Civic Disobedience: Does Internet Use Stimulate Political Unrest in East Asia?

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ABSTRACT. There is a debate in the extant literature concerning whether the Internet stimulates political participation. We examine both whether Internet use encourages traditional participation, such as campaign- and election-centered acts, and nontraditional participation, including protest/resistance-centered acts in the East Asian context. In doing so, we are also able to explore the Asian Values hypothesis, which purports that East Asians have a cultural predisposition toward civic obedience. We theorize that because of the increased probability of being exposed to a dissident flow of information, more frequent use of the Internet leads to the development of negative attitudes about government and results in less obedience, and more nontraditional participation. Conversely, we suggest that Internet use should be negatively associated with traditional participation because dissidents are likely to see it as futile. The results confirm these expectations, suggesting the Asian Values hypothesis is not robust.

KEYWORDS. Asian values, Internet use, political participation

The increasing use of the Internet and social media in the political sphere has raised important questions about the scope and influence of this medium to increase political participation and encourage democratic development. Early research has suggested a democratizing effect...
in which the Internet would be the means by which otherwise excluded people and politicians can expand the otherwise narrow political field, creating more opportunities for ideas and candidates (Barber, 2001; Corrado & Firestone, 1996; Gainous & Wagner, 2011, 2014; Hagen & Mayer, 2000; Rash, 1997). However, the effect of this technology, while significant, is often smaller in magnitude than expected, or even inconsistent across election cycles (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009). Although the Internet helps to remove the barriers that favor some groups and individuals in the electorate (Barber, 2001), this effect is more prominent in some nations than others, leading to more research on the conditions under which political barriers are removed, and by what mechanisms.¹

Changes resulting from the growth of the Internet can be gradual or even limited in established democracies where political actors can, and often do, learn and take advantage of the technology (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Ward & Gibson, 2003; Ward, Gibson, & Lusoli, 2003). However, in the developing world, states often maintain themselves through rules, structures, and institutions that restrict political communication and organization. In such cases, the Internet appears, at least facially, as a solution to overcoming political and institutional barriers, allowing for substantial changes in how and when people participate in governing systems. The Internet provides multiple mechanisms through which people can influence political outcomes, including the distribution of mobilizing information or news not otherwise available, the coordination of political activities, and the creation of places to join, participate with, and engage like-minded people (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Chadwick & Howard, 2008; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013).

In this research, we explore the importance of the Internet on individual-level political behavior and specifically on political participation in East Asia. Although large N survey studies on the effects of the Internet in the United States and other Western nations are quite prevalent, not as much data exists addressing Internet use and political behavior outside Western democracies. As a result, there is limited little large N research on Internet effects in non-Western nations (for exceptions, see Lei, 2011; Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce, 2012; Norris, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013; Wagner & Gainous, 2013). Studies have looked at Internet effects in Asia, but most of the extant literature consists of country-specific studies or those that do not directly explore Internet effects on individual-level participation or civic engagement (for examples, see Abbott, 2001, 2004, 2012; Baasanjav, 2008; Kluver & Banerjee, 2005; Lei, 2011; Nisbet et al., 2012; Norris, 2011; Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009; Yang, 2003). Although Internet use is correlated with political participation in Western nations, it is not clear how the Internet will influence participation and democracy in East Asia, where attitudes, history, and political behavior are dissimilar.

The inconsistent effect of the Internet may well be rooted in inherent cultural distinctions between East and West concerning citizens’ deference to authority. Some scholars have suggested that Asians may be more deferential to authority, while others have disagreed (i.e., the Asian Values hypothesis; see Emmerson, 1995; Fox, 1997; Jayasuriya, 1998; Robison, 1996; Kingsbury & Avonius, 2008; Wei-ming, 1996). Our research centers at the intersection of this potential cultural phenomenon and the influence of the digital flow of information. We examine the relationship between Internet use and traditional participation such as campaign- and election-centered acts, and nontraditional participation, including protest/resistance-centered acts. Specifically, we argue that citizens are more likely to be exposed to dissident flows of information via the Internet because it is more difficult for the state to control digital information as opposed to traditional print and broadcast media (Bailard, 2014; Howard, 2011; Wagner & Gainous, 2013). As a result, Internet use may lead to the development of negative attitudes about government resulting in reduced obedience, and more nontraditional participation.²

Our findings indicate that East Asians, despite the assumptions of greater cultural obedience, have attitudes and behaviors that are sensitive to relatively minor differences in exposure to information via the Internet. This suggests that any cultural deference to authority is not robust.
In this paper, we address both the effectiveness of the Internet in stimulating political participation and the relative importance of the Asian Values hypothesis in understanding civic behavior in East Asia. In considering participation, we look to measures that attempt to disaggregate the concept for a more nuanced view. We contend that an overbroad concept may miss how the Internet can have varying effects depending on the type of political participation it is purported to influence. In our data, we look at both traditional and nontraditional participation and find that Internet use is negatively associated with traditional participation, but positively associated with nontraditional participation. Our theoretical framework suggests that this relationship is structured through the flow of dissident information via the Internet. Those who are exposed to a dissident flow of information are likely to see traditional participation as futile, while being more inclined to see the efficacy of more nontraditional acts.

THE INTERNET, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, AND CLOSED STATES

The study of the effect of the Internet on political participation is grounded largely in studies of Western democracies. Even before the mass adoption of the Internet, the effect of social interaction on civic engagement was well studied in that context (Bourdieu, 1986; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Putnam, 1995a, 1995b, 2000; Shah, 1998). Correlations between Internet use and political participation, even if relatively small in magnitude, have been consistently found in research in Western democracies (Bode, 2012; Gainous, Marlowe, & Wagner, 2013; Gainous & Wagner, 2011, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Boulianne (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of research (published and unpublished) that examined the effects of the Internet on political participation and civic engagement. She found a statistically significant, but substantively small effect. At present, scholars generally find that the effects are present, but small in size and variable over time (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). The focus of the inquiry and debate in the United States and other Western democracies is increasingly over the causal mechanisms (Valenzuela, 2013).

Because the earliest studies concerning the Internet and political participation were conducted in democratic Western nations, the applicability of their findings in contexts outside open democratic systems is unclear. In nations where traditional political communication and organization as well as social behaviors are heavily restricted, the Internet creates a new space for political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Wagner & Gainous, 2013). The size and scope of the Internet along with its speed of transmission creates a new political space that developing states are unprepared to control, or they simply lack the technical ability to do so. As an open-communication platform, the Internet presents a challenge to closed states because it is a communication protocol that is difficult to monitor and contain using traditional and often blunt or unsophisticated approaches (Giustozzi, 2001).

The impact of this, however, varies considerably by regime. In some cases, governments have responded relatively rapidly by adapting the regulatory framework, utilizing existing laws against Internet dissidents (from emergency detention powers to the increased use of defamation suits) or by deploying sophisticated denial-of-service attacks against anti-regime Web sites (Howard, 2011). In some cases, regimes have adopted a full menu of manipulation to meet the challenge. Elsewhere, either by choice, neglect, or because of an initial lack of technological expertise, dissident voices have become more sophisticated and have evolved from a cacophony of accusatory diatribes into a more mature and mainstream mediascape. Consequently, given this context, we expect the Internet’s role in the East Asian context to potentially be more pronounced and significant than in a well-established Western democracy.

Beyond structural limitations, and as noted earlier, the previous work on participation and the Internet has focused largely on
mechanisms of change in developed Western nations (Valenzuela, 2013). Little research has been done on the importance of underlying attitudes. In East Asia, we expect the attitudes and history of the region to influence how people see the new medium and engage with it. The Asian Values hypothesis suggests that cultural values may lead to a greater trust in government, less focus on individual rights, and discomfort with confrontation. These cultural values should mediate and shape the kinds of effects the Internet has in that environment based on the inherent resistance to dissident flows of information. More directly, if the Asian Values hypothesis is an accurate depiction of East Asia’s culture, exposure to a dissident flow might not stimulate protest attitudes or participation. However, our results suggest that this is not the case. Rather, they suggest that heightened Internet use is associated with nontraditional protest-oriented participation. In the next section, we detail the Asian Values hypothesis and then outline our theory of how Internet use may stimulate critical attitudes about the status quo government, and ultimately, result in protest behavior.

THE INTERNET, ASIA, AND OBEDIENCE

General statements about Asia are inherently problematic given the size of the region’s population, the large number of countries within the region, and the diversity of regime types within those countries. Equally, data sets covering the region as a whole are largely limited to the World Values Survey and the Asian Barometer. In the case of the latter, only three countries have been included in three consecutive surveys, while a majority of countries have only appeared in a single survey. Nevertheless, there are some broad generalizations that we can make from an abundance of academic literature in comparative political science, as well as from single-country case studies, that are pertinent to this study in that they could have potentially significant impacts on the results.

Across Asia, authoritarian/semi-democratic regimes are the norm with eleven of the 18 countries that comprise East Asia classified by Freedom House as either Not Free or Partly Free. Of those that are classified as Free, four of these (Indonesia, Mongolia, South Korea, and Taiwan) have made the transition to democracy only after long periods of autocratic rule. Of the seven countries classified as Not Free, four remain under Communist rule, even while their economies may have been liberalized.

The persistence of authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian rule in Asia, particularly as the region experienced rapid economic development and the emergence of vibrant middle-class consumers, has proven to be the subject of intense academic debate and of polemical statements by Asian leaders themselves. Of these, perhaps one of the most enduring—reaching its peak of popularity in the mid-1990s—is the Asian Values hypothesis (c.f. Emmerson, 1995; Fox, 1997; Jayasuriya, 1998; Kingsbury & Avonius, 2008; Robison, 1996; Wei-ming, 1996). At the core of the discourse on Asian values is the contention that they represent a set of distinctive norms that are at best incongruent with political liberalism, and at worse antonymous to it.

The Asian Values hypothesis proposes a cultural explanation for both the economic dynamism of the region as well as for the persistence of authoritarian values and political systems. Within the norms associated with Asian values, we can discern at least four distinct sets of values. The first set stresses the importance of interpersonal relations, particularly within the family, which is regarded as the essential collective unit; the second emphasizes the primacy of the group or community over the individual; the third stresses deference to authority and a penchant for harmony over conflict, while the final set emphasizes hard work, thrift, and self-discipline.

With the exception of the economic norms, many of the distinct values identified above are largely synonymous with Confucianism (Wei-ming, 1996). Consequently, even before critically examining them, one has to question the extent to which they can have a broader regional pan-Asian significance, given their specific cultural and historical origin. This notwithstanding, one of the most central components of a stress on familial ties is the concept of filial
piety (xiào). This is much more than simply respect for one’s elders, but instead is a ritualistic obligation (Chan & Tan, 2004). Such an obligation, however, is not the result of blind obedience but instead is a norm that is born of the relationship between child and parents. Across much of Asia, therefore, the notion of the individual as an atomized rational actor is culturally alien. Instead, the individual is constituted by, and intricately interwoven into, a set of broader familial and societal relationships, each of which has duties associated with them. Moreover, these duties are ultimately driven by the virtues of filial piety as well as loyalty (zhōng), and humanity (rén).

The third set of values identified above are the ones that emphasize deference to authority and stress the normative preference for harmony over conflict. It is these values that are commonly identified as being culturally antagonistic toward democratic norms. Within Confucianism, we can discern a series of relationships within which such role ethics are central. Most commonly, five such relationships are identified: of ruler to subject (Wei-ming, 1998); father to son; husband to wife; elder sibling to younger sibling; and friend to friend. With the exception of the latter, all of these bonds are inherently hierarchical. The key to a harmonious society, therefore, is for all individuals to be bound through ritual and role to ensure the harmony of society as a whole. The conflict, competition, and contention evident in the adversarial politics of the West are by contrast regarded as an anathema. Moreover, an overemphasis on individual rights not only has the potential to have deleterious effects on the social fabric, but can be a cause of the “breakdown of society.” Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew expressed such sentiments directly in a 1994 interview in Foreign Affairs, when he remarked that:

[the expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy. (Zakaria, 1994, p. 111)]

Despite this, many scholars have remarked that there is nothing inherently undemocratic about the core values central to Confucianism (Wei-ming, 1984). Others have stressed that the articulation of specific “Asian” values mirrored the economic self-confidence of the region prior to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and that it consequently represented less a coherent set of shared values (Acharya, 2010) than it did an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) projected against the West. Although this article is not a treatise on the Asian values debate, we nevertheless posit that if there were to be an Asian values effect, then we would likely expect there to be little relationship between Internet use and support for political activities that would be deemed directly confrontational, since such actions would invariably “disturb” social harmony (e.g., attending a demonstration or protest march, participating in a strike or other direct action). On the other hand, if the Asian Values hypothesis is not an accurate depiction of culture, and there is increased opportunity to be exposed to a dissident flow of information via the Internet, then exposure to such information would likely result in protest-centered behavior. The following section details this theoretical assertion.

THE INTERNET AND CIVIC DISOBEDIENCE IN EAST ASIA

Measuring the effect of the Internet on East Asia requires that we conceptualize and measure political participation and account for the potential cultural influence of Asian values. The definition of political participation is rooted in the literature as actions that are intended to or that as a consequence of directly or indirectly affect government action or policies (Conway, 2000; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Initially, we conceptualized and operationalized traditional participation, using the data available to us, as a single-dimensional concept that included
various political behaviors such as voting, contacting an elected official, attending campaign events, signing petitions, and attending protests (Verba & Nie, 1972). However, this definition is more applicable in an open democratic nation such as the United States, where political participation is openly anticipated and structured (Wagner, 2010). Many of the countries in the Asian Barometer data are not fully democratic or politically liberal. Hence, traditional participation such as voting or attending campaign events may hold less relevance, and many citizens may find such traditional participatory acts futile.

Previous scholarship has recognized that the concept of participation includes actions that are supportive of the institutional structure and also actions seeking to change or alter it (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Conway, 2000; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Hoffman, 2012; Marsh, 1977). If forms of traditional political participation are curtailed or are not expected to result in change, political participation sparked by engagement online may result in nontraditional acts of participation such as attending protests or even acts of political violence. Hence, we would expect that in nations that are nonresponsive to traditional political participation, the effect of the consumption of information from the Internet will be seen in forms of nontraditional participation.

Conversely, those who are exposed to dissident information through the Internet may actually be less likely to rely on traditional forms of participation to seek change. To address this concern, we parsed and reconceptualized political participation into two variables to capture both traditional and nontraditional participation.

If, as we contend, access to the Internet can expose individuals to political views that are discordant with those articulated by the regime, and this may then propel those individuals to engage in acts of political disobedience, we consider whether this may be mitigated by underlying cultural values that stress conformity and societal harmony. As noted above, the Asian Values hypothesis posits that cultural norms in Asian societies emphasize and prioritize the harmony and stability of the community writ large. Coupled with filial piety, and reverence for seniority more generally, political goals are more likely to be achieved without confrontation, but instead through formal and informal mechanisms of consensus building. If such values are intrinsic, then we should expect higher levels of conformity, lower levels of disobedience, and low levels of support for direct forms of protest and political action. Furthermore, if these values and attitudes are pervasive, then we expect that although the Internet may encourage greater political communication and more criticism of government and the regime, it will not result in socially “undesirable” activities. However, if these values are not dominant, more frequent use of the Internet by citizens should produce negative attitudes about government. This will lead to more disobedience and result in rising nontraditional participation.

This argument is based on two central premises: (a) people’s attitudes and behaviors are shaped by the information to which they are exposed, and (b) the Internet is a likely source of dissident information. Concerning the first of these premises, established theory holds that people’s attitudes are a product of the information available to them (Bizer, Tormala, Rucker, & Petty, 2006; Hastie & Park, 1986; Lodge & Taber, 2000; Zaller, 1992). If people’s attitudes are shaped by the information they have cognitively accessible, then changing the content and volume of information distributed as a result of the Internet can result in shifting attitudes. For this to be true, the information flow via the Internet must be different from other sources. Specifically, use of the Internet must increase the opportunity to be exposed to dissenting voices and such exposure must stimulate negative attitudes about the status quo and the current regime (for examples of such, see Hassid, 2012; also Liu, 2012).

Recent work by Bailard (2014) supports this effect. She contends that the Internet differs from traditional media, particularly in democratizing nations, and fundamentally alters the way in which citizens evaluate government. Bailard proposes that the Internet changes attitudes and evaluations through two methods: (a) mirror-holding and (b) window-opening. The mirror-holding perspective is based upon the supposition that the size and scope of the Internet
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provides a larger and more diverse set of information or criteria from which one can rely on to evaluate one’s own government. More directly, the Internet allows citizens to get a clearer and more detailed look at themselves (like a mirror). In addition, the Internet opens the window out to the rest of the world more widely. This allows people to judge their own countries’ conditions against those in other places. Together, these effects allow Internet information consumers to be exposed to information that will create dissatisfaction and spawn criticism or dissidence (Bailard, 2014).

Yet, if the cultural norm of obedience is still dominate in East Asia, people should be resistant to the new information. Active forms of protest encouraged by the availability of contrary information through the Internet should be limited because such acts would contradict their deeply held values. Alternatively, if these values are not as well seated in the culture, the influence of the information through mirror-holding and window-opening should have an impact. Whether the availability of the Internet and its new dissident information flows can overcome these purported cultural norms of obedience is untested quantitatively in East Asia. However, there are individual case studies that offer evidence of a shifting media and political environment due to Internet penetration.

Surin (2010, p. 114) notes that in Malaysia the proliferation of alternative voices has resulted in an arena in which “neither government nor established media companies alone control content any more. Government propaganda now faces stiff competition from the counter-propaganda of artists, opposition political parties and well-followed bloggers.” Across those countries that are commonly defined as semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian (Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand), there has been a significant increase in Internet use, including social media. This growth in Internet use has coincided with a more contentious politics, and specifically with an increase in nontraditional forms of political participation. Nowhere perhaps is this more evident than in Thailand, where mass demonstrations and violence between rival political factions has become a defining feature of the country’s politics since the coup of 2007.

Although less violent than Thailand, there has been a similar growth in mass demonstrations and political marches in Malaysia. Most notably, The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) has organized three mass rallies in the past six years (2007, 2011, and 2013), each of which was progressively larger in number than the one before, culminating in the largest demonstration in Malaysian political history. In Cambodia, the return from political exile in July 2013 of the leader of the National Rescue Party, Sam Rainsy, resulted in the largest rally the country had seen in two decades, followed by the opposition’s best performance in any election since 1998. Although Singapore has not seen anything to compare with these examples, and is thus something of an outlier, the 2011 election nevertheless did see the governing party record its lowest share of the vote since independence. Across the region, urbanization, coupled with younger more-educated electorates and access to more diverse sources of information via the Internet, seem to be undermining the semi-authoritarian Asian “model.” Indeed even the region’s more authoritarian regimes are not immune to the impact of the latter of these trends.

Although this paper is a quantitative study of Internet use and participation in East Asia, as noted above, individual case study analyses of the region’s illiberal regimes appears to lend credence to our hypothesis that the Internet is leading to the rise of nontraditional forms of participation. If the cultural norm of obedience is being overcome, we expect to find attitudes that are hostile to the state, and these negative attitudes are likely to lead to a penchant for disobedient behavior. This attitude of disobedience may manifest in acts of protest. It may also discourage traditional political participation, since the Internet increases the probability that users are exposed to information that may suggest traditional routes for change are futile. As a result, people are compelled to take nontraditional routes.
We delineate the theoretical model of this effect in Figure 1 as a path model that we estimate below. In setting out this model and subsequent measures, we work from the assumption that Internet use is not consistent across all demographic groups. There is a wealth of literature illuminating this divide (see Gainous & Wagner, 2011; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Norris, 2001). Hence, we begin by estimating the relationship between demographics and Internet use, which allows these differences to be residualized throughout the rest of the model. Second, we should find a correlation between Internet use and negative attitudes concerning the state as highlighted in our theory above, while controlling for how attentive one is to government affairs. Third, these negative attitudes about government will diminish cultural norms of obedience if these attitudes are not that robust. If so, we have evidence that the Asian Values hypothesis may be an overemphasized assumption about Asian culture. Finally, those who are less obedient, generally, would naturally be more likely to engage in protest-centered or nontraditional political participation (also while controlling for how attentive they are to government affairs). Thus, exposure to information via the Internet, which is assumed to be more dissident overall than traditional media through mirror-holding and window-opening mechanisms (Bailard, 2014), leads to an increased likelihood of protest-centered behavior. Our measures for this theoretical model are discussed next.

**DATA AND MEASUREMENT**

In our models, we measure the relationship between Internet use and traditional political participation and nontraditional participation from nations in the Asian Barometer, ceteris paribus. We then estimate a model of traditional participation combined with measures of attitudes concerning the then current state regime. Finally, to test our theoretical explanation of nontraditional participation, we fit a structural equation (path analysis) to the data to test if heightened Internet use stimulates negative attitudes about government, and if these negative attitudes, in turn, bolster disobedient attitudes that finally result in acts of nontraditional participation.

The survey data used in this study come from the Third Wave of the Asian Barometer. These data were collected in 2010. In order to prevent the loss of cases, we replaced missing values using a multiple imputation process. Five replicate data sets were created based on the data, where the missing data in each replication were substituted with draws from the posterior distribution of the missing value conditional on observed values (Little & Rubin, 1987; see also Horton & Lipsitz, 2001). We rely on a multivariate normal imputation model using all dependent and independent variables in the analyses performed here to predict the missing values. The analyses are then based on pooled results of the five replicate imputed data sets (we use Rubin’s Rules to hand-calculate the standard errors). There are 11,676 usable cases after imputation. Some of the survey indicators of the concepts we measure were not used in every country. To maintain standardization across countries, we did not impute missing values or use any of these indicators.

The countries in these data include: Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The qualitative level of democracy varies across the countries. Some of the analyses here are based on subsets of the data that acknowledge this variation. We categorized nations as low and high democracy based on whether they were below or above the median on the Freedom House Freedom in the World
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Index (available at http://www.freedomhouse.org/). According to this measure, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are categorized as low democracies, and Indonesia, Mongolia, South Korea, and Taiwan as high democracies. Clearly, this is not a perfect categorization because there are more nuanced differences across these countries not captured by either the Freedom House Index or our categorization, but for our purpose, identifying varying Internet effects, this measure will suffice. By performing some of our analyses on these subsets, we essentially control for level of democracy to assure that the observed effects are constant across regime type, broadly defined.

Our primary independent variable of interest is Internet Use. The Asian Barometer data ask only one question about Internet use. Respondents were asked the following question translated in their respective language: How often do you use the Internet (almost daily, at least once a week, at least once a month, several times a year, hardly ever, never)? The item was recoded where higher values represented more use and rescaled to range from 0–1. We would prefer to have more nuanced indicators of Internet use (social media use, political information gathering, exposure to dissent, etc.). Nonetheless, a case can be made that identifying significant results with a general-use indicator is strong evidence of effects. We can assume that the general indicator is a rough estimate of the combination of the more nuanced reasons for variation. If this is the case, identifying a relationship should be more difficult. Thus, our test has a higher hurdle to clear. That said, we will not argue that the interpretation and understanding of our results would not be more descriptive and nuanced with additional indicators.

Although by 2010 the pervasiveness of Internet use in the Asian countries did not rival Western use, the proportion of those who use the Internet is not insignificant. Over half the population use the Internet at least sometimes and nearly 25% use it daily. That said, the modal frequency of use is never, and the median is hardly ever. There is, however, some variation across regime type. Use is higher in those countries categorized as high-democracy countries, particularly at the poles of the indicator. There are close to 10 percentage points separating those who use the Internet daily in high and low democracies, and the same can be said for those who never use it, with the former being a higher percentage in high-democracy countries and the latter being a lower percentage.

Our central dependent variable—political participation—is measured across two dimensions, traditional participation and nontraditional participation. We conceptualized traditional participation as any activity geared toward influencing the existing system through elections and/or other legal means. Nontraditional participation is any activity geared toward resisting the existing system through legal or illegal means. Both concepts individually are measured by constructing an additive index. The index for traditional participation is made up of the following five indicators: (a) In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were away from home, they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. How about you? Did you vote in the election [the most recent national election, parliamentary or presidential] held in [year]? (yes, no); (b) Thinking about the national election in [year], did you attend a campaign meeting or rally? (yes, no); (c) Thinking about the national election in [year], did you try to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party? (yes, no); (d) Thinking of whether you voted or not ever since you became eligible for voting, how would you describe yourself—have you voted in every election, voted in most elections, voted in some elections or hardly ever voted? (voted in every election, voted in most elections, voted in some elections, hardly ever voted); and (e) In the past three (3) years, have you never, once, or more than once done the following because of personal, family, or neighborhood problems, or problems with government officials and policies: contacted elected officials or legislative representatives at any level (once, more than once, never). All were recoded where higher values represented more participation and then each was rescaled to range from 0–1 (α = 0.58).
The index measuring nontraditional participation is comprised of the following three indicators: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have never, once, or more than once done any of these things during the past three years: (a) got together with others to raise an issue or sign a petition, (b) attended a demonstration or protest march, and (c) used force or violence for a political cause. Consistent with traditional participation, each was recoded where higher values represented more participation, each was rescaled to range from 0–1, they were summed, and then rescaled from 0–1 (α = 0.41). We are not concerned with the relatively low alpha score here because we had little reason to believe that just because someone engaged in one of these activities, they were likely to engage in the others. That said, we are confident in the validity, because it is reasonable to believe that engaging in two of these activities is more participatory than engaging in one, and engaging in three is more participatory than engaging in two.

We did not expect as much nontraditional participation as traditional participation in general, and we expected that traditional participation would be higher in more democratic countries while nontraditional participation is probably more likely to occur in less democratic countries. Simply, we believe that people in more democratic countries probably see traditional means of participation as a realistic route to change while those in less democratic countries may feel more compulsion to seek alternative routes for change (e.g., protests and even violence). The results presented in Table 1 partially confirm these expectations. Clearly citizens in low- and high-democracy nations were more likely to engage in traditional participation as opposed to nontraditional (the means are much higher for traditional participation).

That said, within the traditional participation category, the means are only higher among more democratic nations relative to less democratic nations on the voting-related indicators. Citizens in low-democracy nations are more likely to attend a campaign rally and to contact an elected official. Although the mean on the traditional participation index is only slightly higher for less democratic nations, this difference is statistically significant. The results more clearly fit our expectations regarding nontraditional participation across level of democracy. Citizens were more likely to raise an issue or petition with others and use force or violence in less democratic nations. The difference across regime type was not significant for attending protests/demonstrations, but the difference (again small) was significant on the index with those in less democratic nations being more

| TABLE 1. Traditional and Non-Traditional Political Participation Across Level of Democracy |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                | Low democracy   |                 | High democracy  |                 |
|                                | Mean            | S.D.            | Mean            | S.D.            |
| Traditional participation      |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| Voted                          | 0.58            | 0.14            | 0.62            | 0.11            | 0.00            |
| Frequency of voting            | 0.51            | 0.15            | 0.54            | 0.11            | 0.00            |
| Attended campaign rally        | 0.53            | 0.17            | 0.49            | 0.15            | 0.00            |
| Persuade others to vote for a candidate | 0.51        | 0.13            | 0.52            | 0.14            | 0.00            |
| Contacted officials/representatives | 0.39        | 0.19            | 0.31            | 0.12            | 0.00            |
| Traditional index              | 0.49            | 0.15            | 0.48            | 0.12            | 0.00            |
| Nontraditional participation   |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| Raise issue/petition with others | 0.39            | 0.15            | 0.38            | 0.13            | 0.00            |
| Attended demonstration/protest march | 0.11        | 0.05            | 0.11            | 0.05            | 0.78            |
| Used force/violence for political cause | 0.07        | 0.10            | 0.06            | 0.07            | 0.00            |
| Nontraditional index           | 0.20            | 0.10            | 0.19            | 0.08            | 0.00            |

Note. Data come from the Asian Barometer Wave 3 (2010) and the Freedom House Democracy Index. Missing data were replaced using multiple imputation making the variables continuous; p value is derived from a t test.
likely overall to engage in nontraditional participatory acts.

There are also a series of other variables we will rely on for the analyses that follow (operationalization of all other variables is included in an online appendix available at https://www.academia.edu/6414321/Appendix_Does_Internet_Use_Stimulate_Political_Participation_in_Asia_It_Depends). First, we model both traditional and nontraditional participation as a function of Internet use, political attentiveness, gender, income, education, and age. Separate models are estimated for all countries, low-democracy countries, and high-democracy countries, making a total of six models. These models are intended to provide the foundation for the models that follow. They illuminate the aforementioned expected negative relationship between Internet use and traditional participation and the positive relationship between Internet use and nontraditional participation. They also provide a test to see if these effects vary across regime type (there is some slight variation that will be described subsequently).

Next, we add attitude about obedience and attitude about government to the model of traditional participation. Attitude about obedience is measured as a function of citizen’s belief that government leaders are like the head of a family, that the government should decide what ideas should be publicly discussed, and that morally upright political leaders should decide everything. We also constructed an index of attitude about government consisting of several other indices and individual indicators of political trust, attitude about democracy and freedom in each respective country, belief in the fairness of the election process, and external efficacy or the evaluation of government responsiveness. This model is intended to test our theory that these attitudes (about obedience and government) are at the root of the inclination to rely on traditional participation to seek change in Asia. Those who are more obedient and generally feel better about government should be more inclined to rely on traditional participation.

This last model of traditional participation also helps lay the empirics for the theory undergirding the path analysis we rely on to test our central argument. That theoretical argument is represented in Figure 1. Our assertion is that citizens’ attitudes about government are structured by how much information they are exposed to via the Internet, controlling for the degree to which they have been exposed to outside cultures (measured by their attentiveness to foreign events and media programming) and their general attentiveness to public affairs. We assert that heightened exposure to information via the Internet will lead to more negative attitudes about government because the Internet makes it easier to seek out and be exposed to information that challenges the status quo. The probability of being exposed to dissent is higher among those who use the Internet more frequently. This shapes the information that citizens have cognitively accessible to form an opinion about their respective government. As a result of more negative attitudes about government, we argue that citizens will develop an attitude of disobedience and consequentially be more likely to engage in nontraditional participation, ceteris paribus.

RESULTS

The initial answer to our participation puzzle is presented in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, there is a relatively strong negative effect of Internet use on traditional participation across regime type (low and high democracy). The models estimate a 0.20 decrease in traditional participation for every one-unit increase in Internet use when all countries are included, a 0.20 decrease when only low-democracy countries are included, and a 0.21 decrease when only high-democracy countries are included. It is important to note that these results hold up in the face of consistently significant control variables, supporting the notion that the result is not spurious. Additionally, there is a positive effect for political attentiveness, females are less likely to participate, and those with higher incomes are more likely to participate. Interestingly, those with higher education are less likely to participate (not significant in the high-democracy model), and older citizens are more likely to participate.
TABLE 2. Modeling Political Participation as a Function of Internet Use Across Level of Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Participation</th>
<th>Non-Traditional Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A.C.</td>
<td>L.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
<td>−0.20**</td>
<td>−0.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political attentiveness</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−0.03**</td>
<td>−0.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−0.06*</td>
<td>−0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>11,676</td>
<td>6,117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data come from the Asian Barometer Wave 3 (2010) and the Freedom House Democracy Index. Missing data were replaced using multiple imputation. Cell entries are ordinary least squares estimates with associated standard errors in parentheses. **$p \leq 0.01$, *$p \leq 0.05$, +$p \leq 0.10$. (A.C. = All Countries, L.D. = Low Democracy Countries, H.D. = High Democracy Countries).

Although the effect of Internet use on nontraditional participation is not as consistent or strong, there is still a relatively robust effect. In this case, though, the effect is positive. There is a 0.01 increase in nontraditional participation for every one-unit increase in Internet use when all countries are included, and a 0.03 increase when only low-democracy countries are included. Internet use is not significant in the high-democracy model, likely reflecting the fact that citizens in relatively more democratic nations do not feel as compelled to engage in riskier nontraditional acts to achieve their goals, because more traditional means may perceptually have the desired effect. Again, the controls used are consistently important with the exception that income is not significant in the high-democracy model, and interestingly, age is not significant in any of the nontraditional participation models. This suggests that the young and old alike are no more likely than each other to engage in nontraditional participatory acts, ceteris paribus.

In the model presented in Table 3, we address the context of the Asian culture. The model measures the effect of attitudes about obedience and government, in general, on individual decisions to participate. If they matter for traditional participation in one direction, they may matter for nontraditional participation in the opposite direction, in the same way that Internet use does. The model does, indeed, estimate a significant positive effect of both, respectively. A one-unit increase in the attitude-about-obedience index is associated with a 0.04 increase on the traditional participation index. Thus, those who tend to believe that authority figures should

TABLE 3. Sources of Traditional Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>$p$ Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude about obedience</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude about government</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentiveness</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−0.24</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>11,676</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data come from the Asian Barometer Wave 3 (2010). Missing data were replaced using multiple imputation. Cell entries are ordinary least squares estimates.
be respected and followed are more likely to engage in participatory acts such as voting, attending campaign events, and trying to convince other voters to support a candidate. Likewise, those who generally feel better about the status quo regime are more likely to rely on traditional forms of participation. The model estimates a 0.08 increase on the traditional participation index for every one-unit increase in attitude about government.

It is important to note that both of these estimates are significant when controlling for attentiveness, gender, income, education, and age—all alternative explanations of the propensity to participate. All of the control results are in the traditionally theoretically expected direction except education, where the model estimates a negative relationship, and a quite large one at that. For every one-unit increase in education, the model estimates a 0.24 decrease on the traditional participation index. We believe this result is consistent with our larger theoretical model. Those who are more educated tend to be more likely to use the Internet (Chadwick, 2006; Gainous & Wagner, 2011; Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury, 2003; Warschauer, 2003), and our model asserts that those who are more likely to use the Internet tend to favor nontraditional participation, because they may recognize the futility of traditional participation.

Finally, we bring the participation models and cultural effects together. The results in Table 4 are the path analysis estimates based on the theoretical model represented in Figure 1. The root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.07, indicating that model fit is reasonably good. As for interpretation generally, heightened Internet use (as predicted through demographics) seems to lead to negative attitudes about government; these negative attitudes apparently encourage disobedient attitudes, which stimulate the propensity to engage in nontraditional participatory acts such as petitioning, protesting, or even using violence. Specifically, a one-unit increase in Internet use predicts a 0.11 decrease in supportive attitudes of the status quo government, a one-unit increase in these supportive attitudes of this government are associated with a 0.19 increase in obedient attitudes, and conversely, those who are less supportive of government (high Internet users) are less obedient (a 0.19 decrease). Finally, the model estimates that a one-unit increase in obedient attitudes is associated with a 0.02 decrease in the nontraditional participation index.

Again, it is important to note that this model is a representation of the theoretical model represented in Figure 1. Thus, each estimate is based on the estimated dependent variable from the previous model. It is a path from the original independent variable of interest, Internet use as predicted through demographic variation, to the eventual outcome, nontraditional participation, while holding important controls constant throughout. In the first stage of the model, all demographics are significant. Females are less likely to use the Internet, people with higher incomes and education are more likely to use the Internet, and older people are less likely to use the Internet. There were no surprises here. At the second stage of the model, although foreign exposure and attentiveness are held constant at their means as mentioned above, the model suggests that the negative effect of Internet use is still significant independent of the negative effect of foreign exposure and positive effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4. Structural Equation Model of Non-Traditional Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude about government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude about obedience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude about government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RMSEA</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data come from the Asian Barometer Wave 3 (2010). Missing data were replaced using multiple imputation and standard errors were hand calculated using Rubin’s Rules. Model estimates are based on multivariate normal maximum likelihood estimation.
of attentiveness (measured in part by an indicator that captures attention to non-digital sources of media) on the attitude about government index.\textsuperscript{10} Also, the control for attentiveness in the fourth stage of the model helps boost confidence in the estimated effect of attitude about obedience. It remains significant while accounting for the possibility that only those who are highly attentive are willing to engage in nontraditional participatory acts. More directly, despite the Asian Values hypothesis that asserts that there is a cultural norm of obedience, the Internet is having a significant effect. Thus, the norm is not very robust, considering that our model suggests it is malleable and sensitive to Internet exposure.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

Political participation is multidimensional throughout the world, but the East Asian context shows a distinctive split between nontraditional and traditional participation. Some seek to change or to maintain the status quo through traditional participatory acts such as voting or attending campaign events, while others are more likely to engage in nontraditional routes such as protesting or even violence. Our results suggest that information-gathering via the Internet may play a significant role in determining the route that citizens choose. Those who use the Internet more frequently are likely exposed to dissent that may lead to increased distrust in government and low efficacy. The Internet offers a flow of information that gives citizens a set of criteria from which to evaluate government that differs substantively from that offered by the traditional media. This unique flow of information creates a foundation for the creation of disobedient attitudes and as a result, stimulates the propensity to engage in nontraditional participatory acts. Conversely, those who have little exposure to the Internet are less likely to develop disobedient attitudes and are more likely to continue to use traditional participation as a means of political engagement.

These findings challenge both traditional theories regarding the effects of the Internet on political participation and theories centered on an inherent cultural obedience present in East Asian society. Concerning the former, we concede that much of the literature suggests that the Internet stimulates traditional political participation. However, we contend that this effect is conditional on context. Exposure to information coming from outside traditional or government-controlled media in East Asia may actually deter traditional participation because it could draw attention to the futility of this type of participation. In addition, we assert that if there were robust and widespread cultural obedience, these attitudes would not be as sensitive to information exposure via the Internet as our models suggest. The Internet appears to be overcoming the cultural norm. Moreover, if widespread cultural obedience was more resistant to the Internet effect, we posit that we would not see governments in the region investing significant resources into the filtering, monitoring, and policing of activity and content online. In China, for example, despite bans on Facebook and Twitter, Chinese citizens have flocked to the Chinese counterpart Weibo. Disturbingly for the Chinese government, despite policing of the service, increased use of Weibo “leads to perceptions that the government is not answerable to its citizens” (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012, p. 348). Furthermore, there is evidence that the Chinese state’s attempts to control social media consists of “increasingly creative methods of subverting these . . . controls” (Masterson, 2015).

Although we believe that our research sheds light on our understanding of Internet effects in general, and in the East Asian context in particular, this study has some limitations. First, we note that our measure of Internet use is defined in broad terms without much nuance. This is a product of the data available to us. It is the best extant measure addressing individual-level Internet use across multiple countries in East Asia that also includes indicators of political participation. Although a wide measure is not ideal, the significant results from a general question might evidence a robust effect. Even in the absence of a more nuanced indicator that might include social media use or specific types of political information gathering, the correlation between political participation and Internet use is consistent and significant.
Further research that addresses some of the more nuanced questions concerning specific online activities needs to be done. Is social media the primary vehicle for the dissemination of dissent? In what ways are citizens using the Internet to organize nontraditional participation movements? Do citizens seek out dissent, and does the cross-pressure of exposure to information supportive of the status quo regimes curtail the effects of exposure to dissent? Finally, how effective are government efforts to control the flow of information via the Internet, and, does variation in this effectiveness across countries determine the degree to which the Internet can stimulate traditional and nontraditional participation? All are important questions. As this study has shown, the Internet has become an important lever in East Asian politics and it will be a fertile ground for more study and research.

**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL**

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher’s website.

**NOTES**

2. King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) find compelling evidence that the Chinese government is well aware of the potential of the Internet to stimulate such protest-related collective action. Their results suggest that the Chinese government actively tries to censor digital discourse promoting such participation.
3. See, for example, the policies of the government of Singapore (Lee, 2005; Rodan, 1998)
4. For example, Malaysia initially viewed the development of the Internet as simply yet another mega project.
5. We are able to rely on ordinary least squares regression (OLS) to estimate these models. Each dependent variable can be treated as continuous because, first, the multiple imputation procedure used creates a multitude of possible response categories from each item in the indexed variables, and second, the index multiplies these possibilities.
6. Path analysis is a form of structural equation modeling (SEM) that allows the modeling of direct and indirect relationships in order to make causal arguments (see Kline, 2011 for a description of path analysis and SEM).
7. In order to account for the possibility that the Internet effects may vary across a more nuanced degree of freedom by country, we recoded the Freedom House Index to capture the lower-quartile countries, the inter-quartile range countries, and the upper-quartile range countries and reestimated the models in Table 2 across the more nuanced measure, and we saw similar results for both the traditional and nontraditional participation models.
8. We also estimated the model without the demographic foundation using Internet use, foreign exposure, and attentiveness as the first level of the path, and the substantive results did not change.
9. It is worth noting that we also estimated this model for low-democracy countries only in case the Internet path effects on nontraditional participation are only occurring in more authoritarian regimes and the model estimates do not change for the most part. Note that the significance of the “attitude about obedience” indicator does drop close to the 0.10 threshold.
10. We also estimated this model with dummy variables for each country in the first level to account for potential cross-country variation in Internet effects. The estimated Internet effects did not change. They remained statistically significant and the magnitude decreased by only 1/100 of a point. We used Malaysia as the reference category simply because it was the highest value in the country codes.

**REFERENCES**


