



# Spatial Polarization, Partisan Climate, and Participatory Actions: Do Congenial Contexts Lead to Mobilization, Resignation, Activation, or Complacency?

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## Abstract

With increasing evidence on deepening cleavages along geographic lines, we argue that the local political climate plays an important role in political decision-making and engagement. In this study, we aim to understand the role of political contexts in shaping different forms of political participation, whether centered in the local community or in digital spaces. We specifically consider two important contextual factors that potentially relate to participation: the partisan composition of the neighborhood environment and the nature of political representation at the state government level. We introduce two sets of competing arguments: *Mobilization* and *Resignation* vs. *Activation* and *Complacency* to explain different participatory mechanisms. Using both national survey data collected during the 2016 U.S. election period and zip code and state-level contextual data, we employ three-level multilevel modeling to tease out how multiple factors operating at different levels are related to online or public forms of participation. In general, our findings reveal that individuals living in a state with political underrepresentation are more likely to engage in public forms of actions. Additionally, we examine subgroup analyses to show how contextual relationships with participation are different according to political orientations, such as party identification and political interest.

**Keywords** Political participation · Neighborhood political climate · State legislative representation · Partisan media · Political discussion

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## Introduction

America has been divided into red and blue states since David Brooks (2001) popularized the terms after the 2000 election, cementing the notion that America's political divisions are expanding. However, these labels obscure some simple truths about the political geography of the U.S.: that geographic partisanship is continuous, not dichotomous, and that it differs greatly within even the reddest and bluest of states (Glaeser & Ward, 2006). As this suggests, democratic candidates perform well in densely populated urban communities, but struggle for support in rural areas. Even when controlling for a wide range of demographic, social, economic, and geographic factors, location along an urban–rural continuum predicted presidential voting patterns, especially in 2016 (Scala & Johnson, 2017).

Perhaps even more troubling, it is argued that spatial polarization is growing as more people sort themselves into like-minded communities, deepening cleavages along geographic lines (Bishop, 2009; Johnston et al., 2016). While some scholars are skeptical of the degree of this social sorting (Abrams & Fiorina, 2012), evidence is mounting—from both experimental tests and migration analysis—that even after ideological preferences for racial makeup, income level, and population density are considered, partisans tend to seek politically compatible neighbors, areas populated with co-partisans (Gimpel & Hui, 2017; Tam Cho et al., 2013). People make sense of politics and shape political decisions through a lens of their local identities, leading to polarized resentments along these geographic lines (Cramer, 2016). In a sense, “place” itself, as well as one's sense of belonging within it, become political.

Moving beyond urban–rural divides and questions of social sorting, we contend that the nature of the political climate in which people live exerts an influence over their choice of political behaviors. As the literature on spatial polarization suggests, individuals exist in multiple contexts—neighborhoods, counties, and states—within a single nation. For example, a Republican partisan who lives in a predominately Democratic neighborhood in an otherwise solidly red state may be motivated to engage in different types of political action than one who lives in a predominantly Republican community in the same state. That is, the degree of partisan favorability of a locality coupled with the degree of partisan representativeness in state government can provide different social resources, opportunities, and motivations for people, and thereby encourage them to engage in distinct political actions.

In this study, we aim to understand the role of political contexts in shaping different forms of political participation, whether centered on the local community or in digital spaces. In addition to individual-level factors, including demographics and partisan communication, we examine contextual determinants to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what encourages certain political behaviors. Understanding multiple layers of influence on participation is especially important given patterns of geographic and social sorting (Mason, 2018) and media landscapes that are reinforced by selective exposure (Stroud, 2011). At the

individual level, we examine the mobilizing effects of partisan media and homogeneous social circles as they determine participatory choices. In terms of contextual factors, at a meso level, we consider the partisan composition of the neighborhood environment, and at the macro level, we include the nature of political representation at the state government level. Does living in a politically compatible neighborhood and state make you complacent? Do those living in localities hostile to their partisan preferences become strategic by choosing online outlets for activism? Does living in an agreeable locality or state lead people to emphasize local forms of action?

To examine these issues, we propose competing theoretical frameworks of how neighborhood political climate and political representation in one's state government will be related to different participatory patterns: on the one hand, favorable contexts may encourage participation (Mobilization), while unfavorable contexts discourage participation (Resignation); on the other hand, unfavorable contexts may spur participation (Activation), while favorable contexts may lower participation (Complacency). Using both survey data collected during the 2016 U.S. election period and zip code-level as well as state-level contextual data, we employ three-level multi-level modeling to tease out how these nested environments combine to influence participatory choices. Our findings reveal that, in general, individuals living in a state with political underrepresentation are more likely to engage in public forms of actions. Additionally, we show a more nuanced, asymmetric contextual relationship with participation among partisans.

## Contexts Driving Political Participation

The influence of contexts on political outcomes is significant and, at the same time, far from monolithic (Bishop, 2009). Individuals experience politics at the levels of their immediate neighborhoods to larger geographic units, including the state and region. The partisanship of local communities, let alone the state, does not always correspond to proportionate representativeness in state legislatures, especially under conditions of extreme gerrymandering (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015). And people encounter different resources and opportunities during their interactions in congenial and adverse environments, which also inform their political decisions. As Campbell (2013) states, all individual-level measures “hint at the importance of socially oriented explanations for political participation.” (p. 35) That is, motivations behind political actions can be responsive to features of social and political contexts. In this study, we specifically consider two important contexts that may influence participation: partisan composition of the neighborhood environment and political representation at the state level.

First, neighborhood political climate shapes information flows and social networks, stimulating social motives to participation based on experiences with neighbors and networks in communities (Makse & Sokhey, 2014). Scholars have noted that individuals make sense of their reality, process political information, and engage in political activities through social interactions, which reflect the composition of surrounding neighborhoods (Huckfeldt et al., 1998; McClurg, 2006). Despite

the geographic sorting in the U.S. (Bishop, 2009), people also report that they experience some level of partisan cross-pressure in their households and neighborhoods (Bélanger & Eagles, 2007). Therefore, it is expected that individuals, even though they have the same party identification, will experience variance in the community receptivity to a given partisan viewpoint depending on the partisan structure of their neighborhoods (e.g., a Democrat in a Democratic neighborhood vs. a Republican neighborhood).

Second, legislative representation in state government can provide another important structure that is related to political opportunities and motives for policymaking. Representation in state legislatures can have consequences as many of the policies that affect the lives of U.S. citizens are determined at the state level. In the U.S., where each state (except for Nebraska) has a bicameral legislative body consisting of some form of a Senate and a State House, one might expect state legislatures to roughly reflect the distribution of the state population's political composition proportionally. In most states, nowadays, "everyone lives in a state that is either red or blue" (19 states for the Democratic party and 30 for the Republican party), meaning that most legislatures are home to solid majorities (Greenblatt, 2019). Coupled with the partisan sorting into different communities or regions (Mason, 2018), scholars also point out that the redistricting process in favor of one party in power hinders fair voter representation (Kennedy et al., 2016). Therefore, partisans may experience different cognitive, emotional processes depending on how their state legislatures represent them (e.g., a Democrat living in a state with Democrat control or Republican control), which ultimately influence political participation.

### Participation Across Digital Versus Local Spaces

Digital technologies provide new avenues for individuals to participate in politics in various forms, encompassing local and digital spaces. While some forms of participation are largely similar to offline counterparts (Christensen, 2011), unique affordances of online platforms have expanded expressive capacity by allowing content creation and sharing, interactive feedback, and incidental mobilization through weakly-connected networks, facilitating "network-based" participation (Baringhorst, 2008). Online forms of participation also allow for greater anonymity, can be less effortful, and permit global reach (Oser et al., 2013). For example, online participation requires lower investment in energy and cost, compared to most public forms of participation. Online participation also offers greater information availability, increased possibility for users to customize information according to their needs and interests, and lowered barriers for entry beyond an internet connection. In addition, the online sphere often allows impersonal interactions. While some social media platforms and websites reveal identities, the capability to change privacy settings and online norms of anonymity allows individuals to reduce uncomfortable feelings or negative social-psychological consequences of participation, lessening the risk of participation compared to public sphere (Ho & McLeod, 2008). Considering such conceptual distinctions between public and online participation, we examine how

public and online participation are related differently to individual and contextual predictors.

### **Individual Antecedents of Political Participation**

Among important factors such as socioeconomic status (Verba et al., 1995) and political interest (Glenn & Grimes, 1968), the political communication literature has emphasized communicative factors such as news media use and political discussion, as the communication mediation model suggests (Shah et al., 2017). The current media landscape provides a growing number of partisan outlets in cable networks, talk radio, and digital news, often accompanied by ideologically extreme packages of news and opinion targeting niche audiences (Stroud, 2011). Evidence has documented that media use that reinforces partisan predispositions promotes participation because like-minded news sources are perceived to be more credible (Metzger et al., 2015), increase issue understanding (Wojcieszak et al., 2016), and enhance political efficacy (Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017). Outrageous rhetoric and negative emotions highlighted in political talk radio, for example, mobilize audiences to join “attacks” on the opposition (Gervais, 2014).

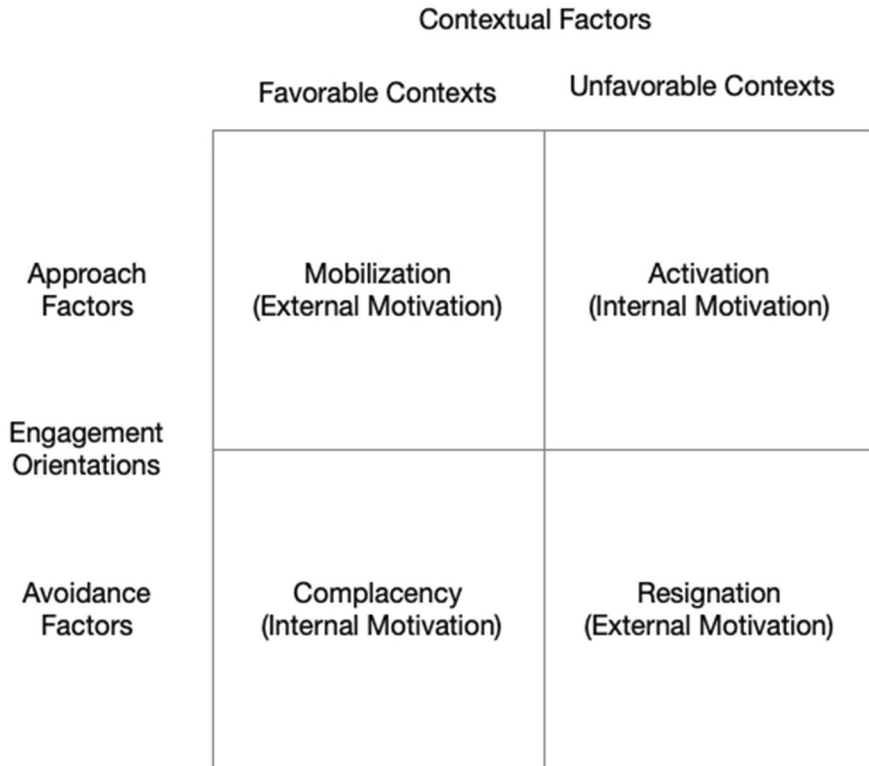
In the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), news and conversations often occur in interactive and reinforcing ways (Shah et al., 2017). Political discussions with like-minded others are considered safe (Eveland & Hively, 2009) and heighten political identities (Slater, 2007), thus encouraging more political involvement. While the current media landscape facilitates heterogeneous communication diets (Garrett et al., 2014), the relative influence of like-minded news sources and discussion partners appears to be stronger than counter-attitudinal counterparts (Dilliplane, 2011), as changing one’s beliefs upon encountering counter-attitudinal information rarely occurs (Bolsen et al., 2015). Accordingly, we offer the following hypotheses:

**H1** Individuals with a higher frequency of like-minded partisan media use will be more likely to engage in public participation and online participation.

**H2** Individuals with a higher frequency of homogeneous political conversations will be more likely to engage in public participation and online participation.

### **Theoretical Arguments of Contextual Influences on Participation**

In addition to individual-level factors, we tease out how these structural factors, operating at multiple levels, combine to influence political participation, thus better understanding the subtleties in how contexts play different roles. In the next section, we provide competing theoretical frameworks of how neighborhood political climate and political representation in one’s state government will be related to different participatory patterns. To be specific, we lay out two sets of competing hypotheses: first, favorable contexts mobilize participation (Mobilization), while unfavorable contexts discourage participation (Resignation); second, unfavorable



**Fig. 1** Contextual and orientational mediating factors motivating campaign participation

contexts activate participation (Activation), while favorable contexts may lower participation (Complacency). Figure 1 illustrates our theoretical framework.

## Mobilization and Resignation

### Mobilization

We posit that favorable political contexts—politically favorable neighborhoods and fair representation at a state government (i.e., party representation corresponding to general voting climate)—are associated with higher participation, providing external motivation for political action. Residing in congenial neighborhoods provides more opportunities to encounter like-minded neighbors and information resources (Huckfeldt et al., 1998). While contexts do not necessarily proxy personal networks, favorable contexts create an environment where the flow of like-minded information is more available and better-received, reinforcing opinion expression and political identities (Slater, 2007). Often, such an environment fosters mobilizing information and political behaviors such as voting (Centola, 2015) or attending protests (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2011) as they increase peer-to-peer support and normative pressure

(Lileker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). In addition, politically favorable neighborhoods “give rise to an overall political bias that favors the continued dominance of majority opinion” (Huckfeldt et al., 1998, p. 1026). Partisans surrounded by homogeneous environments perceive the majority of public opinion to be on their side, thus becoming more politically expressive and engaged (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In a sense, individuals living in supportive districts may be less likely to experience salient consequences from encountering disagreements in their individual networks (Bélanger & Eagles, 2007).

Living in a state with politically favorable representation can also promote political participation because it provides a sense of increased political opportunity. People participate in politics when they perceive their behaviors will have higher benefits over costs (Platt, 2008) and favorable representation in local government is an important contextual opportunity that is linked to more receptivity to policy demands and direct political influence. For example, when the supporting party is in positions of power, people perceive more opportunities to participate because their actions will have a higher chance of success in achieving desired policy outcomes. Relatedly, studies on legislative representation of racial or gender minority find that the in-group population size in state legislatures increases the trust and efficacy of political processes and provides a sense of empowerment, thus increasing minority voter turnout (e.g., Rocha et al., 2010). Similarly, we posit that the higher in-party representation in state legislatures can serve as a powerful symbol for in-party voters and provide the perception of favorable power dynamics, linking to greater empowerment for becoming more participatory and engaged.

## Resignation

A similar logic may also operate in unfavorable contexts, which may discourage participation. When residing in politically unfavorable neighborhoods, individuals proportionally encounter more conflicting viewpoints. While the normative viewpoint of deliberative democracy emphasizes the role of exposure to disagreements in encouraging understanding, general political disagreements that people interact with can suppress vote certainty and political interest (e.g., Klobstad et al., 2013). As the Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) posits, exposure to dissenting views increases conformity pressure and fear of isolation, which can discourage those who perceive themselves as political minorities from expressing their viewpoints, though not necessarily converting their positions (Glynn & Park, 1997). In addition, the concentration of disagreements at the aggregate level can lower a collective sense of efficacy. Beyond encountering more conflicts at the individual level, seeing and visualizing a large number of disagreeable others in neighborhoods can dampen motivations to act against them. Resources of civic or political groups in favor of one’s position might be less available in neighborhoods with concentrated unfavorability, which can inhibit political participation.

Legislative underrepresentation at a state level (i.e., relative underrepresentation compared to the actual voting climate) can also have a negative impact on participation because it would indicate a loss of contextual opportunities for participatory motivations. Low in-party representation may reduce potential allies in government,

signaling to individuals that their political actions have less chance to influence policy and achieve desired goals (Platt, 2008). Perceptions that government is less receptive to influence could reduce political efficacy and foster feelings of powerlessness, leading individuals to resign themselves to inactivity. Such frustration of living in a state controlled by the opposition party may be intensified when the state is more oppositional than it should be according to the composition of the state's voting electorate. In extreme cases of gerrymandering, where statewide voting distributions do not correspond to legislative representation, such discrepancies can discourage interest in politics and Congress (Brunell, 2006) and cause informational deficits among disadvantaged populations, reducing participation (Hayes & McKee, 2012). As such, we propose:

**H3a** Individuals in politically favorable neighborhoods will be more likely to participate (Mobilization), while those in politically unfavorable neighborhoods will be less likely to participate (Resignation).

**H3b** Individuals with proportionately higher representation by their own party in state government will be more likely to participate (Mobilization), while those in proportionately lower represented states will be less likely to participate (Resignation).

Following this line of argument, an oppositional political climate is expected to reduce participation, but it may also be related to choices about how to participate, on a public basis in the local community or online in the digital sphere. An unfavorable political climate may drive individuals from public participation to online participation to avoid conformity pressure (Noelle-Neumann, 1974); therefore, public and online participation could exhibit a compensatory, hydraulic pattern rather than reflecting a pattern of mutual reinforcement. This question is especially relevant at the neighborhood level, where conformity pressures may be stronger. Given the dearth of evidence, we propose the following research question:

**RQ1:** In politically unfavorable neighborhoods, will public and online participation show a compensatory, hydraulic relationship compared to politically favorable neighborhoods?

## Activation and Complacency

### Activation

The competing argument to *Mobilization and Resignation*, which emphasize external motivations to participatory tendency, is *Activation and Complacency*. *Activation* is a concept to describe that politically unfavorable contexts can activate internal motivations to participation. More exposure to political dissent in politically unfavorable neighborhoods can trigger motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), activating pre-existing political identities and motivating participatory action.



In addition, when non-supportive information or networks are concentrated at the aggregate level, neighborhood unfavorability can create perceived social restrictions on political expression. According to the psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), restrictions on freedom, whether real or perceived, can motivate cognitive reactance (i.e., developing counterarguments) and affective reactance (i.e., anger). In an unfavorable political climate, such reactance can be activated to motivate participatory action (Best & Krueger, 2011). Research shows that in politically disagreeable neighborhoods, political motivations to show dissent are higher compared to agreeable neighborhoods (Makse & Sokhey, 2014).

Proportionate underrepresentation by the state legislative body can also be perceived as a collective disadvantage that motivates participation, as underrepresentation likely leads to policies or laws that are against the interests of those in a political minority. It can trigger the perception of relative deprivation based on undesirable treatment and unfair representation by political elites and the government. As the group consciousness literature suggests (e.g., Huddy et al., 2015), an inequitable representation by the state legislature can trigger perceived threats of undesirable economic, social, or political changes (Miller et al., 2016) and a sense of injustice and unfairness (Cramer, 2016), ultimately motivating individuals to respond through activism.

Besides this emotion-trigger, underrepresented individuals are further motivated to change reality and solve problems if they have perceived group efficacy (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Especially in states with extreme redistricting of electoral districts where population votes are not well represented in state chamber seats, underrepresented individuals may perceive dormant in-group support of a silent majority, which possesses a latent ability to act together to effect social change. Overall, unlike *Mobilization*, where political participation is driven by external social support, *Activation* stems from an internal motivation to react to the political unfavorability and call for an equitable representation by the state government.

## Complacency

Again, the same logic can be applied in the other direction: politically favorable contexts might discourage further participation. Residing in politically favorable neighborhoods could have an inhibiting effect on participation by inducing a sense of complacency. For example, the “social loafing effect” (Latané, 1981) posits that people tend to put less effort in collective work as the group size increases (e.g., when asked to make as much noise as possible by shouting and clapping, individuals put less effort as the group size increased). This is also in line with the free-rider argument by Olsen (1965), which suggests that people are incentivized to “free ride” in collective action when there are other individuals who work toward the same goal because they think the impact of their individual actions on outcomes will be miniscule. Also, in line with the *Activation* logic, the aggregation of in-party supporters can be indicative of less external threats and more social trust compared to unfavorable neighborhoods. Such high trust, when combined with low political efficacy, can result in complacent inactivity (Shingles, 1981).

Similarly, people in a state where their political identities and interests are proportionately over-represented in state government might lack incentives to act as the state government is already representing their interests and rather allocate their participatory resources elsewhere. In such situations, ordinary citizens might feel less pressure or necessity as the system is already tilted toward their advantage. Evidence suggests potential policy change in a desirable direction is less motivating for activism than confronting the possibility of a policy change in an unwanted direction; the prospect of desirable policy change can induce complacency in individuals who perceive their position to have widespread support among the public or representative body (Miller et al., 2016). Taken together, these lines of argument lead to the expectation that politically favorable neighborhoods and legislative over-representation produce over-confidence in political outcomes, inhibiting motivation for political action.

**H4a** Individuals in politically unfavorable neighborhoods will be more likely to participate (Activation), while those in politically favorable neighborhoods will be less likely to participate (Complacency).

**H4b** Individuals with proportionately lower representation by their own party in state government will be more likely to participate (Activation), while those in proportionately higher represented states will be less likely to participate (Complacency).

### Interactions Across Local and State Contexts

Individuals also simultaneously experience different levels of favorability in localities and the state. It is likely that local and state environments come together to provide contexts where different engagement orientations are triggered. For example, a favorable local context might combine with proportional underrepresentation in state government to motivate participation, with social rewards and confirming information from proximate others used to collectively channel this against proportional underrepresentation at the state level.

As discussed above, political representation at a state-level determines legislative opportunities for participation, while neighborhood political climate stimulates social motives to participation by structuring information flows, social networks, and resources. In other words, when the state-level representation can *spark* an interest or emotional motive for participation (or lack thereof), the local environment can determine the *sustainability* of participation through social resources. When individuals are embedded in a congenial neighborhood while residing in a state where their party identification is unfairly represented, they may experience Mobilization (at the neighborhood level) and Activation (at the state level), which can lead to the highest level of participation, or Complacency (at the neighborhood level) and Resignation (at the state level), which can lead to the lowest level of participation. A mobilized like-minded network at a local level may be further activated by unfair political representation at the state level, channeling a sense of collective disadvantage. At the same time, it is also plausible that when a sense of resignation and powerlessness

spurred by an unfair legislative representation is combined with complacency at a local level, this may ultimately discourage participation.

Individuals embedded in an unfavorable neighborhood while living in a state with proportional over-representation of one's party identification likely experience different dynamics. While they may not experience a collective disadvantage or relative deprivation at a state level, social restrictions at a neighborhood level, which can create a reactive response (Activation), combined with an ample opportunity at a state level (Mobilization), may lead to heightened participation. Conversely, a combination of Resignation at a local level and Complacency at the state government could result in the lowest level of participation. Based on these contending rationales, we propose the following research question:

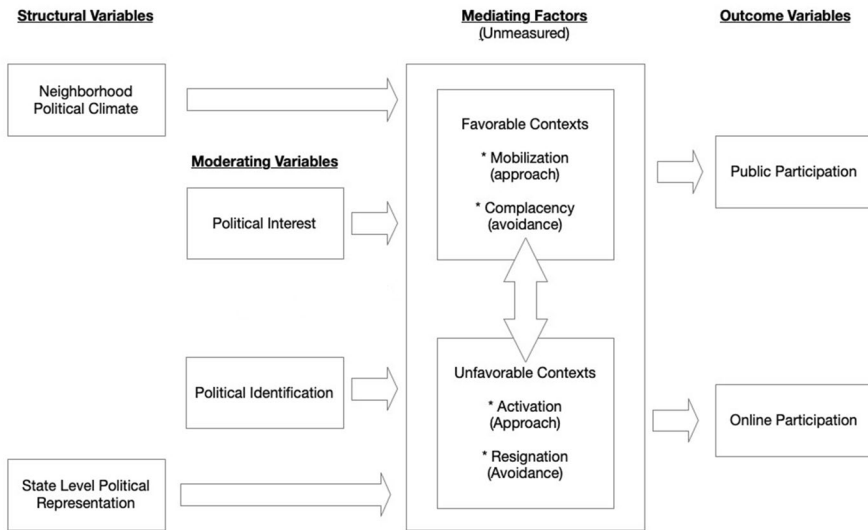
**RQ2:** How will neighborhood political climate and political representation at the state government interact to shape different levels of participation?

### **Moderators: Party Identification and Political Interest**

There are reasons to expect that such competing frameworks would operate differently depending on party identification. Research provides insights into the asymmetry of how the Democratic Party and Republican Party operate and how partisans and partisan media behave; for example, Grossman and Hopkins (2016) note that the Democratic Party is rooted in various issue-based interest groups whereas the Republican Party is more “characterized as a vehicle of an ideological movement” (p. 3), suggesting the fundamental disparity in their structural grounds of party operation. Also, conservative organizations tend to operate in vertical structures and emphasize centralized messaging compared to liberal counterparts, which utilize horizontal structures (Bennett et al., 2018). At an individual level, conservatives exhibit a greater tendency for ideological confirmation and cognitive stability than liberals (e.g., Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Jost, 2017) and echo chambers are more prominent among conservatives (Hmielowski et al., 2020; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), often exhibiting more strategic and aggressive participatory practices on social media to insert their political agenda (Bode et al., 2015).

Less has been explored on a partisan asymmetry in receptivity to contextual environment. Building on the extant literature that documents the fundamental disparity in party operation, communication networks, and cognitive tendencies among partisans, we propose that such evidence can further inform how partisans engage in different motivations to take actions depending on contextual factors. For example, tied to conservatives' more closed communication networks and greater motivation to conform to their in-group, conservatives can be more reactive than liberals when encountering contextual hostility in social and political environment.

We also expect those with differing levels of political interest will show different reactions to political contexts. First, higher political interest is often associated with higher knowledge about political processes, systems, and elections. Greater political interest leads to greater cognitive ability to make judgments based on current political conditions and take action accordingly. Second, political interest is related



**Fig. 2** Theoretical model of structural influences on campaign participation

to personality traits and self-concepts, properties that are stable over time (Gerber et al., 2012). Evidence shows that higher political interest is associated with such dispositional traits as openness to experience, extraversion, curiosity, desire for learning, and sensitivity to the political environment (Gerber et al., 2012; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Such environmental sensitivity likely increases receptivity to external factors like partisan climate in neighborhoods as well as the level of partisan representation at the state government. Despite some useful insights from prior evidence, less is known about how individuals with different levels of political interest and party identification engage in political actions motivated by different layers of contextual factors. Given the above considerations, we propose the following research question (See Fig. 2 for a full theoretical model):

**RQ3:** How will individuals with differing political orientations—party identification and political interest—experience different relationships between political contexts and participation?

## Methods<sup>1</sup>

### Survey Data

We analyzed data from a rolling cross-sectional survey conducted during the 2016 campaign period for 8 weeks from September 20, 2016. We recruited about

<sup>1</sup> Data and R codes are available in the following link: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NBS63L>

100 respondents per day from Qualtrics' online panel, and each day's sample was approximated to the U.S. Census data in terms of age, race, education, and income. Our sample included a total of 5602 respondents.<sup>2</sup>

## Individual-Level Measures

### Public Participation

Respondents were asked to measure the frequency of their engagement in the following activities in the past week on a 5-point scale (1 = Never to 5 = Very Often): (a) attended a political rally, protest, or demonstration, (b) wore a badge or a t-shirt with a political message, (c) Volunteered for a candidate or campaign, (d) attended a campaign rally or event, and (e) Displayed a sticker or sign supporting a candidate ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ,  $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ).

### Online Participation

Respondents also answered the frequency of their engagement in the following items on a 5-point scale: (a) commented on an online news story or political blog post, (b) posted or shared content about politics or a social issue on social media, (c) expressed your political views on social media, (d) Forwarded or circulated funny videos or cartoons related to a political candidate, campaign or political issue, (e) Reposted content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else on social media, and (f) "Liked" or promoted material related to political or social issues that others have posted on social media ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ,  $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ).

### Net Like-Minded Media Use

Respondents answered their frequency of various media use in the past week on a 5-point scale. We first created "partisan like-minded media use" and "partisan counter-attitudinal media use" variables depending on respondents' self-identified partisanship; for Democrats, the like-minded partisan media use was created by averaging the frequency of consuming MSNBC, NPR, and liberal political blogs ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ,  $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) and for Republicans, by averaging their use of Fox, conservative talk radio, and conservative political blogs ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ,  $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). Counter-attitudinal partisan media use was constructed by averaging the counter-attitudinal media consumption. Using these two components, we created a *net* variable by subtracting like-minded partisan media use from counter-attitudinal partisan media use to indicate the relative degree of homogeneous partisan media use, accounting for the counter-attitudinal one ( $M = 0.59$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ).

<sup>2</sup> 2798 Democrats with leaners, 1115 pure Independents, and 1683 Republicans with leaners. 6 did not indicate their party identification.

*Net homogeneous political talk.* Respondents were asked to measure on a 5-point scale how often they engaged in political conversations with various partners, including people who agree/disagree with the respondent, people with extreme liberal/conservative views, and other Democrats/Republicans. Using the similar approach as the media variable, we calculated Democrats' homogeneous political talk by averaging the talk frequency with those who are agreeable, share liberal views, and are other Democrats, and disagreeable talk by averaging with those who are disagreeable, share conservative views, and are Republicans. Republicans' homogeneous and heterogeneous talk variables were created in the same way. The *net* homogeneous political talk was constructed to indicate the relative degree of engagement in agreeable political talk accounting for disagreeable political talk ( $M=0.55$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ).

### Demographics and Political Orientations

Gender (68% females), age ( $M=44.68$ ), education (operationalized as highest degree received; Median = Some college), income (Median = 50 k to 74.9 k), and race (73.8% Whites, 11.7% Black or African American, 2.7% Asian, and 1.09% Others, and 9.8% Hispanic) were asked. Partisan strength was created by dichotomizing party affiliation responses such that 1 = strong partisan (22.7%) and 0 = non-strong partisan (77.3%). Respondents also answered their general level of interest in a) politics and national government and b) political campaigns and issues on a 5-point scale ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ,  $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ).

### Context-Level Data and Measures

We integrated two contextual datasets into the survey data for each respondent: (a) zip code-level political climate for meso-social neighborhood partisanship (Tam Cho et al., 2013) and (b) the macro-partisan composition of each state based on the party of the Governor, State Senate, and State House.

First, we assessed the neighborhood political climate at a zip code level in which individuals reside by using zip code-level voting data, which merged zip codes with precinct-level vote results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election provided by *The New York Times* (Bloch et al., 2018). We used the proportionality of Democratic vs. Republican zip code voting as an indicator of the political climate at the time the cross-sectional survey was conducted. For the political representativeness dataset, we obtained state government partisan composition information as of September 2016 (on the eve of the fall election and at the time our survey data was collected), including the number of State Senate seats by party, the number of State House seats by party, and the partisanship of the State governor. These contextual datasets were merged with the survey dataset by using respondents' self-reported zip code and state information. The final merged dataset included 50 States and 3550 zip codes.

## Neighborhood-Level Political Climate

We created a variable indicating how much of *unfavorable* political climate individuals experience in their zip code-level neighborhoods. Using the percentage of votes for the winner in the 2016 U.S. election, the scores for the unfavorability were adjusted by respondents' party ID; for Democrats, the unfavorability in neighborhood political climate was calculated by  $(1 - \text{the percentage of voting for the Democrat candidate in the zip code area})$  and for Republicans, it was  $(1 - \text{the percentage of voting for the Republican candidate in the zip code area})$ . For example, a Democrat living in an area where 89.5% of residents voted for the Democrat candidate would face 10.5% of people opposite to his/her opinion. For a Republican living in the same area, on the other hand, the unfavorable neighborhood context would be 89.5%. On average, our sample experienced 43% of unfavorable political climate at a zip code level.

## State-Level Political Representation

We also measured *political underrepresentation* at the state government level. This variable measures the extent to which a party identification is proportionately underrepresented at the state level compared to the general voting climate. First, we created an index representing the partisanship of the state government by averaging the percentage of State Senate seats, the percentage of State House seats, and the partisanship of the State governor. We subtracted this index from the state-level voting climate (the percentage of voting for the Republican/Democrat candidate in the 2016 election) in order to consider the party representation at a state government relative to the general voting climate. The final score for each respondent was also adjusted by party ID. For example, for a Democrat living in a state where 48.1% of the state population voted for the Democrat candidate but the state partisanship score is 27.8%, meaning 27.8% of state power is represented by Democrats, this means his/her partisanship is underrepresented by 20.3 (48.1–27.8), while in the same state, Republicans are overrepresented by 20.3. The variable would theoretically range from 1 (living in a state with absolute control by Democrats) to -1 (living in a state with absolute control by Republicans), with 0 being living in a state with a well-represented government corresponding to the state population partisanship.

## Analysis Strategy

Given the nested structure of our dataset, we ran random intercept multilevel modeling with Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML).<sup>3</sup> We consider two contextual factors along with individual-level predictors as well as day of the survey as

<sup>3</sup> While random slope models were also considered for the possibility that the slope of individual-level variables would vary based on the neighborhood unfavorability or state underrepresentation, we could find little evidence for significant variation. Therefore, we opted for random intercept models for parsimony.

a control (Kosmidis, 2014; Matthews & Johnston, 2010).<sup>4</sup> In our dataset, each zip code belonged to only one state, which enabled us to conduct three-level multilevel modeling where individuals are nested within zip codes, within states. In the analysis, given our interest in favorability of political contexts depending on one's party identification, we examined partisan samples (N=4481), excluding Independents. The analysis was performed using the R package *robustlmm*, which provides the robust estimation of multilevel modeling (Koller, 2016).

Factor analysis with principal axis factoring revealed two factors of public and online participation, with 0.67 of factor correlation. In our analysis, we residualized dependent variables by regressing one from another, so that we estimate (unstandardized) residuals after taking into account the contributing effects of another participation variable. Throughout the analysis, all independent variables in the models were grand-mean centered.

## Results

Our findings indicate that more like-minded partisan media use (relative to counter-attitudinal media use) was a positive predictor for online participation, but not for public participation. Similarly, more homogeneous political talk (relative to heterogeneous talk) was negatively associated with public participation, while it was positively associated with online participation (see Table 1). This suggests that more counter-attitudinal media use and disagreeable political talk are positively related to public participation. These observations partially support both H1 and H2. For other controls, our results show that younger people and those with higher political interest were more likely to participate in general. Men, non-Whites, the highly educated, and strong partisans tended to participate more in public.

H3 and H4 suggested competing hypotheses about how contextual variables at a neighborhood level and state level would relate to participation. Our results show that while neighborhood-level unfavorability was not associated with either form of participation, state-level underrepresentation was positively associated with public participation, but negatively with online participation (see Table 1). In other words, people living in a state where the government underrepresents their partisanship were more likely to engage in public participation, but less likely to participate online; this also suggests that higher legislative representation at the state government, in turn, is positively linked to online actions. This supports the Activation and Complacency arguments for public participation (H4b), and Mobilization and Resignation arguments for online participation (H3b).

RQ1 asked whether there will be a compensatory relationship between public and online participation in politically unfavorable neighborhoods. We examined this by checking whether the correlation coefficients between two forms of participation

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<sup>4</sup> Following prior studies employing the RCS design, we included day of surveys as controls (Kosmidis, 2014; Matthews & Johnston, 2010).



**Table 1** Multilevel modeling predicting public and online participation for all sample

Predictors	Public participation		Online participation	
	B	SE	B	SE
<b>Fixed effects</b>				
Level 1				
(Intercept)	0.228**	0.078	- 0.019	0.097
Age	- 0.048***	0.011	- 0.117***	0.015
Female	- 0.077**	0.023	0.012	0.032
Education	0.074***	0.013	- 0.032	0.017
Income	0.000	0.013	- 0.001	0.018
White	- 0.050*	0.024	0.081*	0.034
Partisan strength	0.042***	0.009	- 0.004	0.011
Political interest	0.067***	0.012	0.180***	0.016
Net like-minded media use	- 0.047***	0.012	0.091***	0.015
Net homogeneous political talk	- 0.138***	0.011	0.095***	0.014
Level 2 (zip)				
Neighborhood political unfavorability	- 0.078	0.049	- 0.130	0.070
Level 3 (state)				
Legislative underrepresentation	0.152**	0.055	- 0.190*	0.079
<b>Random effects</b>				
$\sigma^2$	0.28		0.28	
$\tau_{00}$	0.00 <sub>zip</sub>		0.22 <sub>zip</sub>	
	0.00 <sub>state</sub>		0.00 <sub>state</sub>	
Observations	2930		2930	

Dependent variables are residualized estimates. Daily dummy variables are included in the models but deleted for space

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

significantly differed contingent on the political unfavorability at the neighborhood level. To do so, we first median-split the sample using the neighborhood political climate unfavorability score (*Median*=0.42), generating sub-samples above the median and below the median. Our analysis shows that the correlation between public and online participation was significantly higher in more politically favorable neighborhoods ( $r=0.60$ ) than in political unfavorable ones ( $r=0.56$ ;  $z=-1.972$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that the two behaviors reinforce one another in politically favorable zip code areas.

RQ2 asked how the neighborhood political climate and state legislative representation would interact to predict political participation. According to our interaction models for both public and online participation, there were no significant interaction relationships between the two context variables for participation (see full models in Supplementary Information).

## Public and Online Participation by Subgroups

RQ3 asked how the relationship between contextual variables and participation would differ depending on political orientations, namely party identification and political interest. Table 2 shows nuanced patterns between Republicans and Democrats. For Republicans, the neighborhood-level unfavorability was associated with more public participation whereas for Democrats, it was related to less public participation. In other words, Republicans living in areas with politically disagreeable neighbors tended to participate more in public whereas Democrats living in politically unfavorable neighborhoods were less likely to participate publicly. This supports the Mobilization and Resignation argument for Democrats and the Activation and Complacency argument for Republicans, given their reactive participatory behaviors to unfavorable neighborhoods. In terms of state-level legislative underrepresentation, it was negatively related to online participation, but only for Democrats; it was not a significant contextual predictor for Republicans. Democrats proportionately underrepresented in state government tended to retreat from online activity.

Individual-level relationships differed by partisan subgroups compared to the previous analyses. For both partisans, more homogeneous political talk was associated with less public participation and more online participation. However, more like-minded partisan media use was also linked to less public participation and more online participation, but only among Democrats. Younger partisans were generally more participatory, and male Republicans were more likely to participate in public, while female Republicans participated more online. Higher education level was positively associated with public participation across partisans. Democrats with high political interest were more participatory in public and online, while Republicans with high political interest were more likely to participate online, but not in public participation.

We also looked at high and low political interest groups. Our analysis shows that legislative underrepresentation at the state level was positively associated with public participation ( $B = 0.225$ ,  $SE = 0.077$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but negatively with online participation ( $B = -0.221$ ,  $SE = 0.103$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but only among the high political interest group, while the low political interest group did not exhibit significant relationships between contextual features and participation. Additionally, the neighborhood political unfavorability was negatively associated with online participation among the high political interest group ( $B = -0.183$ ,  $SE = 0.091$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); for those with higher political interest, politically unfavorable contexts both in neighborhoods and state governments was associated with reduced participatory behavior especially in online sphere, supporting the Mobilization and Resignation argument. Other individual-level relationships remained largely consistent compared to the total sample (see Supplementary Information for a full table).

## Discussion

Evidence shows that partisan sorting along geographic lines is increasing, but less is known about how the political context in which individuals are situated relates to their participatory styles. Here, we have proposed and examined different

**Table 2** Multilevel modeling predicting public and online participation for Republicans and Democrats

Predictors	(a) Republicans				(b) Democrats			
	Public		Online		Public		Online	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
<b>Fixed effects</b>								
<b>Level 1</b>								
(Intercept)	-0.093	0.110	-0.156	0.180	0.293**	0.095	0.044	0.119
Age	0.003	0.016	-0.117***	0.027	-0.096***	0.015	-0.100***	0.019
Female	-0.121***	0.034	0.140*	0.058	-0.056	0.033	-0.083	0.040
Education	0.039*	0.019	-0.025	0.031	0.080*	0.017	-0.037	0.022
Income	-0.001	0.019	-0.039	0.032	0.003	0.017	0.023	0.022
White	-0.025	0.052	0.033	0.089	0.001	0.032	0.074	0.039
Partisan strength	0.021	0.013	0.005	0.022	0.044**	0.012	-0.009	0.016
Political interest	0.011	0.017	0.203***	0.028	0.111***	0.016	0.168***	0.020
Net like-minded media use	-0.030	0.016	0.040	0.026	-0.040*	0.016	0.126***	0.019
Net homogeneous political talk	-0.066***	0.014	0.062**	0.023	-0.181***	0.014	0.118***	0.018
<b>Level 2 (zip)</b>								
Neighborhood political unfavorability	0.226**	0.087	-0.199	0.146	-0.230**	0.078	0.034	0.095
<b>Level 3 (state)</b>								
Legislative underrepresentation	0.010	0.129	-0.276	0.166	0.177	0.098	-0.268*	0.120
<b>Random effects</b>								
$\sigma^2$	0.07	0.18	0.13	0.22				
$\tau_{00}$	0.11 <sub>zip</sub>	0.58 <sub>zip</sub>	0.21 <sub>zip</sub>	0.29 <sub>zip</sub>				
	0.01 <sub>state</sub>	0.00 <sub>state</sub>	0.00 <sub>state</sub>	0.00 <sub>state</sub>				
Observations	1035	1035	1895	1895				

Dependent variables are residualized estimates. Daily dummy variables are included in the models but deleted for space

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

participation patterns depending on political contexts, especially the partisan climate at a zip code-level neighborhood and political representation at a state level. Employing the three-level multilevel modeling to simultaneously test the association of individual and context-level variables with participation in local communities versus the online sphere, we find support for the importance of local and state contexts as antecedents of political behaviors.

Our analysis reveals that individuals in a state where the government underrepresents their partisanship tend to engage in public participation. Related to the Activation and Complacency arguments, legislative underrepresentation is possibly taken as a political threat or disadvantage that motivates efforts to bring about change through collective action. Specifically, it was related to more public participation, rather than online forms of participation. Given the potential threat, the most effective channel to act against this is possibly through marching on streets, putting out yard signs, or contacting electoral officials, actions based on localities, rather than the act of online sharing and expressing that are less geographically bounded.

Moreover, the subgroup analyses illustrate more nuanced participation patterns among people with different political orientations. We looked at how Republicans' and Democrats' political actions are related to different contextual factors, providing additional insights into fundamental differences between partisans. When the neighborhood political climate was unfavorable to Democrats, they tended to participate less in public, but when they were underrepresented at the state level, they were less active online. For Republicans, on the other hand, it was the unfavorable neighborhood political climate that was linked to more public, confrontational forms of activism. This may reflect an underlying difference between the two parties: The Democratic Party is rooted in various issue-based interest groups, whereas the Republican Party operates based on ideological motivation (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016), suggesting that the meaning and nature of public actions for Democrats and Republicans are different. It is likely that for Republicans, being surrounded by counter-ideological social ties in neighborhoods is considered an important context that enhances motivations to defend their ideological and value standings against left-wing ideas. On the other hand, contextual hostility at a local and state level is a demobilizing factor for Democrats. Expanding previous evidence on the greater tendency of political confrontations and extremity among the right (Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Bode et al., 2015), we further show how adverse local environments can provide a structural motive for political participation, asymmetrically toward the conservatives. That the partisan geographic sorting and gerrymandering practices in some states can be suppressive for some groups but not others may have deeper implications for a representative democracy where political participation is a crucial means of raising voices and influencing policy implementations. Additionally, the relationship between contextual factors and participation was especially significant among the high political interest group, but not the low political interest group, suggesting that those attentive to politics are more likely to be sensitive to political contexts surrounding them, as implied in prior research (Gerber et al., 2012; Mondak & Halperin, 2008).

At the individual level, more like-minded partisan media use and agreeable political talk were linked to more online expressive behaviors, suggesting mobilizing

effects of partisan communications, but only in the online sphere. By contrast, counter-attitudinal media use and more heterogeneous talk were positively related to public participation. Thus, it seems that greater exposure to counter-attitudinal networks and content relative to pro-attitudinal ones is possibly related to a reactive mechanism to take action in public (Taber & Lodge, 2006), whereas communication with like-minded others and from supportive partisan media (Himmelboim et al., 2016) was associated with online expression and content sharing, which require lower levels of input and effort. While previous studies suggest the mobilizing role of partisan media and communication, our analysis emphasizes the importance of considering different types of actions that are mobilized and distinct mechanisms behind them.

As the mounting evidence on the partisan preferences and geography suggests, attributes of neighborhoods or states take on social and political meanings. Beyond the mere regional dichotomy of urban versus rural, we emphasize that the nature of the political climate in which people reside provides an environment for certain political experiences and avenues for expressing political self-concepts and identities. In a sense, our evidence sheds light on how participatory patterns can operate within multiple layers of contexts, beyond well-documented individual-level variables. Many forms of participation may seem mostly similar, but their meaning and consequences can vary to a great extent, depending on the nuances and nature of participatory patterns. We thus call for more scholarly attention to the structural motives surrounding individuals as one additional factor that adds to the nature of partisan participation.

Despite important contributions, our study has some caveats. First, our study focuses on the particular context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Given the competitive election, it is less clear how much of the uniqueness of the context contributed to our findings. Future studies should expand to other electoral contexts like the 2020 U.S. election or elections in other countries with different party systems to document the generalized patterns of voter participation behaviors. Second, in our dataset, the size of zip code clusters is small, which might raise an over-inflation concern. However, evidence demonstrates that the proportions of small level-2 clusters in data do not impact model parameters when the numbers of level-2 clusters are large, as in our dataset (Bell et al., 2008; Clarke & Wheaton, 2007), allaying some concerns. We hope future studies with extensive geographic units to build upon our research design to examine political participation across contextual differences.

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