

Polarisation in Latin America: Examining the Role of Social Media in Ideological Positioning Based on 2018 Census Data

Authors : Sarah Ledoux

Abstract : This paper analyses the quantitative effects of political content consumption in social media platforms on self-reported ideological preference across the Latin American region. Initially praising the democratic potential of the internet and its social networking websites, digital politics scholars have transitioned their discourse to warning against the undemocratic side-effects it cultivates, such as hate speech, filter bubbles, and ideological polarisation. Holding technology solely responsible for political trends worldwide is an oversimplification of the factors influencing social change. Nonetheless, widespread use of social media in new democracies raises questions on the reproduction of recent trends that have been observed in the US and Western Europe. Through the analysis of ordered logistic regressions on data from the 2018 AmericasBarometer survey, this study examines the extent to which the relationship between the consumption of political content on social media is related to ideological polarisation in Latin America. The findings indicate that there is a close link between consumption of political information on social media, specifically on Facebook and WhatsApp, and ideological positioning on the extremes of the political left- and right-wings. This relation holds when controlling for individual-level demographic and attitudinal factors, as well as country-level effects. These results demonstrate with empirical evidence that viewing political content on social media has a significant positive effect on the likelihood that citizens position themselves on the extreme ends of the left-right ideological spectrum and implies that political polarisation is a phenomenon that accompanies politically driven social media use.

Keywords : Latin America, polarisation, political consumption, political ideology, social media, survey

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