

Social Capital and Populism in the Philippines: The Case of Duterte

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ABSTRACT

The paper tackles the question – are the high performance and trust ratings of President Rodrigo R. Duterte (PRRD) indicative of a deep and abiding social capital existing between state and society, and if so, does this mean that Filipinos will now move away from myopic to enlightened self-interest in addressing the current challenges that the country faces? It interrogates the question through the lens of Putnam’s concept of social capital. The paper discusses Putnam’s notion of social capital, Duterte’s high performance and trust ratings, and whether they are linked. The study likewise explores the broader connection between populism and social capital.

Keywords: *social capital, performance, and trust ratings, populism, Duterte*

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the high performance and trust ratings of President Rodrigo R. Duterte (PRRD) and social capital. Specifically the question this paper tackles is: Are the high performance and trust ratings of PRRD indicative of a deep and abiding social capital existing between state and society, and does this mean that Filipinos will now move away from myopic to enlightened self-interest in addressing the current challenges that the country faces?

The question is divided into two parts. The first section asks if the high performance and trust ratings of President Duterte are indications of the existence of social capital between society and the state. The second part is on the implication of the first part of the question. Suppose one assumes an abiding social capital between society and the state, as signified by the president’s high performance and trust ratings, does this imply that Filipinos have moved away from myopic to enlightened self-interest?

To answer the question, this paper utilizes Robert D. Putnam’s concept of social capital presented in his seminal work, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Putnam’s thesis on the relationship between social capital, civic work, and the democratization or advancement of democracy is discussed in the book.

First presented in this paper is Putnam's notion of civic engagement and how he used the concept to explain the disparity between northern and southern Italy. The discussion also includes social capital, the link between civic engagement and social capital, and how social capital advances or makes democracy work.

Next considered by the paper are the performance and trust ratings of President Duterte. It discusses whether performance and trust ratings can serve as proxy variables for social capital or an indicator of the existence of social capital between society and the state. Finally, the paper tackles the question if Filipinos have moved, are moving away, or will move away from myopic to enlightened self-interest in addressing the current challenges that the country faces based on the concept of social capital.

Has social capital been developed between society and the state as indicated by the trust ratings of the president? Can one now say that Filipinos have transcended their narrow self-interest and are looking more toward the general welfare of society? On the whole, the paper touches on the issue of social capital and populism in the Philippines. Suppose social capital, as Putnam argues, is the building block of democracy, how do the high performance and trust ratings of a populist and authoritarian leader like Duterte fit into his contention? Before addressing this question, first, an overall view of Putnam's idea of social capital might be necessary.

Social capital as a building block of democracy

In one of his essential, if not the most important work, Robert Putnam argues for the role of social capital in advancing democracy and the democratization process. He and two colleagues, Robert Leonardi and Rafaella Y. Nanetti, spent two decades investigating institutional performance in northern and southern Italy.

In 1970, Italy's central government ceded power to regional governments. Putnam studied the institutional developments in the north and South of Italy to track how this reconfiguration of Italian polity impacts both regions. His comparison of the North and South of Italy became the basis of his ideas on social capital, democratization, and institutional performance.

"The North is much more advanced than the South," Putnam observes in the case of Italy. He notes, "The wealthier, more modern regions of the North have a head start over their poorer counterparts in material and human resources" (Putnam, 1993, p. 84-85). According to him, the disparity between the North and South is due to the strength of civic engagement in both areas.

“Interest in public issues and devotion to public causes are the key signs of civic virtue,” Putnam quoted Michael Walzer. This summarizes Putnam’s view of civic engagement. For him, “citizenship in a civic community is marked, first of all, by active participation in public affairs” (1993, p. 87). Comparing both regions of Italy, Putnam found that the North is the more civic region and the South least civic. “Membership in sports clubs, cultural and recreational groups, community and social action organizations, educational and youth groups, and so on is roughly twice as common in the most civic regions as in the least civic regions” (Putnam, 1993, p. 98). Furthermore, he found that there is “a remarkable concordance between the performance of a regional government and the degree to which social and political life in that region approximates the ideal of a civic community concluding that “civic-ness” and institutional performance are related (1993, p. 98).” Economically advanced regions appear to have more successful regional governments merely because they happen to be more civic” he observed (Putnam, 1993, p. 99).

Civic engagement Putnam contends is a vital ingredient in creating social capital. Putnam defines *social capital* as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (1993, p. 167). Spontaneous cooperation facilitated by social capital, Putnam posits, is developed and nurtured in civic organizations and associations or through civic engagement. He maintains that “social trust in complex modern settings can arise from two related sources—norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement” (1993, p. 171). Social capital, in turn, is an essential element in institutional performance, according to Putnam.

Social capital, such as trust for Putnam, is a “moral resource,” and its “supply increases rather than decreases through use and which become depleted if not used” (1993, p. 169). He considers trust as an essential component of social capital. “Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time. It can be plausibly argued that much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by the lack of mutual confidence” (Putnam, 1993, p. 170).

Relating social capital to institutional performance, Putnam argues that “in the civic regions of Italy, by contrast to Naples, social trust has long been a key ingredient in the ethos that has sustained economic dynamism and government performance” (1993, p. 170). According to Putnam, civic traditions in the North “provide a historical repertoire of forms of collaboration that, having proved their worth in the past, are available to citizens for addressing new problems of collective action” (1993, p. 174). In contrast, the South, he noted, had “a vertical network no matter how dense and no matter how important to its participants, cannot sustain social trust and cooperation” (Putnam, 1993, p. 174).

Based on his investigation of the relationship between civic community and social capital in the Italian experience, Putnam connected them to advancing democracy and making democracy work. Citing Douglas North, Putnam pointed to the different trajectories of the United States and Latin Republics. “The North Americans inherited civic traditions, whereas the Latin Americans were bequeathed traditions of vertical dependence and exploitation...” noting that “the parallel between this North-South contrast and our Italian case is striking” (1993, p. 179). He concluded that “effective and responsive institutions depend, in the language of civic humanism, on republican virtues and practices. Tocqueville was right: Democratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society” (1993, p. 182).

Social capital, which is cultivated through civic engagement in the community, is what makes democracy work, according to Putnam. “In the civic community, associations proliferate, memberships overlap, and participation spills into multiple arenas of community life. The social contract that sustains such collaboration in the civic community is not legal but moral. The sanction for violating it is not penal but exclusion from the network of solidarity and cooperation. Norms and expectations play an important role” (Putnam, 1993, p. 183).

Based on Putnam’s idea, one can say that social capital is the building block of democracy. From his notion of social capital, are the high performance and trust ratings of President Duterte indicators of a deep and abiding social capital existing between state and society? Does this mean that Filipinos will now move away from myopic to enlightened self-interest in addressing the current challenges that the country faces? The following section confronts these questions.

Performance and trust ratings as proxies for social capital

President Duterte was elected to the presidency in 2016 by a plurality of 16,601,997 votes. Since assuming office, he has maintained a high trust rating among Filipinos, according to Pulse Asia surveys.

In the two surveys conducted by the poll outfit in the last two quarters of 2016, Duterte registered a trust rating of 86 percent in September and 83 percent in December (Sabillo, 2017). He maintained high trust ratings the following year, the 2017 report of Pulse Asia shows, getting 81 percent in June and 80 percent in September (Pulse Asia 2017). In the last two quarters of 2018, Pulse Asia surveys reveal a drop in the trust rating of Duterte.

In the September survey, his trust rating was 72 percent, but it increased to 76 percent in December (Business World, 2019). Rappler’s report in 2019 shows improvement

in the trust ratings of Duterte in the Pulse Asia surveys. In the March 2019 survey, he got 87 percent and maintained an almost similar rating in June at 85 percent (Ranada, 2019). By September, his trust ratings dropped to 78 percent (Cabico, 2019) but recovered in December, climbing to 87 percent (Gregorio, 2019).

Even the COVID-19 pandemic, the most severe health crisis to hit the Philippines and the world, failed to dampen Duterte's trust ratings despite widespread criticisms of his pandemic management. In the first nationwide survey conducted by Pulse Asia during the pandemic, due to health restrictions and lockdowns, Duterte maintained a high trust rating. Conducted on September 14 – 20, 2020, Duterte's trust ratings even increased to 91 percent from 87 percent (December 2019 survey). "Duterte's rating rose even if the Philippines is Southeast Asia's worst-performing country, and also one of the world's laggards, in battling the pandemic. When Pulse Asia's survey period ended on September 20, the Philippines had 286,000 cases of COVID-19..." and "...the country is among the world's top 20 countries with the most coronavirus cases" (Esmaquel II, 2020).

Social Weather Station (SWS) disclosed that "President Rodrigo Duterte's satisfaction rating peaked in November 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic" (Punzalan, 2021).

These are Duterte's satisfaction ratings Punzalan (2021) reported as tracked by SWS: +79, November 2020(84 percent satisfied, 6 percent dissatisfied, 9 percent undecided); +65, May 2021(75 percent satisfied, 10 percent dissatisfied, 15 percent undecided); and +62, June 2021(75 percent satisfied, 13 percent dissatisfied, 12 percent undecided). "The +79 net satisfaction rating that Duterte scored in November last year was his highest since 2016, based on an SWS table" (Punzalan, 2021).

Duterte continues to sustain his high ratings at the end of his term. The December 2021 survey of Pulse Asia revealed that "President Rodrigo Duterte's approval rating increased to 72 percent" (GMA News, 2021) from 62 percent in September 2021. He stepped down from office with a 73 percent performance rating (Peralta-Malonzo, 2022).

The data show that while Duterte's performance and trust ratings since his election up to the end of his term fluctuated, ranging from 62 percent to 91 percent, these figures are high. The high performance and trust rating of Duterte is a subject of debate among scholars and pollsters. Can this indicate a deep and abiding social capital between the state and society? Or, to put the question in another way, are the performance and trust ratings of President Duterte indicators of social capital from the perspective of Putnam? As discussed in the previous section, social capital is features of social organizations such as trust, norms, and networks, and it facilitates coordination in society.

Putnam said it is cultivated through community civic engagements and reciprocity norms. Viewed from Putnam's perspective, are the trust ratings of President Duterte indicators that Filipinos have developed social capital through norms of reciprocity and civic engagements? Putting the question in another way, can the trust ratings of Duterte serve as a proxy variable to measure social capital in Philippine society?

The trust ratings of President Duterte from Pulse Asia surveys need to fit into Putnam's concept of social capital. The trust ratings of Duterte are the public's appreciation of his performance as president. This is not the same as trust, networks, and norms, which are social capital. Social capital, in the Putnamian sense, is an indicator of civic engagement of the people in the community, and the trust ratings of Duterte do not reflect this since they measure how the public looks at his performance as president and not how people are engaged in civic activities. The trust ratings, therefore, of Duterte are not the same as trusts in social capital. Duterte's trust rating is personal attribution to his performance as president, while social capital, as Putnam sees it, is social - the community cultivates it to facilitate coordination.

From the perspective of Putnam, Duterte's trust ratings can be attributed to the weak, if not the absence of social capital in Philippine society. The trust ratings of Duterte and his rise to the presidency can be explained by the dilemmas of collective action, which Putnam discussed in his work. How Filipinos resolve the dilemmas of collective action in the last election and the high performance and trust ratings of Duterte can explain the rise of populism in the Philippines.

Populism and the dilemmas of collective action

Community members are confronted with the dilemmas of collection action – whether to work together for the common good. Putnam cited the parable offered by David Hume, which captures these dilemmas. "Your corn is ripe today; mine will be so tomorrow. 'Tis profitable for us both that I should labour with you today, and that you should aid me tomorrow. I have no kindness for you and know you have as little for me. Therefore, I will not take any pains upon your account; should I labor with you upon my own account, in expectation of a return, I know I should be disappointed, and that I should in vain depend upon your gratitude. Here then, I leave you to labor alone; you treat me in the same manner. The seasons change, and both of us lose our harvests for want of mutual confidence and security." (Putnam 1993, p. 163)

To further illustrate collective action dilemmas, Putnam referred to the tragedy of the commons and the Prisoner's dilemma. "In all these situations, as in Hume's rustic anecdote, every party would be better off if they could cooperate. In the absence of a

credible mutual commitment, however, each individual has an incentive to defect and become a 'free rider'" (Putnam, 1993, p. 163-164). Trust is an essential factor for people deciding to cooperate or not. The problem of each community member is how to ensure each one will keep their commitment. "How can one agent know whether another did, in fact make a "good faith effort" to keep his word in the face of multiple uncertainties and countervailing pressures?" (Putnam, 1993, p. 164).

Putnam admits that "in a world of saints, perhaps, dilemmas of collective action would not arise, but universal altruism is a quixotic premise for either social action or social theory" (Putnam, 1993, p. 164). According to him, there are two ways in which people resolve the dilemmas of collection action.

Thomas Hobbes offers one way of confronting the dilemmas of the collection. According to Putnam, Hobbes gave a classic solution to the dilemmas of collection action – third-party enforcement. "If both parties concede to the Leviathan the power to enforce comity between them, their reward is the mutual confidence necessary to civil life. The state enables its subjects to do what they cannot do on their own—trust one another" (Putnam, 1993, p. 165).

The other way of resolving the dilemmas is by cultivating social capital. "Success in overcoming dilemmas of collective action and the self-defeating opportunism they spawn depends on the broader social context within which any particular game is played. Voluntary cooperation is easier in a community that has inherited a substantial stock of social capital, in the form of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement" (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). For Putnam, social capital enables community members to cooperate and work together for the common good. "Spontaneous cooperation is facilitated by social capital" (1993, p.167).

In the case of the Philippines, the dilemma of collective action are resolved through the Hobbesian way. The Philippines is still stuck in the Hobbesian frame, which resembles the South of Italy, where the "culture of patron-clientelism" (Putnam, 1993, p. 159) is substantial. "The southerner—whether peasant or city-dweller...has sought refuge in vertical bonds of patronage and clientelism, employed for both economic and political ends" (Putnam, 1993, p. 144). Like Southern Italy, the Philippines is also in a similar situation where political dynasties strongly cultivate patron-clientelism.

A substantial number of Filipinos view Duterte as the present-day Leviathan. Instead of relying on trust, networks, and norms, Filipinos turned to a strongman to deal with the problem of crime and security, thus the resonance of Duterte's populist politics. His high trust ratings indicate that Filipinos believe he can still play his role as the Filipino Leviathan. Putnam argues that "for third-party enforcement to work, the third

party must itself be trustworthy” (Putnam, 1993, p. 165), and this explains Duterte’s high trust ratings.

This phenomenon is not unique, argues Rafael (2022), for Filipinos, have a long and enduring history of fantasy with benevolent dictatorship. “It lies at the foundation of the Philippine national state, rooted in the history of colonialism. From the Spanish to the Revolutionary Republic to the United States and the Commonwealth periods, the Philippines has been ruled by a succession of dictatorial regimes, headed by the Spanish king, Emilio Aguinaldo, the US president (via his representatives in the colony), and Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon (subject to American rule). During World War II, the Japanese imposed the ‘East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere,’ installing Jose P. Laurel as the agent of the Japanese dictatorship.” (Rafael, 2022, p. 18).

According to Rafael (2022:18), the dream of a benevolent dictatorship re-emerged in the 2016 election. “The keen interest in a Duterte candidacy was emblematic of the wishfulness” (Rafael, 2022, p. 18). The longing for a Leviathan made Duterte’s populist and authoritarian leadership palatable to many Filipinos.

The COVID-19 pandemic even made the longing for a Leviathan among Filipinos urgent, which enabled Duterte to retain high performance and trust ratings despite severe allegations of corruption and ineptitude in handling the COVID-19 crisis. SWS fellow Geoffrey Ducanes explains, “Most people do not think the government mismanaged the pandemic...They give the government a relatively high rating in terms of taking care of those who got COVID, and a relatively high rating regarding COVID vaccination... In the June 2021 survey, what seemed more important for people was the perception that the government was helping the poor during the pandemic, which might have something to do with *ayuda* (cash assistance)” (Punzalan, 2021). Patronage and clientelism are clearly at work here, and this is possible when social capital in the Putnamian sense is weak or non-existent.

Populism thrives under the climate of fear and not when trust, networks, and norms are vibrant. Veteran journalist Luis Teodoro argues that the atmosphere of fear cultivated by Duterte accounts for his high performance and trust ratings even during the pandemic. “The transformation of the country’s political context from one that before 2016 was relatively threat-free to the climate of fear that now defines it is most certainly a factor as well in the way the populace responds to surveys and public opinion poll” (Palatino, 2020).

Sociologist Randy David echoes Teodoro’s observation. “One need not go to the country’s remotest Barangays to find people who would readily give ‘safe’ answers than say something that could expose them to unwanted drug raids or to being denied

'ayuda.' To people who have felt vulnerable and powerless all their lives—and they are the majority in our country—nothing could be more dangerous than expressing their true opinion about their leaders at the wrong time” (David, 2020).

Political observer Richard Heydarian also shares David’s position (Elemia, 2020). “What is the incentive for people to be completely honest about whether they like or dislike a person? The climate of fear cannot be taken out as a factor,” he notes. Viewed within the context of Putnam’s concept of social capital, Duterte’s high performance and trust ratings cannot be taken as an indicator that a deep and abiding social capital exists in Philippine society. The high ratings reflect how Filipinos regard Duterte as an incarnation of the modern-day Leviathan, not a manifestation of trust, networks, and norms among Filipinos.

In an alternative view, the performance and trust ratings of Duterte can be indicators of the dark side of social capital. Putzel critiqued Putnam’s notion of social capital as a “crucial element of the democratization process” (Putzel, 1997, p. 940). Social capital, as conceived by Putnam according to Putzel, has a dark side. Po Valley, which Putnam identified as “the site of vibrant social capital” in Italy, is also “the ‘cradle of the Fascist movement’” (Putzel, 1997, p. 943). Furthermore, Putzel argues that social capital marked by civic engagement is not necessarily good for democracy, citing the case of the Philippines. “In the Philippines under the Marcos dictatorship, the Chinese Filipino community fared better than they had done at any previous time (Ang See, 1995). They had little interest in replacing the regime with a more democratic one” (Putzel, 1997, p. 942). Putzel cautions against using social capital as a building block of democracy. “Football clubs may indeed establish lasting social networks, but it is necessary to examine what determines whether these networks simply breed hooliganism or serve as the basis for fascist or democratic political movements. It is the articulation of goals, the power of ideas, and the efficacy of organization that will determine the political purposes, if any, that such networks serve” (Putzel, 1997, p. 947).

CONCLUSION

The paper interrogated the question of whether the high performance and trust ratings of President Duterte are indicative of a deep and abiding social capital existing between state and society and does this mean that Filipinos will now move away from myopic to enlightened self-interest in addressing the current challenges that the country faces? It answered the question by first unpacking social capital through the Putnamian lens and discussing the high performance and trust ratings of Duterte. It then examined the link between social capital and high performance and trust ratings of Duterte in the context of the dilemmas of collection action.

Based on the discussion above, the performance and trust ratings of President Duterte cannot serve as proxies for social capital as Putnam envisages the concept. Performance and trust ratings are not “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks.” They do not indicate that Filipinos have now moved away from myopic to enlightened self-interest in addressing the current challenges that the country faces. Instead, they signify Filipinos’ infatuation with strong men and populist politics. From Putzel’s critique of Putnam’s position, the rise of Duterte and his high performance and trust ratings represent the dark side of social capital, which can be a tool of authoritarianism instead of democratization.

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