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Introduction

Since at least the United States election of 2000, scholars have debated the role of the internet in the electoral process. Most often, and without much supporting evidence, pundits have argued that the internet provides new forums for political engagement and increased voter participation among groups previously less likely to participate – notably young people. The 2016 presidential election has spurred a very different discussion. Although pundits have continued to suggest that the internet, and in particular social media, played a role in deciding the outcome of the election, the discourse has taken a negative tone. The defeat of Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, at the hands of Republican candidate, Donald Trump, has generated an outcry from scholars who now point to the deleterious role of social media in influencing the result of the election.

Arguments as to why social media might have contributed to President Trump's election have included the sway of "fake news," algorithms that create filter bubbles, the influence of strong political opinions expressed through social media, and how social media sorts people into echo chambers that limit their exposure to different points of view. Although these issues should not be entirely dismissed, there is no evidence that these forces worked in favor of a particular presidential candidate. By focusing on the potential harmful effects of social media, scholars have largely ignored how the unique historical context of the 2016 presidential election (primarily changes in patterns of inequality and immigration) and the absence or limited use of social media by specific segments of the population contributed to the election's outcome.

In Context

The 2016 election took place on the heels of the Great Recession, a period of general economic decline, high rates of foreclosures, and declines in home values. Americans have felt the subsequent, ongoing, economic recovery unequally; income growth has been concentrated among the highest income earners, whereas most others have experienced income stagnation or decline. Income inequality is at its highest since a peak in the late 1920s (Sommeiller, Price, & Wazeter, 2016).

At the same time, the composition of the American population is changing. At nearly 40 million people, the total, foreign-born population of the United States represents a larger proportion of the population than at any time since the 1920s (Grieco et al., 2012). Opinions about the value of immigration and its impact on America are strongly divided by class and political affiliation. Those from the middle class, those with more years of formal education, and Democrats generally express a positive view of immigrants. Those from the working class, those with fewer years of education, those with low incomes, and Republicans are much less likely to believe that immigrants benefit the country (Doherty, Tyson, & Weisel, 2015).

It was economic inequality and unfavorable attitudes toward immigrants – both concentrated in the white working-class – that created the context for the election of Donald Trump, not the use of social media. Evidence as to why these two factors mattered more than others can be found in an analysis of who switched their vote, from supporting the Democratic candidate for President in 2012, to the Republican candidate in 2016.

Who Switched Their Vote?

Data collected from actual voters suggest that a very narrow segment of the population shifted its vote from the Democratic candidate for president in 2012 to the Republican candidate in 2016. The National Election Pool, a consortium of media companies, has been collecting exit poll data from voters since 2003. In 2016, on behalf of the National Election Pool, Edison Research conducted a national probability survey that consisted of approximately 16,000 phone interviews with early and absentee voters and, on Election Day, in person interviews with 85,000 voters as they exited nearly 1,000 polling stations.

An analysis of exit poll data conducted by the Pew Research Center (2016) found deep divisions among demographic groups and their preference for presidential candidates. However, for the most part, these divisions were consistent with historical trends. For example, women were more likely to vote for Clinton than for Trump (54% to 42%). Yet, women supported Clinton by about the same margin as women had voted for the Democratic candidate over the Republican candidate in 2012 (55% to 44%) and 2008 (56% vs. 43%). Men were more likely to support Donald Trump – by a 12-point margin, which was only modestly higher than the 7-point advantage men gave the Republican candidate in 2012. Clinton lost white voters by a margin that was nearly identical to what occurred in 2012. In 2016, white, non-Hispanic voters favored Trump by 21 percentage points (58% vs. 37%), not unlike the 2012 Republican candidate who won white voters by 20 points (59% to 39%).

One key demographic changed its vote from the Democratic candidate in 2012 to the Republican candidate in 2016. In comparison with recent presidential elections, a wide partisan gap emerged in 2016 between those with and without a college degree. In 2012, those without a college-degree showed near equal support for Democratic and Republican candidates (51% to 47%). In 2016, there was an 8-point margin in favor of Trump (52% to 44%). However, when looking only at white voters without a college degree, a 39-point margin emerged in favor of Trump (67% to 28%). Although whites without a college education had also preferred the Republican candidate in 2012 (61%-36%) and 2008 (58%-40%), it was by smaller margins. Trump's margin of support among white, working-class voters, who are concentrated in less urban areas, was the largest since 1980. It was this shift in voter loyalty that swayed the election in favor of Donald Trump.

Digital Inequality

Evidence of votes shifted from the Democratic to the Republican candidate in the 2016 presidential election points to a small segment of the population, primarily white, working-

class voters without a college degree. The very people who switched their allegiance in 2016 from the Democratic to the Republican presidential candidate are the most likely to be removed from those forces of social media have influenced the vote.

According to a national survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2015), this group is more disconnected in its online and offline media activities than most segments of the American population. An examination of its overall media use shows that this demographic is much less likely to access information on a variety of topics, including education, finances, government services, health care, job information, and their local community. They use less diverse sources of traditional media, like the television, radio and newspapers, and they access less information online. Of the 15 percent of Americans who do not use the internet at home or on a mobile device, two-thirds are white and do not have a college degree.

The reason why this demographic is so digitally disconnected is the result of a confluence of forces. Because they are more likely to live in rural areas and small towns, they are less likely to have access to broadband internet service. Working-class Americans have less disposable income, and the price of broadband internet can be prohibitive. Individually, they often place less value and priority on internet use. White, working-class Americans who do have internet access also tend to use the internet differently than most internet users. They access the internet less frequently and are less likely to use social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Given low rates of penetration and use, social media likely had very little influence on these voters. The argument that “fake news” or other aspects of social media were persuasive, to the extent that they were responsible for vote switching, ignores the fact that those who switched from the Democratic to the Republican candidate tended to be the most disconnected. Far stronger and more ubiquitous social forces than social media drove votes to Donald Trump. However, the internet may still have played a role, or more accurately, the absence or limited use of social media by this demographic, may have paved the road to Donald Trump’s victory

Community

Many of the factors that scholars who study social media have suggested were influential in the 2016 presidential election were present long before the internet. One example is echo chambers or the tendency for people to self-select into groups who share their views and to avoid opportunities for discussion with those who have competing opinions. There is a natural tendency to find people with similar backgrounds and beliefs in similar places and for people who are similar to become friends. When communities have few relationships that extend to diverse outsiders, they become extreme examples of echo chambers. Echo chambers can be a source of insularity and intolerance to outsiders. They are found on- and offline.

In the contemporary world, mobility dilutes echo chambers. That is, as a result of education attainment and economic opportunity, people move geographically and mix with people of different backgrounds and beliefs. Finding similarity that is based on more than a shared

location, new friendships form, and many old social ties go dormant and dissolve. In America, widespread mobility accelerated in the 1800s with large-scale rural to urban migration. It increased with the introduction of technologies, such as the telephone and automobile. More recently, the internet pushed this trend still further, providing additional mobility as a result of the ease of communication. Mobility encourages the formation of diverse relationships and the exposure to different types of people, opinions, and beliefs.

To understand why white, working-class Americans voted for Trump, we need to recognize that members of these communities often have limited exposure to diverse media content, experience less mobility, and as a result, often live in echo chambers with narrow exposure to diverse opinions. These forces, in a situation of economic insecurity generated the ideal context that would sway votes to Donald Trump.

Roots of Intolerance

Donald Trump campaigned on a message targeted to the white working class. He appealed to a demographic that felt especially left behind in the wake of and recovery from the Great Recession. In large part, Trump focused on the presence of immigrants and other minority groups, whom many from the white working class consider to be in direct competition for jobs and economic success. In the words of Mark Sanford, a former Republican governor of South Carolina and member of the U.S. House of Representatives, “Trump fanned the flames of intolerance.”

Middle-class Americans, particularly those with more years of formal education, tend to be more tolerant of immigrants and minorities for a number of reasons. Education increases knowledge about the positive aspects of different groups and encourages people to think critically about stereotypes. Educational institutions and the mobility associated with educational attainment provide for social mixing across groups. Personal, positive, social contact in settings where groups are cooperative builds positive attitudes. The middle class is also less likely to see themselves in direct economic competition with immigrants. As Cote and Erickson (2009) show in their seminal work on “Untangling the Roots of Tolerance,” one of the strongest predictors of tolerance is the diversity of people’s personal networks – ties that break down echo chambers. However, not all diversity is the same; people with diversified ties to middle-class people are more tolerant, but those with ties limited to the working class tend to be significantly less tolerant. It was a campaign message that supported the attitudes of those who view minorities and immigrants as undesirable that persuaded voters.

Escaping the Echo Chamber

Although the use of social media may not have directly influenced the election – certainly not as much as inequality and intolerance – digital technologies are changing the structure and insularity of community. They are influencing the diversity of networks. Social media not only support mobility – increased contact at a distance – but increasingly provide for relational

persistence and pervasive awareness (Hampton, 2016a). This change has significant implications for how people receive information and view the world around them.

Pervasive awareness results from the short, asynchronous exchanges that typify social media. One outcome of these exchanges is increased exposure to the events, activities, beliefs, and opinions shared by friends and family. Internet users and especially social media users report more diverse social networks (Hampton, et al., 2011). It is not clear if their networks become more diverse over time, or if they are simply exposed to more diversity that was always present but previously hidden in their personal network. Relationships are dynamic, and some of this new found diversity may be a result of the persistence of relationships, which makes information from established ties more visible.

Persistent contact is an outcome of communication technologies that allow people to articulate their association and maintain contact over time. Previously ties would have gone dormant or dissolved as a result of mobility, but now, when people move neighborhoods, go away to school, change jobs, and so on, their relationships persist over time both online and often offline. Persistence has the potential to link lives across generations and over the life course in ways that previously would have been difficult or impossible to sustain.

These affordances of relational persistence and pervasive awareness may have important influences on rural, small town, working-class Americans. These communities have experienced a long net loss of young adults migrating out to cities for education and new economic opportunity (Smith, Winkler, & Johnson, 2016). This migration results in an expected increase in diversity within the personal networks of those who leave, as they advance into the middle class and experience a corresponding boost in tolerance. But it has traditionally done little for the small town ties they leave behind; their relationships do not experience a similar boost in diversity; their attitudes towards external groups, such as immigrants and minorities, often remain intolerant. However, with social media, relational persistence may provide rural working-class people with access to diverse middle-class ties. These ties consist of rural emigrants and the ties they visibly maintain through social media, ties that previously would have been unobserved, and relationships that may have dissolved due to distance and infrequent contact. Through an awareness of the activities and attitudes of these ties, maintained through social media, they have increased exposure to middle-class opinions and attitudes towards immigrants and minorities.

Leave No One Behind

Intolerance and isolation are not limited to or inherent to the white, rural and small town working class. Rather, intolerance and its consequences are a result of failures of government policy. There is a failure to reduce competition between minorities and working-class people by intervening with remedies, such as affordable higher education, job retraining, and accreditation of foreign-trained professionals. There is a failure to develop national and regional policies aimed at valuing multiculturalism. These failures have allowed inequality to

reach levels not seen in America for nearly one hundred years. Inefficient policies fail to create the conditions for rural areas to have equal access to broadband infrastructure. They fail to provide adequate subsidies for those with low-incomes to obtain broadband home internet access and training. The conditions that allow intolerance to persist come not from the working class but from the middle and upper classes. The consequences of intolerance are felt not just by minority groups and expressed through public opinion, but are experienced by all Americans as cynicism and lower levels of informal helping behavior (Hampton, 2016b).

Social media may not be the reason why Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States, but they may help eliminate the conditions that have allowed a message of intolerance to sway American voters. Access to and use of social media can increase contact between the working and middle classes. This may increase contact with minorities, enhance local knowledge of the value of different groups of people, and, through diverse networks, influence white working-class Americans to find increased tolerance. Social media may not only influence those who see themselves in direct economic competition with minority and immigrant groups, but they may serve the dual purpose of increasing middle-class voters' understanding of the concerns of working-class Americans.

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