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Baglioni, Simone; Colloca, Pasquale; Theiss, Maria

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SPECIAL SECTION - RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF UNEMPLOYED YOUTH The Moderator Effect of Associational Membership

Simone Baglioni

Glasgow Caledonian University

Pasquale Colloca

University of Bologna

Maria Theiss

University of Warsaw

ABSTRACT: This article discusses how associational membership can compensate for that lack of opportunities and motivation necessary for political participation that unemployment usually provokes. We investigate such a moderator effect of associational membership by means of a CATI survey of young people realized in two different cities: Turin in Italy and Kielce in Poland. The survey was part of a larger research on youth unemployment funded by the EU FP7 program (Younex). We propose an exploratory analysis allowing us to assess at a low level of abstraction and through a local level comparison, how far associational membership performs even across different contexts as a promoter of political engagement of a specific group of young, deprived, individuals.

KEYWORDS: Youth unemployment, associational membership, political participation, Italy, Poland

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS: Simone Baglioni, simone.baglioni@gcu.ac.uk; Pasquale Colloca, pasquale.colloca@unibo.it; Maria Theiss, m.theiss@uw.edu.pl

1. Introduction

A large body of literature has investigated features of contemporary forms of political participation amongst young people. Such studies have revealed a bifurcated path: on the one hand, some scholars have discussed the diffusion of youth disaffection towards political life leading to a general disengagement from politics (Shepard and Patrikios 2013; Wattenberg 2012; Henn *et al.* 2007; Pattie *et al.* 2004; Bay and Blekasune 2002); on the other hand, some researchers have argued that young people have changed their methods of political activity rather than simply refraining from politics. These studies have focused more upon unconventional tools of political engagement such as single-issue social movements, politically-motivated purchasing or boycotts (Inglehart 1989; Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995; Micheletti 2003; Sloam 2013; EACEA 2013).

Among the causes which are considered to be negatively affecting the political participation of young people are the difficulties which they experience in the current turbulent labour markets, particularly unemployment (according to Eurostat data, youth unemployment was at 20.4% in the EU-28 in July 2015, with countries such as Croatia, Greece and Spain having one in every two young people unemployed). Unemployment is considered detrimental for political engagement not only because it tends to generate resignation, apathy or shame, but also because it deprives people of the ties - everyday contacts and networks - which are considered essential for political participation. Such networks and social connections enable the flow of information, discussions and exchanges of opinions that can generate interest in politics and more explicitly political participation. Following Verba and Nie (as in Conway 1991, 37) we can consider the availability of contacts and networks provided by the working environment as the infrastructure allowing people to shift from primary (kin-based) to secondary groups which broaden the opportunities for political knowledge. Thus, without such infrastructure providing social opportunities and information sharing, unemployed young people will likely have fewer opportunities to become politically active than their employed peers.

However, a few recent studies investigating the collective action capacities of the unemployed across Europe (Baglioni *et al.* 2008; Baglioni 2012; Giugni 2008; della Porta 2008, Chabanet 2008; Chabanet and Faniel 2011; Lorenzini 2015) have demonstrated that even those young people facing difficult circumstances, such as unemployment, can generate a resilient attitude and engage in political mobilization. This literature has revealed that when jobless people activated relational resources through the membership of an association or an informal group, they have been able to become politically aware of their status and, in some cases, have become actively involved in politics. Such relational resources and associational memberships have compensated, at least in part, for

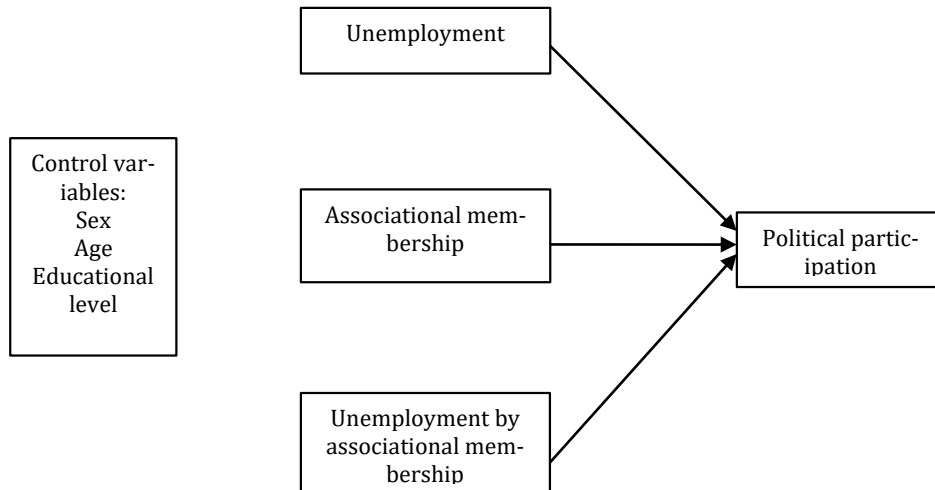
the “negative externalities” of being without a job and the absence of a working environment. Therefore, in continuation of the aforementioned argument, joining an association and acquiring the ties and contacts that such activities offer can function as a resource for allowing the unemployed to share their experiences with secondary groups and networks. This is consistently demonstrated despite cross-country differences in terms of welfare state support of the unemployed, or labour market and employment policies.

Such associational memberships and the ties generated through them become “resources”, as one can mobilize them for her own support and advantage (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993; Stolle 1998; Lin 2001; Maloney and Rossteutcher 2007). Research has shown that the relational resources gained from associational membership contribute towards making potentially vulnerable individuals (e.g. immigrants, sexual minorities) more resilient (Axelsson *et al.* 2013; Jacobs and Tillie 2004): as such we claim that associational membership should be considered carefully when studying unemployed young people and their (dis)engagement with political issues.

Both the literature on associational membership or civic engagement and studies which have focused upon the political mobilization of the unemployed have both enjoyed a remarkable growth but the relation between these two spheres remains somewhat unclear. This paper provides a more fine-grained picture of the relation between associational membership conceived of as a ‘compensatory resource’ made of social connections, source of civic skills and individual well-being which can mitigate the deterring effect of unemployment upon young people’s political participation.

Figure 1 summarizes our model: to test the compensatory effect of associational membership, we investigate its moderating effect on the relationship between unemployment and political participation. Following Baron and Kenny’s (1986) model of moderation, participation is regressed on unemployment (the predictor) and associational membership (the moderator), followed by their interaction term (unemployment by associational membership). In addition, we test the compensatory effect of associational membership by controlling the socio-demographic characteristics that previous studies have identified as key predictors of political participation, namely: education, gender and age.

Figure 1. The regression model testing the compensatory effect of associational membership on unemployment.



We propose to develop such analyses across two different cities, Kielce in Poland and Turin in Italy, which were part of the comparative EU funded research at the basis of this article¹. These contexts differ both in terms of the existing traditions of civic culture and the temporal length of democracy but they are comparable in terms of rates of youth unemployment (at the time of our study, in 2012, Turin had a youth (15-24) unemployment rate of 28.4%, the rate in Kielce was 29.2%), institutional structures of local civil society (based on the strength of both Catholic and leftist or (post)-Communist organizations (Bassoli and Theiss 2014) and in relation to the measures taken by their welfare states in addressing unemployment which have both been classified as underdeveloped or sub-protective (Giugni and Cinalli 2013). More specifically, Kielce is part of a recently democratized society, a post-communist city where civic culture and genuine political engagement have been discouraged for decades by the non-democratic regime. On the other hand, Turin belongs to a country with a relatively longer history of democracy and is a city that hosts a vibrant civic and political community. Although we will not be able to control for the length of democracy variable, nor for the type of welfare regime (for

¹ This article is based on a research entitled "Youth, Unemployment, and Exclusion in Europe: A multidimensional approach to understanding the conditions and prospects for social and political integration of young unemployed" (Younex). The project was funded by the European Union 7th Framework Program (grant n. 216120).

which we will rely upon previous studies), our aim is to investigate, on an exploratory basis, if associational membership acts as a positive resource for the political participation of young unemployed people in “diverse but similar” contexts. As such we will discuss how far membership in various forms of associations becomes a resource working across political-institutional and social settings. Furthermore, our focus on the local level brings new knowledge in the study of a phenomenon like associational membership given that when research has explored its relationship to political engagement, studies are usually conducted at national or regional level and with a high degree of abstraction.

The paper first presents a discussion of the literature that has focused upon the effect of both unemployment and associational membership on political participation. It then presents our data and methodology, and finally it discusses by means of multivariate analyses, how associational membership can function as a compensatory resource with regards to unemployed young people.

2. Unemployment, political participation and associational membership: Discussing the link

Early research on the sources of political participation, within the dominant paradigm of individual's socio-economic status (SES), did not explicitly address the issue of employment status. However, it implicitly suggested that being unemployed should determine a rather low level of political participation: “the educated, wealthy and occupationally skilled citizen participates in political life at a greater rate than uneducated, poor and occupationally unskilled” (Nie, Powell and Prewitt 1969, 365). In a more explicit way, the issue of unemployment as a deterrent for collective action and more specifically for political participation has been addressed extensively by the literature investigating the experience of unemployment from a socio-psychological perspective. Studies which have become ‘classics’ of modern sociology such as Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel (1972; cfr. also Black 2002), the ethnography of the “unemployed community of Marienthal” or Schnapper's (1994 [1981]) investigation of French unemployment in the 1970s, amongst others, have shown how being jobless can generate stigmatization and anomie, sentiments which are preventing individuals from speaking publicly about their status, and more importantly for us, from becoming politically engaged. These studies suggest that the unemployed would tend to maintain their jobless status, becoming detached from their societies' issues and problems in the process, rather than getting collectively involved in changing their situation. Moreover, the literature has pointed out that the unemployed are difficult to ‘mobilize’ politically as they are not a homogeneous social category and

many among them lack resources such as education, money and social ties, all of which are considered necessary for public and political involvement (Richards 2002; Piven and Cloward 1977).

Moreover, the unemployed do not have access to the opportunities to get involved in politics that the working environment offers through, for example, labor union membership and some specific experiences, such as workers' rights violations, gender discrimination or working in unsafe conditions (for the relationship between union membership and unemployment cfr. Faniel 2012).

However, we do know that there are unemployed people who have successfully become politically active through generating collective protest and proper social movements, which raises the question: how was this achieved? Recent studies devoted to such political mobilizations by the unemployed (Baglioni *et al.* 2008; Baglioni 2012; Chabanet 2008; Giugni 2010; Chabanet and Faniel 2012) have suggested that associations and networks of social ties have provided the unemployed with resources compensating for their status as resource-less, potentially stigmatized, individuals. As has been demonstrated by historical research (Hobsbawm 1984), it is through joining with other individuals in formal associations and networks that the "poor" (including the unemployed) can challenge the authorities and eventually succeed in having their claims recognized and accepted. By joining together, people improve their self-confidence, they become increasingly aware of their status but also of what to do to change it. This applies also to young unemployed people. In a nutshell, as we argue in this paper, associational memberships provide the unemployed with a set of resources facilitating their political participation.

The relation between associational membership and political participation is one that has been the subject of much research. According to the classical Tocquevillean argument, membership of associations serves as a "school for democracy" and helps to strengthen civic and political skills through discussion and exchange. Even if scholars have challenged the idea that associations are all alike in developing civic skills (Stolle and Rochon 1998; Warren 2001), there is little doubt that they facilitate political engagement in one direction or in the other. On another similar path, research undertaken by Burt (1992) reveals how social networks acquired by associational membership serving as an information channel help individuals gaining information about politics that they would hardly receive otherwise. Other studies (Teorell 2003) have discussed how social networks play a key role in securing recruitment to social movement organizations. Moreover, social networks are considered crucial for mobilization in relation to extra-institutional (protest-led) political participation (Passy 2003).

When considering associational membership however, one should not overlook the problem of unequal distribution of social, intellectual and economic resources in society

that has an impact on associational membership. Teney and Hanquinet (2012) in their study of young people in Brussels find that the latent forms of political participation (interest in politics, discussing politics) exist only in a cluster of the “Committed Class” of young people from families of high SES. Similarly, McClurg (2003) posits that low-status individuals who gain political information from their social network have substantially higher opportunities to become engaged in electoral politics than those who do not have access to networks whereas high-status individuals are more likely to benefit from politically-oriented social interaction, because their networks make them more likely to employ their personal resources towards political interaction.

Thus, the gap in political participation levels between low-status and high-status individuals increases because of the impact of social interaction. Moreover, Li and Marsh (2008) using the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey, reveal that professionals and managers with high educational qualifications are most likely to be political activists and “expert citizens” and conclude that the close association between economic, social and cultural capital and forms of political participation suggests that the problems of non-participation are often not appropriately addressed.

Recognizing these cautionary words, in our analyses we also control the role of sex, age and education while testing the effect of associational membership as a moderating resource for young unemployed political participation.

3. Data and methods

We use data from Younex, a three-year long research project that investigated, across seven European cities, the effect of unemployment on various aspects of the lives of young people, including political participation (the project was funded by the EU FP7 program). The data has been collected through a CATI survey conducted by professional polling institutes in the year 2010 amongst people aged 18-34 in both Kielce and Turin. The survey’s sample consisted of 1195 interviewees in Kielce and of 1444 in Turin.

Dependent variables

The project’s survey contains several items on whether or not an individual participated in some political activities during the past year. Such items were all measured as dichotomous variables (1= participated; 0 = non participated).

First, we submitted to preliminary Principal-component analysis² the political participation items to check if they clustered around different dimensions of conceptual interest. Participants in both cities clearly identified with the items on two factors, those that we described as “institutional participation” and “extra-institutional participation”³. This analysis enabled us to construct two supplementary factor-based scales, cumulatively counting the number of selected political activities. Consequently, our two dependent variables are count variables: number of used forms of political participation.

Subsequently, we checked the statistical reliability of the resulting subscales by calculating Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients. The two participation scales yielded satisfactory alpha coefficients in both cities: respectively, for Turin $\alpha = .65$ and $\alpha = .62$, for Kielce $\alpha = .81$ and $\alpha = .77$.

Because our dependent variables are count variables, we developed multivariate analyses by means of Poisson models.

Independent variables

The sample was clustered as follows: one third young unemployed people, one third young workers with non-standard forms of employment and one third young workers with full-time, standard contracts. As presented in figure 1, in order to test the role of unemployment, the employment status was dichotomized (0,1): employed or unemployed.

Our second key independent variable (moderator) was associational membership. We measured it with a set of dichotomous questions on whether or not – yes = 1, no = 0 – the respondents were members of various types of associations and groups⁴. As civil society and civic engagement literatures suggest (Stolle and Rochon 1998; Warren 2001; Rosenblum 2001; Baglioni, Lorenzini and Mosca 2014), not all associations are alike in terms of the type of political participation that they foster. Some may encourage more institutionalized forms of political participation whilst others may push towards extra-

² The two-factor solution accounted for 45% of the variance in respondents’ ratings (quartimax rotation). The first factor accounted for 31% of the variance, the second for 14%.

³ “Institutionalized” participation = contacted a politician, worked for a political party, worked for a political group. “Extra-institutional” participation = worn/displayed a badge/sticker/poster, signed a petition, boycotted certain products, deliberately bought products for political reasons, donated money to a political organization, contacted the media, contacted a solicitor or a judiciary body, contacted a national/local government official. The goal of the differentiation proposed here is to distinguish between the institutionally embedded political participation and an “extra-institutional participation”, whereas the parties are the “traditional” political institution we focus on.

⁴ Associational membership = a party member, a trade union member, a religious organization member, a cooperative member, a social movement member, a civil society organization member.

institutional political action. Unfortunately, we were not able to analyze separately different types of membership for reasons of inadequate percentage rates. Although at this point we're not discussing the broader implications of different types of associational membership, we can still assess how far associational involvement may influence not only institutional political participation but also extra-institutional political participation.

Control variables

We are interested in understanding the compensatory effect of associational membership on the relationship between unemployment and political participation. However, as presented in figure 1, we have included a set of control variables, antecedents of occupational status, which previous studies have highlighted as relevant. In particular, we tested the compensatory effect controlling for gender (0/1 dummy-coded), age (numbers of years) and education level (years in education).

4. Results

Institutionalized political participation and associational membership

Political participation scholars have revealed the complexity of issues leading a person to become actively involved in politics (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). We have learned from this literature that although there is no single factor capable of predicting political engagement, some specific individual features such as education play a consistent role. However, political participation scholars have also found that the activity of groups, political parties and associations is pivotal in persuading citizens to participate (Jordan and Maloney 1997) and, as the literature we discussed earlier suggests, that may prove to be particularly true for deprived young people, such as those who are unemployed.

In the initial part of the paper we have hypothesized that associational memberships may moderate the risks of apathy and isolation brought by unemployment. In particular, associational membership could work as a moderating resource fostering that political participation which a specific economic vulnerability (like unemployment) could obstruct.

A moderator effect is evident if the interaction between the moderator and the moderated variables is reliable whilst the independent effect of each is statistically controlled (Baron and Kenny 1986). To this end, we employed moderated (hierarchical) regression analysis: we tested the main effects in the first step, and the interaction effect in the sec-

ond step. We computed mean-centered scores for these variables to minimize problems of multicollinearity (Aiken and West 1991).

As indicated in the methods section, we have created an index of institutionalized political participation considering if, in the last twelve months, the respondent had experienced a range of certain activities such as contacted a politician, worked in a party or worked in a political group.

In the first step, the predictors include both our key-independent variables (unemployment and associational membership) and the control variables (sex, age and education level).

Concerning the main effects in the first step (table 1), the analysis reveals that more institutionalized participation is associated with stronger associational membership in both cities. Additionally, the analysis suggests that there is no significant relationship between unemployment and political participation. The two final equations were statistically significant, with the predictors accounting for 11% (Turin) and 24% (Kielce) of the variance in institutionalized participation.

In the second step, we inserted the interaction term between unemployment and associational membership. The analysis reveals that the interaction term was also significant in both cities ($p < .05$ in Turin, and $p < 0.001$ in Kielce) and its addition to the equation results in a statistically significant improvement in prediction over and above the effects of the other terms: the R^2 change between the first and the second step is significant ($p < .05$ in Turin, and $p < 0.01$ in Kielce). In both cities, the direction of the regression coefficient indicates that as associational membership increased, the strength of the negative unemployment-political participation relation increased ($B = -4.93$ in Turin and $B = -12.4$ in Kielce), that is the higher the associational membership, the lower the negative impact of unemployment on political participation. This result indicates that associational membership operates as a resource for political participation, mainly for the unemployed, so that when there is higher associational membership the unemployed politically participates more than employed young people.

Extra-institutional political participation and associational membership

Political participation studies have emphasized that a 'generational' approach should be adopted to understand contemporary patterns of political engagement: younger generations in fact have not simply refrained from political participation, they have instead adopted different tools to engage in the political and public sphere, tools which in part were not available to previous generations. Consequently, we propose to test the moderator effect of associational membership with reference to new or extra-institutional

forms of political participation. As previously indicated, we have constructed our dependent variable by grouping together political actions such as wearing a badge, signing a petition, boycotting products, deliberately buying products, etc.

To analyze the moderator effect of associational membership also on extra-institutional political participation, we can refer to table 2 that shows the same multivariate test (Poisson models) presented earlier.

Table 1. Institutionalized political participation: moderating effects of associational membership on the unemployment-participation relation (Poisson models)

Institutionalized participation	Turin		Kielce	
	First step	Second step	First step	Second step
	B (SE) sign	B (SE) sign	B (SE) sign	B (SE) sign
(Intercept)	-4.28 (1.39)***	-4.72 (1.40)***	-5.14 (1.42)***	-7.23 (1.46)***
Sex (ref=f) Male	0.84 (0.31)**	0.85 (0.32)**	0.74 (0.43)	0.99 (0.49)*
Age	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.06)
Years in education	0.09 (0.05)*	0.12 (0.05)*	0.11 (0.07)	0.09 (0.07)
Unemployment (ref=yes) No	-0.01 (0.31)	0.17 (0.33)	0.01 (0.61)	1.12 (0.56)*
Level of associational membership	6.79 (1.7)***	10.5 (1.94)***	8.56 (1.27)***	9.98 (2.55)***
Unemployment (ref=yes) *Associational membership Unemployment*Associational membership		-4.93 (2.36)*		-12.4 (2.67)***
Pseudo R ²	0.11	0.12	0.24	0.28
N	1343		1179	

Robust standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

In the first step, the analysis presents results that are similar to those shown earlier for institutionalized participation: for extra-institutional participation too, in both cities, participation is positively related to associational membership while there is no significant relationship with unemployment. In the second step, the analysis yields, but only for Kielce, a significant interaction between unemployment and associational membership on political participation: the value of the regression coefficient of the interaction indicates

that, as associational membership decreased, the strength of the unemployment-political participation relation decreased ($B = -6.86$). In other words, our analysis reveals that those young unemployed people with higher associational membership will likely participate more than those with fewer associational memberships, thus uncovering the moderator effect of associational membership.

Table 2. Extra-institutional political participation: moderating effects of associational membership on the unemployment-participation relation (Poisson models)

<i>Extra-institutional participation</i>	<i>Turin</i>		<i>Kielce</i>	
	First step	Second step	First step	Second step
	B (SE) sign	B (SE) sign	B (SE) sign	B (SE) sign
<i>(Intercept)</i>	-3.10 (0.54)***	-3.18 (0.53)***	-3.09 (1.04)***	-2.93 (0.98)***
Sex (ref=f) Male	0.10 (0.11)	0.10 (0.11)	0.71 (0.23)**	0.76 (0.22)**
Age	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Years in education	0.11 (0.02)***	0.11 (0.02)***	0.12 (0.05)*	0.11 (0.05)*
Unemployment (ref=yes) No	0.04 (0.15)	0.07 (0.15)	0.49 (0.30)	0.83 (0.33)*
Level of associational membership	5.11 (0.68)***	6.57 (1.19)***	6.97 (1.01)***	6.64 (.96) ***
Unemployment (ref=yes) *Associational membership Unemployment*Associational membership		-1.71 (1.26)		-6.86 (2.04)***
Pseudo R ²	0.11	0.11	0.23	0.24
N	1343		1179	

*Robust standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

In addition, to disassemble the significant interaction revealed in the Polish city, we created high and low levels of the moderator variable (by median split) and we conducted and then compared the results of two separate sets of regression analyses: one for the low associational membership participants and one for the high associational membership participants (tables not shown here). As we had predicted, in the low associational membership group, unemployment yields a more negative contribution to the regression

on extra-institutional participation, compared to the contribution in the high associational membership group.

To sum up, young people with fewer associational memberships will likely participate less if they are unemployed than those in employment, whilst unemployment does not negatively affect the political participation of young people with higher levels of associational membership.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the compensatory role which associational membership can play in fostering political participation amongst young people in a vulnerable situation, such as unemployment, whilst controlling for socio-demographic variables. The literature we have presented and discussed was not unanimous in the interpretation of the link between unemployment, associational membership and political participation. According to classical studies, joblessness tends to discourage political engagement as it is usually accompanied by stigmatization, depression and apathy; all situations which obstruct the development of an active, politically aware, citizenship. Furthermore, unemployment deprives individuals of those opportunities for political engagement a working environment offers by enabling the exchange of information and discussion, but also trade union membership and engagement in collective struggles. However, other studies have argued that resilience amongst the unemployed, and as such a more active political standpoint can be developed if compensatory or moderator resources are available. We proposed the hypothesis that such a moderator role may be played by associational membership. We know, in fact, that social ties and the relational resources deriving from being part of a diversified social network typical of civil society associations have been identified as good predictors of the civic and political engagement of individuals.

Overall, our analyses have supported those hypotheses that indicate that associational membership is a factor facilitating political engagement amongst unemployed young people. We have observed that if young unemployed people join a social organization or a social movement, in other words, if they have access to a set of relational resources, they can still engage in politics and avoid social and political apathy that often comes with unemployment. In line with classic studies of associational life and democracy, our results point to the role associational membership can play in keeping young and potentially marginalized people bound to their society.

Although the compensatory effect of associational membership was apparent in both cities, it is significantly stronger in Kielce in relation to institutionalized political participa-

tion, and it is only in that Polish city it occurs in relation to extra-institutional political participation. It is worth noting that the distribution of our independent variable in Turin and Kielce reveals almost no difference. Moreover, from the data on civil society organizations that we have collected in another part of the project, we know that civil society organizations in Turin are much more actively involved in the political mobilization of young people than those located in Kielce. Thus, the differences in local associational structures may not provide an explanation here. Instead, we assume that in Turin for young unemployed people with no 'formal' social ties there are other social networks available, which encourage political participation. In particular, these could be social contacts located in the private sphere (family) that can also be used for extra-institutional political participation. In Kielce, unemployment prevents political participation to a higher extent than in Turin perhaps because in the Polish city the role of informal (family based) social ties is less relevant as a means encouraging to some political activities than in Turin. Rather, relatively strong informal ties out of the working place of some young people from Kielce may contribute to their familialistic orientation (Szafraniec 2012) and refraining from political participation.

Clearly, the analysis considers only two local cases in Italy and Poland and the possibility to generalize from the findings is rather limited. Nevertheless, our argument could be refined through further research efforts that consider the relationship between unemployed young people and political participation at the local level by including more cases across Europe. One of the main advantages of our approach is that by focusing upon the municipal or provincial level we have attempted to test some theories or explanations that have been developed in the literature primarily at the national or regional level and at a greater degree of abstraction.

Overall however, our findings are relevant not only for the academic debate which we seek to contribute towards, but also for public policymaking: Kielce and Turin in fact demonstrate that a policy fostering social connections (through, for example, facilitating joining civil society associations or rewarding militantism and volunteerism) could in turn generate an active and politically aware citizenry which of course may imply a real, sometimes even physical, challenge to political authorities. Social connections could therefore act as a catalyst for mitigating the negative externalities of unemployment and restore to young people the political identity required by a mature democracy.

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AUTHORS' INFORMATION:

Simone Baglioni is Reader in Politics at Glasgow Caledonian University where he is also Research associate at the Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health. He is currently the Principal investigator in three EU funded projects: "*Enabling the Flourishing and Evolution of Social Entrepreneurship for Innovative and Inclusive societies*" <http://www.fp7-efeseiis.eu>, "*European Paths to Transnational Solidarity at Times of Crisis*" <http://transsol.eu>, Marie Skłodowska Curie/Rise Action project "*For a Better Tomorrow: Social Enterprises on the Move*". He has recently co-edited the book "*Civil Society Organizations, Unemployment, and Precarity in Europe*" (with M. Giugni), Palgrave MacMillan.

Pasquale Colloca holds a PhD in Sociology from University of Trento (Italy). He is currently Assistant Professor at the Department of Educational Sciences, University of Bologna. His main research interests include civic engagement, political attitudes and political participation. Among his recent publications: "Beyond protest: issues and ideological inconsistencies in the voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle", in F. Tronconi (ed.) *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015 (with P. Corbetta); "Job precariousness and political orientations: the case of Italy", *South European Society & Politics*, 2013, 18 (with P. Corbetta) and "La recessione civica" (Il Mulino, in press).

Maria Theiss is an assistant professor at the Institute of Social Policy, Warsaw University. Her research focuses on the issues of social citizenship, social capital, civic society and the local level of social policy. She is an author and co-editor of a few books on issues of poverty, social exclusion and governance processes at the local level in Poland.