

The Social Media Effect (SME): A Quantification of the Extent to Which Exposure to Go-Vote Reminders on Social Media Platforms Can Influence Voting Intentions

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Abstract

Over the past decade, researchers have identified and quantified about a dozen new forms of influence that the internet and related technologies have made possible. Some of these, such as the “search engine manipulation effect” (SEME), appear to be among the most powerful forms of influence ever discovered in the behavioral sciences, sometimes producing shifts in voting preferences among undecided voters as high as 80% after just one exposure to biased online content. Although experts have expressed concern about how users – especially children and teens – may be harmed by social media content, we are unaware of controlled studies that have sought to quantify the extent to which go-vote reminders on social media platforms can impact voting. In the present study, we sent various types of vote reminders to US voters to determine (a) whether such reminders can increase the likelihood that people will vote, and (b) how the effectiveness of such reminders can be optimized. We conducted our experiments on a close simulator of the Facebook social media platform we called Doodlebook. Our results showed (a) that interspersing vote reminders in a Facebook-like message feed significantly increased the magnitude of voting intentions ($p < .001$), and (b) that the magnitude of that increase was over 40% under certain conditions. As a public policy matter, we note that because reminders of this sort are ephemeral – impacting people and then disappearing without leaving a paper trail – unless large-scale systems for capturing ephemeral content of this sort are in place, social media platforms that send vote reminders to users in a partisan fashion might be able to shift the outcomes of close elections without people’s knowledge.