Political Bias on Instagram: Generation Z and the 2022 Midterm Elections

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z, today's 10 to 25-year-olds, is emerging into the political sphere. In fact, the outcome of the 2022 United States Midterm Elections was heavily influenced by the power of progressive young voters. With the increased use of social media in recent years, many young activists have adopted online platforms as spaces for political conversation. This study investigates the influence social media activism, specifically from Generation Z creators, had on the outcome of the 2022 United States midterm elections. The study adopts a content analysis approach to analyze a selected amount of Generation Z Instagram posts from the midterms. The goal of the study is to determine the political bias Generation Z expressed online at this time and the effect social media activism had on the outcome of the election. The analysis includes 177 carefully selected posts, and each post was evaluated for its popularity, public response, and political bias. We found a slight progressive political bias within the post content and an unexpected amount of popularity and public response for conservative-leaning posts. The findings from this study suggest a developing progressive political bias among Generation Z. Further research on the connection between social media activism and election results is suggested.

Introduction

Activism is a powerful tool for those who choose to speak up about causes they are passionate about, and over the past century, young people have emerged as some of the most powerful advocates for many types of reform. There have been many influential youth social movements in this time such as the wave of United States student civil rights protests in the mid-twentieth century and the global decolonization movements throughout the 1900s (Roberts 954-955).

Recent movements such as "Black Lives Matter" and anti-sexual assault movements at college campuses in the United States (Milkman) demonstrate how youth involvement in activism has only grown over time. Social media plays a significant role in promoting these calls for justice since it provides a platform for people to engage in political conversations and come together to create social change. This activism takes on many forms due to the variety of social media platforms, one of which is Instagram: a well-known global social network that allows users to share and interact with many forms of content. For younger generations, Instagram has been a crucial way to enter the political conversation by providing various mediums of content to post and view, the ability to interact with people of all ages and political beliefs, and a space to debate important topics in politics. A survey conducted by the *Pew Research Center* in 2022 further emphasizes Instagram's popularity among young people*,* citing 62 percent of surveyed United States teens ages thirteen to seventeen saying they use Instagram, which makes Instagram the third most popular social media platform in this survey behind TikTok and YouTube (Vogels et al.).

With Generation Z's emergence into the political sphere, trends have begun to develop with their political decisions, one of which is their political bias. Young generations typically have more progressive beliefs according to Karl Mannheim's Theory of Generations, but it is hypothesized that young people right now seem to be unique in their

progressive outlook on politics (Milkman). Although Gen Z has not fully demonstrated their preferred political views yet, their recent entrance into the political sphere supports these claims that they may hold progressive political views.

In the context of the 2022 United States midterm elections, the progressive bias from younger generations, specifically Gen Z, was evident in the election results with a record turnout for Gen Z voters, of which over half supported democratic candidates according to a *Washington Post* article presenting the results of the election (Chery). The article explains how Gen Z played a crucial role in influencing the outcome of this election (Chery), and it is likely much of this has to do with their activism on Instagram which helped mobilize young voters, educate people about the candidates, and create conversations about the importance of these elections. Not all members of Gen Z are old enough to be active members of American politics, but as demonstrated in the midterms, their progressive bias is already evident.

Literature Review

Definitions

Before beginning the discussion of this topic, the terms that are used repeatedly throughout the study will be defined. First, this study focuses on Generation Z (Gen Z), which includes people born between 1997 and 2012, according to parameters established by the *Pew Research Center* (Dimock). Since this study focuses on an event that occurred in 2022, this definition includes people ages 10-25 at the time of the elections. Similarly, "youth" will refer to teenagers and young adults. The Millennial generation is also mentioned occasionally and includes people born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock). "Activism" will refer to the action of promoting a political or social reform either on social media or in an in-person protest movement. The word "bias" will be used in the context of politics to describe one's preferred political views, either progressive, conservative, or neutral. This study will only focus on the major political parties in the United States: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. The Democratic Party will be considered "progressive" with an emphasis on a larger role of government in social affairs, and the Republican Party will be considered "conservative" with an emphasis on a more limited role of government ("What is the difference"). The study will consistently refer to "posts", which in the context of this study are feed posts on Instagram. Finally, all references to the "midterms" or the "midterm elections" explicitly refer to the 2022 United States midterm elections.

Youth Movements Throughout History

The origins of youth activist movements around the world often date back to the twentieth century because of the increased global connectedness and conflicts during that time. There were many global youth activist movements in the 1900s, as Ken Roberts analyzes in his paper on youth activism through generations, which looks at the "Young Turks" who led a movement against the Ottoman monarchy and took control of the region before World War I, and youth opposition to colonization in previously colonized countries such as Egypt and Libya (Roberts 953, 955). Much of the global youth activism during this time was in opposition to figures of authority, but the reform movements in the United States were more focused on pushing their leaders to create changes domestically.

A historical case study on a United States youth movement in Georgia explains that most of the examples of youth activism in the 1900s were in response to the civil rights movement and other emerging social justice issues (Perrotta 39). In this study, Katherine Perotta examined the "Ruffled Feathers" movement, which was a group of student activists who voiced their opinions through a school newspaper and faced challenges with censorship. Perotta explained that throughout this era, students and young people were inspired to become activists because "matters concerning the Cold War, gender and civil rights, and the Vietnam War dominated local and national news", and she found that throughout this time period, activists, especially younger activists, were motivated to share their ideas on the social issues at the time but faced extreme challenges with censorship (Perotta 39-40, 45). On a broader scale, a

paper published in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* looks at a broad range of twentieth-century student movements in the United States and argues that this period of the 1960s was a pivotal time for the ability of youth activism to create meaningful change. The author, Andrew Barlow, credits the success of these movements to the unstable politics at this time, which included issues such as the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement (Barlow 1). While this article argues that the success of youth activism at this time was not completely a result of the youth participants, this time period was still a critical time for the progression of youth social movements.

Social Media Activism in Young Generations

Building off the student activism in the 1960s, young activists have continued these movements more recently by using social media as a tool to promote their political discussions. Sociologist Ruth Milkman's article on new political generations and protest after 2008 explains how beginning with Millenials, there has been a "new wave of protest" since young generations have new motivations to stand up for causes they believe in, which has caused a variety of unique social movements throughout the past few years, such as "Black Lives Matter", "the Dreamers", and more (Milkman). She attributes much of the meaningful social change in these movements to social media, writing, "...social media were vital for these movements, helping them scale up their organizing quickly and reducing the costs of recruitment…", and she recognizes how critical in-person interaction was for these movements as well (Milkman).

An article from communications professor Melissa Dodd and account executive Sasha Dookhoo continued to expand on this digitization of social movements by studying Millennials. They identified the gratifications a group of Millennials experienced from online activism and found a higher number of Millennials participating in online activism rather than in-person activism, ultimately concluding that it is important to make digital activism more effective (Dookhoo and Dodd 2). While this study only focuses on Millennials, it provides an insight into the popularity and effectiveness of engaging in activism online, which can be applied to generations similar to Millennials, such as Gen Z.

There have been many movements where social media created social change, such as in a case study by Tobias Hess at Bard College, which studied a group of Gen Z climate activists who were sent away from a San Francisco senator's office while voicing their support for the Green New Deal. The activists posted a video of the encounter on Twitter, which created a widespread debate about the efficacy of activism, specifically for youth, and whether it can create meaningful change in society. Social media was a powerful tool for these young activists to share their movement, but it also ignited a debate about youth activism (Hess). Another study from a group of researchers at the University of Louisiana looked at how people share their personal stories on Twitter, specifically those who experienced sexual assault, to uncover Twitter's effectiveness for feminist activism. The researchers found that Twitter was an effective medium for sharing personal stories about sexual assault and convincing people of the magnitude of the issue, ultimately concluding that the Internet can be a helpful tool for sharing information about important issues in the world (Li et al. 854-857). Finally, a study investigating messages relating to weight gain during the COVID-19 pandemic used Instagram hashtags to analyze the influence of weight loss messages posted under #quarantine15. The study, performed by researchers at the University of Toronto and King's College London, found that Instagram was a relevant platform to use in their study because of the number of posts uploaded about their topic and the many different ways for collecting information about posts on Instagram (Lucibello et al.)

In all, there are many social media platforms that are effective mediums for activism, and although some of these studies did not specifically study young generations or politics, social media's efficacy for activism is just beginning and many young generations are using this tool to share their ideas.

Political Bias in Young Generations

Generations of people develop their own sets of ideals based on their shared ideas and life experiences, and philosophers work to understand the influence these generations will have on the world by predicting their issues of interest.

In an article defining the meaning of "generations", Alexandra Popescu analyzed several theories on generations, to conclude that young people are often more motivated to engage in social movements because they are typically over-shadowed by older generations (Popescu 16-20). Milkman builds on this idea of younger generations by focusing on Karl Manheim's 1927 essay titled "The Problem of Generations". Her analysis of the essay concludes that younger generations tend to have more progressive ideals because they are more sensitive to the issues going on around them and not as accustomed to the challenges people face in the world. She connects this idea to the present-day younger generations, specifically Millennials, to argue that while they clearly line up with Manheim's predictions, their progressive bias is stronger than previous generations, and they have unique qualities that separate them from the generalizations of this theory. The main qualities Milkman credits for this unique progressivism are increased racial and ethnic diversity, new access to communication through social media, and the presence of increased instability in many parts of the world (Milkman). Researchers partnering with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation built upon these ideas in a study on political engagement among Millennial college students. The study concluded that there was an overwhelming desire to become more involved with politics and social movements as well as a general distrust of the government and political system (Kiesa et al.). Although this study does not mention the specific political bias of the students included in the study, it still builds upon the theory that today's younger generations are more engaged in politics, specifically because of the bias they have against the government and the current political climate.

While Millennials constitute most of the young people involved in politics right now, Gen Z has taken on many of these progressive ideals as well. A review of John Della Volpe's book titled *FIGHT: How Gen Z is Channeling their Fear and Passion to Save America* explains Gen Z's motivations for having progressive ideals that are very similar to some of the previously mentioned motivations for Millenial progressivism. These include an ethnic diversity that has not existed in previous generations, the tendency for progressive leaders to target youth in recent campaigns, and most importantly, the major, unprecedented social issues that have existed throughout the entirety of Gen Z's existence (Kirkus Reviews). Although the full extent of Gen Z's political bias does not fully exist, these theories about progressive political bias in Gen Z are built upon knowledge from previous young generations.

Generation Z's Influence in the 2022 United States Midterm Elections

In the context of the 2022 United States midterm elections, Millennial and Gen Z political biases were evident in the outcome of the election, and there was an impressive turnout from young voters (see figure 1) (Kiesa and Medina). In a recently published article, Caleb Clayton and Hailey Trimpey of Ohio Northern University explained that 1 in every 8 voters in this election was either a member of the Millennial or Gen Z generations and 63 percent of the voters in this age range voted for the Democratic candidates in the House of Representatives, exemplifying the progressive bias within these younger generations (see figure 2). Clayton and Trimpey attribute much of this wave of young voters to their unique social media access and their ability to mobilize other young voters who have similar progressive political views (Clayton and Trimpey). Gen Z's Democratic influence was especially important in this election because, before the elections, it was predicted that there was going to be a "red wave" of large victories for the Republican candidates (Alexander). While there is no definitive reason why this "red wave" did not occur, it is clear the progressive influence and large voter turnout from young generations, specifically Millennials and Gen Z, played a role in balancing the Republican and Democratic votes in these elections.

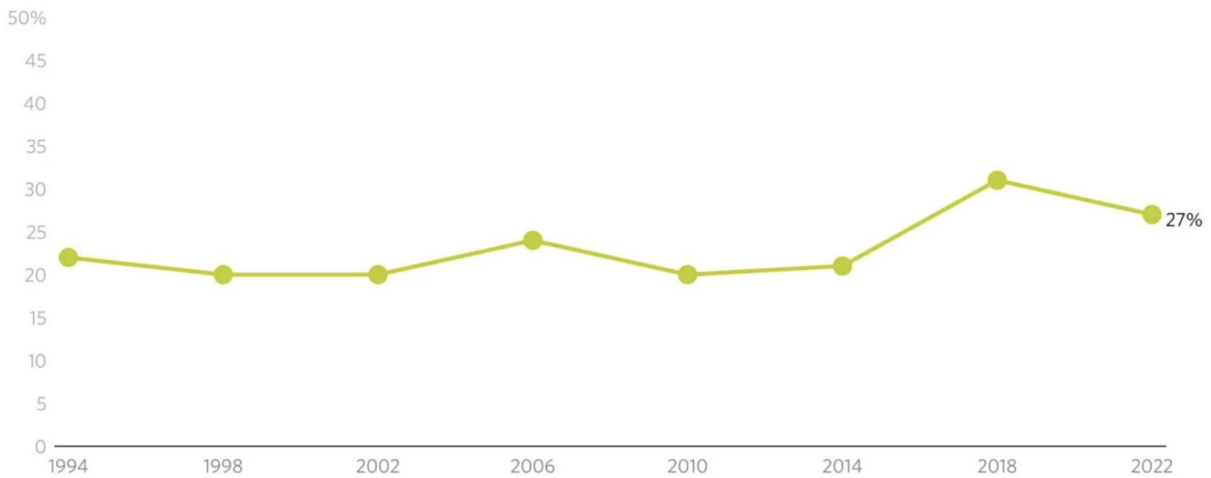The percentage of young people, ages 18-29, who cast a ballot in each midterm election (1994-2022)

Figure 1*: Estimated Youth Voter Turnout in Previous United States Midterm Elections*
Note. Source: Kiesa, Abby, and Alberto Medina. "Millions of Youth Cast Ballots, Decide Key 2022 Races." *TuftsNow*, 9 Nov. 2022, https://now.tufts.edu/2022/11/09/millions-youth-cast-ballots-decide-key-2022-races. Accessed 9 Apr. 2023.

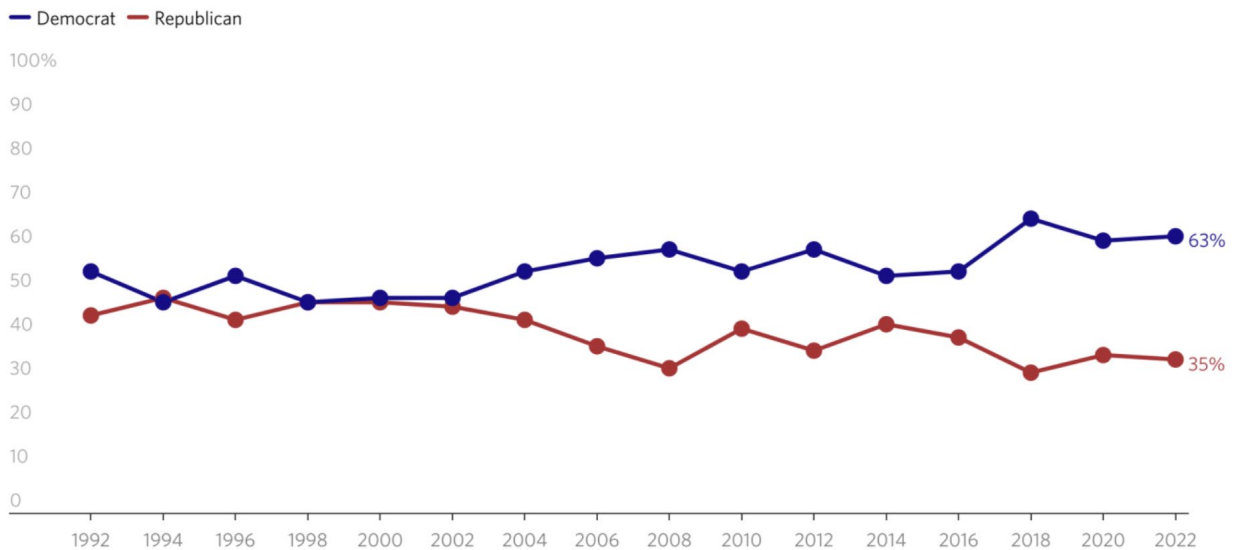Young people's (ages 18-29) national vote choice for candidates to the House of Representatives.

Figure 2*: Youth Vote Choice for House of Representatives Candidates in United States Elections*
Note. Source: Kiesa, Abby, and Alberto Medina. "Millions of Youth Cast Ballots, Decide Key 2022 Races." *TuftsNow*, 9 Nov. 2022, https://now.tufts.edu/2022/11/09/millions-youth-cast-ballots-decide-key-2022-races. Accessed 9 Apr. 2023.

Gap in Research

There is an extensive amount of literature covering political bias in young generations, the evolution of social movements throughout history, and more recently, Gen Z and social media have become important topics of conversation in these studies. That being said, given the recency of the 2022 midterm elections, there has not yet been a study that uncovers how Gen Z displayed their political bias during these elections through their activism on Instagram. This leads to the question: "To what extent did the political conversation on Instagram about the 2022 United States midterm elections display Gen Z's emerging political bias?" This question aims to understand Gen Z's political views through this recent event that was significant for younger generations and uncover the extent to which social media impacted the election.

Methodology

Content analysis is a common method for a range of studies focusing on identifying themes within a given set of data ("Content Analysis"), and some effective content analyses have studied an Instagram hashtag about weight gain during the pandemic, feminist activism on Twitter, and academic library accounts on Instagram (Lucibello et al.; Li et al.; Doney et al.). For this study, a mixed-method content analysis of Gen Z-affiliated Instagram posts from the 2022 midterm elections was the best approach to understanding the political bias that Gen Z activists displayed on social media in this election. To determine the political biases expressed in the Instagram posts included in this study, the researcher evaluated quantitative and qualitative aspects of the posts and converted them into numerical values for the purpose of analysis. The approach for this methodology was modeled after the study done by a group of researchers at the University of Louisiana who analyzed feminist activism on Twitter. The researchers performed a content analysis in which they used hashtags to collect the initial tweets they wanted to use in the study and then defined specific guidelines for filtering through these tweets to identify the ones they would include in the study. From there, the researchers studied the likes, comments, and shares on each tweet and used a thematic analysis to code the tweets into specific categories based on their research questions. The study had multiple researchers to ensure the tweets were coded with minimal bias and ultimately discovered five qualitative themes between the tweets (Li et al. 858-859). Although this study does not specifically focus on political Instagram posts, it provides a detailed content analysis approach and thematic analysis method the researcher adapted for this study.

Content Selection Process

For the content selection, the researcher created a private Instagram account named @researchproject2023 to ensure anonymity when collecting posts and remove any influence that would have been present if the researcher used their personal Instagram account. The researcher was required to undergo additional security checks with this new Instagram account to confirm its legitimacy. The initial content selection process for this study was similar to the University of Louisiana study since multiple hashtags were selected for collecting content. Since the primary variable of this research was activism from the 2022 United States midterm elections, the researcher used hashtags specifically relating to the event. Due to time constraints, the researcher selected a few hashtags from the topic to analyze content from, and each hashtag had to have over 5,000 posts, which indicated its popularity among Instagram users and relevance to the study. The two hashtags selected based on these criteria were #midterms2022 and #2022midterms. From there, the researcher collected posts from these hashtags posted between August 8, 2022, and November 8, 2022, since the midterm elections took place on November 8, and the study focused on information posted during or before the elections. Because of time constraints, the researcher restricted this date range to three months before the election. During this initial process, the researcher did not collect posts with distinct offensive language or a clear lack of connection to the study (ie: the contents of the post were not in English, the post was clearly connected to a different event, or the

post included distinct offensive language). Upon completion of the initial content selection, the researcher found 559 posts that were potentially relevant for analysis.

Content Filtering Process

After collecting the initial set of 559 posts, the researcher defined parameters to further remove posts that were not suitable for the study. The filtering process was modeled after the University of Louisiana study where they removed tweets from their data set that were reposted, unclear, not in English, or did not correlate with their research question (Li et al. 858-859). For this study, the researcher removed posts that were unable to be interpreted, were not in English, included explicit or offensive information, did not pertain to the United States, or were not affiliated with Gen Z. The researcher included reposts in their final data set since they evaluated the efficacy of activism and repeated posting is a tool for improving content engagement. To determine a post's affiliation with Gen Z, the researcher looked at the post's content, the creator's username, and the profile page to find information about their age, attendance at a high school or undergraduate university, or affiliation with a youth organization. If the post was not clearly affiliated with a member of Gen Z or did not display the opinions of a member of Gen Z, it was discarded. The researcher concluded this process with 177 posts in their final data set.

Quantitative Content Analysis

The researcher included a quantitative analysis in this study to determine the popularity of each post based on the number of likes and comments. The researcher recorded the number of likes and comments for each post on February 22, 2023, however, these values may have changed since the date of collection. After gathering this quantitative data, the researcher averaged the number of likes and comments for each post separately and found the average number of likes and comments for all 177 posts. These numerical values aided the researcher in evaluating the popularity of each post by creating a scale that gave a popularity score to each post based on its average number of likes and comments (see table 1). The researcher computed the mean likes and comments across all posts and used this number as a reference when using the scale. A score of "1" on the scale was for posts with an individual average of 32 percent or more below the mean, a "2" score was for posts between 10 to 32 percent below the mean, a "3" meant the post's average was within 10 percent above or 10 percent below the mean, a "4" was for posts between 10 to 32 percent above the mean, and a "5" was for posts with an average more than 32 percent greater than the mean. This scale along with the other scales for this study used a Likert scale approach, which is a five-point scale frequently used in surveys to produce more comprehensive, nuanced results (Losby and Wetmore).

Table 1: Popularity Scale

1	2	3	4	5
Below average	Slightly below average	Average number of likes and comments	Slightly above average	Above average

Qualitative Content Analysis

The researcher performed a qualitative content analysis on the data set that evaluated the public response to a post based on its comments and the political bias expressed in the post. To convert these qualitative observations into numerical values, the researcher created scales for both of these elements using the Likert scale approach previously mentioned. A portion of this analysis was modeled after the feminist activism study that identified eleven codes the

researchers looked for in each of the tweets (Li et al. 858-859). Their coding process was similar to the political bias evaluation performed in this study since the researcher evaluated the content of each post and its caption to uncover if it expressed a neutral political bias (a "3" score on the scale), favored one set of political views (either a "2" or "4" score on the scale), or specifically endorsed a political viewpoint (a "1" or "5" score on the scale) (see table 2). The researcher assigned the largest score of "5" to the progressive political bias posts since it is the political bias Gen Z is hypothesized to display. To determine if a post directly endorsed a political viewpoint, the researcher looked for a mention of a Republican or Democratic political candidate or a specific endorsement of the Democratic or Republican party in the post. To determine if a post favored a political view, the researcher looked for a mention of common values associated with the Democratic or Republican political parties without the direct endorsement of either side. Finally, to determine if a post was neutral, the researcher ensured that the post did not include information in support of the Democratic or Republican party.

For the public response evaluation, the researcher examined the comments on each post to determine the reaction from the audience it reached. The goal of this evaluation was to understand the post's influence on its audience through the qualitative lens of its comments. For the analysis, the researcher determined whether the comments on the post were clearly in support of the post, against the post, neutral, or unable to be determined. Depending on the ratio of positive, negative, and neutral or inconclusive posts the researcher assigned a public response score to the post (see table 3). If the post did not have any comments or a neutral ratio of comments, it received a "3" score in this category. If the post had mostly positive comments, but at least one-fourth of its comments were still neutral or opposing, the post received a "somewhat" positive score of "4". Similarly, if a post had mostly negative posts according to this parameter it was scored "2". For posts with almost all of their comments positive they received a score of "5". Finally, posts with almost all negative comments received a "1" score. For all elements of the qualitative and quantitative analyses, the researcher assigned whole number scores to the posts to maintain a direct correlation with the scales.

Table 2: Political Bias Scale

1	2	3	4	5
Conservative	Leans Conservative	Neutral	Leans Progressive	Progressive

Table 3: Public Response Scale

1	2	3	4	5
Almost All Comments are Negative	Somewhat Negative	Neutral	Somewhat Positive	Almost all Comments are Positive

Research Instruments

As previously mentioned, the researcher used Instagram to collect all of the posts included in the study (see figure 3). The researcher used Google Docs and Google Sheets to collect and organize the data for this analysis. For the content selection and content filtering process, the researcher used Google Docs to store the post number, username, link, and date posted for each post collected in the initial round of content selection (see figure 4). For the content filtering process, the researcher used the same Google Doc to highlight whether the post had passed filtering (marked as yes) or did not pass filtering (marked as no). The researcher assigned a post number to each post to distinguish the posts from each other and labeled posts found under #2022midterms with the letter "a" and posts found under #midterms

2022 with the letter "b". The researcher used Google Sheets for the quantitative and qualitative analyses in which they recorded the number of likes, number of comments, popularity evaluation number, public response evaluation number, and political bias evaluation number for each post (see figure 5). The researcher also included a column in the spreadsheet that averaged the number of likes and comments on each post to aid with the popularity analysis.
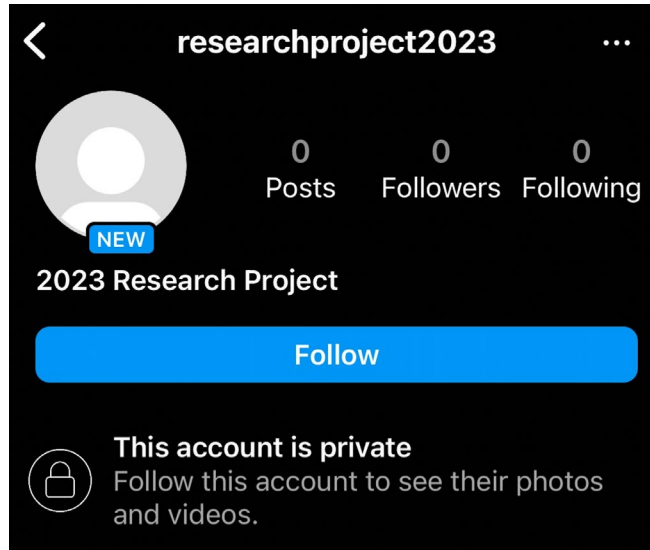

Figure 3: Public View of the Instagram Account

Post: 1a Link: Date Posted: Username:	Status after Filtering: Yes/No
Post: 1b Link: Date Posted: Username:	Status after Filtering: Yes/No

Figure 4: Data Table Used for Initial Content Selection and Filtering

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Post Number	number of likes	number of comments	average likes and comments	Popularity evaluation	Public response evaluation	political bias evaluation
2	1a	86	0	43	5	3	3
3	2a	25	0	12.5	1	3	3
4	4a	31	0	15.5	1	3	5
5	5a	28	2	15	1	4	3
6	6a	20	1	10.5	1	5	3
7	7a	6	0	3	1	3	4
8	9a	24	0	12	1	3	3
9	10a	54	2	28	3	4	4
10	13a	16	0	8	1	3	3
11	14a	60	2	31	3	4	5
12	15a	26	0	13	1	3	3
13	16a	28	0	14	1	3	4
14	17a	32	8	20	2	5	5
15	18a	10	1	5.5	1	3	3

Figure 5: Google Sheets Numerical Breakdown of the First 15 Posts Selected

Note. See Appendix A for full Google Sheets numerical breakdown

Results and Data Analysis

The researcher obtained a data set of 177 posts after the content selection and filtering processes and from there assigned a score for each post's political bias, popularity, and public response. This information was recorded in Google Sheets where the researcher created graphs to display the average findings in each of the categories.

Political Bias Evaluation

The first variable uncovered in this study was the number of posts from the final data set that correlated with each of the five political bias categories. Based on the results of the political bias analysis, 112 out of the 177 total posts were found to be "neutral", 22 posts "leaned progressive", 32 posts were "progressive", 5 posts "leaned conservative", and 6 posts were "conservative" (see figure 6). As demonstrated, few of the posts expressed either form of conservative bias, most of the posts did not express bias, and some posts expressed either form of progressive bias. While a neutral bias was the most prevalent and occurred in about 63 percent of the posts, the overall trend of these results demonstrates a larger amount of progressive posts compared to conservative posts. To substantiate these claims, the researcher averaged the political bias scores across all 177 posts to obtain a value of 3.3898. This number demonstrates that the average political bias tended to be mostly neutral since it was close to three, but the minor increase from three shows the slight progressive bias in the posts. While these observations demonstrate the progressive beliefs Gen Z is developing, they do not demonstrate the overwhelming presence of Gen Z's progressivism that is theorized based on many factors mentioned in previous studies (Milkman).
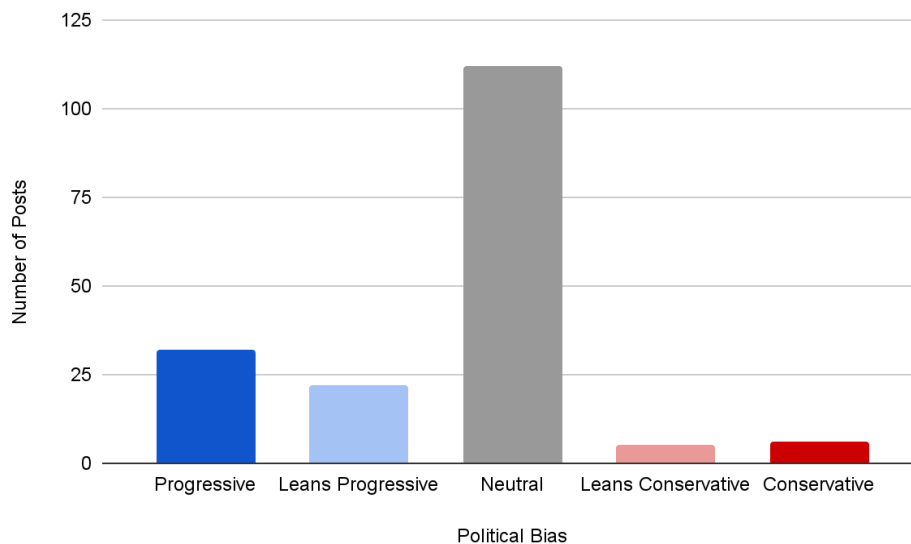

Figure 6: Number of Posts in Each Political Bias Category

Popularity Evaluation

The next variable measured was the popularity of each post based its the number of likes and comments. The individual popularity scores in each political bias group were analyzed, and the conservative and conservative-leaning posts were

the most popular. The conservative posts had an average popularity score of 3, and the conservative-leaning posts had an average popularity score of 3.4. On the other hand, the neutral posts had an average popularity score of 1.91, the progressive-leaning posts' average was 1.81, and the progressive posts' average was 1.97 (see figure 7). In summary, the combined popularity scores of the conservative and conservative-leaning posts were 25 percent larger than the progressive and progressive-leaning posts. Since the conservative and conservative-leaning posts were more popular in this evaluation, they likely reached a larger audience than the neutral or progressive posts. This finding contradicts previous hypotheses that social media has been one of the most popular tools for the progressive "new wave of protest" (Milkman). That being said, these findings could be slightly skewed since there were significantly fewer conservative and conservative-leaning posts in the data set, and the data was averaged in each political bias category.
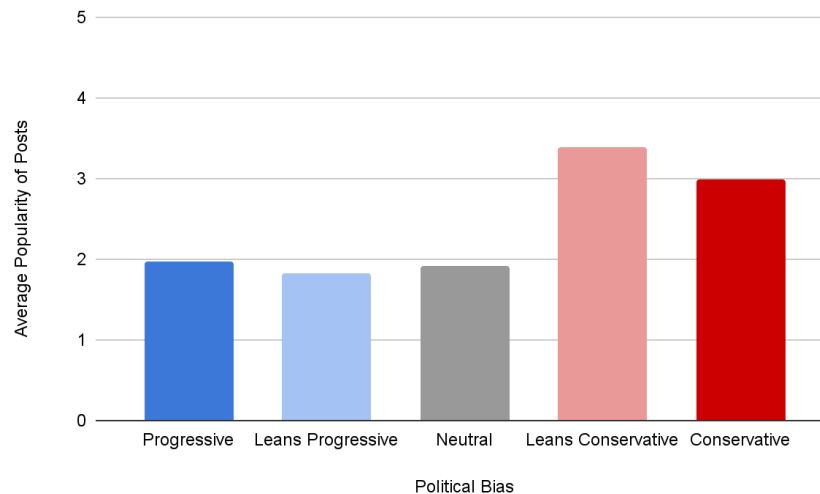

Figure 7: Average Popularity Scores in Each of the Political Bias Categories

Public Response Evaluation

Similarly to the popularity evaluation, each post received a public response score that was averaged with the other posts in its political bias category. The conservative bias posts had the highest public response average of 4.17 and the progressive posts followed next with an average score of 3.63. The remaining three categories had similar ratings to each other with the conservative-leaning posts having a score of 3.4, the neutral posts with a score of 3.42, and the progressive-leaning posts with a score of 3.32 (see figure 8). The most extreme political bias ratings of progressive and conservative tended to receive the most positive comments with the conservative posts having a public response score about 10 percent larger than the neutral posts and the progressive posts about 2 percent larger than the neutral posts. Although these margins are small, one reason for these differences could be that posts with stronger messages may resonate with people and inspire those with similar beliefs to comment whereas posts that are not as explicit with their views may not inspire people to comment. The urge to respond to strong messages is similar to the previously mentioned student-led climate protests since Twitter users created an online debate over the movement because they had strong beliefs about it (Hess). While these results are mostly conclusive, it is also important to recognize that the inequality between the number of posts in each political bias category could have slightly skewed this averaged data.
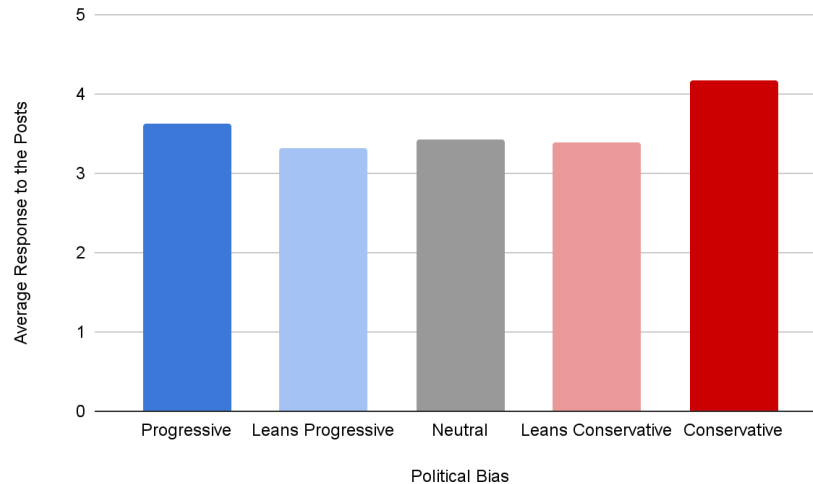
Figure 8: Average Public Response Scores in Each of the Political Bias Categories

Limitations

The methodology of this study contains limitations that may lessen the significance of the study's findings.

First, the content analysis was conducted by one researcher which did not allow for many people to agree on the factors analyzed in each post. This study was modeled after a sample paper where multiple researchers conducted the content analysis and had to mutually agree about the contents of a post. Although the researcher defined strict parameters to limit the presence of bias in this study, there were many qualitative decisions that the researcher had to determine on their own based on the parameters established. Therefore, if the researcher was able to perform this analysis with multiple researchers, the results would have been more credible since each decision would have been agreed upon by multiple people.

Secondly, due to the time constraints of this study, the researcher could only prioritize a certain amount of posts regarding this topic by limiting the content selection to two hashtags on Instagram within a specific date range. With more time, the researcher could have expanded their initial content selection parameters by extending the date range, analyzing content on multiple social media platforms, selecting posts from more variations of the hashtags used, or expanding the study to cover other elections. To ensure a comprehensive analysis of all the posts that could fit in this study, it is especially important to extend the range of hashtags used by studying hashtags such as #midterms, #unitedstatesmidterms, or #2022elections. There are thousands of posts about this topic across many different platforms, so expanding the scope of the study would have allowed for a more comprehensive conclusion.

Finally, since this study required the researcher to collect, filter, and analyze hundreds of posts it is possible there was human error or bias in the process. While the researcher created a system for each step of the content analysis process, there is still a possibility that the researcher had some implicit biases or made some occasional errors they were not aware of.

Conclusion and Implications

This study was successful in analyzing Gen Z's social media activism in the 2022 midterms on Instagram and concluding that the current hypotheses about Gen Z's progressivism are not fully present yet in their social media activism. While there were some aspects of progressivism seen in the analysis of these posts, there was not substantial evidence that supported Gen Z's hypothesized progressive political views influencing the 2022 midterms.

The data from this content analysis exemplifies the somewhat progressive bias that many people hypothesize Gen Z is developing. That being said, some of the results of this research were surprising, since they did not correlate with the assumption that Gen Z consistently favors and expresses a progressive political bias.

The first surprising result was the neutral political bias present in 63 percent of the posts, which could demonstrate that social media may be used as a platform for sharing political information rather than advocating for specific political beliefs. This is challenged by the voting outcomes of the election in which 63 percent of young voters chose Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives (Clayton and Trimpey). If the political biases present on social media were an accurate reflection of the elections, there would have been many more progressive posts to align with these results. Furthermore, for the public response and popularity evaluations, the conservative posts were consistently more popular and received the most positive comments as demonstrated by the 25 percent difference between the popularity scores of the conservative and progressive posts. It was not expected that the conservative posts would generally receive more attention than the progressive posts, but it is important to note that this determination may not be fully conclusive since there were so few conservative posts to analyze.

Although this study did not uncover extreme progressive beliefs in Gen Z's social media activism, it still found many progressive posts on Instagram regarding the 2022 midterms. Furthermore, this study found that conservative posts were often the most popular out of all the content analyzed, which could have implications for future activists who are trying to establish large audiences for their political content. While the results of this study do not correlate with the progressive beliefs that were influential in the midterms, they provide early insight into the development and efficacy of Gen Z political activism on Instagram.

Future Directions

Since Gen Z is still emerging into the political sphere, their actual political bias and impact on politics are still unknown. Future directions for this research should include evaluating Gen Z political bias through other forms of activism such as different social media networks, different elections, or other platforms for activism. Since this study was limited to Instagram posts from the 2022 midterms, future research should use this study as a model to evaluate the impact Instagram may have on future elections. Finally, on a broader scale, this study provides a baseline for future studies to investigate different applications of Gen Z political bias.

Furthermore, to continue the exploration of social media as a tool for activism, future research should continue to investigate the motivations for Gen Z activism, especially on social media. Many of the posts in this study received low attention from other users in the form of likes and comments, so it could be beneficial to uncover how social media activism evolves over time and the role it will play in the future of politics.

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