The Role of Social Media in Shaping Voter Attitudes in the

U.S. Throughout Trump's Political Career

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Abstract:

This thesis examines how social media has shaped public perceptions of Donald Trump and influenced voter attitudes throughout his political career, with particular attention to younger male demographics. Using a mixed-methods approach and triangulating statistical data from Pew Research Center and Statista, expert interviews, and qualitative case studies, this study looks at how algorithmically driven content, digital populism, and platform-specific dissemination styles have reshaped political engagement. Findings reveal that platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and podcasting channels not only propagate Trump's messaging but also contribute to parasocial relationships that blur the lines between Trump being a political leader and a digital influencer. These dynamics are especially influential among younger voters, and especially men, who consume political content in emotionally resonant, visual formats. The research draws on theories such as echo chamber theory and the spiral of silence theory to contextualize changes in U.S voter behavior, concluding that social media facilitates a form of political communication increasingly detached from deliberation and rooted in identity reinforcement.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In today's digital age, social media has become a strong force in shaping political communication. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2024, 72% of Americans accessed news through social media, with younger demographics between 18 and 29 saying they rely heavily on these platforms for political information and discourse. This is a statistic that has been steadily increasing since social media's inception, but more relevantly since the 2016 presidential election. In 2016, the number of American adults who used social media was at 62% (Pew Research Center, 2016, 2020).

When social media sites first became popular, they were mostly used as simple networking sites. However, nowadays they operate as powerful arenas for both social dialogue and political assembly. As social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Youtube, and TikTok have skyrocketed in popularity, political actors have embraced and harnessed these platforms to engage directly with voters and propagate their messaging while influencing public opinion. This dispersed information is often posted in real time, and minimally edited, reflecting the current thinking of the user. According to Statista, as of February 2025, there were 5.56 billion internet users worldwide, which amounted to 67.9 percent of the global population. Of this total, 5.24 billion, or 63.9 percent of the world's population, were social media users (Statista, 2025).

Donald Trump has made important use of social media ever since he first campaigned for president in 2016, and thrust his political career into the spotlight. Fundamentally through the platform Twitter (Now X), Trump could directly speak to tens of millions of Americans without having to rely on traditional media outlets to help convey his messaging. From then on, this essentially changed the way U.S political discourse was conducted. Trump's use of Twitter

enabled him to make often provocative statements which turned social media into a primary tool for mobilizing support, setting media agendas, and shaping public narratives.

Between the years 2016 and 2024, the United States experienced a significant digital transformation, most particularly in how voters access and consume information. This helped form and solidify political attitudes. It showcased how they responded to political campaigns. With this in mind, Donald Trump's political career stands as an unparalleled and unprecedented case study in how the strategic use of social media to disseminate and share political messaging can revamp the traditional norms of democratic engagement and influence key voter demographics on an unprecedented scale.

Social media completely transformed recent election campaigns. Because of their extreme popularity and direct communication, campaigns have been able to develop data-driven microtargeting strategies. These deliver tailored political messages to specific demographic groups based on their online behavior and preferences (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). The above-mentioned social media platforms have also stimulated the virality of political content, especially throughout times of increased levels of political activity such as presidential campaigns. Messages are amplified at an unmatched speed and scale, with algorithms often favoring provocative or emotionally charged narratives that drive user engagement (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020).

It is impossible to talk about charged narratives and viral political content without talking about misinformation and disinformation. These aspects have become a defining feature of modern

digital campaigning. Misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly online and shape public opinion while often reinforcing polarization, therefore potentially altering voter behavior (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020). The role of these social media platforms, both in regards to how they manage fake news and their influence in general, raises concerns about what role they play in democratic processes and the integrity of electoral outcomes.

Lots of literature has been published that explores social media's role in political communication, however these studies mostly fail to address the longitudinal impact of social media over multiple election cycles, particularly in relation to individual voter attitudes and shifts in key demographic areas. This thesis seeks to fill this gap by exploring how social media has affected public perceptions over the course of Donald Trump's career, with an emphasis on how his digital presence influenced key voting demographics. In particular, younger voters, who are not only the most active social media users but also a politically significant group have a large and important influence over elections.

To go further, this study will offer a nuanced approach by not only investigating content dissemination but also the psychological, behavioral, and emotional responses of various voter groups to online content published to social media.

This thesis will aim to answer the question:

How has social media shaped public perceptions of Donald Trump and influenced key voting demographics, especially younger male voters (18-30), throughout Donald Trump's political career?

The hypothesis for this study is that social media has significantly influenced voter attitudes by amplifying political polarization, reinforcing echo chambers, and shaping perceptions of misinformation, all effects that are particularly pronounced among younger demographic voters.

My interest in this topic stems from my deep interest in American politics, more specifically in the recent 2024 presidential election between Donald Trump and the Biden-Harris campaign. Being born in the US, having family there, and having an American passport made me all the more interested in how US politics function and affect me. Being an active user of social media, I have seen first hand the extent to which political content is disseminated across social media and how it is received by audiences of my same age group, the one I am most familiar with and studying in this thesis.

The relevance of this thesis also stems from today's pressing issues of political polarization, misinformation and populism.

The roadmap of this thesis will go as follows: Chapter one will consist of my introduction; this means familiarizing the reader with the research direction of this thesis, the context of the topic, and its significance. Chapter two will consist of the thesis' theoretical framework and literature

review. Here, the various relevant theories of this study will be explored, and position this thesis within current academic debate frameworks. Chapter three will consist of the research methodology, detailing the qualitative content analysis approach, data sources, and analytical frameworks employed in this study. Qualitative data will also be presented through empirical analysis. Chapter five will be the discussion part of the essay, where findings will be interpreted, implications will be discussed, and limitations will be addressed. Finally, chapter six will conclude the thesis by providing a summary of the contributions, suggestions for future policy implications, and offer directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to outline the academic and theoretical landscapes surrounding the use of social media in U.S political communication, specifically how younger demographics have been affected by this over the past decade. This review will situate this thesis within the relevant academic fields of political communication, digital media studies, and behavioural politics. It will focus on the roles of platforms such as X (Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook/Instagram in shaping electoral outcomes.

This chapter's objectives are to first present the theoretical framework supporting this research. Second, empirical studies which have investigated the interplay between social media and political behavior and voter attitudes are to be explored. This includes relevant literature on agenda-setting, voter attitudes, echo chambers, and the rise of alternative media ecosystems; a relevant case study on Rodrigo Duterte will also be included. The effect these dynamics have on younger male voters will be especially explored since this demographic has become increasingly influential in the digital era central to Trump's campaign policies and strategy.

2.2 Key concepts

For the purpose of this thesis, several key concepts will be defined that can be referred back to if needed, these key concepts include: social media platforms, voter attitudes, echo chambers,

misinformation, digital populism, parasocial relationships, authenticity, and algorithmic amplification

(1) Social media platforms

Social media platforms are interactive digital spaces where users create, share, and exchange content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These include Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok. Within this thesis, social media is considered a tool for political communication—one that disseminates information rapidly and shapes public discourse via algorithms that amplify specific content types.

(2) Voter attitudes

Voter attitudes encompass the opinions, beliefs, and predispositions individuals hold toward political figures, parties, and policies (Campbell et al., 1960). In this study, special attention is given to how social media engagement influences these attitudes among younger male demographics. The focus is on whether online exposure reinforces or alters political views and affiliations.

(3) Echo chambers

Echo chambers are environments, especially digital ones, where users mainly encounter information that aligns with their existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints

(Garrett, 2009). These chambers are amplified by algorithmic content curation, which reinforces polarization and can affect voter mobilization and susceptibility to misinformation.

(4) Misinformation

Finally, misinformation refers to inaccurate or misleading information shared without intent to deceive, often influencing public perception and behavior (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). On social media, such content spreads quickly, especially when emotionally charged, and often reaches large audiences before corrections can be made. This study evaluates the role of misinformation in shaping trust and voter behavior during key political events.

(5) Digital populism

Digital populism is the use of digital platforms by political figures to bypass traditional institutions (Gerbaudo, 2018). Its aim is to foster direct communication with the people, and frame elitists and mainstream media as adversaries. As populism does, it often relies on emotionally charged and over-simplified narratives that resonate with those who feel disaffected by society.

(6) Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided psychological bonds that form between public figures and their audiences. These audiences feel a sense of intimacy and familiarity despite never having a real relationship with the host or influencer (Horton & Wohl 1956).

(7) Authenticity

(Perceived) Authenticity refers to the degree to which audiences view a political figure as relatable, unscripted, and genuine, even when this authenticity is deliberately fabricated (Enli, 2017).

(8) Algorithmic amplification

Finally, algorithmic amplification refers to how online platform algorithms disseminate and emphasize certain types of content. These algorithms often favor emotional, polarizing, or generally engaging material that users find the most appealing (Tufekci, 2015).

2.3 Theoretical framework

The four main theories rooted in this study are: The agenda-setting theory, echo chamber theory, spiral of silence theory and the cultural backlash theory.

Agenda-setting theory

The Agenda-Setting theory, first developed by McCombs & Shaw (1972) suggests that media outlets significantly influence the public agenda by determining which issues are important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In their seminal study in the U.S in the 1968 presidential elections, they demonstrated that the prominence of issues presented in the media strongly correlated with the issues that voters considered to be most important. The central argument surrounding this

phenomenon is that media attitudes can strongly influence the public priorities of the general public by emphasizing certain topics, thereby guiding the perceived relevance of the topic, especially when it comes to political issues. Although this theory originated in a time of traditional news outlets, it can certainly be applied to current digital media environments. Platforms like Twitter (X), Youtube, Facebook/Instagram, and TikTok set agendas through algorithmically driven content curation (Andrew M. Guess et al. 2023, Garett, 2009). Users are not simply recipients of the content they consume, but also actively participate by engaging with posts using "Likes", "Shares", and "Comments"; which further shapes this content to be available to a broader audience.

Echo chamber theory

The echo chamber theory suggests that digital platform algorithms expose users to like-minded perspectives, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and deepening polarization. Garrett's seminal study (2009) on internet news users found that politically motivated selective exposure online leads to echo chambers. Users seek out beliefs that correspond to their pre-existing ideology and tend to avoid countervailing information. Garett discovered that when participants were given a mix of liberal and conservative news links, participants overwhelmingly clicked on the link associated with their party and values. Algorithms take advantage of this by personalizing users' feeds to match their interests (Garett, 2009). As users continue to primarily interact with content associated with their pre-existing beliefs, the algorithm reinforces their homogenous news exposure and continues to show them content and news from the same sources.

Spiral of silence theory

The spiral of silence theory suggests that individuals may refrain from expressing their minority opinions out of fear of social isolation. This dynamic is amplified in political discourse, as it is a particularly sensitive topic to talk about, especially in the US (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). According to the theory, this tendency is a self-reinforcing dynamic, the dominant views are expressed more frequently while the dissenting opinions are frequently suppressed, which creates a skewed dynamic and creates an illusion of a consensus opinion. Decades ago, Noelle-Neuman's original work emphasized the role of mass media in shaping perceptions of what the "Majority" opinion is, however this theory can be widely applied to social media news dissemination today. Feedback on social media platforms is instant and often aggressive, meaning the fear of backlash from commenting or posting can discourage many users from using these features.

Cultural backlash theory

Cultural backlash theory suggests that there is a sociopolitical explanation for the rise of right-wing populism in Western democracies. Inglehart and Norris (2016) claim that recent decades of rapid social change, characterized by globalization, rising multiculturalism, gender equality movements, and progressive cultural norms have created backlash amongst segments of the population that feel left behind, alienated, or threatened by this rapid progression. This reaction is generally stronger among older, less educated, and traditionally conservative voters. They consider these changes to be a disruption to their cultural identity and social status. In the digital age, social media amplifies this backlash by providing platforms for these disaffected groups to communicate to one another, and find communities that validate their grievances.

2.4 Existing research on social media and U.S political campaigns

This section will cover pre-existing academic research relating to the topic of this thesis. It will be split into subsections: Social media as a campaign infrastructure, emotional and visual communication online, digital populism and authenticity, alternative media and podcast politics, and any gaps in the literature.

Social media as campaign infrastructure

Over the past decade, social media platforms have been rising to the top as one of the most important pieces of infrastructure to form a well-rounded political campaign. Scholars and researchers have documented how big platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook/Instagram, and TikTok evolved from simple outreach tools into important instruments for engaging with voters,

framing narratives, and instant messaging about key current events. This rapid transformation is closely linked with a phenomenon known as "Permanent campaigning", where political actors maintain continuous public visibility between election cycles through the use of digital engagement (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). This permanent campaigning can heavily influence an election, as politicians use social media not only to secure electoral support but also to shape public discourse to their liking, reinforcing their brand and image, and sustaining their political momentum, regardless if it is election season or not.a

In their research, Enli (2017) describes how Twitter, in particular, was used as a unique political arena during the 2016 U.S presidential election. It enabled candidates to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and share unfiltered messaging directly with their supporters. They conducted a comparative analysis of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton's Twitter use strategies for their campaigns, revealing a growing professionalization of digital campaigning. Clinton's social media use and presence consisted of more polished, policy-driven content. On the other hand, Trump adopted a more improvisational and emotional tone to try and appeal to his audiences. This new style of campaigning reflects broader trends in the way politics and media collide: Digital platforms reward immediacy, spectacle, engagement, and most importantly attention.

Kreiss & McGregor (2017) also found that campaigns have increasingly adapted to technological capabilities and developments while also keeping up with the most engaging types of content that attracts the most viewers. Related to this, political messaging is no longer only shaped by campaign professionals since the logic of platform algorithms paired with user interaction play

an important role. The authors suggest that modern campaigns therefore operate as hybrid media systems, blending this traditional political messaging with a more participatory and performative side. This shift toward platform-driven, continuous campaigning allows for a clear foundation to better understand how Donald Trump leveraged his use of social media to influence voter attitudes among younger voters in particular.

Emotional and visual communication online

Emotional and visual communication has become quintessential with campaigning in general, but especially in regards to digital platforms. On social media platforms, visual storytelling permits candidates to create a political persona that extends beyond traditional scripted policy messaging. These platforms are designed to allow for visual immediacy and emotional engagement, flipping the script on how modern political communication is conducted.

Farkas (2020) examines how politicians rigorously use image-based content to mold political narratives to their liking, while maximising engagement on their social media accounts. Her analysis shows a clear pattern: posted images portraying informality, emotional expression, and everyday life seem to attract a higher number of interactions rather than formal photographs. The main point of these informal images is to humanize politicians, make them appear more relatable, and encourage these illusionary bonds digital audiences tend to form with public figures, contributing to what she terms a "visual personalization" of politics. Farkas also mentions how emotional cues such as smiling, laughing, sharing personal stories, significantly boosts user engagement.

Maddalena (2016), in his analysis of the "iconic Trump epoch", contends that Donald Trump mastered the use of symbolic and affective communication in a way that other, traditional politicians had failed. Trump's campaign was not built through strong policy recommendations but through a consistent stream of emotionally appealing images, statements, and a performative nature engineered to go viral. This mostly visual rhetoric reinforced his self proclaimed image of being a political outsider while taking advantage of the media coverage caused by spectacles and disruptions he caused. This helped to establish a form of "iconic authenticity" that resonated deeply with disaffected audiences, especially younger male voters, who are already familiar with the immediacy and emotional tone of social platforms. These two studies show that image strategy and affective design trump message content when it comes to digital campaigning.

Digital populism and authenticity

The rise of digital populism in recent years has coincided with the strategic use of authenticity as a performative instrument. Enli (2017), introduces the concept of the "authentic outsider", which is a performative alternative persona that political actors can use to distance themselves from elite institutions while enhancing their own perceived reliability to ordinary citizens. According to Enli, platforms such as Twitter (X) allow for politicians to bypass traditional media filters through the use of visual personalization and reinforce their "outsider" image.

Maddalena (2017) further explores how Donald Trump embodies this communicative style. His presence on social media is exemplified through spontaneity, emotive language, and aggressive

antagonism towards mainstream media and institutions. This in turn contributes to the forming of his anti-establishment persona and creates the perfect combination for virality.

The blending of (perceived) authenticity with digital populism offers an important point of view to help contextualize this thesis, particularly in looking at how Trump's strategic self-representation resonates with younger, tech-savvy audiences.

Social media engagement among young male voters

Recent research has indicated that young male voters are highly active on social media platforms, with personalized content often including a blend of politics, entertainment, and "bro culture". A recent study from Montclair State University (2024) found that Gen Z men primarily gravitated towards political content via YouTube, Twitter (X), and podcasts. Donald Trump strategically engaged with popular influencers such as Joe Rogan, Logan Paul, and others. It is this media alignment that propelled Trump to new heights in regards to his popularity with young men (Montclair State University,Do 2024). Comparably, an analysis by Dignam and Rohlinger (2019) on "The Red Pill" online community demonstrates how certain online networks of young men in the "manosphere" rallied behind Trump's 2016 campaign. Within these online forums, Trump was framed as an ally for men against the dominant "feminist establishment", explicitly endorsing him as the force that would drive the reclamation of threatened masculine status (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). These findings show that social media can facilitate the integration of young men into the political scene, albeit not always in expected ways.

From a broader research perspective, while social media networks have the potential to mobilize civic engagement among younger generations, the primary use of these platforms among this demographic is entertainment, which can distract from political participation (Matthes, 2022). Similarly, Nilan (2025) explores why men are so receptive to far-right populist rhetoric in digital spaces. He argues that socio-economic instability and rapidly shifting gender norms have created what he terms as a sense of "fragile masculinity", leaving a portion of young men feeling economically and culturally displaced. Knowing this, he explores how social media platforms can not only act as spaces that make these men feel like they are accepted, but more dangerously as breeding grounds for resentment. This is in part due to algorithmically tailored content which frames minorities as scapegoats for personal and societal decline. (Kreiss & McGregor, 2017). Additionally, Nilan points out that platforms like TikTok and YouTube play a central role in the normalization of these narratives by promoting content that frames them in humor and irony.

This research paints a clear picture: online spaces have created formative communities where young male voters encounter political messaging. This messaging is often intertwined within digital subcultures and deepens the appeal of populist figures like Donald Trump.

Alternative media and podcast politics

In recent years, the rise of alternative media formats have resulted in a reworked approach to political communication. Politicians are now offered direct, unfiltered access to audiences through the use of podcasts, live streams, and YouTube talk shows hosted by prominent influencers. This differs from traditional media outlets which are usually more structured and moderated, which offers limited direct audience engagement or spontaneity.

Donald Trump has made strategic use of these forms of media, he frequently appeared on podcast shows such as "Impaulsive", "The Full Send Podcast", and "The Joe Rogan Experience"; as well as livestreams hosted by other influencers.

Ging (2019) and Enli (2017) analyze this topic, examining how these long-form, informal formats allow for Trump to project a relatable parasocial intimacy with the audience, while avoiding typical constraints of traditional interviews.

This style of communication aligns with a broader trend in populist media use. Ging (2019) notably refers to these spaces as "toxic technocultures", where anti-establishment and masculine narratives are popular points of discussion. Furthermore, Inglehart and Norris (2016) discuss how Cultural Backlash Theory provides a useful template for understanding why it is that Trump's rhetoric resonates so strongly with disaffected demographics, and young men in particular (although cultural backlash theory is said to mainly affect older generations, but more on this later).

These platforms foster emotional trust, with research indicating that long-form media such as podcasts cultivate a perceived intimacy and authenticity. For instance, Vilceanu (2025) conducted a study of more than 12,000 podcast reviews. This study revealed that listeners often develop strong parasocial relationships with the hosts, indicated by feelings of trust and personal connection. It is when hosts, or guests, share personal anecdotes and/or maintain consistent engagement that audiences perceive them as their friend or confidant. These dynamics are especially effective among younger audiences who are already disillusioned with traditional

news sources, and are more inclined to consume news if it is blended with entertaining content (MSU, 2024). Rodrigo Duterte's 2016 presidential campaign also provides a telling example of how social media can be used to propel a candidate to presidential victory.

Comparative case study: Rodrigo Duterte's 2016 presidential election campaign

Recent academic research has drawn parallels between the digital populist campaigns of Rodrigo Duterte 2016 presidential campaign in the Philippines and Donald Trump. Both of these candidates have redefined political communication through the unconventional use of social media in their campaigns. This section will explore these comparative studies that emphasize contextual differences while acknowledging their shared disruption of legacy media structures.

Garrido (2024) critiques the "thin comparisons" that compare Trump and Duterte solely based on their autocratic tendencies, advocating instead for "thick descriptions" rooted in socio-political contexts. He notes that, in the Philippines, Duterte's support base was more demographically diverse and intersectional than Trump's, with supporters coming from both the urban elites and poorer communities seeking stability amid institutional instability. Trump's base, on the other hand, was more characterized by cultural grievances, social degradation, and high partisanship, in other words voters in the US tend to be very loyal to their political parties. This is especially prevalent among rural and white working class voters in the US (Garrido, 2024).

A key aspect of Duterte's campaign strategy involved the use of coordinated online trolling to suppress dissent and shape media narratives. Garrido (2024) discusses how these tactics, ranging

from online harassment of journalists to the artificial amplification of Duterte's rhetoric by taking advantage of social media algorithms, blurred the line between real, organic support, and artificial visibility. Misinformation thrived in this propaganda network, alternative viewpoints were droned out. Although Trump's media strategy was not identical, some similarities can be drawn through his amplification of conspiracy theories and the use of online influencers to propagate his messaging.

Furthermore, empirical data from Sinpeng et al. (2019) explores the 2016 election in the Philippines as the first major "social media election" in the country. This study found that it was not professional campaign strategy that led to Duterte's digital success, it was a grassroots fan base that created viral content surrounding the candidate, with little involvement from the candidate himself. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Now X) were used to spread news about Dutere's campaign. The sheer volume of these digital supporters' posts and interactions blurred the line between authentic political followers, and troll-driven manipulation. The authors argue that this digital attention greatly amplified his campaign messaging across social media, bypassing traditional media gatekeeping institutions.

This phenomenon aligns with broader literature on "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This describes how digital media allows for individuals to mobilize themselves politically without having to rely on centralized organizations like news stations or traditional hierarchies, whether these be digital or physical. Instead of being driven by formal parties or campaign structures, connective action is distinguished by personalized content creation and sharing, emotional storytelling, and the virality of synchronized message dissemination. Similarly,

"citizen-initiated campaigning" (Gibson, 2015) refers to political activity where ordinary every-day users, not campaign professionals, create, rework, and share political content. This subtly creates momentum independent of official campaign organizers. Connective action and citizen-initiated campaigning helps to explain how Duterte's and Trump's campaigns both gained massive traction online. How this wasn't primarily through scripted, pre-planned events but rather through decentralized and emotionally resonant participation. In both cases, social media facilitated a political style portrayed as anti-elite, authentic, and aggressive, all traits that are particularly attractive to disaffected populations, particularly young men.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis and qualitative case studies to examine how social media influences voter attitudes. This approach merges statistical accuracy and contextual depth, offering a broader understanding of digital political engagement. Furthermore, expert interviews will be conducted with scholars familiar in this field of research. This approach aims to contextualize my research, ensuring both breadth and depth in capturing how social media impacts voter attitudes.

In sum, this thesis uses a triangulated method combining literature review, semi-structured interviews, and statistical data to examine the research question from multiple angle

3.1 Quantitative research:

I am using quantitative analysis because it enables the systematic measurement of engagement metrics, demographic shifts, and electoral outcomes across multiple election cycles, providing objective evidence of correlations and trends and supporting robust, generalizable claims (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, this study will collect engagement rates, content shares, and audience demographics from reports by institutions like the Pew Research Center and Statista to track changes in voter behavior during the 2016, 2020, and 2024 election cycles. Voter turnout rates, demographic shifts, and polling trends will also be analyzed to identify correlations between online activity and real-world political participation.

Table 1.

Provides an overview of the various statistical databases that were used within this thesis, accompanied by a short description of them and their methodological context in regards to this study, refer back to if needed.

Statistic / Title	Description and methodological context
U.S. social network penetration by age group (2017)	**Statista**: Based on data from Pew Research Center and eMarketer. This dataset shows the percentage of Americans in various age groups who use social networking platforms. It is typically based on large-scale surveys, with respondents self-reporting their use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This statistic provides historical context to understand the baseline of social media use before Trump's first campaign.
Political news access in the U.S. (2024)	**Statista**: Data collected via surveys conducted among U.S. adults. Respondents were asked where they primarily access

	political news (e.g., social media, TV, online newspapers). The data gives insight into how voters consume political information, highlighting the increasing reliance on platforms like TikTok and YouTube.
Trust in social media for election information by age (2023)	**Statista**: <u>Survey</u> data collected in 2023 among U.S. adults of various age groups. Respondents were asked how much they trust election-related content seen on social media. This measure is essential for understanding how age influences susceptibility to misinformation and trust in digital content.
Trust in social media for election information by political party (2023)	**Statista**: This dataset breaks down trust in social media across party lines—Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. It is <u>survey</u>-based, using a sample designed to be representative of the U.S. adult population. This helps assess how political affiliation correlates with media trust
Election news concerns among U.S. consumers (2024)	**Statista**: Based on a <u>survey</u> in which respondents indicated their concerns about

	political news coverage, including issues like misinformation, bias, and news fatigue. The data highlights widespread public anxiety regarding the quality of political information during election periods.
Political and election news source use by age (2024)	**Statista**: Derived from <u>survey</u> responses asking where different age groups primarily get their political and election news. It helps track generational divides in media consumption, such as younger users favoring TikTok or Instagram, while older groups prefer TV or newspapers.
Most popular news platforms in the U.S. by age group (2022)	**Statista**: This statistic summarizes <u>survey</u> responses about preferred news sources across different age groups. It provides a clear view of generational preferences for news delivery—important for understanding how narrative exposure differs by age.
Highly followed TikTok accounts by content type (2024)	**Statista**: Data aggregated from <u>TikTok's publicly visible metrics and third-party analytics tools.</u> Shows which types of

	accounts (e.g., entertainment, politics, lifestyle) are most followed. While not a direct measure of voter attitudes, it reflects the influence of content creators on political discourse.
Daily time spent on social media by platform (2023)	**Statista**: This dataset combines <u>survey</u> data and usage tracking data to estimate how much time users in the U.S. spend on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook each day. It contextualizes exposure rates to political content and platform influence.
U.S. adults who think Trump tweeted too much by age (2020)	**Statista**: Using <u>polling data</u> from sources like YouGov. Respondents were asked whether they thought Trump's social media activity (specifically tweeting) was excessive. This reflects perceptions of Trump's online behavior across different age groups and helps connect communication style to voter reception
Share of U.S. adults who regularly get news from TikTok (2024, by age)	**Statista**: This is <u>survey</u>-based data showing how frequently different age groups use

	TikTok to access news. It demonstrates TikTok's growing role as a political information source among young voters.
Most popular news platforms in the U.S. (general)	**Statista:** This is a composite measure based on multiple <u>surveys</u> of media habits in the U.S., summarizing overall trends in preferred news sources. It gives a broad overview of where Americans get their news, whether traditional or digital.

3.2 Qualitative research:

I am using qualitative case studies because they allow for an in‑depth exploration of complex social phenomena, capturing the context and nuance behind how individuals interpret and respond to political messaging (Yin, 2018). This approach facilitates the identification of emergent themes, narrative patterns, and emotional appeals within social media content that cannot be fully captured by numerical data alone (Yin, 2018). To gather qualitative data, this study will examine events such as Trump's Twitter ban, notable misinformation campaigns, and viral political movements. Content analysis of selected tweets, Facebook posts, and TikTok videos will identify dominant themes, messaging strategies, and emotional appeals.

While this study does not include direct transcription or systematic content analysis of YouTube or podcast material, it does include select appearances of Donald Trump on various platforms such as the "Full Send Podcast", "Impaulsive", Adin Ross livestreams, and the "Joe Rogan Experience" as part of the qualitative media analysis. In this thesis, these long-form videos are viewed and analyzed as cultural artifacts within this ecosystem of emerging alternative media. This study draws on existing literature and secondary sources to contextualize these appearances. It is focusing on how these sources contribute to political identity formation through the use of digital populism, parasocial engagement, and grievance based rhetoric methods. These examples are expected to support this thesis' claim that Trump's media strategy effectively exploits the informal digital spaces where many young voters now engage politically (Statista 2025)

Additionally, an expert interview will be used because it offers an authoritative insight into this topic, and theoretical grounding from a scholar who has studied related phenomena (Brinkmann, 2013). This conversation helps contextualize and contextualize the findings from both qualitative and quantitative strands, enriching interpretation with firsthand perspectives on the mechanisms and evolving dynamics of social media–driven political engagement (Brinkmann, 2013).

While this study aims to provide an analysis of social media's influence on voter attitudes, there are several challenges that must be acknowledged. First is the evolving digital landscape of our time. Social media platforms continuously change their algorithms, policies, and user behaviors, meaning that what was effective in one election cycle may not apply to another cycle, making it difficult to establish long-term trends. Secondly is access to data; social media companies may restrict access to certain datasets, especially regarding engagement metrics and user

demographics which could be classified as sensitive information. This unfortunately limits the scope of quantitative analysis. Third is misinformation and bias; identifying and measuring misinformation is complex, as it is often subjective and politically charged. Additionally, existing studies on misinformation may contain biases that influence research findings. Fourthly, we have the problem of causation versus correlation. This study examines correlations between social media activity and voter attitudes, however proving direct causation remains a challenge due to the multitude of factors influencing political behavior, these will be explored further later in the essay. Finally, the fact that the 2024 Election was so recent, data availability may be limited, and its long-term impact on voter attitudes is still unfolding.

Chapter 4: Results/ (Empirical Findings)

In this chapter, core empirical evidence addressing this thesis' research question will be addressed. I will draw on the quantitative data collected from Statista and the Pew Research Center, alongside qualitative insights from the expert interview and three election cycle case studies. The data will be organized and presented in 5 sections: youth engagement with social media news; trust and misinformation exposure; perceptions of Trump's digital style; and alternative media analyses.

4.1 Quantitative Findings and Analysis

Youth engagement with social media news

Recent data from Pew Research Center (2024) indicates a significant transformation in how young adults access political information. In 2017, among U.S. adults aged 18–29, 25% used Facebook, 36% used YouTube, 51% used Instagram, 28% used Twitter (X), and 82% used Snapchat. By 2023, the usage patterns among adults aged 18–29 had increased dramatically, with 93% using YouTube, 67% using Facebook, 78% using instagram, 42% using Twitter (X), and 65% using snapchat.

Similarly, TikTok use has had a dramatic increase: TikTok use among U.S adults was at 21% and by 2023 it dramatically increased to 33%. (Statista, 2024). Additionally, the share of 18–29-year-olds who regularly get news from TikTok grew from 9% in 2020 to 39% in 2024 (Statista, 2024). Age‑specific data from a 2022 Statista survey reveal that 47% of adults 18–34 say they regularly get news via social media, compared with 45% of those 35-44 and 33% of

those 45–64, underscoring a somewhat pronounced generational divide in news consumption habits, especially between Gen Z and and Gen X/Boomers (Statista, 2024).

These data reveal a significant shift in how young adults (18–34) access and engage with political information. The increase in platform usage among 18 to 29 year olds from 25% to 67% for Facebook and from 36% to 93% for YouTube between 2017 and 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2024), shows how social media has not only gained massive popularity among younger generations, but also the diversification of their media ecosystems, they are not bound to a singular social media platform. Video-oriented platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have maintained their dominance over the past years. This, coupled with TikTok's dramatic user growth from 21% to 33% of the U.S. adult population (Statista, 2024), suggests there is a significant generational preference for visual, emotionally engaging, and algorithmically curated content. These findings align with Farkas' (2020) study on the visual personalization of politics, which found that emotional expression and informal visuals are more effective to capture users' attention and promote political sympathy than traditional, text-based content.

TikTok's growing role in political news consumption is especially striking. The big leap from 9% of 18-29 year olds using TikTok for news in 2020 to a staggering 39% in 2024 (Statista, 2024) indicates a major shift in how political narratives are consumed and internalized. TikTok specializes in short-form, highly personalized content, which is primarily driven by algorithmic amplification (Tufekci, 2015). This enhances the emotional empathy and intimacy users can feel towards influencers, two core elements of digital populism as discussed by Gerbaudo (2018). Trump also consistently repeats the same narratives while he is campaigning (The Washington Post, 2025), allowing for algorithmically curated feeds to foster echo chambers (Garrett, 2009)

since users are endlessly exposed to content that is familiar and ideologically aligned with their pre-existing viewpoints; this narrows their exposure to alternative perspectives.

To go further, the fact that up to 47% of 18-34-year-olds report regularly accessing news via social media, compared to just 33% of those aged 45–64 (Statista, 2022), shows a clear significant generational divide. This allows for the possibility of a stark difference in political opinion formation and maintenance between generations. Another Statista study from April 2024 found that 73% of 18-29 year olds accidentally come across political news while browsing social media. Because of this, younger users are likely to be primarily exposed to similar narratives and content as they are the ones frequently exposed to this political content on social media. Dominant narratives on these youth-dominated platforms can inadvertently suppress dissenting opinions, especially among younger users who may fear social backlash for sharing the information they gain on social media. This can reinforce generational differences in political engagement and expression.

These findings show how younger voters, who are consumed by immersive and visually enticing content, primarily on TikTok and YouTube are developing their political attitudes through algorithmically specialized content instead of intentionally seeking news. This has deep implications for voter behavior and raises deeper questions about trust in digital media and vulnerability to misinformation across political platforms and age groups.

Trust and Misinformation Exposure

In a 2023 Statista report, a stark generational difference in trust toward election information on social media platforms is observed. Among U.S. adults aged 18-29, 43% trusted what they saw about elections on social media "a lot" or "somewhat," compared with 22% of those aged 50-64 and only 12% of adults 65 and older (Statista, 2023). Partisan divides are comparably stark: 25% of Republicans say they trust social media election coverage, versus 36% of Independents and 68% of Democrats, indicating that democrats place greater faith in digital news sources (Statista, 2023). Another interesting report from a 2024 Pew Research Center report found that republicans have become more likely to trust news coming from social media since 2016. This figure increased from 32% (2016) to 45% (2025). The report also shows that the trust Republicans place in social media today (45%) is comparable to the trust they place in national new organizations at 53%, which has diminished from 70% in 2016. Democrats, on the other hand, have been more consistent with 36% of them trusting social media in 2016 compared to 38% of them trusting social media in 2025, with not much fluctuation in between years. The divide between trust in social media and trust in national new networks is also much starker, since 81% of Democrats trust national new organizations, which has only diminished from 83% in 2016. Concerns about misinformation also remain high. This is because in 2024, 83% of U.S. adults identified "false or misleading information" as a concern in election news (Statista 2024).

The data presented above shows a clear difference in how various groups trust social media when it comes to election news. Younger adults (18–29) are much more likely to trust what they see on social platforms at 43%, compared to just 12% of those 65 and older. This makes sense since

younger generations have grown up with social and digital media and not only feel more comfortable relying on it for information, but it is simply where they have been accessing information over the past years.

It is important to mention that while Statista's 2023 survey finds that 68% of Democrats and only 25% of Republicans trust social‑media election coverage, Pew Research's 2024 data show Republican trust rising from 32% in 2016 to 45% in 2025, with Democratic trust holding steady in the 36–38% range. These differences likely stem from variations in question wording, response scales, and fielding periods, but both sources converge on the key insight that trust in social-media news varies significantly by party and has increased among Republicans over time. Based on the data, it seems that republicans are increasingly turning to social platforms for political news, perhaps because they see mainstream outlets as biased.

However, despite this growing trust in social media platforms, people's concern about misinformation is high. A shocking 83% of US adults say they worry about false or misleading information in election coverage. In other words, people are comfortable using social media for news but still remain unsure of its accuracy

This dynamic between high usage and low confidence relates, again, to Noele-Neumann's spiral of silence theory (1974). Even those who distrust the accuracy of what they see online may choose to remain silent if it makes up the dominant narrative in their respective political ecosystem, allowing misinformation to circulate freely. This effect is likely more pronounced among younger audiences who are not only the most frequent users of social media and thereby digital news (Pew Research Center 2024), but are the most susceptible to peer pressure and social cues online (University of Amsterdam 2024).

This dynamic also suggests not just a fragmentation of information sources but a deeper erosion of democratic values. As Professor Ankersmit noted in our interview, social media might as well be called "a-social media", since it encourages ideological tribalism instead of genuine independent deliberation. In this type of environment, political discourse is not about compromising or persuasion, but about strengthening group identity. It is this very fact that undermines the very foundations of communicative democratic engagement (F. Ankersmit, personal communication, May 2025; see Appendix A).

It has been revealed that not only are younger voters more likely to consume political content via social media, but they are also more inclined to trust it, even if there are widespread concerns about misinformation. This helps to explain how these platforms enable a populist figure like Trump to maintain his influence online.

Perceptions of Trump's Digital Style

A 2020 Statista poll asked people of different age groups whether Donald Trump tweets too much. Among respondents aged 18–29, 61% said "too frequently," while 20% felt it was the "right amount," 6% said "not frequently enough," and 13% were "not sure." For those aged 30-44, 66% said "too frequently," compared with 63% of those 45–64 and 63% of adults 65 and older (Statista 2020).

Statista's 2023 data on daily social-media engagement shows that U.S. adults spend an average of 53 minutes per day on tiktok, 48 minutes on YouTube, and around 30 minutes on Twitter (X), Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. The survey also found that teens and Gen Z showed heavy

use of Tiktok, with 30% of them spending over 2.5 hours on the app per day.

This high average daily usage, around 53 minutes on TikTok, 48 minutes on YouTube, and around 30 minutes each on Twitter (X), Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, shows that social media occupies a decent amount of daily routines, especially for younger generations (Statista, 2023). In this environment, Trump's campaign strategy of frequently posting in a concise manner, while the use of short video snippets aligns perfectly with users' consumption habits. On platforms like TikTok and YouTube, where engagement is driven by short form, attention-spiking content, his posts can be considered almost as entertainment, which reinforces the sense of familiarity and acceptance that he is trying to portray. This content is intended to provoke strong reactions and is therefore likely to be algorithmically favored (Tufekci, 2015). In this context, Trump's digital image and persona is sustained by the very structure that these platforms are built on.

Younger users are more exposed to this type of content and consequently may find themselves within echo chambers, even without noticing, where sustained exposure to repetitive messaging can normalize said messaging, even if it has violent or misinformed tendencies. Older users, who have shorter daily engagement, may interpret the same number of tweets and posts as overwhelming. Building upon the forms of media typically consumed by younger audiences, podcasts and long form talk shows on YouTube become an obvious point of discussion.

4.2 Qualitative Media Analysis

The impact of alternative media and podcasts

Donald Trump's outreach goes well beyond official campaign channels and his X account. More recently in the 2024 election campaign, he made appearances on alternative forms of media that have become hugely popular over the past couple of years: long-form podcasts and live streams which are popular with young men.

His appearances on the Full Send Podcast (Nelk Boys), Impaulsive (Logan Paul's show), The Joe Rogan Experience, and Adin Ross streams are clear examples of how he campaigned this strategy. As mentioned in the methods section, these types of content create a sense of digital intimacy, where listeners feel they're hearing unfiltered thoughts in a casual setting.

Topics often tap into politicized masculine grievances, and hosts and guests complain against perceived cultural elites and "woke" culture. Trump uses informal language and shares personal anecdotes while going on spontaneous rants, creating a sense of digital intimacy with the audience. This reinforces loyalty among listeners who value authenticity over polished, scripted, political messaging. In doing this, Trump is leveraging the opportunity to create parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with the audience, who perceive him as more genuine than a regular politician.

Detailed figures are not exactly clear, but based on publicly available data on Spotify, Youtube, and Twitch:

- The top 10 most watched episodes of The Joe Rogan Experience podcast on YouTube account for around 430 million views. The episode with Donald Trump was viewed over

56 million times (YouTube, 2025)

- The Full Send Podcast YouTube channel has 8.2 million subscribers. Episodes frequently draw millions of views within 48 hours of release (YouTube, 2025). The episodes with Donald Trump have over 10 million views combined.

- Impaulsive averages over 3 million views per episode, and Adin Ross streams regularly exceed 50,000 concurrent viewers on Twitch (TwitchTracker, 2025). The episode with Donald Trump had almost 8 million views on Impaulsive and Adin Ross' stream peaked at 550,000 viewers.

In these male-dominated spaces, Trump's rhetoric resonates more deeply than short tweets since he can interact in a more personable manner with the audience. The sheer scale of these platforms allows for repeated exposure for an unlimited period of time, as the videos can be re-visited at any time. This reinforces his core messaging and separately promotes echo chambers where audience members primarily hear repeated narratives that already appeal to them.

What makes this form of communication so effective is that it not only appeals to the emotions of the audience, but it has the ability to substitute political reasoning with perceived authenticity. Professor Ankersmit commented on this phenomenon by claiming many voters today "don't even know their own interests" and instead look to the political elites to define them (F. Ankersmit, personal communication, May 2025; see Appendix A). In this way, Trump's digital campaign season of appearing on podcasts and livestreams function more as a ready-made

identity framework for disaffected young voters, especially men. Digital populism arises as a clear theme in this context (Gerbaudo, 2018), taking advantage of personalized and informal messaging to reel voters in to what "feels right", instead of encouraging them to form their own opinions.

For young men, who make up the vast majority of these audiences, this mix of digital intimacy and content driven by grievance has been a powerful tool for Trump's campaign, allowing for his social media popularity to translate into notable results during election day, all the while reinforcing their political loyalty to him.

4.3 Synthesis and Cross-Sectional Analysis

Throughout the presentation of the findings in this chapter, a clear pattern has emerged: social media does not only amplify Donald Trump's messaging, it actively reshapes the way he is perceived by the voter base, in particular young men. The algorithmic logic of each platform has allowed Trump to tailor his digital image in a manner that goes beyond conventional political rules. His online and offline presence has molded into that of an digital influencer who is now at the center of everyday online culture.

He frequently appeared and continues to appear on youth dominated platforms like YouTube and TikTok, as well as podcasts and live streams to familiarize the youth with his presence through a

sense of informality that traditional media lack. The parasocial bonds that these interactions create allow for voters to perhaps prioritize entertainment instead of critical reflection.

The interview with Professor Ankersmit builds on this by providing a useful interpretation: in these online environments, political communication is becoming increasingly detached from the development of one's critical ideas and more about reaffirming group identity. This adds context to how Trump's messaging strategies are able to spread to such a large extent, while being particularly impactful for how young male voters relate to the political realm in the first place.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to examine how social media has shaped public perceptions of Donald Trump and influenced key voting demographics, particularly younger male voters, throughout his political career. Through a combination of statistical data, media analysis, and insight from an expert through a semi-structured interview, the findings show that Trump's online presence is not simply a political stunt to further his campaign, it has evolved into a key element of his political identity and public influence.

Social media platforms have played a huge role in allowing Trump to bypass the traditional media filters that have existed for decades, by presenting a self-curated image of authenticity. The evolution of youth engagement with popular social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and podcasting spaces have created new opportunities for political campaigning that reward emotional appeal and informality. This has proven especially effective among younger male voters, who increasingly consume political content in a casual manner on social media. Algorithms promote Trump's appearances on popular podcasts and livestreams, thereby

promoting a form of digital populism that increases loyalty and engagement through parasocial bonds instead of policy depth.

The thesis has also shown that trust in digital news is split between generation and partisan lines, since younger voters are more likely to engage with and trust social media content, which has large implications for news consumption and voter behaviors. This is true even though they express concern over misinformation, which could be an area for further research to be done in the future. The very informative interview from Professor Ankersmit suggests that a broader erosion of democratic norms is occurring, where social media is playing the role of restructuring how political identity and self-awareness is discovered among the youth. This will be particularly interesting to explore and observe over the coming years as younger generations are becoming ever-more interactive with social media.

To conclude, Trump has had immense and unprecedented success in the digital realm. His example shows a deep transformation in how political influence is formed, expropriated, and maintained in this new era of mass digital media. His success in the recent U.S elections is a product of his ability to thrive in personality-driven environments, signaling a shift in electoral politics: Algorithms, perceived authenticity, engagement, and entertainment are becoming increasingly more important and decisive than institutional trust or scripted policy-talk. It is crucial to understand the complexities of this shift to prepare for the broader implications for future democratic participation.

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Appendix

A. Transcript of Interview with Professor F. R. Ankersmit (May 2025)

Section 1:

Rafael Sender Drysdale: Okay, so my first question is going to be about the email that you sent me because I thought there were some interesting ideas in it. And so the first one is that in the email you mentioned the poisoning of political identity by social media. So I was wondering if you could elaborate on what you mean exactly by this term and how social media dynamics might contribute to increased polarization and identity divisions. And I know it's not exactly your field, but maybe you'll have some interesting opinions about it.

Professor Ankersmit: Yeah. Well, to begin with, the last part of your question—you already said that social media functions, or at least leads to a situation in which individuals become a bubble and are no longer, or not very adequately, acquainted and familiar with what happens outside that bubble. And I think that then they become vulnerable to those social media [actors] who can spread their poison so that it penetrates into the minds of the people, the citizens and the electors. So that is regarding the poisoning.

And yeah, there was one more thing that might be of interest. I think the very name of the social media is wrong in the sense that they should be called the asocial media since—well, it's been said I think already by Putnam, Robert Putnam, the man of Bowling Alone—that the people of the United States used to be very gregarious. People liked to talk to each other and to act together and help each other, well, in the way that, well, the description that Tocqueville gave of America and its dilemmas, of course.

And that was—they had an independence of mind and that was fed and stimulated and reinforced continuously by what they absorbed from their surroundings, their social surroundings. They were an impression, from that perspective—rather from the social surroundings—all people they lived in, in their neighborhoods and with whom they dealt in a fruitful and pleasant and constructive way, they—how shall I put it—they made it into part of themselves, but of course in their own way.

And this way, the polarity between the people—not the majority, but the many folds, the greater number—and the individual, these fused in the most happy manner and got the best out of both of them, so that reversely, when an individual was born, an individual could also be carried down to the people. And this has gone. So everyone lives now in their own bubble in the United States. Well, everyone—you know it better than I—but then democracy is no longer possible. For what is then lost is the possibility of a fruitful political debate.

And I have the impression that political debates are no longer a regular dimension or aspect of American life, apart from the war, of course. That's when people—well, you have this war between the Republicans and the [Democrats], so they cry to each other out, but they don't listen anymore to each other. It's a survival war—yeah—that you make the other into a devil—what's the word there?

Rafael Sender Drysdale: Demonize?

Professor Ankersmit: Demonize. Yeah, demonize the others. And that's quite a different thing, of course. Quite different from discussion. And with discussion, there are several aspects. In the first place, you have different opinions, but you have the old French proverb, la vérité est jolie, and it has the character that in an interesting and sincere discussion, something can be the conclusion of a discussion that was not yet part of the opinion that the people—one or both—had before.

Let me put it differently. Suppose you have one person with the opinions A to, well, like D, and another one with the opinions F to K, and then you get a discussion, and then you get, as a result of this discussion, something which compromised something which was not in these opinions from A to D and from F to K. And then, that's progressive. That's—then you have, well, you solve the problem and have dealt with this demonization of each other, may have dealt with different opinions in a far better and more useful way than by demonizing each other.

And then there is still one more aspect I think that's very good, is that in these discussions you also become aware—not only of others, but also yourself—of what your interests are. I have the impression that—let's think of these people in the Midwest, in the Deep South—they no longer have any idea of what their interests are, and it's because these interests that they think they have, have been prescribed to them by the Republican Party.

Section 2:

Rafael Sender Drysdale: Do you think the decline of Western democracies is more driven by changes in media and information, or by deeper political and cultural factors?

Professor Ankersmit: What strikes me is the enormous importance that, in all democracies—both in your country and here—is given to the immigration crisis. It puts immense pressure on a democracy. The majority of people think that as long as the political system is no longer capable of minimizing the problem of immigration, the less they will be prepared to go on with traditional democracy. The more they will be susceptible to the promises of the extreme right.

There is a direct relationship between the successes of the extreme right and the problem of immigration. If we wish to keep democracy functioning, it is of primary importance to do something about immigration that is believable, credible, and acceptable to the majority. That's just one example.

But what I find most worrying is that voters in the United States no longer know what their interests are. Their political opinions are not based on reflection or debate but are prescribed to them—mostly by the Republican Party. It's not just ignorance. It's a kind of regression. These are no longer people of our time.

And it's partly because nobody tells them otherwise. Nobody teaches them how society functions, who really benefits from it, or how they themselves are affected. In a democracy, you need citizens who are capable of saying: "These are my interests, and here is how they differ from someone else's." If people can't do that, then democracy becomes meaningless.

Rafael Sender Drysdale: And instead, they look to figures like Trump to define those interests?

Professor Ankersmit: Exactly. They're waiting for elites to tell them what their interests are. But these interests should come from their own experience and critical reflection. If you wait for someone else to define your political self, then you are no longer a citizen in the democratic sense of the word.

Rafael Sender Drysdale: It has been wonderful talking to you and I think your insights will become invaluable with my thesis arguments, thank you for your time.

Professor Ankersmit: Thank you.