

The Podcast Candidate: Examining the Utility of Podcasts as a Campaigning Tool

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Abstract

Podcasts are a popular form of media that people use for entertainment and news. As voters in the United States increasingly turn towards alternative forms of media for information, podcasts have filled a key niche in market, demonstrating a capacity to inform voters and sway opinions across various audiences. During the lead-up to the 2024 United States Presidential Election, both Vice President Kamala Harris and President-Elect Donald Trump appeared as guests on podcasts as part of their campaign strategy. This paper uses a research survey to gauge college students' opinions on this form of campaigning, alongside relevant data from other studies that show the rise in popularity of political podcasts. Research among college students indicates that podcasts can potentially be normalized as a form of campaigning, as audiences search for sources beyond the traditional news media.

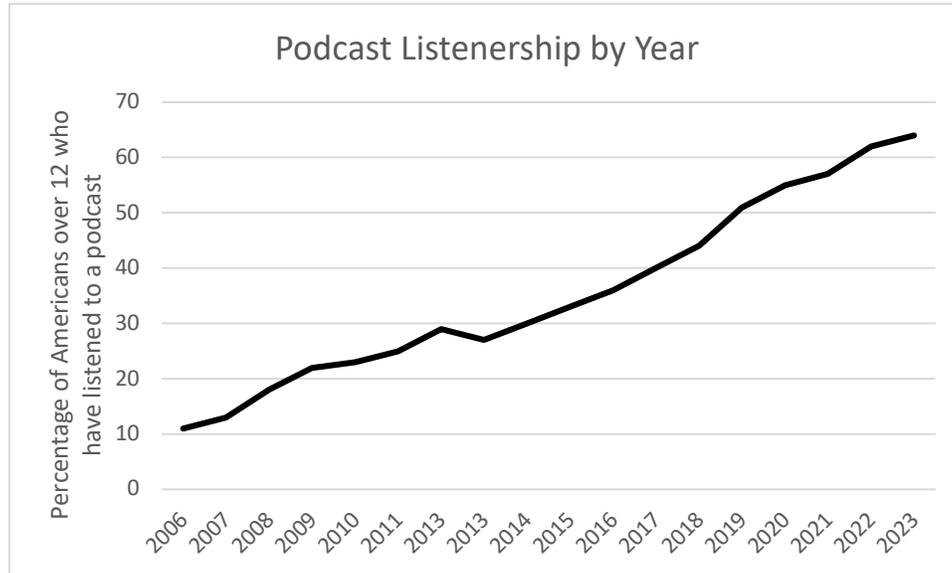
Introduction

Americans interact with multiple mediums of communication and media on the internet every day, including videos, blogs, and games. More than other types of content, however, podcasts have retained relevancy since their formal invention in 2005 through a high-level of accessibility across platforms (Bottomley, 2015). Podcasts are audio-only, so audiences can engage with them by simply listening. This allows audiences to enjoy podcasts more flexibly than forms of media that require higher levels of engagement.

Podcasts' flexibility and high accessibility have allowed for significant audience growth over the years. According to Pew Research Center (2023), monthly podcast listenership has risen from 12% in 2013 to 42% in 2023 (Table 1). As podcast audiences grow, businesses and organizations are increasingly investing in advertisements on popular shows. This shift comes as

traditionally reliable methods, such as television ads, are experiencing declining success and viewership. A survey from Civic Science shows that 25% of people actively pay attention to advertisements that are shown on TV (Commisso, 2022). In contrast, another survey indicates that 35% of podcast listeners actively pay attention to ads read on podcasts (Acast Team, 2022).

Table 1 (from Pew Research Center)



As media trends evolve throughout the decades, political campaign strategies have often been forced to stay in tune with viewership rates and audience engagement, responding to changes by adapting their strategies to maximize exposure. Research demonstrates that political ads always increase in volume in the weeks prior to elections, with some television ads re-airing thousands of times during the final stretch (Holman & McLoughlin, 2001). With political groups, lobbyists, and specific candidates willing to spend exorbitant amounts of money, and advertisers looking to diversify their audiences, campaign strategists have begun to branch out to alternative media platforms more than ever (Clark, 2024).

Following these campaign strategies, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump appeared on different podcasts before the 2024 United States Presidential Election as a form of campaigning.

This continues a trend set in the 2010s by other major political leaders and takes advantage of the millions of viewers tuning in daily. This relatively new tactic of campaigning sparked discourse from across the political spectrum, as the heightened popularity of podcasts has begun to reshape the news media landscape. This paper contextualizes this discourse and the current political trends existing amongst modern podcast audiences and uses a survey amongst college students to gauge the potential efficacy of podcasts as a campaigning tool.

Literature Review

In today's so-called podcast renaissance, audiences can choose from over 400 million podcasts designed to appeal to all different types of listeners (Harutyunyan, 2024). Individuals can turn to podcasts for entertainment, news updates, advice, and more. As niche as some podcast topics may be, the growing number of podcasts has cemented their popularity. As a result, some people are beginning to acknowledge podcasts as a reputable form of journalism, and trust among podcast audiences that the information they are hearing is reliable is only slightly below the credibility of major news networks (Whipple et al., 2022). This increase in credibility can be linked to the increase in listeners using podcasts as their primary source of news (Bargielska, 2024).

Currently, the most successful podcast in the United States is The Joe Rogan Experience (Spangler, 2023). The Joe Rogan Experience is a controversial podcast – Joe Rogan has been accused of disseminating false information and popularizing conspiracy theories. He has hosted several controversial conservative and “extremist” figures on his podcast, which increased his visibility and created discourse. Rogan's relevance in popular culture grew even further in 2024, as Donald Trump and his running mate J. D. Vance chose to appear on his podcast towards the

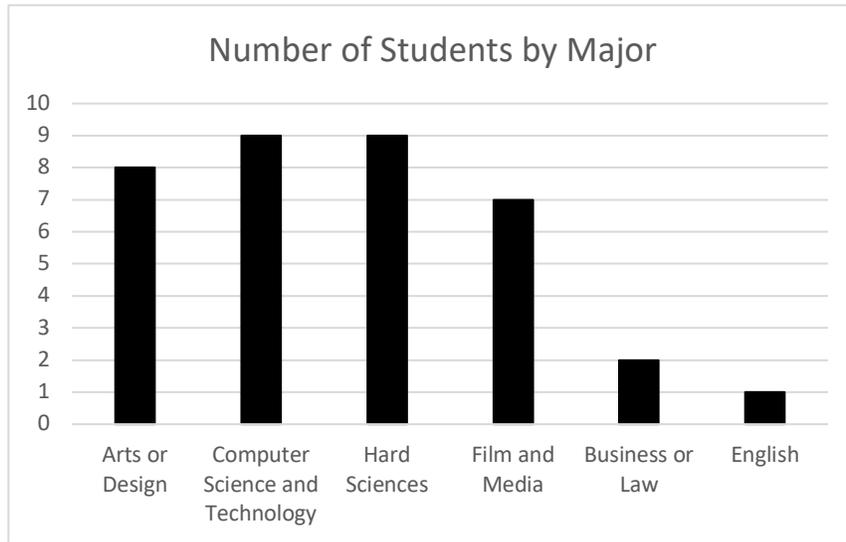
end of the 2024 presidential campaign. Paralleling this, Kamala Harris also chose to appear on widely popular podcasts on the campaign trail, appearing on shows like Alex Cooper's Call Her Daddy, which is described as "the most listened to podcast by women" (Cooper). Despite the popularity of Cooper's show, however, recent listenership numbers still show Rogan in the number one spot, while Cooper is in eighth place (Buzzsprout, 2024).

Among the growing number of podcast listeners, demographics indicate that young people are often the target audience for programs and podcasts. In a recent study, 67% of people 18-29 years old stated that they have listened to at least one podcast in 2023, with only 28% saying the same in the 65+ age demographic (Sherer et al., 2023). College students have also identified that one of the reasons they listen to podcasts is for information (Craig et al., 2021). As candidates appear on podcasts and other forms of alternative media, younger audiences are becoming exposed to campaigns that they otherwise may not have tuned in to.

Method

A survey was distributed to college students at the University of Cincinnati with a series of questions regarding the appearance of political candidates on podcasts. The desired audience included students of varying academic disciplines, ages, and gender identities. Students in this survey are mostly pursuing arts, technology, or science majors, with other academic groups rounding out the rest of the results (Table 2).

Table 2



Students identified their grade level (Table 3) and their gender identity (Table 4).

Table 3

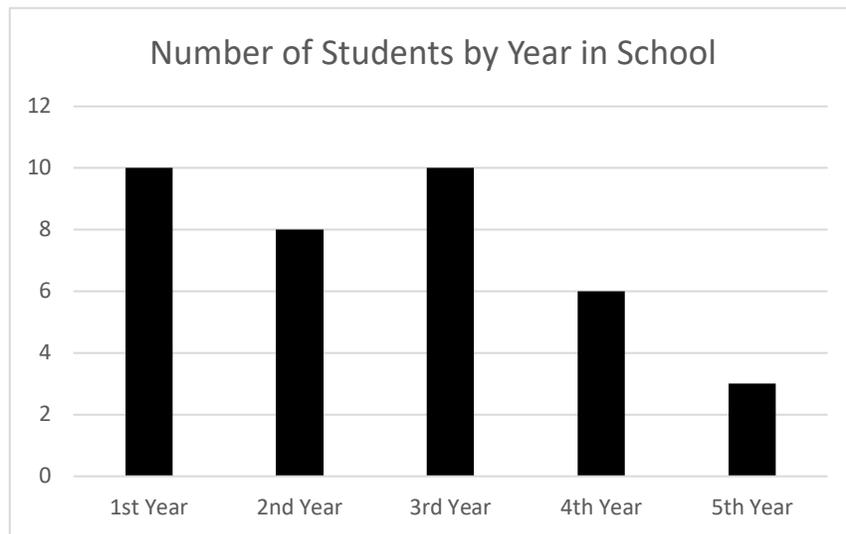
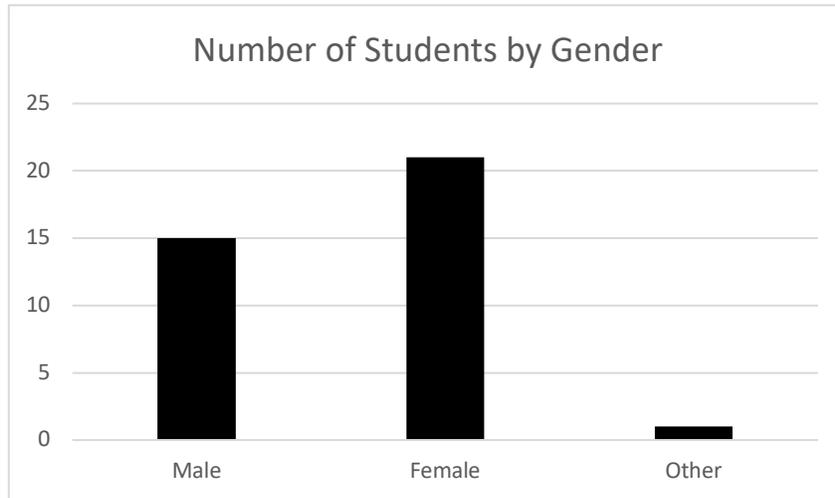
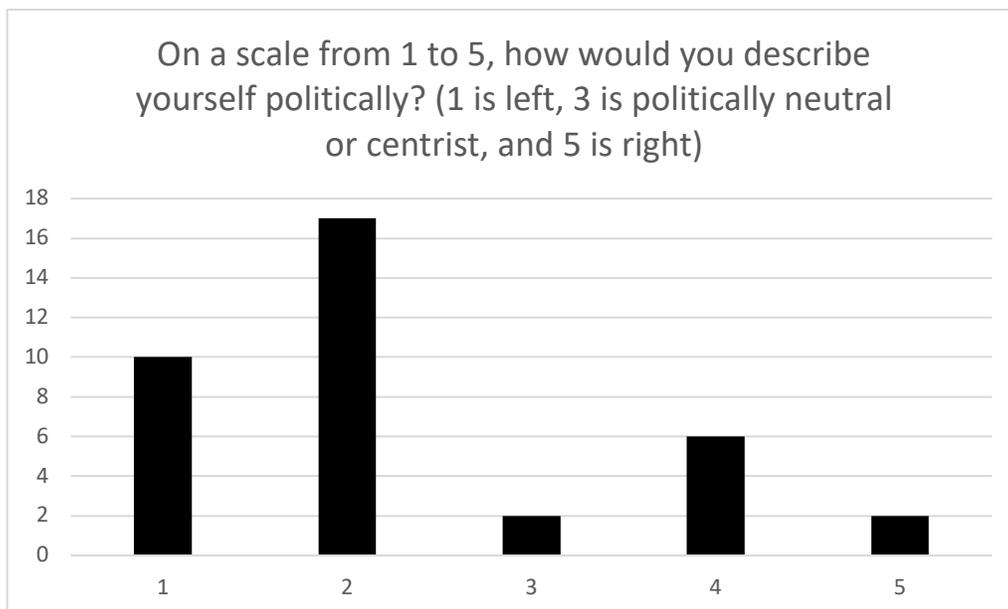


Table 4



Students identified their political bias (Table 5).

Table 5



Question topics included the number of podcasts students listen to, the amount of political content they regularly consume, and the impact they perceive podcasts to have on the political landscape. Additionally, students were given the opportunity to give their opinions on both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump's appearances on podcasts.

Results

The majority of students in this survey listen to podcasts and consume political content at least occasionally (58.3% and 95.8% respectively). Many students note that they use the internet to consume political content. Sources include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, X, and other social media platforms.

Among the surveyed group, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris' appearances on podcasts influenced the students in a similar way; students overwhelmingly indicated that their appearances did not impact their political opinions (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6

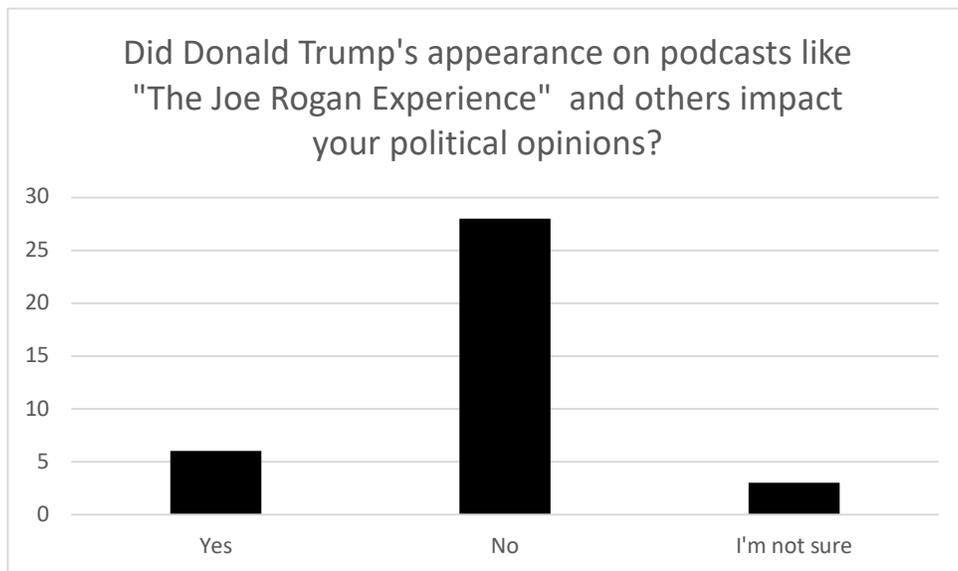
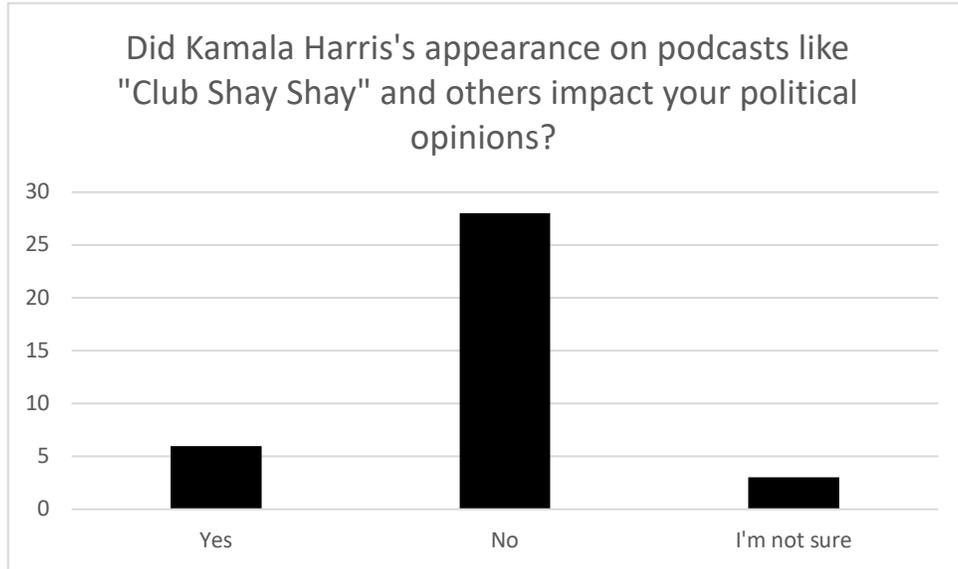


Table 7



Donald Trump’s podcast appearances negatively affected opinions slightly more than Kamala Harris’ appearances. Between the two candidates, Trump’s appearances made three students less likely to vote for him, while Harris’ appearances only made two students less likely to vote for her (Tables 8 and 9).

Table 8

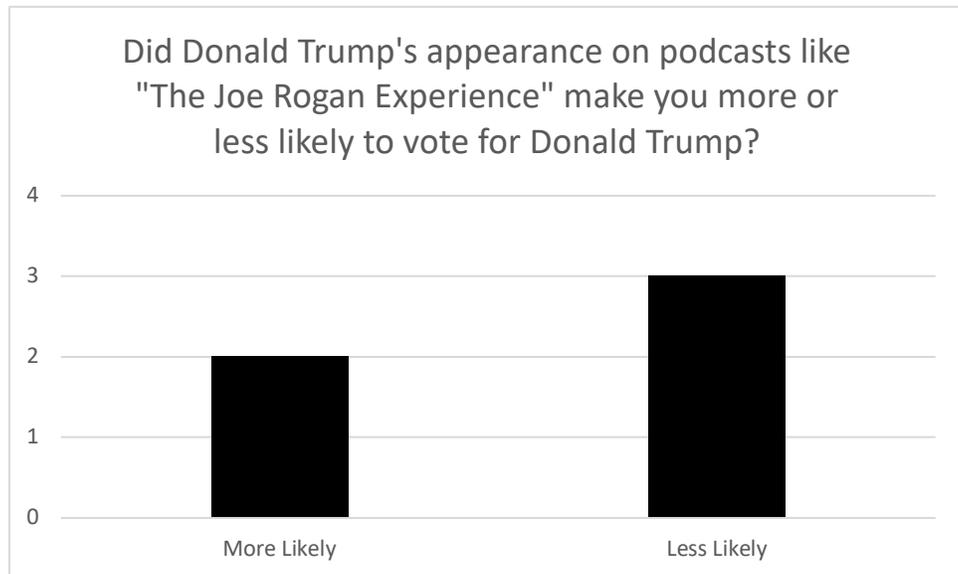
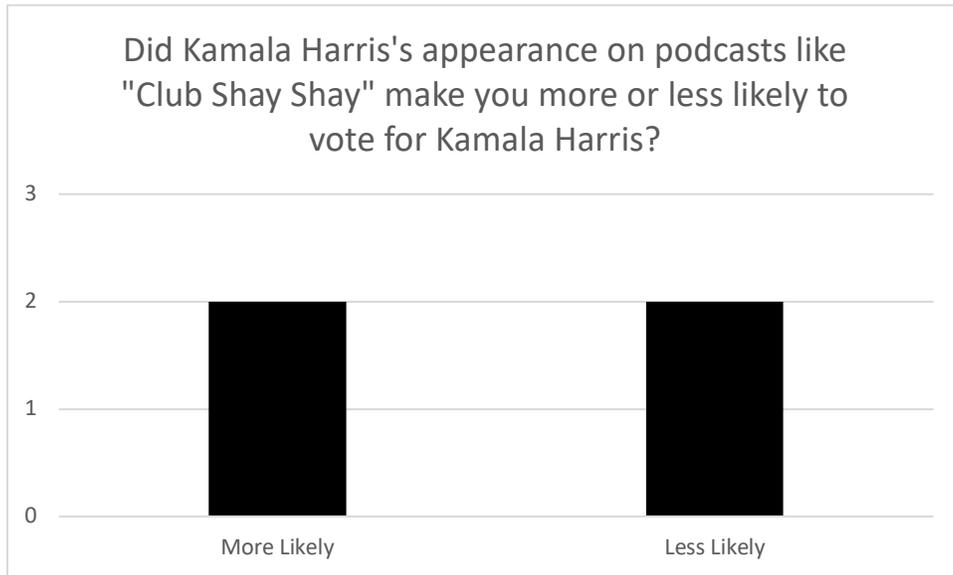
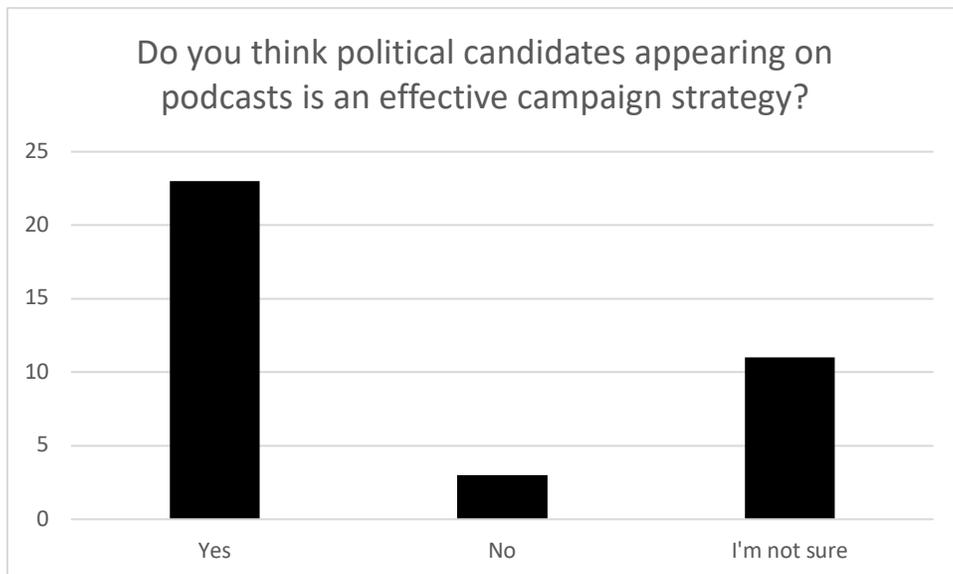


Table 9



Overwhelmingly, students agreed that political candidates appearing on podcasts was an effective campaign strategy (Table 10). Only 8.1% of respondents thought that it was not an effective strategy.

Table 10



Students offered additional written thoughts. One student wrote that podcast appearances "...can either encourage or discourage undecided voters based on how the candidate comes off as genuine or fake." Another student commented, "I would say that simply appearing in a podcast I listen to (if I did listen to podcasts) would not be enough to sway my opinion in one way or another. What could sway me, however, is their talking points in the podcast."

Discussion

Among this group of students, it is clear that podcasts can be received as part of an effective campaign strategy. While not all students listened to podcasts frequently, students overwhelmingly agreed that podcasts can be used as part of a successful campaign strategy, and the candidates' podcast appearances did sway some opinions.

Interestingly, this campaigning impacted about the same number of students, with both podcast appearances making two students more likely to vote for the candidates. Conversely, both candidates had students become less likely to vote for them due to their podcast appearances. While this may seem like it detracts from the effectiveness of podcast campaigning, these statistics could be an example of confirmation bias, with listeners allowing the podcasts to reaffirm their positive or negative opinions of the candidates; if a listener already viewed a candidate favorably or unfavorably, it's possible that the candidate's appearance on the podcast would reinforce their feelings.

While confirmation bias can relate directly to listeners' opinions of the candidates, it can also apply to their opinions of the podcast hosts. As mentioned earlier, Donald Trump appeared on The Joe Rogan Experience, a popular, yet controversial, podcast. Since Rogan is a popular figure to some and a controversial figure to others, his presence could be enough to sway

people's opinions alone. Rogan's controversies could also account for why Trump saw one more person less likely to vote for him than Harris, as the association could be enough to change someone's mind.

Many students reported that the podcast appearances did not directly impact their political opinions, specifically in regards as to who they were planning to vote for. However, this does not necessarily mean that podcasts are an ineffective campaigning tool. The indifferent responses could indicate that the campaign appearances convert moderate or centrist students more than students with strong pre-established political convictions. Only 5.4% of students identified as politically centrist, and a total of 32.4% of students identified as being completely left-leaning or completely right-leaning. It's possible that because the students polled had strong convictions, these appearances impacted them less. Campaigning with podcasts potentially changes the opinions of center-leaning voters more than partisan voters.

Additionally, while some students listen to podcasts regularly and listened to these campaign episodes specifically, about 31% of students do not listen to podcasts and about 29% of students listen to podcasts infrequently. It is interesting to note, though, that even students who do not listen to podcasts still agree that podcasts are an effective campaign strategy. Listening or not, these appearances impact voters. Appearances generate additional discussion online and can be used to appeal to new groups of people.

Based on the results of my survey, candidate appearances on podcasts seem to boost their visibility amongst university-age young adults. Candidates appearing on podcasts sway the opinions of some college students and appear to be effective to students who are not swayed in their political convictions. In the future, reviewing more campaign appearances on podcasts will likely help cement podcast appearances' effects on audiences and voter inclinations. Based on

future results, we could see the efficacy of podcasts alter established campaigning trends and potentially see more candidates use these strategies in the future.

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