



Policies for older volunteers: A study of Germany and Italy, 1990–2008



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ABSTRACT

Older people increase their well-being and contribute to the community when they volunteer. Therefore, policy-makers sometimes consider supporting older volunteers. However, they reach different conclusions on whether they should introduce policies for older volunteers, and on what policy would be the most suitable. This article studies how policies for older volunteers emerged in Germany and Italy, both countries having one of the oldest populations in the world. It explores the political discourse on older volunteers, and how this discourse translates into policies. To do this, the article presents data collected in expert interviews and document analysis. Findings show that German policy-makers stress the contribution of volunteering to older people's well-being and have introduced policies for older volunteers. Italian policy-makers, in contrast, frame older volunteers as social service providers and have decided not to single out specific age groups in their policies for volunteers. Moreover, the policies are influenced by the policy-makers' perceptions and path-dependencies, meaning policies and institutions that were introduced in the past. These findings suggest that whether or not policies for older volunteers emerge depends less on the characteristics of the older population and more on the society and its political traditions.

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Introduction

Population aging and the economic crisis have changed the face of welfare states. These states have had to accommodate the needs of an aging population while cutting their expenditures (Komp & Béland, 2012). For a long time, policy-makers considered this task highly problematic because they assumed that population aging would increase the need for health services and pension benefits. Moreover, they assumed that this increased need would drive welfare state expenditures and drain public funds (Walker, 2000). However, we now know that these assumptions oversimplify the situation.

Aging populations in Western countries comprise many healthy older people, which bring a new challenge to welfare states. Those healthy older people are self-dependent and possibly active. They do not need support through health services. Instead, they put a new welfare need on the political agenda: the quest for meaningful activities in later life (Laslett, 1996; Van den Heuvel, 1997). When engaging in such activities, older people experience a sense of meaning, increased well-being, and stronger social integration (Fraser, Clayton, Sickler, & Taylor, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Consequently, older people may consider it a need to engage in meaningful activities, such as volunteering, life-long learning, or looking after their grandchildren (Laslett, 1996). In their efforts to ensure well-being, policy-makers in welfare states have to consider this need (Barr, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

When policy-makers act upon the welfare needs of healthy older people, they may “kill two birds with one stone.” In addition to supporting older people, they can enact

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austerity policies that counter the effects of population aging and economic crises. This twofold effect arises because some activities are beneficial to older people and to welfare states. Voluntary engagement, in particular, has such an effect. When older people volunteer, they may carry out tasks that would otherwise fall to public social services. Consequently, the demand for public social services could drop, which would ultimately reduce public spending (Erlinghagen, 2010; Minkler & Holstein, 2008). This way, older volunteers may provide policy-makers with a cost-saving opportunity. Considering the benefits for both older people and welfare states, it seems only logical that policy-makers support volunteering in old age (Komp, 2011).

In practice, many policy-makers consider introducing policies for older volunteers. They consider whether such policies are necessary, and which policies would be suitable. The conclusions these policy-makers reach differ widely. For example, American policy-makers established federal programs for older volunteers as early as the 1960s (Chambre, 1993). Moreover, the U.S. government subsidizes organizations with senior-specific volunteering programs (Baldock, 1999). Australian policy-makers support older volunteers to a limited extent. National policies in Australia focus only on those older volunteers who seek to re-enter the labor market through their voluntary engagement, while state policies subsidize a few programs for older volunteers, which the states view as organized leisure activities (Baldock, 1999; Warburton, Paynter, & Petriwskyi, 2007). Dutch policy-makers, finally, decided against policies for older volunteers, considering such policies as ageism. Instead, they subsidize volunteer programs that target all ages (Baldock, 1999).

Previous studies revealed remarkable variation in policies for older volunteers. However, these studies did not identify any pattern to why some governments introduce such policies, while others do not. Neither did these studies identify any pattern to how governments decide on the kind of policy, such as the introduction of subsidies, model programs, or legislation. This lack of knowledge prevents us from drawing conclusions from the few existing country-studies to those countries that have not yet been studied. Consequently, researchers and policy-makers have few models of good practice to learn from. The study at hand aims to help fill this gap.

This article investigates policies for older volunteers in Germany and Italy. On the one hand, it studies whether such policies exist and if yes, what they contain. These questions are interesting, because Germany and Italy are likely to be models of good practice. Surpassed only by Japan, these countries hold the oldest populations in the world (United Nations, 2009), which makes old age policies vital to them. Moreover, both countries are in Europe, where welfare states are comparatively large in scope (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004). Therefore, policy-makers in both countries will consider policies facilitating older peoples' well-being. Finally, both welfare states are based on the subsidiarity principle, which calls for governments to intervene only after citizens have failed to solve problems by themselves, e.g. through volunteering (Sundström et al., 2008). Therefore, policy-makers in these countries are likely to consider old age in conjunction with questions of volunteering. On the other hand, this article explores why policy-makers decide (not) to

support older volunteers. The answer to this question is interesting, because it provides a starting point for explaining country-differences in policies for older volunteers. Additionally, it informs political parties and lobby groups when and how they should best become active to influence policy-making for older volunteers.

The article is structured as follows. First, it introduces Germany and Italy as the settings of this study. It describes both countries in terms of their policies for volunteers of all ages, and in terms of their older citizens' engagement in volunteering. Then, it describes the process of data collection and analysis utilizing the policy cycle model, which understands policy-making as a sequence of stages (Dye, 2008). Subsequently, it presents the findings according to the policy cycle model. Finally, this article discusses the findings in terms of their scientific and practical relevance.

Policies for volunteers of all ages in Germany and Italy

Volunteering plays an important role for German and Italian governments. Policies in both countries are based on the subsidiarity principle, which means that governments should value and preserve their citizens' self-help potential. The assumption is that, when given the opportunity, citizens can often solve or at least diminish their own social problems. Governments should only intervene once this self-help potential has been exhausted (Evers & Laville, 2004; Sundström et al., 2008). Consequently, German and Italian governments try to facilitate their citizens' problem-solving capacities, for example, by leaving room for voluntary activities.

Like in many countries, policy-makers in Germany and Italy often consider volunteers a "third sector". The term "third sector" stems from the idea that welfare emerges from the contributions of several actors, who interact to create a welfare mix (Evers, 1995). In this welfare mix, governmental actors represent a first, economic actors a second, voluntary actors a third, and the family a fourth sector (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002; Evers, Pijl, & Ungerson, 1994). The third sector subsumes all non-profit associations, which are often active in the areas of sports, culture, leisure, and charity. Among third-sector organizations, especially welfare associations catch the eye of policy-makers. Welfare associations usually aim to provide help and care to people in need, for example, individuals with disabilities, or older people. These associations are usually based on religious, charitable, or humanitarian ideas, and many of them date back more than a century. Prime examples of welfare associations are Caritas and the Red Cross. German and Italian policy-makers are particularly interested in supporting welfare associations, because they facilitate the provision of help care to vulnerable citizens (Evers, 1995; Laville, 2008).

Policies for volunteers of all ages in Germany

In Germany, policies for volunteers are institutionalized in legislation, committees dealing with the topic of volunteering, and support programs. Support for volunteers is mentioned in two German laws. First, support for welfare associations is regulated in § 5 of the *Sozialgesetzbuch XII*, which is the legislation that regulates social security. Paragraph 5 of this statute specifies how public agencies and welfare

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