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Chips off the old blocks? The political participation patterns of parents and children in Italy

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Abstract

This article studies the relationship between the political participation of parents and children in Italy, a country for which no empirical evidence on the topic is available and that has particular characteristics in terms of household dynamics and patterns of political participation. The analyses are based on a sample of 12802 children from 14 to 19 years old and their parents, drawn from the “Multipurpose survey – Aspects of daily life”, collected by the Italian National Institute of Statistics. The results show that the political participation of children is strongly associated with that of their parents; that maternal participation is of somewhat greater relevance to the participation of both sons and daughters compared to that of fathers; and that the parents’ level of education is not associated with the likelihood of the child participating, net of parental participation.

Keywords: political participation; political socialization; transmission of participation; parents-children similarity; Italy.

1 Introduction

This article studies the relationship between the political participation of parents and children in Italy. Research has shown that family matters for the socialization of children to political activity, as teenagers and young adults are more likely to be politically active if their parents are politically active too (see Zuckerman, 2005). Indeed, the “legacy of family for political participation” (Schlozman et al., 2012, p. 178) and the importance of the political background of the family of origin in defining political attitudes and behaviours are well documented (see Zuckerman et al., 2007). This line of research argues that primary groups are fundamental political socialization agencies where political beliefs are shaped and where individuals learn about politics (Hess and Torney, 1967). The family, broadly conceptualized, is the primary unit of political socialization, as parents transmit – implicitly or explicitly – knowledge, experience, interest, norms, values and ideologies to their children (Beck and Jennings, 1982; Jennings, 1984; Beck and Jennings, 1991). As a matter of fact, several studies have shown that there is a high degree of homogeneity in party choices, political preferences, and attitudes and behaviours between parents and children (Tedin, 1974; Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Glass et al., 1986; Nieuwbeerta and Wittenbrood, 1995; Jennings et al., 2009).

Most of the empirical evidence on the topic, however, comes from the United States and a few European countries (see Niemi and Hepburn, 1995). In other words, it is yet to be understood whether and to what extent the influence of the family on the patterns of the political participation of children changes across countries. This is an important limitation to our understanding of socialization to political participation since country-specific characteristics might have a very important role in the political socialization of youth.

The article fills this gap in the literature, by using, for the first time a nationally representative sample of Italian households drawn from the “ISTAT Multipurpose survey – Aspects of daily life” (ISTAT, 2013) to study the relationship between the political participation of parents and children. The study makes two main contributions to the literature. First of all, by studying a country – Italy – for which very little is known on the topic of political socialization (see Corbetta et al., 2012), we seek to understand whether the mechanism of political learning is robust to cross-national variation. Indeed, the idiosyncratic characteristics of Italian society – i.e. rather traditional, gender-unequal and family-based (Ferrera, 1996) – offer a unique opportunity to consider and to re-evaluate the mechanisms suggested by previous research in a different institutional setting with different societal norms. On the one hand, in fact, at a time of late transition to adulthood and of economic uncertainty, the Italian

family might not only be a very important “safety net” for children, but also an increasingly important political socialization agency (Garelli et al., 2006). On the other hand, the participatory patterns of sons and daughters, and fathers and mothers, are of particular interest in a country like Italy, where women – and even more so mothers – are under-represented in the public or “political” field (EIGE, 2010), but are over-represented in the private sphere of the family (Dotti Sani, 2012) and have, therefore, a strong influence over their children’s activities (Cardoso et al., 2010). Second, the study contributes to our understanding of political inequality (Lijphart, 1996), as it looks at how participation habits are reproduced from one generation to another in a country, Italy, which has low social mobility (Schizzerotto, 2002) and low levels of civic and political engagement as well (Sani, 1980; Pasquino, 2002), especially among the younger generation (Diamanti, 1999).

Our results indicate that children whose parents are politically active are more likely to be politically active themselves. Furthermore, we find that the participation of mothers is moderately more important for the participation of both sons and daughters than that of fathers, reinforcing the idea of the centrality of the maternal figure for the political making of children, an area that has for a long period of time been attributed to fathers. Lastly, our findings indicate that the parents’ level of education does not affect the likelihood of children engaging in politics. Thus, if young citizens participate like their parents, those who have engaged parents will be more engaged in the public sphere than the children of inactive parents, and hence will feed the spiral of participatory inequality.

2. Theoretical background, literature review and hypotheses

2.1 Parents-children similarity in political participation

Since the early 1950s, families have been considered among the most important political socialization agencies (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995). Despite the difficulties in distinguishing the mechanisms behind the transmission of values, attitudes and behaviours from parents to children in empirical work (Hess and Torney 1967), many studies have underlined the similarity between the political behaviours of parents and children, both in the United States and in other democracies. Early studies in the US showed that the patterns of youth political participation resemble those of their parents (Beck and Jennings, 1979). Successive studies in the United States then confirmed this result, showing that the participation of parents in various types of political activities, such as boycotting a product or being active in a political group, are correlated with the likelihood of the child doing the same activity (Janoski and Wilson, 1995; Jennings, 2002; Andolina et al., 2003). Similar results have

emerged from studies on European countries, in which most of the focus, however, has been on political attitudes rather than behaviours. Percheron and Jennings (1981) show that French parents and children have a strong similarity in terms of political ideology and their evaluation of political objects. Nieuwbeerta and Wittenbrood (1995), using a representative sample of high school students in the Netherlands, show that political partisanship is transmitted from parents to children. Westholm (1999), using data on Swedish adolescents and their parents, also finds that political values are transmitted from parents to children. In their comparative study on the civic commitment of adolescents in seven countries, Flanagan et al. (1998) find that in both transitional (Russia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) and consolidated democracies (Australia, Sweden, and the United States) a “family ethic of social responsibility” has a strong effect on the civic commitment of adolescents.

Does the parent-child similarity in participation described above also apply to Italian households? To better understand this issue, it is useful to keep in mind the characteristics of Italian political participation. Participation in Italy is two-sided. On the one hand, Italians present rather high levels of intense and unconventional forms of participation (Legnante, 2007; Quaranta, 2014). On the other hand, however, they are found to be somewhat uninterested in politics, detached, and dissatisfied with the state of their democracy (Pasquino, 2002). The roots of this scarce attention to political matters in Italy are deep and date back in time (Sani, 1980). Indeed, Almond and Verba (1963, p. 17) defined Italy as a “parochial political culture” that “expects nothing from the political system”. Conventional political participation is also rather low, with almost 60% percent of Italians declaring they have not taken part in any political action in the past two years (Legnante, 2007). However, detachment, disinterest and lack of trust in politics are not absent in other European countries either (Pharr and Putnam, 2000), where political similarities between parents and children have been found to exist. Hence, we have little reason to believe that the scarce participation in political matters of Italians should limit the parent-child similarity explained above. Quite on the contrary, politically active Italian parents, conscious of living in a country where political participation is overall rather low and conscious of the importance of political engagement, could be likely to socialize their children to political activity. Based on these considerations, we formulate our first hypothesis:

H1) *Similarity hypothesis*. We expect the likelihood of the child engaging in political participation to be positively associated with the parents’ engagement in political participation.

Nevertheless, scholars have underlined the importance of other elements in shaping the relationship between the political participation of parents and children. Given the particular position of Italian

women and the social immobility of the country, this article tests the cross-national validity of two elements: the role of the parents' and children's gender, and the role of the parents' education. In the next two sections we spell out commonly debated hypotheses concerning these two intervening variables that may mediate this relationship.

2.2 The gendered transmission of political participation

A widely debated point in the literature on political socialization is whether fathers and mothers influence sons and daughters differently (see Zuckerman et al., 2007). Indeed, many scholars have paid attention to gender differences in the process of political learning, showing that different types of relationships can be formed across distinct dyads made of fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, and arguing that the “political relationship” between parents and children is defined by gender (see Russell and Saebel, 1997). Given the gender differences in participation, which see men more involved in politics and women in civic forms of engagement (Wilson, 2000; Coffè and Bolzendhal 2010), the contested finding that girls are more likely to emulate and identify with their mothers and boys with their fathers (see Diekman and Schneider, 2010), and different expectations at the societal level of what is considered appropriate gender-specific behaviour (West and Zimmerman, 1987), scholars have come to expect gender differences in the transmission of political participation (Cicognani et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the findings of the political socialization literature focusing on gender appear to be mixed and inconclusive. Older accounts from this stream of research argue that the father-husband has the most important role in driving political socialization. This is because politics was considered a more appropriate activity for men than for women.¹ Other studies, however, have come to contest this finding on the grounds of the close mother-child relationship and of their more frequent contacts and exchanges. For the US, Jennings and Langton (1968), for example, find that children tend to agree with their mother's party preference more than with their father's, while Acock and Bengston (1978) show that mothers have a stronger effect than fathers on the child's political socialization. Furthermore, they find that same-sex parent-child dyads are not more similar than different-sex dyads. Zuckerman et al. (2007, p. 91), discussing political influences in British and German families, claim that since “mothers interact more frequently with their children than do fathers [...] [they have] more influence over the children than does [the] husband”. A study focusing on the Netherlands, instead, finds that the father

¹ See Jennings and Langton (1968) for a review of these accounts.

has a stronger political influence on the son than on the daughter and that the mother has a stronger political influence on the daughter than on the son (Nieuwebeerta and Wittenbrood, 1995). A study on Spain reaches similar results, showing that the effect of the father is stronger on sons than on daughters, and the effect of the mother is stronger on daughters than on sons (Rico and Jennings, 2012).

The different results that emerge from previous studies suggest that context matters for the gendered transmission of political participation. This may depend, in particular, on the different roles that women and men take on in a given society. In countries where women and men are equally represented in the public and in the private fields, there are few reasons to anticipate gender differences in the way their children are socialized to politics. By contrast, when women are under-represented in the public sphere and over-represented in the private sphere, they might exert a large influence on their children. If country-specific family systems are relevant when it comes to the “political influence” that mothers and fathers *individually* have on their children, it is an open question whether and which results from previous studies will hold in Italy. Indeed, overall gender equality at the societal level is very low, at least compared to other European states: among the EU countries, Italy ranks fourth from last in the 2010 Gender Equality Index, tying with Slovakia and followed by Greece, Bulgaria and Romania (EIGE, 2010). With respect to women in other EU member states, Italian women are especially under-represented in the political field (Sundström, 2013) and in the labour market (OECD, 2014). The fact that Italian women are largely excluded from the public field and that the concept of *paterfamilias* and the norms of traditional gender-appropriate behaviour are still strong (Anxo et al., 2007) would suggest that a father’s political behaviour is likely to have a strong relevance for the political activity of sons and daughters. However, Italian women have a very important role within their households (Cardoso et al., 2010), being the primary providers of care and domestic services even when they are employed (Dotti Sani, 2012). Hence, we could expect both sons and daughters to imitate a politically active mother. In fact, the centrality of mothers in families – generally at the expense of fathers – has been called upon to account for political similarities between mothers and their children (Zuckerman et al., 2007). Following this reasoning, we formulate our second hypothesis:

H2) *Gendered participation hypothesis*. We expect the likelihood of the child engaging in political participation to be more strongly associated with the mother’s engagement in political participation than with the fathers’, regardless of the child’s gender.

2.3 The role of parental education

As is known, educational and economic resources – which determine the social position of an individual in society – also act as pre-conditions for political engagement (see Brady et al., 1995). For instance, citizens with higher levels of education are more likely to take part in the political sphere because they are more politically competent and therefore they are able to process information and distinguish between political objects. Furthermore, they are more likely to live in an environment which stimulates and encourages them to be publicly engaged, and have other skills which are considered part of the “tool kit” of a potential participant (Verba et al., 1995). Since parental educational resources are transmitted to their children (Kraaykamp and Nieuwbeerta, 2000), the inheritance of the parents’ experiences, and of their human and cultural capital, contributes to the future citizen’s position in the social structure (see Bourdieu, 1984). If education is a pre-condition for political participation, parental education might play a role in the political socialization process by influencing the participation of children. In other words, the question is whether children from families with greater cultural and human capital have greater resources to enter the political and civic world and therefore participate politically to a larger extent than children from households with fewer educational resources (McFarland and Thomas, 2006). The empirical evidence on the topic is mixed. Studies on the US find that the parents’ level of education is a predictor of the participation of the children (Plutzer, 2002; Mahatmya and Lohman, 2012). Similarly, it is found that parents’ education and income are associated with a higher level of civic activity in both boys and girls, although parental civic activity matters as well (Matthews et al., 2010). However, other studies show that the association between the parents’ education and the children’s political behaviour is nullified once parental participation is taken into account. McIntosh et al. (2007), using a US national sample of high school students and their parents, show that the political knowledge, communication and community service of children is affected by youth-parent political interaction, not by parental education. Another study shows that parents’ education is not a significant predictor of the political participation of their children when other variables, such as political stimulation and the respondents’ education, are included in multivariate models (Verba et al., 2005). As for Europe, both Quintelier (2014) for Belgium and Rico and Jennings (2012) for Spain show that the socio-economic status of the family of origin and parental education have mediating effects on the intergenerational transmission of, respectively, political participation intention and political orientation. Hence, it is not completely clear whether parents’ education actually predicts children’s participation, or if this association is unmasked when controlling for the parents’ political activity.

In a country characterized by very low social mobility like Italy (Schizzerotto, 2002), it is plausible that parents transmit their human and cultural capital to their children, which may allow them to be politically active. Indeed, education in the country accounts for gaps not just in political interest, knowledge, efficacy, and satisfaction (see Maraffi, 2007), but also in political participation, as the higher-educated tend to be more active than the rest of the population (Legnante, 2007; Quaranta, 2014). Thus, if parental education acts as a further factor in the transmission of participation (see Verba et al., 2005), we would expect parental education to be associated with the participation of children, net of parental participation. On the basis of this, we formulate our third hypothesis:

H3) *Education hypothesis*. We expect the parents' level of education to be associated with the likelihood of the child engaging in political participation.

3 Research strategy

3.1 Data and sample

The data we use are derived from the “ISTAT Multipurpose survey – Aspects of daily life” (ISTAT, 2013). Each year, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) samples about 20,000 households and interviews around 50,000 individuals on a variety of themes, including political participation. This large-scale survey, designed to collect information on a very broad range of daily activities, has the value of sampling entire households and interviewing all the household members. Therefore, we have direct information about political participation from all the household components and do not have to rely on reported information, which is often used in the study of the transmission of political behaviour and attitudes and which may suffer from reporting or recall bias (Tedin, 1976).² However, one drawback of this dataset is that it only collects a limited number of the variables that are commonly used as controls in the study of political participation. In particular, we do not have information on the respondents' party preferences, nor on their ideological position and neither on personal or household income. However, the data contain detailed information on socio-demographic traits and on relevant variables, allowing us to adjust for important confounding factors (see Dalton, 2008).

² Several studies make use of reported information. See, for instance, Nieuwebeerta and Wittenbrood (1995); Flanagan et al. (1998); Andolina et al. (2003); Verba et al. (2005); McFarland and Thomas (2006); Cicognani et al. (2012); Corbetta et al. (2012).

As far as the sample is concerned, we select sons and daughters who reside with both their parents³ and are between 14 and 19 years old.⁴ This means that our units of analysis are the children, and that the information on the parents are used as predictors. Given the rather restrictive sample selection criteria, we use the six most recent surveys to guarantee a sufficiently large sample size (surveys from 2007 to 2012). After the list-wise deletion of missing values,⁵ our sample consists of 12802 children.⁶

3.2 Dependent variable

We use five dichotomous items to measure whether the respondent was politically active or not in the previous year: listening to a political debate, attending a rally, attending meetings of political parties, attending meetings of environmental, civil rights, and peace associations, and attending a demonstration.⁷ While differentiating among several modes of political participation may be fruitful to uncover differences in the effects of the participation of parents on that of their children, for parsimony we prefer to summarize them into one scale. The five items, in fact, measure engagement in political participation, by which we mean an “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). Furthermore, although these five activities do not fully cover the spectrum of forms of political participation, they are sufficient for our scope as they represent both conventional and unconventional political activities

³ By selecting households where both parents are present we can test whether there are gender-specific patterns in the transmission of political participation in Italian households.

⁴ The questions on political participation were asked to respondents age 14 and older, hence younger children could not be included in our sample. By contrast, we decided not to consider children aged 20 and above to avoid selection problems. Indeed, older children might have left the parental home and therefore would not be observed in our data. Since early home leavers might differ from those who stay longer in the parental home in terms of their political participation behaviour, we focus on teenage children, who are the most likely to be still living with their parents.

⁵ No variable has more than 1.5% of missing observations. All together, we lose 8% of the sample due to observations that have missing values on at least one variable.

⁶ As all the household members are interviewed, we used the information yielded by 12802 fathers and 12802 mothers to build our dataset. In brief, we use child-father-mother triads. The unit of analysis, however, is the child.

⁷ The wording of the question is the following: “In the last 12 months: 1) Have you listened to a political debate? 2) Have you attended a rally? 3) Have you attended meetings of political parties? 4) Have you attended meetings of environmental, civil rights, and peace associations? 5) Have you attended a demonstration? (0 = no; 1 = yes)”. Unfortunately, other items measuring participation are not present in the survey.

(Barnes and Kaase, 1979) and they have different channels of expression and mechanisms of influence over their targets (Teorell et al., 2007).

To verify whether the items actually measure a latent construct, we test their scalability using Mokken Scale Analysis (MSA) (Mokken, 1971; Van Schuur, 2003), a non-parametric technique particularly suitable for dichotomous indicators that has previously been applied to items measuring participation in politics (Quaranta, 2013). The MSA provides information on whether a set of items measures a one-dimensional and cumulative underlying latent trait and uses a probabilistic approach, overcoming the problems of deterministic techniques such as Guttman scaling. MSA evaluates the scalability of a set of items using a scale homogeneity coefficient called “Loevinger’s H ”. The item coefficients (H_i) can be interpreted similarly to discrimination parameters in Item Response Theory models, while the scale coefficient (H) indicates the overall scalability of the items. The rule of thumb requires each item coefficient and the scale coefficient to be ≥ 0.30 . The results from the MSA, reported in Table 1, show that the items form a very strong one-dimensional and cumulative scale. Indeed, the overall scale coefficient H (0.432) and the item coefficients are above the threshold of acceptability. Having empirically tested the scalability of the five items, we proceeded to add the scores to measure the level of political participation of the children.⁸

Table 1 Mokken Scale Analysis for the child’s index of political participation, and the indexes of political participation of the parents, the father and the mother.

	Child’s Index		Parents’ index		Father’s index		Mother’s index	
	π^a	H_i^b	π^a	H_i^b	π^a	H_i^b	π^a	H_i^b
Listened to debates	0.180	0.478	0.426	0.749	0.357	0.728	0.232	0.648
Attended rallies	0.137	0.402	0.086	0.424	0.064	0.432	0.040	0.393
Attended meetings of political parties	0.050	0.483	0.142	0.580	0.118	0.582	0.056	0.505
Attended meetings of environmental, civil rights, and peace associations	0.019	0.456	0.097	0.488	0.086	0.517	0.025	0.428
Attended demonstrations	0.027	0.307	0.039	0.399	0.025	0.399	0.020	0.305
H^b	0.432		0.537		0.550		0.469	
N	12802							

^a Proportion.

^b Loevinger’s H .

The scale ranges from zero – the respondent has done none of the five activities – to five – the

⁸ After MSA the items can simply be added to form a scale (see Van Schuur, 2003).

respondent has done all five activities. It should be noted that one of the major advantages of MSA is that it indicates the existence of a hierarchy among the items. Put simply, it shows that a respondent who engaged in a less popular form of participation is more likely to have also engaged in a more popular one. Table 1 reports the proportion of children who are involved in each form of participation, indicating, therefore, the “popularity” of each item. In other words, the scale tells that a respondent scoring one has probably listened to a debate; that a respondent scoring two has probably listened to a debate and also attended a rally; that a respondent scoring three has probably listened to a debate, attended a rally and also attended meetings of political parties and so on. A respondent scoring five was involved in all the forms of participation. The hierarchy among the items means that our scale of participation requires increasing levels of commitment (see Dalton, 1988) and, therefore, differentiates well between the respondents.

3.3 Independent variables

The main predictors of interest are indices of the political participation of the parents, which were also tested using MSA. Table 1 shows the scalability coefficients for the scales for both parents, the father and the mother. The item coefficients are above the 0.30 threshold, as are the scale coefficients. Hence, all three scales measure the construct of political participation for either one of the parents, the father and the mother. The indices, similarly to the dependent variable, are obtained by summing the number of activities the parents have engaged in, and range from zero – i.e. the parents have done none of the five activities – to five – i.e. the parents have done all five activities. Note that while the overall scale measures how many activities *either* parent has engaged in, the scales for the father and the mother measure how many activities each parent has engaged in *individually*, allowing an investigation of the gendered side of the transmission of political participation. The other predictors of interest are the respondent’s gender (“son” as reference category) and each parent’s educational level (“primary school” as reference category, “middle school”, “high school” and “university”).

The models also include standard control variables used in the literature on political participation (see Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Dalton, 2008). These comprise: the age of the respondent, whether the respondent is a student (“no” as reference category), whether the respondent has used the internet in the last three months (“no” as reference category), and how often the respondent acquires information about politics (“every day” as reference category, “a few times a week”, “once a week”, “a few times a month”, “a few times a year”, “never”). We also control for the age of each parent and its square, and

each parent's employment status ("in employment" as reference category, "not employed", "retired"). Finally, we control for the geographical area of residence ("North West" as reference category, "North East", "Centre", "South", "Islands"),⁹ and for the year of the survey. The relevance of other potentially confounding variables (i.e. the frequency with which parents acquire information about politics or read newspapers) was tested, but ultimately these controls were not significantly related to the outcome and were dropped from the models. The descriptive statistics of the variables used in the models are reported in table A1 in the appendix.

3.4 Models

We model the dependent variable using Negative Binomial regressions. These models are appropriate when analyzing over-dispersed count variables (Long, 1997; Cameron and Trivedi, 1998), which is the case of the index of the political participation of the children, the variance of which exceeds its mean ($\bar{y} = 0.412$, $\sigma^2 = 0.646$).¹⁰ As the respondents are nested in households, they may be related to one another (i.e. brothers and sisters). In this case, the errors of the observations are non-independent. Thus, for all the models we use clustered robust standard errors at the household level. Furthermore, all the models are tested for the presence of multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (Fox, 2008) and in none of them is the problem present.

Four models test our hypotheses. To test the *similarity hypothesis*, we use the index of parental political participation as the main independent variable (Model 1). This allows an assessment of the overall effect of the participation of the parents on that of their children without distinguishing between fathers and mothers. To investigate the *gendered participation hypothesis*, we first include the parent-specific indices of political participation (Model 2), thus discerning between maternal and paternal participation. We then include interactions between the parent-specific indices and the gender of the respondent (Model 3). Eventually, to test the *education hypothesis* we add the father's and mother's level of education, so as to estimate whether parental education has an effect on the participation of children *net* of parental participation (Model 4).

⁹ North West includes: *Piemonte, Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Lombardia*; North East comprises: *Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna*; Centre includes: *Toscana, Umbria, Marche, Lazio*; South comprises: *Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria*; the Islands are: *Sicilia* and *Sardegna*. We follow the NUTS1 classification.

¹⁰ We also run the models using ordered logistic regression. The results were almost identical to those presented in this article.

4 Findings

Table 2 reports the coefficients and standard errors from the Negative Binomial models predicting the political participation of children. As can be seen from Model 1, the *similarity hypothesis* (H1) appears to be confirmed: the positive and significant coefficient for the index of parental political participation ($\beta = 0.299, p < 0.001$) indicates that the more parents engage in political activities, the more their children engage in those activities as well.

To better understand the magnitude of the associations under study, we calculate and plot in Figure 1 the predicted probabilities of the children engaging in a given number of activities conditioning on different values of the participation of their parents, while holding the other variables constant at their means. The figure shows that as parents engage in more activities the probability that the child will have engaged in 0 activities – as indicated by the solid line in Figure 1 – decreases from 0.82 to 0.45. Hence, as found by prior research on political behaviour (Beck and Jennings, 1979; Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Nieuwbeerta and Wittenbrood, 1995; Andolina et al., 2003; Jennings et al., 2009), children are more likely to engage in political activities if their parents are politically active, suggesting the existence of an underlying process by means of which children tend to politically imitate their parents (see Beck and Jennings, 1982). The remaining slopes of the figure convey the same result: as the number of parental activities increases, the probability that the child will engage in one or more activities increases too. For instance, the probability of a child engaging in two activities – probably listening to a debate and attending a rally – is about 0.17 when the parents are inactive and becomes about 0.30 when the parents are highly active. Indeed, when looking at the probability of engaging in 4 or 5 activities, the slope appears somewhat flat and the magnitude of the increase is small. This is mostly due to the fact that only a small number of children engage in more than three activities. Nonetheless, a small yet significant positive effect of parental participation on the participation of children can be noticed even in this case.

Overall, our first hypothesis is confirmed, as the likelihood of a child engaging in political participation is positively associated with the political participation of the parents. This finding indicates that even in Italy, above and beyond Italians' disinterest in political matters, their dissatisfaction with their democracy, and detachment from politics (Sani, 1980; Pasquino, 2002; Legnante 2007), when parents are politically involved so are their children, suggesting that political learning takes place regardless of the institutional context.

Moving to the *gendered participation hypothesis* (H2), Model 2 includes the maternal and paternal participation indices separately, to test whether the effect of the political participation of one parent on that of the children is stronger than that of the other parent. The coefficients for both indices are positive and significant ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$, for the father's index and $\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$ for the mother's index). Furthermore, they are somewhat similar in size, suggesting that both parents influence the child's political behaviour. Since the coefficients of Negative Binomial models are rather uninformative in terms of the magnitude of the effect involved, we once again calculate the predicted probabilities of the children engaging in a given number of activities at five levels of the participation of the parents, separating fathers from mothers.

Table 2 Negative binomial models predicting the political participation of children.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (s.e.)	Coef. (s.e.)	Coef. (s.e.)	Coef. (s.e.)
Age	0.087*** (0.010)	0.089*** (0.010)	0.089*** (0.010)	0.090*** (0.010)
Student	0.317*** (0.065)	0.311*** (0.065)	0.309*** (0.065)	0.301*** (0.066)
Girl	0.057 (0.031)	0.045 (0.031)	0.107* (0.043)	0.047 (0.031)
Parents' index	0.299*** (0.013)			
Father's index		0.185*** (0.016)	0.205*** (0.022)	0.185*** (0.016)
Mother's index		0.252*** (0.018)	0.270*** (0.025)	0.251*** (0.018)
Father's index × Girl			-0.039 (0.029)	
Mother's index × Girl			-0.033 (0.034)	
Father's education level (r.c. Primary school):				
Middle school				0.037 (0.073)
High school				0.009 (0.079)
University				0.038 (0.090)
Mother's education level (r.c. Primary school):				
Middle school				-0.001 (0.079)
High school				0.078 (0.085)
University				-0.013 (0.097)
Intercept	-3.874*** (1.151)	-3.876*** (1.150)	-3.884*** (1.149)	-3.766** (1.155)
log(α)	-0.941*** (0.096)	-0.982*** (0.098)	-0.988*** (0.099)	-0.984*** (0.099)
BIC	19012.48	18977.08	18991.27	19027.80
AIC	18796.22	18753.36	18752.64	18759.33
χ^2	2948.133	3006.150	3029.008	3024.219
p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N			12802	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Two-tailed. Unstandardized coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Clustered standard errors by family. The models also control for: whether the respondent used internet in the last three months, how often the respondent acquires information about politics, the age of each parent and its square, each parent's employment status, geographical area of residence, and the year of the survey.

The predicted probabilities reported in Figure 2 indicate that, for all levels of engagement, maternal participation is marginally more important than paternal participation for the participation of children. Consider, for example, the upper left-hand panel in Figure 2, which displays the predicted probability of the child doing zero activities by the number of activities done by the mother and father separately. When the parents do no activity, the probability is about 0.8. However, as the number of the mother's activities increases, the children's probability of inactivity decreases to 0.48, indicating a decrease of 0.32 on the probability scale. By contrast, the probability that the child will do no activity reaches 0.58 when the father's participation is at its maximum, with a decrease of only 0.22. Similarly, the probability of engaging in one (likely listening to a debate) or more activities is larger as both mothers and fathers increase their political activity. However, as can be noted from the remaining panels of Figure 2, the slope for maternal participation is always slightly above the slope for paternal participation, indicating that mothers influence their offspring's political participation relatively more than fathers, as we had hypothesized.

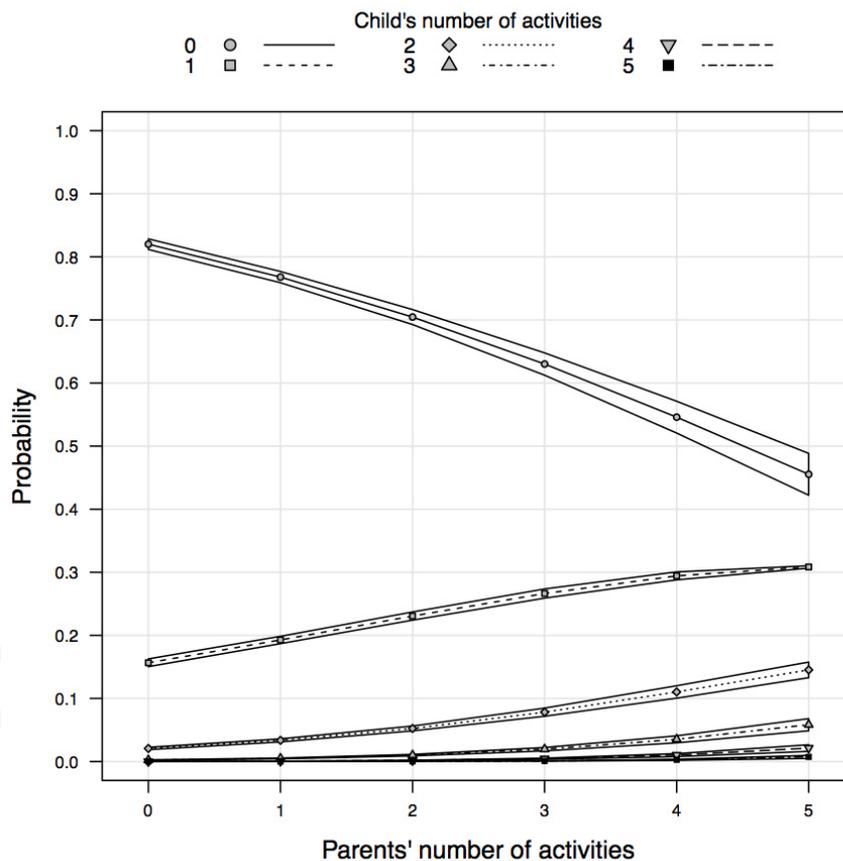
Model 3 adds the interaction between the participation indices for the mother and the father and the children's gender, to test whether there is a same-gender pattern of participation in Italy. The small and non-significant effects of the interaction terms suggest that there is no dyadic relation to be found, and therefore we can conclude that the political participation of mothers and fathers is associated with the participation of both sons and daughters, with, once again, maternal participation being to a small degree more important than paternal participation for children of both genders.

We suggest two possible explanations for this result in the Italian context. First of all, Italian mothers are very often out of the labour market (OECD, 2014) and spend much time at home and with their children (EIGE, 2010; Dotti Sani, 2012). Thus, following the argument proposed by Acock and Bengston (1978), mothers might have a stronger influence on their children's political socialization as compared to fathers, because they spend more time with them. Indeed, our result is in line with previous findings in the Italian context, according to which mothers are so present in their children's lives that they sometimes take on roles that are generally performed by fathers (Manganelli and Capozza, 1993). Indeed, given the strength of family ties in the Italian context (Reher, 1998) and of the mother-child relationship in particular (Manganelli and Capozza, 1993), it is not surprising that

children identify with and emulate a politically active mother as much as or more than a politically active father.

Last, we move to Model 4, which tests the *education hypothesis* (H3): whether there is an association between the child's likelihood of engaging in political participation and the mother's and father's level of education, net of parental participation. As can be seen, the coefficients for maternal and paternal education are all very small and not statistically significant, and the coefficients for the participation indices for the mother and the father remain positive, large, and statistically significant.

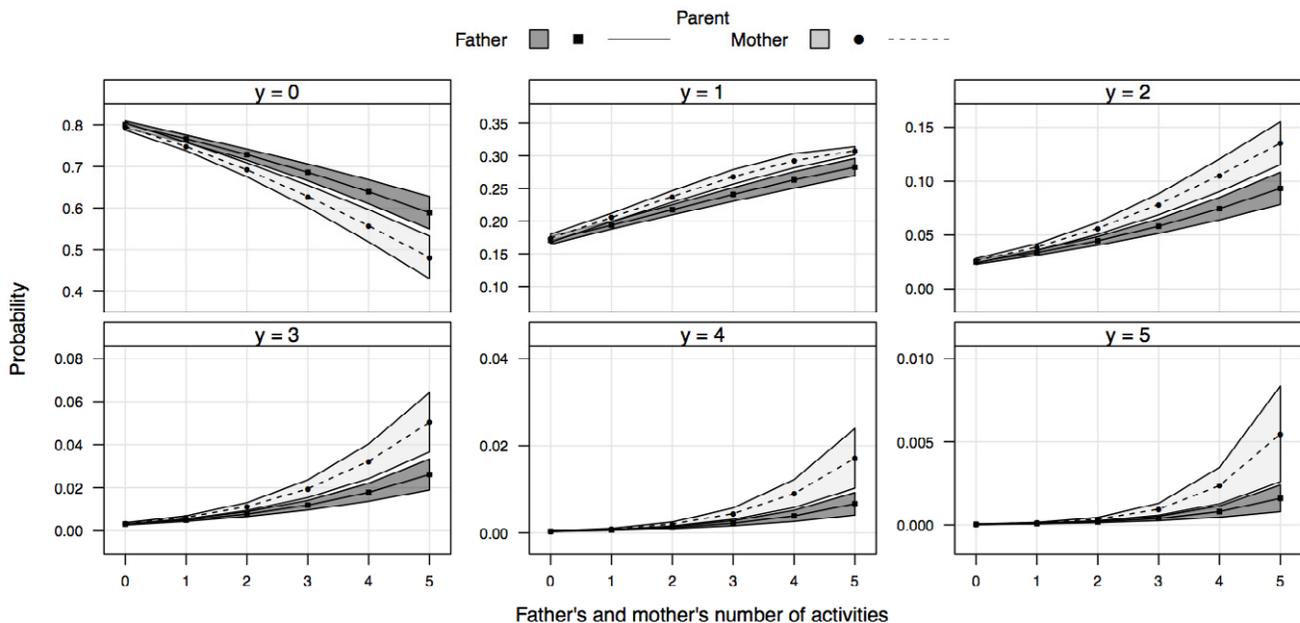
Figure 1 The probability that a child engages in zero, one, two, three, four or five political activities according to the number of activities the parents engage in, with 95% confidence intervals.



The results therefore indicate that once parental political participation is taken into account, there is no effect of parental education on the probability of participation of their offspring. Thus, it appears that what matters the most for the participation of children is indeed that of the parents, despite the

strong link between level of education and political participation in Italy (Legnante, 2007; Quaranta, 2014) and despite the tight connection between parental education and their children's future socio-economic status (Schizzerotto, 2002). In other words, living in a politically engaged household matters more than the parents' education, and this highlights that the participation of the parents is what most influences the offspring. The fact that parental education is not directly linked to youth participation could have positive returns in terms of political equality among the younger generation. Indeed, if the precondition for the participation of children is parental participation and not parental education, then children from families with different educational backgrounds could, in principle, share the same opportunities for political participation, as long as their parents engage in political activities. Further research is required, however, to disentangle the relationship between the participation of children, parental education and parental participation.

Figure 2 The probability that a child engages in zero, one, two, three, four or five political activities according to the number of activities the father and the mother engage in, with 95% confidence intervals.



5 Conclusion

This article has investigated if and to what extent parental participation in political activities is associated with children participating in a country where very little is known on this topic: Italy.

Indeed, studies of political socialization in this country have been rare and largely confined to partisanship and electoral behaviour (Sani, 1976; Corbetta et al., 2012). To our knowledge, this is the first article to focus explicitly on the similarities between the political participation of parents and children in Italy, as has been done in the US (Beck and Jennings, 1979; Jennings, 2002; Andolina et al., 2003) and a few other European countries (Cicognani et al., 2012; Rico and Jennings, 2012). Since most of our understanding of political socialization, especially in terms of political participation, has been developed in specific contexts, mainly the US, the article contributes to the literature on political socialization by studying a different context and thus testing whether the accumulated scholarship on the topic can be considered cross-nationally valid. In a country such as Italy, where, over recent decades, young women and men have grown marginalized from the public sphere and increasingly unhappy with politics (Diamanti, 1999), and where the presence of their family of origin in their lives is relatively stronger than in other European countries (Ongaro, 2001; Dalla Zuanna, 2001; Billari, 2004), understanding the patterns of political participation within households provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the socialization mechanisms found by previous research and can help shed some light on the participatory models of new generations of Italians.

To assess whether the empirical evidence from other contexts is also valid in Italy, we compare our results with those from previous literature. First of all, by showing that Italian children are more likely to be politically active if their parents are politically active, the article has confirmed the findings from previous studies on political socialization and points towards the cross-national validity of the parent-child similarity in participation. Second, in line with previous studies, the article has shown that maternal participation affects child participation slightly more than paternal participation, even in a context where women are not protagonists in political life, and yet are responsible for most child care. Third, in contrast with part of the literature, the article has found that parental education is not associated with child participation once parental participation is controlled for, showing that what is more relevant to predict the engagement of Italian children is indeed what parents do politically, not their educational resources. Considering that other single-country studies do not provide univocal results as for the association between family socioeconomic status, parental participation and child participation (Matthews et al., 2010; Mahatmya and Lohman, 2012; Quintelier, 2014), further cross-national comparative investigation is required to explore whether and which contextual features mediate the relation between these variables. Differently than in other contexts, what matters in Italy for children's participation is the parents' behaviour, rather than their educational background. In other

contexts, instead, parental socioeconomic status accounts for children's participation to a larger extent. Possibly, the difference in the effects of parental education on children's participation across single-case studies depends on the research design, and is therefore affected by the statistical models, the items measuring participation, and the type of information about parents' participation and education, i.e. reported vs. direct. Therefore, a comparative study using the same data source could be a way of addressing such issue and controlling for these aspects.

These results have several implications for our understanding of political participation in Italy. First of all, given that the political participation of citizens is vital for the good functioning of democratic regimes, finding that politically active families grow politically active children is reassuring, as it means that the "political capital" of families is not lost with generational replacement, but it is actually saved and potentially passed on to the next generations. This finding should be especially reassuring for those scholars who fear that Italian youth are growing increasingly detached from the political sphere (see Diamanti, 1999). There is, however, a negative side of children being "chips off the old blocks": that is, that the children of those parents who are not politically active tend to be inactive as well. This inevitably feeds a spiral of political inequality that is especially worrying in a country – Italy – that has very low social mobility (Schizzerotto, 2002). In other words, if Italian children behave politically like their parents, the citizens involved in politics will come from the same social strata, often the more privileged, leaving us with the problem of political inequality (see Verba et al., 1995). This also has serious implications for political representation. In fact, not only politically active citizens – as compared to less active subjects – can gain from their participation in terms of self-empowerment, but they are also more likely to reach their political goals and improve their situation (Lijphart, 1997).

A second consideration regards the importance of the maternal figure for political participation. Indeed, by looking at the patterns of political participation of mothers and fathers and sons and daughters, we have been able to investigate whether there are gendered patterns of parent-child participation in a context where women occupy an exceptional position: they are greatly present within the realm of the family (Dotti Sani, 2012), vastly absent from the political sphere (EIGE, 2010), and rather uninterested in politics in general (Pasquino, 2002). Our results, in line with most previous literature (see Zuckerman et al., 2007), show that Italian mothers play a central role in socializing their children to politics, suggesting that even in contexts where women are under-represented in the public and political field, they are nonetheless important actors in the political make-up of their children.

Moreover, the fact that mothers' socializing role is found for both sons and daughters is an undeniable piece of evidence of the centrality of the maternal figure in Italy, even in a matter, such as politics, that has been historically considered more masculine. However, the strong maternal socializing effect is moderated at the aggregate level. In fact, mothers, overall, participate less than fathers. Thus, while at the individual level, a child who is exposed to the political participation of his father has a lower probability of participation compared to a child who is exposed to the political participation of his mother, the actual chances of being exposed to maternal participation are much lower than those of being exposed to paternal participation, resulting in parents having overall similar intergenerational transmission power. In fact, the children's probability of participating in at least one action is 0.199, when holding the mothers' score of participation at its mean and the fathers' at zero. Instead, the children's probability of participating in at least one action is 0.204, when holding the father's score of participation at its mean and the mothers' at zero. Therefore, at the individual level having an active mother fosters more the child's participation, while at an aggregate level fathers "catch up" as men participate more in the Italian society. Yet, with the ongoing growth of women's presence in the Italian legislatures (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014), it will be interesting to see whether female political participation will increase in the coming years, and whether the parental gap in the transmission mechanisms will become wider or will shrink. In fact, if women's participation shall increase to the level of men's, the importance of the maternal socializing role might become more similar to that of fathers. This, on the one hand, could mean that the effect of mothers and fathers' participation will become more similar, with a reduction of the importance of the maternal role. On the other hand, at the aggregate level, it could result in improved chances of children being involved in politics, because more mothers will be contributing to the socialization process, albeit with less "socializing power". Moreover, children living in contexts that are overall more politicized are likely to receive political stimuli above and beyond the ones coming from their parents, resulting in a reduction of the importance of parental participation. Indeed, studies on other forms of intergenerational transmission have shown that improving contextual characteristics can lead to a reduction in the effect of individual background (see Van Doorn et al., 2011). Similarly, future comparative research should address whether this "maternal effect" is stronger in countries where mothers are over-represented in the private sphere of the family.

This study is not without its limits. One of them regards the use of cross-sectional data. The process underlying the transmission of political behaviour between parents and children can only be

studied using longitudinal data, as this allows tracking changes across time for the same subjects and would allow an investigation of whether parental participation precedes the children's participation. Unfortunately, longitudinal data on political participation in Italian households are not collected, and thus we have had to rely on cross-sectional data. Therefore, our analyses can only address the *similarities* in the participation of parents and children and not the *transmission* of behaviour from parents to children. Nonetheless, considering that longitudinal data on this topic in Italy are not available, studying similarities in behaviour is the best approximation we can reach of the intergenerational transmission of political participation.

Another issue regards the sample selection, as we have focused only on intact households, that is, on children living with both their parents. The rationale behind this choice was to investigate whether there were gender differences in the association between the political participation of parents and children within households. Thus, for the time being the patterns of political participation among Italian children living with only one parent remain unexplored, although several studies have found that family structure is not a predictor of children's political attitudes and behaviours (see Dolan, 1995). Similarly, due to the nature of the sampling, we do not have data on the political participation of parents and children who no longer live together.

To conclude, we wish to stress that political participation is of crucial importance for the functioning of democracies and also for the citizens who live within them (Kaase, 2011). Hence, the question of whether and how political participation is shared between generations is of critical importance to understand the diffusion of broader political inequalities. This article has shown that when it comes to political participation Italian children are "chips off the old blocks": they tend to be politically active if their parents are, while they lean towards inactivity if their parents are not engaged in politics. Indeed, the low levels of participation of children coming from inactive households suggest that these children are not receiving alternative forms of political stimuli. Thus, it would perhaps be fruitful to question the "socializing capability" of other institutions, for example schools, to eventually seek to minimize political inequality among youth.

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Appendix

Table A1 Descriptive statistics

	Mean/Proportion	SD	Min	Max
Child's index of political participation	0.412	0.804	0	5
Parents' index of political participation	0.790	1.076	0	5
Father's index of political participation	0.650	0.995	0	5
Mother's index of political participation	0.373	0.740	0	5
Girl	0.489		0	1
Age	16.514	1.687	14	19
Student	0.879		0	1
Used internet in the last three months	0.817		0	1
Information about politics:				
Every day	0.121		0	1
A few times a week	0.213		0	1
Once a week	0.061		0	1
A few times a month	0.125		0	1
A few times a year	0.080		0	1
Never	0.401		0	1
Father's age	49.120	5.776	30	76
Mother's age	45.564	5.198	29	65
Father's level of education:				
Primary school	0.100		0	1
Middle school	0.508		0	1
High school	0.288		0	1
University	0.104		0	1
Mother's level of education:				
Primary school	0.098		0	1
Middle school	0.491		0	1
High school	0.322		0	1
University	0.089		0	1
Father's employment status:				
Employed	0.842		0	1
Not employed	0.097		0	1
Retired	0.061		0	1
Mother's employment status:				
Employed	0.497		0	1
Not employed	0.491		0	1
Retired	0.012		0	1
Area:				
North West	0.177		0	1
North East	0.187		0	1
Centre	0.150		0	1
South	0.358		0	1
Islands	0.129		0	1
Year:				
2007	0.176		0	1
2008	0.174		0	1
2009	0.169		0	1
2010	0.163		0	1
2011	0.167		0	1
2012	0.152		0	1
<i>N</i>		12802		

Highlights

- We study parents-children similarity in political participation in Italy.
- Negative binomial models are applied to 12802 children and their parents.
- Parents' and children's participation are strongly associated.
- Mothers' participation matters more than fathers' for children's participation.
- Parental education is unrelated to children's participation.