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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The influence of media use on different modes of political participation in China: political trust as the mediating factor

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ABSTRACT

Studies demonstrate that political trust and media use are important predictors of political participation. In this study, we leverage Asian Barometer Survey data on China to clarify how media use to obtain political information predicts how citizens participate in politics and whether political trust mediates these relationships. This study finds that traditional and new media use have distinct relationships with electoral and non-electoral participation. In addition, trust in local government is negatively related to non-electoral. These findings may demonstrate how media use predicts different modes of participation and the influence of political trust.

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KEYWORDS

Traditional media; new media; political trust; electoral participation; non-electoral participation

Introduction

The rise of new media is seen as a tool that can increase political knowledge and thereby facilitate political participation. As traditional media and new media both play a political role today, the influence of media type on the choice political participation becomes extremely important. Nevertheless, there are few studies comparing the effects of the use of different media types (new media and traditional media) on political participation (Bennett et al., 2011). Hence, our knowledge on whether new media use can substitute government-controlled traditional media and produce active citizens is limited. Moreover, it remains unclear how the patterns of media use influence different modes of participation.

For examining the influence of different channels of political information acquisition on different forms of political participation, the mediating variables used in existing studies include age (Holt et al., 2013), civic norms (Copeland & Feezell, 2017), traditional or democratic values (Shi, 2008), and online and offline political discussion (X. Li & Chan, 2017). More recent studies emphasize that the political significance of media use depends on the political psychological tendencies of individuals (Chan, 2014; Kim & Chen, 2015), especially political efficacy and political trust (Xiong, 2014). One study points out that political knowledge and a sense of political efficacy play a positive role in media use and civic engagement (Dimitrova

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et al., 2014; Xia, 2017). To better understand the influence mechanism of media use on the political participation of Chinese citizens, this study instead identifies the mediating role of political trust in the relationship between media use and political participation.¹

With the widespread adoption of Internet technology, two broad categories of media use are considered: traditional media and new media. There are well-established bodies of literature on the positive impact of traditional media and new media on political participation (Chan, 2014; Kim & Chen, 2015; C. Wang & Ji, 2017). Meanwhile, studies of media use have attributed public indifference and political cynicism to media prejudices (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), and the time extrusion effect where entertainment content occupies the limited time available to engage in public affairs (Besley, 2006; Shah et al., 2001). The mixed results on the evidence linking different media use to political participation raise questions about how we can explain the different impacts of traditional and new media use on electoral and non-electoral participation.

Another puzzle in the literature concerns whether media use is related to political trust and whether political trust might mediate the relationship between media use and different modes of participation. There is a lot of research on the relationship between media use and political trust (X. Chen & Shi, 2001; Kennedy, 2009), but political trust is rarely used as a mediating variable for analysing the relationship between media use and political participation. Some scholars theorize that political trust has corresponding forms of media use that reinforce electoral and non-electoral modes of participation (Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Xiong, 2014). Although people who obtain political information through traditional media outlets (e.g., print newspapers, radio, and television) should be more likely to have high political trust and to engage in electoral participation, people who obtain political information through new media should be more likely to have lower political trust and to engage in non-electoral participation (Su et al., 2016; C. Wang & Ji, 2017). Nevertheless, although research has shown that the different political trust in China's local and central government have different effects on political participation, the interactions between media use, political trust, and political participation remain largely unexplored.

This study reconsiders the relationship between media use and political participation in China. In particular, we probe the question of whether traditional media use to obtain political information predicts engagement in electoral participation, and conversely, whether Internet use to obtain political information is related to non-electoral participation. Then we examine whether different kinds of political trust are mediating factors in the relationship between traditional media use and electoral participation (people with high trust in central government) and the relationship between Internet use and non-electoral participation (people with low trust in local government).

Literature review

Political participation

There is a voluminous literature on political participation, which encompasses activities by citizens that try to influence government decision-making (Huntington & Nelson, 1976). Thus, political participation includes the activities of ordinary people, individually or collectively, in attempting to influence political decisions or behaviours, lawfully or otherwise. In the early 1970s, Verba and Norman (1972) first offered

the definition from the electoral perspective, relating to electoral activities and community participation. These electoral-driving activities are mainly related to election rules, which focus on the responsiveness of the political system to the people. However, there are serious non-electoral activities that they have ignored. In 1979, Barnes et al. (1979) divided political participation into conventional activities and unconventional activities, which contains non-electoral activities. These non-electoral activities include protests, petitions, demonstrations, boycotts ... etc. (p. 59). Sabucedo and Arce (1991) divided these into two categories: electoral political participation (i.e., conventional) and non-electoral political participation. The former method refers to institutional and legal political participation, the latter to non-institutional and illegal method. This above distinction became widely used (Rosenstone & Hansen; Copeland, 2014; Norris, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al., 2006).

Chinese society also includes many channels for political participation. In the early 1990s, most political participation available to the Chinese were non-electoral methods. Cooperative actions, voicing to cadres, and contacting representatives are their major political activities available to the ordinary people (Jennings, 1997). Xinfang (i.e., 'petitioning') is also considered a popular political participation method for grassroot people. (Cai, 2004; Paik, 2012, 2018) Today, lobbying officers from government and personal contact with key persons for affecting policies are still popular in digital age (Zhang & Lin, 2014). Besides non-electoral participation, in 1988, the Organic Law of Village Committees was implemented, which started grassroot elections in China and opened electoral political participation to the people. These grassroots elections have increased the people's political participation to varying degrees. Kennedy (2002) found that competition in these elections is the main factor that decides local elections in different areas. O'Brien and Han (2009) reconfirmed the importance of the competition and further indicated that the political participation of the local people has been increased, but the level of competition is different in different regions. Many areas may be affected by party committees, clan forces, local enterprises, and even criminal gangs, resulting in no actual implementation of grassroots elections. However, some scholars have pointed out that whether grassroots elections are competitive elections has little difference in subsequent governance performance. But grassroots elections have increased the accountability of the village committee (S. Wang & Yao, 2007). They also help ordinary people build up a sense of electoral political participation (O'Brien & Han, 2009). Xiao and Yi (2016) summarized these participation models into the categories of voting, campaigning, contact, communication, and resistance, and they indicated that besides participation in local elections, Chinese citizens have other behavioural choices, such as contact, communication, and resistance. There is also an evident structural differentiation: beside voting and campaigning, interpersonal contact is at a relatively high level, whereas communication and resistance are at a relatively low level.

Judging from the development process of Chinese people's political participation, both electoral and non-electoral models have emerged from the early 1990s. Whether considering academic research or survey questionnaires, the mode of political participation in China generally follows these two modes. This study is more concerned with the impact of citizens' access to political information from different media channels on their electoral and non-electoral participation. The former is a political mobilization-type participation, which is allowed by the system and closely related to political trust. The

latter is interest-based participation, which is closely related to the vital interests of the participants and involves a deeper level of engagement. In the next section, we discuss the relationship between media use and political participation in detail.

Media use and political participation

Traditional media has been confirmed to be related to political participation (Hofstetter et al., 1994; Hollander, 1996). Research also found that regardless of size of influence, the digital media can also promote the political participation of people in Western (Boulianne, 2009, 2015) and Asian societies (Willnat & Aw, 2014), especially for online political participation (Xu et al., 2018). Generally speaking, both traditional and digital media use are associated with positive influence for political participation. China's Internet penetration rate increased from 22.4% in December 2008 to 70.4% in December 2020 (*Penetration rate of internet users in China from December 2008 to December 2020.*, 2021). With the popularity of the Internet in China, the relationship between new media and political participation has become important.

China's National Press and Publication Administration has a series of regulations for press and publication. In China, all official news is subject to official censorship. Traditional media, such as newspapers, are also controlled by official propaganda. Bennett et al. (2011) distinguished between the political influence of two types of media. Traditional media typically involves one-way consumption of managed civic information presented by the mainstream news media to ordinary citizens and has the function of transmitting messages from top to bottom. The information from government-controlled traditional media are designed to promote official positions. Therefore, people who like to read traditional media will be more willing to participate in elections or political activities mobilized by the government. In their studies of Chinese political democratization and mass media, researchers found that contact with mass media, especially newspapers, can increase political awareness, strengthen political participation values (Liao et al., 2005), and increase political empowerment to ordinary people (Qiu, 2009). An empirical study has also shown that traditional mass media has a demonstrable influence on political discussion and on expressing opinions online (Chan & Zhou, 2011).

The popularity of the Internet has given Chinese people a new transformation in their political participation. Political participation on the Internet has become an important way for Chinese people to participate in politics. Because digital media offers two-way or interactive communication in which people are able to consume and distribute self-produced information through channels such as email, WeChat, and Weibo and the cost of complete censorship is more expensive than in traditional media. Although the news reports of new media are also subject to official control, after all, online political participation is mostly discussed and commented, which is very different from traditional media, which is only an official propaganda tool.

China's online political participation is essentially based on 'influencing policies'. For the government, the online political participation of the people should mainly reflect opinions or offer suggestions (Jiang et al., 2019; Kornreich, 2019). For the public, they are trying to use the Internet to expand their participation to public affairs (Duckett & Wang, 2013); express opinions or criticisms on certain events (Jiang, 2014), and even make the authorities change their positions (Esarey & Xiao, 2011). To deal with the above situation,

the government also tried to control and guide public opinion through Internet censorship (Bolsover & Howard, 2019; King et al., 2013; Orion, 2013; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). However, recent research has also shown that political participation on the Internet may affect the official public affairs agenda (Luo, 2014; Su, 2015). Therefore, Internet users have more opportunity to access information criticizing the government and are more likely to question the authority of the government, affect policies, and engage in non-electoral participation. Lee and Chan (2016) pointed out that young people who spread anti-government attitudes through social media have formed a new pattern of resistance.

To summarize, different information channels have different impacts on political attitudes and behaviour. These contradictions merit additional research. Thus, the first hypothesis in this article is as follows:

Hypothesis 1a: Use of traditional media to obtain political information positively influences electoral participation.

Hypothesis 1b: Use of the Internet to obtain political information positively influences non-electoral participation.

Political trust and political participation

Political trust is essential to the political participation of Chinese people. High trust usually makes people more willing to communicate with the government (Huang et al., 2017). Political trust reflects the cognition, emotion, and attitudes of the public towards political systems, authority, and officials. These psychological orientations determine whether citizens take part in political participation and the forms of participation they choose.

Since the 1980s, a considerable number of national and cross-national surveys have emerged, and extensive research on the impact of political trust on political participation have been conducted by using these survey data. These empirical studies confirmed the negative relationship between political trust and participation in protest activities. Kaase (1999) found that people's trust in the government reduces their motivation to express their demands through political resistance. At the same time, political trust is associated with traditional political behaviour, such as contacting politicians or government leaders or forming relationships by joining a political party or working actively (Ceka, 2013; Dalton, 2004; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011). Although the abovementioned empirical studies found a relationship between the increase in resistance, political participation, and decline in political trust, other studies have cast doubt on this relationship. Jacobs et al. (2009) suggested that political trust has a negative impact on face-to-face or digital deliberation.

Therefore, despite the growing belief in the proposition that political trust would positively affect traditional participation and dampen protest, convincing empirical supports for this proposition are rare. Conversely, the findings seem to vary across time, space, and other factors (Gabriel, 2017). Furthermore, these studies are mainly carried out in the context of Western democratic societies. In addition, the relationship between political participation and political trust is weakened by political efficacy or other intermediary variables (Hooghe & Marien, 2013). At the same time, these studies do not

distinguish between different types of political trust, such as trust in political leadership or the entire political system. These different levels of trust may lead to different political behaviours, especially in China. For example, when Alex Jingwei and Liang (2021) studied the case of Hong Kong SAR, they found that Hong Kong's public participation has a link on administrative trust, but there is no significant impact on political trust which represents institutional trust. Therefore, in societies such as China with different trust characteristics from Western countries, it is necessary to discuss the impact of different types of political trust on different types of political participation.

Political trust is an important issue in the study of China's authoritarian system. A large number of studies have shown that, unlike the Western trust structure, the Chinese people show hierarchical trust in government. That is, people tend to trust the central government more than they trust local governments (Li, 2008, 2012, 2016; Yang & Tang, 2010). Local governments are often the first line to deal with people's demands. Even in the current digital age, local governments are also responsible for handling people's online complaints on the front line. (Cai & Zhou, 2019) At the same time, the failings of local government are often used as a scapegoat for poor implementation of the policies of the central government (Kennedy, 2009). This results in people having no illusions about local government, but they hold a reverence for the central government, which is far from ordinary people. In addition to the imperial worship of China's traditional political culture and the strict political control of the central government, political education and the political propaganda of the media are also the main reasons for the high levels of trust in the central government. The central government has restricted criticism in the media to maintain its legitimacy and authority but at the same time encouraged local governments to criticize each other as well as the media to criticize local governments (L. Li & O'Brien, 1999; Lu et al., 2017; O'Brien & Li, 1999).

Existing research suggests that political trust increases electoral participation and reduces non-electoral participation. At the same time, media use has an impact on political trust (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). The media is the main channel for people to obtain political information. Therefore, we believe that the media plays an important role in influencing public trust in government agencies. Existing research shows that media information and propaganda are the main sources of political trust in China (X. Chen & Shi, 2001; Heike, 2013; Li, 2012). Chinese officials are selective in criticizing the government's news control. State-owned media often treat local governments as surrogates for poor governance (Li, 2004, 2016). Shi (2008) found that traditional media produced by the government or subject to government censorship focuses on the activities and achievements of the central government and central leaders and rarely reports negative news on the central government. Using data from the Chinese General Social Survey 2010, Su et al. (2016) found that obtaining political news from television generates higher levels of government trust but has no impact on local government trust. However, obtaining news from the Internet is associated with lower levels of trust in both the central government and local government. Wu and Wilkes (2018) summarized that people whose main source of information is traditional media have a high trust in the central government and a low trust in local governments.

In addition to the above discussion of the central government, in the Chinese context, the public's perception and trust in the central government and local governments are different, and this situation further affects the public's response strategies when facing local governments. The Chinese people tend to trust the central government more, and less trust the local governments. (Li, 2016; Su et al., 2016) The people will actively protect their political rights and economic interests from local governments and local officials within the scope of the rules from central government. (Li, 2008; K. O'Brien & Li, 1995; O'Brien & Li, 2004) In this case, if people trust local governments more, it will affect their enthusiasm for non-election participation.

In summary, in societies with strict media control, top-down traditional media often aims to defend the country's image, shape national identity, and increase political trust, especially trust in the central government. By contrast, digital media use is negatively associated with both types of trust. In addition, due to the weak trust in local governments, digital media use may have a stronger negative effect on local government trust. Thus, the second hypothesis in this article is as follows:

Hypothesis 2a: Trust in the central government positively influences electoral participation

Hypothesis 2b: Trust in local government negatively influences non-electoral participation.

The mediation influence

Although existing research has found that media use and political trust affect citizens' political participation, there is only limited empirical evidence on the connection between political trust, media use, and political participation. Sceptics believe that the link between Internet access and political participation is uncertain. The impact of the Internet on political propaganda and civic participation is tiny when excluding the portion of the public with a high level of participation in political affairs and a strong interest in politics (Eveland & Dietram, 2000; Miao, 2019). Further, the role of access to online political information and knowledge in promoting citizenship and civic engagement is limited (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). The massive use of the Internet has increased the cognitive effort required for orienting oneself to the content and structure of the web, produced disorientation (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2003), and reduced the political interest and electoral participation of young people (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011).

The extent to which media use and political trust interact to influence political participation and the internal mechanisms of this effect are unclear. When discussing the relationship between media use and political participation, the psychological mechanism of political trust has been overlooked. Therefore, additional research is needed to clarify whether political trust mediates the relationship between media use and the two forms of political participation: electoral participation and non-electoral participation.

In this article, we argue that type of media use would influence one's route of participating in politics, but the trust in different levels of government would mediate the effect of the media use. Because the Internet has been seen as an effective tool to acquire nonmainstream messages or even express their own opinions (Duckett & Wang, 2013; Jiang, 2014), the propensity of using the Internet as the main information hub could only be higher for those who distrust the local governments. For example, in the famous 'Wukan protest' in 2011, those who questioned the local officials essentially used the Internet and micro-blogs for linking up their movement (Lu et al., 2017). However, with regards to the trust in central government, even calls for collective action were the main targets of censorship. Those narratives that condemn the central government were still not allowed in the sphere of social media (King et al., 2013). In short, use of the Internet lowers people's trust of local government but not the central government and increases people's willingness to participate in non-electoral movements, just as what happened in Wukan.

By contrast, because the vast majority of the content of traditional media, such as newspapers, is in line with the political propaganda needs of the central government, we could expect that a consumer who chooses traditional media as the main source of political information would hold a higher trust of the central government. Therefore, the media information could amplify people's belief (Bolin & Hamilton, 2018) of the benevolence of the central government, and hence, raise the probability of their participating in electoral actions to show their support for the political system.

Accordingly, we could formulate the interaction between media use, political trust, and the forms of political participation as a relationship of mediation. The mediation quantifies the indirect effect of one variable on the dependent variable through another variable, which, should be seen as the 'mediator'. In the above scenario, we could identify that political trust of local/central government is the mediator for the relationship between media use and types of political participation. We then propose the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Traditional media use will increase the likelihood of engaging in electoral participation through the mediating effect of high political trust towards the central government

Hypothesis 3b: New media use will increase the likelihood of engaging in non-electoral participation through the mediating effect of low political trust towards local government.

We summarize our key hypotheses in Figs 1 and 2. In the following section, we outline our data and methods before addressing these questions in the results section.

Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, we use individual-level data from the ABS China survey conducted in 2015 (N = 4,068). The survey uses a GPS/GIS-assisted area sampling method to sample households in 25 provinces (including autonomous regions and municipalities) in mainland China and then chooses respondents aged 18 and over from these households

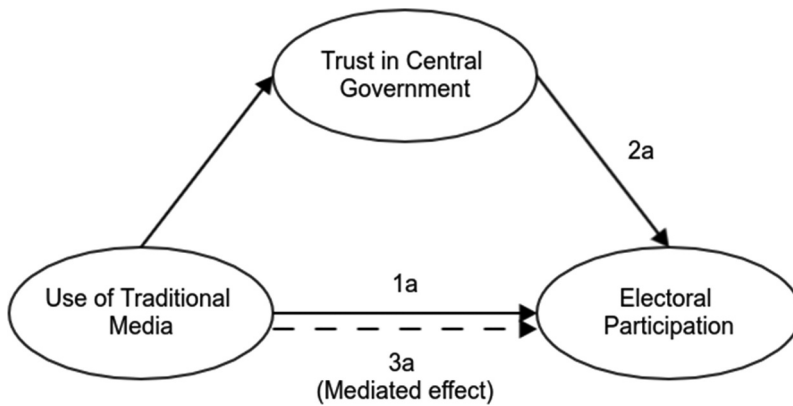


Figure 1. Summary of hypotheses (Use of Traditional Media).

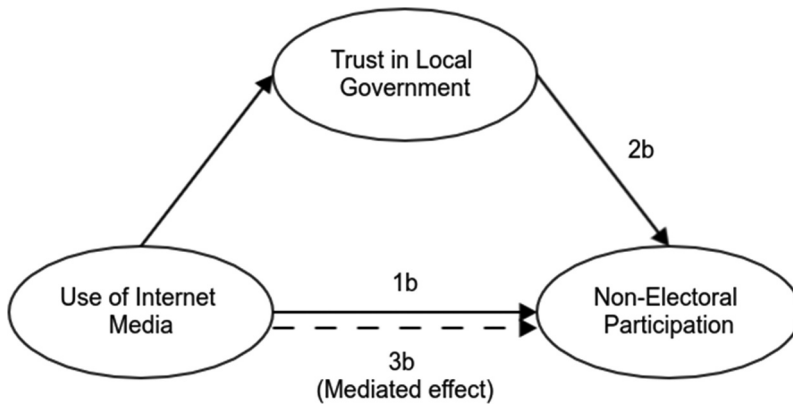


Figure 2. Summary of hypotheses (Use of Internet Media).

using a Kish grid. The basic information of the respondents in the surveys are male = 2047, female = 2004, urban = 1362, rural = 2657. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in respondents' homes or workplaces in the language of the respondent's choice.

Dependent variables: political participation

Our dependent variable is political participation. Using the factor analysis method, the political participation behaviours tested in the survey are divided into two categories. [Table 1](#) shows the contents of non-electoral participation (eight items, Cronbach's $\alpha = .718$, $M = .105$, $SD = 1.40$) and electoral participation (five items, Cronbach's $\alpha = .655$, $M = .269$, $SD = 1.25$).

Independent variables

In this study, traditional media and Internet use are used as independent variables. Central government trust and local government trust are analysed as mediator variables for new and traditional use to types of political participation, respectively. To make the

Table 1. Factor loading of political participation items.

	Non-electoral participation	Electoral participation
Expressed opinions to relevant departments	.710	
Expressed opinions to local government leaders	.671	
Reported issues to People's Congress delegates	.602	
Contacted news media	.582	
Contacted other influential people outside the government	.560	
Got together with others to try to resolve local problems	.484	
Went to court	.474	
Got together with others to raise an issue or sign a petition	.471	
Voted in unit/village election		.801
Have previously voted since became eligible for voting		.762
Participated unit/village campaign meetings or rallies		.641
Mobilized others to vote for a certain candidate		.547
Assisted a candidate's campaign in other ways		.507
Cronbach's α	.718	.655
Variance explained	22.9	15.4

Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Rotation method: Kaiser's normal varimax

coefficients of the regression equation more explanatory and avoid multicollinearity, we use mean centre variables and calculate mediating effects (Aiken & West, 1991; Cohen et al., 2003; Fang et al., 2015; Hayes, 2013).

Media use

For the question 'where do you acquire information about political affairs?' the responses 'watching television', 'reading newspapers', and 'listening to the radio' are labelled traditional media use. For digital media use, we use the question 'how often do you use the Internet or social media to find information about politics and government?' to indicate how often respondents obtained news from online sources.

Table 2 reveals that television is still the main medium for citizens to access political information, followed by the Internet, newspapers, personal contacts, and radio. It should be noted that although Internet use has grown in recent years, the percentage of people using the Internet to access political information was only 12.3% in 2015. In addition, the proportion of respondents who use the Internet or social media networks such as official websites, BBS, chatrooms, blogs, Weibo, WeChat, and other platforms to access information about politics and government every day is only 29.8%, whereas 33.9% of respondents have never used Internet

Table 2. Media use to acquire political information.

Where do you acquire information about political affairs?						
Media	TV	Newspapers	Personal contact	Radio	Text messages	Internet
Mean	.678	.021	.034	.019	.074	.123
N	3794	3794	3794	3794	3794	3794
SD	.471	.145	.182	.135	.262	.325
Frequency of Internet use for access to political information (%)						
Practically never	A few times a year	A few times a month	Once or twice a week	Several times a week	everyday	N
33.9	3.1	8.2	10.3	14.7	29.8	2207

Table 3. Factor loadings for central government trust and local government trust.

	Trust in local government	Trust in central government
Local government	.872	
Government officials	.855	
Police	.703	
Courts	.653	
National government		.854
People's Liberation Army		.801
National Congress		.796
Cronbach's α	.844	.820
Variance explained	37.04	34.43
M	4.17	5.05
SD	.97	.80

Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Rotation method: Kaiser's normal varimax

platforms or social media networks to gather political information. Accordingly, despite the growth of the new media, traditional media, such as government-controlled television, is still the main source of political information for most people.

Political trust. In the survey, political trust is tested in relation to the extent to which the respondents trust various institutions, including the national government, local government, the courts, National Congress, the police, government officials, and the People's Liberation Army. We recoded their answers on a scale from 1 = completely untrustworthy to 6 = completely trustworthy, and finally calculated the arithmetic value of these scores, with higher values signifying higher trust. Then we use factor analysis to divide political trust between trust in local government and trust in central government (Table 3). It can be seen from the difference in the means that trust in the central government is much higher than trust in local governments.

Control variables

We also control for several well-established socio-political variables related to political participation. Based on existing studies on political participation, we controlled for a series of demographic variables. These are type of household registration (rural = 0, urban = 1; $M = .25$, $SD = .43$), self-reported social status (1 = low, 3 = high; $M = 1.90$, $SD = .72$), gender (female = 0, male = 1; $M = .51$), age (range = 18–94; $M = 42.84$; $SD = 15.98$), the squared value of age to capture the nonlinear relationship between age and participation among the youngest and oldest respondents, and education by level (primary school or below = 1, college or above = 4; $M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.30$).

Analytical strategy

We derive the Pearson correlation coefficients for traditional media use, new media use, political trust, and political participation to explore how media use and political trust predict political participation. Furthermore, to clarify the mediation effect of two types of political trust on the relationships between types of media use and types of political participation, we adopt the classical approach developed by Baron and Kenny (1986), also known as the BK approach, in this article.

To utilize the BK approach, we have to regress the dependent variable (mode of political participation) on the independent variable (type of media use), the mediating variable (political trust to local or central government) on the independent variable (type of media use), and we have to regress the dependent variable on both independent variable and the mediating variable. Hence, we would be including the following three regression models:

$$Y = \beta_0 + cX + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

$$M = \beta_0 + aX + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

$$Y = \beta_0 + bM + c'X + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

The Y, X, and M denote to mode of political participation, type of media use, the political trust to local or central government, and the reduction of c (c-c') imply the mediation effect.

To meet the complete mediation effect, the c, a, and b in the above-mentioned model 1–3 must be statistically significant and the c' must be 0 (insignificant). If the c' is not zero, then further test of the mediated path (a*b) should be conducted. The most common approach is to use the Z-test with the Z be calculated as follows.

$$Z = \frac{a * b}{\sqrt{b^2 S_a^2 + a^2 S_b^2}}$$

If $z > \pm 1.96$, then the mediation (c-c' or a * b) is statistically significant at 0.05. In this article, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with provincial dummy to assess the influence of media use and political trust after controlling for key sociodemographic antecedents and to isolate the mediation effect of political trust between media use and electoral/non-electoral participation.

Results

For the test of the relationship between media use and different modes of participation, we begin with a Pearson correlation matrix (Table 4). As the Table shows, there is a positive and significant relationship between traditional media use and electoral participation, trust in central governments, and trust in local governments. There is a negative but insignificant relationship between traditional media use and non-electoral participation. There is a negative and significant relationship between Internet use and trust in local governments, trust in central governments, and electoral participation and a positive and significant relationship between Internet use and non-electoral participation. The significant relationship suggests that types of media use are associated with different forms of political participation. It also raises questions about the relationship between traditional media and electoral participation and between Internet media use and non-electoral participation. This is a question we examine in more detail using the OLS regression.

The results from the OLS regression are displayed in Table 5. The results show that traditional media are positively associated with electoral participation, and the Internet media are positively associated with non-electoral participation, confirming our Hypotheses 1a and 1b. With controls in place for other factors associated with political participation, the significant relationship between traditional media and non-electoral

Table 4. Correlation matrix of pearson correlations between independent and criterion variables.

	Traditional media use	Internet use	Trust in central government	Trust in local governments	Electoral participation	Non-electoral participation
Traditional media	-					
Internet use	-.647***					
Trust in central government	.148***	-.196***				
Trust in local governments	.082***	-.128***	.569***			
Electoral participation	.187***	-.203***	.217***	.150***		
Non-electoral participation	-.013	.005*	-.005*	-.145***	-.001	-

participation with two types of participation stay intact and are consistent with the correlation coefficients we obtained. The results comply with our first hypotheses on type of media use and political participation.

The results in models 10 and 12 also show that there is a curvilinear relationship between age and electoral participation. This is similar to the conclusions of previous studies. For example, Verva et al. (1995) found older people are more likely to engage in electoral participation, whereas Putnam (2000) also showed a decline in civic participation among the young generation.

Turning to other control variables, we find that education and city household are negatively associated with electoral participation but have no effect on non-electoral participation. This indicates that the higher education levels and lower electoral participation levels of urban people are closely related to electoral mobilization, and the high concentration of mobilization in rural areas contributes to higher voting participation. This may be attributable to a lack of competitiveness in Chinese elections, 'causing those who have a strong Western-style democratic orientation and internal efficacy to be less likely to participate in a "semi-competitive" election campaign. And those followers of existing polity supporters and political authorities are more likely to participate in voting activities' (J. Chen & Zhong, 2002).

Our second set of expectations concern the relationship between political trust and different modes of participation. We expect that political trust in central government will have a positive relationship with electoral participation and a negative relationship between trust in local government and non-electoral participation. From the results of correlations (Table 4), the expected relationships exist in the results.

To explore these relationships further, with or without controls in place for other predictors of electoral and non-electoral participation, we turn to our OLS regression model. We expect that two types of political trust is associated with the two kinds of participation but in different directions. Nevertheless, the relationships between local trust and electoral participation and between central trust and non-electoral participation in different media contexts challenges us to reconsider the differences between the two kinds of political trust with respect to political participation. Because political trust in the central government comes largely from propaganda in the traditional media and the decline in trust in local governments is closely related to the use of new media, we formulate hypotheses 2 and 3 to rethink the relationship between media use and political trust and political participation. We will discuss this issue in the next section.

Table 5. The OLS regression.

	(1) Non- electoral	(2) Trust in local	(3) Non- electoral	(4) Electoral	(5) Trust in central	(6) Electoral	(7) Non- electoral	(8) Trust in local	(9) Non- electoral	(10) Electoral	(11) Trust in central	(12) Electoral
Internet Media	0.069*** (0.018)	-0.055*** (0.017)	0.052*** (0.020)				0.036* (0.021)	-0.091** (0.018)	0.035 (0.022)	0.036* (0.019)	0.025 (0.065)	0.035* (0.018)
Traditional Media				0.391*** (0.041)	0.248*** (0.039)	0.374*** (0.047)	-0.004 (0.053)	0.087 (0.081)	-0.000 (0.060)	0.216*** (0.040)	0.136*** (0.048)	0.223*** (0.045)
Trust in local gov't			-0.131*** (0.028)						-0.150*** (0.027)			
Trust in central gov't						0.205*** (0.034)						0.139*** (0.031)
Male							0.187*** (0.039)	-0.075* (0.043)	0.186*** (0.043)	0.144*** (0.040)	0.105*** (0.030)	0.139*** (0.040)
Education							0.011 (0.020)	-0.005 (0.022)	-0.004 (0.023)	-0.028 (0.023)	-0.006 (0.018)	-0.043*** (0.021)
Age							-0.002 (0.002)	0.008*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.014*** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.002)
CCP member							0.272*** (0.055)	0.150*** (0.053)	0.300*** (0.054)	0.296*** (0.072)	0.050 (0.038)	0.287*** (0.079)
Household (City)							0.092 (0.067)	-0.039 (0.047)	0.103 (0.067)	-0.340*** (0.063)	-0.171*** (0.042)	-0.287*** (0.065)
R-squared	0.027	0.031	0.042	0.083	0.064	0.112	0.045	0.050	0.062	0.148	0.120	0.164
Observations	2753	3258	2385	2753	3295	2416	2608	3080	2267	2608	3110	2293

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 6. Z-value of mediating effects.

Mediator: Trust in local gov't (from model 1–3)	Mediator: Trust in local gov't (from model 7–9)	Mediator: Trust in central gov't (from model 4–6)	Mediator: Trust in central gov't (from model 10–12)
2.661	2.024	3.739	2.395

Based on the correlations in Table 4, there are significant relationships between traditional media use and trust in local and central government. This means that people who use traditional media to obtain political information are more likely to have high political trust at both levels of government. Conversely, there is significant, negative relationship between Internet media use and political trust in both local and central government. Previous studies have shown that Internet use is associated with the formation of self-expression values that stress holding the government accountable, leading to a decrease in political trust (Su & Huang, 2015).

Looking at models 1, 7, 4, and 10, when governmental trust factors are not included, online media use and non-electoral participation as well as traditional media use and election-type participation are positively statistically significant. Models 3, 6, 9, and 12 show that when political trust factors are added, trust in local governments negatively affects the role of online media in non-electoral participation, whereas trust in the central government strengthens the role of traditional media in electoral participation.

However, to validate our hypotheses 3, we need more evidence than coefficients from one model alone. From models 1 to 3, it seems that we could not tell that trust in local government could mediate the effect of new media use because the coefficients stay significant. But after controlling other demographic variables (models 7 to 9), it becomes clear that the positive influence of Internet use on non-electoral participation faded with inputting trust in local government, and thus, the mediation effect stands and our hypothesis 3b is validated.

On the contrary, we could not easily confirm the mediating effect of trust in central government based on the relationship between traditional media use and electoral participation as we have done in validating hypothesis 3b. From Table 5, we could only say that the mediating effect of trust in central government is not *completely* present, but it is hard to tell that is not *partially* present. To test hypotheses 3a, here, we follow the instruction of Baron and Kenny (1986) to calculate the Z-value of the mediation effects based on the information on models listed in Table 5. We then show the Z-values of each mediating effect using models with and without control variables in Table 6, respectively.

As displayed in Table 6, all the Z-values of the mediation effects are larger than the 1.96, which means they are all statistically significant at 0.05. Furthermore, the calculated Z-values were higher in the models with control variables (model 7–12), and larger than the threshold of statistical significance. Based on our calculation, we could justify our hypotheses 3a and 3b. Thus, the mediation effects of trust in local and central government on the relationships between types of media use and types of political participation.

Discussion & conclusion

This study examines how political trust mediates the relationship between media use and different modes of participation. We expected that those who use traditional media to obtain political information would be more likely to engage in electoral participation

and less likely to engage in non-electoral participation. Conversely, those who prefer Internet media to obtain political information would be more likely to engage in non-electoral participation and less likely to engage in electoral participation. In contrast to the extant literature on media use and participation, we find that traditional media use is positively associated with only electoral participation, and that Internet media use is positively associated with only non-electoral participation. The results are consistent with previous studies on the positive link between newspaper readership and electoral participation as well as the communication logic of digital media in 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bennett et al., 2011). In other words, digital media such as email, Twitter, and YouTube offer various personalized paths to engagement and the formation of connective networks. At the same time, the finding that traditional media use is not associated with non-electoral participation and Internet use is also not associated with electoral participation calls into question the established theoretical framework on the relationship between media use and political behaviour. Therefore, we turn to political trust to illustrate the logic of the impact of media use on political participation.

Our second question asks whether certain types of political trust are linked to characteristically similar forms of political participation and whether political trust mediates the relationship between media use and political behaviour. Because the acquisition of political information from different channels is related to the individual's understanding of politics, the political information from these different channels differs from the government's own evaluations, which will affect the individual's understanding of politics and their own political efficacy and influence individuals' political participation. Therefore, we assume that access to supportive information through traditional media is more likely to generate a positive evaluation of the government and, to a certain extent, enhance the role of media use in electoral political participation. By contrast, accessing information over the Internet that challenges political authority weakens political trust, thereby increasing non-electoral participation.

Based on the differential pattern of political trust in the central and local governments in China, we distinguish trust in the two levels of government. The results show that central government trust is a mediating variable in the relationship between traditional media use and electoral political participation. Local government trust is a mediating variable in the relationship between traditional media and non-electoral political participation. Traditional media are more susceptible to official monitoring and publishes more content that positively evaluates government behaviour, enhancing citizens' trust in the central government and encouraging citizens' institutionalized political participation. Although online news is more critical of the government, for the central government, the criticism in online news and support in the traditional media have offsetting effects, which makes the central government does not play a role in the relationship between online news and non-electoral political participation. At the same time, non-electoral participation is more of a transactional rather than a political issue related to local governments, so its impact on the central government is not significant. On the contrary, due to the central government's strategy to control local governments, criticism of local government is common in the official media, including newspapers. The negative information in online media and the criticism of local governments in traditional media have

intensified distrust towards local governments among the public. As a result, citizens who access news online are more inclined to participate in non-electoral political behaviour due to weakened trust in local governments.

Due to the political structure of China and the unique mode of central–local government relations, local government trust is relatively scarce. As a result, the mass of Internet users are more likely to quickly acquire a lot of political information, especially information related to their own interests. Coupled with the public's distrust of local governments, interests and demands are more likely to be expressed through non-electoral participation such as petitions. The Internet is also considered more effective than the Bureau of Letters and Visits to seek governmental responses to grievances (Zhang, 2015). Therefore, the Chinese central government's criticism of local governments has made local governments a scapegoat for the public to vent their anger while at the same time maintaining the legitimacy of the central government. This approach has led to greater political participation through non-institutional channels.

Although Internet technology and new media play an increasingly important role in Chinese society, television is still an important channel for people to obtain political news. Therefore, in addition to studying the online participation brought about by the Internet, it is also important to understand the influence of other media types on political participation. Existing research shows that Internet use does not weaken the role of traditional media in the provision of political information. Although urban residents are more likely to use the Internet, rural residents continue to obtain political information through television. This phenomenon may strengthen the differences in patterns of political participation between urban and rural areas. Therefore, the impact of increased Internet use on Chinese political participation needs to be treated with caution. At the same time, the discussion of the political consequences of new media should go beyond simple 'technical determinism' or 'institutional determinism' to consider the political and psychological characteristics of users. Collectively, these findings raise questions about whether the boundaries between the use of traditional and Internet media and non-electoral and electoral participation, respectively, are still relevant in the Chinese political psychology context.

This study advances our understanding of the relationships between media use, political trust, and participation, but it is also not without limitations. First, regarding political participation, although the Internet is a means of participation, online participation (such as online political discussions and forwarding or commenting on political news) has implications for the democratization of authoritarian countries. However, the Internet is increasingly used to access to political information rather than for direct participation. In addition, the survey questions ask respondents 'whether they participated in these behaviours'. Therefore, this study does not explicitly indicate whether the participation is online or offline. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) found that active participants are more likely to 'use whatever tools for political participation are available to undertake their chosen action', including both online and offline activities. Although online political participation is not included in this study, the analysis of the political impact of the Internet by weakened. In the analysis of participation behaviour, to avoid structural imbalance, this study did not contain the 'extreme participation' in official terms, such as parades and demonstrations. The findings are limited to the negative relationship between local government trust and non-electoral participation. In addition, for the

electoral participation, which includes not only participation in national elections but also in local elections, our data show only that, after controlling the variables, trust in the central government significantly explains electoral participation but not the impact of trust in local government over central government on electoral participation. Second, this study uses factor analysis to classify government trust but does not pay attention to the impact of low trust in central government. In addition, the influence of media on politics is dependent on the content and form of the media.

With the prevalence of the Internet in China, people are increasingly participating in politics through the Internet. With the diversification of online media, in addition to using official narratives for news reports, commentary from online media has begun to fragment. In this regard, the government officials are also gradually adjusting the relationship between the official media and the Internet. In the meantime, due to the drastic changes in the external environment in the past 2 or 3 years, whether the relationship between the media and the people's political participation has undergone further changes requires further research.

Note

1. We tested the statistical relationship between political efficacy, traditional values, democratic values, and political trust and participation, respectively, using our survey data and found that internal and external political efficacy is not related to the use of traditional media, nor traditional values or democratic values, so political trust is chosen as a mediator in the influence of media use on political participation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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