

Some Socio-Demographic Determinants of Political Participation

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Abstract. A review of literature on political participation shows mixed results regarding factors associated with political activities in different countries. This study investigates the extent of political participation and some related socio-demographic factors in Penang, Malaysia. The objectives of this research are (1) to examine the forms of political participation; (2) to compare the extent of political participation among citizens; (3) to establish associations between political participation and some socio-demographic factors. For the purpose of this study, a survey is conducted to a sample population of 621 respondents in Penang, Malaysia. The findings indicate different levels of political involvement for different types of political participation. Majority of the respondents (72.3%) involved in voting in every general election, and only a small minority (6.1%) contributed money to political parties. The results also suggest associations between political participation and socio-demographic determinants: gender, ethnic background, and party affiliation.

Keywords: political participation, socio-demographic factors, political activities

1. Introduction

In every political system, there are some ways for citizens to express their needs and demands to the government. For many years, reasons for citizens to participate in political activities have become one of the issues dominating discussions of political participation among political science researchers. Since the common form of political participation revolve around elections, many people fail to see that public efforts to express their political interests and influence public policy extend beyond elections. The focus of this paper is political participation in Penang, Malaysia. The findings enable us to understand the process of political participation not only in the form of voting but also in many other forms.

Research done in many countries suggests that education and social status of individuals are among determinants of political participation. There is a tendency for individuals with high level of education and social status to develop feelings of efficacy and a sense of civic duty that may encourage political participation. They use opportunities for political involvement as well as possess the personal resources and skills that are easily converted into political participation when the need arises [1]. In countries such as the United States, there is an evidence of the better-educated and higher social status group of individuals to dominate the arenas of participation compared to the lower class [2]. Other studies that use social-psychological and rational-choice perspectives have contributed to a rich understanding of the role of personal characteristics, attitudes and interests in voting decisions [3] [4].

Asia Barometer survey shows that middle class affectations cutting across ethnicity and religion have emerged in Malaysian society [5]. The emergence of this middle class interest means that citizens will protect those “developments” and “problems” that affect “the good life” they are enjoying. Thus there is an antipathy for political corruption and crime which may lead the citizens to act in the interest of democratic rights such as freedom of expression and other liberties. On the other hand, another research on women

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across ethnic background and income levels in Malaysia suggests that the majority of the women in the study consider themselves not actively involved in politics even though they vote in every general election [6]. The literature review on political participation in general shows mixed results in determining factors related to political involvement in different countries.

The objectives of this research are:

- to examine the forms of political participation in Penang, Malaysia
- to compare the extent of political participation among citizens from different age groups, gender, ethnic background, education background, income levels, and party affiliation.
- To establish associations between political participation and socio-demographic factors: age groups, gender, ethnic background, education background, income levels, and party affiliation.

2. Methodology

This study used survey method. The sample consisted of 621 respondents in Penang, Malaysia. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale for each item. Data management and analysis was performed using SPSS 17.0. For the purpose of results presentation and discussion in this paper, the answers in a 5-point Likert scale are reconstructed into three categories: Disagree & Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Agree, and Agree & Strongly Agree.

3. Results

For the purpose of this study, the respondents comprised of citizens aged 21 years and above and distributed across all districts in Penang, Malaysia. Table 1 shows that voting in every general election was a form of political participation which most (72.3%) respondents did. The form of political participation which was least done by them (6.1%) was contributing money to political parties. More than half of the respondents did not contact party officials. For those who did so, 20.5% of them contacted Member of State Assembly, 18.4% contacted Committee Member of any political parties, and 13.9% contacted Member of Parliament when necessary. The data also indicates that 54.8% of respondents interviewed paid attention to politics of this country even though majority of them did not actively involved in politics, except for voting in every general election.

	Disagree & Strongly Disagree (%)	Somewhat Agree (%)	Agree & Strongly Agree (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
I vote in every general election	14.8	12.9	72.3	2.57	.736
I contact Member of State Assembly when necessary	61.1	18.4	20.5	1.59	.807
I contact Member of Parliament when necessary	67.9	18.2	13.9	1.46	.725
I contact Committee Member of any political parties when necessary	60.0	21.6	18.4	1.58	.782
I participate in political groups' activities	75.2	14.7	10.2	1.35	.657
I participate in general election campaign	74.7	14.4	11.0	1.36	.671
I pay attention to politics of this country	17.1	28.1	54.8	2.38	.760
I attend political parties' talk	64.1	18.7	17.1	1.53	.770
I contribute money to political parties	80.0	13.9	6.1	1.26	.562

Table 1. Types of Political Participation

Table 2 shows that more than two-thirds (72.9%) of the respondents who disagreed and strongly disagreed that they participated actively in politics. Only 9.7% of them admitted that they participated actively in politics. The data also shows that 18.3% of the respondents felt responsible to participate in politics. However, this sense of responsibility was not translated into political participation since only less than 10% said that they participated actively in politics.

	Disagree & Strongly Disagree (%)	Somewhat Agree (%)	Agree & Strongly Agree (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
I participate actively in politics	72.9	17.4	9.7	1.37	.653
I am responsible to participate in politics	53.1	28.6	18.3	1.65	.770

Table 2. Participate and Responsible to Participate in Politics

Table 3 presents data on respondents who participated actively in politics across age groups. More than half (258) of the respondents who disagreed and strongly agreed that they participated actively in politics were in the age groups of 21-40 years combined. On the other hand, more than half (34) of the respondents who agreed and strongly agreed to the same question were in the age groups of 41- 51 years and above combined.

	21-30 yrs	31-40 yrs	41-50 yrs	51 yrs and Above	Total
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	152	106	102	93	453
Somewhat Agree	36	24	28	20	108
Agree and Strongly Agree	15	11	20	14	60

Table 3. Participate Actively in Politics and Age (N=621)

Table 4 shows that the number of female respondents who disagreed and strongly disagreed that they participated actively in politics was larger than the number of male respondents. There were 17 female and 43 male respondents who participated actively in politics. In other words, the data indicates that more men involved in politics compared to women.

	Male	Female	Total
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	195	258	453
Somewhat Agree	69	39	108
Agree and Strongly Agree	43	17	60

Table 4. Participate Actively in Politics and Gender (N=621)

Table 5 shows that there were more non-Malay respondents (273) who disagreed and strongly disagreed that they participated actively in politics than Malay respondents (180). The data suggests that the number of respondents who agreed and strongly agreed that they participated actively in politics decreased for both ethnic groups. However, there were more Malays (43) than non-Malays (17) who participated actively in politics.

	Malay	Non-Malay	Total
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	180	273	453
Somewhat Agree	46	62	108
Agree and Strongly Agree	43	17	60

Table 5. Participate Actively in Politics and Ethnic Background (N=621)

Table 6 indicates that there were smaller numbers of respondents across all levels of education who agreed and strongly agreed that they participated actively in politics as compared to those who disagreed and strongly disagreed with the same question. The data shows that the majority (34) of respondents who participated actively in politics had secondary school level of education.

	Primary School and Below	Secondary School	College/ University	Not Relevant	Total
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	70	195	187	1	453
Somewhat Agree	6	46	54	2	108
Agree and Strongly Agree	10	34	16	0	60

Table 6. Participate Actively in Politics and Education Levels (N=621)

Table 7 shows that 60 respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they participated actively in politics. The majority (43) of them were from the income level of RM1999 and below. Only 13 respondents who were active in politics came from the income level of RM2000 and above.

	RM1999 and Below	RM2000 and Above	Not Relevant	Total
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	283	128	42	453
Somewhat Agree	76	32	0	108
Agree and Strongly Agree	43	13	4	60

Table 7. Participate Actively in Politics and Income Levels (N=621)

	Barisan Nasional	Pakatan Rakyat	Not Relevant	Total
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	189	96	168	453
Somewhat Agree	45	35	28	108
Agree and Strongly Agree	41	13	6	60

Table 8. Participate Actively in Politics and Party Affiliation (N=621)

The data from Table 8 shows that the numbers of respondents affiliated with both political parties, Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat, who agreed and strongly agreed that they participated actively in

politics were smaller (41 and 13 respectively) than the numbers of respondents (189 and 96 respectively) who disagreed and strongly disagreed with the same question.

In addition, chi-square tests indicate associations between respondents who participated actively in politics and their gender (28.286, $p < 0.001$), ethnic background (22.030, $p < 0.001$), and party affiliation (27.174, $p < 0.001$).

4. Conclusion

This study has found that most of the respondents interviewed admitted that they did not participate actively in politics and about half of them did not feel responsible in doing so. However, the majority of the respondents interviewed admitted that they voted in every general election. Hence, voting in general election was the most common type of political participation and contributing money to political parties was the least common type of political participation practiced by the respondents.

The findings in this study suggest that there were associations between political participation and some socio-demographic factors, namely gender, ethnic background, and party affiliation. The results were partially consistent with previous studies on political participation. As a case study, a limitation of this study is that the sample population was concentrated in Penang, and the results may not be generalized to all states in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the findings provide insights to future research to better understand the political process and political involvement in developing countries.

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