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# Chapter 12

## Learning Democratic Attitudes and Skills: Politics and Volunteer Engagement



Roberto Biorcio and Tommaso Vitale

### 12.1 Does Volunteer Activism Influence Political Attitudes and Behavior?

In this chapter, we propose a reflection on the relationship between volunteering and political participation. We will ask ourselves whether or not the specific traits that characterize volunteer engagement in various forms, individual or associative networks, interpersonal links, and the cultures that develop through these activities can influence political attitudes and different forms of political participation.

In recent years, Italian citizens have scarcely harbored positive feelings toward politics but have rather exhibited indifference and often anger toward parties and representative institutions. Their willingness to participate has not diminished, but has rather taken on other forms quite different from the parties themselves (volunteering, associations, movements). These tendencies had already begun manifesting themselves in Italy in the 1980s with the growth of volunteer commitment at a social, individual, or group level. The weight of social volunteering, oriented to the production of public goods, has increased in the last 20 years, while

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This chapter is based on a paper previously published in Italian in a book edited by Riccardo Guidi, Ksenija Fonovic, and Tania Cappadozzi (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016a). It develops the first paper deepening the final discussion on the regression analyses conducted and discussing in-depth how social participation reduces inequalities of political participation by class and age. We would like to thank the editors of the volume, the anonymous referees, as well as Carlo Barone, Bruno Cousin, and Niccolò Morelli for their comments on previous versions of this paper.

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the influence of political parties has been reduced, and the forms of citizens' participation have been transformed.

In general, a considerable amount of research indicates a significant relationship between volunteering and political participation. However, the relationship can take several different forms and meanings depending upon the type of association to which the volunteers are linked and the possible ways of expressing political participation. On the other hand, a hypothesis may also be put forth that volunteering and political commitment are both influenced by the same social conditions of the volunteers as well as by the territorial contexts in which they operate. In this chapter, we will highlight the overlaps and differences between volunteering and the various forms of political participation in an attempt to grasp their synergies and possible foundational discrepancies.

## 12.2 The Role of Associationism in a Participatory Democracy

Many authors argue—even from different perspectives—that citizens' individual commitment to associations and volunteer activities promotes the development of genuine political participation in democratic societies. A longstanding tradition of studies and research on this subject has produced important results, even if their interpretation has led to many differences in opinion and controversies.

The importance of associationism relative to politics in democracy was highlighted many years ago by the reflections of Tocqueville (1835). The author of *De la Démocratie en Amérique* highlights a series of effects of volunteering engagement in associations that are still considered valid (Carreira da Silva & Brito Vieira, 2019). The American associations studied by Tocqueville guaranteed fundamental, pre-political socialization by spreading among the participants the spirit of cooperation, solidarity, and civic commitment.<sup>1</sup> This function was carried out by volunteer associations created for a wide range of purposes. These associations also had the crucial function of defining common objectives and mobilizing individuals for their achievement: “When an idea is represented by an association, it must necessarily take a clearer and more precise form; it counts its partisans and commits them to its cause” (ibid., 202).

The idea of associations as “schools of democracy” has been proposed on subsequent occasions by many scholars and researchers who value, above all, the role of political socialization that participation in nonpolitical associations can play. The relations between associations and politics have become much more complex, however, and have significantly transformed in recent decades.

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<sup>1</sup>“The most democratic country in the world is also the one in which men have most frequently perfected and applied the art of pursuing in common the objects of common desires” (Tocqueville, 1835, 524).

In the wake of Tocqueville, the research conducted by Robert Putnam has sought to highlight the fundamental role played by associative participation in modern societies in favor of the functioning of democracy and its institutions: “networks of civic commitment facilitate the consolidation of rules of generalized reciprocity among citizens and encourage the emergence of widespread trust within the social body” (Putnam, 1995, 67). Putnam’s most significant innovation was the use of the “social capital” concept, which combines—at a higher level of abstraction—various aspects of social life that are both analytically and empirically distinct:

by social capital we mean the relationships of trust, the rules governing coexistence, the networks of civic associations, elements that improve the efficiency of social organization by promoting initiatives taken by mutual agreement. (Putnam, 1993, 196)

The existence of a high level of social capital in a community should trigger a virtuous circuit to then increase that level as well as guarantee the most beneficial conditions for democratic life.

Several studies have sought to demonstrate how volunteer work and engagement in nonpolitical organizations can foster the growth of individual levels of political participation, especially in the United States (Ayala, 2000). Comparative research in Europe reveals that members of volunteer organizations are characterized by higher levels of political commitment than are nonparticipants (van Deth, 2010). Along with associative participation, the following resources available for political participation generally increase civic competence, information, tolerance toward other cultures, social network memberships, a sense of effectiveness, and the ability to act politically.

The basic mechanisms of the socialization process have been highlighted by qualitative research (Erickson & Nosanchuk, 1990; Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2014). During participation, individuals are accustomed to making democratic decisions, referring to issues of public interest, and developing relationships based on trust and mutual commitment.

However, other scholars have questioned the role of the associations as a “school of democracy”. Disagreements have developed with respect to the same concept of social dialogue introduced by Putnam (Vitale, 2009; Portes, 1998; Foley & Edwards, 1999), which refers to both structural aspects (networks of relationships) and cultural aspects (norms, social values, interpersonal trust, and institutional trust). The different aspects are related, and thus establishing which one precedes the others is difficult to determine in causal terms.

The central ideas of the “neo-Tocquevillian theory” on the mechanisms of political socialization that can be activated in volunteer associations were questioned by Van Der Meer and Van Ingen (2008) at the end of a comparative research study on 17 European countries. The positive correlation between civic participation and political action in all national contexts may depend upon the type of association; while the correlation is very strong in associations of social commitment and within citizens who represent their interests, it is conversely much weaker in associations that produce leisure activities. Those who are active in volunteering may make

self-selections; for instance, people who are politically more interested and active join the associations for the same reasons that they become politically active—that is, to achieve specific objectives, to directly produce the public goods they claim, or to more actively participate in social life (Borghi & Vitale, 2006).

### 12.3 The Different Forms of Political Participation

Citizens' political participation is divided into different worlds—the (individual) social commitment, the private sphere, society, political institutions, and the state—wherein two questions immediately arise: *how* does one take part? and, above all, what should one take part *in*?

Political participation can be defined by referring to either a narrower or broader conception of the boundaries of politics (Sani, 1996, 503). In the narrowest definition, acts of political participation are generally considered those behaviors that either directly or indirectly aim to impact the production process of binding decisions within a political system (Sartori, 1987, 257; Raniolo, 2007, 23–25). This influence can also be expressed through the simple choices of the “decision-makers”, as is usually the case in the context of electoral competition. The relationship between citizens and the political system established by this type of action is that of taking part in the institutionalized political process. However, a broader definition of the political participation concept is possible: “any action that directly or indirectly aims at protecting certain interests or values (consolidated or emerging), or is directed at changing or maintaining the balance of power in social relations” (Sani, 1996, 503). By this perspective, many actions that are far removed from the lives and practices of political institutions can be included in the scope of political participation.

Visible political participation is expressed through a vast repertoire of individual and collective actions and proposing an exhaustive list may be difficult;<sup>2</sup> and, of course, the significance actors attached to their actions must be taken into account (*ibid.*, 503). Decisive actions for the functioning of a democratic political system (e.g., voting) can be practiced as worthless rituals, while political relevance can be attributed to activities in associations that exclusively pursue cultural or recreational purposes. On the other hand, a simple interest in politics may also be associated with emotional involvement. To summarize this dimension of participation, the concept of “latent participation” (Sani, 1996; Sciolla, 2004)—or “invisible participation”—has been proposed and defined as “emotional–affective participation in (or psychological involvement in) what happens in the political world” (Barbagli & Maccelli, 1985, 14–15).

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<sup>2</sup>Various classification schemes for forms of political participation have been proposed, the most frequently used of which are the distinctions between conventional/nonconventional (or institutionalized/noninstitutionalized), legal/illegal, and expressive/instrumental (Barbagli & Maccelli, 1985; Pasquino, 1987; Sani, 1996; Raniolo, 2007).

The probability that citizens will participate (in the different forms) is obviously not identical under all social conditions. Those in a high position in one of the many social hierarchies are more likely to take part in political life—that is, those with high income, with higher education, with high social status, in the central age groups, and, in general, male citizens. The following trends have been confirmed by a considerable amount of empirical research: indicators of education, income levels, and social prestige generally correlate with one another as well as with indicators of political participation. Participation thus seems to reproduce a kind of “model of social centrality” (Milbrath, 1965; Pizzorno, 1993).

As the centrality of individual actors grows, so do their capacities, resources, interests, and motivations for participation, as we have observed in Chap. 10 of this volume. Political participation can become, by this logic, one of the attributes that defines the individual position within a certain type of social structure. It is thus possible to explain participation, which begins from “a psychological feeling of being close to the centre or of being outside, on the periphery” (Milbrath, 1965). Those who occupy central and higher positions in society tend to more easily commit themselves to extending their position of power into the political sphere, while those who occupy marginal positions in social hierarchies more often feel incompetent and incapable of influencing political life. These conditions apply to all dimensions of individuality, including life cycle, age, and gender (Magaraggia & di Nello, 2016; Quaranta, 2016).

To create opportunities for participation and to break the “iron law” of the model from its social centrality, volunteer engagement in associations and more or less structured organizational networks acting on the territory can be greatly important. These networks create opportunities and stimuli to firstly involve even the sectors of the population that are less endowed with economic and cultural resources—as well as those that are further away from politics—and secondly produce self-esteem, confidence in collective action, and a feeling of social effectiveness through their actions (Biorcio et al., 2011; Morelli, 2019). The associative networks “constitute mobilization agencies that stimulate or facilitate participative behavior on the part of more or less large sectors of the population” (Sani, 1996, 506). Naturally, various types of associations exist and may differ not only in the type of purpose pursued but also in the process of formation, the size, the level of solidarity between members, and their organizational structure (i.e., more or less formalized).

## 12.4 Politics, Associationism, and Volunteering in Italy

At the end of the 1950s, Almond and Verba linked up with Tocqueville’s ideas to identify, through comparative research, the types of civic culture that might foster the development of democracy beyond the formal mechanisms that characterized the various political and institutional systems (Almond & Verba, 1963). Particular attention was paid to the role played by associations in mediation between



individuals and the political system due to the influence they exerted upon citizens' political attitudes and levels of subjective competence (*ibid.*, 244–265).

In the 1950s, the Italians were quite far from the model of civic culture “participants”. In Italy, the prevailing, parochial culture combined a lack of trust in the political system with a lack of confidence in one's own ability to influence it. The limits of Italian civiness in the 1950s were also highlighted by the low level of participation in volunteer associations (*ibid.*, 246).

In Italy, however, participation in religious and civic–political associations was relatively high, reaching levels higher than those recorded in other European countries. The importance of this type of associative network in Italy was also recognized and enhanced by the research conducted by the Cattaneo Institute in the 1960s (Manoukian, 1968). The construction and rooting on the main mass parties' territories had widely utilized the networks of associations already established, which involved many volunteers in different types of activities that were often foreign to the political sphere: “the socialist tradition and the Catholic tradition had created the conditions for a mass political socialization” (Galli, 1966, 161). The shortcomings of the national civic culture and the resulting problems for individual public engagement were thus overcome by a process of political socialization based on both partisan political cultures and associative volunteer networks that were connected—directly or indirectly—to mass political parties.

As we have witnessed, the relationship between social associations and the functioning of democracy in Italy was studied by Robert Putnam during the 1980s, who paid particular attention to the differences between territorial areas and the role played by social capital during the development of democratic politics.<sup>3</sup> In Putnam's research, however, the observation units were not individuals, but rather regional communities. The survey was not based on the subjective opinions of a sample of respondents, but rather on the recording of specific behaviors. The survey may be obtained from official statistical sources at the regional level (Cousin & Chauvin, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

The civic index that was built up by Putnam et al. for their research took on very high scores, especially in the regions characterized by “white” and “red” subcultures and in the territorial area most exposed to the influence of German culture (Trentino–South Tyrol). The level of civicism was also high in the most important regions of the northwest (Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria), while it sharply decreased in the south. The level of civic participation calculated in the various territorial areas correlated significantly with the quality of democracy found in regional institutions on the basis of a set of indicators.

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti took part in the research.

<sup>4</sup>Putnam built a regional community civic index using four indicators: (1) the number of sports, cultural, recreational, and social engagement associations in relation to the population; (2) the levels of electoral participation in referendums from 1974 to 1987; (3) data on the reading of newspapers in relation to the number of families; and (4) the percentage of votes of preference between 1953 and 1979, as an indicator of the absence of civism and of personalism and patronage (Putnam, 1993, 107–113).

During the 1990s, however, the political and social framework that had characterized Italy in the aftermath of World War II radically changed. The system of parties that had managed politics and society for many years crumbled following the end of the Cold War due to the investigations of the judiciary on the intertwining of politics and business (*Tangentopoli*) that delegitimized a large part of the Italian political class (Biorcio, 2015). The crisis of the mass parties tended to make the associations more autonomous, while the capacity of the various political formations and their activists to exert influence on the multiple organizational networks existing in the civil society was greatly diminished. The roles, compositions, and cultures of Italian associations changed profoundly. The meanings of the enacted activities were changing, and the motivations for the commitment among volunteers—of associations more dependent upon public funding and less inclined to proposals and advocacy—were changing despite some obviously lingering inertia and nostalgia for the system of fringe organizations typical of the First Republic (Biorcio et al., 2016).

The general trends of participation between 1989 and 2006 can be grasped by analyzing the data collected from seven surveys of the Institute for Educational and Training Research (the so called ACLI-IREF). The membership of social associations involved more than one-fifth of the adult Italian population. Participation grew in the areas of social welfare volunteer, cultural and educational activities, and civil and social engagement. On the other hand, more traditional forms of political participation were clearly decreasing, and the number of political party members had been cut in half during this period.<sup>5</sup>

The transformation of the forms of participation and volunteer commitment regarding aspects of daily life is confirmed by the Istat surveys. In 2013, a large proportion of the Italian population aged 14 and older declared they would participate in social associations' activities (16.7%).<sup>6</sup> Many interviewees stated that they devoted time to free volunteer activities for the benefit of others in recent months (12.6%). There is of course a partial overlap between these areas of commitment; most volunteer actions were carried out within an association (7.9%), although a high percentage of individuals carried out this type of free activity directly, outside an association (5.8%). In some cases, volunteer commitment was exclusively carried out directly (4.6%), while in other cases, the commitment was enacted in a single association (6.5%) or in more than one association (1.3%). We will investigate how these different modalities influenced the volunteers' attitudes and political behaviors.

The geographical distribution of volunteer work reflects the levels of civicness that Putnam experienced during the 1980s. Commitment is highest in all its forms in the northern (15.2%) and central (13%) regions, decreasing significantly in the

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<sup>5</sup>The decrease in this type of participation was also confirmed by the data on members declared by the same parties, which have suffered a sharp decrease since the 1990s.

<sup>6</sup>Participation in social associations is estimated on the basis of statements to have participated in meetings and/or to have devoted time within the preceding year to the activities of any association, excluding participation in parties, trade unions, and trade associations.



southern regions and the islands (9.3%). The differences in levels of civicism recorded in the past in different regional contexts seem to maintain even now an importance concerning an individual's willingness to engage in free volunteer activities for the benefit of others.

On the other hand, these differences between the Italian regions are perfectly consistent with the Istat surveys regarding the territorial distribution of participation in social associations. The highest levels are found in both the regions historically characterized by “white” and “red” subcultures and, generally, in the regions of northern Italy (20.9%). The southern regions, on the other hand, reached much lower levels (11.6%). In these regions, only participation in political parties remains relatively higher than that in the northern regions. The persistence of the various regional contexts' influence on associative participation and volunteer commitment over time demonstrates how citizens' activities outside the private sphere depend upon a complex of conditions, cultures, and relational networks that are not homogeneously distributed on the national territory (Ferragina, 2013). Moreover, the influence of these factors has been maintained over time (see also Bagnasco, 1994; Tarrow, 1996).

## 12.5 Volunteering and Political Participation

Based on the survey results of the Istat Aspects of Daily Life (ADL) of 2013, one may highlight the relationship between those involved in volunteer work, social associations, and politics and the various forms of political participation. The results of the applied analyses appear, at first sight, to be fully consistent with the central ideas of the “neo-Tocquevillian theory” regarding the mechanisms of political socialization that can be activated in associations as well as through the performance of volunteer activities (Table 12.1).

In general, one may observe that the commitment to some type of volunteer activity outside the personal circle has a significant relationship with one's increased interest and participation in politics in all its forms (see also Biorcio & Vitale, 2016b). The level of political participation is almost always much higher compared to the average population. On the other hand, we may observe that those who participate in associations generally possess a higher level of interpersonal trust than that found among the population as a whole. Interpersonal trust is one of the factors that generally promotes civic engagement—in particular, one's willingness to devote attention to and participate in local and national political life.

Respondents who devote their time to free activities for the benefit of others—even those outside an association—declare a level of latent political participation

**Table 12.1** Volunteers' participation rates<sup>a</sup> and attitudes toward politics (percentage values)

	ALL	Active in volunteering		Participant in social associations
		Direct	Organization based	
<i>Visible participation</i>	22.9	32.3	35.8	41.5
Attends rallies	7.6	10.8	14.6	17.1
Participates in processions	4.4	6.8	8.7	11.6
Participates in party activities	4.0	6.1	11.8	12.8
Talks about politics every day	15.9	22.9	24.1	26.3
<i>Latent participation</i>	48.6	63.7	64.7	69.7
Informs oneself about politics every day	38.3	52.5	51.7	54.2
Has listened to political debates	27.7	40.2	42.9	49.8
<i>Area of interest</i>				
Ecologist, pacifist, human rights	1.5	2.8	7.2	9.2
Trade union	5.9	8.5	13.2	14.1
Professional association	4.6	10.2	10.3	14.2
<i>Trust (6–10) in:</i>				
Political parties	9.4	9.1	12.2	10.8
Italian Parliament	19.5	18.8	20.2	19.5
Regional government	24.3	24.9	28.9	27.9
European Parliament	29.3	31.5	34.7	34.9
Judicial system	36.8	35.9	41.9	40.6
Municipal government	39.3	41.4	47.0	46.0
Law enforcement agencies	71.3	70.9	75.4	74.0
<i>Interpersonal trust</i>	21.7	28.0	35.8	34.4
<i>Number of observations</i>	40,262	1,849	3,161	6,565

Source: Biorcio and Vitale (2016a), p. 198

<sup>a</sup>Reference periods: 4 weeks for volunteering; 12 months for participation

much higher than that found among the Italian population as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Among the volunteers a higher level of familiarity with daily information concerning the most important events occurring in the public sphere as well as the willingness to attend political debates exists. This trend is also confirmed with respect to various forms of visible political participation. In general, those who practice some form of volunteer action are more committed than the average population to participating in rallies and demonstrations, to the frequency of political discussions, and to carrying out party activities free of charge. If the free activity is conducted within an association for the benefit of others, the commitment then grows through the various forms of visible political participation.

<sup>7</sup>We have taken as indicators of latent political participation the tendency to inform oneself about political life and the willingness to attend political debates. We have considered as indicators of visible political participation the participation in demonstrations or rallies, meetings and/or activities of a political party, and the tendency to talk about politics every day.

On the other hand, we may observe that those who participate in social associations generally appear more willing to participate in the activities of political parties—those of the left-wing or the ecological, pacifist, and human rights associations. This trend is also identified among respondents who engage in volunteer activities for the benefit of others. Interest and participation are almost always more frequent in those who engage in volunteer activities in one or more associations, while individuals who exclusively conduct direct activities for the benefit of others are less willing to engage in visible forms of participation. Political socialization conducted by associative contexts and their relational networks do not exist for those exclusively acting directly. These effects may of course change in relation to the association type as well as the level and duration of the volunteer's commitment (Table 12.2).

**Table 12.2** Volunteering and political participation<sup>a</sup> according to type of associative commitment (percentage values)

	Political participation		<i>Number of observations</i>
	Visible	Latent	
<i>Voluntary activities</i>			
None	21.3	46.4	35,252
Direct only	32.3	63.7	1,849
Organization based	35.8	64.7	3,161
<i>Type of association</i>			
Volunteering	36.0	64.7	1,346
Cultural	39.8	64.7	249
Sports or recreation	36.2	68.8	276
Religious	26.8	57.9	724
Committee or informal group	32.0	65.2	181
Party, movement, or union	76.5	90.8	119
Other	39.5	66.9	266
<i>Years in the association</i>			
Up to 1 year	35.5	59.0	439
2–4 years	34.9	59.2	868
5–7 years	36.6	65.7	527
8–10 years	34.6	70.7	474
More than 10 years	36.9	69.3	853
<i>Total time spent participating in one activity</i>			
1 hour	36.9	62.0	626
2 hours	33.8	65.4	1,142
4–5 hours	38.2	65.6	968
More than 5 hours	33.9	64.7	425
<i>Total</i>	22.9	48.6	40,262

Source: Biorcio and Vitale (2016a), p. 200

<sup>a</sup>Reference periods: 4 weeks for volunteering; 12 months for participation

Volunteer activity in a religious association is less conducive to political participation, which significantly increases when volunteers engage in a cultural association, social movement, trade union, or party. On the other hand, we may observe that the duration of the associative experience generally tends to favor a greater latent political participation.

In the last 20 years, attitudes toward politics have considerably changed in Italy alongside a strong diffusion of critical feelings, indifference, or alienation from the main political actors and representative institutions (Biorcio, 2007, 196–199). How do citizens who are engaged in volunteer work and social associations relate to this general spread of anti-politics?

In these areas of active citizenship, politics is rarely experienced with detachment or strangeness. Interest and commitment, however, very often combine with positions of criticism and distrust toward political parties, parliament, and representative institutions, sharing to a large extent the opinions spread throughout the population (Table 12.1). Levels of distrust are only slightly reduced for the municipality, the region, and the European Parliament.

The disappearance of mass parties and the spread of anti-political attitudes through the Italian public opinion have diminished neither the interest in nor the commitment to the polity among those who devote time and personal resources to volunteering or social associations. This type of commitment seems to be linked to a more general willingness to engage in different forms of political participation, which may also indicate strong critical and conflictual content with respect to political institutions. On the other hand, as we have already pointed out, individuals who participate in social associations possess a much higher level of interpersonal trust than that recorded for the entire population. This trend is also evident among those engaged in activities for the benefit of others, especially if their activities take place in one or more associations. Interpersonal trust, which Putnam considers an important component of the social capital existing within a community, can generally promote civic engagement and political participation in its various forms.

In other words, participation extends interpersonal trust and trust in certain institutions, thus also increasing the critical capacity of those who participate (Della Porta & Caiani, 2006). More generally, we can note that, even in the age in which anti-politics dominates, direct or organization-based adherence to volunteer activities is often associated with a level of attention and participation in political life that is much higher than that which is manifested in the population as a whole. Even the recent comparative research on the subject in general asserts that “volunteer associations do not operate independently of the policy of conflict: on the contrary, the two are intimately linked by deep institutional ties and by the cultural logic of participation” (Fourcade & Schofer, 2016, 433).

## 12.6 Social Centrality, Politics, and the Commitment to Volunteering

As we have formerly observed, all the participation research often reveals that citizens' political commitments seem to follow a sort of "model of social centrality" (Milbrath, 1965; Pizzorno, 1993; Biorcio, 2008). One may therefore assume that the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for participation justifies the different levels of involvement and activity in both national and local political life. Each individual's centrality is based on one's social position, the type and quantity of one's personal relationships, and one's subjective awareness of whether or not one shall occupy a central position.

We may wonder whether or not the model of centrality also conditions participation in social associations and engagement in volunteer actions for the benefit of others. By analyzing the data generated by the ADL survey, we can determine the effect of the social position on both latent and visible political participation; education, the level of family income, the employment condition, and the employment position are particularly important aspects for the growth of participation (Table 12.3). Political participation is generally more widespread among men as well as both men and women in the upper-middle classes (45–64 years of age). Thus, the results of research studies conducted in many countries are essentially confirmed: the model of social centrality plays an important role in explaining various forms of citizens' latent and visible political participation.

Our research allows us to point out that, in positions of social centrality, the participation in social associations and the commitment to volunteer actions for the benefit of others are generally more frequent. Citizens' levels of education, economic resources, and professional and social positions are particularly important indicators for the likelihood of their involvement in associations (Table 12.3). Respondents in higher social positions (entrepreneurs, managers, and freelancers) and students are more often involved in social associations, while a relative reduction in participation is perceived among workers and, especially, housewives. These differences are at least partly due to differences in education and training levels in the various social positions. Other aspects of the centrality model, such as gender and age classes, are less relevant. However, we will return to both these variables with greater precision because they require a more precise and differentiated analysis than that provided here.

Levels of engagement in others' volunteer activities also considerably change in relation to their educational levels and the economic well-being of their families. On the other hand, significant changes are perceived in relation to employment positions and professional life. These trends are reflected in volunteer activities that are exclusively carried out directly and with no relation to associations.

Important differences in the levels of volunteer participation may be observed depending upon the level of respondents' social centrality. Volunteering seems to have become much more frequent in the middle and upper classes than in the working classes, which is a change explainable by the transformations of

**Table 12.3** Volunteering and political participation<sup>a</sup> by social conditions and macro-regions of residence (percentage values)

	Political participation		Active in volunteering		Participant in social association	Interpersonal trust
	Visible	Latent	Direct	Organization based		
<i>Gender</i>						
Man	28.8	55.8	4.4	8.9	18.1	23.0
Woman	17.6	42.0	4.8	6.9	14.6	20.6
<i>Age</i>						
14–24 years	20.8	32.0	2.6	7.3	19.0	22.3
25–44 years	22.5	45.5	5.1	8.0	17.0	21.5
45–64 years	27.4	57.8	5.6	9.7	18.7	23.9
65 and older	18.5	48.0	3.7	5.5	11.0	19.0
<i>Educational level</i>						
BA or MA	34.7	69.3	8.2	13.2	30.8	32.4
Diploma	27.4	55.2	5.0	10.3	20.7	24.4
Secondary school license	20.5	42.0	3.9	6.5	12.8	18.8
Elementary school	12.9	36.3	3.0	3.0	6.2	15.7
<i>Economic conditions</i>						
Favorable	31.1	66.1	6.8	14.3	30.0	40.9
Adequate	25.0	54.0	5.0	9.5	20.2	26.3
Scarce	20.6	43.2	4.2	6.2	12.1	17.6
Insufficient	21.5	42.1	4.4	5.7	11.7	13.6
<i>Professional position</i>						
Manager, entrepreneur, freelancer	36.1	70.0	8.6	12.4	28.3	32.3
Clerk	31.5	62.8	6.0	11.7	24.9	28.9
Self-employed	28.3	54.8	5.0	9.0	17.3	21.3
Worker	19.7	42.1	4.1	6.2	12.4	19.3
Unemployed	22.0	42.3	4.3	6.3	13.4	17.4
Homemaker	12.0	35.6	4.1	5.3	9.2	17.2
Student	25.2	38.4	3.4	9.2	23.3	24.1
Retired	23.1	55.6	4.1	7.3	14.3	20.7
Other	15.1	33.2	3.3	4.9	8.5	17.0
<i>Macro-region</i>						
North	22.6	51.9	5.1	10.1	20.9	25.2
Centre	22.4	53.2	5.1	7.9	16.1	22.4
South	23.5	43.2	3.8	5.5	11.6	17.9
<i>Total</i>	22.9	48.6	4.6	7.9	16.3	21.7

Source: Biorcio and Vitale (2016a), p. 204–205

<sup>a</sup>Reference periods: 4 weeks for volunteering; 12 months for participation



society as well as the disappearance of mass political parties' role in the socialization of citizens. Differences in age groups are less relevant, as participation significantly decreases exclusively among older people. Young people are less involved in volunteer activities for the benefit of others, especially outside organizations. Their participation in social associations, on the other hand, is higher than that in other age groups in particular as well as within the whole population in general.

Women typically participate to a lesser extent than men in social associations and volunteering, but these differences lessen or disappear if the individual family situations are analyzed.<sup>8</sup> In general, housewives mainly decrease the levels of female participation in associative experiences. Women, on the other hand, appear generally more willing than men to carry out free activities for the benefit of others but only at a direct level.

In general, one may assert that the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for participation influences both one's commitment to volunteering and associative participation and one's different levels of involvement in one's national and local political life. The effects of the social centrality model are similar in substance to both participation in social associations and free engagement (direct or organization-based) with actions for the benefit of others. People who are positioned highly on one of the multiple social hierarchies are more likely to participate in the associations and conduct volunteering—that is, those who have higher levels of income and education and a higher social position.

The position of social centrality not only increases resources and opportunities for participation but also transforms subjective attitudes toward society. People-to-people confidence, which is an important indicator for citizens' civic culture, is sharply growing in relation to levels of education, family income, and professional positions. In this way, motivations for organizational participation and engagement into volunteer actions for the benefit of others depend by the social class of individuals.

## **12.7 Political Participation and Volunteering: A Spurious Relationship?**

If one's level of social centrality increases both one's commitment to volunteering and associations and one's political participation, one may hypothesize that social participation does not influence citizens' political socialization; rather, the relationships we identify may be spurious due to the effects of other variables, such as respondents' social positions. Even more important than the influence of

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<sup>8</sup> Among single women, participation is higher than that of single men. Marriage and the formation of a family do not change men's willingness to participate, while women's willingness to participate clearly decreases under these conditions.

volunteering and associative participation on political participation is participants' self-selection in the two areas of commitment. People who most often engage in volunteering and associations may have reasons and/or motives that make them politically active in that they engage in different forms to achieve specific goals and produce public goods they consider important. Self-selection may to a large extent depend upon citizens' social centrality.

We can control these hypotheses by verifying whether or not people who share the same social characteristics are equally likely to engage in politics regardless of their volunteer activities and participation in social associations. To test this hypothesis, we will refer to three variables that are considerably important for the model of social centrality: education level, professional position, and economic resources available in the family (Table 12.4). We will also verify the influence of level of interpersonal trust in volunteering as well as in associative and political participation.

Of the Italian population of individuals aged 14 years and older, those with the highest education levels have a net latent political participation higher than (69.3%)—in fact, nearly double—that of those who received primary education (36.4%). The gap is even more significant for visible political participation in that graduates are three times more willing to participate than citizens with the lowest education levels (34.6% compared to 12.9%). On the other hand, we have already demonstrated that the increase in education levels also increases the probability that one may volunteer and participate in social associations. If we then consider the professional position of the respondents, we will discover similar trends. The highest levels of political participation are among the upper classes (entrepreneurs, managers, and freelancers) and the middle classes that comprise office workers. In these social classes, one's willingness regarding political participation in its various forms is still sharply growing among those who have been active in either volunteer work or social associations' activities.

We can observe that the latent and visible political participation of those who possess the same education level both increase very significantly among those who engage in volunteer activities and even more so among those who participate in some kind of association (Table 12.4). The increase in political participation among people active in volunteering or in social associations is registered for all levels of education although it is particularly significant among those with lower levels of education.

The same can be said of family income levels; the growth in income availability significantly increases the latent and visible political participation of the entire population, both among citizens engaged in volunteering and in social associations' activities. Thus, even in this case, the commitment to volunteering and participation in social associations among citizens with the same family income significantly increases their willingness to take an interest and participate in political life. The most significant increases are, above all, found among citizens living in families with the lowest levels of economic resources, thus proving that associations

**Table 12.4** Political participation and volunteering<sup>a</sup> in relation to social centrality position (percentage values)

	Visible political participation			Latent political participation		
	Total	Active in volunteering	Participant in social association	Total	Active in volunteering	Participant in social association
<i>Educational level</i>						
BA or MA	34.6	43.7	48.7	69.3	77.8	81.3
Diploma	27.4	36.3	42.2	55.2	66.7	71.8
Secondary school license	20.5	30.2	37.3	42.0	54.8	58.9
Elementary school	12.9	19.3	30.2	36.4	51.4	59.0
<i>Economic conditions</i>						
Favorable	31.1	42.4	42.9	66.1	72.9	81.0
Adequate	25.0	35.9	40.7	54.1	68.7	72.3
Scarce	20.6	32.2	42.2	43.3	57.5	65.0
Insufficient	21.5	32.2	44.5	42.1	60.0	66.6
<i>Professional position</i>						
Manager, entrepreneur, freelancer	36.1	47.2	50.1	70.0	79.1	82.1
Clerk	31.4	38.6	44.2	62.8	71.2	75.4
Self-employed	28.3	38.8	43.3	54.8	64.9	67.4
Worker	19.7	26.2	32.8	42.1	50.4	57.7
Unemployed	22.0	32.8	44.0	42.3	58.7	67.8
Homemaker	12.0	19.8	28.2	35.6	53.5	59.0
Student	25.3	36.8	44.7	38.4	48.9	58.6
Retired	23.1	36.3	41.4	55.7	73.2	78.7
Other	15.1	33.7	38.3	33.3	71.2	68.2
<i>Interpersonal trust</i>						
Trusts in people	27.9	38.1	42.8	56.7	71.9	73.9
Trusts with caution	21.9	33.1	40.7	47.2	61.3	67.6

Source: Biorcio and Vitale (2016a), p. 208–209

<sup>a</sup>Reference periods: 4 weeks for volunteering; 12 months for participation

nevertheless remain a resource to support the politicization of the working classes. In other words, volunteering reduces inequalities in political participation.<sup>9</sup>

We may perform another test to evaluate the hypothesis concerning the self-selection of those who participate both in political life and in organization-based or direct volunteering activities. Those who support this hypothesis believe all the different forms of political and social commitment depend upon the previous socialization of citizens as well as the acquisition of important ideas and attitudes to motivate participation. To achieve this verification, we refer to the level of interpersonal trust declared by the interviewees: an attitude that many scholars consider a fundamental component of the social capital existing within a community.

In general, throughout the population, citizens who have more confidence in others are more strongly committed to both latent and visible political participation (Table 12.4); however, regarding equal interpersonal trust, respondents who volunteered reported higher levels of political participation. The increase in political participation is even stronger among those who have participated in some kind of social association.

In order to assess more accurately the influence on the different forms of participation of the variables we have considered so far, we use logistic regression. We have analyzed five models (see Table 12.5). In the first model, we verified the influence on participation in volunteer activities of all the variables related to the social centrality of the respondents. The analysis highlighted above all the importance of educational levels for this type of participation. Then, in models 2 and 4, we analyzed the influence of different positions of social centrality on visible and latent political participation. Again, respondents with higher levels of education and greater availability of economic resources are more likely to engage in participation. This confirms the significant relationship between social centrality and political commitment. However, looking at models 3 and 5, it is possible to highlight how engagement in volunteering contributes to the further growth of inclination for political participation. This trend remains significant and relevant even after controlling for social class and economic conditions.

## 12.8 Conclusions: Associative Participation as a School of Democracy for the Working Class

Personal involvement in volunteering that aims for the production of public goods is a factor of strengthening the more general feelings of belonging to civil society. Volunteers are able to transform distrust and anger within proposals and actions aimed at the public sphere (Biorcio & Vitale, 2010). The commitment of volunteering and social associations to carrying out socially useful activities with concrete and

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<sup>9</sup>For qualitative analysis of mechanisms associated to poor, marginal, and deprived individuals political empowering by community-based associations, see Vitale and Boschetti (2011); Citroni (2018), Carrel (2016); and Vitale (2019).

**Table 12.5** Logistical regressions: commitment to volunteering and political participation with respect to positions of social centrality<sup>a</sup>

	Active in volunteering		Visible political participation				Latent political participation			
	Mod. 1		Mod. 2		Mod 3		Mod. 4	Mod. 5		
<i>Gender</i>										
Males	0.099	**	0.547	***	0.543	***	0.526	***	0.524	***
<i>Age</i>										
14–24 years	–0.378	***	–0.521	***	–0.504	***	–1.270	***	–1.257	***
25–44 years	–0.018		–0.291	***	–0.290	***	–0.742	***	–0.743	***
45–64 years	0.277	***	0.134	**	0.119	*	–0.016		–0.029	
<i>Educational level</i>										
BA or MA	1.369	***	1.179	***	1.111	***	1.577	***	1.515	***
High school	1.063	***	0.904	***	0.859	***	1.100	***	1.060	***
Secondary school license	0.671	***	0.545	***	0.521	***	0.572	***	0.549	***
<i>Economic conditions</i>										
Favorable	0.479	**	0.126		0.098		0.505	***	0.481	**
Adequate	0.146	*	–0.067		–0.072		0.120	**	0.118	**
Scarce	–0.038		–0.115	*	–0.110	*	–0.073		–0.070	
<i>Professional position</i>										
Manager, entrepreneur, freelancer	0.365	**	0.549	***	0.533	***	0.859	***	0.840	***
Clerk	0.252	*	0.554	***	0.545	***	0.783	***	0.770	***
Self-employed	0.227		0.501	***	0.495	***	0.657	***	0.647	***
Worker	–0.018		0.133		0.139		0.319	***	0.317	***
Unemployed	0.047		0.335	***	0.339	***	0.454	***	0.454	***
Homemaker	0.132		–0.003		–0.008		0.339	***	0.333	***
Student	0.538	***	0.842	***	0.826	***	0.868	***	0.847	***
Retired	0.390	**	0.472	***	0.456	***	0.775	***	0.761	***
Voluntary activities					0.460	***			0.489	***
Constant	–3.176	***	–2.387	***	–2.405	***	–1.308	***	–1.324	***
Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke)	0.053		0.083		0.089		0.148		0.154	

Source: Biorcio and Vitale (2016a), p. 211

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

<sup>a</sup>Dependent variables are voluntary activity, latent participation, and visible participation. Reference positions for the nominal variables entered are gender (women); age (more than 64 years old); qualification (elementary school certificate); economic condition (insufficient); professional position (other); voluntary activity (no activity)

visible results increases their participants' self-esteem and sense of personal effectiveness. In this way, the activists' value references are redefined, as they are generally induced to follow political life more closely, to personally commit themselves to dealing with the main problems of society, and to influence public policies and government decisions alike.

Participation in volunteering—especially if conducted within one or more associations—can help reproduce a relationship of attention and commitment in the political community on a new basis during a time when political parties and representative institutions are largely delegitimized. Even in this phase, the Tocqueville hypothesis of associative participation as a school of democracy—that is, as an opportunity for socialization and for learning about the values and behaviors of active democratic participation—might still be valid.

Of course, as we have already asserted, the existence of an inverse relationship may be founded, as people who have already developed an interest in public affairs and politics participate in associations and volunteering. Their sense of personal effectiveness, personal trust, attention to, and interest in political affairs can in many cases serve as facilitating conditions for their participation in associative activities.

Many researchers argue, in this sense, that the association between civic participation and political action can be largely considered a spurious relationship in that the levels of both variables grow in relation to some traits of the individual subjects, such as education, social status, sense of personal effectiveness, and civic competence. Political socialization often precedes associative participation, as those who possess a high sense of personal effectiveness and are more attentive to public life are generally more willing to both join volunteer associations and engage in political action (Armingeon, 2007). This type of attitude is generally much more widespread among individuals who have access to more desirable economic resources, cultural levels, and social positions. The relationship between social participation and political participation would essentially highlight a selection effect.

Our analysis of the ADL data confirms the validity of the model of social centrality for providing an initially important explanation of the different levels of political participation and commitment in volunteer activities and associations. However, the central point of our analyses highlights something more than a mere selection effect: once the selection effects given by people's social centrality are kept under control, one can still perceive an effect of political socialization exhibited by social participation.

Participation in volunteer associations is not episodic and is much more continuous than participation in individual events or episodes of political mobilization. Associative experiences and volunteering socialize people's political participation as well as provide the many effects of the various social centrality positions (Claps & Vitale, 2016). The role of these experiences seems more important, specifically for the social classes that are less endowed with cultural and economic resources; in these social classes, participation in associations and volunteering largely compensates for the relative social "peripherality" of the more modest classes. Here an inclusive group's style (Vitale, 2003; Eliasoph, 2016; Citroni, 2018) reduces the effects of exclusion from democratic political participation structured by social



inequalities. In 2013, associationism was confirmed as a true school of democracy, namely, for the working classes.

Finally, we note that political and social participation differ in relation to their distribution on the respondents' respective territories. The levels of latent and visible political participation can be significantly influenced by the levels of civicness that traditionally differentiate across the Italian regions, as has been noted since the beginning of Putnam's research in the 1980s. However, in all regional areas, the experience of volunteering and participation in social associations increases political participation. The influence of this experience is much more relevant in the southern regions, where a more limited level of civic participation is traditionally reported. In territories where civicism is lower, not only associationism itself does play a fundamental role in the production of public goods, but it also serves as a fundamental driver of the socialization democratic values and practices, even to more so than in other parts of the *Bel Paese*.

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