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# 2018 Constitution Day Essay Contest 1st Place-- Social Media: Unifier or Divider

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## Social Media: Unifier or Divider

Social media platforms are becoming increasingly popular news outlets for Americans, with two-thirds of Americans claiming to engage with the news on social media in 2017 (Shearer and Gottfried). As the popularity of social media as a news outlet has increased, so, too, has the polarization of the political sphere in America. This has caused some political scientists to look to social media as a major cause of this political polarization. Social media platforms have also become powerful tools for political discussion in general amongst Americans, which can lead to a better understanding between members of opposing parties. Finally, social media has become a resource for political activists and movements, allowing information to be spread quickly and over a wide audience. Thus, to a large extent, social media has impacted polarization, political discussion and understanding amongst groups and individuals.

Social media has given Americans the space to freely express their political opinions. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, approximately one-third of social media users claim that they often or sometimes engage in political conversation on social media (Duggan and Smith). In the same survey, participants were asked about the composition of their friend networks and the political content that is present on their feeds. The survey focused on Facebook and Twitter. It was found that “most users’ friend networks on both Facebook and Twitter contain people with a range of political beliefs” and “about one-quarter of both Facebook and Twitter users report that ‘a lot’ of what they see on each site is related to politics” (Duggan and Smith). Notably, users of both Facebook and Twitter reported in the survey that they come in contact with a wide variety of political views while using these social media platforms; less than

25% of users reported that the majority of the people in their networks hold political beliefs comparable to their own (Duggan and Smith). From this, it is clear that the majority of social media users are exposed to people who hold varying political viewpoints. This is important when analyzing the extent to which social media impacts politics, as more and more Americans are encountering political ideas and discourse through their use of social media.

While social media can bring opposing groups together, it is also important to pay attention to the 25% of Americans who largely follow people with the same political ideology as them. Similarly, it is possible that even if Americans are connected with politically diverse people on their social media networks, they only choose to fully interact with like-minded groups. Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center show that users with “stronger ideological tendencies are more likely to surround themselves with like-minded people” in their networks (Mitchell, et al). Social media sites can easily be used for these people to create political ‘echo chambers.’ Users have the power to choose who they follow and who they choose to ignore, allowing them to cater their social media feed to their particular political ideology. With this, it is common for users to develop politically homogenous social media networks (Stromer-Galley). At the same time, it is common for politically opposing groups to engage in heated discourse when they do converge, resulting in slander and misunderstanding between groups. Both can result in the polarization of the political sphere as related to social media usage.

Finally, social media has become an important tool for political activists across the board, regardless of their political affiliation. The use of ‘hashtag activism’ on social media has become particularly powerful. For example, on the social justice side of politics, #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson became unifiers for stories of racial injustice, allowing millions of people who sympathize with the respective causes to engage with the movements (Aalai). Additionally,

#MakeAmericaGreatAgain became an important hashtag for Trump supporters during the 2016 Election (Cohen). 'Hashtag activism' has increased the visibility of movements and political opinions among social media users, which has increased their political awareness and engagement (Aalai). Features of social media such as hashtags are important in shaping America's political scene.

In conclusion, the use of social media has drastically shaped the way Americans interact with politics in recent years. Whether or not social media has become the primary cause of the political polarization in the United States is debated amongst political scientists, but one thing remains clear: social media is rising as a political platform for Americans, wherein they can more easily engage in discourse, congregate with like-minded individuals and rally for what they believe in.

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