

## **Civic versus political participation : A study among marginalized community in Malaysia**

**Authors:**

Ali Salman

**Authors' Addresses**

School of Media & Communication Studies,  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
Bangi 43600 Selangor, Malaysia.

asalmanphd@gmail.com,

Tel: +60389214736,

H/P no: ++60196126568

**ABSTRACT**

*Embedded in democratic constitutions are the rights and freedoms that accompany citizenship, and these rights and freedoms include participation. The central concept of participation is that citizens transform themselves from bystanders to actively involve themselves with issues, aiming to realize what they perceive as the public good. Development of any society, in large part, has to do with its young generation. It is crucial that the young generation participate in socio-political activities. This paper presents the civic and political participation of the marginalized generation in Malaysia between the ages of 15 and 25. The paper is based on a nation-wide survey of 3558 youths from marginalized communities in Malaysia. From the findings, these marginalized youths are basically more active in civic participation as compared to political participation. The top three forms of participation are all civic participation and the least participations are all in the realm of political participation. Reasons for less participation in politics need to be addressed. Resources are thus needed for the economic, cultural and social development of the young generation, to support future trends in participation. This will provide a level playing field for both the marginalized and non-marginalized community and will go a long way to improve participation for the betterment of policy formulation.*

**Keywords:** *political participation; civic participation; young generation; marginalized community; Malaysia*

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are over a billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24, of which 85 percent live in developing countries and 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 studies to work. During the last two decades all around the world, these young people, as new workers, have faced a number of challenges associated with globalization and technological advances in labour markets (ILO, 2004; ILO, 2005).

Development of any society, in large part, has to do with its young generation. It is therefore, crucial for the young generation to participate in socio-political activities of the nation. This participation could be either offline or online (Ali Salman & Suhana Saad, 2015). Traditional political participation has long been the domain of certain groups: in particular, those with high levels of income and education. As opportunities for political activity have expanded with the internet, we wished to know whether these possibilities for online political engagement have potential to change that pattern (Smith, Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2009). Smith et al (2009) explored constructed separate scales measuring political participation on and off the internet, each containing five political activities that can be conducted either online or offline.

Since the focus of this paper is on participation, the activities as used by Smith et al (2009) will be highlighted namely: contact a government official in person, by phone or by letter; sign a paper petition; send a letter to the editor through the Postal Service; make a political contribution in person, by phone or through the mail; communicate with a civic/political group by face-to-face meetings, print letter or newsletter, or telephone. Smith et al (2009) classified respondents as “active offline” if they took part in two or more of the above activities during the preceding year. In the case of America, 27% of American adults have taken part in two or more offline activities.

For the young generation in Malaysia, in terms of participation, except for discussing current issues featured in the media, their participation is below average, hence, not encouraging. This could be due to the lack of interest in politics shown by Malaysian youth who are by and large comfortable with their lives and therefore not bothered with issues related to politics (Ali Salman & Suhana Saad, 2015).

Marginalization is a multi-layered concept. Whole societies can be marginalized at the global level while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly, ethnic groups, families or individuals can be marginalized within localities (Eldering and Knorth, 1998). To a certain extent, marginalization is a shifting phenomenon, linked to social status. So, for example, 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 marginalized. Similarly, as life cycle stages change, so might people's marginalized position. At certain stages of the life cycle the risk of marginalization increases or decreases. For example, the marginalized status of children and youth may decrease as they get older; the marginalized status of adults may increase as they become elders; the marginalized status of single mothers may change as their children grow up, and so on.

Peter Leonard (1984, p.180) defines marginality as ‘being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive activity’. This includes two groups, firstly a

relatively small group of people who are voluntarily marginal to the social order - new age travellers, certain religious sects, commune members, some artists, for instance. The second group according to Leonard is those who are involuntarily socially marginal. Leonard (1984, p.181) characterizes these people as remaining outside 'the major arena of capitalist productive and reproductive activity' and as such experience 'involuntary social marginality'. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, the focus would be more on the involuntary marginalized, as the marginalized community in this study lives outside the areas of high economic activities due to their geographical location and economic activities. This community did not wish to be marginalized and neither did they opt to be marginalized.

The impact of marginalization, in terms of social exclusion are similar, whatever the origins and processes of marginalization. The social attitudes (such as towards impairment, sexuality, ethnicity and so on) or social circumstances (such as closure of workplaces, absence of affordable housing and so on) do not make any difference. However, different people will react differently to marginalization depending on the personal and social resources available to them (Burton & Kagan, 1996). Hence, the recommendation would be for the authority to pay attention to factors that would alleviate the predicament of the marginalized.

The main objective of this paper is to determine the popular trend in participation (civic and political) among the marginalized community in Malaysia. The paper will also gauge the type of participation which the marginalized community is more involved in.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Marginalized Communities**

Marginalization is a slippery and multi-layered concept. Whole societies can be marginalized at the global level while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly, ethnic groups, families or individuals can be marginalized within localities. To a certain extent, marginalization is a shifting phenomenon, linked to social status. So, for example, 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 marginalized. Similarly, as life cycle stages change, so might people's marginalized position.

At certain stages of the life cycle, the risk of marginalization increases or decreases. For example, the marginalized status of children and youth may decrease as they get older; the marginalized status of adults may increase as they become elders; the marginalized status of single mothers may change as their children grow up, and so on. Even so, there are different risks within particular social groups at risk of marginalization. Eldering and Knorth (1998), for example, demonstrate that the risks of marginalization of immigrant youth in Europe vary with ethnicity, irrespective of the particular host countries, or of degree of acculturation.

Peter Leonard (1984, p.180) defines social marginality as 'being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive activity'. This includes two groups, firstly a relatively small group of people who are voluntarily marginal to the social order - new age travellers, certain religious sects, commune members, some artists, for instance. Here, however, we are concerned with a second group, those who are involuntarily socially

marginal. These are communities who are marginalized not of their own volition, but due to the fact that they are outside the major enclave of productive and reproductive activities, thus resulting in them experiencing marginalization (Leonard, 1984)

Marginalization is at the core of exclusion from fulfilling social lives at individual, interpersonal and societal levels. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them: they may become stigmatized and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes. Their opportunities towards social contributions may be limited and they may develop low self-confidence and self-esteem. Social policies and practices may mean they have relatively limited access to valued social resources such as education and health services, housing, income, leisure activities and work.

Marginalization may take different forms - Ishkanian and Lewis (2007) claim that women are often the majority of paid workers in third sector organizations. However, women's presence in these organizations that are "outside the state," have not necessarily occupied leading positions, but in some countries, particularly the United States, they have managed to exert considerable political influence through their membership. On the whole, third sector organizations are not known for their excellent salaries and benefits.

For this study, marginalized communities is taken to mean young adults who are living outside the areas of improved and robust socio-economic activities and infrastructure.

### **Political and Civic Participation**

Embedded in democratic constitutions are the rights and freedoms that accompany citizenship, and these rights and freedoms include participation (Sherrod, 2008; Bogard, & Sherrod, 2008). The central concept of participation is that citizens transform themselves from bystanders to actively involve themselves with issues, aiming to realize what they perceive as the public good (Meijer, Burger, & Ebbers, 2009).

In countries that practice authoritarian system, most of the people are receivers and in a totalitarian system the people are the participants (on the output side) (Isaak, 1987). According to Conge (1988), participation can be by an individual or a group, local or national, oral or written and by force or voluntary. Participation is a manifestation of support. It is based on the needs and expectations of the people to show their role as strugglers of interest, legitimacy strugglers, voters, and in certain circumstances as policy makers or protesters (the opposition) (Martin, 1992).

Kim (2007) suggests that participation in democracies should go beyond taking part in voting and should include taking part in the governance process. Meijer, Burger, & Ebbers (2009) suggest three forms of participation: political participation, policy participation, and social (civic) participation.

Political participation is defined as any form of activity that impacts decisions. In most liberal democratic countries, political participation influences the outcome of a policy. In countries that have a non-democratic system, participation generally means accepting the final

decision of the government. Political activity refers to the given votes, support or withdrawing oneself from the support (Suhana Saad & Ali Salman, 2013).

Political participation consists of actions of citizens that aim to influence the selection and behaviour of political decision makers. Social or civic participation refers to relations between citizens and government but includes interactions between citizens. Active involvement among citizens may take the form of putting demands on the political and administrative system, and it includes developing systems of mutual support to reach common goals. According to Rowe, G & Frewer (2000), the reasons for developing forms of citizen participation vary, from the recognition of basic human rights concerning democracy and procedural justice, to a 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, from the conventional repertoires of interest groups to protest politics, and from state orientation to a multiplicity of target agencies. The internet is one of the new political forums of the youth. Communication approaches have changed from direct linear communication to network-based approaches.

Wasburn (1982) discusses political participation by dividing it into two aspects. The first is a behavioral routine (routine act) that is political participation which is encouraged, such as being a member of an organization that champions the welfare of students, and this participation does not violate the power, authority and social system. In addition, voting also has been categorized as a routine political participation. In contrast, a non-routine participation is a political act or behaviour which is not encouraged or which violates the social system. It is based on feelings of dissatisfaction about something like a political and socio-economic policy and activities of politicians. All this can encourage a non-routine participation such as involvement in a social movement to demand for changes relating to social order.

What is interesting is that the young generation is losing interest in politics. In a global report on voter turnout, Pintor & Gratschew (2002) suggest that confidence in the political institutions and a high level of social inequality in a society, which results in a greater bias against the political participation of socially deprived groups, could be among the reasons why young people lack interest in the democratic process. Based on a study, Putnam (2000) argues that social trust and civic engagement declined significantly in the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

Civic participation is the way we involve ourselves within our community. The degree to which we engage ourselves relates to how much we make a difference in the lives of those around us. It is active involvement that focuses on the common good. This involvement can take place on a number of different levels ranging from obeying the laws of your community to helping make the laws.

The idea of citizenship being a practice as much as a status has developed through the twentieth century. The work of theorist T.H. Marshall in 1950 can be described as an important "point of departure." While many writers have been critical of Marshall's work, his concept of citizenship as "full membership in a community" comprised of civil, social and political rights and accompanying responsibilities has gained wide acceptance (Yuval-Davis, 1991: 59). Thus

citizenship is bound with rights and obligations, with civic participation being both a duty and a manifestation of belonging. However both 'citizenship' and 'civic participation' are loaded terms for those studying the relationship of the individual, communities and the state.

Korea introduced civil participation in criminal trials (jury trials) for the first time in the nation's history on January 1, 2008 (Lee, 2009). The Korean jury system incorporates both the U.S.-style jury system and the German lay assessor system to assess the actual experience of citizen participation in trials during the initial five year experimental phase. This is a departure from the norm, where participation is mostly concerned with the civic, politics and policy. Lee (2009) claims that amateur participation in judicial decision-making is not uncommon in most parts of the world. More than forty countries within the common law tradition use the jury system, and a number of civil-law countries practice other forms of civil participation. The prevalence of civil participation in judicial decision-making around the world has been recently noted, and jury scholars have paid considerable attention to the adoption of different forms of jury trials in Asian countries.

From literature, the three most common types of participation include political participation, policy participation, and social (civic) participation (Meijer, Burger, & Ebbers 2009). The focus of this paper is on political and civic participation. This does not mean that political and civic participations have no influence on policy. I argue that the two forms of participation could impact policy, though indirectly.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a nationwide study of marginalized youth in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was used to collect data through a survey. For a representative sample, the country was divided into six zones. The zones represent the peninsular and include the North (Kedah, Perlis and Penang), East Coast (Pahang, Kelantan, Terengganu), West Coast (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor) and South (Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johore) and Sabah and Sarawak. Questionnaires were used for data collection.

The respondents for this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique to suit some important criteria of the study (Silverman, 2010). Some 3558 respondents, between the ages of 15 and 25 were sampled for the study.

The survey instrument was developed based on the main concepts used in the study. For this paper, only participation was used. Participation has two dimensions viz. civic and politics. Based on the conceptualization, the two dimensions were operationalized. Hence, the instrumentation and data collection purpose, the main concepts in the study were operationalized as follows:

*Marginalized Communities:* These communities were identified based on locations. In operationalizing this concept, low income rural and sub-urban communities were sampled for the study. To capture the main idea of the entire research, which is generational reorientation, respondents between the ages of 15 and 25 were selected.

*Civic Participation:* Civic participation was operationalized by asking the respondents whether they *talk to friends or family members on current issues published by the media;* were

*involved in recycling activities; were involved in charity work and welfare; volunteer to help the poor / disabled / victims of natural disasters.*

*Political Participation: This dimension was operationalized by asking the respondents if they meet personally with government officials to solve a problem that I face; contact the media to give an opinion on a particular issue (opinions / complaints / awards); participate in activities organized by political parties; meet with the elected representatives to solve a problem / give opinions; wearing badges / stickers to support / refute an issue.*

A pilot study was conducted on 50 respondents to fine tune the instrument. The validity of the instrument was evaluated by experts in the field and the respondents' comments during the pilot study were taken into consideration. Based on the comments, the items were improved. The reliability of the dimensions were measured using Cronbach's Alpha as in Table 1.

**Table 1** Cronbach's Alpha for Civic and Political Dimensions

	Alpha		Items
	Pilot*	Actual Study**	
Civic	0.79	0.81	4
Political	0.80	0.85	5

\*N=50

\*\*N=3558

Data collection was done with the help of student enumerators who were familiar with the locations. To ensure the quality of data collected, the enumerators were briefed and each researcher was assigned a zone for monitoring the data collection process. For this paper, only descriptive analysis was used to present the findings by analyzing the means and standard deviations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are 9 items to measure civic and political participation of Malaysian marginalized youths. The results show that political participation among the young generation in Malaysia is below average. The findings (Table 2), show that the marginalised community are basically more active in civic participation as compared to political participation. Their top three participations are all civic participation and these include talking to friends or family members on current issues published by the media (mean=3.18, SD=1.13), involvement in recycling activities (mean=2.79, SD=1.12), and charity work and welfare (mean=2.72, SD=1.16).

Among the least participation was participating in activities organized by political parties (mean=2.04, SD=1.20), meeting with representatives of the people to solve a problem or give opinions (mean=2.05, SD=1.15), and wearing a badge / sticker to support / refute an issue (mean=2.01, SD=1.14), which are all in the realm of political participation. In other words, political participation among the marginalised generation is below average.

**Table 2**

## Civic and Political Participation of Marginalised Community

Items	Mean*	SD
Civic participation		
Talk to friends or family members on current issues published by the media	3.18	1.13
Involved in recycling activities	2.79	1.12
Involved in charity work and welfare	2.72	1.16
Volunteering to help the poor / disabled / victims of natural disasters	2.71	1.15
Political participation		
Meet personally with government officials to solve a problem that I face	2.31	1.19
Contacting the media to give an opinion on a particular issue (opinions / complaints / awards)	2.24	1.17
Participate in activities organized by political parties	2.04	1.20
Meet with the elected representatives to solve a problem / give opinions	2.05	1.15
Wearing badges / stickers to support / refute an issue	2.01	1.14

\*1 (Seldom) to 5 (Very Often)

One might say that the teenagers and young adults from the marginalized generation, given their circumstances, start off with exposure to civic participation. This might also be due to the fact that a large number of respondents are still furthering their education. Moreover, the Malaysian tertiary education laws prohibit students from involving themselves in politics.

From the analysis, it is evidently clear that the young generation does not have the appetite for political activities. The implication of this is that more youths are becoming passive in real contributions to the development of the country. This trend needs to be critically examined and addressed.

On the whole, one could say that there is low participation among the marginalized youth. This could be due to the advent of the Internet which has somehow affected the way in which people participate in national issues and activities relating to civic and politics. Whoever is not active online is considered old – fashioned. The world has definitely moved away from such activity where everything is done offline. It is now the age of the information super highway.

One may argue that by limiting their activities to the online realm, youths may have a channel to voice their opinions but what of their active, physical involvement in civic and political activities? Democracy thrives on active participation and for any society that wants to develop optimally, citizens' engagement in civic activities is highly necessary.

The urge to participate is also low among the marginalized youth based on their perception that their contributions may not be appreciated or such participation may reinforce discrimination or bias (NDI 2015). In this regard, NDI (2015) defines marginalization as persistent inequality and adversity resulting from discrimination, social stigma and stereotypes. This has been the case with many youths across the globe, thus raising fears of failing to advance sustainable development and nation building when the present crop of adults or leaders leave.

As revealed by the result, the marginalized youths in Malaysia have higher participation in civic than in political activities. Similarly, civic participation in Britain is not on the decline. Participation can be measured in different ways, through organisational growth, overall income of the charitable and voluntary sectors, or (perhaps most importantly for participation) individual involvement. All of these measures suggest that civic participation is vibrant. For charities specifically, there are around 170,000 in the UK, a figure that has climbed steadily since the establishment of the modern registration system in the 1960s. A 2009 survey found that volunteering was undertaken informally by 57% of adults in England, and formally by 43%, in the twelve months preceding interview (Hilton, McKay, Crowson & Mouhot, 2010).

The activeness of this group of people or citizens is connected with the reasons explained above. However it could also be that the young generation in Malaysia is simply not interested in politics, similar to their counterparts in Europe as a study on young generations in eight EU countries revealed. The study shows that majority of interviewed youths were not very interested in politics. They also showed little trust in political parties, although many felt close to a certain party. The EU finds a trend of disengaging from traditional forms of political participation (Isin & Turner, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

The objective of the paper which is to determine the popular trend in participation (civic and political) among the marginalized community in Malaysia, has been achieved. The paper has also determined the type of participation which the marginalized community is more involved in. The results show that political participation among the marginalized young generation in Malaysia is below average. They are basically more active in civic participation as compared with political participation. Their top three participations are all civic participation and these include talking to friends or family members on current issues published by the media, involvement in recycling activities, and charity work and welfare.

The least participation was found in activities organized by political parties, meeting with representatives of the people to solve a problem or give opinions, and wearing a badge / sticker to support / refute an issue, which are all in the realm of political participation.

It is thus evident from the findings that the marginalized community in Malaysia still lags behind in their participation, especially, in terms of political participation. Thus future research implications point to the direction of new media participation through social media applications in particular, and this calls for studies on online participation. There have been studies that addressed this trend. However, more studies need to be conducted to provide a clear understanding by way of theory and subject matter. The authorities should provide encouragement to the youth, especially the marginalized communities to participate actively in civic and political activities.

Furthermore, the present situation of the marginalized community in political participation has implications on policy, especially for the 21st century agenda and transformation of the youth in terms of augmenting the role of the young generation in contributing to the political agenda of the country. Resource is thus needed for economic, cultural and social development of the young generation to support future trends in participation. This will provide a level

playing field for both the marginalized and non-marginalized community and will go a long way to improve both civic and political participation.

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