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Beyond Knowing Facts: How the Structure of Knowledge Drives Political Engagement in China

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between political knowledge and political participation among Chinese university students, introducing the dual dimensions of Knowledge Structure Density as superior predictors and key mediating mechanisms. Analysis of large-scale (N=2,574), face-to-face survey data yields two principal empirical findings. Firstly, political knowledge significantly predicts both online and offline political engagement within this distinct institutional context. Secondly, and more crucially, both Internal and External Knowledge Structure Density prove to be stronger direct predictors of participation than factual knowledge alone, and they mediate a substantial portion of knowledge's total effect. This indicates that the link between information and action is significantly explained by an individual's integrated cognitive map, particularly one that connects systemic politics to personal stakes. Theoretically, the research confirms the generalisability of the foundational knowledge-participation link while advancing political sophistication theory by operationalising Knowledge Structure Density. Methodologically, it demonstrates the utility of moving beyond static knowledge quizzes to capture the structural quality of political understanding. By specifying the cognitive mechanism through which knowledge fosters engagement, the study offers refined insights for cultivating participatory citizenship in non-Western and digitally-mediated environments.

Keywords political knowledge • knowledge structure density • political participation • China

Introduction

The relationship between what citizens know and how they act constitutes a foundational premise of democratic theory and political behavior research. Adequate knowledge is deemed essential for well-informed citizenship, enabling meaningful engagement in political affairs, while participatory acts themselves can further refine an individual's understanding of politics (Zaller, 1992; Highton and Margalit, 2019; Lupia, 2016). A robust scholarly consensus, established primarily within Western democratic contexts, confirms that a more informed citizenry is a more participatory one (Verba et al., 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Prior, 2013).

This relationship gains renewed significance in the digital age. The ascendancy of the Internet and social media has transformed the political information environment, becoming a primary news source for many, particularly younger generations (Bode, 2012; Shearer and Gottfried, 2017; Newman et al., 2020). This shift has augmented opportunities for incidental exposure to political information (Nanz and Matthes, 2020, 2022; Feezell and Ortiz, 2021), and the interlinked architecture of digital platforms may foster the observation of connections among political concepts (Eveland et al., 2004; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). However, whether this heightened exposure reliably translates into greater knowledge or participation remains contested (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017; Amsalem and Zoizner, 2023), underscoring the need to revisit classic questions within new media ecologies.

Despite this extensive literature, critical empirical and theoretical gaps persist. First, the vast majority of evidence supporting the knowledge-participation link derives from Western democracies. It remains significantly underexplored whether this fundamental relationship holds in alternative political systems, such as China, where both institutional channels for participation and the nature of political

knowledge itself may differ markedly. China, with the world's largest internet user base (1.123 billion, CNNIC 2025) and a rapidly evolving digital public sphere, presents a crucial yet understudied context for testing the generalisability of this core theoretical proposition (Chang and Chu, 2006). Understanding how knowledge functions within this distinct institutional setting is essential for a more comprehensive theory of political behaviour.

Second, and more profoundly, a long-recognised conceptual and methodological limitation stifles deeper theoretical progress. Research has predominantly equated 'political sophistication' with the sheer volume of factual knowledge, often neglecting the structural organisation of that knowledge—a dimension theorists argue is equally, if not more, critical (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1987). Luskin's (1987) two-dimensional model distinguishes between the 'level' of knowledge and its 'conceptualisation', the latter referring to the cognitive ability to organise and interrelate political ideas. Yet, empirical studies have largely relied on factual quizzes as a proxy for the broader construct, conflating quantity with cognitive quality. This has created a persistent gap between the theoretical importance of knowledge structure and the tools available to measure it. The concept of Knowledge Structure Density (KSD), which captures an individual's capacity to perceive interrelationships among political entities (Eveland et al., 2004), operationalises this key dimension of conceptualisation. Furthermore, distinguishing between External KSD, understanding systemic connections, and Internal KSD, perceiving the relevance of politics to personal interests, allows for a nuanced mechanistic analysis of how knowledge translates into motivation (Gallina, 2023; Druckman et al., 2006). The extent to which KSD, rather than factual knowledge alone, drives political participation, and mediates the classic knowledge-participation link, remains inadequately tested, especially in non-Western settings.

To address these interconnected gaps, this study investigates the relationship between political knowledge and political participation among Chinese university students, with a specific focus on the mediating role of KSD. It pursues two primary aims: (1) to test the generalisability of the positive knowledge-participation relationship within China's distinct political context, and (2) to advance political sophistication theory by examining whether KSD serves as a stronger predictor and a key cognitive mechanism linking factual knowledge to action. By analysing original, large-scale face-to-face survey data (N=2,574), this research seeks to provide robust evidence from a critical case, moving beyond a simple replication to specify the cognitive pathways through which political knowledge fosters civic engagement in a digitally mediated, non-Western political landscape.

Political knowledge and political participation

Political knowledge is widely regarded as a cornerstone construct for civic competence, essential for both democratic and non-liberal-democratic citizenship (Amsalem and Zoizner, 2023; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Kleinberg and Lau, 2019; Kleinberg, 2024). It is conventionally defined as the store of factual information about politics—encompassing institutions, processes, key actors, and current events—held in long-term memory (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). This substantive knowledge constitutes a fundamental dimension of broader concepts such as political awareness (Solhaug and Christophersen, 2022) and is a key component of political sophistication (Luskin, 1987).

The significance of understanding the link between what citizens know and how they act is amplified in the contemporary digital era. The ascendancy of the Internet and social media has transformed the political information environment, theoretically offering unprecedented opportunities for creating a more informed citizenry (Bode, 2016; Gottfried et al., 2017; Allcott et al., 2020). However,

empirical evidence on whether this potential is realised remains mixed, suggesting that heightened exposure does not automatically translate to greater knowledge or engagement (Amsalem and Zoizner, 2023). This underscores the enduring need to scrutinise the classic relationship between knowledge and participation within new media ecologies.

A robust body of research, established primarily within Western democratic contexts, demonstrates that political knowledge is a consistent and positive predictor of political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006; Prior, 2013; Matthes et al., 2019). An informed citizenry, the consensus holds, is a more participatory one. Yet, a critical empirical gap persists: it remains significantly underexplored whether this foundational relationship obtains in political systems with markedly different institutional arrangements and civic logics. In such contexts, where both access to certain types of political knowledge and channels for participation may be distinct, the dynamics connecting cognition to action could differ. China, possessing the world's largest internet user base and a rapidly evolving digital public sphere, presents a crucial and instructive case for testing the generalisability of this core theoretical proposition. Consequently, this study posits its first hypothesis:

H1：Political knowledge has a positive influence on both online and offline political participation in China.

From Factual Knowledge to Knowledge Structure Density

Political knowledge, however, is beset by a long-recognised yet insufficiently addressed conceptual and methodological limitation: its predominant focus on the volume of knowledge, largely neglecting its structure or organisation. This limitation was evident even in foundational work. Philip Converse (1964) argued that political sophistication is reflected not merely in the number of facts held, but crucially in whether knowledge is organised in a coherent, "constrained" manner, positing that developed belief systems are "denser" and more internally consistent. Robert Luskin (1987) subsequently formalised this distinction by identifying two core dimensions of political sophistication: level and conceptualisation. The former denotes the quantity of political knowledge possessed, whereas the latter refers to the capacity to organise and reason abstractly about politics. This theoretical distinction is critical, suggesting that civic capacity involves not just what one knows, but how one understands it—the ability to connect discrete informational points into meaningful cognitive schemata.

Despite these insights, empirical research, often for pragmatic measurement reasons, continued to use factual recall quizzes as proxies for the broader sophistication construct (Luskin, 2020; Combs, 2026), effectively conflating knowledge quantity with cognitive quality. This has resulted in a persistent disjuncture between theoretical concept and measurement tool: while the importance of knowledge structure is frequently acknowledged, a dedicated, clearly defined, and operationalised construct to capture it remained elusive.

To address this gap, the present study advances Knowledge Structure Density (KSD) as a specific dimension of political conceptualisation and proposes a core thesis: within the cognitive architecture of political engagement, KSD is not only a superior predictor of political participation compared to factual knowledge alone, but also the critical mediating mechanism through which factual knowledge exerts its influence. The concept of KSD was first introduced by Eveland, Marton, and Seo (2004) in their study on the effects of website structure on political learning. It refers to an individual’s cognitive capacity to perceive and comprehend the complex interrelationships among diverse political entities and to understand their interaction within the broader political landscape (Eveland et al., 2004; Eveland &

Hively, 2009; Gallina, 2023). KSD thus operationalises Converse's (1964) seminal insight regarding the structure of political thought, underscores the importance of integrative thinking in political cognition, and is particularly pertinent for studying how digital and algorithmic information environments shape cognitive architecture.

Within parallel research on political awareness, political understanding is identified as a crucial mediator. As defined by Zaller (1992), political awareness encompasses "the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered" (p. 21), a construct that predicts political attitudes and facilitates informed participation (Kristensen et al., 2022; Solhaug & Christophersen, 2022). This perspective builds upon foundational work (Converse, 1964) and aligns with contemporary political cognition studies (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Rapeli, 2022a). Its conceptual framework comprises three progressive dimensions: attentiveness, factual knowledge, and political understanding (Solhaug & Christophersen, 2022). Whilst factual knowledge is necessary, it is held to be insufficient on its own; it must be transformed into political understanding—a deeper cognitive integration of information (Zaller, 1992; Rapeli, 2022a; Gallina, 2022)—which in turn enables informed participation (Kristensen et al., 2022). Political understanding is therefore posited as a mediator between factual knowledge and participation.

Both political understanding and KSD relate to the analysis and integration of political information (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Druckman et al., 2006). However, KSD is distinct in its specific emphasis on the cognitive aptitude to discern and articulate the structural connections among disparate political elements (Eveland et al., 2004). This relational capacity fosters a holistic perception of political dynamics and enables the formation of well-informed, context-sensitive perspectives (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Druckman et al., 2006), thereby contributing to more deliberative discourse (Gallina, 2022; Rapeli, 2022a).

Consequently, the central proposition advanced here is that factual knowledge provides the raw material for engagement, but its translation into political behaviour is critically dependent upon its cognitive organisation. KSD—conceptualised as the degree of coherent connectedness between political concepts, directly reflecting Converse's (1964) principle of 'constraint'—is posited as the key cognitive mechanism that structures isolated facts into a usable mental model. It is therefore hypothesised that KSD will be a more powerful direct predictor of political participation than factual knowledge and will serve as the primary mediator of its effect.

KSD is not intended to replace the broader, multi-dimensional construct of political sophistication, which may encompass aspects like ideological constraint or attitudinal complexity (Goren, 2012; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Rather, it is proposed as a more focused, lower-order construct that specifies the core organisational quality implied by sophistication. It directly operationalises Luskin's (1987) "conceptualisation" dimension and builds upon Converse's (1964) notion of "constraint" and density. In contrast to broader terms like "political understanding," KSD possesses an explicit, parsimonious focus on the cognitive structure of knowledge. Moreover, as a structural property, it remains conceptually independent of specific ideological content or polity-level knowledge.

The core theoretical value of KSD is that it captures the cognitive process essential for transforming isolated facts into actionable political understanding. Knowing that a policy and a social problem both exist constitutes factual knowledge; understanding how that policy instrumentally relates to that problem demonstrates KSD. This relational understanding enables individuals to contextualise information, discern causal mechanisms, and evaluate potential consequences—capacities vital for the systematic

cognition required for participatory decision-making (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).

External and Internal Knowledge Structure Density

To deepen the analysis and address concerns about terminological necessity, this study further distinguishes KSD into two complementary facets with distinct theoretical implications: External KSD (EKSD) and Internal KSD (IKSD) (Gallina, 2023). This distinction is not semantically redundant but substantively meaningful.

EKSD refers to an individual's ability to recognise and evaluate the interconnections among a range of external political concepts—including relationships among events, individuals, and institutions within the political system (Eveland and Hively, 2009). In contrast, IKSD captures an individual's capacity to perceive and assess how various political or social issues relate to, and impact, their own interests over both proximate and longer-term horizons (Gallina, 2023). Together, EKSD and IKSD provide complementary insights into how individuals structure and utilise political knowledge in ways that may inform their participatory behaviours (Druckman et al., 2006; Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000).

EKSD and IKSD capture the cognitive progression from "system logic" to "personal relevance". EKSD and IKSD together form a coherent cognitive chain: understanding how the system works (EKSD) is a prerequisite, but recognising how its workings are germane to one's own interests (IKSD) is the critical translational step for motivating participation (Druckman et al., 2006). This differentiation allows for a more nuanced test of how different dimensions of knowledge structure differentially shape political behaviour.

While factual knowledge provides a foundational understanding of politics, KSD—which captures an individual's ability to discern interconnections among political concepts—should more effectively predict participatory behaviours (Eveland et al., 2004). This is because KSD reflects deeper cognitive integration of political information, enabling individuals to contextualise issues and recognise their personal relevance (Eveland et al., 2004; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Druckman et al., 2006). We, therefore, proposed the following hypothesis:

H2a: Both EKSD and IKSD are stronger predictors of political participation than factual political knowledge.

Factual knowledge alone is insufficient to drive participation; its influence likely operates indirectly by facilitating the development of KSD (Gallina, 2023). Individuals who transform isolated facts into structured, relational knowledge (KSD) are better equipped to engage meaningfully in politics (Druckman et al., 2006; Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000; Rapeli, 2022b). Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H2b: Both EKSD and IKSD mediate the effect of factual political knowledge on political participation.

Method

To test the proposed hypotheses, a face-to-face questionnaire survey (N = 2574) was administered among Chinese university students. Rigorous procedures in questionnaire design, sampling, and data collection were implemented to ensure data quality, enhance the representativeness of the college student population, and safeguard participants' rights.

The questionnaire was developed by the lead investigator and two professors —one specialising in youth political participation and the other in internet and political engagement. Prior to the main survey, the instrument underwent nearly a year of iterative testing through online and offline pilots. These employed snowball and convenience sampling, along with one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and anonymous in-class or individual administrations, to refine question wording, sequence, length, and overall reliability of the survey procedure.

Given the focus on factual knowledge and the need to provide a secure setting for discussing political topics, an anonymous face-to-face survey format was adopted. The study protocol and questionnaire received approval from the Research Ethics Committee.

A hybrid sampling strategy combining purposive and convenience sampling was employed. First, seven comprehensive universities directly under central ministries were selected in four major municipalities/provinces (Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Xiamen) to ensure geographical, institutional and disciplinary diversity[1]. Within each campus, convenience sampling was used, with participants approached at various campus locations. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participant responses to three factual and six attitudinal items were verified for internal consistency. Investigators were trained to identify potential response issues, such as abnormally short completion times or sequences of four or more identical responses, with particular attention to reversed-scale items. In such cases, investigators were required to clarify the responses with the participants. Each participant received a remuneration of 5 RMB upon completing the questionnaire and providing valid responses. The whole process required roughly half an hour.

The survey was conducted by trained research assistants under the supervision of principal investigators. The principal investigators were undergraduate students who had participated extensively throughout the project, including questionnaire and procedure testing. Assistants were recruited from the lead investigator's academic network at the host institution; all were graduate students with prior research experience and a stated interest in the project. Before data collection, all team members completed standardised training workshops—online upon recruitment and in-person immediately before the survey—covering: (1) study objectives and accurate item administration, (2) informed consent and anonymity protocols, and (3) handling participant inquiries. Trained research assistants were teamed with supervisors randomly during data collection to ensure protocol compliance. On-site training and supervision were delivered by the lead investigator in Chongqing, Beijing, and Shanghai, and by a project partner at Xiamen University.

During the informed consent procedure, participants were advised of their rights and assured of

[1] In China, for universities directly affiliated with the central ministries, up to 30% of their admission quotas may be reserved for students from the host province. The remaining 70% of quotas are allocated proportionally across other provinces based on comprehensive factors such as the size of the candidate pool in each province and historical enrollment patterns. For provincially affiliated 211 Project institutions and first-tier universities, up to 70% of admission quotas may be reserved for the host province, with the remaining 30% allocated nationwide. For provincially affiliated second-tier universities, up to 90% of admission quotas may be reserved for the host province, with the remaining 10% allocated nationwide. As for other provincially affiliated junior colleges, their enrollment is predominantly oriented toward the host province. Comprehensive universities are institutions that encompass a wide range of academic disciplines.

anonymity. They were also informed that they could retain the invitation letter, which contained contact details for the lead investigator and the Research Ethics Committee. This enabled them to contact the investigator for further information about the study, its outcomes, or related outputs, and to approach the Committee with any concerns regarding the survey process. Data collection took place between 9 and 19 January 2018. To ensure accuracy, all questionnaires were independently entered by two trained research assistants. A total of 2722 questionnaires were completed, of which 2574 were valid, yielding a validity rate of 94.6%.

Measurements

Independent variables and mediating variables

The measurement of political knowledge and KSD is contingent on political and temporal context. The questionnaire survey was conducted between two major political events in China: the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (18–24 October 2017) and the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (3–20 March 2018). All three measures were designed with reference to these events, particularly the first.

Factual political knowledge assessed recognition of leading political figures and policymakers associated with both events. EKSD examined awareness of key policies and issues raised during the 19th Party Congress that were of broad public concern, especially to university students, and were widely discussed in the interim period before the Two Sessions. IKSD gauged the extent to which participants perceived the relevance of the 19th Party Congress to their own short- and long-term interests.

Four single-choice questions and one multiple-choice question were utilised to gauge the participants' **factual political knowledge**. Single-choice questions included: Who is the current Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, the current leader of Taiwan, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, and the current Minister of Education of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The multiple-choice questions are members of the Standing Committee of the 19th Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, and the options include: Xi Jinping, Wen Jiabao, Wu Yi, Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Huning, Wu Bangguo, Zhao Leji, Jia Qinglin, Han Zheng and Li Changchun. One point was awarded for each correct answer in the single-choice questions, while no points were given for incorrect answers. In the multiple-choice question, one point was given for each correct choice, and one point was deducted for each wrong choice. The total score was computed, with a maximum score of 11. The overall mean value was 5.1377, indicating that the overall score of the respondents was relatively low.

To corroborate positive influence of political knowledge on political participation, participants' **political knowledge acquisition behavior** was also surveyed by frequency or length of time of seven behaviors. Those included frequency of (1) visiting the web pages, blogs, or WeChat of certain social activists and radicals (social activists and radicals refer to those who take action to fight for the interests of individuals or groups, or attempt to influence government decisions or policies, such as those who protect vulnerable groups; or those who criticise the government and promote social change, etc.); (2)visiting websites and WeChat official accounts of The Communist Party of China and government organizations at all levels; (3) visiting the web pages, blogs, or WeChat of other political groups (except the CPC), (4) visiting the web pages, blogs, or WeChat of voluntary organizations; (5) using various means such as news websites, WeChat, and search engines on the Internet to be informed of current events, politics, and social news and information; (6) using television, radio, and newspapers to obtain

news this semester(1=Never, 2=Once or twice this semester, 3=Once or twice per month, 4=Once or twice per week, 5=Three to four times per week, 6=More than five times per week); and (7) How much time do you spend reading news every day this semester? (1=less than 15 minutes, 2=16 - 30 minutes, 3=31 - 60 minutes, 4=61 - 120 minutes, 5=more than 121 minutes).

EKSD was measured by three items: 1. Household registration system reform and real estate development; 2. Corruption and air quality; and 3. Supply-side structural reform and higher education[2] using 5-point Likert scale (1=No relationship or I don't know 2=Weak relationship 3=Moderate Relationship 4=Strong Relationship 5=Very Strong Relationship).

IKSD was measured by three items: 1. Does The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China affect your interests? 2. Does The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China affect your future development? 3. Is The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China related to your daily life? (5-point Likert scale: 1=No influence or relationship, or I don't know 2=Weak influence or relationship 3=Moderate influence or relationship 4=Strong influence or relationship 5=Very strong influence or relationship).

Dependent variables

Political participation

In this study, **online political participation** was measured by five items including 1）How often did you vote, sign petitions, or participate in surveys for political, social or public issues online this semester? (0= Never; 1= Rarely; 2= Occasionally; 3= Often; 4= Always), 2）How often did contact the CPC, governments, or deputies of the People's Congress at various levels online this semester? (0= Never; 1= Rarely; 2= Occasionally; 3= Often; 4= Always), 3）How many times did you organise donation, volunteer activities, or create a petition online? (0= 0 times; 1= 1 time; 2= 2 times; 3= 3 times; 4= 4 times or more), 4）How many times did contact mass media to express your opinions about political, social or public issues online? (0= 0 times; 1= 1 time; 2= 2 times; 3= 3 times; 4= 4 times or more), 5）Did you create political, charity, or volunteering groups or websites online? (0= No; 1= Yes).

Offline political participation was measured by ten questions including (1) How often do you communicate or provide feedback to the Party and government officials at all levels through means other

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[2] 1) **Household Registration System Reform and Real Estate Development**

Reform of the household registration (hukou) system, by relaxing restrictions on settlement, guides population flow towards major cities and metropolitan clusters, directly impacting the demand structure of the real estate market.

2) Corruption and Air Quality

Corruption is a significant factor contributing to the deterioration of environmental quality. Corruption damages air quality through multiple pathways: firstly, by distorting the formulation and enforcement of environmental policies, allowing environmentally harmful practices to persist; secondly, by diverting funds earmarked for environmental projects through rent-seeking behaviour; and thirdly, by reducing the effectiveness of environmental regulations.

3) Supply-side Structural Reform and Higher Education

Within higher education, the core of supply-side structural reform is shifting talent cultivation from a university "resource-oriented" model to a societal "demand-oriented" one.

than the internet? (0=Never; 1=Rarely; 2=Occasionally; 3=Often; 4=Always), (2) When soliciting opinions from People's Congress representatives, did you provide opinions or suggestions through means other than the internet? (0=No; 1=Yes), (3) During the election of People's Congress representatives, did you gather information about the candidates and vote? (0=No; 1=Yes), (4) Are you a People's Congress representative or did you participate in the election of People's Congress representatives? (0=No; 1=Yes), (5) This semester, how many times did you participate in offline volunteer activities? (0=0 time; 1=1 time; 2=2 times; 3=3 times; 5=4 times or more), (6) This semester, how many times did you participate in offline donation activities? (0=0 time; 1=1 time; 2=2 times; 3=3 times; 4=4 times or more)，(7) Totally how many strikes, demonstrations, protests, and petitions did you participate in offline? (0=0 time; 1=1 time; 2=2 times; 3=3 times; 4=4 times or more), (8) Totally how many times did you expose social, public, or political problems to the media or expressed your views on these problems through means other than the internet? (0=0 time; 1=1 time; 2=2 times; 3=3 times; 4=4 times or more), (9) How many times did you advocate for a particular set of values, attitudes towards political or social affairs, or moral standards by either purchasing or not purchasing a certain product? (0=0 time; 1=1 time; 2=2 times; 3=3 times; 4=4 times or more), (10) Have you participated in the following global initiatives (place a checkmark in the box next to the activities you have participated in, see Table1).

Table 1 Global initiatives

World Environment Day	The Clean Your Plate Campaign
Clothes Recycling	Information Technology Poverty Alleviation Initiative
World Health Day	The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge
Earth Hour	International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction

Control variables

There were three control variables in this study, including gender (1170 males, male=0; 1404 females, female=1), academic discipline (1574, science and engineering=0; 973, social science and humanity=1), and estimated average household annual income in recent three years (RMB; m:million; 1=under 20,000 2=20,000-40,000 3=40,000-60,000 4=60,000-80,000 5=80,000-0.1m 6=0.1m -0.12 m 7=0.12 m -0.14 m 8=0.14 m -0.16m 9=0.16m-0.18m 10=0.18m-0.2m 11=0.2m-0.22m 12=0.22m-0.24m 13=0.24m-0.26m 14=0.26m-0.28m 15=0.28m-0.3m 16=0.3m-0.32m 17=0.32m-0.34m 18=0.34m-0.36m 19=0.36m-0.38m 20=above 0.38).

The regression results indicate that gender, academic discipline, and household income exert significant positive effects on offline political participation (See Table 2). In contrast, only academic discipline demonstrates a positive influence on online participation (See Table 2). These findings are consistent with existing literature on the Internet's role in shaping political engagement (Bimber 2003; Schlozman et al., 2010). Specifically, the anonymity and accessibility afforded by digital platforms appear to mitigate traditional barriers to engagement related to gender and socioeconomic status (Best and Krueger, 2005; Hilbert, 2016), aligning with resource-based models of participation (Brady et al., 1995) and extending them to digital contexts (Xenos et al., 2014).

Analysis reveals significant variation in Internal Knowledge Structure Density (IKSD) by both gender and academic discipline, with male students and those enrolled in humanities and social science programs exhibiting systematically higher IKSD scores (See Table 2). The traditional gender division of

labour, encapsulated by the model of "men as breadwinners and women as homemakers," has historically rendered men's survival and developmental interests more closely tied to national policies and public affairs. While contemporary society has witnessed some evolution in gender roles, the enduring influence of female reproductive roles on labour distribution remains significant. Furthermore, deeply entrenched societal norms, cultivated through long-standing gendered practices, continue to resist full transformation (Ji and Wu, 2018; Huws, 2012). In contrast, only academic discipline emerged as a statistically significant positive predictor of External Knowledge Structure Density (EKSD).

Academic discipline exerts a significant positive influence on both forms of political participation and two dimensions of Knowledge Structure Density (See Table 2). Students enrolled in humanities and social science programs tend to achieve higher scores in these domains compared to their counterparts in science and engineering fields. Within China's education system, the requirement to choose between science, engineering, and humanities/social science tracks at the senior high school level represents a decision with long-term implications for civic engagement. This early academic specialisation demonstrates a persistent and measurable impact on students' political participation and knowledge acquisition, suggesting that institutional structures in education shape democratic competencies (Gallina, 2023). To some extent, this indicates that within China's distinct political and cultural context, education can also enhance citizens' political knowledge and engagement. This finding holds significant implications for non-Western contexts, such as China.

Table 2 Regression results: control, mediating and dependent variables

		Gender	Academic Discipline	Income
Offline participation	R^2	.005	.013	.003
	df	1	1	1
	F	11.803	34.526	7.835
	β	.068**	.116***	.056**
	95%CI	.231, .846	.625,1 .251	.014, .081
Online participation	R^2	.001	.004	.000
	df	1	1	1
	F	1.633	10.269	.203
	β	.025	.063**	.009
	95%CI	-.077, .366	.144, .597	-.019, .030
Internal Knowledge Structure Density	R^2	.008	.002	.001
	df	1	1	1
	F	19.606	5.144	2.173
	β	-.087***	.045*	-.029
	95% CI	-.667,-.258	.033,.456	-.039,.006
External Knowledge Structure Density	R^2	.001	.010	.001
	df	1	1	1
	F	1.620	26.631	3.600
	β	-.025	.102***	.038
	95% CI	-.331,.070	.336,.748	-.001,.043

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Since the inception of reform and opening-up in 1978, China has made substantial strides in education. By 2024, nine-year compulsory education had transitioned from universal access to a phase of high-quality, balanced development, maintaining a consolidation rate above 95.9%. Over the same period, the gross enrolment rate for senior secondary education rose from 35.1% to 95.9%, while that for higher education increased from 2.7% to over 60.8%, accommodating nearly 50 million students (State Council Information Office, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2025). To the extent that the positive correlation between education and political knowledge and behaviour holds in the Chinese context, it is reasonable to argue that these educational advances have contributed to expanding political awareness and civic engagement, thereby supporting the ongoing strengthening of democratic governance.

For the regression analysis, control variables were limited to those demonstrating statistically significant effects ($p < .05$) to maintain model parsimony.

Results

The Landscape of Political Participation Among Chinese University Students

Analysis of the survey data reveals a multifaceted picture of political engagement, characterised by varying levels of activity across different domains (see Tables 3 & 4). When examining traditional, state-centric forms of participation, engagement appears relatively restrained, but not entirely absent (see Tables 3). For instance, 32% of participants reported contacting the Party and government officials at all levels through means other than the internet, 9% providing opinions to People's Congress representatives, 18% gathering information about the candidates and vote during the election of People's Congress representatives, 23% being a People's Congress representative or participating in the election of People's Congress representatives, and non-institutional activities such as strikes or petitions were rare (17%). 30% of the participants reported exposing social, public, or political problems to the media or expressed your views on these problems through means other than the internet.

In contrast, communal and social activities proved significantly more popular, with 70% of students engaging in volunteering and 48% in charitable donations during the semester. Political consumerism—using purchasing decisions to advocate for values—was also reported by a notable minority (6%).

Table 3 Chinese university students' offline political participation

Offline political participation					
	Never	Very rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1	68%	23%	8%	1%	0.16%
	No	Yes			
2	91%	9%			
3	81%	18%			
4	76%	23%			
	0 time	1 time	2 times	3 times	4 times and more
5	30%	29%	20%	8%	12%
6	52%	29%	12%	4%	3%
7	83%	11%	4%	1%	1%

8	70%	15%	8%	2%	5%
9	94%	4%	1%	0.27%	0.35%

The digital sphere constitutes a distinct and active arena for participation (see Tables 3). While the overall frequency of online engagement was moderate, expressing views on political and public matters through voting, signing petitions, or participating in surveys was the most common form, with 61% of participants involved. This was followed by online donation, volunteering, and petitioning (55%). The Internet serves as an emerging channel for contacting official institutions, with 25% of students reporting that they have contacted the Communist Party of China or government bodies online, and 26% indicating that they have reached out to mass media at least once to express their views—a level of engagement that remains comparatively lower than that through traditional channels. It is important to note that the Internet also functions as a complementary conduit for organising political activities, reported by 55% of participants, and for establishing political organisations (10%). This contrasts with the real-world context in China, where such activities are predominantly, and often exclusively, channelled through institutionalised frameworks.

Table 4 Chinese university students' online political participation

Online political participation					
	Never	Very rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1	39%	33%	23%	5%	0.54%
2	75%	16%	7%	1%	0.27%
	0 time	1 time	2 times	3 times	4 times and more
3	45%	21%	19%	6%	9%
4	74%	13%	8%	2%	2%
	No	Yes			
5	89%	10%			

A noteworthy trend is the substantive participation in global and transnational initiatives (see Table 5). Campaigns such as 'The Clean Your Plate Campaign' (54%) and 'Clothes Recycling' (44%) garnered significant engagement, reflecting an orientation towards globally-framed, social-action-oriented participation.

Table 5 Chinese university students' participation in global initiatives

World Environment Day	13%	The Clean Your Plate Campaign	54%
Clothes Recycling	44%	Information Technology Poverty Alleviation Initiative	4%
World Health Day	6%	The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge	4%
Earth Hour	35%	International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction	1%

Testing the Direct Effects: From Political Knowledge to Participation

The study first tested the foundational hypothesis (H1) that political knowledge positively influences political participation within the Chinese context. Regression analyses confirmed this relationship robustly.

Factual Knowledge and Participation: As shown in Table 6, factual political knowledge had a significant positive effect on offline political participation (β = .120, p < .001), accounting for a modest 1.4% of the variance (R^2 = .014). This effect remained significant (β = .112, p < .001) after controlling for gender, academic discipline, and household income. The inclusion of these control variables increased the overall explanatory power of the model (R^2 = .027). Similarly, for online political participation, factual knowledge was a significant positive predictor (β = .093, p < .001, R^2 = .009), an effect that persisted (β = .086, p < .001, R^2 = .011) when controlling for academic discipline (see Table 7). These results provide clear support for H1, generalising the classical knowledge-participation link to the sampled Chinese university student population.

Table 6 Regression results: Political knowledge and offline political participation

	Offline participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Political knowledge	.014	1	37.546	.120***	.102, .198
Model-1	.027	4	17.331		
Political knowledge				.112***	.088, .189
Gender				.059**	.131, .798
Academic discipline				.065**	.184, .876
Income				.046*	.006, .073

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 7 Regression results: Political knowledge and online political participation

	Online participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Political knowledge	.009	1	22.602	.093***	.049, .118
Model-2	.011	2	13.895		
Political knowledge				.086***	.042, .112
Academic discipline				.043*	.019, .481

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Political Knowledge Acquisition Behaviour: Extending the measurement of political knowledge, we examined the role of active information-seeking behaviour. This behavioural metric proved to be a substantially stronger predictor of participation than static factual knowledge. For offline participation, it explained over 16% of the variance (β = .402, p < .001; see Table 8, Model 3), and for online participation, nearly 19% (β = .436, p < .001; see Table 9, Model 4). This underscores the potency of dynamic engagement with political information as a driver of civic action.

Table 8 Regression results: Political knowledge acquisition behavior and offline political participation

	Offline participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Political knowledge acquisition behavior	.162	1	497.175	.402***	.280, .334
Model-3	.174	4	130.178		

Political knowledge acquisition behavior	.401***	.278, .333
Gender	.077***	.310, .914
Academic discipline	.049*	.085, .705
Income	.033	-.002, .059

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 9 Regression results: Political knowledge acquisition behavior and online political participation

	Online participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Political knowledge acquisition behavior	.190	1	602.978	.436***	.220, .258
Model-4	.188	2	294.613		
Political knowledge acquisition behavior				.431***	.216, .255
Academic discipline				.025	-.062, .350

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Knowledge Structure Density as a Direct Predictor and Mediating Mechanism

The core theoretical contribution of this study lies in introducing and testing KSD and its two dimensions—IKSD and EKSD—as superior predictors and key mediators.

KSD as a Direct Predictor (H2a): Both IKSD and EKSD demonstrated significant positive direct effects on offline and online political participation, even after accounting for control variables. H2a was supported. Crucially, the explanatory power of models containing KSD dimensions was substantially greater than that of models based solely on factual knowledge. For offline participation, IKSD alone accounted for 3.0% of the variance (R^2 = .030; see Table 10), and EKSD for 2.1% (R^2 = .021; see Table 12)—both exceeding the 1.4% explained by factual knowledge alone (R^2 = .014; Table 6). A similar pattern held for online participation, where IKSD explained 2.1% (R^2 = .021; Table 11) and EKSD 2.3% (R^2 = .023; Table 13) of the variance, compared to 0.9% for factual knowledge (R^2 = .009; Table 7).

Furthermore, the standardised coefficients (β) for the KSD dimensions were consistently larger than those for factual knowledge, confirming H2a. For example, IKSD predicted offline participation with β = .178 ($p < .001$; see Table 10, Model 7), compared to β = .112 for factual knowledge. EKSD showed a similar pattern (β = .138, $p < .001$ for offline; see Table 12, Model 9). The inclusion of control variables in the KSD models yielded final R^2 values of .048 for IKSD on offline participation and .035 for EKSD, representing a more substantial gain in explained variance relative to the baseline KSD-only models than was observed with factual knowledge models.

Table 10 Regression results: Internal knowledge structure density and offline political participation

	Offline participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Internal Knowledge Structure Density	.030	1	79.957	.174***	.203, .317
Model-7	.048	4	30.857		
Internal Knowledge Structure Density				.178***	.207, .323
Gender				.055**	.114, .763
Academic discipline				.082***	.334, .998

Income	.058**	.017, .082

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 11 Regression results: Internal knowledge structure density and Online political participation

	Online participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Internal Knowledge Structure Density	.021	1	54.236	.144***	.114, .196
Model-8	.023	2	29.718		
Internal Knowledge Structure Density				.137***	.106, .189
Academic discipline				057**	.110, .559

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 12 Regression results: External knowledge structure density and offline political participation

	Offline participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
External Knowledge Structure Density	.021	1	55.985	.146***	.165, .282
Model-9	.035	4	22.536		
External Knowledge Structure Density				.138***	.151, .270
Gender				.042*	.010, .660
Academic discipline				.081***	.326, .996
Income				.048*	.008, .074

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 13 Regression results: External knowledge structure density and Online political participation

	Online participation				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
External Knowledge Structure Density	.023	1	59.699	.151***	.124, .208
Model-10	.025	2	32,813		
External Knowledge Structure Density				.146***	.118, .203
Academic discipline				.049*	.058, .509

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

The Mediating Pathway (H2b). To test the mediating role of KSD (H2b), a series of regression and mediation analyses were conducted. First, factual political knowledge significantly predicted both IKSD (β = .180, *p*< .001, R^2 = .032) and EKSD (β = .155, *p*< .001, R^2 = .024) in simple regression models (see Tables 14 & 15, Models 11 & 12 respectively). These relationships remained significant when control variables were included, with the models' explanatory power increasing to R^2 = .037 for IKSD (β = .161, *p*< .001) and R^2 = .028 for EKSD (β = .137, *p*< .001).

Subsequently, as shown in the mediation models (Tables 16 & 17, Models 13 & 14), both IKSD and EKSD significantly mediated the relationship between factual knowledge and political participation. The results reveal a meaningful dual-pathway mechanism. For offline participation, the total effect of factual knowledge was partitioned into a direct effect (70.47%) and indirect effects mediated through IKSD

(20.22%) and EKSD (9.24%). For online participation, the direct effect accounted for 63.41% of the total, with indirect effects via IKSD and EKSD at 19.66% and 16.93%, respectively. Notably, IKSD emerged as a consistently stronger mediator than EKSD, particularly for offline engagement. These findings fully support H2b, specifying that a substantial portion (approximately 29-37%) of knowledge's influence on participation operates through the development of a structured cognitive map that connects political systems (EKSD) and personal interests (IKSD). Distinguishing between these two dimensions of KSD is not only conceptually necessary but also methodologically essential.

Table 14 Regression results: Political knowledge and Internal knowledge structure density

	Internal Knowledge Structure Density				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Political knowledge	.032	1	85.948	.180***	.118, .182
Model-11	.037	3	32.953		
Political knowledge				.161***	.101, .168
Gender				-.077***	-.630, -.192
Academic discipline				.037	-.028, .427

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 15 Regression results: Political knowledge and External knowledge structure density

	External Knowledge Structure Density				
	R^2	df	F	β	95% CI
Political knowledge	.024	1	63.089	.155***	.095, .157
Model-12	.028	2	36.704		
Political knowledge				.137***	.079, .143
Academic discipline				.072***	.176, .594

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Table 16 Regression results: Mediating effect of IKSD and EKSD between FPK and OffPP

Model 13	Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI	Effect size
Total effect	.1385	.0259	.0878	.1892	
Direct effect	.0976	.0258	.0470	.1483	70.47%
Indirect effects					
Internal Knowledge Structure Density	.0280	.0061		.0171	20.22%
External Knowledge Structure Density	.0128	.0042		.0054	9.24%

Table 17 Regression results: Mediating effect of IKSD and EKSD between FPK and OnPP

Model 14	Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI	Effect size
Total effect	.0768	.0180	.0000	.0415	
Direct effect	.0487	.0181	.0072	.0132	63.41%
Indirect effects					
Internal Knowledge Structure Density	.0151	.0041	.0072	.0238	19.66%
External Knowledge Structure Density	.0130	.0034	.0069	.0201	16.93%

Discussion and Conclusion

University students' political participation in China: An Evolving Landscape

The initial empirical contribution of this study is its use of large-scale, high-quality data to provide evidence for mapping the evolving landscape of political participation among Chinese university students—a phenomenon that remains underexplored in international scholarship due to a range of structural and contextual factors. It offers one of the largest and most representative samples within this politically sensitive domain in China (Chen & Lee, 2021; Li, 2008; Lu & Sun, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Stringent protocols ensured complete participant anonymity, thereby securing high-quality data.

Building on this empirical foundation, the findings reveal a complex and multi-layered picture of political engagement in China. When examined through a conventional, state-centric lens, participation appears moderate. For instance, minimalist institutional acts such as contacting the Party and government officials at all levels through means other than the internet were reported by 32% of participants, providing suggestions to People's Congress representatives only 9% of participants, while non-institutional activities (e.g., strikes, petitions) were rarer at 17% (see Table 3). This pattern of restrained formal political engagement aligns with prior observations on Chinese youth (Zhu & Li, 2019) and stands in contrast to the more institutionalised yet expressive participation common in Western democracies (Hay, 2007; Zittel & Fuchs, 2016; Steenekamp and Loubser, 2016).

However, applying Van Deth's (2014) broader operational definition—which encompasses voting, campaigning, communal activity, and contacting—reveals a more dynamic and differentiated picture. A notable pattern is students' marked inclination toward communal and social activities, or what Bennett (1998) termed lifestyle politics, especially volunteering and charitable giving. This reflects a shift toward socially embedded, less institutionalised forms of political engagement, a tendency consistent with findings on youth involvement in community governance (Wang et al., 2023) and with broader patterns of civic participation in advanced democracies (Arslan et al., 2023).

The digital realm constitutes another critical axis of engagement. A substantial number of students reported engaging in online political activities, such as discussing public affairs on social media. While often moderate in intensity, this digital participation is a consistent trend (Qin & Li, 2024) and signifies how technological platforms are reshaping the avenues for political expression. Furthermore, an emerging and noteworthy trend is the rise of engagement with global issues and transnational civic activities. This shift is supported by China's deepening digital connectivity (CNNIC, 2019-2025) and the explicit incorporation of global citizenship objectives into educational frameworks (Wang, 2023; Wu, 2025), which collectively enhance students' global awareness and competencies (Wu & Ran, 2024).

In conclusion, this study moves beyond a binary assessment of participation levels. By leveraging large-scale, high-quality data within an inclusive analytical framework, it demonstrates that the political engagement of Chinese university students is not subdued but rather transformed. It is characterised by a shift from traditional, institutional channels toward socially grounded communal action, digitally mediated expression, and transnational concern. The primary contribution, therefore, is to provide robust empirical evidence for this evolving landscape, bridging the gap between narrow definitions of political action and the contemporary, multifaceted realities of how young people in China enact their civic agency.

Direct effect of political knowledge in China

The second, and theoretically significant, contribution of this study is its successful transposition and

validation of the classical positive link between political knowledge and political participation into the distinct institutional context of China. The empirical results furnish a clear affirmative response, constituting this research's primary theoretical contribution. By robustly demonstrating that political knowledge enhances both offline and online political participation amongst Chinese university students, the study successfully transposes and validates a cornerstone tenet of political behaviour research beyond its conventional Western democratic milieu. It corroborates the established consensus that an informed citizenry is a more participatory one (Verba et al., 1995; Prior, 2013), irrespective of a political system's formal architecture. This advances scholarly understanding by illustrating that the facilitative role of political knowledge is not merely an artefact of liberal democracy but retains its explanatory potency as a catalyst for political engagement within an alternative political framework.

A perennial and central methodological challenge in this field, as noted in the foundational literature, is the operationalisation of political knowledge itself. Given its multifaceted nature—encompassing institutions, processes, actors, and events (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996)—selecting a limited set of questions that accurately capture an individual's substantive knowledge reservoir has long been a complex problem. This study directly engages with this challenge by pursuing an ancillary aim: to refine the measurement of factual political knowledge. Recognising that static quizzes may not fully reflect one's actual stock of knowledge, we introduced and measured political knowledge acquisition behaviouras a complementary analytical tool. This approach yielded a significant finding: whilst general factual knowledge showed a positive association with participation, the behavioural measure of active information-seeking was a far stronger predictor. The variance explained (R^2) by acquisition behaviour substantially exceeded that of the general knowledge test across both participation domains.

This outcome underscores a critical methodological contribution. It suggests that incorporating dynamic, behavioural measures alongside traditional static tests can provide a more holistic and potentially more valid assessment of an individual's engagement with political information, thereby better reflecting their actual stock of knowledge. This approach resonates with cognitive mediation models (Jensen, 2011; Eveland & Hively, 2009) which emphasise the process of learning. Nevertheless, in the spirit of this reflexive turn, it is crucial to acknowledge that our own measurement of factual political knowledge remains subject to the very limitations inherent in the endeavour. The selection of questions, whilst carefully considered, cannot claim to be exhaustive or perfectly representative of the construct. Thus, the study simultaneously highlights the utility of complementary behavioural measures and reinforces the need for continued methodological refinement in the core measurement of political knowledge itself.

The analysis further revealed a domain-specific nuance: knowledge acquisition behaviour was a particularly potent predictor for online engagement. This likely mirrors the digital channels that are primary conduits for contemporary information-seeking (Kleinberg, 2022), offering insight into how the knowledge-action pathway is mediated by communication ecology.

In conclusion, this study makes two principal contributions. First, it generalises a fundamental relationship in political behaviour research, providing robust evidence that political knowledge fosters participation within the Chinese context. Second, and on a methodological level, it advocates for and demonstrates the value of supplementing traditional knowledge tests with behavioural acquisition measures to better capture the dynamism of political learning and its link to action. By foregrounding the challenge of measurement and reflecting on its own limitations, this research not only advances a contextually grounded understanding of participatory citizenship but also underscores a prudent path for

future enquiry: the ongoing refinement of tools to more accurately gauge both the stock and the flow of political knowledge in diverse settings.

Direct and mediating impact of KSD on political participation

This study commenced with a review of the established yet potentially context-bound relationship between political knowledge and participation, posing the question of its applicability within China's distinct political framework (H1). While confirming this fundamental positive link, the primary theoretical contribution lies in moving beyond the traditional focus on knowledge quantity to empirically validate and refine the long-theorised importance of knowledge organisation (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1987).

Our findings directly address the conceptual and methodological limitation noted in the literature—the conflation of factual knowledge with broader cognitive sophistication. By introducing and operationalising Knowledge Structure Density as a specific dimension of political conceptualisation (Eveland et al., 2004), we provide a measurable construct that captures the integrative quality of political understanding. The empirical results robustly demonstrate that both Internal and External KSD are superior predictors of participation compared to factual knowledge alone, thereby bridging the persistent gap between the theoretical concept of 'conceptualisation' and its empirical measurement (Luskin, 1987).

The further distinction between EKSD and IKSD (Gallina, 2023) proves theoretically substantive rather than semantically redundant. It allows for a nuanced mechanistic analysis. The finding that IKSD is the more potent mediator—accounting for approximately 20% of factual knowledge's effect on participation—provides critical empirical support for the theoretical chain linking systemic understanding to personal relevance (Druckman et al., 2006). It elucidates how knowledge translates into motivation: by enabling individuals to perceive the nexus between political issues and their own interests, thus operationalising a key cognitive precondition for the utility-maximising calculus central to the Rational Actor Hypothesis (Downs, 1957). This addresses enduring critiques of rational choice models applied to mass participation by specifying a necessary cognitive mechanism often assumed but rarely tested (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000).

Furthermore, the significant mediation role of overall KSD (29.46-36.59%) extends classical cognitive mobilisation theory (Inglehart, 1990) and the work of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). It specifies that the mobilising power of knowledge stems not merely from possession but from its structural integration into a coherent cognitive schema. This dense mental network lowers the cognitive costs of processing political information and facilitates decision-making, a process particularly crucial in complex digital information environments (Lupia, 2016). The slightly stronger mediating effect for online participation underscores this point, suggesting that in fragmented, high-volume digital spaces (Guess & Lyons, 2020), the capacity to structurally integrate information is vital for translating exposure into efficacious engagement rather than cynicism or overload (Van Dijk, 2020).

In synthesis, this study integrates with and advances the literature on political sophistication in three key ways. First, it validates and specifies Luskin's (1987) two-dimensional model by providing an operational measure for a dimension of 'conceptualisation' and demonstrating its discriminant predictive validity over 'level'. Second, it elaborates the mechanism linking knowledge to action, showing that the pathway flows significantly through the development of a structured cognitive map, especially one that connects the political system to personal stakes IKSD. Third, it contextualises this mechanism within the digital age, highlighting the heightened importance of knowledge-structuring skills for navigating

contemporary public spheres.

Therefore, the dialogue between our findings and prior research culminates in a refined theoretical proposition: the classical knowledge-participation relationship is significantly mediated by the structural quality of political understanding. Fostering informed citizenship, consequently, requires pedagogical and communicative strategies aimed not only at disseminating facts but at cultivating the cognitive skills to interconnect them and perceive their personal and systemic relevance, particularly within non-Western and digitally-mediated contexts. Whilst the findings confirm the mediating role of IKSD and EKSD in the relationship between factual knowledge and political participation, the effect sizes were not as substantial as theoretically hypothesised. It is important to note that this discrepancy could reflect the actual state of affairs or, akin to the challenges in measuring factual knowledge, indicate limitations in the measurement instruments themselves that warrant further refinement.

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