National Centre for Social Research

BSA 42 | Politics and social media: Scrolling politics – engagement, trust and polarisation in the digital age

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JUNE 2025

Contents

Scrolling politics: engagement, trust and polarisation in the digital age

Social media has transformed how millions engage with politics in Britain – especially the young. As traditional news sources lose their audience, new patterns of political news consumption are taking root online. This report examines whether platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) are reshaping political attitudes, engagement, and trust in institutions. Is social media fostering informed debate or deepening political polarisation?

A generational gap

A majority of younger people primarily access political news via social media, which appear set to become the most popular way for ascertaining political developments and news.
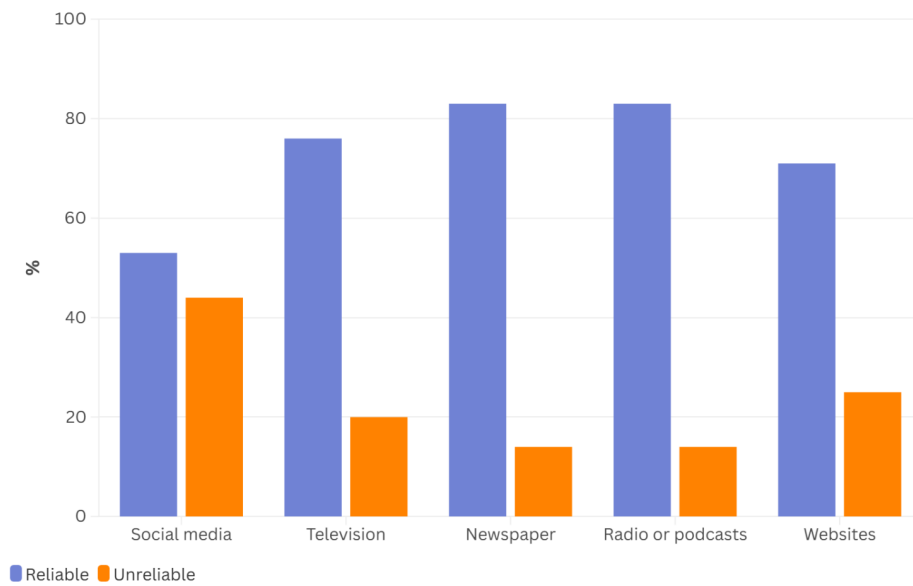
- 58% of those aged under 35 primarily use social media to access political news

- Only 8% of those aged 55 and over primarily use social media for this purpose, with 46% using television instead

- Those who primarily access political news via social media are more likely to be in working-class occupations and to come from minority ethnic backgrounds

Scepticism and diversity

Contrary to some concerns that have been expressed, users are relatively sceptical about the reliability of political news on social media, while many claim they are exposed to a variety of viewpoints.

- Just over half (53%) of those whose main source of political news is social media rate this as a reliable source

- 54% say they "often" try to verify political news they find online by using other sources

- 43% "often" encounter views with which they disagree

Perceived reliability of sources of political news among those who use it as their main source

Reliable ■ Unreliable

Less engaged, less trusting, but not more polarised

Those who primarily obtain political news via social media are less interested and engaged in formal politics and are less trusting of political institutions, but they are not consistently more polarised in their political attitudes.

- 47% express little or no interest in politics, compared with 30% of those who primarily use other media

- 32% have a low level of trust in the courts, compared with 26% of users of other media

- 26% express extreme 'left' or 'right' wing views, compared with 32% of users of other media

Introduction

Social media is now deeply embedded in most people's everyday lives. In 2024, 53.3 million UK adults aged 16 and over – representing 82% of the adult population – reported using a social media platform[1] such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or X (formerly known as Twitter)[2] (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Users rely on social media platforms not only to stay connected with friends or to share personal updates, but also to browse news feeds, follow political figures and influencers, engage with debates and topics that are trending, comment on public issues, and repost content.

Social media is becoming increasingly important as a gateway to political information – a trend which because of what is thought to be its implications, has attracted considerable attention among researchers and policy-makers. Social media is often characterised as an echo chamber, with people being regarded as more likely to select to view content which aligns with their existing beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021). As a result, it is sometimes argued that the social media environment might increase political polarisation (Barberá, 2020; Sunstein, 2017). Yet this perspective is not universally accepted. Elsewhere, it has been argued that social media have contributed to the 'democratisation' of political opinion – enhancing the spread of information and therefore encouraging people to become more knowledgeable and engaged (Margetts et al., 2019). Such a divergence of views about the potential impact of a new form of news media is far from unique; throughout history, each wave of new media has sparked similar anxieties about the effects exposure to it has on both people's attitudes and their behaviour.

This report analyses three key aspects of debate about the relationship between social media use and politics in the UK. First, we examine the demographic profile of those who primarily use social media to access political news. Who are these individuals and are they a homogeneous or diverse group? Second, we investigate reported levels of exposure to differing viewpoints: are those who primarily use social media to access political news more or less likely than those who primarily use other media to encounter opinions that challenge their own? Do they report greater or lesser diversity in the political content that they see or hear? How credible do they find the

political information they come across online, and do they actively seek to verify the information they encounter through other sources? Finally, we investigate the broader political implications of social media use – by comparing the distribution of political attitudes, and levels of engagement and trust in institutions of those who primarily use social media to access political news with those who do not. Are social media users more or less politically extreme or polarised? Are they more or less politically engaged? And do they exhibit higher or lower levels of trust in institutions such as the UK Parliament and the courts?

Social media as a source of political news

We begin by setting out in more detail the current debate about the impact of social media on politics in the UK.

As noted at the outset, a significant and increasingly important role of social media is to act as a gateway to political information. Whether intentionally sought or passively encountered through algorithmically curated feeds, political content now circulates on social media alongside lifestyle posts and viral videos. Indeed, traditional news outlets like the BBC and The Guardian have adapted to this shift, posting directly on platforms such as X, thereby allowing users to consume headlines, previews, and even full stories without ever visiting the publication's own website. Importantly, platforms – especially X and most recently President Trump's Truth Social platform – have become part of the news cycle themselves. During the 2010 UK General Election, Twitter was not just a channel for reporting stories but became central to the unfolding of those stories in real time (Wardle, 2010; Graham et al., 2013). Journalists increasingly turned to Twitter both as a source and a platform for breaking news, public reaction, and eyewitness accounts, making it a space where journalism was not only distributed but also co-produced. Ever since, Twitter's real-time immediacy and viral dynamics have meant that it frequently sets the news agenda – what trends on the platform often influences what is later reported on more traditional formats.

This evolution of social media as a source of political news is often thought to have had profound implications. Different media formats impart knowledge and political information in varying ways. Television-based news, especially public broadcasting, tends to expose audiences to a wide range of political perspectives (Prior, 2007). Although social media potentially facilitate a high-choice environment in which individuals can access news from a diverse range of sources and platforms (Fisher et al., 2025), this breadth can mask a narrowing of exposure that results in social media functioning as an echo chamber, thereby potentially reinforcing preexisting beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021). As Strömbäck et al. (2023) note, in high-choice contexts, people are

more likely to opt for political content that aligns with their own beliefs, regardless of the credibility of the source. This selective exposure can potentially distort public understanding and weaken the impact of balanced or factual reporting.

As a result, the social media environment may heighten political polarisation. If users predominantly follow like-minded individuals or outlets, they are less likely to encounter opposing views (Barberá, 2020; Sunstein, 2017). This risks creating siloed discourse (Cohen, 1972) that pushes public opinion towards extremes. Meanwhile, an overwhelming 98% of social media users report encountering misinformation in their feeds, a phenomenon sometimes termed 'fake news' (ONS, 2024). Misinformation on social media is particularly prevalent in areas such as health, disasters, and politics (Muhammed and Mathew 2022). Unverified and inaccurate information has the potential to be harmful (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019), as illustrated by its role in stimulating the riots which occurred in summer 2024 in the wake of the murder in Southport of three children by a man from a minority background. And if users struggle to discern whether political content on social media is genuine or not, the misinformation spread by social media may also erode trust in political institutions (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Yet, this critical perspective is not uncontested. Social media is also said to have contributed to the democratisation of political opinion. They can enhance the spread of information, and thereby improve political knowledge and engagement (Calderaro, 2018). Through reposts, replies, hashtags, and original posts, ordinary users can engage in visible, immediate political discourse – challenging traditional top-down models of information dissemination (Margetts et al., 2019). Moreover, social media have enabled the rise – and to some extent, the legitimisation – of new, independent sources of political information that are unaffiliated with mainstream media or political actors but are widely followed by the public. True, some such as the Facebook page Stop Brexit Ltd and its ideological counterpart *Brexit Crap*[3] , are openly partisan, even satirical. Others, however, position themselves as non-partisan and focus on news education and accessibility – such as the X accounts @BallotBoxScot, @easypoliticsUK, and @TLDRNewsUK[4] . Thanks to this diverse, easily accessible environment, Boulianne (2011) argues that online media, unlike traditional offline formats, can actually stimulate political interest, expand civic participation, and potentially strengthen democratic

engagement. Indeed, more broadly, it has been argued that social media promotes democracy (Jha and Codila-Tedika, 2020). Much it seems depends on how social media is used and navigated by the public, rather than their inherent characteristics.

The concern that has been expressed about the perceived impact of social media on public attitudes and political behaviour is far from unprecedented. Throughout history, each new wave of media has sparked similar anxieties, sometimes termed 'moral panics'[5] , about the effects of media exposure on attitudes and behaviour. Newspapers were thought to encourage popular vigilantism (Critcher, 2002), while radio faced criticism for disseminating propaganda and favouring entertainment over informative content (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986; White, 1947). Television was feared to reduce attention spans, undermine social interaction and thus erode social and political trust (Bennett et al. 1999; Williams, 1962; Putnam, 2000). Similarly, from the outset, the internet raised concerns about access to harmful content and increased exposure to unverified rumours or information (Scheitle, Moule and Fox, 2018; Soave, 2021). In truth, because each new medium or technology reshapes how people engage with information, it triggers a recurring cycle of moral panic (Orben, 2020). While social media is just the latest example, its growing influence on political communication does make it crucial to understand who primarily uses it to access political news and how these platforms shape public engagement.

Patterns of political news consumption

Using social media is virtually ubiquitous. But to what extent do people rely on it to find out what is happening in politics? As part of an International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) module on digital societies, we asked respondents to our most recent British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey:

Where do you get most of your news about political matters?
Please select the most important source

Online social media (for example WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube)
Television (including TV apps or access via Internet)
Newspapers (in print or access via Internet)
Radio and podcasts (including Internet radio or access via Internet)
Websites (including exclusively online news sites, news aggregators, portals, or search engines)
Other
Can't choose

As Table 1 shows, the most cited primary source of political news is television – mentioned by around three in ten (31%). However, it is only just ahead of social media, which is the primary news source for as many as 27%. No other source of news is anything like as popular. Newspapers, which were the dominant medium for political news prior to the rise of broadcasting, are now the primary source for just 13% – including both print editions and online newspaper websites. In fact, slightly more people (15%) rely on websites that are not associated with a newspaper. Meanwhile, radio and podcasts are still referenced for political news by only a minority (7%).

Table 1 Main source of political news, by age

	16-34	35-54	55+	All
	%	%	%	%
Television	12	29	46	31
Social media	58	24	8	27
Websites	13	21	11	15
Newspapers	5	11	20	13
Radio and podcasts	3	8	9	7
Other or can't choose	9	8	6	7
Unweighted base	*329*	*508*	*687*	*1529*

Note: categories are ordered by values in the 'All' column.

These are, of course, self-reported data reflecting what individuals perceive to be their main source of political news. They indicate where people believe they come across political information most often – whether intentionally or incidentally – and so are not a precise measure of media consumption. It certainly cannot be assumed that those who selected a particular source as their primary source of political news are necessarily heavy users of it – or that their engagement is deliberate rather than a consequence of incidental exposure (such as encountering political news while scrolling through social media)[6] . Equally, some people might be regular users of more than one source of political news.

Who uses social media for political news?

Nevertheless, social media is evidently nowadays a key medium through which people in Britain acquire information about what is going on in politics (see also Newman, 2024). This, above all, is the case for younger people. As Table 1 above shows, among those aged under 35, nearly three in five (58%) identify social media as their main source for political news. In contrast, fewer than one in ten (8%) of those aged 55 and over identify this source. Among older generations, television still dominates, while newspapers are still widely read – a pattern that doubtless reflects media habits acquired earlier in life when social media was not available. It thus seems highly likely that, as new generations enter adulthood and replace older cohorts, social media will eventually replace television as the medium through which people primarily learn and stay informed about politics. Whatever impact, if any, this use has on political attitudes therefore matters.

Being young is by far the most distinctive demographic characteristic of those who identify social media as their main source of political news. However, it is far from being the only way in which this group is distinct. Table 2, which compares the demographic profile of social media users[7] with that of those who primarily use other sources[8] , shows that the former group are more than twice as likely to be engaged in a semi-routine or routine occupation (25%, compared with 11%). They are also less likely to have a qualification at A-level or equivalent. Meanwhile, social media users are more

than twice as likely as other users to identify as Black, Asian or as being from a mixed background (20%, compared with 8%). In short, as well as being young, social media users are also more likely to be involved in working class jobs, to be less highly educated, and to identify with a minority ethnic background. Meanwhile, multivariate analysis reveals that, even after we have taken age into account, all these characteristics are independently associated with different levels of social media use. We will therefore have to take the distinctive demographic profile of social media users into account when we analyse the link between media use and political attitudes later in the report.

Table 2 Demographic characteristics of people who identify social media as their main source of political news, compared with those who identify a different main source

	Social media users	Other media users
	%	%
Aged 16-34	60	14
Highest qualification below A-level	40	35
Black/Asian/Mixed ethnic group	20	8
Female	55	51
Unweighted bases	*326*	*1105*
In semi-routine or routine occupations*	25	11
Unweighted bases	*303*	*1076*

Figures for % in semi-routine or routine occupations are based on those who are currently or have previously been in employment.

Apart from their distinctive demographic characteristics, social media users are, perhaps unsurprisingly, almost constantly connected – and to a greater extent than users of other news media. An overwhelming 95% use the internet

at least several times a day for work or personal purposes – compared to a national average of 89%. As many as 58% are "always switched on", using the web almost continuously throughout the day. This high level of connectivity appears to have an emotional dimension; social media users are more likely than users of other media to say they would feel lonely without the internet, with over a third (34%) agreeing with the idea that, "Without the Internet I would feel lonely". This is more than double the proportion of television users (15%) newspaper readers (12%), or listeners to radio and podcasts (16%) who feel that way, and is even higher than it is among those who identify websites as their main source of political news (24%).

Reliability and diversity of views

As we noted in the introduction, two key concerns that have been raised about the impact of social media is the risk that it disseminates misinformation and that people become embedded in 'echo chambers' that reinforce and strengthen their existing views. Both risks are likely to be amplified if those who primarily use social media for political news regard these media as a reliable source of information. At the same time, much may depend on the extent to which this group use the opportunities afforded by the internet to corroborate what they see and hear on social media. Do doubts about the reliability of what appears on social media lead users to seek out different viewpoints, or does a reliance on social media risk reinforcing narrow perspectives?
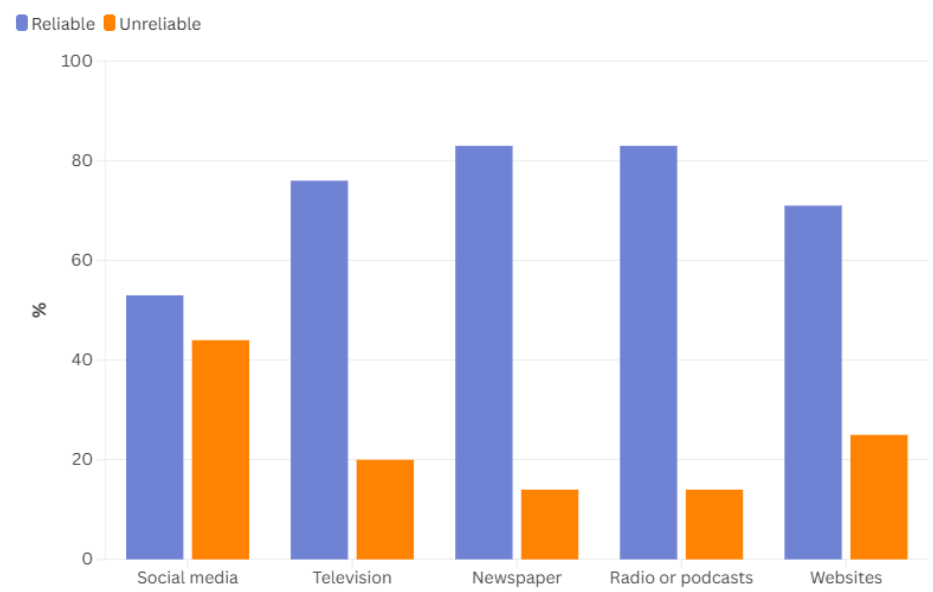
Perceived reliability of social media

Traditional outlets like newspapers, television, and radio adhere to established journalistic standards – including fact-checking, ethical guidelines, and professional accountability. In contrast, social media are dominated by user-generated content, where the boundary between fact and opinion is at greater risk of being blurred. But perhaps this is a feature of which those who rely primarily on social media are well aware?

Respondents were asked to rate the reliability of each of the five media sources identified previously when it comes to news on political matters.

Figure 1 presents, for each source of political news, the proportion of those who primarily rely on that source who state whether they think it is reliable or not. Only just over half (53%) of social media users regard their medium a reliable source of political news. This is well below the equivalent figures for users of any other medium. As many as 83% of those whose main source for political news is radio and podcasts regard these as reliable, while the same is true of newspapers (83%). Meanwhile the equivalent figures for television and websites are 76% and 71% respectively.

Figure 1 Perceived reliability of sources of political news among those who use it as their main source

The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.1 of this report.

Indeed, social media users are unique in not being any more likely to regard their medium as reliable than they are other sources of news. Fifty-eight per cent regard radio and podcasts as reliable sources of political news, 57% say the same of television, while 55% consider websites to be reliable, and 52% view newspapers in this way. In contrast, just one in four (25%) of users of other media believe that social media is reliable. It seems that many social media users are aware of the potential limitations of the platform as a source of political news albeit that this perception is less widespread among this

group than it is among users of other media. But does this awareness prompt them to seek out a broader range of perspectives?

How diverse is the social media environment?

A major concern about people relying on social media as a source of political news is the risk of users becoming immersed in a bubble of like-minded individuals and information. Such an environment, it is feared, can reinforce existing beliefs, including potentially extreme ones, by shielding users from perspectives or evidence that might challenge their view of the world. To address this issue, respondents were asked:

When looking for news or information about political matters online, how often, if at all, do you try to confirm information you find by searching online for another source?

It should be noted that the question focuses on all online political content, not just that disseminated via social media.

As shown in Table 3, concerns about social media users existing in an 'echo chamber' are not reflected in the reported experiences of those who primarily use social media to access political news. As many as 54% of social media users say they "often" try to verify political news they find online by consulting another source, while only 14% do so rarely or never.[9] True, their second source could share the partisan outlook of the first. Moreover, their reported proclivity to consult second sources appears to be largely unrelated to their perception of the reliability of social media.[10] Nevertheless, over one in three (36%) state that they often check news online by using a source they don't normally rely on, rather more than the near three in ten (29%) who say that they rarely or never turn to such an alternative source.[11] In any event, as many as 43% reckon they often come across views with which they disagree, while only 16% say this rarely or never happens. Taken together, these findings suggest that many of those whose main source of political news is social media are digitally active in a relatively diverse political environment.

However, their engagement is not quite as diverse as that of those who primarily gain their political news from websites.[12] As many as three in five

(60%) of primarily website users say they often check out information from a second source, nearly two in five (38%) claim often to use an unfamiliar news source, while over half (54%) say they often come across views with which they disagree. Nevertheless, the online environment occupied by social media users is more diverse than that reported by those who primarily rely on traditional sources such as television and newspapers for political news. Only 37% of those whose main sources of political news are not rooted in the internet[13] say that when they do come across political content online, they often consult a second source. Just 23% do so often by turning to a source they do not use regularly, while no more than 35% often meet views with which they disagree. Part of this difference likely stems from lower overall internet use among those who rely on traditional, non-internet-rooted sources for their political news, as discussed previously. Meanwhile, the offline sources from which they primarily rely for political news may well expose their users to at least as wide a range of views as that experienced by those whose main source is social media. Nevertheless, it appears that the overall greater propensity reported by social media users to check different sources when using the internet helps ensure that the political environment they experience is also a relatively diverse one.

Table 3 Frequency of consulting a second source, consulting sources not normally relied on, and encountering views with which disagree, by main source of political news

	Main source of political news		
	Social media	Websites	Other*
Consult another source	%	%	%
Often	54	60	37
Rarely/never	14	8	21
Come across views with which disagree	%	%	%
Often	43	54	35
Rarely/never	16	10	21
Check source do not normally use	%	%	%
Often	36	38	23
Rarely/never	29	17	32

Other: those who primarily rely on television, newspapers, or radio/podcasts for political news

But is there any sign that the diversity of the online environment occupied by those who primarily use social media for political news has declined over time? We can assess that possibility by examining the answers respondents gave when they were asked whether their online contact with the following two groups had increased, decreased, or remained the same over the last year:

People who share your political views
People with different political views from your own

Table 4 presents responses to these two questions separately for social media users and for those who primarily use a different source for political news. Among those who primarily secure their political news from other sources, 62% say that their level of contact with people whose views are similar to their own has stayed the same. For those primarily reliant on social media, the equivalent figure is, at 51%, rather lower. However, although 15% of social media users indicate that their online contact with people of like mind has increased, this is nearly exactly matched by the 14% who state that it has decreased – much as the two figures (7% and 6% respectively) are largely balanced among users of other media sources. There is little sign here that in their online world people are increasingly, or decreasingly, inhabiting a political echo chamber.

Table 4 Reported change in political character of online contact, by primary source of political news

	People who share views		People with different views	
	Social media users	Other users	Social media users	Other users
Online contact over last year	%	%	%	%
Increased	15	6	9	6
Same	51	62	48	59
Decreased	14	7	21	8
Unweighted bases	*326*	*1105*	*326*	*1105*

That said, a little under half (48%) of social media users say their online contact with people who hold political views different from their own has not changed over the last year, a lower proportion than the six in ten (59%) among those who mainly obtain their news from other sources. At the same time, more social media users state that their contact with people whose views are different from their own has fallen (21%) than indicate it has increased (9%). By contrast, among those who rely on other news sources, the proportions are more balanced, with 8% reporting a decrease and 6% an increase. Here then perhaps there is some evidence of a declining diversity of contact among social media users.

However, we should not rush to judgement. For as many as 45% of those who say their online contact with those of different views has fallen say that their contact with those of similar views has dropped too. Their responses to the two questions may therefore, perhaps, simply be reflecting the fact that their contact with people of all persuasions and of none has fallen. Only just over one in five (21%) of those who say their contact with people of different views has fallen also indicate that their level of contact with people of similar views has increased. This means that just 4% of those who secure their political news primarily from social media indicate that their online contact has

become consistently less diverse in the political views to which they are exposed.

It is, of course, possible that, in judging the diversity of the news and online contact to which they are exposed, those who secure their news primarily from social media apply a different standard than those who use other sources. What they regard as diverse might perhaps appear rather uniform to others. However, it seems that social media users themselves feel the digital space they occupy is relatively diverse and is not an environment in which they are routinely being reinforced in their existing views.

Engagement, trust and polarisation

We now turn to the possible impact of reliance on social media for political news on people's level of engagement in politics, on their political attitudes and party preference, and on their level of trust in the country's political institutions. Are social media users less involved in politics, more likely to hold extreme views, and less likely to trust institutions such as the courts and parliament?

Because our data come from a one-off survey, they cannot prove that social media makes a difference to the trust, engagement or attitudes of individual people whose acquaintance with politics comes primarily through social media. To do that we would need to be able to trace the attitudes and media use of individuals over time and establish whether the pattern of attitudinal change among them varies between users of different media. What, however, we can do is to examine whether we can observe some of the aggregate level patterns that we would expect to find if some of the claims that have been made about the impact of social media are correct. If social media do foster (or diminish) political engagement, then we should find that, collectively, social media users are more (or less) interested in politics or are more (or less) likely to vote. If social media push users towards more extreme and polarised points of view, we would anticipate that those who mainly use social media for their news are more likely to hold extreme views. Equally, if using social media sows distrust in political institutions, we should find that those who primarily use

this news source exhibit lower levels of trust than those who rely on other sources. Although finding such relationships will not prove that reliance on social media is the cause of whatever pattern we uncover (perhaps those with distinctive views are more likely to use social media), the absence of any relationship will, however, cast doubt on whether social media use is having a deleterious (or beneficial) impact on the character of public opinion and engagement in the UK.

Political engagement

Social media users are relatively uninterested in politics. Nearly half (47%) say they are "not very interested" or "not at all interested" in the subject. This is higher than for any other group of media users. In contrast, across all those who primarily obtain their news from any medium other than social media, only 30% express little or no interest. Meanwhile, just 23% of social media users say they are "very" or "fairly" interested in politics, compared with 42% of users of other media. Some of this difference is down to the fact that social media users are, as we discovered earlier, markedly younger – just 22% of all adults aged under 35 are very or fairly interested in politics, compared with 33% of those aged between 35 and 54, and 46% of those aged 55 and over. However, even if we confine our, attention to those aged under 35, just 20% of social media users in this age group are very or fairly interested in politics, compared with 30% of their peers who rely on other media sources. Indeed, the relationship between social media use and whether someone is or is not interested in politics remains significant, even after undertaking multivariate analysis to control for age, education, social class and ethnic background.

Do these lower levels of interest in politics mean that social media users are less likely than other groups to be involved in political activities? To assess this, respondents were asked whether, in the last 12 months, they had undertaken any of the following activities, either online or offline:

Signed a petition
Took part in a demonstration or political protest
Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician to express your views
Organised or helped to organise a demonstration or political protest

Belonged to or joined a group that is involved in social issues or working to advance a cause

Despite their reported lack of interest in politics, social media users are, in fact, as likely as everyone else to say that they have undertaken at least one political activity during the last year. Irrespective of media use, by far the most common action said to have been taken was to have signed a petition. As many as 62% of social media users and 60% of those reliant on other media sources say they have done this. Meanwhile, social media users are a little more likely than users of other media to have taken part in or helped organise a demonstration or protest (19%, compared with 16% of other users) and to have belonged to a group involved in a social issue or cause (17%, compared with 11%). On the other hand, they are a little less likely than other users to say they have attempted to contact a politician (18%, compared with 22%).

This last finding is, perhaps, a sign that what really distinguishes social media users is a relative lack of engagement with the formal political process. That proposition certainly is consistent with the evidence on turnout in the 2024 General Election. At just under 60%, the level of participation was the second lowest since the advent of the mass franchise (see our report on Britain's democracy: A health check). Turnout was particularly low among those who mainly use social media for their political news. Among those aged 18 and over who indicated whether they voted or not in the 2024 General Election, as many as 44% of social media users state that they did not vote, more than twice the proportion (18%) among those who mostly use other news sources. [14] In part, the low turnout among social media users reflects their age, but even among those aged under 35, social media users were 20 percentage points less likely to say that they had voted. It also reflects their low level of interest in politics, irrespective of their age. However, when we undertook a multivariate analysis, controlling for age, political interest and a range of other demographic variables, the relationship between reliance on social media for news and voting in the election remained significant.

Social media use: passive consumption or active engagement?

As noted in the introduction, one of the distinctive features of digital technology, including social media, is that it affords ordinary citizens the ability not simply to be exposed to political news, but also to express their own political views. Indeed, it is the largely unmediated character of the news and information that is available via the internet that gives rise to some of the concern about its impact on the health of democracy. However, while some users take advantage of this opportunity, it is far from universally embraced.

Despite the opportunities that social media and the internet generally afford for interactive political engagement, in practice, they are still used more commonly for passive consumption. Nearly three in five of all our respondents (58%) said that they had not used these platforms to "express, support, or oppose political views", in the 12 months prior to taking part in the BSA survey. Even among those who say they primarily get their political news via social media, over half (52%) had not expressed an opinion about politics online. Nevertheless, a notable group – around one in five (20%) – say they have shared political views on multiple occasions (9% do so daily or several times a week, and 10% several times a month). As we might anticipate, those who do express their views on at least a monthly basis are rather more likely than other social media users to say that they are interested in politics.

Polarisation

Although they engage in a range of political activities, we have seen that those who mainly use social media for political news are less interested in politics and are less likely to vote. A key question therefore is whether this lack of engagement means they tend to be uncritical readers of what appears on social media and thus are consequently more likely to be influenced by what they read, see and hear. If so, given the polarised character of much of the political content on social media, are they therefore also more likely to hold extreme and polarised views?

We address this question by comparing social media users with users of other media on three value dimensions measured every year on the BSA survey, that is, a left-right scale, a welfare scale and a libertarian-authoritarian scale (see the Technical Details for more information on the construction of these scales).

Left–right value dimension

Our left-right scale is derived from how people respond to a set of propositions about one of the central issues of political debate in the UK, that is, inequality and what government should do about it. A low score on this measure, which ranges from 1 to 5, indicates someone with a strongly left-wing (that is, egalitarian) outlook, while a high one denotes someone with markedly right wing (that is, inegalitarian) views.

In Table 5, we define an 'extreme' view as a score that puts someone (as closely as possible) among either the 15% most left-wing (that is, a score of less than 2) or the 15% most right-wing (a score of more than 3.5). The table reveals that social media users are only a little more likely than users of other media to fall within the most left-wing group – 17% of social media users are allocated to this group, compared with 15% of users of other media. Meanwhile, social media users are markedly less likely to fall within the most right-wing group – just 9% do so, compared with 17% of users of other media. As a result, just 26% of social media users express views that put them on either the extreme left or the extreme right. There is little sign here, then, that reliance on social media for political news is associated with a more extreme or polarised outlook.

Table 5 Left/right scale score, by primary source of political news

	Social media users	Other media users	All
Centrist	74	68	70
All Extreme	26	32	30
- Left	17	15	16
- Right	9	17	14
Unweighted bases	*320*	*1102*	*1516*

A not dissimilar picture emerges, when examining placement on a left-right scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right), with no additional clarification given for either endpoint. As Table 6 reveals, 25% of those who primarily use social media for political news place themselves at either 0, 1 or 2 on this scale (that is, well to the left), whereas only 14% of those using other sources for their political news do so. However, just 8% of social media users place themselves at points 8, 9 or 10 (that is, well to the right), fewer than the 13% of other users do so. Although social media users are more likely to place themselves on the left, they are not consistently more polarised in where they place themselves on this scale overall.

Table 6 Self-placement on left/right scale, by primary source of political news

	Social media user	Other user	All
Left-right self placement			
Centre (3-7)	68	73	71
Extreme	32	27	29
- Left (0-2)	25	14	17
- Right (8-10)	8	13	11
Unweighted bases	*238*	*927*	*1217*

Welfare

Another key issue in our politics is the provision of welfare. Here too we have available a scale to summarise attitudes — in this case, one which runs from 1 (sympathetic to welfare) to 5 (unsympathetic) and is based on people's responses to a series of questions about the merits or otherwise of the government providing welfare payments. Once again, we define an extreme view as one that puts someone among the 15% most sympathetic or the 15% most unsympathetic[15] . In this instance, as Table 7 shows, the proportion of social media users with extreme views is exactly the same as the proportion of users of other media. Evidently, this is not a subject on which those who primarily obtain their news from social media are more likely than anyone else to express extreme views.

Table 7 Welfare scale score, by primary source of political news

	Social media users	Other media users	All
	%	%	%
Centrist	70	70	70
All Extreme	30	30	30
- Sympathetic	16	16	16
- Unsympathetic	14	14	14
Unweighted bases	*320*	*1099*	*1514*

Libertarian–authoritarian value dimension

However, we do find some indication of polarisation, albeit limited, on our third value dimension. This dimension is measured through responses to a series of items that assess where people stand on the balance between the need for social order and the value of individual freedom. Libertarians (or social liberals) are those who prioritise individual freedom, while authoritarians (or social conservatives) emphasise social order. As Table 8 shows, slightly more of those who primarily secure their political news via social media (17%, compared with 15% of other users) express views that put them among those with the 15% or so lowest – and thus most libertarian — scores on this scale.

[16] At the same time, slightly more social media users (15%, compared with 12%) are to be found among those with the 15% or so highest – and thus most authoritarian scores.[17] In combination, this means that 32% of social media users are at either end of the libertarian-authoritarian dimension, five percentage points above the figure for those who primarily obtain their news from other media. True, this difference is a little short of being statistically significant, but it is the closest that we have come so far to evidence of more polarised views among social media users.[18]

Table 8 Libertarian/authoritarian scale score by primary source of political news

	Social media users	Other media users	All
Centrist	68	73	72
All Extreme	32	27	30
- Libertarian	17	15	15
- Authoritarian	15	12	13
Unweighted bases	*324*	*1102*	*1520*

Party support

Apart from the low turnout, another striking feature of the outcome of the 2024 election was a record level of support for two parties, Reform and the Greens. Both these parties are widely thought to have presented more radical policy platforms than the 'mainstream' parties (Institute for Government,

2024). Their respective platforms were also very different from each other. So, even though we have so far only uncovered limited evidence of polarisation in terms of attitudes, perhaps there was a greater willingness among those social media users who did make it to the polls to vote for one or other of these two parties?

This does, indeed, prove to be the case. As many as 12% of social media users who voted in the election backed the Greens, six points above the combined figure for users of other media. Meanwhile, as many as 20% supported Reform, five points above the figure for those who primarily use other media for their news. In the case of the Greens, though not Reform, support for the party was especially marked — standing at no less than 19% — among those who believe that social media is a reliable source of political news. Although the attitudes of social media users are for the most part not especially polarised, it appears that there was a degree of polarisation in their vote choices in 2024.

In the case of the Greens, their popularity among social media users reflects at least in part the fact that younger voters in general were more likely to back the party. Even so, among those aged under 35, support for the Greens was still higher among those primarily using social media for their political news (21%) than it was among those using other sources (12%).[19]
 Meanwhile, in general, Reform garnered more support among older voters and so the more youthful age profile of social media users cannot possibly account for Reform's relative success among social media users. Moreover, among voters in general, both the Greens and Reform were somewhat more successful among those with a high interest in politics. So, the relatively low level of such interest among those who primarily obtain their political news from social media cannot help account for their success either.[20]

One characteristic of those who voted Green or Reform in the 2024 election is that they were clearly at opposite ends of our divide between libertarians and authoritarians. Those who voted Green (average score, 2.6 on the scale) were markedly on the libertarian end of the spectrum, while Reform supporters (with an average score of 3.9) were closer to the authoritarian end than any other group of voters.[21] As we have seen, this is the one value divide where we have uncovered some apparent evidence of a degree of polarisation among social media users. This may help explain why those social media users who

did cast a vote, limited in number as they were, appear to have been somewhat more polarised in their voting behaviour too.

Trust

In any event, social media users' low level of electoral participation and their relative willingness to vote for parties that have hitherto at least not been part of the mainstream of British politics might both be thought to be a sign of a lack of trust among them in the country's political institutions. And as discussed in our report on Britain's democracy: A health check, such trust is currently in relatively low supply in Britain.

Our respondents were asked to use a scale from 0 ("do not trust at all") to 10 ("trust completely") to say how much they trust "the UK parliament" and "courts in the UK". Of the two institutions, the courts are the more widely trusted, securing a mean score of just under six (5.9). In contrast, the mean score for parliament was 4.3. Meanwhile, as we would anticipate, in both cases the mean scores on these scales were lower among those who did not vote than among those who did. They were also lower among both Reform and Green voters, compared with those who voted for the Conservatives, Labour, or the Liberal Democrats[22] . So, there does seem to be good reason to anticipate that social media users are less trusting of these institutions too.

This does indeed prove to be the case, and especially so in the case of the courts. As Table 9 shows, nearly one in three social media users (32%) give the courts a score of three or less, while only just over one in five (22%) give a score of seven or more. In contrast, among those who primarily use other media for their news, the equivalent figures were 26% and 36% respectively. Equally, the mean score among social media users is 5.3, compared with 6.2 among those who mainly use other sources.[23] Meanwhile, in the case of parliament, over half (54%) of social media users give a score of three or less, while just 6% recorded a score of seven or more. Among those using other sources, the equivalent proportions are 49% and 13%. The mean score among social media users, 3.9, is also rather lower than among users of other media (4.4).[24]

Table 9 Trust in courts and parliament, by primary source of political news

Level of trust	Courts		Parliament	
	Social Media Users	Other Users	Social Media Users	Other Users
	%	%	%	%
No trust at all or low trust (0-3)	32	26	54	49
Medium trust (4-6)	35	35	31	35
High trust or complete trust (7-10)	22	36	6	13
Mean score	5.3	6.2	3.9	4.4
Unweighted bases	*326*	*1105*	*326*	*1105*

Note: Bases include respondents who selected "Can't choose" or "Prefer not to answer". However, percentages and the mean score are calculated only from those who provided a numerical rating (0 -10).

However, perhaps these differences are simply a reflection or consequence of the distinctive voting behaviour of those who primarily use social media for their political news? Or is there reason to believe that the medium they are using might be sowing distrust? In part at least, the evidence points to the differences simply being a reflection of their distinctive voting behaviour; among those who did not vote, the differences between social media users and others in their average levels of trust are small and are not necessarily in the same direction. However, among those who did vote, the differences in levels of trust are largely still apparent, even after taking their party preference into account[25] . So, in this instance, we cannot discount the possibility that reliance on social media may have played some role in generating greater distrust.

We might wonder too whether those who primarily rely on social media for political news have a lower level of social trust in general, rather than being distrustful of political institutions in particular. The evidence for this possibility is, however, relatively thin. This can be seen if we examine how people responded when they were invited to give their response to the proposition, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?", by using a scale from 0 to 10 in which 0 means "You can't be too careful" and 10 means "most people can be trusted". Although, at 4.9, the mean score among social media users is a little below the 5.3 recorded by other users, the gap entirely disappears among those aged under 35.[26]

Conclusion

The advent of social media cannot be ignored. For many of those who have grown up when it has increasingly become part of the fabric of everyday life, it is the principal medium through which they find out about politics. This is especially true of those with less in the way of educational qualifications and those with less interest in politics – among whom the longer forms of digital content such as websites and podcasts are less popular. Meanwhile, there seems every reason to anticipate that the medium will become even more important as older generations of people wedded to more traditional forms of political news are replaced by yet more cohorts of those who cannot imagine life before the smartphone revolution. If social media can sow distrust, disengagement or polarisation among those who rely upon it, the implications for democracy are potentially profound. In practice, we have uncovered a more subtle story than the picture that much of the concern about social media has painted. It is one where both disengagement and polarisation appear to sit side by side.

On the one hand those who primarily access political news via social media appear relatively disengaged from formal politics. Much of this can be accounted for by their age and low interest in politics, though we cannot entirely discount the possibility that the social media environment is relatively ineffective at motivating people to go to the polls. Yet at the same time, there is some evidence that, even though for the most part they do not feel they are living in bubbles of like-minded individuals, social media users are more polarised at least in one respect – that is, across the libertarian-authoritarian divide, a division that is reflected in attitudes towards many sometimes hotly contested social and cultural issues such as equal opportunities, the rights of transgender people and how we view Britain's past (Curtice and Ratti, 2022). [27] This polarisation is also reflected in a greater propensity to vote for non-mainstream parties that occupy the 'extremes' at both ends of this debate, the Greens and Reform, and an associated greater distrust of political institutions. Yet at the same time, it appears that there is no general tendency for attitudes to be polarised among social media users. We found little or no sign of this on either the left-right divide or in attitudes towards welfare.

Rather than formulating generalised theories about the impact of social media on the structure of social and political attitudes, our evidence suggests we need to ask when and under what conditions it might make a difference. Why, for example, might people's position on the libertarian-authoritarian divide, a division that has become more important in Britain's electoral politics, be particularly polarised among social media users? Perhaps one reason is that the issues that reflect where people stand on this divide are more likely to be regarded as moral choices, as issues of 'right' and wrong', and thus ones where compromise is less likely to be regarded as acceptable? Maybe this quality means that the access that digital technology has given to ordinary citizens to express their views beyond their immediate face to face circle has served to create an environment that is especially polarised on these issues? If so, then perhaps the potential challenge to democracy posed by social media is whether it makes it more difficult to hold reasoned debate about society's moral choices?

Acknowledgements

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) is run by a group of research organisations in different countries, each of which undertakes to field annually an agreed module of questions on a chosen topic area. Between 1985 and 2019, an International Social Survey Programme module was included on BSA as part of the self-completion questionnaire. Since 2021, ISSP fieldwork in Great Britain has been conducted using sample from the NatCen Opinion Panel and a sequential mixed-mode (web/telephone) fieldwork design. Each ISSP module is chosen for repetition at intervals to allow comparisons both between countries (membership is currently standing at 44) and over time. Further information on ISSP is available on their website: http://www.issp.org/.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Perceived reliability of sources of political news among those who use it as their main source

	Social media	Television	Newspaper	Radio or podcasts	Websites
	%	%	%	%	%
Reliable	53	76	83	83	71
Unreliable	44	20	14	14	25
Unweighted base	*326*	*492*	*237*	*131*	*245*

Publication details

Footnotes

1. In the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), social media users are defined as individuals who usually use these platforms for any use to any extent – whether daily, weekly, monthly, or less frequently. Those who do not use social media at all are non-users. Participants were asked: "How often, if at all, do you use social media? [for example, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or X formerly known as Twitter]". ↑

2. Social media platforms are online services – usually accessed through a dedicated website or mobile app – that allow people to create and share content, connect with others, and engage in social networking (Rhee et al., 2021). Some well-known examples of these platforms are Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Snapchat, and LinkedIn. ↑

3. In 2019, the Stop Brexit Ltd page accumulated over half a million interactions (likes, comments, and shares), while the Brexit Crap page garnered nearly 250,000. Follower and like counts on social media platforms can fluctuate over time, and the above figures are based on the most recent publicly available data as of May 2025. ↑

4. @BallotBoxScot (approximately 31,000 followers) provides detailed analysis and visualisations of Scottish electoral data; @easypoliticsUK (approximately 77,800 followers), simplifies and explains UK political developments; and @TLDRNewsUK ('Too Long; Didn't Read') (approximately 58,500 followers) offers concise summaries of complex political news to make it more accessible to a broad audience. Numbers of followers are based on the most recent publicly available data as of May 2025. ↑

5. Moral panic is defined as a societal reaction in which individuals, groups, or phenomena are perceived as a serious threat to pre-existing norms, values or well-being (Cohen, 1972). In the case of social media and political news, such panic is not limited to specific incidents but extends to broader anxieties about the role of social media in shaping public opinion, distorting political discourse, and undermining democratic processes. These concerns in turn reflect deeper fears about the transformative influence of digital platforms on civic engagement and political behaviour. ↑

6. We should also note that the question does not allow respondents to say that they do not follow political news at all. Those for whom that is the case may have responded "other" or "can't choose". Data collected in April 2025 by the NatCen Opinion Panel shows that 9% of adults aged 16 and over do not follow political news at all, similar to the 7% of the ISSP sample that responded "other" or "don't know", 14% follow it rarely or only during major events, 29% do so occasionally, and 48% follow it regularly. ↑

7. While the most accurate description of this group is "those who get most of their news about political matters via social media", for improved readability, they are often referred to in the text as "social media users" or "those who primarily use social media to access political news". Equally, we often refer to those who primarily use sources other than social media as "other media users" or "those who primarily use other media". ↑

8. This includes respondents who specified a particular alternative media source – whether accessed online or offline – including: television, newspapers, websites, and radio and podcasts. It excludes those who selected 'other (unspecified source)' or 'can't choose'. From this point onward, the report compares political news consumption via social media (N=326) with those who identified another media source as their primary source of political news (N=1,105). While data from respondents who were unable to choose or indicated an unlisted source (N=98) may appear in descriptive tables, the analysis primarily focuses on the first two groups. ↑

9. The question asked: 'When looking for news or information about political matters online, how often, if at all, do you try to confirm information you find by searching online for another source?' ↑

10. While 55% of those social media users who felt that the medium was an unreliable source of political news stated that they often checked a second source, the same was true of 54% of those who regard the medium as at least 'somewhat reliable'. ↑

11. The question read: 'When looking for news or information about political matters online, how often, if at all, do you check a news source that's different from what you normally read, watch or listen to online?' ↑

12. This category refers to exclusively online news sources, including search engines, news portals, blogs, or aggregators. ↑

13. While these sources include digital and online formats—such as livestreamed television broadcasts or digital newspaper editions – they are not inherently dependent on the internet for their operation or distribution. Their core formats (e.g. print newspapers and broadcast TV) were established independently of the internet and would be able to function in its absence. ↑

14. All the data in this paragraph are based on those respondents aged 18 and over and excludes those living in Northern Ireland. ↑

15. The former group comprises those with a score of 2.13 or less, the latter those with a score of 3.8 or more. ↑

16. Those in this group have a score of 2.5 or less. ↑

17. This is indicated by a score of 4.17 or more. ↑

18. Chi-square = 3.14. With 1 df, p=0.076. ↑

19. However, limitations of sample size means that this difference is not statistically significant (P=.24). The same is true of the relationship between social media use and voting Green among all voters after controlling for age. ↑

20. In a regression analysis of voting Reform vs. any other party, social media use remains significantly related to voting for Reform after controlling for age, education and political interest. The same is also true of a regression analysis of voting Green or Reform vs. any other party. ↑

21. In contrast, while those who voted Green were furthest to the left on the left/right scale (average score 1.8), those who backed Reform were no more right-wing on average than those who voted Liberal Democrat (2.5) and less so than Conservative voters (2.9). ↑

22. In the case of parliament, those who did not vote gave a mean score of 3.8 while those who did vote gave a score of 4.4. The equivalent figures for the courts are 5.3 and 6.2 respectively. Reform voters gave parliament a score of 2.7 and the courts 4.7, while for Green voters the figures were 3.7 and 5.0. As noted above the average among all respondents was 4.3 and 5.9 respectively. ↑

23. T=3.07, p < 0.01 ↑

24. T=4.99, p < 0.01 ↑

25. Among almost every party's voters, those who primarily obtain their news via social media report lower levels of trust in the courts and parliament than did those who rely primarily on other sources. The only group for whom this is not true is Reform voters. Among all voters in the election other than those who backed Reform or the Greens, the average level of trust in parliament among social media users is 4.0, while it is 4.9 among users of other media. Meanwhile, in a logistic regression of trust in parliament (distinguishing between those with a score of 4 or less and those with one of 5 or more), being a social media user is significantly associated with trust in the courts after controlling for vote, age, educational attainment, social class, and ethnic origin. A similar analysis of trust in the courts shows that media use is also significantly linked. ↑

26. Among this group, the average figures are 4.9 and 4.8 respectively. In a logistic regression of social trust (distinguishing between those with a score 4 or less and those with one of 5 or more), the relationship with relying primarily on social media for political news is not statistically significant after controlling for age, social class, education and ethnic origin. ↑

27. We have some evidence to suggest that the polarisation of attitudes among social media users is also apparent on these particular issues. Around one third of those who answered our questions on their use of media were also asked questions about their attitudes towards a number of equalities issues. Social media users (16%) were more likely that other users (4%) to say that equal opportunities for transgender people have "not gone nearly far enough", while also being almost as likely to say that they had "gone much too far" (28%, compared with 29% of other users). Meanwhile, social media users were both a little more likely to say that equal opportunities for Black and Asian people have "not gone nearly far enough" (13%, compared with 11%) and that they have "gone much too far" (10%, compared with. 6%). It should, however, be borne in mind that these figures are based on a relatively small sample of 542 respondents. ↑

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