

TIKTOK'S IMPACT ON POLITICAL IDENTITY AMONG  
YOUNG ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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This research examines how the political ideologies and identities of young adults (aged 18 to 25) in the United States are affected by regular use of the social media app, TikTok. Previous studies have found that exposure to political information through social media affects individuals' political beliefs and engagement, though the intersection of TikTok, young adults, and shifts in political ideology has been largely uninvestigated. This study's original survey data showed that only 9% of respondents reported their political ideology had not shifted at all. Most participants indicated their political ideology shifted "A great deal" or "A lot" over the course of their regular use of TikTok. When asked to identify the political-ideological nature of their shift in ideology, most respondents indicated that they had become only *moderately* more liberal or conservative (as opposed to *much* more) since regularly using the app. There was no clear pattern between party affiliation and direction of ideological change along the political spectrum. This study did not find that more exposure to political news on TikTok correlated with the degree or direction to which participants indicated their ideology had changed. However, the survey data show that the amount of political news respondents reported seeing on TikTok is directly related to their perceived political-ideological 'sameness' as most of the users they follow on the app.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction and Research Questions

Especially among young adults, social media has become a preferred form of connection to the world (Pew Research Center, 2021). The video-based social media app TikTok has garnered more than 1.5 billion users since the company's conception in 2016 (Weimann *et al.*, 2020). While TikTok's feeds host comedy and dance videos, it has also become a powerful platform for political discussion and campaigning (Wells *et al.*, 2020). Whether users come into contact with political information on TikTok through an official political ad or interpersonal online dialogue about political or politicized topics, the social media app exposes users to customized political messaging they otherwise may not happen upon.

Previous research regarding social media's effects on political ideology has focused on older social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram. Naturally, TikTok, being a relatively new platform, has garnered less attention among scholars than its more senior competitors. What's more, no known academic studies have explored the niche intersection of TikTok, political influence, and young adults. Such a gap in research amidst TikTok's growing cultural significance and nationally heightened political tension emphasizes the importance of investigating how the app has affected the political identities of young adults. Nevertheless, previous studies that have researched political activity among young Americans, social media's contribution to polarizing political climate among users as well as the relationship between culture and political beliefs set the foundation for the research this paper discusses.

## Research Questions

My research questions are the following:

Q1: Among participants who are registered voters, how committed are they to their registered political party?

Q2a: Do respondents report political-ideological change since they began regularly using TikTok?

Q2b: What is the nature of the changes in political ideology participants report?

Q3a: What is the relationship between respondents' reported exposure to political news on TikTok and the degree to which they indicate their political ideology has changed since using the app regularly?

Q3b: What is the relationship between respondents' reported exposure to political news on TikTok and their perceptions about whether they have the same political ideology as most of the users they follow on the app?



## Theoretical Background

### Political ideology and U.S. political identity

It is well-known that individuals' perceptions of reality are based on the lenses through which they see the world. Nevertheless, scholars disagree when it comes to how exactly ideologies are defined, how they are shaped, and how they impact individuals' identities. Broadly, ideologies are characterized by their embodiment of the following, according to a 2021 study conducted by Bianchin (p. 184):

- (a) they have the function of supporting existing social practices,
- (b) they are the output of systematically distorted processes of belief formation,
- (c) the conditions in which distorting mechanisms triggers can be traced back to structural causal factors shaped by the social practice their outputs are designed to support

While definitions of ideology from a general social science perspective help build an important understanding of how attitudes and environments are interconnected, this study focuses on identity and ideology as it concerns politics and is associated with political psychology. A 2013 paper defined the term in this specific respect (Feldman, p. 591):

...ideology is a construct that is used at multiple levels. Political ideologies exist as formal systems of political thought... In somewhat less structured ways, ideologies operate at the societal level to organize political debate by allowing political parties to offer more or less

coherent policy platforms... ideology is also used to describe the ways in which people organize their political attitudes and beliefs.

According to this paper and other similar studies, political ideology abstractly organizes political attitudes and thought within individuals themselves, but it also acts as a system through which individuals organize their political thoughts in contrast to others.

Through this, individuals define their political identity as it associates with and against other systems and groups of political thought. For purposes of this study, this spectrum of political ideology may be organized across the U.S. political range from extremely conservative to extremely liberal in Likert-style survey questions.

### **Political like-mindedness on social media and perceived information credibility**

As an organizational system largely based on group association and shared identity, political ideology is established through communication within and between identity groups (Feldman, 2013). Such interpersonal communication occurs online as it does face to face. Research shows that social media cultivates more polarization among individuals in political identity groups than in-person communication does (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon which minimizes users' exposure to diverse attitudes as it maximizes interaction between "like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative," creates 'echo chambers' among political identity groups (p. 1).

Another study elaborated on this finding, adding that this echo chamber effect differs across social media platforms (Kitchens, 2020). The research analyzed how users' interaction with different social media sites related to the sources users chose to consume. The study reported diverse results of the echo chamber's effect across

different social media sites and emphasized that different sites cultivate different environments for users.

Research conducted in 2022 studied the effects of political discussion on individuals' ideas about media sources, affecting their perceptions of news credibility and their media engagement. It found that among liberals, "supportive interpersonal discussion" resulted in individuals' perceived credibility of liberal news outlets. This was found to cultivate increased use of similar news types among individuals with similar political attitudes. It also decreased these individuals' perceived credibility of conservative news sources that did not share their political attitudes, decreasing their use of conservative media. These patterns were consistent among conservatives' perceptions and use of conservative media. In summary, research shows that individuals trust and choose to interact with news from media sources that tend to share their political ideologies.

Other studies reported complementary findings; research has shown that users' media sources influence their perception of political reality as they filter false political claims from true ones (Whitsitt *et al.*, 2019). Another study examined whether young people's political engagement is influenced by their use of a variety of media. It found that while engagement was not correlated with news consumption via traditional media (non-Internet sources), participants' political engagement was highly influenced by their use of Internet media and social media as news sources (Hao *et al.*, 2014).

## **TikTok and political discussion**

Platforms for online discussion among users have evolved over the course of the internet's lifetime as sites fade in and out of style among the demographic that uses the web to communicate most: young adults (Newport, 2014). The growing popularity and preference for online communication among young adults can be examined by comparing survey data of young adults gathered at different points in time. Data gathered and reported across the 2000s and 2010s by the Pew Research Center shows that in 2005, only 25% of young adults aged 18 to 29 in the U.S. used at least one social media site. By 2019, 90% of the same demographic reported using at least one social media site. This drastic increase demonstrates how the prominence of social media as a platform for young adults' communication has risen over the past decade. The same study found that the vast majority of young adults aged 18 to 29 check their social media daily—6 in 10 saying they viewed it multiple times a day.

The start of America's COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders began in 2020, pulling Americans online for interpersonal interaction on social media even more than they were before as they worked and waited at home for months without the social, cultural, and environmental stimulation they were used to. While young adults continued to regularly use the social media they were already on, new downloads for one of the latest social media apps, TikTok, spiked in the first few months of America's shut down (Pew Research Center; Wells *et al.*, 2020).

TikTok has replaced televisual flow (like that of a film or long video) with a never-ending sequence of short videos to be scrolled through (Kendall, 2021). The engagement that accompanies the activity of scrolling maximizes distraction and minimizes boredom to create a uniquely enticing user experience. The app's "For You" scrolling page displays a combination of recommended popular content tailored to each user interrupted by random unpopular videos. Other apps use similar algorithms, but TikTok's works faster and offers more niche profiling for personalized suggested content (Ohlheiser, 2021). The technology's design makes it easy and fast for any video to become viral almost immediately.

Naturally, the pandemic also pushed official political campaigning for the 2020 election online more than ever before (Alter *et al.*, 2020). With in-person campaign events canceled for social distancing, official campaign strategists have focused funds and attention on social media where a large, widespread audience of voters who may not seek out political information for themselves or be exposed to traditional forms of political engagement (Nott, 2020). A candidate's presence and repetition of their name on social media affect their salience in the minds of otherwise politically unengaged citizens, and it can also offer them a chance to campaign against other candidates— affecting viewers' perceptions of their competitors. Especially when it comes to garnering political support among young adults, ads on social media have been shown to be specifically effective among young adults (Gerodimos, 2012).

Since TikTok's demographic is younger, on average, than those of other social media platforms, politicians are desperate to use the app as a tool to catch the attention

of young voters or soon-to-be voters (Mozilla Foundation, 2020). While Trump's campaigns in 2016 and 2020 largely depended on Twitter and Facebook as campaign platforms, Biden turned to TikTok, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat to capture a younger audience leading up to his election (Alter, 2020).

### **TikTok and political content moderation**

Since its conception by its Chinese parent company ByteDance in 2016, TikTok has transitioned through many phases of political content moderation and censorship practices (Wells *et al.*, 2020). Originally, uploading political messages of any kind violated the app's user agreement. The app also removed content that moderators deemed would make users uncomfortable including videos of disabled people, LGBTQ+ material, "Make America Great Again" merchandise, and even "Black Lives Matter" hashtags, according to some users. As the Black Lives Matter movement became more widespread after the murder of George Floyd and the protests following, backlash about TikTok's censorship of BLM messaging pushed the company to host more politicized and controversial content.

TikTok's content moderation policies continue to change as the company develops amid media backlash and ever-changing cultural dynamics, so an updated analysis of the app's policies on users' political ideologies is difficult.

Its loose content moderation policies in comparison to other social media, its huge influx of users over a short period of time, and its rising popularity amidst a global pandemic and nationally heightened political polarization made TikTok a major

platform for controversial political messaging. Political videos created and posted by random users (unaffiliated publicly with a party or funder) have gone viral on the app and have been found to attract a loyal following of users who interact with or create similar content to create a sort of ‘echo chamber’ of homogenous political beliefs on their individual feeds. This phenomenon is not limited to TikTok, previous studies have found, though the app’s algorithm and context may cater to the effect.

## Study Overview

This study's purpose is to investigate young adults' (18-25) political ideologies and identities, specifically exploring whether they report exposure to political and politicized content on the social media app TikTok has affected it. This research concerns United States politics; the survey only included participants located in the U.S. and questioned them about their ideas and identities as they are defined through U.S. political thought. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 were chosen as the focus of this study because they are the most concentrated demographic on social media--especially TikTok, are the most traditionally persuadable voter demographic in the U.S., and have been reported to be the least rigid in their political beliefs (Newport, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). Participants were not required to be registered or active U.S. voters to participate in this survey, as this study focuses on political ideologies rather than actual voter activity.

In general, the objective of this research is to investigate the political engagement of young Americans on TikTok and how their ideologies have changed over the course of their regular use of the app. Based on anticipations established in the findings of previous research, the following hypotheses correspond with each specific research question this study sought to address.

H1a: Most participants in each party, aside from those registered as Independents, will report being moderately or extremely committed to their registered political party.



H2a: Most respondents will indicate that their political ideology has shifted to some degree over the course of their regular use of TikTok.

H2b: Most participants will indicate that their political ideology has become *moderately* more liberal or conservative since they began regularly using TikTok.

H3a: The amount of political news respondents indicate they see on TikTok will be directly related to the degree to which they indicate their political ideology has changed since using the app regularly.

H3b: The amount of political news respondents indicate they see on TikTok will be directly related to their perceived political-ideological like-mindedness of most of the users they follow on TikTok.

## **Methods**

This research was conducted from April 6 to 10, 2022, through an original survey developed and published through the secure online software, Qualtrics. Participants were recruited and compensated online through the web-based research platform, Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), to obtain a broad, diverse sample of respondents. Previous research regarding young adults' political ideologies and social media has relied on more limited American university participant samples. To incorporate more diversity among respondents, MTurk 'Workers' (participants) were not required to have previously completed any number of tasks or earned a high approval rate for their responses to other surveys.

Despite this, the survey did require certain participation qualifications among Workers. In order to view or participate in the survey, Workers had to have been between the ages of 18 and 25 and located in the United States. Once users began the survey on Qualtrics after qualifying on MTurk, they were asked again about their age and location status. Respondents who indicated they did not qualify for this study were closed out of the rest of the survey automatically. Just the same, participants who indicated they had not regularly used TikTok for a period of six months or longer or did not agree to participate in the survey were excluded from the rest of the study. The survey also included two quality assurance questions embedded separately among other survey questions to ensure participants were responding thoughtfully. Of the 250 participants, many were excluded from the study for not qualifying for the research or for failing quality assurance questions. The resulting sample size was 216.

Table 1 is a visual of respondents’ demographics. Over half of the sample identified themselves as a woman—something that should be weighted in the analysis of this survey’s data. Almost all the participants identified themselves as white (about 87%), so this research is distorted to favor the white experience of TikTok’s effect on political ideologies. Additionally, most of the sample was born between 1996 and 1997, so the findings will be more indicative of what adults in their mid-twenties indicate about TikTok and their political ideology. Additionally, the sample was almost 87% white while only about 60% of America is white—and young adults are even more racially diverse by proportion (U.S. Census, 2020). Ideally, this study would include a more diverse collection of participants to reflect the demographics of their population.

TABLE 1: Sample Demographics

	<i>M or % (N)</i>
<b>Gender</b>	
Man	41.20% (89)
Non-binary	1.85% (4)
Woman	56.02% (121)
Prefer not to say	0.93% (2)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
White	86.98% (187)
Black or African American	6.51% (14)
Asian	2.79% (6)
Latinx or Hispanic	2.33% (5)
Multi-ethnicity	0.47% (1)
Other	0.47% (1)
Prefer not to say	0.47% (1)
<b>Birth Year</b>	
1996	40.28% (87)
1997	32.41% (70)
1998	14.81% (32)
1999	5.56% (12)
2000	5.09% (11)
2001	0% (0)
2002	1.39% (3)
2003	0.46% (1)

## Measures

This survey contained multiple-choice and Likert-style scale questions in a 5-point range. Occasional open text responses were made available for questions about demographics and political identity. Spectrum labels on Likert-style questions varied by question, depending on the context of the response. One version of the survey was offered to every qualifying respondent, though certain responses from participants initiated skips over irrelevant questions to the appropriate survey portion.

### *Questions indicating extent of change*

The survey included questions asking respondents to indicate extents of change: “To what degree has your political ideology changed since you began using TikTok—whether or not you believe TikTok has influenced it?” This specific question prompted a 5-point multiple-choice response on a spectrum from “A great deal” to “None at all” with “A moderate amount” as the third (middle) response option.

### *Questions indicating abstract quantity*

When the survey required respondents to indicate an abstract quantity, they were asked to choose between multiple-choice options on a 5-point scale ranging from “A great deal” to “None at all” with “A moderate amount” as the third (middle) response option. Examples of this question are the following: “How much news do you first hear about through TikTok?” and “Of the news you hear about on TikTok, how much of it relates to politics or politicized topics (such as COVID-19, social justice, women’s rights)?” This was similar to the design of questions indicating extent of change.

### *Questions indicating political ideology*

The survey included questions asking respondents to indicate where their political ideology exists along a spectrum from “Extremely liberal” to “Extremely conservative.” Like the other styles of questions mentioned in this section, these questions were designed on a 5-point Likert-style range of multiple-choice options. Liberal ideology was placed on the left side of the spectrum because of its connotation to the ‘left’ side of politics while conservative ideologies were placed along the right side of the Likert-style spectrum for the same reason.

## Results

FIGURE 1: Registered Political Affiliation

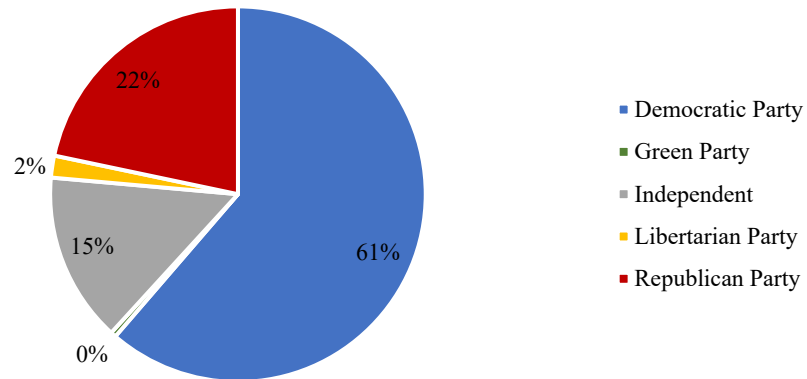
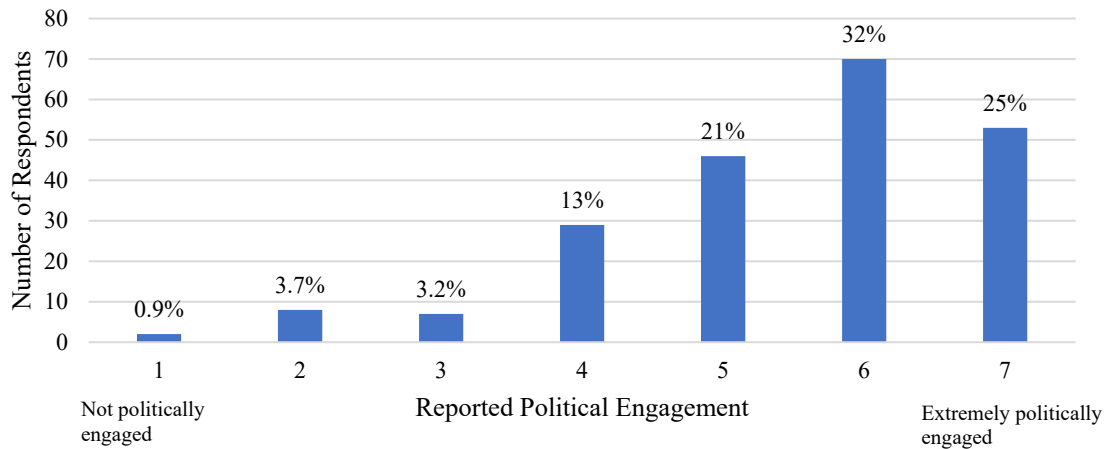


Figure 1 is a visualization of the registered voter affiliation of respondents. Among users who indicated they were registered voters in the United States, the majority (roughly 60%) identified themselves as registered Democrats. The remainder of participants identified themselves as either registered Republicans (about 20%) or registered Independents (about 14%).

Figure 2 shows the reported political engagement of respondents as they indicated it on a 7-point Likert-style question with response options ranging from “Not politically engaged” to “Extremely politically engaged.” Interestingly, the vast majority of participants indicated that they are politically engaged to some extent, with roughly 25% (n = 53) of them identifying as “Extremely politically engaged.”

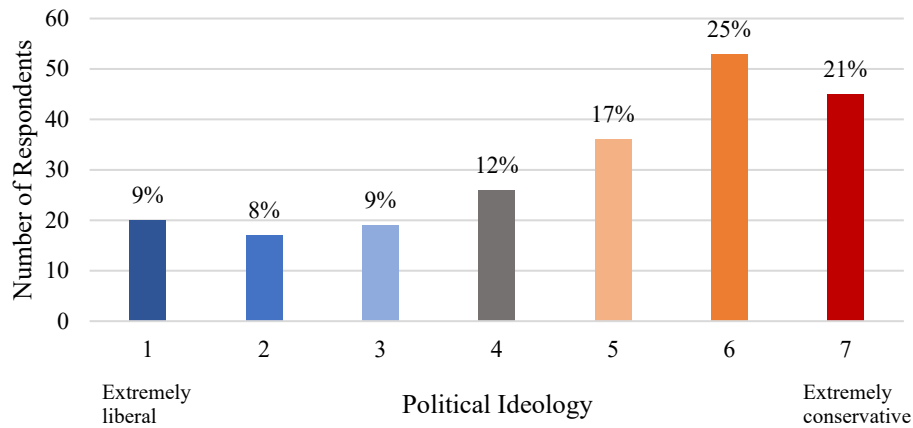
FIGURE 2: Political Engagement



*n* = 216

Figure 3 shows how participants of the sample reported their political ideology lands on a 7-point spectrum from “Extremely liberal” (1) to “Extremely conservative” (7). On this figure, ideologies to the left are more liberal and those to the right are more conservative. Interestingly, while the majority of this study’s sample identified themselves as registered democrats in the United States, more participants indicated they fall on the right half of the political spectrum (toward conservatism). About a quarter of respondents indicated their political ideology is a 6 on a scale from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). A little over 20% of respondents indicated that their ideology was extremely conservative, about 17% indicated their ideology was a 5, and roughly 12% indicated their ideology was moderate rather than leaning liberal or conservative. Reported ideologies on the liberal side of the spectrum (from 1 to 3) were relatively even between extremely liberal and moderate ideologies. Only a little over a quarter of the entire sample ranked their ideology somewhere on the liberal half of the spectrum.

FIGURE 3: Political Ideology



*n* = 216

Figure 4 demonstrates how strongly participants indicated they were committed to their registered political party. Responses are divided by which political party the respondent was registered as. About 40% of participants who indicated they were registered as democrats indicated they were “Extremely committed” to the Democratic Party. Slightly more democrats (about 46%) indicated they are “Moderately committed” to their political party. Only 14% of democrats indicated they were “Minimally committed” to the Democratic Party and no democrats indicated they are not committed at all.

These proportions of commitment were similar to those among participants who indicated they were registered republicans. A third of republicans in the sample indicated they are “Extremely committed” to their political party, slightly more than half of republicans indicated they were “Moderately committed” to their political party, and only about 13% indicated they were “Minimally committed” to the Republican Party. None of the participants who responded as registered republicans indicated they are “Not committed” to their political party.



Among participants who indicated they are registered independent voters, however, about 16% indicated they were “Not committed” to their political party. Slightly under 20% of registered independents indicated they were “Extremely committed” to their political identity. The majority of independents indicated they were moderately or minimally committed to their identity: Almost 40% were “Moderately committed” to their Independent political identity while a little over a quarter of independents indicated they were “Minimally committed.”

Because there were so few respondents who indicated they were registered as a part of the Green and Libertarian Parties, analysis of their reported commitment to their political party would not show dependable results. It is, however, interesting to highlight that of the four respondents who indicated they are a part of the Libertarian Party, each chose a different option for their commitment to their party. The only respondent who indicated they were registered with the Green Party responded that they are “Extremely committed” to their political party. This data is also visualized in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: Commitment to Registered Political Party by Registered Political Party

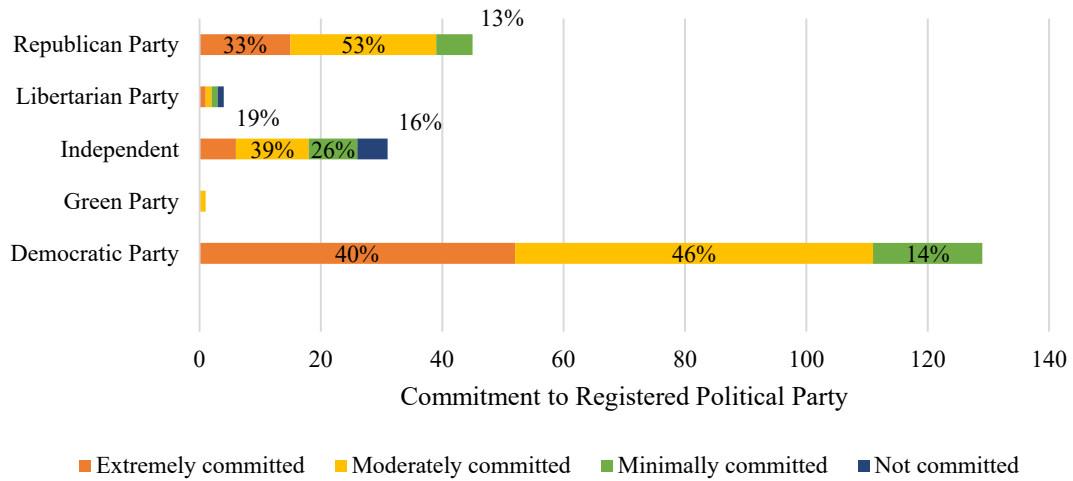
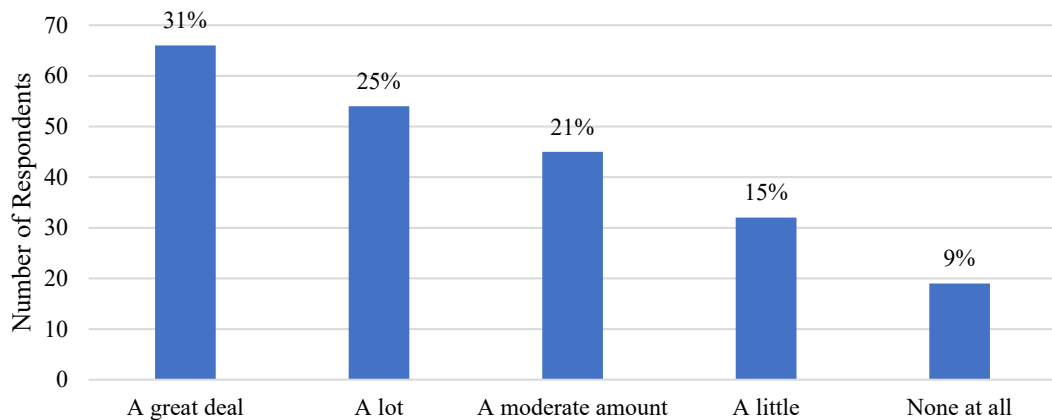


Figure 5 shows how much respondents indicated their political ideology has shifted since regularly using TikTok. About a third of participants indicated their ideology had changed “A great deal” since regularly using TikTok, a quarter indicated their ideology had shifted “A lot,” and slightly over 20% indicated their ideology had changed “A moderate amount.” Only about 9% of participants indicated their political ideology had shifted “None at all” since they began regularly using TikTok.

FIGURE 5: Change in Political Ideology Since Regularly Using TikTok

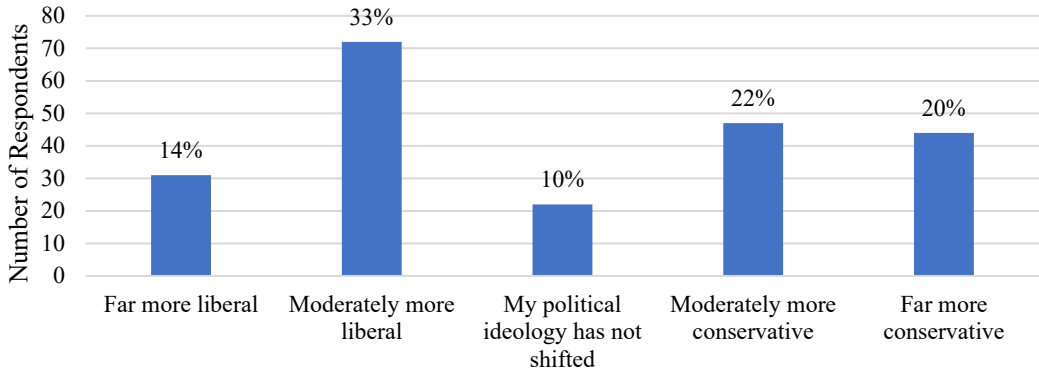


*n* = 216

Closely related, Figure 6 shows the nature of this change in political ideology—which direction participants indicated their political ideology shifted along the political spectrum from liberal to conservative. The majority of respondents (exactly a third) indicated that their political ideology became “Moderately more liberal” over the course of their regular use of TikTok. About 14% of respondents indicated that their political ideology had shifted to become “Far more liberal.” The fewest respondents (about 10%) chose “My political ideology has not shifted” in the five-point range.

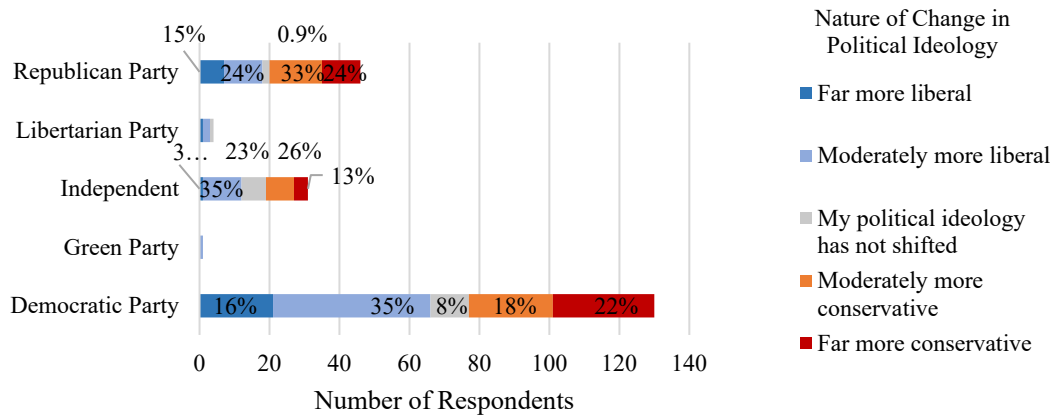
Roughly 20% of participants indicated their political ideology has shifted to become “Moderately more conservative” over the course of their regular use of TikTok, and another 20% indicated they had become “Far more conservative.” On a broader scale, almost half of participants indicated their political ideology had become more liberal while a little over 20% of respondents indicated they had become more conservative since they regularly began using TikTok.

FIGURE 6: Nature of Change in Political Ideology Since Regularly Using TikTok



*n* = 216

FIGURE 7: Nature of Change in Political Ideology by Political Party

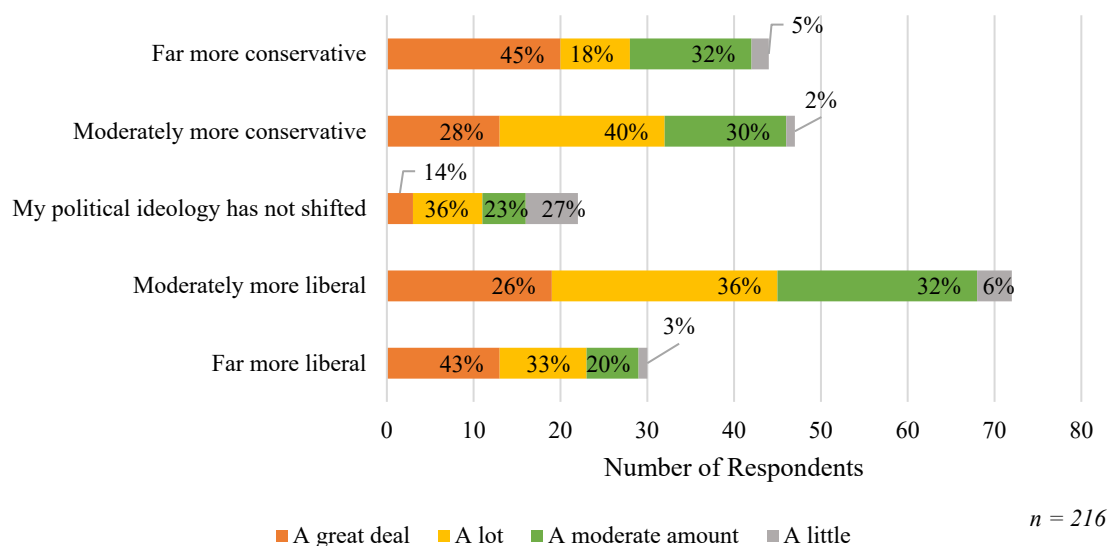


In Figure 7, data for the nature of change in respondents’ political ideology  $n = 216$  divided by political party to differentiate changes in political polarization between party identities. Half of the sample’s registered democrats indicated that they have become more liberal over the course of their regular TikTok use. About 40% indicated they had become more conservative. Most democrats (about 35%) reported becoming “Moderately more liberal.” Among participants who are registered republicans, about 40% say they have become more liberal to some extent. Roughly 57% indicated they had become more conservative. Most republicans (about 33%) indicated they had become “Moderately more conservative.” Independent voters of the sample who indicated they had become more liberal or conservative were split exactly in half—the largest share of them reporting they had become “Moderately more liberal.” About 20% of independents indicated their political ideology had not shifted—a much larger share of the party’s sample than that of other parties.

Figure 8 shows the relationship between the nature of participants’ change in political ideology since regularly using TikTok and the amount of political news they

report seeing on TikTok. The data show that very few participants who indicated any type of change in their political ideology said their TikTok feed only included “A little” political news; no participants said their TikTok consisted of “None at all.” Among respondents who indicated they had become “Far more conservative,” about 45% reported that “A great deal” of the news they see on TikTok is about political or politicized topics. Slightly more than 40% of those who said they had become “Moderately more conservative” said “A lot” of the news on their feed is political. “Moderately more conservative” said “A lot” of the news on their feed is political.

FIGURE 8: Amount of Political News Viewed on TikTok by Change in Political Ideology



Among those who indicated that their political ideology has not shifted since regularly using TikTok, half of them still responded that “A great deal” or “A lot” of the news they see on TikTok is political. About 36% of those who had become “Moderately more liberal” indicated “A lot” of the news they see on TikTok is political. Most of the remainder of the pool was divided between seeing “A great deal” and “A moderate amount” of political news on their TikTok feeds. Those who had become far more

liberal mainly indicated seeing “A great deal” or “A lot” of political news on their TikTok.

FIGURE 9: Amount of Political News on TikTok by Degree of Change in Political Ideology

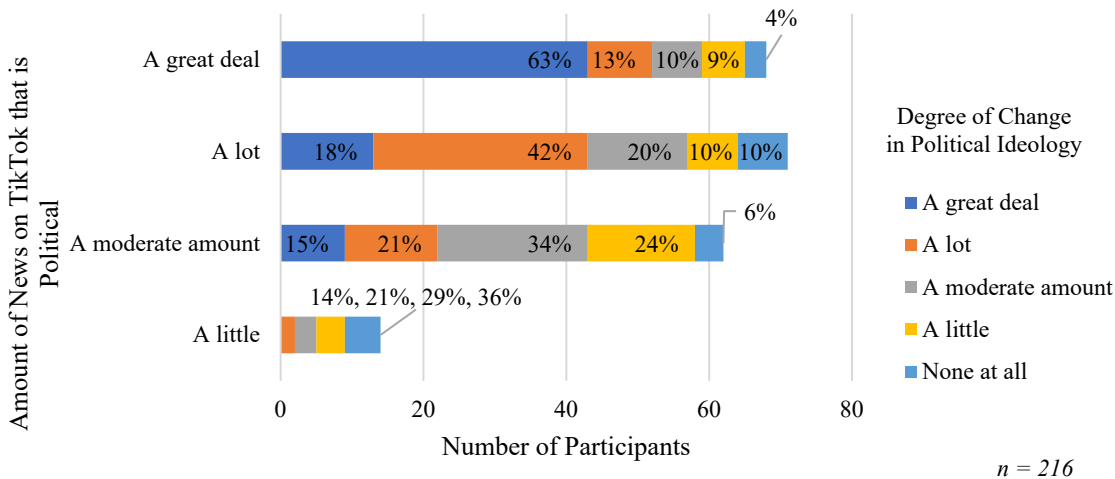
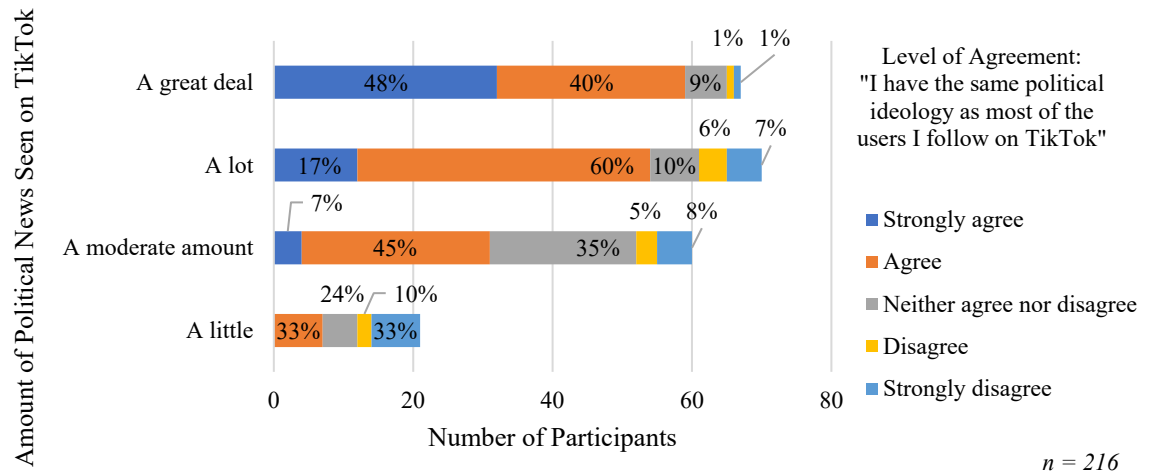


Figure 9 shows the relationship between the amount of news on their TikTok respondents indicate is political and the degree they indicate their political ideology has changed as they’ve regularly used TikTok. This data shows a correlation between those who indicate that “A great deal” of the news they see on TikTok is political and those who indicate their political ideology has changed “A great deal” over the course of their regular TikTok use.

In Figure 10, participants’ agreement with the phrase: “I have the same political ideology as most of the users I follow on TikTok” is compared to their reports of how much news they see on TikTok is about political or politicized issues. Roughly 48% of participants who indicated “A great deal” of the news they see on TikTok is political

“Strongly agree” with the statement, showing they perceive themselves to follow politically like-minded users. The largest share (about 41%) of participants who indicated they only “Agree” with the statement reported that “A lot” of the news they see is political. The largest share of those who “Strongly disagreed” with the statement indicated they only see “A little” political news on TikTok.

FIGURE 10: Perception of Followed Users’ Political Ideologies by Amount of Political News seen on TikTok



## Discussion

The hypotheses based on the research questions for this exploratory study were informed by the findings of previous research regarding young adults on social media, social media and political messaging, information exposure on social media, and the nature of TikTok's content sharing. In general, this study's hypotheses were supported by its original descriptive survey data, showing a clear correlation between TikTok use and shifts in political ideology among young American users. Each research question and its corresponding hypothesis is listed below with an analysis of its compatibility with the data of this research.

**H1a: Most participants in each party, aside from those registered as Independents, will report being moderately or extremely committed to their registered political party.**

This hypothesis was based on the assumption that those registered with a specific political party would consider themselves to be more than "Minimally committed" to their party. This study's survey data supports this hypothesis; Figure 4 is a visual of respondents' commitment to their registered political party. Of those registered with the Democratic, Libertarian, Green, or Republican Party (n= 179); over 85% indicated they were "Extremely committed" or "Moderately committed" to the political party with which they're registered. About 86% of registered Democrats and 87% of Republicans in the sample indicated they were either "Extremely committed" or "Moderately committed" to their party. The share of participants who are registered as a



part of the Green or Libertarian Parties consisted of too few respondents to conclude any meaningful findings about each group.

Independent voters in the sample, because they are not affiliated with a particular political party's identity, indicated that they were, on average, less committed to their registered party. Roughly 58% of participants who indicated they were registered as Independents said they were "Extremely committed" or "Moderately committed" to their party.

**H2a: Most respondents will indicate that their political ideology has shifted to some degree over the course of their regular use of TikTok.**

Based on prior research which indicated a correlation between individuals' use of social media and exposure to like-minded political content, this hypothesis assumed that regular use of TikTok would also cultivate an 'echo chamber' environment wherein users are exposed to beliefs confirming the ones they already have—polarizing their political identity as a result of the one-sided information they are exposed to. This survey's data confirmed this hypothesis. Figure 5 visualizes the data for this finding, showing how much respondents indicated their political ideology has shifted since over the course of their regular use of TikTok. Over half of the sample indicated that their political ideology had shifted "A great deal" or "A lot" as they used the app regularly. Only about 9% of participants indicated their political ideology had not changed at all.

While the data shows this correlation, it is not necessarily indicative of causation; survey participants were not asked about whether their political-ideological changes over the course of their regular TikTok use were *caused by* their TikTok use.

Self-reports of causation behind correlations such as this would not lead to reliable conclusions.

**H2b: Most participants will indicate that their political ideology has become *moderately* more liberal or conservative since they began regularly using TikTok.**

Figure 6 shows that the largest share of respondents indicated their political ideology had shifted to become “Moderately more liberal” over the course of their regular use of TikTok. About 48% of participants indicated they had become more liberal and 42% had become more conservative. Interestingly, the share of participants who indicated their political ideology had shifted to become more conservative was almost evenly split between “Moderately more conservative” and “Far more conservative.”

Because about 60% of the sample indicated they were registered members of the Democratic Party, it is important to analyze changes in political ideology along the political spectrum with respect to participants’ political party. Figure 7 illustrates this categorized perspective. Independents of the sample who indicated they had become more liberal or conservative were split in half—the largest share reporting they had become “Moderately more liberal.” Roughly 20% of independent voters indicated their political ideology had not shifted. Slightly more than half of the democratic participants in this study indicated they had become more liberal since using TikTok regularly. Of this share, the vast majority reported only becoming “Moderately more liberal.” Similarly, most republicans of the sample indicated they had become more conservative—the slight majority of them reporting only becoming “Moderately more

conservative.” These findings confirm the hypothesis, though the data show no clear pattern between party affiliation and direction of political-ideological change.

**H3a: The amount of political news respondents indicate they see on TikTok will be directly related to the degree and direction to which they indicate their political ideology has changed since using the app regularly.**

Survey data from this study do not strongly support this hypothesis for those who have become more liberal, though it shows a weak correlation between the amount of political news respondents reported seeing on TikTok and the degree to which they say their political ideology has shifted to be more conservative. Figure 8 shows the amount of political news seen on TikTok and the changes participants reported in their political ideology over the course of regular use of the app. The data does not indicate a correlation between the amount of political news respondents view on TikTok and the extent of political-ideological change they say they have experienced. About 43% of those who report they have become “Far more liberal” indicated that “A great deal” of the news they see on TikTok is political. This compares to 26% of those who indicate they have become “Moderately more liberal” since regularly using the app also indicating that “A great deal” of the news they see is political. Clearly, there is no correlation between shifts toward more liberal political ideology and amount of political news seen on TikTok.

However, among those who indicated they had become “Far more conservative,” just under 45% reported that “A great deal” of the news they see on TikTok is political. In contrast, those who indicated they had only become “Moderately more conservative” reported that “A great deal” of the news they see on TikTok is

political. Conversely, among those who reported their political ideology had shifted to be “Moderately more conservative,” far more indicated that “A lot” of the news they see on TikTok is political; in general, the share of respondents who reported seeing “A great deal” or “A lot” of political news on the app only indicating becoming moderately more liberal or conservative. Thus, this study found no clear relation between more exposure to political news on TikTok and the greatest degrees of political-ideological change.

**H3b: The amount of political news respondents indicate they see on TikTok will be directly related to their perceived political-ideological like-mindedness of most of the users they follow on TikTok.**

The data shown in Figure 10 supports this hypothesis; the figure shows the degree to which participants agree with the phrase: “I have the same political ideology as most of the users I follow on TikTok.” The data reveal a correlation between participants who indicated they agree more strongly with the aforementioned statement and indicate that a larger amount of the news they see on TikTok is political. The largest share, about 67%, of those who reported that they “Strongly agree” with the statement also indicated that “A great deal” of the news they see on the app is political. The largest share, about 41%, who indicated they only “Agree” with the statement also indicated “A lot” of the news they see is political.

The largest share, around 53%, of participants who reported they “Neither agree nor disagree” with the statement indicated “A moderate amount” of the news they see on TikTok is political. This correlation was unclear in the final bracket of respondents who indicated only “A little” of the news they see is political; most participants (about

67%) indicated they “Neither agree nor disagree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly disagree” with the statement—but a third indicated they “Agree” with the statement. None indicated that they “Strongly agree” that they have the same political ideology as most of the users they follow on the app.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this exploratory study relying on descriptive data was to fill a research gap at the intersection of the new popular social media platform TikTok, young adults, and shifts in political ideology. Since TikTok's conception in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic drew users online as they sought entertainment and connection through social media. The pandemic forced political campaigning online, as well, so political action groups, official candidate campaigns, and political dialogue were also largely 'uploaded' to the internet and social media. This study investigated the effects this new online political climate on TikTok has had on young American adults. To do so, this research employed a survey to young adults aged 18 to 25 in the United States who have regularly used TikTok for a minimum time period of six months. Most respondents reported that their political ideology had shifted "A great deal" or "A lot" during their regular use of TikTok. Only 9% of the sample reported their political ideology had not shifted at all. This survey data also showed that most respondents reported they had become only *moderately* more liberal or conservative (as opposed to *much* more liberal or conservative) since regularly using the app-- but there was no clear correlation between party affiliation and the nature of ideological change on the political spectrum.

This study was not able to confidently prove that more exposure to political news on TikTok correlated with the degree or direction to which participants indicated their ideology had changed. However, the survey data did indicate that the amount of political news respondents reported seeing on the app was directly related to their perceived political-ideological 'sameness' as most of the users they follow on TikTok.

While this study drew conclusions about the relationship between users' political engagement, ideology, and exposure to political news, its findings cannot conclude that these phenomena were *caused* by participants' TikTok use. Gauging individuals' ideological changes through self-reported survey responses does not allow for an accurate measurement of causality. Additionally, the sample's lack of proportionate diversity to the American young adult population limits this explorative study's accuracy and credibility, as it largely neglects insights from people aged 18-23 and people of color. This study's unproportionate participant demographics are reflective of the predominately white Worker population on MTurk, though researchers say MTurk is a more demographically inclusive crowdsourcing recruitment platform than most (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Despite its limitations, this research offers significant findings based on descriptive data that emphasize the need for more exploration of TikTok and its relationship with young users' political identities. Future studies investigating the psychological and ideological impact of TikTok content on users, the specifics of TikTok's entertainment algorithm, and the pandemic's effect on political campaign communication would contribute clearer insights to the largely unstudied topic. As the internet becomes a more significant platform for political communication and the nation becomes more politically polarized, an emphasis must be placed on research concerning the effects of social media on such changes.

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