Conflict as a Barrier to Online Political Participation?
A Look at Political Participation in an Era of Web and Mobile Connectivity

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ABSTRACT

This study extends understanding of conflict avoidance’s (CA) potential of inhibiting online political participation. Specifically, the authors examine whether CA has a direct negative relationship with traditional online political participation and online political expression, and an indirect negative relationship with these two forms of participation as mediated by political interest and internal political efficacy. A survey of young adult college students living in a U.S. Midwestern battleground state was conducted weeks prior to the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Results showed that CA has a direct negative relationship with both traditional online political participation and online political expression. Also, CA is negatively associated with political interest and internal political efficacy, which in turn, are positively associated with traditional online political participation and online political expression. Implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Conflict Avoidance, Mobile Connectivity, Online Political Expression, Online Political Participation, Political Participation

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inherent fixture of the American political process (Jamieson, 1992). American media, for instance, tend to cover politics as a conflict between political actors or groups (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Herbst, 2010). American television viewers are also constantly exposed to conflict-laden news coverage on 24-hour news cycle cable channels such as CNN, Fox, and MSNBC that often portray heated exchanges between political commentators (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Jamieson & Cappella, 2000).
In addition, political arguments have been common in U.S. online forums and social network sites (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The ubiquitous nature of conflict in contemporary American politics and public affairs media coincides with a scholarly interest in the potential that such conflicts might be alienating citizens from the political process (e.g., McClurg, 2006). Research particularly suggests that conflict avoidance (CA) could be inhibiting offline political participation, political interest, and internal political efficacy (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). However, in light of today’s world of Web and mobile connectivity, this line of research remains narrow in two important ways. First, there is limited understanding about the potential that CA might also decrease online political participation. With a few exceptions (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilencik, & Gee, 2015), not much research has examined whether CA is inversely related with online forms of political participation more common in today’s Internet landscape, including online forms of politically expressive acts performed via social media and mobile devices (Pew Research Center, 2014; Smith, 2009, 2011; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015). Second, while research shows political interest and internal political efficacy are two key psychological antecedents of offline political participation (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Moeller, de Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), a question not satisfactorily investigated by empirical studies is whether CA may also undermine online political participation by first inhibiting efficacy and political interest. That is, CA may be linked to lower online political participation because it may dampen one’s interest in, and perceived competence to be part of, the political process.

To address the two above noted voids in the research, the present study’s purpose is two-fold. First, we examine whether CA has a direct negative relationship with traditional online political participation and online political expression. Second, we test a mediation model whereby CA is posited to be indirectly related to online political participation and online political expression via its negative links with political interest and internal political efficacy. Using data from a survey of young adult college students conducted during the weeks prior to the 2012 presidential election, and in a battle ground state in the U.S., the present study examines the potential direct and indirect negative relationship of conflict avoidance with traditional online political participation and online political expression. A state in the U.S. Midwest, where campaign battles were heated leading up to the election, serves as a proper context for the present research. We examine the demobilizing role of CA in online participation among young adults because they are known to use digital and social media more frequently than other age groups (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014; Smith, 2009, 2011). Empirical investigation along these lines is important and timely, given that research suggests that conflict, as manifested in both civil and uncivil discourse, is pervasive in online public affairs discussions (Coe et al., 2014; Papcharissi, 2004).

Conflict Avoidance

Interpersonal conflict can be defined as a disagreement or difference between two or more individuals (Putnam & Poole, 1987). Conflict occurs when a party perceives and/or actually experiences an “incompatibility of values, expectations, processes or outcomes” with another party (Ting-Toomey, 1994, p. 360). Conflicts are inherent in human interactions. As such, people adopt particular styles to resolve or manage them. Defined broadly, a conflict management style is a patterned response to interpersonal conflict that is a product of socialization (Lim, 2009). Scholars have generally studied five types of conflict management styles: avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating, and integrating (Rahim, 1983). Avoidance, in particular, is the style categorized as the refusal to recognize a conflict and engage in any action toward its resolution. Individuals tending to resolve conflict with this style evade directly addressing disagreements through suppressing their opinions, withdrawing, or failing to act (Rahim, 1983). Conflict avoidance is known to make one reluctant to join interpersonal discussions (e.g., Conrad, 1991). Also, individuals who evade conflict tend to refrain from conflict-related communication in an attempt to maintain harmonious relationships (Lim, 2009).
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