

2018

# Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Social Media: Understanding the Relationship Between Facebook, Twitter, and Political Understanding

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## Recommended Citation

Siegel, Ruby, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Social Media: Understanding the Relationship Between Facebook, Twitter, and Political Understanding" (2018). *Sociology Senior Theses*. 3.

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**Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Social Media: Understanding the Relationship Between Facebook, Twitter, and Political Understanding\***

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Word Count = 8076

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## POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

### **Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Social Media: Understanding the relationship between Facebook, Twitter, and Political Understanding**

#### ABSTRACT

Social media is ubiquitous and holds a significant place in modern society. Social media feeds are inundated with political content and are used by politicians and citizens alike to post political commentary. Neither mass media nor politics are new areas of study in sociology, but the entanglement of the two is proving to be of interest, as some scholarship argues that social media is driving changes in how politics works in the United States. We must consider how the citizenry consumes and processes political information in the modern era in view of the interplay between social media and current events. This study examines how membership and/or regular use of Facebook, and membership and/or regular use of Twitter affects perceived political understanding. I propose that, respectively, Facebook and Twitter use will increase perception of political understanding. Analysis of data from the 2016 General Social Survey reveals that Twitter membership and/or regular use is correlated with political understanding; meaning that those who use Twitter are more likely to believe they have an understanding of the political issues facing our country. The data confirms that the relationship between social media and political understanding must be taken seriously, and warrants deeper exploration. There is a need for future research that explores the kinds of content individuals consume on social media and the time they spend on these sites in order to develop a more robust understanding of exactly how social media use affects political understanding.

The advent of social media has changed the lives of all individuals in ways that are not yet fully understood. Sociological study of media is not new. However, the addition of social media into the “mass media” category has changed the previous sociology of media. It appears that social media has a profound effect on its users. Almost anyone who has used technology knows that it can be a vortex into which anyone can be pulled. Social media intensifies this effect. It is only logical to assume that there is a reason that we give social networking applications immense power. Thus, as it is the job of a sociologist to study the forces that dictate the inner-workings of society, the sociological study of social media becomes essential.

As compared to pre-social media eras, political speech on social media platforms appears increasingly “exhibitionist”. One result of this is that one’s ideas can be immediately shared with anyone willing to hear them. This has resulted in, among other things, public, political tension. But it is not only fameless individuals that share their politics on social media. An ever increasing number of celebrities and elected officials choose to use social media to critique and advocate for policies, candidates and protests; and this includes President Trump, who shares many of his critiques of other world leaders, laws/policies and even military strategies on his Twitter in order to reach the largest audience in the shortest amount of time.

There have been social movements organized on social media: the eruption of the nationwide Women’s Marches, Black Lives Matter, etc. There are no bounds to what will be posted, and what can come from said posts. It must also be recognized that given the ease with which it can be accessed, the speed at which it changes, and its instant reward, social media has a constant and consistent presence in the lives of many. So, with a stream of the political opinions of all different

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types of people flowing constantly at our fingertips, it is imperative that we question its effect on all aspects of life, and specifically, our politics.

Like media, politics is not a new area of study for sociology. However, it is the combination of the two that is of current interest in the field of sociology. Social media has noticeably affected the way politics work in the United States (Dimitrova and Bystrom 2013). The infiltration of social media into the political arena has resulted in changes in social behaviors and, as sociologists and consumers of media, we must understand how. Because 2016 is the first year that the social media module was included, the 2016 General Social Survey (Smith et al. 2017) has an incredible source of untapped data waiting to be analyzed. Using this data we can see if there is not only a statistical relationship but a societal trend to which we need to pay closer attention.

This study focused only on Facebook and Twitter because they appear to be most pertinent in the political sphere right now. Both are being considered the preferred platform for connecting and engaging with younger citizens (Loader et al. 2015). Previous research found that Facebook has fostered political engagement through online groups that function similarly to in-person political groups (Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero 2012). Further, Facebook is a networking site to which people of all ages turn for information that is both entertaining and political; it provides opportunity for learning through “incidental exposure”, even when finding information is not the ultimate goal (Xenos, Vromen and Loader 2014). Though my study will *not* focus on Facebook groups, by extrapolating from other research which will be discussed in the literature review, there is a reasonable basis to conclude that a broader use of Facebook might also have a relationship with political understanding. Twitter has also become significant in the discussion of politics and social media. Scholars increasingly regard Twitter as political platform (Murthy 2014), where

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citizens, politicians and media professionals network and engage in a personal type of political communication (Ekman and Widholm 2014).

More broadly, Twitter is fomenting a structural change in the relationship between politicians and citizens (Ekman and Widholm 2014). This is exemplified by the Presidential Twitter account. When President Obama started the official “POTUS” Twitter account, he created an instant, open line of communication between any Twitter user and the current President of the United States – something that was not possible before, and is not possible without Twitter. Now, other politicians also use Twitter to share their views, to discuss politics, and communicate with citizens and voters. President Trump’s Twitter use has furthered the conversation by continuing to use the account to discuss politics. However, Twitter is also widely used among non-politician citizens to discuss politics (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2012). It is because of these facts that studying only Facebook and Twitter is justifiable.

Understanding the effect of social media on the political behavior of individuals helps address how media generally influences individuals. Further, it shows how political media specifically influences individuals by addressing how consumption of political media makes an individual more aware of politics and the political climate in which they live, how political understanding depends on social media usage, and whether the nature of social media consumption differs between political parties. There is no doubt that these questions can be answered through analysis. Therefore, I hypothesize that respondents who are members or regular users of Facebook are more likely to agree that they have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country. I similarly hypothesize that respondents who are members or regular users of Twitter are more likely to agree that they have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

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### LITERATURE REVIEW

Does the consumption of social media imbue an individual with a greater understanding of politics and the political climate in which they live? Previous research in this area has sought to uncover the inner-workings of the relationship between politics and social media. A review of the literature revealed six themes addressing how we seek political information, how we consume media, how politicians use social media, the structural benefits of using social media, the impact of the entanglement of politics and entertainment/celebrity and the effect of all of this on political participation.

#### *Seeking Political Information*

Our democracy depends on political understanding and involvement. We gain political understanding through sources that provide us with the information and tools to become educated politically. We encounter political information every day (Jennings et al. 2017). The media is one source that provides citizens with information about the political process (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2014; Dimitrova and Bystrom 2013). Having access to political news/information is important because, “‘A basic tenet of democratic theory is that voters’ choices must be based on informed thinking about political issues,’ and informed thinking comes from access and exposure to political information, which then results in political knowledge gains” (Bode 2016: 25). In addition to being crucial in informing voters, research has also shown that media exposure is associated with higher tendencies to vote (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2014).

In 2017, political understanding is being sought in ever expanding ways, one of which is social media. Social media functions as an aggregative platform for user generated content, on which individuals can network with peers, colleagues, friends and family to share their thoughts and read the thoughts of those with whom they are connected (Bode 2016; Koc-Michalska et al.

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2016; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010). Though there is a wide age-range on social media, young adults are increasingly attracted and attached to Facebook and are joining social networks for social interaction and connection (Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero 2012; Quintelier and Theocharis 2012). Research has also shown that they are relying more on online media for political information and using social media sites to find political content and commentary from peers and news outlets because young adults are less likely to seek out news in traditional forms of media like newspapers or radio broadcasts (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010). The interaction with political information in the media helps “familiarize [young adults] with political actors and processes and build political knowledge” (Moeller et al. 2013: 691). Further, with many official or traditional news sources active on social media networks, many social media users get their news on their social feeds. The number of social networking sites becoming recognized as a legitimate source of political news, and the part of the population viewing them as such are increasing significantly (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). There is also empirical evidence revealing that internet use, political efficacy, political participation and voting turnout in adolescents are connected (Moeller et al. 2013).

A growing subsection of the user generated information on social media is political content - exposing any user to political information as they scroll through their feed (Bode 2016). Though relying solely on one medium for news might not be the most strategic way to learn politics, ultimately the entanglement of social media and politics allows young adults, or other age groups, to learn about politics and perhaps gain greater political interest (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). Not only are individuals viewing politics more frequently through their networks, but it arguably is encouraging interest in politics.



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In 2007, it was reported that “32% of [social media] users had received information about the presidential primaries from those sites” (Baumgartner and Morris 2010: 30). Similarly, “Between 1996 and 2008, the percentage of Americans who got political information online rose from 4% to 40%” (Kushin and Yamamoto 2010: 612). In 2017, society’s general interaction with social media has increased exponentially, so we must wonder if the percentage of Americans getting political information online has also increased.

Social media can make politics more accessible by diminishing barriers that limit accessibility (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016) and creating new possibilities for political conversation (Srenson 2016). Moreover, social media provides those who might not seek out political information otherwise a place to do so. Because its use is not solely political, Facebook is useful as a source of information for those who are not otherwise exposed, and those who have little political interest. This allows these people to ‘catch up’ with what they may be missing from other news sources (Bode 2016).

### *Politician’s Social Media Use*

Political social media is a two-way street; citizens use social media to get information and politicians use social media to disseminate information and connect with constituents. They also use it to learn who their base is and who is listening to them. Politicians and political organizations use social media for campaigning because it is crucial for politicians to connect with constituents (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016; Loader, Vromen and Xenos 2015; Loader et al. 2015). If many of us now get direct information about politics and representation via social media, it would behoove us to verify and validate this new stream of information. If social media is a valid place to seek political information, perhaps it is impactful in informing voters and affecting political understanding.

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### *Low Cost High Yield*

One reason social media has succeeded in nurturing political thought is because it is “low cost, but potentially high yield” (Murthy 2014: 817). Twitter is an easy way to voice political opinions. Hashtags are common practice and a succinct way to voice an opinion. An individual can tweet #ImWithHer or #MakeAmericaGreatAgain and, in less than five words, demonstrate their political affiliation clearly (Ince, Rojas and Davis 2017). The Tea Party movement illustrates how social movements can arise through effective use of the hashtag #TCOT - Top conservatives on Twitter (Murthy 2014). The hashtag #SayHerName aided the intersectional discussion about police brutality following the death of Sandra Bland (Brown et al. 2017). In these ways, social media is a low-lift way to gain significant participation.

### *Consuming Political Media*

Research has shown that users of traditional media (i.e. newspapers, TV, news) experience increases in political knowledge gains (Bode 2016). But social media is also a successful platform for political consumption because it provides opportunity for conversation, even if that is not the primary motivation for membership on one of these sites (Diehl, Weeks and Zúñiga 2015). Social media provides political information to people who might not otherwise seek it. One group to which this refers is young citizens (Loader, Vromen and Xenos 2015). Social media also provides a political voice to those who might not have had one in the past because “[citizens] can increasingly provide political information and commentary to other citizens, loosening the monopoly on such communication previously enjoyed by a limited field of professional communicators” (Moy, Xenos and Hussain 2013 in Bode 2016: 24). Social media has given ordinary people a platform on which they can share their political thoughts but, unlike in the past,

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it also gives them instant validation that what they are saying is legitimate and should be treated as such (even if it is not). From the beginning then, we must be wary - if in fact people do believe that they have a better understanding of politics from social media, are they understanding facts? Other people's interpretation of facts? Or simply whatever opinion a random internet friend has to share.

Further, it is worth noting that the content that we see on our social media feeds is, in many ways, content that we choose to see. It is specialized based on a network that we have opted into (Bode 2016). We connect with like-minded people and therefore we are finding political content interesting because it has been posted by people with whom we already relate. Perhaps we even are more willing to accept, or even just interact with content that conforms with our beliefs (Baumgartner and Morris 2010).

Moreover, while media is intended to provide a diverse range of information upon which we can base our opinions (Inthorn, Street and Scott 2012), that goal is blunted when viewers choose to consume targeted media aligning with beliefs we already hold. If social media users tend only to expose themselves to content that their friends share, which is likely aligned with the user's pre-existing beliefs, consuming this political media could increase the likelihood that individuals continue to associate with the same beliefs (Baumgartner and Morris 2010).

We frequently hear about the ways in which media consumers absorb the media's messages subliminally or without thinking. This can happen with political content as well and is known as incidental exposure (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). Constant checking and refreshing internet feeds presents users with content that may or may not be what they were looking for. This creates opportunity for "incidental exposure" (Xenos, Vromen and Loader 2014: 154). In a usual scroll through social media we may also consume what some call "Soft News", or "entertainment-based

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programming that contains small amounts of news” (Baumgartner and Morris 2010: 27). In these cases, political information is consumed as a byproduct of consuming media (Bode 2016). Thus through incidental learning, Soft News provides individuals with information that will make them more likely to participate politically in the future (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). Further, if we are indeed learning incidentally, someone who might not be engaged with or knowledgeable about politics simply has to *know* someone who is (and who might then share on social media) to learn about politics and then in turn they can become engaged (Xenos et al. 2014). This raises the question - is soft news the key to engaging those who would not otherwise engage?

### *Politics and the Celebrity*

A large subsection of social media users are celebrities who talk directly to their fans and users of social media (Loader et al. 2015). These celebrities also share politics. Further, people listen to celebrities. So, if celebrities share political information, is it informing voters? Does this exchange increase perception of political understanding? On social networking sites, politicians are competing with these celebrities. This dynamic begs the question - who are people more willing to listen to? But the mere fact that politicians and celebrities alike are sharing political content speaks to the ways that social media are changing our society. Thus, the introduction of politicians and political celebrities into this “emergent social media ecology could thereby mark a further sign of the public domain being opened up to a more personalized genre of politics, blending with the online popular culture of young citizens” (Loader et al. 2015: 401).

Television is one key way that voters can get to know their politicians. It is not just through televised election programming (like debates), because politicians are sitting down as guests on late-night and talk show programming at increasing rates. Watching these shows influences viewers’ perceptions of the candidates featured (Dimitrova and Bystrom 2013).

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### *Social Media and Political Participation*

Online political activity requires a desire to interact with political information (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016), thus we must question if there is some element of political understanding involved. Social media has served as a mobilizing platform for social movements, and its introduction into this sphere has made it easier for marginalized and/or oppressed groups to coordinate and voice their concerns (Gladwell 2010). Twitter was an integral part of the Black Lives Matter movement, allowing anyone to share their opinions and communicate with like-minded individuals, supportive communities and legislators (Ince et al. 2017). Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between social media and political participation because social media offers new ways to consume political information (Skoric et al. 2015; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010). Social Movements like the Arab Spring also mobilized due in part to the strategic use of social networks (Xenos, Vromen and Loader 2014) and without Twitter they “would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy” (Gladwell 2010: 2). The KONY 2012 movement was started by an organization called Invisible Children to take down Ugandan War Lord Joseph Kony. The movement existed largely online and relied heavily on social media for support and attention. With video content constantly going viral (in this case, the KONY video has over 100,000,000 views on Youtube), the KONY 2012 movement gained a substantial following, which further exemplifies how a movement can launch from social media (Loader et al. 2015).

Aside from activism, ordinary citizens feel that they can participate and engage politically on social media. There is also evidence that political activity on Facebook and “exposure to others’ political activity were positive predictors of general political participation” (Dimitrova and Bystrom 2013:1570). We encounter significant social media political participation during debates.

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Presidential debates provide an indispensable opportunity to learn about candidates, and, increased debate tweeting enhances learning during debates (Jennings et al. 2017).

However, it is important to be leery of participation on social media. In many cases, the basic act of tweeting or ‘liking’ something makes people feel like they are participating. In the case of KONY 2012, while thousands of people could ‘like’ the page or share a video, ultimately it did not do much for what was happening on the ground in Uganda (Loader et al. 2015) This exemplifies what some refer to as “Slacktivism” (Srenson 2016)- online activism designed to make us feel good (as opposed to helping a movement progress). Slacktivism has changed political participation because where activists and citizens once needed to vote, campaign, protest, etc., now all they need to do is hit “like” (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016). Social media rarely lead to “high-risk activism” (Gladwell 2010: 6), as participating in a movement online mostly serves our egos.

### *Summary*

Research has shown that “citizens are much more likely to engage with the political system if they have confidence in it” (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2014: 410). It is true that “the *opportunity* for learning from political information to which social media users are exposed is a real one” (Bode 2016: 42), and learning political information likely impacts political understanding. With substantial research supporting the relationship between media, politics and informing voters, and significant evidence of the influence of social media, plus the increasing politicization of both Twitter and Facebook, and, finally, how the combination of both has restructured political conversation, there is basis for the comparison of the use of Facebook, Twitter and Political Understanding.

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### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The “Theory of Self” (Mead 1934) is a symbolic interactionist interpretation of the ways in which individuals perceive themselves. The theory proposes that the “self” develops through social interactions and can be understood in terms known as the “I” and the “Me”. The “Me” is comprised of the expectations and attitudes of a “generalized other”. It is a social self; what we learn through interactions with others. The “I” - the individual identity, formed as a response to the “Me”.

This is an integral framework in the context of this study. First, political understanding is subjective. Further, as will be explained in the coming section, this study relies on a variable which measures self-perception of political understanding. Thus, it is crucial to think about what makes a person feel that they have a better/worse political understanding. Perhaps we might only know how politically versed one is relative to the peers, and based on the social interactions they have. In turn, this affects how one might answer this in a survey question.

The Network Society (Castells 2009) suggests that we live in an information society, in which we rely on a new type of social network which uses micro-electronic based communication technologies such as the internet or cell phones. Moreover, “We live in a media environment, and most of our symbolic stimuli come from the media” (Castells 2009: 364). Because our society is influenced so heavily by media, changing technological systems, in time, will transform our society (Castells 2009).

The Network Society is important in understanding how we, in 2017, interact with social media. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter rely on the types of networks proposed in the Network Society. In many ways, as Castells theorizes, the changing technological systems (and

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perhaps the growing ubiquity of social media) have transformed our society. We can use these two theories to try and understand how we form our self-identity within a Network Society.

The Theory of Self suggests that we develop our sense of self through social interactions. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are fundamentally social networks. Facebook and Twitter users have regular social interaction online – interactions which inform their sense of self. On Facebook and Twitter, users interact with, and are exposed to many kinds of information and opinions, including but not limited to political ones. Thus, if someone uses Facebook or Twitter they have greater social interactions and exposure to political information, which leads them to feel that they have a greater political understanding. But, our networks on social media are self-selective bubbles; we are comparing ourselves to a group of people with whom we likely already share views and experiences. Thus, we think we have a good/bad political understanding because our network thinks they do. Therefore, again, I hypothesize that respondents who are members or regular users of Facebook are more likely to agree that they have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country. I similarly hypothesize that respondents who are members or regular users of Twitter are more likely to agree that they have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

## METHODS

### *Data Set*

To examine the relationship between use of Facebook and Twitter and political understanding, data was collected from the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS). The population of the GSS is non-institutionalized adults (18 and older), who are English and Spanish speakers (Smith et al. 2015). The response rate of the 2016 GSS was .613. In 2016, on ballots two and three,



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respondents were asked questions from the Social Media Usage module. For further information on how the data were collected, see <http://gss.norc.org>.

The social media module is significant because it is the first time there were social media specific questions asked of respondents on the GSS. While there is not a question that asks about time spent on social media, the GSS does, however, ask about which social networks an individual is a member or regular user of. This can provide valuable insight. For purposes of this study, the unit of analysis is individuals. No subsets were created thus the sample of this study is 332 respondents.

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable in this study is “Political Understanding” which measures “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country”, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Of the 2867 total respondents 1498 were coded as missing. After this missing data was removed there was a remaining sample of 346. This variable was then reverse coded so that answers of “strongly disagree” receives a 1, and “strongly agree” receives a 5. Thus, those with a higher score feel that they have a better understanding of the political issues facing our country.

### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables are membership or regular use of Facebook and membership or regular use of Twitter. The GSS asks respondents “Which of the following social networking or social media sites are you a member or regular user of?” (Smith et al. 2015) wherein the social media sites are Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Vine, LinkedIn, Flickr, Googlesn, Pinterest and Whatsapp. The answers for each network are either yes or no. For purposes of this research, only Twitter and Facebook were used. With an original respondent total of 2867, 1483

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were coded as missing. This number comes from two things: Those who answered “don’t know” or “refused”, but also these questions were only asked on two of the three ballots of the GSS. After the missing data was removed there was a remaining sample of 346 for both Facebook and Twitter. Both variables were then dummied so that a “yes” receives a 1, and a “no” receives a “0”.

### *Control Variables*

There are, however, other factors that could play a part in the relationship between Facebook/Twitter and political understanding, such as political views and age. The political views variable asks respondents to categorize themselves from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative”, where “extremely liberal” is coded 1 and “extremely conservative” is coded 7. This is effectively measuring how conservative respondents believe they are. In any discussion of politics, political views are pertinent, making them an essential control variable.

Age is a necessary control variable because different age cohorts not only use social media differently but also have different levels of social media understanding. On social media, there is a noticeable and widely acknowledged skew towards younger age groups (Xenos et al. 2014). Thus, it is important to see if age has any part in the relationship between Facebook/Twitter use and Political Understanding.

## FINDINGS

### *Univariate*

Figure 1 shows respondents’ perception of their political understanding. It suggests that about 50 percent of people reported to agree that they had a “pretty good understanding of the political issues facing our country.” About 15 percent disagreed and just over 20 percent felt that they neither agreed nor disagreed. The “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” answer categories had the lowest percents with a little over 10 percent that strongly agree and less than 5 percent

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strongly disagree. More specifically, according to Table 1, the mean Political Understanding was about 4. Given the 1 through 5 scale on which this variable is coded, this means the average respondent answered “agree”. The standard deviation is about 1 which, given a 5-point scale, means there is a substantial amount of variation. The results therefore indicate that most people agree that they have a “pretty good” political understanding. Should this information be generalized to think about the whole population, a substantial amount of people feel they have a pretty good sense of political understanding.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 2 shows Facebook and Twitter use and suggests that about 75 percent of respondents use Facebook and just under 20 percent use Twitter. More specifically, according to Table 1, an average of 76 percent of respondents use Facebook with a standard deviation of .43, and 18 percent use Twitter with a standard deviation of .39. In this context, because it is a dummy variable, the mean presents the percent of users of Facebook. The standard deviation of Twitter is worth noting because it is more than double the mean. This means that there is substantial variation within this variable.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 3 shows the wide range of ages represented in the GSS. We can see that age ranges from 18 to 88, followed by an “89 or older” option. Looking to Table 1, the mean age was about 43 with a standard deviation of around 17 - this tells us that there is a variation of about 17 years. Figure 4 shows political views - the bars indicate a normal distribution in which the mean, median and mode are all the same. According to the graph about 35 percent of respondents categorize themselves as moderate. According to the table 1, the mean is 4 which, given the 1-7

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coding scheme, is the moderate level. The next highest percentages were the liberal and conservative categories with about 15 percent of respondents reporting each category respectively. A little over 10 percent of respondents categorized themselves as both slightly liberal and slightly conservative respectively and under 5 extremely liberal and extremely conservative. Looking back to Table 1, the standard deviation is 1.47 which means there is not much variation.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

### *Bivariate*

Table 2 shows the Correlations between Political Understanding and Facebook and Twitter use. According to the chart there are significant relationships between Twitter and Political Understanding, Age and Political Understanding, Facebook and Twitter Use, Age and both Facebook and Twitter use and Political Views and Age. The weak, positive relationship between Twitter and Political Understanding tell us that respondents that use Twitter are more likely to agree that they have a strong political understanding. Further, with a weak, positive correlation with age, we can tell that those who are older are more likely to agree that they have a strong political understanding. The weak, positive correlation between Twitter and Facebook tells us that those who use Twitter are more likely to use Facebook. The moderate, negative correlation between Age and Twitter tells us the older one is, the less likely they are to be a member of Twitter. There is a weak, negative correlation between Age and Facebook use which tells us that older respondents are less likely to use Facebook. Finally, with a weak, positive relationship we can tell that older respondents are likely to be more conservative.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

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### *Multivariate*

Table 3 shows the relationship between political understanding and Facebook/Twitter use. The  $R^2$  indicates that 4.8 percent of variation in political understanding can be explained by Twitter/Facebook use, age and political views. After controlling for age and political views, the F test reveals that the regression equation is significant. In the regression model there is a statistically significant relationship between Twitter and political understanding. There are no statistically significant relationships for Facebook and Conservatism. According to the unstandardized regression coefficient ( $b$ ), controlling for other factors, on average Twitter users were almost half ( $b = .406$ ) a point higher on the five-point political understanding scale. Age was also statistically significant ( $b = .010$ ). Again, according to the unstandardized regression coefficient ( $b$ ), controlling for other factors, for every 10 additional years older someone is, they move up one tenth of a point on the scale. The standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for Twitter and Age are .173 and .175, respectively, indicating that both have about the same size effect on political understanding.

[Insert Table 3 About Here]

## DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis revealed that Twitter has a significant relationship with political understanding; respondents that use Twitter are more likely to agree that they have a good sense of the political issues facing our country. Age (a control variable) was also significant, meaning part of the relationship can be explained by respondents' age – specifically, the older a respondent the more likely they are to report having a greater political understanding. However, because their standardized coefficients were virtually the same, it is clear that Twitter use and

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age bare virtually the same affect. Most importantly, these findings support one of my hypotheses.

These findings are consistent with a large body of literature and provide support for the argument that Twitter does influence political understanding. This study supports previous findings that social media provides citizens with political information (Brown and Wilkes 2014; Dimitrova and Bystrom 2013). The results also support findings that indicate that users of media, specifically Twitter, experience gains in political knowledge (Bode 2016), which is consistent with this study's finding that Twitter users report greater political understanding. Looking back to "incidental exposure" (Xenos et al. 2014), whether the content we are consuming on Twitter is fully political or just "soft news", the significant relationship between Twitter and political understanding shows that there must be some sort of learning happening on Twitter (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). This is consistent with my findings because learning would then increase political understanding.

Drawing from previous literature about the relationship between politics and celebrities, we can use the findings to think about how the presence of celebrity accounts affects our political understanding. Because celebrities intermingle on Twitter with citizens and politicians, they are likely part of the relationship. I previously posed the question: if celebrities share political information, is it informing voters? The societal obsession with celebrities has deemed them a guide for behavior, style, and beliefs. Because of the observed statistically significant relationship, we must question if the presence of celebrities is a factor that makes Twitter significant. If someone were to see their favorite celebrity supporting a certain view or politician, could it make them think similarly? Furthermore, the rather arbitrary "all-knowing", legitimate authority we have given to celebrities could lead us to treat the political information they share as

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legitimate (even if it is not). Thus, if we are consuming political media via celebrity accounts, we might think that we have a greater political understanding.

Putting these results back into the framework of Mead and Castells' theories: the regular social interactions that Twitter users have with their online networks also allow them to interact with political information, which, in turn, informs how they feel about their understanding of the political issues facing our country. The findings of this study also support Castells' (2009) theory that because of the media's influence on our society, as technology changes, there will be a societal transformation. The advent of social media has influenced our society in a way that is transforming the political sphere. Given Twitter's consideration as a legitimate source for news and political learning, the fact that this study supports that Twitter increases political understanding means that this is a variable that should be considered in the contemporary interpretation of Castells' work. Given Castell's theory, one might assume that both Twitter and Facebook would increase political understanding – this is not the case.

Why Twitter and not Facebook? With the structural differences in the two networking sites, we could argue that it is because of Facebook's network bubble. On Facebook we can only view what our friends post, there are few accounts that are public in the same way as Twitter. Because we only see our friends' posts, as previously discussed, we end up in a self-selecting bubble. These effects are mitigated on Twitter because celebrities, politicians and citizens alike maintain public accounts. We are still in a bubble on Twitter because most people only follow those whose opinions they want to see, but the opportunity to see different or even opposing views greatly increases. There is, however, complexity in this relationship because these bubbles could also be a reason why Facebook would increase political understanding. Our newsfeeds are filled with content from "friends" – people and pages with whom we have chosen to connect.

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But, our newsfeeds also react to us: online profiles, page suggestions, friend suggestions, and targeted ads are all examples. These “suggestions” perpetuate our “bubbles” because our social media suggests content related to what we have already opted to see and connect with. So, if the information we choose to see and the information the internet chooses for us is all the same information – it would seem like there is nothing new and that perhaps we know everything, thus we might think that we have a better political understanding.

Further, previous literature established that Twitter is a tool on which politicians can network (Ekman and Widholm 2014), and that it is crucial for them to connect with constituents (Loader, Vromen and Xenos 2015; Loader et al. 2015). This type of interaction is not possible on Facebook. This added layer of political interaction could also be a likely explanation for the significance in Twitter and not Facebook.

## CONCLUSION

Building on the previous studies of the relationship between media and the political sphere, this study examines the relationship between membership or regular use of Facebook and Twitter and perceived political understanding. As society becomes increasingly dependent on social media, its enmeshment with our political system is changing the way politics work in the United States. Thus, we must reflect on how we consume political information, how we evaluate our understanding of politics and if one has anything to do with the other. This study examined how membership or regular use of Facebook, and membership or regular use of Twitter affects perceived political understanding. A statistical analysis of data from the 2016 General Social Survey revealed no significant relationship between Facebook and political understanding and that Twitter membership/use is positively correlated with political understanding; those who use Twitter are more likely to believe they understand the political issues facing our country.



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### *Limitations*

The General Social Survey provided a sample from which this study could draw, but the limited bank of questions in the social media module of the 2016 GSS narrowed the scope of this study. The only question available was if the respondent used each social media platform. Thus, there is no way to know *what* content respondents are looking at (that is then making them have a better perception of their political understanding). For all we know, given the information at hand, Twitter users may be looking at memes or cat videos. So, while we can say that those who use Twitter are more likely to report having a better political understanding, we cannot be sure why. Another limitation to this study is that the political understanding variable is self-reported. So, while we know that people *feel* that they have a greater political understanding we cannot be sure that they actually do.

### *Future Research*

The gap in available information suggests that future research should focus more specifically on social media use, starting with the content that people view on social media. This would allow more concrete answers as to what part of social media increases political understanding. Further, knowing the kinds of content that lead to increased political understanding could be valuable information for politicians or anyone trying to appeal politically to citizens.

Further, from the social media questions, all we can know is whether or not a respondent is member or regular user, there is no sense of time. Knowing the time respondents spend on social media sites would allow us to see if there is variation in political understanding depending on the time a person spends on social media.

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Future research could also benefit from knowledge about social media users' interaction with political content online. For example, this study discussed "incidental learning" of political information which occurs as a byproduct of seeing political information on a newsfeed. It would be interesting to study if there are differences in political understanding between those who actively interact with political information and those who see it but don't interact (and are learning incidentally). In the same vein, it would be interesting to see if those who follow or interact with politicians are more/less likely to have a political understanding, and the same for those who actively seek out political information.

Moreover, future research could benefit from a political understanding measure that is not self-reported. Though it would be a more involved question than a simple scale measure, a more in-depth measure could ask people their opinion followed by test-style questions to see if respondents actually do know about the political issues facing our country.

A future study could also benefit from making some measure of primary news-source a control variable. This study does not compare learning from social media to learning from other news sources. Understanding where people get their news from would let us know if part of the relationship with political understanding can be explained by where people get their news.

Lastly, future research would greatly benefit from taking this study one step further and seeing how all of this influences political engagement or participation; if using Facebook and/or Twitter actually makes people get involved, or if the political understanding that we observed in this study (that comes from Twitter use) then leads people to feel more politically engaged.

### *Implications*

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This research demonstrated that Twitter users are more likely to believe that they have a greater political understanding. If citizens are, in fact, learning from social media, specifically about politics, its tactical advantages should be considered. Further, it warrants a place in the discussion of our ever polarizing political system; if we are relying solely on our networks for political information, how can we get an unbiased opinion? How can we be sure we are getting actual facts? Will these social media bubbles lead to further political polarization? More importantly, is Twitter the future of political understanding?

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Table 1. Means, Medians, and Standard Deviations for Variables (N=332)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Political Understanding	3.61	.90
Twitter	.18	.39
Facebook	.76	.43
Age	42.97	16.56
Conservative	4.02	1.47

Table 2. Correlations between (*r*) Political Understanding and Facebook and Twitter Use (Listwise deletion, two tailed test, n = 332)

Variable	Twitter	Facebook	Age	Conservative
Political Understanding	.127*	-.070	.153*	-.007
Twitter		.142*	-.285*	-.092
Facebook			-.192*	-.040
Age				.143*

$P < .05$



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Table 3. Regression of Political Understanding on All Variables

Variable	<i>b</i>	$\beta$
Twitter	.406*	.173
Facebook	-.128	-.061
Age	.010*	.175
Conservative	-.012	-.019

$R^2 = .048$ ;  $F(4,327) = 4.103$ ;  $p < .05$

\* $p < .05$

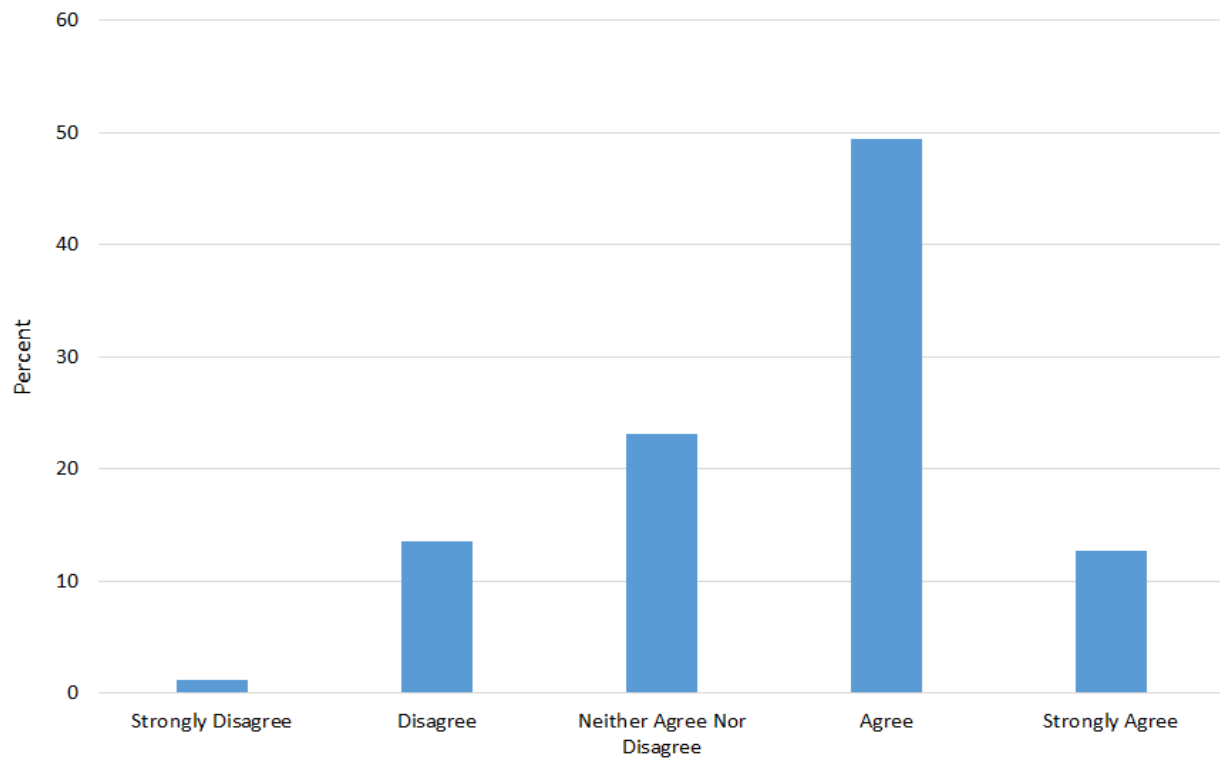


Figure 1. Political Understanding

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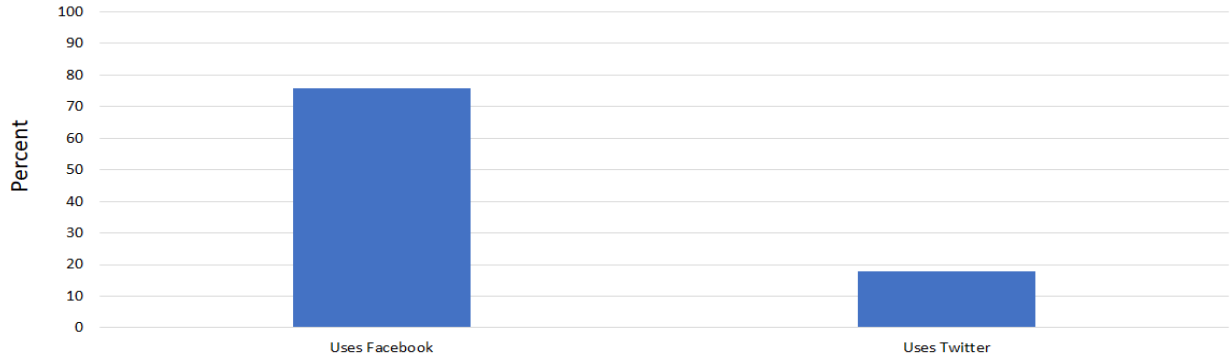


Figure 2. Facebook and Twitter Use

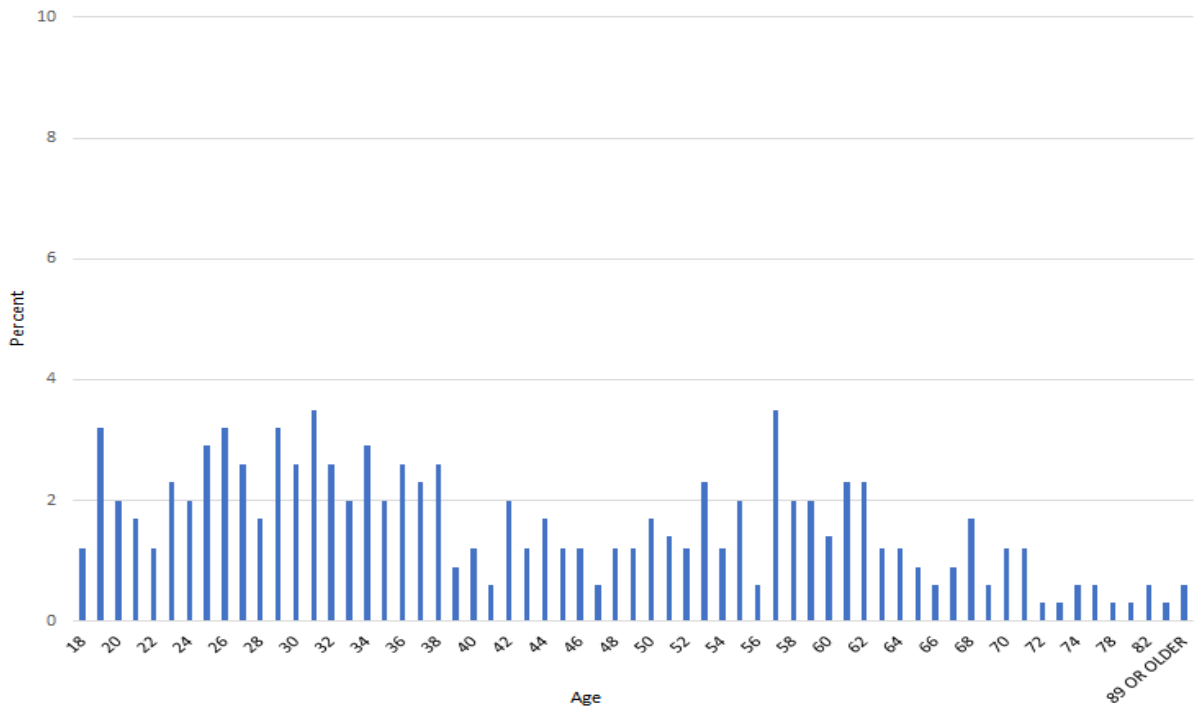


Figure 3. Age

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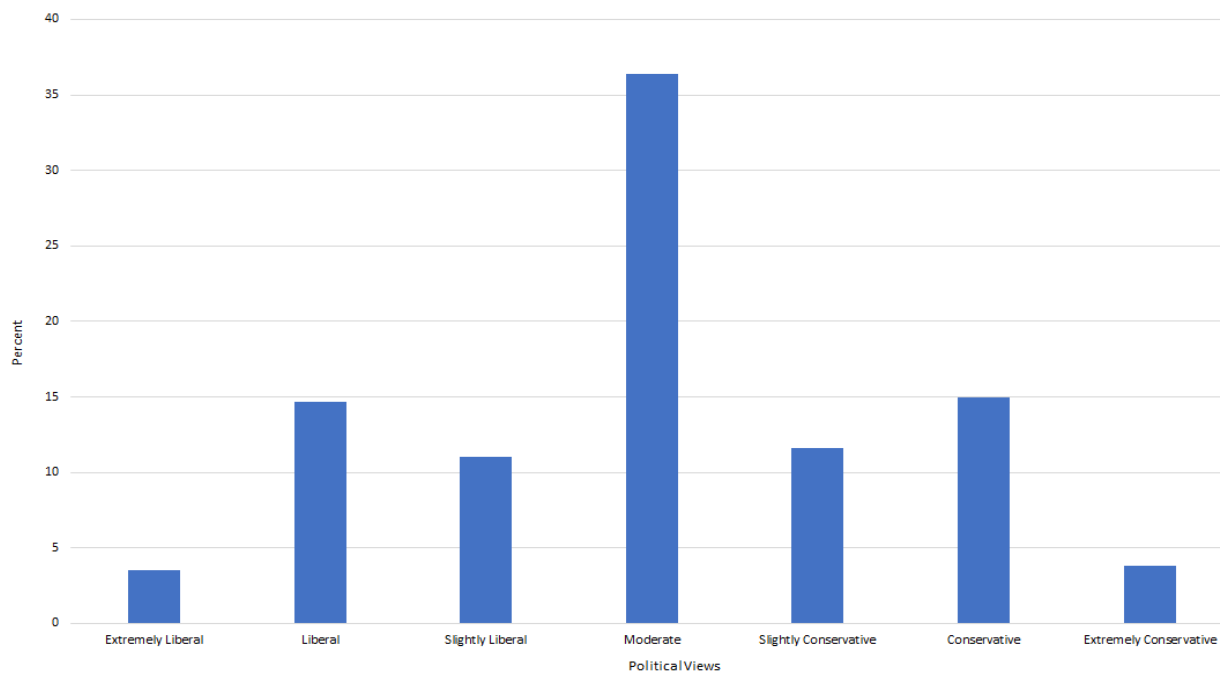


Figure 4: Political Views