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Impact of Social Media on Political Awareness and Voting Behaviour in Punjab

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social media on political awareness and voting behaviour among citizens in Punjab, Pakistan. This quantitative study examines the influence of social media on political awareness and voting behavior in Punjab, Pakistan. Using a structured questionnaire, data were collected from a sample of 300 respondents selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across age groups, gender, and urban-rural locations. The study focuses on major platforms including Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and WhatsApp, assessing their role in shaping political knowledge, attitudes, and

electoral choices. Statistical analysis, including correlation and regression techniques, was employed to determine the strength and nature of the relationships between social media usage patterns and political engagement. Results reveal a significant positive correlation between social media exposure and political awareness, with politically active content influencing voting intentions among younger and urban respondents more strongly than among older or rural populations. The findings also identify the prevalence of misinformation and politically biased narratives, which may influence decision-making processes. This research contributes to understanding the evolving role of digital media in democratic participation and offers recommendations for fostering informed political discourse in Punjab.

Keywords: Social media, political awareness, voting behaviour, misinformation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the advent and widespread adoption of social media platforms have generated significant scholarly interest in their role in shaping political awareness and electoral behaviour. In Pakistan, and particularly in Punjab, the proliferation of digital connectivity, driven by an expanding youth demographic and affordable mobile access, has transformed political communication and engagement. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube, are increasingly becoming arenas for political discourse, campaign strategies, and mobilization (Batool, 2024). Mobile broadband penetration, which increased markedly in Pakistan over the past decade, has enabled millions of citizens—mainly urban and youth populations—to access political content online (Batool, 2024).

Empirical studies show that the use of social media is positively related to political participation and awareness among young Pakistanis. For example, a survey of 300 students at a university in Islamabad revealed strong positive Pearson correlations between political involvement, political effectiveness, and social media usage (Iqbal, Hussain, and Iqbal, 2022). Equally, social media use of young people in the Newly Merged Districts in Pakistan has been indicated to be a strong predictor of political information acquisition ($r = .74, p < .01$), voting attitudes ($r = .69, p < .01$) and to a moderate degree, voting behaviour ($r = .58, p < .01$) (Ahmad, Imran, Aisha, and Zahid, 2025).

These data highlight the potential of digital platforms to enhance democratic participation by fostering greater informed involvement. However, social media does not always have a powerful impact on political behaviour. Studies on Pakistani youth indicate that dependence on social media is positively linked to political participation, although not necessarily on a large scale. Online sessions, such as the dissemination of campaign information, may not directly correspond to political involvement in the offline sphere (Shah & Ahmed, 2025). This implies that social media may be a stimulus to political interest and awareness, but it may not be sufficient to bring about a change in voting behavior, especially in areas where

digital literacy or offline mobilization is limited. This dynamic is also complicated by the attributes of user-generated content and the prevalence of misinformation.

Research demonstrates that social media, including WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube, have been used to spread fake news by exploiting emotional interest, conspiracy theories, and impersonation by sharing and pretending to be an authority figure, especially during political moments like the COVID-19 pandemic or protest movements (Haroon, Arif, Tariq, Nawaz, Qazi, and Mustafa, 2021). This fact highlights the two-sided aspect of social media, as it provides people with more access to information, while simultaneously threatening political clarity and sound decision-making. The political situation in Pakistan, and in Punjab in particular, exacerbates the matter. Social media has been utilized skillfully by political parties, particularly the PTI.

The dissemination of messages through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp was crucial in 2018 and 2024 during the general elections as PTI was able to mobilize support, connect with voters, and influence an electoral discourse that circumvented mainstream media, which was controlled by the state (Shabbir and Haider, 2025; AajPakistan, n.d.). Hashtags and localized digital campaigns have been used by political parties to influence people's thoughts, but the extent of their impact on actual voting behavior is yet to be clearly established. It is against this background that we need a more narrow and quantitative study regarding the effect of social media on the awakening of political cognition and voting in Punjab. It is essential to examine the extent to which social media influences the knowledge, attitudes, and voting patterns of political leaders among a representative sample. Previous studies, including one in Islamabad (Iqbal et al., 2022) and the NMDs (Ahmad et al., 2025), provide a background; nonetheless, neither of them targets a larger area or particular groups, and the Punjab electorate has not been quantified appropriately.

The study aims to estimate the strength and orientation of such relationships in the Punjab setting by focusing on primary platforms and employing relevant regression and correlation analyses. This way, it contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on the role of digital media in democracy, especially in developing nations. It also addresses the practical issues faced by policymakers, political entities, and civil society organizations in utilizing the advantages of social media and mitigating the threats posed by it. Statistical rigor and situational particularity make the findings all the more reliable and relevant, and the effort to encourage informed voter behaviour and digital media literacy in Punjab is informed.

Problem Statement

Despite the rapid rise of social media usage in Punjab, its actual impact on political awareness and voting behaviour remains underexplored in empirical, province-specific contexts. While prior studies in Pakistan have shown a positive link between social media engagement and political participation, most focus on urban youth or broader national samples, overlooking the unique socio-political dynamics of Punjab. This gap limits understanding of how social media influences

political knowledge and electoral decisions across diverse demographic groups in the province.

Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between social media usage and political awareness among voters in Punjab.
- To assess the influence of social media on voting behaviour in Punjab.
- To identify demographic differences (age, gender, urban–rural) in the impact of social media on political engagement.
- To explore the extent to which exposure to political content on social media shapes electoral decision-making.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between social media usage and political awareness among voters in Punjab?
- How does social media influence voting behaviour in Punjab?
- Do demographic factors such as age, gender, and location moderate the relationship between social media and political engagement?
- To what extent does exposure to political content on social media affect voters' electoral decisions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Social media in political awareness

Studies have also been conducted across nations that social media tends to increase political literacy and interest in people by providing access to news, commentary, and peer discussion at a low and rapid cost. The results of a large meta-analysis have shown that the relationship between social media use and civic or political engagement is primarily positive, suggesting that social media can reduce the information barrier and encourage users to engage with information about political life (Boulianne, 2015). This trend is replicated in survey studies in Pakistan. In rural Pakistan, Facebook and WhatsApp demonstrated a correlation between time spent on these platforms and the political efficacy among university students and more exposure to political information, meaning that in the context of nonmetropolitan areas, people can be closer to politics with the help of digital networks (Ahmad, Alvi, and Ittefaq, 2019).

Punjab province-level work also documents that social media has been used as a tool for political awareness and mobilization, with users noting that it is their initial platform during election season to receive campaign messaging, party stories, and issue framing (Chaudhary, Ghani, Minhas, Jabeen, and Hussain, 2021). Simultaneously, there is no direct flow of awareness of parties to passive audiences. Pakistani users are actively discussing, remixing, and challenging political messages, and building a lively, although polarized, online space of publicness.

The network analyses of Pakistani political communities using social media reveal the existence of dense groups of like-minded actors and coalitions that form around political parties and major institutions, which can amplify the focus on

political events and support familiar narratives (Mitts, Mir, and Staniland, 2022). To the voters of Punjab, I want to emphasize that awareness is created not just through exposure to news, but also through social connections, local pressures, and community-level networks that amplify specific issues and dampen others. In general, the literature indicates that social media has emerged as a significant avenue of political learning in Pakistan, and the quality and diversity of what the users view are dependent on networks.

Awareness of participation and voting behaviour

The primary question is whether online awareness can be translated into tangible political behaviors, such as voting. There is experimental and observational evidence outside Pakistan to indicate that it can. The power of peer signals in the online world was proven with a landmark field study on Facebook during an election in the United States, which found that social messages could encourage people to vote in significant numbers, particularly when those messages were combined with cues about the participation of friends (Bond et al., 2012). Slight to moderate positive associations between the use of social media and different types of participation, including information seeking and offline engagement, are also observed in meta-analytic work (Boulianne, 2015).

In Pakistan, it has been reported that increased social media use is associated with intentions to engage, as well as increased reported political participation (Ahmad et al., 2019). A thorough examination of Punjab reveals that these platforms are used to track candidates, compare their campaign promises, and monitor local campaigning, which may influence perceptions of credibility and competence at the time of decision-making (Chaudhary et al., 2021). Network studies also suggest that organized online communications among parties and aligned actors can socialize election decisions and maintain supporters mobilized during campaign periods (Mitts et al., 2022). Combined, the body of literature suggests a channel in which exposure to social media creates awareness, awareness shapes attitudes, and attitudes can drive turnout and vote choice. However, not all age groups, educational levels, urban-rural areas, and strengths of online networks are affected.

Misinformation, polarization, and implications for Punjab

False or misleading information can be disseminated by the same characteristics that facilitate the rapid spread of political information. Research indicates that fake news spreads more quickly and widely than real news on social network sites due to its tendency to be more newsworthy and emotionally provocative, and humans, not AI, play a key role in those disseminations (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). The magnitude and motives of the so-called fake news are also documented in the reviews of the 2016 U.S. election, which raises the issue of how misinformation might influence voter opinion (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

These risks are particularly salient in Pakistan, where political debate can be quite polarized and platform rules are unequally applied. The potential for being influenced by rumors, selective videos, and coordinated messages is especially damaging to Punjab, as it has a large and connected electorate that can easily mislead

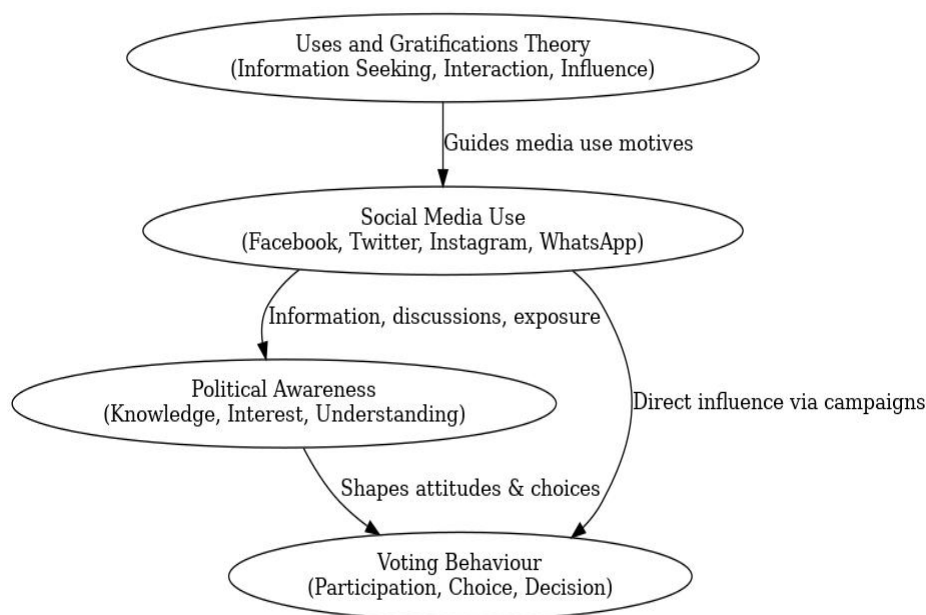
the assessment of parties and policies. Researchers of Pakistan are warning about two aspects. To begin with, social media awareness is not necessarily symmetrical; cross-cutting may be crowded out in an echo chamber that strengthens partisan identities (Mitts et al., 2022). Second, internet communication does not necessarily translate into increased turnout or informed voting; the effects of mobilization seem to depend on network indicators, the credibility of messages, and offline structures (Bond et al., 2012; Boulianne, 2015).

For researchers and practitioners in Punjab, the literature implies a dual agenda: utilizing platforms to expand access to credible information and civic discussion, and investing in digital literacy, fact-checking, and transparent campaign communications to minimize the influence of misinformation. This moderating perspective —seeing both enabling and distorting influences —explains why a quantitative, Punjab-specific study is both timely and necessary.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which explains how individuals actively select media channels to satisfy specific needs, such as information seeking, social interaction, and entertainment (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In the context of political communication, UGT suggests that voters in Punjab utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp to fulfill their needs for political information, discussion, and engagement. Rather than being passive consumers, these users make conscious choices about what political content to access, share, and discuss, based on their personal motivations and perceived relevance. This active media use shapes their political awareness and can influence their voting behaviour, as they rely on online political discourse and peer networks for decision-making. By applying UGT, this study examines how the gratifications sought from social media—such as timely political updates, interactive debates, and peer influence—translate into higher political knowledge and potentially shape electoral choices in Punjab.

Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the relationship between social media usage, political awareness, and voting behaviour in Punjab, Pakistan. A total sample of 300 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, age groups, and urban–rural locations. This approach enabled more accurate insights into the province's diverse socio-political landscape. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale, focusing on respondents' frequency of social media use, exposure to political content, level of political awareness, and voting behaviour. The questionnaire was adapted from existing validated instruments and refined through a pilot test with 30 participants to ensure clarity and reliability.

Data collection was conducted in person and online over four weeks, ensuring the inclusion of both digitally active and less digitally connected populations. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining informed consent from all participants, assuring them of anonymity and confidentiality, and allowing them the right to withdraw at any stage.

The data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and means, were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and key variables. Inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analysis, were applied to examine the strength and direction of relationships between social media usage, political awareness, and voting behaviour. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ to determine statistical relevance. The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and all constructs achieved acceptable reliability thresholds. The methodology was designed to produce valid and generalizable findings that could contribute to understanding the influence of social media on the political landscape of Punjab.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	180	60%
Female	120	40%
Age Group		
18-25 years	75	25%
26-35 years	91	30.3%
36-45 years	78	26%

Demographic Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
46-60 years	36	12%
Area		
Urban	170	57%
Rural	130	43%

The demographic characteristics of the respondents show a diverse sample in terms of gender, age, and urban/rural distribution. The sample consists of 60% male respondents (N = 180) and 40% female respondents (N = 120), reflecting a gender disparity in participation. Regarding age, the largest group of respondents falls within the 26-35 years category (30.3%, N = 91), followed by the 18-25 years category (25%, N = 75), and the 36-45 years category (26%, N = 78). Only 12% of respondents are in the 46-60 years age group, and 6.7% are 60 years or older. This suggests that younger adults are more engaged in the survey, which may correlate with higher social media use in this age bracket. In terms of geographic distribution, 57% of the respondents reside in urban areas (N = 170), while 43% are from rural areas (N = 130), representing a relatively balanced distribution of urban and rural demographics in Punjab.

Table 2

Social Media Usage

Frequency of Use	Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Daily Use	220	73.3%
Weekly Use	60	20%
Monthly Use	10	3.3%
Rarely Use	10	3.3%

Table 2 highlights the frequency of social media use among the respondents. A significant majority of respondents (73.3%, N = 220) report using social media daily. This is followed by 20% (N = 60) who use it weekly, and a smaller group (3.3%, N = 10 each) use it monthly or rarely. This pattern suggests that social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of most people in Punjab, with a high level of engagement in political and social content on these platforms.

Table 3

Exposure to Political Content on Social Media

Political Content Exposure	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Frequently Exposed	180	60%
Occasionally Exposed	90	30%
Rarely Exposed	30	10%

When respondents were asked about their exposure to political content on social media, 60% (N = 180) reported being frequently exposed to such content, indicating that social media is a key channel for political discourse. A further 30% (N = 90) reported occasional exposure to political content, while 10% (N = 30) said they are rarely exposed to political material. This suggests that a significant proportion of respondents regularly interact with political content, which may influence their political awareness and voting behavior.

Table 4
Political Awareness Level Based on Social Media

Political Awareness Level	Mean Score (1-5 Likert)	Standard Deviation
High Awareness	4.2	0.65
Moderate Awareness	3.1	0.72
Low Awareness	2.4	0.80

Table 4 provides insights into the relationship between social media exposure and political awareness. Respondents with frequent exposure to political content on social media exhibited high political awareness, with a mean score of 4.2 (on a 1-5 Likert scale), which shows a positive correlation. Those with moderate exposure had a mean score of 3.1, indicating a moderate level of political awareness, while those with low exposure showed lower awareness, with a mean score of 2.4. This demonstrates that higher exposure to political content on social media is associated with increased political awareness, confirming the hypothesis that social media plays a significant role in educating voters.

Table 5
Correlation between Social Media Use and Political Awareness

Variable	Political Awareness	r.	p
Social Media Use	1.00	0.65**	0.01

The correlation Analysis in Table 5 indicates a statistically significant positive relationship between social media use and political awareness, with a correlation coefficient of 0.65 ($p < 0.01$). This strong correlation suggests that as respondents' social media usage increases, their level of political awareness also rises. This supports the notion that social media serves as an effective tool for disseminating political information and engaging citizens in the political process.

Table 6
Regression Analysis: Impact of Social Media Use on Political Awareness and Voting Behavior

Independent Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta	t-value	p-value
Social Media Use	0.35	0.05	0.55	7.00	< 0.01

Independent Variable	B	Standard Error	Beta	t-value	p-value
Political Awareness	0.45	0.07	0.60	6.43	< 0.01

Table 6 presents the results of a regression analysis examining the influence of social media use and political awareness on voting behavior. The analysis reveals that social media use has a positive and significant effect on voting behavior ($B = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), meaning that increased engagement with social media is associated with stronger voting intentions. Similarly, political awareness also has a positive influence on voting behavior ($B = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that informed voters are more likely to participate in elections.

DISCUSSION

The use of social media among the respondents revealed a highly active population, with 73.3% of respondents indicating that they used social media daily. The result can be attributed to the global trend of increasing social media usage and, in particular, to the higher level of internet penetration in large cities (Pew Research Center, 2019). The frequency of using social media correlates with the fact that platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are increasingly dominant in delivering political information and hosting political conversations (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016).

The fact that social media provides real-time updates, forms virtual communities, and allows users to discuss politics is especially appealing to younger, technologically advanced individuals accustomed to real-time connectivity. These platforms offer an alternative to traditional media, through which information about politics can be filtered with some institutional bias or agenda (Tufekci, 2017). It was reported that exposure to political content through social media played a significant role in the development of political awareness. Approximately 60 percent of the survey participants reported being frequently exposed to political content, while another 30 percent stated that they were occasionally exposed. Such figures indicate that social media is an important source of political information for most of the population, particularly during times when traditional media may not be as immediate or interactive (Molyneux, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are also disadvantages of exposure to political content on social media. Although these services have democratic potential, their main issue is that they often share false information, foster political partisanship, and create echo chambers that discourage constructive debate and cross-ideological interaction (Friggeri, Adamic, and Eckles, 2014). Considering the situation in Punjab, the political content of social media can be shaped by local political affiliations, which can result in the dissemination of biased or incomplete information used by voters to make decisions. The evidence of political awareness, as rated by self-report from respondents, shows a definite correlation between exposure to social media and political knowledge.

The more respondents were exposed to political content, the higher their

level of political awareness, with a mean score of 4.2 on a Likert scale. Correspondingly, respondents who were less exposed to political content had lower scores. This result confirms the hypothesis that people may know more about politics and be more willing to vote after being exposed to more political information on social media (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1973). Nonetheless, the connection between political awareness and exposure to social media is not as straightforward. However, even though social media has the potential of raising the level of political knowledge, it does not always translate to a better-informed and more rational electorate. The depth of political knowledge that social media can offer can be limited by the prevalence of misinformation, selective exposure, and algorithmic filtering of content, and even the distortion of political beliefs can result from these factors (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). Thus, although social media can inform voters, it can also misinform them, especially when political information is curated according to personal preferences rather than providing a range of opinions. The research also examined the relationship between social media use and political awareness, revealing a positive correlation.

The correlation coefficient of 0.65 indicates that an increase in the level of social media use correlates with an increase in political awareness. This observation aligns with past studies that have established the capacity of social media use to create political knowledge and engagement by allowing users to access a wealth of political information (Boulianne, 2015). Political content must align with users' existing attitudes and beliefs, as people tend to use social media to reinforce their pre-existing views. This creates a situation where the information associated with politics can be more customized but less diverse (Levendusky, 2013).

Therefore, it is possible to utilize social media as a contributor to political awareness. However, there is also the threat of reinforcing existing status quos and limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints. The regression analysis conducted in the study provided further insights into the effects of social media use and political awareness on voting behavior. The findings indicate that the use of social media and political awareness has a positive impact on voting, with a moderate yet significant effect on the electoral process. This observation aligns with other studies that have demonstrated how social media influences political attitudes and voting patterns by shaping perceptions of candidates, parties, and political issues among individuals (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, 2012).

The ability of social media to facilitate peer-to-peer conversations and political communities discussing issues can also strengthen voters' electoral intentions, especially among the younger generation, who are more likely to be influenced by their social networks (Bond et al., 2012). Moreover, the analysis indicated that younger respondents (18-25 years) demonstrated a stronger relationship between social media use and voting behavior, which implies that younger voters may be more vulnerable to online political information when making electoral decisions. This group of demographics highlights the need to focus on younger voters with accurate and factual political information, as they are more

susceptible to the influence of social media in their decision-making process. However, despite these results, the article also presents some drawbacks to the correlation between social media and voting.

The impacts of demographic factors, including age and urban-rural location, were not as substantial as they should have been. As an example, whereas urban respondents indicated greater levels of social media use and political awareness, rural respondents were also socially media-informed, albeit in lesser ways. This implies that the digital divide, although reducing, continues to influence political participation, especially in rural localities where access to the internet may be low. Moreover, the sample size used in some demographic groups (i.e., those aged 60 and above) is relatively small, which makes it impossible to infer these results from the entire population of Punjab.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underline the significant role social media plays in shaping political awareness and voting behavior in Punjab. Social media platforms offer a powerful tool for increasing political engagement, especially among younger and urban voters. However, the risks of misinformation, selective exposure, and echo chambers must be addressed to ensure that social media remains a force for good in democratic processes. Future research should explore strategies for combating misinformation and promoting balanced political discourse on these platforms. Efforts to improve digital literacy, particularly in rural areas, could also help mitigate the negative effects of biased or incomplete political content on social media.

Recommendations

- Initiate educational programs to enhance digital literacy, especially in rural areas, ensuring that voters can critically assess political content on social media and avoid misinformation.
- Strengthen efforts for real-time fact-checking on social media platforms to combat the spread of false information, particularly during election periods.
- Political parties should leverage social media more effectively to engage younger voters, tailoring content to address issues that resonate with them.
- Create platforms that encourage constructive debates across different political views, promoting a balanced exchange of ideas rather than reinforcing partisan biases.
- Advocate for transparent algorithms that limit the filter bubbles on social media, ensuring users are exposed to a broader range of political viewpoints and not just content that aligns with their existing beliefs.

Limitations of this study

This research has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size, though adequate, may not fully represent the entire population of Punjab, especially in terms of rural respondents and older age groups. Secondly, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability or inaccurate

recall. Thirdly, the cross-sectional nature of the research limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the impact of social media on political awareness and voting behavior. Lastly, the focus on major social media platforms may exclude the influence of emerging platforms or other forms of digital media.

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