

The Impact of Social Media on the Politics of High Schoolers in Comparison to Socioeconomic Factors

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the extent to which social media impacts political views of high schoolers, in comparison to factors like race, gender, socioeconomic status, and age. Which factor carries a greater weight in determining the political views of the teenagers of today? Does the variation of these dynamics across groups demonstrate disparities in access to information and political participation? Does social media usage lead to teenagers feeling more confident or informed of their political decisions or views? Our research concludes that it seems that racial and socioeconomic factors had the most impact on determining the political views of students, and age and gender to a lesser extent, as compared to social media usage. Furthermore, social media usage did not necessarily impact the confidence level of students while race/ethnicity had a greater impact.

Introduction

Social media has become a dominant force in our world today, especially after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Basch, 2022), and it has become a prominent source of political news for Americans. Around one-in-five adults in America say that they primarily get their political news from social media (Mitchell, 2020), as compared to other sources, such as the radio and television. Traditional media, such as the previously mentioned radio and television, has had significant impacts on the politics of its users, but certain attributes of social media differentiate it from past media: the ease at which one can gain access to social media, which can give a voice to previously marginalized groups, as well as the dependence on content created by users, as opposed to content created by a select group of persons (Zhuravskaya, 2020).

Despite this, U.S. adults whose source of political news is social media tend to have less political knowledge than those who rely on other sources, with around 57% of adults relying on social media for news having relatively low political knowledge, a significantly higher percentage than of those who relied on other sources (Mitchell, 2020). With the surge in usage of social media, the danger of misinformation is great, a result of lax fact-checking standards, low entry barriers which allows greater access to social media, coupled with the speed at which content, including that which is a result of immediate emotional reactions, can spread online (Zhuravskaya, 2020).

Although the imminent danger of misinformation is indeed great, social media has been a vehicle in creating social change, being linked to the coordination of multiple protests in recent history, from the protests against Philippine President Estrada in 2001 (Shirky, 2011), to the Arab Spring movement in the 2010s (Zhuravskaya, 2020), to the January 6 Capitol attack, to the current anti-Israel campus protests. It is therefore evident that social media plays a considerable role in the political sphere and has the potential to influence the views of its users in ways that can manifest into physical, tangible results.

Yet, adults are not the only users of social media. Another, lesser-studied group who overwhelmingly uses social media are teenagers. 97% of teenagers in 2023 reported using the internet at least once a day, with a majority of using it several times a day and one-in-five teenagers saying they are on Youtube or TikTok “almost constantly”. The top used platforms include Youtube, with 93% of teenagers reporting usage; TikTok, with 63%; Snapchat, with

60%; and Instagram, with 59% (Anderson, 2023). Usage differs based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, and household income (Pew Research, 2024).

With so much exposure to social media, it is important to determine the political impact social media has on teenagers and how this may change in the future in order to determine whether it facilitates pro- or anti-democratic changes in society (Zhuravskaya, 2020). Furthermore, although known for being an outlet of youth political expression (Literat, 2019), usage of social media can differ based on racial and socioeconomic factors. Which teenage group, therefore, more so uses social media politically, and what impact does that have on the future of American democracy and politics? How does social media shape political ideologies amongst the youth? What factors lead to political polarization and engagement amongst teenagers? How does misinformation affect them, as research has shown that younger people seem to be affected much less by false news than those who are older (Zhuravskaya, 2020)?

This study aims to determine the extent to which social media impacts political views of high schoolers, in comparison to factors like race, gender, socioeconomic status, and age. Which factor carries a greater weight in determining the political views of the teenagers of today? Does the variation of these dynamics across groups demonstrate disparities in access to information and political participation? Does social media usage lead to teenagers feeling more confident or informed of their political decisions or views?

Methods

High school students from Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, New York City, were used as a case study for this research. An anonymous survey on Google Forms, only viewable by those with a Stuyvesant email address to prevent others from responding, was sent out to the student body through multiple platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Discord, messages, as well as physical requests. Students were further asked to share the survey with their peers to better represent the views of students in the school. Although the survey was anonymous, responders were required to sign into Google to prevent duplicate responses.

Out of approximately 3,300 students, 152 students (4.6%) responded to the survey over a span of three days. For each factor (grade, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and social media), the average confidence level as well as the most-frequently selected answer for each question was determined. For social media, only the top three platforms that were in usage amongst high school students at Stuyvesant High School — YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook — were analyzed. These platforms correspond with the most used platforms by teenagers overall in 2023 (Anderson, 2023), with the exclusion of Facebook, for which Stuyvesant High School has a unique culture (The Stuyvesant Spectator, 2023).

A complete list of the survey questions is provided in Appendix A. Detailed results of the survey are available in Appendix B. An analysis of the results is provided in Appendix C. Individual responses can be seen in Appendix D.

Results

For the first question, which asked students who they would vote for in the 2024 election if eligible, students overall had a 6.9 confidence level in their selection, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. 49.3% of students stated that they would vote for Joe Biden or lean more towards Biden as compared to the other options (*Figure 1*).

This confidence level is the lowest in comparison to the other questions, possibly due to disillusionment after the war in Israel (Medina, 2024), with voters faced with a choice between two candidates, neither of whom many want (PBS News, 2023).

The confidence range of all subgroups was within a range of 1 of the total confidence range, with the exception of the following groups: Hispanic (4.75), Black (9), Central Asian (10), West Asian (8), and those who are upper class (9). However, all of these groups were minimally represented, with 4, 2, 1, 1, and 5 people respectively identifying with those categories, leading to each person's choice having more weight.

Furthermore, both those students who use and don't use Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook had similar confidence levels.

Although overall students leaned towards Biden, freshman (23.7% of all respondents), South Asians (35.9% of all respondents) and those who come from lower/working class families (25% of all respondents) most frequently chose to vote for neither. This trend amongst freshman and students from lower class backgrounds is fascinating, although for South Asians, many of whom are Muslim, it can again likely be linked to the more personal connection these students have felt to the situation in Gaza and the once again disillusionment with both presidential candidates. The same result was shown for Southeast Asians, Middle Easterns, and those who do not use YouTube, but once again, for each the respondents are such a low number that one person's response can dramatically change the final result.

If the 2024 presidential election was being held today, who would you vote for (given that you are eligible to vote)?
152 responses

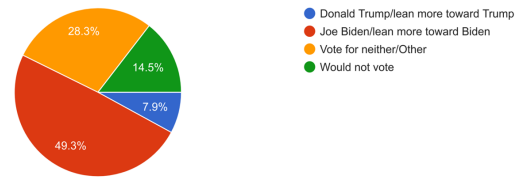


Figure 1: 49.3% of students, 75 students, would vote for or lean towards Biden, while 7.9%, 12 students, would vote for or lean towards Trump. 28.3%, 43 students would vote for someone else while 14.5%, 22 students would not vote. The preference for Biden well represents the political makeup of New York City, with a large population of Democrats, although Biden has less support than he likely would've in previous years, likely due to disapproval of his handling of the situation in Israel and Gaza.

In relation to abortion, which of the following do you agree with? It should be...
152 responses

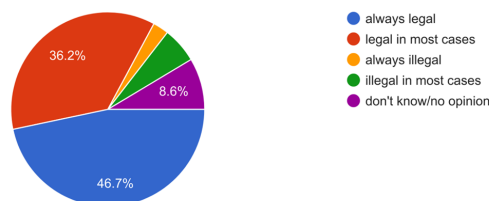


Figure 2: 46.7% of students, or 71 students, think abortion should be always legal. 36.2%, or 55 students, think it should be legal in most cases, 8.6% or 13 students don't know or don't have an opinion, 5.9% or 9 students think it should be illegal in most cases, while 4 students or 2.6% think it should be always illegal. These views well reflect those of a typical public school in New York City.

significant), and those who are unsure of their social class (again, very few people).

For question 2, which asked students for their opinion on abortion, confidence was much higher, the highest of all three questions, 8.1. Most students felt abortion should always be legal (*Figure 2*). All groups were within a range of 1 of this value, excluding Southeast Asians, West Asians, people who are non-binary, and those who do not use YouTube, but once again these groups had so few respondents that one response could significantly change the outcome. Furthermore, all groups overwhelmingly chose always legal except for Southeast Asians (see above to see why this is not as sig-

Question 3 had the most variation in responses when compared to the other two questions. The overall confidence level for this question was 7.1, lower than question 2 (abortion) but higher than question 1 (2024 election). Most students felt that their sympathies were mostly with the Palestinian people but also somewhat with the Israeli people (Figure 3). The trends for this question amongst different groups is fascinating. Senior students who make up 16.4% of respondents, many of whom are now eligible to vote and are transitioning into an age where they are making more major decisions for themselves, such as those relating to college, had the lowest confidence level of 5.72. South Asian students, on the other hand, had a comparatively higher average confidence level of 8.45, and most frequently chose that their sympathies were entirely with the Palestinian people. This may again be related to the fact that many South Asian students are of Muslim backgrounds and thus may personally connect more with this issue.

Another fascinating insight is that freshman students (23.7% of respondents), Asian students (78.3% of respondents), women (53.3% of respondents), middle class students (36.8% of respondents), and lower/working class students (25% of respondents), with overlap amongst these categories, overwhelmingly chose that they sympathize entirely with the Palestinian people. Other groups that overwhelmingly chose this category include Black, Southeast Asian, West Asian, and non-binary students, as well as those unsure of their socioeconomic class, although these students represent such a low percentage of respondents that it is difficult to discern how representative their responses are of all students of that category at Stuyvesant. Hispanic students, although also a small percentage of respondents, overwhelmingly chose that they were unsure of with whom their sympathies were with.

White students, on the other hand, who made up 21.7% of respondents overwhelmingly chose that they sympathize mostly with the Israeli people but also somewhat with the Palestinian people. This can be attributed to the significant Jewish population at Stuyvesant, many of whom identify as white (The Spectator, 2023), and who have personal connections to this issue, as many Jewish students personally know family and friends in Israel.

Interestingly enough, students who used Instagram, 82.9% of respondents, also overwhelmingly said that their sympathies were entirely with the Palestinian people. It is possible that this is because of the extensive usage of Instagram as a platform to circulate images of the dire situation in Gaza, which some have described to be a humanitarian crisis (Jacobo, 2023). Many Palestinians have gained thousands of followers since October 7 for their footage of the situation in Gaza, such as Bisan Owda and Motaz Azaiza (Arafat, 2023). It is possible that widely circulated images, including many that can be highly disturbing to viewers, have been capable of eliciting more sympathy. Students who don't use YouTube (5.3% of respondents) and don't use Facebook (27.6% of respondents) also chose this option overall. It is hard to pinpoint or speculate a specific reason for why, although many students who do not have Facebook do have Instagram.

Conclusion

It is difficult to come to a certain conclusion based on this data, especially considering how much it fluctuated over time, with even the submission of one more student considerably altering the results. This would need to be studied much more in depth to come to a more definite conclusion. However, it seems that racial and socioeconomic had the most impact on determining the political views of students, and to a lesser extent age and gender, as compared to usage of social media. Further, social media usage did not necessarily impact the confidence level of students as compared to other factors. The major factor that seemed to impact confidence levels seemed to be race/ethnicity.

Who do your sympathies lie with the most regarding the current state of Gaza?
152 responses

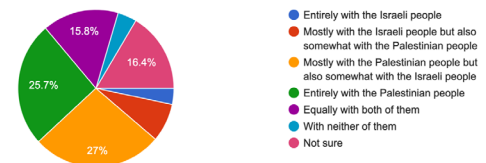


Figure 3: 27% of students, or 41 students, sympathize mostly with the Palestinian people but also somewhat with the Israeli people. 25.7%, or 39 students entirely sympathize with the Palestinian people. 15.8%, or 24 students sympathize equally with both of them. 3.9%, or 6 students sympathize with neither of them. 16.4%, or 25 people are unsure. 3.3%, or 5 people, sympathize entirely with the Israeli people. 7.8%, or 12 people, sympathize mostly with the Israeli people but also somewhat with the Palestinian people.

Limitations

Like any study, this research has major limitations.

Firstly, most respondents found the survey on social media platforms, much more than those who found it through posters in-person, therefore minimizing the amount of students who do not use social media much taking part in this study. Out of all 152 participants, not one chose “I use none of these” platforms when answering the question about social media. Although this can be attributed to the fact that a majority of high school students have access to social media and the internet in some way, it also could be a result of who had access to the survey.

Secondly, as someone who is a South Asian woman myself, my most immediate friend group who I was able to send the form to largely comprises South Asian women, which may have increased the amount of South Asian women who participated in this survey, which could seriously implicate the results. Therefore, the sample was not fully random and thus contained bias.

Thirdly, the questions were purposely left vague, leaving participants to self-interpretation. One question asked by respondents included what was meant by “most cases” in the abortion question, situation or the stage of the fetus. Many participants expressed disappointment in the lack of distinction between the Israeli and Palestinian governments and people, although the question asked for sympathies with the people. Several students also asked for a breakdown of what incomes constituted each economic class. As these distinctions were not provided, students may have interpreted these questions differently, therefore affecting their confidence levels.

Another important consideration is human error, both on the part of respondents and the researcher. Many respondents took the survey on their phones, and often did not realize that they missed several options because of the small screen. It is further possible that because of one unrealized mistype when I was analyzing the data, that the results for a certain group are incorrect.

Lastly, as this study was conducted in a specialized high school in New York City, which has a unique culture compared to other schools across the country, the results cannot be generalized to all high schoolers.

Discussion and Implications for the Future

Due to the large usage of social media amongst high school students, and largely as well amongst all teenagers, it is important to assess the impact social media has on the political views of these students, especially on those who are coming of the age to vote. This is especially significant in a post-pandemic world where social media usage has increased drastically.

It would be fascinating for future research to determine if these dynamics across groups demonstrate disparities in access to information and political participation. Furthermore, an analysis of social media usage amongst teenagers in different countries, in relation to AI and misinformation, would help us further understand globalized political issues in our world today.

Despite the fact that this study could not decisively conclude that there is a correlation between social media and political views, or even social media and confidence in political views, the fact remains that social media is playing a large role, although perhaps still unknown because of the relative newness of this widespread phenomenon. It is therefore imperative for political organizations, individuals, and policy makers to use social media responsively in a way that best engages the political citizens of tomorrow.

Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank all the individuals who have supported me in my research. First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to Fawaz Rehman and Jae (Joanne) Ji, my mentors, whose guidance was instrumental in the completion of this paper. I also wish to express my extreme appreciation to Dr. Meng-Ping Tu, Mr. Jason Econome,

and Ms. Jennifer Suri, who greatly supported me in the review and publishing stage of this process. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the unwavering support of my family, who through the countless late nights and challenges continued to encourage me and allowed me to reach this phase in my academic career.

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