The Mediating Role of Offline Political Participation in the Relationship Between Social Capital and Online Political Participation in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how bonding and bridging social capital in affecting online political participation through offline political participation. This study tests the mediating role of offline political participation in the relationship between two types of social capital and online participation, and examines the mobilization and reinforcement hypotheses by analyzing a nationally-representative adult sample in Taiwan. Results suggest that offline political participation mediates the relationship between two types of social capital and online participation. The findings provide more support for a resource reinforcement hypothesis rather than a mobilization hypothesis.

Keywords: social capital, offline political participation, online political participation

1. INTRODUCTION

Political participation refers to activity that has direct or indirect influence on policy processes or government action [1]. Political participation can be divided into two types: offline participation and online participation [2]. Large bodies of studies examine the predictors of offline participation, while the issue on online political participation is understudied. A study has shown that online political participation increases the frequency of online contacts and minimizes the potential conflicts between two rival groups [3]. It has been widely recognized that resources are important to any type of participation [4.5]. Given that social capital is a specific resource embedded in the social relationship and related to offline and online political participation [15], the study contributes to the development in the field of online participation by understanding how bonding and bridging social capital influence political participation in a virtual world.

The mobilization and reinforcement hypotheses, which link resources with offline and online political participation, may provide a mediational model. The mobilization hypothesis has indicated that, when the extent of online activism increases in proportion to the frequency of internet use, the mobilization effect of internet resources is greater among offline inactive respondents than among their offline active counterparts [6]. Another competing argument, the reinforcement hypothesis, doubts that internet resources attract traditionally disengaged people into politics [7] and argues that online political activists are privileged people who are already active via traditional channels [8.9]. In other words, internet resources do not change the existing pattern of political involvement. Resourceful groups who engage in online political activities simply reflect the established pattern of traditional participation (also termed offline participation), and this reinforces unequal participation along existing lines of socioeconomic stratification. While social capital has been defined as resources embedded in interpersonal relationships [10] and considered as a strong predictor of offline participation [11.12.13], little attention has been paid to the association between social capital, offline political participation and online political involvement in the Digital Age. To fill the void, this study aims to explore whether offline political participation mediates the relationship between two types of social capital and online political participation.

2. SOCIAL CAPITAL AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Social resources embedded in social networks can be mobilized to facilitate certain action [10]. Resources, such as norms of reciprocity, trust, and information, vary with the degree of the closeness in social relationships. Putnam claimed two types of social capital: bonding and bridging capital [13]. Bonding social capital has been conceptualized as co-operative relations between group members who are similar in terms of social backgrounds and shared identity. The concept is similar to strong tie which is defined as intimate ties with family and close friends [14.15]. Bridging social capital refers to trusting relations between dissimilar people in terms of some socio-demographic backgrounds. Bridging social capital is

more likely to be embedded in weak tie characterized by less intensity, less intimacy, and less frequent contact [10]. Bonding social capital is usually measured by the extent of interaction or familiarity with family members, relatives, and friends [16.15]. Bridging social ties theoretically follows Putnam's concepts and measures the number and types of nonpolitical organizational membership [17.11.14].

In Confucian culture, a bonding social network promotes the possibility of being mobilized to join political activities [17]. Pan find that bonding social resource indicators increase online political participation [18]. Evidence shows that bridging social capital, measured by the total number of nonpolitical organizations accessed (called extensity), is found to increase participation in traditionally non-electoral and collective activities [19.11]. In comparison with individual socioeconomic factors and political attitudes, participation in non-political associations has the strongest explanatory power for many forms of political participation except for voting in Mexico [12]. Given that social capital is more associated with non-electoral political activities than with electoral activities, offline and online political participation in the current study will focus on non-electoral modes of participation. Empirical results from Wang et al reveal that bridging social capital (measured by expressive memberships in high school and in college) predicts college students' online political participation in China [20]. Yet they do not consider the functions of bonding and bridging social capital simultaneously.

3. THE MOBILIZATION AND REINFORCEMENT HYPOTHESES

As mentioned above, mobilization hypothesis holds optimistic expectations of the internet in mobilizing participants inactive in political activities offline to be involved in them online, thus equalizing political participation. The reinforcement hypothesis posits that the internet does not transform stratified patterns of political involvement but instead can exacerbate existing inequalities in political participation. The two arguments may be applied in social capital research, because social capital acts as a kind of resource necessary for political participation [17.11.12]. Although online political participation is relatively costless and not subject to spatiotemporal restrictions [20], it remains time-consuming to search for political activities that not merely satisfy the self-interest of actors but also promote the public good. The networks accessed make relevant information and necessary civic skills available to individuals, which may benefit their online involvement in political activities.

According to the mobilization hypothesis, accessed resources embedded in bonding and bridging networks should directly influence online participation, regardless of offline participation. If social capital has its significant effects, it is necessary to divide respondents into three groups – such as inactive, moderately active and active in offline settings [6] – because this helps identify whether resources mobilize individuals who are traditionally inactive.

In the reinforcement hypothesis, it is believed that online political participation merely mirrors existing patterns of participation [6]. Online political activists are those who are already active in traditional modes of political participation [8.9]. A longitudinal study had found that offline participation spilled over into online participation in an adult group, but that the reverse relation was not observed [2]. As such, offline participation may play a key role in mediating the association between resources and political involvement online. The effect of accessed resources may become insignificant or weakened after controlling for offline political participation. As a result, online political participation reinforces the established inequality in participation due to traditionally inactive citizens still being marginalized in online political avenues. Following the line of this reinforcement argument, accessed resources would be utilized by already-active participants in order to make their appeal heard in the virtual world.

The above discussion clarifies the main difference between the two conflicting hypotheses, namely, whether social capital has a direct influence on political participation online. If social capital in terms of network resources significantly associates with online participation, net of political activities offline, network resources are viewed as good for each citizen. In the sense, the mobilization hypothesis would be supported because online avenues for political participation become available to those with wider network sizes and greater resources. In contrast, when offline political participation fully mediates the association between social capital and online participation, it reflects the failure of network resources to mobilize specific populations and this supports the reinforcement hypothesis. It is worthwhile to note that the two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, especially the partial mediation effect which occurs. Nam found that the internet not merely drew those not politically involved into online politics but also reinforced the existing offline participation [6]. Results on internet effects seem mixed, in consequence, it remains unclear whether social capital is able to mobilize offline inactive groups, to reinforce the existing pattern of political participation or to play a dual role in the process of political participation online.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Sample

This study used data collected from the Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS) in the Fall of 2014 – a representative sample of adults aged 18 years and older. The TSCS, which adopted stratified multi-stage sampling with probability proportional to size, was designed to

collect data. The sampling and informed consent procedures were conducted by the Academia Sinica of Taiwan. The TSCS sampled 1,875 adults, with a response rate of 53%. The number of samples with missing values was 247. A total of 1,628 respondents with complete data were analyzed.

4.2. Variables

4.2.1. Social Capital Measurement: Network Resources

Accessed network resources in the bonding and bridging social ties were measured using position generator and internal organization resource methods respectively. These methods assessed whether respondents know their relatives and friends who were lawyers, nurses, policemen and taxi drivers, and whether respondents participated in non-political organizations such as trade unions, religious organizations and sports, leisure or cultural groups. As stated earlier, extensity in both types of social network was measured by summing up the social network. In the position generator, occupational status scores developed by Ganzeboom and Treiman were used to assess the highest occupational prestige score of some occupations accessed by respondents, namely, upper reachability [21]. Prestige scores in the limited occupational list ranged from 73 to 31. This range was calculated by subtracting the lowest prestige score from the highest. Weights for constructing a component score of accessed resources were from factor analysis (0.98 extensity+0.89 upper reachability+ 0.92 range of prestige score)

Earlier studies suggested the use of a two-step approach for the measurement of range of resource and upper reachability score in the bridging network [5]. First, socioeconomic indices including education and income variables (four categories, designated 1-4) were chosen and their mean values were calculated by membership of three voluntary associations. Each respondent was assigned a score of mean organization resources in terms of education and income. If a respondent had membership in all three organizations, they given three different scores. In the second step, factor analysis of the two resource measures was conducted and yielded a one-factor solution. Respondents were given the highest score of organizational resources if they had any membership in the organizations. The range of resource score was assessed in the same way as the range of prestige score in the position generator.

4.2.2. Measures of Offline and Online Political Participation

In the present study, offline participation measured the extent of their offline participation in the following activities: (1) petition; (2) boycott; (3) demonstration; (4) attending a political meeting or campaign; (5) contacting a politician or a civil servant to express their views; (6) donation; and (7) expressing views in the media. Response options ranged from 1 ('have not done it and would never do it') to 4 ('have done it in the past year'). The five items measuring political involvement online or on social networking sites were (1) browsing politics-related information; (2) sharing information about civic issues; (3) expressing political issues; (4) joining political communities; and (5) using internet as a platform to participate in political activities. These were assessed using a four-point Likert scale with 1 (never) to 4 (very often). Oblimin rotated factor analysis shows that two distinct factors account for 52.2% of the item variance. Alpha coefficients are 0.76 for offline participation and 0.83 for online participation. The higher the factor scores, the more active people were in participating in offline and online political activities.

4.2.3. Control Variables

Demographic variables included: gender (male and female), age, education (elementary school or less, junior high school, senior high school, and college or post-graduate), monthly income (NT$10,000 or less, NT$10,001 to 30,000, NT$30,001 to 50,000, and NT$50,001 and more; equal to about US$322, US$968, US$1,613, and above). Internet use, media use, external efficacy, and generalized trust which relate to political participation were also included. Internet use assessed the frequency of personal internet use. Response options ranged from 1 (never use the internet) to 3 (at least once a day). Media use was consisted of five items on evaluating how often they used the media. Generalized trust scale was a three-item scale to measure respondents' perceptions of faith in people – including general trust, mutual help, and fair treatment. A factor score of generalized trust was constructed through factor analysis as media use did. Higher scores denoted frequent internet use and media use, and high social trust.

4.3. Statistical Analysis

Besides descriptive information, linear regression modeling analysis was used to examine the relationship of social capital with offline political participation as well as with online political involvement. To avoid the multicollinearity problem and to deepen the understanding of the effects of the two resource measures, the association of extensity with dependent variable was presented in Model 1 after controlling for covariates. Accessed resource component score was presented in Model 2. In order to understand the mediation effect, the effects of two types of social capital on dependent variable before and after the inclusion of offline participation were also shown in the analysis. Once either extensity or a component score was significantly associated with online political

involvement, this study further divided the sample into three subsamples such as inactive (32.9%), moderately active (33.7%), and active (33.4%) in the offline setting. For key predictors and covariates in the analytic model, values of tolerance larger than .5 and those of VIF below 2 denotes a low risk of multicollinearity after analyzing data with SPSS 22.0.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows that more than 65% of Taiwanese adults know their relatives and friends who were lawyers, nurses, policemen and taxi drivers (extensity of bonding social capital). Of the seven forms of offline political activities, participation in donation or fundraising appears to be the easiest, with a mean score of 1.09. By comparison with offline political participation, online participation seems to be passive rather than active among the general population: most adults prefer browsing politics-related information (0.98).

Table 1. Summaries of All Variables Used in The Study

	Mean (SD)	N (%)
Bonding social capital		
Extensity	1.20 (1.14)	1066 (65.5%)
Upper reachability	35.70 (27.83)	
Range of prestige score	8.53 (12.90)	
Bonding component score	0.00 (1.00)	
Bridging social capital		
Extensity	0.99 (0.86)	1100 (67.6%)
Upper reachability	0.00 (1.00)	
Range of resource score	0.00 (1.00)	
Bridging component score	0.00 (1.00)	
Offline political participation score	0.00 (1.00)	
Petition	0.89 (0.94)	
Boycott	1.04 (1.07)	
Demonstration	0.53 (0.81)	
Political meeting or rally	0.57 (0.86)	
Contact with politicians	0.60 (0.79)	
Donation or fundraising	1.09 (1.11)	
Expressing views in the media	0.42 (0.70)	
Online political participation score	0.00 (1.00)	
Browsing politics-related information	0.98 (1.19)	
Sharing information about civic issues	0.41 (0.78)	
Expressing political issues	0.24 (0.58)	
Joining political communities	0.29 (0.68)	
Using internet as a platform	0.17 (0.52)	
Control variables		
Age	45.44 (17.30)	
Internet use	2.29 (0.92)	
Media use	0.00 (1.00)	
Generalized trust	0.00 (1.00)	
Male		828 (50.9%)
Education		
Elementary school or less		283 (17.4%)
Junior high school		160 (9.8%)
Senior high school		430 (26.4%)
College or post-graduate		755 (46.4%)
Personal income		
NT$10,000 (US$322) or less		403 (24.8%)
NT$10,001 to 30,000 (US$968)		536 (32.9%)
NT$30,001 to 50,000 (US$1,613)		408 (25.1%)
NT$50,001 and more		281 (17.2%)

Note: N=1,628.

As expected, offline political participation is the strongest predictor of online participation and accounts for 5% of variance in online participation (data not shown). Inclusion of offline political participation leads to the weakened effect of network resources upon the bonding tie. The standardized coefficient of extensity on online involvement, which reduced from a significant (0.06) to an insignificant effect (0.03), suggests that offline political participation fully mediates the association between the number of bonding social networks and online participation. Unsurprisingly, the accessed resource component score, one proxy of bonding social capital, significantly associates with the dependent variable despite the weakened effect (β=0.05, see the last two columns in Table 2). What these results reflect is that the effect of a component score characterized by social resource multidimensionality is stronger than that of network size.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Offline and Online Political Participation

	Offline participation		Online participation			
			Exclusion of offline participation		Inclusion of offline participation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Bonding social capital						
Extensity	0.09***		0.06**		0.03	
Component score		0.10***		0.07***		0.05*
Bridging social capital						
Extensity	0.21***		0.04		-0.02	
Component score		0.21***		0.04		-0.02
Offline participation					0.27***	0.27***
Control variables						
Age	-0.12***	-0.12***	-0.23***	-0.23***	-0.20***	-0.20***
Internet use	0.05	0.05	0.20***	0.20***	0.19***	0.19***
Media use	0.20***	0.20***	0.23***	0.23***	0.17***	0.17***
Generalized trust	0.07**	0.06**	0.01	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Male	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Junior high school	-0.01	-0.01	-0.08**	-0.08**	-0.08**	-0.08**
Senior high school	-0.01	-0.01	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***
College or post-graduate	0.16***	0.15***	0.02	0.02	-0.02	-0.02
NT\$10,001 to 30,000	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.00
NT\$30,001 to 50,000	0.00	0.00	-0.06*	-0.06*	-0.06*	-0.06*
NT\$50,001 and more	0.07*	0.07*	-0.08**	-0.08**	-0.10***	-0.10***
R^2	0.29	0.29	0.30	0.31	0.35	0.36
Adjusted R^2	0.29	0.29	0.30	0.30	0.35	0.35

Note: All estimates are standardized; *$p < 0.05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$; *N*=1,628.

5.2. Social Capital Effects: Mobilization vs. Reinforcement

The study additionally analyzes whether or not social capital facilitate the offline disengaged citizens to participate in online political activities. Owing to the non-significant influence of extensity, this study focuses on analyzing the effect of the accessed resource component score. Respondents are divided into three groups – inactive, moderately active and active in offline settings. Results show that among the offline inactive citizens or among offline active population, the component score of bonding social capital does not draw them into online politics. By contrast, resources in the bonding network do mobilize those who are moderately active participants offline to become online activists. The effect of the network resource component score is only reflected among the moderately active subsample (β=0.1, p<0.05, data not shown).

6. DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous research [2], offline political participation is the strongest predictor of online participation. Accordingly, it becomes the potential mediator in the association between bonding social capital and online political involvement. Extensity loses its influence after factoring offline participation into the analytic model. The other network resource indicator, the bonding component score assessing the multidimensionality of resources, relates positively to online participation; however, such network resources fail to mobilize participants who were inactive offline. This shows online political participation mirrors traditionally established patterns of participation.

With regard to whether resources equalize or reinforce the pattern of online participation, unlike internet research that emphasizes the mobilization effect of online resources [4.6], resources embedded in face-to-face networks do not bring traditionally disengaged citizens into online politics.

Levels of online participation do not increase with the levels of network resources among offline participants. It is of interest that the online activists are not influenced by bonding network resources among the active participants in the real world. As such, results do not support the mobilization hypothesis. The study corroborates the reinforcement hypothesis that argues that those elites with more resources acquire access to a variety of means of communication to get their political voices heard [8.9]. As a whole, results lend partial support to the resource reinforcement argument.

7. CONCLUSION

Offline participation mediates the relationship between bonding social capital and online participation. In spite of the bonding social capital increasing online political participation, its effect is too weak to mobilize specific groups. Among inactive participants in the offline setting, bonding social capital does not correlate with online participation. Therefore, the findings provide more support for a resource reinforcement hypothesis rather than a mobilization hypothesis.

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