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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ELECTORAL PREFERENCES OF FIRST-TIME VOTERS: A STUDY BASED ON THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The research studies the impact of social media consumption on the voting behavior of first-time voters during the U.S. presidential elections. With the development of main sources of political communication – such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit – this paper explores how political awareness, social influence and voting incentives are shaped by mentioned digital platforms among first-time voters.

The purpose of this paper is to conduct an elaborative data analysis on the correlation between social media activity and voting preferences, particularly determining the predictive effect of different engagement levels on the choice of a political candidate. The scientific significance of the paper includes quantification of social media engagement's impact on voting behavior and showcasing its statistical image, which enriches the area of political communication.

The paper's practical significance consists of producing insights for political strategists, journalists and civic educators about digital mobilization strategies, which can contribute to the development of political campaigns on social media platforms. The study adopts a quantitative methodology utilizing the American National Election Studies 2020 dataset, also by applying regression analysis to explore the correlation between social media habits (frequency and political posting) and voting behavior among first-time voters.

Results showed positive correlation between active usage of Twitter/Reddit and voting for the Democratic candidate, while Facebook usage, in contrast, indicated a nonsignificant influence. The value of the study is to facilitate the understanding of digital political socialization and to generate empirical evidence of how online engagement reflects electoral outcomes. Practical value of the results presents guidance for potential digital campaign strategies and civic engagement programs.

Keywords: political behavior, social media, first-time voters, U.S. presidential elections.

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Әлеуметтік желілердің алғаш рет дауыс берушілердің электоралдық таңдауларына ықпалы: АҚШ президенттік сайлауы негізіндегі зерттеу

Зерттеудің тақырыбы – АҚШ президенттік сайлауында алғаш рет дауыс берген сайлаушылардың таңдауына әлеуметтік желілерді пайдалану әсерін анықтау. Facebook, Twitter және Reddit сияқты негізгі саяси коммуникация арналарының дамуына байланысты, бұл зерттеуде аталған цифрлық платформалардың алғаш дауыс берушілердің саяси хабардарлығын, әлеуметтік ықпалын және дауыс беруге деген ынтасын қалыптастыру жолы қарастырылады. Зерттеудің мақсаты мен бағыты – әлеуметтік желілер қолданысы мен сайлаушылардың таңдауы арасындағы байланысты жан-жақты талдау, сондай-ақ әртүрлі деңгейдегі цифрлық белсенділіктің саяси кандидат таңдауына әсерін анықтау. Жұмыстың ғылыми маңыздылығы – әлеуметтік желілердегі белсенділіктің сайлаушылардың дауыс беру әрекетіне әсерін сандық тұрғыда бағалау және оның статистикалық көрінісін ұсыну арқылы саяси коммуникация саласын жаңа эмпирикалық деректермен байыту. Практикалық маңыздылығы – саясаттанушыларға, журналистерге және азаматтық білім беру саласының мамандарына әлеуметтік желілердегі цифрлық мобилизация стратегияларын әзірлеуге көмек беретін пайдалы ақпарат ұсыну. Зерттеу методологиясы аясында сандық әдістемеге негізделі отырып, American National Election Studies 2020 деректер жиынтығы бойынша регрессиялық анализ жүргізілді. Нәтижелер Twitter мен Reddit желілерін белсенді пайдалану мен Демократиялық партия кандидатына дауыс беру арасында позитивті

көрсетті, ал Facebook қолданысы, керісінше, төмен әсерге ие екенін анықтады. Бұл зерттеудің маңыздылығы – цифрлық саяси әлеуметтену процесін терең түсінуге және онлайн белсенділіктің сайлау нәтижелеріне әсерін эмпирикалық түрде көрсетуге мүмкіндік беру. Алынған нәтижелердің практикалық маңызы – цифрлық саяси науқандар мен азаматтық белсенділік бағдарламаларының стратегияларын әзірлеу үшін бағдар бола алуында.

Түйін сөздер: дауыс беру, әлеуметтік желілер, алғашқы сайлаушылар, АҚШ президенттік сайлауы.

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Исследование роли социальных сетей в электоральных предпочтениях впервые голосующих: на материале президентских выборов в США

Тема исследования – влияние использования социальных сетей на выбор избирателей, впервые голосующих на президентских выборах в США. В связи с развитием основных источников политической коммуникации, таких как Facebook, Twitter и Reddit, в данной работе рассматривается, как вышеперечисленные цифровые платформы формируют политическую осведомленность, социальное влияние и мотивацию к голосованию среди впервые голосующих избирателей.

Цель данной работы – провести детальный анализ данных о корреляции между активностью в социальных сетях и предпочтениями избирателей, в частности, определить влияние различных уровней вовлеченности на выбор политического кандидата. Научная значимость работы заключается в количественной оценке влияния вовлеченности в социальных сетях на поведение избирателей и демонстрации его статистических данных, что обогащает сферу политической коммуникации.

Практическая значимость работы заключается в предоставлении политологам, журналистам и специалистам по гражданскому образованию информации о стратегиях цифровой мобилизации, которая может способствовать разработке политических кампаний в социальных сетях. В исследовании используется количественная методология с использованием данных American National Election Studies 2020, а также регрессионный анализ для изучения корреляции между привычками в социальных сетях (частотой посещений и публикациями политических материалов) и поведением избирателей, впервые голосующих на выборах.

Результаты показали положительную корреляцию между активным использованием Twitter/Reddit и голосованием за кандидата от Демократической партии, в то время как использование Facebook, напротив, не оказывало существенного влияния. Ценность исследования заключается в том, что оно способствует пониманию цифровой политической социализации и получению эмпирических данных о том, как онлайн-активность влияет на результаты выборов. Практическая ценность результатов позволяет использовать их в качестве руководства для разработки потенциальных стратегий цифровых кампаний и программ гражданского взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова: политическое поведение, социальные сети, впервые голосующие избиратели, президентские выборы в США.

Introduction

In the past decades, social media has completely changed political communication, especially among young people. Social media like Facebook, Twitter (now “X”) and Reddit have not only been communication platforms but have also become sources of political information and campaigning. First-time voters are in an unusual environment where traditional patterns of political participation meet new internet habits. Therefore, it is especially essential to study the importance of social media among new voters in the context of political divisiveness and the USA’s rapidly altering media landscape.

Despite heightened interest in this topic, various questions continue to linger. While research explains the political awareness-raising role and mobilization of youth by social media (Boulianne, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2019), others describe the echo chamber and political polarization threat (Sunstein, 2018; Bail et al., 2018). As first-time voters become a new voting force, with special significance because of the record youth voter turnout in the 2020 elections, a more accurate analysis of how social media influences their political decisions is urged.

Social media influences the voting behavior of first-time voters in the US profoundly by increasing their political consciousness, shaping their choice

by social influence, and raising their vote incentive, but at the cost of polarization and exclusion from information.

This study seeks to offer a balanced account of the advantages and drawbacks of social media usage by first-time voters, drawing on current research and a detailed data analysis assessing the statistical significance of corresponding correlations.

Literature review

Social media is an information network and technology that uses a form of communication by processing interactive and user-produced data. The main functions of social media include the dissemination of information, building up interpersonal relationships and maintaining virtual communication (Biswas et al., 2014).

Voting behavior is defined as a way of voters to be able to express their preferences through the decision-making process of choosing a party or candidate to vote for (Fiorina, 1997).

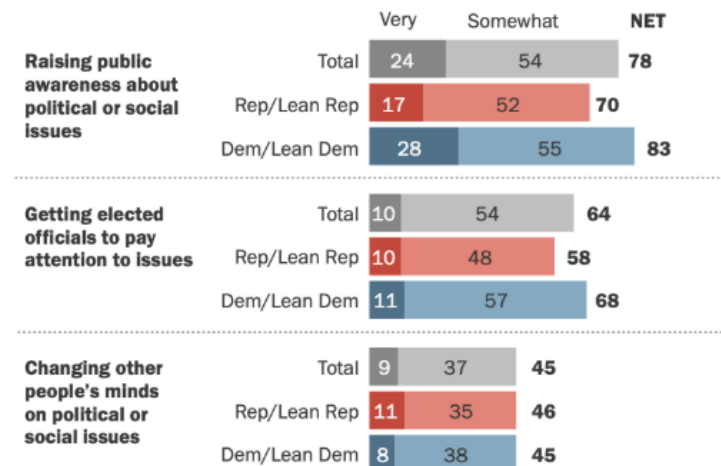
One of the most prominent drivers in social media influence is growing political consciousness. Boulianne (2015) found that political consciousness has a steady positive relationship with the use

of social media, especially among young people. Social media makes news instantly available, thus breaking political information barriers. This is also confirmed by the statistics obtained by Pew Research Center (2022). According to it, Figure 1 shows that majority of Democrats in the U.S. believe that Twitter is a very and somewhat effective tool to raise awareness about politics. Authors also emphasized 32% of liberal democrats and 33% of young adults (age 18-29), who claimed that Twitter is very effective at raising public awareness and influencing people's minds on political and social issues.

Particularly, Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) argue that Facebook has emerged as a major source of news among young adults, enabling the formation of essential information about candidates and issues. However, awareness can be an artefact of the content: political memes and entertainment status updates are identified by research by Weeks and Holbert (2013) to appeal more to young voters compared to usual news stories. As it was stated by Bestvater et al. (2021), on Twitter, more than one-in-ten U.S. users see political content in a form of humor, parody and memes almost every time they use the platform (Figure 2).

Larger share of Democrats on Twitter see the platform as effective at raising awareness about issues

% of U.S. adult Twitter users who say the platform is very/somewhat effective at ...



Note: Other responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adult Twitter users conducted May 17-31, 2021.

"Politics on Twitter: One Third of Tweets From U.S. Adults Are Political"

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Figure 1 – Survey of U.S. adult Twitter users conducted on May 17-31, 2021

More than one-in-ten Twitter users see political memes and parody videos almost every time they use the site

% of U.S. adult Twitter users who say they see ____ on the site ...

	Almost every time	Sometimes
News articles about social or political issues	31	47
Political memes	16	53
Funny or parody videos that reference political or social issues	15	51
Petitions to raise awareness or encourage political or social change	12	49
Campaign advertisements	9	40

Note: Other responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adult Twitter users conducted May 17-31, 2021.

"Politics on Twitter: One-Third of Tweets From U.S. Adults Are Political"

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Figure 2 – Survey of U.S. adult Twitter users on the political content type they regularly see on Twitter

As much as social media increase exposure to information, they also create supposed “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2018). Young voters will follow pages and profiles that share the same political views as them, and this leads to selective information consumption. In a study by Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015), social media websites such as Facebook increase the filter bubble impact of social media by subjecting users to information that resonates with their already existing beliefs.

This has a double effect: on the one hand, users become more confident in their views, on the other, it also leads them to be less likely to critically revisit them. In the case of first-time voters, this would mean prematurely solidifying political preferences on the grounds of a limited range of sources.

The formation of political attitudes by social media has been the subject of much research. Bond et al. (2012), in research, indicated that political messages on Facebook containing news of the friends’ voting can readily increase a Facebook user’s likelihood to vote. This is a testament to the fact that social influence on the internet is very strong.

Further, a study by Vaccari et al. (2015) found that social media communication with friends and acquaintances is more influential in the formation of political views than official political leaders’ pages. Young first-time voters were especially susceptible: not only are they interested in information, but also

in their positions being validated within their social network.

Some studies alert us to political polarization among first-time voters. Bail et al. (2018) showed that exposure to political messages on Twitter can potentially reinforce polarized opinions. Young voters who are heavy users of social media will be exposed to emotive messages, which shape their opinions regarding political opponents. Nevertheless, the impact of polarization is context-dependent. According to one research work by Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019), users who consciously consume alternative political sources have a lower tendency to radicalize. The consumption pattern of information is, hence, the determining factor.

The greatest positive effect of social media is on first-time voter mobilization. According to a study by Valenzuela et al. (2019), the use of political discourse on social media ensured the participation of voters. Political campaigns utilizing special interest advertisements and calls to action on social media are more effective with young voters.

An example of such a campaign was the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, who employed social media to a large extent to mobilize youth (Kreiss, 2012). Donald Trump’s and Joe Biden’s recent campaigns have also used online influence tactics to a large extent, which indicates a growing trend of social media becoming an increas-

ingly important part of electoral mobilization.

Although most studies concur with the widespread social media influence, there are a number of criticisms. Most studies rely on correlational data, and therefore causal effects cannot be readily determined (Tufekci, 2014). Second, differential digital literacy must be accounted for: novice voters who have not yet honed critical analysis skills are more susceptible to manipulation. Besides, the effect of social media may differ across demographic traits of race, gender, and education level (Pew Research Center, 2020). Limited generalizability of results stems from non-representative sampling in some studies.

Considering that the given literature suggests social media contributes to political awareness, formation of political preferences and mobilization efforts, it indicates there is an influence of social media on people's voting behavior. To evaluate the degree of influence, this research will focus on the following operationalization and measurement:

1) Social media use will be measured by survey responses determining frequency of social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) use and the frequency of posting political content on social media.

2) Voting behavior will be measured through the vote choice of respondents, or in other words, which candidate they chose to vote for in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections (Donald Trump/Joe Biden).

Materials and Methods

This study uses a dataset from the American National Election Studies 2020. The ANES is considered to be among the reputable and most popular datasets to study the political behavior of U.S. citizens. ANES 2020 is a major survey that questions respondents regarding voting behavior, political attitudes, socio-economic and demographic attributes, and usage of media sources, including social media.

During the data quality assessment, it was determined that the target population of the survey design is 231 million eligible-to-vote American citizens based in 50 US states or the District of Columbia and voting in the 2020 presidential election. The sample size constitutes 8,280 respondents. Sample frame includes U.S. adults aged 18 and older found in the USPS Delivery Sequence File with residential addresses databases across 50 states and Wash-

ington DC. The dataset was produced through the fresh cross-sectional sampling method, which indicates that the data collection was conducted among various individuals at a single point in time. Since there were COVID-19 restrictions, a contactless and mixed-mode design was used to conduct the 2020 ANES survey, which included self-administered web surveys, online live video interviews and interview over the phone. The invitation to the survey included \$10 in cash and later respondents were offered \$40 of incentives upon completion of the survey. The time period for data collection of post-election interviews was between November 4, 2020 and January 4, 2021 (American National Election Studies, 2021).

ANES employs high-end data weighing techniques to counteract differences of coverage and response participation (post-stratification weights). So, data quality is then thought to be exceedingly high: principles of representativeness are fulfilled, systematic faults are minimized to a negligible quantity, and maximum demographic representation is ensured.

Description of data for analysis

From the overall ANES 2020 dataset, first-time voters only were chosen. Hence, it was decided to set the filter to the variable in the following way: V202056 = 1 ("When did you register to vote for the first time?" = "In the past twelve months").

Following data cleaning for missing values (NA) concerning voting and social media usage, the final sample was between 374 and 391 respondents based on the particular variable.

Table 1 below illustrates the list of variables which were chosen for the current data analysis. Given the variety of response options, it was decided to group them into 2 to 3 main categories:

- Frequency of Facebook/Twitter/Reddit use: high (many times every day, a few times every day, about once a day), medium (a few times each week), low (about once a week, once or twice a month, less than once a month).

- Frequency of posting political content on Facebook/Twitter/Reddit: frequent posting (always, most of the time, about half of the time), rare posting (sometimes, never).

To determine voting behavior, the variable V202073 ("Who did you vote for?") was chosen and binary coded: 1 – vote for Joe Biden, 2 – vote for Donald Trump.

Table 1 – Dataset variables chosen for data analysis

Variable	Code	Response options
Frequency of Facebook use	V202542	1. Many times every day
Frequency of Twitter use	V202544	2. A few times every day
Frequency of Reddit use	V202546	3. About once a day 4. A few times each week 5. About once a week 6. Once or twice a month 7. Less than once a month
Frequency of posting political content on Facebook	V202543	1. Always 2. Most of the time
Frequency of posting political content on Twitter	V202545	3. About half of the time 4. Sometimes
Frequency of posting political content on Reddit	V202547	5. Never

Discussion and Results

There were six bar charts constructed that reflected the association between use and frequency of posting political content on social media and voting behavior.

Figure 3 displays the relationship between the frequency of use of Facebook and votes cast by first-time voters in the 2020 presidential election. Out of the very active group on Facebook, 62% supported Joe Biden and 38% Donald Trump. Out of the moderately active group, the number supporting Biden was 58%, whereas that of the lowly active group was 55%. These results show a low-positive rela-

tionship between Facebook usage frequency and the likelihood to vote for Biden, though the differences among the groups are very minimal.

The bar chart in Figure 4 presents the relationship between Twitter activity and candidate support. Here, there is an even more increase in dynamic: 70% of highly active Twitter users endorsed Biden, compared with 65% of moderately active and 57% of low-level active users. These numbers show that high activity on Twitter shows a statistically significant association with higher support for the Democratic candidate, consistent with previous research considering Twitter's status as an active political platform.

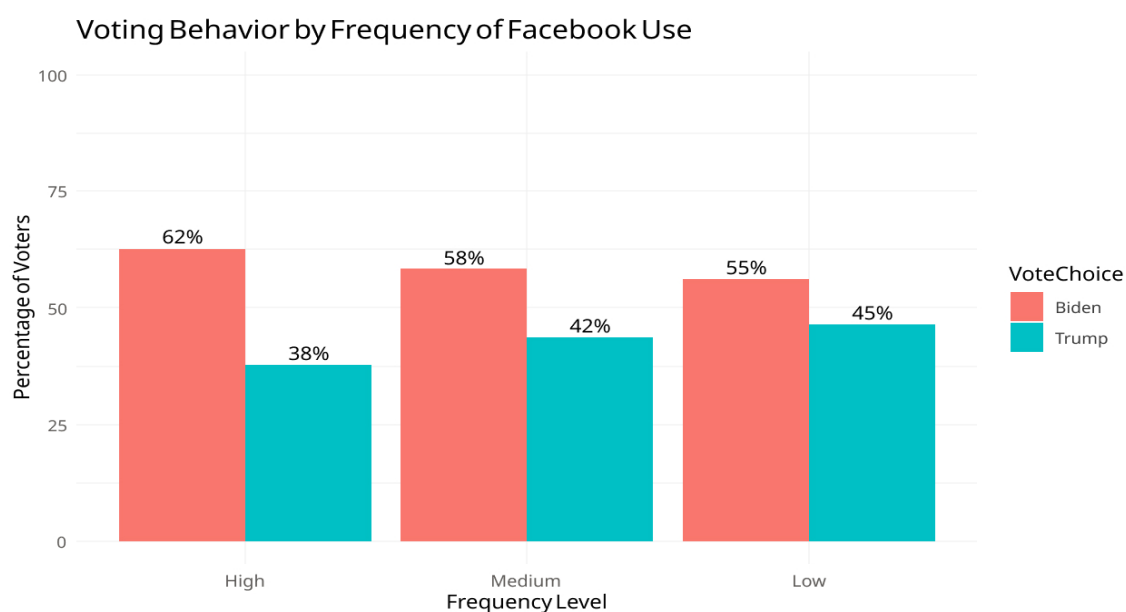


Figure 3 – Voting Behavior by Frequency of Facebook Use

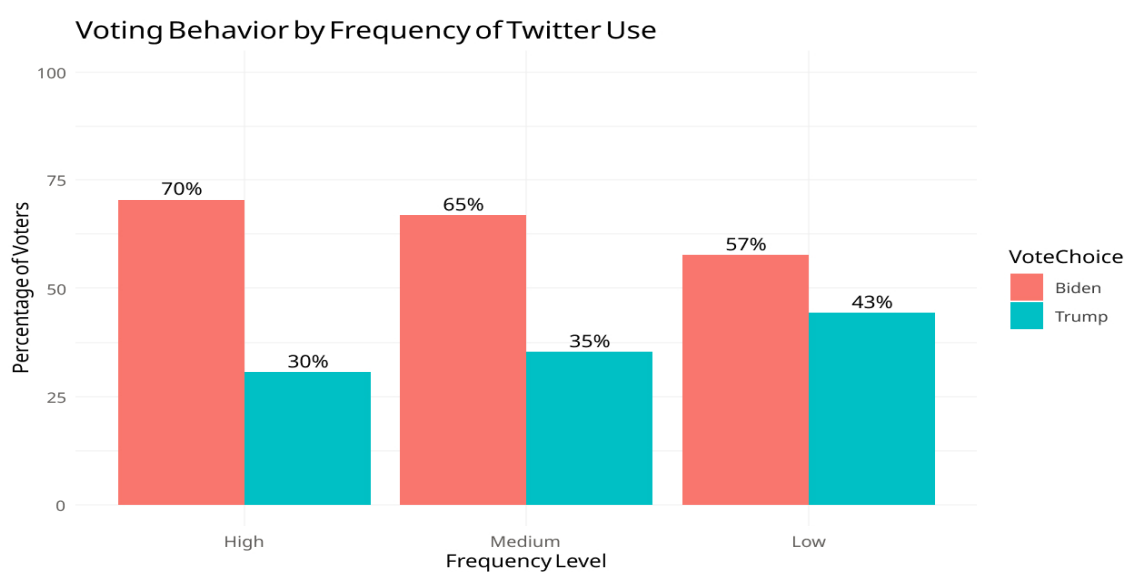


Figure 4 – Voting Behavior by Frequency of Twitter Use

Figure 5 shows the results of the Reddit frequency analysis. Of the active users of Reddit, 68% voted for Biden, followed by 62% of the medium-active users and 59% of the low-activity users. While the

differences among these groups are not as striking as they are for Twitter, the active usage of Reddit also has a moderate positive correlation with the probability of the Democratic candidate's vote.

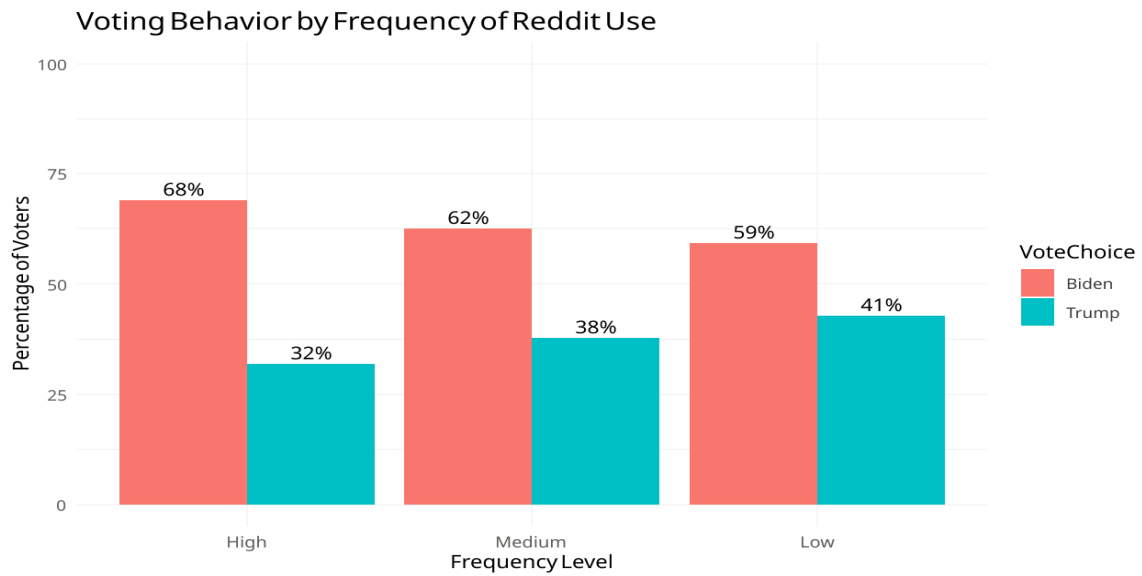


Figure 5 – Voting Behavior by Frequency of Reddit Use

Figure 6 shows the distribution of votes by how often respondents posted political content on Facebook. Among those who posted political content frequently, 60% voted for Biden, compared to 58%

among those who posted infrequently. The groups were very close to each other, which means there is no discernible relationship between frequent political posting on Facebook and candidate choice.

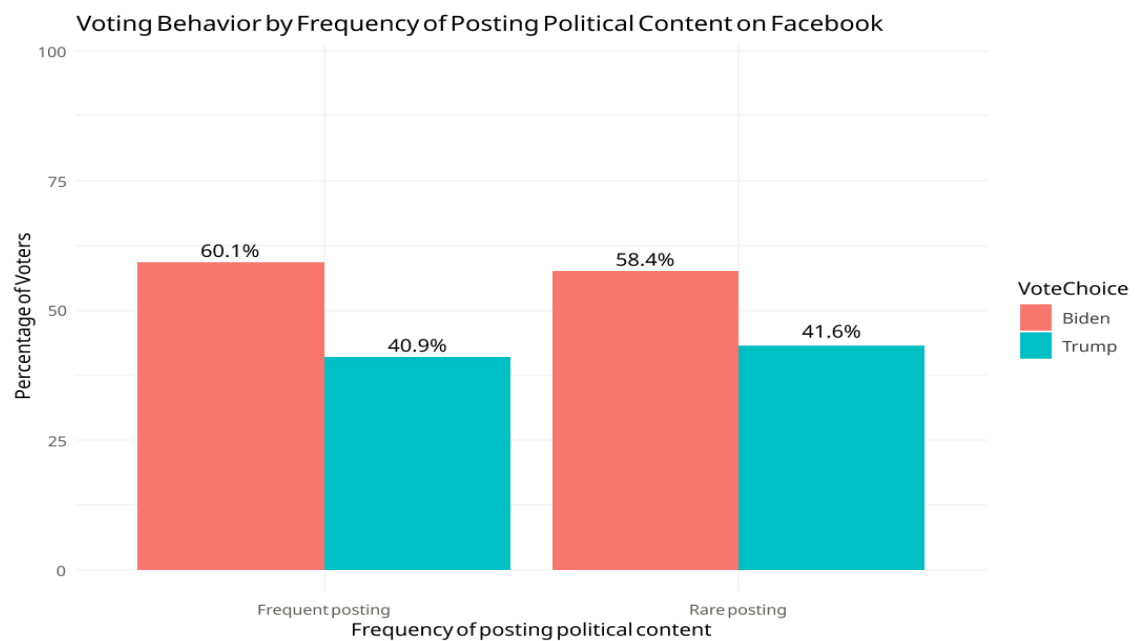


Figure 6 – Voting Behavior by Frequency of Posting Political Content on Facebook

The next bar chart (Figure 7) displays the relationship between posting on Twitter frequency and voting choice. It shows the following trend: 73% of people who actively post political content on Twitter voted for Biden but among non-

active discussers on Twitter only 58% voted for him. Therefore, high rates of active discussion of politics on Twitter are strongly correlated with an increased percentage of voting for Biden by first-time voters.

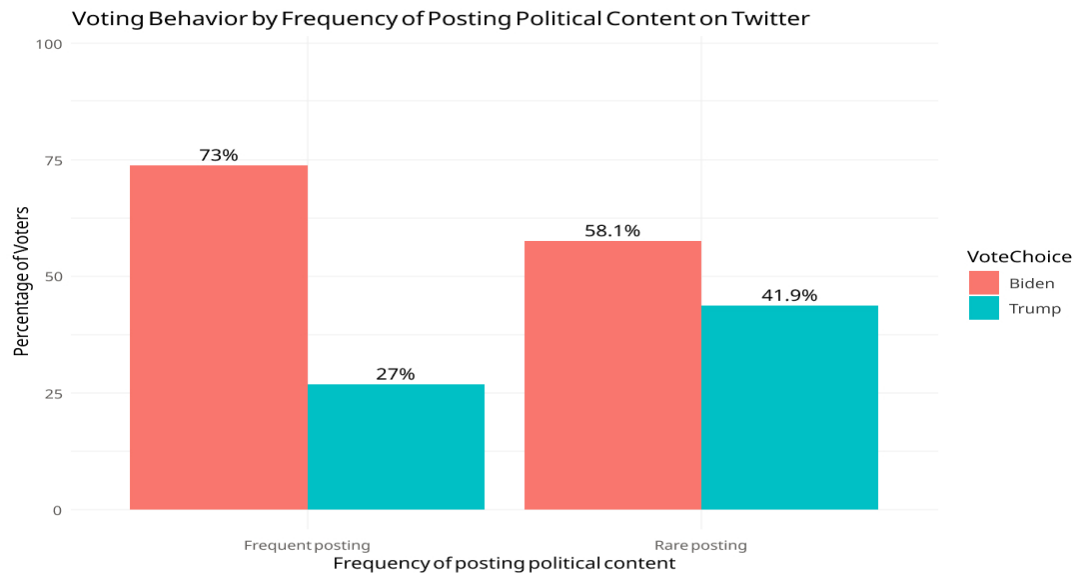


Figure 7 – Voting Behavior by Frequency of Posting Political Content on Twitter

The last bar chart (Figure 8) illustrates the interaction between the frequency of posting on Reddit and vote for candidates. Among the people who posted political content on Reddit with high frequency, 66% voted for Biden, whereas 60% of

voters posting infrequently voted for him. While the contrast was not as stark as in the case of Twitter, the results indicate that there is a weak positive correlation between political engagement on Reddit and choosing Joe Biden.

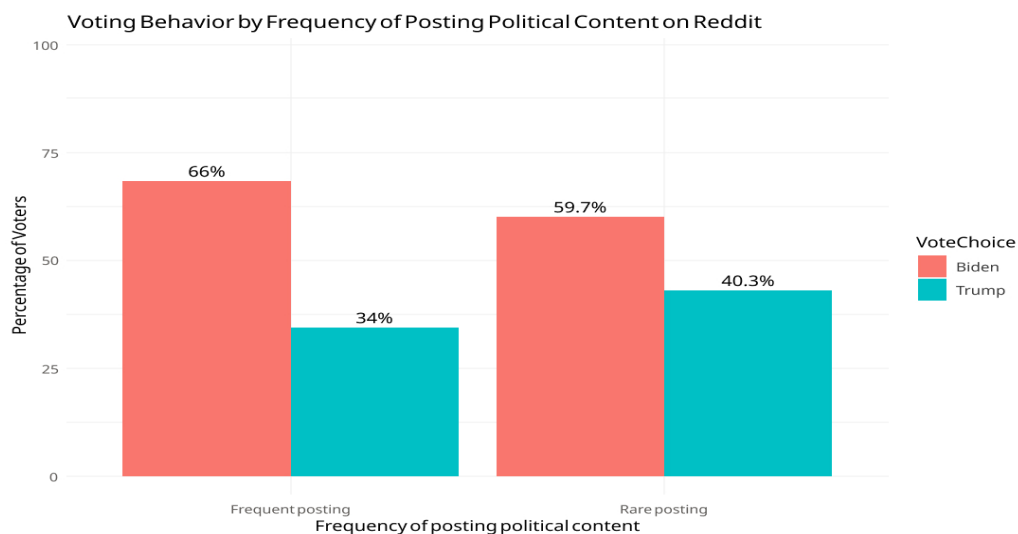


Figure 8 – Voting Behavior by Frequency of Posting Political Content on Reddit

Regression analysis

To evaluate the impact of social media use on voting behavior among first-time voters, a logistic regression model was conducted using voting for Biden as the dependent variable. The results of the regression analysis indicated that Twitter and Reddit use has the most influence on the probability to vote for Biden by first-time voters. High Twitter activity was followed by a rise in the coefficient by 0.91 at a $p < 0.001$ significance level (Table 3), which reflects a high level of reliability of the discovered relationship. Average Twitter activity also positively influenced, $\beta = 0.58$ at $p = 0.0037$ (Table 3). Active use of tweeting political content on Twitter was an even more powerful predictor: frequent posting increased the regression coefficient by 1.03 at a significance level $p < 0.001$ (Table 6), bearing witness to a tight coupling of tweeting with a Democratic candidate preference. A frequency test of Reddit usage also showed that an elevated activity level on the platform has a positive effect on the likelihood of voting for Biden: $\beta = 0.66$ at $p = 0.0010$ (Table 4). Average activity on Reddit, however, failed the significance test, so the effect was found only among high-activity users. Frequency of posting on Reddit also influenced positively, although less so: $\beta = 0.60$ at $p = 0.0027$ (Table 7). These results strengthen the hypothesis that Reddit facilitates mobilization

of political youth voters but to a lesser degree than that of Twitter. As for Facebook activity, the effects were weaker. Table 2 shows that excessive Facebook activity was significantly associated with voting for Biden ($\beta = 0.62$, $p = 0.0006$), but regular activity was not statistically significant. The frequency of posting politic posts on Facebook was not significantly associated with voting: the coefficient β was only 0.15 at a significance level $p = 0.453$ (Table 5), which turned out to be no effect.

The analysis of the models' intercepts further showed that even for low social media users, baseline support for Biden was extremely high. This is in line with the broader trend in vote switching among first-time voters in the 2020 election. Greater use of social media, especially political participation through posts, had an additional significant effect on the likelihood of voting for Biden.

Thus, the results of the regression analysis validate that social media usage and political content exposure are positively associated with voting support for the Democratic candidate among first-time voters. The impact is most significant in the case of the Twitter platform, while that of Facebook is considerably weaker. These findings validate the importance of online sources of political socialization and their effects on the political inclinations of youth.

Table 2 – Frequency of Facebook use

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept: Low)	0.42	0.12	3.5	0.0005
Medium	0.28	0.18	1.56	0.118
High	0.62	0.18	3.44	0.0006

Table 3 – Frequency of Twitter use

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept: Low)	0.35	0.13	2.69	0.007
Medium	0.58	0.2	2.9	0.0037
High	0.91	0.19	4.79	0.000002

Table 4 – Frequency of Reddit use

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept: Low)	0.38	0.14	2.71	0.00067
Medium	0.35	0.21	1.67	0.0095
High	0.66	0.20	3.3	0.001

Table 5 – Frequency of posting political content on Facebook

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept: Rare posting)	0.41	0.12	3.42	0.0006
Frequent posting	0.15	0.2	0.75	0.453

Table 6 – Frequency of posting political content on Twitter

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept: Rare posting)	0.39	0.13	3.00	0.0027
Frequent posting	1.03	0.19	5.42	0.000001

Table 7 – Frequency of posting political content on Reddit

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	Pr(> z)
(Intercept: Rare posting)	0.44	0.13	3.38	0.0007
Frequent posting	0.6	0.2	3.00	0.0027

Conclusion

Active use of social media, in the case of Twitter and Reddit, is positively correlated to the vote probability for a Democratic Party candidate

among first-time American voters for the 2020 election. Active Twitter usage demonstrates the strongest correlation, which corroborates previous research on how essential the platform is to political affiliation among young people. However,

Facebook use and Facebook posting were linked to voting behavior less or statistically nonsignificant, thus a more precise explanation of various social sites was required.

This study complements earlier research into the impact of social media by outlining its role specifically for first-time voters. In contrast to much earlier research, which aims at the mass youth community, this study highlights that the nature of social media activity is key to explaining the political behavior of first-time voters.

The empirical application of the findings is to comprehend the dynamics of digital mobilization: political campaigns to mobilize young voters on Twitter and Reddit can be especially useful to boost turnout and may shape political opinions among

first-time voters. The findings can be applied to create strategies for political marketing, civic education, and online literacy.

As potential avenues of future research, it would be prudent to propose an examination of the impact of some forms of social media content (e.g., news, memes, direct political appeals) on political participation. It would also be beneficial to examine the role played by demographic characteristics – race, gender, and education level – in the influence of social media on the votes of first-time voters.

Overall, the study underscores the growing importance of social media as a mechanism of digital political socialization and highlights its differentiated role in shaping the electoral preferences of first-time voters.

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