

Article

Are Online Political Influencers Accelerating Democratic Deconsolidation?

Rachel Gibson^{1,*}, Esmeralda Bon¹, Philipp Darius², and Peter Smyth³

¹ Department of Politics, University of Manchester, UK

² Center for Digital Governance, Hertie School, Germany

³ Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research, University of Manchester, UK

* Corresponding author (rachel.gibson@manchester.ac.uk)

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Abstract

Social media campaigning is increasingly linked with anti-democratic outcomes, with concerns to date centring on paid adverts, rather than organic content produced by a new set of online political influencers. This study systematically compares voter exposure to these new campaign actors with candidate-sponsored ads, as well as established and alternative news sources during the US 2020 presidential election. Specifically, we examine how far higher exposure to these sources is linked with key trends identified in the democratic deconsolidation thesis. We use data from a national YouGov survey designed to measure digital campaign exposure to test our hypotheses. Findings show that while higher exposure to online political influencers is linked to more extremist opinions, followers are not disengaging from conventional politics. Exposure to paid political ads, however, is confirmed as a potential source of growing distrust in political institutions.

Keywords

democratic deconsolidation; digital campaigning; micro-influencers; online election; online influencers; social media

Issue

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1. Introduction

Views about the direction of digital democracy and indeed democratic regimes more generally have taken an increasingly negative and even dystopian turn in recent years (Foa & Mounk, 2019; Persily, 2017). As talk of decline has intensified, discussion around the emergence of a new type of political actor—the online influencer—has increased. These actors are seen as important alternative voices in the political debate, feeding news and information that often runs counter to conventional political narratives to their large networks of followers. While several studies have linked the growth of online political influencers (OPIs) to the rising tide of voter disaffection and polarisation, the evidence also shows they may be helping to counter such trends by increasing participation, particularly among disengaged citizens. This article advances this debate by profiling the political attitudes and behaviours of OPIs followers

in the US 2020 presidential election campaign using original online survey data. Specifically, we look at whether higher exposure to OPIs content is associated with key indicators of democratic deconsolidation and decline, or conversely a more engaged and mobilized audience. We use the results to speculate on their longer-term political consequences.

2. Literature Review

To better understand the implications of OPIs for representative democracy we integrate three relevant fields of research. Firstly, we locate OPIs within a broader discussion of the internet’s impact on democracy. We then review the work on OPIs themselves and attempt to define them and their political impact. Finally, we outline the democratic deconsolidation thesis and how the findings from current OPIs studies track against its core arguments.

2.1. *The Internet and Political Participation*

The arrival of the internet as a mass medium in the early 1990s prompted speculation about its potential to revitalize democracy (Rheingold, 1993). A meta-analysis of the first decade of findings on the topic by Boulianne (2009) provided a very modest endorsement with positive effects seen as increasing over time and online news consumption identified as the key stimulus to higher political engagement. The arrival of Web 2.0 Tools prompted a new wave of hopes for “e-participation” as new online exclusive activities such as blogging and virally sharing political content took off, particularly among younger cohorts (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010). Boulianne’s (2015) follow-up review article revealed that social media continued the pattern of modest mobilizing effects, particularly concerning informal modes of engagement. Oser and Boulianne’s (2020) recent meta-analysis of studies of digital media use and participation, however, proved more sceptical of the internet’s capacity to mobilize citizens in terms of moving the politically inactive to engage in the political process. Focusing only on studies using panel data the authors found that positive effects were concentrated largely among those already engaged, with any increases in participation therefore reinforcing rather than eroding existing representational bias.

At the macro level, serious questions about the democratizing effect of the internet gathered steam following the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2016 and the election of Donald Trump (Persily, 2017). Attention increasingly focused on the use of manipulative micro-targeting practices by rogue domestic and foreign actors although not all scholars were convinced of the power of these techniques (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). In the absence of a new meta-review of studies since 2016, it does appear the jury is out as to whether scholars’ worst fears are being realised. Some studies continue to reach positive conclusions about the relationship between digital media use and engagement, particularly regarding informal participation among younger citizens (Ida et al., 2020; Lin & Chiang, 2017; Ohme, 2019). However, others report negative effects on voter turnout and exclusion as campaigns increase their reliance on digital data and related micro-targeting techniques (Endres & Kelly, 2018; Kim et al., 2018). Analysis of the 2016 US presidential election, in particular, presented a disturbing picture of how social media was used to disseminate false information to the electorate and polarize the debate (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The expansion of a more extremist political discourse since that election and its shift out of public forums such as Twitter into sub-cultures such as 4Chan and 8Chan has only served to heighten fears about the subversive impact of these new technologies (Benkler et al., 2018).

2.2. *The Growth of Political Influencers*

Arguments associating the internet and particularly social media use with democratic decline have been

accompanied by an increasing number of studies pointing to the growth of a range of new influential political actors. These so-called OPIs or “micro-celebrities” are emerging as important alternative sources of information and cues for voters in recent elections (Riedl et al., 2021). While there is no commonly accepted definition of an OPI, most accounts focus on their informal or quasi-official status vis-a-vis more established campaign actors. For Fischer et al. (2022, p. 259), political influencers “neither represent established professional news media nor political parties,” leaving their activities largely unregulated. For others, the line is more blurred with some studies considering elected politicians such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini, and Modi as OPIs based on their overt criticism of, and distance from mainstream politics (Casero-Ripollés, 2021; Starita & Trillò, 2022). Shmargad (2022) brings some helpful clarity to this question by using the prior work of Wheeler (2013) that distinguished celebrity politicians from politicised celebrities to separate “influential politicians” from “politicised influencers.” While the latter may have a strong ideological outlook, they typically lack a formal partisan affiliation. In addition, the latter are also more likely to retweet the posts of the former, and they receive a very high number of retweets. Taking an even longer view on the question of what constitutes an influencer, scholars have returned to post-war work on two-step flow communication to identify a newer form of online “opinion leaders” (Naderer, 2023). Although similarly pivotal in the communication chain to their pre-digital counterparts, these new leaders are less likely to derive authority from their “real world” social status and direct networks. Instead, they rely on more specialist expertise to build extensive online networks through which they exert indirect influence.

In addition to a lack of precision in identifying who political influencers are, the extent, and nature of their impact on elections and society remains unclear. Numerous studies have presented them as key actors in the spread of misinformation, extremist views, and voter polarization (Dash et al., 2022; Lewis, 2018; Veilleux-Lepage et al., 2022). The 2018 Brazilian presidential election in particular was seen as an occasion in which OPIs defined as “internet personalities and ‘public’ people” involved in the campaign on Twitter played a key role in stoking a hyper-partisan debate and spreading disinformation, particularly among far-right users (Soares & Recuero, 2021, p. 5). Outside of the electoral context, they are also attributed with playing a significant role in fuelling conspiracy theories around Covid-19 and government vaccine programmes (Darius & Urquhart, 2021; Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2021). Finally, on the anti-democratic scorecard, OPIs have also served as useful tools for authoritarian regimes to surreptitiously counter and control anti-government narratives (Tan, 2020)

Other studies have presented OPIs role in a more positive light, showing how they have helped to fight

back against the flow of divisive narratives by promoting more credible sources that inform public discussion and increase political engagement (Allgaier, 2020; Peres-Neto, 2022). Early prototypes of OPIs are seen to have played a critical role in mobilizing global pro-democracy protests such as those that took place in the Arab world over a decade ago (Ayish, 2020). Questions have also been raised about the extent to which they are dominated by extreme right-wing views. Alexandre et al. (2022) analysis of Twitter debates in the first month of Trump's presidency concluded that the most prominent voices were those of established left-wing journalists and news outlets. Work by Park et al. (2015) around the same time in South Korea also identified a clear liberal bias in the following for OPIs. In addition, while they may inject a more emotive and cynical tone into political debates, studies in European and particularly Scandinavian democracies have concluded this can bring a broader and more diverse audience into the public discussion (Ödmark, 2021). Whether this variance in OPI orientation is temporal or contextual is an interesting unaddressed question in this literature. While it may be that the ideological outlook of OPIs has shifted rightward over time, it may also be contextually determined with newer and less stable democracies giving rise to more populist and radical right-wing OPIs, while established regimes enjoy more of a mix that alternates in line with the governing ideology.

To date systematic evidence regarding the negative or positive effects of OPIs is limited. At the micro-level, in terms of individuals' political attitudes and engagement, the picture is particularly sparse and somewhat ambiguous. Early work by Park et al. (2015) on followers of OPIs in South Korea found they consumed a more limited range of news sources and had low levels of political knowledge. Work by Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) on the impact of political influencers during recent national elections in Austria using a two-wave panel, however, found they had a positive effect on followers' online participation, which they argued (but did not test) was likely to extend to offline participation in a "gateway" manner. Naderer's (2023) experimental research, again in Austria, found that social media influencers who typically did not post about politics had a stronger mobilizing effect on followers when they did so, particularly among those with lower levels of political interest. Similarly, work by Schmuck et al. (2022) in Germany using survey panel data presented a qualified "yes" to the question of whether influencer exposure increased young people's levels of engagement in politics. While OPI content did appear to simplify perceptions of politics among this group this was found to have both beneficial and detrimental outcomes in that it increased their interest in key issues but also led them to become more cynical on certain topics. In behavioural terms, Shmargad's (2022) study of OPIs in the 2016 US congressional elections concluded they had helped prompt turnout, particularly for those who were less well-known and resourced.

In addition to a lack of definitional agreement on what an OPI is, and its effects, considerable variance exists in the methods used to detect them and interpret their core message. Some scholars combine rich contextual knowledge with qualitative methods to pre-select high-profile accounts (Peres-Neto, 2022; Veilleux-Lepage et al., 2022). Others adopt a range of objective measures drawn from reputational surveys of experts and platform users (Ryu & Han, 2021; Schmuck et al., 2022) or automated computational methods. The latter can range from simple follower-based metrics (Dash et al., 2022) to more in-depth social network and algorithmic analysis of a relevant retweet database to expose those "nodes" or accounts that are deemed most influential (Acharoui et al., 2020; Shmargad, 2022). While measures of centrality are most commonly relied on to signal influence, conventional "link-based" metrics to identify political influencers have been questioned, with more nuanced measures around the quality of messages and interactions seen as more useful (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). If an inductive or data-driven approach is taken, a mixed method approach that combines these techniques with a more qualitative analysis of accounts and the content of messages is regarded as important, particularly if one seeks to understand how these actors gain their visibility (Soares & Recuero, 2021).

2.3. Online Political Influencers and the Deconsolidation of Democracy

The preceding review has shown how the two main theories of internet effects—mobilization and reinforcement—proceed from the understanding that digital technology has a positive effect on democratic participation, although they reach different conclusions about the benefits of this at the macro level. Since the middle of the last decade, both the optimist and realist view of the gains delivered by society's increasing use of online technology has come under pressure from a more pessimistic scenario that links digital and particularly social media communication with declining political engagement and a rise in support for extremist views. This shift in perspective links, in turn, to a broader negative pivot in the democracy literature, with scholars warning we are entering a period of "democratic deconsolidation" (Foa & Mounk, 2016, 2019) and possibly "backsliding" into authoritarianism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). In their seminal article on the topic, Foa and Mounk (2016) argue that contemporary scholars are naïve to dismiss the signs that a deep and serious structural malaise is taking root within the "supposedly consolidated democracies" of Europe and North America. The warning signs they contend are evident in two main respects—a withdrawal from democratic institutions and rising support for authoritarian alternatives. The former is manifest in what are, in some cases, precipitous declines in the key behavioural and attitudinal supports that underpin the healthy functioning of democracy. This includes

citizens failing to regularly “show up” in elections, a waning commitment to its core values, and the belief that its processes can be used to effect real political change. The latter by an increasingly overt rejection of, and aversion to democratic models of government and support for anti-democratic alternatives.

Taking these arguments a step further, more recent accounts have pursued the second trend to contend that a growing number of democracies are now undergoing a process of “backsliding,” whereby autocratic and illiberal actions of elites that flout the rule of law and undermine constitutional checks and balances on governmental power become increasingly commonplace and accepted by the public. While some of this acceptance may simply reflect an apathetic detachment among the public, the more worrying interpretation is that happening through an active endorsement and selection of anti-system populist leaders by an increasingly polarised and divided electorate that views their opponents as fraudulent and illegitimate. While this has largely been a process associated with countries with a shorter history of democracy, the problem is increasingly seen as affecting well-established democracies such as the US and the UK. Donald Trump’s attempts to delegitimise the 2020 presidential election and the attempted prorogation of parliament by the Conservative government in 2019 are cited as evidence of this regressive turn (Russell et al., 2022).

Although the conclusion that democracies globally are now facing terminal decline has been subject to challenge (Inglehart, 2016), scholars of these trends are careful to point out that they are a long time in the making, their causes are multi-faceted, and the symptoms may often be missed—democracies don’t die overnight. As such, one would not expect the recent rise of a newly networked class of political voices on social media to constitute a critical or even major driver of these developments. That said, the direct attribution of OPI status to populist leaders and as amplifiers of alt-right, extremist, and conspiratorial narratives do raise important questions about the extent to which they are linked, even in symptomatic or epiphenomenal terms with the current spiral of decline that democracies now find themselves facing. It is this question that this article seeks to take a first step toward systematically investigating, using fresh evidence from one of the most prominent cases of deconsolidation and backsliding—that of the US—currently in view.

3. Research Hypotheses

Our literature review has shown how advances in digital technology have sparked a cycle of hopes and fears for democratic politics that have collided with a growing despondency about the extent to which the public and elites inherently value and support the representative institutions and norms that sit at the heart of this model of government. This downward spiral has occurred along-

side the growth of a new type of political actor—OPIs. The extent to which these influencers are contributing to trends toward deconsolidation has not been subject to extensive empirical analysis. The evidence that exists is patchy and inconclusive in that it appears to both support and reject this thesis. In this article, we subject these claims to fresh analysis using original survey data that specifically measures individuals’ exposure to OPIs and other political actors’ content during a highly competitive election and in a high social media use context.

We do so by specifying a series of hypotheses about the likely audience and potential impact of political influencers on voters that is based primarily on deductive inference from the deconsolidation thesis. We augment and develop these expectations where possible, with the findings from the limited set of empirical studies about the characteristics of political influencers’ audiences. A key characteristic of deconsolidation democracy is that “citizens sour on democratic institutions, become more open to authoritarian alternatives, and vote for anti-system parties” (Foa & Mounk, 2019, p. 1). From what we know about the audience of influencers in ideological terms, opinion is divided with some authors concluding they communicate with a predominantly right-wing and more radicalised audience, while others have revealed a left-wing bias. As such if OPIs are part of the deconsolidation trend, we might anticipate that their followers would be more likely to hold extremist views, occupying both left and right-wing ends of the political spectrum, and show a stronger pattern of support for candidates opposing the established political mainstream or status quo. In addition, we would expect to find a stronger scepticism and distrust of the core institutions and processes designed and lower satisfaction in general with the state of democracy. Finally, while Foa and Mounk (2019) do not explicitly consider an increased susceptibility to conspiracy theories as an indicator of democratic deconsolidation it is not a huge theoretical leap to connect an increased belief in these counter-narratives, many of which centre on the existence of corrupt “deep” state, with dislocation from the established mechanisms of representative government. Given the frequent association of OPIs with the circulation of conspiracy stories and fake news, we include a hypothesis reflecting this linkage in the beliefs of their followers.

Expectations about general levels of political engagement and participation are more ambiguous or mixed. Although Foa and Mounk (2016) cite declining turnout and participation in the democratic process as a “warning” sign of deconsolidation, there is an alternative argument to consider that those demonstrating the strongest signs of deconsolidation are more likely to turn out for a populist leader and/or vote “against” the establishment candidate. A similar logic can be applied to expectations about these individuals’ interest in politics, in that studies so far suggest those receiving influencer content, and particularly those who are most likely to be affected by

it, generally pay less attention to politics and are less likely to participate in politics, although they may be more drawn to more expressive e-participation modes. Whether this holds in a high-profile close election in which there is a clear anti-system candidate to support, however, is unclear.

To further explore these questions, we set out and test the following hypotheses. The first set consists of more deductively driven hypotheses that explicitly draw on the deconsolidation thesis that citizens are withdrawing or “soured” on democracy in general, are less trusting of key political institutions, and are more attracted to anti-system populist candidates:

H1: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are more likely to be ideologically extreme.

H2: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are more likely to support populist or anti-system candidates.

H3: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are less likely to trust democratic institutions and the mainstream media (MSM).

H4: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are less likely to be satisfied with democracy in the US.

H5: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are more likely to believe conspiracy theories.

The second set of hypotheses is more inductively derived and while linked to the deconsolidation argument, follows findings from the extant literature:

H6: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are likely to pay less attention to politics.

H7: Individuals with higher exposure to OPIs are less likely to participate in politics, but when they do so, it is via newer online modes rather than traditional offline modes.

4. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses we make use of data from an online survey conducted by YouGov US during the 2020 presidential election campaign (16 September–20 October 2020). An overall sample (N) of 5,379 was generated from YouGov’s main panel to be nationally representative of the target population, i.e., all US adults aged 18 and above, based on education level, age, gender, ethnicity, region, and 2016 past vote. A subset of 3,956 respondents from the total sample completed a specialist module of questions regarding the online campaign and specifically sources of information received during the campaign. YouGov included weights that were applied to the achieved sub-sample to optimise the representativeness and survey responses to all US adults.

4.1. Dependent Variables

The survey data was used to measure the dependent variables specified in H1–H7 and a range of controls. Specifically, the outcomes specified in H1 and H2 were operationalised as binary variables that measured ideological extremism (extremist vs. moderate/centre self-placement) and support for an anti-system candidate (voted for Trump). H3 was operationalised with two 10-point scales that measured trust in the federal government and the MSM. H4 used a standard four-point index measuring respondent satisfaction with democracy. H5 was measured as whether the respondent accepted as definitely or most likely true that Covid-19 was a hoax promoted by the international media or linked to the use of 5G technology. H6 was tested using a 0–10-point scale of attention to politics. H7 was tested using three different dependent variables. The first was a binary measure of whether the individual reported that they had voted or not. The second was a 0–6-point index that measured whether respondents had engaged in a range of more traditional modes of participation (joined in a protest, shown support via a button, sticker, or yard sign, attended a meeting, discussed politics, tried to persuade others, or donated to a political organization). The third measure was a 0–4-point index that measured engagement in a range of new online-specific modes of participation. A final point to note is that both turnout and vote choice were recorded post-election by YouGov for all respondents in their national panel, and responses were appended to our campaign survey dataset. The results from our test of H2 and H7 (vote choice, turnout) can thus be interpreted, albeit cautiously, with a more causal framework. All other outcome variables were measured in conjunction with the exposure measures and they permit inferences of association only. Details of the questions and variable coding are reported in the Supplementary File.

4.2. Independent Variables

4.2.1. Measuring Exposure to Online Political Influencers

Our core variable of interest was the levels of respondents’ exposure to OPIs. The question of what constitutes an OPI and how to measure exposure to their views has provoked a range of methodological responses. Some studies have adopted an entirely author-led and contextual approach to specifying relevant actors, while others have taken the quantitative route, using a range of social media metrics to identify key “nodes” within a given Tweet corpus. Our method lies in between these two poles in that we rely on a subjective definition of an OPI that is based on self-reported exposure by a nationally representative sample of voters during an election campaign. Taking a survey-based approach to identifying and measuring exposure to OPIs has been featured

in the prior literature. Work by Ryu and Han (2021) used small *N* expert surveys and qualitative analysis to generate a set of identifiable influencers that were then used in a larger *N* study. Other scholars have described an OPI to respondents using some specific examples and then asked if they follow one (Schmuck et al., 2022). In this study, we follow this latter approach but do not provide named individuals as prompts. Specifically, we asked how often in the past month (on a five-point scale from never to several times a day) they recalled having seen “non-sponsored content about the election or political issues posted by people or organizations I don’t know personally, but that I follow or like on social media.” In not offering specific examples, we recognize that there is a potential loss of precision and reliability in our measurement. However, this is weighed against the potential for introducing bias by priming respondents negatively or positively toward the question, given only a small set of OPIs can be named. In addition, by naming OPIs there is a risk we impose our perception as a research team of who “ideally” fulfils the role, rather than leaving this to respondents. Finally, on practical grounds, the survey instrument has a longitudinal and comparative dimension and will be fielded again in the US 2024 Presidential election and forthcoming European national elections. For comparative purposes, therefore, we were keen to ensure the question wording remained as consistent as possible across time and space.

A second issue that the wording of our OPI measure requires us to confront directly is the extent to which it allows for the inclusion of elected politicians and candidates. This conflation is not inherently problematic since as noted, the literature is somewhat ambiguous on this point with Trump himself often referred to as an OPI, given his prolific use of Twitter to share what are obviously personal views on topics. Furthermore, although our question does allow for the inclusion of a candidate or elected politician, any conflation may be mitigated by the fact that it is not asked as a “standalone” item but is part of a wider battery that asks respondents to discriminate between their exposure to informal online content from people they do or do not know and formal content (paid ads) from parties and candidates (see the Supplementary File, Appendix 2, for the full wording of the question).

4.2.2. Measuring Exposure to Other Types of Political Content

In a bid to further test whether the profile of those following OPIs was particularly indicative of the deconsolidation thesis, we compared it against the profiles of those with higher exposure to three other types of campaign content. This included campaign ads from parties and candidates using the same five-point scale as for OPIs. We also measured exposure to news media divided into mainstream news media sources (broadcast and cable TV, print, and public radio) and alternat-

ive media sources (independent news sites, blogs, and talk radio). The former was measured on a 0–12-point scale and the latter on a 0–6-point scale. The correlations between all four exposure measures are reported in the Supplementary File, Appendix 2, Table A2. None was over 0.5.

4.2.3. Control Variables and Estimation Methods

In addition to our main exposure measures of interest, we also included a range of standard controls: gender, age, income, education level, ethnicity/race, and employment status. We also control for the impact of party identification (party ID) and, where appropriate, levels of like/dislike toward the two candidates Trump and Biden with a feeling thermometer variable. Details of questions and variables are reported in the Supplementary File, Appendix 2, Table A2. To test our hypotheses, we used STATA version 14 to conduct a series of binary logistic and ordinary least squares regression (OLS) analyses, selected as appropriate to the distribution of the outcome variables. Listwise deletion was used to deal with missing data.

5. Results

Turning first to our main explanatory measures of interest, in terms of frequency of exposure (detailed figures reported in detail in the Supplementary File, Appendix 2, Table A1) it is clear that respondents saw all types of content, except alternative media, quite regularly. Exposure to online ads was typically higher and more frequent than exposure to OPIs with just under three-quarters of the sample having seen some sponsored content from a candidate or party in the past month, and typically several times a day. This compared to just over half reporting seeing content from an OPI, which was spread more evenly across the week. On average MSM and alternative media appeared to gain less of an audience daily. Checks for multi-collinearity were performed and yielded no obvious cause for concern (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2, Table A2).

Tables 1 and 2 provide the results of our core analysis and show that our expectations about the political characteristics of those with higher exposure to OPIs are partially supported, particularly regarding attitudes.

The findings from Model 1 show support for H1 in that those following OPIs are more likely to hold ideologically extreme views. They are also more likely to subscribe to conspiracy theories (H5) as Model 5 shows, at least regarding those linked with the pandemic. Concerning support for populist candidates and a “withdrawal” or souring on the democratic project (H3 and H4); however, our expectations are not met. Followers of OPIs are not significantly more supportive of anti-establishment candidates or critical of democratic institutions. While a null finding is interesting and appears to reduce worries that OPI followers are more detached

Table 1. Factors predicting exposure to online US 2020 election content: Models 1 to 4.

Independent variable	Model 1 (Ideological extremism)		Model 2 (Vote Trump)		Model 3a (Trust in Federal Government)			Model 3b (Trust in MSM)			Model 4 (Democracy dissatisfaction)		
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>beta</i>
Age	0.000	0.003	0.029***	0.006	-0.029***	0.003	0.177	-0.017***	0.003	-0.086	0.000	0.001	0.000
Gender (reference male)	-0.082	0.084	-0.278	0.189	0.049	0.098	0.009	-0.021	0.105	-0.003	-0.032	0.036	-0.016
Income	0.023	0.014	0.055	0.029	-0.028	0.016	-0.034	-0.013	0.017	-0.013	0.000	0.006	0.000
Education (reference no high-school)													
High-school graduate	-0.440*	0.209	0.425	0.504	-0.154	0.226	-0.026	0.002	0.280	0.000	-0.127	0.099	-0.059
College plus	-0.454*	0.211	0.891	0.498	-0.229	0.230	-0.040	-0.142	0.281	-0.020	-0.169	0.099	-0.080
Ethnicity (reference white)													
Black	-0.215	0.133	-1.107**	0.369	0.225	0.169	0.024	0.508**	0.175	0.045	0.100	0.061	0.030
Hispanic -0.069	0.122	-0.401	0.283	0.712***	0.141	0.086	0.575***	0.160	0.057	0.157**	0.052	0.052	
Other	-0.527**	0.170	-0.882*	0.354	0.218	0.187	0.021	0.102	0.214	0.008	0.068	0.068	0.019
Party ID (reference Independent)													
Democrat	0.912***	0.130	-0.923**	0.287	0.359*	0.154	0.063	2.512***	0.156	0.361	-0.009	0.059	-0.005
Republican	1.333***	1.31	1.039***	0.224	0.840***	0.167	0.143	-0.853***	0.160	-0.120	0.088	0.062	-0.042
Employed (reference Unemployed)													
Full-time employed	-0.173	0.098	0.739**	0.218	0.003	0.112	0.001	-0.192	0.121	-0.026	-0.032	0.042	-0.015
Part-time employed	-0.120	0.145	0.735*	0.349	0.200	0.175	0.021	-0.073	0.184	-0.006	-0.132**	0.060	0.042
Like Biden	—	—	-0.032***	0.004	0.023***	0.002	0.282	—	—	—	0.004***	0.001	0.138
Like Trump	—	—	0.042***	0.004	0.035***	0.002	0.477	—	—	—	0.012***	0.001	0.464
Exposed to political ads	-0.036	0.025	0.125*	0.058	-0.060*	0.030	-0.039	-0.081*	0.032	-0.043	0.003	0.011	0.005
Exposed to OPs	0.084**	0.026	0.010	0.061	0.004	0.030	0.002	0.006	0.031	0.003	-0.001	0.011	-0.008
Exposed to MSM	-0.046**	0.014	0.009	0.034	0.143***	0.018	0.160	0.395***	0.018	0.365	0.003	0.007	0.008
Exposed to alternative media	0.138***	0.024	0.011	0.059	0.025	0.030	0.017	-0.129***	0.030	-0.072	0.021	0.011	0.039
Constant	-0.364		-4.731***				2.141***			2.968***			1.656***
(Pseudo) <i>r</i> ²	0.058		0.693				0.240			0.435			0.191
<i>N</i>	2,847		2,521				2,921			2,947			2,853

Notes: Models 1 and 2 use binary logistic regression and report pseudo *R* square; Models 3a, 3b, and 4 use OLS and report *R* square and standardized betas; significance levels = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Factors predicting exposure to online US 2020 election content: Models 5 to 7c.

Independent variable	Model 5 (Conspiracy belief)		Model 6 (Political attention)			Model 7a (Turnout)		Model 7b (Traditional participation)			Model 7c (New participation)		
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>beta</i>	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>beta</i>
Age	-0.021***	0.003	0.027***	0.003	0.175	0.043***	0.004	0.001	0.002	0.012	-0.005***	0.001	-0.073
Gender	-0.194	0.102	-0.561***	0.089	-0.105	-0.236	0.145	-0.118*	0.046	-0.042	-0.027	0.036	-0.013
Income	-0.051**	0.017	0.102***	0.014	0.133	0.128***	0.027	0.061***	0.008	0.150	0.027***	0.006	0.087
Education (reference no high-school)													
High-school graduate	0.277	0.239	-0.058	0.232	-0.010	0.497	0.264	0.072	0.087	0.025	-0.037	0.069	-0.016
College plus	-0.090	0.244	0.485*	0.231	0.089	1.630***	0.282	0.445***	0.091	0.156	0.152*	0.072	0.069
Ethnicity (reference white)													
Black	0.385*	0.160	-0.253	0.156	-0.030	-0.196	0.218	-0.436***	0.069	-0.097	-0.320***	0.050	-0.092
Hispanic	0.180	0.143	-0.010	0.135	-0.001	-0.559**	0.178	-0.308***	0.061	-0.076	-0.123*	0.050	-0.039
Other	0.367*	0.177	-0.301	0.178	-0.031	-0.384	0.250	-0.029	0.095	-0.006	-0.123	0.067	-0.032
Party ID (reference independent)													
Democrat	-0.741***	0.152	1.231***	0.148	0.228	1.439***	0.174	0.472***	0.065	0.168	0.235***	0.049	0.108
Republican	0.560***	0.144	1.223***	0.148	0.220	1.276***	0.180	0.066	0.063	0.023	0.127*	0.049	0.056
Employed (reference unemployed)													
Full-time employed	-0.227	0.118	-0.135	0.100	-0.024	0.399*	0.176	-0.086	0.055	-0.029	-0.096*	0.043	-0.042
Part-time employed	0.131	0.168	-0.130	0.149	-0.014	0.127	0.244	0.024	0.087	0.005	0.039	0.063	0.011
Like Biden	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.103***	0.014	0.137	0.066***	0.011	0.114
Like Trump	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.135***	0.016	0.175	0.150***	0.013	0.249
Exposed to political ads	-0.031	0.031	0.083**	0.029	0.057	0.096*	0.043	0.036***	0.008	0.083	0.033***	0.006	0.096
Exposed to OPs	0.110***	0.031	0.156***	0.027	0.104	0.108*	0.050	0.087***	0.014	0.119	0.087***	0.011	0.153
Exposed to MSM	-0.051**	0.017	0.159***	0.015	0.189	0.041	0.025	0.036***	0.008	0.083	0.033***	0.006	0.096
Exposed to alternative media	0.267***	0.028	0.166***	0.026	0.118	0.006	0.042	0.087***	0.014	0.119	0.087***	0.011	0.153
Constant	-0.407												
(Pseudo) <i>r</i> ²	0.141		2.784***							-0.240*		0.087	
<i>N</i>	3,044		3,044							3,044		3,044	

Notes: Models 5 and 7a use binary logistic regression and report pseudo *R* square; Models 6, 7b, and 7c use OLS and report *R* square and standardized betas; significance levels = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

from the democratic process, it is important to note that current feelings of dissatisfaction with democracy in the US may be driven by other motivations. Although for some voters it may reflect a rejection of what they see as a corrupted and/or unworkable system (i.e., deconsolidation), for others it may express their deep disillusionment that democracy has been “taken over” by anti-democratic forces, and is, in fact, a more positive endorsement or plea for more democracy. Given that the two most significant predictors of democratic dissatisfaction in the model (Model 4) are positive feelings toward Biden and Trump, this dual interpretation of expressions of dissatisfaction with US democracy, at least during the 2020 presidential election is given some credibility. The lack of a link between OPIs and democratic dissatisfaction shown here, therefore, while it might ease concerns over their destabilizing influence on politics arguably requires further analysis to discriminate the underlying rationale for voters’ unhappiness in this regard.

Regarding levels of political engagement more generally, the results from Models 6 and 7a–c show that those following OPIs are more interested and active, both offline and online. While these findings run counter to our hypotheses and present a more positive picture of OPI followers in some regards than anticipated, they also raise some questions about their positive impact on public debate in the short and longer term. Given the more radical and fringe views they hold, their higher level of engagement is likely to contribute to increasing the volume of polarised opinion and circulation of misinformation and fake news during and between elections. Such a combination of extremism, irrationality, and activism while it may not be caused by following OPIs, does suggest that a growth in their followers while it may not contribute directly to democratic deconsolidation, is not likely to promote a greater consolidation and political consensus within US society.

The findings for our other measures of campaign exposure help to further enrich this picture and are worth some discussion at this point. Notably, it seems that those following more conventional and established sources of news, i.e., the MSM are, as one might expect, among the most moderate, engaged, and trusting of government. For those reporting high exposure to campaign ads, however, the picture is rather different. Clearly, the Trump campaign was the main beneficiary of this targeted online contact in terms of vote support (Model 2) and the individuals who saw more online ads were also among the least likely to trust the federal government or MSM. Given that vote choice was recorded and added to the survey data post-election (as was turnout), it is possible to interpret its relationship to ad exposure in a more causal manner than our other dependent variables. Furthermore, the fact that the Trump campaign was the biggest spender on Facebook and Instagram advertising (outspending the Democrats by over 10 million dollars between June–November 2020), lends face

validity at least to the idea that paid advertising was influential on voters’ decisions (Korsunski et al., 2020). Since the trust variables were measured simultaneously with the exposure variables, an argument that social media advertising is increasing public cynicism toward the federal government and mainstream sources is less sustainable but forms an interesting question for future research to explore. Certainly, the fact that campaign ads were found to exert more influence on voter choice than OPIs at this point suggests that from a purely practical standpoint, candidates seeking to leverage influencers to mobilize support should continue to invest in paid appeals, at least in the short term. The longer-term potential impact of this strategy for accelerating declining trust in public institutions, however, points to the importance of research to pinpoint where and how campaign ads may be undermining this more diffuse and very critical support for democracy.

Finally, the profile of those who reported higher exposure to alternative media sources (from both right and left) is the most similar to that of OPIs regarding being both more ideologically extreme and subscribing to conspiracy theories. They also participate more actively in politics and as one might expect, are significantly more distrustful of mainstream news media sources. Given that the correlation between OPI and alternative media exposure is low (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2, Table A2), it would appear they are drawn from the same active but marginalised sector of the electorate, but consume news and information from different sources. As with OPIs followers, therefore, a growth in the audience for alt-media outlets is unlikely to help moderate political divides in US society.

6. Conclusions

This article examines the role that a new type of political actor—the OPI—is playing in contemporary elections, and specifically the claim they are contributing to a “deconsolidation” of democracy. Using self-reported measures of OPI exposure, we have examined the attitudinal profile of those following them and their impact on voters’ behaviour.

Our results have confirmed that greater consumption of OPI content is associated with holding views that run counter to mainstream public opinion, both in general ideological terms and specific beliefs that Covid-19 is a global media hoax and/or a product of 5G technology. More exposure to OPIs, however, is not linked to higher support for populist candidates or distrust of key institutions. Indeed, far from disengaging with democracy, those following this new crop of opinion leaders are more likely to engage via existing channels of political influence. Our findings thus provide some initial reassurance on the central question of whether OPIs are contributing to the deconsolidation of democracy. Viewed from the broader lens of this thematic issue’s focus on mobilization, the findings are arguably more ambiguous.

Based on Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) elite-led definition of mobilization, our finding that pre-election exposure to OPIs is a significant predictor of turnout (reported post-election) suggests these influencers may constitute a new force for electoral mobilization. Adopting the wider attitudinal, extra-institutional, and disruptive lens on mobilization articulated by Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) and Cameron (1974) however, the linkage of OPI followers with extremist and conspiracy beliefs and engagement in more expressive modes of online participation may signal more destabilizing and conflictual outcomes. Such concerns are amplified by recent research in the US on the correlates of conspiracy thinking which has identified support for violence against the government as one of its core traits (Enders et al., 2023). Of course, we accept the reliance of our analysis on self-reported exposure and primarily cross-sectional data limits the extent to which we can draw any firm predictions about the long or short political effects of OPIs.

However, what does appear more likely is that OPIs are contributing to the fragmentation of the news media environment and increasing polarisation of public opinion. In contrast, online political advertising does appear to emerge as a cause for some concern. Those who experience more of this micro-targeted content are more likely to support the anti-establishment candidate and exhibit significantly less trust in democratic institutions and the credibility of mainstream news sources. Whether this is a direct result of online ad content, or more indirectly linked to concerns about data privacy and potential vote manipulation is a question for future analysis to explore.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Rachel Gibson is professor of politics at the University of Manchester. She currently leads the ERC Advanced Investigator grant project Digital Campaigning and Electoral Democracy (DiCED) and is a principal investigator of the Norface project examining The Intended and Unintended Consequences of Data-Driven Campaigning. She has published widely on the topic of digital campaigning including her recent book *When the Nerds Go Marching In* with Oxford University Press.



Esmeralda Bon is the lead research associate for the ERC Advanced Investigator grant project Digital Campaigning and Electoral Democracy (DiCED) at the University of Manchester. Her thesis and published work has focused on the drivers and impact of established and new political elites’ online political communication. Her current research interests centre on the growing role of political influencers in elections and developing methodologies to study this.



Philipp Darius is a postdoctoral researcher at the Hertie School’s Centre for Digital Governance. His research is interdisciplinary and lies at the intersection of technology and politics. He uses computational, quantitative, and qualitative approaches to examine the political implications of social media platforms and their governance. He also works with third-sector groups to develop media literacy initiatives to counter disinformation. During his PhD, Philipp was a visiting scholar at the Data Science Institute at the London School of Economics and GESIS (Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences).

Peter Smyth is the data manager for the Digital Campaigning and Electoral Democracy (DiCED) project at the University of Manchester. He has extensive experience in providing training in the use of social media methods and related data analysis through his work for the UK Data Service. His current work focuses on the collection, integration, and analysis of new forms of online data and their integration with survey responses.