

# Citizenship Norms and the Participation of Young Adults in a Democracy

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**Abstract**—This paper explores the changing trend in citizenship norms among young citizens from various ethnic groups in Malaysia and the extent to which it influences the participation of young citizens in political and civil issues. Embedded in democratic constitutions are the rights and freedoms that accompany citizenship, and these rights and freedoms include participation. Participation in democracies should go beyond voting; it should include taking part in the governance process. The political process is not at risk even though politics does not work as it did in the past. A national sample of 1697 respondents between the ages of 21 and 40 years were interviewed in January 2011. The findings show that respondents embrace an engaged-citizenship norm more than they do the traditional duty-citizen norm. Among the ethnic groups, the Chinese show lower means in both citizenship norms compared with other ethnic groups, namely, the Malays and the Indians. The duty-citizen norm correlates higher with political participation than with civic participation. On the other hand, the engaged-citizen norm correlates higher with civic participation than with political participation.

**Keywords**—citizenship norms, political participation, civic participation, youths, globalization

## I. INTRODUCTION

SOME four million Malaysian eligible voters, who can make a major difference in a democracy, have not registered with the Malaysian Election Commission (EC), and two-thirds of them are between the ages of 22 and 30 years. The chairman of the EC has described the situation as alarming and disturbing [15]. The majority of unregistered eligible voters are ethnic Malays, who make up 56% of the population. The other ethnic groups in multiracial Malaysian society are the Chinese (35%) and the Indians (10%). Ethnicity plays a crucial role in democratic practices in Malaysia. Majority of political parties are formed based on ethnic groups. Efforts to form multiracial political parties have not achieved much success. For the last 54 years since independence, Malaysia has been governed by the National Front, a coalition of several parties representing various ethnic groups. In recent years the once-disjointed opposition parties of different ethnic groups have organized a coalition to form a second force towards a two-party parliamentary system. Both the ruling and the opposition coalitions are now actively courting the young and new voters, knowing that these voters will play a decisive role in the upcoming elections, just as they did in the last general elections in 2008 by denying the ruling coalition its traditional two-thirds majority in parliament.

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One tends to think that unregistered eligible voters are most likely to be opinionated, internet-savvy, and idealistic [3]. Experience in the United States suggests that young people who are economically inactive, lack educational attainment, are manual employees, and are part of an ethnic minority are amongst those most likely to be disengaged [8]. The EC has made several efforts to simplify voter registration and make it as convenient as possible by setting up easy-access registration counters and centres. Some of the reasons why young Malaysian citizens are not keen to register is that they do not trust any political party, political parties are only concerned with their own interests, and election results do not mean much to them [16].

Like in any other democracy, the lack of interest in the political process shown by the young generation in Malaysia could jeopardize the working of democracy in the future. However, voter turnout data indicate that voter turnout increased from 69% in the 1999 general elections to 75% in the 2008 general elections [23]. By contrast, experiences in the United States and other industrialized countries have shown a decline in voter turnout in elections. In the United States voter turnout in presidential elections was between 51% and 56% during the period 2000-2008 (www.infoplease.com). Voter turnout in European Union (EU) elections among residents is only 35% in the United Kingdom, 40% in France, and 43% in Germany [25].

This paper explores why a substantial majority of young citizens in Malaysia are not interested to register as voters. To understand this phenomenon, the paper will explore the changing trend in citizenship norms among young citizens from various ethnic groups in Malaysia. The study will further explore the extent to which this changing trend influences the participation of young citizens in political, civil, and citizen issues.

## II. CITIZENSHIPS NORMS AND PARTICIPATION

Citizenship is a concept and practice that is constantly changing. Reference [13] refers to the concept of citizenship as having three dimensions: civil, political, and social. It has been suggested that Marshall's triad of citizenship is bound by the nation state. Reference [9] argues that globalization has challenged the current model of the nation state. Thus, Marshall's triad may no longer be fully adequate for contemporary circumstances. Citizenship should not be seen exclusively or primarily in terms of a legal status, with rights such as equality before the law, and duties such as paying taxes, or even as incorporation into a particular jurisdiction or cultural identity.

Globalization has challenged the current model in various ways [5]. Specifically, the impact of globalization on citizenship takes place in at least two different ways: first, in a political and cultural nature, as reflected in the increasing worldwide spread of a certain sensitivity to democratic values

and respect for human rights; and second, in the assertion of differences and the promotion of diversity. Matters such as religious minority, sexual rights, drug consumption, and gender rights, which were once covered exclusively in private negotiation, now become matters of society as a whole [10].

Embedded in democratic constitutions are the rights and freedoms that accompany citizenship, and these rights and freedoms include participation [22],[4]. 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 [14]. Citizenship should be the voluntary capacity of citizens and communities working directly together, or through elected representatives, to exercise economic, social, and political power in the pursuit of shared goals [1]. It is further suggested that in exchange for the rights of citizenship one is expected to participate as a citizen by 'helping' out and volunteering and voting [22]. One might expect the sociocultural context to have an important influence on the development of citizenship, especially on adolescents' understanding of what is involved in citizenship. In any democratic society, citizens are encouraged to participate in the decision making that affects their lives. Reference [12] suggests that participation in democracies should go beyond taking part in voting and should include taking part in the governance process. [14] suggest three forms of participation: political participation, policy participation, and social participation. Political participation consists of actions of citizens that aim to influence the selection and behaviour of political decision-makers. Policy participation focuses on the role of citizens in regulation. Social 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 [20], 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 [17] 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. In a global report on voter turnout, reference [18] 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. In addition, [2] attribute the erosion of citizenship to expressions of individualization and a decline in public space. Based on a study [19] argues that social trust and civic engagement declined significantly in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. A study in eight EU countries 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. These young people are termed lazy voters. The EU finds a trend of disengaging from traditional forms of political participation [11].

With the declining turnout, reference [6] suggests that the political process is not at risk even though politics does not work as it did in the past. He argues that the young generation is experiencing changes in citizenship norms. Citizenship norms are defined as what the individual feels is expected of the good citizen. These norms would lead one to vote out of a sense of duty or to feel a duty to be civically active. In contrast, the young reflect a new political reality and stress alternative norms that should encourage a more rights-conscious public, a socially engaged public, and a more deliberative image of citizenship. Reference [6] categorizes citizenship norms as duty-based citizenship and engaged citizenship. The present young generation is not subscribing to the same duty-based norms as their elders. In fact, citizenship norms are shifting from the traditional duty-based citizenship to engaged citizenship. Support for government policies and voting in elections is expected in duty-based citizenship, whereas challenge to authorities and greater participation in civic activities may be expected in engaged citizenship.

In fact, the shifting in norms does not reduce participation but instead increases participation in many ways other than the traditional voting in elections. It reaffirms that rather than erode participation, this norm shift is altering and expanding the patterns of political participation [7]. A study by [21] suggests that more young people are making an effort to directly contact their elected representatives and government officials especially through the online facilities. At the same time these young people are also working with informal groups in their respective communities to address local problems [17], [27].

### III. METHOD

A total of 1697 respondents were interviewed for this study. Trained undergraduates acted as enumerators for the field face-to-face interviews, which were conducted from 1 to 31 January 2011. Respondents interviewed ranged from 18 to 40 years of age. In Malaysia, according to the National Youth Development Act of 2007, the young generation is defined as consisting of people between the ages of 15 and 40 years. To ensure that the youth population was reflected in the sampling, 56% of the total samples were Malays, 24% were Chinese, and 20% were Indians. Among the respondents, 22% had a tertiary education, 32% had a post-secondary education, and the rest had high school diplomas. Slightly more than half (55%) of the respondents were male and the rest were female.

The main variables used in this study were citizen norms and participation. Citizen norms had two dimensions: duty citizen and engaged citizen. Participation had three dimensions: cause-oriented participation, citizen-oriented participation, and civic participation. To determine citizenship norms, eight items were used with four response categories, ranging from 'never' to 'very frequently'. The items were subjected to factor analysis and produced a two-factor loading. The two factors were conceptualized as duty citizen and engaged citizen.

*Duty citizen* had three items with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.72. The three items measuring duty citizen were related to voting in elections, activity in voluntary bodies, and activity in political activities.

*Engaged citizen* had five items, namely, respect for provisions enshrined in the constitution, readiness to help the needy, involvement in environmental preservation, respect for law and order, and willingness to defend the country. The five items had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

To measure participation, respondents were asked to respond to 17 items based on a four-point Likert-type scale, the four points being 'never', 'sometimes', 'frequently', and 'very frequently'. These items were then factor analysed, which subsequently produced three-factor loadings. The three factors were conceptualized as cause-oriented participation, citizen-oriented participation, and civic-oriented participation.

*Cause-oriented participation* had five items related to taking actions, namely, meeting with government officials to solve a problem, wearing buttons to protest, surfing political party websites, meeting with elected representatives to give views, and voicing dissatisfaction by writing to the media. These five items had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78.

*Citizen-oriented participation* had five items, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85. These five items were giving comments in an online news portal, sending letters to the editor through email, commenting on blogs, participating in online discussion groups, and uploading and downloading video on the internet as a protest towards certain issues.

*Civic participation* dealt with involvement in community services such as doing charitable work, volunteering time for the poor, voicing opinions on policy development at the workplace, volunteering to teach less fortunate children, and discussing current issues with family members. The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.86.

#### IV. FINDINGS

Citizenship norms have evolved over time. The young generation's lack of interest in politics is due to changing norms from the traditional duty-citizen norm to the newly acquired engaged-citizen norm. The data in Table 1 show that the citizens' norm is not about acquiring one norm at the expense of the other. The two norms can coexist. The data in Table 1 indicate that citizens do acquire both citizen norms. Duty citizen is highest among those from ages 26 to 30 years ( $M=4.0$ ). Those in the age range of 18 to 20 years who are not eligible to vote have the lowest duty-citizen norms ( $M=3.7$ ). With regard to engaged-citizen norms, those between the ages of 21 and 40 years again show the highest engaged-citizen means ( $M=4.4$ ). The lowest mean for engaged citizen is also from the age group of 18 to 20 years ( $M=4.3$ ).

TABLE I  
CITIZEN NORMS BY AGE

	Duty Citizen	Engaged Citizen
18-20 years	3.7	4.3
21-25 years	3.8	4.4
26-30 years	4.0	4.4
31-35 years	3.9	4.4
36-40 years	3.9	4.4

The subsequent data are about citizen norms and education. It is assumed that those with higher education would have a higher degree of engaged-citizen norms. However, the data in Table II show that educational attainment does not have much influence in developing citizen norms. Those with high-school-level education show stronger duty-citizen and engaged-citizen norms compared with those having post-secondary education.

TABLE II  
CITIZEN NORMS AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

	Duty Citizen	Engaged Citizen
High School	3.9	4.5
College Diploma	3.8	4.4
College Degree	3.8	4.4

Since independence, efforts have been made to foster national integration in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. In spite of much progress in this area, ethnicity still plays a significant role in moulding citizenship norms. The data in Table III show a significant difference in citizens' norms among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. The Malays show the highest duty-citizen norm ( $M=3.9$ ), followed by the Indians ( $M=3.9$ ) and the Chinese ( $M=3.7$ ). The same pattern appears in the engaged-citizen norms, in which the Malays had a mean of 4.5, higher than the norms of the Indians ( $M=4.4$ ) and the Chinese ( $M=4.2$ ). While there is no significant difference between the citizen norms of the Malays and the Indians, the data show that the Chinese have significantly lower citizen norms compared with the Malays and the Indians.

TABLE III  
CITIZEN NORMS AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS

	Duty Citizen	Engaged Citizen
Malays	3.9	4.5
Chinese	3.6	4.2
Indians	3.9	4.4
F	18.4	22.7
Sig	0.01	0.01

Table IV presents a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the differences in participation among the three ethnic groups. For political-oriented participation, the mean is highest among the Indians ( $M=1.5$ ) followed by the Malays ( $M=1.4$ ). The lowest mean is among the Chinese ( $M=1.4$ ). The data show that the Indians and the Malays are more willing than the Chinese to voice their opinions and fight for their cause with the authorities if they have reason to do so. ANOVA shows a significant difference in political-oriented participation among the three ethnic groups.

Citizen-oriented participation is actually participation that involves using the internet where respondents give their views, write comments, or upload and download videos to protest against some issues. The same pattern emerged, with the Indians showing the highest mean ( $M=1.9$ ), followed by the Malays ( $M=1.9$ ) and the Chinese ( $M=1.8$ ). The Chinese, who show high internet usage and experience, nonetheless did not use the internet as much as the Malays and Indians did to champion their cause or protest against certain issues online.

ANOVA shows a significant difference among the ethnic groups with regard to participation using online facilities.

As for civic engagement, which deals with participation in non-governmental organizations to advocate certain causes, the Malays show the highest participation ( $M=1.4$ ), followed by the Indians ( $M=1.4$ ) and the Chinese ( $M=1.3$ ). Again, like in the other two kinds of participation, the Chinese come out last. In this particular participation, however, the difference between the three ethnic groups is not statistically significant.

TABLE IV  
ANOVA ON PARTICIPATION AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS

	Cause-oriented	Citizen-oriented	Civic engagement
Malays	1.4	1.9	1.4
Chinese	1.4	1.8	1.3
Indian	1.5	1.9	1.4
Overall	1.4	1.9	1.4
F	3.10*	4.61**	0.27 ns

\*sig at  $p < 0.05$  \*\* sig at  $p < 0.01$

The subsequent analysis seeks to determine the extent to which citizen norms influence participation. Based on Pearson correlation analysis, as shown in Table V, duty citizen has a stronger relationship with political-oriented participation ( $r = 0.23$ ) than with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.21$ ) and citizen-oriented participation ( $r = 0.13$ ). On the other hand, engaged citizen has a stronger relationship with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.21$ ) than with political-oriented participation ( $r = 0.09$ ) and citizen-oriented participation ( $r = 0.04$ ). These data support the notion that duty citizens are more inclined to participate in traditional politics such as meeting elected representatives and government officials to voice their grievances. Engaged citizens are more inclined to work with non-governmental and voluntary organizations to fight for a certain cause.

Duty-citizen norms among the Malays show a stronger relationship with political-oriented participation ( $r = 0.25$ ), as expected. Among the Indians duty-citizen norms show a similar correlation with political-oriented participation as well with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.26$ ). Duty-citizen norms among the Chinese ( $r = 0.16$ ) do not show stronger relationships with political-oriented participation, as expected, but show a slightly stronger relation with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.19$ ).

TABLE V  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENSHIP NORMS AND PARTICIPATION

	Political-oriented	Civic-oriented	Citizen-oriented
Duty Citizen (Malays)	.25**	.19**	.14**
Duty Citizen (Chinese)	.16**	.19*	.06 ns
Duty Citizen (Indians)	.26**	.26**	.17**
Duty Citizen (overall)	.23**	.21**	.13**
Engaged Citizen (Malays)	.09**	.19**	.05 ns
Engaged Citizen (Chinese)	.05 ns	.24**	.08 ns
Engaged Citizen (Indians)	.09 ns	.24**	.04 ns
Engaged Citizen (Overall)	.09**	.21**	.04 ns

\*\* sig at  $p < 0.01$

Data among the ethnic groups show engaged citizens to be more inclined to participate in civic-oriented activities. Engaged citizen among the Malays correlates more strongly with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.19$ ) than with political-

oriented participation ( $r = 0.09$ ) and citizen-oriented participation ( $r = 0.05$ ). The same pattern is evident among the Chinese, for whom the correlation with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.24$ ) is stronger than with political-oriented participation ( $r = 0.05$ ) and citizen-oriented participation. Among the Indians the relation with civic-oriented participation ( $r = 0.24$ ) is stronger than with political-oriented participation ( $r = 0.09$ ) and citizen-oriented participation ( $r = 0.04$ ).

The Malays are the only ethnic group among the engaged-citizen norms that shows significant relations with political-oriented participation ( $r = 0.09$ ). All three ethnic groups, however, show positive and significant correlations with civic-oriented participation. The engaged-citizen norms among the Chinese ( $r = 0.24$ ) and the Indians indicate more active participation ( $r = 0.24$ ) compared with the Malays ( $r = 0.19$ ). Engaged-citizen norms show no significant relation with citizen-oriented participation. Nonetheless, the duty-citizen norms among the Malays ( $r = 0.14$ ) and the Indians ( $r = 0.07$ ) show significant relations with citizen-oriented participation. The relationship among the Chinese is not significant.

## V. CONCLUSION

Citizen participation in a democratic society is often taken for granted, especially by the younger generation. The lack of interest among the young generation in Malaysia to register themselves as voters could be explained by the shifting in citizenship norms. The shifting of citizenship norms from a traditional duty-citizen to an engaged-citizen norm does not necessarily mean the end of democracy as it is traditionally defined. Instead the results show that members of the young generation have expanded their avenues for participation in a democratic environment with the adoption of new citizenship norms. Besides participating in voting and being actively involved with political parties, they are also connected to a new form of participation such as volunteering their time to offer assistance to the less fortunate segment of society, becoming involved in environmental conservation, and showing respect for law and order.

In multi-ethnic Malaysia, the Chinese show relatively lower citizenship norms (both in engaged-citizen and duty-citizen norms) as compared with the Malays and the Indians. The Chinese, the majority of whom are urban dwellers and who control the major portion of the nation's economy, have in the past been labelled as not being interested in politics and putting distance to anything related to the government. On the other hand, they are more active in non-government bodies. This study confirms their active participation in civic-oriented activities. The Malays, who are indigenous people, have political blood in them due to the community's active involvement in the nationalist movement before and after independence. Thus, this finding shows that the Malays are more active in political-oriented activities than in civic-oriented activism. The Indians, the smallest of the three major ethnic groups, are well positioned in their involvement both in political and in civic-oriented issues.

The changing trend in citizenship norms will have a major implication for political strategy in Malaysia. In the near future, political parties cannot build their strength solely by recruiting new membership especially among the young

citizens. Young citizens might not be members of a political party, but they would support political parties that support the cause and ideas they pursue through voluntary and non-governmental organizations. It is a logical move for political parties to comprehend the changing trends in citizenship norms in order to understand why many young citizens now participate less in the traditional voters' registration exercises.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Data for this article is part of the on-going research on Citizenship and the Malaysian Identity (UKM-AP-CMNB-19-2009/1) funded by The National University of Malaysia.

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