

Does social media make German voters more extreme?

In 2024 most people in Germany use some social media platform on a daily basis, often to inform themselves about political issues. At the same time, the political discourse seems to become more polarized. Rising populist parties from left and right, waning support for mainstream parties, demonstrations and attacks on politicians seem to increase. But is this really the case and is the increased social media usage to blame for these developments? A newly published study provides valuable insights into this debate.

Political social media use on the rise

Social Media usage is steadily increasing, while the consumption of newspapers and TV-news is declining. For a growing number of people, social media has even become their main source of political information. This has led to intense debates about misinformation, hate speech, echo chambers and filter bubbles. The fact, that political debates online become more fragmented, and people therefore expose themselves only to information that conforms to what they already think, is widely believed to contribute to radicalization and political polarization on both sides of the political spectrum. Online anonymity, algorithms which seek to generate user engagement, and fake news sites, are perceived to amplify the problems originating from increased political social media usage.

Moving from the middle to the extremes?

At the same time, the political discourse is believed to become increasingly polarized. Populist parties from the left and the right were the clear winners of the recent European Parliamentary elections, and the mainstream parties governing Germany were the clear losers. At the same time, multiple scandals surrounding the AfD led to demonstrations against right-wing extremism and calls for banning the AfD altogether.

This would suggest an increased political polarization at a time, in which many people use social media to inform themselves about political topics either passively by reading, or actively by sharing political information or even engaging in online activism. This trend has sparked intense debates about the consequences of social media usage on political discourse and the dangers for a democratic society posed by increased polarization. But is society really becoming more polarized and is increased political social media usage to blame for it?

Study finds no effect of social media usage

In a newly published study, the influence of political social media usage on the political polarization in Germany is examined. With data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) from 2017 to 2021 a fixed effects panel regression model is calculated to quantify the effect of social media usage on polarization.

The study shows that social media usage has no significant effect and cannot be held responsible for the increasing polarization. This finding is in line with the mixed scientific evidence regarding this subject. It is also highlighted that social media usage and polarization have been stable in the time period of the data collection.

Situation is better than expected

In summary the study contradicts the popular belief that social media reinforces polarization and leads to more extreme voters. Instead, it suggests that other factors should be considered to understand why polarization is on the rise calls for further research on the subject. Additionally, it also questions whether polarization and social media usage have increased as much as widely believed.