

Where there's a will, there's a way? Civic participation and social inequality

Abstract

Bixa Stefanie, Heitzmann Karin, Hofbauer Johanna, Meyer Michael, Strunk Guido

In the last few decades, the citizens' engagement in civil society has received growing attention in public policies as well as in social and political science. Although definitions vary in detail, civil society refers to "a sphere where people join forces for their collective interests to engage in activities with public consequence" (WHO, 2002). In this respect, it is characterised by associations and networks, which are not part of the state or the market and supposed to be open to the general public. However, involvement in civil society is not only a result of personal willingness but also of individual resources and life situation. What are the determinants that promote or inhibit civic engagement? Do citizens indeed have equal chances for participation or are social inequality and exclusion reproduced within civil society?

Previous studies have investigated determinants that have to be taken into account in order to support social justice as the general basis for citizen's participation. Late French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, distinguishes various conditions on a micro level and divides resources into economic (financial conditions), cultural (education, cultural assets) and social capital (relationships, networks). In the context of social inequality he thereby provides a multidimensional perspective on participation and its influencing factors, combining economic with immaterial determinants like social origin, living conditions or the extent of integration in society (Bourdieu, 1983).

This paper is concerned with patterns and conditions of citizens' engagement in Austria and aims at investigating the interplay between social inequality, exclusion and civic participation. The questions we raise are:

1. Which role do individual resources, in terms of economic, cultural and social capital, play for participation in civil society?
2. What are the (micro-level) determinants that enhance citizens' engagement in addition to the resources mentioned above?

Our research is based on a quantitative analysis of the European Social Survey (wave 1, 2002) and examines different dimensions of engagement (membership and voluntary work in civil society organisations). The objectives are to study the importance of resource variables as well as of further independent variables and their effects on participatory behaviour through multivariate analysis (e.g. the impact of income, education or the socio-economic status, but also of gender, social ties, values etc.) in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the evolution of participation and to further contribute to theory about preconditions of civic engagement.

References

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