The Impact of Social Media on the United States Political Atmosphere

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Abstract

This paper explores the significant impact of social media on the political atmosphere in the United States, focusing on how platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok contribute to political polarization and the spread of misinformation. The discussion begins by highlighting the US's deep historical and current political divisions, exacerbated by social media algorithms reinforcing users' pre-existing views. The role of political figures in leveraging social media for campaigns is analyzed, alongside the detrimental effects of incivility and fake news on democratic processes and voter turnout. The paper emphasizes the urgency of addressing these challenges through education and transparency in social media algorithms. Case studies of state-level initiatives to combat misinformation illustrate potential solutions. Ultimately, the paper argues for a balanced approach to utilizing social media for informed political engagement while mitigating its divisive and deceptive impacts.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Polarization, Fake News, Algorithms, United States, Political Division, Information, Misinformation, Political Campaigns, Democracy, Voter Turnout.

1. Introduction

Approximately 62.3% of the world's population uses social media. It is undeniable that social media is a vast part of today's day and age. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, among others, have completely taken over our lives. We no longer have to be near each other to know what we are feeling, thinking, or doing. A simple Instagram story lets all our followers know where we are in the world, who we are with, and what we are doing; a simple repost on TikTok or Twitter can let people know how we feel about a specific topic or whether we found a video amusing, liked it, disliked it, etc. Social media has completely changed the way we live and interact with each other. Subsequently, this has led to impacts and changes in various aspects of our societies, such as education, language, communication, and one of the most relevant:

politics. The world's political landscape is constantly changing, especially in a country like the United States. With a diverse body of races, countries, languages, and overall backgrounds, the US represents many of the world's languages and cultures. However, that comes with a risk: division. This can be seen in US citizens, who have various opinions on political topics, resulting in a deep polarization. Topics such as gun control, education, and abortion plague the country and create division between the two main political parties: Democrats and Republicans. This division has grown further with the aid of social media, which has significantly impacted the United States political atmosphere. The country has been affected by the growth of social media and the reliance on it by its citizens as a source of information and political information, resulting in the spread of fake news. However, social media has become essential for our society; the key is to use it wisely and for governments to work towards a future that aids politics and citizens' trust in government rather than damaging it.

2. Historical Context and Current Division

The United States has a deep history of division and polarization. A history that dates to before 1861, in which the Civil War erupted primarily over a debate between the South and the North over the issue of slavery. In today's United States, a deep division between Democrats and Republicans can be observed. Republicans tend to have more conservative viewpoints, often supporting abortion bans, a decrease in gun regulations, and lower taxes. On the other hand, Democrats tend to support the opposite: more freedom for abortions, an increase in gun regulations, and taxes for the rich. These opposing viewpoints have polarized the country, so reaching a middle point is almost impossible. This division has been magnified by the widespread use of social media platforms, with 79% of Americans believing that social media and internet access have divided people[1]. As social media has become one of the leading ways in which people receive information related to politics, "more than 8 in 10 Americans get their news on digital devices – beating out TV, radio or print. Among 18-29-year-olds, social media is the most common news source"... "53% of Americans get at least some of their news from social media."[2]. While social media is an accessible way to get the news anytime, anywhere, and keep informed with the latest political updates, it has various issues, such as its algorithm. The social media algorithm is a system that ensures that the information you want to see is displayed at all times. Companies such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook want you to spend hours on their platforms, and the way to accomplish that is to keep you hooked by presenting you with content that they know will keep you watching. This results in you being presented with content that aligns with your views, and when it comes to politics, this means that you will be presented with content that further supports your political views. "Facebook's algorithms tend to reinforce a "filter bubble"

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[1] "Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy across Many Nations, but the US. Is a Major Outlier." Wike, December 6th, 2022.

[2] "How Misinformation on Social Media Has Changed News." Micich & Cross, March 8th, 2024.

that shields people from dissenting information and only delivers content that confirms their views"[3]. YouTube acts similarly by having the "algorithm typically recommends videos that echo the political bias of its viewers and what they choose to view and feeds them videos containing viewpoints that are more extreme than the ones they currently hold"[4]. A Democrat, for example, will be shown posts that talk about the pros of laws that allow for abortion or posts which may be demeaning to the opposition candidates, today, that would be Donald Trump.

3. The Algorithm and Polarization

The biggest issue with this is that you are constantly being reinforced that your views are correct and not being presented with opposing viewpoints. Emotion chambers further exacerbate polarization, where "the reinforcing effect of media and beliefs drive people to wall themselves off from a wider range of media"[5]. Having many news options available means that consumers can choose to hear messages reinforcing their beliefs while avoiding those from alternative points of view. For example, Fox News and MSNBC "only tell us how right we are, and that is making us more extreme"[6].

Therefore, you cannot make an informed decision on political topics because you are constantly being shown the same thing, leading you to believe it is the correct belief. When it comes to politics, it is essential to have all the information and be aware of both sides of the argument and the pros and cons of being on one side or the other. The algorithm prevents this from occurring and instead leads people to believe that the opposing side of the argument is a sort of 'evil' and entirely in the wrong when, in most cases, a middle ground would be most beneficial for society. Today, Americans do not read various news articles from opposing sources, such as the New York Times and Fox News, to make educated decisions on political topics. Instead, they watch a TikTok video or an Instagram reel from a most likely biased source and then decide upon their political beliefs and who they want to vote for.

4. Political Figures and Social Media

However, it is more than just random people or social media outlets taking to social media platforms to discuss politics. Political figures' use of social media in politics began during the 2008 election, in which the campaign "used social media to make personalized appeals to voters aided by data analytics that guided targeted messaging"[7]. Obama is not the only president who has used social media to reach voters. For the 2024 primaries, Independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. posted multiple Instagram videos, and TikTok highlighted what his campaign supports to convince citizens to vote for him.

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[3] "The Political Effects of Social Media Platforms on Different Regime Types." Schaeffer, August 18th, 2021.
[4] "The Political Effects of Social Media Platforms on Different Regime Types." Schaeffer, August 18th, 2021.
[5] "Asymmetry of Partisan Media Effects?: Examining the Reinforcing Process of Conservative and Liberal Media with Political Beliefs." Hmielowski et al., 2020.
[6] "Why We're Polarized" Klein, 2020.

[7] "The Past Decade and Future of Political Media: The Ascendance of Social Media." Owen, 2018.

When social media is used wisely, it can serve as a powerful tool to spread what campaigns stand for; however, when candidates take to social media to undermine opponents with fake news, they use social media in a harmful manner. That being said, it is not just presidential candidates who take to social media to discuss politics, but also Senators and House members. They also have a social media presence to convince citizens to vote for them. A 2022 study from the Journal of Social Psychological and Personality Science demonstrates a 23% increase in incivility in the content Congress members post on Twitter. This means that Congress members are not discussing issues but trying to undermine each other to ensure their legislation is passed and they are consistently voted for[8]. This goes entirely against the Constitutional ideas presented by James Madison in which agreement had to be reached and a compromise made. "When the senators are not talking to each other, they are talking at each other to perform for their Twitter audience, Madison's whole design goes out the window"[9]. Two main issues stem from social media that lead to polarization: We are only presented with our political views, and it prevents members of Congress from doing their job correctly and reaching agreements.

5. The Threat to Democracy

This issue goes further than just being presented with what we want to view, "the extreme polarization we are now witnessing, especially on the political right, has consequences that threaten to undermine democracy itself. These include declining trust in institutions, scorn for facts, legislative dysfunction, erosion of democratic norms, and, in the worst case, real-world violence"[10]. We must control the media situation before it escalates and results in catastrophic damages. If used effectively and wisely, social media could be a powerful tool for keeping citizens informed of political news and campaigns. Currently, that is not happening. Social media only presents us with what they think we want to see, which has, in turn, resulted in us viewing only our political viewpoints. Therefore, the division already present in American society has only intensified, leading to a deep polarization that significantly impacts Americans.

6. The Spread of Fake News

A strengthening of the already present polarization has not been the only result of social media in American politics, but also the spread of fake news. Fake news or fake information is spread and disguised as legitimate, accurate information when, in reality, it lacks any facts. Fake news is highly harmful because people usually struggle to distinguish it from real news. A 2016 Pew Research Center study confirmed that 64 percent of US adults say that "fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events" and that they are unable to identify the bot as a source of misinformation

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[8] "[How Social Media Has Changed the US Congress](#)." Germino, November 6th, 2022.
[9] Idem

[10] "[How Tech Platforms Fuel US Political Polarization and What Government Can Do About It.](#)" Barrett et al., June 27th, 2023.

"implying that they cannot detect and disregard fake news."[11]. Therefore, users tend to read and believe fake news entirely, which can cause significant damage. For example, during the 2020 presidential election, many political figures took to social media to claim that election fraud had been committed and that Biden had stolen the presidency from Trump. Former President Trump also took to social media to proclaim that he should have won the election and that election fraud had been committed[12]. This led to Trump supporters marching into the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, smashing windows and doors, assaulting police officers, stealing federal property, and temporarily stopping members of Congress from proclaiming Biden's victory. This is a stellar example of fake news and the damage it can cause to society. Trump was making statements on social media that lacked any facts, and his supporters fed on these. Instead of believing that he had lost the election because more people had deemed Biden a better fit for the presidency, he made inaccurate statements which resulted in significant damage. This is not the only real-world example of the damage of fake news. "The 2021 Intelligence Community Assessment report found that Iran specifically used social media propaganda during events perceived as civil unrest, such as the multi-racial protest marches and other demonstrations supporting Black Lives Matter. Iran also sent targeted emails to Americans to amplify concerns about voter fraud

in numerous states, according to the same report"[13]. Other countries have also taken advantage of fake news's impact on American citizens and politics. The spread of fake news has created increased political mistrust, as voters cannot perceive what is genuine or fake; they do not know what to believe. This, in turn, has led to a decrease in voter turnout; when comparing the 2022 primary election "to recent mid-term elections, voter turnout was generally low across the country. For example, roughly 25% of eligible voters in New Mexico cast ballots during the state's 2022 primary election, which is lower than in the 2018 and 2014 primary elections. Despite the inclusion of same-day voter registration in 2022, election officials in the state have suggested that the lack of trust in the voting system was one of the factors that they felt led to sluggish voter turnout"[14]. Fake news does not just provide people with incorrect information; it also leads to uncertainty about everything they see on social media, which creates wariness even towards what is true and accurate. People would rather not vote than have to double-check every piece of information that they receive. Therefore, voter turnout has decreased.

7. The Reward of Fake News

The issue with fake news is that people believe it and fake news is rewarded as the information which spreads the farthest. Fake news "is often purposefully exaggerated,

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[11] "Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion." Barthel et al., December 15th, 2016.
[12] "The Role of Misinformation in Trump's Insurrection." West, March 9th, 2022.

[13] "Misinformation Is Eroding the Public's Confidence in Democracy." Sanchez & Middlemass, July 26th, 2022.
[14] "Misinformation Is Eroding the Public's Confidence in Democracy." Sanchez & Middlemass, July 26th, 2022.

using clickbait headlines or out-of-context details to make a story harder to look away from"[15]. These stories are the ones that spread the most because they are the most interesting ones, resulting in fake news being widely spread to people and real news not reaching people. The social media algorithm incentivizes the spread of fake news as "algorithms reward those that share content most frequently by broadcasting their posts to a higher number of social feeds, earning them more views, likes, comments, and shares. As we have seen, exciting or infuriating information stokes more reaction"[16]. Misinformation significantly impacts how voters will vote in future election cycles, and it means that they may vote for a candidate they are not in agreement with or who may be dangerous due to the fake news they are presented with. For example, suppose someone who sometimes votes red and others blue, depending on who the candidate is, is presented with the choice between Trump and Biden during this election cycle. In that case, misinformation may sway that voter's decision. If a TikTok appears on their feed mentioning Biden in a negative light and supporting it with fake evidence, that voter may then decide to vote for Trump. That decision, however, is based on inaccurate information that a user with no knowledge made with the sole purpose of going viral. The problem is that when we view information on social media, we believe it immediately rather than fact-check it.

For this reason, fake news has such an impact on American politics. If citizens were to check every piece of political information they receive, they would be able to make a more educated decision; that, however, is a long, tedious process no one wants to do. When you are tired at 11 pm and mindlessly scrolling through social media, you will not ensure what you come across is factual. However, that leads to today's issue of fake news. This has to be combatted, not just because of its adverse impacts on politics, but because citizens deserve the truth. Citizens deserve to know that what they read is factual and deserve to be informed in a way that helps them make decisions, not harms them.

8. Solutions and Steps Forward

Social media is a powerful tool, and it can just as quickly turn into a powerful weapon. It has done this in the United States by creating a more profound division and spreading fake news. However, our job as a society is to strive to maintain social media as a tool rather than a weapon. Some US states have already begun to do so, such as New Mexico, North Carolina, Connecticut, and California. These states have focused on education, educating the public by providing election fact-checks. New Mexico "has developed a website that provides fact checks regarding misinformation issues specific to elections in the state. North Carolina's Board of Elections created a program called "Mythbuster Monday," a series of posts focusing on debunking popular myths in North Carolina elections and national elections aimed primarily at reaching the public through social media. Connecticut has invested

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[15] "[How Misinformation on Social Media Has Changed News.](#)" Micich & Cross, March 8th, 2024.
[16] Idem

nearly $2 million on marketing to share factual information about voting and a fully salaried staff person who will focus exclusively on combating misinformation by rooting out early misinformation narratives about voting before they go viral. California's Office of Secretary of State is working with the US Department of Homeland Security to combat misinformation"[17]. One of the best ways to combat the adverse side effects of social media on US politics is education. Education is a powerful tool, and being able to educate, starting from a young age, on determining whether certain news is fake news would drastically change the political environment the US currently faces.

Additionally, it is essential to educate children on finding opposing sources and reading from various sources. Ensuring that they know it is essential to acquire news from various sources and to read opposing viewpoints, even if they do not change your opinion. Additionally, the government has to focus on foreign nations' impact on the US political atmosphere. Russia greatly impacted the 2020 election cycle by creating mistrust in citizens through cyber attacks[18]. China has also been able to hack into the US gov agencies' confidential documents multiple times[19]. The ability for foreign entities to spread misinformation has to be combatted, as it undermines the US political system and is a danger to its democracy. Another step that should be taken is for the government to require social media companies to release how their algorithms work. This will lead to greater transparency, and as such, "lawmakers, regulators, academics, and the public would be in a stronger position to assess how the platforms function and demand accountability when warranted"[20]. There will, however, be issues with this, as some may see this as an abuse of governmental power and a lack of privacy towards private companies. This should be combatted, as social media companies must use their algorithms positively rather than just an attempt to feed us with the information we want to see. Otherwise, we will reach a point of no return, and social media will impact our society so much that we will never be able to regain normalcy. This could mean completely undermining democracies, specifically the United States, which many countries rely on.

9. Conclusion

The creation of social media has completely changed the way we live and every aspect of our lives. One of those aspects is politics. However, it is up to us, citizens and governmental figures, to decide whether we want that change to be positive or negative. Social media can help inform people of current news and governmental campaigns anywhere. However, it can also spread fake news and create divisions between citizens due to social

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[17] "[Misinformation Is Eroding the Public's Confidence in Democracy.](#)" Sanchez & Middlemass, July 26th, 2022.

[18] "[Russian Hackers Break into 2 County Systems, Stoking Election Security Fears.](#)" Ewing & Parks, October 22nd, 2020.

[19] "[As China Expands Its Hacking Operations, a Vulnerability Emerges.](#)" Barnes & Sanger, February 22nd, 2024.

[20] "[How Tech Platforms Fuel US Political Polarization and What Government Can Do About It.](#)" Barrett et al., June 27th, 2023.

media platforms' algorithms to attract users. We are in a position where citizens and the government can change social media's route. Our job is to instill policies that educate people on spotting fake news and reading multiple media types and viewpoints, ensuring educated decisions regarding politics.

Policies suitable for all should also be established to hold social media companies accountable for transparency and trust. These companies should not have free range over citizens' information consumption and should be managed by governmental figures to ensure citizens are not exploited. Social media has adverse effects; however, it also has many positive ones, and it is our job to focus on the positives to ensure the best outcome from this tool.

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