

Scrolling, Simping, and Mobilizing: TikTok's influence over Generation Z's Political Behavior

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This article examines TikTok's influence on the political attitudes and behaviors of young citizens. Scholars of political communication and political behavior have extensively examined the media effects of the big three social networking sites: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The impact of TikTok, however, is only beginning to be fully understood. This study examines the effect of TikTok on young users across the 2020 presidential election. Ultimately, this research addresses the following two questions: Is TikTok influential in shaping the political attitudes of young citizens? Does TikTok

usage motivate Generation Z to engage in either online or traditional forms of political participation? To answer these questions, we surveyed 609 18- to 25-year-olds on Mechanical Turk. Our quantitative analysis finds that TikTok is more likely to influence political attitudes and engagement in online and traditional forms of political participation than other forms of social media among young citizens.

Keywords: TikTok, social media, political behavior, Gen Z, media effects

A glance at the “for you page” on the app TikTok shows how a user might be inundated with a wide range of serious and whimsical political content. Picture this: In one video, Britney Spears twirls around as she dodges Russian bombs in a commentary on world affairs (Dunn, 2022). In another, a young man grabs his power washer, comparing it to a sneeze, putting a face mask on top of it and declaring, “See all that is getting through, masks don't work!” (Comrade Cringe, 2020). Scrolling, next is the *Washington Post's* telenovela del Tribunal Supremo depicting conservatives still retaining the majority despite President Biden's new Supreme Court nominee (Washington Post, 2022). Finally, Senator Jon Ossoff posts his speech about restrictions on ballot access that targets marginalized communities in Georgia (Ossoff, 2021). Two minutes on TikTok can expose a user to unique, “Gen Z-fied” forms of discourse.

Through the mass distribution of 15- to 60-second videos (now extended to three minutes), TikTok took the nation by storm during the 2020 elections. With over 183 million users in the U.S., TikTok rivals Facebook and Instagram's popularity and the app has surpassed Google as the world's most popular website, making it one of the most far-reaching media platforms (Moreno, 2021; Wallaroo Media, 2022).

Prior research on mass media suggests that TikTok has the potential to influence political attitudes and behaviors. Studies have found that videos are more effective than traditional media at capturing the attention of young people (Cervi and Marin-Llado, 2021). No other social-media information source can, within a matter of seconds, expose users to “receipts” on candidates for office, tips on saving the Post Office (Chen, 2020), and facts about poll taxes. In 2020, the TikTok content creators “Students for Biden,” “Gen Z for Change,” and “Florida Democrats,” all with strong presences on TikTok, attempted to educate their followers through serious and comedic postings. Students for Biden usually took a more serious stance and described then-presidential candidate Biden as the one who would “save the soul of our nation.” Florida Democrats, took a more sensational approach to campaigning, penning the satiric “Simp for Biden”—meaning to have a “mad crush” on President Biden—movement. Then-president Trump also had supporters on TikTok, with content creators blasting patriotic music and marketing the former president as the only one who could “keep saving America.”

The growing prominence of TikTok was also widely reported in the news media across the 2020 campaign. *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and other media entities reported that users of the app succeeded in derailing multiple Trump campaign rallies by lowering attendance. Representative Ocasio Cortez acknowledged the power of TikTok and Gen Z (Lorenz et al., 2020). Journalists and reporters investigating social media frequently reported how TikTok was becoming a new political hub for Gen Z'ers (Herrmann, 2019; Herrmann, 2020).

Beyond electoral politics, TikTok also provides real-time videos of political events. For instance, the death of George Floyd, triggered an explosion of TikToks detailing the legal definitions of third and second-degree murder and providing the history of misconduct of the police officers involved (Janfaza, 2020). In another example, images and videos of international crises such as the Russian war in Ukraine are plastered across

TikTok (Karimi, 2022). Users, news reporters, and stakeholders alike provide unique updates on the conflict (Khurshudyan, Ilyushina, and Hudson, 2022).

This article provides an assessment of TikTok's influence on the political attitudes and behaviors of young citizens. TikTok holds much importance to young people as it is the third most used social media app for Generation Z (Insider Intelligence, 2023). Scholars of political communication and political behavior have extensively examined the media effects of the big three social networking sites: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The impact of TikTok, however, is only starting to be fully understood. This study examines the effect of TikTok on young users across the 2020 presidential election. Ultimately, this research addresses the following questions: Is TikTok influential in shaping the political attitudes of young citizens? Does TikTok usage motivate Generation Z to engage in either online or traditional forms of political participation?

MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

Mass media impacts political behaviors and attitudes as citizens are exposed to political and social issues (Alalawi & Al-Jenabi, 2016; Coombe & Davis, 2013; Graber & Dunaway, 2018; Stroud, 2007). Early research has concluded that different types of news outlets have produced similar results in terms of the levels of civic engagement of their users (Shah et al., 2005). The evolving information environment, whether in written or visual format, can reinforce or challenge existing political beliefs (Dilliplane, 2011; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Ridout, 2019). Social media, especially TikTok, encourages the acquisition of political information in new ways. Furthermore, short-term videos are more effective in capturing the attention of young citizens than almost any other mode of communication (Firth et al., 2019; Newman, 2010). Before turning to our analysis of TikTok users, it is important to establish what prior research finds in terms of social media's influence on political behavior.

Social Media and Political Attitudes

Though prior studies of digital media have produced a set of mixed findings, social media has influenced political attitudes in three clear ways: an increase of selective exposure, an emphasis on infotainment that has diminished political engagement, and the increase in awareness surrounding racial issues.

First, the internet has led to a rise in selective exposure, and thus, more polarization. Digital content allows for a filtering option, which leads individuals to selectively choose their desired content (Ridout, 2019). In recent years, party polarization has sharply escalated, and with the advent of advanced technology, partisan news has only exacerbated this dynamic (Levendusky, 2013). Prior broadcast media introduced the notions of political bubbles and heightened partisanship (Prior, 2005; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Consumers with strong political views gravitate toward certain news outlets and stories, promoting the viewing or reading of homogeneous news (Bullock et al., 2015; Mossberger et al., 2013).

In addition, users of social media apps are especially susceptible to selective exposure because of algorithms that track their content preferences. Research has shown that the internet can increase selective exposure because of filtering options driven by the platform (Cardenal et al., 2019; Pariser, 2012). Social media apps such as Facebook and Instagram utilize prediction algorithms gathered from search histories to deposit content (Eslami et al., 2015; Mosseri, 2021; Vogels, 2019). Democrats and Republicans already self-select partisan media by “walling themselves” off from opposing views. Instagram users are especially notorious for avoiding multiple viewpoints (Parmelee & Roman, 2020). The “for you page” on TikTok continues many of these trends toward selective exposure through reliance on algorithms to filter content.

Second, there is a growing concern over a widening information gap as people resort to shorter, faster news. Specifically, social media and TikTok can lead to a preference among users for infotainment over more serious news presentations (Literat et al., 2021). Because of the very structure of the platform, originally consisting of only 15 to 60 second videos, TikTok is perhaps the embodiment of infotainment. Concerns about the harms of infotainment are traced back to Neil Postman’s theory that television was increasingly choosing entertainment over real information (Postman, 1985). Fears that citizens favor entertaining videos, even those inclusive of political content, have facilitated what several scholars have termed the substitution effect, where old forms of media are replaced by new, attractive mass media which lack the proper depth and context to assess political information (Heblich, 2016).

Others have questioned this portrayal and argue that we should not fall prey to the “infotainment scare.” New media provides a unique opportunity to mix satire with political news and connects voters to government officials (Boukes & Vliegthart, 2017). In addition, it fosters a sense of community among the youth as they critique archaic norms and outdated political cultures established by previous generations (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Several studies found that exposure to political satire informs citizens about current events and increases knowledge (Brants, 1998; Fox et al., 2007). For instance, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* mixed satire and serious political content. Stewart often condemned major news networks’ loss of journalistic integrity, yet viewers of *The Daily Show* needed a certain level of political knowledge to understand the program (Baym, 2005; Popkin, 2012). Many producers of TikTok videos would likely believe their work falls into the category of informing through satire.

Finally, despite the prevalence of selective exposure and infotainment values in social-media news presentations, some research recognizes the ability of social media to facilitate awareness of key issues among young citizens (Hassan et al., 2016; Intyaswati et al., 2021). Human-development researchers found that some of their subjects use TikTok as a means of obtaining knowledge (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). The latter finding follows previous studies about young people acquiring knowledge via social media (Boczkowski et al., 2017; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Swart, 2023). According to the Pew Research Center, young adults who are more involved on social media show greater concern for particular causes or issues (Auxier, 2021). Specifically, social media users who are involved in the fight for racial equality and justice utilize social media platforms such as Twitter to spread news and images (Freelon et al., 2016). A Pew Center study found that topics on racial awareness circulate heavily during major national events such as events following the killing of George Floyd (Anderson et al., 2021). Another study of tweets during the 2016 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement showed that Twitter users were especially attentive “to issues of racialized policing, and the vulnerability that black people experience in general” (De Choudhury et al., 2016). Additionally, a newer study of Instagram users and BLM found that the social-media platform was successful in fostering activism, allyship, and education for racial justice (Stewart & Ghaffary, 2020). “Blackout Tuesday”—the posting of a black box to show solidarity with BLM (Svirskis, 2020)—invigorated social-

media users on Instagram (even though there were criticisms that this was only a symbolic and generally meaningless act of participation, see Chou et al., 2020).

TikTok's potential effects and educational benefits are not just isolated to racial-justice issues. In its first year, TikTok became a tool for spreading awareness of different hot-button issues in addition to racial injustices, such as climate change, and abortion rights. One study on abortion rights found that TikTok's accessibility and prior use for healthcare awareness is an optimal tool to educate the youth on abortion politics (Duggan, 2021).

Social Media and Political Participation

Young adults, with their low voter-turnout rates, have long been viewed as contributors to the less than idyllic state of U.S. democracy (Delli Carpini, 2000). Low turnout rates and even lower levels of political interest have been the political identity of citizens in the 18-25 category for much of recent history in the United States. Since the internet and other technologies coexist with old forms of media, scholars have tended to assume that those exposed to the internet will have the same type of civic engagement as those who consume traditional news, despite the fact that traditional news and information obtained through social media are potentially quite different. Studies show that young adults utilize the internet “as a venue for social interaction—a place where they can share creations, tell stories, and interact with others” (Lenhart et al., 2007; Norris, 2002). However, an early study of millennials' online activities found that social media use likely did not lead to an increase in traditional forms of political participation (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Some of this may have changed, at least temporarily, with the 2008 campaign of former President Obama. The Obama campaign reeled in young adults with a strong digital grassroots mobilization strategy (CIRCLE Tufts, 2018).

Researchers examining the effect of social media on political participation, while producing mixed results, increasingly conclude that social media can be an important instigator of political participation. Conroy et al.'s study (2012) examined youth political groups and individual social interactions. Focusing on Facebook, they measured membership of online political groups and compared them to levels of offline forms of political activity and knowledge, finding that online participation predicted higher voter turnout. Further, Steinberg (2015) found that youth cyber participation influenced voting

behavior and several online forms of participation, such as friending a candidate and posting comments and/or questions to a campaign's page. Additionally, Lamb and Steinberg's (2022) comparative study of social media users in the United States and Canada, showed that online participation in those countries led to traditional modes of participation such as attending a march or political meeting, signing a petition, and in the case of Canadian users volunteering on a campaign. The former study also reveals that cyber participation does not increase the likelihood to vote which aligns with prior studies. Twitter influenced public attitudes, and, more importantly, it was a predictor of voter behavior (DiGrazia et al., 2013). Twitter has also become a venue for many tech-savvy political junkies to receive real-time campaign information. In summarizing the first wave of research, Bode et al. (2014) conclude that social media is a predictor of increased political participation.

But do efforts to mobilize young people via social media really encourage meaningful online participation? "Clicktivism," a somewhat derogatory term identifying minimal-effort political participation by simply liking or sharing a post, has been the norm for engaging in political discourse among young citizens (Halupka, 2014). The role of social media as a tool of political mobilization, however, took off in 2017 with an emphasis on social justice. The Women's March and the March for Science in 2017, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement led many young people to online and even offline activism (Holpuch, 2019). Further media research found that social media usage influenced demonstrations (Boulianne et al., 2020). For instance, Facebook involvement was positively correlated to young citizens protesting corruption in Chile in 2019 and Instagram posts and stories facilitated mobilization efforts for the second wave of BLM protests in 2020 (Chang et al., 2022; Scherman & Rivera, 2021).

Using data from Pew Research Center, Lazaroiu (2018) concludes that many young people actively participate in social-justice actions because social-media platforms provide an unbiased and non-pressuring environment to voice political opinions. Social media also allows for new forms of citizen journalism which gives rise to new civic leaders (Chang et al., 2022).

Further creative forms of social media have caused an uptick in mobilization and participation. Young voters tend to be lured into the political scene by online videos made

by their peers (Literat & Kilger-Vilenchik, 2021; Zhu et al., 2019). Since young people have an infamously short attention span, scholars surmise that short, user-created content videos are the future of political communication online (Firth et al., 2019). In addition, a recent study on U.S. elections acknowledged TikTok's redefining potential, calling for further investigations of behavior and communication of young people (Medina et al., 2020).

Based on the literature, we have developed five hypotheses about the effects of TikTok on political attitudes and behaviors of young citizens. We break the hypotheses into two categories: attitudes and participation.

Impact on Attitudes:

H1. TikTok use will reinforce and strengthen its users' existing political beliefs because the app easily facilitates selective exposure.

H2. TikTok use will trivialize politics for users because of its emphasis on infotainment.

H3. TikTok use will increase concern over racial injustice because of the extensive content focusing on the BLM movement and George Floyd murder.

Impact on Political Participation:

H4. TikTok use will lead to more online political participation as has been found with other forms of social media.

H5. TikTok use will lead to more traditional political participation because of its unique ability to engage young people on political content.

METHODS

To address these hypotheses, shortly after the 2020 election, we administered an online survey to 609 18- to 25-year-olds on Mechanical Turk (MTurk) which has been widely used in a number of academic subfields to measure attitudes of young people and conduct survey experiments (Ambuehl et al., 2015; Crowder, 2021; Jung et al., 2014). MTurk samples tend to skew whiter, younger, more educated, and more male than random samples. We are attentive to these potential differences in our multivariate analysis, but because our study focuses on young citizens, with the sample restricted to 18- to 25-year-olds, MTurk is an appropriate tool.

Our study focuses on Generation Z because social media is such a critical source of information and engagement among young users. For Generation Z, the emergence of TikTok has further established the popularity of short-form videos as a mode of political communication. Soon after TikTok's success, Instagram adopted short-form videos in the form of "reels" and "shorts" (Perez, 2022).

Of the 609 participants, 374 were users of TikTok (61.4 %). To place this in context, 84.4% were Facebook users and 76.8% were Instagram users (see Table 1 for a description of the media habits of the sample). We acknowledge that our questions could have more clearly established the extent of usage of each social media app. Our analysis is not fully able to differentiate between high and moderate use. Our analysis focuses on TikTok users, so we first wanted to see if there were discernible demographic and political differences between users and non-users. The overall sample was roughly equally distributed across the ages 18 to 25, 60% male and 40% female. Forty-three percent were currently attending college and 29% had graduated from a four-year institution. Comparing our sample with Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics' Harvard Youth Poll, our study slightly over-samples individuals who have attended college and graduated with a bachelor's degree (Institute of Politics, 2021). In terms of race, 43% identified as White, 10% Black and 16% Latino. The rest identified as Asian, mixed race, or refused to state. In comparison to a national sample by the National Center of Education Statistics, in terms of race our sample fairly well represents the population, slightly under sampling Whites, Blacks, and Latinos and slightly oversampling Asians, mixed race, and refuse to state. In terms of age, the entire sample is between 18 and 25, with more respondents on the older end of the spectrum. We compared attitudes and behaviors across the different ages and did not find any significant differences so we do not include age in the analysis that follows.

Table 1. Social Media Accounts and Use of Sample

Social Media Users	%
Facebook	84.4
Instagram	76.8
Twitter	65.1
TikTok	61.4
Snapchat	39.8
Linkedin	38.4
Pinterest	26.9
Time Spent on Social Media Each Day	
Less than 1 hour per day	17.3
1 hour - 5 hours per day	65.9
Greater than 5 hours per day	16.8
Sample Size	609

Note: Social media users are defined as those who report use of the particular app.

As is typical with MTurk, the sample skews liberal, with 53.7% identifying as Democrats and 24.7% as Republicans, the remainder were Independents. Our sample aligns fairly closely with Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics’ National Youth Poll for Democrats and Republicans. However, the independent population is underrepresented. Table 2 provides a demographic breakdown of the sample.

The survey focused on social media measures, political attitudes, and political participation. Social media measures include total time spent on all social media, which social media platforms respondents utilize and an in-depth battery of questions on TikTok use. To measure political attitudes, respondents were asked whether they were concerned about racial injustice, support for Trump or liberal politicians, and a number of policy preferences. We also asked them, in some cases to self-assess how social media might have influenced their views. This method might introduce some response bias as users might not be aware of the effect that media is having on their attitudes. But the measure also gives them a chance to reflect on how the medium interacts with beliefs. To measure political behavior, we had two seven-question batteries on political participation, one for online political participation and one for more traditional participation. We made 7-point scales for each. We also ran models predicting participation in the three most popular modes of online and traditional forms of political participation. The variables for online participation on which we focused are: shared a political post, commented on a political

post, and followed a politician online. The three most popular forms of traditional participation we focused on are: voted in the 2020 elections, donated money to a campaign, and volunteered for a campaign (see Appendix A for full coding instructions of the variables).

Table 2. Demographics of Sample and TikTok Users and Non-Users

	TikTok Users	Full Sample
Party Affiliation	%	%
Democrat	54.6	53.7
Republican	25.8	24.7
Independent	16.4	17.4
Sex		
Male	55.3	56.5
Female	42.8	41.2
Gender non-conforming	2.4	3.3
Education Level		
No College	11.5	12.4
Some College	16.8	19.2
Completed 4-year degree	55.9	51.9
Attended graduate school	15.9	16.4
Household Income		
Under 50,000	51.5	53.9
50,001 - 100,000	38.5	36.3
Over 100,001	9.8	9.9
Race		
White	37.2	43.2
Black	9.1	8.2
Latino	18.5	16.1
Mixed/Other/Declined	35.8	32.5
Sample Size	374	609

RESULTS

In assessing the relationship of TikTok use to political behavior, we have divided our findings into two sections. The first focuses on the three hypotheses regarding how TikTok might influence political attitudes. The second examines the two hypotheses pertaining to political participation, both online participation and more traditional forms of participation.

TikTok and Political Attitudes

To begin to examine TikTok's effect on users' political attitudes we created models that include social media measures, political controls, and demographic controls. The results presented in Table 3 allow us to test the three hypotheses concerning political attitudes. Our first hypothesis expects that TikTok will reinforce existing political beliefs, as has been found in studies of other social media platforms (Bossetta, 2018; Eslami et al., 2015; Pariser, 2012; Parmelee & Roman, 2020; Ridout, 2019). We asked respondents about attitudes toward a host of policy issues, support for political leaders, and how they believed social media influenced their political attitudes. Ultimately, we chose to test the first hypothesis with two dependent variables—one testing support for then-President Trump and one testing whether social media has led respondents to be more supportive of liberal politicians (the first two columns in Table 3).

The models show the significant relationship between TikTok use and political beliefs. In terms of the Trump variable, among social media measures none were significant predictors of support of the former president. TikTok use was of borderline significance ($p < .10$), with users less supportive. As for the second model, two social media measures are significant. The more time respondents spend on social media the more likely they are to be supportive of liberal politicians. TikTok users reported higher levels of support for liberal politicians which follows the trend of social media users leaning toward the left of the political spectrum (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2021). These findings were true regardless of whether respondents identified as Democrats.

Table 3. Relationship Between TikTok, Social Media and Political Attitudes

	1 Support Former President Trump in the 2020 Election	2 Social Media Makes me More Supportive of Liberal Politicians	3 Social Media Makes me Take Politics Less Seriously	4 Believe Racial Injustice is a Serious Problem
Social Media Predictors				
Time Spent on Social Media Per Day	-.09(.12)	.25(.10)*	.12 (.09)	-.08 (.10)
TikTok User	-.59 (.33)	.69 (.26)**	.48 (.22)*	.98 (.32) **
Instagram User	.66(.35)	-.08 (.27)	.10 (.25)	-.04 (.30)
Facebook User	-.43 (.38)	.23 (.30)	-.12 (.28)	.65 (.31) *
Twitter User	-.50 (.30)	-.34 (.24)	-.25 (.21)	-.15 (.26)
Political Controls				
Party (Democrat)	-1.74(.44) **	.73(.28) *	.07(.26)	.55(.33)
Party (Republican)	1.93(.35) **	-.66(.30) *	-.24(.30)	-.76(.33)*
Political Knowledge	.17(.24)	-.52(.18) **	-.46(.16) **	-.06(.20)
Political Interest	-.23(.22)	.05(.17)	-.37(.15) *	-.27(.19)
Demographic Controls				
Education (completed college)	-.15(.33)	.49(.24)*	.66(.21) **	-.02(.28)
Household Income	.02(.11)	.15(.09)	.15(.08)	.11(.10)
Race (White)	.53(.30)	-.94(.23)**	-.97(.09) **	-.43(.26)
Race (Black)	.66(.57)	-.76(.40)	-.98(.16) **	-.82(.43)
Sex (Male)	.44(.28)	.21(.22)	.29(.20)	.48(.26)
Constant	-1.95(.88) *	2.45(.23)	.84(.60)	1.15(.77)
Log likelihood	355.25	550.16	653.79	450.30
Sample Size	561	558	560	557

Note: All models are binary logistic regressions, and models 2-4 combine “agree” and “strongly agree” responses. Statistical significance, chi-square test noted as ** p <.01, *p<.05.

Republicans in the sample were significantly more likely to support President Trump and not be supportive of liberal politicians, suggesting that partisans likely stay in their information bubble when utilizing social media (as backed by previous media effects literature). We also asked TikTok users directly if the social media app reinforced their pre-existing political attitudes, and roughly 70% responded that it did. TikTok is thus

likely part of a new echo chamber as the algorithms being applied deliver ideologically compatible content to TikTok users.

Our second hypothesis expects TikTok users to prioritize infotainment over useful political information. The third column in Table 3 examines whether social media use diminishes how seriously young citizens take politics. Only one social media measure is significant, TikTok use. This is perhaps to be expected, as TikTok is clearly the most purely entertainment-driven social media app. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all allow for the distribution of more in-depth political information, such as sharing links to news stories. Although TikTok seems to be moving the needle for young people in terms of motivating certain political behavior, users certainly recognize the infotainment element of the app. In terms of political controls, those who are politically knowledgeable and interested do not believe social media makes them take politics less seriously. College graduates are more likely to see social media as a distraction from serious content, while Whites and Blacks were significantly less likely to see it this way.

Finally, we focus on our third hypothesis, whether social media use predicts the belief that racial injustice is a serious problem. We chose to highlight this topic because demonstrations surrounding the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement were heavily featured in social media (Janfaza, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2020; Stewart & Ghaffary, 2020). As column 4 in Table 3 demonstrates, two social media measures predict whether one believes racial injustice is a serious problem, TikTok and Facebook. Those using the apps were significantly more likely to believe this was a problem, which was not the case with other social media users. Beyond these social media measures, the only other significant predictor was whether the respondent was a Republican. This was a significant predictor in not believing racial injustice is a serious problem. The Public Religious Research Institute's (PRRI) survey study about perceptions of discrimination shares a similar finding, that only a minority of Republicans believe racial discrimination is a problem (Jones et al., 2017).

In this examination of political attitudes, we highlight two things. First, we find some evidence for all three hypotheses—TikTok use reinforces preexisting attitudes, influences the seriousness with which people consider politics, and the belief that racial

injustice is a serious problem. Second, an emerging finding here is that TikTok appears to be a more politically influential form of social media than other social media platforms.

TikTok and Political Participation

Next, we examine whether TikTok use has an independent effect on political participation. The results here are broken down into two types of participation, online participation and traditional forms of participation. The literature on social media and participation has established that there are different participation rates across age groups depending on whether the participation is online or traditional (Halupka, 2014; Jungherr, 2016; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). To gauge online participation rates, we asked about seven possible modes of participation, (see Appendix A) which we made into a 7-point scale. For this measure, we use OLS regression and present the results in column 1 of Table 4. In addition, we create models predicting participation in the three most common forms of online participation—sharing a political post, commenting on a post, and following a politician on social media. Here we use binary logistic regression and present the models in columns 2-4 of Table 4. These models allow us to test hypothesis 4, TikTok use will lead to more online political participation.

As shown in Table 4, social media use is positively correlated with various forms of online political participation. The latter finding aligns with previous media effects literature on cyber participation such as Steinberg (2015) and Bode et al. (2014). All of the social media measures—time spent on social media as well as use of any of the four social media platforms—significantly increased participation in online political activities (column 1). This, of course, makes sense as using social media will provide the opportunity for very easy forms of political participation. It only takes a couple of clicks to share, like, or comment on any political content, thus engaging in an act of online political participation.

When we look at the top three forms of political participation, we see some significant difference among the different social media apps. TikTok users were significantly more likely to engage in two of the top three online acts of political participation. And TikTok use was the only form that predicted whether a respondent

Table 4. Relationship Between TikTok, Social Media and Online Political Participation

	1 7-point scale of on- line political participation	2 Shared a Political Post Online	3 Commented on a Political Post Online	4 Followed Politician on Social Media
Social Media Predictors				
Daily Time on Social Media	.22 (.07) **	.14(.08)	.25 (.09) **	.07 (.08)
TikTok User	.60 (.17) **	.54 (.22) *	-.10 (.22)	.62 (.20) **
Instagram User	.43 (.20) *	.62 (.24) *	-.08 (.24)	.40 (.23)
Facebook User	.49 (.23) *	.16 (.27)	1.06 (.28) **	-.03 (.26)
Twitter User	.59 (.17) **	.16 (.20)	.31 (.21)	.27 (.20)
Political Controls				
Party (Democrat)	-.00 (.21)	.25(.25)	.05 (.25)	.08 (.24)
Party (Republican)	.15 (.24)	.02 (.29)	.47 (.29)	.50 (.28)
Political Knowledge	-.34 (.13) **	.57 (.16) **	.29 (.16)	-.09 (.15)
Political Interest	-.71 (.12) **	.38 (.15) **	.75(.15) **	.30 (.14)*
Demographic Controls				
Education (completed college)	-.01 (.18)	.29 (.21)	.01 (.21)	-.03 (.21)
Household Income	.02 (.06)	-.07 (.08)	.03 (.08)	.09 (.07)
Race (White)	-.07 (.16)	-.22 (.20)	-.15 (.20)	.03 (.19)
Race (Black)	-.26 (.29)	-.46 (.35)	-.20 (.35)	-.47 (.34)
Sex (Male)	.15 (.16)	.63 (.20)**	-.06 (.20)	-.24 (.18)
Constant	2.56 (.50) *	-.24 (.59)	.20 (.60)	.17 (.57)
R-Squared	.26	-	-	-
Log Likelihood	-	677.21	668.39	731.17
Sample Size	561	562	562	562

Note: Model 1 is OLS regression and models 2-4 use binary logistic regression. Statistical significance, chi-square test noted as ** p <.01, *p<.05.

followed a politician on social media. Instagram and Facebook use predicted participation in only one of the three forms of participation. Twitter use was not significantly related to any of the online acts of political participation. As expected, political knowledge and

political interest were strong predictors of online political participation in terms of control variables.

Beyond online participation, we turn to more traditional forms of participation. Examining traditional forms of participation allows us to assess our final hypothesis that TikTok use will encourage engagement in traditional offline forms of political participation. Here again, we asked respondents about whether they had engaged in any of seven forms of political participation. Table 5, column 1 uses the 7-point scale as the dependent variable in an OLS regression model. Columns 2-4 use binary logistic regression for the three most common forms of participation.

Several key findings emerge. First, time spent on social media does not predict engaging in more traditional forms of participation. This confirms prior examinations of social media that suggest usage is much more likely to encourage online forms of participation but not offline (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2012; Rainie et al., 2012). In terms of the individual social media apps, only TikTok use and Twitter use predict an increase in the traditional forms of participation on the 7-point scale. Turning to the three most common forms of participation—voting (73% reported voting in the last election), making a donation (31%), and volunteering for a campaign (26%)—the influence of TikTok continues to be evident (columns 2-4). TikTok and Twitter use were related to making political contributions. However, only TikTok users were significantly more likely to volunteer on a campaign.

For control variables, political knowledge and political interest impacted two measures of participation. Democrats were significantly more likely to engage in two of the acts of participation—voting and donating money. Finally, race was significant on two measures of political participation. Black and White people were more likely than those in other racial groups to vote. White people were also less likely to volunteer for a campaign. As with other participation measures, college graduates were more likely to participate in two out of three of the measures. Again, this is to be expected, as college students often have the civic skills to be more engaged political participants.

Table 5. Relationship Between TikTok, Social Media and Traditional Political Participation

	1	2	3	4
	7-point scale of traditional (not online) political participation	Voted in 2020 Presidential Election	Made a Donation to a Political Candidate or Cause	Volunteered on a Campaign
Social Media Predictors				
Time Spent on Social Media Per Day	-.01 (.05)	-.15 (.09)	-.02 (.09)	.02 (.10)
TikTok User	.34 (.13) **	.12 (.24)	.75 (.24) **	.53 (.27) *
Instagram User	.21 (.15)	.42 (.26)	-.07 (.29)	-.31 (.30)
Facebook User	.17 (.17)	.04 (.29)	.14(.35)	.38 (.37)
Twitter User	.35 (.13) **	.27 (.22)	.65 (.27) *	.11 (.28)
Political Controls				
Party (Democrat)	-.03 (.15)	.53 (.26)*	.88 (.36)*	-.03 (.33)
Party (Republican)	.10 (.18)	1.06 (.32)**	.68 (.39)	-.14 (.37)
Political Knowledge	-.38 (.10) **	-.09 (.17)	-.33 (.20)	-.66 (.22) **
Political Interest	-.38 (.09) **	-.27 (.16)	-.70 (.20)**	-.40 (.21)
Demographic Controls				
Education (completed college)	.46 (.13)**	.70 (.23)**	.16 (.27)	1.10 (.36) **
Household Income	.11 (.05) **	.24 (.09) **	.12 (.09)	.15 (.1)
Race (White)	-.18 (.12)	.52 (.23) *	.07 (.23)	-1.36 (.29) **
Race (Black)	.03 (.22)	1.01 (.43) *	-.26 (.45)	-.12 (.44)
Sex (Male)	.11 (.12)	.35 (.22)	-.08 (.23)	-.33 (.26)
Constant	2.11 (.37) **	-.64 (.65)	-1.27 (.75)	-.37 (.82)
R-Squared	.25	-	-	-
Log Likelihood	-	563.83	518.90	445.16
Sample Size	561	562	562	562

Note: Model 1 is OLS regression and models 2-4 use binary logistic regression. Statistical significance, chi-square test noted as ** p <.01, *p<.05

Since TikTok has an independent effect on the scale and two of the three individual measures, this largely confirms the fifth hypothesis. If you are a TikTok user, you are significantly more likely to volunteer to work on a campaign and donate money to a candidate, something that is not true of users of other social media platforms.

DISCUSSION

This research adds to the literature on social media and political behavior, by looking at the newest major entrant into the world of social media, TikTok. The results of the study show that TikTok influences the political attitudes and behaviors of its users. Young citizens used TikTok for more than watching satirical videos bashing then-President Trump or “stanning” the fly on then-Vice President Mike Pence’s head during the vice presidential debate. TikTok use, contrary to popular perceptions, encourages a great deal of meaningful political behavior.

To summarize, the study began with five hypotheses gauging the effects of TikTok on attitudes and political participation. Out of five hypotheses, we found some evidence for all of them. The strongest support was for two hypotheses (H4 and H5) focusing on traditional political participation. TikTok was a better predictor of both online and traditional forms of political participation than the other most used social media platforms. This observation adds to the growing body of research that finds social media can encourage forms of online political participation (Steinberg, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Kahne & Middaugh, 2012; Rainie et al., 2012; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Prior social media literature had mixed results of social media affecting or increasing traditional forms of political participation (Boulianne et al., 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Lamb & Steinberg, 2021; Lazaroiu, 2018).

Beyond our central findings several broader implications emerge. First, it is clear that TikTok's algorithm links like-minded individuals, as TikTok is a medium heavily dominated by Democrats and liberals. In our study we found that the use of TikTok was related to holding more liberal views. This is consistent with other work that has found that TikTok seemingly caters to left-leaning individuals as more Democrats and liberal politicians utilize the app (Kambhampaty, 2022). Mobilization efforts such as the Black Lives Matter Movement or political activism such as TikTokers derailing attendance of Trump rallies are among the most reported and popular content (Lorenz et al., 2020; Svirskis, 2020).

Second, what comes across clearly in our multivariate analysis is that different social media platforms have different effects. Our work joins a growing body of research that uncovers that not all social media is the same. Use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,

and TikTok is linked to very different political behaviors. The various platforms have different modalities for communication: Facebook for sharing posts of any length, Twitter for short-form statements, Instagram for images, and TikTok for short videos.

The main question for us is why TikTok motivates more political behavior among young people than other social media platforms. Across our regression models, TikTok is the most significant social media predictor of political attitudes and participation. We identify several factors that might explain this. Generation Z is attracted to short-form videos since young people's attention span, as highlighted by *Forbes* in 2017, is "less than that of a goldfish" (Patel, 2017). Thus, TikTok is the go-to app to obtain fast information since it requires the least amount of time and caters to Generation Z's information-gathering style. Next, TikTok fosters creativity and humor, two adopted traits in Generation Z's social media preferences. The most viewed TikToks are often those that show humorous, dramatic, or outlandish behavior. Generation Z plays a unique role in our current political atmosphere as both avid and lax users have the ability to market a rallying point for major issues, fact check politicians and news organizations, and mobilize their counterparts for greater causes.

Our research provides an additional contribution to youth media effects research. TikTok will likely continue to influence and engage young people in ways that differ from other social media and scholars will need to continue to investigate the effects of TikTok on Generation Z. TikTok provides a venue to facilitate conversations, news, and participation and will continue to inform and entertain the youth.

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APPENDIX A

Variable Coding

Variable	Range	Coding
Dependent Variables		
Supported President Trump in the 2020 Election	0,1	Indicates whether respondent supported President Trump in the 2020 Election (1) or not (0).
Social media makes me more supportive of liberal politicians	0,1	Indicates whether social the respondent more supportive of liberal politicians (1) or not (0).
Social media makes me take politics less Seriously	0,1	Indicates whether social media makes respondent take politics less seriously (1) or not (0).
Believe racial injustice is serious problem	0,1	Indicates whether respondent believes racial injustice is a serious problem (1) or not (0).
7-point scale of online participation	0-7	Indicates whether respondent participated in any of 7 forms of online participation: share political posts; comment on political headlines or posts; argued with other users in the comment sections about a political issue; argued with other users in the comment sections about a political candidate; follow a politician(s); liked or shared a politician's post; commented on a politician's post.
Shared a political post online	0,1	Indicates whether respondent shared a political post online (1) or not (0).
Commented on a political post online	0,1	Indicates whether respondent commented on a political post online (1) or not (0).
Followed politician on social media	0,1	Indicates whether respondent followed politician on social media (1) or not (0).
7-point scale of traditional participation (not online) political	0-7	Indicates whether respondent participated in any of 7 forms of traditional participation: contacted an elected official; voted in the 2020 Elections; worked or volunteered on a campaign, attended a campaign event; joined a group that works on political causes; donated money to a campaign; attended a protest.
Voted in 2020 presidential election	0,1	Indicates whether respondent voted in 2020 Presidential Election (1) or not (0).
Made a donation to a political candidate or cause	0,1	Indicates whether respondent made a donation to a political candidate or cause (1) or (0).
Volunteered on a campaign	0,1	Indicates whether respondent volunteered a on campaign (1) or (0).
Independent Variables: Social Media Factors		
Time Spent on social media	1-7	Indicates time spent on social media. Ranges from rarely or never (1) to more than 9 hours per day (7).
TikTok user	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is a TikTok user (1) or not (0).
Instagram user	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is an Instagram user (1) or not (0).
Facebook user	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is a Facebook user (1) or not (0).
Twitter user	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is a Twitter user (1) or not (0).

Independent Variables: Political Factors

Democrat	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is a Democrat (1) or not (0).
Republican	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is a Republican (1) or not (0).
Independent	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is independent (1) or not (0)
Political Knowledge	1-4	Indicates respondent's level of political knowledge. Ranges from not at all knowledgeable (1) to very knowledgeable (4).
Political Interest	1-4	Indicates respondent's level of political interest. Ranges from not at all interested (1) to very interested (4).

Independent Variables: Socio-Demographic Factors Predicting Political Recruitment

Education	1-6	Indicates respondent's highest level of completed education. Ranges from never completed high school (1) to completed graduate degree (6).
Income	1-6	Indicates respondent's annual household income. Ranges from under 25,000 (1) to more than 100,001 (6).
Race (White)	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is White (1) or not (0).
Race (Black)	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is Black (1) or not (0).
Sex (Male)	0,1	Indicates whether respondent is a man (1) or woman (0).

Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts, Loyola Marymount University for funding the data collection. We have no conflicts of interest. We would like to thank Laura Huffman, Gabriele Magni, Sandy Menotti, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on this manuscript.

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