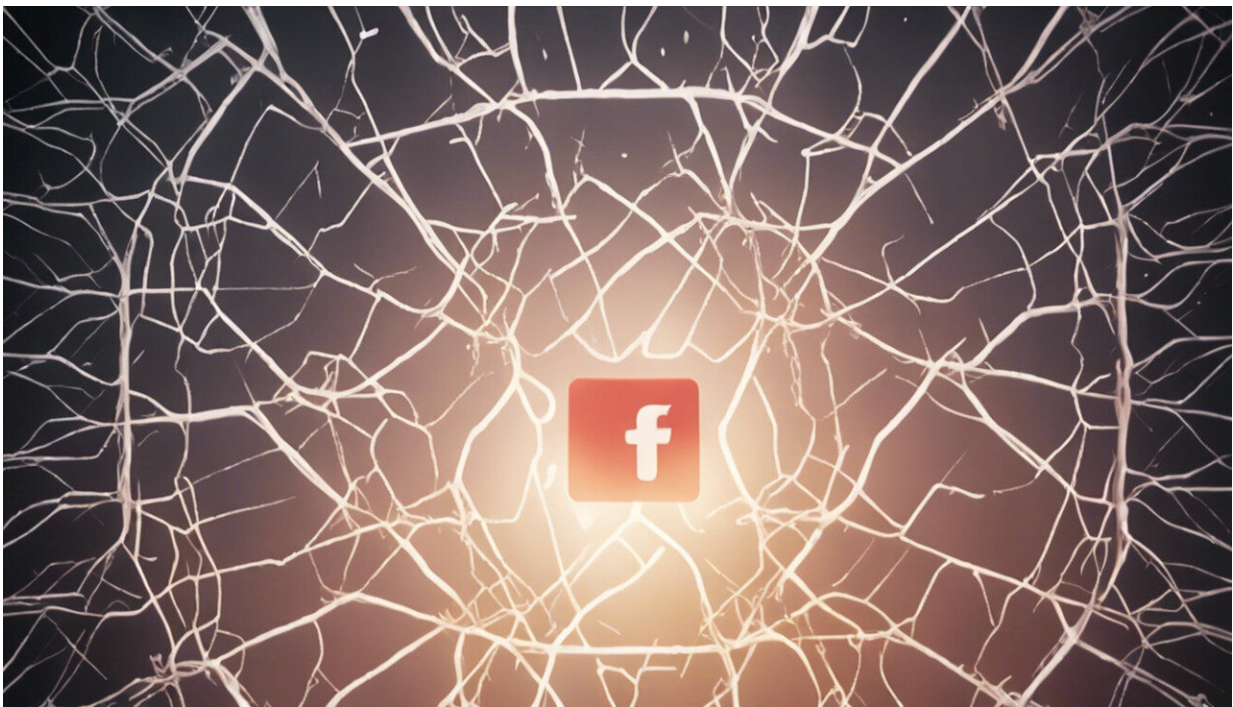


# Political rage on social media is making us cynical: Study

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Credit: AI-generated image

Political anger and cynicism are rising in the United States and in many democracies worldwide, and both are associated with exposure to

political attacks on social media, a new University of Michigan [study](#) shows.

Americans use social media to find information and news about politics, but much of the content they see in their feeds is hostile, uncivil and attacking, said lead author Ariel Hasell, assistant professor of communication and media and an affiliate of the Center for Political Studies at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

Hasell and colleagues investigated whether exposure to political attacks on social media is associated with political cynicism, and if so, whether emotions like anger and anxiety play a role in this process.

They found that people who were exposed to more political attacks on social media were more politically cynical, and that perceived exposure to these attacks was associated with more anger about the state of the U.S., which was subsequently related to greater levels of political cynicism.

Their results, based on a panel survey of 1,800 American adults fielded during the 2020 election, were recently published in the *International Journal of Press/Politics*.

"It's important to understand how feelings of cynicism emerge because we're seeing many democratic governments facing crises of legitimacy," Hasell said. "Our findings provide some of the first evidence of how exposure to political attacks on social media might relate to political cynicism in the context of a U.S. [presidential election](#)."

## **Cynicism in a democracy**

Hasell and colleagues define political cynicism as an attitude that's rooted in distrust of political actors' motivations. It goes further than healthy skepticism, they say, because it involves wholesale rejection of people and processes in democracy and an underlying belief that politicians are guided by corrupt, self-serving, personal interests rather than service to the public good.

"Cynicism can be a rational response to actual corruption and breaches of trust by those in power," said Audrey Halversen, doctoral student in the Department of Communication and Media. "But it is a matter of concern among scholars of democracy because of its potential to delegitimize democratic processes, reinforce negative attitudes, distort people's interpretations of political information, and cause some citizens to withdraw from politics."

Pew Research Center [polls](#) show the American public's confidence in government has reached its lowest point in decades, and perceptions that self-interest and corruption are guiding government action have bred cynicism across the [political spectrum](#). The U-M study tested the theory that this increase in cynicism might be linked to political social media use.

## **Social media influence**

Political content on social media is often toxic, and we can expect to see political hostility surge online this summer and fall as we approach the presidential election, Hasell said.

Prior research has shown that political attacks communicated by independent actors (rather than candidates) can be especially influential in shaping political beliefs. Social media algorithms reward and amplify attacks precisely because they're engaging. Studies show this makes outrage more potent and visible, giving users a warped view of what the

public believes.

"If your main source of news is social media, you are more likely to perceive politics as hostile and angry," Hasell said. "And beyond the feelings that political attacks provoke, it matters how people perceive and read the temperature of 'public emotions' because this can impact assessments about the country's well-being and its ability to solve problems and accomplish goals."

The panel survey in the U-M study asked participants about their social media usage and whether they had been exposed to political attacks against Trump and Republicans or against Biden and Democrats on social media. It included a set of questions to measure political cynicism among respondents and asked about their feelings about the state of the U.S. as a country.

## **Anger and anxiety**

Public anger in American politics has reached a fevered pitch in the last decade, and data show it is rising among American voters heading into the first presidential election since the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll in 2019 found that nearly 7 in 10 Americans reported being angry about the political establishment. A 2023 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute showed that about a quarter of Americans agree that "true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country." This is up from 15% in 2021.

Anxiety is another negative emotion that can be elicited by uncertainty, risk aversion, and threats, especially if they are vague, unknown, or perceived to be beyond one's control, the researchers said. Political fearmongering and social media toxicity can drive anxiety during a

presidential election by creating uncertainty about political outcomes and by creating a generalized sense of political hostility that is beyond an individual's control.

"Negative emotions are not necessarily bad for democracy," Hasell said. "Emotions like anxiety and anger can drive people to the polls, motivate advocacy, and get people to seek and think more deeply about political information. But relentless negativity about the state of a country 'under threat' can also make people frustrated, disgruntled and disengaged. Anger can affect our ability to see things as they are and make measured decisions that are important in a democracy."

## A 'concerning' cycle

The study found evidence that exposure to political attacks on social media contributes to anxiety, anger, and political cynicism, but that anger is the emotion that relates to cynicism.

"As more people turn to social media for news and information, it's likely that they'll be more repeatedly exposed to political attacks, which may further promote political cynicism," Hasell said. "This is concerning because [cynicism](#) can make it harder for people to make sense of political information. It can lead people down a road of apathy and disengagement or toward fringe parties and antidemocratic forms of participation."

Can citizens who use social media do anything to break that pattern?

"An easy way to avoid getting angry and cynical is to be mindful about focusing on nonhostile, civil dialogue," Hasell said. "If you are seeing a lot of hostility in your social media, you can think about re-curating and unfollowing people who are fomenting this kind of hostility. We don't find that social media use in itself is making people angry and cynical, it

has to do with how we decide to use it."

**More information:** Ariel Hasell et al, When Social Media Attack: How Exposure to Political Attacks on Social Media Promotes Anger and Political Cynicism, *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (2024).  
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