

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION AND VOTING AMONG GENERATION Z
COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Generation Z college students, born between 1997-2012, utilize social media extensively, but especially for entertainment and to become informed. Social media is convenient to access and therefore a great source for political campaigns to share their messaging. In recent years, political campaigns have incorporated social media into their communication strategy for reaching voters. This study took data from 170 college students at the University of Oregon with the goal of exploring the relationship between social media use and political participation. Approximately 72% of those interested in politics and who use social media voted in the 2024 Presidential election. Participants completed a 10 question survey to determine their social media usage and how following political content and being aware of candidates and policies contributed to their likelihood to vote. How Gen Z uses social media can appear nonsensical and cryptic to outsiders, but it encompasses the shared cultural logic that spreads vastly across different trends, memes, and viral moments. Social media is a powerful communication tool and has the ability to greatly influence the American political scene. Ultimately, the survey data and pre-existing literature indicate that exposure to political messaging on social media is influential to Gen Z's likelihood to participate in politics, which can be measured through voting data and engagement with political figures and content online.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my mom who encouraged me to join the Clark Honors College and pursue this thesis project. She reassured and motivated me through all aspects of this process by offering her unwavering support during both the highs and lows. This project is a reflection of her belief in me and consistent love and support throughout the course of my academic journey.

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Introduction

The increase in social media use among youth has transformed how Generation Z communicates and understands the world around them. In the age of rapid developments and a polarized political landscape in the United States, social media is a source to connect the youth amongst all the noise. With not much previous research as social media is a newer platform to study, it can be difficult to determine how influential social media is on the political engagement and voting behaviors of Gen Z. The advantages of politicians who are adapting their platforms to a social media sphere are becoming evident (Watta;, Schuff, Mandviwalla, and Williams, 2010 as cited in Hong & Nadler, 2012). The specific platform, TikTok, is notable in influencing youth's political participation through its captivating way of entertaining and informing. The use of video and music effects combined with the ability to see content from almost anywhere has contributed to TikTok's rise in popularity (Hindarto, 2022). TikTok has made many changes to the landscape of youth and politics as it can be considered an effective political tool (Medina, Suminas, & Fahmy, 2023). Members of Gen Z ages 18-25 are less likely to be engaged in politics due to their circumstances—gaining an education, joining the workforce, and transitioning into adulthood (Henn et al., 2002, Smets, 2015; Van Deth, 1989 as cited in Keating & Melis, 2017). Their ability to vote is often hindered due to geographical challenges when away at college. Registering and voting is made more difficult and costly (Bergan et al., 2021). Not only is this part of the overall lower numbers of youth voter turnout, but it supports the reasoning why this age group turns to social media to gain information quickly and conveniently. This voter group may show more political interest if their information is intertwined with the source of their entertainment (Holt et al., 2013). Social media is a space where Gen Z can connect to their friends, families, and now political parties and candidates. With political content seamlessly

combined with their interactions online, social media is a rising force that can have great political influence over the youth of the US. As Gen Z heavily relies on social media for communication and access to news information, it's critical to narrow our focus into how these shifts influence politics and voting.

Research Question

- 1.* Has social media usage by political campaigns encouraged more youth to participate in politics/vote?
 - 1.* How is this specifically reflected at the University of Oregon among undergraduate students?

Literature Review

As a dynamic form of communication, the accessibility of social media has and will continue to contribute to the worldwide digital sphere. Each platform has its own unique digital architecture that allows users to create, message, or watch content that comes in the form of text, audio, photos, or videos each with different constraints to length and formatting (Bossetta, 2018). TikTok refuses the typical subscription feature of other apps through a method that utilizes repeated engagement with the algorithm a user creates just by interacting with the app. The “For You Page” is an endless stream of generated content that aligns with the user’s likes and interests (Schellewald, 2021). While rapidly gaining popularity and making its mark in political related discourse, TikTok’s user base being primarily under 25 has contributed to the lack of and overall shortcomings of research on Gen Z voting habits (Schellewald, 2021). Further research should consider how the various structures of social media platforms contribute to voter engagement, online political discourse and knowledge, as well as relations with candidates and their role in American politics.

Social media has the power to bring attention to the struggles members of Generation Z face when it comes to interpreting political messaging from candidates, how to register to vote, and then what effective voting looks like. According to Bergen, et al., Gen Z comprised 10% of eligible voters starting in 2020 (Bergan et al., 2021). Argued in multiple studies is the idea that preexisting political interest is necessary for social media to serve as a tool for influencing political interests and offline political participation (Holt et al., 2013). However, as social media becomes more of a foundation for communication amongst Gen Z, research is indicating the gradual increase in political awareness and eventual participation in the political process. One study that had 100 survey respondents and 6 interviews with TikTok creators found that TikTok has a

strong influence in online political actions of Gen Z, but still lacks involvement in offline politics (Sodani & Mendenhall, 2021). Youth in the US are more common users of social media than their older generation counterparts. With more than 70% of 18-24 year olds being users of Youtube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. On the other end, this age group is the least likely group to participate in civic duties, according to Smith and Anderson, 2018 (Sodani & Mendenhall, 2021). However, the current state of digital media has allowed citizens to go from listeners to active, engaged, and vocal in issues that concern them (Hindarto, 2022). The power of social media was evident during the 2020 Presidential election where protests for Black Lives Matter and MAGA rallies yielded mass youth turnout and were results of online communication through TikTok (Sodani & Mendenhall, 2021). The more that youth establish their presence online will increase political participation and may result in overall greater levels of political interest and activity (Holt et al., 2013). Being fast adapters to new technology, Gen Z are 'digital natives' of these spaces that bring with them digital skills and communicative abilities that have become so integrated into their lives that an online space is natural to them and therefore where they will express their identities (Keating & Melis, 2017).

Generation Z's heavy presence online has made them the target for political content and messaging from politicians and issue groups (Sodani & Mendenhall, 2021). Campaigns recognize the opportunity here to benefit from the app's ability to harvest the digital traces of voters and use their decisions for persuasion and mobilization techniques (Bossetta, 2018). As a tool, social media can gauge public opinion on different policies and candidates, allowing their campaign teams an advantage for strategizing (Hindarto, 2022; Bossetta, 2018). Online campaign funding exploded in 2008 with Barack Obama's Presidential campaign. The \$22.25 million spent on political ads was just the beginning. During the 2016 election cycle, Trump and Clinton's

campaigns spent a collective \$1.4 billion on sharing their political messaging through social media (Nott, 2020). The various platforms can no longer be collectively referred to as just 'social media' because this fails to encompass the complexity of these 'hybrid political communication systems' (Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Bossetta, 2018). The use of different strategies across platforms has brought attention to the idea that social media should be considered a highly respected and powerful communication tool that has the ability to spread political information, educate the public, and eventually inspire citizens to fulfill civic duties.

TikTok utilizes audiovisual storytelling tools in order to create a culture based on community and participation. Through a series of participant interviews, Bhandari, et al., notes that one participant feels valued by their peers when they make a reference to a post on TikTok that is also acknowledged by others (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). TikTok allows an opportunity for people seeking new creative ways to engage in their political preferences and even to achieve political goals (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2002, as cited in Keating & Melis, 2017). TikTok is playful and based on the foundation of entertainment, it poses political policies and candidates in less serious understandings, which can be emphasized as the importance of seeing politicians as ordinary people (Van Aelst et al., 2011, as cited in Medina, Suminas, & Fahmy, 2023). What used to feel like unscripted and spontaneous interactions with political candidates in the early 21st century, is now an expected part of the digital media landscape (Teen Vogue, 2024).

We no longer need to rely on institutionalized forms of news media for acquiring political information (Schlozman et al., 2012; Bimber, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2009, as cited in Keating et al., 2017). TikTok, like other social media, continues to evolve and adapt their features to keep up with the landscape of society (Hong & Nadler, 2012; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). According to Vitak et al., social media as a political communication tool has immense capabilities of reaching

young voters through these digital spaces, despite there being a lack of literature related to the role of social media in Presidential elections, campaigns, and overall political activity (Hindarto, 2022). The scope of how younger generations utilize social media for political purposes may be an explanation for the lack of attention they put towards traditional political news sources. Therefore, social media acts as a leveler of political interest and offline political participation between younger and older generations (Holt et al., 2013). Additionally, social media use provides socio-political awareness, online communication skills, and the ability to become more empathetic and connected to surrounding communities (Shabir et al., 2014).

Methods

In order to record data for this research a 10 question survey was created, made through the platform Qualtrics. The Qualtrics survey was set to the “anonymous” setting to ensure no email addresses or IP addresses were collected. The questions were developed to both get an understanding of the participant's usage of social media and then gradually see their specific involvement in the 2024 Presidential election. Additionally, to determine their overall thoughts about the current administration and how their personal use of social media has impacted that. The target group were undergraduate students at the University of Oregon aged 18-25. The only personal information collected from participants was their age and gender with the option to indicate their major. The survey was sent out via cold emailing to political science and related field professors at the University of Oregon. Additionally, the survey was presented to multiple classes with a brief speech introducing the thesis and with a QR scannable code for quick access to the survey. Every participant was presented with an extensive informative consent page with all information pertaining to their participation in this study including the researchers contact information and any further information necessary. Every participant was required to select that they consented or did not consent before continuing. If the participant did not consent then they were directed to an ending screen that thanked them for their time and to close out the survey. Listed at the start of the survey was a statement clarifying the survey would take 3-4 minutes, but this varied depending on the amount of time and length of response a participant would want to spend. The researcher sought out to solve the research question of how political campaigns and/or specific politicians use accounts on the social media platforms TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook (Meta), Twitter (X), and Instagram has influence over GenZ college students at the University of Oregon. In order to determine the relationship, the researcher had to get a sense for what

modes of social media students were using, if they had voted, whether they were interested in politics or not, if they followed any political content on social media and what platforms that would be on. The area of study is broad and open to various interpretations, which makes it more difficult to draw definitive conclusions on how social media influences the political participation of Gen Z college students included in this study.

Survey questions:

How old are you?

What gender identity do you most identify?

What is your major? (optional)

1. *On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?*

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-3 hours
- 3-5 hours
- More than 5 hours

2. *How frequently do you use TikTok to view or create content?*

- *Multiple times a day*
- *Daily*
- *Weekly*
- *Rarely*
- *Never*

3. *What source do you primarily use to learn about current events? Select all that apply*

- TikTok
- Instagram
- Twitter/X
- Facebook/Meta
- News channels (TV)
- Newspapers (print or online)

- Online news articles (not social media)
 - Radio or podcasts
 - Email newsletters
4. *Did you vote in the 2024 Presidential election? If so, what motivated your decision? If not, what were your reasons for not voting?*
- Yes
 - If you answered yes to voting in the 2024 Presidential election, why did you vote?
 - No
 - If you answered no to voting in the 2024 Presidential election, why did you not vote?
5. *Do you follow any political party or candidate on social media? If yes, please list the platform(s). You are not required to indicate which political party/candidate. Please list the platform in which you view the content. If you answer maybe or no, please continue to the next question.*
- Yes
 - Yes, I do follow a specific political party/candidate on social media. (List platform below)
 - No
 - Maybe
6. *How interested in politics are you?*
- Very interested
 - Somewhat interested
 - Neither interested nor uninterested
 - Somewhat uninterested
 - Not at all interested
7. *How likely are you to vote if you feel informed about the candidates and policies?*
- Extremely likely
 - Somewhat likely
 - Neutral
 - Not very likely
 - Not at all
8. *How likely are you to vote if you feel informed about the candidates and policies?*

- Extremely likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely/Neutral
- Somewhat unlikely
- Extremely unlikely

9. *What are your feelings regarding the upcoming Trump administration?*

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neither positive nor negative/Neutral
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

10. *How much does not seeing political content on social media influence your decision to vote?*

- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount
- A little
- None at all

Data analysis

The survey remained open from January 14th, 2025 to March 14th, 2025.

For data collection each and every survey response was gone through and organized into a google sheet. Each participant has their own row with answers in the corresponding column to the question it was answering. If any identifiable information was given for any reason in the response, that data was not included.

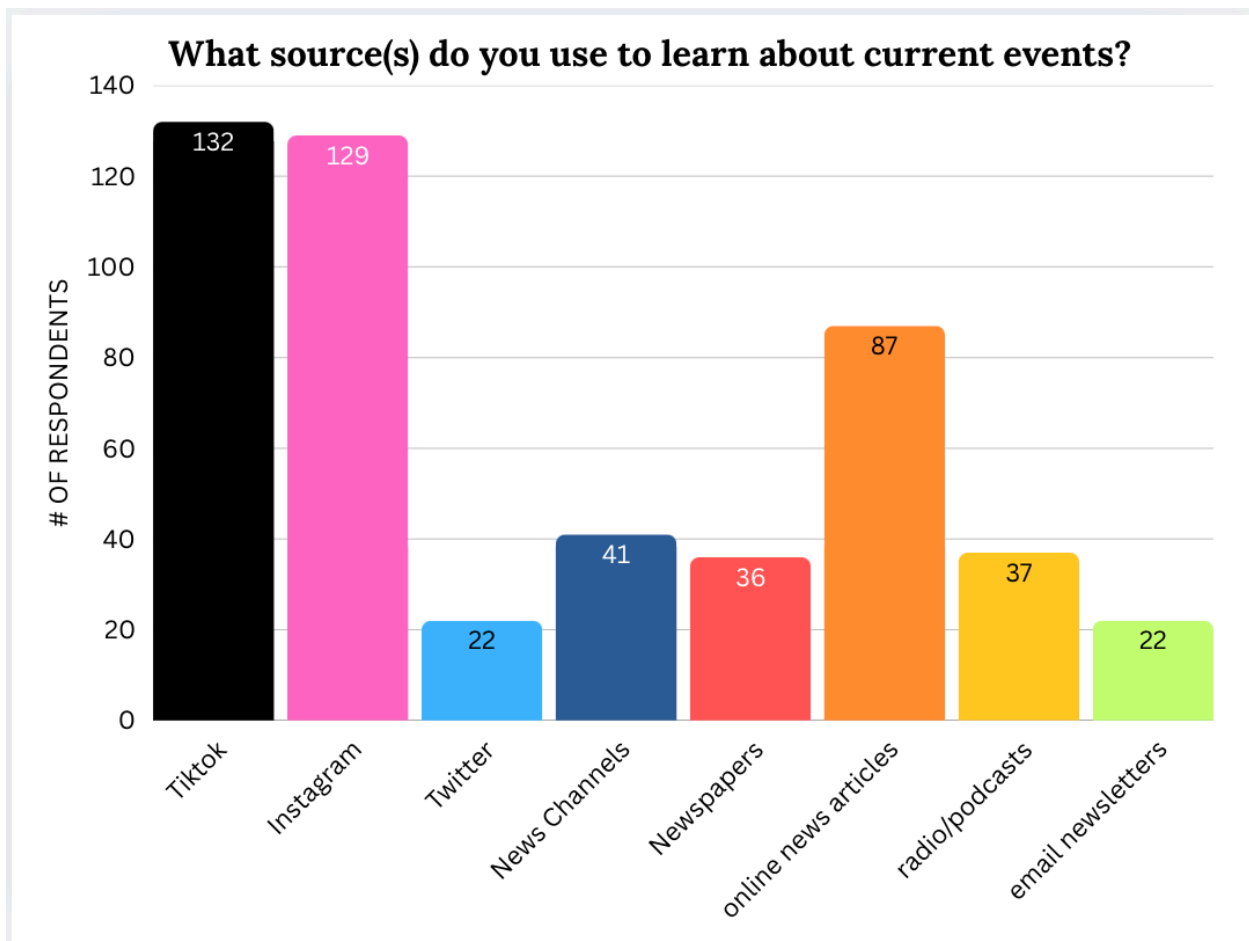


Figure 1: What source(s) do you use to learn about current events?

The graph above shows that the majority of participants use Tiktok and Instagram to get their news. Generation Z is moving away from traditional means of obtaining information and

combining it with the source they are used for entertainment. Social media apps can offer lots of information in a few seconds and culminate in a flashy, attention-grabbing manner with music, loud talking, bright texts and colors.

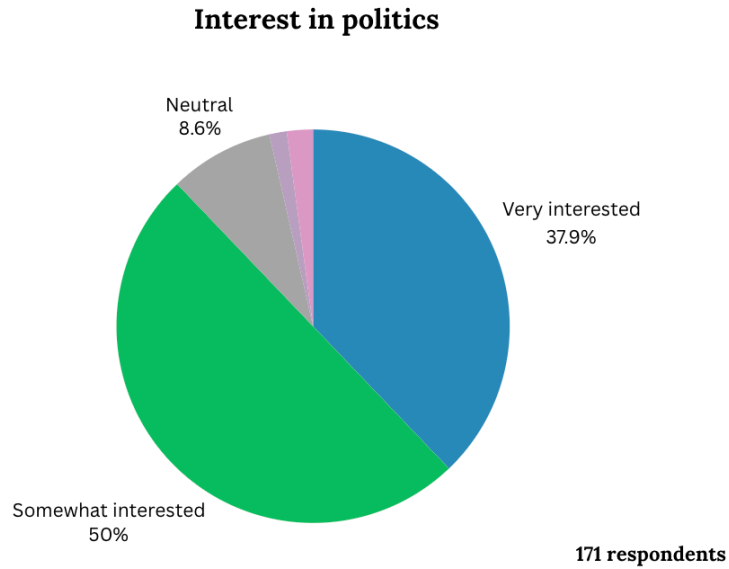


Figure 2: Interest in politics

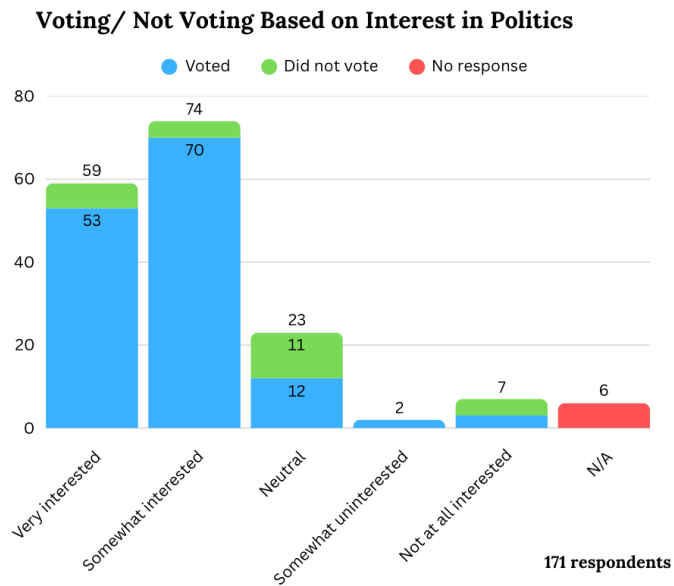


Figure 3: Voting/not voting based on interest in politics

To illustrate how interest in voting translated into whether participants voted or not, Figure 2 includes percentages of participants ranging from not at all interested to very interested in politics. Figure 3 contains data on how many participants voted or did not vote based on their

level of interest in politics. Majority of participants were somewhat interested in politics and voted in the 2024 Presidential election. Those who felt neutral about politics were split in their decision to vote or not. Interestingly, six participants who indicated they were very interested in politics did end up not voting-suggesting that political interest does not always result in action as other circumstances arise near or on election day. For those who had little to no interest in politics, unsurprisingly had low voter turnout.

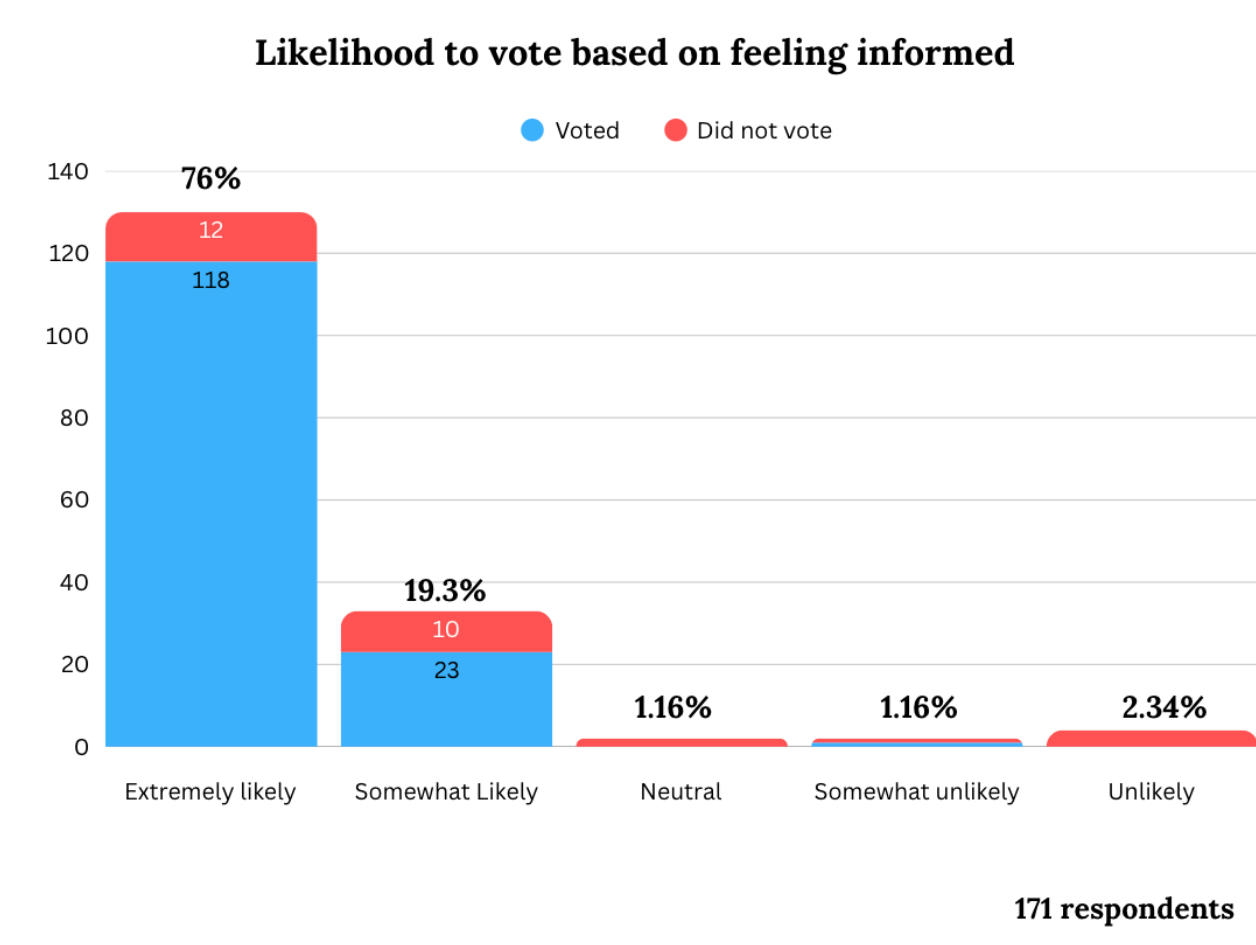


Figure 4: Likelihood to vote based on feeling informed

When asked how likely they would be to vote if they feel informed about the candidate, 76% said they would be extremely likely to vote. 118 participants who were extremely likely to

vote if informed actually voted, emphasizing that feeling informed yields voter turnout. In contrast, those who felt neutral (1.16%) or unlikely (2.34%) to vote if informed, ended up not casting a ballot. The data collected here highlights the importance of needing to educate younger voters and tailor information to effectively resonate with these audiences.

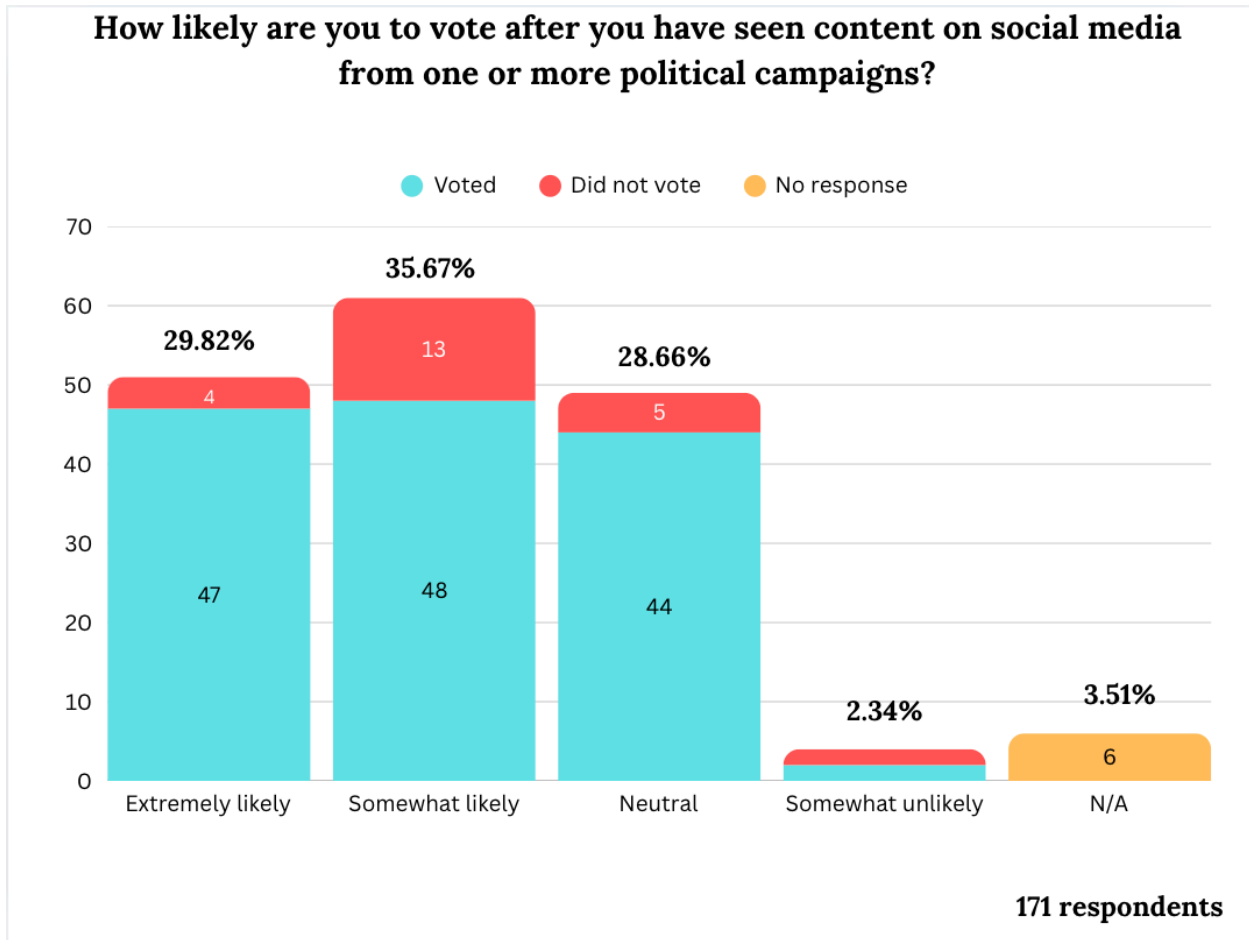


Figure 5: How likely are you to vote after you have seen content on social media from one or more political campaigns?

Participants who viewed content related to political candidates on their social media feeds were generally more likely to vote with those identifying as extremely likely and somewhat likely representing 65% of the sample. For participants who were neutral or somewhat unlikely—approximately 31%—voter turnout still remained high with 46 participants still voting, suggesting that exposure to political content can increase voter participation. Political messaging being

viewed through social media platforms allows voters to feel more informed and more likely to vote.

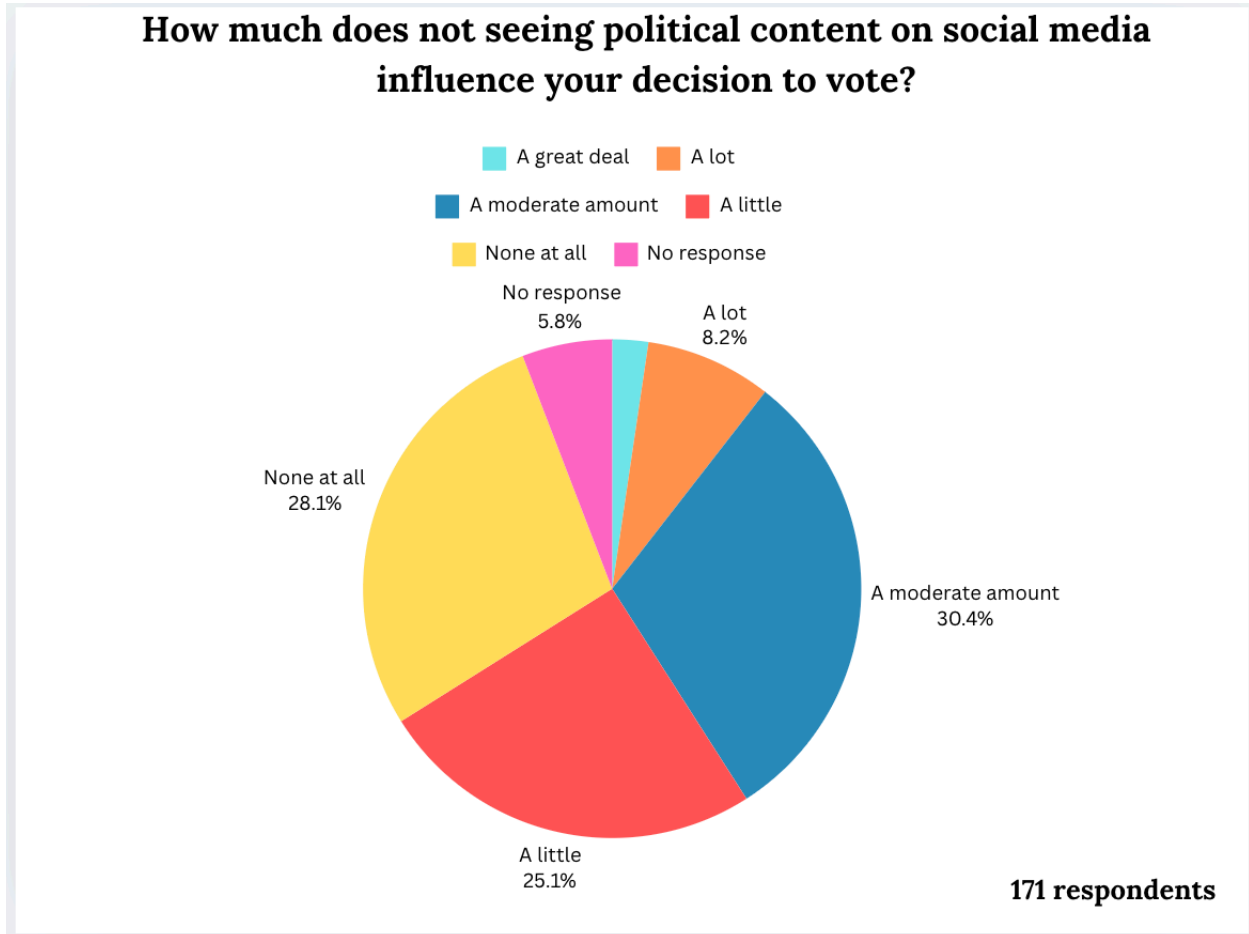


Figure 6: How much does not seeing political content on social media influence your decision to vote?

The last question on the survey asked participants if the absence of political content on social media influences their decision to vote in order to determine how impactful the existence of this content is. Most said it influences them a moderate amount, which suggests that while social media political content does matter, it is not the sole reason a participant is motivated to vote. A small portion -- just 2.3% -- said that not seeing the content would influence them greatly which emphasizes the differences in what encourages some participants to be politically engaged and what they base their decisions off when voting.

Results and Conclusion

The data collected from the survey indicates that amongst 18-25 year old college students at the University of Oregon, social media influences their political interest and engagement. To reiterate, the original research question was how political campaigns using social media encourages more youth to participate in politics, seen through voting. The general political orientation of the participants was left-leaning with 74.3% saying they feel 'very negative' about the current Trump administration. As seen in the comparison between participant's interest in politics and if they actually voted or not, 72% were very interested or somewhat interested in politics and actually voted. 48% of participants follow a political party or candidate on social media. This emphasizes the bridge between politics and social media as youth can directly follow and receive information from the US political sphere, from the convenience of their phone. TikTok and Instagram held a large majority for the sources most participants receive their political information from with Twitter/X and email newsletters being the least frequent source of receiving news. The data supports that the participants are active on social media with 37% using social media 1-3 hours a day and 50% using it 3-5 hours/day. Based on the significance of TikTok in how influential it is in attracting social media users as well as proving to be a platform that shares political information, 74% of participants use TikTok daily. This emphasizes the high number of TikTok users within the participant pool. While social media has the ability to share political content from political parties or from candidates themselves, voting based on how informed one feels is a critical factor in determining political engagement. 69% who said they would be 'extremely likely' to vote if they felt informed, actually voted in the 2024 US Presidential election. Whereas 7% of those who said they would be 'extremely likely' to vote if they felt informed did not end up voting. Being informed on the policies and candidates and being likely

to vote held a majority of the participants' responses. While this survey of 171 respondents captures an aspect of the political engagement and voting behavior of University of Oregon students, more research should be dedicated to the intersection of social media and youth political engagement. As this generation enters adulthood and voting age, and as social media continues to be people's main source of news and communication, understanding the influence of political participation on Gen Z will be crucial for the future of campaigning, elections, and overall democratic engagement.

Limitations

The limitations of this research and data collection is the various interpretations of what a “social media user” pertains to and how each individual’s opinions and experiences can influence their position as a person who uses social media. Additionally, defining what participating in politics actually looks like can be interpreted differently. For the sake of this research, it means following US politics online by viewing related content on social media, as well as voting when applicable. There is also the chance of self-report bias where survey participants may not have truthfully answered the survey, despite their awareness that their answers were anonymous and confidential. The limits in survey size and demographics swayed the survey to be left-leaning due to the environment the participants are part of. If this survey were to be more widespread or held in a different part of the country, it is likely different answers would be received. Not every individual social media platform was analyzed in-depth, therefore there can be gaps in how each platform specifically impacts the survey participants. Overall, this research was limited to a snapshot of the extremely expansive sphere of social media and politics; a select few previous elections and candidates were analyzed. In order to make inferences of youth political engagement in the constraints of this research, it's important to acknowledge the vast development of social media, strategies used during campaigns and elections, and the always evolving nature of social media.

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