

Empowered by Curation: Spatial Differentiation in the Interrelationship Between Social Media Political Curation, Political Competence, and Trust—The Case of Michigan

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Abstract

This study examines geographic variations in the relationship between social media political curation and political trust. Analyzing survey data from the U.S. state of Michigan, findings reveal a positive relationship between social media political curation and internal political efficacy, which is stronger among rural residents compared to urban counterparts. Moreover, this geographic pattern extends to trust in state government; the positive indirect relationship between social media political curation and trust in state government via increased internal political efficacy is only observed among rural residents. These results highlight social media's potential as a civic platform that can connect geographically disconnected communities to politics.

Keywords

social media, political polarization, trust, survey, mediation/moderation

This study explores the relationship between social media political curation and political empowerment, with particular attention to how spatial differentiation within this relationship corresponds to political trust judgments among rural and urban residents.

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While prior studies demonstrate that social media use can be associated with partisan polarization in political trust (e.g., Klein & Robison, 2020), the geographic context of these political divisions is largely absent from the literature. This omission is notable given the increasing significance of spatial polarization in U.S. politics (Mettler & Brown, 2022). Bridging this chasm, the present analysis provides new evidence that the positive association between political curation on social media and internal political efficacy is more pronounced for rural residents than for urban residents, proposing a potential pathway to alleviate spatial disparities in political trust.

This article begins with an overview of the crisis of trust in American politics (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Scholars have been concerned about a constant decline of political trust that hinders amicable democratic processes since the 1960s (Uslander, 2018). Of particular focus here, the functioning regional partisan cleavage exacerbates spatial polarization between rural and urban Americans (Gimpel et al., 2020; Scala & Johnson, 2017). This review outlines the conditions under which ruralites' political trust is lower than that of their urban counterparts, and how this manifestation of spatial polarization deteriorates overall democratic systems. Specifically, the case of the U.S. state of Michigan is examined, highlighting its status as a political battleground.

Second, the concept of trust is revisited, focusing on its relationship to internal political efficacy. While political trust is broadly defined as a rational or affective belief that the government acts in the best interests of individual citizens (Coleman, 1994; Hardin, 1999; Hetherington, 2005; Levi & Stoker, 2000), the emphasis herein is on how this belief is shaped and manifested in democracies. This approach is pertinent as it explores avenues to restore the belief by tracing its origins. Specifically, the review examines how citizens' perceptions, that they can monitor their representatives, operate political trust in democracies: Citizens trust their government *only* when they feel they are efficacious enough to oversee the elite powerholders (Norris, 2017; Warren, 2018).

Lastly, the study investigates the mechanism through which social media political curation facilitates the positive relationship between internal political efficacy and political trust. Research suggests that social media's curative affordances promote sociopolitical learning by enabling effective political communication (Marquart et al., 2020; Starke et al., 2020). Politically curated social media feeds that enhance direct interaction with political actors and enrich political information (Kümpel et al., 2022; Thorson & Wells, 2016; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014) serve to foster political confidence (Newton & Norris, 2000). Studies also demonstrate that such political empowerment is pronounced among rural residents. This suggests that social media platforms and the broader Internet may function as tools of inclusion, potentially cultivating political agency within the historical periphery (Fierro et al., 2023; Nah et al., 2021). As such, this study posits that political communication on social media, driven by political curation practices, acts as a catalyst for individuals' political socialization (Bode et al., 2014). Moreover, the civic empowerment gained through these political learning processes is suggested to have a greater impact on initially marginalized social groups (Beaumont, 2011).

Taken together, this study, using a survey of Michigan residents, scrutinizes whether social media political curation functions to restore political trust by enhancing internal political efficacy, and whether this nuanced mechanism is more prominent among rural residents than their urban counterparts. The statistical analyses provide initial support for the mechanisms.

Literature Review

Crisis of Political Trust in the U.S

Scholarly concern surrounds the steady decline in trust toward government in Western democracies since the 1960s (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Denhardt et al., 2013; Hetherington, 2005; Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2017). This erosion of trust not only hinders the smooth functioning of democratic systems (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Jacobs & Matthews, 2012) but also carries the concerning potential to breed broader societal distrust (Warren, 2018). As trust in government reflects a belief in the institutions' commitment to the citizenry's best interests (Jamal & Nooruddin, 2010; Offe, 1999), societies with low political trust display a concerning tendency towards lower levels of trust between citizens themselves. Scholars in particular express apprehension regarding the increasing geographic disparity in trust toward democratic institutions globally, spanning from European to Latin and Asian countries (Luca et al., 2023; McKay et al., 2021, 2023; Mitsch et al., 2021). This trend also characterizes recent American politics, with a persisting trust gap between rural and urban areas (Kirk, 2024).

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) articulate that sociopolitical conflicts can be diffused when existing social cleavages crosscut to form relevant alliances, such as solidarity between rural and urban working classes. However, when these cleavages align in parallel, such as racial divisions among white and blue-collar workers, conflicts tend to polarize (see also Lipset, 1959). In U.S. politics, unfortunately, cleavages of geography and partisanship reinforce each other rather than crosscut. Gimpel et al. (2020) succinctly show that urbanites with lower incomes are more likely to support Democrats, while ruralites with similar incomes are more likely to support Republicans, deepening spatial polarization.

Even more worrisome is that this trend is escalating (Taylor et al., 2024). The Republican presidential vote share gap between rural and urban America, which was only 2% in 1992, "widened to 10 points in 2000 and a full 21 points in 2020" (Brown et al., 2021, p. 365). In such geographically polarized electoral systems, social consensus to tackle policy problems between urbanites and ruralites becomes harder to reach (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Brown et al. (2021) argue that "the rural-urban divide is contributing to the rise of tribalism, [. . .] permeating politics with an "us" versus "them" dynamic" (p. 366).

Within the context of growing spatial polarization in the U.S., two key factors contribute to lower political trust among rural residents compared to their urban counterparts. The first is the historical marginalization of rural America's economic landscape. The late 1990s witnessed a period of rapid decline in rural economies, driven by trade

liberalization, increased automation in factories, and accelerated depopulation (Choi et al., 2021; Wright, 2020). This heightened economic vulnerability has significantly shaped what Cramer (2016) terms “rural consciousness”—a sense of resentment rooted in place. This perspective leads rural residents to perceive themselves as disrespected, lacking relative power, and denied fair distribution of resources (American National Election Studies, 2021).

Second, the incumbency of the Democratic Party is associated with ruralites’ lower political trust. What Anderson and Lo Tempio (2002) term “winner’s effect”—a proclivity to have more trust in government when political friends come to power and less trust when political opponents in the office—currently forms an unfavorable political climate to rural America. The current presidency of the Democratic Party may have an additional negative impact on ruralites’ political confidence (Pew Research, 2022). Wolak (2018) finds that the winner’s effect also operates at the state-level: “When people share the same partisan leanings as party that controls the state legislature, they are more likely to feel that state politicians listen to them” (p. 773).

Taken together, the long-term decline in political trust illustrates a pervasive trend within American democracy, with rural areas on the historical periphery experiencing even sharper erosion. From the perspective of the gap hypothesis (Rigney, 2010), this represents a situation where “the rich get poorer while the poor get poorer at a faster rate” (pp. 10–12). This dynamic, which contributes to geographic disparities in trust toward governments, could obstruct policy consensus between urban and rural communities, resonating with patterns of spatial polarization.

Michigan, the Battleground

Michigan exemplifies spatial polarization—recent election flip-flops have cemented its battleground status (Durkan, 2022). A surge in rural turnout flipped Michigan *red* in the 2016 presidential election, the first time since 1988; In 2020, increased urban turnout countered the rural vote, turning the state *blue* again.¹ With Democrats currently controlling both the state legislature and governorship following the 2022 midterms, spatial polarization in political trust may become even more pronounced among Michigan voters. Yet it could be argued that categorizing rural as “red” and urban as “blue” is too monolithic (Suk et al., 2022).

However, the strong correlation between geographic division and recent election results provides robust evidence for this pairing (Figure 1). When categorized Michigan’s 83 counties as (1) metropolitan, (2) non-core, and (3) micropolitan based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA, 2020) rural-urban continuum codes and tested the relationships between the classification and election results, there are distinct patterns of urban areas (metropolitan) supporting Democrats and rural areas (non-core and micropolitan) favoring Republicans in Michigan (for the 2020 presidential election: $\chi^2 = 15.028$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .426$; for the 2022 gubernatorial election: $\chi^2 = 17.870$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .464$).

This spatial polarization does not immediately equate to political divisions but underscores how the socioeconomic marginalization of rural areas underpins the

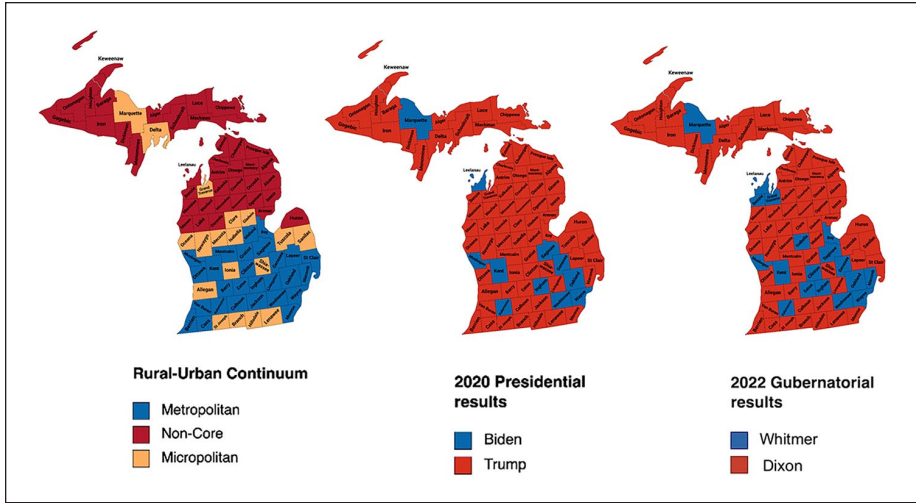


Figure 1. Michigan maps of geographic division and election results.

geographic manifestation of partisan polarization (Brown et al., 2021; Mettler & Brown, 2022). For instance, Michigan’s rural-urban divide mirrors the broader national digital divide. Although more than 95% of Michigan’s land area is rural, over 80% of its population resides in urban regions, resulting in an uneven distribution of civic infrastructure. Rural areas, in particular, face significantly lower availability of high-speed internet compared to urban counterparts (Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity, 2024). This digital divide reflects a critical policy failure that perpetuates structural disadvantages in Michigan’s rural communities. Given that broadband access is increasingly recognized as an essential utility for fostering political sophistication, these disparities highlight persistent policy inadequacies (Lelkes, 2020; Poy & Schüller, 2020). Within the broader context of declining political trust across the U.S., rural Michiganders with limited ICT resources could perceive their interests as being less effectively represented in institutional policymaking compared to urban residents (LaRose et al., 2007). This perception, in turn, could reinforce partisan preferences against urban, Democrat-aligned areas (see Ashwood, 2018).

Political Trust and Political Efficacy

Trust in democratic systems is paradoxical because “democracies emerged from distrust” (Warren, 2018, p. 75). People inherently distrust political actors and their institutions, given that elite powerholders in particular are not immune to abuse of power (Norris, 2011; Warren, 1999). Democracies therefore arise from its ability to limit such relationships of distrust (Braithwaite, 1998; Sztompka, 1999): Trust in democracies is stand-in *only* when citizens believe that the governments are being well monitored.

Put differently, citizens distrust governments that they perceive to be disconnected from the scope of their monitoring capabilities.

Yet, for individuals, the costs of monitoring are unlikely to be affordable. Since people participate in politics when they see that the benefits of their engagements outweigh the costs (Platt, 2008), citizens are more likely to rely on information delegates, such as the mass media, rather than directly monitoring every elected representative (Newton et al., 2018): “Citizens can maximize their participatory resources by using these kinds of information to select a trustee, and then forgo monitoring” (Warren, 2018, p. 84). Such divisions of democratic labor allow citizens to manage the complexities of democracy that are beyond the capacities of individuals, so that a citizen’s decisions to trust or distrust could be understood as a product of strategic choice to maximize their scarce participatory utilities. Individuals trust the government when they feel they have capacities to monitor the government (Warren, 2018, p. 77).

This explains the crisis of political trust coinciding with academic interest in political efficacy. Scholars anticipate that political trust could be restored if citizens feel confident they can make a difference in politics (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Cole, 1973; Craig et al., 1990). This line of scholarship demonstrates the predictive power of political efficacy for voter turnout and trust in government (Inglehart, 1999), often describing it as a “barometer of democratic systems” (Sullivan & Riedel, 2001, p. 4353). The strong correlation between satisfaction with democracy and political efficacy remains consistent in recent global reports (Pew Research, 2022).

This barometer is traditionally divided into internal and external efficacy (Balch, 1974; Converse, 1972): Internal efficacy refers to citizens’ “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics” (Craig et al., 1990, p. 290), while external efficacy indicates their “perceptions of the responsiveness of political bodies and actors to citizens’ demands” (Morrell, 2003, p. 590). Simply put, internal efficacy dictates citizens’ self-evaluation, whereas external efficacy dictates their evaluation of government.

This study focuses on internal, rather than external, efficacy in institutional democratic processes, with a particular emphasis on the investigation of social media as a civic tool for monitoring political bodies. While citizens’ political empowerment may be influenced by their political use of social media (see Bode et al., 2014; Marquart et al., 2020; Nah et al., 2021), their evaluation of government responsiveness may not be directly related to their acts on social media (Starke et al., 2020). Indeed, prior studies show that the relationship between social media use and trust in government is unlikely to be immediate (Pirannejad & Janssen, 2019; Song & Lee, 2016).

Moreover, Mazzurco (2012) notes that “[t]rust in government and external efficacy overlap in their consideration of governmental receptiveness and responsiveness to public participation in politics” (p. 122). Given this overlap in the conceptual boundaries of political trust and external efficacy, theoretically speaking, external efficacy should be predicated on internal efficacy (Norris, 2001; Warren, 2018). Thus, to examine the relationship between social media political curation and political trust, it is prerequisite to examine how internal efficacy mediates the relationship.

Internal political efficacy, in this context, refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to effectively monitor democratic processes. Prior research indicates that personal predispositions are significant antecedents to this; however, one's confidence in their monitoring competence can vary depending on situational factors. Morrell's (2005) seminal experiment provides robust evidence that face-to-face deliberative decision-making enhances participants' internal political efficacy. This finding is particularly pertinent to the current study, as it aligns with the theoretical perspective that social media political curation fosters political socialization.

Social Media for (Sense of) Monitoring

Communication scholarship have long conceptualized the primary function of media communication as "surveillance" through the pursuit of information (Blumler, 1979; Lasswell, 1948). Citizens are motivated to use media for, among other things, "day-to-day surveillance of the political world" (Hopmann et al., 2016). While individuals' informational needs today is increasingly diversified (Prior, 2007), still, "most people indeed seem to associate "being informed" with political information and news" (Kümpel et al., 2022, p. 93).

Yet, Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl (2019) argue that the stage for surveillance practices has shifted from traditional news media to personal online networks such as social media. Studies report that social media reduces the distance between elites and citizens by enabling direct communication that bypasses the gatekeeping of traditional media (Marquart et al., 2020; Parmelee & Roman, 2019; Starke et al., 2020; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015; Weeks et al., 2019). Such direct communication gives citizens opportunities to observe political actors at a closer distance in real time at relatively low monitoring costs (Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2017). For example, Fisher et al. (2019) provide compelling evidence that the primary motivation for following politicians on social media is to get unfiltered information.

Likewise, this study suggests that citizens today can decide on their trust in government by actively utilizing social media, akin to how they have engaged with mass media, as a tool to maximize their participatory capacities (Warren, 2018). In other words, social media may play a role in forming citizens' perception that the political systems are being well monitored, that is, distrust is institutionalized into political domains.

Social Media Political Curation and Sociopolitical Learning

While literature on the relationship between social media use and trust in government is mixed at best (Ceron, 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Klein & Robison, 2020; Mazzurco, 2012; Song & Lee, 2016; Starke et al., 2020), the common thread is that they do not adequately specify the types of use. This misspecification must be addressed because, as Norris (1996, 2001) notes, it is the *way* we use media, rather than the *amount* of media we use, that captures its political consequences. This point becomes even more

relevant given the increasingly personalized nature of media experiences (McQuail, 2013)—coupled with the proliferation of personalization of politics (Bennett, 2012; McAllister, 2007). The impact of social media on political outcomes can be differentiated by the type of usage, personal predispositions, and their entanglements (Aalberg et al., 2012).

In this vein, Thorson and Wells (2016) suggest that curation is a fundamental action in contemporary political information flows: Individuals can actively customize their social media diets, for instance, by following politicians or government agencies, or by subscribing to specific news media or journalists (see also Kümpel, 2022). This direct communication further prompts the responsive social media algorithm itself to curate the information flows with contents that align with the user's interests (Thorson et al., 2021). Thus, an individual's active political curation may fulfill one's need for surveillance by shaping content flows that help them to determine if their interests align with specific political actors or government agencies (Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018; Merten, 2021).

Here, one core underlying mechanism by which social media political curation cultivates one's internal efficacy is the process of sociopolitical learning (Beaumont, 2011; Marquart et al., 2020). Studies show that following politicians on social media evokes parasocial interactions (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Lee & Oh, 2012; Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2017), which in turn fosters learning about effective political communication practices and skills (Bode et al., 2014; De Vreese & Möller, 2014; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Lee, 2013; Starke et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the technological affordances of social media allow users to develop sense of current affairs by exposing them to curated flows from various political communicators (e.g., politicians, journalists, or opinion leaders), even when they do not actively participate in these parasocial interactions (Marquart et al., 2020). Users who do not closely monitor politics on their own still can see how other communicators monitor the government (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Turcotte et al., 2015). Likewise, evidence is mounting that incidental news exposure on social media tends to promote "feeling of being well informed," without necessarily translating into substantial political sophistication (Anspach et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2016).

Literature also indicates that the impact of incidental exposure depends on the user's degree of intentionality or engagement (Kümpel, 2022; Kümpel et al., 2022). While it can occur during general social media usage, those experienced through political curation can further reinforce the perceptions of surveillance. Since political curation can trigger feedback loops within social media algorithms, the likelihood of incidental exposure is more likely to be increased. For users engaged in political curation, incidental exposure to political information may be less unexpected compared to others (Thorson, 2020); incidental exposure aligned with one's interests further increases the likelihood of content engagement, thereby potentially amplifying its media effects (Matthes et al., 2020). Thus, if political curation on social media creates an information environment that fosters active political interactions, users are more likely to gain confidence that they are closely monitoring political processes.

H1: Social media political curation is positively related to internal political efficacy.

In turn, if individuals rate their political competence highly, they may be more likely to believe that the government will care about their interests. That is, trust in one's own ability to monitor political bodies can be translated into trust that the institutions are functioning under citizens' oversight (Pettit, 2012; Rosanvallon & Goldhammer, 2008); Studies likewise find that "political confidence is causally prior to trust" (Jamal & Nooruddin, 2010, p. 53).

However, political confidence may not be always positively related to political trust. For instance, individuals who are confident in their political expression, such as protest leaders, can have a low assessment of government responsiveness. Conversely, individuals who lack confidence in their own political competence may still trust the political systems, particularly in highly democratized societies (Wolak, 2018). Thus, the positive association between internal efficacy and trust in government depends on whether this confidence is rooted in perceptions of *institutionalized* democratic processes. That is, the belief that one's vote can bring about changes in politics is interdependent on the belief that democratic systems work well (McLeod et al., 1999). In the context of state politics, the more confident residents are in their ability to influence their state government, the more confidence they will have in state institutions (Wolak, 2018; see also Cole, 1973).

H2: Internal political efficacy is positively related to trust in state government.

Spatial Polarization and Political Empowerment

Turning to the study's primary concern—whether political curation on social media exhibits spatial differentiation in relation to political trust—the process of sociopolitical learning on social media is anticipated to vary among residents from different regional communities. Given that the process of political socialization interacts with personal backgrounds and socioeconomic status (Bandura, 1997; Beaumont, 2011; Lohmann, 1998), the degree of internal political efficacy facilitated by social media political curation may depend on existing geographical contexts.

The primary debate here arguably centers on how social media usage may be associated with existing political disparities among individuals; that is, whether the affordances of social media compensate for aspects of individual backgrounds that contribute to lower initial efficacy, helping those who fall behind catch up, or it magnifies the existing political gap, pushing the political "haves" further ahead (Matei, 2001; Newton et al., 2018).

Perhaps the most recent evidence of the optimism is from Fierro et al. (2023), who explore regional differences of Internet effects on political efficacy in Chile. Their study provides compelling evidence that residents of economically marginalized rural areas develop a greater sense of political efficacy through Internet use than their urban counterparts. Similarly, Nah et al.'s (2021) survey of a U.S. national sample shows that

community-based social media use drives greater civic engagement, and that this effect is more pronounced for participants in rural than urban areas. Although political efficacy or trust are not included in their analytical models, given that both factors are well-established predictors of various types of engagement (e.g., Inglehart, 1999), their findings suggest that social media as a civic tool may function notably for rural populations.

It is also noteworthy that these studies are in concurrence with Beaumont's (2011) work on the democratic implications of sociopolitical learning. The study conceptualizes sociopolitical learning as "a variant of political socialization," and identifies four types: (1) "experiences in a politically active community"; (2) "acquiring skills for political action"; (3) "engaging in political discourse"; and (4) "inclusion in collaborative pluralist contexts" (p. 217). These sociopolitical learning processes interact *negatively* with personal backgrounds such as income, education, and race, curbing their impact on political efficacy. The findings suggest that such sociopolitical learning practices have the potential to promote political empowerment of individuals as well as political equality in communities by mitigating the initial effects of unequal social conditions.

Likewise, social media allows the political "have nots" to be integrated into such mechanisms of sociopolitical learning with relatively low informational costs (Marquart et al., 2020), which in turn lead them to maximize their participatory resources. It may function as a tool for social inclusion; that is, political curation can facilitate political empowerment for those whose political competencies are initially constrained by their disadvantageous socioeconomic status (Karlsen, 2011; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Therefore, given Michigan's regional divide, the role of curation may carry greater significance for rural residents than for urban ones.

H3: The positive relationship between social media political curation and internal political efficacy is more pronounced among rural residents.

However, it is not immediately evident whether the indirect relationship between social media political curation and trust in state government—mediated by increased internal efficacy—will also be stronger among ruralites. Simply put, even if ruralites' political confidence is boosted, will they be more likely to trust the Democrat-controlled state government?

This calls for a more detailed discussion of what kind of political trust internal efficacy specifically relates to. In their famous typology, Easton (1975) distinguishes political trust into *diffuse* and *specific* support: Diffuse support refers to trust in political institutions, while specific support indicates trust in political incumbents. That is, specific support reflects one's confidence in a particular party that is ideologically congruent with them (i.e., the winner's effect), while diffuse support captures their confidence in given democratic systems in general.

Accordingly, the degree to which a certain factor is associated with political trust can be varied by its nature. For example, partisanship should be linked to trust in

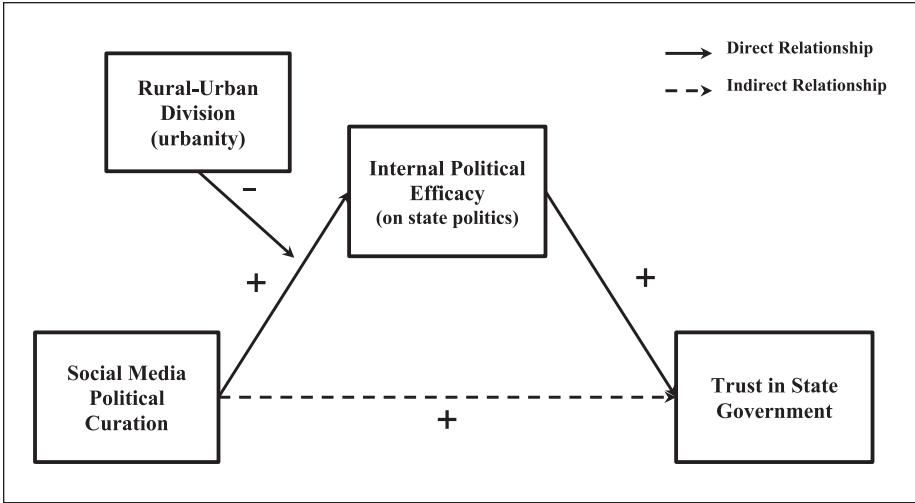


Figure 2. Conceptual model.

government via specific support (e.g., Klein & Robison, 2020), while confidence in democratic institutions such as the electoral management body (EMB) would be linked to trust via diffuse support (e.g., Kerr, 2013). The present study proposes that internal political efficacy is particularly relevant to diffuse support because citizens are more likely to trust the political system itself, rather than support the incumbent, if they are confident that they can monitor the institutions (Song & Lee, 2016). This specification aligns with the current conceptualization of internal efficacy as the perceived competence to engage in institutionalized democratic processes (e.g., voting; see McLeod et al., 1999).

In addition, Wolak (2018) shows that in battleground states, even when the party they support is not currently in power, citizens in general are more likely to believe that their governments enable individuals to “make a difference.” Thus, if rural Michiganders develop an expectation that they can influence competitive state politics through repeated social media political interactions, they may build trust in the state government despite Democrats’ incumbency (Figure 2).

H4: The indirect positive relationship between social media political curation and trust in state government via internal political efficacy is more pronounced among rural residents.

Against the backdrop of long-declining political trust in the U.S., this hypothesis testing seeks to preliminarily explore whether social media political curation can *buffer* against the disproportionately greater erosion of trust in government institutions among rural residents.

Data and Methods

Participants

An online survey of adult Michigan residents was conducted in October 2023 using Dynata's research platforms. Considering imbalanced rural (18%) and urban (82%) populations in Michigan (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), the purposive sample includes residents of 26 urban and 54 rural counties in the state based on the USDA's (2020) rural-urban continuum codes (RUCC). In addition, the accuracy of the place-based classifications was verified by asking respondents' county and street address in the survey instrument.²

A total of 1,009 participants completed the survey, of which 892 responded appropriately to the attention check item included in the final dataset (pass rate: 88.4%; Rural: 313 Urban: 579). While age and gender quotas based on census were stratified for the urban sample, the rural sample could not warrant this stratification. The urban sample averaged 50.13 years of age and included more females (57.2%); the racial composition was 78.0% white and 15.1% Black. In the rural sample, the average age was 54.70 and the racial composition was 91.1% white, reflecting the actual skewness of the rural population. However, females were severely overrepresented in the rural sample (Female: 77.3 %, Male: 21.2%).³

Independent Variable

Social Media Political Curation. . With reference to Merten (2021), four items were employed to gauge social media political curation including "I tend to follow politicians on social media (e.g., verified accounts of politicians, political parties' official pages)" ($M=3.10$, $SD=1.54$, $\alpha=.851$; see Table A.5 for measurement details).

Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (Urbanity). RUCC (USDA, 2020) are entered on a scale ranging from 1 to 9. Counties that are "completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area" are coded as 9, and counties with "1 million population or more" are coded as 1. The mean code point was 3.26 and the median was 2, reflecting a larger sample from the urban population. For ease of analysis, the scale was reverse-coded so that respondents with higher points were classified as residents of a county closer to a metropolitan area (see Appendix).

Dependent Variable

Internal Political Efficacy. Following McLeod et al. (1999), two items were used to estimate internal political efficacy—regarding institutionalized democratic engagement in state politics: (1) Every vote counts in a local election, including yours and mine; (2) In Michigan, everyone who wants to can have a voice in what the government does (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $M=5.47$, $SD=1.38$, $\alpha=.705$).⁴

Trust in State Government. Despite the conceptualization of political trust as multifaceted (Easton, 1975), empirical separation of specific and diffuse support is challenging due to limited individual differentiation at perceptual level (Hooghe, 2011; Song & Lee, 2016). Accordingly, aligning with prior research (Jamal & Nooruddin, 2010; Starke et al., 2020), a single-item measure (“How much do you trust the Michigan government?”) was employed to capture state-level political trust (1 = Not at all, 7 = Fully; $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.65$).⁵

Control Variables

Factors known from studies to affect levels of political efficacy and trust were controlled. Potential covariates on the impact of the Internet on political outcomes were also included. These instrumental covariates are entered into three blocks: demographics, political covariates, and media factors.

Demographics. Studies demonstrate that political efficacy and trust are largely rooted in individual attributes. These include age, gender, race, education, and income. For example, political efficacy tends to higher among whites than Blacks, men than women, and voters from high-income than low-income households—which are also highly correlated with political trust (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Campbell et al., 1954; Craig et al., 1990). Furthermore, these dispositional factors are known to contribute to the digital divide among demographic groups (Hargittai et al., 2019).

Political Covariates. First, political interest is a core predictor of political sophistication and political participation (Luskin, 1990). It was measured with three items: “Please indicate your interest in the following. . . (1) Politics; (2) Campaigns and social issues; (3) News”; 1 = Not at all interested, 7 = Extremely interested; $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.66$, $\alpha = .880$).

Next, individuals in favorable political climates perceive themselves as more politically efficacious and have greater trust in political systems (Suk et al., 2022; Wolak, 2018). Accordingly, partisan identification was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = Strong Democrat, 7 = Strong Republican). The final dataset included 40.6% Democrat leaners, 30.3% Republican leaners, and 29% independents.

District Broadband Service Availability. Fierro et al. (2023) suggest that, in Chile, disparities in political competence between rural and urban residents diminish once internet access is accounted for. This highlights the importance of addressing the potential endogeneity of internet access; however, the accuracy of self-reported measures of political competence remains questionable (see Lelkes, 2020). To improve measurement reliability, this study linked verified residential information of panelists to the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC, 2023) National Broadband Map, utilizing district-level fixed residential broadband service availability (DBSA) data as of December 2022. Broadband availability percentages were aggregated at the county

level. For instance, a respondent residing in a county with 71.54% coverage would have a DBSA value of 0.7154 ($M=0.8351$, $SD=0.1917$).⁶

Media Usage. Norris (1996, 2001) reveals that political media usage increases political knowledge and leads to civic engagement, but such relationships were not found with general media usage. This differential outcome is also observed among social media users (See Shah et al., 2017). To set this distinction and account for potential confounding effects between social media political curation and other forms of media use, the analysis included controls for traditional news media usage, social media general usage, and social media news usage (Traditional news media usage: $M=3.28$, $SD=1.63$; Social media general usage: $M=2.68$, $SD=1.20$; Social media news usage: $M=3.25$, $SD=1.69$). These indices were measured on 7-point scales (Table A.6).

Results

Before proceeding to the hypothesis testing, it is noted that internal political efficacy, trust in state government, and partisan identification vary regionally in the current dataset. Higher levels of efficacy and trust are observed among urbanites than ruralites (for efficacy: $M_{\text{diff}}=0.164$, $p<.05$; for trust: $M_{\text{diff}}=0.406$, $p<.001$), and ruralites are more likely to identify themselves as Republicans ($M_{\text{diff}}=0.457$, $p<.001$). These descriptives align with theoretical conjectures and closely reflect actual electoral patterns (Durkan, 2022).

In addition, when the sample is categorized into four groups based on higher or lower than the mean score of social media political curation by rural or urban residence, a series of one-way ANOVAs indicates significant differences in internal political efficacy and trust across the four groups (Rural-Low-Curation, Rural-High-Curation, Urban-Low-Curation, Urban-High-Curation) (Figure 3; for internal political efficacy: $F(3, 868)=16.69$, $\eta^2=.06$, $p<.001$; for trust in state government: $F(3, 871)=12.76$, $\eta^2=.04$, $p<.001$). For detailed group comparisons, see Table A.7, which includes Tukey's HSD test results.

To test H1, H2, and H3, a series of ordered probit models is conducted. Ordinal logistic regression is commonly employed when the distance between categories of dependent variables is not known (King, 1998), in this case the ordinal scales for both efficacy and trust. In addition, to address separation issues, robustness checks using OLS regression are included (Table A.2; Figures A.1 and A.2). As shown in Table 1, Model 1 yields a positive relationship between social media political curation and internal political efficacy ($\beta=.309$, $SE=0.130$, $p<.05$), and Model 2 reveals that internal political efficacy is positively associated with trust in state government ($\beta=.433$, $SE=0.057$, $p<.001$).

The interaction term of social media political curation and urbanity on internal political efficacy is statistically significant (Model 1; $\beta=-.047$, $SE=0.017$, $p<.01$). As Figure 4 shows in greater detail, higher social media political curation is more strongly associated with higher internal political efficacy among rural residents, while this relationship is not significant among urban residents. This indicates that rural

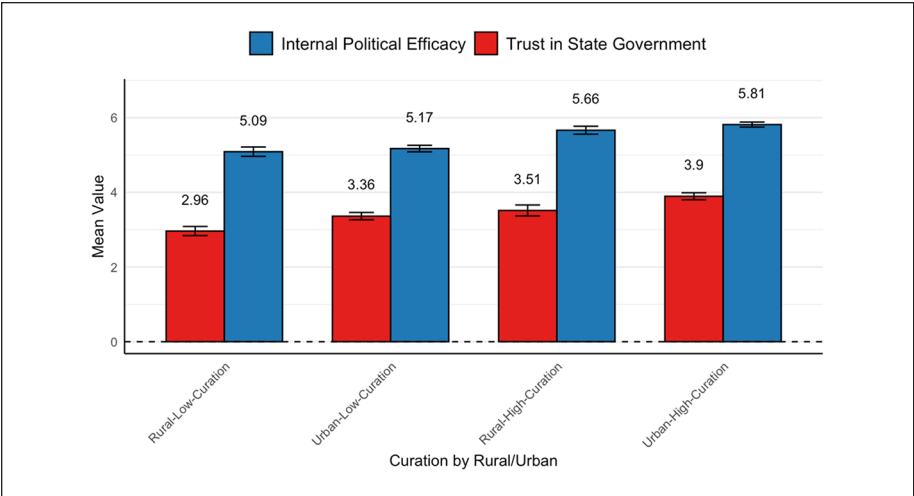


Figure 3. Means-plots for internal political efficacy and trust in state government across geography-curation groups.

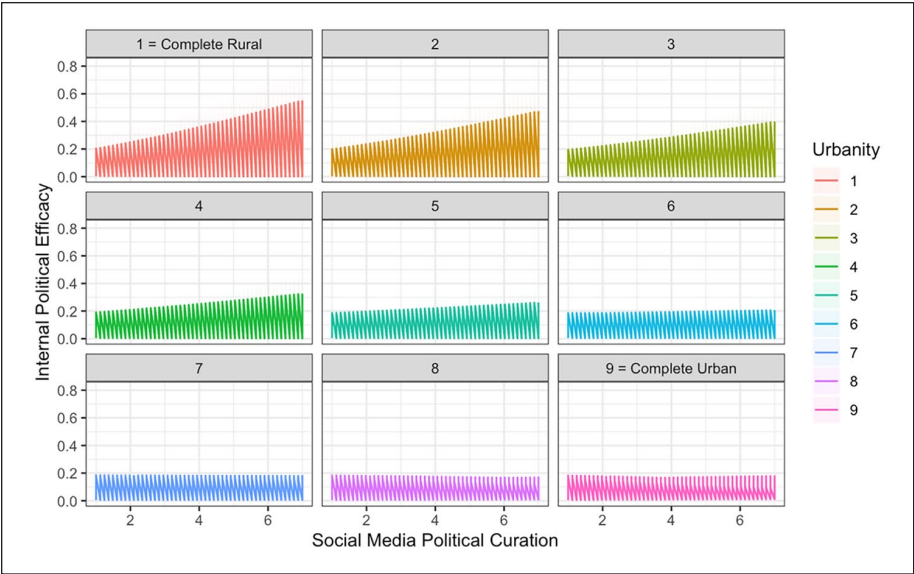


Figure 4. Interaction term of social media political curation and urbanity on internal political efficacy.

Note. Each plot, grouped by urbanity level, is a visualization of an ordered probit model that predicts the probability of internal political efficacy increasing as the level of social media political curation increases, occurring range from 0.0 to 1.0.

Table 1. Ordinal Logistic Regression Models Testing Social Media Political Curation Over Trust in State Government.

	Internal political efficacy	Trust in state government
Model	1. (n = 816)	2. (n = 816)
<i>Block 1. Demographics</i>	β (SE)	β (SE)
Age	.021*** (0.005)	.001 (0.005)
Gender (f)	.703*** (0.143)	.258# (0.148)
Race (white)	.125 (0.179)	.254 (0.188)
Education level	-.002 (0.049)	.000 (0.050)
Income (annual)	.047* (0.020)	-.002 (0.020)
<i>Block 2. Political variables</i>		
Political interest	.398*** (0.052)	.168** (0.053)
Partisan ID (Dem \leftrightarrow Rep)	-.156*** (0.037)	-.572*** (0.043)
<i>Block 3. Media variables</i>		
DBSA	2.246** (0.684)	.464 (0.697)
Traditional news media usage	.086# (0.050)	.049 (0.051)
Social media general usage	.054 (0.068)	.015 (0.076)
Social media news usage	.108* (0.053)	.104# (0.053)
Social media political curation	.309* (0.130)	.108 (0.132)
<i>Block 4. Moderator</i>		
Urbanity	.018 (0.073)	.047 (0.073)
Social media political curation \times Urbanity	-.047** (0.017)	-.012 (0.017)
<i>Block 5. Mediator</i>		
Internal political efficacy	—	.433*** (0.057)
Pseudo R^2	.143	.210

Note. Entries are ordered probit coefficients; Pseudo R^2 is McFadden's exponent; Listwise deletion was applied for missing data.

$p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

residents were more likely than urban residents to positively associate their social media political curation acts with their political confidence, despite overall levels of efficacy being lower among ruralites compared to urbanites. OLS regression confirms a simplified pattern of the same interaction (Figure A.2). Thus, H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Notably, no statistically significant direct relationship is found between social media political curation and trust in state government.

Finally, a mediation-based linear regression analysis is executed to examine the indirect relationship between social media political curation and trust in state government via internal political efficacy (H4; Table 2). While the simple indirect relationship does not show statistical significance, the urbanity-moderated mediation is statistically significant ($\beta = -.0072$, $SE = 0.0032$, 95% CI $[-0.0135, -0.0009]$). To be specific, the positive mediated-relationship is only found among rural respondents ($\beta = .0377$, $SE = 0.0192$, 95% CI $[0.0013, 0.0776]$).

Table 2. Indirect and Conditional Indirect Pathway Analysis.

Paths and effects	Estimates	SE	95% confidence intervals
Social media political curation → Internal political efficacy → Trust in state government (<i>n</i> = 816)			
Simple indirect effect	0.0017	0.0130	[−0.0234, 0.0286]
Moderated mediation			
Closer to rural areas (16th Percentile)	0.0377	0.0192	[0.0013, 0.0776]*
Closer to urban areas (84th Percentile)	−0.0056	0.0138	[−0.0323, 0.0227]
Index of moderated mediation	−0.0072	0.0032	[−0.0135, −0.0009]*

Note. Entries for the path estimates are unstandardized coefficients—indirect paths based on bootstrapping to 5,000 samplings with biased corrected confidence intervals. Demographics (age, gender, race, education, and income), political variables (political interest, partisan identification), media factors (district broadband availability, traditional news media usage, social media general usage, social media news usage) were controlled in the model, respectively.

Asterisks (*) refer to significant indirect effects at the 95% confidence interval.

To revisit the insignificance of the simple indirect relationship, the urbanity is recoded as dichotomous, that is, the same model is run with a binary categorization of rural (=0) and urban (=1) counties. Once again, a statistically significant conditional indirect relationship is only observed for rural participants (for rural: $\beta = .0387$, $SE = 0.0182$, 95% CI [0.0043, 0.0756]; for urban: $\beta = -.0050$, $SE = 0.0140$, 95% CI [−0.0321, 0.0234]). The pairwise contrast between conditional indirect relationships (i.e., urban–rural) confirms the robustness of the results ($\beta = -0.0437$, $SE = 0.0181$, 95% CI [−0.0786, −0.0083]). Thus, initial evidence in favor of H4 is found.

Discussion

This study explored the democratic potential of social media political curation within the context of geographically polarized U.S. politics (Gimpel et al., 2020; Scala & Johnson, 2017). The theory posits that political curation is positively associated with political efficacy by facilitating sociopolitical learning, which subsequently enhances political trust. Literature also suggests that sociopolitical learning on social media may be more pronounced among rural populations (e.g., Fierro et al., 2023; Marquart et al., 2020; Nah et al., 2021). Building on these perspectives, the study argued that social media-based political communication—that is, incidental news exposure, political discussion, or direct interaction with political actors—driven by curation practices fosters political socialization (Bode et al., 2014) and has a particularly strong impact on residents of the social periphery (Beaumont, 2011); that is, active social media political curation could reconnect politically disconnected, thereby potentially addressing regional disparities in political trust judgments. While existing research partially supports this idea, the complete picture remains to be elucidated (Cramer, 2016; Kaufman, 2019; Klein & Robison, 2020; Mazzurco, 2012; Wolak, 2018).

Addressing this gap, the analysis of observational data from the U.S. state of Michigan examined how the interrelationship between social media political curation, internal political efficacy, and rural-urban division is associated with trust in state government. The findings revealed that social media political curation is positively associated with internal political efficacy, especially pronounced among rural Michiganders. Internal political efficacy, in turn, was positively related to trust in Michigan government, consistent with prior research (Cole, 1973; Craig et al., 1990; Finkel, 1985; Wolak, 2018). Importantly, the indirect positive relationship between social media political curation and trust in state government via internal political efficacy was significant solely among rural residents.

This result underscores the theoretical prediction, but the absence of a significant indirect relationship among urban respondents may be further explained by the urban communication infrastructure. Social media political curation may not substantially touch the difference in civic utilities among urbanites already saturated with information (see Nah et al., 2021).

These findings are important given the growing importance of the rural-urban partisan polarization (Mettler & Brown, 2022). When us-versus-them dynamics are embodied along regional boundaries, democratic systems are retarded by preventing social consensus between geographically-delineated communities (Brown et al., 2021). Restoring institutional political trust is therefore significant because it provides the fertile ground for the restoration of social trust (Jamal & Nooruddin, 2010; Warren, 2018). Aligning with this, the present findings render two key implications.

First, political empowerment of rural populations can address the paradox of their place-based resentment. “Rural consciousness” has economic roots but lacks ground in electoral terms: Despite economic deprivation, U.S. electoral systems structurally favor less populous rural constituencies (Brown et al., 2021; Kaufman, 2019; Lohmann, 1998; Rodden, 2019). Political empowerment of ruralites thus can not only restore but also realize their true voice, as political confidence increases institutionalized political engagement (Craig et al., 1990; Inglehart, 1999; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; McLeod et al., 1999).

Second, the process of sociopolitical learning may improve the quality of rural political participation. Nationally, rural turnout remains low (University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, 2023), but Michigan’s rural turnout is rising (Durkan, 2022). However, this increase may stem from distrust and hostility towards political opponents rather than trust (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Kaufman, 2019). By restoring institutional political trust, thus, rural voting behavior could improve both quantitatively (i.e., turnout) and qualitatively (i.e., diffuse support; “support for the democratic process, not just for my candidate”).

That said, the recent 2024 presidential election results indicate that “Trump regained power in rural America” (CNN, 2024). This polarized landscape warrants further investigation into how political trust influences partisan voting behaviors across regional communities and the role of social media political use in this process—specifically, whether it attenuates or solidifies the relationship between trust and partisan choice.

As with all research, this study has several caveats. First, the cross-sectional data limits causal inferences. While prior research supports the proposed pathway, alternative explanations cannot be ruled out by the current research design. Exploring a recursive mechanism, where trust serves as a springboard for efficacy, which in turn leads to political curation, would be valuable (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Although this pathway (trust in state government → internal political efficacy → social media political curation) was statistically insignificant for both rural and urban residents in the current dataset (Table A.4), only longitudinal data would enable a comparative analysis of these competing scenarios. Further research in this direction is highly encouraged.

Second, Michigan's political landscape largely mirrors national trends, but the present quantitative case analysis lacks insight into potential national variations or inter-state disparities (e.g., Gelman, 2009). Future research should utilize a national representative sample to enhance the generalizability of findings. Yet, state-level data offers the advantage of ensuring consistency in geographic comparisons. For instance, while both Lansing, Michigan's capital, and New York City are categorized as metropolitan areas by USDA criteria, the resource disparities between them are likely more pronounced than those between Lansing and its micropolitan or non-core counterparts. National-level data complicates controlling for such multilevel ecological fallacies (Blakely & Woodward, 2000), whereas state-level data allows for more reliable county-by-county comparisons, particularly pertinent to the current examination of the urban-rural divide.

Third, the current dataset does not include respondents' actual social media diets, which limits the findings given the evidence on the relationship between exposure to misinformation and political distrust (e.g., Pantazi et al., 2021). Particularly, conservative social networks, where misinformation circulates more heavily (González-Bailón et al., 2023), can lead individuals to radicalize their political identities (Benkler et al., 2018; Young, 2023); if so, their increased political confidence may not translate into increased trust in Democrat-controlled institutions. This possibility reserves further exploration within the aforementioned context of Trump's reaffirmed popularity in rural areas.

Nonetheless, emerging evidence suggests that misinformation constitutes a small fraction of social media information flows and primarily circulates among a few groups (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019). Furthermore, recent studies indicate that individuals are more likely exposed to heterogeneous information on social media and that even exposure to like-minded political content does not necessarily exacerbate polarization (Nyhan et al., 2023; Wojcieszak et al., 2023); How partisan media use "[. . .] has affected the decline and partisan polarization of trust in government has yet to be established" (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 55).

To obtain more nuanced insights, future research could utilize innovative approaches that combine self-reported data with digital trace data (e.g., Loecherbach et al., 2020; Thorson et al., 2021). This would also enable examination of the differential effects across various social media platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020; Yarchi et al., 2021), which was not feasible in the present study. Overall, further research into the

potential connection between active political engagement on social media and political empowerment seems worthwhile.

As a final remark, it is important to note that social media political curation may only serve as a palliative for the symptom of spatial polarization in trust rather than a cure. Studies show that instead of actively curating political information, social media users are increasingly passive in political information-seeking (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015) and often intentionally avoid news (Bode et al., 2017; Thorson & Battocchio, 2023). These studies suggest that the democratic potential for social media political curation is limited. In this study, the likelihood of engaging in social media political curation was also only half as high as the likelihood of not doing so. Therefore, it is hoped that the theoretical insights gleaned from the present findings can initiate a discussion on whether geographically marginalized groups can convert social media into a civic platform for self-empowerment within broader democratic systems. This possibility echoes Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) dedication of their magnum opus, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, to "defenders of the periphery" (n/p).

Appendix

Table A.1. Zero-Order Pearson's Correlations Between Focal and Control Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age														
2. G (f)	-.267***													
3. R (w)	.237***	.002												
4. Edu.	.137***	-.084*	.089**											
5. Incm.	.111***	-.142***	.058	.394***										
6. PI	.203***	-.204***	-.049	.220***	.132***									
7. PT	.122***	-.050	.174***	-.103***	.057	-.117***								
8. DB	-.096**	-.174***	-.154***	.040	.061	.119***	-.117***							
9. TM	.319***	-.219***	-.043	.163***	.135***	.546***	-.098**	.086*						
10. SM	-.53***	.178***	-.192***	-.085*	-.058	.072*	-.162***	.077*	.000					
11. SN	-.429***	.161***	-.166***	-.161***	-.149***	.049	-.049	.030	.035	.595***				
12. CU	-.383***	.147***	-.138***	-.018	-.058	.258***	-.119***	.018	.086*	.549***	.597***			
13. R-U	-.106**	-.204***	-.171***	.064	.063	.123***	-.106**	.875***	.098**	.076*	.026	.024		
14. IPE	.197***	-.001	.030	.159***	.131***	.393***	-.185***	.098**	.287***	.003	.023	.110***	.046	
15. GT	-.004	.048	-.080*	.114***	.032	.291***	-.508***	.142***	.219***	.139***	.118***	.189***	.110***	.420***

Note. G(f) = gender (female); R(w) = race (white); Edu. = education; Incm. = income; PI = political interest; PT = partisan identification; DB = district broadband service availability; TM = traditional news media usage; SM = social media usage; SN = social media news usage; CU = social media political curation; R-U = rural-urban continuum; IPE = internal political efficacy; GT = trust in state government.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table A.2. Hierarchical Linear Regression Models Testing Social Media Political Curation Over Trust in State Government.

	Internal political efficacy	Trust in state government
Model	1. (<i>n</i> = 816)	2. (<i>n</i> = 816)
<i>Block 1. Demographics</i>	β (SE)	β (SE)
Age	.015*** (0.003)	.001 (0.004)
Gender (f)	.418*** (0.095)	.184# (0.104)
Race (white)	.103 (0.120)	.118 (0.130)
Education level	.024 (0.033)	.000 (0.036)
Income (annual)	.34* (0.013)	.002 (0.014)
<i>Block 2. Political variables</i>		
Political interest	.245*** (0.033)	.110** (0.037)
Partisan ID (Dem \leftrightarrow Rep)	-.102*** (0.025)	-.391*** (0.027)
<i>Block 3. Media variables</i>		
DBSA	1.498*** (0.450)	.709 (0.490)
Traditional news media usage	.051 (0.033)	.049 (0.036)
Social media general usage	-.006 (0.049)	.000 (0.053)
Social media news usage	.050 (0.035)	.059# (0.038)
Social media political curation	.194* (0.084)	.050 (0.091)
<i>Block 4. Moderator</i>		
Urbanity	.000 (0.047)	-.017 (0.051)
Social media political curation \times Urbanity	-.024** (0.011)	-.002 (0.012)
<i>Block 5. Mediator</i>		
Internal political efficacy	—	.302*** (0.038)
Total adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.231	.373

Note. Entries are ordinary least squares (OLS) standardized beta coefficients; Listwise deletion was applied for missing data.

#*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table A.3. Ordinal Logistic Regression Models Testing Social Media Political Curation Over Trust in State Government with Synthetic Minority Oversampling Technique (SMOTE) Applied Sample.

	Internal political efficacy	Trust in state government
Model	1. (<i>n</i> = 1,090)	2. (<i>n</i> = 1,090)
<i>Block 1. Demographics</i>	β (SE)	β (SE)
Age	.024*** (0.004)	.000 (0.004)
Gender (f)	.687*** (0.115)	.187 (0.118)
Race (white)	.076 (0.164)	.038 (0.170)

(continued)

Table A.3. (continued)

	Internal political efficacy	Trust in state government
Education level	.013 (0.044)	−.009 (0.045)
Income (annual)	.046** (0.017)	−.029 (0.017)
<i>Block 2. Political variables</i>		
Political interest	.386*** (0.045)	.127** (0.045)
Partisan ID (Dem↔Rep)	−.173*** (0.034)	−.558*** (0.038)
<i>Block 3. Media variables</i>		
DBSA	2.235** (0.591)	.878 (0.598)
Traditional news media usage	.081 (0.042)	.113** (0.043)
Social media general usage	−.030 (0.066)	.039 (0.069)
Social media news usage	.110* (0.047)	.076 (0.047)
Social media political curation	.335** (0.109)	.105 (0.112)
<i>Block 4. Moderator</i>		
Urbanity	.001 (0.065)	.003 (0.065)
Social media political curation × Urbanity	−.045** (0.015)	−.009 (0.015)
<i>Block 5. Mediator</i>		
Internal political efficacy	—	.500*** (0.050)
Pseudo R ²	.049	.096

Note. Entries are ordered probit coefficients; Pseudo R² is McFadden’s exponent; Listwise deletion was applied for missing data. R code for SMOTE are available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26380669.v3>.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table A.4. Alternative Indirect and Conditional Indirect Pathway Analysis.

Paths and effects	Estimates	SE	95% confidence intervals
Trust in state government → Internal political efficacy → Social media political curation			(<i>n</i> = 816)
Simple indirect effect	0.0037	0.0108	[−0.0172, 0.0254]
<i>Moderated mediation</i>			
Closer to rural areas (16th Percentile)	0.0058	0.0120	[−0.0173, 0.0297]
Closer to urban areas (84th Percentile)	0.0033	0.0126	[−0.0209, 0.0283]
Index of moderated mediation	−0.0004	0.0028	[−0.0135, 0.0052]

Note. Entries for the path estimates are unstandardized coefficients—indirect paths based on bootstrapping to 5,000 samplings with biased corrected confidence intervals. Demographics (age, gender, race, education, and income), political variables (political interest, partisan identification), media factors (district broadband availability, traditional news media usage, social media general usage, social media news usage) were controlled in the model, respectively.

Table A.5. Social Media Political Curation Measurement Scale.

Social media political curation	Indicators	M	SD	Alpha	AVE
	“Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.” (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat disagree, 4 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Somewhat agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly agree)	3.10	1.54	.851	0.590
Principal axis factoring					
	1. I tend to follow news media accounts on social media (e.g., verified accounts of news organizations, journalists).	3.45	1.97	.847	0.565
	2. I tend to follow politicians on social media (e.g., verified accounts of politicians, political parties’ official pages).	2.68	1.81	.811	0.657
	3. I tend to follow advocacy groups on social media (e.g., political groups, campaigning volunteer organizations, etc.).	2.80	1.82	.752	0.718
	4. I tend to follow friends on social media who are well versed in news.	3.47	1.85	.663	0.440
Confirmatory factor analysis					
	$\chi^2(1) = 7.30, p < .01$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
		0.996	0.976	0.084	0.014

Table A.6. Media Usage Indices.

Indicators		M	SD
Traditional news media usage	In a typical week, how many days do you read or watch content from any of the following sources (including online)? (1 = 0 day, 2 = 1 day, 3 = 2 days, 4 = 3 days, 5 = 4 days, 6 = 5 days, 7 = 6 days)	3.28	1.63
	1. Local news media	4.25	2.36
	2. National network news, such as NBC, ABC, CBS	3.73	2.39
	3. Cable network news, such as CNN, FoxNews, MSNBC	3.04	2.33
Social media general usage	4. Other national news organizations, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, AP, Bloomberg	2.15	1.80
	How often do you use each of these social media platforms? (1 = Never, 2 = Very rarely, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Occasionally, 5 = Frequently, 6 = Very frequently, 7 = All the time)	2.68	1.20
	1. Facebook	4.85	2.09
	2. Twitter (now "X")	2.08	1.82
Social media news usage	3. Instagram	3.04	2.26
	4. TikTok	2.64	2.26
	5. Reddit	1.96	1.63
	6. Nextdoor	1.53	1.31
	How often do you use each of the media listed below (including online) to get local news and information (including about Michigan politics)? (1 = Never, 2 = Very rarely, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Occasionally, 5 = Frequently, 6 = Very frequently, 7 = All the time)	3.25	1.69
	1. Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Nextdoor	3.89	2.08
	2. YouTube video, such as news channel or YouTube subscription	2.87	1.99
	3. Messaging apps, such as Facebook Messenger, Whatsapp, Snapchat, Telegram	2.99	1.95

Table A.7. Significant Mean Differences of Internal Political Efficacy and Trust in State Government Between Geography-Curation Groups.

DV	Group comparison	Tuckey HSD test results
Internal political efficacy	Rural-low-curation < Rural-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.57, SE = 0.15, p < .01$
	Rural-low-curation < Urban-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.73, SE = 0.13, p < .001$
	Urban-low-curation < Rural-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.50, SE = 0.13, p < .01$
	Urban-low-curation < Urban-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.65, SE = 0.11, p < .001$
Trust in state government	Rural-low-curation < Rural-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.56, SE = 0.19, p < .05$
	Rural-low-curation < Urban-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.93, SE = 0.16, p < .001$
	Urban-low-curation < Urban-high-curation	$M_{diff} = 0.53, SE = 0.14, p < .001$

Note. One-way ANOVA results for internal political efficacy: $F(3, 868) = 16.69, \eta^2 = .06, p < .001$; for trust in state government: $F(3, 871) = 12.76, \eta^2 = .04, p < .001$.

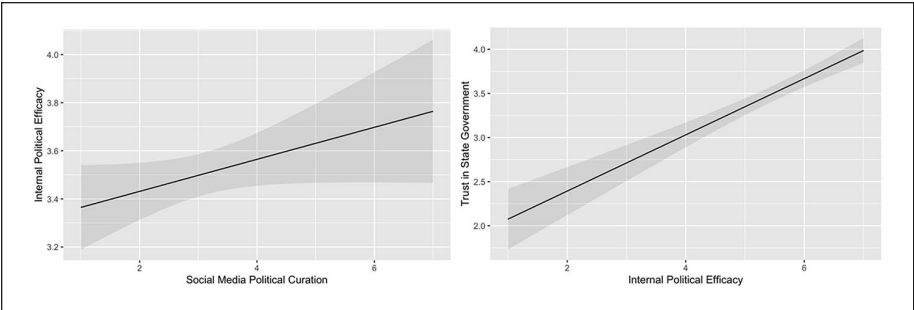


Figure A.1. OLS plot predictions for H1 and H2.

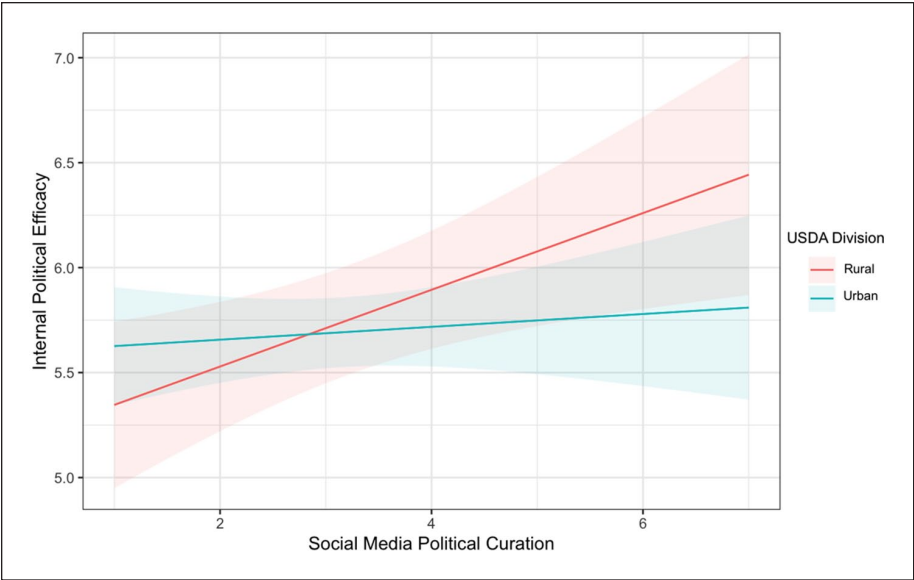


Figure A.2. OLS plot prediction for urbanity on the relationship between internal political efficacy and social media political curation.

Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (USDA, 2020)

1 = Metro—Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more

2 = Metro—Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population

3 = Metro—Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population

4 = Nonmetro—Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area

5 = Nonmetro—Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area

6 = Nonmetro—Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area

7 = Nonmetro—Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area

8 = Nonmetro—Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area

9 = Nonmetro—Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

Note. The above scale was reverse-coded in the statistical analysis.

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Notes

1. The 2024 presidential election flipped Michigan back to a red state. The margin between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in Michigan was 1.4%, making it the second narrowest among the six flipped states, after Wisconsin.
2. To protect respondents' privacy and prevent social desirability bias in their responses, only street names without numbers (e.g., "Madison Ave") were reported.
3. To address the gender imbalance in the rural sample, the analytical models were further tested using the Synthetic Minority Oversampling Technique (SMOTE; Chawla et al., 2002). SMOTE employs machine learning algorithms to generate a hypothetical sample through oversampling minority groups within raw data. In this case, the minority group was rural males, and SMOTE created a total of 1,090 samples (for the female cases, the original data was used). Model analyses using this dataset did not significantly differ from the original results. Detailed results and R code are provided (Table A.3.).
4. Despite being controversial, research concurs that "[t]he Pearson correlation is not an adequate measure of the reliability of a two-item scale. [. . .] Cronbach's alpha is an accurate estimate of reliability under rather restrictive assumptions" (Eisinga et al., 2013, p. 641). Nevertheless, considering the small number of items, it is preferable to offer additional composite reliability measures for this widely used scale ($r = .542$, $p < .001$; $\Omega = 0.702$, $AVE = 0.540$).

5. While single-item measures lack internal consistency reliability, they can still exhibit construct validity (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012). Trust in state government herein could demonstrate predictive validity by correlating with institutionalized political participation (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007). In the present data, it showed significant correlations with self-reported turnout in the 2020 general election ($r=.125, p<.001$) and the 2022 mid-term election ($r=.110, p<.01$), whereas both turnouts were not correlated with partisan identification.
6. However, the DBSA, representing county-level broadband availability, does not directly indicate individual internet quality, raising potential ecological fallacies when linking it to personal utility. Nevertheless, a strong correlation between RUCC and DBSA ($r=.803, p<.001$) supports DBSA as a structural proxy for regional digital infrastructure. Additionally, respondents who answered “Do you have broadband Internet connection at home?” with “Yes” (86.6%) had a significantly higher DBSA mean than those who answered “No” (13.4%; $t(142.206)=2.526, p<.05$), affirming the FCC’s DBSA as a relevant contextual factor.

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