

**Voting in America: The Impact of Social Media on Voter Registration**

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### **Abstract**

The United States has a notoriously poor voter registration rate which leads it to lag in voter turnout for its elections in comparison to other countries with similar government structures. The U.S. government needs a medium to incite citizens to register to vote outside of its own domains. Social media has already proven itself to be a mass mobilizer of its users. With approximately 72% of U.S. citizens using at least one social media network, social media has the opportunity to mobilize millions of U.S. citizens to register to vote (Pew Research Center, 2021). This project investigates the role social media plays in effectively spreading voter information and motivating its users to register to vote. To determine social media's role in increasing registration this project will administer a survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk which simulates a social media feed with the inclusion of voting information. Ultimately, this article hopes to demonstrate that social media can be effectively utilized to spread voting information and increase voter registration rates in the United States in order to create fairer and more accurate voter representation in America's democracy.

## **Introduction**

It is conventional knowledge that the United States has a poor voter turnout rate but this is only partially true. When looking at America's voter turnout compared to its voting-age population, only 62.8% of the voting-age population voted in the 2020 presidential election. This is notably lower than in other developed countries. 82.08% of Sweden's voting-age population voted in their 2018 election and 80.79% of Australia's voting-age population voted in their 2019 election (DeSilver, 2022). However, when taking a look at the United States' voter turnout for its population of registered voters, it is relatively similar to other developed countries. 94.1% of America's registered voters voted in the 2020 presidential election. Compared to Sweden and Australia, with a registered voter turnout of 87.18% and 91.89% respectively, America actually does better than the two countries (DeSilver, 2022). It is made clear that America's voter turnout problem isn't its citizens not voting, but instead, is their citizens not registering to vote to begin with. The Pew Research Center estimates that in 2014 approximately 21.4% of eligible voters were not registered to vote (Pew Research Center, 2017).

There is a myriad of reasons why U.S. citizens are not registered to vote but one major problem is that 62% of unregistered voters have never reported being asked or approached to register to vote once (Pew Research Center, 2017). U.S. citizens are expected to figure out how to register, and to do so, on their own. Social media is a medium of communication that can easily solve this problem by presenting encouragements to register to vote to its users.

States are given the right to conducting elections and thus, voter registration, through the Constitution, and while many states have adopted a form of automatic voter registration, such as Oregon, California, etc., there are still many states that do not have simplified systems in place for voter registration which makes it harder for people to know where to begin in the registration process (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022). This is why private means must be investigated further to determine if they can be utilized to offer aid in increasing the registered voter population in the United States.

This research project will investigate the power social media holds as a private means for spreading political information and mobilizing its users, specifically investigating whether actively consuming information and messages regarding voter registration and how to register to vote can increase the voter registration rates of social media users.

## **Background/Related Work and Motivation**

While social media is still relatively new, being less than three decades old, it is one of the most popular mediums for news, networking, and communication. Approximately 72% of the U.S. population uses at least one social media site (Pew Research Center, 2021). Social media is also

now one of the main mediums for politicians and governments, federal, state, and municipal, to communicate with their constituents.

Social media is also connected to many recent mass political movements in the United States. An average of 79.3% of social media users said social media was somewhat or very important to creating sustained social movements, such as the revival of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020 (Auxier, 2020). Twitter was also recognized as a major catalyst and mobilizer for the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol (Lima, 2022).

Networks such as Instagram have already begun to spread voter registration information on their platforms. In preparation for the 2022 midterm elections, Instagram users could regularly see and access voter registration information curated to their specific location in the U.S. on their social media feeds. Outside of the platforms alone, many different influencers and organizations also utilized their social media platforms for voter registration campaigns. The Student Athlete Advisory Committee at John Hopkins University launched a social media campaign to spread information about voter registration in an attempt to increase college athletes' registration rates ("Hopkins SAAC," 2020). Shaquille O'Neal also partnered with The General Insurance to launch a social media challenge aiming to increase voter registration ("The General Insurance," 2020).

Alabama's Secretary of State attributed the record-breaking voter registration rates leading up to the 2020 presidential election to social media ("Alabama Secretary," 2020). Similarly, Washington and Idaho saw an increase of 50,000 and 40,000 new registered voters respectively, immediately following social media campaigns launched in the states to encourage registration (Camden, 2016). Previous research has also found that utilizing status updates on Facebook that encouraged its users to vote and in turn encourage their Facebook friends to vote as well increased the voter turnout rates of those users as opposed to Facebook users that were not exposed to the trend (Haenschen, 2016).

## **Methods**

This project will investigate the effect of social media on voter registration through a survey administered through Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey will have a sample of approximately 1,000 participants. The survey will be split into three different stages. The first stage will ask participants basic demographic questions. These will include asking participants their age, gender, race, political affiliation, etc. This will also include social media questions such as whether they use social media, what platforms they frequent, and how often, in hours, they frequent social media per week. For the second stage, participants will be placed into either the control or experimental group. The control group will see a sample of an average social media feed. This sample will include aesthetic pictures, celebrity photos, news, etc. The experimental

group will see the same sample feed but riddled in between the posts will be posts about voter registration: where to register, deadlines to register, how to register, etc. The third stage will be questions regarding the registration information of the participants. These questions will include whether or not participants are already registered to vote, if they plan on registering soon, if they know how to register, if they have any interest in registering or voting, etc.

This project will analyze the data collected through the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) Statistics program. Both correlations and regressions will be performed on the data in order to find any strong and statistically significant relationships between different variables. Each variable will receive a number to correlate with each answer, these will range between 0 and 1 for nominal variables and 0-5 for ordinal variables. Correlations and regressions will be performed on how well-versed participants are in voter registration compared with their social media use and whether or not they were in the control or experimental group. For participants who were already registered to vote, a correlation and regression will also be performed to determine if the amount of social media they use each week or the particular platform they frequent the most had any effect on their registration status.

### **Expected Results**

This project expects a strong correlation between competency regarding voter registration and participants who were in the experimental group. In a regression with voter registration competency as the dependent variable, this project expects being a member of the experimental group will be statistically significant. This project also expects a strong correlation between members of the experimental group and whether or not participants plan on registering to vote in the near future. In a regression with voter registration status as the dependent variable, this project expects social media use (in hours per week) to be statistically significant as well. While there isn't any indication that one social media platform is more powerful in mobilizing masses than the other, this project also expects participants who frequent Twitter to be more likely to be registered voters due to Twitter's ties to recent mass movements such as the January 6th insurrection and the Black Lives Matter movement (Auxier, 2020; Lima, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Social media is one of the most popular mediums of communication and outreach in modern society. It can also serve as a mass mobilizer of its users. In the United States, a country that struggles in mobilizing its citizens to vote, it is pertinent that we investigate whether or not social media can aid in mobilizing U.S. citizens in registering to vote.

While it is extremely important to know that social media and its challenges/trends can help increase voter turnout, it is even more important that it first increase voter registration. Utilizing

social media to increase voter registration ensures that as many people as possible will register to vote, making America's democracy more authentic in its representation, especially for its young-voter population which is frequently overlooked and under-represented due to their poor registration and turnout rates. Overall, establishing social media as a medium that can effectively increase voter registration opens the door to a myriad of opportunities for the future of American politics and elections and will ultimately help ease the dilemma of poor voter registration in America.

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### Timeline and Budget

Week	Description	Estimated Hours Worked	Estimated Cost
1	Create questions and survey	10	\$150.00 = 10 hrs work * \$15/hr
2	Finalize survey Distribute survey through Amazon MTurk	1	\$1,015.00= \$15.00 + \$1,000 (\$1/per response through Amazon MTurk)
3	Await and collect responses	0	N/A
4	Analyze results in SPSS Complete research paper w/ analysis	20	\$300.00