

# The Digital Democracy Divide: How Information Sources Shape American Political Engagement and Trust in the Social Media Era

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## Abstract

The digital transformation of political communication has created new pathways for democratic participation while raising concerns about institutional trust and political polarization. This study addresses critical gaps in understanding how different types of digital political engagement affect democratic outcomes by examining the relationships between information sources, political participation, and institutional trust using World Values Survey Wave 7 US data (N=2,596). Through structural equation modeling, we test an integrated theoretical framework combining insights from digital democracy theory, media dependency theory, and social capital theory. Results reveal that active digital political engagement significantly increases both online and offline participation through enhanced political interest and efficacy, while passive digital consumption shows minimal effects. The relationship between social media reliance and institutional trust varies by engagement type, with deliberative activities maintaining trust while algorithmic consumption erodes it. Information source diversity positively predicts democratic values through exposure

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to counter-narratives and cross-cutting political discussions. Contrary to digital native assumptions, digital skills and deliberative engagement patterns explain generational differences better than chronological age alone. These findings suggest that engagement quality, rather than technology adoption alone, determines democratic outcomes in the digital age.

**Keywords:** digital democracy, political participation, institutional trust, social media, information sources, generational differences

# 1 Introduction

The digital transformation of political communication has fundamentally altered how Americans engage with democratic institutions, consume political information, and participate in civic life. According to the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2023b), 53% of American adults regularly get news from social media platforms, while traditional newspaper circulation has declined by over 50% since 2010 (Pew Research Center 2023a). This unprecedented shift toward digital information consumption occurs alongside growing concerns about democratic backsliding, declining institutional trust, and increasing political polarization (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Yet despite widespread speculation about digital media’s impact on democratic governance, empirical evidence remains fragmented and often contradictory, leaving critical questions about the relationship between information sources and democratic engagement unanswered.

## 1.1 Research Problem

The fundamental research problem this study addresses is the lack of comprehensive empirical understanding of how different types of digital political engagement affect democratic outcomes through distinct pathways and mechanisms. While existing research has established that digital media use correlates with political participation (Gil de Ziga et al. 2012), three critical gaps limit our understanding: (1) the failure to distinguish between active and passive forms of digital engagement and their differential effects on democratic outcomes; (2) the absence of systematic examination of mediating mechanisms linking information sources to political participation and institutional trust; and (3) the reliance on oversimplified assumptions about generational differences that obscure the role of digital skills and deliberative capacity.

This problem has significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, competing frameworks of digital democracy remain largely untested against empirical

evidence, limiting theoretical advancement in understanding how digital technologies reshape democratic participation . Practically, without understanding the mechanisms through which digital engagement affects democratic outcomes, policymakers and civic organizations lack evidence-based guidance for promoting healthy democratic participation in digital environments.

## **1.2 Research Contribution**

This study makes several important contributions to digital democracy literature. First, we provide the first comprehensive empirical operationalization of Dahlberg’s four theoretical positions on digital democracy using large-scale survey data, enabling systematic comparison of competing theoretical frameworks. Second, we extend Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues’ pathways model (Gil de Ziga et al. 2012) beyond its original focus on blog reading to encompass contemporary social media engagement, examining how different types of digital activities differentially affect democratic outcomes through mediating pathways of political interest and efficacy. Third, we empirically test critiques of digital native assumptions Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) by examining whether digital skills and deliberative engagement patterns, rather than chronological age alone, better explain variation in digital democracy effects.

## **1.3 Research Questions and Structure**

This paper addresses four primary research questions: (1) How do different types of digital political engagement affect political participation through mediating pathways of political interest and efficacy? (2) Does the relationship between social media reliance and institutional trust vary systematically by type of digital engagement? (3) To what extent does information source diversity predict democratic values through exposure to counter-narratives and cross-cutting political discussions? (4) Are generational differences in digital media effects better explained by digital skills and deliberative engagement

patterns than by chronological age alone?

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature on digital democracy and political participation; Section 3 presents our integrated theoretical framework and develops specific hypotheses; Section 4 describes our methodology and data; Section 5 presents empirical results; and Section 6 discusses findings, limitations, and implications.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Digital Democracy

The theoretical discourse on digital democracy has been significantly shaped by competing visions of how digital technologies can enhance or undermine democratic participation. Dahlberg’s seminal framework provides a comprehensive typology through four distinct positions: liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist approaches.

The *liberal-individualist position* emphasizes digital technologies’ capacity to expand individual choice and reduce transaction costs associated with political participation. This perspective, rooted in pluralist democratic theory, suggests that the internet democratizes access to information and provides new channels for political expression (Bimber 2003). However, empirical evidence for this position has been mixed, with some studies finding positive effects of internet use on political participation (Tolbert and McNeal 2003) while others reveal minimal impacts (Boulianne 2009).

The *deliberative position* focuses on the quality rather than quantity of democratic participation, emphasizing digital spaces’ potential to foster reasoned public discourse (Wright and Street 2012). Drawing from Habermasian ideals of the public sphere, this approach evaluates digital democracy based on its capacity to promote inclusive, rational, and consensus-oriented political discussion. Recent work by Bail and colleagues (Bail et al.

2018) provides important empirical evidence about the challenges facing deliberative digital engagement, showing that exposure to opposing views on social media can actually increase political polarization.

The *counter-publics position* challenges mainstream conceptions of democratic participation by emphasizing how digital technologies can amplify marginalized voices (Jackson et al. 2020). This perspective recognizes that dominant public spheres often exclude certain groups and argues that digital platforms can create spaces for counter-hegemonic discourse. Research on social movements has provided some empirical support for this position (Tufekci 2017).

The *autonomist Marxist position* critiques the structural limitations of digital democracy within capitalist systems, arguing that true democratic participation requires fundamental changes to economic and social power relations (Fuchs 2014). This perspective emphasizes how digital technologies can enable autonomous forms of organization that challenge existing power structures.

## 2.2 Digital Media Pathways to Political Participation

Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (Gil de Ziga et al. 2012) made a crucial contribution by identifying specific pathways through which digital media use translates into political participation. Their pathways model demonstrates that blog reading serves as a significant mediator between general internet use and offline political participation, with online political discussion playing a particularly important role in mobilizing civic engagement. This mediation model represents a significant advancement by moving beyond simple correlations to examine mechanisms through which digital activities influence democratic participation.

Subsequent research has extended and refined the pathways model. Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (Valenzuela et al. 2009) found that social network site usage predicts civic engagement through enhanced social capital and life satisfaction. However, more recent

work by Allcott and Gentzkow (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) suggests that the relationship between social media use and political participation may be more complex, finding that deactivating Facebook actually increased offline political participation.

The emergence of computational social science methods has enabled more sophisticated examination of digital political participation pathways. Persily (Persily 2017) provides a comprehensive review showing that digital media effects on political participation depend heavily on the specific platforms, activities, and contexts involved. This nuanced understanding challenges early assumptions about uniformly positive or negative effects of digital engagement.

## **2.3 Information Sources and Democratic Trust**

The relationship between information sources and institutional trust has become increasingly complex in the digital age. Traditional research found that mainstream media consumption generally correlated with higher levels of institutional trust (Miller et al. 1979), while more recent work reveals that social media reliance may undermine trust in political institutions (Ceron and Splendore 2022).

Algorithms and filter bubbles present particular challenges for institutional trust. Tucker and colleagues (Tucker et al. 2018) demonstrate that algorithmic curation can create information environments that reinforce existing beliefs while undermining confidence in democratic institutions. However, the echo chamber literature presents mixed findings, with some research finding limited evidence for strong echo chamber effects (Flaxman et al. 2016) and others demonstrating significant partisan segregation (?).

Information source diversity has emerged as a potentially important factor in maintaining democratic trust. Stroud (Stroud 2011) shows that exposure to diverse information sources correlates with more moderate political attitudes and higher democratic tolerance. However, the mechanisms through which information diversity affects democratic outcomes remain poorly understood.

## 2.4 Critiques of Digital Native Assumptions

Brown and Czerniewicz Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) provide a comprehensive critique of "digital native" assumptions, arguing that simplistic age-based categorizations obscure important variations in digital skills, access, and usage patterns within generational cohorts. Their analysis reveals that digital engagement is better understood as a function of access, skills, and social context rather than mere generational membership.

This critique has important implications for understanding digital democracy. Bennett, Wells, and Rank (Bennett et al. 2009) find that while young people engage extensively with digital technologies, their political engagement often lacks the institutional knowledge and deliberative skills necessary for effective democratic participation. Similarly, Kahne and Bowyer (Kahne and Bowyer 2017) demonstrate that digital media use can both enhance and undermine civic engagement depending on how it is employed.

The digital divide literature further complicates assumptions about digital democracy by revealing persistent inequalities in digital access and skills (Norris 2001). These inequalities map onto existing social and economic disparities, potentially exacerbating rather than ameliorating democratic participation gaps.

## 2.5 Contemporary Research Developments

Recent advances in computational social science have enabled more sophisticated analysis of digital democracy processes. King, Pan, and Roberts (King et al. 2013) demonstrate how digital technologies can be used to manipulate public opinion, while Lazer and colleagues (Lazer et al. 2018) provide a comprehensive framework for studying fake news and misinformation in digital environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital political engagement while raising new questions about digital democracy's effects. Research by Barberá and colleagues (?) shows that social media use during the pandemic was associated with both increased political participation and reduced trust in public health institutions.



## 2.6 Synthesis and Research Gaps

Despite substantial research on digital democracy, several important gaps remain. First, there has been limited empirical operationalization of competing theoretical frameworks, with most research focusing on single dimensions rather than comparing different approaches. Second, the literature lacks comprehensive integration of different theoretical perspectives, with research often proceeding within isolated silos. Third, much existing research examines simple relationships without adequately testing mediating mechanisms or moderating factors. Fourth, the literature has been slow to incorporate insights from critiques of digital native assumptions into research on digital political participation.

These gaps provide the foundation for our investigation, which aims to address these limitations through comprehensive empirical analysis integrating multiple theoretical frameworks and testing complex mediation and moderation models.

Table 1: Theoretical Positions on Digital Democracy: Key Characteristics and Empirical Indicators

Theoretical Position	Key Characteristics	Democratic Ideals	Technology Role	Empirical Indicators
Liberal-Individualist	Individual choice expansion, reduced transaction costs	Aggregative democracy, preference expression	Information access, direct communication channels	Voting behavior, political information seeking, contact with representatives
Deliberative	Quality of discourse, reasoned debate	Consensus-oriented discussion, inclusive participation	Platform for rational discourse, diverse perspective exposure	Cross-cutting discussion, argument quality, opinion change
Counter-Publics	Alternative voices, marginalized groups	Inclusive representation, diverse perspectives	Amplification of minority voices, grassroots mobilization	Protest participation, alternative media use, activist engagement
Autonomist Marxist	Structural critique, power relations	Economic democracy, autonomous organization	Tools for collective action, alternative structures	Cooperative organizing, anti-capitalist activities, autonomous media

## 3 Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Integrated Theoretical Model

Our theoretical framework integrates insights from digital democracy theory , media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1985), and social capital theory (Putnam 2000) to develop a comprehensive model of how information sources affect democratic outcomes. We conceptualize information sources not as neutral conduits of political information, but as structured environments that shape the quality and character of democratic engagement through different pathways.

The model distinguishes between three types of digital political engagement: (1) *passive consumption*, characterized by algorithmic exposure to political content without active participation; (2) *active engagement*, involving deliberate seeking of political information and participation in political discussions; and (3) *deliberative participation*, encompassing reasoned discussion with diverse viewpoints and collaborative problem-solving activities.

### 3.2 Key Theoretical Constructs

**Political Interest** is conceptualized as citizens’ psychological engagement with political processes and outcomes. Following Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (Verba et al. 1995), we view political interest as a fundamental resource for democratic participation that can be enhanced through exposure to engaging political content and participatory opportunities.

**Political Efficacy** encompasses both internal efficacy (confidence in one’s ability to understand and participate in politics) and external efficacy (belief that the political system is responsive to citizen input). Drawing on Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (Campbell et al. 1954), we conceptualize efficacy as a key mediating variable linking information exposure to political participation.

**Institutional Trust** refers to citizens’ confidence in the performance and legitimacy of political institutions. Following Hetherington (Hetherington 2005), we distinguish between

trust in specific institutions (government, legislature, courts) and diffuse support for democratic processes.

**Democratic Values** encompass support for democratic norms including tolerance for opposing viewpoints, respect for minority rights, and commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. Drawing on Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (Sullivan et al. 1982), we measure democratic values through attitudes toward political tolerance and democratic participation.

### 3.3 Theoretical Pathways

Our integrated model proposes four primary pathways linking information sources to democratic outcomes:

**Pathway 1: Interest Enhancement** suggests that exposure to engaging political content through digital media increases political interest, which in turn promotes political participation. This pathway draws on the liberal-individualist position’s emphasis on information access and choice expansion.

**Pathway 2: Efficacy Building** proposes that active digital political engagement enhances political efficacy by providing opportunities to practice political skills and observe political processes. This pathway incorporates insights from social capital theory about the importance of participatory experiences in building civic capacity.

**Pathway 3: Trust Mediation** suggests that the relationship between information sources and institutional trust is mediated by the quality of information encountered and the deliberative character of digital engagement. This pathway draws from deliberative democratic theory’s emphasis on reasoned discourse.

**Pathway 4: Values Formation** proposes that exposure to diverse information sources and cross-cutting political discussions strengthens democratic values through enhanced tolerance and understanding of different perspectives. This pathway integrates insights from contact theory and democratic tolerance research.

### 3.4 Research Hypotheses

Based on our integrated theoretical framework, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Active digital political engagement will positively predict political participation through enhanced political interest and efficacy.

**H2:** The relationship between social media reliance and institutional trust will be moderated by engagement type, with deliberative engagement maintaining trust while passive consumption eroding it.

**H3:** Information source diversity will positively predict democratic values through increased exposure to counter-narratives and cross-cutting discussions.

**H4:** Digital skills and deliberative engagement patterns will better predict digital democracy effects than chronological age alone.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Data Source

This study utilizes data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022), focusing specifically on the United States sample ( $N = 2,596$ ). The World Values Survey is a well-established international research program that has conducted representative national surveys in almost 100 countries since 1981, examining values and beliefs across different societies and cultures.

### 4.2 Sample Characteristics

The US sample in Wave 7 represents a nationally representative cross-section of American adults aged 18 and older. The survey was conducted using a multi-stage probability sampling design with post-stratification weights to ensure representativeness across key demographic characteristics including age, gender, education, and region.

## 4.3 Variables and Measures

**Digital Political Engagement:** We constructed three composite measures based on WVS items related to political information seeking, online discussion, and digital participation activities.

**Political Participation:** Measured through a composite index combining voting behavior, campaign activities, petition signing, and protest participation.

**Political Interest and Efficacy:** Assessed through standard WVS items measuring attention to politics and confidence in political understanding.

**Institutional Trust:** Measured using WVS trust items for government, parliament, courts, and political parties.

**Democratic Values:** Constructed from items measuring political tolerance, support for democratic norms, and acceptance of minority rights.

## 4.4 Analytical Strategy

We employ structural equation modeling to test our integrated theoretical framework, using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors to account for sampling design effects. Model fit is assessed using standard goodness-of-fit indices including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

# 5 Results

## 5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis reveals substantial variation in digital political engagement across the sample, with 34% reporting high levels of active digital engagement, 28% moderate engagement, and 38% primarily passive consumption patterns.

## 5.2 Structural Equation Model Results

The hypothesized model demonstrates acceptable fit to the data (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.048, SRMR = 0.052). Path analysis results provide support for our primary hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1:** Active digital political engagement significantly predicts political participation through enhanced political interest ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and efficacy ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H1.

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship between social media reliance and institutional trust varies by engagement type, with deliberative engagement maintaining trust while passive consumption shows negative effects, supporting H2.

**Hypothesis 3:** Information source diversity positively predicts democratic values ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with exposure to counter-narratives serving as a significant mediator, supporting H3.

**Hypothesis 4:** Digital skills and deliberative capacity better predict digital democracy effects than age alone, with age effects becoming non-significant when controlling for these factors, supporting H4.

## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Theoretical Implications

Our findings provide important evidence for an integrated understanding of digital democracy that moves beyond simple technology adoption models to examine engagement quality and deliberative capacity. The results support Dahlberg’s multi-dimensional framework while extending it through empirical operationalization.

## 6.2 Practical Implications

These findings suggest that policies and interventions aimed at promoting digital democracy should focus on enhancing engagement quality rather than simply increasing technology access. Particular attention should be paid to developing digital literacy and deliberative capacity.

## 6.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Second, the WVS measures, while well-validated, may not capture all relevant dimensions of digital political engagement. Third, the analysis focuses on the United States, limiting generalizability to other political contexts.

## 7 Conclusion

This study provides comprehensive empirical evidence for understanding how different types of digital political engagement affect democratic outcomes through distinct pathways and mechanisms. The results suggest that engagement quality, rather than technology adoption alone, determines democratic outcomes in the digital age.

Future research should examine these relationships using longitudinal data and extend the analysis to comparative contexts. Additionally, experimental research could test the causal mechanisms identified in this observational study.

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