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# Activism in the Social Media Age

*As the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag turns 5 years old, a look at its evolution on Twitter and how Americans view social media's impact on political and civic engagement*

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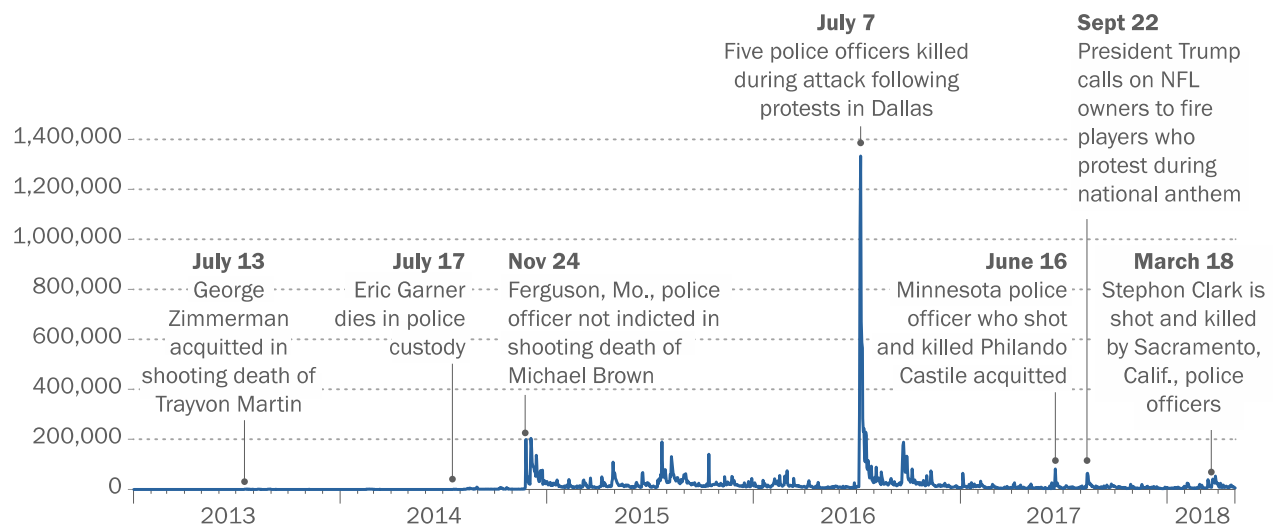
## Activism in the Social Media Age

*As the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag turns 5 years old, a look at its evolution on Twitter and how Americans view social media's impact on political and civic engagement.*

This month marks the fifth anniversary of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, which [was first coined](#) following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. In the course of those five years, #BlackLivesMatter has become an archetypal example of modern protests and political engagement on social media: A new Pew Research Center analysis of public tweets finds the hashtag has been used nearly 30 million times on Twitter – an average of 17,002 times per day – as of May 1, 2018.

### Use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter periodically spikes in response to major news events

Number of Twitter posts mentioning the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, Jan. 1, 2013-May 1, 2018



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of publicly available tweets using Crimson Hexagon.  
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The conversations surrounding this hashtag often center on issues related to race, violence and law enforcement, and its usage periodically surges surrounding real-world events – most prominently,

during the police-related deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile and the subsequent shooting of [police officers](#) in Dallas, Texas, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in July 2016.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag – along with others like #MeToo and #MAGA (Make America Great Again) – has [sparked a broader discussion](#) about the effectiveness and viability of using social media for political engagement and social activism. To that end, a new survey by the Center finds that majorities of Americans *do* believe these sites are very or somewhat important for accomplishing a range of political goals, such as getting politicians to pay attention to issues (69% of Americans feel these platforms are important for this purpose) or creating sustained movements for social change (67%).

Certain groups of social media users – most notably, those who are black or Hispanic – view these platforms as an especially important tool for their own political engagement. For example, roughly half of black social media users say these platforms are at least somewhat personally important to them as a venue for expressing their political views or for getting involved with issues that are important to them. Those shares fall to around a third among white social media users.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the public as a whole expresses mixed views about the potential broader impact these sites might be having on political discourse and the nature of political activism. Some 64% of Americans feel that the statement “social media help give a voice to underrepresented groups” describes these sites very or somewhat well. But a larger share say social networking sites distract people from issues that are truly important (77% feel this way), and 71% agree with the assertion that “social media makes people believe they’re making a difference when they really aren’t.” Blacks and whites alike offer somewhat mixed assessments of the benefits and costs of activism on social media. But larger majorities of black Americans say these sites promote important issues or give voice to underrepresented groups, while smaller shares of blacks feel that political engagement on social media produces significant downsides in the form of a distracted public or “slacktivism.”

These are some of the key findings of Pew Research Center’s analysis of publicly available tweets using Crimson Hexagon and data acquired through Gnip, as well as an accompanying survey of 4,594 U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag focuses on the use of the hashtag on Twitter and does not examine the broader movement of the same name. For more information on the emergence and distinction of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and the Black Lives Matter organization, read The Center for Media and Social Impact’s 2016 report “[Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice.](#)”

<sup>2</sup> A 2018 Pew Research Center [phone survey](#) shows that overall use of social media is mostly similar among whites, blacks and Hispanics. There are, at times, demographic differences by specific platform.

## 1. Public attitudes toward political engagement on social media

Social media use has [grown rapidly](#) over the last decade. Today, Americans use a range of [social media](#) sites and are [increasingly turning](#) to these platforms to get news and information. Social networking sites have also emerged as a key venue for political [debate and discussion](#) and at times a place to engage in civic-related activities.

One of the most prominent recent examples is the role social media has played in the emergence of the ["Me Too" movement](#) aimed at raising awareness around sexual harassment and assault. And [July 2018 marks](#) the fifth anniversary of the use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, one of the most sustained efforts during this time to bring attention to a cause using social media platforms. In light of these and other debates about the impact of social media, the Center fielded a survey to assess the current state of Americans' experiences with and views related to political engagement on social media.

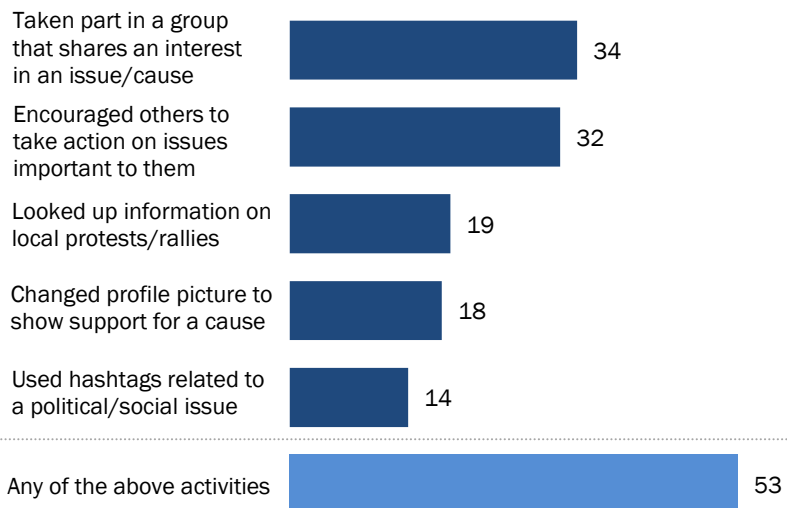
### Around half of Americans have engaged in some form of political or social-minded activity on social media in the past year

There are a number of ways Americans can be politically active on social media. This survey asked about five specific actions people may take on these sites and finds that some activities are more common than others.

In the past year, 34% of Americans have taken part in a group on social media that shares an interest in an issue or cause, while a similar share (32%) says they have encouraged others to take action on an issue that is important to them. Smaller shares have used these

#### Roughly half of Americans have been civically active on social media in the past year

*% of U.S. adults who say they have done the following activities on social media in the past year*



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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platforms recently to find information about rallies or protests happening in their area, change their profile picture to show their support for a cause, or use hashtags related to a political or social issue. Taken together, 53% of U.S. adults have engaged in at least one of these activities on social media in the last year.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to report participating in many of these activities recently on social media. Most notably, Democrats are more than twice as likely as Republicans (by a 24% to 9% margin) to say they have used social media in the past year to look up information about rallies or protests happening in their area. However, notable shares of Americans belonging to each party have done some sort of politically related activity on social media recently: 59% of Democrats have performed at least one of these five activities the Center measured, as have 45% of Republicans.

Engagement in these activities also varies by age: Americans ages 18 to 49 are more likely than those ages 50 and up to have recently changed their profile picture to show support for a cause (23% vs. 13%), looked for information on social media about rallies or protests in their area (24% vs. 13%), or used hashtags related to a political or social issue (20% vs. 8%). There are, however, more modest and less consistent differences in performing these actions by race and ethnicity or by gender. (For details on political and demographic differences, see [Appendix A](#).)

## Roughly half of black social media users say these platforms are personally important to them when it comes to expressing their political views or getting involved with issues they feel are important

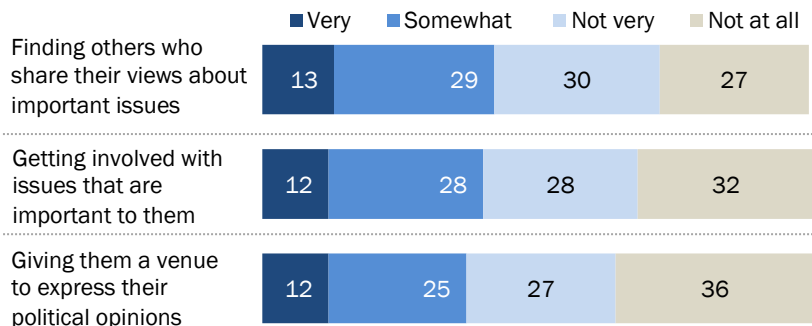
When asked how important social media is to them personally as a venue for political and civic engagement, only a minority of social media users describe these sites as personally important. But blacks and Hispanics are especially likely to value these sites for helping them vocalize their opinions or get involved with issues that are important to them.

Roughly four-in-ten social media users say these platforms are personally *very*

or *somewhat* important to them for finding others who share their views about important issues (42%), getting involved with political or social issues that are important to them (39%), or providing a venue to express their political opinions (37%). However, in each case only around one-in-ten describe social media as *very* important to them for achieving these purposes.

### Roughly four-in-ten social media users say these sites are important for finding like-minded users

*% of U.S. social media users who say social media are \_\_\_ important to them personally when it comes to ...*



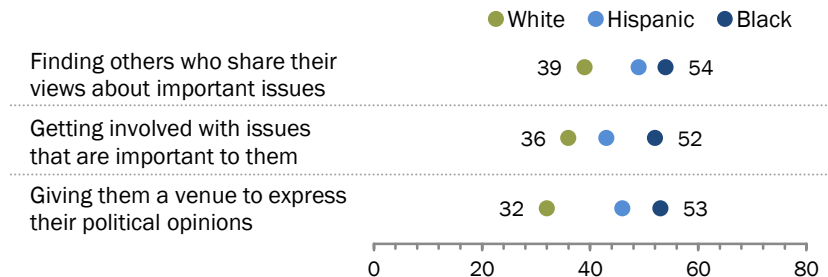
Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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But these attitudes tend to vary widely by racial or ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> For instance, black social media users are more likely than whites to say these sites are very or somewhat important to them for finding others who share their views about important issues (54% vs. 39%), for getting involved with issues that are important to them (52% vs. 36%), or for giving them a venue to express their political opinions (53% vs. 32%).<sup>4</sup>

### Blacks and Hispanic social media users more likely to say these sites are personally important for getting involved with issues, expressing their political views

*% of U.S. social media users who say these sites are **very** or **somewhat** important to them personally when it comes to ...*



Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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Beyond differences by race or ethnicity, Democrats who use social media are somewhat more likely than Republicans to say that social media are important for allowing them to find others who share their views (50% vs. 39%), getting involved with issues that are important to them (49% vs. 34%), and giving them a space to share their political views (43% vs. 33%). (For details on political differences, see [Appendix A](#).)

<sup>3</sup> There were not enough Asian respondents in this sample to be broken out into a separate analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Other survey research has shown that blacks and Hispanics are more likely to engage with and learn about social issues via social media. See Georgetown University's 2011 report "[Social Media Plays Greater Role in Cause Engagement for African Americans and Hispanics.](#)"



## A majority of Americans think social media are important for getting elected officials to pay attention to issues or for initiating sustained social movements

As noted above, assessments of the importance of these platforms for one's own personal political engagement tend to vary by race and ethnicity. But the public as a whole has positive impressions of the ability of social media to help enact sustainable political change.

The survey asked all respondents – not just social media users – about their views of the broader importance of using social media as a tool for political and social activism.

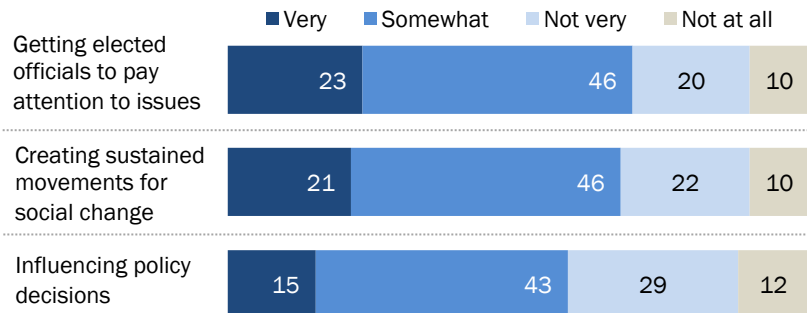
Fully 69% of U.S. adults say social media is very or somewhat important for getting elected officials to pay attention to issues, while a similar share (67%) say these sites are at least somewhat important for creating sustained movements for social change. A somewhat smaller share of Americans (58%) agree that social media is at least somewhat important for influencing policy decisions.

Majorities of whites, blacks and Hispanics all believe social media play a very or somewhat important role in getting elected officials to pay attention to issues, creating sustained movements for social change, or influencing policy decisions. But there are some differences in the intensity of their views. Most notably, 36% of blacks and 27% Hispanics say social media are *very* important for getting elected officials to pay attention to issues, compared with 19% of whites. Blacks and Hispanics are also more likely than whites to describe social media as very important for influencing policy decisions and creating sustained movements for social change. (For details on political and demographic differences, see [Appendix A.](#))

There are generally modest differences related to political affiliation when it comes to the role of social media in getting elected officials to pay attention to issues or influencing policy decisions.

### A majority of Americans say social media are important for getting politicians to pay attention to issues, creating long-lasting social movements

% of U.S. adults who say social media are \_\_\_important for ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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However, a substantially larger share of Democrats (80%) than Republicans (53%) say these platforms are important for creating sustained movements for social change.

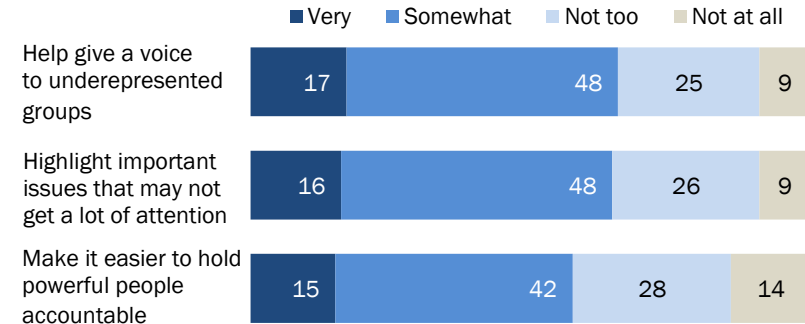
**About two-thirds of Americans think social media help give a voice to underrepresented groups, but a larger share thinks they distract people from more important issues**

Americans describe a mix of both positive and negative effects when asked about some of the broader impacts of using social media for political and civic engagement. On the more positive side, 65% of U.S. adults feel that the statement “social media highlight important issues that might not get a lot of attention otherwise” describes these platforms very or somewhat well. A similar share feels these platforms help give a voice to underrepresented groups, while 56% believe the statement “social media make it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions” describes these sites well. At the same time, relatively modest shares of Americans (in each case, fewer than one-in-five) believe these positive statements describe social media “very well.”

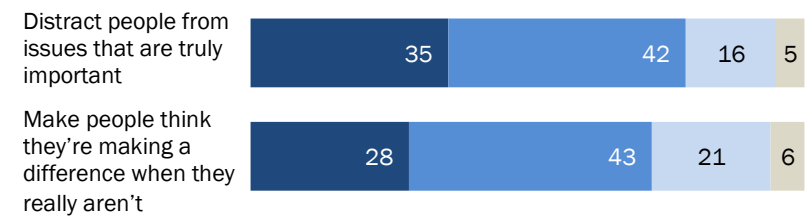
**A majority of Americans think social media help give a voice to underrepresented groups, but a larger share says they distract from more important issues**

*% of U.S. adults who say the following statements describe social media \_\_\_ well*

**POSSIBLE POSITIVE IMPACTS**



**POSSIBLE NEGATIVE IMPACTS**



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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But even as Americans acknowledge the helpful nature of social media, there is also a widely held belief that these platforms distract Americans from more pressing issues. Roughly three-quarters of U.S. adults (77%) say the statement “social media distract people from issues that are truly important” describes these platforms well, with 35% saying it describes them very well. And 71%

believe that social media make people think they are making a difference when they really aren't, with 28% saying this describes social media very well.

Blacks are especially likely to think social media magnify issues that are not usually discussed in other venues. Fully 80% of blacks say the statement “social media highlight important issues that might not get a lot of attention otherwise” describes these sites well, including 31% who say this describes these sites very well – smaller shares of whites and Hispanics say the same. A similar pattern is true when asked whether social media help give a voice to underrepresented groups: Blacks are again more likely than whites or Hispanics to say this is an apt description of these platforms.

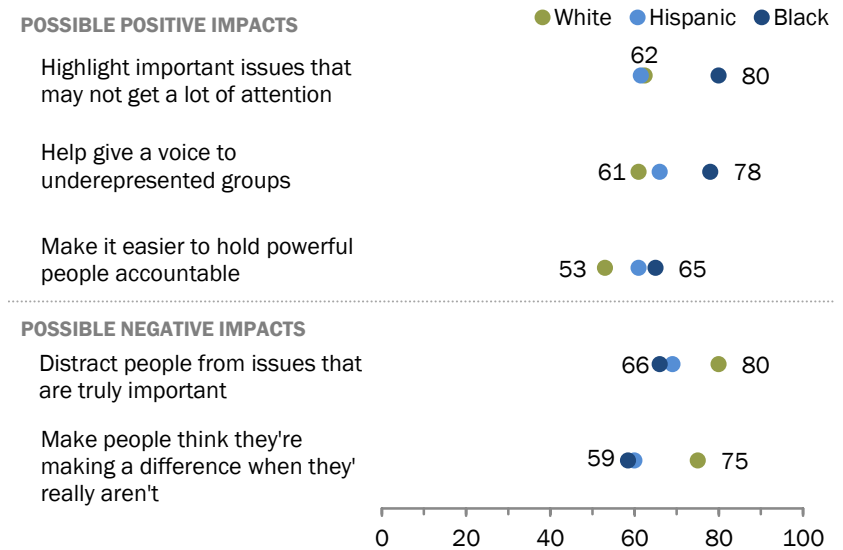
There are also racial and ethnic differences around the idea

that social media make it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions – with blacks and Hispanics being more likely to agree with this compared to whites. Whites, on the other hand, are more likely than either blacks or Hispanics to assert that social media distracts people from issues that are truly important or that these sites make people believe they are making a difference when they really are not. Still roughly half or more of each racial or ethnic group offer up both positive and negative critiques on social media’s impact and influence on these activities.

Along with these differences by race and ethnicity, larger shares of Democrats say that social media give a voice to underrepresented groups, highlight important issues that may not get a lot of attention, and make it easier to hold people in power accountable for their actions compared with either Republicans or political independents. But there are fewer partisan differences when

**Eight-in-ten blacks say social media help shed light on rarely discussed issues; the same share of whites say these sites distract from more important issues**

*% of U.S. adults who say the following statements describe social media very or somewhat well*



Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics; Hispanics are of any race. Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 29-June 11, 2018. “Activism in the Social Media Age”

assessing the potentially negative impacts of online activism. (For details on political differences, see [Appendix A.](#))

## 2. An analysis of #BlackLivesMatter and other Twitter hashtags related to political or social issues

Along with conducting a survey of public attitudes toward political engagement and activism on social media, the Center also performed a separate analysis of several Twitter hashtags. First, it examined the volume of tweets using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and other hashtags related to issues, causes or news events to see how usages differ over time and across issue areas. Second, it conducted a content analysis of the topics that are most often mentioned in conversations around the #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter hashtags during major news events.

### **The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has been a relatively consistent presence on Twitter for the last five years, with periodic increases in usage around key events**

The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag first appeared on Twitter five years ago in July 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. From July 2013 through May 1, 2018, the hashtag has been used nearly 30 million times on Twitter, an average of 17,002 times per day, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of public tweets using Crimson Hexagon software. Although the hashtag was slow to gain prominence, there have been periodic increases in its daily usage in response to real-world events – most notably news and discussion about fatal encounters between law enforcement and black Americans.

One of the most notable of these spikes occurred over a period of roughly 10 days in the summer of 2016. On July 5 of that year, Alton Sterling was fatally shot by police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The following day, Philando Castile was shot and killed by a police officer in the suburbs of Saint Paul, Minnesota. On July 7, a gunman killed five police officers and wounded several others in Dallas, Texas, and on July 17 another shooter attacked law enforcement in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, killing three officers and wounding three others.

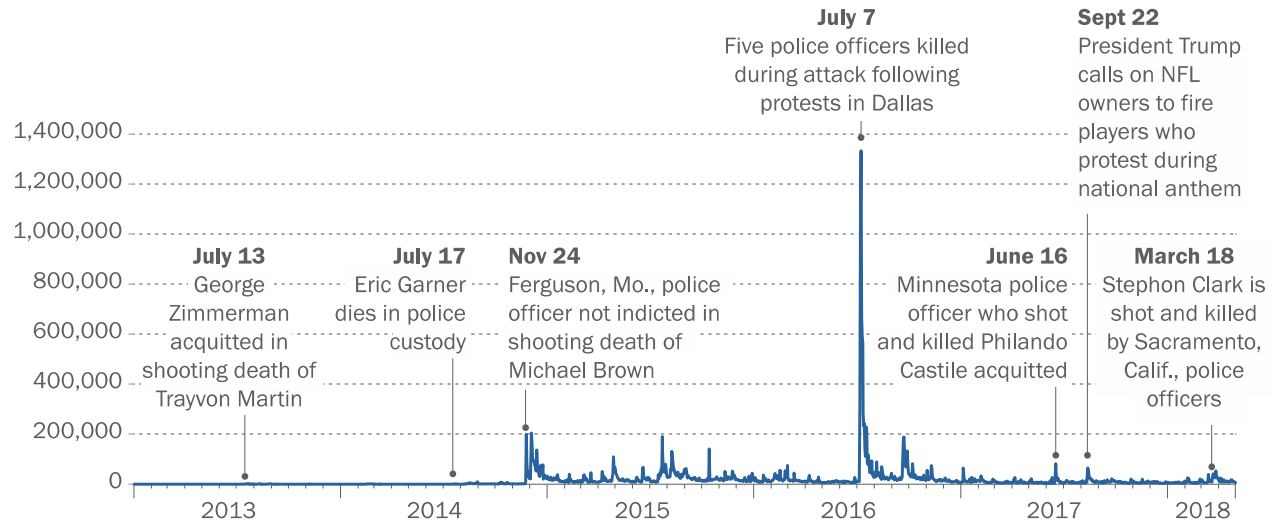
Over the 10 days spanning July 7-17, 2016, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was mentioned an average of nearly 500,000 tweets daily. Indeed, as of May 1, 2018, the top-10 individual days with the largest number of mentions of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag all occurred during this 10-day window in 2016. The #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter hashtags also saw a substantial increase in usage during this time. These 10 days accounted for eight of the 10 most-used days for the #AllLivesMatter hashtag, and six of the 10 most-used days for #BlueLivesMatter.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The number of tweets estimated in this analysis may differ slightly from the Center's 2016 analysis of these hashtags due to differences in how non-English tweets were removed from each sample. Please read the <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/07/11/social-media-activism-methodology/> section for full details on how the 2018 Twitter analysis was conducted.

## Use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter periodically spikes in response to major news events

Number of Twitter posts mentioning the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, Jan. 1, 2013-May 1, 2018



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of publically available tweets using Crimson Hexagon. "Activism in the Social Media Age"

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Following these events, each of these hashtags has been used at rates largely in line with their historical averages. From July 18, 2016 through May 1, 2018, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has been used an average of 15,856 times daily. The #BlueLivesMatter hashtag has been used an average of 3,998 times daily, while #AllLivesMatter has been used an average of 1,844 times daily.

### Beyond #BlackLivesMatter: Differences in the evolution of select hashtags tied to political causes or social issues

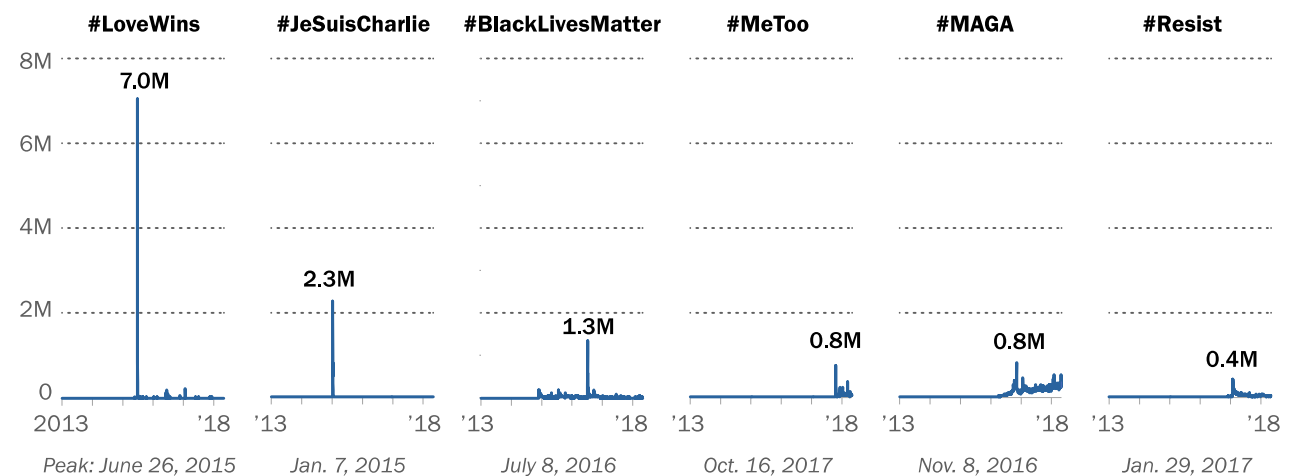
The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag is an archetypal example of a hashtag tied to a political issue or cause, and as noted above it has maintained a relatively high baseline level of usage on Twitter over a period of several years. But there are many other hashtags related to various causes, events or political issues, and these hashtags evolve in a variety of ways. As a case study of the ways in which these sorts of hashtags are used on Twitter today, the Center examined five different hashtags (#MAGA, #MeToo, #Resist, #JeSuisCharlie and #LoveWins) to see how their frequency of usage has changed over the years.

The [#MAGA hashtag](#) grew increasingly prevalent on Twitter beginning in early 2016, peaking in the days immediately following the 2016 U.S. election in November. From Election Day 2016 through May 1, 2018, the #MAGA hashtag has been used an average of 205,238 times per day. Meanwhile, the #Resist hashtag began to appear as a consistent presence on Twitter shortly following the 2016 election and attained widespread usage immediately following President Donald Trump’s inauguration in January 2017. From inauguration day through May 1, 2018, the #Resist hashtag has been used an average of 59,716 times daily on Twitter.

Although the [“Me Too” movement](#) was founded in 2006, the [#MeToo hashtag](#) rose to prominence in 2017 and has continued to be used with some frequency following the revelations of alleged sexual harassment and assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. It was used hundreds of thousands of times on Oct. 16, 2017, as users took to the platform to share their own personal stories of harassment and abuse. From that day through May 1, 2018, #MeToo has appeared an average of 61,911 times per day on Twitter.

## A comparison of Twitter hashtags organized around political causes, social issues, or events

Number of Twitter posts mentioning the following hashtags, Jan. 1, 2013–May 1, 2018



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of publicly available tweets using Crimson Hexagon.  
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In other instances, hashtags related to an event or cause emerge almost instantaneously, quickly attain immense levels of popularity, and then fade (to varying levels and at varying speeds) from

public prominence. One example of this phenomenon is the #JeSuisCharlie [hashtag commemorating](#) the Jan. 7, 2015, Charlie Hebdo shooting in France. Despite being essentially non-existent prior to the shooting, #JeSuisCharlie was used roughly 2 million times on Jan. 7 and 8, 2015. But today its presence is relatively minimal outside of anniversaries of the shooting: from Jan. 1, 2016, through May 1, 2018, it has been used on average just 291 times per day.

The #LoveWins hashtag commemorating the [U.S. Supreme Court's](#) June 26, 2015, decision on same-sex marriage is another example of this phenomenon. #LoveWins appeared on Twitter more than 7 million times on the day of the Supreme Court ruling – a figure that dwarfs the largest single-day volume for long-standing hashtags such as #MAGA or #BlackLivesMatter – and again more than 3 million times on the day following the ruling. But those two days alone account for 63% of all the instances in which the hashtag has appeared on Twitter in the nearly three years from the day of the Supreme Court ruling to May 1, 2018.

### **A case study of topics mentioned in Twitter discussions involving the #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter hashtags**

In addition to examining the volume of tweets using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag over the last five years, the Center also conducted a separate analysis to understand how often certain topics are mentioned in connection with key hashtags in the broader Twitter conversation around race, policing and fatal encounters involving blacks and law enforcement. To perform this analysis, the Center first queried Twitter's Gnip API for a 20% sample of tweets mentioning four hashtags related to these topics (the specific hashtags include #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #BLM) during five specific high-volume points in time between 2014 and 2018 that coincided with major increases in the use of these hashtags.

These time periods explore five major news events, including when the Ferguson, Missouri, police officer involved in the shooting death of Michael Brown was not indicted; the police-related shootings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and the killing of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, Louisiana; the acquittal of a police officer in the shooting death of Philando Castile; President Trump speaking out about the NFL national anthem protests; and Stephon Clark being fatally shot by Sacramento police officers.

After discarding tweets that were indecipherable or in a language other than English, this data collection produced a corpus of 1,312,385 tweets mentioning one or more of these hashtags during these five time periods. The Center then used a two-step process for identifying whether individual tweets mentioned a particular topic. In the first step, researchers manually examined a small



subset of tweets to identify some of the key topics mentioned in these discussions. The identified topics related to these hashtags include:

- **Fatal police-related encounters** – These tweets mention specific names of people who have had fatal encounters with law enforcement.
- **Violent acts in general** – These tweets mention specific acts of violence, regardless of whether those occurred in the context of law enforcement.
- **Police and law enforcement** – These tweets mention police, law enforcement actions, counter-protest measures, and general references to law enforcement. Mentions of shootings or other actions are not included unless they explicitly mention law enforcement or police.
- **National politicians and political parties** – These tweets mention specific politicians, elected officials, or political parties. Mentions of local politicians or elected officials are not included.
- **Race** – These tweets explicitly mention race, a particular racial or ethnic group, or racial discrimination. This category does not include references to culture, religion or immigration unless a specific race or ethnicity is mentioned.
- **Protests** – These tweets mention activist events, specific protests or the general act of protesting.

Next, researchers identified a representative set of words and phrases that could accurately identify tweets mentioning each topic and tabulated all of the tweets in the broader data set containing the keywords that are representative of each topic. This allowed the Center to calculate the share of tweets at each individual time period (as well as over these five time periods collectively) mentioning each of these broad topical areas. Please see the [methodology](#) section of this report for full details of this process.

It is important to note that these topics are not mutually exclusive, and that tweets can be classified into multiple categories depending on the words used in that tweet. It is also important to note that, as with any coding process, this is not the only set of codes or topics that could be developed and applied to this data set. The goal of this particular project was designed to quantify how often a broad set of topics was being mentioned in a large collection of tweets in a way that could be replicated at scale.

## Large shares of tweets mentioning #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter at key points in time explicitly mention race, law enforcement and/or violent acts

Among tweets using the #BlackLivesMatter, #BLM, #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter hashtags during the following time periods, the % that mention the following topics

Share of tweets from each time period mentioning ...

Time period (with corresponding major events)	Fatal police encounters	Violent acts	Police, law enforcement	National politicians/parties	Race	Protests
Nov. 24-Dec. 4, 2014 (Ferguson, Mo., police officer not indicted in shooting death of Michael Brown)	35%	13%	9%	1%	25%	10%
July 7-17, 2016 (Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Dallas, Texas, and Baton Rouge, La., shootings)	8	18	22	8	27	11
June 17-27, 2017 (Acquittal of police officer in shooting death of Philando Castile)	22	20	23	6	26	4
Sept. 22-Oct. 2, 2017 (President Trump addresses NFL protests, Black Lives Matter rallies)	2	20	23	18	24	31
March 19-29, 2018 (Stephon Clark is shot and killed by Sacramento, Calif., police officers)	20	25	20	10	15	14
<b>Aggregate average</b>	11%	18%	21%	8%	25%	12%

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of a 20% sample of tweets (obtained using software from Gnip) containing the listed hashtags from each time period. Each topic was identified using a representative set of keywords. Tweets were assigned to topics based on their usage of those keywords. Categories are not mutually exclusive; individual tweets could be assigned to one or more categories. Aggregate average is the share of tweets across all five time periods mentioning each topic. Time period studied relates to spikes in volume and do not necessarily always correspond with the exact day of when the news event occurred.

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Some of the findings of this analysis are as follows:

*Explicit mentions of race and references to law enforcement are the most common topics in this collection of tweets*

Of the topics identified in this analysis, three are especially common. One-quarter of the tweets in this data collection explicitly mention race, while 21% mention police or law enforcement. These two topics are closely followed by general mentions of violent acts (whether or not those pertain to law enforcement), which are mentioned in 18% of these tweets. In addition to being the most common topics overall, these three topics are also mentioned at relatively consistent levels across all five of the specific time periods evaluated in the study.

Discussions of protests (mentioned in 12% of tweets), fatal encounters with police (11%), and national politicians or political parties (8%) are somewhat less common overall.

*Tweets that mention protests and fatal encounters with police are quite common at certain points in time but less common at others*

Discussions related to protests and to specific fatal encounters with police exhibited a great deal of variation in their usage across these five different points in time. Discussions of fatal police encounters were mentioned in 35% of tweets following the announcement that police officer Darren Wilson would not face trial for the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. But this topic was mentioned in just 2% of the tweets surrounding the NFL anthem protests and Black Lives Matter marches that occurred in the fall of 2017. By the same token, discussion of protests accounted for 31% of the discussion during this latter time period.

*Mentions of national politicians and political parties are relatively rare, but do make up a large share of the discussion during the fall 2017 time period*

For the most part, the tweets in this data collection do not often make explicit references to national politicians or political parties. This topic makes up just 8% of tweets in the overall sample collected for this study. However, there is one major exception: These discussions accounted for 18% of all tweets from Sept. 22-Oct. 2, 2017.

## Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at [pewresearch.org/internet](http://pewresearch.org/internet).

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## Methodology

### Survey methods

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by GfK.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted May 29-June 11, 2018, among 4,594 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 4,594 respondents is plus or minus 2.4 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from several large, national landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23-March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate.<sup>6</sup> The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27-Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.<sup>7</sup> The third group of panelists was recruited from a survey conducted April 25-June 4, 2017. Of the 5,012 adults interviewed in the survey or pretest, 3,905 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 1,628 agreed to participate.<sup>8</sup>

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on a number of dimensions. Gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin

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<sup>6</sup> When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

<sup>7</sup> Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they were internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

<sup>8</sup> White, non-Hispanic college graduates were subsampled at a rate of 50%.

and region parameters come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey. The county-level population density parameter (deciles) comes from the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census. The telephone service benchmark comes from the July-December 2016 National Health Interview Survey and is projected to 2017. The volunteerism benchmark comes from the 2015 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. The party affiliation benchmark is the average of the three most-recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. The internet access benchmark comes from the 2017 ATP Panel Refresh Survey. Respondents who did not previously have internet access are treated as not having internet access for weighting purposes. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Plus or minus ...</b>
Total sample	4,594	2.4 percentage points
Social media users	4,316	2.5 percentage points
Ages 18-49	1,812	3.8 percentage points
50+	2,777	3.1 percentage points
White, non-Hispanic	3,417	2.8 percentage points
Black, non-Hispanic	402	8.1 percentage points
Hispanic	414	8.0 percentage points
Republican	1,209	4.7 percentage points
Democrat	1,707	3.9 percentage points
Independent	1,248	4.6 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The May 2018 wave had a response rate of 84% (4,594 responses among 5,486 individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys

(10.1%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the wave is 2.4%.<sup>9</sup>

## Twitter analysis

This report contains two different analyses of Twitter hashtags: an analysis of the volume of tweets over time mentioning certain hashtags and a content analysis of the major topics mentioned in tweets using a specific subset of hashtags. Each is discussed in greater detail below.

### Hashtag usage analysis

To examine the frequency with which certain hashtags are used on Twitter, researchers used Crimson Hexagon, a Twitter analysis service, to count the total number of tweets per day mentioning each of the following hashtags for the time period starting Jan. 1, 2013 and ending May 1, 2018:

- #BlackLivesMatter
- #BlueLivesMatter
- #AllLivesMatter
- #MAGA
- #MeToo
- #Resist
- #JeSuisCharlie
- #LoveWins

### Content analysis of tweets referencing #BlackLivesMatter and related hashtags

In addition to analyzing the frequency with which certain hashtags are used on Twitter, the Center also conducted a content analysis of tweets referencing the #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, and #BLM hashtags. The usage of each of these hashtags tends to spike around major news events. Accordingly, researchers selected tweets from five different time periods close to major news events in order to better understand the nature of the conversation occurring around those hashtags during these high-volume periods. The five time periods chosen were as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.

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## Date ranges evaluated in Twitter content analysis of #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter and #BLM hashtags

Date range	Corresponding events	Total number of English-language tweets
Nov. 24-Dec. 4, 2014	Grand jury in St. Louis County declines to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the killing of Michael Brown (Nov. 24)	79,332
July 7-17, 2016	Alton Sterling fatally shot by police officers in Baton Rouge, La. (July 5); Philando Castile shot and killed by a police officer in the suburbs of Saint Paul, Minn. (July 6); gunman kills five and injures nine police officers in Dallas (July 7); shooter attacks law enforcement in Baton Rouge, La., killing three and wounding three (July 17)	970,960
June 17-27, 2017	Jury acquits police officer Jeronimo Yanez of all charges in the shooting death of Philando Castile (June 16)	70,928
Sept. 22-Oct. 2, 2017	President Donald Trump brings up issue of NFL protests against police violence at rally in Alabama (Sept. 22). Black Lives Matter marches occur in various cities (Sept. 26).	83,141
March 19-29, 2018	Stephon Clark shot and killed by two police officers in Sacramento, CA (March 18)	108,024

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of a 20% sample of tweets (obtained using software from Gnip) containing the listed hashtags from each time period.

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Researchers collected a 20% sample of all publicly available, English-language tweets during the time periods listed above that contained the following hashtags: "#BlackLivesMatter," "#BlueLivesMatter," "#AllLivesMatter," and "#BLM." The tweets were collected using Twitter's Gnip API (application program interface). In total, this initial selection process resulted in 1,498,352 total tweets mentioning one or more of these hashtags.

### *Human coding of a subset of tweets*

From this 20% sample of tweets, researchers selected a random representative sample of 250 tweets using the simple random sample function in Python. Each of these 250 tweets was hand-coded by Pew Research Center staff into the following categories (outlined in the table below) based on the content of the tweet. With the exception of the "non-English" item, these categories are non-exclusive: any individual tweet could be categorized into any number of these categories.



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## Categories and rules for classification for initial training sample

Category label	Brief description	Other notes
Fatal police-related encounters	Tweet mentions specific victims of police violence (e.g. Philando Castile, Alton Sterling).	Also includes key hashtags related to black Americans who have had fatal encounters with the police.
Violence	Tweet mentions specific acts of violence, such as shootings, murders, killings, assaults, terrorism, shooters, snipers, guns, etc.	Names of specific people are not included, unless accompanied by a more general reference to violence. Generic mentions of crime are not included.
Police	Tweet mentions police; law enforcement actions such as arrests; counter-protest measures such as tear gas; and general references to law enforcement (including the FBI).	Mentions of shootings or other general acts are not included unless specifically linked to police or law enforcement.
Protests	Tweet mentions activist events, specific protests, or the general act of protesting.	Does not include references to online activism or boycotts. Does include mentions of NFL protests.
Race	Tweet mentions race. Does not include references to culture, religion or immigration unless a specific race or ethnicity is also mentioned (e.g. Hispanic, Asian, black, etc.).	Mentions of Black Lives Matter or BLM are not included. Does include #AllLivesMatter and the KKK.
National politicians and political parties	Tweet mentions specific politicians, former or current elected officials, or political parties.	Does not include references to pundits or activists. Mentions of local politicians or elected officials are not included.
Non-English	Tweet is in a language other than English.	Must have non-English language; tweets containing only a link are classified as English.

Note: Categories and descriptions developed by Pew Research Center coders.  
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To test the validity of the coding scheme, two coders were given a sample of 250 tweets to code according to these rules. The rate of agreement between coders was consistently near or above 80% and the Cohen’s Kappa scores were consistently above 0.8.<sup>10</sup>

Once this initial sample of 250 tweets was grouped into categories, researchers identified the keywords that best differentiated these categories from each other. An automated search for tweets containing this list of keywords for each category was tested against the reliability of the coders. The rate of agreement between the keyword search and the coders was consistently around 80%-92%.

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### Inter-coder reliability scores (Cohen’s Kappa)

Category	Agreement between coders	Agreement between keyword search and coders
Non-English	0.822335	0.822335
Police	0.916770	0.891504
National politicians and political parties	0.916611	0.916611
Protests	0.906647	0.839228
Race	0.836487	0.808057
Fatal police-related encounters	0.804962	0.792531
Violence	0.847575	0.808380

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on testing intercoder reliability, please read Mary L. McHugh’s “[Interrater reliability: the kappa statistic.](#)”

These are the keywords associated with each of these categories at the conclusion of this process:

Category label	Keywords used to identify tweets mentioning each category
Fatal police-related encounters	"altonsterling"; "cameron sterling"; "alton"; "philandocastile"; "philando"; "castile"; "sterling"; "sandrabland"; "sayhername"; "fallen angel"; "fallen angels"; "fallen"; "stephon"; "clark"; "leshiaevans"; "leshia"; "evans"; "detective suiter"; "suiter"; "stopkillingus"; "stephonclark"; "rip"; "no justice no peace"; "no justice. no peace."; "nojusticenopeace"; "saytheirnames"; "sayhername"; "sayhisname"; "say their names"; "tamir"; "tamirrice"; "freddiegray"; "freddie gray"; "eric ganer"; "ericgarner"; "ripmikebrown"; "justiceformikebrown"; "mikebrown"; "ferguson"; "charleena"; "lyles"; "charleenalyles"; "sandra bland"; "tanishaanderson"; "tanisha anderson"; "charlespettitjr"; "charles pettit"; "ericgarner"
Violence	"killed"; "killer"; "kill"; "killing"; "violence"; "threaten"; "murder"; "death"; "fatally"; "gun"; "shooter"; "shoot"; "shooting"; "guns"; "rifle"; "bullet"; "weapon"; "shot"; "choke"; "fatal"; "tragic"; "dallaspoliceshootings"; "survivors"; "murder"; "murdered"; "rip"; "fight"; "attack"; "attacked"; "hurt"; "dead"; "shot"; "shoot"; "shooter"; "chokeholdterrorism"; "dallaspoliceshooting"; "gunman"; "sniper"; "snipers"; "strangle"; "slaughter"; "strangled"; "murders"; "gunned"; "shootings"; "beaten"; "brutality"; "violent"; "deaths"; "terrorist"; "terrorists"; "militant"; "armed"
Police	"sheriffclark"; "cops"; "police"; "cop"; "bluelivesmatter"; "officer"; "sheriff"; "blue"; "bond"; "officers"; "dallaspoliceshootings"; "detective"; "badge"; "arrest"; "arresting"; "chiefs"; "pd"; "arrested"; "dallaspd"; "backtheblue"; "tear gas"; "bluekluxklan"; "pd"; "policing"; "chief"; "dallaspolice"; "policemen"; "bluelivesmtr"; "bluelivesmattertoo"; "criminal"; "agent"; "detective"
Protests	"sit in"; "protest"; "protesters"; "sitin"; "protesting"; "nfl"; "taking stand"; "take stand"; "demonstrators"; "demonstrator"; "parade"; "lock off"; "weouther"; "nfl"; "protestors"; "protestor"; "activist"; "atlantaprotest"; "handsupdontshoot"; "rally"; "kneel"; "knee"; "takeaknee"; "kneeling"; "kaepernick"; "march"; "marchers"; "marchforourlives"; "occupying"; "#marchforourlives"; "gather"; "protests"; "#blacklivesmatterprotest"
Race	"slaves"; "blacks"; "black"; "blk"; "illegals"; "slavery"; "skin"; "color"; "skinhead"; "race"; "racial"; "whiteprivilegemeans"; "blax"; "white"; "african american"; "supremacist"; "supremacy"; "racism"; "racist"; "nazi"; "whiteprivilege"; "blacklivesdomatter"; "blackvoices"; "asians"; "latinos"; "asian"; "latinx"; "latino"; "kkk"; "blackandproud"; "runningwhileblack"; "amerikka"; "whites"; "amerikkka"; "alllivesmatter"; "all lives matter"; "hategroup"; "hate"; "alllifematters"
National politicians and political parties	"trump"; "trumps"; "realdonaldtrump"; "giuliani"; "repubs"; "repub"; "republican"; "republicans"; "dems"; "dem"; "democrat"; "democrats"; "hillary"; "clinton"; "obama"; "obamas"; "trump Putin"; "clintonfoundation"; "potus"; "hrc"; "neverhillary"; "hillaryclinton"; "president"; "presidential"; "politician"; "politicians"; "congress"; "congressional"; "caucus"; "gov"; "govenor"; "rnc"; "dnc"; "obamafail"; "white house"; "barackobama"; "congressional"; "sarahpalinusa"; "maga"; "sarah palin"; "mccain"; "biden"; "bernieanders"; "bernie"; "sanderson"; "feelthebern"; "bernieorbust"; "veteran4trump"; "dems"; "reps"; "liberals"; "gopwomen"; "soros"; "scalise"; "governor"; "mike_pence"; "mayor"; "governor"; "leftist"; "rightwing"; "right wing"; "elected"; "election"; "georgesoros"; "whitehouse"; "political"; "conservative"; "conservatives"; "socialist"; "socialism"

### Topic modeling analysis using category keywords

For the final step in this process, researchers calculated the prevalence of each topic across the entirety of the 20% sample of tweets.

First, tweets that were not in English were removed using a python package called ["langdetect"](#) that references the Google language detection library. Tweets were considered non-English if the algorithm determined there was 0% chance the tweet was in English. Removal of these non-English tweets produced a final total of 1,312,385 tweets to be analyzed by keyword.

Once these non-English tweets were removed, researchers used an automated process to search each of the remaining tweets for the keywords listed above and to classify them into the appropriate categories.

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## Appendix A: Detailed tables

### Political engagement on social media, by demographic groups

*% of U.S. adults who say they have done the following activities on social media in the past year ...*

	<b>Taken part in a group that shares an interest in an issue or cause</b>	<b>Encouraged others to take action on issues that are important to you</b>	<b>Looked for information about rallies or protests happening in your area</b>	<b>Changed your profile picture to show your support for a cause</b>	<b>Used hashtags related to a political or social issue</b>
U.S. adults	34%	32%	19%	18%	14%
Men	31	29	20	15	12
Women	37	35	18	22	15
White	36	32	19	16	12
Black	30	35	19	25	19
Hispanic	29	30	18	21	13
Ages 18-29	36	36	26	21	25
30-49	35	33	23	24	16
50-64	36	31	13	18	9
65+	26	27	13	7	5
Republican	31	26	9	14	8
Democrat	35	37	24	22	16
Independent	35	32	18	18	16
Rep/lean Rep.	31	27	12	15	11
Dem/lean Dem.	36	37	24	21	16

Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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## Personal importance of social media for political engagement, by demographic groups

*% of U.S. social media users who say social media are very or somewhat important to them personally when it comes to the following ...*

	<b>Finding other people who share your views about important issues</b>	<b>Getting involved with political or social issues that are important to you</b>	<b>Giving you a venue to express your political opinions</b>
U.S. social media users	42%	39%	37%
Men	39	37	36
Women	45	41	37
White	39	36	32
Black	54	52	53
Hispanic	49	43	46
Ages 18-29	48	45	37
30-49	43	37	36
50-64	42	39	37
65+	37	38	36
Republican	39	34	33
Democrat	50	49	43
Independent	37	35	32
Rep/lean Rep.	39	35	33
Dem/lean Dem.	45	43	39

Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.  
 Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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## Importance of social media in political or social change, by demographic groups

*% of U.S. adults who say social media are very or somewhat important when it comes to the following...*

	<b>Getting elected officials to pay attention to issues</b>	<b>Creating sustained movements for social change</b>	<b>Influencing policy decisions</b>
U.S. adults	69%	67%	58%
Men	68	64	55
Women	70	70	61
White	68	65	56
Black	73	75	68
Hispanic	71	70	58
Ages 18-29	70	73	56
30-49	70	69	57
50-64	66	61	57
65+	69	65	61
Republican	68	53	53
Democrat	75	80	67
Independent	64	68	57
Rep/lean Rep.	66	56	52
Dem/lean Dem.	72	77	63

Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.  
 Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.  
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## Perceptions about political engagement on social media, by demographic groups

*% of U.S. adults who say the following statements describe social media very or somewhat well*

	<b>Distract people from issues that are truly important</b>	<b>Make people think they are making a difference when they really aren't</b>	<b>Highlight important issues that might not get a lot of attention otherwise</b>	<b>Help give a voice to underrepresented groups</b>	<b>Make it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions</b>
U.S. adults	77%	71%	65%	64%	56%
Men	80	74	61	63	55
Women	74	69	68	65	58
White	80	75	62	61	53
Black	66	59	80	78	65
Hispanic	69	60	62	66	61
Ages 18-29	78	72	68	71	61
30-49	79	71	67	67	58
50-64	75	70	63	60	52
65+	75	70	59	58	54
Republican	80	77	58	54	51
Democrat	74	67	73	74	63
Independent	77	72	62	63	57
Rep/lean Rep.	81	76	57	55	51
Dem/lean Dem	74	67	72	72	61

Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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## Topline questionnaire

### 2018 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL

WAVE 35 MAY 2018

FINAL TOPLINE

MAY 29 – JUNE 11, 2018

TOTAL N=4,594

#### ASK ALL:

SM9

Now thinking specifically about some of the ways that people use social media to engage with political or social issues that are important to them ...

How well do you think each of the following statements describes social media?

[RANDOMIZE]

	<u>Very well</u>	<u>Somewhat well</u>	<u>Not too well</u>	<u>Not at all well</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
a. Social media helps give a voice to underrepresented groups May 29-Jun 11, 2018	17	48	25	9	1
b. Social media distracts people from issues that are truly important May 29-Jun 11, 2018	35	42	16	5	1
c. Social media highlights important issues that might not get a lot of attention otherwise May 29-Jun 11, 2018	16	48	26	9	1
d. Social media makes it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions May 29-Jun 11, 2018	15	42	28	14	1
e. Social media makes people think they are making a difference when they really aren't May 29-Jun 11, 2018	28	43	21	6	1

**ASK IF SOCIAL MEDIA USER (SNSUSER=1) [N=4,316]:**

SM10 Have you done any of the following activities on social media in the past year?  
[RANDOMIZE]

	<u>Have done this in the past year</u>	<u>Have not done this in the past year</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
a. Changed your profile picture to show your support for a cause May 29-Jun 11, 2018	19	80	1
b. Used hashtags related to a political or social issue May 29-Jun 11, 2018	15	84	1
c. Taken part in a group that shares an interest in an issue or cause May 29-Jun 11, 2018	36	63	1
d. Encouraged others to take action on issues that are important to you May 29-Jun 11, 2018	33	66	1
e. Looked for information about rallies or protests happening in your area May 29-Jun 11, 2018	20	80	1

**ASK IF SOCIAL MEDIA USER (SNSUSER=1) [N=4,316]:****[RANDOMIZE ORDER OF SM12 AND SM13]**

SM12 How important, if at all, is social media to you PERSONALLY when it comes to the following things? [RANDOMIZE]

	<u>Very important</u>	<u>Somewhat important</u>	<u>Not very important</u>	<u>Not important at all</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
a. Finding other people who share your views about important issues May 29-Jun 11, 2018	13	29	30	27	1
b. Getting involved with political or social issues that are important to you May 29-Jun 11, 2018	12	28	28	32	1
c. Giving you a venue to express your political opinions May 29-Jun 11, 2018	12	25	27	36	1

**ASK ALL: [RANDOMIZE ORDER OF SM12 AND SM13]**

SM13 In general, how important, if at all, do you think social media is today when it comes to the following things **[RANDOMIZE]**

	<u>Very important</u>	<u>Somewhat important</u>	<u>Not very important</u>	<u>Not important at all</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
a. Getting elected officials to pay attention to issues May 29-Jun 11, 2018	23	46	20	10	1
b. Influencing policy decisions May 29-Jun 11, 2018	15	43	29	12	1
c. Creating sustained movements for social change May 29-Jun 11, 2018	21	46	22	10	1