

## Chapter 67

# The Demobilizing Potential of Conflict for Web and Mobile Political Participation

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, we expand the idea that conflict avoidance (CA) inhibits online political participation. We specifically propose that CA has a direct negative link with traditional online political participation and online political expression, and an indirect negative link with these two forms of participation when mediated by political interest and internal political efficacy. We test our propositions through analyzing data from a survey of young adult college students residing in a battleground state in the U.S. Midwest conducted during the weeks prior to the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Our results showed that CA has a direct negative association with both traditional online political participation and online political expression. CA also has a negative relationship with political interest and internal political efficacy, which in turn, are positively linked with traditional online political participation and online political expression. We discussed implications.*

### INTRODUCTION

Conflict is ubiquitous in American politics (Jamieson, 1992). During the run up to the 2016 presidential election, for instance, it was not uncommon to see candidates and their supporters attacking their opponents (Jaffe, 2016; Chozik, 2016). American media also tend to cover politics as a conflict between political actors or groups (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Herbst, 2010). Viewers of American television are also constantly exposed to conflict-laden news coverage on 24-hour news cycle cable channels such as CNN, Fox, and MSNBC that often portray heated exchanges between political commentators (For-

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gette & Morris, 2006; Jamieson & Cappella, 2009; Mutz, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Furthermore, political arguments have been commonplace in U.S. online forums and social network sites (Coe, Ken-ski, & Rains, 2014; Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). In a recent study of more than 400,000 tweets posted by more than 140,000 individual Twitter users during the 2012 election, Vargo and Hopf (in press) found a prevalence of incivility on the social media platform.

The ever-present nature of conflict in American politics and public affairs media coincides with a scholarly interest in the potential that such conflicts might alienate citizens from the political process (e.g., McClurg, 2006). Research particularly suggests that conflict avoidance (CA) could be inhibiting offline political participation, political interest, and internal political efficacy (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). However, in light of today's world of ubiquitous Internet connectivity, this line of research remains narrow in two important ways. First, there is limited understanding about the potential that CA might also decrease online political participation. With a few exceptions (e.g., Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilencik, & Gee, 2015), few studies have examined whether CA is inversely related with online forms of political participation more common in today's Internet landscape, including online forms of politically expressive acts performed via social media and mobile devices (Pew Research Center, 2014; Smith, 2009, 2011; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015). Second, while research shows political interest and internal political efficacy are two key psychological antecedents of offline political participation (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Moeller, de Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), a question not satisfactorily investigated by empirical studies is whether CA may also undermine online political participation by first inhibiting efficacy and political interest. That is, CA may be linked to lower online political participation because it may dampen one's interest in, and perceived competence to be part of, the political process.

To address the two above noted voids in the research, the present study's purpose is two-fold. First, we examine whether CA has a direct negative relationship with traditional online political participation and online political expression. Second, we test a mediation model whereby CA is posited to be indirectly related to online political participation and online political expression via its negative links with political interest and internal political efficacy. Using data from a survey of young adult college students conducted during the weeks prior to the 2012 presidential election, and in a battle ground state in the U.S., the present study examines the potential direct and indirect negative relationship of conflict avoidance with traditional online political participation and online political expression. A state in the U.S. Midwest, where campaign battles were heated leading up to the election, serves as a proper context for the present research. We examine the demobilizing role of CA in online participation among young adults because these persons are known to use digital and social media more frequently than other age groups (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014; Smith, 2009, 2011). Empirical investigation along these lines is important and timely, given that research suggests that conflict, as manifested in both civil and uncivil discourse, is pervasive in online public affairs discussions (Coe et al., 2014; Papcharissi, 2004).

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Conflict Avoidance**

Interpersonal conflict refers to a disagreement or difference between two or more individuals (Putnam & Poole, 1987). Conflict occurs when a party perceives and/or actually experiences an "incompatibility of

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