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How Social Media Affects Political Beliefs and Movements

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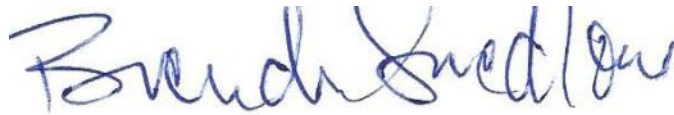
How Social Media Affects Political Beliefs and Movements

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

How Social Media Affects Political Beliefs & Movements

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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With Honors

Department Of

Political Science

By

Alyssa Anderson

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Abstract

This project aims to assess how social media influences young adults' political beliefs and movements. Social media is prominently used through the ages of 18-29 and plays a key role in intellectual development. Engagement online has increased within the last few years discussing topics like politics, COVID-19, and social movements. With the help of social media, young adults feel more empowered and informed by sharing political content. Voter turnout, civic engagement, and participation in social movements have increased with the informative content now available on all social media platforms. In this paper, I assess how social media has affected political beliefs and movements for young adults. The literature reveals that social media has increased engagement in social movements and shapes political beliefs.

Introduction

Over the last few years, social media has affected how young adults hold their political views and how they involve themselves in social movements. The increase in social media use helps stimulate more conversation among young adults, including political conversations. The internet provides young adults with so much information that was not available years ago. Anyone can receive live news through social media about anything around the world. This has pushed young adults to become more aware and educated on political issues. Social media has created many platforms for people to become political leaders and activists in these last few years. According to political scientist Dr. Michael P. McDonald at the University of Florida, voter turnout for the demographic age of 18-29, was 40% in 2016 and climbed to 50% in 2020 (electproject.org 2021). This shows that young adults are taking power and expressing what they believe in, and as this paper will demonstrate, their increased political influence has everything to do with social media.

Throughout the years, political figures would often express that there is not enough involvement from adolescents when it comes to voting and having an opinion on political issues. Now, social media has given college students a platform to freely express these opinions on political conflicts, and show what they truly believe in. Social media is the primary source of news for college students and directly affects their political views and involvement.

Methodology

To answer my research question of how social media has affected political beliefs and movements, I conducted a literature review. I chose 15 sources varying from peer-reviewed articles to studies reached through Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, and Statista. I

narrowed my search to sources within the last ten years to study trends of social engagement. I used search terms such as “politics”, “social media”, “social movements”, “activism”, “adolescents”, and “engagement”.

Literature Review

Social Media Usage

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, now have adapted to mobile devices to make it possible for people to share information about their lives with a wide audience, and millions of people are actively embracing this new form of communication (Swigger 2013). It has changed how the world receives and sends information. Users on social media sites generate content, share it, and comment on what their fellow users produce. These sites are designed to encourage users to publish photos, personal information, and comments about their lives. People were not able to do this a decade ago, but this shift in behavior means that more Americans, particularly younger adults, are living their lives publicly (Swigger 2013).

Ever since social media like Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram has become a norm in our society, young adults use them every day. The majority of 18 to 24-year-olds report using the apps Instagram (76%), Snapchat (75%), or TikTok (55%) (Anderson & Auxier 2021). This suggests that content shown on these sites will be targeted toward this specific age group. Since young adults are constantly exposed to new information through these sites, it becomes more difficult not to be influenced by the information they receive. It also represents a large change in social norms that affects fundamental values and perceptions.

There are benefits to social media usage by young adults. It allows them to create online identities, communicate with others, and build social networks to which they do not have access

in the real world. Adolescents also use social media for entertainment and self-expression. The platforms can expose teens to current events, allow them to interact across geographic barriers, and teach them about various subjects (Mayo Clinic Staff 2022). This relationship with social media is only significant with the youngest generation of Americans, suggesting that online socialization may play a key role in intellectual development and maturation (Swigger 2013).

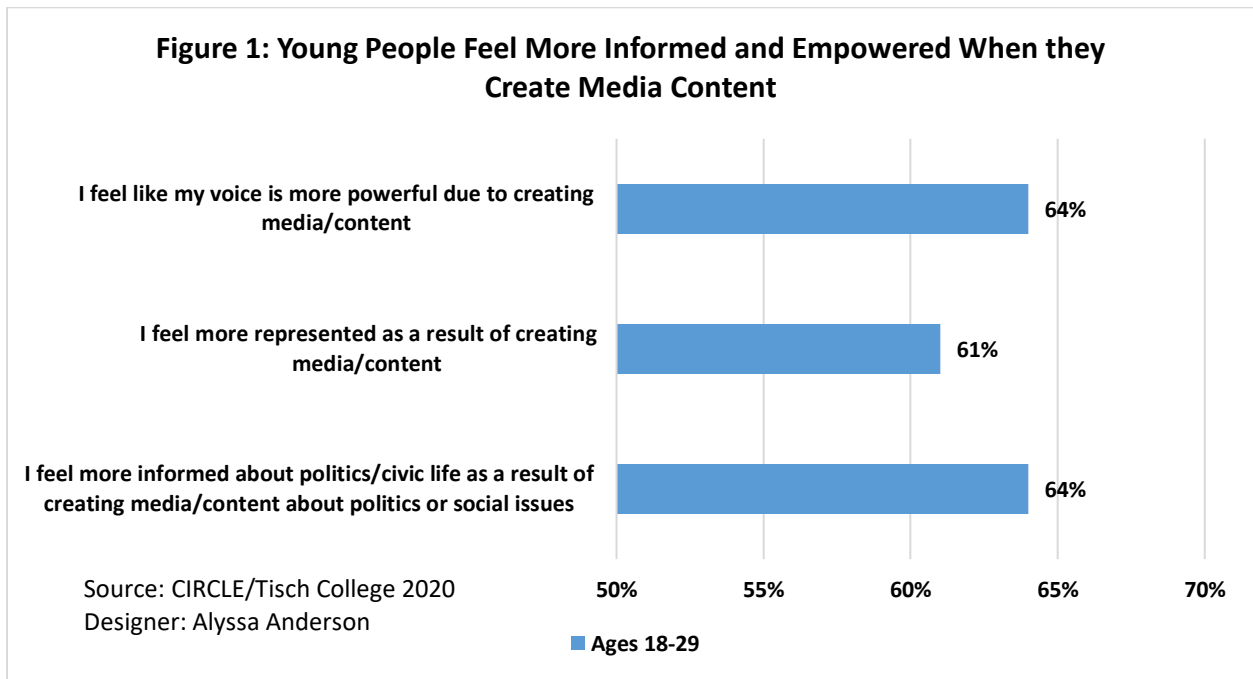


Figure 1 represents a pre-election survey that CIRCLE/Tisch College took in 2020 that shows how adults aged 18-29 feel more informed and empowered when they create media content. Over 60% of young adults felt powerful, represented, and informed when creating social content. There were some differences by age in how often people participate in certain types of civic engagement on social media. The youngest adults (18-19 years old) were 10 percentage points more likely than adults aged 20-29 to have created and shared an image, GIF, or video to bring awareness to a social or political issue that they care about (Belle Booth 2021). This shows

that the differences in points are related to the social media platforms that young people of different ages use.

Overall, the usage of social media has become a part of young adults and adolescents' development and is here to stay. Information is now at a click of a button, and everyone wants to share what they are up in the world.

Social Media & Politics

Social media plays an essential role in creating environmental factors on par with socioeconomic status or familial factors that shape political development, particularly when it comes to norms about the private and public sphere (Swigger 2013). The popular trends that are seen on these sites may influence young adults to follow them, especially political trends. Social media can be a critical space for young people's civic development. It provides a range of avenues for media creation and consumption, creating opportunities for diverse youth to engage with social and political issues (Belle Booth 2021). This opens the door for young adults to be able to share what they want about issues and discuss them. Increased social media use may accompany more exposure to political information that only solidifies existing partisan biases, leading to even more polarization between those with differing partisan attitudes (Klein & Robison 2020). This shows that young adults may feel strongly about certain political views because of the extreme polarization of the information being spread.

Young adults are more likely to be exposed to online political content that is ideologically closer to their political views than to opposing political ideologies. Recent research was done by Bakshy et al. (2015) to study the exposure to ideologically diverse content on Facebook using data on the sharing behavior of over 10 million users. They show that people do

encounter less political content aligned with opposing ideologies than with their own. The authors show that this is due both to Facebook's algorithm of presenting news feeds to users and to the fact that users themselves are less likely to share cross-cutting content with their friends. This may encourage young adults to only stick to what they believe in because they are not being exposed to opposing political content. The only way to receive opposing ideologies is if someone on their friends' list has different views than them. The tendency to form links with like-minded people, is a very important reason users have limited exposure to the political content of opposing ideologies.

Social media has low barriers to entry and relies on user-generated content. Low entry barriers make the gatekeeping of the spread of political information much less effective, allowing new entrants previously sidelined by the political establishment (Enikolopov et al. 2020). Content from all over the world is spread, and that can a lot of misinformation among young adults that do not fact-check all of their sources. False stories on Twitter, for example, spread significantly faster and more broadly than true ones, and the wider distribution of false stories also makes them more profitable for social media platforms (Schleffer 2021). This shows that young people can spread political misinformation easier since the barriers are so low, and may believe in the wrong things. Fake news has gained prevalence in recent years due to the rising role of social media platforms as news outlets, where content can be produced and relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. This type of news is widespread because it is cheaper to produce than precise reporting and because consumers enjoy partisan news. A fake story shared by millions becomes "real" because people believe that if it's going viral, it must be true (Schleffer 2021). Engagement may increase in political issues, but caution is warranted since the information can be inaccurate. Overall, with

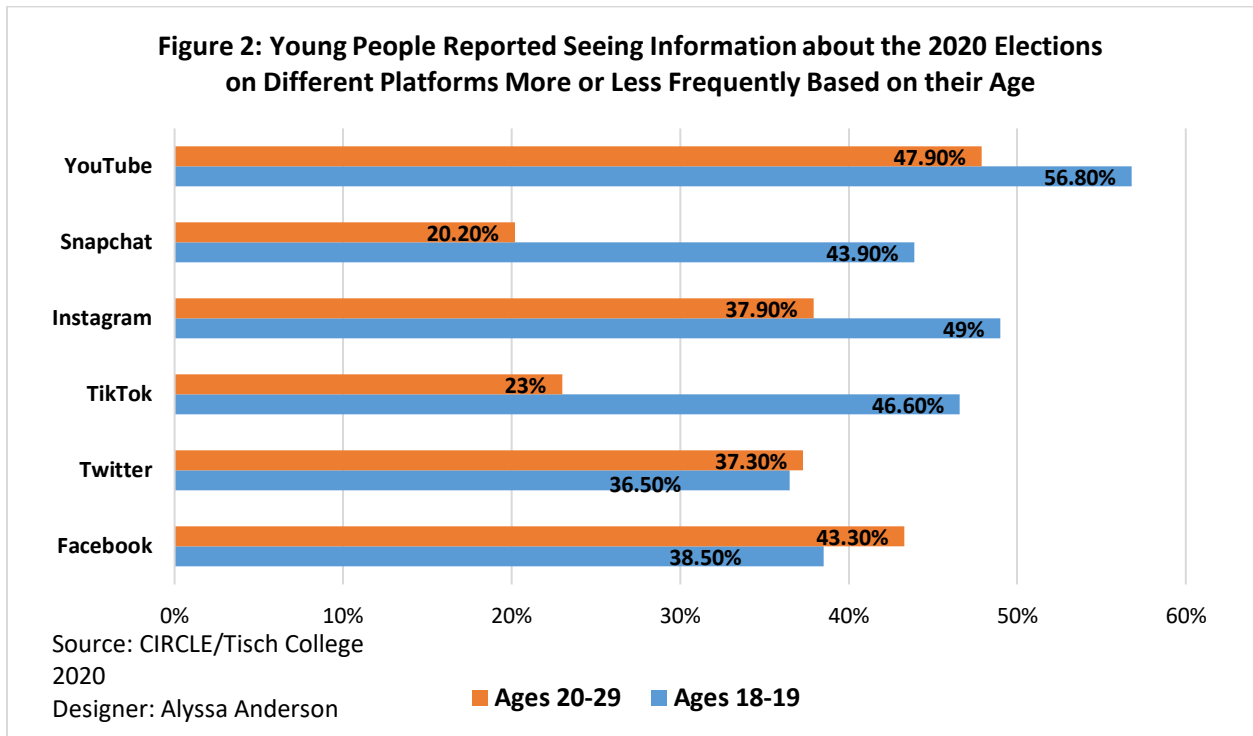
the increased usage of social media, politics have been able to become one of the most discussed topics on all platforms, since political information can now be so easily spread.

Social Media & Elections

Through social media sites, political content and information were shared with younger adults to get them more involved. The youth didn't just hear from campaigns, they heard from each other. In a post-election survey done by CIRCLE, nearly two-thirds of youth (ages 18-24) talked to friends about politics, and almost half tried to convince their peers to vote (Junco et al. 2021). It was estimated that voter turnout among youth (ages 18-29) for the 2020 Election rose by at least 5 and as many as 11 percentage points compared to 2016, and was likely one of the highest rates of youth electoral participation in decades. Young people supported President-elect Joe Biden over President Trump by a wide margin: 61% to 36% (Junco et al. 2021). This shows using social media to bring more awareness to how important participating in the election has worked, and the younger crowd showed up. Young people's doubts about the future of American elections and democracy should also be a major concern. A third of youth in the post-election survey, including half of those who voted for President Trump, consider it at least somewhat likely that the U.S. will no longer hold free and fair elections (Junco et al. 2021). This shows that young adults are being exposed to the type of corruption that can happen in elections, due to all of the exposure they learn on social media.

Younger adults believed the outcomes of the 2020 election will make a significant impact on everyday issues in their community. For many young people, some of the most important

issues are tied to racial and economic justice, so they felt motivated to vote and solve these problems.



According to CIRCLE/Tisch College, their Post-Election Poll is made up of adults ranging from 18 to 29, and many of them reported seeing a lot of information about the 2020 election on various social media sites. Figure 2 shows that youth ages 20-29 were more likely to cite YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as platforms where they heard or saw information about the 2020 election. Meanwhile, youth ages 18-19 were most likely to cite YouTube, Instagram, Tiktok, and Snapchat (Belle Booth 2021). This shows that political information is being spread on all social media sites, so engagement in the election was the result of it being put out there.

Initially, social media sites were not used for political purposes, so voters with access to the Internet lost interest in elections and politics in general. Over time, however, the situation has changed, and new political figures have emerged who manage to mobilize voters by connecting to them directly through the Internet. This change coincided with the emergence of social media (Enikolopov et al. 2020). This shows that political figures knew how important it was to bring engagement back up for elections and using social media to reach younger crowds worked out well. Overall, social media helped young people get more engaged with politics and take it more seriously as a whole. Certain content on these platforms was released and showed how the country would be affected if more people did not engage in voting.

Social Media & COVID-19

At the start of the pandemic in the year 2020, engagement on social media sites increased to an all-time high. According to a survey taken by Kantar Groups, social media engagement increased by 61 percent during the first wave of the pandemic (Kantar Group & Affiliates 2020). Young adults were not able to engage with each other physically, so they had to get creative online. During the COVID-19 lockdown, platforms like Snapchat and TikTok were digital spaces where the youngest eligible voters saw or heard information about the election. However, in the online spaces, young people's families and friends were still critical sources of information about the 2020 election (Junco et al. 2021). This shows that with the increased engagement of social sites during the pandemic, younger adults had more access to information about political issues than ever before, due to family and friends sharing their findings.

People are exposed to multiple stories about government regulations and lifestyle restrictions, people protesting such restrictions and breaking rules, scientific discoveries (treatments, vaccines, variants), and shortages in supply chain issues (PPE, hospital beds,

vaccines) (Buchanan et al. 2021). Many young people started to converse with each other about these problems happening in the world, and they became more aware of them. Overall, social media became a realistic platform for young adults to learn information about COVID-19 and kept them occupied during the lockdown.

Social Media & Social Movements

In 2020, while the pandemic was starting, many unfortunate events happened in the United States. Certain political views toward equality and social justice translated into youth mobilization against racism and issues like police mistreatment of communities of color. Young people were increasingly turning to online social media platforms to learn about, engage with, and share information about COVID-19, politics, and social movements like Black Lives Matter.

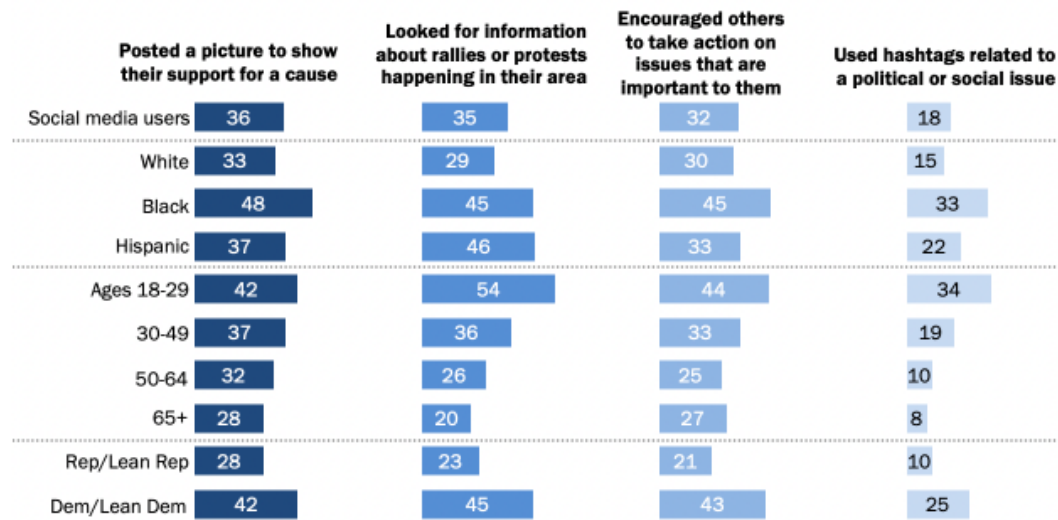
One of the most prominent recent examples is the role social media has played in the emergence of the “Me Too” movement aimed at raising awareness around sexual harassment and assault. The use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was also one of the most sustained efforts during this time to bring attention to a cause using social media platforms (Anderson et al. 2022). This shows that social media was being used to bring attention to social issues happening in America, and young adults started to engage or witness it. Social media accounts that previously featured photos of oneself, friends, and family now feature templates on what to say when calling your local or federal politicians as well as art, stories, and other forms of remembrance for lives tragically lost (Nesmith 2021). This shows that young adults are using their platform to amplify the voices of people that have been affected and have become better allies.

The killings of Breana Taylor and George Floyd in 2020 spiked an uptick in the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and over 8,000 mass demonstrations across the United States

occurred in protest against police brutality and racial injustice in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Baskin-Sommers et al. 2021). Youth activists are also using social media to raise money for various organizations such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Fair Fight, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Social media activists are also promoting learning materials on their online platforms, such as a list of books to read to educate yourself on racism, or a fact sheet about an event happening in the world and the details of when it happened, where, and the people involved (Nesmith 2021). It is clear that younger adults are putting in the effort to help others, and potentially make the world a better place.

Black social media users more likely than white or Hispanic users to say they've recently encouraged others to take action

% of social media users who say they have ____ on social media in the past month



Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 3 represents a survey taken by Pew Research Center in June 2020 to find out how much adults have engaged on social media to show support or participate in political movements. Just over half of social media users ages 18 to 29 (54%) say they have used these sites in the past month to look for information about rallies or protests happening in their area, compared with

36% of those ages 30 to 49, 26% of those 50 to 64 and 20% of those 65 and older. Social media users under the age of 30 are also more likely than those 30 and older to say they have used a hashtag related to a political or social issue and encouraged others to take action on issues that they see as important, while there are smaller age gaps when it comes to posting a picture to show support for a cause (Auxier 2021). This shows that adults aged 18-29 are more involved in social issues on social media, and are not afraid to show their involvement. They have drastically increased their use of social media on political issues over the last few years. Overall, young adults have increased their involvement in social movements with their online presence.

Results

After conducting a literature review, it is clear that social media has a direct influence on political beliefs and movements. Social media has become prominent in young adults' lives and has been proven that online socialization has become a key role in the intellectual development of adolescents. Since it is a part of development, it is difficult for young adults to not be influenced by the content they may see every day that is targeted toward them. Young adults can build communities with their like-minded peers and expose themselves to different current events around the world. Figure 1 showed over 60% of young adults felt empowered and informed when sharing their content on political and social issues. The feeling of being empowered drives them to post more and become more educated on political issues.

Social media platforms have become a critical space for people to share opinions and information on political issues. Most young adults will be exposed to political information that most likely aligns with their ideology because of platforms' algorithms that show them content they will likely engage with and because of the tendency to form links with like-minded people. This sometimes can lead to severe partisan biases because they will not be exposed to opposite

ideologies much. Since there is so much presence on social media platforms for political content and the barriers to entry are relatively low, it is hard to stop misinformation that may lead to partisan biases. This misinformation can be spread within the real world and affect how issues are discussed. Social media can play a positive or a negative role: It can be a liberalizing tool, used to spread information and knowledge, but it can also be a tool of suppression, used to disseminate distorted information and fake news.

For the 2020 presidential elections, more political commentary and information were circulating online. This was due to family, friends, and political figures advertising toward the youth. From the survey done by CIRCLE, nearly two-thirds of youth (ages 18-24) talked to friends about politics, and almost half tried to convince their peers to vote. It was found that voter turnout increased 5-11 percentage points from the past election. This just proves that with the help of social media, young adults were able to see the importance of elections and the need to participate, no matter for whom they voted. With the doubt from younger adults about how the government was being run in the last few years, it did push more to vote for President Biden. Regardless, young adults participated in the election because of how it would impact everyday issues in their community, racial issues, and economic issues.

Once the COVID-19 Pandemic started online engagement rose because that was the only form of communication with the rest of the world. Since there was a lot of free time during the lockdown period, people took that opportunity to educate themselves and discuss issues about COVID-19, politics, and social movements. Social movements were already popular online, since people could show their support with hashtags or art. Once the killings of Breana Taylor and George Floyd were uncovered to the world, more young adults decided to get involved politically. Since young adults became more educated on political issues during the lockdown,

they saw the unjust way police were treating black people and wanted to act on it. Based on Figure 3, this drove about 54% of people aged 18-29 to look and participate in protests, proving more engagement on social media was working.

Conclusion

All in all, social media has significantly influenced the amount of involvement young adults to have in politics and social movements. Social media has become a part of our lives permanently, so it is important to look at the good it can offer. It has been effective in getting college-aged students to participate in discussions on issues that can affect themselves or their peers. Within the last two years, engagement in voting and important social issues have increased, showing that younger adults do care about what happens in the world and how it will affect the future. It is important to acknowledge how engaged this age group is in what is happening. Building communities on social media platforms where they feel safe enough to spread content and their own opinions has made it easier to get involved.

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