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# COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY WITH ITALIAN AND AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to test whether personal commitment to community was related to political involvement in two cultural contexts: Italy and the USA. Participants were 566 adolescents (48.2% males) aged 14-19 years (M = 16 years; SD = 1.29): 311 Italians and 255 Americans. Participants filled out a self-report questionnaire. Analyses of variance revealed that American high school students reported higher levels of personal commitment to community than did their Italian peers and that many forms of political involvement were significantly more common among American adolescents. Structural equation modeling analyses revealed that personal commitment to community was strongly and positively associated with involvement in political activities in both adolescent samples. Thus, fostering personal commitments to community could potentially lead youth to political engagement.
**Key words:** commitment to community; political involvement; gender; Italians; Americans; adolescence

Nowadays, adolescents in several democratic countries around the world are increasingly disengaged from politics (cf. Esser and de Vreese 2007). This trend is alarming because an important task of adolescence is becoming a responsible citizen (Havighurst 1952). Political disengagement might stem from adolescent perceptions of politics as a realm far from their lives and unconnected to their daily experiences (e.g., de Luca 2007). However, adolescents in many countries are involved in community service (Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby and Marcelo 2006; Marta and Pozzi 2007). Might orientation toward community be a starting point for involvement in political activities? We addressed this question by examining whether personal commitment to community was related to political involvement among adolescents from two different contexts: Italy and the USA.

## Community orientation and political involvement

Adolescence is a particularly important time for defining one's role as a member of society (Erikson 1968; Havighurst 1952). Society membership can be expressed behaviorally through both community-oriented and political involvement. A topic of theoretical debate about civic development is: how does one's orientation to local community relate to orientation toward broader political systems?

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Up to now, research on relations between community-orientation and political involvement has focused mainly on one behavioral component of community-orientation: community service. Evidence suggests that community service participation develops in different ways that political participation. For example, in their longitudinal study of civic development, Obradović and Masten (2007) showed that community service and citizenship behaviors (i.e., political involvement) in young adulthood are predicted differently by earlier and concurrent adaptive functioning; all measured competencies (academic, conduct, and social competence) were more strongly related to citizenship than to community service. This evidence suggests that community service and political involvement represent two distinct forms of civic behaviors that develop differently.

Even though community service and political involvement are distinct, are they nonetheless related to one another? Some have argued that community service should foster political involvement by providing experiences to build civic skills and values potentially transferrable to more overtly political domains (e.g., Flanagan 2003; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin and Silbereisen 2002). Others doubt that activities that are not explicitly political have the potential to facilitate political involvement (e.g., Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005) and advance recommendations on how service might be repositioned as a way to encourage political participation (e.g., Walker 2002)

Empirical evidence for relations between community service and political involvement among youth is limited and mixed. Where evidence exists, the focus heavily is on relations between community service during high school and one form of subsequent political involvement: voting. Some scholars reviewing studies conducted in the eighties and the nineties argue that there is little evidence for a relation between community service and later voting (e.g., Perry and Katula 2001; Walker 2002). For example, in herexamination of whether youth service programs promote political involvement, Walker (2002) points to three studies suggesting that youth who participated in service programs were not more likely to vote in the future compared to youth who did not. However, at least one older study (Smith 1999) and a couple of more recent studies have reported positive associations between being involved in community service in high school and more community service and with voting in adulthood (e.g., Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, and Atkins 2007; McFarland and Thomas 2006). Thus, overall the evidence on the link between community service and voting has been inconsistent, likely owing to differing definitions of service and methods of studying both service and voting behavior.

## Conceptual framework

Given the limited and mixed evidence on community-orientation and political involvement, we sought to shed further light on this issue by considering, instead of a behavioral form (i.e., community service), an attitudinal component of community-orientation. We introduce the concept of *personal commitment to community,* which we conceptualize as feeling committed to helping others in one's community or solving issues in one's community. This builds on the concept of social responsibility (e.g., Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger and Alisat 2007) by emphasizing a sense of responsibility to act on behalf of others in one's community. However, it adds the element of personal commitment to this
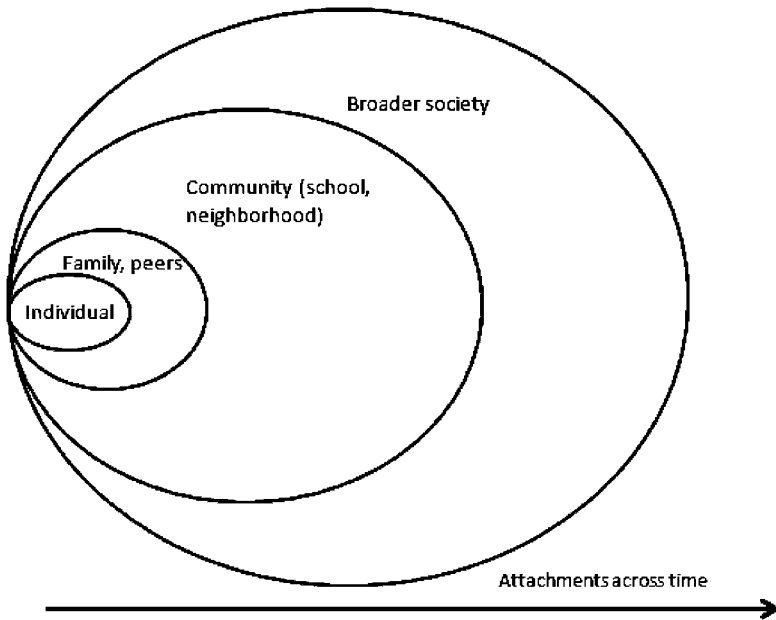
**Figure 1.** Conceptual representation showing how individuals might form commitments to proximal social groups before distal social groups across development.

belief; those who are personally committed to community not only endorse the belief that it is important to be responsible to others, but are personally invested in that belief. We also sought to extend existing work by examining how commitment to community relates to a number of different forms of political participation (e.g., collecting signatures for a petition drive; joining in a protest march, meeting, or demonstration; participating in a discussion about a social or political issue).

The conceptual framework of our work is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, according to which development occurs with the continuous interplay of individual characteristics and multiple social systems to which each person belongs. In his theory, Bronfenbrenner delineated four types of nested systems. He called these the *microsystem* (immediate environments sharing daily contact with the adolescent, such as the family and friends), the *mesosytem* (two microsystems in interaction, e.g., the family and peer systems), the *exosystem* (external environments that indirectly influence development, e.g., parental workplace, neighborhood characteristics, or belonging to an ethnic subgroup), and the *macrosystem* (the larger socio-cultural context, e.g., religious majority, or societal discrimination).

Rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptualization of nested developmental environments, we hypothesized that people form commitments to more immediate proximal social groups first and then expand commitment to more distal social groups across development (see Figure 1). More specifically, since adolescents might first develop

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attachment to local community and then later to society more broadly (resulting in political involvement), we hypothesized that commitment to local community might be an important precursor to youth political involvement. As a first step toward testing this hypothesis we examined whether there are associations between personal commitment to community and political involvement consistent with the prediction across two cultural contexts: Italy and the USA.

## Two cultural contexts: Italy and the USA

Research on youth civic development in Italy and the USA has pointed out both similarities and differences between these two contexts. With respect to community service, there appear to be many differences. In the USA, community service has been touted as an important means of individual action to benefit civic society (Walker 2002) and, differently to what happens in Italy, many schools in the USA emphasize importance of community involvement and even offer opportunities or requirements for community service participation (Niemi, Hepburn and Chapman 2000). Consistent with this difference, recent research has indicated that both American adolescents (Jahromi, Crocetti and Buchanan 2012) and university students (Cicognani, Pirini, Keyes, Joshanloo, Rostami and Nosratabadi 2008) are more likely to be involved in volunteering compared to their Italian peers. On the basis of these findings, we expected that personal commitment to community would be higher in American than in Italian adolescents.

With respect to political participation, a similarity across the countries is that young people are disinterested and even distrustful of politics, viewing it as messy, contentious, and polarizing (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter and Zukin 2002; Cartocci 2002; Lopez et al. 2006). Yet in one study, similar to community service, youth in the USA reported more political activity than did youth in Italy on one specific, conventional form of political involvement: joining or participating in a political party, club, or organization (Jahromi et al. 2012). Country differences in intentions to vote, however, depended on gender; American females had the highest intentions to vote and American males the lowest.In the current study, we sought to expand this previous research by focusing on a larger array of forms of political involvement, both conventional (e.g., joining a political party or organization) and unconventional (e.g., collecting signatures for a petition drive; joining in a protest march, meeting, or demonstration; Metz, McLellan and Youniss 2003). Distinctions between activities might be important; for instance, Vecchione and Mebane (2006) found that Italian youth aged 18-24 years were less likely to participate in political parties than to sign a petition or join a protest.

Given this pattern of differences in levels of community and political involvement in Italy and the USA, these two countries represent valuable contexts for testing factors that might promote engagement. It is possible to examine whether variables that are hypothesized to be related to involvement might play this expected role in a context characterized by generally low levels of youth involvement (e.g., Italy), as well as in a context characterized by higher levels of youth engagement (e.g., the USA). Testing whether some factors might promote engagement in different cultural contexts is a valuable strategy for yielding generalizable findings. In line with this reasoning, previous evidence showed that both in Italy and in the USA certain aspects of peer and school contexts were associated with community but

not political involvement (defined by joining or participating in a political party, club, or organization; Jahromi et al. 2012). The current study looks further at whether personal commitment to community might predict youth political involvement of different types in these countries.

## The present study

In sum, the primary purpose of the present study was to test among adolescents whether feeling personally committed to one's community is associated with involvement in political activities. Moving from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, we hypothesized that personal commitment to community would be linked with political participation on the basis that experiences with one's more proximal social system might increase awareness of and motivate interest in more distal contexts relevant to that community.

We further hypothesized that this association would equally apply in the Italian and the American cultural context. Thus, in a preliminary step, we compared levels of personal commitment to community and rates of political involvement (across an array of political activities) among Italian and American adolescents. In line with available evidence (e.g., Cicognani et al. 2008; Jahromi et al. 2012) we expected that American youth would express more personal commitment to their community and be more politically involved than their Italian counterparts.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 566 adolescents (48.2% males) aged 14-19 years ($M$ = 16 years; $SD$ = 1.29). Specifically, 311 adolescents were Italian students attending three schools located in the center east of Italy and 255 adolescents were American pupils attending one school in the east coast. Participants from both countries were attending academically rigorous high schools that prepare students for university education (classical or scientific lyceums in Italy and a private high school in America). Further, the gender ($\chi^2$ (1, 566) = 2.86, *ns*) and age ($F$ (1, 566) = 0.89, *ns*) composition was similar across countries. Furthermore, both in the Italian and American samples most participants were Caucasian. The socio-economic status (SES) of the families (obtained averaging the education level of both parents) was significantly higher ($\chi^2$ (4, 566) = 304.70, p < .001) in the American sample, where most parents had a university degree. However, the comparison of the SES of the families with the average SES of the respective areas yielded a similar picture: both within the Italian and American samples the family SES of the participants was higher than the average family SES of their peers.

We obtained permission from school principals to administer questionnaires. Parents received letters describing the study; students whose parents did not object to their participation received assent forms.

**Measures**

The self-report questionnaire included socio-demographic questions and measures of personal commitment to community and involvement in political activities. The measures were originally developed in English and translated and back translated from English to Italian by two psychologists.

*Personal commitment to community*

Participants answered five items (i.e., I feel a strong personal commitment to: being involved with my community, helping others in my community, feeling connected to my community, contributing to my community, participating in community events) on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all committed*) to 5 (*strongly committed*) (Jahromi 2008). Item scores were averaged. Cronbach's alphas were .88 and .91 in the Italian and American samples, respectively.

*Political involvement*

Participants answered seven items (adapted from Fredricks and Eccles 2006) assessing their involvement over the previous nine months in a variety of political activities (the complete list is reported in Table 1). Possible answers were: 0 (*never*); 1 (*once*); 2 (*two-three times*); 3 (*four-five times*); 4 (*six-ten times*); 5 (*more than ten times*).

**Results**

*Personal commitment to community*

Descriptive results (see Table 1) from the total sample indicated that adolescents exhibited medium levels of personal commitment to community. A univariate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on personal commitment to community with nationality and gender as independent variables and age as a covariate revealed a main effect of nationality ($F$ (1, 565) = 61.84, $p <$ .001, $\eta^2$ = .10). American adolescents displayed levels of personal commitment to community higher than their Italian counterparts. The main effect of gender and the nationality X gender interaction were not significant.

*Political involvement*

Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) computed in the total sample revealed that adolescents exhibited very low levels of political involvement. A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) on various forms of political involvement with nationality and gender as independent variables and age as a covariate revealed an overall main effect of both nationality (Wilks' Lambda = .74, $F$ (7, 555) = 28.06, $p <$ .001, $\eta^2$ = .26) and gender (Wilks' Lambda = .96, $F$ (7, 555) = 3.44, $p <$ .001, $\eta^2$ = .04), as well as a significant nationality X gender interaction (Wilks' Lambda = .96, $F$ (7, 555) = 3.56, $p <$ .001, $\eta^2$ = .04).
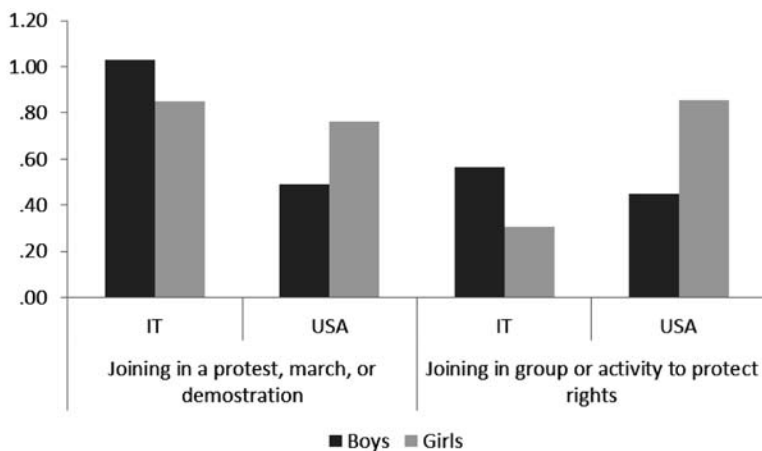
**Figure 2.** Mean scores of involvement in political activities by nationality and gender

Results of follow-up univariate analyses for national differences are reported in Table 1. Findings showed significant differences between Italian and American adolescents in each form of political activity, with one exception: participants did not differ on "collecting signatures for a petition drive", which was a political action rarely endorsed by adolescents of both countries. On five of the six political activities for which significant differences were detected, American adolescents scored higher than their Italian peers; however, Italian adolescents reported more involvement in protest marches, meetings, or demonstrations compared to American adolescents.

Significant gender differences emerged on two of the seven political activities examined: contacting a public or school official about a particular issue ($F$ (1, 565) = 8.58, $p$< .01, $\eta^2$ = .02) and collecting signatures for a petition drive, ($F$ (1, 565) = 7.12, $p$< .01, $\eta^2$ = .01). Boys reported higher involvement than did girls in both these activities.

Finally, nationality X gender interactions emerged on two of the seven political activities studied: joining in a protest march, meeting, or demonstration, $F$ (1, 565) = 6.07, $p$< .05, $\eta^2$ = .01, and joining or participating in a group or activity to protect rights that are considered important, $F$ (1, 565) = 14.55, $p$< .001, $\eta^2$ = .03. As depicted in Figure 2, for both activities in the Italian sample boys scored higher than girls, whereas in the American sample girls scored higher than boys.

*Associations between personal commitment to community and political involvement*

The main purpose of this study was to test whether personal commitment to community was related to political involvement. As a preliminary step, we found that these variables were positively correlated ($r$ = .35, $p$< .001, $N$ = 566). Thus, we tested a model in which personal commitment to community was associated with involvement in political activities. In order to adjust for measurement error, structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent
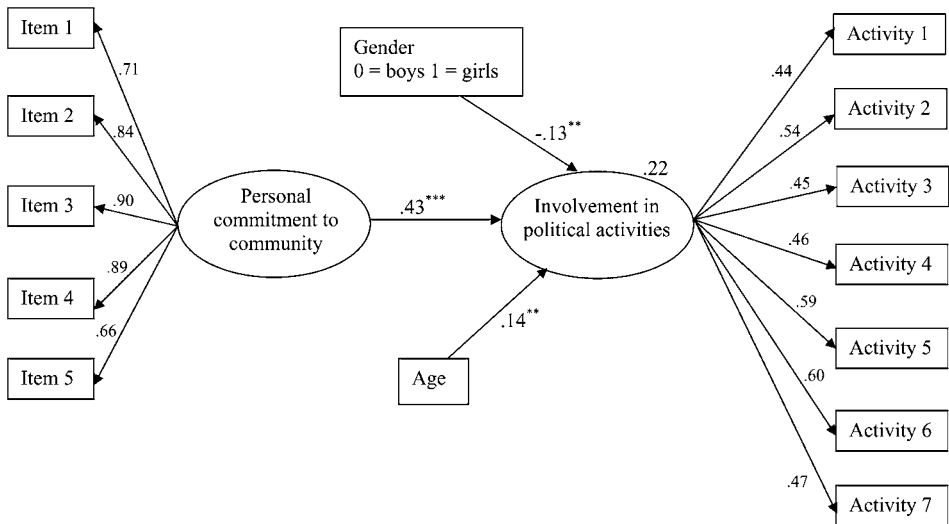
**Figure 3.** Standardized solution of the model tested in the overall sample ($N = 566$)
*Note.* All loadings on personal commitment to community and involvement in political activities were significant at $p < .001$.
$** p < .01. *** p < .001.$

variables (Bollen 1989) was performed using AMOS 19 (Arbuckle, 2010) program. Five items loaded on the latent factor personal commitment to community and seven items assessing the various forms of political activities considered in this study were used as indicators of the latent factor involvement in political activities[1]. Gender and age were included in the model as covariates.

The model fit was examined in the overall sample relying on various indices (Kline, 2005): the ratio of the chi-square statistic to the degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df$) should be less than 3, with acceptable values between 1 and 5; the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) should exceed .95, with values higher than .90

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[1] Before testing the fit of the model, we tested measurement equivalence across national groups. In order to ascertain significant differences between the models we compared, at least two out of these three criteria had to be satisfied: $\Delta\chi2$ significant at p < .05 (Byrne, 2009); $\Delta$CFI > .01 (Cheung, Rensvold 2002); and $\Delta$TLI > .02 (Vandenberg, Lance 2000). First, we tested invariance of factor loadings of the personal commitment latent factor. Specifically, we estimated multi-group structural equation models: a constrained model where each factor loading was set equal across groups was compared to a number of models, in each of them only one factor loading was allowed to vary across groups. In this way it was possible to ascertain if, and eventually which, factor loadings differed significantly across groups. Model comparisons indicated that all factor loadings were equivalent across national groups. Second, we repeated the same procedure for testing invariance of factor loadings of the political involvement latent factor. Also in this case, model comparisons indicated that all factor loadings were equivalent across national groups. As a result of this, in the estimation of the hypothesized model with links between personal commitment to community and political involvement (with gender and age as covariates) factor loadings for both latent variables were fixed across groups.

**Table 1.** Mean (m) scores and standard deviations (SD) of personal commitment to community and involvement in political activities

| | Total sample N = 566 | | Italian sample n = 311 | | American sample n = 255 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **M** | **SD** | **M** | **SD** | **M** | **SD** | |
| Personal commitment to community | 3.24 | 0.75 | 3.03 | 0.80 | 3.50 | 0.58 | $F(1, 565) = 61.84$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$ |
| Involvement in political activities | | | | | | | |
| Contacted a public or school official by phone or mail to tell him/her how you felt about a particular issue | 0.38 | 0.87 | 0.19 | 0.57 | 0.60 | 1.10 | $F(1, 565) = 30.33$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$ |
| Collected signatures for a petition drive | 0.27 | 0.69 | 0.26 | 0.67 | 0.28 | 0.72 | $F(1, 565) = 0.07$, $p = .79$, $\eta^2 = .00$ |
| Run for a position in student government | 0.43 | 0.85 | 0.26 | 0.63 | 0.64 | 1.02 | $F(1, 565) = 27.97$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$ |
| Joined in a protest march, meeting, or demonstration | 0.79 | 1.09 | 0.93 | 1.09 | 0.62 | 1.07 | $F(1, 565) = 11.98$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$ |
| Joined or participated in a group or activity to protect rights that are considered important | 0.52 | 1.06 | 0.42 | 0.98 | 0.65 | 1.15 | $F(1, 565) = 5.55$, $p< .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$ |
| Joined or participated in a political party, club, or organization | 0.86 | 1.34 | 0.43 | 1.00 | 1.38 | 1.51 | $F(1, 565) = 75.56$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$ |
| Participated in a discussion about a social or political issue | 2.20 | 1.84 | 1.65 | 1.64 | 2.87 | 1.86 | $F(1, 565) = 66.27$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$ |

*Note*. Response format for Personal commitment to community ranged from 1 (*not committed at all*) to 5 (*strongly committed*). Response format for Involvement in political activities ranged from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*more than ten times*).

considered to be acceptable; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should be less than .08; and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) equal or less than .05 means good fit, with a value less than .08 considered to be acceptable.

Findings revealed that the fit of the model was adequate, $\chi^2 = 264.40$, df = 74; $p< .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.57$; GFI = .93; CFI = .93; TLI = .91; RMSEA = .07 (90% confidence interval: .06 -.08); SRMR = .05. Significant paths are reported in Figure 3. As can be seen, personal commitment to community was strongly related to political involvement. Additionally, gender and age were significantly associated only with involvement in political activities (i.e., involvement in political activities was higher in males and in older adolescents).

Overall, the model explained 22% of the variance in political involvement (with personal commitment to community explaining 18% of the variance).

Finally, we performed multi-group analyses to test whether the model applied equally well to American and Italian adolescents. The fixed model (in which all parameters were fixed to be equal between the two national samples) was compared to a number of models (in each model only one parameter was allowed to be free, making it possible to ascertain which parameters were statistically different in the two national groups). Findings indicated that only one path was statistically different in the two samples: the path from gender to involvement in political activities ($\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 5.17, $p < .05$): this link was significant only in the Italian sample (-.19, $p < .01$), whereas it was not significant in the American one (.02, $p = .74$).

## Discussion

Because youth around the world are increasingly disengaged from politics it is urgent to shed light on which factors could promote political participation. In this study we sought to examine whether personal commitment to community might foster political involvement. We tested this hypothesis by examining the association between personal commitment to community and political involvement in two cultures: Italy and the USA. We found that Italian and American high school students differed in their levels of both personal commitment to community and political involvement such that American youth were generally higher on both. Nonetheless, personal commitment to community was positively and significantly related to political involvement in both countries. Thus, it is plausible that a personal commitment to community promotes political involvement.

### Personal commitment to community in Italian and American adolescents

In line with our hypothesis, American adolescents reported higher levels of personal commitment to community than did their Italian peers. This result is consistent withprevious work showing that American high school students are more engaged in volunteer activities and have higher intentions to volunteer in the future than do their Italian counterparts (Jahromi et al. 2012; see also Cicognani et al. 2008, for similar differences found among American and Italian university students).

Various cultural factors might explain this difference between Italian and American youth. First, American students, more than their Italian peers, are stimulated to caring about their community and being involved in it by their schools. Indeed, some schools in the USA value community service as part of their school mission statement and many schools in the USA offer opportunities for or even require community service participation (Flanagan 2003; Niemi et al. 2000). In contrast, school systems in Italy focus on high academic standards without as much emphasis on extracurricular involvement (Grassi 2007). Secondly, cultural differences in emphasis on personal responsibility and individual helping behavior (higher in the USA) and emphasis on social welfare programs as a way to solve social problems (higher in Italy) might also be a factor leading to higher personal commitment to community among American than Italian youth.

*Political involvement in Italian and American adolescents*

In this study we further expanded extant knowledge on rates of political involvement of American and Italian adolescents. Available evidence (Jahromi et al. 2012) indicated that American adolescents were more likely to participate in a conventional form of political involvement, namely joining a political party or organization, than were their Italian peers. The current study provided a more complete picture, by revealing that these different rates of political involvement were consistently found in several other forms of political participation (e.g., contacting a public or school official to express feelings about a particular issue; running for a position in student government; joining or participating in a group or activity to protect rights that are considered important; participating in a discussion about a social or political issue).

In interpreting these findings, it is useful to attend to perceptions of political involvement shared by young people. In particular, it is interesting to consider that in Italy adolescents hold very negative views of their peers who are politically involved. Data collected through focus groups (Graziani 2004) showed that political involvement in adolescence is regarded with suspicion. To explain the political affiliation of some of their peers, adolescents advance explanations that involve two specific personality traits. The first identifies them as fanatical individuals, characterized by aggressive and domineering ways that hinder the possibility of an open and honest discussion about relevant issues. The second considers politically engaged young people as characterized by a weak personality and therefore particularly malleable and influenced by propaganda promoted by leaders of political parties.

Only one form of political involvement in our study was endorsed more by Italian than by American adolescents: joining in a protest march, meeting, or demonstration.A likely reason is the practice in Italy for high school students to take some days off from school specifically to join strikes organized against the government. As documented by surveys conducted in Italy (cf. Crocetti and Palmonari 2011), adolescent participation in such forms that arise in school settings, such as occupying buildingsor participating in protest marches, declines with age. Among Italian emerging adults, political participation takes on more direct forms, such as making requests to a party and signing up for a referendum.It would be worthwhile to investigate whether adolescent participation in protests and strikes might be a way to promote more general political involvement. However, in one qualitative study (Crocetti 2004), most Italian university students asked to reflect on their political experiences in the high school remember participation in protest marches more as a routine (i.e., something that is done, for instance, every first Saturday of the scholastic year) than as an effective form of political participation. In fact, university students complained about the lack of political awareness of high school students participating joining strikes. Therefore, this form of participation currently does not appear to be an effective way to foster political involvement of young people.

In this study we found that rates of involvement in some specific political activities were further qualified by gender. Effect sizes for gender were very small (explaining 1 to 3% of variance) but they deserve some attention because they highlight some interesting patterns. Specifically, boys reported higher involvement than did girls in two activities: contacting a public or school official to express feelings about a particular issue,and collecting

signatures for a petition drive.For two other activities (joining in a protest march, meeting, or demonstration; joining or participating in a group or activity to protect rights that are considered important) Italian boys scored higher than did Italian girls whereas American girls scored higher than did American boys. In the multi-group structural equation modeling the path from gender to involvement in political activities was significant only in the Italian sample, revealing that girls were less politically involved than boys. Taken together, these results suggest that gender differences apply mainly to the Italian sample and are consistent with past evidence that Italian boys report relatively strong intentions for political involvement in the future (Jahromi et al. 2012). Nonetheless there is also a trend for opposite gender differences in the U.S., whereby females are somewhat more politically involved than are males. We did not predict these findings; it might be profitable for future research to focus on the gendered experience of civic experiences—and specifically politics—in each country to see how it might arise. It would thus be very interesting to track these gender differences in longitudinal work so as to unravel how they develop and to see whether they continue in emerging adulthood.

*From community to politics: a possible pathway*

A primary goal of this study was to shed further light on the association between community orientation and political involvement. In line with our hypothesis, which was rooted in theidea of nested environments from the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979), we found that a higher personal commitment to community was associated with more political involvement. Specifically, personal commitment to communityexplained 18% of the variance in rates of political involvement, suggesting that such commitment is a relevant predictor of political participation. This result was replicated in both Italian and American samples, highlighting that even in countries in which rates of civic engagement differ widely the same pathway from community to politics might apply.

Although the one-time correlational design of this study does not allow us to draw conclusions about causation, these results are consistent with theory suggesting that an orientation to community fosters political involvement (Flanagan 2003; Youniss et al. 2002). Community involvement is more common among youth than is political involvement, and community issues might be more relevant, less abstract, and easier for youth to understand than political issues. Our data add to a growing literature (McFarland and Thomas 2006; Hart et al. 2007) suggesting that attachments to and involvement in more local communities potentially facilitate political involvement across different contexts. This finding has important practical applications. It suggests that interventions aimed at promoting political involvement might try to foster commitment to community contexts that are closer to individual experiences. In this way they could progressively reduce the existing gap between young people and the political realm.

*Limitations and suggestions for future research*

The evidence presented in this study is useful toward identifying factors that could foster political involvement in young people. However, a main shortcoming of this investigation

concerns the one-time correlational design, which does not allow for the test of the links over time. Our hypothesis was that personal commitment to community would be a precursor of political involvement because the community is a context that is closer to individual experiences but is connected to the most distant societal realm that includes politics. However, to clarify the direction of the association between these constructs longitudinal studies with multiple waves are needed. Further, it would be worthwhile to take into account the possible role of additional third variables (e.g., parental socialization; Marta and Pozzi 2007; Vollebergh, Iedema, and Raaijmakers 2001) that could predict both personal commitment to community and political involvement. An additional limitation of our study concerns the generalizability of the findings. In particular, our sample included exclusively adolescents attending academically rigorous high schools. Future studies are needed to unravel links between personal commitment to community and involvement in political activities in more heterogonous adolescent groups, comprising students who are enrolled in lower educational tracks, individuals from ethnic minority groups, and adolescents who dropped out from school.

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