

Improving the Quality of Online Political Conversations

Research area: Computational Social Science

Everyday casual political conversations through which individuals construct their identities, recognize others' perspectives and form informed opinions are central to a vibrant deliberative democracy. Such interactions online are especially known to foster political mobilization and participation [1]. However, the quality of these online conversations is declining; now roughly half of social media users find online political discussions to be less civil, less respectful and more angry than offline conversations [2]. A major contributing factor in the prevalence of low quality political discussions is the noted recent increase in affective polarization, a tendency of partisans to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively [3]. Increasingly, rank-and-file Republicans and Democrats view each other as selfish, hypocritical and close-minded [4]. In my PhD work, I aim to improve the quality of online political discussions by specifically accounting for the consequences of the strong partisan identities that we observe today.

Research on improving online conversation quality on social media predominantly focuses on altering community deliberation norms by highlighting, removing or reordering user posted content [6,7]. Others study the impact of different affordances such as anonymity [8], message character limit [9] and conversation threading [10] on conversation quality. Surprisingly, few consider the partisan nature of political discussions in studying online conversation quality (see [11] for an exception). Partisan identity, salient in most political interactions, is a social identity which engenders group oriented behavior. Further, the anonymity in online platforms accentuates group identity, exacerbates ingroup favoritism and outgroup animosity which directly affects conversation quality [5,12]. Thus, in order to improve online political discourse it is crucial to mitigate the effects of partisan identity, a topic widely studied in political science research on reducing partisan prejudice and polarization. In my work, I incorporate these theories to inform study design and intervention to improve conversation quality. Specifically, I examine the following: Can **priming a superordinate identity** such as the American national identity improve conversation quality between partisans? Does **mediated outgroup contact** such as exposure to feel-good online news of everyday Democrats and Republicans working together reduce online hostility? Does **individuating users** to see beyond partisan identities or **highlighting shared social identities** improve inter-party relations online? I use observational causal inference techniques and online experiments to answer these questions.

Platforms such as Facebook are vibrant spaces for political discussion, bringing new voices, increasing personal involvement and increasing knowledge about political candidates [2]. However, a majority of users also feel stressed and frustrated when discussing politics online, which calls our attention to the quality of these conversations [13]. I believe that my interdisciplinary research with its focus on partisan identity addresses this urgent need to improve online political discourse. More broadly, this research will help to build an online public sphere that enables free and respectful political conversations, strengthening the fabric of democracies worldwide.