



## **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND REACTIONS TO POLITICAL MESSAGING ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

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### **Abstract**

Social media has transformed political communication by enabling political parties, candidates, governments, activists, and citizens to exchange messages in real time and at large scale. Unlike traditional media, social media allows political messages to be personalized, interactive, visual, and algorithmically distributed, which significantly shapes how the public perceives political actors and reacts to their messages. This paper examines public perceptions and reactions to political messaging on social media, with particular attention to trust, credibility, emotional response, engagement, polarization, and misinformation. Drawing on recent scholarship, the paper argues that public reactions to political messaging are not determined solely by the message content, but also by platform design, emotional framing, prior political beliefs, perceived authenticity, and the broader digital information environment. The paper concludes that social media political messaging is a double-edged phenomenon: it can stimulate participation, awareness, and mobilization, yet it can also intensify cynicism, outrage, selective exposure, and ideological division. The study contributes to the understanding of digital political communication by synthesizing the major factors that shape public opinion and response in online spaces.

**Keywords:** social media, political messaging, public perception, political communication, engagement, polarization, misinformation, digital democracy

### **1. Introduction**

The rise of social media has fundamentally altered the structure of political communication. Political leaders and parties no longer depend exclusively on newspapers, television, or radio to reach voters. Platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok now serve as central spaces where political narratives are created, circulated, contested, and amplified. This transformation has widened access to political information while also changing the emotional tone, speed, and reach of political messaging.

Political messaging on social media includes campaign slogans, policy claims, speeches, videos, memes, issue-based appeals, criticism of opponents, and citizen-generated commentary. These messages shape public perception by influencing how people evaluate political actors, interpret issues, and respond to current events. Research shows that social media can encourage political participation, but its effects are uneven and often mediated by users' prior attitudes, media habits, and exposure patterns (Boulianne, 2015; Tucker et al., 2018).

This paper explores how the public perceives political messaging on social media and how users react cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. It focuses on the opportunities and risks of political messaging in digital environments and highlights the growing importance of trust, emotion, outrage, and polarization in shaping online political response.

## **2. Concept of Political Messaging on Social Media**

Political messaging refers to the strategic communication of political ideas, identities, values, and agendas intended to persuade, mobilize, inform, or influence public opinion. On social media, such messaging is distinct from traditional political communication because it is immediate, interactive, measurable, and often tailored for engagement rather than deliberation.

Social media platforms encourage short, visual, emotional, and shareable communication. This alters both the form and reception of political messages. Messages framed through anger, fear, pride, hope, or identity tend to travel more widely because they generate reactions such as likes, comments, shares, and reposts. Studies on political engagement online show that emotional appeals are central to user engagement and can stimulate political participation, especially when messages invoke conflict, urgency, or group identity (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Rathje et al., 2021).

Thus, political messaging on social media is not merely informational. It is performative, relational, and algorithmically shaped. The public does not simply receive messages; users interpret, remix, challenge, endorse, or reject them in highly visible ways.

## **3. Public Perception of Political Messaging**

Public perception refers to the way citizens interpret the credibility, relevance, authenticity, fairness, and intention of political communication. On social media, these perceptions are shaped by at least five major factors: source credibility, message framing, prior ideology, platform context, and digital literacy.

First, the perceived credibility of the sender matters greatly. Messages from verified politicians, known journalists, or trusted institutions may be received differently from anonymous or partisan sources. However, trust in political content on social media is often fragile because users are

aware of misinformation, propaganda, trolling, and manipulated content. Literature on political disinformation consistently shows that digital environments complicate credibility judgments and expose users to misleading or low-quality information (Tucker et al., 2018; Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019).

Second, public perception is influenced by the tone and framing of the message. Rational and policy-oriented messages may build informed opinion, but emotional and identity-centered messages often attract more attention. Research indicates that different emotions produce different engagement patterns; anger, fear, and conflict-oriented appeals tend to elicit stronger reactions than neutral informational messages (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022).

Third, citizens interpret political messages through pre-existing partisan beliefs. People frequently evaluate the same content differently depending on whether it aligns with their ideology. This contributes to selective exposure, confirmation bias, and hostile interpretation of opposing views. A systematic review by Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) found consistent evidence that pro-attitudinal media exposure can intensify polarization, especially in digital settings.

Fourth, the platform itself shapes perception. Social media feeds are filtered by algorithms that prioritize engagement-heavy content. This means that messages perceived as controversial, emotional, or divisive may receive greater visibility than balanced or informative content. Research on divisive and emotionally charged content suggests that engagement-based systems can amplify such messages disproportionately.

Finally, digital media literacy affects how users judge political content. Citizens with stronger critical skills are generally better equipped to evaluate claims, detect manipulative framing, and resist misleading narratives. Without such skills, people may confuse visibility with credibility.

## **4. Public Reactions to Political Messaging**

Public reactions to political messaging on social media can be classified into cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses.

### **4.1 Cognitive Reactions**

Cognitive reactions involve attention, interpretation, acceptance, skepticism, and opinion formation. Political messaging can increase awareness of issues, expose users to multiple viewpoints, and stimulate discussion. At the same time, repeated exposure to partisan or misleading content can distort issue understanding and reinforce false beliefs. Scholarship on misinformation shows that while the overall spread of fake news is not equally distributed across

all users, its visibility during political campaigns can still shape perceptions of reality and institutional trust (Guess et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2018).

## **4.2 Emotional Reactions**

Emotional reactions are among the most powerful outcomes of social media political messaging. Users may feel hope, enthusiasm, anger, fear, resentment, pride, or anxiety after consuming political content. Recent evidence shows that outrage and ideological conflict can drive interaction at high levels. One study describes a “confrontation effect,” in which users often engage strongly with content they disagree with because disagreement itself triggers outrage and reaction (Mochon et al., 2024).

Hostile or attacking political messages may also increase cynicism. Research has found that perceived exposure to political attacks on social media is associated with anger and higher political cynicism, suggesting that repeated exposure to aggressive political discourse can weaken trust in politics and democratic institutions (Song, Gil de Zúñiga, & Boomgaarden, 2021; Hmielowski et al., 2024).

## **4.3 Behavioral Reactions**

Behavioral reactions include liking, commenting, sharing, reposting, discussing, donating, voting, protesting, or disengaging. Social media can mobilize people quickly and provide new avenues for participation. Meta-analytic evidence indicates a positive relationship between social media use and civic or political participation, although the strength of this relationship varies across contexts (Boulianne, 2015).

However, not all reactions are constructive. Some users respond by spreading misinformation, attacking opponents, withdrawing from debate, or becoming more extreme in their views. Thus, behavioral reaction is not identical with democratic improvement.

## **5. Social Media, Polarization, and Echoed Political Identity**

One of the most important concerns surrounding political messaging on social media is polarization. Polarization can be ideological, where policy positions become more extreme, or affective, where people increasingly dislike and distrust members of opposing political groups. Research reviews show that social media can contribute to polarization, especially when users repeatedly encounter like-minded content and when platforms reward divisive messages with higher visibility (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Tucker et al., 2018).

At the same time, the relationship is complex. Some studies suggest that users also engage with disagreeable content, not only supportive content. Yet this cross-cutting exposure does not

necessarily reduce polarization because the reaction may be hostile rather than reflective. Out-group hostility appears to generate especially high engagement, meaning that political messaging focused on opponents may spread more effectively than messages centered on policy or compromise (Rathje et al., 2021; Mochon et al., 2024).

As a result, political messaging on social media often strengthens identity politics. Users respond not simply as citizens evaluating arguments, but as members of partisan or ideological communities defending group status and attacking rivals.

## **6. Misinformation and Trust Crisis**

Misinformation is a central factor in public reaction to political messaging online. False or misleading political content can circulate rapidly because it is often emotionally provocative, partisan, and easy to share. Although the prevalence of fake news sharing is not uniform across all users, its existence contributes to a broader climate of suspicion and uncertainty (Guess et al., 2019).

This matters because perception of widespread misinformation can itself damage democratic trust. When citizens begin to assume that most political content is manipulative, they may become cynical not only toward specific politicians but toward the entire political process. Reviews and recent studies connect exposure to misinformation and hostile political content with reduced trust in media, institutions, and democratic discourse.

Therefore, the problem is not only whether a particular message is true or false. The larger issue is that the social media environment can normalize doubt, outrage, and strategic manipulation as routine features of political communication.

## **7. Democratic Opportunities and Challenges**

Despite these risks, social media political messaging also offers important democratic opportunities. It lowers communication barriers, enables marginalized voices to be heard, allows faster circulation of political information, and supports participation beyond election periods. It can connect citizens with representatives, facilitate grassroots mobilization, and broaden public debate. Research on political participation continues to show that social media can support engagement under the right conditions.

Yet these benefits depend on the quality of the digital environment. When platforms privilege sensationalism over accuracy, visibility over credibility, and outrage over deliberation, public reaction may become more reactive than reasoned. The challenge for democratic societies is therefore not to reject social media entirely, but to strengthen digital literacy, platform accountability, transparent moderation, and ethical political communication.

## 8. Conclusion

Public perceptions and reactions to political messaging on social media are shaped by a complex interaction of message content, emotional framing, source credibility, partisan identity, and algorithmic visibility. Social media has expanded the reach and immediacy of political communication, making politics more interactive and participatory. At the same time, it has intensified exposure to misinformation, emotional provocation, cynical political attacks, and polarization.

The evidence suggests that public reaction is rarely neutral. Political messages on social media generate interpretation, emotion, and action, often simultaneously. Citizens may become more informed and engaged, but they may also become more suspicious, angry, and divided. For this reason, political messaging on social media should be understood as a powerful but unstable force in contemporary democracy. Its effects depend not only on what political actors say, but also on how platforms distribute messages and how citizens interpret them. Strengthening media literacy, ethical campaign practices, and platform responsibility remains essential if social media is to support democratic dialogue rather than undermine it.

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