Participation and Social Capital Formation: Norway in a Comparative Perspective

Dag Wollebæk* and Per Selle

Voluntary associations are often ascribed a fundamental role in the formation of social capital. However, scholars disagree on the extent to which face-to-face contact, i.e. active participation, is necessary to create this resource. The impact of participation in associations on social capital is examined using three dimensions: intensity (active vs. passive participation), scope (many vs. few affiliations) and type (non-political vs. political purpose). While those affiliated display higher levels of social capital than outsiders, the difference between active and passive members is absent or negligible. The only cumulative effect of participation occurs when the member belongs to several associations simultaneously, preferably ones with different purposes.

Introduction

According to Robert Putnam (1993; 1995a; 1995b; 2000), it is through experiences of interaction face to face with people from different backgrounds that we learn to trust each other. The voluntary association represents one of the main arenas for interaction of this type. Associations create networks that allow social trust to spread throughout society. Moreover, they are thought to generate civic engagement, and further the ability of their members to influence public affairs, by being ‘schools in democracy’. Consequently, Putnam regards associations as the prime sources of social trust, horizontal social networks and civic engagement – i.e. social capital.

This article will investigate five questions, all derived from the implications of Robert Putnam’s understanding of social capital:

1. Does participation in associations contribute to social capital? If so . . .
2. . . . does active participation contribute more to the formation of social capital than passive membership? If so, is active participation necessary for the formation of social capital?

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3. . . . do several affiliations contribute more to social capital than one affiliation?
4. . . . is the level of activity more important than the number of affiliations?
5. . . . do members of non-political associations display higher levels of social capital than members of political associations?

Following Putnam, we expect to give confirmatory answers to all of these questions. If this is the case, his main hypothesis – that the overlapping horizontal networks of face-to-face interaction created by associations contribute to the formation of social capital – is strengthened. If this is not the case, a discussion of the implications this may have for the theory is in order.

**Voluntary Associations: External and Internal Effects**

Putnam distinguishes between the associations’ ‘internal’ effects on their participants and their ‘external’ effects on the political system. Externally, associations are seen as an alternative channel of influence. They provide institutional links between the members and the political system, and serve as intermediary institutions. The articulation and aggregation of interests and values are eased by the presence of a ‘dense network of secondary associations’ (Putnam 1993, 90). This improves social collaboration on the one hand and democratic governance on the other, thus making democracy more responsive and effective.

The ‘internal’ effects are more closely related to the formation of social capital at the micro level. According to Putnam (1993, 89–90), ‘associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity and public-spiritedness’. This is on the one hand an effect of socialisation, in which participants are taught the right ‘habits of the heart’ (Newton 1999). On the other hand, it is also an educational effect, because participants gain skills and competencies that are important for a democracy.

Which types of participation are most successful in creating such effects? This question is examined along three main dimensions, which will follow us through the empirical analyses: intensity, scope and type.

**Intensity of Involvement**

One of the most important changes in the voluntary sector over recent decades, which appears to be a near-universal trend in Western countries, has been the growth of what Putnam calls ‘tertiary associations’ at the
expense of ‘classic secondary associations’ (Putnam 1995b; Maloney 1999; Skocpol 1999a; Selle & Strømsnes 2001). Tertiary associations are characterised by centralised, paid-staff leadership; they tend to be non-democratically structured, and the support of the members tends to be channelled through money rather than time. This implies a trend in which the intensity of associational involvement is declining.

Putnam (1995b) quickly dismisses the growth of tertiary associations as a potential counter-trend to the decline of social capital in the United States. The main reason given is that, although the members may feel a common attachment to symbols and values, they do not interact face to face. Furthermore, tertiary groups consist of vertical rather than horizontal networks. Their structure is better characterised as client–patron relationships than as interaction among equals (Maloney 1999, 109), and ‘two clients of the same patron, lacking direct contact, hold nothing hostage to each other’ (Putnam 1993, 175). Therefore, owing to the low level of active participation of members and the vertical organisational structure, tertiary associations do not contribute to horizontal networks or social trust.

Putnam does admit that tertiary associations may have important external effects on the wider polity. Passive supporters play an important role in providing them with economic support and numerical strength, which gives more weight to their arguments. However, the internal effects on the participants are thought to be weak or absent. In sum, therefore, their contribution to social capital is not comparable to that of associations in which active members interact face to face.

This leads Putnam to dismiss passive support as a source of social capital, which may be problematic on several counts. First, Putnam does not directly address secondary associations in which many or even most members are passive. In many countries outside the US, this is very common. The high proportion of passive membership is one of the main structural characteristics of the voluntary sector in Scandinavia and The Netherlands (Dekker & van den Broek 1998). In Norway passive members outnumber volunteers by three to one, and in many humanitarian, advocacy or political organisations, passivity is the rule rather than the exception (Wollebæk et al. 2000b). Although ‘tertiary’ organisations are gaining ground here too, most associations are still of the classic ‘secondary’ form, in the sense that they rely on the efforts of volunteers and are democratically structured internally.

Thus, passive members may belong to institutions within which large stocks of social capital are embedded. Although empirical evidence is scanty, some studies do suggest that they feel neither alienated nor disconnected from these social systems (Selle & Strømsnes 1998; Maloney 1999; Wollebæk 2000; Strømsnes 2001). If Putnam’s emphasis on face-to-face contact is correct, the level of social capital should nevertheless be
observably higher among the core of activists than among the passive supporters, even within the same association.

Moreover, one of Putnam’s main sources of inspiration, Almond and Verba’s *The Civic Culture* (1963), attributes an importance to passive memberships which exceeds their external effects. In this classic study, passive members displayed a significantly higher level of civic competence than non-members across five countries. Passive supporters were also more supportive of democratic norms than outsiders, and shared a higher sense of political efficacy.

This suggests that passive membership may indeed have ‘internal’ effects on participants, a notion that is corroborated by other studies. Godwin (1992) emphasises that even the most passive form of participation, financial support through cheque writing, ‘reduces political alienation, as contributors believe their contributions make a difference. This, in turn, reduces the support for aggressive political participation’ (cited in Maloney 1999, 113). This effect is related to the durability of involvement – the longer individuals remain in their passive roles, the more influence the affiliation has on their attitudes.

Furthermore, why should a sense of community or identification with a cause, which may be conducive to trust in compatriots, presuppose face-to-face contact? The theory of *imagined communities* provides a clue to how social capital of this kind can develop without personal interaction (Anderson 1991; Newton 1999; Whiteley 1999). The imagined community is a group one feels a psychological affinity to, even though it is too large to allow face-to-face contact between all its members. Therefore, imagined communities are based on an *abstract* form of trust rather than on thin or thick trust (Newton 1999). In this vein, Whiteley (1999, 31) shows that those who most strongly identify with the imagined community (express patriotism) are more likely to express a generalised sense of trust in other people than individuals whose patriotism is weaker.

Even though in many cases the emotional bonds between passive members and associations will be weaker than those between a citizen and a nation, which is the typical example of an imagined community (Anderson 1991, 6), the two types of relations clearly share important characteristics. Associations with passive members and nations are both social systems that are too large to allow face-to-face contact, but their members/citizens may still feel a common affinity to symbols or values, or share a commitment to a cause. To the degree that individuals hold overlapping memberships in associations, their sense of identification and abstract trust may be transferred to several contexts, and possibly to society as a whole.

The suggestion that low-intensity participation may also have internal effects raises the question of whether the role of passive memberships in the formation of social capital may be understated.
Scope of Involvement

It is possible to identify two ways in which multiple affiliations may contribute more to social capital than singular affiliations do. These can be labelled a *moderating* and a *cumulative* effect.

First, at the societal level, the more overlapping and interlocking networks that exist, the higher the probability that people from different backgrounds will meet. To the extent that associations create horizontal networks that span underlying cleavages, they may have a *moderating* effect on the level of conflict in societies. This occurs as a result of cross-pressures experienced through participation in multiple networks (Putnam 1993, 90). When interacting with individuals of diverse backgrounds, goals and preferences, each person is forced to moderate their own attitudes in order to create a lasting social contract in the different settings. Dense, overlapping and interlocking networks thus contribute to compromise and negotiation where there might otherwise be warring of factions and centrifugal, escalating conflict. It is hypothesised that associations are particularly able to generate cross-cutting, multiple networks, because the relationships between those involved are characterised by *weak ties* of relatively low intensity (Granovetter 1973).

Second, at the individual level, multiple affiliations mean more and broader interaction. Consequently, they should have a *cumulative* effect on the level of trust and civic engagement, and extend the scope of networks, which eases their diffusion into society. Almond and Verba did find the number of memberships held by an individual to affect civic competence cumulatively (1963, 264–5). In fact, the number of multiple affiliations discriminated more clearly between the more ‘civic’ and less ‘civic’ countries in their study than did the proportion of the population holding memberships or the level of membership activity.

Intensity and scope do not always move in accord, and although they are related, they should be treated as two separate aspects of participation. On the one hand, intense involvement in one association may foster an interest to take part in others. On the other hand, highly intense involvement may build barriers towards outsiders, and consequently narrow the scope of the networks created.

Although Putnam emphasises both scope and intensity of involvement, it follows from the weight attached to face-to-face interaction that intensity has first priority. Passive membership in several associations is seen as less productive of social capital than active membership in one.
Does Type Matter?

Until now, the discussion of the impact of participation in associations and social capital has focused on form rather than content. However, given the immense variety of different purposes for which associations exist in Western countries, the question of which activities the participants are involved in also needs to be taken into consideration.

At a glance, Putnam’s contention seems to be that the type of association is virtually irrelevant for the extent to which social capital is developed (Putnam 1993, 90), which is identical to Almond and Verba’s (1963, 265) assertion that membership even in non-political associations leads to a more competent citizenry. However, if type means little in Putnam’s work, structure means everything. The three demands of horizontality, face-to-face interaction and ability to transcend subcultural barriers will be met more often by non-political, leisure-oriented associations than by associations with a manifest political purpose. Politically oriented associations are often products of cleavages in society, are centralised in structure and have a large minority or even a majority of passive members.

Thus, in Putnam’s understanding of how to make democracy work, a choral society or a birdwatching club plays a vital role, while the value of social movements, labour unions and political parties is downplayed (Foley & Edwards 1996). This somewhat counter-intuitive notion stems directly from Putnam’s distinction between external and internal effects, of which the latter appears to be given priority (Putnam 1995a, 71).

This view is, naturally, contested. With regard to the internal effects of participation, Quigley (1996, 3) claims that non-political associations cannot to the same extent as organisations contesting state authority foster the civic skills necessary to promote social capital and strengthen democracy. Foley and Edwards (1996) and Rueschemeyer (1998) emphasise that, externally, non-political associations cannot play the role of a counterweight to the state like political associations or social movements do. Finally, Skocpol (1999b) and Selle and Strømsnes (2001) question the degree to which associations can act as intermediary institutions between the individual and the state, as long as they are non-political in purpose and often purely local in structure.

If Putnam’s contention is correct, we might expect members of political associations to display lower levels of social capital than members of associations without an expressed political purpose. Therefore, in the analyses to come, the impact of the type of associations to which participants are affiliated will be subjected to empirical examination.
Operationalisations and Data

Operationalisation of Participation in Organisations

The independent variables are measurements of the scope, intensity and type of association involvement. Scope is operationalised as the number of associations to which each individual is affiliated. The scope of the involvement includes both membership and volunteering. If a person has reported membership as well as volunteering for the same association, this is only counted once.²

The intensity of involvement is operationalised as the combined amount of time spent participating and volunteering in associations over the past year. This provides a reasonably accurate measure of the amount of face-to-face contact to which the member/volunteer has been exposed. It should be observed that one additional hour of participation does not necessarily mean the same for highly active participants as for the more passively affiliated. Therefore, rather than introducing a linear measure of the number of hours spent participating, the variable aims to divide the sample into groups of approximately equal size. In most of the following analyses, those affiliated with associations will be divided into four groups, each representing about one-quarter of the members/volunteers. Those who are members of one or more associations but have not spent any time participating are classified as completely passive and given the lowest value. Those who have contributed up to 50 hours in the past year are classified as relatively passive, while 150 hours (three hours per week) serves as the cut-off-point between the relatively and highly active.

In order to compare the impact of intensity with the impact of scope, a composite variable representing four different modes of participation is introduced, based on the number of affiliations and the time spent participating. Both variables are dichotomised: intensity between active (one hour per week or more) and passive (less than one hour per week), and scope between singular (one) and multiple (two or more) affiliations. If intensity is more important than scope, a higher level of social capital should be observable among those who are active in one association than among those passively affiliated with several.

Type is operationalised as the main purpose of the association(s) to which a person is affiliated. The degree of political involvement will be the main dimension in differentiating between associations of different purposes. On the one hand, we have the pure non-political associations, among which sports associations have a dominant position, but which also include music groups (e.g. choirs, bands), hobby associations (e.g. birdwatching, model aeroplanes) or fraternity groups (e.g. masons’ lodges). Religious associations are rarely involved in politics in Norwegian society. However, they are
sufficiently different from leisure-oriented associations, in both purpose and structure, to deserve a separate subcategory of the non-political type. At the other end of the scale, we find the organisations whose main purposes are political, namely political parties and unions. In between, there are a number of associations with a more or less manifest political purpose, e.g. local community associations, humanitarian associations, environmental associations or advocacy groups for disabled persons. These are given the somewhat unsatisfactory ‘semi-political’ label. They will tend to be more involved in politics than for example a choir, but their relations with decision makers will in most cases tend to be less frequent than those of a political party or a union.

As many are affiliated with more than one type of association, two additional categories are in order: those who are affiliated with both a non-political and a semi-political association are classified in the first combinatorial type, while those affiliated with non- or semi-political associations and a political association are grouped in the second type. In the regression analyses, the distinction between political and non-political purpose is captured by means of a dichotomised variable distinguishing those who are affiliated with a non-political leisure association from those who are not.

Operationalisation of Trust and Civic Engagement

Social trust is measured by a single question: ‘In general, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be careful enough in dealing with other people?’ This common operationalisation of social trust has been widely used in empirical studies, including Putnam’s own (Putnam 1995a; 1995b).

Civic engagement is operationalised as the level of expressed civic and political interest. In order to measure this, three items are used, both independently and in a composite index: voting behaviour, readership of news material in daily newspapers, and political interest. The second and third indicators both measure knowledge and resources that may be activated in order to act collectively in a democracy. In this respect, the proportion of respondents voting at every parliamentary election can be said to be in a different category, since voting is a political act, not a resource. In this context, however, voting behaviour is used as a measure of a minimum level of political interest, which is mainly used to distinguish between those who are moderately engaged in civic matters and those who are more oblivious to their political surroundings. From these three indicators, a composite index with seven values was created.

In summary, the indicators chosen to measure the subdimensions of social capital are identical to the ones that Putnam uses (social trust, voting
behaviour and newspaper reading). It therefore seems sound to conclude that the validity of the indicators used is high.

**Control Variables**

The control variables include standard sociodemographic variables (age, education, gender, marital status), as well as factors that may represent alternative sources of social capital (full-time employment, time living at current place of residence and population density).

**The Data**

The analyses are based on a nationwide survey carried out by the Norwegian Centre of Research in Organisation and Management (LOS Centre) in 1998, as part of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Wollebæk et al. 1998). The Survey on Giving and Volunteering (SGV) was administered by means of mailed questionnaires to 4,000 randomly selected Norwegians aged between 16 and 85. The respondents were contacted four times – a postcard one week before mailing the questionnaire, the mailing of the questionnaire itself and two follow-ups. The last follow-up was carried out by telephone. In all, we received 1,695 valid responses, which equals a response rate of 45 percent (adjusted gross sample). This response rate is somewhat lower than is the case for most mailed surveys in Norway. The probable cause of this was a combination of the relatively long questionnaire and a relatively low salience of the topic.

A low response rate increases the probability of systematic sample biases. In this case, as in many other postal surveys, individuals with higher education and middle age are over-represented. There are no biases with regard to gender or county of residence. The age and education biases are compensated for by weighting the results, so that more weight is attributed to responses from the groups that are under-represented in the sample. Another potentially problematic aspect in a survey such as ours is that the most active participants in associations may have responded more frequently than the less active. There is no observable tendency in this direction. The overall number of volunteers and members in most categories of associations corresponds well to other comparable sources (Wollebæk 2000, 48).

**Empirical Analysis**

The propositions presented above are now put to the test, and the importance of participation in associations for the formation of social
capital is analysed. First, for each indicator, a graph indicating the importance of scope and intensity is presented. The relative importance of these two dimensions of participation is also compared by using the composite index presented above. Second, we analyse whether it matters which type of association one is affiliated with. This is done by simple cross-tabulations or comparisons of means. Third, by means of regression analysis, the impact of participation is contrasted with and adjusted for the potential impact of other sources. To begin with, we examine whether participation has an effect at all, using the entire sample. Thereafter, the respondents who are affiliated with associations are selected in order to examine which types of participation are most conducive of social capital.

The relationship between social trust and participation in organisations is illustrated in Figure 1. The results indicate that there is, in accordance

Figure 1. Participation in Associations and Social Trust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensity/Scope Index and Social Trust (percent)</th>
<th>‘Outsider’ (no affiliations)</th>
<th>‘Passive’ (0–1 hour/week)</th>
<th>‘Active’ (&gt;1 hour/week)</th>
<th>% diff. (sig.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 affiliation</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>65 (N = 318)</td>
<td>70 (N = 158)</td>
<td>−5 (0.568)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more affiliations</td>
<td></td>
<td>77 (N = 294)</td>
<td>79 (N = 499)</td>
<td>−2 (0.194)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% difference (sig.)</td>
<td>−12 (0.004)</td>
<td>−9 (0.043)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with expectations, a clear relationship between participation and social trust. While only slightly more than half of those not affiliated with any association answer that ‘most people can be trusted’, the corresponding proportion among members and volunteers is almost three out of four. The percentage of ‘trusters’ increases slightly with level of activity, with 77 percent among the highly active compared to 68 percent among the completely passive. The curve representing the scope of participation rises sharply up to three affiliations, where it flattens out.

However, the difference between joiners and non-joiners is much larger than that between active and passive members. Even the completely passive, i.e. those who have not spent a single hour on associational activities over the past year and therefore have not been exposed to any face-to-face contact, are much more trusting than the outsiders.

Furthermore, contrary to expectations, the scope of participation appears to be a more powerful predictor of the level of trust than its intensity (see table below Figure 1). Passive members with multiple affiliations are more trusting than active members with only one affiliation, and trust other people to the same extent as active members with more than one affiliation. The difference between active participants and passive supporters is not significant when number of affiliations is held constant. Scope, on the other hand, does matter. When activity level is held constant, the number of affiliations still has a significant impact.

Another central tenet of Putnam’s formulation of social capital is the importance attributed to non-political associations, which tend to be more horizontally structured and involve more face-to-face contact than associations with a manifest political purpose. Thus, we expect that those affiliated with associations engaged in non-political activities, i.e. culture and recreation, display the highest level of generalised social trust.

Table 1 does reveal significant variations between supporters of different types of associations, but not in the direction predicted by Putnam. Members of all types of associations are more trusting than non-members, but the proportion of trusters in associations active in fields of culture and recreation is, surprisingly, slightly lower than in the population as a whole.

Again, the scope of the participation appears to be the most important factor. The highest level of trust is found among those affiliated not only with more than one association, but with several associations of different types. Four out of five members/volunteers in the two composite categories trust other people, compared with two-thirds of the supporters of non-political associations and slightly more than half of those not affiliated with any associations.

The other component of social capital identified above, which provides the crucial link between social connectedness and participatory democracy, is civic engagement. Civic engagement is measured using four indicators:
Table 1. Proportion Who Say Most People Can Be Trusted, by Type of Association

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Association</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not affiliated</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated with:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-political, culture and recreation</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-political, religious</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-political organisations</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political organisations (parties and unions)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both non-political and semi-political</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both non-semi-political and political</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, volunteers/members</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, entire sample</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1642</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 34.141, P = 0.001$ (only members and volunteers included).

political interest, daily news readership, regular voting at parliamentary elections and a composite index constructed on the basis of the three variables.

If active participation ‘inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavours’ (Putnam 1993, 90), we would expect members of voluntary associations to be more civicly engaged than non-members, and active members even more so than passive supporters. Furthermore, if Putnam’s (1993, 90) assertion that ‘these effects . . . do not require that the manifest purpose of the association be political’ is correct, there should be no difference in civic engagement between participants in non-political and political associations.

The impact of intensity and scope was similar for two out of three indicators in our civic engagement index (political interest and regular voting behaviour), with a consistent positive correlation between scope of participation and level of civic engagement, and no correlation between engagement and intensity. For the third indicator, news material reading, neither scope nor intensity had any effect. On all three indicators, however, members differed from non-members. Thus, when all three measures are combined, in Figure 2, a clear pattern emerges.

Civic engagement is moderately to strongly related to being a member of an association. However, there is nothing to suggest that active members are more engaged in civic matters than are passive members. The number of involvements, conversely, distinguishes clearly between the more and less civicly engaged, among passive and active participants alike. These findings support the results presented by Almond and Verba (1963), which suggested that multiple affiliations have a cumulative effect on civic engagement, regardless of activity level.
Figure 2. Participation in Associations and Civic Engagement Index.

Intensity/Scope Index and Civic Engagement Index (Average Scores 0–100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>‘Outsider’ (no affiliations)</th>
<th>‘Passive’ (0–1 hour/week)</th>
<th>‘Active’ (&gt;1 hour/week)</th>
<th>Diff. Diff. (sig.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 affiliation</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>64.5 (N = 327)</td>
<td>62.2 (N = 157)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.283)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more affiliations</td>
<td>68.1 (N = 297)</td>
<td>68.1 (N = 507)</td>
<td>0.0 (0.950)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff. (sig.)</td>
<td>−3.6 (0.026)</td>
<td>−5.9 (0.003)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almond and Verba also asserted, as does Putnam, that this was true regardless of which type of association the member was affiliated with. Although the differences between various types of affiliations are significant for all indicators except news material reading, the results presented in Table 2 do render some support to this notion. Members of all types of associations, with the exception of those affiliated only to religious groups, display a somewhat higher level of civic engagement than those who are not affiliated at all. However, with the exception of the indicator voting
Table 2. Civic Engagement Index, Political Interest, Daily News Material Reading, and Voting at Every Parliamentary Election, by Type of Association

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Association</th>
<th>Civic engagement index (mean score 0–100)</th>
<th>Political interest (mean score 0–100)</th>
<th>News material readership (% who read daily)</th>
<th>Votes at every parliamentary election (% with the right to vote)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not affiliated</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member or volunteer in:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-political, culture and recreation</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-political, religious</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-political organisations</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political organisations (parties and unions)</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both non-political and semi-political</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both non-semi-political and political</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, members/volunteers</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>1289</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>1278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, entire sample</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>1675</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>1664</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
F = 6.911 \quad F = 6.223 \quad \chi^2 = 10.79 \quad \chi^2 = 17.07
\]

\[
P = 0.000 \quad P = 0.000 \quad P = 0.095 \quad P = 0.009
\]

*Note:* Only members and volunteers are included in significance tests.
behaviour, members of political associations are, perhaps not surprisingly, more engaged than those affiliated with leisure associations.

Again, the respondents in the combinatory category, comprising those with membership of a non- or semi-political association in addition to a political affiliation, score highest on the indicators. As was the case for trust and social networks, those affiliated with several associations with different purposes display the highest levels of social capital.

Table 3 presents regression analyses of the impact of the two different indicators of social capital, wherein the impact of different types of participation – high vs. low intensity and non-political vs. other purposes – is controlled for standard background variables.

The results confirm that participation has an impact on social trust even when controlled for sociodemographic characteristics. In fact, when the entire sample is included, affiliation with associations ranks above education as the most important independent variable. The table also shows that both level of activity and number of affiliations have an impact on trust. However, when both are included in the same equation, the effect of activity level disappears. The dummy variable representing whether the respondent is affiliated with a non-political association does not have an effect on social trust, neither alone nor together with other participation variables.

In summary, the results substantiate Putnam’s notion that participation in associations contributes to social trust. They do not support, however, his emphasis on face-to-face contact. Passive affiliations appear to be of slightly less importance to the development of social trust than active ones, but

Table 3. Regression Analysis of Measures of Social Capital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social trust</th>
<th>Civic engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entire sample</td>
<td>Only members &amp; volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (−1)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (1–3)</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density (1–3)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential stability (1–5)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working full-time (−1)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>−0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/co-habitant (−1)</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated with organisation (−1)</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of activity (1–4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of affiliations (1–4)</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-political association (0–1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 1456/1114 (social trust), 1463/1130 (civic engagement index), listwise deletion of cases. Significance: * P ≤ 0.05, ** P ≤ 0.01. Standardized beta coefficients reported.
Table 4. Participation in Associations and the Formation of Social Capital: Summary of Empirical Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does participation in associations contribute to social capital?</td>
<td>Social trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Does active participation contribute more to the formation of social capital</td>
<td>Only among young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than passive membership?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Is active participation necessary for the formation of social capital?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do several affiliations contribute more to social capital than one affiliation?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is level of activity more important than number of affiliations?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do members of non-political associations display higher levels of social</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capital than members of political associations?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
multiple affiliations more than compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact. The youngest participants represent a notable exception to this general trend. Furthermore, participants in non-political associations do not display a higher level of social trust than what is found in the population as a whole. Generally speaking, bowling in organised leagues has an impact on social trust only when accompanied by affiliation with associations with other, preferably more politicised, purposes. The analyses above show, first and foremost, that belonging to several associations, regardless of the degree of face-to-face contact or the associations’ purposes, appears to be the most productive source of social trust.

Table 3 also shows that association involvement is only one among several factors influencing civic engagement. Age has a remarkably strong effect when one analyses both the entire sample and only those affiliated with associations. Urbanity and, unsurprisingly, education also emerge as relatively strong predictors of civic engagement; married men and women are more engaged than singles; and men are slightly more engaged than women.

Nevertheless, the impact of affiliations with associations, both active and passive, is not cancelled out by these factors. Among those who are members or volunteers, only the number of affiliations matters. Neither the level of activity nor the dummy variable representing affiliation with non-political associations influences the level of civic engagement when controlled for background variables. Although secondary to age and possibly education and urbanity, participation in several associations does appear to contribute to engagement in civic matters.

In summary, those who are affiliated with voluntary associations are more civically engaged than those who are not. Therefore, Putnam’s view of associations as networks and generators of civic engagement is corroborated.

Summary of Findings

Table 4 summarises the findings from the analyses above with reference to the research questions specified at the outset of this article.

With regard to the first question in Table 4 – whether participation in associations contributes to social capital – confirmatory answers are given for all indicators. Furthermore, even though other factors, notably age and education, proved to be at least as important as predictors of social capital as participation, the relationship is still present when adjusted for the potential effects of sociodemographic and contextual variables. Thus, the weight attached to the role of voluntary associations in the formation of social
capital in Putnam’s theory is corroborated by empirical results at the individual level.

Our expectations were also confirmed with regard to whether multiple affiliations have a cumulative effect on social capital. In fact, the scope of involvement proved to be a more powerful predictor of trust and civic engagement than intensity of involvement. When activity level was held constant, multiple affiliations contributed more to forms of social capital than singular affiliations, while activity level failed to distinguish between members with the same number of affiliations. Indeed, the consistent cumulative effect of multiple affiliations emerges as one of the principal findings of this study.

The assertion that participation in non-political associations is more conducive of social capital than participation in associations with more expressed political purposes was not strengthened by the results. On the contrary, the analyses showed that participation in leisure or cultural associations needs to be accompanied by an affiliation to semi-political or political organisations in order to have an impact. Members of only leisure-oriented associations failed to distinguish themselves from the general population in terms of trust and civic engagement. This serves as a specification of the argument above: the most productive form of participation with regard to the formation of social capital seems to be not only participation in several associations, but multiple affiliations in associations with different purposes.

Finally, and most importantly, the question of whether time-intensive, active participation is more conducive of social capital than passive support is, contrary to expectations, given a negative answer. There is nothing in the data to suggest that active participation, compared with passive, broadens social networks or strengthens civic engagement, and the relationship between trust and intensity of involvement is tenuous at best. Furthermore, even passive membership had a positive influence on all of the indicators presented above. Thus, at least based on the data presented, a preliminary negative answer must be given to the question of whether active participation, i.e. face-to-face interaction, is necessary for the formation of social capital.

Implications for Social Capital Research

In sum, our findings reveal a pattern at odds with Putnam’s understanding of how social capital is developed. Naturally, the use of population surveys in broad investigations such as this one is not problem free. However, the results do not appear to be entirely anomalous. A study built on a survey on Norwegian environmentalism points in the same direction (Selle &
Strømsnes 1998; Strømsnes 2001). One of the few other studies that have investigated the relationship between passive memberships and social capital, by Dekker and van den Broek (1998, 33–5), also indicates that some of the findings here may be valid in other contexts than the Norwegian.

What are the theoretical implications of the findings? Three possible interpretations of the results presented above will be discussed. First, that the role of voluntary associations in the formation of social capital is overstated in the work of Putnam and other social capital theorists; second, that passive affiliations may have internal effects on those loosely connected to associations; third, that the main contribution of associations to social capital may be more accurately located if a more institutionalist perspective is employed.

A first interpretation of the absent effect of face-to-face contact is that Putnam exaggerates the role of voluntary associations in the formation of social capital. If active participation does not have an impact on trust and civic engagement over that of passive support, this sufficiently proves that Putnam is mistaken in placing voluntary associations at the centre of his social capital thesis. In this interpretation, the observed relationship between passive affiliations and social capital is seen as spurious. The differences between joiners and non-joiners stem from members having resources of some kind that outsiders do not possess.

There is some empirical support for this claim. The impact of participation was rather modest in statistical terms. Furthermore, the indicators used to measure other sources of social capital, such as education and employment, may be too crude to claim that the impact of status or integration in the workforce has been controlled for. To regard the relationship between participation and social capital as spurious would not be contrary to common sense. After all, association involvement is for most people, compared with other activities we take part in on a more frequent basis, of rather low intensity whether measured in time and/or in emotional commitment. At the very least, the relationship needs to be qualified. Specifically, Putnam’s view of participation in birdwatchers’ associations or bowling leagues as the hallmark of civic engagement and a vibrant democracy is not given much support by the data.

However, given the numerous studies that, like the present one, have found participation in associations as a whole to be related to social capital and civic engagement – even when controlling for a wide range of factors – it does not seem plausible to dismiss the entire relationship as spurious.

Furthermore, such a dismissal would rest on the a priori assumption that being passively connected to associations cannot affect the supporter. This is not an incontestable truth, but an empirical question. Elsewhere, we have shown that passive members are connected to and care about their
organisations to a greater extent than is generally assumed (Wollebæk 2000). Therefore, rather than a rejection of the relationship between participation and social capital, a closer examination of whether the nature of the relationship is correctly spelled out by Putnam is in order. In particular, the presumption that social capital can come only from face-to-face interaction should be subjected to critical examination.

A second interpretation, therefore, is that the results show that voluntary associations contribute to social capital, but not necessarily by means of direct interaction between members. This implies that even passive affiliations may have internal effects on those participating.

How might this occur? It is possible to distinguish between four understandings of the relationship between the passive supporter and their association: the association as social system, imagined community, information system and network of political influence.

When one regards the passive member as part of a social system, it is implied that socialisation may take place even if the member does not interact with other members within the context of the association. Many passive members are likely to socialise with activists, but in other social settings than the organisation. Although most members in tertiary associations, at least in the US, are recruited through direct marketing techniques (Maloney 1999), many, especially in associations combining active and passive membership, are recruited through already existing social networks (Strømsnes 2001). Passive members keep in touch with the association by way of their networks of contacts with activists. Although this will certainly not always be the case, and the socialisation is of a less intensive character than is the case for active participants, it is a possibility that should not be ruled out a priori. The finding that the number of affiliations completely cancels out the effect of activity level on breadth of social networks and the presence of friends in the current situation suggests that this interpretation may not be entirely off the mark.

Second, the affiliation may contribute to a sense of identification with and commitment to a cause. As discussed above, associations relying on passive support resemble Anderson’s (1991) idea of an ‘imagined community’, a concept referring to all social systems too large to allow face-to-face contact, wherein members nonetheless share emotional ties to a community. Passive affiliations may foster a sense of affinity to a cause, which individuals know is important not only to themselves, but also to others. If the association is successful, the membership, regardless of activity level, conveys a sense of the value of cooperation for common purposes, of political efficacy and of a shared belonging to something important. Clearly, these virtues are all conducive of social capital.

Third, associations may function as information systems. Norwegian nationwide voluntary associations publish more than five journals and
newsletters per person in the adult population annually (Hallenstvedt & Trollvik 1993). Furthermore, the information networks in the new tertiary associations founded in the past couple of decades, which rely almost entirely on passive support, are at least as comprehensive as those in traditional voluntary associations. It is not unlikely that this function will become increasingly important as a result of recent technological developments, such as the internet. Norwegian tertiary associations are at the forefront of making use of these new opportunities for information dissemination. This implies that the passive member is not necessarily out of touch with the goings-on of the association, and perhaps will be even less so in the future. The extensive networks of information disseminate knowledge about current issues and how the association relates to them. As such, they may serve as ‘schools in democracy’ and promoters of civic engagement – even though the members do not interact personally.

Finally, associations might serve as networks of political influence, even for those not actively involved. As demonstrated above, passive members are not entirely marginalised with regard to internal decisions in the associations. They have the power to withdraw their support – to exit – which is clearly not inconsequential to the associations. If they hold multiple affiliations, as many do, they have the opportunity to exert influence on several arenas simultaneously. This participation by proxy exercised by many passive supporters may be of no less significance for democracy than active participation.

The notion that the passive members’ affiliations with extensive information networks, imagined communities and networks of political influence leave them unaffected in terms of trust, social networks and civic engagement is an assumption that so far has not been supported by empirical results. Pending evidence to the contrary, the postulation that only face-to-face contact within the realms of voluntary associations has internal effects on those affiliated should not be too readily accepted.

The third interpretation of the absent effect of face-to-face contact is that associations contribute to social capital, but primarily as institutions in which norms and resources are embedded. The logic of this argument may be clarified by means of a contrafactual thought experiment. What would the level of social capital be like if associations were absent? Regardless of whether those joining associations possess more social capital than non-joiners to begin with, associations contribute to the sustenance and transformation of values and norms because they are an important part of the political, social and cultural infrastructure of a society. The existence of a multitude of visible voluntary associations is in itself evidence of the value and rationality of collaborative efforts, even for individuals who do not actively take part themselves. Thus, in this perspective, the role of associations as generators or catalysts of trust, networks or civic engagement is
subordinated to their role as institutions expressing and sustaining the same values and resources in society at large.

This implies a move from the internal effects of participation to the external effects of associational life on society at large. These external effects can be divided into two broad categories: integration and democracy. Their contribution to integration lies in the ability to create multiple and overlapping networks that reduce the conflict potential in society. This occurs because the loosely knit networks may span existing cleavages and patterns of loyalty. In this perspective, the ‘broad’ voluntary sector, exemplified by the Scandinavian countries, may be particularly well suited to institutionalising social capital, because it creates weaker ties to multiple institutions instead of, or in addition to, strong ties to few. As Dekker, Koopmans and van den Broek (1997) show, levels of social trust are much higher in the Scandinavian countries and The Netherlands, which are used to exemplify the ‘broad’ model of a voluntary sector, than in the ‘parochial’ or ‘active’ models found in the rest of Europe and in North America.

If associations contribute to the sustenance of values of moderation and generalised trust among citizens, they also contribute to a stable democracy. Their democratic relevance, however, is also of a more direct character. A diverse range of associations is necessary for democratic pluralism, which can be seen as a value in itself. Their involvement in public discourse can convey a sense of political efficacy among members and non-members alike – a feeling that participation is not futile. The role of the passive supporter is not unimportant in this respect. A broad membership base, more or less regardless of activity level, is an essential source of legitimacy for many associations with an outward-oriented, political purpose.

To regard associations as institutionalisations of trust, networks and civic engagement, rather than generators, catalysts or vehicles, entails a different perspective from that of Putnam. Rather than focusing on the internal effects of participation on the active member (i.e. socialisation), it draws attention to its external effects on the wider polity or society (i.e. pluralism and cross-cutting cleavages). Less significance is attributed to the intensity of involvement (i.e. degree of face-to-face contact) as the main indicator of vibrancy of associational life than to the scope of participation (i.e. multiple, overlapping memberships).

Finally, it does not discard associations with a political purpose simply because they tend to be more vertical in structure than leisure-oriented associations. On the contrary, purely horizontal networks (if such power-neutral networks exist at all [Mouzelis 1995]) are insufficient if democratic pluralism as well as political and social cohesion is to be ensured (Berman 1997; Rueschemeyer 1998). In order to contribute to these ends, associations need to provide institutional links reaching beyond local
communities and into the political system. Thus, by definition, the networks need to be ‘vertical’ in one sense of the word. Purely local voluntary groups, the ideal in a bottom-up neo-Tocquevillian model, do not suffice if associations are valued for more than the by-products of membership activity, as important social, cultural and democratic institutions in their own right (Skocpol 1999b).

This does not exclude or undervalue horizontal networks at the local level, which are still found in most outward-oriented and politically relevant secondary associations in Norway. Rather, it stresses the fact that the desire for social connectedness through active participation in local, non-political associational life should not lead us to neglect the role of associations as intermediary institutions – between the citizen and individual on the one hand, and the political system and society at large on the other. This function may indeed be of more consequence to democracy than bowling in any number of organised leagues.

NOTES
1 For a more extensive discussion of these matters, see Wollebæk (2000) and Wollebæk & Selle (2002).
2 In the questionnaire, the respondent was asked to check a box for each category of associations he or she belonged to, and thereafter asked to provide the names of these organisations. This accommodates an important methodical objection to Putnam’s empirical analyses raised by Skocpol & Fiorina (1999, 8), namely that multiple within-category memberships are counted only once in the General Social Survey data Putnam uses.
3 If a person is affiliated with both a religious and another non-political association, he or she is classified in the first combinatory category.
4 When used in regression analyses, the responses are re-coded into a three-point scale, where those who say that ‘most people can be trusted’ are given the highest value, those who don’t know’ are given a middle value, while those responding that ‘you can’t be careful enough’ are given the lowest value.
5 At the lowest level, we find those who usually do not vote at elections and who read news material less frequently than once a week. The second lowest value is given to those who either vote sometimes or read newspapers at least once a week, while those who do both are given the third lowest value. The fourth value is given to those who either vote at every election or read news material daily, while the fifth is given to those who do both. The sixth value is given to those who, in addition to reading and voting, are somewhat interested in politics, while the seventh and highest value is given to those who are very interested in politics regardless of their voting behaviour or newspaper reading. This allows for the possibility that abstention from voting may be an act of protest, and hence a profound act of civic engagement. Those who are too young to vote are given values on the index corresponding with how often they read news material in the papers and how interested they are in politics.
6 As a control, the analyses were also carried out without weighting. The resulting overall levels of social capital increased very slightly on most indicators. For example, the percentage of respondents agreeing that ‘most people can be trusted’ increased from 69 to 70 percent, owing to the over-representation of higher-educated respondents in the unweighted sample. There were no substantial changes in any of the relationships discussed in the article which would affect our interpretations. No relationships changed direction or level of significance (above or below 95 percent).

REFERENCES


