



Talking Back

How the communications revolution is reshaping the relationship between business, government, and individuals. **By Ronald Brownstein**

More information, more options, and more control over their personal choices as consumers.

Most Americans believe that the rise of the Internet and the spread of social me-

dia has delivered all of those tangible benefits, according to a new Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll exploring public attitudes toward the cascading technological advances that have revolutionized communication between individuals, business, and government.

Millions of Americans, the poll found, use

online tools not only to comparison shop but also to learn from the collective experience of other consumers and to contribute to that mass judgment by posting accounts of their experiences, good or bad, with businesses and government. A solid majority of Americans, especially those who actively use social media, believe that this ongoing communications



No. 1 in popularity: Facebook.

their immediate control, such as buying a car or planning a trip. But most doubt that these tools are increasing their leverage over the vast public and private institutions that shape the larger currents of American life. That dynamic is similar to the attitudes expressed in earlier surveys about issues from retirement security to lifetime employment: In an economy that now offers individuals both more choices and more risks, most Americans have become reluctant individualists, trusting their own efforts, rather than any institution, to obtain security.

SOCIALLY ACTIVE

The Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor polls explore the ways that Americans are navigating the changing economy. The latest poll, conducted by Ed Reilly and Jeremy Ruch of FTI Strategic Communications, a communications-strategy consulting firm, surveyed 1,000 adults by landline telephone and cell phone from May 19-23. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

This survey focused on Americans' experiences with online communications, particularly social-media tools such as Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The poll explored how individuals are using these tools to interact with businesses and government, and whether their development is changing the sources of information that people use in making consumer and political choices.

Fundamentally, the poll documented the remarkable spread of the Internet and social media through American life. Slightly more than four-fifths of adults use the Internet at least occasionally, and that figure predictably rises to near-universal adoption among younger people (96 percent of those ages 18-29, and 94 percent of those 30-39); those with at least a four-year college degree (90 percent); and those earning at least \$100,000 annually (93 percent). Most Internet users report using it at least several times a day.

Nearly four-fifths of Internet users say they have an active social-media account and that they've accessed it in the past month. That percentage soars to more than 90 percent among Internet users ages 18-29. (Interestingly, nonwhite Internet users are somewhat more likely than whites to use social media.) In all, just under two-thirds of adults say they regularly use social media. Among that group, Facebook is by far the most popular site: 79 percent of regular social-media users have an active account there. Google+ was next at 43 percent, followed by Twitter at 20 percent, and LinkedIn at 19 percent. No other site cracked double digits.

But ubiquity has not yielded credibility for social media, the survey found. Social media and blogs ranked at the bottom when the poll asked respondents how much they trusted in-

revolution is enhancing their ability to make informed choices as consumers. A narrower plurality of respondents also feel that the same dynamics are equipping them to make better choices as voters.

But for ordinary Americans, has this explosion of Internet use increased their influence over the public and private institutions that shape their lives? On that front, despite high-profile examples of online uprisings that forced changes on such companies as Bank of America and Netflix, Americans are much more dubious.

In the survey, only small minorities say that big companies or government are more responsive to public complaints than they were 10 or 15 years ago. And comparably small percentages believe that their influence over those institutions has increased during this period. Moreover, the poll found, most people believe that big institutions engage online

mostly to advance their own agendas rather than to genuinely seek feedback from consumers and citizens. Most people also still express more trust in traditional information sources, such as newspapers and television news, than in online forums. Skepticism about the motivation and trustworthiness of both government and big business remains endemic as well. "For every company that's willing to listen to the criticism, there's far more [of them] willing to stifle dissent," said Beth Thibault, the technology manager for a consulting firm in Westport, Conn., who responded to the poll.

Taken together, these contrasting attitudes extend a central—perhaps *the* central—thread in the 13 Heartland Monitor surveys conducted since early 2009. In the latest survey, most Americans say that the emergence of constant communication is providing them with better tools to make decisions under

formation they received from different individuals, groups, and media platforms.

On this broad measure, just 30 percent of those polled placed a “great deal” or “some” trust in information when they “hear it, see it, or read about it” on social-media websites and services such as Facebook, Twitter, and others. Nearly twice as many (58 percent) say they put not very much or no trust in that information. Blogs didn’t score much better: Just 34 percent expressed much trust in them, compared with 53 percent who said they had little trust. In each case, the finding was comparable to the modest 37 percent who placed a great deal of trust in advertisements. For both sources, regular social-media users expressed only slightly more trust than the public overall.

More-traditional information sources performed better. Public television and radio (including NPR and PBS) ranked highest, with 75 percent expressing a great deal of faith in them. Following were newspapers (71 percent); cable news programs (70 percent); network news (64 percent); magazines (57 percent); talk-radio programs (53 percent); and company websites (51 percent).

SHARING EXPERIENCES

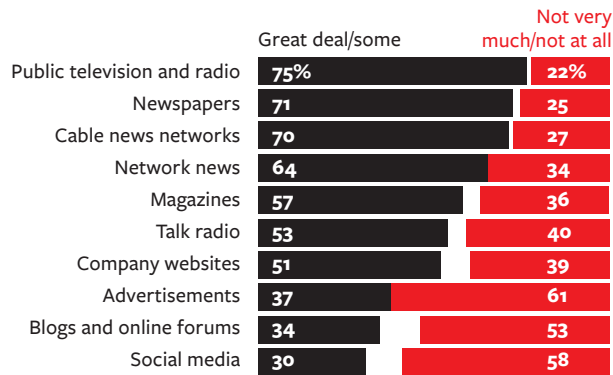
The survey found that online sources scored better in a question tied to purchasing decisions. The poll asked respondents how much consideration they gave to an array of information sources when buying a product or service. Continuing another consistent Heartland Monitor finding, by far the most trusted sources were those closest to home: Nearly nine in 10 said they relied a great deal or some on conversations with friends, family, and acquaintances. Nearly three in four leaned heavily on “expert reviews in publications like *Consumer Reports* and major newspapers,” and 57 percent cited advertising.

But online forums (59 percent) and online reviews from other consumers on sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor (54 percent) also scored well. Among regular social-media users, reliance on those sources soared to 72 percent and 66 percent, respectively, approaching the level of users who consult expert publications (77 percent). About seven in 10 young adults also report relying heavily on those sources. What’s more, it’s becoming much more common for Americans to not only seek information about their experiences but also share it: More than half of regular social-media users say they have posted a review or comment online after a positive experience with a product or service, and nearly half say they have done so after a negative experience.

Sarah P., a thirtysomething graduate student in Rexburg, Idaho, who did not give her last name, was one of many respondents who said they now routinely seek the online reactions of other consumers before opening their

Trust in Information Sources

How much do you trust information when you hear it, see it, or read about it in each of the following places?



Source: Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor Poll

wallets. When buying something, she said, she usually pokes through consumer reviews on Amazon, Target, or other sites. “You can shop smarter,” Sarah said. “I think social media has certainly made it better for me to shop and look up problems that certain products have.”

Tom A., a sales manager in Champaign, Ill., who also declined to give his last name, was one of several who said that the communications revolution has shifted power from businesses to consumers by making it easier to compare options and alternatives. “Let’s go back to our grandparents,” he said. “They did business with the same people the whole time and didn’t really have a platform to compare other industries or services with. People fire their banks and attorneys all the time now, because people use the Internet and social media to learn more about their alternative choices.”

In weighing those choices, Tom said he now leans more heavily on the collected opinions of other consumers than on the reviews in expert publications: “I’m an avid biker, and I just bought a headlight for my bike. I didn’t care what expert reviews and the manufacturer say because it seemed almost like propaganda. I care what people do in their real life. I can see a guy who is exactly like me and what he thinks.”

Such assessments help explain why a re-

sounding 60 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “the rapid growth of the Internet, most recently through social media,” has made it easier “to be a well-informed consumer.” Only 32 percent said that the information explosion “has made it harder for me to be a well-informed consumer” because of unreliable reports or by overwhelming people with “too much information to manage.” The share who believe that the Internet has empowered them rises to 68 percent among college graduates, 69 percent among social-media users, and 73 percent among those who use the Internet several times

daily. But it’s not just the young digerati who feel that way. Robert Merkle, a retired 73-year-old former owner of a gourmet-food shop living in Bayville, N.J., succinctly expressed the consensus in the poll across a broad range of groups. “I don’t buy anything or go anywhere without checking online,” he declared.

SKEPTICAL ABOUT CORPORATIONS

For many of those who consult consumer reviews online, the one major hesitation is the fear that companies selling the product have planted the positive responses. “I tend to look at Amazon reviews and a few blogs,” said Justin Merritt, a music professor in Northfield, Minn. “I always have in the back of my mind that a lot of reviews are planted, so I’m always a little bit skeptical.” That concern, which surfaced surprisingly often in interviews, reflects a broader suspicion in the survey about the motivations of businesses that are active on Facebook, Twitter, or other sites.

Among those who regularly use social media, just one in five said that companies use such sites primarily “to collect feedback ... so they can improve their businesses and personally respond to questions.” Nearly three in four said that corporations instead use these tools to “more easily advertise their products and services and collect information about current and potential customers so they can increase their profits.” Social media users were even more skeptical than those respondents who don’t heavily frequent such sites.

Social-media users assessed corporations more charitably on another set of questions. Nearly

“I don’t buy anything or go anywhere without checking online.”

Robert Merkle, Bayville, N.J.

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three-fifths tend to view companies that are active on social media as more “accessible and responsive to the questions and concerns of people” like them. Just under half said a company’s visibility made it more likely that they would view that firm as open in its business practices or dependable in its actions. But only 42 percent said that this social-media visibility influences them to see businesses as more trustworthy.

Thibault, the Connecticut technology manager, said she believes that companies use social media not to get closer to their customers but to be further insulated from them. “You’re cut off from traditional methods of contacting them,” she said. “It’s impossible to call companies; they want to put you on a live Web chat all the time. It’s purposefully removed.”

Actually, almost three-fifths of poll respondents said they have directly contacted businesses (through e-mail, letters, or phone calls) after either positive or negative experiences. But Thibault’s suspicion connects with a persistent strain of skepticism about the motivations of big institutions, both public and private. Overall, just 42 percent of those surveyed viewed major corporations as responsive to the public’s concerns; 45 percent considered them trustworthy; and 33 percent rated them as transparent in their business practices. Businesses scored best on reliability, with 52 percent rating them as consistent and dependable in their actions. (On each measure, young adults were somewhat more positive on corporate motivations than older people.)

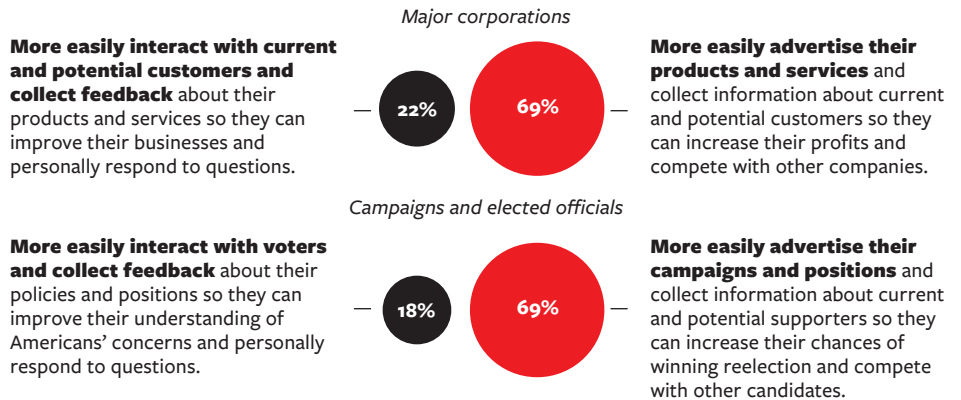
SUSPICIOUS ABOUT GOVERNMENT

It might be cold comfort in the corner of office, but in a separate question, government scored considerably worse than the private sector on reliability (with only 39 percent rating it consistent and reliable in its actions) and no better on the other three measures. When respondents were asked which institutions they trust as information sources, the federal government (at 51 percent) and major corporations (42 percent) scraped the bottom of a list topped by small and local businesses (nearly nine in 10) and local and state government (around two-thirds). Political candidates faced even more skepticism than corporations from social-media users about their reasons for using such sites: Just one in six saw a genuine effort by candidates to “more easily interact with voters and collect feedback,” while almost three in four thought they participated to “more easily advertise their campaigns and positions and ... increase their chances of winning” campaigns.

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Why Corporations and Politicians Use Social Media

Do you believe ... are active on social media mostly so they can ...

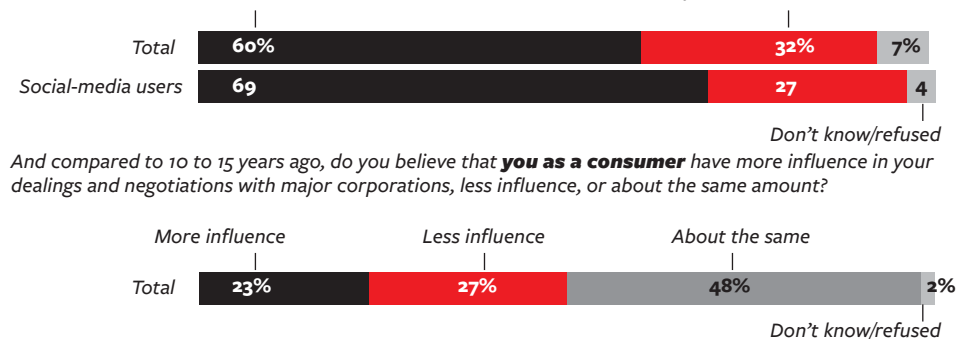


Impact of Online Information on Consumers

Now, as you know, the rapid growth of the Internet, most recently through social media, has resulted in a vast amount of information from **companies, reviewers, and other consumers about products and services**. Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

This information has made it **EASIER** for me to be a well-informed consumer because it is now easier to research and compare products, and it allows for increased communications with other consumers and with the companies themselves.

This information has made it **HARDER** for me to be a well-informed consumer because there is now too much information to manage, and it is hard to know what reports and reviews are reliable and trustworthy.

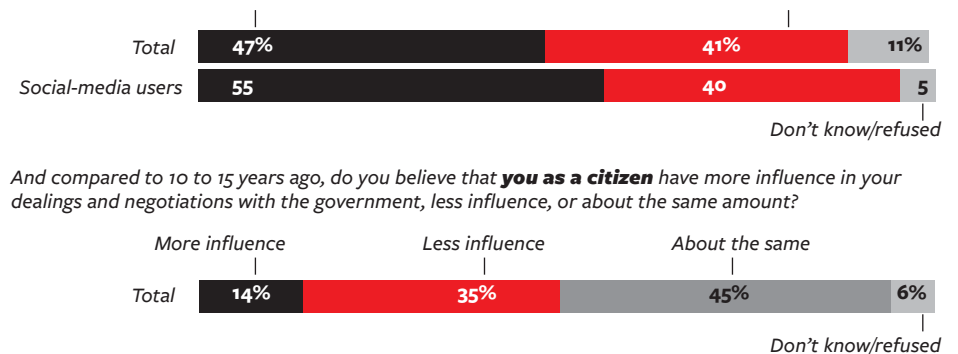


Impact of Online Information on Citizens

Now, as you know, the rapid growth of the Internet, most recently through social media, has resulted in a vast amount of information from **campaigns, elected officials, political commentators, and other Americans about policies and issues**. Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

This information has made it **EASIER** for me to be a well-informed citizen because it is now easier to research and compare issues and candidates, and it allows for increased communications with other Americans and with the government itself.

This information has made it **HARDER** for me to be a well-informed citizen because there is now too much information to manage, and it is hard to know what information is reliable and trustworthy.



Source: Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor Poll

THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

No Margin For Error. Recent economic setbacks could be devastating for President Obama's reelection prospects.

BY RONALD BROWNSTEIN

President Obama's bid for a second term stands on the edge of a knife.

That's the overriding message of the latest Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll. In the survey, the country divides almost in half on Obama's overall performance as president, his impact on the economy, and the choice between him and Republican Mitt Romney in the 2012 election. On the ballot test, the needle bends slightly toward Obama; on the critical job-approval measure, it tilts slightly away from him. But all of these gauges show that the president is operating with virtually no margin for error—a conclusion underscored by the fact that this survey was completed before the release of last week's deeply disappointing jobs report.

The latest Heartland Monitor Poll surveyed 1,000 adults, including 871 registered voters, by landline and cell phone from May 19-23. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points for the entire sample and 3.3 percentage points for the registered-voter subset.

The poll's first 2012 ballot test has Obama leading Romney among registered voters by 44 percent to 41 percent. (Unlike some other polls, this survey did not push undecided voters to lean toward one candidate.) But Obama's job-approval rating, usually the most revealing measure of an incumbent's standing, dipped to 47 percent in the latest poll, with 48 percent disapproving. That's a decline from a 51 percent approval rating in the Heartland Monitor survey last March, albeit

within the margin of error.

Both the ballot test with Romney and the job-approval assessment capture the persistence of the racial and class divide that has characterized reactions to Obama. In the matchup against Romney, Obama leads among nonwhite voters by 65 percent to 21 percent. That's a big lead for Obama, but it represents erosion from 2008, when he won a commanding 80 percent of all minority voters.

Obama trails in the poll among whites, drawing just 37 percent to Romney's 49 percent. The president attracts only 32 percent of whites without a college education, compared with 50 percent for Romney, a result consistent with other recent national polls (and a decline from Obama's modest 40 percent showing with those voters in 2008). Obama is more competitive among whites with at least a four-year college degree, attracting 42 percent to Romney's 47 percent. Obama captured 47 percent of college-plus whites last time. That's a slightly weaker showing for Obama than in most polls, largely because the Heartland Monitor records Romney (at 46 percent) and Obama (at 44 percent) essentially splitting college-educated white women; most other surveys have found Obama leading among those voters, the most Democratic-leaning portion of the white electorate.

All of these results closely track attitudes toward the president's job performance. Almost two-thirds of minorities, but only two-fifths of whites, say they approve. Since January 2010, Obama's approval rating among whites in the Heartland Monitor has exceeded 41 percent only in the poll conducted

after the mission that killed Osama bin Laden. Just 41 percent of independents approved of Obama's performance in the new poll.

The recent drumbeat of disappointing economic news, particularly the stock-market swoon and May's bleak jobs report, threatens the survey's best

the recent economic setbacks reverse this slowly spreading optimism, the impact on Obama could be devastating. Here's one measure of how devastating: In the new survey, among those who believe the economy will improve over the next year, Obama leads Romney by 65 percent to 24 percent.

Presidential Traits

Which statements do you believe better describe ...

	OBAMA	ROMNEY
Has the experience and skills needed to improve the economy	40%	46%
Will support policies that benefit people like you	48	39
Will support policies that promote opportunity for all Americans	53	35
Will support policies that will be better for future generations	47	40
Can be trusted to live up to campaign promises	40	36
Will bring the deficit under control	34	43

Source: Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll

news for Obama. In the poll, 62 percent of all adults say they expect the economy to improve over the next year. That continues a steady increase from 50 percent last October to 60 percent this March. Minorities are by far the most optimistic, with nearly four in five expecting improvement; about three-fifths of college-plus whites and just over half of noncollege whites agree. Those polled remain optimistic, if less exuberantly, about their personal situation: Forty-four percent expect their own finances to improve over the next year, compared with just 12 percent who expect it to deteriorate. Forty-one percent expect no change. That's comparable to the numbers since last December but significantly better than the results from early last year.

The increasing number of Americans who believe that the economy is gaining ground has been key to Obama's improved standing since last summer. If

Among those who believe the economy will decline over the next year, Romney leads Obama by 73 percent to 9 percent.

Americans' assessments of their current economic situation haven't improved as much since last fall as their expectations for the future. Just 43 percent describe their current situation as excellent or good, while 56 percent call it fair or poor. (That's an improvement within the margin of error from the 39 percent to 60 percent split on that question last October.) On a separate question, only 28 percent of respondents said they are earning enough to live comfortably every month; 52 percent said they can get by but don't have enough money to save; and 17 percent said they are finding "it hard to make ends meet every month." All of those numbers have shown strikingly little change since summer 2009.

Other questions also re-



Still looking: Too many Americans.

vealed close divisions that have not changed appreciably over the past couple of years. Thirty-two percent of those surveyed said that Obama's agenda would increase opportunity for people like them to get ahead; 34 percent said that it would diminish their opportunities (the remaining 29 percent said that it would have no impact). Those overall numbers have varied only slightly since December 2010. Going back even earlier, to January 2010, no more than one in four whites have said that Obama's agenda would increase their opportunities.

Likewise, 45 percent said that Obama's economic policies helped to "avoid an even worse

economic crisis and are laying the foundation for our eventual economic recovery," while a comparable 46 percent agreed that Obama has "run up a record federal deficit while failing to end the recession or slow the record pace of job losses." Those numbers have varied remarkably little all seven times the Heartland Monitor has posed that question. Similar stability defines attitudes on a third key question that the poll has tested repeatedly, on the effect of Obama's overall agenda. Thirty-seven percent say that the country is "significantly worse off" because of Obama's policies. Only 12 percent say that the nation is already "sig-

nificantly better off" because of his efforts, but 47 percent still say that his program is moving the country in the right direction, even if it has not produced significant benefits yet. Those numbers have barely budged since April 2010.

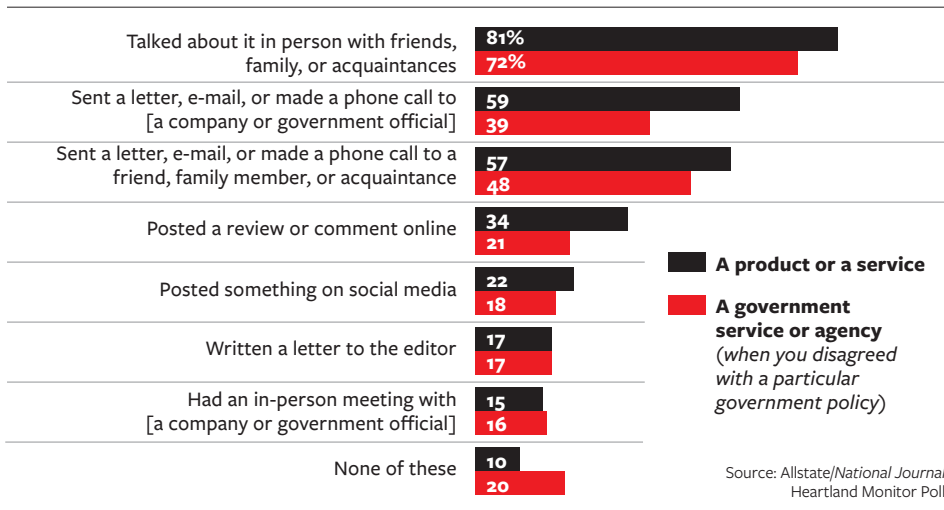
A final set of new questions captures how closely divided, and conflicted, voters are today. Asked to assess the two rivals based on a series of traits, more adults deemed Obama as more likely to offer policies that promote opportunity for all, would benefit people like them, and would be better for future generations. But more also said that Romney stood a greater chance of bringing the deficit

under control, and they gave the former governor an edge (46 percent to 40 percent) on perhaps the most salient question in this election, that of who "has the experience and skills needed to improve the economy." (Whites preferred Romney more emphatically.)

Yet when voters were asked how they thought their personal finances would fare over the next few years, slightly more said they would be better off under Obama (40 percent) than Romney (37 percent). This election is already teetering on a knife's edge, and the economy's performance in the months ahead may well decide which way it falls. ■

Response to Negative Experience

Which of the following have you done after a negative experience with ...



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When asked if the emergence of the Internet and social media has made it easier to be a well-informed citizen, both the public overall and social-media users divided more closely than they did on the comparable question about consumerism. Only 47 percent of all adults said that the information explosion had better equipped them as a citizen by making it easier to research candidates and issues; 41 percent said that it had made it harder “because there is now too much information to manage, and it is hard to know what information is reliable and trustworthy.” For social-media users, the division was 55 percent positive and 40 percent negative—higher than the public overall, but still well below the balance among the digitally active on the question about consuming.

Yet for all the ways that Americans praise the Internet for helping them as individual consumers in the marketplace, they are much more uncertain about its impact on their collective influence on the big public and private institutions in their lives. Generally, the poll suggests, Americans feel they have the most influence over the most narrowly focused interactions. Almost exactly half of those surveyed said they considered major corporations “somewhat” responsive “to complaints about negative experiences”; another 13 percent considered them “very responsive.” “I think you have more options to voice your opinion than you used to,” said Merkle, the retired shop owner. “When I was growing up, you had to go through a formal process to contact a company. You had to write a letter and go to the post office. Now you have the ability to contact and communicate with companies very easily.”

Still, those polled didn’t see a systematic

trend toward greater responsiveness. Asked to assess how corporations deal with complaints, 28 percent said they considered companies more responsive than 10 or 15 years ago, 25 percent said less responsive, and 42 percent saw no change. Social-media users were somewhat more optimistic: 34 percent perceived greater responsiveness, compared with only 21 percent who perceived less; 41 percent saw no change.

But those polled displayed less confidence that the communications revolution is making corporations more responsive to public demands on issues broader than their personal complaints: Just 23 percent of all adults (and 29 percent of regular social-media users) believe that consumers have more influence on major corporations than 10 or 15 years ago. Merkle was one of those who felt that ease of communication has provided consumers with more leverage to shape corporate decisions. “With all of the Twitter and Facebook [visibility], their reputations can be damaged very easily,” he says. “I think it has a lot of clout to get a corporation to acknowledge that there is a problem that needs to be corrected.” Ari Ru-

“It’s impossible to call companies; they want to put you on a live Web chat all the time.”

Beth Thibault, Westport, Conn.

bin, a securities trader in Los Angeles, agrees. “There’s a definite link between greater consumer participation and the shaping of corporate policy in a variety of areas,” he says. “There’s a much greater opportunity for consumers to have input on corporate behavior.”

However, the largest group (48 percent overall, 45 percent of social media users) sees no change in corporate responsiveness. About one-fourth of both the public overall and social-media users believe their influence has actually declined in recent years. Merritt, the Minnesota music professor, was one of many who considered the well-publicized examples of successful online uprisings, such as Bank of America’s retreat on debit-card fees, the exceptions. “For every time social media affects a corporate decision, you have to think of the thousands and thousands of times it’s not,” he says, “or it’s too complicated to become an issue on social media.”

The verdict is even gloomier about the impact of these new tools on government. Just 18 percent of adults feel that government agencies are more responsive than 10 or 15 years ago, compared with 30 percent who see them as less responsive, and 44 percent who see no change. Only 14 percent believe their influence over government decisions has increased over that period; 35 percent see less influence, and 45 percent perceive no change. In each case, the numbers are equally pessimistic for social-media users. Less than two-fifths say that government is responsive to complaints about negative experiences. Thomas Koch, a construction manager in Baltimore, expressed a common source of skepticism about the prospect of easier communication yielding more public influence over political decisions: “Politics is driven by money,” he said.

Still, in a summary question asking Americans to balance all of the effects of the communications revolution on the marketplace and politics, a 49 percent to 39 percent plurality said it had provided individuals more influence by allowing people “to quickly communicate and organize around common objectives.” Regular social-media users were slightly more encouraged than the population overall, as were respondents under 40.

Americans may not yet see evidence that the virtual community made possible through the Internet is forcing big institutions to genuinely respond more to their needs. But at a moment when so many Americans feel that the struggling economy has left them paddling alone, the opportunity to learn from, and sometimes join with, others online is becoming an important source of support. ■

William Friedman contributed