

The Effect of Social Media Content on Influencing Political Opinions and Affiliation Among College Students

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Introduction

Across the United States, college students are becoming increasingly more familiar with politics and the ways in which it shapes their lives through the use of social media. Political affiliation and opinions are generated through a number of ways, one factor being content in the media. The 2008 election marked the first time a Presidential candidate, former President Barack Obama, successfully used social media as a platform to consolidate a strong support base. However, after the 2016 election it is even more evident that social media has become a major factor in political campaigns and the ways in which people think about politics. Additionally, there have been numerous articles discussing a few of President Donald Trump's false claims and how a significant portion of his voters believe such claims simply because he says they are factual via Twitter. This underscores the importance of media content and the role it plays in influencing the opinions and political affiliation of individuals.

Because millennials are heavy social media users, relying on such platforms to help them stay connected with friends and family, the focus of this report will be on how social network sites influence college students' political opinions and affiliation. Today it is nearly impossible to go on Facebook or Twitter and not see a single post related to politics, whether that comes in the form of an informative article or an opinion piece from a friend. Some argue it has even created greater polarization between liberals and conservatives. College students learn about politics through education, interacting with their peers, and from their parents own opinions, however social media, in particular, has become the largest medium for political discussion and debate. Media content not only enables, but also influences young adults to form political affiliations and opinions of their own. The extent of this influence varies from person to person and place to place. The purpose of this project is to examine how effective social media content is in influencing the political affiliations and opinions held by college students.

Methodology

In order to examine the extent to which social media influences college students' political affiliations and opinions a survey was conducted on surveymonkey.com as a way of collecting primary research. It was hypothesized that a vast majority of college students use social media regularly for both social and political purposes, which in turn has influenced their beliefs at least to a certain degree. In addition, the less *politically engaged* students would be influenced by social media to a greater extent than those who are well versed on issues of politics. According to American Psychological Association being politically engaged refers to "an individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern." In other words, political engagement is displayed when citizens work together to make a change or difference in the community. In addition to the primary research, reputable documents and data on Cal Poly's Robert E. Kennedy Library databases related to social media's influence on political beliefs were examined to fill potential gaps in the primary research and to highlight key findings of the report.

Subjects

The survey link was posted in the facebook group “Cal Poly Class of 2021” with 6,257 members, as well as the “Cal Poly Rideshare” group with 21,528 to ensure a wide range of age groups in the results. Respondents, for the most part, differed in demographics, which helped maintain diversity and secure the most accurate and representative results. The survey was open for four days and received 100 responses, which is the maximum number of responses with the basic plan on surveymonkey.com.

Procedures

For the primary research, participants were asked a multitude of questions to document their opinions and to examine how extensive of a role, if any, social media plays in influencing their political beliefs. The survey maintained anonymity of respondents in order to gather the most honest and accurate results. First, questions were asked involving the demographics of participants, specifically their age, race, gender, economic class, year and major at Cal Poly, and where they are from originally. These questions were asked primarily to maintain some level of diversity in the report. The next questions determined how often individuals use social media, in an effort to find a correlation between social media use and an influence of political beliefs as a result. The following questions gave insight into the political affiliation and opinions of respondents as well as possible factors that contributed to such beliefs. Then, participants reported whether or not their beliefs have changed at some point throughout their lives and, if so, what factors led to that change. To examine a correlation between political awareness and social media influence, students were asked to what extent they consider themselves politically engaged, in other words how often do they work together with other citizens to affect change in the community for the greater good of the public. Short answers were specifically asked about what students use as their main source to learn about politics, as well as how often they see politically related posts and/or articles on social media without deliberately searching for them. The final question explicitly asked participants to what extent, if any, has social media influenced their political opinions and affiliation throughout their lives. Additionally, I asked respondents to provide an explanation as to why they believe this phenomena occurred to gain more insight into why or why not social media is effective at influencing the political beliefs of college students. A full list of the survey questions and answers can be found in the appendix on page 14.

For secondary research, relevant and reputable documents were examined to gain greater insight into the influence of political affiliation and opinions among college students across the United States and to fill in any holes in the primary research. Keywords such as “college students,” “political affiliation,” “political persuasion,” “political opinion,” “social media,” and “online influence” were searched for on Cal Poly’s Robert E. Kennedy Library databases. These keywords led me to several relevant journals and articles. These sources offered more diverse perspectives from college students across the United States and provided additional studies and results, all of which strengthened the analysis of how social media influences political opinions and affiliation among college students.

Limitations

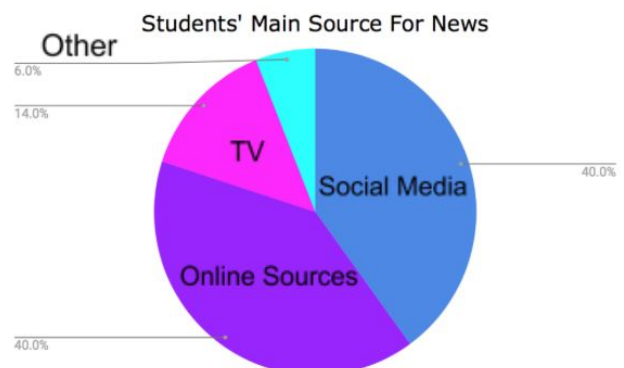
The primary research, obtained in the form of a survey, received 100 responses, an adequate number to represent the college student population confidently. However, due to the basic plan on survey monkey only 100 responses are allowed and there is no way of knowing if the survey received more. In addition, a maximum of ten questions are allowed to be asked, which caused several questions to be combined into one. This, in turn, generated questions with short responses, rather than multiple choice, which made it more difficult to make inferences about certain questions. Although the survey was anonymous in efforts to promote honesty among respondents, it is difficult to determine how seriously each individual took the survey. However, this limitation was most likely suppressed by posting in Cal Poly student pages because college students are generally mature and are willing to help their fellow classmates. Another significant limitation has to do with the diversity of participants. Although questions were asked about demographics, the majority of respondents were white, middle class, Californians due to the fact Cal Poly is a mostly white school in the center of California. This is where my secondary research came into play and provided significant details and data about the influence of social media on political beliefs among more diverse groups college students. Due to these potential racial, economic, and political biases, without the secondary research generalizations could be made about the effect of social media on influencing political opinions and ideologies among college students, however they would not be as accurate and representative. Incorporating secondary research reduced the impact of these limitations.

Results

Primary Research

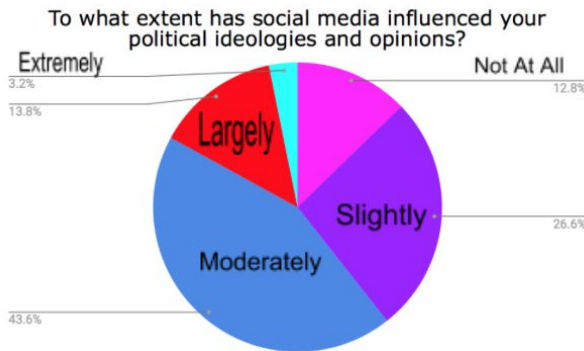
The survey generated responses that, for the most part, aligned with the hypotheses presented and maintained a general level of diversity in age, sex, and major. However, 73 of the 100 participants reported being caucasian. Although not ideal, this was expected due to Cal Poly being a primarily white university.

When asked about social media use, a considerable amount of students (88%) reported using social media more than five times a day, while only six percent claimed they either rarely or never use it. Of those who use social media to any extent, 87 percent reported seeing politically related posts and articles on social media platforms without deliberately searching for them regularly. There were zero responses that stated individuals never see such posts on social media. Another significant finding related to the above two was the vast majority of students who seek political information and news via social media apps. According to the pie chart on the right, college students are just as



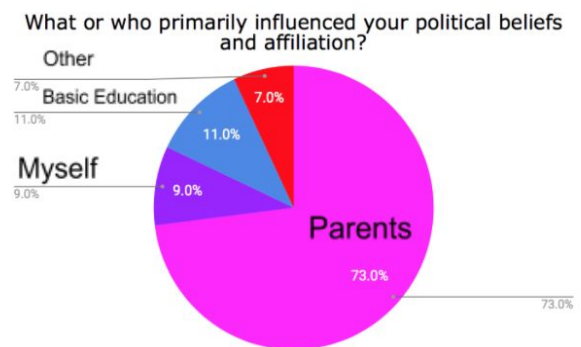
likely to use social media to learn about politics as they are to seek this information through an alternate online source such as Apple’s “News” app.

When explicitly asked the extent to which students believe social media has an effect on them in terms of influencing their political opinions and affiliation and why that is, a vast majority (82%) reported that it does, at least slightly. This question had five multiple choice options: not at all, slightly, moderately, largely, and extremely.

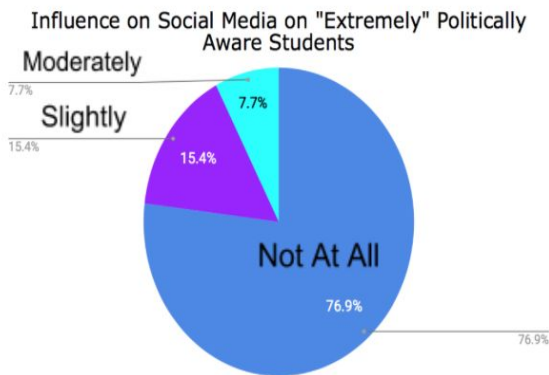


The graph on the left breaks down the data between each of these choices, with only 12.8 percent reporting that social media has no effect on their political beliefs. In order to make reasonable inferences about this specific set of data, participants were also asked open ended questions about what or who predominantly influences their political opinions and affiliation. Students reported (73%) that their parents play the most powerful role in influencing their political beliefs. The graph to

the right displays the data from this specific question. Not a single individual pointed toward social media as the greatest influencer of their political beliefs. The reason behind and analysis for these two sets of data will be explained in great detail in the discussion section of this report.



Perhaps the most compelling finding from the survey had to do with the exceptionally strong correlation between not being politically engaged and being largely influenced, politically, by social media. Almost half (42%) stated they were either not politically engaged at all or were, to a very limited extent. Of the 14 percent who were not politically engaged at all, 64.3 percent reported that their political ideologies and opinions are “largely” influenced by social media and 21 percent reported being “extremely” influenced by social media. In addition, those who described their political awareness as being extreme (13%), primarily reported that they are not influenced by social media. The chart to the left indicates that of the 13 “extremely” politically engaged individuals, 10 (76.9%) of them believe social media has absolutely no influence on their political affiliation and opinions. None of these individuals reported being “largely” or “extremely” influenced by social media. The remaining data maintains this correlation with the “somewhat” and “moderately” politically engaged students making up the majority of individuals who reported being “slightly” or “moderately” influenced by social media in regard to their political beliefs.



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Literature Review

According to *The Millennial Impact Project*, a new study conducted by Achieve research agency in which 1,045 adults aged 18-34 from across the country were surveyed, a majority of participants reported posting on social media the past week about issues they care about. One major factor that explains this

“This generation tends not to consume news in discrete session or by going directly to news providers,” writes Achieve research agency, “instead, news and information are woven into an often continuous but mindful way that millennials connect to the world generally, which mixes news with social connection, problem solving, social action, and entertainment,”

occurrence is that “millennials are 2.5 times more likely to be early adopters of technology than other generations” (Achieve, 2015). According to Achieve research agency, 69 percent reported getting the news daily and 86 percent claimed they usually see diverse political opinions by means of social media. “This generation tends not to consume news in discrete session or by going directly to news providers,” writes Achieve research agency, “instead, news and information are woven into an often continuous but mindful way that millennials connect to the world generally, which mixes news with social connection, problem solving, social action, and entertainment,” as shown by the 88 percent of millennials who get news from Facebook on a regular basis (Achieve, 2015). These statistics underscore increasing social media usage among young adults and provides logic as to how social media has become so compelling in

influencing their political beliefs.

In the report, *The Use of Social Media and Political Participation Among University Students*, a positive relationship between political engagement and time spent on Facebook was established. 41 percent of college students consider political contents on social media more credible than traditional media, for example newspapers and television. While 34.2 percent reported that social media has been influential in shaping their political views (Yang, 2016). Although students reported that content credibility on Facebook is higher, they also asserted that traditional media is more forceful in influencing their political opinions. Furthermore, Yang asserts that “social media’s importance and role has evolved over time to become an important platform for political discourse and giving access to social networking sites for political information and engagement.” Various studies, for example, *The Opinion Maximization in Social Networks*,

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support the claim that consumer opinion may be influenced by the use of social media due to the fact that in social networks, “opinions and ideas propagate faster through virtual connections” (Gionis, Terzi, Tsaparas, 2013). In other words, political values and ideas circulate much faster than they would through face to face interactions. Although social media has the ability to influence individual’s political beliefs, according to Yang, it is not influential enough to wholly change users’ political ideologies. This is due, in part, to sufficient media coverage in the United States. In Malaysia, for example, media coverage is weak, enabling opposition parties to consolidate public support through social media alone.

In the article titled, *The Revolution Will Be Networked: The Influence of Social Networking Sites on Political Attitude and Beliefs*, results highlighted the rising importance of social media for not only voters, but also for political campaigns and candidates. In the 2008 election, social media played a powerful role in affecting users’ political attitudes and behaviors (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, Bichard, 2010). The authors cite President Obama’s understanding and usage of social media as one of the primary reasons he succeeded in the election. Since 2008, social media as a means of campaigning has become an increasingly more common way to influence voters, particularly the youth, among candidates and their campaign teams. Later on in the article, a study reported that “4.6 out of 5 people reported high levels of *political efficacy* on social media” (Zang et al., 2010). Political efficacy refers to the level of trust with the government as well as the belief that individuals can understand and influence political affairs. The correlation between increased social media use in presidential campaigns and political efficacy is evident here. With more time spent on social media, more people rely on and are influenced by content on these networks. (Johnson, Raye, 2006).

“People rely on social networks to gratify informational needs such as finding out about candidate or even to help them decide who to support.”

Discussion

The primary research, conducted in the form of a survey, aligned with my hypotheses for the most part. The secondary research accompanied the survey responses and results by highlighting key findings about correlations, specifically, between social media use and social media as a predominant source of news, as well as the parallel between age and increased use of social networking sites. The interrelationship between being extensively engaged politically and being influenced to a lesser extent, if at all, by social media’s political content became even more compelling after examining responses to the open ended questions that sought to determine why these individuals were seldom influenced by political content on social media. The decision to ask open ended questions, following those with multiple choice responses, allowed for more accuracy and legitimacy when make inferences and created results that would enable generalizations to be made about the population of college students, as a whole, with confidence. A number of factors came into play throughout this report. The following conclusions will point to key factors and findings, verifying that social media certainly plays a role in influencing political opinions and affiliations among college students.

The first conclusion is supported by data, which indicates that a vast majority of college students (88%) use social media more than five times throughout the day. This gives reason as to why 87 percent reported

seeing political content on social networking sites more than twice a day without deliberately searching for it and provides reason as to why 40 percent seek politically related information through social media primarily. Another compelling statistic reveals 82 percent of college students believe they are, at the very least, somewhat influenced by political content on social media. The secondary research backs up this data. According to *The Use of Social Media and Political Participation Among University Students*, 41% consider political content on social media as more credible than information from traditional sources such as newspapers and television. The combination of these statistics underscores how common political content has become on social media. Due to the fact individuals are consistently exposed to articles and posts related to politics on social media, there is a feasible chance that students might subconsciously choose social media to search for news later on and even become influenced from such content without being fully aware of it. There is a strong correlation between using social media, seeing political content on social media unintentionally, and being influenced by such posts to some extent, whether they are aware of it or not. Using social media regularly increases the likelihood of an individual being exposed to political content unintentionally, and in turn making judgements or conclusions about what they read. It is not absolutely clear that stumbling across political content on social media influences political affiliation and opinions, however, there is logical reason to believe that with growing political discussion on social media platforms comes a greater potential for individuals' beliefs to be influenced.

Another significant conclusion to this report illustrates that although social media is not responsible for students' political affiliation alone, it plays a large role in how and what they think of policies, attitudes and behaviors politicians, and the ways in which these factors affect their everyday lives. According to the survey, 82% of students reported being, at the very least, slightly influenced by political content on social media. Due to the fact that this question was quite ambiguous, two open ended follow up questions were asked.

The first being why respondents believed that this phenomena occurred. In other words, why or how is social media's political content influential in students' personal beliefs. A few responses that stood out most are as follows:

- ❖ “Facebook is constantly filled with posts and articles related to some issue of politics, it is impossible to scroll through your feed without seeing at least a few [political] posts.” -- First year, Male student.
- ❖ “Social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, have become the largest platforms for addressing politics in the modern world. Whether someone is ranting, supporting, or trying to change some aspect of politics, political talk is always there. I find it interesting to read.” -- Second year, Female student.
- ❖ “There are a ton of legitimate, persuasive, and interesting posts about political issues on social media. It is hard not to be influenced in some way.” -- First year, Female student.

These responses seemed the most compelling because of their evident honesty and sincerity. These students are, in fact, completely right. Political content is everywhere, all the time, making it hard to discern between what is legitimate and what is not. When individuals are influenced by illegitimate content, it can have negative effects. That is why it is imperative to take the time to check sources, especially if an individual uses social media as a primary source of news.

The second open ended question I asked had to do with who or what principally influenced respondents' political opinions and affiliation. Students overwhelmingly (72%) reported that it was their parents who predominantly influences their political beliefs. Other responses pointed towards elementary education and themselves alone as being the greatest influencer of their political ideals. Not a single student reported social media as being a primary influence. This data should be easy to digest because as Weiwu Zhang asserted, media alone is not influential enough to change users' political ideologies or affiliations. A monumental change in political affiliation would most likely occur as a result of a multitude of factors including, but not limited to an individual's parents beliefs, furthering one's education, a specific, perhaps traumatic event, accompanied by political content on social media. In general, social media, in and of itself, does not have the power to completely change the mind of an individual in terms of their political stance. Additional secondary research about media coverage in the United States advanced this conclusion. It is more common than not to enter a store, an airport, a restaurant, or a home and see the news displayed on the television. This is because media coverage is routine in American culture, which makes it much more difficult to be wholly influenced by political content on social media. Take Malaysia, for example, a country where media coverage is insufficient. Citizens, in turn, look toward social media for nearly all political information, whether they are looking for information on current events or seeking guidance on how to vote in elections. Candidates use this lack of media coverage to further their advantage, which causes opposing parties to consolidate large amounts of support via social media. In Malaysia, social media may be the primary influence of political opinions and affiliations, however in the United States there are a multitude of news outlets, therefore it would be impractical to merely rely on social media as a source of political information.

The above sets of data, accompanied by a detailed analysis illustrate that, although, social media alone will not cause someone to change their political opinions and affiliation, it still plays an important role in influencing individuals political beliefs. This is due to the fact that it creates platforms that foster environments where freedom of expression is encouraged, as well as a place for political discourse, discussion, engagement, and furthering one's own knowledge.

The third and final conclusion of this report provides a strong and compelling correlation between political engagement and the extent to which an individual is influenced by political content on social media. Of the 100 respondents, 14 stated that they are not politically engaged at all. Of the 14, 64.3% stated that their political opinions and affiliations are largely influenced by social media, and 21% said that they are extremely influenced by political content on social media. On the opposite side of the spectrum, 13 of 100 students reported being extremely engaged politically. 10 of these students also said that they are not influenced at all, politically, by social media. The interrelationship that can be drawn from this data states that the more politically engaged an individual is, the less likely he or she will be influenced, in his or her political opinions and affiliations, by social media. The extremely politically engaged students reported viewing political content on social media just as much as everyone else, however when asked why they are not influenced they provided compelling answers. A few of the responses are as follows:

- ❖ “There is quite a lot of fake news, especially after the 2016 election. I always approach political posts and articles on social media with as much caution as possible. I prefer to have the facts right just in case I get caught up in some heated political debate later that day.” -- 2nd year, Male, Business Major

- ❖ “I generally get my news from reputable news outlets like the Wall Street Journal, CNN, and NPR. Also being a political science major, I like to have my facts straight and not engage in debates over illegitimate news articles on social media, which I see far too much.” --2nd year, Female, Political Science Major
- ❖ “I actually go on Facebook a solid amount just to see my friends’ political posts. Sometimes there’s good stuff, most of the time I see my own friends and total strangers arguing in circles about issues that are portrayed with huge biases from mostly bogus “news outlets.” Since I was a child I was very politically active and passionate and I am even more so today. I take what I read seriously and hardly ever make generalizations about whatever political content I come across on social media.” -- Third year, Female, Political Science Major

The secondary research from Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard stresses the idea that “people rely on social networks to gratify informational needs such as finding out about candidates or even to help them choose which to support.” This claim is definitely representative of the majority of participants in the survey conducted. Those who seek out information on social media do so because they tend to be less politically engaged and somewhat unaware of political issues. The small number of students who said they were extremely engaged politically, as well as not influenced by social media’s political content, would be the exception to this group. As stated in the participants’ responses above, these students are not influenced because they are well versed on political issues, they are aware of their own beliefs and affiliations and why, and they simply prefer getting their news, when necessary, from reputable news outlets. Overall the data highlights that less politically engaged students are more likely to be influenced on social media, and in certain cases this can be very negative due to the large amount of fake news outlets that promote themselves on social network sites, such as Facebook. It is imperative in today’s world to keep up with current political events because decisions, actions, and behaviors of politicians directly affect our personal lives.

Recommendations

The primary purpose of this project was to examine the extent to which social media influences the political opinions and affiliations among college students. Primary and secondary sources supported both hypotheses that social media plays a somewhat of a role in influencing students’ political beliefs as well as the idea that less politically engaged students would be more prone to social media’s influence of political ideals. Political content on social media has become commonplace, with the rise of technology in the past decade and a half. A large number of individuals seek out political information merely through social media. In turn, greater social media use creates a greater potential for social network sites to influence the beliefs of college students. It is recommended that users find additional, more relevant, reputable, and consistent news outlets such as the New York Times, CNN, NPR, BBC, and the Wall Street Journal to avoid falling to the influence of false stories and claims that are considerably prominent in society. Social media plays a noticeable role in influencing the political opinions and ideologies of college students, however it is not effective enough to do so on its own. People are significantly more likely to develop beliefs based on those of their parents. It is recommended that individuals form their own beliefs based on personal research, inferences, deductive reasoning, and interactions with others that are not always a part of their immediate family. Data suggests, the more politically engaged students are, the less likely they will be influenced politically through social media, especially from fabricated news stories. It is also

recommended that social media users act cautiously when examining social media content by checking for biases and ensuring a renowned news outlet is behind the posted political content. Everything is political and politics is constantly influencing our lives whether we are aware of it or not. The actions, attitudes, and behaviors of politician have a direct impact on our lives, therefore it is imperative to be politically engaged, to be well versed on political issues, to approach political content particularly on social media with caution, and to exercise the right to vote to ensure the safety and security of not only ourselves, but our peers, our family, and the nation as a whole.

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Appendix

* 1. Please answer the following: what is your age? race? sex? economic class? where are you from originally? what year and major are you at CP?

* 2. How often do you use social media?

- 5 or more times per day
- 1-4 times per day
- Rarely
- Never
- Other (please specify)

* 3. What is your political affiliation?

- Very Conservative
- Moderately Conservative
- Slightly Conservative
- Moderate
- Other (please specify)
- Very Liberal
- Moderately Liberal
- Slightly Liberal

* 4. What or who was/is the most influential in your current political beliefs/affiliation?

* 5. How politically engaged do you consider yourself?

- Extremely
- Moderately
- Somewhat
- Very Little
- Not At All

* 6. What do you use primarily as a source for political information?

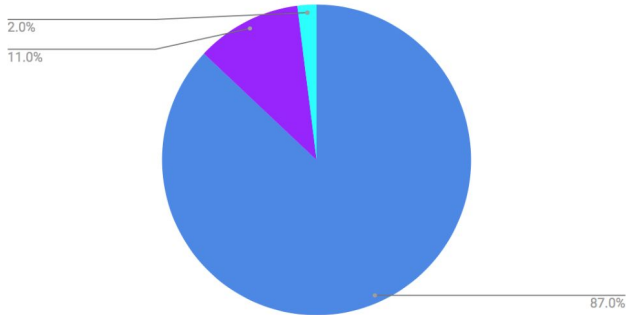
- Social Media
- Newspaper
- TV
- Online Search/News App
- Other (please specify)

* 7. How often do you see political content on social media without deliberately seeking it out?

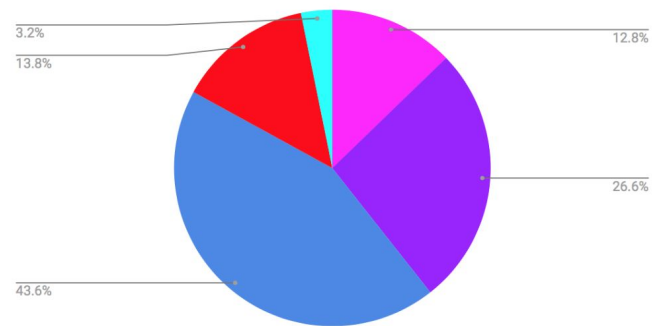
- More than twice a day
- Daily (one a day)
- Weekly
- Never
- Other (please specify)

8. If your political opinions or affiliation has changed over time what was the cause of that change?

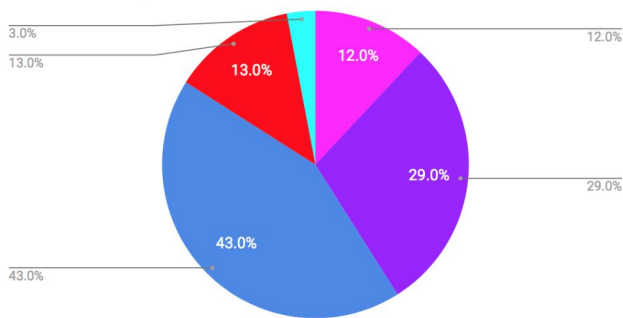
How Often Students See Political Posts/Articles on Facebook Unintentionally



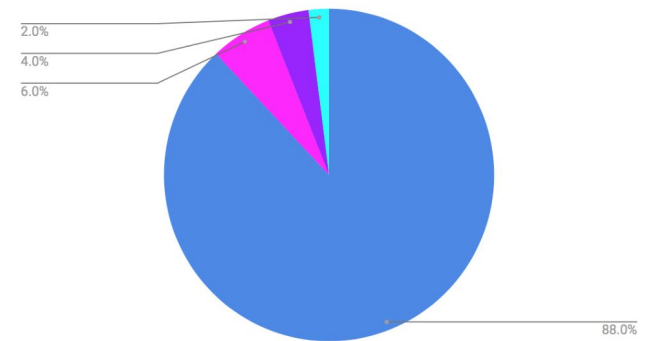
To what extent has social media influenced your political ideologies and opinions?



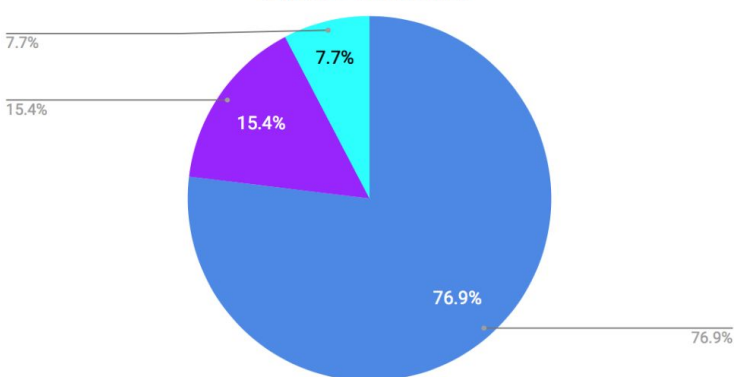
To what extent has social media influenced your political opinions and affiliation?



How Often Students Use Social Media



Influence on Social Media on "Extremely" Politically Aware Students



What or who primarily influenced your political beliefs and affiliation?

