



Chips off the old blocks? The political participation patterns of parents and children in Italy



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ABSTRACT

This article studies the relationship between the political participation of parents and children in Italy, a country for which no empirical evidence on the topic is available and that has particular characteristics in terms of household dynamics and patterns of political participation. The analyses are based on a sample of 12,802 children from 14 to 19 years old and their parents, drawn from the “Multipurpose survey – Aspects of daily life”, collected by the Italian National Institute of Statistics. The results show that the political participation of children is strongly associated with that of their parents; that maternal participation is of somewhat greater relevance to the participation of both sons and daughters compared to that of fathers; and that the parents’ level of education is not associated with the likelihood of the child participating, net of parental participation.

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1. Introduction

This article studies the relationship between the political participation of parents and children in Italy. Research has shown that family matters for the socialization of children to political activity, as teenagers and young adults are more likely to be politically active if their parents are politically active too (see Zuckerman, 2005). Indeed, the “legacy of family for political participation” (Schlozman et al., 2012, p. 178) and the importance of the political background of the family of origin in defining political attitudes and behaviours are well documented (see Zuckerman et al., 2007). This line of research argues that primary groups are fundamental political socialization agencies where political beliefs are shaped and where individuals learn about politics (Hess and Torney, 1967). The family, broadly conceptualized, is the primary unit of political socialization, as parents transmit – implicitly or explicitly – knowledge, experience, interest, norms, values and ideologies to their children (Beck and Jennings, 1982, 1991; Jennings, 1984). As a matter of fact, several studies have shown that there is a high degree of homogeneity in party choices, political preferences, and attitudes and behaviours between parents and children (Tedin, 1974; Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Glass et al., 1986; Nieuwbeerta and Wittenbrood, 1995; Jennings et al., 2009).

Most of the empirical evidence on the topic, however, comes from the United States and a few European countries (see Niemi and Hepburn, 1995). In other words, it is yet to be understood whether and to what extent the influence of the family on the patterns of the political participation of children changes across countries. This is an important limitation to our understanding of socialization to political participation since country-specific characteristics might have a very important role in the political socialization of youth.

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The article fills this gap in the literature, by using, for the first time a nationally representative sample of Italian households drawn from the “ISTAT Multipurpose survey – Aspects of daily life” (ISTAT, 2013) to study the relationship between the political participation of parents and children. The study makes two main contributions to the literature. First of all, by studying a country – Italy – for which very little is known on the topic of political socialization (see Corbetta et al., 2012), we seek to understand whether the mechanism of political learning is robust to cross-national variation. Indeed, the idiosyncratic characteristics of Italian society – i.e. rather traditional, gender-unequal and family-based (Ferrera, 1996) – offer a unique opportunity to consider and to re-evaluate the mechanisms suggested by previous research in a different institutional setting with different societal norms. On the one hand, in fact, at a time of late transition to adulthood and of economic uncertainty, the Italian family might not only be a very important “safety net” for children, but also an increasingly important political socialization agency (Garelli et al., 2006). On the other hand, the participatory patterns of sons and daughters, and fathers and mothers, are of particular interest in a country like Italy, where women – and even more so mothers – are under-represented in the public or “political” field (EIGE, 2010), but are over-represented in the private sphere of the family (Dotti Sani, 2012) and have, therefore, a strong influence over their children’s activities (Cardoso et al., 2010). Second, the study contributes to our understanding of political inequality (Lijphart, 1996), as it looks at how participation habits are reproduced from one generation to another in a country, Italy, which has low social mobility (Schizzerotto, 2002) and low levels of civic and political engagement as well (Sani, 1980; Pasquino, 2002), especially among the younger generation (Diamanti, 1999).

Our results indicate that children whose parents are politically active are more likely to be politically active themselves. Furthermore, we find that the participation of mothers is moderately more important for the participation of both sons and daughters than that of fathers, reinforcing the idea of the centrality of the maternal figure for the political making of children, an area that has for a long period of time been attributed to fathers. Lastly, our findings indicate that the parents’ level of education does not affect the likelihood of children engaging in politics. Thus, if young citizens participate like their parents, those who have engaged parents will be more engaged in the public sphere than the children of inactive parents, and hence will feed the spiral of participatory inequality.

2. Theoretical background, literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Parents–children similarity in political participation

Since the early 1950s, families have been considered among the most important political socialization agencies (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995). Despite the difficulties in distinguishing the mechanisms behind the transmission of values, attitudes and behaviours from parents to children in empirical work (Hess and Torney, 1967), many studies have underlined the similarity between the political behaviours of parents and children, both in the United States and in other democracies. Early studies in the US showed that the patterns of youth political participation resemble those of their parents (Beck and Jennings, 1979). Successive studies in the United States then confirmed this result, showing that the participation of parents in various types of political activities, such as boycotting a product or being active in a political group, are correlated with the likelihood of the child doing the same activity (Janoski and Wilson, 1995; Jennings, 2002; Andolina et al., 2003). Similar results have emerged from studies on European countries, in which most of the focus, however, has been on political attitudes rather than behaviours. Percheron and Jennings (1981) show that French parents and children have a strong similarity in terms of political ideology and their evaluation of political objects. Nieuwbeerta and Wittenbrood (1995), using a representative sample of high school students in the Netherlands, show that political partisanship is transmitted from parents to children. Westholm (1999), using data on Swedish adolescents and their parents, also finds that political values are transmitted from parents to children. In their comparative study on the civic commitment of adolescents in seven countries, Flanagan et al. (1998) find that in both transitional (Russia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) and consolidated democracies (Australia, Sweden, and the United States) a “family ethic of social responsibility” has a strong effect on the civic commitment of adolescents.

Does the parent–child similarity in participation described above also apply to Italian households? To better understand this issue, it is useful to keep in mind the characteristics of Italian political participation. Participation in Italy is two-sided. On the one hand, Italians present rather high levels of intense and unconventional forms of participation (Legnante, 2007; Quaranta, 2014). On the other hand, however, they are found to be somewhat uninterested in politics, detached, and dissatisfied with the state of their democracy (Pasquino, 2002). The roots of this scarce attention to political matters in Italy are deep and date back in time (Sani, 1980). Indeed, Almond and Verba (1963, p. 17) defined Italy as a “parochial political culture” that “expects nothing from the political system”. Conventional political participation is also rather low, with almost 60% percent of Italians declaring they have not taken part in any political action in the past two years (Legnante, 2007). However, detachment, disinterest and lack of trust in politics are not absent in other European countries either (Pharr and Putnam, 2000), where political similarities between parents and children have been found to exist. Hence, we have little reason to believe that the scarce participation in political matters of Italians should limit the parent–child similarity explained above. Quite on the contrary, politically active Italian parents, conscious of living in a country where political participation is overall rather low and conscious of the importance of political engagement, could be likely to socialize their children to political activity. Based on these considerations, we formulate our first hypothesis:

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