

# *The Impact of Social Media on Political Participation*

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**Abstract:** Political participation is an important symbol of the modernization of a country's political society, and the scale and degree of political participation are important indicators of the democratization process of the polity. With the rapid development and popularization of internet technology, people can obtain political information, express political views, and supervise public opinion through the internet. Consequently, the internet plays an increasingly important role in political society. By reviewing and analyzing relevant literature from both domestic and international sources, this paper concludes that the influence of social media on the process of political communication is significant.

## 1. Concept of Political Participation

Foreign scholar Valenzuela describes political participation as a slippery concept to grasp, Huntington, in his book "Hard Choices: Political Participation in Developing Countries", defines political participation as "the activities of civilians who try to influence government decision-making"<sup>[1]</sup> In Huntington's view, civilians are the real participants who are involved in politically related activities. Their interest in politics, their familiarity with political knowledge, and their self-judgment of their ability to participate in political activities are not included in this definition. Vibha and others have a similar view to Huntington. In his book *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, Vibha defines political participation as "activities undertaken by civilians with the more or less direct purpose of influencing the choices made by government agents and/or the actions they take"<sup>[1]</sup>.

Domestic scholar Zhou Baohua defines political participation as "the public's involvement in the political process, with the intention of influencing the government and the actual effect of the behavior"<sup>[2]</sup>. Kong Deyuan also emphasizes the concept of involvement in the political process<sup>[3]</sup>. Xiao Tangdart and Yi Shenbo have sorted out three common types of citizen political participation in Chinese mainland, one is communication participation, which refers to the expression of personal political opinions to the media, the government, and the National People's Congress representatives; the second is contact participation, which highlights the role of the "leadership" and emphasizes the contact with the upper level; and the third is resistance participation, which refers to the realization of political demands by means of group petitions, marches, demonstrations, and so on<sup>[4]</sup>. The third is resistance participation, which refers to the realization of political demands through group petitions, marches and demonstrations, etc.<sup>[4]</sup>. Li Yuanshu summarized the common characteristics of political participation in China and found that the main forms of participation are economic participation for utilitarian purposes and network participation, with an increase in autonomous

participation, collective participation, democratic participation, and an overall lower degree of participation<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 2. New Media and Political Participation

Relying on the Internet and mobile communication technology, citizens are increasingly using the Internet to follow news and political events and to participate in online political activities such as donations. The landscape of political participation has expanded from physical spaces to the digital realm. The types of online political participation are like offline political participation, including online voting, monitoring, and joining political groups; however, the environment of participation has transitioned to the virtual space of the internet.

### (1) The impact of social media on the U.S. elections

The field of communication studies has been relatively weak in terms of targeting research on the impact on political participation, and until 2004, academic research was focused on television media and U.S. elections, such as Michael D. Dorsher's "Seeing-or Hearing - Reactions to Listening to the 2004 Presidential Debates With and Without Video"<sup>[6]</sup>, which examined the different reactions of voters to televised debates with sound only versus televised debates with pictures, leading to the conclusion that there was not much difference between the two. This is also related to the context of the time, after all, before 2004 was the era of TV dominance. 2004 saw the first research on "blogging" and its impact on political communication, which is also a sign of the beginning of academic attention to new media and political communication, for example, Howard Dean's paper, "The 2004 U.S. Presidential Election: Online Communication and Networked Communication"<sup>[7]</sup>. For example, Howard Dean's paper "The 2004 U.S. Presidential Election: Online Communication and Online Fundraising" talks about how presidential candidates began to use blogs to promote themselves and raise campaign funds through blogs<sup>[8]</sup>. 2008 is the first time that scholars pay attention to social media, Clay Shirky's paper "The Power of Ordinary People to Gather Together" is not only focusing on blogs, but also focusing on social networking sites such as Twitter in the era of Web 2.0 and arguing how to persuade political leaders to use blogs as a means of political communication. They advocated for how to persuade political groups to participate in political activities and to organize them more effectively.<sup>[8]</sup> There are also some authors who approach the issue from a micro perspective, such as Sounman Hong and Daniel Nadler's "Which candidates do the public discuss online in an election campaign? presidential candidates and its impact on candidate salience," which focuses on whether mentions of a candidate's twitter, or microblogging in the U.S., have an impact on online voters.

Barack Obama was the first president to use social media well enough to win a U.S. election. Many political commentators and strategists called Obama's successful 2008 campaign a "Twitter campaign", a "new media success in politics", and a "Facebook-dictated campaign". The campaign was "decided by Facebook".<sup>[8]</sup> In the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, Obama and his campaign team fully utilized social media to effectively convert online activities into actual support, thus helping him win the election. In the 2008 presidential election, Obama made full use of the three-dimensional communication advantages of the new media, and he set up his own official blog to establish a young, energetic and enterprising candidate image for himself, interacting with voters and bringing them closer together. Surveys show that during the 2008 election, Obama's blog was visited more than 70 million times, and Obama's popularity soared. In addition to this, he spent more than 3 million dollars to buy keyword ads on the search engine Google, if the voters search for Obama, the right side of the search page will appear Obama's video propaganda ads as well as criticisms of rival McCain's policy positions and so on. Obama's success also comes from, his ability to raise money, and most of the donations he has raised have come from small fundraisers on

the internet. Logging on to Obama's official website, you will be prompted to donate an unlimited amount of money to Obama's campaign. Although these are small donations, Obama has managed to attract 1.3 million people and raise a cumulative total of \$520 million. 2012, Obama's commitment to social media was even greater than it was in 2008. In 2012, Obama invested even more in social media than he did in 2008, spending \$47 million on social media during the 2012 U.S. election cycle, 10 times more than Romney, and employing a team of more than 100 people dedicated to running his social media accounts, including his Twitter account.

Donald Trump's surprise victory against Hillary Clinton in 2016 is widely attributed to his skillful use of social media, a trend that was further underscored during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The COVID-19 pandemic forced more campaign activities and rallies into the digital sphere. Throughout the election process, Donald Trump maintained a strong presence on social media, while Democratic candidate Joe Biden also leveraged social networks to advance his campaign. Political advertisements, such as "Get out the vote" initiatives, significantly impacted voter awareness and behavior.

Both the Obama and Trump teams strategically used social media to their advantage, effectively increasing their chances of success. Social media is anticipated to be as transformative in political communication as television was in the 1960s. Experts predict that social media will lead to an explosion of information, a dramatic shift in the relationships between politicians, the government, and the public, and a more open and transparent society. This transparency, facilitated by social media, is expected to dramatically decrease the rates of corruption and bribery.

## (2) The Impact of Social Media on Ethnic Minority Political Participation - The Case of Asian American

The study of Asian American political participation is a growing field in American academia. Traditionally, scholars have focused primarily on examining political participation in mainstream white society, with the study of minority political participation emerging only after the 1960s.<sup>[9]</sup> Initially, scholars focused on the African-American civil rights movement, followed by Latino political participation.<sup>[9]</sup> Initially, scholars focused primarily on the African American civil rights movement, followed by Latino political participation, with very little research on Asian political participation, and almost no attention from the mainstream academic community. Some scholars realized the lack of research on Asian American political participation and actively explored this area. Don T. Nakanishi, of Japanese descent, is one of these scholars. He participated in the founding of the Asian American Journal, the core academic journal for Asian American studies in the U.S. In 1986, he published an article entitled "Asian American Political Participation: An Agenda for Research", in which he stated that in 1986, he published "Asian American Political Participation: A Research Agenda" in the Asian American Journal, pointing out that past research on Asian American political participation was seriously insufficient, and that most of the previous works on Asian American political activities were descriptive historical surveys lacking in-depth analyses. He advocated that research on Asian American political participation should consider both domestic and transnational political activities in the U.S., the micro- and macro-levels, and the forms of political participation in both elected and non-elected elections. His insightful argument has become a reference point for many subsequent scholars engaged in the study of Asian American political participation.<sup>[7]</sup>

It was not until the anti-Asian American wave of the 1990s, which sparked a nationwide political mobilization of Asian Americans, that their political participation became increasingly visible. Asian Americans have been active in advocating for their rights and defending them through diverse channels of political participation. Over the past two decades, Asian Americans have become more involved in campaigns and appointments, and their voices have become increasingly important in the social and public policy arenas. The increase in Asian American political participation and its

impact has led to a boom in related research.<sup>[7]</sup>

Online new media has become an important platform for Chinese Americans' political participation. Taking the 2013 Chinese American protest against "ABC's insulting remarks" as an example, Chinese Americans made full use of online new media to liaise and mobilize in this protest movement: after ABC's insulting remarks, the initiator, Wang Li, called on Chinese Americans to hold a protest through the Internet to express the dissatisfaction of the Chinese society and demanded that the ABC TV station publicly apologize; in organizing the "11-9 protest action", online new media became the main tool for liaison across the country, such as the special protest for the ABC TV station to apologize. In organizing the "11-9 Protest", the new media network became the main tool for Chinese people all over the U.S. to contact each other, such as the registration website, QQ, WeChat, BBS, and Facebook, which were set up specifically for the protest, and played an important role in organizing the protest; in the White House Petition Network, the petition was launched entirely by relying on the network to organize and mobilize. In less than 20 days, the number of people who joined the petition exceeded 100,000, reaching the number of people who demanded a response from the White House, which shows that the network played an important role in this Chinese protest movement.<sup>[10]</sup> In subsequent Chinese protests, Chinese people across the United States have also used WeChat to communicate and organize protests ABC's parent company, Disney.

Since the 21st century, especially in the last decade, with the development of new media technologies, a unique media landscape has developed among international migrant communities around the world: people often carry the social software of their country of origin during the migration process and rely on this social media with the characteristics of their country of origin and ethnicity long after they move into the host country. For example, Vietnamese immigrants like to use Zalo, Japanese immigrants like to use Line, Korean immigrants tend to use KakaoTalk, and Chinese immigrants prefer to use WeChat.<sup>[9]</sup> These ethnic social media platforms not only play an important role in strengthening the ties between immigrant communities, and promoting the development of ethnic cultures, but also play a pivotal role in shaping immigrants' political activity.

The importance of WeChat to the political life of the Chinese community in the United States is that it enables millions of people to participate in political and social issues of their own concern in ways that were not possible a decade or so ago, effectively bringing together the weak political participation forces of individual Chinese, and broadening the channels through which Chinese can participate in politics, thus making it easier for more Chinese to participate in politics.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

As Zuckerberg stated, social media, being an equal and two-way medium, enables people to effectively defend their own interests, respond to issues, and receive timely solutions. He envisions a national people's network akin to a Council Chamber, where individuals can freely discuss national policies and the latest meeting information. This setup aims to ensure that the primary actors of political participation take the initiative, thereby enhancing citizens' awareness of political involvement. However, social media also has limitations regarding political participation, such as the proliferation of false information and irrational voices. Therefore, while leveraging social media for political engagement, it is essential to implement effective management strategies to mitigate these issues.

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