DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AFFECTING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ARMENIA

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Introduction

Citizen empowerment has always been one of the most challenging foundations of any democratic state. Informed and educated citizens not only facilitate governmental operations by raising their collective needs and desires but also challenge the authorities requiring more accountable and transparent governance.

Since independence, the Armenian government has initiated a number of undertakings (list, which exactly), as well as legislative solutions aimed at creating and fostering citizen-government direct cooperation. The system of local self-governance has emerged due to 1995 RA Constitution provisions, 1995 Law on Administrative Territorial Division and was further strengthened by the 1996 Law on Self-Government, as well as by several other constitutional amendments. Next steps were made by the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 2002 and Utrecht Protocol in 2013. Both documents aimed to promote the administrative and financial independence of local communities, as well as create space for citizens’ direct involvement in the communities.

Despite the abovementioned steps, a number of issues are still present on the local level: financial dependency on the central government, non-transparent intergovernmental transactions, and consequent citizen disengagement. To address the issue of low participation rates of the Armenian population in the local governance, a huge number of intervening factors should be considered: starting from the demographic ones to the financial situation. It is of primary importance to find out the causes that either positively or negatively affect ordinary citizens’ participation in community affairs.
In the scope of this research the following factors were considered: age, gender, settlement, income, as well as trust level of the citizens. To understand the features of civic engagement in the Armenian context and to find out the segment of society that is interested in local governance, current study is aimed to analyze the survey of Armenian households conducted in 2015. The survey was conducted among approximately 1500 households which makes the results generalizable for the whole population of Armenia (CRRC Armenia 2015).

The paper starts with the review of scholarly studies in the field showing different patterns of participation in different states. Further, the bivariate analysis of relationship (s) between demographic, trust and income factors and participation tendency is presented in a way that illustrates the current situation in Armenia.

The main findings show that age and gender factors do no determine population’s inclination to participate in the community affairs. Meanwhile, people’s economic situation and trust have a positive influence on their decision to participate. Hence, those with higher income and trust are more eager to be engaged in the local governance. In addition, urban-rural separation does also matter. People living in rural settings are more inclined to take part in local affairs.
Literature Review

Scholarly interest in citizen participation has emerged with the growing urbanization patterns and people’s better access to information. The rural-urban migration influx has resulted in the resource management problems and consequently, population’s growing interest in being ‘a part of solution’ (Mapuva 2010, p. 7).

At its simplest definition, citizen participation assumes “citizen involvement in decision making pertaining to the management of public affairs and service delivery” (Langton 1978 cited in Aikins and Krane 2010, p. 89). The participation is determined by the cooperation needs between citizens and public officials, as well as certain mechanisms ensuring this cooperation (King, Feltey and Susel 1998). In addition, the precondition of citizen participation is illustrated in granting ordinary citizens with a decision making power that affects their own decisions/citizenship/life. Thus, participation requires not only listening to the public opinion but also creating mechanisms to ensure its proper implementation (Irland and Vincent 1974).

Importantly, Krause (1968) identifies the main stakeholders of citizen engagement. Those are:

- The whole community
- Special interest groups
- All the residents being a target population of a program or service

It should be mentioned that citizen participation consists of two main layers having formed as a result of technological as well as demographic changes. Thus, participation can be either traditional or internet-based. The first layer involves public hearings, community meetings, outreaches, forums. The second one assumes facilitation of the first, employing technological innovations such as online feedback, surveys, chat forums, etc. (Aikins and Krane 2010).
The bulk of Citizen Participation (CP) scholarship can be divided into two main groups depending on their perspective on the issue. The proponents of the idea assert that public involvement in the decision making is not only one of the fundamental tenets of democracy but also makes public policies more legitimate and realistic grounded in citizen preferences (Pierce, Lovrich and Matsuoka 1990; King and Stivers 1998). Furthermore, citizen participation brings more informed and educated citizens that are able to evaluate governmental projects. Thus, public political maturity eliminates the sense of powerlessness and isolation (Crenson 1974).

In juxtaposition, the opponents of CP claim that engaging citizens in the decision making is too costly, taking into consideration the wasted time on the procedures and uniformed decisions (Irland and Vincent 1974). In addition, a group of authors believe that governments stage citizen participation for just having them informed and making them approve the already made decisions (Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Smith and McDonough 2001; Julian et al. 1997). Last but not least, since people are concerned with their individual gains, the aggregate decision does not always provide benefits for the majority of the population (Crenson, 1974; Barber, 1984; deLeon and Denhardt, 2000).

Having considered the advantages and disadvantages of CP, it is also vital to concentrate on the participants and see what segment of the population is more concerned and interested in the decision making processes. In the scope of this research, the focus is on the demographic factors such as age, gender, settlement type, as well as income and trust levels of the interested citizens.

As for the age factor, it is noteworthy that scholarly works that have been conducted in the different parts of the world do not have principal contradictions. They assert that older people have higher tendency to participate in the town hall meetings, surveys, and discussions. It is
grounded in the fact that the older people are more experienced and educated in terms of public policies than their younger counterparts (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Conway 2000; Hansen and Rosenstone 1993). The idea is supported by Welch and others (2005), who conducted their research in the United States and found that older people happen to review governmental sources and reports more.

As for the second variable, there is not much focus on the relationship between gender and political participation among the scholars. In the scope of the sources I reviewed, the findings are different across the globe. Pierce, Lovrich, and Matsuoka (1990) conducted a comparative study in the US and Japan and found that unlike Japanese women, American female population is more engaged in the decision-making processes. As a matter of fact, not only lack of interest but also cultural features hinder women activism in local governance.

Another group of scholars argue that although statistically men are more active in the community affairs, the difference is very little (participating men/women-74%/71%). However, the more obvious factor is the income level of the participants. Disadvantaged men and women tend to be more ambitious in terms of active participation in the decision making process (Schlozman et al. 1995). On the contrary, a research done in the US showed a different pattern: women were more engaged in the local governance issues than men (Welch, Hinnant, and Moon 2005).

Thirdly, the income factor has also had some impact on people’s decision to participate or not in the political decision-making processes. The crux of the matter is that most people’s engagement in the local programs was motivated by the desire to raise their social-economic issues and get corresponding support in order to have more material possessions and opportunities. Thus, there was a clear negative correlation between family income and participation. Active citizens mostly
seek individual benefits and gains which are often translated into political demands (Krause 1968; Strange 1972; Vedlitz, Dyer, and Durand 1980; Mladenka 1977; Lehnen 1976; Crenson 1974; Aikins and Krane 2010). And because poorer people are mostly isolated and self-interested, it becomes difficult to coordinate and unite a group based on common premise (Crenson 1974). In contrast, a number of research findings show that tendency is changing and people with higher income are more prone to participate in community affairs. It is grounded in the fact that modern CP assumes access to information via state-of-the-art gadgets which are not affordable for everyone (Strange 1972). In addition, Welch et al. (2005) posit that income does not play a major role. It is those with better education and profound information that seek to have their own contribution in solving community problems.

Coming to the location factor, it is important to mention that participation and interest in local governance is highly dependent on the settlement type of the citizens. Since civic activism was initially linked to the bad economic conditions and the latter was mostly obvious in rural areas, people from those territories were more likely to participate (Strange 1972). However, other studies show that a well-organized, sustainable and institutionalized participation can happen only in the cities with larger population where per capita income is higher. The logic lies in the fact that the more resources are allocated to the citizen participation, the better and longer it will be. The latter is proved by the study conducted in the five north-central cities of United States (Aikins and Krane 2010; Halachmi and Holzer 2010).

Last but not least the factor measuring people’s trust towards the government does also matter. As Kim (2005) explains: “Trust can reconcile the tensions between accountability and flexibility by expanding citizens' willingness to accept government authority” (p 611). In other words, those people who think that their voice, complaint or suggestion will be taken into consideration by the
authorities are more likely to participate (Onibokun and Curry 1976; Welch, Hinnant, and Moon 2005; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Yates 1972). As an alternative point, scholars argue that people with lower trust in governmental transparency have more interest in participating and having access to more information. Thus it is believed that citizen input will make the governmental operations more efficient and effective (Halachmi and Holzer 2010; Citrin 1974; Zimmerman 1972).

Armed with the inferences drawn from the literature, it can be stated that influence of demographic and social factors do vary across the globe and their correlation with CP notion is not practically generalizable.

After reflecting on the CP situation in the world, it is also vital to focus on the national level. There are 915 communities in Armenia that are operating based on elections once in 4 year. Since 1996, a number of investments have been made to foster this sector for developing its capacities starting from introducing constitutional changes to granting financial opportunities. In recent years, the focus of the government, as well as various projects by international organizations is not only to ensure the smooth implementation of community affairs but also make it feasible for ordinary citizens to have some share in them. Additional, a process of uniting several communities into one entity is progressing (though with impediments). A survey conducted in 14 communities in Armenia by ERDSC (2014) reveals the following information: a huge portion (36%) of the respondents believes that local communities operate ineffectively and non-transparently, only 11% of people mentioned that they had ever participated in the community affairs. It is inevitable that low trust and disinterest define people’s disengagement in local governance.
Not much research has been done in local governance at national level. To fill the missing information gap, the current study intends to examine the major factors leading to citizen participation in local governance in Armenia. Analyzing survey results conducted among 1443 households in Armenia, data analysis will be delivered. The final results will contribute to the scholarly debate on the factors affecting CP.
Methodology

In the scope of the current study, the relationship between the demographic and participation variables was measured. In addition, income and trust factors were assessed to see their actual impact on citizen engagement. Thus, the research questions of the study were the following:

RQ1: Are older people more likely to participate in the local governance?

RQ2: Do males and females have the same participation patterns?

RQ3: Are people with lower income more likely to be engaged in citizen participation?

RQ4: Do people with higher trust in government have an upward tendency to participate in local governance?

RQ5: Are people living in urban settings more active in public participation?

With an eye to find out the actual pattern in Armenia, data of CEloG household survey of 2015 was used. To measure the correlation between variables, SPSS (19) quantitative data management tools were employed.

Operationalization of variables/Levels of measurement

**Independent variables:** age, gender, income level, settlement type of the respondents, as well as trust in local government

**Dependent variable:** citizen participation that presents the aggregation of the following sub-variables:
• Contacting the head of the community/the member of the local council/other local government official/ respondent’s member of the Parliament for a personal or a community problem in the past 6 months

• Participating in the meetings of local council/ budget hearings/discussions of policies and plans/media interview and programs about local problems in the past 6 months

• Voting in the last elections of the head of the community/ local council

• Monitoring of the community-level service provision
Results

The overall descriptive statistics represents 500 (34.7%) male and 943 (65.3%) female respondents of 18 and above years old.

It should be noted that all of the answers such as “don’t know”, “legal skip”, “not applicable” and alike were marked as missing and were not taken into consideration for the accuracy of the results.

In order to answer the first research question, Pearson correlation was used between age variable and overall participation. As it can be seen from the table below, there is a weak correlation (not statistically significant, p > .05) between the two variables. Thus, age does not define people’s inclination to participate in local governance affairs.

The second research question is related to the gender factor in participation. According to group statistics, at first glance the means are almost equal (male sample mean=0.03, female sample mean=0.01). As for the significance level, there is a statistically not significant difference in participation tendency depending on the gender (2-tailed sign=0.002, p<.01). Thus, males and females have almost the same participation rate.
Table 2

**Group Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>.0283</td>
<td>.16611</td>
<td>.00747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>.0077</td>
<td>.08723</td>
<td>.00289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Independent Samples Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>38.050</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>2.582</td>
<td>.100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third research question asks whether people with lower income are more likely to be engaged in local governance. Interestingly, there is a statistically significant positive correlation (p=.099) between living conditions and participation. Consequently, people with higher income are more interested in local governance.

Table 3

**Age- economic situation correlation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Your family’s economic situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>1408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your family’s economic situation</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.099**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>1402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As for the forth factor, the relationship between people’s trust in local government and their consequent participation is measured. As the test shows, there is again a statistically significant positive correlation between the variables. Thus, it can be stated that people for whom the local government is more trustworthy, are more inclined to participate in it.

Last but not least, citizens’ settlement type can also affect their activeness in community affairs. As data shows a statistically significant positive correlation is evident between the factors. As the higher values of settlement variable mean more rural settings, it can be inferred that people living outside Yerevan, particularly in rural communities, are more likely to participate in local affairs.
Discussion and Conclusion

It is evident from the abovementioned analysis that a very small segment of the Armenian society has eagerness to participate in local affairs. As ERDSC (2014) survey showed, only 11% of people mentioned that they had ever participated in the community affairs. However there are still important indicators that do motivate citizens to be ‘a part of solution’.

Coming back to the research questions of the current study, it can be stated:

1. The answer for the first research question is that there is no significant difference in participation rates determined by age. Thus, the scholarly statements that older people are more informed and interested in the community affairs cannot be proved for the Armenian case.

2. In response to the second research question it should be stated that men and women participate almost equally in local governance. There is no significant difference between two patterns. As stated in the literature, women disengagement is not merely a matter of their interest. A number of cultures directly limit women rights and consequently determine their low participation rate. In the Armenian context, especially young people have almost equal opportunities and rights independent of gender factor.

3. The answer for the third question is that people with better living conditions participate more. This can be grounded in the fact that people who are more concerned with their financial situation do not have motivation or interest to contribute to the community-level affairs.

4. For the forth factor, the answer is that trust has a positive influence on participation in local governance. Evidently, as already mentioned in the literature, those people who
believe that their decisions are not taken into consideration, would not waste their time on engaging in community discussions.

5. Lastly, the relationship between urban location and participation is negative. Rural people happen to be more active in community affairs. This can be explained with the fact that rural settings are smaller and almost everyone knows each other. Thus, it is easier for the population to keep in touch with the authorities and raise their concerns.

It can be concluded from the data above, that the most active portion of the Armenian society represents rural people with sufficient income and high trust in community. Moreover, age and gender do not determine the extent of people’s activeness. The participation assumes not only electing and contacting council members, but also participating in budget hearings, media interviews, as well as local policy discussions and protests.


