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POLITICAL SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN JAPAN

by

Tiffany A. K. Swope

December 2021

Thesis Advisor: Robert J. Weiner
Second Reader: Tristan J. Mabry

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Social media has become a powerful platform for political communication across the world. However, despite high internet and social media penetration rates in Japan, research has shown political social media use to be significantly lower in Japan when compared to other Asian states with similar social, political, and cultural characteristics. This thesis seeks to understand why political social media use in Japan has remained low by using a comparative approach to examine polarization levels, conventional media environments, and government systems across Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. It concludes that Japan's low political social media use arises from a combination of its low levels of political polarization, the strength of the conventional media, and its stable government structure, institutions, and norms.

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POLITICAL SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN JAPAN

Tiffany A. K. Swope
Major, United States Air Force
BA, University of San Diego, 2009
MA, American Military University, 2016

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December 2021**

Approved by: Robert J. Weiner
Advisor

Tristan J. Mabry
Second Reader

Afshon P. Ostovar
Associate Chair for Research
Department of National Security Affairs

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Social media has become a powerful platform for political communication across the world. However, despite high internet and social media penetration rates in Japan, research has shown political social media use to be significantly lower in Japan when compared to other Asian states with similar social, political, and cultural characteristics. This thesis seeks to understand why political social media use in Japan has remained low by using a comparative approach to examine polarization levels, conventional media environments, and government systems across Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. It concludes that Japan's low political social media use arises from a combination of its low levels of political polarization, the strength of the conventional media, and its stable government structure, institutions, and norms.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Social media plays an important political role in many countries. Because of its ability to reach a large majority of the population with internet access, its accessibility across various literacy levels, and its user-friendly and cost-free nature, social media can increase democratic participation and ultimately influence government decisions. However, this effect is not consistently prevalent across all democracies. In Japan, social media use is widespread and accessible to most of the population, leading us to expect similar levels of *political* social media use to those of Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.[1] Despite high internet and social media penetration rates in Japan, however, research has shown social media political participation among voters and politicians to be significantly lower in Japan compared to other Asian states with similar social, political, and cultural characteristics.[2] Furthermore, the lack of published information citing similar levels of political engagement via social media in Japan highlights a gap in Japan-focused research on this topic. Therefore, this research will aim to investigate why Japanese voters and politicians do not typically use social media to obtain political information or engage in online political discussions and social movements.

Although this thesis will focus on political social media *use*, not the related and important question of social media's *impact* on politics, its explanations for low levels of political social media use should, in effect, also provide much of the explanation for social media's low impact on politics in Japan.

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[1] Michael Chan, Hsuan-Ting Chen, and Francis L.F. Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24, no. 2 (2019): 129.

[2] Toshio Takeshita, Shinichi Saito, and Tetsuro Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan," in *Social Media, Culture, and Politics in Asia* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014); Yan Su and Xizhu Xiao, "Interacting Effects of Political Social Media Use, Political Discussion and Political Trust on Civic Engagement: Extending the Differential Gains Model," *The International Communication Gazette*, 2021, 1–21; Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch, "Comparing Political Communication: A 2020 Update," in *Political Communication*, Fifth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 336–58.

A.   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Understanding what factors make Japan unusual with respect to political social media use can enhance our grasp of how the Japanese democratic system works and prepare us for future changes in political communication. Social media has the power to control information and shape political narratives and ideas, which sometimes lead to changes in voter behavior and actions by the government.[3] This influence has major implications for how governments and citizens use social media in domestic politics. Accordingly, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have changed the political landscape in countries across Asia. Political actors in these countries, including everyday citizens, are turning to social media as a convenient platform for information dissemination, political engagement, amassing popularity, organizing social movements, and expressing discontent toward the government. Citizens in Thailand, South Korea, and Singapore have used social media to gain political information, become politically active, and organize civic engagement groups calling for reform.[4] Similarly, in the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia, politicians have used social media to launch political campaigns attacking opposition parties and government critics, contributing to polarization in the electorate.[5]

Studying the low use of social media in Japanese domestic politics can thus help explain the contemporary social, political, and cultural environment in which the Japanese government and electorate communicate and make decisions. In particular, it can help explain whether smaller opposition parties can challenge the domestic political-party hegemon, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In 1996, Japanese opposition parties began calling for campaign reforms that loosened restrictions on political internet usage and thereby allowed them to be more competitive

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[3] Karine Nahon, "Where There Is Social Media There Is Politics," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (Routledge, 2016), 40.

[4] Linda Hasunuma and Ki-young Shin, "#MeToo in Japan and South Korea: #WeToo, #WithYou," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 40, no. 1 (2019): 97–111; Chu Yun-han et al., *Forum on the IPS Post-Election Survey on GE2020*, 2020, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/news-events/events/details/forum-on-the-ips-post-election-survey-on-ge2020; Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies*, February 28, 2021.

[5] CNA Insider, *How To Manipulate Politics In Malaysia, Indonesia & The Philippines With Social Media | CNA Insider*, Video, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs_w58v8Nis; Aldila Irsyad, *The Role of Social Media Companies in Shaping Political Discourse in Indonesia* (Canberra, Australia: New Mandala, 2019), https://www.newmandala.org/the-role-of-social-media/.

against the LDP, which has monopolized control of domestic politics for decades.[6] Once the laws were loosened in 2013, however, voter turnout in the subsequent Upper House election still registered a record low level of 52.61%.[7] Although further analysis is required to determine how much social media was used for political purposes, the 2013 election turnout and subsequent low election turnout in the years following suggests that internet and social media did not play a noticeable role in increasing Japanese political participation. We continue to see similar trends in low political social media use in Japan, suggesting there are unique underlying conditions that explain why social media has been unable to penetrate Japanese domestic politics.

B.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Political engagement can take many forms, including campaign contributions, whether one votes and whom they vote for, engaging in online and offline political discussions and debates, volunteering for campaigns, circulating petitions, and attending rallies or demonstrations to express political views. The ways in which voters turn to social media for information and political action can differ by state, issue, and voter motivations. There are limitations on measuring the entire spectrum of political engagement, particularly when attempting to study offline behavior. Therefore, this thesis will define political engagement as using social media to search for political information and engage in discussions that sometimes lead to demonstrations with like-minded people or attempts to change others' political views.

Although all Asian states vary in wealth, democratic strength, literacy rates, and internet availability, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan have striking similarities within the aforementioned categories when compared to Japan. Yet despite these similarities across the four states, there are variations in the amount of political participation seen on social media.

Aside from being a wealthy country with a highly educated and literate population, Singapore resembles Japan in that it holds parliamentary elections and has a de facto single-party government. Although it is less democratic because of its restriction of pluralism and limits on

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[6] Leslie M. Tkach-Kawasaki, "Politics @ Japan; Party Competition on the Internet in Japan," *Party Politics* 9, no. 1 (2003): 112.

[7] Tetsuro Kobayashi, "Is the Power of Online Campaigning in Japanese Electoral Politics a Myth? A Causal Inference Analysis of the 2013 Upper House Election," in *Internet Election Campaigns in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 136.

freedom of expression and assembly, it is consistent with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in terms of economic and human development. Singapore's 2011 watershed election demonstrates how opposition parties can use social media to challenge an authoritarian single-party government and tilt unfair electoral laws in their favor. Although the People's Action Party (PAP) continued to hold vast majorities of parliamentary seats, the Worker's Party (WP) won unprecedented (if small) seat shares.[8] Social media was a critical aspect of the opposition's strategy to reach a wider audience and contributed to Singaporean citizens' ability to publicly express their dissatisfaction with the PAP. Discontent continued following the election, and in 2013, social media allowed citizens to organize the first mass demonstration against the PAP.[9] The PAP responded to the electorate by adjusting welfare policies, increasing investments in the general population, and loosening campaign restrictions on opposition parties, further demonstrating the power social media usage can have in a state's domestic politics.[10] In 2019, however, the PAP recognized the power of information obtained online and implemented the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation (POFMA) law, which allowed the government to punish those who posted information deemed to be harmful to public interest. As of 2020, the government exercised the law on government critics more than 50 times.[11]

South Korean and Taiwanese voters have also leaned on social media to call for government reform. Following mass demonstrations organized through social media vis-à-vis South Korean women's #metoo movement, 139 bills were proposed and seven laws passed addressing gender equality and sexual harassment in the workplace.[12] In Taiwan, voters and candidates transitioned from conventional media to the internet and social media as internet

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[8] Sean Tan Xing Hao, "Generally Exasperating (GE) 2020," *Sean Opinionated* (blog), July 11, 2020, https://seanopinionated.wordpress.com/2020/07/11/generally-exasperating-ge-2020/; Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, "New Normal' No More: Democratic Backsliding in Singapore after 2015," *Democratization* 27, no. 7 (2020): 1124.

[9] Natalie Pang and Debbie Goh, "Social Media and Social Movements - Weak Publics, the Online Space, Spatial Relations, and Collective Action in Singapore," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (Routledge, 2016).

[10] Abdullah, "New Normal' No More: Democratic Backsliding in Singapore after 2015," 1127.

[11] Human Rights Watch, *Singapore: 'Fake News' Law Curtails Speech* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/singapore-fake-news-law-curtails-speech.

[12] Linda Hasunuma and Ki-young Shin, "#MeToo in Japan and South Korea: #WeToo, #WithYou," 2019, 102.

proliferation rates increased. In 2012, presidential candidates leveraged Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to attract voters, resulting in significant levels of internet and social media use to gain political information.[13]

In contrast to the literature addressing social media penetration into the politics of other Asian counties, literature discussing political participation through social media in Japan is limited. Jungherr found that, as of 2016, only one out of the 127 academic articles published between 2008 and 2014 on Twitter use in elections worldwide discussed Japanese elections.[14] In comparative studies analyzing social media usage across several countries, substantive findings on Japanese political participation through social media are rarely mentioned. Although the internet and social media are heavily used by the majority of the Japanese population, several studies show that social media has not been widely used in the country for political purposes. Despite Japan's 94% internet penetration rate and 51% social media penetration rate, a 2017 study showed that its social media political engagement was lowest when compared to Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.[15] The study suggested that Japanese voters were more likely to rely on conventional media, primarily newspapers and television, than social media to educate themselves on politics.[16] Likewise, surveys designed to analyze how Japanese voters respond to online political information concluded that political information gleaned through the internet had minimal impact on Japanese political participation.[17] Although studies conducted in 2010 and 2021 showed that social media usage helped politically active Japanese voters engage with other like-minded individuals, this trend was only seen within a small pool of the population that was already politically active outside

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[13] Tsung-Jen Shih, "Social Media and Political Participation in Taiwan," in *Social Media, Culture and Politics* (Peter Lang, 2014), 89.

[14] Andreas Jungherr, "Twitter Use in Election Campaigns: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 13, no. 1 (2016): 75.

[15] Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries," 141.

[16] Takeshita, Saito, and Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan"; Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries," 142.

[17] Takeshita, Saito, and Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan," 141.

of social media.[18] Thus, while political social media usage has seemed popular among voters in other Asian states, Japanese voters appear less likely to rely on social media for political participation.

Understanding why Japanese political social media use is low requires drawing from the literature in a number of areas. As explanatory factors to understand the different levels of influence social media has in different countries, scholars have identified campaign laws, government structure, polarization, media freedom and public attitudes toward mass media, culture, the public's trust in government, and how the government uses social media.[19] These hypotheses provide insight into potential underlying conditions that make Japanese politics less vulnerable to social media penetration.

One variable the literature points to as an explanation for Japan's low political social media usage is campaigns laws; however, political social media use has remained low despite restrictions being lifted in 2013. Japan and South Korea had campaigning laws that restricted the use of the internet prior to elections; yet once both countries loosened their respective laws and allowed politicians to leverage social media, the results in Japan and South Korea were vastly different. Until 2013 in Japan, the Public Offices Elections Law (POEL) prohibited politicians from using the internet for campaign purposes two weeks prior to an election and restricted the distribution of campaign information to what are considered to be appropriate formats.[20] These included postcards but excluded other types of leaflets, posters, and using the internet as a campaigning medium. Tkach-Kawasaki that the POEL prevented the spread of social media in Japanese politics.[21] However, social media usage continues to be relatively low seven years after the POEL

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[18] Su and Xiao, "Interacting Effects of Political Social Media Use, Political Discussion and Political Trust on Civic Engagement: Extending the Differential Gains Model," 15; Takeshita, Saito, and Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan," 140.

[19] Takeshita, Saito, and Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan"; Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries"; Hinenoya and Gatbonton, "Ethnocentrism, Cultural Traits, Beliefs, and English Proficiency: A Japanese Sample"; Mergel, "Social Media Adoption and Resulting Tactics in the U.S. Federal Government."

[20] Masaki Taniguchi, "Changing Political Communication in Japan," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 131.

[21] Tkach-Kawasaki, "Politics @ Japan; Party Competition on the Internet in Japan," 113.

was relaxed. In contrast, South Korea lifted its law restricting social media campaigning 180 days prior to an election in 2011, and in 2012 presidential candidates turned to social media across a variety of platforms to establish connections with the electorate.[22] The different ways Japan and South Korea approached the ability to use social media as a campaign tool suggests there are other factors contributing to low social media penetration into Japanese politics.

Other scholars argue that the way the government uses social media increases the public's trust and therefore influences voters' online political participation, even in free-press democracies. While some governments recognize the impact social media can have and incorporate social media into their strategic communications, others prefer to use social media as a bulletin board that provides information but not does engage in meaningful discussions. Mergel describes the government's ability to engage the electorate through social media as a push/pull system: the government can push out notices as an additional method of distributing information or the government can pull in its citizens through proactive engagement through social media.[23] Al Aufit et al. concludes that governments who use a pull system create more trust and ultimately increase citizens' political participation. The interactive nature of the pull system allows citizens to feel heard by the government, particularly when their concerns are addressed.[24] This two-way communication creates trust and drives voters to social media in order to engage in meaningful dialogues with their government. A search for literature describing how the Japanese government uses social media disclosed one 2015 case study conducted on Toru Hashimoto, a charismatic politician who made regular appearances on radio and television even prior to entering politics. Although the Osaka mayor had the most Twitter followers when compared to all other Japanese politicians in 2015, his usage did not increase his followers' political knowledge and had no impact on their political participation. Kobayashi and Ichifuji conclude that Hashimoto's Twitter usage was only effective in creating exposure for the politician, not voter behavior, because Hashimoto

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[22] Lars Willnat and Young Min, "The Emergence of Social Media Politics in South Korea: The Case of the 2012 Presidential Election," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016).

[23] Mergel, "Social Media Adoption and Resulting Tactics in the U.S. Federal Government," 125.

[24] Ali Saif Al Aufi et al., "Citizens' Perceptions of Government's Participatory Use of Social Media," *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* 11, no. 2 (2017): 180.

did not tweet about issue positions or use the platform to discuss his policies.[25] That is, he did not practice the pull style of social media engagement with its tendency to foster trust and create meaningful dialogue with the electorate. Although, the Japan Restoration Party, a right-populist party that Hashimoto helped form, has become the third largest in the Lower House, its popularity and support base continues to trail far behind the LDP's. Further data collection is required to study how the central government utilizes social media to communicate with the electorate.

Still another hypothesis argues that citizens of cultures with strong interpersonal ties tend to express themselves more on social media and use it for political reasons. Some scholars argue that Japanese culture is filled with weak interpersonal ties and introverted personalities, which lead to an electorate that is not passionate about politics in general.[26] Although there are many cases of political competition and political activists in Japan, scholars described the overall population as politically apathetic.[27] In contrast, Su and Xiao found that Taiwanese citizens discussed politics often and were "highly enthusiastic about political discussions."[28] Their 2021 study showed positive connections between social media use and civic engagement in Taiwan, South Korea, and China, but low connections in Japan. A different study conducted in 2010 explains that the hesitation to engage in intimate conversations online is attributed to the *uchi* component of Japanese culture.[29] *Uchi*, meaning 'within' or 'among,' refers to a harmonious nature that is commonly thought to be found in Japan. Because social media is built around establishing online connections through dialogue, differences in opinion can directly contradict Japanese *uchi* cultural tendencies. After reviewing social media engagement across six Asian countries, Chan *et al.* concludes there was lower political social media engagement when users did not know the political

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[25] Tetsuro Kobayashi and Yu Ichifuji, "Tweets That Matter: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment in Japan," *Political Communication* 32, no. 4 (2015): 585.

[26] Hinenoya and Gatbonton, "Ethnocentrism, Cultural Traits, Beliefs, and English Proficiency: A Japanese Sample"; Tetsuo Makita and Mieko Ida, "Highlights of Value Change in Japan," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 13, no. 4 (2001): 426–32; Su and Xiao, "Interacting Effects of Political Social Media Use, Political Discussion and Political Trust on Civic Engagement: Extending the Differential Gains Model," 15.

[27] Makita and Ida, "Highlights of Value Change in Japan," 432.

[28] Su and Xiao, "Interacting Effects of Political Social Media Use, Political Discussion and Political Trust on Civic Engagement: Extending the Differential Gains Model," 15.

[29] Toshie Takahashi, "MySpace or Mixi? Japanese Engagement with SNS in the Global Age," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 455.

views of others on the site and that users were less likely to share opinions if there was a chance of disagreement.[30] A 2017 poll showed that 53% of Japanese respondents did not know their friends' political views. [31] Because political conversations may lead to disagreements or controversy, this might help explain why the Japanese electorate does not actively engage in politics on social media.

Other possible explanations for Japan's low political social media use are Japan's low levels of political polarization, the strength of its conventional media environment, and its parliamentary system of government, which are further explored in this thesis. Political polarization in Japan is low, creating a neutral environment that prevents political social media use from taking root.[32] Additionally, low polarization in Japan is reflected in its conventional media. Japan's main conventional media companies are not politically polarized and are generally trusted by the public, contributing to voters using social media for entertainment purposes rather than political purposes.[33] Finally, Japan's parliamentary style of government rewards conformity, gives prime ministers fewer formal powers, and relies on government institutions, discouraging political social media.[34]

C.   POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Although there is not a significant amount of published research on political social media use in Japan, indirect evidence and comparison to other states suggest several conditions that potentially explain the low levels of political social media usage in Japan. Common variables that surfaced during the literature review were campaign laws, media freedom and public attitudes toward conventional media, political polarization, culture, government structure, and how trust in

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[30] Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries," 140.

[31] Chan, Chen, and Lee, 142.

[32] Nahon, "Where There Is Social Media There Is Politics," 49.

[33] Takeshita, Saito, and Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan," 134.

[34] Alisa Gaunder, "The Institutional Landscape of Japanese Politics," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 4.

government corresponds with the way government uses social media. This thesis will consider three of the six factors, in the form of the following hypotheses:

H1: The incumbency power of Japanese conventional media, including its pervasiveness and trustworthiness, decreases voters' desire for an additional outlet of political participation.

H2: There is not enough pre-existing polarization in Japan for political social media usage to thrive on, resulting in overall low political social media use.

H3: Japan's party-focused elections minimize voters' social media use when compared to presidential candidate-focused elections.

The remaining three explanations—campaign laws, culture, and government use of social media—will not fit within the scope of this thesis because they appear to be insufficiently explanatory, cannot be measured effectively, or lack existing literature to draw from. Although campaign restrictions on using the internet may have been a factor in the past, the law has allowed Japanese politicians to leverage social media as a political platform since 2013. Therefore, this factor does not appear to help explain how Japanese politicians and the public leverage social media for political reasons today. Meanwhile, while the cultural component of Japan's political participation on social media may be a contributing factor to why usage has remained low, there are significant limitations in measuring culture. Finally, although the hypothesis regarding governments' style of social media usage and its correlation to the public's trust in government and political participation is compelling, published research that discusses specifics on the Japanese government's social media usage is, unfortunately, rare. This may be a productive hypothesis to test as more information becomes publicly available.

D.   RESEARCH DESIGN

This research will implement a comparative approach to study the three above hypotheses, addressing political social media usage in Japan. By comparing conventional media, polarization, and government structure in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore to those in Japan, this thesis will aim to explain why political social media usage has remained low in Japan. These countries were chosen because they are all Asian states with high literacy rates, high internet availability and usage rates. and hold either presidential or parliamentary elections, yet they seem to have a higher degree of political social media usage.

Evidence for this research will be drawn from published literature and supplemented with polling data, news articles, and social media posts where applicable. Polling data and news articles will help provide up-to-date information on the current political and media dynamics in each country and help fill in the gaps that peer-reviewed literature has not yet covered. Additionally, a review of political information on social media can provide insight into how each country's public utilizes these platforms to consume political information. Although language barriers pose a problem to conducting a comprehensive review of social media political engagement in these states, this research can review the number of likes, shares, retweets, and comments to gauge public political use of social media.

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II.   POLARIZATION

One possible explanation for low political social media use by Japanese voters is the low degree of polarization among voters. The current main opposition party does not differ drastically from the LDP, leaving voters to choose between the center-right LDP and the center-left to center-right Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Although there are policy positions on which the two parties disagree, many voters do not fall on extreme ends of the political spectrum, and many do not identify with one particular party at all – almost half, according to one 2010 poll. [35] Additionally, strong professional linkages and personal ties between reporters and politicians and close working relationships between conventional media and the Diet often influence political coverage, limiting broadcasts to mainstream party opinions and thereby further reducing polarization.[36] This combination of less-polarized politics and single-party dominance in Japan might contribute to political apathy, which in turn might result in voters' lack of desire to engage in political discussions through social media. Because social media thrives on existing polarization, low levels of polarization in Japan might be fostering a mostly neutral environment that does not encourage social media to penetrate politics and vice versa.[37]

This chapter evaluates the role of political polarization and political social media usage in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan. First, it defines polarization and identifies the main characteristics used in this research. This chapter then discusses relative levels and the history of polarization in each country, and contemporary issues that separate political actors into distinct ideological poles. Overall, it finds that states with relatively higher levels of polarization, such as South Korea and Taiwan, generally display higher levels of political social media use. Meanwhile states with lower polarization levels, such as Japan, display lower political social media use. Singapore, however, does not seem to follow this pattern due to its low political polarization and relatively moderate political social media use.

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[35] Reuters Staff, "Nearly Half of Japan's Voters Support No Party," *Reuters*, April 4, 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/idCATRE63408220100405.

[36] Lars Willnat and Annette J. Aw, "Political Communication in Asia: Challenges and Opportunities," in *Handbook of Political Communication Research* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), 479–98.

[37] Nahon, "Where There Is Social Media There Is Politics," 40.

A.   DEFINING POLARIZATION

The causes of polarization continue to be a topic of debate among analysts and can vary among countries and political systems. In this research, the term "polarization" is used to describe the diverging ideas among political parties and the electorate that lead the two groups toward varying positions on an ideological spectrum.[38] The ideological spectrum can differ by country. Therefore, this thesis will broadly define ideological poles as progressive, referring to left-leaning preferences, and conservative, referring to right-leaning preferences.

Studying political polarization and its effects on political communication helps inform analysts on the legitimacy of a democracy and the level of stability within a democratic system. In healthy democratic elections, opposing political parties should be expected to represent distinct policy choices and the social cleavages present in the electorate. However, polarized politics can also have the negative effect of highlighting sociopolitical cleavages. The cleavages create a representation gap that places government further away from the average voter, leading to higher perceived polarization by the electorate. Perceived polarization describes how citizens interpret differences between political parties and whether differences between the parties accurately reflect political differences in the electorate. Although a more polarized government provides voters with more disparate policy choices and represents varying political preferences, it can also create winners and losers in society and lead to conflict.[39]

Social media has the ability to accentuate and encourage diverging political preferences within a country, leading political actors to lean on the power that social media can have in influencing a political system. Citizens in advanced countries are most likely to use television, radio, and newspapers as their main source of political information.[40] Social media can also be used as a tool to report information found on conventional media outlets, making the internet and

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[38] JungHwan Yang et al., "Why Are 'Others' so Polarized? Perceived Political Polarization and Media Use in 10 Countries," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21 (2016): 351.

[39] Russell J. Dalton and Aiji Tanaka, "The Patterns of Party Polarization in East Asia," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (August 2007): 216.

[40] Yang et al., "Why Are 'Others' so Polarized? Perceived Political Polarization and Media Use in 10 Countries," 351.

social media useful resources for news consumption.[41] However, in addition to social media's ability to support the conventional media system, it can also have the negative effect of filtering out opposing views, particularly in polarized environments. Actors such as "trolls, bots, fake-news websites, conspiracy theorists, politicians, highly partisan media outlets, the mainstream media, and foreign governments" have the ability to use algorithms that ensure that viewers are only exposed to specific political narratives.[42] Additionally, although social media can expose users to cross-cutting ideologies and increase political participation overall, its use can also result in unmeaningful and uneducated exchanges informed by polarized content and misinformation. In fact, polarization can be exacerbated by disinformation distributed through social media. By 2016, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and partisan news had become increasingly prevalent on social media, which led to widespread public misperceptions.[43] Producers of misinformation can exploit groups of like-minded individuals who are likely to support false or unverified claims that align with their previously held beliefs and political ideology. Social media thus thrives in politically polarized environments due to its distinct methods of communication. When compared to in-person political discussions, political participation on social media has unique characteristics: fewer contextual clues, varying levels of anonymity that can erode the quality and depth of discussions, and different levels of publicity that expand the conversations' audience.[44] Thus, although social media may not be responsible for creating political polarization, it has the ability to contribute to or thwart democratic governance and political participation. Social media can therefore serve as a powerful force in a polarized political system.

B.   SOUTH KOREA

South Korea's polarized domestic politics seems to contribute to the electorate's higher use of political social media. The country's polarized politics is rooted in its authoritarian history and

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[41] Nic Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019* (Oxford, England: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf.

[42] Joshua Tucker et al., "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature" (Loughborough University, 2018), 22.

[43] Tucker et al., 52.

[44] Tucker et al., 11.

is a prominent feature of contemporary South Korean democracy. South Korean politics is largely divided into two camps: a conservative right that descended from the country's previous military dictatorships and a progressive left that is mainly composed of South Korean pro-democracy activists. Generational differences between conservatives and progressives were once defining features of the two ideological poles, where the older generation disproportionately supported the conservative camp while the younger generation formed the progressive camp.

Although generational divides no longer define the electorate's political preferences four decades after the country's democratization, they helped create the trajectory of polarization that remains in contemporary South Korean politics. After South Korea's experiences with Japanese colonialism, civil war, and a weak economy, the older generation focused on strengthening the country via a military dictatorship. Civil liberties and human rights were secondary to national security, industrialization, and economic growth. This generation of South Koreans thus became more anti-communist and supportive of the U.S. security alliance and took a more hardline approach toward North Korea.[45] Progressives, on the other hand, trace their identity to challenging the country's previous military dictatorship and being responsible for initiating South Korea's democratic government. South Korea's "386 generation," describing those who were born in the 1960s and attended college in the 1980s, make up the generation of those who called for democracy during South Korean authoritarian rule. Therefore, they largely reject ideals that align with South Korea's authoritarian history and support policies that elevate South Korea as an independent and strong nation.[46] They tend to be more critical of South Korea's dependence on the U.S. security alliance, support more engagement with North Korea, and are more concerned than conservatives about civil liberties and human rights issues. Polarization heavily driven by generational differences has also been sustained by differences over policy toward economic growth, North Korean, and other current issues.

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[45] Hahm Chaibong, "The Two South Koreas: A House Divided," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 59.

[46] Park Sun-Young, "Shinsedae: Conservative Attitudes of a 'New Generation' in South Korea and the Impact on the Korean Presidential Election," *EWC Insights* 2, no. 1 (September 2007).

Because social media thrives on existing polarization, South Korea's polarized environment provides optimal conditions for social media to penetrate the political landscape.[47] Due to different online political groups, partisan hashtags, filters, and algorithms, social media has the ability to fragment voters into their own information spheres, forming an echo chamber that only reinforces existing beliefs and political preferences.[48] A 2017 study showed that 32 percent of South Korean respondents engaged in politically like-minded social media sites, while Taiwanese respondents were at 27 percent, Singaporean respondents at 23 percent, and Japanese respondents at 18 percent.[49] South Korea's politically polarized environment thus provides optimal conditions for increased social media use among voters. Not only can ideological divisions perpetuate further entrenchment into one's ideological beliefs, therefore driving conservatives and progressives farther apart from each other, but it can also make it easier to vilify the opposing group and eliminate opportunities for cross talk. Therefore, although social media can help increase political participation such as in the 2012 presidential election, it can also have the detrimental effect of further dividing the electorate into its ideological poles and deepening divisions that were already present in South Korean domestic politics.[50]

C.   TAIWAN

Taiwan's highly polarized political parties have driven its more moderate electorate away from conventional news and toward social media usage. As in South Korea, cleavages in Taiwan's domestic politics can be traced back to the island's authoritarian history. Dating back to the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945 and the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to Taiwan and established a new, single-party state. After the 2–28 Incident in

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[47] Nahon, "Where There Is Social Media There Is Politics."

[48] Esser and Pfetsch, "Comparing Political Communication: A 2020 Update"; Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries."

[49] Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries," 142.

[50] Changjun Lee, Jieun Shin, and Ahreum Hong, "Does Social Media Use Really Make People Politically Polarized? Direct and Indirect Effects of Social Media Use on Political Polarization in South Korea," *Telematics and Informatics* 35, no. 1 (April 2018): 245–54; Willnat and Min, "The Emergence of Social Media Politics in South Korea: The Case of the 2012 Presidential Election," 392.

which thousands of Taiwanese citizens and political elites were massacred by Republic of China (ROC) troops, the newly arrived KMT administration elected to govern Taiwan through an authoritarian government. Primarily focused on establishing itself as the main ROC political party and saving mainland China from the "communist bandits," the KMT did not focus on catering to the needs of Taiwanese citizens and society.[51] Instead, the KMT governed with strict authoritarian rule to build a strong military and economy capable of someday ruling over a united China.

Although Taiwan has since democratized in the early 1990s, the KMT remains one of the two main political parties in Taiwan and continues to support a one-country-two-systems model with China. The KMT's main opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was formed in 1986 shortly prior to martial law being lifted in 1987. Composed of local politicians voted into office by Taiwanese citizens, the DPP won the 2000 presidential election and ended 50 years of KMT rule.[52] Although the DPP currently controls the presidency, the two parties have alternated in power since 2000. Focused on representing the people of Taiwan, the DPP centers on establishing strong human rights and a Taiwanese identity.[53]

Taiwan's history has created two major political cleavages between its two main political parties: cross-strait relations with China and national identity issues. Ethnic divides between Taiwan's sub-ethnic groups of mainlanders and Taiwanese and debates over Taiwan's international status are the crux of the island's domestic politics.[54] Despite its authoritarian past and desire to unite China, contemporary KMT politicians campaign on maintaining the status quo with China. KMT President Ma Ying-jeou won the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections with his Three Nos campaign - no independency, no unification, and no armed conflict - and a pledge to support Taiwanese businesses in mainland China.[55] By contrast, the DPP promotes democratization and the pro-independence movement. Although the party's policies do not

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[51] Shelley Rigger, "Taiwan," in *Politics in China* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014), 472.

[52] Rigger, 474.

[53] Cal Clark and Alexander Tan, "Political Polarization in Taiwan: A Growing Challenge to Catch-All Parties?," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 3 (2012): 14.

[54] Rigger, "Taiwan," 476.

[55] Rigger, 481.

promote radical independence reforms, they are less friendly with mainland China.[56] The two main parties' inability to find common ground on cross-strait relations and national identity issues have expanded into disagreements over labor laws, pension reforms, infrastructure planning, and nuclear power policies, further pushing the KMT and DPP apart.[57]

However, although Taiwan's political parties are highly polarized, the majority of the electorate seems to fall somewhere in the middle of the two poles. A 2012 survey of Taiwanese citizens showed that just 1.7 percent of respondents wanted unification as soon as possible, and only 4.8 percent of respondents wanted independence as soon as possible. The majority of respondents preferred to maintain the status quo indefinitely or maintain the status quo and decide on unification later. Additionally, as generations pass, more citizens identify themselves as Taiwanese and see the debate over national identity as a thing of the past.[58]

The misrepresentation of party polarization in conventional media and public opinion has helped drive political participation on social media. The gap between partisan narratives on conventional media and a moderate electorate became more apparent as the KMT and DPP ideologies failed to reflect public opinion.[59] As social media became a more popular form of political participation globally, politicians and voters in Taiwan felt more comfortable using sites like Facebook or YouTube for political communication to escape the hyperpolarized conventional media. During the 2012 elections, President Ma Ying-jeou accumulated 900,000 Facebook followers within seven months of opening his account.[60] This is remarkable given that the population of Taiwan is approximately 24 million people. By the end of the election, President Ma had approximately 1.3 million followers, and DPP opposition candidate Tsai Ing-wen had approximately 650,000 followers.[61] Each candidate's social media presence allowed Taiwanese

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[56] Rigger, 482.

[57] Yi-ching Hsiao and Eric Chen-hua Yu, "Polarization Perception and Support for Democracy: The Case of Taiwan," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 8 (2020): 1146.

[58] Rigger, "Taiwan," 477.

[59] Hsiao and Yu, "Polarization Perception and Support for Democracy: The Case of Taiwan," 1147.

[60] Tsung-Jen Shih, "Social Media and Political Participation in Taiwan," in *Social Media, Culture, and Politics in Asia* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), 93.

[61] Shih, 93.

citizens to connect with presidential candidates and participate in government without needing to filter through politically charged media stories on the election. Additionally, the Taiwanese public's low trust in its partisan government can encourage voters to become more involved in politics.[62] Social media provides a convenient and effective avenue for political participation and direct engagement in politics.

D.   SINGAPORE

Despite its relatively low levels of polarization, political participation through social media by opposition parties in Singapore is high. The Singaporean government has been dominated by the People's Action Party (PAP) since the country's independence in 1965. Although the number of PAP seats has fluctuated in legislature, the PAP has secured its place as the ruling party and is generally accepted by the electorate as a competent ruling party. The PAP was founded in the late 1940s, when Singapore was still united with Malaya under British rule. It was initially a left-leaning party that supported "unification with Malaya, subsidized housing, free education, and opposition to proposed restrictions on school."[63] It campaigned on a platform of equality, welfare, and fair working conditions. Following low voter turnout in the 1950s, the PAP mobilized massive efforts to reach potential voters through mass and street-corner meetings and painted itself as an approachable party that could fulfill citizens' needs.[64] It incorporated itself into society and sought ways to unite communities under PAP ideology. Once the PAP established its dominance, it adopted a pragmatic approach to governance that valued meritocracy, economic interventionism, and welfare spending.[65] Presently, the PAP continues to be involved in communities, which allows it to identify and address the electorate's concerns. In this way, the PAP presents itself as an approachable party for the masses.

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[62] Su and Xiao, "Interacting Effects of Political Social Media Use, Political Discussion and Political Trust on Civic Engagement: Extending the Differential Gains Model," 7.

[63] Meredith L. Weiss, Hoe-Yeong Loke, and Luenne Angela Choa, "The 2015 General Election and Singapore's Political Forecast: White Clouds, Blue Skies," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 5 (2016): 88.

[64] Meredith L. Weiss, "Edging toward Sovereign Singapore," in *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 104.

[65] Weiss, 77.

Nevertheless, a number of opposition parties contest Singaporean elections. Singapore's main opposition party, the Worker's Party (WP) is the face of the opposition and has made the most significant gains in past elections. The WP also started out as a leftist party supporting unification with Malaya and welfare provisions. The WP ran on a platform of "full independence, parliamentary democracy, socialism, and racial equality."[66] The WP brands itself as a check and balance against the PAP; however, the WP is at a great disadvantage in gaining public support due to campaign laws.[67] While the PAP is entrenched in citizens' daily lives, the WP is restricted to short campaigns that place them in the background until election season every five years.

Thus, elections in Singapore are less about which party will govern the country under a unique ideology and more about how many seats the PAP will lose to the opposition. Wanting to retain as many seats as possible, the PAP has responded to voters by loosening and tightening their authoritarian style of governing and increasing its focus on Singapore's social problems. Following low voter support in the 2011 elections, the PAP strengthened its welfare policies through increasing investments into the general population and businesses. The PAP also loosened restrictions on opposition parties to campaign, helping to level the political playing field. Feeling confident after a major victory in the 2015 elections though, the PAP instituted authoritarian-like regulations that silenced critics and suppressed opposition parties, essentially eliminating fair elections. Laws such as the Administration of Justice Protection Act, which held critics of Singapore's court system accountable, and POFMA, which discouraged citizens from posting information that could be deemed anti-government were passed. Additionally, the government was more aggressive in acting against academics and activists who had been critical of the PAP.[68] Voters responded with high support for the opposition in the 2020 election, demonstrating the call for change in Singapore's political space.

With social media's ability to spread information to its users, the PAP can no longer control the political narrative through conventional media unless it exercises the POFMA law. This limited

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[66] Weiss, 87.

[67] Elvin Ong, "Opposition Coordination in Singapore's 2015 General Elections," *The Round Table* 105, no. 2 (2016): 187.

[68] Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, "'New Normal' No More: Democratic Backsliding in Singapore After 2015," *Democratization* 27, no. 7 (2020): 1130.

freedom provided by social media not only allows citizens to receive information that may damage the PAP's legitimacy, but it also allows the opposition to challenge the long-ruling party. Following the spread of social media, Singapore's opposition parties and politically oriented civil society organizations (CSOs) became more organized and able to attract more talent to their parties.[69] Opposition parties now had a platform outside of PAP-controlled spaces to reach a wider audience. Additionally, CSOs leveraged social media to raise issues of human rights, migrant worker rights, and animal rights, all topics that were considered sensitive under a PAP-controlled mass media environment. However, these changes have not yielded enough votes for the opposition to become serious contenders, nor have they been able to overcome more than five decades of PAP rule. While social media has become the opposition's platform of choice, it is possible that the lack of opposing ideologies between the PAP and WP prevent social media use from making significant disturbances to this single-party system.[70] Polarization, therefore, does not seem to be the leading reason for political social media use in Singapore. Instead, the PAP's suppression of opposition parties has pushed the WP to new forms of political communication. However, while social media use has removed some obstacles for the opposition in Singapore, it has not become powerful enough to overhaul Singapore's domestic politics.

E.   JAPAN

In Japan, relatively low levels of polarization between the two major parties tend to produce fewer opportunities for political social media use among the electorate. Japan's two major political parties have many similarities in their policies. Following Japan's 1994 electoral system reforms, Japanese domestic politics became largely divided into two parties: the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). With the exception of two instances that totaled four years, the LDP has managed to hold power in the Diet's House of Representatives despite being contested and therefore has controlled the Japanese government for 62 years. Often characterized as a

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[69] Cherian George, Xiaoming Hao, and Nainan Wen, "Social Media and Political Participation in Singapore," in *Social Media, Culture, and Politics in Asia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 174.

[70] George, Hao, and Wen, 175.

conglomerate of small, fragmented opposition groups that came together to beat the LDP, the DPJ is the only credible opposition group with a chance to govern Japan.[71]

The DPJ differs from the LDP in some minor ways, but ultimately not significantly enough to shift the direction of Japan's domestic and foreign policy. When the DPJ won the 2009 elections and had a chance to implement their own policies, it was evident that the two parties had more in common than they claimed. Both parties ultimately support postwar military constraints, both parties value the U.S.-Japan alliance, and both parties are tied to the bureaucracy. In comparison to the LDP, the DPJ tends to be more reliant on themselves than on the bureaucracy. However, this approach rendered the party ineffective and resulted in the DPJ being unable to institute new policies during their short time in office.[72] Additionally, the DPJ sees Japan as an equal partner to the U.S. and prefers to do things bilaterally versus allowing the United States to lead.[73] However, despite the DPJ campaigning on reforms in "social policy, education, fiscal policy, transportation policy, foreign policy, relations between central and local governments, and the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats," it made no distinctive impacts in Japan's domestic and foreign policy.[74] Although that outcome is partly attributable to only 30 percent of the DPJ's proposed policies being passed, it was also clear that three years of DPJ governance mostly continued the trajectories of the LDP.[75]

Thus, despite the two parties' nominal opposition, they have many similarities in policy positions, political objectives, and even personnel. In fact, because the DPJ is made of members from small opposition parties that may have a more revisionist ideology, some DPJ members can

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[71] Kenji Kushida and Phillip Lipscy, "The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Party of Japan," in *Japan Under the DPJ. The Politics of Transition and Governance* (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2013), 4.

[72] Brad Glosserman, "The Seiji Shokku," in *Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 70–80.

[73] Ellis Krauss, "Crisis Management, LDP, and DPJ Style," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 2 (June 2013): 183.

[74] Kushida and Lipscy, "The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Party of Japan," 4.

[75] Kushida and Lipscy, 20–24.

have more in common with LDP members than those in their own party.[76] Additionally, due to the winner-take-all nature of Japan's first past the post system which awards 300 out of 480 House of Representative seats, the LDP and DPJ prioritize their campaign efforts on appealing to the average voter. Wanting to win as many votes as possible, the two parties tend to stay away from proposing policies that are associated with the extreme political poles. Running on middle-of-the-road policies and making campaign promises based on valence issues oftentimes results in the LDP and DPJ sharing many of their policy positions.[77] Without having diverging policies to run on, elections in Japan tend to focus on which party is considered the most competent to lead the country and implement reforms.[78]

Japan's less polarized political environment provides fewer opportunities for political social media to take root. Because the LDP and the DPJ are not on extreme sides of ideological poles and do not drastically differ from each other, there are fewer diverging political preferences for social media actors to exploit. Political actors may have a more difficult time articulating the differences in their policy preferences, leading to overall fewer debates between parties over the future of Japan's domestic and foreign policy. One of the few cases involving a Japanese politician active on social media, Toru Hashimoto, during a 2013 House of Councillors election, showed that he did not use his Twitter platform to communicate policy positions. Consequently, one study concluded that Hashimoto's social media use had no effects on voter behavior.[79] However, a less polarized environment is not completely immune from political social media. Rather than focusing on policy positions, political opponents have the ability to leverage social media to launch personal attacks on candidates, amass popularity through social media, and campaign on the credibility of their party. However, exploitation of social media is not commonly practiced in Japan as it is in South Korea and Taiwan. This possibility suggests that while studying polarization in Japan is

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[76] Ethan Scheiner, "The Electoral System and Japan's Partial Transformation: Party System Consolidation Without Policy Realignment," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 12 (2012): 367.

[77] Scheiner, 362; Kushida and Lipscy, "The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Party of Japan," 28.

[78] Scheiner, "The Electoral System and Japan's Partial Transformation: Party System Consolidation Without Policy Realignment," 365.

[79] Kobayashi and Ichifuji, "Tweets That Matter: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment in Japan," 588.

helpful to understanding the political context for voters and politicians, it is not the only factor keeping political social media use in Japan lower than that in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.

F.   CONCLUSION

There is not enough polarization in Japan for political social media use to thrive on, contributing to overall low political social media use. Without diverging political preferences, political actors in Japan are only able to use social media to launch political attacks on opponents or to amass popularity for their own name. While Singapore also has low levels of polarization, its anti-democratic suppression of the opposition presents different dynamics to when opposition parties and the electorate are willing and able to turn to social media. Opposition parties can overcome some of the PAP's campaign restrictions through social media, thus making political social media a useful tool in Singapore. By contrast, existing polarization in South Korea and Taiwan make social media use more popular among politicians and voters. Politicians are able to capitalize on existing social cleavages and articulate distinct policy positions that resonate with portions of the electorate.

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III. CONVENTIONAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

The levels of political polarization reflected in South Korean, Taiwanese, Singaporean, and Japanese domestic politics greatly influences the levels of polarization present in each country's conventional media environment. The previous chapter discussed how higher levels of polarization tend to be associated with more political social media use, and a similar phenomenon is observed with polarization levels in conventional media. When polarization levels in conventional media are higher, voters turn to social media for different reasons. In South Korea, social media served as a useful platform for those who did not subscribe to the dominant pro-government conservative narrative. Once political social media use took root across both mainstream ideologies in South Korea, social media became a popular and convenient way to connect with like-minded voters. In Taiwan, moderate voters turned to social media to get away from the highly polarized conventional media environment. Low levels of political polarization in Japanese domestic politics are transposed to its conventional media, where a less polarized media and lower levels of political social media use are observed. Observations across South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan thus show that highly polarized conventional media environments drive the electorate to increased political social media use, while low polarization in media drives less political social media use. Polarization in Singapore's domestic politics and conventional media are both low; however, their effect on political social media use cannot be clearly assessed due to the government's tight control of the media environment.

Some scholars argue that less media freedom and negative public attitudes toward conventional media drive voters to increase their social media engagement in politics. Studies have shown that the proliferation of social media has drastically changed the way voters educate themselves on politics, particularly when mass media is polarized, censored, or suppressed by a government. [80] These factors can therefore have effects on what type of media the electorate consumes and how it chooses to engage with different sources of information. With the exception

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[80] Shelley Boulianne and Yannis Theocharis, "Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement: A Meta-Analysis of Research," *Social Science Computer Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 111–27; Suveyda Karakaya and Rebecca Glazier, "Media, Information, and Political Participation: The Importance of Online News Sources in the Absence of a Free Press," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 16, no. 3 (2019): 290–306.

of Twitter, survey respondents across South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore had higher rates of social media use for news when compared to Japan (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1.   Social Media Use for News/for Other Purposes in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore in 2019[81]

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Japan	5% / 19%	10% / 25%	2% / 15%	16% / 50%
South Korea	22% / 47%	7% / 19%	8% / 31%	38% / 68%
Taiwan	54% / 77%	N/A	7% / 28%	43% / 75%
Singapore	48% / 74%	9% / 19%	15% / 47%	27% / 73%

Table 2.   Social Media Use for News/for Other Purposes in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore in 2021[82]

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Japan	6% / 19%	16% / 31%	4% / 21%	24% / 57%
South Korea	16% / 39%	7% / 18%	12% / 41%	44% / 74%
Taiwan	41% / 66%	N/A	7% / 29%	38% / 65%
Singapore	40% / 70%	7% / 18%	13% / 38%	25% / 73%

From 2019 to 2021, trust in conventional news increased across South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan. One possible explanation is the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the media environment.[83] Searching for guidelines and information on the new virus, citizens across the four countries relied on conventional media to disseminate accurate information regarding the pandemic. Additionally, misinformation regarding COVID-19's origins, contagion, and possible cures circulating online led to an overall awareness of false information circulating on social media, further contributing to increased trust in conventional media (Table 3).[84]

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[81] Adapted From Nic Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Oxford, England: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, n.d.), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf.

[82] Adapted From Newman et al.

[83] Newman et al.

[84] Newman et al.

Table 3.   Trust in Conventional News in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore in 2019 and 2021[85]

	2019	2021
Japan	39%	42%
South Korea	22%	32%
Taiwan	28%	31%
Singapore	42%	45%

This chapter will discuss the conventional media environments in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan, and how factors like political polarization and government influence can push the electorate toward more political social media use. Overall, this chapter concludes that Japanese citizens place higher trust in conventional media when compared to South Korea and Taiwan due to Japan's emphasis on facts-based news reporting. Although trust in conventional media is higher in Singapore when compared to Japan, overt government censorship of the news may contribute to higher social media use in Singapore.

A.   BACKGROUND

In order to understand why the incumbency power and positive public perception of conventional media is so strong in Japan, we can compare how each country's media environment influences public perceptions and trust in conventional media. In Japan, daily life is saturated by conventional media; in addition, 83.5 percent of the public regularly use the internet, and 83.6 percent of Japanese citizens own a cellular telephone, further contributing to the wide availability of and accessibility of media.[86] As social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook became popular in the 2010s, Japanese users embraced the new style of online communication, leading to 51 percent of the population having social media accounts by 2017.[87] Although a 51 percent social

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[85] Adapted From Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*; Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*.

[86] Yoshitaka Mori, "Media in Japan," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Japan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 459.

[87] Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries," 129.

media penetration rate seems high on a global scale, it is lower in comparison to South Korea at 83 percent, Taiwan with an 81 percent rate, and Singapore with a 77 percent rate.[88]

B.   SOUTH KOREA

Despite being a free-press democracy, South Korean newspaper companies' partisan reporting has correlates with skepticism and distrust among the public.[89] The partisan nature of South Korean mass media has arguably led to a lack of trust in conventional media and contributed to the normalization of political participation through social media. South Korea's polarized conventional media can be traced back to its authoritarian politics and its democratic press freedom reforms. The 1988 democratization of South Korea liberated conventional media from state censorship. Major conservative media outlets such as *Chosun, Dong-A,* and *JoongAng* were now able to operate freely and journalists were no longer subject to suppression or fear of imprisonment by a military dictatorship. Additionally, liberalization of the press allowed journalists with opposing ideologies to publish their own newspapers, increasing the partisan distinctions among South Korean news outlets. *Hankyoreh*, South Korea's largest left-leaning newspaper, was created by previously banned journalists who were prohibited from publishing anything under the military dictatorship. Partisan reporting became even more common ten years later after opposition candidate Kim Dae-Jung's presidential election victory ended conservative government rule. The government's positive relationship with South Korean conversative newspapers created a rift between government and progressive media that continues to perpetuate partisan coverage in conventional media.[90]

Distrust of pro-government conservative news outlets that dominated media spaces drove progressive South Korean journalists and news consumers to smaller internet-based sources of news, paving the way for political engagement on social media. In the 2000s, South Koreans turned to the internet for alternative sources of news as *Chosun, Dong-A,* and *JoongAng* continued to report from a right-leaning perspective and progressive outlets like *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang* incorporated left-leaning narratives. The rift between conservative and progressive outlets was

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[88] Chan, Chen, and Lee, 129.

[89] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*, 146.

[90] Kwak, "Digital Media and Democratic Transition in Korea," 218–219.

exacerbated when, in 2009, the Broadcasting Act was amended to allow four conservative newspaper companies to create television channels. *Chosun, Dong-A, JoongAng* and *The Korea Economic Daily* subsequently initiated television channels and were heavily criticized by the opposition as having received preferential treatment by the government.[91]

Seeking a way to reach their progressive audience, journalists who did not fit into the largely conservative conventional media environment turned to the internet. Despite being largely reform-oriented, sites like *OhmyNews* and *Pressian* were embraced as more reliable and convenient sources of news, particularly by the youth.[92] The sites were also used to support progressive presidential candidate Roh Moo-Hyun during the 2002 presidential election, when users posted information on Roh's policies, fundraised, and provided live polling information. Recognizing the power of the internet after Roh's victory, conservative newspapers acknowledged the need to have an online presence and focused their efforts on internet reporting. The number of conservative online newspapers and viewership increased by 2006, and online news became a norm for both conservative and progressive South Koreans.[93] Broadcasting companies similarly transitioned away from traditional reporting toward digital technologies and livestreaming services that enabled interaction with their viewers.[94]

In contrast to Japan, where conventional media remains the most popular source of news, normalization of online news in South Korea opened up the possibility of social media gaining traction. From 2011 to 2016, weekly newspaper consumption dropped from 45 percent to 28 percent of the population, and in 2019, domestic search engines and news aggregators like Naver and Daum were the biggest sources of news for South Korean consumers.[95] Given South Koreans'

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[91] Morihiro Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan," in *Internet Election Campaigns in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 92.

[92] Kwak, "Digital Media and Democratic Transition in Korea," 220.

[93] Kwak, 219–22.

[94] Kwak, 225.

[95] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*; Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan."

affinity for consuming news on digital devices, television and newspaper consumption has continued to decline from 2016 to 2021 (Figure 1).[96]
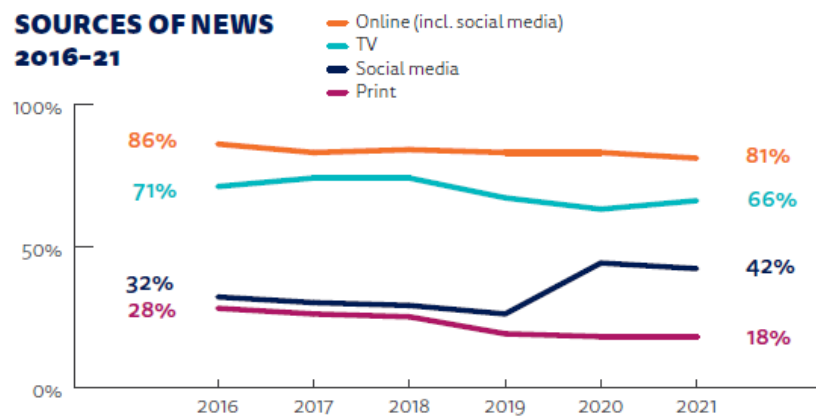

SOURCES OF NEWS 2016-21

— Online (incl. social media)
— TV
— Social media
— Print

Figure 1.   Sources of News in South Korea from 2016 to 2021[97]

In addition to news aggregators, South Koreans have also turned to social media as a source of news and political engagement, particularly during election season. The unprecedented voter turnout of 75.8 percent during the 2012 presidential election is largely attributed by scholars to social media and its ability to engage the youth in politics.[98] This trend was again present in the 2017 presidential election with a voter turnout of 77 percent.[99] South Korean youth have helped shift the media environment away from television and newspapers and toward the internet and social media. However, because the audience on social media is mostly progressive voters, political participation through social media is partisan and thus not fully embraced by the entire electorate. Additionally, South Korean citizens' doubts over the reliability of information obtained from social media remain after rumors of campaign cheating and political slandering filled social

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[96] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*.

[97] Source: Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021," 147.

[98] Willnat and Min, "The Emergence of Social Media Politics in South Korea: The Case of the 2012 Presidential Election," 392.

[99] IFES Election Guide, *IFES Election Guide | Elections: South Korea President 2017* (Arlington, VA: IFES, 2017), https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3014/.

media spaces.[100] Although misinformation and disinformation has turned some users away from social media, political social media use continues to be a common form of political participation.

Despite concerns over biased and incorrect reporting, social media has changed South Korea's media environment from predominately conservative to one with a more balanced distribution of news sources across opposing ideologies.

C.   TAIWAN

In Taiwan, the disconnect between a highly polarized media environment and a more moderate electorate has led to the public's distrust in conventional media. Much like South Korea, Taiwan's contemporary media environment has been greatly influenced by the island's political history. Under martial law from 1949 to 1987, Taiwanese media was subject to the strict oversight and control of the Kuomintang (KMT). Upon the country's liberalization, however, the number of newspaper publishers and broadcasting agencies increased exponentially, resulting in over 2,000 newspapers and 56 cable television stations offering over 277 channels in 2018.[101]

Taiwan's main conventional media outlets are divided among partisan lines. The four major contemporary national newspapers are *United Daily News, China Times, Liberty Times,* and *Apple Daily. United Daily News* and *China Times* date back to the 1950s and continue to have a pro-unification political ideology that aligns with the KMT's Chinese identity.[102] *Liberty Times*, established after martial law was lifted, became known as a "Taiwanese identity-oriented" newspaper and is ideologically aligned with Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) ideas.[103] These widely circulated newspapers have clear partisan tendencies and are generally aligned with their respective political parties' narratives. *Apple Daily,* owned by Hong Kong's Jimmy Lai, touts itself as a politically neutral alternative and became popular in Taiwan in 2004. *Apple Daily* does not associate itself with the KMT or DPP and offers the unique perspective of being a China-oriented

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[100] Jihyang Choi and Jae Woong Sim, "New Media and Participatory Politics," in *Social Media, Culture, and Politics in Asia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 106–15.

[101] Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan," 86.

[102] Jens Damm, "Politics and the Media," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 184–97; Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan."

[103] Damm, "Politics and the Media," 188.

newspaper that is critical of the CCP.[104] Although *Apple Daily* was closed in Hong Kong in 2021, it continues to print in Taiwan. Taiwan's broadcasting companies are also politically polarized and have been criticized for prioritizing revenue over quality news coverage: companies seeking to protect their business interests in China censor themselves against being too critical of the CCP, making their reporting less credible.[105] Furthermore, the vast number of channels has created fierce competition, and placement marketing has become common in Taiwanese news, further degrading the level of trust among viewers.[106]

In comparison to Japan and even South Korea, social media is a more common form of political participation in Taiwan due to the electorate's mistrust and frustration over Taiwan's competitive and politicized media environment. Due to high levels of competition and partisan reporting, the Reuters Institute considers Taiwanese conventional media historically weak.[107] In the early 2010s, frustrated by conventional media, Taiwanese citizens turned to social media to connect with each other and organize protests against the government such as movements promoting LGBT rights, supporting stronger protection of human rights in the military, and criticizing the construction of a nuclear power plant in Gongliao. The 2014 Sunflower Movement that objected to economic cooperation between Taiwan and China was organized across several social media platforms and gained a national following, warranting government response.[108] Social media has thus provided an avenue for users to communicate about public daily life issues away from the politically charged conventional media environment.[109] Taking advantage of the popularity of social media and its users' willingness to engage on meaningful issues, politicians also began to leverage social media to communicate with the electorate, further normalizing

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[104] Damm, 190.

[105] Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan," 99.

[106] Damm, "Politics and the Media," 191; Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan," 93.

[107] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, 144.

[108] Damm, "Politics and the Media," 192.

[109] Damm, 192.

political activity on social media in Taiwan. Social media has therefore served as an avenue to overcome the heavily polarized and distrusted conventional media (Figure 3).[110]
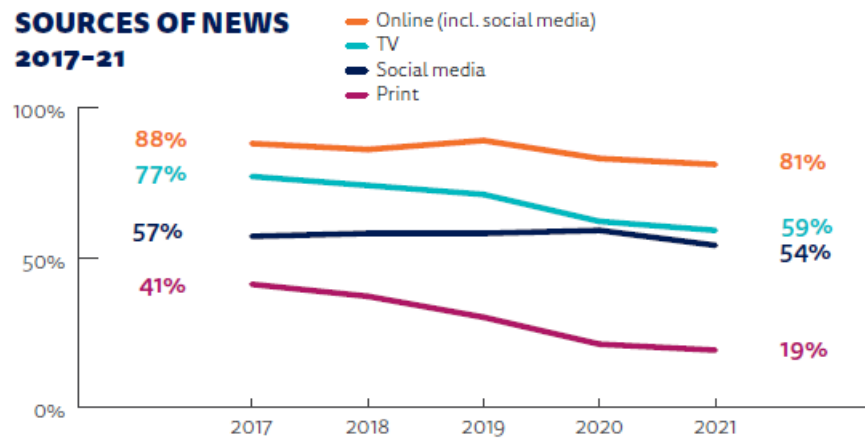

SOURCES OF NEWS 2017-21
- Online (incl. social media)
- TV
- Social media
- Print

88% ... 81%
77% ... 59%
57% ... 54%
41% ... 19%

Figure 2.   Sources of News in Taiwan from 2017 to 2021[111]

D.   SINGAPORE

Singapore's single-party government has tight control over conventional media, driving political actors to increased social media usage. Through the Info-Communications Media Development Authority (IMDA), the People's Action Party (PAP) has the power to censor any content it deems unsuitable for publication as well as authority to sue, imprison, or persecute journalists who try to circumvent government censorship. The conventional media environment therefore does not have much room for independent reporting, and self-censorship is essential for journalists wishing to remain employed. MediaCorp, which operates all broadcasting and is owned by the government, and Singapore Press Holdings, which owns all newspapers and is listed as privately owned but has government-appointed leadership, are the two groups that control all conventional media in Singapore.[112] Due to the two companies' ownership of all newspaper and

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[110] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*.

[111] Source: Newman et al., 149.

[112] Reporters Without Borders, *Reporters Without Borders, Singapore* (Washington, DC: Reporters Without Borders, 2021), https://rsf.org/en/singapore.

broadcasting services, media in Singapore aligns with PAP ideology. Likewise, in 2019, Singapore passed the POFMA bill, also known as the anti-fake news law, in an attempt to extend its control to digital media. The law allows the government to order websites, individuals, and conventional media groups to amend information considered to be "fake" and violations are punishable by a hefty fine or imprisonment. Passed to protect public interest against online falsehoods, inauthentic behavior, misuses of online accounts and "to enable measures to be taken to enhance transparency of online political advertisements," the law can be used to suppress critics of the government on blogs, chat rooms, and social media.[113] The law has been heavily criticized for infringing on civil liberties and electoral freedom.[114]

The government's inability to impose similar levels of control on social media as it does on conventional media contributed to the overall increase of social media use, particularly among critics. Despite the fact that Singapore has newspapers published in Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English, circulation rates have declined from 2017 to 2021. Similarly, there has been a slight decline in television news consumption (Figure 4).[115] Digital media has become an increasingly popular way for Singaporeans to consume news. Online news site mothership.sg, a multimedia website that claims to have over 30 million views per month, aggregates short news stories encompassing politics, the environment, leisure, and current events.[116] However, because it aggregates many stories from social media, trust in the veracity of the reporting is low. As a result, while social media increased as a source of news from 2017 to 2019, Singapore's 2020 General Election and COVID-19 may be contributing factors driving Singaporeans to conventional media in search of factual information. From 2019 to 2021, trust in conventional media increased nine points, and social media use for news decreased five percent.[117] Although social media use for

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[113] Singapore Statutes Online, "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019 - Singapore Statutes Online," accessed July 30, 2021, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/18-2019/Published/20190625?DocDate=20190625.

[114] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, 140.

[115] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*; Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*.

[116] Mothership, "Mothership," 2021, https://mothership.sg/category/news/.

[117] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*.

political purposes has decreased overall, it remains higher in Singapore when compared to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.
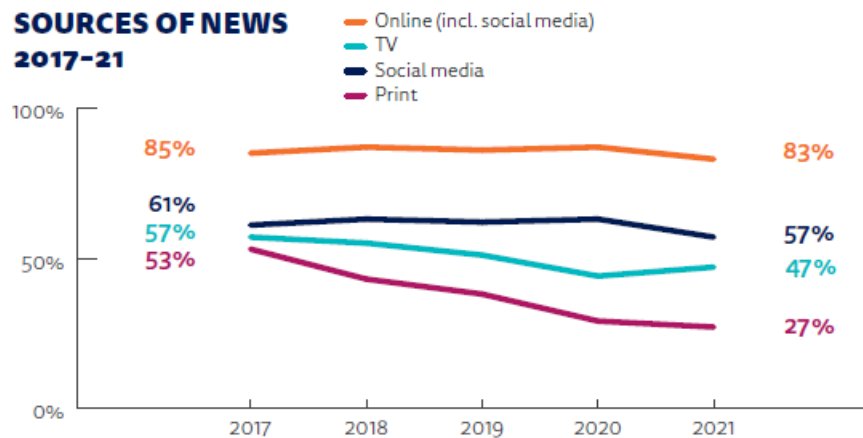

Figure 3.   Sources of News in Singapore from 2017 to 2021[118]

E.   JAPAN

In Japan, conventional media is seen as reliable by domestic consumers of information.[119] Conventional media has played a massive role in postwar Japanese society and in its economy and continues to penetrate citizens' daily lives. Several polls show that the Japanese electorate trusts conventional media over social media and relies on television and newspaper sources for political information. [120] Accordingly, Japanese citizens have spent a daily average of three hours consuming mass media over the last fifty years.[121] These findings align with the Japanese public's overall trust in mass media, suggesting that voters tend to rely on traditional media outlets for

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[118] Source: Newman et al., 145.

[119] Mori, "Media in Japan."

[120] Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries"; Dentsu Institute, *World Values Survey Wave 7; Distinctive Trends in Japan Revealed by Comparison of 77 Countries*.

[121] Mori, "Media in Japan," 459.

information.[122] Moreover, although Japan is ranked number 67 out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index due to the government's ties to conventional media outlets, it is free from authoritarian restrictions and trusted by the public.[123] A 2017 poll revealed that the Japanese public mostly turned to television news and printed newspapers versus the internet as trustworthy sources of information.[124] Additionally, Japanese social media users do not tend to rely on social media as a news source. A 2008 survey showed that Japanese respondents found the internet to be useful for gaining information on hobbies and entertainment, yet unreliable for politics.[125] This trend is again apparent in a 2021 survey that found that 51 percent of respondents in Japan were concerned about misinformation on the internet and only six percent of respondents used Facebook as a source of news.

Five primary media groups have dominated Japanese conventional media since pre-war times: Asahi TV and Asahi newspaper, Nihon TV and Yomiuri newspaper, TBS and Mainichi newspaper, Fuji TV and Sankei newspaper, and TV Tokyo and Nikkei newspaper. Cross-ownership among broadcasting and newspaper companies have allowed these companies to maintain tight control over operations and contributed to the strength of Japan's conventional media.[126] The five media groups are also all affiliated with Japan's national broadcasting system, the Nippon Hoso Kyoukai (NHK), which further integrates the groups' interests and together makes up Japan's six media giants. Additionally, all of these media groups belong to press clubs, *kisha kurabu*, which control access to government information and officials. *Kisha* clubs often block freelance journalists or foreign media from gaining direct access to newsworthy information

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[122] Dentsu Institute, *World Values Survey Wave 7; Distinctive Trends in Japan Revealed by Comparison of 77 Countries*.

[123] Reporters Without Borders, *Reporters Without Borders, Japan* (Washington, DC: Reporters Without Borders, 2021), https://rsf.org/en/japan.

[124] Chan, Chen, and Lee, "Examining the Roles of Political Social Network and the Internal Efficacy on Social Media News Engagement: A Comparative Study of Six Asian Countries."

[125] Takeshita, Saito, and Inaba, "Social Media and Political Participation in Japan."

[126] Mori, "Media in Japan," 460–62.

released during exclusive meetings.[127] This arrangement has allowed Japan's major media groups to dominate conventional media.[128]

The integrated nature of the six media giants in Japan and their reluctance to report contentious information also leads them to emphasize facts-based reporting without exaggerating political differences, thus increasing the trustworthiness of conventional media among the Japanese public. Furthermore, political neutrality has been embraced by mass media outlets, which rely on viewership for financial support.[129] Although each media group can lean slightly to the center-right or center-left, none of them support a specific political party. Rather than catering to a specific readership that shares an ideological viewpoint, Japanese newspapers focus on fast and accurate reporting. This commitment to facts-based reporting is further facilitated by Japan's one-party dominance. Aside from two interruptions from 1993 to 1994 and 2009 to 2012, the LDP has dominated Japanese politics, minimizing partisan rhetoric reported in Japanese news.

Likewise, each newspaper's broadcasting affiliate tend to avoid political coverage. Instead of focusing on issues and candidates' platforms during the 2000 House of Representatives election, Japanese television spent a majority of its efforts broadcasting information about the race and its logistics.[130] Avoiding ideology-based coverage not only caters to the large number of Japanese citizens who do not affiliate themselves with a political party but also elevates the veracity of the information and increases its trustworthiness. Providing information that is not opinion-based and can easily be fact checked makes Japan's media giants non-controversial and perceived as a reliable source of information.

Despite Japan's mass media history and the public's tendency to rely on print newspapers and television for news, media companies are slowly transitioning to online services as competitors like Yahoo! increase their presence in the Japanese news arena. As a result, at 39.9 million, or 0.7 copies per household, newspaper circulation rates experienced a record 5.3 percent fall in 2019

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[127] Taniguchi, "Changing Political Communication in Japan," 124.

[128] Mori, "Media in Japan," 460–62.

[129] Ogasahara, "Media Environments in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan," 84.

[130] Taniguchi, "Changing Political Communication in Japan," 121–26.

and continued to drop another seven percent in 2020.[131] With free online news aggregator Yahoo! News becoming a more popular method of news consumption starting in the early 2000s, widely circulated national newspapers like *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri*, and *Nikkei* finally seemed to recognize the need to transition to online services. In addition to its traditional newspaper, *Asahi* launched seven websites covering online-only specialty topics such as college sports or women's lifestyle.[132] In 2021, *Asahi* also leveraged Line, a popular Japanese social networking platform, to send out daily news bulletins and alerts.[133] *Yomiuri* added a *Yomiuri Online* option to its subscription service; however, subscribers must also purchase the print newspaper to gain access to online content. *Nikkei* took an unprecedented approach of publishing news stories online prior to releasing the print version. It also started using Twitter to advertise exclusive interviews prior to their release.[134] Finally, in 2020, NHK initiated online live streaming services, paving the way for other media groups to follow.[135]

In Japan, the gradual shift to online news has yet to significantly penetrate social media platforms especially outside the purview of the media giants. Although platforms allowing more anonymity like Twitter and YouTube are more popular in Japan than in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, Japanese news consumers continue to overwhelmingly prefer television broadcast and online news aggregators over social media (Figure 1).

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[131] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*; Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*.

[132] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, 135.

[133] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*, 138.

[134] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, 135.

[135] Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*, 138.
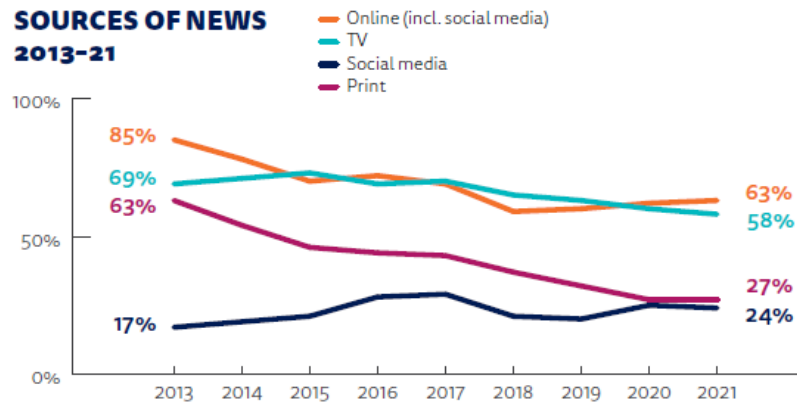
SOURCES OF NEWS 2013-21

Figure 4.   Sources of News in Japan from 2013 to 2021[136]

F.   CONCLUSION

Japanese citizens continue to place higher trust in mass media than the populations of South Korea and Taiwan. Conventional media in South Korea and Taiwan is highly polarized, and major newspapers and broadcasting companies cater to a politically partisan audience. These political narratives and identities contribute to the negative public attitudes toward conventional media in South Korea and Taiwan. Public attitudes toward conventional media in Singapore are three percent higher than in Japan. Despite the high trust, however, low levels of press freedom contribute to Singapore's high social media use. Conversely, the self-regulated and facts-based nature of Japanese conventional media leaves little room for skepticism, and the strength of the *Kisha* clubs keeps reporting against the mainstream narrative from being widely distributed. Although there has been a major shift in how conventional media is consumed in Japan, the six media groups remain the primary and most trusted source of news. Newspaper subscriptions are slowly being replaced by free sources of online news through news aggregator Yahoo! News, which has forced the six major media groups to change their tactics to remain relevant. Major publications that maintained the highest circulation rates in the world through 2019 began to offer online reporting, and some companies began to leverage social media platforms in attempts to keep their subscribers. Therefore, despite the increase of Japanese news consumers turning to social media in 2021, the total number remains significantly lower than in South Korea and Taiwan.

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[136] Source: Newman et al., 139.

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IV.   GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

An additional factor behind low political social media use might be Japan's parliamentary system of government, in which the electorate does not vote directly for its head of government. In contrast to South Korea or Taiwan, where presidential elections are held, national elections in Japan and Singapore are comparatively party-focused, which place less emphasis on individual candidates. Additionally, in party-focused elections career politicians seem to rely on traditional campaigning methods rooted in conventional media and community outreach rather than social media.[137] However, in addition to being open to political outsiders, presidential elections are clear-cut competitions where the winner holds a high amount of concentrated power. Presidential elections in South Korea and Taiwan thus allow political outsiders or charismatic candidates to compete and develop support through political social media use.[138] This chapter discusses the types of government systems in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan, and how those systems encourage or discourage political social media use. Overall, it finds that presidential elections in South Korea and Taiwan place higher emphasis on the candidate's popularity and their ability to resonate with the electorate, making political social media use a powerful tool. In Singapore and Japan, however, parliamentary elections, strong institutions, and the single-party nature of the countries' government system overshadows the influence that political social media use can have.

A.   SOUTH KOREA

The concentration of presidents' executive power and a culture of political participation encourages political social media use in South Korea. Since its democratization in 1987, South Korea has been a democratic republic with executive, legislative, and judicial branches; however, the executive holds the most power in South Korean politics. Although South Korea is often used as a model case study for successful democratization, some authoritarian legacies remain embedded in its contemporary domestic politics. South Korean presidents enjoy relatively

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[137] Esser and Pfetsch, "Comparing Political Communication: A 2020 Update."

[138] Francis Fukuyama, Bjorn Dressel, and Boo-Seng Chang, "Facing the Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 16 (2005): 102–16.

unchecked power across policy making, foreign affairs, and national security matters, leading some analysts to describe South Korea as a weak democracy due to the executive branch's overwhelming influence over the state.[139] The legislative branch and judicial branch were established as secondary functions of government that were subordinate to the executive and therefore unable to effectively provide the checks and balances that are critical to a fully consolidated democratic system. Instead, the president's centralized power results in weak political parties that do not effectively serve as intermediaries between the electorate and the executive.[140] South Korean presidents' power has allowed them to suppress civil liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press and obstruct NGOs' efforts to reaching North Korean citizens through leaflets or messages delivered through balloons and USB drives.[141] Additionally, the concentration of executive power places considerable emphasis on South Korean presidents' personalities, political preferences, and personal connections. One presidential election can have vast implications for South Korea's foreign and domestic policies, further contributing to a president's celebrity-like status.

As a result, charismatic candidates who participate in presidential elections are more likely to engage in "personality politics" and develop large social media followings that they can use to their advantage.[142] After a ban on internet and social media campaigning was lifted in 2011, politicians began to leverage social media in an attempt to reach a wider audience. In 2012, presidential candidates Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in exploited social media platforms in order to build a connection with potential supporters. Conservative candidate Park used a personal account in addition to her campaign's official account to showcase aspects of her private life and improve her political image among the South Korean youth. Progressive candidate Moon used Twitter and Facebook to personally send out live updates and share his opinions on current events, which were often retweeted by his followers. The post-election analysis revealed a 12.8 percent

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[139] Jung H. Pak, *North Korea's Long Shadow on South Korean's Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2021), https://www.brokings.edu/articles/north-korea-long-shadow-on-south-koreas-democracy/.

[140] Pak.

[141] Pak; Reporters Without Borders, *Reporters Without Borders, South Korea* (Washington, DC: Reporters Without Borders, 2021), https://rsf.org/en/south-korea.

[142] Fukuyama, Dressel, and Chang, "Facing the Perils of Presidentialism."

increase in voter turnout compared to the previous election, which was largely the result of social media's ability to reach and engage the South Korean youth.[143]

Another aspect of South Korea's government system that encourages political social media use is the already present culture of political participation among citizens, which transferred to social media platforms. South Korea's weak political parties, weak bureaucracy, and concentrated executive power have encouraged a proactive electorate that interacts with government and politics at the grassroots level.[144] Rather than passively absorbing politics, relying on parties to represent their interests, or being indifferent to presidential scandals, South Koreans are more likely to publicly express their discontent towards the government and public institutions. Since South Korea's democratization in 1987, political participation has gradually increased and fostered the growth of diverse political views on key South Korean social and security issues. In addition to citizens' desire to be active participants in democracy, government leaders also encourage citizen input. Seeking to foster the public's trust in government, between 2003 and 2008, the Roh Moo Hyun administration launched initiatives to improve collaboration among citizens and government.[145] Through the newly established Presidential Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization, the government "conducted citizen surveys, built infrastructure for volunteer activities, improved civic activities," and measured whether its efforts at increasing citizen participation in government was effective.[146]

This atmosphere of citizen participation remains present in contemporary South Korea and has manifested in the social media environment. Citizens connecting with each other through social media to organize candlelight protests and voice discontent with the government have become a part of contemporary South Korean culture.[147] For example, the 2002 Yangju

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[143] Willnat and Min, "The Emergence of Social Media Politics in South Korea: The Case of the 2012 Presidential Election."

[144] Younhee Kim, "Citizen Participation in Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Korean Politics and Public Administration* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 315.

[145] Kim, "Citizen Participation in Korea."

[146] Kim, 318.

[147] Maurice Vergeer and Se Jung Park, "Origins and Channels of Online Civic Movements," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 281.

candlelight protests against the acquittal of two U.S. soldiers who accidentally ran over two South Koreans with a military vehicle drew 100,000 participants and lasted for 2 months. This mass demonstration pressured both the U.S. and South Korean governments to revise the Status of Forces Agreement, giving South Korea jurisdiction over crimes committed by U.S. service members. Similarly, a 2008 candlelight protest organized on social media against the government's plan to lift its U.S. beef import ban during a mad cow disease outbreak lasted approximately 100 days and drew a crowd of 3.5 million participants. The intensity and duration of the protest led the president to issue a public apology and enter into renegotiations with the U.S.[148] In 2018, South Korean voters showed how social media can be effective in demanding government reform. Following mass demonstrations organized through social media vis-à-vis South Korean women's #metoo movement, 139 bills were proposed and seven laws passed addressing gender equality and sexual harassment in the workplace.[149] South Korean citizens have thus leveraged social media use to organize and communicate with the government.

B.   TAIWAN

As in South Korea, Taiwan's history of authoritarian rule has created an atmosphere where voters participate in elections as a demonstration of their commitment to the democratic process. Taiwanese presidential elections are strongly contested by multiple parties and have high voter turnout. In Taiwan, voting is not compulsory and voters must travel to their household registration districts to cast their ballots, regardless of where they reside. Still, Taiwan boasts an overall 78 percent average voter turnout for national elections.[150] Following a 1994 decree stating that presidents must be nationally elected, both the prominent party, the KMT, and the opposition, the DPP, have held office.[151] In 1996, KMT candidate Lee Teng-hui won the first contested elections by securing 54 percent of the popular vote. After his term ended in 2000, however, DPP candidate

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[148] Seongyi Yun and Young Chang, "New Media and Political Socialization of Teenagers: The Case of the 200 Candlelight Protests in Korea," *Asian Perspective* 35, no. 1 (2011): 144.

[149] Hasunuma and Shin, "#MeToo in Japan and South Korea: #WeToo, #WithYou," 2019.

[150] Timothy Rich and Jonathan Sullivan, "Elections," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 112.

[151] Dafydd Fell, "Party and Party Systems," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 88.

Chen Shui-bian was the electorate's top choice.[152] The 2000 election resulted in the KMT's first experience with not ruling Taiwan since its authoritarian rule. Since independence, the KMT had not adapted the party image to one that the electorate could identify with. Following its 2000 loss, it recognized the need to change its campaign strategy, connect with the public on a more personal level, and understand what issues resonated with voters if it wanted to stay in power.[153]

The 1994 decree outlining the requirement for a nationally elected president resulted in a candidate-centered system that gave well-known politicians leverage in competitive elections. A candidate's identity and reputation have become so important that Taiwanese presidential campaigns often revolve around getting the electorate to know the candidate. As described by Gary Rawnsley, "the purpose of a modern campaign is to sell the client, the candidate standing for election."[154] Successful candidates understand the importance of exploiting technology as part of the process of advancing their campaigns and reaching a wider audience with well-articulated and easily understood platforms. All candidates contesting the 2000 elections had their own websites that highlighted their identities, campaigns, and policy platforms. Some candidates developed creative ways to connect with voters online. Chen Shui-bian encouraged those who visited his website to submit nominees for Cabinet positions. He supplemented the survey with personal photographs, periodic updates on his campaign, and a list of his political achievements both in simplified Chinese characters and in English to reach a wider audience.[155] Other campaign tactics ranged from James Soong Chu-yu wavering on whether he would run for office as an independent or a member of the KMT to Chen Shui-bian producing campaign merchandise such as mugs, hats, and key rings to attract voters.[156]

Taiwan's system of government has given rise to the excitement surrounding Taiwan's election culture. Analysts describe Taiwan's elections as electrifying, filled with enthusiasm,

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[152] Rich and Sullivan, "Elections," 121.

[153] Gary Rawnsley, "An Institutional Approach to Election Campaigning in Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 37 (2003): 773.

[154] Rawnsley, 770.

[155] Rawnsley, 766.

[156] Rawnsley, 768.

rallies, sound trucks, and campaign leaflets on every corner.[157] Election culture can look like "democratic festivals" where voters proudly wave flags or wear colors representing their candidate of choice.[158] Elections are much anticipated events that build up during non-election years; voters are exposed to "permanent campaigns" framing current events as issues to be voted on during the following election.[159] One month prior to the 2000 election, the Cathay General Hospital reported treating 20 to 30 percent more patients for anxiety and insomnia due to the elections. Physicians warned the public to be aware of "election syndrome" and stated that they were busy treating patients with physical injuries from scuffles at rallies and restraining the elderly who wanted to be released to cast their ballot.[160]

Taiwan's election culture has manifested on social media, where users are able to engage directly with candidates and have public discussions about each candidate's platform. Social media's ability to reach a high number of users and provide sound bites of candidates' identities and platforms make it a powerful medium of communication in Taiwan's candidate-focused elections. China, which has a direct interest on the outcome of Taiwanese elections, recognizes the influential role social media plays and closely follows political social media accounts and blogs.[161] Taiwanese pollsters observed new trends of social media usage in the 2020 election: candidates were more aggressive in creating content through livestreams, posts, and discussions compared to the 2016 election, which showcased leaflets and more traditional websites; and social media posts were presented in "soundbite" styles that had a bigger chance of going viral. Several candidates showcased their popularity by openly discussing their fan clubs or appearing on famous

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[157] Rawnsley, 777.

[158] Rich and Sullivan, "Elections," 119.

[159] Rawnsley, "An Institutional Approach to Election Campaigning in Taiwan," 778.

[160] Taipei Times, "Hospitals Report an Increase in Patients with 'Election Syndrome,'" *Taipei Times*, March 17, 2000, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/local/archives/2000/03/17/0000028119.

[161] Jessica Drun, *Taiwan's Social Media Landscape: Ripe for Election Interference?* (Washington, DC: Center for Advanced China Research, 2018), https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2018/11/13/taiwans-social-media-landscape-ripe-for-election-interference.

YouTubers' channels.[162] The speed and popularity of social media have taken Taiwan's elections to a new level, connecting voters and candidates in real-time exchanges and offering more insights into candidates' personal lives than was previously possible.

C. SINGAPORE

The stable nature of Singapore's single-party government system and the PAP's dominance in government discourage political social media use among citizens, despite opposition parties' reliance on political social media. The Singaporean government is a non-democratic single party system and elections do not have the same type of festive atmosphere as those in South Korea and Taiwan. As discussed in Chapter 2, the PAP has held power since Singapore's 1965 independence, so although support for the PAP has fluctuated in the past, elections are less about increasing citizen participation in government and voting for a new representative government. Instead, elections are more about how many parliamentary seats the PAP will lose to the opposition. Although the state is known to hold free elections, analysts do not consider them fair because the opposition faces an array of obstacles to connecting with the electorate and being an effective veto power in parliament. Singaporean elections generally have high voter turnout, allow different parties to run, and are not riddled with electoral fraud. However, the PAP utilizes authoritarian tactics to tip the scale and give itself greater advantages in elections. The PAP has leveraged the media to control the narrative surrounding their party and only display positive aspects of their efforts, has gerrymandered district lines to their advantage, and has sued opponents into bankruptcy so they can no longer participate in elections.[163]

The results of Singapore's election in June 2020 suggested that there was overwhelming public support for the PAP because of the number of parliamentary seats won by the PAP. However, Singapore's parliamentary plurality model did not accurately translate voter support into parliamentary seats. For example, in 2020, the PAP won 61% of the vote, the WP won 11% of the

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[162] Huileng Tan, "Taiwan's Presidential Hopefuls Turn to YouTube and Facebook as Elections Draw Closer," *CNBC*, January 9, 2020, sec. Asia Politics, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/09/taiwan-elections-presidential-candidates-ramp-up-social-media-campaign.html.

[163] Abdullah, "New Normal' No More: Democratic Backsliding in Singapore after 2015," 127.

votes, and the remaining 28% of the vote went to other smaller parties.[164] Despite only winning 61% of the votes, the PAP ended up holding an overwhelming 89% of seats in the legislature. The remaining 11% went to the WP, which resulted in the highest number of seats won by the opposition since Singapore's independence.[165] Opposition parties with a small amount of support did not fare well. The Progress Singapore Party and Singapore Democratic Party won 10% and 5% of the votes respectively yet did not win any seats in legislature.[166] Thus, the plurality model used in Singapore does not accurately represent minority parties, which can discourage voter support for parties that seem guaranteed to lose. Less voter support can translate into decreased political participation on social media by voters during election season, particularly when the PAP is expected to win every election.

Still, even without significant opposition, the PAP is responsive to its citizens despite being an autocratic government. The 2020 elections show that public support for the PAP had declined since the last national election in 2015. In fact, with the exception of the 2011 election, where PAP support was 60%, the 2020 elections reflect the lowest public support the PAP had received since 1968.[167] Because the PAP's position as the majority party is not threatened by the opposition, they can leverage elections as a meter of public satisfaction with government. In this way, the public has a more significant role in domestic politics than opposition parties because the PAP has responded to public dissatisfaction. Following low voter support in the 2011 elections, the PAP strengthened its welfare policies through increasing investments into the general population and businesses. The PAP also loosened restrictions on opposition parties to campaign, helping to level the political playing field. After the PAP's major victory in 2015, however, the PAP reinstituted some of its strict illiberal policies, which resulted in lower public support in the 2020 elections.[168]

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164 Hao, "Generally Exasperating (GE) 2020."

165 Conrad Guimaraes, "Singapore's 2020 Election: Explaining the PAP's Stagnation," August 5, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/singapores-2020-election-explaining-the-paps-stagnation/.

166 Hao, "Generally Exasperating (GE) 2020."

167 Abdullah, "New Normal' No More: Democratic Backsliding in Singapore after 2015," 1128.

168 Abdullah, 1124.

The PAP's concern over its public accountability opens the possibility for more liberal discourse through social media from the electorate; however, retribution under the POFMA law, political apathy, satisfaction with government performance have kept Singaporeans away from political participation on social media. This is despite the fact that social media could offer an ideal platform for political participation in Singapore. The country's elaborate internet infrastructure and high literacy rates combined with the government's constraints on political expression and civic participation seem to offer ideal conditions for expressing discontent, engaging in political debates, or connecting with like-minded voters on social media. Social media offers anonymity to those who fear retribution from the government and offers private spaces that make monitoring by the government more difficult. However, 2016 POFMA law and the government's willingness to enforce it presents a significant impediment to political social media use. Additionally, aside from criticism from the opposition, the lack of evidence pointing to a large number of public online movements against the PAP suggests that the electorate has not felt compelled to organize against the government. Much like in Japan, there is significant political apathy among the electorate, leading to a lack of interest in the state's politics. [169] Additionally, the PAP's record of performance and legitimacy has kept the majority of the electorate satisfied with the government system. Singaporeans are concerned about, "'bread and butter' issues such as the cost of living, housing, and heath care, rather than greater political pluralism for its own sake."[170] Citizens may not feel a need for a major political overhaul, leading to less political discourse through social media.

D.   JAPAN

In Japan, formal and informal constraints on prime ministers' executive power and the strength of government institutions make political social media use less impactful and therefore less used during national elections. Japanese prime ministers are often described by analysts as having weak power due to Japan's constitution, government structure, and bureaucracy. [171]

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[169] Marko Skoric, Deborah Ying, and Ying Ng, "Bowling Online, Not Alone: Online Social Capital and Political Participation in Singapore," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (2009): 414.

[170] George, Hao, and Wen, "Social Media and Political Participation in Singapore," 175.

[171] Gaunder, "The Institutional Landscape of Japanese Politics," 4.

Japan's constitution appoints prime ministers as the head of the Cabinet, which allows them to select and dismiss Cabinet members, dissolve the Lower House, initiate legislation at Cabinet meetings, and have the secretariat's support. However, it does not clearly articulate their authorities nor grant them exclusive executive responsibilities.[172] Instead, Article 66 states that the Cabinet is responsible to the Diet, and Article 3 divides executive power across Cabinet members. In the event of any confusion over competing authorities within the Cabinet, Article 6 clearly specifies that the prime minister cannot hold executive power independent of the Cabinet.[173] Thus, the prime minister's ability to informally influence the Cabinet has a direct impact on how effectively he can govern Japan. Prime ministers must maneuver the government system informally through factional leadership; personal ties within the bureaucracy and opposition parties; and support from the public, businesses, and the United States.[174]

In addition to its formal constraints on the prime minister's authority, Japan's party-centric government system rewards conformity and does not give prime ministers much independent informal power. Japan's constitution identifies the National Diet as the "highest organ of state power."[175] The Diet is divided into an Upper House and a Lower House, with the Lower House being the more powerful chamber due to its responsibilities in controlling the budget, ratifying treaties, and selecting prime ministers.[176] The Japanese prime minister is a member of the Lower House and is selected to hold the position by their party, not the electorate. Furthermore, the Lower House has the ability to place a different party member in the prime minister position at any time. The Lower House's influence often results in politicians who adhere to party principles in attempt to position themselves competitively to hold this office. Because Japanese political parties have selected prime ministers who adhere to party policies in the past, most prime ministers have been reluctant to advocate for controversial policies or take positions against their party's preferences. With the notable exceptions of Shinzo Abe and Junichiro Koizumi, the Japanese government

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[172] Gaunder, 4.

[173] Tomohito Shinoda, "Prime Ministerial Leadership," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 51.

[174] Shinoda, 54.

[175] Gaunder, "The Institutional Landscape of Japanese Politics," 4.

[176] Gaunder, 4.

system has yielded a number of prime ministers who have quickly fallen out of favor with the electorate. The Lower House's power to select prime ministers also results in a high turnover: in the last 23 years, Japan has had 12 prime ministers.[177] Despite the high turnover rate, Japan has remained a stable country with a strong economy with few fluctuations in its domestic politics, suggesting that changes in prime ministers does not drastically alter Japanese politics.

Another factor that weakens the prime minister's independent power is Japan's strong bureaucracy. Prime ministers do not have direct authority over the bureaucracy, which has an institutionalized role in government that often gives it more influence than elected politicians.[178] The bureaucracy originated in Japan's prewar political system and has survived and gained its power through Japan's economic growth, its subject matter expertise, and continuity provided by career bureaucrats.[179] Although the bureaucracy can help a prime minister execute their agenda, it can also carry on independently regardless of who is in office. Despite the numerous prime minister transitions, "the system ensured its own survival, no matter who was in charge."[180] In fact, the Japanese bureaucracy's objectives are to advance their respective sectional interests, which can at times be misaligned with the prime minister's interests. Rather than collaborating with the executive, the bureaucracy governs in a way that protects its own authority. To accomplish this, bureaucrats select cabinet vice-ministers who support their sectional interests. Because cabinet ministers often hold office for a short time, the vice-minister position is considered crucial in maintaining continuity and advocating for the bureaucracy's interests.[181]

Overall, strong institutions in Japan's government system erode prime ministers' independent power and changes the dynamics of Japan's national elections, which reinforces low political social media usage in Japan. The strength of the bureaucracy and Japan's parliamentary

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[177] Andrew Oros, "Domestic Power Transitions and Japan's Evolving Strategic Posture, 2006 to 2012," in *Japan's Security Renaissance* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 189.

[178] John C. Campbell, "Democracy and Bureaucracy in Japan," in *Democracy in Japan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 114.

[179] Gerald Curtis, "The Government of Modern Japan: The Japanese Bureaucracy," accessed December 11, 2020, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/jp_bureau/govtjb06.html.

[180] Glosserman, "The Seiji Shokku," 75.

[181] Shinoda, "Prime Ministerial Leadership," 49.

style of government where the Lower House selects the prime minister can leave voters feeling disenchanted with and disconnected from the selection process of their next state leader because they have little influence over the outcome. Although this feeling of disenchantment is often described by analysts as political apathy in the Japanese electorate, political candidates are equally absent from political participation on social media. Unlike South Korean and Taiwanese candidates who invest in their social media presence to reach voters, Japanese politicians are generally more reliant on traditional methods of political communication. This observation can partially be explained by the prime minister selection process, where adherence to party principles is more important than public popularity. Moreover, because personal and political networks established after years in government service are crucial for the prime minister selection, outsiders —whose ability to directly connect with the electorate often makes them powerful candidates for political office — are rarely seen in Japanese politics. In a party-centric environment, social media is thus not a useful tool for politicians who wish to conform and appeal to their party rather than the electorate.

E.   CONCLUSION

The differences in elections and government systems across Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore have direct impacts on each state's political social media usage. While Japan's and Singapore's party-centric elections do not reward politicians for a large social media presence, candidates contesting in South Korea's and Taiwan's elections suffer negative consequences if they fail to leverage social media in their campaigns. Additionally, the amount of independent power each state's government system grants its premier seems to correlate to the electorate's desire to directly connect with politicians. Voters in South Korea and Taiwan participating in presidential elections recognize that each candidate can bring vastly different domestic and foreign policies that may impact their daily lives. Social media gives both politicians and the electorate a platform to engage, collaborate, and participate in the democratic process. By contrast, strong state institutions in Japan and Singapore erode prime ministers' independent power and ensure that government processes remain stable regardless of the head of government.

V.   CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to investigate why there is a low level of political social media use in domestic Japanese politics, particularly when compared to Asian countries with similar qualities —specifically South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Through a comparative approach, this research has explored three hypotheses addressing political social media across Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, and concludes that levels of political polarization, public attitudes towards conventional media, and national government structures, institutions, and norms all play a role in influencing each country's political participation through social media. This chapter discusses the findings of this research, its associated implications for Japan, and concludes with possible areas for future research. Overall, Japan's low political social media use arises from its low levels of political polarization, the strength of the conventional media, and its stable government structure, institutions, and norms. These findings suggest that political social media use is likely to remain low in the near term due to the stability of Japan's polarization levels and media and government systems. However, to fully understand the role political social media use has in Japanese domestic politics, further research is required on what circumstances lead politicians and voters to turn to social media and how they choose to utilize social media.

A.   FINDINGS

Low political polarization and the incumbency of the conventional media and government system all contribute to Japan's low political social media use: low polarization results in less political cleavages for social media to thrive on, high levels of trust in Japan's sophisticated conventional media discourages voters from turning to social media for news, and Japan's stable parliamentary system of government encourages conformity, which is less exciting for creating social media content. Although Japan and Singapore have similarities across all three factors, the non-democratic nature of Singapore's government system presents an additional variable that contributes to comparatively higher use of political social media in Singapore. By contrast, in relation to Japan, political participation through social media in South Korea and Taiwan are high as supported by their high levels of political polarization, polarized and fragmented conventional media, and presidential democratic government systems (Table 4).

Table 4.   Summary of Political Polarization, Conventional Media, and Government Systems across Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore

	Political Polarization	Conventional Media	Government System	Political Social Media Use
Japan	Low	Centralized	Parliamentary/Democratic	Low
South Korea	High	Decentralized	Presidential/Democratic	High
Taiwan	High	Decentralized	Presidential/Democratic	High
Singapore	Low	Centralized	Parliamentary/Non-democratic	Moderate

Although the phenomena themselves are discrete, polarization, conventional media, and government systems in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan are interconnected and influence one another (Figure 5). It is therefore difficult to attribute Japan's low political social media use to a single factor. For example, not only does Japan's low political polarization contribute to the electorate's overall low political social media use, but it also influences the conventional media environment and supports single-party dominance in Japan. Low amounts of political cleavage in Japanese society support the conventional media system's emphasis on facts-based neutral reporting. As a result, because there are fewer divergent political views among the electorate, citizens are less likely to seek outside perspectives from freelance journalists or foreign press, including on social media. Japan's government system also encourages low political polarization in the electorate. Strong state institutions leave little room for politicians to formally drive Japan's policies, leading to less divergent political ideologies and less polarization.
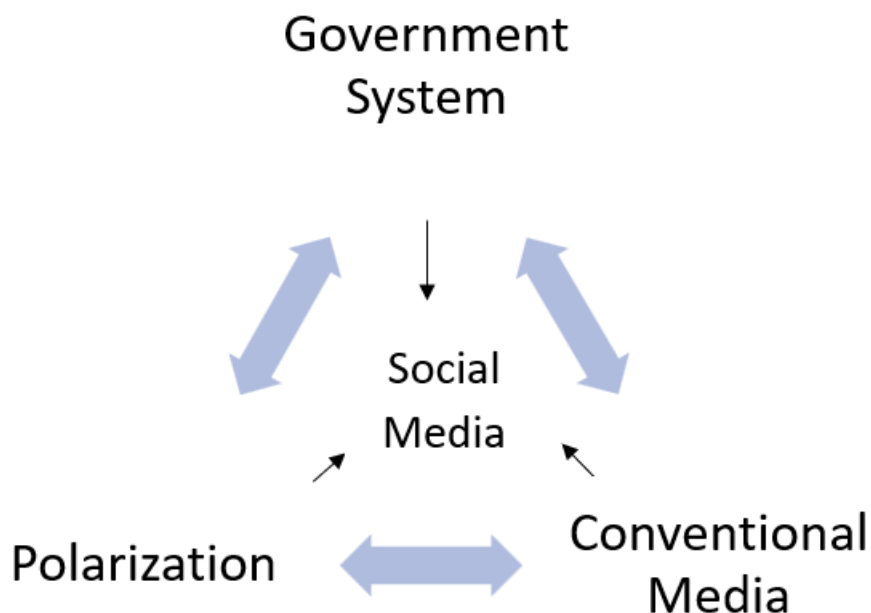
Figure 5.   Relationship between Government System, Polarization, and Social Media

It is thus hard to draw clear boundaries regarding exactly what makes political social media use in Japan lower than in comparable Asian states. There are no clear boundaries that point to the fundamental reason why political participation through social media in Japan is low. Low levels of polarization, the incumbency of the conventional media system, and Japan's system of government all play a role in explaining why Japanese voters and politicians typically do not turn to social media for political engagement.

B.   IMPLICATIONS

That said, the complementary relationships between Japan's polarization, conventional media, and government system are helpful in assessing how likely Japan's political social media use is to change in the future. Government system reforms or an overhaul of Japan's conventional media system may alter political polarization levels, thus influencing political social media use. However, Japan's bureaucracy, parliamentary elections, single-party system, media giants, and *kisha* clubs are institutionalized factors that are unlikely to undergo significant modifications in the near future. Japan's government system, conventional media, and low polarization levels have resisted disruptions and remained stable since the 1950s. Changes to Japan's political social media use is thus also unlikely to occur, making Japan both more resilient against risks associated with

social media use and resistant to adopting new and innovative ideas that might arise from social media.

A main benefit of low political social media use in Japan is that it makes social media users less vulnerable to new and potentially disruptive sources of information. Harmful information obtained through social media can range from new deviant domestic political voices to misinformation and foreign influence. Because of social media's ability to accentuate users' political views, create echo chambers that reinforce one's beliefs, and easily mask misinformation, foreign and domestic political actors can exploit social media to sway the electorate and harm a country's democratic institutions. Regardless of intent, misinformation causes confusion, distrust, and division among citizens and can damage political communication within a society. A 2019 study on the 2016 U.S. presidential election showed that user engagement with misinformation and fake news websites spread through social media peaked in 2016, and although consumption of information has since declined, access to fake news websites remains high among Americans.[182] In Japan, low levels of political social media use suggest that the proliferation of misinformation generally conducted through social media is also low. Additionally, Japanese citizens' tendency to rely on conventional media outlets for news has the ability to make them less vulnerable to misinformation spread through social media. Even if voters are exposed to false or misleading information, they are probably less likely to believe its contents and instead interpret the information as entertainment or spam.

However, there are also negative implications to low political social media use in Japan: new and less powerful domestic politicians, opposition groups, independent media, and minority groups remain peripheral and have limited access to communicate with voters. While media publication and broadcast of diverging ideas can lead to higher polarization among the electorate, they can also contribute to political parties offering more distinct policy choices that represent social cleavages within Japan. Rather than retaining political and media incumbents that dominate Japanese domestic politics, increased social media use by the electorate could provide a platform for new players in Japan's democratic system. Social media has proven to be a powerful mediator for bottom-up reforms in South Korea and Taiwan and provided a platform for opposition groups

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[182] Hunt Allcott, Matthew Gentzkow, and Chuan Yu, "Trends in the Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media," *Research and Politics*, June 2019, 2.

in Singapore. However, the strength of Japan's government system coupled with associated low levels of political polarization and a strong conventional media system reinforces existing norms and inhibits new ideas from taking root.

C.   FUTURE RESEARCH

At the time this research was conducted, there was a gap in the literature with respect to case studies or analyses of political social media use in Japan. Therefore, this study relied on survey results and quantitative evidence to address the research question. Much remains to be studied surrounding political social media use in Japan. Despite the prevalence of social media in Japan, it has not played a significant role in the country's domestic politics. Low political social media *usage* has thus made it difficult to assess whether political activity on social media has had any *impact* on Japanese politics. Although studies on social media's use and impacts are abundant for other countries, only a small amount of literature has been published on this topic for Japan. However, as the conventional media environment in Japan slowly transitions to online spaces to remain competitive with internet news aggregators, it will be instructive to observe whether Japanese political actors will change how they interact with political social media. Additionally, research on whether political social media use trends are consistent across national and local politics may help further inform how polarization, conventional media, and systems of government influence how and when political participation occurs through social media.

D.   CONCLUSION

Political social media use has become an increasingly popular method of political communication around the world because of its ability to act both as an accelerant of and intensifier to the spread of information.[183] Social media can give marginalized groups, political grievances, social movements, and unconventional political actors a global audience that places pressure on the status quo. As a result, social media has radically changed how citizens gather political information and engage with their government.[184] In Japan, however, social media has yet to

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[183] Marc Lynch, "How the Media Trashed the Transitions," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015): 96.

[184] Willnat and Aw, "Political Communication in Asia: Challenges and Opportunities," 4.

become a key political player. Understanding the factors that discourage political social media use in Japan will be increasingly important as this trend of social media in politics continues around the world.

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