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Rita Mano

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Rita Mano

University of Haifa

ritamano@research.haifa.ac.il

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Abstract

Civic participation reflects the effects of institutional agents. In this study we compare the effects of welfare allocations, nonprofit activity and internet communication technology (ICT) on civic participation in eight EU nations. Drawing upon the social welfare, social origins and media ecology perspectives, we contend that variations in a) welfare allocations b) nonprofit activity and c) ICT investments contribute to national level variations in civic participation in eight EU nations. We include information for a) welfare allocations in employment, housing, health, education; b) nonprofit activity in public and private support to social causes; and c) ICT investment in mobile and fixed broadband investments (OECD, 2014).

Combing three data sets (OECD, 2014) we show that (a) ICT investments facilitate civic participation (b) national level variations in welfare allocations and nonprofit activity affect civic participation less than ICT (c) type of welfare regime plays an intervening role in the link between civic participation and welfare allocations and nonprofit activity. In social democratic regimes higher civic participation is congruent with education and mobile broadband, whereas in liberal regimes civic participation civic participation reflects the level of nonprofit activity and fixed broadband allocations.

Introduction

Civic participation relates to the active involvement in public issues (Adler & Goggin, (2005; Delli, 2016). *Civic participation or engagement (hereafter CP)* is the "extent to which formal stakeholder engagement is built in the development of primary laws and subordinate regulations" (OECD, 2014). Existing studies have examined CP in terms of community activities (Amnå, 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Luengo et al., 2014), fundraising (Ballard, 2014), professional activity (Leroux 2007), fraternal organizations (Driskell et al., 2008), and cause-related events (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Ballard, 2014). These studies address the importance of institutional frameworks that affect CP to one extent or another. Therefore, in this study CP refers to both "formal group memberships and social participation" (Shah, 1998, p. 479).

The social welfare regimes (Epsing-Andersen, 1990) and social origins perspective (Salamon & Amheier, 1998; Salamon et al., 2017)) are the most notable perspectives used to examine the link between institutional frameworks and CP. Recently, though, the magnitude of ICT infrastructures has also been reported as an institutional framework that may affect CP (Mano, 2014; Purdy, 2018) and has the potential to induce positive social change raising the possibility that some nations are more likely to be defined as "good" societies just by using more ICT (Muehlebach, 2012; Hotchkins et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2011; Mundy & Musa, 2010).

ICT is one of the fastest growing forms of technology in the last decades (Wearesocial, 2016). The low cost of ICT transactions combined with the considerable ease of access for individuals and groups (Lagos, Coopman, & Tomhave, 2014) increased the range of CP activities (Purdy, 2017) and make it easier to form partnerships, make consultations and exchange ideas (de Reuver, Stein, & Hampe, 2013). Similarly, texting, calling or accessing the web on mobile devices is an efficient and effective means of communicating new ideas (De Reuver et al., 2013), thus increasing the importance of new ideologies and practices **(**Wang, 2015). As the notion that ICT is a key institutional factor in post-industrial societies (Das & Sahoo, 2012; Carty, 2010; Castells, 2013), addressing ICT as an institutional level phenomenon enables to do nation level comparisons in CP (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013) and compare its effects to those of traditional institutional approaches (Amnå, 2012; Bobek et al., 2009) including *social welfare regimes* (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and *social origins* (Anheier & Dull, 2007).

Here, we examine the relationship between ICT and CP. We consider the possibility that nation level variations in CP reflect the variations in in ICT allocations controlling for the effect of allocations to social welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and nonprofit sector activity (Salamon & Anheier, 1988). We combined three data sets (OECD, 2014): a) four indicators of social welfare allocations to jobs, housing, health and education; b) nonprofit—public and private—allocations to social causes; and c) investments in ICT technology—mobile and fixed broadband (Lin et al., 2011; Mundy & Musa, 2010). We posit the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does ICT affect CP?

RQ2: Does the link between ICT and CP vary across different social welfare regimes?

Combing three data sets (OECD, 2014) we show that (a) ICT investments facilitate civic participation (b) national level variations in welfare allocations and nonprofit activity affect civic participation less than ICT (c) type of welfare regime plays an intervening role in the link between civic participation and welfare allocations and nonprofit activity. In social democratic regimes higher civic participation is congruent with education and mobile broadband, whereas in liberal regimes civic participation civic participation reflects the level of nonprofit activity and fixed broadband allocations.

Background

Welfare allocations and CP

An important perspective in social and economic analysis is the *social welfare regime* perspective (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Social welfare regimes are "a particular constellation of social, political and economic arrangements which tend to nurture a particular welfare system" (Taylor-Gooby, 1996:200). According to Esping-Andersen (1990), the way welfare regimes operate in terms of socioeconomic arrangements affects the way labor markets operate, hence affecting the potential to advance or constrain individual-level welfare privileges (Arvidsonet et al., 2018). According to the typology of the "three worlds of capitalism" (Esping-Andersen, 1990) differ in the distribution of national resources to individuals and families (Lewis, 2000).

Social democratic regimes such as Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway aspire to ensure universal high standards of living and to lower the costs of care for weak social groups. They use equality-based distribution rules that cover all citizens and ensure that the welfare system provides equality between social classes mainly through the promotion of human rights associations. Conservative regimes (Germany, Italy, Spain) provide social insurance measures to support families and individual members in need and to minimize social inequalities. To this end they initiate the creation of political and economic unions (Castles & Obinger, 2008) and institutionalize citizenship activities in education (Busemeyer & Nikolai, 2010), childcare (Petella, 2018), healthcare (Bartolini, 2018) and housing (Stephens, 2016). In liberal (or corporative) regimes such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, the state allocates welfare services in order to ensure a basic "safety net" for individuals belonging to weak groups. The initial distinction between these three different social welfare regimes—liberal (or corporatist), social-democratic and conservative—hints at the level of CP. Indeed, while differences among liberal, social-democratic and conservative welfare regimes are potential sources of variations in CP, the specific perspective does not stipulate explicit hypotheses regarding national level variations in CP. Accordingly we hypothesize that:

H1: Higher allocations to social welfare will decrease CP.

H2: National level variations in CP will be related to national level variations in social welfare allocations.

Nonprofit activity and CP

The *social origins theory* (Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Salamon et al., 2000) adds some possible explanations regarding how nations adopt the ideal of a "good society"

and hence differ in CP (Anheier & Dell, 2007; Wang 2015). The social origins approach focuses on the role of the nonprofit sector, thus expanding the social welfare regime perspective (Esping-Andersen, 1990) by emphasizing the importance of civil society. Civil society can modify institutionalized forms of engagements (Wang, 2015), primarily through political power relations (Wikd, 2006).

The theory contends that the size and development of the nonprofit sector emerges from the socioeconomic power ratio between social institutions (Johnson, 2014) and so do the levels of allocations to nonprofit activity (Curtis et al., 1992; Hodgkinson, 2003; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006: Salamon and Anheier, 1998). The cultural and political contexts determine the size and scope of the nonprofit sector in different countries (Curtis et al., 1992; Hodgkinson, 2003; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006: Salamon & Anheier, 1998). Variations in the national level support for nonprofits shapes then a nation's normative background (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001, 2003). When the role of nonprofits is regarded as minor then the nation's potential mobilize citizens and instigate CP is lower (Hossain & Lamb, 2012; Lin & Lo, 2012; Steinberg, 1990).

The social origins approach classifies nations into four nonprofit regimes—liberal, social-democratic, corporatist and statist—with corresponding levels of governmental social welfare spending and nonprofit sector size ranging from high to low (Smith & Shen, 2002). Empirical evidence indicates that in social democratic regimes characterized by significant allocations to social welfare, the need for additional/alternative forms of engagement is restricted to human rights, thus reducing the need to invest in nonprofit activity (Salamon & Anheier, 1998). In conservative regimes such as Germany, France and Belgium, the size of allocations to nonprofits in the areas of human services is high (Petrella, 2012), thus initiating higher public awareness of and expectations for social support (Newman & Tonkens, 2011; Muehlach, 2012). These high allocations led to increased CP in the form of three million volunteers in various domains, including employment (Borgi & van Berkel, 2007) and health (Fuller et al., 2008). Similarly, in liberal states such as Australia and the USA, reports show that it is easier to draw upon a rich reserve of volunteers and increase the capacity of the nonprofit sector to stimulate social and political awareness (Neville, 2016). Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H3: Higher nonprofit activity will increase CP.

H4: National level variations in CP will be related to national level variations in nonprofit activity

ICT effects on CP

Advanced digital technologies introduced to affect CP have the potential to provide a broad platform for up-to-date and intensive connectivity that addresses the needs of many groups. The possibility for simultaneous feedback and responses necessary to activate individuals with CP inclinations (Eimhjellen et al., 2014), has, indeed increased the use of virtual platforms (Shirky 2008; Purdh, 2018; Mano, 2014) "encouraging acts of reciprocity, negotiation and cooperation" (Chesire et al., 2010, p.177) such as tele-mentoring and tele-tutoring (Cravens, 2006; Song & Kim, 2006; Rainie et al., 2012). Recent studies indeed show that ICT increases the likelihood of online CP behaviors, such as distributing virtual petitions, sharing resources, fundraising and coordinating people online (Boulianne, 2009; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Obar et al., 2012; Skoric et al., 2016). ICT therefore facilitates the promotion of social causes (Mano, 2014; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Obar et al., 2012; Skoric et al., 2016; Seelig, 2018) and increases public awareness (Lee et al., 2012). ICT is also shown to expand the limits of small local communities (Mesch & Talmud, 2010) enabling them to exhibit higher levels of online as well as offline interest (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009; Kang & Gearhart, 2010).

This is possibly why the analysis of ICT rests on the premises of the "technology determinism" paradigm. This paradigm suggests that it is easier to instigate new norms and behavioural patterns in societies that advance and support technology in its various forms. Moreover, some recent studies of ICT allocations suggest that ICT develops differently in different nations. According to Jho and Song (2015), this is why national level investments in technology, including ICT, provide the necessary institutional infrastructure to unravel differences in the flow of information that may affect the odds for higher exposure to and participation in public issues (Chaeyoon & Sander, 2013). Indeed, according to the "Media Ecology" metaphor (McLuhan, 1964; Scolari, 2012; De Zúñiga et al., 2014), new forms of media communication may become the main framework that affects society because significant periods of time and social growth can be depicted by the introduction and development of a new technology (Chipidza & Leidner, 2019). Gencarelli, 2006). Thus, while ICT alone does not have the potential to change social structures (Castells, 2013) or the mechanisms of power (Kvasny, 2006) yet, it still reflects the way "agents and agencies are situated in a dynamic field of changing balances of capitals, where the trajectories of these changes matter (Singh et al., 2018, p. 213). Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H5: Higher ICT investments will increase CP.

H6: National level variations in CP will be related to national level variations in ICT investments.

Methods

Sample:

National level data: OECD reports provide information on a wide range of national level indices (OECD, 2014) in 58 nations. To address the variations in social welfare regimes and nonprofit size, we only extracted information on nations for which a full report of the indices was available (Total N=27652; 67.3%). We then grouped the eight nations (Esping-Andersen, 1990) into the following categories: a) democratic welfare regimes—Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands (N=9233; 33.4%); b) conservative welfare regimes—Germany, Italy, Spain (N=11431; 44%); c) liberal welfare regimes—France, United Kingdom (N=6988; 25.6%).

Measures:

Dependent variable: Civil participation (CP): CP is the OECD (2014) estimated index of the average of two composite indicators (respectively covering primary laws and subordinate regulations) that measure four aspects of stakeholder engagement (OECD, 2014): i) systematic adoption (of formal stakeholder engagement requirements); ii) methodology of consultation and stakeholder engagements; iii) transparency of public consultation processes and open government practices; and iv) oversight and quality control, referring to the existence of oversight bodies and publicly available information on the results of stakeholder engagement. The maximum score for each of the four dimensions/categories is one, so that the maximum aggregate score for the composite indicator is then four.

Independent variables: (1) Social welfare allocations: We examined national level variations using the following OECD (2014) indices: a) Education considers the number of adults aged 25 to 64 holding at least an upper secondary degree among the population of the same age, as defined by the ISCED classification. b) Jobs refers to the number of persons who have been unemployed for one year or more as a percentage of the labor force (the sum of employed and unemployed persons). Unemployed persons are individuals currently not working but are willing to do so and are actively searching for work. c) Housing refers to household expenditures for housing and home maintenance. It includes actual and imputed rentals for housing, expenditures for home maintenance and repair (including miscellaneous services) and for water supply, electricity, gas and other fuels, as well as expenditures for furniture, furnishings and household equipment, and goods and services for routine home maintenance as a percentage of household gross adjusted disposable income. d) Health refers to the percentage of the population aged 15 years old and over who answer "good" or better to the question "How is your health in general?" where the response scale is "very good/ good/ fair/ bad/ very bad". *(2) Nonprofit activity* refers to the size of nonprofit activity calculated as the sum of grants and funds allocated to the support of social causes; *(3) ICT* is measured as the amount of US dollars spent for mobile broadband and fixed broadband (OECD, 2014).

Findings

Prior to undertaking the study analyses, we present a national level analysis of ANOVA mean tests (Appendix 1) and Pearson correlations (Appendix 2) for the examined variables in eight EU nations.

First, we present the results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted to estimate the differences between the three categories reported as social welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Insert Table 1 about here

The findings in Table 1 point to noticeable differences between the types of welfare regimes in the Esping-Andersen classification (1990) on the following indicators. First, social democratic regimes were ranked highest on education (x=83.1527), mobile broadband (x= 1220.1499) and civic engagement (x=9.0833). Conservative regimes were ranked highest on job allocation (x=10.2571), and liberal regimes were ranked highest on nonprofit allocations (x=22780) and fixed broadband (x=43.0569). The results clearly indicate that in social democratic regimes the highest CP is congruent with education and mobile broadband but not with nonprofit activity, whereas in liberal regimes CP goes hand in hand with high nonprofit activity and fixed broadband allocations. The lowest CP rating that was observed in the conservative nations indicates that a lower level of allocations for both mobile and fixed broadband but a surprisingly high level of nonprofit activity does not coincide with a high level of CP.

Second, we explore the extent that welfare allocations, nonprofit activity and ICT affect CP. To do so we ran three separate logistic regression models predicting CP. In the first step we assessed the level of explained variance in the prediction of CP. In the second step we added the type of social welfare regime (1=social democratic regime) to test if the type of welfare regime has an added effect in the prediction of CP.

Insert Table 2 about here

The findings from the first step reveal that ICT has the largest explained variance (R^2=.471) in explaining CP, followed by welfare allocations (R^2=.324) and nonprofit activity (R^2=.151). The findings from the second step reveal that type of social welfare regime improves the prediction of CP in a different way. ICT prediction of CP improves from R^2=.471 to R^2=478; welfare allocations effect improves from R^2=.324 to $R^{2=}$.443; nonprofit activity effect improves from R^2=.175 to $R^{2=}$.251.

The results indicate that while a model based on ICT predicts CP best, yet, it is the type of social welfare regimes that explains best CP when we consider a model regress welfare allocations and nonprofit activity and CP. Next, we discuss the direct and specific effects of welfare allocations, nonprofit activity and ICT on CP.

Insert Table 3 about here

The direct effects of the independent variables add an interesting insight. Three of the five examined institutional effects have a negative impact on CP. First, housing allocations have a low negative effect on CP (Beta =-.109), followed by health allocations (Beta =-.153). Nonprofit activity has the largest negative effect on CP (Beta =-.298). In contrast, positive effects are related to the level of jobs, indicating lower unemployment (Beta =609) and the level of education (Beta =045), indicating greater knowledge and information about social issues. More importantly, ICT has a direct and positive effect on CP (Beta =.808).

Conclusions

Membership in social organizations plays a central role in civic engagement when information and communication technologies (ICTs) play an increasingly influential role. The role of ICT in empowering citizens to access and elaborate on information has been assessed frequently in connection with multiple virtual behaviors, such as banking, dating, gaming and more, and has also been positively associated with civic activities. The role of ICT in CP has been mainly considered in the context of ICT's potential to enable the public to articulate concerns and express beliefs. Most studies address CP as an individual-level expression of prosocial behavior and not as an institutional agent that can turn voiceless and passive citizens into active promoters of public goals and create national level variations in CP. Here we focused on the role of ICT along with welfare allocations and nonprofit allocations as principal institutional agents that generate national level variations in CP.

The macro-level test of CP has been raised in traditional institutional theories but has not been assessed empirically. A major role in estimating CP is assigned to the nature of the welfare system. The basic assumption has been that in those societies that nurture welfare policies it will be easier to engage citizens to participate in public and social arenas. Similarly, the role of the nonprofit sector has also been regarded as an important perspective in delineating CP. The social origins perspective assumes that the size of the nonprofit sector shapes the normative framework leading to CP. In both perspectives, a nation's potential to become a "good" society increases, yet neither perspective addresses the role of ICT in doing so.

Here we addressed this theoretical and empirical lacuna. We claimed that the potential of ICT infrastructures to generate CP and thus to instigate quick, easy, up-to-date and intensive connectivity needs to be addressed in order to compare national level differences in CP. We explored the possibility that ICT expansion over multiple platforms may offer an impressive capacity to facilitate social engagement. We also suggested that a nation's level of ICT investment may be used as an index of the potential of ICT to instigate national level variations in CP and compared its impact in EU nations.

Revisiting our research questions, we asked first whether ICT significantly affects CP and second whether the ICT / CP relationship differs between nations when national level variations in welfare and non-profit activity are considered. The findings confirmed the direction of our first research question. They indicated that ICT allocations account for the largest explained variance (relative to social welfare and nonprofit allocations) in predicting CP. As a result we were able to confirm our hypotheses stating that

ICT is significant institutional agent to predict and assess national level variations in CP. We can thus conclude that ICT is a powerful "technical" tool that can easily become a strong institutional agent in transforming public awareness and in examining national level variations in CP in view of existing differences in welfare and nonprofit activity.

The findings nonetheless indicate that differences in type of welfare regime as well as in nonprofit activity contribute to the prediction of CP. The results therefore indicate that higher institutional national level allocations to welfare and nonprofit activity affect CP. This strengthens existing institutional perspectives for it points to the possibility that adjustments in policy to accommodate social and public engagement can affect CP as well. As a result the traditional institutional effects adopted in studies of social welfare policy and civil society are also important, even when the effects of new institutional—ICT—agents on CP are impressive. These policies may generate national level differences in CP that are not related to ICT effects. These policies may not have the same direct, empirical and discernable effect on CP as ICT, but they are still evident and raise fundamental questions regarding what constitutes civic participation for a person and why a person participates.

We thus conclude that new technologies have the potential to instigate a dynamic institutional environment in the generation of civic participation and can increase the potential of a nation to foster ideas of a "good" society. Future research should therefore focus on delineating how this new and complex institutional environment can advance the potential of ICT to engage, mobilize, and organize individuals and groups to strengthen civil society, without disregarding or underestimating the role of traditional institutional agents.

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