Networks of Influence: How Media, Identity, and Relationships Shaped College Students'

Behavior in the 2024 Presidential Election

By Amadea Lehoczky Escobar

Lehigh University

Dr. Ziad Munson and Dr. Mariana De Maio

May 2025

Abstract

Over the past two decades, heightened polarization and the rise of social media have reshaped the U.S. political landscape, transforming how Americans consume information and form political views. These effects can be best observed among young people. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduate students at a Pennsylvania university, this study examines how political information influenced college student behavior during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Using three theoretical lenses—diffusion of innovations, social identity theory, and selective exposure—the study finds that students played active roles in their information ecosystems, selectively consuming, curating, and sharing political content. However, these behaviors were strongly mediated by pre-existing political attitudes. Students with clear political preferences experienced the campaign period as reinforcement, while undecided students often felt overwhelmed or disengaged. For the latter group, close personal ties played a more significant role than media in shaping their partisan engagement. Ultimately, the study finds that students' political behavior was shaped by their social networks, identities, and patterns of information consumption.

Networks of Influence: How Media, Identity, and Relationships Shaped College Students'

Behavior in the 2024 Election

If an individual were to behave rationally, they would not have cast a ballot by November 5th, 2024. Many theorists have noted that the costs of voting for any American—transportation, time, and becoming informed—outweigh the infinitesimal probability of their vote impacting the election (Aldrich, 1993; Downs, 1957; Feddersen, 2004). And yet, "mass voting is essential to a well-functioning American democracy" that derives its legitimacy and power from its citizens (Bryan et al., p. 12653; Dahl, 1998). Given the opportunity costs associated with voting and other political engagement, motivating political participation is always challenging (Feddersen, 2004). Nonetheless, in the 2024 presidential election, 155 million ballots were cast, representing a 64.1% voter turnout, the second highest in the past century (McDonald, 2025). While a definitive explanation of American voter engagement remains elusive, *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld's seminal 1940 survey of voters, identified key mechanisms through which political influence unfolds (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Finding that most voters begin the election with partisan leanings, Lazarsfeld (1948) determined that mass media serves to reinforce these predispositions, whereas interpersonal influence primarily drives a subset of undecided voters. Since this landmark study, the American political campaign landscape has shifted dramatically as a result of increased polarization and new media. These shifts are likely to have had a particularly pronounced effect on younger voters, who have never known an environment unaffected by these forces. To understand how influence unfolds in this new landscape, this manuscript examines the nexus of information consumption and political behavior among students at a Pennsylvania university during the 2024 presidential election.

The U.S. political environment during the 2024 campaign period was characterized by a "clear-cut, polarized two-party system and a competitive, partisan media market" (Zhu et al., 2024, p. 466). Since the emergence of the two-party system in the 1850s, the Democratic and Republican parties have collectively won every presidential election (The Center for Legislative Archives, 2022). However, in recent history, the longstanding partisan divide in American politics has grown increasingly pronounced. Over the past 50 years, Democrats and Republicans in Congress have undergone significant ideological differentiation (DeSilver, 2022). This has led to a widening party divide, with Republicans shifting rightward more than Democrats have shifted left (DeSilver, 2022). Whereas there were over 160 congressional moderates in 1972, that number had dropped to approximately 24 by 2022 (DeSilver, 2022). Concurrently, Zhu et al. (2024) found that emotional animosity between partisan supporters during the 2016 and 2020 elections "reached levels unseen in other presidential elections in the late 20th and early 21st centuries" (p. 466). This split is also reflected in mass media, where the estimated ideological positions of television channels *CNN, MSNBC,* and *Fox News* shifted nearly 50% further apart between 2000 and 2015 (Matthews, 2017). Although this trend predates its rise, social media is widely viewed as a contributing factor to the partisan divide (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Barrett et al., 2021; Eschbaugh-Soha, 2015).

While evolutions in media technology have regularly buffeted the electoral process, the advent of social media marked a significant departure from previous inventions by shifting who consumes, distributes, and controls information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In the 2012 election, one of the first in which candidates actively used social media, Barack Obama maintained public accounts on nine platforms, compared to Mitt Romney's five (Pew Research Center, 2016). Social media engagement appeared to predict the election's outcome, with Obama

significantly outpacing Romney in Facebook likes, 27.5 million to 2.9 million, and Twitter followers, 18 million to 800,000 (Eschbaugh-Soha, 2015). While candidates utilize these platforms to construct their public image, citizens leverage them to participate in political discourse. During the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Obama's speech spurred more than 50,000 related tweets every minute (Stroud, 2014). In 2016, tweets about Donald Trump were more numerous and received markedly more likes than those about Hillary Clinton—a dynamic both candidates later described as instrumental to the election's outcome (Fujiwara et al., 2024). The integration of social media into U.S. democracy has been accompanied by serious concerns, particularly regarding the intensification of polarization and the proliferation of misinformation. These concerns gained heightened visibility in 2016, when Trump popularized the term 'fake news' to describe both social and mass media (Benkler et al., 2018). Research supports the view that social media fosters an environment conducive to the spread of misinformation, owing in part to its legal liability shield (Taras & Davis, 2022). Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that the most widely shared fabricated news stories on Facebook reached larger audiences than top mainstream news stories, and many individuals who encountered this content reported believing it. At the same time, Americans' trust in the accuracy of mass media news reporting has steadily declined since 1976, hitting a record low in recent years (Brenan, 2024). This "declining trust in mainstream media could be both a cause and consequence of 'fake news' gaining more traction" (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 215).

This was the backdrop of the 2024 presidential election, in which incumbent Vice President Kamala Harris, who assumed the nomination after the resignation of President Joe Biden, faced former President Donald Trump. Presidential candidates, political parties, and independent interest groups spent a total of $5.5 billion, making the 2024 race the second most

expensive presidential election since at least 1988 when adjusted for inflation (Grabenstein, 2024). Most of this money was allocated to advertising across television, radio, and digital media platforms such as social media. Television accounted for the largest share, with $3 billion spent, compared to about $365 million spent on digital media (Wesleyan Media Project, 2024). While digital advertising spending is growing, television advertisements remain paramount as "campaigns still find value in reaching voters in more traditional ways" (Wesleyan Media Project, 2024). This aligns with how American adults received political and election news: 35% most commonly through television, 21% via news sites or apps, and 20% through social media (Shearer et al., 2024). However, the pattern varies meaningfully across age demographics. While 63% of Americans aged 65 and older primarily received their news from television, just 10% of adults aged 18-29 did (Shearer et al., 2024). For these younger Americans, social media took precedence, with 46% identifying it as a primary news source, followed by news sites or apps with 18%—a notable departure from older age groups (Shearer et al., 2024).

In the rapidly evolving American political landscape, shaped by new media and increased polarization, young Americans' formative political decisions offer a valuable avenue for analysis. Given their dominant use of social media, examining how these platforms, alongside mass media and interpersonal channels, influence young Americans' political attitudes and behavior is essential for discerning long-term political trends. Despite a history of lower participation, youth voter turnout has fluctuated in recent years, reaching unprecedented levels in 2020 (Marcus, 2024). However, in the 2024 election, turnout declined again, with an estimated 42% of voters aged 18-29 casting ballots nationwide, and 50% in battleground states (Tufts University Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2024). Within this broad age category, college students represent a particularly interesting subset. Positioned in

institutions intended to serve as incubators for intellectual development, college students have particularly open access to information and dense social networks. Additionally, get-out-the vote efforts often descend on college campuses because of the concentration of un-registered, eligible citizens. Such efforts have grown in recent years, as "the higher education community has specifically pushed for increasing voter turnout as an important form of civic participation" (McNaughtan & Brown, 2020, p. 356) As the recipients of an abundance of influences, college students represent a valuable population for this study's examination of the relative impact of information sources on political behavior formation.

While the momentous character of U.S. presidential elections has stimulated a large body of research, few studies have specifically disentangled the contemporary experiences of college students. During campaign cycles, numerous surveys track Americans' information sources and political attitudes to help explain electoral outcomes. I reference several of these datasets throughout this manuscript, as they help situate the study's findings within a broader national context (Aubin & Liedke, 2024; Eagleton Institute of Politics, n.d.; Pew Research Center, 2024). However, these surveys often present generalized findings across broad demographic groups and lack granular analysis of how specific content shapes attitudes and behaviors. Canonical studies, such as *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) and *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), offer ambitious qualitative insights into electoral decision making, emphasizing the distinct influences of interpersonal networks and mass media. While these studies form a critical architecture for this research, their construction in earlier paradigms limits their direct relevance to a modern landscape characterized by the rise of social media and amplified polarization (Tucker et al., 2018). More recent studies often center on Twitter and Facebook, falling short of capturing the evolving dynamics of newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Bond et al.,

2013; Bashky et al., 2012; Fujiwara et al., 2024). Given these platforms' unique algorithmic structures, participatory remix cultures, and overwhelming popularity among Gen Z users, they represent a patently different communication environment that may reshape how political messages are encountered, interpreted, and shared (Cervi et al., 2023; Kligler-Vilenchick & Literat, 2025). Considering this lacuna, this research aims to provide a holistic account of how college students received information and influence during the 2024 presidential election, and how these factors shaped their political behavior.

To achieve this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 students at Lehigh University in February 2025. The analysis is grounded in three theories that have historically shaped research of Americans' electoral campaign experiences: diffusion of innovations, social identity theory, and selective exposure theory. Through the lens of diffusion of innovations, I examine how participants evaluated information from social media, mass media, and interpersonal channels to inform their behavior. Social identity theory helps reveal how participants' group affiliations shaped their electoral decisions. Selective exposure theory captures the agency participants exercised in choosing the influence they consumed. Together, these theories form a robust framework for understanding participants' experiences. With this approach defined, the following review examines the key literature that informs this study.

Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of Innovations

Diffusion of innovations is a theory of interindividual behavior that elucidates the process through which novel "ideas, practices, or objects" are adopted across social networks over time (Rogers, 1983, p. xviii). At the core of this theory, and of several interrelated concepts discussed in this review, is the social network, which serves as the primary structure through which

information flows (Al-Taie & Kadry, 2017). The term was first introduced by Barnes (1954), who described it as follows:

> "The image I have is of a set of points, some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, or sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact with each other. We can, of course, think of the whole of social life as generating a network of this kind" (p. 43).

Barnes's (1954) findings advanced the idea that populations are interwoven through the relationships of their social actors. Building on this foundation, subsequent researchers investigated how communication flows through these networks (Granovetter, 1973; Milgram, 1967; Rogers, 1983). Milgram (1967) demonstrated that social networks are powerfully knit, allowing information originating from one individual to reach socially distant or otherwise unconnected populations. This transmission relies on an intermediary who bridges the two populations (Milgram & Travers, 1969). Granovetter (1973) found that intermediaries are most often individuals connected by numerous weak ties, defined as relationships characterized by low intimacy, infrequent contact, or limited reciprocity. As information shared through strong ties often becomes redundant, circulating within homogenous groups, weak ties play a critical role in facilitating diffusion to broader populations (Granovetter, 1973).

While these researchers mapped the pathways of information dissemination, Rogers (1983, originally published in 1962) focused specifically on how novel innovations are adopted across social networks. In *Diffusion of Innovations,* Rogers (1983, p. 7) argued that diffusion, or "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system," occurs through an observable pattern. The first determinant of this process is the communication channel. Rogers (1983) found that while mass media is

primarily effective in generating initial awareness of an innovation, interpersonal channels—interactions with members of one's social network—are more persuasive in encouraging its adoption. Most individuals do not evaluate innovations objectively but instead rely heavily on the opinions and experiences of their strong ties when forming judgments (Rogers, 1983). This emphasis on relative influence initially made Rogers's diffusion of innovations theory appear well suited to the aims of this study. However, over the course of the research, I found that its emphasis on the spread of novel information was not directly relevant to the more routine flow of political information that emerged from the interviews. Therefore, instead of drawing on all aspects of the framework, this manuscript primarily considers the roles of social networks, communication channels, and opinion leadership.

Opinion leaders, identified by Rogers (1983) as key actors in the diffusion process, are individuals who "are able to influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior informally, in a desired way, and with relative frequency" (p. 27). This concept originates with Lazarsfeld (1944), who first recognized opinion leaders as key intermediaries between mass media and their social networks. Expanding on this, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) argued that the influence of mass media does not unfold directly, but rather through a 'two-step flow,' first reaching opinion leaders, who then interpret and transmit the information within their social networks. Opinion leaders hold the greatest influence over their strong ties (Rogers, 1983). However, as Granovetter explained, weak ties connect individuals across different networks, allowing information to flow beyond isolated social circles (Granovetter, 1973). Together, these dynamics show that mass media and interpersonal channels influence individuals in different ways, depending on where they are located in their social networks and how they interact with others.

To explore how these patterns shape influence during campaign periods, I first return to the work of Lazarsfeld (1944). While examining how voters formed their electoral decisions during the 1940 election, Lazarsfeld (1944) found that "the strongest influence…was face-to-face contact," as opposed to mass media. This was partly because "a considerable part of the population was scarcely touched by the political content of the media" (Lazarsfeld, 1944, p. 322). Instead, mass media content primarily reached "opinion leaders, who in-turn [passed] it on to the rest of the people by word of mouth," demonstrating a two-step flow of communication (Lazarsfeld, 1944, p. 327). Another reason interpersonal channels were particularly influential was because they had the greatest impact on undecided voters. While most individuals entered the election period with largely formed voting intentions, undecided voters remained uncommitted even after exposure to mass media. As a result, this group was "especially sensitive to the social pressures around them" (Lazarsfeld, 1944, p. 330). More recent research has corroborated Lazarsfeld's finding that political behavior can be influenced by interpersonal communication and social network dynamics (Kenny, 1992; Nickerson, 2008; Reilly, 2017). Kenny (1992) found a positive correlation between an individual's likelihood of voting and the voting behavior of those they discussed politics with. Moreover, Nickerson (2008) found that voting is "contagious," observing that "the entire act of voting is assisted by interactions with friends, neighbors, and family members" (p. 49). The present study further investigates the relationship between interpersonal and mass media influences on political behavior, while also examining a third channel: social media.

While Rogers (1983) developed diffusion of innovations theory before the advent of the internet, this invention has fundamentally transformed the mechanisms through which information spreads. Over the past four decades, individuals' lives have increasingly distended

into the virtual realm, with internet usage among U.S. adults surging from 1.4% in 1983 to 96% in 2024 (Fox & Rainie, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2024). The internet has reshaped communication by expanding interpersonal interaction to include behaviors like text messaging, evolving mass media to incorporate digital formats, and giving rise to social media platforms (Balqis & Amelia, 2023; Han, 2024). In this manuscript, social media will be defined as platforms that allow users to "create a public or semi-public profile within a delimited system, to create a list with other users with whom they share a connection, and to watch and go through the list of their connections and the people connected with it" (Botou & Marsellos, 2018, p. 1457). As of November 2024, 85% of Americans reported using YouTube, 70% Facebook, and 50% Instagram, making these three the most widely adopted social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2024). As these platforms have supplanted traditional forms of communication and relationship-building, they have become central channels for information dissemination (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Kapoor et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2023).

Although social media presents a markedly different communication landscape, it continues to support the influence of opinion leaders, as well as the network-based spread of political behaviors. Research consistently finds that the role of opinion leaders persists on digital platforms (Alexandre et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2014). Wu et al. (2011) found that just 20,000 Twitter users created half of the links consumed by all 42 million users. Furthermore, Wu et al. (2011) found that approximately 490,000 Twitter users acted as intermediaries between mass media and their followers by reposting or resharing content from mainstream outlets. These users facilitated a two-step flow of information, enabling a substantial portion of Twitter users to access media content indirectly (Wu et al., 2011). One study found that this networked structure also enables political behaviors to spread across users (Bond et al., 2013). During the 2010

congressional elections, Bond et al. (2013) sent messages to 61 million Facebook users featuring an 'I Voted' button and polling place information, with some users also shown photos of their friends who had clicked the button. They found that messages including images of users' friends led to higher engagement and directly increased voter turnout by approximately 60,000 individuals (Bond et al., 2013). However, Bond et al. (2013) argued this mobilization worked because it "primarily spread through strong-tie networks that probably [existed] offline but [had] an online representation" (p. 298). This finding highlights the complex dynamics of how influence unfolds across social media, mass media, and interpersonal channels. To better understand the roles these channels play in shaping young people's political behavior, the present study poses the following research question:

> RQ1: How did college students receive political information through social media, mass media, and interpersonal channels during the 2024 election, and in what ways did these sources influence their political behavior?

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s, presents a paradigm for understanding intergroup behavior, defined as "interactions between two or more individuals that are fully determined by their membership in social groups or categories" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 8). In the theory's foundational chapter "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," Tajfel and Turner (1986, p. 16) define social identity as "the aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves as belonging." Even in the absence of formal affiliation, social identity contributes to an individual's self-esteem and shapes how they think about others, consequently influencing how they behave (Botou & Marsellos, 2018; Greene, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, the

development of social identity gives rise to the related processes of social categorization, social comparison, and the pursuit of positive distinctiveness. Social categorization refers to the mental assignment of individuals into in-groups, to which one perceives belonging, and out-groups, considered the distinct, oppositional category. Tajfel and Turner (1986) found that even the unbidden performance of social categorization is "sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group" (p. 13). This occurs through social comparison, whereby individuals evaluate the status of their in-group relative to others, and through positive distinctiveness, the motivation to inflate differences between groups to maintain a favorable in-group identity (Greene, 2004). As I later apply social identity theory to analyze students' experiences during the electoral campaign period, this review explores how political participation is shaped by several forms of social group identification.

Given the defining role of the two-party system in American politics, political group identification conventionally centers on self-designation as either a 'Democrat' or a 'Republican.' Despite the voluntary nature of political party identification, as of April 2024, 65% of registered voters identified with one of the two, and 97% expressed at least some inclination toward either party (Pew Research Center, 2024). Research demonstrates that political party alignment can function as a powerful social identity. Campbell et al. (1960) were among the first to propose that individuals identify with political parties in the same way they do racial, ethnic, and faith-based groups. Expanding on this research, Greene (2004, p. 143) found that political parties "represent real and meaningful groups" with which individuals can strongly identify. Political identification can prompt behaviors consistent with additional aspects of social identity theory (Campbell et al. 1960; Greene, 2004). In particular, strong party identifiers often display heightened positive affect toward their political party (Greene, 2004). This attachment can lead

to long-term affiliation, as "partisans tend to repeatedly support their preferred party, even when the candidates and the issues change" (Dalton, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, party identification plays a central role in political behavior, with stronger identification correlating with increased participation in partisan activities (Campbell et al., 1960; Dalton, 2021; Greene, 2004). While party identification was introduced in early electoral research, it holds increased relevance today in light of growing political polarization (American National Election Studies, n.d.; DeSilver, 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Arguing that "partisanship has become one of Americans' most salient social identities," Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018, p. 23) found that while parties have maintained strong in-group cohesion, they have become increasingly hostile toward the opposing party. Therefore, partisanship functions as a prominent social identity embedded in electoral behavior.

Social identity as 'a voter' has emerged as another dimension of political participation. Bond et al. (2013), whose research was discussed above, found that Facebook users were 2.08% more likely to identify themselves as 'a voter' if they viewed a counter of their connections who had already done so. This suggests that identifying as 'a voter' is viewed as socially desirable. Brennan (2025) reinforced this idea, showing that most Americans regard casting a ballot, regardless of its substance, as a moral obligation. By voting, individuals adopt the social identity of 'a voter,' which can enhance self-esteem by aligning them with an in-group perceived as "competent, morally appropriate, and worthy of social approval" (Bryan et al., 2011, p. 12653). Framing voting in terms of social identity, therefore, can be a powerful motivator for turnout. Bryan et al. (2011) found that eligible but unregistered Americans showed greater interest in participating in the 2008 election when asked if they wanted to 'be a voter' rather than simply to 'vote.' Given the study's median age of 23, Bryan et al. (2011) contended that this social identity "may be more effective at influencing young adults, whose self-concepts may be less well

defined than those of older people" (p. 12654). This observation prompts the present study to assess whether 'voter' identity holds similar salience among college students.

Another component this study explores is the role of demographic identities, which have consistently been demonstrated to underpin partisan voter behavior (Hajnal, 2023; Harrison, 2023, Wolf et al., 2024). The widely accepted idea that social demographics, such as gender, race, and income level, determine voting behavior can be traced back to Lazarsfeld (1944). In the 1940 election, Lazarsfeld (1944) found that he could predict individuals' party preferences with approximately 75% accuracy based on just three factors—religious affiliation, economic status, and urban or rural residence—which he collectively defined as their 'political predisposition.' Furthermore, he observed that in the months preceding the election, individuals' voting intentions shifted to better align with his predictions. Lazarsfeld (1944) hypothesized that these shifts resulted from increased exposure to political propaganda and social networks aligned with individuals' predispositions. Kulachai et al. (2023) proposed an alternative explanation, suggesting that individuals vote along demographic lines because social groups prioritize different policy issues. This is illustrated by examining women's voting patterns, as over the past 40 years, this group has consistently supported "the Democratic presidential candidate in greater numbers than men" (Kahn, 2020). Kulachai et al. (2023, p. 3) found this is because "women often prioritize issues such as healthcare, education, social welfare, and gender equality, which are commonly associated" with the left. Another explanation can consider the role of education level, which has become an increasingly strong predictor of political behavior over time (Bovens & Wille, 2021). Kim (2023) identified that "education develops individuals' knowledge and their democratic values," which in turn increases political participation, such as voter turnout, among college-educated individuals. This indicates that the lived experiences of certain demographic

groups can also contribute to belief formation. It is likely that propaganda exposure, policy concerns, and lived experiences all contribute to why demographic identity shapes political behavior.

As I review the social identities that may have informed students' experiences, it is essential to recognize that the internet has become a central arena for young people's social identity formation. Nearly 75% of college students report using their phones every hour, with one of the most frequent uses being engagement with social media platforms (Vorderer et al., 2016). Multiple studies have demonstrated that college students interact with their social groups through social media (Bal & Bicen, 2017; Botou & Marsellos, 2018; Jenyanthi, 2022). Therefore, social identity can be formed, expressed, and maintained through social media just as it can through face-to-face intergroup interactions. Given that social identity extends to social media platforms, research indicates that Tajfel and Turner's (1986) theoretical principles remain applicable in virtual contexts. Heatherly et al. (2017) found that when individuals strongly disfavor a partisan out-group, they are likely to also direct hostility toward out-group members encountered on social media. Some research indicates that social comparison predominantly manifests as in-group favoritism in physical environments and out-group derogation on social media (Greene, 2004; Rathje et al., 2021). This is likely due to the relative anonymity, deindividuation, and reactive communication that characterizes social media platforms, fostering settings where negative language dominates (Botou & Marsellos, 2018; Schöne et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2024). Prior research has established that social identity processes can unfold in both digital and virtual environments. However, relatively little attention has been given to how the social identities that contemporary youth construct, such as partisan, 'voter,' or demographic, shape their political behavior. Accordingly, the present study asks:

RQ2: What was the relationship between college students' social group memberships and

their political behavior in the 2024 election?

Selective Exposure Theory

Selective exposure is the tendency of individuals "to expose themselves more readily and

more often to messages expressing views compatible with their own attitudes than to messages

espousing incompatible views" (McCroskey & Prichard, 1967, p. 1). This phenomenon was first

observed by Lazarsfeld (1944). Disrupting the prevailing view of the time, Lazarsfeld (1944, p.

324) found that the "stereotype of the impartial voter weighing all the evidence offered by both

political parties is just another political myth." Instead, he identified that individuals'

partisanship shapes both the communication channels they use and the content they engage with,

as they tend to seek out congenial messages (Lazarsfeld, 1944). While Lazarsfeld's research

illustrated selective exposure, Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* is most often cited

as the basis for its formalized study (Stroud, 2014). Festinger (1968) asserted that "the existence

of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the

dissonance and achieve consonance" by "actively [avoiding] situations and information which

would likely increase the dissonance" (p. 3). Dissonance arises from the presence of two

conflicting beliefs, ideas, or values (Hart et al., 2009). Therefore, once individuals form a belief,

they tend to seek reinforcement and "actively avoid…arguments counter to their opinions"

(Freedman & Sears, 1965). This can occur through the deliberate or inadvertent selection of

like-minded sources, such as discussion partners, media outlets, or pieces of content (Stroud,

2014).

Researchers have extensively examined the conditions under which selective exposure

occurs, resulting in a range of explanations (Fischer et al., 2008; Steppat et al., 2022; Stroud,

2014). Consistent with cognitive dissonance theory, Hart et al. (2009) found that dissonant information poses a greater cognitive threat when it contradicts a deeply-held belief, making individuals more likely to engage in selective exposure to protect those beliefs. However, this can hinge on an individual's tolerance for cognitive conflict, as open-minded individuals are more willing to engage with dissonant viewpoints than their counterparts (Hart et al., 2009; Mutz & Martin, 2001). Selective exposure can also depend on an individual's level of critical engagement, as processing like-minded information "requires less cognitive effort than processing uncongenial information" (Stroud, 2014, p. 533). Stroud (2014) also found that individuals tend to perceive congenial information as higher in quality than incongruent information, a process known as selective validation, which leads them to devote greater attention to it. Another notable finding is that when individuals anticipate being challenged to articulate their beliefs, they are less likely to engage in selective exposure (Hart et al., 2009). Therefore, the threat of being perceived as poorly informed can motivate more balanced information consumption (Hart et al., 2009). As the present study explores the dynamics of selective exposure in the 2024 election, it considers how well these explanations account for college students' behavior.

Interpersonal interactions are a primary channel through which college students are exposed to political information (Head et al., 2019; Klofstad, 2015). The conversations individuals have about politics are a "function of two factors: the availability of discussion partners in one's immediate environment and the amount of selectivity exercised in the choice of partners" (Mutz & Martin, 2001, p. 98). While nationwide, residential segregation has isolated individuals from others holding dissimilar views, one could reasonably expect that the diverse geographic makeup of a college campus counteracts this tendency (Guerin, 2021; Morales et al.,

2019). In this case, selectivity would become a greater determinant of exposure (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Individuals tend to seek out political discourse with like-minded individuals and avoid those with differing viewpoints (Stroud, 2014; Steppat et al., 2022). Given that individuals disagree with strong ties on approximately 30% of issues, selectivity appears to be an active and discerning process (Goel et al., 2010). This behavior is motivated by a desire to evade the perceived socio-emotional repercussions of network disagreement, which include anxiety, shock, betrayal and relationship strain (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Zhu et al., 2024). When these consequences are expected, expressing dissenting views requires courage (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Therefore, less assertive individuals tend to either avoid such discussions or temper their views when participating (Mutz & Martin, 2001).

Prior to the heightened fragmentation and plurality that define today's media environment, Mutz and Martin (2001) contended that mass media combatted the selective exposure that proliferated in interpersonal contexts (Steppat et al., 2021). Mutz and Martin (2001) found that individuals encountered more counter-attitudinal viewpoints through mass media, attributing this to the greater availability of dissimilar perspectives and a reduced ability for selective exposure. They elaborated on this idea, stating:

> "Media's greatest potential lies in its impersonal exposure of audiences to cross-cutting views, an essential form of communication in a highly pluralistic society. In order to sustain this benefit, however, news media must be structured so as to limit the public's capacity for selective exposure" (Mutz & Martin, 2001, p. 111).

As media choices expanded, it became clear that this structure relied on their limited number (Fischer et al., 2008; Iyengar et al., 2019; Rabb et al., 2023). For instance, Fischer et al. (2008) identified that individuals preferred congenial sources when presented with ten options, but

dissonant sources when only offered two. When there were limited options, individuals evaluated sources on their orientation, fueling curiosity towards dissonant information. However, with abundant choices, quality emerged as the decisive factor, driving preference for congenial sources (Fischer et al., 2008). Further, when presented with numerous choices, individuals may default to consuming sources favored by their like-minded peers (Steppat et al., 2022). Whether selective exposure is more readily practiced in interpersonal or mass media settings, as Mutz and Martin (2001) initially inquired, remains a matter of debate. However, in the modern media ecosystem characterized by a profusion of content, selective exposure is highly relevant. In mass media, this is reflected in the clear partisan divide among the news sources Americans consume (Jurkowitz et al., 2020; Shearer et al., 2024). On social media, this dynamic is further complicated, as algorithms curate content in ways that reinforce users' existing beliefs and limit exposure to opposing viewpoints (Cinelli et al., 2021; Steppat et al., 2022).

The emergence of social media as a dominant communication channel has spurred a substantial body of research exploring its impact on selective exposure (Avin et al., 2024; Steppat et al., 2022; Weeks et al., 2017). Steppat et al. (2022) found that selective exposure is more prevalent on social media than in newspapers, radio, or television. Given that preference for congenial content increases with the number of available options, the heightened selectivity observed on social media may be driven by its overwhelming volume of content—an estimated 500 million tweets and 95 million Instagram posts are shared daily (Lister, 2024; Sayce, 2022). As with mass media, the volume of available content on social media exceeds any individual's capacity to consume it, necessitating selective curation (Zhang et al., 2022). However, while content selection in mass media is largely agentic, on social media it is often shaped by algorithms, which curate users' feeds based on inferred preferences (Cervi et al., 2023; Zhang et

al., 2022). This design amplifies the potential for selective exposure by enabling users to easily view, search, and share viewpoint-specific content (Steppat et al., 2022). Through these features, social media empowers users to predominantly consume one-sided content and create echo chambers, or "closed (systems) where other voices are excluded by omission, causing (an individual's) beliefs to become amplified or reinforced" (Avin et al., 2024, p. 1). Conversely, muted user agency over content consumption on social media can enhance the likelihood of incidental news exposure (Steppat et al., 2022). Mitchell et al. (2013) found that 78% of Facebook users came across news content they did not actively seek out on the platform. Thus, social media creates an "environment where individuals can selectively approach information supporting their political worldviews, while being incidentally exposed to socially shared information that challenges their beliefs" (Zhu et al., 2024, p. 465). The present study closely examines the role of selective exposure on social media, given its central role in how young people consume political information (Shearer et al., 2024).

As this manuscript aims to connect information consumption to political behavior, it is crucial to review the effect of selective exposure on political attitudes. While exposure to opposing viewpoints can moderate emotional responses, enhance tolerance, and broaden political knowledge, selective exposure to congruent viewpoints may narrow political tolerance, reduce willingness to compromise, and constrain attention to divisive issues (Steppat et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). During the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Zhu et al. (2024) found that reliance on pro-attitudinal political information was associated with increased polarization, characterized by hostility towards political out-groups and enthusiasm for in-groups. Morris and Morris (2022) observed these effects in the 2016 election, finding that "exposure to Republican partisan media [had] a significant negative effect on feelings toward Hillary Clinton, even when controlling for

party identification, ideology, and feelings toward Clinton" prior (p. 1101). Building on this,
Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) illustrated that an additional three minutes of Fox News
consumption a week increased the likelihood of an average Democratic voter casting a
Republican vote by 1.03%. Conversely, Fujiwara et al. (2024) estimated that a 10% increase in
the number of users of Twitter, a predominantly liberal platform at the time, correlated with a
0.2% decrease in Trump's share of the total vote count in the 2016 and 2024 elections. While
these studies find that information consumption has tangible impacts on political behavior, they
fall short of explaining the cognitive mechanisms underlying these effects. Moreover, although
prior findings show individuals most often selectively expose themselves to congenial messages,
they do not address how individuals perceive their own selectivity. Therefore, the present study
poses the following research question:

> RQ3: How did college students exercise agency in shaping their spheres of information
> and influence in the 2024 election, and what factors guided these decisions?

Methods

Study Design

To address these three research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20
undergraduate students at Lehigh University in February 2025, focusing on their experiences
during the 2024 presidential campaign period. Located in Northampton County, Pennsylvania,
Lehigh sits in "the largest swing district in the biggest" of seven swing states widely regarded to
have determined the election's outcome (Schapitl, 2024, para. 10). Lehigh enrolls 5,811
undergraduates who spent the election campaign period in this spotlight county (Lehigh
University, 2023). Both Trump and Harris held rallies in the region (Schapitl, 2024). Several
organizations, including Project26 and LehighValley4All, actively engaged with students on

campus, promoting participation and facilitating voter registration (Lehoczky Escobar, 2024; Project 26 @ Lehigh University, n.d.). Additionally, Pennsylvania led the nation in presidential advertisement reservations (LaMarre, 2024). This abundant political presence makes the university particularly advantageous to this study's goal of assessing the comparative influence of various information sources on electoral decision making. Nonetheless, the decision to conduct this study with Lehigh University students was made carefully. A private, selective institution, Lehigh's student body is 60% white and has a median household income of $167,000 (Lehigh University, 2023; The New York Times, 2017). Approximately 75% of students voted for Harris in the 2024 election—based on a pre-election survey conducted by the university's student newspaper and local polling data (Contino, 2024; Northampton County, 2024). While Lehigh's enrollment does not mirror the national population, studying this group offers a valuable, if incomplete, view into the dynamics that shape the voting patterns of college-aged individuals.

To capture the nuances of students' experiences during the 2024 election, I determined that semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate research method. This study aimed to understand the interplay between political information and political behavior, rather than to merely quantify each. Therefore, a qualitative approach was necessary to gain deeper insights than a quantitative analysis could offer (Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Hurst, 2023). To ensure the authenticity of participant accounts, which was crucial for this study's validity, I chose not to conduct focus groups, in order to avoid self-censorship and prevent bias from collaborative idea exchange (Hurst, 2023; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Interviews are a widely used technique in the social sciences because of their strength in holistically uncovering how individuals construe their social worlds (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). Open-ended interview questions, which were used in this

study, allow research to be directly shaped by participants' reflections of "their feelings, prejudices, opinions, desires, and attitudes toward different phenomena they experience" (Dunwoodie et al., 2022, p. 86). This qualitative design enables interviews to challenge preconceptions and uncover unexpected patterns (Hurst, 2023). Thus, in addition to providing empirical support for existing theory, interviews can enable researchers to develop new theory from the data (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). This study's reliance on three theoretical models rendered the interview method especially valuable for assessing their enduring relevance and exploring further implementations.

Although there is no definitive consensus across disciplines, several studies suggest that limited sample sizes can be effective for interview research (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Sandelowski, 1995). Based on these findings and practical considerations, I set the sample size at 20 participants. Interview-based studies aim to achieve thematic saturation—the point at which subsequent interviews no longer yield new insights—in order to justify the sample size (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saunders at al., 2018). A key assessment of saturation from Guest et al. (2006) found that thematic saturation is reached at an average of 12 interviews, which is supported by subsequent research (Ando et al., 2014; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). While best practice involves iterative sampling until saturation, I decided that a predetermined sample of 20 would be appropriate for the scope of this study (Dunwoodie et al., 2022).

The finding that individuals' sociodemographic characteristics are significant predictors of their voting behavior has been consistently supported since it was first presented by Lazarsfeld (1944). In the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, factors including race, ethnicity, gender, age, and college major were correlated to both voter turnout and political alignment (Marcus, 2024; Montanaro et al., 2024; Eagleton Institute of Politics, n.d.). Thus, accurately contextualizing

these behaviors among college students required interviews with a sample representative of Lehigh University's undergraduate population. To accomplish this, I employed stratified sampling to select participants from an initial intake form. Stratified sampling is a method where "the sample is split into strata, [and] members of each are selected in proportion to the population at large" (Hurst, 2023, Table 5.1). The strata defined for this study were gender, race and ethnicity, college of study, and grade level. I selected these characteristics because they represented the entire population, ensuring inclusivity and accounting for related strata, such as household income, home state, and political affiliation. Although this study specifically discusses participants' political orientations, party identification was not selected as a stratum because there was no definitive measurement of the partisan composition of Lehigh's student body. For the four selected strata, I set proportionate stratification targets based on Lehigh's last reported census data, collected on the 10th day of the fall 2023 semester (Lehigh University, 2023). All participants were undergraduate students enrolled at Lehigh in the fall of 2024, aged 18 or older, and U.S. citizens.

Participant Overview

To recruit participants, I distributed virtual flyers within my social network and placed physical flyers in high-traffic locations across Lehigh University's campus. To minimize self-selection bias from individuals particularly interested in or at ease with political topics, the flyer did not specify the study's specific focus, instead indicating that the research would explore "how people process news from different sources" (Boas, 2024). Flyers directed interested individuals to complete an online intake survey, which consisted of 10 questions designed to collect relevant demographic information and assess eligibility for the study. The intake survey was open from January 27th to February 9th, 2025. As interested individuals completed the

survey, I made selections to best match the predetermined demographic targets. A total of 32 individuals completed the intake survey. From this pool, 22 were invited to participate in the study, and 20 participants completed interviews.

Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown of participants relative to the stratified sampling targets. Although political affiliation was not used as a sampling criterion, during the interviews, I identified 12 participants as left-leaning, four as centrist, two as right-leaning, and two as third-party affiliates. This leftward alignment is somewhat consistent with my earlier estimate that 75% of the university supported Harris. While it is unknown whether participants' political affiliations accurately represented Lehigh's broader population, the sample did overrepresent female and senior students.

Table 1

Participant Demographics by Stratification Group

STRATA	UNIVERSITY DEMOGRAPHICS	TARGETS	PARTICIPANTS
MALE	52.44%	10	7
FEMALE	47.56%	10	13
WHITE	58.77%	12	12
HISPANIC ANY RACE	10.86%	2	4
ASIAN	10.79%	2	2
BLACK	5.13%	1	2
OTHER/UNKNOWN	14.45%	3	0
ARTS&SCIENCE	38.03%	8	7
ENGINEERING	22.35%	4	5
BUSINESS	24.29%	5	3
HEALTH	3.71%	1	2

INTER-COLLEGE	10.60%	2	3
OTHER	1.02%	0	0
FRESHMAN	24.94%	5	2
SOPHOMORE	25.76%	5	4
JUNIOR	22.40%	5	4
SENIOR	26.76%	5	10
1			
TOTAL	100%	20	20

Data Collection

I conducted interviews between February 5th and February 26th, 2025. All interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes and held in private rooms on Lehigh University's campus. With funding allocated by Lehigh's College of Arts and Sciences Research Grant, participants were compensated with $40 Visa gift cards. The interviews were guided by a 95-question script, which can be found in the Appendix. While the script provided a framework, I conducted the interviews using an semi-structured approach, allowing flexibility and facilitating the exploration of emerging themes (Hurst, 2023; Weiss, 1995). I did not necessarily ask all questions to each participant, and I added follow-up questions based on the flow of conversation. Each interview was recorded to produce clear and complete audio, ensuring accuracy during later transcription. The recorded interview segments ranged from 28 to 79 minutes, with a mean duration of 48 minutes.

Table 2

Interview Durations

PARTICIPANT	LENGTH
1	0:33:00
2	0:40:33

3	0:50:13
4	0:37:51
5	0:55:45
6	0:27:42
7	0:55:08
8	0:51:39
9	0:27:53
10	0:40:24
11	0:49:13
12	0:50:55
13	1:06:30
14	1:18:42
15	0:37:26
16	1:11:34
17	0:45:06
18	0:46:40
19	0:49:45
20	0:40:04
MEAN	0:47:48
MEDIAN	0:47:57

Data Analysis

Throughout data collection, I transcribed all interviews word-for-word, removed identifying information, and assigned each participant a numerical identifier. I then utilized thematic analysis to decipher how participants' information ecosystems influenced their political behavior during the 2024 election. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). As it facilitates the discovery of themes across qualitative accounts, this method is particularly useful for interpreting the rich data generated by interviews (Naeem et al., 2023). Given that thematic analysis is a multi-stage,

iterative process, I followed the stages of data familiarization, quotation identification, code generation, theme development, and interpretative analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). Initially, I familiarized myself with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts, writing interview summaries, and manually highlighting pertinent quotes. After completing this process for the first five interviews, I coded the quote segments in a spreadsheet, assigning short phrases or keywords to each excerpt. A mechanism for labeling data, coding "enables researchers to identify specific elements of the data that are relevant to their research question, which can then be used to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying concepts" (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 7). As I engaged in this staged process with the remaining interview transcripts, recurring patterns emerged, allowing me to refine the coding scheme and organize codes into thematic categories. Following the development of themes, I proceeded to interpret the data, focusing specifically on how the codes and themes addressed my three research questions. The last phase of the analysis was to connect these findings to the relevant literature outlined in the theoretical framework, in order to elaborate on seminal theories.

In addition to this qualitative analysis, I compiled quantitative data for certain key questions to frame the qualitative methods. Weiss (1995, p. 4) argued that producing "numerical data from qualitative interview studies that have explored the same area with different respondents" can be beneficial, even when there is missing or limited data. The integration of these two methods can yield a higher degree of comprehension than either method used in isolation (Verhoef & Casebeer, 1997). Although qualitative data drove this study, secondary quantitative data complemented the analysis by offering a holistic view of participants' experiences and situating them within the broader national context.

Results

This section presents the findings on how college students received political influence during the 2024 presidential election and how these influences shaped their attitudes and behaviors. Findings are organized according to the study's guiding theoretical framework, which draws on diffusion of innovations, social identity theory, and selective exposure theory.

Diffusion of Innovations

The 20 participants interviewed in this study all reported receiving some political information through mass media, social media, and interpersonal channels. However, the way information propagated through these channels, and the extent to which it influenced political behavior, varied based on both the communication channel and the individual's level of political conviction. As explained in the theoretical framework, diffusion of innovations focuses on how "ideas, practices, or objects that are perceived as new" are adopted across social networks (Rogers, 1983, xviii). Yet, during the research process, it became evident that most of the political information participants consumed was not inherently novel. As a result, rather than applying Rogers's full paradigm, this manuscript focuses on the core elements of communication channels, social networks, and opinion leadership to explain how political information circulated and influenced participants' political behavior.

To illustrate how participants consumed political information through social and mass media channels, this paragraph reports the sources they used. The data reflects whether participants engaged with a given source, without measuring the extent of that engagement. Further, instances where participants used a source solely to view a presidential debate are not included. Social media emerged as the most common channel through which participants consumed political information, with all 20 participants (100%) reporting its use. Within this

category, TikTok (70%) and Instagram (65%) were the most frequently cited sources, followed by YouTube (25%) and Snapchat (10%). Facebook, X, and Threads were each mentioned by a single participant (5%). Mass media was also widely used, with 18 participants (90%) reporting it as a source of political information. Among mass media sources, participants most frequently turned to news websites and apps, with 85% noting its use. Other mass media formats utilized were television (30%), podcasts (15%), and radio (10%). Across both social media and mass media, participants' use exceeded national figures for how individuals aged 18–29 received political and election news—46% using social media, 18% news websites and apps, and 10% television (Shearer et al., 2024). While this discrepancy may reflect age group differences or sample bias, findings suggest that participants' heightened information consumption may be the result of social network dynamics, within which consumption habits were shared and reinforced.

Participants described political information consumption as a norm within their social networks and reported adopting increased engagement with various sources as a result. In some instances, this occurred intentionally, through the deliberate promotion and adoption of consumption habits. For example, one of Participant 10's friends shared with him that he stayed informed about the election by listening to the *NPR First Up* podcast while walking to class. Participant 10 "thought it was a good idea" and began doing the same. Similarly, Participant 2 said he began consuming more political content after his friends and family "encouraged [him] to go read something, be updated, and be informed." In contrast to these deliberate actions, several participants also consumed political content unintentionally while in shared spaces with members of their social networks. For example, Participant 7 encountered political content on television at her parents' house and in patient rooms during hospital shifts, Participant 9 heard it on the radio multiple times weekly while riding in the car with her mother, and Participant 14

observed it on television in her dorm's lounge. These accounts illustrate how political information consumption propagates through social networks, spreading both actively and passively as part of everyday social interaction.

While a similar pattern of social network influence on political information consumption emerged across social media platforms, it varied between TikTok and Instagram—the two most frequently used platforms among participants. To understand how political information spread on TikTok, it is first necessary to consider the amount of political content participants encountered on the platform. Participants consistently characterized this as abundant, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> Participant 2: Guaranteed every time I opened it, every time I looked through anything, every other post was something related to the election.
>
> Participant 12: Probably saw hundreds of TikToks within the span from September to November.
>
> Participant 15: On TikTok, literally every single day. Every other scroll was probably something related to the election.

TikTok's central role in the diffusion of election-related information is highlighted by the fact that 45% of participants identified it as their primary sources of election content, compared to just 20% who cited news articles. Participants described the political content they encountered on TikTok as primarily originating from content creators they did not personally know, as well as less frequently from news outlets or the candidates themselves. In two participants' words:

> Participant 12: It was either from verified news sources, and then I got a lot of people just sharing their opinions on the discourse—"Trump did this, so I think this," and then "Kamala did this, so I think that"—so it's just like..People give their own opinions.

> Participant 15: Some of them would share comparisons between her plans for taxes and stuff, and Trump's plans for taxes. Some of it would be stuff that Trump has done in the past. Some of it would be things that Kamala would do. Some of it would be bashing one candidate, some of it would be bashing the other. It was a mix of stuff.

These findings support earlier research showing that opinion leaders continue to play a role on social media by interpreting mass media content and disseminating it to their audiences (Alexandre et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2014).

However, while a two-step flow model remains relevant, findings indicate that the role of opinion leaders on social media differs significantly from the original concepts proposed by Lazarsfeld (1944) and Rogers (1983). These researchers envisioned opinion leaders as individuals whom members of a social network routinely relied on for information (Lazarsfeld, 1944; Rogers, 1983). On TikTok, however, participants did not form lasting associations with specific creators, suggesting a more diffuse and impersonal form of opinion leadership. Nonetheless, Lazarsfeld's (1944) finding that the impact of opinion leaders on political belief formation is limited because individuals enter the election period with established 'political predispositions' remains highly applicable. In the present study, two distinct profiles emerged: high-conviction and low-conviction participants. High-conviction participants entered the election period with firmly established voting intentions and a strong candidate preference. In contrast, low-conviction participants lacked a strong preference and did not have fully formed voting intentions. These profiles are referenced throughout the manuscript, and they are useful for understanding how TikTok content influenced political attitude formation. For example, four participants described viewing Kamala Harris's TikTok account, @KamalaHQ, but they already strongly supported her. In contrast, Participant 2, a low-conviction voter, reported following

Democratic content creator Harry Sisson but admitted to engaging minimally with his content. He explained, "I didn't really pay a crazy amount of attention to what he was saying, because I run a pretty middle ground when it comes to politics and he's very democratic, so I just didn't listen too much." These patterns suggest that TikTok's influence may be limited: high-conviction participants tended to consume content that reinforced existing beliefs, while low-conviction participants often disregarded partisan content.

Instagram presented a markedly different diffusion landscape than TikTok. While opinion leaders still played a role, they were more often familiar members of a user's social network or established news outlets. Participant 13 described this distinction:

> Participant 13: On TikTok, I'm getting people's opinions on news, but on Instagram, I'm just looking at the news article from *CNN* or [*The*] *New York Times*…also on Instagram, I would see how people I know personally care about the issue because they would post on their Instagram Story.

The primary way participants received political information on Instagram was through reposts from individuals in their networks. Reposted content was primarily statistics, excerpts of speeches, voter mobilization that originated from news outlets, political advocacy accounts, or the candidates' accounts. Reposted content primarily consisted of statistics, speech excerpts, and voter mobilization messages originating from news outlets, political advocacy accounts, or the candidates themselves. As with TikTok, participants described the content they encountered having limited direct influence on their political attitudes. Among low-conviction participants, this was because they found the content uninteresting or irrelevant, leading them to disengage from it. For high-conviction participants, this was because they had already formed firm political beliefs, as illustrated by the quotes below:

Participant 10: I wouldn't say it influenced me too heavily. I feel like I came into the election cycle knowing pretty well who I wanted to vote for and stuff like that.

Participant 11: I was always pretty solid on who I wanted to vote for. It was just more reinforcing. Like, no, I'm definitely making the right choice.

Participant 17: Most of what I was seeing I already agreed with, so it wasn't going to change my mind. It kind of just helped me be like, oh yeah, this is still what I believe.

This suggests that for high-conviction voters, social media content primarily served to reinforce existing beliefs—an idea that will be further explored in the third results section on selective exposure. However, even when social media content didn't directly shape partisan attitudes, it served as a catalyst, motivating some participants to seek out more information and engage more actively in the election.

The primary behavior that social media content motivated was the consumption of additional content. In fact, participants often described visiting news websites or apps only after first encountering related content on social media, which prompted them to seek out more elaborate information. As three participants explained:

Participant 11: TikTok…Someone was like, "Project 25—Trump says he doesn't agree with it, but it's written by all the people he's with or surrounds himself with"…People were all talking about [it in] the comments, and it seemed really scary. So I was like, alright, it can't be that bad. Let me actually look out for it. Let me actually read a lot of it. And I was like, damn. They were kind of right. That was a little scary, but I'm glad I knew about it.

Participant 13: My first finding out, first information would be through social media. And

if it was something that I was generally interested in or didn't know if it was true, I would

go look it up on Google and then find articles like [*The*] *New York Times* or *CNN*.

Participant 14: When I was doom scrolling on TikTok, I would come across some

headline. I'd be like, wait, pause, and then I'd go check [*The*] *New York Times* or [*The*]

Washington Post, and actually research and understand what the topic was and what was

actually happening.

As these accounts demonstrate, social media served as a powerful tool for generating initial

awareness and sparking interest in political topics. However, to validate or gain deeper

understanding of these topics, participants often turned to mass media sources, primarily news

apps or websites. These findings suggest a slightly different flow of information through social

media than the two-step model Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) presented. While opinion leaders on

social media interpret mass media content and share it with their audiences, a third step emerges

in which individuals respond by actively seeking additional information from mass media

sources. Through this three-step communication flow, participants developed their understanding

of the events unfolding during the election.

The effects of the information participants received through social media and mass media

channels on motivating political behavior varied significantly between the two participant

profiles. Among high-conviction participants, the information they received reinforced their

beliefs, energizing them to increase their participation in the election. See the following quotes:

Participant 7: Hearing the polarity of arguments from the presidential candidates really

made me say, "Okay, well, even if this doesn't really count for all that much, I need to

make an effort to vote"…I was also motivated not only to vote in the presidential

election, but in local elections as well. I was re-made aware of the significance of local

elections and how they can ultimately play a larger role.

Participant 15: It definitely motivated me to [vote]...I know there's smaller elections like

governors and mayors and stuff like that. So, [the content] definitely motivated me to

make sure I'm registered, and I vote in those smaller ones, so I can have some feeling of

control.

For high-conviction participants, social media and mass media content influenced political

behavior by encouraging voter turnout, generating interest in protests and rallies, and motivating

individuals to actively contribute to the spread of information. Particularly with social media,

participants were not merely passive recipients of information. High-conviction participants

reported actively disseminating content they found particularly interesting or informative with

their networks. These findings suggest that while political content on social media may not

saliently change individuals' partisanship, it can increase individuals' political interest and

engagement.

However, these effects were only observed among high-conviction participants. For

low-conviction participants, the omnipresence of political content on social media appeared to

discourage political engagement. This is demonstrated by the following quotes:

Participant 2: It encouraged me not to go vote, I would say, because I was so sick of it…I

was not encouraged to go vote just by all the information, all the stuff they were talking

about…But I was very encouraged not to go vote.

Participant 5: I would see heaps of mass information on TikTok, and a lot of it was just

kind of stuff that I didn't know if it was false or fact. It was all just arguments that

weren't so productive. That definitely worked the other way and made me less inclined.

These responses suggest that for individuals with weaker political convictions, the often overwhelming and contentious nature of political content on social media can lead to disengagement rather than mobilization. As these participants disengaged, they did not contribute to the spread of content in the way that high-conviction participants did. This indicates that the diffusion of political information on social media is largely driven by high-conviction individuals, alongside content creators, political figures, and mass media organizations. This concentration may help explain why political content is often characterized as hyper-partisan.

A similar pattern was observed in the spread of political information through interpersonal channels, with high-conviction participants showing a greater willingness to discuss political topics. For example, Participant 5, a low-conviction participant, described discussing politics "only a little bit" with his close friends and family, and "very, very little" overall. On the other hand, Participant 17, a high-conviction individual, said she discussed politics with her close friends "probably every day" in the months leading up to the election, and "multiple times a day" as the election drew nearer. As high-conviction individuals had a greater interest in political topics, they were often the ones to initiate political conversations when interacting with low-conviction individuals. In doing so, they sometimes emerged as opinion leaders. For example, Participant 6, a low-conviction individual who "didn't have the energy" to engage with politics, said she learned most of her political information from her close friend, whom she described as "very passionate about politics." Although Participant 6 never actively sought out political discussions, she was frequently exposed to lengthy political discussions initiated by that close friend.

Interpersonal channels functioned less as opportunities to learn new political information and more as spaces for debriefing news and sharing influence. Among high-conviction

participants, these interactions enabled them to coalesce around shared responses to news first encountered through social media and mass media. For example, two participants described their political discussions as follows:

> Participant 13: My friends and I cope with humor, so we joke about the situation…For example, when Trump does this, we won't be able to do this.

> Participant 17: It was both people agreeing what's happening is crazy, and us being scared of what could happen and what was likely to happen and what wasn't.

Therefore, these interpersonal channels served to reinforce high-conviction participants' political attitudes. In contrast, interpersonal channels exerted significant influence over the political behavior of low-conviction participants. Given their tendency to avoid political information, low-conviction participants relied on information from their high-conviction social ties. This is illustrated by Participant 6, who described her political attitudes as directly influenced by the information she received from those around her. She explained:

> Participant 6: Just hearing about [a close friend] rant about it for hours, and my parents briefly talking about what they wanted. I want the same thing they want because they're my parents…So what I hear and what I believe in more just kind of goes towards what I hear from my friends and family.

Participant 6 also noted that she would not have voted without the influence of her close relationships, a view echoed by several other low-conviction participants. For instance, Participant 2 said that he voted, despite being "pretty hell-bent on not voting," because of encouragement from his friends and family. He also described voting for the presidential candidate they supported, stating he knew "they would've been really upset" if he had chosen otherwise. Consistent with Lazarsfeld's earlier findings (1944), these accounts suggest that while

interpersonal channels have limited impact on high-conviction individuals, they can directly shape the political attitudes and behaviors of low-conviction individuals.

Among all 20 participants, 45% identified interpersonal interactions as the most influential factor in their political behavior during the election, followed by 30% who cited media sources. The remaining 25% either viewed both as equally influential or were unsure. Overall, social media was the primary channel for learning new information, mass media served to validate that information, and interpersonal interactions were key for sharing influence. While interpersonal channels had the greatest influence on low-conviction participants, mass and social media were more influential for high-conviction participants by amplifying their interest and engagement in the election. Building on this understanding, the following sections explore how social identity and selective exposure shaped the networks of influence that guided participants' political attitudes and behaviors.

Social Identity Theory

Among the 20 students interviewed in this study, three social identity categories emerged as key influences on political behavior: 'voter' identity, partisan identity, and demographic identity. These findings align with the categories identified in the literature review. The following section explains how these social group memberships emerged, evolved, and intersected to shape participants' political behavior during the 2024 presidential election.

Although auxiliary political behaviors such as canvassing, donating, or wearing political merchandise were absent in this sample, voting was widespread, with 17 out of 20 participants (85%) reporting that they cast a ballot in the election. This participant voter turnout rate exceeds the national figure of 64.01%, Pennsylvania's rate of 68.5%, and the estimated 50% turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds in battleground states (McDonald, 2025; Pennsylvania Department of

State, 2025; Tufts University CIRCLE, 2024). While the higher voter turnout may reflect a skewed sample, it also points to unique influences at Lehigh University that may have motivated student voting. This study's findings suggest that this elevated turnout may be correlated to a robust 'voter' identity among students, reinforced through their social networks.

Every participant, irrespective of the strength of their conviction, expressed that by the polling period, they held a positive attitude toward voting. This was consistent even among the participants who did not vote—Participant 15, who was underage at the time, and Participants 16 and 19, who were unable to vote due to circumstantial factors. In their words:

> Participant 15: I feel like I let us down by not being able to vote, even though I literally couldn't. It was just, like, I felt the need to, because it's a big thing. It's really important.
>
> Participant 16: I technically didn't; I really wanted to.

Participants' desire to vote stemmed from the perception that it represents a fundamental responsibility of American citizenship. While four participants expressly described voting as a "civic duty," many others emphasized that it is something all citizens should do, often framing it as a "privilege" not afforded to residents of other countries. When voting is perceived in this way, it functions as an emblem of civic virtue, as Bryan et al. (2011) argued, and thus becomes a desirable social identity. Most participants described an enhanced self-image associated with belonging to this category. However, the salience of a 'voter' identity varied by the individual. While low-conviction participants generally were not strongly attached to this identity, most high-conviction participants internalized it deeply. This is exemplified by Participant 1, who described her voting behavior as a key part of her self-concept, stating, "Me personally, I was very proud of myself because I was like, 'Yeah, I'm very, very committed to this cause, and I'll do it no matter what.' So I feel like that's something that really stuck with me." In addition to

viewing voting as a source of self-esteem, Participant 1 noted that not voting would have made her feel guilty—a sentiment echoed by six other participants. Thus, voting served both as a means of reinforcing a positive self-concept and preventing a negative one.

Consistent with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) theoretical principles, the development of social identity resulted in subsequent social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness. For participants with strong 'voter' identities, social categorization occurred through dividing their social circles into in-group voters and out-group non-voters. Because the in-group was perceived as morally righteous, the out-group was viewed as lacking this virtue, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. The following quotes illustrate this:

Participant 13: I do think voting is important, so I definitely, I just didn't like that people didn't vote.

Participant 14: Finding out people didn't vote for me is crazy, because I'm just like, "But you could have! And if you did it, and other people felt the same way and understood how I felt, we could have made a big difference."

Participant 15: I did unfollow a lot of people that were saying they weren't going to vote, or were saying that the election is stupid. I feel like that's just ignorant. But for the people that did post things to try to encourage others to vote, I was like, "Yeah, good for you."

Among these high-conviction participants who identified strongly as 'voters,' sharing their voter status, either interpersonally or through social media, served as a signal of their in-group membership, positioning them to be viewed more favorably by like-minded peers. For instance, Participant 12 said she made sure those around her knew she voted, as she believed they would have lost respect for her if she hadn't. Similarly, Participant 13 expressed that she was glad her friends knew she voted, explaining that "people who didn't vote were viewed in a different light

and looked down upon." Therefore, being a 'voter' served as a salient social identity that shaped the formation of social groups and the political behavior norms within them.

While individuals strongly attached to a 'voter' identity actively engaged in comparison and categorization, the effects of this identity also reached low-conviction participants with weaker attachments. This group felt less compelled to advertise their voter status but were willing to disclose it when asked. This is reflected in the following excerpt:

> Participant 5: Since I was kind of not fully on board with a certain candidate, I didn't feel like it was important to…If the topic came up and it was like, "Oh, are you going to vote?" I wouldn't have any reservations. I would just be like, "Yeah."

Participant 5 expressed a weaker attachment to the voter identity due to his low level of conviction toward the candidate he supported. Initially unsure whether he would vote, he said a key influence in this decision was that the people around him felt "so passionate" about it that they would "dislike" if he didn't. Other participants expressed similar sentiments. Therefore, the presence of a 'voter' identity motivated voting behavior among some low-conviction individuals, as they sought to avoid being categorized as out-group non-voters.

It may have also motivated behavior as participants sought to align themselves with the in-group. This is exemplified by Participant 17, an unaffiliated voter, who, despite stating voting was "important" and a "civic duty," only voted for the presidential candidate on her mail-in ballot, leaving the remaining selections blank. Participant 17's limited scope of voting behavior, extending only to the most visible office, indicates that her espoused value of voting was likely performative and not as deeply held as implied. This is also illustrated by Participant 3, who described herself as "very big on voting" and consistently voted, including in local elections and while abroad. However, she admitted that she hadn't researched the candidates or decided whom

to vote for until she was waiting in line on Election Day. For some participants, voting was driven more by a desire to fulfill social and personal expectations of 'being a voter' than by genuine investment in political outcomes. This suggests that the prevalent 'voter identity' cultivated among Lehigh University students helped motivate voter turnout, but it also points toward another finding: the positive social value associated with voting did not extend to other forms of political engagement.

While participants built social identity around voting behavior, they did not cultivate similar identities around other high-commitment political behaviors. As previously noted, no participant reported wearing merchandise, attending a rally, joining an organization, or engaging in visible forms of political engagement outside of voting. Instead, participants avoided adopting a social identity as being 'political.' This can be seen in participants' own words:

Participant 7: I'm by no means a political activist.

Participant 8: Honestly, I am not political by any means.

Participant 10: I'm very much not a very political guy or anything.

Participant 11: I'm definitely not a political person.

Participants' reluctance to identify as 'political' did not always reflect their actual level of political interest or engagement. Consider Participant 10, who, despite rejecting this designation, described considering attending a rally, speaking about politics daily, and feeling strongly about the election. Other participants who actively consumed information, purposefully encouraged others to vote, and generally showed signs of interest also avoided this label.

I hypothesize that participants' disinclination towards a 'political' identity arose from how that identity was depicted in their information environments. Most participants described that the political information they encountered interpersonally, on social media, and in mass

media was highly polarized. For instance, Participant 10 said that although he consumed some bipartisan news, he predominantly encountered content on Instagram and television that was "abrasive, "unprofessional," and "an attack on people with other beliefs." Given that participants' primary exposure to 'political' individuals came through hyper-partisan talk show hosts and content creators, they came to associate the term with division and extremism. As this narrative did not resonate with them—most participants were not fervent party supporters who sought to disparage those with different beliefs—they rejected both the 'political' label and the associated partisan behaviors.

The motivations behind this rejection also hinged on the strength of participants' convictions. For some high-conviction participants, the avoidance of 'political' expression appeared to stem from a fear of external judgement. For example, several participants, including Participant 10, described refraining from partisan activity on Instagram to avoid this label. Participant 1 explained this, saying, "I have (conservative) family on social media, so I don't want to make them super upset or think, 'Oh my gosh, she's all about politics.'" Instead, these participants opted to promote voting on their social media platforms, a form of engagement which did not carry negative connotations. Among low-conviction participants, avoiding the 'political' label reflected a deeper personal disillusionment with the political ecosystem. Many believed that being 'political' inherently meant being distinctly partisan, an association they found undesirable, leading them to disengage from politics entirely. For example, Participant 3 described intentionally "not becoming too politically involved" to avoid "getting sucked into one party or the other."

While participants were not explicitly asked which candidate they voted for or their party affiliation, some of this information emerged organically during the interviews. Of the 20

participants, I identified 12 as left-leaning, four as centrist, two as right-leaning, and two as third-party affiliates. However, just nine (45%) self-identified as a member of one of the two major political parties, and seven (35%) reported registered major party membership. The relationships among these three metrics were inconsistent. For example, Participants 13 and 19, while registered with a major party, planned to change their registration to independent; Participant 15 strongly supported Harris but didn't "think about labels"; and Participant 17 was "definitely more" Democratic but remained unaffiliated. As illustrated, party membership was not a salient social identity for most participants, as they preferred not to identify with any political party. This was largely driven by the perception that such affiliation was a monolithic commitment, implying resolute support of all party platforms, including nominated candidates. The following quotes demonstrate this finding:

> Participant 3: I feel like identifying with a party is, I don't want to say, giving up. I feel like to me, if you identify with a party, you're kind of saying, I automatically disagree with the other party, and I don't like the idea of disagreeing with other people simply off of principle.

> Participant 4: Overall parties change, candidates change, and most people aren't going to completely align with one party one way or another, so you should probably re-evaluate which candidate is the best option depending on the specific candidate rather than the party in general.

> Participant 13: If I had it my way, I would register as an independent just because then [my vote is] really based on the candidate.

Given that many participants viewed their candidate support as fluid and party affiliation as restrictive, they expressed a preference for political independence. Therefore, for the majority of

participants, and all low-conviction participants, party identification was not a primary influence on their political behavior.

However, among some high-conviction participants, salient social identities did form around partisan expressions, whether tied to a candidate affiliation or party membership. This constituted an important part of their self-concept, as they viewed their partisanship as a reflection of their underlying values and interests. See the following four quotes:

Participant 8: I think people could very well make an educated guess that I'm a registered Democrat.

Participant 12: I just feel like if you have more conversation with me, it kind of makes sense...I just feel like I just give off that kind of energy. It's just by nature of the organizations that I'm associated with, the communities that I'm in.

Participant 14: I put myself as [a] Democrat. Just because, again, I have empathy.

Participant 15: I hope [people] would know who I would vote for based on my character.

This data illustrates that participants viewed their political in-groups as embodying desirable traits, while out-groups were associated with opposing or less favorable characteristics. As a result, being perceived as supporting the opposing party would be seen as an insult. While high-conviction supporters viewed these distinct social categories, low-conviction supporters did not report the same perception. This is consistent with Greene's (2004) assertion that "greater social identification leads to a perception of greater differences between the relevant in-group and the out-group" (p. 148). Strong party identifiers experienced heightened positive feelings toward their political party, which, in turn, motivated them to eagerly vote for that party's candidate.

A third category of social identities influencing participants' political behavior during the election was their demographic identities. Some participants described feeling an intrinsic obligation or receiving external pressure to vote for a certain candidate based on aspects of their gender, race, ethnicity, family background, sexuality, or fields of study. The clearest manifestation of this was in minority women. This is reflected in the following quotes:

Participant 1: I'm a person of color. I'm a woman. My parents, they're not American. I have a lot of family that are immigrants. I feel like if you have my background and you don't vote, it's like, what are you doing?

Participant 14: My personal interests, I mean, I'm a career woman…that definitely affects my decisions. A lot of my sexuality too.

Participant 15: Being a woman, being a minority, I definitely felt like I needed to vote.

These participants saw voting for Harris as crucial to safeguarding the interests of their social groups. This perception was rooted in personal experiences and reinforced by interactions within their immediate social networks. For example, Participant 1 explained that her vote was shaped by proximity to other in-group members directly impacted by political outcomes:

Participant 1: A big reason why I voted the way I voted is because a lot of things hit really close to home. I know a lot of cases where reproductive rights—laws limiting that—or DEI, or just immigration [have impacted] the people that I know…Their personal experiences really motivated me to vote a certain way…My immediate social circle, whether it's friends and family, hearing their stories, I really did have them in mind when I voted.

As a majority of Participant 1's close relationships were with individuals in her demographic in-groups, she placed greater importance on the issues affecting those groups—even when they

would not directly impact her. This suggests that social identity does not influence political decisions in a vacuum, but rather operates through individuals' embeddedness in social contexts.

As individuals form in-groups based on their demographic characteristics, political alignment can become an extension of that group identity. This is clearly illustrated by two participants who described that their sororities, formed around shared attributes, developed group norms that shaped political behavior. For example, Participant 12, a member of a Latin sorority focused on "keeping women of color in higher education spaces," said she believed that every member of her sorority voted for Harris. This shared partisanship suggests that their common identities shaped the policy issues they prioritized. However, it also demonstrates that within demographic groups, political affiliation can become a normative expectation. This was evident in Participant 6's experience, who said, "I could tell there were a lot of women [in my party]...All the girls in my sorority were in the same party." Despite stating that she didn't "care that much" about political topics, she identified as a Democrat because she saw that political identity as aligned with her identity as a woman and as a member of her sorority. By identifying as a Democrat, Participant 6 could reinforce her sense of belonging both as a woman and as a member of her sorority. Therefore, political alignment can emerge not from personal ideological conviction, but from a desire to maintain consistency with social group identities.

While my findings indicate that demographic identities served as salient partisan motivators for some participants, one participant's experience highlights the limitations of this influence. Participant 5, a 22-year-old male, described facing significant social pressure, both through peer interactions and media exposure, to vote for Trump due to his gender identity. He explained:

Participant 5: My peers that were younger males that predominantly voted Trump, it was, "Why aren't you voting for Trump because you're a 22-year old guy, this is sort of an obligation that you have to protect your masculinity."

Participant 5 described feeling that his social identity as a young man aligned with a cultural expectation to vote for Trump, calling it "the thing to do as a guy." Despite this, Participant 5 rejected this identity-based pressure. Although undecided until a few months prior to the election, he chose to vote for Harris, citing the sentiments of individuals in his close circle, his mother and girlfriend, as a more powerful influence. He described this decision:

Participant 5: If these people that I care about are going to feel like I'm supporting them by voting for this candidate…then that's what I'm going to do.

This illustrates that the normative expectations of social group membership did not always align with the influences of participants' close interpersonal relationships. Given this dissonance, Participant 5 prioritized protecting his interpersonal relationships over maintaining alignment with his group identity. This suggests that while social group membership can exert significant influence on political behavior, its power may be limited when it conflicts with the values or expectations of close interpersonal relationships.

While social identity and interpersonal relationships shaped participants' political behavior, it is also important to recognize that participants were not merely passive recipients of this influence. They actively exercised agency in curating the partisan information they consumed through interpersonal interactions, mass media, and social media. To better understand this dimension of influence, the following section turns to selective exposure theory.

Selective Exposure Theory

As participants were all students at Lehigh University, they described shared aspects of their information environment, including frequent election-related messaging across campus, free and convenient digital news resources, and ample availability of political discussion partners. Despite this wide access, many noted that they lacked the time, energy, or motivation to engage with all available information. These accounts suggest that selective exposure theory is a particularly relevant framework for understanding how participants chose which information to consume, thereby shaping their personal spheres of influence.

Participants' information diets were foremost shaped by the time and attention they devoted to engaging with political information. While participants were not asked to quantify how much time they spent consuming such information, most described their consumption as limited. They most often cited the demands of being a college student as the reason for this constraint. Two participants explained this clearly:

> Participant 11: I'm busy at school. There's not much time, so I just try to de-stress. If I get some news, I get some news—there's not much I can do about it.

> Participant 12: Being a student is really time consuming, and I had enough content to read and enough homework. So, I think it's really important, but getting good grades is more of a priority for me.

As these quotes illustrate, during the election, participants prioritized academic performance and personal well-being. Since consuming political information did not support either of these primary objectives, most did not prioritize it. In some cases, this took the form of deliberate avoidance of political content. Participant 11, for example, explained:

Participant 11: There were days, I just was like, all right, we can't get on TikTok. We can't get on any news sites or anything, just because I wanted to either focus on school completely or just I wanted to relax and be chill.

These findings suggest that selective exposure can occur as a means of managing cognitive load and preserving emotional well-being. This effect may be amplified for political topics perceived as direct threats to these goals.

Another factor that shaped how much political information participants chose to consume was their judgment of its relevance to their electoral decision-making. High-conviction voters, who had already solidified their candidate preferences, saw little reason to consume additional political information. This is demonstrated in the following quotes:

Participant 11: I never really searched for news for the election. I was always kind of set on what I wanted to vote for.

Participant 12: If the candidates were kind of similar…one was a little bit more left and one was a little bit more right, it would've been something I researched more. But, for me, it was kind of an obvious choice between the candidates.

Participant 20: I already knew how I was voting regardless, so I didn't really intentionally go out and seek new information to try to change my mind or anything.

Low-conviction participants who had already developed aversions to political discourse also viewed political information as unnecessary for their decision-making and irrelevant to their interests. Several described deliberately avoiding political content, "trying to ignore" it or "wanting to be out of the loop." These accounts suggest that some participants approached political information consumption as a functional tool—useful only when it served a clear purpose in decision-making, rather than as an intrinsically valuable activity. Once their voting

preferences were formed, whether through candidate support or disengagement, they saw little reason to seek out additional information.

As most participants had limited intention to engage with political content, their exposure primarily occurred passively through social media platforms. In their words:

Participant 6: I don't go out looking for sources very much. It just happens to be there, and then I watch it, like on TikTok, I'm just scrolling, and I just happen across it.

Participant 14: I'd be doom scrolling on [TikTok and Instagram], and it would just be constant headlines…or there'd be like the reminder, this is happening, reminder, this is happening, talk to your senator, talk to, and I'm like, listen guys, I know. I just want to see a stupid video of a cat; I'm not going to lie.

As these participants described, the design of social media feeds limited their ability to control the content they encountered. This reduced agency extended to the partisan slant of the content they were fed. The impact of this design varied between Instagram and TikTok, the two social media platforms participants most commonly used. On Instagram, participants primarily encountered political content shared by their social networks, meaning its partisanship mirrored the views within those networks. However, on TikTok, participants chiefly consumed content curated by algorithm-driven feeds, which frequently mirrored their existing partisan views.

TikTok's algorithm reflected participants' political views to varying degrees, with their conviction strength playing a key role in the diversity of viewpoints they encountered. High-conviction participants tended to encounter content that consistently reinforced their single partisan perspective. This pattern was so noticeable that participants explicitly acknowledged it, as reflected in the following responses:

Participant 13: I do think that TikTok, their algorithm…picked up on what my political affiliation was…I mostly saw things on one side of the argument. And I would also say that the outcome of the election surprised me based on what TikTok showed me before.

Participant 14: Because I lean left, or I lean in a certain way, my algorithm is going to be catered to that more…There's going to be less right-wing influence in my media, just because the algorithm is catering to me. That's how the freaking algorithm works.

While high-conviction participants saw this alignment as obvious, low-conviction participants did not experience it in the same way. Instead, they described their TikTok feeds as "very mixed," "very diverse," and "complete 180s." Low-conviction participants did not encounter content that reflected their disillusionment or more moderate views. They still described being exposed to highly partisan material. For example, Participant 5, who recalled seeing content from Republican commentator Charlie Kirk and Democratic influencer Harry Sisson, described how the material "forced to [him] by the TikTok algorithm" presented "both extremes, but…there was really no gray area of it." Regardless of whether it aligned with their personal beliefs, participants consistently characterized political content on social media as overtly partisan.

Even though participants lacked direct control over the content they viewed on social media, selective exposure still played a role. Most participants encountered some cross-cutting content on these platforms, and how they chose to engage with it was indicative of their propensity for selective exposure. While participants generally reported passively viewing content, exposure to strongly partisan material occasionally prompted them to engage more actively. The following quotes illustrate this shift:

Participant 2: If it did align with my beliefs, I probably just liked it…If [it didn't align

with my beliefs,] I probably only watched it for one second, two seconds, and just kept

going. I didn't really stay there long, because I didn't want to listen to it.

Participant 12: I would like the ones that agree with my beliefs and then not like the ones

[that didn't.] I just didn't want to get more of that content on my page, which, now that I

say it out loud, is kind of like, oh, I probably should listen to those and listen to opposing

beliefs.

These responses illustrate a clear preference for congruent information and an active aversion of

dissonant information. This pattern not only limited participants' immediate exposure to

opposing viewpoints but also influenced the content subsequently presented to them, reinforcing

algorithmic feedback loops. By selectively blocking or disliking content, some participants

deliberately altered the feedback loop to reduce exposure to opposing viewpoints. In doing so,

participants effectively contributed to the curation of personalized echo chambers across their

social media feeds. Participants' selective engagement with content limited TikTok's capacity to

facilitate cross-cutting exposure, highlighting how user agency and platform design together

shape social media information ecosystems.

Even so, some participants reported engaging with dissonant viewpoints on social media,

albeit to a limited extent. This counter-attitudinal exposure occurred both through intentional

exploration and algorithmically recommended content, further illustrating the interplay between

user agency and platform design. Participants described these experiences as follows:

Participant 1: I thought it was really interesting to try to look at arguments from my

opposing political views…I would just put like 'Republican reproductive rights' or

something like that. And then, because of how the algorithm works, I got those videos as well just on my For You page.

Participant 2: Sometimes I wanted to hear a different belief, but sometimes, I wanted to read it to see, like, it's crazy that someone thinks that way. I may have read it for that reason, just to see what they're saying. Maybe I got a laugh out of it or was like, "Oh my God."

Participant 10: If it was something I didn't agree with, I would watch the full video, and then I would go look at the account, and I would try to see—I don't know—I was just curious. This person doesn't agree with me. I wanted to understand more of what they were saying.

These quotes illustrate that the motivation for counter-attitudinal exposure ranged from social comparison, rooted in social identity processes, to curiosity towards opposing viewpoints. As the primary intent was not to consider adopting these views, only one participant, Participant 16, described a salient change in political attitude due to this exposure. He described holding a "loose" pro-life stance that was "swayed" after a weak tie posted "a really good point" on her Instagram Story. He messaged her directly, and their "valuable, good conversation" contributed to his shift. This suggests that while social media can facilitate cross-cutting exposure, its ability to foster attitude change may depend on the open-mindedness of the individual.

In addition to selective engagement, another way selective exposure manifested in participants' social media use was through selective validation. Since most participants consumed political information on social media unintentionally, this behavior did not indicate that they considered it a reliable source. In fact, when participants identified social media as their primary source of political information, they often expressed a degree of embarrassment. As

Participant 12 acknowledged, "I know I shouldn't get [political information] from social media, but who doesn't? Which I'm going to be very self-aware is probably not the best, but it kind of feels like the norm." This perception aligned with a common criticism among participants: because anyone, regardless of authority or expertise, could share information on the platforms, its reliability could not be assumed. Given this, participants actively sought to discount the information, intending to prevent it from entering their calculus of belief formation. See below:

> Participant 1: TikTok is more like, yes, it taught me stuff, but I wouldn't rely on it officially for news information.

> Participant 8: I try to take the third parties with a grain of salt, especially on TikTok. You don't know what their credentials are, who's telling you this kind of stuff.

> Participant 15: I know literally anybody can say anything on social media and people just believe it, off rip. And I sometimes find myself believing things immediately without questioning it, and it's just like, that's not good.

These reflections highlight how participants engaged in selective validation, questioning the credibility of content and attempting to filter what they accepted. However, they also admit the limits of this strategy, acknowledging that social media content could still influence their thinking before critical evaluation occurred.

As most participants consumed political information on social media with skepticism, they at least sometimes engaged in fact-checking as a form of evaluation. However, they did not practice this behavior uniformly. While participants reported fact-checking content they viewed as "extreme" or "outrageous," those perceptions were shaped by their partisan leanings. For example, Participant 5, a middle-ground voter, described fact-checking content "on either end that were very much to the extreme." On the other hand, Participant 13, a Democrat, described

fact-checking TikTok videos that portrayed Trump's "super crazy" platforms and other "things [she] didn't agree with." To fact-check information, participants reported viewing additional social media content, conducting Google searches, or visiting news websites. However, their choice of trusted news sources was often also shaped by their partisanship. For example, Participant 13 explained that she would fact-check by consulting *The New York Times*, "never *Fox,"* and "maybe *CNN.*" Taken together, these patterns suggest that while participants engaged in fact-checking to evaluate political information on social media, the process was often filtered through partisan lenses, ultimately reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs.

A similar tendency emerged in how some participants selected their mass media outlets. Participants frequently cited a desire for unbiased, factual information as the basis for their selectivity. As the following responses illustrate, this often involved avoiding sources they viewed as overtly partisan and favoring those they perceived as neutral:

> Participant 3: I try not to click on things that are either known to be a certain party, like I try to avoid *Fox*, *CNN*, and stuff. If I go for something, it's probably *AP News* or stuff that I feel like is generally considered to be more unbiased.

> Participant 11: I try to click on a news site that I knew wasn't as leaning on either side. I wouldn't click on a *Fox* article, but I would try not to click on a *CNN* article…But an *ABC* (*News*) article, I don't know what's leaning (*The*) *New York Times* is, but I know that's a decent site, so I always go in there.

While most participants relied on commonly held associations to guide their choices, two reported using bias-checkers, and others assessed sources based on the content itself. In many cases, however, their judgments about what qualified as an unbiased source were influenced by their own partisan leanings. For instance, Participant 11, an unaffiliated voter who supported

Harris, expressed a preference for factual reporting free of personal opinion, which led them to avoid right-wing podcasts and Fox News in favor of *The New York Times*—a source rated by several media evaluation sites as left-leaning (Ad Fontes Media, n.d; All Sides, 2025; Media Bias Fact Check, 2024). Participant 7, a Democrat, also reported discounting "places where information has been shown to not necessarily be true," naming *Fox News* and instead relying on *CNN* and *The New York Times*. In total, participants reported viewing 12 different mass media outlets, with the most frequently cited being *The New York Times* (55%), *CNN* (35%), *The Washington Post* (15%), and *AP News* (15%). These preferences reflect the sample's overall left-leaning orientation. Although participants framed their media selections as grounded in quality and objectivity, these evaluations were often shaped by their existing political beliefs. As a result, they demonstrated a preference for viewpoint-congruent information.

While some participants believed that unbiased news sources existed, others viewed all mass media as ideologically driven and expressed broad distrust toward it. This blanket skepticism is reflected in the following participants' comments:

Participant 3: When I read news articles, I'm kind of judgemental about it. I feel like when I read stuff, I go into it looking for something to pick apart from it or looking for a reason to say, "Oh, that clearly doesn't make sense."

Participant 11: In society, I guess, the news outlets are supposed to be unbiased, and even though they are, all of 'em have a bias.

Participant 12: I feel like news sources, especially nowadays, they try to make a profit, they try to grab your attention. A lot of times, that's the most politically controversial, and maybe they'll exaggerate.

This distrust resulted in three effects across participants. For some, it led to a more discerning approach to political information. Many, for instance, preferred to consume content directly from recordings of candidates speaking at presidential debates or rallies. That way, as Participant 2 explained, information came "from them themselves rather than people putting words in their mouths." Four participants explicitly described seeking unmediated information through primary sources such as raw data sets, candidate websites, and government platforms. For others, this distrust resulted in a resignation to biased information. As Participant 7 stated, "If information's going to be biased, I would probably rather get it from a source that I feel like I align with more." Among a third group of participants, distrust led to disengagement. Participant 9, for example, explained their avoidance of political information, stating "I don't know what to believe. Every site is different and I don't know what's true and what's not." Although it shaped selective exposure in varied ways, nearly all participants reported considering bias when curating their mass media information diets.

While participants largely demonstrated selective exposure in social and mass media through judgments of information quality, different dynamics emerged in interpersonal contexts. To explore how participants exhibited selective exposure in these settings, I draw on Mutz and Martin's (2001) framework, which suggests that political discussion partners are shaped by both environmental availability and individual selectivity. Although participants described their social networks as largely co-partisan, nearly all acknowledged some ideological diversity within their circles. They encountered dissonant viewpoints within their families, roommates, romantic partners, friends, friends-of-friends, dorm communities, group therapy sessions, and virtual chat rooms. Since participants' social networks included individuals with differing political views, whom they engaged in political discussions directly reflected their tendency toward selective

exposure. Although this manuscript previously demonstrated that high-conviction supporters engaged more frequently in political discussion, the following section examines the mechanisms underlying this selectivity and its effects on attitude formation.

Participants exercised a high degree of selectivity in choosing their political discussion partners, predominantly avoiding those with dissonant views to avoid incommodious disagreement. While participants interacted with out-partisans somewhat frequently, they perceived that injecting political discussion into those relationships would precipitate conflict, jeopardizing their social harmony. This is demonstrated in the quotes below:

Participant 2: When it came to other friends that had conflicting opinions, I just tried to kill that conversation. I didn't get involved, no point to have like an argument, or I don't really care enough to have an argument.

Participant 7: I really only talked to the people I was really close with about it, just because, I was kind of worried I might run into some opposing opinions, and I don't like to be confrontational if I don't need to be. I know that especially this past election was really emotional and kind of a hot topic for people, so I didn't want to really incite any negative conversations regarding the election.

Participant 13: A lot of my male friends who I knew that they weren't going to, or I suspected, weren't going to vote the same way that I did, I did not talk to 'em about it because I didn't want to ruin our friendship or jeopardize our friendship over politics.

For most participants, interpersonal selective exposure was motivated by a desire to avoid the emotional distress they believed political discussions would inevitably cause—either for themselves, their conversation partners, or both.

As a result, engaging meaningfully with out-partisans was often perceived as an act of bravery. Four participants explicitly stated that they avoided such conversations because they did not consider themselves "confrontational." For example, Participant 8 stated:

> Participant 8: I'm not a very confrontational, I don't like disagreement. I'm a people pleaser, and I think I tried not to bring it up…If they were my friends, I felt bad or guilty causing a fight with them, I guess. But that was just my people pleaser, and also I back down very easily. So if they were going to disagree with me and start fact checking every little thing I say, which I would hope that I wouldn't spread misinformation, I would probably back down. So I think, yeah, I did pick and choose who to bring it up with.

The quote above illustrates that individuals may avoid political discussions when they anticipate discomfort, such as being scrutinized for their knowledge. When avoidance was not an option, some participants chose to disengage from the conversation by withholding their authentic perspectives. Even when participants expressed an openness to engage in inter-partisan dialogue, they described that "it never felt like a good time" to do so. Given its equivalence with inciting conflict, the dorm was not a good time, nor were class, virtual chat rooms, or family gatherings. Therefore, most participants shirked sincere interpersonal dialogue with out-partisans, rationalizing it as a way to preserve social harmony.

While both low- and high-conviction participants avoided uncomfortable conversations, they differed in whom and what they associated with such discomfort. Low-conviction participants demonstrated a tendency to evade political discussion with overtly partisan individuals, which is evident in the following quotes:

> Participant 3: If somebody has a really strong political opinion, I'm going to be extremely motivated not to offer my opinion.

Participant 5: I was cautious of only getting into those conversations with people that I knew were also more middle ground and didn't feel an extreme way about one side or the other.

This avoidance of political discussions with high-conviction individuals stemmed from a fear that they would impose their partisan beliefs and pass judgment. For example, Participant 3 described avoiding political discussions with partisan individuals because she felt they "would judge [her] based on that" either by responding with, "Oh, great, you understand me," or, "Ew, why would you think that?" As this manuscript previously demonstrated that high-conviction participants formed social identities around their partisanship and judged others accordingly, these fears were not unfounded.

In avoiding interactions where they expected criticism, low-conviction participants were more inclined to discuss politics with individuals they perceived as tolerant or accepting. As Participant 3 explained:

Participant 3: It's more of a comfort thing than it is about what the actual opinions are. If you make me feel comfortable talking about it or you'll respect me no matter what I say, then I'll be more likely to talk about it, as opposed to simply do I agree with it or not.

These perceptions typically led low-conviction participants to confine political discussions to their strongest ties. For example, Participant 2 said he only discussed politics with his parents and girlfriend, explaining that he was "very intentional" about avoiding conversations with people who wouldn't keep his views private or who would "make a big deal about it." This pattern is further illustrated by Participant 9, who shared, "I don't feel comfortable talking to anybody about it, just [my boyfriend.] Because I know he's not going to judge me or say anything." However, this was not necessarily based on shared partisanship, as both Participant 2

and Participant 3 noted that their romantic partners held dissonant political views. As a result, strong ties had the greatest influence on low-conviction participants' political attitudes and behaviors, because of the trust and openness that allowed for genuine cross-partisan engagement.

Conversely, high-conviction participants perceived interactions with out-partisans as sources of discomfort and therefore deliberately sought co-partisan interpersonal engagement. These participants felt that cross-partisan interactions diminished their enjoyment of political discussion by requiring them to justify their own views and consider opposing perspectives. Participant 17 described this, stating, "If I disagree with somebody politically, it's easier to get defensive about it. But if you agree with somebody, then you build off of each other's points and it's like an actual conversation instead of an argument." In co-partisan environments, participants felt empowered to openly share their political opinions, hopes, and concerns. As a result, they actively sought out these spaces, as the following accounts illustrate:

> Participant 10: As it got closer to the election, it was definitely an intentional thing. Like, okay, I'm with these people, so I can talk about it now, and we can talk about it because we all have similar views.

> Participant 14: I think it was definitely more comfortable. I'd make more jokes, I'd be more open, because sharing the same beliefs is definitely helpful to have an extended conversation and not just like a, "Oh, this is happening."

These reflections demonstrate that while psychological safety encouraged more open and sustained dialogue for both low- and high-conviction participants, the conditions under which they perceived that safety differed.

As high-conviction participants preferred to discuss politics with co-partisans, they reinforced their existing beliefs while avoiding dissonant viewpoints. This pattern of selective

exposure mirrored their behavior on social and mass media, further isolating them within one-sided information environments. Notably, three participants explicitly used the term 'echo chamber' to describe these dynamics, as illustrated in the excerpts below:

> Participant 10: I don't want to say [my friend and I] created a little echo chamber, but we would all kinda read the same news or see the same stuff and then talk about it with each other. And so, it kind of just became our own ideas circulating with each other, the same views going around and around.

> Participant 11: It's not a good thing, but I kind of echo chambered myself with my roommates and my friends. We all had the same beliefs, and we kept talking to each other about it. We probably all got each other more political because of that.

> Participant 12: Leading up to the election, I might've been [in] a bit of an echo chamber thinking that Kamala was going to win…Mostly because of conversations I was having with people close to me and also some on social media.

By cultivating echo chambers, high-conviction participants curated homogeneous spheres of information and influence. In contrast, low-conviction participants were more open to differing perspectives within their close relationships but engaged with politics far less frequently overall. These findings suggest that patterns of selective exposure are shaped by the strength of individuals' pre-existing political beliefs.

Given that participants engaged in selective exposure across all information channels, it is relevant to consider which channels more readily facilitated cross-cutting exposure. However, consistent with the findings of the review, there was no definitive answer. Some high-conviction participants reported encountering more dissonant viewpoints in interpersonal environments than

through media, attributing this to the filtering effects of algorithmically tailored feeds. As two participants explained:

> Participant 13: I definitely think I see more people who don't agree with me in person than I do online, because my algorithm on social media is definitely skewed.

> Participant 14: Because I lean left…there's going to be lesser right-wing influence in my media, just because the algorithm is catering to me…I'd encounter more of these in person also because I have a good chunk of my family who are right-leaning.

However, other participants explained that a lack of perceived opportunity for interpersonal political discussion, driven by fear of conflict, led them to encounter opposing viewpoints more often through media. This is illustrated below:

> Participant 4: It just never felt like a good time to talk about [the election] in person. Like I said, I wasn't really going to bring it up, so I just had more opportunity online.

> Participant 19: I think [I saw] more [opposing viewpoints] on social media. In person, it is kind of tough because it's sort of a taboo topic and isn't always talked about. So I definitely say you see more of it on social media.

Although previous research has identified social and mass media as drivers of selective exposure, some participants reported that these platforms offered more cross-cutting exposure than interpersonal environments (Avin et al., 2024; Cinelli et al., 2021; Steppat et al., 2022). These findings suggest that interpersonal, social media, and mass media channels each possess design features that can both facilitate and restrict exposure to opposing viewpoints. As a result, where participants encountered dissonant perspectives varied by individual and were shaped by their selective behaviors.

Conclusion

This manuscript's findings corroborate the initial premise that new media and heightened polarization have considerably reshaped the political landscape within which young people formed political decisions during the 2024 presidential election. Given this conjecture, this study set out to understand the comparative impact of disparate agents in motivating partisan behavior among Lehigh University students, a population expected to have been exposed to oversized information and influence. The results indicate that social media, mass media, and interpersonal channels played distinct roles in political attitude and behavior formation, with this divergence hinging on the strength of participants' pre-existing convictions. Social media predominantly served as a source for learning new information, mass media as a means to validate its accuracy, and interpersonal interactions as an avenue for sharing influence. The compatibility of these channels with participants' habits led to their adoption, meaning a significant portion of their political exposure wasn't actively sought. Despite this, participants agentially managed their exposure to partisan content, with high-conviction individuals predominantly seeking authoritative, consonant viewpoints and those with low-conviction, disillusioned by the spectacle, opting for avoidance. For high-conviction supporters, exposure primarily served to reinforce their partisan leanings. These participants developed social identities centered on their candidate support and, most notably, their voter behavior, and subsequently projected these identities onto low-conviction individuals within their social networks. This influence, particularly when exerted through strong ties, proved to be a primary motivator for low-conviction individuals. Many participants also existed on a gamut between these two ends. The weighted integration of these channels guided participants as they navigated their information and influence spheres, ultimately informing their partisan political behavior.

The analysis of these findings was constructed through a theoretical framework grounded in diffusion of innovations, social identity theory, and selective exposure theory. While these theories were chosen for their observed relevance to voter behavior in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), their principles manifested with remarkable clarity in this study conducted over 75 years later. This study indicates that the central findings from Lazarsfeld's research, specifically the reinforcement of pre-existing partisan leanings by media and the susceptibility of undecided voters to interpersonal influence, remain highly significant to contemporary elections. Yet, through investigating modern political and media dynamics, this research demonstrated new applications for these theories. For one, this study offered a revised understanding of opinion leaders, arguing that content creators, even without directly influencing attitudes or behavior, played a crucial role in driving the conversation by disseminating mass media content. Building on a two-step flow model, this research identified a three-step flow characteristic of the new media landscape, wherein individuals take an additional step to substantiate opinion leaders' claims. With regards to social identity theory, this study found that even amidst political disillusionment and without strong party identification, 'voter' identity can exert a powerful influence on motivating voter turnout. Further, while social identity can be a powerful motivator by framing a vote as an expression of demographic support, its influence as a motivator depends on the depth of participants' interpersonal relationships within that group. Lastly, selective exposure remains a highly relevant paradigm that can occur across all forms of exposure. While selective exposure was primarily enacted through judgments of information quality in media consumption, it manifested as conflict avoidance in interpersonal interactions.

While these results are intriguing, several limitations in the study's design affect how the study's findings should be interpreted. This research relied on a sample of 20 students from

Lehigh University. Although some research indicates that small samples are effective for interview research, recommendations vary widely (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Sandelowski, 1995; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Additionally, because the sample size was set prospectively, additional interviews may have yielded new insights (Guest et al., 2006). While stratified sampling was used to achieve a representative sample of the university's undergraduate population, the targets for each stratum were not perfectly met. As a result, the sample overrepresented female and fourth-year students—demographics shown to influence behavior in ways that may have skewed the findings (Kahn, 2020; Pryor, 2010). Further, this study did not select for partisanship. Given the significant role of party leaning in shaping electoral experiences, this presents a central constraint (DeSilver, 2022; Morris & Morris, 2022; Zhu et al., 2024).

In addition to sampling limitations, this study's use of semi-structured interviews introduces other methodological concerns. This approach is susceptible to response bias, inaccuracies in individual's self-reports, and recall bias, the imprecise or incomplete recollection of past events (Popovic & Huecker, 2025). Another factor may have been social desirability bias, the tendency to "falsify responses to create a socially desirable image" (Gower, 2022, p. 3). While my positionality as a peer undergraduate may have fostered rapport and openness, it may also have amplified this bias by making participants hesitant to share views they perceived as negative or unconventional within the student body. Moreover, because the study draws exclusively from Lehigh University undergraduates, its findings are not generalizable. While the results may offer insight into similar higher education contexts, they cannot be extended to all college students or young adults (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maxwell, 2013).

To address these limitations and advance this area of study, future research should adopt broader methodological approaches and explore additional populations. The growing availability

of large-scale online data offers an opportunity for future research to employ comprehensive quantitative methods, using robust measures of participants' engagement with political content in both social and mass media (Bond et al., 2013). Qualitative studies could benefit from a longitudinal design that captures participants' reflections throughout the election period, mirroring Lazarsfeld's (1944) approach. Ultimately, the primary limitation of this research is its limited generalizability. A larger sample size incorporating additional strata to better represent Lehigh University would enhance the study's applicability to similar institutions. Another avenue would be to adopt a multi-institutional approach by surveying participants from private and public universities across the U.S., thereby accounting for the diversity of higher education contexts. Moreover, future research should also consider young people outside the college population to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Considering unprecedented levels of polarization, the rapid proliferation of new media, and the potential ramifications of emergent technologies like artificial intelligence, research into the electoral decision-making processes of young Americans will continue to be of paramount importance.

References

Ad Fontes Media. (n.d.). *The New York Times Bias and Reliability*. Ad Fontes Media. Retrieved May 5, 2025, from https://adfontesmedia.com/new-york-times-bias-and-reliability/

Aldrich, J. H. (1993, February). Rational Choice and Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, *37*(1), 246-278. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111531

Alexandre, I., Yoo, J. J., & Murthy, D. (2021, May 11). Make Tweets Great Again: Who Are Opinion Leaders, and What Did They Tweet About Donald Trump? *Social Science Computer Review*, *40*(6), 1456-1477. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211008859

Al-Taie, M. Z., & Kadry, S. (2017, March 21). Information Diffusion in Social Networks. *Python for Graph and Network Analysis*, *21*, 165-184. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53004-8_8

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017, Spring). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*(2), 211-236. https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.31.2.211

All Sides. (2025, May). *New York Times Fact Check*. All Sides. Retrieved May 5, 2025, from https://www.allsides.com/news-source/new-york-times-fact-check-media-bias

American National Election Studies. (n.d.). *Affective Polarization of Parties: Own-party and rival-party feelings*. American National Election Studies. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-guide/anes-guide.html?chart=affective_polariz ation_parties

Ando, H., Cousins, R., & Young, C. (2014, January). Achieving Saturation in Thematic Analysis: Development and Refinement of a Codebook. *Comprehensive Psychology*, *3*, 1-7. Sage Journals. https://doi.org/10.2466/03.CP.3.4

Avin, C., Daltrophe, H., & Lotker, Z. (2024, January 11). On the impossibility of breaking the echo chamber effect in social media using regulation. *Scientific Reports*, *14*. Nature. Retrieved March 31, 2025, from https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-50850-6

Bal, E., & Bicen, H. (2017). The purpose of students' social media use and determining their perspectives on education. *Procedia Computer Science*, 177-181. Retrieved February 15, 2025, from https://pdf.sciencedirectassets.com/280203/1-s2.0-S1877050917X00197/1-s2.0-S187705 0917324389/main.pdf?X-Amz-Security-Token=IQoJb3JpZ2luX2VjECUaCXVzLWVhc3

QtMSJHMEUCIH%2Fx8WpZjWyIz4vLQVFtwY7PtIUiAwq74xlZJIHhrK%2FkAiEAlt1

wy%2BRNePJYZmikPn931UsAk3OuiGOsdOgIKKW

Balqis, N. R., & Amelia, L. T. D. (2023). Changes in Communication Patterns in the Digital

Age. *ARRUS Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, *3*(4), 544-566.

https://doi.org/10.35877/soshum1992

Barnes, J. (1954). Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish. *Human Relations*, *7*(1),

39-58. Retrieved February 15, 2025, from

https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/001872675400700102

Barrett, P., Hendrix, J., & Sims, G. (2021, September 27). How tech platforms fuel U.S. political

polarization and what government can do about it. *Brookings Institution*.

https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-tech-platforms-fuel-u-s-political-polarization-an

d-what-government-can-do-about-it/

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network Propaganda: Manipulation,*

Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics. Oxford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.001.0001

Boas, T. C. (2024, July). Who Participates in Focus Groups? Diagnosing Self-Selection. *Political*

Science and Politics, *57*(3), 384-389. https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652400009X

Bond, R. M., Fariss, C. J., Jones, J. J., Kramer, A. D. I., Marlow, C., Settle, J. E., & Fowler, J. H.

(2013, November 20). A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political

mobilization. *Nature*, *489*, 295-298. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3834737/

Botou, A., & Marsellos, P.-S. (2018). Teens' Perception about Social Networking Sites: Does

Facebook Influence Teens' Self-Esteem? *Psychology*, *9*(6), 1453-1474. Retrieved

December 28, 2024, from

https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=85734#return25

Bovens, M., & Wille, A. (2021, April 26). Education, Inequality, and Political Behavior. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1772

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006, January). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research In Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. ResearchGate. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brenan, M. (2024, October 14). *Americans' Trust in Media Remains at Trend Low*. Gallup News. Retrieved April 23, 2025, from

https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx

Brennan, J. (2025, February 21). *The Ethics and Rationality of Voting*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from

https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=voting

Bryan, C. J., Walton, G. M., Rogers, T., & Dweck, C. S. (2011). Motivating voter turnout by invoking the self. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *108*(31). Retrieved December 28, 2024, from https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1103343108

Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). *The American Voter*. The University of Chicago Press.

The Center for Legislative Archives. (2022). *The Two-Party System: A Revolution in American 1824 to 1840 Politics*. National Archives.

https://www.archives.gov/files/legislative/resources/ebooks/two-party-system.pdf

Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., & García Blesa, F. (2023, May 16). TikTok and Political Communication: The Latest Frontier of Politainment? A Case Study. *Media and Communication*, *11*(2), 203-217. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6390

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021, February 23). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *118*(9). https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

Contino, J. (2024, November 3). *Brown and White pre-election survey results*. The Brown and White. https://thebrownandwhite.com/2024/11/03/bw-pre-election-survey-results/

Dahl, R. A. (1998). *On Democracy*. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv18zhcs4

Dalton, R. J. (2021, December 22). Party Identification and Its Implications. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-72?d=%2F10.1093%2Facrefore%2F9780190228637.001.0001%2Facrefore-9780190228637-e-72&p=emailA8DOnBjmOn%2FkA

DeSilver, D. (2022, March 10). The polarization in today's Congress has roots that go back decades. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/

Downs, A. (1957, April). An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, *65*(2), 135-150. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/257897

Dunwoodie, K., Macaulay, L., & Newman, A. (2022). Qualitative interviewing in the field of work and organisational psychology: Benefits, challenges and guidelines for researchers and reviewers. *Applied Psychology*, *72*(2), 863-889. Retrieved February 25, 2025, from https://iaap-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apps.12414

Eschbaugh-Soha, M. (2015). Traditional Media, Social Media, and Different Presidential Campaign Messages. In *Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns* (pp. 136-152). NYU Press.

Feddersen, T. J. (2004). Rational Choice Theory and the Paradox of Not Voting. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *18*(1), 99-112. JSTOR. Retrieved April 11, 2025, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/3216877?seq=2

Festinger, L. (1968). *A Theory Of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press. https://archive.org/details/FestingerLeonATheoryOfCognitiveDissonance1968StanfordUniversityPress/page/n5/mode/2up

Fischer, P., Schulz-Hardt, S., & Frey, D. (2008). Selective exposure and information quantity: How different information quantities moderate decision makers' preference for consistent and inconsistent information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*(2), 231-244. APA PsychNet. Retrieved February 16, 2025, from https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-00466-004

Fox, S., & Rainie, L. (2014, February 27). *Part 1: How the internet has woven itself into American life*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved February 6, 2024, from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/02/27/part-1-how-the-internet-has-woven-itself-into-american-life/#:~:text=In%20possibly%20the%20first%20survey,U.S.%20adults%20used%20the%20internet

Freedman, J. L., & Sears, D. O. (1965). Selective Exposure. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *2*, 57-97. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60103-3

Fujiwara, T., Muller, K., & Schwarz, C. (2024). The Effect of Social Media on Elections: Evidence from the United States. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, *22*(3), 1495-1539. Retrieved January 9, 2025, from

https://www.princeton.edu/~fujiwara/papers/SocialMediaAndElections.pdf

Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015, September 7). Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, *20*(9), 1408-1416.

https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2281

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. AldineTransaction.

http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Glaser_1967.pdf

Gower, T., Pham, J., Jouriles, E. N., Rosenfield, D., & Bowen, H. J. (2022, June). Cognitive biases in perceptions of posttraumatic growth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *94*, 1-12. ScienceDirect.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2022.102159

Grabenstein, H. (2024, November 5). The cost of this election | Live Updates. *PBS*.

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/live-update/election-news-2024/the-cost-of-this-election

Granovetter, M. S. (1973, May). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360-1380. JSTOR. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from

https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776392?seq=12

Greene, S. (2004). Social Identity Theory and Party Identification. *Social Science Quarterly*, *85*(1), 136-153. JSTOR. Retrieved December 26, 2024, from

https://www.jstor.org/stable/42955932

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 59-82.

https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Guerin, K. N. (2021, March 24). Democrats and Republicans Live Segregated Even within Neighborhoods, Harvard Researchers Find. *The Harvard Crimson*.

https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2021/3/24/partisan-segregation-within-neighborhoods/

Hajnal, Z. (2023, October 10). *How Did We Get Here: Understanding the Demographic Sources of America's Party Divisions*. Protect Democracy. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from

https://protectdemocracy.org/work/understanding-the-demographic-sources-of-americas-party-divisions/

Han, L. (2024, December 30). The Rise of Digital Media: Transforming Communication, Culture, and Commerce. *Global Media Journal*, *22*(72), 1-3.

https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/the-rise-of-digital-media-transforming-communication-culture-and-commerce.pdf

Harrison, R. (2023, July 6). *Racial Identity Explains Presidential Vote Choices More than Geography*. Yale University Institution for Social and Policy Studies. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from

https://isps.yale.edu/news/blog/2023/07/racial-identity-explains-presidential-vote-choices-more-than-geography

Hart, W., Albarracin, D., Eagly, A. H., Brechan, I., Lindberg, M. J., & Merrill, L. (2009). Feeling

    Validated Versus Being Correct: A Meta-Analysis of Selective Exposure to Information.

    Psychological Bulletin, 555-588. Retrieved January 7, 2025, from

    https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4797953/

Head, A. J., DeFrain, E., Fister, B., & MacMillan, M. (2019, August 5). Across the great divide:

    How today's college students engage with news. *First Monday*, *24*(8). First Monday.

    https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i8.10166

Heatherly, K. A., Lu, Y., & Lee, J. K. (2017, August). Filtering out the other side? Cross-cutting

    and like-minded discussions on social networking sites. *New Media & Society*, *19*(8),

    1271-1289. Sage Journals. Retrieved March 30, 2025, from

    https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1461444816634677

Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022, January). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative

    research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, *292*, 1-10.

    https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953621008558

Hurst, A. (2023). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Helpful Guide for*

    Undergraduates and Graduate Students in the Social Sciences. Oregon State University.

    https://open.oregonstate.education/qualresearchmethods/

Iyengar, S., & Krupenkin, M. (2018). Partisanship as Social Identity; Implications for the Study

    of Party Polarization. *The Forum*, *16*(1), 23–45. https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2018-0003

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The Origins

    and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of*

    Political Science, *22*, 129-146. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034

Jenyanthi, M. (2022, June). Social Media and Identity Formation – The Influence of

    Self-Presentation and Social Comparison. *Mind and Society*, *11*(2), 138-144.

    ResearchGate. https://doi.org/10.56011/mind-mri-112-202216

Jurkowitz, M., Mitchell, A., Shearer, E., & Walker, M. (2020, January 24). 2. Americans are

    divided by party in the sources they turn to for political news. *Pew Research Center*.

    https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/americans-are-divided-by-party-in-t

    he-sources-they-turn-to-for-political-news/

Kahn, S. (2020, October 23). Women Tend to Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidates More

    Than Men Do. Here's How That Gender Gap First Came to Be. *TIME Magazine*.

    https://time.com/5903399/gender-gap-politics/

Kapoor, K. K., Tamilmani, K., Rana, N. P., Patil, P., Dwivedi, Y. K., & Nerur, S. (2018).

    Advances in Social Media Research: Past, Present and Future. *Information System

    Frontiers*, *20*, 531-558. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-017-9810-y

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow

    of Mass Communications* (3rd ed.). The Free Press.

Kenny, C. B. (1992). Political Participation and Affects from the Social Environment. *American

    Journal of Political Science*, *36*(1), 259-267. JSTOR. Retrieved February 15, 2025, from

    https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2111432.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Aefba26791ac95

    9f9c6e1a6bb983b4168&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1

Kligler-Vilenchick, N., & Literat, I. (2025, January 7). Expressive citizenship: Youth, social

    media, and democracy. *Journal of Children and Media*, *19*(1), 46-52. Taylor & Francis.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2438680

Klofstad, C. A. (2015, February 6). Exposure to Political Discussion in College is Associated

    With Higher Rates of Political Participation Over Time. *Political Communication*, *32*(2),

    292-309. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.944322

Kulachai, W., Lerdtomornsakul, U., & Homyamyen, P. (2023, August 22). Factors Influencing

    Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review. *Social Sciences*, *14*(1), 1-16.

    https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090469

LaMarre, H. (2024, October 9). Blitz of political attack ads in Pennsylvania and other swing

    states may be doing candidates and voters more harm than good. *The Conversation*.

    https://theconversation.com/blitz-of-political-attack-ads-in-pennsylvania-and-other-swing
    -states-may-be-doing-candidates-and-voters-more-harm-than-good-239034

Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1944). The Election Is Over. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *8*(3), 317-330.

    JSTOR. Retrieved January 8, 2025, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/2745288?seq=1

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The People's Choice: How The Voter Makes*

    Up HIs Mind in a Presidential Campaign. Columbia University.

Lehigh University. (2023). *About Lehigh - University Statistics*. Lehigh University.

    https://www2.lehigh.edu/about/university-statistics

Lehigh University. (2023, November 17). *Undergraduate - 10th Day Census Fall 2023*. Lehigh

    University Office of Institutional Data. Retrieved April 27, 2025, from

    https://data.lehigh.edu/sites/data.lehigh.edu/files/CensusPDF_ug202340.pdf

Lehoczky Escobar, A. (2024, October 4). Lehigh Valley for All canvasses Northampton County.

    The Brown and White.

    https://thebrownandwhite.com/2024/10/04/lehigh-valley-for-all-canvasses-the-county/

Lister, M. (2024, January 14). *31 Mind-Boggling Instagram Stats & Facts for 2024*.

   WordStream. Retrieved March 31, 2025, from

   https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/04/20/instagram-statistics

Marcus, J. (2024, September 30). Once-low college student voting rates are trending up. *The*

   Hechinger Report. Retrieved January 6, 2025, from

   https://hechingerreport.org/a-surprising-shift-in-the-political-equation-once-low-college-s

   tudent-voting-is-way-up/

Martin, G. J., & Yurukoglu, A. (2017). Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization.

   American Economic Review, *107*(9), 2565-2599. Retrieved February 17, 2025, from

   https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20160812

Matthews, D. (2017, September 8). A stunning new study shows that Fox News is more

   powerful than we ever imagined. *Vox*.

   https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/8/16263710/fox-news-presidential-vote-

   study

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). Designing a Qualitative Study. In *Qualitative Research Design: An*

   Interactive Approach (pp. 214-253). SAGE Publications.

   https://www.researchgate.net/publication/43220402_Qualitative_Research_Design_An_I

   nteractive_Approach_JA_Maxwell

McCroskey, J. C., & Prichard, S. V. O. (1967). Selective Exposure and Lyndon B. Johnson's

   1966 "State of the Union" Address. *Journal of Broadcasting*, *11*(4), 331-338. Retrieved

   February 15, 2025, from

   https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/08838156709363565?needAccess=true

McDonald, M. (2025). *National Turnout Rates Graph*. University of Florida Election Lab.

Retrieved April 19, 2025, from https://election.lab.ufl.edu/national-turnout-rates-graph/

McNaughtan, J., & Brown, M. (2020). Fostering Democratic Participation at Community

Colleges: Understanding the Relationship Between Voting and Student, Institutional, and

Environmental Factors. *Community College Review*, *48*(4), 355-375. Sage Journals.

Retrieved October 13, 2024, from

https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0091552120926250

Media Bias Fact Check. (2024, December 2). *New York Times - Bias and Credibility*. Media

Bias/Fact Check. Retrieved May 5, 2025, from

https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/

Milgram, S. (1967, May). The Small-World Problem. *Psychology Today*, *1*(1), 61-67.

https://snap.stanford.edu/class/cs224w-readings/milgram67smallworld.pdf

Milgram, S., & Travers, J. (1969). An Experimental Study of the Small World Problem.

Sociometry, *32*(4), 425-443. JSTOR.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/2786545?origin=crossref

Mitchell, A., Kiley, J., & Gottfried, J. (2013, October 24). *The Role of News on Facebook*. Pew

Research Center. Retrieved May 2, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2013/10/24/the-role-of-news-on-facebook/

Montanaro, D., Moore, E., McMillan, N., Jin, C. H., & Wood, D. (2024, November 22). How

Black, Latino and young voters shifted political leaning this election. *NPR*. Retrieved

February 24, 2025, from

https://www.npr.org/2024/11/22/nx-s1-5199119/2024-election-exit-polls-demographics-black-latino-voters

Morales, A. J., Dong, X., Bar-Yam, Y., & Pentland, A. (2019, October). Segregation and

polarization in urban areas. *Royal Society Open Science*, *6*(10).

https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.190573

Morris, D. S., & Morris, J. S. (2022, September). Partisan media exposure, polarization, and

candidate evaluations in the 2016 general election. *Social Science Quarterly*, *103*(5),

993-1319. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13182

Mutz, D. C., & Martin, P. S. (2001). Facilitating Communication across Lines of Political

Difference: The Role of Mass Media. *American Political Science Review*, *95*(1), 97-114.

Retrieved January 7, 2025, from

https://www.polisci.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/mutz%202001%20apsr.pdf

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023, October). A Step-by-Step Process of

Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International*

Journal of Qualitative Methods, *22*, 1-16.

https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/16094069231205789

The New York Times. (2017). Economic diversity and student outcomes at Lehigh University.

The New York Times.

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/lehigh-university

Nickerson, D. W. (2008). Is Voting Contagious? Evidence from Two Field Experiments.

American Political Science Review, *102*(1), 49-57. Cambridge University Press.

Retrieved February 16, 2025, from

https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/is-

voting-contagious-evidence-from-two-field-experiments/8C2E64552D946C87FD062DD

2CCD9054E

Northampton County. (n.d.). *Official Election Results*. Live Election Results | Northampton

County, PA.

https://www.livevoterturnout.com/ENR/northamptonpaenr/7/en/Index_7.html

Pennsylvania Department of State. (2025, January 31). *Secretary of the Commonwealth Reports*

Record-High Voter Turnout in 2024 General Election. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Retrieved May 3, 2025, from

https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dos/newsroom/record-high-voter-turnout-in-2024-general-el

ection.html

Pew Research Center. (2016, July 18). *Digital news developments in U.S. presidential*

campaigns, 2000-2016. Pew Research Center. Retrieved April 13, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/07/18/digital-news-developments-in-u-s-p

residential-campaigns-2000-2016/

Pew Research Center. (2024, April 9). *The partisanship and ideology of American voters*. Pew

Research Center. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/the-partisanship-and-ideology-of-ameri

can-voters/

Pew Research Center. (2024, April 9). *Party affiliation and ideology of US registered voters*.

Pew Research Center. Retrieved January 18, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/the-partisanship-and-ideology-of-ameri

can-voters/

Pew Research Center. (2024, November 13). *Internet, Broadband Fact Sheet*. Pew Research

Center. Retrieved February 6, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/

Pew Research Center. (2024, November 13). *Social Media Fact Sheet*. Pew Research Center.

Retrieved February 6, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

Pierpont, G. (2024, November 4). Northampton County holds power in presidential election. *The*

Brown and White.

https://thebrownandwhite.com/2024/11/04/northampton-county-holds-power-in-president

ial-election/

Popovic, A., & Huecker, M. R. (2025). *Study Bias*. StatPearls Publishing.

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK574513/

Project 26 at Lehigh University [@project26lu]. (n.d.). Instagram. Retrieved April 24, 2025,

from https://www.instagram.com/project26lu/

Pryor, J. H. (2010, October 28). *Voting Behavior Among College Students*. Higher Education

Research Institute. Retrieved May 3, 2025, from

https://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/briefs/HERI_ResearchBrief_Politics_Oct_2010.pdf

Rabb, N., Cowen, L., & de Ruiter, J. P. (2023). Investigating the effect of selective exposure,

audience fragmentation, and echo-chambers on polarization in dynamic media

ecosystems. *Applied Network Science*, *8*(78), 1-29.

https://appliednetsci.springeropen.com/articles/10.1007/s41109-023-00601-3

Rathje, S., Van Bavel, J. J., & van der Linden, S. (2021, June 23). Out-group animosity drives

engagement on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the*

United States of America, *118*(26), 1-9.

https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8256037/

Reilly, J. L. (2017, June 20). Social connectedness and political behavior. *Research & Politics*, *4*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017719173

Rogers, E. M. (1983). *Diffusion of Innovations* (3rd ed.). The Free Press. (Original work published 1962) https://teddykw2.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/everett-m-rogers-diffusion-of-innovations.pdf

Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. (n.d.). *Gender Differences in Voter Turnout*. Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout#GGN

Sandelowski, M. (1995, April). Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health*, *18*(2), 179-183. Wiley Online Library. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.4770180211

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & quantity*, *52*(4), 1893-1907. National Library of Medicine. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8

Sayce, D. (n.d.). *The Number of tweets per day in 2022*. David Sayce. Retrieved March 31, 2025, from https://www.dsayce.com/social-media/tweets-day/

Schapitl, L. (2024, November 3). The Lehigh Valley has changed drastically. Now, it could swing Pennsylvania. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2024/11/01/nx-s1-5126662/harris-trump-lehigh-valley-northampton-pa-boomerang

Shearer, E., Lipka, M., Naseer, S., Tomasik, E., & Jurkowitz, M. (2024, October 10). *2. Where Americans turn for election news*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved April 13, 2025, from

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/10/10/where-americans-turn-for-election-news/

Schöne, J. P., Garcia, D., Parkinson, B., & Goldenberg, A. (2023, July 6). Negative expressions are shared more on Twitter for public figures than for ordinary users. *PNAS Nexus*, *2*(7), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad219

Sim, J., & Waterfield, J. (2019, July 19). Focus group methodology: some ethical challenges. *Quality & Quantity*, *53*, 3003-3022. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-019-00914-5

Steppat, D., Castro, L., & Esser, F. (2021, September 17). What News Users Perceive as 'Alternative Media' Varies between Countries: How Media Fragmentation and Polarization Matter. *Digital Journalism*, *11*(5), 741-761. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1939747

Steppat, D., Castro Herrero, L., & Esser, F. (2022). Selective exposure in different political information environments – How media fragmentation and polarization shape congruent news use. *European Journal of Communication*, *37*(1), 82-102. Retrieved January 8, 2025, from https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8958559/#bibr41-02673231211012141

Stroud, N. J. (2014). 37 Selective Exposure Theories. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (pp. 531-548). Oxford University Press. Retrieved February 16, 2025, from https://watermark.silverchair.com/294951323.pdf?token=AQECAHi208BE49Ooan9kkhW_Ercy7Dm3ZL_9Cf3qfKAc485ysgAAA20wggNpBgkqhkiG9w0BBwagggNaMIIDVgIBADCCA08GCSqGSIb3DQEHATAeBglghkgBZQMEAS4wEQQMXL92vP6UtJWUw_BpAgEQgIIDIN9TTIlLp_99DlnFOoDLpv0dgDWbakHUyKZ-VuwAICfuVz

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In

    Psychology of intergroup Relations (S. Worchel; W. G. Austin ed., pp. 7-24). Retrieved

    December 28, 2024, from

    https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Intergroup_Conflict/Tajf

    el_&_Turner_Psych_of_Intergroup_Relations_CH1_Social_Identity_Theory.pdf

Taras, D., & Davis, R. (2022). Trending Politics: How the Internet Has Changed Political News

    Coverage. In *Electoral Campaigns, Media, and the New World of Digital Politics* (pp.

    44-56). University of Michigan Press.

Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barbera, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan,

    B. (2018, March). Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A

    Review of the Scientific Literature. *William & Flora Hewlett Foundation*, 1-95.

    https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3144139

Tufts University CIRCLE. (n.d.). *Dispelling Myths about Youth Voting | CIRCLE*. Center for

    Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University.

    Retrieved April 11, 2025, from

    https://circle.tufts.edu/understanding-youth-civic-engagement/dispelling-myths-about-yo

    uth-voting#myth:-youth-voting-has-been-low-for-decades

Tufts University CIRCLE. (2024, November). *The Youth Vote in 2024 | CIRCLE*. Center for

    Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University.

    Retrieved April 11, 2025, from https://circle.tufts.edu/2024-election

Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S., & Young, T. (2018, November 21). Characterising and

    justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: systematic analysis of

qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7

Verhoef, M. J., & Casebeer, A. L. (1997, March). Broadening horizons: Integrating quantitative and qualitative research. *The Canadian journal of infectious diseases*, *8*(2), 65–66. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved April 12, 2025, from https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3327344/pdf/idmm08065.pdf

Vorderer, P., Kromer, N., & Schneider, F. M. (2016). Permanently online – Permanently connected: Explorations into university students' use of social media and mobile smart devices. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *63*, 294-703. Science Direct. Retrieved February 25, 2025, from https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563216304216

Watson, J., Watson, M., Stillwell, D., & van der Linden, S. (2024, September 16). Negative online news articles are shared more to social media. *Scientific Reports*, *14*. Nature. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10338895/pdf/pgad219.pdf

Weeks, B. E., Lane, D. S., Kim, D. H., Lee, S. S., & Kwak, N. (2017, October 12). Incidental Exposure, Selective Exposure, and Political Information Sharing: Integrating Online Exposure Patterns and Expression on Social Media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *22*, 363-379. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12199

Weiss, R. S. (1995). *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. The Free Press.

Wesleyan Media Project. (2024, October 31). *More Than $4.5 Billion in Ad Spending This Cycle*. Wesleyan Media Project. Retrieved April 13, 2025, from https://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases-103124/

Wolf, Z. B., Merrill, C., & Mullery, W. (2024, December 13). Anatomy of three Trump elections: How Americans shifted in 2024 vs. 2020 and 2016. *CNN*.

https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2024/politics/2020-2016-exit-polls-2024-dg/

Wu, S., Mason, W. A., Hofman, J. M., & Watts, D. J. (2011, March). Who Says What to Whom on Twitter. *ResearchGate*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1145/1963405.1963504

Xu, W. W., Sang, Y., Blastula, S., & Park, H. W. (2014). Predicting Opinion Leaders in Twitter Activism Networks: The Case of the Wisconsin Recall Election. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *58*(10), 1278-1293. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764214527091

Yang, B., Zhang, R., Cheng, X., & Zhao, C. (2023, February 07). Exploring information dissemination effect on social media: an empirical investigation. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, *27*, 1469-1482. ResearchGate.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s00779-023-01710-7

Zhang, X., Akhter, S., Nassani, A. A., & Haffar, M. (2022, April 12). Impact of News Overload on Social Media News Curation: Mediating Role of News Avoidance. *Frontiers in psychology*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.865246

Zhu, Q., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2024). Implications of online incidental and selective exposure for political emotions: Affective polarization during elections. *New Media and Society*, *26*(1), 450-472. Retrieved January 9, 2025, from

https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/1461444821106133
6

Appendix

Interview Questions

Section One: Information

1. Where did you primarily receive your political information during the election period?

2. Are you active on social media?

   a. Which social media platforms do you have an account on?

   b. Did you encounter political information on these platforms in 2024? Which ones?

   c. How often did you encounter political information on these platforms?

   d. Did you follow any content creators, brands, or news sources specifically for political information?

      i. How did you find them?

      ii. Why did you decide to do so?

   e. Did the information you saw on these platforms influence your political opinions during the 2024 election? How? Why or Why not?

   f. Did the content you saw share your beliefs?

      i. Did you respond differently if they did or didn't?

3. Do you typically view news sites, news apps, or newspapers?

   a. Which news sites, news apps, or newspapers do you typically engage with?

   b. Did you encounter political information on these sources in 2024? Which ones?

   c. How often did you encounter political information on these platforms?

   d. Did you visit any of these news platforms specifically for political information?

      i. How did you find them?

      ii. Why did you decide to do so?

   e. Did the information you saw on these platforms influence your political opinions during the 2024 election? How? Why or Why not?

   f. Did the content you saw share your beliefs?

        i.   Did you respond differently if they did or didn't?

4. Do you typically view live TV?

    a. Which channels or services do you typically engage with?

    b. Did you encounter political information on these channels in 2024? Which ones?

    c. How often did you encounter political information on these channels?

    d. Did you ever watch any live TV specifically for political information?

        i.   How did you find it?

        ii.   Why would you decide to do so?

    e. Did the information you saw on these channels influence your political opinions during the 2024 election? How? Why or Why not?

    f. Did the content you saw share your beliefs?

        i.   Did you respond differently if they did or didn't?

5. Do you engage with any other sources?

    a. Why didn't you choose to engage with other sources of information?

6. Did the things you were reading or seeing ever motivate you to do or not do anything?

7. Were the sources you engaged with similar to those of the people around you?

8. Was gaining political information from these sources ever a shared experience?

9. Would others be surprised to learn of the sources of political information you consumed?

    a. If others found out about the sources of political info you consumed, how would you have responded?

10. Which of the content sources you engaged with do you feel provided the most information into the 2024 presidential election?

    a.   Which of the content sources you engaged with do you feel played the largest role in shaping your opinions in the election?

11. In the 2024 election, did you weigh sources of political information differently?

    a.   Were you more likely to trust information from a certain source over another?

12. Did you encounter any directly conflicting information?

    a.   What would you do if you encountered directly conflicting information?

13. How often did you speak with others about politics?

    a.   Who are the people in your life who you spoke to about politics?

        i.   Did you intentionally select who to discuss politics with?

    b.   What did those political conversations typically look like?

        i.   Did you learn political information from others? How often? What kind?

        ii.   Did the people you spoke to typically share your beliefs?

            1.   Did you respond differently if they did or didn't?

    c.   Did these conversations ever motivate you to do or not do anything?

14. In the 2024 presidential election, would you say you were politically informed?

    a.   What source of information or consumption practice contributed to that feeling?

Section Two: Behavior

1.   How would you describe your political behavior during the 2024 election?

2.   Did you vote?

    a.   Did you vote alone or with others?

        i.   Did others know you were going to vote?

    b.   When did you decide to vote and why?

        i.   Was this your first time voting?

ii.   What sources of information impacted your decision to vote?

   c. Did you vote for a straight ticket?

3. Were you involved in any political organizations? How many?

   a. Which organizations?

   b. When did you decide to join and why?

   c. What activities did you participate in through this organization during the election?

4. Did you ever try to persuade others of your opinions?

5. Did you ever display campaign paraphernalia?

6. Did you attend any rallies?

7. Did you contribute any money?

8. Did you identify as a member of a party?

   a. Were you registered as a member of the party?

   b. How did you express that?

   c. Did you feel you had a lot in common with other people of your party?

   d. Did it bother you if or when you saw people negatively responding to or speaking about your party?

Section Three: Reflection

1. Did you ever feel pressured to participate in the election in a certain way because of an aspect of your identity?

2. Did you ever feel conflicted about your political beliefs because they clashed with the norms or expectations of your social group?

3. Would you consider yourself to have had strong beliefs about the election?

     a.   Did you share those beliefs either in-person or online?

     b.   Why did you choose that method to share your beliefs?

4. Was participating in the 2024 election in the way that you did important to you?

     a.   When did it become important to you?

     b.   Which aspect of your participation was most important to you? Why?

     c.   If those around you hadn't participated, would you still have?

5. If I asked a close friend or family member of yours, would they know the extent of your political involvement? Why or why not?

     a.   Would they know your stance on key political issues? Why or why not?

     b.   Would they know who you voted for? Why or why not?

6. Did you have stronger political beliefs than your friends or family?

     a.   Did your political beliefs align with those of your friends or family?

     b.   Did you want your friends or family to be aware of your political behavior?

7. If you hadn't participated the way you did in this election, how would you have felt?

     a.   How would the people around you have responded?

     b.   Was that something you considered as you formed your behavior?

8. What do you think played the biggest role in your behavior in this election—the people you know or your media information sources?