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by Sanaul Haque

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The Rise of AI and a Conservative Resurgence: Reminiscent of the Reagan Era

Nayna Ahuja

Lawrence E. Elkins High School

Junior Category

United States of America

naynahuja@gmail.com

Abstract

In the last few years, the "advancement" of AI has caught fire. Studies show increased reliance on AI results in less independent thought, potentially leaving the youth more vulnerable to appeal to pathos as opposed to logos, especially from politicians. With the re-election of Donald Trump, a politician who relies on emotional appeals, there may be a correlation.

Research Question

Is there a correlation between AI usage and conservative beliefs within the youth, and did it affect the 2024 election?

Background

Gen Z, born between 1997-2012, grew up with an infinite access to information and a more tolerant community than any generation previously. However, this didn't necessarily translate to a cohesive progressive group of individuals. Current socioeconomic trouble leads the younger generation to fall prey to the nostalgia of the past. A resurrection of more conservative trends, such as trad-wife content on TikTok, is indicative of this shift. The numbers are there to back it up: A Gallup poll from 2024 finds there is a 7% increase in the number of teens who perceive themselves as more conservative than their parents in the last 20 years (Janfaza, 2024). As a result, Donald Trump achieved more of the youth vote in 2024 versus 2020 (McNeil, 2025). Simultaneously, NPR finds, in 2025, that AI usage among students aged 13-17 has doubled in the last year: from 13% to 26% (NPR, 2025). Logically and empirically, AI can affect and diminish cognitive ability, and the desire for critical thinking (Gerlich, 2025). Understanding the relationship between AI usage and the growth in the conservative youth vote can likely provide insight as to why Gen Z, especially men, are more vulnerable to this alt-right content.

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of overreliance on AI.

Michael Gerlich, the head of the Center for Strategic Corporate Foresight and Sustainability at Swiss Business School, contends that increased AI usage correlates with an atrophy of critical thinking (Gerlich, 2025). They conducted a quantitative questionnaire with 666 participants in the UK, ranging in age groups, educational backgrounds, and professions, asking questions about their AI usage and self-assessed critical thinking. Wanting to ensure the validity of the conclusions, they also conducted qualitative surveys to gain insight into other possible factors that lead to reduced critical thinking, or cognitive offloading. Specifically their findings proved that increased AI reliance and simultaneous cognitive offloading are increasingly present in the youth (aged 17-25). Du, a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, provides a potential reason for this decrease in critical thinking. AI models' responses often reflect the language of the queries they receive, affirming the reader's preconceived notions rather than providing objective information. In fact, some chatbots have in-built "friendly" features meant to prevent criticism of user thoughts, creating a confirmation bias (Du, 2025). Without users being questioned or exposed to other perspectives, their interest in critical thought is diminished. Fording and Schram, both political science professors, draw the connection between critical thought and conservatism, particularly in the initial Trump era. They conducted a study testing a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adults on basic political knowledge and self-assessed need for cognition (NFC). The results proved a strong correlation between people with low political knowledge and a low NFC. These voters are considered "low info voters," who rely more on emotional appeal than rationalization, providing a potential reason for why this group favored Trump over Clinton in 2016. The preference gap for Trump versus Clinton was 20.2 points in Trump's favor for low information voters; whereas, for Romney versus Obama the gap was only 2.6 points (Fording et al., 2017). This hypothesis of "low info voters" voting republican didn't hold for Romney, due to Trump's comparatively blatant conservatism/ "know-nothing-esque" appeals to racial anxieties. His initial election was likely influenced by conspiracist campaign efforts, spread through social media's algorithmic system. Although Fording and Schram's study is from 2016, the correlation with critical thinking is still relevant today to the rise of algorithmic-based AI. At a time when political polarization is at a peak, Machete and Turpin, both IT professors, write that people are more likely than ever to seek sources that align with

their interests. This phenomenon is known as "truth decay," where emotional appeals are more attractive than critical thinking and analyzing facts (Machete et al., 2020); This directly relates to the uptick in AI usage and confirmation bias its presents. Overall, most studies have either noticed the relationship between critical thinking and AI usage or the relationship between critical thinking and conservatism. This study seeks to bridge the gap between increased AI usage and a conservative resurgence within American youth, specifically in the 2024 election.

Methodology

Before examining AI's potential effect on the 2024 election, a mixed method approach should affirm the hypothesis that increasing AI usage makes users more conservative. A survey will be conducted with over 1000 demographically diverse Americans from ages 17-20. Questions will include: the extent to which the participant uses AI, how long they've been using AI, what they use AI for, and their political alignment. Similar to the study conducted by Fording and Schram, there would also be a portion dedicated to users self-assessing their NFC. These findings would help prove different aspects of the hypothesis: students who use AI for homework are more affected, which groups within high AI users report a lower NFC, and if the effect is also present in more progressive states. After compiling the survey answers, the participants will be split into a control and experimental group. The control group would comprise those who have no or very low reported AI usage. Since there will likely be a larger group with significant exposure to AI, a random selection will be conducted to match the size of the control group. Each person, within both groups, will participate in a 1 on 1 interview, regarding their political beliefs on certain topics. Every person will be asked the same questions, including their broad opinion on the topic and their evaluation on opposing perspectives, from a visually concealed interviewer. The interview will be recorded and graded by a panel of judges, with varying political beliefs, using the Critical Thinking VALUE rubric (AACU). This rubric, made by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, consistently has high levels of inter-reliability, meaning when different graders assess the same assignment they give highly similar scores. Additionally this rubric was developed by national teams of faculty and was used by 4,000 institutions between 2010-2012 (Rhodes et al., 2013). Not only will this experiment

reflect political beliefs between high and low usage of AI, but also the critical thinking abilities of both. Finally, the general political beliefs of today's youth will be compared to the opinion of the people aged 17-20 during 2016, during Trump's initial election. This will be done by using data from 2016 depicting the youth's vote and beliefs. A possible limitation is assessing what is considered high versus low AI usage, meaning a specific threshold will have to be developed.

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