondents balanced across all parties and ideologies especially among frequent posters. Republicans and Democrats commented with approximately the same frequency; however independents were more likely to comment frequently than were partisans. The same pattern also appears with ideology; moderates were somewhat more likely to post than conservatives or liberals, but liberals were less likely to post than conservatives. Only a small percentage (less than 3%) of respondents identified themselves as Tea Party members or Christian conservatives (slightly more than 5%). Those who disapprove of John Kasich were less likely to post than those who approved. Frequent posters were statistically more likely to have a favorable view of the Tea Party and a less favorable view of labor unions than infrequent posters.

Survey takers were more likely to perceive a liberal news bias as opposed to no bias or a conservative bias. The perception of bias was not related to frequency of posting but it was associated with the ideology of the respondents as conservatives were much more likely to perceive this bias than moderates or liberals. Almost 90% of conservatives perceived a liberal

bias, while about 40% of liberals perceived a conservative bias. Moderates were twice as likely (40% to 20%) to perceive liberal as opposed to a conservative bias.

The frequency of posting comments was not clearly related to political involvement. Frequent posters reported they gave contributions less often than infrequent commenters, but this difference was not statistically significant, nor was it significantly related to volunteering on political campaigns.

**Table 8: Political Views and Posting Patterns**

| <b>Question</b>              | <b>Category</b>                   | <b>Percent of Sample</b> | <b>Frequently</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Rarely</b> |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------|
| <i>Party Affiliation</i>     | Republicans                       | 30.7                     | 10.6              | 33.0             | 56.4          |
|                              | Independents                      | 21.1                     | 16.9              | 35.4             | 47.7          |
|                              | Democrats                         | 43.5                     | 7.3               | 21.2             | 64.2          |
| <i>Ideology</i>              | Liberal                           | 34.7                     | 4.9               | 28.4             | 66.7          |
|                              | Moderate                          | 31.1                     | 15.9              | 29.5             | 54.5          |
|                              | Conservative                      | 31.6                     | 11.2              | 34.7             | 54.1          |
| <i>Perception of Media</i>   | Media Liberal Bias                | 45.9                     | 10.9              | 31.4             | 57.7          |
|                              | Media Conservative Bias           | 19.4                     | 8.3               | 33.3             | 58.3          |
| <i>Political Involvement</i> | Contribute to Political Campaigns | 49.1                     | 8.0               | 30.2             | 61.7          |
|                              | Volunteer to Work on Campaigns    | 56.6                     | 9.2               | 30.7             | 60.1          |
| <i>Obama</i>                 | Approve                           | 30.0                     | 7.9               | 29.2             | 62.9          |
|                              | Disapprove                        | 44.4                     | 13.4              | 29.9             | 56.7          |
| <i>Kasich Approval</i>       | Approve                           | 22.1                     | 20.0              | 28.8             | 51.5          |
|                              | Disapprove                        | 53.0                     | 7.0               | 25.9             | 58.9          |
| <i>Tea Party</i>             | Favorable                         | 25.6                     | 18.4              | 26.3             | 55.3          |
|                              | Unfavorable                       | 67.7                     | 6.5               | 31.8             | 61.7          |
| <i>Labor Unions</i>          | Favorable                         | 48.0                     | 7.7               | 33.6             | 9.7           |
|                              | Unfavorable                       | 48.3                     | 13.9              | 28.7             | 57.6          |

Note: Percentages for frequency of posting sum to 100% across.

## Civility and Commenting

**Table 9: Attitudes about Ohio Civility**

| Question                                 | Category   | Percent of Sample | Frequently | Sometimes | Rarely |
|--|--|-------------------|------------|-----------|--------|
| <i>Civility of Ohio Politics</i>         | Incivility Rating<br>(1= Low, 10=High)                 | 7.1               | 7.2        | 7.3       | 7.0    |
| <i>How Serious Is Lack of Civility?</i>  | Serious Problem  | 75.1%             | 9.8%       | 29.9%     | 60.3%  |
|  | Not Serious  | 23.3%             | 12.9%      | 34.3%     | 52.9%  |
| <i>Do Comments Harm Civil Discourse?</i> | Agree  | 46.1%             | 8.3%       | 26.5%     | 65.1%  |
|  | Disagree   | 54.0%             | 12.1%      | 35.2%     | 52.7%  |
| <i>Feelings about Ohio Politics</i>      | Incivility Rating<br>(1= Satisfied<br>10=Dissatisfied) | 7.4               | 7.4        | 7.7       | 7.21   |

Note: Percentages for frequency of posting sum to 100% across.

Lastly, one point of our research involved understanding attitudes towards civility; Table 9 shows the respondents' feelings about civility in Ohio politics. We asked respondents to rank the civility of Ohio politics on a scale of one to ten, where one meant the respondent felt that Ohio politics were generally respectful while ten meant that politics in the state are rude and disrespectful. The survey respondents generally felt that politics in the state are uncivil, with an average rating of 7.1. This rating however did not vary greatly by the frequency of postings. Respondents also felt that incivility was a problem. Three in four respondents felt that the lack of civility is a somewhat serious or very serious problem. There was a mild relationship between the frequency of posting and incivility; those who felt it is a problem were less likely to post often, this however was not statistically significant.

The survey revealed that respondents have positive feelings about posting online comments after news stories. Over half believed that commenting does not exert a harmful effect

on civil discourse in the public. Those who thought comments harmed discourse were less frequent posters than those who did not.

Finally, the table shows how respondents feel about Ohio politics. The vast majority (66.9%) of respondents feel that Ohio politics are very uncivil or uncivil. While only one in ten feel that Ohio politics are very civil or civil. Just over two in ten (22.7%) of people had neutral feelings about Ohio politics.