

# How do media, social trust, and political institutions shape attitudes and behaviors in Italy and Norway

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report explores the complex interactions between media, social trust and political institutions in shaping citizens' attitudes and behaviour in Italy and Norway, using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) round 11. Both countries, although advanced democracies, have distinct social, political and media contexts that influence how people perceive and interact with the world around them. Investigating these dynamics is crucial to analysing democratic health, civic engagement and social cohesion in these countries. This study focuses on analysing how social trust and confidence in political institutions, as well as media consumption, influence citizens' civic attitudes and behaviour in Italy and Norway.

## 2. THEORY

Media serve as communication channels that transmit information to the public, encompassing traditional forms like print, radio, and television, as well as online platforms and social media [1]. The agenda-setting function of the media is significant, as it can highlight specific issues while ignoring others, thus influencing public opinion. The advent of online and social media has sparked debates about their impact on democratic societies <sup>1</sup>. While they can improve access to information and foster political discussions, they may also negatively affect political trust. Studies indicate that relying on social media as the primary information source can decrease trust in political institutions. The spread of unverified or false information through online platforms can undermine social and political trust, contrasting with the more reliable reputation of traditional media <sup>2</sup>. Traditional outlets, such as newspapers, television, and radio, often employ qualified professionals and moderation mechanisms, providing more verified information and higher levels of political trust.

Social trust refers to the belief that most people are reliable, serving as a cornerstone for social cohesion, cooperation, and democratic stability [2]. Social trust<sup>3</sup> often arises from direct personal experiences, while political trust is typically learned indirectly, often through media consumption. Social capital<sup>4</sup> theory suggests that dense networks of voluntary associations and citizen organizations promote trust and cooperation, which are essential for civic engagement and democratic participation. However, research shows no strong individual-level correlation between

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<sup>1</sup>The agenda-setting function of media outlets and their power to influence political trust has been a subject of both theoretical and empirical works in the political science academia for a long time (Akinola et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wanta & Alkazemi, 2017)[1].

<sup>2</sup>By contrast to online media, traditional mass-media such as press, television, and radio are usually portrayed as more reliable sources of information positively associated with political trust (Ceron, 2015)[1].

<sup>3</sup>Political trust and social trust are similar in some ways but different in others. Social or inter-personal trust can be based upon immediate, first hand experience of others, whereas political trust is most generally learned indirectly and at a distance, usually through the media [2].

<sup>4</sup>The most recent variation on these themes is to be found in recent writings on social capital. It draws mainly from the social theory tradition of de Tocqueville and Mill and argues that trust has its origins in that broad, deep, and dense network of voluntary associations and intermediary organizations that comprise civil society [2].

membership in voluntary organizations and trust attitudes. Additionally, social and political trust have distinct causes and are not closely correlated. Although they share similarities<sup>5</sup>, social trust is often based on direct, immediate experiences with others, while political trust develops indirectly via media and institutional interactions. Societies with high levels of social trust tend to be more prosperous and exhibit higher levels of political trust. Social trust enhances cooperation and reduces opportunistic behavior [2]. Trust in political institutions is essential for effective governance and democratic legitimacy [3]. It reflects citizens' perceptions of the competence, fairness, and transparency of the political system. A decline in institutional trust can create opportunities for populist and radical parties<sup>6</sup>. Media play a crucial role in shaping citizens' trust in the political system by influencing the political agenda and public opinion<sup>7</sup>. The way media present information affects how citizens perceive institutions. Political polarization, where ideological divisions become more pronounced, is often exacerbated by social media, which creates "echo chambers" that reinforce existing beliefs and reduce exposure to diverse opinions.

The impact of media on political trust is heterogeneous. Some media types can enhance trust in institutions, while others can undermine it<sup>8</sup>. For example, consuming social media as a primary information source is associated with decreased political trust, whereas consuming print media appears to have a positive effect. Furthermore, the interplay between trust in political institutions and political participation is mutually reinforcing. Low trust in institutions often leads to lower political participation, whereas high trust can encourage greater involvement. Individuals who trust institutions are more likely to adhere to laws and actively participate in democratic life.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter delineates the methodological approach adopted in this research to investigate the interplay between media consumption, social trust, political institutions, and their influence on attitudes and behaviors, specifically within the contexts of Italy and Norway.

#### 3.1. Data Collection: The European Social Survey (ESS) Round 11

The core of our empirical analysis relies on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), specifically Round 11 (2023). The ESS is a rigorous, cross-national survey that provides comprehensive and comparable data on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors across European countries. The ESS employs a strict methodology to ensure high-quality data collection, increasing the reliability of cross-country comparisons. Data are gathered using a standardized *Source Questionnaire*, ensuring consistent questions and uniform survey administration in each participating country [4]. The questionnaire is designed by the ESS ERIC Core Scientific Team and is publicly available [4].

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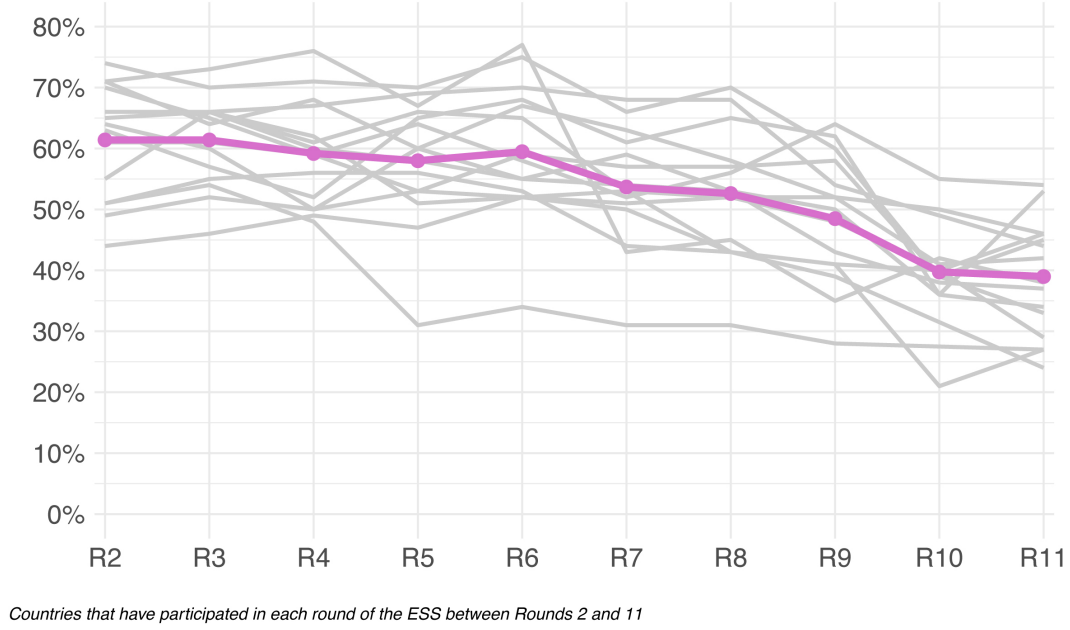
<sup>5</sup>By and large there is a general tendency for countries with higher levels of social trust to show higher levels of political confidence, and vice versa. But the association between social and political trust is not necessarily close, and there are some exceptions to the general rule.[3]

<sup>6</sup>Declining trust in institutions is problematic for several reasons. Trust partly reflects good institutional performance; it is also an essential precondition for effective governance. Trust in governmental institutions can increase compliance with regulations. Trust in government authorities increases willingness to pay taxes, and may enable authorities to implement structural reforms with short-term costs, but long-term benefits[3]

<sup>7</sup>A recent study (Conti and Memoli, 2017) highlighted the role of the media in trust towards the EU. Those who are most exposed to traditional media are more favourably disposed towards the EU process and are more likely to trust EU institutions [1].

<sup>8</sup>As for the consumption of traditional media, reading the press seems to have the most noticeable positive effect on the trust of citizens in their national political systems, in line with the literature expectations [1]

### ESS response rates, 2004 – 2024



**Figure 1:** ESS has seen a steady decline in response rates over the years

The ESS employs a multi-stage sampling approach to ensure the representativeness of the survey population in each country [4]. Surveys are typically conducted through face-to-face interviews with randomly selected individuals, with variations based on each country’s specific implementation. The survey focuses on adults residing in private households. The ESS collects data from multiple countries, including Italy and Norway, making it an ideal source for comparative research. This allows us to assess how the relationships between media, social trust, and political institutions vary across different contexts.

This study uses data from Round 11, the most recent data available at the time of analysis (2023), enabling a contemporary investigation of the proposed research questions. The ESS is primarily cross-sectional, providing a snapshot of attitudes and behaviors during the survey period without longitudinal tracking of the same individuals. Panel data, which follows individuals across multiple survey waves, is not available within the ESS. As a result, causal inferences are drawn with caution, acknowledging the limitations inherent to cross-sectional research designs.

### 3.2. ESS Questionnaire Structure

The ESS questionnaire is structured into several sections covering a wide range of topics. Relevant sections for this research include questions on trust in political institutions (e.g., parliament, the legal system, police, politicians, political parties, the European Parliament, and the United Nations), political participation (e.g., contacting politicians, donating to parties or pressure groups, campaigning, and signing petitions), satisfaction with the political system, media use, and trust in media [4].

Other elements include perceived control over one’s life, frequency of fruit consumption, alcohol use, gender identity, marital and family status, educational levels, employment status, and ethnic background. There is also a section dedicated to describing one’s personality and agreement with societal and environmental statements. Finally, an optional section asks about willingness to be re-contacted for further research. These data are essential for our analysis, allowing us to examine how socio-demographic, political, and individual factors interact with media consumption and trust in institutions.

### 3.3. Methodological Framework

This research adopts a multi-faceted methodological framework that integrates elements from existing theories, including agenda-setting theory, echo-chamber literature, perspectives on institutional and social trust, and the

impact of individuals' perceptions of their environment on their evaluation of political institutions [1][5].

Key variables investigated include:

- **Media consumption:** Differentiating between traditional and online media, and among types such as social media, press, TV, and radio [1].
- **Social trust levels:** Examining trust in others and societal institutions.
- **Perceptions of political institutions:** Both local and national.
- **Individual attitudes and behaviors:** Related to political engagement and participation.

The research employs a comparative approach, focusing on Italy and Norway as case studies to highlight the differences in social, political, and cultural contexts. These two countries offer a significant contrast, enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics under examination.

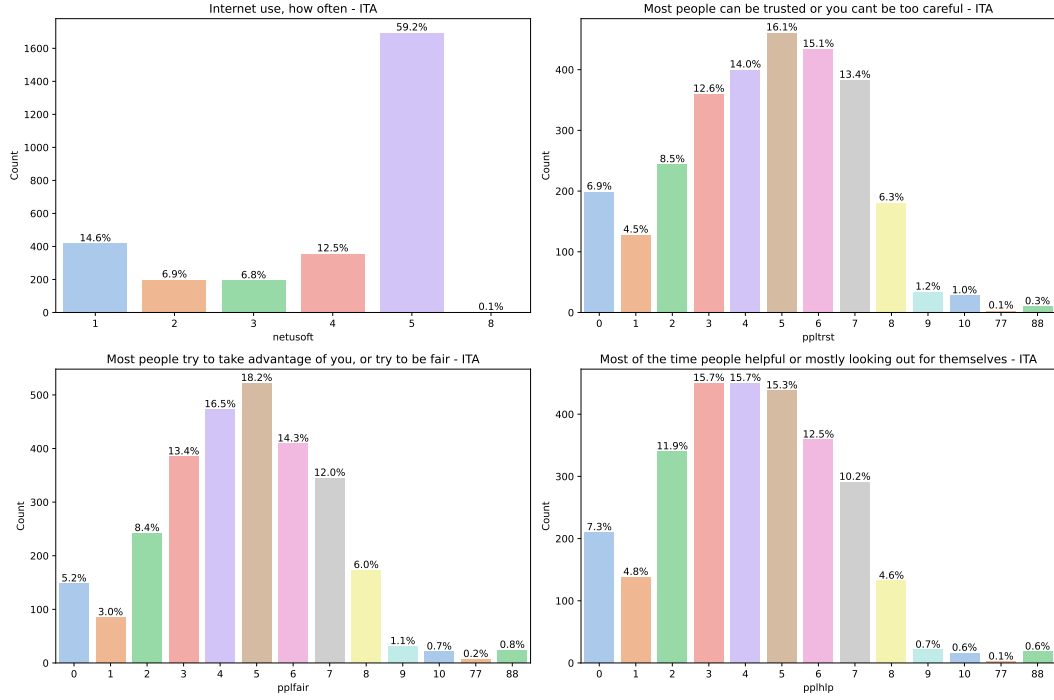
We acknowledge several limitations in this study. The cross-sectional design of the ESS data precludes definitive causal inferences, limiting the ability to establish temporal relationships between variables. While the ESS is a robust and widely recognized dataset, some measurement errors or biases in survey responses may still exist, potentially influencing the reliability of the results. Additionally, certain relevant variables, such as specific types of media consumption or detailed political preferences, may not be fully captured within the scope of the ESS data, constraining the depth of the analysis.

## 4. FINDINGS FOR ITALY

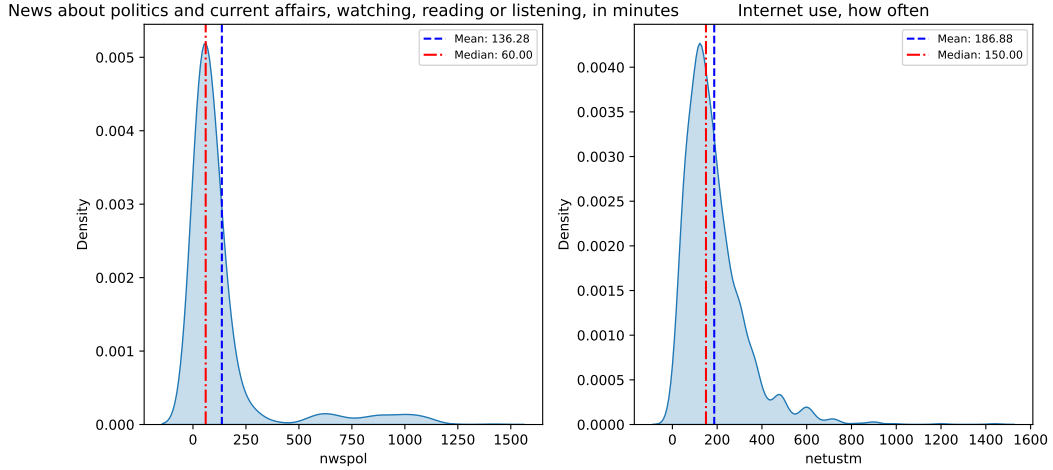
This section presents the main findings of the study, focusing on the analysis of media consumption, social trust, and political engagement among Italian respondents, as captured by the European Social Survey Round 11 (ESS11).

### 4.1. Media Consumption

The analysis of internet usage frequency (*netusoft*) reveals significant variations among respondents. Approximately 59.2% of participants reported high levels of internet use (code 5), with a sharp decline in frequency among other categories (Figure 2). Gender differences in internet usage were statistically significant ( $p\text{-value} = 0.003$ ), with males displaying marginally higher usage rates than females (Figure 5).



**Figure 2: Internet Usage and Social Trust Levels in Italy.** The graphs display the frequency distribution of internet use (*netusoft*) and measures of social trust (*ppltrst*, *pplfair*, and *pplhlp*) among Italian respondents. Most individuals report high internet usage and moderate levels of trust, fairness, and helpfulness, with peaks around the midpoints of the scales.

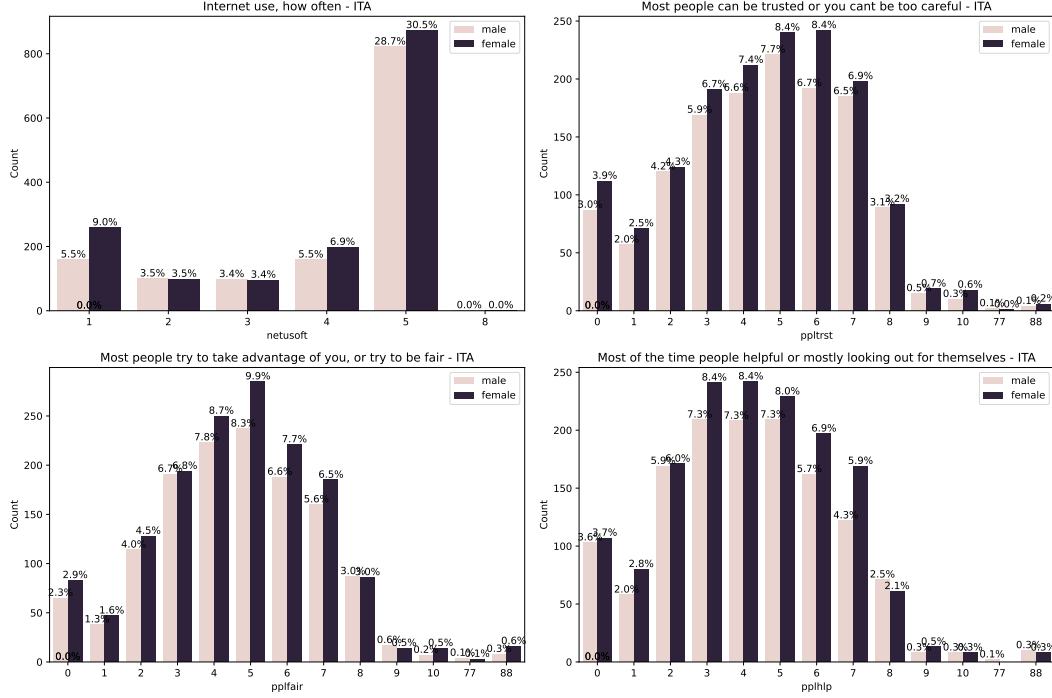


**Figure 3: Engagement with Political News and Internet Usage in Italy.** The density plots represent the time spent on political news consumption (*nwspol*) and general internet usage (*netustm*). Political news engagement is highly skewed, with a mean of 136.28 minutes and a median of 60 minutes, whereas internet usage shows a broader distribution with a mean of 186.88 minutes.

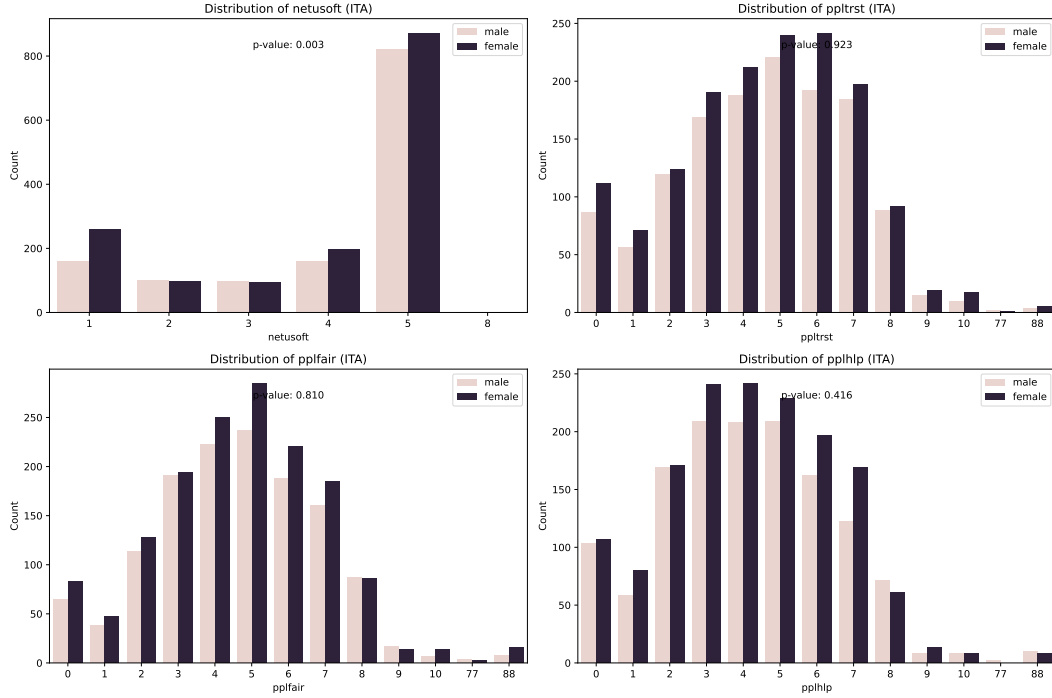
Political news consumption (*nwspol*) further emphasizes this pattern, where the mean time spent consuming political content was 136.28 minutes, with a median of 60 minutes (Figure 3). This distribution demonstrates a skew towards lower consumption times, with a small subset of respondents exhibiting extremely high engagement.

## 4.2. Social Trust

Social trust, measured through variables *ppltrst* (trust in others), *pplfair* (perceptions of fairness), and *pplhlp* (perceived helpfulness), reflects diverse levels of trust across the population. The majority of respondents indicated moderate trust, fairness, and helpfulness levels, with peaks around scores 5 and 6 on an 11-point scale (0–10). For *ppltrst*, 16.1% of participants gave a neutral score of 5, while for *pplfair*, the most common response was 6 (18.2%). Similar trends were observed for *pplhlp*, where both 5 and 6 garnered 15.7% each (Figure 5).



**Figure 4: Gender Differences in Internet Usage and Social Trust in Italy.** These plots examine the gender-based distribution of internet use (*netusoft*) and social trust metrics (*ppltrst*, *pplfair*, and *pplhlp*).

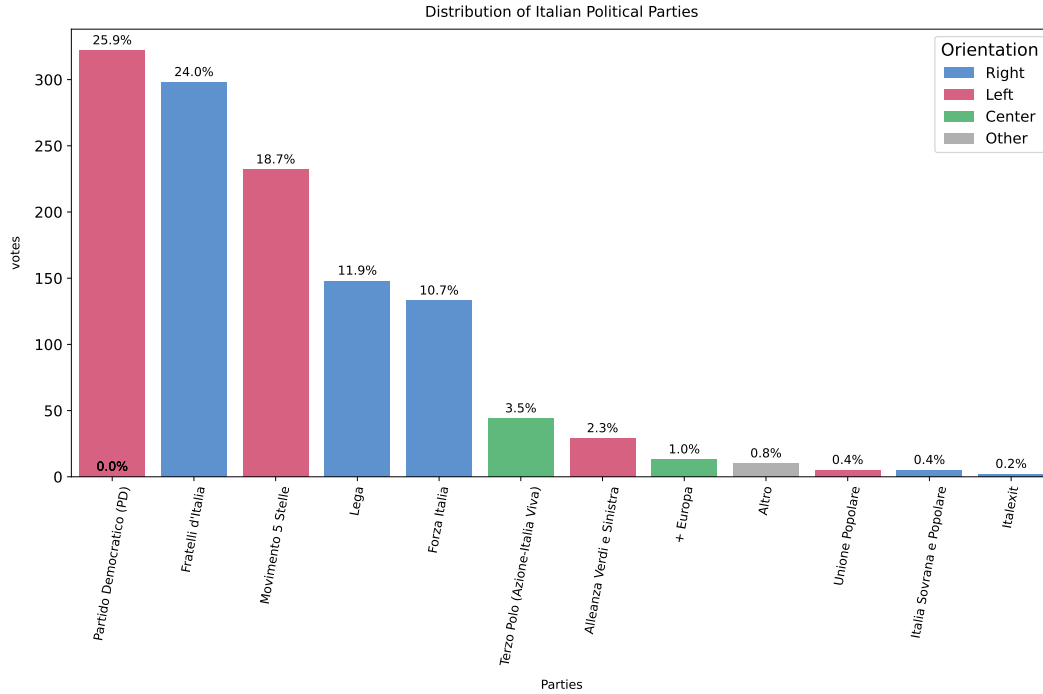


**Figure 5: Gender Differences in Internet Usage and Social Trust in Italy.** These plots examine the gender-based distribution of internet use (*netusoft*) and social trust metrics (*ppltrst*, *pplfair*, and *pplhlp*). Statistically significant differences are observed only for internet use ( $p\text{-value} = 0.003$ ), while trust-related variables show no significant gender disparities.

Gender-based analyses of these variables showed no statistically significant differences, as indicated by  $p\text{-values}$  of 0.923 (*ppltrst*), 0.810 (*pplfair*), and 0.416 (*pplhlp*) (Figure 5).

### 4.3. Political Engagement

The distribution of votes across Italian political parties reveals notable fragmentation. The largest share of support went to the *Partito Democratico* (PD) with 25.9%, followed by *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) at 24.0%, and *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) at 11.9%. Other parties, such as *Lega* and *Forza Italia*, exhibited lower levels of support, at 10.7% and 8.2%, respectively. Minor parties collectively accounted for less than 5% of total votes (Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Distribution of Italian Political Parties.** The bar plot illustrates the vote share across various political parties in Italy, highlighting the dominance of *Partido Democratico* (PD) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), which collectively account for approximately half of the total votes. Minor parties such as *Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra* and *Italexit* garnered minimal support.

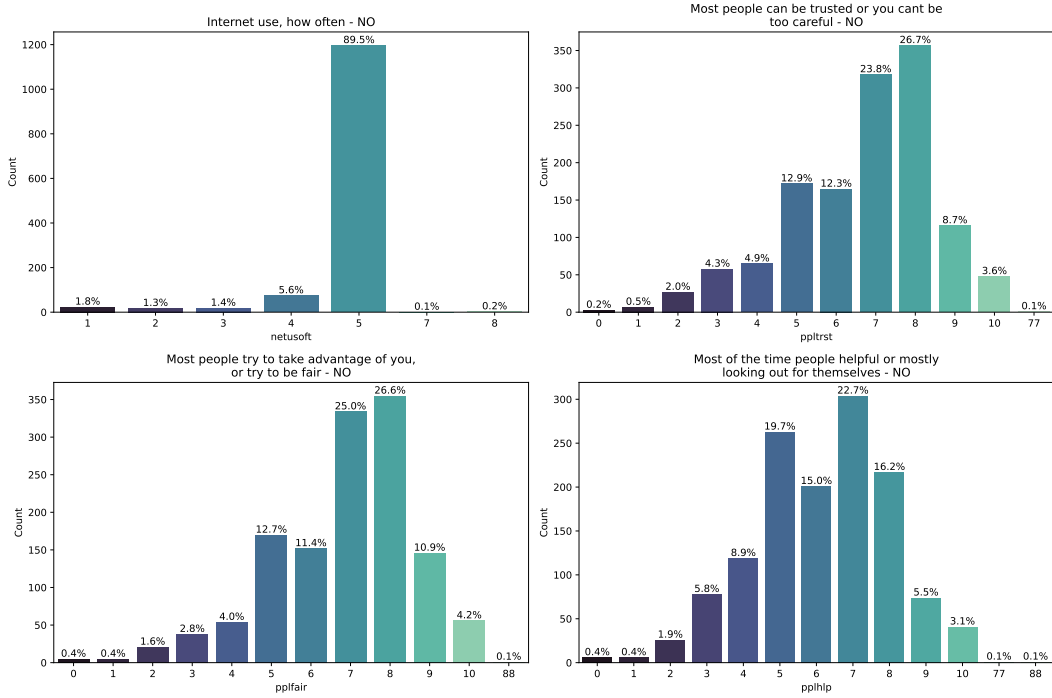
## 5. FINDINGS FOR NORWAY

This section presents the main findings of the study, focusing on the analysis of media consumption, social trust, and political engagement among Norwegian respondents, as captured by the European Social Survey Round 11 (ESS11).

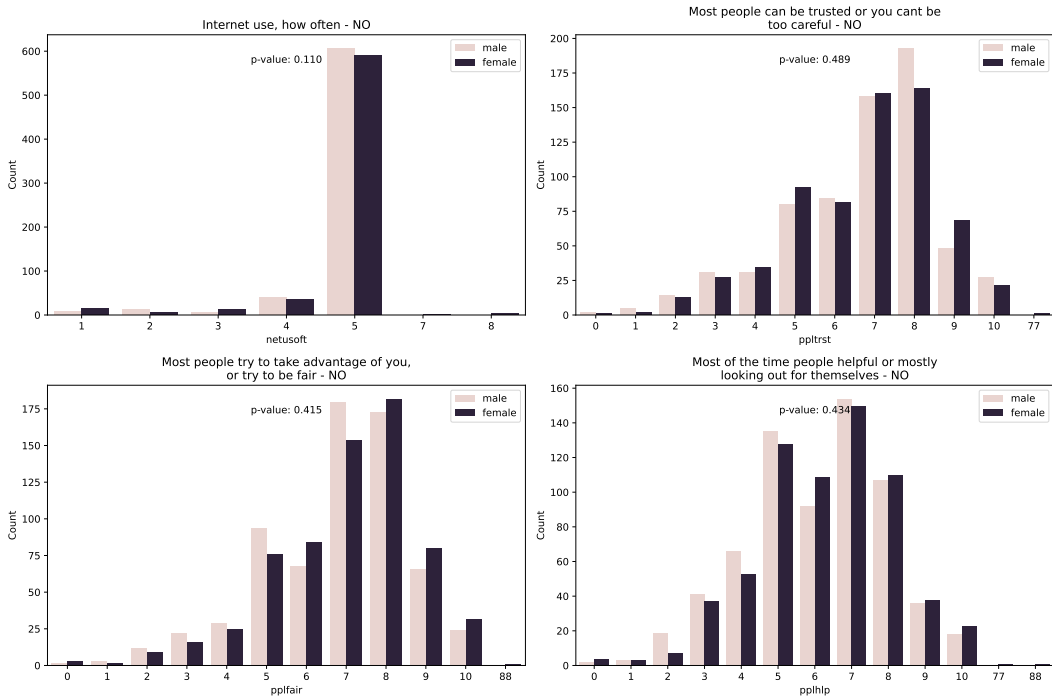
### 5.1. Media Consumption, Social Trust and gender comparison

The analysis of internet usage frequency (*netusoft*) reveals that 89.5% of Norwegian respondents reported the highest level of internet use (code 5), with minimal representation in lower categories (Figure 7). Gender differences were statistically insignificant, with a *p-value* of 0.110 (Figure 8). Social trust, measured through *ppltrst*, *pplfair*, and *pplhlp*, shows moderate to high levels of trust among Norwegian respondents. Notably, 26.7% scored 9 on the trust scale, while fairness and helpfulness also peaked at high scores (Figure 8).





**Figure 7: Internet Usage Frequency in Norway.** The majority of respondents report frequent internet use, with 89.5% at the highest frequency level. Trust, fairness, and helpfulness scores are generally high, with peaks near the upper end of the scales.

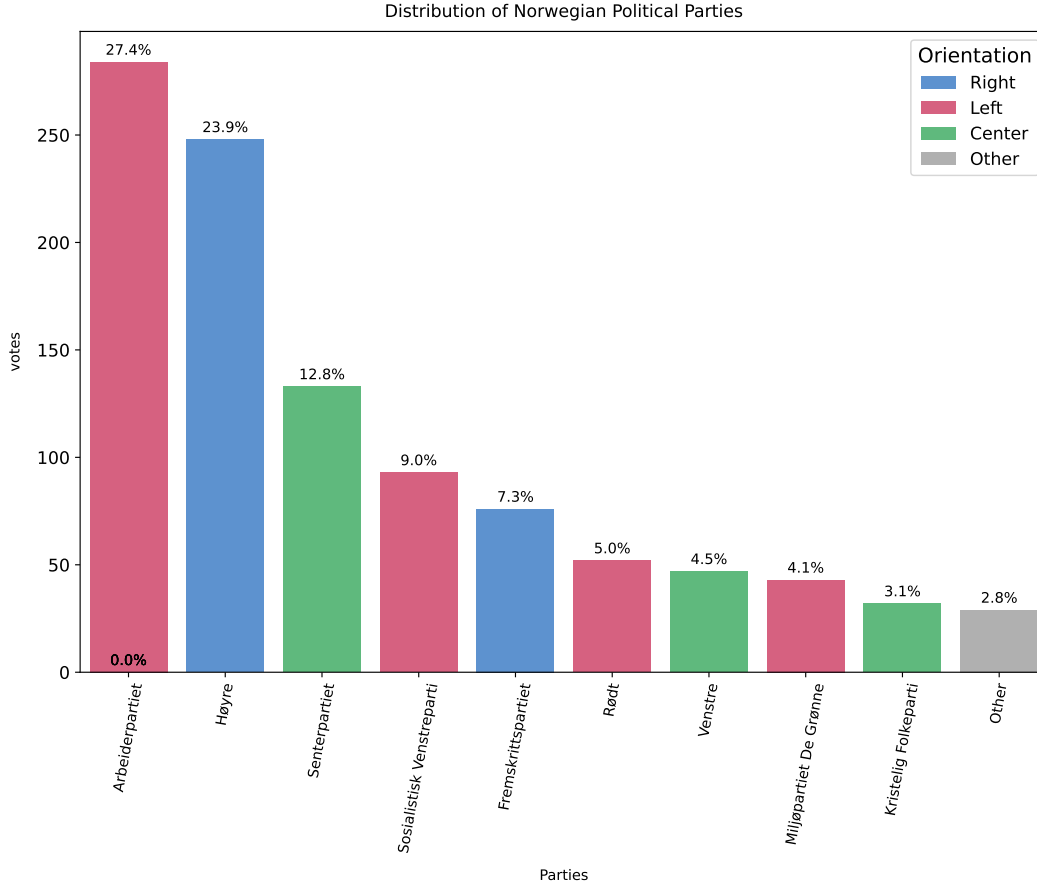


**Figure 8: Gender Differences in Internet Usage in Norway.** No statistically significant differences were observed ( $p\text{-value} = 0.110$ ). No significant differences were observed for trust, fairness, or helpfulness.

Gender comparisons yielded no significant differences for *ppltrst* ( $p\text{-value} = 0.489$ ), *pplfair* ( $p\text{-value} = 0.415$ ), and *pplhlp* ( $p\text{-value} = 0.434$ ) (Figure 8).

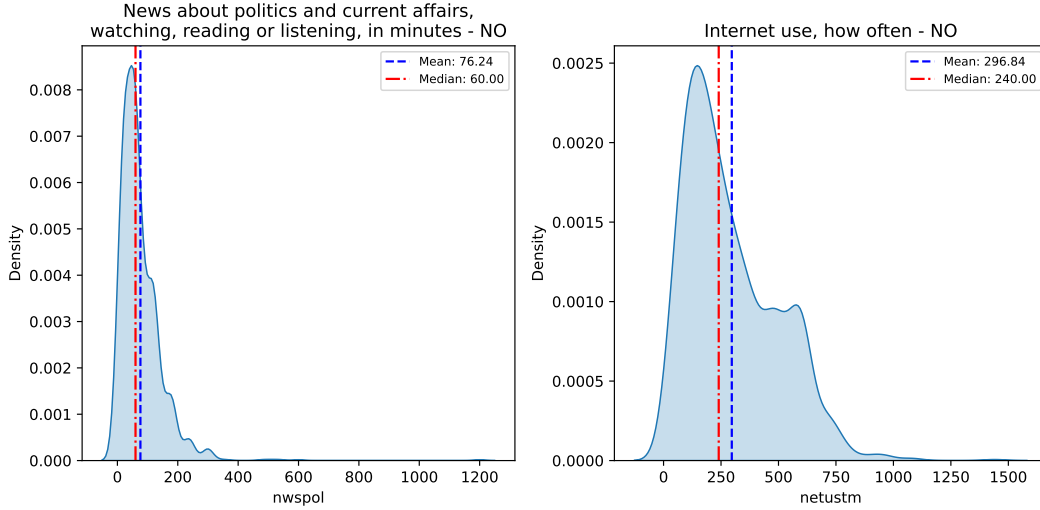
## 5.2. Political Engagement

The distribution of votes among Norwegian political parties indicates a high degree of support for the Center Party (27.4%) and the Labour Party (23.9%). Other parties such as the Conservative Party (7.3%) and Socialist Left Party (9.0%) received moderate support, while smaller parties accounted for minimal vote shares (Figure 9).



**Figure 9: Distribution of Norwegian Political Parties.** The Center Party and Labour Party collectively account for over 50% of the votes.

Political news consumption (*nwspol*) exhibited a mean of 76.24 minutes and a median of 60 minutes, while general internet usage (*netustm*) had a mean of 296.84 minutes and a median of 240 minutes, indicating higher overall internet engagement than political news engagement (Figure 10).



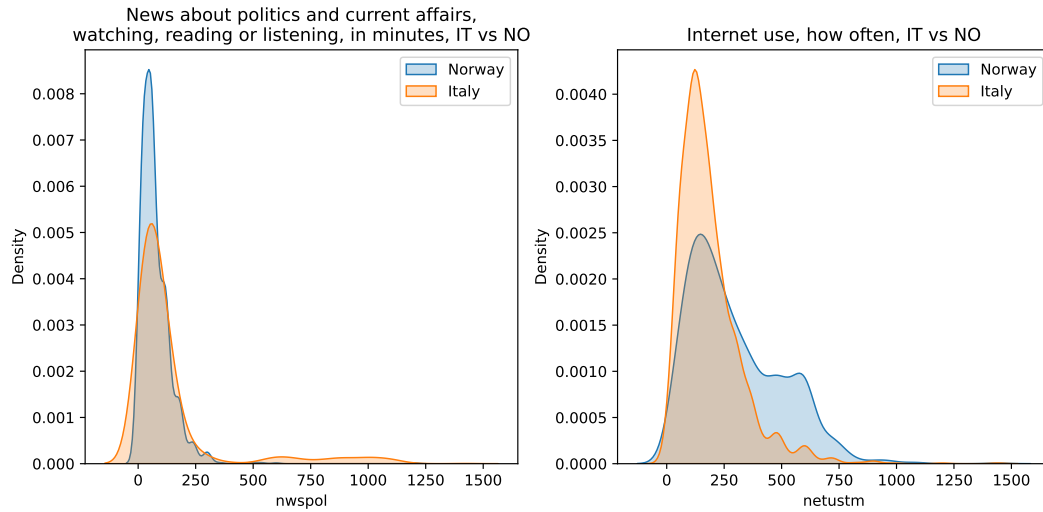
**Figure 10: Political News Consumption and General Internet Use in Norway.** Political news consumption is lower compared to overall internet use.

## 6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

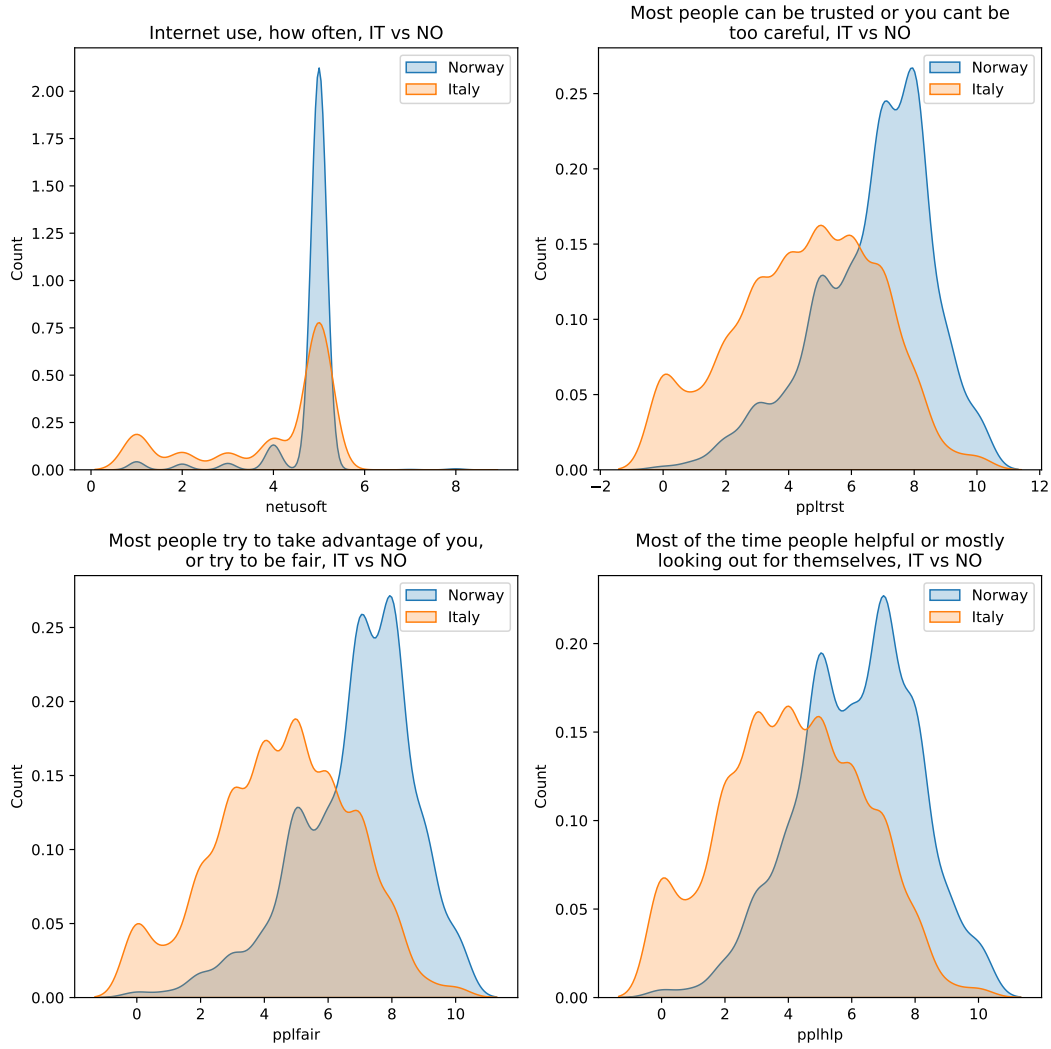
This section provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of media consumption, social trust, political engagement, and attitudes towards immigration between Italy and Norway based on the European Social Survey Round 11 (ESS11). The following subsections explore these aspects in detail, with figures illustrating the patterns observed in both countries.

### 6.1. Media Consumption and Social Trust

The comparative analysis of media consumption reveals stark contrasts between Italy and Norway. Internet usage frequency (*netusoft*) is significantly higher in Norway, where the majority of respondents report maximum usage levels, indicating widespread internet access and integration into daily life. In contrast, Italy shows a more balanced distribution, with a substantial portion of respondents reporting moderate usage, suggesting varying degrees of digital engagement (Figure 12). Social trust metrics, including *ppltrst* (general trust in others), *pplfair* (perceived fairness), and *pplhlp* (perceived helpfulness), exhibit significant national variations. Norwegian respondents generally score higher on all three indicators, suggesting a greater degree of social cohesion and trust in society. In Italy, while moderate scores are common, a wider distribution indicates a more mixed perception of social trust and fairness (Figure 12). Gender differences in trust were also examined. Both countries display a pattern where women report slightly lower trust levels than men, though these differences are not statistically significant. This finding suggests cultural factors influencing trust perception similarly across both nations.



**Figure 11: Political News Consumption in Italy and Norway.** This density plot compares the time spent consuming political news across both countries. Norwegian respondents report consistently higher engagement with political news, while Italian respondents show lower median consumption, highlighting potential cultural differences in political awareness and media habits.

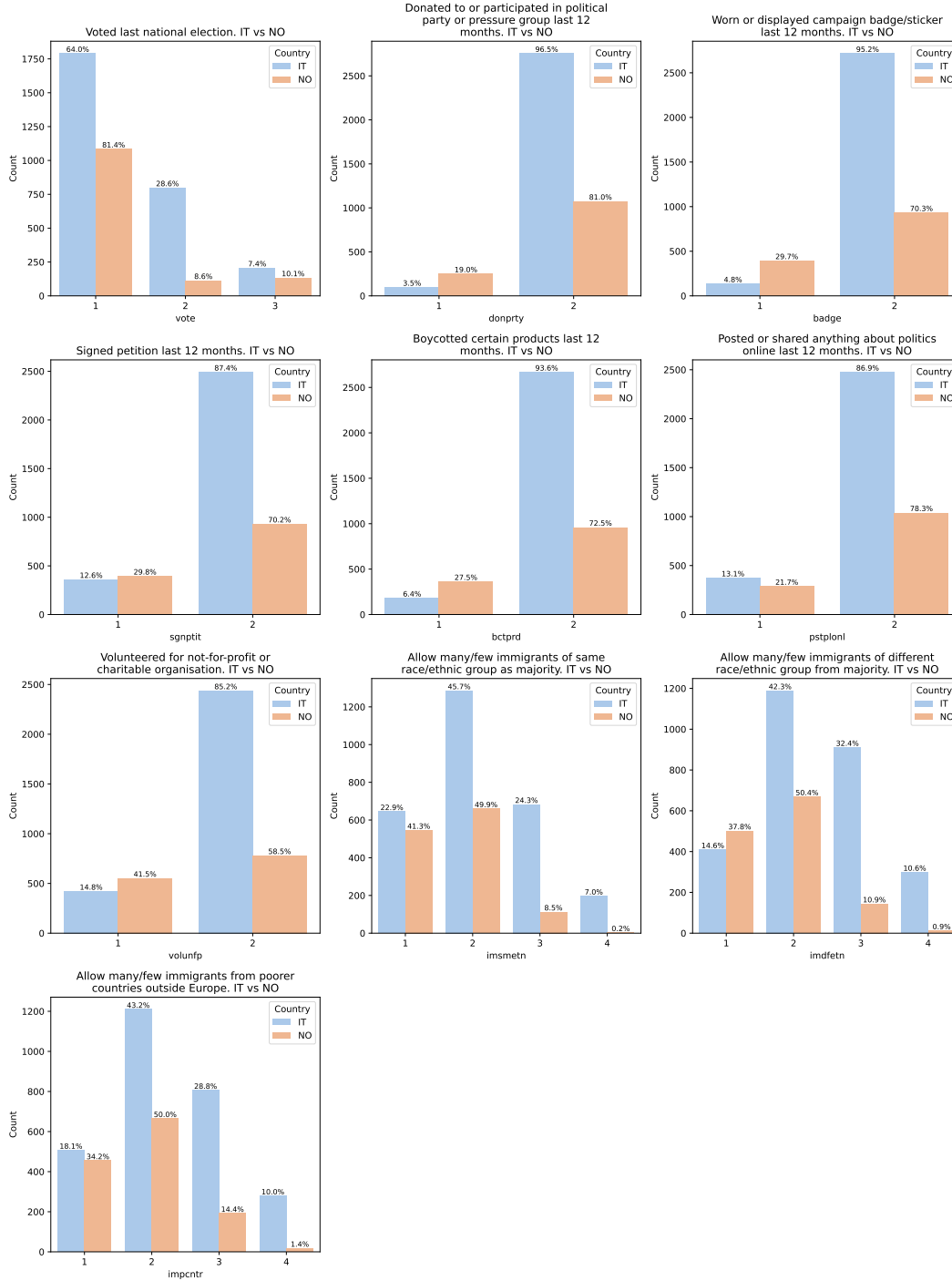


**Figure 12: Internet Usage Frequency in Italy and Norway.** This figure illustrates the frequency of internet usage among respondents from Italy and Norway. Norwegian respondents show a higher tendency towards maximum internet use, reflecting broader digital integration. Italian respondents, however, display a wider distribution of usage patterns, with significant representation across moderate and high usage levels. Norwegian respondents generally report higher levels of trust, fairness, and helpfulness, while Italian responses are more varied, reflecting differences in societal cohesion.

Political news consumption patterns also show differences between the two countries. Norwegian respondents report higher mean and median engagement with political news, suggesting greater political awareness and media consumption. In contrast, Italian respondents display lower engagement on average, potentially reflecting differing media habits or political interest levels (Figure 11).

## 6.2. Political Engagement

Political participation patterns reflect notable differences between the two countries. Voting turnout is substantially higher in Norway, with 81.4% of respondents indicating they voted in the last national election compared to 64.0% in Italy. Additionally, Norwegian respondents more frequently engage in non-electoral political activities such as signing petitions, political donations, and volunteering, indicating a broader culture of civic participation (Figure 13).



**Figure 13: Political Engagement and Immigration Attitudes in Italy and Norway.** This figure provides a comprehensive comparison of voter turnout rates, political participation, and attitudes towards immigration in both countries. Norwegian respondents demonstrate higher voter turnout and broader civic engagement, including activities such as signing petitions, volunteering, and boycotting products. Additionally, Norwegian respondents exhibit greater openness towards various immigrant groups, including those of the same ethnicity, different races, and economically disadvantaged regions, while Italian respondents display comparatively more restrictive views.

### 6.3. Attitudes Toward Immigration

Attitudes toward immigration also reveal cross-national differences. Norwegian respondents generally express more openness toward immigrants, particularly those from different racial and economic backgrounds. Italian respon-

dents, on the other hand, show greater caution and more restrictive views, with a higher proportion selecting responses indicating limited openness to immigrants (Figure 13).

Overall, the comparative analysis reveals consistent patterns of higher political engagement, greater social trust, and more open attitudes towards immigration in Norway compared to Italy. These findings highlight important cultural and structural differences in societal behaviors across the two countries.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Our comparative analysis reveals consistent trends where Norwegian respondents exhibit higher media consumption, greater social trust, stronger political engagement, and more openness toward immigration compared to their Italian counterparts [5]. The analysis of media consumption highlighted significant differences, with Norwegian respondents engaging more frequently with internet and political news compared to Italian respondents. This disparity may be indicative of broader access to digital infrastructure and higher digital literacy in Norway. The variance in media consumption patterns could also reflect cultural differences in news consumption habits and trust in media institutions <sup>9</sup>.

Social trust emerged as another area of divergence between the two countries. Norwegian respondents generally reported higher levels of trust, fairness, and helpfulness. This stronger social trust in Norway could be attributed to a well-established welfare state and higher levels of institutional trust, while the more diverse responses from Italy suggest a fragmented perception of societal cohesion. Political engagement patterns further emphasized the differences between Italy and Norway. Norwegian respondents demonstrated higher participation in voting, petitions, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement <sup>10</sup>. This increased involvement suggests a more participatory democratic culture in Norway, potentially driven by stronger institutional trust and civic education.

Finally, attitudes towards immigration reflected broader patterns of openness in Norway compared to Italy. Norwegian respondents were generally more accepting of immigrants from diverse backgrounds, while Italian respondents displayed more restrictive attitudes. These differences could be linked to historical migration patterns, political narratives, and levels of social cohesion.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of national contexts in shaping attitudes and behaviors related to media use, trust, and political participation. Norway's higher levels of social trust and political engagement highlight the role of institutional stability and civic culture in fostering democratic health. Italy's more varied patterns suggest a need for policies aimed at enhancing media literacy, social trust, and civic participation to strengthen democratic resilience. Future research should explore the causal mechanisms underlying these differences and consider longitudinal studies to capture evolving trends over time.

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<sup>9</sup>A recent study (Conti and Memoli, 2017) highlighted the role of the media in trust towards the EU. Those who are most exposed to traditional media are more favourably disposed towards the EU process and are more likely to trust EU institutions. [3]

<sup>10</sup>In eight Member States, political participation actually increased among those with low trust in political institutions. In the majority of countries, however, political participation either declined or remained at the same levels among those who tend not to trust political institutions. [3]

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