Social Networks and Political Group Participation:

The Chain Mediation Effect of Social Participation and Intrinsic Political Efficacy

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Abstract. Political groups serve as an important forum for grassroots participation in social governance and political dominance, and are a powerful guarantee for political democratisation and social modernisation. Using data from the China CGSS 2017 national survey, this study explores the relationship between social networks and political group participation, and the role of social participation and intrinsic political efficacy in this relationship.The result indicated the following: (1) social networks positively predict political group participation, even after controlling for age, gender, education, and economic status. (2)Social participation and intrinsic political efficacy mediate between social networks and political groups via three pathways: parallel mediation of social participation and intrinsic political efficacy, sequential mediation of social participation, and sequential mediation of intrinsic political efficacy. This study suggests that different incentives can be used to promote political group participation for people with different social network statuses, and that a focus on the composition and operation of social networks can provide insight into the future direction of democratic politics in China.

Keywords: social networks, political group participation, social participation, intrinsic political efficacy.

1. Inroduction and literature review

China's democratic form of socialism has been evolving towards whole-process people's democracy, which is an all-round, full-chain, and full-coverage democracy. Political groups, whether formal or informal organisations, play a crucial role in the participation of non-institutionalised groups in China which owning a population of over 1.4 billion.This study focuses on the participation of masses in grassroots party organisations in China, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Federation, trade unions or associations, etc.[1] Unlike the conceptual definition in Western countries, the participation of political groups in China has obvious characteristics of the nature of a socialist state, being an important political link and position for the realisation of political participation in people's social life and an important social pillar and supervisory force of the state power. On the one hand, political groups have the function of aggregating and expressing interests, providing the public with a daily context for political participation, and are an important bridge and link between the government and the public.On the other hand,   political groups can take over some of the functions of government management, making up for the inherent deficiencies of the government's social management capacity, working as an important subject of social governance. Therefore, the study of possible influencing factors and pathways of political group participation in Chinese society under the leadership of the Communist Party of China is essential to promote the development of socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics.

Scholars have studied the factors influencing political participation to a certain extent in China, and have actively explored the practical ways to break the dilemma of political participation, mainly focusing on the following aspects. Firstly, with regard to the subject differences in political participation, scholars have studied the behavioural choices of political participation for groups such as women [2], youth [3], farmers [4], entrepreneurs [5], university students [6],   party

members and so on. Secondly, with regard to the form differences in political participation, different scholars have explored the mechanisms of political participation in two dimensions: one is the institutionalised participation, such as the election of National People's Congress deputies and grassroots autonomous organisations [7], and the other is the non-institutionalised participation, such as network participation, expression of demands and group action [8]. Thirdly, with regard to differences in the psychology of participation, scholars have explored the internal logic of political action from the feelings of social justice [9], subjective well-being [10], relative deprivation[11], political efficacy [12], life access[13] and so on. Finally, with regard to the structural differences in participation, scholars have focused on the analysis of orderly political participation among different subjects [14], constructing an 'interactive' framework of political participation [15], attempting to explore a stable framework of political participation [16] and so on.

Synthesizing previous research findings, scholars have tended to study more structural differences in institutionalised political participation behaviour under different demographic variables, different psychological perception effects and different participation structures. However, little research has been done on non-institutionalised participation behaviours, especially those similar to political organisations and party groups. In fact, political group activities are characterised by high frequency, diverse forms and rich content. They are more proper and closer to the masses in the scenes of daily life and could respond to the demands of the masses in a timely manner, playing a more prominent role in enhancing the sense of access and effectiveness of the masses' political participation. In addition, it is important to note that the behaviour types and awearness of political participation are closely related to personal awareness and concepts, but the literature had also little focused on the impact of individual indicators such as self-perception and social relations on political participation behaviour. Thus, this paper explores the influence of relation and self-perception variables on participation in political groups from an individual perspective, in order to enrich the framework for understanding the influences on political participation.

2. Theoretical framework and research and research hypothesis

From the Chinese context, 'relationship' is an important perspective in traditional and even modern Chinese society. Chinese self-construction comes from relationships, and the Chinese self needs to be seen in relation to other people, society, and context, focusing on embedding themselves in a network of social relationships, living and surviving with others[17]. On this basis, Yang reveals Chinese group behaviour by backtracking at traditional Chinese philosophy: she regarded the Chinese self and society as a tight, hierarchical structure, with each individual in an invisible network of relationships, and the individuals tend to transcend the 'individual self' through 'internal transformation', finally achieving 'decentralisation' and blending as one with society. This also echoes the classical Chinese theory of ' Diversity-orderly Structure', where diversity refers to the static character of the relation structure from a horizontal perspective while 'orderly' refers to the dynamic character of relation structure from a vertical perspective. It not only allows for the coexistence of individuals in a number of groups, but also allows for the state of dispersion and customization for individuals in multiple groups[19]. Therefore, the theories of social construction and Diversity-orderly Structure embody the Chinese self's emphasis on interdependence and relationality respectively, and use them as a starting point to explain the intrinsic sources of Chinese moral and behavioural characteristics, contributing to a deeper understanding of the intrinsic links between Chinese social networks and social or political behaviour in the Chinese context.

At the same time, Bourdieu's theory of social capital considered "a familiar, recognised and institutionalised network of relationships" as the main source of social capital[20]. Social capital can facilitate social participation, the most important part of which is social networks, enabling the transmission and diffusion of trust, promoting spontaneous cooperation, and enhancing social efficiency [21]. Inspired by Granovetter's theory of strong and weak ties [22], Putnam later divided

social networks into two types: bonded and bridged networks [23]. The former refers mainly to emotional or material support and belonging among closely-knit individuals (e.g. family or friends), which have extensiveness but weaker relationships, while the latter arises from social networks of people from different backgrounds, which have extensiveness but weaker relationships [24]. A Singapore-based study shows that bridging capital is positively associated with online political participation, while bonding capital is positively associated with traditional political participation [25]. Furthermore, research on political communication shows that citizens in complex social networks are more likely to receive political   information and advice through frequent contact with others, thus participating in various consultation activities, enhancing their ability and chance in political activities. Social network analysis illustrates the social factors to the flow of information and resources among individuals or groups. As a result, we hypothesize that individuals with a wider social network are more willing to participate in various activities in society and life than those with a lower degree of social network, thus gaining more political information and resources and being more willing to participate in the activities of political groups.

According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which refers to an individual's subjective judgement and perception of his or her ability to complete a task or behaviour [26], individuals with a higher sense of self-efficacy have higher expectations and motivation, are more willing to challenge the impossible, and are able to demonstrate a higher level of intelligence and competence in the process. Accordingly, in the political participation, Angus Campbell introduced the concept of 'political efficacy' [27], which is defined as 'the perception that an individual's political behaviour can have an impact on the political process'. Lane later refined this into intrinsic and extrinsic efficacy: intrinsic efficacy refers to an individual's perception that he or she has the resources and ability to influence the political process; extrinsic efficacy is an individual's perception that the government is processing or responding to external demands and influences [28]. Research has also demonstrated that political efficacy can significantly influence citizens' political participation and help them build confidence in the process, creating a virtuous circle between the two [29]. On this basis, Craig argues that intrinsic efficacy is independent of extrinsic efficacy, two of which play different roles in political behaviour, with intrinsic efficacy having a more pronounced impact on participation in traditional and community political activities [30]. During an individual's participation in political activities, the higher sense of political efficacy leads them to higher expectations of political behaviour, gaining the ability to remain optimistic and confident before political resistance, and taking the initiative to learn relevant knowledge and skills to solve obstacles in the process of participation [31]. Therefore, we hypothesize that intrinsic self-efficacy can facilitate participation in political groups.

Finally, the relationship between political efficacy, social networks and participation in social activities all stem from the process of socialization. Participation in social activities and involvement in social networks contribute to the formation of an intrinsic sense of efficacy, promoting solidarity and mutual trust among members and the cohesion of mutual shared expectations[32]. On the one hand, participation in social activities is essentially a process of social interaction, where individuals are able to gather more or more critical political information beyond their own resource constraints. At the same time, it   facilitates discussions among those members who are interested in politics and strengthens the recognition of the political participation within the group, which means enhancing their self-confidence to strengthen their internal sense of political efficacy [33]. Therefore, we hypothesize that social participation contributes to a sense of political efficacy. On the other hand, an individual's position in a social network also influences the use of social information and resources: individuals with a high degree of network centrality usually have more resources to connect with others, and are thus more dependent on individuals at the periphery of the network, generating a stronger sense of belonging and self-confidence, which ultimately manifests itself in a sense of political efficacy [34]. Thus, we conclude that social networks contribute positively to the development of political efficacy.

In summary, this study hypotheses: (1) social networks have a positive predictive effect on political group participation; (2) social participation and intrinsic political efficacy play a chain mediating role between social networks and political group participation; and (3) social participation and intrinsic political efficacy play a serial mediating role between social networks and political group participation.

3. Data and methods

3.1 3.1 Sample and data collection

This paper explores the relationship between social networks, social participation, and political participation using the CGSS2017 survey database published by the China General Social Survey on October 1, 2020. This database contains multiple levels of individuals, households, communities, and societies. From the CGSS2017 data, 12,582 valid samples containing 783 variables were completed, and this paper is based on the research. The data was cleaned based on the questions and question items, and 2,195 samples were obtained after eliminating cases with missing items in the relevant question items.

3.2 3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Independent variable

The independent variable is social network, which can be classified into two types: sticky networks and bridging networks, according to existing research [35]. Sticky networks consist of three questions, including "In the past year, did you often get together with relatives who do not live together in your free time?", "In the past year, have you often get together with friends in your free time?" and "How often do you engage in social and recreational activities with other friends (e.g. hanging out with each other, watching TV, eating together, playing cards, etc.)?". Bridging networks consist of the two questions "How often do you socialize with your neighbors (e.g. visit each other, watch TV, eat together, play cards, etc.)" and "In the past year, did you often socialize or visit your neighbors in your free time?" A scale of 1-5 (1="never", 5="always") is used, with higher scores indicating higher levels of social networking.

3.2.2 Dependent variable

The dependent variable is political group participation status, which is operationalized as "In the past year, how often did you participate in the activities of a political party, political group, or political group organization". It uses a scale of 1-5 (1="never", 5="always"), with higher values indicating greater involvement in political groups.

3.2.3 Mediating variables

The mediating variables are social partcipation and intrinsic political efficacy. Social participation is measured in four dimensions: social organization activities, cultural activities, recreational activities, and public welfare activities [36]. Specifically, they are the frequency of participation in cultural activities such as attending concerts, shows, and exhibitions in the past year, the frequency of going to the cinema in the past year, and the frequency of participation in voluntary activities of charitable or religious organizations in the past year. A scale of 1-5 (1="never", 5="always") is used, with higher scores indicating higher levels of social participation. Intrinsic political efficacy is operationalized as "People like me have no say in what the government wants to do", on a reverse scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' on a scale of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater political self-efficacy.

3.2.4 Control variables

The control variables included demographic and social characteristics variables. The demographic variables were specifically age, gender and educational level. The social characteristics variable is social status, operationalised as "In general, at which level of society are you currently located", whose answers are a scale of 1-5 (1= "low",3="high"), with the higher the social status characteristic.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Descriptive statistics and Correlation analysis

The results of the revalued samples are shown in the table 1. Chinese society has a high degree of public social network bonding, and the public socialises with friends, which is consistent with the traditional influence of China's high-context culture and 'acquaintance society'. In terms of participation in political group activities, the public is significantly less involved. In terms of social participation, the public participates more frequently in group and recreational activities than in public welfare activities and cultural activities, reflecting the fact that Chinese society in general prefers recreational and group activities, but in general, social participation scores are not high and social participation needs to be improved.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics results

Varible	Proportion/Mean(SD)
Dependent Variables	
Participation of political groups score(0-5)	
political activity	1.40(0.90)
Independent Variables	
Social network score (0-5)	
get together with unfamiliar relative	2.32(0.72)
get together with friend	2.70(0.92)
social contact	2.78(1.01)
socialize with neighbor	2.56(1.31)
socialize with friend	3.00(0.98)
Mediating variable	
Social participation frequency(0-5)	
group activities	1.92(1.32)
cultural activities	1.60(0.81)
recreational activities	1.80(0.83)
public activities	1.34(0.8)
Intrinsic political efficiency(0-5)	
Power and responsibility	2.85(1.17)
Control variables	
Demographic variables	
Age	41.92(14.19)
Gender(%)	
Male	50.04
Female	49.96
Education(%)	
lower	11.08
medium	56.24
higher	32.68
Social characteristic	

Social status(%)	
lower	28.4
medium	68.87
higher	2.73

We conducted a correlation analysis to examine the association among all the variables, and the correlation matrix is illustrated inTable 2. Table 2 shows a significant positive correlation between the four variables of social network, social participation ,intrinsic political efficacy and political group participation.

TABLE 2   correlation matrix

	Social network	Social participation	Intrinsic political efficacy
Social participation	0.276***	1	
Intrinsic political efficacy	0.069***	0.098***	1
Participation of political group	0.150***	0.379***	0.103***

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4.2 Regression and mediation effect analysis

The study conducted regression and mediation analyses to examine the relationship between social network and political group participation. Social participation and intrinsic political efficacy were used as mediating variables, while gender, age, education level, and social status were used as control variables.

The results of the regression analysis showed that social network had a significant positive predictive effect on social participation and political efficacy ($p<0.001$). Additionally, social participation had a significant positive predictive effect on political efficacy and political group participation ($p<0.001$). Furthermore, political efficacy was a significant positive predictor of political group participation ($p<0.001$).

Stratified regression analysis was used to test whether social engagement and intrinsic political efficacy mediated the relationship between social networks and political group participation. Models 4 and 5 showed that when the social network and social engagement variables were entered into the equation simultaneously, the regression coefficient for social network decreased and remained significant ($p<0.001$), explaining 17.9% of the variance. This suggests that social engagement mediates social network and socio-political group engagement to some extent.

Models 4 and 6 showed that when both the social network and intrinsic political efficacy variables were entered into the equation, the regression coefficient for social network decreased and remained significant ($p<0.001$), explaining 8% of the variance. This suggests that social participation mediates social network and political group participation.

Comparing Models 4, 5, 6, and 7 showed that when the social network, social participation, and intrinsic political efficacy variables were entered into the equation at the same time, the regression coefficient for social network remained significant ($p<0.001$) and explained 18.3% of the variance. This suggests that social participation and intrinsic political efficacy play a mediating role in social networks and socio-political groups.

TABLE 3   Regression results for PPE and SC, IPE, SN

	Social participation	Intrinsic political efficacy		Participation of political groups			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	（6）	(7)
Demographics							

gender	0.044*	0.072	0.068	-0.178***	-0.201***	-0.183***	-0.204***
	(0.024)	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.037)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.035)
age	-0.003***	-0.001	-0.001	0.007***	0.009***	0.007***	0.009***
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
education	0.315***	0.135***	0.106**	0.255***	0.093***	0.246***	0.087***
	(0.020)	(0.041)	(0.043)	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.034)
Social characteristic							
Social status	0.149***	0.193***	0.180***	0.078**	0.002	0.066*	-0.007
	(0.025)	(0.053)	(0.054)	(0.036)	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.034)
Central variables							
SN	0.246***	0.106***	0.084**	0.197***	0.071**	0.190***	0.066**
	(0.020)	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.030)	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.028)
SP			0.091**		0.513***		0.509***
			(0.043)		(0.041)		(0.041)
IPE						0.062***	0.051***
						(0.016)	(0.015)
N	2195.000	2195.000	2195.000	2195.000	2195.000	2195.000	2195.000
r2	0.209	0.020	0.022	0.074	0.179	0.080	0.183
r2_a	0.207	0.018	0.019	0.072	0.176	0.078	0.180

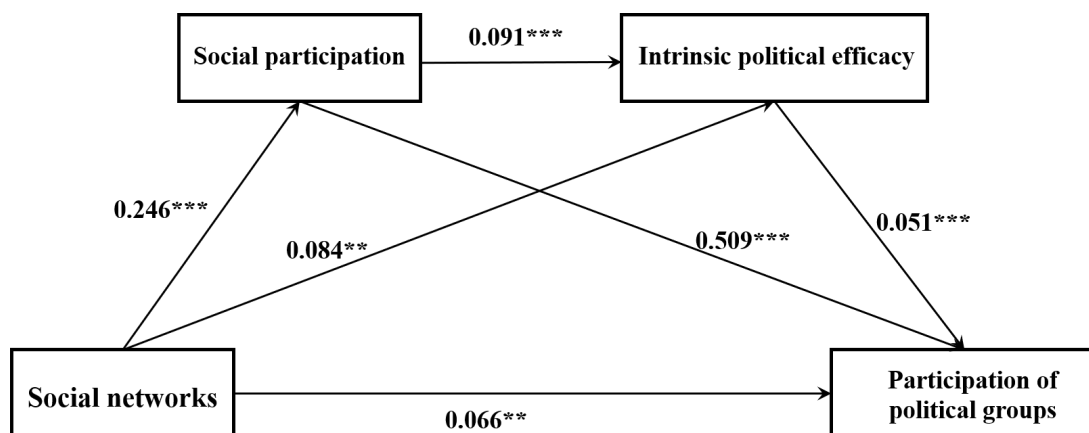Standard errors in parentheses
* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Figure 1   Social networks and political group participation:
the multiple mediating roles of social participation and intrinsic political efficacy

4.3 Bootstrap test

After conducting a regression analysis, we further analyzed the model using the bootstrap method to test the mediating effect. We used Stata 17.0 software for the analysis, with a sample size of 500 and a 95% confidence interval. The results showed that the direct effect of social networks on political group participation was 0.066, accounting for 33.3% of the total effect.

Regarding the mediating effect, the path coefficient of Network -> social participation -> political groups was 0.125, accounting for 63.1% of the total effect. The path coefficient of Network -> intrinsic political efficacy -> political groups was 0.005, accounting for 2.5% of the total effect. Finally, the path Network -> social participation -> intrinsic political efficacy -> political groups was 0.002, accounting for 1.1% of the total effect size. All three paths were significant, and the total effect was also significant. Therefore, all of our hypotheses were proven.

TABLE 4 Results of the bootstrap method of testing for multiple mediating effects

route	Observed Coefficient	str.eer	[95% conf. interval]
Network → political groups	0.066	0.0280	[0.0120,0.1217]
Network →social participation → political groups	0.125	0.0142	[0.1000,0.1576]
Network → intrinsic political efficacy → political groups	0.005	0.0024	[0.0009,0.0104]
Network → social participation →intrinsic political efficacy → political groups	0.002	0.0007	[0.0002,0.0034]
Total effect	0.198	0.0295	[0.1379,0.2505]

5. Conclusion and discussion

Based on data from the China General Social Survey 2017, this study finds that social networks have a positive predictive effect on participation in political group activities. This effect holds even when controlling for demographic variables such as gender, age, and educational attainment, as well as the social status variable. The study suggests that social networks and interpersonal relationships play a unique role in the Chinese context, connecting individuals with different resources and unequal power. Social networks in participation behavior may confer social or material benefits to individuals [37]. Therefore, institutional pressures and resource incentives in interpersonal networks can influence citizens' participation in political groups [38] , i.e. such 'strong ties' can be supported by administrative or information resources from interpersonal networks such as relatives, friends and neighbours, or by the diffusion of traditional notions of 'favours' and 'face-saving', allowing even less-educated individuals with lower social status to have a high level of enthusiasm and action for political participation.

This study further found that social networks contribute to political group participation in several ways. Firstly, social networks influence political group participation through social participation. When individuals have denser and stronger social networks, they are often seen as having more positive and open personality traits or as being able to develop more social skills, they are more motivated or encouraged to participate more in social participation activities such as volunteering, recreational activities and group activities [39]. As individuals become more involved in social interactions, their understanding of society deepens, enabling them to identify inherent social ills or urgent social emergencies , thus promoting their willingness to change society and calling for a higher level of political participation. Political groups, as both political expression and social governance, have undoubtedly become the most effective channel for the grassroots to express their views and demands. Therefore, social networks have actually become their "social capital" in the process of participation.

Secondly, social networks influence political groups through the sense of intrinsic political efficacy. This suggests that low density social network groups are more likely to fear the effectiveness of their political participation and reduce or refuse to participate in political group activities due to their lower intrinsic political efficacy. It can be seen that intrinsic political efficacy is an important factor in political group participation, which is consistent with previous research findings. It is worth noting that some scholars have concluded that political efficacy and political participation are interactive and mutually reinforcing [40]. In fact, social networks give individuals stronger, more accurate and higher quality political information and political resources through long-term and close interaction, lowering the cost and threshold of participation, lowering the cost and threshold of participation, and increasing political efficacy.

Finally, social networks increase intrinsic political efficacy via social activity involvement, facilitating political group participation behavior. Although this mediating effect accounts for a much smaller proportion of the total effect than the first two, it is still an important pathway through which social networks influence political group participation. On the one hand, individuals with higher levels of social networks are more inclined to participate in social activities, they become familiar with each other and compare themselves with each other in the process of frequent social interactions.Terefore, in that process, they are more likely to form positive judgments about their self-worth and self-efficacy, and generate positive self-perceptions of the political system and a sense of political responsibility. On the other hand, social networks reduce the distance between individuals by facilitating social activities, increase the social information available to them through high-density information exchange, improve their understanding of society and generate a desire to participate. These attitudes facilatate certain political behaviours that are more likely to be reflected in political group participation in daily life situations [41], such as participation in party and group activities, regular activities held by organisations , such as women's associations or trade unions and so on. In this way, social participation in fact reshapes individual responsibility by linking individuals and organisations, individuals and society, and the effect of chain mediation is answered.

The theoretical significance of this study is to explore a new research perspective in the field of political life - political group participation - and to expand the understanding of the influencing factors involved. The study found that in a developing socialist country such as China, social networks have a positive and significant effect on political group participation, and that the variable of political group participation is influenced by both internal cognitive variables, i.e. intrinsic political efficacy, and external behavioural variables, i.e. participation in social activities, in a sequential mediated logical path. The practical value of this paper is that, as social networks are a significant predictor of political group participation, more attention needs to be paid to groups with low social network density and low political efficacy to avoid the possible "Matthew effect". They not only tend to be more vocal in their political demands but are also more likely to "lose their voice" in the political participation activities of high-density social networks and high efficacy groups. On the other hand, as people with high social network status are more likely to participate in political group activities, it is possible to make full use of these groups in the social network and mobilize them to bring more people to participate in political group activities.

As a result, this paper makes the following suggestions: Firstly, we should attach importance to the role of grassroots party organisations as a bastion of combat, enrich the contents and forms of party and group activities to facilitate the political group participation of non-party members in daily situations and gather the ideological consensus of the grassroots. Secondly, we should provide scenes and resources for political participation in daily social activities participation, permeate the concept and value of political participation, and enhance people's sense of political efficacy. Thirdly, cultivate a social network of reciprocity and trust. The government should pay attention to the disadvantaged groups and mobilise the dominant groups in social networks, expand the influence of political group participation to solve real-life problems, promoting the harmonious and stable development of society.

However, there are also some shortcomings in this study: Firstly, although the data were obtained from authoritative, national sample survey data, due to the limitations of the original questionnaire, only one measure of intrinsic efficacy was used, which may be the causes to the dissatisfactory effect of chain mediation. In the future, we could enrich the measurement dimensions of political efficacy. Secondly, the data used in the study are only from one cross-sectional data, which can hardly reflect the real causal relationship of the variables. Future studies can try to conduct longitudinal series or comparative studies to verify the longitudinal relationship between these variables. Thirdly, the variables of social network and social participation, political efficacy and political participation do not act in a completely unidirectional way, but a circle of interacting with each other and reinforcing each other. A better causal chain between these variables still needs to be further considered and explored in the future.

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