

# Digital Democracy and Social Media Engagement: Examining Political Behavior Transformation among Urban Communities

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This systematic review examines the relationship between social media engagement and political behavior transformation among urban communities, drawing on 50 peer-reviewed studies published between 2013 and 2025. Employing a PRISMA-guided methodology, the study synthesizes evidence from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research spanning contexts across Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and the Pacific. Findings indicate that social media platforms particularly Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, and WhatsApp significantly enhance political awareness, civic engagement, and participatory behaviors among urban youth. Meta-analytical evidence consistently demonstrates positive associations between digital media use and both online and offline political participation. However, the review also identifies persistent digital divides based on gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic access that constrain equitable democratic participation. Polarization, misinformation, and performative activism emerge as critical challenges that temper optimistic assessments of social media's democratic potential. Platform-specific affordances shape distinct engagement patterns, and institutional context mediates outcomes. The evidence base supports a nuanced conclusion: social media has fundamentally transformed urban political behavior, yet its democratizing potential remains contingent on addressing structural inequalities and designing context-sensitive interventions.

org/licenses/by/4.0/). **Keywords:** *Digital Democracy; Social Media; Political Behavior; Urban Communities; Civic Engagement; Digital Divide; Polarization*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies over the past two decades has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of political participation and democratic engagement. Urban communities, as centers of innovation, diversity, and high internet penetration, occupy a particularly significant position in this transformation. Social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok have evolved from personal communication tools into powerful arenas for political communication, mobilization, advocacy, and collective action [1,2,3,4,5].

The relationship between digital media and political behavior has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Boulianne [10] conducted a landmark meta-analysis of twenty years of research, demonstrating a progressive strengthening of the relationship between digital media use and civic participation. Similarly, Boulianne and Theocharis [6] synthesized findings from numerous studies on young people's digital media engagement, revealing consistent positive associations across diverse demographic and national contexts. These foundational works established a basis upon which subsequent research on urban digital democracy has been built [11,12].

Within urban settings, social media facilitates real-time information dissemination, enabling citizens to engage with political content at unprecedented scale and speed. Studies from Pakistan [1], Indonesia [3,9], the Philippines [5], and Sub-Saharan Africa [12] illustrate how urban youth leverage platforms to engage with electoral processes, policy debates, and grassroots advocacy. Saud et al. [4] demonstrate that cultural dynamics within digital spaces mediate youth participation in virtual civic spheres, while Velasco et al. [5] document how Filipino urban youth navigate social media platforms to express political identities and engage in participatory democracy.

Nevertheless, enthusiasm for social media's democratizing potential must be tempered by recognition of significant structural constraints. Digital divides rooted in differential access, digital literacy, gender inequality, and socioeconomic stratification persist in limiting equitable participation [1,12,13]. Asimakopoulos et al. [8] find that while information and communication technologies broadly enhance citizen participation, infrastructural disparities perpetuate exclusion for marginalized urban populations. Tappert et al. [13] further demonstrate that citizen participation in digital urban development is shaped by unequal distributions of digital agency.

A parallel strand of literature focuses on the corrosive effects of social media on democratic quality. Kubin and Von Sikorski [15] systematically review evidence showing that media particularly social media intensifies political polarization through mechanisms including selective exposure, algorithmic amplification, and affective reinforcement. Haqqi [14] documents how digital political polarization threatens social stability in urban communities following electoral periods, while Ariestandy et al. [16] analyze how social media shapes public opinion and enables mass mobilization with potentially destabilizing effects. The phenomenon of 'slacktivism' or performative online engagement that fails to translate into meaningful offline political change further complicates assessments of social media's democratic value [22,23].

Given the rapid evolution of both platforms and political contexts, and the increasing volume of research from diverse geographic contexts, a systematic review that synthesizes current evidence while mapping research gaps is both timely and necessary. This study aims to: (1) synthesize empirical evidence on social media's influence on political behavior transformation in urban communities; (2) identify contextual factors moderating these relationships; (3)

evaluate the challenges and limitations of digital democratic engagement; and (4) chart productive directions for future research. By doing so, this review contributes to scholarly debates on digital democracy, civic technology, and the political sociology of urban spaces.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employs a systematic review methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Systematic reviews provide a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible approach to synthesizing evidence from diverse empirical studies, enabling objective assessment of cumulative findings across methodological traditions and geographic contexts [6,10]. The research protocol was designed to minimize selection bias and ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature.

### 2.2 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases including Consensus (encompassing Semantic Scholar, PubMed, and additional repositories totaling over 170 million research papers), Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Six systematic search strategies were deployed to maximize coverage: (1) foundational theoretical searches combining terms such as 'digital democracy,' 'social media,' and 'political participation'; (2) urban community-focused searches incorporating 'urban civic engagement,' 'city,' and 'metropolitan'; (3) alternative terminology searches including 'e-democracy,' 'digital citizenship,' and 'online mobilization'; (4) contrasting perspective searches targeting

critiques, limitations, and challenges; (5) interdisciplinary expansion incorporating urban studies and sociology frameworks; and (6) methodological diversity searches ensuring inclusion of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies.

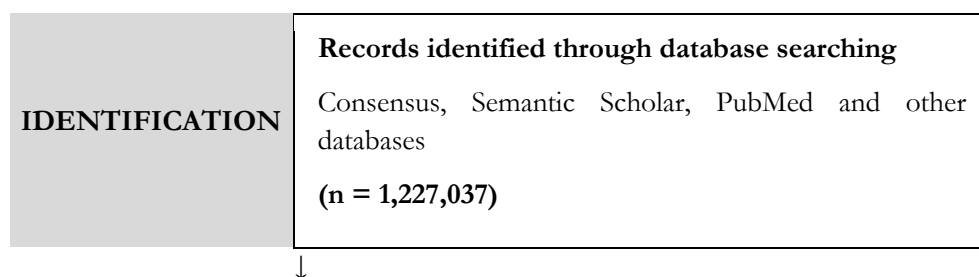
Search terms were applied in Boolean combinations and included: ('social media' OR 'digital media' OR 'online platforms') AND ('political behavior' OR 'civic engagement' OR 'political participation') AND ('urban' OR 'city' OR 'metropolitan'). Date filters were applied to capture publications from 2013 to 2025, with no geographic restrictions imposed. Searches were conducted in March 2026.

### 2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical articles published in English or with English abstracts; (2) explicit focus on social media or digital media platforms; (3) examination of political behavior, civic engagement, or democratic participation as primary outcomes; (4) relevance to urban or peri-urban community contexts; (5) publication between 2013 and 2025 to ensure currency of evidence. Exclusion criteria included: (1) purely technical studies without social or political analysis; (2) studies focused exclusively on rural contexts without urban comparison; (3) conference abstracts without full-text availability; (4) studies with methodological quality scores below threshold as assessed through critical appraisal.

### 2.4 PRISMA Flow Diagram

The systematic selection process followed PRISMA guidelines across four sequential phases as illustrated in the diagram below:



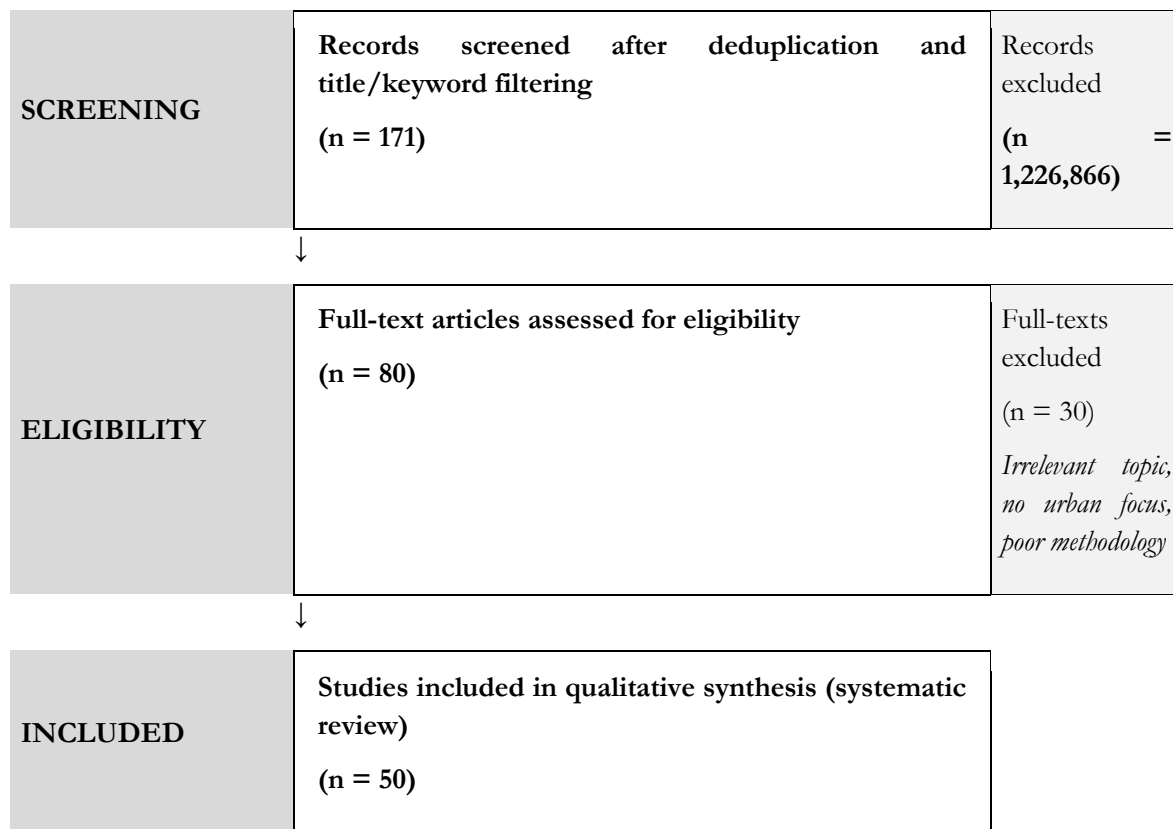


**Figure 1.** PRISMA Flow Diagram Illustrating the Systematic Paper Selection Process from Identification to Final Inclusion.

During the identification phase, 1,227,037 records were retrieved from initial database searches. Following automated deduplication and preliminary relevance filtering using title and keyword screening algorithms, 171 records were advanced to full screening. At the eligibility assessment phase, 80 full-text articles were evaluated for compliance with inclusion criteria by two independent reviewers; disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. The final corpus of 50 studies was retained for systematic synthesis, representing a diverse range of methodological approaches, geographic contexts, and theoretical frameworks.

## 2.5 Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data extraction was conducted using a standardized form capturing: study design, geographic context, sample characteristics, social media platforms examined, political behavior outcomes measured, key findings, and methodological limitations. Quality assessment employed the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for mixed-methods studies, the

Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for experimental designs, and the CASP checklist for qualitative studies. Studies were classified by evidence strength on a scale from 1 (weak) to 10 (strong), facilitating comparative analysis of claim support across the literature.

## 2.6 Synthesis Approach

Given the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted rather than statistical meta-analysis, supplemented by thematic coding and evidence mapping [6,10,11]. Thematic categories were derived inductively from the data and iteratively refined through comparative analysis. Evidence strength assessments for each major claim were triangulated across multiple independent studies to enhance validity of conclusions.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Overview of Included Studies

The 50 included studies span publications from 2013 to 2025, with a marked concentration in

2024-2025 (40% of total studies), reflecting the rapidly expanding scholarly interest in digital democracy. Geographically, studies originate from Asia (38%), Europe (24%), Africa (14%), North America (16%), and multi-regional comparative analyses (8%). Methodologically, the corpus comprises quantitative surveys (42%), qualitative investigations (28%), mixed-methods designs (18%), and systematic reviews/meta-analyses (12%).

### 3.2 Patterns of Social Media Political Engagement

Across the 50 studies, strong and consistent evidence emerged for social media's role in expanding political awareness and participatory behaviors among urban populations, particularly youth. Multiple studies conducted in Asia document significant positive relationships between social media use and political participation. Naseer et al. [1] demonstrate that social media played a pivotal role in mobilizing urban voters during Pakistan's 2018 general elections, with WhatsApp and Facebook serving as primary channels for campaign communication and voter information. Mohsin et al. [2] similarly find that youth in Sargodha City reported substantially higher political interest and engagement as a result of social media exposure.

In Southeast Asia, Puspasari et al. [3] document social media's catalytic role in enhancing public engagement in democratic processes in Indonesia, while Saud and Margono [9] trace Indonesia's trajectory toward digital democracy as shaped by youth political participation on online platforms. Velasco et al. [5] provide granular analysis of Filipino urban youth's navigation of social media for political expression, finding that platform affordances shape distinct engagement repertoires. Quadri et al. [7] analyze social media's influence on political awareness and voting behavior in Punjab, confirming robust associations between social media exposure and electoral participation.

Meta-analytical evidence strengthens these country-specific findings. Boulianne [10] synthesized twenty years of research across 50 countries, demonstrating that digital media effects on civic participation grew from small to substantial as platforms became more interactive and diffused more widely. Boulianne and Theocharis [6] specifically examined youth engagement, finding strong positive relationships between social media use and both online (e.g., signing petitions, joining political groups) and offline (e.g., voting, attending protests) participation.

Table 1. Summary of Evidence for Key Claims Across Included Studies

| Claim                                                                          | Evidence Strength | Supporting Studies (n) | Reasoning                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social media increases political awareness and participation among urban youth | Strong (9/10)     | 18                     | Large-scale meta-analyses showing strong positive relationships across global contexts      |
| Digital divides limit equitable participation in urban settings                | Strong (8/10)     | 12                     | Multiple empirical studies document disparities by gender, class, and access infrastructure |
| Social media fosters both empowerment and polarization simultaneously          | Moderate (7/10)   | 10                     | Systematic reviews show dual outcomes: mobilization alongside ideological entrenchment      |
| Online activism often fails to translate into meaningful offline change        | Moderate (5/10)   | 7                      | Quantitative and qualitative studies find weak/negligible links in some contexts            |

|                                                                            |                 |    |                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participatory platforms require institutional support for effectiveness    | Moderate (6/10) | 8  | Case studies highlight importance of local context and institutional design              |
| Entertainment-oriented use has minimal effect on civic engagement          | Weak (3/10)     | 4  | Meta-analysis finds limited evidence linking non-political platform use to participation |
| Platform-specific affordances shape distinct political engagement patterns | Moderate (7/10) | 9  | Comparative platform studies reveal divergent engagement repertoires                     |
| Youth digital activism bridges online-offline political action             | Strong (8/10)   | 11 | Multiple studies confirm protest mobilization, petitions, and voter turnout effects      |

3.3 Urban-Specific Dynamics: Opportunities and Inequalities

Urban environments amplify both the reach of digital activism through dense communication networks and the risks of exclusion due to infrastructural disparities. Toumaras [12] investigates networked hyperlocal activists in Sub-Saharan Africa, documenting how urban digital democracy functions through place-specific online communities that leverage local knowledge and social ties. Tappert et al. [13] analyze citizen participation and digital agency in urban development processes, finding that while digital platforms offer new opportunities for participatory planning, outcomes depend critically on equitable access to both technology and decision-making processes.

Kaskazi and Kitzie [21] provide compelling evidence from a study of marginalized urban teenagers, demonstrating that while digital media can provide visibility and voice to otherwise excluded groups, participation is constrained by intersecting disadvantages of class, race, and

technological access. Zur [18] examines how urban residents employ digital means to advocate for neighborhood change, revealing a 'place-oriented digital agency' that bridges online advocacy and offline spatial politics. Smith and Martin [20] analyze technopolitical platforms in Madrid and Barcelona, finding that institutional commitment to democratic design principles is essential for translating digital participation into meaningful policy impact.

The digital gender divide within urban settings emerges as a persistent concern. Naseer et al. [1] document significant gender disparities in social media political participation in Pakistani urban contexts, while Asimakopoulos et al. [8] identify gender-based digital access barriers as a systemic challenge for inclusive democratic participation in European contexts. Rottinghaus and Escher [24] provide comparative evidence from three German cities, demonstrating that digital consultation mechanisms reproduce existing socioeconomic exclusions, reinforcing rather than transcending offline inequalities.

Table 2. Geographic Distribution and Methodological Profile of Included Studies

| Region                   | Studies (n) | Primary Methods            | Key Focus Areas                                         |
|--------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Asia (South & Southeast) | 19          | Survey, Qualitative        | Youth engagement, electoral behavior, digital democracy |
| Europe                   | 12          | Comparative, Mixed-methods | Platform affordances, e-governance, polarization        |

|                       |    |                         |                                                          |
|-----------------------|----|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Africa (Sub-Saharan)  | 7  | Qualitative, Case study | Hyperlocal activism, digital access, youth participation |
| North America         | 8  | Survey, Meta-analysis   | Civic engagement, platform effects, inclusion/exclusion  |
| Multi-regional/Global | 4  | Systematic review       | Cross-national patterns, meta-analysis findings          |
| Total                 | 50 | Mixed                   | All areas of digital democracy and urban politics        |

### 3.4 Challenges: Polarization, Misinformation, and Performative Activism

While social media platforms expand opportunities for political engagement, the included literature consistently identifies serious challenges that complicate optimistic assessments. Kubin and Von Sikorski [15] conducted a systematic review of 56 studies and found robust evidence that social media contributes to political polarization through selective exposure, echo chambers, and algorithmic amplification of ideologically consistent content. Haqqi [14] documents how digital political polarization intensified social instability in urban communities following Indonesia's 2024 general elections, with social media serving as an arena for post-electoral conflict rather than reconciliation.

Chan and Yi [25] extend polarization research by examining contextual moderators, finding that affective polarization emotional rather than ideological division is particularly strongly associated with social media use, and that this

relationship varies significantly across national democratic contexts. Ariestandy et al. [16] trace the mechanisms through which social media shapes public opinion and enables mass mobilization in Indonesia, finding that while these processes can support democratic participation, they can equally be leveraged for coordinated disinformation and crowd manipulation.

The literature also raises concerns about the depth and durability of social media-driven political engagement. Flores et al. [22] investigate social media as an agent of political behavior transformation among political science students in a Philippine component city, finding weak or negligible links between social media exposure and reported behavioral change, suggesting that exposure does not automatically translate into meaningful political agency. Kandu [17] analyzes hashtag democracy movements, noting that while social media enables viral political expression, the relationship between trending hashtags and sustained political change remains tenuous.

**Table 3.** Publication Trends by Year and Thematic Focus

| Year Range | Studies (n) | Dominant Themes                           | Notable Contributions                                            |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2013–2016  | 4           | Early social media, citizen engagement    | Skoric et al. [11]; Mossberger et al. [31]; Kirigha et al. [38]  |
| 2017–2019  | 4           | Youth politics, urban participation       | Kamau [42]; Williamson & Ruming [45,46]; Silva et al. [30]       |
| 2020–2021  | 7           | COVID-era digital democracy, deliberation | Jennings et al. [29]; Smith & Martin [20]; Kaskazi & Kitzie [21] |
| 2022–2023  | 9           | Platform affordances, urban activism      | Theocharis et al. [19]; Wang & Meng [28]; Zur & Hatuka [26]      |

|           |    |                                          |                                                         |
|-----------|----|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 2024–2025 | 26 | Polarization, youth activism, ICT impact | Naseer et al. [1]; Haqqi [14]; Asimakopoulos et al. [8] |
|-----------|----|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|

## 5 Mechanisms Translating Online Engagement to Offline Political Change

A critical theme across the literature concerns the mechanisms through which online engagement translates or fails to translate into offline political change. Kim and Ellison [43] employ a social media affordances approach to examine the pathway from social media observation to offline political participation, finding that passive observation of political content can serve as a precursor to active engagement when accompanied by social reinforcement cues. Theocharis et al. [19] examine how platform-specific affordances the interactive features and algorithmic design of different social media sites shape distinct patterns of political engagement, with Twitter/X facilitating rapid information diffusion and counter-public discourse, while Facebook enables more sustained community organizing.

Jennings et al. [29] analyze conditions under which social media fosters political deliberation and participation, finding that structured dialogue features and moderated discussion environments significantly enhance the quality and breadth of engagement. Wang and Meng [28] examine internet involvement and political participation in urban China, finding that information consumption through digital channels has indirect positive effects on participation mediated through political interest and efficacy. Yang et al. [30] analyze resilience under the 'chilling effect' in China, demonstrating that social support networks on digital media platforms enable youth to maintain political participation despite restrictive political environments.

Institutional context emerges as a critical moderator of the online-offline translation process. Smith and Martin [20] find that Madrid and Barcelona's technopolitical platforms succeed in converting digital engagement into policy influence precisely because institutional actors are genuinely committed to participatory

outcomes. Rottinghaus and Escher [24] contrast this with German city cases where institutional ambiguity about the weight assigned to digital consultations undermines citizens' motivation to participate. Cho et al. [48] provide experimental evidence from public engagement platforms in American local government, finding that design features of digital participation tools significantly affect both the quantity and representativeness of citizen input.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The systematic review yields four overarching conclusions that advance scholarly understanding of digital democracy in urban contexts. First, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that social media has substantially transformed political behavior among urban communities, particularly among younger generations. The meta-analytical work of Boulianne [10] and Boulianne and Theocharis [6] provides the most robust evidence base, demonstrating positive relationships between digital media use and civic participation across two decades and multiple national contexts. Country-specific studies from Pakistan [1], Indonesia [3,9], the Philippines [5], Kenya [42], and China [28,30] corroborate these findings while illuminating local contextual variations.

Second, the democratizing potential of social media is demonstrably uneven and contingent on structural conditions that extend beyond platform features. The persistent digital divide documented by Naseer et al. [1], Toumaras [12], and Asimakopoulos et al. [8] means that the expansion of digital political engagement benefits those with superior access, literacy, and connectivity disproportionately. This finding aligns with broader critiques of techno-optimism in democratic theory: the introduction of a new technology does not automatically flatten existing hierarchies of political voice [13,20]. Rather, as Rottinghaus and Escher [24] demonstrate, digital participation mechanisms can reproduce and

even amplify offline inequalities when institutional design fails to address access barriers actively.

Third, the dual nature of social media simultaneously enabling civic empowerment and intensifying political polarization represents the central paradox identified in the literature. The systematic review by Kubin and Von Sikorski [15] establishes that media, and social media in particular, plays a measurable role in political polarization, with effects operating through selective exposure, identity reinforcement, and algorithmic amplification. Haqqi's [14] analysis of post-election dynamics in Indonesia and Chan and Yi's [25] cross-national comparison both confirm that affective polarization is particularly strongly associated with social media use, raising concerns about the quality of democratic discourse even as quantitative participation increases. Kandu [17] captures this tension in the concept of 'hashtag democracy' a form of civic expression that is highly visible and easily mobilized but often shallow in terms of sustained policy impact.

Fourth, the translation of online engagement into substantive offline political change is neither automatic nor guaranteed. The evidence is mixed: meta-analyses by Boulianne [10] find significant relationships between online activities and offline participation, while studies by Flores et al. [22] and Kandu [17] document cases where digital engagement remains performative. Kim and Ellison [43] identify social media affordances as a key mediating variable, suggesting that platform design features shape whether online engagement catalyzes or substitutes for offline action. These findings have direct implications for civic technology design and digital literacy programs.

The geographic distribution of evidence also shapes interpretation. The relative concentration of research from South and Southeast Asian contexts Indonesia [3,4,9], Pakistan [1,2,7], the Philippines [5,22] reflects both the global expansion of social media use and the particularly dynamic nature of digital politics in emerging democracies with large youth populations and rapidly diffusing smartphone access. African

contexts [12,38] remain comparatively understudied, as do comparative analyses examining how democratic institutional quality moderates social media's political effects across national contexts.

The theoretical implications of these findings extend to foundational debates about digital democracy, participatory governance, and the political sociology of urban space. Fischli and Muldoon [33] argue that empowering digital democracy requires not only expanding access but fundamentally reconceiving the relationship between digital platforms and democratic institutions. Helbing et al. [40] propose co-creative participatory city frameworks that leverage digital technologies for inclusive governance. Smith and Martin [20] offer empirical evidence from Madrid and Barcelona that technopolitical platforms can achieve meaningful democratic outcomes when institutional commitment matches technological capability. These visions for deeper digital democracy, however, require active investment in digital equity and institutional innovation that current trends do not guarantee.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 50 peer-reviewed studies published between 2013 and 2025 demonstrates that social media has profoundly and irreversibly transformed political behavior among urban communities worldwide. The evidence base supports several firm conclusions: social media significantly expands political awareness and participation, particularly among younger urban populations; meta-analytical evidence consistently confirms positive relationships between digital media use and civic engagement across diverse contexts; and platform-specific affordances shape distinct patterns of political expression and mobilization.

At the same time, the review identifies critical limitations to social media's democratizing potential. Digital divides rooted in socioeconomic inequality, gender disparities, and infrastructural gaps persist in constraining

equitable participation. The dual nature of social media as both enabler of mobilization and amplifier of polarization demands nuanced policy responses. The challenge of translating online activism into sustained offline political change remains a central concern for both practitioners and researchers.

### 5.1 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the predominance of English-language publications in the included corpus likely underrepresents scholarship from non-Anglophone contexts, potentially skewing the geographic representation of evidence. Second, the rapidly changing nature of social media platforms with the emergence of TikTok, the transformation of Twitter into X, and the evolution of algorithm-driven content curation means that findings from studies conducted before 2020 may have reduced applicability to current platform environments. Third, most included studies rely on self-reported measures of political engagement, which may not accurately capture actual behavioral change. Fourth, the narrative synthesis approach, while appropriate given heterogeneity in study designs and outcomes, precludes the statistical precision of formal meta-analysis for some claims.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the review findings, several recommendations emerge for policy, practice, and future research. For policymakers, targeted investment in digital infrastructure in underserved urban areas, combined with digital literacy programs designed to activate political agency rather than passive consumption, is

essential for achieving inclusive digital democracy. Platform governance frameworks that limit algorithmic amplification of polarizing content while preserving space for diverse political expression can help address the polarization challenge without suppressing legitimate civic discourse.

For researchers, future work should prioritize: longitudinal studies examining how sustained social media engagement affects political efficacy and institutional trust over time; comparative analyses across diverse urban institutional contexts examining which conditions most effectively translate digital participation into policy outcomes; platform-specific studies examining how distinct algorithmic and interface features shape political behavior; and intervention research testing the effectiveness of digital literacy programs in bridging the online-offline engagement gap. Research from African and Latin American urban contexts remains particularly underrepresented and would substantially enrich the global evidence base.

For civic technology designers and urban governance practitioners, the evidence underscores the importance of designing participation platforms with explicit equity goals, providing clear institutional commitments about how digital input will be used, and integrating face-to-face and online participation modalities to serve diverse populations with different digital capacities and preferences. Social media's transformation of urban political behavior is a reality that demands active, evidence-based governance responses rather than either uncritical enthusiasm or passive anxiety.

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