CIVIC PARTICIPATION AS A PRECURSOR TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A LOOK AT MALAYSIAN YOUTHS

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ABSTRACT The problem of political apathy has been discussed and studied across time, space and cultures with increasing importance. Evidence of youth disengagement has been well documented in all parts of the world. This led to the rise in civic activities as governments struggled with wavering democracies. In a landmark study, Putnam found a direct positive association between civic participation and democracy. However, his hypothesis could only be generalized for Italy. This study broadened Putnam's work by testing his theory in the South East Asia, a region far different from Europe. Data were collected through a national survey ($N = 5,237$), sampling youths aged from 15 to 25 years old. Reaffirming Putnam's hypothesis, the study found a strong positive relationship between civic and political participation. The discussion highlighted the role of third sector organizations to promote civic activities, which require support from both public and private sectors.

Keywords: Youth, political apathy, civic participation, political participation.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of political apathy among youth has been discussed and studied across time, space and cultures, with increasing importance. Evidence of youth disengagement – often measured in terms of registration, voter turnout and party membership has been well documented in many parts of the world including the South East Asia region. In Malaysia for example, youth's political participation was ranked in the bottom five among the 51 Commonwealth countries (*Commonwealth Youth Programme Report*, 2013). According to the Statistical Department of Malaysia, out of the 13.4 million youths in the country, 3.9 million (2007) and 2.9 million (2009) did not register as voters at the eligibility age of 21. The Malaysia Youth Index also reported low score of political socialization since 2006. Based on the latest data by the

Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, youths' political socialization is still at a moderate level (IYRES, 2018). Two indicators, Involvement in Political Activities and Following Development in Politics, have declined from the previous year.

Past and present researchers had tried to offer numerous theories, hypotheses and assumptions to explain this democracy-threatening problem. Many of these attempts focused on young people (Pasek et al., 2006). This was also the case for Malaysia. Nga et al. (2009) reported that "Malaysia struggles with political inclusiveness and engagement by young people in the political process." Ismie et al. (2011) observed that young people in Malaysia demonstrated "continuous lack of engagement with the political process." Despite obvious cultural differences, similar observations were also reported by researchers in Western countries. Bakker and deVreese (2011) observed an increasing number of young people who became detached from politics over the last decade. In America, young people's political involvement was consistently lower than older Americans' (Pasek et al., 2006).

Of all the attempts to explain declining political participation, one hypothesis stood out and was described by Laitin (1995) as "a stunning break-through in political culture research." It was the work of Putnam (1993), who studied the Italian politics. According to Putnam, civic participation was positively associated to democracy and that "civic engagement is an important precursor to political action" (Pasek et al., 2006). But Putnam's study had its limitations. One of which was location – it was a case study of two regions within a single country (Italy). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other parts of the world, especially in much less developed nations, where compounding factors such as cultural inheritance and levels of economic development would need to be considered. Seligson (1999) refined Putnam's work by testing her hypothesis in Central America, a developing region in the Third World.

Much in the same way that Seligson expanded Putnam's work, this study further tested the original hypothesis in the South East Asia. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1984; 2001), Malaysia is considered a low power distance but high collectivism society, unlike European countries

like Italy. Therefore, this study broadened Putnam's – and Seligson's work – by testing the validity and replicability of Putnam's findings in a region that is very different from Europe and Central America.

For a democratic country like Malaysia, declining youth participation is a very critical issue in the nation's development agenda. The National Youth Development Action Plan, which was approved and launched in 2004 by the National Youth Consultative Council, outlined 11 core development focus areas; including social development, role of media and communication, as well as political awareness and national integration. The plan formed the basis of consideration for the 9th Malaysia Plan to empower youth for the future. Despite government's efforts to address the issue by establishing national policies, statistics showed that youth participation continues to decline. As scholarly debate on the topic continues, youth disengagement from civic and political activities remains a social concern. This calls for a research that will examine the relationship between civic and political participation.

Literature Review

Due to overwhelming national interests prompted by wavering democracies around the world, studies on citizen participation and democracy have been conducted for decades. Several key themes emerged from the past studies: (i) definition of civic and political participation; (ii) evidence of disengagement or political apathy; (iii) conflicting hypotheses, and (iv) the mediating effect of civic participation.

Traditionally, civic and political participation have been defined in both specific and generic terms. Generic terms include social capital (Putnam, 2000), civic literacy (Milner, 2002), and political and civic engagement (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011); while specific terms range from membership and political knowledge to registration and voter turnout (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011). These definitions began to evolve as internet revolutionized the way people work and play. Since then, the definitions have included newer (online) forms of participation.

Empirical evidence of youth disengagement from civic and political activities can be found across all continents, often measured in terms of declining interest in politics, low turnout for political elections, and low number of registered voters (Delli Carpini, 2000, 2004; Pirie & Worcester, 2000; Phelps, 2004). Based on the evidence, youth political apathy is a major threat to democracies worldwide. The question is no longer *what* but *why*.

The quest for deeper understanding of this phenomenon has offered many insights on the association between civic and political participation. More than four decades ago, Pateman (1970) examined the causal relationship between the two. He found that participation equips people with the social skills and attitudes, which are two important ingredients in nurturing democracy. Huttington and Nelson (1976) also found that the more people participate in community organizations, the more likely they will participate in politics. Their finding was further supported by Verba, Nie and Kim (1978), who argued that when people engage themselves in non-political civil society organizations, they are exposed to political stimuli that expands their worldview, which ultimately leads to political participation. Almost two decades later, a major breakthrough was made by Putnam (1993), who found a direct positive association between civic participation and democracy. Verba, Schoolman and Brady (1995) described civic participation as being "at the heart of democracy." Putnam (1993, 2000) believes that civic engagement is an important precursor to political action because it helps build social capital.

Research Model and Hypothesis

Figure 1 shows the two-variable model of this research based on a direct causal relationship between offline civic participation and offline political participation.

Figure 1 Research model

Based on the findings of past studies on civic and political participation, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Offline civic participation is positively related to offline political participation

Measurement of Variables

Civic participation was defined as the frequency with which an individual performs various traditional (offline) civic activities. The respondents indicated the frequency of their involvement in 11 activities on a scale that spans 'no engagement at all' (1) to 'very frequent engagement' (5). 'Frequent' and 'very frequent' were regarded as corresponding to participation in activities usually performed as a Malaysian citizen.

Political participation was defined as the frequency with which an individual performs various traditional (offline) political activities. The respondents indicated the frequency of their involvement in 11 activities on a scale that spans 'no engagement at all' (1) to 'very frequent engagement' (5). 'Frequent' and 'very frequent' were regarded as corresponding to participation in activities usually performed as a Malaysian citizen.

Methodology

This study seeks to test Putnam's thesis which concludes that civic participation is a precursor to political participation. The independent variable is civic participation and dependent variable is political participation. The subjects of the study were Malaysian youth aged from 15 to 25 years old across the country. The data were obtained through a national survey completed by 5,237 youths through self-administered questionnaires. Descriptive statistics provided analysis on distribution of frequency, mean and standard deviation of respondents according to demographic profile, civic and political participation. Pearson correlation test was used to analyze the relationship between the two variables.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the distribution of frequency of respondents according to their demographic profile. In terms of age, nearly half of the respondents (44 per cent) were 18 to 22 years old. In terms of gender, the respondents were almost balanced. Nearly half of the respondents were Malay (49 per cent), followed by Chinese (25 per cent), Bumiputera Sabah (10 per cent), Bumiputera Sarawak (8 per cent), Indian (7 per cent), and other (1 per cent). Muslims constituted the largest group (58 per cent) while the remainder was accounted for by other faiths.

Table 1 also shows that in terms of education, more than a quarter of the respondents (34 per cent) reported that their highest education level is Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM).

Table 1 Distribution of frequency and percentage of respondents according to their demographic profile

Items (n = 5,237)	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
15–17	1,634	31
18–22	2,286	44
23–25	1,317	25
Sex		
Male	2,827	54
Female	2,410	46
Ethnicity		
Malay	2,566	49
Chinese	1,309	25
Indian	367	7
Bumiputera Sabah	523	10
Bumiputera Sarawak	419	8
Other	53	1
Religion		
Islam	3,054	58
Buddha	963	18
Christian	868	17
Hindu	339	6

Other	13	1
Highest Education Level		
UPSR	438	8
PMR	892	21
SPM	1,763	34
STPM/STAM/Matriculation	420	8
Certificate	230	4
Diploma	788	15
Degree	356	9
Other	12	1

Table 2 shows that Malaysian youth's civic and political participation were reported mostly as 'not frequent engagement' (average mean for civic participation = 2.68, average mean for political participation = 2.12). This only reaffirms the findings of past researches and various reports on youth disengagement in the country.

Table 2 Distribution of the mean and SD of respondents' civic and political participation

Item (n = 5, 237)	Mean	SD
Civic Participation		
Discussing with friends or family members on current issue published by the media	3.20	1.13
Involved in recycle activities	2.76	1.14
Involved in charity and welfare work	2.67	1.16
Volunteering to help the poor/OKU/natural disaster victims	2.66	1.16
Reporting a crime in my neighborhood to the police	2.48	1.20
Lodging a complaint on service used/vandalism/ unsatisfactory government service	2.44	1.18
Contacting the mass media to voice opinion on a certain issue (opinion/complaint/recognition/suggestion)	2.19	1.17
Political Participation		
Meeting government official personally to resolve an issue	2.24	1.19
Participating in activities organized by political party	1.98	1.18
Meeting district officer to resolve an issue/voice opinion	1.98	1.13
Wearing badge/sticker to support/protest a certain issue	1.94	1.11

Note: 1 = no engagement at all; 2 = not frequent engagement; 3 = less frequent engagement;
4 = frequent engagement; 5 = very frequent engagement

The most popular civic activity is discussing current issue published in the media with friends or family members (mean = 3.20). Is there a reason why this activity is the most popular? One possible explanation is that it requires the least effort compared to the other civic activities (involving in charity work, volunteering, lodging a complaint). This finding brings to light one very important insight – *how* disengaged young people are from civic activities. If it requires time and efforts, then they are less compelled to participate and as a result, would not be mobilized. Contrastingly, the most popular political activity is meeting government official personally to resolve an issue (mean = 2.31). There is one possible explanation for this. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in youth intervention programs that provided an avenue for them to meet and interact with government officials, leaders, ministers and even the prime minister. This was spurred by the growth of the third sector and the establishment of NGOs and youth-led social enterprises, as well as government agencies such as 1M4U (an initiative of the Malaysian government to promote volunteerism among youth).

Table 3 shows the correlation test conducted between the independent and dependent variables. The results showed that there was a strong positive relationship between civic participation and political participation ($r = .69$, $p = .00$). This is in line with Putnam's discovery that civic participation was positively associated to political participation. Therefore, Putnam's hypothesis that civic participation is a precursor to political participation was supported.

Table 3 Correlation test between independent and dependent variables

Dependent Variable	Civic Participation	
	r	p
Political participation	0.69	0.00

Although the above results suggest that Malaysian youths are not interested to participate in both civic and political activities, it is important to consider that this study only focused on traditional (offline) participation. Would the findings be different had the study also included digital (online) participation? One possibility can be explained by mobilization theory (Norris,

1996, 2001), which argues that "new communication technologies reduce the cost of information, communication, and coordination, thus create more opportunities for social inclusion." According to Norris (1996, 2001), "Internet is a new form of civic engagement that empowers citizens and strengthens their social capital by reducing the divide between government and the governed."

Following Norris' work, many recent studies had also shown that "the Internet makes participation easier, more accessible, and low-cost" (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). This holds true especially for the millennials, labelled as 'digital natives' by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). In 2012, ITU ranked Malaysia as fourth in the world in terms of youth populations who are active internet users. Therefore, it is likely that the younger generation would find it more convenient (less time and efforts) to participate in online civic and political activities such as signing online petition and visiting websites with political content.

More importantly, the result of the correlation test proves that Putnam's hypothesis holds true even for South East Asia, a region far different from Europe or Central America. This study shows that in all three regions, participation in civic activities is an important precursor to political participation and ultimately leads to a healthy and functioning democracy.

CONCLUSION

What is the significance of proving that Putnam's work holds true for this region? First, theoretically, it broadens Putnam's hypothesis beyond Italy and subsequently, Seligson's refinement of Putnam's work beyond Central American countries. This study shows that Putnam's hypothesis holds true even when applied in a region that is far different from Europe and South America.

Second, in terms of practical implication, the findings of this study put forward important policy recommendations. Youth political apathy is a global phenomenon and is a big threat to democracies around the world. Therefore, it is imperative for policy makers to recognize the role and contribution of civil societies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), not-for-profits,

foundations, social enterprises and social businesses in promoting civic activities among young Malaysians. The growth and sustainability of the third sector will keep the young generation active in civic activities, which over time, will help lead to increased political participation.

At policy level, the inputs from social organizations are crucial and yet, the third sector was underrepresented in dialogues, forums, workshops and technical working group discussions aiming at policy formulation. Moving forward, policy makers need to include more third sector organizations, whose grass-root intervention allows them to have the 'pulse' on the ground. Therefore, government and corporate entities should also allocate more funds and other resources to support the third sector. The sustainability of the third sector organizations might be the 'secret ingredient' in the remedy for wavering democracies around the world, including Malaysia's very own.

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