

Social Capital, Political Engagement and Vibrant Democracy: A Critical Examination of Linkage and Mechanism

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the linkage between social capital and effective democracy. Robert D. Putnam, in his study *'Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy'* asserted that a substantial stock of social capital affects the quality of democracy in terms of effective institutional performance. However, a group of critics, such as Carles Boix, Margaret Levi, and Sidney Tarrow, pointed out that Putnam did not delve into the linkage between social capital and effective democracy, and also did not explain the deep-rooted mechanism by which social capital leads to effective democracy. Thus, a research gap exists that needs to be addressed. Throughout this research paper, a mechanism is established that explains how this linkage between social capital and effective democracy works better. Social capital transforms its civic capacity into effective institutional performance by triggering a high level of political engagement in society. A substantial stock of social capital is a force that brings about politically engaged citizenry. Once citizenry is politically engaged, it transforms into power to ensure the quality of democracy. So, the argument is that social capital transforms its civic capacity into the political engagement of citizens, which, in turn, leads to effective institutional performance and makes democracy vibrant.

Keywords: Social Capital, Political Engagement, Institutional Performance, Vibrant Democracy, Robert D. Putnam.

Introduction

The democratic political system is practiced in many countries around the world. Democracy is generally assumed to be the best form of government and the best possible solution to most of the political problems. However, some democratic countries are more effective and responsive in terms of institutional performance than others. It means that some factors contribute to institutional success. 'Institutional success' means a vibrant representative democratic government, as suggested by Robert D. Putnam. Although the debate about the notion of institutional success is ancient, it is still a significant debate in contemporary political theory. The main concern is to study the relationship between social capital and vibrant democracy in terms of effective institutional performance. In this paper, I delve into the mechanism through which trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagements in turn transform into vibrant democracy.

Putnam, in his work *Making Democracy Work* (1993), examined the institutional performance (as a proxy for government's performance) of twenty newly established regional Italian governments that existed for over two decades 1970-1990. These twenty regions were divided in southern Italian regions and northern Italian regions. He found that the institutional performance in southern Italian regions and northern Italian regions was drastically different due to the differences in stock of civicness in both regions. The southern Italian regional governments were poor in institutional performance due to low level of civicness, whereas their northern counterparts were good in institutional performance due to high level of civicness. Putnam argued that civic life deeply affects institutional performance.

Putnam traced the disparity between contemporary civic path in northern Italy and uncivic path in southern Italy to two different times in 19th century and 11th century. He asserted that social context and history are two key factors that affect the development of high or low stock of social capital in a community. Once a certain form of social structure (civic or *uncivic*) is setup in a community, it goes on as equilibrium and is extremely hard to reverse. History is path dependent (Putnam 1993, 8).

According to Putnam, a community can be more or less civic. In a civic community, trust, collaboration and cooperation is found among its members. Public-spirited citizenry enjoys a high stock of social capital. Civic engagement, associations, horizontal ties, civic attitudes, virtuous

circles, social solidarity, political equality, and tolerance among the members are important constituents of civic community. On the other hand, less-civic community lacks trust, collaboration and cooperation among its members. People are isolated and work for personal interests. Defection and free riding are common. Civic engagements and associational life are at the lowest level. Vertical ties, exploitation, powerless citizens, social alienation, intolerance and vicious circles are the prominent constituents of a less civic community (Putnam 1993, 90-105; 2000, 125).

Since institutional performance is an ancient debate, various philosophers from antiquity to date have also explored these two factors of socio-cultural context and history separately to explain institutional performance. Socio-cultural approach rests upon social structure (social context) as an explanatory variable of institutional performance. Different philosophers counted different elements of social structure including morals, values, traditions, culture, sentiments, habits, and civic attitude as fundamental determinants for institutional success. The proponents of socio-cultural approach (Plato, Max Weber, Ibn Khaldun, Sidney Verba, Alexis de Tocqueville, Robert Putnam etc) assume that citizenry plays greatest role in attaining effective institutional performance through their active political participation.

On the other hand, the proponents of history as basic factor of explaining institutional performance (Niccolo Machiavelli, William A. Dunning, George H. Sabine, Robert Putnam etc) have emerged in history as distinct group than that of proponents of socio-cultural approach. Historical approach maintains that present environment is mainly affected and determined by the past environment. In short, the past helps in understanding what is happening in the present. Descriptions, autobiographies, profiles, and past events constitute the main components of history.

Social Capital and Institutional Performance

Robert Dahl, an American Political Scientist, argued that trust, tolerance and active participation contributes to democratic effectiveness and stability. He asserted that networks and social relationships play an important role in maintaining and building effective democratic institutions. He also demonstrated that interest groups and associations facilitate civic engagement, promote political participation and make elected officials accountable (Dahl 1971). However, Dahl did not explicitly use the term 'social capital' in his works. Later on, Dahl's

work greatly influenced the works of James Coleman and Robert Putnam.

John Dewey, an American philosopher, greatly emphasized the importance of cooperation, active participation, critical thinking, community engagement, decision making and collective problem solving by the public to ensure that the state serves the common good. He studied the relationship between the state and the public. He believed that education should play its role in preparing the citizens for active democratic participation. He asserted that strong communities with mutual cooperation and support are necessary for vibrant democracy (Dewey 1927). Dewey's work has also great influence on the works of James Coleman and Robert Putnam.

The concept of social capital was first formulated by Pierre Bourdieu. He presented three forms of capital, which are cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital. Cultural capital is simply what we have and what we know. Economic capital can be described as money and assets (that we can convert into money instantly). Social capital is to say who we know. It is built on social relationships (Bourdieu 1986, 242-252).

Similarly, James S. Coleman also worked on social capital. He presented three forms of social capital. He treated obligations as credit slips. Larger number of credit slips means high stock of social capital. Social capital also helps in spreading information that is required for social action. It is information substratum. Social relationships help in information sharing. Similarly, norms and effective sanctions guarantee safe living and protection in a society (Coleman 1990).

Nonetheless, Robert D. Putnam expanded the scope of social capital and made it a global debate. Putnam writes, "Social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam 1993, 171-176). Putnam categorized social capital into bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is formed when people from same identity, groups, and ethnicity come together and are tied up in form of networks, engagements and norms. Bridging social capital is formed when people from different identities, groups and communities come together and are tied up in networks, engagements and norms. According to Putnam, it is actually the bridging social capital that unites people from different communities and backgrounds for achieving common good (Putnam 2000, 21).

The elevation of the concept of social capital to a rudimentary factor of explaining institutional success makes it much easier to better understand that effective institutional performance is significant as it concerns citizens' lives. Putnam argued that social capital makes democracy work. That effective and responsive democratic government results into better schools, faster jobs, paved roads, lower crimes and faster economic development. Social capital leads to both political and economic growth. He supported this argument through the disparities he found in institutional performance and the amount of civicness in northern Italian regions and southern Italian regions.

In recent years, the concept of social capital is being applied in multiple fields. In economics, the concept of social capital is being used to explain economic outcomes such as economic growth, innovation and entrepreneurship; in sociology, the concept is being used to investigate education and social mobility outcomes; in political science, it is being used to explore the outcomes of social movements, voting behavior and civic engagement.

The concept of social capital can also play an important role in debunking the spectre of terrorism. Social capital, through its forms (trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement), can help in overcoming the three elements of terrorism which include politics, violence and ideology by enforcing the concepts of dialogue and cosmopolitan intellectuals to mitigate terrorism and to bring global peace (Malook 2018, 86-88).

The core question of this paper is to study the relationship between social capital and vibrant democracy, and the mechanism through which social capital transforms into vibrant democracy in terms of effective institutional performance. A linkage between social capital (trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagements) and vibrant democracy through the analysis of institutional performances of northern Italian regional governments and southern Italian regional governments has been asserted by Putnam.

However, the linkage between social capital and vibrant democracy has been criticized by different critics. Sidney Tarrow argued that the emergence of associations and guilds (networks of civic engagements) in northern Italy in different times during 11th century to 19th century might have been the result of some deliberate efforts of political parties (the exogenous group) for achieving some political goals (Tarrow 1996,

393-394). Like Tarrow, Viven Lowndes and David Wilson also criticized this linkage for same reason that the existence of associations and guilds does not entail that these associations and guilds are civic networks and be counted as a stock of social capital (Lowndes and Wilson 2001, 629).

Such criticism seems to be too narrow and not right at the point. This has been noticed through the historical analysis of northern Italy as pointed out by Putnam that due to the impact of ancient guilds, associations emerged during different periods. Choral societies and mutual aid clubs emerged in 20th century in northern Italy and all together left the same impact of bringing horizontal ties in society and promoting collaboration, cooperation and social connectedness among citizens. This must be result of their inherent civic capacity rather than some exogenous factor. Moreover, the case was vice versa in southern Italy. So far, such guilds, associations, choral societies and mutual aid clubs etc were found absent there. Hence, hierarchical ties were established in the society, and collaboration and cooperation among citizens were not recorded. Such hierarchical social context in southern Italy strengthens the view of inherent civic capacity of civic organizations (Nisa 2023, 191).

Margaret Levi also criticized this linkage. She argued that the linkage between social capital and institutional performance is not plausible. It does not explain how micro-level associations transform into civic engagements that further lead to effective institutional performance and eventually make democracy vibrant (Levi 1996, 46). Here, Levi first points out that how do micro-level associations transform into networks of civic engagements? Secondly, how do networks of civic engagements produce effective institutional performance?

Levi's first question is almost similar to the criticism presented by Tarrow, Lowndes and Wilson. Whereas, Putnam's analysis of civic engagements suggests that only those guilds, associations, and groups are counted as civic engagements which are producing horizontal ties in socio-political structure to positively affect institutional performance. All those associations and groups involved in establishing hierarchical socio-political structure negatively affect institutional performance and hence are not counted as civic-engagements. The consequence is to say that micro-level associations incorporating horizontal ties are inherently civic in terms of their capacity (Nisa 2023, 191-193).

The second question is concerned with the relationship between civic engagements and effective institutional performance. This question seeks some serious attention. Carles Boix and Daniel N. Posner present four models that may help in explaining relationship between civic engagements and effective institutional performance. Model-One suggests that civic engagements lead to effective institutional performance by encouraging citizens to effectively participate in political-social affairs. Model-Two suggests that high stock of social capital results in improvement in performance of bureaucracy. Model-Three suggests that civic-engagements increase civic virtues of citizens. Model-Four suggests that social capital helps in reducing antagonism and conflict among political representatives.

This four-model-mechanism enables social capital to have an impact on institutional performance (Boix and Posner 1996, 4-10). This explanation of relationship between civic-engagements and effective institutional performance seems scattered. These models are reducing the impact side of social capital into its mechanism (input side). Moreover, both the criticism and the solution are restricted to explaining only civic engagements (micro-level associations) that are one of the features of social capital. It is better to consider broader term civic-organizations (all features of social capital) instead of civic-engagements in order to explain its linkage to effective institutional performance.

Putnam's analysis moves around two variables of social capital and effective institutional performance. It seems justified here to put all attention to find out a clear explanation of linkage between these two factors. That is to say that the linkage between social capital and political capital needs some deeper explanation which is missing in Putnam's work. Putnam did not explain the mechanism by which features of civic organization like associations, guilds, choral societies, mutual aid clubs, and cooperatives transform their civic capacity into effective institutional performance. Putnam asserted in his study that social capital helps in overcoming collective action dilemmas. Collective action dilemmas are referred to the problems that are faced by the citizens collectively.

The issues like safer society, cleaner environment, cleanliness, street crime, low voter turnout, and resource depletion etc are the instances of collective action dilemmas. Societies lack these public goods because these can be produced by some and used by all. So, because of high

probability of free riding and defection in producing these public goods, collective action dilemmas emerge. Because social capital ensures collaboration and cooperation, this is why a high-level of social capital helps in resolving collective action dilemmas that in turn lead to effective institutional performance (Nisa 2021, 25-26). According to Putnam, “membership in horizontally ordered groups (like sports clubs, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, cultural associations, and voluntary unions) should be positively associated with good government” (Putnam 1993, 167).

Social Capital, Political Engagement and Institutional Performance

The resolution of collective action dilemmas with the help of social capital as argued by Putnam may be considered as a hint to the mechanism by which features of civic organization transform their civic capacity to effective institutional performance but it may not be the whole story. Putnam did not delve into the explanation of whole mechanism. Social capital transforms its civic capacity into effective institutional performance by triggering a high level of political engagement in the society. A substantial stock of social capital is a force that brings about politically engaged citizenry. Once citizenry is politically engaged, it transforms into power to ensure the quality of democracy. So, it can be said that social capital transforms its civic capacity into political engagement of citizens that in turn leads to effective institutional performance and makes democracy vibrant.

The political engagement is a broader term that refers to increased political awareness of citizens and their active participation in the political processes (voting, policy making and decision-making regarding problems faced by citizens through influencing), and policy implementation regarding demands postulated by citizens.

Political engagement is a complex process that begins from exchange of political information among citizens and then transforms into a greater concern for voting, policy making and decision-making regarding problems being faced by citizens. Lastly it ensures the policy implementation regarding demands postulated by citizens. Such that political engagement includes all activities of citizens from political awareness to voting and policy making, and then to ensuring policy implementation, therefore we can see variety of representations of political engagement in the society i.e. voting, joining political debates for common good, debates on problems faced by citizens, academic researches on issues, associations with political parties, connections to

government institutions, peaceful protests and strikes for issues, and implementations on the demands of citizens.

However, the traditional view of the concept of political engagement (which has been used as political participation) was narrow, and gradually evolved. Initially the term was used for the involvement of citizens in electoral process only (Brady 1999, 738). The term was confined to the participation of private citizens in voting and approval of political policies made by their representatives. Verba et al. stated, “by political participation we refer to those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978, 46).

Recent definitions of the term have some broader meaning and include all activities of citizens that may influence political outcome (Teorell, Torcal, and Montero 2007,336). Parry et al. stated about political participation, “actions by citizens which aimed at influencing decisions which are, in most cases, ultimately taken by public representatives and officials” (Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992, 16). The term political engagement has been used in this paper instead of political participation for its broader meaning. Political participation of citizens in political processes like voting, policy making and policy implementation are considered as the feature of the broader concept of political engagement.

The role of social capital in transforming its civic capacity into political engagement that in turn leads to effective institutional performance also needs to be explored. Here, once again, we need to peep deeper into Putnam’s analysis of social capital. Putnam asserted that a high level of social capital ensures that a community is civic and horizontal social context has been established in that community. On the other hand, if a community has minimum or no stock of social capital, it follows that community is *uncivic* and settled on hierarchical social context. So, these are horizontal and hierarchical social contexts that respectively bring and diminish political engagement in a community.

The members in civic community are bounded all together through different associations and groups (like mutual aid societies). The impact of these features of civic organization in community is deep and wider. On social front, it brings honesty, trust and law abidingness and tolerance among people. The people in civic community cooperate with each other, show social connectedness and express public spiritedness.

On political front, it brings horizontal ties. The political leaders and their followers are equal. Their relationship is that of equal respect. Political leaders are answerable to their followers. Political leaders are enthusiastic to support political equality. The politics in a civic community is thus programmatic than that of clientalistic.

On the other hand, in a less or *uncivic* community, opposite comes true. In a less or *uncivic* community, social capital is at minimum level. The impact of which is that, on social front, people exploit one another, work for self interest and do not show social connectedness. They do not abide by laws, and have zero or low tolerance. Rather, they create chaos in community. Political life in less or *uncivic* community is settled on hierarchical ties. Patron-client relationship exists between leaders and followers. The politics in a less or *uncivic* community is thus clientalistic than that of programmatic (Putnam 1993, 112-114).

In this scenario, horizontal social context in a civic community that is comprised of honesty, trust, law abidingness, tolerance, social-connectedness, public-spirited citizenry and political equality works as potential force to bring about a high level of political engagement that in turn leads to effective institutional performance and ensures a vibrant democracy. Norms of reciprocity, trust, civic engagements and associations bring about social connectedness, public spirit, collaboration and cooperation among citizens. These engagements and associations actually provide platforms to people to exchange public and political information and make them prepared to participate in socio-political debates, voting and policy making processes and policy implementations.

On the other hand, in less or *uncivic* community, hierarchical social context comprised of exploitation, self-interest, lawlessness, intolerance, political inequality and clientalism due to low stock of social capital, causes low level of political engagement that leads to ineffective institutional performance and keeps the democracy bad. In less or *uncivic* community, always-defect becomes a norm. People never cooperate and always defect. Lowest level of civic engagements, associations and social-connectedness is found. Citizens are isolated and frustrated. They have no platforms to exchange public and political information, and to get ready for active political participation in policy making and implementations. Voter turnout is also low in such communities. This leads to poor institutional performance and bad democracy (Putnam1993, 115).

The Concept of Democracy

Democratic government is one in which majority of the people rule. According to Abraham Lincoln, democracy is "a government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people" (Lincoln 1984, 184). It is also known as the rule by the majority of the people. Democracy stands on its principles. It is not only a conjecture of set of institutions but also comprised of attitudes, behaviors, values, practices and engagements. Democracies are vibrant and effective in terms of their institutional performance where the principles of democracy are established firmly and practiced in true letter and spirit and vice versa. Main principles of democracy are power sharing, free and fair election, rule of law, accountability and transparency, responsiveness of government, political equality and human rights.

Social Capital, Effective Institutional Performance and Vibrant Democracy

Putnam asserted that social capital brings collaboration, cooperation and social connectedness in community that produce results such as paved roads, better health care system, faster economic growth, better schools, cleaner environment, lower crime, safer society-all which lead to effective and responsive government and make democracy vibrant. According to Putnam, features of civic organization affect democracy in two ways. Trust, norms of reciprocity and civic engagements (guilds, associations, groups) affect large polity externally (to make citizens able to raise voices and save them from political exploitation) and participants internally (to make them cooperative, be public spirited and skillful) (Putnam 1993, 177-178).

Apparently, the linkage between social capital and institutional performance does not seem to fully explain the mechanism by which features of civic organization transform their civic capacity into effective institutional performance. A deeper scrutiny of the Putnam's analysis presented in this research suggests the mechanism through which social capital transforms its civic capacity into vibrant democracy. It is asserted in this research that social capital transforms its civic capacity into effective institutional performance by triggering a high level of political engagement in society. The term political engagement has been used in broader meaning that is comprised of increased political awareness of citizens and their active participation in the political processes (voting, policy making and decision making regarding problems faced by citizens through influencing) and in policy

implementation regarding demands postulated by the citizens. Political engagement is a complex process.

From exchange of political information to voting, joining political debates for common good, debates on problems faced by citizens, academic researches on issues, associations with political parties, connections to government institutions and peaceful protests and strikes for issues and implementations on the demands of citizens are the clear instances of political engagement brought about by social capital. It is only politically engaged citizenry that can ensure the quality of democracy and make it stand firmly on its principles. So, it can be said that social capital transforms its civic capacity into political engagement of citizens that in turn leads to effective institutional performance and makes democracy vibrant.

Conclusion

Robert D. Putnam while evaluating the twenty Italian regional governments found a strong correlation between social capital and institutional performance. He argued that this strong correlation was due to social context and historical developments that took place in the past. However, many philosophers (like Charles Boix, Margaret Levi) criticized these findings on the ground that the mechanism through which social capital leads to institutional performance was not clear and not explained in detail by Putnam. They argued that it was important to explain the mechanism because without explaining the mechanism it was difficult to authenticate, acknowledge and approve the findings. Thus, this linkage needed some deeper explanation to explain the mechanism by which social capital produces political capital and effective institutional performance.

In this paper, a critical examination of the linkage between social capital and institutional performance has been conducted and the mechanism through which social capital produces political capital has been established. It is found through critical analysis that social capital transforms its civic capacity into a high level of political engagement that further leads to institutional performance and makes democracy vibrant. This explanation of the mechanism is important because it helps in understanding the relationship between social capital and institutional performance.

If we look back from antiquity to modern and then contemporary ages, a large group of political philosophers including Plato, Ibn Khaldun,

Machiavelli, Rousseau, Edmund Burke, John Stuart Mill, Tocqueville, Almond and Verba have embraced the view that the active participation of citizens and the quality of citizenry are rudimentary factors to explain the institutional success and effective government. But it has never been found so exactly why citizens fail to make their government effective. Putnam's discovery of social capital as a broader concept and its linkage to vibrant democracy is a great achievement in the field of political thought and other academia. Citizens' political engagement is rudimentary in making democracy vibrant but can only be established through features of civic organizations or social capital.

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