

The Internet and Chinese Citizens' Political Participation: Practices and Challenges

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Abstract: *This article provides an analysis of the current circumstances and challenges associated with public political participation in China within the context of the Internet era. Continuous advancements in Internet technology have fundamentally transformed the methods of information dissemination, significantly impacting the political landscape of China. The Internet exhibits immense vitality and potential, providing citizens with more convenient channels and opportunities for political participation. However, it also introduces several issues. Unrestricted freedom of speech can jeopardize social stability, and the challenges of information overload, along with the dissemination of misinformation, affect the quality of information. Furthermore, information fragmentation and the emotionalization of political discourse have constrained the space for rational political discussion. Therefore, citizens should engage in politics rationally while adhering to China's legal and regulatory framework. At the same time, the government should enhance Internet governance to foster an orderly and well-regulated online ecosystem.*

Keywords: *Internet, Political participation, Practice, Reflection, Law*

1. Introduction

The expansion of the Internet and technological innovations have transformed political participation, particularly in China. As of December 2023, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.092 billion, with an Internet penetration rate of 77.5%. As a crucial platform for information transmission and public discussion, the Internet offers citizens new opportunities. Informational resources and tools provided by emerging technologies can amplify public influence in social and political arenas. The substantial increase in online political groups and the frequency of their activities clearly underscore the significant role of the Internet in the political sphere [1].

At present, the methods by which citizens engage in public affairs have significantly expanded, incorporating both traditional and contemporary elements. Traditional forms of political participation, including voting, elections, and protests, continue to enable the public to express their will. Meanwhile, the rise of e-government, the proliferation of vibrant online discussions, and the emergence of online mobilization have created new avenues for citizen participation in public affairs. These two forms of participation reinforce each other, thereby fostering a pluralistic network of citizen involvement in social and public issues.

The rapid growth of the Internet in China has created new opportunities for interaction between citizens and the government [2]. Citizens can more conveniently and directly express their opinions and participate in policymaking discussions through the government's official Weibo accounts and e-government platforms. This model of online interaction overcomes the previous one-way constraint of information dissemination, enhancing the frequency and depth of engagement between the government and the public [3]. Moreover, in cyberspace, all individuals enjoy equal status as independent political actors, without biases related to wealth, power, or social status. A significant number of Internet users remain unaffected by their real-world identities and circumstances [4]. Despite the Internet offering unprecedented opportunities for civic political participation, online political engagement still faces multiple complex challenges. This article will explore emerging challenges in contemporary society and examine the current state of citizen political participation in China in the Internet age, as well as its implications for the political landscape.

This article examines the current state of political engagement among Chinese citizens in the digital

era and its impact on the political landscape. This study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the dual-edged role of the Internet in enhancing civic political participation through an analysis of the aforementioned phenomena.

2. Political participation and its significance for Chinese citizens in the internet era

2.1 Definition of political participation

Political participation encompasses various activities through which citizens seek to influence public policy and governance [5]. Online political participation refers to a spectrum of actions undertaken by Internet users and virtual organizations to shape and promote political decision-making via digital platforms [6]. Citizen political involvement serves as a mechanism for exercising political rights, thereby reflecting the actual implementation of these rights in political life [7]. The goal of citizens' political engagement is to influence the actions of government officials or policy decisions [8]. With the evolution of the socio-economic landscape and the entrenchment of democratic ideals, citizens have raised their expectations regarding social governance and governmental political accountability [9]. In this situation, when citizens get involved in politics, it not only helps them understand political issues better but also encourages openness and responsibility in how the government makes and carries out policies, leading to better social governance and progress in democracy.

2.2 The significance of political participation

In modern democratic countries, citizen political participation has become an integral aspect of modern life. Its extent and scope directly reflect the maturity of a country's political system and its democratization process [5]. Without citizen participation in politics, a political system cannot be deemed truly democratic [10]. Recently, many government officials have recognized that utilizing online platforms to engage with the public on governance, societal needs, and policy recommendations is a crucial strategy for enhancing governance effectiveness amid evolving circumstances [2]. This approach exemplifies a new trend in the interplay between government transparency and public opinion.

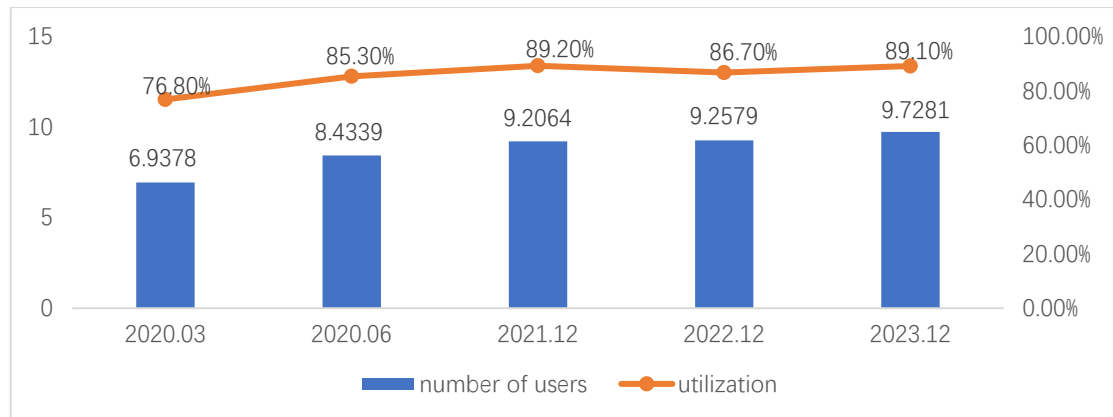
Extensive public engagement has laid a solid foundation of public opinion for government policymaking, significantly strengthening democratic legitimacy and public trust. Citizen participation ensures that government policies remain closely aligned with public needs, effectively meeting societal expectations and thereby enhancing policy implementation efficiency and relevance. Moreover, increased citizen participation has contributed to the continuous refinement of the government's administrative service system at multiple levels. On the one hand, it has significantly diversified government services, providing the public with a wider array of demand-driven options. On the other hand, citizen engagement has markedly enhanced governmental service capacity, enabling a more efficient response to public needs and the delivery of higher-quality services. This process has emerged as a crucial catalyst for improving governmental decision-making quality and accelerating the effective implementation of policies.

The development of socialist democratic politics in China closely links to citizen political participation. It is considered both the foundation and an integral component of modern democratic politics, playing a crucial role in the development of socialist democratic governance [6]. Furthermore, it serves as a key determinant of democratic political development and a fundamental prerequisite for the stable functioning of the modern political system [6].

3. How do Chinese citizens participate in politics on online platforms?

3.1 E-government platforms and policy feedback

As of December 2023, the number of users accessing online government services in China had reached 973 million, representing 89.1% of the country's total internet user base. China's online government services are expected to undergo continuous optimization and top-level improvements, thereby strengthening the structural foundation for the advancement of a high-quality digital government. Fig. 1 presents data on the scale and adoption rate of online government services from March 2020 to December 2023.



Source: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)

Fig.1: Number and Utilization Rate of Online Government Users from 2020.3 to 2023.12

E-government platforms and policy feedback mechanisms are instrumental in facilitating political participation among Chinese citizens. Online platforms streamline citizens' access to government policies and provide channels for expressing their opinions. The government's digital transformation has enhanced administrative efficiency and reinforced two-way communication mechanisms between the government and the public [11]. Today, citizens can efficiently utilize online platforms to stay informed about policy updates, actively engage in the policymaking consultation process, and monitor government actions.

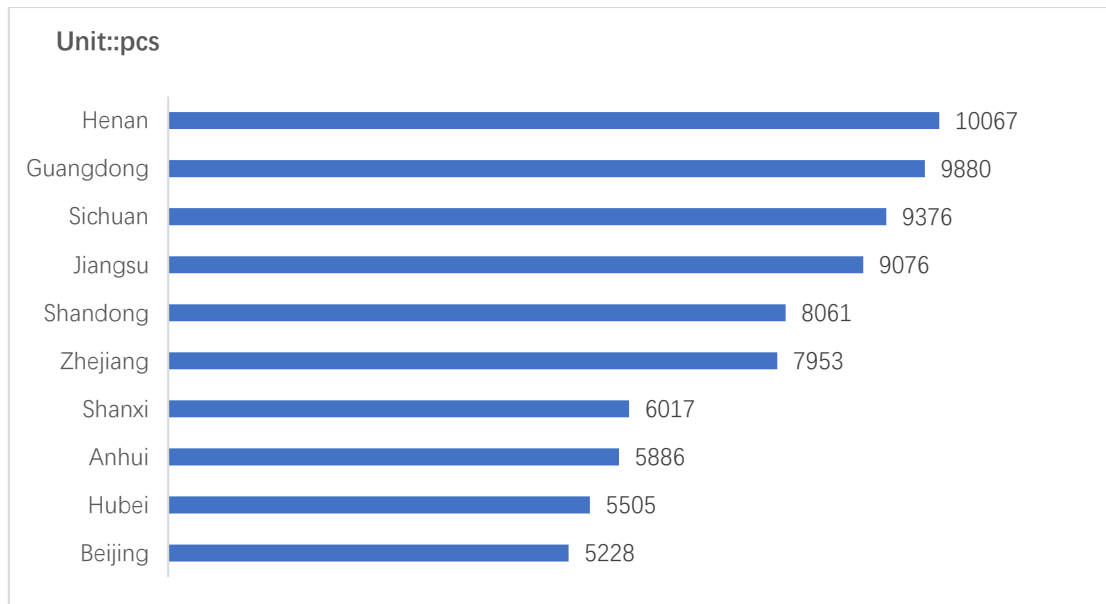
A major benefit of e-government platforms is their improved ways for people to give feedback, which solve the problems of old political participation methods that had limited ways to communicate and were often inefficient. These platforms enable citizens to directly submit proposals to government agencies, facilitating seamless and real-time information exchange.

3.2 Online public opinion expression

The expression of public opinion online has emerged as a widely recognized form of political participation among Chinese citizens. Online public opinion is formed through an aggregation effect, wherein netizens coalesce around specific topics or events via digital platforms by expressing personal views and emotional inclinations. This phenomenon is an inevitable outcome of the interweaving, fusion, and reinforcement of public ideas during the process of online information dissemination, reflecting the complex interactive mechanisms of online communities and the processes of collective cognitive construction [12]. Digital platforms, such as online forums and Weibo, have fostered an expansive environment for public debate, enabling citizens to engage in real-time communication and extensive exchange of political views [13]. This mechanism of online public opinion expression has lowered barriers to citizen political participation, effectively stimulating public enthusiasm for political engagement and fostering a model of participation that transcends geographical and temporal constraints.

As of December 2023, all 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in China had established official Weibo accounts on the Sina platform, with a total of 146,638 verified accounts. Fig.2 presents the distribution of government Weibo accounts across selected Chinese provinces.

With its distinct characteristics of timeliness and wide reach, online public opinion has empowered citizens to respond swiftly to government policies and pressing social issues. Through interactive features such as "liking," "commenting," and "sharing," individuals can effectively disseminate their views and opinions, facilitating the rapid circulation of information and the exchange of diverse perspectives. This trend has significantly enhanced the frequency and depth of communication between the government and the public while expediting the process by which social issues gain attention and spark widespread discussion. In instances where specific events or policies become highly contested, citizens leverage social media platforms to voice their opinions, rapidly coalescing into an online public discourse arena that exerts considerable pressure on the government to respond promptly and refine policy measures. This extensive digital political engagement and real-time interaction not only enhance the government's responsiveness to public sentiment but also accelerate the feedback loop in public decision-making, thereby advancing the democratization of national governance and fostering a more evidence-based approach to policymaking.



Source: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)

Fig.2: Number of Government Weibo Accounts in Some Chinese Provinces

By strengthening its capacity to analyze public opinion, the government can more effectively monitor shifts in public sentiment and evolving societal demands, thereby adjusting its policy framework and strategic direction accordingly. This approach not only enhances the adaptability and transparency of policymaking but also fosters greater public trust in the policy system, ultimately contributing to the optimization and efficiency of governance. As the internet continues to evolve and the number of users expands, the proliferation of online events has given rise to recurrent surges in public discourse, further highlighting the growing significance of online public opinion in political participation [12].

3.3 Online supervision and reporting

The establishment of online supervision and reporting mechanisms has played a crucial role in enhancing government transparency. As an efficient medium for information dissemination, the internet has empowered citizens to monitor governmental activities and publicly report instances of misconduct. Through digital platforms, citizens can actively engage in state and societal affairs, thereby exercising their right to supervision [14]. Online reporting mechanisms enable the public to expose corruption and administrative negligence, strengthening governmental accountability and fostering greater transparency. Moreover, the increased scrutiny of public officials underscores the close integration of "digital governance" and "online democratic oversight," which has contributed to the advancement of China's contemporary governance system.

The implementation of the online reporting system has enabled citizens to directly report unlawful activities through government websites. This mechanism has compelled government agencies to adopt a more proactive approach in addressing public concerns and responding to policy suggestions. Undoubtedly, in today's diverse opinion landscape, online participation plays an increasingly crucial role, continuously solidifying its significance in political engagement [9].

3.4 Online opinion solicitation

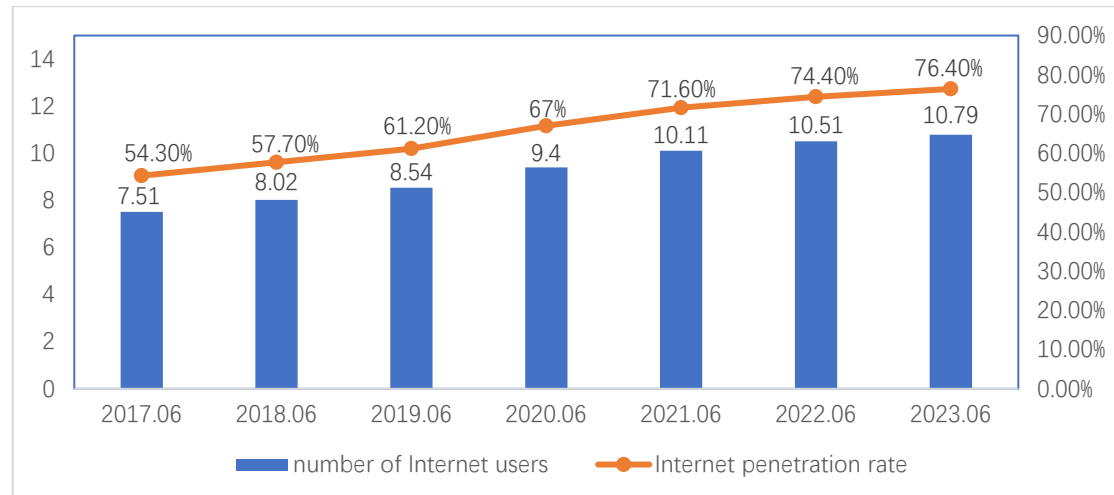
Large-scale online public opinion collection initiatives have enabled citizens to participate directly in governance at both national and local levels. In the process of policy formulation and decision-making, the Chinese government has actively adapted to the transformations brought about by the internet, soliciting feedback from the public. As a result, the role of citizens has shifted from passive observers to active participants.

The online public opinion collection mechanism not only broadens the scope of public participation in policymaking but also enhances the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of policies. By transcending regional and institutional boundaries, the government can efficiently gather input from stakeholders, thereby gaining deeper insights into the needs of diverse social groups and their genuine perspectives on

policies. Through the systematic analysis and integration of these varied viewpoints, the government can more accurately identify the root causes of social issues and formulate policies that more effectively address public demands.

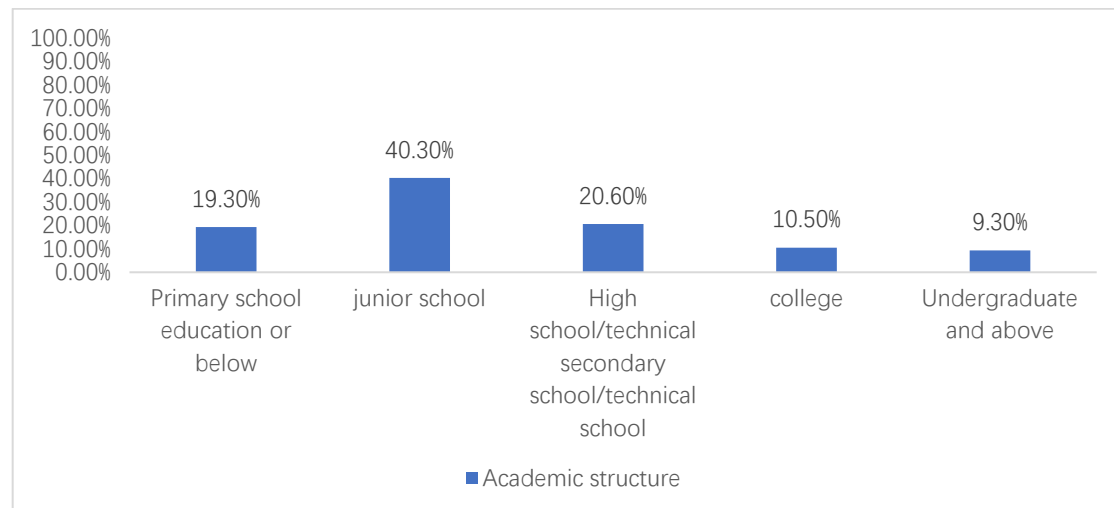
4. Challenges in Chinese citizens' online political participation

To fully comprehend this section, it is essential to first evaluate and analyze the data presented in fig.3 and 4. Fig.3 illustrates the trends in the number of internet users in China (i.e., the scale of internet users) from June 2017 to June 2023, alongside the corresponding internet penetration rate. Fig. 4 primarily examines the distribution of educational attainment among internet users, detailing the proportion of individuals with different educational backgrounds.



Source: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)

Fig.3: Number of Internet Users and Internet Penetration Rate in China from June 2017 to June 2023



Source: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) 2020.12

Fig.4: Educational Background of Internet Users

Fig.3 demonstrates a steady increase in the number of Chinese internet users over this period. Simultaneously, the rising internet penetration rate reflects the widespread adoption and deep integration of information technology across all social strata, as well as the acceleration of digitalization. Analyzing the data in fig.4, as of December 2020, reveals that individuals with a junior high school education constitute the largest segment of the online population, accounting for over 40%. In contrast, the proportion of internet users with a college degree or higher remains relatively low, highlighting potential disparities in internet proficiency, information acquisition efficiency, and digital literacy across different educational backgrounds.

From a favorable perspective, the analysis of the aforementioned data suggests that online platforms

provide accessible channels for citizens to express political demands and participate in public affairs, thereby enhancing their democratic awareness and capacity for political oversight to some extent. However, as internet penetration continues to rise and the number of users expands, certain negative consequences have become increasingly apparent. Citizens are often influenced by emotionally charged and radical viewpoints, leading to the dissemination of unverified information and harmful rhetoric in the public sphere. Such behavior undermines the objectivity and fairness of discussions, exacerbates societal polarization, and poses challenges to effective governance and social stability.

Notably, the proportion of internet users with lower educational attainment remains relatively high. This demographic tends to exhibit lower levels of digital literacy, weaker awareness of information security, and limited ability to critically assess information. Consequently, they are more susceptible to misinformation, including rumors, thereby contributing to the amplification of negative information and the formation of misinformation dissemination chains. This phenomenon complicates social governance and presents obstacles to cultivating a healthy and orderly online political environment.

4.1 Unrestricted freedom of expression

The right to free expression is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution, ensuring that all citizens have the political freedom to articulate their opinions, thoughts, and beliefs [15]. From a political science perspective, freedom of expression on the internet represents a natural extension and expansion of classical concepts of free speech in cyberspace. However, it is essential to recognize that the exercise of free speech is not "without boundaries"; rather, it is subject to legal regulations and ethical considerations. Citizens must exercise this right with due caution, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as national security, public order, and social development.

Different nations adopt varying regulatory approaches to online speech. Some countries endorse a model of absolute protection, prioritizing individual rights and freedoms and allowing citizens to fully exercise free speech in the digital realm [15]. However, China's political framework does not permit unrestricted online expression. The country's current legal and regulatory model for the internet is government-driven, with internet and media censorship aimed at preserving social stability and preventing the dissemination of misinformation and harmful content. Within this framework, achieving "borderless" freedom of expression is challenging, particularly in areas concerning national security, religion, and core national interests. Consequently, freedom of expression must be accompanied by responsibility. This implies that citizens should adhere to legal and regulatory frameworks, respect the legitimate rights and interests of others, and contribute to maintaining public order and social stability while exercising this right.

The internet is not beyond the reach of legal regulations. While globalization has facilitated the unrestricted flow of information, regulatory approaches vary across nations due to historical, cultural, political, and social differences. Unlike the free speech policies prevalent in Western countries, the Chinese government must balance national security, social stability, and individual rights. Therefore, ensuring freedom of expression in China requires a carefully structured framework that harmonizes these three elements.

4.2 Information overload and the dissemination of misinformation

In the digital age, Chinese citizens' political participation faces two major challenges: information overload and misinformation. While the internet and social media have facilitated information access and dissemination, they have also contributed to the proliferation of excessive and misleading information, potentially distorting public opinion. These challenges not only test citizens' political literacy and critical judgment but also place new demands on the government's ability to effectively guide and regulate online political discourse.

4.2.1 Information overload

Information overload occurs when individuals are inundated with excessive information, making it difficult to filter, process, and comprehend essential content. In the digital environment, information redundancy not only intensifies cognitive burden but also complicates the process of verifying authenticity and making informed value judgments.

The impact of information overload on civic political participation is primarily manifested in cognitive overload and a diminished sense of participatory efficacy. First, individuals often experience distraction during the information screening process, leading to unstable opinions. Second, the challenge

of accessing systematic and comprehensive information in a complex digital environment makes citizens more susceptible to emotional and biased content during decision-making, thereby undermining rational and in-depth political analysis.

4.2.2 The dissemination of misinformation

In the era of big data, the openness of the internet facilitates the flow of information while simultaneously fostering the spread of misinformation [16]. Driven by emotions, the public is highly susceptible to misinformation, leading to the widespread dissemination of unverified content. This phenomenon results in information distortion, weakens public identification with mainstream ideology, interferes with citizens' political judgment, and may even trigger a crisis of trust in both the government and society [17].

Addressing the challenges of information overload and misinformation requires the joint efforts of both citizens and the government. Citizens must cultivate critical thinking skills and rely on credible information sources to mitigate the effects of information overload and enhance their ability to process information efficiently. Meanwhile, the government should strengthen information regulation, refine review mechanisms, and ensure the maintenance of a well-regulated and orderly cyberspace. Only through the synergy of these two forces can a dual-driven mechanism be established in the digital era, fostering rational civic participation and enhancing the effectiveness of governmental decision-making.

4.3 Fragmentation of information and citizens' emotional expression

4.3.1 Manifestations and impacts of information fragmentation

Information fragmentation refers to the increasing diversity of available information, which is often presented in a disorganized and fragmented manner, lacking structure and depth. This phenomenon disrupts the intrinsic logical coherence of content, impeding the formation of a comprehensive and interconnected information chain. The complexity of political issues, compounded by the proliferation of disjointed information, limits citizens' ability to engage in in-depth analysis and systematic thinking. Consequently, this leads to a superficial understanding of political events and hinders their capacity to discern the fundamental and underlying causes of these issues.

4.3.2 Emotional expression

Closely related to the phenomenon of information fragmentation is the increasing emotionalization of citizens' political participation. Emotions play a significant role in shaping public behavior on social media, often manifesting in immediate emotional reactions to political events and the widespread dissemination of emotionally charged statements through processes of emotional resonance [18]. While emotional expression can capture public attention and stimulate engagement, it also carries the risk of exacerbating irrational polarization in political discussions, hindering fact-based and rational communication among citizens.

Moreover, heightened emotional expression can contribute to the prevalence of cyberbullying. The online environment functions as a virtual public square, where collective emotions can rapidly escalate, leading to what can be described as a "crowd effect." In such scenarios, if misinformation and emotional contagion spread unchecked, a dominant emotional consensus may emerge. This numerical majority often fosters a sense of moral superiority, potentially resulting in targeted cyberbullying against dissenting voices [9]. Cyberbullying manifests in various forms, including verbal abuse, defamation, and doxxing, all of which can have serious repercussions for individuals and, in extreme cases, threaten social stability [19].

4.3.3 The combined effect of information fragmentation and emotional expression

The interplay between information fragmentation and emotional expression has the potential to significantly impact the quality of citizens' political engagement. When public understanding of political matters is frequently limited to emotionally charged fragments, emotional factors may become the primary drivers of political discourse. This phenomenon not only exacerbates online opinion polarization but also risks oversimplifying complex social issues, thereby neglecting their structural intricacies and deeper underlying causes.

Information fragmentation and emotional expression exert a dual influence on civic political participation. On the one hand, emotional expression serves as a mechanism for mobilizing public sentiment on issues of national interest, effectively stimulating political engagement, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering collective support for political processes. On the other hand, the adverse

consequences of this phenomenon cannot be overlooked. A fragmented information environment fosters selective bias and cognitive distortions in public perception, deepening social divisions and exacerbating political conflicts [20].

5. Conclusion

Network governance and network politics have emerged as undeniable trends in contemporary society [2]. This shift signifies a transformation in the ways the public engages in politics in the digital era, as cyberspace increasingly serves as a crucial arena for social governance and political interaction. This evolution enhances the diversification of democratic oversight and public policy deliberations. Citizens' political participation is not only a fundamental means of expressing their interests and exercising political rights but also a key indicator of a country's level of modernization and democratic progress [21].

The internet has disrupted the monopoly of traditional media and state-controlled information dissemination. Citizens can now utilize social media, news platforms, and other digital channels to access and exchange information, thereby enhancing the timeliness, autonomy, and breadth of information flows. The advancement of internet technology has facilitated a transition from offline to online political participation. To some extent, this shift has promoted the free flow of information and heightened citizens' political awareness. However, it has also introduced new challenges, including the unregulated exercise of free expression, information overload, the proliferation of misinformation, the fragmentation of information, and the increasing influence of emotional discourse. The diversification and complexity of online political participation channels may, in turn, elevate the risks of disorder and unlawful activities in cyberspace governance [22].

The current state of Chinese citizens' political participation necessitates a holistic consideration of the interplay between technological advancements and societal realities. Information technology shapes cyberspace, a novel socio-political and economic sphere that inherently links to governance and regulatory enforcement. A limitation of this study is its lack of exploration of specific strategies for optimizing citizens' online political participation and enhancing governmental regulatory effectiveness in cyberspace governance. Future research should further examine pathways for constructing a normative framework for online political behavior, improving citizens' digital literacy, and strengthening governmental technological capabilities and legal mechanisms for internet governance. These efforts are essential for collectively fostering a well-regulated and interactive online political participation ecosystem.

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