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From Scroll to Poll: How Social Media Engagement Predicts Voter Turnout in Five U.S. States (2016–2024)

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From Scroll to Poll: How Social Media Engagement
Predicts Voter Turnout in Five U.S. States (2016–2024)

Each election cycle, millions of American voters sift through politics-related memes, campaign videos, speeches from politicians, and arguments between strangers on social media sites—but we still don't know how all of this online activity correlates to whether or not it inspires individuals to cast their votes. In today's politics, where social media posts on TikTok or arguments between individuals on social media platforms influence one's consumption of news through algorithms, this correlation is one of the most significant questions of modern politics.

At its most general level, this paper examines: How does online engagement of political information shape voting behavior? This project specifically looks at: How does engaging political news primarily through social media affect political engagement and voter turnout among college-educated adults in California and four comparison states: Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington, from 2016 to 2024?

In answering this question, I use two measures of political engagement: political social media engagement and political media consumption, employing CCES survey data from 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024 to examine each measure's role as a predictor of actual voter turnout for highly educated individuals in the five largest states.

CONTEXT SIGNIFICANCE

“In the last decade, politics and politics-related communications have been completely transfigured in America.” Between 2016–2024, social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X have become widely used sources of political information. In California alone, according to the UC Berkeley-IGS Poll, “32 percent of voters use social media to learn election-related information,” and this group is composed mostly of “young and college-educated individuals” (IGS Poll). Not surprisingly, “In General: Nearly half of U.S. Adults” come into contact very or somehow “often” with politics-related information on social media platforms (Pew Research Center, “Social Media and News Fact Sheet”).

It is important to understand how this shift impacts political behavior, especially among highly educated individuals casting their votes: first of all, individuals holding at least a bachelor's degree have consistently shown higher voting rates than any other group; secondly, they also demonstrate higher consumption of political news reported on social and traditional media platforms. In fact, by 2024, “a majority of college-educated Americans reported being social media users daily,” putting them right at the forefront of modern digital politics. (Pew Research Center, “Social Media and News Fact Sheet”).

Second, because this project is also considering California and comparing it to other large states like Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington, it will be possible to analyze across different partisan and demographically diverse settings. The five large states selected for comparison include two blue or Democratic-leaning states (New York and Washington) and two

others leaning toward the Republican side (Florida and Texas), making them sufficiently diverse for comparison and analysis for this project.

Thirdly, California politicians are now faced with the challenge of addressing digital politics. This is because contemporary legislation requiring transparency for digital advertisements is based on the state's overall concerns to address information distortion and polarization through digital information exposure algorithms. Misinformation and distorted information environments based on social media platforms have been shown to shape politics and institutional trust, as demonstrated by Allcott and Gentzkow's study, which shows their influence on politics and institutional trust (Allcott and Gentzkow 213).

At last, the period between 2016 and 2024 is also unprecedented from the perspective of digital influence on politics. This period spans the crisis of misinformation surrounding the 2016 election, further online campaign activities sparked by the outbreak of COVID-19, and highly divided election cycles of 2022 and 2024. According to Ekström and Widholm, social media sites have interwoven politics and conversation to become part of daily activities for many to such an extent that politics is no longer viewed as one thing and communications as another, but is instead integrated into daily activities (Ekström and Widholm 514). However, Ekström and Widholm are also supported by other researchers, such as Waeterloos, because social media politics is often nothing but superficial politics or “low-effort” politics (Waeterloos 9). This reality is rectified by the conclusions offered by Lee and Cho because active social media use is positively associated rather than passive use (Lee and Cho 6).

Together, these factors create a basis for significant theoretical interest as well as a need for further study to comprehend the association between social media use and actual voter

turnout for several reasons. Given its growing role as Californians continue to use social media to read their news and share their opinions, one of the most significant things to determine is whether social media use predicts actual voting behavior for Californians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political science studies have acknowledged widely that social media affects politics-related activities of individuals differently, but no consensus exists among researchers on whether social media impacts positively or negatively on actual participatory activities. The existing studies cover three strands: (1) social media as an enabler of political participation, (2) social media as a place of shallow or limited political participation, and (3) platform-specific and network-specific effects on participation.

The initial group of studies emphasizes the capability of social media to positively influence political participation by making it more accessible and further integrating politics into one's daily activities. In this regard, a meta-analytic study conducted by Boulianne reported that social media use is positively linked to higher levels of political participation, especially among individuals who use the website to participate in activities such as writing comments or remarks related to politics (Boulianne 530). A further study conducted by Ekström and Widholm also supports this point by claiming that social media sites further introduce politics into one's daily activities (Ekström and Widholm 514).

A “second” stream of literature adopts a rather skeptical approach to online engagement and points to its potentially shallow and passive or even biased character. A notable example is shown by Allcott and Gentzkow's study on online misinformation during the 2016 United States election campaign: their findings indicate how “false or misleading information diffused quickly

on social media and influenced numerous individuals' perceptions of politics" (Allcott and Gentzkow 212-13). A suggestive warning is also provided by Waeterloos's observations: "not all online civic activities deliver robust civic outcomes" because many types of "political action" online, like clicking "like" on a particular statement or simply browsing online information on politics, tend to "signal 'low-effort' politics" rather than actual engagement (Waeterloos 8-10).

The third theme concerns the role of differences between platforms and political discussion networks as influence factors for political participation. According to Lee and Cho, it is not just a matter of whether one accesses or participates in politics online but also how one does so because active participation through such activities as discussing or sharing or even making politics-related content is clearly more significant to civic engagement than passive consumption of news feed information (Lee and Cho 5–6). Another study by Durotoye et al. confirms that while one engages in politics online through discussion networks constructed on platforms like social media sites, especially those accommodating sustained dialogue, to mobilize political participation is crucial because each social media platform facilitates different discourses or activities around politics on each one of them—a principle demonstrated to operate differently on each platform: for example, on Facebook or X or even Instagram (Durotoye et al. 3–4). This line of research underscores the need to evaluate political engagement not simply as "social media use," but as specific patterns of online behavior with distinct political effects.

Together, these studies highlight two crucial findings that inform this project. First, active and interactive forms of politics, like comments on political posts or following events on politics online, tend to have stronger positive associations with civic engagement. Second, passive or overloaded engagement with politics on media platforms, like watching politics on television or

general platforms for a protracted period of time, does not necessarily lead to higher civic engagement and can act as a deterrent instead.

THEORY&HYPOTHESES

This specific project is founded on concepts of digital politics and its role within voter turnout and consumption of political information from social media platforms rather than traditional places of information consumption. Scholarly concepts from digital politics researchers have outlined social media's role within politics by portraying it as interactive and very social (Ekström and Widholm 514). According to Ekström and Widholm, social media brings politics to conversation to give people opportunities to participate in politics through conversation rather than being held within formal or public settings (Ekström and Widholm 514). This shows that social media is not just for information consumption but is also for conversation to establish strong politics and a strong identity among social media users.

This theoretical perspective is further supported by a meta-analysis conducted by Boulianne, which shows social media use is significantly associated with increased civic engagement activities, particularly among those who engage in expressive activities like posting or sharing information on social media sites (Boulianne 530). Moreover, authors Lee and Cho assert the significant role of participatory social media use, especially using comments or messages to share on social media to take part in civic activities offline (Lee and Cho 5–6). It is evident from these authors' rationales that social media use is no longer confined to politics but serves as a nexus between politics and activities such as voting.

Nevertheless, another school of thought argues that consuming political information from multiple online sources can also enhance political awareness and motivation, particularly among

college-educated adults (Pew Research Center). This suggests that while certain forms of passive online participation may create overload, intentionally seeking political information across several online news sources can strengthen awareness and support higher political motivation among voters (Pew Research Center). These findings show that digital political behaviors vary in their effects depending on whether they involve expressive engagement or intentional information seeking.

These theories combined inform one of the most crucial conceptual distinctions for this study: expressive political engagement (as measured using the 0–5 political social-media score) may have a participatory mobilizing influence, and broader political information exposure (as measured using the 0–4 political media engagement score) can also increase political motivation, particularly in information-dense environments like California (DiCamillo; Pew Research Center). This provides direction to the hypotheses and causality tested in this analysis. This distinction is especially relevant in California, where reliance on social-media news is significant, making the association between social-media engagement and voter turnout particularly strong (DiCamillo).

Hypothesis 1: Engaging With Social Media Can Activate Mobilization

Higher levels of political social media use are related to higher levels of political participation because expressive acts on social media activate one's political identity and reinforce social norms of voting behavior.

Operational Form: Those individuals with high scores for political engagement measured on social media sites (0 to 5) have higher probabilities of validated voting within the CCES dataset.

Hypothesis 2: Online News Source Motivational Hypothesis (California)

Greater exposure to political information through multiple online news sources increases political motivation and participation among Californians, especially given the state's high rates of digital information consumption (Pew Research Center).

Operational Form: Persons scoring higher on measures of political media use (0–4) will have a higher probability of validated voting in the CCES dataset.

Hypothesis 3: State-Conditioned Social-Media Engagement Hypothesis

Social-media engagement is especially strongly associated with voter turnout in California due to the state's unusually high reliance on social-media news for election-related information (DiCamillo).

Operational Form: The association between social-media engagement and validated voting will be strongest in California compared to Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington.

CAUSAL MECHANISM

The processes between each category of political engagement and turnout are very different. Turning to political engagement on social media sites, four primary processes are likely to lead to higher turnout: (1) political expression enhances visibility and thus facilitates further participation as a social contagion effect; (2) interactive feedback loops like likes, comments, and shares enhance one's political identity; (3) expressive behavior boosts perceptions of politics-related knowledge and effectiveness; and (4) discussion network formation on-line, as outlined by Durotoye et al., enhances one's participation level (Durotoye et al. 3-4). These

processes combined may account for why individuals who actively participate in politics on social media sites are likely to carry their online behavior into offline politics.

Conversely, media exposure for politics through television, newspapers, or even passive social media browsing may not necessarily trigger these processes but rather result in one-way information transmission processes, which do not necessarily encourage politics to take place. When individuals are exposed to high frequencies of negative or contradictory information through politics-related news coverage, it may lead to fatigue, civic cynicism, or detachment, as well as high levels of fatigue and a lack of motivation to participate actively (Allcott and Gentzkow 212-13). Waeterloos offers another explanation: passive politics may also contribute to civic feelings without necessarily spurring higher levels of participation (Waeterloos 8-10).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This particular study evaluates the role of social media and media consumption on validated voter turnout among college-educated voters within five major U.S. states. This particular need for analysis is addressed by developing and structuring a research design to specifically outline the independent variable, dependent variable, unit of analysis, and scope of analysis for answering this particular study's hypothesis. Each one of these categories is utilized from the “Cooperative Election Study” or “CCES” secondary data from YouGov and Harvard's annual nationwide survey.

Independent Variable (X): Political Social Media Engagement

The primary independent variable is political social media use, and it is measured on a 0 to 5 scale. This scale is created from questions on the CCES regarding whether or not individuals

participated in particular activities on social media for politics, such as comments on politics posts, sharing politics posts or information on social media platforms, following politics-related events on social media platforms, sending politics links to others on social media platforms, or reading/abouting politics-related news events on social media platforms. Each yes answers adds one point to their total score. This is because it assesses expression-related social politics online activities, which researchers suggest is associated with identity activation or activation and politics-related mobilization or reinforcement online or social media platforms. The scores for this independent variable are derived directly from the CCES questions included in all election-year data files for 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024 cycles.

Second Independent Variable: Political Media Engagement

Given that my project is comparing two forms of engagement, for my second independent variable, I conduct a measure for general consumption of political media, ranging from 0 to 4. One point is awarded for any form of consumption for each category of political stories viewed or accessed within the last 24 hours, which includes television-based stories, reports or articles found in newspapers, stories on the radio, or general information on social media sites. This is because passive consumption is shown to potentially fail to activate one's political identity and may instead result in demobilizing outcomes like fatigue or information overload/cynicism, to name but two examples of negative outcomes associated with passive consumption of information. Once again, this information is gathered through the CCES survey batteries. These points directly inform this project's use of its two measures of civic engagement based on CCES: Political social media engagement (0-5) and Political media consumption (0-4). This project compares these measures of civic engagement among individuals who have higher education in five major states, thus helping to further understand whether digital spaces of politics act to

facilitate civic engagement or reduce civic engagement to simple online acts and gestures instead.

Dependent Variable (Y): Validated Voter Turnout

The dependent variable is validated voter turnout, obtained from the official CCES vote-validation process. Turnout is recorded as:

1= the respondent actually voted,

2 = the respondent did not vote.

Turnout is measured using validated turnout rather than self-reported turnout because validated turnout is more reliable than self-reported turnout and does not contain social desirability bias, where many individuals tend to overreport their turnout. This variable directly measures the outcome of my research question: whether higher levels of engagement online lead to higher levels of turnout offline. This data comes from the CCES validated turnout file matched to election cycles.

CONTROL VARIABLES

To reduce omitted-variable bias and isolate the effects of political engagement on turnout, I include two control variables: state population size and respondent education level.

The first control variable is statewide population size, which attempts to control for statewide differences between California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington. Larger states tend to have different politico-communicative contexts, campaign tactics, levels of voter outreach efforts, and information environments. While statewide population size is measured using state population data for each election year, which is readily available and grouped according to each

election year, it is conceptualized to merge with CCES by matching each respondent to her respective statewide population size to avoid differences in statewide politics merely being differences in statewide population size or campaign reach.

The second control variable is "Education level" and is obtained from the CCES educ variable provided for analysis. The analysis is conducted among individuals whose education level is beyond high school. This is because cases whose response categories include "No high school" and "High school graduate" are not part of the analysis. Categories "Some college," "2-year degree," "4-year degree," and "Post-grad" represent this control variable.

These categories represent differences that are significant to one's level of political knowledge and information-seeking habits. Using postgraduate education as an example, one could presumably have higher levels of political sophistication and information-seeking habits than someone who only has some collegiate experience. Without accounting for differences among those college-educated individuals, one could determine civic resource differences to confound the association between online engagement and turnout. This is derived directly from the education variable offered by CCES itself.

Unit of Analysis and Design Structure

The unit of observation for this particular project is the single respondent to the CCES survey. This project involves several cases (five states) and several election cycles, making it a technically repeated cross-sectional analysis because it involves several observations at different points in time. This is not technically a panel dataset because the CCES does not have any methodology for linking observations to particular individuals being surveyed repeatedly, but simply provides new data points for each election cycle.

N-Size, Temporal Scope, and Geographic Scope

The time duration for my project is 2016 to 2024 and involves three presidential election cycles and two midterm election cycles. The primary rationale for this is that turnout and engagement activities have been shown to differ immensely between election cycles and off-cycles for voter turnout and activities around politics and communication. The geographical area for my project involves five states: California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington. The rationale for my project involves geographical areas that are large and diverse to incorporate differences between these areas and others to create overall comparisons. The total n-number for all election cycles involves several thousand college-educated respondents each year based on CCES waves. Altogether, these elements form a robust methodology to examine how e-political participation affects actual voting turnout among highly educated individuals for a period of eight years.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study will use descriptive and correlational analysis to determine whether social media political engagement is a stronger predictor than traditional political media consumption for validated voter turnout using CCES data. Because my project involves both ordinal measures of social media engagement and binary measures of voter turnout, I will use statistical tests that match each variable's level of measurement.

First, I analyze descriptive statistics for each election cycle between 2016 and 2024 for the mean political social media engagement score, the mean political media engagement score, and the proportion of college-educated respondents who voted. Second, to determine if differences exist between California and other states, such as Texas, Florida, New York, and

Washington, regarding correlations between online politics and voter turnout, descriptive statistics for each state's election cycle are analyzed for mean political social media engagement scores, mean political media engagement scores, and proportions of college-educated voters for each election cycle.

In order to determine whether or not the independent variables are related to the dependent variable, I conduct a point-biserial correlation analysis because one variable is binary (validated turnout = 1 or 2) and the other is continuous or ordinal (engagement scores). This analysis aims to determine whether individuals with high scores for engagement are also likely to have high scores for turnout. Additionally, for social media engagement scores (0-5) and media engagement scores (0-4), the point-biserial correlation analysis can determine whether turnout is highest at the top of each continuum and whether social media/ media engagement is positively associated, negatively associated, or unassociated with turnout.

Since both engagement measures are ordinal, Spearman's rho is also calculated to assess rank-order correlation. This correlation measures monotonic relationships between increasing social media engagement and increasing turnout, for example. Spearman's rho is appropriate for your data because social media questions and media questions result in ordered scores of engagement rather than normally distributed scores for Pearson's correlation analysis.

In addition to correlation analysis, I also perform a chi-square test of independence to examine each category of engagement (ranging from 0 to 5 on social media and 0 to 4 for media) against validated turnout. This serves to ascertain to which voting habits may differ between categories of engagement. For instance, to what extent do people's scores of 4 or 5 on social

media differ in terms of turnout from those at 0 or 1? This can all be assessed by the chi-square test if it is found to differ significantly.

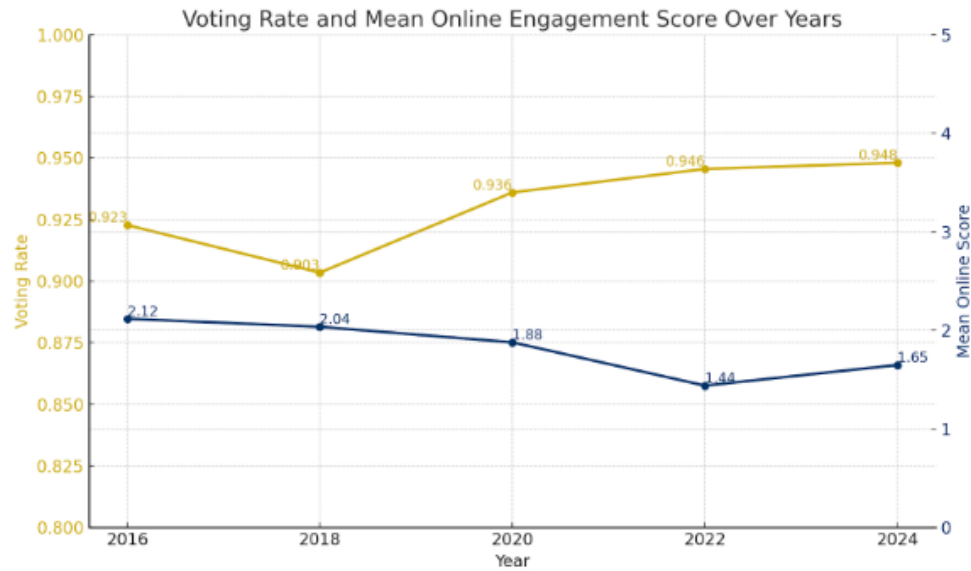
RESULTS&FIGURES

Descriptive Trends Across the Five States

This section will display outcomes generated from Descriptive Statistics analyses conducted to determine whether Political Social Media Participation and Political Media Consumption predict Certified Voter Turnout among College-Educated Citizens between 2016-2024 for California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington. These outcomes have shown significant differences between the two types of participation and their respective relationships to politics.

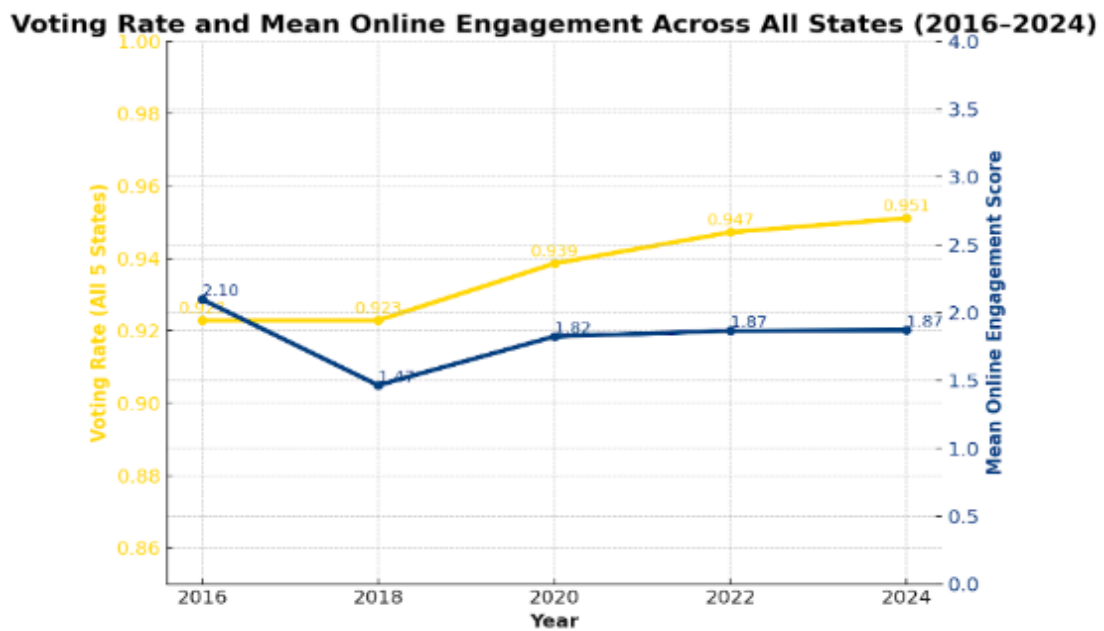
To start off, I analyzed the average scores of political engagement and average validated turnout for all five states from 2016 to 2024. Figure 1 shows the mean value of social media political engagement and mean turnout for each election year. While both series have fluctuations from year to year, there is no direct correlation between online engagement and turnout for each respective year.

Figure 1: Mean Social Media Engagement Score and Mean Voting Rate Across 5 States



A similar pattern appears when examining political media engagement (TV news, newspapers, radio news, etc.). As shown in Figure 2, mean media exposure and mean turnout vary each year, but the statewide averages do not track each other.

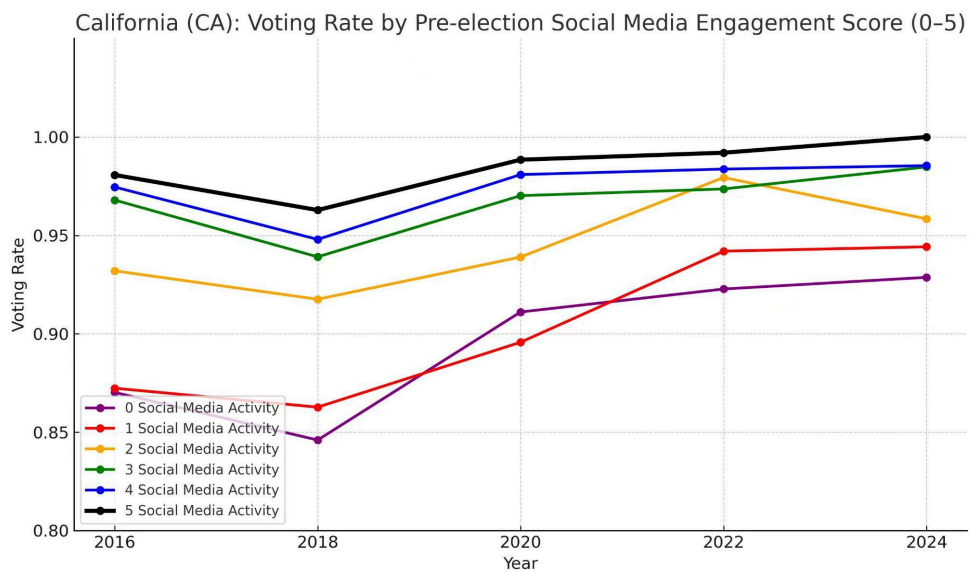
Figure 2: Mean Media Engagement Score and Mean Voting Rate Across 5 States



Individual-Level Results: California

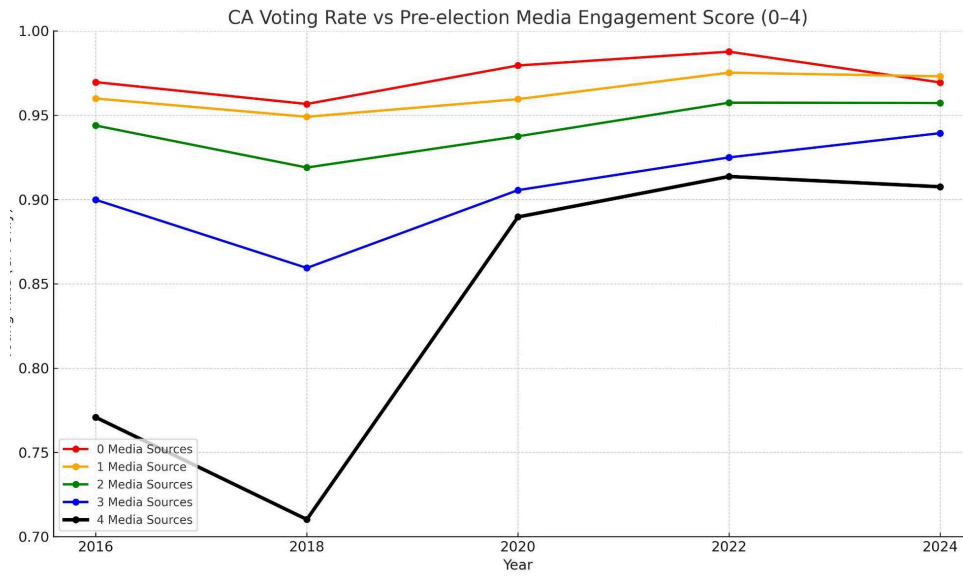
Because California is one of the key states for this project, I also looked at whether social media engagement at the individual level affects validated turnout outcomes. Figure 3 below shows how turnout is strongly correlated with high social media engagement scores. Those whose social media scores range between 4 and 5 have the highest turnout percentages at almost perfect levels for some election cycles.

Figure 3: CA Social Media Engagement Score vs. Turnout



Conversely, political media engagement, as measured by traditional sources of political information, depicts a reversed relationship. Notably, from Figure 4, higher scores for media engagement are linked to lower turnout among Californian college-educated individuals.

Figure 4: CA Media Engagement Score vs. Turnout



These California findings indicate that expressive digital political behavior (social media engagement) is linked to increased participation, while passive political media consumption may suppress voting among highly educated adults

Individual-Level Results Across Five States

To determine whether this is also the case for different political settings, the same analysis was performed for Texas, Florida, New York, and Washington. Based on Figure 5 and 6 below, for all five states combined, social media engagement is positively linked to turnout. In all five states combined, individuals with social media engagement scores of 4 or 5 have consistently high turnout regardless of their respective state's politics.

Figure 5: States' Social Media Engagement Score vs. Turnout

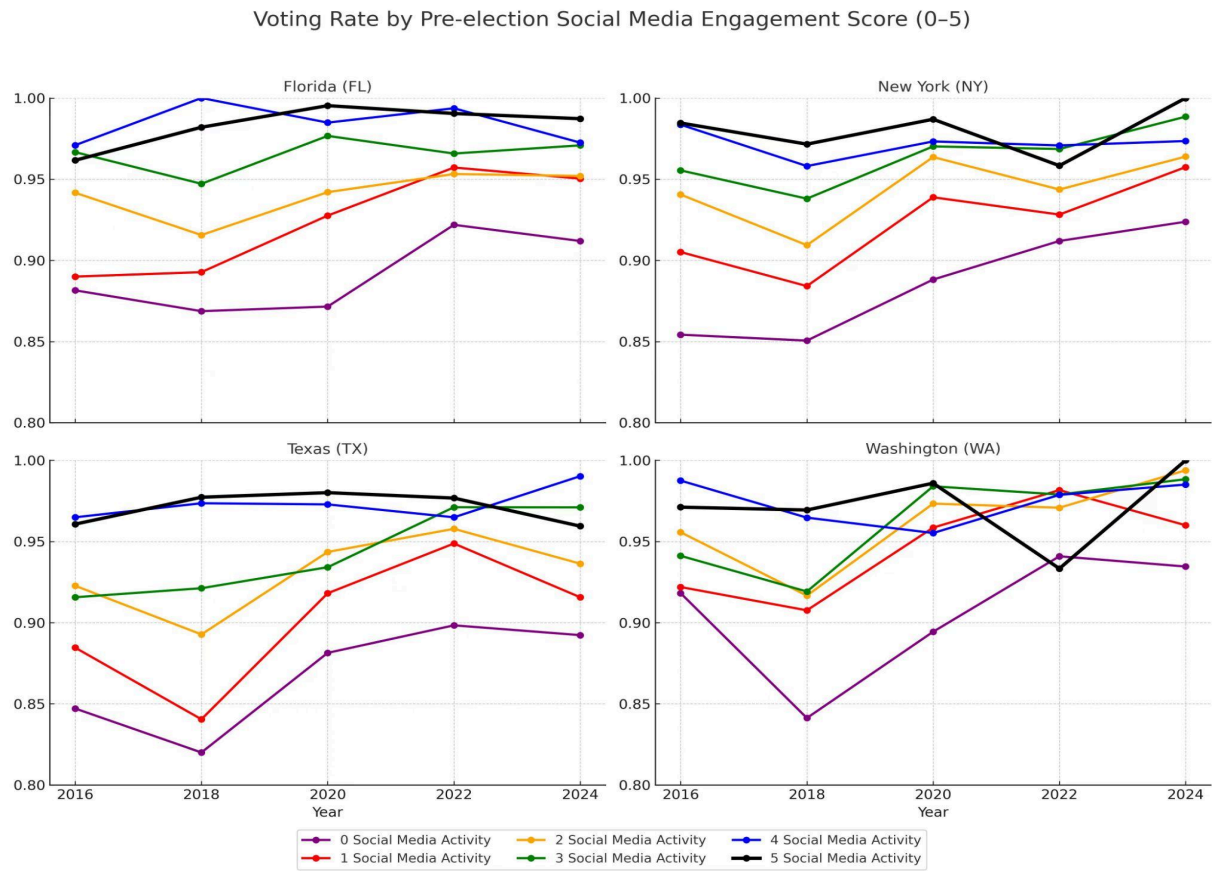
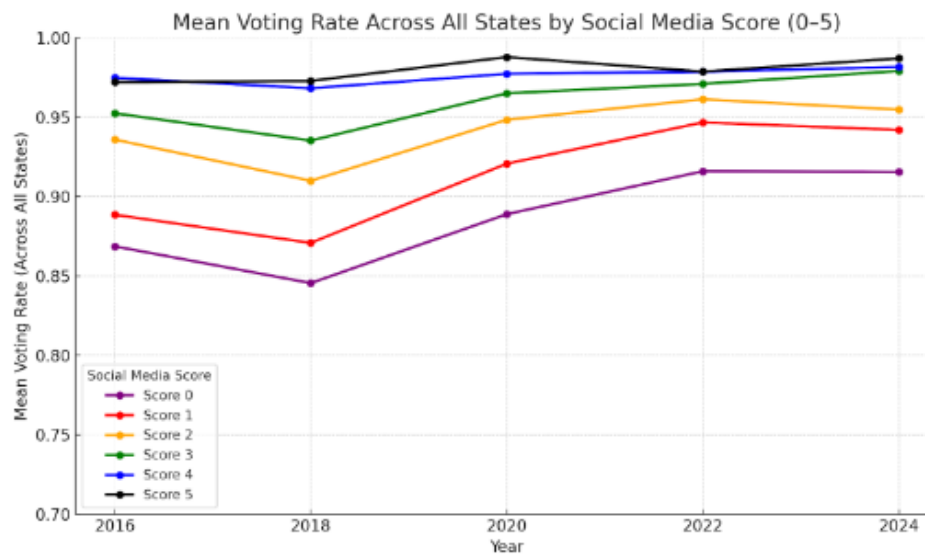
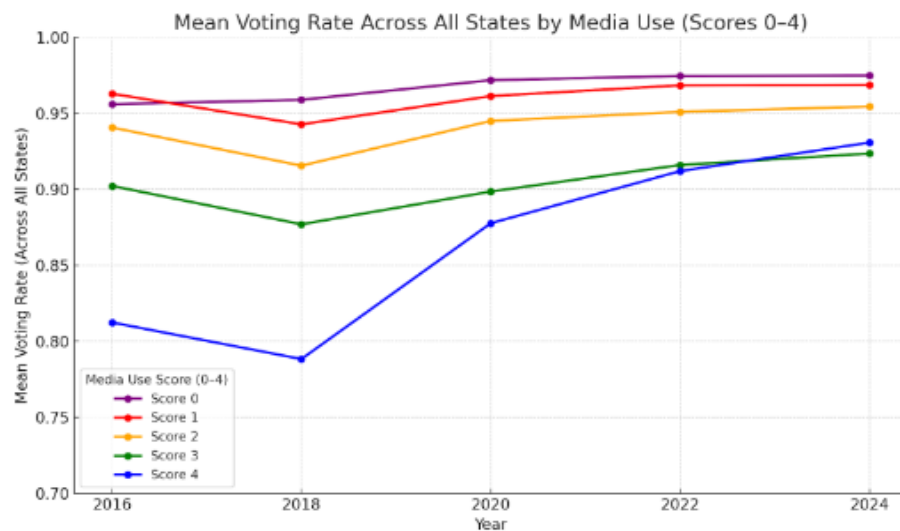


Figure 6: Five-State Mean Social Media Engagement Score vs. Turnout



At the same time, Figure 6 makes it apparent that higher levels of political media engagement are associated with falling turnout in each of the five states tested. This is true for both democratic and republican states and indicates that passive consumption of media may not necessarily equate to active engagement in politics among the collegiate population.

Figure 6: Five-State Mean Media Engagement Score vs. Turnout



Together, these multi-state findings reinforce the California-specific results: active political engagement on social media is positively associated with voting, while heavy consumption of traditional political media is negatively associated with turnout.

Upon examining individual data, correlation tests, and inter-state comparisons, it is apparent that:

- Higher political social media engagement → higher turnout
- Higher political media engagement → lower turnout
- Statewide averages mask the clear individual-level relationships

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS & LIMITATIONS

The results show clear differences in how expressive and informational digital behaviors relate to voter turnout. Across all five states, Hypothesis 1 is satisfactorily tested because individuals who ranked higher in political engagement on social networking sites always had a propensity for voting. This positive trend could be discerned in each state, but was more marked in California because of a sharp gradient separating those with low and those with high levels of political engagement. This clearly indicates that political engagement via social networking sites acts as a strong mobilizer in California.

Further, the results confirm Hypothesis 3: Social media engagement would be most mobilizing in California compared to the other five states. This is because California voters have shown a more evident and stable connection between various forms of political expression in and outside of social media.

Conversely, Hypothesis 2 cannot be confirmed. The data fail to demonstrate a positive association between having access to several types of political news sites on the Internet and voting turnout in California. Conversely, a flat turnout rate or a downward trend may be observed among those who access a number of sites. This means that informational exposure fails to act as a mobilization route in this case.

This data indicates that voters are more effectively mobilized through expressive engagement with digital technology than with broad-based informational exposure. Social networking sites appear to be a critical component of political identity reinforcement and civic activation. Thus, social networking site use, such as commenting, posting, and following, can be considered a strong predictor of electoral turnout. California, because of its extensive use of

digital and social networking site news, presents a strong example of how such engagement leads to political action. This supports academic literature concerning civic behavior.

The fact that no support was shown for Hypothesis 2 indicates that more general levels of consuming news online are unlikely to increase voting motivation. In California and similar types of states where the amount of information available tends to be large, heavy use of online news may cause information fatigue and a patchwork political awareness instead of political mobilization. The above findings lead to the conclusion that reaching voters for elections should be more diversified and involve approaches other than spreading information. They should focus instead on virtual environments where voters actively participate in political information.

Several limitations are worth noting. First, the CCES data proxy digital engagement using self-reported survey items, which misses subtleties in the use of online platforms, like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube. Second, the analysis confines itself to college-educated adults, so generalization to the full population should be approached with caution. Third, the online news measures 0-4 count of sources-is a breadth rather than a depth or intensity measure, which constrains any conclusions about the quality of information.

Going forward, it would be beneficial to add in platform-level behavioral data or to measure specific content types that drive participation. Researchers could also expand the scope to non-college-educated groups, explore differences across age ranges, or compare states with varying political cultures. Longitudinally tracking change across multiple election cycles might provide insight into whether changes in norms at the platform level change mobilization differently over time.

Results from this project demonstrate that not all forms of digital political engagement drive civic participation in the same way. Expressive activity on social media-interacting with political content, for example, or participating in online discussions-emerges as a consistently strong predictor of voter turnout across states, with California showing the clearest and most pronounced pattern. In contrast, relying on multiple online news sources does not increase turnout and may reflect the challenges of navigating dense information environments, especially in highly digital states.

CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that political digital outreach remains a powerful tool, but its effectiveness will always depend on how it's used. The interactive digital spaces of participation and identity-building seem far better at mobilizing voters than passive informational exposure alone. In other words, the challenge isn't whether to use digital outreach but how to use it to engage rather than overload.

Finally, this study echoes that digital mobilization is extremely sensitive to context. States vary in their media environments, information-seeking habits, and political atmospheres, and thus there can be no one-for-all model of online civic engagement. Outreach efforts should be adapted to each state's electorate based on its unique digital behavior-for example, take advantage of the expressive digital engagement of places like California and adapt outreach methods when media dynamics are different. Understanding these contextual differences is crucial to creating effective, responsible digital voter-engagement efforts in the years to come.

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Appendix

Mean Media Sources Count Vs Voter Rate Graphs For Each Election Cycle

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qaANMyT7BkYcZIANUUikWA7XbClrTg9fW0U5kmgrJcE/edit?usp=sharing>