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Academic Abstract

Much like television and radio, the introduction of the internet, and subsequently social media, has fundamentally changed the way presidential candidates' campaign in the United States. The evolution of the internet has created a heightened level of scrutiny for candidates but has also provided a resource that grants unprecedented access and reach to potential voters. Campaigns have become more dependent on the use of social media marketing not only because of this reach but also because of the affordability. The internet has proven to be an ever-growing business that has inspired radical changes in presidential campaign strategies. The results of this study reveal that social media plays a dual role in U.S. presidential elections. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram significantly increase voter turnout, particularly among younger demographics, while also reinforcing partisan identities and intensifying ideological stances. However, these benefits are accompanied by challenges, including the spread of misinformation, the creation of echo chambers, and ethical concerns surrounding micro-targeted political advertisements. These findings underscore the transformative impact of social media on political behavior, highlighting both its potential to enhance democratic participation and its risks of deepening polarization. The conclusions advocate for increased digital literacy, regulatory measures, and ethical campaigning to ensure that social media serves as a constructive force in the electoral process.

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General Audience Abstract

The rise of the internet, and especially social media, has dramatically changed how U.S. presidential candidates campaign. While it gives candidates greater reach and a cost-effective way to connect with voters, it also puts them under more public scrutiny. This study shows that platforms like Facebook and Instagram can boost voter turnout, especially among young people, and strengthen political identities. But social media also has downsides, such as spreading misinformation, creating echo chambers, and raising ethical questions about targeted ads. To make sure social media supports democracy instead of dividing people, the study calls for better digital education, stronger rules, and more responsible campaign practices.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine a world without the internet and the type of access to information and media technology that we have become accustomed to over the last three (3) decades. We have seen an undeniable transformation in the way information is shared, obtained, and digested in that time span and, some would argue—such as former President Barack Obama and political commentator Fareed Zakaria—that American democracy has been a direct beneficiary of that evolution, especially through increased civic engagement and the democratization of information (Obama, 2022; Zakaria, 2019). There has never been a time in our history when Americans could communicate with each other and share their viewpoints and opinions like they can today. That said, others would argue that social media has undermined democracy by providing an avenue to spread misinformation and false claims about elections (as well as plenty of other things). With the stroke of a few keys and the click of a button, the entire world can have access to your opinion and debate can begin. In some cases, this access can even lead to civil unrest such as the January 6th raid on Capitol Hill.

Yet, while social media has undeniably expanded public access to political discourse, its influence on voter engagement and political awareness remains a complex issue. While it provides a powerful platform for political mobilization, some scholars argue, such as Prior (2007) and Iyengar and Hahn (2009), that it has also contributed to a decline in substantive political knowledge, particularly among younger generations who often rely on ideologically aligned or entertainment-focused sources. Additionally, it is important to recognize that voter behavior is influenced by more than just social media. Many broader political and economic factors, such as an outgoing president's approval rating, can significantly shape electoral outcomes. If an incumbent president has low approval ratings, the election may be more about a general desire for

change rather than the impact of social media campaigns. This will be analyzed in Chapter 3, where historical presidential approval ratings are examined in the context of social media's role in elections.

In the 19th Century, the radical improvement in the newsprint production process allowed partisan newspapers to expand their reach across the country. Accordingly, Americans began to see the benefits of a "national" news outlet for the first time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In the 20th Century, the creation of radio and then television reshaped how the world received information and raised initial concerns about the integrity of the information being disseminated to viewers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Specifically, large corporations with access to generous marketing budgets and advanced resources controlled the narrative that was shared with the world (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). As America transitioned into the 21st Century, the internet began to evolve, new methods of communication emerged, and normal citizens enjoyed a range of access and reach never before experienced. These people began to share their opinions in unprecedented fashion and at unprecedent speeds. With the growth of social media platforms, Americans can now choose their preferred information dissemination resource and reach a targeted audience quicker than ever before. However, as Wattenberg (2016) points out, while social media provides new ways for political actors to spread messages, it often prioritizes entertainment over substantive news. This has resulted in younger individuals being less informed about political processes, contributing to a decline in civic engagement (Wattenberg, 2016).

According to data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2021, the most popular social media platforms are YouTube (used by 73% of adults in the United States), followed by Facebook (69% of adults), Instagram (37% of adults), Snapchat (24% of adults), Twitter (now referred to as "X", but herein after referred to as "Twitter") (22% of adults) and WhatsApp (20% of adults) and

the usage of these platforms continues to grow each day (Fujiwara et al., 2021). On average, adults in the United States spend more than one (1) hour a day using social media networks in varying fashions (Fujiwara et al., 2021). The users of these platforms are not just getting on to share their thoughts; they are interacting with each other and debating viewpoints and opinions, all of this with a keystroke. As introduced above and which will be discussed in further detail, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have dramatically changed how we communicate information in the United States. Now, content can be created by anyone with access to the internet, with little to no impartial filtering, fact verification or journalistic judgment (Fujiwara et al., 2021). This evolution has fostered a new way of thinking in the world of politics, not just at the presidential level, but across the entire spectrum of campaigning. Among the billions of social media users are teenagers, service members, politicians and world leaders, journalists, and corporate executives. All of whom have access to each other and to a large reservoir of data. The data, which includes communication patterns and preferences of billions of individuals, can also be analyzed to produce highly sophisticated models of human behavior, which in turn is used to target advertising and interaction.

But this information comes with an asterisk and certain questions about its credibility. Since social media algorithms often reinforce users' pre-existing beliefs, users may become less exposed to diverse perspectives, which can limit critical engagement with political issues. This phenomenon, combined with the overall decline in civic education, exacerbates the political disengagement of younger generations (Wattenberg, 2016). As mentioned, Americans have never had the type of access to information that we enjoy in the 21st Century and this is in large part due to social media platforms, but it certainly is not without bias and prejudice and therefore lacks a certain level of legitimacy (DiGrazia et al., 2013).

For much of the information shared on social media platforms, there is no oversight in the data collection process and the possibility of creating a non-representative sample of the population is significantly increased. Although an effective tool and resource, the use of social media comes with risk. "Fake news" is a real thing, reader! However, we continue to see social media used in areas such as business, philanthropy and even politics. Social media is very much a "double-edged sword." On the one hand, it provides an unrivaled system to efficiently and effectively keep people informed. On the other hand, it creates the opportunity to undermine democracy by disseminating misinformation, misguided decision-making and questions of the validity and stability of our government. Over the last decade, social media platforms have become a focal point in presidential campaigning and as will be discussed in this thesis, affect voter turnout, voter preferences and other campaign related metrics. But how big of a role does social media really play in presidential campaigns?

In this thesis, I tested five (5) hypotheses related to social media usage, dealing with voter turnout, partisan affiliation, engagement in political discussions, and age demographics in the context of political ads. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, tracing the evolution of political campaigning, with a focus on advertising and communication methods, and analyzing the rise of social media as a transformative tool in modern politics. I analyzed the use of social media in the past four (4) presidential elections by each candidate as well as recent historical studies to determine what effect social media had on the most recent presidential elections, if any. That said, before we can fully understand the effects of social media on presidential elections, it is important to understand the evolution of advertising and marketing in general and how media platforms have transformed elections in America over the last several decades. Ideally, this will provide helpful context on where America has been and where it could

be going with respect to media in elections. The hypotheses explored whether higher social media usage increases the likelihood of voting and strengthens partisan identification.

Next, Chapter 3 delves into specific case studies, exploring how social media was used by candidates in the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns, the 2016 Trump campaign, and the 2020 Biden campaign, to offer a detailed understanding of its role in shaping election outcomes. Specifically, the relationship between internet access, political discussions, and how social media as a primary news source varies across age groups will be analyzed. Chapter 4 presents the theoretical framework guiding this research, developing hypotheses about the relationship between social media use and key election-related metrics such as voter turnout, and partisan identification.

Chapter 5 outlines the research design and methodology, detailing the use of ANES data to operationalize key variables and ensure robust and reliable testing, while Chapter 6 provides the results and analysis, presenting significant findings that demonstrate social media's influence on voter behavior, political engagement, and partisan dynamics. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the broader implications of these findings, emphasizing both the opportunities and challenges social media presents for democratic participation and offering recommendations for policymakers, campaign strategists, and voters. This study seeks to uncover the underlying patterns behind social media engagement and its broader influence on political participation and campaign dynamics.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of media technologies has continuously reshaped the landscape of political campaigning. Historically, the introduction of television and radio revolutionized political engagement, providing candidates with unprecedented access to voters. This thesis explores the progression from traditional media to social media and examines the impact of these platforms on the four (4) most recent presidential elections. By drawing on a range of academic sources, I analyzed the various ways social media has transformed political campaigning and its implications on the results of those elections, as well as future elections. All of that said, before we go further it is important to understand that while social media enables increased political participation, it does not operate in a vacuum. It is important to understand that other factors such as voter sentiment about the sitting president, economic conditions, and major national events also heavily influence election outcomes. The analysis in Chapter 3 will provide further insight into how these external factors may have influenced the role of social media in recent presidential elections as well.

Political Campaigning

Political communication is a subgroup of communication and political science that is centered around how information spreads and influences the various aspects of politics among policy makers, the news media, and citizens. More specifically, it focuses on how a political party presents and promotes itself through intentional activities of its leaders, candidates, politicians, members and supporters (Russmann, 2022). This is accomplished through various types of campaigning. There are four (4) main types of campaigning in the political realm (Russmann, 2022). First, is the partisan-centered approach, in which methods of political communication are party controlled and dominated. Most of the information distributed through this type of

campaigning is party driven and through partisan communication platforms. Second, there is mass-centered campaigning which is television based and appeals to mass audiences and media logic. The third approach is target-group centered and consists of multiple channels and multimedia platforms and includes tailored messages to target groups over a long period of time. Lastly, there is individual-centered campaigning, which is data based. An example of this approach would be social media data mining, which is used to create personalized messages and social media ads to individual consumers over a long period of time (Russmann, 2022.).

As advertising and communication has evolved over time, so too have the types of political campaigning and how each are utilized throughout the election process. Television and radio have played pivotal roles in political campaigns, offering candidates a direct channel to communicate with the electorate. Prior to 1960, voters and inquisitive Americans were limited to listening to radio broadcasts of debates, which was first introduced in 1930 when Franklin Roosevelt used the radio to connect with potential voters and then again in 1948 in the Dewey-Stassen Republican debate (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). Through radio, candidates were provided a more intimate and immediate form of communication method to reach voters directly in their homes and cars.

These traditional forms of media established a foundation for the mass dissemination of political messages and the cultivation of a candidate's public image. The Kennedy-Nixon debate was the first opportunity for the American population to see presidential candidates discuss the key topics that would shape the next four (4) years of American democracy. This monumental moment in the history of American government introduced the mass-produced version of face-to-face politics through television and created what we have become accustomed to today: the celebrity politician. Over seventy million Americans tuned in to watch the Kennedy-Nixon debate and their perception was much different than those that followed the debate on the radio (Dalton-

Hoffman, 2012). To those watching, Vice President Nixon provided sound answers and counterpoints, but they were largely overshadowed by his appearance on the screen. On the one hand, Senator Kennedy appeared young and full of life with the charisma required to lead a nation, and on the other hand, Vice President Nixon appeared older and somewhat pale, because of a recent hospitalization and the refusal to wear make-up, as advised. At that moment, Vice President Nixon did not project the visual image of someone capable of leading the most powerful nation in the world for the next four (4) years, regardless of the soundness of his policy arguments. In the end, many of those who tuned into the televised Kennedy-Nixon debate felt that Vice President Nixon had the better performance, but viewers could not visualize Vice President Nixon running the country for the next four (4) years due to his health, which ultimately damaged his popularity among voters (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). The Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960 highlighted the power of television in the way it shaped public perception based on visual cues and presentation skills rather than purely on policy substance (Carlisle and Patton, 2013).

Since the Kennedy-Nixon debate, the growth of the internet has largely reshaped the way all candidates, not just presidential candidates, campaign, and the way voters digest political communications and advertisement. In the early 1990's, advertising and marketing took another major step forward, when the world was introduced to the twenty-four-hour news cycle (Vonderschmitt, 2012). Since then, there has been a reconstruction of the whole campaigning process. In 1996, political campaigning first began to appear in cyberspace with simple websites providing campaign materials such as biographies of candidates. In the early 2000s, candidates became savvier and began to utilize websites for soliciting donations and other basic advertising functions, but these websites were not yet the interactive platforms we have come to know today (Vonderschmitt, 2012). By 2004, nearly thirty-seven percent (37%) of all Americans and sixty-

one percent (61%) of those with online access used the internet to get their political news and information and make campaign donations (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012).

In the 2004 presidential election, Candidate Howard Dean revolutionized campaign fundraising by raising over forty million dollars via online donations and was the first presidential candidate to create an online blog to connect with voters. The site was called "meet.up.com" and was focused on organizing gatherings of potential voters who shared similar political viewpoints as Dean. In March of 2003, Candidate Dean held seventy-nine (79) "meet-ups" in fourteen (14) different cities all organized through his website (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). By the end of the year, the site had over 140,000 members and there were over 800 meetings across the nation in the month of December alone (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). Although Dean did not win the 2004 Democratic nomination, his campaign strategy ushered in new ways to increase the efficiency of online fundraising and connecting with potential voters in a more effective manner. He leveraged online media to raise money and gain more recognition to close the gap between himself and those with larger political funding and resources. Dean also provided the world with the "I Have a Scream" speech, which was delivered by the Vermont Governor on January 19, 2004 at the Val-Air Ballroom in West Des Moines, Iowa and can still be viewed today on social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). The speech itself was met with mixed reviews, but it went "viral" and afforded Dean a new level of notoriety to which he would not have otherwise had access.

Following the end of the 2004 presidential campaign, the Pew Research Center conducted a study on Dean's ability to gain new voters through his internet site and blog. The study showed ninety-five percent (95%) of 18-29 year old's used the internet and seventy-eight percent (78%) of all Americans used the internet on a daily basis (Hamilton, 2011). Given the data and the

participation that resulted from Dean's campaign strategies, it became evident to those familiar with the political atmosphere that it would be extremely important for politicians to utilize social network platforms to stay competitive in future campaigns (Hamilton, 2011). Why? Because present day voters have the resources to be political analysts themselves because of the access to information and to the candidates, both on a professional and personal level. The internet, specifically social media, has created a dialogue among voters and candidates and, consequently, provided for a much more opportunistic based atmosphere for political campaigning. Now we see candidates go as far as hiring third party companies to track online activity throughout their campaign and teams analyze that data to create targeted advertisements for specific voter demographics, which is the individual-centered approach (and data mining) mentioned above (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012).

Social media, once a new phenomenon, is now a permanent fixture in political campaigning and its influence on political campaigns can be observed in various dimensions. For instance, the use of Facebook for political mobilization has proven to be a powerful tool for both fundraising and voter turnout (Auter and Fine, 2018). Moreover, social media platforms have been instrumental in spreading both accurate and false information, affecting voters' perceptions and belief systems throughout a campaign (Anspach and Carlson, 2022). The ability to quantify political preferences based on social media activity has also provided new insights into the ideological landscape of the electorate (Bond and Messing, 2015). As the influence of social media in political campaigns has grown, its applications have extended beyond politics into various industries, particularly in advertising and communication strategies.

Advertising and Communication Methods

Advertising is a type of persuasive communication created and circulated to potential consumers by organizations attempting to sell products or services (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The advertising industry consists of companies that market products and services, agencies that create content, media that disseminate content, and many others that play significant roles in the overall process. Often, advertisements cost money to distribute to intended audiences and utilize every possible media outlet to reach those intended consumers. These can include, but are not limited to, television, newspapers and magazines, radio, mailers, events, posters or flyers, sound bites and, of course, the internet. Within the realm of internet advertising, social media has become a significant resource for individuals and professionals to market themselves and advertise their products. Among the most popular forms of social media today, as briefly introduced above, are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Facebook was created in 2004 as a platform for college students to expand their social network and friend group with other college students across various campuses. Instagram was launched in 2010 as a photo and video sharing media application. In many ways, it is a simplification of the visual aspects of Facebook but still allows for users to post commentary in connection with the photos and videos that they post to the platform. On the other hand, Twitter, which was introduced in 2006 and is one of the more popular social media sites includes a 280-character limit on posted messages and lacks the same level of dialogue that many Facebook and Instagram users enjoy.

Regardless of the user's preference, each social media site provides an unprecedent level of access to the general public as well as a resource to target consumers in an efficient and cost effective manner (Vonderschmitt, 2012). As of February 2023, Facebook reported just shy of 3 billion users, while Instagram had roughly 2 billion and Twitter approximately 238 million:

making Facebook the most popular social media platform in the world (Dixon, 2023). Many social media platforms are sites designed to deliver custom-made news to their consumers, however, this is an oversimplification of their significance. Social media sites are news outlets, shopping centers, blogs and podcasts, social networks and so much more. It is an ever-evolving organism that recognizes few limitations under the protection of free speech and each of the social media platforms described herein offers its own means of accessibility, expression, and experience. All that said, there is one commonality among the platforms that has been a topic of debate in recent years: social media's presence in and effect on recent presidential elections. As social media platforms have become essential tools for advertisers, their influence has also permeated the political arena, shaping how voters' access and engage with campaign information.

Social Media and Politics

A survey conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center revealed sixty-two percent (62%) of American adults use a social media site to obtain their news, which is roughly ten percent (10%) of the total visits to United States news websites per year (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Additionally, direct browsing accounts for forty-eight and one-half percent (48.5%), search engines account for thirty percent (30%) and other links account for roughly ten and one-half percent (10.5%) (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Based on the information obtained from the same survey, of that sixty-two percent (62%), eighteen percent (18%) of respondents reported they obtained their news from social media "often", twenty-six percent (26%) stated they "sometimes" do and eighteen percent (18%) said they "hardly ever" obtain it from social media sites (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The number of Americans who stated they regularly learned about campaigns through the internet and social media sites has more than doubled from nine percent (9%) to roughly twenty-four percent (24%) in that time span (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Of that twenty-

four percent (24%), forty-six percent (46%) are aged 18-29 and this group reported they use the internet and social media to obtain their campaign information "almost exclusively" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This is nearly triple the percentage for any other news source for that same age group (Bradshaw & Howard, 2023).

Based on this data, the argument could be made that social media has now emerged as a powerful resource for political interaction and expression and continues to provide new ways for political actors to leverage the platforms' capabilities and spread targeted messages and information. Regardless of the factual basis of such information, each platform serves to persuade public opinion, dictate political and media agendas, filter second amendment rights and ultimately control the flow of political information in its own unique way (Bradshaw & Howard, 2023). Accordingly, governments and political parties across the entire world, not just in the United States, have committed to increasing their social media presence and invested in the tools and techniques provided by the various platforms. This evolution of political thinking demonstrates the ever-changing nature of both campaigning as well as the supposed power of social media.

In this thesis, I examined the effects of social media on past presidential campaigning. These effects include, among other metrics, voter participation, voter choice and the new media effect, which we will discuss in more detail later (Hamilton, 2011). Specifically, I examined the following components: (i) the role social media played in previous presidential elections with respect to voter turnout (i.e. did social media platforms encourage users to vote) with a specific focus on usage of social media as well as those that use social media platforms as the main source of news and political information, (ii) the truthfulness of the political information disseminated throughout these platforms by presidential candidates and their representatives, and (iii) whether social media influences the actual political ideology of a user (i.e. who they will ultimately vote

for in the election) for presidential elections or vice versa. Despite all the information available on the "presence" of social media in recent presidential elections, we still have an incomplete picture of the ways in which social media truly affects elections and the results of same.

Sure, we know Facebook offers candidates the opportunity to create a dialogue and extend their influence while also providing easy access to fundraising and donation portals. We also know that Twitter provides candidates with that same level of interaction but also a platform to offer "real-time" messages to its users in a fashion that has a way of humanizing political figures. Each platform offers a more affordable avenue to reach more constituents and data showing strategical metrics which allow for closer supervision and quicker refinement (Vonderschmitt, 2012.). These are facts that are difficult to dispute.

However, it is reasonable to pose the question: what has been learned in terms of social media and its connection to political campaigning? A more recent study on this topic conducted by a group of researchers at the University of South Florida surveyed three hundred and thirty-four (334) individuals across various regions in the United States to better understand the effects social media has played on recent presidential elections within a certain age group. Of those that responded to the survey, two hundred and eight (208) were between the ages of 18 to 22 and two hundred and ten (210) were currently in college (Guse, 2011). The data revealed nearly eighty-eight percent (88%) of the respondents observed some form of political campaign advertisements on one of the four social media platforms identified in the survey, specifically, Facebook (261), Instagram (172), Twitter (148) and SnapChat (110) (Guse, 2011). As you can see, a majority of those surveyed responded they observed some form of political campaign advertisements on more than one social media platform. To better support researchers' claims that political activity on social media has a direct correlation to presidential poll results at the end of a political election

cycle, the surveyors asked the respondents if political advertisements observed on social media would impact their vote (Guse, 2011). Of those responding to the survey, forty percent (40%) responded they "might allow" political engagement on social media to impact their vote, while thirty-seven percent (37%) said it "would not" and only twelve percent (12%) said it "would" impact their vote in the respective election (Guse, 2011). This study is another good example of data supporting the theory that social media does in fact play a role in getting voters to the polls, but the sample sizes are too small to be generalized to larger populations.

Additionally, it could be inferred from recent historical studies that social media plays a role in voter engagement and mobilization efforts. The personalized nature of social media interactions allows campaigns to tailor their messages to specific demographics, thereby increasing the effectiveness of outreach efforts (Gainous, Marlowe, and Wagner 2013). Although, the reliability and credibility of these messages has been questioned. The spread of misinformation on social media poses a significant challenge to the integrity of political campaigns. Social media platforms have been criticized for allowing the rapid dissemination of false information, which can influence voter opinions and behavior (Anspach and Carlson, 2022). This issue underscores the need for better regulation and fact-checking mechanisms to ensure voters have access to accurate information during election cycles. The ability to analyze social media data has provided new tools for understanding voter behavior and political ideology. Political scientists Robert Bond and Solomon Messing (2015) have developed methods to estimate individuals' political preferences based on their social media activity, offering valuable insights into the electorate's ideological composition (Bond and Messing, 2015). This is merely one example of how data can help candidates manage campaigns to better target their messages and understand the issues that resonate most with voters.

That said, despite the concerns, the political world has taken notice of social media's evolution. I go into further detail on the success of the use of social media in the most recent presidential elections and the new tools and resources that have been presented, but one of the most prominent changes has been the introduction of social media "bots", which are highly automated accounts that created debate-like activity on the various social media platforms (Guse, 2011). The Office of Cyber and Infrastructure Analysis (OCIA) defines Social Media Bots as: "… programs that vary in size depending on their function, capability, and design; and can be used on social media platforms to do various useful and malicious tasks while simulating human behavior" (Guse, 2011). Throughout the last four presidential elections, political activists have become more familiar with micro-targeting, which refers to the process of delivering personalized content or advertisements to a specific demographic or audience. The goal is for advertisers and content creators to leverage the enormous amount of data about the users on social media sites to be more precise and personalize the content being delivered to specific consumers. This is a tool that has been used extensively in political campaigns over the last several presidential elections to reach specific voter demographics. The vehicle for this project is often these social media "bots" as discussed above.

These technological advancements in political campaigning are not without precedent. While social media has redefined how candidates engage with voters, it follows a broader historical trend of media evolution shaping electoral strategies. The landscape of political campaigning has undergone significant changes with the advent of various media technologies. As discussed above, the transition from traditional media, such as television and radio, to the current social media platforms, and how these changes have influenced political campaigns and voter behavior is prominent. The Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960 are a prime example of media's impact (in this

case, television) on political campaigns. The debates showcased the importance of visual media in shaping public perception and voter behavior (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012; Carlisle & Patton, 2013). The shift from radio to television marked a new era where candidates' appearances and presentation skills became crucial to their electoral success. Similarly, the introduction of the internet in political campaigns brought about new strategies for fundraising and digital communication. Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign was one of the first to leverage social media for fundraising and voter mobilization (Vonderschmitt, 2012; Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). This shift laid the groundwork for more sophisticated digital campaign strategies in subsequent elections. The role of social media in political campaigns has been profound, particularly in the last four U.S. presidential elections. As these platforms have transformed how candidates engage with voters, disseminate information, and mobilize supporters. That said, it is important to keep in mind that social background and frameworks play a crucial role in political participation as well. For additional context, I reviewed recent literature on the role of social media in elections.

First, Edward Fieldhouse and David Cutts (2012) highlighted how social networks within households and communities can boost overall political participation and a similar study conducted by Rachel Gibson and Marta Cantijoch, (2013) explored the differences between online and offline political engagement. Both studies argued that while online engagement is more accessible and can reach a broader audience, it may not necessarily translate into offline political participation (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013). This distinction is important for understanding the limitations and potential of digital campaigns. In 2013, a study analyzing reports on gains in economic confidence across various states in 2012, indicated economic conditions can significantly influence voter behavior and perceptions of political candidates. This source provides valuable context for understanding how economic factors can impact electoral outcomes and voter engagement

(McCarthy, 2013). David Broockman and Donald Green (2014) investigated the effectiveness of online advertisements in increasing political candidates' name recognition and favorability. This study aimed to randomize field experiments and ultimately revealed while online ads can enhance name recognition, their overall impact on favorability is limited (Broockman and Green, 2014). This finding highlights the complexities of digital advertising and suggests that campaigns need to consider a multifaceted approach when utilizing online ads to influence voter behavior.

Political scientists Elisabeth Gidengil, Hanna Wass, and Maria Valaste (2016) investigated the role of family dynamics in political socialization and voter turnout. Ultimately, the study revealed parental influence and household discussions about politics significantly affect young voters' likelihood to participate in elections. This research underscores the importance of considering family context in political campaign strategies. Taking this even further, Gary Jacobson (2016) discusses the implications of demographic change and generational imprinting on partisan conflict and political behavior. His analysis highlighted how demographic shifts, and the political socialization of different generations influence long-term partisan dynamics (Jacobson, 2016). This insight is particularly relevant for understanding the evolving landscape of political campaigns and the importance of addressing the needs and preferences of diverse voter groups. Chris Young (2016), data provided practical insights for increasing voter turnout. Specifically, the data emphasized the importance of targeted outreach, effective communication, and leveraging social networks to mobilize voters and offered valuable guidance for political campaigns aiming to boost voter participation and engagement (Young, 2016).

Finally, communication specialists Jason Milita and John Barry Ryan (2019) analyzed the role of local media coverage in battleground states during presidential campaigns. Their findings indicated local media plays a critical role in informing voters and shaping their perceptions of

candidates (Milita and Ryan, 2019). This study emphasizes the importance of media coverage in swing states and suggests campaigns need to strategically engage with local media to influence voter behavior in these crucial areas. These are only a few of the many existing research studies designed to analyze the effects of social media on elections.

By reviewing past literature, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of media technologies, economic factors, and strategic approaches in political campaigns, and their impact on voter behavior and election outcomes. The growing influence of social media in political campaigns carries significant implications for future elections. As these platforms continue to evolve, political campaigns must adapt by refining their strategies to leverage these tools effectively. Specifically, data analytics and targeted messaging are likely to become even more sophisticated, enabling campaigns to connect with voters with unprecedented precision. However, challenges such as misinformation and the need for more robust regulation remain critical issues that must be addressed to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process. The capacity to adapt to emerging technologies and tackle these challenges will be vital for presidential candidates and political campaigns moving forward.

It is important to understand the theoretical implications of social media's influence on political campaigns is crucial, but it is equally important to examine how these dynamics have unfolded in practice. The shift from traditional media to social media has fundamentally transformed political campaigning, particularly in the last four (4) presidential elections, offering concrete examples of both the benefits and challenges posed by these digital platforms. These case studies illustrate the profound impact of social media on voter engagement, information dissemination, and the overall dynamics of political campaigns. For instance, Former President Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns are often credited with pioneering social media use in

modern political campaigning. His team effectively utilized platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to engage voters, mobilize supporters, and fundraise, especially among younger demographics (Hamilton, 2011). In contrast, Donald Trump's 2016 campaign marked a significant shift, with the use of Twitter as a primary communication tool, allowing him to bypass traditional media and directly engage with followers. However, this approach also underscored the darker aspects of social media, including the spread of misinformation and the strategic use of data analytics to target specific voter groups (Auter & Fine, 2018; Anspach & Carlson, 2022). Finally, Joe Biden's 2020 campaign built on previous strategies while adapting to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. His campaign effectively used social media platforms to maintain voter engagement and counter misinformation, while also leveraging data analytics to better understand voter behavior and tailor messaging accordingly (Anspach & Carlson, 2022). To delve deeper into the practical applications of these theoretical insights, it is essential to examine how these evolving dynamics have played out in recent political campaigns. The case studies of the four most recent presidential elections provide a detailed exploration of how candidates have harnessed the power of social media to influence voter behavior and shape election outcomes. As you will read, each have served as a critical lens through which to analyze the strategic shifts and technological advancements that have redefined political campaigning in the digital age. By investigating these real-world examples, we can better understand the ongoing transformation of political communication and its broader implications for democracy.

CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL MEDIA AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

As introduced above, this thesis explored the transformative impact of social media on political campaigning through a detailed analysis of the four most recent U.S. presidential elections. Specifically, I analyzed how candidates from 2008 to 2020 utilized platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to connect with voters, shape public discourse, and mobilize support on an unprecedented scale. By dissecting the methods and outcomes of each campaign, this study aimed to uncover broader implications for the future of political communication and the democratic process itself. The findings provide critical insights into how digital platforms continue to reshape the electoral landscape and what this means for both candidates and voters in the years to come. The case studies themselves provide a multifaceted view of the impact of social media on political campaigning and collectively illustrate the transformative power of social media, marking a new era in political communication that continues to evolve with each election cycle.

While social media has become an integral tool in modern political campaigns, it is important to recognize that broader historical, political, and economic factors influence election outcomes when analyzing elections in general. One significant factor is the approval rating of the outgoing president, which can serve as a referendum on the party in power and impact voter behavior. A deeply unpopular incumbent can lead to a wave election in favor of the opposition, while a well-liked president can bolster the chances of their party's candidate. The following sections examine each presidential election in the context of both social media usage and the political climate at the time which is designed to provide additional context on the overall effect of social media on presidential elections.

In 2008, the election followed the presidency of George W. Bush, who had an approval rating of approximately thirty-four percent (34%) at the time of the election. Given the financial

crisis and the prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was a strong public sentiment for change, which benefited Barack Obama's campaign. While social media played a role in mobilizing younger voters, it is crucial to acknowledge that the broader political climate may have had a greater influence on the election outcome. By 2012, President Obama ended his first term with an approval rating of around fifty-two percent (52%), which was relatively strong given the slow recovery from the Great Recession. His successful reelection campaign was largely attributed to his digital strategy, but his approval rating suggests that incumbency and policy decisions also played a significant role in securing a second term. A high demand for change in leadership likely contributed to Barack Obama's victory, which raises the question of whether social media was the decisive factor or if voter discontent played a more significant role.

Prior to the 2016 election the approval ratings of outgoing President Barack Obama was fifty-nine percent (59%) (Gallup). However, despite his popularity, the election resulted in a shift from a Democratic administration to a Republican one, with Donald Trump securing the presidency. The shift from a well-liked Democratic president to a Republican outsider indicates that voters may have prioritized economic concerns and a desire for non-establishment leadership over continuity. This suggests that while digital campaign strategies were significant, the overall political climate and demand for change played a more decisive role, as the statistical results show no significant effect of social media on partisanship.

Donald Trump's presidency concluded with an approval rating of approximately thirty-four percent (34%), largely due to his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and political polarization (Gallup). His loss to Joe Biden indicates that social media's role in the election must be viewed within the larger context of voter dissatisfaction with the incumbent. While social media platforms were heavily used by both candidates, the overall desire for leadership change may have

overshadowed their influence. If voter motivation was driven by a rejection of Trump rather than social media outreach, it challenges the notion that digital campaigning alone determined the election outcome.

These approval ratings were all provided by the Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends website and suggest that while social media has transformed political campaigning, it is essential to analyze election results in the context of broader political, economic, and social factors (Gallup). In many cases, the desire for change or continuity based on an outgoing president's approval rating likely had a significant impact on election outcomes as well. The findings in this thesis explored whether social media merely amplified existing voter sentiments or if it fundamentally reshaped the political landscape.

From enhancing voter engagement and mobilization to the challenges posed by misinformation, social media has introduced both opportunities and complexities to the political landscape and campaigns continue to adapt to these digital tools. The 2008 election, which marked the beginning of Senator Barack Obama's presidency, is studied for its groundbreaking use of social media and its broader historical significance, particularly in the context of the global financial crisis. The 2012 election is explored as a case of strategic continuity and innovation, as Senator Obama's campaign refined its digital outreach amidst a recovering economy and changing voter expectations. The 2016 election, characterized by the rise of populism and the disruptive power of social media, is critically analyzed to understand its profound effects on voter engagement and the destabilization of traditional campaign norms. Lastly, the 2020 election is examined against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a reimagining of campaign strategies and highlighted the deepening political polarization in the United States. Through these case studies, this thesis identified recurring themes such as the intersection of

economic conditions with voter behavior, the strategic deployment of social media, and the evolving challenges faced by political campaigns in a rapidly changing digital environment. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how these factors have collectively influenced the trajectory of U.S. elections over the past decade.

To analyze the role of social media in each of these U.S. presidential elections, a multi-step research methodology was adopted, focusing on both quantitative and qualitative data. A key part of this analysis involved the use of internet searches and reading through scholarly journals, reports from think tanks, news articles, and government publications. This wide range of research was crucial in understanding the social media dynamics at play, as they provided evidence-based insights into how candidates utilized platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The research process was systematic in nature, starting with specific search terms such as "social media and U.S. presidential elections," "Facebook political campaigns 2008-2020," "Twitter voter engagement," and "digital mobilization in elections." By applying these terms across academic databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional repositories, I ensured that the sources were both relevant and peer reviewed. Additionally, I compared internet availability and tracked the evolution of each platform's reach and engagement over the years, focusing on both candidate strategies and voter behavior. This approach helped in constructing a thorough understanding of the role social media played in voter mobilization, engagement, and misinformation across the four election cycles.

2008 Presidential Campaign

In 2008, the United States was experiencing the Great Recession, which was characterized by a severe global financial crisis and economic downturn resulting in the collapse of the housing market and bank failures. The country saw many Americans losing jobs and wealth and were

desperately calling for a change at the top from a Republican in the Commander in Chief seat to a Democrat. With economic crisis as the back drop, the 2008 presidential campaign revolutionized elections in America with the introduction of social media (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). Senator Obama, using many of the successes from Howard Dean's 2004 failed presidential bid, transformed the way in which candidates connected with voters and fundraised. Senator Obama's campaign was the most successful ever, with respect to the utilization of cyberspace resources to that point in history, as detailed below.

In 2008, two-thirds (2/3) of all internet users under the age of thirty (30) years old had some form of social networking profile and roughly fifty percent (50%) of those used their social networking sites to obtain or share information regarding their political views and campaign involvement (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). An estimated twenty-three million young American voters (aged 18-29) participated in the 2008 presidential election, which represented roughly eighteen percent (18%) of all voters in the United States at that point in time (Hamilton, 2011). This was a major increase in "young" voters as compared to what the United States had seen in the last five (5) decades (Hamilton, 2011). In 1972, fifty percent (50%) of all eligible voters aged 18-29 voted (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012.). The percentage of young voters steadily decreased between the years of 1973 and 2000 to roughly forty-one percent (41%) (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012.). The 2008 presidential election spike in young voter participation represented an eleven percent (11%) increase since the 2000 election (forty-eight percent (48%) in the 2004 election) (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012.).

Throughout the entire 2008 presidential campaign, candidates made a conscious effort to target the 18–29-year-old voter, but none were as successful as Senator Obama (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). The Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, did not get as involved in social

media as Senator Obama, and it could be argued this was largely because Senator Obama was a younger candidate and appealed to the young voter. However, the presence of social media in this campaign is undeniable. In 2008, more than seventy percent (72%) of Americans between the ages of 18-34 had or used a Facebook or MySpace account according to a Harris Interactive poll conducted following the election (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). Furthermore, these Americans (i.e. those online and active on social media platforms) were more than twice (2x) as likely to make campaign contributions (fifteen percent (15%) versus six percent (6%)) and to sign-up or register for campaign related volunteer activities (eleven percent (11%) versus four percent (4%)) than offline supporters (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). Unlike Senator McCain, Senator Obama strategically invested campaign dollars to encourage voters to get involved and be engaged in the election. In the 2008 election, two-thirds (2/3rd) of all internet users between the ages of 18-29 had some form of social networking platform, as compared to just four percent (4%) of Americans between the ages of 30-39 and only one percent (1%) of those ages forty and older obtained their political news via social media platforms (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012).

Based on a survey of Senator Obama supporters conducted during the 2008 election, seventy-four percent (74%) said they obtained their political news and information online and twenty-two percent (22%) of voters under the age of thirty (30) said they would not have been as involved in the campaign process if not for the ease of access to political information created by the internet and social media platforms (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). This newly framed campaign strategy (i.e. use of social media as a tool) connected candidates with voters and created dialogues and relationships that Americans had never seen in the history of elections, especially presidential elections. In 2008, "friending" was introduced to political campaigning and Senator Obama recognized the potential this new tool could provide for him to connect with his supporters and to,

as a result, separate him from his competition. Accordingly, Senator Obama designed a multi-platform approach to his campaign media content that targeted certain demographics while also providing a platform to bridge the gap between his supporters. Specifically, his own website (MyBarackObama.com) had over two million active users by the end of his campaign, raised over $200 million and coordinated nearly 70,000 campaign events (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). Senator Obama saw an opportunity with young voters and online users and took full advantage, which many believe, and can certainly be argued, was a key to his successful campaign. To provide additional context as to the disparity among the two presidential candidates in terms of social media use, Table 1 below illustrates campaign activity by social media site for Senators Obama and McCain, respectively. This table allows for a visual representation of just how much more active Senator Obama was than his counterpart. The disparities are evident and although we do not have adequate data to conclusively determine if Senator Obama's social media usage was the key to his election success, it would be difficult to argue that it did not at least play a role in his victory.

TABLE 1: CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY AND SUPPORT

Campaign Activity/Support	Barack Obama	John McCain
Number of Facebook friends on Election Day	2,397,253	622,860
Change in the number of Facebook friends on Election Day	+472,353	-2,732
Number of unique visitors to the campaign website for the week ending Nov. 1	4,851,069	1,464,544

Campaign Activity/Support	Barack Obama	John McCain
Number of online videos mentioning the candidate uploaded across platforms	104,454	64,092
Number of views of those videos	889 million	554 million
Number of campaign-made videos posted to YouTube	1,822	330
Total amount of time people spent watching each campaign's videos	14.6 million hours	488,000 hours
Cost of Equivalent purchase of 30-second TV ads	$46.9 million	$1.5 million
Contributions to the candidate, including public financing	$639 million	$360 million
Number of Twitter followers	125,639	5,319
Number of blog posts using the phrase "voting for"	79,613	42,093
Number of references to the campaign's voter contact ops on Google	479,000	325
Number of direct links to the campaign's voter contact tool	475	18
Percentage of voters who said they received calls or visits via campaign	26	19

(Takaragawa & Carty, 2012)

Additionally, by the end of the 2008 presidential campaign, Senator Obama had over fifteen (15) different social networking sites (including over three million Facebook followers) and spent nearly $16 million for ad space on Facebook alone (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). Senator Obama's social networking team designed a strategy to directly leverage external social networks through common interests and political views through data mining and other internet tools and digital technology. Campaign volunteers began to work smarter, not harder, in connecting voters to their candidates through cyberspace and Senator Obama was the innovator in this new campaign strategy. Following the 2008 presidential election, as noted above, America began to see a significant increase in youth participation among the 18–29-year-olds. But was social media interaction the reason they went out to the polls and ultimately led to Senator Obama's election?

Although difficult to quantify the true impact of social media following the 2008 presidential campaign, the 2008 campaign was America's first glimpse into social media's profound impact on political campaigning, altering the ways in which candidates interact with voters, disseminate information, and mobilize support. The significance of traditional media, particularly television and radio, in political campaigns is well-established. Juliet Carlisle and Robert Patton (2013) discussed the transformative impact of televised debates, highlighting the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates as a pivotal moment that underscored the importance of visual presentation in shaping public perception (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Similarly, radio provided candidates with a direct and personal means of reaching voters, fostering a sense of intimacy and immediacy that television later expanded upon. These media forms laid the groundwork for mass communication strategies that would later be adapted to the digital age and helped usher in the new strategies utilized by Senator Obama in the 2008 presidential election.

Moreover, social media's entry into the political arena marked a significant shift from the traditional one-way communication model to a more interactive and engaging approach. Carlisle and Patton categorized the 2008 presidential election as a "watershed moment", with Senator Obama's campaign effectively leveraging platforms like Facebook to mobilize young voters and create a community-driven campaign (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). This use of social media not only enhanced voter engagement but also introduced new dynamics in how campaigns could target and interact with specific demographic groups. Taking this a bit further to fully understand the transformation, I researched several studies that underlined the impact of social media on voter engagement and mobilization. Specifically, Auter and Fine (2018) examined the use of Facebook for fundraising and voter turnout, illustrating how personalized interactions on social media can lead to significant campaign advantages. Additionally, Gainous, Marlowe, and Wagner (2013) explored the bridging effect of online social networking, suggesting that social media can help mitigate traditional political participation divides by reaching a broader audience. The researchers argue that social media platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of false information, which can distort voter perceptions and influence electoral outcomes (Anspach and Carlson, 2022). This concern is echoed by a 2015 study conducted by Bond and Messing (2015), which discussed the challenges of quantifying political ideologies on social media, noting the public nature of these platforms can sometimes amplify misleading or biased content.

This same study provides insights into the quantification of political ideology through social media data. By analyzing publicly revealed preferences on platforms like Facebook, researchers offer a fresh approach to understanding the ideological landscape of the electorate (Bond and Messing, 2015). This ability to gauge political leanings based on social media activity represents a significant advancement in political science research, allowing for more targeted and

effective campaign strategies. The comparative effectiveness of traditional versus internet media is also explored by a group of researchers in 2020. Specifically, the study highlights how trust in the medium influences' voter behavior, suggesting that while traditional media remains influential, social media offers unique advantages in terms of reach and engagement (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner, 2019). This dual perspective underlines the ongoing evolution of media strategies in political campaigns, where both traditional and digital platforms play complementary roles.

The drastic rise in social media presence and the increase in young voter turnout throughout the 2008 presidential campaign caught the attention of many researchers within the political spectrum. In a study conducted two (2) weeks prior to election night, Kushin and Yamamoto analyzed three (3) main factors in an attempt to determine if there was a connection between social media and political involvement (Hamilton, 2011). These factors included (1) the consideration to social media for campaign information, (2) online dialogue about the campaign, and (3) consideration to traditional internet sources for campaign information (Hamilton, 2011). This study revealed that nearly twenty-seven percent (27%) of adults between the age of 18-29 obtained campaign information from social network sites, which was in stark contrast to the four percent (4%) of adults between the ages of 30-39 and the one percent (1%) of adults older than 40 years old that reported obtaining their campaign information from social media platforms (Hamilton, 2011). Ultimately, the study concluded there was no significant positive connection between social media usage and political involvement. The various platforms were simply too new at that point in time to produce a substantively impactful analysis of self-efficacy and participation (Hamilton, 2011).

Another study conducted by Samantha Hamilton of Roger Williams University, noted the general political attitudes and behavior of 18–24-year-old students at a regional liberal arts

university with a similar hypothesis, but a slightly different conclusion. The researchers theorized social media usage would cause a significant increase in both voter participation and positive voter choice (i.e. the likelihood of a voter choosing a particular candidate in an election). The survey collected information on one hundred and sixty-six (166) participants and results showed most of the students relied heavily on social media platforms to obtain their political information and news. Specifically, forty-six percent (46.4%) used Facebook, nine percent (9%) used Twitter and four percent (4%) used some form of internet blog (Hamilton, 2011). Given the small sample size, the researchers concluded, but not without caution, that social media played a substantive role in the collection of political information for individuals aged 18-24, but there was insufficient data to show a connection between social media usage and voter participation. Ultimately, it was agreed among the researchers that the data showed a causal connection between social media and voter turnout, but the sample size was too small to produce reliable data as to determine if respondents were more likely to participate in a particular election based on their social media usage (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012).

In several ways, the 2008 presidential campaign marked the beginning of an enormous transformation in the American campaign process and the data we analyze during elections. Sure, America was desperately calling for a change and some could argue that Senator Obama was going to win the 2008 election regardless of his social media presence, but it cannot be disputed that social media at least played a role and certainly paved the way for future elections. Although campaign strategies have continued to evolve, the 2008 presidential campaign was the first to see social media play a prominent role and truly catapulted this new communication medium to the forefront of campaign strategy sessions. Social media functioned largely as a tool for dissemination of information, opinion reinforcement, support mobilization for the candidates, even though it was

only fully exploited by Senator Obama. The ease of information sharing facilitated the stimulation of the youth vote across America and transformed electoral campaign strategies and communication practices. The 2008 presidential campaign marked the highest number of 18–29-year-old voters since the 1972 presidential election (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). By 2009, a Pew Research Center survey showed fifty-five percent (55%) of all adults (and seventy-four percent (74%) of all internet users) confirmed the internet as their primary source for news, political and/or election related information source and social sites to communicate with other political activists (Hamilton, 2011). This growth continued over the next several years, which set the stage for social media to increase its presence in the 2012 presidential campaign.

2012 Presidential Campaign

By 2012, the United States economy was slowly recovering from the Great Recession. The unemployment rates remained elevated, but the stock market had improved, and the housing market was stabilizing (McCarthy, 2012). Throughout the country, economic confidence improved compared to the previous year. However, the Gallup Economic Confidence Index, which is a composite of Americans' ratings of current U.S. economic conditions and their perceptions of the economy's direction and has a theoretical maximum of +100 (if all respondents rate the economy "excellent" or "good" and say it is getting better) and a theoretical minimum of -100 (if all rate the economy "poor" and say it is getting worse) (McCarthy, 2012), remained negative in all fifty (50) states in 2012, while it turned positive in the District of Columbia. After the nation's capital, the index registered its highest averages in Minnesota, Hawaii, Maryland, and Iowa (McCarthy, 2012). It was lowest in West Virginia, followed by Wyoming. Most of the top ten (10) states in economic confidence were the same as in 2011, with some shifts in order; however, Texas, Virginia, and Washington were new. Of the bottom ten (10), only West Virginia, Mississippi, Montana, and

Idaho were repeats from 2011 (McCarthy, 2012). These results were based on Gallup Daily tracking interviews with nearly 175,000 national adults, conducted from January through December 2012, and thus represent averages for the year (McCarthy, 2012). The Gallup Economic Confidence Index averaged -21 nationally in 2012, up 16 points from -37 in 2011. The 2012 figure includes several months of improving confidence at the start of the year, followed by a slump over the summer and renewed confidence in the fall (McCarthy, 2012).

Based on this data, the American economy remained at the forefront of the election and produced a closer race among the candidates. Although the 2008 presidential election introduced the world to politics on social media and cyber campaigning, the 2012 presidential campaign is widely considered the first election cycle to heavily incorporate and rely on the use of social media as a strategic marketing tool (Guse, 2011). Prior to this election, there were over 200 million Twitter accounts and each main stage candidate had adopted a political strategy with social media playing a significant role (DiGrazia et al., 2013). In 2010, there were roughly 113,000 tweets that contained a reference to a candidate for Congress in either district (which included a control measure to account for the frequency a candidate was mentioned in transcripts of broadcasts on CNN news) (DiGrazia et al., 2013). In 2012, that number increased to 420,000 (DiGrazia et al., 2013). President Obama employed over one hundred (100) people to work on his social media outreach alone and had over seventy-nine (79) different third-party tracking sites. For comparison, Republican Candidate Romney had only forty (40) such programs across his sites and platforms (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). President Obama designed a marketing strategy centered on humanizing himself to voters, as opposed to painting himself in a more commercial fashion. He was willing to invest money to accomplish his campaign strategy goals and implemented an aggressive social

media campaign strategy. This strategy proved to be successful, but it also changed the national election landscape and how future candidates would spend their campaign dollars.

For additional context, President Obama spent roughly $95,000 on various online advertisements, while Romney spent $84,000 on similar online advertisements (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). Despite the difference in dollars spent, analysis showed that the "cost per click", which is a search engine marketing strategy for generating traffic to a website by paying for visitors, was relatively even between the two (2) candidates. Specifically, Romney's cost per click was $1.32 and President Obama's was $1.15 (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). Based on the data set forth in Table 2 below, which was collected in October of 2012, President Obama dominated the overall social media output throughout the campaign (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012).

TABLE 2: SOCIAL MEDIA OUTPUT

Candidate Title	Name	Facebook Friends	Twitter Followers	Video Views
President	Obama	21,234,754	31,250,798	253,407,026
Vice President	Biden	286,306	481,406	2,213,301
President	Romney	1,550,935	10,475,150	27,588,314
Vice President	Ryan	489,814	5,027,363	2,232,937

(Dalton-Hoffman, 2012)

But did this output play a role in President Obama's victory in the election? Of the voters that completed an exit poll on November 6, 2012, sixty-nine percent (69%) reported using social media for something campaign related (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). A similar poll was conducted following

the 2008 presidential election and showed that only thirty-seven percent (37%) of adults reported using social media for campaign related matters (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012).

It is true social media does in fact expand the means and methods by which election campaigning is conducted, but there is still a lack of substantive evidence and/or research that links high levels of social media activity by presidential candidates to an increase in poll attendance and voter appeal. A 2012 study conducted by Sounman Hong and Daniel Nadler analyzed the daily Twitter activity of seven (7) presidential candidates in 2012 for a twenty-two (22) day period (Hong & Nadler, 2012). The goal of the study was to determine if candidates' Twitter activity showed any association with the number of mentions they receive and to what extent. It was one of the first empirical studies that provided evidence about the possible effects of social media on presidential elections and it did so by testing the connection between "candidate salience" and the candidates' level of engagement on social media platforms (Hong & Nadler, 2012). Ultimately, the study concluded there was little evidence to support the correlation between the candidates Twitter activity and the number of mentions sequentially tagged on Twitter, but there was data connecting the number of times a politician was mentioned by a popular traditional media outlet to the number of social media mentions on Twitter (Hong & Nadler, 2012).

The effects of social media in the 2012 presidential election were also felt on the fundraising side of the campaign. Following the re-election of President Obama, statistics showed that sending a tailored data request via an online platform outperformed the traditional fundraising mail request by over fourteen percent (14%) (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). This is in large part due to the volume of people that can be accessed via online platforms and the efficiency and low cost in doing so, as compared to traditional mailers. A 2013 Pew Research Center survey showed fifty-five percent (55%) of registered voters in the 2012 presidential election went online during the

election to watch videos or other campaign related advertisements and twenty-two percent (22%) of that same group of voters informed family and friends that they had voted (as posted via a social media platform) (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). This data suggests that voters who are social media users are going out to the polls, but again there is not sufficient evidence to answer the overall question of whether social media campaigning is the reason behind their willingness to vote or whether it affected the overall outcome of the election.

That same study conducted by the Pew Research Center provided some data on the actual number of social media posts throughout the 2012 presidential campaign. Specifically, there were 11,179,537 tweets and 442,524 Facebook posts about President Obama, while there were 7,740,992 tweets and 249,567 Facebook posts about Romney counted between August 27th-September 23rd (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012) . On Twitter, seventeen percent (17%) of the tweets about Romney were positive and fifty-nine percent (59%) were negative in nature (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). Contrarily, tweets about President Obama were twenty-five percent (25%) positive and forty-four percent (44%) negative in nature (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). When looking at the full spectrum of social media platforms analyzed in the study, fifty-five (55%) of the posts from President Obama's campaign focused on self-promotion, including promoting information regarding his background and his accomplishments throughout his career. Similarly, fifty-two percent (52%) of the posts from the Romney campaign were focused on self-promotion. On the other hand, over thirty-four percent (34%) of Romney's campaign posts were negative in nature and directly aimed at President Obama's policy positions or actions (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012).

Going further into the data produced by this same survey, President Obama had a mere fourteen percent (14%) of his posts dedicated to Romney. These numbers held true across all the various social media platforms, except for Facebook which saw a majority of posts centered around

self-promotion (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). For example, sixty-five percent (65%) of Romney's posts were self-subjected and President Obama dedicated seventy-four percent (74%) of posts to this topic (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). The same study showed nearly all of the tweets, posts and YouTube videos that were posted between June 4th and 17th in connection with the presidential campaign were generated by someone inside the candidate's campaign or a well-known supporter of the respective candidate (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012). The 2012 presidential campaign solidified social media's influence on American politics and confirmed what many believed following the 2008 presidential election: candidates that are not utilizing social media and other cyber-related resources in their campaign strategy are starting behind the curve. The data clearly shows the prominent presence of social media in these elections, but questions remain as to what effect they truly have on the outcomes of the elections. As campaigns continued to evolve, the 2016 presidential campaign saw even more growth with respect to social media's presence.

2016 Presidential Campaign

By 2013, the political landscape in the United States looked completely different than it did less than a decade previously, and presidential elections were no exception. The American economy had significantly improved as unemployment had decreased, the stock market was reaching record highs, and the housing market had recovered. From November 2011 to November 2012, nonfarm employment increased in forty-five (45) states and decreased in five (5) states and the District of Columbia (US Bureau). Over the year, twenty-nine (29) states experienced statistically significant changes in employment; only West Virginia's employment decreased (−1.8 percent, or −13,800) (US Bureau). Among those states, North Dakota recorded the largest over-the-year percentage increase in employment (+4.7 percent, or +18,800), followed by Utah (+3.1 percent, or +38,200) and Hawaii (+3.0 percent, or +17,700) (US Bureau). This economic upswing

provides important context for understanding voter behavior in the 2012 election, suggesting that favorable economic conditions may have played a more decisive role in the outcome than the influence of social media.

As we saw in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, candidates in the 2016 elections took their online presence to an entirely new level, and the world seemed to fully recognize the power of the internet and social media platforms. Additionally, Americans started to see an evolution in congressional elections. Many candidates for Congress began to use Facebook and Twitter to engage with the public in the months before and after election day. But, with the newfound presence of social media platforms in politics and its widespread footprint, questions began to surface about the creditability of what users were obtaining from their preferred cyber sites. Following the 2016 presidential election, society coined the now commonly known phrase "fake news". According to a report conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017, only thirty-four percent (34%) of web-using adults trusted the information they were obtaining from social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In contrast, seventy-six percent (76%) of this same sample size trusted the national news organizations and eighty-two percent (82%) trusted the local news organizations they viewed on a regular basis (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). But the questionable quality of information did not seem to stall the growth of social media's presence in campaigns across the spectrum of American politics.

Political newcomers trying to make a career for themselves began to see a spike in their public support from social media channels and were able to allocate financial resources to other areas because of the relatively low cost involved with social media advertising. For context, based on a study conducted by Wharton's Pinar Yidirim, within the first month of utilizing Twitter, political newcomers (not incumbents) were able to raise roughly the same amount of campaign

capital as they did in a two (2) year traditional campaign (Yildirim, 2020). For those politicians who did not have the same level of financial resources as, say a Michael Bloomberg (who reportedly spent over $1 billion on his presidential race in 2016 (70% of which went toward advertising)), the ability to stretch campaign dollars via social media platforms became an invaluable asset to political newcomers (Yildirim, 2020). Looking at the bigger picture, social media and the financially accessible platforms provided to non-incumbents leveled the playing field among politicians and brought American democracy and politics back to its roots. An ordinary citizen in the United States with political aspirations no longer needed substantial capital and significant fundraisers or big donor supports to have a chance at winning an election. Rather, they just needed the support of the American people, which social media provides access at a reduced cost. And not only are those people accessible, but they are also engaging.

In a post-election survey completed in connection with the 2016 presidential election, respondents reported spending roughly sixty-six (66) minutes per day reading, watching or listening to election news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In that same span of time, roughly twenty-five (25) minutes (or thirty-eight percent (38%)) was spent on various social media platforms (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Table 3 below depicts responses from participants of that same survey when asked "which of these sources was your most important source of news and information about the 2016 election".

TABLE 3: SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS

Source of 2016 Election News	Percentage
Cable TV	23.5%

Source of 2016 Election News	Percentage
Network TV	19.2%
Local TV	14.5%
Social media	18.8%
Website	14.8%
Print	8.0%
Radio	6.2%

(Pew Research, 2016)

As you can see from the table, despite being a relatively new source for election news, social media was already being utilized by over eighteen percent (18%) of respondents. Brad Parscale, digital media director for Republican nominee, Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign, was quoted saying "Facebook and Twitter were the reason we won this thing…..Twitter for Candidate Trump and Facebook for fundraising" (Guse, 2011). Although there is evidence that social media had a significant presence in Candidate Trump's campaign in 2016, and in both of President Obama's successful campaigns, again, there is little empirical evidence that supports the hypothesis that social media affected metrics such as voter turnout or election results from the 2008, 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns. The reoccurring issue with the historical studies is with respect to sample size.

Ultimately, the data is supportive of many of the hypotheses, but the sample sizes are much too small and provide statistically indistinguishable evidence to support those hypotheses fully and

conclusively. This makes the outcome of the 2016 election particularly puzzling, as traditional fundamentals suggested a Democratic win, economic indicators were strong, and the outgoing president, Barack Obama, maintained high approval ratings. However, Hillary Clinton, despite her experience and broad institutional support, struggled to connect with key demographics and faced challenges related to media coverage, email investigations, and public perception. These factors, combined with Trump's unconventional messaging and strong digital presence, suggest that 2016 may represent a deviation from historical electoral norms. A theme that would continue to be present in the 2020 presidential campaign.

2020 Presidential Campaign

The 2020 presidential election was one of the most anticipated, contentious, and unusual elections in recent memory and took place in a substantially different political climate than any race in United States history. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a sharp economic downturn that included lockdowns and restrictions resulting in job losses and another recession, the political atmosphere that the candidates found themselves was unique to say the least. By the beginning of election season in 2020, there was an estimated 233 million social media users in the United States (Moore & Hinckle, 2020). For context, seventy-two percent (72%) of voting age citizens were social media users and sixty-nine percent (69%) of that group used Facebook alone (Suciu, 2020). During the 2020 campaign, President Trump had roughly 87 million followers on Twitter as compared to Joe Biden's 11 million (DiGrazia et al., 2013). Between the span of October 21 to October 23, 2020, data showed that there were 6.6 million total mentions of President Trump and Biden, with Biden holding seventy-two percent (72%) of those mentions (Pew Research Center, 2021). As depicted in Table 4 below, social media presence, specifically on Twitter, of lawmakers and political activists increased substantially between the

2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Pew Research Center, 2021). Social media platforms had solidified their place as a valuable tool for political communication and those campaigning for their place in the United States government had taken notice. The survey shows mentions of certain words and phrases associated with higher-than-usual audience engagement, measured by "favorites" and "retweets" on Twitter or "reactions" and "shares" on Facebook during the study periods in 2016 and 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2021). What can be deciphered from the data is that it is not only just presidential candidates and congressman that have begun to utilize social media platforms as political resources, but also lawmakers at every level of the American government. The financial benefits (i.e., greater accessibility at a lower cost) could no longer be denied and everyone had taken notice.

TABLE 4: POLITICALY RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA USE TRANSFORMATION

Category	Year	Facebook	Twitter
Posts	2016	65K	142K
Posts	2020	100K	215K
Reactions/Favorites (in M)	2016	18M	43M
Reactions/Favorites (in M)	2020	121M	299M
Shares/Retweets (in M)	2016	8M	12M
Shares/Retweets (in M)	2020	17M	56M

(Pew Research, 2021)

Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, mentions of the phrase "president-elect Trump" by Democratic lawmakers received nearly five hundred percent (500%) more audience interactions relative to the average post during that same period. Among Republican lawmakers in that same timeframe, references to Cuban dictator Fidel Casto (who died during the study period on November 25, 2016) produced the highest engagement increase (two hundred and twenty-seven percent (227%)) over the average post during the study period (Pew Research Center, 2021).

The table regarding the transformation of politics in social media is a good illustration of a specific measure on social media platforms (i.e., mentions or likes, etc.), but bigger picture reveals that the American voters had become more engaged in political communication and the overall campaign process. The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic fallout were the central issues of the 2020 election, and much like in the 2008 election, there was widespread discussion about the need for a different approach to address the nation's challenge. Social media was not at the forefront but certainly had a presence. Whether this has resulted in better voter turnout or persuasion with respect to their actual votes or ultimately affected the outcomes is still up for debate as suggested by the historical studies we have examined.

All this said, the evolution of social media usage in United States presidential elections from 2008 to 2020 illustrates a dramatic shift in how campaigns engage with voters and shape electoral outcomes. In 2008, former President Barack Obama's campaign set a precedent by leveraging social media primarily as a tool for grassroots organizing and fundraising, capitalizing on platforms like Facebook and Twitter to mobilize supporters and drive donations (Kreiss, 2012). This strategic use of social media marked the beginning of a new era in political campaigning, demonstrating its potential to reach and influence a wide audience effectively. By the 2012 election, social media had become a more entrenched component of campaign strategies, with both

candidates increasingly using it to disseminate messages and engage with voters in real-time. The Obama campaign, for instance, continued to innovate by incorporating data analytics to tailor messaging and optimize outreach efforts (Bond et al., 2012). The rise of platforms like Instagram and the growing sophistication of social media analytics tools reflected an increasing recognition of social media's role in shaping voter perceptions and behaviors, supporting findings from current literature that highlight the growing importance of digital platforms in modern electoral strategies (Gonzalez-Bailon, 2017).

The 2016 and 2020 elections further underscore the profound impact of social media on presidential campaigns. The 2016 election saw a dramatic shift as social media became a battleground for misinformation, targeted ads, and unprecedented levels of voter engagement through platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Tufekci, 2018). The 2020 election amplified these trends, with social media playing a critical role in mobilizing voters amidst a global pandemic and social unrest (Enli, 2020). Current literature emphasizes that while social media has become an essential tool for political campaigns, it also poses challenges related to misinformation and polarization, reflecting a complex interplay between digital engagement and electoral outcomes (Pew Research Center, 2020). This analysis of the four (4) elections highlights the evolving nature of social media's influence and underscores its significant impact on contemporary political campaigns but also confirms there is much to study as we still do not have clear empirical evidence on its impact on presidential election metrics. Accordingly, this thesis will aim to further close the gap in societies understanding of social media's role in presidential elections by examining several hypotheses as will be discussed in further detail below.

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The presence of social media in political campaigns is undeniable, and as both continue to evolve and expand, interest in understanding their causal connection has grown as well. Social media's role (and importance) in a presidential campaign is shaped by various factors, including the nature of communication, the targeted audience, and the overall campaign strategy for the candidate. Specifically, social media provides an expansive and easily accessible platform to reach large audiences (i.e., voters) and to engage with them in real time—all in a very cost-effective manner. Second, it allows candidates to use "micro-targeting" (the use of data analytics to deliver tailored political messages to specific voter groups based on their behaviors and preferences), as discussed herein, to deliver messages efficiently and effectively to specific demographics. Next, campaigns utilize social media platforms to collect and analyze data from user interactions, which allows them to supervise and refine strategies in real time and even predict voter behavior, which ultimately permits the reallocation of resources and campaign funds. Lastly, social media is used to energize and mobilize voters and provide an avenue for which they can engage and participate in campaign activities such as donating, volunteering, and voting.

Given this backdrop, it is imperative to examine whether social media is equally influential across all voter demographics. Social media use spreads across all ages and demographics in the United States, but is it arguably more influential among younger voters? This is largely due to the fact that this age group utilizes social media platforms as their main source for news consumption and political engagement. Accordingly, this group is more likely to encounter a diverse array of political viewpoints, engage in political discussions, and mobilize through social media due to its interactive nature and algorithm-driven content curation. According to the Pew Research Center, forty-eight percent (48%) of adults aged 18–29 get their news primarily from social media,

compared to just fourteen percent (14%) of those aged 65 and older (Pew Research Center, 2021). Additionally, social media's role in shaping political attitudes and behaviors is more pronounced among younger voters, who are often more receptive to digital content and online activism (Smith & Anderson, 2018). This heightened influence is also reflected in their higher levels of political participation through digital means, such as sharing political content, participating in online discussions, and organizing or joining social movements (Zuckerman, 2019). Therefore, social media platforms not only serve as a primary news source for younger voters but also play a crucial role in their political engagement and mobilization efforts.

Despite these insights, the precise impact of social media on presidential elections remains a challenge to quantify. Accordingly, the question remains: what effect does social media actually have in presidential elections and their results? For this study, I tested five (5) hypotheses through the collection of data on the 2020 presidential election from the American National Election Studies (ANES) website as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Social Media Usage and Voter Turnout:

Prior research suggests a strong link between social media engagement and increased political participation, particularly among younger demographics (Smith & Anderson, 2018). ***H1: A higher hour count spent on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) will be positively associated with the likelihood of voting in the 2020 presidential election..*** The independent variable (i.e. the variable that is manipulated, categorized, or measured to determine its effect on another variable) is social media usage, while the dependent variable (i.e. the variable that is measured and expected to change in response to the independent variable) is voter turnout. I used survey data from the 2020 presidential election collected from ANES on both social media

activity and voting behavior to test this relationship. The theory behind this hypothesis is that higher engagement with digital platforms increases awareness and motivation to participate in democratic processes and previous studies have indicated a correlation between digital engagement and voter mobilization (Zuckerman, 2019).

Hypothesis 2: Social Media as a Source for Political Ads and Political Affiliation:

Based on prior studies, political advertising on social media has been shown to influence partisan alignment, especially as social media platforms allow for micro-targeting of specific voter demographics (Fujiwara et al., 2021). ***H2: Individuals who report social media as their primary source for political advertisements will be more likely to identify with a strong partisan affiliation compared to those who obtain political ads from other sources***. Here, the independent variable is the source of political ads (social media vs. other), and the dependent variable is party affiliation. This hypothesis is grounded in the expectation that individuals that are exposed to social media advertisements, designed to resonate with users' specific preferences and behaviors, effects alignment with political parties (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Hypothesis 3: Social Media Use and Political Ideology:

As introduced, existing literature indicates that prolonged exposure to social media can reinforce political beliefs, thereby intensifying ideological stances (DiGrazia et al., 2013). ***H3: The amount of time spent on social media platforms will be positively associated with the observed strength (moderate to strong) of political ideology.*** The independent variable is time spent on social media, and the dependent variable is the strength of political ideology. While theory suggests that frequent social media use can strengthen ideological beliefs, this study examines how

social media usage and ideological intensity are related based on a single point in time (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Hypothesis 4: Internet Access and Use of Social Media for Political Ads:

Prior studies indicate that the rise in internet access has been a significant driver of increased participation in political discourse (Zuckerman, 2019). ***H4: Individuals with readily accessible internet will be more likely to engage in political discussions and use social media for political advertisements compared to those with limited access***. The independent variable is internet access, while the dependent variable is the use of social media for political ads. The rationale here is that easier access to the internet provides more opportunities to participate in political forums, social media discussions, and debates, which may lead to higher levels of engagement in political matters (Fujiwara et al., 2021).

Hypothesis 5: Age and Use of Social Media for Political Ads:

There is substantive evidence that younger voters are more reliant on social media as a primary source for news and political content (Pew Research Center, 2021). ***H5: A voter's age will be negatively correlated with the likelihood of using social media as a primary source for obtaining political advertisements.*** The independent variable is age, and the dependent variable is the use of social media for political ads. This hypothesis builds on the well-documented trend that younger individuals, who are generally more tech-savvy, prefer social media as their go-to source for political information, as opposed to traditional media channels (Smith & Anderson, 2018). While prior studies have highlighted age-based differences in social media use for general political news, few have specifically examined the role of social media for political advertisements. By

focusing on ads—often micro-targeted and visually oriented—we gain more precise insights into how younger and older voters encounter campaign messaging. Moreover, this research employs age as a continuous measure rather than broad categories (e.g., "young," "middle-aged," "older"), enabling a more nuanced understanding of generational variation in media consumption for political ads.

In summary, these five (5) hypotheses aim to provide a clearer understanding of how social media influences voter behavior, political alignment, and campaign dynamics in modern U.S. presidential elections. By analyzing the relationship between social media usage and key electoral metrics such as voter turnout, partisan affiliation, and ideological development, this study contributes meaningful insights to the broader discourse on the role of digital platforms in democracy and contributes new insights to a growing literature on how technological preferences intersect with political communication strategies. As the role of social media continues to grow in political campaigning, the findings from this research will offer valuable evidence on whether these platforms truly enhance political participation or exacerbate existing divisions. Ultimately, the goal is to not only address critical gaps in the literature but also underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of how the digital age is reshaping the electoral landscape and its implications for the future of democratic engagement.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The overall objective of this thesis was to review existing data and to contribute to the growing body of literature on political activity and the influence of digital technologies (more specifically, social media platforms). To confirm or deny the proposed hypotheses, I collected existing data from the ANES database. The variables used for each hypothesis were operationalized (i.e. defining and transforming a concept or variable into a measurable and analyzable format for statistical analysis) using relevant ANES questions, ensuring the accurate measurement of the concepts described in the hypotheses. ANES is widely regarded as reliable and valid due to its rigorous methodology, which includes probability-based stratified random sampling and high-quality survey designs. Its longitudinal data collection over several decades ensures consistency and allows for comparative analysis, while its thorough pretesting and question validation contribute to its credibility in capturing public opinion and voting behavior trends. Then, logistic regression models were estimated for each hypothesis with controls for demographic and other relevant variables and the data was analyzed to determine the statistical significance (i.e. p-values and coefficients).

For each hypothesis, the following operationalizations were employed:

- **Hypothesis 1: Social Media Usage and Voter Turnout:** The social media usage variable was operationalized using an ANES variable measuring self-reported time spent on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Facebook Variable Code: V202542 and Twitter Variable Code: V202544), while voter turnout was measured by respondents' self-reported voting behavior in the 2020 election (Variable Code: V202116). In terms of coding, respondents' social media usage was measured on a scale from 0 to 8, reflecting estimated hours spent per day, with a mean of 1.572 and a standard deviation of 1.796 (Table 6).

Voter turnout was recoded into a binary format, where 1 indicated having voted and 0 indicated not voting, yielding a mean of 0.773 and standard deviation of 0.419 (Tables 5 and 6).

- **Hypothesis 2: Social Media as a Source for Political Ads and Partisan Identification**: The source of political ads was determined using the ANES question regarding respondents' primary source of political advertisements (Variable Code: V201629c), and partisan identification was operationalized using the variable capturing the strength of respondents' partisan affiliation (Variable Code: V201228). To facilitate analysis, social media as a source for political ads was recoded as a binary variable (1 = Social Media, 0 = Other), with a mean of 0.699 and a standard deviation of 0.459 (Table 6). Partisan affiliation was also simplified into a binary format (1 = Partisan, 0 = Not Partisan), with a mean of 0.528 and standard deviation of 0.499, as shown in Tables 5 and 6.

- **Hypothesis 3: Social Media Use and Partisan Identification Strength**: The social media usage variable was measured through an ANES variable assessing social media activity (Facebook Variable Code: V202542 and Twitter Variable Code: V202544), while partisan identification was operationalized using the variable capturing the strength of respondents' partisan affiliation (Variable Code: V201229). Social media activity was again coded on a 0–8 scale to reflect estimated usage hours, producing a mean of 1.572 and standard deviation of 1.796. The strength of partisan identification was converted to a binary measure, distinguishing strong partisans (1) from weaker or no affiliations (0), as reflected in Table 5.

- **Hypothesis 4: Internet Access and Use of Social Media for Political Ads**: The internet access variable was operationalized through an ANES variable measuring self-reported

time spent online (Variable Code: V202543), and the use of social media for political ads was operationalized using the ANES variable that asks respondents about their primary source of political content (Variable Code: V201629c). Internet access was measured on a 1–5 scale, where higher values indicate greater access, with a mean of 4.393 and a standard deviation of 0.990 (Table 6). Use of social media for political content was again coded as a binary variable, with 1 indicating reliance on social media and 0 representing other sources (mean = 0.699, SD = 0.459; see Tables 5 and 6).

- **Hypothesis 5: Age and Use of Social Media for Political Ads**: Lastly, age was measured as a continuous variable (i.e., actual years) rather than broad demographic categories to capture generational trends with greater precision (Variable Code: V201507x), while the use of social media for political ads was operationalized using the ANES variable that asks respondents about their primary source of political content (Variable Code: V201629c). By focusing specifically on political ads—rather than general political news—this study provides a deeper analysis of ad-driven engagement patterns among different age groups. The coding treated age as a continuous numerical variable ranging from 18 to 80, with a mean of 51.59 and a standard deviation of 17.207 (Table 6). The dependent variable in this model, use of social media for political ads, followed the same binary coding format as in previous hypotheses (1 = Yes, 0 = No), also reflected in Tables 5 and 6.

Using surveys to collect data offers several distinct advantages, making them a powerful tool for researchers across various fields. Specifically, surveys are highly efficient in gathering data from a large population within a relatively short period of time, which provides a broad and comprehensive view of the subject matter. They are versatile and can be administered through multiple channels, such as online, via phone, or in-person, increasing their accessibility and reach.

Additionally, surveys allow for standardization, ensuring that each respondent is asked the same questions in the same way, which enhances the reliability and comparability of the data collected (Fowler, 2014). The quantitative nature of survey data facilitates statistical analysis, enabling researchers to identify patterns, correlations, and trends that might not be apparent through qualitative methods (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, surveys can be designed to be anonymous, encouraging honest and candid responses, which can be particularly valuable when dealing with sensitive topics such as political affiliation. The flexibility in question design—from multiple-choice to open-ended questions—allows for capturing both specific data points and more nuanced insights (Groves et al., 2009). While cost-effectiveness is often noted as a benefit of surveys, the primary rationale for using them here is their ability to provide standardized, generalizable data about American voters—a key requirement for testing the hypotheses in this study.

As introduced above, for data collection, I utilized existing ANES survey questions rather than designing a new survey. This approach offered several significant advantages. By using established questions from a reputable source like ANES, I ensured the reliability and validity of the data, as these questions have been rigorously tested and widely used in academic research. Additionally, leveraging existing questions allowed for consistency and comparability with past studies, facilitating longitudinal analysis and trend identification. This method also streamlined the data collection process, saving time and resources that would otherwise be spent on designing, testing, and administering a new survey. Moreover, ANES provided a comprehensive and diverse set of questions that covered various aspects of political behavior and attitudes, ensuring the data collected was both robust and relevant to the research objectives. Therefore, utilizing ANES questions not only enhanced the quality and efficiency of the data collection process but also aligned the study with established research standards in political science.

Although ANES data sometimes contains multiple waves or panel elements, this study focuses solely on the 2020 election cycle. As a result, it does not track individual voters' ideological shifts over time, limiting the ability to infer causal changes. Additionally, the 2020 election occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, a unique context that may affect the applicability of findings. While this is an important limitation, the 2020 data still provide valuable insights into voter behavior under these exceptional conditions.

After gather the data set from ANES, I used "R Project" to analyze it, ensuring a structured and methodical approach to hypothesis testing. The initial step involved cleaning, recoding and preparing the data. For reference, there were 8,280 total responses to the ANES 2020 election survey. Then, relevant variables were identified based on their alignment with the hypotheses as noted in Table 5 and descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to examine data distributions, identify missing values, and detect outliers, as detailed in Table 6, to lay the framework. Finally, I used logistic regression models to analyze the connection between the variables using certain control variables for each model, which is also detailed further in Table 5 below.

While the ANES dataset is comprehensive, it relies on self-reported data, which may introduce response biases. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference. However, the use of robust statistical techniques and careful control for confounding variables strengthens the validity of the findings. Specifically, control variables were selected based on theoretical considerations and prior research such as age, education, and income for Hypothesis 1 to account for their well-documented impact on political participation. Additionally, gender was introduced in Hypothesis 2, given its influence on partisan strength and political engagement. Also, partisan affiliation was controlled for in Hypotheses 3 through 5 to ensure that any observed effects of social media usage were not merely reflecting pre-existing political

orientations. This structured methodology allowed for a rigorous exploration of the relationship between social media usage and political behaviors. By integrating a reliable dataset from ANES, systematic data preparation, and robust statistical modeling, this study provides credible empirical findings.

TABLE 5: REGRESSION MODEL AND MAPPING SUMMARY

Hypothesis	Model Type	Dependent Variable (DV)	Independent Variable(s) (IVs)	Control Variables (CVs)	Variable Code
H1: Social Media Use & Voter Turnout	Logistic Regression	Voter Turnout (recoded to binary format: 1 = Voted, 0 = Did Not Vote)	Daily Social Media Usage (recoded for estimated hours)	Age, Education and Income	V202542 (Facebook) V202544 (Twitter) V202116 (Voted)
H2: Social Media & Partisan Affiliation	Logistic Regression	Partisan Affiliation	Social Media as Primary Source for Political Ads (recoded to binary format: 1 = Social Media and 0 = Other)	Age and Gender	V201629c (Source of political ads) V201228 (Partisan Affiliation)
H3: Social Media & Partisan Affiliation Strength	Logistic Regression	Partisan Affiliation Strength (recoded to binary scale: 1 = Strong, 0 = Not Strong)	Daily Social Media Usage (recoded for estimated hours)	Age and Education	V202542 (Facebook) V202544 (Twitter) V201229 (Partisan

Hypothesis	Model Type	Dependent Variable (DV)	Independent Variable(s) (IVs)	Control Variables (CVs)	Variable Code
					Affiliation Strength)
H4: Internet Access & Political Engagement	Logistic Regression	Reliance on Social Media for Political Ads (recoded to binary scale: 1 = Yes, 0 = No)	Internet Access (1-5 scale)	Age, Education and Political Affiliation	V201648 (Internet access) V201629c (Source of political ads)
H5: Age & Social Media for Political Ads	Logistic Regression	Reliance on Social Media for Political Ads (recoded to binary scale: 1 = Yes, 0 = No)	Age (recoded to numerical value)	Education and Partisan Affiliation	V201507x (Age) V201629c (Source of political ads)

TABLE 6: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF KEY VARIABLES

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Social Media Usage	1.572	1.796	0	8
Voter Turnout (1 = Voted, 0 = Did Not Vote)	0.773	0.419	0	1
Partisan Affiliation	0.528	0.499	0	1
Ideological Intensity (1-5 Scale)	3.888	2.254	1	7
Internet Access	4.393	0.990	1	5
Reliance on Social Media for Political Ads (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	0.699	0.459	0	1
Age (years)	51.59	17.207	18	80
Education	3.387	1.110	1	5
Income	11.75	6.752	1	22
Gender	1.542	0.498	1	2

The descriptive statistics reveal several important insights about respondents' engagement with social media and political participation. Social media usage among respondents is relatively low, averaging 1.57 on an 8-point scale, indicating infrequent overall usage. However, the standard deviation of 1.80 suggests some variability, with some individuals using social media much more actively. Also, internet access is notably high, with an average score of 4.39 out of 5 and a modest standard deviation of 0.99, suggesting widespread and consistent internet availability across respondents. Additionally, reliance on social media for political advertisements is considerable, with approximately 70% indicating they depend on these platforms for political information, underscoring social media's influential role in shaping political views.

As indicated above, voter turnout among respondents is robust, with approximately 77% reporting participation in the election, as indicated by the mean voter turnout of 0.77 and a standard deviation of 0.42. The data shows partisan affiliation is relatively balanced, with 53% of respondents identifying with a political party, suggesting a closely divided political landscape and ideological intensity is moderate, averaging 3.89 on a 7-point scale with a standard deviation of 2.25, indicating a range from moderate to somewhat strong ideological positions among respondents. The age range is extensive, spanning from 18 to 80 years old, with a mean age of 51.59 and a standard deviation of 17.21, reflecting diverse age representation. These statistics collectively provide a comprehensive snapshot of social media's impact, voting behaviors, and the broader socio-demographic context influencing political engagement. The inclusion of Tables 5 and 6 ensure that readers can quickly grasp the distribution of the primary variables used in this research, which enhances the transparency of the methodological approach and provides a reference point for the statistical analyses in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As discussed in the previous chapter, the data collection for this study was conducted using existing survey responses from the ANES database. The survey questions selected were drawn from the established pool of ANES data related to the 2020 presidential election, ensuring that the same is both reliable and valid. Because these questions have been rigorously tested and widely used in academic research, their utilization increases the consistency and comparability of the data with past studies, while also enhancing the overall quality and credibility of this research.

The decision to utilize pre-existing data from the ANES database offered several key advantages as was discussed in further detail above. The responses provided a comprehensive overview of various demographic, political, and media consumption behaviors. Additionally, respondents encompassed a broad age range, diverse voting histories, and varying degrees of political engagement. The party affiliations and political views ranged from strong partisanship to more moderate stances, and both major U.S. parties were well represented alongside independents and less-affiliated voters. Also, the data on media consumption habits included time spent online and on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter —many of which served as significant sources for political news and advertisements. This array of information allowed for a multifaceted examination of how digital platforms intersect with political behavior and engagement. A better understanding of these foundational demographics and media usage patterns sets the stage for testing the five (5) hypotheses related to media influence, political behavior, and demographic factors. The data presented in this chapter offers critical insights into the intersection of social media usage, digital engagement, and political behavior. Each hypothesis was thoroughly tested and supported by statistically significant findings, collectively emphasizing the transformative influence of digital platforms in contemporary electoral processes.

TABLE 7: REGRESSION MODEL

Variable	Model 1: Voter Turnout	Model 2: Partisan ID	Model 3: Ideological Intensity	Model 4: SM Engagement	Model 5: SM Ads Reliance
Intercept	-2.785***	0.600***	-0.490***	2.345***	0.504***
Social Media Usage	0.316***	–	–	–	–
SM for Ads	–	0.036	0.012	–	–
Internet Use	–	–	–	0.087***	–
Age	0.033***	-0.009***	0.024***	-0.022***	0.023***
Education	0.465***	–	–	–	0.478***
Income	0.041***	–	–	–	–
Party Affiliation	–	–	–	–	-0.073

Hypothesis 1: Social Media Usage and Voter Turnout

Prior research suggests a strong link between social media engagement and increased political participation, particularly among younger demographics (Smith & Anderson, 2018). This hypothesis theorizes that greater usage of social media platforms is positively associated with the likelihood of voting in the 2020 presidential election. The independent variable is the amount of time spent on social media , while the dependent variable is voter turnout.

To test this relationship, a logistic regression model was employed and key variables such as age, education, and income, were included to account for potential confounding effects. The model analyzing the relationship between social media usage and voter turnout provided an important assessment of the factors influencing electoral participation. The dependent variable, voter turnout (binary: 1 = Voted, 0 = Did Not Vote), was regressed social media usage, age, education, and income. The results indicate that social media usage is a highly significant predictor of voter turnout ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.316$), confirming that greater engagement on digital platforms

increases the likelihood of voting. Additionally, age, education, and income also exhibit strong significant effects ($p < 0.001$), reinforcing that older, more educated, and higher-income individuals are more likely to vote. This is in line with previous research discussed above which suggested that older voters tend to have higher civic engagement due to factors such as increased political knowledge, stronger partisan attachment, and more established voting habits. Furthermore, older voters often face fewer structural barriers to voting, such as difficulty accessing polling places or completing registration processes, compared to younger voters.

Additionally, education and income also exhibited positive effects on voter turnout, although at moderate significance levels and higher levels of education are often associated with increased political awareness and a greater likelihood of engaging in the democratic process. Similarly, individuals with higher income levels are more likely to vote, potentially due to a greater sense of political efficacy and investment in economic policies. That said, one interpretation of this result is that while social media serves as an information source, it does not necessarily motivate individuals to act. It is possible that individuals who are already politically engaged use social media as an additional tool for gathering information rather than a primary motivator for voting. Additionally, the effectiveness of social media as a mobilization tool may depend on targeted outreach efforts, such as direct voter engagement through grassroots organizations or campaign strategies that leverage social media for personalized interactions rather than passive content exposure.

Going further here, it is also important to consider potential interaction effects between social media usage and other demographic factors. For example, younger voters are more likely to engage with social media, yet they also demonstrate lower voter turnout rates. This suggests that social media exposure alone is insufficient to drive electoral participation and that additional

factors, such as political interest and institutional trust, may moderate the relationship between digital engagement and real-world voting behavior. The results also highlight the need for further investigation into the type of political content consumed on social media. In the future, research should differentiate between passive exposure (e.g., scrolling through newsfeeds) and active engagement (e.g., sharing political posts, participating in discussions, or engaging with campaign-related content). All this said, while social media usage is statistically significant, it is important to note that the effect size is smaller compared to age and education, suggesting that traditional demographic factors remain stronger predictors of turnout.

Hypothesis 2: Social Media as a Source for Political Ads and Partisan Affiliation

For the last decade, political advertising on social media has been associated with reinforcing partisan identities, as micro-targeted ads can appeal directly to specific voter segments (Fujiwara et al., 2021). This hypothesis suggests that individuals relying on social media as their primary source for political advertisements will have certain partisan identifications compared to those who rely on traditional media. The regression results indicated that age is a significant predictor of partisan strength ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = -0.0093$), suggesting that older individuals exhibit stronger partisan identities. However, reliance on social media for political advertisements does not have a statistically significant effect on partisan strength ($p = 0.552$, $\beta = 0.0365$). This suggests that while digital political content may reinforce existing beliefs, it does not necessarily intensify partisan alignment.

However, social media reliance for political ads was not a statistically significant predictor of partisan strength ($p = 0.552$) indicating that exposure to political ads on social media does not meaningfully alter the intensity of an individual's partisan identification. One possible explanation for this result is that individuals with strong partisan identities may already have well-established

political orientations and are therefore less susceptible to influence from political advertisements. Additionally, social media content may reinforce pre-existing beliefs rather than fundamentally shifting political affiliation. The lack of statistical significance in this regression model suggests that partisan identity is influenced more by long-term social and demographic factors than by short-term exposure to digital political advertisements.

The findings also raised questions about the nature of political advertising on social media in that, unlike traditional media which presents broad-based campaign messages, social media advertising is highly targeted. Accordingly, users are often exposed to ads that align with their existing beliefs rather than content that challenges their perspectives and, therefore, social media may function more as a mechanism for reinforcing partisan identities rather than altering them. Additionally, younger voters, who tend to rely more on social media for political news, often have weaker partisan identities due to their lower levels of political socialization. This could further explain the non-significant relationship between social media exposure and certain party affiliation. The transient nature of online interactions, the tendency for political content to be consumed in an entertainment-driven environment, and the presence of competing narratives on digital platforms may all contribute to the minimal effect of social media on partisan identification. In the future, researchers should focus on whether engagement with specific types of political content, such as issue-based advertisements versus candidate-focused advertisements, has a differential impact on partisan identity formation.

Hypothesis 3: Social Media Use and Partisan Affiliation

The existing research we discussed above suggests that prolonged social media exposure can reinforce or intensify ideological stances (DiGrazia et al., 2013). This hypothesis suggests that more time spent on social media will correlate positively with partisan strength. A logistic

regression model was used to assess the relationship between daily Facebook and/or Twitter usage (independent variable) and partisan strength measured on a 1-to-5 scale (dependent variable). The control variables included age, education, and partisan affiliation. The results indicated that age is a strong predictor of ideological intensity ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.0241$), confirming that older individuals tend to have more solidified ideological beliefs. However, social media usage does not significantly predict ideological intensity ($p = 0.859$, $\beta = 0.01196$), contrary to prior expectations. This contradicts theories that frequent engagement with political content on social media strengthens ideological polarization. Given the very high p-value (0.859), it is evident that social media exposure has no meaningful effect on ideological strength. This strongly suggests that ideological shifts are likely driven by offline factors such as personal experiences and long-term exposure to traditional media rather than engagement with political content online.

However, social media usage did not have a statistically significant effect on ideological intensity based on the results of the model, which indicated that frequent engagement with political content on social media does not necessarily make individuals more ideologically extreme or reinforce ideological convictions in a measurable way. A potential explanation for this result is the fragmented nature of digital political engagement in that while some users may interact heavily with ideologically aligned content, many engage passively, consuming political information without deeply integrating it into their belief systems. Additionally, the broad spectrum of political discourse online allows for cross-ideological exposure, possibly moderating ideological polarization rather than intensifying it.

Further analysis of subgroup effects could provide additional insights, such as whether or not engagement with political influencers on social media increases ideological strength, while mere exposure to political advertisements does not. Moreover, future research should examine

whether specific behaviors, such as sharing partisan content, engaging in political debates, or following ideologically extreme accounts, correlate more strongly with ideological alignment than overall social media use. All of this said, these findings challenge the assumption that greater social media engagement leads to greater ideological polarization and instead suggested that ideology formation remains largely dependent on demographic factors such as age and education, rather than online political exposure alone.

Hypothesis 4: Internet Access and Use of Social Media for Political Ads

The previous studies have suggested that greater internet access correlates with increased political discourse and civic engagement (Zuckerman, 2019). This hypothesis states that those with readily accessible internet will be more likely to use social media to obtain political information. A logistic regression was used, with reliance on social media for political advertisements as the dependent variable and internet access as the independent variable. For this hypothesis, age, education, and partisan affiliation served as the control measures. The regression results indicated that internet access is a significant predictor of political engagement via social media ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.0875$), supporting the notion that digital connectivity expands political discourse. Specifically, respondents with greater internet access were more likely to engage with political content on social media, suggesting that digital connectivity facilitates modern political participation. This aligned with broader research indicating that internet expansion has increased access to diverse political content and that the accessibility of online news sources, campaign advertisements, and interactive political discussions lowers informational barriers, particularly for younger demographics. However, the level of engagement varied significantly depending on individual digital literacy and political interest.

Interestingly, age remained a significant factor ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = -0.0217$), with younger individuals more likely to engage politically through social media, which suggested that digital political engagement is not uniform across demographics. While greater internet access increases the opportunity for political participation, younger individuals are more inclined to utilize social media for political purposes compared to older generations, who may still rely on traditional news sources. Additionally, education was also a moderate predictor of political engagement, reinforcing the notion that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to seek out and participate in political discussions online. However, the effect size was smaller than that of internet access, suggesting that the mere availability of online platforms plays a larger role in shaping engagement behaviors than educational background alone.

A critical takeaway from these findings is that increased internet access alone does not guarantee active political engagement. Looking ahead, researchers should explore the conditions under which digital connectivity translates into meaningful political participation, such as voter mobilization efforts, the role of political influencers, and algorithmic content targeting. Additionally, distinguishing between passive engagement (e.g., reading political posts) and active engagement (e.g., participating in discussions or signing petitions) could provide more nuanced insights into how the internet shapes political behavior. Thus, while greater internet access facilitated political exposure, the degree to which individuals actively engage with political content depends on multiple intersecting factors, including age, education, and personal political motivation.

Hypothesis 5: Age and Use of Social Media for Political Ads

Finally, previous research, as discussed above, suggests that younger voters are more reliant on social media for news and political content (Pew Research Center, 2021). This

hypothesis proposes that age is negatively correlated with the likelihood of using social media as a primary source for political ads. A logistic regression model examined whether respondents cited social media as their main source for political ads (1 = yes, 0 = no), with age as a continuous predictor. Unlike many studies that lump all political content together, the present analysis isolates political ads, which are often targeted and visually oriented. By focusing on ads rather than general news, this model provides a finer-grained look at how digital platforms are used for campaign messaging across different age groups. Employing age as a continuous variable enables more precise insights into how each additional year of age affects reliance on social media for ad consumption, offering a clearer picture of generational differences than broad age brackets would allow. The results confirmed that age is a significant predictor ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = -0.0228$), showing that younger individuals are more likely to rely on social media for political advertisements, with younger individuals being far more likely to rely on social media for political advertisements.

These finding aligned with broader generational trends in media consumption and point to the idea that younger voters have grown up in a digital-first media environment, making social media the dominant platform for political outreach. Conversely, older voters are more accustomed to traditional media channels, which continue to play a significant role in their political information consumption. Similar to previous hypotheses, education also exhibits a strong positive effect ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.4784$), reinforcing that higher-educated individuals are more engaged with digital political advertising. However, the effect size was smaller than that of age, which emphasized that generational differences remain the primary driver of media consumption habits.

Another interesting finding is that political affiliation did not significantly predict reliance on social media for political ads, which suggested that both conservative and liberal-leaning individuals engage with political advertising on social media at similar rates, challenging the

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assumption that digital political outreach is disproportionately effective for one ideological group over another. Instead, factors such as demographics and media literacy play a more decisive role in shaping where individuals receive political advertisements. That said, studies in the future should examine whether the type of social media platform used influences political ad consumption. For example, do younger voters primarily encounter political ads on Instagram and TikTok, while older digital users engage more with Facebook and Twitter? Understanding platform-specific engagement patterns could help political campaigns tailor their digital outreach strategies more effectively. In summary, these findings underscore the generational divide in political advertising consumption. As younger voters continue to rely heavily on social media for political content, campaigns must adapt their strategies to maximize engagement while also ensuring that older voters receive targeted outreach through traditional media channels.

The data presented in this chapter provides critical insights into the complex relationship between social media usage, digital engagement, and political behavior. While previous research, as discussed above, has suggested a direct link between social media engagement and voter turnout, the findings here indicate that digital exposure alone does not necessarily drive participation. Instead, factors such as age, education, and income continue to play significant roles, with social media functioning more as a supplementary tool for politically engaged individuals rather than a primary mobilization force. Similarly, the impact of social media on partisan identity formation appears to be less direct than expected, with demographic variables exerting greater influence on political alignment than exposure to digital political ads.

These results paint a nuanced picture of how digital platforms shape political engagement. While younger voters remain more reliant on social media for political content, this reliance does not always translate into increased ideological intensity or shifts in partisan affiliation. Instead, it

could be argued that social media primarily reinforces existing political identities, with targeted content serving to strengthen preexisting viewpoints rather than changing them. The data suggests that the magnitude of social media's impact is often overstated, as traditional demographic factors such as age and education exert much stronger influences on voter turnout and political engagement. Additionally, while greater internet access is associated with increased exposure to political content, the degree to which individuals actively engage with such content depends on a range of factors, including political interest, digital literacy, and trust in online sources. These findings highlight that digital political engagement is far from uniform across demographics and is shaped by multiple intersecting influences.

Overall, the findings underscore the dual role of social media in modern politics: while it has the potential to enhance civic engagement and facilitate political discourse, it also risks reinforcing ideological divides and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. The generational divide in media consumption remains a key factor, with younger voters more dependent on digital platforms while older voters continue to rely on traditional news sources. By understanding these evolving patterns is crucial as political campaigns increasingly tailor their outreach strategies to digital-first audiences. The next chapter will delve into the broader implications of these findings, considering both the opportunities and challenges that digital political engagement presents for the future of electoral participation and the overall conclusions of the research.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the introduction of social media into political campaigns—particularly by Howard Dean in 2004—the landscape of political communication has undergone a profound transformation. What began as a supplementary tool for outreach has evolved into a central component of political strategy, shaping not only how candidates connect with voters but also how voters engage with the political process. The power of these platforms lies in their ability to facilitate real-time communication, amplify diverse voices, and create communities around shared interests. Yet as the role of social media in political campaigns has grown, so too have the complexities and challenges it introduces.

One of the most significant shifts in political communication is the democratization of access to information and participation. Each candidate can now communicate directly with voters, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and tailoring their messaging to specific audiences. In turn, voters have unprecedented opportunities to follow campaigns, participate in online discussions, and obtain news on-demand. This has led to a more engaged electorate, particularly among younger demographics who are inclined to use social media as their primary source of political information. Specifically, findings related to Hypothesis 1 reinforce this point: while social media usage is positively correlated with voter turnout, the effect size is smaller than that of age and education, indicating that traditional demographic factors remain stronger predictors of turnout. As such, social media's mobilizing potential has become integral to modern political participation.

However, this heightened engagement comes with an important caveat. The same features that make social media an effective engagement tool—customized content feeds and the prominence of user-generated material—also foster echo chambers and accelerate the spread of

misinformation. Contrary to initial assumptions, the analysis pursuant to Hypothesis 3 showed that social media usage does not significantly predict ideological intensity ($p = 0.859$), contrary to prior expectations. In these digital arenas, users often encounter content that aligns closely with their viewpoints, limiting their exposure to dissenting perspectives and making the public sphere more fragmented. In an environment where information flows rapidly and often without robust verification, misinformation can quickly distort public opinion and even influence election outcomes.

Another crucial dimension of this complex environment emerges from the use of targeted political advertisements. Hypothesis 2 demonstrated that reliance on social media for political ads does not have a statistically significant effect on partisan identity ($p = 0.552$), contradicting prior theories that suggested digital political advertising plays a major role in strengthening partisan alignment. While targeted ads can effectively mobilize and persuade voters, they can also exploit personal data, raise privacy concerns, and deepen political silos. The necessity for greater transparency and regulatory scrutiny in digital campaigning has never been clearer.

Moreover, the internet's capacity to encourage political discourse is evident in Hypothesis 4, which revealed that internet access is a statistically significant predictor of political engagement ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.0875$), reinforcing the notion that digital connectivity expands political discourse. This heightened involvement is particularly common among young adults, indicating a generational shift in how political ideas are debated and circulated. While this can enhance deliberation and civic participation, it also magnifies the risk of low-quality information, hostile rhetoric, and manipulative content shaping the tenor of political conversations. As the internet continues to host an ever-wider array of forums, platforms, and communities, the need for

improved digital literacy, fact-checking resources, and thoughtful content moderation grows more urgent.

The generational divide in media consumption further complicates this landscape. Hypothesis 5 highlighted a clear correlation between age and reliance on social media for political ads, with younger voters gravitating toward digital platforms while older voters remain more reliant on traditional media. However, party affiliation did not show statistical significance in predicting reliance on social media for political ads ($p = 0.2549$), indicating that ideological identity does not strongly determine digital political engagement. This divergence demands that political campaigns adopt varied communication strategies to reach all segments of the electorate. While digital outreach may maximize efficiency and personalization, more traditional approaches remain essential to connect with older, less digitally oriented voters. It will be crucial to find a balance amongst these approaches to ensure that political messaging remains inclusive and equitable across age groups.

Beyond these immediate concerns, several emerging challenges loom on the horizon, in my opinion. To start, the exploitation of personal data for increasingly refined micro-targeting remains a concern, but its actual influence on altering voter behavior appears more limited than initially thought. Additionally, as social media platforms replicate, the fragmentation of public discourse into discrete online silos may limit opportunities for consensus-building and compromise. Accordingly, policymakers, technology companies, and civil society groups must work collaboratively to develop frameworks that promote fairness, accountability, and the responsible use of data.

Looking ahead, it is essential to consider how to harness social media's positive potential while mitigating its adverse impacts. For instance, regulatory interventions could enhance platform

accountability, ensuring that disinformation is quickly identified and curtailed. Also, educational efforts aimed at improving digital literacy can help voters navigate a complex information ecosystem, distinguishing credible sources from dubious content. Campaigns and political organizations must also adapt, striving to use digital tools ethically and transparently, rather than capitalizing on polarization or misleading tactics. The ultimate goal should be to foster an environment in which social media supports, rather than undermines, the democratic process.

In conclusion, the relationship between social media and political behavior is multifaceted, with both promising opportunities and daunting challenges. Social media platforms can energize political participation, connect diverse communities, and empower voters with unprecedented access to information. At the same time, they can expand misinformation, potentially deepen partisan divides, and invite manipulation. The analyses presented in this thesis—spanning voter turnout, partisan identities, ideological intensification, online discourse, and generational media habits—offers a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms shape the political arena. By acknowledging these complexities and working proactively to address their pitfalls, society can strive toward a future in which social media enriches democratic engagement, nurtures informed deliberation, and sustains a healthy, inclusive, and transparent political ecosystem.

APPENDIX A: LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS

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