Exploring political compromise in the new media environment: The interaction effects of social media use and the Big Five personality traits

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ABSTRACT

Using nationally representative survey data from the United States, we explored how social media use influences the formation of attitudes toward political compromise. We also analyzed the moderating effects of the Big Five personality traits and individual preference for living in a homogeneous or heterogeneous community on the relationship between social media use and political compromise. The results revealed that a preference for living in a heterogeneous community, where most residents have different opinions on politics, related positively to favorable attitudes toward political compromise. Moreover, two of the Big Five personality traits, agreeableness and conscientiousness, moderated the influence of social media use on attitudes toward political compromise. These findings suggest that social media use has differential effects on the formation of attitudes toward political compromise, depending on personality traits, rather than having a uniform influence. The results and corresponding implications are discussed in detail.

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1. Introduction

The notion of democratic ideals suggests that a variety of information and perspectives are exchanged in public discourse. Citizens can listen to, and consider ideas and information that differ from their personal perspectives (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012). However, concerns have recently emerged that some countries, particularly the United States, have become more politically polarized, and that the citizens, congresses, and governments of these countries have strong internal disagreements, reflecting opposing viewpoints, which are becoming increasingly more intense (Leeper, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). Political polarization indicates that individuals' attitudes on a given political issue or policy are becoming more rigid through their identification with a political party (e.g., Democrat or Republican) or an ideology (e.g., liberal or conservative) (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996). Opinion or attitude distributions among citizens are moving toward extremes over time (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). This has a negative impact on both citizens and healthy democratic society. For example, the extreme conflict over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare, between the US Congress and the President forced a shutdown of the federal government in October 2013. This political gridlock had a negative impact on both the American society and the US economy (Rosenberg, 2013).

In deeply divided political landscapes, political compromise is essential for the functioning of healthy democratic politics (Leeper, 2014). Political compromise represents that people on opposing sides arrive at an agreement by modifying their positions, to advance the political process (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012). It also suggests that members of a democracy, such as politicians and citizens, should not stubbornly hold on to their positions on particular issues, thereby avoiding the situation of a political stalemate. Political compromise is important to both politicians and citizens. Elected public officials should pay attention to what their citizens expect and want from them (Kim & Han, 2005). When citizens ask their political leaders, such as their President or congressional representatives, to compromise or stand their ground, the political leaders should be willing to listen to the citizens' demands. Previous studies show that, a significant number of citizens are extremely divided on political issues (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fischer, & Matson, 2009); this politically polarized environment is likely to compel political leaders to stand their ground on principle, rather than to compromise (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012). This tendency suggests that realizing political compromise depends on citizens' compromising attitudes. Thus, an understanding of citizens' attitudes toward political compromise and their formation is required.

The way citizens access information has undergone a change because of new communication technologies, such as the Internet (Bimber, 2003; Pariser, 2011), and this has significant implications for political polarization and compromise. Recently, social media has been increasingly used for political purposes, which makes encountering political information and perspectives on the platform, more likely (Rainie,

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Smith, Lehman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). As social media platforms enable users to select their preferred news outlets and types of news information, it might increase people's exposure to opinions and news information they agree with (Pariser, 2011; Zhang, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2013). This consumption of selective information contributes to developing stronger attitudes (Kim, 2009), indicating the potential to politically polarize citizens (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011). Social media users can also construct personal online networks, which mostly tend to have other like-minded people (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014), suggesting that the network could lead to the development of attitude extremity (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2006). Thus, social media use can influence formation of attitudes toward political compromise, because its use confirms people's pre-existing attitudes (e.g., Bessi et al., 2016; Hahn, Ryu, & Park, 2015; King, Orlando, & Sparks, 2016), resulting in increased attitude tenacity.

Through this perspective, the study explores the effects of social media use on attitudes toward political compromise, using nationally representative US survey data. Additionally, we also examine the moderating effects of personality traits, specifically the Big Five dimensions of personality, and lifestyle preference, on the relationship between social media use and attitudes toward political compromise. While previous studies have focused on the direct influence of social media on political outcomes (e.g., Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Valenzuela, 2013), they have neglected the fact that the impact of social media use could depend on individual differences, such as personality traits or lifestyle preference (Shin, 2016). Individuals utilize social media to satisfy their varying personal needs (Ruggiero, 2000; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). These differences may lead to social media having differential effects on people, rather than a global, uniform impact (e.g., Hyun & Kim, 2015; Xenos & Moy, 2007; Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014). It has been found that new media use interacts with stability of community living to influence the political outcome variable (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). A more recent study also demonstrated that social media had differential effects on political participation, depending on personality traits (Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). Our study suggests that social media may interact with personality traits and lifestyle preference, to influence attitudes toward political compromise. Thereby, this study improves our understanding of the influence of social media use on political compromise, in a politically polarized environment.

2. Political compromise

In the political context, compromise refers to agreements in which the opposing sides make some sacrifices to improve the current situation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012). At the individual level of political compromise, citizens hold a compromising mindset in the form of an attitudinal structure that indicates willingness to consider others' evidence and arguments, and openness to changing one's position to advance in the political process (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Gutmann & Thompson, 2012). Individuals with compromising mindsets demonstrate greater political tolerance for opposing views and more willingness to soften their positions (Wolf et al., 2012). On the other hand, uncompromising mindsets imply that individuals will not yield their positions, which tends to impede desirable progress (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; Wolf et al., 2012).

Political compromise plays a significant role in a politically polarized environment. Citizens of democratic societies have the freedom to develop diverse values and interests regarding social and political issues. This diversity of perspectives produces conflict among citizens (Mutzs, 2006). Citizens express their political differences by opposing alternative perspectives in environments, such as political discussions (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004). Thus, political disagreement is considered a necessary part of democratic politics. However, in recent years, increasing political polarization, particularly in the United States where disagreements have intensified over time, has caused a political

gridlock, which could negatively influence democratic well-being (Abramowitz, 2010; Leeper, 2014). Political scientists have suggested that political compromise would not only prevent political gridlocks but also support healthy democratic politics (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; Leeper, 2014; Wolf et al., 2012).

Citizens' attitudes toward compromise are evident in the demands they make of their political leaders (make compromises or stand their ground) (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2011). The political climate in the US has become increasingly contentious in recent years, and compromise can play an important role in opening the way for political progress and facilitating cooperative democratic politics (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; Yang, Preston, & Hernandez, 2012). As citizens' attitudes toward political compromise matter in politics, it is important to understand how compromising attitudes are formed.

2.1. Social media and political compromise

Studies have found that new communication technologies, which change the landscape of the information environment, could influence individuals' cognitions or attitudes toward political issues among others (e.g., Bimber, 2003; Prior, 2007). The emergence of new media, such as social media, has enriched the flow of information (Shin, 2015). A continuously growing array of media options, with an increasing number of types and modes of content and channels, is available to a burgeoning audience of information consumers (Bennet & Iyengar, 2008). The resulting abundance of information allows for selectivity on any given issue (Stroud, 2011). Information selectivity suggests that individuals can choose to receive only specific information that they are interested in or favorable to. People selectively attend to information offered by the new media environment, and this tendency could reinforce pre-existing attitudes, which might develop their attitude extremity (Kim, 2009).

More recently, a growing number of people are using social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, to obtain (or create) news and information (Perrin, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015), suggesting that social media may be a significant channel influencing political knowledge or participation (e.g., Bode, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Social media provide new ways of communicating information that are substantially different from traditional media, such as newspapers or television (Shin, 2014). For example, social media enable users to customize (or personalize) their news feeds to the news outlets they favor, such as *CNN* or *Wall Street Journal* (Lee & Ma, 2012). By doing so, social media users can avoid information that conflicts with their opinions, and instead engage only with information that is congruent with their pre-existing attitudes (Kim, 2012; Kim & Chen, 2016).

Social media is highly interactive, and users can easily share information with each other through their online networks (Choi & Shin, 2016). Particularly, they tend to interact with others who share their attitudes, opinions, and perspectives, because the networks built are mostly homogeneous (Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014). Hence, they are more likely to be exposed to content congruent with their opinions than otherwise, which is associated with increase in attitude extremity (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). These features of social media use suggest that it could influence the extent of a compromising or uncompromising mindset (Shin, 2013). For example, it is likely that reinforced attitudes that develop through social media use, might positively relate to an uncompromising mindset, which supports a resolute position on political issues.

2.2. Lifestyle preference and political compromise

As modern politics involves everyday life, lifestyle patterns are influence attitudes toward politics (Bennett, 1998; Fischer & Matson, 2009; Giddens, 1991). People tend to prefer interacting with others whose lifestyles are similar to theirs (Bishop, 2009; Fischer & Matson, 2009). Preference for social, cultural, or religious similarity in their lifestyles