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## InstaDAMN –The Power of Instagram’s Platform As An Instigator and Indicator For Offline Political Participation Among Young Adults

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**InstaDAMN –The Power of Instagram’s Platform As An Instigator  
and Indicator For Offline Political Participation Among Young  
Adults**

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Senior Honors Thesis Colby College

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## **Abstract**

Over the past decade, exposure to various forms of political content on social media, as well as social media usage for political means, has been studied by scholars as a link to predicting offline political participation by social media users. While evidence has been gathered that categorizes activity on the platforms of Facebook and Twitter as potential influencers and predictors of offline political behavior, the literature on the political relevance of Instagram as a predictor of offline political participation has yet to be fully explored. Additionally, although younger generations have historically participated in some forms of political behavior (particularly voting) to a lesser extent than older generations, recent data has shown that the number of active voting adults within Gen Z has increased immensely since the 2016 election, in addition to a larger portion of this generation being able to vote simply because of turning 18 years of age. In this thesis, I look at the effects of exposure to political content on Instagram, as well as the effect of active political participation within the Instagram app, on offline political participation by Instagram users, specifically of a young demographic: those aged 18-24, or those who would be categorized under the “Generation Z” label. I conduct a survey of young people aged 18-24 and question them on their use of Instagram, and also on their offline political behavior. My results demonstrate the value of Instagram as a platform on which to share political ideas that hold significant power to spur those already engaged with the app to take political action in an offline setting and presents implications for the future about what news sources the younger generations will turn for information that will, in turn, predict how they participate in the United States’ democracy.

## **Chapter 1—Introduction**

### **2022 Midterm Elections**

The 2022 midterm elections shocked much of the American public when a predicted “Red Wave” of Republican candidates failed to be elected, and Democrats somehow held on to their grasp of the U.S. Senate. Also significant within the 2022 midterm results was the election of Maxwell Alejandro Frost, a Floridian chosen to serve the state’s 10th Congressional district, and the first member of Generation Z to be elected to Congress. Post-midterm, pollsters were confused as to how they could have missed a factor in predicting voting large enough to derail a Republican victory that had seemed all but guaranteed before the votes were counted. However, as Rutgers University marketing expert Mark Beal explains, Generation Z, or those born in the late 1990s or early 21st century, also known as the “purpose generation,” due to their widely-acknowledged culture of social activism, played an important role in determining the surprising election results (Alexander, 2022). Generation Z proved themselves to be active participants by voting in larger numbers than ever before, overwhelmingly leaning towards the liberal sphere and thus contributing significant support towards Democrats across the nation (Alexander, 2022).

Pundits’ shock at the voting participation of the younger generation most likely is a result of voting experts overlooking the primary mechanisms by which younger generations receive their news (news that typically influences how one might behave politically) when predicting electoral outcomes: outlets including newer forms of social media like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, which typically engage audiences younger than 25 years of age (Generation Z). Additionally, Gen Z does not tend to consume more traditional media outlets like radio or television, unlike their older voting counterparts. Their media consumption is unlike that of

generations before them. This is a result of “growing up online,” or being the first generation raised entirely during the internet era, and, as the youngest generation eligible to vote, they are the only generation with voting power that is unique in this way. However, the distinctive media outlets that Generation Z engages with proved their influence during the 2022 midterms and cannot be ignored in future elections, as they appear to have as much or perhaps even more influence than traditional media news sources in terms of impacting political participation.

Because 2020 was the first year in which the majority of the members of Generation Z could vote in a presidential election, the way that this generation is active in politics is still a relatively new phenomenon to analyze. Therefore, their behavior is difficult to predict. However, the current patterns exhibited by their voting behavior in the 2022 election demonstrate a clear power exerted by the generation’s members and the value of further analyzing the media platforms where they tend to get their news and that might be disregarded by members of older voting generations.

### **Political Participation and Young Adults**

The function of the political system within the United States is dependent upon the successful exercise of democracy, or governance by “the people” of the country, and the primary way such democracy is exercised is through the direct political participation of U.S. citizens through actions like voting, political rallying for a candidate, campaign contributions, and mobilization for a cause through canvassing or other outreach.

Prior to recent election cycles, younger generations have typically been regarded as relatively non-participatory compared to older generations. Because Generation Z has only been able to participate in the last presidential election or two (depending on the year they were born),

this pattern does not necessarily apply. However, newly eligible voters might not be attuned to the actual process of registering to vote or casting a ballot, meaning that they are more likely to miss key windows for electoral participation (Holbein & Hillygus, 2016). There have been past pushes in communities of political scholars for the creation of “pre-registration” processes, or ways for younger generations to register to vote before they are actually of voting age, thus ensuring that when they are eligible, they may easily cast their ballot (Holbein & Hillygus, 2016). Currently, 15 U.S. states (as well as Washington, D.C.) allow such pre-registration, indicating that a lack of political engagement amongst young adults is a legitimate concern worthy of being addressed (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022).

There is also a habitual nature to political engagement: the more one participates in elections, political events, and so forth, the more likely one will continue to engage in such activities in the future (Holbein & Hillygus, 2016). Accordingly, voting rates for those under 25 have typically lagged behind those in older age groups with more experience participating in political activities and the electoral cycle (Bogard, Sheinheit, & Clarke, 2008). In the 2004 election, for example, under-25-year-olds had a 54% participation rate in terms of voting (percentage of those registered to vote actually voting) versus a 66% voting rate of those registered in other age groups (Bogard, Sheinheit, & Clarke, 2008). Therefore, it is apparent why in any given election, younger generations have long been viewed as having less potential to effectively mobilize to participate in politics compared to generations that have participated in the past years.

Past scholarly work has also thoroughly investigated the linkage between the attitudes of young adults who are participating in politics and certain political outcomes. Additionally, young adult participation has changed dramatically since the 2016 election. Although participation rates



are typically lower within younger age ranges, youth participation in voluntary groups sets a precedent for political participation throughout one's adult life, and youth now more than ever believe they can impact the political climate within the United States (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Tufts University, 2020). Youth voter turnout has also been increasing: the 2020 election saw an 11-point increase since the 2016 presidential election in voting participation by those ages 18-29 (Tufts University, 2021). Some of the youth surveyed in the 2020 Tufts study pointed to the COVID pandemic as an eye-opening experience that increased their awareness of politics, while some blamed their intense hatred of Donald Trump (Tufts University, 2020). Because of the apparent connection between youth populations and electoral activism, and the shifting and growing participation rates amongst the youngest generation, focusing specifically on the behaviors of today's youth is essential to understanding voting patterns in America and predicting future electoral outcomes.

### **Generation Z and Instagram**

Instagram, a social media platform that came to fruition at the hands of Kevin Systrom in 2010, boasts a user base mostly made up of those who fall under the "Gen Z" or "Millennial" categories. As of 2022, the United States alone boasts about 123 million active Instagram users, 30.2% of whom are aged 18-24 (We Are Social, & Hootsuite, & DataReportal, 2022). This demographic makes up the second-largest contingent of the user population, following the 25-34 age group, which makes up about 32% of Instagram users (We Are Social, & Hootsuite, & DataReportal, 2022). Thus, with the growing rates of change in political participation in Generation Z and their high Instagram usage rate, the impact of the app on the political activities of young voters is an important area of study and the subject of my survey.

As Generation Z has entered the realm of being able to fully engage in political participation, the influence of social media and the internet as tools for political mobilization can be seen in a clearer light: the generation has subverted the typical lack of participation from newly eligible voters, even garnering the nicknames of “Generation Fixer-Uppers, Generation Hopeful,” and more. The nicknames they’ve accumulated result from the recent push for “social justice” amongst the generation itself. This social justice trend has manifested in different forms, but social media has been a major platform that Generation Z has utilized to push out messages surrounding different causes. Take Greta Thunberg, who has used Twitter extensively to challenge opponents of global warming activism and to spread information on the science behind climate change, relevant legislation, and potential action for Twitter users to take to combat the issue. Another Gen Z activist and the inaugural poet for President Joe Biden, Amanda Gorman, has authored very public poetry full of messages promoting social change that she also shares on her social media platforms.

From a Generation Z standpoint, it is now “trendy” for the young to be politically aware, and social media outlets have considered this trend when updating their apps. TikTok had a tool for users to follow the 2020 presidential election, while Instagram has an entire page on their website dedicated to “Instagram for Politics and Government,” where the app’s staff explain how the platform can be used to promote topics related to these themes (Instagram, 2023).

Furthermore, new features on Instagram have made it easier than ever to share political content. For example, details surrounding recent political events such as the Roe v. Wade decisions, or Supreme Court appointments, were featured prominently by the “slides” feature on the app, where multiple slides may be featured in a single post, as well as the advent of Instagram “stories,” or temporary posts featured on each user’s profile for 24 hours before they

disappear or are saved to a separate, more hidden folder within each profile. These features allow Instagram users to dabble in politics and feature components of political awareness within their app presence without transforming the public image of their account to a more specifically politics-focused account. When major political events occur, elections are on the horizon, or a march or rally is scheduled, Instagram users will most likely be exposed to political content posted by at least some of those they follow.

## **Media and Politics**

United States politics and the media hold a long-standing relationship that dates back to the beginning of the presidency, and federal and local candidates have consistently utilized the media and manipulation of the press to establish an image, conduct outreach, and garner support for their platforms. For example, Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first presidents to openly orchestrate his media coverage to present a favorable image of himself to the public, while Woodrow Wilson was the first president to attempt to harness the power of the media and the press by establishing routine presidential press conferences in 1913, which subsequently became televised to the public in 1955 during the Eisenhower administration (Schmertz, 1986).

Political scholars have widely acknowledged that the media is a powerful tool for the manipulation of public opinion and thus, an influence on mobilization or political action (Schmertz, 1986). Without the ability to mobilize the public, political campaigns and initiatives tend to fail due to lack of support, an issue that those who retain political power must be cognizant of at all times (Cook, 2017). An historical example of a political figure using the media to enhance their image and platform is FDR's "Fireside Chats," talks aimed at the public that he had broadcasted across radio airwaves between 1933 and 1944 (Schmertz, 1986).

Additionally, FDR's presidency utilized a similar manipulation of media to create an image of a strong and physically healthy president that was a far cry from the reality of his debilitating illness. FDR's harnessing of the radio and other forms of media to personalize his message and to inspire public confidence in his competency as president is just one example of the media's potential to create a political personality and attach the public to a certain person, ideology, or political goal.

Though the media has changed significantly since FDR's time, its potential to influence politics and public political participation have significantly expanded, especially through the advent of multiple popular social media platforms in the late 2000s. In terms of "traditional" forms of news media, past studies have shown that newspaper use has repeatedly proved to be positively related to various forms of civic and political engagement, like voting, for example (Bakker, 2011). Nowadays, there are many other ways in which to absorb news: the short-form narrative platform of Twitter emerged in 2006, while arguably the most well-known social media website, Facebook, was founded in 2004, following the precedent set by MySpace, which was founded in 2003. Today, Facebook alone boasts almost 3 billion users, while Twitter has 330 million and counting. The growing popularity of social media has changed the way society has operated in an online setting: people across the country have the opportunity to network with those thousands of miles away and the ability to create networks of followers that are receptive to the content that they produce or display on their platform profiles.

Social media has now become just as intertwined with politics as older forms of media, like television and newspapers. This paper will delve more deeply into social media's rise as a political force as a result of the 2008 presidential elections in the following chapters, but, as of 2023, it is now commonplace for political leaders, candidates, scholars, or other figures, to not

only maintain social media accounts and profiles of their own but also to use such platforms as a means to distribute political messaging and to attempt to mobilize their followers to achieve their political goals. Political ads run rampant on platforms like Facebook, and even the more recently-founded platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram have all been host to different viral videos or posts crafted by politicians' media teams, politically-motivated groups, or even politicians themselves (think Hillary Clinton's infamous viral and much-memed Snapchat video "I'm just chillin' in Cedar Rapids" or Minnesota State Sen. Matt Little's musical response to Trump's attempt to ban TikTok, which he posted on the app itself). Although political activity on social media has experienced a significant amount of scrutiny in terms of its actual effectiveness regarding meaningful political mobilization, it is becoming increasingly clear, especially during the past two presidential election cycles, that social media is an enormously powerful tool that can be harnessed to achieve political milestones and objectives.

Examining the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump famously harnessed his Twitter platform to communicate with his followers and to establish himself as the leader of a "populist resurgence" (Cook, 2017). Historian Roger F. Cook calls Trump's use of the platform a modern form of "tribalism" that served to further his political fortunes through "emotional hyper-targeting," or specific messages that he pushed out in order to engage bias or opinion-related actions from his Twitter followers and supporters (Cook, 2017). Famously, Trump's activity on his Twitter account was blamed for inciting violence at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, when he tweeted prior to that day's events: "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" According to the January 6th's Committee's investigation into the incident, multiple rioters specifically referenced this Tweet as their primary motive or "instruction" to become violent at the nation's capital. One of the Oath Keepers' group members even messaged out to his

Facebook followers: "Trump said It's gonna be wild!!!!!! It's gonna be wild!!!!!! He wants us to make it WILD that's what he's saying. He called us all to the Capitol and wants us to make it wild!!! Sir Yes Sir!!! Gentlemen we are heading to DC pack your s\*\*\*!!!" (Driesbach, 2022).

Trump also refused to use this platform to send the protesters home until he had received immense pressure to do so, and irreparable damage had been done, including the loss of the lives of multiple Capitol police officers.

## **My Study**

On June 2, 2020, a wave of blank, black squares dominated the majority of Instagram user's feeds. These squares, meant to demonstrate a show of support for the anti-police brutality protests sweeping the country in the wake of the tragic murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, proved themselves to be a controversial and instrumental part of a wider growth of Instagram activism during a flurry of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that took place throughout the summer. In the weeks following this orchestrated "Blackout Tuesday," Instagram was continuously flooded with posts, stories, and hashtags covering a variety of related information regarding BLM: informing readers where to meet up for protests, exposing information pertinent to the cause like safety measures protesters could take, and generally demonstrating various levels of support for the protests as a whole. Although, as previously discussed, political mobilization via social media is not an entirely new concept, the 2020 wave of activism on Instagram specifically has set a precedent for future online movements and raises the question of what precisely the impact of Instagram itself is upon offline activism and political participation as a separate and influential entity.

The concept of political participation, up until the past decade or so, has consisted mainly

of tangible, physical actions taken by members of a constituency: whether this be voting, marching, directly contacting politicians, or other forms of in-person political engagement. These “classic” forms of political activism have not been expanded to include online activism, which is often branded as “slacktivism” due to its low personal cost and the lack of effort needed to produce online content. However, since the 2008 presidential election, which is widely acknowledged as the first “social media” election, or election in which social media platforms became relevant to political action, online social media platforms like Facebook have become objects of interest in terms of considering online and offline interaction within a political context. The Obama campaign was the first widely-watched political campaign to use social media as an operational strategy, and since then, social media platforms have become fixtures of political outreach among politicians. Politicians, activist groups, and even everyday social media users post political content at extraordinarily high rates, reaching personal followings of up to millions of content consumers.

Although some traditional political theorists (e.g. Hersh 2020, Morozov 2012) somewhat dismiss social media activity as ineffective in terms of predicting or being associated with offline political action, other scholars have embarked on various investigations into the power of different social media as major influencers and predictors of offline political participation. For example, much research and experimentation have been done on Facebook and Twitter. Abdu, Mohamed, and Muda’s (2017) study on Facebook’s influence on political action, as well as Bond et al.’s (2012) experiment on Facebook and voting, and Vaccari et al.’s (2015) research on Twitter and political participation all provide excellent examples of the linkages between the online and offline realms. Each of the outcomes of these projects suggests a significant correlation between social media usage for political means and offline or high-cost personal

participation. However, a significant gap remains within the existing literature in regards to Instagram as a platform for political engagement, an omission that is especially glaring as the youngest generation of voters becomes increasingly involved in the political sphere.

Because Instagram is one of the newer social media platforms (created in 2010, in contrast to the earlier Twitter and Facebook), and the majority of Americans are users, with an especially high concentration of younger users, failure to include Instagram in investigations of the connection between political participation and online political activism results in the absence of information that could aid in election predictions and other political forecasting. As younger generations are increasingly exercising their right to vote, and to participate in politics as a whole, platforms that engage with a younger demographic must be examined in order to evaluate patterns of political participation and predict future political outcomes.

In my work, I will explain the traditional theories behind political participation, and then delve into how social media has been seen to contribute to or modify such theories (Chapter 2). I will then describe in detail the survey I conducted of a representative sample of the U.S. population aged 18-24 about their Instagram use and political participation offline with an outlined methodology (Chapter 3), and analyze these results, which suggest that there is a powerful connection between online and offline political participation by Instagram users, and that Generation Z may behave differently offline as a result of this connection (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). I will conclude by discussing why these results are significant to the changing political environment within the United States (Chapter 6).

By using a survey of Instagram users aged 18-24 to gather data on their online political participation and exposure to political content in relation to offline political action, I am gathering first hand user feedback and ensuring that my responses are from real users (or, as it



may happen, non-users) of Instagram. By demonstrating a correlation between online political participation and exposure to political content and various forms of offline political participation, I demonstrate the value of future analysis of Instagram user activity in predicting political outcomes, like election results or voting patterns amongst specific demographics. Furthermore, by asking users directly if they have executed offline political action as a result of a call-to-action on Instagram, I am creating an opportunity to link these variables. Overall, my study contributes to a greater understanding of the social-media generation and how platforms such as Instagram work in tandem with older forms of media to influence political results.

## **Chapter 2–Literature Review**

### **Political Participation**

Traditional theories of the influences on levels of political participation attribute classic political participation to a variety of factors, most glaring: a sense of civic duty or political socialization, access to information and resources, and participation by invitation or group mobilization (a trio classically described as the “civic voluntarism” model) (Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2010). My study acknowledges and builds upon these theories by incorporating social media, specifically Instagram, into the existing models that explain cycles of political participation.

Anthony Downs’ well-known theory behind voting participation specifically regards the cost-to-benefit rationale that each citizen mentally notes before casting their vote. Downs’ theory suggests that voters focus on the benefits, more than the costs, when casting a ballot, and thus the actual determining factors of such engagement are the “long run participation value” of their vote in upholding a system of democracy, and its actual participation value in determining the outcome of a given election between candidates (Lee and Berry, 1982). According to Downs’ work, voters will not participate in an election if the costs outweigh the potential perceived benefits. Thus candidates would do well to present the most benefits imaginable to their constituents as an incentive to vote. Downs’ theory can also be applied to other manners of political participation (marching in protests, contributing to campaigns, etc.): should the cost outweigh the benefit, the citizen is less likely to engage in any of these actions.

There has also traditionally been a socioeconomic rationale ascribed to varied levels of political engagement. Scholars have discovered that, often, perception of politics and one’s participation in politics is influenced by access to education and other resources (newspapers,

media, etc.) that interact with the country's political system (Lang & Lang, 1956). The greater one's access to such resources and learning, the more likely they are to have a proclivity to participate in political actions like voting, political rallies, and campaign donations. Voting suppression is often an issue for those of lower economic status within the United States: as income level decreases, historically, so does voter participation (Bentele, 2013). This is due to a variety of factors: voting requires carving out a portion of one's day to cast a ballot, thus potentially impacting those who might be unable to take hours off of their jobs. Additionally, information dissemination surrounding elections is often on platforms (television, newspapers, online information) accessed by those with higher education and higher income levels, which could potentially influence them to vote more than those who might not have the same opportunities presented to them, not to mention the institutionalized racism that influences attempts at voter suppression and the silencing of minority voices (Bentele, 2013).

The aforementioned civic voluntarism model explains another dimension of the multitude of influences on political participation within the United States. Civic voluntarism includes, as part of its participation by "socialization" clause, allusions to different voluntary organizations in which U.S. citizens can participate, which, in turn, influence aspects of their political participation (Skocpol, Ganz, & Munson, 2000). Such organizations could include religious groups, sports clubs, and many other types of group socializing. This aspect of civic voluntarism as a model suggests that one's membership in voluntary civic organizations makes one more inclined to participate in political action, as many of these organizations have goals that may influence members to participate politically in a certain way (Verba, 1995). Additionally, even if group members aren't "asked" specifically, social norms within a group may nonetheless lead to more political activity by members. Thus, constituents are effectively recruited to engage

politically through the groups in which they associate with.

Directly connected to the “civic voluntarism model,” scholars have also put forth a “mobilization theory.” As Schlozman, Brady, and Verba describe, one of the primary obstacles inhibiting individual political action is that “nobody asked,” or simply that no one has motivated or encouraged an individual to exercise their tools of democracy (Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2010). Thus, “mobilization theory” suggests that political participation is due, in large part, to encouragement from others to participate within the political sphere. In their book on the analysis of voting participation, in *Get Out the Vote*, Donald Green and Alan Gerber describe the many ways voting turnout can be influenced and increased. Regarding “mobilization theory,” they discuss how face-to-face communication has typically been a major facet of campaign canvassing in terms of attempts to garner support from the electorate (Green & Gerber, 2019). Such tactics, they write, function as a personal invitation to vote, which often is enough to make the difference in an individual making it to the polls (Green & Gerber, 2019).

The aforementioned forms of political outreach have long been part of attempts by politicians and political groups to increase political participation by the average U.S. citizen, attempts that are usually highly concentrated during targeted periods of campaigning before a major election. Over the last half-century or so, within a modern political era, this outreach has manifested itself in the form of rallies, speeches, televised appearances, publicized appearances by candidates or activists, and radio announcements or broadcasts. Such outreach into a community of voters has been labeled as “ground campaign” tactics, and centers entirely on direct contact with voters, a strategy that is a key component of garnering electoral success (Enos & Eitan, 2015). One major purpose of the use of such ground campaign tactics within political campaigns and political movements is to personalize a cause or concept, or to humanize a

candidate, allowing constituents to believe that their individual perspectives are being heard and catered to and that their potential elected officials are similar to the voters themselves.

“Ground campaigns” in recent election cycles have begun to transition into the online sphere. In *Get Out the Vote*, Green and Gerber confirm the advantages of “ground campaign” tactics, and also cite “authenticity” and personalization as the contributing factors to the success of certain types of social media outreach (Green & Gerber, 2019). However, since the founding of the first major social media platforms, including MySpace and Facebook, in the early 2000s, “ground campaigns” during election cycles have completely shifted in terms of the resources a candidate can utilize to reach out to his or her constituency. Recent studies have even demonstrated the internet’s potential to remedy the gap between political participation and the newly-able to vote by exposing those who normally wouldn’t search for information on other media outlets to political messaging (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010).

### **Social Media and Politics**

The Obama campaign of 2008 was the first major campaign to utilize the then-novel idea of social media to amplify its political platform. In final numbers, his campaign generated over 5 million followers across 15 different social media platforms, with a primary focus on Facebook and MySpace users, a number unheard of prior to his presidential campaign. Obama’s social media team frequently updated his Facebook page with reports from the campaign trail and personal statements, serving to both humanize the future president and to widen his political reach across the country (Aaker & Chang, 2009). The Obama campaign also took pains to show users of his personal social media website, “MyBO,” locations of campaign events taking place near their active location, which was guessed by analyzing their IP addresses (Aaker & Chang,

2009). Obama also had nearly four times the amount of Facebook Friends than opponent John McCain did, and orchestrated over 200,000 offline events via his personal social media platforms. Not only are these actions partially credited with the success of Obama's presidential victory, but they also set a precedent for the strategies of future generations of political leaders and how political action is to take place as technology becomes increasingly advanced and social media grows in power and influence.

Social media's role in politics has continued to grow since the 2008 election, when the percentage of Internet users was already 90% for the age group 18 to 29 (Bakker, 2011). In the elections following the 2008 presidential election, the internet has been acknowledged as an important form of communication by politicians and campaign managers alike, who typically allocate a portion of campaign resources towards achieving outreach in this arena (Bakker, 2011). Campaign strategists are wise to do so: social media use as a news source has been linked to participation in offline forms of participation, especially when the consumption of the news online is through some sort of interactive medium (Bakker, 2011).

To completely understand the value in evaluating Instagram as a relevant political influence, one needs to consider the scholarly literature that has been written about different iterations of social media as a factor in voter participation and registration, as well as a means for guiding general political engagement, like contacting politicians or engaging in protest behavior offline. The existing literature is incredibly valuable in connecting social media to a tangible measure of political engagement, whether that be voting, posting, registering to vote, or messaging friends about political issues. Additionally, experiments analyzing political behavior post-social media exposure widely indicate a connection between such platforms and political participation offline.

### **Past Studies: Social Media and Offline Political Actions**

Kahne and Middaugh (2012) examine social media as both a facet of and a factor in participatory politics, focusing on political engagement by young adults. They observe that those who participate in non-politically-driven interest groups on different social media platforms online are five times more likely to participate in a political manner than those outside of any interest groups. Their survey results also indicated that those who engaged in a form of political activity online were twice as likely to report voting in elections than those who did not report such activity (Kahne and Middaugh, 2012). Although their survey does not indicate a direct causation between online political activity and one's proclivity for in-person voting, they do provide a correlative link.

Obar, Zupe, and Lampe's (2012) study contributes similar findings to Kahne and Middaugh in linking social media participation and usage with real-world actions or objectives. The results of their survey of individuals from 53 separate activist groups indicate that all groups surveyed use social media to communicate with citizens almost daily. The respondents also indicated that they believe that various forms of social media help them achieve their activist goals (Obar, Zupe, & Lampe, 2012). In order to assess the factors that lead to "collective action" and "political mobilization," their survey identified the frequency of social media use by each group, as well as social-media specific employee numbers. Their findings indicate that according to most, if not all, advocacy organizations' staff, social media's role is believed to be essential to the success of the organization, further suggesting that social media holds great value to an organization's cause (Obar, Zupe, & Lampe, 2012).

Scholars of the past decade, the most relevant decade for social media mobilization, have traditionally conducted analyses based on Twitter and Facebook's relation to user behavior within the political field of study. These two major social networks each encompass millions and billions of users, respectively, and the data gleaned from past research into their political influence has been incredibly helpful in formulating my study, as the two have proved to be highly influential in linking political messaging and content as a means of offline mobilization. However, as will be discussed, the lack of analysis conducted on other social media platforms is a research gap that must be addressed, which I intend to do with my survey study.

Bond, Jones, Kramer, Marlow, Settler, and Fowler's (2012) experiment that analyzed the behavior of 61 million Facebook users resulted in conclusions that informational or social messages sent to targeted audiences within the Facebook network directly influenced levels of individual political expression, information seeking, and actual voting behavior of millions of people. The authors found that those who had received both "social" messages and "informational" messages were, indeed, more likely to cast an actual vote, measured through an "I Voted," button (Bond et.al, 2012). The experiment's results are significant for my study, as they prove a measurable link between online and physical spheres in terms of political action.

Carlisle and Patten (2013) follow Bond et. al's 61 million user Facebook experiment with another analysis of Facebook that helps to reinforce the validity of the former group's findings from 2012. Carlisle and Patten analyzed user activity during the primary and general elections of 2008, which, as previously mentioned, is traditionally regarded in scholarly literature as the first election with significant social media involvement (Carlisle & Patten, 2013). Using this frame of analysis, they sought to determine levels of user engagement within Facebook and identify which factors might have influenced the users' choice to participate politically or not. Their findings are



remarkable in that, given who they were able to observe as political participants, they did not find significant differences between motivation for political engagement between users of different parental income levels, sex, or age, suggesting that perhaps Facebook exists as a way to level the playing field in terms of political engagement (at least in online communities) (Carlisle & Patten, 2013). However, Carlisle and Patten did not investigate Facebook itself as a factor of influence in offline political participation but rather as a measuring tool for engagement within the app itself and how this platform might shift how constituents are able to interact with politics.

In Abdu, Mohamed, and Muda's (2017) research on the political influence of Facebook on youth populations in Nigeria, the indicative results of previous Facebook experiments are once again echoed in the study's findings, at least in an online setting. From a sampling of almost 400 youth in the Bauchi metropolitan area of Nigeria, the researchers found a direct relationship between Facebook use, obtaining quality information, political interest, and online political participation (Abdu et al., 2017). The scholars analyzed time spent on Facebook as correlated with "online political participation," rather than direct electoral participation or other offline engagement. Regardless of the sphere of action, their findings reveal the direct influence of online content on personal political action.

In terms of offline participation, however, Shehzad, Yousaf, Mahmood, and Ogadimma's (2021) analysis that focused on Facebook and Pakistani women's political participation revealed that online content can also influence action outside of the internet or social media. Using a survey of over 500 Pakistani women ages 18-60, the researchers established a connection between the duration of one's Facebook usage with online political participation and the presence of one's online political participation with offline political action. Their findings imply that Facebook use increases political knowledge, leading to political participation by its users

both online and offline. This inspired an element of my study in which I inquire about users' political posting in connection to their offline political actions.

Traditional Facebook-based experiments on political influence have also been replicated in other countries outside of the United States by examining social media platforms specific to those nations. For example, Spierings and Jacobs's (2014) experiment regarding the Dutch 2010 elections analyzes the effects of candidates' personal social media profiles on the Dutch Facebook equivalent Hyves, as well as Twitter, on the number of "preference votes" that that candidate received in the June 2010 parliamentary election. The authors' findings somewhat echo the results of the 2012 Facebook experiment by Kahne and Middaugh in that both draw a direct correlation between follower count and number of votes received. In the Spierings and Jacobs experiment, adding 1,000 followers drew 190 votes, on average. The researchers also measured the interaction between Dutch candidates and their personal social media (frequency of posting and updating on their accounts), which added an average, per additional Tweet by a given candidate, of 11 votes per 1,000 followers. Their findings suggest that, as seen in Bond et al.'s experiment, exposure to information online is a causal driver of political action, and the more content a constituent sees from a candidate, the more likely they are to cast a vote for them.

Twitter is also examined as a factor that has the potential to contribute to political engagement in Vaccari, Barberá, Bonneau, Jost, Nagler, and Tucker's (2015) article on political expression on social media's connection to political action in Italy. Using a somewhat similar perspective as Downs' theory evaluating the balance between the cost and benefit of political action, the researchers examined the connection between low threshold (low personal effort/cost, without direct contact with politicians) political action and higher threshold political action (direct contact with politicians, offline activity, with the goal of directly impacting political

outcomes). Echoing the studies in previous years, like Bond et al.'s, Vaccari et al. found a correlation between both receiving and expressing political information online and participating in higher threshold political activities both online and offline (Vaccari et al. 2015). Their study influenced my hypotheses, as I want to consider one's exposure to content in addition to one's proclivity to post content as correlated with offline action. Vaccari et al.'s study proved the value of this line of inquiry.

In addition to experiments conducted on the general political influence of social media, there has been attention paid in recent years to the #BlackLivesMatter movement even before the emblematic summer of 2020, a movement that has historically utilized social media as a major activist platform. Targeted studies of this movement and its foundations have further exposed the link between online activity and activism and physical mobilization and participation. Ross and Mundt's (2018) evaluation of the BLM movement's online activity yields similar results to the protest group responses in the earlier Obar, Zupe and Lampe survey. Ross and Mundt examine how the Black Lives Matter movement has utilized online social networks, namely Twitter and Facebook, to broaden its audience and enhance its offline community. The vast majority of the BLM groups with whom they conducted interviews mentioned social media as the primary way to gather people offline and mobilize them, mostly through physical events or protests (Ross & Mundt, 2018). Some leaders specifically noted that social media networks allowed them to reach and mobilize people they otherwise wouldn't have reached (Ross & Mundt, 2018). Ross and Mundt then specifically conclude that social media is useful as a "scaling tool," or a way to amplify a pre-existing initiative for movements like BLM (Ross & Mundt, 2018).

Opponents of theories like those listed above, in which social media is credited with having significant potential for political influence, have conducted studies on "slacktivism," or

the idea that political or activist content that one is exposed to online rarely actually translates to outside or “offline” action by those consuming this content. For example, in *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, Morozov argues that for many events that have been attributed in the news or other publications to social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook (namely, the Tehran protests of 2009 that have been widely connected with Twitter activism), there is little tangible evidence of this causation (Morozov, 2012). Cabrera Matias, and Montoya (2017) also conclude that it is dangerous to associate exposure to online activism with actual effective activism and that there is an inherent danger in creating an imaginary correlation between the two items.

Professor Eitan Hersh’s book, *Politics Is For Power*, explicitly discusses the idea of “political hobbyism,” or what Hersh branded “slacktivism” in the political sphere. In his work, he discusses a survey he conducted in 2018 of the American public, in which he concluded, “A third of Americans say they spend two hours or more each day on politics,” and yet “four out of five” of these people say that all of this time engaging in politics is spent online, watching T.V., or speaking about politics with friends and family, rather than actually mobilizing for a cause (Hersh, 2020). However, even the authors of such counter-theories acknowledge that some online practices are conducive to actual activism, especially amongst young students (Cabrera et al., 2017). These practices include connecting online social engagement with what must be effective live activism, like sharing the details of a protest’s location, or where to cast a ballot.

### **The Young Adult-Social Media Connection**

Overall, as the literature discussed here demonstrates, numerous scholars have found a link between online activity and offline political participation. However, these studies have

focused mainly on earlier platforms like Facebook and Twitter that typically host older generations of voters. Thus, there is a gap in the existing literature regarding Instagram, and the correlation between online activity and offline political participation. This is odd, considering that most of the existing literature on social media and politics has been published within the last decade, the same timeframe of Instagram's existence as a social media platform. The absence of studies on this topic is most likely because Instagram has been deemed a "young-person's" app with little political significance. But as discussed in Chapter 1, Generation Z has shown itself to be highly engaged politically. Thus they, and their social media usage, need to be studied.

Young adult populations not only make up the highest percentage of Instagram users but also spend more of their time on this app compared to other, older adult populations, thus increasing their potential exposure to political content on the app in comparison with other age groups. Technology company Uswitch's Screen Time Report from 2022 details how, not only do young adults under the age of 35 spend the most time on social media per day in comparison with other ages, but also how those aged 16-24 are "spending the most amount of time on Instagram compared to any other age group. In fact, almost one in 10 people aged between 16 and 24 spend seven hours a day on Instagram" (Uswitch, 2022). Additionally, according to the Pew Research Center, over 7 in 10 Americans aged 18-29 reported using Instagram, with about 6 in 10 American adults saying they use Instagram at least once a day (Schaeffer, 2021).

I chose to focus my hypothesis on young adult users of Instagram and their offline political participatory behavior due to the obvious relevancy of their political participation, as well as Instagram's relative newness as one of the major social media platforms for Americans, especially those of younger demographics. Because of the link between younger generations and political participation, and because the majority of Instagram users are between the ages of 18-

34, the influence of Instagram is an important factor to evaluate when examining patterns of political activism (Dixon, 2022). After observing the events of the summer of 2020 and the subsequent Instagram political “takeovers” during events like the overturning of *Roe V. Wade*, it is evident that Instagram must be evaluated for its influence on young voters’ behavior.

### **Chapter 3–Methods**

Given the prevalence of Instagram amongst younger age demographics, specifically Generation Z, who have been proven more and more likely to engage in politics since the election of 2016, this thesis aims to provide a link between Instagram activism and actual offline political participation for those ages 18-24. By proving that political participation on Instagram and exposure to Instagram activism correlates with higher levels of offline political engagement, I demonstrate the value of the platform as a potential source of political influence for political and apolitical actors and demonstrate the importance of future studies on social media's linkage with political behavior, as more and more generations grow up online.

My research questions are as follows:

**R1:** What is the effect of exposure to political content on Instagram on “Generation Z” users in terms of having an influence on their offline political participation?

**R2:** What is the effect of increased posting of political content on Instagram from “Generation Z” users in terms of having an influence on their offline political participation?

The first research question seeks to address the potential influence of simple exposure to “political content” on Instagram on the offline political behavior of young Gen Z users. This research question is of greatest value to my work, as a significant correlation between simple exposure on the app to political content and greater offline political engagement would demonstrate the critical role of social media platforms in generating offline political results.

My second research question seeks to address the effects of one's own posting/personal engagement with political content on Instagram on offline political behavior. This question is of

interest, in part, because I believe knowing this information is valuable to the central premise of my study (that offline and online behavior are not necessarily separate), but also to differentiate those who are politically active themselves from those who have simply been exposed to online content in terms of determining the effects of both on offline activity.

To answer these questions, I designed a survey of those aged 18-24 via the platform Lucid to gain a sample representative of the greater U.S. population. The content of my survey was formulated on the online questionnaire maker Qualtrics, and I accessed the platform through Colby College's subscription. In total, I was able to survey 2,005 young respondents. The survey had a total of 20 questions, including a series of socio-demographic questions, along with questions about internet usage, and self-reported political participation.

A survey was my preferred method of data collection primarily because of the difficulty in gaining access to a controlled environment where I could "treat" groups of people with exposure to political content on Instagram. Even if I could message them directly on the app (which is a difficult task to begin with due to the degree of privacy settings on different accounts), there would be other hardships arising from the presence of information on Instagram that they might be exposed to outside of my experiment. Likewise, it would be quite troublesome for me at Colby, a small liberal arts college in Maine, to find a sample of willing participants that would be representative of the greater U.S. population. Thus, I chose a survey tool (I utilized the online platform Lucid) that could provide me with this sample and allow me to ask multiple types of questions that would give me enough information to work with when considering the survey responses.

Although I chose to use a survey to gather information and patterns, I acknowledge that there are some potential pitfalls that arise from this method. The primary downside is that it is



difficult to control for outside influences that might affect political participation offline, or what one might be exposed to on Instagram. However, I have attempted to control for some variables by adding questions on my survey that cover other factors of one's identity, like race, education level, etc.

Going into my survey, my initial hypotheses are as follows:

**H1:** As young "Generation Z" Instagram users of voting age are exposed to increasing political content on Instagram, their political participation offline increases.

**H2:** The more that young "Generation Z" Instagram users of voting age use the app to post political content, the more likely they are to participate in offline political activity.

### **Measures for my Dependent and Independent Variables**

In order to test these hypotheses, I asked a series of questions that would measure my two key explanatory variables, as well as six different measures for political participation. To see a full copy of the survey I created (excluding demographic/political identifiers), a copy is available at the end of this chapter.

#### *Independent Variables*

The first independent variable in my thesis is exposure to online activism and politics via Instagram. I asked respondents the following question: "Have you ever observed political-related content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?"

Respondents were then offered the following response options: "Never," "Sporadically," "Monthly," "Weekly," "Daily," or "Multiple times per day." The variable is then coded 1 through 6, where a lower value indicates less exposure and a higher value indicates more

exposure. This variable measures how frequently survey respondents say that they view political content on Instagram in the forms of posts, stories, or hashtags, as well as if they follow political accounts or politicians themselves. This variable is summarized in Table 3.1.

My second independent variable is the extent to which survey respondents themselves produce or post political content on Instagram, in the forms of actual pictures, comments, stories, or hashtags. I asked respondents the following question: “Do you share political content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?” Respondents were then offered the following response options: “Never,” “Sporadically,” “Monthly,” “Weekly,” “Daily,” or “Multiple times per day.” The variable is then coded 1 through 6, where a lower value indicates less exposure and a higher value indicates more exposure. This variable is also summarized in Table 3.1.

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variable in my experiment is the extent to which survey respondents say that they engage in offline political activism, and in what political activism they partake. I will measure this variable through participation in the past year in offline protests, direct contact with politicians, attending political rallies, donating to campaigns, and voting habits.

I will also ask respondents directly if they have ever participated in offline political activity as a direct result of something they saw on Instagram, for example: attending a protest they heard about through the app, or writing a letter to a politician as suggested by a post from an online activist group via the same Instagram platform.

I will use a survey approach to measure how my variables interact, and a regression analysis to analyze the responses I get to prove a correlation between online activism and

exposure to political content via Instagram with offline political participation. I will use the responses from my direct “yes or no” question regarding offline political activity as a direct link to something seen on Instagram to suggest that this correlation might be partially causative in nature.

### *Control Variables*

In order to account for other factors that might influence offline political participation, I include questions on my survey that function as other general identifying questions. These questions cover the following categories: education level, gender, political party identification, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and political interest level (although political interest level is excluded, which I will explain later in my analysis). The purpose of these questions is to attempt to discern patterns unrelated to Instagram itself so that I can assess the potential weaknesses in my results. Additionally, the patterns that these questions reveal might speak to a greater point about who Instagram media tends to reach, and how it targets different demographics. These variables are all summarized in Table 3.1.

### **Conclusion**

In the following chapters, I will analyze the results of my regression analysis, and their significance to my research questions and hypotheses. In Chapter 4, I will examine my first research question (RQ1) and hypothesis 1 (H1). In Chapter 5, I will examine my second research question (RQ2) and hypothesis 2 (H2). The specific evidence that would support my hypotheses would be finding significant correlations between the independent variables of personal engagement with and exposure to online Instagram activism, and the dependent variable of

offline political participation in its numerous forms. The other evidence needed to suggest a somewhat causative relationship would be if a large percentage of survey respondents indicated that they participated in offline activities related to politics as a direct result of something they saw on Instagram itself. I will analyze my results using regression coding generated on the Stata 15 software, downloaded on my MacBook.

**Table 3.1: Summary Statistics**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
VARIABLES	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<b>Offline Actions:</b>					
Donate to Campaign	2,005	.1236908	.3293106	0	1
Donate to Political Group	2,005	.0573566	.2325808	0	1
Vote	2,005	.5695761	.495259	0	1
Contact a Politician	2,005	.0568579	.2316286	0	1
Volunteer	2,005	.1216958	.3270157	0	1
March	2,005	.159601	.366327	0	1
<b>Independent Variables:</b>					
Exposure Freq. Political Content on Instagram	2,001	3.256372	1.619796	1	6
Sharing Freq. Political Content on Instagram	2,004	2.287924	1.507986	1	6
<b>Control Variables:</b>					
Education Level	2,002	2.726274	1.050451	1	5
White	2,006	.6246261	.48434	0	1
Black	2,006	.1525424	.3596355	0	1
Asian	2,006	.0363908	.1873073	0	1
Hispanic	2,006	.1380857	.345076	0	1
Female	2,002	.536963	.4987564	0	1
LGBTQ+	2,000	.3105	.4628141	0	1
“Other” Party	2,003	.4173739	.4932488	0	1
Republican	2,003	.2760859	.4471714	0	1

**Full Copy of Original Survey**

The survey I will utilize is as follows (excluding the aforementioned background identifiers and a consent-to-survey question):

- 1. How frequently do you typically open the Instagram app?**
  - a. Never
  - b. Sporadically
  - c. Monthly
  - d. Weekly
  - e. Daily
  - f. Multiple times per day
- 2. Have you ever observed political-related content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?**
  - a. Never
  - b. Sporadically
  - c. Monthly
  - d. Weekly
  - e. Daily
  - f. Multiple times per day
- 3. Do you share political content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?**
  - a. Never
  - b. Sporadically
  - c. Monthly
  - d. Weekly
  - e. Daily
  - f. Multiple times per day
- 4. Do you ever see political ads on Instagram?**
  - a. No, Never
  - b. Yes, for Liberals/Democrats only
  - c. Yes, for Conservative/Republican only
  - d. Yes, for both
- 5. Do you follow politicians on Instagram?**
  - a. No
  - b. Yes, Democrats/Liberal only
  - c. Yes, Republicans/Conservatives only
  - d. Yes, both parties
- 6. Do you follow political groups on Instagram?**
  - a. No
  - b. Yes, Democrats/Liberal only
  - c. Yes, Republicans/Conservatives only

- d. Yes, both parties
- 7. **In the past year did you do any of the following? (select all that apply):**
  - a. Volunteer for a campaign?
  - b. Make monetary campaign contributions/donations to a campaign?
  - c. Attend a political march, protest, or rally?
  - d. Vote?
  - e. Directly contact a politician?
  - f. Donate to a political group?
- 8. **Do you follow up on things you see on Instagram on other outlets? Examples of following up would be research via online searches, newspapers, books etc.**
  - a. No
  - b. Yes
- 9. **Has something you have seen on Instagram directly and successfully prompted you to participate in a specific political activity (volunteering for a campaign, donating to a campaign, attending a march, protest, or rally, vote, contacting a politician, or donating to a political group/cause)?**
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c.
- 10. **Do you ever feel more inclined to engage in offline politics after observing political content on Instagram about certain topics or issues?**
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

## **Chapter 4–Findings H1–Exposure to Political Content on Instagram and Offline**

### **Participation Results**

#### **Introduction**

To review, my first research question was: What is the effect of exposure to political content on Instagram on “Generation Z” users in terms of having an influence on their offline political participation? I predicted that the more exposure one had to political content via the Instagram app, the more likely one was to participate in various forms of political engagement in real life. For my hypothesis to be supported, there needed to be a positive correlation between increased exposure to political content and the likelihood of participating offline through various avenues.

Even before regression analysis, my survey yielded interesting results. A large percentage of respondents indicated that they had “directly and successfully” been prompted by Instagram to participate in an offline political activity (Question 9). Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents answered “Yes,” to this question, and this significant proportion of affirmative responses strongly suggests Instagram’s influence on the offline political sphere. Additionally, 40.8% of respondents answered “Yes” to the question: Do you ever feel more inclined to engage in offline politics after observing political content on Instagram about certain topics or issues? (Question 10). Therefore, even if one had not already participated politically offline as a result of Instagram’s political content, many at least believed themselves more inclined to do so.

#### **Data and Findings**

In order to test my hypothesis, I ran a series of logit regressions. My dependent variable in each regression is one of the six forms of political participation that I described in greater

detail in Chapter 3. These include: vote, volunteer, march, contact public officials, donate to a political campaign, and donate to a political group. My key explanatory variable in each of these models is the measure of exposure to political content on Instagram. Respondents were asked: “Have you ever observed political-related content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?”. Respondents were then given the options “Never,” “Sporadically,” “Monthly,” “Weekly,” “Daily,” or “Multiple times per day.” This variable is now coded 1 through 6 where 1 indicates lower levels of political content exposure on Instagram, and 6 indicates higher levels of this exposure. I also include a litany of control variables to help isolate the effects of political content on Instagram. These include: education level, race, gender, party ID, and LGBTQ+ identification. These controls were re-coded from my original independent controls to streamline the gender, party, and LGBTQ+ variables into simpler controls. Here, the gender options were simplified to indicate “Female” or not, while party was simplified to “Republican,” “Other,” or not, and the different sexual orientation options were simplified to either LGBTQ+ identifying or not. In total, I ran six separate logit regressions that included these control variables. If my hypothesis is supported, I expect that respondents who are more exposed to political content on Instagram will also be more likely to participate in real world political action. The results of these six logit regressions can be found in Table 4.1.

The results in Table 4.1 support the first hypothesis, as they demonstrate a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables. As one’s exposure to political content on Instagram increases, each respondent’s offline action is also predicted to increase. Each positive coefficient in the top row represents a positive and statistically significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables. In order to help better interpret the results, I calculated the predicted probability of participating in each of the six “offline”



activities while holding all variables at their means. The results can be found in Figure 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Effect of Exposure to Political Content on Instagram on Six Forms of Political Participation**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VARIABLES	Vote	Volunteer	March	Contact	Candidate Donate	Group Donate
Political Content Instagram Exposure Frequency	0.113*** (0.030)	0.129*** (0.045)	0.250*** (0.041)	0.238*** (0.064)	0.170*** (0.045)	0.178*** (0.063)
Education Level	0.250*** (0.047)	0.153** (0.067)	0.177*** (0.061)	0.106 (0.095)	0.122* (0.067)	0.158* (0.093)
Black	0.197 (0.243)	-0.388 (0.306)	-0.518* (0.302)	-0.495 (0.449)	1.069** (0.421)	-0.693 (0.439)
White	0.494** (0.221)	-0.809*** (0.278)	-0.549** (0.270)	-0.498 (0.397)	0.254 (0.408)	-0.817** (0.380)
Asian	-0.279 (0.321)	-0.632 (0.444)	0.068 (0.380)	-1.303 (0.814)	0.558 (0.525)	-0.392 (0.587)
Hispanic/Latino	0.197 (0.245)	-0.360 (0.310)	-0.204 (0.300)	-0.336 (0.449)	0.691 (0.431)	-0.127 (0.412)
Female	0.053 (0.094)	-0.186 (0.141)	0.172 (0.129)	-0.291 (0.199)	-0.222 (0.140)	-0.092 (0.197)
Other	-0.377*** (0.115)	-0.090 (0.164)	-0.576*** (0.153)	-0.467** (0.236)	-0.366** (0.171)	-0.022 (0.245)
Republican	-0.329*** (0.127)	-0.248 (0.188)	-0.230 (0.160)	-0.293 (0.251)	0.006 (0.176)	0.324 (0.249)
LGBTQ+	-0.010 (0.103)	0.263* (0.150)	0.487*** (0.135)	0.572*** (0.206)	-0.078 (0.158)	0.215 (0.212)
Constant	-0.887*** (0.286)	-2.116*** (0.389)	-2.579*** (0.372)	-3.287*** (0.560)	-3.090*** (0.490)	-3.360*** (0.549)
Observations	1,992	1,992	1,992	1,992	1,992	1,992

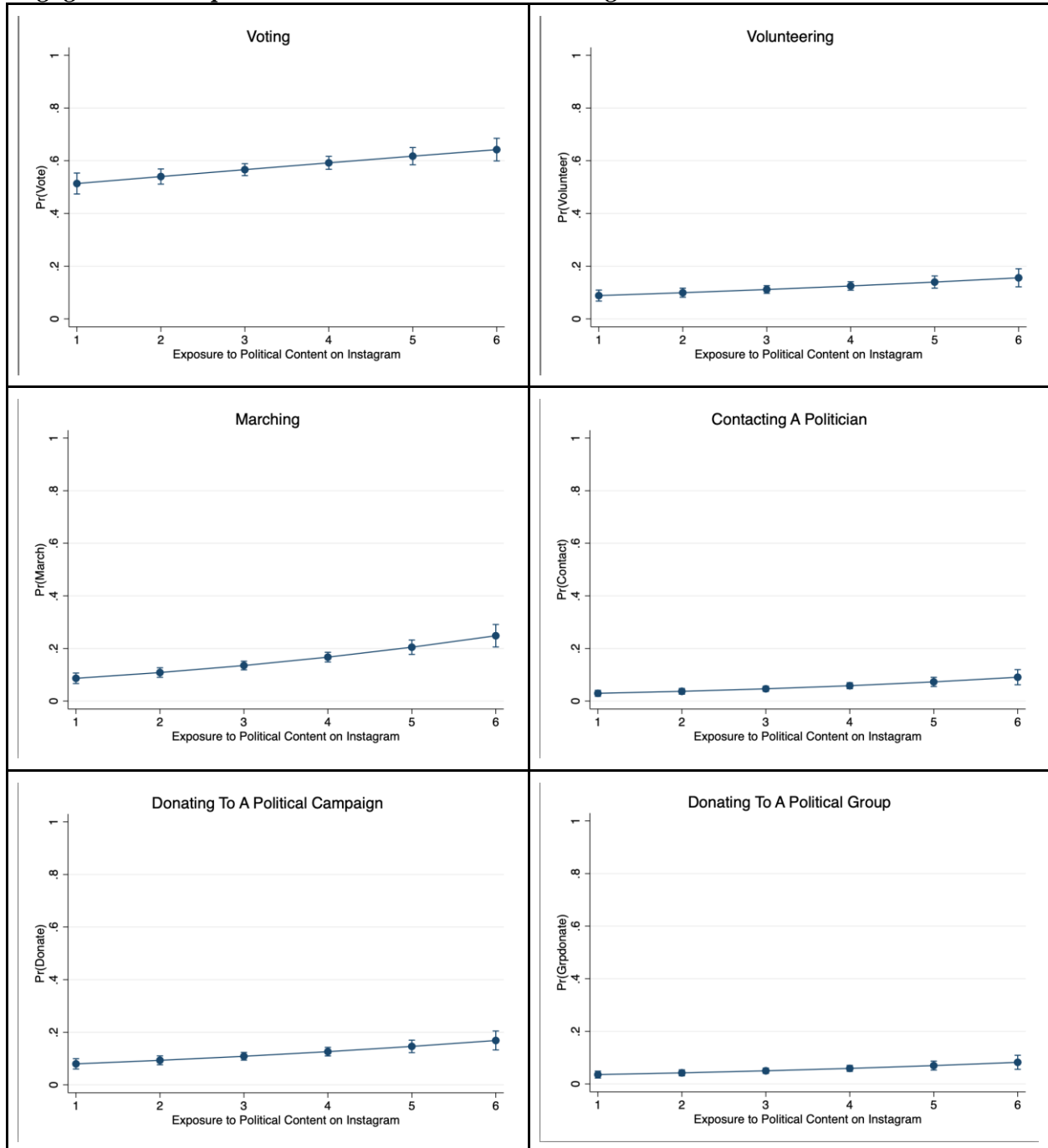
Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Again, the results in Figure 1 support my hypothesis, but also reveal the magnitude of the effect of exposure to political content on real world political engagement. In the plots displayed in Figure 1, each positively-sloped line represents that, by moving from “never” being exposed to political content on Instagram to being exposed “multiple times per day” one is predicted to

increase their probability of participating in all six forms of offline actions.

**Figure 4.1: The Predicted Probability of Participating in Six Forms of Offline Civic Engagement as Exposure to Political Content on Instagram Increases.**



Observe the plot in the top-left hand corner, which shows the predicted probability of

voting as exposure to political content on Instagram increases. The results show that someone with the least amount of political content exposure online has a predicted probability of voting of 51%. In comparison, someone with the greatest amount of political content exposure has a predicted probability of voting of 65%. This is an increase of 14 percentage points. This pattern holds for all of the other forms of offline political participation. For marching, one's proclivity to participate increased by 15.7 percentage points between extremes. For volunteering, this number was 6.8; for contacting a politician, 4.6; for donating to a political campaign, 8.9; and for donating to a political group, 4.7. Each category of participation, regardless of the included controls, showed a measurable change in participation levels by the Generation Z survey participants.

### **Reflection on Results**

My analysis of the survey data supports my first hypothesis: as one sees more political content on Instagram, one's chances of participating in a number of different actions increase significantly, to varying extents between each variable. Although Instagram's algorithm does indeed push out content it calculates users want to see, which could contribute to some elements of what could be interpreted as political exposure, there is a large percentage of users who are likely seeing political content mostly on their friends' accounts—Instagram's algorithm shows individual users their friends' accounts more frequently than ads. Additionally, Instagram's policy on political ads and content ensures that any ad with such a theme must include a “paid for by” disclaimer so users can evaluate its validity themselves, and anyone wishing to run such an ad must complete an application with Instagram itself (Instagram Business Team, 2020). This sets Instagram apart from platforms like Facebook, which has faced backlash in the past for the

number of political ads that the website allowed its entire user base to see, regardless of who they might follow or the validity of such ads, making them much easier for people and organizations to post, and users to view (Roose & Isaac, 2021).

The change in percentage points across variables may seem minute, but it is important to evaluate these changes in the context of the average rates at which people tend to participate in offline politics, which for many of the categories has historically been relatively low. For example, a 2018 Pew survey found the average percentage of those in the United States who donated to a campaign in the past year was only 14%--therefore, a percentage point increase of 8.9 points in the dependent variable from my survey “donation to a political campaign” is extremely significant when the number of typical participants per year is low to begin with (Oliphant, 2020). The same principle applies to the other dependent variables of participation. Volunteering for a campaign, for example, only boasts a 5% participation rate according to the same 2018 Pew survey, meaning that the percentage point increase of 6.8 is also notable (Oliphant, 2020).

For clarity’s sake, I must note that I eliminated the control of “political interest level.” I did this for two reasons. Primarily, I chose to eliminate “political interest level” because I believe this is another potentially dependent variable that Instagram could influence, rather than a totally independent control variable that could manipulate my results and analysis. Additionally, some amount of “political interest level” is likely determined by the other variables for which I have already chosen to control.

Findings for the first research question both appear to support my first hypothesis and also potentially contribute to the information gained from studies like Bond et al.’s experiment, which found that as Facebook users’ exposure to political content increased, their likelihood of

physically casting a ballot offline did as well, and with Spierings and Jacobs's 2014 experiment regarding the Dutch 2010 elections, where the number of "Tweets" on candidates' accounts directly correlated with the number of preference votes given to them by their constituents. The results of my survey are consistent with the results of these two experiments: there is a direct correlation between online exposure to specific political content and political actions offline (the most glaring of which being the "vote" variable).

To explain the somewhat drastic shift in the vote category, I want to mention how voting is something that every American has access to, regardless of the resources they have available (Although I want to acknowledge that some types of resources do make voting easier, and an increasing number of states have recently enacted laws to make casting a ballot more difficult). Voting is also the political activity that most Americans already engage in compared to other types of political participation. Thus, it makes sense that we would see the largest percentage points change in voting as one's political exposure increases, as it is the easiest means of political engagement to access for many American citizens who may not have money to donate to a cause or the ability to take part in in-person marches (Oliphant, 2020).

My findings also partially refute some of the work referenced earlier, namely Cabrera Matias, and Montoya's 2017 paper on "slacktivism" and Morozov's book *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), which both concur that it is foolish, and even dangerous, at times, to attribute offline behavior to online exposure to political content or rallying, as the two spheres are separate entities. Rather than completely dispute the points that these scholars made, my findings demonstrate that the line between online and offline political behavior is not so clearly defined. One cannot simply write off the effects of exposure to political information and content as occupying totally different spaces.

## **Chapter 5– Findings H2–Sharing Political Content on Instagram and Offline Participation**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

My second research question was: What is the effect of increased posting of political content on Instagram from “Generation Z” users in terms of having an influence on their offline political participation? This question is different from my first, as sharing content online is more similar to participation in political activities offline than a simple act of passive observation of such content.

However, as previously referenced, as a media account visible to the eyes of one’s followers, many scholars have argued that there is a “performative” aspect to Instagram and that political engagement offline does not necessarily occur (Hersh, 2020). Although there are certainly cases where “slacktivism” or “political hobbyism” is problematic and completely divergent from actual political engagement, I argue that one’s online and offline presence are becoming increasingly intertwined. Hersh conducted his survey before Generation Z became politically active, thus his conclusions do not accurately capture how younger people use social media and engage in politics. I want to examine whether online activism for young people today can actually translate into real world political engagement.

I anticipate that, for young people, because so much of their real-world life is intertwined with their online lives, online political activism will translate into traditional forms of political participation. Therefore, I hypothesize that young people who share more political content online will also participate in such traditional forms of participation (voting, marching, etc.) at higher rates.

In order to test this hypothesis, I used a similar series of logit regressions (a total of six,

for the six dependent variables of participation). These variables are as follows: voting, marching, donating to a campaign, donating to a political group, volunteering, and contacting a politician. In this analysis, however, the key explanatory variable is “sharing” of political content on Instagram. The survey question I used to answer this is: “Do you share political content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?” The respondents could answer: “Never,” “Sporadically,” “Monthly,” “Weekly,” “Daily,” or “Multiple times per day.” This variable is coded where lower values indicate less sharing, and higher values indicate more sharing. I continued to control for the same variables of party ID, race, education level, sexual orientation, and gender.

Of course, this new explanatory variable presents a potential complication. The new independent variable measures whether or not an individual shares political content. Potentially, this is also a form of political participation, which means that I could potentially be predicting participation using a measure of participation. In order to determine whether or not my independent and dependent variables are intercorrelated, I ran correlation codes between political content-sharing and each individual offline action, and these were essentially individually unrelated, as pictured in the correlation tables below in Figure 5.1.

Most of the dependent variables have correlation rates that are quite low (the highest being “donate”), indicating donating to a political campaign, with a correlation rate of 0.25. Normally, a strong correlation between variables would be indicated by a value of at least 0.6 or higher. Additionally, correlations between variables that are 0.1 or lower are considered “negligible,” or likely cease to exist, while all below 0.19 are considered likely to be nonexistent. Therefore, sharing political content online is either *very* weakly correlated with offline action, or not at all (Middlesex University London, 2023).

**Figure 5.1: Correlation Matrix between Key Explanatory Variable and Six Different Forms of Participation**

<pre>. cor pol_share vote (obs=2,004)</pre> <table> <tr> <th></th><th>pol_sh~e</th><th>vote</th></tr> <tr> <th>pol_share</th><td>1.0000</td><td></td></tr> <tr> <th>vote</th><td>0.0128</td><td>1.0000</td></tr> </table>		pol_sh~e	vote	pol_share	1.0000		vote	0.0128	1.0000	<pre>. cor pol_share grpdonate (obs=2,004)</pre> <table> <tr> <th></th><th>pol_sh~e</th><th>grpdon~e</th></tr> <tr> <th>pol_share</th><td>1.0000</td><td></td></tr> <tr> <th>grpdonate</th><td>0.0781</td><td>1.0000</td></tr> </table>		pol_sh~e	grpdon~e	pol_share	1.0000		grpdonate	0.0781	1.0000	<pre>. cor pol_share donate (obs=2,004)</pre> <table> <tr> <th></th><th>pol_sh~e</th><th>donate</th></tr> <tr> <th>pol_share</th><td>1.0000</td><td></td></tr> <tr> <th>donate</th><td>0.2519</td><td>1.0000</td></tr> </table>		pol_sh~e	donate	pol_share	1.0000		donate	0.2519	1.0000
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Although the variable “donate,” indicating a donation to a political campaign within the past year could be said to have a weak correlation with the frequency of sharing political content on Instagram, and thus could potentially link these behaviors intrinsically, it is important to note that the act of donating is already more similar to online behavior in relation to the other dependent variables. Donations can be made online, and one can post links to donate on different online platforms on their social media accounts. Therefore, it makes sense that this variable might be more correlated with online content sharing than the others.

Thus, it is time to re-evaluate how one’s behavior online is predictive of offline behavior. The ties between posting political content on Instagram and one’s engagement offline are also important to evaluate potential electoral behavior and election outcomes, especially when examining generations individually. Now that I have tested the correlation between political sharing online and offline participation in various spheres, I am ready to test my hypothesis. If



my hypothesis is supported, I would expect to find that young people who share more political content on Instagram would also be more likely to participate in real-world forms of civic engagement.

## **Data and Findings**

In order to test my hypothesis, I again run a series of logit regressions. My dependent variable in each regression is one of the six forms of political participation that I described in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4. These include: vote, volunteer, march, contact public officials, donate to a political campaign, and donate to a political group. My key explanatory variable in each of these models is the measure of exposure to political content on Instagram. Respondents were asked: “Do you share political content on Instagram (stories, posts, comments, hashtags all constitute such content)?” The variable is now coded 1 through 6 where 1 indicates less political sharing, and 6 indicates higher levels of sharing political content online. Like with my first research question and hypothesis, I re-coded the variables that include party, gender, and LGBTQ+ identification for ease of analysis. Again, party has been re-coded to indicate Republican or Other, sexual orientation has been coded as either LGBTQ+ identifying or straight, and gender has been coded as female or other.

With the aforementioned controls accounted for in my regression, I also found positive correlations between increased levels of posting frequency and increased political behavior in an offline setting. The initial data I found is represented by the table below (Table 5.1):

*Table 5.1: Effect of Sharing Political Content on Instagram on Six Forms of Offline Civic Engagement*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VARIABLES	Donate	Donate Politician	Political Group Donate	Vote	Volunteer	March
Sharing Political Content on Instagram Frequency	0.400*** (0.044)	0.400*** (0.044)	0.168*** (0.061)	-0.020 (0.032)	0.295*** (0.044)	0.295*** (0.044)
Education Level	0.082 (0.068)	0.082 (0.068)	0.165* (0.092)	0.283*** (0.046)	0.128* (0.067)	0.128* (0.067)
Black	0.914** (0.429)	0.914** (0.429)	-0.759* (0.441)	0.220 (0.243)	-0.560* (0.311)	-0.560* (0.311)
White	0.373 (0.415)	0.373 (0.415)	-0.778** (0.381)	0.483** (0.221)	-0.769*** (0.281)	-0.769*** (0.281)
Asian	0.569 (0.534)	0.569 (0.534)	-0.436 (0.586)	-0.302 (0.321)	-0.677 (0.448)	-0.677 (0.448)
Hispanic/Latino	0.705 (0.439)	0.705 (0.439)	-0.125 (0.413)	0.213 (0.245)	-0.406 (0.314)	-0.406 (0.314)
Female	-0.128 (0.144)	-0.128 (0.144)	-0.074 (0.198)	0.040 (0.094)	-0.130 (0.143)	-0.130 (0.143)
Other	-0.267 (0.174)	-0.267 (0.174)	-0.037 (0.245)	-0.450*** (0.114)	-0.006 (0.166)	-0.006 (0.166)
Republican	-0.033 (0.179)	-0.033 (0.179)	0.295 (0.248)	-0.344*** (0.126)	-0.283 (0.190)	-0.283 (0.190)
LGBTQ+	-0.145 (0.161)	-0.145 (0.161)	0.177 (0.212)	-0.019 (0.102)	0.227 (0.151)	0.227 (0.151)
Constant	-3.558*** (0.493)	-3.558*** (0.493)	-3.173*** (0.528)	-0.519* (0.280)	-2.394*** (0.383)	-2.394*** (0.383)
Observations	1,995	1,995	1,995	1,995	1,995	1,995

Standard errors in parentheses  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

For the most part, the results support my hypothesis. This data shows that, aside from the voting, which has a negative coefficient, every dependent variable indicating an offline political activity carries a positive coefficient. This means that as the frequency with which one shares political content on Instagram increases, so does one's likelihood of engaging in offline political activity. In addition, these effects are all statistically significant, with the exclusion of voting. Overall, Table 5.1 demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between one's proclivity to share political content on Instagram, and one's increased chances of participating politically

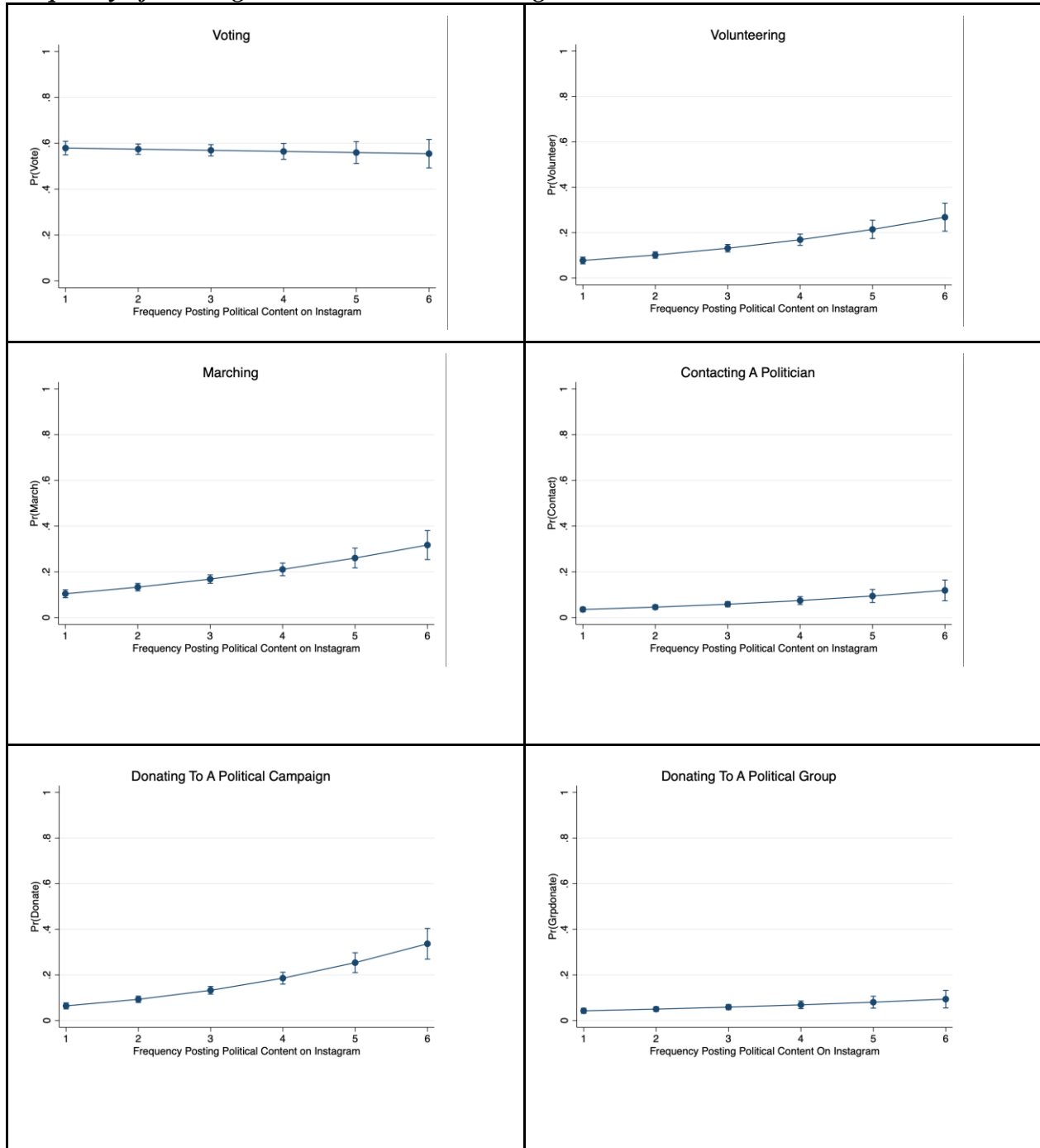
offline.

In order to help interpret the magnitude of the effect of online sharing on real world political participation, I calculated the predicted probability of participating in six forms of civic engagement while holding all other variables at their mean. The results can be seen in Figure 5.2. Figure 5.2 on the following page represents the relationship between an increase in posting frequency of political content on Instagram and the apparent percentage point increase in one's proclivity to participate in each of the listed offline activities (indicated by participation at least once in the last year). In this model, the unspecified variable of "Volunteering" refers to the variable of one's volunteering for a political campaign.

The results of sharing political content on Instagram on action offline can be assessed through the difference in the percentage change between 1 and 6 on the political sharing frequency scale. For example, those who shared the most political content on Instagram were 28 percentage points more likely to have donated to a political campaign within the past year than those who shared the least amount of political content on the app. The results show that, in the plot in the top right-hand corner, someone with the least amount of political content sharing on Instagram has a predicted probability of volunteering at a level of 8%. In comparison, someone with the greatest amount of political content sharing on the app has a predicted probability of volunteering of 27%. This is an increase in the predicted probability of volunteering of 19 percentage points. For marching, one's proclivity to participate increased by 21.3 percentage points between extremes. For contacting a politician, this number was 8.3; and for donating to a political group, 5.1. Interestingly, voting as a dependent variable for political content sharing was actually a negative change of 2.3 percentage points between levels 1 and 6 of political content sharing frequency. I will provide rationale for this abnormality in the following paragraph. But,

aside from voting, each category of participation, accounting for the controls I mentioned, demonstrated a visible change in participation levels by the Generation Z survey participants.

**Figure 5.2: Predicted Probability of Participating in Six Forms of Civic Engagement as Frequency of Sharing Political Content on Instagram Increases**



The variable of “voting” behaving differently than the other variables can be easily explained: voting by itself is unique in the world of political engagement. Every individual of voting age gets the same amount of “votes” in relation to others, regardless of other variables in their identity or life. The costs associated with voting are low, and it is unique in that it is anonymous unless one decides to advertise their vote (Downs, 1957). Additionally, it is important to note that although the variable of “voting” negatively correlates with increased political sharing on Instagram, this correlation is *not* statistically significant, which means that there is likely to be no actual relationship between the two variables.

In order to explain the difference between the way voting behaves between my first and second hypotheses, I want to acknowledge that, although political content sharing is not directly related to any of my dependent variables, it is an additional form of political outreach, unlike exposure. Therefore, its relationship to voting will be inherently different from political content exposure’s relationship to voting.

## **Reflection on Results**

My findings are most consistent with the 2015 Vaccari et al. article that expressed a connection between “low threshold” and “high threshold” political action, which often came in the form of online or offline action (offline being more effortful or “high threshold”). Vaccari et al. noted that those posting or commenting on political content online had higher rates of participation offline, much like the results stemming from RQ2.

I also want to reiterate just how significant my results are in comparison with older studies, like Green & Gerber’s, whose investigation into how to increase forms of political

engagement showed that, at best, a traditional form such as canvassing might only increase participation in a category like voting between 6% and 7% (Green & Gerber, 1999). My findings, which include variables with historically lower participation rates than voting, show that participation rates can potentially be increased at far greater through simple engagement online (up to over 21 percentage points for marching for those posting content on Instagram more frequently). Additionally, my results, alongside some of the previous scholarship on the subject, possibly refute critics like Hersh or Morozov, who have explicitly worked on projects that “de-link” online and offline political action. Although individual offline participation variables are not correlated with posting political content on Instagram, the more that one engages with politics through this online method, the more likely they are to also participate offline. Thus, it is important to consider a re-evaluation how to assess an online and offline political connection.

## Chapter 6–Conclusion

On March 27, 2023, three children and three adults at the Covenant School in Nashville, Tennessee, were murdered by a mass-shooter. The shooter was under care for an emotional disorder and was able to stockpile seven guns in their home. This shooting marks the 125th shooting in 2023 alone, marking an average of more than one shooting per day (Liebhaber, 2023).

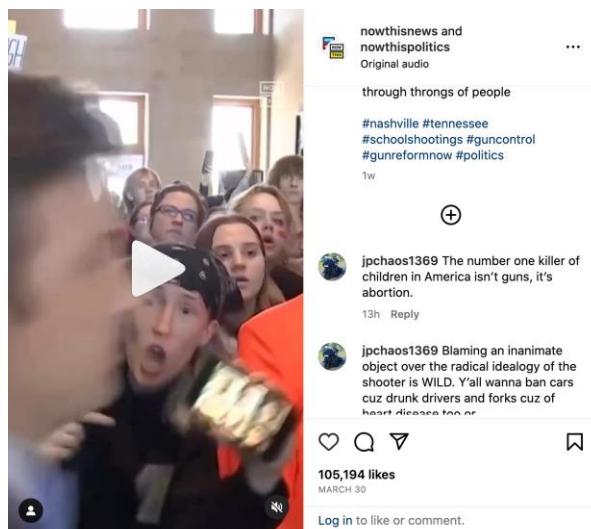
To protest the shooting, and to advocate for gun reform, thousands of young students gathered outside of the Tennessee state capitol on April 3rd. This protest was largely organized by young political activists, and publicized significantly on Twitter by figures like Representative Justin Jones (TN), and social activist Olivia Julianna (Webb et al., 2023). Although there has been sporadic media coverage by smaller or local news outlets, they have failed to capture the magnitude of the protests in the manner that social media users have. The Twitter screengrab in the image below illustrates the scale of the protests, organized, in large part, by young constituents who assembled their peers online.

***Image 6.1: Rep. Justin Jones’ Retweet of Chris O’ Brien’s Video of Youth Protests in Nashville, TN.***



The Tweets and videos were also accompanied by Instagram posts, something that is key to note as part of a thesis that has observed the effects of Instagram’s political content. The screengrab from Instagram in the days after the shooting, shown in Image 6.2, boasts over 105,000 likes, which suggests that the breadth of its audience is likely even greater (not everyone who sees content will like or comment on such content).

***Image 6.2: “nowthisnews” Post on Instagram, Exposing Video from the Tennessee Student Rallies Following the May 27 Shooting.***



Social media has been met with much skepticism regarding its effectiveness in mobilizing users offline, but also in terms of the validity or trustworthiness of the content published online (Hersh, 2020). Hersh even labels social media engagement with politics as a “fleeting work of art”--temporary, meaningless, and fallible (Hersh, 2020, 90). Although the actual content online may be questionable, my results suggest that regardless of what political content is being broadcast on platforms like Instagram, these platforms are instigators for collective action amongst young people offline as well.

The findings from my survey indicate that Instagram has great potential power in terms



of how its content can incite offline political participation by its user base, and presents greater implications for the future of social media influence on generations to come and, in turn, major electoral implications. With the responses from my survey, I show that exposure to political content online and posting political content online can and do translate into real world civic engagement for young people today. While previous scholars have not found that online political engagement often leads to great civic participation in the real world, my findings suggest that this is not the same for Generation Z's political activism (Hersh 2020). For this generation of young people who grew up online, virtual participation can and does move into offline participation.

The large percentage of responses indicating that many participants in the survey did, in fact, participate in a specified political activity directly as a result of something they were prompted to do on Instagram is evidence of the shifting methods of political influence globally as new generations mature to voting age. This is especially interesting to note because, as recently as 2019, only 6% of adults surveyed by the Pew Research Center acknowledged that they trusted Instagram as a news source, while 37% said they were impartial on levels of trust, and 42% outright distrusted the news on the app (Schaeffer, 2021). Perhaps it may be time to re-do such a survey, especially given the responses for the “direct influence” question in my survey from the age group I examined.

Additionally, over 50% of respondents in the same Pew survey indicated that they followed up on political content they viewed on Instagram on other media outlets. This is a type of engagement within itself, and also something to acknowledge when considering Instagram's power to prompt knowledge-seeking and interest in politics, as well as when attempting to refute traditional scholarly theories that label social media as self-limiting in terms of ability to

influence one's political engagement in other forms.

In a larger context, my findings demonstrate the viability of alternative-media platforms, like social networks, in influencing a significant portion of the voting population, specifically members of Generation Z, to participate in offline-politics in a manner that generates tangible political results. As outreach via mailers and door-to-door canvassing have been phased out, newer forms of texting communications, messaging, and social media advertising have quickly taken their place. Traditional "ground campaign" tactics, as previously mentioned in this paper, have translated effectively into direct outreach through Instagram, whether it be through politicians' accounts or through the network of one's own social connections on the app's interface. Seventeen percent of today's non-voting-age teens believe that it is "extremely" or "very" important for people to speak up about political and social issues on social media, so these new translations of "ground campaign" tactics have reached even those who are not yet able to become fully politically active (Anderson et al., 2022).

My findings indicate a change between the youngest generation of political participants and generations past. Unlike older generations, today's youth (Generation Z) have grown up entirely online, with some acquaintances they only know through the online world. This generation's version of "ground campaigns" might be entirely online-taught or online-sponsored, something to consider when evaluating political events of the future. Additionally, Instagram and other online platforms have the potential to remedy problems of traditional communication through offline coordination tactics. With the ability to reach wide audiences at the click of a button, there is less need for extensive planning, fundraising, and spending of monetary and human resources.

My findings also may insert Instagram into Schlozman, Brady, and Verba's "civic

voluntarism” model (Schlozman, Brady & Verba, 2010). Again, this model works by explaining political engagement through access to certain educational or informational resources, interest level and socialization regarding politics, and an “invitation” to engage (Verba, 1995). The results of my survey demonstrate the value of resource availability on Instagram itself (access to resources), online groupings and messaging in terms of motivating one to engage in certain offline actions (interest and socialization), and invitation (messaging or posts on the app). My survey responses indicate that new means of political mobilization may still fit within the bounds of this tried-and-true, tested model, implying that Instagram can be a viable source of influence on political engagement offline.

Additionally, it is important to note that Instagram and other social media networks may eliminate some aspects of the traditional theory that those of higher socioeconomic statuses are more inclined to participate in politics due to access to education and other resources (one component of the “civic voluntarism” model). Although my study did not focus explicitly on this aspect of political participation (or lack thereof), my findings regarding the influence of Instagram show that there must be additional investigations conducted into how Instagram and other online networks might potentially eliminate or at least partially ameliorate the participation gap between economic levels. This is certainly an area for future research. Understanding whether all young people, regardless of socioeconomic status, are effectively mobilized into real world action when they are politically active online is not clear yet.

Party differences regarding Instagram use and political participation also need further investigation. Although the “average” percentage points representing the likelihood of participating in offline political activities increased with exposure to Instagram political content in the responses to my survey, it is interesting to note that this percentage point increase did not

remain stable when differentiating between parties. As exposure to political content on Instagram increased, non-Democrats participated *less*, while their Democratic peers participated at greater rates offline. The discrepancy in participation likelihood between political parties who had the same level of political content exposure on Instagram is yet another area for additional investigation that comes from my survey the results, and adds to the already-existing data that suggests that young Democrats may use social media posting for politics far more than their Republican counterparts (Anderson et al., 2022). Additionally, the Pew Research Center has found that “About three-quarters of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (74%) say social media has been more of a bad thing for U.S. democracy, compared with a smaller majority of Democrats and Democratic-leaning (57%) (Clancy, 2022). These statistics could help to explain the discrepancies between the Democrats and non-Democrats in my survey: perhaps political ideologies in America have become polarized enough that even social media has become factionalized as politics has become included in online content.

Although it is clear that Instagram holds a tangible influence to some degree for all parties involved, this influence is nonetheless important to evaluate and begs the question of what exactly the political content is that Instagrammers are being exposed to. Is the content leaning towards the right? Center? Is it leftist? What does exposure to different political ideologies do to those who are members of each party, and what, exactly, are people posting about on both sides of the political spectrum? This is another avenue that appears important to look into as Instagram grows, Generation Z continues to vote, and parties become increasingly polarized within the United States.

While it may be easy to dismiss a generation of “screenagers,” “slacktivists,” or those who gain the majority of their news from online or social media content while being active on

these platforms, this generation will continue to make up more and more of the U.S. voting population. Additionally, the “new media” that is continually expanding is increasingly able to target discrete audiences in different and innovative ways (there are now certain campaign outreach strategies that have begun targeting voters through personal messages on dating apps!), making the political predictive process progressively unpredictable (Owen, 2018; Tran, 2023). Ignoring the reality of generational change and refusing to further investigate the constantly changing role of social media in influencing political behavior would be akin to dismissing any foresight into the political landscape of the future, as the internet and what comes with it are most certainly here to stay.

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