

Social Media Usage and Minimum Wage. New and Old Factories of Opinion Formation

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Abstract

This study uses the issue of minimum wage to analyze how ideological identity and media usage interact in the process of opinion formation. We explore how our audience, college student in the state of Connecticut, feels about raising the minimum wage over \$15, how urgently they think the government should address this issue, and how they weight possible positive or negative effects of this policy, such as the growth of illegal immigration, the stimulus of the region's economy or the increase of layoffs. The ideological identity of our participants, to what extent they identify as liberal or conservative, strongly correlates with their opinion about raising the minimum wage, as well as with the perception of the issue and the possible implications of the policy. Furthermore, the study looks into the media consumption habits of our audience with special focus on the penetration of social media. We establish a relationship between media usage, ideological inclination an the opinion on the topic at hand. The study shows a precipitous decline of the legacy media. Social media have become the almost exclusive channel used by our students to access information on national or international issues. The correlation analysis does not provide any conclusive connection between the types of media used to access information and their opinion or perception of the urgency of the issue. This fact supports the thesis that media do work as echo-chambers. Regardless of the type of channel, opinions seem to be pre-shaped by the ideological inclination of our participants.

Keywords: Social Media, Media Usage, Minimum Wage, Echo-Chambers, Ideology

1. Introduction

The expression "manufacturing consent" is not an invention of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky. Walter Lippmann , in his classic *Public Opinion* (1922), introduced the concept. And Edward L. Bernays (1955) adopted the idea in his groundbreaking work in the professional field of public relations. Bernays speaks of "engineering of consent" as the technique of leading public opinion in the desired direction of the social engineer. Yet, it was the work of Herman and Chomsky what consolidated the popularity of the concept. With the propaganda model developed in "*Manufacturing of Consent*" (1988), both authors unveiled the monumental collusion between mainstream media, economic and political power. The result of this collusion is a propaganda machine of colossal dimensions. Their work focuses on the anti-communist agenda that characterized the mainstream America during the cold war (the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, a year after the publication of the book).

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After World War II, communism had been fulfilling the role of what Carl Schmitt called the Feindbild (image of the enemy). A common enemy is a useful concept that helps amalgamate the group. It provides with a powerful argument to stay together through a threat that the individual must fear and agree to fight against.

The engine of the propaganda machine is still working at full-power. Mainstream media continue setting the agenda of public priorities (Rogstad, 2016). Still, the mass communication paradigm has radically changed with the explosion of new digital communication technologies, particularly social media. These popular digital platforms impact communication dynamics in all possible communication contexts. Social media are becoming essential in interpersonal, group, educational, intercultural or professional communication. This impact is also relevant - perhaps specially relevant - in mass communication. Younger audiences are resorting to alternative media to get the information about the issues they are interested in. The decadence of the so-called legacy media seems to be accelerating (del Ama et al., 2021).

The German scholar Hans Matthias Kepplinger revealed a strategy of mainstream media to influence political opinion. He called it "instrumentelle Aktualisierung" (1997). The concept could be translated as "instrumental use of news" or "instrumental reporting". Kepplinger works on the assumption that news have a political valency (or load), and that media decide to publish certain news - or to place those news in relevant space or time in their print or audiovisual outlets - based on their own political or ideological agenda, on the political benefits that those issues might yield. And of course, political actors and organizations try to push issues into the public agenda from which they know they can extract political capital.

This study explores the political valency of the topic "minimum wage" among the current college generation. We assumed this topic may be relevant for our participants since most of our them are working full or part time on this salary range. We want to see to what extent their opinion on raising the the minimum wage may correlate with their ideological position.

The study also explores how they view some possible positive or negative consequences of this political decision, such as causing an increase in the number of undocumented immigrants, boosting the state's economy or causing lay-offs.

Finally, we explore how the media usage of our students, with special emphasis on social media, may affect their opinion on the issue at hand. We identify the sources they resort to to get information about current issues in national and international politics and economy. The final goal is to see if there we can establish a connection between the opinion formation process and the media consumption habits.

2. Methodology

We focused our study on university students who are attending any of the community colleges or universities of the Connecticut public system of higher education. In addition to the "elephant in the room", the University of Connecticut, the rest of the institutions that belong to this system are the four state universities (Central, Western, Eastern and Southern Connecticut State University) and 12 the community colleges. The reason why we chose this target group was pure convenience, since the Connecticut Labor Department agreed to act

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as a "gate keeper". Its assistance was vital to recruit participants who are listed in their database as "active student workers".

2.1. Participants

We recruited 236 students through an email action. The invitation to participate in the survey the survey was sent to all active student workers. E-mail addresses were collected from Core-CT/Oracle PeopleSoft. The first sample analysis showed an unbalance with regard to ethnicity. The Latino and African American minorities were underrepresented. We balanced the sample with 22 face to face interviews on campus addressing the groups of the population underrepresented in the online survey.

2.2. Materials

The survey measured the ideological inclination of the participants, their media usage and their opinion on several questions related to raising the minimum wage. The ideological standpoint was established through a 10 point semantic differential scale. They had to respond if they saw themselves as rather liberal or conservative (1 being hard core liberal/left wing and 10 hard core conservative/right wing). We used a 10 points semantic differential scale to explore how urgently they thought the government should address this issue (1 not urgent at all, 10 extremely urgent). We also asked them to define their political affiliation as democrats, republicans, independents, or none of them.

To measure the media consumption habits, we used a Likert like frequency scale. Participants were asked how often they used a different channels when they looking specifically for information about national or international issues, such as national or regional newspapers, TV news, online video platforms (YouTube), talk radio, and social media. We have been studying the spread of social media among the current generations of college students (del Ama et al, 2021). Following this format, the questionnaire included scales to measure both time and frequency of social media usage as well.

Finally, students had to signalize to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a 3 statements on the basis of a five range Likert scale (1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree). These statements had to do with possible positive or negative impacts of raising the minimum wage over \$15: Escalating illegal immigration, stimulating Connecticut's economy, increasing layoffs).

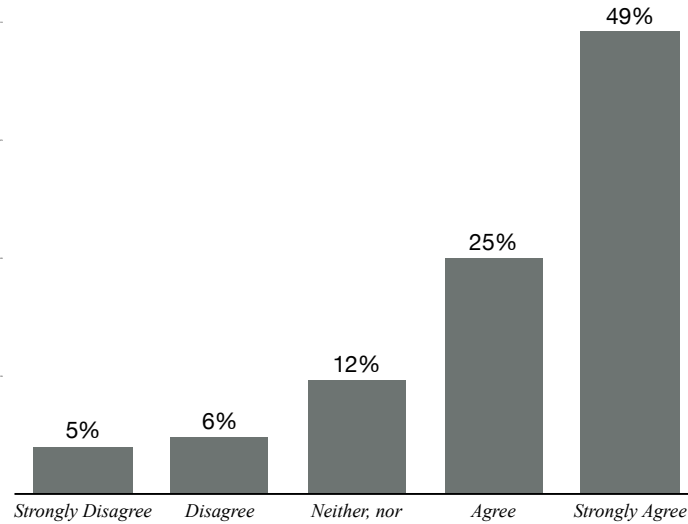
3. Results: Frequencies

Since the target of our study were college students, we expected a strong interest in the subject. When asked about their working status, 80% of our participants declared to be working part-time, and 11 % full-time. Only 9% of the participants are not working at all. Many of the students taking part-time jobs, are doing it in industries that pay the minimum wage. And as a matter of fact, the level of interest in the topic was very high. To measure the perceived urgency of addressing this issue, we use a 10 point semantic differential scale (1-not urgent at all, 10 extremely urgent). The mean of this answer was rather high, 7.6, and 37% of the respondents chose the the highest value in the scale (10). When asked to self-

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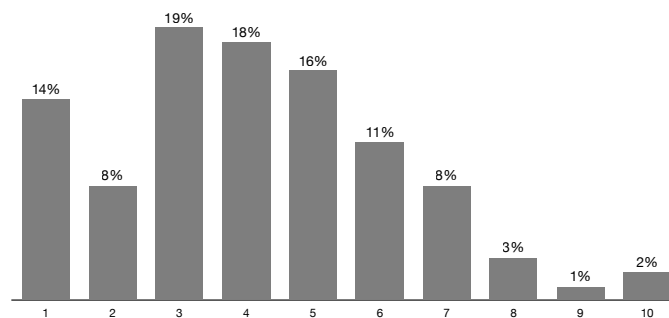
assess their level of knowledge, also using a 10 point differential scale (1 no information at all, 10 perfectly well informed), the results were pretty similar (mean 7.25, highest value 23%). It is no surprise, either, that most of the participants, 73%, agreed or strongly agreed that the minimum wage should be raised over \$15.

Figure 1: Statement "Minimum age should be higher than \$15"



The distribution of the answers through the 10 points semantic differential scale (going from 1 hard core liberal/left wing to 10 hard core conservative/right wing) shows a clear skewness toward the liberal/left wing area of the scale.

Figure 2: Ideological Background distribution



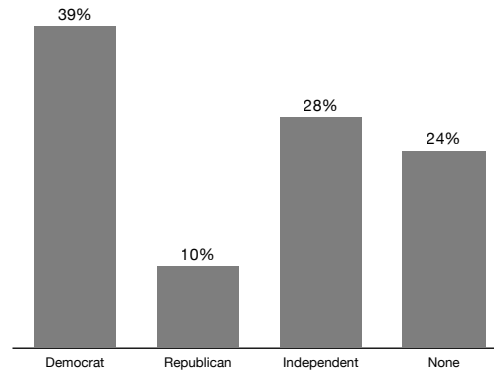
(1 hard core liberal/left wing to 10 hard core conservative/right wing)

When asked about their party affiliation, most of the participants in the study, 39 %, identify themselves as democrats. Only 10 % did it as republicans. 28%, consider themselves to be independent, and 24% do not think any of those categories represents them. These outcomes seems consistent with the scale used to measure the ideological background. Conservative positions are commonly associated with the Republican Party. The fact that few

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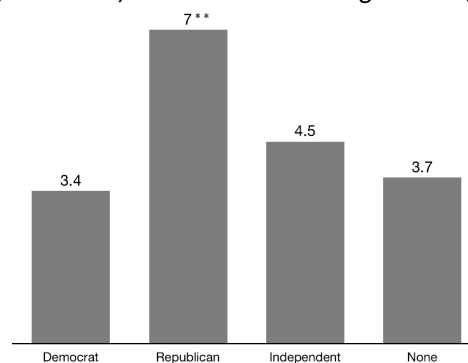
students identify as Republicans explains why the ideology distribution is skewed toward the liberal pole.

Figure 3: Party Affiliation



An ANOVA test shows that Republican students do in fact score significantly higher in the ideology scale than the other groups, including independents and those participants who did not express any party affiliation. It seems that these two groups of participants in our study are ideology closer to democrats than to Republicans¹.

Figure 4: Party Affiliation and Ideological Background



(N = 258). ** $p < .01$, two-tailed. ANOVA Party Affiliation and Ideological Background

¹ The assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated (the Levene Test was significant at $p < .001$). Thus, we performed a Welch ANOVA, which showed a significant effect of the party affiliation on the ideology ($F(3, 254) = 25.78, p < .001$). The Games-Howel model was used for the post hoc analysis. Students who identified themselves as Republicans scored significantly higher in the ideological scale (meaning they saw themselves as more conservative) than Democrats ($p < 0.001$, 99% C.I. = [2.22, 4.86]), independents ($p < 0.001$, 99% C.I. = [1.12, 3.86]), or those who do not identify themselves with any of those categories ($p < 0.001$, 99% C.I. = [1.89, 4.70]).

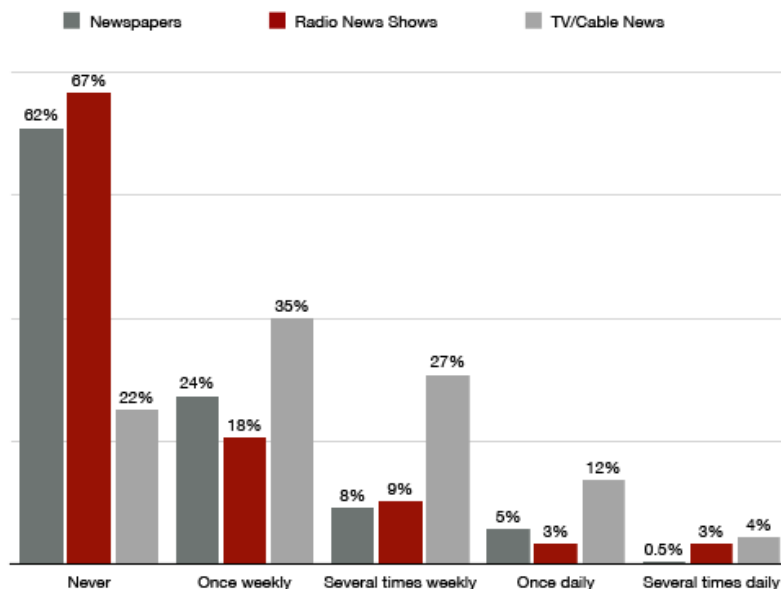
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3.1. Media Usage

The impact of new digital technologies is changing the communication paradigm in all possible contexts. Interpersonal communication, group communication, professional communication have been developing at a furious pace. Still, it is in the field of mass communication where the impact has had the most striking consequences. The hegemony of mainstream media has been challenged. With this changing paradigm in mind, we explored the media consumption habits to see what are the channels they are using to get information, but also if the consumption of different types of news platforms may have an impact on their vision of the minimum wage issue.

The results show beyond a doubt the decline of the so-called legacy media. Over 80% of the participants in this study rarely or never read newspapers, not even in their online editions. Radios shows a similar decline. TV seems to keep some popularity among college students. However, not even 15% of the participants resort to TV daily as a source of information. Art Swift (2016) has been documenting for the Gallup Poll Social Series how U.S. Americans have been consistently losing their trust in the legacy media. The longitudinal study shows how this decline, which started to manifest itself during the financial crisis of 2007, is particularly salient among the younger generations.

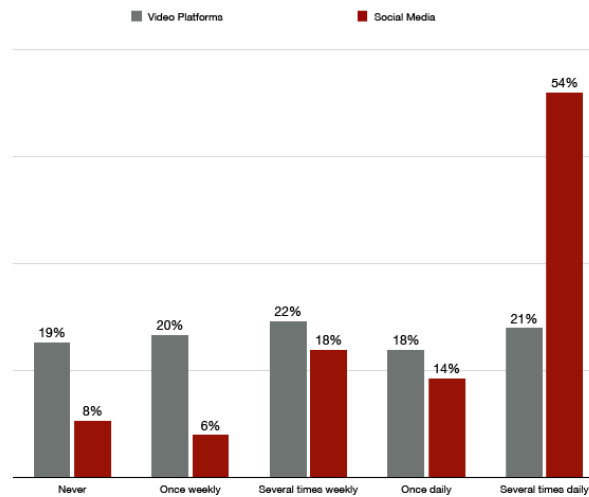
Figure 5: Legacy Media



The usage pattern seem to be exactly the opposite when the degree of ego-involvement drops. Video platforms and social media seem to be the preferred channels to access information for our students. Almost 70% of the participants rely on their social media to get political and economic, national and international information.

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Figure 6: Social Media



4. Results: Correlations

The first and most relevant finding in our study is that it exists a significant correlation between the ideological background of the participants and their opinion on each items related to the the raise of minimum wage. A strong negative correlation was found between the ideological positioning and the opinion on raising the minimum wage over \$15, as well as between ideology and the perceived urgency of the issue. When asked to self-assess their level of information about topic, the correlation with the ideological background was only marginal. Since the the liberal/left wing pole was on the lowest value of the scale, a negative correlation implies that the more liberal the participants see themselves, the more likely that they agree with the raise of the minimum wage and perceive the issue as urgent to be addressed by the government.

Table 1: Pearson's Correlation between Ideology and Minimum Wage (Opinion, Perceived urgency)

	1	2	3
1. Ideology			
2. Minimum Wage Urgency	-.41**		
3. Level of Information	-.11^	.31**	
4. Higher than \$15	-.33**	.48**	.07

Note. $N = 249$. ^ $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Very interesting in the section dedicated to the possible negative or positive impact of increasing the minimum wage. Two items highlighted possible negative consequences of the policy: increasing illegal immigration and increasing the number of lay-offs. The positive item

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was stimulating the economy in Connecticut. The more liberal/left wing the participants saw themselves, the more likely they would believe raising the minimum wage may have the positive impact of stimulating the economy of the region. A more conservative mindset would correlate with weighing higher the possible negative consequences of the policy in term of illegal immigration or increasing layoffs.

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation, Ideology and Potential Impact of Raising the Minimum Wage

	1	2	3
1. Ideology			
2. Illegal immigration	.25**		
3. Stimulate economy	-.33*	.07	
4. Increase layoffs	.29**	.13*	-.43

Note. $N = 249$. $^{\wedge}p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

4.1. Impact of media

When analyzing the correlation between the media usage and the opinion formation no significant values were found. The opinion on raising of minimum wage over \$15, or the perceived urgency of addressing this issue by the government do not seem depend on the type of media they normally use to access information. Neither did the assessment of the potential positive or negative effects of this policy correlated in a significant way with the generic media consumption. The fact that participants were inclined, for instance, to read national or local newspapers does not seem to affect their opinions on the minimum wage. The same appears to be the case with the use of social media to access information about current events. The selective exposure theory (Bryant & Davis, 2008) has been documenting for decades that media users tend to avoid cognitive dissonance resorting to those news outlets they know will not force them to leave their area of comfort. The very nature of social media feeds reinforce the echo-chamber effect (Cinelli et al, 2021). Although there is not general agreement on the echo chamber effect of social media, as a matter of fact, there has been some evidence that this effect does not occur (Dubois & Blank, 2018), the majority of studies support the thesis that a homophilic interaction occurs at the level of consumption and dissemination of information (Cinelli et al, 2021). The contents of the news feeds in those platforms are determined by the self-defined profile of the user, as well as through their browsing history. It has never been easier to provide the user with the contents they are going to enjoy or approve.

The analysis of the correlation between ideological inclination did not yield strong significant correlations either. Still, higher scores in the ideological scale (conservative participants) correlate with the use of newspapers ($r(256) = .17, p = .006$), online video channels ($r(256) = .14, p = .023$), podcasts ($r(256) = .14, p = .023$) and political blogs ($r(256) = -.15, p = .008$). No significant correlation was found for the rest of the news sources. The outlets that yielded positive correlation demand a higher degree of what Petty and Cacioppo (1982) called in their classic study "Ego-Involvement". Such outlets could be considered "pull media". The

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user must actively "pull" the information they are looking for, which involves a previous awareness of the nature and perhaps also the quality of the contents provided by the outlets. News feeds in social media are ideal to "push" the desired information on a very well defined audience.

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation: Ideology and Media Usage

	1	2	3	4
1. Ideology				
2. Newspapers	.17**			
3. Political Blogs	.15**	.22**		
4. Video Platforms	.14*	.24**	.24**	
5. Podcasts	.14*	.15**	.31**	.49**

Note. $N = 249$. $\wedge p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Ideology strongly correlates with social media quantity and frequency of use. Our study shows a negative correlation. Taking into account that the lowest values in our semantic differential scale correspond to the liberal/left wing mindset, a negative correlation means that participants who identified as liberal/left wing tend to spend more time engaged with their social media accounts ($r(256) = .17$, $p = .006$) and check them more frequently ($r(256) = -.15$, $p = .008$) than students who see themselves as conservative.

Table 4: Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Social Media Usage

	1	2	3
1. Ideology			
2. Frequency of Use	-.17**		
3. Amount of Time	-.15**	.67**	

Note. $N = 249$. $\wedge p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$ (2-tailed)

5. Conclusion

The current generation of college students are clearly turning legacy mainstream media away, at least when it comes to look for information on national or international issues. Newspapers, Radio or TV seem to be in an unstoppable decline. Social media are becoming the preferred platform to access information about relevant matters. Less than 10% of our participants resort to newspapers or radio to search for information on a daily basis. The consumption of TV news is higher, although no even 15% use TV to get informed. The trend reverts when asked about social media. Almost 70% of the participants check their news feeds in their social media accounts on a daily basis.

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As we expected, the majority of our students, around 73%, supports raising the minimum wage over \$15. The issue was also perceived as urgent to be addressed by the government (mean 7.6 in a 10 point semantic differential scale). 37% of the respondents thought the this issues is "extremely urgent to address". These outcomes may be explained by the fact that a good number of our students, over 90%, are working full or half-time and may be directly affected by this policy. Still, the ideological distribution of the sample may also explain the support of the raise. The descriptive analysis clearly showed that a liberal mindset strongly correlates with the support of increasing the minimum wage over \$15. Since most of the participants identified themselves as liberal/left wing, we cannot be surprised by the overall support of the policy.

The correlation between ideology and the perceived urgency of the issue was also very strong and run in the same direction. Liberal/left wing participants tend to see the issue of minimum wage are very urgent to be addressed by the government. The correlation is equally strong when participants responded to the questions that highlighted potential positive or negative social and economic effects of raising the minimum wage. Conservative participants tend to emphasized the negative impacts (escalation of illegal immigration, increase the number of layoffs), while more left oriented students agree with the positive effects of economy (stimulating economic growth).

The fact that there is no significant correlation between the types of media they use get information and the opinions they have about the issue at hand could be interpreted as a sign that the source of the information is not relevant at all for the process of opinion formation. Most likely, the opinion was already fixed before they exposed themselves to any information about the issue. Regardless of the type of media, whether the outlet requires a higher or lower degree of ego-involvement, the opinion of all the questions asked around raising the minimum wage and the possible consequences of this measure seem to have more to do with the ideology of the participants than with channels used to get the information. The fact that social media accounts have become the main channel to access news, seems to reinforce the thesis, supported by several studies, that social media work, as a matter of fact, as echo chambers. This will be the next battleground for manufactures of political consent. We have shown in other articles (del Ama, 2023) that there is a strong connection between the ideological inclination and the perceived urgency of issues. Political actors will try to hijack issues, since they know they will be able to extract political capital from them. The priority, once the issue has been seized/grabbed, is to push it into the public agenda. Once the awareness of an issue is created, the right frame of mind is manufactured to advocate for the issue, as well to support the candidate who is extracting political capital from it.

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