

University of Nevada, Reno

Impact of Twitter on Political Views

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and International Affairs and the Honors Program

by

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Impact of Twitter on Political Views

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Abstract

The modern age is deeply woven in the internet, and thereby social media. Due to this permeation of our human experiences by social media, social media has also transformed modern politics. Given the significance of social media in the 2016 Presidential election, it is important to stay attuned to the ways social media can affect politics. This research hones in on Twitter and the demographic with the greatest investment and understanding of the internet and social media: the Generation Z population. By using a framework of ingroup and outgroup biases, this research aims to study how content on Twitter can shape the political views of individuals from this particular Generation Z demographic.

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Introduction

The modern age is deeply interwoven in social media - for better and for worse. Due to this profound permeation of social media in our human experiences, politics has become permanently entrenched in social media (Bennett 21). The impact thereof is both positive and negative. For example, social media has proven of value in a variety of political regimes as a democratization tool, as seen in the Arab Spring (Wolfsfield 121). Twitter and Facebook were extraordinarily important for the Tunisian and Egyptian public to mobilize protests, which led to the ultimate coup of the Tunisian and Egyptian government. However, the value and character of social media is different in different political regimes (Shirky 28). Such is the case in authoritarian regimes that use the internet and social media to suppress the civil liberties of the public. The Chinese government has been able to perpetuate their unique authoritarian, yet capitalist regime through the evaluation of the public's sentiments.

Taken together, it is therefore especially important for a democracy to be aware of the way that social media- a venue that houses many of that democracy's citizens- positively or negatively impacts the choices and views of those in power. The 2016 U.S presidential election proved the authority of Twitter. Given the unique character of President Trump, it is important to investigate whether the impact of his tweets was an anomaly, or if it points to a larger trend in the future of politics. Moreover, with the nation's youth largely culturally invested in social media, it is crucial to understand how Twitter's content might shape the new voter demographic. Indeed, the young voter turnout rate was 31% for the 2018 midterms, which is 10% higher than the 2014 midterms (CIRCLE). As such, it is crucial to examine how influential Twitter, and in

what context, has been on that demographic. This research seeks to determine if Twitter can have an impact, and what that impact looks like, on political discourse, viewpoints, and participation. Because this study is vested in the most contemporary situation, real tweets and real people are consulted in addition to the literature emerging on the past few years in politics.

Twitter is the most important and most relevant to this research because of the nature of the platform. There are four major social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Out of all the platforms, how ideas and content are communicated on Twitter in comparison to the other platforms makes it distinctive and important. Facebook is infamous for its politicization, which makes it an inherently problematic resource to use (Sveningsson 5). Instagram as a platform is exclusively invested in media content. Only pictures and videos on this space has proven to be conducive to aesthetic pleasure. For example, a simple hashtag on Instagram will render the hashtag Trump has 10.7 million results, while the hashtag “mua” (makeup artist) has 47.8 million results. Snapchat is largely a one-on-one interface, making the issue of politics reliant on whether two individuals will engage in a political conversation. Twitter involves making social commentary in the space of 270 characters. It is not needed to post a picture to post commentary, as with Instagram. It is just simply necessary to make a point in that character limit, which is why Twitter can easily be used in a political capacity.

I have conducted an experiment of college-aged students in which they are asked to take a generic political survey in order to gauge their political leanings. This political survey asked questions on hot button topics and people so that the tweets utilized can correspond

with these subjects. This provided a greater capacity for identifying quantifiable change in a participant's viewpoint. The issues that the participants were asked to make a judgment on were climate change, immigration, healthcare, sexism, racism, and gun control. The politicians that the participants were asked to make a judgment on were Beto O'Rourke, Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Mitch McConnell, and Elizabeth Warren. Following, the subjects were split into three groups- one who does not use a Twitter, one that follows a Twitter that retweets viral, political tweets, and one group that is following a Twitter that tweets neutral, non-political tweets. The group exposed to the viral, political tweets saw tweets in which viral is defined as retweeted over 5,000 times and liked over 10,000 times. Moreover, the tweets in this treatment group are published by people who do not work in the news media and just engaging in political commentary. The group exposed to the neutral tweets consumed tweets that are not exclusively political in nature. Rather, these tweets include all the different types of news stories in various fields. The idea is to stimulate a gradation of biased exposure with one group consuming politically biased tweets and the other consuming general news stories. Both of these are juxtaposed with the control group, who does not have a Twitter account at all. After three months of exposure 5 days a week, the subjects took a close-out survey that gauges political leanings once again. If there was a statistically significant change in the Likert scale scorings from the pre to post-surveys, it will prove that at the least Twitter can be an important political tool. However, if political views and participation remain stagnant, this is also an important result in that it proves that social media is not impacting society politically as much as it seems.

Literature Review:

In order to proceed with research on the political effects of Twitter on the collegiate demographic, it is important to understand the research from the relevant disciplines. This includes social psychology, communications, anthropology, and political science. Further, the phenomenon of social media is new in the scheme of human history. Accordingly, this literature review will draw upon the existing research that pertains to the phenomena and trends that I believe may arise in my experiment. This interdisciplinary approach to the literature will help situate an understanding of Twitter and how it might play a role in discourse, views, and participation in established research.

Peer Groups

The concept of peer groups, most often used in in social psychology and communication, concerns a collection of people with similar interests and status Coie et. al. 17). Peer groups prove interesting in that they can produce a strong influence on the members' beliefs and actions within the group (Coie et. al. 18). Social pressure and group behavior are areas of social psychology research that explain the dynamics between people in peer groups, and offer explanations for why individuals do not act in necessarily rational ways in a group setting. Ingroups and outgroups are two terms coined that help organize group behavior. An "ingroup" is a social group in which multiple individuals connect with the identity of the group as a whole, and it is often denoted by shared ideals and interests (Axt 275). Meanwhile, an "outgroup" is a group where an individual does not associate with that group's collective identity, ideals, and interests (Axt 275). For example, in the case of American politics, an

individual's ingroup might be Republicans while their outgroup might be Democrats.

The pressure to be accepted and liked encourages people not to act based on their own rational, individualized thought, but in ways that are aligned with the interests and actions of an ingroup (Giannakakis 83). Complying with norms of an ingroup is a "critical basis of status among in-group peers" and helps generate conformity amongst the group (Suhay 221). Approval by one's peers in the group comes once an individual demonstrates conformity (Strickland and Crowne 171). In an effort to invoke conformity and thereby approval, individuals who want to identify closer with an ingroup can do so by a variety of mechanisms. A method for ingroup acceptance that is especially pertinent to my research is how people can seek ingroup validation by differentiating oneself from an outgroup (Suhay 223). By distancing from the norms and ideas of a given outgroup, polarization is exacerbated (Suhay 223). In academia, the widening between ingroups and outgroups is also known as intergroup polarization.

Network homogeneity is the byproduct of intergroup polarization. In an effort to retreat within the ingroup and away from an outgroup, a given group or network increases the homogeneity of its individuals. Strickland and Crowne alluded to this effect of peer groups when they discussed the relationship between compliance of ingroup norms and conformity (172). Scholars have elaborated on the trends of intergroup polarization, and such is seen in Parson's work on "partisan identity salience" (Parsons 699). Partisan identity salience refers to situations in which one's partisan identity- a discriminating factor of one's identity, e.g race, political party, gender, etc- becomes especially prevalent (Parsons 699). These different features of

intergroup polarization- network homogeneity and partisan identity salience- lend to the importance of studying ingroups and outgroups. Homogeneity and lack of alternative norms and actions in an ingroup, combined with the comfort provided by retreating into one's partisan identity, can help explain the existence of ingroups and outgroups. Indeed, politics provides a breeding ground for practices in network homogeneity, partisan identity salience, and as a result, intergroup polarization.

Peer Groups and Politics

Scholarly work in the field of Political Science has identified that political ideals can act as a catalyst for ingroups and outgroups. (Eriksson and Funcke 10). Bolsen even found that when substantive information and arguments are absent, individuals can still be influenced by the political opinions and behaviors of other individuals within their peer group (250). Partisan political identity is then a mechanism for individuals to associate or disassociate from specific social groups, in the same way the race or gender can induce partisan identity salience (Kelly 21). Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, using the framework that political affiliation invokes polarization, analyzed how attack-based campaigning perpetuated aversion to outgroups (23). Here, one's political affiliation is a fundamental group attachment to an ingroup. Clearly, an individual's political persuasion can be a key component of their sociability. Recent work substantiates that political identification gives individuals a means to connect on a social level. Iyenger and Krupenkin found a strong positive association between partisans of the same political identifications and a strong negative association between partisans of opposite political identifications (Iyengar and Krupenkin 213).

Peer Groups and Social Media

It is then well corroborated that group interaction is colored by identification mechanisms, and political affiliation is one such mechanism. The role of social media is important because it can erode the barriers to accessing identification mechanisms through “disentrained channels (Carr 2). The “disentrained channels”- “media that provide greater temporal resources to interactants, facilitating strategic self-presentation and reducing copresence. lend to easier communication,”- lends to easier communication with members in peer groups and out of peer grounds (Carr 2). Barker notes in, “Older Adolescents' Motivations for Social Network Site Use: The Influence of Gender, Group Identity, and Collective Self-Esteem” that communication with peer groups is the biggest motivator amongst older adolescents for using social networking sites (106). Furthermore, social media aids the formation of unprecedentedly large social groups and networks (Xenos and Moy 705). Within these new and large online spheres of influence, traditional theories of social psychology still reign true; social media provides space for individuals to find and practice group attachments (Stroud 346).

Incidental Learning

At the same time, scholars have noted there is also the existence of “incidental learning.” Incidental learning is passive learning that is, “characterized by an absence of resistance to what is learned” (Krugman and Hartley 184). Literature on incidental learning originally occurred in light of the advent of Television (Blumler and Mcquail 49), but researchers began studying the trend with the spread of the internet as early as 1998 (Morris 339). Indeed, researchers have come to identify similar effects in not

just the internet, but more specifically in social media platforms (Bergstrom and Belfrage 593). Individuals can now use social media for recreational purposes and to connect with family and friends, but this can also provide incidental exposure to outside information. Furthermore, Bergstrom and Belfrage found that individuals can even become reliant on social media as a news medium, even if it is incidentally (Bergstrom and Belfrage 591).

Political Implications of Incidental Learning

While this access has increased the opportunity for involvement in the political process, it has also meant less and less users are able to opt out of politics (Richardson 15). Individuals do not need to have a predefined partisan identity to be at least exposed to political discourse online (Fletcher and Nielsen 2462). As social media users experience the influx of political information, even when such users are not explicitly seeking out such information, they can be driven to participate in the democratic process (Valeriani and Vaccari 1870). However, Valeriani and Vaccari's research on what they dub "accidental exposure" precludes the individuals who actively use social media for information seeking. Kim's analysis revealed that college-aged students in particular use a variety of social media platforms for information seeking purposes (177). Taken together, it can be inferred that social media users are both actively and passively exposed to information online.

Active and passive engagement with online information is crucial as it relates to political information. Morris' findings as of the late 90's show that incidental exposure on the internet is positively correlated with political knowledge (39). The internet of 1998 was not nearly as permeated with the social atmosphere of today,

which lends to the idea that incidental exposure and its connection to increased political knowledge might be more prevalent today. Morris' study also contextualizes the area of incidental learning and political discourse because he found that internet access helped narrow the socioeconomic "knowledge gap" (346). Providing greater access to political information via the internet allows all members the opportunity to obtain knowledge and further engage in the political process, which was a practice formerly colored by the exclusivity of higher socioeconomic status (Morris 347). Studies have shown that the exposure to political information online not only provides more political knowledge, but can incite political participation (Zúñiga 326). Bode identifies that the participation in the democratic process ranges from mere witness to opinionated engagement in political discourse (364). However, Bode's study reveals that certain actions online- one on one discussion and direct posts about political issues- can lead to offline participatory political behavior (365). Clearly, the extent to which social media drives political participation has important implications for the modern democratic process. As a result, scholars have attempted to investigate which social media platforms are most conducive to political participation. As the character of the platform varies, political information and participation looks different on the different platforms (Halpern et. al. 321).

Twitter VS. Other Social Media Platforms

Most scholarly work on the differences in social media is vested in the type of opinion leaders, content, networking, which shape the character of a social networking platform. Opinion leaders are individuals who are "likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 3). However, the

opinion leaders have taken a position in social media platforms (Park 1646). Due to the character limit, opinion leaders play a particularly influential role on Twitter (Park and Kaye 174). The character limit has rendered the platform of Twitter as one of “microblogging” (Larson and Moe 730). Larson and Moe’s study of the 2010 Swedish election campaigns shows how the Twitter as a social media platform, because it is conducive to “civic microblogging,” provides the greatest breadth for online democratic processes. Indeed, Choi found that tweets by opinion leaders were more likely to be retweeted (705). The concept of retweeting is important because it means that the information disseminated by the Twitter opinion leader can reach a much larger audience (Choi 706). Having a larger audience means that more users are vulnerable to passive and active engagement with political information.

Content on Twitter is also important in distinguishing it from its social media sisters. Bonilla and Rosa discuss the advent of “hashtag activism” as it occurred during the Ferguson protests for Michael Brown’s death (5). When a specific hashtag gains popularity as it relates to a certain event, users on Twitter can engage in a “shared political temporality” (Bonilla and Rosa 4). In addition to Twitter’s ability to invoke a political experience for the user, Twitter plays a role in forming mediated images of politicians and issues (Buccoliero 4). Further, forming an image of a politician or issue is more likely to impact the user if it generates a moral or emotional response (Motta and Fowler 24). As content on social media is situated in the type of network on social media, it is important to analyze what scholars have to come to learn about network.

Facebook users tend to network reciprocally, whereas Twitter does not have

this same sense of reciprocity (Halpern et. al. 323). Moreover, the motivations for networking on Facebook is different from age group to age group: senior citizens use Facebook for social bonding while younger users use Facebook for entertainment and documentation (Alhabash 3). Pond writes that the specific network character of Twitter can be defined as an “ambient” one (222). Twitter’s network has an ambience in that a user has either a “probability that [their] timeline is going to fill with discussion of a shared topic/hashtag, or what might be characterised as diffuse meaning-making practices” or a user is likely “going to be exposed to a specific tweet (or chain of tweets), or what might be characterised as specific meaning-making practice” (Pond 226).

By synthesizing the literature surrounding Twitter, Twitter stands out as a crucial platform for studying the potential for political influence and participation as a result of online discourse. Social participation online can be characterized by an individual’s desire to perpetuate identification and categorization with in groups or out groups. In addition to users who are engaged in active information-seeking, online users also experience incidental exposure to political information. Scholarly work on social media generally highlights that social media makes it easier to participate socially, and thereby politically. As such, I am able to study how Twitter might encapsulate the effects of active and passive engagement with political information in the college-aged demographic and what it means for participation in the modern era.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary approach is necessary to establish the foundation for this particular research topic. The political experience on Twitter for the collegiate

demographic is shaped by peer groups, group attachments, incidental learning, and the unique disposition of Twitter as a social media platform. Taken together, these concepts and attributes help situate the validity of an experiment that will test just how much peer groups and incidental learning play a role on Twitter. It is crucial to understand in the current state of human society- one that is permanently engraved by the enterprise of social media- how might social media can shape our political experience.

Methodology

I conducted an experiment of college-aged students in order to determine whether Twitter has an impact on political discourse, views, and participation on this particular demographic. The participants were recruited through flyers on campus, my own promotion on social media and in my classes, and through my professor's classes. I offered one \$100.00 Amazon gift card and twenty \$10.00 Amazon gift cards as incentive to the participants to join the study. As I used human subjects, I obtained IRB approval. I sought to establish the most even split of males, females, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents as was possible in order to establish an unbiased sample and a more reliable statistical analysis. Following recruitment, the participants took a political survey in order to gauge their political leanings.

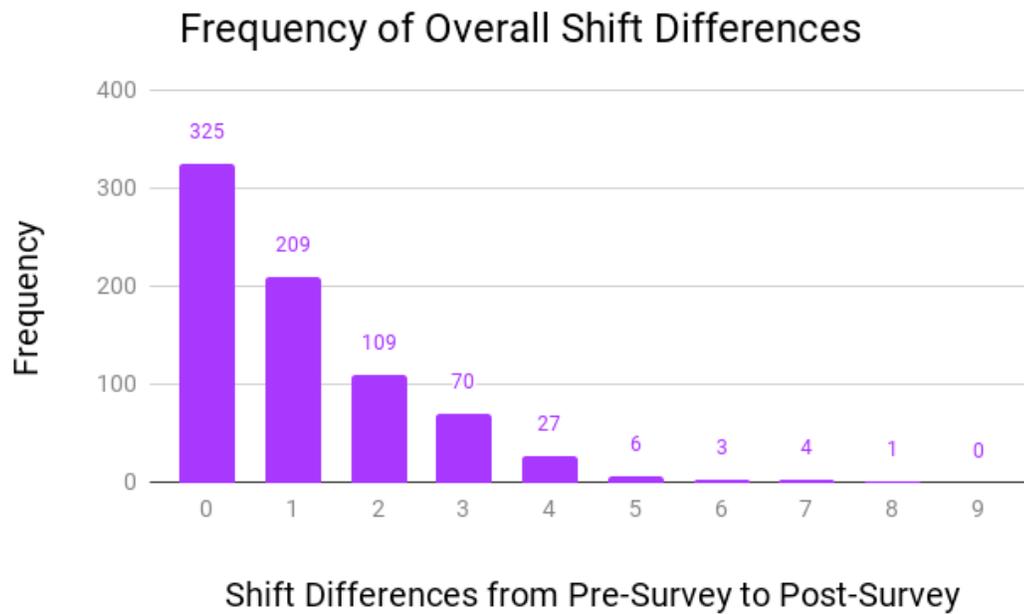
My pre-survey included both multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions about the participants' Twitter usage, political identification, news consumption, and Likert scale questions on different issue areas and politicians. The goal of using different issue areas and politicians was two-fold. First, by using subjects that are pertinent to the either party's platforms, I was able to ascertain a general sense of support for either party. Second, using a Likert scale on specific issues and people allows a comparative analysis with the post survey to see specifically where people have changed their views. The five issue areas included on the study were climate change, sexism, gun control, healthcare, and immigration. The six politicians that participants scored were Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Mitch McConnell, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Beto O'Rourke, and Elizabeth Warren. Participants are asked to what degree, on a scale of 1-10, how much of an issue the specific topic is or how much the

government should be involved in regulating that specific topic. For example, the question concerning climate change is: “On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how strongly do you believe that climate change is an issue our government should be addressing?” The participants were also asked on a Likert scale how much they support the various politicians, where 1 is no support and 10 is very high support. Following the pre-survey, the subjects were split into three groups: one whose participants did not use Twitter, one whose participants followed a Twitter that retweeted viral, political tweets, and one whose participants followed a Twitter that retweeted neutral, non-political tweets. Organizing the groups so that the individuals would follow the Twitter account proved to be one of the next most problematic steps in recruitment.

The group exposed to the viral, political tweets saw tweets in which viral was defined as retweeted over 5,000 times and liked over 10,000 times. Moreover, the tweets in the viral, political tweets treatment group were published by people who do not work in the news media and just engaging in political commentary. The disassociation of the tweeters from the news profession is important because it helps provide a context that more closely aligns with the “ingroup” and “outgroup” literature. Aligning oneself with journalists is not as relatable for the type of participant in this study as is the average Twitter user who was able to author a viral tweet. The “coolness” factor helps separate regular people who obtain viral tweet status as opposed to someone who is in the profession of disseminating news. As such, I was only concerned with tweets published by people not in the news profession for this particular experimental group. The content of the tweets in the

treatment group was specifically left-wing on the ideological spectrum. The “n” of the study was too small to conduct a double-sided treatment, where a double-sided treatment would use both left and right-wing content. Using a one-sided treatment also allowed for the substantiation of research into ingroup attachment or outgroup disassociation for those individuals without political affiliation.

The group exposed to the neutral tweets consumed tweets that are not exclusively political in nature. Rather, these tweets include all the different types of news stories in various fields. The idea was to stimulate a gradation of biased exposure with one group consuming politically biased tweets and the other consuming general news stories so that I had one treatment group exposed to politically biased tweets and another exposed to general tweets. Both of these are juxtaposed with the control group, who is composed of participants who do not have a Twitter account at all. Exposure began January 1st, 2019 and ended March 15th, 2019. The frequency of the exposure was roughly two tweets retweeted per day for five days out of the week. After the exposure to the tweets, the subjects took the same survey as they did to begin the experiment. The only difference between the pre and the post survey is that the post survey asked participants whether or not their Twitter usage had changed, and if so how. I was able to compare the pre-survey to the post-survey and identify how individual’s preference had changed, and whether those changes are statistically significant. Asking participants to follow the accounts and take two surveys proved difficult for retention rates, so while I began the study with 100 participants, I ended the study with 84.

Data**Figure 1**

This graph demonstrates the distribution of shift differences from the pre-survey scores to the post-survey scores. Given a one-sided t-test on all of these shift differences from the 84 participants, a shift was determined to be statistically significant if it was 2.26 or greater.

T-test

Because a Likert scale uses integers, 2 was established as a significant shift to analyze the pre-survey and post-survey data. A “shift” will then refer to every instance in which an individual shifted by 2 or more on an issue area or politician from the pre-survey to the post-survey. The following data was rendered by group and by political affiliation by each group.

	Average Shift	Standard Deviation	Shift significant	Shift significant at 10%:
Climate Change	1.02	1.38	2.36	1.81
Sexism	1.27	1.42	2.42	1.86
Racism	NA	NA	NA	NA
Healthcare	1.24	1.85	3.16	2.43
Regulating Guns	1.34	1.88	3.22	2.47
Borders	1.51	1.78	3.04	2.34
Trump	1.33	2.49	4.25	3.27
Ocasio-Cortez	4.73	4.58	7.84	6.03
Cruz	3.68	4.11	7.03	5.40
O'Rourke	4.67	4.49	7.69	5.91
McConnell	5.29	4.58	7.83	6.02
Warren	4.95	4.58	7.83	6.02
	Average Shift	Standard Deviation	Shift significant	Shift significant at 10%:
Overall Stats	1.1	1.32	2.26	1.74

Table 1

Control Group

The control group experienced 72 overall “shifts.” Of those 72 shifts, 44 were to the political left and 28 were to the political right. Here are the splits by political party within the control group:

Independents

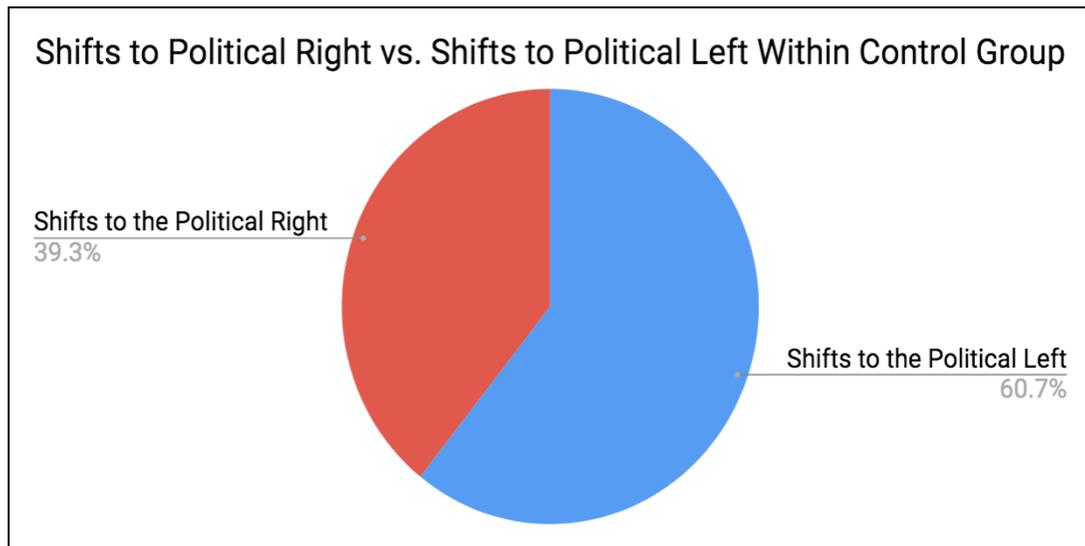


Figure 2

Democrats

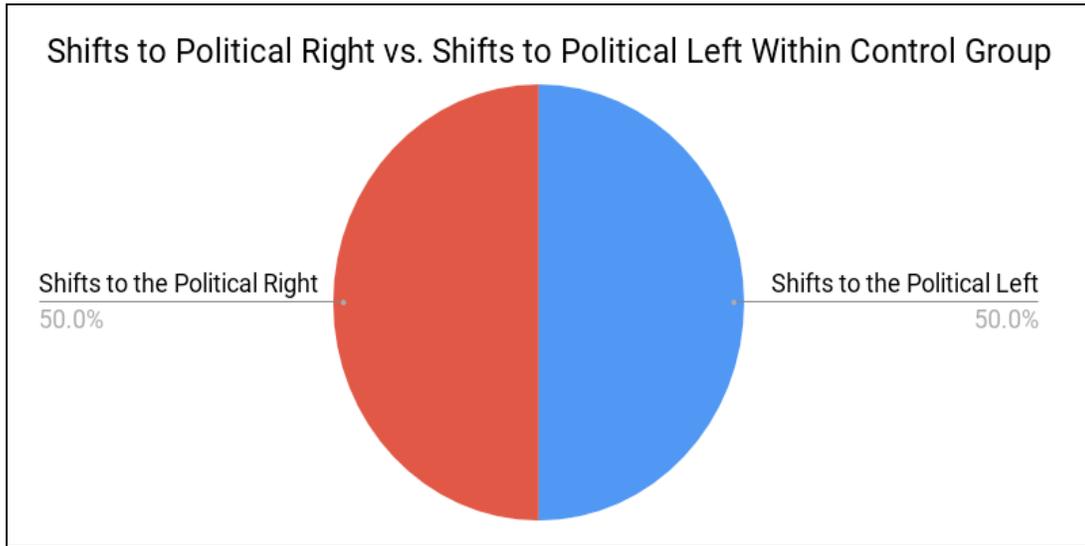


Figure 3

Republicans

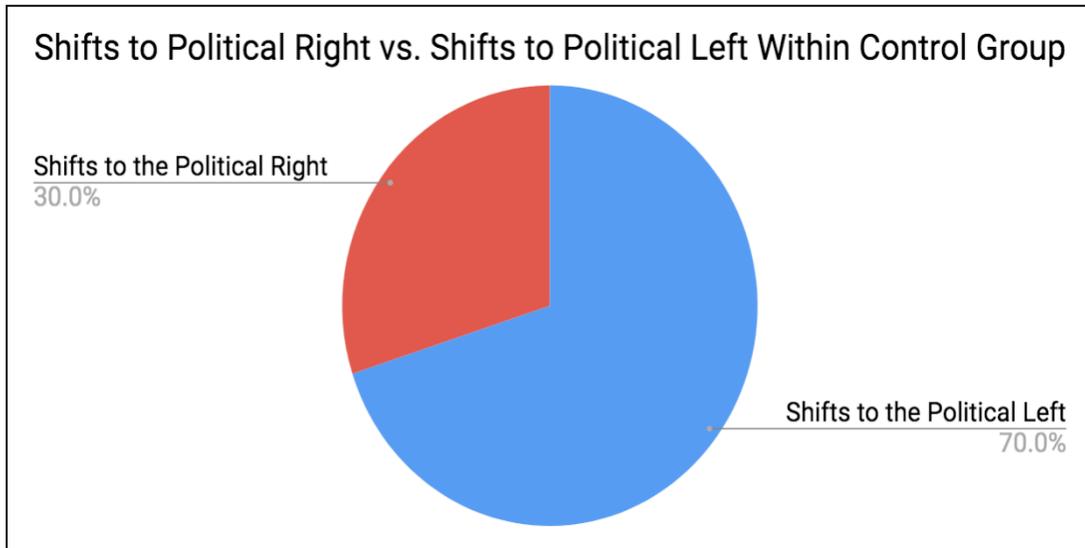


Figure 4

Party Identification

From the pre-survey to the post-survey, 2 participants who originally identified as an Independent shifted to Republican and 2 participants who identified as a Democrat shifted to an Independent in the control group.

	Independents or N/A	Republicans	Democrats
Pre-Survey	7	9	11
Post-Survey	7	11	9

Table 2

Voting Preferences

The following table displays how participants plan on voting in the next election, if they plan on voting. Of the participants in the control group, two did not answer how they planned to vote at all in the survey.

	Undecided in next election	Voting Republican in next election	Voting Democrat in next election
Pre-Survey	5	11	10
Post-Survey	6	11	9

Table 3

Neutral Tweets Treatment Group

The neutral tweets treatment group experienced 69 overall shifts. 34 of those shifts were to the political left and 35 of those shifts were to the political right. Here are the shifts by political party in the neutral treatment group:

Independents

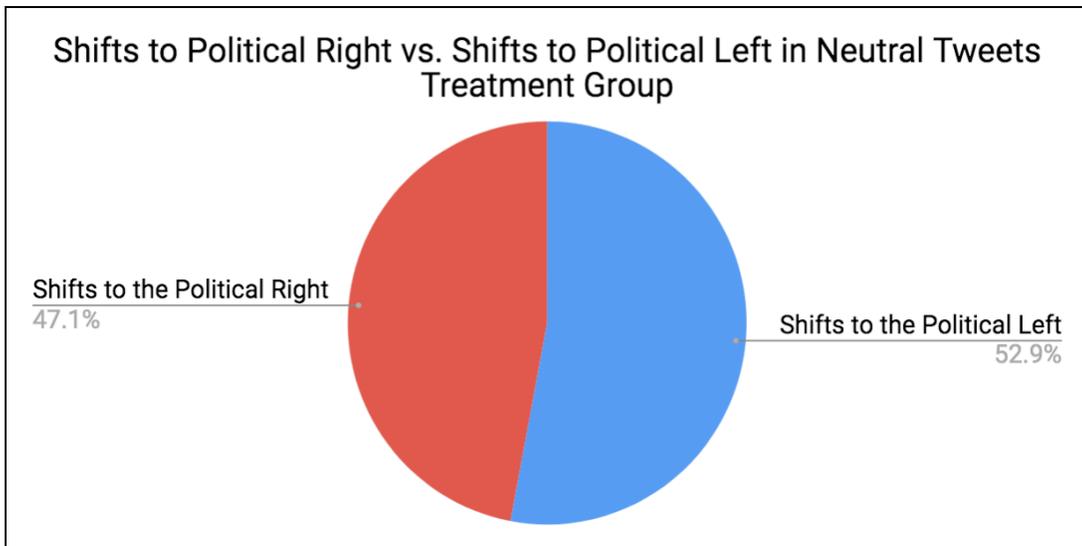


Figure 5

Democrats

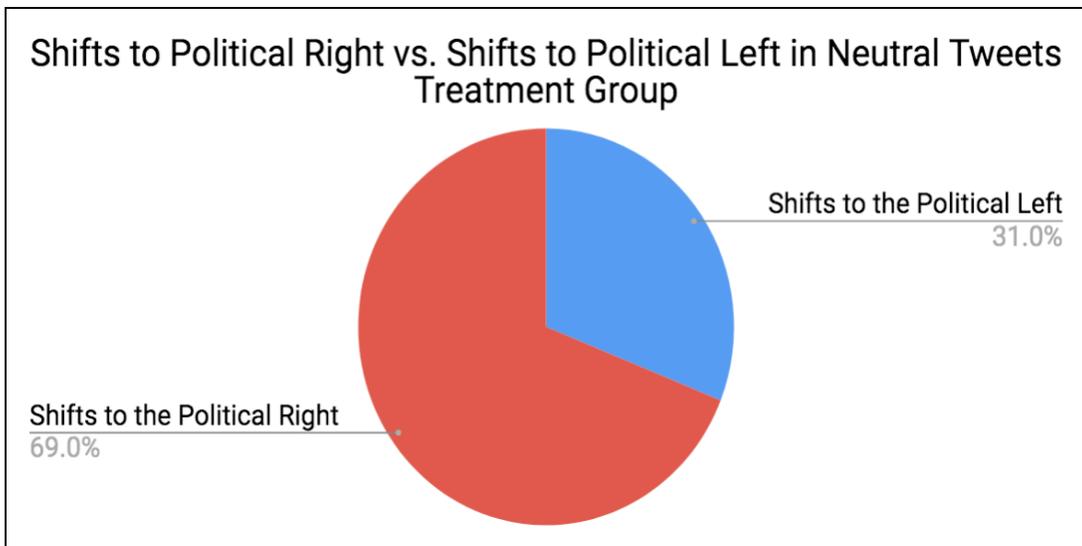


Figure 6

Republicans

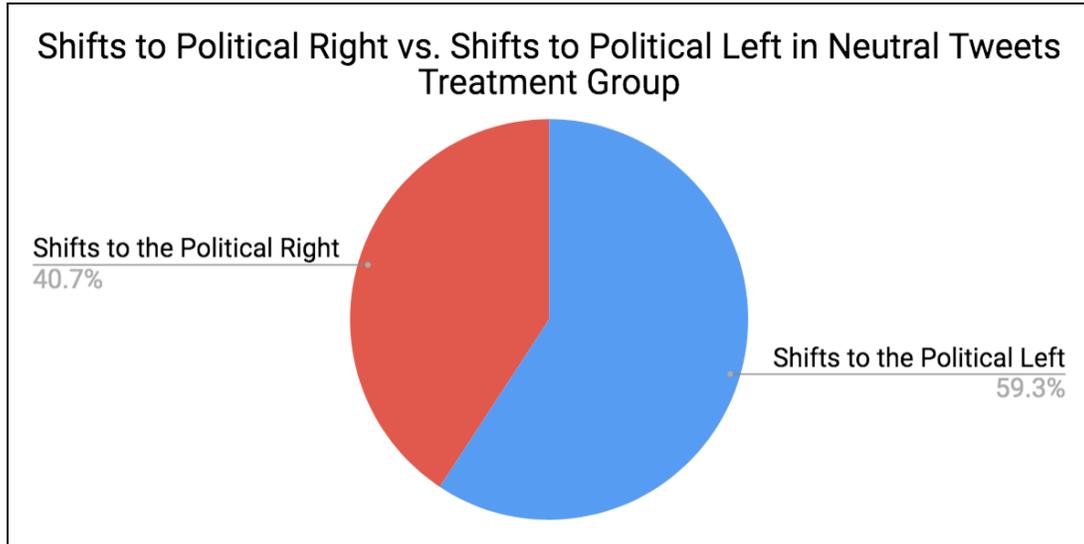


Figure 7

Party Identification

From the pre-survey to the post-survey, 1 participant who originally identified as a Republican shifted to Independent and 1 participant who identified as a Democrat shifted to Independent in the neutral news treatment group.

	Independents or N/A	Republicans	Democrats
Pre-Survey	6	8	14
Post-Survey	8	7	13

Table 4

Voting Preferences

	Undecided or N/A in the next election	Voting Republican in the next election	Voting Democrat in the next election

Pre-Survey	4	8	16
Post-Survey	6	9	13

Table 5

Political Tweets Treatment Group:

The political tweets treatment group experienced 77 total shifts. 36 of those shifts were to the political right and 41 of those shifts were to the political left. Here are the divisions of those shifts by political party:

Independents

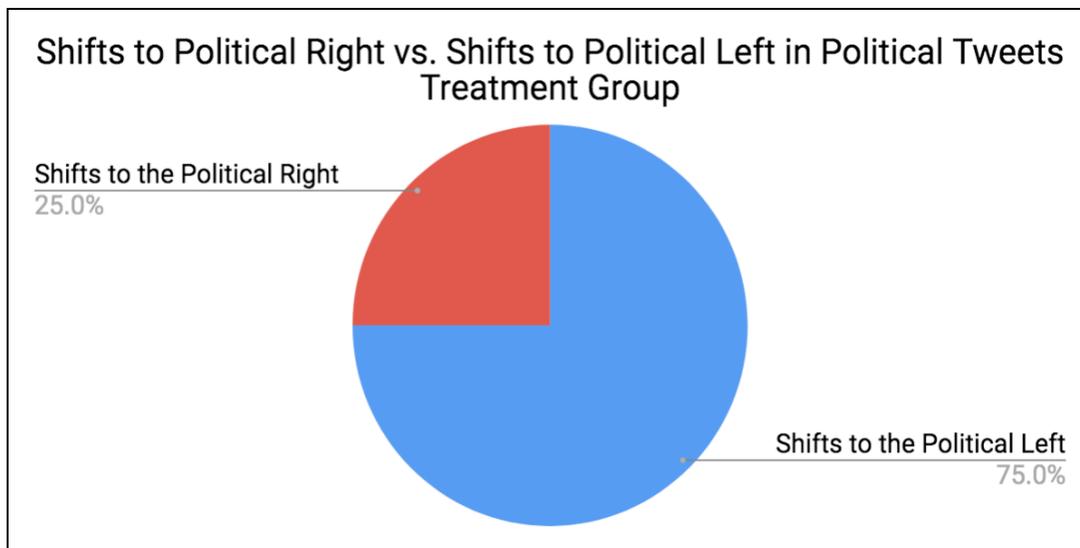


Figure 8

Democrats

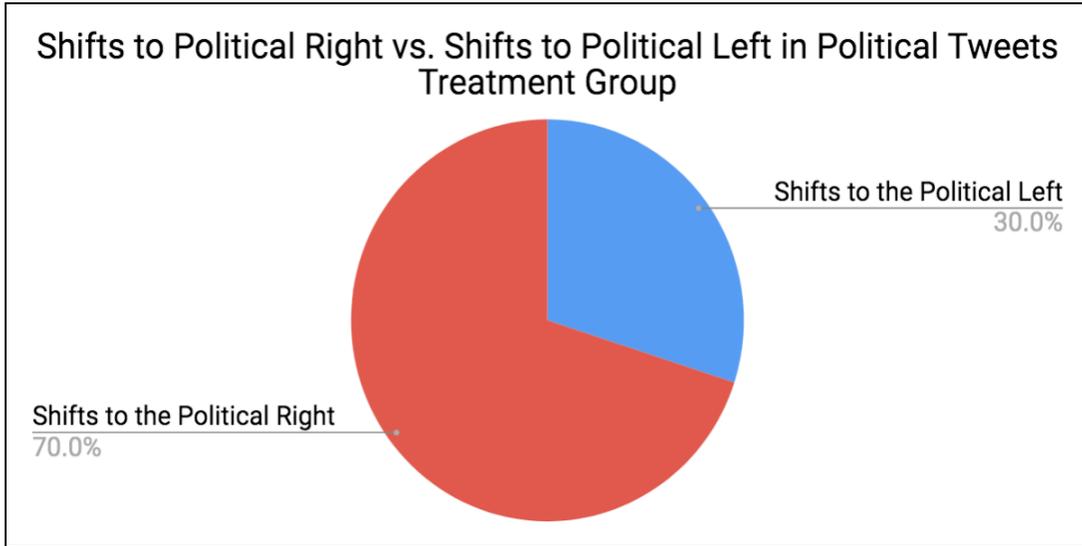


Figure 9

Republicans

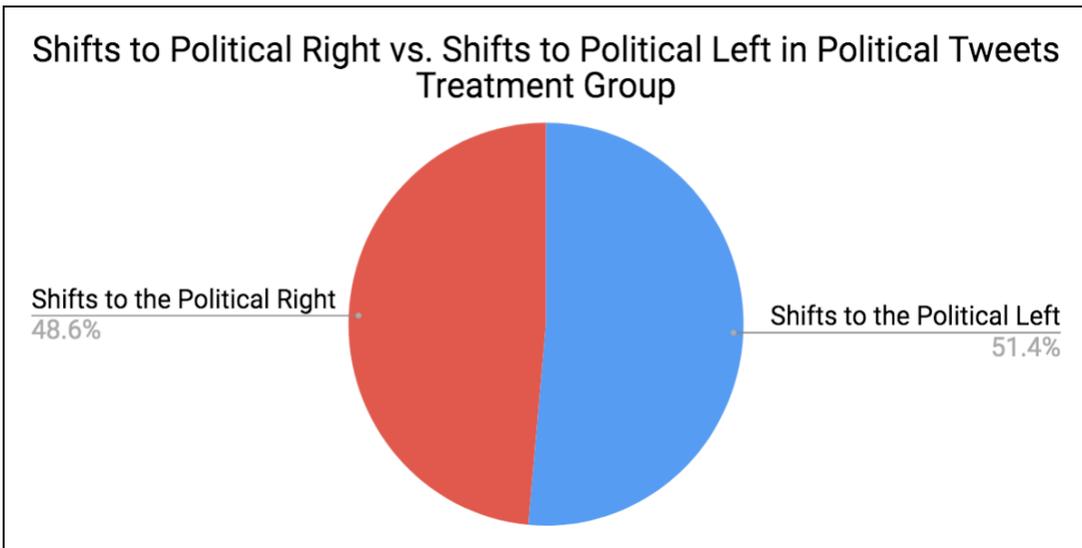


Figure 10

Party Identification

The following table shows how participants from the political tweets treatment group identified politically in the pre-survey and the post-survey. 1 individual who identified as an Independent in the pre-survey identified as a Republican in the post-survey. 2 individuals who identified as a Republican in the pre-survey switched to Independent in the post-survey.

	Independents or N/A	Republicans	Democrats
Pre-Survey	5	11	13
Post- Survey	6	10	13

Table 6

Voting Preferences

The following table displays how participants plan on voting in the next election, if they plan on voting. Of the participants in the political tweets treatment group, a Republican switched to undecided on voting in the next election.

	Undecided or N/A in the next election	Voting Republican in the next election	Voting Democrat in the next service
Pre-Survey	3	12	14
Post-Survey	4	11	14

Table 7

Discussion of Results:

The methodology of this study was constructed in order to try and induce a measurable change in the political opinions of participants. From this perspective, the study was successful, and most notably concerning the Independents in the political tweets treatment group. Participants in the political tweets treatment group that identified as an Independent in the pre-survey experienced 12 statically significant shifts in opinion (2 points in more) from the pre-survey to the post-survey on the Likert scale questions. Of those 12 shifts, 9 were to the political left and only 3 were to the political right, or a 75% and 25% split respectively. Given the exposure to this group was with left-wing tweets, this is an interesting finding. The Independents in the neutral tweets treatment group had 52.9% of the shifts to the political left. Control group Independents had 60.7% of the shifts go to the political left.

Taken together, the amount of shifts to the left by the political tweets treatment group Independents helps substantiate the potential for media exposure to inform political views. Individuals who identify as Independent or unaffiliated with a party hypothetically do not have group attachments to either of the major political parties in the United States. This initial vacillation between the two designated parties might lend to a lack of identity, and can thereby make the Independents vulnerable to political influences. The preset uncertainty might have made the Independents in the political tweets treatment group especially susceptible to the treatment. Another alternate explanation is that the higher frequency of left-wing content online positioned left-wing ideology as the “ingroup.” Independents, in an effort to attach themselves to the ingroup and distance themselves from the outgroup, might take more left-wing stances on issues because it is perceived

that ideology is popular.

Further interesting results materialized in the political tweets treatment group by the self-identified Democrats and Republicans. Across all the neutral and the treatment groups, Democrats showed a high ratio of shifts to the political right. However, this ratio proves interesting when juxtaposed with the control group. 70% of the shifts by Democrats in the political tweets treatment group were to the political right and 69% of the shifts experienced by Democrats in the neutral tweets treatment group were to the political right, whereas only 50% of the shifts by Democrats in the control group were to the political right. The 20% and 19% difference between the tweet treatment groups presents an opportunity for theorizing, given that these participants are more involved with social media than the control group. A particularly interesting theory that might explain the difference is that involvement on Twitter is conducive to greater partisanship through two different ways. Firstly, involvement on social media platforms, and specifically Twitter, might increase polarization in views because it provides greater access to content.

A second explanation might be a more specified version of the first theory. The pre-survey was conducted in a chronological proximity to the 2018 midterm elections. I posit that because the participants in the Twitter treatment groups were exposed to a lot of political content during the period of time, their scores were more polarized than they would have been if the pre-survey was conducted at a different time. As such, that is why there is a high amount of shifts to the political right on issue areas and politicians from the pre to post-surveys by Democrats on Twitter. The participants in the neutral and political tweets treatment groups might be experiencing more shifts to the political right,

not because they are becoming Republican in their ideology, but because they were further left on the issue areas and politicians in the pre-survey than any of the Democrats in the control group. Accordingly, access and involvement on Twitter around elections can cause individuals to become obstinate in their party's ideology because there is a higher influx of political content from both sides.

Republicans in the experiment also showed compelling changes in viewpoints. Across the board, Republicans are generally experiencing a majority of their shifts to the left. While still predominately to the left, the shifts experienced by the Republicans in the political tweets treatment group were much closer to a 50-50 split. In fact, only 51.4% of statistically significant shifts made by Republicans in the political tweets treatment group were to the left. Compared to the control group- 70%- and the neutral tweets treatment group- 59.3%- this is a particularly fascinating statistic. The lower rate of shifts to the left suggests that while as a whole Republicans in the Generation Z demographic are becoming marginally more liberal in their viewpoints, Republicans exposed to left-wing content online might behave reactionary. The progression of higher right shifts from the control to the neutral to the political tweets treatment group also corroborates this theory: 70%, 59.3%, and 51.4% respectively. Although the neutral tweets treatment group was not exposed to politically polarized content in the Twitter account I was administrating, that is not to preclude them from interacting with this type of content from other Twitter accounts or social media platforms.

Conclusively, the three types of party affiliates in the study did not behave as was exactly hypothesized. The marginal shifts to the political right by Democrats in the political tweets treatment group leads to further research investigating the effects of

elections as an event on partisanship. The reactionary response by Republicans was indeed anticipated, but not at as subtle levels as produced. Finally, the Independents shifts was the most compelling evidence to substantiate the hypothesis that content on Twitter can shape political views. These different reactions by participants in the study and the structure of the study itself opens up this research to a plethora of suggestions for further study.

Suggestions for Further Research:

Given the structure of the study, the study itself is conducive to a myriad of suggestions for further research. Firstly, it would be beneficial to conduct the research with a right wing treatment to see if the same effects occur via right wing ideology. As a result of the ingroup and outgroup biases that can be perpetuated by political affiliation, the results of a right wing treatment would be interesting as it is contrasted to those of the left wing treatment. Further, conducting the right wing treatment could be worthwhile in order to test political content as a stimulus more comprehensively, but requires a much larger sample size than that of this study. Only a one-sided treatment was feasible in this particular study because the sample size was so small due to difficulty in recruiting and attrition. If a researcher is able to collect a large enough sample, the researcher might find benefit in conducting the treatment with both a right-wing treatment and both a left-wing treatment and comparing the results.

This study was also particular in that it focused on a specific demographic, along with a specific political persuasion in content. Researchers could conduct the study once more with the different voting demographics and then different political content. An issue area specific replication of this study would also be fruitful. This particular study asked participants about climate change, sexism, healthcare, immigration, and gun ownership in the pre and post-surveys in order to provide issue areas representative of left-wing content. However, a study that only surveyed about a specific issue and utilized only content relevant to that issue could corroborate more definitely how online can influence viewpoints. Further, the influence of content might vary by issue-area.

Because this particular study also rendered interesting results within the

independents in the political tweets treatment group, further research is also worthy if it studied independents across all the study groups: control, neutral treatment, and political treatment groups. That way, the results of that occurred in this study could be comparatively analyzed to determine whether the independents changes in view points are normal for that group , or if it was specific to the exposure of left-wing tweets.

Furthermore, because this study was also specific to content on Twitter, a replication on a different social media platform would be beneficial. Exposing political content to the participants on different social media platforms- Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Facebook- might reveal how different interfaces and user capacities are conducive to political discourse. The findings from such a study compared to that of the study focused on Twitter content might be beneficial for campaigning as well. If a candidate can establish via this type of study which social media has the ability to influence political views of Democrats, Republicans, and undecided voters, it would be beneficial to create content specific for that platform.

Conclusion:

This study investigated the impact of Twitter on political views. Because Twitter is a microblogging platform where opinion leader's ideas gain traction, it political discourse is propitious. Further, tweets that gain viral regard often hold short, but intense statuses within the Twitter sphere. As a result, viral tweets or those tweets that are viral because they are authored by an opinion leader carry heavier weight and deference than those tweets that are not viral. Moreover, sociology ideas of ingroup and outgroups situate the possibility for viral tweets, especially when they are political in nature, to allow an individual to attach themselves or distances themselves from an ingroup or outgroup.

The findings that presented themselves after treatment were interesting and specific to each study group and political party. In order to structure the study so that such findings would be measurable, all the participants took a pre-survey and a post-survey with the same questions. The surveys consisted of multiple choice questions in order to determine if they had a Twitter, what political party the participant claimed, whether or not they voted in the last election, if they plan on voting in the next election and for what party if applicable, and where they typically get their news. The rest of the questions in the surveys consisted of Likert scale questions in order to gauge the participant's views on a variety of political issues. The differences on the Likert scale questions were measured and calculated to to be statistically significant if the shift was 2 points or greater.

The control group Republicans and the neutral tweets treatment group Republicans experienced statistically significant shifts that were predominantly to the

political left. However, the Republicans in the political tweets treatment group, though the higher percentage was still to the left, had the lowest shifts to the political left and more shifts to the political rights than the other two groups. Democrats, conversely, across all three groups had high amounts of shifts to the the political right. It is important to recognize, however, that the Democrats did not shift their views on political issues to that of traditionally right wing ideology. Rather, a Democrat who originally scored the government's responsibility for being involved in mitigating climate change as a 10 in the pre-survey, scored that same question as an 8 in the post-survey. I postulate that this might be because the pre-survey was conducted in a chronological proximity to the midterms. The independents across all three study groups also showed differences in shift percentages by political ideology. The Independents in the political tweets treatment group had the highest percentage of shifts to the political left than the Independents in the control and neutral tweets groups. In fact, Independents had 75% of their shifts to the political left, and this stark difference corroborates the plausibility of Twitter impacting political views of those not affiliated with a party.

All of these findings are important for democratic society as we enter an era unattached from the internet and social media. From now on, elections and politics cannot be unmarried from the internet and social media. The 2016 U.S Presidential election is a testament to severity of online involvement.

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Appendix A: Pre-Survey Questions:

Where do you get your news from?

Twitter

Newspaper

News Publication Websites

News Notifications on Phone

News App on Phone

Other:

Do you use Twitter?

Yes

No

If you use Twitter, how often do you use it?

Multiple times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

Once a week

A few times a month

N/A

What is your Twitter username? (If you have one.)

Your answer

Which political party do you most identify with?

Republican

Democrat

Independent

N/A

Other:

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how strongly do you believe that climate change is an issue our government should be addressing?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how severe of a problem do you believe

sexism is in America?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how severe of a problem do you believe

racism is in America?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, what level of responsibility do you believe the government should have in ensuring the population has healthcare?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how strongly should the government regulate gun ownership?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the most open, how open should a country's borders be?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

If you KNOW who Donald Trump is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being the very strongly, how much do you support Donald Trump?

Not at all

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

Very strongly

If you KNOW who Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?

Not at all

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9

10

Very Strongly

If you KNOW who Ted Cruz is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Ted Cruz?

Not at all

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

Very Strongly

If you KNOW who Beto O'Rourke is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Beto O'Rourke?

Not at all

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

Very strongly

If you KNOW who Mitch McConnell is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Mitch McConnell?

Not at all

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

9
10

Very strongly

If you KNOW who Elizabeth Warren is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Elizabeth Warren?

Not at all

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

Very strongly

If you do plan on voting, what party do you generally plan on voting for?

Republican

Democrat

N/A

Undecided

Other:

Did you vote in the 2018 midterm elections?

Yes

No

Do you plan on voting in the 2020 election?

Yes

No

Undecided

Appendix B: Post-Survey Questions

Where do you get your news from?

Twitter

Newspaper

News Publication Website

News Notifications on Phone

News App on Phone

Other:

Do you use Twitter?

Yes

No

If you use Twitter, how often do you use it?

Multiple times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

Once a week

A few times a month

N/A

Do you think your Twitter usage has changed over the past few months?

Yes

No

N/A

If your Twitter usage has changed, if so, how?

Increased

Decreased

N/A

What's your Twitter username? (If you have one)

Your answer

Which political party do you most identify with?

Republican

Democrat

Independent

N/A

Other:

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how strongly do you believe that climate change is an issue our government should be addressing?

1

2

3

4

- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how severe of a problem do you believe sexism is in America?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how severe of a problem do you believe racism is in America?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, what level of responsibility do you believe the government should have in ensuring the population has healthcare?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the strongest, how strongly should the government regulate gun ownership?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the most open, how open should a country's borders be?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

If you KNOW who Donald Trump is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being the very strongly, how much do you support Donald Trump?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

If you KNOW who Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

6
7
8
9
10

If you KNOW who Ted Cruz is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Ted Cruz?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

If you KNOW who Beto O'Rourke is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Beto O'Rourke?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

If you KNOW who Mitch McConnell is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very strongly, how much do you support Mitch McConnell?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

If you KNOW who Elizabeth Warren is: on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10

being very strongly, how much do you support Elizabeth Warren?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

If you do plan on voting, what party do you generally plan on voting for?

Republican

Democrat

Undecided

Other:

Do you plan on voting in the 2020 election?

Yes

No

Undecided

Appendix C: Additional Information

The tweets used for treatment and raw data are available upon request.