# Rage clicks: Study shows how political outrage fuels social media engagement

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According to a new Tulane University study, people on social media are more likely to interact with content that challenges their views than those that align with their own beliefs. (Photo by Adobe Stock)

A new Tulane University study explains why politically charged content gets more engagement from those who disagree. Researchers found a “confrontation effect,” where people are more likely to interact with content that challenges their views than those that align with them.

The study analyzed data from Twitter, Facebook, and online experiments over time, including during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and found that users frequently react to opposing viewpoints with heightened engagement, often driven by outrage.

“The research helps explain the large amount of toxic discourse we observe online.

Our results reveal that individuals are strongly driven to voice their outrage toward those with whom they disagree," said study lead author Daniel Mochon, the Edward H. Austin Jr. Professor of Business Administration and an associate professor of marketing at Tulane University's A. B. Freeman School of Business. "While previous studies show that people avoid content inconsistent with their beliefs, we found that counter-ideological content actually drives higher engagement."

The study was published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. Researchers exposed more than 500,000 Americans to political posts on Facebook, including those for and against then-President Donald Trump, to observe how users responded based on their political affiliations. The results showed that users were far more likely to comment on or react to posts that contradicted their beliefs, especially when they felt their core values were challenged.

Mochon noted that some social media platforms and users exploit anger to drive engagement. "Platforms benefit from keeping users active, regardless of whether the interaction is positive or negative," he said.

The study found that engagement isn't always an accurate indicator of user preferences. While engagement in areas like sports or fashion reflects interest, political engagement often stems from anger, creating a vicious cycle.

For example, many comments on Vice President Kamala Harris' X account appear to be from people with opposing political views, despite their likely preference not to follow her account.

The research provides insights that could inform strategies for political campaigns, media organizations and social media platforms aiming to manage divisive content. For policymakers, understanding this dynamic can help in regulating online discourse and mitigating the rise of toxic discussions.

"We hope our findings provide a more balanced perspective on the interplay between ideology and online engagement," Mochon said.

The paper was co-authored by Janet Schwartz from Duke University.