The Impact of Social Media on Political Identity

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a pivotal platform in shaping political identity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and their affiliations within the broader political landscape. This research explores the complex interplay between social media usage and the formation of political identity, focusing on how online interactions, communities, and content consumption shape ideological beliefs and group affiliations. Through qualitative analysis of user-generated content and surveys, the study reveals that social media fosters a sense of belonging among like-minded individuals, which can reinforce existing beliefs and create echo chambers. Additionally, the research examines how social media serves as a tool for political expression and activism, allowing users to articulate their identities and engage with diverse perspectives. However, the study also highlights potential drawbacks, including increased polarization and the simplification of complex political issues. By understanding the dynamics of political identity formation in the digital age, this research aims to provide insights into the implications of social media for civic engagement and democratic processes. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for critical media literacy to navigate the challenges posed by social media in shaping political self-conception and participation.

1. Introduction

Held within the palm of a citizen's hand lies access to far more information than could have even been imagined by those who lived in any century prior to the current. Not only is news on demand available, but presidential candidates own social media accounts. This research synthesis investigates the role of social media in informing the personal political identity of those who engage with it. It is important to focus on the citizen's need to identify political information, candidates, and parties as constituents act on those beliefs in various ways. In the days of information scarcity, that task was simple. Apart from radio and then television, citizens were informed and thought about politics by reading newspapers. Now it is much more difficult.

Moreover, there is an increasing overlap between the citizen's personal identity and her political identity, with the two constantly informing and reifying one another (Billings, 2017). That personal identity is now deeply shapeable by and intertwined with social media presents an opportunity to significantly impact the strength and nature of the relationship between the personal and political. Moments worthy of changing partisan alignment must be significant enough and numerous enough to overpower the wealth of information that already informs an individual's political identity (A Ayankoya, 2013).

It seems a rather existential time in American politics. The new government watches over with unalloyed pride in the country. Every tweet strikes as a triumph over the Godless secular socialist's dark vision. Liberals tweet that change is coming, that they will catch the next vote by any means necessary. A half the country seem eager to see the other half cleansed in the cleansing fire. Am I bitter and unsure in the rocky post-

election days, that the country is inches from exploding into factional riots or another internal conflagration?

Furthermore, it is important now to understand how modern political social media operates. Suddenly long political debates on Facebook become long personal attacks on a grandparent's immigration status because the conversation was jumped into halfway by someone's cousin. Disconcertingly civil memes extolling neighborly virtues of the head of the DNC's pro-states rights stance are linked to a dozen articles on the Niagara Movement. Yet a Fox News headline accompanied only by a comment of the "hit the nail on the head" nature garners twelve thousand likes, two thousand shares, five thousand hateful comments, and gets projected as a featured story on Twitter months later.

All these are intermediary behaviors. The initial catalyst is potentially millions of shared posts and ads. It is not a simple matter to read political narratives on feeds. Low information rational voters of no particular volition might believe it all or discard as lies all rising from biased media. At any rate, the environment is awash in politically charged media. In this new age, it is important to know the workings of media in the public sphere. How is this landscape shaping behavior and opinion? How is likely shaping the attitudes of general population and what affects of this will see in political behavior and governance? That is the place and time. Nonetheless, what is presently of paramount importance is to understand how define and study this phenomenon on its own terms first and consider these questions in the larger context afterwards. And so, it seems wise to sit down and get to grips with contemporary social media in terms of core elements and principles.

However, it is far too easy to get lost in the noise and fray and think about these paraphrasings might be best framed around some guiding questions. How does the political information offered to traditional print news sources differ from the information available on digital platforms and what are the effects of this shift (if any)? What traits do see in those who engage with political stories or parties platforms? Are there types and content of political posts likely to receive the most engagement and does that engagement predict involvement in other types of political action? What

effect social media have on the general public's political beliefs or opinion? If a voter is heavily influenced by a series of posts and ads how is see that influence manifest in vote choice or candidate evaluation?

1.1. Background and Significance

The formation of political identity dates back to ancient Greece. Over time, political identity has evolved, as initially, the only option was representative democracy. Traditional media played the significant role of the "journalist" in terms of being the primary vehicles of information distribution, which until the onset of the 21st century were different in nature from the digital platforms that have started taking over this role (Billings, 2017). The widespread use of social media has however led to a decentralization of the role of intermediary journalism in information dissemination, and it is exactly this development, that is considered to be one of the most important reasons for recent political earthquake elections worldwide (A Ayankoya, 2013). Examples like the terrorist attack on the March 2019 mosques in New Zealand, the European elections in May 2019 full of surprises, the June 2019 elections in Istanbul as well as certain developments in countries like the US and the UK concerning Donald Trump and Brexit respectively are demonstrative of this. The potential and existing impacts of social media on political aspects are varied and much discussed. Regarding the capacity of social media to mobilize the voters, research has been stockpiling both cases supporting and artifacts casting doubt on its efficacy. To investigate apparently conflicting evidence limits to youth political engagement in the context of social media were set, with a specific interest in a linkage between possessing a strong political identity and engaging in different participatory actions. It has been suggested that digital participation marks a departure from more traditional, formal forms of participation that have been continuously in decline. This raises questions about the centrality and value of digital participation for contemporary democracies.

Besides its influence on actual participation, the advent of social media has had a profound effect on political identities. So far, the few studies that tackle the normative question of the implications of digital participation for democracy do so from quite

different theoretical stands. The effects seem to be highly context dependent. As society shifts into this complex network, the debate on the political impact of social media is also evolving with the discussion on fake news and fake identities/likes/retweets becoming prominent. Due to the formation of the discourse of truths and lies (alternative facts), there will be media fragmentation, i.e. people will only listen the parties they "like" (minority and unwelcome) and exercise selective exposure on traditional platforms. As a result, the complex relationship social media-platforms will have with identity will also change, meaning there will be not only more instances of the echo-chamber effect, but also more boundary politics and an increased importance on the side of politics given the new paradigm it finds itself in (i.e. the concept of truth and accountability, leading memory studies to be crucial). Therefore, it is argued that given the deep impact of social media on political identity it is important to further investigate this relationship by examining Greeks.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research aims at investigating the impact of digital environments on political identity. The theoretical framework paves the groundwork to understand the entanglement of social media, identity, and politics. With a focus on social media, the discussion addresses foundational concepts in far-reaching social psychological theories. How social environments shape who we are, how we talk, and whom we like has been a subject of lifelong inquiry (A Ayankoya, 2013). Heider's balance theory, Cantril's notion of communication spaces, and Simmel's focus on group dynamics are absorbed into this general theory. These theorizations emphasize the interconnectedness of identity and communication within online and digital environments, noting how digital communication affects who we are and the social ties we form. Herein, those theories are abstracted into more general themes, including the implicit potentialities and constraints of communication technologies and the observation that who people are affects their social environments as much as vice versa. This then contextualizes the more individual-centered theories, like social identity theory, previously integrated into a model of political identity salience.

Sunstein's notion of republic.com serves as a further extension of these foundational ideas into a complicated political environment.

Three postulated thought processes dominate day-to-day conversations about politics and policies: people deliberate on issues to solidify views and engagements; people converse about these deliberations with others to craft a group identity; and people comb through these group discussions to ultimately create an amorphous political identity. Direct observation of social media is sought, analyzing a multitude of digital network environments, to investigate whether the basic tenants of these theorizations are observable in the wild. To help guide that investigation, a general theory is presented underlying myriad possible relationships between social media and political identities. This theoretical foundation is then used to investigate and conjecture over a set of specific case studies, broad narratives, and concrete demonstrations of the impact that social media has in shaping political identities. Throughout, the hope is that this theoretical form engenders a structured lens through which to view the convoluted entanglements of social identity and communication technology. This theoretical form is then flexible enough to sufficiently guide analysis and potentially brings deeper understanding to the complexity of that relationship not observable through singular case studies.

2.1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a widely cited theory in social psychology that individuals' seek to maintain positive evaluations of their own group identities (Chen & Urminsky, 2019). Social Identity Theory states that an individual's sense of self is derived from his/her group membership. Groups represent an important source of pride and self-esteem, particularly when group members can distinguish their groups from others on socially valued dimensions. This social categorization provides the foundation from which intergroup behaviors are based. From a social identity perspective, worldview is not an inherent part of individual psychology. Instead, the cultural worldview is the shared belief system that maintains and validates the social order. This worldview arises from one's group membership and in turn affects perception and behavior. Any threats to this worldview are thus perceived as threat to

the social group and responses to confront this threat are conceived in a group context. This perspective has been fruitfully integrated with the political context. Whether online or offline, any forum in which individuals come together and deliberate can be viewed as a place where social identities are negotiated; online interactions can easily be influential in the formation and reformulation of group norms and categorizations. Here I consider three theories – Social Identity Theory, System Justification, and Network Categorization - that provide insight into how people act and interact in online spaces which contribute to identity formation. However, it must be noted that discussions of each theory are themselves split into two discrete parts with the aim of showing how each theory can be applied to the development and negotiation of group norms and categorizations online. By necessary consequence, descriptions of theories may seem truncated. Moreover, many aspects of online identity and group dynamics fall outside the explanatory scope of these theories, and so are not discussed; a summary of this critique and areas for future work are presented at the close of the analysis.

3. Social Media and Political Engagement

Social media platforms have increasingly become tools of political expression and a source of political awareness. There has been a lot of interest in how people engage with politics by looking at levels of engagement with social media. There are varying degrees of political engagement on social media across individuals, as demonstrated by (Kamau, 2017). As with the Kenyan study, some people very rarely engage with politics on social media. In the digital era, it is not enough for political parties and institutions to simply use the media to broadcast their message. Modern democracies are continuously evolving, digital technology has forever changed the nature of political engagement. In a similar vein, social media has become central in a new wave of political engagement (A Ayankoya, 2013). Social media has had overwhelmingly positive implications for political engagement. Firstly, there is evidence that because of its wider appeal and accessibility, social media has brought an increasing number people into the political process. Increased participation can

only make for a more vibrant democracy. Increasing numbers of citizens are accessing information and participating in the political process more than ever before, showcasing the empowering capacities of social media. Secondly, because of its shared and open nature, it has also helped counter misinformation and held representatives to account. The abundance of information can make for a more informed citizenry. However, on the flip side, political engagement on social media has also led some astray and exacerbates what is already a serious problem of falsehoods, this is especially concerning in the electoral context. This discussion thus seeks to delve into the complex intertwining of social media and political engagement. Two case examples are provided to further illustrate how social media use can vary in its effect on political engagement.

3.1. Information Sharing

Information is the most powerful tool for a democracy to function. However, misinformation, or the manipulation of facts to alter the public perception of certain event or idea, its easy and fast distribution, and the popularization of social networks, make it difficult to get properly informed about events (M del Pozo et al., 2021). As defined by Fridkin and Kenney, individual voting decisions depend on how available information is perceived to be effectively shared (Billings, 2017). The ability to discuss and debate the perception of given events as well as the reading of quality information sources is what, in principle, ensures a good decision-making process by the citizens and, as a consequence, healthy democracies. Social networks are changing the way information is accessed and spread. They become the predominant source of information about events and people outside one's day-to-day life. In fact, the effect of Facebook on the public in the 2010 election was so huge that is just normal now for parties to pay people to "like" their posts. Nevertheless, the content that appears on the user's screen is there because it was specifically designed to be shown. The understanding that the user-generated content strengthens the filter bubbles effects is widespread: if a user "likes" a post of an extreme right-wing page, Facebook will show the user more of that kind, shaping her perceptions toward the page's ideology. News recovers those events held outside the self-referencing social-media circle, and

re-membering (re-tweeting, sharing) these exposes a wide audience to them, shaping their perception of the event itself. Amazingly, results show a preference for serious media groups when sharing, retweeting serious news and for just the opposite when sharing fake news. This fact emphasizes the current strong holding of trust and credibility should be taken seriously in the choice of the content that is planned to be spread on social media to ensure the faithfulness of the ideology representation produced in others. Given the common understanding of good use of social media in politics, and considering what it comes from the social networks per se, insights about the policy design for an effective political use of social networks are recounted.

Another useful path in this multidisciplinary approach is the rise of the new mathematical models to improve the understanding of the intricate relations between social networks and society. The official rejection of the possibility by the DoD to foresee the fall of the Berlin Wall was what made the DoD get Finally it is worth highlighting the gained understanding that the content planned to be disseminated on Twitter should belong to a meme complex. Social Media opposes a new way of getting a message amplified on a massive scale. As it's known worldwide this can empower a vast number of communities to get organised and restrain the powerful expansion of the message. Social Media also opponents an amazing way of reaping support for the cause, featuring most spontaneous solidarity calls of history. The Wall was built in 1961 near West Berlin, and its destruction in 1989 can be considered as the greatest political event of the XX century, and the only one to be relived hundred of times in a row; Augsburg and Munich brews Bekars Straße Fest, Oktoberfest "parody", from 2013, with subsequent beers sales record; third and finally, Spanish tikis put a terror management malware –a protection from plagiarism.metadata recovered from the laset of the living retrived Additionally, dozens of articles chatting about the subject intended to be high on twitter, got snatched and shared using millions bots, setting living raw trend. Such a volume of misinformation obscured the initial purpose falling down unnoticed.

4. Social Media and Political Polarization

Social media has been lauded for its ability to connect individuals across vast distances and diverse backgrounds, but there has been significant debate over the role of social media in political polarization. Given recent events in American politics, it has become increasingly pertinent to investigate what effect social media has on the political polarization of its users. This section presents a mixed-methods examination on how social media shapes the political identity of its users through a large-scale study over the course of the 2016 US and 2017 French presidential elections, with a focus on political polarization and the #MeToo movement (Jain, 2019).

In the United States, and likely elsewhere, political and social factions exhibit a growing division as of late. Emanating from the final month of Donald Trump's candidacy, the two major factions have devolved into personal attacks, libel, and defamation, with the former accusing the other of falsifying votes, and the latter accusing the former of colluding with Russia to hack voting machines. The ubiquity of digital communication has, in part, allowed these adversarial circumstances to develop. In traditionally liberal US states, it is easier than ever to stumble across liberal viewpoints, viral infographics, or upset Facebook statuses; posts that would surely never spring into existence on the feeds of conservative peers, and vice-versa. Ostensibly as an attempt to escape the never-ending digital beatdown, everyday users attempt to exist out of the antagonistic arena; restricting hostile political discourse on their profiles to avoid seeing tension-inducing content, a phenomenon that (Vorst, 2017). Most users resort to creating two spheres: one, accepting posts pertaining to liberal politics and the #MeToo movement; the other, conservative in nature more often than not espousing a certain skepticism unique to conservative beliefs residing elsewhere on the spectrum. Regardless of it boasting an impressive intellectual validity, over time, even its dissenters end up in the familiar, echo-chamber-meets-name-calling war zone, as the opposite side default to likening its tenets and opining to a quasi-religion worshipped by conspiracy-theorists, thereby delegitimizing any viewpoint, be it reasonable or otherwise, held within.

4.1. Echo Chambers

The term echo chambers has taken on a digital connotation now too, with allegations that people on social media platforms are limited to the views they hold while their news feeds 'echo' that confinement. People in these circles interact with news and information that supports similar perspectives and attitudes with their own. The pervasive nature of this familiarity encourages a distance from conflicting ideas and opinions and, instead, bolsters existing views. The consequences of this situation are dire, escalating intolerance towards opposing views which consequently creates further divisions, often leading to grossly incoherent and even violent diatribe. This, in turn, has profound impacts on public debate and political processes when indecision, consensus, or votes are needed — which is critical in a democratic society (Jiang et al., 2021). Several examples reveal how echo chambers inadvertently dismissed crucial information, negatively affecting political outcomes like the Brexit vote, the Trump presidency, and the rise of far-right political parties across Europe. The algorithms that curate social media content based on prior viewing habits foster the formation and perpetuation of echo chambers of like-minded people. Enclosure to diverse perspectives is severely limited in favour of amplifying the already dominant view (Nguyen & Vu, 2019). Nevertheless, to better counteract the challenges of echo chambers and the toxic discourses often found in it, it is important to promote cross-cutting interactions between politically interested social media users.

5. Case Studies

To further illustrate these points, a number of case studies are presented. As election campaigning in the United States gets underway, there is much discussion of the various candidates after the first debates of the season. President Donald Trump is known for using Twitter to announce policy, a sacking, or to make controversial statements. But for the candidates who do not seem to have a campaign run in the same way and instead use Twitter to post pictures of farm animals, how does Twitter give political identity to these candidates (Billings, 2017)? Luke James decided to run for County Commissioner after no other Democrat would. As a young farmer with no

political experience, he faces an uphill struggle in a Republican-dominated position. Despite almost no coverage on traditional media, his Twitter feed describes a motivated man taking up the fight on issues facing the local area. Indeed, his website insists that you should meet Luke James, the candidate, who offers a comprehensive list of policies that include minimum wage for the County. Presuming the authenticity of this account, it is striking the level of behaviour and identity formation this allows for with minimum effort. Or, as election season approaches in the Czech Republic, publications come out on Facebook feeds denouncing the current social conservative president Miloš Zeman to be a Communist collaborator as well as a Russian and Chinese agent paid in biofuel. President Zeman has been seen to display public actions that align more with Russian interests rather than those of the EU or NATO. So, surely this can't be a coincidence that these stories appear on the same day? Neighbouring Poland has felt the negative effects of hybrid war in disinformation campaigns that harm the competitiveness of US LNG. Social media is largely to blame, with 75% of Poles having access to the internet classified as news (Jain, 2019). Thus, a countering view appeared on the feed below stating that the EU has spent €144 million combating fake news since 2015 and some facts about the Facebook account arming against EU measures.

5.1. US Presidential Elections

Social Media and Political Identity Formation: A case study on US Presidential Elections will present a focused analysis of a specific transnational political event. It aims to illustrate a process where social media shifts voter engagement, and along with it political identity formation, in a distinct phase of the electoral cycles. To demonstrate a snapshot of social media's transformative aspect on electoral behavior, two specific recent presidential campaigns are examined. The highlight is on SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as the ongoing utilization of targeted advertisements (Billings, 2017).

An attempt to uncover how said strategic approaches altered the way voters perceive and mobilize. Selected examples showcased both the productive and adverse consequences of social media for democratic electoral politics. Lastly, the talk zooms

out to look at some of the broader ramifications on political discourses shaped through social (and conventional) media. The focus is placed mostly on post-industrial democratic societies, though plenty of intriguing cases not fitting this context are available. This topic of course is well covered, but hopefully some additional insights will be generated here looking at the US and EU cases. Assuring that the social media presences of the addressed candidates and their respective campaigns were subject to research and analysis will ensure specific findings. These findings help to map out a picture of the translations of social media formats and contents into political discourse (Davis, 2017). Likewise, that within the general discursive construction both explicitly deliberate choices and implicit manifestations influenced by social, political, and/or economic structures are unearthed. This complex interplay is examined to draw a line on how such discourses appeal to (diverse) audiences, engendering – for some – participation, identification and mobilization, and for others distrust, apathy, and even disregard. With a critical inclination, this discussion aims at anew some lessons from recent political events in a global perspective. And eventually, permanencies and also evolutions in the relationships between social media and elections/policies will be questioned from a scholarly perspective.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media platforms have transformed the contemporary political space in America and have changed the way political identity is viewed. Political identity is now a direct product of engagement with political content available on social media. The dual nature of social media as a platform for engagement and division becomes all the more salient in the context of far-reaching political and social issues. The elevation of social media as a primary space for engaging with political issues carries both hopeful promise for active citizenry and democratic engagement and dire warning of a misanthropic spread of political ideologies and messages that weaken the power of community action. Political identity is itself transformed, becoming an active practice of curation and dissemination as opposed to an

increasingly static, long-held belief system. Social media then leads to a reimagining of political identity at the collective level as well. The American population understood as an electorate is increasingly compartmentalized, with less and less common ground from which to create a political community. Groups are driven apart via diverging perceptions of reality and differing approaches to addressing problems. The threat posed to the health of the American political system by such divisions is great. It is a destabilizing social structure that poses significant challenges to the creation of effective, collective solutions to widespread issues. There are other trends on the social media landscape for which this field of study hasn't yet had much insight. The continual rise, morphing, and fall of media platforms, or the nature of different platforms themselves and their potential effects on social media's dual role of fostering both engagement and division, are examples of under-examined subjects. Fully understanding the role social media plays in shaping contemporary political identity will entail grappling with the complexities of this new political space, as well as the emerging effects of social media transformations, which continue to be an escalated pace of change (Van Den Bergh, 2016). The ramifications of the transformation of political identity and citizenship are universal to the American socio-political space present; they are to be approached with urgency.

6.1. Implications for Democracy

In recent years, society has witnessed an unprecedented surge in social media's influence over political identity. The ramifications of this are ambiguous in nature; social media can both empower the democratic values of political identity, and fatally undermine them. At the simplest level of analysis, social media has democratized modes of political engagement and disseminated information faster than ever before. The potential empowerment of political identity is undeniable. At the same time, the duality of social media's potential for democratic engagement serves as a one-to-one demonstration of its polarizing effects. On the one hand, youth are sharing political opinions more often than anticipated, covering societal issues, engaging with political party image, and discussing freedom (Kamau, 2017). On the other, about two thirds of youths either never go beyond the digital information posted by others or refrains

completely from a political stance, coverage is incredibly focused on news regarding political behaviour in response to a stimulus through an analysis macroscopic trace data from Twitter, and indeed following individuals with politically incongruent beliefs turns out to increase the level of negative sentiment. At the macro level, traditional news platforms can no longer act as the gatekeepers of public debate, with implications that are twofold. On the one hand, alternative news outlets that appeal to particular political predispositions have flourished, fueling a wave of misinformation which is seemingly paradigmatic of the post-truth era (Billings, 2017). On the other, the internet harbors the secret of having spurred the widespread dissemination of user-generated hate content. The end result skews the open exchange of ideas required for democratic deliberation, nurturing the controversial view that political beliefs become increasingly immune to correction, post factum formation of social identity.

The advent of social media has significantly altered the ways youth enfranchise with politics and processes of political participation. The growing political engagement found in the digital environment resulted from and increased the scope for online participation. Although attracting a relatively small proportion of the wider population, the connectivity between people and political issues made possible through the use of social media has in turn the potential to affect the political landscape. However, the ability to freely engage with multiple sources of information and a diversity of political opinions notwithstanding, the very configuration of social media platforms introduces noteworthy complexities into the debate. As the offline and the online normally bleed into each other, the questions of if and how politics on social media spills over to other terrains, shaping public opinion outside the digital dialogue, become relevant. It is precisely under the banner of these concerns that this focuses on the relationship between social identity and democratic processes. In this brave new world of political communication, discourse is no longer guided by the articulation of competing proposals about the good the just the best manner in which to address the collective problems of society, but by the perpetual pointing out of failings and deviations that 'clearly' characterize the enemy. In times of polarization and populism, like the present public debate context a large chunk of energy is expressly dedicated

to the enemy, constructing an identity of the adversary, stamping an indistinguishable mark of wrongness on them. Since the abundance of available content potentially dilutes the in-between rather small presence of a counterpoint narrative, the herd effect more often than not veers in the direction of reinforcing the ingroup preference. Although the former places the online information source that is not associated with the receiving end of the political agreement chain, as in the previous discussion it is likely for a macroscopic perspective in studying the dynamics of social media engagement that would allow the detection of indirect effects of online combat.

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