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# Schools of Democracy? Disentangling the Relationship between Civic Participation and Political Action in 17 European Countries

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## Abstract

Since Tocqueville's seminal writings, voluntary associations have been proclaimed to be schools of democracy. According to this claim, which regained popularity during the 1990s, involvement in voluntary associations stimulates political action. By participating in these associations, members are socialised to become politically active. Supposedly, having face-to-face contact with other members induces civic mindedness – the propensity to think and care more about the wider world. Participating in shared activities, organising meetings and events, and cooperating with other members are claimed to induce civic skills and political efficacy. Over the years, many authors have elaborated on these ideas. This article offers a systematic examination of the neo-Tocquevillian approach, putting the theoretical ideas to an empirical test. It offers a critical overview of the literature on the beneficial role of voluntary associations and dissects it into five testable claims. Subsequently, these claims are tested by cross-sectional, hierarchical analyses of 17 European countries. The authors conclude that the neo-Tocquevillian theory faces serious lack of empirical support. In line with the expectations, they find a strong, positive correlation between associational involvement and political action. Moreover, this correlation is positive in all countries under study. However, more informative hypotheses on this correlation are falsified. First, the correlation is stronger for interest and activist organisations than for leisure organisations. Second, passive (or 'checkbook') members show much higher levels of political action than non-involved, whereas the additional effects of active participation are marginal. Third, the correlation between associational involvement and political action is not explained by civic skills and civic mindedness. In sum, the authors find no evidence for a direct, causal relation between associational involvement and political action. The socialisation mechanism plays a marginal role at best. Rather, this article's findings imply that selection effects account for a large part of the correlation between associational involvement and political action. The conclusion reached therefore is that voluntary associations are not the schools of democracy they are proclaimed to be, but rather pools of democracy.

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*What is interesting here, perhaps, is the question of people who are motivated to help, and why. Given a definition of prosocial behaviour as actions that benefit other people or society as a whole (see Twenge et al. 2007), it is apparent that prosociality is intimately bound up with ethics. Ethics guide how our actions affect ourselves, the people around us and our society, usually with principles designed to minimise harm or maximise happiness.*

