

## SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS INFLUENCE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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**ABSTRACT** Studies addressing the normative questions of whether social media use positively or negatively affects citizens' levels of democratic engagement and satisfaction with democracy have produced mixed findings. This study tests the proposition that political polarization plays an important contingent role in explaining these relationships. Combining Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) and World Values Survey (WVS) data, this study examines how issue polarization and affective polarization at the country level shape the relationships between social media use for political information and democratic outcomes in 27 developed democracies. The findings show *divergent* consequences of social media use contingent on affective polarization. In the countries with high affective polarization, social media use increased democratic engagement (i.e. participation and voting) and decreased satisfaction with democracy (i.e. political satisfaction and perceived quality of democracy), which may have implications for democratic erosion and backsliding. In the countries with low affective polarization, social media use increased the perceived quality of democracy but had no effect on political satisfaction. Issue polarization had a limited contingent influence. The findings contribute to the literature by explicating the dynamics of country-level affective polarization that can shape and contextualize the relationship between social media use and democratic engagement in democracies across the world.

**Key Words:** SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, INFLUENCE, POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

### INTRODUCTION

An estimated 60% of the world's population uses social media (Statista, Citation2023). For citizens in many democracies, social media platforms have become sources of information that shape their political attitudes and decisions. Against this background, political communication scholars have explored two overarching research questions related to the normative role of social media in politics: first, whether social media increases democratic engagement, such as voting in elections or other forms of political participation (Boulianne, Citation2020), and second, to what extent social media fosters political information environments showing that governments are responsive to the demands of their citizens, which is an important precursor of satisfaction with democracy (Ceron & Memoli, Citation2015; Placek, Citation2023). However, these studies have produced mixed findings.

To resolve the issue of these contradictory findings, this study examines the contingent role of political polarization, which we propose shapes the relationships between social media use and the two types of democratic outcomes mentioned above. Public and scholarly discourses about political polarization have posed it as a direct threat to democracies globally (Gidron et al., Citation2020). Diverging opinions, attitudes, and beliefs on policy issues as well as intergroup dislike, distrust, and hostility among political elites and citizens (Iyengar et al., Citation2019) can undermine democratic norms, such as rational debate (Rossini, Citation2022), which can lead to democratic backsliding and gradual erosion in the quality of democracy (McCoy & Somer, Citation2018). Political polarization also shapes countries' political information environments. In highly polarized countries, political actors' strategic use of rhetoric can enlarge cleavages in society by stoking in-group/out-group resentment and even hate (McCoy et al., Citation2018). This rhetoric, in turn, can be amplified exponentially across social media among users who come across and share political content (Kubin & von Sikorski, Citation2021). Thus, the degree of political polarization in a country should also be reflected in the types and valence of political information in its social media space (Urman, Citation2019).

Based on this argument, we test the moderating role of two types of political polarization, namely affective and issue polarization, on the relationships between social media use for political information and democratic outcomes in 27 established democracies. Among these are countries that are known to have very polarized politics, such as the United States, Brazil, and Malaysia, and others that do not, such as Canada, New Zealand, and Japan. By testing these potential moderators, this study addresses several gaps in the literature. First, it helps explain the divergent findings in the literature on the relationships between social media use and democratic outcomes. Second, it provides a more nuanced cross-national understanding of the dynamics of political polarization and social media, given that the scholarship to date has focused mostly on the United States (Urman, Citation2019). Third, it highlights the important contextual role

of political polarization among other factors (e.g., “free” and “other” press systems; Boulianne, Citation2019), which can inform the design of meta-analyses and cross-national comparative research on the democratic consequences of social media use.

## SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS INFLUENCE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Political participation is crucial in democratic countries because it allows people to keep their elected representatives accountable and have a role in how their country is governed. Traditionally, political participation has taken the form of voting, joining political parties, attending political rallies, and contacting elected officials ([Ahmad Said 2019](#)). These forms of political participation are considered essential for the functioning of democratic systems, as they ensure that citizens contribute to making critical decisions ([Kaskazi and Kitzie 2023](#)). However, recently, traditional forms of political participation have become less popular in many countries, especially among young people. This trend has been explained by a number of factors, such as a lack of trust in political institutions, cynicism toward political parties, and a feeling of disengagement from the political process ([Zagidullin et al. 2021](#)). In this context, social media (SM) has been hailed as a new and innovative tool for enabling political participation among young people and mobilizing them to take action ([Kenna and Hensley 2019](#)). Social media platforms (SMPs) have allowed young people to communicate with individuals who have same ideas and to share their views on political issues. They have also provided platforms for young people to participate in public debates and to express their opinions, often in ways that were not possible before the arrival of SM ([Omotayo and Folorunso 2020](#)). Moreover, SM has the potential to break down traditional barriers to political participation. For instance, young people who may feel excluded from traditional political activities, can utilize SM to express their views and to participate in political discussions on their own way ([Moon and Bai 2020](#)). SM has also been invested for mobilizing young people to contribute to protests and demonstrations, especially those that are organized through SMPs. However, while SM has been distinguished as a new tool for enhancing political participation, there are also fears that it may negatively affect political participation ([Arshad and Khurram 2020](#)). Some researchers claimed that SM may cause a sense of political apathy, because young people may feel that their political participation is limited to sharing political content on SM, rather than taking real actions to effective change. Others have thought that SM has the potential to contribute to a division of public discourse, as young people may communicate and interact with like-minded individuals on SM, rather than engaging in discussions with people who hold different views ([Albanna et al. 2022](#)). Thus, there are complex interactions between SM and political participation. Although SM can be a powerful tool for involving young people in politics, its effects are likely to vary depending on a number of variables, such as the political environment, the nature of the issues at stake, and the demographics of the SM user base ([Chu and Yeo 2020](#)). Empirical research is required to better understand the impact of SM on political participation and to specify the factors that affect young people’s usage of SM for political participation ([AbuAlRub and Abdunabi 2020](#)). As a result, social media has altered how individuals communicate with one another, consume news, and participate in public debate. Social networking services like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become widespread features of modern life, with billions of people utilizing them to interact with friends, family, and colleagues throughout the world ([Al Momani 2020](#)). SM has also developed into an important source of news and information where many people use social networking sites to stay up to date on what happens around the world ([Ahmed and Cho 2019](#)). The impact of SM on numerous parts of society has been extensively researched and debated and especially its impact on political participation which has become one of the most challenging topics. Some academics argue that social media has increased political participation and engagement, particularly among young people ([Lee 2020](#)). It is said that social media reduces barriers to political participation by facilitating expressed opinions and dialogues with individuals who share your beliefs. On the other hand, there is disagreement about how SM affects political participation; critics believe that it fosters echo chambers, limiting exposure to other ideas. This can result in polarization and can harm the trust in political institutions ([Algharabat et al. 2020](#)). Regardless of the current argument, there is mounting evidence that SM has a substantial impact on participation in politics. According to the research conducted by a Pew Research Centre, around 60% of Americans use social media to obtain political news and information, and roughly 40% use it to engage in political discussions or distribute political content ([Mitchell et al. 2020](#)). [Adav et al. \(2012\)](#) discovered a favorable association between SM use and political awareness and interest among US teenagers. The effect of social media on political participation varies around the world; it organized people throughout the Arab Spring and brought about political change, but it is also controlled by the Chinese government. Although SM is important in political debates, an empirical study is needed to investigate its effects on political participation amongst young people in the country and to determine the elements that influence young people.

### Social Media, Democratic Engagement, and Satisfaction with Democracy

Normative theories of democracy presume an information environment that informs citizens on the important political and social issues that affect their lives and provides them with opportunities to express their views to elected government officials (Delli\_carpini, Citation2004). From a rational choice perspective, such an environment lowers the costs of participation in politics for citizens as it reduces the time, money, and effort required to access relevant information and news that inform their political actions and choices (Vissers & Stolle, Citation2014). Legacy media such as newspapers and television have long served this information function to increase democratic engagement (McLeod et al., Citation1999), but in the past two decades social media platforms such as Facebook have gained popularity as sources of information. According to the 2022 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 42% of online users in the United States use social media as a source of news, which is in the middle range between democracies in the lower range, such as Japan (28%) and Germany (32%), and those in the higher range, such as Chile (70%) and Thailand (78%) (Newman et al., Citation2022).

Social media use is not universal among citizens but has nevertheless altered the dynamics of political communication in various ways, and these processes can be understood through the “network media logic” framework (Klinger & Svensson, Citation2015). Based on previous theorizing of “media logic” as a form and process in which media transmits communication (Altheide, Citation2016), “network media logic” encompasses different “communication norms and practices related to media production, distribution and usage” (p. 1246), which stands in contrast with the “mass media logic” of legacy media. For example, based on the logics of *production* and *distribution*, election candidates can engage in “personalized politics” by bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of information (i.e., professional media and journalists) and disseminating information directly to supporters and potential voters through social media posts and tweets (McGregor, Citation2017). Furthermore, these users are not mere recipients of information as they can also serve as “intermediaries” to increase the virality of the information by sharing it across “networks of like-minded others” (Klinger & Svensson, Citation2015, p. 1246). These logics were demonstrated by Wojcieszak et al. (Citation2022) in their study of Twitter users, who they found were overwhelmingly engaged with and shared information from politically aligned in-group actors (i.e., politicians, pundits, and news media) rather than those from the out-group. This is not to say that the social media space is devoid of legacy media presence: the mass media and network media logics overlap because news media organizations and journalists have also appropriated social media to develop connections with audiences and promote their content (Gulyas, Citation2013). Nonetheless, because of the logic of *media usage* that allows users on social media to engage in selective exposure and customize their information environments (Merten, Citation2020), the news media and journalists must compete with other political actors to gain citizens’ attention.

The three aspects of the network media logic (production, distribution, and media usage) are intertwined, and collectively they can further reduce the costs for citizens who use social media to obtain timely and relevant political information that facilitates democratic engagement compared with those who do not use social media. This assertion is supported by several meta-analyses of the literature, although not all coefficients of previous studies were statistically significant (Boulianne, Citation2019; Skoric et al., Citation2016). A possible reason is that these analyses have usually pooled different measures of democratic engagement. Voting in elections is often considered in the political literature to be one aspect of political participation, alongside others such as donating to campaigns and contacting government officials (Brady et al., Citation1995). From a cross-national comparative perspective, however, voting should be considered a distinct form of democratic engagement because some countries have high voter turnout but relatively low citizen engagement in politics, for reasons such as compulsory voting (e.g., Singapore and Peru) or political culture (e.g., Japan).

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