How Definitions Shape Our Understanding of Political Influencers on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Political discourse now circulates through sprawling social media networks where multiple actors wield influence in addition to traditional elites. Yet scholarly conclusions about who actually shapes that discourse diverge because leading studies operationalize “political influencer” in fundamentally different ways. To clarify the stakes of those choices—and advance more coherent theorizing—we examine six definitions that are prevalent in the literature and are rooted in audience size, elite ties, network importance, and message engagement. We then apply these distinctive definitions to a single dataset, namely a panel of 597,815 registered U.S. voters on Twitter during the 2020 presidential campaign to identify convergence and divergence across definitions. Three patterns emerge. First, conceptual boundaries matter: definitions that differ in scale rarely converge on the same influencers, confirming that different lenses reveal largely distinct influencer groups. Second, definitional emphasis reshapes the portrait of influence itself: elite-based criteria surface highly political, centrally positioned senders with compact but engaged followings, whereas follower- and engagement-based criteria net vastly larger, more heterogeneous groups that address politics only episodically. Third, upstream choices about conceptual boundaries and definitional emphases cascade downstream to the characteristics of influencers' audiences, producing systematic shifts in followers’ age, gender, racial, and partisan characteristics. By showing how conceptual decisions impact both who counts as a political influencer and which citizens follow their messages, the current study lays the groundwork for clearer conceptualization of the relevant dimensions for advancing the accumulation of knowledge on this increasingly important political phenomenon.

Keywords: political influencers, social media, Twitter, network importance, engagement

Introduction

In the digital age, influencers have become central figures in shaping political conversations on and off social media. Roughly one-third of all tweets posted by U.S. adults during 2020 were political in nature (Bestvater et al., 2022). Within this environment, social media influencers have emerged as a distinct and increasingly consequential class of political actors, wielding reach, network position, and the capacity to bypass traditional gatekeepers (Flamino et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2023). By 2024, roughly 20% of Americans regularly received news online from such influencers (Stocking et al., 2024). These influencers—whether they are celebrities, subject-matter experts, or everyday users—leverage their followings and network positioning to influence public opinion, consumer behavior, and even societal norms (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Hasell & Chinn, 2023; Wellman, 2026). The rise of influencers on social media platforms has the potential to democratize influence, creating opportunities for individuals outside of traditional media or elite spheres to gain prominence and to impact online discussions (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Papacharissi et al., 2017; Riedl et al., 2023).

The emergence of social media influencers and their capacity to shape modern information dissemination has attracted the attention of scholars from various fields, including communication, political science, economics, and computer science. Historically, political influence was predominantly mediated by traditional media outlets and politicians, who set the agenda for political discussions. This top-down model of communication, which can be traced back to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model, positioned media and opinion leaders as key intermediaries between political elites and the public. However, social media disrupted this paradigm, and a considerable body of recent research has grappled with the social and political implications of this fragmented and decentralized media ecosystem.

Through social media, non-traditional actors can now find large audiences, affect their opinions, and even influence behavior (Schmuck et al., 2022; Shmargad, 2022). This new model has amplified the reach of a variety of actors whose content includes political topics

(Goodwin et al., 2023), ranging from religious influencers (Febrian, 2024) to child influencers (Abidin, 2025) to strategic propaganda campaigns (Martin et al., 2024; Woolley, 2022, 2023). This broadened landscape of political discourse introduces new challenges in assessing the role and impact of influencers whose political engagement varies widely in frequency and focus. Studies of political influencers contribute to broader debates on media effects, particularly around how exposure to ideologically congruent or diverse content shapes political attitudes. Mukerjee et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence that influencers act as gatekeepers in these processes, suggesting that understanding their role is key to unpacking the effects of political communication on social media. Political influencers bridge the gap between elite and public conversations, acting as key intermediaries in the flow of political content across social media networks (Bail et al., 2018).

A growing body of research suggests that influencers shape not only the content users encounter online, but also their attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Lee et al. (2024) find that influencers are on-par with celebrity endorsers in their capacity to achieve positive brand advertising outcomes, and both actors are more effective than brand-only advertising. Even influencers outside overtly political domains, such as health advocates, can shape followers' attitudes through relevant experiences (Heiss & Rudolph, 2023). Research focused specifically on political information finds that influencers help structure the political information environment by shaping users’ exposure to political content (Shamir et al., 2024), and by acting as stewards of political education (Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Other studies highlight how exposure to influencers can affect political behavior and knowledge: Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) show that following pro-environmental influencers increases political participation, while Schmuck et al. (2022) find that influencer-produced content can enhance users’ perceived understanding of political issues. Importantly, research shows that influencers can also have normatively negative impacts, such as spreading misinformation (Starbird et al., 2023), or amplifying hatred toward outgroups (Stewart et al., 2023).

Yet this influence is neither uniform nor unbounded. Research on repeated exposure to misinformation from influencers has found limited effects on belief change, pointing to contextual limits on persuasive power (Harff et al., 2026). Research suggests an important role for celebrity endorsements (Alatas et al. 2019), although in terms of the traditional political characteristics of partisan identity, athlete statements on vaccination have less effect on sports fans than partisans (Mirer & Bode, 2025). Moreover, research on influencer activism in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement identifies a performative allyship that fails to yield substantial progress on the movement's substantive goals (Wellman, 2022). Together, these studies underscore the diverse pathways through which influencers may shape political meaning and action, reinforcing the need to better understand who these actors are and how they function within contemporary information systems.

To advance our understanding of this complex and evolving influence landscape, we need clear and consistent definitions for who is considered an influencer. In this study, we heed Riedl et al.'s (2023) call for the definitional investigation of influence and influencers. We survey the literature to identify common definitions of influencers across different fields, geographical contexts, and social media platforms. We then investigate whether existing definitions of political influencers capture the same theoretical construct or diverging ones by operationalizing those definitions in a single high-quality dataset. Specifically, by leveraging a large and unique panel of 597,815 registered U.S. voters on Twitter during the 2020 presidential election, we can consider multiple definitions and their downstream implications for identifying influencers and their audiences. A main contribution of our findings is the observation that existing definitions capture distinctive dimensions of political influence with limited overlap between them. We conclude by discussing how researchers can build on these findings to advance conceptual and empirical clarity about distinct dimensions of political influence.

What is an Influencer?

The term "influencer" has emerged with the rise of digital platforms, and is distinct from the term “influence,” which refers to a capacity for changing citizens’ attitudes or beliefs that many kinds of actors can exert. Influencers do wield influence, but they also cultivate a personal brand, build parasocial relationships with audiences, and leverage algorithmic visibility to reach their audiences (Riedl et al., 2023). They are defined by attributes such as authenticity and personalized communication, and not by influence alone (Dubois & Dommett, 2025).

Influencers are often described as modern online opinion leaders (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022; Shamir et al., 2024; Soares et al., 2018; Suuronen et al., 2022) because, like the opinion leaders in the classic two-step flow of communication, influencers serve as a bridge between elite information sources and broader publics by filtering and reframing content for their followers (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Harff et al. (2026) refine this framing by classifying influencers as a specific subset referred to as “proximal mass opinion leaders,” who leverage personalized communication and self-built networks to disseminate messages.

Building on this conceptual grounding, we now turn to the attributes that the literature often treats as central to being considered an influencer. A central feature in most definitions is *audience size*. Large followership is often used as a proxy for influence, reflecting the assumption that a broader audience enhances persuasive potential (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Heiss & Rudolph, 2023). This “broadcast model” reflects a shift from peer-to-peer diffusion to high-visibility dissemination, with influencers positioned to spread content widely (Goel et al., 2016).

Whereas audience size definitions focus on sheer numbers of followers, *elites*-based definitions emphasize direct ties to political elites. Elite connectivity—such as being retweeted or

followed by high-profile politicians or media figures—positions influencers as bridges between mass audiences and elite discourse, enabling them to shape political narratives in distinct ways not captured by audience size alone. This dimension has been explored in studies showing that elite accounts often serve as key hubs in political communication networks, with influence tied not just to popularity but to embeddedness within elite discourse (Barberá et al., 2015; Freelon et al., 2020; Shamir et al., 2024). Recognizing elite connectivity as analytically distinct from popularity helps clarify how some influencers act as bridges between grassroots audiences and institutional power, while others operate largely outside elite-driven spaces.

An additional parameter of influence is *network importance*. Unlike followership metrics, which emphasize visibility and audience size, network positioning highlights the influencer's structural role in connecting otherwise disconnected parts of the network or facilitating information diffusion. Measures such as degree centrality, betweenness centrality, and PageRank are often used to identify these strategically situated individuals (Pei et al., 2014; Soares et al., 2018). Influencers occupying central positions may exert significant influence not by virtue of reach alone, but by bridging distinct communities or controlling the flow of information, making them critical nodes in political discourse.

A final central dimension is content *engagement*. While audience size reflects potential reach, engagement metrics offer a more dynamic view of influence by capturing how audiences respond to an influencer's posts. High levels of retweets, likes, and replies can indicate that content is resonating with followers, spreading more widely, and potentially shaping discourse (Liang & Lu, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). This focus on engagement shifts attention from who sees the content to who interacts with it, underscoring that influence is not just about visibility, but about generating reactions and conversation.

Taken together, our synthesis of the literature identifies four central dimensions of digital influence: audience size, elite connections or status, network importance, and audience engagement. As prominent research has shown that influencers often operate across multiple

social media platforms (Riedl et al. 2023), we focus on dimensions that are relevant across platforms. These dimensions are analytically distinct yet often overlapping in practice, and together they shape how scholars identify and classify influencers in empirical research.

What is a *Political* Influencer?

Building on our synthesis of the literature on influencers in general, the contemporary notion of *political* influencers is rooted in, but distinct from, the foundational concept of *opinion leaders* from Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model. The classic conception of the term "opinion leaders" in this early literature focused on actors who served as intermediaries between mass media and the broader public, transmitting and interpreting elite-driven messages within their communities. While both concepts emphasize the power of intermediary communicators, the contemporary term "political influencers" focuses more specifically on actors who operate in a decentralized and digitized communication environment (Riedl et al., 2023).

Political influencers are thus proximal mass opinion leaders: they reach mass audiences while maintaining the accessibility and relatability of a peer. (Harff et al., 2026). Despite these subtle terminological distinctions in the literature, the terms "opinion leaders" and "political influencers" are often used interchangeably, including in recent work that has identified prominent Twitter users based on whom ordinary users follow (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Mukerjee et al., 2022; Soares et al., 2018). Similarly, disinformation studies often treat high-engagement users as key political actors, regardless of whether they are elites (Vaccari et al., 2023), further supporting a broader empirical scope that includes, but is not limited to, classical opinion leadership.

A common descriptor of "political influencers" in recent work is individuals who shape public discourse by sharing content related to politics (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Gibson et al., 2023). This engagement with politics can range from occasional commentary, such as

celebrity endorsements during elections, to sustained participation in political conversations (Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025). Influencers, even those outside overtly political spaces, can exert meaningful influence on social and political attitudes. For example, Alrababa'h et al. (2021) find that exposure to Muslim soccer star Mohamed Salah led to a measurable decline in anti-Muslim hate crimes and prejudicial attitudes in Liverpool, suggesting that the visibility and perceived identity of public figures can have potent downstream effects on public behavior.

This variability in the prominence of political content in the messages posted by influencers complicates efforts to classify a given figure as a political influencer based solely on the quantity or composition of their shared content, as no clear threshold separates those who post little to no political content and those posting almost entirely political content. As past research indicates, influencers on platforms such as Instagram exhibit a broad spectrum of political content, with the proportion of political posts varying widely (Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025).

While some scholars identify political influencers through explicit political affiliations or elite connections (e.g., Bail et al., 2018), others note that political influencers without these traits can still wield substantial political influence (Goodwin et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Suuronen et al., 2022). For example, figures such as Taylor Swift may engage politically only during major political events, yet their posts can reach large, ideologically mixed audiences (Nisbett & Dunn, 2021). Conversely, some political influencers may consistently produce largely political content and engage with a more narrow audience that is motivated by politics and ideology (Rose & Rohlinger, 2024). Therefore, measuring influencers' engagement with politics and considering different levels of political content is essential for a more holistic understanding of political influencers' impact on their networks.

Several additional dimensions are theorized as defining features of political influencers but cannot be measured from platform behavioral traces alone. Dubois and Dommett (2025) propose a six-attribute framework that includes three dimensions our dataset does not capture:

personalized communication (cultivation of a personal brand and parasocial bond), *compensation* (monetization of influence), and *control* (autonomy from parties, media, and platforms). *Authenticity* is likewise widely identified as central to the influencer concept (Harff et al., 2026; Riedl et al., 2023), and whether *monetization* is a necessary condition of influencer status remains contested (Dubois & Dommett, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023). We return to the implications of these unmeasured dimensions in the Discussion.

Identifying Political Influencers

To date, there is no canonical way to identify political influencers. Instead, scholars have used a wide range of operational definitions to study political influencers and their impacts on social networks. Our synthesis of the literature identified four dimensions that are commonly used to identify influencers in general, and these dimensions are also relevant for political influencers.

To identify operational definitions of political influencers, we searched Web of Science for the term "political influencer*" across all available years through May 18, 2026, yielding 110 records. We supplemented these records with Google Scholar searches and snowball sampling to capture work using adjacent terminology (e.g., "online opinion leader") applied in political contexts (such as Bail et al., 2018; Mukerjee et al., 2022) or that were cited by already-identified sources. We excluded records that do not engage with online political influence empirically or operationally. Table 1 describes the four main dimensions used in the literature as prominent approaches for identifying influencers, along with concrete operationalizations used in the current study. Specifically, we list two different operationalizations based on audience size, two elite-based approaches, one operationalization that focuses on network importance, and one operationalization that examines audience engagement with influencers' content (e.g., resharing, liking). Next, we describe these six operational definitions in greater detail in terms that are generalizable across social media platforms.

Table 1. Synthesis of Major Operational Definitions of Political Influencers

Descriptor	Operational definition	Focus	Example citations
	Audience-size approaches		
(1) Following Micro+	Accounts with 10,000 or more followers (micro, macro, and mega influencers)	Audience size threshold	Campbell & Farell, 2020 Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025
(2) Following Top	Union of the top 1,000 most followed accounts across subsamples of the population	Robust following across the population	Chung et al., 2023 Mukerjee et al., 2022
	Elite-based approaches		
(3) Elite Followers	Non-elected individuals followed by 15 or more members of Congress	Accounts with direct ties to the political elite	Bail et al., 2018 Dash et al., 2022 Shamir et al. 2024
(4) Elite Lists	Manually compiled lists of politicians, pundits, and media organizations' social media accounts	Media and political elite lists	Eady et al., 2025 Wojcieszak et al., 2022
	Network-based approaches		
(5) Network Importance	The top 10 percent of accounts based on network centrality	Network centrality	Pei et al., 2014, Soares et al., 2018 Zhang et al., 2023
	Engagement-based approaches		
(6) Engagement	Accounts in the top 10 percent of reshares in a network	Audience engagement	DeVerna et al., 2024 Liang & Lu, 2023 Rose & Rohlinger, 2024

Note: Authors' synthesis of key definitions in the literature.

The first definitional approach we discuss relates to audience size, which is among the most common definitions used in the literature. Using this approach, researchers identify influencers by examining their number of followers, and classifying users as influential if they meet or exceed certain thresholds. In marketing, popular typologies often distinguish between

micro-influencers with 10,000-100,000 followers and macro-influencers with 100,000-1,000,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). For analytical purposes, we do not distinguish between micro- and macro-influencers, and study the combined group that we refer to as *Following Micro+*, that is, influencers with an audience size of at least 10,000 followers. In contrast to this threshold-based measure, an alternate audience-size approach is used by Mukerjee et al. (2022) in their identification of influencers as the union of the top 1,000 accounts followed by different subsamples of the population. This audience-size approach is often used to identify general influencers (e.g., Chung et al., 2023), and not uniquely political ones. We refer to this robust operationalization as *Following Top* as it focuses on the most followed accounts.

In contrast to this focus on audience size, the additional definitional approaches we review relate to elite connections and status. The *Elite Followers* approach is distinctive in its definition of political influencers through their connections to key political elites. This method identifies political influencers by focusing on their centrality within elite networks, particularly among political figures. Bail et al. (2018) typify this approach by defining political influencers as non-elected individuals who are followed by 15 or more members of Congress. By setting this type of threshold, the Elite Followers approach focuses specifically on elite connectivity, identifying political influencers based on their embeddedness within elite political networks, rather than their mass audience size. Distinct from this focus on elite connections, the *Elite Lists* measurement approach is based on a qualitative list of politically elite accounts on social media, typically containing politicians, top pundits, journalists, and news outlets. Using this approach, Eady et al. (2025) and Wojcieszak et al. (2022) defined “politically elite” accounts as those run by members of Congress, top politicians, media organizations, and journalists. The selection of these accounts is strategic, aiming to capture key figures and institutions that shape political narratives and influence information flows online. By focusing on prominent accounts with

established influence, researchers can analyze the concentration of political discourse and identify how elite perspectives permeate public conversations.

Distinct from this focus on audience size or elite characteristics, another main definitional approach identifies political influencers based on their *Network Importance*. Studies adopting this approach (e.g., Soares et al., 2018) have used audience centrality to highlight users who, while not always prominent, have a critical role in disseminating political content to broader audiences. Different types of centrality measures were used to evaluate an individual's role in a network. For example, those with high "degree centrality" are connected to many users, indicating broad reach, while those with high "betweenness centrality" serve as bridges between different parts of the network, controlling information flow (Soares et al., 2018; Suuronen et al., 2022). These types of degree centrality measures help identify influencers who occupy strategic positions that enable them to shape discourse. Other measures, such as PageRank and k-core decomposition, can be used to identify the network members optimally positioned to disseminate information (Pei et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2023), but often require a complete network snapshot, which can be unattainable in practice. Addressing this, Pei et al. (2014) showed that a local approximation of k-core provides the most accurate and computationally tractable alternative for identifying influential spreaders, even when using a partial network snapshot.

Finally, prior work has identified influencers based on the level of *Engagement* with their content, specifically metrics such as retweets, likes, and comments. Accounts that rank in the top ten percent of reshares in a network are typically considered influential, as their messages resonate widely with audiences. This approach emphasizes not only reach but also audience engagement with the message (DeVerna et al., 2024; Liang & Lu, 2023).

These six operational definitions of political influencers highlight the multidimensional nature of political influence on social media, with each capturing a different facet, including audience size, elite connectivity, network importance, or engagement. Rather than privileging

one definition, we apply all six to a single high-quality dataset to examine where they overlap, where they diverge, and what these findings reveal about political influence online. The next section outlines the research questions that guide this investigation.

Research Questions

Given the diversity of operational definitions and methods for identifying political influencers, we investigate several key research questions. By systematically applying prominent approaches for identifying political influencers using the same dataset, we aim to clarify whether these distinctive definitions identify influencers in comparable ways. As part of our effort to clarify the conceptualization and operationalization of distinctive influencer definitions in the literature, we use the classic communication terms “sender” and “receiver” (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1949), which are not commonly used in contemporary research on online influencers. Despite the conceptual simplicity of these terms’ focus on unidimensional directional effects, they are useful in the current study for delineating specific key actions taken by influencers and their followers.

Our first research question asks how different operational definitions and methods used in existing scholarly work impact the identification of political influencers (*RQ1: Operational definition overlap*). The multiple approaches documented in Table 1 are all commonly employed to classify political influencers or “senders,” and can yield different conclusions about who holds significant influence in political communication. By comparing these operational definitions of political influencers across different thresholds of political content sharing, we identify robust patterns of overlap and divergence among these distinctive definitions.

We then explore the variation in the prevalence of political content across the political influencers identified in the sample (*RQ2: Political content prevalence*). Political influencers differ in the frequency and consistency with which they post or share political information compared to their posts on non-political topics. By analyzing these patterns, we aim to identify political influencers who are consistently involved in political discussions as opposed to those

with more intermittent political engagement. Understanding this variation provides insight into the nature of political influence, highlighting whether the proportion of political content shared by influencers is systematically related to other characteristics of influencer types and their audiences.

Next, we examine how political influencers identified by these methods vary in terms of their presence on social media across key metrics related to influence (*RQ3: Variations in influencers' social media presence*). For example, we examine whether political influencers identified as having a large number of followers are also characterized by high levels of network importance, and also experience high levels of audience engagement. Investigating this research question allows us to systematically assess how political influencers identified through distinctive definitions compare across key relevant measures of social media presence and behavior that are used to identify influence.

Finally, we ask how different definitions of political influencers vary in terms of their audience's sociodemographic characteristics (*RQ4: Receiver characteristics*). This question focuses on demographic and ideological traits of individuals who follow political influencers, i.e., their audiences. In addition to clarifying basic sociodemographics of the audiences of different types of influencers—specifically age, gender, and race/ethnicity—we also aim to investigate the followers' partisan identity to determine whether influencers cultivate specific followings aligned with particular political ideologies, or if their reach extends across partisan lines. By analyzing audience characteristics, we can better understand how political influencers engage diverse types of users.

Thus, the following research questions guide this study:

1. How much overlap is there between the different operational definitions of political influencers? *(RQ1: Operational definition overlap)*
2. What is the variation in the prevalence of political content across the influencers identified by different operationalizations? *(RQ2: Political content prevalence)*

3. How do political influencers identified by distinctive definitions vary in terms of relevant measures of social media presence related to influence? *(RQ3: Variations in influencers' social media presence)*
4. How are the political influencers identified through different definitions distinctive regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of the users who receive their content? *(RQ4: Receiver characteristics)*

Methods and Data

In this study, we analyze a pre-existing large-scale panel of registered U.S. voters matched to Twitter accounts by cross-referencing full names and locations from U.S. voter records with Twitter profiles. A pilot version of this panel was first used by Grinberg et al. (2019), and the full panel we analyze in the current study was used in multiple other works (Baribi-Bartov et al., 2024; Green et al., 2022; Shugars et al., 2021).

There are several key characteristics of the dataset that make it a uniquely high-quality data source for our study. First, in terms of *representativeness,* Hughes et al. (2021) compared the panel with a representative sample from the Pew Research Center and confirmed that it is largely reflective of U.S. voters on Twitter, with minor differences due to the matching process (see SM.1 of Baribi-Bartov et al., 2024 for more details about the panel construction and representativeness). Second, in terms of a *verified human sample*, the panel's focus on registered U.S. voters allows for verification of users as individual Twitter users, and not bots or organizational entities, which are increasingly challenging for researchers to identify clearly. This means that an important advantage of the dataset that we analyze is that it focuses precisely on the target population that political influencers in the U.S. are trying to influence. A third important feature of the dataset is *high-quality sociodemographic data* available through the panel's integration of voter file data on individual-level sociodemographic characteristics, which would

not be accessible otherwise. A fourth key high-quality feature of our dataset is that it is based on *people's actual behavioral actions through digital trace data.* This type of behavioral data is not subject to the familiar limitations of other commonly used methods in the field, such as survey data, which is characterized by problems related to individual-level discrepancy and extreme outliers (Guess et al., 2019). A final key high-quality feature of our sample is that it is one of the few large-scale samples that enable comprehensive research into the *interaction of audiences with political influencers* on social media. Taken together, these features of our dataset render it an exceptionally well-suited data source to answer the motivating research questions of our study.

Twitter in 2020 offers a uniquely informative environment for this study: roughly one-third of tweets posted by U.S. adults during the election period were political in nature (Bestvater et al., 2022), and Flamino et al.'s (2023) analysis of nearly a billion tweets during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential election documents a well-established, identifiable population of political influencers on the platform, before subsequent platform changes constrained large-scale empirical research. Despite these strengths, it is important to acknowledge that without greater transparency from platforms, it is difficult to determine how our findings may apply to other platforms, or even to Twitter (now X) at different points in time, given the substantial changes the platform has undergone. However, recent research points to declining information quality on platforms like Twitter (now X) over time (Özturan et al., 2025), indicating that an important advantage of our dataset is its relatively high information quality.

Our dataset contains 1,127,162 accounts evaluated as potential political influencers active on Twitter during the 2020 U.S. presidential election (August to November). These accounts met three lenient conditions for inclusion, deliberately set to ensure that the resulting pool of political influencers could accommodate the full range of operational definitions listed in Table 1. They had at least 1,000 followers on Twitter, had at least one political tweet in the 10% random sample (Decahose) of all Twitter content, and had been followed by at least one out of

the 597,815 panelists who were active during the election. We used the threshold of 1,000 followers because it is the lowest threshold used in the literature thus far to define influencers (e.g., Conde & Casais, 2023; Dubois & Dommett, 2025).

We used the political classifier developed by Baribi-Bartov et al. (2024, see SM.2 of their work for details), which was explicitly trained and validated for the 2020 election. Because the Decahose is a random sample of ten percent of all public tweets, some lower-activity accounts may fall outside our sample. We use basic sociodemographic characteristics from the Twitter panel, which originate from two different sources: voter records, which document age, gender, and registration with a party; and the voter file vendor TargetSmart, which identifies race/ethnicity and partisanship.[1] For the elite lists identification, we followed the comprehensive list approach used by Wojcieszak et al. (2022) in their influential research on political elites on Twitter.

Constructing Variables to Answer the Research Questions

To investigate our research questions, we construct several variables that describe influencers' accounts, the content they posted, and sociodemographic characteristics of their audiences. Table 2 describes the key variables used in our analysis.

[1] TargetSmart is a leading political data firm in the U.S. that provides voter file data and analytics tools primarily to campaigns, advocacy groups, and research organizations. See Hughes et al. (2021) for additional validation of vendor-provided information.

Table 2. Summary of Key Variables

Variable	Description
Number of Followers	Number of followers on Twitter.
Elite Audience Size	Number of members of Congress following the influencer.
Network Importance	Following Pei et al.'s (2014) local approximation of network k-core, computed as the total sum of followers' followers.
Engagement	Number of retweets that influencers received on all of their content during the study period.
Posting Frequency	Monthly frequency of tweets posted over a defined period of time.
Political Content Proportion	Ratio of political tweets to total tweets.
Audience Demographics	Summary statistics of the audience's age, gender, and race/ethnicity.
Audience Partisanship	Proportion of followers identified as Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Other.

Understanding the reach and impact of political influencers requires a detailed analysis of their audiences. *Number of Followers* is a primary metric, often measured as in-degree, meaning the number of followers an influencer has, which reflects the potential reach of their messages. Audience size is primarily measured as the total number of followers for a given influencer.

Elite Audience Size, defined as the number of members of Congress following an influencer, reflects the potential for influence within elite political discourse (Bail et al., 2018). We can evaluate an influencer's capacity to shape public and institutional conversations by considering both mass and elite audiences.

The *Network Importance* of an audience is also relevant, as the connections between an influencer's followers (i.e., their followers' followers) can amplify political content beyond the influencer's direct network. We use Pei et al.'s (2014) approach of measuring network importance for influencers as the number of followers of the influencer's followers.

Beyond audience size and composition, *Engagement* metrics such as retweets, likes, and mentions measure whether influencers' audiences actively engage with influencers' content in ways that can increase its public visibility. Following Liang and Lu (2023), we compute engagement rates by analyzing the top 10% of users by their total number of retweets received. High engagement levels often signal that content resonates with followers, serving as a stronger indicator of influence than audience size alone (Schmuck et al., 2022).

The metric of *Posting Frequency* represents an influencer's level of activity on the platform. Although influencers may be active on the platform through other means of engagement, such as solely viewing or commenting on others' content, the frequency of their posting is a useful metric to gauge their potential to influence. Posting Frequency is measured in our data as the monthly number of tweets posted over the study period by a potential influencer's account.

Notably, the *Political Content Proportion* assesses the prevalence of political content produced by each influencer by calculating the ratio of political tweets to total tweets. As noted earlier, we used the political classifier built and validated specifically for the 2020 election by Baribi-Bartov et al. (2024).[2] This metric assesses the degree to which an influencer's posted content is focused on politics.

To understand whether the different operational definitions of influencers identify different types of receivers, we identify the sociodemographic characteristics of the audience by assessing key measures of *Audience Demographics,* including summary statistics on age, gender, and race/ethnicity. In addition, we calculate the *Audience Partisanship* of an influencer's followers by analyzing the proportion of registered Democrats (D), Republicans (R), Independents (I), and Other (O) among the panel followers. This breakdown helps determine

[2] This model was trained using tweets containing political terms (such as candidate names and election-related hashtags) as examples of political content, and a random sample of tweets without whitelist terms as non-political examples. The model was evaluated by crowdworkers and was found to classify political content with precision of 88.8% and recall of 80%.

whether the influencer attracts a politically homogeneous audience or if their content appeals to a more ideologically diverse group. Taken together, these demographic variables are critical for understanding how influencers might appeal to specific demographic groups, which can further contextualize their role in shaping political discourse. As a robustness check, we also examine partisan affiliation using the voter file vendor's measure of inferred partisanship.

Findings

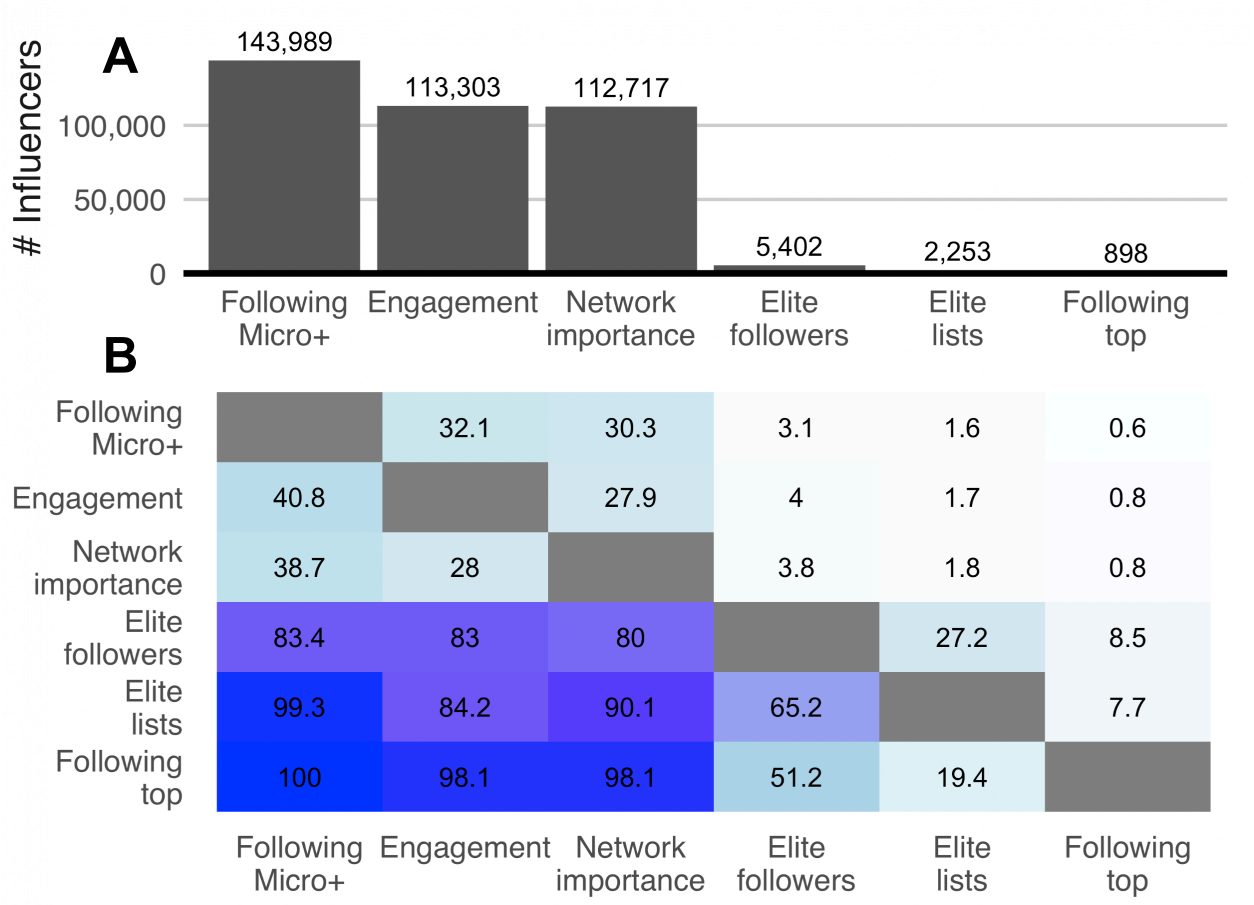
Our results underscore the importance of definitional clarity for identifying political influencers. Using six prominent operational definitions drawn from the literature, we find substantial variation not only in the number and type of users classified as influencers but also in the characteristics of these identified influencers across multiple key measures of social media presence. These results highlight meaningful differences in who is being studied when scholars use different approaches to examine online influencers.

Figure 1 provides results that answer RQ1 (Operational definition overlap), illustrating both the number of influencers identified by the key definitions and the overlap between the identified accounts. As shown in Panel A (top), the sheer number of accounts captured by different definitions varies by several orders of magnitude. While the two elite-based definitions (i.e., Elite Followers and Elite Lists) and the audience-based definition of Following Top yield relatively small and selective groups, other definitions identify much larger populations of political influencers. As shown in Supplementary Figure A1, this finding is robust to using different levels of political sharing when considering influencers as political, demonstrating that the proportion of political sharing in an influencer's posts does not fully explain these large differences in scale. Panel B (bottom) further shows a block-like pattern that distinguishes small-scale definitions from larger ones. Small-scale definitions are well-contained within larger definitions (as evident by 80-100% overlap values in the bottom-left quadrant of Panel B), but

account for only a small portion (0.6-4%) of the political influencers identified by larger-scale definitions (as evident in the top-right quadrant).

Importantly, overlap between definitions of the same scale (top-left and bottom-right quadrants) is below 40% most of the time and not higher than 65.2%. The fact that small definitions are contained within larger definitions suggests that there is some coherence across the different scales. However, the limited overlap in all other cases indicates that different operationalizations capture substantively different populations. Supplementary Figure A2 shows that this relatively low overlap between definitions persists across different levels of political sharing.

Figure 1. Scale and overlap between influencer definitions.

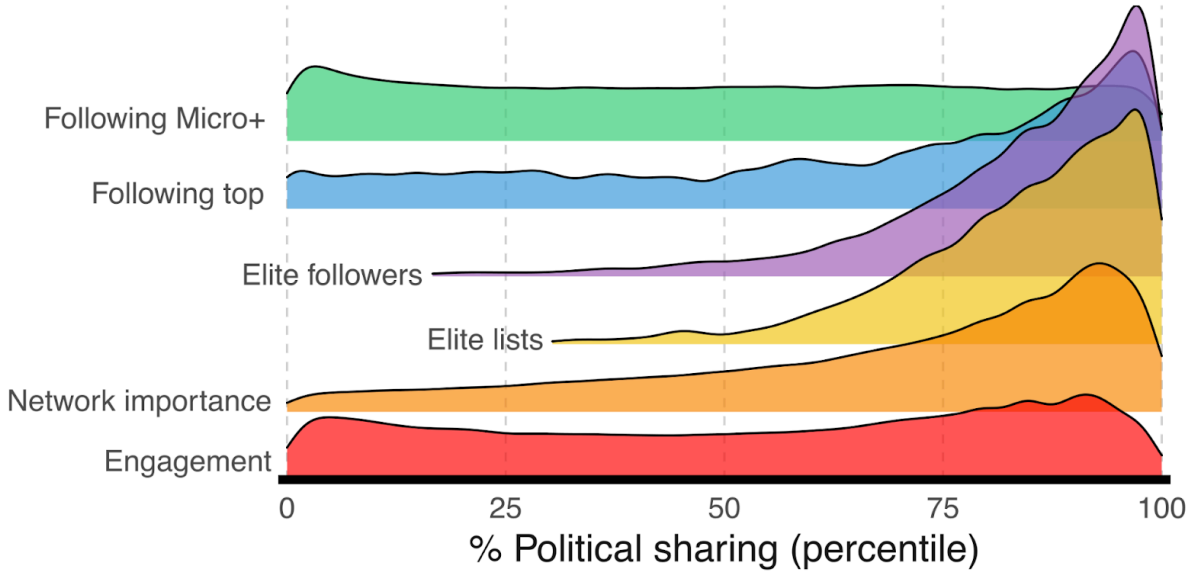


Notes: Panel A (top) shows the potential number of political influencers identified by each definition. Panel B (bottom) shows the percentage of row definition members that are included in the column definition.

Next, we investigate the prevalence of political content sharing (RQ2) by examining the distribution of political content sharing as a percentage of all posts across influencer definitions. A Kruskal-Wallis test established that there are significant differences in political sharing between definitions (χ^2 = 36,489, df = 5, $p < 0.001$, see Table B1 for pairwise effect sizes and post-hoc significant differences). Figure 2 visualizes the distribution of political sharing across definitions. It shows that definitions associated with higher levels of political content sharing include those grounded in elite connectivity (Elite Followers and Elite Lists), network importance, and high levels of audience popularity (Following Top). These definitions identify

users who are more consistently engaged in political discourse. By contrast, the Following Micro+ definition, which includes all users with at least 10,000 followers, identifies a population with relatively diffuse political content engagement. This finding highlights that an audience-based definition that includes a threshold that begins with micro-influencers identifies a population of political influencers who post a relatively low proportion of political content. The engagement-based definition exhibits a relatively flat but slightly bimodal distribution: one subset of users has a relatively high level of political sharing, and another subset has a relatively low share of political content. This divergence suggests that while engagement metrics can capture politically active influencers, they also encompass popular accounts that are less politically engaged, and whose visibility may be driven by content that is largely unrelated to politics.

Figure 2. Political content prevalence.

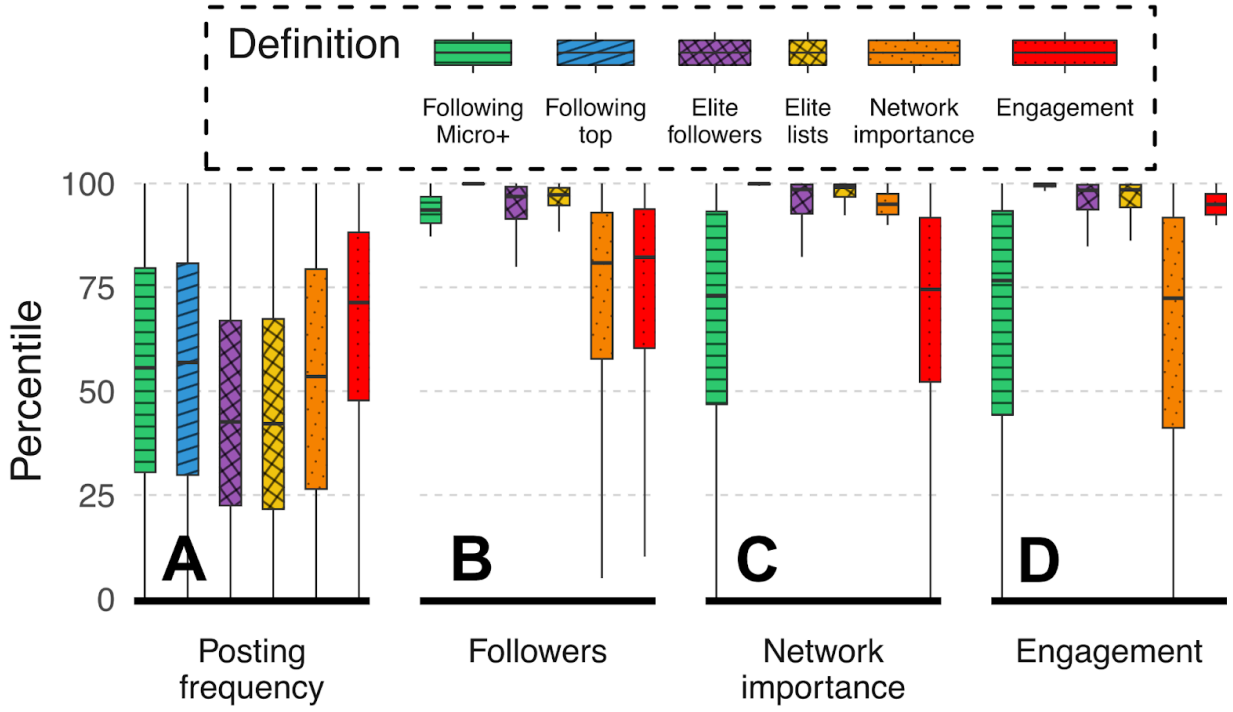


Notes: Six prominent definitions are shown (y-axis) along with the distributions of influencers' percentiles in sharing political content as a percentage of all posts.

Turning to RQ3, which focuses on variations in social media presence related to influence across multiple measures, we again find significant differences between influencer definitions (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2 > 16{,}530$, df = 5, $p < 0.001$). Figure 3 documents summary statistics for the different definitions across four behavioral and structural characteristics: (A) posting frequency, (B) followers count, (C) network importance, and (D) engagement received.

Figure 3 shows systematic variation across political influencer types based on distinctive parameters of influence and social media use. The findings for posting frequency show that influencers identified by engagement metrics are highly active influencers who post frequently (panel A), while elite-based definitions are skewed toward influencers with lower posting activity. In terms of network measures, smaller and more selective definitions (e.g., Elite Followers, Elite Lists, Following Top) tend to concentrate at the upper end of the distributions for followers (panel B), network importance (panel C), and engagement (panel D), indicating that these influencers occupy more prominent positions in the network. In contrast, broader definitions such as Following Micro+ encompass a wider range of influencers with more heterogeneous levels of visibility and connectivity. Across all panels, the figure shows that the different influencer definitions identify influencers with substantially different types of social media presence and behaviors across key measures (as also evident in the moderate and large effect sizes in Supplementary Table B1). These findings illustrate that the influencer definitions that we have operationalized are not interchangeable, as each yields distinctive variations in key measures of social media presence.

Figure 3. Variations in influencer's social media presence.

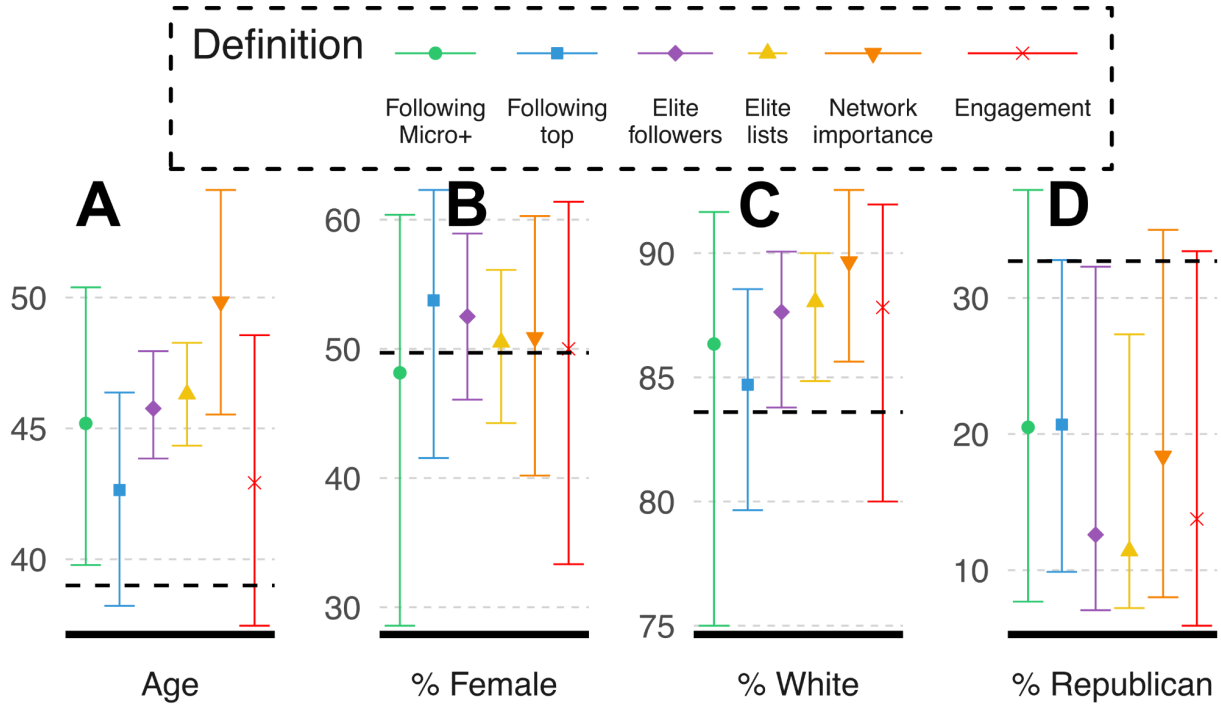


Notes: Standard boxplot statistics (y-axis; percentiles) for prominent influencer definitions (x-axis) are compared in terms of (A) Posting frequency (B) Number of followers (C) Network importance, and (D) Engagement of audiences with influencer content.

Finally, to address RQ4, we examine how audiences' demographic and partisan composition vary across the six influencer definitions. We found significant differences between definitions in terms of audience average age, and the degree of heterogeneity in gender, race/ethnicity, and partisanship (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2 > 2301.2$, df = 5, $p < 0.001$, see Table B1 for pairwise effect sizes and post-hoc tests). Figure 4 visualizes these differences, showing the median and central 50% of influencers across definitions (with statistical significance reported in Supplementary Table B1). For example, panel A shows that the median influencer identified through Network Importance has an audience age average of ~50 years old, while the median influencer identified based on Engagement has an audience age average that is younger by 7 years, and a wider age range. In terms of gender, elite-based definitions yield relatively gender-balanced audiences, while follower-based definitions include influencers with more

skewed audiences. In terms of race/ethnicity, Network Importance influencers tend to have a greater proportion of white citizens in their audience, whereas Following Top captures greater racial diversity. Partisan composition is skewed across the board: Republicans are consistently underrepresented. The findings suggest that studying audience interactions with an influencer may provide a skewed perspective on current events, especially when using Elite- or Engagement-based definitions.

Figure 4. Audience demographics and partisanship across influencer definitions.



Notes: Median influencer and central 50% of influencers (y-axis) are compared across six prominent influencer definitions (x-axis) in terms of (A) Audience average age, (B) Percent of female followers, (C) Percent of white followers, and (D) Percent of Republican followers. Dashed horizontal lines designate panel statistics.

Our robustness checks of these findings indicate that the audience differences persist when considering influencers with larger audiences (see Fig. A3) or when using vendor-inferred partisanship instead of voter-record party registration (see Fig. A4). Across all of the demographic and partisanship measures we studied, Engagement and Micro+ definitions exhibit the highest diversity, possibly capturing a broader mix of audience types. Clearly, the upstream choice of which definition one uses affects the downstream characteristics of target audiences that are studied.

Discussion

Our findings contribute new insights about the landscape of political influencers on social media, particularly regarding how influence is operationalized and what these operationalizations capture. By surveying the literature to identify multiple common approaches, and testing these approaches on the same dataset, our study illuminates the complexity of conceptualizing and measuring political influence. Our results show that existing approaches fall short of capturing a single and consistent construct, and highlight the need to develop a clearer, multi-faceted approach for examining digital political influencers more robustly. In fact, our results may imply the need for future work to identify multiple types of political influencers to avoid the appearance of cumulative knowledge where, in fact, separate literatures are forming around incomparable definitions.

The meaningful differences we have found between the groups of users defined as “influencers” based on various definitions highlight each definition’s unique focus and limitations. As shown in Figure 1, the most notable difference between the groups thus defined is their scale, but substantial differences also exist between definitions of similar size. For instance, the Following Top approach emphasizes influencers with widespread visibility, often identifying individuals whose posts are popular across various content domains beyond politics (Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Suuronen et al., 2022). Conversely, the Elite Followers definition foregrounds

influencers with direct ties to political elites, capturing those with potentially greater sway in political discourse but smaller, more ideologically homogeneous followings (Bail et al., 2018; Rose & Rohlinger, 2024). While both of these definitions identify influencers who are included in larger definitions (along with many other influencers), the relatively limited overlap between them suggests that each method captures distinct dimensions of political influence and, thus, unique groups of political influencers. Our findings suggest that using multiple existing definitions offers a more comprehensive view of who influences political discourse on social media.

The limited overlap between influencers identified by most of the various definitions suggests that political influence is a multidimensional phenomenon. High follower counts may enhance visibility and potential reach, yet elite-connected influencers can shape narratives within politically engaged communities without directly reaching mass audiences. These findings call attention to how influence operates on two primary levels: mass reach and strategic placements within elite networks, each impacting different aspects of political engagement and discourse. As a result, researchers and political practitioners aiming to focus on specific dimensions of mass engagement should focus their energies on operational definitions that specifically tap the conceptual dimensions that are most salient for their work. Practically, campaigns seeking mass mobilization or partisan agenda-setting will be best served by different operational lenses, and platform or policy interventions framed around a single definition will systematically include or exclude actors depending on which definition is chosen.

Our analysis also reveals variability in political content engagement among influencers. Some influencers are deeply embedded in political discourse in terms of both the frequency of political content posting and the prevalence of political content in relation to overall content. Others contribute political content sporadically and at a low prevalence relative to other content, which may still yield high engagement in contexts that align with audience interests or during politically charged moments. These findings align with prior research suggesting that sporadic

political engagement by popular influencers may mobilize less politically active segments of the population, while political influencers who consistently post political content may engage audiences already predisposed to political topics (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023; Mukerjee et al., 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022). These observations point to the potential for next-step research to identify whether various types of influencers succeed in shaping public opinion in distinct ways, depending on the timing and nature of their political content.

Several limitations are important to note. First, while our study's use of a high-quality dataset of registered U.S. voters matched to Twitter accounts during the 2020 U.S. presidential election offers valuable insights, social media platforms have undergone significant changes since then—including policy shifts, user demographics, and algorithms—which may impact the underlying dynamics of political influence. Similar to Mattoni et al.'s (2025) discussion of "platforms as partners" in relation to civil society organizing efforts, influencers are also in ongoing negotiation with platform logics, suggesting the need for platform-specific approaches to studying influencers (Kreiss et al., 2017). Our analysis is also characterized by practical limitations due to computational constraints and data availability, as methods such as multi-level detection techniques (e.g., PageRank, k-core decomposition) require access to complete network data, which is exceptionally rare, and is not available through our panel-based sampling design. Nonetheless, the selected definitions represent some of the most frequently and recently applied approaches in political influencer studies, allowing our work to provide a foundational empirical basis that future research can expand upon by integrating additional definitions and methods as data accessibility and computational resources improve.

In addition to these methodological considerations, several general characteristics commonly associated with influencers are not fully captured by our data, including the dimensions of personalized communication, monetization, authenticity, and autonomy identified by Dubois and Dommett (2025) and others (e.g., Harff et al., 2026; Riedl et al., 2023). While central to broader understandings of influencer culture, these dimensions fall outside the scope

of our dataset and measurement strategy. This gap indicates a potentially important area for future research. For example, Magin and Geiß (2019) highlight that autonomy from elite actors can shape how communicators operate in hybrid media systems, suggesting that unaffiliated influencers may be perceived differently in terms of trust and impact. Similarly, Nicholls and Culpepper (2021) show that computational methods often miss subtle rhetorical frames, underscoring the need for future research that combines behavioral metrics with deeper qualitative analysis. More broadly, the pragmatism of available platform data—-including what APIs make available, and what behavioral traces are loggable—has likely shaped which operational definitions of "political influencer" have proliferated in the literature, privileging dimensions that platforms make measurable (e.g., followers, engagement, network ties) over those that require qualitative or survey-based access (e.g., authenticity, monetization). Our study reflects this pattern even as it works to make the resulting definitional choices more visible and comparable.

Conclusion

This study addressed four core questions: (1) How much the leading operational definitions of "political influencer" overlap, (2) how the prevalence of political content varies across definitions, (3) how influencer definitions co-vary across key measures of their social media presence, and (4) how the demographic and partisan makeup of influencers' audiences shifts with each definition. Our findings show that these definitional choices are far from cosmetic. The groups identified by each of the six operational definitions varied substantially, indicating that different studies often examine largely disjoint populations of influencers. Definitions grounded in elite connectivity or network position spotlight highly political accounts with smaller audiences that are situated at the center of information flows, whereas follower- and engagement-based definitions capture much broader, more behaviorally diverse groups that speak about politics

only intermittently. These upstream definitional decisions, in turn, shape the downstream composition of the audiences of distinctive types of influencers. The choice in how we identify political influencers, in this sense, is not a prelude to analysis but a substantive theoretical commitment that shapes what any analysis can find.

Taken together, the results underscore that “who counts” as a political influencer, and therefore whose messages appear salient in any analysis, depends heavily on the conceptual lens applied. Treating a single definition as definitive risks obscuring critical segments of the influencer ecology and distorting conclusions about political communication online. Our findings show that a more transparent, multidimensional framework—one that acknowledges the complementary insights of audience size, elite ties, network importance, and engagement—offers a clearer path for theory development and empirical replication.

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SUPPLEMENTARY FILE - ONLINE APPENDIX

Section A. Robustness checks

Section B. Supplementary analyses

Section A. Robustness checks

Figure A1. Number of accounts included by quartile of political content

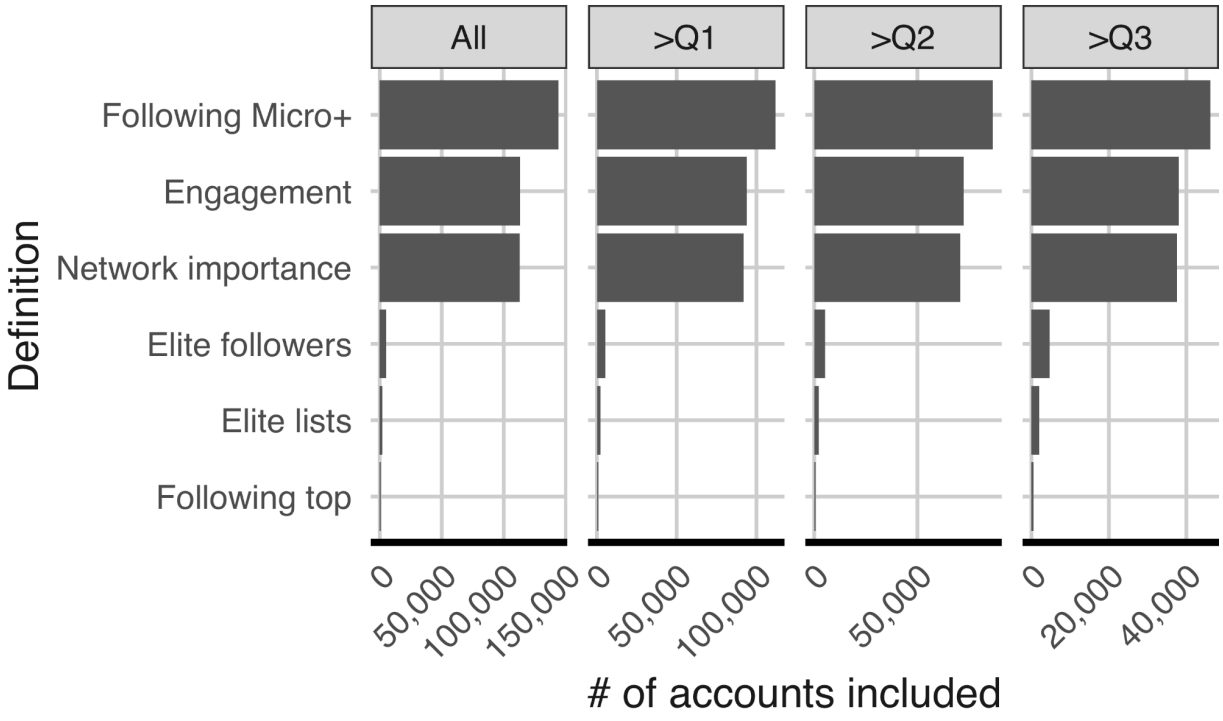


Figure A2. Overlap between influencer definitions by quartile of political content. Each point represents the percent of political influencers identified by one definition that are also included in another definition.

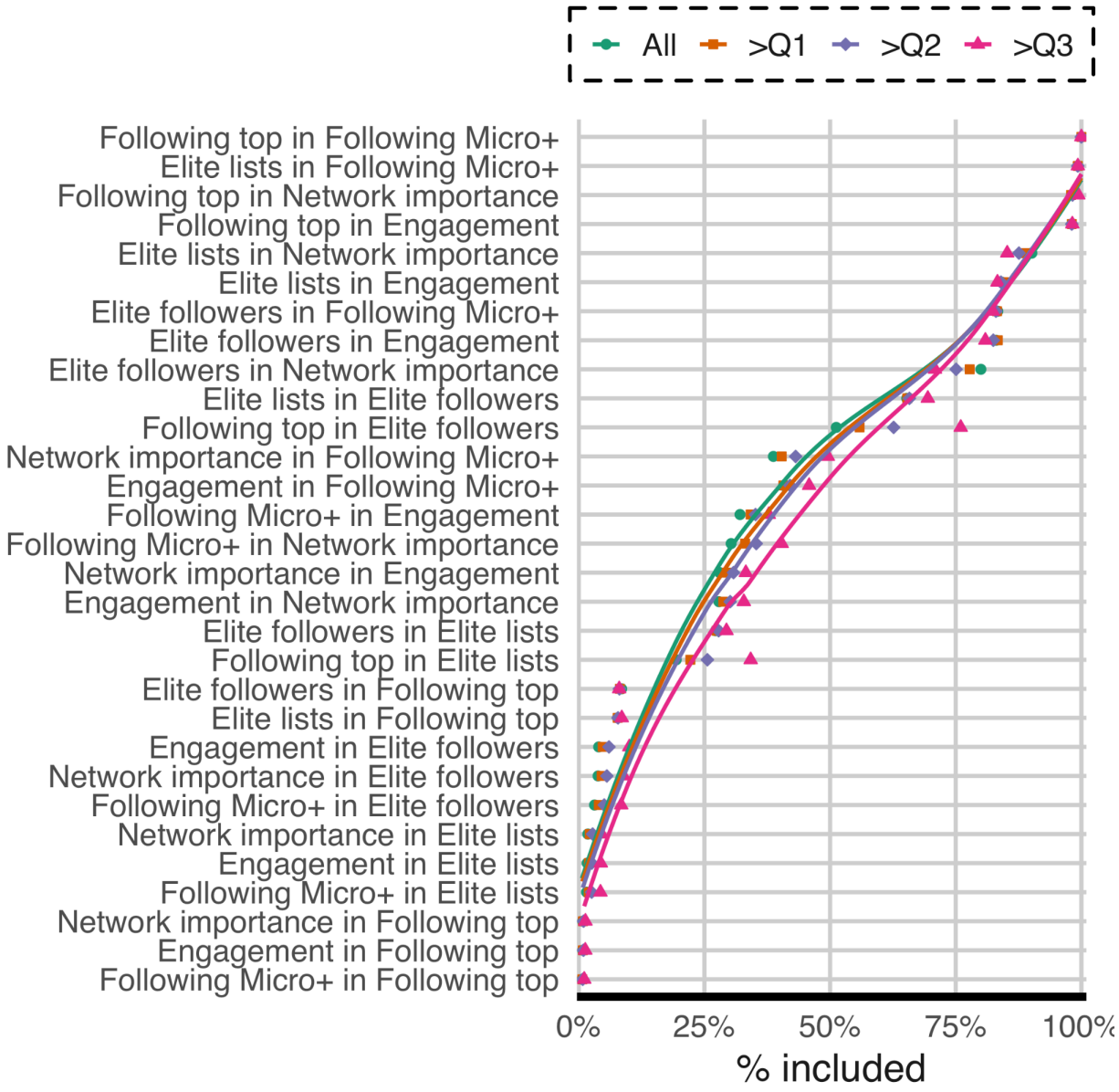


Figure A3. Robustness to different audience size thresholds. Just like Figure 4 in the main text, this figure shows the median influencer and central 50% of influencers (y-axis) across six definitions of influencers (x-axis) and variables (panels A-D). In contrast to Fig. 4, the set of influencers in each definition is limited to users with 30 or more panel followers. Dashed horizontal lines designate panel statistics.

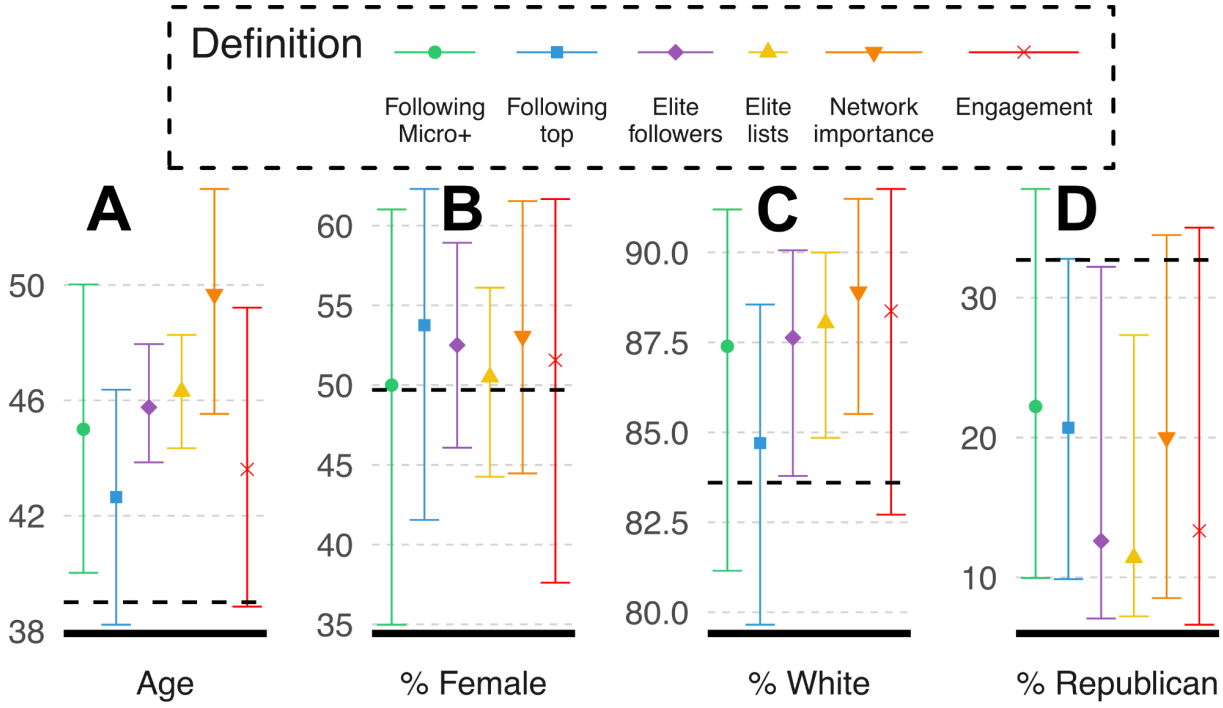
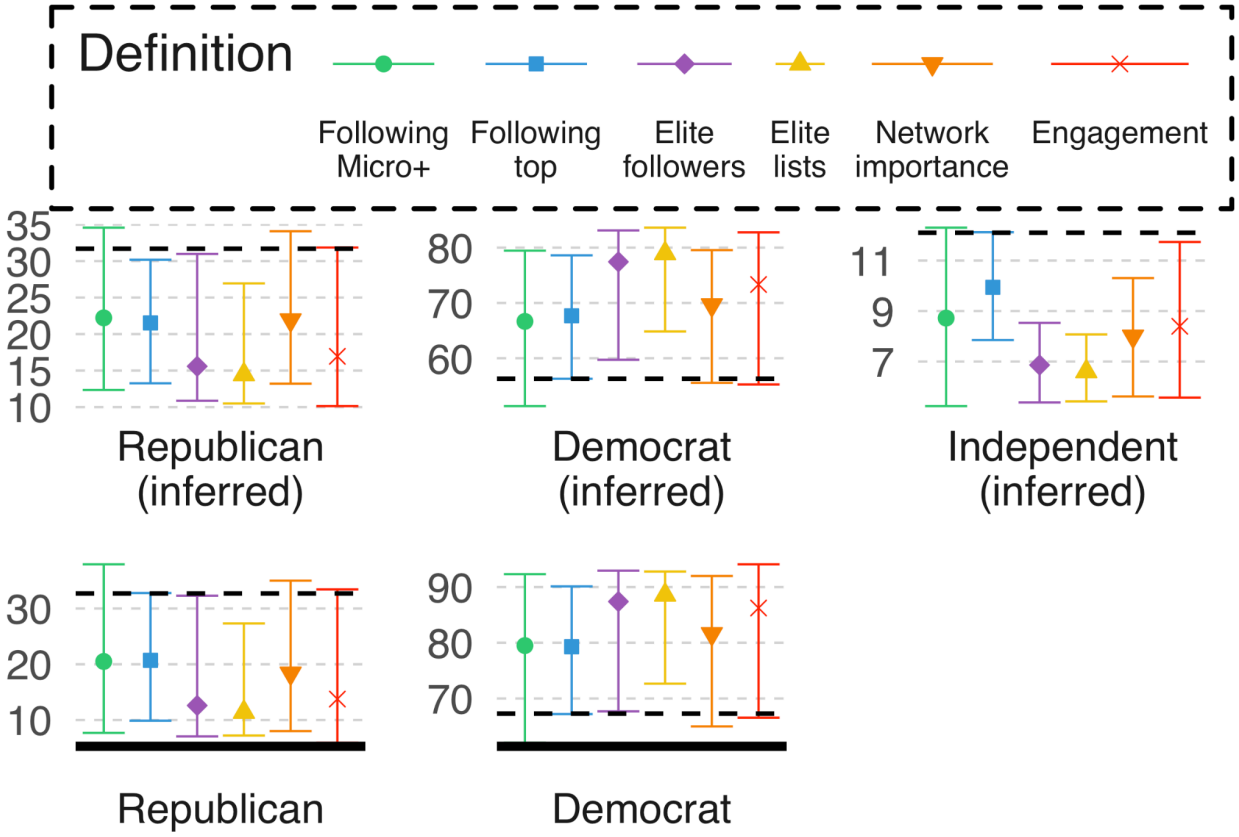
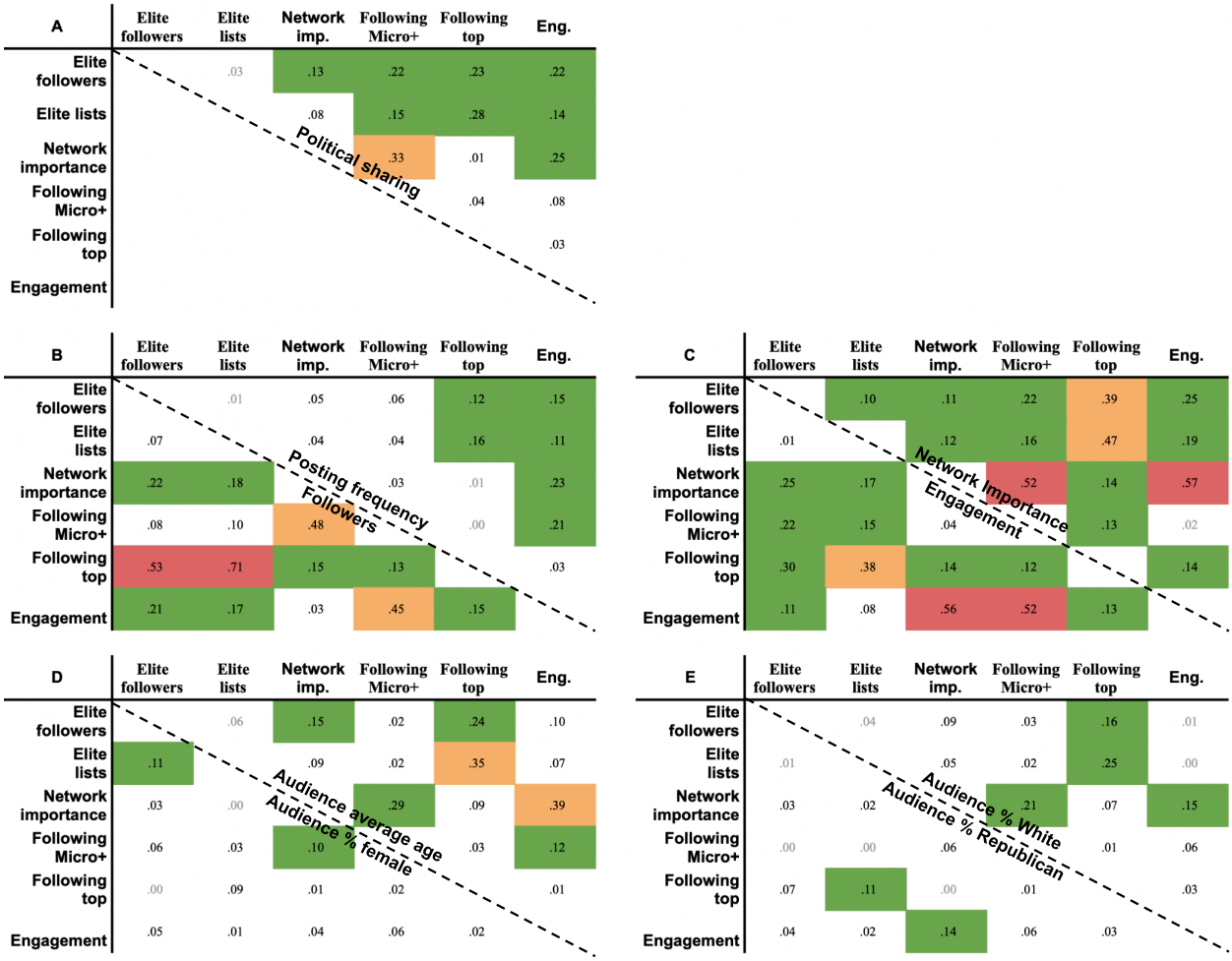


Figure A4. Robustness to different partisanship measures. Six prominent definitions are compared (x-axis) in terms of audience percentage of Republicans, Democrats, or Independents (y-axis). Top panels show the composition of influencers' audience based on inferred partisanship, while the bottom panels show audience breakdown based on self-reported partisanship (excluding Independents, which have different meanings according to state rules on registration). Dashed horizontal lines designate panel statistics. Note that self-reported and inferred partisanship have different scales (as expected), but the relative positioning of the different definitions is largely preserved when using self-reported or inferred partisanship.



Section B. Supplementary Analyses

Table B1. Statistical significance of differences and effect sizes. Effect sizes (Wilcoxon) are shown for differences between influencer definitions in political sharing (panel A), posting frequency and number of followers (panel B), network importance and engagement (panel C), and audience characteristics (age and gender in panel D; race and partisanship in panel E). Cells are colored based on the common interpretation of values in 0.1-0.3 representing small effects (green), 0.3-0.5 representing moderate effects (orange), and 0.5-1.0 representing large effects (red). All pairwise differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$ using two-sided post-hoc significance Dunn test with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparison), except for 16/135 pairs, which are indicated by light-colored (gray) font.



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