Discouragement or Encouragement?

– Contexts in the Role of Others' Participation –

Gento Kato[1]

[1]*Department of Political Science , University of California, Davis*

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Readings this week concern with the factors of political participations in non-voting contexts. To cope with the collective action problem (Olson 1965), each study suggests new factor that potentially explains individual's decisions to participate in costly political activities; from social esteem (**?**) to emotion (fear) (Young 2017). Three of assigned papers (Kuran 1991, Cantoni et al. 2017, Pearlman 2016) focus on the role of (predicted or observed) level of others' participation. It is seen both as encouragement (Kuran 1991, Pearlman 2016) and discouragement (Cantoni et al. 2017) to one's participation. In this critical review, I suggest the way to make sense of this seemingly contradicting implication, and introduces some contextual conditions that influences the applicability of different collective action models. Lastly, in light of the preceding discussion, I assess the evidence presented in the empirical studies this week.

To start with, in the classic rational choice model of collective action suggested by Olson (1965), other's participation is seen as the discouraging factor. It is argued that higher predicted level of participation leads to stronger incentive to *free-ride*, the non-participation with the aim to be benefited from public goods provision achieved by the participation of others. The finding made in Cantoni et al. (2017) provides the direct evidence to the above logic in the context of participation to annual pro-democracy demonstration at Hong Kong. On the other hand, Kuran (1991) introduces the very different model of collective participation, called threshold (or cascade) model[1]. In this model, the observed participation of others is considered as an encouraging fac-

[1]Very similar model of collective participation is suggested in Granovetter (1978), where the author uses riot as the

tor. As more of the others participate, one is more likely to participate due to reduced risk of being prosecuted (Kuran 1991, 18) and increase in emotions that morally incentivize participation (Pearlman 2016).

How can we make sense of the discrepancy between two collective action models? In the early conception of threshold model, Granovetter (1978) explain the central characteristics of his model as follows: "substantial heterogeneity of preferences and interdependence of decisions over time" (1435). Regarding the first element, the classic model of collective behavior often assumes the homogeneity in preference. More specifically, in his model, every actor in the society is expected to receive equal amount of benefit from their participation (if the purpose of the activity is achieved). All studies that disregard preference heterogeneity latently makes this assumption. In contrast, the threshold model explicitly states that preference heterogeneity matter. The chain of participation is initiated from those people who are more highly benefited from the purpose of the activity, and stops when there is a deep-enough dip in preference distribution. Regarding the second element, the dynamic interdependence of decisions, threshold model sees participation as a process rather than an one-shot event. The classic model often assumes simultaneous decision-making, but in the threshold model, an individual can make participatory decision *after* observing others' actions.

From the above discussion, the classic model is fitted more with the context of one-shot participation in the population with homogeneous preferences and the threshold model is fitted more with the context of dynamic participation in the population with heterogeneous preferences. In what follows, I assess the evidence presented in studies assigned this week in light of the above implications on context-model correspondence.

First, the research setting in Cantoni et al. (2017) is consistent with the classic model. They use relatively homogeneous sample of university students (who are motivated enough to respond to survey), and deal with the one-shot event of demonstration participation. However, the broader phenomenon of participation in Hong Kong pro-democracy movement is *not* an one-shot event, and preferences toward the movement in larger Hong Kong population is *not* homogeneous. In

context.

other words, the external validity of the finding is in question. For one, the dynamic process of pro-democracy movement with heterogeneous population, observing more people participating in one demonstration may lead to more rather than less participation in the next demonstration. The finding of Cantoni et al. (2017) has no implication over this possibility.

Second, the research settings in Kuran (1991) and Pearlman (2016) are consistent with the threshold model. They expect the pro-democracy preferences to have high variance in the society, where some people have quite high preference to take action, while others are (at least initially) weakly motivated. Their qualitative findings closely traces how the actions of more-strongly motivated individuals consequently influences the actions of more weakly motivated individuals. The weakness of their findings lies in the *post-hoc* nature of the explanations. For one, as Kuran (1991) admits that his model is making "[t]he prediction of unpredictability," the findings may not be useful in predicting the occurrence of next major-scale participation. For another, studies often look only at participants and ignore non-participants. For example, Pearlman (2016) shows how the participants in the Syrian pro-democracy movement in 2011 are inspired by early-risers. However, the evidence is silent about the action of non-participants who at least had some motivations to participate. Here, the scene of early risers being captured and tortured may discourage rather than discourage participation, by increasing fear toward the government. The selective sample of participate population may be biasing the findings.

Third, the research setting of Young (2017) is in between two models. More specifically, the contexts in conceptual background and the research setting are slightly inconsistent. Conceptually, she sees participation as a process (i.e., by wearing wristband, sharing jokes, or more generally, revealing pro-democratic preferences) and treats others' participation as an encouraging factor. On the other hand, the design of the experiment is aiming at the role of intrinsic emotion in one-shot participatory intentions (i.e., index of participation intentions) and event (i.e., taking wristband), and the perceptions others' participation is not dynamic: it is measured simultaneously as the participatory decisions. Also, her analytical model does not take preference heterogeneity into account. The above assessment suggests that the conceptual background the study is closer to the

threshold model, but the experimental setting is closer to the classic model.

This seeming discrepancy between the conceptual background and the experimental setting may affect the results in at least two ways. First, in terms of the behavior of others, it is unclear if the fear influences the participatory intention through pessimistic view towards future action of others, or by heightening the threshold for taking action. In the threshold model, people are taking actions based on observed participation of others rather than future expectations. In this sense, fear may lead to more conservative preferences that induces higher threshold for taking action. Under fear, Once many observed number of participants are no longer *many enough* for an individuals to be activated. Young (2017) has no measures to differentiate the above two logics. Second, the incorporation of preference heterogeneity may matter. It is not clear if the fear equally suppress the participation across individuals with different preferences. It might be the case that, for strongly committed, the fear reminds them the need for taking actions. In other words, the current mean based inference ignores the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effect.

In sum, I argue that the explanatory powers of two models of collective participation – the classic model and the threshold model – are contingent on the context of participation. In light of this argument, I reassessed the evidence on the role of *others' participation* presented in today's readings. Understanding the homogeneous/heterogeneous preferences and dynamic/one-shot nature of participation context would lead to the deeper understanding on the applicability of findings in each study.

References

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