Challenging conventional (political) wisdom: revaluing democratic participation and representation

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Challenging conventional (political) wisdom: revaluing democratic participation and representation


Conventional wisdom, or “the generally accepted belief, opinion, judgment, or prediction about a particular matter” (“Conventional wisdom,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online), is one shortcut to understanding social phenomena. While the term implies commonplace knowledge, it can also be extended to broadly cover prevailing theories and perspectives in any academic discipline. Perhaps with only a modicum of exaggeration, it is akin to Kuhn’s normal science (Kuhn 1962): What are considered conventional wisdom in the political science discipline, for instance, enjoy some level of consensus and become the basis for current research and problem-solving efforts. Given the pluralism aspired to in the discipline (Stoker and Marsh 2010), however, one would hope that the increasing demand for the generation of falsifiable hypotheses is not so much to hunt for anomalies in theoretical offerings, as it is to refine theories toward the better understanding of political behavior. After all, contrary to Kuhn’s rather rigid system of casting-off old theories, knowledge can and do in fact develop by accumulation. Still, following John Kenneth Galbraith (1958), “(t)he enemy of the conventional wisdom is not ideas but the march of events.” Accepted theories are challenged on the basis of their ability to explain actual occurrences.

Several recent works pose bold challenges to conventional political wisdom. Four in particular provide useful insights for the study of Philippine politics. All are based on empirical research, and are supported by strong argument elaboration. Two (Trumbull and Sinclair) are specific to advanced industrial democracies, but the subjects of inquiry are latent in the Philippines (and developing country democracies in general), if not already emergent. The other two (Yadav and Kasuya) are situated within developing country contexts. They tackle very different issues and themes, have varying levels of scope and focus, but share a common emphasis on views that diverge from the widely held consensus.
In *Strength in Numbers*, Gunnar Trumbull demonstrates how diffuse interests manage to come together and advance their common cause. Betsy Sinclair explores the effect of the social environment on individual political decisions in *The Social Citizen*. Vineeta Yadav, in *Political Parties, Business Groups, and Corruption in Developing Countries*, explains the puzzle behind greater corruption in certain countries, despite the ubiquity of business interest links to politics everywhere. The dynamics between party stability and democratic consolidation meanwhile is the focus of Yuko Kasuya’s *Presidential Bandwagon*.

Reading through these books, two main streams of a new perspective are apparent. The first stresses the need to re-conceptualize political behavior, particularly with respect to political choice, participation and interest representation. This broad focus is backed by new insights on the role of specific actors (political parties, coalitions) and institutions (legislative rules, electoral systems, political networks), as well as on outcomes (corruption, regulation/policy, political stability). The other, not so much a debunking of existing theory but a challenge to existing practice, is a careful effort to unpack the process of political behavior. Here, the focus is on methodologies and how the adoption of new techniques and technologies can aid in bolstering theoretical claims. Considered together, they provide a provocative challenge to political knowledge, and offer exciting new tools for the conduct of political science research.

**Re-conceptualizing political behavior**

Collective action remains one of the most enduring subject matters of political science. What motivates people to participate in political life? What is the impact of such participation or non-participation on political outcomes?

The political man is taken as a rational individual, who makes decisions on political participation based on his calculation of what it would cost him and what he would gain if he participates (Olson 1961). This individual has an equal opportunity to form and express his preferences as the others (Dahl 1989). It is individual choice that determines political behavior like voting, joining groups (including party switching as a voter or as a candidate), making election contributions, or indeed, not doing any of these. The ideal democratic setup is premised on the assumption that one individual’s choice has equal weight as those of others.

However, according to Anthony Downs (1957), voting is costly so rational voters will rarely turn out to vote. Likewise, following Mancur Olson (1961), the high costs and the free rider problem make organization of diffuse interests difficult. Large groups tend to have insufficient incentives to do collective action and are therefore underrepresented in public policy. In contrast, owing to their size and the structure of incentives, concentrated interests organize better. Olson’s theory has been the basis for much of the work around regulatory policy, with two particular tendencies emerging. One suggests a tight regulation of concentrated interests, the other rejects regulation entirely, with both avoiding regulatory capture.

Yet, people do turn out to vote and diffuse interests do form groups and achieve policy victories. This is what the books address – Sinclair and Trumbull more generally and directly, with Yadav and Kasuya supplying details on how political behaviors deviate from expectation in rather specific circumstances.

**Political choice, participation and interest representation**

Betsy Sinclair offers the freshest and boldest insight, and does not start from the assumption of an atomistic rational political individual. *The Social Citizen* offers an
alternative theory in which the political individual is also a social citizen, who is susceptible to social pressure, and who can “lose some of their individual autonomy and base their political decisions on the preferences of others” (148). Few will deny that the ideal democratic setup rarely obtains, that political inequities exist, allowing for certain political preferences to be undermined in favor of the preferences of the more powerful. Sinclair’s contention, however, springs from the existence of an individual who yields his/her political choice to his/her social networks “which often come together based on factors unrelated to political interests” (148). Simply put, “ordinary citizens are influenced by their social networks both in their political choices and in their political participation decisions” (18).

That the “functioning of a democracy is attributable not merely to individual expression but to an expression of a collective social identity” is not entirely new. Constructivists hold that one’s politics is also an expression of his/her identity. A close reading of Sinclair reveals two new things: one, the social network can be manufactured and be outside the assumed identity groups or networks an individual can belong to (e.g., class, tribe, political party); and two, with enough social pressure, an individual can be made to decide against a previous identity (her example is convincing a Democrat to vote Republican). Sinclair does not deny identity but contextualizes it within a social environment, in itself an improvement over the identity/expression explanation of political behavior. She suggests that “(a) single individual has more influence than simply one vote” but has the “potential to influence members of her social network” (155). That is, everyone has the potential to become a social citizen. The social environment affects the individual through two channels—information and social pressure.

In her carefully designed empirical research of four political behaviors, Sinclair finds that while information has an effect, it is social pressure that determines the extent of an individual’s political participation. On voting, direct mobilization (door-to-door canvassing) has a bigger impact on voter turnout than indirect mobilization (postcard reminder); and direct mobilization is even more effective when done by somebody from the social network (e.g., a neighbor) than by a stranger. Social pressure is most effective for publicly visible norm, like the giving of campaign contributions. The choice of candidates changes in the course of the campaign and tends to converge towards the choice of an individual’s social network. Finally, political partisanship is flexible and is affected in the same way that an individual identifies with other group characteristics.

Sinclair does not deny expression, and recognizes that the social pressure component (in party identification, for instance) can derive from a rational choice framework. But she rejects the idea that an individual only relies on groups and networks for information to enable him/herself to make rational choices. Parties and groups are therefore not just organizing tools for individual preferences, but directly determine those preferences.

Gunnar Trumbull neither repudiates rationality nor denies strategic behavior, although he is more pointed in his criticism of conventional wisdom. In *Strength in Numbers*, Trumbull tries to debunk Olson, and makes the claim that “diffuse interests have historically always found representation in public policy.” He takes the consumers as a main representation of diffuse interests who face tremendous barriers to effective representation. They are large in numbers; they deal with issues that are technical, reducing their ability to engage them in policy debate; they have multiple identities (e.g., as workers, business owners, welfare recipients, etc.) whose interests intersect and even conflict with their interests as consumers; they have diverse potential interests (e.g., price, quality, safety, access, etc.), making agreement on a unified agenda difficult; among others (10–11). Trumbull claims that no sooner than Olson wrote his book that a
A surge of “mobilization, policy activism and industry accommodation in defense of the consumers” (34) happened, putting in place progressive consumer protection policies in almost all advanced industrial democracies by the early 1980s. With cases from nine advanced industrial democracies (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Japan, France and the United States), Trumbull shows that diffuse interests, particularly consumers, defied organizational obstacles, mobilized around shared pragmatic interests and succeeded in having those interests transcribed into public policy.

For Trumbull, diffuse interests have the capacity to coordinate and do organize “when the collective interest is both material and evident” (11). While coordination is not easy, it is possible. This is a concession to Olson, though scarcely acknowledged as Trumbull consistently points out Olson’s weaknesses throughout the book. A related departure from Olson is Trumbull’s observation that diffuse interests organize even sans selective incentives, or more pointedly, even as benefits are not made exclusive to members. This is a unique challenge to Olson – that the identified constraints to collective action can in fact be advantages. In diffuse interests, when an individual does act, it is on the basis of firmly held beliefs (versus the simple expectation of gains).

The role of political actors

For Trumbull, group membership may be passive or active, but in both instances, shared interests bind the members. Three sets of actors are central to diffuse interest representation. There is the activist, who mobilizes grassroots constituencies in support of a cause. There is the industry, which may affiliate with consumers for strategic objectives, e.g., to establish product standards that also serve as effective barriers to the entry of competition. And then there is the state, represented by policymakers or policy entrepreneurs who defend diffuse interests to preempt the opposition or to defend broad public interest. Trumbull contends that all these actors face the challenge of legitimacy, and to be effective, they have to seek external sources of legitimacy by forging coalitions with each other. Diffuse interest representation, therefore, becomes more effective with legitimacy coalitions. A coalition usually takes a combination of any two of the three actors; thus, state-activist, industry-activist, or state-industry coalitions.

Yuko Kasuya’s Presidential Bandwagon: Parties and Party Systems in the Philippines, and Vineeta Yadav’s Political Parties, Business Groups, and Corruption in Developing Countries offer the counterpart insights on interest representation through political parties in developing country democracies, often in ways that defy previous scholarship on the topic. Kasuya sees a stable party system as crucial in consolidating democracy. As aggregators and articulators of political demands, political parties have a significant role in strengthening democracy. In the case of the Philippines, however, she rejects conventional belief that political party formation is determined by social cleavages and factionalism (Lande 1965), which she claims to not have empirical support. Yadav, in her investigation of corruption, on the other hand, claims that strong parties are not necessarily good for democracy. She identifies two types of political systems. Where legislative rules allow parties control over agenda-setting and amendments, and where parties have the ability to expel members who vote against party line, the system is said to be party-focused. Where these privileges are given to individual legislators, it is called an individual-focused system. Yadav offers a provocative central hypothesis that where parties exercise greater control over the legislative process, they become the focus of business lobbying. Supporting the narrative with a cross-sectional inquiry into developing country democracies, she finds that corruption tends to be higher in party-focused systems.
This is contrary to previous studies (Kang 2002; Tomsa and Ufen 2013) that claim that a functioning party system has a tempering effect on corruption.

Instead of factions and cleavages, Kasuya maintains that it is the shortened term limit that determines party formation, affiliation and stability. The presidential bandwagon framework (fully discussed in Chapter 3) offers three propositions: One, the number of parties joining district-level elections is determined most pronouncedly by the presence of a viable presidential candidate. Therefore, presidential elections influence party affiliation of legislative candidates. Two, a higher number of viable candidates means more instability in presidential elections, which in turn means instability in the party system. And three, the single-term limit causes unstable electoral competition. This framework implies that party switching and the formation of new parties are more likely during presidential elections. The presence of an incumbent in a presidential election reduces coordination problems among political candidates at the district level, so they can cooperate better. Without one, however, aspirants expect a higher probability of winning, thereby encouraging the formation of new parties. When the Philippines enacted the single-term limit rule, frequent changes in party affiliation became the norm. For Kasuya this norm creates party system instability, which is negative for democratic consolidation. Kasuya’s claim rests on an added element of weak voter-party ties, though with scant elaboration, except if one considers the discussion on patronage.

Yadav and Kasuya’s books demonstrate how parties can be detrimental to interest representation, because of party instability and the primacy of patronage (over policy) in determining winnability in elections (Kasuya), and because of the positive relationship between party control and corruption (Yadav). But beyond feeding into growing anti-party sentiments (Tan 2013), they problematize when and how political parties might behave contrary to expectations.

The importance of institutions

The less-than-expected political behaviors proposed in the four books are true only for certain institutional setups. Yadav and Kasuya’s work are in the context of developing country democracies, while Trumbull’s is specific for advanced industrial democracies. Sinclair’s study focused exclusively on the United States. Still, there are lessons for developing countries in Trumbull and Sinclair’s work.

Yadav and Kasuya look at previously neglected institutions – legislative rules, and electoral systems – that are crucial in testing their new theories. Yadav’s is a direct challenge to the stylized study of corruption that often sees legislatures as rubber stamp institutions. Kasuya’s challenges claims attributing party instability to canvassing rules. In both cases, the presidential system of government also appears to be a favored system. Yadav’s party-focused system tends to obtain in a parliamentary system (while the less corrupt individual-focused system thrives in a presidential system), while Kasuya’s explicit preference for a two-party system is logical for a presidential setup.

Trumbull strictly delimits the applicability of his theory to advanced industrialized countries, and concedes that Olson’s thesis continues to characterize interest group politics in developing countries. The explicit suggestion here is that developing countries lack the institutional conditions for the formation of autonomous interest groups, and certainly limit their ability to “mobilize and defend their interests” (210).

Strength in Numbers highlights how institutional contexts affect the types of legitimacy coalition that can form to advance diffuse interests. These include the type of electoral system and the preferred national production strategy. Parliamentary systems favor cross-
class political coalitions to form, while presidential majoritarian systems tend to favor broad consumer interests. Hence, in parliamentary Germany, the Catholic Church and the Social Democrats (representing the preservation of the way of life and the defense of workers, respectively) coalesced to restrict store operating hours, thereby restricting the growth of big retailers. In contrast, presidential France opened up to hypermarkets to promote lower prices (as consumerism represented broad interests). Germany prefers smaller-scale quality production, while France prefers Fordist manufacturing and mass distribution. The types of institutions affect whether or not and how diffuse interests are promoted.

In *The Social Citizen*, social networks are important because of the norms they generate. These norms exert social pressure that influences an individual’s political decision and action. In networks, norms are operative as institutions – which, when explicitly communicated or are publicly visible, exert social pressure that affects an individual’s political behavior. In the study of party affiliation, Sinclair finds that, after controlling for other relevant variables, given an individual that has a different party identification than the persons he/she discusses political issues with (the discussants), the probability that such individual will change party identification in the next elections increases. Moreover, the probability that he/she will disagree with his/her discussants in the next election decreases. The prediction is that, if the individual switches parties, it will be towards the discussants’ party affiliation.

**Political outcomes**

The political actor’s interaction with institutions, in the context of the nuanced appreciation of political participation and interest representation, results in differential outcomes.

In terms of political stability, Kasuya rules out electoral rules and social cleavage as determining of political party stability. Instead, it is the term limit that leads to the creation of new parties, party splits and mergers, and an overall increase in entrants, leading to more unstable presidential elections. She extends her analysis to 38 new democracies and finds support for her theory. Kasuya concludes that, in the case of the Philippines, the restoration of the two-term limit will facilitate party system stability. This links very closely with an explicit preference for the two-party system as more stable than other systems. She cautions, though, that there are various and complex factors that need to be scrutinized in order to more fully understand democratic transition and consolidation.

Yadav and Kasuya examine corruption in developing countries: Yadav with case studies of Brazil and India specific to industry lobbying of legislators and political parties; Kasuya with a case study of patronage in the Philippines and how it affects electoral outcomes.

Yadav examines the demand-side and supply-side dynamics that facilitate higher corruption in party-focused lobbying. On the demand-side, parties’ need for funds is greater than that of individual legislators’, and they prefer flexible money to other political resources (like information and technical assistance). On the supply-side, parties capture state institutions through legislative delegation (through appointment powers) and their ability to protect corrupt financing practices (through the flouting of auditing rules). Yadav’s findings are unequivocal: contrary to the widely held belief that political parties can temper corruption, the average level of corruption is higher where parties control the rules, even after accounting for economic and political variations.

Kasuya studies the elaborate workings of patronage in the Philippines. While the link to political parties is less straightforward, owing to the nature and instability of the
country’s party system, she finds that patronage is a key determinant in winning elections. The President controls the legislators’ patronage through the pork barrel system (from sources including the Countrywide Development Fund, or what is now known as the notorious Priority Development Assistance Fund or PDAF) and his power of release (i.e., timing of pork barrel funds during deliberations of crucial legislation and during elections). This strongly links to the role of presidential elections in party formation.

Trumbull’s thesis on regulatory capture also defies convention. Culling from his case studies of what are considered havens of regulatory capture – farm support (Chapter 6) and pharmaceutical industry regulation (Chapter 7), he posits that regulatory capture is less common than is supposed. It is also typically contested, and incomplete. Industry might have influenced and won certain regulatory battles, but it is not without tradeoffs. For instance, the pharmaceutical industry in the United States is unconstrained in terms of pricing policy, but it has to contend with strict quality regulation. French pharmaceuticals, on the other hand, might have gotten a relative respite on quality standards, but they are faced with restricted pricing.

Rationality and narrative

Only The Social Citizen does not start with the rational individual assumption, even as it acknowledges how some findings are not inconsistent with rational choice. The four books are quite emphatic in their claims, but they do not necessarily reject other explanations.

Trumbull, for instance, makes full use of narratives, emphasizing the power of policy narratives to affect outcomes. Even as he emphasizes the significance of coalitions in advancing diffuse interests, a common cause that an individual can identify with is a requisite. In the unpacking of this shared interest, the importance of legitimating narratives is key. Legitimating narratives define the shared interest to which diffuse interests converge, and around which they organize. They frame policy discourse. They are pragmatic, to show constituencies that they share concerns that define and structure policy response. They also have a normative role in policy formation, where public interest is defined and areas that need response are identified. These narratives delineate boundaries rather than prescribe an outcome, thereby making possible the continued identification with a constituent group.

Trumbull names two types of narrative. The narrative of access defines shared interest in terms of group members having access to goods, services and markets. The narrative of protection defines uncertain risks and known dangers against which group members must be defended. The narratives are usually initially malleable, but they persist and harden over time, determining future common interests.

Determining the process of political behavior: enriching methodological contributions and approaches

A shared strength of the four books is their elaborate research design and methodology. Despite some differences in the uptake of certain assumptions, the four books employ mixed methodologies.

Perhaps Trumbull is most straightforward in his use of comparative case study, with strategic introduction of processed descriptive data. The careful selection of cases and the depth of analysis make compelling argumentation all throughout. Trumbull also utilizes typology as theory building, offering a typology of concentrated and diffuse interests and a typology of coalitions.
Sinclair, Yadav and Kasuya all use regression analysis, but situated within elaborate empirical designs. Yadav and Kasuya use large-n analysis to complement their case studies, supplemented by key informant interviews. Both Yadav and Kasuya use internationally recognized measures of corruption and party system volatility to test against their variables for legislative rules and political stability. Yadav uses the International Country Risk Guide index of corruption, the Transparency International corruption perceptions index, and the corruption index from the World Bank; Kasuya uses the Laakso and Taagepea, and the Pedersen Indices. Kasuya employs surveys in her examination of patronage in Philippine elections to establish important correlation, and deploys processed official data to check for the salience of factors like party switching and party nomination. Yadav’s design is more complex as it uses survey and regression analysis to also empirically test lobby behavior for the case studies. The result is a systematic unpacking of the legislative black box and its susceptibility to business interest lobby.

Sinclair’s empirical design is the most complicated, as it employs various techniques for the separate testing of the four political behavior of voting, campaign contribution, candidate choice and party affiliation. Two types of experiments are done for the measurement of the effect of social pressure on voting, and surveys complemented by in-person interviews are used for the three other behaviors. The designs for both experiments and surveys are elaborate and required several layers of variations and separate analyses. There is also extra care to correct for homophily, or the tendency of the individual to associate with others that share common characteristics with him/her. While the techniques do not completely eliminate the selection problem, they do improve the knowledge on how networks influence individuals.

The books present well-developed arguments and hypotheses, with all grounds covered, and supported by previous scholarship. Sinclair and Yadav both have an impressive survey of literature, which immediately make them valuable sources for the study of social pressure and corruption, respectively. Kasuya and Trumbull deploy processed data to great effect. Yadav and Trumbull give good process tracing analysis respectively for lobbying behavior and regulation.

The books’ most significant contribution has been that they not only argue, but also clearly demonstrate with empirical vigor, their claims. It is not so much that methodologies are mixed and complicated, but that they represent serious attempts at measuring and explaining the relationships among factors that determine political behavior.

Takeaways and caveats
The four books are not without weaknesses. Trumbull attacks Olson to the point of caricature, and with a tendency to over-read him, potentially undermining the central theme of his treatise. His claims on regulatory capture are instructive, but can neither fully account for the massive influence of corporations in other areas nor over time. Yadav’s use of proxy macro corruption indices, when she is measuring a rather confined type of legislative corruption, could have huge implications on attribution. Kasuya’s use of similar proxy measures may have corollary effect. Likewise, her dedicated focus on national-level parties, leaving out local dynamics, could limit the value of her framework. The detailed empirical design of Sinclair’s gives rise to questions of alternative operationalization for aspects of political behaviors, and the likely impact on the findings.

However, the purpose of inquiry is not to arrive at a perfect explanation, but to identify good ones. And here, these four books satisfy immensely. They are ambitious enough to
go against common conceptions of political behavior, yet tolerant enough to acknowledge the limitations of their works. For all his criticism, even Trumbull could not completely demolish Olson’s theory.

The real-world translation of these works has wide-ranging implications on democracy and its institutions. If the social network is persuasive and determining, the potential for greater participation can be stimulated through vocal and committed individuals. On the negative side, however, is the danger of perverse polarization when an individual refuses to interact with others who have differing views. Better inclusiveness is possible with inter-group coalitions, but one has to be on the lookout against the risk of diminution or cooptation of specific preferences. The design of legislative and electoral rules will go a long way in reducing corruption and promoting political stability. In what instances they will be most appropriate, however, will have to be weighed against other institutional factors.

In The Affluent Society, Galbraith comments that the attack on conventional wisdom is normally unfruitful. There is no need for such cynicism in the present day. Neither is it imperative to adhere to Kuhn’s rigidity. A pluralist mindset is all that is needed to spot new insights, and to accept that no matter how limited, they add to existing wisdom, and widens the possibility of knowing or interpreting more of the world.

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References

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