

Original Article

Social Media and Youth Voter Turnout: A Conceptual Framework of Information, Expression, Social Influence, and Mobilization

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Abstract

Young adults often participate in elections at lower rates than older citizens, while social media has become a prominent space for political information, expression, interpersonal influence, and campaign communication. Yet the literature frequently combines general social media use with political social media use and treats political engagement, voting intention, and actual turnout as if they were equivalent outcomes. This conceptual ambiguity makes it difficult to specify when and how social media might matter for voting. This paper addresses that problem through an integrative conceptual review rather than an empirical study. It synthesizes foundational theory, meta-analyses, survey and panel research, field experiments, and recent political communication studies to distinguish key concepts and identify plausible mechanisms. The synthesis indicates that politically oriented uses of social media are more consistently associated with participation than overall platform use, but existing evidence does not support a simple or universal direct causal effect on turnout. The proposed framework therefore links social media use to political information exposure and political expression, then to peer or social influence and mobilization, political motivation or voting intention, and finally actual voting behavior. Political interest, political trust, misinformation, platform affordances and algorithmic curation, and socioeconomic resources are treated as contextual or conditioning factors rather than as components of a single social media-use variable. The framework contributes a clearer basis for future empirical research by separating mechanisms, proximal attitudes, and actual electoral behavior and by identifying relationships that can be tested with longitudinal, experimental, and comparative designs.

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Introduction

Voting is a unique type of political action because it transforms political desire into an institutional act of voting. In many democracies, age is an important correlate of voter turnout, and there are indications that younger citizens are less regular voters than older citizens (Fox, 2024; Smets & van Ham, 2013). Meanwhile, social media have become part of the information environments in which many young adults engage in public affairs, express political opinions, and observe peers and get messages about elections (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; McClain et al., 2024; Xenos et al., 2014). These two developments have sparked continued question regarding whether social media is a viable means of encouraging young adults to participate in elections. The heart of the issue is that the relationship is frequently stated too generally. General social media use refers to activities that are not necessarily political, such as entertainment, interpersonal communication, commerce, and much more; political social media use refers to activities that are political, such as following public affairs, seeing political information, commenting on issues, sharing political opinions, and reacting to mobilization messages. Meta-analytically, it appears that there is more evidence of the participatory associations of digital media with specific political, informational and expressive uses, than with the time spent online in general (Boulianne, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Skoric et al., 2016). The findings also reveal political usage differences between platforms, further demonstrating the importance of distinguishing between general use and political exposure and activity (McClain et al., 2024).

The second conceptual issue is related to outcomes. Political engagement may be psychological, communicative, of interest, of efficacy, or of discussion; political participation is behavior; voting intention is a proximal motivational state; and voting is the actual act of casting a vote. Combine these outcomes in studies to show general relationships with

engagement, and with limited evidence of actual voting. Similarly, cross-sectional research cannot rule out that social media bring people into civic engagement who were already engaged in it, but who are drawn to social media instead of other forms of engagement. Furthermore, cross-sectional studies cannot distinguish between whether social media bring people into civic engagement who were already engaged or whether people who are already engaged use social media more politically than they use other types of media (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Keating & Melis, 2017). The question of "social media and turnout" is therefore regarded as a conceptual and theoretical conundrum that needs to be sorted out before more robust empirical tests can be developed. Instead of social media use being a single independent variable and electoral turnout being a multi-dimensional dependent variable, the paper distinguishes between the steps that could link digital use to electoral turnout. It combines evidence related to political information, expression, peer influence, mobilization, motivation and voting, alongside contextual factors like platform design, misinformation, political trust, and socioeconomic resources. The contribution is a literature-based model in which possible pathways are identified, but not assumed to be causal.

Objectives

The overall objective is to develop a theoretically grounded conceptual framework for examining how social media may be related to voter turnout among young adults. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To clarify the distinctions among general social media, use, political social media use, political engagement, voting intention, and actual voter turnout.
- To synthesize evidence on political information exposure, political expression, peer or social influence, and mobilization as possible mechanisms connecting social media activity with electoral participation.
- To integrate civic voluntarism, connective action, social influence, and motivational perspectives into a coherent conceptual framework while identifying important contextual and conditioning factors.

Literature Review

Conceptual Boundaries: Engagement, Participation, Intention, and Turnout

In a focused framework, the outcome has to be clearly and specifically stated. Political participation is a catchall concept for a class of behaviors by which citizens try to affect the political process or the political product, whereas engagement might include orientations that increase the likelihood of participation, such as political interest, attention, discussion, knowledge, and efficacy (Verba et al., 1995). However, voting is not the only type of participation and its institutional endpoint is evident – whether or not an eligible citizen will vote. The concept of voting intention is therefore different from that of turnout. Intention can refer to the attitude or the drive for election, while turnout is a post-election behaviour that could still be influenced by registration processes, access, competing demands, campaign context, and other obstacles (Smets & van Ham, 2013). It is important for research on social media. Online activities can draw more attention or discussion to politics without affecting a person's vote. On the other hand, social media can serve as a kind of wake-up call for an individual who already plans to vote. Social media can also serve as a reminder to an individual who is already going to vote, but does not really influence their overall political attitude. In this line of thinking, political motivation and/or intention is therefore a proximal stage and actual voting as a separate final outcome.

General Social Media Use Versus Political Social Media Use

Prior studies carry the message that the content and function of the media are more important than the frequency of use. Meta-analysis of the research indicated by Boulianne (2015) that the overall relationship between social media use and participation was positive, although it was not consistently statistically significant or of great magnitude. Likewise, Skoric et al. (2016) found positive associations with informational, expressive and relational uses, and less supportive data for civic and political involvement for entertainment and identity uses. For youth-focused research, Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) discovered that directly political digital activities, such as political news usage and online political discussion, were generally more closely connected to offline engagement than undifferentiated digital media use. The conceptual appropriateness of using hours or frequency of social media use as an equivalent to political exposure is questionable given this evidence. A young adult can be a heavy social media user, but may not get much election information, or a light social media user, but may seek out politics, politicians, civic organizations, or politician conversations on social media. Recent descriptive research also shows that there are significant differences in users' motives for using social media and in the amount of political content they say they encounter (McClain et al., 2024). Thus, the framework starts with the social media as an environment of access but does not equate political information exposure with political expression, but rather regards them as separate mechanisms of the process.

Youth Political Engagement and Voter Turnout

The transition to adulthood is a critical time in one's political socialization as it is when they first experience the electoral process, which can influence later participatory practices. In addition, social and economic disparities, political socialization and institutional context, rather than age, condition turnout gaps (Fox, 2024; Smets & van Ham, 2013). Relevance of social media could be that it reduces cost of communication, can provide access to political information more quickly and can integrate public affairs into peer networks that are already important to young adults. Research in a number of democracies has detected positive connections between social media use and youth political involvement, with the nature

and significance of the relationship differing according to how the social media is used and the political context (Loader et al., 2014; Xenos et al., 2014).

Digital participation can also offer other avenues for political expression than traditional organizational participation. Cohen et al. (2012) define participatory politics as 'peer-based, interactive activities in which youth can share information, develop content, and recruit others'. Broadening the youth politics may expand the range of youth politics, but expanding participation is not necessarily equal to increasing participation. For instance, Keating and Melis (2017) point out that social media can amplify voice of the young people, but at the same time it may also disproportionately target those who already have political interest. Rather than asking whether social media are politically significant overall, the question here is why, and under which circumstances, political experiences in the Internet are turned into electoral motivation and, subsequently, into voting.

Mechanisms Connecting Social Media with Electoral Participation

The first possible mechanism is political information exposure. Election news, information, candidate messages and commentary can be integrated into normal communications through social media. Social media news was linked to social capital, civic engagement and political participation by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012). Political information can help lower information costs and make an election salient, but it does not guarantee learning or action. Whether exposure will have a political impact is influenced by the quality of information, prior interest, source credibility, and the user's motivation to process the content. The second mechanism involves political expression and discussion. Social media allow people to both watch and respond to information, comment on it, share it and publicly express preferences. Conroy et al., (2012) noted that there was a correlation between online political group membership and offline political participation, but not necessarily an increase in political knowledge. Also, Vaccari et al. (2015) found that, for politically active Twitter users, political information seeking and political expression on social media were correlates of higher threshold forms of political participation. These studies lend support to the potential for some positive reinforcement of attention, efficacy, identity, or commitment through the act of expression, while also providing a warning against assuming causal directionality from the cross-sectional associations.

A third mechanism is peer or social influence and is particularly relevant because social media include political messages in interpersonal networks. In a large-scale study conducted on Facebook, Bond et al. (2012) showed that small but measurable effects can be obtained for validated voting through a social message, and that these effects can be mediated by means of close social contacts. The study does not suggest that the use of mainstream social media inevitably leads to voting behavior, but it is a particularly compelling demonstration of how social cues can influence voting at the margin. Peer signals can be used to convey norms, make participation salient and be used to enhance the perceived relevance of an election. Mobilization is a fourth mechanism. Prominent campaigns, civic organizations, and individual citizens can send reminders, invitations to events, registration details, and calls to action. However, there are mixed findings from experiments: Theocharis and Lowe (2016), for example, showed that establishing and maintaining a Facebook page had no effect on the political participation of their young Facebook users and was correlated with lower reports of political participation among these users. These results are significant because they demonstrate that the platform is not a mobilizing treatment. The user's experience and actions are what determines who will be mobilized, and not simply who has an account.

Countervailing Processes and Conditioning Factors

Multiple processes can sometimes make the pathways suggested less strong, reverse or make them more complex. One problem is the selection and reinforcement issue of political interest. Those who have developed an interest in politics are more apt to look for political information, have opinions on politics, join political organizations, and vote. This can result in a positive social media-participation association even in instances where participation in media is not the initial cause of participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Kandel & Bist, 2026; Keating & Melis, 2017). Hence, any empirical test would ideally reflect prior political interest and not assume it to be an unobserved background phenomenon. Second, a lack of faith in the political institutions could influence the connection between information and mobilization and institutional participation. Comparative evidence indicates that political trust could be related differently to institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of participation, as described by Hooghe and Marien (2013) political trust is positively related to institutionalized participation (such as voting), whilst lower trust may coexist with non-institutionalized participation. Trust should not be part of social media use; instead, it should be seen as a situational mindset that can influence perceptions of political messages.

Third, misinformation and low quality information can be a pathway disruptor. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) reported the prevalence of fake news in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and found that a more thorough exposure to fake news does not guarantee an informed response. Moreover, the political perspectives that appear are not only determined by algorithmic ranking, but also by user choice. Although network structure was found to influence exposure to cross-cutting news on Facebook, the study by Bakshy et al. (2015) also demonstrated that individual choice had an even stronger influence. Platform affordances and algorithms are, therefore, part of the political exposure information environment. Finally, socioeconomic conditions and political resources still play a role. The civic voluntarism tradition places emphasis on resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment as key pillars of civic participation (Verba et al., 1995), and turnout studies typically include education, income, social class, and mobilizing context as correlates of civic participation. The civic voluntarism tradition bundles resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment as important bases of civic participation (Verba et al., 1995), and turnout studies consistently add education, income, social

class, and mobilizing context as correlates of civic participation. Not all of the costs of communication can be eliminated through social media, but unequal resources, unequal registration, unequal digital skills, and unequal political socialization cannot be addressed through social media alone.

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

Civic Voluntarism

The civic voluntarism model provides a useful foundation because it explains participation through resources, engagement, and recruitment rather than through information exposure alone (Verba et al., 1995). Applied to social media, the model suggests that digital platforms can create additional channels for information and recruitment, but the likelihood of acting still depends on time, skills, socioeconomic resources, political interest, and invitations to participate. This helps explain why the same online message may be consequential for one young adult and irrelevant to another.

Connective Action

Connective action theory explains how digital media can organize political action through personalized content sharing and networked communication rather than relying entirely on formal organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). For the present framework, its importance lies in the transition from exposure to expression and mobilization: users can circulate personally meaningful political content, connect messages to peer networks, and help distribute calls to action. Connective action therefore clarifies why political expression and sharing should be treated as mechanisms, not simply as measures of platform frequency.

Social Influence

Social influence theory is reflected in evidence that political behavior can respond to cues from socially meaningful others. Bond et al. (2012) provide direct experimental evidence that peer-linked messages can affect voting at small scale and can spread through close ties. In the proposed framework, peer or social influence occupies a distinct position between individual political activity and mobilization because the same message may carry different weight depending on who communicates it and how visible participation is within a person's network.

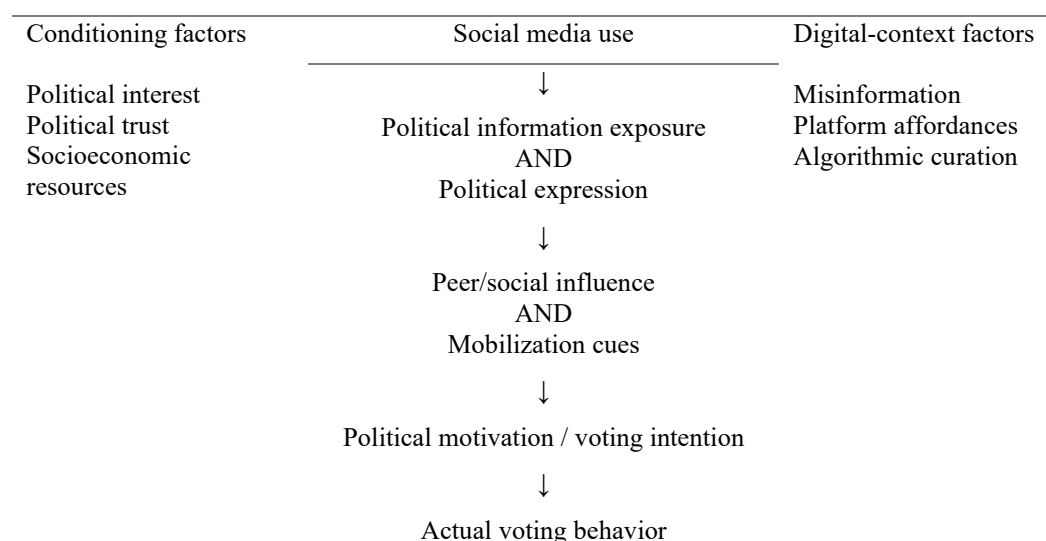
Motivation and the Transition to Behavior

The gap between encountering political content and acting on it requires a motivational link. Knoll et al. (2020) argue that social media effects on political participation depend on psychological processes and contingent conditions rather than exposure alone. This perspective supports separating political motivation or voting intention from actual turnout. Intention is a plausible proximal outcome of information, expression, social influence, and mobilization, but the final transition to voting remains dependent on resources, opportunity, institutional rules, and election-specific circumstances.

Integrated Conceptual Framework

The framework integrates these views in a phased approach. The communication environment is provided by social media use. In such a context, political information exposure and political expression are two different types of political use. These activities could trigger the activation of peer or social influence and mobilizing cues, and either enhance political motivation or voting intention. The actual voting behavior is considered as the final result of the elections. Political interest and trust, misinformation, platform affordances, misinformation, platform affordances/algorithm curation and socio-economic resources are present throughout the process as contextual or conditioning factors. The arrows in Figure 1 are propositions for empirical testing, and do not reflect causal relationships already established by this conceptual paper.

Figure 1: *Proposed conceptual framework linking social media use with youth voter turnout*



Note. Arrows indicate relationships proposed for empirical testing; they do not represent causal effects established in this paper.

Methodology

Study Design

This paper uses an integrative conceptual review design. It is a theoretical and literature-synthesis paper rather than a qualitative interview study, survey study, or experiment. No primary data were collected from voters, and no hypotheses were statistically tested. The unit of analysis is the published scholarly literature used to define concepts, compare findings, identify mechanisms, and construct the framework.

Sources of Data and Analysis

The source material consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, meta-analyses, field and survey studies, foundational academic books, and a recent nonpartisan research report relevant to social media, youth political engagement, political participation, and voter turnout. The literature represented in the paper spans foundational participation research and later digital-politics research, including studies of political information use, expression, social influence, mobilization, misinformation, algorithmic exposure, political trust, and turnout. Sources were selected purposively for conceptual relevance and evidentiary value rather than through an exhaustive systematic-review protocol. The literature was analyzed through thematic and comparative synthesis. First, studies were read for how they defined social media use, political engagement, political participation, intention, and voting. Second, findings were organized around four recurring mechanisms: political information exposure, political expression or discussion, peer or social influence, and mobilization. Third, studies were compared for evidence of reinforcing or countervailing conditions, particularly political interest, trust, misinformation, platform affordances and algorithms, and socioeconomic resources. Finally, stronger causal designs such as field experiments and panel studies were distinguished from cross-sectional associations when evaluating what the literature can support. This process generated the staged framework in Figure 1 and the empirical propositions discussed below.

Discussion

The main implication of the review is that the social media-turnout relationship should not be represented as a single arrow from platform use to voting. That specification hides several theoretically different processes. General platform use may simply indicate access; political information exposure concerns what users encounter; political expression concerns what users communicate; peer influence concerns interpersonal signals; mobilization concerns calls or reminders to act; voting intention concerns motivation; and turnout concerns behavior. Treating these elements as separate stages produces a framework that is both more faithful to the literature and more testable. The distinction between general and political social media use is particularly important. Meta-analytic research finds more consistent participatory associations for political, informational, and expressive digital activity than for undifferentiated media use. This suggests that future studies should avoid using total screen time or platform frequency as the principal explanatory measure when the theoretical interest concerns elections. Researchers should instead measure exposure to political information and political expression separately, because a person can score high on one and low on the other and because these activities may work through different psychological processes.

Political interest is will likely be one of the most important conditioning factors. It can precede political social media use, increase attention to election information and make political expression more likely, and even increase turnout. In the absence of ordering, a positive relationship can indicate reinforcement rather mobilization. Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) explicitly cite evidence for reciprocal causation, and Keating and Melis (2017) demonstrate the reasons for which digital spaces can reach interested individuals more effectively than uninterested individuals. In order to determine the role(s) social media may play, longitudinal designs that assess prior political interest are necessary. Trust, misinformation, and the design of the platforms further complicate the pathway. Political trust is not uniformly related to all forms of participation, but comparative evidence suggests that it can be positively related to voting. Misinformation can increase political participation while decreasing the overall quality of information. Therefore, we cannot assume that exposure to information is politically positive (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Algorithmic ranking, network composition, user selection, and other factors can lead to very different political information environments for individuals who have the same level of platform use (Bakshy et al, 2015; Raskoti & Kandel, 2025). Considering the aforementioned, it is justified to consider the digital environment as a conditioning context as opposed to a neutral channel.

Socioeconomic resources also remain important because online communication does not eliminate offline constraints. Education, income, civic skills, registration arrangements, and political socialization influence whether people can translate motivation into participation (Smets & van Ham, 2013; Verba et al., 1995). This is especially relevant when studying young adults, whose independence, residential mobility, first-time voting experience, and exposure to political recruitment can vary substantially. A framework that omits these conditions risks attributing to social media differences that may originate in broader inequalities. The framework can be applied across political and electoral settings, but the expected strength of each pathway should not be assumed to be constant. Electoral rules, compulsory or voluntary voting, registration procedures, campaign intensity, media systems, platform penetration, freedom of expression, and the credibility of political institutions can alter the meaning of information, mobilization, and turnout. Evidence from advanced democracies, for example, cannot automatically be generalized to settings with different institutional constraints or digital infrastructures. Research among university students in rural Pakistan also reports positive associations between social media use and political participation, illustrating the relevance of examining these relationships beyond Western democracies while not establishing that identical mechanisms or effect sizes apply across settings (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Comparative studies should therefore test whether the same mechanisms operate similarly across countries rather than presuming universal effects.

The conceptual framework clarifies what we expect from future empirical studies. First, we expect that the relationship between the use of political social media and participation and the use of general social media would be stronger. Second, we should model politics-related information and politics-related expression as separate mechanisms rather than be used interchangeably. Third, we should study the mobilizing messages and/or peer cues as the online activity that could be a motivator for voting. Fourth, political interest, trust, exposure to politics-related misinformation, the design of the online political participation tools, the algorithms and the socioeconomic factors should be studied as contextual factors in the research. Fifth, the research should distinguish voting intention from actual voting. The propositions call for studies of a higher order than a one-time self-administered survey. Studies with a fixed number of surveys with fixed intervals (i.e. panel studies) can establish a relationship where one factor can be shown to occur before the other. In the case of these propositions, field experiments can study the effects of specific cues that are designed to activate participation, while in other cultures validated turnout records can be used to reduce self-reported survey errors. In most cultures, other factors will be important (e.g. the media system). Multilevel comparative designs can be used to study the effects of different media systems, institutions, and cultures on participation. While qualitative interviews can be useful to gauge young adult understanding of the relationship between the phenomena studied, they should be considered as a separate study.

Conclusion

The conceptual problem addressed by this paper is the tendency to treat social media use, political engagement, voting intention, and voter turnout as if they formed a single undifferentiated relationship. The literature does not support that simplification. Instead, existing research suggests that politically oriented uses of social media are more relevant than general platform use and that information, expression, peer influence, and mobilization are plausible but conditional pathways through which digital activity may become connected to electoral behavior. The framework contributes by ordering those processes rather than by claiming an established causal effect. It proposes a sequence from social media use to political information exposure and political expression, through peer or social influence and mobilization, to political motivation or intention and finally actual voting behavior. Political interest, trust, misinformation, platform affordances and algorithms, and socioeconomic resources are positioned as conditioning factors that may strengthen, weaken, or redirect the pathways.

Future empirical research should test the stages separately, establish temporal order, distinguish political from nonpolitical platform use, and measure intention separately from verified or carefully reported turnout. Longitudinal, experimental, and comparative studies are particularly valuable because they can determine whether social media primarily mobilize less engaged young adults, reinforce those already interested in politics, or operate differently across electoral and media contexts. In this way, the framework provides a clearer theoretical foundation for empirical work without overstating what the current evidence can demonstrate. This paper has several limitations. First, it is an integrative conceptual review rather than a systematic review, so it does not claim exhaustive coverage or provide pooled effect estimates. Second, a substantial share of the literature comes from the United States and other advanced democracies, which limits direct generalization to different media systems and electoral institutions. Third, the social media environment changes rapidly; platform features, recommendation systems, political advertising practices, and user populations can change faster than the academic publication cycle. Fourth, many studies rely on self-reported political participation and cross-sectional data, which makes causal direction difficult to establish. Finally, the framework is intentionally parsimonious. It emphasizes the mechanisms most consistently represented in the reviewed literature but does not include every possible influence on turnout, such as campaign competitiveness, family political socialization, candidate evaluations, or election administration.

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