Social Media's Effects on Voting

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Abstract

Technology such as the internet become integral aspects of people's lives; it is how they get news, stay in touch with friends, and entertain themselves. Social media is unarguably changing the way many Americans spend their time, but how is it affecting their voting behavior? My hypothesis is that the manner in which people spend time on social media sites will determine whether or not they are likely to vote. Those who are actively engaging in politics online will be more likely to vote than those who do not, regardless of the number of hours they spend on social media. All of the campaign advertisements in the world do not matter if someone is not paying attention to them. According to a small survey of Indiana State University students, this appears to be true. Students who spent more hours on social media were not more likely to vote, but those who reported observing higher levels of political content were.

Introduction

In every generation, there is technology that fundamentally changes the way people live. Whether due to the use of vaccines or the average American family owning a television, these changes affect most of the population in life-altering ways. According to 2017 data, people worldwide spend an average of 135 minutes on social media every day, a number that has been steadily increasing with each passing year (Statista 2019). There may be preconceived ideas that this time on the internet is disproportionately spent by young people, who are more likely to embrace new technology. However, 69% of American adults use Facebook, with 74% of them visiting the site at least once per day (Perrin and Anderson 2019).

There is no question that Americans of all ages have embraced social media as a form of entertainment, and for some, a form of news. As early as 2008, almost a quarter of voters were learning about political campaigns via the internet (Kohut et al. 2008). Since the 2008 election, American politicians have increasingly embraced social media as a way to gain direct access to their voters, fundraise, and advertise to millions of people. Consistent social media posts are used as free advertising. From one subreddit-distributed link alone, Bernie Sanders fundraised $13 million during his 2016 bid for the presidency (Stewart 2019). In the first half of 2019, Donald Trump's reelection campaign spent over $11.1 million on Facebook and Google advertisements (Wong 2019). Social media platforms like Facebook have been effectively used to engage a politician's base and acquire donations, but whether it is an effective way to encourage potential voters who may otherwise sit out is unclear. Individuals on social media are seeing political advertisements, whether they actively search them out or not.

Young people, especially, have embraced social media as a means to engage in certain forms of political participation. In spring of 2018, more than 800 marches were planned across

the U.S. alone by the March for Our Lives organization that was started by a group of teens from Southern Florida after their school experienced a mass shooting (Correal, et al. 2018). The students in the organization have become national symbols, taking part in televised town halls with one-time presidential hopeful Marco Rubio and other well-recognized names.

But does increased social media use affect the likelihood of voting? My hypothesis is that increased social media use will coincide with a decrease in voting when the social media use is passive, but will increase when the social media use is more active. For the purpose of this paper, active or passive use of social media sites is measured by the level of political content an individual observes or notices. My dependent variables are the amount of time passively spent on sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram and whether individuals spend time actively engaged in political online activities, and my independent variable is whether or not the individual votes.

Theory

The United States lags behind similarly developed countries when it comes to voter turnout. This has been true for decades; between 1972 and 1980, 54% of eligible citizens voted in elections, while the average of 20 other developed countries was 80% of eligible citizens (Powel 1986). What causes low voter turnout is complicated, as Americans tend to participate in politics in other ways at much higher rates, which is usually an indicator of higher rates of voting. For example, significantly more Americans report having discussions about politics, trying to convince another to vote a certain way, or working for a political party or campaign (Powel 1986). There are many complex reasons for the United States' lower voter turnout, including administrative barriers, America's type of election system, and the political socialization of most would-be voters (Timpone 1998; Bowler, Brockington, & Donovan 2001;

Linimon & Joslyn 2002). But how has the increased use of social media sites affected citizens' decision to show up to vote or not?

Scholars acknowledge that advancements in technology likely change the way and rates at which people participate in politics on at least some levels. Some believed that watching television was consuming so much of Americans' time that they no longer had the access time to be as civically engaged (Putnam 1995). However, Putnam's study was only concerned with civic engagement as a whole, which he measured with the number of social groups an individual participated in. So, while television appears to broadly have a very slight negative affect on certain forms of political participation, increased television viewing does not having a significant effect on most forms (Norris 1996). In fact, news and public broadcasting programs actually increased every type of political participation when looked at specifically.

The advertisements from candidates also have an effect, regardless of the program being watched. For example, those who live in politically competitive television markets are exposed to higher numbers of presidential television ads, and Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004) found that those individuals who watched more television in competitive states were up to 10% more likely to vote. Despite the huge amounts of money politicians spend on television advertising, it appears to account for a small fraction of the differences in turnout between states (Krasno and Green 2008). Television has been a major part of American culture for decades, yet there is still debate about the effects it has on our political process.

Social media use could follow a similar pattern, where certain people engage more with the political process after spending time on social media. There have been high hopes in some political circles that the internet, and the social media sites born there, would allow individuals to participate in politics at higher rates more easily, creating a renewal of interest in civic

engagement (Reeher 2002; Norris 1999). Social media sites give politicians a platform that is easy to find for anyone with an internet connection. According to the rational choice theory, individuals must weight how much time they have to "invest" in any given activity, and social media significantly decreases the investment of time necessary to find political information (Bimber 2001). If the rational choice theory is accurate, easier access to information should increase the number of people invested in finding it.

Social media sites have the potential to impact voter turnout in the U.S. on a major scale, based on other theories as well. If individuals who see more political ads on television are more likely to vote, it would be logical to assume that those who see online advertisements would be more likely to vote as well (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004). In general, people also appear to vote at higher levels when surrounded by people similar to themselves (Giles and Dantico 1982). Through online forums, Facebook groups, and shared posts, social media sites could allow voters to feel the same as those who are surrounded by similar people geographically. Of course, these groups involve a more active form of internet use than many people engage in on a daily basis.

The problem with studying social media appears when scholars refuse to recognize the different ways that individuals spend their time online (Bode 2012; Kuru and Pasek 2016). Some social media users are passive, simply scrolling through their timelines and absorbing content. However, other users are actively engaging with friends, starting discussions, forming groups and spreading information. It is possible that active users have increased levels of political engagement, while passive users have decreasing levels of political engagement. However, many surveys do not distinguish between the different types of social media use, as it complicates the matter.

Many internet users browse platforms in a manner that is much more comparable with "soft news" than "hard news," if comparing internet use to watching television. In television, individuals that consume "soft news" do seem to choose candidates that align more with their actual views (Baum & Jamison 2006). This could mean that individuals that only gained political knowledge from social media in passive ways, such as through campaign advertisements or the political posts of friends, may increase their ability to vote accurately, though not necessarily increase their likelihood of voting. Social media sites can act as a valuable source of information, but those who are not already actively interested in utilizing it to increase their participation do not seem to be persuaded through their passive use.

Not every scholar has been as optimistic about the impact social media, or the internet more broadly, will have on voters. Bimber (2001) found that those who were using the internet as a source of political information were less interested in politics in general and were not any more likely to vote, even if they had spent time intentionally searching for political information online. Of course, this study was made when the internet was still relatively new to many people and before modern social media sites existed, so new internet users may have been searching for political information primarily as a sort of test.

More recently, Bode (2012) found that individuals who used Facebook were not necessarily influenced by the amount of time they spent on the social media site, but what kind of activities they participated in. She found that "intensity" of the time spent on Facebook was correlated with a higher likelihood of voting in the 2008 presidential election, while length of time spent on Facebook was negatively correlated with voting. It is difficult to know if an already-present interest in politics results in more intense social media use, or if intense social media use makes individuals more likely to vote, especially when studying adults.

If social media use was going to affect any group at higher rates, it would likely be young people. They have used social media from a younger age and view it as a regular part of life. Young people do use social media at much higher rates than other groups; however, they may not be embracing it as a form of political engagement that it has the capability of being, at least not yet in regards to voting. Keating and Melis (2017) found that while small groups of young people were using social media sites to engage in political actions, the majority of young people never use the internet with that intention. Social media is an excellent way to share and learn political information for those who are already interested, but not a great place to foster new interest.

Social media sites have been accused of fostering political polarization. It appears that people spending their time online at least perceive there to be more disagreement between political factions in general than those who do not spend a significant amount of time online (Barnidge 2017). On the surface, more disagreement between people may be seen as a negative aspect of social media. However, when adolescents are exposed to political conflict, the results can be interesting. Pacheco (2008) found that adolescents raised in battleground states had higher rates of consistent voting later in their adult lives. Social media could mimic these effects on a national scale, so it would be as if every adolescent who spent a significant amount of time online would be watching the same amount of discourse as those adolescents who live in battleground states.

Methodology

Does increased social media use affect the likelihood of voting? My hypothesis is that increased social media use will not coincide with an increase in voting when the social media use is passive, but will increase when the social media use is more active, regardless of the actual

length in hours spent on social media. My independent variables are the amount of time spent on sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram and whether individuals spend time actively engaged in political online activities, and my dependent variable is whether or not the individual votes. A person's political activity level on social media sites is observed by the amount of political content they perceive. It is assumed that those who report observing higher levels of political content are more actively engaging with finding that content. A person's voting activity is measured in two ways: whether or not they voted in Indiana's recent city elections, and whether or not they plan to vote in the 2020 presidential election.

This information was obtained through a survey made for the purpose of this paper. Respondents were primarily from six different college classes at Indiana State University: two 100-level English classes, a 300-level English class, a 400-level English class, and two 300-level Political Science classes, with a small number of respondents being asked randomly in public areas around ISU. There were 110 surveys recorded, with the majority being completely filled out. The surveys were handed out at the beginning of each class after a brief explanation of the project. Responses were voluntary and anonymous. Printed out surveys were used to encourage higher rates of completion.

The question about voting in the local elections included an option of "I do not recall" and "I am an international student" and the question about voting plans for 2020 gave the options "probably" and "I am an international student" in order to prevent false answers. The questions about social media use were asked using an ordinal scale, from "Up to 1 hour" to "More than 5 hours" for the time spent on social media, and "Very little" to "Very High" for the question about political content observed. Both of these questions had an "I do not use social media" option. Every respondent was given the opportunity to list the five political people or

organizations they observed most frequently, and to put the most noticed person or organization. Because these were written answers instead of multiple choice, some answers needed to be interpreted by the author. Often, only first or last names were reported, and occasionally only a nickname, but the majority were still very clear. Demographic information was asked about political party identification, race, and gender.

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Data Analysis

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Because the surveys were distributed exclusively among college students, there was a danger of being little variation in the data. The demographic questions were asked partially to ensure that there was variation. The respondents were more likely to be women than men, 58.18% women and 40.18% male. This is partially caused by the 300- and 400- level English classes surveyed, which frequently do not have a normal gender ratio. Race was closer to normal for ISU, with 70% of the respondents being white, 21% being black, and over 8% of the respondents choosing another option. The respondents had a slightly abnormal distribution of

Party ID Distribution   **Amount of political content observed on social media**

Strong Republican	4
Republican	9
Lean Republican	12
Independent	25
Lean Democratic	20
Democrat	17
Strong Democrat	17
Total	104

Legend: Do not use, Very little, Little, Moderate, High, Very High
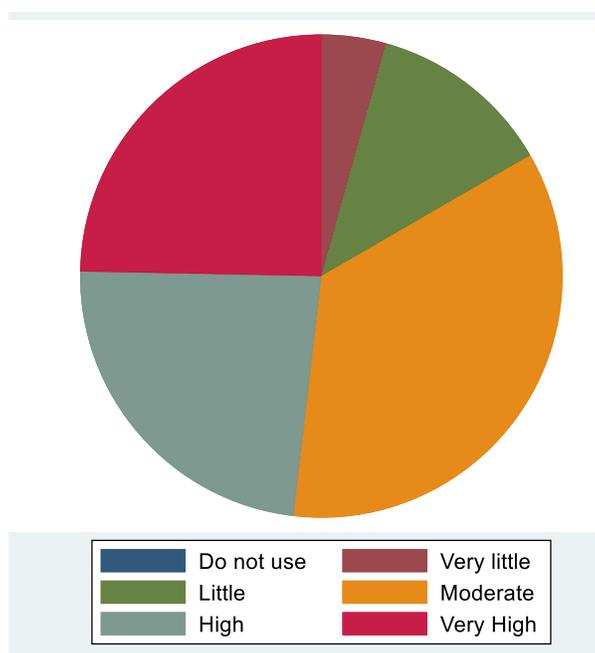
party identification, with respondents being more likely to identify as a Democrat than Republican. Because of the divisive political times, I hypothesize that some conservative college students are averse to identifying with the Republican Party even in an anonymous survey. There was also adequate variation in the amount of time spent on social media and the amount of politics observed.

All 110 respondents reported an estimate of how often they spend on social media every day. Using STATA, a cross-tabulation of hours spent on social media and whether or not they plan to vote in the 2020 election was performed with a chi-square. There is not a strong correlation between the hours spent on social media with the likelihood of them planning to vote in the upcoming election with the p-value of .261. This is a relatively small sample size, so with more respondents there might be slightly more correlation appearing between the two outcomes.

Time on social media and 2020 voting plans

Do you plan on voting in 2020?

Social media use	No	Probably	Yes	Total
Not on social media	1	2	2	5
Up to 1 hour	2	1	12	15
1-3 hours	4	8	26	38
3-5 hours	4	5	26	35
More than 5 hours	3	7	7	17
Total	14	23	73	110

Pearson chi2(8) = 10.0519   Pr = 0.261

The results of this table confirm part of the hypothesis of this paper: more hours spent on social media do not lead to people voting more often than those who spent few hours or those who do not use social media at all

The same test was even less interesting when a cross tabulation is performed using the time spent on social media per day and whether or not they voted in the Indiana city elections in 2019. The p-value for the similar test was .306. As a public university in the state, Indiana State University's student identification cards work as a valid form of identification for voting in elections. All students, except international students, are technically allowed to vote as long as they live in Indiana, and ISU had voting booths on campus, which were well-utilized during the 2018 midterm election, with some students waiting hours to vote. Despite this, only 19 of the 110 respondents reported voting in the local elections, a small percentage that is likely still higher than the average of students due to the two political science classes surveyed. Of course, Indiana has a registration deadline that discourages many young people from voting, especially during local elections. Organizations on campus still attempt to register voters, but push less aggressively than during larger elections.

According to the hypothesis of this paper, a cross tabulation of the levels of political content the respondents observed should be more highly correlated with whether or not the respondent votes or plans on voting. In order to most accurately portray this, respondents who reported no social media use were taken out of the calculations. While "no social media use" as an average is relevant when looking at the length of time spent on social media, it is not relevant when looking at the amount of political content they see on social media. Unsurprisingly, only three of the respondents fell into this category. The p-value was 0.019 when those who do not use social media were included, and the p-value was 0.028 when they were removed. The effect

of removing one small category was larger than expected. The lower p-value in the more

accurate cross tabulation may be due to the slightly lower sample size.

Political content observed on social media and 2020 voting plans

Do you plan on voting in 2020?

Levels of political content	No	Probably	Yes	Total
Very little	5	4	5	14
Little	4	6	10	20
Moderate	3	8	27	38
High	1	2	16	19
Very High	1	1	14	16
Total	14	21	72	107

Pearson chi2(10) = 17.2419   Pr = 0.028

With either version of this chart, those who observe higher levels of political information

on social media are more likely to plan to vote in the 2020 election. This can be interpreted in

two ways, one that agrees with the hypothesis and one that does not. Those who are observing

"High" and "Very High" levels of political content on their social media feeds may be more

actively participating in politics by choosing to follow political figures, journalists, and

organizations. This heightened level of political information may be convincing individuals of

the importance of voting and encouraging their political participation. On the other hand, those

who are observing "High" or "Very High" levels of political participation may already have

decided to vote beforehand, and are using social media as a chance to inform themselves. Both of

these possibilities are positive when it comes to the rate of informed voters, but only one truly agrees with the hypothesis.

Even those who reported seeing lower levels of political content on their social media feeds often listed individuals who they noticed the most often; 93 of the 110 respondents reported an individual person or organization they noticed most frequently. The vast majority of answers were predictable: politicians, political candidates, journalists, and news organizations. Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Barack Obama were all common answers in the list of five, as were Elizabeth Warren and other 2020 candidates. Of the individual the respondent viewed as the most active political person or organization on social media, the most popular answer was overwhelmingly the current president.

Respondents rate of reporting Trump as most active political person on social media

Most active figure/org	Frequency	Percentage
Trump	58	62.37
Not Trump	35	37.63
Total	93	100

The respondents who identified as "Leaning Democrat," "Democrat," or "Strong Democrat" consisted of 51.93% of the survey, yet 62.37% of respondents reported Donald Trump as the political person they observed most on social media. Several respondents wrote "eww" or "I don't agree with him though" next to his name. It appears safe to assume that many of these people are not actively seeking out his posts, but are observing them anyway. This is relevant to the type of content respondents witness on their social media feeds. It is not just news

organizations, campaigns, and politicians they follow intentionally; it is also people they disagree with and possibly even individuals who they are actively trying to avoid.

Conclusion

A survey of Indiana State University students tentatively agrees with the hypothesis: the way an individual spends time on social media impacts whether or not they vote more than the length of time they spend on social media. The amount of political content respondents observed on their social media feeds was correlated with a higher likelihood of voting, while the number of hours they spent each day on social media was not. This agrees with Norris' 1996 study regarding the way television impacts political participation and with Bodes' 2012 study regarding the way time spent on Facebook impacts individual political participation. The intensity of the activity matters, not the duration of time spent. Those who spend their time watching public interest or news stories and those who observe high levels of political content on social media are more likely to vote than those who spend more hours watching non-political television or observe low levels of political content online.

This is an especially important research topic in regards to young individuals, as the majority of the respondents were. Young people are reporting spending more than five hours every day on various social media sites. As Keating and Melis (2017) found, a small number of young people are utilizing social media with the intent of participating in political discussions, but many use social media at extreme rates but never engage with politics. It is important to find what encourages some young people to engage and not others. This is of interest not only to politicians attempting to engage young people, but to any individual who is trying to further their cause with the large number of young people who are not engaging with various aspects of the political process.

Aspects of this research design could be improved for further study. 66.36% of respondents reported planning to vote in 2020, and 20.91% reported that they would "probably" vote. Even during a presidential election year, this rate of voting would be significantly higher than expected from an average group of college students. It is possible that the results are skewed by the types of classes surveyed, or that the 2020 election being farther away makes the respondents more optimistic than they would be just a month or two before the election. Giving an option of "undecided" instead of "probably" would potentially result in more predictable rates of reported voting.

The intensity of time spent on social media could also be reported in a larger variety of ways. Due to the time-sensitive nature of this project, it would have been difficult to ask more than one page of questions. However, if respondents were asked about whether or not they actively decided to follow the individuals they listed, whether they participate in conversations on social media sites frequently, and whether they share or retweet the political content they observe, a clearer picture of the type of time they spend on social media could be observed. With access to older populations, a comparison could even be drawn between those who have always been use to social media and those who may be more reluctant to use it.

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