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Title

Political Participation and Membership Pattern: The Impact of Associational Scope and Intensity

Abstract

It is a broadly held argument that voluntary associations could induce political participation among their members. However, it is not clear whether a person who belongs to only one association behaves the same with people who belong to multiple associations. The question also exists whether an active member behaves similarly with a passive member or will a labor union perform a similar function with a sports group? This paper tries to answer these questions by examining the impact of associational scope (the number of groups a person belongs to) and intensity (the activeness a person participates in the group activities) on political participation. Based on the social capital theory and the explanation about returns in human capital, positive influence is expected from both factors. Considering the bridging functions of the “weak ties,” a positive impact is also expected from the passive membership. This paper uses data from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS). I combined the “socio-political participation” and “citizenship” modules to gather information on both association and political participation. The 2004 GSS is the most recent to include both modules. An ordinary least square (OLS) multiple regression approach is adopted, and the findings show that associational scope has a positive impact on political participation, which aligns with findings from studies in European countries and Australia. The impact of associational intensity is more complex – the hypothesized positive impact only exists in some associations, which indicates the influence of group type. No passive member, except for the political party, demonstrates a higher level of political participation than comparable non-group members, which indicates the insufficiency of passive membership in fostering political participation.
Keyword

political participation; associational scope; associational intensity