

Association Memberships and Political Involvement: Evidence from the UK and Germany.

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I. Introduction

- Association membership $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ political involvement
- The debate about the effect of civic engagement on political participation:



- Positive effect : associations as “schools of democracy”
- Negative or zero effect: dark side of social capital; evaporation of politics
- Self-selection hypothesis



- Limitations of data used in previous research to test the causality direction -> panel data used in this research

contribution

II. Research Question & Hypothesis

- **Research Question**

“What is the relationship between individuals’ interest in politics and membership in voluntary organisations?”

- **Hypotheses**

- H1: “*association membership increase individual’ interest in politics. .*”

III. The positive impact of associational involvement



- Organisations function as ‘**schools of democracy**’, providing their members with resources, values, and attitudes that encourage political participation (Putnam 2000);
- **Associations** serve as a **political arena** where people can obtain and practice civic skills through the daily routine, such as writing letters, signing petitions, participating in the discussions (Verba 1995);
- They **politicise members** through the opportunities to exchange information they provide while at the same time providing the necessary skills and knowledge to interact with political institutions (Almond and Verba 1963, van Deth 1997).

III. The negative impact of associational involvement



- It has been **questioned** the very **capacity** of associations to **breed interest** in politics and create a public sphere of debate (Eliasoph 1998).
- **Evaporation of politics**: the focus on local action;
- Rising **political disaffection** as a result of strong civil society (Beem 1999)
- **Self-selection bias**
People that are interested in politics and more engaged in political activities join associations (Hooghe 2003).

III. Political interest – the focus of the paper

“Citizens who are interested in politics, ...who care about what happens, who are concerned with who wins and loses – are more politically active”
(Verba 1995).



- It forms part of political participation, the internal stimuli to political activity.
- The subjective interest in politics represents “the degree to which politics arouses a citizens’ curiosity” (van Deth 1990), and thus their predisposition for further political participation (van Deth 2006, p. 107).

IV. Data and Research Design (1)

- **Main databases:**

British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)

German Socio-Economic Panel Innovation Sample (SOEP-IS)

- **Years:** 2001 till 2008 for the UK and 1998-2011 for Germany

- **Dependent variable:**

Political interest

“How interested would you say you are in politics?”

1 stands for no interest at all in politics, and 4 for being very interested.

- **Main independent variables**

Member of one of listed organisations (1 yes, 0 no).

- **Individual-level controls:** Education, gender income (logged), employment and marital status

Why Maximum likelihood estimation of structural equation models is chosen?

- It allows to identify the proper causality direction between the membership in associations and political interest; It is essential to account for the possible effect of the previous level of interest in politics on the current membership status.
- The paper aims to estimate the effect of the membership in associations at time t on the level of interest in politics at time $t+1$.
- This method permits to control for unobservables, without losing the effect of time-invariant variables (such as gender) that usually an issue in fixed effects models.
- To account for the effects of the previous values of all the independent variables, I estimate models with lagged IVs

IV. Research Design

ML-SEM method

Model:

- $interest_{it} = \lambda interest_{it-1} + \beta_2 membership_{it-1} + \beta_3 education_{it-1} + \beta_4 income_{it-1} + \beta_5 marital\ status_{it-1} + \beta_6 employed_{it-1} + \delta_1 gender_i + \alpha_i + \xi_t + v_{it}$
- $(t = 1,2,3,4) (i = 1, \dots, N)$
- $interest_{it}$ is a value of individual i interest in politics at time t , which initial values y_{i0} treated as exogenous.
- $\lambda interest_{it-1}$ is a value of individual i interest in politics accumulated up to $t - 1$.
- $Membership_{it-1}$ is a value of membership at previous time point. It is treated as a predetermined time-varying variable, accumulated up to t ; meaning that, e.g., the error of y_{i3} (interest in politics) in wave 3 is uncorrelated with x (membership status) in the waves 1-3, but allowing for a possibility that interest in politics at the wave 3 could affect membership status in future waves (wave 4 in this case).
- *Education, marital status, employment, and income* are exogenous variables, accumulated up to t . *Gender* is strictly exogenous time-invariant variable

V. Main Results

The effect of associational involvement on political interest in the UK

The effect of associational involvement on political interest in Germany

	Model 1	Model 2
Dependent variable: Political interest (ranges from 1 "no interest at all" to 4 "very interested")		
Interest _{t-1}	0.0993*** (0.0101)	0.0998*** (0.0101)
Member of any association _{t-1}	-0.0192+ (0.0112)	-0.0189+ (0.0113)
Individual-level factors		
Income logged _{t-1}		0.00263 (0.00389)
Education _{t-1}		0.0789+ (0.0464)
Marital status _{t-1}		0.00311 (0.0189)
Employed _{t-1}		-0.0120 (0.0160)
Gender		0.290*** (0.0149)
Observations	9991	9914
Number of periods	4	4

	Model 1	Model 2
Dependent variable: Political interest (ranges from 1 "no interest at all" to 4 "very interested")		
Interest _{t-1}	0.137*** 0.0301	0.303*** 0.0974
Member of any association _{t-1}	-0.00897 0.0371	-0.0536 0.0905
Individual-level factors		
Income logged _{t-1}		-0.0781 (0.127)
Marital status _{t-1}		-0.279+ 0.146
Employed _{t-1}		0.149 (0.248)
Gender		0.200+ (0.109)
Observations	582	102
Number of periods	5	5

Standard errors in parentheses
+p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

VI. TYPE OF ASSOCIATION MATTERS

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Interest groups	Non-interest groups	Mixed groups	All organisations	Social clubs
<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
Political interest (ranges from 1 "no interest at all" to 4 "very interested")					
Interest _{t-1}	0.100*** (0.0101)	0.100*** (0.0101)	0.0996*** (0.0101)	0.0998*** (0.0101)	0.0998*** (0.0101)
Member of any association _{t-1}	0.00775 (0.0148)	-0.0143 (0.0120)	-0.0187 (0.0173)	-0.0189+ (0.0113)	-0.0692*** (0.0198)
<i>Individual-level factors</i>					
Income logged _{t-1}	0.00253 (0.00389)	0.00257 (0.00389)	0.00258 (0.00389)	0.00263 (0.00389)	0.00266 (0.00389)
Education _{t-1}	0.0789+ (0.0464)	0.0786+ (0.0464)	0.0796+ (0.0464)	0.0789+ (0.0464)	0.0785+ (0.0464)
Marital status _{t-1}	0.00337 (0.0189)	0.00315 (0.0189)	0.00307 (0.0189)	0.00311 (0.0189)	0.00330 (0.0189)
Employed _{t-1}	-0.0121 (0.0160)	-0.0118 (0.0160)	-0.0122 (0.0160)	-0.0120 (0.0160)	-0.0113 (0.0160)

Table 3. Associational involvement and political interest: by associational type

Gender	0.289*** (0.0148)	0.290*** (0.0149)	0.288*** (0.0149)	0.290*** (0.0149)	0.290*** (0.0149)
Observations	9914	9914	9914	9914	9914
Number of periods	4	4	4	4	4

Standard errors in parentheses
+p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

V. Summary and dicussion

- In general, there is no robust, substantial and statistically significant effect of the associational involvement on interest in politics in either UK or Germany. This also applies when distinguishing between different types of associations. The only exception are British social clubs taken solely. Hence, the *H1: (association membership increases individual' interest in politics) is rejected.*
- It might be the case of : Focusing on the local issues, Evaporation of politics from the associations, avoiding politics (Eliasoph 1998). People are “busy”, they are not interested in politics because they do not have enough time and give it a low priority (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002).
- Little is known what is going on inside nowadays: do organisations still cultivate civic virtues? Do members engage in political debates and discussions? Specifically, the case of social clubs is compelling as it decreases interest in politics among its members.
- Future there is a room for qualitative research can explore the internal dynamics of associational life and shed a light on this topic.
- Beyond associations, there are many new "physical" and "virtual" spaces to build and satisfy the curiosity in politics.