

Social Media and Political Participation

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Abstract

Social media use is becoming increasingly prevalent in the United States, and its uses are becoming more politicized. Since Barack Obama's campaign for presidency in 2008 to the 2016 presidential election, the conversation around how social media is impacting our political environment has grown. Through this thesis, I examine how using social media politically affects the likelihood that someone will participate in politics. I look at four different acts of political participation: contacting a political official, donating to a political campaign, participating in a political activity like a rally, and voting. I also look at the timeline of Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to analyze potential effects of social media platforms on political participation. To analyze this relationship, I used survey data from the American National Election Surveys to set up a statistical analysis. The analysis found that using social media politically increased the likelihood that a person will engage in all four types of political participation. As the United States moves forward in the social media age, it is important to know that social media use is correlated with acts of participation.

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Every two years, Americans have the opportunity to cast their ballots in the most direct form of political action: voting. However, the intense process leading up to an election is full of opportunity to be politically engaged in ways that go beyond voting. The opportunities to participate in America's vast and complex political system also includes contacting elected officials and demonstrating for a political cause. But Americans' involvement is especially low. Despite all the opportunities to do so, Americans simply do not demonstrate high levels of political engagement. In addition to being an essential component of a democratic society, political participation is also a key to understanding how people interact with elections and the campaigns leading up to them.

What is political engagement? From voting in an election to attending a political rally, political engagement can take many forms. What causes a person to become politically engaged, to decide which areas of politics to engage in, or how much to engage? Understanding the answers to these questions and what influences these decisions is important for analyzing democratic societies and is also a key goal for campaigns and political movements. There are many explanations to why people engage the way they do, which requires further research. One factor affecting political engagement could be the rise of social media, and the increasing influence it has on our society.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on what causes political engagement to vary within the context of the United States. Narrowing political engagement, I will look specifically at what causes variation within four essential areas: voting, contacting a political agent, engaging in political activity, and making a monetary donation to a political candidate. I have chosen these

four factors because they are diverse activities requiring different types of commitment¹ and are well-established in political science as primary modes of political involvement. Further, each of these modes of participation can and are influenced by the formation of new social media platforms.

In recent years, the introduction of interactive internet platforms, social media, has raised new questions about how the changing technological landscape affects politics. While social media platforms were initially aimed at connecting on an individual social level, new features have enabled them to act as platforms for political discourse and involvement. There have also been documented examples of social media acting as an important influence politically, whether positively or negatively. In 2008, Barack Obama's campaign for President of the United States introduced the use of the internet, particularly Facebook, as a powerful political tool. Again in 2016, social media changed the electoral game. Nominee Donald Trump's frequent and unedited tweets were a large force for constructing his persona, as well as garnered him millions in earned media coverage. Then, Russian bots and the spread of misinformation on Twitter and Facebook gained national attention. While these events are not the focus of this thesis, they prove that social media are quickly becoming consequential to our society. Instead, this thesis will explore if social media shows a discoverable trend or if these high-profile instances of influence are themselves unique.

¹ Commitment referring to the time, effort, ability, and often money that is required to participate in these activities. From relatively low commitment by calling or writing a letter to a candidate which costs little time and resources, donating which would require the monetary commitment, and attending a protest or voting which often requires a move outside of the home or work sphere to participate, including often giving personal or work time or spending money to get there.

Since social media began with Facebook in 2004 it has gained popularity and influence, and information has moved to the tips of our fingers with the introduction of smartphones. Social media platforms have been multiplying, with a few rising to cultural prominence. Many more platforms have become more political since their conception as well. Not only have they added features that facilitate the political, but their audience is receptive to this change and these platforms have become entwined with today's politics. As citizens now turn to social media for information about politics,² or to engage in it directly, these apps have developed tools and features to facilitate political participation. Considering the plethora of social media platforms and variations in the definitions of social media, this thesis will look specifically at highly trafficked social media which have a high availability of political content: Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat.

As the influence of social media in our lives increases, it becomes increasingly important to understand its effect on salient acts of political engagement. It is widely acknowledged that social media has indeed transformed our everyday lives, and its contribution to the 2008 election has been widely discussed. Despite the potential transformation of politics, and voting in particular, that came to light after the 2008 election, there remains little knowledge of social media's specific effects. In the wake of the 2016 election, the implications of social media in politics has become increasingly relevant. President Donald J. Trump's use of Twitter during his campaign, as well as his continual use of Twitter in office as "official statements by the President of the United States" ("Trump's tweets are 'official statements'") exemplifies political elites

² In a PEW study, 38% of Americans *often* get news online, including through social media (Barthel et al.).

turning social media into another political platform and further hybridizing the media and political world.

Since voting and other forms of political participation are so essential to a democratic society, understanding the political implications of social media and the power it may have is an area that must be explored. Actions like voting, donating, protesting, and contacting political officials affect real policies and people. Those that work on electoral campaigns may want to understand the implications of social media to develop strategies and know the most efficient ways to inform or invigorate potential voters. Campaign advertising is expensive and using social media effectively and cost-efficiently requires intimate knowledge of its implications. In addition, social media's function as a free and public platform for information and communication means that citizens can leverage it for information. Especially in the wake of 'fake news' spreading on Facebook and other social media platforms, civilians may want more information on how their social media feeds are able to influence their actions. How does social media use affect a person's likelihood of political participation? This thesis will focus on the relationship between social media and four types of political participation. Specifically, that using social media political influences the likelihood of participating politically.

Literature Review

Literature on political participation has been far-reaching, investigating different types of participation and how people respond to each form. Analysis on social media's impact, however, has been limited as a function of its newness.

Political participation encompasses a wide variety of actions. While the most visible form of participation is voting, many other forms of participation are significant to the political system. To identify four modes of participation, the foundational work on political engagement, *Voice and Equality*, outlined “contributions to campaigns, . . . contacts with public officials, . . . attendance at demonstrations” (Brady, 9) and “monetary contributions” (Brady, 8) as some unique and important ways that people can participate. As Brady et al. expand on, these four types of participation each require different levels of commitment and have different motivations and psychologies.

To see how social media has interacted with political movements in the past, I looked at examples where social media was seen to have contributed to the formation or success of political movements. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring introduced social media as an organization tool for large political protests. Articles by Mark Tremayne and Yannis Theocharis demonstrate how Twitter was used to organize and amplify political protests by utilizing specific features which made the communication and planning easier. Looking at Occupy Wall Street, the spread of memes and messages through social media enabled the movement to organize, as well as disseminate objectives of the organization to other social media users. Social movements since the rise of social media have not only been successful (to a degree) but have challenged how we view the informing and invigorating functions of social media platforms. Through studying the Arab Spring, Zeynep Rufecki and Christopher Wilson were able to demonstrate that social media, especially Facebook, was able to inform users about protests and even increase the likelihood that someone would attend a protest. In more recent years, the Women’s March utilized Facebook by creating events for the march in DC but also sister marches around the world. The March for Our Lives organizers used social media to spread

information and build momentum to protest for gun control, and Black Lives Matter used social media to communicate about racism and police brutality, as well as promote demonstrations.

Apart from issue movements, campaigns have also utilized Facebook and Twitter to increase attendance at candidate rallies and other events. Obama's 2008 campaign is well known for having combined social media and grassroots organizing to drive canvassing efforts, as well as the introduction of the large rally (Chadwick). In the 2016 presidential election, social media has been used to build support for candidates and drive large crowds to campaign rallies. With the rise of social media, "ordinary people gained access to the means of digital production" and were able to use this access to "facilitate organizations and protests" (Enli). Social media has been used in the past years to function as organizers, informers, and mobilizers for political events.

Social media platforms have garnered attention for their ability to be tools for political movements and campaigns, which have used social media to amplify information and invigorate groups into action. With the rise of Facebook and Twitter, and their increasing politicization, there are more opportunities for these platforms to act as vectors for political action.

Outside of political movements and campaign rallies, there has been a lot of focus on social media's ability to facilitate donations. Social media be used by campaigns to promote or discourage political participation. Bimber's analysis of the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns shows how the internet and rise of social media impacted campaign decisions on engaging citizens and how this led to innovative solutions to encourage donations. Bimber's work highlights how, with social media, campaigns are able to fish for donations using well-timed appeals and easily accessible links to donation websites. Further, users can seek out donation

links on a candidate's account. The Obama campaign was also unique in its ability to raise enough in small donations that it could forgo public funding and the associated spending limits. This innovative combination of new and traditional methods to raise unprecedented amounts in small donations during the 2008 Obama campaign is highlighted with Chadwick's discussion of hybridity in the campaign.

Besides social media use, party polarization in elections could explain likelihood to vote. Party polarization has increased rapidly since the mid-1970s and party discipline has increased, which is why Dodson argues that party polarization is becoming increasingly relevant for voter turnout. Strength of party identification is believed to be a significant factor in vote choice, and Dodson demonstrates that the increasing polarization is a consistent source of the change in voter turnout over the past decades. As he explains, perceptions of polarization raise the likelihood of voting, and propel citizens towards higher involvement. Increasing political polarization is an alternate explanation for voter turnout.

There are certain expectations of behavior, which Stephen Medvic lays out in *Campaigns and Elections: Players and Processes*, which serve as control factors for the study. We expect older citizens to be more likely to participate, those that identify strongly as a Republican or Democrat to be more likely to participate, and those with certain levels of education to participate more. We also expect younger citizens to be less likely to vote, although more likely to have a social media account. These assumptions are key to developing a model that controls for factors that could affect the relationship between participation and social media use.

Theory

Definitions and Assumptions

Defined by Jan W. Van Deth, political participation can include “any voluntary, nonprofessional activity concerning government, politics, or the state” (Van Deth). *Voice and Equality* also views it as “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action” (Brady et al., 38). These definitions will be the foundation for considering political participation as activities that include a variety of actions ranging from donating to voting. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on four specific types of political participation. These political actions are taken by individuals and are political in nature and involve the act of doing something; simply viewing a television news program does not constitute a political activity in this context.

Furthermore, many political actions are taken in pursuit or support of a political cause. Political causes are issues and policies, either general or specific, which people support or oppose. These can be specific policies such as a hurricane relief bill or general support for gun rights, for example. Either way, people may find themselves taking action for a political cause, constituting political participation.

Looking more closely at the four modes of participation, I define voting as an act of casting an official ballot in an election. Here, data comes from votes for President of the United States, U.S. House of Representatives, and U.S. Senate. Next, I define donations as monetary gifts to a specific candidate who is running for elected office. Contacting refers to direct communication with a political official regarding a political cause, which can come in the form of emails, calls, or other direct messages (ANES Codebooks). Finally, I define activities as a specific action requiring additional involvement or capability to go beyond the home and join

others: a political rally, demonstration, meeting, or working for a candidate. These actions involve sacrificing personal time, and sometimes money, to attend an ‘event.’

Social Media Platforms

Social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (Merriam-Webster), such as microblogging or social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. These social media platforms also have a wide reach. In early 2016, PEW Research Center reported that “69% of the public uses some type of social media,” which increased from 5% in 2005 (“Social Media Fact Sheet”). Not only do a majority of Americans have social media profiles, but PEW also reported that 38% of Americans got their news online, including through social media sites, in 2016 (“About four-in-ten Americans”). So social media is used by a significant percentage of Americans and is also a source of political news for its users. Given its use and ability to convey news and information, social media have the potential to say something about the political participation of its users.

I have selected three major social media platforms to focus on, which were chosen based on their ability to build an interactive and communicative community as well as the presence of unique features that could facilitate political engagement. Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat all offer unique features and are used for political discussions, as well as campaign messages. When thinking about the interplay of social media and political participation, Twitter and Facebook are often the first to come up given their histories as powerful political tools. Snapchat, however, is a newer platform that was just beginning to develop political features during the 2016 election. So far, Snapchat does not appear to have had a direct impact at the level of Twitter and Facebook,

but it is still interesting to look at how new platforms are developing themselves to join into political discussions and activities in the wake of Facebook and Twitter.

% of U.S. adults who use ...

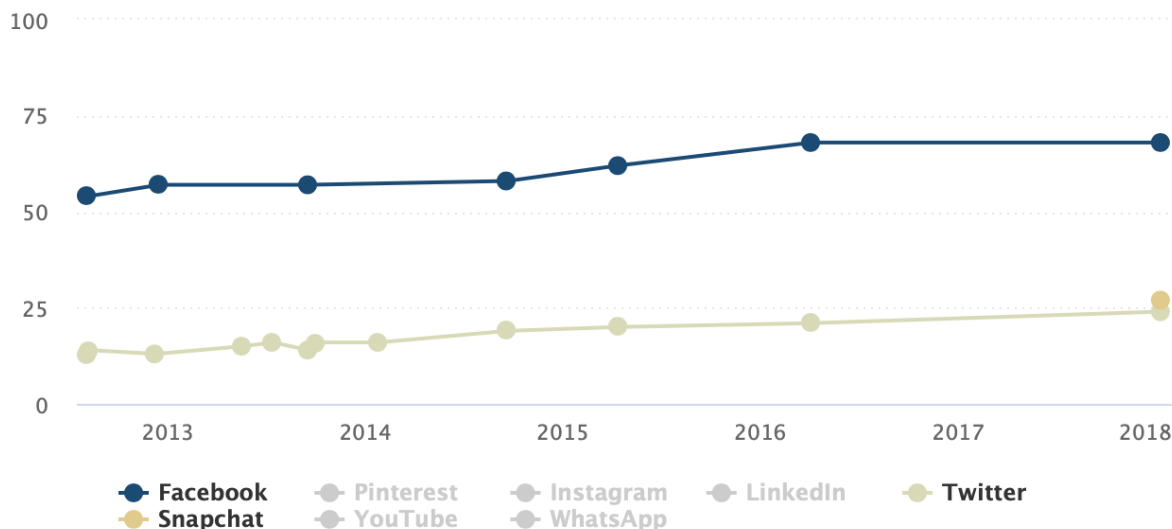


Figure 1 PEW: Percent of adults who use Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat by year. ("Social Media Fact Sheet")

Facebook

Launched in 2004, Facebook was the first major platform to transform political discussions. Initially a social network dedicated to keeping in touch with friends and posting personal photos, subsequent updates introduced it as a way to communicate politically. In 2006, Facebook launched the News Feed, which updates lists of statuses, links, photos, videos, and other content to the main screen. The introduction of News Feed allowed the sharing of articles of a political nature, and for friends to share their thoughts and opinions via comments and shares. The comment feature especially allowed others to continue a dialogue on these issues or news updates. Facebook continued to gain popularity, and by October of 2012 it had reached one billion active users a month (Kiss). By the time of the 2012 election, Facebook had introduced

several additional features that further promoted communication: Timeline (Fox), the ability to subscribe to pages (“Facebook tests subscribe button”) and News Feed stories (“Facebook adds ‘subscribe to page’”), the Facebook mobile app (Casti), and verified accounts for public figures (Constine). These features combined allowed Facebook users to gather information and interact with others in a political context.

The success of the Obama campaign in 2008 to utilize Facebook as a campaigning tool meant that campaign strategies now look beyond traditional campaign tactics and into the realm of social media. The further hybridization of campaign strategies to leverage new social media platforms in concert with traditional tactics has introduced even more opportunities to influence voters. Facebook was particularly influential in organizing events and reaching people quickly and directly. Organizing for America and the Obama campaign’s strategy showed that using social media had the potential to drive participation (Chadwick).

Twitter

Twitter has been around since 2006 but did not become important to the political sphere until after the 2008 election. Between the 2008 and 2012 elections, many realized what an invaluable tool Twitter could be, much like Facebook, in driving political participation, and many new features were developed that could facilitate participation. The iconic hashtag, a single phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#), was introduced in 2007 and is used to categorize Tweets and make them easily searchable and monitored.

In December of 2012, one month after the 2012 election, Twitter announced that it had over 200 million monthly active users (Fiegerman). Twitter has continued to gain traction as a

political social media platform and has been utilized in several political protests and movements worldwide. In 2011 the Arab Spring was aided by social media to amplify protest messages, and the Occupy Wall Street movement utilized social media to spread memes and information. More recently, the Women's March and the March for Our Lives movements used Twitter as a tool to organize mass demonstrations in support for political ideas.

Twitter has also been a place where diplomats and prominent political figures could communicate with their constituents, peers, and other countries. Twitter diplomacy arose after many diplomats joined the popular app and began using it to send diplomatic messages to other countries and leaders, as well as promote U.S. interests. Diplomats from the U.S. Secretary of State to the President of India have Twitter accounts, and use them to spread support for legislative agendas, make announcements, and interact with other political figures from across the world. Diplomats are not the only political official to adopt Twitter as a form of communication. Many U.S. members of Congress, heads of agencies, Governors, etc. have Twitter profiles from which they issue official statements. The ability of Twitter to get messages out quickly and directly to a large audience has been very influential in its rise as a political platform.

Later, Twitter introduced Discover tabs to present trending topics in Moments. Moments condenses these trending topics and hashtags into an easily-read series of tweets from various sources to summarize the 'moment' (Olanoff). During the 2016 election, I observed that one of these Moments pages was specifically for politics, and there was a '2016 Election' page with several moments regarding trending campaign topics. Additionally, Twitter was been able to

livestream election debates and provide election night coverage during the 2016 election. These features have allowed for a rise in Twitter being used in political ways.

Snapchat

The youngest of these platforms, Snapchat was not launched until 2011 (Colao), well after the introduction of foundational social media platforms. At first, it was only used to send pictures and videos back and forth between friends via images which expired after ten seconds. While Snapchat's popularity spiked after its introduction, its early functions were purely social. It wasn't until after the 2012 election that Snapchat began expanding its capabilities and introduced features that had political implications.

In October of 2013, My Story was introduced, allowing users to share a picture or video with all of their friends for a 24-hour period (Etherington). With My Story, people could record and distribute their actions more widely, while celebrities and other public figures could share their stories with followers. In some cases, this allowed political information to be spread.

Snapchat Discover was launched in 2015. Discover provides a daily feed of stories from various brands whose content range from beauty tips to breaking news. With the integration of traditional news networks like *The New York Times* and *CNN*, Snapchat became a potential source for political information. These news organizations take their articles and content and format them with graphics, videos, and interactive content to appeal to the Snapchat platform. Further, Snapchat and other brands have developed content for viewers with Snapchat shows such as CNN's "The Update" and NBC's "Stay Tuned," each of which create content specifically for Snapchat and report primarily on political news.

One good example of Snapchat developing political content is “Good Luck America.” American political journalist Peter Hamby, who worked at CNN and is now the head of news at Snapchat hosts the Snapchat original production “Good Luck America” (Byers). In this series, Hamby airs an episode every two to four weeks, which cover topics that are salient to voters. Many of these stories focus on campaigns and elections, from the 2016 presidential primaries to the upcoming 2018 midterm elections, or single issues such as the immigration debate. Hamby focuses on a new topic each ‘episode’ that is political in nature. He goes to different places in the country to interview people or follows candidates on the campaign trail. The show follows journalistic norms of objectivity, as it aims to shed light on both sides of an issue. Similarly, during the 2016 election cycle, Snapchat allowed for Discover stories that focused exclusively on election-specific content or political issues for a short period of time during which these breaking issues were relevant.

While Snapchat remains a new social media platform, it has begun developing ways to transmit political information to its users through these features. While they may not be particularly affective, they have aimed to deliver news visually, which many Americans prefer (Barthel). Perhaps, with further refinement and a larger political audience, Snapchat may be a larger factor in the future.

Inform

One of the many struggles facing American politics is a widely uninformed citizenry. For several reasons, Americans fall behind other democratic countries when it comes to understanding of current events, political knowledge, and systems. Some reasons for this are the complexity of the American political system and lack of adequate education on politics

(Schudson). Americans go to the polls so often, and are faced with such a complex governing structure, that it is difficult to have the level of political knowledge that encourages them to be active participants in the political sphere. In surveys, Americans consistently display low levels of political information – only 36 percent of Americans could identify each of the three branches of government in the United States (“Americans know surprisingly little”). These low levels of information present barriers to participation and introduce a possibility for social media to inform.

While political knowledge is low, social media offers quick, convenient, and accessible ways for users to become more politically informed. This informing function could provide the American public with relevant knowledge that could increase participation. Research suggests that people who are more politically knowledgeable are more likely to vote (Carpini). Social media provides many opportunities for political exposure, as well as the opportunity to follow politicians, government officials, news organizations, and other that could increase users’ level of political knowledge.

In addition to providing generalized political knowledge, social media can also inform users of specific events or tools that could inform participation. This type of informing comes in the form of Facebook or hashtag events that include information about what, where, and when a political event, such as a rally or demonstration, will occur. In recent political movements, like the Women’s March, social media has been used to spread information about when and where the marches will take place, and how to get involved. It can also inform users about the numbers or address of political officials they might want to contact, thereby making it easier to reach out. In this way, social media can inform users to further mobilize them politically.

Finally, social media can inform about campaigns and elections more specifically. Social media is another area for exposure to campaign messages, as well as a place to learn more about a candidate through a Snapchat video or Twitter account. If they are informed about the issues and actors in a campaign, they might be more willing to donate to a campaign or cause or cast a ballot for a specific candidate or proposal. In addition, social media has made efforts to get out the vote by amplifying messages about when election day is, as well as providing links for voters to find out how and where to vote. In all these ways, social media can inform users about politics in meaningful ways that could impact how they participate.

Facilitate

Social media also offers the potential for being facilitators of political participation. In addition to being able to inform users, these platforms have developed specific features that could facilitate engagement. One way it can do this is by providing easy opportunities to connect with candidates and political officials. Since most candidates and officials have a Twitter or Facebook account, the ability to directly contact them is more widely available by replying to their tweets or direct messaging them. In these instances, social media can facilitate contact between users and officials.

Another way social media can facilitate participation is through donations. It is easier to include direct messages and links to donation websites on a candidates' social media profile or through their messages on that platform. These messages can also be sent out at key times when emotions are running high, and their timing can be used to drive more donations. In addition, donating over the internet is often much easier than writing a check and dropping it off at the

candidates' office. Instead, it takes only a few minutes to donate, and can be done with the click of a button. With these technological advancements, the act of donating has an additional path.

Invigorate

Finally, social media opens up additional opportunities to invigorate people and get them mobilized. The conversations that happen on social media platforms can build momentum and excitement around a particular candidate or issue. Campaigns and movements often capitalize on the emotions brought out by trending or prominent political news to invigorate people into attending a campaign rally, march, or turn out to vote. In this way, social media can amplify emotions to create enough of a motivation for people to turn out to vote or drive 500 miles to attend a march in D.C. Organizers can plan an event and urge people to attend in a short time that allows the emotions of an event to still be strong. This invigorating effect may be why marches can draw such large crowds and attention, and why social media could impact participation levels.

Hypotheses

Given the recent development³ and rapid emergence of new technologies and platforms in the 21st century, the prevalence and increasing normalcy of social media in our lives gives rise to many questions. Given the uncertainty surrounding social media, I drew my hypotheses to reflect the differences in these four forms of political participation, and why the internet could have different effects on each of them.

³ Creation of the public World Wide Web only occurred in 1991 ("The Invention of the Internet").

Hypothesis I: Using social media politically increases the likelihood of contacting political officials.

Today it seems as if every politician has a Twitter and Facebook account. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to think of a political official without one.⁴ Since every politician, running or elected, has a platform to express their views to their constituents and the world more broadly, there is the opportunity for citizens and officials to communicate more frequently and directly. On Facebook, users have the ability to privately message an official or leave public comments on their posts, and on Twitter can direct message, reply, and quote tweets to open up communication. Additionally, many social media accounts have direct links or information about how to further contact the official.

Since these new avenues for communication between voters and officials are opened up through social media, using social media politically could have a positive effect on whether or not someone is going to contact a political official. These commenting and messaging features give people increased access to interact with political officials. Instead of having to know their address or phone number, people have the ability to send a quick message to them voicing their opinion on a specific topic. Even if people did want to contact them through the more traditional methods of letters or calls, social media can make that information more accessible. Although the likelihood of response may be lower, the ease of access could increase the potential for people to

⁴ I went through Twitter accounts and found that in the 115th Congress, only four representatives did not have a Twitter account. In addition, most government agencies have an official Twitter account, and many times the people in higher positions in those agencies have their own accounts. For example, the State Department, Secretary of State, Undersecretaries of State, Assistant Secretaries, Press Secretary, and Ambassadors all have official Twitter accounts.

contact political officials. Since social media reduces the barriers to contacting officials and make it quick and simple, it functions as a facilitator of political participation.

Hypothesis II: Using social media politically increases the likelihood of donating to candidates running for political office.

One of the largest focuses of campaigns is fundraising. Campaigns without enough money often lose to better-funded candidates, and driving donations is a large focus of any campaign. With the advent of social media, these sites have been increasingly used to target donations. Social media accounts and messages can be used to easily send a link to a donation website and quickly appeal for donations. In many campaigns, social media has been used to send appeals for donations during or directly after an event that has invigorated supports, such as sending out donation messages during a debate using something the opposing candidate had just said. The ability of social media to get voters directly involved in the action and to target them right when their emotions are heightened could be a big factor in social media having a positive relationship with donations.

In addition to targeting donors directly, the past decade has seen a rise in the amount of small donations that a campaign raises. Small donations are quickly becoming the new wave of donations for many political candidates and has seen success with candidates Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders. As we saw in 2008 with the Obama campaign it was able to drive large amounts in small donations due to its innovative use of social media to facilitate donation appeals. In the 2016 election, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump were also able to drive small donations through their social media profiles by featuring donation links in Tweets and profiles, as well as making pushes for donations after inflammatory moments in the campaign.

In recent years, the importance of small donations and the ability to target donation appeals has pointed to the possibility that social media could encourage users to donate to campaigns. Social media messages are able to directly target young voters who may not have as much spending power as big donors, but who are enthusiastic about a candidate and can donate quickly and easily using links on social media. These messages are also able to reach older populations that are politically active on social media and also benefit from the newfound ease of donating. Since campaigns are run by money and donations are a key in campaigns, the increasing ease with which social media can facilitate donations could have the effect of increasing users' likelihood of donating.

Hypothesis III: Using social media politically increases the likelihood of engaging in political activities.

In the past, many high-profile political movements have demonstrated an ability to mobilize groups to support certain political goals. Examples such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the 2008 Obama campaign, and the recent Women's March all demonstrate how social media was able to mobilize supporters into action. These movements also garnered attention for their innovative use of social media to amplify information and invigorate groups to mobilize. With the rise of Facebook and Twitter, and their increasing politicization, comes more opportunities for these platforms to act as vectors for political action.

Given the past successes of Facebook and Twitter to assist political movements, social media has been shown to make the communication and planning of political activities easier. Social media's special features, like Facebook events and Twitter hashtags can easily connect people to inform about events happening and invigorate them to participate in these activities.

Social media is also able to build a community of those that share a common goal or interest, creating a sense of shared participation and community belonging. Campaigns have also been able to utilize these features to increase attendance at campaign rallies and events. Given the history of their relationship, I hypothesize that the more someone uses social media, the more likely they are to participate in political activities.

Hypothesis IV: Using social media politically decreases the likelihood of voting.

Voting is an incredibly complex political action, with many complex influences. In the United States, voting occurs frequently, and despite attempts to make it more accessible, there remain significant barriers to voting.⁵ Many factors influence whether a person decides to vote, including the weather, their access to polling stations, or being sick or working on voting day. There are also distinct differences between which groups turn out to vote. Since young people make up a large share of social media users but do not turn out to vote, social media can lead to voter fatigue, and voting is an independent act I hypothesize that social media use and voting have a negative relationship.

Historically, while being the most touted and visible acts in American democracy, voting has only been done by 50 to 58% of the voting age population since 1976.⁶ In addition, age and education play a large role in someone's likelihood to vote, and turnout data shows that as age and level of education increase, so does voter turnout ("Voter Turnout Demographics"). Since

⁵ Voter suppression, registration deadlines, a lack of early or absentee voting options, general apathy, and little understanding of the process all contribute to lower levels of voter turnout.

⁶ This study uses voting age population (VAP), which only takes into account population over 18, rather than voting eligible population (VEP) which only considers those who are able to vote. In 2016, 56% of the VAP cast ballots in the presidential election according to data from the Pew Research Center (Desilver).

young voters are the most likely to use social media politically but the least likely to vote, there does not seem to be a strong indication that the two would have a positive relationship.

Since 2000, less than 65% of the voting eligible population turned out in presidential elections (“National General Election VEP”), but the use of the internet and social media sites has increased. Since the majority of social media users are young, and young people are historically the least likely to turn out to vote, there might be more important factors for voter turnout. While social media can inform about voting procedures and even invigorate voters to go to the polls, 54% of people ages 18 to 29 did not vote in 2016 (File), despite a reported 77% of the population having a social media profile in 2016 (Edison Research). Since a lot of social media users are young (“Social Media Fact Sheet”), the trend of low youth turnout could outweigh social media’s influencing power.

While Obama’s 2008 campaign is discussed for having increased the youth turnout, youth turnout fell again in 2012 (“Young-Adult Voting”). In 2008, social media was a novel tool and could have meant persuasion was more powerful. By 2012 and onwards, however, social media’s increased saturation could decrease its effectiveness when compared to other complex factors that impact voting. This disparity leads me to believe that social media is not as important to voting as it is to other forms of participation.

While social media introduces new ways to spread information about the voting process that may make voters more likely to exercise this right, voters could be suffering from an overload of information that makes them uninterested in politics and voting instead. As campaign cycles become even longer, the news cycle seems constant and fast-paced, and social media exposes us to higher levels of unsought political information, voters may be fatigued

(Walker). Social media has the ability to amplify political news and bombard users with political messages even in situations where users have not sought out that information. Since young people are more likely to use social media and become fatigued, that can also help explain why younger people are less likely to vote. Overexposure to campaign messages online may also increase feelings of annoyance towards a particular candidate and decrease support for them, which leads to a decrease in voting. The barrage of messages on social media, combined with being asked to vote many times, could create a negative relationship between social media and voting.

In addition, I predict this reversal of likelihood by distinguishing voting from the other forms of participation on the basis that it is more individual than collaborative. The other types of participation are collaborative in a way that would benefit from social media's highly communicative and connection-based interface. Participating in a protest is a distinctly group action, and people may be more likely to attend with a group of friends. Donating builds off of collective action to spur further donations and contacting points to a collaborative relationship based on communication of shared opinions and future desires. Voting, however, is a uniquely individual act that is more private and personal. Secret ballots are used to make voting independent, and people might stop to the polls on their way back from work rather than organize an outing to the polls with friends. While voting itself is an act of communication and mass organization, there is a level of disconnect between adding your vote to a tally and visibly protesting or contributing with a community. Voting's inherently private construction prevents it from being a collaborative act in the same way that donating, contacting, and activities are.

The other three forms of political participation are actions that can benefit from the highly collaborative and community-based social media platforms in a way that enhances social media's ability to illicit action. Voting, however, is a more private and personal act whose social media impact might not benefit in the same way from the communicative platforms and where other factors outweigh the influence of social media.

Methodology

To test my hypotheses, I turned to data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). The ANES, considered the "gold standard" (NSF) in American election surveys, is a reputable data source whose thorough methods of surveying enables a broad selection of questions from a large sample. Its mission to "inform explanations of election outcomes by providing data" ("About Us") allows for in-depth analysis of political participation.

ANES Time Series surveys use a combination of face-to-face surveys and, in recent years, web surveys.⁷ Interviews are conducted twice: once in the two months preceding the election, and then again beginning the day after election day. The surveys are lengthy and ask a range of questions from thoughts on terrorism to feelings towards the Speaker of the House.

To build my data set, I used Time Series survey data from 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016. I chose these years to demonstrate the potential effects of social media. In 2004, social media was at the forefront of creation and it wasn't until the 2008 election, with the Obama campaign, that Facebook had the potential to impact participation. With each subsequent national election year,

⁷ In 2012, ANES began using an internet survey in addition to face-to-face surveys in Time Series Studies. (ANES 2012 Codebook)

new social media platforms emerged. Therefore, examining the effects up to 2016 can paint a more complete picture of social media's influence on political participation.

Dependent variables were chosen to demonstrate these effects and were divided into the four modes of participation identified earlier. The questions asked in the surveys measured whether or not people participated in these actions by asking yes or no questions. When choosing these variables, I looked for questions that were consistent across all four years of data and could represent the different acts of political participation.

First, I identified variables that would represent voting: whether or not the person had voted for President, Senate, and House. These questions were all yes or no questions asking whether or not they had voted for the position. After tabulating the data for voting, in all years but 2012 there were no overlaps in voting for another position and not voting for President. For 2012 data, I recoded voting to include the one person who voted for House of Representatives and not President to be included in how many people did or did not vote.

Next, the variable for contacting asked if, "during the past twelve months," the person had "telephoned, written a letter to, or visited a government official to express [their] views on a public issues" with the answer options being yes or no.⁸ To calculate donating: "during an election year people are often asked to make a contribution to support campaigns. Did you give

⁸ In the 2016 Time Series survey, this question was changed to include three separate questions, which I combined into a singular variable to represent contacting in 2016. The questions combined asked if in the past year the person had contacted a "member of the U.S. Senate or U.S. House of Representatives," a "federal elected official, such as a member of Congress or the President, or someone on the staff of such an official," or an "elected official on the state or local level, such as governor, mayor, or member of the state legislature of city council, or someone on the staff of such an elected official." (ANES Codebook 2016)

any money to an individual candidate running for public office” (ANES Codebook 2016) yes or no.

To build the variable on activity, I combined a few questions which asked about activities that would require the person to have dedicated personal time to attend. These questions covered “political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate,” if they had done “work for one of the parties or candidates,” if they had attended a “protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue,”⁹ and attendance at “a meeting about an issue facing your community or schools” (ANES Codebook 2016). All of the questions used to measure activity were yes or no answers.

To build my independent variable, I used question on the surveys that asked specifically about internet use. Within the ANES survey, questions asking about social media specifically were not available until 2012. Instead, I used a question about internet usage to view information about campaigns. Since social media exists on the internet, it is fair to assume that many of those who used the internet could have also used social media platforms. In the base model, the question used was “did you read, watch, or listen to any information about the campaign for President on the Internet” (ANES Codebook 2016). In model b, the question was how frequently they used the internet in that way on a scale from none, a few, several, and a good many times (ANES Codebook 2008). This frequency question was asked beginning in 2008. In 2012 and 2016, a question about Twitter and Facebook was introduced. The question for model c asked if

⁹ The time period specified for this question varied from year to year, asking either “have you ever,” “in the last 4 years have you,” and “in the last 12 months have you.” Since the question remains the same, I used the variables despite the different time specifications (ANES Codebooks 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016)

they had “sent a message on Facebook or Twitter about a political issue” (ANES Codebook 2012).

For control variables, I took key expectations from Medvic’s *Campaigns and Elections* and Kyle Dodson’s “The Return of the American Voter” to identify behaviors to control for. There are certain expectations of behavior that Medvic outlines: we expect older citizens to be more likely to participate, those that identify strongly as a Republican or Democrat are more likely to participate, those with certain levels of education participate more. We also expect younger citizens to be less likely to vote, but more likely to have a social media account. Dodson wrote further about the growing relevance of party polarization in elections and the rapid increase of polarization in the turn of the century. Since strength of party identification is believed to be a significant factor in vote choice, it can also have an impact on enthusiasm for other types of participation, as well as an increase in social media use to connect with other partisans. These assumptions are key to developing a model that control for factors that could affect the relationship between participation and social media use.

Using this research, I used gender, race, age, education, strength of partisanship, and year as my controls. Age is likely to have an effect due to differences in how age groups vote, although PEW suggests that younger people might be more likely to attend rallies or marches. Younger people are also more likely to have accounts on a social media site (Social Media Fact Sheet), which makes controlling for age important to separate out the relationship between participation and social media use. Education levels, race, and gender were also controlled for. Degree of partisanship was measured in the survey on a seven-point left to right scale, beginning with strong Democrat and ending with strong Republican. Year was also controlled for using

i.year. Controlling for year this way allows us to visualize this as a function of participation rather than a function of the population's increasing access to the internet.

% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site, by age

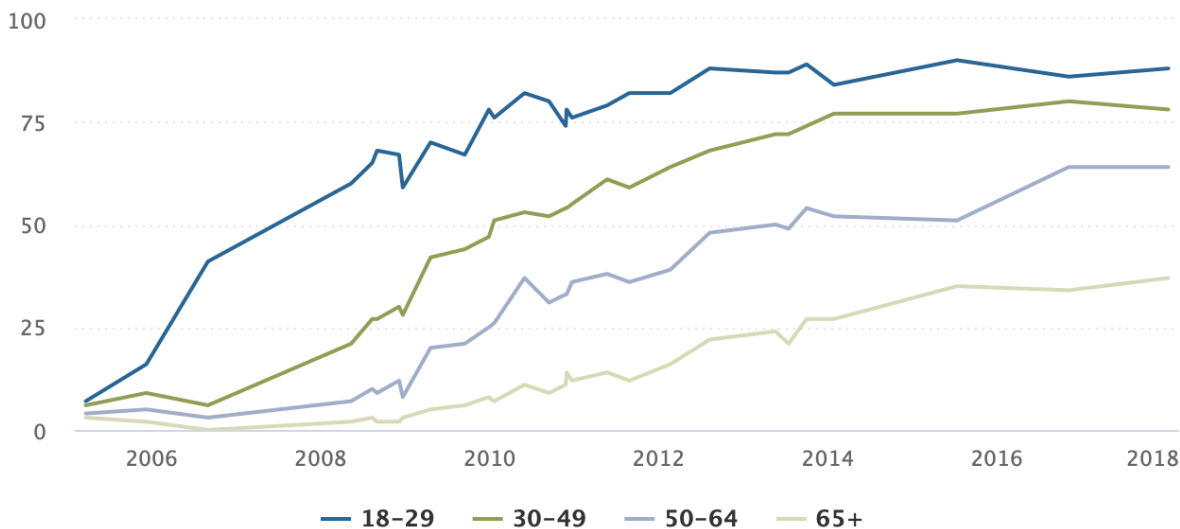


Figure 2 PEW: Percent of American adults on social media by age. ("Social Media Fact Sheet")

My base model analyzes general use of the internet to view campaign information against the four modes of participation. Since the internet variable is a yes or no question, I ran logits:

```
logit contact internet gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
logit donate internet gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
logit active internet gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
logit vote internet gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

Model B, which looks at frequency of internet use, used a regression:

```
reg contact netamount gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
reg donate netamount gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
reg active netamount gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
reg vote netamount gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

Finally, model C looked at Twitter and Facebook usage in 2012 and 2016. Since the independent variable is a yes or no question, I ran a logit:

```
logit contact twitter gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
logit donate twitter gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
logit active twitter gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

```
logit vote twitter gender age race education partystrength i.year [pweight=weights]
```

Though I considered combining the four participatory variables into one participation variable, the variables were so different that an overall participation variable would not have added to the study.

Results

Using STATA, I ran four models of participation types as well as three models with different independent variables. The base model was a logit measuring bimodal internet use across all four years, model b measured frequency of internet from 2008 to 2016 with a regression, and model c represented use of Twitter and Facebook between years 2012 and 2016 with a logit. On the tables, an asterisk represents a P value below .05.

The first model looks at contacting. I hypothesized that use of social media would increase the likelihood of contacting a political official because of the ease with which social

media can inform of numbers and addresses, as well as the potential to facilitate contacting through direct messages or interactions through retweets and comments. Across the base model and models B and C, contacting and internet have a positive coefficient, which indicates a positive relationship between internet use and contacting. The models show that using internet generally, more frequently, and sending Twitter and Facebook messages increases the likelihood of contacting a public official, supporting my hypothesis.

MODEL 1: CONTACT	BASE MODEL: INTERNET (LOGIT)	MODEL B: FREQUENCY (REGRESSION)	MODEL C: MESSAGE (LOGIT)
INTERNET	.6826* (.0759)	.0335* (.0067)	.9510* (.0840)
AGE	.0183* (.0019)	.0031* (.0003)	.0200* (.0023)
GENDER	-.1628* (.0751)	-.0199 (.0136)	-.2600* (.0983)
RACE	-.0033 (.0082)	-.0001 (.0016)	-.0023 (.0069)
EDUCATION	.3279* (.0312)	.0491* (.0057)	.2955* (.0365)
PARTY STRENGTH	-.0341* (.0151)	-.0064* (.0029)	-.0342 (.0177)
2008	-.0897 (.1211)		
2012	-.1981 (.1234)	-.0169 (.0240)	
2016	-.2174 (.1082)	-.0701* (.0190)	.1086 (.1204)
R²	.0566	.4049	.0613
PEARSON CHI²	308.12	58.66	233.31
OBSERVATIONS	9,012	5,762	6,253

The second model looks at donating. I hypothesized that using social media politically would increase the likelihood of money to a political candidate. This is because social media can provide direct links to donation sites, as well as time messages to when they would have the biggest emotional impact. Additionally, the rise of small donations in the last decade means that

even younger social media users, who may not have significant cash funds, are able to donate a small amount of money quickly and easily. On this, the model shows a positive relationship between donating and social media use, which supports the hypothesis.

MODEL 2: DONATE	BASE MODEL: INTERNET (LOGIT)	MODEL B: FREQUENCY (REGRESSION)	MODEL C: MESSAGE (LOGIT)
INTERNET	.8428* (.0976)	.0311* (.0054)	1.0750* (.1021)
AGE	.0324* (.0026)	.0034* (.0003)	.0347* (.0032)
GENDER	-.0840 (.0957)	-.0142 (.0113)	-.3085* (.1248)
RACE	-.0040 (.0085)	-.0001 (.0009)	-.0059 (.0083)
EDUCATION	.3843* (.0404)	.0379* (.0047)	.3439* (.0474)
PARTY STRENGTH	-.0772* (.0208)	-.0118* (.0025)	-.0828* (.0247)
2008	.2215 (.1591)		
2012	-.0631 (.1594)	-.0398* (.0198)	
2016	-.0069 (.1437)	-.0671* (.0161)	.1086 (.1204)
R²	.0872	.3289	.0931
PEARSON CHI²	201.29	53.56	155.99
OBSERVATIONS	9,020	5,772	6,262

My hypothesis surrounding activity postulated that using social media would increase the likelihood of someone engaging in an activity. The features of social media offer a direct way to inform users about events and invigorating them to attend. Over the past decade we have seen social media as an organizational tool for bringing together rallies and demonstrations. All three models indicated a positive relationship between activity and social media use, which supports my hypothesis.

MODEL 3: ACTIVE	BASE MODEL: INTERNET (LOGIT)	MODEL B: FREQUENCY (REGRESSION)	MODEL C: MESSAGE (LOGIT)
INTERNET	.5232* (.0631)	.0424* (.0076)	.6840* (.0747)
AGE	.0066* (.0016)	.0016* (.0004)	.0086* (.0020)
GENDER	.0939 (.0644)	.0268 (.0162)	.0875 (.0852)
RACE	.0076 (.0046)	.0021 (.0014)	.0072 (.0046)
EDUCATION	.4068* (.0268)	.0788* (.0062)	.3725* (.0311)
PARTY STRENGTH	-.0609* (.0134)	-.0153* (.0033)	-.0419* (.0161)
2008	.2258* (.1028)		
2012	-.4461* (.1091)	-.1852* (.0263)	
2016	-.1043 (.0954)	-.1706* (.0214)	.3107* (.0861)
R²	.0689	.4604	.0627
PEARSON CHI²	270.56	66.06	254.06
OBSERVATIONS	9,010	5,767	6,259

My hypothesis was that social media use would decrease the likelihood of voting, since voting is an activity that not many young people, who are a large audience of social media, vote anyways.

The model, however, indicated a positive relationship between internet use and voting, disproving my hypothesis.

MODEL 4: VOTE	BASE MODEL: INTERNET (LOGIT)	MODEL B: FREQUENCY (REGRESSION)	MODEL C: MESSAGE (LOGIT)
INTERNET	.6676* (.0843)	.0283* (.0064)	.8946* (.0977)
AGE	.0387* (.0024)	.0051* (.0003)	.0388* (.0024)
GENDER	.0938 (.1005)	.0215 (.0133)	.0883 (.1012)
RACE	-.0026 (.0047)	-.0022 (.0013)	-.0036* (.0048)
EDUCATION	.4362* (.0268)	.0630* (.0062)	.4913 (.0311)

	(.0384)	(.0052)	(.0384)
PARTY STRENGTH	-.0202 (.0172)	-.0018 (.0024)	-.0166* (.0384)
2008	-.8724 (.8414)		
2012	-4.7512* (.7394)	-.1393 (.0156)	
2016	-4.9994* (.7388)	-.2276 (.0098)	-.3029* (.0969)
R²	.2135	.3616	.1222
PEARSON CHI²	128.57	73.10	81.56
OBSERVATIONS	8,431	5,659	6,265

Overall, the models showed that there is a positive relationship between internet and social media use and participation in these types of political actions.

Discussion

From the results of the statistical analysis, I conclude that using social media politically increases the likelihood that a person will contact a political official, donate money to a political campaign, participate in political activities like rallies, and vote. In each of the models, the regressions resulted in positive coefficients with P values less than 0.05. Therefore, for all modes of political activity, using social media politically was a significant predictor.

My hypotheses concerning contacting, donating, and activities were all proven. My hypothesis about voting, however, was disproven. Instead, voting follows the general positive trend of the other modes of participation. I did not think that voting would be affected in the same way as other forms of participation, but voting does correlate with social media use.

In the future, research should be expanded by looking at qualitative research methods to supplement the quantitative data. Focus groups, individual interviews, and a more specific survey could be conducted to learn more about individual responses to social media. While

looking at the numbers indicates that social media increases the likelihood for political participation, it does not provide the depth and further specification that is need when looking to adjust to the social media environment. Learning more about individual reactions to social media, as well as understanding how people believe they are affected by social media, can lead to a deeper understanding of the effects of social media. Personal accounts and perspectives would also bring further depth to the research and help explain the correlation in a meaningful and actionable way.

One of the weaknesses of the statistical study was the inability to focus questions specifically on social media platforms, and further research would benefit from specificity. Since the variables I used were taken from ANES survey data, the questions asked did not capture the phenomenon of social media between 2004 and 2016. However, the internet and social media are increasingly intertwined, and it is clear that the message people are getting online are tied to how they participate in politics. In future surveys, more specific questions regarding social media would paint a clearer picture. In the future, I see more survey questions being asked about specific social media platforms, as further research into its impacts will be sought after.

Conclusion

As the importance and frequency of social media use continues to rise, understanding how it can affect political participation will be a key moving forward. After the 2016 election, questions arose as to the ability of social media to spread misinformation in ways that negatively impacted the political sphere. As campaigns try to adopt social media strategies, they are even more aware of the possibility for distortion since social media is now accepted to have played a large role in recent elections.

As the models show, using the internet and social media politically increases the likelihood of participating in all four areas of politics. This means that campaign strategies especially will continue to capitalize on this influence, and that the public will increasingly try to monitor its effect on them. Clearly, the rise of the internet in the last thirty years, and the introduction of social media in the 21st century have changed the political landscape significantly, and further research into how and why social media influences decisions will be interesting.

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