

Has Italy Become A Tocquevillian Democracy? A Longitudinal Analysis Of The Determinants Of Political Participation Monica Poletti (March, 2012) – SPS/11

In the early 60s Italy was described as a country characterized both by high disaffection and low social participation, not a picture of a healthy democracy particularly if compared with other more economically advanced countries, characterized by a *participant* civic culture (Almond and Verba, 1963). Since the country was divided between a partisan minority that actively participated in political parties (and related organizations), and those who did not participate at all, according to the authors the decentralized pluralistic democracy proposed by Tocqueville was still non-existing in Italy. In the last sixty years Italian society has undergone a process of modernization and mass scholarization that significantly changed the socio-political context: the levels of resources in society increased, an intense season of social mobilization led to an expansion and growth of civil society participation and a gradual separation from subcultural belonging. According to the neo-Tocquevillian thesis of *political socialization* of associations, the slow, but persistent, upward movement of Italian social participation and civil associations should have then transformed Italian *parochial* citizens into *participatory* citizens, with higher political efficacy and more likely to participate at higher rates in politics in less partisan ways, closer to the ideal model of participant citizen. Yet, while political disaffection has stayed quite constant (and extremely high) through the years, conventional political participation, relatively high in the 1960s compared to other countries, not only has not increased in the last sixty years as expected, but has actually decreased. Participation in political parties and in trade unions has undergone a slow but profound crisis since the 1980s and electoral participation, that had been surprisingly high since the end of the war (more than 90% turnout), and quite stable for many years, started to decrease. What appears from these macro level trends of the socio-political context is a paradox in light of social capital theories: in Italy the theory that sees the spread of social associations as producing participatory citizens has not worked, and the three indicators of interest, social participation, political disaffection and political participation, seem to follow rather independent behavioural paths. Why is it so?

This is a longitudinal and causal study that is very important for understanding the dynamics at work in Italy but it has much wider implications that go beyond the specificity of a single country. Similar results between macro and micro levels are found, implying that the underlying mechanism hypothesized by social capital theories is undermined, at least in its universalistic perspective. This volume consists in two main parts. The first one includes Chapter 1 to 3 and relate to a broad and extensive literature review on the world of political and social participation as well as of political disaffection, both in general terms and in more specific terms relating to the Italian case. The second part of the research includes Chapter 4 to 8 and relates to the empirical analyses of the Italian socio-political context. I first describe through secondary data analysis the evolution of the Italian socio-political context across time. I then construct a few hypotheses linking education and time in its time-period, political cohort and life-cycle aspects, in order to test whether the thesis of *cognitive mobilization* by Inglehart has been at work in Italy after the post-war process of societal modernization that has increased resources and scholarized the masses for different types of associations. I then move to a more analytical level constructing several hypotheses in order to study the existent causal relationship between social participation, political participation and political efficacy. Using a three-wave panel, through structural equation modelling (SEM) I test for several forms of association, whether at the micro level the theory of *political socialization* of associations holds in my panel (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995 - *civic voluntarism model*). I also test alternative models, such as the theory of *self-selection*, or the theory of *reverse causation*. Finally, in order to give more insight to my findings I run a latent class analysis identifying different profiles of participation among the Italian population. Chapter 9 summarizes my findings, thinking upon the general interpretation of results and discuss the implications for future research.