"We are living through a radical shift in the nature of political engagement..."

THE RISE OF DIGITAL POLITICS

Carl Miller

DEMOS

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Contents

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Carl Miller
July 2016.

Executive summary

Over the last 50 years, a gap has been growing in the UK between political institutions and the people they represent. Voter turnout continues to decline; mass membership of political parties, once the most important bridge between the people and the political elite, continues to fall; and trust in and contact with politicians is at a historic all-time low.

At the same time, while fewer and fewer people are turning to conventional ways of making their voice heard, the use of social media has exploded. Over half of British adults now use social media platforms regularly and we spend more time on social networks than on any other online activity.

This paper explores this emerging digital political landscape and the impact it is having on the political process, what it means for politicians, and the effects it has on the people who take part. Demos commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct an online poll that was representative of UK social media users at the height of the 2015 UK general election campaign. It studied how people used social media to engage with politics and what opportunities this creates to reconnect people to a political process that many feel distant from.

If the results are extrapolated nationally:

- Social media are changing the way that people participate in political and democratic debate. Half (51 per cent) of adult British social media users undertook some political activity on social media during the general election. This is a greater proportion than for social media users who reported participating in politics or activism around the election offline.

- A large majority (72 per cent) of people who had used social media for political purposes reported that they felt more politically engaged, in one way or another, as a direct result.

- People who used social media for political activity on social media were also more likely to act on their political convictions as a direct result of it. Over a third (39 per cent) of poll respondents who had engaged with political content on social media felt more likely to vote as a direct result – equivalent to a potential 7.1 million people if the results are extrapolated nationally.

- Social media is engaging some of those disengaged with politics. Young people aged 18–24 are least likely to vote of all age groups, and least likely to be strongly attached to any particular party. However, in our poll they were more likely to feel more politically engaged as the result of political activity on social media, and were the second most likely age group to use social media for politics. Just under 1 in 6 (15 per cent) social media users said that social media was the only way that they engaged with politics over the last year; around 1 in 5 (21 per cent) who claim to have no interest in politics had still sent messages with political content on social media.

These findings are significant for the future democratic health of the UK. A new opportunity has now opened to use social media not just to win political power, but to wield it better. Social media builds bridges between people and institutions, and at a scale and with an ease that has never before been possible.

The potential of social media to open up political debate, re-engage people in the political process and allow new forms of contact between people and their elected representatives must be harnessed. *The Rise of Digital Politics* lays out some key principles for how social media can do this:

- listen to the electorate and treat social media as a two-way street
- recognise new online groups and mobilisations, and the power they yield
- move from online discussions to something that can contribute towards the political decisions that are taken
- be aware of the dangers of digital exclusion.

1 Introduction and Method

Most people say they are interested in politics.[1] The Electoral Commission estimates there are 15.5 million political conversations in Britain every day, and 57 per cent of people take part in at least one discussion on a local issue.[2] Beyond formal politics, millions of people across the UK are passionate about improving their community, country and the lives of others. There are around 900,000 civil society organisations in the UK. The National Trust has over 4 million paid members, while the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) each has over half a million members.[3] Over 15 million people volunteer at least once a month.[4]

But while most people are *interested* in politics, they are *participating* less and less in formal politics. For the last 50 years, there has been a growing gap between political institutions and the people that they represent and serve. This has resulted in three clear trends.

The first is the decline of the mass membership political party, once the most important bridge between people's normal, daily lives and the political decisions taken on their behalf. In the 1950s, Conservative Party membership peaked at 3 million, and Labour at 1 million. At the end of 2013, Labour had around 190,000 members and the Conservatives 150,000. Not withstanding recent surges in membership for Labour, the SNP, UKIP and the Green Party, the broader trend is a clear, deep decline in the proportion of the electorate who are members of any party involved in formal politics.[5]

Second, there has been a decline in electoral turnout. In the 14 UK general elections between 1945 and 1992, the average turnout was 77 per cent.[6] The turnouts for last four elections have been the four lowest since the beginning of

universal suffrage.[7] Average turnout in local elections in the 1940s was 45 per cent. In the 2000s it fell to 36 per cent, and in 2012 it dropped to 31 per cent.

Finally, levels of trust in politicians by the public are rock bottom. According to a 2015 Ipsos MORI poll, just 21 per cent of Britons trust politicians to tell the truth, less than the proportion of Britons who trust estate agents (25%) or bankers (37%) to tell the truth.[8] In another poll, conducted in autumn 2013, Eurobarometer found just 24 per cent of people 'tended to trust' the UK Government: 37 per cent trust their local MP to tell the truth, yet just 23 per cent trust leading Labour politicians, 19 per cent trust leading Conservative politicians (16 per cent Lib Dems), and 21 per cent trust senior civil servants. All of these figures are lower than when measured in 2003.[9]

These trends are highly generational. There are signs that formal politics is failing to either engage or inspire younger people. Each generation that enters the electorate is successively less attached to any one political party than the last. Since the 1980s, 50–60 per cent of the pre-war generation consider themselves a supporter of a political party, 30–40 per cent of baby boomers, 20–30 per cent of Generation X and 10–20 per cent of Generation Y. This is not the result of age alone: when today's 70-year-olds were in their 20s, voter turnout was at an all-time high. The UK has the largest turnout gap between young and old people in the OECD.[10] In 2013, the average age of a Conservative Party member was 59 years.[11] In 2015, the average age of all party members was almost 50. The average age of local councillors across all parties is 60.[12] According to one recent survey, 70 per cent of young people would consider voting 'none of the above'.[13]

This all adds up to a problem that has become widely recognised, especially in the run-up to the general election held last year: people feel that our democratic institutions and the political figures we elect are too remote and distant from our lives and concerns. Just 13 per cent of people feel at least 'some influence' over local decision making nationally,

although 41 per cent would like to be involved in decision-making.[14] Only a third of the public think the system by which Britain is governed works well.[15]

This sense of distance makes the problem worse by preventing people reaching out to politicians and political institutions, and also entrenching the feeling that these same institutions fail to reach out to them. Just 28 per cent agree that parliament encourages involvement in politics.[16] The electorate's willingness to contact a political representative has dropped from 51 per cent in 2014 to 33 per cent in 2015.[17]

The rise of digital politics

While fewer and fewer people turn to conventional ways of making their voices heard, the use of social media platforms has exploded. Over half of British adults now use platforms that allow them to generate, share and consume content. Indeed, social media are now the predominant way that the internet is used: in the UK we spend more of our online minutes on social networking than on any other activity, including shopping and viewing entertainment, news, business or our email account.[18]

A small number of platforms dominate social media use in the UK. Facebook is far the most widely used, with 55 per cent of British adults using it over the last three months. Behind that, 18 per cent of UK adults have visited Twitter in the last three months, and 16 per cent have visited LinkedIn.[19] More people now regularly visit social media – indeed Facebook alone – than voted in the 2010 general election.[20]

The use of social media as an increasingly mainstream part of social life is itself an agent of social change. It changes where we live our lives, and how we talk about the experiences we have and the attitudes that we hold, the culture and identities that we recognise and cherish, how we solve problems, who we know, even how we think. It influences the rules, norms and values that we live by, and how we relate to and treat others.

Methodology

At the height of the 2015 UK general election, Demos studied the way people used social media to engage with politics. The aim was to learn about the scale, nature and kind of engagement happening in the digital world, and whether it might present a new opportunity to reconnect people to a political process that too many feel too distant from.

As part of this research, Demos designed and commissioned an online poll by Ipsos MORI representative of British social media users aged 18–75, about 36 million people.[21] Fieldwork took place midway through the last election campaign, 17–23 April 2015. The 12 questions of the online poll asked 1,002 social media users about whether they had used social media to do things broadly related to politics and, if they had, the effects, if any, that it had on them; about other political activity they may have undertaken; and about what sense of involvement and participation they had had in the political process. This report lays out the major trends, findings and implications from that research.

2 Research findings

Finding 1: Political participation has shifted to online platforms

Political activity, broadly defined, is widespread on social media. The survey showed that half (51 per cent) of our poll respondents sent or received political material in the build-up to the election – equating to around 18 million people if extrapolated nationally. This is greater than the number of social media users in our poll who reported participating in politics or activism offline (42 per cent) – including contacting a politician (12 per cent), signing a paper petition (also 12 per cent), donating money to a charity (16 per cent), attending a political meeting (4 per cent), taking part in a demonstration or march (3 per cent), or taking part in a hustings, town hall meeting or public consultation (5 per cent).

This landscape is not full of passive consumers and one-way political dialogue. As many people surveyed had contributed political content as had received it – most often with friends, relatives and people they knew.

Our poll showed that a significant proportion of all age groups has received or sent political content on social media (table 1). However, younger users were more likely to do so than older users, and the youngest age bracket, those aged 18–24, were the second most likely group to use social media for politics overall.

Table 1 **The proportion of respondents who had received or sent political content on social media in the last three months**

Age group	
18–24	56%
25–34	52%
35–44	60%
45–54	49%
55–64	43%
65+	37%

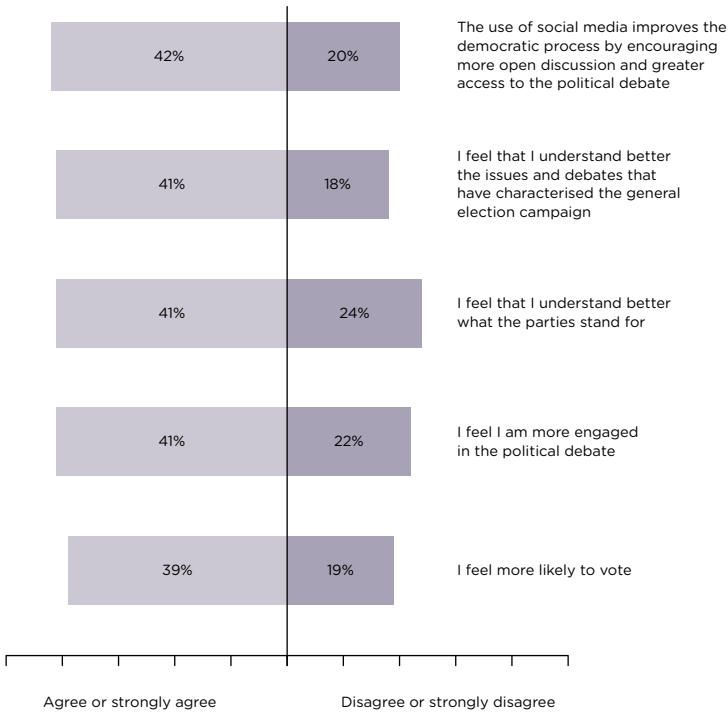
Source: Demos survey, Apr 2015

This political activity was importantly concentrated on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter. Of those who had received political content on social media in the last three months, 83 per cent received it on Facebook (32 per cent of all social media users), 25 per cent on Twitter, 9 per cent on YouTube, 7 per cent on WhatsApp, 3 per cent on Instagram and 2 per cent on Reddit.

Overall, the picture is clear. Talking about politics forms part of the digital life of most social media users in the UK. They do so proactively, contributing content as often as they receive it, and mainly communicate with people whom they know. This is happening across all age groups, but most significantly among younger users of social media, the same age groups that are least likely to be involved in traditional, offline forms of political participation.

What does this mean for the people themselves, and for politicians and political institutions?

Figure 1 **The benefits of political discussion on social media**



Finding 2: Political conversation on social media makes people feel more engaged with politics and more inclined to vote as a direct result

As part of our study, we asked respondents who had either received or sent political content on social media whether they felt positive or negative effects as a result of doing so. Almost three-quarters of those surveyed (72 per cent) reported at least one positive benefit arising from receiving or sending this political content, with people listing almost three (2.9) benefits on average in their survey responses.

If the results of this representative online poll are extrapolated to the 36 million people who use social media in the UK, it suggests that social media could have a significant impact on politics as a whole. A possible:

- 7,500,000 people felt they understood the general election campaign better
- 7,500,000 people felt they understood what the parties stand for better, and were more engaged in the political debate
- 7,100,000 people felt more likely to vote as a result of seeing political content on social media.
- 5,300,000 people felt social media helped them decide whom to vote for

The findings are significant and suggest that social media provide a new bridge between people and the political process.

Finding 3: Social media enables genuine political debate and can be an avenue to other forms of political participation, but there are some downsides too

Social media sites are sometimes criticised for simply bringing people into contact with others who agree with them, or not allowing issues to be debated in detail. In the tumultuous run-up to the general election, there was no clear consensus on whether this was the case: 29 per cent of survey respondents felt social media helped them decide whom to vote for, while 30 per cent disagreed; 29 per cent of respondents felt that social media did not provide adequate space to discuss issues in the necessary detail they deserve, while slightly more – 31 per cent – disagreed. A slightly lower proportion of respondents – 26 per cent – said they thought that using social media gives them a better understanding of politicians.

However, our findings also show that political activity on social media is a significant avenue for people into political topics and issues, and to a lesser extent an avenue for people into political parties and offline participation. Over a quarter

(27 per cent) of our respondents who had engaged in political conversation on social media said that this conversation encouraged them to do further research on an issue or topic, around 1 in 14 (7 per cent) said it encouraged them to go to a political event, such as a husting or demonstration, while 1 in 20 (4 per cent) said that it actually encouraged them to join a political party.

Finding 4: Political discussion on social media benefits those groups least likely to vote – such as young people and those not interested in politics

The survey showed that, generally, social media users already interested in politics were more likely to use social media for politics, and to feel more engaged as a result. This is unsurprising. However, the research found that the digital political landscape also touched three important and less politically engaged groups: young people; those not interested in politics, and those who otherwise have nothing to do with politics.

Young people

As a group, young people aged 18–24 are least likely to vote, and least likely to be strongly attached to any particular party. However, they reported the greatest benefits to political engagement as a direct result of political activity on social media: larger proportions (38 per cent) than for any other age category felt a significant number of benefits from sharing or seeing political content on social media, and over three-quarters felt at least some benefits – significantly more than those in any other age group (table 2).

Table 2 **The proportion of survey respondents who found any benefits to political engagement* on social media, by age group****

Age	More than 5 benefits	Between 3 and 5 benefits	Any benefit
18–24	38%	20%	78%
25–34	33%	19%	70%
35–44	25%	19%	72%
45–54	30%	17%	71%
55–64	25%	16%	70%
65+	24%	15%	64%

* who had sent or received political content on social media

** NB Some sample sizes small, so findings are indicative, not definitive.

Source: Demos survey, Apr 2015

People who are not interested in politics

Our study found that over a fifth (23 per cent) of respondents who reported not being interested in politics had, nonetheless, received political content on social media, and a similar proportion (21 per cent) had sent some too. They also saw the benefits of the political conversation on social media:

- A fifth (20 per cent) thought social media directly made them feel better able to express their political views and for them to be heard.
- Around a quarter (23 per cent) felt that social media directly helped them understand what parties stood for.
- Over a quarter (26 per cent) felt that social media directly made them more likely to vote.
- Around a fifth (18 per cent) thought social media helped them decide whom to vote for.

People who otherwise have nothing to do with politics

About 15 per cent of survey respondents who otherwise had nothing to do with politics reported that social media were the only way that they had engaged with politics over the last year. This small but important group noted that they had not contacted a politician, donated money, signed a petition or attended any kind of political meeting, demonstration or hustings. They had however engaged with politics on social media – whether through signing an e-petition, discussing political issues or events, or contacting a political representative online.

Furthermore, this group clearly recognised some benefit to doing so (they listed 2.7 benefits on average per person in interviews). Around 4 in 10 (40 per cent) felt that they better understood what the parties stood for as a result of engaging with politics on social media, and a similar proportion (38 per cent) felt more engaged with the political debate too.

Finding 5: There are emerging expectations for MPs to listen to and engage with people on these channels

The rise of politics on social media is creating a new body of expectations from the digital electorate about where their politicians need to be and how they can engage with them. While less than 1 in 20 respondents (4 per cent) had actually contacted their elected representatives on social media, almost a third (32 per cent) said they were very or fairly likely to do so in the future. Interestingly, respondents reported that they were more likely to contact a councillor or local constituency MP (32 per cent each) on social media than to contact government ministers, cabinet ministers or the prime minister – suggesting that digital politics starts at the local level for many people.

These findings suggest that there is now a clear expectation from the electorate for politicians to be on social media. Around one-third (34 per cent) of our respondents think that politicians should have an account on social media and over half thought politicians should use social media to share their views, policies or values.

Our respondents were keen that politicians should use social media to engage and communicate with them:

- 42 per cent thought the use of social media by politicians improves the democratic process by encouraging more open discussion and greater access to debate.

- 54 per cent thought politicians should reply and engage with people who ask them questions and send them comments on social media.

- 53 per cent thought politicians should use social media to gather comments from constituents and take them into account when making decisions.

This demand extends to survey respondents who otherwise do not have much to do with politics, suggesting that engagement with politicians on social media may offer a route back into politics for those who are disengaged. Of the survey respondents who had not taken part in any act of offline political activism over the last 12 months:

- Nearly half (45 per cent) agreed that politicians should use social media to share their views and policies.

- A further 30 per cent agreed that if political representatives tended to reply to messages on social media, they would use social media as a way of talking to them.

3 Recommendations

These findings are significant for the future democratic health of the UK. Millions of people use social media to discuss politics and doing so makes them feel closer to politics, especially the 'lost generation' of younger voters who participate least in traditional forms of politics. There is a demand from social media users for politicians to share their views and policies on social media, but also to listen to the views and values of others.

During the 2015 UK general election there was an explosion in digital electioneering from politicians. There was an unprecedented concentration of resources, time and new ideas into how the digital world could be used to reach the electorate, make a political case, and ultimately win volunteers, donations and votes.

With the growth of social media, a new opportunity has now opened to use social media not just to win power, but to wield it better: to include a wider range of voices in the debate, to make the work of politicians and parliament easier and better understood, even to start changing the way that decisions are made. Social media build bridges between people and institutions at a scale and with an ease that has never before been possible. People can speak to an MP with the click of a button. They can join a local interest group to oppose a planned bypass, or establish their own groups or movements, and find others, with radically reduced cost and difficulty. People can not only watch a political debate from their living room but step into that debate itself.

MPs should make social media central to the way that they engage with the public…

Social media are two-way streets, and people use them to engage proactively in politics – to offer their own opinions and views as well as learning those of other people. There is an opportunity not only for politicians and institutions to reach the electorate, but also for the electorate to reach them. There is a clear expectation from the digital electorate – an emerging norm in these spaces – that there should be two-way communication between them and politicians.

Politicians need to use social media to learn more about the needs and views of their constituents, and as a convenient first-step gateway to face-to-face or more sustained contact with their constituents. This could involve holding online surgeries by asking constituents to leave questions and comments on an MP's Facebook page or Twitter account, or by conducting live digital Q&As.

Starts at the local level

Social media users are more likely to contact their local politicians – a local councillor or constituency MP – than national politicians. Constituency-level conversations on social media are vital first steps, key ways to use social media to make politics more relevant and reflective of people's daily lives and concerns. Local conversations and social media spaces dedicated to constituency-level debates provide the first and most straightforward opportunities for politicians to use social media to learn about the everyday experiences and concerns of the people they represent. Political representatives should encourage and recognise digital citizen interest groups to facilitate everyday democracy.

The public debate is on social media and Parliament should catch up

Social media create large, constantly updating digital public commons. Listening to this commons gives an opportunity to bridge national institutions with street-level social reality. From the identification of policy failures, outbreaks of concern, the way new policy roll-outs are received, patients' complaints, misunderstanding of communications to helping people respond in crises, listening to social media provides a key new coalface in gathering and understanding social attitudes on politics and policy.

Therefore every parliamentary debate should have a social media element to allow the public to offer their views and opinions for the benefit of the participants. Numerous social media platforms support the streaming of live video, allowing viewers to tune in and comment on debates in real time. Video highlights of the debates should be packaged for people to share, discuss with friends, annotate and respond to, to broaden the reach of these debates and get the country talking.

Recognise new groups, communities and movements online

Valuable democratic opportunities are created on social media when people use them to talk to politicians and civil servants, and to each other. Social media radically reduce the cost and difficulty of people organising and debating themselves, forming 'communities of interest' united by a particular concern, whether a common complaint about a local NHS service, opposition to a local planning application, or a suggestion for a traffic calming measure. Processes should be undertaken to find out how digital communities of interest can be supported and recognised across national, local and civic government.

Begin to move from discussions to decisions

Discussions are not decisions, and the most formidable challenge lies in converting the sea of passionate debates, concerns and new ideas expressed on social media into something that can contribute towards political decision making. This is not an easy task as there are many concerns, from recognising the risk of ignoring the digitally excluded, to exploring fundamental questions regarding political process. However, it is an important one. From deliberative platforms to wikified official documents, this is an area of constant innovation, and it is up to the political establishment to be open to these new opportunities.

A starting point is for government consultations to have a digital dimension to encourage debate and engagement from people outside professional politics or policy engagement. This can take the form of digital deliberative processes, using rapidly developing distance learning techniques (such as those used in delivering massive open online courses) to take citizens through the complexities, trade-offs and constraints surrounding a particular decision with the help of policy makers and experts.

Acquire new capabilities and expertise

To help catalyse this process, parliament should offer social media training to legislators in the Commons and Lords. This should cover the practical steps of setting up and using social media platforms, the norms and standards of the platform, and the risks and opportunities of using social media to engage with constituents.

This training should include advice on making engaging content. People increasingly access a range of social media platforms on their smart phones – 27 million a day on Facebook alone – and video makes up an enormous part of this. Politicians need to know this and how best to reach this audience.

Above all, social media give politicians an opportunity to communicate with citizens without a media filter. People come online to have genuine conversations and politicians must therefore strive to be as authentic as possible.

Be alert to digital exclusion

The explosion of new digital practices has occurred within a social context where many are excluded or unwilling to participate in such practices. Not everyone uses social media – including some of the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Technology is not a panacea for the problems democracy faces. Because democracies are supposed to reflect the views of citizens, technology must not skew political power to certain groups, whether the digitally savvy or the digitally hyper-vocal. Social media are not the only answer to political disengagement, and it is important that digital views are not heard above others, and especially over groups that are the most disengaged, vulnerable and voiceless.

However, while the challenges are significant, there are no signs that they are insurmountable. And while social media are not the only answer to political disenfranchisement, they are an important one. It is clear that digital engagement is an important part of political renewal.

A number of different kinds of people and institutions, from parliament and parties to government and not least the people who use social media themselves, will form parts of the solution. Most important now is for Britain to start a journey to reflect the digital world in the political one, and so create a democracy fit for the twenty-first century.

4 Conclusion: The way towards a democracy for the twenty-first century

Most of the time, politicians and political institutions seem remote and disconnected from the everyday lives and experiences of most people. Demos has long tried to suggest ways to make British democracy an everyday activity, where people, as a matter of habit and routine, participate in the institutions that shape their lives and the decisions taken for the common good. The appetite remains for people to engage in political activity and activism to improve their own lives and those of their communities and the people around them. From volunteering to charitable giving to running campaigns, activism takes place all over the UK when people can fit it into their other commitments and concerns. But engagement in formal politics remains limited.

Introducing digital democracy, like introducing any significant change, brings with it some severe difficulties and risks. We face a number of challenges if we are to translate and reflect the political activity carried out on social media into the political decisions that are taken, so that political representatives and institutions become more aware of and reactive to the concerns and experiences of people who live in Britain, and those people feel that their voices are heard. Despite attempts from within[22] and outside[23] government, it is striking how little impact technology has had on the structures and institutions of formal politics.

A new opportunity has now opened. We are living through an important shift in political participation. People of all ages, especially those in younger groups who have least to do with traditional conventional political participation, are using social media to do politics.

Social media are the vehicle through which Britons read news content, inform themselves of what candidates and parties stand for, and discuss issues with friends. Social media are now the corner shop, the high street and the pub – a place where people go to have genuine, authentic conversations about politics. Moreover, the vast majority of people who engage with politics on social media feel closer to it as a result. For them, digital participation is genuine participation.

But people use social media not to be talked at but to have a conversation. Our findings show that a significant 42 per cent of people feel that use of social media by politicians will encourage open debate. Majorities of our respondents thought that politicians should reply to constituents' enquiries on social media (54 per cent) and use the platforms as a means to collate feedback on policies and issues (53 per cent).

Crucially, respondents told us that they felt better informed and more likely to vote as a result of political activity on social media, including the cohorts of people typically disinterested in politics. Of the 34 per cent of people we spoke to who said they were not interested in politics, 26 per cent felt that social media had a direct influence in making them more likely to vote.

During the 2015 election there was an explosion in digital electioneering from politicians. There was an unprecedented concentration of resources, time and new ideas into how the digital world could be used to reach the electorate, to make a political case, and ultimately win volunteers, donations and votes.

Democracy has to involve more than holding elections every five years. Social media can help move British democracy towards an everyday democracy, where people, as a matter of habit and routine, participate in the institutions that shape their lives and the decisions taken for the common good. Social media should not replace existing ways in which politics can become more open and inclusive: after all, many people do not use social media. But they do offer an opportunity for new ways for people and politics to connect – including those who are not currently engaged, and especially young people who, as a generation, participate least in traditional ways of doing politics. The rise of digital politics has now to meet the rise of digital democracy.

Annex: Survey top-line results

The annex contains the top-line results of the selected survey questions most important to this paper. The full survey will be published on the Demos website (www.demos.co.uk)

Table 3 **In the last three months, have you been sent content on social media from any of the following sources that is broadly related to politics?**

	Total	Percentage
Base	1,002	
from a political party or politician in the UK	141	14%
from a political party or politician abroad	39	4%
from an activist, charity or NGO	82	8%
from a journalist, commentator or mainstream news outlet	63	6%
from a friend or relative	263	26%
from a private sector company	33	3%
from your council, electoral register office or electoral commission	56	6%
None of these, I have not received any political content in the last 3 months	562	56%
Don't know	58	6%
Net any content	382	38%

Filter: all social media users

Table 4 **Thinking about the discussions you've had about politics on social media in the last three months, which of the following were your main two or three topics of discussion?**

	Total	Percentage
Base	398	
Issues and proposals local to where you live?	98	25%
Areas of politics specific to your key interests, such as the industry you work in	77	19%
National issues that are important to everyone — such as the economy or the NHS, or MPs' expenses.	240	60%
Politicians as a group or specific individuals	123	31%
Political parties	167	42%
Other (please specify)	17	4%
Don't know	31	8%

Table 5

Have your discussions and activity on social media broadly related to politics encouraged you to do any of the following?

	Unweighted base	Total	Percentage
Base	514	515	
Do further research on an issue or topic related to politics that you care about?	136	137	27%
Go to an event – a demonstration, meeting, husting, or surgery	38	38	7%
Join a political group or movement	29	29	6%
Change your opinion on a political issue that you care about	48	48	9%
None of these	313	313	61%
Don't know	11	11	2%

Filter: All who have received or taken part in political content or discussions in the last three months

Table 6 **Thinking about the politically-related discussions you've had, and the activity you've seen, on social media in the last three months, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, as a direct result of these discussions and activity?**

	I feel that I understand better the issues and debates that have character-ised the general election campaign	I feel that I understand better what the parties stand for	I feel that social media does not give me the space to debate issues in detail	I feel that I am only able to discuss political issues with people who have similar views to my own
Base	515	515	515	515
Net agree	212 (41%)	212 (41%)	148 (29%)	160 (31%)
Strongly agree	47 (9%)	53 (10%)	46 (9%)	42 (8%)
Tend to agree	165 (32%)	159 (31%)	101 (20%)	118 (23%)
Neither agree nor disagree	193 (37%)	163 (32%)	184 (36%)	174 (34%)
Net disagree	94 (18%)	125 (24%)	160 (31%)	170 (33%)
Tend to disagree	58 (11%)	79 (15%)	117 (23%)	114 (22%)
Strongly disagree	36 (7%)	46 (9%)	42 (8%)	56 (11%)
Don't know	15 (3%)	15 (3%)	24 (5%)	11 (2%)
Net difference	118 (23%)	87 (17%)	−12 (−2%)	−10 (−2%)

I feel that it helped me decide whom to vote for	I feel I am more engaged in the political debate	I feel better able to express my political views and for them to be heard	I feel I better understand a politician, for instance their values or personality	I feel more likely to vote
515	515	515	515	515
151 (29%)	213 (41%)	200 (39%)	163 (32%)	199 (39%)
38 (7%)	52 (10%)	49 (9%)	39 (8%)	103 (20%)
113 (22%)	160 (31%)	152 (29%)	123 (24%)	96 (19%)
192 (37%)	173 (34%)	189 (37%)	194 (38%)	210 (41%)
156 (30%)	114 (22%)	109 (21%)	148 (29%)	95 (19%)
87 (17%)	66 (13%)	59 (11%)	89 (17%)	42 (8%)
69 (13%)	48 (9%)	50 (10%)	59 (11%)	53 (10%)
16 (3%)	15 (3%)	16 (3%)	11 (2%)	10 (2%)
−6 (−1%)	99 (19%)	91 (18%)	15 (3%)	104 (20%)

Table 7 **To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these statements relating to the use of social media by politicians?**

	They should use social media to share their views, policies and values	They should reply and engage with people who ask them questions and send them comments on social media	They should use social media to gather comments from constituents and reflect them in the decisions they make
Unweighted base	1,002	1,002	1,002
Base	1,002	1,002	1,002
Net agree	500 (50%)	540 (54%)	529 (53%)
Strongly agree	106 (11%)	155 (15%)	124 (12%)
Tend to agree	394 (39%)	384 (38%)	405 (40%)
Neither agree nor disagree	301 (30%)	287 (29%)	265 (26%)
Net disagree	141 (14%)	118 (12%)	137 (14%)
Tend to disagree	69 (7%)	58 (6%)	74 (7%)
Strongly disagree	72 (7%)	60 (6%)	64 (6%)
Don't know	60 (6%)	58 (6%)	70 (7%)
Net difference	359 (36%)	422 (42%)	392 (39%)

Politicians themselves should control their social media account rather than their office, or an external company	It is acceptable that a politicians' social media account is managed by people other than the politician themselves, as long as it represents their views	If political representatives did tend to reply to messages on social media, I would use social media as a way of talking to them
1,002	1,002	1,002
1,002	1,002	1,002
509 (51%)	290 (29%)	369 (37%)
193 (19%)	63 (6%)	85 (9%)
315 (31%)	227 (23%)	284 (28%)
302 (30%)	286 (29%)	291 (29%)
121 (12%)	348 (35%)	272 (27%)
76 (8%)	194 (19%)	126 (13%)
45 (4%)	154 (15%)	146 (15%)
71 (7%)	78 (8%)	69 (7%)
388 (39%)	−58 (−6%)	97 (10%)

Table 8 **How likely, if at all, would you be to contact or interact with each of the following political representatives on social media? Please select one answer only**

	Your local councillor		Your local constituency MP	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Unweighted base	1,002		1,002	
Base	1,002		1,002	
Net likely	323	32%	325	32%
Very likely	92	9%	79	8%
Fairly likely	230	23%	246	25%
Net not likely	587	59%	583	58%
Not very likely	223	22%	234	23%
Not at all likely	364	36%	349	35%
Don't know	92	9%	94	9%
Net difference	−264	−26%	−258	−26%

Someone seeking political office		A government minister		A cabinet minister or the prime minister	
Total	**Percentage**	**Total**	**Percentage**	**Total**	**Percentage**
1,002		1,002		1,002	
1,002		1,002		1,002	
198	20%	223	22%	219	22%
37	4%	57	6%	63	6%
161	16%	166	17%	157	16%
714	71%	688	69%	690	69%
319	32%	272	27%	261	26%
395	39%	416	42%	429	43%
90	9%	91	9%	92	9%
−516	−51%	−465	−46%	−471	−47%

Table 9 **To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these statements relating to the use of social media by politicians**

	Political representatives, such as MPs, MSPs and Welsh Assembly members, should have an account on social media		The use of social media improves the democratic process by encouraging more open discussion and greater access to political debate		The use of social media helps give me a better understanding of politicians	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Base	1,002		1,002		1,002	
Net agree	340	34%	416	42%	256	26%
Strongly agree	78	8%	81	8%	55	5%
Tend to agree	262	26%	335	33%	201	20%
Neither agree nor disagree	398	40	328	33%	368	37%
Net disagree	181	18%	200	20%	319	32%
Tend to disagree	90	9%	102	10%	157	16%
Strongly disagree	91	9%	98	10%	162	16%
Don't know	83	8%	58	6%	58	6%
Net difference	159	16%	216	22%	−62	−6%

Notes

1 See eMarketer, Global Media Intelligence Report: Western Europe, Sep 2015, p 88. The sample reflects the wide range of the platforms used by social media users.

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Over the last fifty years, a gap has been growing in the UK between political institutions and the people they represent. Voter turnout continues to decline; mass membership of political parties, once the most important bridge between the people and the political elite, continues to fall; and trust in and contact with politicians is at a historic all-time low.

At the same time, while fewer and fewer people are turning to conventional ways of making their voice heard, the use of social media for politics has exploded. This report outlines the emerging contours of political life online: who is doing it, for what ends and why. On the basis of new survey research, it also outlines the impact that digital politics is having on the political process, political engagement, and what it means for politicians.

It argues that the rise of digital politics is significant for the future democratic health of the UK. A new opportunity has now opened to use social media not just to win political power, but to wield it better. Social media builds bridges between people and institutions, at a scale, and with an ease, that has never before been possible. It lays out some key principles for how digital politics can be harnessed to reverse decades-long trends of political disengagement: the importance of listening to the electorate and treating social media as a two-way street; the need to recognise new online groups and mobilisations, and the power they yield; the necessity of moving from online discussions to something that can contribute towards the political decisions that are taken; and the dangers of digital exclusion.

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