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Patterns and Factors of Political Disconnection on Social Media: A Cross- Platform Comparison

Felix- Christopher von Nostitz, Marie Neihouser, Giulia Sandri and Tristan Haute

Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on the use and selection of social media platforms for political activism. However, less attention has been given to identifying citizens who are politically disconnected—those registered on social media platforms but not engaging in political activities. Additionally, whether patterns of non- use of social media for politics vary across different platforms remains understudied. Based on an online survey of 1,978 respondents conducted after the 2022 French presidential election campaign, this article aims to address these questions by examining the patterns and factors contributing to political disconnection from social media, particularly across six platforms: Facebook, private social networks, Instagram, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. Our findings indicate that three main factors explain political disconnection: digital skills, interest in politics (except for platforms less frequently used for politics), and social media efficacy. These results provide significant and original contributions to the broader debate on how and why individuals disconnect socially and technologically on social media platforms. While many studies focus on the variables that account for political participation in the age of social media, ours examines the conditions that explain non- use in the context of political disconnection. We also contribute to the existing literature by analysing the phenomenon of non- use holistically, addressing platform type, demographics, digital literacy, and political traits (e.g., interest and competence)

Keywords

digital disconnection; digital literacy; elections; online democratic practices; online non- participation; political disconnection; political interest; political participation; social media

1. Introduction

The use of social media platforms for political purposes by individuals has gathered increasing attention in academic literature (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022). Although online political activity has grown, individuals who engage in it still represent a minority (Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). While many people have accounts on social networks and frequently use them, most do not engage with political content (Neihouser et al., 2022). Online political activities, such as political expression or consuming political information, are primarily undertaken by individuals who are highly politicized and educated (Neihouser et al., 2022; Schlozman et al., 2010), and more often by men (Oser et al., 2013; Saglie & Vabo, 2009). Yet, surprisingly little is known about those who, though connected social media users, are politically inactive on social media.

Building on literature about digital disconnection (Ross et al., 2024), various studies explore the voluntary limitation or lack of political uses of social media by some citizens (Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu, 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). The polarization and increasing fragmentation of the public sphere—especially due to misuse of platforms by various political groups—are cited as factors potentially explaining this withdrawal from online political activities. However, this body of literature mainly focuses on very specific political non- users of social media who are often well- informed and politicized. It remains unclear whether the deterioration of the online public sphere is a significant factor for the political non- use of social media by other groups, particularly those less politicized, though they are similarly connected on digital platforms. In an era when digital technology permeates all aspects of our daily lives—from work and leisure to shopping, medical consultations, and administrative procedures—this article analyses why citizens refrain from using social media for political purposes.

Digital disconnection refers to the voluntary or involuntary disengagement from digital platforms, including social media, the internet, and other digital technologies. While political disconnection involves a lack of interest or participation in political processes, digital disconnection encompasses a broader range of activities, including withdrawing from online spaces for reasons of personal well- being, information overload, or distrust of technology (Syvertsen, 2020). Although digital disconnection can lead to political disconnection—since disengaging from digital platforms limits exposure to political news and discussions—the two concepts are not synonymous. Political disconnection may arise from disinterest in politics itself, whereas digital disconnection can be driven by broader concerns about privacy, mental health, or the quality of online interactions (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023). Thus, while they intersect, digital disconnection reflects a wider spectrum of motivations beyond just political disengagement (Hesselberth, 2018).

The difference between political disconnection and non- use of social media for political purposes relates to the degree of engagement with political content online. Disconnection is a broader concept than non- use; it encompasses all types of disconnections, including the refusal to use technology for both political and non- political reasons. It applies to citizens who do not use the internet at all, as well as to those who actively avoid exposure to political information on social media. In contrast, non- use for political purposes

specifically refers to the absence of active engagement with political content on social media, rather than merely avoiding consumption of or exposure to political information online. In this study, we focus on a specific sub- category of disconnection, namely the use of social media but not for political purposes.

Further, we differentiate between general non- use of a platform and refraining from political uses of the platform. Political disconnection, in our definition, is thus related to both social media non- use and non- participation but concerns primarily non- political use of social media. According to the two variables used for building our classification matrix presented in Table 1—being a user of social media and being politically active—four categories of citizens were identified: those who are social media users and politically active (at least online), those who use social media but do not engage with political content online, those who are not social media users but are politically active offline, and those who are neither social media users nor politically active. To study disconnection, we focus on citizens who are social media users but not for political purposes (i.e., they are digitally connected but politically disconnected, see the bottom-left quadrant in Table 1), and compare them to citizens who are not social media users but are politically active offline (i.e., they are digitally disconnected—not registered on any platform—but politically connected, see the top-right quadrant in Table 1). Both groups are understudied in the literature on digital political disconnection. In Section 4, we further compare the profiles of individuals registered on social media but politically inactive with those of individuals belonging to the two remaining groups in the matrix, and particularly with citizens who are on social media and politically engaged (see the top- left quadrant in Table 1), to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the determinants of political disconnection.

Our study therefore focuses on the patterns and factors explaining the types of disconnection of the two groups studied in this article (see Table 1), focusing on three main predictors for explaining political disconnection: digital skills, interest in politics, and social media efficacy. To address these questions, we focus on a case study and we draw upon the results of a post- election survey conducted online after the second round of the 2022 French presidential election, using a representative sample of 1,978 individuals. This was the first national election after the Covid- 19 pandemic, which potentially drove new and more users to engage with politics online. Furthermore, we focus on the presidential election as it is the most significant election in France, resulting in high levels of citizen engagement with politics both offline and online. Indeed, electoral participation was similar to that in past elections, with over 70% turnout in both rounds. Macron won in the second round with 58.5% of the vote, defeating Le Pen.

France’s case is particularly interesting for several reasons. Firstly, despite the momentum generated by the presidential election campaign and the widespread adoption of social media among the population, the political use of social networks by citizens remains relatively uncommon (Neihouser et al., 2022). This usage is consistently linked to individuals’ interest in politics, their ideological positioning, and their other offline political practices. For instance, those who actively follow political news and participate in offline political activities are more likely to engage with political content on social media. Conversely, citizens with low

Table 1. Classification of social media and political users.

	Social media user	Social media non- user
Political	Political social media users	Political social media non- users*
Non- political	Non- political social media users*	Non- political social media non- users

Note: * = Groups studied in this article.

political interest or engagement tend to avoid political discussions online, even if they are active on social media for other purposes. Additionally, political use of social media in France is highly socially differentiated, particularly by age. Younger individuals are more likely to engage in political activities online, but this engagement is often shallow, such as liking or sharing content rather than deeper involvement like participating in discussions or campaigns. On the other hand, older users, while generally less active on social media, may engage in more meaningful political exchanges when they do participate. However, no survey directly addresses the patterns of non-use of social media for political purposes, leaving a gap in understanding why certain demographics choose not to engage politically online despite being active on these platforms for other reasons. This lack of data hinders a comprehensive understanding of the nuances behind political disconnection in the digital sphere.

In the next section, we discuss the literature on the topic and formulate our hypotheses. After presenting our data and methods in Section 3, in Section 4 we present our analyses and discuss the results. Section 5 outlines the conclusions of this study. Overall, this article explores the patterns and factors influencing the political non-use of social media across different platforms. It demonstrates that non-use is driven not only by digital divides and lack of digital skills (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022; Boulianne & Larsson, 2024; Hargittai, 2001; Hoffmann & Lutz, 2021), but also by a range of personal and political disconnections. Our findings suggest significant differences in how individuals disengage from political content online, as they are influenced by their digital competence, interest in politics, and the specific types of social media platforms they use.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Studies on the political non-use of social media are relatively scarce, with most research focusing instead on the broader phenomenon of political disconnection, highlighting the voluntary and deliberate aspect of restricting online political practices or abstaining from social media for political purposes (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). Among these studies, many examine selective exposure to online political information (Bode, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019), particularly through “politically motivated unfriending” on social media (Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2022). Researchers suggest that this practice is primarily due to polarization and fragmentation of the public sphere in the digital age. More specifically, politically motivated unfriending is often intended to create online “safe spaces” (Zhu & Skoric, 2021) where individuals can communicate and express their political views without risking facing political disagreement, social isolation, or perceived systemic victimhood (Zhu & Skoric, 2022).

Indeed, Zhu et al. (2019) found that a heightened perception of out-group threats strengthens the relationship between Facebook use and selective avoidance. Investigating whether social media constitute a Habermasian public sphere, Kruse et al. (2018) demonstrated that individuals avoid online political discussions due to fears of harassment, workplace surveillance, fear of social isolation, and perceived systemic victimhood. They therefore prefer to exchange online only with politically similar others, especially when they perceive themselves as holding minority opinions. In other words, the results of these studies tend to show that individuals refrain from expressing themselves politically online or, at the very least, select the political information to which they expose themselves on platforms, due to their negative perception of certain aspects of the digital public sphere: polarization, fragmentation, risk of being sidelined, and so on.

While this literature primarily associates a degraded perception of the digital public sphere with political non-use of social media, it seldom explores other potential factors for individuals distancing themselves from online politics, often because it studies relatively specific individuals and political contexts (Zhu et al., 2019).

Furthermore, many studies define disconnection as a deliberate form of non-use (Nassen et al., 2023) or even as a “right to disconnect” (Hesselberth, 2018). In other words, it is seen as an active choice to opt-out, abstain, or unplug for psychological, socio-economic, and/or political reasons (Klingelhofer et al., 2024). However, this literature rarely considers that disconnection, especially political disconnection, might not always be voluntary or deliberate. Being (politically) digitally disconnected for some individuals might not “work” in addressing issues of digital well-being (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024); instead, it may exclude them and silence their voices in both public and political debates, online and offline. This is particularly problematic in today’s context, where we not only receive political information online and through social media, but political parties and politicians also gather information about citizens’ demands and interact with them through data-driven campaigning (Dommett et al., 2024). This dynamic contributes to the concept of “digital citizenship” (DC), which expands societal participation and responsibilities into the digital sphere (Novelli & Sandri, 2024). Choi (2016) identifies four integral dimensions of DC that underscore the risks of digital political disconnection:

1. DC as ethics: emphasises the importance of engaging appropriately, safely, ethically, and responsibly online, recognising virtual communities as platforms where individuals frequently interact and communicate.
2. DC as media and information literacy: extends beyond the ethical use of digital technologies to include the ability to access, use, create, and critically evaluate information, underscoring the necessity to bridge the digital divide and ensure universal internet access.
3. DC as participation/engagement: explores the role of the internet in facilitating both broad and personalised forms of political, socio-economic, and cultural participation, highlighting activities ranging from e-voting to more personal cultural interactions online.
4. DC as critical resistance: while overlapping with participation, specifically calls for transformative actions that challenge existing power structures and promote social justice, often through innovative, decentralised methods.

This clearly demonstrates that, in today’s world, being online is essential for full participation in politics, and digital political disconnection may be more harmful than beneficial. However, given that many individuals have multiple social media accounts on different platforms, they may not use all of them for political purposes. Additionally, social platforms exhibit technological heterogeneity (Theocharis et al., 2023), necessitating the multi-platform approach taken in this article. Furthermore, just because individuals are politically disconnected online does not mean they are not politically active offline. Therefore, it is important to compare online and offline political disconnection. However, the study of why some individuals engage politically on specific platforms, while others avoid them or prefer offline participation, must be expanded by considering additional factors.

First, studies of political disconnection do not, to our knowledge, consider those not engaged due to a lack of digital skills (van Laar et al., 2017), but see skills more as needed for engaging in disconnection practices (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023). Digital skills, often defined as the ability to effectively use digital technologies

to access, manage, understand, and communicate information, are increasingly recognized as essential for navigating the contemporary digital landscape (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

Several studies highlight the importance of digital skills in facilitating online political engagement. Digital technologies, particularly those facilitating social interaction, open new pathways for political engagement. Online interactions can shape voting behaviour, drive participation in political movements, and influence the motivations behind various forms of participation (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2023). For instance, social media has empowered citizens to easily initiate and organize boycott campaigns against political figures or policies. Thus, digital skills enable individuals to navigate and use digital platforms effectively, which is crucial for participating in online political activities (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Recent research further emphasizes that individuals with higher digital skills are more likely to engage in online political discourse and activism, as these skills enhance their ability to critically assess information and participate meaningfully in digital conversations (Boulianne, 2020). Recent research emphasizes that digital skills are not only necessary for participation but also mediate the quality of that engagement. For instance, Hargittai (2021) found that those with higher digital literacy were more likely to engage in nuanced, productive political discussions online. Other studies, such as those by Shaw and Hargittai (2018), indicate that gaps in digital skills contribute to unequal political engagement online, with marginalized groups often being left out of the political discourse due to limited access to or knowledge of digital tools. Similarly, studies on political non-use of social media often do not address the possibility that individuals do not see the point of expressing themselves politically online, simply finding online political engagement inefficient or time-consuming.

Moreover, this body of work rarely considers how interest in politics (Bimber et al., 2015; Oser & Boulianne, 2020) might impact non-political use of social media. Unlike broader political disconnection, non-political use of social media may stem from a low sense of digital or political competence, or from a negative judgment of the effectiveness of online political engagement. This is similar to how offline political non-participation can arise from low internal and external political efficacy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Oser et al., 2022). Political efficacy is defined as the belief in one's ability to influence political processes, encompassing both internal efficacy (confidence in one's own abilities to understand and participate in politics) and external efficacy (belief in the responsiveness of political institutions, or in this case online platforms, to citizen input; see Boulianne et al., 2023).

As outlined above, political non-participation substantially differs from general online non-participation (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). On the one hand, political non-participation often refers to the deliberate choice of individuals not to engage in political activities, such as voting, campaigning, or discussing politics. This can be influenced by a variety of factors including political disillusionment, distrust in the political system, or a feeling of inefficacy and being too time-consuming (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Teorell, 2006). On the other hand, general online non-participation refers to the broader lack of engagement in digital activities or online platforms. This can include not participating in social media discussions, not engaging with online content, or not using digital tools for civic activities. The reasons for this can vary widely from lack of access to technology, digital literacy issues, or personal preferences for offline interactions (Boulianne, 2009). Thus, while political non-participation is often tied to attitudes and feelings towards the political system, general online non-participation is more about access, skills, and preferences related to digital technology. For this

reason, this study focuses on three predictors of non-political use of social media specific to variations in online engagement with political content, namely digital skills, political interest, and social media/political efficacy. Therefore, our first set of hypotheses is the following:

H1: Individuals with lower digital skills are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes.

H2: Individuals less interested in politics are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes.

H3: Individuals who view online political engagement as ineffective are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes.

Furthermore, we know that people's use of social media varies depending on the platform. Indeed, depending on their affordances and digital architecture (Bossetta, 2018; Ruess et al., 2023), platforms attract different types of individuals for different purposes (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022; boyd, 2010). For example, X is often perceived as a platform that facilitates political dissemination, with most accounts being public and accessible even to unregistered individuals (Stier et al., 2019). Conversely, other platforms, where more accounts are private and exchanges are based on reciprocal links, tend to be used more for recreational activities, leisure, or maintaining social ties with loved ones (Stier et al., 2019). This is the case with platforms such as Facebook or Snapchat, even if these platforms are more and more used by politicians (Neihouser & Figeac, 2024). Following this literature, we can consider that the patterns and factors of political disconnection vary depending on the platform. Therefore, our fourth and fifth hypotheses are the following:

H4: Individuals less interested in politics are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes on platforms like X, which are traditionally identified as being dedicated to political use.

H5: Regardless of the platform, individuals with lower digital skills are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes, leading to greater digital and political disconnection.

We thus study the non-use of social media for politics to better understand if, for example, citizens are simply disinterested in politics, or actively repelled by certain characteristics of politics on social media. Overall, our main research question pertains to the conditions that explain political non-use of social media in the context of political disconnection.

3. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a post-electoral survey focused on digital campaigning as part of the PEOPLE2022 (Pratiques Électorales et OPinions Lors des Élections de 2022) project (Briatte et al., 2024). This survey was carried out online from April 25, 2022, to May 9, 2022, immediately following the second round of the presidential election. It involved a sample of 1,978 individuals who were representative of the French population registered to vote and aged 18 and over. The sample was selected using the quota method based on gender, age, social class, urban area, and region. Weighting by calibration on the margins was applied for gender, age, socio-professional category (after recoding the declared profession), level of

education, and vote in the first round of the 2022 presidential election using the R “icarus” package (Rebecq, 2019). The survey was financed by the ESPOL Lille (European School of Political and Social Sciences), the CERAPS (Centre d’études et de recherches administratives, politiques et sociales, UMR CNRS/Université de Lille) and the LEM (Lille économie et management, UMR CNRS/Université de Lille). The sample was provided by Dynata France. In addition to the authors of this article, François Briatte collaborated in the production of the post- election survey, as did Étienne Farvaque.

The survey allowed us to study the non- political use of social networks and the justifications individuals cite for this non- use. Firstly, we asked respondents about their use of each platform considered in the study (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp) through the following question: “During the campaign, did you view, share, ‘like,’ or comment on any content related to the presidential election on social networks?” The possible responses were: “Yes, often”; “Yes, a few times”; “No, never, but I am registered on this network”; “No, I am not registered on this network.” Secondly, for those who answered “No, never, but I am registered on this network,” a follow- up question was asked for six of the selected platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp): “Why haven’t you viewed, liked, shared or commented on any content related to the presidential election on [social media platform]?” The response categories were: “I am not interested enough in politics”; “It would take up too much of my time”; “It’s pointless”; “I don’t want to produce content that will be visible forever”; “I’m afraid of getting into trouble with people I know”; “I have political opinions that may be stigmatized by some people”; “I don’t know enough about how this social network works”; “I have not been exposed to any content related to the presidential election on [social media platform]”; “None of these rationales.” Multiple answers were possible.

To test our hypotheses, we analysed responses to these two questions for each of the six platforms. We also compared the profiles of individuals who are registered on social media but politically inactive with those who are both registered and politically active online. We employed a set of multinomial models. The dependent variable in our models is the political inactivity of respondents registered on the platform. We ran one model for each of the six platforms and a seventh model for respondents registered on at least one platform. The independent variables include the level of interest in politics, whether respondents in the last month have liked, commented on, or shared friends’ and family members’ posts or photos on the same social media platform, whether they have shared non- political information on the chosen platform, and the intensity of offline political activities (measured through a binary variable indicating participation in electoral meetings or in- person engagement with activists). Non- political activities on social media serve as a proxy for digital skills, while offline political activities and the sharing of non- political information online are used as proxy variables for political and social media efficacy. In this context, the value of social media as a platform for information sharing is assessed, and offline political activities may be preferred over online ones due to their perceived greater effectiveness. The control variables in our models include gender (binary sex), age, education, and political self- placement.

4. Results

Table 2 summarizes the political and non- political use of each of the six platforms studied. While the majority of respondents are registered on at least one platform (84.9%), only 43.5% are politically active on at least one platform. The proportion of individuals registered on at least one platform but not politically active is

Table 2. Use of different platforms for political and non-political purposes (%; and, in brackets, the unweighted number of respondents).

	Not registered	Registered but not politically active	Registered and politically active
At least one social media	15.1 (293)	41.4 (822)	43.5 (863)
Facebook	24.8 (492)	41.2 (819)	34.0 (667)
Private messaging apps	39.2 (753)	40.3 (815)	20.5 (410)
Instagram	48.3 (950)	32.2 (638)	19.5 (390)
Snapchat	55.7 (1,118)	30.0 (587)	14.3 (273)
X	55.2 (1,123)	25.2 (483)	17.5 (372)
TikTok	64.8 (1,281)	21.3 (424)	13.9 (273)

Notes: □ = 1,978; weighted data. Source: Briatte et al. (2024).

significant (41.4%), which justifies the relevance of our study. This proportion is particularly high on Facebook (41.2%) and private messaging apps like WhatsApp (40.3%). On other platforms, this phenomenon is less common (ranging from 21.3% on TikTok to 32.2% on Instagram). This lower prevalence can be explained by the fact that most respondents are not registered on these platforms. When we focus only on those who are registered on a platform, the proportion of politically inactive users varies from 54.6% on Facebook to 67.7% on Snapchat. It reaches 66.3% on private messaging apps, which are therefore relatively less politically engaged, but only 59% on X. Instagram (62.6%) and TikTok (60.5%) fall in an intermediate range.

Table 3 presents the respondents' reasons for their non-political use of social media across the six platforms. The responses "I don't want to produce content that will be visible forever," "I'm afraid of getting into trouble with people I know," and "I have political opinions that may be stigmatized by some people" align most closely with explanations provided by the classic literature on general disconnection, as cited above. However, these reasons are the least frequently cited by respondents. Between 6.8% and 10.1% of respondents report that their main reason for not engaging with political content on the selected platform is fear of getting into trouble with people they know, while between 6.4% and 11.6% cite fear of being stigmatized by others. Lack of time and the desire to avoid leaving a permanent record of their opinions online are also infrequently mentioned. In contrast, the justification "I don't know enough about how this social network works" is cited more often by respondents (ranging from 7.4% to 16.1%) as a reason for not engaging with political content on the selected platforms, indicating that digital skills could be a more significant factor in political disengagement. Additionally, low interest in politics is a common reason (cited by 14.4% to 21.1% of respondents, depending on the platform), reinforcing the expectation that political interest levels are key determinants of political disconnection. However, the most frequently cited reason for not using social media for political purposes is low political and social media efficacy, with 28.5% to 38.3% of respondents offering this explanation, suggesting that social media efficacy is the primary factor in explaining political disconnection.

These descriptive statistics lead us to test three main factors for the non-political use of social media with our set of regression models: lack of digital skills (operationalized by non-political activities on social media), lack of political interest, and perception of political inefficacy (operationalized by greater offline political activity coupled with less frequent sharing of non-political information online). Table 4 presents the results of our regression models (odds ratios). In the first model, which focuses on registration and activity on at

Table 3. Justifications for non- use of social media for political purposes during the 2022 campaign (%).

Response category	Facebook	Private social networks	Instagram	Snapchat	X	TikTok
You are not interested enough in politics	21.1	16	17.1	16.1	14.4	15.1
It would take up too much of your time	5	6.1	5.5	5.7	3.9	6
It's pointless	38.3	33.3	28.5	30.5	30.2	31.9
You have not been exposed to any content related to the presidential election on [social media platform]	10.5	19.1	11.6	17.4	5.8	13.6
You don't want to produce content that will be visible forever	15.8	NA	10.1	NA	10.5	8.5
You're afraid of getting into trouble with people you know	10.1	9.7	6.8	7.0	8.2	7.9
You have political opinions that may be stigmatized by some people	11.6	10.7	6.4	6.9	7.3	6.6
You don't know enough about how this social network works	7.4	9.1	11.5	9.9	16.1	12.4
N of respondents (unweighted)	819	815	638	587	483	424

Notes: NA = response category not available for this item; weighted data. Source: Briatte et al. (2024).

least one of the six social media platforms, we find that individuals interested in politics are significantly less politically disconnected. This resonates with our exploratory descriptive analyses, which show that among respondents registered on at least one platform, 71.7% of those not at all interested in politics are politically inactive on social media, compared to 32.4% of those highly interested in politics. Similarly, non-political uses of social media are associated with higher political disconnection. This too resonates with our exploratory descriptive analyses, which show that among respondents registered on at least one platform, 49.8% use social media to share non-political information and 70.8% use it to interact with friends or family. These practices are less common among registered but inactive respondents. Indeed, only 28% of respondents who shared non-political information on social media in the last month are politically inactive, compared to 69.4% of those who did not share any information. Similarly, only 38.7% of respondents who liked, commented on, or shared friends' and family's posts or photos in the last month are politically inactive, compared to 73.2% of those who did not engage in such activities.

These findings indicate that digital skills and political interest are key factors in explaining political disconnection. Regarding efficacy, there is a negative relationship between sharing non-political information and political disconnection, as well as between offline political activities and political disconnection. This suggests that politically disconnected individuals do not view social media as an effective platform for sharing information beyond personal connections, and they do not perceive offline political participation as more effective than online participation. Only 15.7% of respondents who participated in an electoral meeting or engaged with activists in person are politically inactive, compared to 60.4% of respondents who were not politically active offline.

Table 4. Odds ratios of the logistic regression models. Dependent variable: being registered on platforms, but politically inactive on social media (weighted).

Variable		At least one social network	Facebook	Private social networks	Instagram	Snapchat	X	TikTok
Sex	Male	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Female	1.21	1.03	1.33	1.39	1.48	0.47	1.54
Age	18–24	0.28***	0.38**	0.41*	0.23***	0.51	0.66	0.33*
	25–34	0.61	0.80	0.75	0.43**	0.80	0.89	0.82
	35–44	1	0.65	0.87	0.71	0.70	1.28	0.99
	45–54	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	55–64	1.81*	2.00*	1.51	0.92	1.32	1.66	1.52
	65 or more	2.40***	2.24**	1.97*	2.29*	4.78**	4.09***	2.29
Level of education	Advanced higher education	1.05	1.34	0.99	1.26	1.23	1.38	1.01
	Higher education	1.03	1.51	1.04	1.31	0.75	1.24	1.56
	High school	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Less than high school	0.56**	0.56**	0.84	0.83	0.63	1.81	0.74
Political interest	Not at all	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	A little	0.30***	0.49**	0.43**	0.83	0.56	0.50	0.51
	Some	0.31***	0.52*	0.45*	0.70	0.55	0.32	0.57
	A lot	0.17***	0.28***	0.24***	0.62	0.65	0.28	0.49
Self- position on political scale	Far- left	0.26*	0.73	0.26*	0.46	0.39	0.27*	0.15*
	Left	0.72	0.74	0.78	0.64	0.61	0.76	0.63
	Center	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Right	1.03	0.96	0.88	0.90	0.96	0.57	0.68
	Far- right	0.44**	0.48*	0.53	0.60	0.48	0.61	0.30*
	No answer	0.96	1.10	0.81	1.46	0.70	0.93	0.58
Offline political activities	No	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Yes	0.22***	0.22***	0.28***	0.22***	0.15	0.39***	0.24***
Like, comment, or share posts of friends and family on this social media	No	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Yes	0.47***	0.61**	0.39***	0.41***	0.48	0.27***	0.36***
Share non- political information on this social media	No	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Yes	0.38***	0.35***	0.37***	0.51**	0.30	0.42***	0.32***
N of registered respondents (unweighted)		1,685	1,486	1,225	1,028	860	855	697
Akaike information criterion		1,735.22	1,598.25	845.29	1,230.68	1,031.23	796.18	693.76
Pseudo- χ^2		0.33	0.29	0.35	0.27	0.31	0.33	0.35

Notes: The reference category of the dependent variable used in the regressions is to be politically active on the social media considered; baseline categories for independent variables are marked as “ref” (i.e., reference category); both models are estimated on survey- weighted observations using the “survey” R package (Lumley, 2020) with pseudo- χ^2 statistics computed using the Nagelkerke method (Lumley, 2017); two- tailed χ^2 - values—*** $\chi^2 < 0.01$, ** $\chi^2 < 0.05$, * $\chi^2 < 0.1$; the “survey” R package fits weighted logistic regression models by maximizing the Horvitz- Thompson estimator of the population log- likelihood, which means that they do not have a pseudo log- likelihood (Lumley, 2020). Source: Briatte et al. (2024).

The results from our first model provide strong support for our initial three hypotheses. Specifically, individuals with lower digital skills are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes (H1). Additionally, those with less interest in politics are also more inclined to refrain from political engagement on social media (H2). Finally, individuals who perceive online political engagement as ineffective are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes (H3). The six additional models (see odds ratios in Table 4) enable us to examine patterns of political disconnection across different platforms. Across all platforms, we observe a consistent negative relationship between political disconnection and offline political activities, as well as between political disconnection and non-political uses of the platform. These findings further confirm that, for all platforms, low digital skills and low social media or political efficacy are key factors contributing to political disconnection.

However, the relationship between political interest and political disconnection shows some nuanced results. While the data reveal a negative association between political interest and disconnection, this relationship is not uniform across all platforms. Specifically, individuals highly interested in politics are less likely to be politically disconnected than those with no interest, but the strength and significance of this relationship vary depending on the platform. This variation can be linked to the level of politicization on different platforms. On one hand, generalist platforms like Facebook, which are widely used by the general population and heavily targeted by political parties, exhibit clearer distinctions between politically active and inactive users. On the other hand, more specialized, politically focused platforms such as X show a sharper divide between those interested in politics and those who are disengaged. For example, among respondents registered on X, only 41.2% of those highly interested in politics are politically inactive, compared to 78.2% of those not at all interested in politics. This trend holds across other platforms but is less pronounced and statistically insignificant on newer platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. On Snapchat, for instance, 87.7% of respondents not at all interested in politics are politically inactive, compared to 57.7% of those highly interested in politics.

These findings suggest that while political interest plays a significant role in explaining political disconnection on platforms that are either more generalist (like Facebook) or politically oriented (like X), it is less relevant on newer, less politicized platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, or TikTok, which attract younger users and are only recently becoming arenas for political engagement. Ultimately, our fourth and fifth hypotheses are only partially validated. Low digital skills and low social media/political efficacy emerge as significant factors in political disconnection across all platforms. However, the role of political interest is more platform-specific. While low political interest explains disconnection on politically focused and generalist platforms, it has less explanatory power on newer, less politicized platforms where political engagement is still in its early stages.

5. Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the non-political use of social media is not solely due to individuals' perceptions of the degradation of the online public sphere, which leads to fears of disagreement or social isolation (Zhu & Skoric, 2021, 2022). It showed that in addition to age, three factors structured political disconnection: digital skills, interest in politics (excepted for less politically oriented platforms), and social media/political efficacy. The phenomena of polarization and fragmentation in the online political sphere, and even the fear of disagreement, are not the sole factors deterring the political use

of social media. Online political participation remains a minority activity (Neihouser et al., 2022), not least because of the uneven digital skills across the population and highly variable levels of interest in politics.

While many studies focus on the variables that account for political participation in the age of social media, ours examines the conditions that explain non-use in the context of political disconnection. We also contribute to the existing literature by analysing the phenomenon of non-use holistically, addressing platform type, demographics, digital literacy, and political traits (e.g., interest and competence).

Moreover, we show that the perception of the futility of using social media for political ends is the primary reason for its non-use. While many studies highlight the risks of polarization in online public debates (Barberá, 2020; Yarchi et al., 2021), citizens often feel that expressing their political opinions online is useless. Rather than the spread of extremist ideas or the incivility of debates, it is the non-participation of individuals—who view such engagement as pointless—that disrupts democratic processes online.

Furthermore, our study shows that justifications for the non-political use of social media vary by platform, extending the literature on differences in digital architectures and platform affordances and their implications for user behaviour (Bossetta, 2018; Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022; Ruess et al., 2023). Our data explore the use and non-use for political purposes of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp. However, our multivariate analyses on the reasons for non-use focused on only six of these platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp. Our findings highlight distinct differences between Facebook, X, and TikTok. A lack of interest in politics is frequently cited to justify non-political use on Facebook, while a lack of social media knowledge is the predominant reason for non-political use on X and TikTok. These differences are influenced by the degree of politicization of the platforms and the profiles of their users. On less politicized platforms with larger user bases, such as Facebook, individuals are more likely to cite a lack of interest in politics as the reason for non-use for political purposes. Conversely, on more specialized and politicized platforms like X and Twitch, a lack of digital competence is most often cited. These preliminary results suggest the need for further investigation into the relationship between platform politicization, user profiles, and political engagement.

The main result highlighted in this article is that causes for not using social media for political purposes vary according to the profiles of the individuals concerned. The socio-demographic characteristics, digital skills, ideological positioning, and offline political engagement of individuals are very important for understanding political disconnection. Just as political uses of digital technology are socially differentiated (Neihouser et al., 2022), so are non-uses. Depending on their characteristics and skills, individuals avoid political expression on social media for various reasons. These may be digital-related—such as a lack of digital skills—or related to an individual's relationship with politics, such as a lack of interest and perceived futility of expressing oneself online. Notably, individuals who refrain from engaging with political content online due to a lack of social media competence often declare themselves politically active offline and express a high level of interest in politics. For these individuals, digital-related barriers outweigh their significant interest in politics, preventing them from engaging politically online. In contrast, those who are less interested in politics and use social media primarily to connect with friends and family more often cite political reasons for their lack of political engagement online. Thus, an individual's relationship with politics significantly influences their perception of social media's potential uses.

Exploring online political disconnection, especially by focusing on political non-use of social media, is crucial for better understanding digital disconnection in current digital democracies. Since political engagement increasingly takes place in online spaces, understanding why individuals choose to disengage politically online provides valuable insights into the broader phenomenon of digital disconnection. Political disconnection in digital contexts can reflect deeper issues, such as distrust in digital platforms, concerns about misinformation, or frustration with the quality of online political discourse. By studying online political disconnection, researchers can better grasp how digital environments shape not only political engagement but also broader societal behaviours, ultimately informing how democracies adapt to the challenges posed by the digital age. This exploration is essential for identifying strategies to foster more inclusive and effective digital participation.

However, this study is not without its limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on the French case. Testing our hypotheses in other political contexts would be valuable, as national environments significantly shape the adoption and perception of social media. For instance, X is far more popular in the United States than in France, and in some contexts, it is less frequently used by highly politicized individuals. Such contextual differences could impact the generalizability of our findings. Second, due to the design of our survey, there is an under-representation of politically disconnected individuals. To address this limitation, future research could benefit from incorporating qualitative interviews to more deeply explore the causes of political disconnection on social media. A mixed-methods approach would complement our quantitative results and offer richer insights into the underlying factors driving disengagement.

In conclusion, while this article presents important initial findings, it also highlights new avenues for research, particularly in terms of cross-national comparisons and more nuanced explorations of political disconnection through qualitative methods.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data associated with this article are available here: <https://data.sciencespo.fr/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.21410/7E4/6FMMTC>

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