The Quality of Social Capital and Political Participation in South Korea

Aie-Rie Lee

Previous research claims that associational membership produces social capital. Employing the first wave of the Asian Barometer Survey conducted in 2003, this study investigates the development of social capital and its political consequences in South Korea. Rather than study simple association membership, I examine the quality of civil society (defined as associational commitment and interaction) that individuals pursue through membership. This, I believe, provides a close test of the theoretical impact of social interactions on political participation. The findings indicate that there is a positive association between voluntary activity and two modes of political activity (voting and campaign participation) in different ways and to varying degrees. Associational membership is a significant predictor of voting. In the case of the quality of social capital, associational interaction (talking politics with group members) turns out to be significant in encouraging participation in election campaigns. Overall, my findings on the role of social capital support Putnam’s argument that group interactions foster democratic participation.

KEYWORDS: social capital, civil society, political participation, formal versus informal organizations, South Korea

Ever since the publication of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s The Civic Culture, associational involvement has been considered relevant for the analysis of citizens’ political behavior and attitudes (Almond and Verba 1963). Members of any type of association, even if nonpolitical, are believed to display higher rates of political competence and participation than average citizens. Yet, it was Robert Putnam who introduced associational involvement as one of the main indicators of the existence of social capital. Nevertheless, Putnam does not specify whether involvement in all kinds of community groups has...
an impact on political participation or whether participation in only certain kinds of community groups causes political participation.

Clearly, all group membership cannot be equally effective in its relative capacity to create social capital. Rather, the internally democratic character of civil society itself should affect the degree to which it can socialize participants into democratic—or undemocratic—forms of behavior. It is thus quite plausible that some civic organizations may not have political consequences. Many, in fact, may have little to do with politics on a day-to-day basis. To take advantage of the benefit of social capital, membership alone is not enough; the principles involved in social capital must be practiced.

Empirical evidence on the benefits of social capital in democratic development in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) is inconclusive or limited. On the one hand, Russell Dalton found an overall positive impact of group activity, albeit with cross-national variation, in shaping citizens’ values and behaviors across six Asian nations (Dalton 2006). However, his analysis includes no controls for values or attitudinal determinants that may influence the social capital–democratic participation linkage, primarily relying on bivariate correlations between group membership and such other correlates as social trust, political engagement, and democratic values. An additional test is warranted to see if the bivariate relationships between social capital and several indicators of democratic attitudes and behaviors remain significant after possibly confounding factors are taken into consideration.

On the other hand, later studies (e.g., Lee and Glasure 2007) employing multiple waves of the World Values Surveys conclude that in Korea social capital plays a minor role in political participation (or at least their measure of it) once a host of other theoretically important variables are taken into account. Moreover, the impact of social capital is shown for only protest participation or support for democracy out of numerous available indicators of political participation. Thus, it is unclear if the impact of social capital on political participation persists using alternative measures of participation.

Why is it then that people who join organizations are not more involved in political participation than those who do not? This raises intriguing questions. One plausible explanation would attend the membership question. Most, if not all, analysts tend to favor the formal organizations of individuals because they are easier to study, but they may also be less relevant to social capital insofar as they tend to be more bureaucratic and formal and involve their members only rarely or marginally on a daily basis. Informal associations, in contrast, are loose-knit,
informally organized, weak-obligation groups, but they may also have a stronger impact on the attitudes and behavior of those who participate.²

It is thus possible that social capital in Korea is not exclusively developed by formal organizations as Putnam hypothesizes. What matters most may not be intermediary civic engagement, but daily interpersonal communications among participants, who interact in less-organized intermediate or informal groups (such as after-hours co-worker groups, study/training groups, and hobby circles). Such groups help increase social capital, which in turn plays an important role in facilitating democratic support and participation. Kenichi Ikeda’s assessment of the Japanese Election and Democracy Study (JEDS) 2000 survey, for instance, unequivocally demonstrates that not only is politically relevant social capital in Japan generated in personal networks (e.g., daily conversation within interpersonal environments), but it is also a by-product of political conversation in one’s networks. Increasing levels of politically relevant social capital enhances the likelihood that a citizen will be engaged in politics. This aspect of associations has not been investigated thoroughly.³

In this study, I take an empirically grounded first step toward tracing the impact of social capital on the levels and modes of political participation. Social capital may be fostered by a variety of formal and informal interactions between members of society, although the full range of social interactions is not observable. Therefore, my research first examines the effects of different types of associations on a range of indicators related to social capital—whether one form of association (e.g., formal vs. informal) can have similar consequences for political skills as others (Krishna 2002; Seligson 1999). In addition, this study explores if the quality of social group interactions as understood in terms of group commitment (measured by participation in group meetings or activities) or interaction (measured by political discussion) matters more in facilitating democratic participation than mere membership.

Korea is a good laboratory for testing and refining propositions on social capital and political participation. Korea successfully accomplished its transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in the late 1980s and has now become one of the leading nascent democracies in Asia. Undoubtedly, the socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Korea have altered the social structure of the country as well as the size and resources of its major voluntary organizations, which may have facilitated—if not directly caused—democratic transitions and, to a larger extent, also helped determine the dynamics of posttransitional politics in democratic consolidation. Scholars like Sunhyuk Kim go even further and argue that it was civil society groups that initiated and directed the
process of democratization (Kim 2004). Students, intellectuals, church groups, workers, and women’s groups, among others, helped establish the rising strength of opposition forces in the 1980s (Kim 2000; Diamond 1994). Clearly, these secondary organizations would help define the nature of ongoing democratic consolidation as well.

Aggregate levels of group membership and activity were especially visible in the democratic transition in the late 1980s and grew stronger along with the mass movement for democratization. The number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) soared to 60,000 (third-sector organizations) in Korea in the 1990s. Korea today apparently has an active civil society. There is little doubt that the growth of civil society plays a pivotal role in consolidating democracy. Yet there has not been much effort to support and demonstrate such a claim empirically in Asian countries in general and Korea in particular (Alagappa 2004). Because Korea is a new democracy, it becomes even more crucial to examine the quality of civil society as reflected in the strength of its civic associations.

The article unfolds as follows. I begin with a brief review of the literature that focuses primarily on the nature of the social capital–building process. I then empirically investigate characteristics and causal determinants of social interactions: formal, informal, or both. Finally, I evaluate the influence of associational life on mass political behavior. My particular research interest lies in addressing how well simple associational membership and associational commitment and interaction are conducive to two modes of political action: voting and campaign participation.

**Previous Research**

One of the most compelling streams in the literature on democratization is a rediscovery of civil society and the role of social capital. Basing their research largely on participant observation in small voluntary groups, scholars are charting the bases for collective political action, particularly how citizens choose to identify themselves and organize for political action in response to state repression. The civil society paradigm finds that groups organize along lines that express new and old horizontal solidarities. These include grassroots religious organizations, trade unions, business associations, environmental organizations, student groups, women’s groups, neighborhood associations, and indigenous groups. The theoretical framework looks primarily to the self-organization of political space through associational life as the answer to the puzzle of building and sustaining democracy.
Putnam, a pioneer in this endeavor, claims to have found a direct positive association between civic participation and the quality of democracy (Putnam 1993a). In a comparison of Italy’s northern regional governments with those of the south, Putnam attributes the greater success of the northern governments to the quality of their civil society as reflected in a more vibrant associational life, which demonstrates greater social capital. Essentially he argues that “a dense network of secondary associations both embodies and contributes to effective social collaboration” (Putnam 1993a, 90).

Contemporary focus on civil society relies in part on the social capital argument. While little agreement exists on types and dimensions of social capital (e.g., Foley and Edwards 1997; Edwards and Foley 1997, 2001, 1–16; Van Deth 2003; Newton 1997), Putnam defines it as “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1995b, 664–665). In this vein, social capital is a social resource that facilitates action and exists to varying degrees in social relations of all sorts.

Following scholarly work on civil society, social capital may be understood and defined in terms of (1) norms and values (i.e., trust and reciprocity), (2) networks (i.e., civic organizations), or (3) consequences, in the form of voluntarily produced collective facilities and resources (e.g., charitable goods and services). In light of its multiple meanings, this study adopts a definition that posits social capital as social networks of individuals, groups, and associations as the crucial component of social capital, because any ability to mobilize a wide range of personal social contact is crucial to the effective functioning of social and political life.

Why is social capital important for democracy? Putnam (1993a) argues that social capital is important because it enhances the ability of democratic institutions to work. How? Putnam goes on to assert that participation in voluntary associations generates social capital by supporting norms of reciprocity and civic engagement, building social trust, and providing networks of social relations that can be mobilized for civic action (Putnam 1993a, 1993b, 1995a, 1995b, 2000). In short, Putnam emphasizes the importance of voluntary associations and social engagement as training grounds for democracy.

Nevertheless, one cannot assume that social capital is everywhere. Likewise, it is unrealistic to assume that access to social capital is evenly distributed throughout a society. Access to social capital depends, in part, on the social location of the specific individuals or groups at-
tempting to appropriate it in much the same way that other forms of capital are differentially available. Geographic and social isolation can constrain the structural availability of social capital, as can the lack of financial resources—resources needed, for example, to go online and link into a national social movement or other imagined community.

Equally, increased educational attainment, for instance, generally enables one to experience more diverse social relations and gain access to wider networks of weak ties, thereby increasing one’s access to a specific and important form of social capital. Accordingly, Putnam (1995b, 667) presents data showing that education is by far the strongest correlate of both trust and organizational membership.

According to Putnam, the concept of social trust captures a main component of the social capital–democracy linkage: a strengthened civil society will supply the link (trust) in the chain of democratic development by translating associational involvement into trust of others and, most importantly, into trust of strangers. According to Kenneth Newton, social networks and social trust, although closely related, should be kept conceptually separate, for two reasons. First, whereas norms and values are subjective and intangible, social networks and organizations are objective and observable. Second, if we are to understand the nature of social capital, it is important to keep the norms and networks approaches theoretically distinct (Newton 1997). According to Putnam, “People who join are people who trust . . . the causation flows mainly joining to trusting” (Putnam 1995b, 666). If the theory of social capital holds true, we would expect to find a statistically consistent relationship between social capital and social trust even after other factors are taken into account: associational membership increases social trust. It is therefore important to look more closely at the causal chain between associational membership, generalized trust, and democratic participation stressed by Putnam and others.4

To recap, in this article I examine patterns of social capital in Korea. I inquire into whether the ongoing changes in Korea’s civil society are related to changes in associational life. My research asks whether these societal changes are affecting how individuals are socially connected, what kind of social group ties they have, and whether new forms of social capital are developing in Korea. I also examine attitudes toward political participation as a possible consequence of these trends. In the next section, I conduct an empirical test of the social capital–political participation linkage, together with standard demographic explanations and other likely influences, to determine what explains variation in political participation in Korea.
Data and Method

The empirical part of this project is based on the first wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) conducted in 2003. The ABS gave me the means to test my hypotheses: besides containing the appropriate measures, it poses questions on such topics as social relations, membership, two forms of social interaction (formal and informal), social trust, and political involvement. If the social capital hypothesis holds, one would expect to find the impact of social capital (associational membership, associational commitment, group interaction) on prodemocratic orientations statistically significant even after other factors are adjusted for. What is less clear though is which measure of social capital (membership only or the nature of associational activity) determines political participation (measured as voting or campaign participation).

Independent Variable: Social Capital

While scholars generally agree that simple network involvement does not automatically increase social capital, there is considerable debate on whether membership in any social group is sufficient to promote social capital. I start with two measures of social capital characteristics: membership only and member activity (commitment and interaction). Following the lead of Putnam, I conceptualize social capital as commonly understood in terms of associational engagement that is a proxy measure for the existence of social capital stocks. However, my objective goes further to capture the nature of the group environment and display the quality of social interactions. The links generated by social interactions may be formal or informal in nature. The ABS offers, although to a limited extent, a resource to compare associational interactions across two types of associations.

The ABS asked respondents (1) whether they were a member of any organizations or formal groups (e.g., political parties, trade associations, PTA); and (2) whether they were a member of any private groups, circles, or regular gatherings (e.g., circles of friends who exchange information, share common hobbies, and the like). Each of these two measures is dichotomous, given that the most important distinction is that between those who join groups and those who do not.

It should be noted that membership in either type of group does not necessarily imply that all members are actively participating in group activities. The frequency and quality of participation in group meetings or activities can indeed tell us more about what Putnam calls associa-
tional density. Fortunately, the ABS includes items that tap the quality of social engagement: commitment and interaction. If respondents answered “yes” to either (1) or (2), or to both, then the follow-up questions asked them (1) how frequently they participated in meetings and activities (commitment); and (2) how often they discussed politics (interaction). This enabled me to examine membership in both formal and informal organizations, and with respect to both to ask about the frequency of participation and whether it involved political communication. In sum, I could investigate two separate analytic dimensions here that may or may not covary: formal/informal participation; and more intense/less intense commitment/communication.

What is being tested here is (1) whether—and if so, how—group activity follows a single pattern in Korea; (2) whether participation in formal associations is more likely to lead to higher rates of political participation than participation in informal ones. While my research interest lies in addressing how well each type of group resource, formal and informal, is conducive to political participation, the measurement of the two types of associational membership is not as full as I would have liked. Moreover, due to the large number of missing cases (non-membership in this instance), I had to combine two types of voluntary activity in the multivariate analysis. Note that a high percentage of Korean people do not belong to formal organizations at all (91.2 percent), and less than half belong to informal groups (42.2 percent). To increase the sample size, a group “member” throughout the study, unless otherwise specified, refers to a respondent who is a member of formal (3.6 percent), informal (42 percent), or both (5.2 percent) groups. For a test of the quality of social interactions, the first hypothesis (group commitment) would be: the greater the involvement in organizational activities, the greater the generalized activity in politics. With regard to the “interaction” hypothesis, the expectation would be that higher levels of political discussion within groups would lead to higher rates of political participation.

Dependent Variables: Political Participation

Obviously, participation is highly unequal. Political participation is more common in some groups than in others, which in turn causes the former participants to have a stronger impact on the political process. A wealth of research concludes that social capital encourages political participation (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman,
and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000, 2002). I limit my analysis to conventional participation, following previous work. I explore political participation with two measures: voting and campaign participation. Campaign activity obviously is a significant mode of action, for through it citizens can increase their influence over the election outcome beyond the one vote allocated to each citizen. Furthermore, greater initiative is required of citizens to participate in campaign activity than to simply vote; campaign activity is clearly a more difficult political act than mere voting.

**Voting (VOTE).** The measure of voting is relatively straightforward. The ABS asked the following question:

Q. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were away from home, they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. How about you? Did you vote in the elections [the most recent national election, parliamentary or presidential] held in [year]?

**Campaign participation (CP).** The question for the second dependent variable is: “Thinking about the national election in [year], did you try to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party?” Yes was coded “1” and no was coded “0” for a dichotomous measure of both dependent variables: 82.3 percent of respondents said they voted in the last election and 16 percent tried to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party

**Control Variables**

The existence of social capital has important implications for a number of key democratic norms and activities (Dalton 2007; Kittilson and Dalton 2008; Howard and Gilbert 2008; Uslaner 1998). Several control variables were created on the basis of survey questions. Note that I do not formulate extensive theory or estimate additional causal models for the relationship between social capital and these control factors, because I am interested in them only to eliminate spurious effects.

**Social trust.** Research frequently focuses on social trust—a belief that people in general can be relied upon—as an indicator of a potential byproduct of patterns of social capital formation. Ronald Inglehart (1997)
and Putnam (2002), for example, emphasize that trust in others is a key element in developing a civic culture. Distinguishing, what is called, “thin trust” (built by generalized mutual reciprocity) from “thick trust” (which derives from personal experiences), Putnam goes further to argue that thin trust is the core of social capital, because it nurtures newly formed networks and chances of new associations beyond daily friendship (Putnam 2000, chap. 8). The ABS contains a standard survey question tapping trust in others.

Psychological involvement (PI). Like some forms of human capital, psychological involvement in politics is used as a control variable to test the hypotheses. Studies have long demonstrated that participation in nonpolitical organizations stimulates political involvement and interests (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Uhlane 1989; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Both formal and informal activities of the association impart an understanding of political issues. Associations also open up possibilities for political participation by cultivating among their members the “organizational communications skills that are relevant for politics and thus can facilitate direct political activity” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). After all, social engagements in the Putnam context are training grounds for democracy. The PI scale is composed of two items on the respondent’s level of interest in politics and frequency of following news about politics. The PI variable is coded so that for each item higher numbers indicate greater involvement.

Government trust. Several studies also show that a lack of social capital, because it produces mistrust in government, becomes an incentive for political conflict (Putnam 1993a, 1993b, 1995b; Della Porta 2000; DiFranco and Gitelman 1984; Flanagan and Richardson 1980; Sigelman and Feldman 1983; White 1981). Trust in public officials and institutions is part of the complex of attitudes and behaviors that constitute social capital. Here, the measure of government trust taps the respondents’ degree of trust in eight political institutions: parliament, the national government, civil service, the courts, political parties, the police, the armed forces, and local government.

Demographic variables. Previous work finds that individual resources, especially socioeconomic status, affect participation, both social and political. In testing differential access to social capital (a measure of one’s social location), a total of five demographic characteristics are considered control variables. These are gender, age, education, family income, and residence.
In sum, I look at the effect of the intensity of associational membership, controlling both for demographic and other attitudinal factors.

Findings

Who Are Group Members?

Before turning to the findings, it must first be asked whether group members are distinct in social background from nongroup members, since this could bias results. Following previous work on participation inequality, the expectation is that individuals of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be involved in organizations. Table 1 reports the results of a descriptive analysis that examines what types of citizens join, or do not join, associations. The answer found is mixed. As Table 1 demonstrates, the sizes of the lambdas and t-values indicate that there are few significant differences in group membership between selected groups. In general, group joiners are men; respondents in their thirties with some high school education; respondents in the middle class; and respondents who reside in urban areas, though the difference is not as great as expected. A significant difference between group members and nonmembers comes from education: the average score for members (6.96) is significantly higher, based on the t-test, than that for nonmembers (6.72) on a 1–10 scale. However, women and respondents in their twenties were, as expected, more likely to be nonjoiners, with the former approaching statistical significance.

A closer examination indicates a number of additional features. First, men tend to outnumber women in their dual membership in both formal and informal groups, the ratio being 2.5:1. Membership levels are also higher for those in their thirties, fifties, and older with some college education; respondents in the upper middle class belonged to both types of groups. Second, with respect to types of membership, respondents in their forties and older with some college education and in the upper middle class are more likely to belong to formal organizations, whereas respondents in their late thirties with a high school education and in the lower middle class tend to join informal groups, though the differences are not approaching statistical significance. In short, it is safe to say that participatory inequality does exist in associational membership (members vs. nonmembers), albeit weak, across sociodemographic categories, but not in member type (formal vs. informal), which indicates that individual resources, especially socioeconomic status, do not affect associational interactions across two types of associations.
Table 1  Demographic Attributes and Type of Group Members and Nonmembers (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Members N = 762 (54%)</th>
<th>Nonmembers N = 738 (47%)</th>
<th>Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M/NM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>.10* (lambda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>.00 (lambda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(762)</td>
<td>(738)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F/IF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 and over</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>1.42 (t-value)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(762)</td>
<td>(738)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>2.43* (t-value)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(762)</td>
<td>(738)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower middle</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper middle</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>-.40 (t-value)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(617)</td>
<td>(588)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>.01 (lambda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>.00 (lambda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(631)</td>
<td>(588)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For a more meaningful and simpler presentation, Age, Education, and Income were collapsed into four categories to eliminate categories with few cases. For the nominal level variables (Gender and Residence), lambdas are reported, as lambdas tend to estimate the strength of the association based on chi-square approximation. For ordinal or interval variables, a t-test was performed using the original categories of each variable: Age (2–12), Education (1–10), Income (1–7). M, NM, F, IF denote member, nonmember, formal, informal. *p < .05

Do Associations Matter?

If group members differ only slightly from nonmembers in their sociodemographic attributes, is it also more likely to observe similar consequences for other political norms and activities? If not, it might not per-
haps be possible to rule out a reasoning that their orientational splits are
due in part to the socialization impact of associations on cultivating dem-
ocratic attitudes and activities. Do associational members and nonmem-
bers differ in their orientations? This question was tested by computing
the average scores for the two groups separately for each orientation cat-
egory. The fact that nonparticipants are more likely to be apathetic leads
one to expect that nonmembers would also be more negative, pessimistic,
or inactive toward some orientations when compared to their member
counterparts. Consequently, it should follow that nonmembers are less
politically involved and less trustful of people or political institutions.

Table 2 presents the mean opinion scores for the five orientation
scales for the total sample, group members, and nonmembers. Reported
also are the significance levels as established by a two-tailed difference-
of-means test between members and nonmembers. On the five orientation
scales, as shown in the table, members of associations score above the
total sample mean in all of them. Note also that members and nonmem-
bers exhibited significant differences at the .05 level in their opinions on
four items (VOTE, CP, PI, and Trust). Those who joined either or both
type of associations, compared to their nonmember counterparts, were
more likely (1) to participate in electoral activities via voting or persuad-
ing others to vote; (2) to show interest in politics and follow news about
politics; and (3) to consider that most people can be trusted. The theory
that group participation presumably may nurture a feeling of trust in gov-
ernment institutions is not born out. Apparently to place a high level of
trust in ordinary people is one thing, but to place the same level of trust in
government institutions is another, at least in Korea. The correlation be-
tween Government trust and Trust is rather weak ($r = .16$).

An interesting pattern is uncovered in group types: formal versus
informal. A few items passed the difference-of-means tests. Formal
group members had higher scores on three items (VOTE, CP, PI); for-
mal members compared with their informal counterparts were signifi-
cantly more likely to participate in election-related activities (voting
and campaign participation) and to show higher levels of political en-
gagement. In the case of member activity, while informal group mem-
bers tended to participate more often in group activities, their formal
counterparts did more talking with associational colleagues about pol-
itics, although the differences are not statistically significant. Note that
the practice of counting only relationships significant at the .05 level or
below is a conservative one, given the smaller sample sizes of mem-
bers, especially in the formal associations. In summary, despite no sig-
nificant difference found in Government trust, one can conclude with
Table 2 Impact of Associational Membership and Type on Selected Orientations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political participation</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Nonmember</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting (VOTE)</td>
<td>8.59</td>
<td>9.01</td>
<td>8.15</td>
<td>9.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign participation (CP)</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological involvement (PI)</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>7.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government trust</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: VOTE, CP: 1 = not participate, 10 = participate; Government trust: 1 = not at all trust, 10 = a great deal of trust; PI: 1 = low involvement, 10 = high involvement; Trust: 1 = careful, 2 = trust; Commitment, Interaction: 1 = never, 5 = very often. M, NM, F, IF denote member, nonmember, formal, informal. *p < .05
confidence that members do differ from nonmembers in some significant political orientations.

**Political Implications of Social Capital**

For present purposes, the most important empirical test is to explore the connections, if any, between social capital and political participation. Specifically, the test is to see whether the quality of group participation, as opposed to membership only, is more likely to lead to participation in political activities. To some extent, participation differences between members and nonmembers might be spurious—that is, the consequences of underlying factors, such as individual resources. For instance, because citizens have a higher level of education, they are better equipped to participate politically—although no direct causal relation exists between social capital and participation.

Multiple measures of several concepts introduced in Table 2 are used to estimate separate models of two dependent variables (voting and campaign participation) for each of the two membership characteristics, with Model 1 explaining variation in the percentage of Membership-only respondents who participated, and with Model 2 explaining variation in the percentage of the Member activity sample that participated in the political acts, the latter thereby testing the quality of membership among the Members subgroup. A particular emphasis of this section will be given to an investigation of the relative effects of two models (one with simple membership, the other with the quality of membership) on political participation. Variables included in the equations are Membership, Member activity (Commitment and Interaction), PI, Government trust, Trust and two demographic characteristics (age and gender). For the respondent’s attributes, age is only included in the analysis for two reasons: (1) only three variables (age, education, gender) are significantly related with either of the two dependent variables; (2) redundancy (and possibly multicollinearity) is avoided in the information in predictor variables with a high level of correlation between age and education ($r = -.63$).

To maintain the parallelism of the predictors regressed on each of these two dependent variables, excluded is the other dependent variable from the logistic regressions on both dependent variables. Table 3 presents estimates for these four logistic regression models of political participation. Since the dependent variables are dichotomous, logistic regression is used to estimate the models. In the models, the significant coefficients of all the control variables are in the expected direction. Reported are
unstandardized coefficients (b) for all variables as well as standardized errors for the variables with \( p < .05\). Also reported in the table are bivariate correlation coefficients. Multivariate analysis is used to verify the patterns that emerged in the bivariate analysis.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the results in Table 3. First, turning to the results of associational interactions, it is clear that social capital encourages political participation in different ways and to varying degrees. In the case of voting, simple Membership is a significant predictor after the effects of other controls enter the picture. It does, however, surprise us to see that neither Commitment nor Interaction has a significant effect on voting (see Model 2). The original assumption was that either political communication with associational fellows or frequent participation in group activities was more likely to generate political participation—voting in this case. For whatever reason, it appears that in Korea, talking politics with group members or participating in group meetings is one thing, and participation in elections is another.

In the case of campaign participation shown in the right panel of Table 3, however, the coefficients clearly show that while Membership is not significant with respect to campaign participation, political discussion within groups turns out to be important in stimulating people to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party, all else being equal. Given the fact that, unlike the vote, campaign participation is a relatively difficult act that is likely to depend on individual motivation and resources, it makes sense that people who do have resources (having political conversations with associational colleagues in this case) are engaging in “more” campaign activity (persuading others to vote). By contrast, the coefficient for Commitment is negative but not approaching statistical significance, suggesting that greater participation in associations may not be enough to boost campaign participation. In short, the results indicate that associational membership has an effect on voting but not on efforts at political persuasion. Note also that the quality of interaction among the Members subgroup does not affect propensity to vote, but political communication does enhance the likelihood of engaging in persuasion.

Second, the Government trust variable completely drops out from all four equations, all else being equal. Thus, more widespread trust in institutions does not appear to stimulate higher levels of political participation (nor does it discourage it). Counter to my hypothesis, the results suggest that Government trust does not influence electoral participation, at least not in Korea. Interestingly, though, a high level of Trust
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voting</th>
<th></th>
<th>Campaign Participation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>.63*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>involvement</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government trust</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.57*</td>
<td>.55*</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender: male</td>
<td>-.44*</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 1,463 750 1,499 758
Pseudo R² .157 .115 .074 .091

* Significant at < .05; S.E. = standard errors
in ordinary people promotes voting, but not campaign participation, even after controlling for either Membership or Member activity.

Third, in the case of PI, the coefficients clearly show that citizens’ levels of psychological involvement dominate all other attitudinal variables, even when controlling for confounding factors. Moreover, the impact of PI remains remarkably stable over all the models included in the study. As a wealth of research unequivocally contests, psychological involvement in politics is a key ingredient in promoting conventional participation in this study as well.

Finally, turning to the results of the respondent’s attributes, interesting patterns emerge. In the voting equation, regardless of the model, the respondents’ resources, especially age, match the theoretical predictions as suggested by previous studies: older respondents are more active in voting even after controlling for either Membership or Member activity. It is also abundantly clear from the table that age is far from being significant in stimulating a more difficult political act, campaign participation. It is equally interesting to note that gender now turns out to be a significant predictor in the voting model (Model 1). Although men and women did not differ much in terms of participation in campaign participation (see an insignificant zero-order effect on campaign participation), the politicization deficit among women reversed once the effects of Membership only are taken into account. Finally, it should be noticed that the fit of the model is noticeably better in Voting, with $r^2$ ranging from a low of 7 percent to 16 percent of the explained variance.

**Conclusion**

This article finds its theoretical basis in the process of changing civil society and its relationship to democratic attitudes and behaviors among the mass public in Korea. Because my interest has focused on one dimension of civil society, social capital, I have demonstrated in this article some of the consequences of the development of social capital. This is in accordance with previous studies in the social capital literature regarding the emphasis placed by associational interactions on democracy. One might debate, and rightly so, the causal direction of this relationship (the building of social capital may itself be facilitated by the circumstances conducive to democracy), but the present analyses focus on the impact of social capital on political participation.
Empirically, the specific purposes of this article were threefold. First, I wanted to identify the sources of the formation of social capital. Second, I wanted to examine, if plausible, patterns of social capital in terms of associational connectedness and two types of associations. Third, I have elaborated and tested the role social capital played in contributing to political participation. Seen from a different perspective, the research intended to show that simply examining membership status may be easier and more readily available for many aggregate or survey data, but in many cases it will miss the property of social capital formation that was of prime interest.

This inquiry into the connection between associational activity and democratic norms and behaviors supportive of social capital has found that associational members are significantly different from nonmembers across the broad range of indicators of social capital that were examined. This relationship between associational membership and indicators of social capital holds up across two types of association—informal and formal—in three out of five orientation scales (see Table 2). Simply put, both associations generate social capital–promoting interactions between their members, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Several additional conclusions can be derived from the findings. First, simple associational membership displays a significant effect on voting. This effect is not an artifact of other factors, and it does not depend on other mass attitudes. In the case of campaign participation, however, Interaction (political discussion with fellow members) remains significant even after demographic and other key attitudinal variables are introduced into the regression equations, whereas simple Membership and Commitment (the degree of member participation in organizational meetings or activities) are not. Certainly, it might be expected that people who engage in political communication with associational members are more likely to try political persuasion; although the results showed this to be true, the correlation was only modest ($r = .18$).

Although I found some support for my hypothesis, it does not mean that the study was without fault. First, my model focused on rather broad associational categories: formal versus informal. This is a limitation because this distinction may prove ineffective in investigating more specific aspects of association and social capital formation. Consequently, knowledge of why measures of social capital such as thick versus thin, inward-looking versus outward-looking, and bridging versus broadening help determine one’s level and mode of political participation remains insufficient.10 Second, due to data limitations, it was
not possible to deal directly with the question of whether formal associations resulted in significant differences in political participation compared to informal ones once confounding factors are taken into consideration. Given the inconclusive/mixed social capital–political participation linkage uncovered in this study, I would therefore have to agree with Doh Shin (1999): face-to-face friendship or fraternal associations in Korea may promote little of the social capital necessary for political development. Third, the effects of associational interactions in predicting political participation can better be determined by a longitudinal study. Are civil society groups in Korea beginning to closely approximate the neo-Tocquevillian framework as Kim (2004) claims? I would conclude that the jury is still out on the long-term impact of social capital on the effective functioning of democracy in Korea.


### Notes

1. The six nations are Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, China, and Vietnam.
2. For more about the distinction between two types of groups and the importance of the distinction, see Newton (1997).
3. Of the total respondents to the survey, 26 percent were affiliated with these informal groups. See Ikeda (2002).
4. Newton also clearly acknowledges an endogeneity issue, so it is difficult to see how social networks can be created unless there is trust to start with. Perhaps we may never completely unravel such chicken-and-egg problems, but it does not help the attempt to confuse possible causes and possible effects in the same definition. See Newton (1997).
5. The data used in this study are part of the Asian Barometer Survey study, which is available at http://www.asianbarometer.org. The ABS bears no responsibility for my analysis and interpretations.
6. I define informal organizations as socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. Thus, informal organizations are self-enforcing organizations, in that
they constitute members of a community’s mutual best response to one another. Fewer than 4 percent of the total respondents to the survey are affiliated with formal groups, 42 percent with informal, and 5.2 percent with both types.

7. The ABS also includes a question that taps experiences in campaign participation: “Did you attend a campaign meeting or rally?” Unfortunately, I was unable to use this item. An overwhelming number of respondents (over 90 percent) said “no.”

8. The wording of the ABS question is: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with them?”

9. Age is chosen because it seems to be predicting our dependent variables better than education. The correlation between education and voting is -.11; between education and campaign participation, it is .03, the latter being insignificant. However, I further tested both models with education. Similar patterns, except Model 2 for Voting, emerge where the education variable turns out to be insignificant.

10. For more on the distinction of types of associations, see Putnam (2002), and Van Deth (2003).

References


The Quality of Social Capital in South Korea


