

# **E-Participation in Contemporary China: A Comparison with Conventional Offline Participation<sup>1</sup>**

Ping Xu<sup>2</sup>

Kristin Johnson

Ashlea Rundlett

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<sup>2</sup> Corresponding author. Email: [pingxu@uri.edu](mailto:pingxu@uri.edu)

## **E-Participation in Contemporary China: A Comparison with Conventional Offline Participation**

**Abstract:** Drawing on the resource theory of political participation, we compare the determinants of Internet-based e-participation and conventional offline political participation in China by employing data from an original survey conducted in 2013. We find that e-government and other online platforms provide more equal participation opportunities to Chinese citizens traditionally lacking political resources. Although non-party members and non-elites are disadvantaged in conventional offline participation, they are not in e-participation, especially through using e-government systems. Internet/computer access and Internet skills push individuals away from conventional offline participation, and frequent social media users are more likely to engage in e-participation. Taken together, these results suggest that e-government and other online platforms offers genuine potential to expand the scope of participation and empowers those traditionally disadvantaged in China.

**Keywords:** e-participation, e-government, conventional offline political participation, resource theory, political resource, participatory inequality

With the rapid diffusion of information technology, the Chinese government has actively rolled out e-government and other digital platforms to enhance democratic responsiveness and delivery of government services. After the 1998 nationwide “Government Online” initiative, all provincial governments and most local governments set up their portal websites, and many of these sites have integrated functions such as Governor’s (or Mayor’s) mailbox, e-petition, and citizens’ comment box (Jiang and Xu 2009). Many governmental agencies have created their own social media accounts to communicate and interact with their constituents. Some local governments even established what is called the “E-government Office” that combine all e-government services and platforms to help solve citizens’ problems more efficiently.

The e-government and other online platforms provide Chinese citizens alternative ways to participate in politics. Given China’s powerful party state, a top-down political system and a state regulated media system, Chinese citizens have had relatively fewer choices to influence policy and seek political change offline (Conover 1995; Putnam 2000; Xu *et al* 2018; Jennings 1997). Conventionally, citizens with grievances may contact representatives of the People’s Congress or petition the Bureau of Letters and Visits (BLV), but many discover these means tend to be ineffective (Jennings 1997; Mingxin 2015; Chen and Xu 2011). Other channels such as collective petitioning and mass protests may be more effective in enacting change, but tend to be more risky and costly (Chen 2004). Limited channels, relative ineffectiveness and the risks involved have cultivated low levels of political participation and prevalent political apathy in the post-reform era of China (Harding, 1994).

The rapid development of information technology and the introduction of e-government in the past two decades offers new opportunities for political participation in China. Cyber space allows citizens to interact with government agencies and with each other rapidly with very little cost, making citizens more informed and connected. It also provides free and open space for citizens to

engage in public discourse and various civic and political activities (Krueger 2002; Xu *et al.* 2018). By using the Internet, ordinary Chinese citizens can now more easily contact governmental officials, monitor governmental behavior, voice their opinions, form groups and even mobilize collective actions (Xu *et al.* 2018).

The application of e-government systems can lead to improved delivery of government services and democratic responsiveness, increased transparency and access to information, and reduced levels of corruption (West 2004; Mistry and Jalal 2012; Abu-Shanab 2013; Esselimani *et al.* 2021). As a result, some scholars argue that the interactive features of the Internet have the potential to facilitate democracy in China (Dahlberg 2001; Ye *et al.* 2017). However, others are less optimistic about the e-government's democratic prospects in China because of the large-scale censorship efforts implemented in online spaces, which limits free exchange of information on the Internet and limit its potential for political mobilization (King *et al.* 2013; 2017). Other research points to flaws in e-government's democratizing capabilities by arguing that e-government in China operates inefficiently (Wu and Guo 2015), and increases control of the central government over subnational levels of government (Seifert and Chung 2009).

In order to ascertain whether Internet and the e-government system has the potential to broaden political participation, we must first find out the magnitude of Internet-based e-participation, identify who is more likely to engage with e-government systems, and determine whether or not online political participation broadens participation by incorporating previously unengaged members of society. Previous literature offers consensus that an entrenched pattern of inequality is demonstrated with conventional political participation in both democracies and non-democracies. In democracies, individuals with more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to participate in politics, resulting in unequal governmental responsiveness to the citizenry and constituent inequality (Lijphart 1997; Nagel 1987; Verba and Nie 1972). Lijphart (1997) identifies

unequal political participation as “democracy’s unresolved dilemma” and a deep-rooted problem affecting the quality of democracy.

In the context of China, scholars document similar patterns of inequality with conventional offline political participation. For example, Jennings (1997; 1998) finds that the traditional resource model functions well to identify determinants of participation in the Chinese countryside. Those who are wealthier, more highly educated, and those with stronger civic skills, personal connections, and professional networks are more likely to participate in conventional offline political activities.

Does the e-government and other digital platforms change this pattern of participatory inequality in China? Will it provide citizens who would not otherwise participate in politics a new opportunity to participate in online space? In this paper, we set out to analyze and compare Internet-based e-participation with conventional offline political participation in China by using an original survey conducted in China in November 2013. In the following section, we introduce Internet-based e-participation as an emerging type of political participation in China, and we compare e-participation with conventional offline political participation among Chinese citizens. In section two, we introduce our use of resource theory and discuss the determinants of offline and e-government political participation in China. Section three outlines our data and methods to test whether or not e-participation reinforces participatory inequality with conventional offline participation. In section four, we present our results, and in the final section, we discuss the implications of our findings.

### **Political Participation and the Emergence of E-Participation in China**

Political participation is generally understood as engagement in political activity with an intent to influence outcomes in policy or government action. In western democracies, typical participation activities include voting, holding or running for political office, writing to legislators,

attending public hearings, signing a petition, marching in a protest, or serving in political organizations (Putnam 2000; Conover 1995).

Previous research suggests that political participation in China, like other hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes, is mostly grievance-based (Chen 2012; Li 2004, 2008), occurs more often at the policy implementation stage motivated by issue based mobilization rather than the policymaking stage (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007; Roberts 2002), and is characterized as informal (instead of formal) and particularistic (instead of having common goals) (Jennings 1997, 1998). In China, citizens can employ various means to engage in political participation, including contacting representatives of the people's congress, contacting governmental officials, petitions to Bureaus of Letters and Visits (BLV), attending public hearings, and more autonomous activities such as collective petitions and protests (Tianjian 1997; Chen 2012).

With the rapid diffusion of information technology, many of the conventional offline participatory activities find a parallel platform in cyberspace. For example, all provincial governments and most local governments set up their portal websites after the 1998 nationwide "Government Online" initiative. Many of these sites have integrated functions such as Governor's (or Mayor's) mailbox, e-petition, and citizens' comment box (Jiang and Xu 2009). Nearly all provincial portal sites have adopted an online mailbox for citizens to send in complaints and many provincial governments even publish complaints and their responses. Many governmental agencies have created their own social media accounts to communicate and interact with their constituents. These new functions enable citizens to reach officials within one click while sitting at home, instead of physically visiting a government office.

E-participation also extends beyond e-government systems to various social media platforms such as Wechat (Weixin or 微信 in Chinese) and Microblog (Weibo or 微博 in Chinese). Instead of writing to editors of newspapers, Chinese citizens can now expose the misconduct of governmental

officials instantly and spread the information on a massive scale within seconds. Citizens can also mobilize and organize collective action online much more easily. It is not uncommon for citizens to expose and protest against policies that could potentially cause detriment to their wellbeing through the Internet (Xu *et al* 2018). Many Chinese citizens regard Internet-based participation as a more effective means of communicating grievance than offline in person participation. A Chinese saying details this reality: if someone has a grievance and intends to seek a solution, it is “more effective to go to the Web than go to the BLV (上访不如上网 in Chinese)” (Tao and Chen 1999; Zhang 2015).

Following Vicente and Novo (2014), we examine e-participation and define it as the use of any digital technology that facilitates interactions between citizens and the governments in an online environment. Although we are particularly interested in the role of e-government in expanding the scope of political participation, we also consider a wider range of e-participation activities, extending beyond the e-government systems to activities on other online platforms such as social media.

Table 1 below provides frequency responses from a survey conducted by researchers at Huazhong Science and Technology University (HSTU) in November 2013, based on participation format (conventional offline participation vs. e-participation) and individual action(s) taken. Individuals were asked how frequently they participated in two e-government activities: (1) offering an opinion or suggestion to governmental agencies online, 2) monitoring governmental policy-making process and other governmental behavior online; and two general e-participation activities: (3) posting or reposting their political opinion online, (4) organizing or participating in an online protest. These questions are intentionally framed to be compatible with those in western surveys as well as prior research on political participation in China (Jennings 1997; Best and Krueger 2005). Similar questions on offline participatory activities were asked roughly in parallel with the online forms, in order to offer meaningful comparisons. All questions are constructed with a 7-point scale, with 1 indicating “Never,” and 7 indicating “Very Frequently.” We present the fractions of

respondents who indicated that they never participated as well as those indicating they often participated in a particular activity.

Table 1 indicates a much smaller proportion of respondents indicating that they have never engaged in political activity in an online format compared to a similar offline format. The differences between an online and a similar offline activity are as much as 15-20%. In contrast, a much higher percentage of individuals indicate that they participated in any given online political activity, especially those related to e-government, compared to a similar offline activity, with differences ranging between 10% and 16%. Among all four e-participation activities, offering suggestions to government agencies and organizing/participating in an online protest are less frequently utilized by Chinese citizens compared to the other two types of activities. This is possibly because these two types of activities are less anonymous and therefore could entail more risk, compared to the other two types of e-participation that are more passive.

**Table 1: Frequency of Political Participation**

<b>Measure of Participation</b>	<b>% <i>Never</i></b>	<b>% <i>Often</i></b>
<b>Conventional Offline Participation</b>		
<i>Have you contacted an official to offer an opinion or suggestion?</i>	35.19	17.47
<i>Have you attended a public hearing or other meetings organized by the government?</i>	28.54	21.55
<i>Have you contacted the official media by letters/phone to express your opinion?</i>	33.94	18.30
<i>Have you organized or participated in protests?</i>	42.01	19.63
<b>E- Participation</b>		
<i>Have you offered an opinion or suggestion to a government agency online?</i>	20.38	28.70
<i>Have you monitored governmental policy-making process online?</i>	11.65	37.94
<i>Have you posted or re-posted your political opinion online?</i>	14.23	33.61
<i>Have you organized or participated in an online protest?</i>	22.96	29.36



Overall, we observe that e-government and social media are popular means for Chinese citizens to engage in political participation. As an important complement to conventional means of political participation, e-participation seems to have gained even more popularity than offline participation. This observation is consistent with findings from previous survey research (Zhou 2011; Zhang 2015). In 2008, Zhou conducted a survey in Xiamen, Fujian Province in China, asking Xiamen residents' choice of means to voice their opinion after the government decided to build a highly-polluting Paraxylene (PX) factory near downtown Xiamen city. The survey shows that when facing this pressing concern, only 14.0% of respondents chose conventional means to participate, and 33.6% of them used the Internet (Zhou 2008). Online political participation gained its popularity in China and worldwide, possibly because it is more convenient, less costly, less risky, and can disperse information more easily and rapidly.

Another reason for the observed higher frequencies of online political activities might be the online nature of our survey. Indeed, Internet users will likely use online tools to participate in politics more often. Some readers may even question the representativeness and appropriateness of using an online survey for this study. We argue that Internet access has grown exponentially worldwide since its first onset in the 1990s and very possibly nearly everyone will have Internet access in the near future. For instance, 43% of Americans had access to the Internet in 1996 and this number grew to 62% in 2000 and nearly 80% in 2016 (Best and Krueger 2005). Likewise, the number of Internet users in China increased from 1 million in 1997 to 11 million in 2005, and to 710 million in 2016 (CNNIC 2016). As Krueger (2002: 478-479) argues, "because of the rapidly expanding medium, considerations of its impact on political participation should focus not only on describing its current manifestations but also on how individuals might use the medium if all segments of society had equal penetration. This approach focuses on the potential of the medium per se, purged from issues of access." We adopt a similar approach in this paper and examine who

may be more likely to engage in online and offline participation provided all members of society had equal access to Internet. Therefore, the limitation of our respondents to individuals with Internet access is not entirely inappropriate.

### **Offline- and E-Participation: How Their Determinants Differ**

One of the most interesting questions regarding the popularity of e-government in China focuses on who is utilizing this new form of participation. Does e-government participation reflect a diverging and new demographic of participation, or does it simply represent an increase in activity from an already politically engaged cohort? Traditional resource theory of participation suggests that “given equal motivation to participate in the population, political activity should stratify by resources (Verba *et al.* 1995; Krueger 2002). In western democracies, individuals from more advantaged backgrounds participate more in politics, as they possess greater resources including money, time and civic skills that are required for political participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995). However, this pattern of participation is not confined to democracies, as consistent empirical evidence shows that resources matter for political participation (Marien *et al* 2010; Ekman 2009).

In the context of China, scholars find a similar effect of resources such as money and civic skills on political participation. Based on data collected from four Chinese rural counties, Jennings explores determinants of conventional offline political participation behavior such as contacting officials, attending local party or all-village meetings, and solving local problems by collective action. He finds that individuals with higher income and higher levels of civic competence are much more likely to participate in various offline political activities (Jennings 1997).

Do traditional resources such as money and civic skills also influence e-participation? The well-known “knowledge gap hypothesis” argues that individuals “already engaged in politics are those endowed with the resources (civic skills, money, and free time) necessary to participate; with the addition of a new participatory medium, the same high-resource individuals should better take

advantage of this new participatory opportunity” (Krueger 2002; Murdock and Golding 1989; Tichenor *et al* 1970). Even though other scholars challenge this argument and contend that online participation requires a different set of resources, we argue that other resources may be important, money and civic skills are still two important resources required for participation in China.

Therefore, we develop the following two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1-a:** individuals with higher income are more likely to engage in both e-participation and conventional offline political activities in China.

**Hypothesis 1-b:** individuals with higher levels of civic skills are more likely to engage in both e-participation and conventional offline political activities.

Beyond these traditional resources of participation, scholars like Jennings (1997) and Tsai and Xu (2017) suggest that there are other types of resources such as **political networks and connections** that may also influence Chinese citizens’ political participation. Other scholars look into whether or not being a Communist Party member influences governmental responses to participatory activities (Chen et al. 2006). For example, being a party member, having a second occupation, and facing pressing local problems make rural residents more likely to participate in political activities in the Chinese countryside. According to Jennings (1997), “**members of the communist party have unusual access to information, influential individuals, and experience in working the system. They are well situated to engage in the kinds of initiatory activities that may seem daunting to the ordinary citizen.**”

Jennings also argues that in the post-reform era, China is “characterized by an enormously significant political stratification system,” with the “distinctions between cadres and non-cadres, party and non-party members, and center and periphery being the most salient features (Jennings 1997).” He finds that individuals with a second occupation in rural China in the 1990’s were more likely to participate in politics, because these individuals are “connected to more local networks,

upwardly mobile, willing to push hard for their interests, and in expanding sectors of the economy where the rules of the game are still in flux (Jennings 1997).”

Given the specific context of rural China in the early 1990s, it is reasonable for Jennings to use party membership and having a second occupation to gauge one’s political resources. In contemporary China and a non-rural setting, we need new ways to identify individuals with more political resources as having a second occupation may simply mean that the person holds multiple jobs at the same time trying to make ends meet. Tsai and Xu (2016), for example, find that another type of political resources, political connections or personal ties to governmental officials, play an important role in political participation. Those with more connections are more likely to contact authorities and complain about governmental services (Tsai and Xu 2016). We contend that while communist party members still have unique access to information, influential individuals, and experience in working the system, individuals holding higher levels of job positions including governmental officials and managerial positions could possess more personal and political networks than ordinary citizens. We call these individuals political or economic elites and argue that they are advantaged in face-to-face offline political participation due to their political connections.

However, because party members and elites are good at solving their problems in offline settings, they do not need to go online, and more importantly, they may not necessarily be advantaged when interacting with e-government systems. Therefore, we contend that elites are advantaged in offline but not necessarily so in Internet-based e-participation. Instead, the Internet may be an alternate choice for individuals who lack the types of political connections, professional networks and necessary political resources to solve problems offline. Based on this, we develop the following two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2-a:** individuals with more political connections are more likely to participate in politics offline, but not necessarily in e-participation.

**Hypothesis 2-b:** Communist party members are more likely to participate in politics offline, but not necessarily in e-participation.

As the development of information technology spreads, the Internet emerges as an alternative arena for participation in a relatively closed authoritarian regime. Because of relative low-cost, ease of use, and availability of various online tools (e.g., bulletin boards, interactive social media applications, governmental portal sites), e-participation has quickly emerged as a new phenomenon in China.

Although resource theory receives much empirical support when it comes to conventional offline political participation in both China and in western democracies, scholars have divided opinions on whether or not e-participation requires the same set of resources. The “knowledge gap hypothesis” argues that individuals endowed with traditional resources required for conventional offline participation are also more likely to participate online because the Internet is just a new participatory medium (Krueger 2002). Other scholars challenge this argument and contend that online participation requires a different set of resources such as access to computer and Internet, Internet speed, and one’s Internet proficiency. In their view, traditionally disadvantaged groups may not possess socioeconomic resources such as money and time required for offline participation, they may possess excellent Internet-related resources to participate online and actually feel more empowered in an online environment.

Early research on Internet political participation indeed finds that resources such as Internet specific skills matter more for online participation, as individuals need technical proficiency to be able to navigate through the Internet in order to participate (Bucy 2000; Krueger 2002; Vicente and Novo 2014). In addition, Internet connection speed and home Internet access also influences one’s decision to engage in online political activities (Leigh and Atkinson 2001; NTIA 2000; Grubestic and Murray 2002). Those with higher Internet speed will be more likely to engage in online political

activities, because faster connections enable users to more easily navigate through websites, download and upload files, transmit smoother videos and audios, and promote multimedia applications (Krueger 2002). In addition, individuals with home Internet connections are more likely to participate online, because home Internet connection offers individuals with greater opportunity, more privacy, and increased flexibility for online participation compared to public or work computer terminals (NTIA 2000).

However, on the other side, just as Putnam (2000) argues that television watching is responsible for the declining civic engagement in the United States, scholars argue that the Internet is also suspected to disengage people from civic and political activities (Kraut et al., 1998; Putnam, 2000; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Chan & Zhou, 2011). For one, it is likely that when people use most of their online time on shopping and entertainment, they are likely to be less involved in civic and political activities. Additionally, arguments surrounding “slacktivism” posed by previous literature suggest that Internet usage mainly focuses on activities that make users *feel good* rather than meaningful activities with real political outcomes (Christensen 2012). Other skeptics argue that the great abundance of online information could require more cognitive effort for one to meaningfully process it and therefore cause disorientation and disengagement (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2003). What is even worse, negative and agitating information on the Internet could impair political participation and result in political indifference (Chan & Zhou, 2011).

Furthermore, because of its interactive features, social media could also promote e-participation. Political scientists with an interest in social media and political participation suggest that social media helps develop a more vocal and lively civil society and facilitates political participation (Jennings and Zeitner 2003; Mack 2004; Norris 2005; Shah et al 2001; 2005; Uslander 2004). Indeed, because of its interactive features, social media provide an unprecedentedly new venue for ordinary citizens to share their opinions about politics, reveal political scandals such as

corruption or misconduct of government officials, and even mobilize protests in the virtual online community. However, some scholars maintain that the Chinese government's firm control of the content on the Internet may have a negative effect on individuals' participation in politics (Yang 2009; Qiang 2011; Jiang and Xu 2009; Tsui 2003; Jiang 2010). Others argue that online communication, just like television, reduces face-to-face interactions and therefore decreases civic participation (Putnam 2000; Leibold 2011). Others contend that online activities such as blogging are often too discursive and shallow to facilitate true political participation (Leibold 2011; Morozov 2011). Therefore, the real impact of social media on political participation in China remains unclear. Because of the extreme popularity of social media in China, we are interested in further exploring the effect of social media on both offline and online participation. Since we do not study how in-depth individuals engage in each activity, and instead only focus on whether or not they take part in the activity, we argue that the use of social media itself promotes the likelihood of e-participation. This is because the interactive feature of social media makes it easy for individuals to discuss politics, pay attention to public affairs, and more easily reached and mobilized for potential collection actions.

Based on all above arguments related to Internet resources, we hypothesize that individuals with better Internet access and skills are more likely to engage in e-participation, but not necessarily offline participation. Frequent social media users may be more likely engaged in e-government and online participation but not offline participation.

**Hypothesis 3-a:** individuals with better Internet and computer access are more likely to participate in e-government and online politics, but this factor should not affect conventional offline participation.

**Hypothesis 3-b:** individuals with more Internet competency are more likely to participate in e-government and online politics, but this skill should not influence offline participation.

**Hypothesis 3-c:** frequent social media users may be more likely to participate in e-government and online politics, but they do not necessarily help offline political participation.

## **Data and Methods**

We utilize data from an original survey conducted in 2013 to examine the potentials of e-participation in China. The survey was designed by researchers from HUST and conducted by a professional Chinese polling firm in November 2013. The polling firm randomly selected 17,035 individuals from their user pool of more than 400,000 subscribers from 31 provinces and districts in China, and sent an invitation to all of them to participate in the study. Out of the 17,035 invited individuals, 1,202 participants responded (response rate = 7.06%). All returned online surveys were reviewed by calling back the interviewees to confirm the responses. The sample was weighted by gender to make it more representative of the population, because the original sample included 60.3% males, whereas males in the Chinese population were 55.6%. The weighted sample had 55.6% males and an average age of 32.87 years old.

Because our dependent variables are means of four scores ranging from 1-7, we consider them as continuous, and therefore use multivariate linear regression models. Below are specifications of our dependent variables, key independent variables and control variables.

### **Dependent Variables:**

***Conventional offline political participation.*** Respondents are asked how frequently they have participated in any of the following conventional offline political activities before on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 7 = very often): (1) contacting an official to offer an opinion or suggestion, (2) contacting the official media by letters/phone, (3) attending a public hearing or other meetings organized by the government, and (4) organizing or participating in protests. We take their



responses to these four questions and use the mean of these four scores as an indicator for offline political participation.

*E-participation through e-government and other online systems.* Similarly, respondents are also asked about the frequency of participating in the following online political activities: (1) offering an opinion or suggestion to governmental agencies online, (2) monitoring governmental policy-making process and other governmental behavior online, (3) posting or reposting a political opinion online, and (4) organizing or participating in an online protest. Answers are recorded in a 7-point Likert-type scale, and we use the mean of these four scores to generate an indicator for e-participation.

### **Independent Variables:**

*Traditional resources.* Previous literature suggests that traditional resources such as money and civic skills both promote conventional offline participation. We consider income and civic skills and test whether or not these traditional resources influence e-participation and conventional offline participation in the same way. We use participants' self-reported monthly family income as a measure for money and wealth. This original income indicator has 12 categories, ranging from less than RMB ¥1000 (=1) to more than RMB ¥30,000(=12). Our measure collapses these into five categories, including the lower class (12.3%; family monthly income below RMB¥3,000), lower-middle class (23.4%, RMB¥3,000-¥6,000), middle class (24.4%, RMB¥6,000-¥10,000), middle-upper class (26.9%; RMB¥10,000-¥20,000), and upper class (13.0%; RMB¥20,000 and up).

Following the classical measure of civic skills created by Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995), the survey asks participants to indicate how frequently they participated in activities organized by communities, volunteering, and environmental advocacy activities on a 7-point scale (1 = never and 7 = very often). We use the sum of these three scores as the indicator of one's civic skills.

***Political resources.*** We use Communist party membership and elite job status as measurements for one's political connections and resources. We define elite job status as those holding managerial positions and governmental officials. Consequently, ordinary workers, farmers, students and teachers are categorized as non-elites. Both of these two measures are based on self-identified job status and party membership status questions. We expect to see that Communist party members and individuals with elite occupation status (i.e., governmental officials and managers) are more likely to engage in conventional offline political activities, but not necessarily in Internet-based e-participation.

***Internet-related resources.*** We consider Internet and computer access as well as Internet skills as measures for Internet-related resources. To measure participants' access to computers and the Internet, we ask participants to indicate where they can use the Internet, including home, workplace, Internet cafes, friends' homes, anywhere with mobile-device Internet access, public places such as libraries, and other. In addition, they are asked to indicate what equipment they use to go online, including desk computer, laptop, tablet, smartphone, and other. In each question, participants are instructed to select all the options that apply to them and the values from the two questions are added for each participant as an index of the degree of access to computers and the Internet (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ).

We also ask participants how they perceive their Internet skills on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = no confidence and 5 = excellent), and we use this measure as Internet competency. We expect to see that individuals with better access to the Internet/computers and Internet competency are more likely to participate in online activities but not offline activities.

We also consider social media usage as a contributing factor for e-participation but not necessarily for conventional offline participation. We asked participants if they had used blogs, Weibo (i.e., Microblog), and Weixin (i.e., Wechat) before. At the time of the survey, 33%, 61%, and

62% had used blogs, Weibo, and Weixin before, respectively. We add these three indicators and generated a social media usage measure, ranging from 0 to 3, with 0 meaning the person never uses any of the three social media formats, and 3 meaning the person uses all three.

### **Control Variables:**

We consider one's political interest as an important control variable. Participants are asked whether they agree with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ): "I am interested in political or public affairs," "I search for information on public affairs or politics through various channels," and "It is worthy of spending time thinking of politics or public affairs." We use the average score of these three items as a measurement of political interest.

We distinguish between internal and external political efficacy and consider both as control variables. Participants are asked to rate the following two items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ): "I think I am more than able to understand political issues," and "I am able to express my opinions on national and local issues." We use the average of these two scores as a measure for internal political efficacy. External political efficacy is measured by the average of the following two items on the same scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ): "The governmental decision-making system effectively responds to the public's reactions," and "the government and its officials actively and effectively respond to the public's reactions."

In addition, we include demographic characteristics such as age, gender and education level as control variables. We expect the younger generation more likely to engage in more unconventional political activities including online activity, and more educated individuals more likely to participate in general.

### **Results**

Results of our analysis evaluating the determinants of e-participation and offline participation are detailed in Table 2, below. We find support for both Hypothesis 1a and 1b: traditional resources such as money and civic skills are positively associated with both e-participation and offline political participation and the relationships are statistically significant. A one-unit increase in one's family income will result in 0.09 (0.11) unit of increase in e-participation (conventional offline participation). A one-unit increase in civic skills is associated with 0.15 (0.23) unit increase in e-participation (conventional offline participation). These results are consistent with Jennings' findings that income and civic skills promote political participation in rural China (Jennings 1997). Additionally, our finding is consistent with resource theory arguments as well as the well-known "knowledge gap hypothesis" which surmises that individuals endowed with civic skills and money could take advantage of this new participatory medium and tend to participate more.

We also find support for Hypothesis 2a and 2b. Communist party members and elites by occupation are more likely to participate in conventional offline political activities. Again, these results are consistent with Jennings' argument that individuals connected through a realm of social and political networks are more likely to utilize the personal impact of their networks in an offline context. Interestingly, neither of these two variables has a significant effect on e-participation. In other words, while party members and elites are more privileged in conventional offline participation due to the constellation of their political connections and networks, they are not necessarily more privileged in online participation. In contrast, although non-party members and those holding less elite/prestigious jobs are disadvantaged and less involved in the conventional offline political activities, they are as likely as their more advantaged counterparts to engage in online political activities.

We find partial support for Hypothesis 3a, 3b, and 3c. Unsurprisingly, computer and Internet access are negatively associated with conventional offline participation and the effect is

significant at the 0.01 level, perhaps indicating that as e-government and other online platforms expand in China, for example through the Government Online Project, participation may increasingly move to cyberspace. This is supported by the finding that Internet competency and social media usage are also negatively associated with offline participation, even though the effects are either moderately significant or insignificant. These patterns suggest that as individuals master Internet-related resources, they will likely move away from traditional means of participation.

Among all three Internet-related resource variables, only social media usage has a positive and significant effect on e-participation, partially supporting hypothesis 3c. Although computer/Internet access and Internet competency both have positive effects on e-participation, the effects are not statistically significant. These findings are a bit puzzling because there are strong theoretical arguments for a positive role of these Internet-related resources in facilitating online participation (Bucy 2000; Krueger 2002; Vicente and Novo 2014; Leigh and Atkinson 2001; NTIA 2000; Grubestic and Murray 2002). There are few explanations for this null finding. First, our measures on “Computer/Internet access” and “Internet competency” are *not* indicators of “whether or not a respondent has access or is competent,” but instead how advanced their access and competency is. These results, therefore, suggest that advanced Internet skills/multi-point Internet access are *not* required for online political participation; instead, basic Internet access and skills may be already sufficient for online political participation. To put this intuitively, it does not require someone to be a computer engineer to participate online; citizens with basic Internet access and competency should be able to participate online if they desire to do so. Secondly, the null finding of “Computer/Internet access” and “Internet competency” might be also due to the fact that we grouped all four types of online political participation activities into one dependent variable. It might be that different types of online political participation require different kinds of Internet-related resources. To verify this speculation, we conduct additional analyses and present the results in the

Supplementary Materials. Overall, results from these additional analyses show more nuanced effects of Internet-related resources on different types of online participation.

Our results show that external political efficacy has a positive and significant effect on offline participation, and political interest and internal political efficacy both have positive and significant effects on e-participation. These are not surprising as they suggest that both motivation and interest are key in determining online participation, while those perceiving offline activities to be effective are more likely to choose that strategy of engagement. Political interest itself, whether inherent or triggered by grievances, is not enough to make a person participate in politics face-to-face. This finding is also consistent with our finding that individuals with abundant political resources who feel as though they are highly effective through a realm of social and political networks may find personal contact or an in-person visit a feasible way to realize a positive outcome.

Both age and education have significant and negative effects on offline and online participation. Younger and less educated individuals are more likely to participate in offline and online political activities. In part, this is likely to reflect the reality that younger individuals are more likely to engage in seeking changes for policy implementation and air grievances surrounding issue targeted change. Levels of education are negatively associated with both forms of participation, which contradicts our prediction, perhaps implying those who are highly educated understand the political process better and therefore are not motivated to participate after gauging the risks involved.

**Table 2: Effect of Traditional, Political, and Internet-related Resources on Offline and Online Participation**

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Offline Participation		Online Participation	
<i>Traditional resources:</i>				
Income	0.11 ***	(.03)	0.09**	(.03)
Civic Skills	0.23***	(.01)	0.15***	(.01)
<i>Political resources:</i>				
Party Member	0.18*	(.08)	0.04	(.08)
Elite Job Status	0.13+	(.07)	0.06	(.07)
<i>Internet-related resources:</i>				
Computer/Internet Access	-0.06**	(.02)	0.01	(.02)
Internet Competency	-0.07+	(.04)	0.01	(.04)
Social Media Use	-0.05	(.03)	0.05+	(.03)
Gender	0.06	(.72)	0.04	(.06)
Age	-0.02***	(.00)	-0.03***	(.00)
Education	-0.14**	(.05)	-0.11*	(.05)
Political Interest	-0.03	(.05)	0.26***	(.05)
Internal Efficacy	0.06	(.04)	0.2***	(.04)
External Efficacy	0.17***	(.03)	-0.02	(.03)
Constant	0.44	(.27)	0.44+	(.26)
No. of observations	1202		1202	
R-squared	0.5219		0.5122	

+:  $p < 0.1$ ; \*:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$

## Conclusion

The rapid development and diffusion of information technology has provided governments around the world a new tool to deliver services and engage citizens. This paper compares e-participation with the conventional offline participation in China, with the intent to determine whether or not e-participation broadens participation by incorporating previously disadvantaged and unengaged members of the society.

Our exploration leads to some quite interesting findings, most notably, the finding that political resources such as connections and networks are an important determinant for offline participation but not for e-participation. Party members and elites are more privileged in offline

participation because they can more easily achieve a desirable outcome due to their rich political connections and networks. However, these political resources become largely irrelevant when it comes to e-participation. Those who are politically under-resourced, for example non-party members and non-elites (or essentially ordinary citizens) are as likely to use online political activities as their more advantaged counterparts. This finding has important implications for China's political future: e-governments and other digital platforms has the potential to broaden the scope of participation to a broader swathe of society, making it more inclusive.

We expected to find that all Internet-related resources such as Internet skills, access and social media usage contributed to online participation. However, we find that more Internet access and better Internet skills push individuals away from offline activities, but do not directly facilitate online participation. Among all three Internet-related resources, only social media usage significantly promotes online political participation. As King, Pan and Roberts state, the rise of social media enabled 1.3 billion people to “broadcast their individual views, making information far more diffuse and considerably harder to control” (King et al pp 891). Our findings suggest that having Internet access and Internet skills may be important but they are not enough to empower e-participation. Instead, social media motivate political engagement through the spread of information, low barrier to organization, and the speed of dissemination, less cost and risks (Tufekci and Wilson 2012), all of which makes e-participation a more attractive and effective tool to seek for change.

The power of social media in promoting participation is observed in other countries around the world, from Arab Spring in Egypt to political engagement in the United States and Canada among young adult populations (Zúñiga et al 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Zúñiga et al 2012). Our findings surrounding social media are consistent with cross national evidence and suggest a positive role of new media in promoting political participation in China. Our findings also suggest that political interest and internal efficacy support a changing landscape for political action in



China. Traditionally, due to the ineffectiveness of offline participation, Chinese citizens may require assurance that the government will respond in order for them to participate. With the advent of online participation, citizens may no longer need assurance of efficacy as a prerequisite for participation.

Because our paper utilizes a survey conducted in 2013, our conclusions can not necessarily be generalized to the periods after 2013. In recent years, the Chinese government has put more emphasis on the Internet, social media and information technology in general. This emphasis could be a double-edged sword when it comes to its impact on online participation. On the one hand, the government has tightened control on the Internet since 2015. There has been greater security and regulatory action of online content, including deletion of over 10,000 social media accounts and posts for vulgarity and negativity (Davis 2018; Feng 2022). Generally speaking, the crackdown could depress online participation. However, on the other hand, the government has renewed the emphasis on using the Internet to modernize governance; governmental officials are instructed to study and engage with public opinion online (Repnikova 2018). China now sees nearly 10,000 government Weibo accounts serving as platforms for news conferences, online polling and channels for citizen feedback (Repnikova 2018). Some local governments are even experimenting with the idea of “E-government Offices” that combine various e-government services and platforms into one office. The city of Chengdu, for example, established an “E-government Office” that hires 100 people to work on a daily basis, responding to thousands of citizens’ complaints regarding power outages, water leaks, and other service delivery issues (Hu 2019). Future studies are encouraged to explore how governmental regulations on the Internet influences online political participation in the post-2013 era.

Our research suggests that Internet-based e-participation offers an immediate and new solution for political engagement with a changed personal cost: relative ease, low cost, and low risks,

with the possibility of bringing a significantly larger portion of the population into the process. Our preliminary exploration suggests that a much broader swathe of the population is gaining access and becoming engaged in various online political activities in China, suggesting a new potential for political participation that allows broader social commentary and elicits pressure on government actors (Yang 2007). However, we have no intention to make the argument that the Internet is the ultimate solution for limited participation in China or that it will completely eliminate the participatory inequality between groups with high and low socioeconomic resources, yet we are optimistic that this initial study identifies the ways in which new information technology offers some potential to reduce inequality in political engagement in China. Future work is required to ascertain the overall degree to which online political participation is effective, and under what circumstances e-participation can lead to governmental responses, and whether or not responsiveness is selective and inequitable.

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