



PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL INTEREST GROUPS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Political interest groups (PIGs) are formed by people having common goals and working their way to make their goals a realization. These groups play a crucial role in influencing the minds of the youth in their outlook about various societal issues. As a way for the youth to be able to participate, these groups found a way to organize political interest group chapters within universities. The organization allow university students to be able to actively participate in conducted activities within their campuses. This study investigated the different political interest groups which are existing in the universities within Cebu City, Philippines. The study also endeavored to examine the different reasons why students are willing participate in these so-called political interest groups and the factors that drive them in joining, how these institutional chapters are recognized and monitored by their respective universities. The findings revealed that students who participated in political interest groups find them interesting and beneficial serving as primary channel to voice their opinions regarding crucial and current societal issues. Also, the universities give them permits to conduct fora and seminars inside the campus. Many students confirm that joining political interest groups bring them more benefits, hone their political interests. Finally, joining political interest groups foster and deepen university students' social development, broaden their political horizons and bring about positive social change while nurturing students' rational choices.

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1. Introduction

University students, especially those who already reached the voting age, desire that their voices be heard in the political arena within their political environment. Political interest groups are organized by tertiary students, mostly pursuing University level studies, which serves as apolitical vanguard in the promulgation, enactment and implementation of laws and policies. Some university students who are more politically inclined are likely to participate in different political interest groups which meet their political aspirations.

In the Philippines, it is common for different political interest groups to penetrate the universities and recruit prospective students to join their cluster. The renewed interest of students in activism has captured the young minds of university students (Ivester, 2013). Institutional political interest groups engage themselves beyond the political arena so they can exist with or without politically inclined activities. They only become politically dynamic when defending their interests in the societal political system, policy and decision making (Evangelio and Abocejo, 2015).

Modern student activism is initiated by those who have the confidence and possess the ability to make a change within their jurisdiction (Chung, 2009). These political interest groups acquire the commitment of the young citizens to engage themselves in green politics, global politics, modern politics and even local politics (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). Nonetheless, many students compensate the democratic system of their universities by way of forming political interest groups and getting involved in student activism (Rosas, 2010). Meanwhile, the concern of universities includes “*student activism*” as institutionalized by the different political interest groups where potential source of disrespect and egotism can be inappropriate and unfit for their age (McQueen, 2011).

Student activism channeled through political interest groups in universities help enhance the potential of students of becoming student leaders (Chung, 2000). This is a window for student leadership to be nurtured and be a stepping stone for students towards political leadership in the near future (Ivester, 2013). This study desires to shed light the positive and negative sides of political interest groups in the perspective of student activism.

There is a need to understand the fundamental dynamics of institution-based political interest groups and how they influence the current university students. This study basically focused on students’ insights and the factors which drive them to join political interest groups. In essence, the study hopes to provide a momentum in the conduct of further related researches which could help universities, and the community as well, on how to handle and proactively guide the young generation of university students who participate in political interest groups.

1.1 Study objectives

This study determined the different existing political interest groups participated in by university undergraduate students who are studying in the universities of Cebu City, Cebu province, Philippines. This study assessed the reasons of participating and the benefits (or drawbacks) of participating. The study also evaluated how the universities recognize and monitor the different political interest groups existing and operating within their academic institutions of higher learning.

2. Literature Review

Political interest groups are usually composed of people, often university level students, who work together under a registered or non-registered organization which advocates common shared interests (Allern and Bale, 2012). They play a crucial role as they represent individuals, students' interests, and even the general public, before the government (Petracca, 2018). They act to inform the public, policy makers and political leaders about pressing issues that concern that welfare of members or of certain groups (Flöthe, 2020), monitor and evaluate government activities and programs, provide critical assessment or promote policies beneficial to their interests and that of the general public (Berry, 2015).

An interest group is best described as a pluralism, an idealized system where individual members organize freely and none of the groups could dominate (Burstein, 2002). The premise of "*organization*" and the political interest groups drives participation in state affairs. A political interest group is organized but distinct from the government (Esser and Matthes, 2013), implying that students who involved themselves in political interest groups are completely free from their own viewpoints and ideas.

This study notes that political interest groups are a minority movement with limited political sphere. Political interest groups are less viewed as one of the stream actors in politics and policy making (Constant, 2002). However, after the EDSA Revolution in 1986 in Manila, Philippines, the number of organized interest groups have been rising (Schock, 1999).

Universities and higher learning institutions have varied forms of their education delivery, advocacies and policies (Lewis, 2014). As students enrolled in an institution, they look forward to finding groups and organizations that suit with their interests and personalities. Students also expect from the universities they enrolled in the right environment supportive to their pursuit of knowledge and social groups integration. There are various student organizations which offer students varied and dynamics activities which try to recruit budding leaders to join academic related organizations, including politically inclined societies and interest groups (Chung, 2009).

Students make their own efforts and try to make a change in their institutions even without permission from the superiors or from the administration (Page, 2010). They do what they think is right for them and make justice for the mislead action of school administration. Student activists are always reprimanded by school authorities which often restrict other students not to participate in campus political activism (Davis, 2017).

Most individuals who participate in political groups and engage in political activities, in view of certain personal motivation, decide to engage themselves when the benefits outweigh the costs (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). Flaucher (2015) revealed that that lower-income university students without many resources have more interests to join, not only they choose to participate, but also they join in large number than of well-off peers.

Interest groups are also called advocacy groups for their wide-ranging advocacy platforms to influence for public opinion or policy (Holyoke, 2013). As groups, they began to be more active and engage in the processes and development of societal issues and dynamics, especially in politics (Maisel and Berry, 2010), international affairs (Yeneza and Abocejo, 2012; Abocejo, 2014), community issues (Abocejo and Gubalane, 2013; Dela Serna, Ferrer and Abocejo, 2017; Vivar, Salvador and Abocejo, 2015; Arnado, Gogo and Abocejo (2017), and public affairs (Andaya and Abocejo, 2019; Alvarez, Ong and Abocejo, 2017; Inabangan, Garcia and Abocejo, 2019; Pañares and Abocejo, 2019).

There are dynamics on the role of interest groups in society with limited or not so large members yet influential. Some interest groups have long term plans on social purposes, and some are immediate actors in response to an issue or concern (Evangelió and Abocejo, 2015). These groups have various methods in achieving their goals, carry out political or administrative lobbying, media campaigns, publicity stunts, briefing policies, research and even polls (Galston, 2001). Some are supported by businesses which are powerful and politically influential (Cinco and Abocejo, 2020), while others have a few for resources. The eagerness and aggressiveness of some interest groups paved the way to social, and political stance, even giving rise to social movements (Johansson, Scaramuzzino and Wennerhag, 2019).

2.1 Theoretical and conceptual framework

The study anchored its framework on the Rational Choice Theory advocated by Riker in 1962 which argues that an individual behavior is motivated by utility maximization, self-interest, or more simply a goal for fulfillment (Riker, 1995). Theorists of rational choice attempted to explain the social outcomes as a reference to individual behavior of micro-level analysis, as a model of individual behavior that the presumption that people chooses a course of action that fits with their preferences (Bevir, 2010). Riker (1995) was the rational theory founder, which he applied game-theoretic and economic approaches to expound the complex of mathematical models in politics.

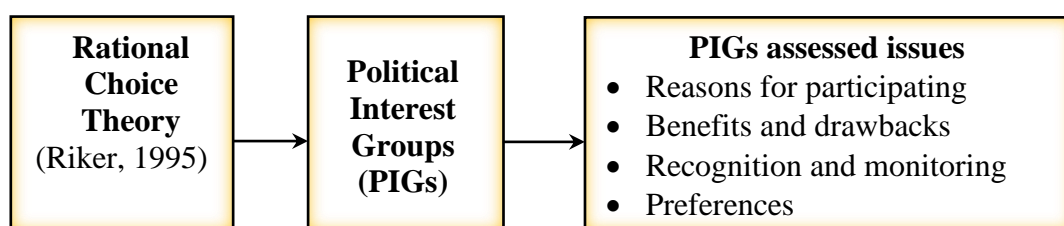


Figure 1: Theoretical and conceptual framework of the study

The arguments put forward by the rational choice theory were seen as the appropriate contentions that explain the underpinnings of the present study towards the political interest groups. The issues assessed in the study focused on the reasons for participating in the political interest groups, the derived benefits and drawbacks, how they get recognized and monitored by the concerned higher education institutions and the preferences of the students about joining such political interest groups.

3. Research Methodology

This study was carried out employing a descriptive survey research design where primary data were generated through survey questionnaires as the principal research instrument. The questionnaires contained questions soliciting answer for the stated specific study objectives.

The study considered all the six universities in Cebu City. However, in the actual conduct, the researchers found out that only University of the Philippines-Cebu and Cebu Normal University have accredited Political Interest Groups, where the study was finally implemented.

The respondents were randomly selected students within the qualified universities. The students who were considered as target respondents were those who active members of political interest group on campus regardless of enrolled degree programs and department they belonged to. More than 50 students qualified, but only 50 gave their consent to be respondents.

Before the study implementation, written permission was sought from the respective University President. Upon approval, identification of target respondents was carried out based on certain inclusion criteria. Voluntary involvement of identified research respondents was observed where through a duly signed informed consent. It was made clear to the respondents that they could back out anytime they want, and their participation was of their own free will. The purpose of the study was clearly explained. It was ensured that all research respondents were not, in any way, harmed during the conduct of the study. The generated data were dealt with utmost confidentiality and were used only for the study.

The survey research was used in the study consisted of two questionnaires. The first questionnaire had six (6) parts. Part 1 asked for active political interest groups present and duly recognized in the qualified universities. Part 2 asked why they decided to join the political interest groups, the reasons and factors behind why students are interested in joining. Part 3 solicited answers about the benefits and drawbacks to capture the advantages and disadvantages. Part 4 asked for the activities initiated by their political interest groups within the university and the community to uncover how they concretely engaged in extra-curricular activities. Part 5 asked for how their political interest groups are recognized by their respective universities, the requirements they had to accomplish before being fully accredited. The last part asked on how they are monitored by their universities as a whole and individually, how their group adviser looks after them. The second questionnaire contained the profile of the students with

respect to date of birth, gender, enrolled degree program, occupation, educational attainment and earnings of parents. The last part contained the semantic differential questions soliciting the negated and affirmative reasons in joining political interest groups.

The researchers prepared a letter request which was personally handed to the Office of Student Affairs in the universities under study. Upon approval, the researchers implemented the survey with a duly signed informed consent by the student respondents who were members of accredited political interest groups. They were also briefed about the study, and with their free will they can backout anytime of the survey. The generated data were dealt with utmost confidentiality and were only used analysis and discussions.

Descriptive analyses were carried out to substantially discuss the results with provided interpretations and implications. Discussion of findings were sequenced and presented based on the study stated objectives. Conclusion were drawn based on the study derived study findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Accredited political interest groups per university

One limitation of this study is that, during the preliminary survey, only two universities accredited political interest groups within their institutions; namely, the Cebu Normal University (CNU) and University of the Philippines Cebu (UPC). Moreover, there were few accredited political interest groups in these universities. There were a number of existing political interest groups within the two university campuses but were not institutionally accredited. They were allowed to exist on grounds that it is their right to get involved in organizations, but they could conduct institutional activities with the campus.

In CNU, the only accredited political interest group is the "*Anakbayan*", although this group has not yet fully accomplished all the requirements to be submitted but the university already considers this group as accredited. It was still on the process of accreditation, at the time of the study, making it new in the university. This political interest group has already been established outside the university and has organized an institution-based chapter in CNU. Its organizers are working their way in completing the requirements where they are nearly fully accredited.

The UPC has two accredited interest groups namely the NKE ("*Nagkahiutang Kusog sa mga Estudyante*") and the UPS (Union of Progressive Students). These political interest groups are fully accredited by the university and fully operate throughout their campus. These two also serve as the political parties during their university's SSC Elections. Both groups are active through the years during elections. They are also the channels of the students in pursuing their interests within UPC. These two political interest groups have umbrella organizations outside the UPC campus.

4.2 Reasons for participating

Among the reasons cited by the students, the respondents all affirmed that they join in the political interest groups because they see these groups as avenues to voice out their opinions regarding certain issues in the university in particular and in the government in general. Political interest groups have long served as legal organizations where students enjoy the freedom to engage and connect with other students regarding their opinions. They also confirmed that political interest groups are able to meet other students who share the same ideas and sentiments. In so doing, they make their way easier since they form part a large group young people working for the same goals and objectives.

On the positive note, the accrediting university are supportive in the different activities that they conduct within the campus with the assistance of their Advisers who are connected with the university. Students do not feel downgraded in joining political interest groups and their respective universities also give them the chance to implemented activities that help them voice out their views and ideas in the right venue and forum.

University students believe that joining these kind of political interest groups is very convenient where they could participate in activities that concern certain issues, at the local, regional and national levels. Although some of them think that joining these groups is a bit time consuming but somehow, they are satisfied with what they want to express, they are listened to, and they are able to see changes for the better of their student lives and the society around them. Although not all of their concerns are being addressed but they are all able to voice out what they think is right channeled through these political interest groups.

4.3 Benefits and drawbacks

The respondents affirmed to have found no drawback nor disadvantage in joining political interest groups, although they said it to be little time demanding like attending meetings, fora, activates and other gatherings. They still do not consider these as drawbacks because they say that as long as students have the commitment to engage such required activities then they are free to do as members of political interest groups.

On the other hand, students consider political interest groups as beneficial involvement. Foremost, political interest groups serve as channels to voice out their opinions. They are able to meet new friends, more people and gain connections. Most of the members consider political interest groups as helpful towards their future life careers, when they become managers and leaders (Ricablanca and Abocejo, 2020) in their own right. Political interest groups also serve as breeding ground for future leaders commencing from the leaders in universities where most of the people running for elections come from political interest groups. Students are convinced that if political interest groups offer none of such benefits, they would not be interested to join and participate. Such that, event during their university years, many young people are exposed and already know the dynamics of the Philippine electoral system (Abocejo, 2015)

4.4 How the universities recognize and monitor the political interest groups

Political interest groups are recognized in the campus by allowing them to conduct to conduct institutional based activities as long as they ask for legal permit. These include seminars, fora, campus rallies as long as they have the right permits. They say that their universities are not that strict when it comes to the activities that they organize, one factor is they say is that because CNU and UP-Cebu are government run universities. The students are not strictly monitored by their institutions, as long as they comply with the necessary requirements for accreditation. In this respect, they feel more welcome and free in these universities.

One vital factor in joining these political interest groups is by knowing from which field discipline are the member students. Majority of those joining enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Political Science program comprising more than one third (34 percent) of the entire respondents. As political science major, many students were inclined towards politics and were more politically active even at young age since they study politics and political dynamics in their degree program curriculum. They are more aware of what is happening locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally regarding important issues in public policy, politics and local governance. They are more cognitively and socially involved in the issues of the government. They are convinced that joining political interest groups help them to be formed and be informed about societal and government issues.

By age, majority of student members were about nineteen (19) years of age or around third year level of their university studies. At this age level, students are normally on the stage of maturity where they tend to think and act independently for themselves and for the society they belong to. They affirm that they already know what they want in life, and the direction that the government from the local to the national levels must act and do for its citizens. In the Philippine context, the legal age starts at 18 but basically at the height of maturity this age is not yet considered as a maturity stage for the youth, a year older would be better for them to be considered already mature and independent.

There are several variables positively predicting the influence of students in joining political interest groups and one of them is the educational attainment and occupation of both parents (Rosas, 2010). Students who reportedly have high socio-political influence scores come from the family whose parents are both university graduates and those coming from average-earning families. In the role of shaping the students' minds, family has a lot to do with influencing the decisions made by the young people. Basically, the family is one of the determining factors in the behavior of the youth because this is the initial environment that comprises their being persons. Among the many socio-political factors considered in this study are students' family background which are said to influence them a lot.

Female students are more influenced in their involvement to activism more than the males on the humanitarian outcome (Persson, 2012). This explains the result of the survey that the females dominated the males by more than half. Out of the 50 students, 34 of them were females and only 16 were males. Arguably, it does not tell that males

have lesser influence than their female counterpart, with respect to political interest groups participation.

On the wider sphere, the figure below shows that respondents average responses on the questions given to them in semantic differential form.

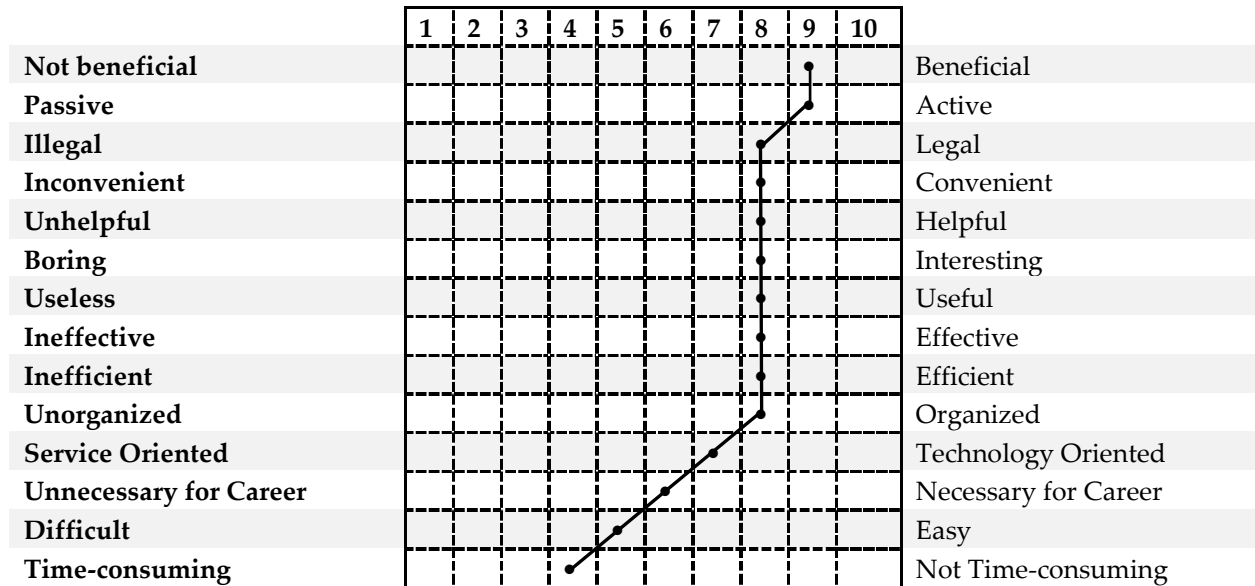


Figure 2: Preferential ratings of students about joining political interest groups

Clearly, the students' outlooks in joining political interest groups are positive (Figure 2). They have always regarded these groups as motivating factors rather than distractions. In the figure above, majority treated joining political interest groups beneficial to them as students. Although not that necessary for their future careers but they affirmed that these groups are helpful and useful. Most of them think that joining political interest groups is very interesting since these organizations are very service oriented. Many respondents affirmed that political interest groups are positive motivators for the youth today. Those who joined political interest groups, majority of them believe that these organizations are helpful to them as students. They have always considered joining these groups as very efficient and useful for they are convinced of benefits from their participation as they confront different societal issues.

5. Conclusions

Political interest groups in universities serve as the primary channel of students to voice out their opinions concerning the different societal issues nowadays, even fewer universities in Cebu City accredit institutional chapters within their campuses. Students consider joining political interest groups to boost their confidence in facing people embedded in societal structures. As institutions, universities and higher learning institutions are in strategic positions to foster youth social development and political maturity if given the right opportunities to engage in proactive political groups geared towards positive social change.

Joining the right political interest groups provides inclusive benefits which open windows of opportunities and nurture dedication and commitment. Members who are considered effective devote more of their time engaging with the various productive political activities. Finally, this study affirms the argument of the Rational Choice Theory advocated by Ricker in essence that university students join political interest groups to maximize benefits, optimize productive time and gainfully engage in politically inclined activities which bring them fulfillment, sense of pride, becoming productive and proactive students.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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