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Participation in Contentious Politics: Rethinking the Roles of News, Social Media, and Conversation Amid Divisiveness

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ABSTRACT

When political disputes devolve into heated partisan conflicts, do the factors known to trigger electoral political engagement continue to operate, or do they change? We consider this question during a divisive electoral context—a gubernatorial recall—focusing on how media consumption, conversations, and interactions with social media feed into the decision to participate in politics. To do so, we employ high-quality survey data collected in the weeks before the 2012 Wisconsin recall election. Results indicate that during times of contentious politics, political communication does not operate as observed in less polarized settings, calling into question widely held assumptions about what spurs and suppresses electoral participation. Most notably, we find that broadcast news consumption negatively predicts participation, whereas political conversation with coworkers and use of political social media positively predict participation. The implications for electoral behavior research in contentious political environments are discussed.

In recent years, partisan conflict in the United States has reached a fever pitch, with political elites, media outlets, and advocacy groups advancing oppositional, seemingly intractable political positions (Abramowitz, 2011). These battles have produced government shutdowns, near credit default, terrabytes of inflammatory headlines in social media, and expressions of civic discontent as varied as the rise of the Tea Party movement, Occupy Wall Street, and Donald Trump's presidency.

In this essay, we examine how our polarized era is playing out in citizens' choices about how to participate in politics. Political polarization itself has, of course, been greatly studied; but the possibility that this polarization—and especially, the eruption of intense periods we refer to as *contentious politics*—may reshape the dynamics of communication and political behavior has received less attention. We therefore seek to explore how the established relationships between political communication and political behavior change (or do not) in periods of political contentiousness.

Our approach to this question is to examine a particular case—political divisiveness in Wisconsin between the political protests of 2011 and failed recall election of Governor Scott Walker in 2012—that has two features useful for study: first, it is a moment of intense contentiousness, meaning that political events took on more than their usual share of importance in news coverage, interpersonal talk, social media discussion, and citizen involvement. As we shall see, this was a moment in which underlying polarization becomes such a dominant feature of civic experience that even citizens usually uninterested in politics could not help but form opinions, develop alliances, and get involved (Wells et al., 2017).

Second, the case's state-level nature is significant because it brings us a bit closer to the level of everyday citizen experience. Because our society's division goes beyond national politics, many states in the union are riven by divisive and bitter struggles between contending parties and the groups that support them (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). This is magnified by the growing choice of states as sites of political change by strategists pursuing agendas that have stagnated in Washington

(Nagourney & Martin, 2013). Moreover, the nature of state-level politics is that all politics can become especially personal, with the potential to divide citizens not just from abstractions on cable news, but from their neighbors, coworkers, and even family members (Brace & Jewett, 1995).

We suspect that contentiousness occurring within the micro-polity of the state may result in different relationships between political communication and political behavior. As developed below, we contend that some of the "usual suspects" of citizen engagement in politics—news consumption, political talk, and social media use—may operate differently in contentious political climates, forcing scholars to rethink accepted assumptions about what drives engagement amid divisiveness. Fundamentally, this should affect how we think broadly about American elections as well.

We begin by reviewing the roles played by news and social media use, along with interpersonal talk about politics, in the extant literature. We then elaborate our conceptualization of political contentiousness, leading us to reconsider research on the antecedents of political participation. Doing so motivates a set of predictions about the dynamics of engagement during our case of state-level contentious politics. We analyze survey data to examine the relationship of news consumption, political discussion, and social media use with a range of democratic outcomes. Our results reveal the underpinnings of political participation during an especially contentious period.

Literature review

Our approach to studying contentious politics is guided by concerns central to contemporary public opinion and civic engagement research, which has developed a view of news use and communication among citizens—face-to-face, online, or through social platforms and systems—as channeling the effects of demographic and social structural variables on civic and political behavior (Bode et al., 2016; Gil De Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). However, during contentious political periods—when news depictions grow more intense, conversational networks become more polarized, and social media is saturated with partisan views—the tensions associated with social structural location

and affiliations may be amplified, altering these communication factors (Wells et al., 2017).

Communication during political campaigns

In typical campaign settings, the importance of citizen communication is understood in three ways: (a) communication among citizens is seen as channeling the influence of news media on democratic outcomes; (b) offline and online conversational networks are considered distinct yet complementary pathways to participation; and (c) talking politics with family and friends (understood as homogeneous others) is linked to participatory engagement, whereas talking to coworkers (understood as heterogeneous others) produces tolerance for oppositional views, but reduces engagement (Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Pan, Shen, Paek, & Sun, 2006; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). News provides citizens with the information and motivation to take on political activities (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001) and citizen conversation, in turn, acts as a springboard for participation and democratic acts (Carey, 1995; Habermas, 1962).

News media use has a direct effect on civic and political participation (Bode et al., 2016; Edgerly), and news use is also thought to complement political talk, especially among family and friends. This is particularly true during political campaigns, in which citizens feel increased pressure to pay attention to information about the campaign (Campbell, 2008). Many reasons explain the centrality of talk and its complementarity to news: it provides resources for understanding incoming information, encourages both expression and the crystallization of attitudes during message composition, and creates opportunities for recruitment into collective action (Pan et al., 2006).

But not all discussion contexts, or partners, are created equal. Individuals tend to associate with those like them, typically citing family and close friends as primary political discussion partners (Wyatt et al., 2000). These homogeneous settings are powerful contexts for encouraging political behavior and collective action (Centola, 2010; Mutz, 2006). Conversely, political talk that includes a wider range of viewpoints "teaches citizens to see things they had previously overlooked, including the views of others" (Manin, 1987, p. 351). Workplace conversations often provide exposure to divergent viewpoints, largely

because most people do not self-select their colleagues (Mutz & Mondak, 2006; see also Brundidge, 2010).

However, while cross-cutting talk may increase awareness of and tolerance for oppositional perspectives, it may also reduce partisanship and participatory intent (Mutz, 2006). In particularly contentious political periods, some may choose to close off conversations to avoid disagreement or discomfort—dynamics that may become especially acute in politically heterogeneous settings such as the workplace (Wells et al., 2017).

Social networking sites

Online social network systems, such as Facebook and Twitter, are relatively recent additions to traditional models predicting participatory outcomes. They serve multiple functions, as both sources of news content shared by friends and locations of political and social expression, often blending the two seamlessly. Political campaigns make use of social networking systems, as do grassroots activists and citizens engaging in everyday political talk (Kreiss, 2012). In many cases, news and conversation are purposely merged into a single broader interaction.

Research has begun to examine the political influence of social networking sites on democratic outcomes (Bode, 2016a; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Xenos et al., 2014) and generally finds positive impacts of social networking use on political participation (Boulianne, 2015). According to Dimitrova and coauthors (2014), social media sites function primarily to involve, connect, and mobilize voters. Unlike more conventional and even other online modes of political talk, the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) for news and commentary often includes public affiliation with one side or the other (Kim & Chen, 2016). And since news sharing and conversation occur simultaneously on these platforms, their influence on participation may bypass the processes observed in prior research, in which conversation and news sharing are distinct temporal events.

Participating in contentious politics

The research just reviewed has been almost entirely built on studies conducted at a national level, many in situations that did not exhibit a particularly intense level of political disagreement. But this polarization has become the baseline of American politics and social life, with partisanship and related identities now forming a primary component for many citizens' interpretation of moral judgments, policy preferences, social and political groups, and even acceptance of fact (Abramowitz, 2014; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Kreiss, 2017; Layman, Carsey, & Menasce Horowitz, 2006). We must be mindful that we are likely to encounter a greater frequency of periods well described as contentious—and that at such moments, dynamics of participation may display different patterns from those described in most research on these topics.

But aggregate-level polarization itself is not something that many citizens experience in a very direct way. This is because patterns of homophily lead us to experience more agreement than disagreement in our daily lives (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), and social practices lead us to smooth over the rest (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). But there are times in which general *polarization* gives way to something more direct and consequential for citizen participation in politics. This we refer to as political *contentiousness.*

We conceptualize contentiousness as moments in which political events reach an unusually high level of acrimony and occupy a greater than usual portion of public and media attention and engagement. These features were evident in the Wisconsin case: news media from not only Wisconsin but the United States and around the world attended closely to events in Madison; citizens from both sides avidly shared information and mobilized via social media; remarkable levels of citizen participation occurred, in forms as varied as protesting at the state capitol, erecting yard signs, and signing recall petitions (the total number of signatories amounted to more than 20% of Wisconsin's adult population; Veenstra, Iyer, Hossain, & Park, 2014; Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, 2012). A third of citizens experienced the moment so acutely that they felt the need to close off political talk with at least one other person (Wells et al., 2017).

Contentiousness, as we see it, encompasses the moments that occur when underlying conditions of polarization are inflamed by a particular set of circumstances, often involving "takeoff issues." Baldassarri and Bearman describe those issues thusly: "sometimes,

typically for very short periods, some issues become the focus of intense attention and consequently appear to radically polarize Americans" (2007, p. 784). Presumably, these moments often coincide with what Boydstun, Hardy, and Walgrave (2014) term "media storms." Our understanding of the Wisconsin case certainly suggests this occurred: long-term trends toward polarization and social division had affected the state, as in much of the country, but this was extended into a "resentment" many felt toward the state's public-service workers (Cramer, 2016). The "takeoff" issue in this case was Walker's Act 10, which constituted a frontal assault on public sector employees and their unions. In the following period of contentiousness, the sphere of politics expanded beyond its normal domains, into the lives and routines of citizens who usually are shielded from politics by virtue of some combination of social graces, commitment to pluralism, inattention, and disinterest.

With the incendiary campaign and early presidency of President Trump, it may be that our nation is entering a phase of prolonged contentiousness, which we see as only increasingly the importance of our investigation. Still, under normal circumstances, it is no accident that we are seeing these circumstances arising in state politics more often than national ones. One reason is simply that state politics is more local politics: citizens have a stronger sense in state politics that their interests are at stake and that it is their tax dollars or resources that are threatened (even if the salience of local political contests tends to pale in comparison to national; Roh & Haider-Markel, 2003). It is therefore more personal, both in terms of the outcomes' impacts and in terms of the individuals involved. And it can draw on longstanding local resentments—across social classes, occupations, and races (Cramer, 2012). Much of the discussion around contentious politics, too, is framed in both policy discourse and media coverage as a national problem, despite the centrality of the state as the defining unit of our federal politics, campaign strategy, and political culture (Elazar, 1987, 1994; Gimpel, Kaufmann, & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2007). In an environment where Republicans and Democrats increasingly express aversion—even contempt—for one another, campaign exposure and resulting communication practices at the local level likely contribute to the broader political dynamic of contentiousness and partisan loathing (Iyengar et al., 2012).

Hypotheses and research questions

How we expect contentiousness to change the status quo

While past research offers clear expected relationships between news, citizen communication, and social networking sites on political participation, participation should function differently when contentious politics deepens social cleavages and heightens the salience of certain social structural positions. We use this section to outline what changes in relationships between political communication and political behavior we expect to see in periods of contentiousness.

Exposure to news media

Most previous research has observed a positive relationship between news media exposure and participatory behaviors, albeit generally mediated through citizen communication (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). In a contentious climate, in which partisans are more polarized and likely to perceive media as hostile to their views, news seekers may gravitate toward sources over which they have greater control, selectively exposing themselves to consonant ideas (Stroud, 2008). Greater control over media content occurs most clearly online, where users can and often do seek out more resonant, partisan, and mobilizing messages (Bode, 2016b; Farnsworth & Owen, 2004).

Hypothesis 1a: In contentious contexts, use of online news sources will be positively associated with political participation.

This is in contrast to media content which is generally non-partisan and over which consumers have less control—especially television. In the latter case, exposure to the other side of the controversy may actually be demobilizing (Mutz, 2006). This expectation is supported by past research finding television news lacks the potency to spur participation (Putnam, 2000). We think this should be especially true during times of contentious politics where journalists tend to adhere to the characteristics of the protest paradigm, supporting the status quo, focusing on "deviant"

tactics and the circus-like atmosphere of a protest, and relying heavily on quotes and soundbites from officials and bystanders (McLeod, 1999). Television viewers, in turn, become more critical of protesters and produce lower estimates of the protest's effectiveness, public support for the protest, and judgments about the protest's newsworthiness (McLeod, 1995; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Thus, we predict that consumption of local television news coverage centering on contentious politics will result in demobilization.

Hypothesis 1b: *In contentious contexts, use of television news sources will be negatively associated with political participation.*

In the case of print media, however, we expect an amplified selection effect. That is, those that still use print media in a period of declining engagement with that medium (Pew Research Center, 2012) are likely more engaged than the average citizen and thus mobilized by their use. This rationale is combined with past research finding that local newspaper use (but not television news) is a significant predictor of participation at the local level (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999).

Hypothesis 1c: *In contentious contexts, use of print news sources will be positively associated with political participation.*

Interpersonal political talk

As noted above, talking about politics with close family and friends consistently predicts engagement in political behaviors (Brundidge, 2010; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Given that family and friends are still likely homogeneous and supportive during contentious politics as in ordinary political contexts, we see no reason why this influence should change for contentious contexts.

Hypothesis 2: *In contentious contexts, political talk with family and friends will be positively associated with political participation.*

Our prediction with respect to coworker talk, while parallel, is more complicated. Because talk with those who hold divergent views decreases mobilization,

while increasing perspective-taking and tolerance (Mutz, 2006), considerable literature has shown a depressive effect—or at least a non-enhancing effect—of talk with professional colleagues, whom are generally understood as less ideologically homogeneous due to limits on self-selection (Mutz & Mondak, 2006).

But in contentious climates, this expectation may not hold. Although the primary basis for expecting exposure to divergent views in workplaces was based on the relative heterogeneity of people in them, in reality workplace networks are neither randomly distributed, nor is their structure neutral. Rather workplaces often remain "occupational ghettos," highly segregated by gender (Charles & Grusky, 2004) and race, and occupationally stratified by education (Sweet & Meiksins, 2013).

Hypothesis 3a: *In contentious contexts, political talk in the workplace will be positively associated with political participation.*

When a political issue at stake has valence for particular occupational categories, workplace homogeneity may be especially pronounced. In our case, the central issue at stake during the period leading up to the recall concerned collective bargaining for public workers. Because all public workers and unionized workers had a stake in this, opinion on the issue in those workplaces is likely to be much more homogenous than the average workplace. Public workers also generally have higher levels of education, in part because they include teachers, technical and professional specialists, and office workers. This again suggests that the structure of the public workplace is likely to exhibit greater homophily than the private workplace.

Hypothesis 3b: *Political talk in the workplace should have a stronger effect for government workers than for non-government workers.*

The same is true for unionized workers, as the nature of the union imbues a certain political element into the workplace. In this contentious context, therefore, certain workplace networks may function similarly to networks of family and friends in spurring participation.

Hypothesis 3c: *Political talk in the workplace should have a stronger effect for unionized workers than for non-unionized workers.*

Use of social media

As already observed, social media fall into a novel category between mass media and interpersonal talk. Much of the current events-related content received through social media originates with news sources, often ideologically consistent due to network homophily of self-selected online "friends" and "filter bubble" technologies used by social network sites to tailor agreeable information to users (Pariser, 2012; Thorson & Wells, 2015). Most conversational interaction happens with close contacts, which suggests homophily; but some findings suggest that online networks are more diverse than many would expect—or even realize (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010), reducing selective exposure on social media (Messing & Westwood, 2012). Thus, these networks may exhibit a high degree of homophily, yet still be sites of cross-cutting exposure if ideologically dissimilar friends endorse an idea.

Further, social media enable relatively close communicative contact with a wider network—encompassing everything from campaign outreach to exposure to cross-cutting communication—of weaker ties than everyday analog life (De Meo, Ferrara, Fiumara, & Provetti, 2014; Kim & Chen, 2016; Schmitt-Beck & Mackenrodt, 2010). Given that the nature of political information on social media remains an unresolved debate, we refrain from offering a directional hypothesis, asking instead:

Research Question 1: *In contentious contexts, is there a relationship between exposure to political news via social media and political participation?*

Wisconsin, 2011–2012

The recall election of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker provides a strong case study in contentious politics. Shortly after assuming office in January 2011, Governor Walker introduced an immediately controversial "budget repair bill" that significantly reduced benefits for public employees and curtailed the rights of public

sector unions to bargain with the state. Ensuing protests lasted for months, with protesters occupying the state capitol building, Democratic legislators decamping to Illinois, and international media descending on Madison. After the budget repair bill passed, the opposition's attention was largely drawn to efforts to recall the governor, lieutenant governor, and 10 Republican State Senators between 2011 and 2012.

Leading up to the June 5, 2012 recall of Wisconsin's governor, Scott Walker, there is no doubt that Wisconsin was highly politically polarized: as recently as February 2013, President Obama achieved 93% approval among Wisconsin Democrats but only 4% among Republicans. Opinions about Governor Walker, who survived the recall election, were similarly divided, with Republican approval at 92% and Democratic approval at 9% in Wisconsin, representing the largest partisan divide identified for any governor or president (Gilbert, 2013; Public Policy Polling, 2013). This is not a matter of simple divergence of political opinion, but of the intense partisan polarization that is increasingly characterizing state-level politics, with Wisconsin an archetypal case (Brownstein & Czekalinski, 2013). This fits our first criteria for contentious politics—stronger than normal political affect.

But it was also something much more. Beyond opinion, polarization was a level of involvement and intensity seldom seen. The state was covered with canvassers, signs, bumper stickers, hand-drawn posters, and other participatory expressions of a hard fought political contest (Yates, 2010). And following weeks of demonstrations at the state capital by crowds of up to 100,000 people, 931,042 petition signatures for the recall of Governor Walker were submitted (Sewell, 2011). Wisconsin's population is roughly 5.7 million people, meaning that more than one in five adults (21.1%) signed the recall petition, an astounding level of direct engagement with the issue. Correspondingly, 58% of eligible Wisconsin voters would cast a ballot on June 5, "easily the highest turnout in more than 60 years for a nonpresidential ballot" (Gilbert, 2012). This fulfills our second criteria for contentiousness—involvement even among the usually politically apathetic.

Given this, Wisconsin in 2011–2012 offers a unique opportunity to consider the dynamics of opinion and participation in a polity riven by contention.

Data and methods

The data come from the Marquette Law School Poll (MLSP), a landmark polling operation in Wisconsin that was conducted beginning in 2012. To date, there are over 30 independent cross-sectional samples, ranging between 700 and 1400 respondents per wave. The first sample was collected January 19–22, 2012. We take advantage of four such cross-sectional waves, for a total of 2836 respondents. When possible (i.e., when item wording is consistent across waves), we used all waves prior to the recall election—four waves of data collection ranging from April to June.[1] For some variables, indicated below, data were only available in wave 4, which was conducted April 26–29, 2012. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The MLSP uses a sample of Wisconsin registered voters and eligible voters who said they would register by Election Day (Wisconsin has election-day registration). The sample was stratified by geographic regions of the state and media market, and respondents were contacted by landline and cell phone using random digit dialing and interviewed by live interviewers. Cell respondents were screened to ensure that they live in Wisconsin and to identify their county of residence. The data collection was managed by LHK Partners Inc., Newtown Square, PA. Samples are weighted by age, sex, and education to approximate known demographic characteristics of registered voters based on the 2008 and 2010 November Supplements to the Current Population Survey. Descriptive statistics of all variables may be found in Table 1.

Ideally, we might match these data to data from the same place—the state of Wisconsin—but at a different time, in which contention is less present. However, given that the contentious nature of Wisconsin politics has been growing for many years (Cramer, 2012), there is no clear baseline sample to which we can compare it. We therefore rely on the clear expectations generated by decades of research to generate our baseline comparison. However, this obviously limits the confidence we have in attributing any findings to contentiousness specifically, rather than to alternative explanations.

Outcome variables

To measure participation outcomes, each political behavior was assessed with the following prompt: "Since Jan '11 have you…" put up a yard sign or bumper sticker to express your political views, contributed money to a candidate, signed a recall petition, and attended a political demonstration or rally? Answers were a simple dichotomous yes or no (3 "don't knows" omitted), combined into a mean scale (scaled 1 to 2, Cronbach's α = .59, mean = 1.27).[2]

Voting outcomes, a more straightforward form of political participation, were ascertained with the following measures. First, "Do you plan to vote in

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Dev.
Petition	0	1	0.41	0.49
Donation	0	1	0.26	0.44
Sign display	0	1	0.26	0.44
Rally	0	1	0.20	0.40
Participation	1	2	1.27	0.41
Vote recall	0	1	0.93	0.26
Vote general	0	1	0.96	0.19
Age	18	99	57.35	17.17
Gender	1	2	1.49	0.50
Education	1	9	5.08	1.93
Income	1	9	5.64	2.03
Black	0	1	0.05	0.21
Hispanic	0	1	0.03	0.16
Religious attend.	1	6	3.77	1.55
Union member	0	1	0.26	0.44
Government worker	0	1	0.21	.041
Follow politics	1	4	3.64	0.69
Ideology	1	5	2.74	1.03
Partisanship	1	5	3.04	1.65
Newspaper use	0	7	4.00	2.90
Television use	0	7	4.78	2.71
Online news	0	7	2.67	2.94
Social news	0	7	1.63	2.61
Talk friends/family	1	5	3.76	1.29
Talk coworkers	1	5	2.78	1.62
Rural	1	12	2.48	2.11

Note: For ideology, higher values reflect more liberal orientation. For partisanship, higher values reflect more Democratic orientation.

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[1]Response rates (I/((I+P)+(R+NC+O)+(UH+UO))) were 6.2% (April 26–29, N = 705), 8.5% (May 9–12, N =704), 9.0% (May 23–26, N =720), and 7.3% (June 13–16, N =707), respectively. More details are available at https://law.marquette.edu/poll/results-data/.

[2]We also estimated the same model for each individual dichotomous behavior, and results were largely similar, particularly with regard to our variables of interest. Therefore, despite the relatively low α, we think it most parsimonious to present results using this dependent variable.

the June recall election for governor?" and second, "Do you plan to vote in the November 2012 general election?" ("Absolutely certain" and "very likely" were coded 1 and all other answers were coded 0).

Media variables

We also asked several questions to reflect media use of respondents. These included newspaper use ("How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper?"), television use ("How many days in the past week did you watch the local TV news at 5, 6 or 10 o'clock?"), and online news use ("How many days in the past week did you go online to read about state and local news at news websites or political blogs?"). Each ranged from 0 to 7.

Talk and social variables

Other variables of interest reflected communication patterns of respondents. First we asked, "How often do you talk about politics with family and friends?" (with responses ranging from never = 1 to more than once a week = 5). We also asked, "How often do you talk about politics with co-workers?" (with responses ranging from never = 1 to more than once a week = 5). Finally, we asked, "How many days in the past week did you go online to read about state and local news through social media such as Facebook, Twitter or e-mails?" (with answers ranging from 0 to 7).[3]

Political variables

We also controlled for several political variables, given that our outcomes of interest are political in nature. These include interest in politics ("Some people seem to follow what's going on in politics most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in politics most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?" hardly at all = 1 to most of the time = 4),

ideology ("In general, would you describe your political views as..." very conservative = 1 to very liberal = 5), and partisan identification ("Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" strong Republican = 1 to strong Democrat = 5).

Demographics

Finally, we included a range of demographic and background variables often related to political outcomes (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), including age, gender (recorded by interviewer), education, total family income, race, ethnicity, religious attendance ("aside from wedding and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?"), and those related to our specific context, including union membership, government worker ("Do you or any member of your household work for federal, state, or local government—for example, as a public school teacher, police officer, firefighter, or other government job?"), and residence in urban or rural areas.[4]

Results

Because voting variables are dichotomous, we estimated a logistic regression model for each form of voting. The participation measure is roughly continuous, making ordinary least squares regression appropriate. Results are reported in Tables 2 and 3.

Findings suggest that we are right to question the mechanisms of mobilization in contentious political contexts. News and talk were significantly associated with participatory activities, though in ways that differ in important respects from what has been observed in other contexts—and not always positively or consistently. Notably, both newspaper use and online news use only predict one voting behavior, the intent to vote in the recall. Neither measure predicts broader political participation. As predicted, television news use is negatively associated with participation (but not with either type of voting). Altogether, this

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[3]Admittedly, some people will encounter news without seeking it out in these media. However, if anything that means, we are conservatively estimating who is exposed to state news in this way. Additionally, we cannot disentangle the effect of social media and that of email, due to the wording of this measure.

[4]Urban or rural is a measure ranging from 1 (most urban) to 12 (most rural), taken from the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. For more information, see http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/urban-influence-codes/documentation.aspx.

Table 2. Political participation during contentious politics.

	Coefficient (SE)
Age	0.01 (0.01)
Gender	0.03 (0.02)*
Education	0.01 (0.01)
Income	0.01 (0.01)
Black	0.04 (0.04)
Hispanic	0.12 (0.05)*
Religious attend.	0.01 (0.01)
Union member	0.01 (0.04)
Government worker	0.01 (0.05)
Follow politics	0.06 (0.01)*
Ideology (L)	0.02 (0.01)*
Partisanship (D)	0.01 (0.01)
Rural	0.01 (0.01)
Newspaper use	0.01 (0.01)
Television use	−0.01 (0.01)*
Online news	−0.01 (0.01)
Talk friends/family	0.04 (0.01)*
Talk coworkers	0.02 (0.01)*
Social news	0.02 (0.01)*
Talk coworkers * union	0.01 (0.01)
Talk coworkers * government worker	0.01 (0.01)
R^2	.11
N	649

Ordinary least squares regression. Betas reported with SE in parentheses. The dependent variable is an index of four types of participation. *$p < .05$. Data are from wave 4 only.

Table 3. Voting behaviors during contentious politics.

	General	Recall
Wave	−0.03 (0.11)	0.07 (0.12)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Gender	0.60 (0.25)*	0.29 (0.21)
Education	0.44 (0.09)*	0.17 (0.07)*
Income	−0.01 (0.06)	0.12 (0.05)*
Black	0.52 (0.56)	0.30 (0.44)
Hispanic	0.08 (0.59)	0.58 (0.56)
Religious attend.	0.24 (0.08)*	0.15 (0.07)*
Union member	0.32 (0.58)	0.48 (0.54)
Government worker	−0.65 (0.83)	−0.02 (0.70)
Follow politics	1.00 (0.13)*	0.70 (0.13)*
Ideology (L)	−0.07 (0.13)	0.13 (0.12)
Partisanship (D)	−0.11 (0.08)	−0.25 (0.07)*
Rural	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.08 (0.04)*
Newspaper use	0.05 (0.05)	0.13 (0.04)*
Television use	0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.04)
Online news	0.07 (0.06)	0.11 (0.05)*
Talk friends/family	0.20 (0.10)*	0.28 (0.09)*
Talk coworkers	−0.06 (0.11)	−0.03 (0.09)
Social news	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.11 (0.05)*
Talk coworkers * union	−0.09 (0.19)	−0.04 (0.17)
Talk coworkers * government worker	0.56 (0.31)	0.18 (0.22)
Pseudo R^2	0.31	0.27
N	2573	1937

Each column represents the results of a logistic regression. Betas reported with SE in parentheses. Pseudo R^2 is Nagelkerke. *$p < .05$. Ns change based on differential nonresponse.

presents a relatively weak portrait of influence from news sources. Newspaper (H1c) and online news (H1a) are positively but inconsistently related to political behaviors, and television news viewing is generally associated with lower levels of engagement (H1b).

Variables reflecting talking with family, friends, and coworkers were much more consistently predictive of participatory action around the recall and were uniformly positive, including for political talk among coworkers. As expected by H2, talking about politics with family and friends was positively associated with political participation. Notably, talking about politics with coworkers had a similar positive relationship for participation (as predicted by H3a), suggesting that workplace networks were more socially, economically, or ideologically segregated and stratified than previous research might suggest and in this case amplified participatory actions.

In contrast with these parallels, talking with family and friends was also linked with intent to vote in the recall and the general election, whereas talking with coworkers was not. Overall, this presents a very strong portrait of influence from political conversation. This provides support for H2 and suggests that workplace networks produced effects similar to political conversation with close contacts for participation outcomes, partially supporting H3a. Although previous research (Mutz & Mondak, 2006) suggests workplaces are more heterogeneous, and thus more likely to provide demobilizing cross-cutting talk, in this context political talk among coworkers may have been more homogeneous than this scholarship suggests.

We also expected that particular types of workplaces should experience especially strong effects of workplace communication. For this reason, two interaction terms are included in each model—considering workplace talk among union workers and workplace talk among government workers. Contrary to our expectations, talk in these workplaces is not associated with political participation (failing to support H3b and H3c).

In terms of social news (reading about state and local news through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or e-mails), the results are somewhat mixed. Social news was positively associated with political participation, but was not significantly related to voting in the general election (RQ1). Looking more closely at the intent to vote during 2012, of particular interest is the unanticipated

negative relationship between social news consumption and voting in the recall election in June. While the literature suggested that both a positive relationship and no relationship were plausible, we had no reason to expect a negative relationship.

As a result, we conducted additional analysis to explore this finding. Specifically, we split our sample to consider Republicans and Democrats separately. Because the two sides in the recall election pursued different mobilization strategies (Kaufman, 2012), we thought partisans might be affected differently by this particular information source, which by its nature presents a different and unique experience for each person. This expectation was born out, as shown in Table 4. While Democrats were unaffected by social news, Republicans were less likely to vote in the recall as a result of exposure to news via social media. This may reflect the tendency of social media use to "reduce partisan selective exposure" (Messing & Westwood, 2012) and promote political disagreement (Barnidge, 2015), in this case among Republicans, who likely encountered considerable cross-cutting talk from outspoken Democratic friends within their social network.[5]

Discussion and conclusions

What spurred Wisconsin citizens to the intensely high levels of political participation observed during the contentious period in 2011–2012? In this paper, we have trained our lens on the roles of media consumption, political discussion, and social media use during this period. Our findings yield some support for our hypotheses, with limited effects of news, strong effects from conversation, and mixed effects from social media. We consider each of these in turn.

News sources did not play a strong direct role in mobilizing political action around the recall election. Consistent with expectations, broadcast news viewing seemingly suppressed participatory behaviors (H1b), whereas print (H1c) and online news (H1a) consumption generally did not predict political participation, running counter to our predictions.

Particularly notable is the negative effect of broadcast news on participation. As proposed, we believe broadcast media was the least likely source to contain confirming information (or put another way, the most likely to contain cross-cutting information). Whereas newspapers have editorial sections and individual articles can be considered or overlooked, and online news can be searched, selected, and tailored to seek supportive perspectives, television news viewing does not allow this type of selective exposure. If local broadcast journalists attempted balanced coverage of both sides, this likely resulted in viewers "hearing the other side" and engaging in perspective taking with those on the other side of the collective bargaining issue, which can be demobilizing (Bello, 2012). Alternatively, a protest paradigm focus of television news likely upholds the status quo and focuses on the spectacle of the protest, rather than the issue content surrounding it (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). This, too, should be demobilizing. Future research might pair this with content analysis of local news for a more formal test of the role of protest coverage and cross-cutting content.

Table 4. Voting in the recall by party.

	Republicans	Democrats
Wave	0.17 (0.24)	0.04 (0.16)
Age	−0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Gender	−0.29 (0.43)	0.38 (0.28)
Education	0.04 (0.13)	0.09 (0.09)
Income	0.12 (0.11)	0.13 (0.07)
Black	−0.85 (1.22)	0.58 (0.52)
Hispanic	18.85 (7094.69)	−0.05 (0.63)
Religious attend.	0.20 (0.13)	0.10 (0.09)
Union member	−0.37 (0.95)	0.14 (0.67)
Government worker	1.53 (1.78)	−0.21 (0.88)
Follow politics	0.89 (0.27)*	0.68 (0.16)*
Ideology (L)	−0.16 (0.26)	0.29 (0.16)
Rural	−0.13 (0.07)*	−0.05 (0.06)
Newspaper use	0.21 (0.08)*	0.11 (0.05)*
Television use	−0.04 (0.08)	−0.01 (0.06)
Online news	0.15 (0.09)	0.10 (0.07)
Talk friends/family	0.47 (0.17)*	0.18 (0.12)
Talk coworkers	−0.07 (0.17)	−0.09 (0.12)
Social news	−0.20 (0.08)*	−0.10 (0.06)
Talk coworkers * union	0.08 (0.33)	0.15 (0.23)
Talk coworkers * government worker	−0.39 (0.50)	0.24 (0.28)
Pseudo R^2	0.27	0.27
N	895	914

Each column represents the results of a logistic regression. Each party includes Leaners but not Independents. Betas reported with SE in parentheses. *$p < .05$. Data are pooled over all four waves.

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[5]It is noteworthy that the variable, "wave," reflecting the time at which the data were obtained, is not significant for any model. This suggests that Wisconsin citizens did not become more or less likely to vote as time went on.

In contrast with these limited effects from news media variables, talk with family, friends (H2), and coworkers (H3a) was found to have a positive effect on a range of engagement behaviors. The relationship between political talk within networks of family and friends and participatory behaviors was strong and consistent. More novel was the finding that talking with coworkers increased political participation, which runs counter to research in traditional political settings concluding that talk with coworkers is *less* likely to mobilize than talk within networks of family and friends (Mutz, 2006). This suggests one of three possibilities: (1) that workplaces in Wisconsin, or at least those in which political talk was taking place, are more homophilous than is typical; (2) that modern workplace networks are not as diverse as past research would suggest and are increasingly stratified by race, gender, and education, casting doubt on the heterogeneous workplace hypothesis (Campus, Ceccarini, & Vaccarri, 2015; Charles & Grusky, 2004; Sweet & Meiksins, 2013); or (3) that this finding is a product of contentious politics taking place in response to a work-related issue (benefits for public workers). As we cannot distinguish between these multiple causes, this raises questions for research in this area. We might, for example, begin to think of new ways of measuring political agreement in workplace networks or consider alternative manifestations of weak tie networks where cross-cutting discussion might be likely *outside* of the workplace. The consequence we wish to highlight is that in contemporary contentious politics, social, economic, and political divisions are not easily distinguished, and under these conditions, worker interactions may operate differently from what previous work suggests.

Our study also suggests that within highly politicized and media-saturated environments, news encountered within the context of social media may act as an important motivator for citizens to become involved in local and state politics (answering RQ1). In particular, we find some evidence that social media use increases certain forms of offline political participation, though not voting. This finding is in contrast to critics' (e.g. Gladwell, 2010; Marichal, 2012; Morozov, 2011; White, 2010) claims that social media might do more harm than good in the political process. They

refer to the ease with which individuals can create and join communities online as self-satisfying *slacktivism* or *clicktivism* and suggest that the low cost of membership detracts from formal engagement. It is also worth noting that our operationalization of social media use only measures exposure–not expression. Existing research suggests that political expression on social media is more strongly related to political engagement than is political exposure in that venue; we would therefore expect these effects to be even stronger if we were using a measure of expression (Boulianne, 2015).

However, the political context in which social media is used may play a major determining role in its effect on political participation. In other words, it may be the case that during times of contentious politics within a state, where much of the policy-making occurs, the impact of these policies on citizens' daily lives is so strong that social media use may act as a facilitator for individuals to take part in traditional political participation.

Social media, however, were also found to discourage citizens from voting in the recall election. This suggests, interestingly, that the role of social media functions differently for political participation and for voting. Perhaps, participation extends more naturally from social media use (Bode, 2017; Christenson, 2011; Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2015), whereas voting is thought of as a separate act. Various elements of participation—persuading someone to vote, signing a petition, and donating money—could flow directly from links provided through social media, making this transition easier. Voting, on the other hand, requires a physical presence entirely separate from social media activity.

Upon further investigation, we found that the negative effect of social media on voting resides with Republicans and had no effect on Democrats. As mentioned earlier, public sector workers in Wisconsin initiated the recall election as a response to new laws proposed by the Republican Governor and passed by the Republican controlled Legislature. Given the outspoken nature of progressive expression during the period of the protests and the recall, Republicans may have been more likely to encounter information or ideas from Democrats—or at least those against the new legislation—within their social

media network, dampening their desire to vote. The unique structure of social media invites incidental exposure to views that may be different from one's own (Bode, 2016a; Messing & Westwood, 2012), and there is some evidence that Republicans experience less homophily (and would therefore see greater cross-cutting content) in social media than do Democrats (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). In this case, social media may have had a countervailing effect that tempered the reinforcement of Republicans' predispositions, discouraging them from voting. A 2014 Pew report supports such a possibility, finding that only a quarter (23%) of people who encounter politics on Facebook say these posts are "mostly" or "always" in line with their political viewpoints (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). Times of contentious politics may amplify this general occurrence, as greater intensity and participation should result in more political content shared within social media. It is worth noting, however, that we do not measure exposure to disagreement directly, even if we think that is the most plausible mechanism to explain our findings. Given the different effects of social media on participation and voting, and differential effects among partisans, future research should examine the role of social media in contentious politics in greater depth, focusing on the flows of partisan information, the extent of disagreement present, and the diversity of networked communication. Similarly, we compare conventional wisdom supported by academic literature to a specific case of contentiousness. Future research would be well served to expand on this with a design comparing apples to apples, employing longitudinal data that includes times of contentiousness as well as calmer times.

Although our study is confined to examining one election in one state at one particular moment in time, the events in Wisconsin embody a much larger conflict between competing ideologies that is taking place in states all over the United States and, in different forms, all around the world. Understanding the dynamics of the events in Wisconsin is crucial to start a broader discourse about the increasingly polarized politics that define our divided electorate.

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Disclosure statement

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