Partisan strength and social media use among voters during the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council election: Examining the roles of…

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Partisan strength and social media use among voters during the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council election: Examining the roles of ambivalence and disagreement

Abstract

High identifiers to political parties are typically the most cognitively and behaviorally engaged during elections. Using a national post-election survey of voters (N = 924) in the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council election, the present study examined the relationship between partisan strength and a variety of social media behaviors. Findings showed that partisan strength was positively associated with social media use during the campaign. However, the relationships were generally only significant under conditions of lower ambivalence towards political parties and less disagreement among one's friendship networks. Implications for the findings are discussed.

Keywords: elections, Hong Kong, social media, Facebook, party identification, ambivalence, disagreement

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While Obama's win in the 2008 US presidential election was historic in many respects, one aspect that interested many was the role of social media during the campaign to galvanize enthusiasm and support among citizens. Indeed, the election has been retrospectively dubbed by some as the "2008 Facebook election" (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2011); not because it was ultimately responsible for the election outcome, but because it offered a new channel for information dissemination and user-generated content among interconnected social networks across hundreds and thousands of users. In doing so, it fundamentally altered the dynamics of political campaigning, communications, and citizen engagement that were previously based primarily on centralized and often expensive campaign messages disseminated through the traditional mass media.

A decade later, the global diffusion of social media platforms has risen exponentially. For example, the number of daily active Facebook users have exceeded 1.2 billion with the Asia Pacific region now comprising the largest user segment (Facebook, 2017). Complementing this rise has been a growing body of scholarship demonstrating a consistent relationship between social media use and democratic engagement in different cultural and political contexts, including the United States (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012) Europe (Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014) and Asia (Chan, 2016; Hyun & Kim, 2015). Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis of 36 studies also found a general trend of positive effects, but studies that "focus exclusively on election campaign activities are less likely to report a positive coefficient and less likely to report a significant coefficient, compared to other participation activities" (p. 531). This finding seems to challenge the "game changer" narrative that is often espoused by observers about the impact of social media on elections, and it leads to an important question: under what conditions would politically-engaged citizens use or not use social media during elections?

Three factors that are particular salient for electoral contexts are examined. On the one hand, partisan strength is considered the "ultimate heuristic" because it is a source of self-identity and affects the processing of attitudinal and behavioral cues in favor of the in-group (Dalton, 2016). Therefore, it is one of the most important and consistent predictors of electoral participation and is a core variable when considering people's social media use during elections. On the other hand, a research on cross-cutting communication environments suggest that perceived disagreement within one's social network may discourage electoral participation because it engenders greater ambivalence (Mutz, 2002). Or at least, the combination of the two may cause voters to delay their voting decisions (Nir & Druckman, 2008). Taken together, these findings suggest that even when voters have strong psychological attachments to their respective political parties or candidates, they nevertheless under certain conditions may feel compelled not to engage in social media activities during an election, which may weaken the supposed impact of social media use on participation. Previous research suggest that disagreement and ambivalence are two of the conditions that can have substantive attenuating roles. An integrative framework of the three factors will be used to examine their roles in affecting political social media use during an election.

The context of the study is the 2016 Legislative Council Election in Hong Kong, a city state where Facebook is used by 80% of the population (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017) and smartphone use over 200% (OFCA, 2016). The election was particularly notable for the record number of candidates (289) and record turnout of over 2.2 million voters (58% of the electorate) that provided a very competitive election and several surprising results. Moreover, almost all the candidates had a Facebook page, which they used in varying degrees to disseminate messages to solicit greater cognitive and behavioral engagement among the 1.4 million plus fans to the pages (Cheung, 2016). The Hong Kong election thus provides a suitable context to examine the proposed relationships.

Literature review

Partisan strength and political social media use

Party identification has been one of the most enduring concepts in political science because of its core role as an antecedent of political attitudes and predictor of electoral participation. Originally defined as "the individual's affective orientation to an important group-object" (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 121), party identification focuses on the internalized subjective feelings towards a group that can vary by valence and intensity. Therefore, a positive and intense attachment towards a political party entails a greater sense of psychological identification. More recently, some scholars have articulated the concept from the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), pointing out that partisans not only exhibit in-group bias, but are also predisposed to maximize the distinctiveness and status of the in-group relative to the out-group (Greene, 2004; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In political contexts that are characterized by intergroup competition, partisans are therefore more motivated to act in ways that promote the interests of the in-group (i.e. vote for their party candidate) at the expense of the out-group. Regardless of the nuances in the psychological underpinnings of party identification, research has consistently shown that high-identifiers (i.e. those with greater partisan strength) are more politically active during election campaigns for the in-group. They are not only more likely to vote, but also more likely to attend rallies, display materials, attempt to influence others and donate money to their parties (Dalton, 2016).

High levels of engagement among partisans extends also to media use, particularly the use of social media during the campaign. At the minimum, social network sites (SNSs) like Facebook can provide an additional channel for users to obtain news about politics (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). They can cultivate and tailor their news sources by connecting to particular media outlets and politicians or receive news shared by others. Complementing

these *consumptive* uses of SNSs are a variety of *expressive* opportunities, such as liking

certain political parties or candidates, sharing of political news for others to read, and

expressions of one's own partisan views (Bode, et al., 2014; Chan, 2016; Rainie, Smith,

Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). Compared to SNSs, less work has focused on the role of

smartphone-enabled social messaging apps in political participation even though their use has

become increasingly ubiquitous. While such apps may not be suitable for seeking new

information because they are primarily tools of interpersonal communication among small

groups, they do provide outlets for political expression. For example, in a cross-cultural

comparative study of Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, Chan, Lee and Chen (2016) found that

the use of messaging apps for political discussion was related to political and civic

participation among young university students. However, whether partisans are more likely to

use messaging apps for expressive purposes during elections has not received much attention.

Overall, considering that partisans are generally the most active and engaged participants

during election campaigns, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> H1: Partisan strength is related to consumptive political SNS use
>
> H2: Partisan strength is related to expressive political SNS use and political
>
> messaging app use

The role of ambivalent attitudes

Ambivalence arises when individuals hold competing cognitive considerations

towards an object, such as having equally positive evaluations of two candidates in a

presidential election (Lavine, 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that that high-

identifiers exhibit less ambivalence because they are already psychologically biased in favor

of their own political party or candidate. However, research suggests that partisan

ambivalence can be quite common and occurs when an individual's party identification

conflicts with his or her short-term evaluations of the party (Lavine, Johnston, &

Steenbergen, 2012). For example, during the election campaign, partisans may disagree with certain policy positions of their parties, be dissatisfied with their governance record, or be disappointed because the candidate they support is involved in some scandal. These and other negative evaluations may affect the extent in which partisans participate in elections. 'Univalent partisans' are those whose evaluations of their parties are consistent with their party identification. Therefore, there is no ambivalence and individuals behave in accordance to relevant party cues and motivations. 'Ambivalent partisans' have evaluations that contradict with their party identification, resulting in greater doubt and uncertainly. Therefore, they tend to "pause, acquire information and reflect" (Lavine et al., 2012, p. 21) so as to make more informed political judgements and decisions. Evidence suggests that individuals who are politically ambivalent may not necessarily be deterred from voting, but because of the greater internal cognitive conflict, they take longer to decide how to vote and are less active during the campaign, i.e. less likely to discuss politics or attend campaign rallies (Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012; Nir, 2005). Thus, while ambivalent voters do participate in politics as dutiful citizens they appear to do so with less enthusiasm, and this should have some consequences on the level of engagement and communications through social media.

Previous studies did not state nor propose specific consequences of partisan ambivalence on individuals' use of media and their communication behaviors, but there are several logical possibilities. As they have less or no cognitive conflict, univalent partisans should be more willing to express support and share Facebook posts disseminated by party candidates among their own friend networks. But for ambivalent partisans, the need to pause and reflect may lead to decreased expressive uses of social media. An individual who is loyal to a political party, but at the same time displeased with its current direction or policies may be less motivated to engage enthusiastically on social media, such as sharing positive news

stories of the party or attempt to influence others to vote. Therefore, the following hypothesis

is proposed:

   H3: The relationship between partisan strength and expressive political

   SNS use and political messaging app use is contingent on lower

   ambivalence

   The picture is less clear for consumptive uses. On the one hand, ambivalence leads to

greater uncertainty, which can engender more information seeking on social media as an

uncertainty reduction strategy. On the other hand, the same uncertainty can increase

reluctance from seeking social media news because the content may be highly partisan. Yet,

the same partisan content may be highly attractive for univalent partisans. Thus, the

following research question is raised:

   RQ1: How does ambivalence influence the relationship between partisan

   strength and consumptive political SNS use and political messaging app use?

The role of perceived political disagreement

   While ambivalence relates to an internal psychological state, political disagreement is

concerned with the perceived level of divergent political views within a person's social

network (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004). Because disagreement provides the

antecedent conditions to engender greater political tolerance and discussion in a deliberative

democracy, much research has sought to examine the normative implications of disagreement

on political participation and whether the relationship is positive or negative. Findings have

generally been mixed. Some point out that disagreement deflates political participation

because it leads to greater ambivalence and interpersonal conflict (Mutz, 2002) while others

showed that disagreement may actually increase participation by facilitating greater cognitive

involvement and reflection on issues (Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, &

Nisbet, 2006). These mixed findings have also extended to research on social media with

some studies indicating that greater disagreement mediated the relationship between SNS use and online political participation (Kim & Chen, 2016) and others showing that discussion disagreement on social network sites were negatively related to participation (Lu, Heatherly, & Lee, 2016). The mixed findings may be due to technical issues relating to the actual measurement of disagreement (see Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013), but another possibility is that the influence of disagreement manifests more powerfully in high-stakes situations such as election campaigns where partisan attachments and social pressures become much more salient, and where one's expression of political support on social media has substantive social consequences because it is viewable by others.

Partisans who are already cognitively engaged and are motivated to further the interest of the in-group should therefore be more encouraged to express their views on social media if they perceive that the majority of others in their social networks share the same political views. They may perceive such expressions as relatively 'safe' because they are shared by many and so the chances of causing offense to others are reduced. Conversely, partisans in social networks characterized by high levels of agreement may refrain from commenting or expressing opinions so as to avoid offending others or be seen to be taking sides in a polarizing context such as an election (Mutz, 2002). This has implications for expressive uses of social media because messages are disseminated and viewed by others. However, it may not necessarily influence consumptive uses of social media because such behaviors are typically not observable by others and hence less susceptible to social pressure. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H4: The relationship between partisan strength and consumptive social
>
> media use will not be affected by political disagreement

H5: The relationship between partisan strength and expressive political

SNS use and political messaging app use is contingent on lower levels of

political disagreement

Joint influences of ambivalence and disagreement

The previous sections explicated the conditions in which ambivalence and

disagreement can separately affect the relationship between partisan strength and social

media use during an election. Yet, previous theorizing has also explicated the close

relationship between ambivalence and disagreement, such that those who reside in social

networks characterized by political disagreement will tend to be more ambivalent towards

politics. This in turn may discourage people from voting in an election (Mutz, 2002). Even if

they do vote, the process of participation is not as gratifying and individuals "produce less

enthusiasm for the campaign" compared to those who are less ambivalent (Huckfeldt,

Mendez, & Osborn, 2004). Given their close relationship, it is thus necessary to examine their

contingent *joint* effects on the relationship between partisan strength and social media use.

Based on the extant literature and logical reasoning, one can surmise that partisans who are

not ambivalent (i.e. certain in their evaluations) and reside in social networks of low

disagreement have fewer constraints on their willingness to engage in political social media

use during the election. However, for those partisans who hold conflicting evaluations about

political parties and reside in networks where there are diverse political views and

perspectives, there may be less enthusiasm to use social media during the election. These two

combinations represent the common archetypes often mentioned in the literature. By

examining their joint effects, it is possible to examine other combinations that have received

less attention. For example, how will the relationship between partisan strength and social

media use vary under conditions of low ambivalence and high disagreement? In other words,

will a univalent partisan who is very attached to the in-group still express one's opinions on

social media even if it is disagreeable to others? By examining their joint effects, it would be

possible the examine the contingent effects of one factor at different levels of the other. With

this in mind, a general research question is raised and Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical

model:

>   RQ2: What are the joint contingent effects of ambivalence and disagreement
>
>   on the relationship between partisan strength and political SNS use and
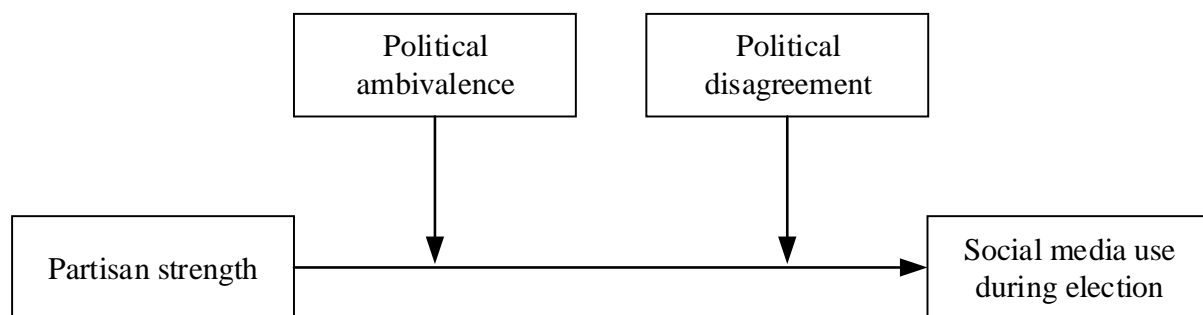>
>   political messaging app use?

Figure 1. Theoretical model examining the contingent effects of ambivalence and political

disagreement on the direct effect of partisan strength on social media use.

The electoral context of Hong Kong and the role of Facebook

        Hong Kong is a transitional democracy under China's sovereignty and its policy of

"one country two systems", and there are democratic elections every four years to elect the

legislative branch of government. However, only 40 of the 70 legislature seats is elected

through universal suffrage while the remainder is elected by special interest groups. Another

characteristic of Hong Kong politics is that partisan divisions are not split according to a

traditional conservative/liberal divide, but along a continuum of pro-establishment parties

that emphasize the interests of the Chinese government on the one hand, and pro-democracy

parties that strive for greater freedoms and democratization of the city state on the other. And

since most of special interest group lawmakers align politically with the pro-establishment

parties, they are able to support and enact laws favorable to the Chief Executive, who in turn is elected by a predominantly pro-China election committee. The perceived unfairness of Hong Kong's political system and the slow pace of democratization ultimately gave rise to the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Ortmann, 2015). Thus, the 2016 election took place under a highly polarized political climate, and a pre-election opinion poll showed that 74% of respondents identified with a political party (CCPOS, 2016). Taken together, Hong Kong's political environment provides the prerequisite conditions in which to examine the proposed theoretical model in this study.

As mentioned in the introduction, Facebook is used by 80% of the population. Because of its popularity, Facebook has become an important tool for a variety of actors: government officials, government departments, political parties, politicians, activists, and citizens interested in politics, to disseminate information, express views, and mobilize support (Tang & Lee, 2013; Yung & Leung, 2014). In fact, the 2016 election was notable by the fact that the majority of the 289 candidates had a Facebook page. Its potential to reach a sizable proportion of voters is one reason. The restrictive rules governing elections in Hong Kong is another. For example, all candidates are constrained by low spending caps and are banned from television or radio advertising. Moreover, media organizations must follow the "fair and equal treatment" principle so that candidates are allocated equal time and attention when they are featured on news broadcasts or forums. So, Facebook is the one channel where candidates can stand out and disseminate content to garner publicity and support. This was especially important for those who were not affiliated with any political party and hence had no party infrastructure or logistics to support their campaigns. Facebook itself also became involved in the elections as it launched its 'voter megaphone' for the first time in Hong Kong, which allowed users to report their voting status (George, 2016). Of course, the level of activity among the Facebook pages of candidates varied widely and the amount of

engagement (i.e. posts, likes, comments, fans etc.) did not necessarily correlate with their

chances of winning a seat. However, it is safe to say that Facebook had a substantive though

not pivotal role in the 2016 election and it provided a platform for many citizens, especially

partisans, to engage cognitively and behaviorally with candidates during the campaign.

Method

A post-election survey (September 8-20) was conducted through computer-assisted

telephone interviewing (CATI) after the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council election

(September 4) by a university-affiliated research center. The sampling frame was based on

the most recent residential phone directories and the respondents comprised a random sample

of Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking residents aged 18 and above. To account for unlisted

numbers in the directories, the last 2-digits were removed and replaced with values of

between 0-99. Because the study focused specifically on those who voted in the election, a

filter question first asked if anyone in the household had voted in the 2016 election, and the

next-birthday method was used to select the respondent if the answer was two or above. The

response rate was 76.6 % according to AAPOR RR6 (AAPOR, 2016).[1] A final sample of 924

voters were obtained. Of the total, all had Internet access, 65% were users of Facebook and

79% used a smartphone messaging app, such as WhatsApp and WeChat.

Measures of social media use during the election

Facebook Use. Respondents were asked the frequency (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 =

sometimes, 4 = often) in which they did the following actions related to the election during

the campaign period: paid attention to news content (M = 2.31, SD = 1.31), shared or

commented on others' posts (M = 1.46, SD = .83), and posted an opinion or comment about

the campaign (M = 1.36, SD = .74). Moreover, they were asked if they had 'Liked' or

'Followed' a political party (Yes = 11%) and a candidate (Yes = 18%) during the campaign

period. The latter two answers were combined to form a cumulative index (M = .29, SD

= .62). Respondents also answered whether they had posted on their Facebook profiles to publicize their intention to vote in the election or to declare that they had already voted in the election (Yes = 5%).

Messaging app use. Respondents were asked the frequency (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often) in which they did the following actions related to the election: paid attention to news content sent by their friends (M = 1.82, SD = 1.02), commented on others' messages about the election (M = 1.46, SD = .78), and posting an opinion or comment about the election (M = 1.37, SD = .71).

Political variables

Partisan strength. Respondents were first asked whether they supported a political party in Hong Kong. Those who did not support any party were coded as 0. Those who indicated support for a political party (total = 88%) were then asked a follow-up question on whether they were: (1) somewhat supportive (2) strongly supportive, or (3) extremely supportive of that party (M = 1.14, SD = .94). The measure thus ranged from 0 to 3 with higher values representing greater partisan strength.

Political ambivalence. Drawing from the thermometer rating approaches used in previous research (Nir, 2005), respondents were asked to state how they generally felt about 1) the pro-establishment political parties, and 2) the pro-democracy political parties, from 0 = strongly dislike to 10 = strongly like (5 = half-half). An ambivalence score was then computed using an adaptation of the Griffin formula below (Basinger & Lavine, 2005; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995), which measures the relative intensity and degree of similarity/difference in the feelings towards both political camps:

Ambivalence = (pro-establishment sentiment + pro-democracy sentiment) / 2

– (pro-establishment sentiment – pro-democracy sentiment)

Based on the formula, values can range from -5 (i.e. rating of 10 for one political

camp and 0 for the other) to 10 (i.e. rating of 10 for both political camps). The values were

rescaled to a range between 0 to 1, with the lowest value representing complete polarization

(i.e. no ambivalence) and the highest value representing ambivalent and intense feelings

towards the two political camps (M = .38, SD = .23). A correlation analysis showed that

ambivalence had a weak negative relationship with partisan strength ($r = -.18$, $p <. 001$) and

political interest ($r = -.24$, $p <. 001$).

Political disagreement. Respondents were asked the extent (1 = very close to 5 =

very different) in which their political stances were similar or different to their friends; and

whether they disagreed (1 = hardly ever to 5 = almost all the time) with the political views of

their friends when political topics arose from regular conversations. Both answers were

combined to form a measure of perceived political disagreement (M = 2.60, SD = 81; $r = .80$,

$p < .001$).

Controls

Additional measures were included as statistical controls. For political interest,

respondents stated their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to the

statement: "I am interested in politics" (M = 3.10, SD = 1.12). Demographics included

gender, age, education, and income. Females comprised 52.2% of the sample. The mean age

was in the 45-49 range (M = 7.58, SD = 3.21; 6 = 40-44, 7 = 45-49; 8 = 50-54; median = 8).

Mean education was secondary 6-7 (M = 5.12, SD = 1.83; 4 = secondary 4-5, 5 = secondary

6-7; 6 = associate degree; median = 5), which is equivalent to senior high. Monthly

household income was between HK\$40,000-49,999 (M = 5.07, SD = 2.88; 4 = HK\$30,000-

39,999, 5 = HK\$40,000-49,999; 6 = HK\$50,000-59,999; median = 4), equivalent to around

US\$5150-\$6440. Compared to the latest 2016 census data from the Hong Kong government,

the study sample had slightly lower percentage of females (census = 54%) and similar level

of education (census median = upper secondary 6-7). It was also slightly older (census

median = 44.3 years) and earned a higher median income (census = $24,900). [2]

Results

Partisan strength and social media use

Hypotheses 1 and 2 proposed that partisan strength is related to consumptive and

expressive uses of SNSs and messaging apps during the election campaign. To test them

linear regression analysis was performed for each social media. All models included

demographics (age, education, gender, income) and political interest as controls along with

the three key variables of the study: partisan strength, ambivalence and disagreement.

Omnibus tests showed that all models were significant. In terms of consumptive use, partisan

strength predicted attention to election news on Facebook ($\beta = .07$, $p < .10$), but at marginal

levels of significance. H1 was supported. For expressive uses, the models showed that

partisan strength predicted all Facebook uses, including sharing and commenting on others'

posts ($\beta = .11$, $p < .001$), expressing views ($\beta = .09$, $p < .001$), and liking the pages of

politicians/parties ($\beta = .05$, $p < .001$); and messaging app uses, including sharing information

($\beta = .08$, $p < .01$) and expressing opinions ($\beta = .10$, $p < .001$). A logistic regression model

also showed that partisan strength significantly predicted the likelihood of declaring one's

vote status on Facebook (B = 1.09, $p < .05$). H2 was supported.

Conditional effects of partisan strength

In order to examine the contingent effects of ambivalence and disagreement on the

relationship between partisan strength and social media use, regression analyses were

performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).[3] The Model 2 template was

used as it corresponded to the theoretical model of this study. Demographics and political

interest were entered as covariates, along with partisan strength (X), disagreement (M),

ambivalence (W), and social media use (Y). Following the template, interaction terms were

automatically created that crossed X and M as well as X and W. Regression models were run

for each type of social media use and the findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Hierarchical regression models predicting social media use during the 2016 LegCo election

	Facebook					Messaging apps		
	Get news	Share news	Express opinion	Like	Voted	Get news	Share news	Express opinion
Gender	.18**	-.01	.01	-.01	-.25	.18*	.15*	.04
Age	-.19***	-.07***	-.06***	-.03***	-.08	.02#	-.02#	-.06***
Education	.08***	.03#	.02	.02*	.08	.03	.02	.04*
Income	.02#	.01	-.01	.01	-.01	.03*	.01	-.01
Political interest	.15***	.14***	.12***	.06***	.18	.13***	.17***	.12**
$\triangle R^2$	.33	.14	.14	.12	.01	.04	.08	.14
Partisan strength	.07#	.11***	.09***	.05***	1.09*	.06	.08**	.10***
Ambivalence	-.73***	-.45***	-.27**	-.18***	1.55	-.65***	-.52***	-.38**
Disagreement	.01	-.09**	-.08**	-.01	.41	-.08#	-.12**	-.11***
$\triangle R^2$	.02	.03	.03	.02	.03	.04	.05	.05
Partisan strength x Disagreement	.01	-.03	-.03	-.05*	-.34*	-.05	-.08*	-.07*
Partisan strength x Ambivalence	-.17	-.19#	-.26*	-.22*	-.37	-.13	-.05	-.21*
$\triangle R^2$	.00	.01	.01	.01	.01	.00	.01	.01
Final R^2	.35	.18	.18	.15	.05	.08	.14	.20
N	919	919	919	916	918	918	918	918

Notes: *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$, # = $p < .10$. Figures are unstandardized beta coefficients. Results were derived from linear regression except *Voted* (Yes/No), which used logistic regression. Therefore, Final R^2 for *Voted* represents the value of Nagelkerke R Square.

In terms of demographics, those who were generally younger and interested in politics

were more likely to engage in social media.[4] Examining the interactions in more detail, there

were significant negative interactions of partisan strength and disagreement for liking parties

and candidates and declaring one's vote on Facebook as well as expressing opinions on

messaging apps. There were also significant negative interactions of partisan strength and ambivalence for sharing news, expressing opinions and liking pages on Facebook as well as expressing opinions on messaging apps.

For subsequent hypotheses and research questions, it is necessary to examine the conditional effects of partisan strength on social media use at different levels of ambivalence and disagreement. This is summarized in Table 2, which displays the betas and their significance levels at mean, high (+1 standard deviation), and low (-1 standard deviation) levels of ambivalence and disagreement. H3 proposed that the relationship between partisan strength and expressive uses of SNS and messaging apps during the election are contingent on lower ambivalence. Results showed that the contingent effect of low ambivalence was significant for all expressive behaviors, but only under conditions of low disagreement. H3 is partially supported. RQ1 asked to what extent ambivalence will influence the relationship between partisan strength and consumptive political SNS use and political messaging app use. Results showed that there were no significant relationships. H4 proposed that there will be no contingent effects of political disagreement on consumptive social media use. As no significant coefficients were observed, H4 was supported.

H5 proposed that the relationship between partisan strength and expressive political SNS use and political messaging app use is contingent on lower levels of political disagreement. Results showed that all behaviors were contingent on low disagreement, but generally under conditions of low and mean ambivalence. H5 is partially supported. RQ2 asked about the possible joint contingent effects of ambivalence and disagreement. As the results for H3 and H5 indicated, the contingent effects of ambivalence or disagreement on expressive political SNS and messaging app use were often contingent on the value of the other.

Table 2

Conditional direct effects of partisan strength on Facebook and app use at different levels of ambivalence and disagreement

		Facebook					Messaging apps		
		Get news	Share	Express opinion	Like	Voted	Get news	Share	Express opinion
Ambivalence	Disagreement								
Low	Low	.10	.17***	.17***	.16***	.43#	.10	.15***	.19***
Low	Mean	.11	.15***	.15***	.12***	.15	.08	.09*	.13***
Low	High	.10	.05	.12**	.08*	-.12	.04	.03	.07
Mean	Low	.07	.13***	.11***	.11***	.34#	.09	.14***	.14***
Mean	Mean	.07	.10***	.09**	.07***	.06	.05	.08**	.08***
Mean	High	.07	.08	.06	.03	-.20	.01	.01	.03
High	Low	.03	.08	.05	.06	.26	.06	.13**	.10*
High	Mean	.03	.06	.03	.02	-.01	.02	.06	.04
High	High	.04	.03	-.01	-.02	-.30	-.02	.01	-.02

NOTES: *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$, # = $p < .10$. Figures are unstandardized beta coefficients. 'Low' and 'High' represent one standard deviation below and above the mean. For ambivalence: low = .15, mean = .38, and high = .62. For disagreement: low = 1.79, mean = 2.60, and high = 3.41.

Discussion

Social media technologies have become an integral part of election campaigns around the world. Not only do they provide political parties and candidates additional tools to reach the electorate, but also ways for voters to get more engaged in the electoral process. Through SNSs like Facebook, citizens can receive messages from candidates as well as articulate their own opinions to others. Smartphone-enable messaging apps like WhatsApp provide them a further channel in which to communicate with others about the campaign. Nevertheless, despite the pervasiveness of social media and its supposed impact, the overall evidence for its influence on political participation have been mixed, and meta-analyses even suggest that the technology has "minimal impact" on electoral participation (Boulianne, 2015).

Compared to previous studies that mostly focused on bivariate relationships, this study took a different approach to examining the relationship. Rather than focus on the extent in which social media use predicts electoral participation, it examined the key antecedents of different social media uses among a national sample of actual voters with different levels of partisanship. After all, if the most dutiful of citizens (i.e. those who voted) who are high-identifiers to their respective political parties did not demonstrate noticeably greater engagement with social media during the campaign compared to low-identifiers, candidates can reasonably wonder whether their social media strategies are worth the time and effort, and researchers may question whether social media does play any substantive role in elections. In any case, the study findings clearly showed that partisan strength was positively related to all the expressive behaviors on Facebook and messaging apps. This is consistent with previous theorizing and evidence that high-identifiers are typically the most cognitively and behavioral engaged during elections because they are motivated to act in ways to further the in interests of the in-group against the out-group (Greene, 2004; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008).

However, there are certain conditions in which the positive impact of partisan strength can be attenuated. Partisans may experience ambivalence because they have competing evaluations of their own party with the opposition at the time of the election, which causes doubt and uncertainty. While these ambivalent partisans may in the end vote for their party, they may do so grudgingly and exhibit less enthusiasm to participate in the campaign. This reasoning is supported by the findings, which showed that the direct effect of partisan strength on social media uses were to a large degree contingent on lower levels of ambivalence (i.e. polarized evaluation in favor of one party). At high levels of ambivalence, the direct effect of partisan strength becomes insignificant. Lavine et al. (2012) suggested that one way for ambivalent partisans to reduce uncertainty is through acquiring more accurate

information. Therefore, this study examined whether ambivalent partisans would use social media news more, but the findings were not significant. One possible reason is that ambivalent partisans simply went elsewhere for their information because social media platforms like Facebook are good at displaying news based on user habits, but less effective in affording users the ability to actively search for news. In fact, the study findings as a whole suggest that partisan strength does not really have a substantive impact on consumptive uses of social media, only expressive uses. A logical rationale is that there are many substitutes available for partisans to get news, whereas there is only one channel to interact with a candidate Facebook post, which is through Facebook.

Similar patterns of findings were found for political disagreement, which showed that the effects of partisan strength were contingent on lower levels of disagreement. That is, partisans shared and expressed their opinions only if they perceived them to be agreeable among their social networks. This is consistent with the argument by Mutz (2002) that social context matters when individuals behave in ways that are observable by others. When the joint effects of ambivalence and disagreement are examined, a clearer picture appears. The stronger effects tend to be under conditions of low ambivalence and low disagreement, meaning that partisans are most comfortable using social media when they are very certain in their support for the party and most of their friends agree with their views. But there are some distinct differences between Facebook and messaging apps. Univalent partisans expressed their opinions and liked the pages of politicians and parties at all levels of disagreement. In these cases, it could be that absolute party loyalty overcame social accountability concerns. Interestingly for messaging apps, the contingent effect of low disagreement was significant at all levels of ambivalence. One contributory factor could be that messaging apps like WhatsApp are generally closed networks predominantly used to keep in touch with close friends rather than weak ties (Aharony, 2015). Therefore, in high agreement environments

ambivalent partisans may feel more comfortable to express their opinions. In fact, there may even be social accountability pressures to actually speak out in such strong-tie networks. In any case, these are tentative explanations and more research is needed to explore whether the different pattern of findings is due to characteristics of the social media platform, the composition of the individual's network structure, or both.

In all, this study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between social media use and electoral participation in several ways. First, social media tools do provide high-identifiers with ways to get engaged in the campaign, especially with regards to expressive uses. Such uses are important for candidates because they can leverage the networks of SNS and messaging app users to exponentially increase the reach of their messages and hence their potential influence. Therefore, party identification and more specifically partisan strength is an essential variable to include in future studies of social media effects in elections. Similar to Hong Kong, Facebook use also exceeds 75% usage in young Asian democracies such as Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore (Newman, et al., 2017), so this study's findings indicate the potential of the platform to generate greater citizen participation in the elections of those countries. Second, previous studies on social media have largely focused on the accentuating factors of participation. This study highlights the need to also consider attenuating factors such as ambivalence and disagreement, especially in Confucian-influenced societies in Asia that generally value group cohesion and harmony over confrontation. Third, the findings have more general practical implications for social media strategies and techniques adopted by future candidates in democratic elections. As this study showed, under the conditions of high ambivalence and high disagreement, the effect of partisan strength is basically negated. Therefore, campaign messages may need to be designed that not only appeal to a people's party loyalties, but also alleviate the uncertain

attitudes and social concerns they may have. However, this may be a tall order in such polarized political environments as Hong Kong and the United States.

Limitations and further research

Even though the sample was collected immediately after the election it is still based on a cross-sectional design. Future panel studies are needed to better account for the causal directions of the variables. The study was also based on the unique Hong Kong election context so the findings cannot be generalizable to other countries and political systems. Granted, party identification, political ambivalence and political disagreement are variables that have accumulated decades of empirical research. But, these individual level indicators also interact with characteristics of a country's media and political systems. For example, almost all the political ambivalence scholarship is based on bi-party political systems. While the Hong Kong legislature can be classified along pro-democracy/pro-government lines, it is ultimately a multi-party system. Therefore, the Griffin formula adapted for this study was not able to capture potential differences *within* the camps. For example, more radical factions have emerged within the pro-democracy camp since the Umbrella movement, and it is quite feasible that individuals who identified with these parties may have negative evaluations of other pro-democracy parties. More refined measurements of partisan ambivalence are thus needed for future studies of ambivalence in multi-party democracies. The study was also based on a sample of voters and their social media use habits, which excluded those under 18 who may have participated in the Umbrella Movement. Since several student leaders eventually went on to form pro-democracy political parties to participate in the 2016 election it would have been useful to include this demographic to examine their social media behaviors.

Despite these limitations, the present study integrated variables considered by political scientists and political communication scholars to be central to predicting political

activity during democratic elections, and showed how they worked together to influence people's use of SNSs and messaging apps during the campaign. Social media does matter in elections, but its effects are contingent on individual factors that are most often outside the control of the political parties and candidates. Future studies of social media and political participation would benefit by incorporating both accentuating and attenuating influences that explain how individuals use social media during elections.

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Endnotes

[1] The filter question for households of two or more people adds within-household randomization. RR6, or the "maximum response rate" as defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2016) is the total number of completed interviews divided by the sum of completed interviews + refusals + non-contact + Other (i.e. did not vote).

[2] While not totally representative of the general Hong Kong population, it should be noted that the study sample comprised individuals who use social media and who voted in the election. Previous research suggest higher income earners are more likely to use new media technologies (e.g. PEW, 2015) and voter turnout among the electorate is often higher for older individuals relative to those who are younger. For example, examination of the Hong Kong 2016 Election website (http://www.elections.gov.hk/legco2016) showed that voters aged 51 and above comprised 52% of voters while those aged 18 to 30 accounted for 17%. More detailed information on the demographics is available on request.

[3] SEM-based path analysis is another possible approach for testing the model. A regression approach was adopted because the focus was on estimating the beta coefficients of each regression equation independently, rather than looking for an overall 'model fit' through the SEM approach (see Hayes, Montoya, & Rockwood, 2017).

[4] Past research suggests that education and income have substantive influence on different kinds of political engagement. When political interest is removed from the regression models, education significantly predicts all the dependent variables, but income is not affected. In fact, the predictive role of income on social media use in politics have been quite mixed (see Bode et al, 2014 and Gil deZúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014).