

**Literature Review:**  
**Social Media and the Informed Voter**

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March 7, 2021

## Abstract

This paper explores social media's impact on voters and answers the question, "How does political social media, with its broad range of opinions and questionable data, impact voters?"

The findings are based on a literature review of existing articles and papers. It examines the connection between the interested voter and the informed vote. The paper utilizes sources to identify social media users' habits related to political search trends, social media engagement and the impact of the data itself. The data was analyzed both in support and counter to the argument which was based on the findings. The research concludes that increased engagement by voters leads to their analysis of the validity of social media sourced news resulting in an informed vote.

*Keywords:* Social media politics, "fake news", informed voter, social media news, political posts.



(Social Media Politics, 2021)

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INFORMED VOTER

People have opinions, and lots of them, as evident by the increased use of social media to engage in political discussion. Media platforms, with their fanbase-like approaches to politics, have certainly popularized elections. Some feel strongly that political narratives are distorted and manipulated by trolls, extremists, news media and even the politicians themselves. Others say that likes, posts, and shares, whether they are good or bad, lead to more interested, engaged, and informed voters. As evident by millions of posts, social media has increased interest in politics leading to an engaged and informed voter.

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok are a few of the communication platforms discussing political issues that interest the general population, which includes young people. In fact, “Youth today frequently get their political information from social media rather than traditional media,” per Florentina-Alina Vasile, a student in the School of Politics, University of Nottingham (Vasile, 2014). The phenomenon is not limited to younger generations, several polls indicate that growing numbers of middle-aged voters are also utilizing social media politics to identify trends and hot topics (Statista, 2019). Twitter and other platforms have also become a

popular way for politicians to engage with their voter base. Ubiquitous thoughts of a nation, on everything from healthcare to the environment to global policies to the pandemic and unemployment, has ignited an unprecedented interest in politics for people of all ages.

Is the voting public actively interacting in political discussions? Approximately 71% of the U.S. gets its news from social media (Hutchinson, 2021). Of all social media users, 50% interact online with political posts by way of shares, comments and likes (Anderson, 2014). There are some that claim this is not a good thing, and it is because of social media that “fake news” has become prevalent. For example, *How Fiction Becomes Fact* (Carey, 2017b), explains that social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, reinforce personal biases utilizing algorithms which lead to misinformation. Benedict Carey, the article’s author, interviewed Professor Colleen Seifert from the University of Michigan whose research concluded that political ads and memes are customized towards individual cognitive biases. For example, if you “like” posts on Facebook that insinuate Nancy Pelosi and President Biden are dishonest, then you will see memes in your feed that supports this theory. However, over the last year social media providers have taken additional measures to flag political posts that are highly questionable, as I recently witnessed in a friend’s Facebook feed (Figure 1).

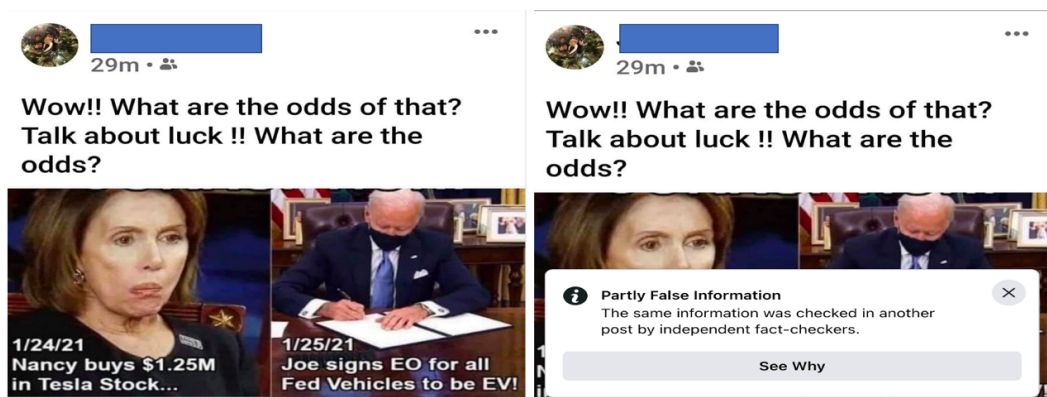


Figure 1. Facebook flagging potential misinformation, March 5, 2021.

Also garnering interest in politics are Influencers, both paid and unpaid. They have become “hype houses” whose sole job is to engage the public and spur interest in topics that will support their politicians of choice (Goodwin, 2020). The result is a country exposed to moderate, conservative, and liberal views on posts numbering in the millions.



The evidence is clear that the nation is engaged, but are they accurately informed? The short answer is, yes. People are exposed to more information today than ever before, but a debate continues as to whether they are misinformed and misled. There is a consensus that considerable amounts of erroneous information are being spread through online communications and this could lead to a misinformed vote. Let’s first look at the term “fake news”. According to Google Trends, “fake news” scored in the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile for popular searches in election year 2020 and overall searches for political topics were even higher (“Fake News” Search Trend, 2021). This means that while voters may search for data that supports what they already want to believe, they are now also hyper aware of opposing views and are taking time to investigate them. This illustrates that while political social media has a wide range of accuracy and “alternate facts” as coined by politicians, it is serving a purpose. That purpose is to garner the interest that motivates

the voting population towards researching political issues and to delineate between factual and nonfactual information.

Data illustrates that 39% of Americans have engaged with political posts, meaning that a larger percentage is consuming the content without interacting with it. The Google Trends analysis indicates that people aren't as stupid as the news media portrays them to be. Voters are researching political issues in larger numbers than ever before in the history of elections. The accuracy of voters' beliefs will always depend on the data sources they've purposely chosen. A recent Princeton study showed that, "social media users are less, not more likely to vote for Trump in 2016 or hold polarized views" (Fujiwara et al., 2020). The study provides empirical evidence that is contrary to popular belief in the United States. Voters are researching opposing views and validating data. Social media has, therefore, not only spurred more interest in politics, but has also led the charge to a more informed vote.

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