The Effects Of Social Media and Polarization During The 2016 Election

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Introduction

The public was shocked. Facebook was found to have known about election malfeasance by Russia in the 2016 election (Gartenberg, 2018). Russia had been creating fake events and fake accounts to interfere with the 2016 election. This seemed to confirm the widespread belief that social media was contributing to polarization and heightening political tensions.

Polarization is defined as division between two sharply contrasting beliefs or groups of people (Oxford 2019). In politics, this refers to a political divide between two political groups. In context this means a sharp divide between Democrats and Republicans.

Did social media contribute to polarization in the 2016 Election? Because social media exists in all facets of our lives, this question of social media's impact, connection, and possible exacerbation of polarization is increasingly important.

Literature Reviews

Facebook and Polarization:

According to a study by Christopher Sibona, most friends on Facebook are added by people who know them in real life. The top two most common types of "friends" are actual friends and work acquaintances. Sibona's study found that, on average, friends are chosen based on race, ethnicity, age, religion, and gender in that order.

In a list compiled by Sibona, most people unfriended due to frequent posts; polarizing posts sat at number three on the list (2018). This shows that while polarizing topics are on the list, it would be hard for one to say social media is not only the cause of polarization, but also the most significant.

Tribalism, Propaganda, and Polarization:

This behavior helps explain the divide between the left and right. Like having friends with similar ideals, according to Jonathan Haidt, politics is a form of expressing regular tribalism (Pappas 2012). This shows how our social behavior on social media is tied into people's political behavior in real life.

The psychology of the effect of Russian bots can also be analyzed to help understand this. There are many types of propaganda; the most effective one used by the bots was the transfer technique, or the process of reinforcing people's beliefs by targeting them with a message they agree with (Cuesta College, n.d.).
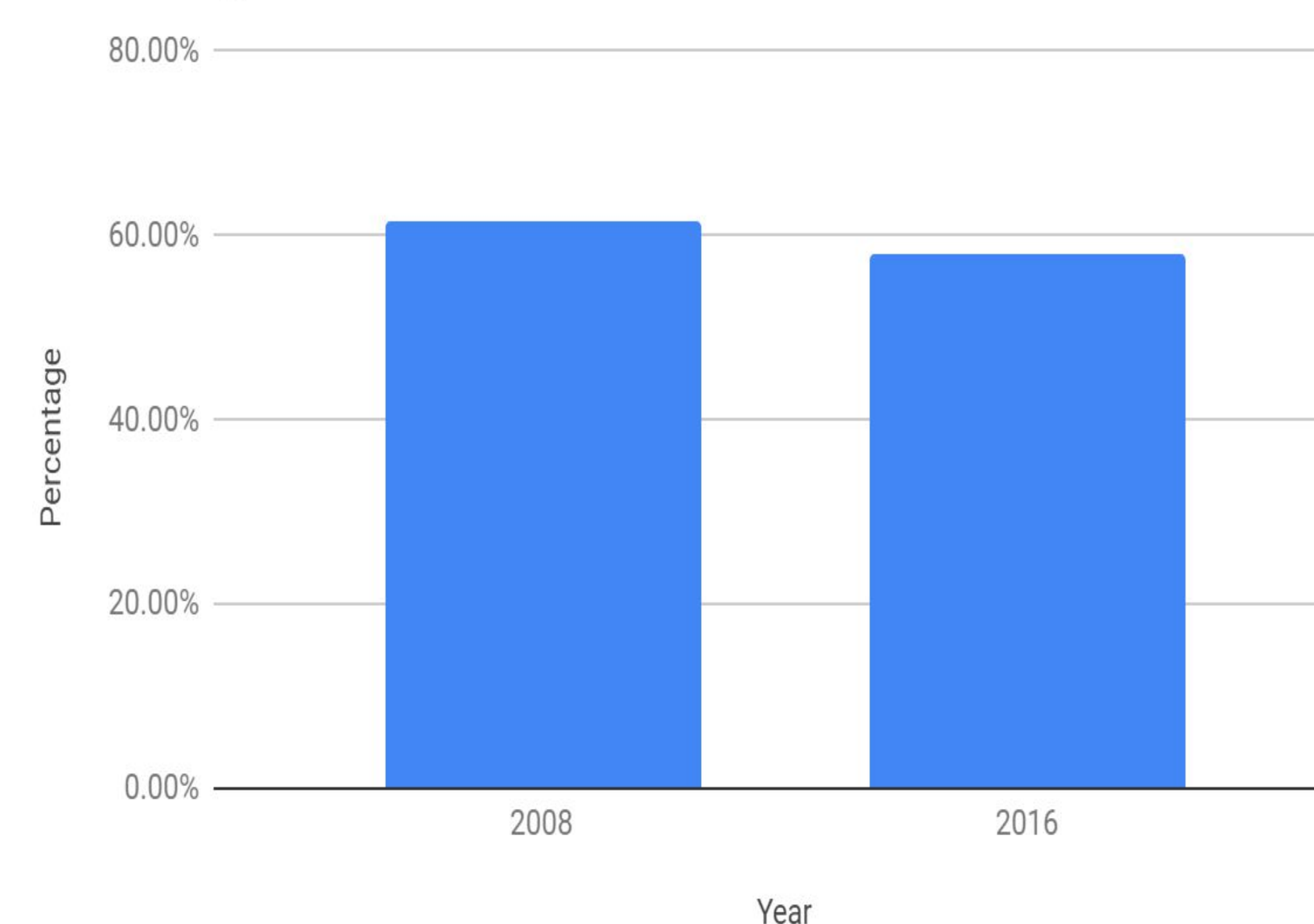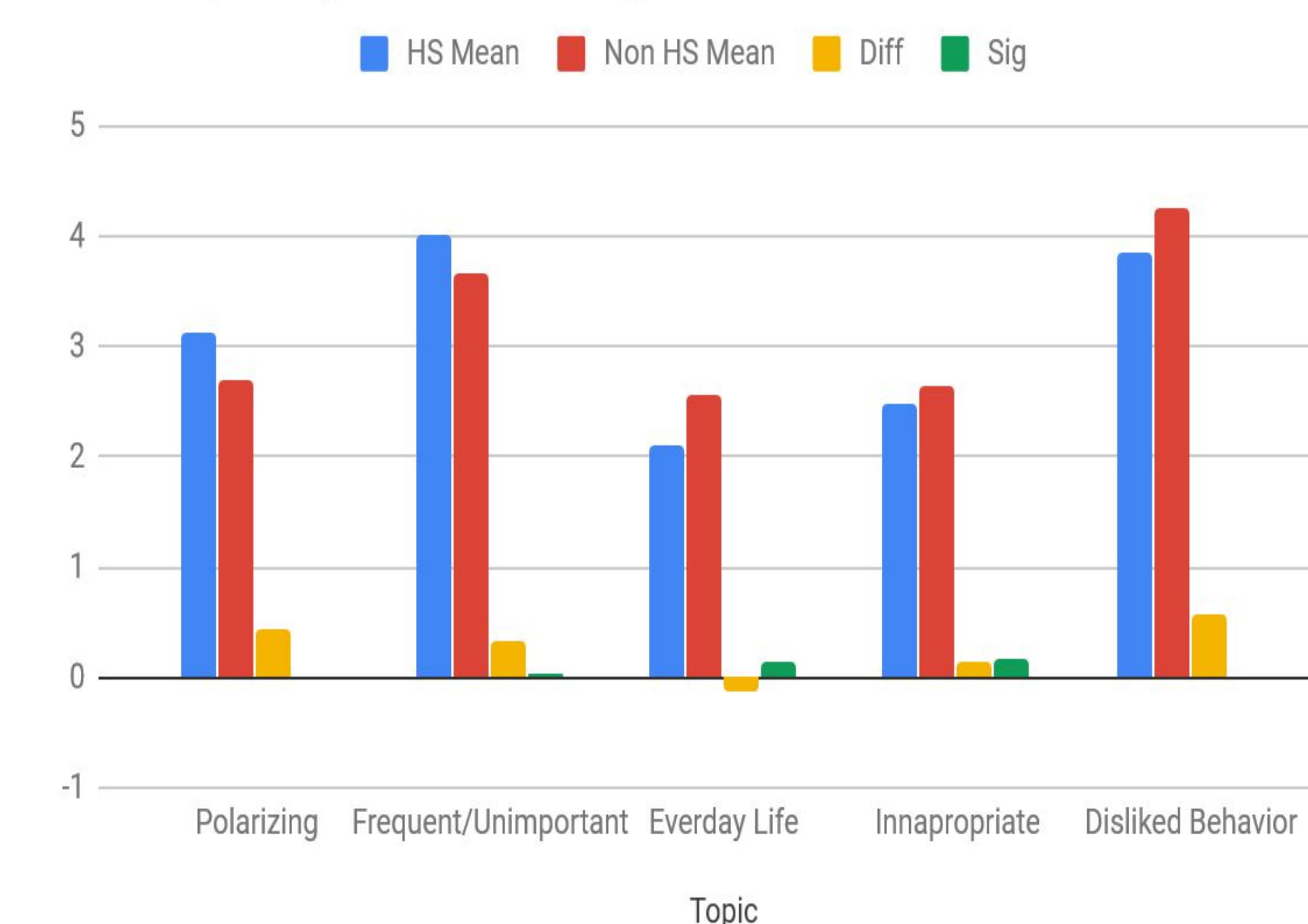

Figure 1a: Differences in Voter Turnout

Figure 1b: Frequency Of Unfriending from Christopher Sibona's Unfriending Study

Conclusions

Polarization was not exacerbated by social media in the 2016 election. The tribal moral tactics of our subconscious caused certain voters to believe false information; however, that information was only processed as such because many had pre-existing notions. The number of bots was large, but if there were only 137.5 million people who voted in the election (Penn State Libraries, 2018) and not all of them were active on social media, it would be wrong to say that social media exacerbated, in terms of sheer numbers, polarization. Social media simply made these voices louder and allowed their ideas to be reinforced; it didn't cause people to be more polarized or make new people polarized.

Next Steps

Polarization cannot be eliminated, but mitigating it is possible. According to the Brookings Institution there are ways the government and individuals can address the problem.

Government Actions (Nivola, 2005)**:**

- Primary reorganization--such as adjusting the presidential primary schedule so that high population states such as California vote earlier and have a larger voice--and studying the effects of some state's blanket primaries, in which voters are not required to vote along party lines.
- Increasing voter participation: this will help give everyone a voice and gain a moderating influence.
- Revising the rules of engagement, such as preventing obstructionist policies, such as gerrymandering, or drawing district lines in favor of one party.

Non-Government Actions (University of Chicago):

- "Use data science to extract and summarize information from campaign finances records and other large data sets in order to provide better informational cues to voters.
- Work with news organizations and social media websites to develop tools and strategies that facilitate more thoughtful, balanced and respectful consideration (by their audiences) of differing viewpoints.
- Strengthen fact-checking initiatives.
- Expand civic education and civic news exposure among young people. Increase interest by utilizing age-relevant content."

Citations

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