Inequalities in Non-Institutionalized Forms of Political Participation. A Multilevel Analysis for 25 countries.

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Abstract

Various studies suggest that while institutionalized and electoral forms of political participation are in decline in Western societies, non-institutionalized forms of participation (like demonstrating, political consumerism or signing petitions) are on the rise. This expansion of the political action repertoire of citizens, however, also entails the question of equal participation opportunities. It can be argued that contemporary ideals of democratic participation assume an equal representation of citizens' interests. In this paper, we analyze the equality of participation patterns using comparative data from the 2004 ISSP survey. Our results suggest that non-institutionalized forms of participation increase patterns of inequality due to education but strongly reduce or even reverse gender and age inequalities. As such, both institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of participation have specific (dis)advantages from the perspective of preserving equal access to democratic decision-making procedures.

Keywords: political participation, comparative research, inequality

Introduction

The ways in which citizens express themselves in the political realm have changed dramatically in recent decades. Whereas voter turnout, party membership and other more institutionalized forms of political engagement are caught in a downward spiral, innovative ways of civic engagement seem to be on the rise in most liberal democracies (Klingemann & Fuchs 1995; Norris 2002; Inglehart & Catterberg 2002; Pattie, Seyd et al. 2004; Dalton 2008). 'The observed increase in non-institutionalized participation in practically all countries' was labelled by Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs (1995, p. 431) as 'the most unambiguous finding' in the study of the changing relationship between citizens and the state. In effect, participatory acts like political consumerism, demonstrations and internet activism have become important channels of public voice and participation in contemporary democracies (Stolle, Hooghe et al. 2005; Norris et al. 2005; Norris 2001).

Further, it can be observed that traditional, mass-membership based civil society organisations are rapidly being transformed into professionally managed groups that are seeking financial contributions rather than volunteers. Partly as a result of these structural changes, civic engagement in voluntary associations becomes more sporadic while financial contributions tend to replace voluntary engagement (Skocpol 2003, p. 127; Wollebaek & Selle 2003).

In short, participation acts that are focused on the electoral process are losing ground, while other forms of participation apparently are still expanding (Kriesi 2008).

It is not always possible to make a clear distinction on theoretical grounds between traditional and new forms of political participation. Various authors have pointed out that petitions or consumer boycotts are not a new phenomenon: these participation acts did already exist in the 18th or 19th century (Friedman 1999). Chronology, therefore, is not a good criterion to distinguish "old" from "new" forms of participation. In line with the classic distinction between conventional and non-conventional forms of participation, the distinction should rather evolve on the issue of institutionalisation (Barnes & Kaase 1979). Traditional – or conventional – forms of participation are all closely related to the electoral process. Party membership, voting or contacting politicians are all part of the electoral process or they involve officials that have been elected as a result of the electoral process. This is not the case for acts like political consumerism, participating in demonstrations or signing petitions: while these acts might be directed toward elected officials, this is not necessarily the case. Participants in more traditional political activities, such as attending a political meeting or

joining a political party, become “part of the political system” and they try to influence the political system directly, while participants in non-institutionalized forms of political participation keep some distance from the political system by trying to have an indirect impact on political decision-making or by circumventing the political system all together. A campaign to boycott products from multinational companies that invest in dictatorial regimes, might serve as an example in this respect.

Scholars have suggested that these non-institutionalized forms of political participation are more easily compatible with the demands of a new generation of citizens that has been characterized as ‘monitorial’, ‘post-materialist’ and ‘critical’ (Schudson 1999; Inglehart 1997; Norris 1999). Monitorial citizens, for instance, are still interested in politics and they will participate in political life if they consider this to be necessary. Even so, however, they will refrain from joining traditional political organizations (Schudson 1999; Hooghe & Dejaeghere 2007). Henrik Bang and Eva Sørensen (2001) have claimed that the new generation of politically engaged citizens should be seen as ‘everyday makers’: while they integrate elements of political deliberation in their everyday life style decision, they tend to refrain from participating in formal political institutions (Li & Marsh 2008). In a similar manner, the post-materialist thesis states that rather than engaging themselves in formal fixed membership structures, post-materialist citizens prefer more individualized ways to become engaged in the political sphere, carefully avoiding enforced commitments and any reference to party politics (Inglehart 1997). Post-materialist citizens often want to spend money rather than time. A related account in the literature argues that citizens are still – and even more than ever before – supportive of democracy but that they have become more critical of the way democracy is currently functioning. As a result, citizens still want to engage in politics, but not in traditional party politics (Norris 1999; Norris 2002). Within the literature, there is an intensive debate on the question whether these non-institutionalized forms of participation also can be considered as less-demanding, in terms of time, commitment, risk or energy. Although it is difficult to make general statements about an entire group of participation acts, some authors have claimed that non-institutionalized forms of political participation require less commitment, as participation is often sporadic and opting out is rather easy (Trechsel 2007; Li & Marsh 2008). Other authors, however, have pointed out that e.g., taking part in a demonstrating can be equally demanding as more institutionalized forms of political participation (Norris, Walgrave et al. 2005).

In the context of the proliferation of non-institutionalized forms of political participation, the question arises whether these participatory acts are characterized by the same patterns of inequality as institutionalized forms of political participation. An important question in this respect is to determine by whom these non-institutionalized forms of political engagement are performed. One of the most striking and enduring findings in political participation research is the unequal nature of institutionalized political participation. The international literature demonstrates abundantly that education, class, gender and age strongly correlate with political participation (Verba, Schlozman, et al. 1995; Parry, Moyser, et al. 1992; Teorell, Sum et al., 2007). While we know that these inequalities tend to be persistent with regard to institutionalized political participation, there is less research available on patterns of inequality in non-institutionalized participation. The aim of the present article is therefore to explore our main research question: do these forms of participation lead to more equality in the substantive representation of policy issues and preferences, or do they simply reproduce, or even reinforce, already existing patterns of inequality in favour of privileged groups within the population? First, the concept and importance of political equality is briefly reviewed followed by a discussion of the most important sources of inequality addressed in the participation literature. Subsequently, the data and methods are discussed. Finally, the results of our analyses are presented and discussed followed by a number of concluding remarks.

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Data and methods

For the analysis, we will rely on data from the International Social Survey Programme 2004 (ISSP 2004). The ISSP is an annual program of cross-national collaboration on surveys covering topics that are considered as important for social science research. We will use the 2004 ISSP dataset because the core module for that year focused on 'Citizenship', including a substantial number of questions on political involvement and awareness. The response rate of the survey (completed questionnaires/eligible respondents) ranges quite substantially from 15 percent in France to 100 percent in Chili (See Appendix). Since some countries have an unacceptably low response rate, one might question the validity of the data from these countries (Groves & Heeringa 2006). The response rate is one way to determine the quality of a survey since 'the higher the proportion of its target respondents who participate, the more reliable are its results likely to be' (Billiet et al. 2007, p. 113). Especially in cross-national

research, response rates determine the validity of the comparisons between countries, as non-response often leads to bias in the estimates. In high quality comparative surveys, like the European Social Survey, it has therefore become customary not to include the data from countries that do not reach a sufficiently high response rate (Billiet et al. 2007, p. 115). In line with this practice, we opted not to include the data from countries in the ISSP data set, that are plagued by a low response rate of below 50 per cent, as this might endanger the validity of the data for these countries. Other countries with a dubious quality of data, too, were removed from our analysis. This selection process led to the inclusion of 25 countries, with an average response rate of 69 per cent. Given the nested structure of the data (respondents were sampled in 25 different countries), we will rely on multilevel analysis. Multilevel analysis allows taking the intra class-correlation and the variance between the countries into account and yields correct standard errors (Snijders & Bosker 1999).

In the ISSP questionnaire, political participation was questioned by providing respondents with a list of seven different forms of political and social actions that people can participate in. For every activity, respondents could indicate whether they had participated in any of these activities in the past year, in the more distant past, whether they had not done it but might do it or whether they have not done it and would never, under any circumstances, do it. For the analysis the participation of the respondents during the past year was used. All political activities were recoded therefore into dummies: if a participant had participated in the activity during the past year, these acts were scored as 1; if they had not participated, these were coded 0 (even if they claimed to have participated in the more distant past). These forms of participation include: signing a petition, boycotting or deliberately buying products for political, ethical or environmental reasons, taking part in a demonstration, attending a political meeting or rally, contacting a politician to express one's views, donating money or raising funds for a social or political activity and joining an internet forum or discussion group.

Party membership was also included in the ISSP questionnaire: respondents could indicate whether they are a member of, and/or actively participate in a political party. All party members (both active and passive members) received a score of 1, all non-members got a score of 0 (also if they had been a member in the distant past).

Finally, respondents were asked if they had voted in the last election (1=yes, 0=no). In our analysis, we excluded respondents who were not eligible to vote during these elections, for reasons of age or citizenship status.

In total, that means we have information on nine different forms of political participation. All questions were asked in all countries, with the sole exception of the internet question that did not appear in the South African questionnaires. Since it was impossible to impute these data, we opted for the safe solution to remove South Africa completely from the analysis. The questions and frequencies of the variables are presented in the appendix.

As independent variables we include the background variables that have a strong impact on patterns of inequality: education level, gender and age. We also know from previous research, however, that political interest and political efficacy are crucial determinants of political participation (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995). These elements too were included in the analysis, in order to arrive at a fully specified model.

As we already mentioned, the ISSP dataset includes respondents from 25 countries, with each their specific country background. On the country level, we include Gross Domestic Product/capita as an independent variable in order to take the differences in political participation between low- and high-income countries into account (Teorell, Torcal et al. 2007, pp. 350-351). We derived these data from the International Monetary Fund (2008). The ISSP dataset also includes countries that are usually not considered as full democracies. In these more authoritarian countries, democratic participation might be less self-evident. In order to take this effect into account, we also include the 2004 score of that country in the Freedom House Index (Freedom House 2004). The Freedom House Index includes measurements on political rights and basic civil liberties. One could, for instance, expect that people are more likely to participate in democratic regimes than under authoritarian regimes. Adding both scale leads to a composed scale, ranging from 2 to 14 with low values indicating high degrees of freedom in a country.

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Results of the Multilevel Model

First, we will investigate inequalities with regard to the participation in institutionalized forms of participation (Table 5). Because we analyze data from different political systems, we use multilevel analysis using the program MLwIN, with individual level and country level data. The first model (Model 0) estimates the mean number of activities people participate in and

the variance at level 2 (the country). Seven percent of the variance in institutionalized political participation is due to country differences. In Model 1 (Table 5) we entered basic individual level variables: gender, age and education. The results confirm earlier studies: men participate more often than women, and we find a significant relation between political participation on the one hand and education level and age on the other hand. Model 2 includes individual political attitudes (political interest and efficacy) and the country-level variables Gross Domestic Product per capita and the Freedom House Index (FHI). Political interest is, as expected, an important indicator of institutionalized political participation. Political efficacy also adds slightly to the explanation of institutionalized participation. Entering GDP/capita and the Freedom House Index as country level variables does not lead to new insights, as these variables are not significantly related to institutionalized forms of political participation. Finally, in Model 3 we also take the effect of political discussion and watching political news into account. Political discussion and political interest clearly are the most important determinants of political participation. To summarize: participation in institutionalized forms of politics remains strongly skewed. Men and older people participate more intensely than women or younger people. At first sight, education level is a very strong determinant of institutionalized participation, but most of this effect can be explained by higher levels of political interest and more intensive political discussion among highly educated groups of the population.

Table 5. Explaining Institutionalized Political Participation

		Institutionalized forms		
	Model 0	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Individual level-variables				
Gender (male=0)		-0.130***	-0.057***	-0.038***
		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)
Age		0.003***	0.002***	0.002***
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Education		0.059***	0.023***	0.007*
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Political interest			0.194***	0.150***
			(0.004)	(0.007)
Political efficacy			0.018***	0.015***
			(0.002)	(0.002)
Discuss politics				0.082***
				(0.006)
Watch political news				-0.002ns
				(0.004)
Country level-variables				
GDP/capita (in 10,000US$)			0.015ns	-0.057**
			(0.017)	(0.020)
Freedom House Index (FHI)			-0.021ns	-0.328***
			(0.031)	(0.085)
Intercept	0.288	0.045	-0.501	0.470
	(0.034)	(0.037)	(0.126)	(0.243)
Variance at				
Country-level (in %)	6.88	7.27	6.23	3.08
Number of cases	30,437	30,163	28,956	15,427
IGLS Deviance	56,949.630	55,683.230	51,550.200	26,007.170

Data: ISSP 2004, 25 countries. Entries are parameter estimates and standard errors (between brackets) of a multilevel OLS regression. Sign.: ***:<.001; **<.01; *<.05; ns: not significant

In order to explain the participation in *non-institutionalized forms of politics* we proceed in exactly the same manner (Table 6). Striking here is that the intra class correlation in the null model stands at .13, compared to the .07 in the previous model. This indicates that countries differ more strongly from one another with regard to non-institutionalized participation than with regard to institutionalized participation. The results already indicate a remarkable difference between the two forms of participation: whereas men are significantly more involved in institutionalized participation, this gender difference is reversed for non-institutionalized forms that are being practiced more often by women. This difference is clear, and it remains persistent if we further develop our model. Obviously, non-institutionalized forms of political participation are much more successful in attracting female participants than conventional forms are. For age, we encounter the same phenomenon: while older respondents participate more often in institutionalized forms, younger people participate more intensively in non-institutionalized forms of politics. For the education variable, however, the results are in line with the model for institutionalized forms of participation. Here too more

highly educated respondents participate more actively, and the parameters are even stronger than for institutionalized forms of participation. This could indicate that education is a more important predictor for non-institutionalized than institutionalized forms of participation. Political interest, political efficacy and discussing politics have a clear positive relation with non-institutionalized participation (Model 3). It has to be noted, however, that even taking all these control variables into account, the effect of education level remains strongly significant, which was not the case in our analysis of institutionalized forms of politics.

Table 6. Explaining Non-Institutionalized Political Participation

		Non-institutionalized forms		
	Model 0	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Individual level variables				
Gender (male=0)		0.035***	0.090***	0.144***
		(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.015)
Age		-0.004***	-0.005***	-0.005***
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Education		0.155***	0.114***	0.096***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.006)
Political interest			0.209***	0.147***
			(0.007)	(0.011)
Political efficacy			0.031***	0.024***
			(0.003)	(0.004)
Discuss politics				0.176***
				(0.010)
Watch political news				0.007ns
				(0.007)
Country level-variables				
GDP/capita (in 10,000 US$)			0.082**	0.424ns
			(0.030)	(0.480)
Freedom House Index			-0.041ns	-0.482*
			(0.054)	(0.200)
Intercept	0.689	0.399	-0.270	0.719
	(0.072)	(0.075)	(0.220)	(0.575)
Variance at country-level (in %)	12.89	13.49	8.21	6.44
Number of cases	28,799	28,545	27,508	14,452
IGLS Deviance	78,103.380	75,514.550	71,827.990	37,819.060

Data: ISSP 2004, 25 countries. Entries are parameter estimates and standard errors (between brackets) of a multilevel OLS regression. Sign.: ***:<.001; **:<.01; *:<.05; ns: not significant.

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Conclusion

The legitimacy of a democratic political system partly depends on the extent to which all citizens that will be affected by the decisions made by the political system, have had an opportunity to get their voices heard in the decision-making process (Young 2000, pp. 5-6). Given the increasing importance of non-institutionalized participation, in this paper we wanted to determine whether these forms of participation contribute to achieving this ideal of a more inclusive political community. We do so by examining inequality at the input side of the political system, and in this specific analysis we focus only on the background characteristics of participants. We realize we do not include information about the motivation or the ideas of these participants (Phillips 1995, 25) and this is something that needs to be taken up in future research.

The results of our analysis indicate that non-institutionalized forms of politics indeed are successful in counterbalancing some traditional sources of inequality among the citizenry. First, non-institutionalized forms stand in sharp opposition to the historical dominance of men in politics: whereas almost all previous studies on political participation demonstrate that men participate more intensively than women, for non-institutionalized forms this is exactly the other way around. Gender differences remain significant, even after including various control variables. Theoretically this is an interesting finding, because it sheds new light on the ongoing debate about why women are less active in politics (especially in party politics) than men are. Apparently, this is not a matter of a lack of political interest or efficacy, since otherwise women would not participate in a non-institutionalized manner, either. Therefore, reasons for the under-representation of women in electoral politics clearly should be sought in the way these structures and institutions operate. Given the fact that the low participation rates of women have been such a stable feature of political participation research for decades, the importance of this finding should not be underestimated. What exactly explains why women seem more strongly attracted toward non-institutionalized forms compared to institutional forms, remains a topic for further research. In line with earlier research, we can only assume that non-institutionalized forms of political participation correspond more clearly to the notion of ‘life style politics’, allowing citizens to give a political meaning to day-to-day activities. This widening of the concept of the political apparently has strong consequences on the gender balance of those who participate in the decision making process.

For age too, a similar logic can be constructed. In most of the ongoing debate about the lack of electoral participation among younger age groups, a lack of interest is often cited as a cause

for these declining participation levels. Again, it is difficult to see how this alleged lack of interest could be combined with the high participation levels in non-institutionalized forms of participation. Self-evidently, young age groups could opt for non-institutionalized forms of participation because these are less intensive and less demanding, but since we do not have any data available on intensity of participation, we cannot really elaborate on this claim.
Non-institutionalized forms of politics, therefore, clearly lead to a more inclusive political society: women and young people tend to use these forms to get their voices heard in the political arena. Although the data do not allow us to provide insights on what specific demands they voice toward the political system, we can assume that an increasing diversity of the 'democratic choir', as Robert Dahl labelled it, almost inevitably will also have an impact on the kind of demands voiced toward the political system.

However, there is also a downside to our findings. Non-institutionalized forms of participation tend to strengthen inequalities based on education. Already for institutionalized forms of participation we observe a strong pattern of inequality as the highly educated are far more active in this kind of politics. But even when comparing both forms of participation, the only conclusion can be that access to non-institutionalized forms is even more strongly biased. The current analysis does not allow us to determine why this is the case. Signing a petition or joining an internet forum might indeed require more cognitive skills, so these acts are not accessible to others. Donating money or political consumerism, on the other hand requires material resources and it is more likely that the highly educated can dispose of this resource more abundantly. Part of the effect that we ascribe to education level, therefore, in reality might be due to income differences. Given the insurmountable challenge of measuring income levels in a uniform manner across 25 countries, data limitations do not allow us to test this assumption in a more direct manner.
No matter what is the exact causal mechanism involved, however, we can note that the strong disparities based on education should be a reason for concern. Research has demonstrated quite convincingly that the highly-educated have distinct political preferences in comparison to lowly-educated groups in society. If these highly-educated groups are more active in getting their voices heard in politics, it is more likely that their interests and preferences will receive more weight in the political decision making process. In recent years, a number of authors have argued that lowly-educated groups within the population grow increasingly alienated from the political process, which could lead to extremist voting behaviour or to not taking part in elections at all. The current analysis suggest that non-institutionalized forms of

political participation, like demonstrations, petitions or political consumerism, do not provide an effective mechanism to get lowly-educated groups within the population involved in politics. If the political system wants to reach out more successfully to these groups, clearly other mechanisms will have to be explored.

In some of the normative literature, we can observe a sharp conflict between authors highlighting the democratic potential of non-institutionalized forms of politics versus those who want to keep standards high with regard to institutionalized forms of participation. The results of the current analysis, however, do not allow us to choose sides in this drawn-out debate in an unequivocal manner. Rather it seems that this is not a 'either/or' story: both forms of participation attract a different audience, and a plurality of participations acts might therefore be able to entice the largest proportion of citizens into the political decision-making process. The challenge for political systems is that they are well-equipped with way to integrate institutionalized forms of participation, and to accommodate the input provided by these acts. There is far less experience, however, with ways to include the input received by means of non-institutionalized forms of political participation. One of the perennial concerns with regard to this form of participation is whether it can be considered as truly representative for public opinion. The current analysis, however, demonstrates that especially for younger age cohorts and for women, non-institutionalized forms of participation might even be the preferred mechanism to get their voices heard in the political decision-making process. Combining various acts, should allow for a meaningful participation of women and men, young and old citizens. On the question how to engage citizens with low educational credentials, however, the current analysis does not provide any specific solutions.