

The American Partisan: Is Social Media Creating Superficial Partisan Alignments?

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This study tests the relationship between social media and partisan identification. Data for this study is taken from the Pew Research American Trends Wave 19 survey which was conducted in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election. The findings conclude that posting on Facebook is a predictor of partisan identification. This inference suggests that when individuals use social media as a channel to share their opinions, they are fermenting and developing their political views.

Political participation is the cornerstone to the American electorate. There is an immense database of research that explores the mechanisms and motivations that increase the likelihood of an individual participating politically. As technology increases, there are new mechanisms and new motivations that are linked to political participation which deserve exploration. This study aims to find a correlation between social media usage, partisan identification, and the likelihood of opinion change. The goal is to determine whether social media persuades individuals to engage in online political participation or if social media is simply a tool that is utilized by individuals with strong political convictions. Conclusively, the results indicate that social media is a network for individuals to share political views but there are some intriguing findings that signify that social media may be prompting political participation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The political environment has begun shifting from a collective culture to an individualized culture (Bennett, 2012). This shift is a result of the decline in social capital. Social capital is derived from the networks developed amongst individuals (Putnam, 2001). Nowadays, individuals develop virtual networks on social media sites. Online networks lack the inherent trust that social networks which developed from face to face interactions contain. The lack of trust is causing a shift from community orientated organizations to individualized associations; this notion can be attributed to the increase in access to information. Information abundance overwhelms the American public. The internet allows for the instantaneous flow of information from various sources. Several communicative mechanisms, such as social media, contribute to the information overload that individuals encounter on a daily basis. Social media has increased the use of personalized politics, where individual action is promoted in replace of collective

group action, to persuade citizens to engage in political matters (Bennett, 2012). Understanding the influence of social media among the voting population is essential to the American political landscape because it will affect the mechanisms by which politicians use to persuade voters.

In order to understand the effects of social media on partisan identification it is important to discuss online political participation. Online political participation is the newest trend in political culture. In the past, information accessibility has proven to be the biggest indicator separating the voting population from those who deliberately chose not to vote. Social media grants a vast majority of the population access to information which was historically granted to the elite of society. Political communication research indicates that frequency, exposure, and engagement to political information translate to actions based upon that information (Feezell, 2016). Those who socialize amongst online networks are more likely to engage in online political participation (Valenzuela, Kim, Zuniga, 2011).

Individuals are constantly using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center, 68% of adults are active on Facebook and of those users 75% use Facebook on a daily basis (Pew, 2018). The mere scrolling through social media exposes individuals to a tremendous amount of political information. People typically do not seek political news on social media rather they encounter information from posts that others create on the site; this information can either reaffirm or contradict their initial predispositions. Often, people inadvertently encounter contradicting information on the internet which this is known as online incidental exposure (Brundidge, 2010). The continual exposure to contradicting information exists in result of the impersonal environment of social media networks; the anonymous nature of the internet allows people to share information without considering the audience which receives the material. People can make volatile comments

without having to physically interact with those in which they are offending. Theoretically, individuals will feel more inclined to make political comments on social media since they do not have to feel the physical discomfort of upsetting another individual.

Selective exposure suggests that people favor information that reaffirms their preexisting views while simultaneously avoiding information which contradicts those beliefs (Garrett and Stroud, 2014). Increased access and increased obtainability of information creates the perfect gateway to selective exposure. The internet allows individuals to actively search for and engage with information that reaffirms their preconceived political ideas (Bennet and Iyengar, 2008). Strong partisans are more likely to engage in selective exposure behaviors opposed to those with weaker partisan alignments. The mounting partisan media allows individuals to avoid information that contradicts their initial predispositions. Partisan selective exposure generates echo-chambers which provides likeminded people to the opportunity to participate in one-sided arguments (Panke and Stephens, 2018). The concern with this practice is that it reduces political discourse in the online setting. Inherently, political discourse and the exposure to diverse opinions fuels democracy. Discourse between individuals regarding political circumstances promotes ingenuity in society.

Individuals with unfermented opinions act like a sponge when confronted with political information on social media platforms. Often times, people encounter contradictory political information unintentionally (Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, Kwak, 2017). The feeling of discomfort when exposed to information, which contradicts their initial predispositions, may motivate people to share their own political viewpoint. Those with moderate to minimal partisan identification may find solace amongst one of the mainstream political parties, Democrat or

Republican. The ideal population for testing the effects of social media is the population which exists outside of the mainstream political parties.

Polarization in the American electorate has increased tremendously over the past quarter century (Druckman, Peterson, Slothuus, 2013). The highly partisan electorate are politically involved and maintain high levels of political knowledge. Therefore, polarization exists primarily within the elite of society (Prior, 2013). The partisan divide in the nation presents itself on social media. This partisan division may be attributed to selective exposure

Social media is multidimensional. The sites provide access to information and serve as a platform for individuals to express and share their personal views with their “friends” or “followers.” There is an inherent bias in the sharing of information on social media. People have the ability to selectively choose who and what they engage with on these sites. A power of this magnitude leads people to surround themselves with individuals who share similar beliefs as them. As technology advances, social media frequently enhances its features. The popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram maintain a “blocking” feature. “Blocking” allows people to disperse themselves of any nuances that cause discomfort. The feeling of discomfort when confronted with information that conflicts with their personal predispositions is defined as cognitive dissonance. Scholars found that cognitive dissonance produces a physical and mental reaction to the human body. Individuals chose to avoid physical uneasiness which causes them to create mental barriers to unpalatable information. The purpose of this study is to address the role of social media on the shifting of the modern American partisan.

RESEARCH GOAL:

American politics have changed as the American people have become sufficiently reliant on technology. Research indicates that access to the internet and social media usage are relatively significant indicators of voter turnout; this relationship stems from the outpouring of information that voters receive from these modern communicative modes. In order to copiously comprehend turnout, understanding voter behavior and partisan alignments are necessary. This study aims to create a causal connection between an individual's social media usage and their partisan alignment while also checking whether social media affects the likelihood of opinion change.

This research is limited because it tests partisan identification and opinion change at one point in time which may result in potential biases in the outcomes. Any causal correlations predicted are potentially a result of preconceived partisan alignments opposed to the individual's social media usage. Personalized time series survey data could help eliminate potential flaws in the results but due to time constraints that issue cannot be addressed at this time. For future research, the goal is to understand whether social media has a "blinding" effect on how people classify their partisan alignment.

METHODS:

The data for this research was taken from Pew Research American Trends Wave 19 survey. The survey consisted of questions involving social media engagement and political attitudes. The targeted demographic were American adults ages 18 and over. A sample size of 4579 respondents was used in the survey. Of the respondents, 4165 conducted the survey online and the remaining 414 sent in the email by mail. The survey was taken prior to the 2016

Presidential election. A logistic regression analysis was employed due to the dichotomous dependent variables.

Dependent Variable- Model One

H1: An individual who engages politically on social media is likely to identify as either Democrat or Republican.

The first study conducted tests partisan identification. The survey question asked the respondent to identify their political party alignment; the possible responses were as follows, “1. Republican, 2. Democrat, 3. Independent, 4. Other”. The responses were recoded to a dichotomous variable by combining the Democrat and Republican options and coding it to a one value while the other responses were coded to a zero value. Recoding these variables creates a distinction between those respondents who maintain partisan values and those respondents who deviate from the standard political construction. Understanding the relationship between partisan identification and social media usage is pertinent to determining the effects of social media on political behavior. The goal of this model is to determine if partisan identification predicts political engagement on social media.

Dependent Variable- Model Two

H2: An individual who engages with politics on social media sites is less likely to change their opinion based on information they encountered on social media.

The second study tests whether a respondent has changed their political opinion based on something that he\she saw on social media. The survey question asked, “have you ever modified your views about political or social issues because of something that you saw on social media” and the responses are as follows “1. Yes and 2. No”. The variable will remain dichotomous.

Control Variables:

The standard demographic variables such as age, education, race, and income are used in this study. Demographic variables are strong indicators of which and how individuals behave politically. Research specifies that older highly educated people are more invested in politics than their younger middle-class counterparts. Historically, the more educated portion of society had greater access to political information. But the rise of technology has diminished that societal barrier and now all people despite education have endless access to political information.

The younger populations are more active on social media yet maintain lower levels of political engagement whereas the older population is less active on social media but maintain higher levels of political participation. The age, income, and education variables are continuous on a ranging scale with the first response being the lowest and the last response being the highest. Leaving these variables on a continuous scale allows for more variation in the results. The race variable was recoded to be dichotomous. The responses on the survey were, “1. White, 2. Black or African-American, 3. Asian or Asian-American, 4. Mixed Race, 5. Or some other race”. The recode consisted of combining responses two through five to equal zero value and response one to a one value to create a “white” and “non-white” variable. Altering this variable

provides for a clear analysis between the political behaviors of the minority and majority cultures in the United States. The control variables are used in both models within this study.

The independent variables of interest in this model are related to politically involved social media usage. The variables used are described below:

Online Civic Engagement:

This variable originates from the survey question that reads, “have you ever publically expressed support for a political campaign on FB, Twitter, or Instagram?”. There was one response option which equated to a yes answer. The yes response was coded to one value and any other responses were coded to a zero. This variable examines whether respondents are strongly motivated to act politically on social media platforms.

Political News:

This variable comes from the question, “how often do you get political news on social media?”. The responses were “1. Often, 2. Sometimes, 3. Hardly ever, 4. Never”. A recode was conducted to put the responses on a low to high scale. Including this variable in the model will pinpoint which respondents rely heavily on social media for political news.

Politicians:

This variable is used to understand the extent to which individuals use social media as an outlet for gathering political information. Theoretically, if an individual follows political figures on social media then they are highly engaged in that politician which translates to high levels of

political engagement. This is a dichotomous variable with a yes response having a one value and a no response with a zero value.

Politician Beliefs:

Understanding what information a respondent is seeing on social media is pivotal to the research question in this study. This variable alludes to the effects of selective exposure. The survey question in which this variable comes from reads, “would you say that the political figures you follow...” and the responses include, “1. Mostly people who share your views, 2. Mostly people who do not share your views, 3. Mix of people with different views.” A recode was conducted to make response one equal a two value, response two equal a zero value, response three equal a one value; this puts the variables on a low-high scale. This variable will be included in both models.

Facebook and Twitter Friends:

The basis of this study hinges on this variable. An individual’s behavior on social media is dependent on the content they encounter. The survey questions reads, “Do most of your FB\Twitter friends...” and the responses include “1. Have similar political beliefs to you, 2. Have different political beliefs to you, 3. Mix of political beliefs to you, 4. Not sure about their political beliefs.” The purpose of this variable is to test whether the respondent’ friends agrees or disagrees with them. Therefore, the variable was recoded for response one to equal a one and responses two through four to equal a zero value.

Facebook and Twitter Posting:

The social media sites being tested in this study are Twitter and Facebook. This particular variable set is looking to test the active participation of a respondent on social media networks. The survey question(s) which constructs these variables states, “how much of what you post on FB\Twitter is related to politics?”; the responses are set on a high-low scale with response one being the highest and response four being the lowest. A recode was conducted to set the responses on a low to high scale.

Facebook and Twitter Encounters:

Besides the ability to post on social media sites, encountering the posts of others is equally as beneficial (Prior 2013). People develop opinions based on accidental encounters with information. The survey questions tested was similar to the one which asks about individual posting, “how much of what you see on FB\Twitter is related to politics.” The responses included, “1. A lot, 2. Some, 3. A little, 4. None”; the recode reversed the variables to a low-high scale.

RESULTS:

Partisan Identification [Insert Table One]

According to Table 1, the demographic control variables age, sex and education, all have positive coefficients signifying that there is a positive, though not statistically significant, relationship between each and the likelihood that one will identify as a Democrat or Republican. This trend aligns with similar studies that use demographic variables to explain political behavior. The income variable also predicts a positive and statistically significant relationship between social media and partisan identification. An individual’s income foretells their

availability to technology. Typically, those with a higher income have access to more reliable technologies which would provide them the opportunity to actively involve themselves in the social media community. Higher income equates to more access and more flexibility to use and engage with social media therefore it is a significant predictor of the relationship between social media usage and partisan identification.

This analysis calculates noteworthy relationships between the independent variables and partisan identification. Unsurprisingly, the variable testing whether a respondent gets political news on social media maintained a negative coefficient; the initial hypothesis projected that this occurrence would take place. The negative coefficient signifies that moderate to weak partisans utilize social media as a news resource more than strong partisans. Typically, those who identify as a strong Democrat or a strong Republican will seek out their news from more credible sources such as cable news and newspapers.

Following the trend of strong partisanship alignments, the variables testing for whether respondents use social media as a mechanism for engaging with politicians, are positive in predicting partisan identification. Those who identify themselves as either Republican or Democrat are more likely to follow politicians on social media; those political figures are likely to align with their personal beliefs. The notion behind this finding is simple. If an individual is highly engaged, they are likely to seek political involvement in all forms, including social media.

Individual usage of social media platforms presents unique outcomes. Posting on Facebook signifies the likelihood of identifying with a political party whereas simply acquiring information on Facebook is likely to predict a moderate to politically uninterested individual; the results are opposite for Twitter users. The trend indicated in Facebook is predictable. Posting political information on Facebook requires a certain threshold of knowledge, a threshold that

avid political supporters would maintain. A positive relationship between partisan identification and posting on Facebook strengthens the notion that strong political affiliations are correlated with political engagement, online and offline. The negative coefficient that is affiliated with the posts that individuals see on Facebook reinforces the thought that a relationship with a political party stems from strong political engagement not merely encountering political information.

It is important to note that the age demographic on Facebook may contribute to the significance of the variables. Facebook users span across numerous generations including the older less technologically advanced population (Pew Research Center, 2018). The older generation is more politically involved than the younger generations. Therefore, their presence on Facebook may increase the likelihood of online political participation. The repetitive act of posting political information on Facebook has the capability of solidifying an individual's political views. Theoretically, an individual who continually posts on social media will encounter others who have similar beliefs as them. Engaging in one-way arguments with others who share similar views is correlated with strong partisan affiliations. The results of the next model are reliant on the moderate to politically uninterested population.

Opinion Change [Insert Table Two]

There is a lack of statistically significant variables in this study which is a positive finding. That indicates that it is exceptionally difficult to change someone's mind. External factors such as partisan identification and personal circumstance shape the way in which people think and those factors remain stronger predictors of political opinions than social media. Social media is not at the capacity where people are altering their political views due to content they encounter on these sites; people remain faithful to their political predispositions.

Age, sex, and income all maintain negative coefficients. This signifies that age, sex, and income are not predictors of opinion change. Education has a positive coefficient which indicates that individuals with lower levels of schooling are more likely to alter their opinion on a political or social issue based on something they encountered on social media. Education is correlated with political engagement. Therefore, the less politically engaged individuals are susceptible to opinion modification.

There is a positive coefficient associated with the variable testing whether respondents receive their news from social media outlets. Those who responded “yes” to the question are more likely to change their opinion based on something they saw on social media. This finding is in accordance with the notion that those who acquire news from social media are less politically engaged.

In relation to the use of Facebook and Twitter, there is an opposite reaction in terms of the way an individual uses the sites and how their political opinion is altered. Individuals are more likely to alter their opinion when they post on Twitter whereas individuals are more likely to alter their opinion when they view political material on Facebook. The findings pertaining to Twitter are contradictory to the casual relationship that has been explained throughout this study. Methodological error could account for that error. Generally, the results of both studies run conclusive with the theoretical framework presented in the paper.

This model reaffirms the findings from the first model which signify that posting on Facebook is a predictor of partisan identification. The variable testing whether an individual posts political information on Facebook maintains a negative coefficient which indicates that those who use Facebook as a mechanism to share political beliefs are less likely to alter their opinion based on a post they encountered on social media. The significance of this variable

allows us, with certainty, to conclude that those who participate politically on Facebook identify as a member of a mainstream political party and that their political views are solidified. The regression analysis proved valuable to the understanding that social media is merely a means for politically engaged individuals to share their opinions as opposed to social media provoking individuals to participate with politics. This study also provided ample evidence showing that Facebook is more widely used and accessed by the public than Twitter.

[Insert Table 3]

Table three summarizes the respondents answers to the variables testing social media posting and social media encounters. This summarization further demonstrates the significant differences between Facebook and Twitter usage amongst the American electorate. Facebook is more widespread as compared to Twitter. As previously discussed, posting on Facebook proves a significant indicator of both partisan identification and a significant indicator of an individual who maintains their political predispositions despite encountering contradictory information. This finding is validated when looking at the substantial difference in the number of respondents who use Facebook in comparison to Twitter. There is over a 75% increase in the number of respondents who use Facebook (3155) compared to those who use Twitter (781). If the numbers were closer, the results could signify either a closer relationship between the two social media platforms or they may remain the same. Regardless, this study demonstrated that Facebook is the one of the most predominant social media platforms in reference to political engagement.

DISCUSSION:

Social media is merely a means for political participation. The findings indicate that individuals have to make a conscious effort to participate in political activities on social media to

suggest partisan identification. Simply encountering political information on social media does not predict an individual's political alignment. Therefore, people with strong political convictions are more inclined to share their beliefs on social media platforms. There are several limitations in this study that can be expanded upon in future research.

The overreaching goal of this research is to predict whether individuals are identifying with a political party due to information that they encountered on social media. A time series analysis could best predict the change in an individual's political beliefs. Ideally, conducting this study near an election would provide the most accurate results seeing as how social media is flooded with political information during an election cycle. The target demographic for future research is the millennial population because they maintain low levels of political participation and use social media at exponential rates in comparison to the older populations.

Table One
PARTISAN IDENTIFICATION

Age	.309 (.155)
Sex	.402 (.257)
Income	.080* (.058)
Education	.126 (.101)
Political News on Social Media	-.068 (.195)
Individuals Following Politicians on Social Media	.635 (2.39)
Politicians Views in Accordance with Individual	.452 (.299)
Individuals Posting on Facebook	.014* (.211)
Individuals Posting on Twitter	-.072 (.180)
What Individuals See on Facebook	-.174 (.160)
What Individuals See on Twitter	.285 (.144)
R ²	.090
N	4579

Table Two

OPINION CHANGE

Age	-0.458 (.164)
Sex	-.100 (.270)
Income	-0.81 (.061)
Education	.110 (.109)
Political News on Social Media	1.142 (.272)
Respondents Who Follow Politicians on Social Media	-.633 (.255)
The Views of the Politicians Compared to the Views of the Respondent	.084 (.302)
Respondent Posting on Facebook	-0.004* (.234)
Respondent Posting on Twitter	.166 (.201)
What Respondents See on Facebook	.343 (.173)
What Respondents See on Twitter	-.101 (.148)
R ²	.157
N	4579

Table 3**STATISTICS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA VARIABLES**

	A Lot (% of Respondents)	Some (% of Respondents)	A Little (% of Respondents)	None (% of Respondents)	N
How much of what you see on Facebook is related to politics?	148 (3.2%)	730 (15.9%)	1409 (30.8%)	868 (19.0%)	3155
How much of what you post on Facebook is related to politics?	1514 (33.1%)	900 (19.7%)	516 (11.3%)	221 (4.8%)	3151
How much of what you see on Twitter is related to politics?	68 (10%)	166 (3.4%)	331 (1.9%)	216 (1.7%)	781
How much of what you post on Twitter is related to politics?	458 (10%)	154 (3.4%)	86 (1.9%)	80 (1.7%)	778

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