

# SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A COMPLEX PUZZLE?

CONCEIÇÃO PEQUITO TEIXEIRA, PAULO PEREIRA

## Abstract

The current decline in political participation is a great cause of concern among political scientists, opinion makers and political leaders. There are two main approaches to this decline that occurs especially in Europe. The first one is the 'modernization' thesis. The second is the 'social individualization' thesis. Nevertheless, the empirical debate has not been successful in providing a detailed record of the relations between social capital and political participation. Much of it is due to a reductionist use of both concepts' operationalization.

In this article we have two main goals. Firstly, we showed that the concepts of social capital and political participation are, theoretically and empirically, multidimensional concepts. Secondly, we assessed, through multivariate regression analyses, the explicative capacities of the more traditional political participation explanatory models: 'the individual resources model' and the 'civic voluntarism model' together with the more recent 'social capital relational model'.

## Introduction

The concept of social capital is far from being new despite its enormous influence. Robert Putnam mostly holds the credit for recovering and universalizing the concept through his pioneer work *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993), written with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanneti. However, its origins go back to the nineteenth century and Alexis de Tocqueville, in his work *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), can be held as its great inspirer.

Still, the first authors in the twentieth century to systematically develop the concept of social capital were two sociologists: Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1993, 1999). In one of the very first publications in this area Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital as 'made up of social obligations ('connections')' and underline the fact that we are dealing with relations between individuals within specific groups or categories (Bourdieu 1986, p. 246). Coleman developed a similar approach but stressed the common aspects of social capital by their functions: They all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure (1990, p. 302). Putnam (1993) further improved the concept to address 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions' (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). Therefore, high social capital communities should act together collectively more often than low social capital communities. Thus, many authors defend these social-relation-based resources were expected to be particularly effective in solving problems that lack collective cooperation, often called 'dilemmas of collective actions,' 'the prisoner's dilemma,' 'the free-rider problem,' (Coleman, 1990a, 1990b; Putnam, 1993).

Accordingly, the results of higher levels of social capital were usually associated with benefits or gains in productivity, efficiency, or cooperativeness (Coleman, 1999; Fukuyama, 1995; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Paxton, 1999; Putnam, 2000). Researchers who were particularly interested in revealing how an individual's participatory behavior in the political arena could be facilitated by these social resources have examined the roles of what they have termed distinctively as 'social capital serving civic ends' (Putnam, 1995), or 'politically relevant social capital' (La Due Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998).

Despite the frequent use of the term political participation, its terminological vagueness leaves room for different definitions. This also applies to the study of political participation which is comprehensively and simultaneously defined as 'being part of' and 'taking part in', i.e. as the ability and right to belong to a certain political community, on the one hand and, on the other, as the ability and right to take part in a certain political act or process, or participate in political decision formation (Schultze, 1998, p. 470).

Even though they social capital and political participation are not synonymous. Although there is a thesis formed in these last decades that draw the concept of social capital and political participation together, making the first one of its independent or explicative causes. By this we mean the thesis of the 'decline of political participation'. In effect, according to some scholars, there has been a decline in political participation in the last three decades or so, which was associated by Putnam in 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', fundamentally to the decline of some dimensions of the social capital stock. Having for reference the data of General Social Survey, the author suggests that the social capital is eroding in USA, for force of the 'movement of women into the workforce', the 're-potting hypothesis and other demographic changes have made impact on the number of individuals engaging in civic associations, but also and mainly technological 'individualizing' of leisure time via television, Internet and eventually 'virtual reality helmets'.

It is no surprise that the topic of political participation has been widely covered recently among academics, journalists and politicians in most liberal representative democracies. These concerns are mainly the decline in voter turnout and growing electoral volatility (Blais and Rubenson, 2013), the decrease of partisan identification (Garzia, 2013; Thomassen and Rosema, 2009), as well as partisan affiliation and activism (Whitetely, 2011) and other mainstream political activities.

### ***Social Capital and Political Action Repertoires***

There are two main approaches to the thesis of the 'decline of political participation' observed in the last decades. The first one is the 'modernization thesis', which finds in Inglehart (1977, 1990; 1997) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005) some of its most representative authors among many. Secondly, we have the 'social individualization' or 'social atomization' thesis, with Robert Putnam and his theory of social capital as one of its most prominent authors.

As a forerunner of cultural modernization theories, Ronald Inglehart claimed there was a substantial transformation in the values prioritization among modern industrialized societies (1990; 1997). With this transformation, post-materialistic

values overlap traditional materialistic values. This cultural change in mass public values will have led to a deepening of democratic values, a larger participation and political intervention in public life by citizens, together with the great support for the improvement of the functioning of democratic institutions and the creation of alternative political intervention channels.

'Critical citizens' (Norris, 1999, 2002), 'post-materialistic citizens' (Inglehart, 1997) or 'disaffected citizens' (Torcal and Montero, 2006) would focus their civic energy in those new ways of political participation, characterized by direct action (without the interference of parties that represent them) and carried out by non-hierarchical organizations marked by their horizontality, fluidity, pragmatism, direct mobilization form through the new information and communication technologies, namely the Internet and punctual in time.

Be that as it may, when treating empirically many researchers argue that the alleged decline in political participation observed in previous studies might be due to a measurement artifact: in focusing solely on the level of political participation, these studies failed to consider possible new forms and patterns of political participation (Dalton, 2008, Stolle and Hooghe, 2004). Still, it has been argued that researchers should focus more on the structure of political participation and not only on participation levels.

### **Social Capital and Political Participation Explanatory Models**

One of the main goals of this article is to identify if, and to what extent, social capital strengthens both conventional and unconventional participation. Our research consists of empirical verification in several European regions with stronger and consolidated democracies and weaker ones still in consolidation. Many different theories have been discussed to explain who becomes involved in political action, some have been more or less fashionable at different times.

Consequently, we will seek to compare the more traditional explanatory models of political participation: the 'individual resources model' and the 'civic voluntarism model' with the more recent, yet less explored, 'social capital relational model'.

A brief revision of existing literature in this area suffices to show how much we still must learn regarding the causes of political participation (Leighley, 1995, Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Thus, it is no surprise that researchers have shifted their main focus from individual resources and attitudes associated with participation to social interactions regarding individual levels of participation ('social capital resources model').

One of the possible reasons for this gap is the surely the fact that social interactions are apparently always present in any act of participation, therefore not allowing a classification that sets participants in political life apart from non-participants. Another reason is that if existent literature has underlined the importance of formal interactions, such as belonging or activism in voluntary organizations, as a cause of political participation (Leighley, 1995; Radcliff and Davis, 2000), it has, however, omitted the importance interactions in interpersonal or informal networks may assume in political participation, perhaps due to empirical analysis difficulties.

### **Reaction to the Unitary View of Social Capital and Its Effects on Political Participation**

So far it has been assumed that social capital has the capacity to increase political participation. As a matter of fact, such assumption implicitly derives from Putnam's pioneering work (1993) where he exemplifies how civic engagement as a social capital asset led to various participatory processes for a working democracy. However, precisely how and why such a connection to non-political organizations stimulates political participation has not been widely recognized as a study worthy empirical issue (Erickson and Nosanchuck, 1990; Levi, 1996). Putnam fails to pursue his inquiry and never fills the gap between social and political participation. He simply juxtaposed two chapters (2 and 3), as if the relationship between the two forms of participation was a matter of common sense.

Nevertheless, the empirical debate has not been successful in providing a detailed record of the relations between social capital and political participation, as claimed by some authors. This is much due to an insufficient and reductionist use of both concepts' operationalization. It is true that Putnam makes a distinction between different forms of social capital, but, as Bjørnskov (2006) stresses, in his conception of social capital trust, norms and networks are all different aspects of the same functional notion (p. 23). In support of a unitary concept, he argues that individuals congregate in different types of voluntary organizations where they learn to trust each other through 'repeated interaction'.

This shortcoming happens partly due to the dominance of Putnam's work and, consequently, the inability to draw on a wider and more sophisticated theoretical framework. Putnam's theory, although innovative, has struggled to explain how social capital forms – 'the so-called circularity problem' (Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). Such limitation has hindered the possibility of researching the different dimensions social capital can have and stress the importance of recognizing these multiple dimensions in terms of statistical measurement.

In order to overcome such methodological and measuring problems, it is essential that both concepts be treated as a unitary concept, gathering different attributes. This implies that one must stop using one-dimensional additive indexes to measure social capital and political participation and start seeing both as multidimensional phenomena.

The theoretical approach described above developed as a reaction to the unitary view of social capital and its effects (Bjørnskov, 2006; Woolcock, 1998). Such view argues that social capital can possess different dimensions and sub-dimensions— combinations of dissimilar social relationships (structural and cognitive) — and such dimensions are linked to also diverging political participation modalities.

### **Social Capital and its Operationalization**

Our empirical analysis compares the multifaceted composition of social capital in six predefined European regions. The regions are: 1) Northern Europe (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden); 2) Western and Central Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland); 3) Britain and Ireland; 4) Southern Europe (Greece, Spain and Portugal) and 5) Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and the Baltic Countries (Estonia and Lithuania). We used data from the five European Social Survey (ESS) waves between 2002 and 2010.

As stated above, it is consensual that social capital is an especially complex and problematic concept due to its multidimensional nature.

If we were to adopt Putnam's definition (1993, 2000) — which, even with great criticism around it, is still the starting point of many scientific analyses — we would easily identify its components and integrate them in structural and cognitive dimensions. According to Putnam (1993), social capital includes 'the features of social organization, such as networks, social norms and trust that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action' (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). Social norms and networks 'provide defined rules and sanctions for individual participation in organizations' (Putnam, 1993, p. 166), and promote reciprocity and cooperation 'founded on a lively sense of mutual value to the participants of such cooperation, not a general ethic of the unity of all men or an organic view of society' (Putnam, 1993, p. 168). On the whole, networks and norms provide a mechanism for such an internal mutual commitment where 'rational individuals will transcend collective dilemmas' (Putnam, 1993, p. 167).

#### *Social Networks Dimension*

In the fifth round of the ESS (2010), the participation in informal social networks can be measured by two survey questions that ask people 'How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?' and 'Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?' The ESS contains two survey questions that can be used to measure the participation in formal social networks. People are asked 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a trade union or similar organization? If yes, is that currently or previously?' and 'During the last 12 months have you participated in a voluntary organization or association?'

#### *Social and Institutional Trust Dimension*

Trust and trustworthiness are integral elements of reciprocity. Information regarding the trustworthiness of others is an essential input to the reciprocal decision of an individual of whether he will cooperate or not. That the norm of reciprocity prevails in a society implies that a significant proportion of individuals in it are trustworthy.

What he defines as 'generalized reciprocity' can be summed up as short-term altruism grounded on the expectation of a long-term benefit can facilitate cooperation and make trusting relationships easier to maintain while suppressing self-interest or opportunism (Putnam, 1993, pp. 182-183). We used three survey questions from the ESS and built an index which allowed us to measure generalized trust: 1) Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? 2) Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair? 3) Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves? This three-item scale can be considered reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha of .860

Concerning institutional trust, we make an important distinction between (1) trust in institutions on the representation side of the political system (parties and parliament) and (2) trust in institutions on the implementation side (government

and legal system), in accordance with the existing questions in the Social European Survey to measure the institutional confidence, being in this case the value of Cronbach's alpha 942.

#### *Civic Norms and Awareness Dimension*

This dimension refers neither to people's relations with others nor to their trust in others, but to specific behavioral traits do they demonstrate. What matters most is the reciprocity, cooperation and civic commitment of people. Social norms often facilitate more predictable or beneficial behavior patterns of individuals. In fact, it is hard to imagine how interaction and exchange between strangers could take place without norms.

According to Putnam, 'reciprocity' is clearly the underpinning norm amongst social norms, which is strongly reflected by the ethics of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. We used the following questions to measure civic norms and civic consciousness in 2010's ESS: 'How wrong is it to make exaggerated or false insurance claims?', 'How wrong is it to buy something that might be stolen?' and 'How wrong is it to commit a traffic offense?'

At this point it is important to state that our basic assumption and research proposal in this sub-section is: theoretically, social capital constitutes a multidimensional concept. Empirically, it is not an unitary concept that can be translated in a complex index based in the sum of different indicators but a stable and multifaceted social construct, although the relative importance of alternative social capital components or dimensions may differ in European regions with different overall economic and political development levels. Therefore, the following research hypothesis states that:

H1a. Social capital is a multidimensional concept and its components are robust and similar in European regions.

To test the empirical validity of social capital's multidimensionality we used an exploratory factor analysis. This analysis was conducted using the principal components method with varimax rotation. First, we used the Kaiser criterion to decide the number of factors. Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant. The KMO test statistic is .802, showing that the factor solution is good and stable. Altogether, the five extracted factors explain 62.68% of the total variance of 15 initial indicators included in the analysis. The saturations of the variables in each factor are always above the required minimum of 40%. The table 1 shows the associations between the factors (or dimensions) and variables:

Variables	Factors of Social Capital				
	1	2	3	4	5
1.1. How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues	.055	.053	-	<b>.790</b>	-
1.2. Important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close	.024	.049	.147	<b>.356</b>	.032
1.3. Take part in social activities compared to others of same age	.041	.038	-	<b>.785</b>	.111
2.1. Member of trade union or similar organisation	.075	.115	.060	-	<b>.774</b>
2.2. Worked in an organization or association: voluntary work	.114	.020	-	.211	<b>.699</b>
3.1. Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	.256	<b>.779</b>	.001	.077	.117
3.2. Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair	.208	.084	.019	.079	.058
3.3. Most of the time people helpful or mostly looking out for	.202	<b>.780</b>	.044	.042	.011
4.1. Trust in country's parliament	<b>.855</b>	.163	.000	.048	.068
4.2. Trust in the legal system	<b>.838</b>	.203	.023	.046	.086
4.3. Trust in the policing system	<b>.746</b>	.204	.098	.041	.068
4.4. Trust in political parties	<b>.813</b>	.174	-	.049	.061
5.1. How wrong to make exaggerated or false insurance claim	.068	.055	<b>.812</b>	.044	.083
5.2. How wrong to buy something that might be stolen	.077	.061	<b>.823</b>	.035	.129
5.3. How wrong to commit traffic offence	-	-	<b>.711</b>	-	-
<b>Variance explained %</b>	<b>18.9</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>9.62</b>	<b>8.00</b>
<b>Total variance explained %</b>	<b>64.6</b>				

Table 1. Factors of Social Capital

The structure of social capital components would be further clarified by a confirmatory factor analysis. Since the exploratory analysis gives us the factors that can be correlated to each other, we use them here as input in the first-order CFA. This enables the structure and aggregation possibilities of social capital indicators to be further clarified, as we can see in Figure 1.

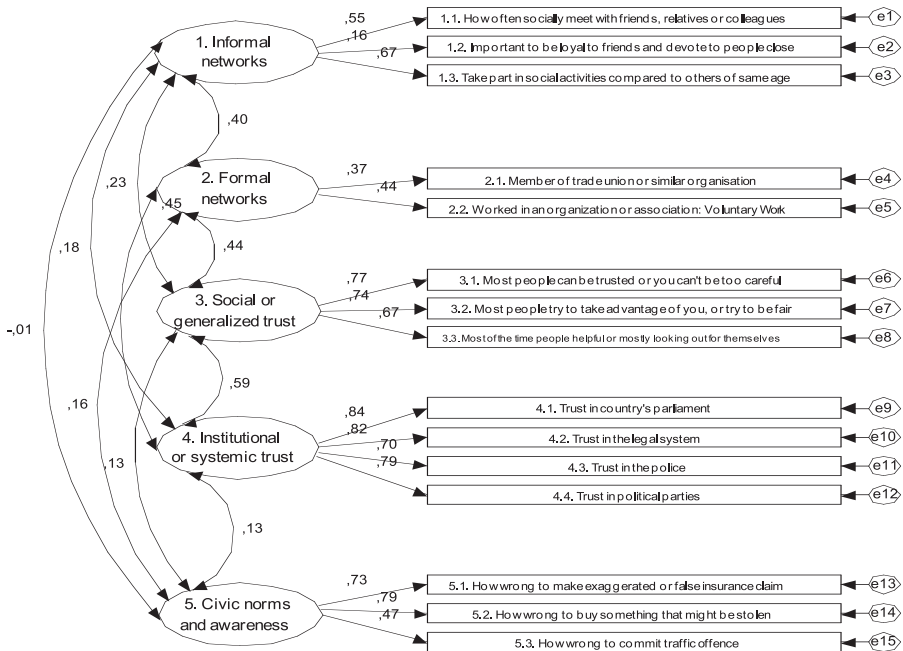


Figure 1. Global Model of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Standardized Estimates)

The findings of CFA show that the loadings are high ( $M > 0.500$ ) and significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The internal reliability is verified by the composite reliability (higher than 0.7). The extracted variance is higher than 0.5 for most dimensions. On the other hand, they also demonstrate that all dimensions show significant correlations. Lastly, they reveal that measurements indicate a good fit according to CFI ( $CFI > 0.90$ ), RMSEA ( $RMSEA < 0.08$ ) and NFI ( $NFI > 0.80$ ), but not according to Chi-square ( $p < 0.05$ ), which is affected by the large sample dimension and CFI.

At this point, we can conclude that our first research hypothesis (H1a) is theoretically and empirically valid. The proposition stating that the concept of social capital is multidimensional is empirically valid (see Figure 1) in all European regions. Moreover, its components are robust in all regions, i.e. social capital has an unchanging structure or composition in Europe's regional context.

### **The Operationalization of Political Participation**

The concept of social capital has not been the only one approached in an empirically reductive way. We can extend such criticism to the concept of political participation. Therefore as with social capital, political participation should be operationalized in a multidimensional way. To that end we first used an exploratory factor analysis and secondly a confirmatory factor analysis. Our research hypothesis suggests that:

H2b: Political participation is a multidimensional concept and its components are similar and robust in European regions.

There are many mainly dichotomy classifications that distinguish institutional from non-institutional participation or conventional from unconventional participation, and they tend to use different criteria to differentiate the types or modalities of political participation that should or should not be part of both political action repertoires in the context of advanced industrial democracies.

In this article, we will follow the conceptualization of political participation provided by Ekman and Amnå (2009). Indeed, it serves the purpose of mapping political participation in its various forms, which is in line with our objectives. They consider political participation to be composed of a 'manifest' and a 'latent part'. 'Manifest' political participation comprises parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of activism. The 'latent' participation and its forms refer to behaviors and types of engagement that could be of great significance for future manifest political actions, such as activities based on personal interest to politics and societal issues (Ekman and Amnå, 2009).

In other words, while 'manifest political' participation refers to activities intended to influence actual political outcomes by targeting relevant political or societal elites (which is more than just electoral participation), in 'latent' political participation, 'the notion of latency is based on the simple observation that citizens actually do a lot of things that may not be directly or unequivocally classified as 'political participation', but at the same time could be of great significance for future political activities of a more conventional or unconventional type. If we are interested in declining levels of political participation' (Ekman and Amnå, 2009, p. 8), we must not underestimate such potential political forms of engagement.

In the fifth round of the ESS, 'latent participation' is measured by the following questions 'How interested would you say you are in politics?', 'How much of this

time is spent reading about politics and current affairs?', 'How much of your time listening to the radio is spent listening to news or programs about politics and current affairs?', and 'How much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programs about politics and current affairs?'

Such questions can be indicators of higher political participation in the future. However, we also assume a set of attitudes related to the potential future of political protest (semi-legal or illegal) in the sphere of 'latent participation', thus recognizing the growing part it has been playing in present societies — some talk about the 'art of protest' as an increasingly generalized form of political action. Here we used the following questions from the ESS: 'Do you consider you don't have the duty to obey police decisions if you disagree with them?' and 'Do you consider you don't have to do what the police says, even when you don't understand or agree?'

As to 'manifest participation'<sup>1</sup>, the ESS questions we found most fit to measure it are divided in two distinct sets. The first asks respondents whether they have '...contacted a politician, government or local government official?', '...worked in a political party or action group?', '...worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?', 'worked in another organization or association?', and can be of greater importance at the level of conventional political participation forms. In the second set we tried to measure the respondents who choose less conventional forms of political participation: '...signed a petition?', '...taken part in a public demonstration?', and 'boycotted certain products?'

In order to test the similarities and differences of the political participation structure in European regions, we performed the exploratory factor analysis on pooled data (N = 38.974). The exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the principal components method with varimax rotation. First, we used the Kaiser criterion to decide the number of factors. Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant. The KMO test statistic is .656, showing that the factor solution is good and stable. Altogether, the seven extracted factors explain 54% of the total variance of 12 initial indicators included in the analysis. The results also show that the indicators of social capital are clearly divided into two groups describing the predefined dimensions of political participation (i.e., latent participation and manifest participation), and every indicator corresponds to the expected dimension. The saturations of each factor's variables are always above the required minimum of 40%. The **table 2** illustrates the associations between the factors and variables:

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<sup>1</sup> In manifest political participation, we do not consider here the parliamentary forms of activism, which are not included in European Social Survey.

Variables	Component or Factor			
	1	2	3	4
1.1. How interested in politics	<b>.605</b>	.037	.243	.237
1.2. TV watching, news/politics/current affairs on average weekday	<b>.726</b>	-	.008	-
1.3. Radio listening, news/politics/current affairs on average	<b>.590</b>	.008	-	.017
1.4. Newspaper reading, politics/current affairs on average	<b>.635</b>	.041	.088	.017
2.1. Contacted politician or government official last 12 months	.117	.037	<b>.613</b>	.142
2.2. Worked in political party or action group last 12 months	.053	-	<b>.819</b>	-
2.3. Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months	-	.012	<b>.537</b>	.350
3.1. Signed petition last 12 months	.036	.036	.179	<b>.744</b>
3.2. Taken part in lawful public demonstration last 12 months	-	-	.370	<b>.462</b>
3.3. Boycotted certain products last 12 months	.093	.024	-	<b>.774</b>
4.1. No duty to: back decisions made by police, even if disagree	-	<b>.908</b>	-	.015
4.2. No duty to: do what police say, even when don't understand or	-	<b>.908</b>	-	-
<b>Variance explained %</b>	13.9	13.8	13.1	13.1
<b>Total variance explained %</b>	<b>54.1</b>			

Table 2. Factors of Political Participation

Afterwards, we undertook a confirmatory exploratory analysis. It allowed us to confirm the adjustment degree of observed data to the typology of political participation we adopted. In Figure 2 we can see the results of the global confirmatory analysis model:

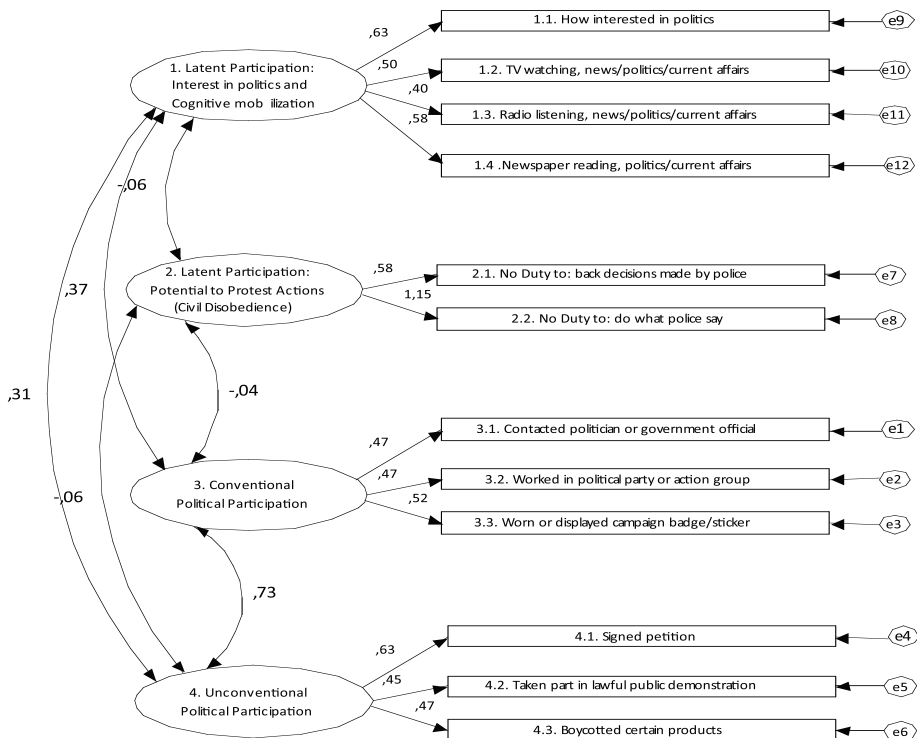


Figure 2. Global model of confirmatory factor analysis (standardized estimates)

The findings of CFA indicate that there is convergent validity in all dimensions, since saturations are high and significant and so is construct consistency, with the relative exception of the 'conventional political participation' dimension. They all show that all dimensions present significant correlations. Lastly, we have a good structural adjustment of the model in all its evaluation criteria, whether we take into account Chi-Square ( $p > .005$ ), CFI ( $p > 0.90$ ), RMSEA ( $p < 0.08$ ) and NIF ( $p > 0.80$ ).

At this point we can conclude that the concept of political participation is multidimensional too (see Figure 2) in all European regions. Moreover, all components are identical for all regions. The concept's structure is consistent and unchangeable, as occurs with the concept of social capital.

### **Theorizing Individual Drivers of Political Participation**

#### *How does biographical availability shape political participation?*

Literature on participation focuses on four major factor groups that shape political participation: resources model, political attitudes model, social capital model and institutional opportunities and constraints models. Using ESS data, we will sequentially explore the first three of these models of explanation. Afterwards, we will examine their interaction through a multivariate regression analysis of political participation.

The earliest major empirical study carried out by Verba and Nie (1972) that covered the entire range of political actions taken in the United States used resource-based explanations of behaviour. People participated in politics, who had the resources to do so; this placed variables such as education, occupation and income – the 'socio-economic status' (SES) – at the centre of the analysis.

Many previous studies of political participation found the causal foundations of political activity in class and other socioeconomic and demographic variables. For instance, older citizens have been regularly identified as more likely to engage in political activities than young ones since the elderly have greater experience and, typically, a greater stake in society that they need to defend. Those with greater socioeconomic resources, as evidenced by higher income levels, can apply them in their political activity (e.g. greater contributions to political candidates, parties or campaigns) and, of course, have a greater property stake at risk in the political sphere, which they may wish to protect through participation in politics (Brady, Scholzman and Verba, 1995).

In turn, educated citizens usually participate more in politics than less educated ones since they show better political abilities and, therefore, hold more information regarding the importance of political affairs as well as a better perception of their proximity and influence over political decision-making

#### *How do civic and political attitudes and behavior can shape political participation?*

In the 1990s, the SES approach was supplemented to create an extended model known as 'civic voluntarism' (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995), which included other resource aspects, such as time, money, civic skills, as well as political engagement and involvement in major social institutions. People participated in politics if they had the resources – and the opportunity – to take part. People who are more motivated and have civic and social resources could be seen as having more opportunities, and were thus more likely to participate.

Political participation as a basis of democratic citizenship has also been traditionally understood as the result of rational choices made by individuals who are motivated, are informed and capable of participating. Empirical studies have subsequently focused on the extent to which individual-level variables account for both the willingness ('psychological predisposition') to take part or engage in various political activities. In those 'psychological predispositions', four elements are eventually taken into consideration by Verba, et al. (1995): political interest, political efficacy and sophistication political information and partisanship. As Verba, et al. (1995, p. 354) summarize it: 'interest, information, efficacy and partisan intensity provide the desire, knowledge and self-assurance that impel people to be engaged by politics.'

On the other hand, the instrumental considerations should be seen as a separate set of motivations and they will have their own place in the model. These 'instrumental motivations' are motivations which are rationally relevant to include in the decision to participate or not. This instrumental motivation is expected to have a positive effect on political participation since it is the issues that motivate a citizen to defend their interests. We should also consider the theory of rational choice, which is arguably the dominant approach in the analysis of political behaviour. A rational choice approach would predict that only people who perceive the benefits of taking part in political action to be greater than the costs are likely to participate.

However, looking at political participation - or the lack of it - as a function of these individual-level influences has, however, left much room for challenged and contradictions. Therefore, researchers in political science began to seek alternative mechanisms to better describe the democratic participatory process. Among other things, relational and social contexts in which individual choices are made and behaviors take place drew particular attention. For example, Uslaner (2003) proposed that motivations for individuals to take part in political activities could be modified by sociability or group consciousness that adds incentives to narrow self-interest. This attention shift to social factors made up for the remaining deficiencies of individual capabilities or motivation regarding different levels of political participation. Political participation does occur as a rational outcome and the lack of it may be overcome when it is mobilized by socially interested.

#### *How do social capital dimensions shape political participation?*

Here we must mention social capital theory. Coleman (1999a, 1999b) affirms that this 'embeddedness' of individual choices in social relations can occur while individuals use specific resources. Defining them as 'social capital', he posited that they contribute to 'facilitate certain actions of actors within the social structure that in its absence would not be possible or could be achieved only at a higher cost' (Coleman, 1999b, p. 304). Putnam (1993) further improved the concept to mean 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions' (Putnam, 1993, p. 167).

According to Knack and Keefer (1997), individual participation in political affairs is regarded as 'civic duty', based mainly on cooperative norms or social expectations with less regard to costs and benefits. Smith (2002) holds a similar view. He argued that political disengagement is a problem of 'too few opportunities and resources,

or too little cooperation upon shared interests' rather than too much individual freedom to avoid participation. Coleman (1990b, 1990) and Putnam (1993, 2000) based on their account of results that undermine collective action, offer a rationale that supports seeing political participation as an outcome of social resources.

According to these authors, both the free-rider behavior and its opposite, 'an excess of zeal', occur under the same structure of interests, where these are all realized by the same outcome. What determines the prevalence of zealous involvement over free riding is whether or not additional incentives exist 'to reward the others for working towards the outcome' (Coleman, 1990b, p. 275).

In other words, the work of social resources, i.e. encouraging others or providing positive sanctions, explains a unique aspect of political participation that otherwise would have simply been avoided. Smith (2000) argued further that individuals are capable of altering situations not only by just 'reacting' to these resources, but also by 'acting' cooperatively and pooling resources to overcome the perverse incentives. In summary, taking social relations into consideration beyond the individual-level influence of capability, motivation or information can redefine issues of political participation in terms of the abundance or lack of available social resources.

It then becomes important to examine how the general constitution of social resources (dimensions) actually works to facilitate political participation. In this specific debate, social capital is supposed to increase the capacity for political action and thus enhance the likelihood that individuals are politically engaged.

### ***Methodology and Hypotheses***

We thus have established three general areas from which relevant hypotheses about political participation can be drawn and tested: resources or bibliographical availability, psychological predisposition or political engagement and social resources (social networks, social and institutional trust, norms and social cohesion). Before we discuss our findings, we need to describe our hypotheses and look more closely at some key methodological challenges.

Based on the arguments presented in the previous section, we tested the following research hypotheses.

H3 - The model that best explains citizen political participation is that of the 'social capital relational model' when compared to alternative theoretical models from the 'individual resources model' or by 'civic voluntarism model'.

If we look exclusively to the 'social capital relational model', we can assume the following research sub-hypotheses:

H3b. Social networking is positively related with latent interest in politics and negatively related with latent potential for political protest (or civic disobedience).

H3b. Social networking is positively related with conventional political participation and negatively related with unconventional political participation and civic disobedience.

H4b. Institutional trust is positively related with latent political participation, i.e., interest in politics, and negatively related with latent potential for political protest (or civic disobedience).

H4b. Institutional trust is positively related with conventional political participation, and negatively related with unconventional political participation.

H5a. Social and generalized trust is positively related with latent political participation, i.e., interest in politics, and negatively related with latent potential for political protest (or civic disobedience).

H5b. Social and generalized trust is positively related with manifest conventional political participation and negatively related with manifest unconventional political participation.

H6b. Civic consciousness is positively related with latent political participation, i.e., interest in politics, and negatively related with latent potential for political protest (or civic disobedience).

H6b. Civic consciousness is positively related with manifest conventional political participation and negatively related with manifest unconventional political participation.

In order to test these hypotheses we used three regression analyses separately related to the three explanatory models of political participation. The next step was a regression model with the variables that are specific to all three models in order to compare their performances with each other.

The following empirical analysis compares the three explicative models of political participation in six predefined European regions. The regions are: 1) Northern Europe (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden); 2) Western and Central Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland); 3) United Kingdom and Ireland; 4) Southern Europe (Greece, Spain and Portugal); 5) Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and 6) Baltic Countries (Estonia and Lithuania).

### ***Findings***

We began by testing the 'individual resources model', which focuses on the sociodemographic profile or bibliographical availability of citizens. Its main characteristics are independent or explicative variables, and the dependent or explained variables are the factors resulting from the confirmatory factor analysis of political participation. Table 3, in Appendix A, shows that individual resources are important in all considered types of political participation, especially in latent participation and at the level of conventional participation regarding forms of manifest participation. The predictors of latent and conventional political participation match the specialized literature.

It is men with higher formal instruction and greater income those who participate more in public life, both in latent and manifest forms. Still regarding manifest participation, we see that those who choose unconventional forms of participation are younger ( $\beta = -.035$ ), higher educated ( $\beta = .026$ ) and have less income ( $\beta = -.053$ ). In turn, those who reveal greater latent predisposition to resort to radical protest actions, including civil disobedience, are characterized especially by the fact that they are men, have a higher level of formal instruction and, in a complementary fashion, a lower level of socioeconomic income and are also outside of the labor market (See Appendix A).

As to what regards inter-regional differences, these do not exist at the latent or manifest levels, if we take into account only conventional and unconventional political participation. This does not happen if we take into account the potential predisposition of individuals to participate in radical protest actions. The negative

highlight goes to the Baltic countries but also to England and Ireland. Eastern Europe shows positive values, although they are not statistically significant.

Regarding this model's explicative capacity for different models, it performs better at the level of latent participation ( $R^2 = .129$ ) and conventional manifest participation ( $R^2 = 0.068$ ) than at the level of latent participation related to the potential of political protest ( $R^2 = 0.026$ ) or non-conventional manifest participation ( $R^2 = 0.039$ )<sup>8</sup> (See Appendix A).

Subsequent, we tested the 'civic voluntarism' model, where political attitudes, closely related to socioeconomic status and education, were also an important reason for political participation: 'people are more likely to participate if they feel informed, interested and efficacious, if they care strongly about the outcome, and if they think that they can make a difference. The independent variables we used were the following: the importance individuals give to politics, where they position themselves in the ideological scale (left vs. right) and their support for post-materialistic values, the assessment of the government's political performance and the state of their country's economy. The dependent variables are the different types of participation. So what does the data show about the predictors of political participation here?

As we can observe in Table 4, in Appendix A, that role is stronger and statistically significant regarding latent political participation, where those for whom politics matters most and consume more political information position themselves to the left in the ideological spectre and share post-materialistic values. However, latent participation tends to decrease among individuals who negatively value their government's performance and the economy.

If we look at manifest political participation, namely conventional participation forms, Table 4 shows that only those who value the government's political performance negatively resort less to such types of political action. At the same time, the assessment of the country's economy is not statistically significant. On the other hand it is those who position themselves more to the right and share mostly materialist values those who use conventional political action more often.

However, when we look at unconventional participation forms, we see that, except for the importance given to politics, all independent variables in the model determine the resort to the unconventional action repertoire in a statistically significant and negative way. In other words, the more to the left individuals place themselves, the higher their adherence to post-materialistic values and the more negative their assessment of government and the economy, the higher is their tendency to engage in unconventional participation forms.

Finally, regarding the propensity to engage in radical protest as a form of latent manifestation, it is present among those who value politics, position themselves ideologically to the left and assess the state of the economy very negatively.

As to what concerns inter-regional differences, if we exclude the Baltic countries and Western Europe, they are practically non-existent at the level of latent participation. However, if we only take into account conventional participation regarding manifest participation, we have to exclude Northern Europe. As to unconventional participation, the Baltic countries are, again, the exception.

Finally, this model's explicative capacity is variable according to the forms of political participation at stake. Therefore we see the model performs better when

explaining conventional manifest participation ( $R^2 = 0.440$ ) and, even if to a smaller degree, also latent participation understood as interest in politics and cognitive mobilization ( $R^2 = 0.173$ ). The model's performance declines when it comes to non-conventional manifest participation ( $R^2 = 0.067$ ) and latent participation related to more radical potential political protest actions ( $R^2 = 0.073$ ) (see Appendix A)

Therefore, we tested the model resultant of the 'social capital relational perspective', using the different dimensions of social capital from the confirmatory factor analysis as independent variables and the different types of political participation from our confirmatory analysis as dependent variables.

Table 5, in Appendix, shows a strong, positive and statistically significant correlation between formal and informal social networks, social or generalized trust plus civic conscience and latent participation, understood here as interest in politics and cognitive mobilization. However, this is the weakest determination, although it is positive and statistically significant ( $p = .084$ ). These observations partially confirm hypotheses H3a, H4a, H5a and H6a. On the other hand, regarding conventional participation and with the exception of informal social networks, all the other dimensions of social capital tend to increase resorting to conventional participation. That is what occurs with civic conscience ( $\beta = .114$ ), systemic or institutional trust ( $\beta = .10$ ), formal social networks ( $b = .074$ ) and also with social or generalized trust ( $\beta = .027$ ).

The data apparently confirm the impact of formal social networks over conventional political participation, thus confirming the classical social capital approach, which focuses solely on formal and vertical voluntary organizations instead of informal and horizontal ones. If these data are correct, there is no determination replica between them and the different forms of conventional participation, which helps explain the primacy given to the first ones over the rest.

The different dimensions of social capital determine all types of unconventional participation in a negative and statistically significant form, especially in the cases of systemic or institutional trust ( $\beta = -.247$ ), civic consciousness ( $\beta = -.140$ ) and social or generalized trust ( $\beta = -.098$ ), apparently confirming hypotheses H3b, H4b, H5b and H6b.

The negative and statistically significant effect of social capital dimensions is equally felt when speaking of latent forms of participation related to radical protest potential, including civil disobedience. In this case, the social capital dimensions that strikingly reduce this potential are formal social networks ( $\beta = -.390$ ), informal social networks ( $\beta = -.152$ ) and institutional trust ( $\beta = -.115$ ). Therefore, hypotheses H3b, H4b, H5b and H6b are confirmed.

We can now conclude that social capital and its different dimensions amplify latent political participation understood as the interest for political life and cognitive mobilization over political affairs, as well as conventional political participation. On the other hand, they significantly reduce unconventional political participation and potential future political protest, thus being in accordance with the main social capital scholars regarding the relation with political participation. It should also be noted that, in inter-regional terms, there are no differences regarding these trends with the exception of Eastern Europe in the case of protest potential or civil disobedience.

Finally, this model's explicative capacity is variable according to the forms of political participation at stake. We see a better performance of the model when explaining latent participation related to potential protest actions including civil disobedience ( $R^2 = 0.153$ ), as well as latent participation understood as interest in politics and cognitive mobilization ( $R^2 = 0.115$ ). The model's performance is also good at the level of conventional manifest participation ( $R^2 = 0.108$ ) and its explicative capacity increases when related to conventional manifest participation ( $R^2 = 0.056$ ) (see Appendix A)

At this point we should start addressing the central research hypothesis 3. The model proposed by the 'social capital relational perspective' strengthens the explicative capacity of citizen political participation proposed by other alternative theoretical models given by the 'individual resources perspective' or the 'civic voluntarism perspective'. And our conclusion is that it is partially confirmed. Why?

When we have a regression model that gathers the proposed independent variables by all models and relates them to different participation types, we can see that both sociodemographic or biographical availability variables and variables related to political attitudes and values are statistically significant (can be negative or positive) and maintain almost unaltered (the level of significance doesn't change). The same occurs with social capital dimensions. On the other hand, when we look at the explicative weight of this integrated model, we soon realize that it is the one that better predicts how citizens resort to the different types and forms of participation, showing an adjusted  $R^2$  of .184 for latent participation understood as interest in politics and one  $R^2$  of .185 for latent participation seen as potential political protest or civil disobedience. Conventional political participation has an  $R^2$  of .442 and unconventional participation one  $R^2$  of .116.

We can therefore conclude that none of the multiple linear regression models, when considered separately, presents a determination coefficient ( $R^2$ ) that explains the variance of dependent variables as high as this last model. This allows us to conclude, in line with Granovetter (1985), that the 'social relational approach' occupies the middle ground between two distinct ways of understanding human action and its consequences. So, there are good and justifiable reasons to state that in respect of political participation the 'social capital really matters'.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article mainly addresses the relations between social capital and political participation starting from two basic premises: the great proximity between both concepts, resulting from thesis on 'the decline of political participation' in recent decades in and outside Europe, but also from their insufficient and reductionist empirical operationalization. In social capital's case, and looking to overcome one of Putnam's biggest weaknesses, it consists of treating social capital as a one-dimensional concept through a single additive index.

Our theoretical approach can be seen as a reaction to the unitary view of social capital and its effects. Our adopted view defends that social capital as a complex and multifaceted construct, which is constituted by different dimensions (structural and cultural) and that dimensions and sub-dimensions are linked to also diverging political participation repertoires. Our analysis confirms this hypothesis.

However, social capital has not been the only concept approached in an empirically reductive way. Such criticism is extendable to political participation. Based on Ekman and Amnå's classification (2009), we showed that political participation is a multidimensional concept that also comprehends different dimensions and sub-dimensions. Therefore, within latent political participation we can fit interest in politics and cognitive mobilization, as well as more radical potential protest actions, while within manifest participation we find political participation forms traditionally seen as conventional and non-conventional.

Finally, and given the current challenges and contradictions regarding older explicative models of political participation, namely those proposed by the 'individual resources perspective' and by the 'civic voluntarism perspective', we tested the most recent model presented by the 'social capital relational approach'. We wanted to know if, and to what extent, motivations for individuals to take part in political activities could be reinforced by social capital's dimensions – social networks, social and institutional trust and civic norms that add incentives to overcome self-interest and utilitarian actions.

In order to test these hypotheses we used successive multivariate regression analyses, related to the three explanatory models of political participation. Finally, we build an integrative regression model with the variables that are specific to all previous models in order to compare their explanatory performance with each other. We could see that the explicative capacity of the last model showed a high increase for all political participation categories with the introduction of structural and cultural dimensions of social capital. This leads us to conclude that, concerning political participation, 'social capital really matters'.

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*Conceição Pequeto Teixeira*

*Ph.D. in Political Science and Comparative Politics (Higher Institute for Social and Political Sciences of the Technical University*

*Paulo Pereira*

*Ph.D. in Chemistry (Sciences and Technology Faculty the New University of Lisbon – FCT/UNL) and a MBA in Business Administration (Superior Institute of Work and Management Sciences - ISCTE).*