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Facebook and the Paradox of Digital Politics

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In the 12 years since Barack Obama first mastered the art of digital campaigning, social media has grown into a central feature of American public life. So much so, that the CEO's of both Facebook and Twitter were recently called to testify before the U.S. Senate about the potential influence that their companies may have on electoral outcomes. But when it comes to politics, social media's growing importance should not necessarily be mistaken for a vote of public confidence.

Source: Richard Drew/Associated Press

A recent survey conducted at the University of South Florida examined the role that Facebook played in the 2020 election and found an interesting paradox: while Floridians are increasingly turning to social media to stay up-to-date and informed about politics, many are dissatisfied with the quality of the information they encounter online.

The survey – which was conducted between October 10th and 17th – asked a representative sample of 600 Floridians how heavily they relied on Facebook to 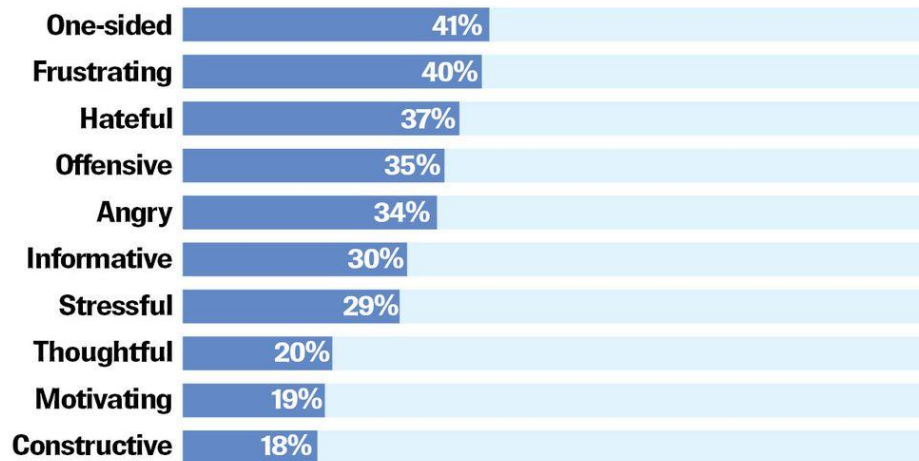stay informed about the Presidential election. Consistent with national trends, more than half (58%) indicated that they relied on Facebook at least "a little," while nearly a third (31%) answered "a lot."

For many, social media platforms have become part of a day-to-day news routine. Almost a quarter of respondents (22%) reported collecting information about the election on Facebook every day, while more than half (57%) did so at least once a week. The responses remind us just how deeply engrained social media has become in modern political life, but at the same time, it seems that many users are less than enthusiastic about the political environment that they encounter on Facebook and other platforms.
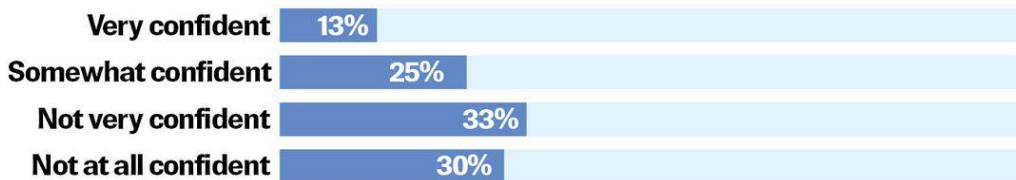
While reliance on social media is on the rise, nearly two-thirds of social media users in Florida (63%) said that they were "not very confident" about the accuracy of the political information they see on Facebook.

Worse yet, when asked to describe the political conversations they encountered on social media during the Presidential election, most respondents painted a decidedly negative picture. The most frequently chosen adjectives were "one-sided" (41%), "frustrating" (40%), "hateful" (37%), and "offensive" (35%). Less than 20% of respondents described these discussions as "thoughtful" or "constructive."

How Floridians describe political discussions on social media

Category	Percentage
One-sided	41%
Frustrating	40%
Hateful	37%
Offensive	35%
Angry	34%
Informative	30%
Stressful	29%
Thoughtful	20%
Motivating	19%
Constructive	18%

Confidence in the accuracy of political information on Facebook

Category	Percentage
Very confident	13%
Somewhat confident	25%
Not very confident	33%
Not at all confident	30%

Source: The USF study was conducted as an online survey using Prodege MR, a leading market research provider. The sample of 600 Floridians was fielded to be representative of the state's demographic composition based on region, age, gender, race, and ethnicity. The results are reported with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error +/- 4.

For some Floridians, the rancorous discourse was enough to affect their online relationships. Nearly a third of respondents (29%) reported "unfriending" or "unfollowing" someone over political posts in the three months leading up to the 2020 election. Another 25% utilized Facebook's "snooze" feature to temporarily block someone for the same reason.

The fact that so many social media users are breaking network ties over politics is alarming. For one thing, it reflects the already polarized nature of American politics in the 21st century, including an increasing trend toward politically homogenous social circles. Furthermore, while some say they unfriend others for posting about politics too often, respondents more commonly reported "unfriending" or "unfollowing" members of their social network simply for posting a political opinion with which they disagreed.

In recent years, political scientists and others have raised significant concerns over the potential for these behaviors to result in the formation of online "echo chambers" – or social networks that become increasingly one-sided as alternative viewpoints are filtered out with the click of a button.

Not only do these "echo chambers" lead to further partisan entrenchment, but it is also feared that they may foster the conditions in which misinformation can flourish, as false claims and unfounded conspiracy theories can remain unchallenged in closed-off networks. Between COVID-19 and the Presidential election, we've seen ample evidence of this in recent months.

Social media companies can't be blamed for all that ails American democracy. With or without Facebook, we would likely still be struggling with severe polarization and very real challenges over informational credibility. But it is also safe to say that social media isn't making things better, either.

While trends and data suggest that platforms like Facebook and Twitter will only become more central to public and political life in the coming years, many users seem to be sending clear signals about the type of information environment that they would like to find there – namely one populated by more reliable information and more civil discourse. For social media companies such as Facebook, achieving those outcomes may be the single most important challenge of the next decade.

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