

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON THE GEN Z
MALE VOTE IN THE 2024 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

by

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This study examines how popular non-political influencers incorporated political messaging into their social media content during the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election, with a focus on content targeting Gen Z males. Motivated by a significant shift towards Donald Trump among young male voters from 2020 to 2024 and the growing use of social media for political information, this project analyzes posts from Joe Rogan, Dave Portnoy, and Theo Von across various short-form social media platforms. Through qualitative social media content analysis, this project identifies clear patterns in candidate framing, narratives, and stylistic strategies among these three influencers. Although political content was rare, it consistently portrayed Donald Trump positively while framing Kamala Harris negatively. In addition, social media content was characterized by a lack of specific policy discussion, as well as stylistic strategies unique from conventional news media. The findings demonstrate the important role that influencers can play as digital opinion leaders who act as middlemen between politicians and young voters. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of recognizing the sway of influencers in modern-day political communication.

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Introduction:

The 2024 U.S. presidential election occurred amid drastic changes to the political media landscape and was defined by significant shifts in typical voting trends. Social media has emerged as a dominant platform for news dissemination. On the other hand, some forms of traditional media have seen a noticeable decline in recent years. According to a 2024 study on news consumption and trust from *Reuters*, social media and online news consumption have increased drastically over the past decade, while traditional forms like print media usage have declined (Newman, 2024). This shift towards using social media for news consumption has amplified the influence of online personalities, including social media influencers.

Some of these influencers, often known for content related to entertainment, sports, fitness, or lifestyle, have used their platforms to share political messaging to large audiences. While these influencers are not traditional journalists or political commentators, many posted endorsements or other election-related content during the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. These political posts are often embedded within non-political content, making them more casual and potentially persuasive to young followers. For Gen Z males in particular, this blending of entertaining content and political messaging presents a unique form of influence.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election also demonstrated some unique shifts in voting habits, particularly for Gen Z men. In the 2024 presidential election, 56% of men aged 18-29 voted for Republican candidate Donald Trump, a significant increase from 41% in the 2020 presidential election (Medina, 2025). There is also a distinct gendered gap in voting patterns, as President Trump received just 41% of the votes from women aged 18-29.

These recent shifts in media consumption and political ideology raise important questions about the influence of social media news dissemination, particularly for Gen Z men.

Furthermore, understanding the role of influencers is essential for analyzing the factors that contributed to the political shift within this demographic.

Literature Review:

Gen Z:

Generation Z, typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first generation to grow up in a digital world. Gen Z spent their formative years immersed in the internet, social media, and mobile communication. The early presence of technology in the lives of Gen Z has created unique trends in media consumption and identity formation. Gen Z and Millennials have the highest social media usage rates, with Gen Z predominantly using YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (*Pew Research Center, 2024*). In addition, Gen Z spends more time on social media than all other generations, with 35% spending more than two hours daily and 94% spending at least ten minutes daily. While Gen Z uses social media more than previous generations, research also shows that Gen Z is more likely to cite negative feelings about social media, often in the form of fear of missing out or poor body image (Coe et al. 2023). Roberta Katz says that the rise of technology has contributed to negative stereotypes about Gen Z being lazy or coddled due to the ease that technology provides, but Katz finds that Gen Z is a highly collaborative and pragmatic generation (Katz, 2021).

In terms of political ideology, Gen Z tends to be more politically aligned with Millennials and more receptive to progressive views than previous generations, especially on concepts such as climate change, LGBTQ, gun control, and others. Gen Z is also more favorable to government action than other generations, with 70% arguing the government should do more to solve problems in a 2018 survey (Parker et al. 2019).

However, recent trends also display a stark gender gap in political leanings. In a poll from April of 2025, 24% of Gen Z women approve of how Trump is handling his job as president, compared to 45% of men (Kamisar, 2025). Across all generations, men have more

favorable views of President Trump than women, but the 21-point gap between Gen Z men and Gen Z women is significantly higher than the gaps of other generations.

The Role of Journalism in Society:

The traditional view of the press categorizes the media as the “Fourth Estate,” a term unofficially dating back to 18th-century British Parliament. This perspective sees the press as watchdogs of democratic governments, responsible for holding public officials accountable. Walter Lippmann expanded on this role in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, where he argued that the world was too complex for individuals to understand the nuances of certain issues, resulting in the creation of stereotypes. Lippmann emphasized that since the press also relied on stereotypes and greatly influenced public opinion, it was thus the responsibility of the press to provide accurate and objective reporting (Lippmann, 1922).

This framework set by Lippmann highlights the need for unbiased reporting, but scholars like Jay Rosen have recently argued that this approach can shift media coverage to the people in power, while ignoring the questions and needs of the citizenry. Instead, Rosen asserts that a more community-centered approach to reporting would allow for more transparency and a press that is in tune with the needs of the people (Rosen, 1999).

The Rise of Influencers:

The idea that popular social media accounts can influence political ideology is not a new theory. The two-step flow of communication model positions opinion leaders as middlemen between mainstream media and other members of society (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968). In this model, opinion leaders are those who interact with traditional mass media and current issues, and then pass them on to other members of society. This model of communication replaced the “hypodermic needle” model, which presented the idea that mass media directly influenced the

opinions of a passive audience (Berger, 1995). Under the two-step flow of communication model, these opinion leaders become valuable because of their outreach and perceived authenticity.

In the current media landscape, influencers occupy these positions as opinion leaders. Social media has provided the platform for opinion leaders to now reach even wider audiences. In contrast to the professional standards and editorial oversight commonly seen in traditional media, influencers can establish perceived credibility through a more intimate relationship with the audience. Research shows that individuals in the U.S. tend to obtain news from influencers at a higher rate than most other democratic countries, suggesting a shift in where American individuals receive news (Newman, 2024). Furthermore, one study found that perceived credibility of information increases when an expertise is shown, regardless of whether it is from an influencer or mainstream media outlet (Zimmerman et al. 2023). This contrasts with assumptions that individuals view mainstream media as more credible than influencers. This study underlines the need to regard news and political influencers as powerful spreaders of information.

Stephanie Alice Baker explains how alternative-health influencers used social media to spread dangerous conspiracy theories, as well as far-right extremism, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through her study, Baker found that these influencers can create more intimate and trustworthy relationships with their audiences than traditional mass media. Baker explains that many influencers build a “persecuted hero” narrative, in which the mainstream media is trying to silence them. Baker underlines the importance of recognizing the impact that these influencers have on their audiences (Baker, 2022).

Influencers distinguish themselves from the mainstream media in the tone and style of content. Rather than following the norms of traditional mass media, influencers can produce a more casual and conversational form of content than mainstream news sources, which can form bonds between the influencer and their audience. Studies show that this form of content can establish a more intimate relationship between the influencer and the audience, resulting in increased perceived credibility and trustworthiness (Riedl et al. 2021).

Influencers can also separate themselves from mass media in the way they interact with politics and public officials. One group of scholars explains how the social media trend of “ratioing”, or a reply to a post that gets more likes than the original post, can be used to hold public officials accountable to citizenry (Harris et al. 2023). This “gamification” of social media can amplify dissent, but also can increase polarization through incentivizing sensationalized content.

Influencers are also heavily reliant on advertising and partnerships as a way to profit from their influence, and scholars have asserted that this can create conflicts of interest when incorporated into political information. Joëlle Swart argues that too many social media users lack media literacy, making them especially susceptible to problematic content (Swart, 2023). In addition, in recent elections, some influencers have teamed up with candidates to create coordinated political campaigns through social media (Goodwin et al. 2023). Goodwin explains that partnerships between news influencers and candidates are likely to continue increasing, which brings further concerns for individuals about discerning between accurate reporting and political messaging.

Another concern about the public influence of influencers is the spread of misinformation and disinformation online. Results from a 2014 study suggest that of all political information

online, social media platforms are the least credible for political information (Johnson and Kaye, 2014). Research also shows that social media algorithms can impact exposure to problematic content and lead to extremist radicalization. Researchers at UC Davis found that 36% of 100,000 created bot accounts on YouTube were recommended problematic content (Russell, 2023).

Scholars also argue that there are benefits from a system in which news influencers act as opinion leaders. Darian Harff finds that news and political influencers can increase political efficacy and participation, especially amongst young voters (Harff, 2023). Harff asserts that influencers can better communicate the impact of voting and political participation than mainstream outlets, especially among politically disengaged communities.

Research Question:

How was political content incorporated into social media posts from influencers popular amongst Gen Z males during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?

Specific Research Questions:

- *RQ1: What political narratives and themes were most commonly presented by influencers during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*
- *RQ2: How did influencers frame candidates and political parties when addressing Gen Z males during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*
- *RQ3: What stylistic strategies did influencers use to appeal or engage with Gen Z males during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*
- *RQ4: In what ways did popular influencers encourage political participation among Gen Z males in the 2024 U.S. presidential election?*

Methodology:

For this thesis, I will use a qualitative social media analysis to examine how popular social media political content may have influenced Gen Z male voting habits during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. I will employ qualitative content analysis to determine specific themes of political content, such as political framing, tone, and calls to action. To further analyze this content, I will use basic data analysis to quantify the occurrence of certain themes and political leans.

For this study, I will select three popular influencers across X, formerly known as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. I will use the following criteria for selecting these influencers:

1. Must have a following of at least 1,000,000 users.
2. Must not be primarily known for political content.
3. Regularly posted political content from September 5, 2024, to November 5, 2024.
4. General appeal to a Gen Z audience, determined by style and audience engagement

I will analyze every social media post from these influencers across X, Instagram, and TikTok during the lead-up to the election. These posts will be chosen from September 5, 2024, to November 5, 2024, which allows for content from the two months leading up to the election. Each post will be archived with data, including date and engagement metrics.

Then, each post will be coded using qualitative content analysis to identify tones and ideological biases. Some themes may include:

5. Candidate endorsement
6. Appeals to age and gender
7. Anti-mainstream media narratives
8. Misinformation or disinformation

9. Calls to action

Each post and its corresponding analysis will be added to a datasheet, as will engagement metrics such as likes, replies, or reposts.

Results:

I analyzed a total of 981 social media posts across X, Instagram, and TikTok from September 5, 2024, to November 5, 2024. I analyzed posts from three popular influencers: Joe Rogan, Dave Portnoy, and Theo Von. I selected these influencers based on their high popularity on social media platforms, engagement with the 2024 U.S. presidential election, and content appeal towards a Gen Z male audience. All posts quoted in this section have any original grammatical errors left intact.

Joe Rogan is best known as a podcaster, comedian, and UFC commentator. His podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, is the most listened to podcast on Spotify. On his podcast, which has aired over 2,500 episodes since its inception in 2009, Rogan has been known to feature guests from across the political spectrum, including President Donald Trump, Senator Bernie Sanders, and Elon Musk. Rogan has expressed support for traditionally liberal policies such as universal health care and universal basic income, but has also criticized the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns and regulations on gun rights, and formally endorsed Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign.

Dave Portnoy is the founder and owner of Barstool Sports, a digital media company that produces various online blogs, podcasts, and shows covering sports and pop culture. Portnoy founded Barstool Sports in 2004 and has created print and digital content, including sports commentary, sports gambling, and pizza reviews. Portnoy has described himself as socially liberal and fiscally conservative, and has endorsed Donald Trump in all three of his presidential campaigns.

Theo Von is a comedian and podcaster who hosts *This Past Weekend w/ Theo Von*. His podcast is the 5th most-listened to podcast in the world as of 2025. Von's shows often include

comedic stories from his childhood, and feature a wide array of guests, including Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and JD Vance. Von did not formally endorse either candidate in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, but did express support for conservative policies and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Of these 981 total posts, Dave Portnoy accounted for the vast majority at 84.5%. Meanwhile, Theo Von and Joe Rogan were significantly less frequently active on social media, accounting for 10.50% and 5.0% of the total posts, respectively. 79.5% of the posts from all three influencers were uploaded to X, 14.0% were uploaded to Instagram, and 6.5% were uploaded to TikTok. However, there were some instances where the same post was shared across multiple platforms.

In total, political content constituted just 4.99% of the total posts. Meanwhile, other genres, such as sports, lifestyle, and pop culture, made up a significantly higher percentage of the content of posts.

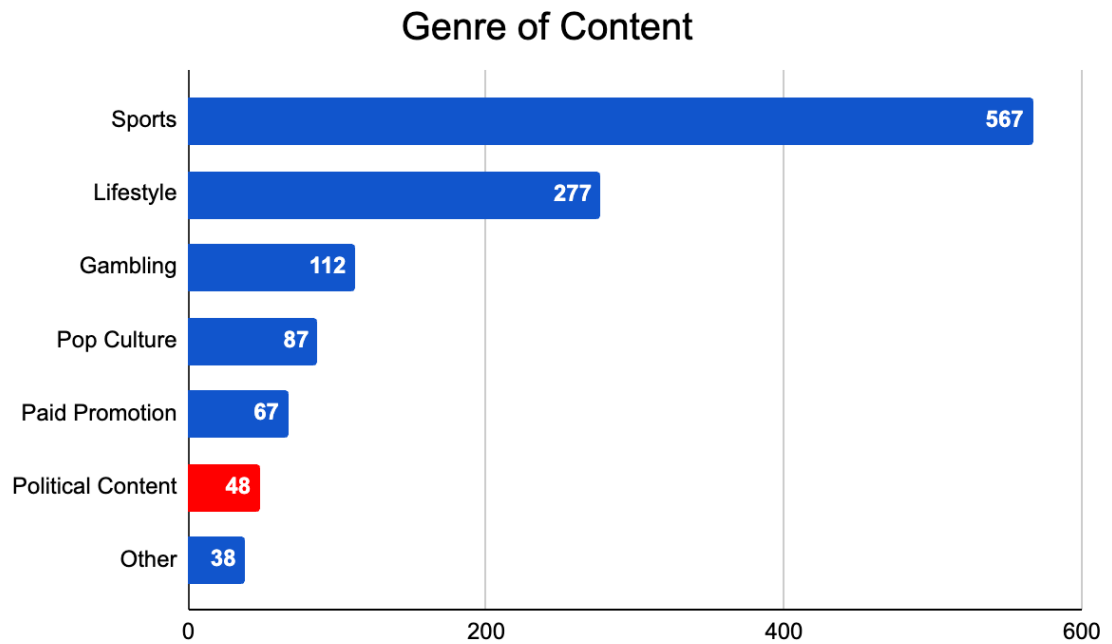


Figure 1: Genre(s) of content present in post.

As for each influencer, Joe Rogan had the highest percentage of posts that contained political content, as 28.6% of his social media posts included political messaging. 16.5% of Theo Von’s posts contained political messaging. Dave Portnoy had the lowest percentage of political content at just 2.2% of posts, although Portnoy did have a significantly higher number of posts than both Rogan and Von.

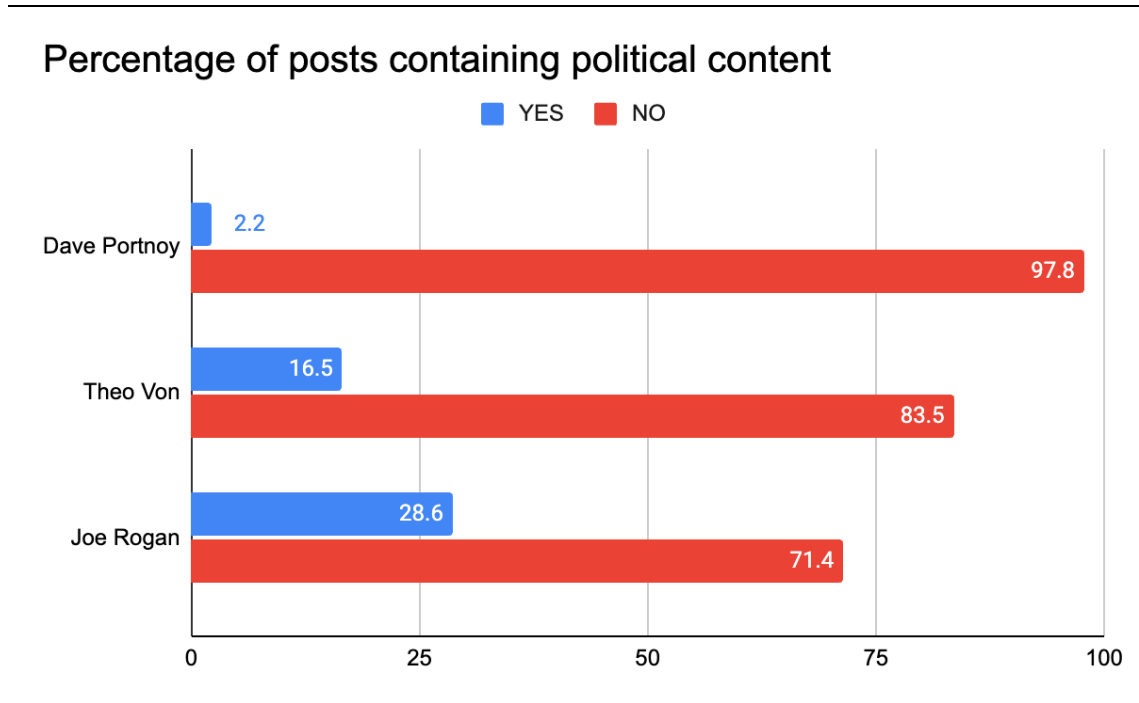


Figure 2: Percentage of total posts containing political content per influencer.

Research Question 1:

RQ1 aimed to find which specific political narratives and themes were presented by these influencers during the two months preceding the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Of the 48 total posts that contained political content, 11 distinct themes were presented, with some posts containing multiple themes. Candidate endorsement was the most common theme, appearing in just over 30% of political posts. Immigration was the second most common theme, yet it was only mentioned in 12.5% of the 48 posts. Other issues, including the economy, health, media coverage, crime, and single-issue advocacy, were mentioned, but none accounted for more than 10.42% of political posts.

What specific issues are mentioned in the post?

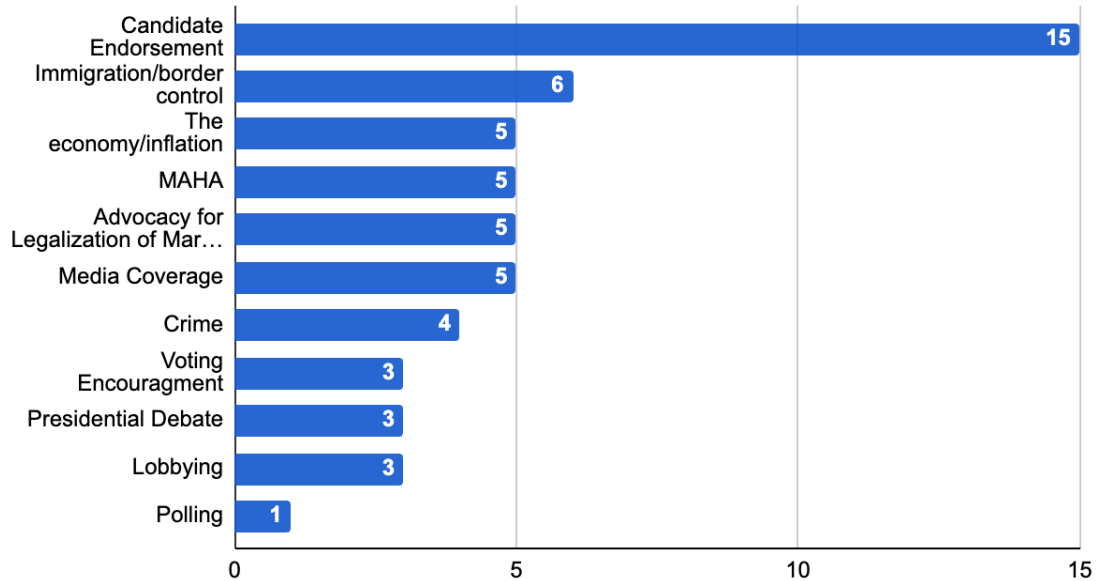


Figure 3: Number of times each specific issue was mentioned in political posts.

The 48 posts that contained political content also contained a sizeable share of anti-establishment narratives. 57.14% of political posts contained messaging that was critical of the government, media, or other mainstream institutions, such as Theo Von’s October 10th tweet: “mainstream media is corrupt,” or Joe Rogan’s October 30th post to Instagram: “Abolishing Income Tax is POWERFUL.”

There was also a relatively similar share of anti-establishment narratives across all three influencers. Of Dave Portnoy’s and Joe Rogan’s posts that contained political content, 61.1% and 61.5% contained anti-establishment narratives, respectively. In addition, over half of political posts by Theo Von also contained anti-establishment narratives, with 52.9% of his political posts containing messages that were critical of mainstream institutions.

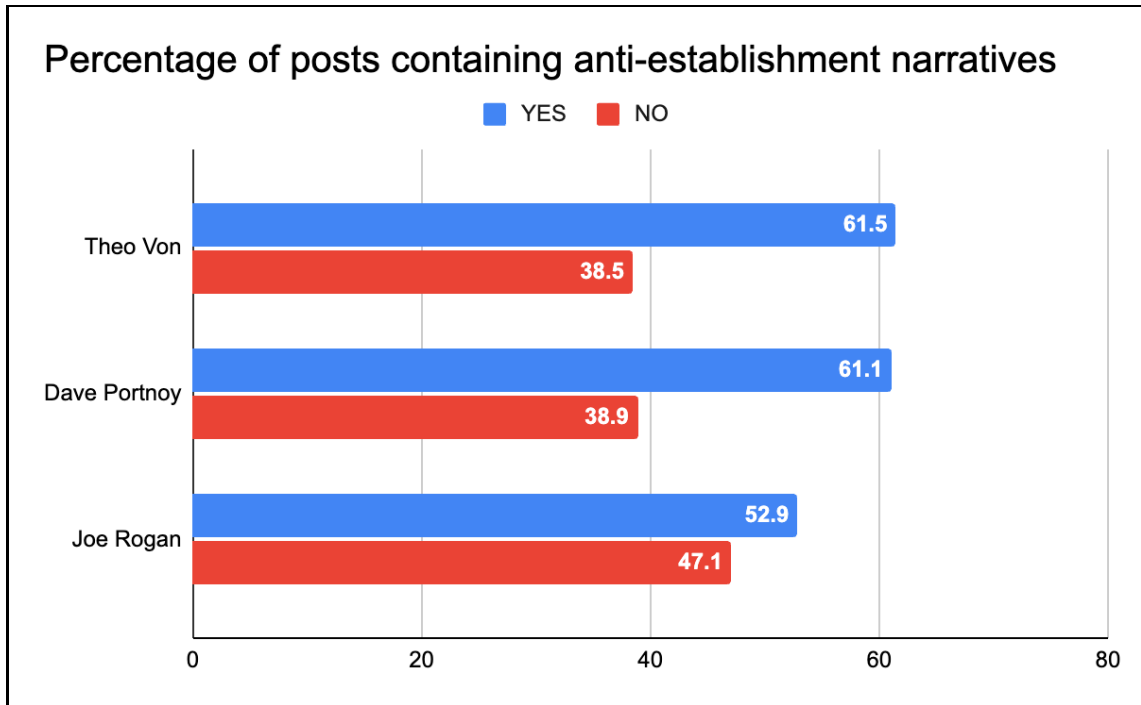


Figure 4: Percentage of political posts that contained anti-establishment narratives.

Research Question 2:

RQ2 aimed to determine how the selected influencers framed both candidates and political parties. For RQ2, I filtered out all posts that did not feature political messaging, leaving a dataset of 48 posts that contained political content.

Across all three influencers, mentions of Donald Trump and the Republican Party were consistently positive, whereas Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party were either portrayed negatively or omitted entirely. However, all three influencers differed in how they balanced support for Trump and the Republican Party.

Trump was framed either somewhat positively or extremely positively in 33.3% of political posts, while Harris was never portrayed positively. Trump was framed negatively in just 2.1% of political posts, while Harris was framed negatively in 18.75% of posts.

For example, Joe Rogan’s post on November 4th promoting his podcast with Elon Musk includes in the caption that Musk “makes what I think is the most compelling case for Trump

you'll hear, and I agree with him every step of the way. For the record, yes, that's an endorsement of Trump.”

Meanwhile, Harris was often framed negatively, such as Portnoy’s October 7th tweet: “Real talk. Am i getting screwed on taxes? I pay 50% of everything I make to the Gov. Is Kamala saying teachers, nurses and firefighters pay more than 50%? I've asked my accountants for this super wealthy tax break and they cant seem to find it.”

However, a large portion of posts didn’t mention either candidate directly, as a number of posts featured single-issue advocacy, such as five posts from Portnoy advocating for the passage of Florida Amendment 3, which would legalize recreational marijuana. At the same time, Trump was referenced more frequently, being mentioned in 35.4% of posts compared to 20.8% of posts for Harris.

All three influencers shared content that portrayed Trump in a positive light. Joe Rogan did so most frequently, as 38.5% of his posts that contained political content favorably represented Trump. Dave Portnoy was the only influencer to post content that framed Trump somewhat negatively, as he expressed concern over Trump’s performance in the presidential debate, although his critique was partially directed at the moderators: “I don't think this is going well for Trump so far at all. Probably doesn't help that it's a tag team match, but yeah not great.”

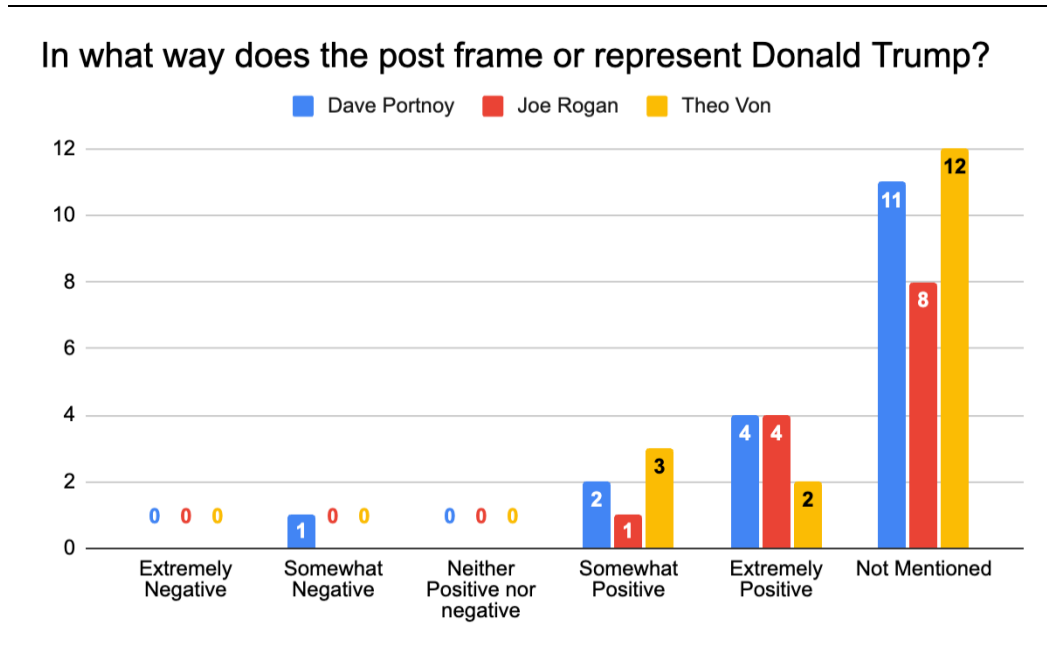


Figure 5: Framing of Donald Trump.

Of the posts that mentioned Harris by name, 90% framed her or her campaign in a somewhat negative or extremely negative way. Dave Portnoy accounted for 70% of the posts that mentioned Kamala Harris, as he frequently critiqued the lack of a Democratic primary election, immigration policy, and current involvement in the federal government as the vice president under Joe Biden. Meanwhile, none of Theo Von’s political posts mentioned Harris, while Von positively mentioned Trump in five of his political posts.

In what way does the post frame or represent Kamala Harris?

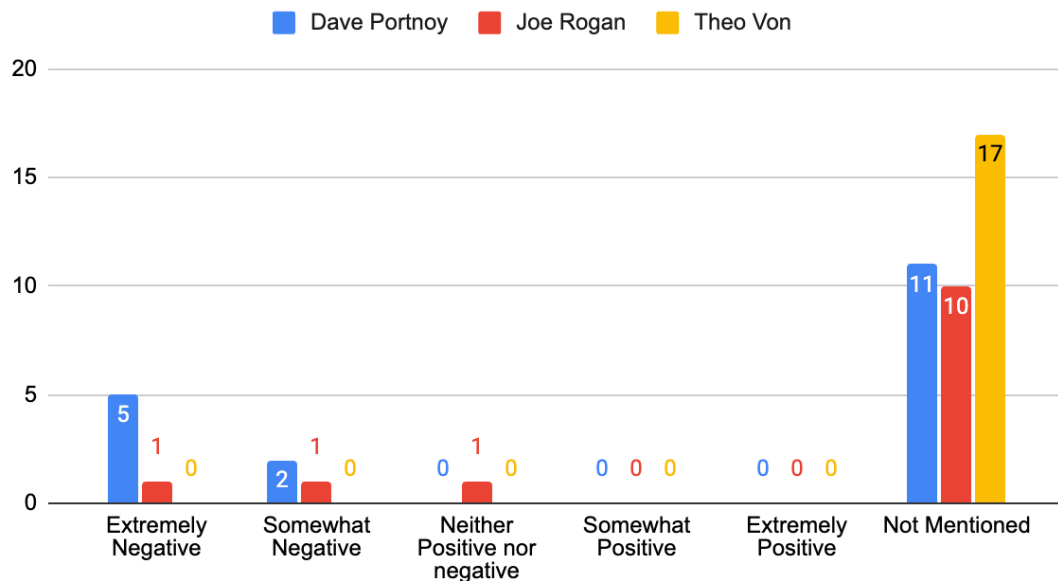


Figure 6: Framing of Kamala Harris.

The findings show similar trends for the framing of both political parties. The Republican Party was depicted favorably in 33.33% of posts, and framed positively in every instance the party was mentioned, such as Von’s November 5th tweet in support of Kennedy Jr.’s Make America Healthy Again movement: “AMEN!! 😊 @RobertKennedyJr.” Rogan also most frequently represented the Republican Party in a positive light, as he did so in 61.5% of posts that contained political content, expressing support for Trump, JD Vance, Elon Musk, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on eight separate occasions.

For example, Rogan made several collaborative posts with Kennedy, or posts that are shared from multiple accounts, including an October 26th post to Instagram, which commented on Trump’s podcast with Rogan: “He spoke with specifics, conviction, and passion about California irrigation, nuclear power, North Korea, ISIS, boxing, the UFC, and the Lincoln Bedroom. He was calm and moved easily from each subject Joe raised, demonstrating his

authenticity with honest thought, experience, and thoughtfulness Kamala Harris could never muster.”

While Portnoy represented Trump positively in 33.3% of his political posts, only 11.1% referenced the Republican Party. Rogan and Von, however, showed an opposite trend, in which a greater proportion of their political posts favorably represented the Republican Party than Trump himself.

In what way does the post frame or represent the Republican Party?

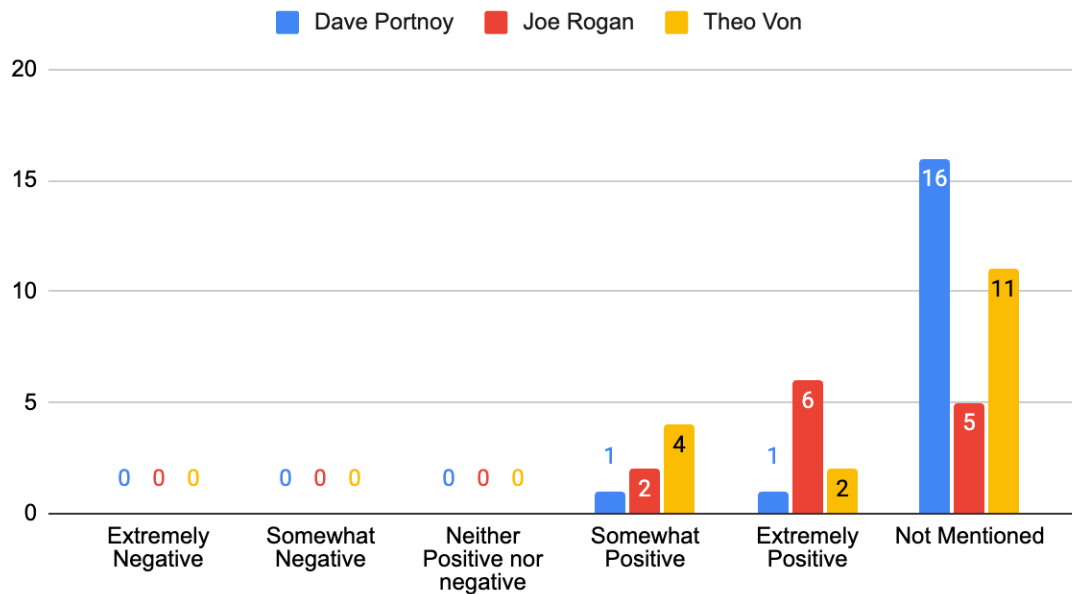


Figure 7: Framing of the Republican Party.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party was only referenced in 14.6% of political posts, all in a negative light. For example, Portnoy’s October 13th tweet critiques the lack of a Democratic Primary Election, writing: “I know people are gonna say Trump is the worst candidate of all time and you're entitled to your opinion but he has won the nomination 3 times fair and square. Kamala has never had a vote cast for her yet.”

As for each influencer, Portnoy negatively referenced the Democratic Party in 16.6% of posts, while the Republican Party was mentioned in 11.15% of posts and shown favorably.

Rogan mentioned the Republican Party more frequently than he mentioned the Democratic Party, while Von never referenced the Democratic Party, and positively portrayed the Republican Party in 33.3% of his political posts.

In what way does the post frame or represent the Democratic Party?

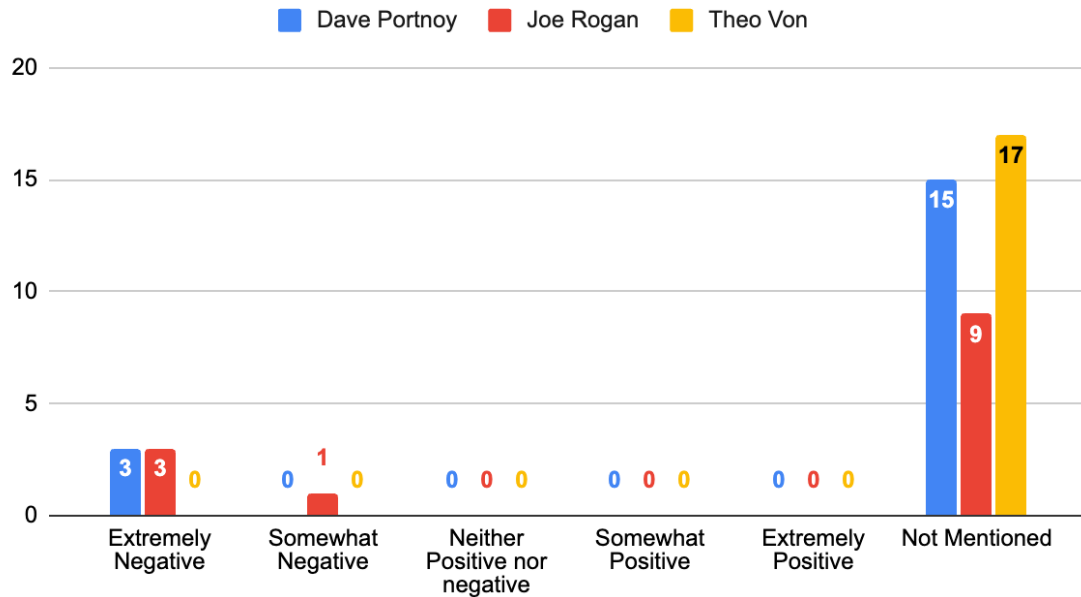


Figure 8: Framing of the Democratic Party.

Research Question 3:

RQ3 aimed to examine the stylistic strategies used by influencers that may have appealed to Gen Z males.

The results from this research question showed that while no content directly referenced a Gen Z male audience, numerous stylistic strategies were used that would likely appeal to that demographic. 56.3% of posts addressed the audience directly, often using the second-person “you.” Rogan had the highest frequency of direct audience addressing, at 69.2% compared to 50.0% from both Portnoy and Von.

Number of posts that directly address the audience

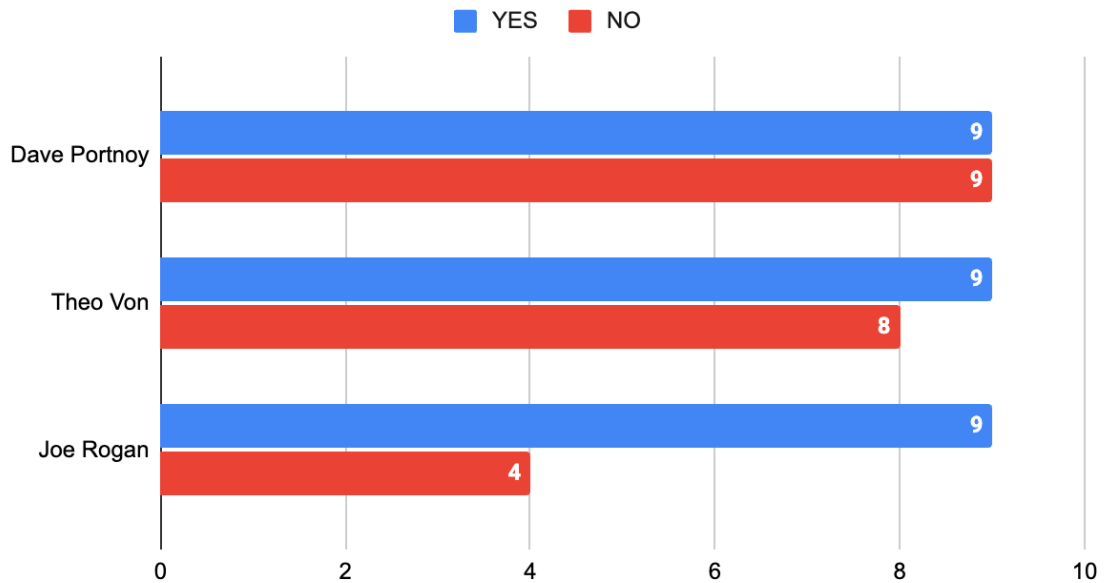


Figure 9: Number of posts that directly address the audience.

In addition, an overwhelming 91.7% of political posts from all three influencers used Gen Z slang and casual language. For example, Joe Rogan’s November 4th endorsement of Trump uses casual language, stating, “If it wasn't for him we'd be fucked,” in reference to Elon Musk. Meanwhile, Theo Von’s October 13th TikTok uses the caption, “Is the money talking @JD Vance,” when referencing online betting odds for the election.

Number of posts that use casual language or Gen Z slang

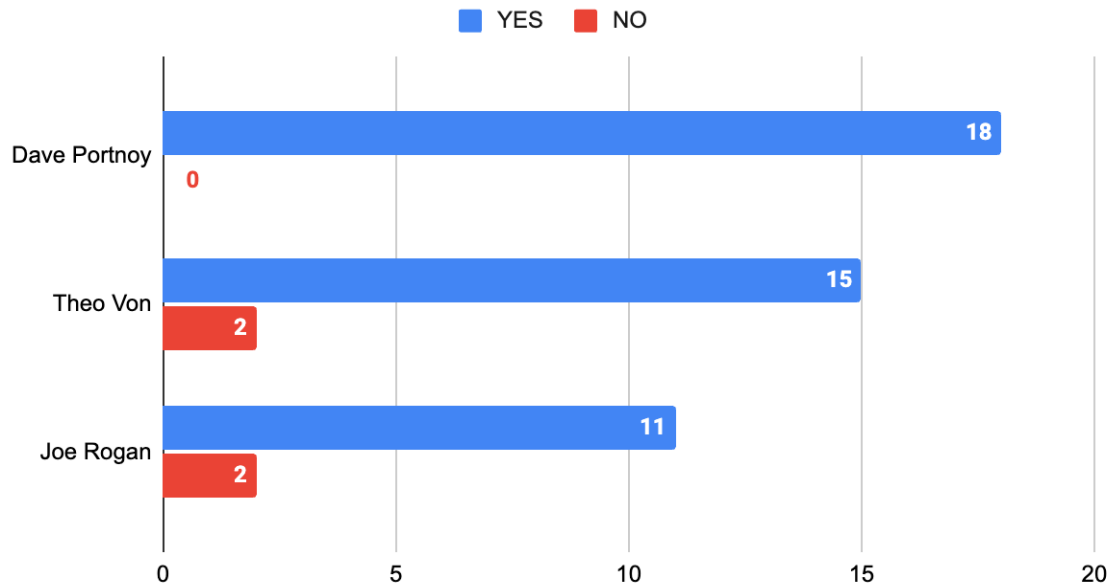


Figure 10: Number of posts that use casual language or Gen Z slang.

Along with the use of Gen Z slang, a large percentage of political posts involved the blending of political information with other genres such as sports, pop culture, or internet memes. 85.4% of posts incorporated political messaging into non-political genres. In addition, 43.8% of political posts included direct references to pop culture.

For example, Portnoy’s September 25th tweet references Taylor Swift and her decision to endorse Harris: “As the king of the Swifties people are asking me what I think of her Kamala endorsement. I don’t care at all. People can vote for whoever they want in this country. How somebody votes will never change my opinion of a person. I’m voting the other way but to each their own.”

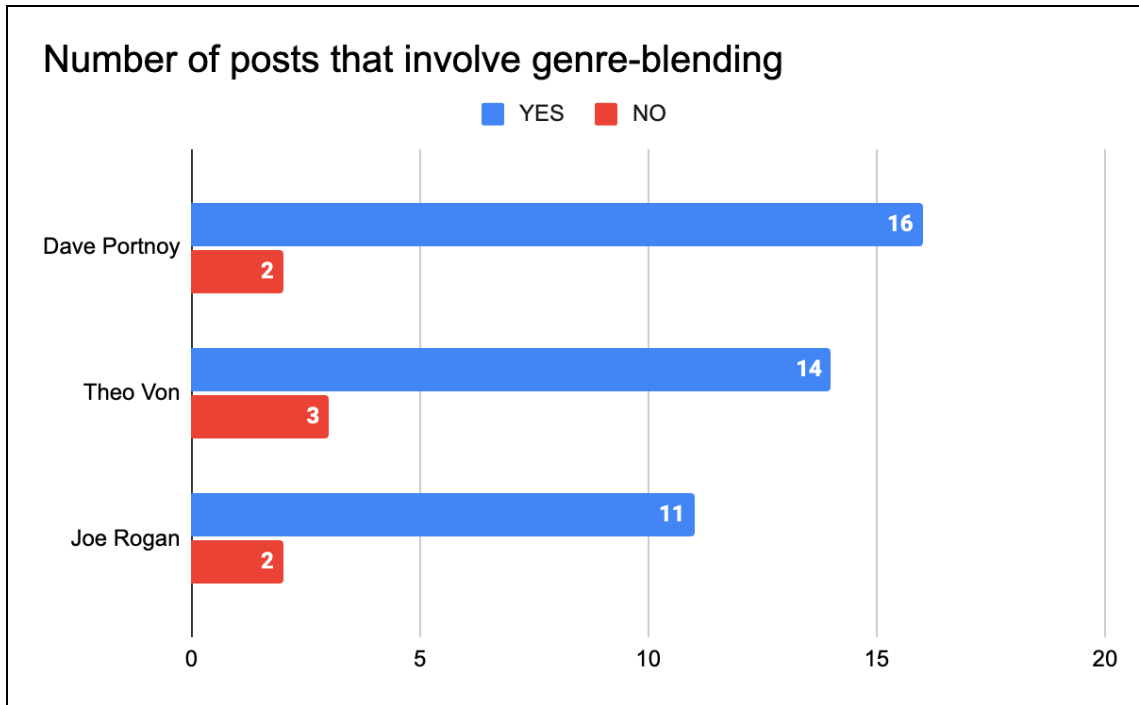


Figure 11: Number of posts that involve genre-blending.

As for the tone of delivery in political content, there was a notable discrepancy between the three influencers. 50.0% of Portnoy’s political posts were angry in tone, often in the form of political rants, such as his October 6 post to Instagram that featured a six-minute rant: “If you don't like my political rants don't watch this. But how can Kamala Harris keep calling herself the candidate of change when she is the sitting VP? I feel like I'm taking crazy pills...”

On the other hand, a few posts from Rogan and Von were angry in tone. Instead, 76.9% of posts from Rogan were serious, such as his September 22 post to X: “I think one of the most interesting moments of the podcast with @johnfetterman was when we were talking about immigration. I think everyone should understand exactly what is happening.”

Von and Portnoy used humor and satire more frequently, at 35.3% and 33.3% of posts, respectively. For example, Von’s October 23rd post to TikTok, captioned “learnin abt lobbyists w/ @JDVance,” features both Von and JD Vance laughing at and making jokes about the role of lobbying in elections.

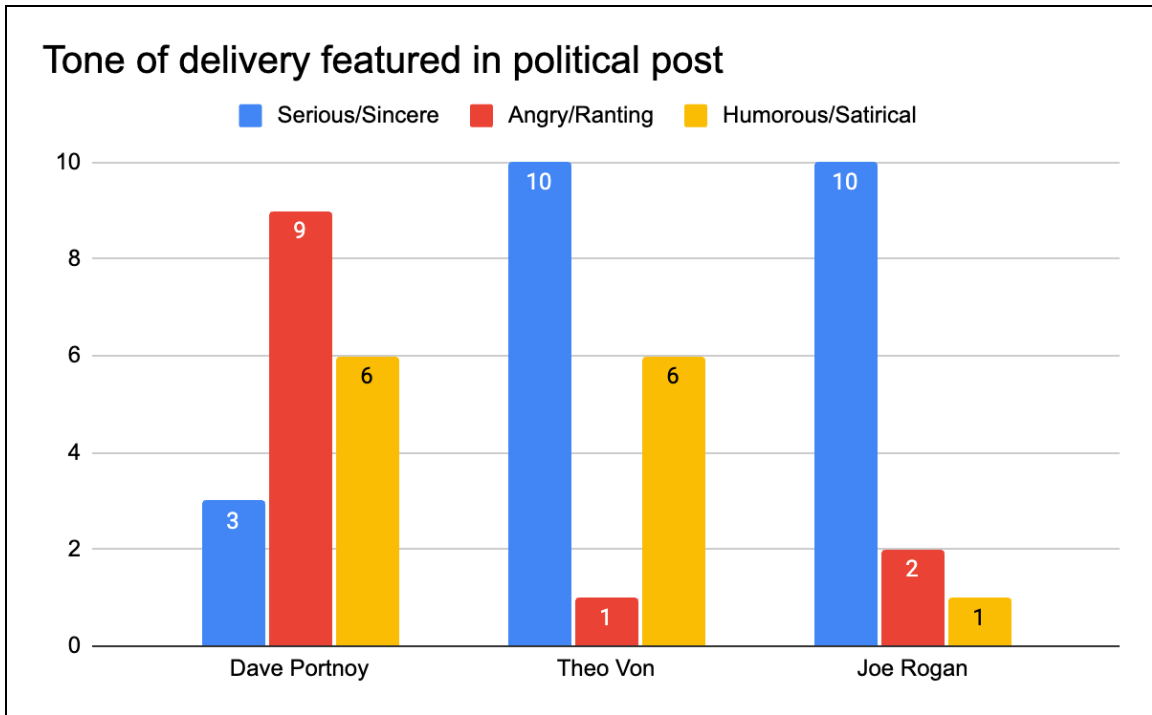


Figure 12: Tone of delivery featured in political post.

Research Question 4:

In what ways did popular influencers encourage political participation among Gen Z males in the 2024 U.S. presidential election?

RQ4 aimed to examine the ways these influencers encouraged political participation.

Once again, all non-political posts were filtered out, leaving a subset of 48 posts.

In total, only 29.2% of posts directly encourage viewers to vote, and there was a notable disparity among the three influencers. 50% of Portnoy’s political posts encouraged viewers to vote. Many of Portnoy’s posts included the message that viewers should vote for whoever they prefer, but that his vote was going towards Trump. Rogan and Von were significantly less likely to urge viewers to vote, as 15.4% and 17.6% of their posts advocated for political participation, respectively.

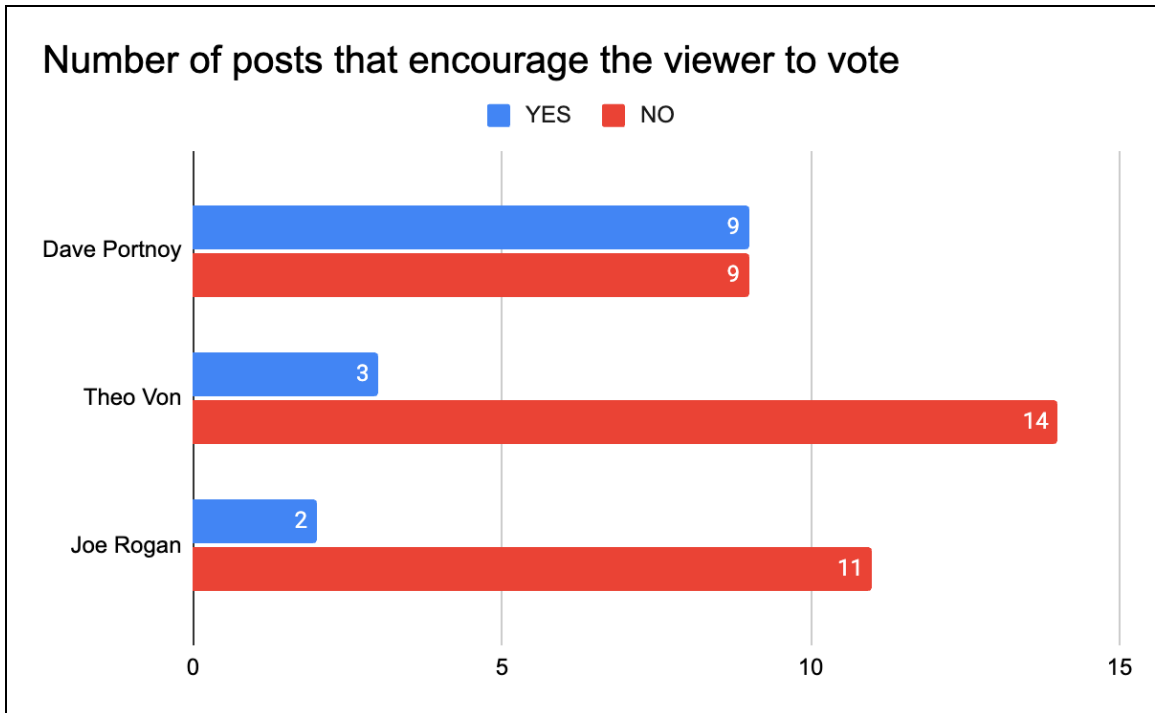


Figure 13: Number of posts that encourage the viewer to vote.

While a total of 48 political posts were analyzed, there was a surprising lack of supplementary resources attached to posts. Across all three influencers, none of the posts included links to additional information such as policy plans, voter registration resources, or credible data sources.

Discussion:

While each influencer's content is largely based on non-political genres, the results demonstrated that political content was present, often in subtle yet impactful ways. The results point towards a form of political communication that is more informal, emotional, and casual than conventional media coverage. In addition, the findings suggest that political alignment was rooted largely in personality and cultural identity, rather than in specific policy or ideology. Building on previous studies on the news consumption of younger generations, which reveal that Gen Z receives larger portions of news from influencers and social media, it becomes increasingly important to examine the content itself (*Pew Research Center, 2024*).

Overall, the findings demonstrate how political content from these influencers blurred the lines between politics and entertainment, especially compared to traditional media. The influencers, each with a strong online identity tied to sports, comedy, and pop culture, rarely expressed support for specific issues or policy, yet still displayed specific ideological leanings.

In doing so, these influencers demonstrated how political alignment can be seen as an extension of one's cultural identity. I interpret these findings to follow what I consider a "vibes-based" approach to political ideology, in which political support is determined through emotional response and identity rather than policy agreement.

These findings also contribute to the research that posits influencers as digital opinion leaders, in which influencers can act as middlemen between politicians and voters, shaping public opinion through content. In addition, the existing studies on political communication suggest that Gen Z male audiences often receive political content through social media, rather than conventional media platforms, once again suggesting a shift in the overall model of political communication and adding to the significance of influencers (*Newman, 2024*).

The following sections address each main takeaway and explore the specific narratives, framing strategies, stylistic choices, and appeals that were used by these influencers to engage with political communication.

Politics and Entertainment: The Blurry Line

One of the clearest findings from the study is the rarity of political content, making up just under 5% of the total posts from these influencers. At the same time, this allowed for political content to be embedded within broader genres of entertainment. Political messages were surrounded by posts on sports, podcast clips, internet memes, pop culture, etc. These non-political genres are also popular within the Gen Z male audience, and suggest that audiences are following them to view content on the non-political genres, yet were still exposed to political messaging.

Political content not only made up a small percentage of posts, but also appeared between non-political posts, creating a subtle association between the two. For example, Dave Portnoy sandwiched a six-minute rant criticizing Kamala Harris between posts on day trading and his betting picks for that week's NFL Sunday. This reinforces my earlier point about identity-based political alignment, as these influencers effectively intertwined Donald Trump with their non-political genres, making political messaging feel like an extension of their usual content.

The most common form of political content was candidate endorsement, specifically for Trump. However, 80% of the endorsement posts lacked explanations of specific policy positions or political issues. Instead, endorsement was seemingly reasoned through social or cultural identity. This once again follows a "vibes-based" approach to political ideology, in which political support is determined through emotional relatability rather than policy support.

The influencers also posted political content differently across platforms. Across all three influencers, the majority of political content was posted to X, while a smaller percentage was posted to TikTok. X has a more conservative, Trump-supporting audience, largely due to Elon Musk's influence and ownership. Meanwhile, TikTok is more popular among younger generations and tends to have a more liberal-leaning audience (*Pew Research Center, 2024*). These influencers rely on engagement from online audiences, and this discrepancy suggests that political content was a calculated way to increase engagement by appealing to the specific audiences on each platform.

As a Gen Z male, I can see how these findings reflect the media environment I grew up in. On social media, users do not seek out a single genre like one might expect when watching a specific television network or reading newspaper articles. Instead, platforms bring a mixed feed where sports, memes, lifestyle content, and political information appear side by side. This structure blurs the line between entertainment and politics, making politics feel like just another genre in one's social media algorithm and thus, social identity. This helps explain why these influencers' political posts fit naturally within their content, as genre-blending is the norm on social media, and identity, entertainment, and politics are constantly intertwined.

Politics without Policy: The Emergence of “Vibes-Based” Alignment

A second major theme was the dominance of identity-based political alignment rather than support for specific policy proposals or issues. Across all three influencers, rarely was a specific policy discussion presented, often replaced by emotional and personality-based associations. All three influencers are straight white men who favored the white male candidate over the women of color, following literature that discusses the role of identity in shaping political preferences (*Fukuyama, 2018*).

Across all three influencers, Trump was consistently framed positively, while Harris was either framed negatively or not mentioned at all. Even in posts where no specific policy or issue was mentioned, Trump was often framed positively through appeals to his personality, once again following the proposed “vibes-based” approach to political alignment. For example, Portnoy echoed his support of Trump through tweets complimenting Trump’s golf swing, as well as tweeting out, “This shirt has no business going this hard,” while promoting a Trump-themed T-shirt.

These framing strategies tie back to the literature on influencers serving as public opinion leaders. The influencers’ specific endorsement of Trump, rather than an endorsement for specific policy issues or conservatism as a whole, suggests that these influencers can serve as middlemen between political figures and a historically disengaged audience (Berger, 1995). This casual, “vibes-based” approach to political commentary makes political content more accessible and engaging for a Gen Z male audience that may otherwise disregard mainstream conventional political discourse.

Anti-establishment narratives were also prevalent, appearing in more than half of the posts with political content. Even when no specific issues or topics were mentioned, there was a notable trend towards encouraging distrust in the media and mainstream institutions, and sandwiched in between non-political posts. For example, Theo Von’s tweets on a UFC event and fantasy football advice surrounded the tweet, “mainstream media is corrupt.”

In addition, while Rogan and Von’s posts tended to present Trump and the broader Republican Party in a more positive light, Portnoy’s posts typically aligned with Trump personally but not with the Republican Party. This difference suggests that Portnoy’s political leanings may be rooted less in conservatism and more in his perception of Trump as a relatable,

anti-establishment figure. This reinforces the idea that influencers and, in turn, their audiences, can form political alignment on personality appeal rather than specific policy agreement.

This identity-driven style of political information reflects what I often see among social groups as a Gen Z man. Political discussion rarely covers specific policy, but rather how a candidate “feels,” whether that’s through humor, perceived authenticity, or cultural alignment. Among Gen Z men, it’s common to see political opinions formed through memes, influencer reactions, or social media content rather than direct agreement with policy. Observing these patterns in my own social environments helped me understand the impact these influencers may have on young voters, as it reflects an era in politics where cultural identity and emotional resonance can be more important to building support than specific policy.

Influencers as Digital Opinion Leaders

Another key finding was the stylistic contrast between political communication from these influencers and the traditional media. While these influencers never presented themselves as political experts, their communicative strategies and large social media audiences positioned them as highly influential digital opinion leaders.

Influencers spread political messaging with a much more casual and conversational tone, using words like “you” or “we” to directly address and involve the audience. This choice helps establish a sense of authenticity or intimacy with the viewer, potentially leading viewers to better sympathize with specific talking points. This approach ties back to existing literature, which explains that perceived authenticity results in a more intimate relationship between the influencer and the viewer compared to traditional media (Baker, 2022). Combined with the use of humor or casual language, political messaging felt more personal and potentially resonated deeper with a Gen Z audience.

Another defining stylistic choice was the heavy use of genre-blending, or the coverage of political content through a non-political lens, such as sports, pop culture, or memes. For example, Von's October 23rd post to TikTok compares the role of lobbying to the payroll disparities in professional baseball during his interview with JD Vance.

In addition, these posts often included the use of Gen Z slang and casual language, invoking a sense of shared internet culture that included political content. This ties back to the literature on online intimacy, which shows that when influencers appear authentic, their audiences tend to view them as more credible (Riedl et al. 2021).

The results show how strongly these influencers acted as digital opinion leaders. Rogan, Von, and Portnoy each hold strong sway in non-political spaces such as sports, comedy, podcasting, and pop culture, and they used those spaces to incorporate political content into those genres. By posting content that consistently praised Trump, they helped position him within those spaces and made political messaging feel like an extension of their usual content.

At the same time, Trump and his cabinet aligned themselves with these individuals, recognizing their outreach and influence on their audiences. By appearing on podcasts and reposting their content, Trump strengthened his association with these influencers and, therefore, their digital and cultural spheres. This reciprocal dynamic helped normalize political content within entertainment and once again blurred the line between political alignment and cultural identity.

Through intentional stylistic choices, such as genre-blending, casual language, and authenticity, these influencers reshaped political communication. Rather than presenting political information in a formal or issue-based way, these influencers treated political alignment as an

extension of one's identity, reinforcing the idea of a "vibes-based" approach to political alignment.

Symbolic Political Participation

Notably, not a single political post contained links to outside sources, such as news or academic articles, policy plans, or voter registration resources. The absence of outside resources reinforces the idea that political ideology was rarely justified through policy or issue-based appeals. Instead, political alignment was reasoned through a personality-based connection and expressed through the use of stylistic choices that would appeal to a Gen Z male audience.

While just under 30% of posts did encourage viewers to vote, these calls to action lacked substantive guidance or resources on how or where to do so. As a result, their purpose seemed to be based on reaffirming group identity rather than encouraging political participation. This aligns with literature showing that social similarity encourages political participation in like-minded groups, while deterring political activity among diverse groups (Overton, 2025).

Overall, these findings suggest that while these influencers all hold significant reach with their online communities, their political influence was felt through cultural alignment rather than through direct voter mobilization. This once again suggests a contrast in political messaging between influencers and mainstream media, in which political communication by influencers has shifted to focus on identity-based alignment rather than specific policy coverage.

General Discussion

Collectively, these insights reveal that influencers play a substantial role in shaping political attitudes, though often through cultural framing, stylistic choices, and identity alignment rather than issue-based analysis or direct persuasion. Their influence stems from the ability to make politics feel entertaining, relatable, and tied to non-political genres that their audience

already consumes. These influencers are not traditional political communicators, but rather act as digital opinion leaders who can interweave politics and entertainment. Their influence during the 2024 presidential election reflects a shift from traditional mass media towards a more personality-driven, emotionally engaging social media, and potentially helps explain why Trump gained a 15-point swing from 2020 to 2024 among men aged 18-29.

As a Gen Z male, these findings reflect my own experience on social media. Political messaging is rarely seen independently, but is rather mixed with humor, sports, memes, and lifestyle content. Influencers such as Rogan, Portnoy, and Von frame political engagement as a choice connected to identity rather than a civic duty. It's essential to recognize this dynamic to better understand how Gen Z males form political alignment and engage with political content on social media.

Limitations

While this study provides insight into how influencers may have shaped the Gen Z male vote in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, there were several limitations. First, the analysis focused on only three influencers: Joe Rogan, Dave Portnoy, and Theo Von. These influencers provide a look into how political content was incorporated into non-political genres, but these findings may not generalize to other influencers, demographics, or social media communities. Different influencer samples or audiences could produce different patterns of political communication.

Secondly, this study focused on the content itself rather than audience reception. This approach does not measure how audiences engaged with the content, or how other aspects of social media, such as comment sections, could've impacted the viewer. In addition, no Gen Z males were surveyed, so conclusions can not establish a direct causal effect.

Additionally, coding political content involves some subjectivity, especially when analyzing posts for certain frames and tones. Certain posts could have been coded differently depending on the coder's judgment. Furthermore, this research looks only at short-form content, so full podcast episodes were not analyzed, which likely contain additional political content.

Finally, this study focuses on a specific time frame: the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Influencer strategies may vary based on the election, the country, or the time period. Therefore, conclusions from this study may not be generalizable to other studies of political communication.

Future Research

After completing this analysis, I have identified several areas for additional research. Future studies could expand the scope of influencers and audiences studied, including different genres, demographics, and social media platforms. Studies could also evaluate how content is received, including surveys or engagement metrics to assess how viewers interpret political content. Lastly, future research could analyze how political messaging differs among different demographics, nations, or election cycles.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how popular non-political influencers incorporated political messaging into social media content during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, specifically content geared towards Gen Z males. This study also attempted to explain how social media content may have led to a dramatic shift towards Donald Trump in voting patterns among young men from 2020 to 2024, alongside the growing tendency of younger generations to consume news primarily through social media platforms. Through qualitative content analysis of posts across X, Instagram, and TikTok, this project identified clear patterns in political messaging from three popular influencers: Joe Rogan, Dave Portnoy, and Theo Von. Although political content represented a small portion of overall content, its usage reveals insights into how influencers framed candidates and political issues, as well as the stylistic strategies that vary from conventional news media. These insights also present an analysis of how political messaging is relayed over social media.

All three influencers consistently framed Trump and his administration in a positive light, while Kamala Harris was often framed poorly or omitted entirely. Additionally, across all three influencers, candidate endorsement and personality-based framing were significantly more prevalent than discussion of specific policy. This pattern underscores a central insight of this research, showing that for these influencers, political alignment stems from identity and cultural “vibes” rather than specific policy agreement. Furthermore, stylistic strategies such as the use of humor, genre-blending, and casual language reveal a form of political messaging that is distinct from conventional media. In doing so, these influencers made political participation feel less like a civic duty and more like an aspect of one’s identity.

Additionally, this study contributes to larger discussions about democratic participation and its relation to media literacy. As political messaging becomes increasingly embedded in lifestyle and entertainment content, subtle messaging may be harder to detect. Recognizing this trend is important for scholars to understand how younger generations consume political information, and for politicians to understand how to engage young voters.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that influencers, even those typically known for non-political content, can act as significant figures in the modern-day political landscape. Through serving as intermediaries between politicians and voters, influencers can translate political messaging into familiar narrative forms and aesthetics for younger audiences, and contribute to the idea of political alignment being an extension of one's social identity. These findings will help researchers expand on the knowledge of the role influencers play in spreading political messaging, as well as understanding how younger generations interact with political information on social media.

Appendix

Qualtrics Survey:

This appendix contains the Qualtrics survey that was used to code each social media post.

The survey went as follows:



Which influencer does the post come from?

Dave Portnoy

Joe Rogan

Theo Von

Which social media platform was the content posted on?

X

Instagram

TikTok

How many views did the post receive?

How many likes did the post receive?

Does the post contain political content?

Yes

No

Which date was the post uploaded on? (Write answer as "month.day")

Upload the caption of the post



If the answer to Q5, “Does the post contain political content?” is “No,” the coder is redirected to this page:



Genre of Content

- Sports
- Fitness
- Gambling
- Pop Culture
- Gaming
- Lifestyle
- Paid Promotion
- Other



If the answer to Q5, “Does the post contain political content?” is “Yes,” the coder is redirected to this survey:



Which specific issues are mentioned in the post?

The economy/inflation

Immigration/border control

Climate change

Reproductive rights

Crime

LGBTQ+ issues

Candidate Endorsement

Other

Does the post include any anti-establishment narratives?

Yes

No

Does the post include any appeals to identity?

Gender-based appeal

Race-based appeal

Generation-based appeal

Sexual orientation-based

Religious identity

Class-based

No appeals to identity

Does the post include any misinformation or disinformation?

Yes

No

In what way does the post frame or represent Donald Trump?

Extremely negative

Somewhat negative

Neither positive nor negative

Somewhat positive

Extremely positive

Donald Trump not mentioned

In what way does the post frame or represent Kamala Harris?

- Extremely negative
- Somewhat negative
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat positive
- Extremely positive
- Kamala Harris not mentioned

In what way does the post frame or represent the Republican Party?

- Extremely negative
- Somewhat negative
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat positive
- Extremely positive
- Republican Party not mentioned

In what way does the post frame or represent the Democratic Party?

- Extremely negative
- Somewhat negative
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat positive
- Extremely positive
- Democratic Party not mentioned

What tone of delivery is present in the post?

- Serious/Sincere
- Angry/Ranting
- Humorous/Satirical

Does the post involve the use of casual language or Gen Z slang?

Yes

No

Does the post involve the use of any pop culture references?

Yes

No

Does the post involve genre-blending?

Yes

No

Does the post address the audience directly?

Yes

No

Does the post directly endorse a candidate?

Trump

Harris

Third-party

No candidate endorsement



Does the post encourage viewers to vote?

Yes

No

Does the post link to any additional resources?

Yes

No

Does the post encourage viewers to engage with the content?
(Like, share, comment, etc.)

Yes

No

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