

## **Civic and Political Participation: A Study of Marginalised and Mainstream Youth in Malaysia**

**Salman, A.<sup>1\*</sup>, Samsudin, A. R.<sup>2</sup> and Yusuf, F.<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>2</sup>*Center for Youth Empowerment, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>3</sup>*Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

Embedded in democratic constitutions are the rights and freedoms that accompany citizenship, and these rights and freedoms include participation. The central concept of social participation is that citizens can transform themselves from passive bystanders into actively involved citizens working towards what they perceive to be the public good. It is crucial for young generations to participate in socio-political activities, as the development of any society in large part has to do with this demography. This paper examines the offline civic and political participation of 15 to 25-year-olds in Malaysia. The paper is based on a nation-wide survey of 5,042 youth members in Malaysia both from marginalised and mainstream communities. The findings show that this demographic is more active in civic participation as compared to political participation. The top three forms of participation were found to be forms of civic participation, with the least amount of participation found in the political sphere. While mainstream youth appear to have a higher amount of participation compared to those from marginalised communities, their participation is still average overall. Additional resources are thus needed for the economic, cultural and social development of the youth in Malaysia to support future trends in participation. A level playing field is required for young people both from marginalised and mainstream communities to improve their social participation.

*Keywords:* Civic participation, Malaysia, marginalised community, political participation, young generation

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#### *E-mail addresses:*

asalmanphd@gmail.com (Salman, A.),

samsudinukm@gmail.com (Samsudin, A. R.),

yusuffahminazri@gmail.com (Yusuf, F.)

\* Corresponding author

### **INTRODUCTION**

At the beginning of the 21st century, there are now over a billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24, of whom 85% live

in developing countries, mainly in urban settings (CIA World Fact Book, 2014). Many of these young people are in the process of making, or have already made the transition from educational studies to the workplace. Over the last two decades throughout the world, as new workers, these young people have faced a number of challenges associated with globalisation and technological advances in labour markets (ILO, 2004; ILO, 2005). The development of any society in large part has to do with its younger generations. It is therefore crucial for these demographics to participate in the socio-political activities of their nations.

Such participation can come in either offline or online form (Salman & Saad, 2015). Traditional offline political participation has long been the domain of certain groups, in particular, those with high levels of income and education. However, opportunities for political activity have increased along with the development of the Internet. This study sought to gain knowledge as to whether the current opportunities for online political engagement have the potential to change traditional forms of political participation (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009).

Smith, Schlozman, Verba and Brady (2009) have developed separate scales to measure both online and offline political participation in relation to five political activities. As the focus of this paper is on participation, the offline activities discussed by Smith et al. (2009) will be the focus of examination in this study, which include contacting a government official in person by phone or letter, signing a paper petition,

sending a letter to the editor through a postal service, making a political contribution in person by phone or through the mail, communicating with a civic/political group in face-to-face meetings, printing a letter or newsletter or calling. Smith et al. (2009) classified respondents as “active offline” if they took part in two or more of these activities throughout a year. In the case of the United States, 27% of American adults took part in two or more of these offline activities.

For the younger generations in Malaysia, save for discussing current issues featured in the media, political participation is below average as compared to other developing countries. This failure to participate may be due to lack of interest in politics among Malaysian youth, who are by and large comfortable with their lives and go unbothered by issues related to politics (Salman & Saad, 2015).

At the global level, entire societies can be marginalised, whereas at the national level classes and communities can be marginalised by a dominant social order. Furthermore, ethnic groups, families and individuals can be marginalised within specific localities (Eldering & Knorth, 1998). To a certain extent, marginalisation is a shifting phenomenon that is linked to social status. For example, certain individuals or groups might enjoy high social status at one point in time, but as social change takes place, they lose this status and become marginalised. Similarly, as the stages of individuals’ life cycles change, so too does the nature of marginalisation.

At certain stages of one's life cycle, the risk of marginalisation can either increase or decrease. For example, the potential marginalised status of children and youth may decrease as they grow older, while the potential marginalised status of adults may increase as they become elderly. In addition, the potential marginalised status of single mothers may change as their children grow up.

Leonard (1984) defines marginality as "being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive activity" (p.180). This definition relates to two groups: a relatively small group of people who are voluntarily marginal to the social order e.g. new age travellers, certain religious sects, commune members and artists, and those who are involuntarily socially marginal, whom Leonard (1984) characterises as people remaining outside "the major arena of capitalist productive and reproductive activity," and as such, they experience "involuntary social marginality" (p.181). For the purposes of this paper, the focus here is more on the involuntary marginalised within marginalised communities.

The typical impacts of marginalisation in terms of social exclusion are often similar regardless of the causes or processes behind marginalisation, be they social attitudes e.g. towards impairment, sexuality, ethnicity etc. or social circumstances e.g. closure of workplace and absence of affordable housing etc.. Furthermore, marginalised people react differently to marginalisation depending on the personal and social resources available to them (Burton & Kagan, 1996). The

authorities of a country must pay attention to factors that can alleviate the predicament of the marginalised in order to bring them into the mainstream community.

While attempting to understand social participation among the younger generations in Malaysia, this paper compares between mainstream community and marginalised communities. The former comprises people who are better off in terms of income, environment and exposure to opportunities due to their social environment. More broadly, the paper examines the civic and political participation of those aged 15 to 25 in Malaysia based on a nation-wide survey of 5,042 young people. Marginalised and mainstream youth are then compared in terms of the differences, if any, in their social participation. Implications for the nation are presented in the conclusion of this paper.

### **Civic and Political Participation**

Embedded in democratic constitutions are the rights and freedoms that accompany citizenship, and these rights and freedoms include participation. The central concept of social participation is that citizens can transform themselves from passive bystanders into actively involved citizens working towards what they perceive to be the public good. Kim (2007) suggested that participation in democracies should go beyond voting and should include participation in government processes.

Meijer, Burger and Ebbers (2009) suggested three forms of participation: political participation, policy participation

and social (civic) participation. The focus of this paper is on political and civic participation. This does not mean that political and civic participation are here taken to have no influence on policy. Rather, these two forms of participation are understood to impact policy indirectly.

Political participation refers to the actions of citizens who aim to influence the selection and behaviour of political decision-makers. Social or civic participation refers to the relations between citizens and government, and also includes interaction between citizens. Active involvement among citizens may take the form of making demands of a political and administrative system, including the development of mutual support systems to reach common goals. According to Rowe and Frewer (2000), the reasons for developing forms of citizen participation typically vary, from the recognition of basic human rights related to democracy and procedural justice to the practical recognition that public participation may result in more support for government policies.

According to Norris (2003), political participation has undergone a significant transformation, from involvement in interest groups to new social movements, the conventional repertoire of interest groups to protest politics and state-orientated change to a multiplicity of target agencies. As one of the new political forums of the youth, communications technology such as the Internet have changed political participation from direct, linear communication to network-based approaches.

The younger generations in Malaysia appear to lack interest in politics as the results of this study would later show. In a global report on voter turnout, Pintor and Gratschew (2002) suggested that lack of confidence in political institutions and high levels of social inequality in society have led to greater bias against political participation among socially-deprived groups. Indeed, Putnam (2000) argued that social trust and civic engagement declined significantly in the United States at the end of the 20th century due to increasing lack of trust in the social system and individualistic tendencies.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the findings of this study (Table 1), the younger generations of Malaysia can be said to be more active in offline civic participation compared to political participation. The top three forms of participation among the youth fell into the category of civic participation, including 'talking to friends or family members on current issues published by the media', 'involved in recycling activities' and 'engage in charity work and welfare'.

The youth least participated in 'activities organised by political parties', 'meet with elective representatives to solve a problem/give opinions' and 'wear a badge/sticker to support/refute an issue', all of which fall into the category of political participation. Thus, political participation among the younger generations in Malaysia can be understood to be below average as compared with in other developing countries. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, given their

Table 1  
*Civic and political participation*

|  | Mean* | SD   |
|--|-------|------|
| Discussion with friends or family members on current issues published by the media             | 3.19  | 1.14 |
| Involved in recycling activities   | 2.78  | 1.15 |
| Involved in charity work and welfare   | 2.70  | 1.18 |
| Volunteer to help the poor/disabled/victims of natural disasters                               | 2.70  | 1.17 |
| Report crimes in my residence to the police  | 2.52  | 1.21 |
| Lodge complaints about services used/public property damage/unsatisfactory government service  | 2.48  | 1.19 |
| Meet personally with government officials to solve a problem                                   | 2.25  | 1.20 |
| Contact the media to give an opinion on a particular issue (opinions/complaints/awards/backup) | 2.24  | 1.19 |
| Participate in activities organised by political parties                                       | 2.04  | 1.22 |
| Meet with elected representatives to solve a problem/give opinions                             | 2.03  | 1.15 |
| Wear badges/stickers to support/refute an issue  | 1.98  | 1.13 |

Note: \*Rarely (1) to Very often (5)

circumstances at a young age, youth first begin with exposure to civic participation. This might also be due to the fact that a large number of the respondents are still furthering their education. Moreover, the Malaysian tertiary education laws prohibit students from being involved in politics.

The means of the two categories of participation were compared to determine any differences between the mainstream and marginalised groups (Table 2). Overall, both groups showed significant civic participation and low political participation. Comparatively, however, the mainstream group scored higher than the marginalised in the top three participation areas (i.e. 'talk to friends or family members on current issues published by the media', 'involved in recycling activities' and 'engage in charity work and welfare'). Furthermore, the

mainstream group scored higher in terms of political participation e.g. concerning 'wear a badge/sticker to support/refute an issue', 'meet with elected representatives to solve a problem/give opinions' and 'participate in activities organised by political parties'.

Further analysis (Table 3) of the means of the two categories of participation among the mainstream and marginalised groups revealed the mainstream group to be significantly more active in both political and civic participation.

It is evident from the data of this study that the majority of participants were more active in online rather than offline civic and political activities. The implication of this is that more young people in Malaysia are becoming passive in terms of tangible contributions to the development of their country, which is a trend that should be

Table 2  
*A comparison of participation among the marginalised and mainstream (non-marginalised) respondents*

|  | Respondents Category |      |              |      |
|--|----------------------|------|--------------|------|
|  | Mainstream           |      | Marginalised |      |
|  | Mean*                | SD   | Mean*        | SD   |
| Talk to friends or family members about current issues published in the media                    | 3.23                 | 1.14 | 3.15         | 1.15 |
| Involved in recycling activities   | 2.84                 | 1.17 | 2.74         | 1.13 |
| Involved in charity work and welfare   | 2.71                 | 1.19 | 2.69         | 1.17 |
| Volunteer to help the poor/disabled/victims of natural disasters                                 | 2.70                 | 1.19 | 2.69         | 1.15 |
| Report a crime in my residence to the police   | 2.54                 | 1.23 | 2.49         | 1.19 |
| Lodge complaints against services used/public property damage/unsatisfactory government service  | 2.52                 | 1.20 | 2.46         | 1.18 |
| Meet personally with government officials to solve a problem                                     | 2.30                 | 1.26 | 2.20         | 1.15 |
| Contact the media to offer an opinion on a particular issue (opinions/complaints/awards/back-up) | 2.29                 | 1.22 | 2.20         | 1.16 |
| Participate in activities organised by political parties   | 2.08                 | 1.15 | 1.99         | 1.12 |
| Meet with the elected representatives to solve a problem/ give opinions                          | 2.08                 | 1.25 | 2.00         | 1.18 |
| Wear badges/stickers to support/refute an issue  | 2.04                 | 1.15 | 1.99         | 1.12 |

Note: \*Rarely (1) to Very often (5)

Table 3  
*A comparison among Malaysian youth*

|       | Group                  | N    | Mean* | SD   | Sig.  |
|-------|------------------------|------|-------|------|-------|
| CIVPA | Mainstream Community   | 2251 | 2.69  | 0.90 | 0.023 |
|       | Marginalised Community | 2791 | 2.63  | 0.88 | 0.024 |
| POLPA | Mainstream Community   | 2251 | 2.12  | 1.02 | 0.001 |
|       | Marginalised Community | 2791 | 2.03  | 0.92 | 0.001 |

Notes: \*Rarely (1) to Very Often (5)  
 CIVPA = civic participation, POLPA = political participation

quickly addressed and critically examined as it could lead to passive citizenship. The findings of the study also show that political participation among the younger generations in Malaysia is below average compared to other developing countries. Eleven items were used to measure the offline civic and

political activities of Malaysian youth in this study. Among these items, 'talk to friends or family members about current issues published by the media' (mean=3.19) is compared to youth engagement activities. This item is followed by youths who claimed that they were involved in recycling



activities (mean=2.78), with involvement in charity work and welfare sharing the same mean (2.70) as volunteering to help the poor/disabled/victims of natural disasters. The means of the other items are as follows: Report a crime in my residence to the police (mean=2.52), lodge complaints about services used/public property damage/unsatisfactory government service (mean=2.48), meet personally with government officials to solve problems (mean=2.25) and contact the media to offer an opinion on a particular issue (opinions/complaints/awards/back-up) (mean=2.24).

The three activities least participated in by the youths were participation in activities organised by political parties (mean=2.04), meeting with elected representatives to solve a problem/give an opinion (mean=2.03) and wear badges to support/refute an issue (mean=1.98). By limiting themselves to online activities, the youth add their voice, yet their active, physical involvement in civic and political activities is questionable. Democracy thrives on active participation, and any society seeking to optimally develop relies on the engagement of its citizens in civic activities.

Table 2 shows a comparison between the marginalised and non-marginalised (mainstream) groups in terms of their offline participation in political activities and civic engagement. As can be seen from the table, the non-marginalised group has a higher involvement in the two areas of examination. The reasons for this could be many. For one, the affluence of the mainstream youth may be a strong influence in this regard. The

mainstream due to their affluence have the opportunity for exposure. On the whole, from the results of this study, one could say that there is low participation among both the marginalised and mainstream youth. This could be due to the advent of the Internet, which has potentially affected the way people participate in national issues and activities. Those who are inactive online may be considered old-fashioned by the youth. The world has unquestionably moved into the age of the information super-highway.

Desire to participate may also be low among the marginalised youth due to the perception that their contributions may not be appreciated by others or that such participation may reinforce discrimination or bias (NDI, 2015). The NDI (2015) defines marginalisation as persistent inequality and adversity resulting from discrimination, social stigma and stereotypes. Such marginalisation has been the case for many youths across the globe, thus raising fear among youth and governments of for sustainable development and nation-building when the present adult leaders leave their positions.

As stated earlier, non-marginalised youths were found to greater participate in civic and political activities, and the activeness of this group can be linked to the reasons discussed above. However, as one study of the younger generations in eight EU countries has revealed, it may also be that the younger generations in Malaysia are simply not interested in politics. In the mentioned study, although many felt

an allegiance to a certain party, the youth expressed little trust in political parties in general. Indeed, the EU has recognised a trend of disengagement from traditional forms of political participation (Isin & Turner, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, it is clear that the younger generations of Malaysia currently lag behind their counterparts in other developing countries in terms of social participation, especially with regard to political engagement. While those from mainstream communities appear to show higher levels of participation compared to those from marginalised communities, the participation of the former is still average. The current offline political participation of youth in Malaysia has significant implications on policy, especially given the 21st century agenda of encouraging younger generations to contribute more to their country. Resources are thus needed for the economic, cultural and social development of the younger generations in Malaysia to support future trends in participation. Such resources will provide a level playing field for young people both from marginalised and mainstream communities, which in turn will improve participation. As it is now, the mainstream is more exposed to opportunities. Hence, by providing resources to support development of the marginalised, the playing field could be level.

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