

Characteristics and Tendency of College Students' Political Participation in Internet in the "Micro Internet Age"*

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Abstract—There are many realistic features of undergraduates' political participation in the "micro-internet era". For example, the scale and influence of participation are expanded; the participants are good at and willing to use network technology and new media, and they have a stronger sense of political responsibility and democratic legal system. However, low political efficiency, political indifference and political enthusiasm coexist. In the meantime, the emotional and irrational aspects of participation and other realistic features cannot be ignored. At the same time, the political participation of college students in the "micro-internet era" also reflects the possible trend of democratization of information production and dissemination, expansion of the scope of participating subjects, and improvement of the degree of citizen organization, thereby promoting the gradual maturity of the development of socialist democracy.

Keywords—*micro internet age; college students; network political participation; development tendency; realistic features*

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is an era of networking. The network has gradually become a potential force to promote the continuous advancement of the world's economic, political, and spiritual civilizations. With the full application of network technology in social life, the Internet has also infiltrated into the political life process. With its fast speed of dissemination, wide range of transmission, and free expression of public opinion, it has become a corresponding technology foundation for the participation of netizens in political. Based on this foundation, a new network of political participation has been formed. In the research category of political participation in the Internet, college students' online political participation should be studied as an important aspect. College students have such features as large number and large scale, a higher level of knowledge and ability, strong awareness of democratic equality and right legal system, etc., Which determines that college students' online political participation has important

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influence and significance on the development of cyber politics. Their political participation in the network constitutes the mainstream of the young generation's political participation. The characteristics, existing problems, and development trends of their participation will have a tremendous impact on the entire social political development process, and may have a profound impact on China's long-term political development tendency.

II. THE ADVENT OF "MICRO INTERCONNECT ERA" AND COLLEGE STUDENTS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Human society entered the second decade of the 21st century. With the unprecedented expansion of mobile Internet, Weibo, social networks, and instant messaging tools in society, human society has entered into an entirely new era composed of flat and interactive information dissemination network, which regards individuals as main body of information transmission, massive micro-information as contents, various interconnected terminals (especially mobile terminals) as tools, and integrated mobile and non-mobile Internet as carriers. Due to the miniaturization and fragmentation of network information content, the miniaturization and portability of its terminal carriers, and the mobilization and personalization of the Internet in this era, we can name this age as the "micro-interconnect era."

"Political participation in the Internet is an activity in which participants participate in political life through the Internet and influence public decision-making according to laws. It mainly includes the use of the Internet to carry out political information releasing, online interest expression, online commentary, online surveys, online petitions, online elections, and online supervision. That is, the general public participates in the political affairs through the Internet, and through public opinion supervision, they participate in social public administration and exercise democratic rights."^[1] The advent of the "micro interconnect era" has brought about qualitative changes in the pattern of political participation of netizens today, and has also created an unprecedented challenge to the ability of traditional political systems to respond to this new type of political participation. As an important group of Chinese society, college students have become an important group in the micro-interconnect era that

has a huge impact on China's online political participation. Their political participation in the network constitutes the mainstream of the young generation's political participation. Its current status, characteristics, and problems will hugely affect the entire social and political process and may have a tremendous impact on China's long-term political development tendency.

III. THE REALISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' INTERNET POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE "MICRO INTERNET ERA"

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the basic situation and characteristics of the college students' online political participation in "micro internet era", the author and the relevant task force conducted a questionnaire survey in Sichuan Agricultural University and Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine in November 2017 and 250 students from different disciplines in liberal arts, science, and agricultural sciences were selected as survey objects. In the survey, 250 questionnaires were distributed and 235 questionnaires were returned with the recovery rate of 94%. Among them, there were 175 valid questionnaires with the effective questionnaire rate of 70%. After careful analysis of late-stage data, we have a preliminary understanding of the characteristics of college students' online political participation in the "micro internet era":

A. Large Numbers of Participant, Large Scale, and Large Social Influence

According to the *2015 China Higher Education Quality Report*, by the end of 2015, the number of students in regular colleges and universities has been 37 million. They are featured by rich vitality, energy, high-knowledge and cultural level, more open-minded vision and new ideas. At the same time, they have high degree of agglomeration and organization. Moreover, their political awareness and responsibility are obviously stronger than other social groups. All of these characteristics make this group play an important role in the field of political participation in the Internet and its strength and social influence cannot be ignored.

B. High Level of Knowledge and Ability, Grasp of Online Political Participation Techniques, Good at and Willing to Use High-tech Means and New Media to Participate

College students have a relatively high level of knowledge and culture, and they are young and strong in learning ability. What's more, they tend to be easy to accept new things, and dare to lead the trend of society. Usually, college students have a higher degree of integration with the Internet, and they have a longer network age. They also spend more time online in their daily learning and living. According to the survey, most of the students had early contact with the Internet, and 95.6% of students started to understand the Internet in the primary and secondary schools. The survey found that college students have been at the forefront of the mobile Internet era. First, 82.9% of students often use mobile phones to access the Internet. At the same time, college students are also more willing to use WeChat, Weibo, instant chat tools and social networking sites to understand information and express

opinions. In answering the question of "How do you express opinions on political issues on the Internet?", 40.6% of the students said that they will express their opinions by publishing and forwarding the contents in WeChat Moment and Weibo and 9.9% of them will make comments through social networking sites. Another 26.2% of students tend to express their opinions through instant messaging tools. It can be seen that the popularity and use of mobile Internet and new media adapted to it are very high among college students. These tools and platforms are also the main ways for college students to participate in politics.

C. Strong Sense of Political Responsibility, Strong Awareness of Democracy, Rights and Legal System, but Low Political Efficacy

College students are highly educated, and at the same time they have a wide range of channels for receiving information and ideas. Therefore, they generally have more independent thoughts, higher social responsibilities, and stronger democratic awareness, rights awareness, and legal awareness. But meanwhile, because of the limited participation channels in real political life and the lack of opportunities for participation, especially the lack of active political participation experience, college students generally lack the sense of political efficacy, that is, they lack confidence in the political influence of their participation behavior. In the survey, 51.7% of the students thought it was very necessary to care about politics and 26.9% of them felt that it was necessary to participate but lacked channels. Together, nearly 80% of them thought that they should care about politics. This shows that college students are very high. Social and political awareness and responsibility showed the high social and political awareness and sense of responsibility among college students. But in the mean time, nearly 27% of college students thought that there was a lack of participation channels. In addition, only 7.1% of the students expressed complete satisfaction with the opportunities and channels currently available to college students for political participation and 51.8% of the students expressed general satisfaction. 41.1% of them expressed their dissatisfaction with the opportunities and channels for undergraduate participation in politics, feeling that they did not have the opportunity to participate, and there were few ways to participate. In addition to doubts about participation channels and opportunities, a large number of college students do not have confidence in the ability to participate in politics. 42.1% of the students felt that contemporary college students have strong awareness of participation but low ability to participate, while 20.2% of students felt that contemporary college students have certain ability to participate, but the participation consciousness is weak. 24.2% of the students thought that both contemporary college students' participation awareness and participation ability are very weak. This lack of confidence in the channels, opportunities, and abilities of college students to participate in politics directly leads to the next feature:

D. Coexistence of Political Indifference and Political Enthusiasm, and Overall Low Political Participation

Although some college students have very high political participation enthusiasm and often engage in online political

participation, their overall proportion is not high. Most college students maintain a certain distance from online political participation, and even a considerable part of them maintain political indifference. They do not care about political affairs, and they never take part in it. Even if some college students sometimes pay attention to political affairs, they will only stay at the level of concern and will not take substantive participation. In the survey, only 15.2% of the students often pay attention to political affairs, 56.7% of the students sometimes pay attention to them and the remaining 9% of students said they never pay attention to political affairs; when answering the question "If you have opportunities and channels, do you want to participate in politics?", 17.7% of the students said that they want to participate in politics very much and 49.1% of them expressed their desire to participate in politics, and the sum of the two reached 66.8%. It indicates that the political indifference of a considerable number of college students at this stage is not due to a lack of willingness to participate but is not satisfied with the channels and opportunities for participation.

E. The Prominent Issues of Emotion and Non-rationality in the Process of Participation and the Certain Influence of Extreme Thinking

Since many college students are still in puberty or post-puberty, their ideas are not so mature. Usually, they consider issues in a superficial way. What's more, they are deeply influenced by Western culture, resulting that they have rebellious tendencies, and problems such as one-sided thinking and extreme thinking still exist. These psychological and thinking weaknesses will also be fully manifested in the political participation on Internet, so that the emotional and irrational phenomena of political participation in cyberspace are more prominent. In answering the question "What is the most common content of your opinions on political topics on the Internet?" 50.2% of the students said that they are to express their feelings, 17.6% of them are to question, and 9% are to criticize. And 13.1% of the students are to make suggestions while the remaining 10.1% are to express support. It can be seen that their political participation is largely sentimental and emotional, and the proportion of rational thinking and serious suggestions is not high. It is precisely because of the perceptual characteristics of this participation that some of the undergraduates' online political participation is sometimes over-excited. For example, it is easy to fall into emotional network disputes and it is easy to use violent language such as personal attacks in arguments. In terms of ideology, they are vulnerable to more radicalized trends of thought. They are also easily ideological in terms of specific issues, so that they tend to automatically set up teams on the Internet to form different ideological camps and attack each other.

IV. THE POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT TREND OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' INTERNET POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE "MICRO INTERNET ERA"

A. Network Mobility and Terminal Portability Bring More Extensive and In-depth Participation

The "micro-internet era" is a network society based on mobile information networks. With the popularization of high-speed mobile communication networks in the 4G era and the large-scale construction and opening of wireless local area networks (WIFI), as well as the portability, personalization, and price reduction of Internet terminals, the threshold for political participation in the Internet has been greatly reduced. More college students can more easily participate in online political activities at any time and place, which effectively promotes the development of college students' online political participation. The mobilization of the Internet and the miniaturization and portability of networked terminals have made the political participation of the Internet no longer a troublesome activity that requires the use of fixed computers and wired networks at fixed locations and at special times. College students can use mobile phones and tablets and netbooks to access networks anytime anywhere, and receive and send political information anytime anywhere. And these miniaturized Internet terminals are no longer high-end consumer goods that require large sums of money to be purchased. Mobile phones as low as several hundred dollars can enable every non-economic self-supporting college student to have one, resulting in the digital divide due to economic conditions is bridged, and greatly expanding the boundaries of political participation in the Internet. Each college student may be involved in the political life of the Internet.

B. The Mode of Information Production and Dissemination in the Self-media Era Has Promoted the Democratization of College Students' Online Political Participation

"The era of micro-interconnection" is a self-media era based on a revolutionary change in the way of communication. In this era, any individual who accesses the Internet through a portable terminal can become a producer and distributor of information anytime, anywhere, without the need for specialized reporters, editors, and specific mass media, which makes the information production and dissemination mechanism more decentralized, diversified, flattened, and democratized. It breaks traditional centralized and authoritative information production and dissemination system of the original pyramid-style and the monopoly of a small number of people on information production and communication, making it possible for college students to become direct producers and disseminators of political information and obtains more diversified political views and information, which is more conducive to college students participating in political activities through the Internet, and it is easier to inspire the enthusiasm and responsibility of college students to actively participate in political.

C. The Miniaturization of Information Promotes the Expansion of the Main Body of Political Participation in the Internet

The miniaturization of information makes it easier to publish information and opinions on the Internet. It makes it possible that express self-political opinions or participate in political discussions with only pieces of words and sentences, but it is no longer necessary to organize regular, logical and rigorous long articles, which is the biggest difference between the era of micro-internet and electronic forum as well as blog era. This eliminates the ability gaps in the face of most average college students who are not good at rigorous logical arguments and lack the ability to express themselves in writing, which hinder them to participate in politics, making most college students can be engaged in politics through the Internet.

D. Social Interaction Makes It Possible to Form an Online Citizen Society in the Process of College Students' Participation

The important feature of network activity in the "micro-internet era" lies in the unprecedented development of network interaction. Weibo, social networking sites, and instant messaging tools are all created for interaction and are highly interactive. This narrows the distance between network participants. At the same time, this interaction is conducive to full discussion of public affairs and the formation of political consensus. It is even possible to form a certain network community or organization and to coordinate common political participation, which plays a powerful role in promoting the citizen participation awareness and ability. As a group with a high level of knowledge and culture, a strong rational thinking ability, and a high sense of participation and responsibility in the society, college students can gradually learn to participate in public politics in this virtual network society, thus promoting the formation of an online civil society.

V. CONCLUSION

"Active, healthy, orderly, and efficient online political participation of college students is not only the need for the development of modernization of China's democratic politics, but also an important path for college students to improve their ability to participate in democratic politics and democratic political accomplishment." [2] In view of the realistic characteristics and trends of college students' online political participation mentioned above, colleges and universities and society must take active measures to promote the participation of college students in online politics: government departments should strengthen the standardization, transparency, and credibility of government behavior; it's necessary to strengthen the construction of mainstream network micro media; the scientific network management mechanism in the micro-internet era should be explored; it's important to improve the network guidance mechanism for emergencies. Colleges and universities should strengthen the values and rational education and online new media courses; improve and perfect the campus network management system so as to play the role of campus media well. In addition, paying close attention to the political hot spots that college students participate in online is necessary, so that a healthy, orderly and rational network

political participation of college students can be actively guided.

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