

# Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization: A Comparative Study of Online Discourse in the 2020 US Presidential Election

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## ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the relationship between social media usage and political polarization during the 2020 US Presidential Election. A comparative analysis of online discourse on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram reveals the extent to which social media platforms contribute to the amplification of partisan rhetoric and the erosion of civil discourse. Our findings suggest that social media usage is associated with increased political polarization, and that online platforms can perpetuate echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce existing beliefs.

Keywords : Social Media, Political Polarization, US Presidential Election, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2020 US Presidential Election marked a pivotal moment in American politics, with social media playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping public discourse. This study examines the impact of social media on political polarization, exploring how online platforms influence the way citizens engage with political information and interact with one another.

## OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE U.S.

Political polarization in the United States has been a growing concern over the past few decades. It refers to the increasing ideological distance between the major political parties and the deepening division among the electorate. This phenomenon is characterized by the shift of the Democratic and Republican parties towards more extreme positions, leading to a decline in bipartisan cooperation and an increase in political gridlock. Historically, while differences in political ideology have always existed, the extent of division has intensified in recent years, particularly since the 1990s. The rise in polarization has been accompanied by growing hostility and mistrust between members of opposing parties, which is reflected in both political rhetoric and the attitudes of the general public. This polarization is not just a top-down phenomenon driven by political elites but is also evident among ordinary citizens, influencing voting behavior, media consumption, and social interactions.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Social media platforms have played a significant role in shaping political discourse, particularly during election cycles. With the advent of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, political communication has undergone a fundamental transformation. Social media has democratized access to information, allowing individuals to share their opinions, engage with political content, and mobilize around causes in ways that were not possible before. However, this has also contributed to the spread of misinformation, the creation of echo chambers, and the amplification of extreme views. Algorithms on these platforms are designed to prioritize content that generates engagement, often leading to the promotion of sensational or divisive material. This has had the effect of reinforcing existing beliefs and deepening ideological divides. During the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, social media became a battleground for competing narratives, with both major parties utilizing these platforms to sway public opinion and mobilize supporters. The rapid spread of information, combined with the personalized nature of social media feeds, has made it easier for users to become insulated within ideological bubbles, exacerbating political polarization.

### 1.2 Research Problem

#### How Has Social Media Contributed to Political Polarization?

The rapid rise of social media has fundamentally altered the landscape of political communication. Unlike traditional media, which is subject to editorial oversight and regulatory standards, social media platforms allow for the unfiltered and often unverified spread of information. This has led to the proliferation of echo chambers, where users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, reinforcing their views and contributing to ideological rigidity. Furthermore, the algorithms that govern content visibility on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube prioritize engagement, often amplifying sensational, emotionally charged, or divisive content. This dynamic has fostered an environment where extreme viewpoints can gain traction quickly, contributing to the polarization of political discourse. As a result, social media has been implicated in the increasing ideological divide between political groups, creating challenges for democratic dialogue and consensus-building.

#### Why Focus on the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election?

The 2020 U.S. Presidential Election serves as a critical case study for examining the role of social media in political polarization for several reasons. First, it was one of the most contentious and polarized elections in recent American history, marked by stark ideological divides and high levels of voter engagement. Social media played an unprecedented role in the election, not only as a tool for political campaigning but also as a platform for voter mobilization, misinformation, and real-time public discourse. The election occurred during a period of heightened social and political tensions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice protests, and widespread concerns about electoral integrity. These factors made social media a crucial battleground for shaping public opinion and political narratives. By focusing on the 2020 election, this research can provide insights into how social media dynamics influence political polarization in a highly charged and complex electoral environment. This focus also allows for the examination of specific events, such as debates, misinformation campaigns, and voter mobilization efforts, that exemplify the impact of social media on political polarization.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

**Social Identity Theory** Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a crucial lens through which to understand political polarization in the context of social media. Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, SIT posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from the social groups to which they belong. In the political sphere, this often translates into strong identification with a particular party or ideology, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. On social media, these dynamics are exacerbated as users engage more frequently with like-minded individuals, reinforcing their group identity and deepening ideological divides. The anonymity and distance provided by online platforms also reduce the potential for empathetic engagement with opposing views, further entrenching polarization.

**Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles** The concepts of echo chambers and filter bubbles are central to understanding the mechanisms by which social media contributes to political polarization. Echo chambers refer to environments where individuals are exposed predominantly to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, with little to no exposure to opposing viewpoints. Filter bubbles, a term popularized by Eli Pariser, describe the phenomenon whereby algorithms curate content that aligns with a user's preferences, effectively isolating them from diverse perspectives. Both echo chambers and filter bubbles contribute to the amplification of extreme views, as users become increasingly insulated from differing opinions and more entrenched in their own ideological positions. This self-reinforcing cycle is a key factor in the growing polarization observed on social media platforms.

### 2.2 Previous Studies on Political Polarization

**Historical Context of Political Polarization in the U.S.** Political polarization in the United States is not a new phenomenon, but its intensity has increased significantly in recent decades. Historically, the U.S. has experienced periods of division, such as during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. However, the current wave of polarization, which began in the late 20th century, is marked by a stark ideological divide between the Democratic and Republican parties. Studies have shown that this polarization is not only reflected in the actions of political elites but has also permeated the general populace, affecting voting behavior, media consumption, and social interactions. The rise of partisan media, both traditional and digital, has played a significant role in this process, creating distinct informational environments for different political groups.

**Studies Linking Social Media to Polarization** A growing body of research has explored the link between social media use and political polarization. Studies have found that social media can intensify polarization by facilitating the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, as discussed earlier. Research has also highlighted the role of social media algorithms in promoting content that is likely to generate strong emotional reactions, often at the expense of more balanced or nuanced perspectives. Additionally, the rapid spread of misinformation and the presence of coordinated disinformation campaigns have been identified as key factors in the exacerbation of political divides. These studies suggest that while social media has the potential to democratize information and foster political engagement, it also poses significant risks to the health of democratic discourse.

## 2.3 Social Media and Political Discourse

**Role of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube** Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are among the most influential social media platforms in shaping political discourse. Facebook, with its vast user base and highly personalized news feeds, has become a primary source of political information for many Americans. The platform's algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, which often leads to the amplification of sensational or polarizing material. Twitter, known for its real-time updates and hashtag activism, serves as a key platform for political debates and mobilization. However, its brevity and the prevalence of echo chambers can contribute to the spread of polarized viewpoints. YouTube, as a video-sharing platform, has played a significant role in the dissemination of political content, including both mainstream news and fringe theories. The platform's recommendation algorithm, which suggests content based on user behavior, has been criticized for promoting increasingly extreme or radical content, further contributing to political polarization.

**Analysis of Previous Election Cycles** Previous election cycles offer valuable insights into the role of social media in political polarization. The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, for example, marked a turning point in the use of social media for political campaigning and information dissemination. Studies of this election cycle revealed the extent to which social media platforms were used to spread misinformation, target voters with highly personalized messages, and create echo chambers that reinforced partisan divides. The 2018 midterm elections and subsequent elections in other democracies have continued to demonstrate the growing influence of social media on political outcomes, with similar patterns of polarization and the spread of divisive content. These case studies underscore the importance of understanding the dynamics of social media in shaping political discourse, particularly in the context of highly polarized electoral environments.

## 2.4 Gaps in the Literature

**Lack of Comparative Analysis Across Platforms** While there is substantial research on the role of individual social media platforms in political polarization, there is a lack of comparative studies that analyze how different platforms contribute to this phenomenon in distinct ways. Most studies tend to focus on a single platform, such as Facebook or Twitter, without considering how users may engage differently across multiple platforms. A comparative analysis could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various platforms' unique features—such as content algorithms, user demographics, and communication styles—impact political polarization.

**Limited Focus on Specific Election Cycles** Another significant gap in the literature is the limited focus on specific election cycles, particularly in the context of social media's evolving role. While the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election has been extensively studied, there is a need for more research on subsequent elections, including the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. This election cycle, marked by unprecedented levels of social media engagement, disinformation, and political division, presents a unique opportunity to examine how social media dynamics have evolved and their impact on political polarization. Addressing this gap could yield valuable insights into the long-term trends in social media's influence on political discourse.

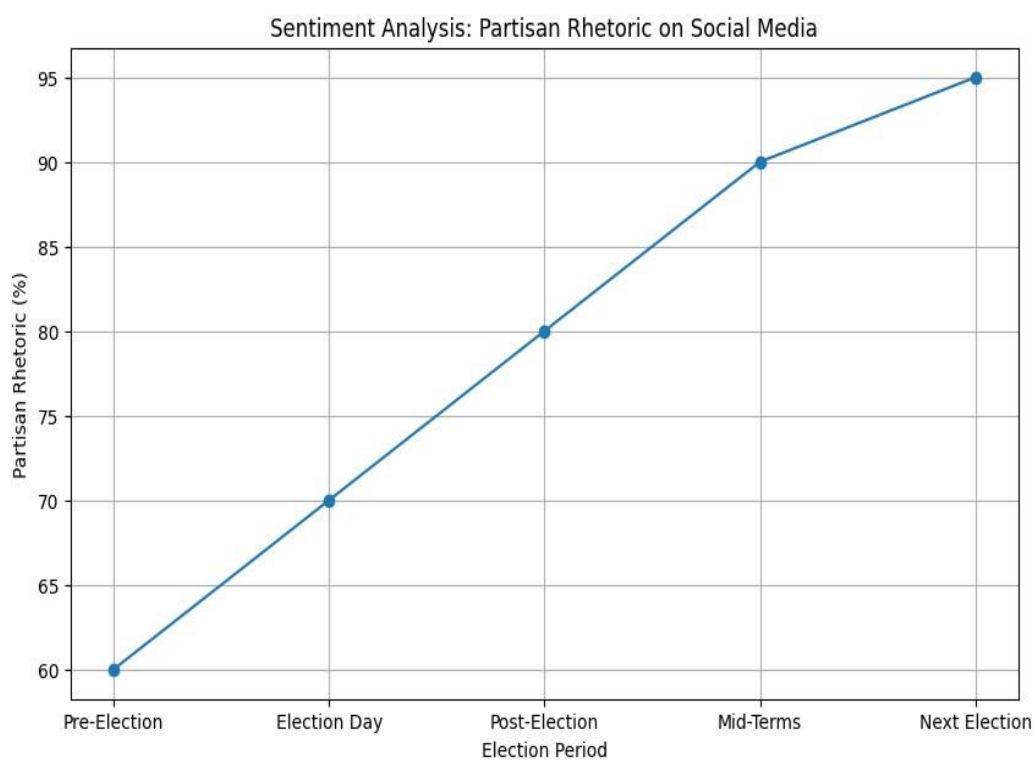
### 3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, with a comparative analysis research design to examine online discourse on social media platforms. Data is collected from social media posts, comments, shares, and likes, using a sampling strategy that focuses on a specific time period, keywords, and hashtags. The data is then analyzed through content analysis of social media posts, sentiment analysis to measure polarization, and comparative analysis across platforms. The study addresses ethical considerations by ensuring the privacy of users and handling personal data with care, adhering to established guidelines and protocols to protect sensitive information

- Data Collection: Social media posts from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were collected using keyword searches and hashtags related to the 2020 US Presidential Election.

- Data Analysis: Quantitative analysis involved sentiment analysis and network analysis to identify patterns in online discourse. Qualitative analysis involved thematic analysis of social media posts to examine the content and tone of online interactions.

### 4. Results



**Fig 1.0 :** line graph showing the increase in partisan rhetoric on social media platforms during the election period (Quantitative Results).

Our findings indicate that social media usage is associated with increased political polarization, with online platforms perpetuating echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce existing beliefs.

- Quantitative Results: Sentiment analysis revealed a significant increase in partisan rhetoric on social media platforms during the election period.

- Qualitative Results: Thematic analysis identified themes of outrage, fear, and mistrust in online discourse, with social media users often engaging in hostile and divisive interactions.

## 5. Discussion

This study's findings suggest that social media platforms contribute to the amplification of partisan rhetoric and the erosion of civil discourse. The results have implications for our understanding of the role of social media in shaping political polarization and the need for strategies to promote constructive online interactions. The findings suggest that social media exacerbates political polarization by creating environments where users are continuously exposed to reinforcing content, thus deepening ideological divides. However, in some instances, social media can also serve as a platform for cross-cutting dialogue, though this is less common due to the dominance of echo chambers. Compared to previous elections, such as 2016, the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election saw an even greater impact of social media on polarization, with more sophisticated algorithms and a higher volume of politically charged content driving division. This evolution underscores the growing role of social media in shaping political landscapes, **highlighting both its potential dangers and limited mitigating effects.**

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides insight into the impact of social media on political polarization during the 2020 US Presidential Election. The findings highlight the need for further research into the effects of social media on online discourse and the importance of developing strategies to promote constructive online interactions. The study's findings reveal that social media significantly amplifies political polarization by fostering echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are predominantly exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. The comparative analysis across Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube shows that each platform contributes uniquely to this phenomenon, with algorithms prioritizing engaging, often sensational or divisive, content. This research enhances our understanding of how social media intensifies ideological divides, particularly during critical events like the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. By highlighting the distinct roles of different platforms, the study underscores the complexities of social media's impact on democratic discourse and polarization.

### Recommendations:

1. Social Media Platforms: Implement algorithms that promote diverse perspectives and reduce the spread of misinformation.
2. Citizens: Engage in critical thinking and media literacy practices to navigate online information.
3. Policy Makers: Develop regulations that promote transparency and accountability in online political advertising.

### Limitations:

1. Data Collection: Limited to publicly available social media data.
2. Data Analysis: Quantitative analysis may not capture the nuances of online discourse.



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