

How Social Media Affects Political Polarization

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Introduction

Everyday, social media becomes more pervasive into the society and culture of the United States of America. As a natural consequence of this, social media has become a place where people feel free to share feelings and information about politics in the United States. People of the United States are feeling highly polarized, and the widespread use of social media is a large cause of this. To examine the effect of social media on political polarization, I will first explain how polarizing content is encouraged on social media sites, and then I will explain how this affects the American users of these sites. Social media increases access to highly polarizing and hyperpartisan content while decreasing access to trustworthy and reliable information, which increases affective polarization. Social media sites increase access to highly polarizing content by using an algorithm to encourage content that is interesting. This affects people because having access to highly polarized content, whether it aligns with your viewpoints or not, increases the polarization people have against members of opposing political parties.

Background

This paper will primarily focus on X [formerly Twitter] and Facebook as they have been the most polarizing platforms. This paper will refer to the social media site as “X” or “Twitter”, using the name that was in effect at the time the source being used was published. This paper will specifically focus on data collected in the time shortly before and after the US 2020 presidential election. This will include data collected during the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riot. There are not many formal sources pertaining to the 2024 election yet because it was so recent, however this paper will use some informal, popular sources to gain more insight into how people were interacting with social media in the time around the US 2024 Presidential Election. An important

definition to better understand the content and scope of this paper is the difference between political polarization and affective polarization. Political polarization as a broad topic happens when political ideologies move further towards either extreme of the political spectrum. Affective polarization happens when people believe that members of any opposing political party are bad people.

Polarizing Content is Encouraged on Social Media Sites

How Social Media Sites Affect Viewable Content

All social media sites are run by companies. The main goal of these companies is to generate profit, and the primary source of profit is from advertising revenue. As a result of this social media sites want to keep users on their platform for as long as possible to maximize the amount of revenue they can generate from the user. Social media sites will use algorithms to show content that keeps users on the site for longer. While some may argue that using these algorithms is the best way to show users content that is relevant to them, they can prevent users from seeing different viewpoints. Social media sites can promote content that is engaging and interesting; these sites can also hide content that may not benefit the platform.

Adam Aleksic (2025) provided anecdotal evidence of the suppression that social media sites can use. The example he provided featured one person, @dddaemon3, posting, “Paying for [X] means you are funding free speech” and a secondary user, @Lil_Chimpy, replying with the word, “cisgender.” The reply was flagged as potentially harmful content, and had limited visibility. Aleksic recounted that he had to put forth additional effort to find this reply because it had been suppressed by the algorithm that X uses. Aleksic continues that content on social media sites has to go through many barriers and filters before it can be perceived by users. He points out that content has to abide by the terms of service of the particular platform it is being shown

on and then be interesting enough to generate engagement before it has a chance of showing on a large amount of social media feeds. If the specific content is ever found to violate the terms of service of a platform, or if it stops being engaging content, the media will not be presented to any more people and will essentially die. Social media sites can alter their terms of service in any way at any time to limit the information shared on a site. This filtering is an example of survivorship bias because the only content being shown is the content that “survives” the filters (Aleksic, 2025). This survivorship bias alters the information that people can see and believe, which in turn affects the way that they interact with politics and how polarized they feel.

Social media posts are not just filtered by what is engaging to users, but also filtered by what individual users would be interested in seeing. People generally like to consume media and information that agrees with their viewpoints and opinions, which leads to the “filter bubble effect.” In a TedX Talk, Tuguldur Baterdene (2024) explains that the “filter bubble effect” occurs when social media sites filter out opposing viewpoints and only present users with information that corresponds to the things that the user already believes. Baterdene continues to explain that this increases polarization because it discourages collaboration and association with people who have opposing viewpoints. Proponents of the filter bubble effect may argue that it creates a place where users feel safe to share their ideas because they align with the ideas around the user already, but it discourages people from interacting with opposing views and discourages people from challenging their own beliefs.

What Polarizing Content is Encouraged

False information is easily accessible through social media and that limits how much people trust information that they are given. Falsified and hyperpartisan topics thrive on Twitter. According to Groen and Geboers (2023) from March 2020 to December 2020, the amount of

news sources on Twitter that contained misleading, false, or fabricated information increased from 16% to 30%. Groen and Geboers also include statistics from March 2021 where this figure dropped to 10%, they assert that this is due to a, “purge of user accounts by Twitter in the days after the Capitol riots of January 6th. The purge likely affected users who were involved in sharing problematic sources. Groen and Geboers also assert that Twitter and Facebook are platforms where hyperpartisan content thrive due to the algorithms they utilize. Although the amount of fabricated information circling the site was reduced, it is important to understand that there is still falsified and fabricated information available to users. This false information can greatly alter the perceptions of the users, and can lead people to believe things that are untrue about opposing political parties and the members of those parties.

Knowing that engaging content reaches the most people due to the algorithms that most social media companies employ leads to the question of what types of content are the most engaging. Edsall (2022) shared information that content that is “moralizing, divisive, and emotional” is the content that is most boosted by social media algorithms and reaches the most people. Polarizing posts generally fall into one of those categories, which helps to explain why those types of posts are spread so far. While social media does share polarizing content, Edsall also explains that social media sites are not the main factor in the growing political polarization that the United States is currently facing. Even though social media is not the primary way that political polarization is growing, Edsall concedes that it is accelerating polarization. Edsall’s main reason for believing that social media is not the main proponent of accelerating polarization is that the most polarized group in the United States are older adults (65+); however, Van Bavel et al. explain that this is a fallacy because we cannot assume that older adults are not exposed to

social media. Because social media is accelerating polarization in United States politics, it is important to understand why this polarization is happening before solutions can be found.

There are ways that companies can decelerate polarization, but they are unfavorable because they would reduce the profits the company would receive. Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims (2021) explain that the Federal Trade Commission has the authority to, “enforce a social media code of conduct that would go beyond transparency and define the duties of tech companies when addressing hateful, extremist, or threatening content.” The Federal Trade Commissions, “could set benchmarks for various categories of harmful content that remain on platforms even after automated and human moderation. If the benchmarks are exceeded, fines could be imposed.” These standards would reduce the amount of polarizing content that is available to users on social media sites. Although this approach is favorable to the users of various social media sites, it is unfavorable to the companies that run these sites because it reduces the amount of money they would be able to receive (Barrett et al., 2021). This approach would reduce the advertising revenue that social media rely on because users would likely not be on the sites as long. When the users are not on the site as long they are not exposed to as many advertisers.

People are Affected by Polarizing Content

Social media has led to an increase of affective political polarization, the polarization against members of another party, even though most Americans agree on many divisive topics. According to Shmargad (AZPM, 2024), “when you look at how people think about issues, we are not actually that far apart.” People believe they are more polarized because social media provides a skewed perception on what people from each political party believes (AZPM, 2024). Someone may see an exaggerated viewpoint from either an opposing political party, or their own political party, and depending on how that idea resonates with them they will feel validated or

will feel vindictive. Something important to note is that affective polarization has the most effect on people who believe that politics are a central part of their lives (AZPM, 2024). Shmargad concluded that spending time in spaces and with people who are less centered on politics can help to reduce the perceived polarization on an individual scale. Some examples of less political spaces would be in person interest groups, such as a running club or a social group. Spending time in apolitical spaces also has the advantage of getting to see members of opposing political parties as people instead of obstacles.

Interactions Between Users and Polarizing Content

One of the most polarizing times in recent history was January 6th, 2021. At this time there were many opinions and statements being made on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. In a study conducted by Kovacs, Cotfas, and Delcea in 2021, they found that many tweets posted on January 6th around the Capitol riot were considered unhealthy and included, “inflammatory language about the other side.” Furthermore, this study found that many of these posts included the traits of antagonize, generalization, and dismissiveness. These posts from the January 6th Capitol riot help researchers to gain insight into the true thoughts and feelings of people because they were posted at a time of high stress for all people. This was a time when polarizing and political topics were being discussed ad nasueum, which makes it a perfect dataset to analyze for the polarizing opinions being shared at the time. The aggressive content of these tweets leads to the conclusion that the posters were not polarized against the beliefs of others, but were polarized against the subjects of their tweets (Kovacs et al., 2021). The large immense number of these tweets and negative sentiments leads to the conclusion that affective polarization perpetuates itself and leads to a positive feedback loop where people are growing more negative feelings toward “opponents”.

Many people believe that fake news sharing is limited to “bot accounts” and people who are either misinformed or ignorant, however Osmundsen, Bor, Vahlstrup, and Micheal (2021) found that the primary reason that fake news is shared on Twitter is to increase polarization among different voters. These researchers explained that the main reasons that people will share and spread information is either accuracy-oriented, where people consume and spread true information, and goal-oriented where people focus on the information that is useful to them. Social media has increased the amount of information available to any given person, and as a result of that news outlets are driven to create content that is more goal-oriented, and interesting, to be competitive in the social media space. When goal-oriented content is prioritized and spread more, information oriented content suffers. This decreases access to informative and reliable content overall.

This paper by Osmundsen, Bor, Vahlstrup, and Micheal (2021) continues to show that when people are exposed to so much false information, it can be hard to find trustworthy information. On a platform like Twitter, people are exposed to many different news sources and outlets at a fast pace and may not take the time to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of different sources before they consume and share these sources (Osmundsen et al., 2021). This recklessness with the information shared and processed can lead to a mistrust of the sharer and/or a mistrust of news gained on social media sites in general when the information is found to be false or misleading. People rarely trust a source that has previously given false information, even if new information is correct and helpful. The final conclusion of this paper by Osmundsen, Bor, Vahlstrup, and Micheal is that people share false information because they want to increase people who share their viewpoint, and increase polarization, not because they are ignorant of the truthfulness of the information.

In this digital age, it is difficult to know what information is reliable and trustworthy. Gibson and Jacobsen (2018) explain that social media helps facilitate the spread of misleading information through, “blaring headlines about stolen elections, the questioning of scientific findings and of the scientific method itself, of mutual incomprehension across political and cultural divides, of accepted norms upended, of governing processes questioned, and of facts themselves.” People are questioning everything around them, which includes things that are widely agreed to be facts. Gibson and Jacobsen continue to explain that this decrease in trust of facts makes people more reluctant to accept information from new sources and increases polarization. This article speaks about this topic from the viewpoint of how librarians can help people to find and access trustworthy information and critically examine it to ensure that it is information that is true and widely agreed upon. Being able to think critically about sources received, within reason, allows for people to gain more true information, and potentially challenge some of their deepset biases.

Contact With Opposing Political Parties

Social media spaces are ones where extreme and polarizing ideas can thrive, but that knowledge leads to the question of how those hyper partisan ideas affect the users of different social media sites. One experiment described by Van Bavel, Rathje, Harris, Robertson, and Sternisko exposed Democratic and Republican users to messages from elected officials with opposing political views for a month. This experiment facilitated this by paying the users to follow bot accounts that would retweet these messages, which does lead to some bias in the results because they are of people more willing to be exposed to opposing viewpoints. The result of this experiment was increased polarization (Van Bavel et al, 2021). This gives an example of how polarization can increase from exposure to opposing viewpoints and not just increase with

exposure to allied viewpoints. Van Bavel, Rathje, Harris, Robertson, and Sternisko also explained that people are more likely to, “seek out politically congruent information” and “update their beliefs more when that information supports what they already believe.” Intuitively this makes sense. It is easier to build upon the beliefs that you already have than it is to completely restructure your belief system. All extreme content is shown to increase polarization among users whether it aligns with their political views or is opposing their political views.

In addition to exposing people to extreme and polarizing content, social media offers a place where people can debate topics. While this can be good for exposure to non-extreme viewpoints of other people, these debates often dissolve into arguments. Trevor Lee is a member of the Utah House of Representatives from District 16, he has personal experience with both social media and politics. His experience makes him a great source on how politics and social media overlap. In a personal interview Trevor Lee stated, “[people] wouldn't have these kinds of debates in person but online they feel empowered to be able to do whatever they want without any consequences to what their rhetoric is or how they're expressing themselves.” In this same interview Trevor Lee expressed that he sees people having a lot of access to short form content and headlines that skew their perception of political topics and viewpoints. He does believe social media can be a great tool for free speech to be shared and for people to get a wide variety of news sources, but admits that it can be misused. During this interview Trevor Lee repeatedly stated that if you are concerned about an issue, it is better to contact your representatives via email or phone call than sharing information on social media. He said that oftentimes elected officials are, “too busy to look at social media during [the] legislative session.” He also said that the most impactful social media posts were the ones that lead several people to contact their representatives. Talking to a representative about your political worries and beliefs is a great way

to channel any strong feelings you may feel without pinning them to members of opposing parties.

Conclusion

Most people agree on most issues that our country faces, but social media makes it seem as if that is not the case. Political polarization is relatively low while affective polarization is skyrocketing. Although social media sites are not the main contributor to the polarization that people of the United States face, social media sites accelerate the rate that political polarization grows. The main sites that increase affective political polarization are Facebook and X, but most social media sites increase polarization due to the algorithms they have in place. Polarizing content is interesting, and is therefore encouraged by the sites and spread to more people. When people have more access to polarizing content, whether it aligns with their views or not, they are polarized against the people of the opposing party. To combat this a great thing to do is to build community in real life and be kind to others in general. Prioritizing apolitical spaces and decentralizing politics from one's life decreases the polarization that they feel. It can be helpful to separate someone from their beliefs. It is important to understand that most people are just trying to do their best with the information available to them and to think critically about the information that one receives online. Reducing consumption of political social media, prioritizing apolitical spaces, respecting other people, and having civil debates are the keys to reducing polarization.

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Appendix

Interview With Trevor Lee, March 13, 2025

Q: How do you see social media affecting political polarization?

A: It's a really easy way to attack people and go after them without showing who and what your identity is, which I think is really problematic because many of the quote unquote like I would say "keyboard warriors", which is what has become a side issue from social media is what these people will not have the civil they wouldn't have these kind of debates in person but online they feel empowered to be able to do whatever they want without any Consequences to what their rhetoric is or how they're expressing themselves and so I think it's become very. It's been very polarizing and politics and social media has been very harmful on that side of it. Now there is some good social media as well. I think that it is also at the same time allowed for more free speech to be out there within the world and I think that's a good side of social media. We're not just handicapped to the basic news channels that you would normally have seen on TV from the past. But you could have news come from YouTube, from Facebook, form X, Instagram and so I think that is the good side of social media is allowing and having more options as it pertains to where you get your news from for politics.

Q: How do you use Social Media as an elected official?

A: So I use my X account more than anything just because I have a good following on there so I'm able to get my messaging out with what I believe and policies and what we're doing in the legislature to a bigger audience than I would let's say on Facebook, which I do use. I have a personal account which I don't use for my official legislative account and then I have my legislative account which I use, but it's a little different audience than what I would have. Let's

say it's Smaller. Fine tune to constituents and that's mostly gonna be used for what's going on in the legislature and then outreach that I have for what I've been doing specifically that affects them so that's why your social media as a legislature I have my ex account which is more personal beliefs and also what's going on to a bigger audience in the Facebook side which is more fine tune to just constituency And maybe campaign stuff or legislative stuff only pertaining to that not personal viewer opinions.

Q: How does social media affect you during the legislative session?

A: I honestly I don't think it affects us that much and what I mean by that is social media while it's gotten bigger it's still such a very small fraction of the population that use it and so I would say that if I'm getting emails or I'm getting phone calls that's gonna have a much bigger impact than what someone says in social media and a lot of cases too unless the post of social media goes big, that impact doesn't affect us unless people look at that post and then use it to call us or email us cause that's usually what we're gonna answer and talk about during the session. We just don't have a lot of time to sit on social media. We will have our interns use it sometimes or we try to push out if we have an event on social media during the session but outside of that. It really is like phone calls and emails are the most interactive way we have with our constituency on my policy. This has a legislator and that's just because it hasn't gotten that big yet it could keep growing, but we'll see what happens and it does grow and will use it more if it does.