

Social Media and its Effects in Politics: The Factors that Influence Social Media use for Political
News and Social Media use Influencing Political Participation

Research Thesis

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By

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Introduction

Political participation is an important part of democracy that has been long studied. A key part of democracy is to have citizens go out and vote, but when we look at voter turnout we can see that the number of citizens that vote has decreased over the last one hundred years. There are factors that can influence political participation: race, education, age, etc. (Wolfinger and Rosenstone).

With the new forms of technology (i.e. social media) that citizens have access to, will it provide an opportunity for more citizens to participate in our democracy? Social media will be another factor that influences your political participation, specifically on voter turnout due to information social media provides for the citizen.

Social media can be a challenging concept to define, since there are different arguments about what counts as social media. For this paper, social media will be defined as any websites or applications that we can use to receive political information (twitter, Facebook, CNN, etc.).

Social media has become a part of our daily lives and we could make the argument that young people are at the helm of this shift in society. People seem to assume that young people (18-24) use social media for everything, but would that be true when it comes to how they get their political news and would that then influence this age group to vote. In *Who Votes?* By Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 18-24 year olds had one of the lowest voter turnouts out of all the different age groups except for the 79+ age group, but social media should have an effect on this particular age group political participation (38). Looking at data can show us how much social media use can change, given different factors that are important to who participates in the political process. In the book, *Voice and Equality* by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, highlights that political information is one of the factors that can predict political participation, which is one

of the many ways that social media/media in general can help increase political participation because citizens can have access to news and information easily (417). This can then have a larger effect on the outcome of the election, because if social media can influence political participation this could have an impact on voter participation.

There hasn't been a lot of research done that looks at what the correlation of social media is in comparison to person identities (race, income, party, and education), but there has been research done on social media and its relation to political participation. Both of these are important questions in the study of how social media affects our political system.

There are the two main themes that come from the prior research on this topic and they include: political participation and age related to social media use, which can help us understand the themes that are happening with the data that was collected.

Literature Review

Social media and political participation fits into the previous research of political participation that has been endlessly studied but; Verba et. al, Rosenstone and Hansen, and Wolfinger and Rosenstone provide a basis for political participation research.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brandy wrote a book about political participation and civic engagement called *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. One of the points that is made in this book is that race, ethnicity, and class influence your political participation which is important to understand given that these are individual characteristics that can't be change (other than class). "Circumstances of initial privilege have consequences for educational attainment which, in turn, has consequences for the acquisition of nearly every other participatory factor" (Verba et. al. 514). They provide different factors that influences whether someone is more likely to participate in the political process and education is one of the most

important factor that effects political participation. Overall, the research that they conduct is an important basis for what factors (individual or not) influence our willingness to participate in the political process.

Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America by Rosenstone and Hansen which looked at elections over time and what makes someone more likely to participate in the political process. “Through the strategic choices of candidates, parties, interest groups, and activists, political, economic, and social change has tipped the balance of political participation in America... Candidates now speak directly to the electorate through new campaign technologies” (Rosenstone and Hansen 233). This is the reason to why the public is more encouraged to mobilize which we know increases them to go out and vote. This is an important factor in what makes social media important for citizens, because it gives individuals access to the candidates in ways that have not always been there. This research provides us a basis on how new technologies can be used to help get citizens active in the political process and to get citizens to go out to vote in elections. This research by Rosenstone and Hansen is an important part of the study of not only political participation, but to how social media is important for campaigns and citizens.

In *Who Votes?* by Wolfinger and Rosenstone the research that was done on what characteristics are important factors on whether someone turns out to vote. The key finding that they came to was that education is the most important factor for political participation, followed by age and income. However, “if future political cleavages more closely parallel education, income, race, and age differences, then the consequences of variations in turnout will be felt in the fate of policy proposals” (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 114). Which when looking at social media use for political news, these are all important factors to whether you turn out to vote just

like Wolfinger and Rosenstone said, so social media just adds another layer to their research that already proves that these are important factors on whether someone goes out and votes. Overall, their research on political participation comes down to individual experience and personal qualities which can help our understanding of how social media can help our understanding of how social media can influence political participation (102). This research provides a basis on how we look at the influence of social media specifically on how it relates to us as individuals and furthermore effects political participation.

There is previous research on social media and its relationship to politics which has concluded two different thoughts on social media and politics: one being that social media (positively or negatively) effects political participation or political efficacy and the other being age playing a role in social media use.

Matthew James Kushin and Masahiro Yamamoto did a study during the 2008 election that looked at college aged individuals and how much they were paying attention to different news outlets. Their hypothesis that tested for a variety of different relationships between social media and political self-efficacy. Their study also looked at how much the individual used social media for political purposes and how politically active the individual was. Their study showed that social media and political self-efficacy doesn't have a direct correlation. However, "online expression and attention to traditional Internet sources were significant predictors of situational political involvement... That is, respondents who frequently expressed opinions about the election online and those who paid greater attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information were respectively more involved in the election" (Kushin and Yamamoto). This shows that in college aged individuals who are paying attention to traditional internet news sources are more politically active. The study also showed that "attention to social media for

campaign information was not significantly associated with political self-efficacy and situational political involvement” (Kushin and Yamamoto). Which means that the more traditional internet sources you use, can mean that you are more politically active, but using social media didn’t show that same correlation. In *figure 1* we can see that Social Media use is the highest among the 18-24-year-old cohort, but this doesn’t always mean that they are paying the most attention or have it influencing them to participate in politics. This shows that using social media for political information doesn’t mean that you are more politically active. This important to consider because it means that using social media isn’t the same as using traditional internet sources for political information.

In a study that was run by Zhang et al. that was interested in how social media affected different variable including civil engagement. They did this by doing a phone survey that included 998 individuals that were all ages. The results showed that “reliance on social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Myspace was positively related to civic participation but not to political participation or confidence in government” (Zhang et al.). We can see that in this study that social media didn’t influence political participation, even when they didn’t just get their research from only college aged respondents. When we consider the Kushin and Yamamoto study, it shows a similar result, because college student’s social media wasn’t found to have a positive coloration on political information.

In other research that was conducted looking at political participation because of social media by Zungia found a similar pattern as Zhang et al. Zungia states that “as a final interesting note to results in relation to SNS, there was no evidence whatsoever to statistically relate general overall frequency use of SNS to increasing citizens’ participatory behaviors and social capital” (328). Although this research found that SNS didn’t increase political participation, it did find

that “a statistical relationship between using SNS for news and reporting higher levels of social capital which implies that social media may also facilitate community life beyond the strict measures of civic participation” (Zungia 329). So, while SNS may not have consequences on political participation, it does influence involvement in the community. This can end up being an important factor for what your political choices are, since who you are surrounded by can affect your political choices.

When we consider the Zhang et al. and Zungia’s research it means that even when there are people looking at social media to get political news, it doesn’t mean that social media is helping their participation in politics. This means that social media doesn’t have an effect even with college aged individuals that are using social media the most.

If we look at the previous research on the effects on social media on political behavior it asks questions about political participation in relation to social media. However, it is important to see how much individuals are looking at social media to get their election news, because that is a huge part of information that seems to be missing from all the previous research that has been done on this topic. We see in Kushin and Yamamoto, that they asked college aged individuals in a survey who studied more about the political efficacy in relation to social media use, but never clarified how much these individuals were using social media. We observe something similar in Zhang et al. which looked at individuals across all age groups. The way that people get their news stories could influence how campaigns and news outlets share their content in the future. Looking at how different age groups receive their political news, as well as how individuals in different political parties receive their political news, could drastically change how news is shared in the future.

In research done by Baumgartner and Morris, they note this phenomenon of age as it pertains to social media use and political information. “Young adults seem to use SN Web sites to connect online with like-minded individuals. Political information will only penetrate the online social networks of those who share an interest in politics, and not many young adults who frequent these sites seem politically inclined” (28). They further point out that young adults can easily navigate social media, which means that they can avoid the information that they don’t want. Their research shows that “there is a significant positive relationship between SN Web site news usage and enjoyment of news that shares the individual’s pre-existing point of view (Baumgartner and Morris 32). This means that social media won’t influence your vote choice, because they are generally looking at the same viewpoints that they already have. This means that campaigns would have to target people that share the same beliefs as them to get the individual to vote for them.

However, participation in politics has other factors that are involved and by looking at previous research that has been done we can see that overall participation isn’t influenced by how much they use social media or if they use social media at all, it is more about the individual characteristics that make up the individuals and that is a big marker on whether they turn out and vote.

Hypotheses

H1: The 18-25-year age group would receive more of their political news through social media than any other age group.

H2: The person’s Political Party would influence how they receive political news and whether or not they receive political news via social media. More specifically Democrats would use social media for political news more than independents and republicans.

H3: The less education that a person has the more days that they will use social media for political news.

H4: If you have high income above 100k a year the more they you use social media to receive political news.

H5: Social media would have a positive impact on your political participation (measured by voters and non-voters) no matter age, party, or income. So, the more that you use social media, the more that you will vote. Meaning that there would be a positive increase the more that you use social media.

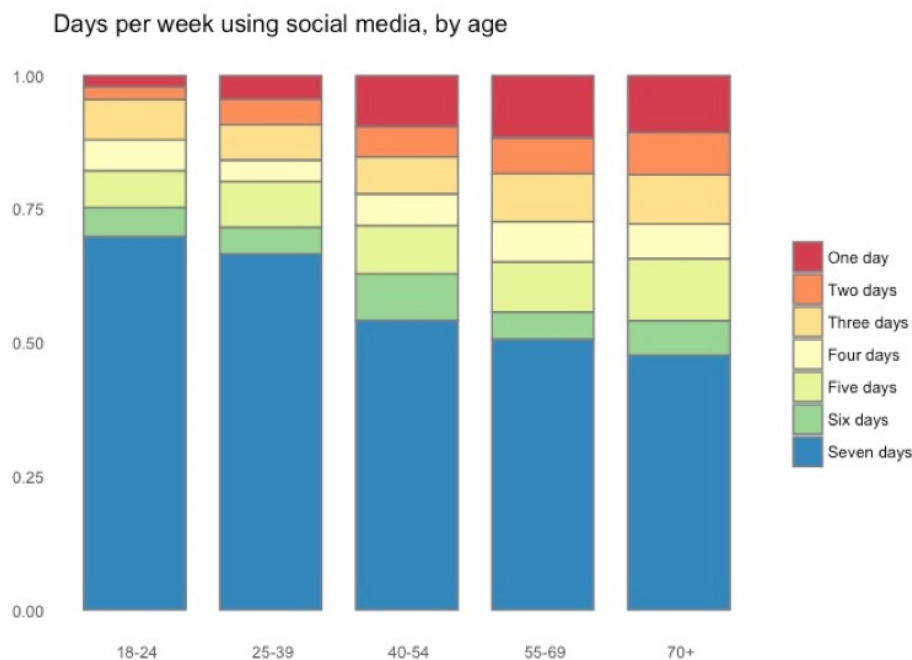
Method

Using ANES data for the 2016 election we can look at how many days per week individuals were using social media, given age, political party, if the campaigns reached out on social media, education, and socio-economic status. To see if previous research on political participation and how politics are now being tailored to the individual is correct, when we look at the 2016 election. Using ANES data for the 2016 election we can see if these factored into the way that campaigns will have to change for future election cycles.

Research

I. Age and Social Media

Figure 1



The age of the voter was important to the social media campaigns in 2016, because the use of social media was determined by the voter's age. We can see that in *figure 1* that there is an age variance in who uses social media to receive news about the presidential election. Every age group has some people that are receiving political news on social media to some degree, but the 18-24 and 25-39 age groups are using social media the most number of days.

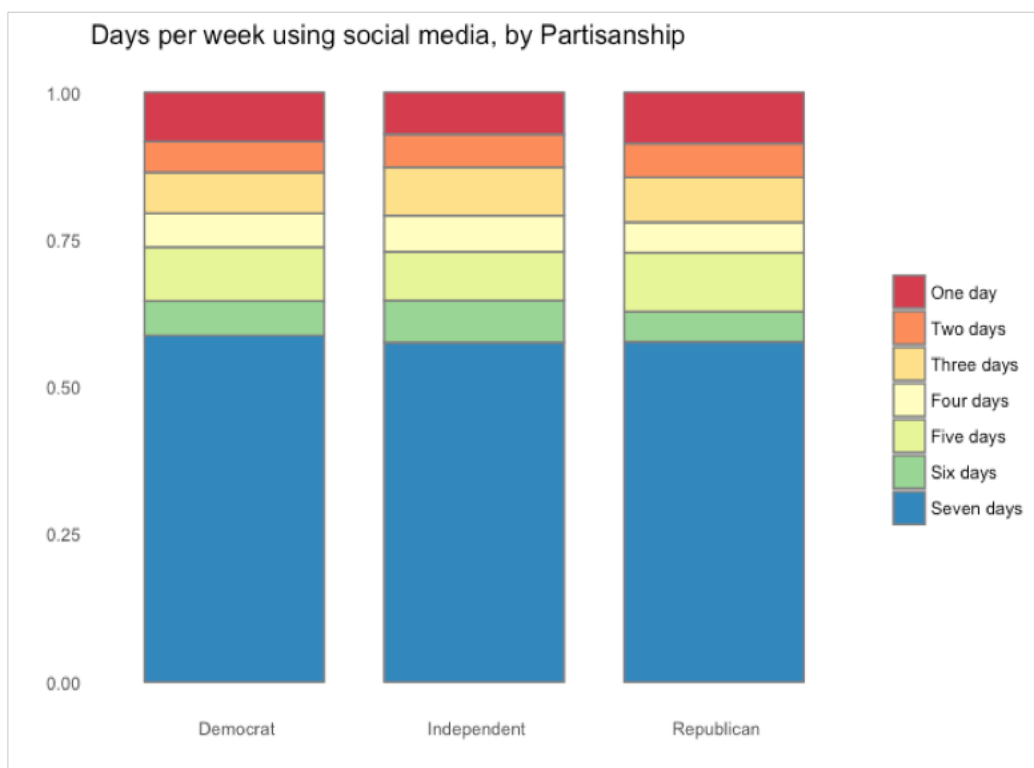
The 18-24-year age group is using social media the most to get political news. This is also the age group that has one of the lowest voter turnouts, which is also a factor in political participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone). The impact that this has on political participation will be discussed at the end of the paper.

As we can see in *figure 1* after the 25-39 year age group, social media use seven days a week for political news drops significantly, and drops for every age group after that. This graph is showing that the age categories using social media the most for political news are the 18-24 and 25-39 age groups. After that the people using social media for political news every day drops.

Overall, we can say that the only two age groups that use social media frequently for politics are the 18-24 and 25-39 age groups. This will have consequences for campaigns, as it pertains to how they reach out to these voters. While the other age groups don't use social media as frequently, meaning that social media would not be the best way to reach out to them.

II. Party and Social Media

Figure 2



Partisanship and political information of voters doesn't directly relate to campaigns using social media, but it plays an important role in how voters interact with the campaign and how the campaign relays their message to voters. Partisanship is an interesting concept, because voters don't necessarily pay attention to the parties or even know what the differences between parties are, but they know what party they belong to. We can see that in *figure 2* that partisanship doesn't influence who uses social media and how many days that it is used to receive political news. Partisanship can affect the messages and the advertisements that we see, but social media gives a new face to how campaigns share their message.

Even though we can see that the different parties don't use social media differently, in terms of how many days that the different parties are getting news via social media, we can say that they are most likely receiving different news. Since, there's not an accurate way of determining what each person is seeing on social media, we could assume that because of Nanocasting and different ways that technology has allowed us to target an audience. Nanocasting means "using highly targeted ads on Facebook, Twitter, and Google, candidates can reach down to tiny niches based on dozens of people (or even single individuals) and seek to influence their voting behavior" (West 7). This means that campaigns themselves can target specific people that would vote for them. So, looking at *figure 2* we can say that democrats, independents, and republicans look at social media at the same rate, but it doesn't mean that they are receiving the same information about the campaign or candidates. This could mean that in the long run that different parties could become more polarized than they already are, because they are only getting information that reassures their point of view. This is not only because of social media, but it sure doesn't help.

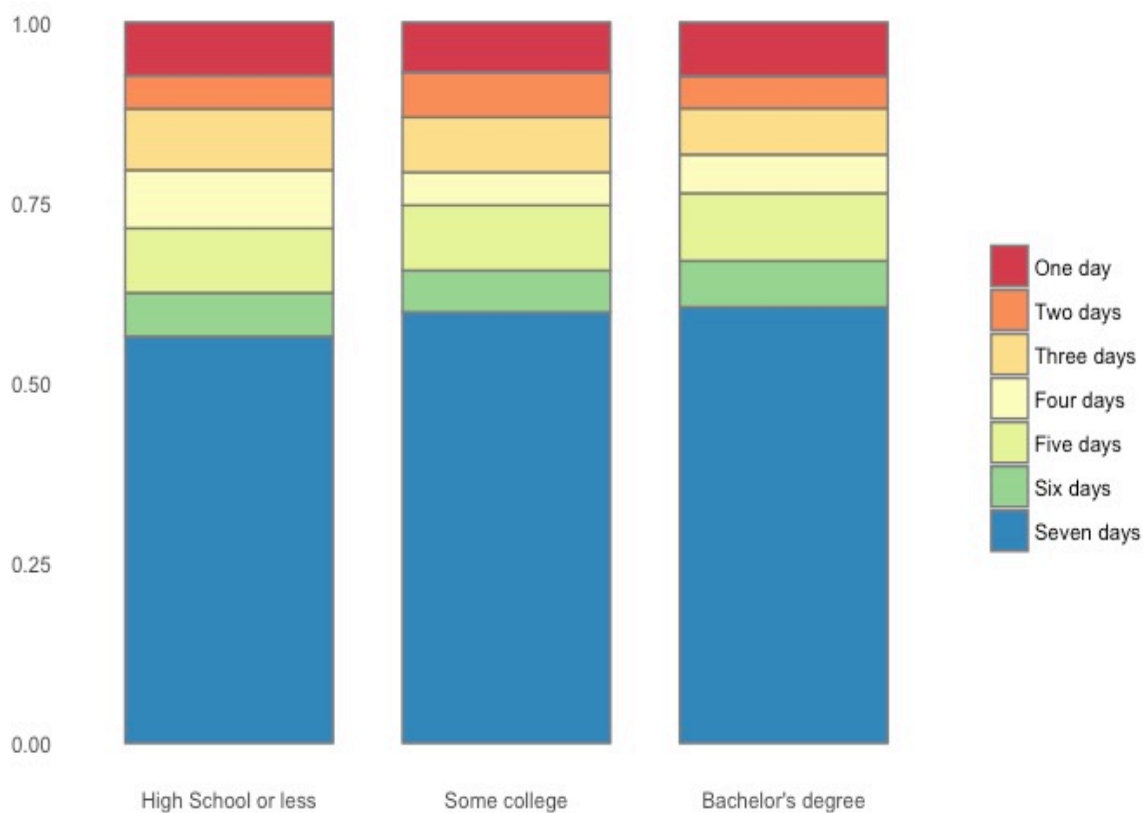
Partisanship influences who you vote for or sometimes even if you choose to vote

(depending on the election), but we can say that social media use isn't something that is specific to either party or even people that would identify as independents.

III. Education and Social Media

Figure 3

Days per week using social media, by Education



Education level can be important for a variety of different things when we talk about politics, but could it influence whether people use social media for political purposes. Depending on the level of education of the voter, the amount that one participates or is solidified in their party is going to change. This means that for campaigns voters that are of higher education are more of the target audience for voting, whereas lower education voters are going to be more the

target audience for changing viewpoints or party. We also know that people that vote tend to be people with a higher education, so this could have an impact on who votes, but not necessarily who receives information about politics/campaigns via social media.

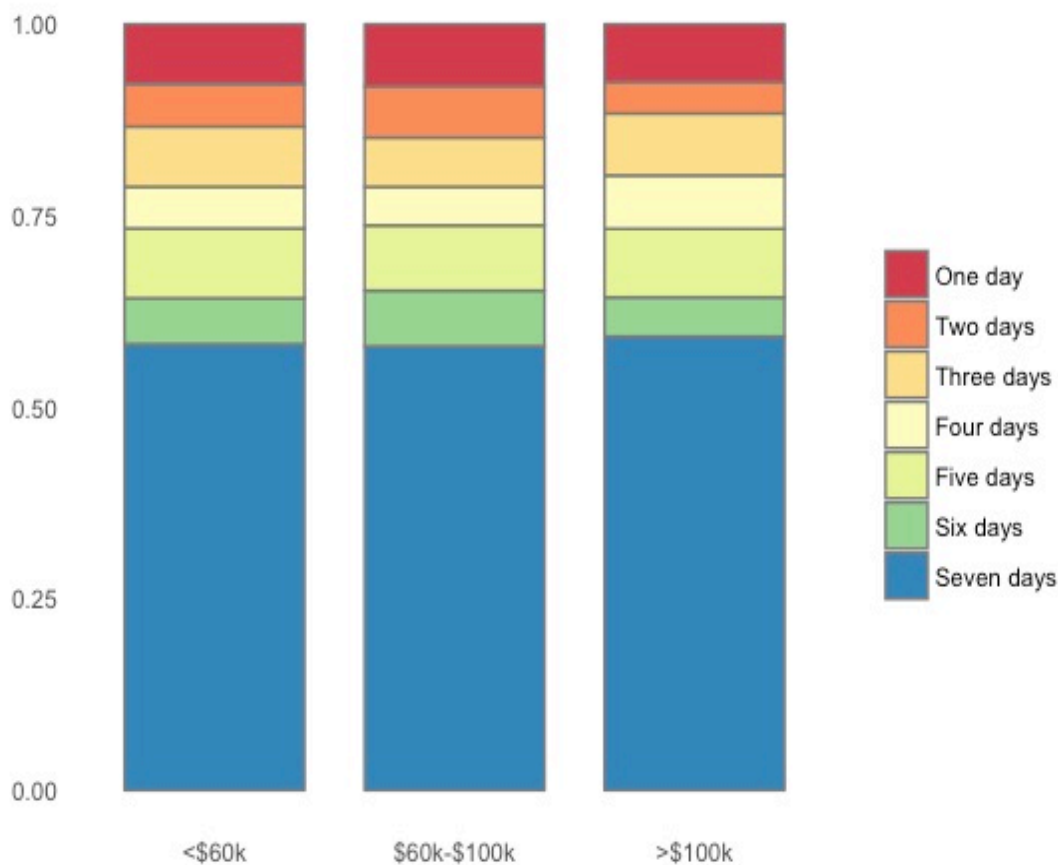
However, education can influence where you receive political news or even how often you receive political news. The more educated that you are the more that you are going to receive news from a newspaper and the less educated that you are the more you will receive news from TV sources (Gotterfried et. al 18). This doesn't necessarily mean that people with higher education aren't going to get news from TV, it just means that the more educated you are the more likely you will get news from newspapers. But is this the same for social media, we can see in *figure 3* that who uses social media seven days a week doesn't change all that much when it comes to what level education you have. We can see that if you have some college or a bachelor's degree you use social media seven days a week more than someone with just a high school education does.

There may not be a huge difference between education and social media for political news in 2016, but given other factors that are observed with other forms of media this observation could change in the future.

IV. Income and Social Media

Figure 4

Days per week using social media, by income cohort



One of the last factors that we can look at for what influences social media use is what their income is. Just because most social media is free doesn't mean that it is accessible to everyone, since some sort of electronic device and an internet connection is needed. So, when we talk about accessibility to knowledge about politics we could say that social media would help us learn about the candidates, but because of one's socio-economic status it could mean that they don't have the same access to political news. This could make a difference in not only the political party that you vote for, but also how different people are able to understand what the

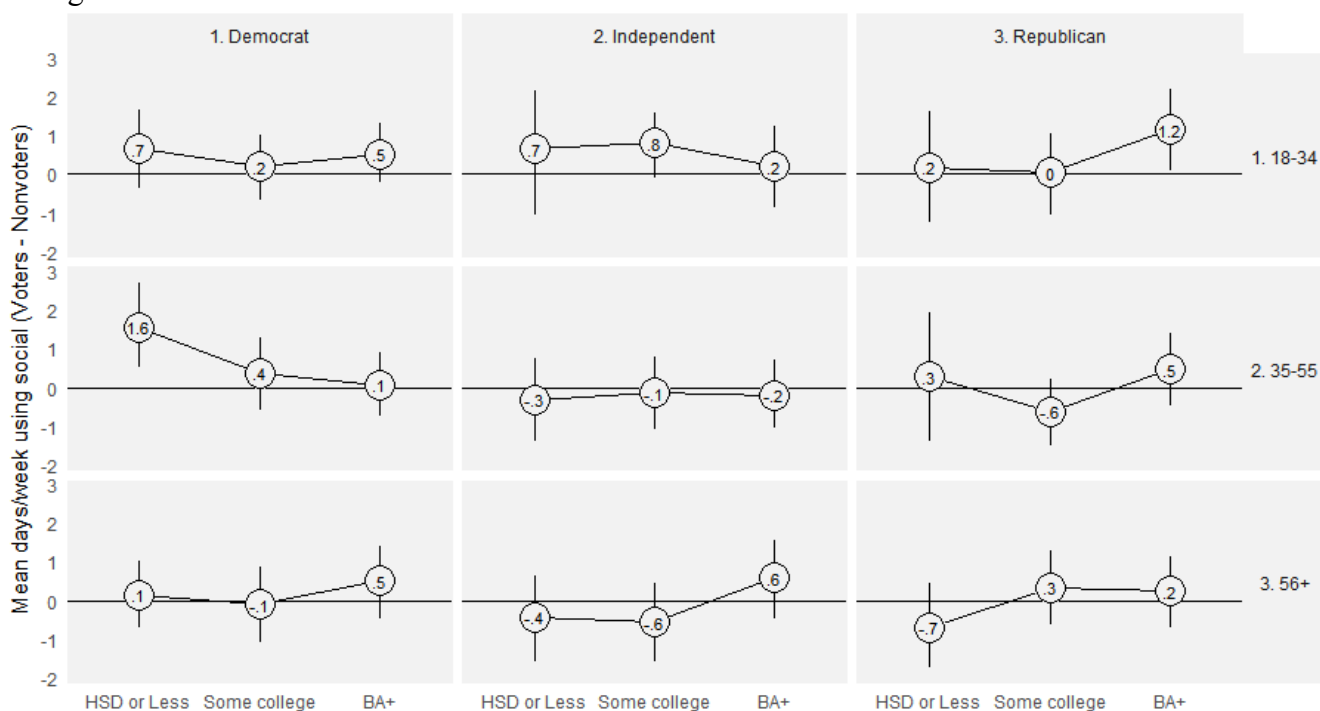
news of the day is or what the candidates are saying. This can become an important factor in whether or not the person votes. Socio-economic status can influence a lot about how a person would vote or even whether they can go out and vote, but it could also affect what news about the politicians they are getting because of the role that social media plays in the campaigns.

We can see that in figure 4 that there is virtually no difference that income makes more likely to receive news about politics via social media. We can see that if you make about \$100,000 a year that you use social media to get news slightly more than if you make less, but it's not a dramatic difference.

Over all, income doesn't make a difference on whether you are going to use social media to get political news. There are other factors that we could consider when it comes to income such as having a mobile device or internet for social media use to get political news, but those don't seem to be factors for this.

V. Participation and Social Media Use

Figure 5



As we saw in figures one through four we can see how different characteristics influence social media use for political information, but these didn't show the impact that social media has on political participation. In *figure 5* we can see the relationship of different individual characteristics, social media use, and voter participation (if the individual voted in the 2016 election).

Looking at *figure 5* we can see that both positive and negative effects occur. However, we can see that there are substantial positive effects for democrats that are between the ages of 35-55 that have a High School Diploma or less, as well as republicans that are between the ages of 18-34 with a BA or above when using social media for political news information. We also observe that independents no matter the age category or education that they tend to have the most negative impact when it comes to the relationship between social media and political participation, except for independents that are between the ages of 18 and 34.

We can say that there aren't huge effects in political participation for most of the population in a positive or negative direction. Independents seem to have the most negative effects when it comes to the use to social media and political participation, although independents that are between the ages of 18 and 34 have a positive relationship between social media and political participation regardless of their education level. There are individual characteristics that have a high positive relationship between social media use for political news and political participation, but for the majority of people there isn't a huge relationship between social media use for political news and political participation. However, for the most part other than independents, democrats and republicans have a positive relationship between social media use and political participation, but this also depends on the age category. Overall, we can say that

figure 5 shows us that while there are positive and negative effects that social media has on political participation, these effects are not substantial for most of the population.

Hypotheses Evaluation

H1: As we can see in *figure 1* age did influence how much that you use social media for political news. The 18-24 year-old age group did you social media for political news more than the rest of the age groups, but the 25-39 year old age group is close to the same use as the 18-24 year old group. However, after that the amount of days that you use social media for political news drops.

H2: Looking at *figure 2* there is no difference between the parties when it comes to how many days that they use social media for political news. So, hypothesis 2 is incorrect because democrats don't use social media for political news more than the other parties.

H3: It is not that the less education you have the more that you will use social media for political news, it is the opposite the more education you have the more you use social media for political news.

H4: Although, there is not a significant difference between the income cohorts, we do see in *figure 4* that there is a difference for the group that make over 100k a year where they used social media for political news more than people that made under 100k a year.

H5: Social media did have a positive impact for certain groups of people, it didn't have a positive outcome for all groups though some groups had negative impacts on political participation. We see that for independents ages 35-55 their negative impacts on voter participation for all education levels. There positive or no impacts for independents, democrats, and independents aged 18-34 no matter education level as well as democrats aged 35-55. While there are positive and negative impacts for democrats, independents, and republicans aged 56+ as well as republicans aged 35-55 depending on education level. This means that it is not a simple as how

many days you use social media to get your political news, it depends on age, party, and education level.

Conclusion

The role of social media can have different effects depending on what you are looking at. We can see that while there may not be a consensus from everyone in the field, we can say that for the most part the general consensus that comes from social media use in politics has not had an effect. After looking at data from the 2016 election we can see that this is true, because if social media increased political participation we would have seen an increase in how much republicans used social media. We can also say that while social media has provided us with great possibilities, these possibilities have not translated to an increase in political participation.

What we do gain from social media is that young people from the ages of 18-24 get their news from social media, which means that the age group that would be least likely to watch the news are getting some type of political news. However, this could have a negative effect, because as research has shown people typically only see things on social media that they have followed, subscribed to, or people who they add as a friend. This means that they could potentially only be seeing the side of politics that they agree with. This also is the reason that political campaigns have become more personalized and tailored to the individual.

We also observed that there is virtually no difference between partisanship and social media, nor education, or income. However, when we look at these factors in relation to whether the person votes or not we, observe that there is a difference in the turnout due to these factors. Party is one of the most important factors in this relationship, because independents have a different relation between age and education than democrats and republicans. Overall, what we observe is that the relationship between social media and voter turnout has to do with different

individual factors (age, education and party) and all these factors combined influence whether you go out and vote or not.

There is room for more research on how social media affects campaigns and how campaigns use social media, as well as how age will affect how people get their news, and of course how social media will affect the future of politics as more people of all ages use social media and new technologies. The other thing that future research related to social media will have to research, is whether the use of social media will stay consistent as people in the age groups get older and change to a different age cohort.

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