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Schools of democracy? Disentangling the relationship between civic participation and political action in 17 European countries

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Abstract. Since Tocqueville's seminal writings, voluntary associations have been proclaimed to be schools of democracy. According to this claim, which regained popularity during the 1990s, involvement in voluntary associations stimulates political action. By participating in these associations, members are socialised to become politically active. Supposedly, having face-to-face contact with other members induces civic mindedness – the propensity to think and care more about the wider world. Participating in shared activities, organising meetings and events, and cooperating with other members are claimed to induce civic skills and political efficacy. Over the years, many authors have elaborated on these ideas. This article offers a systematic examination of the neo-Tocquevillian approach, putting the theoretical ideas to an empirical test. It offers a critical overview of the literature on the beneficial role of voluntary associations and dissects it into five testable claims. Subsequently, these claims are tested by cross-sectional, hierarchical analyses of 17 European countries. The authors conclude that the neo-Tocquevillian theory faces serious lack of empirical support. In line with the expectations, they find a strong, positive correlation between associational involvement and political action. Moreover, this correlation is positive in all countries under study. However, more informative hypotheses on this correlation are falsified. First, the correlation is stronger for interest and activist organisations than for leisure organisations. Second, passive (or 'checkbook') members show much higher levels of political action than non-involved, whereas the additional effects of active participation are marginal. Third, the correlation between associational involvement and political action is not explained by civic skills and civic mindedness. In sum, the authors find no evidence for a direct, causal relation between associational involvement and political action. The socialisation mechanism plays a marginal role at best. Rather, this article's findings imply that selection effects account for a large part of the correlation between associational involvement and political action. The conclusion reached therefore is that voluntary associations are not the schools of democracy they are proclaimed to be, but rather pools of democracy.

Introduction

Ever since the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville (2000 [1835–1840]), social scientists and political ideologists have presented participation in voluntary associations as an 'all-purposive elixir for the ills of society' (Uslaner &

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Dekker 2001). When people get involved in voluntary associations there are all kinds of benefits for the participants themselves and for society as a whole (Rosenblum 1998; Stolle & Hooghe 2003). Several of these effects have been examined in the past, such as trust (Brehm & Rahn 1997; Claibourn & Martin 2000; Jennings & Stoker 2004), physical and mental health (Wilson 2000), democratic values (Flanagan et al. 1998; Hooghe 2003), generosity (Brooks 2005), income in later life (Baer 2006) and status attainment (Lin 1999, 2001). In political science, great attention has been paid to the positive effects of civic participation on political activity (Putnam 1992; Bowler et al. 2003; McFarland & Thomas 2006).

From the neo-Tocquevillian perspective, voluntary associations are claimed to have internal political functions (Newton 1999; Warren 2001), or act as 'schools of democracy' (cf. Tocqueville 2000 [1835–1840]; Morales & Geurts 2007). Participation in voluntary associations leads to a 'social spiral' (Lichterman 2005): citizens obtain the civic skills necessary for participation in a democracy, and build a broader and more varied social network. Moreover, civic participation makes people pro-social, trusting and politically interested (Halpern 2005). In the end, participants in voluntary associations are more likely to be politically active as they have obtained the skills, the network and the mindset to be so. We consider this positive, causal relationship between civic participation and political action, through socialisation, to be the core of the 'neo-Tocquevillian' theory. Positive, small-scale experiences in associations enable people to socialise into larger political involvement.

Over the years, neo-Tocquevillians have laid down a set of interlocking claims on the social spiral thesis. Yet, the empirical foundation of the neo-Tocquevillian approach has not kept abreast with the extensive theoretical claims (Ayala 2000). First, empirical support is mostly found in macro-correlations, where 'elaborate lists of civic activities and social practices are thrown together in a single amorphous grouping, which illuminates little about [social capital] and does even less to demonstrate how these activities and practices matter for the health of political democracy' (Boggs 2001). Second, empirical evidence on the validity of more specific claims is scarce and ambiguous. Several empirical analyses shed doubt on the validity of the neo-Tocquevillian theory, contesting the *socialisation* effect in favour of a *selection* effect (Armingeon 2007). According to the latter, certain personality traits stimulate citizens to join voluntary associations and engage in political activities at the same time, without a causal relation between the two. It is 'self-evident that not everyone will have the same inclination to join voluntary associations' (Hooghe 2003). Citizens that are more pro-social, outgoing and assertive are more likely to undertake both civic and political activities.

Throughout this article we strictly aim to test the (neo-Tocquevillian) socialisation thesis, yet we keep the selection thesis in the back of our minds as a viable alternative. To advance the debate we need a more thorough empirical examination of neo-Tocquevillian theory, thereby filling the gap between the theoretical claims and their empirical foundation. We will dissect the neo-Tocquevillian literature and derive five empirical claims from it:

1. There is a strong, positive relationship between civic participation and political action.
2. The strength of this relationship differs according to the type of voluntary association: leisure organisations are more important than interest and activist organisations.
3. The relationship is universal for all (Western) democratic societies.
4. The strength of this relationship differs according to the extent of involvement.
5. The relationship is explained by a socialisation mechanism – that is, associational involvement increases civic skills and civic-mindedness, which in turn stimulate political action.

We contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we present an overview of previous research on neo-Tocquevillian theory. Second, we derive five empirical claims, making the theory more 'testable'. Third, we test these claims on a detailed cross-sectional dataset, which provides us with more nuanced insights in the nature of the relationship between civic participation and political action. In the next section we will formulate the neo-Tocquevillian approach in general terms. Then, we will elaborate on the five neo-Tocquevillian claims in the subsequent sections, both theoretically and empirically.

The neo-Tocquevillian approach

The idea of a positive relationship between civic and political participation is both attractive and old. A properly functioning democracy needs competent and involved citizens. Both qualities are supposedly encouraged by 'associational experiences' in small-scale environments such as clubs and voluntary organisations. If the link between civic and political engagement worked, it would be an easy road to more political involvement and more vibrant democracies. Voluntary associations would be a stepping stone to political action.

The idea that voluntary associations stimulate their members' political action is the common denominator of the studies we will henceforth label 'the

neo-Tocquevillian approach'. Evidently, this literature is far less homogeneous and far more elaborate than the basic idea suggests. The following paragraphs will do more justice to this diversity. However, the essence of the approach, named after its first propagist, Alexis de Tocqueville, is the 'schools of democracy' idea. Studying the nineteenth-century American democracy, De Tocqueville concluded that voluntary associations kept the excesses of individualism at bay:

> Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human spirit is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another. I have shown that this action is almost nonexistent in a democratic country. It is therefore necessary to create it artificially there. And this is what associations alone can do. (Tocqueville 2000 [1835–1840]: 491)

A neo-Tocquevillian line of reasoning was firmly established when Almond and Verba (1965) comparatively studied the importance of the 'civic community' as a determinant of political attitudes and behaviour. Attention to voluntary associations was renewed after Putnam (1992), who claimed that voluntary associations are crucial in the functioning of participatory democracies.

Voluntary associations, in the neo-Tocquevillian line of reasoning, are small-scale learning environments (Van Deth 1997) in which people gain experience in dealing with dissimilar others and in contributing to a common good. When people associate with others, they learn to cooperate, discuss, organise and trust. In civic associations, members obtain the abilities (civic skills) and the urge (civic-mindedness) they need in order to participate in politics (Lichterman 2005). Civic participation would be most beneficial when involvement is active, when participants have face-to-face contact and the organisations are horizontally structured (cf. Selle & Stromsnes 2001).

Although this argument has been found in political science for a long time, it is not obvious that it is valid. There are encouraging (e.g., McFarland & Thomas 2006), discouraging (Van Deth 2000) and mixed findings (e.g., Sobieraj & White 2004) on the extent to which civic participation stimulates political action. Some studies even conclude that voluntary association participation sometimes leads to turning away from politics (Eliasoph 1998; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing 2005). Moreover, there may be negative outcomes to involvement in certain types of associations – notably isolationist and hate groups, the so-called 'dark side of social capital' (Portes 1998). On the whole, voluntary associations seem unable to meet theoretical expectations empirically (Dekker 2004). In sum, what is needed is a clear specification of hypotheses from the theoretical, neo-Tocquevillian work, and thorough empirical tests to

see whether these ideas are valid. Lack of sufficiently detailed measures is probably the main reason why such a dissection has not yet been done. However, recently, new datasets have been released that make such an investigation of the schools of democracy thesis possible.

Data and measurement

As the stepping stone thesis is at its core an individual-level explanation (i.e., the mechanism takes place between citizens), we opt to use survey data to test it. The theoretical claims put a high demand on the quality of our dataset, which is met by the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), collected in 2002 and 2003. The ESS presents high quality data: it has a mean response rate of over 70 per cent and the data collection has been tight and uniform, based on strict procedures of sampling, questioning and coding.

Our dataset includes 17 countries: 13 Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, West Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden) and four former communist countries (East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia). Luxembourg is left out of the analysis as it is an outlier on several of the independent variables (most notably on respondents' citizenship). Furthermore, due to measurement issues, we had to exclude Finland, Israel and Italy (see below). Our dataset contains a total of 28,439 respondents aged 18 years and older. To a large extent these 17 societies are similar on general cultural and political characteristics, as they are all European liberal democracies and predominantly Christian.

An important caveat of this study is our inability to draw conclusions on the causal direction between civic participation and political action. Neo-Tocquevillian theory puts forward a clear sequence: civic participation causes political action. However, as we lack longitudinal, comparative panel data, we can at best test this claim indirectly – that is, by combining cross-sectional data with theoretical reasoning. When we speak in causal terms about our findings, this is, strictly speaking, only in statistical terms: we consistently introduce measures of civic participation as determinants of political action in our multilevel regression models.

Civic participation

The ESS dataset addresses 12 types of voluntary associations (ranging from sports clubs to environmental organisations) and four modes of involvement (membership, active participation, volunteering and donation of money). To cope with this overload of information, data reduction is needed. We

distinguish three types of associations based on their primary purpose: leisure organisations, interest organisations and activist organisations (Van der Meer 2007).[1] Leisure organisations consist of sports, cultural and social associations. Interest organisations consist of trade unions, professional/business and consumer organisations. And activist organisations consist of environmental and humanitarian/peace organisations. For each type of organisation we construct four dichotomised variables (cf. Curtis et al. 1992; Ruiter & De Graaf 2006). We examine whether each respondent was a member of, participated actively in, volunteered for, and donated money to at least one such voluntary association. Based on these variables, we construct metric scales of civic participation (one for each type of association). Mokken scale analysis showed that the four modes of civic participation are hierarchically related. As the scalability coefficient H is 0.58 for leisure organisations, 0.60 for interest organisations and 0.40 for activist organisations, all three scales can be classified as strong. However, the scales do not hold up in Italy, Israel and Finland, where – likely due to measurement errors (Van der Meer 2007) – only a fraction of the respondents report more than one mode of participation per type of association. We therefore left these countries out of the analysis. The resulting scales of civic participation (separately for leisure, interest and activist organisations) range from 0 to 4. The score of 0 represents no civic participation; the score of 4 represents the most intense form of civic participation.

Political action

Political participation is defined as 'legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take'. The distinction between conventional and unconventional political participation is 'one of the most common classifications of political participation' (Sabucedo & Arce 1991). Conventional political participation aims to influence the political process in a system of representation through the electoral process (Verba & Nie 1972). Unconventional political participation aims to influence the political process from the outside – for instance, by holding a demonstration or boycotting products. Conventional political action includes four activities: contacting a politician; working for a political party; wearing a campaign badge or sticker; and donating money to a political organisation. Unconventional political action contains: lawful demonstration; product boycott; signing a petition; buying products for political reasons; and illegal protests. Both measures of political action are dichotomised into doing at least one activity or not.[2]

Background characteristics

Bivariate analyses of the neo-Tocquevillian approach run the risk of erroneous conclusions. A bivariate association between civic participation and political action might be explained by selection effects: people with socio-economic resources or pro-social dispositions might be civic participants *and* politically active at the same time, without a direct relation between the two forms of involvement. To take such effects into account, we control the association between civic participation and political action for background characteristics: gender; education; income; income source; age (as a non-linear effect – see Putnam 2000); length of residence in a community; urbanisation of residence; marital status; household size; denomination; church attendance; and citizenship. Measures of pro-social dispositions are scarce, unfortunately, although the indicators of civic-mindedness (see below) cover one aspect of this disposition. Nevertheless, we cannot completely rule out selection effects due to a lack of available measures of a pro-social disposition in our dataset.

Intermediating factors

Finally, the ESS dataset includes proxy measures of civic skills and civic-mindedness that, according to the fifth claim, we expect to intermediate the association between civic participation and political action. First we distinguish measures of political interest. One is self-reported political interest. The second is the use of media: the time people spend watching television (to measure disinterest in politics), and watching the news more specifically (to measure interest in politics). Next, we distinguish two measures of trust: trust in other people and trust in the national parliament. Third, political efficacy – the idea that the respondent is able to affect the political process – is measured in two aspects: knowledge (whether one thinks politics is too complicated to understand) and skills (whether one could take an active role in a political group). Finally, political cynicism is measured as agreement with the idea that politicians do not care about the voice of the respondent.

Analyses

The respondents in our dataset are nested in different countries. We therefore employ multilevel analysis (Snijders & Bosker 1999) using the ML-WIN 2.0 package (Goldstein 1995) for all subsequent models. As the dependent variables (conventional and unconventional political participation) are dichotomous, we use multilevel logistic regression (PQL, 2nd Order, no extra-binominal variance assumed). We specify models (simultaneously at the

individual and contextual levels) that estimate the odds of participating politically. Positive values indicate a higher chance of being conventionally or unconventionally politically active; negative values a lower chance. Respondents with one or more missing values on any of the variables were left out of the analyses; all models are based on the same set of respondents.

The base claim

Our first claim is the most basic claim in neo-Tocquevillian theory and reads:

> *H1*: There is a strong, positive relationship between civic participation and political action.

Almond and Verba (1965) were the first to posit this claim in a systematic, empirical fashion. Based on data from five countries, they concluded that, in general, members in voluntary associations are different from non-members in the sense that they: feel more confident of their ability to influence the government; are more active in politics; are more 'open' in their political opinions; and are more committed to democratic values. Several scholars have worked in this tradition, finding positive associations (Verba et al. 1995), and the idea has come to a point where it is almost axiomatic. Nevertheless, we will (re-)test this claim, if only to use it as a reference for the subsequent (more specific) analyses. As the mechanisms described in neo-Tocquevillian theory are inherently individual, they should be analysed at that level. This avoids the risk of ecological fallacy.

Table 1 shows that the association between civic participation and political action still holds in the modern-day European countries that are represented in our dataset. Even when we control for background characteristics, there are strong, positive effects of civic participation. In other words, the base claim of the stepping stone thesis is supported by our findings. Table 1 also shows that the positive effect of civic participation is stronger on conventional than on unconventional political participation, although the difference between the two effects is small.

With regard to our control factors, we find that education, income and citizenship all contribute to both modes of political participation. Religion has mixed effects: Catholics are less likely to participate politically on both dimensions, whereas Protestants are less likely to be involved in conventional political action and more likely to be involved in unconventional political action (compared to non-religious). Church attendance functions as a counterweight to these negative effects on conventional political action.

Effects of gender, urbanisation and length of residence support our theoretical distinction between conventional and unconventional political action. Men and people from rural areas are more likely to be involved in conventional political action. However, women, citizens living in urbanised communities and citizens who lived for a relative short time span in their communities are more likely to participate unconventionally. In subsequent

Table 1. Civic participation and political action

	Conventional	Unconventional
Participation in voluntary associations	**0.38 (0.01)**	**0.34 (0.01)**
Woman	**–0.18 (0.03)**	**0.22 (0.03)**
Age	**0.02 (0.01)**	**0.04 (0.01)**
Age^2 (*100)	**–0.02 (0.01)**	**–0.04 (0.01)**
Income	**0.02 (0.01)**	**0.07 (0.01)**
Education	**0.19 (0.01)**	**0.23 (0.01)**
Reside	0.01 (0.01)	**–0.07 (0.01)**
Household size	0.01 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.01)
Urbanisation	**–0.03 (0.02)**	**0.09 (0.01)**
Income source (job)		
* Pensioned	–0.01 (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)
* Unemployed	**0.23 (0.12)**	0.15 (0.11)
* Other benefits	**0.45 (0.09)**	–0.09 (0.09)
* Other income	**0.39 (0.13)**	**0.26 (0.13)**
Marital status (mar)		
* Separated	–0.05 (0.13)	0.09 (0.12)
* Divorced	0.10 (0.07)	**0.11 (0.06)**
* Widowed	–0.03 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)
* Unmarried	–0.03 (0.05)	**0.16 (0.05)**
Kid at home	–0.05 (0.05)	–0.02 (0.04)
Citizen	**0.22 (0.11)**	**0.43 (0.10)**
Religious attendance	**0.04 (0.01)**	–0.01 (0.01)
Religion (none)		
* Catholic	**–0.11 (0.05)**	**–0.15 (0.05)**
* Protestant	**–0.07 (0.05)**	**0.09 (0.05)**
* Orthodox	–0.26 (0.19)	**–0.39 (0.18)**
* Other	**–0.18 (0.10)**	0.04 (0.09)

Notes: Hierarchical logistic regression, PQL, 2nd Order, no extra-binominal variance assumed. Unstandardised coefficients, standard errors between brackets. Bold figures are significant at $p < 0.05$.

models we control for these determinants, but to save space, we do not present them in the tables.

The second claim: Type of association matters

In recent years, several authors have examined how effects of civic participation differ between the types of associations in which people participate (e.g., Stolle & Hooghe 2005). 'Advocates of social capital and civil society acknowledged that not all associations might be equally well equipped to function as "schools of democracy" and as an aid to social and political problems' (Rossteutscher & Van Deth 2002). There are two lines of reasoning that justify the expectation of differences in effect sizes between types of associations.

Theoretically, leisure associations serve as the most important stepping stone towards political action in the neo-Tocquevillian argument. Putnam (2000) emphasises the role of associations like bird watcher clubs, choirs and bowling leagues, as they are heterogeneous (Coffé & Geys 2007) and built around horizontal face-to-face relations (Glover & Hemingway 2005). Heterogeneous associations stimulate public discourse and deliberation (Gutmann 1998). Experiences in groups with demographic differences allow the 'leap of faith' from in-group to generalised trust (Stolle 1998). As heterogeneous associations are better representatives of society as a whole than homogeneous associations, positive experiences in these contexts serve as better 'preparations' for society at large. A second argument is the *horizontal structure* leisure organisations often have. An 'internal organisational democracy' is traditionally seen as a requirement for learning about cooperation and proliferation of civic virtues (Putnam 1992; Selle & Stromsnes 2001), as a horizontal structure offers opportunities for the majority of the members to become engaged.

Empirical evidence on the relationship between leisure associations and politics is ambiguous. In Norway, for example, Seippel (2006) found that participation in sports clubs can increase levels of trust and political commitment. However, other types of associations performed better, as did multiple memberships. Similarly, other authors claimed a positive democratic role for 'community gardening' (Shinew et al. 2004; Glover et al. 2005), singing (Jeannotte 2003), and social gatherings in bars and coffeehouses (Oldenburg 1989). On the other hand, Armingeon (2007) finds that members of non-political organisations like 'bird watchers and members of soccer clubs [are] hardly more prone to participate politically than . . . citizens without any active associational involvement'. Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990) conclude that 'intense involvement in a very apolitical organization is at best irrelevant to political participation and may even divert people from political activity'.

The alternative line of reasoning focuses on the *goal* of the organisations and comes to different expectations. Some organisations have an inherently politicised dimension (Donovan et al. 2004) – most notably interest organisations such as labour unions and activist organisations such as environmental groups. Citizens join an interest organisation to defend the direct interests of their specific group, and join an activist group to defend a broader societal cause not directly beneficial to its own constituents (Newton 1999). In both cases, a group of people has a desire that will be hard to meet without exerting influence on politics and government. In these organisations, citizens come into contact with political processes and with a network of people who have the skills and mindset to participate politically. Consequently, members of interest and activist organisations are more likely to obtain civic-mindedness, political interest and familiarity with political procedures. Leisure organisations, on the other hand, do not have goals that are related to political processes (with the exception of an incidental call for a permit). Since involvement in cultural associations and sports clubs mainly serves entertainment purposes, one would expect smaller effects on political participation. Therefore, we come to two hypotheses (*H2a* and *H2b*) against which we can formulate an alternative hypothesis (*H2c*):

> *H2a*: The effect of civic participation on political action is positive for all types of voluntary association.
>
> *H2b*: The effect of civic participation on political action is stronger for leisure organisations than for interest and activist organisations.
>
> *H2c*: The effect of civic participation on political action is stronger for interest and activist organisations than for leisure organisations.

To test these hypotheses, we simultaneously inserted three measures of civic participation in Table 2: participation in leisure, interest and activist organisations. The first thing to note from Table 2 is that involvement in any of

Table 2. Civic participation and political action, by type of organisation

	Conventional	Unconventional
Participation in leisure organisations	**0.18 (0.01)**	**0.16 (0.01)**
Participation in interest organisations	**0.29 (0.02)**	**0.21 (0.02)**
Participation in activist organisations	**0.37 (0.02)**	**0.51 (0.02)**

Notes: Hierarchical logistic regression, PQL, 2nd Order, no extra-binominal variance assumed. Unstandardised coefficients, standard errors between brackets. Bold figures are significant at $p < 0.05$.

the three types of voluntary associations has a positive impact on the chance to participate politically. Taking participatory overlap into account, the effects remain positive for all types of voluntary associations. In other words, participation in each type of association contributes to political action. Contrary to Bowler et al. (2003), we do find that leisure associations have a positive impact on both modes of political participation. This supports hypothesis *H2a*.

Second, as expected, the effects are not equally strong. Participation in activist organisations is more strongly related to political participation than the others. Although we repeat again that we cannot make causal inferences, the high correlations of participation in activist organisations support the politicisation argument rather than the neo-Tocquevillian claim. The leisure organisations (encompassing the bowling clubs, the bird watchers, the Elks, the choirs and the reading groups) that are emphasised by Putnam are least strongly related to political action. These findings are in line with a similar analysis by Van Deth (2007), who focuses on the impact of civic participation in 12 types of voluntary associations on political engagement (interest and saliency). In short, our analysis gives uniform support for hypothesis *H2c* and none for *H2b*. We find the smallest impact from involvement in leisure organisations, and the strongest impact from involvement in activist organisations. Interest organisations fall somewhat in the middle.

Third, we can look into the differences across types of associations in more detail by comparing the impact of each type of organisation across modes of political action. The impact of participation in interest organisations is significantly stronger on conventional than on unconventional political action. Participation in activist organisations, on the other hand, is more strongly related to unconventional than to conventional political action. Finally, for participation in leisure organisations there is no significant difference in the size of the effects.

The third claim: Cross-national variance

Although the neo-Tocquevillian approach finds its theoretical and empirical roots in American political science, the socialisation mechanism is regarded as a universal characteristic of stable democracies (Howard & Gilbert 2008). Nevertheless, a universal, positive association between civic participation and political action is not evident at all (Armony 2004). The social spiral may depend on the institutional environment. The literature offers different theories. One claims that the social spiral may not function in countries that have, or recently have had, a repressive regime. In authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, the state controls the public sphere and citizens take refuge in small,

private networks (Howard 2003). In such a regime, associations' most important function is opposing the political system, rather than supporting it (Fung 2003). Another theory focuses on the institutional relationship between state and civil society. When states actively seek cooperation with voluntary association in the policy process (i.e., in pluralist and corporatist societies), members are more likely to contact officials, engage in politics and have an entrance into political life (Bowler et al. 2003). Yet, when bureaucracies actively discourage voluntary associations to contribute to public affairs (i.e., in statist societies), the social spiral is expected to be far weaker or even absent.

Therefore, we test whether hypothesis *H1* holds in all of the 17 European countries that are in our dataset. Until now, we acknowledged that the respondents in our dataset are citizens who are nested in countries (and treated them as such in hierarchical analyses), but we have not yet allowed the associations to vary cross-nationally. Here we test the following hypotheses:

> *H3a*: The effect of civic participation on political action is positive in all countries.
>
> *H3b*: The effect of civic participation on political action is similar in all countries.

Table 3 displays the results of analyses on the country-level variance (U) of the association (B). In general, we find the association between civic participation and political action to be positive for all distinctions. Hypothesis *H3a* is supported: the association between civic participation and political action is positive in all countries under study. However, this is not to say that the

Table 3. Cross-national differences in the relation between civic participation and political action

	Conventional	Unconventional
Participation in leisure organisations	**0.21 (0.03)**	**0.16 (0.02)**
Country-level variance (U)	**0.01 (0.00)**	0.00 (0.00)
Participation in interest organisations	**0.31 (0.04)**	**0.21 (0.02)**
Country-level variance (U)	**0.01 (0.01)**	0.00 (0.00)
Participation in activist organisations	**0.37 (0.03)**	**0.52 (0.04)**
Country-level variance (U)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)

Notes: Hierarchical logistic regression, PQL, 2nd Order, no extra-binominal variance assumed. Unstandardised coefficients, standard errors between brackets. Bold figures are significant at $p < 0.05$.

association is similar in all these countries. We hardly find any significant cross-national variance in the strength of the association between civic participation and political action. Regarding unconventional political action, there is no significant variance in the effect slope for participation in any type of voluntary association. This supports hypothesis *H3b*. Regarding conventional political action, however, there is some slope variance to be explained for participation in leisure and interest organisations, although these effects are rather small. Being strict, we should reject hypothesis *H3b*. Despite the large country differences in levels of civic participation and political action, the strength of their correlation shows little variation. Apparently, at the individual level the two co-vary similarly in all countries. This does not imply, however, that the institutional and cultural environment does not matter. Yet, based on these results there are no *a priori* reasons to assume that different mechanisms are at play.

The fourth claim: Extent of involvement

Several researchers have formulated more nuanced hypotheses on associational effects, paying attention to the mode of participation (Stolle & Rochon 1998; Anheier & Kendall 2002; Glanville 2004; Howard & Gilbert 2008). Higher levels of involvement come with more 'exposure' to and interactions with other members, and often more tasks to accomplish and a more important position in the organisation. The greater the involvement and cooperation, the greater the chances of positive effects arising (Rosenblum 1998). In our study, we would expect subsequent levels of civic participation to be related to increased political action: the most intensive civic participants should be the most involved in political action. Yet are subsequent levels of civic participation also expected to contribute to political action equally? Or are some levels of involvement or types of civic activities more important than others? Or, to rephrase these questions in technical terms: is the effect of civic participation linear? When it comes to the *number* of actions that can be deployed in voluntary associations, the existing literature offers no clear expectations. However, a lot of focus has been put on the unequal importance of certain *types* of civic activities.

In the neo-Tocquevillian line of reasoning some types of activities are more beneficial than others. A distinction is made between passive involvement (e.g., formal membership or donating money) and active participation (e.g., partaking in activities or doing voluntary work). Being involved in voluntary work is most likely to be beneficial for political engagement. According to Wilson (2000), the difference between active and passive involvement

coincides with producing versus consuming collective goods. Helping to produce some common good is the kind of experience researchers expect to have beneficial side effects, such as stimulating democratic values and increasing political skills and interests. Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990) emphasise that volunteers – compared to ordinary members – are more involved in the administrative work of organisations. Volunteer work can involve activities that are like politics on a small scale: organising, meeting, discussing, planning, and contacting officials and administrators. Knoke (1990) concludes that participation in the internal politics of an organisation is strongly related to being involved in external politics, although the relationship was stronger for 'problem-solving organisations' then for 'non problem-solving organisations'.

Ordinary – passive – members do not have these experiences. Rather, most authors expect little impact from passive involvement ('checkbook membership') because the social spiral is supposed to be caused by socialisation and network effects. These can only take place through face-to-face interaction (e.g., Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). Putnam (2000), for example, expects little 'social capital effects' from passive involvement since checkbook membership does not bring people into contact with other members. However, we must not completely rule out passive membership as a source of political engagement (Selle & Stromsnes 2001). There are some ways in which this could still have an encouraging effect. For example, members often receive newsletters that can trigger political interest, passive membership may evoke a certain commitment and identification with political causes, or fellow (passive) members may meet outside the organisation and still have political discussions as a result of their membership (Wollebaek & Selle 2002). Nevertheless, these effects of passive membership should pale in comparison to the socialisation effects of active involvement.

> *H4a*: The higher the level of civic participation, the higher the level of political action.
>
> *H4b*: Passively involved citizens are as politically active as non-involved.
>
> *H4c*: Compared to passive members, volunteers and active participants will show disproportionately higher levels of political action.

To test hypotheses *H4a*, *H4b* and *H4c* we dissected the civic participation scales that we used in Table 2 by showing the results for each category (0–4) on the scales separately. This enables us to test hypothesis *H4a*. *H4b* and *H4c* can be tested by the same measures: as we noted above, the Mokken scales are constructed by the count procedure. The 'easiest items' for each of the three scales were measures of passive involvement: membership (for leisure and

interest organisations) and donation (for activist organisations). We can compare whether this first step makes a difference at all, and whether the subsequent steps are more important determinants of political action.[3]

Figure 1 describes the differences between the five categories of each of the three scales, without controls for the background characteristics. On the horizontal axis the figure displays the average level of conventional political action; on the vertical axis the average level of unconventional political action. The three lines represent the three types of associations, and the sequence of dots on each line represents the intensity of civic participation (0–4). As Figure 1 clearly shows, all categories of civic participation are positively related to political action. The average level of political action rises with each subsequent category of civic participants. This gives credibility to hypothesis *H4a*. The most important difference in political action is between those who are not involved in voluntary associations and those who are, regardless of the extent and the type of activities. The latter criteria play a role, but not as much as the differences between the civically involved and the civically non-involved. Especially when we look at unconventional political action, it seems to be the first step that counts.

The true proof of the pudding is not in Figure 1, however, but in the multivariate analysis of Table 4. The findings of Table 4 strongly echo those from Figure 1. The effect of each category of civic participation on political action (compared to the reference group of the non-involved) is significant and strongly positive. Moreover – with the exception of the first few steps in leisure associations – subsequent levels of civic participation are related to more

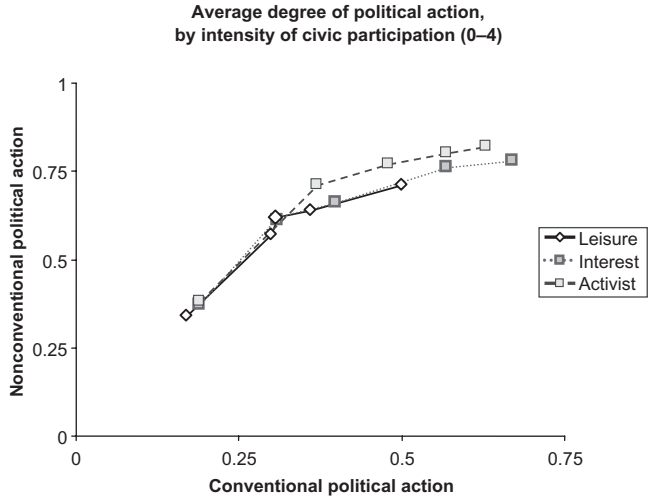

Figure 1. Average degree of political participation, by intensity of civic participation (0–4).

Table 4. Extent of involvement in voluntary associations and political action

	Conventional	Unconventional
Participation in leisure organisations		
* no activities (ref)		
* 1 activity	**0.42 (0.04)**	**0.40 (0.04)**
* 2 activities	**0.44 (0.05)**	**0.45 (0.05)**
* 3 activities	**0.48 (0.06)**	**0.42 (0.06)**
* 4 activities	**0.82 (0.07)**	**0.63 (0.07)**
Participation in interest organisations		
* no activities (ref)		
* 1 activity	**0.34 (0.04)**	**0.28 (0.04)**
* 2 activities	**0.57 (0.06)**	**0.42 (0.06)**
* 3 activities	**0.91 (0.09)**	**0.64 (0.10)**
* 4 activities	**1.09 (0.16)**	**0.71 (0.18)**
Participation in activist organisations		
* no activities (ref)		
* 1 activity	**0.49 (0.04)**	**0.69 (0.04)**
* 2 activities	**0.71 (0.06)**	**1.03 (0.07)**
* 3 activities	**1.13 (0.12)**	**1.24 (0.14)**
* 4 activities	**1.21 (0.15)**	**1.34 (0.17)**

Notes: Hierarchical logistic regression, PQL, 2nd Order, no extra-binominal variance assumed. Unstandardised coefficients, standard errors between brackets. Bold figures are significant at $p < 0.05$.

political action. This roughly supports *H4a*'s claim that a higher degree of involvement in voluntary associations leads to a higher chance of participation politically.

However, the effect of degree of civic participation on political action is not linear. In general, the step that increases the odds of political action most is the one from no involvement to doing one civic activity. In other words, the most important difference in terms of political action is between those who are and those who are not involved in a voluntary association. This is most apparent for leisure organisations, where in fact only two steps seem to matter: from no civic involvement to some, and from three civic activities to four. For interest organisations, on the other hand, subsequent steps contribute to political action more equally.

The effect of civic participation on political action is evidently non-linear, but what does this mean? If we go back to the general meaning of the civic

participation scales, we recapitulate that for each of the three scales the easiest item (the first category on the scales) is a measure of passive involvement. For leisure and interest organisations, category 1 generally represents 'membership'; for activist organisations, 'donation of money'. And, surprisingly, we find that this measure of passive involvement is in fact the most important step stimulating political action. As 'doing anything at all' generally means passive involvement (membership or donation of money), these are apparently relatively strong determinants of political action. This completely opposes the neo-Tocquevillian claims that passive involvement is of little or no use, and that active involvement and face-to-face contacts are necessary preconditions for the social spiral to set in. Therefore, hypothesis *H4b* is refuted. Reasoning from our theoretical perspective, this finding is surprising. However, a comparable result was found in other recent research with regard to the generation of trust (Wollebaek & Selle 2007). Likewise, hypothesis *H4c* is refuted. Levels of political action are higher among active participants, but contrary to our expectation, active participation is hardly the most important determinant. The main distinction in terms of political action is between the non-involved and the involved, regardless of whether the latter are passive or active.

The fifth claim: Civic-mindedness and civic skills as explaining mechanisms

So far, we have tested several neo-Tocquevillian claims without explicitly dealing with their rationale – the expected underlying mechanisms. In this section we delve into the mechanisms that supposedly explain the relationship. Although the neo-Tocquevillian approach has been criticised for lack of focus on these mechanisms (Mondak & Mutz 1997; Stolle 2001), a process of socialisation is claimed to account for the relationship between civic participation and political action. In this reasoning, voluntary associations are schools of democracy because they provide their members with the competence (civic skills) and the mindset (civic-mindedness) to participate in the wider, political world (Ayala 2000; Morales 2002). 'De Tocqueville argued that secondary associations draw individuals out of their primary associations, educating them about their dependence upon others' (Warren 2001: 30). Similar ideas can be found in the work of Putnam (2000): 'Internally, associations and less formal networks of civic engagement instill in their members habits of cooperation and public spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life.'

Civic-mindedness is the outcome of interactions with diverse others. One of the main concerns of voluntary associations is 'cultivating the disposition to

cooperate' (Rosenblum 1998). Getting to know people from different backgrounds, and bridging gaps in language and customs, contribute to tolerances and appreciation of diversity. Civic participation thus 'makes people care more, and think more, about the wider world' (Eliasoph 1998). Furthermore, voluntary associations 'contribute to the shaping of public discourse' by creating collective values (Wuthnow 1991). The instilling of civic values need not be purposive; it can also occur as a side-effect of participation.

Like civic values, the creation of civic skills is related to being part of an organisation: members cooperate with others, speak up in meetings, perform tasks for the group and make arrangements with third-parties (Verba et al. 1995; Ayala 2000). People who are involved in organisations in this sense are likely to get into contact with administrators, officials and politicians. They become exposed to political processes, policy making and the implementation of legislation, causing a strong link between involvement in the internal politics of an organisation and involvement in external politics (Knoke 1990).

The mechanism of political socialisation is the cornerstone of neo-Tocquevillian theory, which sets it apart from the rival selection explanation. If civic skills and civic-mindedness cannot explain the correlation between civic participation and political action, the socialisation thesis needs revision, possibly in favour of the selection mechanism. The accompanying hypothesis we test is:

> *H5*: The association between civic participation and political action is explained by civic skills and civic-mindedness.

In statistical terms, we expect a mediating effect of civic skills and civic-mindedness. We should see a decline in the effect of civic participation once civic skills and civic-mindedness are taken into account.

To test whether hypothesis *H5* holds, we elaborate on our most sophisticated model (shown in Table 4) by incorporating measures of civic skills and civic-mindedness as determinants of conventional and unconventional political action. If the causal chain indeed goes from civic participation through civic skills and civic-mindedness to political action, the direct effects of civic participation should be strongly reduced by the incorporation of these intermediary variables. This should become apparent by comparison of the effect sizes in Table 4 and Table 5.[4] Table 5 shows that most of the direct effects of the intermediary variables are significant and in the expected direction. High levels of (self-reported) civic skills (political efficacy) and civic-mindedness (political interest, social trust, absence of political cynicism, watching politics on television) are related to a high level of political action. The civic skill of

Table 5. Civic skills and civic-mindedness as explaining mechanisms

	Conventional	Unconventional
Participation in leisure organisations		
* no activities (ref)		
* 1 activity	**0.36 (0.04)**	**0.34 (0.04)**
* 2 activities	**0.37 (0.05)**	**0.38 (0.05)**
* 3 activities	**0.40 (0.06)**	**0.34 (0.06)**
* 4 activities	**0.70 (0.08)**	**0.50 (0.07)**
Participation in interest organisations		
* no activities (ref)		
* 1 activity	**0.29 (0.04)**	**0.24 (0.04)**
* 2 activities	**0.51 (0.07)**	**0.37 (0.06)**
* 3 activities	**0.74 (0.10)**	**0.51 (0.10)**
* 4 activities	**0.79 (0.17)**	**0.46 (0.18)**
Participation in activist organisations		
* no activities (ref)		
* 1 activity	**0.40 (0.04)**	**0.62 (0.04)**
* 2 activities	**0.60 (0.07)**	**0.95 (0.07)**
* 3 activities	**0.93 (0.12)**	**1.11 (0.15)**
* 4 activities	**1.00 (0.15)**	**1.16 (0.18)**
Political interest	**0.40 (0.02)**	**0.37 (0.02)**
Political efficacy	**0.29 (0.01)**	**0.15 (0.01)**
Political understanding	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Political cynicism	**–0.04 (0.02)**	**–0.03 (0.02)**
Political trust	**–0.02 (0.01)**	**–0.04 (0.01)**
Time spent watching television	**–0.05 (0.01)**	**–0.06 (0.01)**
Time spent watching politics on television	**0.03 (0.02)**	**0.05 (0.01)**
Social trust	–0.01 (0.01)	**0.04 (0.01)**

Notes: Hierarchical logistic regression, PQL, 2nd Order, no extra-binominal variance assumed. Unstandardised coefficients, standard errors between brackets. Bold figures are significant at $p < 0.05$.

political understanding is not significantly related to either mode of political action.

Remarkably, the effect of political trust is negative. Our findings suggest that people who are less trusting in politics are somewhat more likely to participate politically. As the effect of political trust did not turn out negative in the bivariate association, we considered the possibility that the negative effect in Table 5 might have been caused by multicollinearity. However, additional tests showed this was not the case. Note that low levels of political trust

do not necessarily mean that citizens are cynical; they could also be skeptics: citizens who simply do not trust politicians on their blue eyes. They feel the need to participate politically, if only to keep the politicians on their toes (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). Conversely, previous research also found examples of citizens who are not actively involved, but who do show high levels of political trust and interest. Van Deth (2000) labeled them 'political spectators'.

The crucial question is, of course, whether the inclusion of the intermediary variables also reduces the direct effect of civic participation. The answer to this question is a clear 'no'. Comparison of the effects in Tables 4 and 5 univocally refute hypothesis *H5*. Admittedly, the estimated effect sizes of civic participation are somewhat smaller in Table 5 than in Table 4 – the decrease ranging between 10 and 20 per cent, with a peak at 35 – but this reduction is not near the strong reduction expected from true intermediary effects. Moreover, in none of the cases is the decrease in effect size significant.[5] We should conclude that the socialisation mechanism does not explain the strong correlations between civic participation and political action we have found throughout this study. Another mechanism must account for the correlation.

Summary and discussion

In this article we have attempted to disentangle the neo-Tocquevillian theory into five empirically testable claims. The quintessence of the paradigm is that participation in voluntary associations leads to political action through a *socialisation* mechanism. Voluntary associations form a friendly environment in which interactions are converted into positive experiences. In these 'schools of democracy' people learn the value of cooperating with others with different backgrounds. Moreover, they acquire skills in debating, negotiating, organising events and managing an organisation. This adds up to an increased level of political action among members; they have acquired both the skills and the urge to become involved. Theoretically, the idea is attractive. As active citizens are needed for a properly functioning democracy, why not get them involved through voluntary associations? Empirically, however, the evidence does not build a strong case.

The first of five claims we advanced to test the empirical validity of the theory was: *'There is a strong, positive relationship between civic participation and political action.'* The claim of universal validity was made explicit in our third claim: *'The relationship is universal for all (Western) democratic societies.'* Both claims were supported by our data, the relationship between civic

participation and political action was positive and significant in each country. These findings, however, are far from sufficient evidence for the neo-Tocquevillian theory. They only prove that there is a universal, strong and positive correlation between civic participation and political action. Tests of the three remaining claims cast severe doubts on whether this correlation can be explained by a socialisation mechanism.

In our second claim we argued that, if socialisation is the guiding mechanism, we should see that: '*The strength of this relationship differs according to the type of voluntary association: Leisure organisations are more important than interest and activist organisations.*' In line with the neo-Tocquevillian literature we expected the strongest effects to emerge among the associations with most social interaction – that is, leisure organisations. However, our findings indicate the opposite: leisure associations bring about the smallest effects. Rather, the correlations with political action are strongest for involvement in interest organisations and activist organisations – organisations with goals that are related to politics, or that need political support to be attained. This implies that the goals of associations are more important than their structure. The selection mechanism offers a more plausible explanation: people who are more politically minded in the first place join associations more often and show higher levels of political action. They join interest and/or activist (and not leisure) organisations for the same reasons that they become politically active – namely to reach specific political goals or get involved in political discourse.

Our fourth claim stated that: '*The strength of this relationship differs according to the extent of involvement.*' Our analysis revealed that the first step of involvement in an organisation is the most important; the biggest difference in political action is between non-involvement and passive involvement. Although there is little socialisation effect to be expected from a neo-Tocquevillian point of view, checkbook membership turns out to be the most important determinant of political action. This, too, points to selection rather than socialisation effects: passive members can hardly be socialised by the association, so we should look for the reason why they are politically active in themselves rather than their association. A pre-existing pro-social disposition or specific interest might explain the 'effect' of passive membership.

A dynamic of selection and adaptation could account for these associational effects (Hooghe 2003; Stolle & Hooghe 2003). The core of this idea is that the socialisation and self-selection mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, but depend on each other. Socialisation effects cannot emerge without preceding selection. Members are confirmed and further stimulated in their initial values and behaviour only when *value congruence* emerges. If people do

not meet with similar others, there will be no socialisation effect. Our findings imply that selection effects account for a large part of the correlation between civic participation and political action: if not, we would not find such strong effects of passive involvement. However, additional effects of higher levels of involvement remain, and the question is: could this *additional* effect be explained as the outcome of a socialisation process?

There are strong indications that the answer is 'no'. This becomes clear when we look at our final claim: '*The relationship is explained by a socialisation mechanism – that is, associational involvement increases levels of civic skills and civic-mindedness which in turn stimulates political action.*' If the increase in political action among the most active civic participants is the result of socialisation, civic skills and civic-mindedness should explain much of this correlation. Yet, our analyses told a different story. The socialisation mechanism on which the neo-Tocquevillian theory is built faces serious lack of empirical support. Voluntary associations do not contribute to their members' levels of political action; instead, their members were already more likely to participate politically. Rather than schools of democracy, this makes voluntary associations *pools of democracy*. Nevertheless, even if they are not socialising agencies, voluntary associations may still contribute to democratic societies in other ways. As pools of democracy, voluntary associations facilitate high levels of social capital, although they do not generate them (Wollebaek & Selle 2007). By combining the pooled skills of their members, voluntary associations may balance (and even resist) governmental power, and represent the interests of their constituencies (Fung 2003).

The assertion of associations as pools of democracy opens up a set of intriguing research questions. First, how does the process of selection and adaptation take place? Which crucial pro-social selection criteria are at play? These need not even be the same in different countries. Again, we point to the necessity of a broad and time-spanning panel study to shed light on the causality at play. Second, even if voluntary associations do not stimulate political action among adults, might they nevertheless socialise the youth? More generally, we need a life-cycle perspective on the socialisation effect: do early socialisation effects hold over a lifetime, or do they need constant confirmation? And finally, if voluntary associations do not function as schools of democracy, what about other candidates such as the workplace, church, school and the family? In sum, the results of our study imply that there are no easy ways to generate politically engaged citizens. Voluntary associations do not make citizens politically active, but bring politically active citizens together. Social scientists should not assume that these associations socialise their members. Rather, they should look for the ways in which society might benefit from the potential in these pools of democracy.

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Notes

1. From the twelve types of voluntary associations, we leave out political parties and religious/church organisations. We leave out the former as it overlaps with both civic and political participation. The latter is left out for several reasons. First, 'church membership . . . may be somewhat less "voluntary" than other types of association involvement' (Curtis et al. 1992). Second, the exact meaning of 'religious and church organisations' is unclear: do they only encompass church-related groups like Christian youth organisations, or church membership in general? Third, related to the previous comments, there is a country-specific bias in the registration of church members (Van Oorschot et al. 2006), as some countries have a tradition of registration of citizens as church members. We exclude church and religious organisations from our analysis to do right to the neo-Tocquevillian argument. However, this does not mean that they cannot function as schools of democracy.
2. For reasons of conceptual clarity, we leave out some forms of political action. Discussing politics with peers is both a measure of political interest and a measure of political action. To keep the boundaries of these concepts clear empirically, we leave them out of the analysis. We also do not include voting turnout. The neo-Tocquevillian literature focuses strongly on political activities that need a pro-social attitude, social and political skills. Voting, however, is a more ritualistic activity, needing little political skills. Moreover, it is strongly affected by the voting and party systems, which we are not able to pay proper attention to within the confines of this article. We leave it to a future study to investigate the association between civic participation and voting.
3. To test this even further, we ran different models, including a *typology of activities* in voluntary associations rather than the categorised scale used in Table 4. These additional tests confirm the results in Table 4. (Tables are available from the authors on request.)
4. In our cross-sectional (i.e., non-panel) analysis we cannot *verify* the fifth claim. Even if we do find that the effect of civic participation is strongly reduced by incorporating civic skills and civic-mindedness, this does not necessarily mean that the neo-Tocquevillian line of reasoning is right. It could signal an intermediary effect (which is the claim we test), but could also signal a spurious relationship (civic participation and political action are not directly related, but both are caused by civic skills and civic-mindedness). This selection effect is plausible as well: people who have more social and civic resources, and who are more confident may be more inclined to participate civically *and* politically.
5. Admittedly, due to the splintered nature of our civic participation measures it might be hard for an effect size to decrease significantly. Therefore we also did separate analyses in which we included the intermediary variables in Table 1 and Table 2. Although the decline of the effect size of civic participation reached significance in these cases, the

reduction of the effect was limited to a meagre 12–13 per cent. This still does not approach the strong reduction of the effect size needed to support *H5*.

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