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Like, Post, and Distrust? How Social Media Use Affects Trust in Government

ELAD KLEIN and JOSHUA ROBISON

There is much discussion about the potential negative effects of social media use on people's political attitudes. But, does social media use shape trust in government? We use evidence from the 2012 and 2016 ANES as well as the 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll to test competing expectations regarding this question: that social media polarizes *versus* de-polarizes *trust judgments across partisan lines. Our analyses provide greater support for the expectation of polarization. We then unpack the potential mechanisms behind these findings. We use the number of "stealth" issue campaigns targeted to the respondent's state in 2016 as a proxy for the amount of political conflict the respondent was likely to have experienced when using social media during the 2016 Presidential election. Notably, we find that polarization is substantially impacted by the nature of the voter's broader political environment. These findings are consequential for our understanding of how social media influences public opinion and draws attention to the role of the broader political context for this relationship.*

Keywords social media, partisan polarization, trust in government

Most Americans now use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Their use of these platforms is not apolitical as a majority of Americans report obtaining political news from social media platforms (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). One politically salient worry is that exposure to political content on social media may have dire consequences for democratic politics. The political content shared on social media tends to be highly contentious, emotional, and moralized in nature (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017; Kim et al., 2018). It is often shared between people of similar partisan and ideological predispositions who may use this information to further solidify their initial political views (Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). One worry is thus that social media use may

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further polarize the already polarized American mass public and thereby solidify cross-partisan conflict (Settle, 2018).

Our key contribution to the study of social media use and political polarization is to reorient the discussion to a novel outcome. Existing studies have tended to focus on whether social media use leads to more extreme issue attitudes and greater animosity toward opposing partisans (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Settle, 2018; Suhay, Bello-Pardo, & Maurer, 2018; Sunstein, 2017). However, this may give only a glimpse of the potential political importance of social media use insofar as other attitudes are also impacted. Our focus is on the inter-relationship between social media use, partisan predispositions, and *trust in government*. Trust in government is a crucial indicator of democratic health as trust enables governments to tackle difficult policy problems (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Levi & Stoker, 2000). If social media use also undermines trust judgments, then its effects may be baleful indeed. However, few studies have considered how the growing reliance of the mass public on social media impacts these systemic attitudes (see Ceron, 2015 for an exception).

We use the best available survey evidence to contrast rival empirical predictions regarding the relationship between social media use and trust in government. On the one hand, increased social media use may accompany increased exposure to political information that only solidifies existing partisan biases thereby leading to *even more* polarization in trust judgments between those with differing partisan attitudes. On the other hand, social media use is not the echo chamber many proclaim it to be (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Eady, Nagler, Guess, Zilinsky, & Tucker, 2019). Many are incidentally exposed to incongruent political information, which may *depolarize* partisan differences in resulting trust judgments (a la Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010). These rival claims have contrasting implications for democratic politics.

To test these claims we first analyze data from the 2012 and 2016 ANES Time Series. Here, we find that social media use is associated with a polarization in trust; while respondents with highly favorable attitudes toward the Democratic Party report greater trust as their level of social media use increases, the inverse pattern occurs among those with highly favorable attitudes toward the Republican Party. We then analyze the 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll and find the *inverse* pattern, which may reflect the change in the Presidency from a Democrat to a Republican. These patterns suggest that insofar as partisans are encountering incongruent information on social media they are principally using it to reaffirm their partisan allegiances (Bail et al. 2018). Finally, we consider the role of political conflict in driving these results. Here we leverage variation in the level of political conflict likely experienced by respondents during the 2016 Presidential election due to the presence of divisive issue campaigns targeted to residents of select states during the campaign (Kim et al., 2018). Notably, we find polarization is structured by the likely extent of conflict experienced on social media. These findings have important political implications, which we discuss further in the conclusion.

Theory

Trust in Government and the Media

We follow existing work in defining trust in government as reflecting a person's "rational or affective belief in the benevolent motivation and performance capacity of another," in

this case the government (Norris, 2017, p. 19; see also: Hetherington, 2005; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Stokes, 1962). A considerable amount of attention has been given to understanding the origins and dynamics of this concept, a fact not surprising when one considers its important role in affecting the public's willingness to grant leeway to the government and politicians (Bianco, 1994; Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Jacobs & Matthews, 2012). Reflecting its definition, this literature suggests that variation in trust can be explained by variation in distinctly *political* judgments of citizens (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Levi & Stoker, 2000). On the one hand, people trust agents when they believe these agents have common interests to themselves (Bianco, 1994; Hardin, 2002; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). It should not be surprising then that trust is higher when people see political friends in office rather than enemies or when they are satisfied with the government's policy outputs and its performance with regards to salient social problems (Chanley et al., 2000; Citrin, 1974; Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Miller, 1974; Mishler & Rose, 2001). On the other hand, (perceived) deviations by elected officials and governing parties form norms of good governance may undermine a sense of trust as it suggests that politicians have bad intentions or deliver bad performance. Thus, scandals and higher levels of conflict may undermine trust in government (Chanley et al., 2000; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Ramirez, 2009).

A prominent line of inquiry within this broader literature concerns the role of the news and mass media in affecting trust in government (as well as other signals of democratic functioning such as efficacy and participation). Perhaps the key debate here concerns whether the media undermines or bolsters trust, i.e. the media malaise or virtuous circle debate (Avery, 2009; Newton, 1999, 2017; Norris, 1996; Stromback & Shehata, 2010). This literature has produced mixed findings regarding media consumption in general, although it does suggest that *particular* types of media content may be damaging to political trust. "Strategic" or "horse-race" news content that focuses on the tactics and self-interested motivations of politicians, for instance, fosters heightened cynicism and distrust (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2011; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Zoizner, n.d.). Likewise, "uncivil" and conflict-heavy coverage may have similar outcomes (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). It is perhaps not hard to see why given the definition advanced earlier; such news content suggests that politicians are motivated by goals potentially at odds with the public interest and are too caught up in the "game" of politics to be effective at the job of governing.

The foregoing debate about the media and political trust focuses principally on the competing influences of newspapers and TV on political trust. However, this portrait leaves out the dramatic change in the media habits of people over the past decade due to the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Most Americans now use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Many of these people seek out, or are alternatively incidentally exposed to, political news from these sites (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). How does use of social media platforms impact our understanding of political trust?

Surprisingly, we have found only one study explicitly concerning the effects of social media use on political trust. Ceron (2015) argues that obtaining news from social media platforms should undermine trust because it should be associated with a higher exposure rate to "marginalized voices and antisystem arguments". Eurobarometer data from 2012 supports his argument, with respondents who indicate that they obtain news from social media and social network sites reporting lower trust in government. While Ceron's argument appears plausible, we feel that one key limitation of this study is its lack of

attention to how social media use *interacts* with the individual's partisan predispositions. As outlined earlier, trust in government is decidedly political such that those who see ideological allies in office report higher trust than those that do not. This suggests that social media use may have contingent effects of political trust, e.g. leading to more trust for some and less for others depending on their relationship to the ruling party. Moreover, Ceron focuses exclusively on those respondents who report explicitly seeking news from these sites, which may be an important choice insofar as news exposure on social media sites is also incidental in nature (e.g., Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017). In the next section, we highlight two competing accounts for how to understand the potential interaction between social media use and the partisan predispositions of the person using the platform.

Competing Accounts & Hypotheses

On the one hand, many researchers provide reasons to suggest that social media use should *polarize* evaluations of governmental performance, and hence trust, across political lines. Political content is often shared between people of similar political predispositions (Barbera et al., 2015; Colleoni et al., 2014). Thus, individuals with viewpoints consonant to those of the party in government will mostly see evidence that bolsters their existing positive evaluation of government performance, while those with opposing views and evaluations will mainly receive bolstering information of their negative attitudes. Moreover, a person's feelings toward political parties substantially influences how they interpret and use new information. In particular, individuals with attitudes strongly favoring one side rather than the other readily accept information consonant with this predisposition and either dismiss or rationalize incongruent information (Bisgaard, n.d.; Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). These patterns of exposure and interpretation should thus result in a *polarization* of trust judgments such that those predisposed to express favorable views of governmental performance will report higher trust, while those predisposed in the other direction will report even more *distrust*. This pattern may be especially likely in contexts featuring a high level of divisive political content. Prior studies show that conflict motivates people to act on the basis, and in defense, of their predispositions (Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). This suggests that the polarizing impact of social media use will be greater for those individuals situated within more conflictual contexts.

While there exist reasons to expect polarization based on social media use, there are also reasons to expect the converse effect as well (i.e. depolarization). While people's social networks, offline and on, tend toward homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), they are not fully enclosed echo chambers (Bakshy et al., 2015; Eady et al., 2019; Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004). Indeed, social media platforms may widen a person's social circle and increase the heterogeneity of their peer networks given that most people join these networks for non-political reasons and "be-friend" or "follow" people from school or work, e.g. weaker ties (Kim, 2011; Kim, Hsu, & de Zuniga, 2013). As a result, these networks may provide an opportunity to be incidentally exposed to information that challenges one's predispositions much as other contexts like the workplace or one's neighborhood do (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Weeks et al., 2017; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Notably, while people may seek out information consonant with their views, they tend not to *selectively*

avoid discordant information when it is available (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2011). Importantly, we know from research on political discussion within *offline* social networks that exposure to discordant information from peers fosters greater awareness of the legitimate rationales for the other side's actions and positions; creates ambivalence about candidates and parties; depolarizes people's perceptions of partisan groups; and ultimately fosters greater tolerance of political difference (Lyons & Sokhey, 2017; Mutz, 2006; Pattie & Johnston, 2008; Robison, n.d.). Likewise, while partisans may attempt to dismiss incongruent information, this process has its limits and sufficient conflicting information can undermine partisan biases in information processing (Bullock, 2011; Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk et al., 2010). These observations suggest the potential for a *depolarization* in trust evaluations, e.g. for less trust among those predisposed to favor the government based on partisan considerations and/or for higher trust among those predisposed the other way (e.g., Lee et al., 2014).

Based on the foregoing, we can postulate the following competing expectations:

H1a: Greater use of social media sites *polarizes* political trust judgments across partisan lines

H1b: The degree of polarization due to social media use increases with the level of political conflict experienced on social media

H2: Greater use of social media sites *de-polarizes* political trust judgments across partisan lines

A First Test: The 2012 and 2016 ANES Time Series

Data and Measures

We turn to the 2012 and 2016 ANES Time Series surveys for a first test of our hypotheses. Our dependent variable is trust in government. Following much prior work we created an index from four items frequently used to tap trust in government on the ANES (Hetherington, 2005; Levi & Stoker, 2000). The first item asks respondents how much they can trust the government to do what is right.[1] The second item captures their perception of whether the government is run for all or for just a few big interests. The third asks whether the government wastes taxpayer money while the fourth captures beliefs about the "crookedness" of politicians. We rescaled each item to fall on a 0–1 scale with higher scores indicating greater *distrust* in government. We then created an index by averaging across the items using all valid responses from a respondent (mean = 0.70, st.dev = 0.21, alpha = 0.64).

Our expectations posit that social media use will either polarize or depolarize trust judgments based on how people feel about political parties. We use an indicator of partisan affect based on the feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic and Republican parties. Our measure of partisan affect subtracts ratings given to the Democratic Party from those given to the Republican Party, which we then rescale to fall on a 0 (maximally favorable to the to the Democratic Party) to 1 (maximally favorable to the Republican Party) scale. We use this measure because we believe it provides a more complete picture of the respondent's partisan proclivities than a measure of party identification alone. Indicators of party identification tap into a sense of *positive*

identification with a party.[2] However, recent work highlights the importance of capturing the *negative* aspects of partisanship, e.g. reactions to the out-party, as well (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Medeiros & Noel, 2014). Lelkes and Westwood (2017), for instance, finds that it is principally those with polarized partisan attitudes (i.e. positive in-party and negative out-party) that discriminate against the out-party. Likewise, research on ambivalence shows that partisans with consistent attitudes (e.g. positive toward the in-party and negative toward the out-party) react in a more biased manner than do those with inconsistent attitudes (Lavine et al., 2012). Finally, research on party cueing shows that partisans appear to react more strongly to out-party than in-party cues (Goren, Federico, & Kittilson, 2009; Nicholson, 2012). Ultimately, we expect a positive relationship between this variable and our measure of distrust, i.e. increasingly favorable views toward the Republican Party relative to the Democratic Party should be associated with increasing *distrust* given that a Democrat occupied the White House in both 2012 and 2016.

Our key moderator is social media use. Respondents on both surveys were asked on the pre-election wave to indicate "how many days" they used "social media such as Twitter or Facebook" during a typical week. Scores could thus range from 0 to 7. We rescaled this variable to fall on a 0–1 scale (mean = 0.36, sd = 0.43). While this item appears on both surveys, one crucial difference does differentiate the two surveys: respondents on the 2012 ANES were asked how many days they used social media "to learn about the election for President" whereas respondents in 2016 were simply asked how many days they used social media without a reference to the Presidential election. It should not be surprising that social media use looks higher in 2016 (mean = 0.55) than in 2012 (mean = 0.21).

H1a suggests a three-way interaction between partisan predispositions, social media use, and exposure to conflict. Unfortunately, we do not have a direct measure of exposure to conflict on social media. Instead, we turn to a proxy measure. Kim et al. (2018) highlight the actions of "stealth" advocacy groups who targeted residents of several states during the 2016 Presidential campaign with customized messages on highly divisive wedge issues. Moreover, exposure to these divisive targeted campaigns was not merely dichotomous (e.g. targeted vs not-targeted), but rather varied such that residents of some states were (potentially) exposed to a greater or lesser degree of divisive issue campaigns. Users in Pennsylvania, for instance, were targeted with five divisive issues, such as guns, abortion and immigration whereas residents of New Jersey were only targeted with two issues. We use Kim et al.'s (2018, Table 2) identification of states exposed to these campaigns as a proxy for exposure to divisive political content. Specifically, we use the number of issues each state was targeted with as a proxy for the divisiveness and negativity of the types of political content users in these states were potentially exposed to during the campaigns. This measure has certain advantages. First, exposure to this type of divisive content did not emanate from the choices of the individual social media user, but rather the external choices of these campaigns. Second, it focuses distinctly on conflictual information experienced on *social media*, whereas other indicators (such as battleground state status) do not.[3] This measure also has a clear drawback, however: focusing on the targeted paid ads central to these stealth campaigns does not capture other types of negative political content encountered by respondents. Our key expectation is that the polarization we witnessed earlier should increase in size as the level of issue targeting increases. This effect, moreover, should manifest in 2016 *but not* in 2012 given that the targeting only occurred in the former year.

We regress our measure of trust in government on party attitudes, social media use, their interaction, and a variety of control variables using OLS models. We control for a wide array of potential predictors of trust that could account for the relationships of interest to us. Specifically, we control for: (1) self-rated news consumption and the use of other news media; (2) self-rated ideology and issue attitudes to capture the respondent's symbolic and operational ideological leanings; (3) the respondent's personal financial situation; (4) social trust; (5) presidential job approval; (6) respondent demographics; (7) campaign activism; and (8) a dummy variable for survey year to control for unmeasured year-specific factors. We provide results stemming from models that exclude or alternatively include survey weights. The inclusion of survey weights enables for inferences to the broader population, although the increased variance they introduce may threaten the efficiency and statistical power of the models (Bollen, Biemer, Karr, Tueller, & Berzofsky, 2016).

Results

We provide the results from four models in Table 1, truncated to focus on our variables of interest; see Table OA1 for full model results. In Models 1 (unweighted) & 2 (weighted) we regress trust on all predictors but without the interaction between social media use and party attitudes. We expected to see a positive relationship emerge between the party attitude item and distrust, however Models 1 & 2 are not consistent with this expectation. Both social media use and party attitude appear, *on average*, unrelated to trust in Models 1 & 2.

We add the interaction between social media use and party attitudes to the initial model in Models 3 (unweighted) and 4 (weighted). These models provide evidence more consistent with Hypothesis 1a, i.e. that social media would polarize trust judgments,

Table 1
Partisanship, social media use, and distrust (ANES)

	(1) Unweighted	(2) Weighted	(3) Unweighted	(4) Weighted
Party Attitudes	−0.013	−0.001	−0.030	−0.011
	(0.015)	(0.021)	(0.016)	(0.023)
Social Media Use	−0.002	−0.002	−0.022*	−0.014
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.016)
Party Attitudes #			0.043*	0.027
Social Media Use			(0.019)	(0.026)
Constant	0.744***	0.755***	0.751***	0.760***
	(0.019)	(0.027)	(0.020)	(0.028)
Observations	7801	7801	7801	7801
R^2	0.154	0.144	0.154	0.144
Adjusted R^2	0.152		0.152	
Controls Included?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

DV is coded so that higher = more *distrust*. High on polarization = more positive feelings toward the Republican Party than Democratic Party. All variables coded from 0–1. See Table OA1 for full model results. Standard errors in parentheses; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

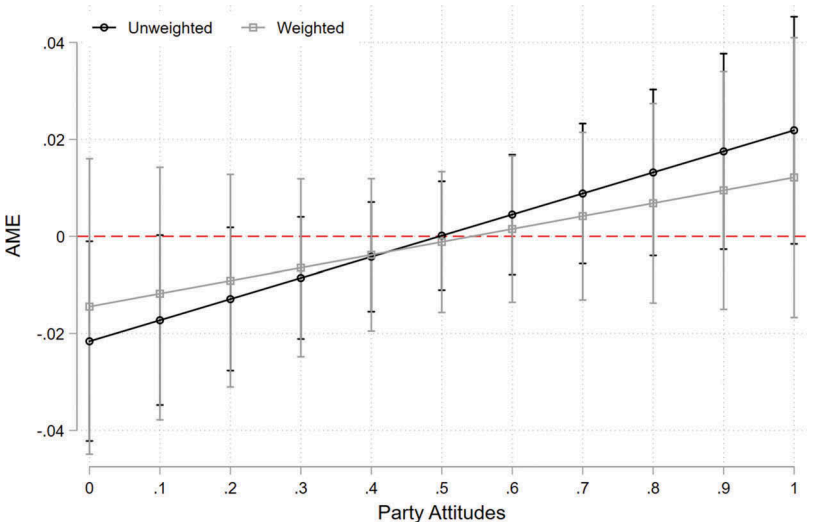

Figure 1. Social media use and distrust by partisan affective polarization (ANES).**Notes**: Markers provide the effect of social media use by the respondent's party attitudes (pro Republican Party relative to Democratic) with 95% confidence intervals based on Models 3 & 4 in Table 1.

although the precision of the interaction terms is sensitive to the use of survey weights. First, social media use is associated with less distrust (or more trust) among those who score 0 on the party attitude item, i.e. those with extremely positive attitudes toward the Democratic Party relative to the Republican Party, although in neither model is the effect statistically significant (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006). Second, the interaction is positive in both models, and statistically significant in the unweighted one indicating that social media use is associated with increasing distrust as we move from low to high on the party polarization measure (e.g. from pro-Democratic attitudes toward pro-Republican attitudes). Figure 1 provides a nice illustration of the offsetting impact of social media use across the spectrum of the respondent's party attitudes by plotting the effect of social media use by party attitude. Thus, we see the negative *effect* (i.e. less distrust, more trust) among those low on the scale and the corresponding *positive effect* (i.e. more distrust, less trust) among those at the other end of the scale. The result is increased polarization.

We turn to an analysis of Hypothesis 1b in Table 2 and Figure 2. Here, we include the measure of stealth campaign exposure via a three-way interaction with social media use and party attitudes. We separately model results by year as the stealth campaign only occurred in 2016. Thus, H1b implies a positive three-way interaction in 2016 but not in 2012.[4] And, indeed, this positive interaction only emerges in 2016. Figure 2, meanwhile, plots the effect of social media use by party attitudes but now with separate sub-plots for the level of divisive stealth issue campaigns targeted at residents of the state in which the respondent resides. The relationship between social media use and party attitudes noticeably reverses as this proxy for exposure to conflict increases. Social media use is associated with increased *distrust* among those with highly Democratic leaning attitudes in states with no stealth campaign, while being associated with increased *trust* among partisans at the other end of the scale, although this latter effect is statistically

Table 2
The moderating role of stealth issue campaigns (ANES)

	(1) 2012 (Unweighted)	(2) 2012 (Weighted)	(3) 2016 (Unweighted)	(4) 2016 (Weighted)
Party Attitudes	−0.050*	−0.023	0.105***	0.116*
	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.031)	(0.048)
Social Media Use	−0.046*	−0.021	0.058**	0.047
	(0.020)	(0.033)	(0.020)	(0.032)
Party Attitudes #	0.090*	0.030	−0.086*	−0.054
Social Media Use	(0.040)	(0.060)	(0.037)	(0.052)
Stealth Campaigns	0.027	0.033	0.135***	0.169**
	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.040)	(0.056)
Party Attitudes #	−0.033	−0.043	−0.242**	−0.254**
Stealth Campaigns	(0.045)	(0.057)	(0.076)	(0.089)
Party Attitudes #	−0.103	−0.166	0.198*	0.169
Social Media Use #	(0.105)	(0.135)	(0.101)	(0.121)
Stealth Campaigns				
Observations	4665	4665	3136	3136
R^2	0.137	0.128	0.201	0.208
Adjusted R^2	0.133		0.195	

Full model results are provided in Table OA2. Standard errors in parentheses;
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

insignificant. The inverse pattern, however, is observed in states with high levels of stealth issue campaigns. Here, social media use is associated with *decreased* distrust among Democratic leaning partisans and *increased* distrust among Republicans (albeit, again, noisily so especially in the weighted model).

The results partially confirm our expectations that the polarizing effects of social media are merely pronounced in states with high levels of negative campaigns in the sense that social media use is associated with opposite effects on trust across the partisan attitudes measure in the states where residents were targeted by a lot of divisive issues. However, as noted, there is an inconsistency here as well: in untargeted states we see the *inverse* relationship (i.e. more distrust among those with attitudes that strongly favor the Democrats and either less distrust or no effect among those that strongly favor the Republicans). Why do we not see a flatter slope in these states for the effect of social media use? One possibility is that other unmeasured aspects of these states are driving these results. We address some possibilities in Online Appendix OD where we find a similar pattern even while controlling for whether the state was a battleground status and, moreover, show that the level of state-level polarization, electoral competitiveness at the Presidential level, and attention to the states by the Presidential candidates does not reliably vary across states with varying levels of stealth targeting. The intriguing findings merit further research on the question of how state-related contextual factors might influence the relationship between polarization and social media use.

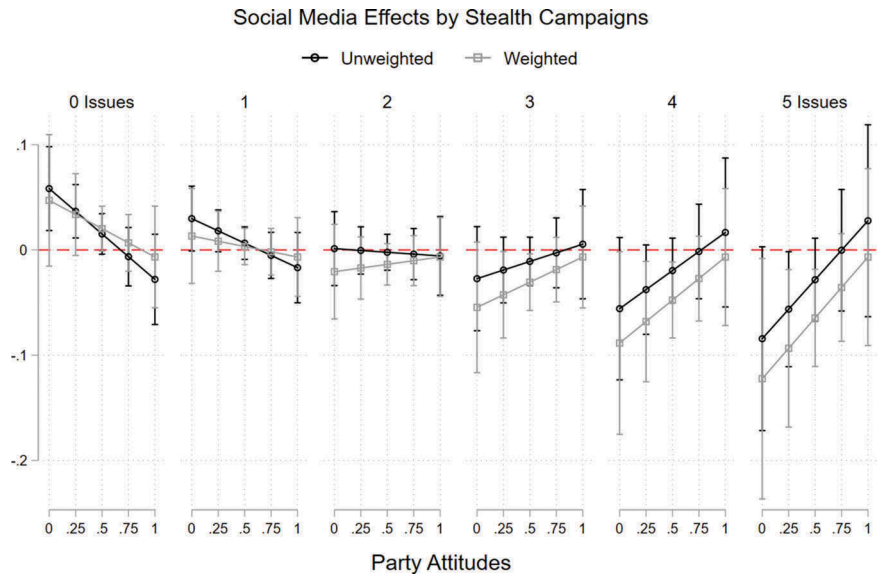

Figure 2. Social media use and distrust by partisan affective polarization and state-level "Stealth" issue campaigns.**Notes**: The line provides the effect of social media use by the respondent's party attitudes along with 95% confidence intervals and a reference line at 0. Sub-graphs plot respondents by the level of "stealth" issue campaign in the state, from 0 to 5. Results stem from Models 3 & 4 in Table 2.

Discussion

Our first analyses provide (noisy) evidence for H1, e.g. that social media use is associated with *polarization* of trust in government. However, there are two key limitations to these analyses. First, these results stem from a specific political environment, i.e. one wherein a Democrat was in the White House. It is thus worth asking whether a similar, but reversed, pattern will emerge with a Republican in the White House. Second, the measure of social media use on the ANES is only a single item that may not capture the variety of ways that people use social media. We thus analyzed a second dataset to ameliorate these concerns.

A Second Test: The 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll

To get a sense of whether the foregoing results replicate in a different time period and with different measures, we turn to the 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll (hereafter AICP; Ladd, Tucker, & Kates, 2018). The AICP was an online survey fielded by YouGov with a sample size of 5400 American adults from July 12th to July 19th 2018. This survey contains measure of trust in government as well as a more varied battery of items concerning social media use. In addition, the survey was conducted after the election of President Donald Trump, enabling us to see whether the patterns we saw in the 2012 and 2016 analyses translate into this new political environment.[5]

Trust in government is measured in a similar manner as on the ANES, except that only two of the items were included (how much can one trust the government and how many politicians are "crooked"). As with our ANES analyses we rescaled both items to

range from 0–1 and created an index for *distrust* in the government based on their average (mean = 0.64, sd = 0.23). Our measure of party attitudes is the same as with the ANES items as well, i.e. the difference in respondent's thermometer ratings for the Republican and Democratic Parties, again on a 0–1 scale (mean = 0.42, sd = 0.26).[6]

One place where the AICP differs from the ANES is in its measurement of social media use. The AICP contains an extended battery of items on this subject and we will ultimately examine analyses using four separate indexes from these items. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had an account with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Snapchat. Respondents were then asked how often they looked at, posted on, and posted *political* content on each of the platforms for which they had an account. Response options here ranged from never to more than ten times a day. We recoded these items to range from 0 (never) to 7 (more than ten time a day). We then formed a scale for each of these behaviors by averaging the summed squared platform specific score for all valid responses divided by five (i.e. Facebook^2 + Twitter^2 … /5). This method of constructing the indices enables us to consider both the number of platforms the respondent uses as well as the degree to which they use them. Respondents with accounts on Facebook and/or Twitter were also asked an additional set of items where they were asked how often they see political information on the platform from friends or acquaintances, news organizations, and politicians or political campaigns. We created a fourth scale using the same process for these items. We took one final step in coding these indices. Respondents who reported not being a member of *any* social media platform were not asked these follow up questions and would thus be coded as missing via the procedure above.[7] We recoded these respondents to have a score of 0 to incorporate them in the models under the reasoning that they also "never" use these platforms as well. We expect to see a reversed relationship with this data as in 2016 due to the change from a Democratic to a Republican president.

The use of multiple indices poses both advantages and disadvantages for our analyses. On the one hand, the different indices capture varying levels of active involvement with social media and information contained therein. It is plausible that people who report "looking at" social media a great deal will be less affected than those who "post" a great deal given that the latter requires a greater degree of cognitive attention and elaboration, which in turn should promote more durable effects of encountered information on subsequent attitudes (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). Individuals who engage in more active forms of political engagement on social media, meanwhile, may have different predispositions, e.g. higher levels of political interest, that may also promote a stronger reaction to political content (Settle, 2018). Using multiple measures thus enables us to disentangle social media's effects in a more nuanced manner. At the same time, multiple measures pose the disadvantage that differences in results may be the result of subtle reactions to question wording rather than differences in the underlying construct.

Analyses

Table 2 provides truncated results from four sets of OLS models. In each model we regressed distrust in government on our measure of partisan polarization, an index of social media use, their interaction, and a series of control variables.[8] We again provide results from both weighted and unweighted models. Each model uses a different social media index measure. Figure 3, meanwhile, plots the interaction between party polarization and social media use much as in Figure 1.

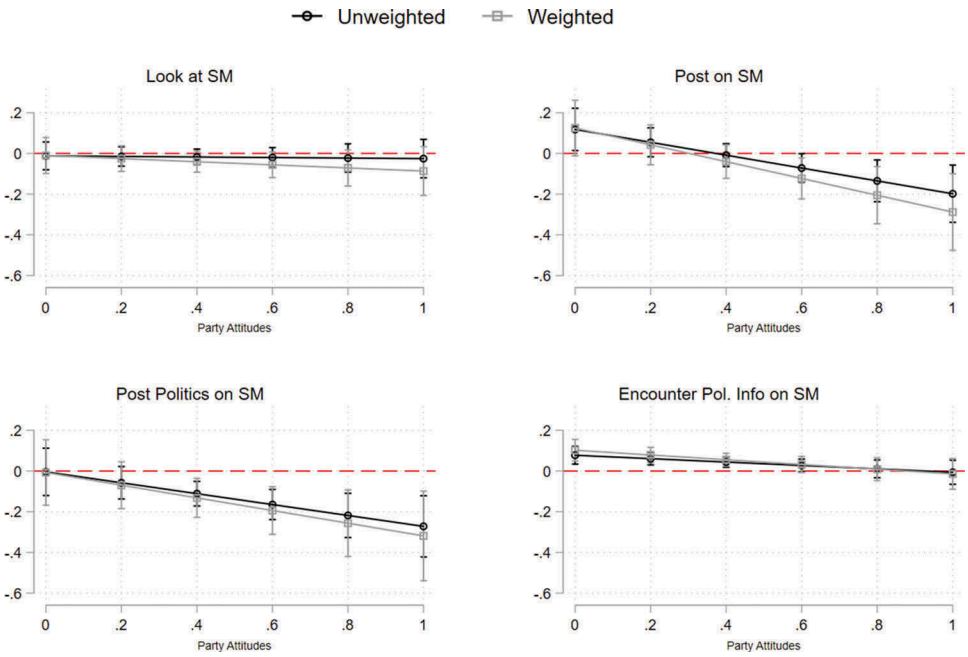

Figure 3. Social media use and distrust by party attitudes (AICP).**Notes**: The line provides the effect of social media use by the respondent's party attitudes (pro Republican Party relative to Democratic) with 95% confidence interval.

Two important results emerge from Table 3 and Figure 3. First, in all models a significant negative relationship is observed between the party thermometer measure and distrust when social media use is at its minimum (e.g., = 0; Brambor et al., 2006). In other words, respondents who strongly favor the Republican to the Democratic party reported significantly less distrust than those with the inverse partisan inclinations. Second, social media use tends to have a similar interactive relationship with this measure in its relationship to distrust, albeit in the *inverse* direction as in 2012 and 2016. As Figure 3 shows in greater detail, higher use of social media is associated with *less* distrust among those that favor the *Republicans* and either no effect (Look at SM and Post Politics on SM) or alternatively *greater* distrust among those that favor the *Democrats* (Post on SM, Encounter Political Info on SM). A plausible explanation for this reversal of the relationship between party polarization and social media use is likely due to the change from 2012/2016 to 2018 in the party of the Presidency, e.g. from a Democrat to a Republican. Figure 3 thus suggests that, as expected, two forms of *active* involvement on social media, lead to a reinforcement of partisan judgments of governmental trust and thus polarization.

Conclusion

Political trust is a critical component of well-functioning democratic societies as it fosters compliance with laws and provides room for governments to tackle social ills even in cases where it may require sacrifice from the public (Hetherington, 2005; Jacobs & Matthews, 2012; Levi & Stoker, 2000). In this manuscript we asked how

Table 3
Partisanship, social media use, and distrust (AICP)

	Look at SM:		Post on SM:		Post Politics on SM:		Encounter Pol Info on SM:	
	(1) Unweighted	(2) Weighted	(3) Unweighted	(4) Weighted	(5) Unweighted	(6) Weighted	(7) Unweighted	(8) Weighted
Party Attitudes	−0.058**	−0.068**	−0.036*	−0.050*	−0.046**	−0.065**	−0.041*	−0.054*
	(0.021)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.022)	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.024)
Look At SM	−0.012	−0.010	0.118*	0.125	−0.004	−0.007	0.077***	0.102***
	(0.035)	(0.045)	(0.053)	(0.070)	(0.059)	(0.082)	(0.022)	(0.027)
Party Attitudes	−0.013	−0.077	−0.316**	−0.413**	−0.268*	−0.311	−0.084	−0.116*
# Look At SM	(0.073)	(0.092)	(0.110)	(0.142)	(0.121)	(0.167)	(0.045)	(0.057)
Constant	0.625***	0.649***	0.614***	0.636***	0.622***	0.645***	0.607***	0.623***
	(0.018)	(0.022)	(0.017)	(0.021)	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.021)
Observations	4977	4977	4977	4977	4977	4977	4977	4977
R^2	0.134	0.121	0.136	0.124	0.137	0.126	0.137	0.125
Adjusted R^2	0.131		0.132		0.134		0.133	
Controls Included?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Full model results are in Table OA3. Standard errors in parentheses
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

changes in the media consumption habits of the American mass public, and particularly the growing use of social media, impacts judgments of trust in government. While prior work provides some reason for pessimism on this front (e.g., Ceron, 2015; Settle, 2018), our results provide a more nuanced perspective. People interpret new political information through partisan lenses (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Thus, those with partisan attachments to the governing party, Democrats in 2012/2016 and Republicans in 2018, reported *more* trust in government as their levels of social media use increased even while controlling for their general media use. On the other hand, those with negative views of the governing party reported *less* trust. These relationships appear to be further affected by the *political content* these partisans were likely to have confronted given their place of residence; especially divisive "stealth" issue campaigns further polarized partisans. Our results thus suggest that social media use is neither a panacea for polarization nor necessarily a stimulant. Instead, the importance of social media use depends critically on its actual contents and how this content interacts with a person's predispositions, much as with media content more generally (Aalberg et al., 2011; Zaller, 1992).

Further attention is also required to tease out how and why social media use may vary across contexts. On the one hand, we saw different results in our 2016 analyses between respondents who resided in a state that was not targeted by stealth issue campaigns and those heavily targeted. One potential explanation for this pattern has to do with varying levels of conflict experienced on these platforms. However, the indicator we used here is at best a proxy for this variation and other factors may differentiate these states. These considerations point to the need to better measure exposure to political disagreement to disentangle what exactly it is about social media use that impacts trust (e.g., Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

On the other hand, we saw a positive interaction in our ANES analyses between social media use and party attitudes and a negative one in the AICP analyses. It strikes us plausible that this reversal is driven by the changing partisanship of the Presidency. However, other elements of the political contexts within which the AICP respondents operated also likely changed in this time frame. For instance, the years since 2016 have seen near constant controversy for Facebook, and to a lesser extent Twitter, due to privacy concerns and the inability of either platform to deal effectively with incivility and abuse on the platforms. The result has been a declining trust in these organizations. In addition, Facebook and Twitter frequently update the algorithms used to display content to users. It is possible that these changes, or some other factor, might be driving the reversal we see here. One strategy future work could employ would be to look for placebo tests, i.e. variables where an interaction between social media use and party attitudes should not reverse over time due to a change in President such as political knowledge concerning facts that are not relevant to the value of the respondent's partisan leanings.[9] Unfortunately, such items were unavailable on the AICP. Thus, while the change in the direction of the interaction between party attitudes and social media use strikes us as plausibly driven by the change in government, we must leave it to future work to solidify this argument.

One final area for future research concerns how these results travel to other contexts. The US is highly polarized two-party system, which may promote the type of polarization seen here. However, other results may emerge in multi-party systems or in systems with different electoral systems and regulations, especially insofar as

variation along these lines impacts the intensity of the public's partisan proclivities (Lupu, 2015).

Notes

1. This item varied in an important way between the surveys. The 2012 ANES featured a split ballot wherein a half sample received this question with four response options (as was traditional on prior on ANES surveys) while the other half received five response options. The 2016 ANES, meanwhile, used the five-option format. Our analyses of the 2012 sample focus on those respondents who received the five-response format to maintain comparability between the two surveys. This should not bias our results given that the number of options was randomly assigned.

2. Partisanship (coded so that high = Strong Republican) and the thermometer difference item are correlated at 0.83. In Online Appendix OF we also provide results from models using either party identification or a factor variable created from party identification and the thermometer difference.

3. Importantly, while there is some overlap between a state being targeted by a stealth campaign and that state being a battleground state, the overlap is far from complete as only half of the targeted states were battleground states. In Online Appendix OD we report analyses that alternatively introduce controls for battleground state status or use this variable as the moderator. Our results do not change in the former case while, in the latter, battleground state status does not moderate the relationship between social media use and partisan predispositions. Appendix OD also compares these states across other dimensions including competitiveness in the Presidential election and extent of polarization in their state legislatures.

4. See Table OA2 for full model results.

5. Other aspects of the American political scene also changed between 2016 and 2018 which may influence our results as we discuss in the Conclusion.

6. As with the ANES data, this variable is substantially correlated with a standard PID item ($r = 0.77$). See Online Appendix OF for models using PID and a factor variable composed of PID and this difference item.

7. This affects 735 out of the 5400 respondents. We discuss the implications of other coding rules in Online Appendix OB. We explore results separately by platform in Online Appendix OC; notably, results from analyses on the three largest platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) are all consistent with the results using this index despite not incorporating this same squaring and averaging process.

8. The control variables used here are the same as in the ANES results save for the omission of a Presidential job approval item as one was missing from the survey. Full model results can be found in Table OA3.

9. We thank a Reviewer for bringing this possibility to our attention.

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/GBAV4

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open science badges for Open Data through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/GBAV4

Supplementary material

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