

**Do They Care Anymore?: Examining Effects of Exogenous Shocks on Political Interest
and News Avoidance**

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Serena L. Armstrong
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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 election, police brutality, and Black Lives Matter protests led to a heightened, and divisive, political environment in the US. Collectively these events served as an exogenous shock, a prolonged and widespread crisis that made it difficult to reconstitute life, to Americans. This study examines impacts and perceived effects that exogenous shocks can have on political interest and news engagement levels of young adults. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this research provides insight that the level of importance that young adults attribute to holding a high political interest is high, even when not engaged themselves due to perceived negativity and aggression associated with politics and news. Many of those who previously held high levels of interest and engagement before the exogenous shock hit a ceiling and then the floor in terms of their interest due to becoming overwhelmed, while many who had not been previously involving themselves had a wake-up call and steadier rise in terms of their interest and engagement with news and politics. These findings can inform the current state of politics in the eyes of young adults, how to approach news and politics with young adults, and the possibilities of mitigating related effects.

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Introduction

During the time that many refer to as the “lockdowns,” there was a heightened political climate in the US and across the world as governments scrambled to handle the COVID-19 pandemic (Gollust et al., 2020; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Morrison et al., 2022; Reisdorf et al., 2021). Prominent healthcare recommendations regarding topics such as remote vs essential in person work, masking, and in 2021 COVID-19 vaccines all became topics of political debate (Gollust et al., 2020). This was not in isolation, however. At the same time, the US was preparing for a high impact election between the incumbent president Donald Trump and former vice president Joe Biden. The murder of George Floyd in May of 2020 sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the country to bring attention to and call for change against police brutality, particularly toward Black Americans. All of this together set the stage for a collective exogenous shock to Americans.

Exogenous shocks are prolonged and unanticipated events that are external to a society, system, or establishment that results in rapid change to social, personal, or economic changes (Morrison et al., 2022; Röglinger et al., 2022; Soluk et al., 2021). These events can range from natural weather disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, or economic depressions, such as the great recession of 2008 (Morrison et al., 2022; Röglinger et al., 2022; Schüwer et al., 2019; Soluk et al., 2021; Venetoklis, 2021). While these shocks appear to be more commonly examined and studied in fields of economics and business (Röglinger et al., 2022), there are many other areas that deserve increased attention in the literature. For example, in the context of politics, exogenous shocks, perhaps particularly involving political matters themselves, could have consequences for how people engage with each other and with politics itself.

As the events associated with COVID-19, the 2020 presidential election, BLM protests and more were all highly politicized events in the US, it is important to understand the potential effects they may have had on the political environment both during and after they have settled. The possible impacts of these exogenous shocks are especially important to study during the impressionable period wherein young adults establish their political interest, which then becomes dispositional and remains stable over the life course (Prior, 2018). What this study seeks to understand is the potential influence of exogenous shocks on dispositional interest, with a specific focus on young adults who are currently in this critical period. In doing so, understanding the context of how young adults think about news and politics is an important factor to consider. It is also helpful to learn how young adults understood the politics involved in the smaller events that constituted the exogenous shock. This study seeks to add to the political communication literature by examining how political interest and news engagement may be impacted by exogenous shocks in a critical time for dispositional political interest development.

Literature Review

Defining Political Interest and Disinterest

Political scientists and political communication scholars define political interest as “the degree to which individuals are motivated to pay attention to political events and issues, seek out political information, and participate in political activities” (Prior, 2018, p. 2-3). Research suggests that political interest is influenced by a combination of structural, psychological, and situational factors (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Bender, 1967; Hooghe, 2004; Prior, 2018; Warren

& Wicks, 2011). Structural factors such as social class and education play a role in shaping political interest, however, these factors are mediated by psychological factors such as values, attitudes, and personality traits (Prior, 2018). Finally, situational factors such as media encounters and political campaigns cycles can also impact political interest by curating certain issues brought to an individual's attention and affecting the relationship between news and political interest and personal wellbeing (Dahlgren, 2021; Gil De Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Prior, 2018; Stromback et al., 2013). Therefore, examining broader situational factors and patterns with political interest levels may then provide insight into the current state of political interest and engagement with potential consequences for our democracy for this generation of young adults.

The flip side of political interest may be political disinterest with each lying on an end of a spectrum of each other. Research examining disinterest in politics spans across various disciplines and under different terms in the US and globally such as apathy syndrome and political apathy (Bennett, 1986; Eliasoph, 1998; Mahamud, 2022; Zhelnina, 2020), disengagement (Eliasoph, 1998; Prior, 2018; Rafail & Freitas, 2017), and political malaise (Furedi, 1999), across different disciplines. Much of this work tells a similar story. This is not a new phenomenon. There have been people who avoid politics and its related discourse (i.e reading the news, discussing politics, voting) for various reasons across decades. Today, avoidance and overload are often framed in news reports pop culture reporting as a US-based and generational phenomenon, however it has been seen in contexts across the globe and across age ranges (Mannell & Meese, 2022; Morrison et al., 2022; Villi et al., 2022).

As Prior describes in his 2018 book, Hooked: How Politics Captures People's Interest, there are two kinds of interest in politics. Situational interest is when an event or change in the environment - such as the 2020 election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden or the mounting moments of police brutality through 2021 - sparks a reaction from an individual but is then absent when this trigger/event is over (Prior, 2018). Dispositional interest, on the other hand, is when this interest exists outside of the need for these emotional triggers as an intrinsic motivation to be informed and/or engaged in political matters. A person with a dispositional political interest will maintain their interest in politics because they expect that there is gratification to be gained from doing so. For example, this can be an emotional response of feeling as though an individual's efforts or vote mattered in an election cycle, they may feel a sense of identity with a political party or group, or they feel as though politics affects an aspect close to their identity (e.g. political discussions around BIPOC and LGBTQ rights). In the same way individuals can hold a political interest, either situational or dispositional, they can also be disinterested.

Political interest can be influenced by friends and family (Hooghe, 2004; Zhelnina, 2020), perceptions of societal acceptance from such interest (Daoust & Blais, 2020; Furedi, 1999), the amount of options in an individual's media diet (Prior, 2010, 2018), and more. Zhelnina (2020) found that both within families and cultures on a broader scale, anti-political attitudes, or apolitical attitudes were a learned phenomenon wherein emotional mechanisms and/or cynicisms were passed along to others as a response of "feeling powerless in the face of political realities one cannot control" (p. X). In this way, avoiding politics was not necessarily a personal strategic consideration to meet an end (e.g. preserving mental health), but rather a

collective experience with seemingly no direct aims from the individual. It is a cultural adaptation of a longer-term distrust in the government and public figures which causes those in these societies to simply not involve themselves in an area they feel they cannot change or even interact with.

Political interest levels are important to understand as it is a strong predictor of engagement in the political system, from voting in elections, knocking on doors for a candidate or simply seeking out information on political party policies (Rafail & Freitas, 2017; Thorson, 2012; Zhelnina, 2020). One of the concerns with potential decreases in political interest is that these aspects of engagement will follow suit. According to a comprehensive analysis in Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work, civic literacy is essential for the functioning of democracy, and that individuals who possess this literacy are more likely to engage in political activities and make informed decisions (Milner, 2002). This civic literacy is defined by Milner as “a general political informedness linked to citizenship” and the “application of that knowledge” (2002). The knowledge obtained by engaging with news and political content can inform individuals about events such as political rallies and elections as well as the values that can help people feel more efficacious in their skills and personal impact in the political process. Losing the first step in the path to this civic literacy, therefore may have dire consequences for our democracy. This research expands on these prior works and argues that it is also essential to understand why this dispositional interest may change due to different environmental factors.

There are many reasons one may choose to extend or not extend their level of interest to an equal amount of engagement. These can be related to emotions attributed to the current political climate or decisions made (Wolak and Sokhey, 2022), the perception that their engagement will be fulfilling and have worthwhile consequences (Papacharissi, 2021), and the perceived efficacy that one understands what is happening in politics and how to engage with it (Papacharissi, 2021; Toff and Nielsen, 2022).

Eliason's work has also shown that some people will go out of their way to appear as though they do not care about politics even if the interest is present (1998). This may provide important context for similar findings from Pew Research two decades later. Despite the majority of Americans being on social media, only 9% say they often post political content on social media with 55% saying that they were “worn out” by politics on their social media feeds (Atske, 2020; McClain, 2021). Further, the more that an individual expresses their interest in following politics, the less likely they are to discuss politics with others across partisan lines. Perhaps then, it is not that interest in itself has changed, but the cultural context around the expression of such interest that has. This could mean that the measures used in researching political interest and engagement levels could be missing those who are interested but not willing to express as such for fear of being judged and ostracized (Atske, 2020; Jørgensen et al., 2022; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) or losing relationships altogether (Van Duyn, 2021). Therefore, research on political interest should venture beyond traditional measures of engagement to capture interest in its own light.

There are modest increases in joining protest and civic associations over time and place before the years that have become known to be associated with COVID-19: 2020-2021 (Wehr 1998; Rafail and Freitas 2017). This has continued to be the case through the period of exogenous shock (Jørgensen et. al, 2022). However, according to a study conducted by Downton and Wehr actions, or inactions, that present as disengagement with political issues may actually be a cultural shift from social movement participation to different patterns of engagement.

However, there is also a longer trend shown in research that activists and others who engage at high levels in politics experience subsequent burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). This assessment has been explored more recently as well and has come to similar conclusions (Dalton, 2008; Thorson, 2012). Rather than an erosion of public participation, we may instead be seeing a diversification of methods in this participation. Research also suggests that as scholars, we may be behind in the way that we measure engagement and citizenship when it comes to young people specifically (Thorson, 2012). In looking at these areas, it is important to both be addressing how young people understand their engagement as well as to take into account the context in which they are doing so. For instance, a study by Lane and colleagues (2021) suggests that measuring political engagement on social media during and following the elections with Donald Trump may have been affected by a ceiling effect. Wolak & Sokhey (2021) confirm these assertions. There were heightened levels of political discussion in 2016 compared to 2012, and the American National Election Studies (ANES) report shows that these levels of discussion have maintained into 2020 (2021). Now, in

2023, it is possible to take a more comprehensive view of how the exogenous shock truly affected interest with a lower potential to experience a ceiling effect in the findings.

Connecting Political Disinterest and News Avoidance

Research in this area also highlights some of the ways in which it is possible to more actively and intentionally avoid politics. The media environment available today has millions of options to choose from compared to a mere two decades ago. Users now have the ability to curate their media experiences by choosing to click on different channels once a political or news program comes on, following social media accounts that are not political in nature, and essentially are able to intentionally avoid politics altogether with ever expanding entertainment options (Prior, 2018; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Although politics receives significant coverage in the news media, it is not the sole focus. Various other subjects, such as local events, weather updates, traffic reports, and pop culture, are also covered. Avoiding news altogether might seem excessive. However, as previous scholars have shown, there is a strong connection between the the avoidance of news and of politics (Gorski, 2022; Mannell, 2022; Mathews et al., 2022; Strömback et al., 2013; Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020; Toff and Nielsen, 2022). For instance, Strömback et al. identifies political interest as a key motivating factor behind news consumption (2013). On the other hand, Toff and Nielsen argue that motivations for avoiding the news can then result in a reduction in involvement in “civic and political affairs” due to a perceived lowered efficacy in

retaining and utilizing political knowledge (2022). Whichever the direction of this causality, it is clear that these two concepts are deeply intertwined.

Politically uninterested individuals can also more easily avoid related news than in the past due to the number of options that exist in terms of spending one's time such as through entertainment channels (i.e. streaming and pop culture articles) (Prior, 2010). Additionally, the algorithmic nature of many social media platforms may continue to limit the amount of news information that an uninterested user sees in their feed (Dahlgren, 2021; Jiang et al., 2021; Ohme, 2021; Pariser, 2011).

However, contrary to being able to avoid news and politics with other sources of entertainment and information, it is also possible that the algorithmic nature of some social media platforms may contribute to greater unintended exposure to these topics. For example, Pew Research Center has shown that a small but growing share of U.S. adults say they regularly get their news on TikTok (Matsa, 2022). Could it be that the rise of such platforms and the general switch to algorithmic social media feeds during this period has actually increased the amount of news that an individual sees on a regular basis? This is the argument of researchers such as Thorson and Wells who in their 2016 paper, discuss the complexity and multi-faceted nature of today's media environment. An individual's media diet is no longer chosen primarily by conventional newsmakers such as with the mass media era but is now curated by various actors such as algorithms, social networks, individual preferences, and strategic communication entities.

Today's media technologies and environment expose people to unprecedented amounts of news and information as well as a fragmented way of receiving them (Boczkowski, 2021;

Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020). This has led to some feeling as though they are in a stressful world of information and news overload (Gorski, 2022; Mannell, 2022; Mathews et al., 2022; Ströömback et al., 2013; Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020; Toff and Nielsen, 2022). As a result of this, news avoidance increased and was even recommended by national government systems during the height of the pandemic (Gorski, 2022; Mannell, 2022). Strategies and reasons for doing so have been varied through different studies from emotional well-being support (Mannell, 2022; Toff et al., 2022), to a lowered trust in the news (Gorski, 2022; Mathews et al., 2022), and identity maintenance (Mathews et al., 2022); however what seems to be a common trend is that it is negatively affecting viewers/readers perceived wellbeing. The Harvard Public Opinion Project's poll of 2,024 18-to-29-year-old undergraduate students found that nearly half report that politics (45%) and news media (46%) have a negative impact on their mental health (2022). This has been consistent in the literature; people have maintained a level of perceived fear of becoming mentally distressed and overwhelmed by the news leading to thought-out and intentional avoidance of it in their day-to-day lives, particularly during the years of the pandemic (Gorski, 2022; Mitchell & Liedke, 2021, Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Tunney et al., 2021). In addition, there has been a disproportionate avoidance of news among lower social classes and those who feel that they are under or misrepresented in the news (Lindell and Båge, 2022; Toff and Nielsen, 2022; Tunney et al., 2021). This has potentially dangerous implications for those who are missing out on important health, policy, and political information affecting both those in their communities and themselves. Toff and Nielsen found in a 2022 study that active news avoiders feel as though there is a barrier in place to engaging in political affairs, widening the gap between those who do and do not engage with civic life. This coupled with the

heightened levels of negative news during the pandemic's peak years, means that the potential for interest and engagement with news decreasing could leave some behind in understanding the world of politics in a more general sense, and specifically what may be essential knowledge to be and feel informed for an upcoming election or other realm of political engagement. As research in these areas has found mixed results, it is important to continue the exploration of where the levels of interest and engagement are currently while incorporating the context of the exogenous shock into the questions and analysis.

Exogenous Shocks

There are various factors that can lead people to avoiding the news and politics on an individual basis, however, similar factors have not been examined on a larger scale. It is important not only to understand why and how a person may avoid politics, but also larger cultural shifts that may be occurring and their source. In other fields of research, the catalysts of these shifts are referred to as exogenous shocks. Exogenous shocks are defined as “a period of prolonged and widespread crisis in which actors struggle to reconstitute all aspects of social life” ranging from periods of economic crises to natural disasters (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 32). Pulling from psychological scholarship, exogenous shocks can have immense impacts on well-being and behaviors following it (Morrison et al., 2022). Exogenous shocks have been explored thoroughly in sociology, economic management, and strategic actions literature (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Morrison et al., 2022; Soluk et al., 2021) but have not yet seen as much work in the political communication sphere. The great recession of 2008 is a prime example of the impacts that exogenous shocks have on not only the economy but also various social aspects of life as well. Scholars have found that mental and physical health

deteriorated, divorce rates rose (Cohen, 2014), child development and family dynamics were negatively affected (Kalil, 2013), and there was a large “thermostatic” political shift toward the left in the US which political scientists have since attributed President Obama’s success (Bartels, 2013). Beyond the great recession, Morrison et al. has shown how these external crises have been shown to affect many aspects of life such as lowering mental health and wellbeing for a population through the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic (2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic in itself has been identified as an exogenous shock in itself due the immense impact that it has had on schools (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Wyse, 2020), corporations (Buchetti et al., 2022; Koutoupis et al., 2021), the economy (Baker et al., 2020; Borio, 2020), individuals (Atske, 2021; Devine et al., 2023; Jantan et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2021; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Morrison et al., 2022; Strasser et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2021), and politics (Bol et al., 2021; Devine et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election, protests, and heightened political dynamics at this time are arguably inseparable due to the intertwined nature of public health and politics in the US context (Clinton, 2021; Gollust et al., 2020). For this reason, this paper will examine the collective exogenous shock of 2020-2022 rather than attempting to isolate any one event during this period as a causal influence.

The globally collective shock of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the political discussions surrounding the time period may have pushed people to stray away from news (Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Villi et al., 2022) and politics (Devine et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2021; Mahmud, 2022). The increase in social media use throughout the pandemic while people were in lockdowns and working from home may very well exacerbate the level of unintentional

avoidance (Boczkowski, 2021; Ohme, 2021; Social Media Platforms MAU Growth 2021). Alternatively, the increased amount of time spent with media devices at home during lockdown periods generally, (Trott et al., 2022) as well as specifically seeking out COVID-19 related news (Bento et al., 2020) may have helped people to engage with news and politics more broadly, sparking a continued interest in these areas. For example, when accessing a news website for COVID-19 news and updates, there are likely other stories featured on the page which, even if not clicked, provide a headline informing an individual about a political matter. The increase in general social media use over the course of the pandemic while people were in lockdowns and working from home may very well exacerbate the level of unintentional avoidance for this very reason (Boczkowski, 2021; Ohme, 2021; Social Media Platforms MAU Growth, 2021; Thorson, 2012).

There are also factors related to the pandemic that have affected intentional avoidance (Gorski, 2022; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Schäfer et al., 2022; The Institute of Politics at Harvard University, 2022; Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Tunney et al., 2021; Villi et al., 2022). Intentional news avoidance is “an intermittent news use practice in which people deliberately turn away from the news” (Schäfer et al., 2022, p. 1).

In the context of the COVID-19, there was also an infodemic defined by the World Health Organization (W.H.O) as “an overabundance of information, both online and offline” with the added concern for misinformation and disinformation regarding the pandemic (2020). This meant that in addition to the overwhelming amounts of unsettling news, consumers also needed to work to parse out truth within this complex plethora of available information. This added effort in an already stress inducing climate was enough to push some to avoid the news

in its entirety (Fu et al., 2020; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2022; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Schäfer et al., 2022; Toff & Nielsen, 2022); while others chose to actively limit their consumption of news media (Schäfer et al., 2022; Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020; Villi et al., 2022). Studies have shown that people who avoided the news during the pandemic have expressed a need to prioritize their mental wellbeing over being informed about politics and the pandemic, citing impacts on their wellbeing and negative mood changes (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2020; Schäfer et al., 2022; Strasser et al., 2022; Toff & Nielsen, 2022). A particularly unusual, and large scale, instance of this was seen in Australia during early stages of COVID-19 lockdowns. Government mental health organization, Head to Health and the Department of Health issued advice to limit news consumption for the sake of reader/viewer mental health in 2020 (Mannell & Meese, 2022).

Summary and Research Questions

Existing literature showcases the relationship between political interest, news avoidance, and their subsequent consequences for our democracy. Individuals develop their lifelong political interest, or lack thereof, during their young adult years (Prior, 2010; 2018). If people do not develop an interest in politics and/or a sense of civic duty to engage with news and politics, notable aspects of our political environment (e.g. voting, campaigning, maintaining an informed electorate) could be in danger. Therefore, it is important to begin examining the potential factors that may contribute to or hinder the development of these lifelong political interest levels.

Current literature also provides some insight into the differences that this generation of young adults holds toward political engagement and news media (Thorson, 2012; Zhelnina,

2020). Therefore, it is essential to understand the perceived importance that having political interest holds among this population before assuming that prior held beliefs from different age cohorts hold true, considering the potential influence of the exogenous shock during their impressionable years. Moreover, the exogenous shock elements of 2020-2022 have contributed to strain in each of these areas (Mannell & Meese, 2022; Morrison et al., 2022; Villi et al., 2022). COVID-19 and the various heightened political matters between 2020 and 2022 together is a ripe example of an exogenous shock, consequently an appropriate context to examine these effects. While dispositional political interest may be stable over the life course (Prior, 2018), it is not clear how stark changes in interest and participation during an individual's impressionable years can affect where this interest settles. To explore these issues, this study used the following research questions:

RQ1: What do young adults perceive as the effects of the exogenous shock on their political interest and news engagement?

RQ2: How important are political interest and news engagement in the eyes of young adults today?

RQ2b: What are reasons for choosing to engage or disengage from politics and news for young adults today?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, this study consisted of 20 semi-structured informational interviews with undergraduate students enrolled in the SONA subject pool at the University of Minnesota's Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Students

are automatically enrolled in this pool for the opportunity to earn extra credit in their courses in exchange for their participation in research studies. Professors with large course sections are encouraged to involve their classes in the SONA program and then these students will have the opportunity to select from available studies to partake in. This study awarded 4 SONA points which was then converted to extra credit as determined by the instructor of the courses offering such.

The focus on data collection among young adults within this program is intentional as this is a critical period for developing a dispositional interest. As Prior (2018) argues in Hooked: How Politics Captures People's Interest, after an individual's early twenties, dispositional interest remains stable throughout the lifetime. This time from late teens to early twenties is what Prior calls the "impressionable years", where an individual's dispositional interest (or lack thereof) is settling into a steady position to be maintained over the adult life course. Therefore, there is a concerning potential for any possible newly found situational disinterest in politics among this age group to become dispositional, which could have consequences for individual political engagement and our democracy on a larger scale.

Additionally, focusing on students whose work revolves around news and communication has the potential to show the impacts on those who both were and are invested in these areas. While this is not representative of young adults across the US, potential effects shown among a sample of highly politically interested individuals who frequently engage with news content provides insight on the reach of these effects. By examining a case of extremes through theoretical sampling, this research aims, in part, to maximize the probability of finding

null results (Becker, 1998; Luker, 2008). This is both a limitation and a strength as the generalizability of the results will be lower, however it will showcase the impact on young adults who at some points have had a higher-than-average level of involvement with news and/or politics. This is a result of initially choosing journalism as their path for furthering education as well as due to being immersed in the content more frequently.

All interviews were in person and were face-to-face and took place in the research suite on the third floor of Murphy Hall on the University of Minnesota campus. The interviews ranged from 26-63 minutes with a median time of 37 minutes and were completed in March and April of 2023. This is notably a non-election year which may help to gauge the dispositional interest levels as many of the exogenous drivers of interest - most notably, presidential election campaigns and the news coverage they stimulate - are not as strong during this time period. This is also when COVID-19 cases, and resulting deaths were reported to be low which meant that there was less to focus on in the news (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Demographics were asked at the start allowing participants to speak to their most prominent identities (see Appendix A). Questions for the interviews revolved around three main sections: political interest and attention to news currently, recalled political interest and news attention *before* the exogenous shock period of 2020-2022, and their perceptions on how this period has affected their political interest levels and interactions with news content. The full set of guiding questions can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed through Otter.ai Pro then were then coded using a critical discourse analysis in the qualitative coding software NVivo. From these emerging themes, this study provides an updated understanding of how dispositional and situational political interest have changed over the course of the shock of 2020-2022.

Critical discourse analysis is important to this work as political interest is largely a contextual matter. Though dispositional interest has been shown to be stable over the life course, situational interest responds to major events, such as when a large legal bill is in question, when there is a mass shooting, or during presidential elections. With that said, situational interest may have fluctuated for participants throughout the months interviews were conducted due to emerging news at the time such as Donald Trump's indictment, multiple mass shootings, and bills introduced that aim at limiting human rights across the country. This may lead them to situate their perceived dispositional interest in different ways based on the level of their situational interest at the time of the interview. While change in interest is not directly measured in the study in this a cross-sectional examination, the interviews did ask participants to reflect on their *perceptions* of change in interest over time. Additionally, critical discourse analysis allows the researcher to consider the context in which each interview took place. From the answers and conversations that ensued during the interview, codes were collapsed into encompassing themes that transcend the context at play.

Appendix A

Participant #	Pseudonym	Age	Degree of Study	Race	Gender	Year in School	Pol Identity	Other
1	Ann	N/A	Strategic Communications	White	Woman	First year	Leaning liberal	
2	Sierra	22	Undeclared	White	Woman	First year	Moderate Con.	Heterosexual, non religious, air force veteran
3	Alex	18	Strategic Communications	White	Man	First year		
4	Jeremy		Journalism and Cinema Media Culture	White	Man	Fourth year		cis gay male
5	Sofia	22	HR		Woman			jewish
6	Jacob	21	Strategic Communications	White	Man			bisexual
7	Jordan	19		White	Man	First year		
8	Tracy	18	Journalism and Marketing	White	Woman	First year		heterosexual female
9	Jan	N/A	Political Science	White	Woman		liberal	cis bisexual female
10	Nova	N/A	Developmental Psychology	Indian Asian	Unsure			she/they pronouns, international student
11	Dorian	19	Math and Spanish	White and Latino	Man			cis gay male
12	Aubrey	27	Economics	Black Somalian	Woman			
13	Lolo	19	Sociology of Law, Criminology, and Deviance	White	Woman			
14	Skylar	19	Undecided in CLA	Half Black	Woman			Gen Z
15	Mathilde R	N/A	Individual Studies	White	Woman			
16	Iguana F	18	Journalism and Political Science	Bali Indonesian	Woman	First year		
17	Maggie	20	Strategic Communication		Woman	Second year		
18	Laura	18	Undecided in CLA	White	Woman	First year		
19	Muna		Global Studies	African American	Woman	First year		Muslim and hijab wearing
20	Jonathan	19	HR & Supply Chain Management	Asian (Mong)	Man	First year		cis male

Appendix B

- I am interested in your perspective so there are no right or wrong answers.
- This is a voluntary, informational interview.
- Feel free to skip any questions that don't apply to you, or you wish to skip, please expand on areas that you think would help us get a better understanding of your experience.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Tell me about yourself and your prominent identities. How would you describe yourself? What are you doing now? (Degree of study - Age - Year in program - Race/Gender - etc)

PRESENT

- What is a piece of news you heard/saw recently?
 - What does news mean to you?
 - What do you pay attention to in the news?
- How would you describe your media usage?
 - How often do you encounter politics during this?
 - How does it make you feel to encounter politics in your media use?
- How interested would you say you are in politics?
- How would you describe your interest in political matters? What are some examples of this?
- How do you engage with politics now? (retweets, reading articles, protests, voting, etc)
 - How do you decide when to engage in politics? (read an article, seek out information about politicians, read a post on a social media feed, etc)
- How do you feel when you engage in politics?
- Thinking about the pandemic. Has COVID changed the way you engage with the world?
 - Has it changed the topics you're interested in...your news habits....etc. a story
 - Has it changed the way you think about politics? In what ways?
 - Do you have a story that comes to mind?
- How does your experience differ or is similar to people in your life
 - How do people in your life engage in politics?
 - Do they seem to be heavily interested? Not so much?
 - How has that affected your interest in politics?
- Do you talk about politics with your friends/family? If so, can you tell me about what those conversations look like? Tell me about a conversation you had around politics.

PAST

- We talked about current engagement. Tell me more about if it was different pre-pandemic?
 - What did you pay attention to in the news then?
 - How often do you remember encountering politics during this time?
 - How did it make you feel to encounter politics in your media use?
- Can you describe your interest in politics before the pandemic hit in 2019?
 - *If there is change:
 - Why do you think your level of interest in politics has changed?
 - *If there is no change:
 - Why do you think your level of interest in politics stayed the same?
- Has what you paid attention to changed at all? How did you decide when to engage in politics?
- Can you describe your level of interest as a line from 2019-end of 2022? (others broadly?)

BROADLY

- How do you think other people's political interest levels have or have not changed?
 - What do you think about this? Do you see it as healthy? A problem?

Findings

Overview

This study sought to answer three interrelated research questions about how exogenous shocks impact dispositional political interest as well as news engagement. RQ1 examines the importance that young adults attribute to politics and news media, RQ2 and RQ2a seek to understand the potential effects of the exogenous shock on political interest levels, and RQ3 and RQ3a explore the potential effects of the exogenous shock on news engagement.

Overall, while participants found politics and news to be important conceptually, they held negative perceptions of politics and traditional news in the US and associate the topic with conflict and aggression broadly and on an interpersonal level. They had varying experiences with their current political interest and news engagement as a result of the exogenous shock in terms of their involvement and interest in politics and news which appears to be dictated by levels of involvement prior to the shock. Some young adults who were previously frequently involved with politics in some form often hit a ceiling in their level of participation and interest levels and then the floor after deciding that they could not maintain the levels that they had been. Others who were not engaged prior to the exogenous shock felt wake-up calls following varied political events to pay more attention to the news and to engage in political matters. In both cases, identity was a major factor when choosing when to engage in political matters as someone who typically avoids politics and news.

Politics are Important, Even if Not to Me

Many of the participants cited an importance in holding and expressing interest in political matters as it can have consequences to our democracy. This was shown across

individuals' reported level of interest during the interview. It was important to participants to have “a healthy medium of like news content, and like, understanding of what's going on” though she had earlier described that she “tried to stay away from like, the aggressive news” (Sierra, #002). Nova talks about how “politics are really important as a tool” despite reporting low interest herself as a “2 or 3 out of 10” (#010). Other participants echoed this saying how essential it is for others to be involved in politics and keeping up to date with the news. However, there was also a dissonance from some participants when comparing their personal level of involvement and interest compared to their expression that it is important to hold these values broadly. Many participants stated that it is important that people maintain a higher level of interest in politics and stay engaged with the news despite earlier in the interview openly reflecting on their little to no interest themselves. Young adults frequently brought up statements of how they “should be more informed” (Dorian, #011) or “should have cared” more about what was happening in politics (Lauren, #018). There was unease in the conversation from many participants when asked to expand on these ideas further, shifting in chairs and smiling as they recounted their earlier experiences in congruence with the statements they were making now. A few reflected on the way that hadn't been asked to think about, and have a conversation, centered on topics of politics, their own involvement, and their broader views. Sierra and Laura paused frequently during the interview and had apologized for needing extra time to think as they “had never thought about” (#002, #018) these topics before and then been asked to articulate them. Laura showed some discomfort, shifting in her chair and smiling because politics is something that she says she is never asked to talk about, and typically is not one to bring it up either.

Politics are Negative, Aggressive, and Not for Me

Similar to recent research on news avoidance from Toff and Nielsen (2022), young adults cite high levels of negativity and aggression associated with the news as reasons for not following regularly. The “cognitive load” (Laura, #018; Mathilde, #015) that participants feel when they “truly pay attention” leaves them feeling overwhelmed (Maggie, #017), “frustrated” (Sierra, #002), and “exhausted” (Mathilde, #015). When talking about how and why she began avoiding the news and politics in 2020, Skylar shared some of these sentiments: “[Politics during COVID was] overwhelming, overwhelmingly negative. People felt like divided, like, angry all the time.” (Skylar, #014). She goes on to say that she was particularly starting to avoid politics during this time because she

“lost faith a little bit in our politicians, like more than a little bit. I think before the pandemic, I just assumed that they like were intelligent people who knew what they were doing. And I don't necessarily think that's the case anymore. But before the pandemic I was confident that they're qualified and now I'm not” (Skylar, #014).

This appears to be in agreement with research from Strasser et al., who found through a review of literature that there is a strong link between COVID-19 news consumption and declining mental health in young people (2022). This frustration is reflected in other participants as well. Jonathan expands on this with commentary on how politics seems to follow everywhere and can be difficult to avoid which is frustrating to him. “I just feel like everything has political, like, animosity towards it” (Jonathan, #020). He later discusses how

this hostility around politics is one of the reasons that they see their circle adamantly avoiding news and politics altogether. Further, Dorian depicts how the perceived barrier to engaging with politics limits their willingness to do so:

“yeah, when I feel overwhelmed, it's a little bit because like, politics often feels so hard to interact with like that you as a citizen don't have a lot of control. Oftentimes, it can be complicated and hard to understand. So you know that like if you're engaging with that media you are sort of investing in trying to figure out like how the whole issue works, and then forming your opinion, while also trying to like set aside the opinion of the news outlet that you're getting your news from. If you want to be like a responsible media consumer, you have to be able to look past that. And so sometimes, if I'm not in the mind's eye set to like, do all that extra work when learning about political news. I will just not do it” (Dorian, #011).

This “extra work” that Dorian refers to was one of the reasons that young adults found themselves avoiding news and politics altogether. This reflects much of the current literature in news avoidance where the perception that the cost outweighs the benefits of participation (Fu et al., 2020; Gorski, 2022; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Schäfer et al., 2022; Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Tunney et al., 2021). Young adults in these interviews performed these mental calculations and made the decision that the effort necessary for engagement was not worth the perceived effort it would take to do so, despite recognizing its relative importance to a functioning democracy. Participants discussed the need to value their “peace of mind” (Mathlide, #015) over the pressures of participation and staying informed.

Jordan and Iguana shared this sentiment. In addition to the extra labor needed to engage with this type of news, these participants also mentioned how negative political conversations actually were affecting, or had affected, their lives. Iguana brought up that if they “do talk about politics, it's more like in a hush hush tone. It's more like oh, like, Yeah, but like, sweep it under the rug” when political conversation happens with friends (#016). She continues to discuss how there is strain and discomfort when political conversations arise and that she often avoids them because she does not like the amount of tension that is involved. Jordan continues this point of view:

“it seems like it's better to not know any things that you can't talk about than [...] talk about it and get into arguments and whatnot. So I kind of just avoided it for the longest time” (Jordan, #007).

What Jordan is describing is the intentional avoidance of politics in an effort to avoid political conversations altogether. There was a learned association between having political knowledge, being able to participate in related conversations, and the result of direct negative consequences, primarily in the way of arguments or losing relationships. One solution in this situation is to simply not know about the political topics that may come up in conversation. This tracks with research done by Pew Research Center showing that even prior to the exogenous shock, avoiding conversations around politics online has become a common occurrence amongst Americans (McClain, 2021). Similarly, participants recognized that these potentially tense conversations could lead to equally tense relationships or even fallout. When these conversations do happen, they feel risky and complicated making the perceived level of

effort increase. Another solution as Alex described is trying to “steer the conversation away” when politics comes up with friends and family (#003). This is similar to other research in the field examining sociability wherein people are taught that conversations about politics, even online can lead to these negative consequences; it then becomes part of that environment culture to avoid these discussions altogether (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

Self-preservation continued to be a theme with some participants saying they needed to shift away from their previous purposeful engagement and towards a mindset of self-care, paying attention only when the benefits to themselves heavily outweigh the cost. This preservation not only focuses on maintaining social circles and relationships, but also internally to the self and prioritizing mental health. Nova puts this well stating that “like, at this point, I would like to know more but I simply don't have the mental capacity” (#010). Similarly, though she enjoyed engaging at one point in her life, Skylar now becomes “emotionally, mentally exhausted quickly [with politics] being the environment that it is” (#014).

Mathilde spoke about this frequently throughout the conversation when discussing their current state of political involvement and level of news engagement:

“I didn't want to, like just like, stay completely, like jaded and stuff and it's like, I'm trying to like, I feel like my inclination to care. Like, yeah, there's just so much that like, I need to focus more on, like making sure that there's enough of me to like give. And then, it's just, it's disheartening because there's so you know, like, when you really pay attention, there's like so much” (Mathilde, #015).

The overwhelming nature of news and the world of politics came up frequently from other participants as well. These young adults learned through experience that when they attempted to be more aware and informed, there was an immense amount of information, much of it negative, to take on. That is why Maggie decided to “just focus on issues that are like, more relevant to me, because otherwise it's a bit like overwhelming” (#017).

Identity as a Primary Factor for Future Engagement

Identity is a major factor for when self-proclaimed avoiders of news and politics will engage further for many young people. This is where participants expressed that keeping some political interest and news awareness was most important. Many participants shared in the sentiment that Dorian did: “Typically, I'm really likely to engage politically when it deals with injustice, especially within communities that I identify with or I have close connections with” (Dorian, #011). Lolo echoes this, talking specifically in reference to her own parents and the areas where she feels affect those close to her. While she talks earlier about not caring much for news, areas that affected her and her family directly were areas of concern, and a reason to not “check out completely”:

“I feel like I see a lot more now, or like a lot more issues that I think I find interesting, like I pay more attention to when stuff happens. Or if they relate to me.”

“Can you tell me more about that last part?”

“Like Roe v Wade. It was a major part is just like that has a lot to do with I mean women. And so like I've feared that and then also the concern about same sex marriage is being overturned, like along with Roe v. Wade, because my parents, I have two moms. So that was huge. And that was just really kind of scary point. But yeah, like just like women's rights and like if I will be able to, like get to have the right to an abortion and stuff like that because I may need it or just basic level like health care” (Lolo, She/her, #013).

Having two moms came up throughout the conversation as an important area of her life that led her to becoming more conscious of LGBTQ+ politics and rights and something she kept up with frequently. Similarly, Jonathan talks about how this extension of themselves through friends and family that encounter these political matters due to their identity:

“I do identify as like a person of color in this country as a minority. So you know, that inherently is kind of an important topic to me. And recently, reproductive health rights. I mean, I identify as a cisgender male, but I do have a lot of friends who identify as cisgender females and I have a younger sister and have a mom, biological mom. And you know, when I think of them, and what's happening in the news right now, or what we see in the news, I always like, kind of think about that and I was, every time I vote, or, like, get a campaign. I'm always like, kind of thinking about them” (Jonathan, he/him, cisgendered male, #020).

Here Jonathan talks about how he recognizes that those around him may deal with some political battles in a way that he does not based on his identity as a cisgender male. This insight

they hold as a minority person of color helps them to recognize these other political struggles and the need to pay attention and keep those in mind when making political decisions.

Iguana not only recognizes the areas of identity that help her to stay attentive, but also when she is going to elect to not be active in other aspects. She discusses identity in a way of what needs to be of interest to her and what isn't in the context of the Ukraine war:

“This might sound like a little crass like Ukraine, let's say like Ukraine war. I don't have any personal relation to that. So I do view it in like the acquisition, but I wouldn't say I would actively, like, look into that. But then like certain things like I have a friend who lives in Israel, so when I do see news about this, I'll be able to be like, Hey, are you okay? I'm checking in on that. Or like, whenever they were talking about the hijab, like I come from Indonesia, it's mostly like a Muslim populated, its majority Muslim. So I think that there's like a personal interest to me that I'm like, Okay, I need to look into this deeper” (Iguana, Hijab-wearing Muslim, she/her, #016)

She recognizes that while it may be “crass”, since she has no personal relation to the war or those involved, she does not involve herself in any related efforts or follow the developing news about the area. However, with her friend from Israel, there was a pull to keep in touch with those affected and make sure they were adequately informed about such topics. As identity was a frequent determinant to when a participant would engage with the news and politics, young adults who felt that these events were “close to home” were more likely to follow related developments in the news. The words “identity” and “close to me” or “close to

home” came up in many other interviews as well when talking about when they are most likely to engage with news and politics.

The Seemingly Universal Large Interest Spike

More Time at Home with Devices... and Parents

Nearly every participant in this study cited an increased overall media use and heightened news exposure during the shock, largely attributed to COVID-19 lockdowns. Many moved from their college housing back home where their parents had news on more frequently. Research has shown that parents hold an important role in the political socialization of their children as well as their news consumption levels (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Bender, 1967; Hooghe, 2004; Warren & Wicks, 2011). The lockdowns during the early stage of the pandemic set up a path for further political socialization from participants' parents. As this socialization was during the critical period of dispositional political interest, it is important to consider the potential effects this has on today's young adults.

Alex, at the time, had moved home from school during COVID-19 lockdowns. He describes how this abundance of time at home and watching the news turned into a memorable “family bonding activity” that “kind of connected [them] with the news” (#003). However, after the lockdowns were lifted, and his mother went back to work, these times of bonding and having a reason to engage with the news ceased. Skylar had a similar experience: “my grandma had the news constantly. And I was at home because I was quarantined. So I had watched the news a lot more” (Skylar, #014).

Others, like Sierra, used news as main opportunities for bonding, points of conversation, and quality time with their roommates due to losing other aspects of their lives to discuss while quarantining together.

“She kind of teased me because I was very oblivious to like everything that was happening she was constantly sending me videos keeping me up to date with what was going on with like, George Floyd and all that stuff, and I she would send me videos of like girls getting like kidnapped at gas stations just because I was just like, not aware of anything that was going on. I was just kind of in a bubble growing up. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but I just never really thought about it. So it's kind of a rude awakening during COVID and just getting all this information sent to me and I was on my phone more and I was like, looking up things more common. We had a TV in the house that was like would have the news on, so I guess just like I was more focused on it because you don't really have anything else going on. I guess. And I feel like I don't know. If anything big was happening with like, movements, but I feel like I just noticed that more during COVID I guess” (Sierra, #002).

This is an interesting contrast to previous points of discussion with participants, as well as in the research broadly, as news is described both as a dividing force, and also as a point of community and relationship building. As youth were at home during lockdowns, they sought out ways to keep up human interaction levels through discussion of current events.

Hitting the Ceiling and Floor vs the Steady Rise

In describing their level of interest in news and politics from 2020-2022, nearly all the participants noted a steep spike in interest and attention they devoted to news and politics. But what is a critical distinction is understanding whose interest was maintained versus dropped. Some participants held a high level of involvement with politics and regularly were caught up in news media before the exogenous shock hit in 2020, while others had little to no interest in doing so. This appears to be the determining factor for where their interest levels would land after the exogenous shock. One path that emerged was with young adults who held this interest and higher level of engagement prior to the onset of the exogenous shock and reported that attempting to maintain or increase their involvement, led to them stopping altogether.

Hitting the Ceiling and the Floor

For young adults who were highly engaged in politics and kept up with the news before the exogenous shock, this spike that many of the participants seemed to experience led to negative consequences. Mathilde spent much of the interview talking about how initially they used social media to have political discussions and advocacy for political candidate Bernie Sanders. Politics, especially theoretical politics and progressivism, were areas that she was deeply interested in actively learning about and kept up with the news each day on Twitter. Though, she acknowledges that a part of why she no longer sees these accounts is due to the changes that Twitter had made around the time of the interview, she also points to her own personal decisions about how much to engage with news:

“honestly, since the pandemic, I kind of realized how it is not healthy for me to be engaging at a level like that. And I've been kind of, you know, purposefully trying to

just scale back and focus on, like, passions of mine, or like music and things like that, because I felt like the dilution of everything was pretty overwhelming and honestly, not very good for my mental health” (Mathilde, #015).

She goes on to talk about how she engages now which is on a much lower scale that may not have the apparent and visible impact she was making previously, but instead focuses inward towards her inner circle. They left behind the more active and exhausting work for a quieter approach to their involvement. She says, “you know, outrage didn't get me anywhere before. So I'm trying to like, you know, play the long con or whatever. In, honestly, just like living a fulfilling life, right?” The discussion continued around how she did not want to “ feel sad about the state of things all the time” and feel “Machiavellian” about the world. This feeling was similar to many participants who had been avoiding politics during their early adulthood altogether, the difference here however, is that participants who were involved prior to the exogenous shock had different views about keeping involved after it seems to have concluded. Mathilde brings up a logic about how she rationalizes this lower level of involvement:

“maybe somebody's [...] gonna want to listen to me more about, like, why I care about, like, my trans friends being able to live their lives, if I'm not, like, trying to pick a fight with them all the time (Mathilde, #015).

Though some participants still avoid the online nature of news and politics, they keep themselves just informed enough about the political matters that affect those close to them, but do not involve themselves further for enjoyment as they had done before.

The Steady Rise

Inversely, those who had a self-reported low level of interest in politics and engagement with news prior to the exogenous shock described this period as a “wake-up call” that led to them being more interested and “inspired” to take action over the course of the shock and into the present. These young adults did not discuss topics such as burnout or ceiling effects in the same manner as those who had previously been engaged prior to the shock. Instead, they discussed this steady increase in their engagement and acquisition of news and political knowledge with each of these participants pinpointing the catalyst event that sparked their involvement. Muna discusses this feeling of “waking up” and needing to be more informed after discussing how they heard the news of George Floyd's murder:

“[...] it just kind of became clear that like if you're not making an effort to be informed and if you're not making an effort to be like politically informed then you're not like I want to say not doing your part but like you're not being a good, a good voter, not a good voter, but like a good citizen, I guess” (Muna, African American, she/her, #019).

She connects the willingness to be politically informed to “doing your part” and “good” citizenship showing an understanding of the importance this holds for our democracy. This was a new understanding for Muna as she previously had not been involved and as a self-reported result of the exogenous shock began to take up habits that kept her better informed. Iguana relates to this idea without having a particular event but an overall recognition of their inability

to participate in conversations with others effectively about political issues and news events more generally:

“I think it was just a realization, how, like, how numb I was, I guess at that moment, because I really went from I refuse to accept any news because I was overwhelmed at the beginning [of the pandemic] to I think it's time to pick it back up. Yes, some of it was because of moving here but I think this other part of me was like, I can't, like converse in certain discussions anymore as good as I was before 2019. So that's when I'm like, okay, we need to sort of like re-engage yourself.” (Iguana, #016)

While there is no way to tell where these individuals' interest would be if not for the exogenous shock, the pattern shown in this study is quite clear cut. One of the questions toward the end of the interview supported this assessment. I asked participants to describe their interest as a line from 2019 to the end of 2022. These lines lumped into two categories: those who started with higher levels of interest, spiked, and fell in 2020 and those whose interest was quite low in 2019, spiked in 2020/2021 and then either dropped slightly or maintained through 2022 (See Figure 1.). One of the reasons participants cited as the reason for their continued low level of interest after hitting the ceiling was that the engagement “no longer served [them]” (Mathilde, #015). They turned to participating in smaller scale activities that focused closely on their “circle” as opposed to larger scale protests, calling events, door-to-door canvassing, and more. Their perceived impacts were higher in their smaller scale environments and were also

less likely to contribute to mental fatigue. These environments looked different than what traditional engagement has been measured by in the current literature.

Discussion

Altogether, these findings reach a few overarching conclusions. Even when choosing not to hold high interest and engagement levels themselves, young adults view politics and news to be important elements to maintain our democracy. This dissonance was recognized by participants as shown through their body language as well as the way in which they tended to backtrack to their earlier sections of the interview. They seem to grapple with the difference between the value they have placed on news and politics, and where it is valued in their everyday life. This led to some conversation about how they should be more involved than they are currently. There may be a potential then that having these candid conversations to bring forward this dissonance that may help people to re-engage. Further research in this area would be beneficial to examine ways to help young adults more organically engage with news and politics, outside of a school environment.

Reasons for choosing to avoid news and politics matches with other literature in the field with many citing the extra work that comes with reading, fact-checking, and understanding the topics, decaying mental health, and avoiding interpersonal conflict (Bento et al., 2020; Fu et al., 2020; Gorski, 2022; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Schäfer et al., 2022; Toff & Nielsen, 2022; Tunney et al., 2021; Villi et al., 2022). This dissonance was present among many of the participants and was expressed as a pattern they see within their personal circles as well. When it comes to deciding how to engage, particularly regarding COVID-19, many people look to their social circle and evaluate the norms that are present (Jaffe et al., 2022;

Jiang et al., 2022). What is unique in this case is the unifying event of the exogenous shock as an overarching reason for this avoidance.

Even within those who actively avoid news and politics, however, there are pieces that pull them back. Topics that related to their own identities or the identities of their inner circle would help them to re-engage as these were areas where they felt that it was most important to stay involved, regardless of scale. Identity was the primary factor that led to this re-engagement. Whether it was for their own held identities, or those in their close circle, young adults recognize these areas of politics and news to be critical to pay attention to and involve themselves in related issues.

Finally, though nearly all of the participants reported a large spike in their interest and involvement in the spring of 2020, there was a significant difference between those who maintained this interest and those who stopped paying attention altogether. This depended on the level of engagement prior to the exogenous shock. Young adults who held high levels of involvement with news and politics such as engaging in campaigns, protests, watching the news frequently and on social media applications prior to 2020 felt themselves hit a ceiling where they were no longer benefiting from their engagement and in many cases, ceased their engagement and interests completely. Whereas others who reported that they were in “an online bubble” (Jeremy, #004) and did not care about the news and politics prior to the exogenous shock experienced a sort of awakening that led them to engage for the first time. This interest and engagement then either maintained or grew throughout the course of the exogenous shock and for many at the time of the interview reported to be on a steady rise. While it is not clear where these individuals' interests would lie if not for the exogenous shock, these findings

provide insight into the potential, and perceived, effects of exogenous shocks on political interest and news engagement.

Conclusion

Overview

COVID-19, the 2020 election, police brutality and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests and more set the stage for a shock to our political system from 2020-2022. These events had differing consequences for young adults' reported level of political interest and engagement with the news. Participants had lower interest in keeping up with politics despite recognizing it as an important value to hold due to the negative associations they have with it. They also have varying experiences with their levels of interest in politics and news engagement noting particular events and their accumulation as primary reasons. This variation often seems to emerge from the level of involvement held before the initial events that categorize the exogenous shock studied in this paper. Across the board, identity was a defining factor for how young adults would choose whether or not to pay attention or further engage with a political topic or event. This study also shines a light on how young adults understand news and politics in our current environment and provides necessary context for how to approach these topics in future work.

Limitations and Future Research

Participant pool

In qualitative research it is important to acknowledge our positionality and limitations that follow as it can impact the direction and interpretation of our work. In the context of this

study, I recognize that I am a graduate student at the institution where this research was conducted. This means that some of the young adults who participated in this study were also participating in classes that I assisted with, or guest lectured in. This may have affected the level of comfortability in the space and willingness to share experiences among some of the participants compared to those who had no prior relation to me. Interviews with participants who were also my students were able to refer to our related course materials and discussions and seemed to relax more quickly in terms of body language and depth of conversation. Those that did not have prior relation to me in some manner skewed towards providing more “I don’t know” answers whereas those that did seemed to be more comfortable with discussing their lived experiences with politics in both positive and negative lights. I was also living in Minneapolis during the time of the George Floyd murder and following Black Lives Matter protests which contributed to the shock of this time period in the US and especially locally. This allowed me to be aware of the events that interviewees discussed around these topics and further conversation in a way that may not have been possible had I not. By not needing participants to provide a foundation for the events that took place during the summer of 2020, we were able to then dive deeper into the nuances and their impacts on their personal lives in relation to the study at hand.

Though this added comfort may have been a positive, future work would benefit from working with participants and researchers who were either not known to each other at all or all related in some way to avoid this potential difference in comfortability and conversation flow. This would help to avoid some of the confounds possible due to the prior relationship held with young adults in the subject pool.

Additionally, while it was intentional to use a subject pool of young adults, with having a sample pulled from a pool of students in journalism and communication courses, the language the participants used seemed to pull from the learning provided in these courses. Discussions around news avoidance and media use sparked up topics such as media literacy, algorithmic advertising content, knowledge gaps, and mis/disinformation spread which may not have come up as often with a broader participant pool. It is possible that those who had less intentional involvement with news and politics, compared to those currently studying the subject, would have less significant effects due to the exogenous shock because they either weren't interested in reading news and politics to a higher extent as some of the participants in this study, and/or did not have a requirement to begin engaging with these topics as these communications students did. Future research in this area would benefit from examining a more representative sample of young adults during this period of time. This would allow for a better understanding of where the average person's understanding of politics is during these impressionable years as well as the perception of how the exogenous shock affected their current interest and engagement levels.

Another path for future work could replicate Markus Prior's longitudinal research to examine the longer-term effects of exogenous shocks on political interest and engagement levels. While the current study offers a deeper contextual look at political interest levels as it relates to exogenous shocks, a longitudinal approach would detail to what extent these results maintain over time. Perhaps as society moves on from the shock, young adults' political interest may return to their previous levels of interactions with news and their interest in politics. This

may mean that exogenous shocks do not have long lasting effects, even if the short term appears to have notable changes.

This study focused solely on young adults as their dispositional interest was, and is, in a critical period of being set. It remains an open question about how these findings may translate to older adults in a more representative sample across the US. Prior's work has shown that political disinterest is stable over the life course, and this study has added to this theory by showing the effect of exogenous shocks on sculpting this interest in young adults. What is unclear now, is whether or not dispositional interest is maintained despite exogenous shocks. It is possible that this was not in consideration with the onset and development of political interest frameworks and theories and should therefore be examined. In other words, do adults with a set dispositional interest have any longer-term changes in their interest as a result of exogenous shocks?

Timing

While the interviews were conducted in a two-month period, they did not happen in a political vacuum. This is to say that there were political events happening over the course of the interviews conducted that caused focus to shift for participants onto what may have happened the day or week of their interview slot. An example of this is the arrest of former President Donald Trump which happened on April 4th which multiple participants over the next two weeks of interviews brought up as examples of a catalyst for aggressive partisan discussions both interpersonally and online, specifically via social media platforms. Developments in the Russian-Ukraine conflict were also raised when discussing political interest and news

avoidance. While I cannot speak to the direct effects of these events, for consistency, it may be beneficial to conduct the interviews with a team in a shorter period of time to remove this variability or have more interviews spread out to balance out the variability.

Significance

This study sought to understand the impact of exogenous shocks on dispositional political interest and young adults' relationship with news media, focusing specifically on the shock from the amalgamation of political events that occurred in the US from 2020 to 2022. It provides compelling results as to how to think about these topics in the future both in academic settings as well as outside of it.

Academic Implications

This study follows in much of the previous literature that this period of young adulthood seems to be a known pinnacle point for developing a political interest and subsequent habits. However, it appears that the presence of an exogenous shock during this important developmental period can have consequences for those who develop a dispositional interest and for whom it becomes limited to situational interest which relates to the identity of themselves and their inner circles.

One area this study informs further is how young adults think about, and define, politics and news. There seems to be a long running misconception that young adults do not care about politics (Henn and Weinstein 2006), however, the way in which some are choosing to engage may be flying under the radar. Those who reportedly ceased their previous engagement were

still active, just on a smaller and interpersonal scale. They were no longer active in online spaces, protesting, and campaigning, but they were having calmer conversations within their circles where they felt less mental strain for the perceived impact. This echoes an ongoing conversation from political scientists where there was a cultural shift in the way that people engaged with politics in the US (Dalton, 2008). What is unique here is the introduction of exogenous shocks as one of the reasons for this change. While Dalton argues that larger shifts like the integration of the internet over generations and the lack of questions including such may be to blame, this study suggests that events during far shorter periods of time are also able to cause this need to rethink how we define participation and interest in politics and news. This is important for researchers to consider when asking questions about political interest and news engagement. Young people and researchers alike may be stuck in a definition as shown by the way participants talked about their levels of engagement even after they reportedly stopped paying attention altogether. These individuals were still in many ways involved with politics however, especially when it pertained to the identity of their inner circles. In future work, it is important that the definition and examples we use when asking questions in this area are more inclusive as to expand on the current measurement tools used in the field. This would allow researchers to grasp the way in which young adults have adapted to the impact of the exogenous shock but are still engaging outside of more traditional definitions.

Practical Implications

This research also has practical implications to consider. In the popular press political sphere, it is often stated that young people simply no longer care about politics, citing age

group voter turnout and polls conducted by politicians running for office (Beach, 2022; *Hatfield*, 2015; “Most Young Lack Interest in Politics - Official Survey,” 2014). Similar to the academic implication above, those who do work in politics and measure engagement and interest would benefit from reevaluating how they define and measure each in accordance with varying age groups.

Additionally, while political interest levels may be stable after the impressionable years, we may be able to better prepare young adults in the case that there is another exogenous shock like the one experienced from 2019-2022 in the US. Many of the participants discussed the overwhelmingly negative nature of the news and politics with more exposure during this time without much in the way of reprieve. It may be time to begin considering ways to transmit news in a more digestible manner so as to not overwhelm, and put off the future generations of politicians, voters, advocates, and citizens at large.

Figures

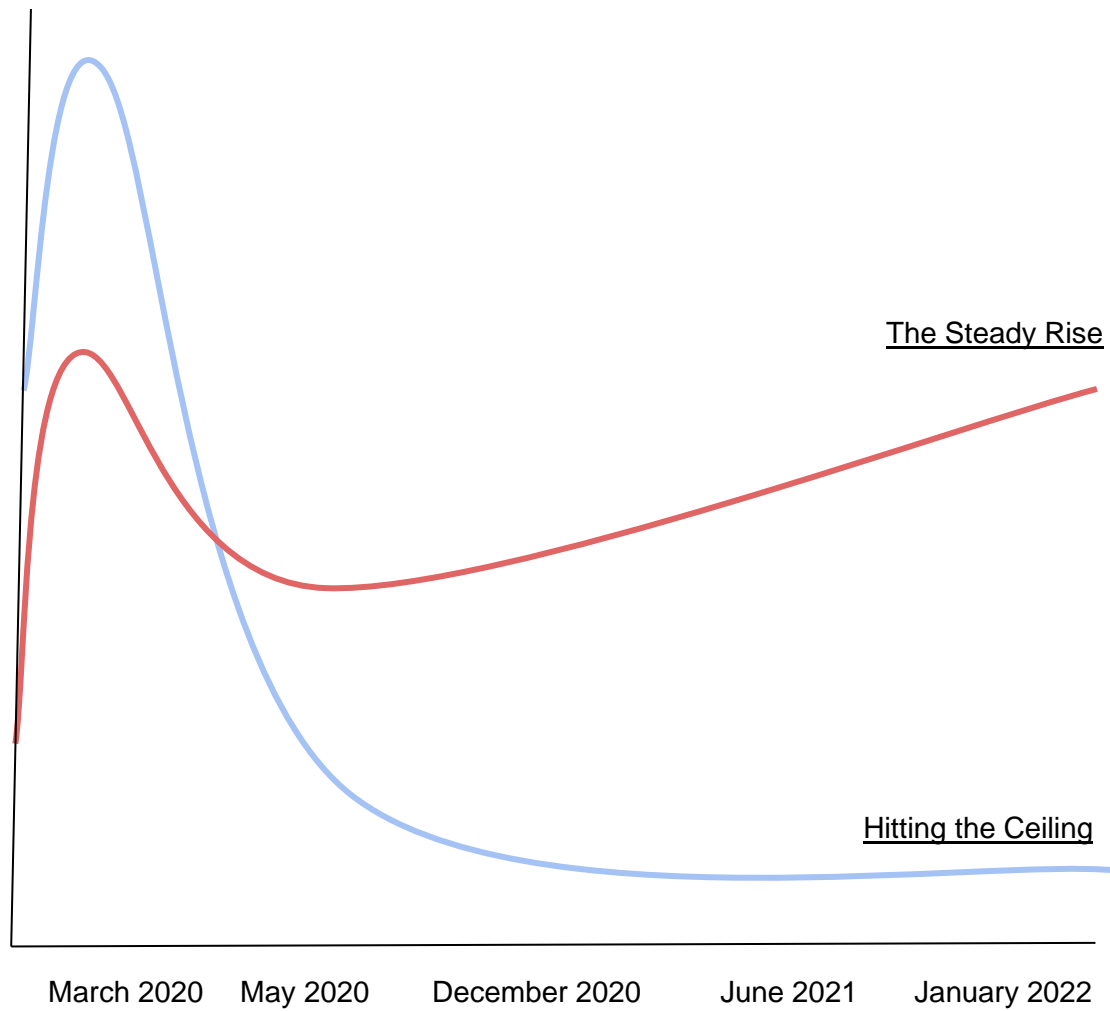


Figure 1.

A Simplified Visualization of Diverging Political Interest as a Result of the Exogenous Shock.

Note: This does not show the variation that was present from situational spikes but rather dispositional interest that was coded from participants own drawings and interviews.

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