The Relationship between Social Capital and Two Types of Political Participation

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Abstract. This study mainly explores the role of bonding and bridging social capital in affecting offline and online political participation. This study uses a nationally-representative adult sample in Taiwan to examine the relationship between two types of social capital (measured by extensity and network resource component scores), offline participation and online participation. The results showed that both bonding and bridging social capital enhanced offline participation, while bonding social resource indicators were positively related to online participation. Results suggested that bonding social capital enhanced online political participation.

Introduction

Political participation is defined as activity that has direct or indirect influence on policy processes or government action [1]. Recently, online opportunities have provided citizens with an important avenue for political participation in stable democracies [2]. Empirically, offline and online political participation are two distinct constructs [3]. Regardless of the kind of political activities people participate in, resources matter in the field of participation [4,5]. However social capital is viewed as a kind of social resources which can be used to achieve desired outcomes, 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 bonding and bridging social capital, measured by network extensity and an accessed resource component score, relate positively to two types of political participation. Such research contributes to the development of online participation research by understanding the predictors of online political involvement from the perspective of social capital. The present study is the first to use a nationally representative adult sample to address whether bonding and bridging social capital relate to political participation across on/offline settings.

Social Capital and Political Participation

Social capital here refers to social resource embedded in the networks, which can be accessed or mobilized to facilitate certain action [6]. Network refers to all relations people have built and maintained. Such resources as norms of reciprocity, trust, information vary with the degree of the closeness in social relationships. Based on different forms of social relationships, Putnam claimed two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging capital [7]. Bonding social capital which is good for specific reciprocity and solidarity has been conceptualized as co-operative and close relations between group members who are similar in terms of their backgrounds and shared identity. The concept is similar to strong tie which is defined as intimate ties with family and close friends [8]. Bridging social capital which is good for the flow of diverse information refers to trusting relations between dissimilar people in terms of some socio-demographic backgrounds. Such social capital is more likely to be embedded in weak tie characterized by less intimacy, less intensity, and less frequent contact [6]. Bonding social capital is usually measured by the extent of interaction or familiarity with family members, relatives, and friends [9]. Bridging social ties theoretically follows Putnam's concepts and measures the number and types of nonpolitical organizational membership [8].
In the field of political sociology, bonding social ties may be beneficial for offline participation, but bonded solidarity also reduces the ability of family members to cooperate with outsiders. Thus, the relationship between bonding social capital and political participation is contingent upon a different cultural context. Bonding social capital (measured by frequency of interaction with relatives and friends) is positively related to non-electoral political participation in the Netherlands and Germany, but the relationship has not been observed in the United Kingdom [10]. In Confucian culture, a bonding social network promotes the possibility of being mobilized to join political activities [11]. Perhaps bonded solidarity is not so strong enough in modern Eastern societies for bonding network to hinder the political involvement. On the contrary, evidence consistently demonstrates that bridging social capital, measured by the total number of nonpolitical organizations accessed (also called extensity), is found to increase participation in traditionally non-electoral and collective activities [12]. When compared with individual socioeconomic backgrounds and political attitudes, involvement in nonpolitical associations has the strongest explanatory power for many forms of political participation but the nonpolitical organization index is unimportant for voting in Mexico [12]. Given that social capital is more associated with non-electoral political activities than with electoral activities, political participation in the current study will center on non-electoral modes of participation.

In terms of the effect of social capital on online participation, most scholars examine the influences of cognitive components such as perceived connections to people [13], but they do not adopt conventionally resource-based measures. To date, there has been no research adopting network resource approach to analyze the association of two types of social capital with political involvement in a virtual world.

Based on social capital theory, two research hypotheses, outlined below, are proposed here. First, H1: it is expected that bonding and bridging resource indicators (extensity or a component score) is positively associated with offline political participation. Second, H2: it is hypothesized that two types of social capital are positively associated with online political involvement.

**Methodology**

**Sample**

This study used data collected from the Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS) in the Fall of 2014—a nationally-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 on Taiwanese political participation, social capital, political efficacy, social trust, and citizenship issues. The sampling and informed consent procedures were conducted by the Academia Sinica of Taiwan.

The TSCS sampled 1,875 adults. The number of samples with missing values was 247. Little's missing completely at random (MCAR) test showed that missing data should be considered as MCAR ($\chi^2=934.677$, degrees of freedom (df)=974, $p>0.05$). A total of 1,628 respondents with complete data were analyzed.

**Variables**

**Social Capital Measurement: Network Resources**

Accessed network resources in the bonding and bridging ties were measured using position generator and internal organization resource methods respectively, to assess 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. 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 [14] were used to assess the highest occupational prestige score of some occupations accessed by respondents, namely, upper reachability. 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 a principal component analysis (0.98 extensity+0.89 upper reachability+ 0.92 range of prestige score)

Previous research suggested the use of a two-step approach for the measurement of upper reachability and range of resource score in the bridging network (see [5]). The range of resource score was rated in the same way as the range of prestige score in the position generator.

**Measures of Offline and Online Political Participation**

In the present study, offline participation was measured by asking respondents about the extent of their offline participation in the 7-item activities. 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 (SNSs). 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.

**Control Variables**

Demographic variables include: gender, age groups, education, monthly income. Internet use, media use, external efficacy, and generalized trust which relate to political participation were also included.

**Statistical Analysis**

Linear regression modeling analysis was used to examine the relationship of social capital with offline political participation as well as with online political involvement.

**Results**

**The Association between Bonding and Bridging Social Capital and Political Participation**

Table 1 reports whether social capital indicators relate to offline (H1) and online political participation (H2) when controlling for covariates. Generally, bridging social capital has the stronger association with offline participation than bonding social capital. Extensity and accessed resource component scores have the explanatory power that was anticipated. Despite the different effects of extensity and component scores in the bonding network, the gap in magnitude is not pronounced. In terms of online political participation, bonding social capital is found to be positively related to online political involvement, whereas bridging social capital is not.

**Discussion**

For decades, the crucial role social capital plays in shaping offline political participation in general population has been acknowledged, yet there is a paucity of research exploring the relationship between social capital and online participation among adults. Like social capital studies using different measures in an offline setting, two indicators of bonding and bridging social capital also promote political involvement offline. The data hence lend support to H1. That the strength of the association between bridging social capital and offline participation is stronger than that between offline bonding social capital and offline activists may be due to the downside of bonded solidarity, namely the tendency to cooperate with the out-group. Most extant studies that measure bridging social capital rely on the number of association participation (extensity). Results suggest that no matter what political activities citizens participate in, the magnitude of extensity is as same as the component score of bridging social capital that is constructed based on the internal
organization resource method [5]. Accordingly, the most commonly used measure, extensity, can be considered as a valid resource indicator in the social capital literature.

In terms of the predictors of online political participation, this study not only extend the scope of previous studies [3] to the adult samples in a Chinese society, but also identifies the role of bonding social capital in enhancing online involvement, which is not found by extant literature. Bonding social capital increases adult online participation, while bridging social capital does not have an effect. The offline bonding social tie – which, to some extent, overlaps with online social networks – may partially explain this discrepancy, because status homophily remains the basis of online friendships and face-to-face close friendships [15]. As citizens are endowed with more bonding network resources, information and civic skills available from online friends may increase the probability of becoming online activists themselves. Taken together, the data provide partial support for H2.

Table 1. Regression Analysis of Offline and Online Political Participation.

|                        | Offline participation |                       | Online participation |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
|                        | Model 1               | Model 2               | Model 1              | Model 2               |
| Bonding social capital |                       |                       |                      |                      |
| Extensity              | 0.09***               | 0.06**                | 0.07***              |                      |
| Component score        | 0.10***               | 0.07***               |                      |                      |
| Bridging social capital|                       |                       |                      |                      |
| Extensity              | 0.21***               | 0.04                  |                      |                      |
| Component score        | 0.21***               | 0.04                  |                      |                      |
| Offline participation  |                       |                       |                      |                      |
| Control variables      |                       |                       |                      |                      |
| Age                    | -0.12***              | -0.12***              | -0.23***             | -0.23***             |
| Internet use           | 0.05                  | 0.05                  | 0.20***              | 0.20***              |
| Media use              | 0.20***               | 0.20***               | 0.23***              | 0.23***              |
| Generalized trust      | 0.07**                | 0.06**                | 0.01                 | 0.01                 |
| Male                   | 0.00                  | 0.01                  | 0.00                 | 0.00                 |
| Junior high school     | -0.01                 | -0.01                 | -0.08**              | -0.08**              |
| Senior high school     | -0.01                 | -0.01                 | -0.13***             | -0.13***             |
| College or post-gradu- | 0.16***               | 0.15***               | 0.02                 | 0.02                 |
| ate NT$10,001 to 30,000| -0.01                 | -0.02                 | -0.01                | -0.01                |
| NT$30,001 to 50,000    | 0.00                  | 0.00                  | -0.06*               | -0.06*               |
| NT$50,001 and more     | 0.07*                 | 0.07*                 | -0.08**              | -0.08**              |
| R²                     | 0.29                  | 0.29                  | 0.30                 | 0.31                 |
| Adjusted R²            | 0.29                  | 0.29                  | 0.30                 | 0.30                 |

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

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