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Social Media's Link with Individualism and the Dangers that Follow

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SOCIAL MEDIA'S LINK WITH INDIVIDUALISM AND THE DANGERS THAT FOLLOW

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Intro

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Novel Coronavirus Disease a pandemic. The following days, the first lockdown were issued which closed all non-essential businesses and most people were advised to stay at home. As the months continued, lockdowns were gradually lifted and some non-essential businesses slowly started to open, but more recently states have been issuing in-state lockdowns and some people fear another lockdown could happen in the winter. During these lockdowns, one of the only means to connect with the outside world was through social media. Suddenly finding themselves with extra time, millions of Americans downloaded the top three apps of the time, TikTok, Zoom, and WhatsApp, to keep busy, stay employed, and order necessities to stay alive.[1] All of these apps, among others, are a means to connect and interact with people. By watching videos, making Zoom calls, or texting their friends, people were finding ways to stay connected and have some type of social interaction.

When Alexis de Tocqueville came to American in the 1830s, he observed "individualism" and concluded that it was needed for a modern democracies. Individualism is when citizens' prefer private rights over public rights and create inner groups of friends and family rather than focusing on the needs of the community. "The men who live in aristocratic times are therefore almost always connected in a close way to something that is placed outside of themselves, and they are often disposed to forget themselves…In democratic times, on the contrary, when the duties of each individual toward the species are much clear, devotion to one man becomes rarer."[2] Individualism limits people's obligations to fit the needs of their inner

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[1] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview." *Global Digital Insight*, (2020). https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview.
[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 205.

circle which minimizes their public role. It also has the possibility of being absorbed into egoism, causing citizens to only consider themselves. This will lead to a surrender of democracy's basic virtues and core values of discussion, debating, compromising, and being involved within one's community. On social media platforms, users can create their own profile, choose whom to follow, and post pictures, videos, ideas, or thoughts to get more likes and followers. They have the power to create their own inner circle of followers. It is a modern-day form of individualism. These features raise the question of whether such platforms could exacerbate the individualism Tocqueville identified.

With social media usage rising, Pew Research tested the political knowledge of adults who primarily use social media to get their political information. For example, did they understand what the federal budget deficit is or what policies each party supports? Their study found that 17% of adults had high political knowledge, 27% had middle political knowledge, while 57% had low political knowledge. How can social media help foster a healthy political atmosphere when the majority of its users have low political knowledge? Social media outlets encourage their users to register and vote, but at the same time, 57% of these users who use it to obtain their news have low political knowledge.[3] How can these users, and now voters, engage in politics when they are not as informed in politics as other Americans?

Social media was created, at least in theory, to bring old friends together and to make new friends. Since its beginning, it has grown into an arena in which the conversations needed for a democracy could be held, both on the national and local levels. These conversations predate social media, having existed since the Puritans came to New England to start a new life. Their

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[3] Mark Jurkowitz, et al, "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, (2020). https://www.journalism.org/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/.

values became the "Spirit of America," and provide the foundations for the *United States Constitution*. However, social media seems to be taking interest in the national aspect of issues rather than the local ones. Take one popular platform with young adults, Snapchat. On Snapchat, there are different types of stories that people can follow and listen to from national news headlines, updates on sports teams, to learning how to make fancy cakes. Yet where are the options for the local news stories? With the increased prominence of social media in American daily conversation, could these core values of conversation, local government, and social capital be threatened?

Social media is a modern concept of individualism; therefore, it holds the same dangers that Tocqueville writes about. If social media continues to have negative effects, such as creating users who have low political knowledge, it will lead to users becoming egoist rather than placing their obligations to fit the needs of their friends and family, community, or nation, destroying social capital. This would then have damaging effects not only in voting, local government participation, but also in creating opinions, obtaining knowledge, having a concept for deep thought, and create even more political polarization within the nation.

I: Tocqueville and Putnam: What is Individualism?

America was the first modern democratic nation, which inspired Alexis de Tocqueville to visit America in the 1830s to see firsthand this new system. His subsequent book, *Democracy in America*, describes the American way of life and government, and details the difference between this new form of government from previous ones he had seen beforehand. He believed that America would become the model for the future that the rest of the world would soon imitate. Focusing mostly on the American *politeia* within his book, he observed individualism which is one of the theories responsible for modern democracy. Prior political arrangements displayed egotism, but individualism is new and distinct from egotism. "Egotism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man relate everything only to himself alone and to prefer himself over all things. Individualism is a reflective and peaceful sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellow men and to draw himself off to the side with his family and friends."[2] Egotism is when self-interest motivates an individual's actions, and when one feels superior to others whereas individualism leads people to live a private life with no interest in other people besides the ones they have chosen for their circle.

In older, traditional European governments, such as monarchies or aristocracies, there was a link between everyone in that country, from the peasant to the king. The feudal system structured everyone to a socially higher or lower level than everyone else. Families had an understanding for their ancestral lands and privileges, thus stayed on their land for centuries, passing their land down to each subsequent generation. In a democracy, the situation is quite the opposite. There is no caste system, therefore all citizens are equal to one another under the law. Citizens tend to forget about their forefathers because there is no land to inherit nor obligations

they need to fulfill in the family name. These citizens see their destiny in their own hands. From this, citizens develop the idea of "self-interest rightly understood," favoring private rights over public rights, and choosing thier own family and friends.

Tocqueville, however, warned Americans of the dangers that come from individualism. "Egoism dries up the germ of all the virtues; individualism at first only dries up source of the public virtues, but over the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and eventually becomes absorbed in egoism."[2] Though individualism is not being selfish, in the end it will bring people to it. Americans will also start to forget about their forefathers and only worry about their circle of friends. As Dana Jalbert Stauffer notes, individualism limits citizens to their own obligations to fit the needs of their small circle and minimizes their role to the public community.[4] When this happens, it diminishes the significance of one's duties as a citizen. Citizens could start to get "lost in the crowd" and lose social structure.

Since individualism and self-interest could be a threat to democracy, Tocqueville offers a solution. He calls for more community involvement, democratic participation and conversation about civic virtues and duty. With more participation and conversation, it will then lead people to consider the interest of others and to work towards the common good. In a democracy, a community may start out as one person seeking out their own self-interest, such as wanting to fix their road, but to accomplishes such a project one needs help from others. When the community comes together to fix the road, it helps out the entire community, not just the person who started the project. Working together to fix a common problem will lead to increased participation in local civil society, fulfilling one's civil duties, and a well-run community where Americans' virtues can flourish. Citizens also need to vote in every election, from electing town leaders, to

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[4] Stauffer, Dana Jalbert, "Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion," *The American Political Science Review* (2014), 772-82.

state, to national. Having the opportunity to voice one's opinion by choosing who will represent a community in government is one of the most important duties of a citizen. This is what the Founding Fathers fought for, a chance to have a government that recognizes people's natural rights.

Today, there is a growing problem of decreasing community involvement. In 1995, Robert Putnam wrote an article, "Bowling Alone," to explain that Americans have become disconnected from social capital and civic activities, and to explain how they might reconnect.[5] He wrote a book of the same title expanding on everything in the article. Social capital is the successful functioning of a group or community through personal relationships, a shared understanding, trust, and cooperation. What is one of the best ways to be part of civic engagement? By developing one's social capital. This could include becoming a part of one's local organizations or building up a relationship with one's neighbors. However, Putnam observed that small civic engagement clubs, such as bowling leagues where people meet and have discussions about life and community issues, were decreasing. The effects of this disconnect from social capital resulted in decreased voter turnout and participation in local government. Social connections and civic engagement are important not only for public life but to keep Americans from becoming too individualistic as Tocqueville described.

Putnam explained that four reasons why American social capital is eroding are (1) the movement of women into the labor force, (2) mobility, (3) demographic transformation, and (4) the technological transformation of leisure.[5] Putnam especially saw the rise of technology as a threat to one's private time and social capital. Almost every American had a television in their homes and "American's social connections withered [as] they increasingly watched *Friends*

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[5] Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, (1995), 65-78.

rather than having friends."[6] Also at the time, the first virtual reality was created which could allow its users to escape the real world and enter into a brand new, fictional world of their own preference. More and more people were using technology to escape social capital building activities and duties, preferring to spend their leisure time alone rather than with friends and family. Today, one major individualizing activity of our leisure time is through a trend called binge-watching, when a person watches large amounts of content over a short span of time, usually a television series. People who could have been socializing with their neighbors or joining a bowling league are instead watching hours of television. Another trend is bingeing on video games, where players can escape from the real world for hours not cognizant at the passing of time. For about the last ten years, the video game industry has made more money than the Hollywood and music industry put together.[7] Technology is becoming more advanced every day and taking over many people's leisure time causing them to leave traditional activities, which naturally foster conversations with their friends and interactions within their community.

According to Putnam, traditional groups, such as bowling leagues, PTA groups, and local religious organizations, are being replaced by tertiary organizations[8], non-profit organizations, and support groups. These groups will usually tend to have larger number of members and more money versus more traditional groups, because they tend to be nationally focused organizations rather than the standard, local PTA group. In the 1960s, about 47% of families were a part of their school's PTA group, but since, that number has declined to approximately 20% as of 2019.[9]

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[6] Thomas H. Sander, et al, "Democracy's Past and Future: Still Bowling Alone? - The Post-9/11 Split." *Journal of Democracy*, (2010).

[7] Igor Mitic, "Video Game Industry Revenue Set for Another Record-Breaking Year," *Fortunly* (2020) https://fortunly.com/blog/video-game-industry-revenue/.

[8] Those in service of the economy.

[9] Brittany Murray, et al., "Civil Society Goes to School: Parent-Teacher Associations and the Equality of Educational Opportunity." *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, (2019). https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/5/3/41#sec-14.

People are now more inclined to send a check to an organization, rather than going to a meeting and actively participating in it. In the late 1990s, nearly half of Americans undertook some volunteering activity, but, more recently, only about 20% of citizens volunteer on a regular basis. Not only was there a decline in traditional civic clubs, but also in family bonds and the time spent with neighbors and family. In the 1970s, the average American had guests in their house about fifteen times a year. Before the pandemic hit, only 50% of Americans were now entertaining guests, and only about twelve times a year. [10] Though these new organizations could have more participants and money, the traditional groups and activities that enhance social capital are decreasing.

Although Putnam's article was written over two decades ago, the threat of technology has expanded to social media. Alexandra Hudson recently wrote "Bowling Alone at Twenty," reflecting on Robert Putnam's ideas in "Bowling Alone" to visit and assess his predictions about the state of human interaction. Putnam feared that using the telephone more would reduce face-to-face socializing resulting in more loneliness. Today, as Hudson explains, more people are making new friends on the internet from social media apps and other platforms. They are not as lonely as Putnam predicted. However, Hudson did find that social media creates barriers to building relationships. Hudson references Molly Crockett from Yale, who hypothesizes, "social media interactions depersonalize interlocutors[11], rendering us less likely to feel empathy for others and making it easier for us to shame opponents."[10] Social media has its pros and cons, but when it comes to natural human emotions and how we treat and think of each other, it appears to have an overall negative effect.

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[10] Alexandra Hudson, "*Bowling Alone* at Twenty," *National Affairs*, (2020).
[11] A person who takes part in a dialogue or conversation.

II: Social Media

To reconnect with social capital, Putnam proposes that Americans need to develop the ideas of social capital to find out what effectively represents these lost values. Since 1995 when his book was published, the use and availability of technology and social media have risen annually. Social media may have started as a place where a person can reconnect with old friends, but today its influence and scope have become much larger than could have ever been predicted. Could this be a way to reconnect with the lost social capital, to engage within civic conversation, and to curtail this threat of individualism leading to egoism?

Social media started in 2003 and 2004 with the platforms Myspace and LinkedIn, but it was really Facebook that started the era of social media as we know it today. At the end of 2004, Facebook had about 1 million active users. In 2019 that number went up to 2.3 billion active users.[12] Today, about 7.7 billion people are living on Earth and about 3.5 billion people actively use social media, with about a 9% annual increase.[13] Social media is growing by the minute. Many social media platforms, such as Facebook, increase linearly annually as seen in Figure 1, or exponentially like Instagram in Figure 2, thus showing how fast they are growing. Another study reported that 70% of Americans currently use social media.[12] Where do these users access social media? Through their smartphones. In 2011, 35% of Americans owned a smartphone and by 2019, 81% of Americans owned a smartphone.[14] Most Americans have become accustomed to grabbing their phones at any time of the day. Smartphones made it possible that a person no longer needs to sit at their computer to use social media platforms but access it almost anywhere.

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[12] Felix Richter, "Infographic: Facebook Keeps On Growing." *Statista Infographics*, (2019). https://www.statista.com/chart/10047/facebooks-monthly-active-users/.

[13] Dave Chaffey, "Global Social Media Research Summary 2019," *Smart Insight,* (2019), https://www.smartinsights.com/

[14] "Demographics of Mobile Device Ownership and Adoption in the United States." *Pew Research Center*, (2020). https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/.

These platforms allow users to create their own inner circle of friends, giving them the ability to

reach them anywhere at any time. In a Pew Research Study, 40% of Gen Z participants, anyone

born after 1996, who said social media has a positive effect said so because it helps them to stay

connected with friends and family. [15] With many different ways to digitally communicate, it

encourages more conversation between these small groups. Thus, being the concept of
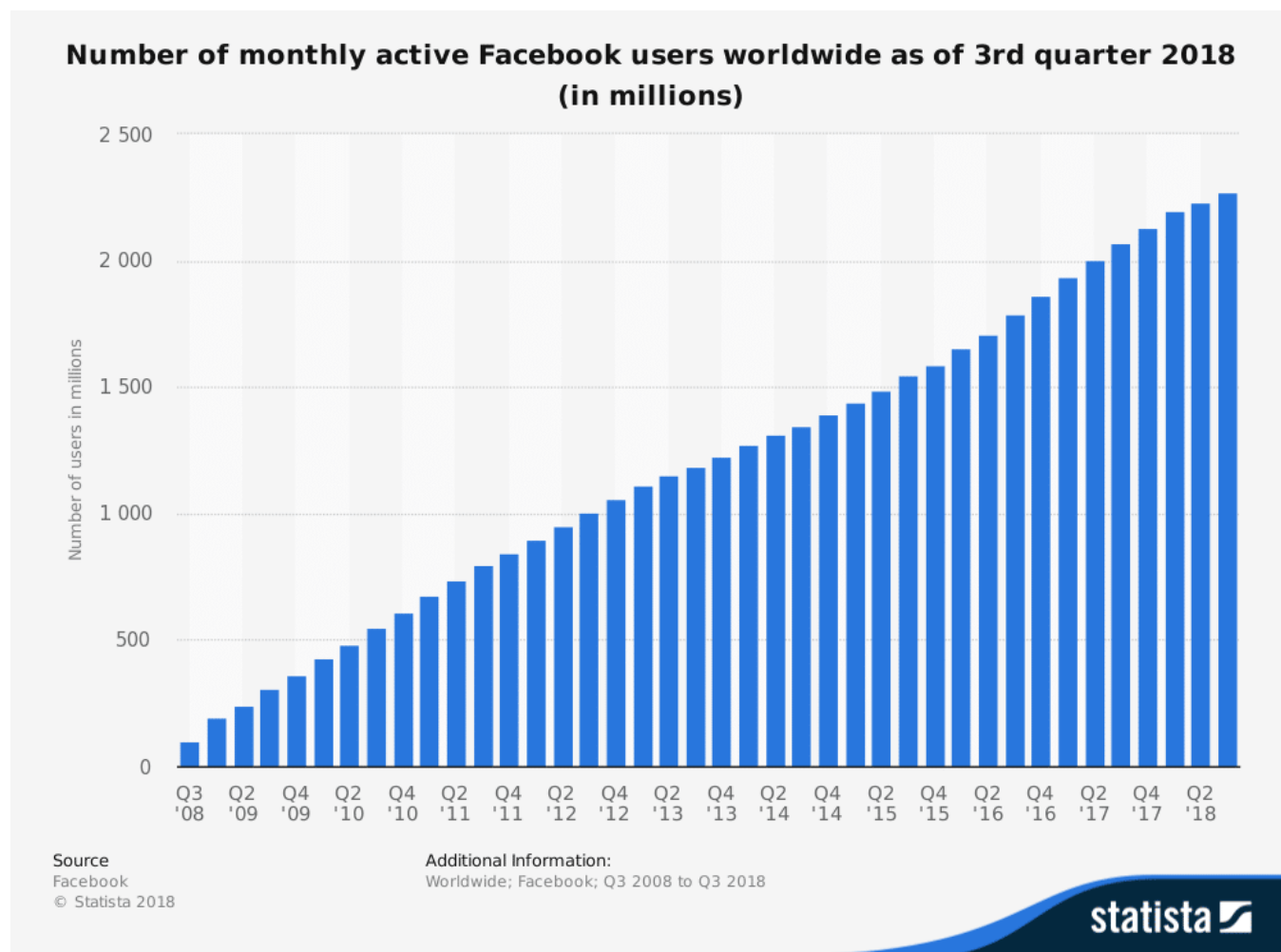
individualism.

Figure 1[12]

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[15] Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik. "What We Know About Gen Z So Far," *Pew Research,* (2020). https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/.
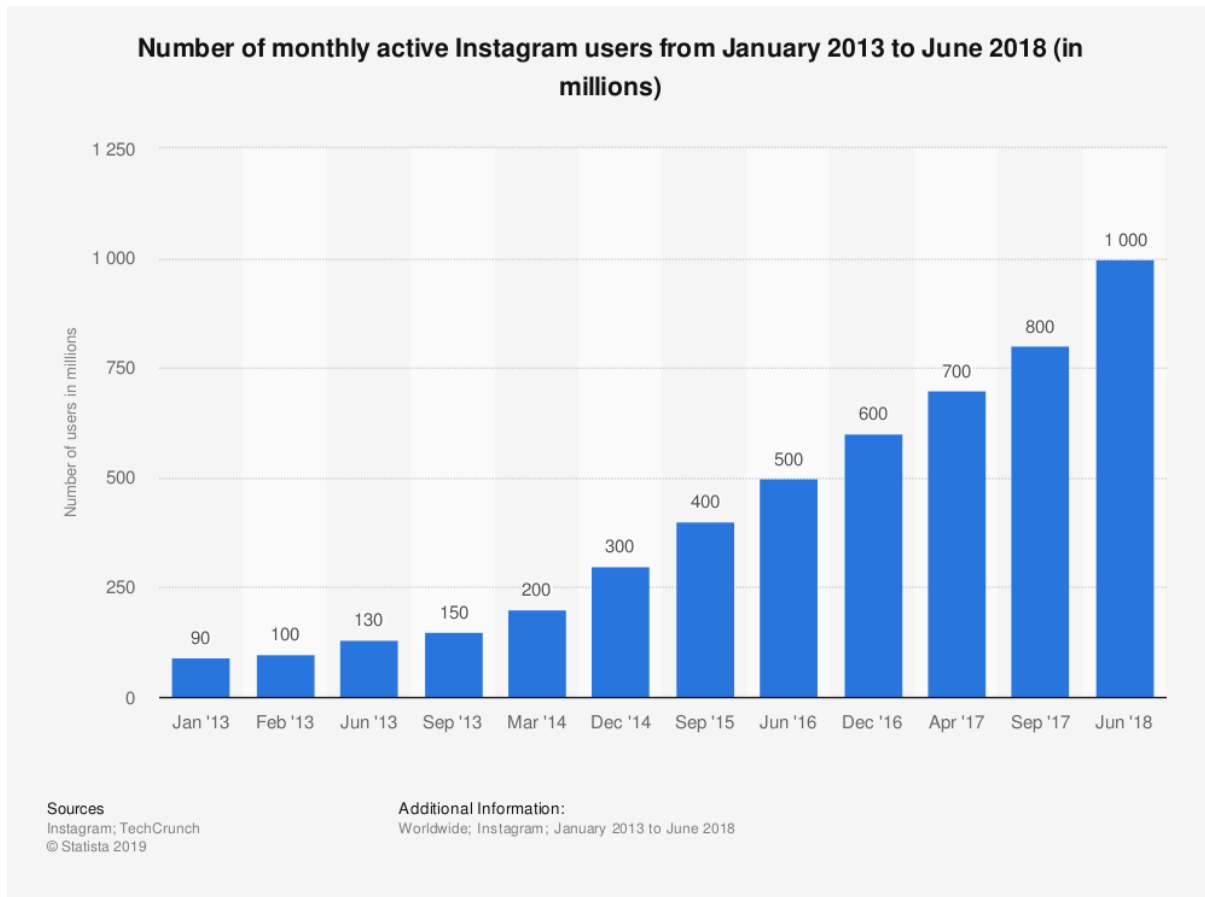
Number of monthly active Instagram users from January 2013 to June 2018 (in millions)

Figure 2[12]

Since it follows the individualist lifestyle, it also carries the danger of minimizing one's public duty to fulfill the needs of their friends and family rather than the community. Social networking may, at first, seem like it is a very democratic form of communication because it can reach billions of people and it enables anyone to share any type of information. A user has access to many different sources and all it takes is just a click of a button to access them from anywhere. With these abilities, however, will it encourage citizens to start to branch out and start a conversation to expand one's public duty? Will it form peaceful compromises and agreements about important issues, whether those issues are national or local? Users start to create their own world within their hands, and some become more self-interested with their desires to gain more followers and likes on their platforms. It is easy to hide behind a phone or a social media account

and have that become your "new" world. Social media has the possibilities of starting a conversation needed for democracy, but it also has the tendency of encouraging users to isolate and to think only for themselves, rather than their group of friends or family.

Though social media may sound like a great idea at first, users also need to remember who is the man behind the curtain and what is his main focus. In the 2020 documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, former heads of these apps speak about the dangers of these platforms. Their sole business is that many users come to the platform, stay on the platform, and invite their friends to the it. They do not care about what people say, but only their numbers and profit. "If you are not paying for the product, you are the product."[16] Users may believe they are there to speak their mind, but in reality, they become the product of these companies. Social media platforms also have the power to control what users see and do not see. Platforms, such as TikTok, create algorithms that produce similar content to what users have liked in the past, so they stay longer on the app and invite their friends to join. The heads of these apps also have the power to ban certain groups and ads, but to what extent should they be allowed to do this? What qualifies as a denial of your First Amendment rights, and who gets to decide this? The users? The tech billionaires? Congress? The Supreme Court? Right now, it seems to be in control of the social media platforms, the same platforms whose primary goal is to increase profit.

In the documentary it also states that social media uses psychology to persuade people to use and keep using technology. From using the techniques of scrolling, photo tagging, and ellipsis[17], these methods are used to get people to look at their phones and to get more people on the platforms. These apps are affecting emotion without the user ever realizing it. Another way

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[16] Jeff Orlowski, *The Social Dilemma*. Netflix documentary, (January 26, 2020). https://www.netflix.com/browse?jbv=81254224.

[17] When two people are talking to each other on a platform and one is typing, on the other person's screen dots will appear to let the user know that the other person is typing and to not leave.

these platforms persuade people is through campaign ads. If the CEOs of these platforms are in control of what the users see, they can push out certain campaign ads to get the users to think about one certain candidate more than the other. Andrew Sullivan writes, "They [the social media platforms] literally restructure our minds. They pickle us in propaganda. They use sophisticated psychological models to trap, beguile, outrage, and prompt us to seek more of the same."[18] Politically, social media can affect real world behavior and emotions without ever triggering the user's awareness. It can cause them to vote one way or another or spread fake news about a candidate. Social media targets civil societies that hold democratic elections more than any other type of regime because of the influence it can have on the voters. Since democracies have freedom of speech, it is easy to promote political campaigns and spread certain beliefs about a candidate, whether it is the truth or not. Democracies are facing a crisis, and that crisis is the effect of social media on people and society.

III: Social Media, Individualism, and Voting

Voting, as Putnam explained, is an effect of engaging with social capital and it is also one of the most important duties a citizen can fulfill. In 2010, Putnam wrote a small article asking if we are, "Still Bowling Alone?" He discovered that America's confidence and strength of civic conscience were in the young citizens of the 9/11 generation, instead of the older generation. They grasp their duties and responsibilities far more strongly than their parents had done. Figure 3 shows the data collected from 1966 to 2008 of asking freshmen in college what their interest in politics are. Since the 1960s, their interest keeps decline but from 1999 to 2009, their interest and the belief that, "it's my duty as a citizen to always vote," rose almost by 50%.[7] Putnam

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[18] Andrew Sullivan, "We are All Algorithms Now." *The Daily Dish*. Sept 18, 2020.

hypothesized in the 1990s that more citizens would start to lose their sense of civic duty, but after 9/11 the sense of duty seemed to be rising, or at least more people began to understand the importance of voting. Ten years later, the younger generation appears to still stress the importance of voting, and they are using social media to promote their ideas. Two months before the 2020 Presidential Election, Instagram put a message on their home screen stating, "See voting resources and official updates about the 2020 US Election." Other social media platforms soon followed a similar approach to promote the election. These platforms made sure to promote how important it is to vote in the upcoming election and gave users easy access to get information about the candidates and how to vote. But is it really working? Is voting participation going up because social media is helping to increase voter participation? What is social media doing to help promote local governments?

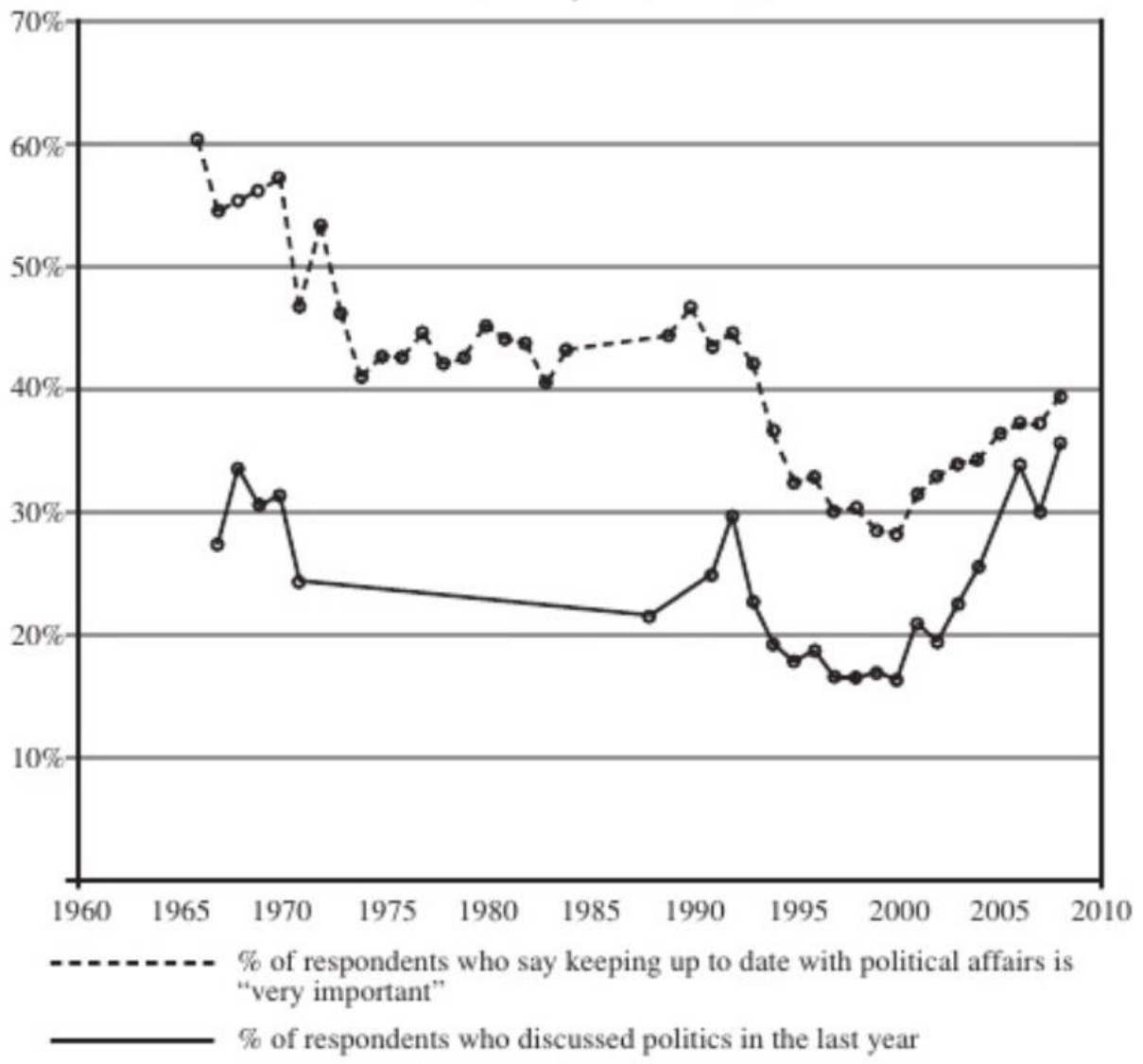FIGURE—INTEREST IN POLITICS AMONG AMERICAN COLLEGE FRESHMEN, 1966–2008

- - - - - - - - % of respondents who say keeping up to date with political affairs is "very important"

———————— % of respondents who discussed politics in the last year

Figure 3[7]

Social media seems to promote more national, or even global political and social

problems, but it does not seem to promote local government as much. Where was this link on

Instagram when primaries, state elections, or town elections were taking place? During the 2020

November election, almost every major social media platform encouraged its users to get

informed about their voting options for the presidential election. Not only was social media

encouraging this, but other major corporations, figures, and even sports teams were as well. At

the same time there was very little information released regarding local elections this year or previous years. Why not have this link up all the time, since politics is always happening, not simply two months leading up to the election? With an upcoming election and many open positions, not just for president, where is all the information about these candidates?

A study about Gen Z and Millennials showed how they tend to have similar viewpoints on major issues of the day, such as climate change and its causes.[15] Could a reason for this be that these two generations were the two that were introduced to social media at a young age and grew up with it? While on social media, they saw increased attention given to climate change, how it is caused, how it affects the world, and how to fix it. Social media helped to promote and spread this idea. More people are also prone to believe what they hear or read on the internet[19], thus helping to increase the popularity of larger stories.

Tocqueville warned Americans that too much self-interest could take over their lives. Americans would be thinking more about themselves and how to better their lives instead of trying to improve their community and the nation as a whole. By being involved within local organizations and participating in local affairs, however, will lead Americans out of the threat of individualism. It will bring people to consider the interest of others since one needs the help of others to get the job done. One easy way an American can practice this is through local voting. The politics of local government affects the lives of Americans on a daily basis more than national politics, but there is less involvement with local civil societies. Local governments are the core of democracy and pave the way for citizens to discuss, solve problems, and become a part of their community. Why not be a part of it?

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[19] Alison Escalante, "Research Finds Social Media Users Are More Likely To Believe Fake News," *Forbes,* (2020). https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisonescalante/2020/08/03/research-finds-social-media-users-are-more-likely-to-believe-fake-news/?sh=262e62828657.

Each community in America published an annual report about their local government meetings, budgets, and more. Weston, Westport, and Amherst are three towns in Massachusetts that represent an affluent, a middle-income, and a low-income town, respectively. All three towns show less than a 25% turnout of registered voters for their town elections. Between the years 2002 and 2018, Weston, one of the richest per capita income[20] towns in Massachusetts had a 70% voter turnout in November's general election, a 36% voter turnout for the March presidential primaries, an 11% voter turnout for the September state primaries, while the town elections only had a 13% turnout.[21] Some people do not vote because one might think their vote will not matter on the national or state level, but with local civil societies, their vote will have a greater influence. Why would someone not want to participate in something where he or she could actually make a change? This is not the only town or city that represents similar patterns in data. In Westport, a middle-income town, between the years 2010-2019 there was a 54% voter turnout in the November elections, a 26% voter turnout in the March presidential primaries, a 15% voter turnout for the September state primaries, and a 23% voter turnout in their town elections.[22] Between 2008 and 2019 in Amherst, one of the lowest per capita income towns in Massachusetts, there was a 56% turnout in the November state election, a 31% turnout in the March presidential primaries, a 17% turnout for the September primaries, while there was an 18% turnout in their town elections.[23] All three towns showed lower voter turnout for their local elections compared to the state elections in November. This is not just happening within a few

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[20] "Selected Economic Characteristics 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates". *US Census Bureau*, (2017).

[21] "Condensed Annual Town Records." *Town of Weston*, (2020). https://www.weston.org/Archive.aspx?AMID=37.

[22] "Annual Town Reports." *Town of Westport*, (2020). https://www.westport-ma.com/board-selectmen/pages/annual-town-reports.

[23] "Upcoming and Past Election Information." *Town of Amherst*, (2020). https://www.amherstma.gov/650/Upcoming-and-Past-Election-Information.

towns but in the majority of municipalities in the United States. There may be more involvement in the national election, but local government is just as important and must not be forgotten. It is not just local governments that are seeing these low number but even the primaries leading up to the national elections. This is when voters are deciding which candidate best fits their beliefs and seems best to represent them, but the turnouts are not much higher than the local government turnouts. It seems that the only elections that concerns voters are the two major ones, and not the other ones.

The three graphs below show the total number of registered voters per year, and how many of those voters participated with their town election, the state primary, the state election, and the presidential primary in that year. (Figure 4, 5, 6)
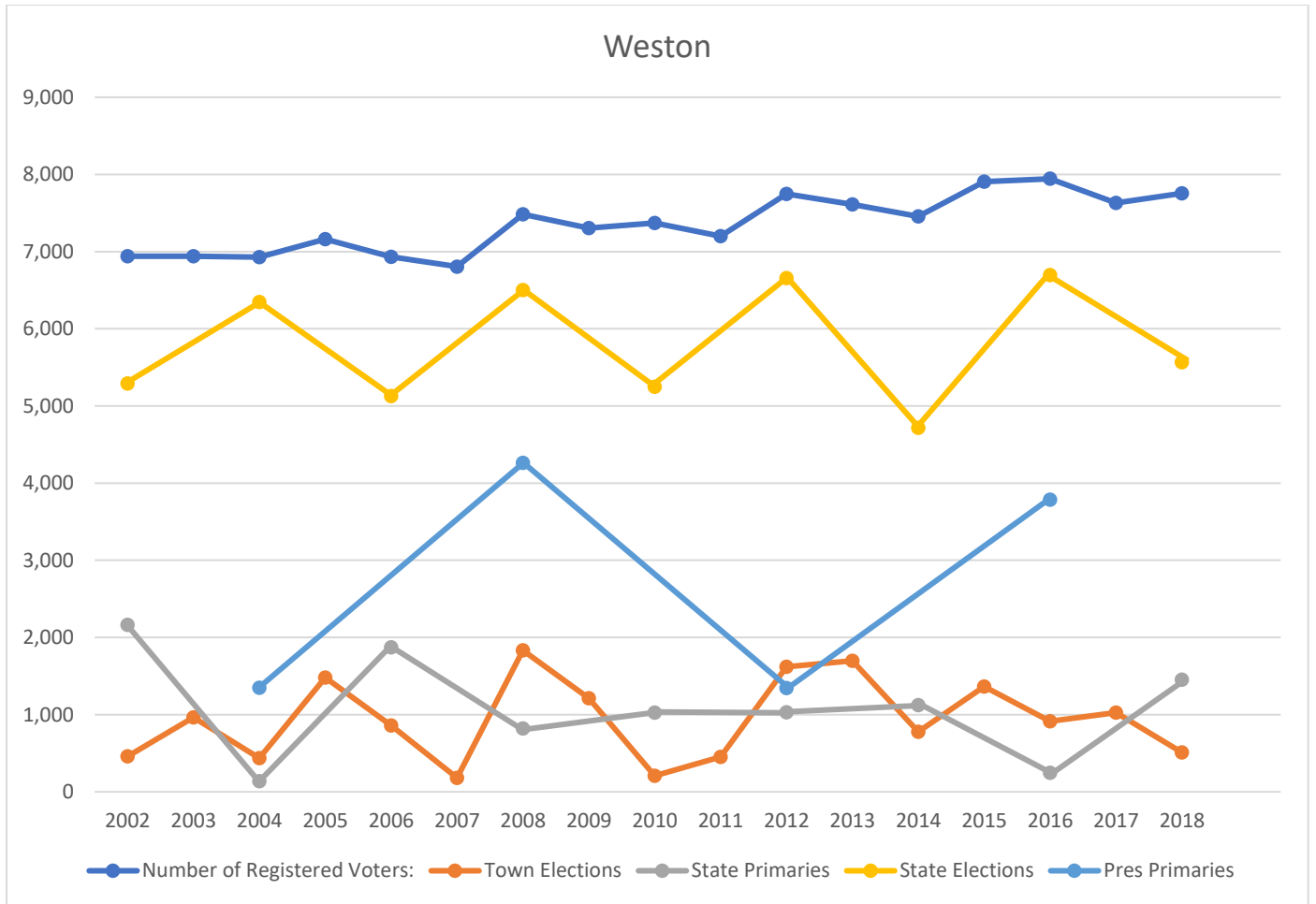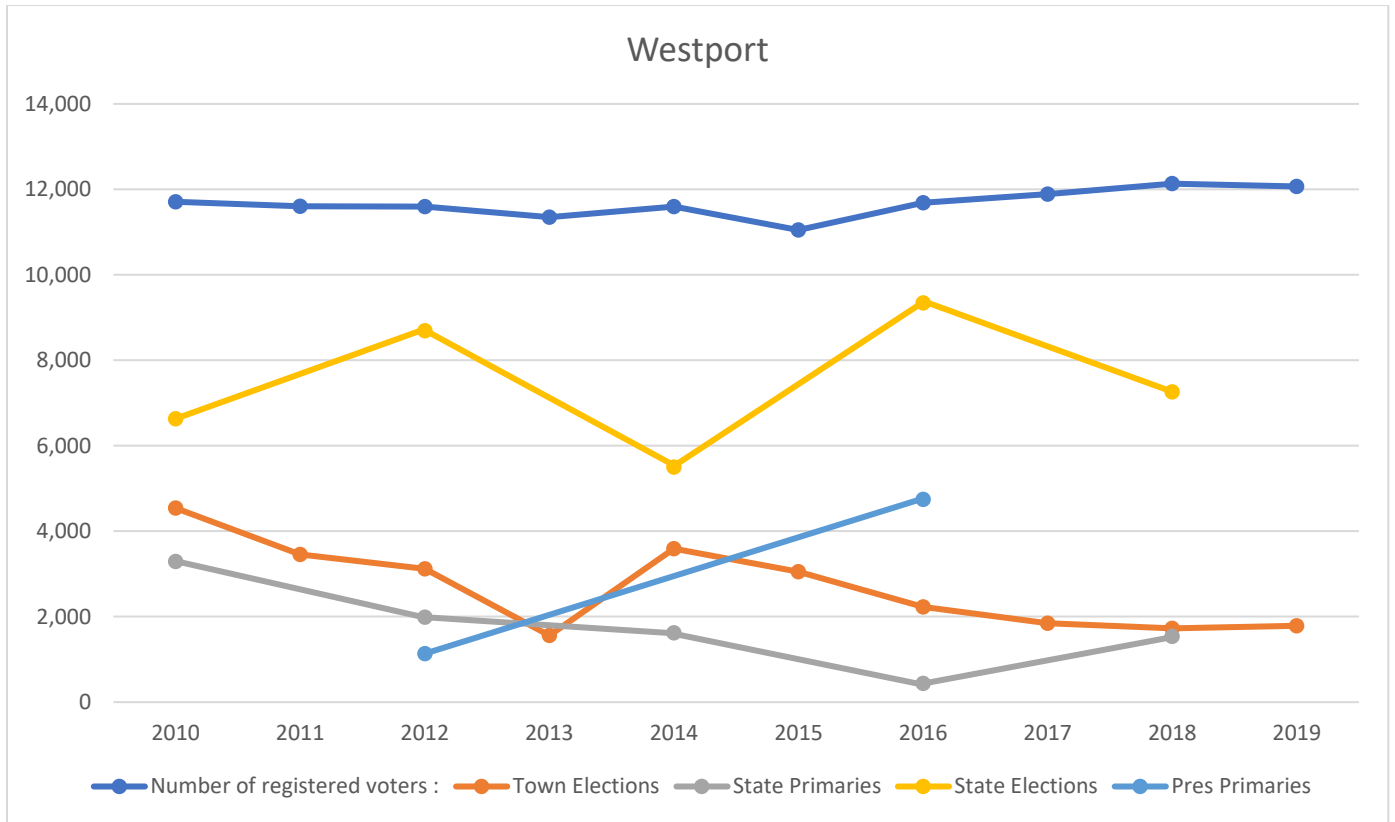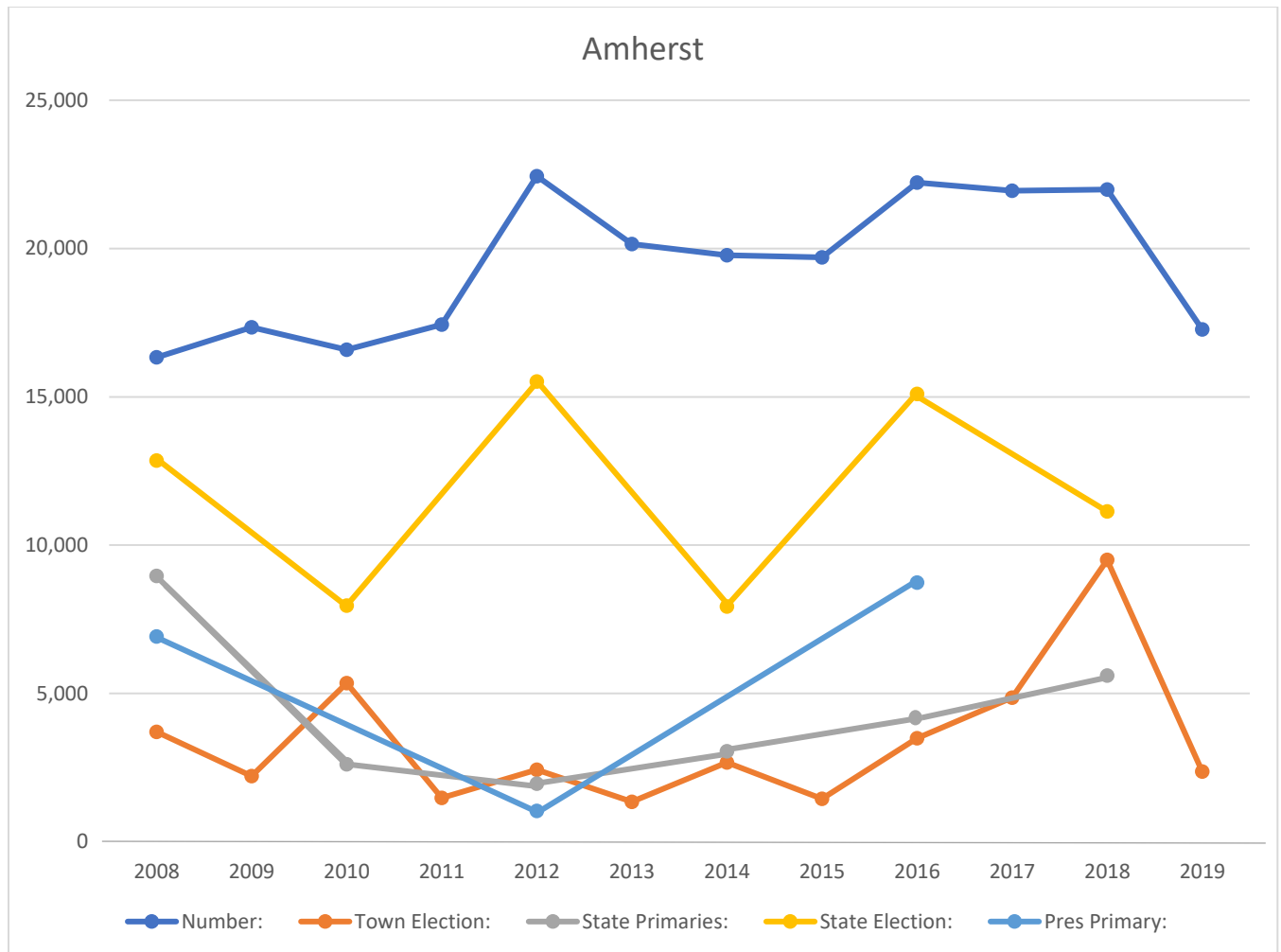
Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

The US Census has collected data from 1789 to today because it is a mandate of the

Constitution to show the number of eligible citizens who can vote, how many are registered, and

who actually voted in a certain year for the midterm and presidential elections.[24] Figure 7 shows

the data collected from the Census that reported the nation and midterm election turnout for that

given year. The Census reported in 1966 that there were 112,800,000 eligible voters, and 70.3%

of these citizens were registered voters. In 2018, there were 249,748,000 eligible voters, but only

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[24] Michael McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present." *United States Election Project*, (2020). http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present.

61.3% were registered voters.[25] At the later date, a time where there are more registered voters, there was about a 10% overall decrease in the number of registered voters since the 1960s. Americans are simply not as involved with the government as they were in the 1950s and 1960s. There is a lost sense of duty amongst some Americans and it could have damaging results, such as a loss of civic conversation.
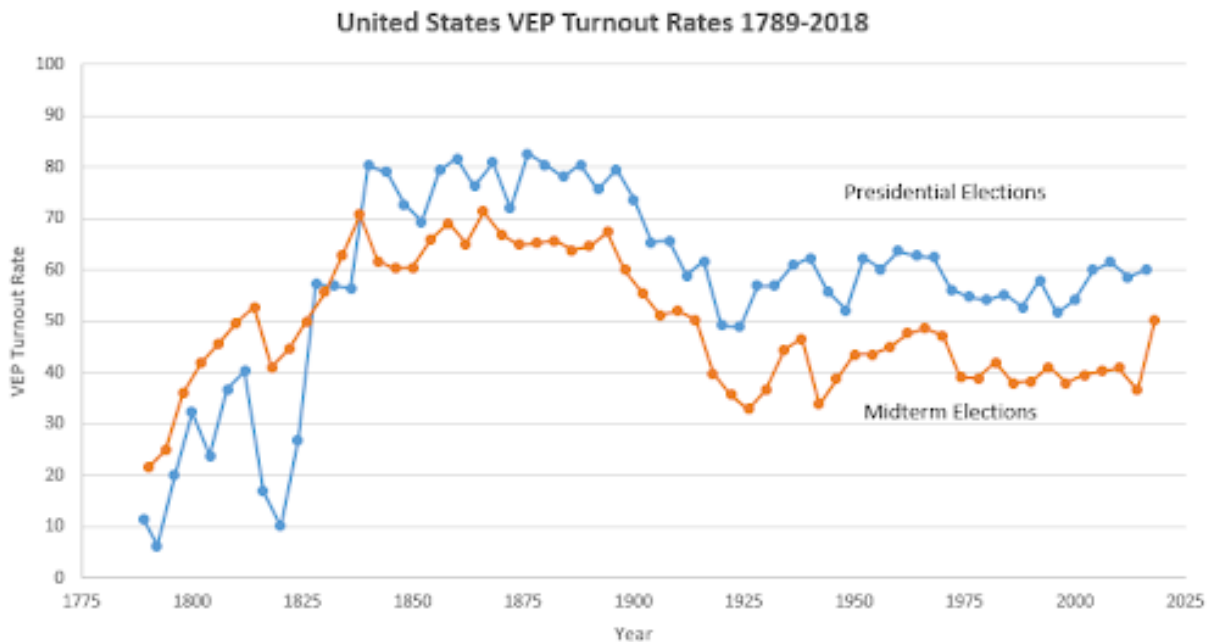
United States VEP Turnout Rates 1789-2018

Figure 7[24]

Why might there be more interactions within national elections versus local elections? Some might claim that local government is boring. There is no exciting drama in local politics like there is within the national election. Or perhaps, some might argue that they have never heard of the candidates running for their local election, whereas they know the candidates running for the presidential election and that is why they focus more on the national election. However, when people have the world in the palm of their hands via a cell phone, how hard is it

[25] "Historical Reported Voting Rates." *The United States Census Bureau*, (2019).
https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/voting-historical-time-series.html.

to find out who is running in their town? How hard is it to find out what your local government is doing when in a heartbeat you can find the results of last night's football game played hundreds of miles away? Whatever the excuse is, Americans must not forget about their local politics and their duty to vote at that level. Tocqueville loved the New England towns' local government system because it resulted in people engaging within their town and their government. When the Puritans left England for the New World, they did so for a new life. They started the first forms of a community government that led them to participating in their civic duty and inspiring conversation amongst their neighbors which led to communities engaging with one another. It was the core of democracy and could be the reason why this government has lasted for so long. However, with social media focusing on national and global issues, it will start to lead people away from the politics of local government. National and global issues are important, but so is one's community.

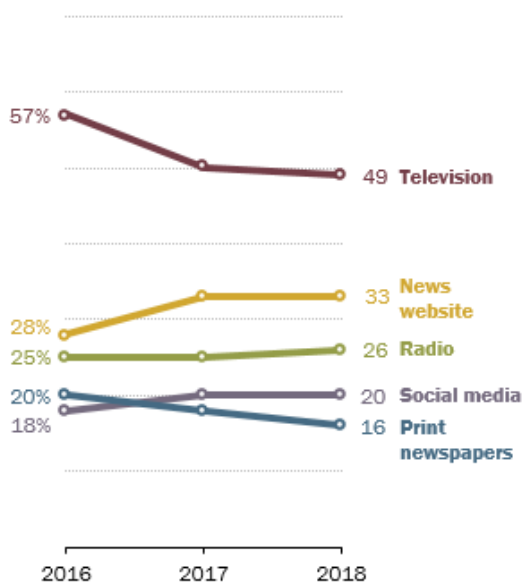## V: Social Media and How Users Obtain Knowledge

The news has always been an important aspect of American life, thus why the founding fathers included freedom of the press in the first Amendment. Today, new sources have many means to connect and spread their wide range of stories, from the newspapers, televisions, radios, websites, and social media platforms. Pew Research has gathered information to discover how people are obtaining their news stories and what the political results are from these different news sources. From 2016, social media surpassed print newspapers as new sources for Americans. Television still remains the number one news source, but it too has been declining since 2016 as social media and websites have all been increasing, which can be seen in Figure

8.[26] In another study, Pew Research found that one in five US adults get their political news primarily through social media, and those who get their news from social media tend to be under the age of thirty. As social media gets more popular, users will use these platforms to obtain more news stories, especially the younger generation since they grew up with social media. However, will social media threaten the amount of political knowledge people know? Figure 9 shows the research collected from users who use social media as a primary news source and whether or not they have high political knowledge.[2] Political knowledge is very important to a society because it causes people to form individual opinions, to understand how their government works and how to get involved, and teaches them how to be engaging, civic citizens. It leads to discussion and debate amongst citizens, which in turn lends to an overall increase in knowledge. If social media is resulting in a decrease in this knowledge, it will have damaging effects in American government.

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[26] Elisa Shearer,. "Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers in the U.S. as a News Source." *Pew Research Center*, (2020). https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/.

More Americans get news often from social media than print newspapers

% of U.S. adults who get news often on each platform

57%

49 Television

33 News website

28%
25% 26 Radio

20% 20 Social media
18% 16 Print newspapers

2016   2017   2018

Note: The difference between social media and print newspapers in 2017 was not statistically significant.
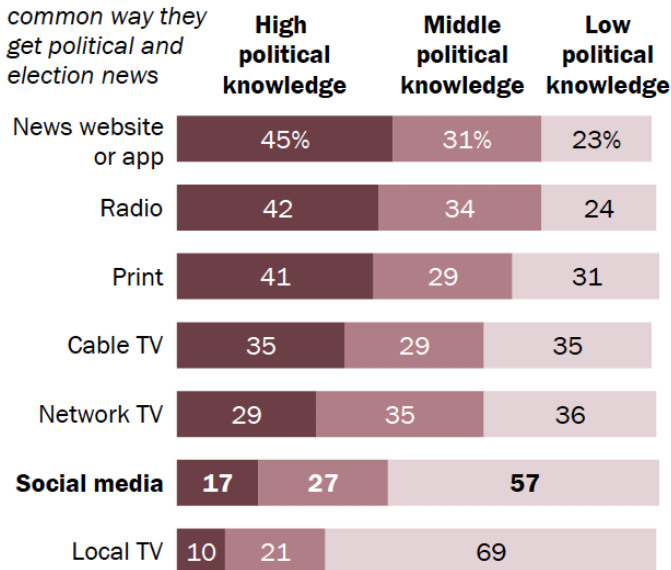Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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(Figure 8)[24]

Those who depend on social media for political news have lower political knowledge than most other groups

% of U.S. adults who have _____, according to an index of nine knowledge questions

Among those who say ___ is the most common way they get political and election news	High political knowledge	Middle political knowledge	Low political knowledge
News website or app	45%	31%	23%
Radio	42	34	24
Print	41	29	31
Cable TV	35	29	35
Network TV	29	35	36
Social media	17	27	57
Local TV	10	21	69

Note: Knowledge index created from nine political knowledge questions. High political knowledge includes those who answered eight or nine questions correctly, middle knowledge includes those who answered six or seven questions correctly, and low knowledge includes those who answered five or fewer questions correctly. Answers correct as of November 2019.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

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(Figure 9)[2]

According to Glenn Reynolds, author of *The Social Media Upheaval,* social media has resulted in making its users think "too fast, too incomplete, too emotional, and too untrustworthy."[27] He argues that using social media, there are thousands of different stories, articles, videos, and comments to look at every second of the day. With the technology of

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[27] Glenn Reynolds, *The Social Media Upheaval*. (New York: Encounter Books. 2011).

smartphones, these stories are available without getting out of bed. Many users start scrolling on their phone read only the headlines and believe they know the whole story. Users enter into, "an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning."[25] It then has encouraged users to start thinking not for themselves, but with those whom they follow. The results are a shortening of their attention span for deep reading and thinking, feeling the need to be constantly on their phone, and make users learn empathy through emojis. With some people not fully reading articles, they will tend to believe more stories. Some people will start to create an opinion based on what the biggest headline is for that day, rather than researching and forming their own opinion.

Glen Reynolds was not the only one to observe that some people are more inclined to form an opinion from a simple summary or headline. Columbia University and the French National Institution Study conducted a study in 2016 researched about the news domains' relationship with social media. They looked at the news as, "a primary topic of conversation on social media…[a] diffusion of news [is] generally considered highly influential…[and] news exhibits multiple forms of diffusion."[28] In their results, they discovered that 59% of links that are shared on social media platforms have never been followed. 59% of people are retweeting news without ever reading it. In an article by the *Washington Post*, Arnaud Legout, a co-author of the study, states "People are more willing to share an article than read it. This is typical of modern information consumption. People form an opinion based on a summary, or a summary of summaries, without making the effort to go deeper."[29] Just as Reynolds stated, people using

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[28] Maksym Gabielkov et al, "Social Clicks: What and Who Gets Read on Twitter?". *ACM SIGMETRICS / IFIP Performance* (2016).

[29] Caitlin Dewey, "6 In 10 of You Will Share This Link without Reading It, a New, Depressing Study Says," *The Washington Post* (2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/06/16/six-in-10-of-you-will-share-this-link-without-reading-it-according-to-a-new-and-depressing-study/.

social media as their news source are less likely to read the article of the story, but still share it. User then start to form their own opinion and their own version of the story, just based on the headline. He or she does not learn the details of the story, thus having incomplete knowledge.

Glen Reynolds, in his book, mentions scholar Daniel Hannan and how he suggests that our politics are becoming crueler because we are not as intelligent anymore, which could have resulted from social media shortening our attention span.[25] As Reynolds also mentions, social media is leading more and more of its users to not think on their own, but rather as a collective. It encourages their followers to follow the latest trend or to all agree on this one matter, and if one does not agree, he or she is an outcast. These big tech companies do not care what one individual says on their platform, they only care if that individual is staying on the platform and bringing others to use it.[14] How can anyone form a non-biased, truthful, individual judgment on an issue when social media and the current news brings in tons of fake news, fake accounts, and flashy headlines to make you think you know the whole story?

VI: Polarization

Social media may have started as a means to bring people together, but it has caused people to become distracted from knowledge. It has shortened their attention spans, caused people to learn more on a national scale rather than local, have the ability to simply unfollow someone when one does not share the same ideas as them, and more. These could all be important factors to explain why and how America has become so polarized today. In another study done by Pew Research, they analyzed the approval rates from both political parties from

Eisenhower to Trump, at the time of their presidency, which can be seen in Figure 9.[30] The graph shows that there has been some polarization since the 1950s, but it has gotten much larger since then. The graph also shows, for the most part, that when a president is in office the approval rates for both parties will follow the same pattern. If Republicans approve the president, than the Democrats will approve as well, and the same pattern for negative approval rates. However, the pattern starts to break apart when President Obama comes into office. When the Democrats' approval rate went up, the Republicans' went down. This new pattern continues to President Trump's term as well. What was so important at the time that could cause this dramatic change in the pattern? One possibility could be because of Obama's presidential campaign, which was the first to capitalize on social media. Though Facebook was first available in 2004 and Obama's term began in 2008, President Bush did not have the same access to social media when he campaigned for his second term. Since then, social media has become a huge part of political life, especially campaigns. Social media may not be the exclusive reason why this change occurred in the approval rate pattern, but it cannot be ignored when discussing polarization.

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[30] Amina Dunn, "Trump's Approval Ratings so Far Are Unusually Stable – and Deeply Partisan," *Pew Research Center*, (2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/24/trumps-approval-ratings-so-far-are-unusually-stable-and-deeply-partisan/.

Trump approval more polarized than for any other president since Eisenhower

% who approve of president's job performance, by party
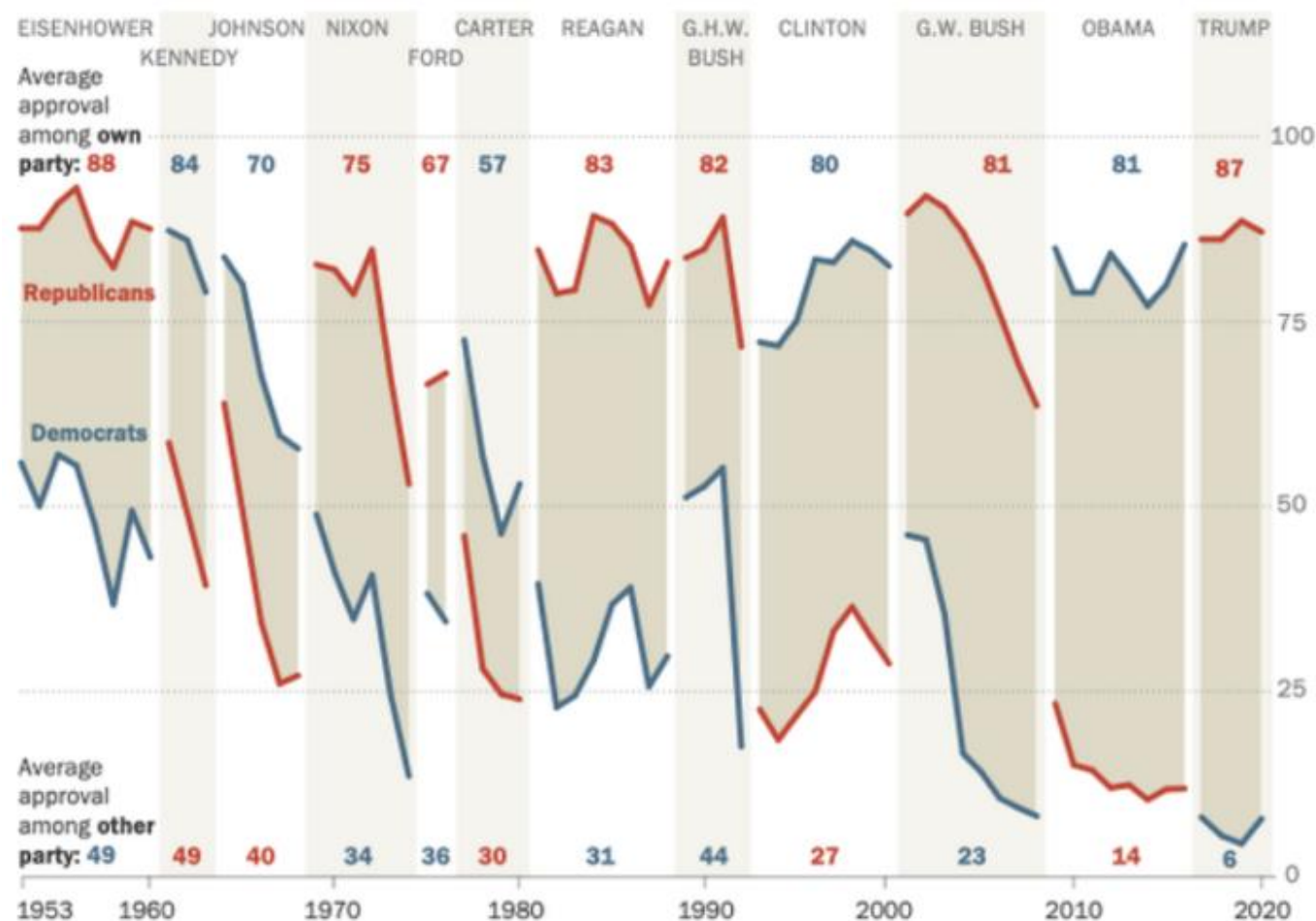
Note: Lines show yearly approval averages; data labels show administration averages. Because some earlier data did not include partisan leaning, Republicans and Democrats in this graphic do not include leaners.

Source: Annual totals of survey data from Pew Research Center American Trends panel (2017-2020), Pew Research Center phone surveys (1993-2017), and Gallup organization (1953-1993).

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(Figure 9)[29]

Glen Reynolds's observations of social media show that it is making users think too quickly rather than promoting careful thinking, thus causing users to think incompletely, because they are learning too fast. Social media has also made its users more emotional and untrustworthy of others, which is contributing to more polarization within America. Some users

are afraid to express their opinions either on social media or in real life because they might offend somebody, or they could be ridiculed. On the other hand, other users are willing to voice their opinions no matter whom they offend. When people who share the opposite view see these ideas, they could call that person names, or even invoke violence simply because they do not share the same views. Emotions cause some to hide their opinions while also causing some to rashly act out. An article in the *Atlantic* by Conor Friedersdorf explained an interview done by the University of North Carolina in which they questioned both conservative and liberal students to find out their views on each other. About a quarter of the liberal students interviewed stated they would not be friends with a conservative, whereas about 15% of conservative students thought it would be a better place without liberals.[31] No matter which party one is affiliated with, there are negative feelings to their opposite party, when in reality they should be coming together to help invoke conversation and practice civic duties. This is not healthy for a democracy. Even though two people may share different views on government issues, they can and should have respect for each other.

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[31] Conor Friedersdorf, "Evidence That Conservative Students Really Do Self-Censor," *Atlantic Media Company*, (February 17, 2020), https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/evidence-conservative-students-really-do-self-censor/606559/.

Conclusion

Individualism is one of the many aspects that make up a modern democracy. It causes one to live a private life, create their own circle of friends and family with no real interest in the outside world. It diminishes one's obligations to fit the needs of their friends and family rather than their civil society. Social media encourages an individualist lifestyle by encouraging users to communicate with their friends and family and allowing you the creation of accounts where you can control who you follow and who follows you. It also causes users to feel less empathy making it easier to shame others, to lose capability for deep thought, and results in 57% of social media to have low political knowledge. Social media is a threat to what Tocqueville warned Americans individuliasm would result in. A threat that could ruin a civil society.

Robert Putnam saw the rise in technology within the 1990s as a threat to social capital, a sense of duty, and potentially leading Americans to isolate themselves. Putnam then observed that the generation after September 11th, 2001 had a growing understanding of the importance of their civic duty, the opposite of what he proposed in the 90s. As time continued on, so did the technology. In 2003 and 2004, Facebook quickly became one of the most popular sites and started the modern-day social media foundation. Millions of people fled to their computers and created a platform, a new world, to connect with friends and post pictures. Within the upcoming years, smartphones were invented and became the new thing everyone needed. People were now able to access these social media platforms on their phones anywhere. Today, there are about 69% of US adults actively using social media. [32]

Alexandra Hudson wrote an article in 2019 reflecting the ideas proposed by Putnam in the 90s. She argued that Putnam was wrong that more people using phones would lead to

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[32] John Gramlich, "10 Facts about Americans and Facebook," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, July 31, 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/16/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/.

Americans becoming more isolated because social media encourages people to reach out and make online friends. However, she did observe that social media created barriers when building relationships and users start to lose the human traits of detecting empathy and emotions through others. Users rely on words or emojis to read a person rather than using body expression, tone, and voice. Glenn Reynolds had similar observations about social media linking it to the reason for distracted thinking, shortening the attention span for deep reading and thinking, believing, and spreading fake news easily, and creating opinions over emotion. Social media is having damaging results to many of its users and they need to be made aware of these before it is too late.

Social media tends to promote national ideas and government versus local government policies where democracy and community change can happen. Though the voting turnout for the national elections has gone up over the past couple of years, possibly because social media has promoted voting, local government elections are not seeing an increase at all, barely having more than 25% turnout for elections. Where Tocqueville observed democracy at its finest at the local level, it is has become less important to many Americans. The rising generation are also, more than likely, using social media as their primary news source. Many are only reading the title of the stories and then forming their opinions, reposting stories that one does not even fully read, and becoming part of the collective rather than forming their own opinion. These readers start to become emotionally attached to these opinions and can become violent or aggressive when faced with different viewpoints. Social media allows users to hide behind a screen and run when someone with opposite views comes up on their platform, rather than having a real-life conversation about their differences. Seen through the first presidential debates of the 2020 National Election, debating, discussion, and even respect for the opposite view has diminished.

Americans and users of these social media platforms believe they are in control from what they see to what they do, but users need to remember that they are just a product for the big tech companies. Users has access to social media almost everywhere does not mean they need to be on it all the time. There needs to be a change in the conversation that people have adapted to within the past years, as well as a movement back to local civil societies to encourage this conversation. Two people could have opposing views on how the government should be run and still have respect for each other. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams disagreed on many issues, but in the end, they still respected each other. More recently, Justice Scalia and Justice Ginsburg disagreed about many issues and were very vocal about it, but they remained very good friends and respected each other. These are the relationships Americans need in order to have a healthy relationships with fellow citizens which will lead to a democracy without polarization. Social media, however, has the tendency to rip these relationships apart and to rip away the foundation and virtues of civil society, paving the way for egoist traits to take its place.

Just as Tocqueville proposed in the 1800s to prevent individualism from being a threat to democracy, there needs to be more community involvement, local government participation and conversation about civic responsibilities. Once users start to realize how these platforms are effecting them, the next step is to do change it. Perhaps this change could be turning notifications off on their phones so there are no flashing alerts to get them to pick up their phone, setting time limits on certain apps, taking breaks from social media, or even delating the apps themselves. By doing these little things, people will have more free time to hang out with their friends, make new "real life" friends, or even join a bowling league to prevent the threat of individualism destroying this country and its people.

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