Multi-Dimensional Understanding of Active Citizenship

– The Need for Unified Conceptualization –

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Broadly stated, readings today discuss the factors and consequences of active citizenship. First, Chapter 3 of Downs (1957) sets the basic logic as to how citizens form a political preference, which becomes the basis of active citizenship. Second, three papers make empirical assessments for the potential factors of active citizenship. McClendon and Riedl (2015) argues that self-affirming religious message promotes active participation, while findings in Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2014) and Croke et al. (2016) suggest weak or adversary effect of information/education on participation. Third, in a slightly different taste, Tsai (2007) discusses how the existence of informal institutions promoting active citizenship can improve local public goods provision. While all papers agree with the importance of *active citizenship*, they start from significantly different understandings of this same concept. The conceptual ambiguity makes it difficult to extract consistent implications from their findings. In this critical review, I suggest the unified and comprehensive concept of active citizenship. Then, I argue that this new conceptualization can help to extract meaningful insights from the studies on active citizenship.

To start with, each of today's readings operationalizes active citizenship in different ways. To start with, Downs (1957) explicitly see it in the form of voting participation in an attempt to increase the individual-level utility. Croke et al. (2016) extend this operationalization and measure participation in different forms of formal communication with political elites including voting. Next, the participation measure used in McClendon and Riedl (2015) does not require the

formal form of participation. They measure participation by whether an individual joins in the activity to express their political preferences publicly. Lastly, the operationalization of active citizenship in Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2014) and Tsai (2007) do not require activities to be political. The measures in Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2014) explicitly concern with the active educational investment, and the conceptualization in Tsai (2007) emphasizes the importance of closely-connected, social (but not necessarily political) activities in the local area. The diversity in the operationalization puts the heavy burden on the readers of those studies to gain consistent understandings of the findings regarding the active citizenship.

Now, I introduce the unified and comprehensive conceptualization of active citizenship. To begin with, I broadly define active citizenship as the physical participation in any activities that improve the quality of life through normatively valid procedure[1]. Then, at least two dimensions of the active citizenship can be identified. First, the form of the participation can be *political* or *non-political*. Some forms of participation do have explicitly political characteristics, such as voting, campaigning, and the contact with politicians. On the other hand, other activities, such as educational investment and involvement in local social groups do not have to have a direct connection with the political institution. Second, active citizenship can be initiated by either *individually* or *socially* based motivations. Individually motivated participation expects some direct improvement in the personal welfare as a consequence of participation. For example, voting participation with the expectation of some returns in the form of personally favorable policy is a simple case of individually-motivated participation. On the other hand, participation with social motivation does not require the improvement in personal welfare. In this type of active citizenship, an individual participates with an expectation of the improvement in the overall life conditions in the society (or in the smaller community) as a consequence of participation. The societal benefits, even if not personally beneficial, generates psychic benefits for the individuals.

[1]The definition of the normatively valid procedure is out of the scope here. But the very definition of "citizenship" requires some normative assessments.

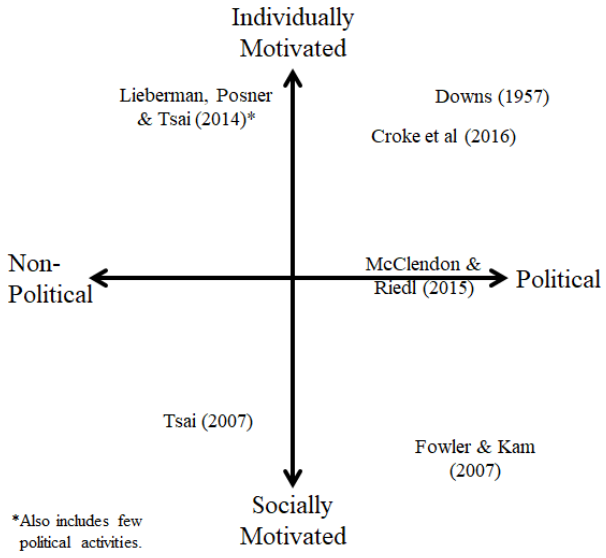

Figure 1: Dimensions of Active Citizenship

Figure 1 maps each study in this week on the two-dimensional conception of the active citizenship. This mapping illustrates the context and limitations of the arguments made in this week's readings. First, looking at the upper right-hand panel, the argument in Downs (1957) is a typical example of individually motivated, political form of the active citizenship. Croke et al. (2016) follows this tradition in selecting the type of participation. In this realm of active citizenship, active individuals pursue the personal utility through political channels. However, findings from these studies have little implications over socially motivated or non-political form of active citizenship. For example, Croke et al. (2016) shows that more educated individuals in Zimbabwe are less likely to become active in political channels. However, this finding does not imply that those people are less active in non-political channels. Educated people in Zimbabwe may find non-political ways to become active and improve their quality of life than voting or contacting political elites. The findings in Croke et al. (2016) are silent about this possibilities. Also, the studies in this category ignore the non-personal motivations to become active in the society. The logic in Downs (1957) focuses exclusively on the personal utility of political activities and provides little explanations to such phenomenon as rich people become active in promoting redistributive policy.

Second, the upper left-hand panel of Figure 1 includes those studies focusing on the individually-motivated, non-political form of activities. Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2014) fall into this category. Their measurement of active citizenship focuses mostly on the educational activities, and not much on political activities[2]. Also, the Uwezo intervention (and their experiment) are designed specifically for improving the quality of education for the children (of respondents). This design

[2]They have few political activity measures regarding education, such as "approached officials" about education. However, no general political activity measures are offered.

assumes the personal motivation of the respondents to engage in the activities. Their null-finding on the effect of information thus speaks to those non-political, individually-motivated form of the active citizenship, but not others. For example, the general information about the quality of education may activate more socially-motivated form of active citizenship. Or, the information about how the politicians can influence the education and how people can contact the politician (or how to vote) may enhance the active citizenship through political channels. The specific context presented in Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2014) does not produce implications over those other types of possibilities.

Third, the bottom right-hand panel of Figure 1 includes studies on socially-motivated, political form of the active citizenship. The optional reading this week, Fowler and Kam (2007) specifically speaks to participations in this category. They argue that strong partisan identity and altruism, measured by the size of the offer in the dictator game, promote higher level of voting participation. Those individuals have an incentive to participate in voting for the society/group, in addition to for themselves. The participations discussed in McClendon and Riedl (2015) are related to this category, but the implications of their findings are not entirely clear. First, their measurement of participation – sending SMS regarding their policy preference – seems to have little connection to the improvement of personal utility, but the possibility is not zero. Second, their independent variable, self-affirming religious message, may impact the incentive for participation in at least two ways. For one, the message may increase the self-confidence in using political channels to improve the personal welfare. This logic is more closely related to the individually-based motivation in participation. For another, the message may increase self-confidence in realizing socially-desirable act and become a part of "good citizenly." This logic is more closely aligned with socially-based motivation in participation. While the finding of religious message affecting participation is impressive, more assessment is needed for the mechanisms. The current finding is silent about whether the religious message increases individually- or socially-based motivations to get involved in political activities.

Fourth, the bottom left-hand panel of Figure 1 includes the studies on socially-motivated, non-

political form of the active citizenship. While its central focus is not on participation, the conception of active citizenship in Tsai (2007) seems to follow the logic in this category. In the article, the author argues that the existence of informal institutions such as temples, churches, and lineage groups, increases the accountability of local elites to residents[3]. They suggest that those informal institutions help to build shared moral values between elites and residents and improved communications of the elite achievement to the residents. All the above logics assume the high level of local participation in the informal, non-political social groups, and the participating in those groups are incentivized by the norm of the community rather than personal utilities[4]. In other words, the active citizenship in the form of non-political, socially-motivated participation is the prerequisite for the mechanism of local accountability in Tsai (2007) to work. From this perspective, the argument in Tsai (2007) is important, because it explains the potential mechanism as to how the non-political and socially-motivated form of active citizenship produces the political and (possibly) personal-utility-increasing outcomes.

In sum, I argue that there are large variations in the conception of active citizenship discussed in the readings this week. I suggest the unified and comprehensive conception of active citizenship, which includes two dimensions: political and non-political form and individually-based and socially-based motivation. Then, I illustrate how this new conception provides deeper and more consistent insights to studies of active citizenship.

[3]I don't discuss too much about the empirical details here. In general, the data seem to be underpowered in fully testing the author's argument.

[4]This second part can be controversial. If local residents are participating in the informal institution with the expectation of personal returns or with the personal fear of social sanction, then this study may move up to the upper left-hand panel of Figure 1.

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