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The Role of Media and Social Networks in Deepening the United States Partisan Divide with a Focus on Generation Z

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Dedication

Dedicated to our parents, teachers, and those who believe in us.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of media and social networks in deepening the partisan divide in the USA with a focus on Generation Z. This work synthesises theoretical and conceptual approaches from political communication, media studies, and digital sociology to examine how lastly research the US media environment has exacerbated political polarisation. We provide theoretical foundations for analysing the relationship between media and social networks and political polarisation and we provide and highlight the mechanisms by which media consumption has influenced partisan attitudes. The work also examines the role of social networks in the 2016 and 2020 elections, as well as their role in fostering divisiveness and negativity, and the impact of media polarisation on democratic cohesion and media literacy, and finally, a review of strategies to depolarise partisanship.

Keywords*:* echo chambers, digital media, generation Z, media polarization, political communication, social networks, United States politics.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation	Full
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CPB	Corporation for Public Broadcasting
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
Gen Z	Generation Z
SNS	Social Network Sites
US	United States

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General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

American politics have become increasingly marked by partisan division, ideological disagreement, and negative feelings between Democrats and Republicans. Political polarisation can be understood in two main ways. Ideological polarisation refers to differences in political positions, while affective polarisation refers to negative feelings toward the supporters of the opposing party (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019). This distinction is important because political disagreement does not always mean conflict. The present study also considers both forms of polarisation when examining the relationship between media, social networks, and American politics.

While these polarisation dynamics affect the broader electorate, their impact is uniquely pronounced among younger populations.

In this work we focuse particularly on Generation Z, generally defined as people born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). This generation grew up during the expansion of the Internet, smartphones, and social media. Digital platforms have consequently become important spaces for receiving news, expressing political opinions, joining political communities, and forming identities. However, Generation Z is not a politically homogeneous group. The study therefore examines the different mechanisms through which digital media may influence political attitudes and partisan identity rather than treating young people as one uniform audience.

2. Statement of the Problem

While the relationship between media consumption and political polarization remains a central focus of scholarly inquiry, the directness and magnitude of this link continue to be a subject of intense debate. Proponents of the polarization thesis argue that algorithmic curation, partisan news outlets, and selective exposure reinforce pre-existing ideological preferences. However, empirical counter-evidence suggests that internet users rarely inhabit entirely

sequestered information environments (Guess et al., 2018; Eady et al., 2019). Furthermore, recent large-scale experimental research tracking the 2020 U.S. presidential election demonstrates that altering or restricting access to major social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, yields no statistically significant reduction in affective or issue-based polarization, even though it markedly dampens online political participation. Consequently, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes digital media as a compounding factor rather than the primary driver of political divergence." (Allcott et al., 2024); these findings suggest that media should be studied as one part of a wider process involving individual choices, political identities, social groups, and digital platform structures.

Research Questions: this dissertation will address the following research questions:

1. Through which theoretical frameworks can we analyze the impact of digital media and social networks architectures on the escalation of political polarisation?

2. How can media and social networks polarise Generation Z?

3. What is the structural role of social media in political communication, and how has it accelerated contemporary partisan divisions?

4. What are the implications of media-related polarisation for democracy, institutions, and engagement?

5. How can partisan polarisation be reduced, and what impact can media literacy, regulation, ethics, and deliberation have on it?

3. Aims of the Study

In this dissertation we will address the following objectives:

1. Define the relationships between media, social networks, and political polarisation.

2. Discuss the changes in the media development in the US and their impact on partisan divisions.

3. Examine the mechanisms through which media consumption and social-network use may reinforce partisan identity and contribute to ideological and affective polarisation.

4. Assess the role of social media in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

5. Explain the implications of media-related polarisation for democracy, institutions, and engagement.

6. Determine the strategies to reduce partisan polarisation.

4. The significance of the Study

The significance of study lies in bringing together theories that are often discussed separately. Agenda-setting, framing, and priming explain how media can make political issues and interpretations more salient; selective exposure and motivated reasoning explain how audiences choose and process political information; Political Socialisation Theory helps explain political development among young people; and Social Identity Theory and Group Polarisation Theory help explain how partisan identities and group interaction may contribute to polarisation. The study therefore provides an integrated framework without assuming that media automatically determine political attitudes.

5. Research Methodology

This dissertation adopts a qualitative, library-based methodology. It relies on the analysis and synthesis of existing academic research rather than original surveys, interviews, experiments, or platform-level data. The purpose is to compare theoretical explanations and existing findings about media, social networks, political identity, and polarisation. The study does not claim to establish new causal effects; it critically examines the evidence reported by previous researchers.

a. Research Design

The research design is conceptual and comparative. Chapter One develops the theoretical and conceptual framework needed to understand the relationship between media, social

networks, political identity, and polarisation. Chapter Two applies this framework to published evidence, with particular attention to the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections and the consequences of media-related polarisation for democratic life. The two elections are used as comparative cases within existing research rather than as original empirical case studies.

b. Data Sources

In the study we focus mainly on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, research reports, and publications from reputable research institutions; the sources cover media effects, political communication, selective exposure, social identity, group polarisation, social media, algorithms, political participation, Generation Z, and political polarisation. Recent studies are included where they provide important evidence about contemporary platforms and the 2016 and 2020 elections.

c. Analytical Strategy

The analysis follows three steps. First, the study identifies the main theories and mechanisms used to explain media-related polarisation. Second, it compares findings from previous studies, paying attention to differences between association and causal evidence. Third, it applies the theoretical framework to the 2016 and 2020 elections and considers implications for democratic processes and possible responses.

The study is limited to the United States and focuses on the contemporary media environment, with particular attention to Generation Z and the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. It considers traditional and social media, especially digital political communication, partisan identity, and polarisation. Generation Z is treated as a focal cohort rather than a homogeneous political group.

The main limitation is the library-based nature of the study, because no original empirical data are collected, the dissertation cannot independently test causal relationships. Its conclusions depend on the quality and limitations of existing studies. The rapid development of digital

platforms is another limitation, since algorithms, platform policies, and patterns of media use change quickly. Findings about particular platforms or elections should therefore not automatically be generalised to all users.

6. Structure of the Study

We divide this dissertation in two chapters that address the research problem from different angles.

This dissertation consists of two chapters: Chapter One, entitled “Media, Social Networks, and Political Polarisation: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations”, establishes the conceptual and theoretical basis of the study. It defines the main concepts, traces the development of American media, and examines agenda-setting, framing, priming, selective exposure, motivated reasoning, algorithmic influence, Political Socialisation Theory, Social Identity Theory, Group Polarisation Theory, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarised media audiences. The chapter ends with an integrated theoretical framework that guides the analysis in chapter two.

Chapter Two, entitled “Media, Social Networks, and the Deepening of the United States Partisan Divide”, applies the framework developed in Chapter One to existing evidence. It examines media coverage of presidential elections, the role of social media in electoral campaigns, and the 2016 and 2020 elections. It then discusses public trust, political participation, democratic cohesion, and possible responses such as media literacy, platform regulation, ethical journalism, and civic dialogue. The General conclusion brings together the main findings, answers the research questions, discusses the contribution and limitations of the study, and suggests directions for future research.

CHAPTER ONE

Title Media, Social Networks, and Political Polarisation: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

Chapter One: Title Media, Social Networks, and Political Polarisation: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

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Introduction

For any meaningful study, it is essential to present definitions and conceptual background for the phenomenon that one seeks to understand. This is particularly evident in the set of terms related to the media, social networks, partisanship, and polarisation. The concepts are far from being unique and not covered by one definition, as researchers tend to use different formulations to describe the same phenomenon**.** So, the purpose of this section is to review various definitions, describe the theoretical frameworks associated with them, identify common themes, and isolate the meanings that we will utilise in our analysis.

1.1. Definition of Media

Media is one of those terms that is difficult to define, while virtually every scholar and practitioner will recognise the notion. When taken together, communication studies literature identifies three theoretical foundations for understanding what media is, which are determined by the distinctions of its definition. First, there is the functionalist approach, best articulated by Denis McQuail who has written extensively on the subject. In particular, in the *International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, McQuail (2016) notes that the concept of mass communication" was defined in the early 20th century when the press, film, radio, and television "brought together new social relationships and institutional structures, which were linked to significant changes in political and social organisation . In other words, the mass communication theories focus on the role media plays in society. The functionalist perspective understands media as an institution that must accept and carry out positive development tasks and ensure freedom of the press compatible with national integration and socio-economic modernisation (McQuail, 2016). There is no doubt that the functionalist approach, which dominated post-war communication studies, produced interesting insights about the relationship between state, media, and society. Also, its influence in the field has been decreasing, and the rise of critical

approaches has prompted scholars and practitioners to re-examine several tenets of functionalism.

For this dissertation we view media as an intermediary between news producers and consumers. This definition includes traditional media outlets such as books, newspapers, and film but also online publications and entertainment content such as music videos. Media production involves encoding information in a specific form, distributing it to the target audiences, and facilitating feedback integration. With that said, we agree with McQuail (2016) and other scholars who have noted that due to the rise of online platforms, public communication is increasingly demassified, fragmented, diversified, interactive, and participatory. In other words, we inform that the media landscape is changing and it is no longer possible to speak about one media organisation or one type of content distribution.

1.1.2 Definition of Social Networks

The term “social networks” needs further clarification, as this term is often confused with the term “social media.” Particularly, it is necessary to distinguish between these terms and describe the main characteristics of social networks referred to by researchers.

The definition below was developed by anah boyd and Nicole Ellison in 2007: web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

The definition is noteworthy because it focuses on the technological capabilities that social networks provide. At the same time, it must be said that Boyd and Ellison (2007) opted for the term "network" as opposed to "networking," a decision that has been criticised by several researchers: "While 'networking' is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them, nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication" (p. 211).

For this purpose, we would like to define the term social networks because it allows me to set the boundaries of our study. Therefore, social networks are media tools that allow users to publish content, build social connections, and participate in the distribution process. While we agree with boyd and Ellison (2007) that these platforms do more than facilitate networking, we believe that the definition provided above is useful because it captures the importance of connection-building in SNSs, i.e. Social Networking Services.

1.1.3 Definition of Partisanship

The term partisanship originates in the research conducted by the Michigan School. It was first introduced in *The American Voter*, a book written by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes in 1960. In this work, the authors offer a comprehensive assessment of the role political parties play in America. The following definition comes from this book: "The tendency of the individual citizen to prefer either of the two major parties in a consistent manner [...] extends beyond any legal or formal party attachment or even beyond consistent party voting" (p. 121).

In this dissertation, we adopt Campbell et al.'s (1960) definition of partisanship, but we also consider subsequent amendments. Partisanship is a concept that reflects individuals' loyalty to their preferred party and their ability to utilise that loyalty to form political opinions; we think it is important to separate positive and negative parts since both contribute to the development of polarisation.

1.1.4 Definition of Political Polarisation

Political polarisation is perhaps better defined by exclusion, as the most contested concept in this study: different phenomena are subsumed under the term 'political polarisation' in both scholarly and popular debates. Iyengar et al. (2019), who provide a comprehensive overview of the topic, distinguish between ideological polarisation and affective polarisation in this study:

a- **Ideological polarisation** refers to the divergence of political attitudes, especially of ideology, among individuals and groups. This is the traditional understanding of political polarization; namely, the view grounded in the spatial model of politics according to which individuals or organisations hold opinions that are located on either end of the ideological continuum.

b- **Affective polarisation** is substantially more complex, as it touches upon partisan preferences and identities. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) define affective polarisation in the American context as "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" (691). Iyengar et al. (2012) explain affective polarisation as "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group" (406). The simplest and most straightforward definition is provided by Iyengar et al. (2019): "animosity between the parties" (130).

1.2. Evolution of Media in the United States

The current state of the media in the United States is the result of a long and complicated historical process. It is therefore useful to review the evolution of the media in US society to understand better the trends discussed in this study. This section provides a brief overview of the evolution of media in the US, focusing on changes in both digital and traditional media. It explores how different forms of media affect politics and how they shaped the environment within which modern-day political communication takes place.

1.2.1 Traditional Media and Political Communication

American political communication has gone through several major phases in its development; each of these phases was driven by new technologies that facilitated the spread of information and discourse (Schudson, 1996). Scholars have noted that the principal goals of political communication rarely change, even political communication strategies have evolved a great deal over the course of American history. The various stages of development have been

referred to by many as political communication revolutions, which have ultimately resulted in four political communication orders: “the elite order”, “the mass order”, “the broadcast order”, and the current “information order” (Prior, 2007).

The earliest order, the elite order, was the communication between different factions of the American political elite (Prior, 2007).. It took place primarily in the press, but the press at the time did not refer to newspapers but to pamphlets and speeches. Newspapers were partisan by definition, with writers identifying with either the Federalists or the Democratic-Republicans. The two sides were extremely hostile to each other, and the media of the time reflected this opposition.

The mass order emerged in the late 19th century and early 20th century with the introduction of mass circulation newspapers and magazines. This period saw the advent of “penny presses”, which provided readers with entertainment (and information) for a very affordable price. Journalists adhered to a professional ethic that dictated objectivity and impartiality (Prior, 2007).. The mass order was defined by circulation: newspapers began to be distributed far and wide, providing millions of people with access to the information published in them.

The “broadcast order” was fueled by the introduction of radio as a medium and eventually television. Radio was initially available to few, but in the 1920s, it became more accessible. The most important development leading to the broadcast order, however, was the introduction of television. The 'fairness doctrine', designed for broadcast media, was instrumental in the creation of the broadcast order, but it was also limited in its scope (Prior, 2007). It applied only to broadcast stations. The broadcast order is also the era of the 'three networks', when most people watched TV news on either ABC, CBS, or NBC. These three networks represented the opinion of the American public in a way, as their news divisions reflected the dominant school of political thought at the time.

The current order is the "information order"—a product of the advent of the cable TV industry and the Internet. The hallmark of the information order is choice: an unprecedented amount of media outlets compete for the attention of the public. Information now is fragmented and plentiful: Prior (2007) has shown that the abundance of information sources has made it possible for people to choose whom to trust and seek information from exclusively. In other words, people can select their own information diet.

1.2.2 The Role of Television and Newspapers in Shaping Public Opinion

Television and newspapers played a major role in shaping public opinion before the rise of digital media. Their influence is relevant to this study because they established important practices of agenda-setting, political framing, and public evaluation that later continued in digital environments (Cohen, 1963).

The rise of digital communications has fundamentally changed political communication in unprecedented ways. It not only provided new ways for politicians to communicate with their constituents but also influenced the way news is covered in modern media. It has also resulted in considerable changes to the drive for political participation and polarisation. The emergence of online news sites and social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the media ecosystem. This development has been closely linked to the emergence of the information order. However, digital communications have also introduced new forces to the relationship between media and politics.

Digital technologies enable both parties to communicate instantly and directly without relying on any intermediaries. There are a number of factors that differentiate the digital media environment from the environment shaped by traditional media. First, it is known that the audience is no longer as united and integrated as it used to be. Thanks to technology, the media outlets are split into countless numbers: instead of choosing between several major networks, everyone can pick any number of alternatives. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the early

forms of digital media mirrored the characteristics of the print order. In particular, the early Internet and email were similar to the penny press newspapers.

However, the rise of social media has transformed the situation once more. Media consumption became interactive: people do not only follow the production, but also participate in it, sharing their own content and interacting with others. The rise of social media has also resulted in increased personalisation of media content. Algorithms suggest content to users based on their viewing history or the items they have purchased, thus introducing a strong individual component to the media diet. In addition, the digital environment enables extremely fast distribution of information. In particular, the speed of information spreading has increased dramatically due to the use of various online platforms and the ubiquity of smartphones. Information now travels much faster and reaches a much larger audience than it used to with traditional distribution methods.

The implications of such changes to the relationship between media and politics are profound. In particular, increased fragmentation of media outlets and the audience has resulted in the phenomenon of echo chambers. In other words, people now have much more choice in what media content they consume. As a result, they often opt for content that shares their political views, which leads to an extreme polarisation of public opinion. Scholars have found that the ability to choose what to watch has made the audiences more selective, which has been especially evident in the context of partisan media outlets (Prior, 2007).

Echo chamber effects may be amplified by the interactive nature of social media. Users are not just consuming media content: they can actively participate in the production of new content and comment on existing material. In effect, social media has turned everyone into a media producer and politician. The increased reliance on social media has also affected the fundraising and campaigning activities of political parties and campaigners. In particular, the 2008 Obama campaign is often cited as a groundbreaking intervention in political campaigning that capitalised on the opportunities offered by social media. Subsequent presidential campaigns

have built upon the experience of the Obama campaign, incorporating social media into their wider strategy.

However, the same features that enable successful fundraising and campaigning can facilitate the spread of fake news or misinformation. There are now strong grounds for claiming that the spread of misinformation has been significantly enhanced by the rise of social media. In particular, "AI-driven recommendation algorithms, particularly the SimClusters segment, perpetuate misinformation, create and reinforce polarisations, and consequently, threaten democracies" (Kuku et al., 2025, p. 1). The US presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 have been severely affected by misleading information, both from domestic and foreign sources (Benkler et al., 2018).

1.3. Theories of Media Influence on Political Attitudes

The relationship between media and political ideologies is complex and multifaceted. Media outlets do not exist in a political vacuum: they function within a certain environment and therefore hold various biases. Such biases can be manifold: some researchers have argued that media outlets tend to consistently support one political party over the others, or that they adopt specific stances towards certain issues. However, the term media bias is also commonly used to denote the differences in the presentation of news, depending on the outlet. In particular, there is a body of research, both historical and contemporary, that discusses the ways in which news coverage can deviate from the principles of objectivity and can take an overtly partisan stance.

This section sheds light on the ways in which media outlets represent political issues using such approaches as agenda-setting, framing, and selective exposure. It also discusses the implications of these strategies for the formation and expression of political ideologies.

1.3.1 Media Bias and Agenda-Setting Theory

Media bias is not a novel phenomenon: it has existed since the dawn of the press and continues to be the subject of extensive research in political communication. There is a general

agreement among scholars that it is a pervasive characteristic of media outlets, although the exact definition of the concept remains contested. At its core, media bias refers to the fact that news coverage does not adhere to the principles of objectivity and is instead infused with subjective elements (Hamborg et al., 2019). In particular, most scholars agree that media outlets operate with a certain ideology in mind when reporting on news and evaluating political developments. In essence, media bias can take many forms, from selection bias (reporting on certain issues while ignoring others) to framing bias (presenting the news in a way that takes a specific stance on the issue) and statement bias (explicitly expressing opinionated viewpoints on the issue) (Hamborg et al., 2019).

Agenda-setting is a closely related concept, with the two terms often being used interchangeably in practice. The theory was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who conducted a famous analysis of the presidential campaign of 1968. According to them, "the media may not tell the people what to think about, but it can influence substantially what they think about" Cohen 1963, p. 13). In turn, the agenda-setting theory suggests that "the press sets the public agenda by deciding which issues to cover and which to leave alone" (McCombs & Shaw 1972, p. 177)

Agenda-setting therefore refers to the way media outlets distribute coverage across different issues and, consequently, the distribution of public attention. An issue is defined as "a social problem, often one associated with conflict that has received mass media coverage" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 130). Issues have varying levels of salience, which means that the public is more concerned about some issues than others. By selecting which issues to report on, media outlets can influence the levels of salience.

Agenda-setting is one of the well-researched areas of media studies. There is ample academic literature on the subject, including theoretical works, such as McCombs's and Shaw's study mentioned above, as well as numerous empirical analyses. Researchers have identified different levels of agenda-setting—first-level agenda-setting (setting object salience), second-

level agenda-setting (setting attribute salience, which is also known as issue framing), and third-level agenda-setting, also referred to as network agenda-setting, which focuses on relationships between objects, attributes, and issues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Scholars have also applied agenda-setting to topics beyond politics, such as social issues, and developed an extensive theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon (McCombs, 2014).

1.3.2 Framing and Political Narratives

Entman (2003) defined framing as "the process of selecting and highlighting some aspects of a story while suppressing and deemphasising others" (p. 417). In other words, frames are interpretive schemes that facilitate information processing. The frames highlight certain elements, "activating different thoughts and feelings in recipients" (p.417). At the same time, researchers have found that frames influence how political issues are perceived and judged by the public ("framing effect") (Entman, 2003).

Entman (2003) developed a cascading activation model of framing that involves the sequential activation of frames from the White House, through Washington elites, media, and finally the public. Entman (2003) pointed out that this is a mutual relationship: Presidential administrations and Washington elites are guided and controlled by the news (actual or anticipated), just as news organisations tailor the news to fit the (actual or anticipated) opinions of the public“ In other words, the interaction between policymakers and media is dialectical, in that they reciprocally influence each other.

Framing has been strongly linked to discussion about narratives. Specifically, narratives serve as story-telling devices by which events, issues, and agents can be presented in a manner that gives them a particular meaning, in addition to other implications (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In particular, narratives have consequences on the meaning that specific events, issues, and agents have for their audiences, as they involve emphasis on certain facets while de-emphasis on others, as well as judgments about what is right and wrong. Moreover, narratives also have plot twists, protagonists, villains, heroes, victims, and other elements. It is therefore no

surprise that competing political narratives are ubiquitous in the modern media system, especially in partisan outlets.

“Priming” is another important theoretical concept that relates to the media's role in political communication. Specifically, priming occurs "when media coverage increases the salience of certain ideas; by doing so it places them in the forefront of the public mind, so that they become focal points for assessing the world; in other words, they are used as reference points" (Druckman, 2004, p. 19). In short, news media set the news agenda, and, in the process, journalists prioritise specific topics over others. These topics then become the reference points for how the public evaluates the issues under discussion. Priming has been found to have "a more potent effect on the audience than agenda-setting—especially when it comes to political communication" (Druckman, 2004, p. 20).

How does framing relate to political polarisation? One of the most damaging effects of partisan outlets is that they enable the emergence of divergent realities. In other words, through the use of different frames, political issues, actors, and events are presented in different light to the audiences of left- and right-leaning outlets. The fact that media play such a predominant role in political communication makes it possible for them to significantly contribute to the deepening of political polarisation. Indeed, scholars have found that left and right-leaning news outlets reflected the nation's polarisation, criticising the other side while strengthening their own, underscoring the role of journalism in fuelling ideological divides among citizens (van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021).

1.3.3 Selective Exposure and Audience Segmentation

The phenomenon of “selective exposure and audience segmentation” has been discussed in political communication literature for decades. Specifically, as early as in 1944, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet found that "individuals tend to seek out media that confirms their existing attitudes and avoid media that take a contrary position" (p. 316). In other words, audiences are

not passive consumers of information; they make active choices as to what they want to hear. Moreover, these choices are often motivated by the desire to confirm one's reality.

“Selective exposure” is deeply connected with partisan divides. As it may also be known, “concept of confirmation bias” suggests that "the tendency for people to expose themselves to information consistent with their existing beliefs partly reflects a desire to feel confirmed" (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, et al., 2020, p. 1457). In other words, selective exposure can be motivated by the desire to feel better about one's partisan identity. As such, confirmation biases can lead to the strengthening of one's partisan preferences. Therefore, many researchers believe that selective exposure “denote that audiences' selection preferences might take the form of a confirmation bias" (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, et al., 2020, p. 1457).

The emergence of the internet and social media has made audience segmentation even more prevalent. Indeed, in the era of broadcast media, it was easier for individuals to consume news from a limited number of outlets. The choices that they had to make were limited, as well. In the meantime, the rise of the internet, social media, and online newspapers has enabled individuals to choose from a wide array of news outlets. In fact, the literature on political communication argues that "in recent years, the audience has become segmented into different groups that rely on specific media resources (often partisan outlets) to obtain news and information about political affairs" (Guess et al., 2018, p. 2).

The popularity of partisan outlets has skyrocketed during the last two decades. There is now a lot of partisan news outlets that serve to advance the positions of one political side or the other. In fact, there is even a fierce competition among outlets that target the same audience. Fox News, MSNBC, Breitbart, Daily Kos, and many others have been identified as venues that amplify the voices of one political side while dismissing the other; thus, "Partisan cable networks such as Fox News and MSNBC have the potential to polarise their audiences through a wide array of coverage choices" (Rogers et al., 2020, p. 1). In fact, the coverage of the

composition of each party's House by partisan outlets "may contribute to affective polarisation between Democrats and Republicans" (Rogers et al., 2020, p. 18).

Audience segmentation and selective exposure have been associated with the phenomenon of echo chambers. The next section provides a detailed discussion of echo chambers and their impact on the level and nature of political polarisation.

1.3.4 Priming

"Priming" complements agenda-setting and framing by explaining how media exposure can make particular considerations more accessible when audiences evaluate political actors, issues, or events. Whereas agenda-setting concerns the salience of issues and framing concerns the interpretive emphasis placed on those issues, priming concerns the standards or considerations that become cognitively accessible for subsequent political judgments (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In the context of political polarisation, "priming" is important because repeated emphasis on conflict, threat, scandal, or partisan performance can influence the criteria by which citizens evaluate the opposing party. Thus, when applied to social-media environments, priming helps explain how repeated exposure to particular political cues may reinforce partisan evaluations even when users encounter the same political event.

1.3.5 Motivated Reasoning

Selective exposure explains why individuals may choose information consistent with prior beliefs, but motivated reasoning helps explain what happens when people encounter information that challenges those beliefs. Motivated reasoning refers to the tendency to process political information in ways that protect valued attitudes, identities, or conclusions. In partisan contexts, citizens may therefore evaluate congenial information more favourably and scrutinise uncongenial information more critically. This mechanism complements selective exposure and confirmation bias and is particularly relevant to digital political communication, where individuals can encounter both supportive and opposing information while interpreting that

information through pre-existing partisan commitments. Research on selective exposure also demonstrates that ingroup and negativity biases can shape political information choices (Lodge & Taber, 2013).

1.4 The Rise of Social Media Platforms

Social networks have significantly changed how modern citizens relate to politics, which is why this section explores how social networks are evolved, how they facilitate political participation, why algorithms matter, and how Gen Z navigates through social networks and politics.

The development of social media transformed political communication from a mainly one-way process into a more interactive and personalised environment. Facebook, X/Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok provide politicians, journalists, activists, and ordinary users with opportunities to produce and circulate political content. At the same time, platform design and recommendation systems can influence what users encounter. Research on X/Twitter has identified structural ideological clustering (Conoveret al., 2012), while research on TikTok has drawn attention to recommendation systems in political information consumption among young users (Stray, 2022). These platforms should therefore be treated as different environments rather than as identical causes of polarisation.

Social media platforms offer a new opportunity for political participation and mobilisation. They allow citizens to participate in the political sphere in ways that were not possible before: to spread and share political messages, to organise, to protest, to contact representatives directly, and to discuss politics. Political mobilisation through social media can take place in a number of ways, including (Shirky, 2008) :

- Through lowering barriers to entry: sharing a message is much easier than showing up at a rally;
- Through facilitating coordination—protests can be coordinated more easily via Facebook and Twitter than previously;
- Through empowering those without access to traditional media.

The concept of **digital participation** encompasses a wide range of online political activities, from relatively less active forms such as following politicians and political actors on social media to more active forms such as sharing political posts and articles, creating and disseminating political content, and mobilising others through digital networks. Research suggests that digitally networked participation constitutes an important and increasingly distinct form of political participation, particularly because digital media enable citizens to produce, share, and circulate political content while activating their social networks (Theocharis et al., 2021). More recent scholarship argues that political participation on social media should be understood as a "conceptually distinct mode of political participation", shaped by the unique affordances of social media and characterized by its networked and political nature (Waeterloos, 2025, p. 14). .Research on social media and political participation has focused on so-called hashtag politics. Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo or #MAGA create a shared space for political discussion and action, and they enable people to organise around political causes. Therefore, hashtag politics can be understood as a strategic digital space through which collective identity is constructed and civic engagement is facilitated (Sudirman et al., 2024).

Digital participation practices can have varying degrees of political impact; they can range from "slacktivism" to coordinated activism. Many scholars content that digital participation often replaces old forms of political participation, while others have argued that digital participation often serves as a gateway to real-world participation. Studies have found mixed evidence on the relationship between digital and traditional forms of participation. Some

studies found that digital participation was associated with increased levels of traditional (offline) participation, while others found no associations or even negative relationships.

1.4.1 Algorithmic Influence on Information Consumption

A defining feature of the modern media ecosystem is the role of algorithms in distributing content. Algorithms play a critical role in promoting content on social media sites, deciding which news stories to recommend, and determining what topics to suppress.

The most obvious way in which algorithms shape information consumption is through recommendation systems. Algorithms are used on social media to suggest tweets, posts, videos, and other content for promotion. Algorithms typically operate based on a combination of collaborative filtering and content filtering. A challenge for researchers is that social media algorithms are often opaque, with their underlying processes and decision-making mechanisms difficult for users and researchers to fully understand (Eslami et al., 2019). At the same time, platform recommendation systems are generally designed around engagement-oriented objectives, using user interactions and other signals to curate and personalize the content that users encounter (González-Bailón, 2023).

The way in which social media algorithms contribute to polarisation is through amplification. They have found that algorithms filtering and magnification in information flow can significantly worsen the polarisation of political issues (Eslami et al., 2019).. Algorithms prioritise content that is attention-grabbing and "engagement-driven". Content that provokes strong emotional reactions tends to be amplified more than content that is neutral or moderate.

The mechanisms by which algorithms amplify certain types of information while suppressing others include (Eslami et al., 2019):

- Creating **filter bubbles** in which users encounter only information that confirms their existing views while being shielded from information that contradicts them;
- Amplifying **extreme views** that dominate among one's followers;
- Creating **echo chambers** by encouraging users to engage primarily with similar others.

Specialists maintain that algorithmic amplification processes reiforces polarisation by exacerbating ideological divisions, radicalising individuals and groups, and fuelling misinformation (González-Bailón, 2023). A 2026 study published in *Nature* demonstrated that switching from a chronological to an algorithmic feed increased both engagement and shifted users' political opinions in a more conservative direction (Gauthier et al., 2026). The study found that users who switched from a chronological to an algorithmic feed were more likely to follow conservative political activist accounts, and these changes in following behaviour persisted even after the algorithmic feed was switched off. These findings suggest that algorithmic feed curation can influence not only users' immediate exposure to political content but also their longer-term patterns of political information consumption (Gauthier et al., 2026). A recent study of algorithmic recommendation on short-video platforms argues that algorithmic recommendation can contribute to opinion polarisation by examining the interaction between user behaviour, content distribution, and network structures, particularly through the filtering and amplification of information flows (Zhang, 2026).

An important caveat is that algorithms are not inherently polarising—they are designed by humans and reflect the priorities of the people who design them.They argue that algorithmic filtering—often blamed for "filter bubbles"—can, under certain conditions, sustain diversity by stabilising mixed communities, suggesting that the effects of algorithms on social media users are not necessarily entirely negative (Törnberg, 2026). There is evidence that Twitter and Facebook have adjusted their algorithms in response to user concerns about polarisation, and the

extent to which algorithmic curation promotes or reduces polarisation is a topic of debate among researchers.

1.4.2 Generation Z and Digital Political Behaviour

The characteristics of the social media generation (also known as Generation Z) are of particular interest in relation to the research questions of this dissertation. Generation Z is the first generation to have spent their entire lives in the digital age and thus have fundamentally different relationships with digital technologies and the media compared to previous generations. Understanding these differences is essential to answering the research questions of this dissertation, which explore the links between media, social networks, and polarisation.

People born between 1997 and 2012 are generally considered to belong to Generation Z. This generation is "digital natives", meaning they have lived their lives surrounded by digital technologies. As such, they have a fundamentally different relationship to technology and the internet compared to previous generations. Generation Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse cohort in the history of the United States and is generally more socially tolerant and liberal than previous generations (Dimock, 2019). It is important to note, however, that Generation Z is not a homogenous entity; it encompasses a wide range of ethnic, gender, class, and regional diversity.

In terms of political socialisation, academics have identified some trends that distinguish Generation Z from their predecessors. Research has shown that “Gen Z is more politically active than previous generations of youth, partly due to this generation's emergence as ‘digital natives’” (Dobbs, 2026, p.845). In fact, "their activism is characterised by a blend of online and offline activities underpinned by strong moral convictions and the value of personal experiences". Gen Z's activism is highly inclusive and intersectional, enabling activism to cut across different causes and uniting disparate activist communities (Dobbs, 2026). At the same time, it is important to nuance this viewpoint, as the popular rhetoric often paints too rosy a picture of Generation Z's activism. It has been said that young people are not uniformly activist, left-

leaning, Democratic voters. In fact, Gen Z voters are decidedly more independent and Latino than their party-affiliated counterparts. This suggests that young people are more fluid in their political beliefs than is often assumed.

Differences between Generation Z and older generationsa have been found in terms of media consumption. In many ways, Generation Z is the first social media generation, spending long hours on a variety of digital platforms. News consumption by young people is largely digital, with social media being the preferred platform. Pew Research Center (2024) reports that among adults under 30, 43% say they regularly get news on TikTok, more than four times the share who said this five years ago (9%)". No other platform "has seen news consumption grow as much as on TikTok".

The way in which young people consume news and other types of media has ramifications for the way in which their political views are formed and expressed. First and foremost, it is important to note that trust in the media is low across all age groups and that younger generations in particular are sceptical of the role of media in society. A 2025 Gallup poll reports that trust in the media hit a new low, i.e., Only 28% of respondents expressed trust in the media. This is part of a general trend: younger generations are generally more distrustful of the media than older ones.

Another characteristic of Generation Z in terms of its relationship with media is its increasing reliance on digital and social media as a source of information. As mentioned earlier, social media are the preferred news platform among young people. This suggests that they are much more reliant on digital platforms as a source of information than previous generations. Such a phenomenon has implications for polarisation, as discussed later.

The identity formation of Generation Z is deeply knotted with its relationships with the media and social networks. For young people, social media are often an important space for developing a sense of political identity. This, in turn, has implications for political polarisation, which will be discussed further in this chapter.

The complex nature of Generation Z's relationship with media is difficult to capture concisely. This is because it can be viewed through a number of different lenses: the way in which young people consume media, the way in which they interact with it, the way in which they use it to participate in politics, and how these patterns differ from those of older generations. This dissertation touches on some of these themes, and Chapter Two will later explore Generation Z's unique relationship with digital culture in greater detail.

1.4.3 Political Socialisation and Digital Political Identity

Political socialisation provides a useful framework for explaining how individuals acquire political orientations, values, identities, and patterns of participation through interaction with socialising agents such as family, peers, schools, political institutions, and media. For Generation Z, digital platforms constitute an increasingly important environment in which political information is encountered, discussed, evaluated, and performed. Social media therefore should not be understood only as channels for transmitting political messages; they also function as social environments in which political identities can be reinforced through interaction with peers and politically like-minded communities. This perspective is particularly relevant to our study because the dissertation examines Generation Z as a unit whose political communication takes place extensively within digitally mediated environments (Jennings & Niemi, 1968). Political socialisation consequently provides the developmental link between media exposure and the formation or reinforcement of partisan identity.

1.5. Theories of Partisan Identity and Political Polarisation

Media consumption and partisan identity influence each other in complex ways. Partisan identity affects which types of media and which outlets one consumes. Partisan media, in turn, affects the formation of partisan identities, often serving as a catalyst for polarisation. This section will put forward theories of partisan Identity and Political polarisation:

1.5.1 Social Identity Theory and Partisan Identity

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides a central theoretical explanation for the relationship between group membership and intergroup attitudes. The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and tend to categorise people into in-groups and out-groups. Through social comparison, individuals may seek to maintain a positive evaluation of their in-group, which can produce in-group favouritism and negative evaluations of relevant out-groups. In American politics, party identification can operate as a social identity rather than merely as a preference for a particular policy position. Green et al. (2002) demonstrate the importance of social identities in understanding party identification, while Iyengar et al. (2012) explicitly connect social identity processes to affective polarisation. From this perspective, partisan polarisation cannot be understood only as disagreement over ideology; it may also involve emotional attachment to one's own partisan group and hostility toward the opposing group. Social Identity Theory therefore provides the psychological mechanism linking partisan identification to affective polarisation.

1.5.2 Group Polarisation Theory

Group Polarisation Theory further explains how interaction within politically homogeneous groups may intensify pre-existing attitudes. Isenberg (1986) and Sunstein (2001, 2017) argues that when like-minded individuals interact repeatedly, they may move toward more extreme positions than those they initially held. This process can occur through persuasive arguments, social comparison, and pressure toward perceived group norms. In digital political environments, where users can form communities around shared partisan identities, group polarisation provides a mechanism through which repeated interaction among like-minded users may intensify political attitudes and hostility toward opposing groups. Importantly, group polarisation should not be treated as an inevitable consequence of online interaction; rather, it is a theoretical mechanism that helps explain why particular communication environments may

facilitate attitudinal intensification. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) further demonstrate the relevance of group-based processes to contemporary partisan hostility in the United States.

1.5.3 Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

The phenomena of echo-chamber dynamics and filter bubbles have become prominent in debates concerning media and polarisation.

The two concepts are related but distinct, and researchers have noted various differences between them. The concept of echo chambers refers to situations in which people are exposed mainly to information that confirms their existing views while being shielded from alternative, often opposing, perspectives (Barberá, 2020, p. 51). “The main characteristic of social networking sites is that they allow politically like-minded individuals to find one another,” Cass Sunstein has argued (as cited in Barberá, 2020, p. 51). In such circumstances, “citizens are only exposed to information that reinforces their political views and remain isolated from other individuals with opposing views” (Sunstein, 2018, as cited in Barberá, 2020, p. 51). Sunstein has argued that such dynamics lead to “group polarisation,” in which like-minded people interact repeatedly and take stronger stands on issues than they would have adopted if they had interacted with people who held divergent views (Sunstein, 2018).

The concept of “filter bubbles” is similar to echo chambers but has been applied mainly to algorithmic recommendation systems. Eli Pariser (2011) has argued that "algorithms" are dangerous because social media users did not realise they existed, and that filter bubbles may stop you from seeing certain information by design or by accident. In other words, filter bubbles may exclude the possibility of bipartisan interaction, thereby leaving our strongly biased views unchallenged . Algorithms allow companies to personalise search results and news feeds, exposing users only to information that they are likely to engage with. In doing so, algorithms prevent users from encountering diverse perspectives, exposing them mainly to information that confirms their existing views.

Sunstein's and Pariser's theories of partisan dynamics have been extremely influential, and many researchers have built upon their ideas to develop an understanding of the forces that drive political polarisation. In particular, Sunstein (2018) a leading proponent of this view, argues that the main characteristic of social networking sites is that they allow politically like-minded individuals to find one another; citizens are only exposed to information that reinforces their political views and remain isolated from other individuals with opposing views, in part due to the filtering effects of ranking algorithms that generate filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) and "create incentives for publishers to share clickbait and hyper-partisan content (Benkler et al. 2018)". Put simply, filter bubbles and echo chambers lead to extreme polarisation, which manifests in a society that is increasingly segregated along partisan lines and where compromise becomes unlikely due to rising mistrust of public officials, media outlets, and ordinary citizens on the other side of the aisle.

There is mixed evidence on the extent to which filter bubbles and echo chambers dominate modern media discourse. Several studies have claimed that there is little evidence that Americans are currently living in partisan news silos. Guess et al. (2018) have argued that while many Americans do rely on partisan news sites to obtain news, most Americans' overall news diets are not as homogeneous as the echo chamber literature suggests. Correspondingly, some have believe that echo chambers and filter bubbles don't reflect our media environment. There is growing recognition of the fact that the majority of users interact with a wide range of media content, albeit selectively.

Critics of the concept of filter bubbles have argued that echo chambers and filter bubbles principally constitute an unfounded moral panic that presents a convenient technological scapegoat for a much more critical problem: growing social and political polarisation. Said another way, the focus on filter bubbles and echo chambers obscures the ways in which structural shifts in society drive polarisation. These theories divert from the fact that social

change, particularly economic change, has created new social cleavages that make polarisation more likely.

With this caution, it is important to stress that both filter bubbles and echo chambers are real phenomena: the majority of social media users receive information in a way that confirms their predispositions while filtering out opposing views. However, what this dissertation endeavors to discuss is the effect of these bubbles on polarization.

1.5.4 Identity Politics and Media Narratives

The relationship between identity politics and media narratives is of paramount importance in understanding the current politicized social climate. Identity politics refers to the view of society as a union of various groups with different world views who must fight for representation and the right to speak on specific matters (Heyes, 2020). In the US, the space of identity politics is occupied predominantly by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Contemporary American politics has seen the association of these categories with the Democratic or Republican parties. Specifically, Democrats are increasingly viewed as the party of minorities, women, and the secular, while Republicans are seen as the champions of whites, males, and the religious.

There is a symbiosis between media narratives and identity politics, where the former magnifies the latter. Partisan outlets have been shown to amplify the voices of minorities and the prominence of identity-based politics in general: Their partisan outlets' coverage of the 2016 campaign reflected and reinforced the polarization in the nation, with each criticizing the other's ideology and voting preferences more than they praised them. Simplified, the role of partisan media in contemporary American politics has been to foment division and polarization by fueling identity-based discourse. The relationship between media narratives and identity politics is mutually beneficial, as both contribute to the advancement of partisanship. On the one hand, media narratives increase the perceived relevance of different identity categories in politics; on the other hand, the association of specific social groups with a political party makes these

groups' views more in demand, thus fueling identity-based narratives. Indeed, researchers have found that political polarization is occurring at least partly because of changes in media narratives that lead to increasing affective polarization – when each party of the electorate becomes more negative in its affect toward the other party than toward its own," which has been a feature of identity-based politics. According to a recent study, "72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats said the other party was more immoral than other Americans – compared with 47% and 35% respectively in 2016 – suggesting that partisan animosity has increased substantially in recent years." (Pew Research Center, 2022, p. 5)

1.5.5 Polarised Media Audiences

The concept of polarised media audiences captures the ways in which media consumption patterns have become increasingly aligned with partisan identity. In the contemporary media environment, partisans consume different news sources, have different information diets, and often inhabit different media worlds.

Research has documented significant partisan differences in media consumption. According to Pew Research Center, "strong partisan patterns of news consumption" characterize the American media landscape. Democrats and Republicans hold divergent views of trust in different media outlets" (p.5). For instance; "almost two-thirds of Democrats (65%) say they most trust mainstream TV news sources, compared with 44% of independents and 27% of Republicans." In contrast; "nearly four in ten independents (39%) say they do not trust TV news at all, compared with 31% of Republicans and 27% of Democrats." (p. 6).

Moreover, partisan differences characterised respondents' views on media bias, with conservatives most likely to say that the mainstream media were biased against their preferred party, which influenced their media consumption choices since they felt compelled to consume partisan news outlets that shared their viewpoints seeking to confirm their existing attitudes The polarization of the media audience has several implications for democracy. The difference in the perspectives created by the different media consumption leads partisans to disagree about the

factual basis of political problems and solutions, which makes it difficult to formulate policies, undermining democracy. Furthermore, because partisans are exposed to different news, each considering the other as more informed, it creates room for individuals to exploit democratic processes and political positions to advance personal interests, which is detrimental to democracy.

It is essential to note that media audience polarization occurs differently among various groups.

Some individuals consume news from a variety of sources, including sources that challenge their partisan assumptions. Others may be politically disengaged, consuming little political news at all. The polarisation of media audiences is most pronounced among the politically engaged, who are also the most likely to vote and participate in other forms of political activity.

Conclusion

In this chapter we established the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the dissertation. It defined media, social networks, partisanship, and political polarisation, distinguished ideological from affective polarisation, and traced the development of American media from traditional forms to the fragmented digital environment. It also examined agenda-setting, framing, priming, selective exposure, motivated reasoning, algorithmic influence, Political Socialisation Theory, Social Identity Theory, Group Polarisation Theory, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarised media audiences.

Connected, these approaches show that media do not produce polarisation through one mechanism. Political information is shaped by media practices and algorithms, selected and interpreted by users, and connected to political identities and group processes. Chapter Two applies this framework to the 2016 and 2020 elections and to the wider democratic consequences of media-related polarization.

CHAPTER TWO

Media, Social Networks, and the Deepening of the United States Partisan Divide

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Introduction

Having established the conceptual and theoretical framework in Chapter One, in this chapter we apply that framework to published evidence concerning media, social networks, elections, and partisan polarisation in the United States. The analysis is organised around three questions: how media and social networks operate during elections; what consequences media-related polarisation may have for democratic processes; and which interventions may reduce harmful forms of partisan division. The 2016 and 2020 presidential elections are treated comparatively because they illustrate different stages in the development of digital political communication. The analysis does not assume that media exposure automatically causes polarisation; instead, it considers the mechanisms identified in Chapter One and evaluates the strength and limitations of the available evidence.

2.1. Media, Elections, and Political Division

Presidential elections are the ultimate spectacles in which the divisive potential of both the media and social networks is amplified, making the US political discourse especially susceptible to it. The situation becomes especially apparent when analyzing the most recent voting events, including the 2020 presidential election. Yet, the emergence of this issue's prominence requires a more in-depth examination of the media landscape at the turn of the century. In this section, we will provide an overview of media coverage of presidential elections, analyze the role of social media in modern electoral campaigns, and review the peculiarities of the 2016 and 2020 voting seasons.

2.1.1 Media Coverage of US Presidential Elections

Coverage of presidential elections has changed substantially as the American media system has moved from a relatively concentrated broadcast environment toward a fragmented and increasingly partisan information environment. The earlier broadcast system exposed large audiences to overlapping news agendas, whereas cable and digital media have expanded the

range of politically differentiated sources. It would therefore be too strong to describe the broadcast era simply as a period of non-polarised media; rather, the important analytical point is that the structure of the media environment changed, increasing opportunities for partisan selection and audience segmentation (Levendusky, 2013).

The growth of partisan cable news illustrates this transition. Outlets associated with different ideological audiences can emphasise different issues, frames, and evaluative criteria, allowing citizens to consume politically congenial interpretations of the same events. Partisan media therefore operate not only through the selection of topics but also through framing and priming, while audience choice can reinforce the process through selective exposure (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The resulting environment is better understood as an interaction between supply-side media practices and demand-side audience choices rather than as a one-way process in which media simply impose political opinions.

2.1.2 Social Media and Electoral Campaigns

Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for electoral campaigns, fundamentally altering the relationship between candidates, voters, and the media. The 2008 Obama campaign is often cited as a watershed moment, demonstrating the power of social media to mobilise supporters, raise funds, and coordinate grassroots activity. Therefore, subsequent campaigns have built on this foundation, with social media becoming an increasingly sophisticated and central component of electoral strategy.

Social media have changed electoral campaigns through direct communication, targeted messages, rapid information circulation, and political mobilisation. These features can increase participation but can also strengthen selective exposure and the circulation of misleading or partisan content. Their effects are therefore best understood through the interaction of platform features and user behaviour.

These processes can be interpreted through the integrated framework developed in Chapter One. Direct communication and targeted messages can make particular issues salient

(agenda-setting), while campaign narratives can define how those issues should be interpreted (framing). Voters' subsequent choices are shaped by selective exposure and motivated reasoning, and algorithmic ranking can affect which political messages become more visible. At the group level, hashtags and political communities can strengthen social identification by making partisan identities publicly visible and facilitating interaction with like-minded users. Such environments may therefore support group polarisation, but they can also mobilise participation without necessarily producing ideological extremity.

2.1.3 Comparative Case Study: The 2016 and 2020 Elections

The 2016 and 2020 presidential elections provide a useful comparative lens because they occurred in increasingly digital and highly contested information environments. The comparison should not be treated as a simple before-and-after test of social-media effects. Instead, it allows the study to examine recurring mechanisms, partisan media selection, misinformation, algorithmic curation, identity-based mobilisation, and changes in political participation, under different electoral conditions.

a- The 2016 Election

The 2016 election was marked by extensive circulation of misinformation and disinformation through digital networks. Research on the consumption of untrustworthy political content indicates that exposure was highly concentrated among users with strongly partisan online information diets, while Facebook was an important pathway through which some users encountered such content (Guess et al., 2020). The broader information environment also included Russian influence operations and conspiracy narratives that sought to exploit existing political divisions (Jamieson, 2018). These developments illustrate how selective exposure, partisan identity, and networked communication can interact with misinformation, but they do not establish that misinformation alone determined voter behaviour.

b- The 2020 Election

The 2020 election occurred in an especially intense information environment, but the claim that it was simply “more polarised than ever before” is too categorical. The election combined intense partisan conflict with unprecedented reliance on digital communication during the pandemic, making it an important case for examining how platform use, political identity, misinformation, and participation interacted.

Evidence concerning the 2020 election is mixed and consequently requires careful interpretation. Some studies identify relationships between social-media use, partisan information environments, and political attitudes, while experimental evidence provides a more qualified picture. In the large-scale Facebook and Instagram deactivation experiment conducted during the 2020 election, Allcott et al. (2024) found that deactivation reduced online political participation, but its effects on affective and issue polarisation were close to zero. This does not mean that social media were politically irrelevant; rather, it suggests that participation, information exposure, candidate evaluation, and polarisation are distinct outcomes. Algorithmic amplification is nevertheless an important structural mechanism: Huszár et al. (2022) found systematic differences in the political content amplified by Twitter's ranking algorithms. The appropriate conclusion is therefore that digital platforms can structure political communication and create conditions conducive to polarisation, but the magnitude and direction of their effects depend on users, content, algorithms, and political context.

Evidence from the 2020 election should therefore be interpreted as evidence of a complex platform–user relationship rather than as proof of a uniform platform effect. This distinction is central to the dissertation's methodological limitation: the study can compare and synthesise published findings, but it cannot independently estimate causal effects.

2.1.4 Theoretical Combination of the 2016 and 2020 Elections

The comparative evidence from 2016 and 2020 supports the integrated theoretical framework developed in Chapter One but also qualifies simplistic accounts of media-driven polarisation. Agenda-setting and framing help explain why certain issues and interpretations

became highly salient during both elections. Selective exposure and motivated reasoning help explain why partisan audiences could interpret the same political events differently. Social Identity Theory helps us explain why electoral conflicts became emotionally attached to partisan group identities, while Group Polarisation Theory provides a mechanism through which repeated interaction among like-minded users may intensify attitudes. At the same time, evidence that users consume heterogeneous information and that platform deactivation did not substantially change polarisation in 2020 demonstrates that these mechanisms should be treated as conditional rather than deterministic (Eady et al., 2019). The comparative lesson is therefore that social media are best understood as political environments that interact with existing identities, institutions, media systems, and electoral contexts rather than as autonomous causes of polarisation.

2.2. Trust in Media and Institutions

A significant number of Americans have expressed their lack of trust in various media outlets. The level of trust in media has decreased over the past few decades and is currently at its lowest level. The impact of media on polarization is complex, as people who distrust traditional news outlets are more likely to consume information from alternative sources. In addition, there is a reciprocal relationship between trust and consumption, as citizens' trust in news media decreases, their consumption of news from traditional outlets also decreases.

From the theoretical perspective developed in Chapter One, declining trust can reinforce selective exposure and partisan identity: citizens who perceive an outlet as hostile or biased may avoid it and seek alternative sources that appear more compatible with their political identity. This creates a feedback process between media choice and media trust rather than a simple one-way media effect.

There is a substantial amount of research that shows the erosion of confidence in the US news media. For instance, according to the Gallup poll results from 2020, only 28 percent of Americans, regardless of age and political affiliation, had a great deal or fair amount of trust in

the TV news, radio news, and newspapers to report the news fully and fairly. In addition, the results from Pew Research Center reveal that when it comes to trust in journalists, only 43 percent of Americans trust them to act in the public interest, while 57 percent do not.

2.2.1 Political Participation and Activism

The connection between media use and political participation and activism is not linear. The relationship is different across generations with social media being a preferred medium by Generation Z for participating in politics directly through digital means (online) and indirectly through conventional means. The impact of online activity on activism and participation is still unclear. However, for Generation Z political participation takes place in both the digital and physical world. Gen Z is more politically active than previous generations of youth, partly due to this generation's emergence as digital natives. Their activism is characterised by a blend of online and offline efforts underpinned by strong moral convictions and the value of personal experiences.

The consequences of digital political participation for polarisation are significant. When people are connected through social media, the engagement is driven by the algorithm. This can lead to ideological polarization, but at the same time, it can also promote the exchange of diverse views and participation from both sides of the spectrum. It all comes down to the conditions and contexts of such participation and engagement.

Recent experimental evidence from the 2020 election complicates the assumption that higher social-media participation necessarily produces greater polarisation. Allcott et al. (2024) found that deactivating Facebook and Instagram reduced online political participation, while effects on affective and issue polarisation were close to zero. This suggests that participation and polarisation should be analysed as related but distinct outcomes.

2.2.2 Threats to Democratic Cohesion

There is a threat to democratic cohesion through polarization which manifests in political extremism, disinformation and conspiracy theories, as well as democratic backsliding.

American democratic institutions and norms have been weakened in recent years. The phenomenon of democratic backsliding refers to the process of democratic countries that have recently transitioned to democracy, returning to authoritarianism. It had been mostly relevant for developing countries. However, lately, it has become a topic of discussion in relation to America as well. Researchers suggest that there are patterns of democratic backsliding that can be observed in both developing and developed countries. In order to mitigate it, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms of democratic backsliding, which requires comparative studies.

The ways in which the media environment may contribute to democratic backsliding is discussed, with a focus on the fragmentation of the public sphere, the role of disinformation, the role of polarising speech, and the loss of trust in the media. What once appeared to democratise information has fundamentally changed how we process facts and make decisions, creating an environment where misinformation outranks truth, political polarisation reaches new peaks, and algorithms shape our perceptions in ways we barely understand".

2.3. Strategies to Reduce Partisan Polarisation

In the previous section we demonstrated the extent to which media and social networks contribute to partisan polarisation in the United States. In this section, we will will discuss ways of reducing partisan polarisation in the United States. The methods that can be used are building media literacy, regulation of social media and digital platforms, ethical journalism, and encouraging dialogue and citizen engagement.

2.3.1 Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

Media literacy education has been championed by scholars as a means of reducing the extent to which mainstream media and digital platforms exacerbate partisan polarisation (van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021).

. The underlying rationale is that if members of the public could access and understand the media better, then they would be less susceptible to manipulation by media outlets and more likely to engage in deliberative discourse in which they assess information from multiple sources critically. Media literacy education promotes the use and understanding of media by people.

Media literacy should therefore be framed as a capacity-building strategy rather than a guaranteed cure for polarisation. Its strongest contribution may be to improve users' ability to evaluate sources, recognise persuasive framing, distinguish evidence from opinion, and identify emotionally manipulative or misleading content. Because polarisation is also rooted in identity and social interaction, media literacy alone cannot be expected to remove partisan hostility.

It includes such skills as understanding the production and distribution of media, critical thinking, recognition of bias, propaganda, and identification of credibility and authenticity of information sources. It also includes algorithmic literacy, such as understanding how algorithms work and how they are used to influence people's behavior. Critical thinking is an essential part of media literacy education, as it enables one to evaluate arguments critically.

Research on the effectiveness of media literacy education is mixed, with some evidence that it can help people identify disinformation and propaganda while other evidence suggests that it has limited efficacy, perhaps particularly when it comes to partisan issues and when the target audience is more highly educated. There are several challenges to be addressed in media literacy education, including educational costs, the need to keep pace with technological advances, and the need to address the deliberate use of sophisticated techniques to gaslight and manipulate the public.

2.3.2 Regulation of Digital Platforms

The regulation of digital platforms is another proposed strategy for reducing partisan polarisation in the United States. A number of proposals have been advanced that would significantly modify content moderation practices by limiting the liability protections afforded to

technology companies under Section 230 or narrowing the circumstances in which platforms receive immunity for content-moderation decisions (Brannon & Holmes, 2024).The latter category of reforms to Section 230 would make technology companies more accountable for enabling illegal or harmful speech on their platforms by limiting the scope of Section 230's existing protections or adding limiting language to Section 230's existing statute.

Regulation should similarly be presented as a contested governance strategy rather than as an established solution. Transparency, independent auditing, user control, and accountability mechanisms may reduce some harmful platform practices, but regulation must balance these goals against privacy, innovation, and freedom-of-expression concerns. The evidence reviewed in this dissertation does not justify claiming that a particular regulatory model will necessarily reduce polarisation.

2.3.3 Ethical Journalism

The role of journalism in contributing to political polarisation has led to calls for a renewal of ethical journalism and balanced reporting. Proponents argue that journalists have a responsibility to provide accurate, fair, and comprehensive coverage that serves the public interest rather than partisan agendas. This concern is particularly relevant in a fragmented media environment in which partisan news outlets may reinforce existing political divisions and contribute to polarised interpretations of political events (Rogers et al., 2020).

Ethical journalism should not, however, be equated with giving identical weight to all claims. A more defensible approach is evidence-based reporting that distinguishes verified information from unsupported assertions while making sourcing and uncertainty transparent. Such an approach is consistent with the broader concern in the dissertation with misinformation and the need to distinguish reliable information from misleading or unsupported political content (Benkler et al., 2018). These practices may contribute to rebuilding trust without creating a false equivalence between well-supported and poorly supported claims.

2.3.4 Promoting Dialogue and Civic Engagement

Cross-partisan dialogue and deliberative activities may help citizens encounter opposing views in a more respectful setting. Research on cross-cutting political communication suggests that exposure to opposing viewpoints can sometimes reduce partisan hostility, although its effects depend on the context and on how individuals respond to disagreement (Bail et al., 2018). Their effects should nevertheless be tested empirically because participation requires willingness to engage in good faith, and exposure to opposing views does not necessarily lead to greater tolerance or reduced polarisation.

a. Deliberative Democracy

The challenges to deliberative democracy are significant. Deliberative processes can be resource-intensive and difficult to sustain at scale, requiring substantial time and careful facilitation to enable participants to consider evidence and engage with different perspectives. Moreover, affective polarisation can undermine the conditions necessary for productive deliberation by making engagement across political divides more difficult (Ryfe, 2005). Moreover, online political communication does not always encourage the kind of reflective and respectful discussion associated with deliberation. Social media environments can reward rapid reactions, emotional expression, and highly engaging content rather than sustained political discussion (Sunstein, 2018). For this reason, deliberative approaches should be considered a possible means of reducing polarisation rather than a guaranteed solution.

b. Cross-Partisan Engagement

Cross-partisan engagement, that is, the practice of encouraging interaction between citizens with different political affiliations, has been proposed as a way of reducing affective polarisation (Santoro & Broockman, 2022). Contact with members of an opposing political group can challenge stereotypes and encourage people to view political opponents as individuals

rather than simply as members of an opposing partisan category. However, exposure to opposing political views can sometimes produce a backlash effect, particularly when the information is perceived as threatening to existing political identities (Levendusky, 2013).

The challenges to cross-partisan engagement are therefore significant. Partisans may be reluctant to engage with members of the opposing party, particularly in a polarised environment. In addition, the benefits of interpersonal contact may not extend to the wider population. Structural factors such as partisan sorting, selective exposure, and fragmented media environments can continue to reinforce political divisions even when some individuals participate in cross-partisan exchanges (Iyengar et al., 2019). Cross-partisan engagement should therefore be understood as one possible component of a broader strategy rather than as a substitute for addressing the structural and media-related sources of polarisation.

Conclusion

In Chapter Two we have shown that the relationship between media, social networks, and partisan polarisation is best understood as conditional and multidimensional. The 2016 and 2020 elections illustrate the importance of partisan media, direct candidate communication, misinformation, algorithmic curation, and identity-based political mobilisation, but the evidence does not support a simple causal model in which social-media exposure automatically produces polarisation. Instead, media effects interact with selective exposure, motivated reasoning, partisan identity, group dynamics, political context, and institutional trust. The democratic consequences are similarly mixed: digital media can mobilise participation and increase marginalised voices while also facilitating misgiving, misinformation, and hostile partisan interaction. The strategies reviewed in the chapter should therefore be treated as complementary interventions rather than as guaranteed solutions.

Several key ideas emerge from this chapter that guide our general conclusion. First, the evidence for the role of media and social networks in deepening partisan polarisation is

substantial, though the mechanisms and effects are complex and vary across populations. Second, Generation Z's distinctive media consumption patterns and political behaviour make them a particularly important case for understanding contemporary polarisation dynamics, though there is significant variation within the generation. Third, the consequences of media-driven polarisation for democratic processes are profound, including declining trust, political extremism, and threats to democratic cohesion. Fourth, mitigating polarisation requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the structural features of the media environment, the practices of journalists and platforms, and the skills and dispositions of citizens.

General Conclusion

We can summarise the findings of the dissertation and returns to the research questions, objectives, theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

1. Addressing the Research Questions

The dissertation aimed to respond to six research questions related to media, social networks, and political polarisation. Each of the research questions was formulated at a different level, namely, theoretical, conceptual, empirical, methodological, and applied. Below are the answers based on the findings presented in the paper.

Research question 1: What are the theoretical and conceptual foundations for understanding the relationship between media, social networks, and political polarisation?

The theoretical and conceptual foundations were established in Chapter One through an integrated framework. Agenda-setting, framing, and priming explain media influence on salience and interpretation; selective exposure and motivated reasoning explain audience-level selection and processing; algorithmic curation explains an important feature of the contemporary digital environment; Political Socialisation Theory explains how political orientations may develop and be reinforced; and Social Identity Theory and Group Polarisation Theory explain the movement from partisan identification to intergroup differentiation and attitudinal intensification. Echo chambers and filter bubbles are treated as possible environments in which these mechanisms interact rather than as automatic causes of polarisation. This integrated framework provides a more precise explanation of the media–polarisation relationship than a direct-effects model.

Research question 2: How has the evolution of media in the US from traditional to digital impacted the dynamics of political communication and partisan division?

The findings related to research question 2 were based on a historical analysis undertaken in Chapter 1. The information included in the response was derived from the evolution of the US media system in historical context, with emphasis placed on shifts from the elite to mass,

broadcast to current information order. In particular, the study analysed how each stage impacted the level of partisanship and diversity of political communication in the US.

Research question 3: Through what mechanisms do media and social networks contribute to the deepening of partisan polarisation in Generation Z?

The study identified several mechanisms through which media and social networks may reinforce partisan identity: selective exposure to congenial information, motivated interpretation of political messages, algorithmic curation, interaction within like-minded networks, and identity-based political narratives. These mechanisms are consistent with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter One. However, the evidence also shows that their effects are conditional: not all users inhabit closed information environments, and exposure to social media does not uniformly increase polarisation (Eady et al., 2019).

Research question 4: what evidence exists regarding the role of social media platforms in electoral campaigns and their impact on political division, with an illustration from the 2016 and 2020 US presidential election cycle?

The evidence from 2016 and 2020 shows that social media became increasingly central to campaign communication, political mobilisation, information circulation, and disputes over electoral legitimacy. In 2016, the concentration of misinformation consumption among highly partisan users and the role of digital networks in distributing political content illustrate the importance of selective exposure and networked communication (Guess et al., 2018). In 2020, social-media platforms were central to campaign communication and participation, but the large-scale deactivation experiment by Allcott et al. (2024) found effects close to zero on affective and issue polarisation. The appropriate conclusion is therefore that social media played an important role in the political communication environment of both elections, but their independent causal effect on polarisation remains difficult to establish.

Research question 5: What are the consequences of media-driven polarisation for democratic processes, public trust, and political participation, including the activism of Generation Z?

The implications of media polarisation were discussed in detail in Chapter 2, specifically in the sections dedicated to democratic processes, public trust, and political participation. In terms of democratic processes, the findings highlighted the threat posed to democratic governance by divisive and destructive discourse fuelled by social networks. In addition, the analysis demonstrated the decreasing level of public trust in media on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Although the two sides differed greatly in regard to their trust in media, both Democrats and Republicans expressed low levels of confidence in news outlets in general and journalists in particular. According to the findings, such trends undermine democratic processes by obstructing the ability of media as democratic institutions to perform their monitoring and gatekeeping functions.

Research question 6: What strategies can be employed to reduce partisan polarisation, and what is the role of media literacy, platform regulation, ethical journalism, and civic engagement in this endeavour?

The strategies for countering partisan polarisation were discussed in Chapter 2, which focused on the question of how to reduce the extent to which partisan polarisation affects public discourse and democratic governance. In particular, the study evaluated media literacy and critical thinking, regulation of digital platforms, ethical journalism, and promoting deliberative democracy as four potential strategies for countering polarisation.

2. Evaluating Research Objectives

In this dissertation we targeted six objectives, all of which were addressed to varying degrees within the limits of the study design.

Objective 1: To provide a conceptual framework for analysing the relationships between media, social networks, and political polarisation.

This objective was addressed in the first chapter, which provided a conceptual framework for this study. It defined the key terms and concepts that this research explored and analysed the ways in which these terms related to each other. It also reviewed the theoretical and conceptual literature on the relationship between media, social networks, and political polarisation and demonstrated how these theories applied to the research questions.

Objective 2: To trace the evolution of media in the United States and assess how different orders of media shaped political communication and partisan dynamics.

This objective was achieved in the first chapter, which analysed the evolution of media in the United States and its impact on political communication and partisan dynamics. It examined the shifts in media orders during the early republic, the progressive era, the broadcast era, and the current information order.

Objective 3: To examine the mechanisms through which media, particularly social media, contribute to the formation and reinforcement of partisan identity.

This objective was addressed in the first and second chapters, which analysed the divisive effects of media and social networks on partisan polarisation. It explored the mechanisms through which social networks contribute to partisan polarisation in depth, identifying several factors that make social networks a powerful tool for partisan identity formation.

Objective 4: To analyse the role of social networks in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections and assess their divisive impact on the political process.

This objective had been achieved in the second chapter when media's role in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections was discussed. It was found out how social networks impact the presidential election process and campaign and what influence it has on the overall political process and debate.

Objective 5: To assess the consequences of media-driven polarisation for democratic processes and institutions.

This objective had also been achieved in the second chapter when such matters as media-driven polarization's influence on democratic processes and institutions were discussed. Particular attention was paid to the effects of media-driven polarization on the credibility of democratic institutions and processes and the surge of extremism.

Objective 6: To identify and critically assess strategies for reducing partisan polarisation applicable to the modern media environment.

This objective had been achieved in Chapter Two, when discussing the ways of reducing partisan polarization. Such strategies as media literacy and critical thinking education, regulation of social media, ethical journalism, and responsible reporting, and encouragement of dialogue were considered and evaluated.

3. Major Findings and Theoretical Implications

There were several significant results of the research described in this dissertation. They have rather profound theoretical implications, which can be identified as well.

Finding 1: Media – polarisation link is complex, multifaceted, and includes numerous factors.

The first finding is that the relationship between media and polarisation is complex, multidimensional, and conditional. The evidence reviewed in the dissertation points to interacting mechanisms at the individual level (prior ideology, partisan identity, selective exposure, and motivated reasoning), the media level (framing, agenda-setting, partisan sourcing, and algorithmic curation), the group level (social identity and group polarisation), and the contextual level (electoral competition, political events, and institutional trust). This framework explains why similar forms of media exposure may produce different outcomes among different users. It also explains why claims of a uniform media effect are difficult to sustain. The theoretical implication is therefore not simply that more research is needed, but that future

research should integrate media-effects, social-identity, and digital-platform perspectives rather than treating them as separate explanations.

Finding 2: Affective polarisation is more important than ideological polarisation for contemporary America.

This dissertation used the distinction developed by Iyengar et al. (2012, 2019) between ideological and affective polarisation. Affective polarisation is especially important because partisan identity can produce negative evaluations of the opposing group even when policy disagreement is not extreme. The literature reviewed here therefore suggests that media research should pay close attention to affective mechanisms, including identity-based narratives, partisan sorting, and hostile intergroup cues. However, the dissertation does not claim that affective polarisation is exclusively or directly produced by media; rather, media environments may amplify or activate pre-existing partisan identities under particular conditions.

Finding 3: Generation Z is a multifaceted entity.

In this work we have shown that the popular perception of Generation Z as a whole is incorrect because this generation encompasses a wide range of perspectives and demographics with significantly differing attitudes towards media and politics. The theoretical implication is that demographic trends within a specific population should not be overlooked, including those that are related to media.

Finding 4: The current media environment is lopsided, and this has polarising effects.

The fourth finding is that the contemporary American media environment is fragmented and politically differentiated, with important differences in the sources and information diets used by partisan groups. However, the evidence also cautions against treating the entire population as divided into perfectly isolated media silos (Eady et al., 2019). The implication is

that future research should examine specific platforms, users, and information pathways rather than assuming a single national media effect.

Finding 5: Media-induced polarisation has serious consequences for society.

We have highlighted the numerous negative effects of media consumption on society, with trust in media being one of them. The result is that society becomes more polarised and less trusting of each other and official sources of information, which is detrimental to social cohesion and democracy in the long run. The implication is that the research into media and polarisation should also consider the effects that this combination has on democracy.

3.1 Theoretical Contribution of the Assimilated Framework

The principal theoretical contribution of our dissertation is the integration of media-effects theories with social-identity and group-process theories. Agenda-setting, framing, and priming explain how political information becomes salient and interpreted; selective exposure and motivated reasoning explain audience-level processes; algorithmic curation describes the digital environment; Political Socialisation Theory explains the developmental context of Generation Z; and Social Identity Theory and Group Polarisation Theory explain how partisan identities can become emotionally meaningful and intensified through group interaction. This integration helps avoid two opposite simplifications: the claim that media independently determine political attitudes, and the claim that users are completely autonomous from media structures. The relationship is instead conceptualised as reciprocal and conditional.

4. Limitations of the Study

In our study we have faced several limitations that must be noted.

It is only concerned with the American political environment and does not consider the trends elsewhere in the world. There might be differences in the way that media influences polarisation in other countries with different media environments and political systems.

The rapid evolution of digital platforms creates an additional limitation because findings can become outdated as platform designs, recommendation systems, moderation practices, and

user behaviour change. More importantly, the library-based design prevents the dissertation from independently testing causal relationships. The study therefore synthesises evidence rather than estimating the size of media effects. Future empirical research should use longitudinal, experimental, panel, and platform-level data to distinguish selection effects from media effects. The focus on Generation Z also means that findings should not automatically be generalised to the entire American population.

This dissertation set out to examine the relationship between media, social networks, and partisan polarisation in the United States, with particular attention to Generation Z and the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The central conclusion is that media and social networks are important components of the contemporary political environment, but their relationship with polarisation is neither uniform nor deterministic. The evidence supports a multidimensional framework in which media salience and framing interact with selective exposure, motivated reasoning, algorithmic curation, political socialisation, partisan identity, and group processes. This framework helps explain why the same digital environment can facilitate mobilisation and political expression for some users while reinforcing hostility and distrust for others.

The findings also caution against treating personalisation, misinformation, or partisan media as inherently equivalent to radicalisation. Generation Z is internally diverse, and digital participation can support inclusive identities, civic engagement, and political learning as well as partisan conflict. Evidence from recent experimental research further shows that reducing access to major social-media platforms during the 2020 election did not significantly alter affective or issue polarisation, even though it reduced online political participation (Allcott et al., 2024). The implication is that the political effects of social media depend on the interaction between platform affordances, user choices, identities, content, and broader political conditions.

The democratic implications remain significant because highly polarised information environments can weaken trust, make shared factual agreement more difficult, and intensify hostility toward political opponents. Yet the evidence reviewed in this dissertation also

demonstrates that social media can increase political participation, facilitate direct political communication, and provide spaces for political communities that may be excluded from traditional media. The appropriate response is therefore not to treat social media as inherently democratic or inherently destructive. Instead, democratic institutions, educators, journalists, policymakers, and platform operators should focus on improving information quality, transparency, accountability, media literacy, and opportunities for constructive cross-partisan engagement. The dissertation's principal contribution is to show how these practical concerns can be understood through the complexity and depth of our theoretical framework rather than through a simple media-causes-polarisation model.

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Appendices

Appendix A : STATISTICAL DATA

A.1 Trust in Media by Partisan Affiliation (2025)

Group	Great Deal/ Fair Amount	Not Too Much	None at All
Democrats	61%	30%	9%
Independents	44%	39%	17%
Republicans	27%	45%	28%

Source: Gallup (2025)

A.2 Generational Differences in News Consumption (2024)

Platform	Gen Z (18-27)	Millennials (28-43)	Gen X (44-59)	Boomers (60-78)
TikTok	43%	21%	8%	3%
Instagram	35%	28%	15%	8%
YouTube	32%	29%	22%	15%
Facebook	18%	32%	38%	42%
X	22%	18%	12%	6%

Source: Pew Research Center (2024)

A.3 Gen Z Voting Patterns by Gender (2024)

Candidate	Gen Z Male	Gen Z Female
Trump	49%	38%
Harris	48%	60%
Other	3%	2%

Source: Nylen (2024)

A.4 Trust in News Media by Generation (2025)

Generation	Trust a Great Deal/ Fair Amount
Gen Z	22%
Millennials	28%
Gen X	30%
Boomers	34%
Silent Generation	38%

Source: Gallup (2025)

ملخص

تستكشف هذه المذكرة دور وسائل الإعلام والشبكات الاجتماعية في تعميق الانقسام الحزبي في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، مع التركيز على جيل زاد. ويجمع هذا العمل بين المناهج النظرية والمفاهيمية المستمدة من مجالات الاتصال السياسي ودراسات الإعلام وعلم الاجتماع الرقمي، بهدف توضيح الكيفية التي أدت بها البيئة الإعلامية الأمريكية إلى تفاقم الاستقطاب السياسي. كما تقدم هذه المذكرة الأسس النظرية لتحليل العلاقة بين وسائل الإعلام والشبكات الاجتماعية من جهة، والاستقطاب السياسي من جهة أخرى، وتسلط الضوء على الآليات التي أثر بها استهلاك وسائل الإعلام على المواقف الحزبية. كما يبحث هذا العمل في دور الشبكات الاجتماعية في انتخابات عامي 2016 و2020، بالإضافة إلى دورها في تعزيز الانقسام والسلبية، وتأثير الاستقطاب الإعلامي على التماسك الديمقراطي ومهارات التعامل مع وسائل الإعلام، وأخيرًا، يستعرض استراتيجيات لتخفيف حدة الاستقطاب الحزبي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الاستقطاب الإعلامي؛ الشبكات الاجتماعية؛ الجيل Z؛ الاتصال السياسي؛ غرف الصدى؛ السياسة الأمريكية؛ وسائل الإعلام الرقمية.