

The Effects of Political News Use, Political Discussion and Authoritarian Orientation on Political Participation: Evidences from Singapore and Taiwan

Abstract

This paper utilizes two national representative surveys to examine the roles of political news use, political discussion, and authoritarian orientation in shaping political participation in two democratizing societies: Singapore and Taiwan. The regression findings show that in both societies, the effects of political news use and political discussion have to be conditioned on the type of political participation as well as the nature of the political system. Both mass and interpersonal communications are confirmed to positively influence contact and campaign participation, to different degrees depending upon the political system. Interaction effects between the two communication variables are seen as well. The authoritarian orientation is found to mainly interact with communication factors to shape political participation. Implications regarding communication influences on political participation in societies where authoritarianism is evident are discussed.

Key words: authoritarian orientation, political discussion, political news use, political participation

Introduction

Communication behaviors, including both mass media usage and interpersonal communication, have been found to be important factors influencing political participation in established democracies — mass media both mobilize and inhibit political participation, depending on the content consumed (e.g., Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Scheufele 2000; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Interpersonal discussion on politics both directly influences political participation (e.g., Eveland & Thompson, 2006; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Straits 1991) and modifies the relationship between mass media and political participation (e.g., Scheufele, 2002). However, whether the general patterns found in established democracies hold true in other political systems is worth examining for a few reasons. Media systems often depend on political systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and thus, how mass media affect political participation should vary in different political systems (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). Furthermore, interpersonal discussion of politics is heavily influenced by the political climate in a society (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) and whether it strengthens the positive relationship between hard news use and political participation among citizens needs to be examined in relation to the political environment.

As stated by Shah McLeod and Yoon (2001, p. 466), “the role of social context — that is, properties of the collective in which the individual exists” should be included when studying political participation. Therefore, this paper examines two societies in which the degree of authoritarian rule varies. This property of collectives is thought to be able to constrain mass media, define different types of political participation, and shape individuals’ political psychologies. Two societies, Singapore and Taiwan, are compared because they are similar in many respects, especially in terms of culture. Both have a dominant population of ethnic Chinese who share the same language and traditions; both have relatively small sizes (Singapore is a city-state and Taiwan is an island); and both have undergone rapid economic growth in the past 20 years and are now considered two of the leading economies in Asia. These cultural, geographical and economic factors have been proposed as explanations for variations in political participation and communications. By showing the similarities in these features, the influence of political systems can be better established.

The two societies have undertaken dissimilar paths of political development: Singapore has the popular election of parliament but the governance can be authoritarian (Ortmann, 2010, pp. 5-7); and Taiwan is now one of the most advanced

democracies in Asia although it was an authoritarian regime for almost 40 years till the late 1980s (Chang, 2009; Wei & Leung, 1998). The 2009 Freedom in the World Report (freedomhouse.org, 2009) indicates that Singapore is only partly free; whereas, Taiwan is ranked as free. Singapore is a de facto one-party state since its independence. The ruling party, known as People's Action Party (PAP), has won all the elections with a majority support. The oppositional parties were only able to obtain a handful of seats in the parliament. Taiwan, in contrast, has gone through a transition from a one-party state (Kuomintang or KMT) to a full-fledged democracy in the past 20 years (Wang & Lo, 2000). The competition between the pro-unification camp and the pro-independence camp became fierce and fueled a partisan politics.

These two political systems, therefore, fall between the two poles of mature liberal democracy and complete authoritarian rule. Given the hybrid features of transitional societies, a comparison between the two illustrates how individual political psychology (i.e., authoritarian orientation) shaped in different systematic arrangements (i.e., one-party dominance vs. competitive politics) conditions the effects of political communications on political participation to different extents.

The purpose of this paper is thus three-fold: First, it compares the level of political engagement in two political systems that differ with regards to authoritarian

rule, but are similar in other respects (e.g., cultural and economic ones). This examination helps to testify the argument of cultural determinism, which claims that the Confucian culture does not match democratic values. Second, it verifies the independent effects of three important predictors (i.e., political news use, political discussion, and authoritarian orientation) on political participation in two Asian societies. The political realities in these societies are quite different from the established democracies. The analysis helps us to understand how political engagement is given different meanings in different contexts. Third, it explores how these three factors interact to influence political participation in different political systems. In total, an interactionist approach that integrates systematic, communication, and psychological features is taken and tested in this paper. Utilizing a secondary analysis of two nationally representative sample surveys conducted in 2006, this paper relies on independent t-tests to document the absolute differences between the two societies and regression models to reveal the significance of the effects of the predictors. A comparison between two societies is also made by examining both the significance and the direction of the effects observed.

The Effects of Political News Use and Political Discussion

Research on the two sources of communication influence, one via interpersonal channels and the other through mass media, has generated a rich body of literatures. The evidence about mass media effects on political engagement is mixed. On the one hand, the media malaise school tends to blame mass media for their negative influence on civic engagement. The argument runs on two fronts – Either time spent on using mass media deprives time that could be spent on civic activities (Kraut et al. 1998; Moy, Scheufele, & Holbert, 1999; Norris, 1996; Putnam, 1995) or the distorted media coverage of politics and other social realities creates a disengaged citizenry (Ansolobehere & Iyengar 1995; Cappella & Jamieson 1997). On the other hand, plenty of empirical data suggest that mass media are used for different purposes and different usages actually have different consequences. Newspaper usages, especially those of the hard news, often positively relates to civic engagement (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Television entertainment use often negatively affects political participation whereas television news viewing shows a positive, albeit weak, link to political engagement (Sheufele 2000; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Studies that combined newspaper and TV news use into one measure of exposure to media news often find that media news use positively relates to civic and political participation (Kanervo, Zhang, & Sawyer, 2005). The importance of interpersonal communication has been well documented

since the early days of communication research (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Political discussion has its direct and positive effects on participation and knowledge (Eveland & Thompson, 2006; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Straits 1991). Political discussion also shapes political attitudes and opinion quality (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Lalljee & Evans, 1998). In addition, political discussion interacts with media to influence participatory behavior. “(I)nterpersonal discussion plays a role in the reception and processing of political news when it comes to translating mass-mediated messages into meaningful individual action” (Scheufele, 2002, pp.57-58).

The robust findings regarding the positive effects of both political news use and political discussion are primarily based on data from advanced liberal democracies. It is only recently that other types of democracies began to be examined. The evidence basically shows an ambiguous picture. Consistent with the existing literatures on the differential effects of news vs. entertainment, Chang (2007) found that in Taiwan, TV news and newspaper usages positively relate to civic and election participation whereas Internet use for pleasure negatively does so. Wei and Leung (1998) reported that media exposure in general has a positive relationship with political efficacy in Taiwan. However, political news attention in specific has a negative relationship with political efficacy and a positive relationship

with support for authoritarian attitudes. Studies on political discussion from other democracies are even scarce. Research from Hong Kong, another ethnic-Chinese society, shows that there is a positive bivariate relationship between political discussion and support for democratization (Sing, 2005). Ordinary political conversation with family and friends is found to be positively related to online political chats with strangers, expression of a minority opinion, political knowledge, and voting (Lee, 2009).

This paper not only examines the main effects of political news use, political discussion, and their interaction effects but also explores the roles of political orientation within transitional societies where fundamental political changes are undergoing. The authoritarian orientation becomes the focus of this paper due to the fact that the political transition in the two societies of interest is mainly considered as from an authoritarian rule to a democratic one.

Authoritarianism and Political Participation

Authoritarianism can be understood as either a genre of nation-states with a particular governance style (e.g., Steele, 2009) or a psychological feature of citizens

regardless of their residence of countries (e.g., Adorno, et al., 1950). A connection between the authoritarian state and the authoritarian citizen is evident when looking at the historical context in which the concept came into being. The structure approach to authoritarianism was initiated in democratization research, especially during the era of the so-called “third wave” (Huntington, 1991). This approach describes and explains the formation and continuation of the authoritarian regimes, in which the authoritarian orientation held by their citizens is found to be one of the explanations. The psychology tradition was rooted in the efforts to discover the psychological reasons of the German people and their mass support for the rule of Nazis (Stone, Leaderer, & Christie, 1993, p.3). This tradition suggests that psychological traits such as feeling of insecurity and preference for strong leadership make people opt for an authoritarian style of governance. This paper incorporates both conceptualizations by first, choosing two countries where the degree of authoritarian rules varies and second, measuring the individual responses to the authoritarian orientation scale. Both approaches are embraced here because political engagement, the consequent variable in this paper, is subject to the influence from both the political structure of states and the political psychology of citizens.

As a structural feature, authoritarianism is opposed to democracy, on the one hand, and totalitarianism, on the other hand, in terms of the freedom of citizens and the

diversity of opportunities to get engaged in politics. Authoritarian states typically “allow some plurality of political involvement, ... allow autonomy of favored groups in civil society,” and “experiment with freedoms of speech, the press, assembly, and other rights at selected locales, for favored individuals and groups, over various lengths of time” (Smith, 2008). Empirical evidence from authoritarian regimes shows that the political structure does provide some space for political engagement and variances of involvement in politics are thus observed (e.g., Heryanto & Mandal, 2003; Ottaway, 2003). One problem that often puzzles scholars of authoritarian regimes is that why citizens under the authoritarian rule do not always seem to be keen to overthrow the regimes. Stubbs (2001) used a concept of “soft authoritarianism” to explicate the source of the legitimacy of an authoritarian state – A combination of performance excellence and construction of hegemonic consensus. Another explanation comes from the cultural difference claim. Antlov and Ngo (2000) questioned the compatibility of liberal democracy with Asian cultures and implied that authoritarian regimes suit the cultural traditions in Asia. Still others, including the author of this paper, are curious about the direct influence of individual political psychologies and try to examine one such factor, the authoritarian orientation, and its impacts on political participation.

Authoritarian orientation as a political psychological concept has been widely studied in various political settings. In European and North American democracies, the shift from authoritarian to libertarian attitudes is related to higher participatory levels and more assertive modes of political involvement (Flanagan & Lee, 2003). Democratic reform efforts taking place in Asian democracies such as Japan and Korea are argued to be caused by the attitude change from authoritarian to libertarian (Flanagan & Lee, 2000). In addition, authoritarianism at the individual level shows significant influence on other political attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Sing (2005) observed a negative relationship between authoritarian orientation and support for democratization in Hong Kong. Another example is that authoritarians experiencing economic threat are more likely than non-authoritarians to support social policy and political agendas that restrict benefits or curtail rights for disadvantaged groups (Rickert, 1998). Lavine, Lodge and Freitas (2005) found that in the presence of threat, high authoritarians became significantly less interested in a balanced, two-sided article, compared to low authoritarians.

A democratic communication system, including the free flow of information and the open exchange of opinions through both interpersonal and mediated channels, is often expected to act against both authoritarian rule and orientation. But what if the communication system is not democratic, or becomes democratic only for a handful

number of years? Would usage of the mediated channels in such contexts reinforce a preference of authoritarian rule?¹ Would the interpersonal communication on politics be limited by the available viewpoints supplied by the mass media? These are all questions that cannot be answered in countries with well-established liberal democracies. However, answering such questions can greatly enhance our understanding about the political impacts of communications.

Background, Hypotheses and Research Questions

The rise of Asia in the third wave democratization results in a variety of polities, ranging from parliamentary order to one-party dictatorship. The debate over Asian democracy centers on whether the political changes can be seen as progress leading to liberal democracy. A central element in the debate is the role of culture in politics. Huntington (1991) proclaimed that the conflicts between liberal democracies and other political systems are in nature the clash of civilizations. Almond and Verba (1963) assert that democracy requires a supportive civic culture. The cultural determinist view of politics argues that liberal democracy is not appropriate to indigenous culture and norms found in Asian countries (e.g., Confucian culture). A major motivation of comparing Singapore to Taiwan is because of their cultural

similarities. As both societies are dominated by ethnic Chinese, a Confucian culture is shared by the two (e.g., Wang, 2008). However, the two societies have undertaken dissimilar paths of political development since 1960s. A comparison between the two culturally similar but politically dissimilar societies enables the verification of the cultural determinist argument.

If we accept a narrow definition of democracy as the rulers being elected by the ruled (Schumpeter, 1947), both Singapore and Taiwan can be considered as democracy. Both systems use popular elections to (partially) decide who constitutes of the legislative body and the presidency. However, both manifest unique deviations from the typical model of liberal democracy. Singapore has an actual single-party system in which the opposition parties have never made any significant challenges to the domination of the ruling party since the state was established in 1965. The ruling party successfully curbed any meaningful opposition by a sophisticated usage of legal restrictions, judicial punishments, media control, and hegemonic construction. For example, the Film Act bans political parties to use videos to mobilize their supporters (Ang & Yeo, 1998). The competitiveness of politics in Singapore is low, manifested in the fact that many voters did not get the chance to vote as their constituencies only had PAP candidates. The political culture in Singapore is thus

marked with apathy and fear, which discourages citizens from directly influencing political decision-making. Political participation, therefore, is mainly through legal and feedback channels such as contacting political leaders or joining activities that are allowed by the government. All of these hybrid features lead to a hybrid term that scholars sometimes use to describe Singapore, namely, authoritarian democracy (Ortmann, 2010, pp.4-7). Regardless what the label is, the political system in Singapore holds “elections with broad suffrage and the absence of massive fraud” (Collier & Levitsky, 1996) whereas the authorities limit basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and association.

Taiwan, in contrast, liberalized its political climate to a degree that it is often considered as one of the most advanced democracies in the region now. However, this wave of liberalization started only in the late 1980s (Rawnsley, 2000) and resulted in the first president elected by popular votes in 1996. Therefore, Taiwan is a fairly new liberal democracy. An example is that the Election and Recall Law restricted the use of mass media as a campaign vehicle till 1989. The Publication Laws that controlled the press via strict licensing regulations were not abolished until 1999, as another example. The current political scene in Taiwan is highly competitive with mainly two camps, the pro-unification camp (or pan-blue coalition)

that is led by KMT and the pro-independence camp (or pan-green coalition) that is led by Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), fighting against each other. In the 2000 presidential election, Chen Shui-Bian, the DPP candidate, was elected, which was the first time that an oppositional party won over KMT. Eight years later in the 2008 presidential election, Ma Ying-Jeou, the KMT candidate, got into power. The grassroots support to both camps, especially the DPP that is particularly skillful in winning the minds and hearts of the public, is fairly strong given a tradition of political activeness (e.g., the 228 incident) and the liberalized political system (e.g., termination of martial law). It could be said that political culture in Taiwan is relatively active with participation in politics lying along the partisan line. However, due to the fact that Taiwan has been under an authoritarian control for almost 40 years, it is no surprise to see the counter-democratic forces being active in the political landscape (e.g., the corruption case of Chen Shui-Bian). Therefore, Singaporeans and Taiwanese are expected to show varied degree of the authoritarian orientation, which, according to the theoretical arguments mentioned previously, should be negatively associated with political participation. The first set of hypothesis and research question is based on this thread of thinking.

RQ1: What are the differences between Singapore and Taiwan in terms of authoritarian orientation, political news use, political discussion, and political participation?

H1: In both societies, authoritarian orientation is negatively related to political participation.

Media in both societies play important yet ambiguous roles in the process of democratization. The Singapore media are often recognized as under close control of the government (Rodan, 2004, pp.18-42). However, as George (2005) argues, the close control of media is anything but violent repression. The legal framework governing the press allows the government to influence through the mechanism of management shares rather than direct ownership or brutal censorship. The government only periodically exerts its power by picking on individual offenders, which results in behind-the-scenes self-censorship (Chang, 1999). This framework gives the Singapore press the face that it is independent of the state as well as the motivation to be appealing to the readers in order to make profits for the publishers. Regular reporting of social events and policy decisions is kept at a professional level and in a rational manner (George, 2005). Biases become apparent only occasionally, such as when the government needs the press to persuade the citizens about some

unpopular policies. Therefore, it is found that news from mass media still serves as the most important source of information for Singaporeans, although the credibility is questioned by the more discerning readers (Hao, 1996).

Taiwan media, on the other hand, have gone through the liberalization reforms in the 1990s and adopted a free market model of media industry. As the press ban was lifted in 1988, a boosted number of print media, as well as an intensified environment of competition, were observed (Wei, 1997). Some scholars consider the commercialization of press as the amenable condition in which freedom of press and political pluralism can be created (Rampal, 1994). Still others think “the emergence of corporatized media has inhibited journalism in communicating democracy” (Chen, 1998, p.11). Whereas commercialization seems to lower professional standards under the pressure of market competition, the regulation of Taiwan media is difficult as business interests become intertwined with the legislative power (Wang & Lo, 2000). A manifestation of such complexity is that despite of the laws that forbid the ownership of media by parties and politicians (Rawnsley & Gong, 2011), certain media and their coverage clearly show inclination towards one of the camps. The media discourse in general is thus very much contested. The contested nature of a deregulated media system is demonstrated in

perceived credibility and satisfaction among the public. Gunther and colleagues (1994, p.628) supply a finding that television news, despite its control by government at that time, was rated as more credible than commercialized print news. After cable TV was legalized in 1993, however, a positive relation between cable market competition and subscribers' satisfaction with the media performance (Li, 2004) as well as a positive relation between TV news use and knowledge about international affair (Lo & Chang, 2006) was observed. The contradictory findings may be attributed to the types of media content we are examining. Gunther and colleagues (1994, p.628) notice that the gap of perceived credibility is narrowed when asking about political news. A recent study (Chang, 2007) generally supports that a positive relationship is found between mobilizing media use (TV news, newspapers, magazines, and Internet for work) and political participation whereas a negative relationship found between demobilizing media use (TV non-news, radio, and Internet for pleasure) and political participation. Therefore, the hypotheses regarding the influence of mass media are centered on political news use. A research question that explores the interaction between political news use and authoritarian orientation is posed.

H2: In both societies, political news use is positively related to political participation.

RQ2: How does political news use interact with authoritarian orientation to influence political participation?

Political discussion is seldom studied in the two societies of interest. Agreeing with Lee's assertion that "(c)itizens in authoritarian societies or countries undergoing democratic transition also talk about politics" (2009, p.380), this paper is eager to test the often-found positive effect of political discussion on political engagement (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). This paper also tries to find out how such an influence may be conditioned on authoritarian orientation.

H3: In both societies, political discussion is positively related to political participation.

RQ3: How does political discussion interact with authoritarian orientation to influence political participation?

The interaction between political news use and political discussion is even less studied in such societies. Evidence from advanced liberal democracies clearly shows that the interaction is significant in predicting political participation and

political knowledge (e.g., Scheufele, 2002). Specifically, the positive effect of media use is larger among people who discuss politics more than people who discuss less. Therefore, interaction effects are tested as the fourth group of hypotheses. A final question about the three-way interaction between political news use, political discussion, and authoritarian orientation is proposed.

H4: In both societies, there is an interaction effect between political news use and political discussion on political participation.

RQ4: How do political news use, political discussion, and authoritarian orientation interact with each other to influence political participation?

Method

The study is a secondary data analysis of the 2006 Asian Barometer Survey², a longitudinal multi-nation project documenting the political and civic engagement in Asia. The data to be analyzed were collected from two societies: Singapore and Taiwan. The fieldwork in Taiwan was conducted during January 14 and February 15, 2006 whereas the fieldwork in Singapore was between August 18 and December 22, 2006³. Data were gathered through 2,599 (1,012 from Singapore and 1,587 from

Taiwan) face-to-face interviews of voting-age citizens (21 years old and above in Singapore and 20 and above in Taiwan). The addresses were randomly selected from the 2005/2006 Singapore Residential Telephone Directory and systematically selected from the household system in Taiwan. The most recent next birthday method was used to select the appropriate respondent from a household. The response rate is 69.5% in Singapore and 32.1% in Taiwan (AAPOR formula 1). The same exact questions were asked in both surveys. The Chinese language was used in Taiwan whereas English, Chinese, and Malay were used in Singapore considering its multi-racial population. The original questionnaire was in English and it was translated by qualified translators. Back-translation was done to ensure accuracy.

Authoritarian orientation. A 9-item scale of authoritarian orientation was compiled based on previous research (Altemeyer, 1981; Evans, Heath, & Lalljee, 1996; Flanagan & Lee, 2000). Respondents were asked to indicate, on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*), whether they think “government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions”, “the government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society”, “harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups”, “when judges decide important cases, they should accept

the view of the executive branch”, “if the government is constantly checked (i.e. monitored and supervised) by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things”, “if we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything”, and “if people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic” (Singapore: $\alpha = .74$; Taiwan: $\alpha = .66$).

Political news use. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale (1 = *practically never* to 5 = *everyday*) how often they follow news about politics and government.

Political discussion. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 3-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *occasionally*, 3 = *frequently*) how often they discuss political matters when they get together with family members or friends.

Political participation. A 9-item scale of political participation was compiled based on previous research by measuring both election-related and non-election participation (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not (1 = yes, 0 = no), in the past three years, they (1) “attended a campaign meeting or rally”, (2) “tried to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party”, (3) “did anything else to help out or work for a party or candidate running in the election”, (4) “contacted government (administrative)

official”, (5) “contacted elected officials or legislative representatives at any level”, (6) “contacted officials of political parties or other political organizations”, (7) “contacted representative of non-government/civil society organizations (farmers’ associations, trade unions, religious groups, human rights groups, interests groups)”, (8) “contacted traditional leaders/community leaders”, and (9) “contacted other influential people”. Using principle components solution with oblique rotation, two factors were identified. Items (1) to (3) loaded together and were labeled “campaign participation” (Singapore: $\alpha = .42$; Taiwan: $\alpha = .51^4$). The rest loaded on another factor named “contact participation” (Singapore: $\alpha = .81$; Taiwan: $\alpha = .73$).

The two factors indicate conceptually distinct ways to participate in political processes. Comparative studies by Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) in seven nations discovered that campaign activity differs from contact participation as campaign activity directly influences the political process of elections. During non-election time periods, people also try to influence politics through personalized contacts, “either to seek help from governmental officials or to communicate their own preferences to them” (Shi, 1997, p.5). Contact participation is considered as not relying on the premise of the right to select the rulers and has been seen in authoritarian or even communist countries such as Soviet Union. The analyses,

therefore, will use two indicators of political participation instead of one lump-sum measure⁵.

Control variables. The first group of control variables includes four demographics, gender, age, years of education, and monthly household income (This is a categorical measure using quintiles and the quintiles are based on official household income statistics). The democratic characteristics of the Singapore sample are as follows: 52% female, 56% with a monthly household income lower than Singapore Dollar 3,999 (US\$2,835), the average age is 45-year old ($SD = 13.99$) and the average education is 10 years ($SD = 4.40$). The democratic characteristics of the Taiwan sample are as follows: 50% female, 55% with a monthly household income lower than Taiwan Dollar 65,000 (US\$2,025), the average age is 45-year old ($SD = 16.37$) and the average education is 17 years ($SD = 19.90$). *Size of social network* was prompted by asking “on average, about how many people do you have contact with in a typical weekday” with a 5-point scale (1 = 0-4 people to 5 = 50 or more people). The statistics are as follows in Singapore ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.24$) and Taiwan ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.16$). *Political interest* was indicated by respondents’ agreement (1 = not at all interested to 4 = very interested) to the question “how interested would you say you are in politics” (Singapore: $M = 1.88$, $SD = .82$; Taiwan: $M = 2.10$, $SD =$

.85). *Internal political efficacy* was the average of respondent's agreement with two 4-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree): (1) Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on (reverse-coded); (2) I think I have the ability to participate in politics (Singapore: $r = .23$, $p < .001$, $M = 2.13$, $SD = .61$; Taiwan: $r = .36$, $p < .001$, $M = 2.22$, $SD = .54$).

Results

The analytical strategy involves a series of two independent sample t-tests and Ordinary Least Squares regressions. The t-tests basically compare means between the two societies. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, t scores and their significances. These descriptive statistics answer RQ1 that generally speaking, Taiwanese are more engaged in politics than Singaporeans, with higher political interest and internal efficacy, more political discussion and campaign activities. Taiwanese are also less oriented to authoritarianism compared to Singaporeans. However, it is interesting to see that in terms of political news use and contact participation, the two societies do not show significant differences.

<Table 1 about here>

Variables were added step by step in regressions. The first step includes demographics and controls for political psychologies. The second step involves authoritarian orientation, political news use and political discussion. Three two-way interactions (i.e., political news use*discussion, political news use*authoritarianism, political discussion*authoritarianism) were added as the third step. One three-way interaction (i.e., political news use*discussion*authoritarianism) was entered as the last step. The centering method (Aiken & West, 1991) was used to address the concern of multicollinearity when interaction terms were calculated.

Table 2 demonstrates the results regarding two types of political participation in Singapore and Taiwan, respectively. H1 states a negative relationship between authoritarian orientation and political participation, and is partially supported. The findings show that the negative relationship is significant in Singapore with regards to contact participation. In Taiwan, authoritarian orientation fails to make a main effect. This finding indicates that authoritarian orientation alone in Taiwan is not very influential any more, probably because Taiwan has moved away from an authoritarian rule for a while. However, in Singapore where the authoritarian

governance is still evident, authoritarian orientation has a direct impact on everyday participation in politics through contacting political leaders.

<Table 2 about here>

Political news use is positively related to contact participation in Singapore. However, political news use does not have a significant main effect in Taiwan. H2 is also partially supported. The reason why political news use does not have an independent effect on political participation in Taiwan can be attributed to the content of political news. Taiwan news media are quite liberal in their coverage of politics. Whether political news use encourages or discourages political participation has to depend on which kind of news content users consume. Mobilizing information can motivate citizens to participate. Cynical coverage of politics may turn readers away from participating in politics. Due to the mixed nature of political messages conveyed in Taiwan media, the positive as well as negative effects may cancel each other and result in non-significant findings.

H3 is largely supported because political discussion is positively associated with contact participation in both societies as well as with campaign participation in Taiwan. Although the coefficient is not significant in Singapore when predicting

campaign participation, the direction and magnitude of its effect is similar to other coefficients. The positive main effect of political discussions is generally confirmed.

These findings can be further explicated when we examine the interaction between political news use and political discussion hypothesized in H4 (see Graph 1). The positive sign of the interaction terms suggests that the relationship between political talk and contact participation is more positive among people with higher political news use than those with lower political news use, with regards to contact participation in both societies. H4 is half supported. Campaign participation seems not to be influenced by the interaction between political news use and political discussion. Together with the positive main effects of political discussion found above, we can see that during election time, the impact of interpersonal communication on participation is not modified by media exposure in these two societies.

<Graph 1 about here>

The interactions between political news use and authoritarian orientation are significant with regards to contact participation in Taiwan and campaign participation in Singapore (see Graph 2). The positive sign of the first interaction effect suggests that the relationship between political news use and contact

participation is more positive among people with higher authoritarian orientation than those with lower authoritarian orientation among Taiwanese. The negative sign of the second interaction effect suggests that the relationship between political news use and campaign participation is more positive among people with lower authoritarian orientation than those with higher authoritarian orientation among Singaporeans. RQ2 could be answered as that political news use interacts with authoritarian orientation to influence political participation and the effect depends on both political system and the type of participation.

<Graph 2 about here>

The interactions between political discussion and authoritarian orientation are significant across both societies with regards to contact participation (see Graph 3). The patterns are same: The negative sign of the coefficients suggests that the relationship between political talk and contact participation is more positive among people with lower authoritarian orientation than those with higher authoritarian orientation. RQ3 could be answered as that in both societies, political discussion increases contact participation at a higher rate among people who have lower authoritarian orientation than people who have higher authoritarian orientation.

<Graph 3 about here>

RQ3 asks about the three-way interaction between political news use, political discussion, and authoritarianism and it is not significant.

Conclusions and Discussions

This paper investigates the communication effects on political participation in Singapore and Taiwan, in which authoritarian orientation is readily visible. Two communication variables (i.e., political news use and political discussion) shape political participation with different strengths, depending on political orientation of the individuals, the type of participation, and political system. The significant positive effects of political communications are mostly found in the type of participation that is not considered to directly challenge the authorities, i.e., contact participation. In addition, the effects are found to differ among people with lower versus higher authoritarian orientation. When political discussion works better for low authoritarians in both societies, political news use better motivates Taiwanese high authoritarians to contact their political leaders.

Campaign participation is often considered as directly pressuring the established authorities but how much it is influenced by communications has to be

contingent on the political system and authoritarian orientation. When democratization proceeds to the stage in which electoral contestation is heated and the media are free to take sides in Taiwan, political discussion with peers becomes the major driving force to participate in campaign activities. When electoral contestation is low and campaign coverage is biased towards the authorities in Singapore, mass media help the authorities to mobilize low authoritarians to participate in their staged activities.

In conclusion, political participation, although “at the heart of democracy” (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p.1), is essential to other political systems as well (Shi, 1997). Given the fact that political participation is often examined in liberal democracies, there is an assumption that participation in politics means support for democracy. However, it may be that different types of participation have different connotations or even that the same types of participation have different meanings in different political systems. Whether political participation means activism for democratization or conformity to authorities should be examined, especially when authoritarian societies allow some space for participation but that space is opened for co-opting potential challengers. A thorough analysis of the role

of different types of political participation in different political systems is urgently needed.

The second conclusion of this paper is that communication factors cannot work on their own to influence political participation. The findings call for an interactionist approach (Veltmer, 2006, p.6) that considers the dynamics between political system (including media system), individual orientation, interpersonal communication, and types of political participation. Each of the four factors has to be dependent on the performance of the other factors in the dynamic interaction process. How communications may influence political participation, given vastly different political systems, would not be one investigation, but rather a series that must incorporate the examination of political orientations (e.g., authoritarian orientation) shaped in political systems.

A third conclusion we can draw is that culture is not always a primary factor in explaining political differences. Although Singapore and Taiwan share many cultural similarities, the differences in political engagement are apparent. These differences cannot be attributed to cultural similarities but rather are better explained by the political systems adopted. For instance, a liberalized media system separates Taiwan from Singapore despite the dominant Chinese culture in common. If culture

does have any influence on political participation, it would have to function through the inheritors of the culture, including both political elites and ordinary citizens. When political elites run politics under cultural influence, citizens' orientations to politics are subject to cultural impact, too. However, a culturalist explanation does not seem to directly account for the variations in political participation we have seen in this paper. Future research needs to examine the role of culture through its influence on political actors, including both elites and citizens.

This paper illustrates the complexity of studying political communication in transitional societies. When transitions to democracy affect virtually all aspects of a society, the relationship between political institutions, media systems, and political actors becomes highly fluid. Much of our established knowledge regarding the effects of political communication (e.g., political news use promotes political participation) does not hold any more. We have to suspend our assumptions about how mass and interpersonal communication should work but rather starting to examine the very basic factors ranging from systematic to individual ones. Instead of looking at the Western role models for inspiration, transitional societies may benefit more from comparing themselves with other societies that have been in the process of transiting from the old regime (e.g., East European countries).

When making the conclusions above, some limitations of this study need to be reported. First, this study employed secondary data that did not include sophisticated measures of political communication variables. For instance, attention and retention of news content can better explain the effects of media use than frequency measures. What has been discussed when people are talking about politics tells us better about the effects of political discussion than does the amount of talk. Future research that is interested in thoroughly examining the influence of political news use and political discussion can develop more detailed measures to tap into the multiple facets of such variables. Second, the R-square values of the regressions models are relatively low due to secondary data. Only a small portion of variance is explained by the current models. Future research can utilize first-hand data to verify the findings reported here and improve the predictability of the models.

Endnotes

¹ For example, Shanahan (2001) reported that heavy television viewing was associated with authoritarian attitudes. Reith (1999) and Oliver (1999) found that authoritarianism was positively related to frequency and enjoyment of viewing crime dramas in certain racial groups.

² The data, although not collected by the author, are appropriate to answer the research questions and hypotheses raised in this paper because first, the measures were originally employed to examine the concepts this paper is studying, not re-constructed to suit a secondary analysis; second, the general purpose of this project is also consistent with that of this paper, which is to examine the relationships between factors that may influence political engagement; third, the methodological details such as national representative samples and identical measures across societies fit the needs of a comparative analysis almost perfectly. In short, the author would not have done many differences were the author involved in the design.

³ The prevailing economic conditions in Singapore and Taiwan at the time of each survey were similar. Taiwan's economy showed a GDP growth rate of 4.03% in 2005. In Singapore, economic growth was 6.4% in 2005 and 7.9% in 2006. In terms of political conditions, both had major elections around the survey time. A general election was held in Singapore three months before the survey. Local elections were held in Taiwan one month before the survey. The presence of elections may motivate people to have more political communications and participation.

⁴ The relatively low reliability of campaign participation is not as striking as it may seem to be. A review of published studies shows that the reliability of various political participation measures ranges from .44 to .83. The reason why this measure has lower reliability in Singapore might simply be that campaign participation is still rare among Singaporeans compared to Taiwanese. The factor analysis confirms that in both societies, the three items loaded on one same factor.

⁵ Voting is not included as an indicator of political participation mainly due to the complexity of the Singaporean case. In Singapore, there are two situations in which voters do not vote. One is that the constituencies are not contested, which results in walkovers; the other is that an individual decides not to vote despite the fact that voting is compulsory if the constituency is contested (Singapore Elections Department 2010). Therefore, a simple measure of whether one has voted or not in

Singapore cannot indicate voluntary participation in elections, which makes this measure not comparable to the one in Taiwan where voting is voluntary.

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Table 1. Mean Comparisons with Standard Errors in Singapore vs. Taiwan

	Singapore	Taiwan	t score
Political interest	1.88 (.82)	2.10 (.85)	-6.467***
Internal efficacy	2.13 (.61)	2.22 (.54)	-3.743***
Authoritarian orientation	2.52 (.55)	2.44 (.37)	4.376***
Political news use	3.46 (1.29)	3.48 (1.55)	-.276
Political discussion	1.53 (.56)	1.74 (.59)	-9.191***
Contact participation	.60 (1.27)	.58 (1.14)	.434
Campaign participation	.15 (.44)	.32 (.65)	-8.111***

***p <.001

Table 2. Regressions Predicting Political Participation in Singapore vs. Taiwan

	<i>Contact participation</i>		<i>Campaign participation</i>	
	Singapore	Taiwan	Singapore	Taiwan
Step 1				
Male	.002(.086)	.012(.058)	.070*(.031)	.007(.033)
Age	.034(.004)	-.068*(.002)	-.016(.001)	.074**(.001)
Education	.180***(.012)	-.025(.002)	-.007(.004)	-.027(.001)
Income	.020(.002)	-.020(.001)	-.014(.001)	.015(.001)
Network size	.087**(.035)	.082**(.025)	-.037(.013)	.043(.014)
Political interest	.115**(.053)	.180***(.035)	.083*(.019)	.259***(.020)
Internal efficacy	-.045(.074)	.049(.056)	.077*(.027)	.065*(.032)
Step 2				
Authoritarianism	-.078*(.087)	-.005(.085)	.025(.031)	.033(.047)
Political news use	.088*(.035)	.043(.021)	.057(.013)	-.014(.012)
Political discussions	.077*(.082)	.097**(.059)	.066(.030)	.187***(.033)

Step 3

News × Discussion	.107**(.060)	.082**(.034)	.067(.022)	.037(.019)
News × Authoritarianism	-.021(.078)	.070*(.063)	-.102**(.029)	.003(.035)
Discussion × Authoritarianism	-.105**(.179)	-.087**(.163)	.002(.065)	.021(.091)

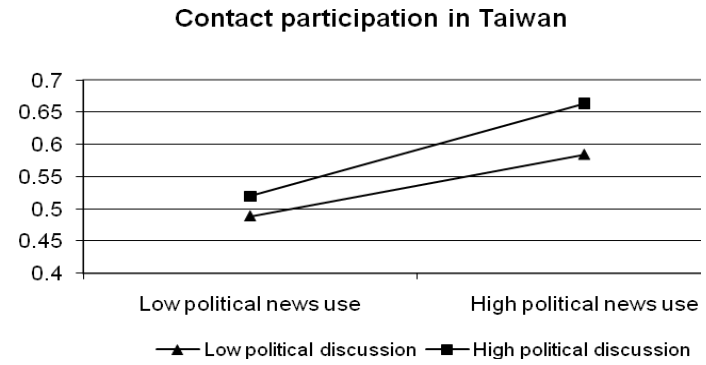
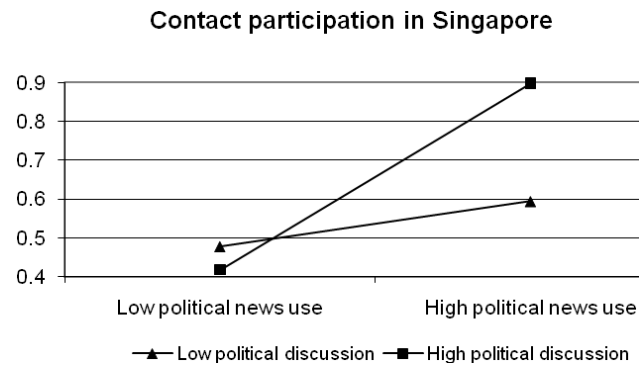
Step 4

Three-way interaction	-.024(.135)	-.050(.099)	-.034(.049)	-.002(.055)
N	918	1524	916	1524
Adjusted R-Square	.08	.08	.03	.11

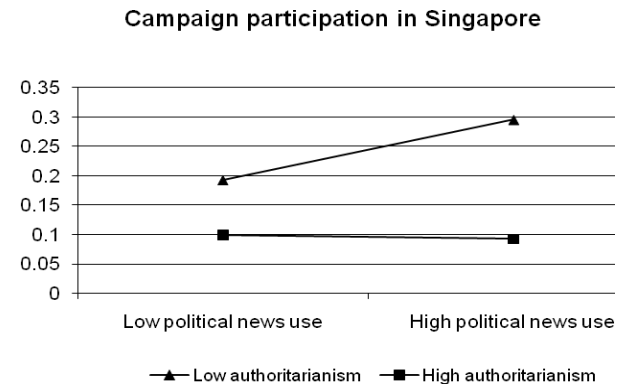
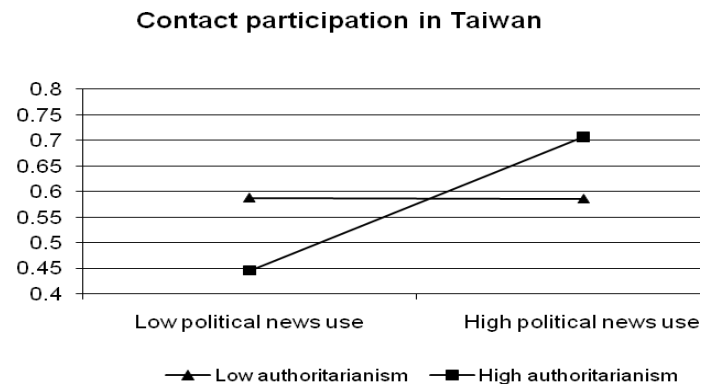
*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001

Note: Entries are regression coefficients along with standard errors in brackets when a step-by-step hierarchical analysis was used. Standardized regression coefficients are reported.

Graph 1. Two-way Interaction between Political News Use and Political Discussion



Graph 2. Two-way Interaction between Political News Use and Authoritarian Orientation



Graph 3. Two-way Interaction between Political Discussion and Authoritarian Orientation

