

RESEARCH NOTE

YouTube Usage, Polarization, and Foreign Policy Preferences

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Keywords: YouTube, party identification, polarization, echo chamber, foreign policy

<https://doi.org/10.58570/ZYQR9839>

Taiwan Politics

Social media enables individuals' greater control over the information content they receive but also leads to more severe echo chambers if partisan supporters seek information favoring their own party while filtering out what they dislike. Through a phone survey (combined landline and mobile) with a total sample size of 2,263, conducted from February 13 to 20, 2023, we aimed to investigate whether partisan YouTube news viewers are more polarized than non-users in their foreign policy preferences. The findings revealed that viewers of news on YouTube among pan-green supporters significantly favored the United States while exhibiting more dislike toward China than non-users. On the other hand, YouTube news video viewers among pan-blue supporters favored China significantly more than non-viewers.

Compared to previous research that measured the "average effect" of YouTube usage on all respondents, this study indicated a "heterogeneous effect" of YouTube news usage, which intensifies the views of party supporters regarding their party's foreign policy stances.

Introduction

For the general public, preferences regarding foreign policy tend to be intricate due to the inability to directly engage with diplomatic envoys and the often-existing disparity between national interests and individual interests. Previous research suggests that the formation of preferences in foreign policy is derived from two major sources. First, political party identification plays a significant role. Political elites mobilize partisans to endorse specific foreign policies. Furthermore, information reception and interpretation by the public are often influenced by partisan lenses (Taber and Lodge 2016; Satherley, Osborne, and Sibley 2023). The second source comes from the mass media. Previous studies in America have indicated that while soft news in mass media can increase public interest in foreign affairs, it may also lead to greater support for extreme options, such as war (Baum 2002).

However, with the rise of social media, individuals have gained greater control over the information content they receive. In comparison to traditional media, such as television, newspapers, and radio, people using social media are more inclined to receive information that aligns with their preferences while filtering out content they dislike. In this scenario, if individuals spend more time obtaining political information through social media platforms, their preferences regarding foreign policy may become increasingly polarized.

To investigate whether political information obtained on social media contributes to polarization in foreign policy preferences, this study focused on Taiwanese YouTube users, aiming to explore the relationship between YouTube news usage and the attitudes of Taiwanese citizens towards the

United States and China. Taiwan serves as a compelling case for several reasons. Firstly, YouTube has emerged as a significant information source for the Taiwanese, with over 70% of citizens utilizing the platform by 2023, averaging nearly 2 hours of daily usage, and 22.6% of users frequently watching the news and reports concerning current affairs on it (Hsu and Lin 2023).

Additionally, past studies have indicated a growing trend of political polarization in Taiwan, post-2006 (Wang 2019). Consequently, supporters of different political parties may be filtering information based on their party identification, a tendency that might also manifest in their use of YouTube.

Thirdly, Taiwan has been considered one of the most dangerous places on Earth in recent years (*The Economist* 2021). Amidst the competition between the United States and China, Taiwanese public attitudes toward these two nations are crucial for stability in the Taiwan Strait. If Taiwanese sentiments toward the United States and China become increasingly polarized, it could imply greater difficulty in achieving consensus among political parties on this issue in the future.

Literature Review

Compared to traditional media, the supply-demand relationship between creators and viewers on YouTube is more pronounced (Munger and Phillips 2022). YouTube creators generate content that appeals to their audience's preferences, with audience response measured by click rates and increased interaction. Therefore, unlike traditional media accountable to advertisers, if partisans on YouTube tend to seek information favoring their political parties (including their parties' foreign policies), content creators are more likely to cater to their audience and exhibit political bias, leading to increased polarization among partisans using YouTube.

In previous research on YouTube and Taiwanese politics, while there have been studies on the average impact of YouTube on political participation (Hong 2016) as well as studies on its usage rates (Wang 2021; Hsu and Lin 2023), there remains a gap in exploring the relationship between YouTube and political polarization or policy preferences.

Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) found that public opinion in a country does affect the country's foreign policy, and there is a positive correlation between citizens' favorability toward U.S. foreign policy and whether the country sent troops to support the U.S. war in Iraq. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, citizens' attitudes toward foreign policy are associated with their party identification. Given this perspective, we think that in terms of overall foreign policy preferences, supporters of different parties will reflect their preferences for government foreign policy through their favorability toward a foreign country.

Since 2016, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government, facing an increasingly tense strategic environment in U.S.-China relations, has encountered stronger threats from China. In response, the government has chosen to strengthen its relationship with the United States in its foreign policy (Drun 2022). Therefore, it can be anticipated that the pan-green camp, which mainly consists of DPP supporters, due to such foreign policy, will show a greater preference for the United States than will other political camps.

To the contrary, the Kuomintang (KMT), while attempting to maintain ties with the United States, simultaneously adheres to engaging in communication with Beijing based on the so-called “1992 Consensus.” Some hardline nationalist KMT members even regard a leaning toward the U.S. as incompatible with unification with China, viewing it as an imitation of the DPP (McCartney 2022). Therefore, it can be expected that the pan-blue camp, which mainly consists of KMT supporters, in comparison to its opponent, the pan-green camp, will exhibit a greater affinity for China.

Based on the above reasoning, we hypothesize that supporters from both major political camps in Taiwan, pan-green and pan-blue, tend to seek content aligning with their preferences while watching news on YouTube. Thus, compared to non-users, these partisan users may exhibit more polarization in their attitudes toward the United States and China. Pan-green supporters who watch news on YouTube may express stronger support for the United States than pan-green non-users do. On the other hand, pan-blue supporters who watch news on YouTube may exhibit increased support for China compared to pan-blue non-users.

Data Collection, Measurements, and Methods

The Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG) conducted the phone survey on the population of Taiwanese aged 20 and above by random sampling from February 13 to 20, 2023. To achieve a better coverage rate, the survey employed both landline and mobile phone surveys simultaneously and merged the two groups of survey data after the surveys were completed. To align the sample with the demographics of the population, we applied a raking weighting method to these variables based on the population. The total number of samples after weighting is 2263 and the distribution of demographics matched that of the population ([Table 1](#)).

As mentioned in the previous section, the preferences regarding foreign policy should be reflected in favorability toward a country. As a result, we used feelings towards the United States and China as the dependent variables in this study. These were measured by a feeling thermometer, and respondents were queried by asking, “*On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 represents strongly dislike and 10 represents strongly like, how would you rate the United States (China)?*”.

Table 1. Demographics

	n	Pop. %		Weighted n	
Sex					
Male	1168 (51.6%)	49%	$\chi^2 = 6.14$ $p < 0.05$	1085 (47.9%)	$\chi^2 = 1.03$ $p > 0.05$
Female	1095 (48.4%)	51%		1178 (52.1%)	
Age					
20-29	298 (13.2%)	15.5%	$\chi^2 = 24.7$ $p < 0.001$	333 (14.7%)	$\chi^2 = 6.28$ $p > 0.05$
30-39	382 (16.9%)	17.3%		371 (16.4%)	
40-49	473 (20.9%)	19.6%		421 (18.6%)	
50-59	437 (19.3%)	18.5%		397 (17.5%)	
60 and up	562 (24.8%)	29%		622 (27.5%)	
Non-response	111 (4.9%)			119 (5.3%)	
Edu					
Elementary or None	118 (5.2%)	12.6%	$\chi^2 = 432.6$ $p < 0.001$	260 (11.5%)	$\chi^2 = 5.1$ $p > 0.05$
Middle School	157 (6.9%)	14.2%		299 (13.2%)	
Senior High	550 (24.3%)	30.6%		686 (30.3%)	
College	1158 (51.2%)	35.8%		833 (36.8%)	
Master and up	260 (11.5%)	6.8%		165 (7.3%)	
Non-response	20 (0.9%)			20 (0.9%)	
Area					
North	1022 (45.2%)	45.6%	$\chi^2 = 9.11$ $p < 0.05$	1021 (45.1%)	$\chi^2 = 0.64$ $p > 0.05$
Middle	524 (23.2%)	24.6%		549 (24.2%)	
South	647 (28.6%)	27.5%		607 (26.8%)	
East	35 (1.5%)	2.3%		51 (2.3%)	
Non-response	35 (1.5%)			36 (1.6%)	

Population data source: Population statistics (December 2022) from the Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan.

Regarding the independent variables, the first one was YouTube news usage. The survey queried respondents with a question: “How many days a week do you use YouTube on average?”. Those who didn’t answer zero or “Do not use” were labeled as YouTube users. Then it further queried these YouTube users with a multiple-choice question: “*What types of videos do you usually watch on YouTube?*”. Those who indicated “News and Current Affairs” were coded as 1, while others were coded as 0. Hence, this variable is a binary categorical variable.

The second independent variable was party identification. The respondents were queried, “*Among the political parties such as the Democratic Progressive Party, Kuomintang, Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), and New Power Party, which party do you feel closest to?*” If the respondent was unable to answer a specific party, they were further queried as to whether they leaned towards “Pan-blue” or “Pan-green.” If the respondent still could not provide a clear response, they were classified as “None.” For the subsequent analysis in this paper, party identification was recoded as follows: “Pan-green” (including DPP, New Power Party, and pan-green), “Pan-blue” (including KMT and pan-blue), or “Neutral” (including those with no specific party identification or who answered “TPP,” “don’t know,” or “decline to answer”).

Table 2. YouTube usage rates and percentage who watch news on YouTube, by political camp

Party identification	YouTube users %	Watch news on YouTube %	n%
Pan-green	72.4%	29.1%	20.7%
Pan-blue	75.8%	25.7%	18.6%
Neutral	68.4%	19.3%	60.7%
All	70.6%	22.6%	100%

The results exclude non-responses, such as “don’t know” or “decline to answer.”

As [Table 2](#) shows, 70.6% of respondents were YouTube users. There were differences in the proportion of those who watched news on YouTube among different political parties. Overall, YouTube users with party affiliations had a higher percentage who watched news on this platform, with proportions exceeding 25%. In contrast, a smaller fraction of neutral respondents consumed YouTube news, at 19%.

In addition to the independent variables, we included gender, age, and education level as control variables to elucidate YouTube news usage and party identification’s impact on feelings towards the United States and China. As the dependent variable ranges from 0 to 10, we conducted the analysis using a 2 Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Model1 : } FT_US = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times YT_news + \beta_2 Pan_green + \beta_3 Pan_blue \\ & + \beta_4 YT_news \times Pan_green + \beta_5 YT_news \times Pan_blue \\ & + \beta_6 ControlVar + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Model2 : } FT_CN = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times YT_news + \beta_2 Pan_green + \beta_3 Pan_blue \\ & + \beta_4 YT_news \times Pan_green + \beta_5 YT_news \times Pan_blue \\ & + \beta_6 ControlVar + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

FT_USA and *FT_CN* mean feelings toward the United States and China, respectively, *YT_news* means watch news on YouTube, and ε is the error term. Party identification (Pan_green, Pan_blue) uses Neutral as the baseline group.

Results

First, we used descriptive statistics to observe the difference between YouTube news users and non-users among each party with regard to their feelings towards the United States and China. As shown in [Table 3](#), in terms of feelings towards the United States, news viewers among pan-green supporters on YouTube exhibited a mean rating of 7.2, higher than that of those who did not watch news on the platform (6.5). Meanwhile, regarding feelings towards China, as [Table 4](#) shows, YouTube news viewers among pan-blue supporters exhibited a relatively higher mean score (5.4) compared to that of other pan-blue supporters (4.7). From the results of the independent samples t-test, the differences in these mean scores have statistical significance. The assumptions of this study have preliminary validation.

Table 3. Party identification, YouTube news video consumption, and mean of feelings towards the United States

Watch news on YouTube	n	Mean	Std Dev	t-test
Pan-Green				
Watch Frequently	95	7.2	1.59	t-statistic= 3.85 p < 0.001 df = 342
Don't Watch	249	6.5	1.54	
Pan-Blue				
Watch	81	4.5	2.52	t-statistic= -1.62 p > 0.05 df = 306
Don't Watch	227	5.0	2.47	
Neutral				
Watch	159	5.4	2.19	t-statistic= -1.60 p > 0.05 df = 889
Don't Watch	732	5.7	1.92	

The results exclude non-responses, such as “don’t know” or “decline to answer.”

Table 4. Party identification, YouTube news video consumption, and mean of feelings towards China

Watch news on YouTube	n	Mean	Std Dev	t-test
Pan-Green				
Watch	94	2.6	2.56	t-statistic= 0.21 p > 0.05 df = 342
Don't Watch	250	2.5	1.96	
Pan-Blue				
Watch	82	5.4	2.10	t-statistic= 2.30 p < 0.05 df = 309
Don't Watch	229	4.7	2.36	
Neutral				
Watch	165	3.7	2.16	t-statistic= -0.47 p > 0.05 df = 909
Don't Watch	746	3.8	2.11	

The results exclude non-responses, such as “don’t know” or “decline to answer.”

The results of regression model analysis are shown in [Table 5](#). Firstly, in terms of the main effects, YouTube news users had lower scores in their feelings towards the United States by 0.41, but that variable did not significantly impact feelings towards China. Compared to Neutral supporters, Pan-green supporters expressed a higher level of support for the United States by approximately 0.9 points, while their scores for China were lower by around 1.4 points. Pan-blue supporters exhibited the opposite trend. Their scores for their feelings towards the United States were approximately 0.7 points lower than those of Neutral supporters, while their scores for China were higher by around 1.1 points.

Next, under the interaction of YouTube news usage and party identification, pan-green supporters who watched news on YouTube had increased feelings towards the United States by approximately 1.2 points, while their scores for China were decreased by about 0.6 points. On the other hand, YouTube news usage did not significantly impact feelings towards the United States among pan-blue supporters. However, in terms of feelings towards China, pan-blue supporters who watched news on YouTube increased by about 0.6 points towards China.

Table 5. YouTube news usage and party identification in relation to feelings toward the United States and China

	Model 1 (DV = FT US)		Model 2 (DV = FT CN)	
	$\hat{\beta}$	(s.e.)	$\hat{\beta}$	(s.e.)
YT news (non-users=0)	-0.410*	0.180	-0.040	0.189
Party identification (Neutral=0)				
Pan-green	0.893***	0.145	-1.357***	0.154
Pan-blue	-0.692***	0.152	1.069***	0.162
Interaction				
YT news × Pan-green	1.226***	0.295	-0.595+	0.312
YT news × Pan-blue	0.421	0.301	0.585+	0.317
SEX (female=0)	0.028	0.102	-0.112	0.108
AGE	-0.265***	0.04	-0.130	0.043
EDU	-0.076	0.069	-0.036	0.073
Intercept	6.676***	0.321	4.373***	0.339
n	1508		1509	
R ²	0.135		0.171	
Adj. R ²	0.13		0.167	
F	29.25***		38.71***	
df	(8,1499)		(8,1500)	

+: $p < .1$; *: $p < .05$; **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$

In summary, the hypothesis in this study was validated. Supporters of the pan-blue and pan-green camps' attitudes towards the United States and China not only related to their party affiliations but also, among users of YouTube for news, the partisan supporters tended to exhibit stronger preferences for either the United States or China compared to non-users. Among pan-green supporters, those who viewed YouTube news videos liked the United States and disliked China more, and the pan-blue supporters showed a stronger preference for China if they consumed YouTube news videos.

Conclusion

In this article, we presented evidence that partisan YouTube news users are more polarized than non-users in their attitudes toward foreign policy. The findings of this study could partially elucidate the heightened level of political polarization among Taiwanese citizens. Compared to previous studies that measured the “average effect” of YouTube usage on all respondents, our study indicated a somewhat balanced but heterogeneous effect of YouTube news usage that depended on political camp, indicating that YouTube news usage may intensify the views of party supporters regarding their party's foreign policy stances.

We think that the phenomenon in Taiwan is not an exception but rather a more prevalent political inclination following the rise of social media. These platforms empower individuals with the ability to select information, yet they

also contribute to exacerbated echo chambers, leading supporters from different political factions to become more resistant to compromise and more averse to engaging with opponents.

Certainly, there are several limitations in this study, and we offer some perspectives on these as suggestions for future research. Firstly, due to the use of phone surveys, we were unable to inquire about the content of news that respondents consumed on YouTube. The type of news content these partisans consume needs to be checked by other survey methods.

Secondly, as this study relied on cross-sectional survey data, causal relationships among party identification, media usage, and policy preferences cannot be determined. The possibility that individuals with more extreme party affiliations are more inclined to watch news on YouTube cannot be ruled out. Further tracing of the feeling thermometer of those partisans to identify a causal relationship between YouTube consumption and changes in thermometer would be necessary.

Thirdly, additional variables need to be controlled to clarify the relationship between YouTube usage and polarization, such as the amount of time spent consuming information through other channels, like TV or radio.

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Submitted: December 21, 2023 CDT, Accepted: February 06, 2024 CDT



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