

Editorial

Social Participation and Contemporary Scenarios: Transformations, Representations, and Psychosocial Impacts in Territories

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In recent decades, contemporary societies have undergone profound transformations in civic and political participation, shaped by cultural, social, and technological changes (e.g., Aresi *et al.*, 2022; Gatti & Procentese, 2024; Natale *et al.*, 2016; Procentese *et al.*, 2011; Tonkiss, 2014). The traditional concept of active citizenship, grounded in institutional participation, conventional volunteering, and membership in established organizations, now coexists with more fluid and fragmented forms of engagement (e.g., Aresi *et al.*, 2022; Nowakowska & Pozzi, 2024; Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a, 2025b). Participation has become increasingly selective, oriented toward immediate outcomes, and often mediated by technology. In this context, the studies presented in the current issue of the journal provide a comprehensive overview of these ongoing changes, offering an integrated perspective on contemporary civic engagement and challenging reductionist interpretations that have long characterized declining institutional participation as a sign of disengagement or social apathy. The evidence, on the contrary, suggests that civic and political engagement is being reconfigured along more flexible, selective, and hybrid trajectories, in which individuals actively shape the timing, modes, and meaning of their participation.

Volunteering, in particular, offers a privileged lens through which to observe social change, revealing a constant tension between continuity and innovation. Traditional, episodic, and digital volunteering should not be understood as rigid categories but rather as dynamic positions along a continuum of participatory practices (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025b). Research conducted within the PRIN (Progetti di Ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale) project “Profiling traditional, episodic and online volunteering: pathways from civic engagement to local collaborative networks” by various research units (e.g.,

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Gatti *et al.*, 2025; Mutti *et al.*, 2025) identifies three types principal volunteer traditional, episodic, and digital – each with distinct modes of engagement, perceptions, and motivations. Traditional volunteers remain committed to social causes, justice, and activism, cultivating a strong identification with their group and organization, and perceiving themselves as agents of change (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). While this model reinforces community bonds and social generativity, it shows limitations in terms of flexibility and appeal for younger generations, who increasingly seek horizontal, immediate, and customizable forms of participation. Traditional volunteering often requires continuity, time, and organizational commitment (Snyder & Omoto, 2008) that do not always align with contemporary needs.

Episodic volunteering, characterized by short-term commitments and specific opportunities, allows for immediate and rewarding involvement, often connected to local events, campaigns, or awareness initiatives (e.g., Pozzi *et al.*, 2019). Its defining feature is the capacity to enable participants to experiment, develop skills, and perceive the impact of their contribution without ongoing obligations (Macduff, 2005). However, this approach demands that organizations adapt to integrate innovative contributions while maintaining internal cohesion.

Digital volunteering, though still marginal relative to traditional models, introduces a transnational, technology-mediated dimension (e.g., Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Ihm & Shumate, 2022; Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). Here, digital competencies become a tangible asset for collective engagement, from organizing online campaigns and disseminating informational content to managing virtual communities. Digital volunteers often perceive themselves as actors difficult to coordinate, and approach their participation almost professionally, distant from local contexts yet deeply connected to a global civic sphere (Mutti *et al.*, 2025). Gatti *et al.* (2025) note that across all three types, volunteers share certain constants a combination of altruistic and self-development motivations, and an awareness of the limited social recognition of their efforts alongside their generative contribution to the wider community.

Overall, these findings suggest that contemporary volunteering is not in crisis but is evolving toward fluid and hybrid forms (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025b), requiring organizations to adopt inclusive strategies that facilitate transitions between traditional, episodic, and digital engagement while considering the role of technology in shaping civic identity. Traditional volunteering continues to play a fundamental role in fostering stable social bonds, transmitting values of solidarity, and generating social capital. Nonetheless, its decreasing appeal to younger generations highlights the need to rethink organizational models, which often remain hierarchical and insufficiently responsive to contemporary demands for flexibility, autono-

my, and individual recognition (Procentese, 2025). Episodic volunteering introduces an experiential, project-based logic that aligns with the biographical and occupational precarity experienced by younger generations (Pozzi *et al.*, 2019). Yet, it also presents organizational challenges, necessitating new approaches to coordination, belonging, and continuity in collective action to prevent fragmentation or the erosion of shared identity (Mutti *et al.*, 2025). Digital volunteering represents perhaps the most innovative and simultaneously challenging form of civic engagement. It extends the space of citizenship beyond territorial boundaries and positions digital skills as central resources for civic action; however, perceptions of invisibility and distance from local contexts raise questions about the social recognition of these practices and their capacity to generate enduring belonging and collective responsibility (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a).

Similar vein, digital engagement also shapes modern sociocultural phenomena such as contemporary feminism, exemplified by phenomena such as parasocial feminism (Degen & Johanssen, 2025). Analysis of followers' narratives of feminist influencers reveals that digital spaces can foster personal empowerment and social transformation, allowing online communities to extend the social self and influence individual choices, relational dynamics, and self-perceptions. Practices like #volanismus, combining artistic performances and media content, illustrate how digital feminism can generate everyday empowerment and symbolic resistance, while retaining structural limitations tied to the individualizing logic of platforms. This highlights that contemporary civic engagement is no longer confined to physical or institutional spaces but extends into digital spheres, where relationships, identity, and collective participation take on novel and complex forms, creating temporary, flexible, and multidimensional communities capable of influencing offline practices.

Theoretically, these contributions call for a revision of traditional models of active citizenship, which remain anchored to dichotomies – conventional/non-conventional, online/offline, individual/collective – that no longer capture the complexity of contemporary participation. The evidence points instead toward interpretive frameworks that acknowledge the coexistence of individual motivations and collective orientations, formal and informal practices, and physical and digital spaces.

The social implications of these transformations are particularly evident in youth political participation, which demonstrates complex dynamics. As noted by Foglia *et al.* (2025), young people tend to have a narrower conception of political participation than adults and often perceive institutions as unresponsive to their needs, explaining apparent disengagement from electoral or institutional processes. Comparative studies in contexts such as Naples and Bogotá, however, indicate that a lack of party affiliation does

not equate to disengagement: young people redefine participation through fluid, selective, and informal practices rooted in social movements, community initiatives, and identity-driven actions, where personal motivation intersects with a desire to impact the social environment. In Italy, the public university system and historical student mobilizations provide opportunities for institutionalized participation, yet declining representation and rising abstention encourage more flexible engagement oriented toward civic causes and social rights. In Colombia, youth participation emerges despite repression and institutional distrust, combining local and online activism with identity-based engagement. These findings underscore the influence of political and relational context on participation. Participation is also shaped by psychological factors, such as self-efficacy and anomie, and varies with political orientation and national context: left-leaning youth integrate transformative ideals with collective action, right-leaning youth adopt more normative or critical approaches, and non-affiliated youth articulate autonomous, reflective perspectives (Foglia *et al.*, 2025). International comparisons reveal the plurality of youth participation and the limitations of traditional dichotomies, highlighting the need for a more dynamic understanding focused on the shared construction of meaning.

Cross-national comparisons, such as between Italy and Colombia, further emphasize the role of structural, political, and relational conditions in shaping participation. In contexts characterized by institutional distrust or repression, engagement tends to be informal, identity-driven, and often digital, whereas in contexts with a tradition of mobilization, hybrid forms emerge that combine institutional spaces with grassroots action. This underscores the importance of viewing participation not as isolated individual behavior but as a situated process influenced by macro- and micro-social factors (e.g., Procentese & Gatti, 2022; Procentese *et al.*, 2023). The political implications of these insights are significant for public policy and strategies targeting youth and active citizens. Rigid normative models of participation risk excluding or delegitimizing emerging forms of engagement, widening the gap between institutions and citizens. Conversely, recognizing the plurality of participatory practices could foster more inclusive policies that value intermittent, digital, or non-conventional engagement.

Further research emphasizes the role of territory as a site of citizenship construction, particularly during the transition from childhood to adolescence. The relationship between adolescents, youth, and local environments forms a foundation for civic and community participation. Initiatives connected to Educating Communities, such as the ComunitAttiva project by Gruppo Abele and the University of Turin (De Piccoli *et al.*, 2025), demon-

strate that adolescent involvement is facilitated through networks connecting schools, families, services, and associations, oriented toward well-being and personal growth. Territory is not merely a physical backdrop for interactions but a meaningful space for belonging, identity, and security, which are central to activating participation (e.g., Procentese & Gatti, 2022; Procentese *et al.*, 2020). The transition from childhood to adolescence entails gradual detachment from protective family environments and the pursuit of autonomy and exploration of broader public and social spaces (e.g., Beyers *et al.*, 2003). Daily interactions, integrated activities, and participation in local initiatives help maintain ties to the territory, fostering resilience, responsibility, and psychosocial well-being. Findings from the ComunitAttiva project indicate the need for structural, long-term interventions capable of capturing systemic and indirect effects. For generations raised in digital contexts, such as Gen Alpha, hybrid modes of socialization between online and offline spaces redefine relationships with territory and community, offering new opportunities for civic education.

Experiences of Educating Communities and the ComunitAttiva project suggest that civic participation cannot be assumed as spontaneous but must be cultivated through supportive relational contexts, sustained educational continuity, and long-term investment. Territory emerges as both a symbolic and relational space where belonging, security, and agency intersect. In an era dominated by digital relationships, connections to local spaces serve as critical anchors for identity, particularly for adolescents. Yet, these connections must be actively constructed through shared practices, meaningful experiences, and opportunities for real participation. The coexistence of online and offline spaces, as seen in the experiences of new generations including Gen Alpha, presents both challenges and opportunities for civic education. Educating Communities are tasked with integrating digital dimensions as full-fledged social environments in which civic skills, values, and identities are developed.

Overall, the research presented in this issue demonstrates that civic engagement is increasingly plural, fluid, and interconnected across local, national, and digital contexts. Traditional volunteering continues to play a central role in fostering community ties, but now coexists with episodic and digital forms, requiring new organizational strategies and attention to volunteer experiences. Finally, digital environments emerge as new arenas of participation, where personal empowerment and social practices intersect in innovative forms of civic engagement.

Youth political participation is being redefined in terms of alignment between values, practices, and contexts, reflecting selective and critical engagement rather than withdrawal. Relationships between adolescents and territory underscore the importance of long-term, integrated, and flexible

interventions that cultivate belonging, autonomy, and active citizenship. These developments suggest the need to reconsider traditional models of citizenship, embracing the complexity of contemporary experiences, valuing both individual and collective motivations, and recognizing interactions between offline and online, local and global, and institutional and informal dimensions (e.g., Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2016). Ultimately, as highlighted by the authors in this issue, changes in civic engagement do not signify declining participation but rather a dynamic evolution, prompting reflection on the meaning of citizenship in the 21st century, the importance of shared spaces for collective learning, and the responsibility of institutions, communities, and citizens to support new forms of conscious, generative, and sustainable activism. Only through the integration of local, national, and digital dimensions, and by valuing individual and collective experiences, resilient and inclusive communities can be built, and become capable of addressing emerging social challenges and promoting a shared sense of responsibility that strengthens cohesion and civic identity over time.

These phenomena reveal the limits of approaches that focus exclusively on a single context, such as the digital realm, which often reinforce individualistic and performative logics. The risk is confinement within one of the contexts shaping contemporary social life, resulting in a symbolic rather than actionable perspective unless complemented by collective practices and offline-online engagement. The evidence underscores that no single context replaces others in shaping participation; rather, they reorganize and interact, producing new hybrid configurations of civic engagement (e.g., Gatti & Procentese, 2024).

In light of these findings, future perspectives must account for the complexity and dynamism of contemporary civic engagement. From a research standpoint, longitudinal and mixed-method approaches are needed to trace individual participation trajectories and transitions across different forms of engagement throughout the life course. Attention should also be given to intersections of psychological, social, and technological factors, as well as intercultural differences.

Practically and politically, third-sector organizations and institutions must reconsider engagement strategies, adopting more flexible, inclusive, and participatory models. This entails recognizing digital skills as valuable, supporting episodic experiences, and creating spaces that facilitate transitions across different modes of engagement without implicit hierarchies.

Finally, there is a pressing need for renewed citizenship education that integrates local and global, online and offline, individual and collective dimensions. Promoting active citizenship in the 21st century requires acknowledging the plurality of participation forms, fostering shared meaning-

making processes, and guiding citizens in developing a conscious, generative, and sustainable sense of social responsibility.

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