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Gender Differences in Civic and Political Engagement and Participation Among Italian Young People

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Supplementary Materials: Data [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

A substantial amount of literature has revealed gender gaps in political participation. However, little is known about such gaps when using more comprehensive measures of civic and political participation including online participation. In the present study, we recruited a sample ($n = 1792$) of young people living in Italy. Controlling for age, majority/minority status, socioeconomic status, respondents' educational attainment, and parents' educational attainment, we found that female participants reported higher scores on online and civic participation, while male participants were more likely to report political and activist participation. The effect size for these gender differences was small. In addition, we did not find any gender differences in voting behavior in the last European parliamentary elections, national parliamentary elections, and local elections. These findings highlight the need to move toward a more comprehensive and detailed picture of gender gaps in political engagement and participation including different types of participation.

Keywords

gender, participation, voting, political behavior



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Highlights

- Most research on the gender gap in participation has been dominated by studies relying on survey data from adult participants and involving samples from North America. More evidence is needed to investigate gender differences in participation among young people even distinguishing different types of participation.
- This paper adds to the literature by examining gender differences in different types of participation among young people.
- Results showed that young female participants reported higher scores on online and civic participation, while male participants were more likely to report political and activist participation.

Gender equality in political participation remains an essential component for real and effective democratic participation (Galston, 2001; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Lijphart, 1997). Over the past few decades, the number of women holding positions in national parliaments has gradually increased, with an average EU percentage ranging from 21% in 2005 to 28% in 2015 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). In particular, the situation in Italy has improved, as the share of seats for parliamentary women more than doubled from 2005 to 2015 (from 12% to 30%; EIGE, 2017). Despite these improvements in female institutional representation, a persistent gender gap in favor of men still exists in relation to citizens' political participation (Burns et al., 2001; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010, 2011; Desposato & Norrander, 2009; Espinal & Zhao, 2015; Fulton et al., 2006; Gallego, 2007; Isaksson et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2005; Morales, 1999; Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011; Paxton et al., 2007).

Types of Participation

The issue of equality in democratic participation is closely related to the identification and discussion of the different types of participative activities in the social and political sphere. On the one hand, distinctions have been drawn between political and civic forms of participation. *Political participation* has been defined as having the aim of influencing governmental decisions “either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). *Civic participation*, by contrast, refers to voluntary activity focused on helping others, achieving a public good, or participating in the life of a community, including work undertaken alone or in cooperation with others in order to effect change (Barrett & Zani, 2015; Zukin et al., 2006). On the other hand, literature on the topic has also distinguished between *conventional* or *institutionalized* forms of political activity related to the electoral process and the support of representative democracy — e.g., voting, party membership, election campaigning, etc. — and *unconventional*

or *non-institutionalized* forms beyond the electoral sphere, including activism and consumer behavior – e.g., protesting, involvement in social movements, signing petitions, political consumption, boycotting, etc. (Barrett & Zani, 2015; Marien et al., 2010). Youths seem to prefer participation in extra-parliamentary actions, connected to independent and non-institutionalized networks (Dalton, 2008; Kann et al., 2007; Norris, 2002; Zukin et al., 2006). These types of activities seem to also be more attractive for women (Marien et al., 2010).

Recent literature has also underlined the link between participation and broader concepts of citizenship (Kennedy, 2018; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & Zalewska, 2017; Zalewska & Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2018). Indeed, active participatory citizenship is considered an important dimension, among others, of citizens' relationship with a democratic community (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Further elements may include national identity, patriotism, civic virtues, daily activities, etc. (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & Zalewska, 2017). Moreover, an attitude of interest and a sense of belonging to a given community already indicate citizens' engagement (Ekman & Amnå, 2012) and this is true also for young people (Tzankova et al., 2020; Zalewska & Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2018).

The attention toward non-institutionalized engagement and broadening definitions of relevant participation forms is also affected by an increase in reliance on online opportunities in addition to offline means. Online participation has received growing attention from recent research as more and more people, especially younger individuals, are involved in emerging forms of civic and political commitment in the virtual sphere (Cicognani et al., 2012; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Jenkins, 2005; Oser et al., 2013; Šerek & Machackova, 2014). Above all, the Internet has become a crucial political instrument for young generations as this type of participation seems more widely accessible, has low entry costs, and allows people to use it sporadically, which involves fewer constraints over time (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Collin, 2008; Livingstone, 2007; Shah et al., 2001).

Theoretical Explanations of Gender Differences

Different explanations have been offered for gender differences in participation – some highlighting the role of unequal resources and opportunities (Jennings, 1979; Verba et al., 1997), while others focus on social processes such as gender socialization (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003; Lawless & Fox, 2005). Part of the literature focusing on the adult population at large has highlighted the importance of resources that promote participative activity – in particular, access to education, employment and financial resources (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Verba et al., 1997). Lower levels of female political participation have thus been attributed to the lower likelihood of holding resources like income or education and to larger burdens with housework and family caregiving. It has been speculated, however, that greater gender uniformity should be expected among younger people who are not fully established in family life and the labor force, since the crucial

resources would be more equally distributed in comparison to older adults (Portney et al., 2009).

An influential theoretical perspective that can explain the underlying processes of gendered participation in terms of socialization has been provided by the Social Role Theory (SRT; Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000). SRT holds that the expectations associated with gender roles act as normative pressures that promote behaviors consistent with the typical characteristics of the sex in which one belongs. These characteristics are socially shared and built, socialized from a young age and maintained through confirmation and self-regulation processes. According to SRT, roles that imply greater control of resources, a greater degree of autonomy, independence and decision-making power are culturally associated with men. Such expectations (socialized by family, school, peers, media, etc.) may encourage boys to feel greater confidence in expressing a political stance and taking political actions. The preference of young men for political forms of participation is underlined by the fact that, compared to young women, men are seen as more "agentic" (Bakan, 1966). Bakan claims that agentic traits concern attention for the self and an orientation toward self-promotion and self-affirmation, as well as dominating behavior (Bakan, 1966; Eagly et al., 2000). Differently, according to SRT, women tend to be socialized toward a gender role that is less oriented toward competition and more prone to cooperation, rule-abiding, and helping (Eagly et al., 2000). Unlike a male role, which would be associated with the desire to act, a female role would be related to the desire to help others and to want to give something back to the community (Malin et al., 2015). The belief that women are more suited to caregiving roles and are more sensitive to others' well-being makes the role of women more likely to be interpersonally sensitive and group oriented (Eagly et al., 2000; Wood & Eagly, 2002).

Studying gender differences in civic and political participation among youth is, thus, crucial as they may have internalized gender role expectations with respect to their political agency that influence the levels of different forms of citizen action. As youths increasingly move away from formal politics and institutionalized participation, it is important to assess whether existing inequalities persist in their broadening participative repertoire. Moreover, late adolescence and young adulthood are critical developmental periods for the formation of sociopolitical orientations – the "impressionable years" (Mannheim, 1952). At this age youths are engaged in the maturing of their identity and of their relationship with society (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Youniss et al., 2002). The formative experiences during these periods continue to influence the civic and political attitudes and habits throughout adult life (Sears & Levy, 2003; Sherrod et al., 2010; Wilkenfeld et al., 2010). Gendered differences in opportunities and experiences of participation during this time would have a lasting impact, socializing youths to the possible expressions of citizenship that are available to them.

Evidences of Gender Differences in Participation

The existing research has evidenced that women demonstrate less ambition to run for political office and seldom decide to take up a political career. They also tend to see themselves as less qualified to compete for political roles, and when they do, they feel that they must achieve higher educational levels than men (Fox & Lawless, 2014; Fulton et al., 2006; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Paxton et al., 2007; Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011). Women do not only participate less in politics, but many studies have found that they are also less engaged, less interested, and demonstrate less political knowledge than men (Fortin-Rittberger, 2016; Ihme & Tausendpfund, 2018; Karpowitz et al., 2012; Mendez & Osborn, 2010; Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011). Most studies have revealed that gender differences vary according to institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of political participation. Specifically, men are more likely than women to engage in institutionalized forms of participation such as party membership, campaign involvement, actions to influence government policies, directly contacting a politician, attending political meetings, and participating in a broader sense in the political discourse (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Burns et al., 2001; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Marien et al., 2010; Stolle et al., 2005; Verba et al., 1995). Also, men have a greater propensity toward all those activities that would influence decision making such as affiliation to a political party, contact with representatives, and expression of political opinions (Schlozman et al., 1994).

Moreover, Norris et al. (2004) have found that men are more likely to be involved in group activities with the propensity to form an aggregate of like-minded people, including engagement in violent and nonviolent direct action and demonstrations (Norris et al., 2004). Differently, women are usually more engaged in informal, private, and less conflict-oriented types of political participation, often acting individually and in a less visible way (Eliasoph, 1998; Lister, 2003; Schneider et al., 2016). In addition, women tend to choose forms of political involvement that connect politics with their daily lives such as boycotting, political consumerism, signing a petition or donating (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010, 2011; Espinal & Zhao, 2015; Gaby, 2017; Gallego, 2007; Stolle et al., 2005). In a number of instances, women's participation is focused on fewer formal institutions and hierarchies, like attending volunteer groups or social meetings. Finally, compared to men, women participate more at a civic level and are more involved in non-political volunteering, community service, and local civic organizations (Malin et al., 2015; Portney et al., 2009).

Despite these differences, voting remains a form of political participation in which the gender gap seems to disappear. Although a strong general decline in election participation has been reported over the past thirty years (Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017), gender differences in turnout have always been low or even non-existent (Gaby, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Some authors have also argued that at an equal level of interest, women would be more engaged than men in voting (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). In some countries, indeed, women vote more than men

(Bean, 1991; Burns et al., 2001; Burrell, 2005). Young people's voting, in particular, also seems to have diminished in different countries, but this has been attributed to a more general youth disengagement from all forms of traditional political activity (Henn et al., 2002; LeDuc et al., 2002). At the same time, as age increases, so does women's turnout (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Gaby, 2017; Jenkins, 2005).

While research on civic and political participation among adults has evidenced major gender differences, the existing literature on youth participation has produced more inconsistent results. Compared to young women, young men show less civic and community engagement, in terms of actions and interest (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Flanagan et al., 1998; Gaby, 2017; Portney et al., 2009). Hooghe and Stolle (2004) found that girls are more involved than boys in social movement-related forms of participation, and that boys are more involved in radical and confrontational actions compared to girls. Notwithstanding, Hooghe and Stolle (2004) did not find the typical gender differences regarding the number of intended political acts, since girls even outperformed boys. Regarding political participation, gender differences are less clear. Some studies report that boys still seem to emphasize conventional and institutional political activities (Dejaeghere & Hooghe, 2009; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011).

Differently, Eckstein et al. (2012) found no gender differences between boys and girls with respect to their willingness to participate in politics and their attitudes toward political engagement. Other studies found gender differences only in adolescents' political interest as boys report greater interest in current events and political affairs, but no differences emerged for political activity and for voting intentions (Cicognani et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2005). There is a general consensus that young women and men use new technologies differently. In the past, being a woman has been associated with higher levels of communicative use of the Internet, but only outside of a political scenario (Cotten & Jelenewicz, 2006). More recent studies have found that men are more involved in online political participation, make more attempts to access and have more intense use of digital political content than women (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Heger & Hoffmann, 2021; Wagner et al., 2021). Men are more politically participative in both social media (Bode, 2017) and in other online activities such as commenting on news sites or political blogs, posting political videos to YouTube, and visiting websites of parties or political organizations (Wen et al., 2013). However, other studies on online political participation have found inconsistent results (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2021; Vochocová et al., 2016). Relative to young adults and adolescents, the pattern seems to follow the trend of adults. For example, Fox and Lawless (2014) showed that high school girls are significantly less likely than boys to visit political websites. Cicognani et al. (2012) found that, with respect to political participation, male participants used the Internet more than female participants. A study by Fuller (2004) found few gender differences in online civic participation, but the goal of use was quite different. Men browsed government information websites more frequently and discussed political views, economics, foreign

affairs and web taxes more often than women. Women visited websites in order to grasp critical issues. On the whole, the literature suggests that youth participation in politics through new technologies may still be structured by gender, but the presence and configuration of gender differences in online participation are far from being fully explored.

Overall, most research on the gender gap in participation has been dominated by studies relying on survey data from adult participants (e.g., Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Pfanzelt & Spies, 2019). More evidence is needed in order to investigate gender differences in participation among young people distinguishing different types of participation.

In this paper, we seek to provide further evidence of the gendered characterization of youth civic and political participation. Our aim is to examine gender differences in a variety of types of participation in a large sample of Italian adolescents and young adults. On the basis of the reviewed literature, our research hypotheses are the following: young men are more likely to engage in conventional forms of political participation (Hypothesis 1) and in activist forms of political participation (Hypothesis 2), while young women are more likely to be involved in civic participation (Hypothesis 3). Given the lack of conclusive theoretical predictions regarding levels of online participation, we did not advance a specific hypothesis, but we tested the differences at a descriptive level. The following research question was included: Do gender differences exist in online participation? (Research Question 1). Moreover, we explored gender differences in voting behavior as an open research question with no a priori hypotheses (Research Question 2).

Method

Participants

This research is based on data collected within the H2020 project: “CATCH-EyoU. Processes in Youth’s Construction of Active EU Citizenship” (Cicognani et al., 2019). In the present study, we recruited 1792 young people living in Italy. The average age of the sample was 19.73 ($SD = 3.59$), ranging from 15 to 30 years. The proportion of male respondents was 39.2%, while that of female respondents was 60.8%. The majority of participants were university students (10%). The educational attainment of participants was as follows: 47.2% completed lower secondary education, 37.1% completed upper secondary education, and 15.7% completed higher education. Most participants (86.3%) belonged to a national ethnic/majority within the country, while the remaining 10.2% belonged to an ethnic minority. The proportion of participants with both parents born in Italy were 86.3%, and the remaining participants reported that one parent/caregiver was born in another country (6.5%) or that both parents/caregivers were born in another country (7.3%). The highest level of education completed by the respondents’ mother was

as follows: not completed lower secondary education (1.8%), lower secondary education (33.8%), upper secondary education (44.4%), higher education (24.7%), while the remaining participants (3.4%) were not able to provide such information. Also, the highest level of education completed by respondents' father was as follows: not completed lower secondary education (10.4%), lower secondary education (33.8%), upper secondary education (38.3%), higher education (20.8%), while the remaining participants (4.3%) were not able to provide such information. Participants' socioeconomic status was assessed using the following question: "Does the money your household has cover everything your family needs?". The responses to this question were as follows: *not at all* (1.8%), *partly* (10.3%), *mostly* (33.9%), and *fully* (54.0%).

Measures

For this research, we used 16 items from the Civic and Political Participation scale (CPP; Enchikova et al., 2019; Noack & Macek, 2017). According to Cicognani et al. (2017), the items of this scale assess four forms of participation: online participation, political participation, civic participation, and activist participation. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed a good fit of the hypothesized four-factor model, $\chi^2(113) = 1094.95$, $p < .001$, CFI = .91, GFI = .96, SRMR = .049. Appendix reports all items that form a specific subscale.

Participants were asked to respond using a 5-point scale ranging from *no* (0) to *very often* (4). Using yes/no answers, young adults (18-30 years old) were also asked whether they had already voted in the previous European Parliament (63.1% responded 'yes'), local (75.7% responded 'yes') and national (69.1% responded 'yes') elections.

Procedure

We obtained ethical approval for this study from the Ethics Committee of the University of Bologna. Data collection took place from September to December 2016. A total of 1792 Italian young people between 14 and 30 years old participated in this study. Participation in the research was on a voluntary basis and no personal incentives were provided. Data were collected using both online (64.3%) and paper (35.7%) questionnaires. The sampling strategy of the present study was convenience sampling. To recruit high school students, six upper secondary schools were contacted: one vocational school, three technical schools, and two lyceums. The schools and students reflected the diversity in terms of educational careers and socioeconomic backgrounds. After contacting the headmaster and reference teachers, we explained the aims and the procedure of the study. All the schools agreed to participate in the study. Consent from the participant was obtained and written consent from parents was required for minor participants. Participants completed the questionnaires under the supervision of a researcher and/or a teacher during a class hour. Participants were given the opportunity to interrupt participation

in the study; however, all students completely answered the questionnaire. For the cohort of late adolescents, 50.5% of participants were female. In addition, the highest level of education completed by the respondents' mother was as follows: not completed lower secondary education (1.0%), lower secondary education (31.5%), upper secondary education (42.2%), higher education (18.8%), while the remaining participants (6.6%) were not able to provide such information. Also, the highest level of education completed by respondents' father was as follows: not completed lower secondary education (2.7%), lower secondary education (38.3%), upper secondary education (36.2%), higher education (13.7%), while the remaining participants (9.1%) were not able to provide such information.

To recruit young adults, university students and young workers were contacted through one official university office (92.7%) and youth organizations (7.3%). We obtained from the university office a list of 24,000 institutional email addresses of students attending different courses of six Schools (Translation and Interpretation, Engineering and Architecture, Pharmacy, Biotechnology and Sport Sciences, Political Science, Psychology and Education Sciences, Law, Languages and Literature). An email was sent to participants. The content of the email included a short explanation of the project and the link to take part in the study. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide their consent. About 10% of participants who completed the consent form did not complete the questionnaire. We collected 995 completed responses (university students). With the support of the network of youth organizations, we were able to involve 126 respondents (young workers) who provided their consent to take part in the study. For this cohort of young adults, 70.8% of participants were female. In addition, the highest level of education completed by participants of this cohort was lower secondary education (0.4%), upper secondary education (69.59%), and higher education (29.6%). Moreover, the highest level of education completed by the respondents' mother was as follows: not completed lower secondary education (2.5%), lower secondary education (20.6%), upper secondary education (46.3%), higher education (30.0%), while the remaining participants (0.5%) were not able to provide such information. Also, the highest level of education completed by respondents' father was as follows: not completed lower secondary education (1.9%), lower secondary education (29.8%), upper secondary education (40.2%), higher education (27.2%), while the remaining participants (1.0%) were not able to provide such information.

Statistical Analysis

We employed a priori power analysis to determine sample size. Using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), with alpha set at .05 and power (1 – beta) set at .80, a priori power analysis revealed that a sample size of at least 1369 participants was needed to identify a small effect ($f = .10$). All analyses were carried out controlling for age, majority/minority status, socioeconomic status, respondents' educational attainment, and parents' educational

attainment. The General Linear Model was used to investigate gender differences in participation. Gender differences in voting behavior were tested using multiple logistic regression. Following the guidelines of Cohen (1988), small, medium, and large effects would be reflected in values of η^2 equal to .01, .06, and .14, respectively. Rosenthal (1996) recommended qualitative size categories for odds ratios: about 1.5 = small effect, about 2.5 = medium, about 4 = large, about 10 = very large.

Results

Table 1 reports sample properties of study variables. Missing data analysis revealed that the percentage of missing data was less than 5% and, thus, we used pairwise deletion of cases. We conducted preliminary analyses to investigate any effect of sample cohort and data collection method (online vs. paper and pencil) on the following dependent variables: online participation, political participation, civic participation, and activist participation. The results revealed that the sample cohort and data collection method did not have any significant influence on these dependent variables (data are available upon request from the first author) and, therefore, were not included in the GLM. Such preliminary analyses were not conducted for voting behavior since all data on voting behavior were collected using online questionnaires and among young adults.

Table 1

Sample Properties of Study Variables

| Variable | Min | Max | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | α |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|----------|-----------|----------|
| Online participation | 1 | 5 | 2.01 | 0.93 | .84 |
| Political participation | 1 | 5 | 1.25 | 0.60 | .82 |
| Civic participation | 1 | 5 | 2.28 | 1.00 | .71 |
| Activist participation | 1 | 5 | 1.15 | 0.41 | .66 |

Table 2 displays the differences between female and male participants regarding participation using GLM. Compared to male participants, female participants were more likely to report Civic participation. Gender differences in online participation were statistically significant but had a negligible effect size. Male participants reported higher scores on Political and Activist participation than female participants. Logistic regression analyses revealed that gender did not influence voting behavior among young adults in the last European parliamentary elections, $b = 0.30$, $p = .064$, $OR = 1.35$, 95% CI [0.98, 1.86], in national parliamentary elections, $b = -0.18$, $p = .324$, $OR = 0.84$, 95% CI [0.59, 1.19], and in local elections, $b = -0.11$, $p = .529$, $OR = 0.89$, 95% CI [0.63, 1.27].

Table 2*Differences Between Female and Male Participants Regarding Participation*

| Types of participation | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | η^2 |
|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Online participation | | | | | |
| Female | 2.05 | 0.93 | 7.379 | .004 | .00 |
| Male | 1.94 | 0.93 | | | |
| Political participation | | | | | |
| Female | 1.18 | 0.46 | 48.717 | < .001 | .03 |
| Male | 1.34 | 0.75 | | | |
| Civic participation | | | | | |
| Female | 2.38 | 1.00 | 8.491 | .004 | .01 |
| Male | 2.13 | 0.97 | | | |
| Activist participation | | | | | |
| Female | 1.13 | 0.33 | 13.531 | < .001 | .01 |
| Male | 1.19 | 0.51 | | | |

Note. Analyses were carried out controlling for age, majority/minority status, socioeconomic status, respondents' educational attainment, and parents' educational attainment. Because of multiple comparisons, significance was considered for *p* values < .013 for the tests according to Bonferroni correction.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate gender differences among youth in different forms of participation, using a sample of Italian adolescents and young adults. Based on the existing literature, we hypothesized that: young men are more likely to participate in conventional forms of political participation (H1) and activist forms of political participation (H2). Conversely, we hypothesized that young women are more likely to be involved in civic participation (H3). Moreover, we sought to explore whether there are gender differences in online participation among young people (RQ1) and if young men and women differ in terms of voting behavior (RQ2). Consistent with our hypotheses, the results evidenced gender differences in relation to each of the analyzed forms of participation, with the exception of voting behavior. Overall, although the effect sizes of gender differences were small, we found that young male participants engaged more in political and activist forms of participation, while young female participants were more inclined to participate in civic forms. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the specificities in youth gendered repertoires of participation in the civic and political spheres. Most studies discussed in the current literature on gender differences in participative behavior have been carried out in the United States and have focused mainly on the adult population. Our study addressed limitations in existing research by analyzing gendered participation among Italian adolescents and young adults. Moreover, the

analysis looks at type-specific gender differences using a comprehensive measurement of participation according to different forms of activity, not limited only to individual electoral behavior and conventional political participation.

Consistent with much of the literature on gender differences in participation, we found that — among young people — male participants show higher levels of conventional and activist political participation (H1 and H2), while female participants show higher levels of engagement in civic activities (H3). As evidenced by our results, the persistence of gender gaps in participation among people of a young age after having controlled for their educational and socioeconomic background points to explanations related to the socialization of gender roles and gender stereotyping, rather than causes based on the availability of resources and opportunities. Prior research has also suggested that young men and women's divergent preferences toward different forms of engagement is likely driven in part by gendered socialization (Albanesi et al., 2012; Cicognani et al., 2012; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Portney et al., 2009).

The greater involvement of young men in both conventional political activities (such as getting involved with political parties and movements, participating in campaigns, or contacting politicians) and in activist participation (such as taking part in protests and in occupations), as evidenced by our results, may be linked to the social imperative of assuming male-typed behaviors characterized by autonomy, leadership, self-affirmation and dominance, as contemplated by SRT (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000). Similar results have been obtained in previous research in relation to the greater propensity of male participants to convey an individual opinion to a larger group or to higher authorities (contacting a politician, contacting the media, or joining a political forum on the Internet; Pattie et al., 2003), as well as to break the law or engage in nonviolent direct action and demonstrations (Norris et al., 2004; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011).

Our findings related to greater civic participation (in terms of volunteering, donating and participating in charity events) among young female participants are also in line with the theorized gender role socialization (Eagly et al., 2000) and observations of female prevalence in civic life (Wilson, 2000). In fact, women are more likely to raise funds for others (charity) and to participate in religious-based activities and organizations (Djupe et al., 2007; Taniguchi, 2006). The preference of young women for service to the community over political commitment has been underlined in previous research by the fact that, compared to young men, young women: (a) consider community service more worthy (Metzger & Smetana, 2009); (b) have higher scores in tests regarding prosocial reasoning and social responsibility (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Jenkins, 2005).

A significant finding stands out from our analysis concerning differences in online participation between young men and women (RQ1), as there appears to be a noteworthy lack of studies exploring this issue. The analysis did not reveal remarkable gender differences in online participation. These results differ from previous findings, which have suggested higher likelihood of political use of the Internet by young men — e.g.,

Fox and Lawless (2014) found that high school girls are significantly less likely than boys to visit political websites, while Cicognani et al. (2012) found that male participants use the Internet more than female participants. This discrepancy might be due to the measures used for assessing online participation, as we have considered a greater variety of activities such as discussing social and political issues online, sharing or joining social and political group content on social media, joining an internet-based boycott. As previous research has suggested, women may be more likely to engage in informal and private types of participation, often acting individually, in a less visible way (Eliasoph, 1998; Lister, 2003; Schneider et al., 2016), or in closer connection with their daily lives through acts such as boycotting, political consumerism, signing a petition or donating (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010, 2011; Espinal & Zhao, 2015; Gaby, 2017; Gallego, 2007; Stolle et al., 2005).

Finally, concerning electoral behavior (at the local, national, and European level), no significant differences emerged between young men and women. The results are in line with existing evidence in other national contexts, where gender differences in turnout have always been low or even non-existent (Gaby, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). In the Italian panorama, women's rate of voting was already as high as that of men as early as 1946, the year in which women were granted the right to vote. Some authors have suggested that the lack of a gender gap in voting, contrary to the trends in other political behaviors, may be related to higher feelings of civic duty and conscientiousness among women (Carreras, 2018). Such an interpretation is in agreement with the idea of a social role assigned to women that is associated with rule-abiding and dutiful characteristics (Eagly et al., 2000). The lack of significant differences between male and female participants does not mean that gender roles do not play a role. Young women may exercise their right to vote, but at the same time they may be socialized at the level of family (or friends) to conform to the idea of who is more interested in politics (see Hypothesis 2).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study focuses on a non-representative sample in a specific national context (i.e., Italy). Further studies could seek to generalize results by enlarging the sample and including other countries. Secondly, as a cross-sectional study, it was not possible to establish developmental patterns of gender differences, which would shed light on the socialization processes that underlie gender gaps in participation. A potential limit in the control variables used is the measure of socioeconomic status (SES), which relied on self-reported perception of financial ease in the family. Such measures have been recommended in psychological research interested in the influence of subjective experience of economic hardship and especially in the case of younger participants who may not be able to accurately estimate their household income levels (Diemer et al., 2013). Moreover, recent contributions have

shown that it is crucial to account for perceived financial situation in addition to measures of objective SES such as income (Maison et al., 2019). Future research could compare the role of both types of financial situation in predicting political behavior. Moreover, it was not possible to disentangle other psychological or contextual influencing factors that could explain the resulting differences. Further research should investigate more thoroughly the psychosocial aspects of gender socialization with regard to different forms of civic and political participation, as well as its developmental characterization by using longitudinal designs. Despite these limits, however, our study offers a solid empirical basis in investigating gender influence on participation and provides consistent and solid results for a large sample of young Italians. By controlling the effect of a series of background variables (i.e., age, majority/minority status, socioeconomic status, respondents' educational attainment, and parents' educational attainment), the study's outcomes represent important evidence of the persistence of inequalities in civic and political participation according to gender.

Our findings offer some implications for future research and practice. We stress the importance of examining the civic and political potential of future adults. Studying youth engagement is highly informative because participation at a young age is conducive to future engagement in one's life course (Eckstein et al., 2012; Zaff et al., 2011). Future research should further examine the evolution of gender differences over time, their causes and effects among younger generations, as well as their impact on political equality. While the current era of the #metoo movement suggests that gender dynamics may be undergoing new and promising social changes toward greater female involvement, the existing data on the persistence of gender gaps in participation among youth — also confirmed by our results — poses important questions on the factors that determine differential preferences for specific typologies of actions by men and women. Greater clarity on these aspects would allow the individuation of actions and interventions that could mitigate inequalities. The hope is that of rebalancing the gender gap in political participation in such a way that the same interests and the same responsibilities and positions within the world of politics can be covered by both male and female participants. As evidenced, gender differences are already noticeable in adolescence, as female participants by that time engage less in politics and tend toward civic participatory forms, suggesting that they are less accustomed to the possession of power.

All this can translate into the absence of equal political representation already at a young age. Research on this topic is particularly important in contexts such as Italy. The Italian political system has been ranked among the last in Western Europe regarding its state of democracy by the EIU Democracy Index 2019, as it has been categorized as a "flawed democracy" based on a relatively disappointing performance in terms of government functioning, political culture and civil liberties (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Gender equality is also a persistent issue for the country with respect to other EU Member States (EIGE, 2017). In fact, the current Italian political situation is still in

the hands of male figures who are candidates for elections to a greater extent (EIGE, 2017). The Italian political landscape is still pervaded by several gender stereotypes that pose women in a struggle to obtain equal access and rewards in such fields (Belluati et al., 2020). In this sense, the national political context has important consequences on the opportunities for civic and political participation. Previous research has evidenced that levels of industrialization and affluence can affect political participation (Dalton, 2017; Dalton et al., 2004), while characteristics such as levels of income inequality and political structures influence inequalities (Dalton, 2017). Future research should further investigate country-level influences on gender inequalities with cross-national and multilevel approaches.

It is hoped that future research will deal with a reduction of gender differences with the aim of promoting, through specific “ad hoc” interventions, a reduction of the gender gaps. Future research will necessarily have to deal with giving shape to interventions (e.g., at the school level), which take into account the current gender gap with the intention of balancing it. Another future direction that research in this field can take is to verify which types of roles can reduce the disparities between male and female participants in the various forms of participation. Lastly, gender differences in dimensions of broad citizenship (e.g., belonging, patriotism, loyalty, personal activity) could be analyzed and considered in further research.

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Data Availability: The data that support the findings of this study (Cicognani, Noack, & Macek, 2019) are openly available from AMS Acta Institutional Research Repository – University of Bologna. This data is made available for open access in compliance with H2020 Program regulation, following the guidelines stipulated by the Data Management Plan adopted by the CATCH-EyoU research project.

Further data on the results of the analysis of the effect of sample cohort and data collection method (online vs. paper and pencil) on the dependent variables is available upon request from the first author.

Supplementary Materials

The following Supplementary Materials are available (for access see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#) below):

- Dataset
- Codebook

Index of Supplementary Materials

Cicognani, E., Noack, P., & Macek, P. (2019). *CATCH-EyoU. Processes in Youth's Construction of Active EU Citizenship. Italian Wave 1 Questionnaires. EXTRACT. Global Citizenship* [Research data and codebook]. AMS Acta, University of Bologna.
<https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo/amsacta/6202>

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Appendix

Table A.1

Results From Multivariate General Linear Model for the Interaction Between Gender and Sampling and Between Gender and Questionnaire Format

| Variables | <i>F</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | η^2 |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Gender × Sampling | | | | |
| Political participation | 2.219 | 2, 1633 | .109 | .00 |
| Online participation | 1.812 | 2, 1633 | .164 | .00 |
| Civic participation | 0.561 | 2, 1633 | .570 | .00 |
| Activist participation | 0.371 | 2, 1633 | .690 | .00 |
| Gender × Questionnaire format | | | | |
| Political participation | 0.607 | 1, 1633 | .436 | .00 |
| Online participation | 0.003 | 1, 1633 | .960 | .00 |
| Civic participation | 0.859 | 1, 1633 | .354 | .00 |
| Activist participation | 0.398 | 1, 1633 | .528 | .00 |

Note. Questionnaire format refers to paper and pencil vs. online format. Sampling refers to high school students, university students, and young workers. Analyses were carried out controlling for age, majority/minority status, socioeconomic status, respondents' educational attainment, parents' educational attainment, gender, questionnaire format, and sampling.

Civic and Political Participation Subscales

Political participation

- Worked for a political party or a political candidate
- Contacted a politician or public official (for example via e-mail)
- Created political content online (e.g., video, webpage, post in a blog)
- Donated money to support the work of a political group or organization

Activist participation

- Taken part in a demonstration or strike
- Painted or stuck political messages or graffiti on walls
- Taken part in an occupation of a building or a public space
- Taken part in a political event where there was a physical confrontation with political opponents or with the police

Online participation

- Joined a social or political group on Facebook (or other social networks)
- Signed a petition
- Boycotted or bought certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons
- Worn a badge, ribbon, or a t-shirt with a political message
- Shared news or music or videos with social or political content with people in my social networks (e.g., in Facebook, Twitter etc.)

- Discussed social or political issues on the internet
- Participated in an internet-based protest or boycott

Civic participation

- Volunteered or worked for a social cause (children/ the elderly/refugees/ other people in need/ youth organization)
- Participated in a concert or a charity event for a social or political cause
- Donated money to a social cause

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