



# High political participation, high social capital? A relational analysis of youth social capital and political participation

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## ABSTRACT

Social capital has been alleged to increase the capacity for political mobilization. Yet, until now, the empirical debate has not succeeded in rendering a detailed account of the relationships between social capital and political participation partly because of the use of a reductive conception and operationalization of both concepts. Using a multidimensional and relational technique (multiple correspondence analysis) and a detailed youth survey data from Belgium, the article demonstrates that youth draw on diverse forms of social capital and that these forms vary along socio-economic status and ethnic origin. Six classes based on the forms of social capital were identified. Two of them – the ‘Committed’ and ‘Religious’ are highly political active. The ‘Committed’ Class, based on a diversified social capital, consists mainly of non-immigrant youth with a high socio-economic background undertaking a large diversity of political activities. The ‘Religious’ Class, based on a narrow social capital built around religious activities, is mostly composed of ethnic minority youth with a low SES involved in more specific political activities.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the landmark work of Putnam (1995, 2000) on the decline of social capital and its consequences for political participation and democracy in the United States, research on the relationship between social capital and political participation has mushroomed. In this debate, the most widely used approach on social capital is that introduced by the rational-choice sociologist Coleman (1988) which is partly adopted by Putnam (Fine, 2010). Accordingly, social capital which is seen to be produced through networks and structure of relations between individuals is expected to facilitate certain kinds of positive actions by individuals that would not have been taken place in its absence (Coleman, 1988). More specifically for this debate, social capital is supposed to increase the capacity for political actions and thus enhance the likelihood for individuals to be politically engaged (Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998; Paxton, 1999). This decline in civic and political participation is often seen as affecting more particularly youth (Banaji and Buckingham, 2010; Putnam, 2000). Recent research, however, shows that youth is involved in less traditional (or more informal) patterns of engagement (Dalton, 2007, 2008; Pattie et al., 2004). As a consequence, they may not be necessarily less socially and politically engaged, once one investigates these phenomena more thoroughly. Yet, until now, this complex relationship has been obscured because the relationships between social capital and political participation have been inadequately operationalized. In this article, using an unusually detailed study of pupils who attended the last year of compulsory education in 70 schools in Brussels, we show that social capital has to be considered as a multifaceted phenomenon whose different components are more or less associated to the dimensions of

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political participation. This is line with a theoretical current that has been developed in reaction to the unitary view of social capital and its effects (Bjørnskov, 2006; Woolcock, 1998). This argues that social capital can take different forms – as combinations of different social relationships – and these forms are linked to different forms of political engagement. Methodologically, this implies that one must depart from using unidimensional indexes to measure social capital and political participation, especially when studying today's youth. We begin by highlighting the need for an encompassing and multidimensional conceptualization of social capital at the individual level, following a relational framework. In this regard, we discuss the key features, and the limitations of previous studies on the association of social capital with informal political participation, notably in sociology of immigration given the ethnic diversity characterizing Brussels' youth.<sup>1</sup> Then, we describe the implications of our approach with regard to the operationalization of social capital and political participation. We explain in our fourth section the data and the exploratory methodology (multiple correspondence analysis) used for this exercise. Lastly, the results section is composed of two parts. In the first step, the dimensionality of social capital based on the multiple correspondence analysis is described. Then, a typology of youngsters according to their social capital is discussed in the light of their political behaviors.

## 2. Complex relationships between social capital and political participation

In studying the relationships between social capital and political participation, it is hard not to mention Putnam's work (1995) that has influenced most the scholarship on the topic in the past 15 years. Putnam defined social capital as “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995, p. 67). Accordingly, a large stock of social capital makes easier the coordination and communication within society, leading to a higher level of social trust. His focus on associational life has led many sociologists to explore further the link between associational life and political participation among different social groups. For instance, most previous ethnic minority studies conceptualized social capital “in a strict sense as being embedded in a social network through associational life” (Jacobs and Tillie, 2004, p. 419). In these studies, social capital is approximated with a dummy measuring the participation of respondents in voluntary associations. Their results show that ethnic minorities are significantly less politically engaged than the ethnic majority. Moreover, they find that social capital is significantly and positively associated with political participation among the main ethnic minorities of European cities (for a recent overview, see Giugni and Morales, 2011). Even though some researchers refined their approach by differentiating between the types of associations respondents participated in (Berger et al., 2004; Jacobs et al., 2004; van Londen et al., 2007), many studies entirely focused on formal social capital and assumed that the types of social capital remain constant and uniform across social groups (and by extension across ethnic minorities). Yet, this approach endorses one of the weaknesses of Putnam's theory, namely his unidimensional conceptualization of social capital. If it is true that he distinguished several forms of social capital but, as Bjørnskov put it (2006, p. 23),

“in his conception of social capital, trust, norms and networks are all different facets of the same functional notion. In support of a basically unitary concept, he argues that individuals congregate in voluntary organisations of different types where they learn to trust each other through repeated interactions”.

Bjørnskov showed that these three elements of social capital – trust, norms and networks – refer to separate components that are relatively independent from each other. In other words, items measuring trust, norms and networks showed high loadings on three orthogonal components and are almost not correlated with each other (Fischer, 2005). The social capital literature has so far neglected to adequately consider possible variation in types of social capital along gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin (Fine, 2010). This shortcoming is partly due to the dominance of Putnam's work and, as a consequence, the inability to draw on a wider and more sophisticated theoretical framework. Putnam's theory, though innovative, has struggled to explain how social capital gets formed (the so-called circularity problem: Ponthieux, 2006; Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). This limitation has hindered the possibility of investigating the different forms social capital can take. As Woolcock (1998) puts it, social capital should be defined according to its sources, rather than to its consequences. Social capital refers indeed to social relationships and the investigation of their different combinations – as different forms of social capital – and their diverse consequences remains an essential research issue. This is how a “negative” form of social capital, for instance, can be conceived (Portes, 1998): some types of bounded solidarity can have negative consequences for the members of some specific groups. The shortcomings of the ‘putnamian’ conceptualization lies in the level of analysis: he “transformed social capital from an individual property into a feature of cities and countries” (Portes, 1998). In this respect, Bourdieu's theory, less popular in the US (Portes, 1998), offers an interesting framework to study social capital at the individual level.

In conceiving social capital as associated with social determinants, such as economic or cultural capital, Bourdieu (1985) sheds light on the formation of social capital and on its consequences in terms of inequality: individuals have access to certain types of social capital because of their position within the social space. Thus, social groups take advantage of different forms and level of capital to define their position. In other words, his notion of social capital is closely linked to the investigation of (the transmission of) power, privileges and inequality. In brief, “[s]ocial networks are not a natural given and must be constructed through investments strategies oriented to the institutionalization of groups relations” (Portes, 1998). Bourdieu's approach is definitively relational and multidimensional: the forms of social capital and the resulting potential resources possessed by individuals vary according to their social determinants. Nevertheless and in contrast to his

<sup>1</sup> The literature on formal political participation is not relevant, since turnout is not an issue due to the Belgian compulsory voting system.

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