From clubhouse to cheque-book? A quantitative study of new forms of civic engagement in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract

The field of volunteerism and associational life is undergoing several transformations. One of these transformations is the shift from classic ‘secondary’ organisations which are democratically structured and membership-based, towards new and more centralised ‘tertiary’ organisations due to processes of professionalization and specialisation (Putnam, 1995 & 2000; Selle & Strømsnes, 2001; Skocpol, 2003; Wuthnow, 1998). This organisational transformation also has a fundamental impact on the nature of voluntary engagement. A typical characteristic of the new ‘tertiary’ organisations – also named as ‘mailing list organisations’, ‘mail order groups’, ‘cheque-book organisations’ or ‘protest businesses’ – is that they are substantially less dependent upon the active engagement of their members. In this respect, several scholars indicate a shift from formal and active volunteering – where members interact face-to-face – towards looser and more passive forms of engagement, for example cheque-book activism (Dekker & Van den Broek, 2005; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005; Putnam, 1995; Skocpol, 2003). The latter is often seen as a ‘lazy’ form of engagement, which compensates for a lack of a ‘real’, that is, active and time-consuming engagement. In this regard, cheque-book activism can be seen as ‘participation by proxy’, where citizens intentional ‘contract out’ the job of influencing policy and organising action to the professional staff within these new (non-profit) organisations (Maloney, 1999).

A key question concerns the consequences of this widely heralded shift from active engagement to passive ‘cheque-book’ support for social capital. Generally, two opposing theses can be distinguished in international literature. The first one has been advanced by Robert Putnam in his influential publication ‘Bowling Alone’ (2000), in which he expressed a highly pessimistic scenario for voluntary engagement and social capital in Western societies. Active voluntary engagement is assumed to be decreasing, and consequently the levels of social capital in Western societies too. The growth of the specialised ‘tertiary’ organisations with their passive constituency are no contra-indication for this decline of social capital, because the more passive cheque-book membership in tertiary organisations does not rely on intensive and regular face-to-face contact between the members. On the other side, there is a more optimistic thesis, supported by more recent studies that show that there is no fear for a trade-off between giving time and giving money (Bekkers, 2002). It is argued that Putnam’s fear for a decline of social capital should not be overrated, as people who can be categorised as cheque-book members, also still engage in more active ways. Also Wollebæk & Selle (2002 & 2007) and Wollebæk & Strømsnes (2008) demonstrated that passive memberships can contribute to social capital.

In this paper, we will further explore the potential of cheque-book activism as a new form of voluntary engagement. Based upon data of a face-to-face survey of a representative sample of 1477 respondents in Flanders (Belgium), we will first assess the prevalence of cheque-book activism in Flanders, and the socio-demographic characteristics of the Flemish cheque-book activist. Furthermore, we examine the relative effect of cheque-book activism on a number of indicators of social capital in comparison to the effect of more active forms of engagement (i.e., active membership and volunteering).

The results of our analysis show that cheque-book activism is a popular form of engagement in Flanders. Moreover, multivariate analysis reveals that cheque-book activism contributes...
significantly more to the social capital of the Flemish society than active forms of engagement. The results support the more optimistic thesis as described above and provide new insights for research on the transformation of present-day voluntary engagement and its consequences for social capital.

References


