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Mary Gilmartin

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The Relationship Between Social Media Usage During the Covid-19 Pandemic, and Its Effect on the Youth Voter Turnout in the 2020 General Election

Mary Gilmartin

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Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Brian Frederick, Thesis Advisor Date: 5-9-23

Dr. Rachel Navarre, Committee Member Date: 5-9-23

Dr. Jessica Birthisel, Committee Member Date: 5-9-23
Abstract

History has shown that young voters have been known to be a lagging demographic when it comes to voter turnout in general elections. However, in 2020 there was a sudden spike in voter turnout in the age group of 18-24-year-olds. This sudden spike in voter turnout can be explained by the societal changes the youth demographic faced due to the Covid-19 pandemic and isolation protocols. Due to social distancing, normal in-person political participation shifted to online environments, especially on social media. Through social media, young people began to become more engaged politically as they gained access to political information and discourse about their political ideology and opinions. This increase of non-traditional political engagement through social media inspired young people to continue their political impact by showing up to the polls in the 2020 general election.
Introduction

Through previous studies, it has been shown that young people participate at a disproportionately lower rate in United States elections (Tufts, 2020). For political systems to be representative, all parts of society must be included. When young people are disengaged from politics, a large portion of the population has little or no voice in decisions, undermining democracy's representativeness. To make a difference in the longer term, it is essential younger people are engaged in formal political processes and have a say in formulating today's and tomorrow's politics.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought on several societal and systemic changes to the United States, one specifically being our electoral system. The 2020 presidential election itself was already a skeptical and unusual election due to the re-election campaign of Donald Trump, a candidate with non-traditional and erratic views. As we add the Covid-19 pandemic to this picture, we see Trump’s disruptive presence erupt. However for the voters we saw a shift in how campaigns were run, how we voted, and what we valued.

Convivence, comfort, and safety were top factors in a voter’s decision to turn out during the 2020 election and the Covid pandemic (Atske, 2020). State-wide it was found that when states were provided with mail-in absentee ballots, they had higher voter turnout rates than those that restricted voting (Census, 2020). However, the 18-24-year-olds age group had the lowest rate of voting by mail in the 2020 election (Census, 2020). In 2020 40% of youth voted in person, 20% voted before the election day, 27% voted by mail, and 13% voted by absentee ballot drop-off (Tufts, 2023). Although this shows a continued lack of interest and possible barrier to access to voting for the youth vote, it shows that electoral institutions are adapting to new non-
traditional methods that may eventually spark youth political participation as new ways of voting increases their access.

Due to social distancing, social media became the focal point of the presidential election as it allowed candidates to connect with voters and for voters to display their own political ideologies and ideas. We saw Trump take to Twitter to stir up his voters and create a skeptical as he posted erratic and outrageous tweets (Ball, 2020). Both Trump and Biden moved their campaigns to the internet for “online tele rallies”, in hopes of avoiding scrutiny for not following proper social distancing protocol (Ball, 2020). As online political discourse continued important issues were highlighted. Among these important issues discussed were the economy, health care, Supreme Court appointment, the coronavirus outbreak, violent crime, and racial and ethnic inequality (Atske, 2021). It was found that in 2020, 23% of adult social media users claim social media led them to change their views on certain issues (Perrin, 2020). Among these issues were prominent social justice issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and women’s reproductive rights (Perrin, 2020). As it is found, social media highlights important issues that may not get a lot of attention otherwise. This social media conversation allows young people to gain a voice and share their political interests and ideas.

Young people (ages 18-24) especially have become more engaged with non-traditional forms of political participation, and then resulted in a spike in poll turnouts in the 2020 presidential election (Tufts, 2020). This in turn raises the question of whether social media activism is influencing and encouraging young people to vote. To measure this correlation, we will look at first the connection between the Covid-19 isolation era and the increase in social media usage among youth. Then we look at the voting turnout pre- and post-covid and see if there is an increase in youth voter turnout that aligns with the increase in social media usage.
Literature Review

Lack of Voter Turnout by Younger Demographic

Prior research by political theorists has shown that the demographics of American citizens can be a key predictor of voting trends in the United States. Demographics such as race, religion, economic status and age can help us determine who does and who does not vote in the United States. Leighley and Nagler (2013), compare demographic characteristics and political views of voter and nonvoters in American presidential elections since 1972. One of the key findings is that there is trend of older Americans continuing to vote more than younger Americans. Their findings beginning in 1972 determine the youngest age group (18-to-24-year old’s) reports the lowest level of voting in every election year (with a notable spike in 2004 a slight increase in 2008).

However, in the 2020 presidential election, there was a noticeable increase in youth voting. In a study done by Tufts Circle, 50% of young people, ages 18-29 voted in the 2020 presidential election, a 11-point increase from 2016 (39%). This is likely one of the highest rates of youth electoral participation since the voting age was lowered to 18. This brings into question, what is influencing this voting increase, and how did young Americans increase their civic education?

Characteristics of a Young Voter

It has been found that young adulthood is a critical period in civic development, however as we know, young people vote less than older people. Hillygus and Holbein (2020), determine a gap between voting intention and the turnout of young voters. Their main finding is that those best equipped to overcome the personal and contextual context of voting are those with strong
noncognitive skills. Therefore, those with capabilities to self-regulate, effortfulness, and interpersonal interaction. Therefore, the act of voting requires persistence, fortitude, energy, and patience, in Hillygus and Holbein’s opinion, these skills are taught, reinforced, and activated. Aside from personality characteristics, there is still a cost that many young voters face, and that is the need of resources.

In terms of developing voting habits, Pultzer (2002) found that young people who establish voting habits are more likely to vote later. In Pultzer’s terms voting behavior is gradually an acquired habit. Pultzer claims that when a young citizen becomes eligible to vote, it the parental socioeconomic and political resources available that determine whether the young citizen will vote. The excessive costs of first-time registration and voting can come from their parents, and with these resources comes political interest. However, as Pultzer points out, how can we be sure that this political participation will remain a long-term effect? Through his studies, it was determined that after initial obtainment of resources, this effect diminishes gradually as young voters achieve their own accomplishments and political knowledge. This leads to the question of how we can provide resources for potential young voters so they then can become habitual voters in their early 20s and beyond.

**Technology as a Resource for Young Voters**

Prakash Yadav and Rai (2017) define the young voter age group (18-24) as Generation Z or “Gen Z”. Gen Z is the first generation to have technology readily available to them right from birth. People of Gen Z are thought of as naturally comfortable with technology, and interacting on social media is a significant portion of their social behaviors. Through a study of Gen Z and their use of social media, it was found that the need to be involved and informed is the main rationale behind the use of online socializing. Prakash Yadav and Rai believe that active use of
social media will influence changes in society's measures and behaviors at the social level such as in public and political commitment. It has been found that participation in certain social groups and communities builds a form of social citizenship.

One of the main reasons there is a lack of turnout within the younger generation is that they cannot obtain the traditional resources that spark interest in young voters and drive them to the polls. However, within the past decade, there has been an increase in technology and digital media that has created a nontraditional way for young people to engage and participate politically and has resulted in an increase in voter turnout. Kruger (2002) has found that new information technologies, most importantly the internet, have enhanced people’s ability to post information and interact with others. It is found that the Internet may help low-income people obtain civic skills that may not be able to obtain through traditional outlets. However, as Kruger points out, the internet will only bring new people to the political process if equalized access is available.

Youth political participation is taking a creative form through media. Seppala (2022), examines Tik Tok one of the most popular social media platforms within Generation Z, and just how it is inclining young people to get involved with political participation. Sepala considers three different forms that creative political participation takes on the platform: performing political identity, creating community by debating, and trolling as a protest. Sepala found that online political participation can be an important part of civic engagement because creative forms of self-expression can be more meaningful than voting.

According to a study done by Mcclain, Vogels, Perrin, Sechopoulos and Rainie (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to social distancing norms. Through their study, they found that 90% of the adults they surveyed...
say the internet has been at least important to them personally during the pandemic. Along with this, the study finds that 40% of Americans claim digital tools have taken a new relevance, and that they have used technology in ways that were new or different to them.

**Theory**

It has become evident that Gen Z has been immersed in technology ever since they were born, and as technology has evolved so have their ideas, identities, and way of life (Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2017). Several factors drive a young person to vote such as social skills, family life, economic status, demographic, education, and where they live (Holbein and Hillygus, 2020). When it comes to young people, what many believe is most important is civic education is the most effective first step in increasing political participation. This access to political information and news can be difficult if the young person is not motivated to learn about their part in civic engagement.

Social media has allowed young people to politically participate outside of traditional institutions (Sepala, 2022). These traditional institutions are rejected by many young people because they believe their opinion is not being heard (Sepala, 2022). The greatest boundary between young people and the voting polls is that young people believe the issues they care about are not being addressed. As Sepala suggests, social media has created a platform to allow young people to share their own creative content and political opinions freely. The digital barrier created in social media has given young people new confidence in political participation.

As we see through the studies of Mclain, Vogels, Perrin, Sechopoulos and Rainie (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic has driven young people to turn to technology and social media as a new possible source to become involved with politics. Through social media, young people are able
to access news and information on politics and become more politically engaged with each other through online discourse.

**Hypothesis**

As we look into surveys done by research centers which study youth political engagement, we see that there is a correlation between how youth voters are adapting to new ways of political engagement online and youth voter turnout. In comparison between the pre and post-Covid-19 era, the level of online political engagement by Generation Z has increased over time. From there, as online political engagement increases, the voting turnout among young people in the 2020 general election increases as well.

**Operationalization/ Data Analysis**

**Tuft’s CIRCLE Study**

As this is an undergraduate research thesis there is limited data provided in terms of surveying youth’s online political participation. Tuft's CIRCLE is chosen as a secondary form of data for this project, as it provides a study of how young people turned to online political engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. This nonpartisan research organization focuses on youth civic engagement in the United States. The research Tuft’s CIRCLE conducts help improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to participate in civic life. Their main purpose is to understand, address, and ultimately eliminate the systemic barriers that keep young people marginalized and underrepresented in civic life.

The survey done by Tuft’s CIRCLE that we will be observing focuses on how young people turned to online political engagement during Covid-19. Within this survey we will be focusing on two data sets (the first displayed in Figure 1 and the second displayed in Figure 2).
These surveys were fielded from May 20 to June 18, 2020 and covered adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who were eligible to vote in the United States 2020 election. In total 2,234 adults completed the survey, which includes oversamples of 18- to 21-year-olds (N=671), Asian American youth (N=306), Black youth (N=473), Latino youth (N=559) and young Republicans (N=373) (Circle at Tufts, 2020)

**Operationalization**

This study consists of two sets of independent and dependent variables. The first set shows time, meaning the periods of pre Covid (2018) and past Covid (2020), as the independent variable, and the dependent variable is level of online political engagement by Generation Z, and how it can increase over time. This relationship is measured in Figures 1 and 2, here we see how much political information young people are receiving online, and how much political content they are posting. The second relationship measures online political engagement as the dependent variable and the increase of young voter turnout (ages 18-24) in the 2020 general election. This is measured in Figure 3, as we compare the levels of voter turnout between the 2016 and 2020 general election.
Data Analysis

Figure 1

The data pulled for Figure 1 was found in a survey done by Tuft’s CIRCLE, a research center which studies young voters' political participation. The survey covered young adults ages 18-24 who were eligible to vote in both the 2018 and 2020 general elections. This data set covers 671 of the total adults surveyed.

The chart above shows the percentage of 18–24-year-olds receiving political information on different social media platforms in 2018 compared to 2020. Through the survey, it was found that on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Reddit, young people sought out a significantly greater amount of political information and news in 2020 during the Covid pandemic than they did in 2018. Meaning there is a strong relationship between the attain of political information and news on social media and the time period of the Covid-19 pandemic.
This is with the exception of Tik Tok, where the platform was not created yet in 2018 and there is no data to compare.

**Figure 2**

![Figure 2 Percentage of Politically Related Posts by 18-24 Year Olds](image)

In *Figure 2*, which comes form the same Tuft’s Circle data set, shows the percentage of young voters ages 18-24 who made politically related posts on social media in 2018 and 2020. As you can see, the amount of online political discourse did increase in 2020 at 38% in comparison to 2018 which was only 18%. This is most likely due to the fact that as isolation limited the ability of young people to participate in political discourse in person, they turned to social media to share their political ideas and opinions.
The data for Figure 3 was pulled by the United State Census Bureau, which is responsible for producing data on the American people and the economy. The data specifically found above is pulled from the 2018 and 2020 Presidential Election Voting and Registration tables. This figure focuses specifically on the 18-24 age group and the percentage of the registered voters who turned out to vote in the 2018 and 2020 elections.

In 2018 the percentage of voter turnout for ages 18-24 was 43%, as seen in the figure there is an increase of voter turnout in 2020 with 51.4%. Although there is no figure showing a direct correlation between online political participation and voter turnout increase, it can be implied that the increase in social media for political participation is a factor that has influenced the increase in voter turnout.
Conclusion

The data provided in Figures 1 and 2 show a strong correlation between the isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic and young voter inclination to engage politically online. Both figures show that in 2020 there was a dramatic increase in access to political information and posting of political content through social media. The data also shows that following Covid-19 there was an increase of voter turnout with the 18-24 voter turnout compared to the voter turnout in 2018.

What this study shows is not only is social media a great source of information about elections and civic engagement for young people, but it is a space in which young people can share their opinions and ideas. The creation of online media has become a source of activism that can help young people express their political identity and their growth of civic skills. However, engagement with social media alone will not address the long-standing gap in youth voter turnout. The issue is that there is no direct connection between social media usage and voter turnout, it is only implied. If there were to be further research on this topic it would need to explore further how young people interact with social media in different ways, and what inequalities young people face in terms of internet access. Along with this there is the factor of social media being a source of misinformation and not being helpful in terms of increasing a young person’s civic education.

Along with this if we are to explore the voter turnout in the 2020 election, we must acknowledge other factors at play that drove young people to vote such as non-traditional voting methods being mail-in voting and absentee ballots. Although they were not extremely popular among young voters in the 2020 election, this popularity is growing as the 2022 election data shows that 32% of young voters voted by mailers (in comparison to the 27% in the 2020 election) (Tufts, 2023).
Another factor at play was the candidates running for the 2020 presidential election. One candidate who specifically caught the attention of young voters was Bernie Sanders. Sanders’ platform was based on political revolution, proposing changes to U.S health care, Social Security and education. These topics drove young people to vote with a certain enthusiasm they did not have in the 2016 or 2018 elections. This age cohort was the most important predictor of Sanders’ support, many young voters do not feel confident in their vote as many either felt their ideologies did not align with the candidates listed or felt as if they did not know much about the candidates (Moore, 2023). This can imply that young people are aligning with independent ideologies as they believe this is the safest decision for their vote. With these young people, independents had become the driving force which pushed for Sanders’ vote. Although Sanders did not win the election, this shows that the identity and ideology/political interest of a voter are intertwined.

As we look at elections that follow the 2020 general election, we see that young people are becoming more interested and motivated to vote. In the 2022 election, 27% of young people turned out to vote (that is the second highest youth voter turnout rate in U.S history) (Tufts, 2022). An important issue that we must continue to address is the limitations that young people face when it comes to voter turnout. The traditional institutions that are put in place for electoral process do not work for new people. Therefore, we must find ways to drive young people to vote just as mail-in voting, absentee voting, and social media discourse has.
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Data Sources
