

## Social Media's Polarization in Politics

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**Abstract**

There is an invisible tutelage over your habitual consumption of social media. There are unknown forces at play whenever you open an app. Netizens are being influenced by psychological persuasion conducted by tech firms. This paper intends to analyze the polarization of social media from the use cases of social media framing with psychological operations. The pre-existing studies have examined the effectiveness of social media use in political campaigns. The following research paper will discover what affirms the current division and motivations of the major political parties from social media. Analyzing the strong motives that caused the Capitol attack from the recent 2020 election caused the following research questions to develop: (1) How does information spoofing cause the audience to have an emotional valence? (2) How does truthing cause favoritism towards a political candidate? (3) How does identity spoofing cause the audience to gain arousal in the message? (4) How will the political affiliation of a social media user affect their reaction towards the message exposure? The paper suggests the use of an experimental study that could find possible causation to events of the 2021 Capitol insurrection.

*Keywords: polarization, social media, psyops, framing, 2020, maintenance, favoritism, politics, capitol attack, ethnography, content analysis*

### **Introduction**

On January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the U.S. Capitol was sieged by citizens of America. The events leading up to this domestic terrorism act were influenced by the use of social media (Mosley, 2021). The former President, Donald J. Trump, used social media to rile up his supporters with misinformation (Lee, 2021). A myriad of trump loyalists stormed the Capitol with members of congress seeking refuge under their desks. Hysteria ensued with radical militias waving their trump flags while carrying their assault rifles and militarized gear. In pursuit of the rally, the riot began to smash windows with confiscated riot shields from the Capitol police. Upon rioters gaining entry inside the building, gunshots were fired, and tear gas was thrown (Fisher, 2021).

This coordinated attack had key traits of social media framing and the use of psychological persuasion. The impact of gathering radical militias to take charge was a precedent event. This attack is a significant point in U.S. history and will be studied for further case studies. The reason why this incident is relevant is that it is a sign that we are moving towards a new type of democracy with unknown threats (Grisales, 2021). Social media became a huge factor in political communication and is a new utilitarian tool that needs legislation for a U.S. president (Ghosh, 2021).

The former President, Donald J. Trump, has incited riots with the help of social media framing (Ghosh, 21). The use of framing can influence behavioral responses conducting emotional responses that can operate as mediators to the framing effects on people's attitudes and opinions (Valenzuela, 2017). In addition, the use of psychological persuasion to establish a sense of urgency and public call to action triggers an emotional and spontaneous audience response (Innes, 2021). Like this, social media posts leading to the Capitol Insurrection could

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emphasize specific parts of the former President's speech to create their messages. For example, Trump's social media posts, "LIBERATE MINNESOTA! LIBERATE MICHIGAN! and LIBERATE VIRGINIA! and save your great 2nd Amendment," was triggering an emotional and spontaneous response (Lee, 2021). Furthermore, a political campaign run by Trump called "STOP THE STEAL" or "STOP THE COUNT" was used to trigger a sense of urgency and public call to action by members of Trump's campaign board to insinuate action to his loyalist. Multiple campaign board members gave statements preceding the insurrection such as representative Mo Brooks of Alabama, Donald Trump Jr., and Rudy Giuliani. Phrases including "Are you willing to do what it takes to fight for America? Louder! Will you fight for America?", "If you're gonna be the zero and not the hero, we're coming for you and we're going to have a good time doing it!", "If we're wrong, we will be made fools of", "But if we're right, a lot of them will go to jail. So let's have trial by combat." (Holt & Carvin, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to identify the ways social media played a role in the Capitol insurrection. The literature review will include the discussions of challenging the pros and cons of social media use in a political campaign and the possibility of altering reality from social media. The significant goal is to dissect the causes of the siege by the use of maintenance, favoritism, and systematic messages that lead to the action.

### **Literature Review**

My literature review will be organized by answering the following questions: (1) the pros and cons of social media use in politics, (2) discovering why social media is an essential tool to winning elections, (3) the possibility of altering reality with social media framing. There have been many articles discussing the controversial issues and findings, so it would be easier to discuss the questions in that frame. We will compare the multiple research studies of their

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similarities and differences. The subsection will address the main keywords from my peer-reviewed journals, which are: democracy, social media, behavior/reactions, disinformation, and strategy/ethics.

### **Social Media Use in Politics: Advantages and Disadvantages**

Social media roles in politics have been shown as an effective tool for campaigning. With any controversial topic, however, there is always a double-edged sword. Negative factors that live behind the scenes. Of course, social media is an essential tool to winning elections. Haenschen (2016) said, there is a positive association between political participation and social media use. Haenschen further demonstrated that the use of social media leads to an increased voter turnout rate. With shared messages are leading to social pressure and making messages emphasizing the importance of civic duty, an effective percentage in turnout was from 15.8% to 24.3% (Haenschen, 2016), claiming that the use of social media represents a new form of democracy.

Haenshen added that there is an increased voter turnout percentage, yet the social pressure can be seen as a negative. The use of social media platforms creates a social norm by influencing individual compliance, and these communication platforms make users' actions visible, which enables individuals to monitor the activities of others (Haenshen, 2016). Members of the user's network have the potential to change their behavior and make them conform to powerful social norms (Haenshen, 2016). Haenschen asserts that certain individuals can be targeted with direct social pressure by being tagged or mentioned (2016). Continuing with notifications from these platforms bombard the users with reminders and alerts even when they are not on the platform. With the social norm of participating in civic duty, people are often praised which is stemmed from the root of the psychology of social acceptance.

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Additionally, the use of social media has inherent democratic capabilities. Transitioning off of traditional media, social media has created a platform for citizens to be able to challenge the monopoly of mass media production and dissemination by state and commercial institutions (Loader, 2011). Loader claims that social media is easily accessible to most citizens living in advanced societies and netizens no longer have to be passive consumers of political party propaganda, government spin, or mass media news. They are enabled to actively challenge discourses and share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions (Loader, 2011). Social media is significant in challenging the existing commercial and political dominance of many social groups; it has become a mass collaboration of innovations and ideas in democratic practices (Loader, 2011).

With social media, and anyone being able to participate in the use of these platforms, there are discouraging users that troll public communication on social media (Hannan, 2018). Hannan explored a mainstream issue affecting social media politics and even legislation. Hannan went in-depth about the amusement in individuals trolling to create a public discourse leading up to turning democracy into entertainment. Public discourse in polarizing topics such as religion, health, science, and immigration has been converted into a new form of entertainment (Hannan, 2018).

Taking a look at social media communication performed by past presidents, former U.S. president Barack Obama was able to effectively use his robust social media presence. Obama was able to gain support by participating in talk shows, videos, and sharing his personality online (Hannan, 2018). Citizens were not just voting for what political stance a president holds; consequently, it is all about the entire package (Hannan, 2018). Politicians could no longer have a boring and humorless personality of the past (Hannan, 2018). Rather, they had to exhibit

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qualities that would enable them to stand out constantly on social media. Reinventing themselves to be charismatic was apparent yet again in Trump's candidacy (Hannan, 2018).

The exception was that Trump's statements were based around his narcissism, constant, and desperate need to feed his ego through exaggerated praise (Hannan, 2018). Trump publicly attacked fellow politicians, journalists, musicians, late-night comedians, athletes, union leaders, nations, and even private citizens (Hannan, 2018). This occurrence of a toxic and unstable personality thriving on social media revealed a disturbing fact about social media (Hannan, 2018). That there are trolls, sociopaths who find enjoyment in the psychological abuse of others (Hannan, 2018).

Anonymous users in the comments section would leave deliberately cruel comments that served no purpose other than to hurt, shock, offend, and cause discord (Hannan, 2018). What began as an anonymous practice has become a normalized and rationalized behavior. Trolling is now an open practice, in which many trolls no longer bother hiding behind fake names and fake pictures. Feeling ever more confident to make abusive comments on people they know and do not know. The atmosphere of social media has become so poisoned by incivility that trolling can rightly be said to be the new normal, as regular to our political atmosphere as the air we breathe (Hannan, 2018).

Uncovering a complex scene that leads to questionable tactics from the victory of a specific candidate (Valenzuela, 2017). There is a myriad of issues that arise when social media comes to play. To have a true democracy, there should not be disruptive movements or actions that sway a certain political candidate (Aruguete, 2018). The use of social media has allowed for the creation of alliances, maintenance, and favoritism towards candidates; additionally, can shape netizens' choices and opportunities by providing a clear advantage over other factions (Hallinan,

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2020). The analysis of a digital democracy can be used in the future to provide important intel that could be used in any political landscape (Loader, 2011).

### **Influence of Social Media Framing: The use of Psychological Persuasion**

Shleifer (2014) described the aim of political marketing as to achieve political goals by way of psychological persuasion. There is no difference between political marketing and psychological operations (PSYOP). The goal of PSYOP is to help the military forces achieve victory by using mainly civilian media tools, which are prevalent in current political-social media (Shleifer, 2014).

Social media platforms can collect user data and influence a user's mood (Hallinan, 2020). A popular platform, Facebook, was able to control a user's feed to selectively make them see what they wanted to see. Facebook was affecting how their users felt, playing with their emotions. Hallinan concluded that there will be issues regarding transparency, manipulation, and the potential for future harm for the users of social media sites. These social media sites have become a common part of a person's daily routine.

Social media communications are used to disseminate misinformation and disinformation routinely, and relatively invisibly, to influence collective behavior and public attitudes across multiple situations and settings (Innes, 2019). A multitude of studies comprises digital information being falsified or conspired to be influential on public attitudes and behaviors in moments of emergency and crisis. The studies further emphasize the use of subtly framing social issues that are collectively attended to and neglected (Innes, 2019).

According to Aruguete (2018), there are algorithms in social media that identify trends and inform backend operation managers to inform editors on what news they should prioritize, "the act of framing social events by selecting or discarding information offered by the official



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government social media account” (p. 480). Aruguete continues to state that users can frame social events by affecting the frequency of words, images, and embedded links that circulate among connected peers, stating that there are distinguished users in pro-and anti-government communities frame by selecting or discarding posts that included words, hyperlinks, and hashtags. In particular, social media serves a key role in the delivery and propagation of content and framing can be in place by the works of impressions, the more interaction a content has with an incident (Aruguete, 2018). The more an affair will get labeled to what the viewers want. By the audience choosing what terms should be associated with an event, the social media platform will feature keywords, images, and links responding to the trending frames (Aruguete, 2018). However, if the content is not congruent with the users’ beliefs, it will not be shared and will not propagate among peers (Aruguete, 2018). Social media frames political narratives by highlighting facets or issues in polarized political environments.

This ability to steer the construction of ‘public problems’ is crucial to the understanding of how social communications platforms and their data are influencing social order (Innes, 2019). When it comes to publicly influencing the understanding for psychological action. There are three elements to social media disruptive influences: identity spoofing, information spoofing, and truthing. Identity spoofing is when individual claims to be someone they are not; furthermore, providing false social status (Innes, 2019). This can give a logos rhetoric to readers that are not well informed. Identity spoofing helps to persuade the audience to take action on false credibility. Information spoofing involves the process of falsification, suppression, or amplification through misrepresenting the content of a message (Innes, 2019). Information spoofing is another term for framing by highlighting the emotional aspects of the message that would incite action. Truthing persuades by “claiming to be furnishing the audience with the

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facts” (pg. 248); it can be a positive aspect, but under a public image could be damaging to one’s reputation. Truthing comprises the use of statistics, data, quotes, and official statements to discredit other narratives.

With all these elements having to deal with sparking an emotional response. It accumulates a more participatory result. Valenzuela (2017) had collected the datasets from multiple social media content and then conducted in-depth interviews. The frames focused on the social issues and what made up a share. From the data, Valenzuela showed an increase in human interest by 44% on new information provided. Valenzuela insisted that the influence of sharing content affects people’s attitudes and opinions. The varied emotions from social media content contain hope, anger, arousal, or valence relating these leading up to psychological actions.

Moreover, social media is a new form of democracy where users are all participants. There are negative and positives to this new age device that can cause political discourse. With the influences of social media framing and emotional triggers, there is a vision of why physical action takes place in response to social media communication.

### **Research Questions**

Past researchers mention but never fully explore the result of intention based on social media content. The adverse in social media posting will be investigated with identity spoofing, information spoofing, and truthing to uncover emotional effects. These emotional effects can cause reinforcement in favoritism with an influencer’s stance. The proceeding research questions were developed with this aim in mind:

RQ1: How does information spoofing cause the audience to have an emotional valence?

RQ2: How does truthing cause favoritism towards a political candidate?

RQ3: How does identity spoofing cause the audience to gain arousal in the message?

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RQ4: How will the political affiliation of a social media user affect their reaction towards the message exposure?

### **Methodology**

In order to discover this study's hypothesis on whether identity spoofing, information spoofing, and truthing play a role in the support of a candidate or individual beliefs; correspondingly, an experimental study will be conducted.

### **Participants**

For participants, I will be using quota sampling of social media users above the age of 18. Limiting the age to above 18 will eliminate uninformed citizens that has the inability to carry out their civic duty. The recruitment will be age-restricted to ensure manipulation checks. Since this study finds participants that use social media, they will be taken from various social media platforms. Ideally, a selection of approximately 150 from each political party will be selected to ensure an accurate representation of the political affiliation. The accuracy of this study will be improved by recruiting participants from social media, because of their current background knowledge on these platforms.

### **Variables**

For stimuli, I will choose the selected social media platforms through a pretest from social media users; with the intention to reveal the main platform for the dominant type of user-generated content.

### ***Independent Variables***

**Stimuli.** The procedures of this study will employ a randomized 3 (Public influence: identity spoofing, information spoofing, truthing) x 3 (Text Based, Image-Based, and Video-Based) full factorial design in three different political parties (liberal, moderate, conservative).

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To test the effects of spoofing and political party affiliation in different parties, it can enhance the external validity of the study's findings. These participants will be exposed to political content in each form of media being video, text, and image that include each category of social spoofing, identity spoofing, and truthing. Among the post shown there will be a mix of traditional campaigning messages that do not include any type of psychological persuasion tactics. The use of showing traditional posts will establish a baseline for participants to understand how they typically react.

**Political Affiliation.** The political affiliation will be the independent variable (IV) that will affect the participants' reaction to a message. After completing the voluntary consent form, the question of "which political affiliation would you best describe yourself?" will be asked with the following three answer choices "liberal, moderate, conservative". By organizing it into these subgroups, it will create a sectional study to determine the group similarities of background leading to fewer differences factoring into the dependent variable.

### *Dependent Variables*

**Belief in the Message.** The dependent variable (DV) will be the level of a person's belief in the message and the level of their intention to support a candidate. Recording the reaction to a post in multiple form factors such as accuracy, emotional valence, credibility, and support for the candidate. The questionnaire will adopt questions from Orben's effect of valence and social media relationship (2017). The basis of the questions will be on a five-point Likert scale (1—not well at all, 5—extremely well) that will be used to measure the level of the participant's reaction. The information spoofing question will be collected by "How accurate do you believe the post is?". The identity spoofing question will be gathered by "How accurate do you believe the claims are based on the participant's credibility?". The truthing question will be questioned by "How

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well are you to support the opposing candidate based on newly found evidence?”. The truthing question can measure three values support, favoritism, and maintenance. The level of emotional response will be asked by “How well do you feel about this social media post?”.

### **Procedure**

Researchers will send an invitation on various social media platforms. Once redirected to an online survey site, they will be presented with an informed consent document, and decide whether to take part in the study. The site will use a simple randomization function to assign participants to one of the nine conditions (public influence x social media platform). Then, they will be asked to answer the political party with a predestined trait. Pre-existing attitudes are measured to act as a control along with a manipulation check question after the first stimulus. Then, participants will answer questions for dependent variables.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations for this study will need to be approved by James Madison University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this experimental design. The IRB will protect the participants in the research to prevent risk to the participants and to ensure that the procedures are ethical. In gaining the university’s IRB approval, research participants will sign a voluntary informed consent form stating their written permission to be a part of the study. The study will protect the participants’ anonymity. The research participants will be kept confidential to the researcher as well. At any moment that the participant feels uncomfortable with the study, they can leave at their own will.

### **Validity and Reliability**

The study will first introduce a pilot study to ensure validity and internal consistency. The study will also examine Cronbach’s alpha coefficient to assess the reliability of

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measurements. If Cronbach's alpha results are all over a measurement of a .70 on the scale, the results are reliable measurements. A series of (ANOVA) tests will be performed on the data collected to determine whether the given independent variables affect the dependent variable.

### **Limitations and Future Direction**

With the study comprising full anonymity of the participants and the data being confidential to the researcher, there is a plausible issue of troll surfacing in the study. The troll may skew the data as anonymity will cause no repercussions. The ability to gather sufficient participants from each political party to take part in the study is difficult because some platforms are more populated with one party or another. The potential for participants to partake in the research is scare relating to no inclination of reward. Measuring the level of an individual is respondent on their self-report. The self-reported data may be biased from the fact it is their own perceptions and emotional sensitivity. In the future, this research should triangulate multiple data collection strategies, exploring different methodologies. Using a larger sample size and conducting a study where the data is not confidential to the research to reduce having trolls partaking in the study.

### **Conclusion**

Social media has delved into modern man's routine. With unknown forces lurking in the shadows, they are perceptually changing our outlook. Political Democracy is in jeopardy when these instruments are being used maliciously. The ability to cause a physiological and psychological reaction to netizens has been proven by evidential events such as riots, campaigns, and coup d'etat.

Previous literature has studied thoroughly the effects of social media. The advantages and disadvantages of social media. The echo chambers and confirmation biases resulting from social

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media. The past research has not intensively studied how individuals react to the contents of a post. The measurement of an individual relating to political content regarding emotional valence, informational accuracy, informational credibility, support, favoritism, and maintenance.

Therefore, this paper attempts to meet this need for research by approaching these topics from an experimental design perspective.

The study includes participants from various sources of social media. The participants are divided into their respective political affiliations. Gathering participants' reactions to content, but have yet to study how the relationship is between physiological and psychological reaction coming to fruition. The data is limited and will need further research to lead to a better understanding.

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