# Chapter 20
# Social Media Use and Political Mobilization

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## ABSTRACT

*This article describes how political participation is a central component of democracy. Past research has found that a variety of factors drive individual decisions about participation, including the media that citizens use to gain political information. Social media offers the possibility of engaging citizens in a new way and potentially increasing various forms of participation. In this article, the role that social media use has in fostering a variety for forms of political participation is examined. This article finds that social media use can be a driver of participation, but that this impact is largely contingent on the political predispositions of the user.*

## INTRODUCTION

Democratic principles rest on the idea of power and legitimacy deriving from the people. Implicit in that notion is that the people are participants in some capacity. In the case of representative democracy, the main form of participation is voting. A smaller number of people do engage in other forms of electoral participation ranging from trying to persuade people to vote for their preferred candidate to donating to various causes. In general, American participation is well below levels in other countries. In recent elections, there has been a modest rebound of participation. Did social media play a role in increased turnout in recent elections? This research explores this question through examining the role that social media may play in mobilizing citizens. Elements of social media, such as greater social connectedness, exposure to mobilizing messages, ease of accessing information, would appear to have the potential to

engage citizens. On the flip side, there is the possibility that other elements may offset the potential for mobilization, such as increased distractions available from non-political content. It is our expectation that social media's impact, ultimately, will depend on the predispositions of the individual user.

## BACKGROUND

Political participation is a cornerstone of American democracy. Voting is the most common form of participation, although turnout rates in the U.S. have been a perpetual problem, with large numbers of eligible voters abstaining from voting (Teixera, 1992). Even though the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections had higher turnout than many presidential elections, American voter turnout still lags behind other established, and even less established democracies.

While, voting is the most common form of participation for American citizens, there are a variety of other ways that people can engage in the political process, ranging from simply talking about politics with friends, to symbolic support of a candidate or cause with a yard sign or button, to volunteering for a campaign or donating to a candidate or party. While there have been concerns about a decline in civic engagement in the U.S. in recent years (Putnam, 2000), there is some evidence of a rebound in civic engagement (Zukin et al, 2006).

For political campaigns, volunteers can be an important resource. A number of advances in tele-communication technology has altered campaigning (television advertising, direct mail) and placed a priority on the fundraising ability of campaigns, which emphasizes purchasing services and advertising (Wattenberg, 1991). Even so, some tasks such as door knocking are still best performed by armies of volunteers. These in-kind donations can have tremendous influence in shaping electoral outcomes and stimulating others to vote (Bergan et al, 2005; Green & Gerber, 2008).

While Americans, on average, are somewhat disengaged, participation rates in any number of political activities are unevenly distributed. There are key demographic differences in participation, with younger voters and those lower in socioeconomic status being less likely to engage (Teixera, 1992). Further, a variety of attitudinal factors may enhance or participation as well. Those who are lower in political interest, political efficacy, or political knowledge tend to be dramatically less likely to participate politically than those who are higher in these attributes (Teixera, 1992; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Strength of partisanship leads to increased participation in a variety of forms, largely through raising the perceived stakes of political outcomes. As Americans have become more polarized, we have seen a modest increase in some forms of participation (Abramowitz, 2009)

A changing media environment has the potential to shape participation as well. Critics have argued that the rise of television as an information source hampered political participation, and the timing fits that story, with American voter rates dropping off after the 1950s. Though many things changed during this period, television is seen by some as a major factor in declining turnout. One aspect of this is content and presentation. Postman contended that television was a poor medium for conveying important information, not only due to a lack of certain kinds of content, but because the way information was presented largely trivializes politics (Postman, 1985). Putnam also blames television for a decline in political and broader civic participation though through a different mechanism. His argument is that time spent watching television comes at the expense of time spent socially engaging with others, which tends to promote political engagement (Putnam, 2000).

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