

# A Cross-National Comparison of the Internal Effects of Participation in Voluntary Organizations

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This article draws on two recent and largely untapped sources of data to test empirically the Tocquevillian argument about the impact of involvement in civic organizations on individual attitudes and behaviors. Our analysis is based on two related studies – the European Social Survey (ESS) and the US ‘Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy’ (CID) survey – that incorporate innovative and detailed measures about respondents’ involvement in voluntary associations in nineteen European countries and in the United States. These surveys provide us not only with rich individual-level data within a cross-national comparison, but they also allow us to develop and test a new measure of civic involvement that distinguishes between different levels of participation. After employing our ‘civic involvement index’ in pooled and individual country analyses, we find general support for the Tocquevillian argument. On average, those persons with greater levels of involvement in voluntary organizations also engage in more political acts, have higher life satisfaction and are by and large more trusting of others than those who do not. These findings highlight the general importance of actual involvement as opposed to nominal membership.

In his penetrating analysis of political life in mid-nineteenth-century America, Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized the importance of face-to-face interaction in civic associations as the bedrock of American democracy. Without active participation in organizations, Tocqueville believed that extreme individualism and equality would sever the ties that bind people together to work for the common good. It is through such interaction that ‘feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and understanding developed’ (Tocqueville, 1969, p. 515). In Tocqueville’s view, participation in groups produces not only a sense of interdependence among those who take part, but also a habit of association. In this way, interaction in voluntary organizations results in virtuous circles of cooperation and political involvement, effectively creating ‘schools of democracy’ (Tocqueville, 1969, p. 522).

Over a century and a half later, Tocqueville’s ideas have been applied in a more systematic fashion by a number of ‘neo-Tocquevillian’ social scientists. Most prominently, Robert Putnam (1993; 2000) emphasizes both the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ effects of participation in voluntary associations.<sup>1</sup> The internal effects refer to the benefits that individual participants themselves receive – their democratic attitudes and/or behavior – while the external effects involve the link



between civic associations and democratic performance, and both have received a great deal of attention in the literatures on social capital and civil society.<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on the internal effects of participation in voluntary organizations, and it makes two specific contributions to an already rich literature. First, we develop a new operationalization of civic involvement that distinguishes between different levels of participation in a more sensitive and nuanced way than in most other survey-based studies. Second, not only do we apply our 'Civic Involvement Index' to one society, but we add a wide-ranging comparative perspective that allows us to measure the internal effects of participation in a variety of different social and institutional contexts.

Our analysis is based on two related studies – the European Social Survey (ESS) and the US 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' (CID) survey – that incorporate innovative and detailed measures about respondents' involvement in voluntary associations in nineteen European countries and in the United States. This provides us with rich individual-level data, and it allows us to test various hypotheses in a truly comparative and cross-national perspective.

In this article, after reviewing the theoretical and empirical debates about the internal effects of participation in voluntary associations, we develop two different measures of organizational involvement for our analysis. The first allows us to distinguish between four types of people, which we label inactive, passive, active and super-active. Since this measure is derived from the ESS and was also replicated in the CID survey, we can apply it to all twenty countries, although for presentation purposes we show results that distinguish between three country groupings: the US, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. The second measure was applied only in the CID survey, and is therefore restricted to the American sample. It captures how frequently respondents actually participate in the activities of voluntary organizations (whether a few times a week, a few times a month, etc.). Both of these measures contribute to greater measurement validity, since they provide a more nuanced picture of people's levels of involvement.

We then employ these new measures of organizational involvement as independent variables within regression analysis that seeks to explain three different dependent variables that should be closely linked to participation in civil society: political action, life satisfaction and interpersonal trust. This allows us to test whether civil society participation actually provides the associated internal benefits that its advocates have long claimed, or to see if skepticism is warranted.

As it turns out, our results provide general support for the Tocquevillian argument. On average, those persons with greater levels of involvement in voluntary organizations also engage in more political acts, have higher life satisfaction and are (for the most part) more trusting than those who do not, even when controlling for important demographic factors. Although these findings provide only an initial examination of the internal effects of participation, they highlight

the general importance of actual involvement as opposed to nominal membership, thus underscoring the transformative impact of participation in voluntary organizations on individuals.

### The Internal Effects of Participation in Voluntary Associations

Based on Tocqueville's proposition that voluntary associations are equivalent to 'schools of democracy', many scholars have argued that active participation in voluntary associations improves both the *quality* and *quantity* of political participation.<sup>3</sup> Participation in voluntary associations should improve the quality of individual political participation by facilitating democratic virtues such as tolerance (Diamond, 1999; Hooghe, 2003) and interpersonal trust (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Claibourn and Martin, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Stolle and Rochon, 1999), as well as enhance life satisfaction (Putnam, 2000, p. 335).<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these studies make a strong case that participating in voluntary organizations allows citizens to learn 'the habits of the heart' (Bellah *et al.*, 1985) that promote democratic citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

The quantity of political participation should also be enhanced by participation in voluntary organizations.<sup>6</sup> There are multiple mechanisms proposed in the literature that link participation in voluntary organizations to increased levels of political activity. First, voluntary associations provide opportunities for ordinary people to learn important civic skills such as organizing meetings or giving presentations, and to develop feelings of efficacy, which in turn produce more proficient and engaged citizens.<sup>7</sup> Second, in their extensive study of political participation in America, Sidney Verba *et al.* (1995) maintain that those who participate in voluntary organizations are more likely to take part in politics because participation creates essential networks and opportunities for mobilization by members of the organization, political elites and political parties.<sup>8</sup> Finally, participation in voluntary associations provides social connection with others that reduces the information and motivational costs to take part in political acts (Teorell, 2003; Verba *et al.*, 1995).

Nonetheless, not all scholars agree that more participation is necessarily better. William Maloney (1999, pp. 116–7), for example, emphasizes that passive check-book membership has allowed more people to participate in organizations, which is better than no participation at all, and he maintains that passive membership creates a sense of community even if members never meet face to face. Similarly, in their study of associational activity in Norway, Dag Wollebæk and Per Selle (2003, p. 84) find that 'there is nothing in the data to suggest that active participation, compared with passive, broadens social networks or strengthens civic engagement'. Instead they maintain that, among other things, 'passive affiliations may have internal effects on those participating ... by contributing to a sense of identification with and commitment to a cause' (Wollebæk and Selle, 2003, p. 86). Finally, in his critique of the Tocquevillian model, Mark Warren

(2001, p. 43) notes that ‘face-to-face’ interaction is far less crucial today than it was in the nineteenth century, particularly given new forms of communication.

This debate about the different possible internal effects of participation in voluntary organizations raises a number of important, yet still unresolved, questions. In the next section, we discuss the limits of the most common measures of organizational involvement, and in the following section we develop a new empirical measurement that can help to provide some tentative answers.

### Existing Measures of Civic Involvement

Although the study of the internal effects of participation in voluntary organizations has received a great deal of attention from scholars, much of the research in this area has relied on very basic measures of organizational membership that do not capture different *levels* of involvement in organizations. Indeed, the typical measure records – albeit in many different forms – whether or not a respondent is a ‘member’ of certain types of organizations, without delving into more specific forms of participation (e.g. donating money or volunteering) that may or may not occur, and without indicating how frequently people actually participate in a group’s activities.<sup>9</sup> In other words, such a measure does not allow us to ascertain whether a given ‘member’ merely sends a check once a year or actually gets involved in the activities of an organization, and it also mis-categorizes people who may be active participants without formally being members.

Several other studies have incorporated more nuanced and sensitive measures of organizational involvement, and the field is clearly moving in this direction. For example, studies that go beyond a simple measure of organizational membership have focused on the number (Whiteley, 1999) or duration of membership (Stolle, 2001). Paul Dekker and Andries van den Broek (2005) examine both ‘belonging’ (membership) and ‘active’ (doing unpaid voluntary work) involvement in voluntary organizations in twelve Western democracies over time, yet they use a proxy rather than a direct measure of checkbook membership to differentiate further between active and passive participation. Studies such as Curtis *et al.* (1989), Curtis, Grabb and Baer (1992), Lawson and Hirai (2001) and Curtis, Baer and Grabb (2001) distinguish between membership and unpaid voluntary work, but they are similarly hampered by surveys that do not make more refined distinctions between active and passive participation.<sup>10</sup>

The most comprehensive effort to measure different levels of organizational involvement is Wollebæk and Selle’s (2003) study of Norwegian civil society, in which they develop a measure of the scope and intensity of involvement in civic organizations. Wollebæk and Selle’s analysis contributes significantly to our understanding of the different levels and types of organizational involvement in Norway and its impact on trust and civic engagement. Nevertheless, their measure of the type of organizational affiliation (as measured by degree of political involvement) relies on a distinct understanding of the political nature of

associations in Norway (pp. 73–4), and it has not been replicated in other countries.

In short, while certainly an improvement compared to the standard measure of organizational membership, these measures do not quite capture the essence of the argument concerning active face-to-face participation in voluntary organizations. Wollebæk and Selle come closest, but their study remains restricted to Norway. As a result, we still know relatively little about the internal effects of different levels of organizational involvement, particularly in a comparative perspective. This is an unsatisfying state of affairs given recent debates about the rise of a passive form of ‘checkbox membership’ in professionally run advocacy groups, which Theda Skocpol (2003, p. 292) argues is a very different, and ‘diminished’, form of civic participation.<sup>11</sup> In short, in order to test the internal effects of different forms of participation, a new and more sensitive measure of organizational involvement is needed. And in order to reach broader comparative conclusions, the same measure should be applied to different societies.

### A New Civic Involvement Index

We now turn to our two measures of organizational involvement. The first draws primarily on the 2002 European Social Survey (ESS), which was conducted in 21 European countries and Israel, using in-person interviews and applying very high methodological standards.<sup>12</sup> In the analysis below, we exclude Israel since it is outside Europe, and we are forced to leave out the Czech Republic and Switzerland, because the questions on organizational activity were not asked in those countries. This leaves us with nineteen European countries, which – for brevity and ease of presentation – we divide into two pooled groups, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Moreover, thanks to the US Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID) survey, we can also include the US in our comparative analysis.<sup>13</sup>

The ESS and CID surveys asked respondents about their involvement in twelve different types of organizations.<sup>14</sup> For each organization, respondents were asked whether, over the previous twelve months, they: (1) have been members; (2) participated; (3) did voluntary work; (4) donated money; or (5) none of the above.<sup>15</sup> Although not presented here, we analyzed the descriptive results of the four different types of participation for all twelve organizations in the US, Western Europe and Eastern Europe, respectively.<sup>16</sup> This analysis produced two especially noteworthy findings. In cross-national perspective, we found that all forms of involvement in organizations other than trade unions are significantly lower in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe and the US.<sup>17</sup> In terms of the different types of involvement, most organizations have higher levels of membership than of participation, voluntary work or donating money, although with some interesting exceptions.<sup>18</sup>

As discussed above, there are strong reasons to believe that an index based solely on membership – as is typically applied in other studies – is insufficient. And if we

had to choose a single indicator, the ESS ‘participation’ measure would certainly be much closer to the theoretical origins of the concept of civil society. Fortunately, however, the combination of response options in our data allows us to create a more sensitive index to capture respondents’ different levels of civic involvement. We have therefore created what we call a ‘Civic Involvement Index’, which is coded in the following way, with various combinations to address the fact that multiple responses were allowed for this battery:

- 0 Inactive (no involvement of any kind)
- 1 Passive (member only, donor only or member and donor only)<sup>19</sup>
- 2 Active (volunteer only, participant only, any combination of either volunteer or participant with member or donor)
- 3 Super-active (volunteer and participant only, or three or more of the above)

In other words, our conceptualization assumes that some forms of organizational involvement represent greater ‘activeness’ than others. For example, being a member or donating money corresponds to a lower degree of involvement than participating or volunteering. Several combinations of these four types of involvement lead to the classifications of inactive, passive, active or super-active for each type of organization.

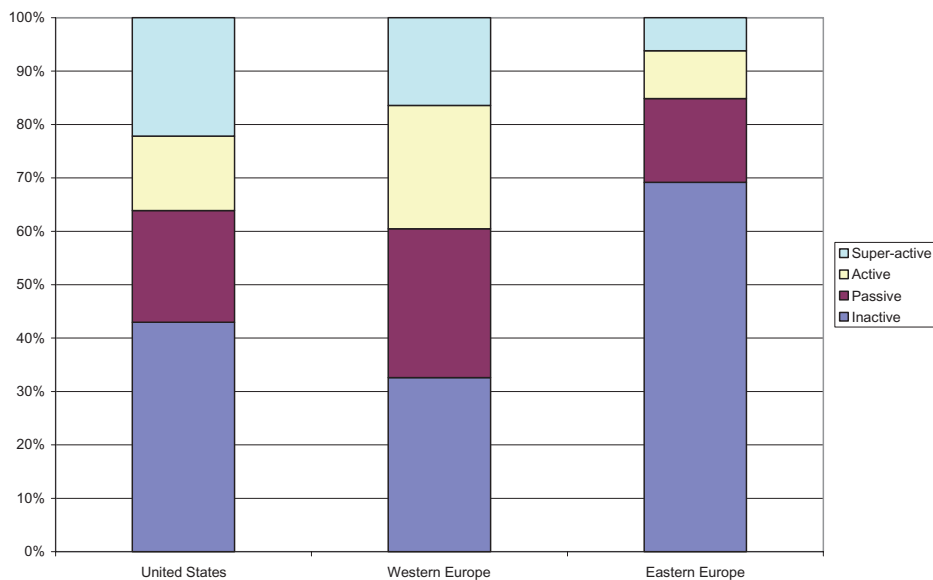
This measure corresponds to the respondent’s *highest* level of involvement in at least one of the organizations. For example, if a respondent participates or volunteers for one organization and is also a member of another group, he or she will be coded as participating or volunteering overall (i.e. as ‘active’); if another respondent participates and volunteers in just one organization, he or she will be coded as such (i.e. as ‘super-active’).<sup>20</sup> What matters from the perspective of social capital and civil society is that people interact in some organized capacity, and as computing an aggregate measure that somehow multiplies the type of participation by the number of organizations could be very misleading<sup>21</sup> and an additive index produced basically the same results,<sup>22</sup> this appears to be the best possible measure to distinguish between people who participate in various ways in voluntary organizations.

Figure 1 shows the distributions across the four categories of our civic involvement index for the three country groupings. The percentage of inactive respondents is by far the highest in Eastern Europe, and inactivity is slightly higher in the US than in Western Europe. The categories of passive, active and super-active have relatively similar proportions in the latter two groups, and again Eastern Europe stands out as having the lowest number of active or super-active respondents.

### **The Effects of Civic Involvement on Political Action, Life Satisfaction and Trust**

With this new measure in hand, it is now possible to analyze the internal effect of participation in a comparative context. In the analysis that follows, we explore

Figure 1: Levels of Civic Involvement



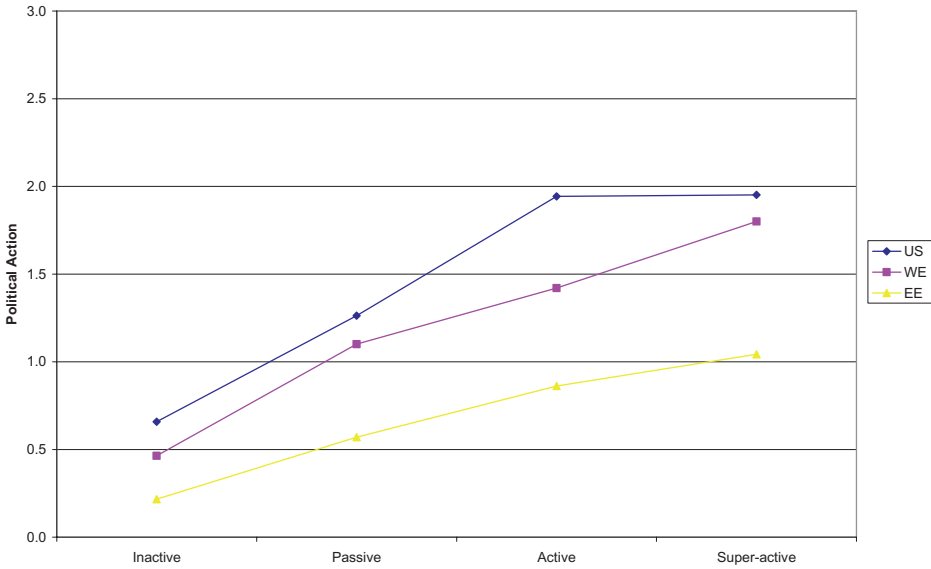
Source: ESS (2002) and US CID survey (2005).

the relationship between our Civic Involvement Index and the following three dependent variables: political action, life satisfaction and generalized trust.<sup>23</sup> We focus on these measures because they have been identified in the literature as key outcomes of the internal effects of associations. As discussed earlier, increased political action – in this case consisting of seven different acts such as contacting a politician, signing a petition and boycotting certain products<sup>24</sup> – is one of the expected individual behavioral effects produced by participation in voluntary associations,<sup>25</sup> while higher levels of life satisfaction (Anheier *et al.*, 2004; Putnam, 2000) and trust (Putnam, 1993; 2000; Stolle and Rochon, 1999) are among the most important attitudinal effects of participation in voluntary associations.<sup>26</sup>

Combined, these internal effects on an individual's behavior and attitudes should improve both the *quantity* and *quality* of his or her political participation. The theoretical expectation is that the greater people's involvement in voluntary associations, the higher will be their levels of political action, life satisfaction and interpersonal trust.

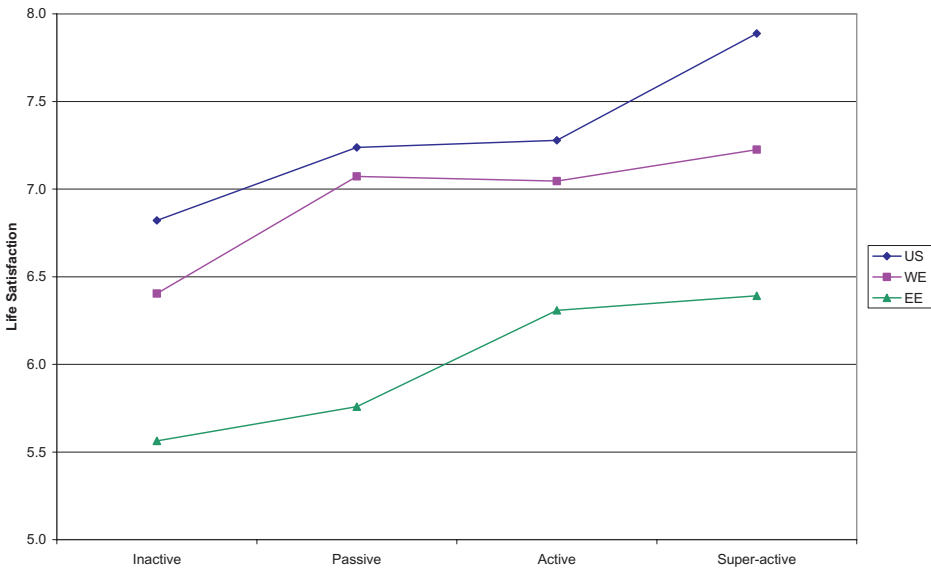
The results provide some support for these arguments. Figures 2–4 present plots of the means of the dependent variables for each increasing unit on our Civic Involvement Index, showing a pattern in which political action, life satisfaction and trust generally increase in all three country groupings.<sup>27</sup> For example, political action almost more than tripled from the inactive to the super-active category in

**Figure 2: Means of Political Action and Civic Involvement Index**



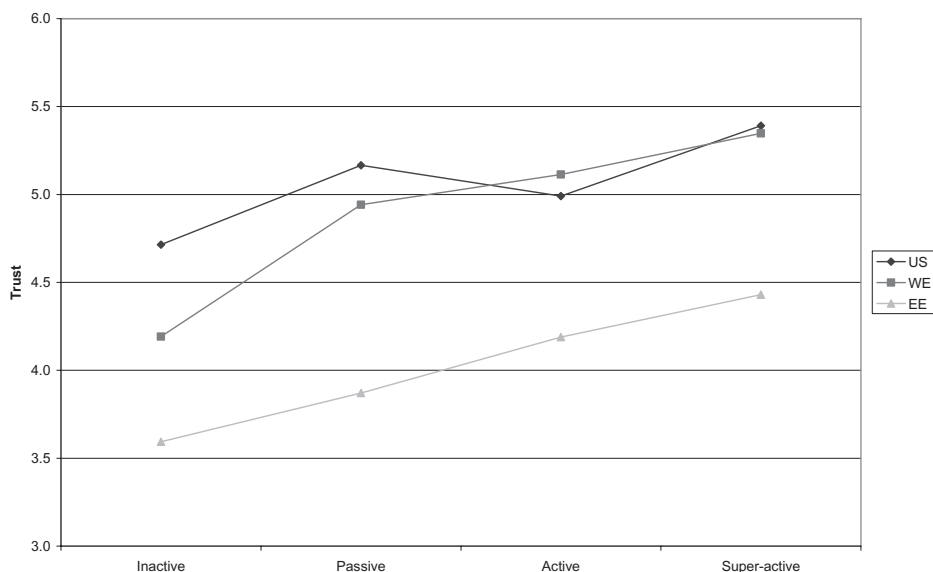
Source: ESS (2002) and US CID survey (2005).

**Figure 3: Means of Life Satisfaction and Civic Involvement Index**



Source: ESS (2002) and US CID survey (2005).

Figure 4: Means of Trust and Civic Involvement Index



Source: ESS (2002) and US CID survey (2005).

each country group. While the increase between the inactive and the super-active category was not quite as dramatic as political action, life satisfaction increased by more than a point in the United States and by 0.8 in Western and Eastern Europe. In comparison, the results for trust show a more modest increase, as only in Western Europe does trust increase by a point from the inactive to super-active category. That being said, most of the means of trust do increase, albeit only slightly, as participation in voluntary organizations intensifies.

Having established that there appears to be an increasing benefit of political action, life satisfaction and trust for those who participate more actively in voluntary associations, we can operationalize our Civic Involvement Index as an independent variable within a series of regression analyses that control for income,<sup>28</sup> education, age and gender.<sup>29</sup> Numerous empirical studies of political participation have shown that demographic factors – and in particular socio-economic status, measured here by the income and education variables – are important predictors of political and civic activity.<sup>30</sup> Now we can weigh the relative effect of different degrees of involvement in voluntary organizations while controlling for socio-economic status. We expect to find a strong statistically significant and positive relationship between involvement in voluntary organizations and political action, life satisfaction and trust.

Table 1 presents the regression results, which show that as expected, the Civic Involvement Index is statistically significant in eight out of the nine models (with

**Table 1: OLS Regression of Political Action, Trust and Life Satisfaction**

Country group	Independent variables	Political action	Life satisfaction	Trust
United States	Civic Involvement Index	0.39 (0.05)###	0.26 (0.08)###	0.03 (0.07)
	Income	0.08 (0.06)	0.35 (0.09)###	0.16 (0.10)####
	Education	0.21 (0.05)###	0.04 (0.07)	0.29 (0.09)###
	Age	0.0003 (0.004)	0.01 (0.005)####	0.02 (0.01)##
	Gender (female)	-0.26 (0.12)#	0.14 (0.17)	-0.12 (0.18)
	Constant	-0.08 (0.25)	5.42 (0.43)###	2.76 (0.43)###
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.06	0.04
	N	829	840	843
	Sum of weights	828	844	846
Western Europe	Civic Involvement Index	0.34 (0.01)###	0.18 (0.02)###	0.29 (0.02)###
	Income	0.04 (0.01)##	0.37 (0.02)###	0.13 (0.02)###
	Education	0.24 (0.01)###	0.07 (0.02)###	0.22 (0.02)###
	Age	-0.004 (0.0007)###	0.01 (0.001)###	0.005 (0.001)###
	Gender	0.10 (0.03)###	0.11 (0.04)##	-0.02 (0.04)
	Constant	0.07 (0.06)	5.18 (0.11)###	3.31 (0.11)###
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.05	0.06
	N	23,553	23,813	23,838
	Sum of weights	22,901	23,083	23,113
Eastern Europe	Civic Involvement Index	0.24 (0.02)###	0.17 (0.05)###	0.16 (0.05)##
	Income	0.04 (0.01)##	0.50 (0.05)###	0.14 (0.05)##
	Education	0.12 (0.01)###	0.10 (0.04)##	0.25 (0.03)###
	Age	-0.001 (0.0008)	-0.01 (0.003)##	-0.004 (0.003)
	Gender	0.02 (0.03)	0.20 (0.10)#	0.07 (0.09)
	Constant	-0.10 (0.06)####	4.42 (0.22)###	2.84 (0.19)###
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.07	0.05
	N	4,176	4,200	4,218
	Sum of weights	3,250	3,276	3,282

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

### $p \leq 0.001$ ; ## $p \leq 0.01$ ; # $p \leq 0.05$ ; #### $p \leq 0.10$ .

Source: ESS (2002) and US CID survey (2005).

the exception of trust in the United States), and all but one at the 0.001 level.<sup>31</sup> It is one of the strongest and most consistent variables across all nine models, on a par with education, which has a known relationship with these variables (on political participation see Leighley, 1995, pp. 183–5; on life satisfaction see Anheier *et al.*, 2004, pp. 81–2; on trust see Uslaner, 2002, ch. 4). *Ceteris paribus*, an increase in one unit on the 4-unit scale of the Civic Involvement Index is associated with an increase of 0.39 (in the US), 0.34 (in Western Europe) and 0.24 (in Eastern Europe) on the political action scale. This is a tremendous boost given that approximately 67 per cent of Americans, 70 per cent of Western Europeans and 91 per cent of Eastern Europeans took part in one political act or less.

Turning to life satisfaction, an increase in one unit of the index is associated with an increase of 0.26 in the United States on the 10-point scale of life satisfaction and slightly lower levels in Western and Eastern Europe. Such changes are difficult to interpret, but considering that most respondents cluster at the middle of the scale, these coefficients appear to be substantively significant as well, as for example super-active respondents will receive almost a full point increase in comparison to those who are inactive in the US. Finally, on the regression of generalized trust, while the index is not statistically significant in the US, an increase in one unit is associated with a 0.29 and 0.16 increase in Western Europe and Eastern Europe, respectively, on the 10-point scale. This means that a super-active respondent will receive a 0.87 boost in trust in Western Europe and a 0.48 increase in Eastern Europe. In short, with the exception of generalized trust in the US, the results are statistically and substantively robust.

It is important to note, however, that, as with much of the research on social capital and civil society, there may well be something of an endogenous relationship between participation in voluntary associations and our dependent variables. For example, it could be that happier and more trusting people are more likely to join and actively participate in voluntary associations, and therefore that higher levels of trust and life satisfaction are not necessarily products of their participation in organizations, but are instead a function of the type of people who join. While it is impossible to disentangle cause and effect completely with a cross-sectional survey such as ours, we agree with the dominant strand of the literature, which views people's participation in organizations as having a potential transforming influence on their attitudes and behavior. Even if one cannot make strong causal claims here, it is evident from the strength of the associations that civic involvement, political participation, life satisfaction and trust are part of a mutually reinforcing 'syndrome' of attitudes and behaviors in a cross-national context.<sup>32</sup>

On the whole, the effects of the Civic Involvement Index in the models in Table 1 indicate general support for the Tocquevillian argument, showing that increasing levels of involvement in voluntary organizations are associated with significantly higher levels of political action and life satisfaction in all three sets of countries, and generalized trust in Western and Eastern Europe. But the overall index does not allow us to examine the individual effects of the four particular levels (inactive, passive, active, super-active) that it contains. Table 2 therefore turns to a dummy variable analysis, with the inactive category serving as the baseline.

The table highlights the new results for the same three dependent variables. The effect of the dummy variables on political action is very strong, showing that each level of involvement, except in the case of active vs. super-active respondents in the US, is associated with an even greater effect on the propensity of respondents to undertake political acts. The results on the life satisfaction and trust variables, however, are more mixed. In Western Europe they are extremely strong, with every model displaying coefficients that are significant at the 0.001 level, indicating increasing differences between each of the dummy variables and the

**Table 2: OLS Regression of Political Action, Trust and Life Satisfaction (With Dummy Variables for the Civic Involvement Index)**

Country group	Independent variables	Political action	Life satisfaction	Trust
United States	Dummy passive	0.33 (0.14)#	0.07 (0.22)	-0.09 (0.26)
	Dummy active	1.10 (0.20)###	0.27 (0.26)	-0.05 (0.28)
	Dummy super-active	1.09 (0.16)###	0.80 (0.25)###	0.11 (0.23)
	Income	0.08 (0.06)	0.36 (0.09)###	0.17 (0.10)####
	Education	0.21 (0.05)###	0.05 (0.07)	0.29 (0.09)###
	Age	0.001 (0.004)	0.009 (0.005)####	0.02 (0.006)##
	Gender (female)	-0.25 (0.12)#	0.14 (0.17)	-0.13 (0.18)
	Constant	-0.15 (0.25)	5.43 (0.44)###	2.76 (0.43)###
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.06	0.04
	N	829	840	843
	Sum of weights	828	844	846
Western Europe	Dummy passive	0.48 (0.03)###	0.50 (0.06)###	0.57 (0.06)###
	Dummy active	0.71 (0.04)###	0.51 (0.06)###	0.72 (0.06)###
	Dummy super-active	1.04 (0.04)###	0.57 (0.07)###	0.88 (0.07)###
	Income	0.03 (0.01)##	0.36 (0.02)###	0.12 (0.02)###
	Education	0.23 (0.01)###	0.07 (0.02)###	0.21 (0.02)###
	Age	-0.004 (0.0007)###	0.006 (0.001)###	0.005 (0.001)###
	Gender (female)	0.10 (0.03)###	0.13 (0.04)##	-0.01 (0.04)
	Constant	0.04 (0.06)	5.08 (0.11)###	3.21 (0.11)###
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.06	0.06
	N	23,553	23,813	23,838
	Sum of weights	22,901	23,083	23,113
Eastern Europe	Dummy passive	0.27 (0.05)###	0.04 (0.14)	0.11 (0.13)
	Dummy active	0.53 (0.07)###	0.39 (0.17)#	0.27 (0.15)####
	Dummy super-active	0.68 (0.10)###	0.54 (0.18)##	0.53 (0.19)##
	Income	0.03 (0.01)#	0.50 (0.05)###	0.14 (0.05)##
	Education	0.12 (0.01)###	0.10 (0.04)##	0.25 (0.03)###
	Age	-0.001 (0.0008)	-0.008 (0.003)#	-0.004 (0.003)
	Gender (female)	0.02 (0.03)	0.19 (0.10)#	0.07 (0.09)
	Constant	-0.10 (0.06)####	4.43 (0.22)###	2.84 (0.19)###
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.07	0.05
	N	4,176	4,200	4,218
	Sum of weights	3,250	3,276	3,282

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

### $p \leq 0.001$ ; ## $p \leq 0.01$ ; # $p \leq 0.05$ ; #### $p \leq 0.10$ .

Source: ESS (2002) and US CID survey (2005).

baseline of inactive respondents. In contrast, though, in the US, only super-active respondents are much more likely to be highly satisfied with their lives, and none of the dummy variables has any effect on generalized trust. And in Eastern Europe, the super-active and active have higher life satisfaction than the baseline (at the 0.05 level or less), and the active and super-active are more likely to be trusting than inactive people (at the 0.10 level or less).

Space constraints preclude an in-depth discussion of the substantive significance of the dummy variables across all nine models, but the example of Western Europe indicates that, compared to inactive people, passive respondents will on average engage in 0.48 more political acts, while active respondents will undertake an additional 0.71 acts and the super-active will engage in 1.04 more political acts. This is a large boost in light of the range of average responses on political action. The effects on life satisfaction and trust are not quite as striking, but they too indicate a significant increase at each level of greater civic involvement.

In sum, the performance of the civic index and its relationship to political action, life satisfaction and trust in the pooled country analyses provides strong and relatively consistent support for theories of social capital and civil society that stress the importance of active participation and its resultant effect on engagement in the political sphere.

### Frequency of Participation in the United States

In addition to the battery on membership, participation, voluntary work and donating money, the CID survey conducted in the United States included an even more detailed measure of respondents' level of involvement in associations, in the form of a follow-up question asked of respondents who answered 'yes' to any of the four options above for a particular organization. This set of questions allows us to establish how frequently respondents participate in that group – never, once a year, a few times a year, once a month, a few times a month or a few times a week – which means that we can further distinguish the active participants from the non-participants.<sup>33</sup> And since the discussion that follows focuses strictly on the US CID survey, which also included five additional types of organizations that were not used in the ESS, our analysis presents results on participation in all seventeen types of organizations in the US.<sup>34</sup>

Following the logic behind the Civic Involvement Index, we created a new aggregate measure of participation in voluntary organizations, which corresponds to the respondent's highest level of frequency of participation in at least one of the organizations. In other words, if a respondent participates a few times a week in one organization, a few times a month in a second and once a year in a third, he or she will be coded as a few times a week overall. If another respondent participates once a month in just one organization, he or she will be coded as such.<sup>35</sup> Although not presented here, the descriptive data show that most respondents are clustered at the two ends of the frequency spectrum with few in the categories once a year (2 per cent), few times a year (7 per cent) and once a month (8 per cent). Therefore to create our index, we grouped the respondents into the following categories:

- 0 Never
- 1 Rarely or occasionally participate (once a year, few times a year and once a month)

- 2 Regularly participate (few times a month)
- 3 Frequently participate (few times a week)

Our theoretical expectation, once again, is that as the frequency of respondents' participation in voluntary associations increases, so too should their levels of political action, life satisfaction and trust. However, unlike the case of the Civic Involvement Index, there is not a strong theoretical argument that different levels of frequency represent discrete categories. Dummy variables produced from the Frequency of Participation Index would not capture qualitatively different kinds of participation and are therefore not presented here.

Table 3 presents the regression results, which show that the Frequency of Participation Index is a statistically significant predictor of political action and life satisfaction, but not generalized trust, when controlling for the four demographic factors used in the previous section. *Ceteris paribus*, an increase in one unit on the 4-unit scale of the Frequency of Participation Index is associated with an increase of 0.33 on the political action scale and 0.31 on the life satisfaction scale. Thus, a respondent who participates weekly in at least one organization will receive a 0.99 increase in political participation in comparison to a respondent who is inactive and receives a 0.93 boost in life satisfaction. In addition to the overall distribution of respondents on the dependent variables, these results provide strong evidence that the effects of frequency of participation on political action and life satisfaction are substantively as well as statistically significant.

In sum, the results from the Frequency of Participation Index are consistent with those from the Civic Involvement Index. While Americans who participate more

**Table 3: OLS Regression of Political Action, Trust and Life Satisfaction in the US**

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Political action</i>	<i>Life satisfaction</i>	<i>Trust</i>
Frequency of Participation Index	0.33 (0.05)###	0.31 (0.07)###	0.07 (0.08)
Income	0.08 (0.06)	0.34 (0.09)###	0.16 (0.10)
Education	0.22 (0.05)###	0.03 (0.07)	0.28 (0.09)###
Age	0.0007 (0.004)	0.009 (0.005)####	0.02 (0.01)##
Gender (female)	-0.24 (0.12)#	0.16 (0.16)	-0.12 (0.18)
Constant	-0.06 (0.25)	5.45 (0.43)###	2.77 (0.42)###
Adjusted $R^2$	0.13	0.07	0.05
N	829	840	843
Sum of weights	828	844	846

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses.

### $p \leq 0.001$ ; ## $p \leq 0.01$ ; # $p \leq 0.05$ ; #### $p \leq 0.10$ .

Source: US CID survey (2005).

frequently in voluntary associations certainly engage in greater numbers of political acts, and also have higher levels of life satisfaction, there is little apparent relationship between civic involvement or frequency of participation and generalized trust in the United States. Overall, however, the results still – on balance – tend to support the general direction of the Tocquevillian theory.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis has been to re-examine long-standing and eminent theories in light of a new and more sensitive measure of civic involvement, as well as the availability of high-quality cross-national data. Indeed, Tocqueville and his many followers have argued that involvement in associations is not merely beneficial for democracy (its external effect), but also for the people who participate themselves (its internal effect). And most theories of civil society since Tocqueville stress the importance of human interaction in developing the democratic attitudes and behaviors of individuals. While these theories have certainly been tested using various measures of organizational involvement, they have rarely been applied to more than one country in any given study.

In contrast, this article develops two new measures that are both more precise and more consistent with the theoretical basis of the civil society and social capital concepts. And thanks to the breadth of the European Social Survey and its partial replication in the US CID survey, we can now examine these questions cross-nationally. Our new indices allow us to examine not only the type and level of involvement in voluntary organizations in nineteen European countries and the US, but also the frequency of participation in the US. Moreover, these indices are not only robust theoretically, but also empirically, in several different types of comparative analysis. In general, our findings support the Tocquevillian argument that the greater people's involvement in voluntary associations, the higher their levels of political action, life satisfaction and (albeit to a lesser extent) generalized trust. We also found evidence to suggest that the more frequently people take part in the activities of voluntary organizations in the US, the more they are satisfied with life and engage in political action. The one notable exception in our findings – which calls for future research and exploration – involves the weak relationship between our index and generalized trust in the US.

On the whole, our analysis of the individual-level and pooled country data from the ESS and CID surveys provides support for theories of civil society that stress active participation and its resultant effect on individuals. These findings lend support to the arguments of those who bemoan the rise of 'checkbox membership' as an alternative to face-to-face interaction within organizations. They suggest that while sending a check may be better than no involvement at all, there is no substitute for actual participation.

Although our findings are robust, they should not yet be considered definitive. Future research is necessary to refine comparative measures of different types of

organizational involvement and to examine the impact of this participation on a wider range of individual attitudes and behaviors than those analyzed here. In addition, our analysis only provides brief snapshots of participation from 2002 and 2005 and we are therefore unable to examine how, or indeed if, changes to civic participation (or its effects) have occurred over time. In order to address these issues, additional comparative and longitudinal surveys must be developed and expanded. Nonetheless, our results provide an important step forward by empirically demonstrating that – for individuals in the United States and Europe – involvement in voluntary associations is a relatively strong predictor of political action, life satisfaction and interpersonal trust.

## Appendix

### *Dependent Variables*

**Political Action.** This dependent variable is an additive score of the respondent's number of 'yes' responses to the following seven items. During the last twelve months, have you done any of the following: (1) contacted a politician or a local government official; (2) worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker; (3) signed a petition; (4) taken part in a lawful demonstration; (5) boycotted certain products; (6) deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons; (7) participated in illegal protest activities?

**Life Satisfaction.** This dependent variable is the respondent's answer to the following question which ranged on a scale of 1–10: all things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays? Please answer using this card, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied.

**Trust.** This dependent variable is the respondent's response to the following question which ranged on a scale of 1–10: generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted.

### *Independent Variables*

**Income Quartiles.** Income measured in equivalent amounts of euros or US dollars is collapsed into approximate income quartiles based on each country's relative distribution of income.

**Education.** This variable is coded into the following six categories with the US equivalent in parentheses: primary or first stage of basic (none, or Grade 1–8), lower secondary or second stage of basic (Grades 9–11), upper secondary (high school graduate or GED), post-secondary, non-tertiary (business, technical or

vocational school after high school), first stage of tertiary (some college or college degree), second stage of tertiary (postgraduate training, professional schooling after college).

**Age.** This variable was coded as eighteen years or older from the year of the interview, which was 2005 for the CID and 2004 for the ESS.

**Gender.** Coded as a dummy variable, 1 = female, 0 = male.

**Civic Involvement Index.** Information about participation in the following types of organizations were analyzed: (1) sports or outdoor; (2) cultural or hobby; (3) trade union; (4) business, professional or farmers; (5) consumer or automobile; (6) humanitarian aid or human rights; (7) environmental protection, peace or animal rights; (8) religion; (9) political party; (10) science, education, teachers and parents; (11) social, young, retired/women, fraternal; (12) other.

**Frequency of Participation Index.** Information about participation in the following types of organization were analyzed in addition to the twelve listed above: (1) neighborhood/homeowner/condominium association or block club; (2) veteran's organization; (3) nationality or racial group; (4) self-improvement or self-help group; (5) an organization that provides social services to the needy.

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## Notes

- Putnam (1993, pp. 89–90) writes that ‘Civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government ... both because of their “internal” effects on individual members and because of their “external” effects on the wider polity. Internally, associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public spiritedness’. Putnam continues this discussion by maintaining that externally, a ‘dense network of secondary associations’ enhances the articulation and aggregation of interests, which ‘contributes to effective social collaboration’.
- For studies of the external effects of civil society in the United States, see, for example, Putnam (2000); Ray (2002); Skocpol and Fiorina (1999); Skocpol (1999); Verba *et al.* (1995); for such studies of Europe and other regions, see Alagappa (2004); Civicus (1997); Dekker and Van den Broek (2005); Diamond (1999); Howard (2003); Paxton (2002); Putnam (1993). For studies that focus on the internal effects of civil society, see, for example, Dekker *et al.* (1997); Moyser and Perry (1997); Rogers *et al.* (1975); Wollebæk and Selle (2003). These references represent only a small sample of the work that has been conducted on these prominent themes over the last fifteen years.
- Pamela Paxton (2002, p. 258) makes this useful distinction.
- Moreover, Ronald Inglehart (1988) maintains that a person's life satisfaction, interpersonal trust, political satisfaction and support for the existing social order have an effect on larger institutional processes such as economic development and democratic stability.
- Mark Warren (2001, pp. 72–3) asserts that the expectation that participation in voluntary organizations promotes civic virtue is widespread in the democratic theory literature and is espoused by all contemporary theoretical schools which ‘emphasize the developmental impact of democracy on individuals’.

- 6 As Teorell (2003, p. 49) notes, this connection is one of the most established findings in studies of political participation. For a listing of such studies, refer also to Teorell (2003, p. 49).
- 7 Green and Brock (2005); Putnam (2000); Verba *et al.* (1995); Warren (2001).
- 8 This finding is related to Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) contention that voluntary organizations are an essential location for mobilization, which is a key factor that leads to political participation.
- 9 For just a few examples of studies based on this measure of organizational membership, see Brehm and Rahn (1997); Howard (2003).
- 10 For a comprehensive examination of the way that associational membership has been operationalized in survey research, see Morales (2002).
- 11 Interestingly, both Skocpol and Putnam – who otherwise have very different approaches to civil society – maintain that checkbook membership is a form of passive membership, which is not an effective proxy for actual participation (Putnam, 1995; Skocpol, 1999; 2003). Moreover, they both stress the importance of participation in groups that give people the opportunity to interact face to face. They are therefore concerned about the growth of large, national advocacy networks, whose members only take part in passive checkbook membership, and the 'diminished' effects that this type of membership may have on both individuals and democratic institutions.
- 12 For more on the ESS, see <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>
- 13 For more on the US CID survey, see <http://www.uscidsurvey.org>
- 14 The full list of organizations is included in the Appendix. Note that, as we discuss below, the CID survey also asked about five other types of organizations, in addition to the twelve in the ESS. As a result, for the analysis where the US is included with the ESS countries (in the case of our new Civic Involvement Index), we only consider the common twelve organizations, but for the US-only analysis (in the case of the Frequency of Participation Index), we include the full list of seventeen organizations.
- 15 Note that multiple responses were accepted. And in our analysis below, the 'don't know', 'no answer' or 'refused' responses – of which there were very few – were recoded to the none category.
- 16 The category of Western Europe includes the following sixteen countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The category of Eastern Europe consists of Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. When creating the Western Europe and Eastern Europe country groupings, we applied the ESS 'population' weight for a pooled data set. Thus, the groupings represent the 'average' person from each region, with smaller countries weighted down, and bigger countries weighted up. For this reason, we provide both the unweighted population as well as the sum of weights in all of the tables.
- 17 This finding is consistent with other studies (e.g. Howard, 2003).
- 18 For example, in all three country groups, both human rights organizations and environmental/peace/animal rights groups have more donors than members.
- 19 Verba *et al.* (1995) similarly equate membership and donating money in their measure of civic involvement.
- 20 Note that our measure equally weights participation across the twelve different types of organizations. For example, according to our measure, super-active participation in sports clubs is equivalent to super-active participation in human rights groups. While in principle it might be preferable to give extra weight to certain types of organizations that are deemed to be more 'civic' and less 'recreational', this would require potentially erroneous assumptions about the meaning of participation across groups and countries.
- 21 For example, it would weigh 'down' a respondent who is super-active in one organization while also being active in several others, thus making it appear that he or she is less active than someone who is super-active in just one organization.
- 22 We also created an additive index in which each respondent was coded as being inactive, passive, active or super-active as specified above, but rather than examining only their highest level of participation, we instead added the scores for each respondent across the twelve different organizations. The results for this additive index were not significantly different from those reported here. We have kept our measure because its descriptive categories are more intuitive, and the results are therefore easier to interpret.
- 23 See the Appendix for the exact question wording, and for a description of the coding of these variables.
- 24 Note that the full measure of political action includes ten items. But in order to avoid endogeneity in the relationship between our Civic Involvement Index and our measure of political action, we have not included the following three acts that overlap with the measures of civicness: 'working in a political party or action group', 'working in another political organization or association' and 'donating money to a political organization or group'. In addition, we also tested our political action model without participation in political parties as one of the twelve organizations comprising our involvement index. We found that the coefficients changed very slightly and the general significance levels did not change at all.

- 25 Almond and Verba (1963); Barnes and Kaase (1979); Putnam (2000); Stolle and Rochon (1999); Teorell (2003); Verba *et al.* (1978); Verba *et al.* (1995).
- 26 We also tested all of the models presented in this article with a composite trust variable, which combines questions on whether others can be trusted, are fair and are helpful. Although the results did not change substantially, we decided to use the more straightforward measure of trust due to concerns that the general variable includes different concepts (see for example Uslaner, 2002, pp. 69–74).
- 27 To give a better sense of the difference between the levels of the Civic Involvement Index as well as further justification for our new scale, we conducted a series of difference in means tests. With some exceptions, these tests generally revealed statistically significant differences in the means of political action, trust and life satisfaction for each country group and involvement level. These results illustrate that there is in fact an important distinction between active participation and pure passive members, as Skocpol and Putnam claim. In addition, these results further empirically substantiate the intuition behind our Civic Involvement Index.
- 28 Because many people across countries did not report their income (7,026 in Western Europe, 547 in Eastern Europe and 127 in the US), we also ran all of the models presented in Tables 1–3 without this variable. With some minor exceptions, the coefficients and statistical significance of our main variable of interest, the Civic Involvement Index, did not change substantially.
- 29 The Appendix provides a description of the coding of these variables.
- 30 See Leighley (1995) for a detailed list of these studies.
- 31 In order to ensure that OLS is appropriate for a count variable like political involvement, we also collapsed this variable into an index (0 = none, 1 = 1–2 political acts, 2 = 3 or more political acts) and conducted an ordered logit analysis. In general, the sign and significance of most variables did not change much in this new analysis, giving us confidence that OLS is producing valid results.
- 32 In addition to concerns of endogeneity in our study, we also wanted to ensure that our results in the pooled sample were not spurious. We therefore ran identical models in each individual country and found that if the regression analysis is computed for all countries based on the dependent variable of political action, the Civic Involvement Index is statistically significant (less than the 0.10 level) in every country. In seven out of the nineteen European countries, the index was not significant in explaining trust (the exceptions are Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg and Portugal). In eight out of the nineteen European countries, the index was not significant in explaining life satisfaction (the exceptions are Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland and Luxembourg). While it goes beyond the purpose of this article to analyze further these individual country results, these findings suggest that the attitudinal effects of participation are much more variable across countries, which is most likely related to cultural, historical and other institutional differences.
- 33 See the Appendix for the exact question wording. Once again, as with the Civic Involvement Index, the very few ‘don’t know’, ‘no answer’ or ‘refused’ responses were recoded into the ‘never’ category.
- 34 In addition to the twelve organizations that were included in the ESS, the CID survey asked about the following five organizations: (1) neighborhood/homeowners/condominium association or block club; (2) veterans organization; (3) nationality or racial group; (4) self-improvement or self-help group; and (5) an organization that provides social services to the needy.
- 35 Again, as discussed in the context of the Civic Involvement Index, since computing a measure that somehow multiplies frequency of participation by the number of organizations could be very misleading, this appears to be the best possible measure to distinguish between people who participate more or less frequently in voluntary organizations.

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