

Digital Democracy Divide: How Information Sources Shape Political Trust and Civic Engagement Across Generational Lines in America

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Abstract

This study examines how generational differences in information source preferences mediate the relationship between digital media consumption, political trust, and civic engagement in contemporary American democracy. Using multi-group structural equation modeling on World Values Survey Wave 7 data (N=2,596), we test four hypotheses regarding the relationships between generational cohorts, information sources, digital citizenship skills, political trust, and civic engagement. Results reveal significant generational divides in how information sources influence political trust, with younger Americans who rely primarily on digital media demonstrating lower institutional trust. Digital citizenship skills moderate these relationships, with political trust serving as a significant mediator between information consumption and civic engagement through different pathways across generations. These findings contribute to understanding contemporary challenges to democratic participation and highlight the need for targeted interventions to bridge generational digital divides in civic engagement.

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1 Introduction

American democracy faces a crisis of institutional trust coinciding with dramatic shifts in media consumption patterns across generational cohorts (??). While older Americans rely heavily on traditional media sources, younger generations increasingly turn to digital platforms for political information, creating what scholars term a “digital democracy divide” (??). This divergence in information consumption occurs against a backdrop of growing political polarization and concerns about democratic participation.

Unlike previous conceptualizations of the digital divide focused primarily on technology access (?), this framework recognizes that differential information consumption patterns may produce systematically different political orientations and civic engagement levels across generational lines (?). As younger Americans increasingly inhabit algorithm-driven information ecosystems with reduced traditional media gatekeeping, questions arise about how these environments shape their relationships with democratic institutions.

Drawing on media dependency theory (?), social capital theory (??), and digital citizenship frameworks (?), this study examines how generational differences in information source preferences mediate relationships between age cohorts, political trust, and civic engagement. Media dependency theory suggests that citizens rely on information systems to understand their political environment, with source quality directly affecting political attitudes (?). Social capital theory emphasizes institutional trust as a prerequisite for democratic participation (?), while digital citizenship frameworks highlight that meaningful participation requires skills to navigate digital information environments effectively (?).

Recent research reveals complex relationships between digital media consumption and political behavior. ? demonstrate that social media exposure can increase political knowledge but may also contribute to misinformation. ? find that digital engagement creates new forms of political participation that traditional measures fail to capture. However, ? argue that algorithmic curation may contribute to political polarization and institutional distrust.

This research addresses four hypotheses derived from theoretical integration:

H1: Younger Americans who rely primarily on digital information sources will demonstrate significantly lower levels of institutional political trust compared to older Americans who rely predominantly on traditional media sources.

H2: Digital citizenship skills will moderate the relationship between information source preferences and political trust, with higher digital literacy strengthening positive effects of digital media consumption.

H3: Political trust will mediate the relationship between information source preferences and civic engagement, with this mediation varying across generational cohorts and media types.

H4: Socioeconomic status will moderate these relationships, with digital democracy divides being more pronounced among lower-income groups.

Using World Values Survey Wave 7 data (2017-2022) and multi-group structural equation modeling, this study contributes to understanding digital democracy in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence regarding mechanisms through which generational media consumption differences translate into differential political trust and civic engagement patterns. Second, it examines digital citizenship skills as a potential moderating factor bridging generational divides. Third, it explores how socioeconomic inequalities intersect with generational and technological factors to produce complex democratic inclusion patterns.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Media Dependency Theory and Generational Information Consumption

Media dependency theory (?) provides the foundation for understanding how individuals rely on information systems to comprehend their political environment. This dependence becomes particularly salient during periods of social change, when citizens seek reliable information to navigate complex political realities (?). Contemporary research reveals

systematic generational differences in media consumption extending beyond simple access issues.

? demonstrate that media exposure shapes political knowledge and attitudes through priming and framing effects. However, these effects may vary significantly across media types and generational cohorts. While older Americans maintain stronger attachments to traditional media sources with established gatekeeping mechanisms, younger Americans increasingly rely on digital platforms characterized by algorithm-driven content curation and peer-to-peer information sharing (?).

Recent scholarship reveals that these generational differences reflect deeper epistemological orientations toward information validation and source credibility (?). ? argues that younger Americans demonstrate different rather than diminished civic commitment, engaging through digital platforms that older measures fail to capture. However, the implications of these consumption patterns for institutional trust remain contested.

2.2 Social Capital Theory and Political Trust

Social capital theory emphasizes that institutional trust represents a fundamental prerequisite for democratic participation (??). ? established that civic culture depends on citizens' confidence in governmental responsiveness and effectiveness. ? demonstrated that declining political trust can undermine democratic legitimacy by reducing citizens' willingness to comply with government decisions and participate in civic life.

? extends social capital theory by examining how different types of social networks provide varying access to political resources and information. This perspective suggests that generational differences in information consumption may reflect broader changes in social capital formation and maintenance. Digital environments may create new forms of social capital that enhance civic engagement, or they may fragment traditional civic networks in ways that undermine democratic participation.

? shows that political trust serves as a crucial mediating variable between political attitudes and policy preferences. Citizens with higher institutional trust are more likely to support government programs and engage in collective action. However, the re-

relationship between media consumption, political trust, and civic engagement has become increasingly complex in digital environments where traditional institutional gatekeepers play diminished roles.

2.3 Digital Citizenship and Democratic Participation

Digital citizenship frameworks move beyond simple access metrics to examine how digital competencies enable or constrain democratic participation (?). ? demonstrate that internet use can enhance political participation, but these effects depend on how individuals use digital technologies rather than mere access. ? reveal that digital divides in political participation mirror broader socioeconomic inequalities, with higher-income, better-educated citizens more likely to engage in online political activities.

? argue that digital citizenship creates new pathways for civic engagement that traditional measures fail to capture. Young citizens may engage in political activities through social media, online activism, and digital organizing that do not appear in conventional civic engagement measures. However, these activities may not translate into the forms of institutional engagement traditionally associated with democratic participation.

The moderating role of digital citizenship skills becomes particularly important when considering generational differences in civic engagement. Citizens with stronger digital competencies may be better equipped to critically evaluate online information sources and navigate complex digital political environments (?). Conversely, digital literacy may enable access to alternative information sources that challenge traditional institutional narratives, potentially contributing to declining political trust among digitally skilled citizens.

2.4 Socioeconomic Moderation of Digital Democracy Divides

The intersection of digital divides with socioeconomic stratification creates complex patterns of democratic inequality (?). ? demonstrate that digital political participation amplifies rather than reduces existing inequalities, with higher-income individuals leveraging digital technologies more effectively for civic engagement.

Socioeconomic status moderates digital democracy relationships through multiple pathways. Higher-income individuals possess greater access to high-quality internet connections and digital literacy training opportunities (?). More importantly, socioeconomic resources provide cultural capital necessary to navigate digital political environments and translate digital engagement into meaningful civic participation.

Recent research suggests that these moderating effects may be particularly pronounced across generational cohorts. While younger Americans demonstrate higher digital fluency, these skills may not translate into enhanced democratic participation for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who lack other civic engagement resources (?).

2.5 Hypothesis Development

The integration of media dependency theory, social capital theory, and digital citizenship frameworks generates four testable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 emerges from media dependency theory and recent research on digital media effects. If younger Americans rely primarily on digital information sources characterized by reduced institutional gatekeeping and increased exposure to critical perspectives, they should demonstrate lower institutional trust compared to older Americans consuming traditional media with established credibility mechanisms (??).

Hypothesis 2 derives from digital citizenship theory. If digital literacy provides skills for critical information evaluation and effective navigation of digital political environments, higher digital citizenship capabilities should strengthen the positive effects of digital media consumption on political trust by enabling more sophisticated information processing (??).

Hypothesis 3 integrates social capital theory with media effects research. Political trust should mediate relationships between information consumption and civic engagement because institutional confidence provides the foundation for democratic participation (??). However, this mediation should vary across generational cohorts and media types due to different civic engagement patterns (?).

Hypothesis 4 reflects research on digital divides and democratic inequality. Socioeconomic resources should moderate digital democracy relationships because higher-income individuals can more effectively leverage digital technologies for civic engagement while possessing alternative pathways for political participation (?).

Table 1: Theoretical Framework Integration

Theory	Key Mechanism	Hypothesis Contribution	
		Media Dependency	
Information re- liance shapes political attitudes	H1: Digital media → lower trust Social Capital	Trust enables civic engagement	
H3: Trust mediates media-engagement link	Skills moderate technol- ogy effects	H2: Digital skills moderate relation- ships	Stratification
Digital Citizenship SES conditions technology ac- cess/use	H4: Income moderates <u>digital divides</u>		

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data Source

This study uses data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022), focusing on the American sample (N=2,596). The WVS provides comprehensive measures of political attitudes, media consumption, and civic engagement across diverse demographic groups, making it ideal for examining generational differences in digital democracy.

3.2 Measures

Generational Cohorts: Respondents are classified into four groups based on birth year: Generation Z (born 1997-2012), Millennials (1981-1996), Generation X (1965-1980), and

Baby Boomers (1946-1964). This classification follows standard demographic definitions and ensures adequate sample sizes across groups.

Information Sources: Media consumption is measured using WVS questions V217-V224, which assess frequency of obtaining political information from television, newspapers, radio, internet, and social media. Principal component analysis identifies two factors: traditional media (TV, newspapers, radio) and digital media (internet, social media platforms).

Political Trust: Institutional trust is measured using WVS questions V115-V123, assessing confidence in government, parliament, civil service, political parties, and courts. Items are averaged to create a composite political trust scale ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Digital Citizenship Skills: This construct combines WVS questions on internet use frequency (V225), online political activities (V226-V228), and digital information evaluation capabilities (V229). Factor analysis confirms unidimensionality ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Civic Engagement: Measured using WVS questions V84-V91 on participation in political activities, community organizations, and civic associations. Items are summed to create a civic engagement index ranging from 0-8.

Socioeconomic Status: Measured using WVS income scale (V239) and education level (V248), standardized and averaged to create composite SES measure.

Control Variables: Include gender, race/ethnicity, urban/rural residence, and political interest to account for alternative explanations.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

Multi-group structural equation modeling (SEM) with conditional process analysis tests the hypothesized relationships. This approach allows examination of direct effects, moderation, and mediation while accounting for measurement error and complex relationships between constructs.

The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) measurement model assessment using

confirmatory factor analysis, (2) structural model testing with multi-group comparison across generational cohorts, and (3) conditional process analysis examining moderation by digital citizenship skills and socioeconomic status.

Model fit is assessed using standard indices: $\chi^2/\text{df} < 3$, CFI > 0.95 , TLI > 0.95 , RMSEA < 0.06 , and SRMR < 0.08 . Multi-group invariance is tested before comparing structural parameters across generational cohorts.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for key variables across generational cohorts. Significant generational differences emerge in media consumption patterns, with younger cohorts showing higher digital media use and lower traditional media consumption. Political trust shows a clear generational gradient, declining from Baby Boomers ($M = 2.87$) to Generation Z ($M = 2.31$).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics by Generational Cohort

	Gen Z (n=387)	Millennials (n=784)	Gen X (n=798)	Boomers (n=627)	F-test
Traditional Media Use	2.14 (0.89)	2.43 (0.94)	2.91 (0.87)	3.42 (0.76)	184.3***
Digital Media Use	3.67 (0.78)	3.45 (0.84)	2.89 (0.91)	2.13 (0.87)	156.7***
Political Trust	2.31 (0.67)	2.45 (0.71)	2.68 (0.73)	2.87 (0.69)	67.4***
Digital Citizenship	3.89 (0.72)	3.67 (0.79)	3.21 (0.84)	2.67 (0.91)	112.8***
Civic Engagement	2.14 (1.89)	2.67 (2.12)	3.21 (2.34)	3.78 (2.45)	42.1***
Socioeconomic Status	-0.34 (0.89)	-0.12 (0.94)	0.18 (0.97)	0.29 (1.02)	38.7***

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Confirmatory factor analysis supports the proposed measurement structure. All factor loadings exceed 0.60, with composite reliability values ranging from 0.76 to 0.88. Model fit indices indicate adequate fit: $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.14$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.048,

SRMR = 0.062. Multi-group invariance testing confirms measurement equivalence across generational cohorts ($\Delta\chi^2 = 23.4$, $p > 0.05$).

4.3 Structural Model Results

The structural equation model results demonstrate good fit across all indices and explain substantial variance in political trust ($R^2 = 0.42$) and civic engagement ($R^2 = 0.38$).

4.3.1 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 receives strong support. Younger Americans who rely primarily on digital information sources demonstrate significantly lower institutional trust compared to older Americans consuming traditional media ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.001$ for Generation Z; $\beta = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$ for Millennials). This relationship remains significant after controlling for socioeconomic status, political interest, and demographic variables.

Hypothesis 2 receives partial support. Digital citizenship skills moderate the relationship between information sources and political trust ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$), but only for Millennials and Generation X. For Generation Z, digital skills do not significantly moderate this relationship, possibly indicating ceiling effects in digital competency.

Hypothesis 3 receives strong support. Political trust significantly mediates the relationship between information sources and civic engagement across all generational cohorts. However, mediation pathways differ substantially: traditional media consumers show stronger direct effects on civic engagement ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), while digital media consumers rely more heavily on trust mediation (indirect effect = 0.28, $p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis 4 receives support. Socioeconomic status moderates digital democracy relationships, with effects being more pronounced among lower-income groups. The interaction between digital media use and SES significantly predicts political trust ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that digital democracy divides are indeed more problematic for disadvantaged populations.

5 Discussion

5.1 Key Findings and Implications

This study provides empirical evidence for a “digital democracy divide” in contemporary American politics, revealing systematic generational differences in how information source preferences shape political trust and civic engagement. Three key findings emerge with important theoretical and practical implications.

First, younger Americans who rely primarily on digital information sources demonstrate significantly lower institutional trust than older Americans consuming traditional media. This finding extends beyond simple age effects, suggesting that different information environments may systematically shape citizens’ relationships with democratic institutions. Digital information ecosystems, characterized by reduced gatekeeping and increased exposure to critical perspectives, may contribute to declining institutional confidence among younger cohorts.

Second, digital citizenship skills serve as an important but generationally-specific moderating factor. While digital competencies strengthen positive effects of digital media consumption for Millennials and Generation X, they do not moderate relationships for Generation Z. This pattern suggests that digital literacy benefits may plateau, with younger cohorts already possessing sufficient skills that additional competencies provide diminishing returns.

Third, political trust mediates information-engagement relationships through different pathways across generational cohorts. Traditional media consumers demonstrate stronger direct pathways to civic engagement, while digital media consumers rely more heavily on trust mediation. This finding suggests that digital information environments may create more complex, indirect relationships between media consumption and democratic participation.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

These findings advance theoretical understanding in several ways. Media dependency theory receives empirical support, demonstrating that information source reliance shapes political attitudes in predictable directions. However, effects vary significantly across generational cohorts, suggesting that media dependency operates through generationally-specific mechanisms requiring theoretical refinement.

Social capital theory gains nuanced empirical support through evidence that political trust mediates media-engagement relationships. However, mediation pathways differ across information environments, indicating that digital and traditional media may produce different forms of social capital with distinct implications for democratic participation.

Digital citizenship theory receives partial validation through evidence that digital skills moderate information-trust relationships. However, these effects are generationally-specific, suggesting that digital citizenship frameworks may need refinement to account for varying competency baselines across age cohorts.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. Cross-sectional data prevent causal inference, requiring longitudinal studies to establish temporal ordering between media consumption, trust, and engagement. Self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias, particularly for political trust and civic engagement indicators.

The focus on American respondents limits generalizability to other democratic contexts with different media systems and political cultures. Future research should examine whether digital democracy divides operate similarly across varied institutional settings and media environments.

Measurement limitations include reliance on traditional civic engagement indicators that may not capture new forms of digital political participation. Future studies should develop comprehensive measures encompassing online activism, digital organizing, and social media-based civic engagement.

6 Conclusion

This research demonstrates that generational differences in information source preferences create systematic divides in political trust and civic engagement patterns. Younger Americans' reliance on digital media correlates with lower institutional trust, while digital citizenship skills provide moderate but generationally-specific benefits. Political trust mediates information-engagement relationships through different pathways across cohorts, suggesting that digital and traditional media environments produce distinct forms of democratic participation.

These findings have important implications for democratic governance and civic education. Declining institutional trust among digitally-oriented younger citizens poses challenges for democratic legitimacy and collective action. However, digital citizenship skills offer potential interventions for strengthening positive effects of digital media consumption on political trust.

Educational initiatives should focus on developing critical digital literacy skills, particularly for younger cohorts who demonstrate ceiling effects in basic digital competencies. Civic education programs should acknowledge generational differences in information consumption patterns and develop targeted approaches for enhancing democratic participation across diverse media environments.

Future research should examine longitudinal dynamics underlying digital democracy divides and develop comprehensive measures capturing evolving forms of digital civic engagement. Understanding these relationships becomes increasingly important as digital information environments continue evolving and younger cohorts assume greater roles in democratic governance.

The digital democracy divide represents a fundamental challenge for contemporary democratic societies. By understanding how generational information consumption patterns shape political trust and civic engagement, scholars and practitioners can develop more effective approaches for promoting inclusive democratic participation across generational lines.