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Gender differences in youths' political engagement and participation. The role of parents and of adolescents' social and civic participation

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

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Adolescence
Civic participation
Social participation
Sense of community
Institutional trust

Research examining youths' political development mostly focused on young people as a general group; comparatively less attention has been devoted to the examination of gender pathways toward citizenship. Two studies were conducted addressing (a) the role of parents' participation and the moderating role of adolescent gender and age group ($n = 1419$) and (b) the role of adolescent social and civic participation and the moderating role of adolescent gender and type of school ($n = 1871$). Results confirmed the gender gap in political interest and in the use of the Internet for political participation, while no differences emerged for political activity and voting intentions. Adolescents' political engagement and participation are influenced by parents' participation (especially among girls) and by adolescents' social and civic participation (especially among boys). The impact of adolescents' social and civic participation on conventional participation (voting intentions) is partially mediated by sense of community and institutional trust.

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Introduction

Explaining youths' political development has been the focus of considerable attention by researchers in different disciplines, including political science, sociology, developmental psychology (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010a). In this context, we adopt the overarching framework of socio-political development theory which acknowledges young people's active processes of construction of citizenship across the life span (psychological, affective, psychosocial) as well as the role of the multiple influences within the different contexts (family, school, political and community organizations, media, etc.) within which this process occurs (Flanagan, 2004; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010b).

Most of the research on youths' political development has focused on young people as a general group, and comparatively less attention has been devoted to the examination of gender differences in the pathways toward citizenship. Such limitation is especially important in view of the gender gap in political engagement (defined, in this context, as interest and attentiveness towards political issues; cf. Emler, *in press*) and participation (e.g., actual behaviours) still documented in research on adults. In fact, a considerable body of studies, conducted on nations with different political regimes and social traditions, as well as varying levels of economic development, indicated that men are more interested in political issues and more politically active than women (e.g., Burns, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Gallego, 2007; Paxton, Kunovich, & Hughes, 2007; Schlozman,

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Burns, & Verba, 1999). Such gap is higher in participation in formal politics (De Piccoli & Rollero, 2010; Schlozman, Burns, Verba, & Donahue, 1995; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). Women are more likely to participate in informal political action, and their participation is more likely to take the form of individualised rather than group activities. If politics still seems to be a more typical pursuit of men, research indicates that women are more inclined than men to be involved in civic forms of participation, such as voluntary work (e.g., work involving direct care) (Wilson, 2000). So, gender differences may also result in different types of participation (civic vs. political). Even though women have made considerable improvements over the recent decades (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Mattinson, 2000; McManus, 2006; Paxton et al., 2007; Waring, Greenwood, & Pintat, 2000), the gender gap in political engagement and participation still persists. Recent national statistics collected in Italy (Istat, 2010) indicated that, while at 14 yrs male and female adolescents show similar levels of political interest, the gender gap becomes significant from late adolescence (18–19yrs), steadily increasing in adulthood. Such difference with men is lower among women with a higher education and socioeconomic level.

The research evidence on adolescent populations confirms that some gender differences in political interest and participation do exist, even if the picture is complex. A comparison between adolescents from four different countries (Japan, Mexico, China, and US) indicated that, despite the great variety in political culture, gender differences in political socialization were similar and small (Mayer & Schmidt, 2004). Girls were somewhat less interested in politics in three of four countries, but despite the near universal assumption that politics is “a boys’ thing,” girls value political participation at least as much as boys do, in all four nations. Hooghe and Stolle (2004) found that 14-year-olds in the United States do not differ in anticipated levels of participation, but girls prefer more social-movement related forms, and boys radical and confrontational actions. As regards internet political participation there is a general consensus that young women and young men use new technologies differently (e.g., less access, lower usage, less enjoyment and confidence in using them; Harris, 2008). This indicates that youth participation in politics using the new technology continues to be structured by gender. Research has also shown a gender gap in political activism, with young men more likely to have broken the law, in addition to taking part in direct action and demonstrations, whereas young women were more likely to have donated money to a cause or written to politicians and newspapers. Young men were more likely than girls to say that they would vote in a general election (Briggs, 2008). Altogether, these findings point to the need to further investigate and document gender differences in political engagement and participation during this developmental period.

Explanations of gender differences in political engagement and participation

Traditional explanations of gender differences in political engagement and participation within political sciences have stressed the role of structural social factors (e.g., marital and parental roles, work status) differentially affecting men’s and women’s opportunities and resources for participation (e.g., time available to men and women for engagement in political affairs, access to education, income; access to leadership roles) (Jennings, 1979).

From a psychosocial perspective, a powerful process influencing gender differentiation is gender stereotypes (the tendency by individuals to ascribe typical characteristics and traits to men and women, cf. Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jost & Kay, 2005). Gender stereotypes may have an impact on men’s and women’s perception of one’s competences and abilities on political and civic participation. In fact, the literature indicates that, when gender differences do occur, they often map onto gender stereotypes with women behaving in traditionally feminine ways and with men behaving in traditionally masculine ways (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). Social role theory is among the most influential explanations for why gender stereotypes are confirmed (Eagly, 1987). This theory proposes that women and men confirm gender stereotypes because they act in accordance with their social roles, which are often segregated along gender lines. Such social role expectations are consensual as ideology that is socially shared and built. As such, women and men behave in gender-typed ways because the social roles that they perform are associated with different expectations and require different skills.

In exploring the origin of the gender gap in adolescence, it is important to focus the attention also on the socialisation contexts (or “developmental niches”, Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011) for political engagement and participation available to youths, because it is within these contexts that gender stereotypes can produce their effects. As the literature on socio-political development has indicated (cf. Sherrod et al., 2010a), this requires to extend the analysis also to other forms of participation, more typical and widespread during the adolescent years, that have been found as precursors of mature political engagement and participation, such as civic engagement (e.g., working to solve a community problem, volunteering), and involvement in social and cultural activities in the community, as members of formal and informal groups and organizations, having a social aim (cf. concept of “emergent participatory citizenship”; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). One of such contexts is the *family*, which has been found to be linked in numerous ways to youths’ civic and political engagement and participation (e.g., Chaffee & Yang, 1990; Gniewosz, Noack, & Buhl, 2009; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Research evidence indicates that adolescents whose parents are interested in political and social issues have higher levels of interest in these issues themselves as well as higher levels of civic knowledge (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). A family ethic of social responsibility predicts levels of civic commitment (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998); individuals whose parents engage in civic volunteering have higher levels of civic and political participation, are more interested in news about politics and government, and are more likely to engage in consumer activism (Zukin et al., 2006). Parents who participate in protests are more likely to have offspring who also participate in protests (Jennings, 2002). Despite these consistent results, however, it is less clear in this literature how father and mother engagement and participation may differentially impact engagement and participation of male and female children.

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Moreover, it is important to focus on youth involvement in *formal and non-formal organisations and groups* in the community, which have been confirmed as central for political socialization (Sherrod et al., 2010a; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) (e.g., faith-based groups, community groups, extracurricular activities at school, student government). Several studies have confirmed that adolescent involvement in community organisations offering programmes designed to foster civic and political engagement, predicts adult political participation (Larson & Hansen, 2005). Further, retrospective studies of adults have found that participation in non-formal community youth groups and extracurricular activities is related to engagement in civic associations and political affairs in adulthood (Verba et al., 1995). Analyses of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey show that young adults' political and civic interest and involvement can be traced to their involvement in extracurricular activities as eighth graders (Smith, 1999).

Research has also identified several psychological and psychosocial mechanisms and processes whereby these socializing agencies (or “developmental niches”) impact youths' political engagement and participation (e.g., situated learning; scaffolding, by involvement in structured and adult-supervised organisations providing information, training and access to the political system; perspective taking, by involving youth in discussions with people with different perspectives, interests and needs) (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010). Involvement in community organizations may also enhance the development of civic and political skills (e.g., collaborative problem solving skills), as well as the construction of a supportive social network and social bonding with others, trust toward the institutional order, a sense of belonging to the community and a sense of civic commitment (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007). These processes positively contribute to youths' political engagement and participation (Flanagan et al., 1998; Putnam, 2000; Sherrod et al., 2002). In fact, there is evidence that trust promotes the likelihood that individuals actively engage in society through service, voting, and other forms of self-governance (Kelly, 2009). Similarly, sense of community has been found as a catalyst for participation (Wandersman & Florin, 2000).

One question on which the findings from this literature are less clear is whether the impact (direct or indirect) of the family and of such formal and non-formal community organizations on youths' learning of knowledge, competences and skills for political participation differs according to gender. For instance, the gender role theory perspective contends that parents (as well as other significant adults) hold different expectations on boys' and girls' behaviours, and treat male and female children differently, giving manifest and latent messages about what is appropriate for the specific gender, what are the values and the role of women in the social and political world (e.g., girls are taught to be more passive, private and compassionate, while boys are encouraged toward leadership, public roles, autonomy and self-reliance) (Fox & Lawless, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Such effect may act also indirectly, by the way adults (parents and other adults within institutions, such as school) structure the social environment of male and female children, thus differentially shaping their socio-political development. However, young people may also play an active role in such process; for example, studies on youth activism have found that teens' gendered relationship to parental worry, opposition, and control plays a central role in shaping their activism (Gordon, 2008).

Another possible explanation is in terms of social capital (Putnam, 2000). For instance, the more adolescents are involved in different formal and informal community organizations and groups, and therefore are connected to a wider social network, the more they have opportunities to learn skills and play different social roles. This may promote the development of a more complex civic and political identity and a sense of belonging to the wider community (sense of community, Chiessi, Cicognani, & Sonn, 2010; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The family can play a role in such process: traditionally, male adolescents are more encouraged by parents to become autonomous and make different experiences outside the family than females; with female adolescents parents tend to be more protective and to restrict their participation, often encouraging involvement in more adult-controlled and caring organizations (e.g., religious, volunteer). Some evidence of the greater involvement of males comes from studies on formal group membership during adolescence (e.g., Kirchler, Palmonari, & Pombeni, 1990). The family may thus encourage boys to engage in a higher number of (and partially different) kinds of activities. These processes would reduce females chances to learn competences and skills for political participation. In sum, from this evidence we can conclude that a greater attention toward gender differences in adolescent political engagement and participation is still needed, both in order to clarify the extent of the phenomenon and the role of some explanatory mechanisms, within the family and the community where adolescents become adults.

The studies presented in this article aim to investigate adolescent political engagement and participation, as well as other forms of participation typical at this age (civic, social), and to examine the possible role of the family (Study 1) and of formal and non-formal community organizations and groups (Study 2) in explaining levels of participation and gender differences.

Study 1

Aims

The first aim of this study was to examine the impact of parents' (father and mother) participation in social, civic and political activities on their adolescent children's participation; in particular, we considered adolescent political engagement (political interest) (Emler, *in press*) and participation in political activities, as well as social and civic participation. As a second objective, we aimed to test the moderating effect of adolescents' gender and age group in such relationship. We also preliminarily tested gender and age group differences in all measures of adolescent participation.

Based on the literature examined, we expected the following.

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- H1) Higher levels of political interest and participation in political activities among male vs. female adolescents (Briggs, 2008; Mayer & Schmidt, 2004).
- H2) Higher levels of political interest and participation among late adolescents vs. middle adolescents (Sherrod et al., 2010).
- H3) Fathers should report higher political participation than mothers, whereas mothers were expected to score higher on civic participation (Burns, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Gallego, 2007; Paxton et al., 2007; Schlozman et al., 1999).
- H4) Parents' participation (social, civic, political) would enhance adolescents' social, civic and political participation (Flanagan et al., 1998; Schulz et al., 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). Such effect was expected to differ according to adolescent gender (H5); in particular, considering the strength of gender stereotypes, we expected that female adolescents would report greater political engagement and participation than males when mothers were also more politically active (thus showing more counter-stereotypic behaviours).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in different high schools in Liège (Belgium). The sample includes 1419 adolescents, 42.6% were male and 57.4% female, drawn from the last years of the secondary school covering general and vocational fields (4ème: 37.7%; 5ème: 24.5%; 6ème: 35.1%, 7ème: 2.7%). Age ranged from 15 to 19 years. For the purposes of further analyses, adolescents were classified into two age groups: middle adolescents (16 yrs or younger; $n = 576$) and late adolescents (17 yrs or older; $n = 761$). 9.6% of them were born abroad. As to parent education, 11.0% of the fathers and 11.6% of the mothers had elementary school diploma; 22.6% of the fathers and 17.5% of the mothers secondary professional school diploma; 16% of the fathers and 18.5% of the mothers secondary general school; 25.5% of the fathers and 31.2% of the mothers high school; and 25.8% of the fathers and 21.3% of the mothers a university degree.

Procedure

Participants were approached in schools by trained researchers, after presenting the aims of the study and obtaining the consent of school authorities. A self-administered questionnaire was completed anonymously during class time and took about 50 min. All approached adolescents agreed to fill the questionnaire.

Measures

The questionnaire included the following sections.

A. Parent participation

Questions asked about father and mother involvement in political (protest campaigns, political parties, trade unions), civic (charity activities, youth movements¹) and social activities or associations (pupils' parents associations, church activities, cultural organisations, sport clubs, recreational clubs). Participants were asked to indicate whether father, mother, or both parents were involved or not. For each parent, we calculated three scores of participation (social, civic and political) by averaging across the scores of the specific items (0 = no participation, 1 = participate).

B. Adolescent participation

This was measured by a set of items assessing participation in different social activities (cultural associations, student associations, religious movements, recreational clubs or hobbies), and civic activities (youth movements, human right associations²). Participants were asked to choose whether they participated in each of them, whether they used to participate in the past, or whether they never participated. For each adolescent, an average score of social participation and of civic participation were computed; to this purpose, no participation was coded as 0, and past or current participation were coded as 1.

As regards political engagement, we used the classic and widely used one-item measure of political interest (cf. European Social Survey) (response alternatives from 1 = "not at all" to 4 = "a lot"); moreover, we measured political participation by asking whether adolescents participated in political activities ("Did you participate actively in an activity that you consider as political, such as a demonstration, a boycott, a strike, an occupation, a petition?"). Responses were provided on a four point scale: 1 = "never", 2 = "1–2 times", 3 = "several times", 4 = "often".

¹ In Belgium, youth movements are traditionally voluntary organizations whose aim is to educate, physically and morally, young people between the ages of 8 and 25, to prepare them for their role in society according to a certain conception of life and to guide their first steps in the fulfilment of that role. The most important is the Scouts.

² In Belgium, as well as in Italy, human right associations are not bound to political parties, but are considered an expression of the civil society. Generally, members do not perceive themselves as members of a political organization, so in this context we considered these associations as a form of civic participation.

Table 1
Adolescent participation. Gender and age differences (M and SD).

	Total mean	Male	Female	Sig.	<16yrs	17yrs or older	Sig.
Social participation ^a	.29 (.22)	.27 (.20)	.31 (.23)	$F(1, 1337) = 9.00, p < .01, \eta^2 = .004$	.31 (.21)	.27 (.22)	$F(1, 1337) = 7.56, p < .01, \eta^2 = .008$
Civic participation ^a	.27 (.31)	.26 (.30)	.28 (.31)	$F(1, 1337)$	.30 (.31)	.25 (.30)	$F(1, 337) = 8.08, p < .005, \eta^2 = .006$
Political interest ^b	2.09 (.98)	2.33 (1.00)	2.07 (.95)	$F(1, 337) = 27.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .023$	2.18 (1.00)	2.22 (.96)	$F(1, 1337)$
Political participation ^b	1.64 (.80)	1.61 (.80)	1.67 (.80)		1.67 (.31)	1.62 (.30)	

^a Range 0–1.^b Range 1–4.

Results

Adolescent participation: gender and age group differences

We first assessed adolescents' levels of political interest and participation, as well as levels of social and civic participation, and tested gender and age group differences using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Results (Table 1) indicated higher scores of political interest among male adolescents vs. females. Levels of social participation were higher among female adolescents. No gender differences were found on civic and political participation. As regards age, only a slight reduction in social and civic participation among late adolescents vs. middle adolescents was found and no differences in political interest and participation.

Mother and father participation

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to test the differences between father and mother in each of the three forms of participation. Results (Table 2) suggest a gender role distinction between parents as far as preferred form of participation, consistently with traditional gender role expectations, where men prefer political participation ($F(1, 1404) = 26.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .018$) and women civic involvement ($F(1, 1418) = 14.43, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$). No differences between father and mother were found in social participation.

Impact of parent participation on adolescent engagement and participation

To assess whether father and mother participation (social, civic, political) impacts adolescent political engagement and participation, as well as social and civic participation, and whether such relationship is moderated by adolescent gender and age group, Multivariate Analysis of Variance was used. To this purpose, scores of father and mother participation were dichotomized, by distinguishing non participation in any kind of activity from participation in at least one activity (father-social participation: no = 41.4%, yes = 58.6%; mother social participation: no = 42.8%, yes = 57.2%; father civic participation: no = 66.5%, yes = 33.5%; mother civic participation: no = 61.9%, yes = 38.1%; father political participation: no = 73.5%, yes = 26.5%; mother political participation: no = 78%, yes = 22%).

Results of the six MANOVAs with adolescent gender, age group and each of the six scores of participation (father-social, mother-social, father-civic, mother-civic, father-political, mother-political) indicated that, for all forms of parental participation, adolescents with parents who participate in the same forms of activities score higher than children of non participating parents. The difference is significant for mother social participation (adolescent social participation, $F(1, 1324) = 81.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .038$); father social participation (adolescent social participation, $F(1, 1324) = 44.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$); mother civic participation (adolescent civic participation, $F(1, 1323) = 141.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .102$), father civic participation (adolescent civic

Table 2
Adolescent participation as a function of parents' participation (M and SD).

	Parent participation M (SD)	Adolescent social participation		Adolescent civic participation		Adolescent political interest		Adolescent political participation	
		Parent No	Parent Yes	Parent No	Parent Yes	Parent No	Parent Yes	Parent No	Parent Yes
Social M ^a	.20 (.34)	.23 (.19)	.34 (.22)	.20 (.27)	.33 (.32)	2.08 (1.00)	2.28 (1.97)	1.53 (.73)	1.73 (.84)
Social F ^a	.20 (.32)	.24 (.21)	.32 (.22)	.22 (.28)	.30 (.32)	2.08 (1.01)	2.28 (1.96)	1.55 (.74)	1.71 (.83)
Civic M ^a	.24 (.23)	.25 (.21)	.35 (.21)	.19 (.27)	.39 (.31)	2.14 (.99)	2.29 (.95)	1.56 (.74)	1.78 (.87)
Civic F ^a	.21 (.22)	.26 (.20)	.35 (.22)	.22 (.28)	.37 (.32)	2.14 (.97)	2.32 (.99)	1.56 (.75)	1.80 (.86)
Political M ^a	.09 (.09)	.28 (.21)	.33 (.23)	.25 (.29)	.35 (.34)	2.12 (.97)	2.48 (.98)	1.55 (.73)	1.99 (.93)
Political F ^a	.12 (.23)	.27 (.21)	.33 (.24)	.25 (.30)	.31 (.33)	2.08 (.94)	2.51 (1.04)	1.54 (.72)	1.97 (.91)

^a Range 0–1.

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participation, $F(1, 1323) = 72.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$); mother political participation (adolescent political interest, $F(1, 1312) = 35.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .026$; adolescent political participation, $F(1, 1312) = 70.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .054$); father political participation (adolescent political interest, $F(1, 1312) = 57.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .045$; adolescent political participation, $F(1, 1312) = 79.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .058$). Besides these parent-child similarities between the same forms of participation, results showed evidence of higher adolescent involvement, when parents are themselves more active also in different forms of participation. For example, when mothers participate in social activities, adolescents score higher also in civic participation ($F(1, 1324) = 56.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .039$), political interest ($F(1, 1324) = 15.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .011$) and political participation, $F(1, 1324) = 20.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .016$); similar results were found for father social participation (respectively, $F(1, 1324) = 20.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .012$; $F(1, 1324) = 14.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$; $F(1, 1324) = 12.62, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$) (Table 2). When mothers and fathers participate in civic activities, adolescents show higher social participation (respectively, $F(1, 1323) = 65.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .034$ and $F(1, 1323) = 46.68, p < .001, \eta^2 = .035$), political interest (respectively, $F(1, 1323) = 9.39, p < .005, \eta^2 = .018$ and $F(1, 1323) = 11.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .009$) and political participation (respectively, $F(1, 1323) = 23.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .007$ and $F(1, 1323) = 25.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .019$). Lastly, when mothers and fathers participate in political activities, adolescents are more involved in social participation ($F(1, 1312) = 15.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .007$ and $F(1, 1312) = 15.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .005$) and civic participation ($F(1, 1312) = 23.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .012$ and $F(1, 1312) = 7.77, p < .005, \eta^2 = .003$).

Moreover, while no evidence on the moderation effect of age group emerged, significant interactions between parental participation and adolescent gender were found which consistently indicate that female adolescents score higher in political and social participation than males, when mothers and fathers participate socially and politically. In the following, we describe the specific results. In particular, results indicated a significant gender x mother political participation interaction ($F(1, 1312) = 10.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .008$) (Fig. 1) and a gender x father political participation interaction ($F(1, 1312) = 6.31, p < .05, \eta^2 = .005$) (Fig. 2). Both interactions indicate that having politically active (vs. inactive) fathers and mothers, is associated with higher political participation among females vs. males.

Further, a significant gender x mother social participation interaction ($F(1, 1324) = 6.02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .005$) (Fig. 3) and a gender x father social participation interaction were found for adolescent social participation (Fig. 4) ($F(1, 1324) = 9.67, p < .01, \eta^2 = .005$). Again, the interactions indicate that parents' social participation is associated with children social participation to a higher extent among female adolescents vs. males.

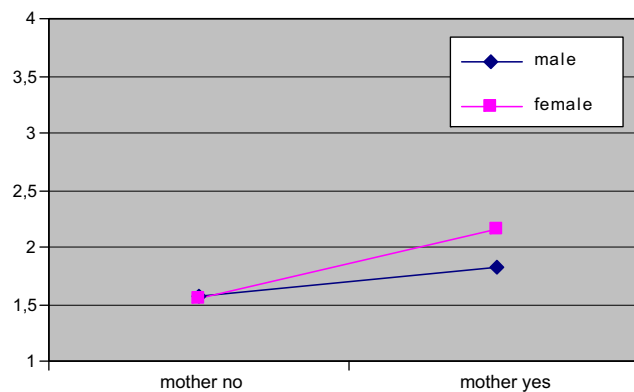


Fig. 1. Adolescent political participation as a function of mother political participation.

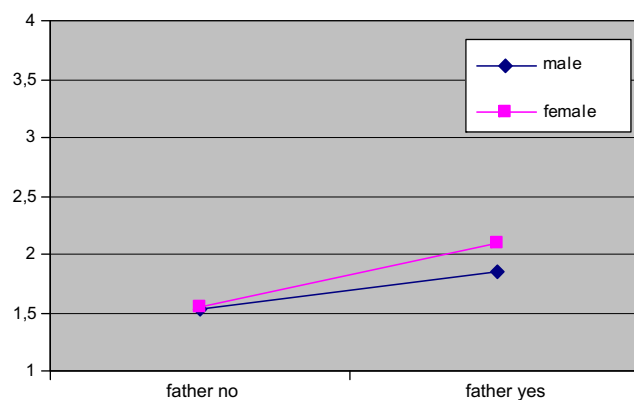


Fig. 2. Adolescent political participation as a function of father political participation.

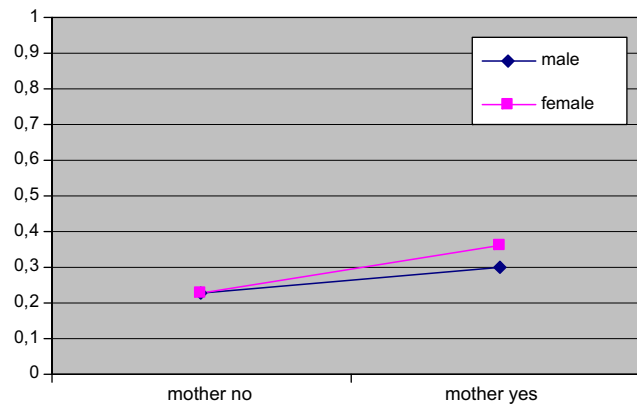


Fig. 3. Adolescent social participation as a function of mother social participation.

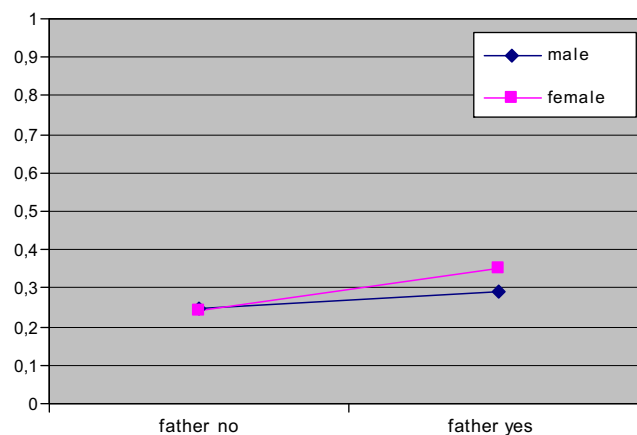


Fig. 4. Adolescent social participation as a function of father social participation.

Discussion

From this study some important findings emerged, which we briefly summarize. First, levels of adolescent political engagement and participation are low and there is some evidence of gender differences, even though only on political interest, thus only partially supporting our hypotheses (H1). Concerning social participation, females reported higher scores than males. As regards differences between age groups, contrary to expectations, no differences were found in levels of political engagement and participation between middle and late adolescents (H2); moreover, results indicated that late adolescents score lower in social and civic participation than middle adolescents.

Adolescents' parents show overall low levels of participation in social and civic activities, and even lower in political issues, and differences emerged between fathers and mothers (fathers more involved in political activities and mothers more involved in civic issues) which are consistent with traditional gender roles and with our hypotheses. Also, results indicated that, when parents are perceived as having higher levels of participation (social, civic and political), also their adolescent children are more involved in the same forms of participation, lending support to the literature and hypotheses (H4) (Briggs, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006). The impact of parental participation (both father and mother) is stronger for female adolescents, particularly on political participation and social participation (H5). This finding supports our hypothesis concerning the role of mothers' political participation on female political participation, but also shows an unexpected pattern, as also fathers' political participation seems to benefit more daughters than sons.

Study 2

The second study focused on adolescents' engagement and participation in community organizations and groups. The general aim was to investigate whether adolescents' social and civic participation influence their political engagement (political interest) and participation in political activities. More specific aims were (a) to assess whether such effect is moderated by adolescent gender and the type of school attended; in particular, we considered students from college

preparatory schools (lycee), technical institutes and vocational schools (preparing youths for a job); secondly, we wanted to assess (b) whether the effects of social and civic participation on indicators of political interest and participation are mediated by adolescents' sense of community and trust in institutions (Albanesi et al., 2007; Kelly, 2009). We preliminarily assessed gender and school type differences in all the variables.

Hypotheses were the following, starting from descriptive analyses.

- H1) As regards gender differences, we expected that male adolescents would score higher in political engagement (political interest) and participation (Briggs, 2008; Mayer & Schmidt, 2004). Male adolescents were also expected to have higher sense of community than females, consistently with the literature (cf. Chiessi et al., 2010).
- H2) Considering differences by type of school, consistently with the literature on the role of education (Istat, 2010), we expected that students from lycee would score higher on political engagement and participation than students from less qualified schools (particularly vocational schools). No specific hypotheses were advanced on differences according to school type in sense of community and trust in institutions.
- H3) We expected that social and civic participation would positively enhance adolescents' political interest and participation. The impact of social and civic participation on political interest and participation was expected to be stronger among male adolescents than females (cf. Kirchler et al., 1990).
- H4) We expected that sense of community and institutional trust would predict political engagement and participation and partially mediate the impact of social and civic participation on political interest and participation (Albanesi et al., 2007; Kelly, 2009).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in different high schools (lycee, technical institute, vocational school) in two large cities in the North of Italy. The sample was constructed so as to be representative of the population of students of these three types of schools in the area, which capture students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample included 1871 adolescents attending the last year of high school ($M = 18.21$, $SD = .76$). 46.9% were male and 53.1% female. 94.5% were Italian and 5.5% migrants. As to school, 47.5% were from lycee, 37% from a technical institute and 15.5% from vocational school. As to father education, 47.6% had completed compulsory schooling, 37.4% high school diploma, 16.1% had a university degree. Considering mother education, 41.1% had completed compulsory schooling, 43.6% had a high school diploma, and 15.3% a university degree. Parent level of education was slightly higher among males (mother education: 55% males and 50.1% females had a mother with at least a diploma, $p < .05$; the percentages for father education: 61.9% vs. 56.3%, $p < .01$). Parents' occupations included: high social class (professionals, managers, etc.; 33.2% of fathers and 11.4% of mothers), middle class (clerks: 25.1% of fathers and 48.1% of mothers; autonomous job: 17.1% of fathers and 7.3% of mothers), manual workers (21.7% of fathers and 13.2% of mothers) and unemployed (2.9% of fathers and 20.0% of mothers).

Procedure

Participants were approached in schools by trained researchers, after presenting the aims of the study and obtaining the consent of school authorities. A self-administered questionnaire was completed anonymously by participants and took about 30–40 min. Students received credit for their participation; none refused to fill the questionnaire.

Measures

The questionnaire included several sections. For the purposes of this paper, the following parts will be considered.

A. Political engagement and participation

Political engagement was measured by the same item used in Study 1, assessing level of political interest (response alternatives from 1 = "not at all" to 4 = "a lot"). As regards political participation, we considered voting intentions at the subsequent elections (1 item, response alternatives from 1 = "definitely no" to 5 = "definitely yes"), and internet political participation (3 items, concerning use of internet to obtain information, to express opinions on political issues on blogs or websites, and participation to protest or boycott; response alternatives ranged from 1 = "never" to 4 = "regularly"). An overall score of Internet political participation was computed ($\alpha = .67$).

B. Social and civic participation

This was measured by a set of items assessing social participation (active membership of religious groups, cultural associations, football fan clubs) and civic participation (active membership of human rights³ or emergency associations,

³ See note 2.

scouts, volunteer associations, environmental associations and student councils). Participants were asked to choose whether they participated to each of them, whether they used to participate in the past, or whether they never participated. Two scores of social and civic participation were computed, by summing across the items, after coding current and past participation as 1 and no participation as 0.

C. Trust in institutions

We considered the main institutions of which adolescents have some direct experience and which may thus contribute to the construction of generalized trust toward the social order (church, school, police, media, government and political parties). Participants were asked whether they trusted each of the institutions considered (response on a Likert-type scale from 1 = “not at all” to 4 = “a lot”). Alpha for the total scale was .70.

D. Sense of community

It was measured with the Sense of Community Scale for Adolescents (Chiessi et al., 2010), measuring sense of community with reference to the local community (town), and including 20 items. Alpha for the total scale was .83.

E. Sociodemographic variables

We included gender, nationality, family composition, parent education and occupation.

Results

Descriptive statistics and differences according to gender and type of school

Multivariate Analysis of Variance was used to test gender and school type differences in political engagement and participation, and in social and civic participation, as well as in sense of community and trust in institutions (Table 3).

Results confirmed the presence of significant gender differences in political interest and internet political participation; as expected, male adolescents score higher than females. Moreover, male adolescents score higher also in social participation. A coherent pattern according to type of school also emerged, indicating that students from lycee show higher political engagement and participation, as well as social and civic participation, than adolescents from other types of school, and especially, vocational schools (Table 3). Considering differences in sense of community, male adolescents score higher than females, while females obtain higher scores in institutional trust than males. Trust in institutions is lower among lycee students.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for all the variables. Gender and school differences (M and SD).

	Total mean	Gender		Sig.	School type			Sig.
		M	F		Lycee	Technical school	Vocational school	
Social participation ^e	.67 (.77)	.78 (.83)	.56 (.71)	$F(1, 1699) = 29.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .018$	.78a (.81)	.65 ab (.74)	.57b (.74)	$F(2, 1699) = 9.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .011$
Civic participation ^a	.71 (1.00)	.73 (1.05)	.66 (.96)	ns	.80a (1.02)	.63 ab (.95)	.70b (1.03)	$F(2, 1699) = 5.14, p < .01, \eta^2 = .006$
Political interest ^b	2.14 (.89)	2.30 (.92)	1.97 (.83)	$F(1, 1699) = 53.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .031$	2.34a (.86)	2.14b (.86)	1.93c (.89)	$F(2, 1699) = 25.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .029$
Internet political participation ^b	1.62 (.65)	1.74 (.71)	1.50 (.56)	$F(1, 1699) = 50.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .029$	1.72a (.66)	1.58b (.62)	1.55b (.64)	$F(2, 1699) = 10.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .012$
Voting intentions ^c	3.73 (1.33)	3.78 (1.35)	3.68 (1.32)	ns	4.04a (1.21)	3.79b (1.36)	3.34c (1.47)	$F(2, 1699) = 29.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .034$
Sense of community ^d	2.16 (.55)	2.24 (.56)	2.08 (.53)	$F(1, 1777) = 33.66, p < .001, \eta^2 = .019$	2.19 (.54)	2.15 (.55)	2.13 (.57)	ns
Trust in institutions ^b	2.08 (.47)	2.02 (.49)	2.16 (.44)	$F(1, 1777) = 15.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .011$	2.03a (.45)	2.10 ab (.48)	2.10b (.48)	$F(2, 1777) = 3.89, p < .05, \eta^2 = .004$

Note: means with the same letters are not significantly different (Duncan $p < .05$).

^a Range 0–5.

^b Range 1–4.

^c Range 1–5.

^d Range 0–4.

^e Range 0–3.

Impact of social and civic participation on political engagement and participation

To assess whether adolescents' social and civic participation impacts political engagement and participation, and whether such relationship is moderated by adolescent gender and type of school, Multivariate Analysis of Variance was conducted. To

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this purpose, scores of social and civic participation were dichotomized, by distinguishing non participation in any kind of activity from participation in at least one activity (social participation: no = 47.4%, yes = 52.6%; civic participation: no = 53.1%, yes = 46.9%).

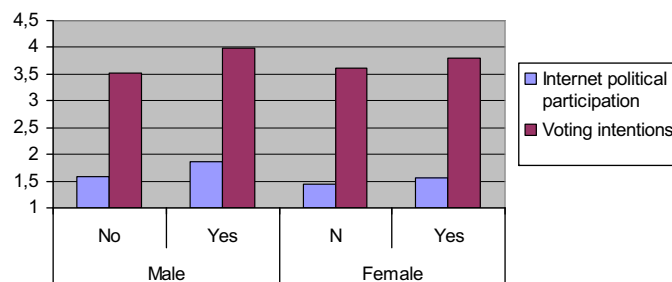
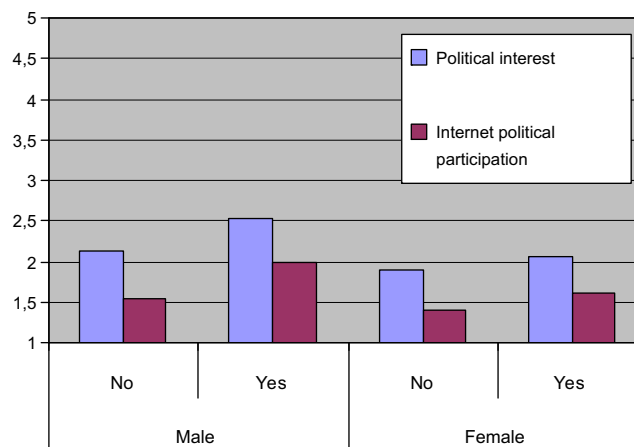
Results of MANOVA on gender by type of school by social participation indicated a significant main effect of social participation on all indicators of political interest and participation (Table 4): adolescents who participate have higher levels of political interest, internet political participation and voting intentions. An interaction effect of social participation with gender also emerged for internet participation ($F(1, 1693) = 5.09, p < .05, \eta^2 = .003$) and voting intentions ($F(1, 1693) = 4.87, p < .05, \eta^2 = .003$): the impact of social participation on political participation is stronger for males than females (Fig. 5).

MANOVA also indicated a significant main effect of civic participation on all indicators of political participation. Adolescents scoring higher in civic participation also score higher on political interest and participation (Table 4). A significant interaction of civic participation with gender also emerged for internet participation ($F(1, 1693) = 15.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .009$) and voting intentions ($F(1, 1693) = 6.65, p < .01, \eta^2 = .004$): the effect of civic participation is stronger among males vs. females (Fig. 6). No significant interaction effects of type of school by social participation were found.

Table 4

Differences in political interest and participation based on levels of social and civic participation (M and SD).

	Social participation		Sig.	Civic participation		Sig.
	N	Y		N	Y	
Political interest ^a	1.99 (.85)	2.27 (.89)	$F(1, 1693) = 40.54,$ $p < .001, \eta^2 = .023$	2.02 (.86)	2.29 (.89)	$F(2, 1693) = 37.22,$ $p < .001, \eta^2 = .022$
Internet political participation ^b	1.51 (.56)	1.72 (.70)	$F(1, 1693) = 39.53,$ $p < .001, \eta^2 = .023$	1.47 (.52)	1.81 (.72)	$F(2, 1693) = 107.42,$ $p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$
Voting intentions ^c	3.57 (1.39)	3.89 (1.26)	$F(1, 1693) = 21.79,$ $p < .001, \eta^2 = .013$	3.62 (1.39)	3.87 (1.26)	$F(2, 1693) = 12.86,$ $p < .001, \eta^2 = .008$

^a Range 0–4.^b Range 1–4.^c Range 1–5.**Fig. 5.** Adolescent political engagement and participation as a function of social participation and gender.**Fig. 6.** Adolescent political engagement and participation as a function of civic participation and gender.

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Mediation analyses on sense of community and trust in institutions

In this section we present Regression Analyses conducted to test, separately for male and female adolescents, the predictive role of social and civic participation on political interest, voting intentions and internet political participation, as well as the mediation analyses on sense of community and institutional trust (Sobel test). Table 5 shows the correlations among the variables separately in the male and female subsamples.

Table 5
Correlations with measures of political engagement and participation (male and female subsamples).

	Political interest	Voting intentions	Internet political participation
Voting intentions	.49**/.44**		
Internet political participation	.56**/.50**	.25**/.19**	
Trust in institutions	.07*/.08*	.21**/.17**	-.09*/-.11**
Sense of community	.04/.06*	.104**/.08*	-.01/.08*
Civic participation	.16**/.11**	.11**/.08*	.32**/.24**
Social participation	.22**/.15**	.17**/.07*	.28**/.22**

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$.

Mediation effects of sense of community

We first tested, using Regression analysis, and separately for male and female adolescents, the role of social participation and sense of community in predicting *political interest*. Regression analysis conducted on the sample of male adolescents indicated that social participation significantly predicts political interest (beta = .22, $p < .001$) but sense of community was not significant (beta = *ns*). Similar findings emerged from the Regression analysis on the female sample (social participation: beta = .13, $p < .001$; sense of community: beta = *ns*). Also Regression analyses conducted to test the predictive role of civic participation and sense of community indicated only a significant effect of civic participation, both in the male sample (beta = .17, $p < .001$; sense of community: beta = *ns*) and among female adolescents (civic participation: beta = .10, $p < .01$; sense of community: beta = *ns*).

Regression analysis conducted to test the role of social participation and sense of community in predicting *voting intentions*, indicated a different pattern of results among males and females. In particular, among male adolescents, both social participation and sense of community (beta = .11, $p < .01$) positively predict voting intentions and the coefficient of social participation is reduced (from .17, $p < .001$ to .15, $p < .001$) when SoC is entered in the regression equation. Sobel test is significant (2.81, $p = .004$). However, in the female sample, the only significant finding is a slight direct positive effect of Sense of community on voting intentions (beta = .07, $p < .05$). Considering the regression analysis to test the role of civic participation and sense of community in predicting voting intentions, the pattern of results is similar in both gender groups. Among males, both civic participation and sense of community (beta = .13, $p < .001$) predict voting intentions and the coefficient for the former is reduced (from beta = .10, $p < .01$ to .09, $p < .05$) when sense of community is included (Sobel test = 2.10, $p = .017$). Also among females, both civic participation and sense of community (beta = .07, $p < .05$) are significant predictors, and the coefficient of civic participation is reduced (from beta = .07, $p < .05$ to beta = .06, $p < .05$) when SoC is entered into the equation (Sobel test = 1.65, $p = .04$).

Regression analysis on social participation and sense of community as predictors of *internet political participation* indicated a significant effect only of social participation, both among males (beta = .28, $p < .001$) and among females (beta = .20, $p < .001$). Testing the predictive role of civic participation and sense of community, results of the regression analysis indicated only a significant direct effect of the former, both among males (beta = .33, $p < .001$) and among females (beta = .22, $p < .001$).

Mediation effects of trust in institutions

Results of Regression Analyses on social participation and institutional trust in predicting *political interest* indicated only a slight significant effect of trust among females (beta = .07, $p < .05$). Regression analysis on civic participation and institutional trust predicting political interest indicated only a direct effect of trust, both among males (beta = .07, $p < .05$) and among females (beta = .08, $p < .01$).

Regression analysis on social participation and trust in institutions predicting *voting intentions* in the male subsample, confirmed that trust predicts voting intentions (beta = .19, $p < .001$) and reduces the predictive effect of social participation (from beta = .17, $p < .001$ to .15, $p < .001$) when entered in the equation (Sobel test = 2.83, $p = .002$). However, among female participants, only a direct effect of trust on voting intentions was found (beta = .17, $p < .001$). Regression analysis including civic participation and institutional trust indicated that, among males, both civic participation and trust (beta = .21, $p < .001$) predict voting intentions, and the coefficients of the former decrease (from .10, $p < .01$ to .09, $p < .05$) by entering trust into the equation (Sobel test = 1.79, $p = .03$). Among females, only direct effects of civic participation (beta .08, $p < .06$) and trust (beta = .18, $p < .001$) were found.

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Regression analysis on *Internet political participation* including social participation and trust in institutions indicated that, among males, both social participation ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) and trust ($\beta = -.11, p < .001$) significantly predict Internet participation. However, the mediation (Sobel test) was not significant. Similar findings emerged among females (social participation: $\beta = .22, p < .001$; trust: $\beta = -.12, p < .001$). Finally, the Regression Analysis testing the role of civic participation and institutional trust on internet political participation indicated, in both subsamples, a significant effect of both civic participation and trust in institutions but no significant mediation effects (Sobel test) (males: civic participation: $\beta = .33, p < .001$; trust: $\beta = -.10, p < .01$; females: civic participation: $\beta = .23, p < .001$; trust: $\beta = -.09, p < .01$).

Discussion

Results of this study confirmed the presence of gender differences in adolescents' political interest and internet political participation, in favour of males (H1); moreover, male adolescents report higher social participation than females. Such higher social involvement of Italian male (vs. female) adolescents might be explained in part by the characteristics of the organisations and associations offering social activities for adolescents: in Italy such organizations have limited structure and thus attract sometimes also at risk youths (mostly males; e.g., football fan clubs). Females tend to be more selective in their choices and prefer – and are encouraged by parents to choose – more structured and adult supervised activities. The higher social involvement of male adolescents has been confirmed by other studies conducted in the Italian context (cf. Albanesi et al., 2007), and may be associated with gender differences in the nature of adolescents' social networks, and consequently, with the opportunities to develop sense of belonging and sense of community referred to the local territorial community. In fact, consistently with our hypotheses, and with the literature (Chiessi et al., 2010), males score higher than females also in sense of community.

Results also supported our hypotheses considering differences by *type of school* (H2): students from lycee reported higher scores in the measures of all forms of participation, than students from vocational schools. Similar findings have been found in previous studies conducted in Italy (e.g., Albanesi et al., 2007). A possible explanation may be found in the characteristics of the two types of schools, in terms of requiring an investment in long term education, hopefully leading to obtaining qualified intellectual professions (in case of lycee) vs. planning to finding a job. The curriculum of the former also devotes a considerable emphasis to stimulating students' reflection and discussion over social, political, cultural issues, so the greater interest toward political issues is something expected from lycee students. Students of vocational schools are generally more focused on concrete and short-term life objectives; such schools are often selected by those youths who do not show strong intellectual abilities, interest and motivation toward learning. Further, even if in this article we did not include a consideration of SES, we should also consider the association between type of school and family socioeconomic and cultural background in Italy: generally, students attending lycee come from higher SES families, which have greater social resources and wider social networks, and this might favour their offspring's social, civic and political involvement. Trust in institutions was lower among lycee students.

There is evidence in the data that social and civic participation in adolescence positively enhance adolescents' political interest and participation and voting intentions (H3). The impact of social participation and of civic participation on political interest and participation is stronger among males than females (H4).

We expected that sense of community and institutional trust would partially mediate the impact of social and civic participation on political interest and participation. Results on this point only partially confirm our hypotheses (H5) and show a different picture depending on the type of participation and the hypothesised mediator. Considering sense of community, there is evidence that sense of community significantly predicts *voting intentions* and partially mediates the impact of both social participation (among males) and civic participation on it. Thus, it appears that adolescents' involvement in social and civic activities enhances more conventional forms of participation by strengthening the bonding relationship with the community. No significant effect of sense of community was found for political interest and internet political participation. Institutional trust positively predicts voting intentions both directly, and by mediating the impact of social participation. Thus, involvement in social participation may enhance conventional participation as voting, by strengthening adolescents' trust toward institutions. It is interesting to notice that trust in institutions negatively predicts internet political participation, suggesting that trust in social institutions is important to voluntarily decide to vote, but lack of trust induces adolescents to become more involved in alternative non conventional forms of participation, such as the use of the internet. These findings are promising in terms of illuminating mechanisms and processes explaining political interest and participation; however, we must caution that the cross sectional nature of the data is a potential limitation for their validity. Recent positions have questioned the use of mediation analysis on cross sectional data, even if conducted following the guidelines provided by Baron and Kenny (1986). Thus a further testing of the relationships between the variables with longitudinal data is necessary in order to provide additional support.

General discussion

Recent perspectives on socio-political development during adolescence emphasise the need to approach the explanation of this phenomenon using a multidisciplinary and life span approach, by acknowledging the multiple factors (from the micro level to the macro social and structural level) and influences within the different socialization contexts (family, school, political and community organizations, media, etc.), as well as the active role of individuals in the processes (psychological, affective, psychosocial) of social construction of citizenship (Flanagan, 2004; 2010b; Sherrod et al., 2002, 2010a). The role of

gender in political participation has been the focus of considerable theoretical and empirical interest and debate in the literature on adult populations, but relatively minor attention has been devoted to the investigation of such differences during adolescence. Existing studies suggest that some differences between boys and girls are present also during this age period (Briggs, 2008; Harris, 2008; Mayer & Schmidt, 2004), and increase across adulthood. This raises the issue of the role of socialization contexts in differentially affecting male and female youths' political engagement and participation. In particular, results indicate that the high school period is crucial for the emergence of gender differences. Such period is characterized by a greater youths' involvement in a range of socialization contexts; moreover, it is also the period in which they begin to learn and become aware of how the wider society conceives about gender differences by differentially structuring the positions and roles of men and women within the social order. Such differences are also vehicled through the school system: for example, vocational schools in Italy are typically distinguished according to a gender dimension, based on the types of competences and skills on which training is based; some of them are attended mostly by males (e.g., schools providing craft and industrial skills, technological and mechanical skills) and others by females (e.g., fashion and design, hairdressing, food and catering). Similarly, lycee comprises both classic and scientific education; even though less evident nowadays, the former (including education on Latin, Greek and Italian literature and philosophy) was traditionally preferred by female adolescents and the latter (providing education for students interested in choosing science and medicine at the university) by males. Gender differentiation continues also through university, by the differential choices of degree studies by male and female youths (e.g., caring professions are still preferred by females). This implicit gender differentiation within the school system becomes salient to youth when they are facing the choices of the type of high school (which occurs in Italy at 14yrs).

One key theoretical explanation of gender differences is in terms of Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and of the impact of gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are still widespread in our societies, and may constrain and channel youths' participatory behaviors in gendered ways by differentially impacting boys' and girls' perception of one's competences and abilities on political participation, thus affecting the opportunities to learn political knowledge and skills (cf. Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jost & Kay, 2005). The impact of such gender stereotypes is experienced by youths within everyday socialization contexts (or "participatory niches", Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011), in the family and community organizations, through the expectations of adults and their structuring (scaffolding) of contexts and activities along gender dimensions.

The two studies described in this article aimed to further investigate adolescents' political interest and participation in political activities, including also internet participation and voting intentions. Together, they covered a range of different indicators of political engagement and participation, measured on youths from two European countries, Belgium and Italy. Results confirm the gender difference in political engagement (interest) and in the use of the Internet for political participation, whereas male and female adolescents do not differ in their involvement in political activities in their community and in voting intentions. As far as social and civic participation, results are not consistent between the two studies (e.g., in social participation), presumably due to the differential opportunity structures available to youths in the two countries (e.g., nature of organizations and associations and their underlying structure and educational philosophy) and there is no evidence of the gender difference more clearly evident among adults (including adolescents' parents), indicating that females, more than males, prefer civic forms of participation (cf. Study 1). Considering the cross-sectional design of the studies, it is not clear from the data whether such lack of differences is due to historical, social and cultural differences between the two generations (e.g., in terms of the strengths of gender stereotypes on political participation and of different opportunities and resources for participation for the two genders), to developmental factors or to other types of explanations. The pattern of results according to age was unexpected in the light of the existing empirical literature, as no increase in levels of political interest and participation emerged from middle to late adolescents, and we even found significantly lower levels (though mean differences are very small in absolute terms) in social and civic involvement in the older group.

A second issue investigated in the first study is the role of father and mother, and specifically, their own degree of participation (in social, civic and political activities) in influencing their offspring's engagement and participation. There is evidence in the literature indicating that, for each form of participation considered, parents' involvement is associated with adolescent participation (Flanagan et al., 1998; Schulz et al., 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). Our findings further support these results; however, an additional and new result is that the impact of parents' participation affects their offspring's participation to a greater extent among girls than among boys. So, it appears that the family has a special role in enhancing political participation among girls; it is interesting to notice that both fathers and mothers have a greater influence over girls' (vs. boys') participation. Unfortunately, we did not assess the role of parents in the second study, so it is not clear whether this is a general result or whether more specific factors in the Belgian context might help to explain it.

In the second study we examined the impact of adolescents' involvement in social and civic forms of participation in influencing their political engagement and participation. A considerable body of evidence in the literature, including longitudinal studies, shows that involvement in formal and non-formal community organizations and extracurricular activities in adolescence, predicts youths' political participation, even in adulthood (cf. Sherrod et al., 2010a; Verba et al., 1995). The data emerging from our studies further confirm the association between social, civic and political forms of participation, consistently with perspectives on socio-political development (cf. Flanagan, 2004; Sherrod et al., 2010b). Other potential explanatory processes can be considered, however, including self-selection processes (e.g., broader personality differences, inducing some youths to become involved in different types of activities, with different social and political aims) and social selection (e.g., recruitment strategies, Verba et al., 1995). We were especially interested in investigating gender differences in this process, and thus tested our hypotheses in a sample of late adolescents, the period in which national statistics in Italy indicated that gender differences in political engagement become significant. Results confirmed that youths'

involvement in civic and social participation is associated with greater political engagement and participation among all youths and more strongly among boys; the latter appear involved in a larger number of community organizations and seem to benefit from such participation to a greater extent than girls. Such finding supports an explanation in terms of social capital: male adolescents, more involved in a larger network of formal and non-formal community organizations and groups, have greater opportunities to learn and practice skills and play significant roles (including leadership roles), as well as constructing significant relationships and bonds with other people. The higher scores in sense of community referred to the town among males, which is in line with previous studies (cf. Chiessi et al., 2010), appears consistent with such explanation.

In the literature within Community psychology, there is evidence on the role of sense of community in enhancing participation, both among adults (Wandersman & Florin, 2000), and among adolescents (Albanesi et al., 2007). In our data, the importance of sense of community in influencing adolescent political participation is confirmed for more conventional forms (voting intentions); additionally, there is evidence (and more strongly among male adolescents) of a mediation role of sense of community in the association between social and civic participation, on the one hand, and voting intentions, on the other. This result indicates that by participating in social and civic activities, young people may strengthen their sense of belonging to the local community, and become more motivated to be involved in conventional forms of participation. Also trust in institutions plays a significant role in affecting youths' political participation, but its influence differs depending on the form of participation. Institutional trust seems to be important for motivating youth to engage in conventional political participation (voting), consistently with the literature (Kelly, 2009): this means that trust in institutions (such as, for example, the government and political parties), is a prerequisite for deciding to support their functioning by valuing democratic procedures like vote (like classic political socialization theories would suggest, cf. Flanagan, 2004). On the contrary, the use of non conventional means of participation such as the Internet, is more typical of youths who do not trust social institutions. It would be interesting, in future research, to test whether the web is considered as an alternative means of participation, available to youth when other channels are not considered effective or trustworthy, like these findings would seem to suggest. Trust in institutions shows direct effects on participation and only marginally (e.g., voting intentions), mediates the impact of social participation on conventional political participation.

Results concerning differences based on type of school are consistent with existing findings on the role of education in political engagement and participation; in particular, students from lycee, which prepares youth for entering university, show higher political interest and participation than students from vocational schools, which typically prepare youth for entering the work context, generally aspiring to less qualified types of jobs. Such differences can be explained in part by the nature of the school curriculum, which differentially emphasizes learning of contents and skills important for political participation. Moreover, considering the association still existing in Italy, between type of school and family socioeconomic background, such finding is consistent with the role of education and socioeconomic status in differentially impacting youths' political participation. Such effect appears similar for male and female adolescents, at least during this age period (cf. Istat, 2010).

Altogether, the two studies seem coherent in indicating that the family (specifically, parents' own involvement in social, civic and political issues) enhances political engagement and participation especially of female adolescents, whereas involvement in community organizations and groups offering opportunities for social and civic participation, is more influential on male adolescents' political engagement and participation. This evidence would seem to confirm that the pathways toward citizenship are partially different in male and female middle and late adolescents (cf. also Gordon, 2008).

Some limitations of the present studies should be acknowledged. There is clearly the need to focus more deeply – and using different methodologies (e.g., including qualitative studies, longitudinal designs, etc.) – into the processes and dynamics of functioning of the different socialization contexts for male and female adolescents in order to better understand their impact on political participation and the differences between the two genders. In particular, further research should investigate the role of gender also along a developmental dimension, using longitudinal designs.

From a methodological and psychometric point of view, we might question the use of one-item measures of some constructs, such as political interest; the choice for this item was justified by its popularity and the opportunity to allow comparisons of the data with previous studies and larger national and international datasets (e.g., ESS), as well as to have a “pure” measure of political interest. Moreover, participation was measured using dichotomous items (asking whether a not individuals participated); other important dimensions of participation (e.g., frequency and intensity of participation, subjective meaning of participation) should be assessed in order to obtain a broader picture of the phenomenon. Future studies should work toward constructing more adequate instruments for capturing social, civic and political engagement and participation (cf. also Emler, in press).

As already mentioned, in these studies we did not control for the role of family SES, which may partly explain the pattern or results related to the school types. For example, in the second study, students from lycee generally come from higher SES families than students attending vocational schools. Further studies should attempt to disentangle the specific role of SES and of types of school (and associated differences in curriculum type, etc.).

Moreover, the cross sectional design of the studies did not allow to disentangle the role of individual differences (e.g. in personality) which may additionally help explain the positive association between the different types of participation, besides actual learning through direct involvement, and other contextual factors (e.g., recruitment strategies, nature of organizations and associations). Previous studies, including longitudinal designs, support the political development theory, but how personality adds to the explanation of participation deserves further attention. For example, youths with a more agentic personality might engage in a range of different forms of participation.

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Finally, further research should attempt at better distinguishing the role of the different factors (structural, cultural, historical, economic, etc.) that may differentially affect political participation, including a consideration of other socio-demographic variables (e.g., migrant status and ethnic background), here not considered owing to the low numbers of participants in the sample.

In conclusion, findings from these two studies significantly add to the literature on youths' political socialization processes, also suggesting the need to further investigate the specific psychosocial processes influencing the gender gap in political participation still existing in different countries. Such focus is helpful both from a research and an intervention and policy perspective, in the attempt to reduce sources of gender inequalities in resources and opportunities within societies. In particular, results concerning the differences in participation according to the school type suggest that tracking students by school type is a good policy for promoting broad civic engagement, by better tailoring the contents and methods of citizenship education to the specific needs, competences, motivations and life goals of the different students.

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