

Political Representation and Action: Conceptions of Political Participation Among Youth in Bogotá and Naples in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The research aims to investigate the co-constructed social representations of political participation that circulate among different groups of young Italian and Colombian university students and to verify whether there are correlations between social representations, political participatory behaviour, perceived anomie and self-efficacy. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, it was possible to reach a total sample of 327 students from Naples and 370 students from Bogotá, divided into three subgroups based on “political orientation”: young people on the right, young people on the left, and young people who are not affiliated with any political party. The internal structure of social representations was reconstructed using the hierarchical evocation technique. The content of the representations studied was operationalised using specific psychometric scales. Right-wing young people exhibit a very traditional view of political participation. Italian young people tend to emphasise the positive aspects of participation, whereas Colombian young people associate it with a negative connotation. Left-wing young people, both Neapolitan and Bogotano, are very active in demonstrations and actions aimed at change: the latter also emphasise their ability to influence the socio-political fabric. Young people who claim not to identify with any political party or faction have a strong distrust of their respective state institutions, as well as traditional representative bodies. The students involved in the study, regardless of their nationality and political orientation, showed great interest in participating. The results obtained so far provide important insights into how young people participate in politics and the meanings they attribute to it.

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Riassunto. *Rappresentanza e Azione: Le Concezioni di Partecipazione Politica tra i Giovani di Bogotà e Napoli in Prospettiva Comparata*

La ricerca intende indagare le rappresentazioni sociali della partecipazione politica, costruite e circolanti in diversi gruppi di giovani studenti universitari, italiani e colombiani, e verificare se esistono delle correlazioni tra le RS, i comportamenti politici partecipativi, l'anomia e l'autoefficacia percepite. Utilizzando un questionario semistruzzurato, è stato possibile raggiungere un campione totale di 327 studenti napoletani e 370 studenti bogotani, suddivisi in tre sottogruppi in base all'“orientamento politico”: giovani di destra, giovani di sinistra, giovani antipartitici. La struttura interna delle rappresentazioni sociali è stata ricostruita attraverso la tecnica delle evocazioni gerarchizzate. Il contenuto delle rappresentazioni studiate è stato operazionalizzato servendosi di apposite scale psicometriche. I giovani di destra mostrano una visione molto tradizionale della partecipazione politica: gli italiani sono ancorati agli aspetti positivi della partecipazione, mentre quelli colombiani ne offrono una connotazione negativa. I giovani di sinistra, sia napoletani, sia bogotani, sono molto attivi in manifestazioni e azioni volte al cambiamento: i secondi, inoltre, rimarcano la loro capacità di incidenza sul tessuto sociopolitico. I giovani che affermano di non riconoscersi in nessun partito o schieramento politico nutrono una forte sfiducia nei confronti delle rispettive istituzioni statali, così come degli organi di rappresentanza tradizionali. Gli studenti coinvolti nello studio, a prescindere dalla nazionalità e dall'orientamento politico, hanno mostrato un grande interesse nei confronti della partecipazione. I risultati fin qui ottenuti rappresentano un importante spunto di riflessione sulle modalità e sui significati che i giovani attribuiscono alla partecipazione politica.

Parole chiave: partecipazione politica, giovani, rappresentazioni sociali, mixed-methods, confronto interculturale, orientamento politico

1. Introduction

Political participation is fundamental to the development of an effective democratic system. To date, numerous studies have explored this phenomenon from a multidisciplinary perspective, which, while enriching the field of research, has also made it more difficult to establish a clear definition and conceptualization (Weiss, 2020). One of the reasons for the differences in political behavior is the variety of definitions of political participation. Several studies that have examined how this phenomenon is conceptualized have shown that young people tend to construct a narrower definition of political participation than researchers and adults (Andolina *et al.*, 2002; Bynner & Ashford, 1994). Therefore, the issue concerns both individuals' understanding of what politics entails and their awareness of acting to achieve political goals (Weiss, 2020). In this regard, «low political partici-

pation among young people is a by-product of their narrow conception of politics and their impression that politicians do not sincerely care about their needs» (Quintelier, 2007, p. 169). Consequently, young people's political distrust, rather than stemming from a lack of interest, appears to be a result of the very nature of political organization (Weiss, 2020). Research has increasingly focused on how young people define "political participation" and what they perceive as such (Henn *et al.*, 2002, 2005; O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003a). As Rainsford (2017) rightly observed, «it seems that the problem of young people's political participation is not so much whether they participate, but rather where they participate» (p. 2).

Our study fits into this framework and aims not only to explore 'where young people participate' (Rainsford, 2017), but also how they participate and what meanings they attribute to their actions. In this regard, the primary objective of this research is to reconstruct the meanings that young people themselves attribute to the phenomenon in question, using the framework of Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1961). It is necessary to reflect on young people's understanding of political participation, taking into account new lines of research aimed at understanding their ideas and, possibly, finding ways to engage them politically and promote their active citizenship in the future (Bruno & Barreiro, 2014; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003; Weiss, 2020). We have chosen to work within the framework of Social Representation Theory because it allows us to understand young people's political participation based on the concepts and knowledge that, as a group, they construct and share through daily social interaction and practices, which enable them to interpret the reality related to the object of representation (Wagner & Flores-Palacios, 2010). Forms of participation are supported by the representations that legitimise them and, in turn, contribute to reinforcing these representations (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). As stated by Howarth *et al.* (2014), political participation is defined as the power to construct and transmit particular representations of others. This concept refers to the power relations and conflicting representations that exist between social groups. Few studies have analyzed young people's political participation using social representation theory. Rochira *et al.* (2019) recently examined the relationship between sense of community and social representation of political participation, while Mannarini *et al.* (2020) analyzed the content and semantic structures underlying the social representation of political participation in the Italian and Greek media. Restrepo *et al.* (2016) conducted a study in Colombia that showed that political participation is understood as the ability to influence social, community and political spaces through public opinion. Furthermore, as noted by Weiss (2020), current research in this field lacks broader transnational investigations that consider how young people define political participation

and conduct comparative analyses of young people's participatory behavior. Yet, it seems essential and interesting to analyze intercultural differences, since, as Barrett (2007) points out, representations of national identities are influenced by a series of social, cognitive and motivational factors and by a cultural context that is constantly interacting and evolving. Symbols, myths, shared memories and historical narratives that are internalized and reproduced in discourse contribute to constructing and defining one's identity linked to one's context of origin. On the other hand, Sarrica, Grimaldi and Nencini (2010) have shown how young people develop citizenship by simultaneously intertwining two dimensions: on the one hand, the institutional dimension, linked to duties, rights and formal political practices; on the other, the cultural and symbolic dimension, which is rooted in social belonging, the media and collective narratives.

This research attempts to enrich the scientific debate on youth political participation by reflecting on the meanings attributed to the phenomenon from an intercultural perspective, as it compares the social representations of both Neapolitan and Bogotano university students. The Italian and Colombian university systems have structural and cultural differences that shape the meaning and modalities of student political participation. In Italy, the prevailing public system and the constitutional autonomy of universities favor institutionalized forms of representation and a well-established tradition of student mobilization linked to national parties (Barile, 2024; Cini & Guzmán-Concha, 2017). Italian universities, especially in large urban centers, are spaces for political socialization through collectives, assemblies and occupations that are perceived as legitimate (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). In Colombia, the mixed public-private system is characterized by strong socio-economic segmentation and chronic underfunding of public universities, which historically represent epicenters of radical mobilization and social resistance (Donoso, 2023; Pinto Ocampo, 2010). Colombian students face greater institutional repression through the Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios (ESMAD) and criminalization of activism, making participation a highly risky act for individuals and the collective (Ariza Santamaría & Velásquez Bonilla, 2020). The post-conflict context and recent national mobilizations (Paro Nacional 2019-2021) continually redefine student participatory practices (Donoso, 2023). These institutional differences influence both the levels of participation observed and students' willingness to respond to sensitive items in comparative research (Van de Vijver & Leung, 2021).

Naples and Bogotá, although geographically distant, are much closer in terms of symbolism. In the specific case of Italy, as reported in the latest Censis Report (2024), the majority of the population has disengaged from traditional politics: abstention in the last European elections stood at 51.7%

of those eligible to vote, and 68.5% of Italians believe that Western democracies and traditional systems of representation no longer work. Young people, however, identify with new forms of non-hierarchical, non-institutionalized and informal participation. The growing fragmentation of the party system, combined with the weakening of traditional social ties, has contributed to eroding the classic dichotomy that previously divided the Italian electorate into right-wing and left-wing voters (Corbetta, 2009). In this context, the concept of post-ideological politics is gaining importance, in which political orientation is no longer articulated around coherent and shared value systems, but is instead reorganized around individual concerns and contingent issues (Pozzi *et al.*, 2021). As a result, the political space is also interpreted differently by each generation, giving rise to heterogeneous symbolic configurations and narratives despite the use of a common language (Tuorto, 2018). Young people combine a deeply disenchanted view of politics with an approach based on solidarity (Della Porta & Portos 2020; Giugni & Grasso 2021), founded mainly on the principles of combating inequality and militarization, as well as demonstrations in support of peace, environmental sustainability and civil rights. Similarly, when examining the Colombian context, several studies explain that the low rate of youth participation is often due to a sense of exclusion, as well as the lack of attention paid by politics and its representatives to the concerns of that age group and the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which leads them to feel unheard, unrepresented and uninformed. This translates into a lack of motivation to participate and a detachment from political organizations, which are considered impractical or irrelevant to their life plans, and a distrust of the effectiveness of political participation and institutions due to issues such as corruption, inequality and insecurity. This generates a negative attitude towards politics, which is perceived as institutionalized and reserved for the few and their interests (Bruno *et al.*, 2011; Cárdenas *et al.*, 2007; Henn *et al.*, 2002; Huanca, 2021; Kitanova, 2019; Márquez *et al.*, 2020; Taller de estudios de los Jóvenes y la política, 2000). Although young people reject politics and institutional or conventional mechanisms, they tend to be active in causes, community actions, organizations, projects or social movements that allow them to participate and that are also linked to their identity, goals and context (Bruno & Barreiro, 2014; Cubides, 2006; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003; Ramírez & Sánchez, 2010; Rossi, 2009). These findings contradict the idea that young people are apathetic or politically disinterested and offer a new perspective not only on the recognition of other forms, actions and means of participation (Alonso & Brussino, 2019; Bruno *et al.*, 2011; Bruno & Barreiro, 2020; Bruno & Barreiro, 2021; Márquez *et al.*, 2020), but also on the possibility of different definitions that young people attribute to politics and their participation in it.

In light of the above, the study aims to enhance our understanding of youth political participation in Italy and Colombia by conducting a comparative analysis of social representations and related variables, including participatory political behaviors, perceived anomie, and perceived self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their ability to produce specific results: individuals are unlikely to have a political impact if they do not believe they can achieve the desired results through their actions (Caprara *et al.*, 2009). Anomie, on the other hand, can be understood as a perception of social disintegration and loss of normative coherence (Teymoori *et al.*, 2017).

The objective is to move beyond traditional dichotomies and enrich the theoretical framework by identifying the structure and content of social representations, shared and circulating among youth groups, exploring the role of psychological variables involved in the positioning of the groups regarding the object of political participation, and specifying the existing relationships between social representations and the selected variables.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This research aims to conduct an exploratory analysis among university students in Naples and Bogotá. Through a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method, it was possible to administer a semi-structured questionnaire to 697 young people, 327 Italian (mean age: 20,37 years; *SD*: 4,35) and 370 Colombian (mean age: 22,95 years; *SD*: 4,75). In Naples, the questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in the Sociology degree course at the Department of Social Sciences of Federico II University. In Colombia, on the other hand, the survey was conducted thanks to the collaboration of Psychology students at the University of Cundinamarca.

The descriptive variables of the participants are summarized in the table below (Table 1).

Italian and Colombian students were then divided into three subgroups based on the variable of "political orientation": right-wing youth, left-wing youth, and non-partisan youth. Comparative literature (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Luna & Zechmeister, 2005; McCoy, 2024; Zechmeister & Corral, 2010) suggests that the left-right axis operates as a shared cognitive meta-dimension, but with content that varies according to historical, institutional, and cultural divisions. In Western Europe, and in Italy in particular, the axis remains anchored to redistributive conflicts and is enriched by cultural dimensions linked to cosmopolitanism and socio-cultural values. In Latin

America, and in Colombia specifically, the meaning of the axis incorporates security, public order, peace/conflict, anti-corruption and inequality with greater salience. It follows that ideological self-positioning is comparable in structure but not directly commensurable in content: the same label may reflect different sets of issues.

Table 1 – Descriptive variables of Italian and Colombian students

	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Colombian</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	52 (16%)	178 (48%)
Female	275 (84%)	192 (52%)
<i>Vote in the last elections</i>		
Yes	211 (64,5%)	256 (69,2%)
No	116 (35,5%)	114 (30,8%)
<i>Political orientation</i>		
Right	37 (11,3%)	35 (9,5%)
Left	44 (13,5%)	49 (13,2%)
Non-partisan	246 (75,2%)	286 (77,3%)

2.2 Study Design

To achieve the set objectives, the research uses a mixed-method approach. This choice is closely aligned with the principles of the theory and the study's specific objectives. Social Representation Theory (SRT) is fundamentally a multi-method approach. SRT operates within a dialogical epistemology (Markova, 2000), which inherently requires the use of various methods for in-depth exploration and analysis. This approach enables us to comprehend the complexity of social representations, which manifest in both discourse and common sense (through qualitative data) and in measurable psychological dimensions (through quantitative data). This triangulation of data aims to provide a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.3 Data Construction Strategies and Procedures

To ensure that the research tool measured the same theoretical constructs in both cultural contexts, and to minimise bias due to linguistic and cultural differences, two native Spanish-speaking researchers (Colombian, MFC and FRC), with excellent knowledge of Italian and the research topic, independently translated the tool from Italian into Spanish. The two translators, together with a member of the research team, then compared their ver-

sions. Subsequently, discrepancies were discussed, and the best formulations were chosen to create a single preliminary version in Spanish. Two new native Italian translators (AP and CC), who had never seen the original version of the instrument, independently translated “Version 1” from Spanish back into Italian. The entire research team compared the original Italian version with the two reverse translations, and the original and re-translated versions were found to have a very high semantic equivalence. Finally, the questionnaire was administered to a small group of Colombian students ($n = 12$) balanced by gender, asking them to “think aloud” as they answered, explaining how they interpreted each question and motivating their choice of each answer. This method did not reveal any ambiguities or unexpected interpretations, so the questionnaire was administered to the general population.

From January 2024 to June of the same year, the questionnaire – designed, translated, and adapted to both the Italian and Colombian contexts – was distributed via an online form. Students from both countries were provided with a link to the Google Form. They completed the questionnaire outside of class and without teacher supervision, so that they had the time necessary to answer the questions freely, without external constraints. It was composed as follows:

- The first section was devoted to the Technique of Hierarchical Evocations (Abric, 2003; Vergès, 1992), which was used to identify the internal structure of the respondents’ social representation of political participation. Specifically, each student was asked to express themselves in two distinct moments: 1) to freely associate the first five words that came to their mind when thinking about “political participation”; 2) to classify their verbal productions according to their relevance. To overcome the limitations associated with the interpretation of associative materials, which are by nature extremely polysemous, the free association technique was supplemented with a series of open-ended questions aimed at requesting subjective justification for each freely associated word (Fasanelli *et al.*, 2020).
- The second section of the questionnaire focuses on representational content, which is investigated using the psychometric scales described below. The Scale of Participatory Political Behaviour, developed by Magallares and Talò (2016); Talò and Mannarini (2015), was used to examine social practices related to political participation. It consists of 16 items across four factors -disengagement ($\alpha_i = .769$; $\alpha_c = .783$), civic participation ($\alpha_i = .650$; $\alpha_c = .718$), formal participation ($\alpha_i = .878$; $\alpha_c = .828$), activism ($\alpha_i = .755$; $\alpha_c = .805$). This tool, initially validated in Italy, was subsequently translated into Spanish. The original scale was

tested on a sample of students in Naples, while the Spanish version was used as a guide by students in Colombia. The Perceived Political Self-Efficacy Scale, created by Caprara *et al.* (2009) and Vecchione *et al.* (2014), was employed to investigate whether disaffection towards public affairs could be a manifestation of “learned helplessness”. This scale measures individuals’ confidence in their ability to influence the political system. A short version of this scale, consisting of four items, was developed and validated in Italy and Spain ($\alpha_i = 0.832$; $\alpha_c = 0.871$). The Anomie Perception Scale by Teymoori *et al.* (2016) was chosen to assess the impact of social disintegration ($\alpha_i = 0.585$; $\alpha_c = 0.798$) and the perception of non-functional leadership ($\alpha_i = 0.571$; $\alpha_c = 0.815$). It is composed of 12 items across two factors. Finally, the last tool was validated in 28 countries, including Italy, Spain and Chile.

- The last section of the survey instrument consists of descriptive variables, which are investigated using checklists (gender, age, political orientation).

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The terms obtained through free association were subjected to a preliminary lexical analysis, followed by a frequency categorical analysis. In particular, lemmas were grouped according to the synonymy criterion until clusters of terms coinciding with their manifest meaning were obtained. Each cluster was then assigned a label, the choice of which mainly followed two criteria: high lexical proximity with the other words belonging to the grouping and the highest frequency of occurrence within the single set. The data obtained were processed with the IRaMuTeQ software and treated with similarity analysis (Flament, 1962), a particular type of network analysis. The procedure consists of an elaborate similarity matrix obtained from the chosen index: the Chi-square. The final output shows a network of concepts, characterized by a size directly proportional to the frequency of appearance and to the rank of appearance that the participants themselves attributed to them. The structural theory of social representations (Abric, 2003; Flament, 1962) proposes that every collective representation is organized according to an internal structure divided into a central core and one or more peripheral systems. The central core guarantees coherence, stability and identity function to the representation, while the periphery plays a role of adaptation and mediation with the context. Within this theoretical framework, the analysis of similarities (or verbal co-occurrences) is a valuable tool for the empirical investigation of representational structure, as it allows us to detect the frequency and

strength of co-occurrences between the elements evoked, revealing the interconnections that underpin the overall organization of the system. This approach, therefore, allows us to empirically distinguish between elements with a core function and those with a peripheral function. The graph produced by the similarity analysis in IRaMuTeQ can be interpreted in terms of representational structure: the nodes, i.e. the words, represent the most frequent lemmas or lexical forms in the corpus. The arcs, or lines, indicate the co-occurrence of two terms; their presence indicates that the two words appear in the same context.

The thickness of the arcs is proportional to the strength of the link (number of co-occurrences). Thicker arcs indicate stronger associations. Groups of strongly interconnected words form semantic clusters that can be interpreted as thematic nuclei of the representation.

In this sense, the graph is not a simple frequency map, but a map of associative relationships: it allows us to visualize which terms constitute the central core (most frequent and interconnected) and which occupy the periphery (less frequent but still linked to certain clusters).

The text strings, starting from each subject's explanations to justify their evocations, were subjected to a categorical-frequency analysis of the content (Bardin, 1998) of the "paper and pencil" type. Using SPSS V. 29.0.1.0 software, it was possible to analyze the data collected through the psychometric scales subjected to correlational analysis. To explore the differences between subgroups of young people according to their declared political orientation (right, left, non-partisan), a set of non-parametric analyses was conducted using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

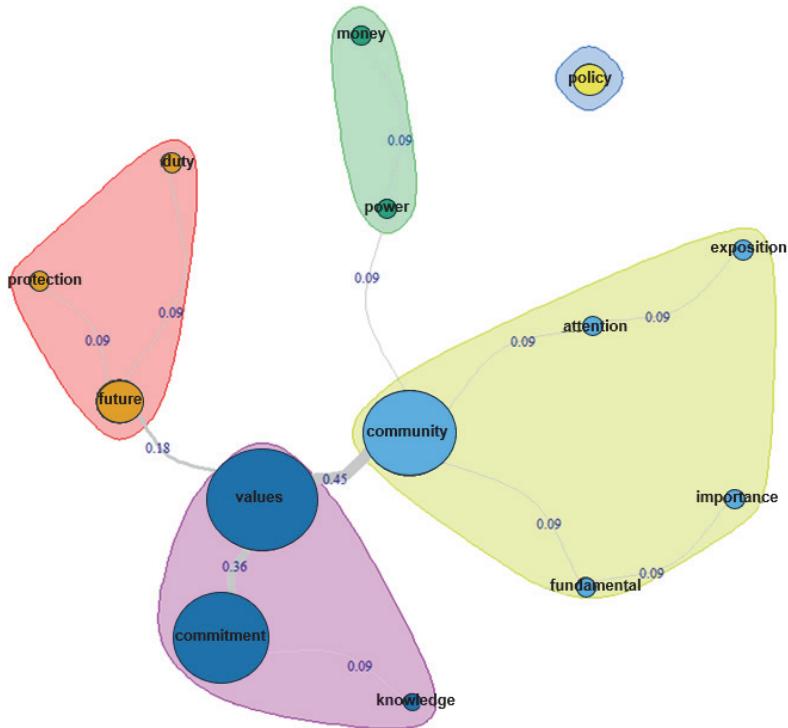
3. Results and Discussion

A comparative analysis between Italian and Colombian university students reveals divergent dynamics and surprising convergences in how political participation is understood and practiced. These findings, derived from the triangulation of qualitative data (analysis of social representations) and quantitative data (correlations and non-parametric tests), show how the socio-political and cultural context significantly shapes the semantics of participation, while maintaining certain transnational constants.

In the case of right-wing youth, an interesting dichotomy emerges between the two countries. In Italy (Figure 1), the concept of political participation is deeply rooted in normative and moral values, including ethics, civic sense, and collective responsibility. These values, often evoked in everyday language, form the foundation for an idealized vision of political

engagement, one oriented toward social cohesion and responsible action. Participation is understood as a civic duty, rather than a strategic response to the system.

Figure 1 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Italian right-wing students



In Colombia (Figure 2), by contrast, right-wing youth adopt a more conservative and institutional framework: participation is described in terms of canonical tools (“vote”, “government”, “law”), but trust in institutions appears fragile and permeated by suspicions of corruption and opportunism. Values are not associated with shared ethical principles but rather with clientelist dynamics and private benefits, thus generating an ambivalent representation.

At the quantitative level, both groups show a significant relationship between formal participation and activism (Table 2; Table 3).

However, among Colombian respondents, this engagement is accompanied by a greater perception of institutional deregulation ($r = -.648$, $p <$

.05), suggesting that political involvement is also constructed as a critical reaction to a system perceived as instrumental.

Figure 2 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Colombian right-wing students

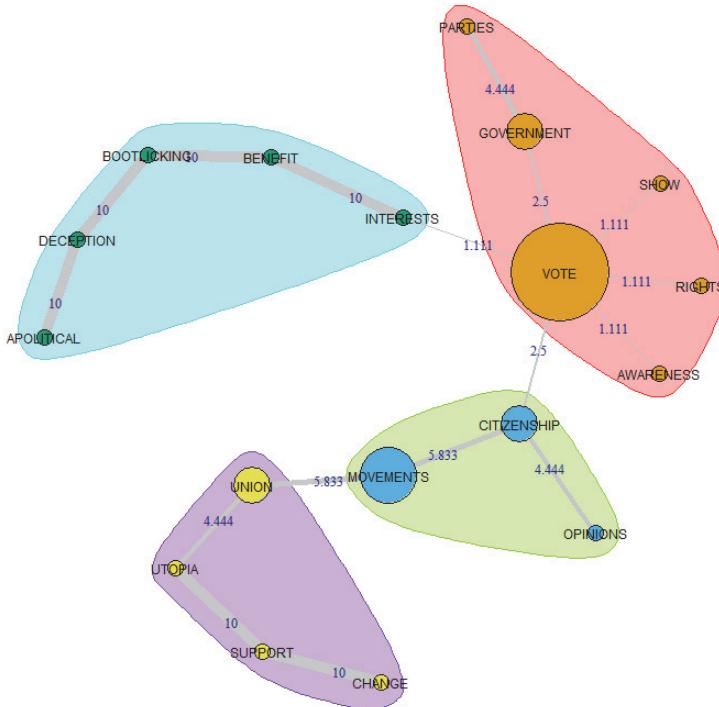


Table 2 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Italian right-wing students

	Sum_diseng	Sum_civilpart	Sum_formalpart	Sum_act	Sum_selfeff	Sum_disint	Sum_disreg
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.722*	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.836**	.673*	--				
Sum_act	.070	.236	.267	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.269	.317	.623*	.281	--		
Sum_disint	.134	.402	-.110	.345	-.193	--	
Sum_disreg	-.054	.086	.157	.047	.397	-.098	--

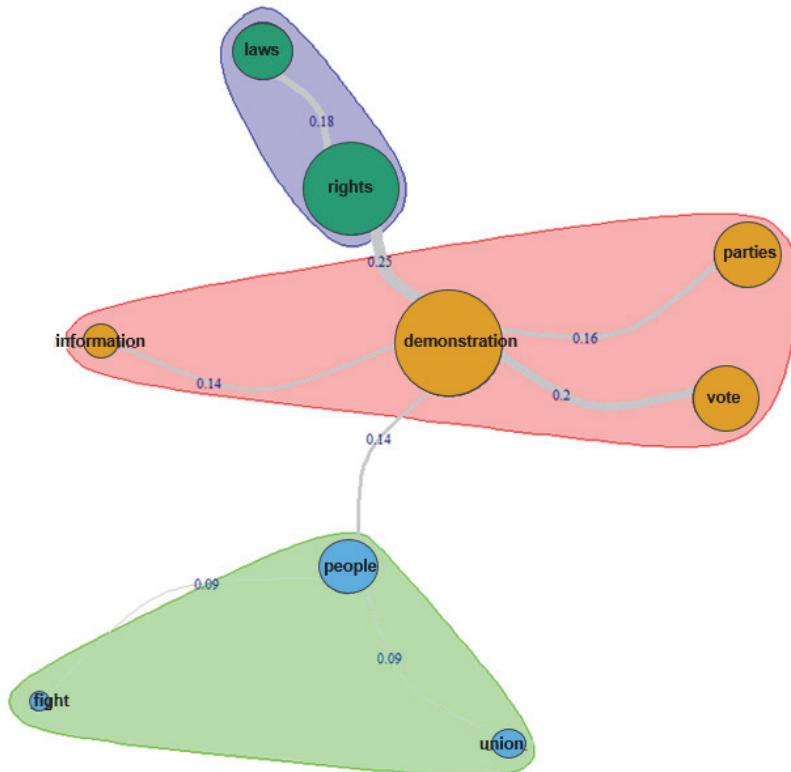
The comparison between left-wing youth in the two contexts highlights a more marked convergence. In both Italy (Figure 3) and Colombia (Figure

4), political participation is represented as a transformative process, oriented toward action and social change. The shared lexicon encompasses terms such as “rights”, “protests”, “justice”, and “equality” indicating an evident politicization of practices and identities. However, conceptually relevant differences also emerge.

Table 3 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Colombian right-wing students

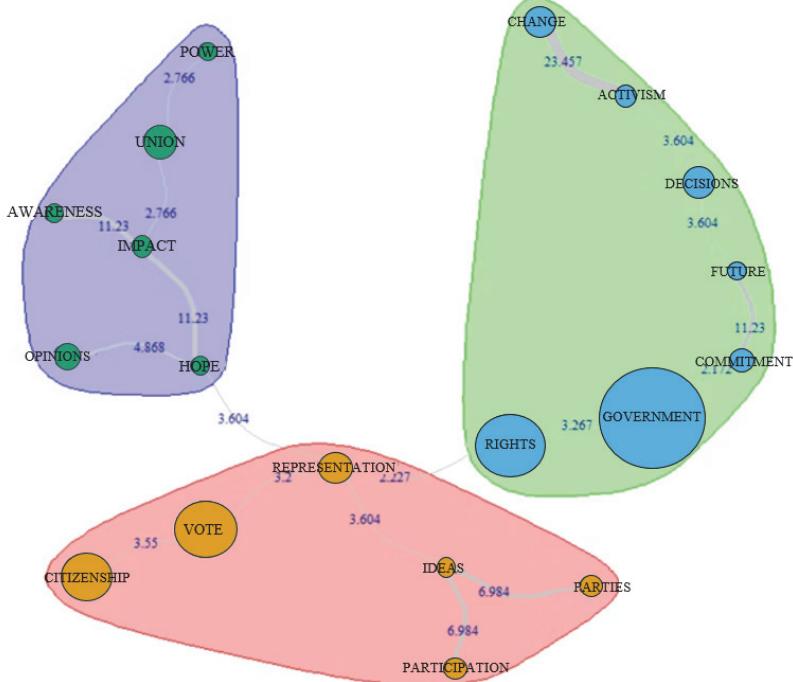
	Sum_dis_eng	Sum_civ_ilpart	Sum_for_malpart	Sum_act	Sum_sel_eff	Sum_dis_int	Sum_dis_reg
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.077	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.606	.466	--				
Sum_act	-.505	.541	.661*	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.306	-.529	.075	-.115	--		
Sum_disint	.090	-.290	-.415	.047	.047	--	
Sum_disreg	.190	-.648*	-.406	-.557	.150	.245	--

Figure 3 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Italian left-wing students



For Colombian youth, the concept of “influence” (i.e., the effectiveness of action in modifying the social and political environment) is directly embedded in the social representation of participation, indicating a stronger sense of agency. In Italy, by contrast, self-efficacy remains confined to the psychometric dimension and is not explicitly thematized in participants’ narratives.

Figure 4 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Colombian left-wing students



In Italy (Table 4), although similar associations are observed, they appear less structured and more fragmented, perhaps indicating a gap between declared intentionality and perceived efficacy.

Quantitative evidence supports the internal coherence observed among Colombian respondents (Table 5): civic participation is significantly correlated with self-efficacy ($r = .535, p < .01$), activism ($r = .643, p < .01$), and formal participation ($r = .640, p < .01$).

The profile of non-affiliated youth reveals distinct nuances in both contexts. In Italy (Figure 5), participation remains firmly institutionalized: “voting” holds a central position in the representation of politics and is associated with a citizenship right/duty. However, this is accompanied by

tangible distrust toward the state and representative structures, primarily emerging in the discursive justifications.

Table 4 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Italian left-wing students

	Sum_dis_eng	Sum_civ_ilpart	Sum_for_malpart	Sum_act	Sum_sel_eff	Sum_dis_int	Sum_dis_reg
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.229	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.275	.708**	--				
Sum_act	-.014	.575**	.568**	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.138	.506**	.597**	.679**	--		
Sum_disint	.048	-.108	.059	-.032	-.052	--	
Sum_disreg	.050	-.192	-.232	-.132	-.178	.235	--

Table 5 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Colombian left-wing students

	Sum_dis_eng	Sum_civ_ilpart	Sum_for_malpart	Sum_act	Sum_sel_eff	Sum_dis_int	Sum_dis_reg
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.256	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.216	.640**	--				
Sum_act	-.100	.643**	.741**	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.402*	.535**	.484**	.471**	--		
Sum_disint	.027	.045	.035	.191	-.004	--	
Sum_disreg	-.001	-.125	-.276	-.452**	-.263	-.249	--

In Colombia (Figure 6), by contrast, such distrust is structurally incorporated into the social representation, with the term “corruption” directly linked to “government” and “power”.

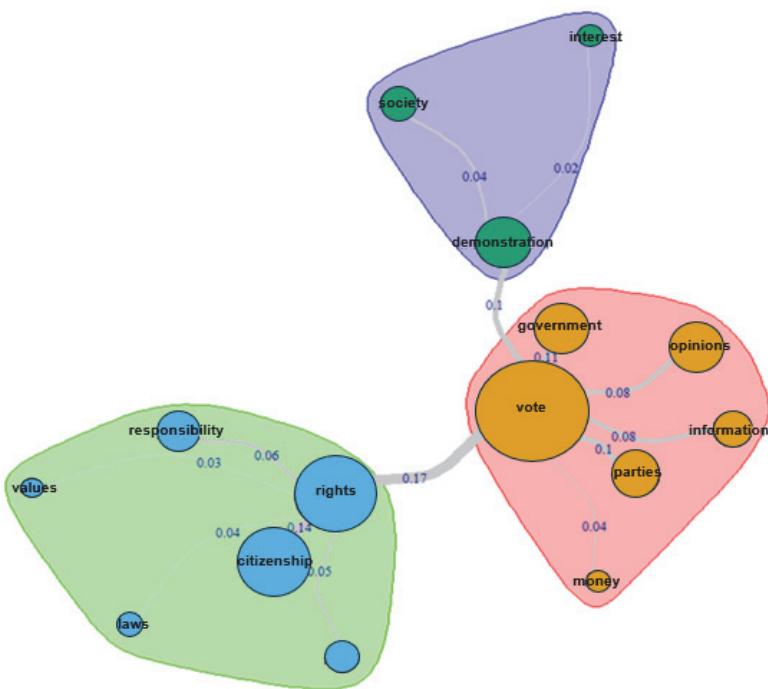
At the quantitative level, both groups exhibit significant levels of civic and political engagement: correlations between activism and formal/civic participation are high in both samples (e.g., Colombia: $r = .669$, $p < .01$). However, in Italy (Table 6), these dimensions are not significantly associated with other behaviors, remaining more marginal.

Among Colombian youth (Table 7), this activism coexists with a widespread perception of social disintegration and institutional instability (e.g., civic participation and disintegration: $r = .318$, $p < .01$), whereas in Italy (Table 6) these dimensions are not significantly associated with other behaviors, remaining more marginal.

Overall, the data suggests that in both countries, the lack of partisan affiliation does not imply an absence of political orientation, but rather a redefinition of participation in a plural, fluid, and reactive key. The distance from institutional channels is compensated by a critical and selective form of activism, expressed through heterogeneous and often informal practices. Moreover, the notion that young people are politically apathetic or disen-

gaged is refuted by the semantic and relational density of their representations, as well as by the richness of the quantitative connections they exhibit. Far from being univocal, youth participation is modulated by opportunities, cultural contexts, and institutional constraints, resulting in a complex yet coherent mosaic.

Figure 5 – IRaMuTeQ output - Similarity analysis for Italian non-partisan students



The integration of qualitative and quantitative data, analyzed in the three subgroups, allows for a more in-depth observation of the degree of convergence or divergence between the two levels of analysis.

With regard to young people on the right, different patterns emerge in the two contexts. In Italy, qualitative representations describe political participation as a civic and moral duty, closely linked to ethical values and a sense of collective responsibility. However, on a quantitative level, the correlations appear less structured, indicating a certain distance between discursive intentionality and actual reported behavior. In contrast, among Colombians, the narratives paint a more ambivalent picture, centered on insti-

tutional practices but permeated by distrust of institutions. Here, quantitative data reinforce the qualitative interpretation: significant associations between formal participation and activism coexist with indicators of institutional deregulation, confirming the critical tension that young people express in their discourse. In this subgroup, therefore, Italy and Colombia show a divergence in the relationship between qualitative and quantitative data: in Italy, the convergence is partial and weaker, while in Colombia it is closer and more consistent.

Figure 6 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Colombian non-partisan students

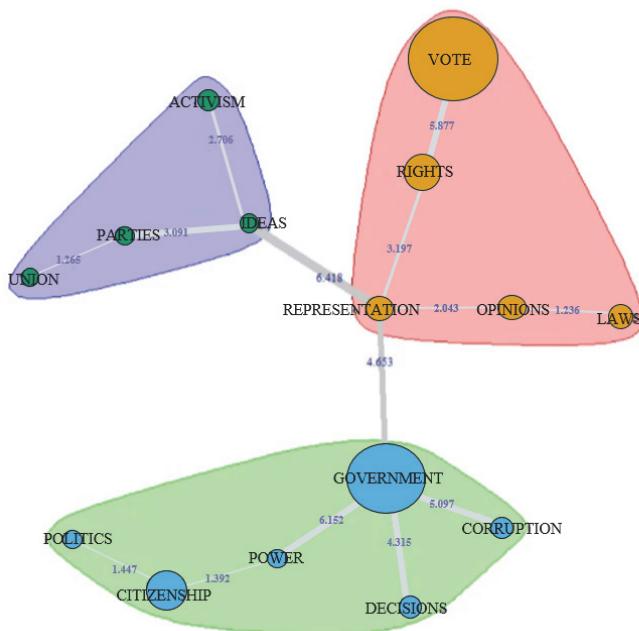


Table 6 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Italian non-partisan students

	Sum_dis_eng	Sum_civilpart	Sum_formalpart	Sum_act	Sum_selfeff	Sum_disint	Sum_disreg
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.240*	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.172*	.575*	--				
Sum_act	-.155*	.634**	.570**	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.259**	.420**	.375**	.392**	--		
Sum_disint	.046	.114	.015	.047	.034	--	
Sum_disreg	.053	-.114	.023	-.022	-.032	-.018	--

Table 7 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Colombian non-partisan students

	Sum_dis_eng	Sum_civ_ilpart	Sum_for_malpart	Sum_act	Sum_sel_eff	Sum_dis_int	Sum_dis_reg
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.081	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.062	.471**	--				
Sum_act	-.092	.669**	.560*	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.120*	.448**	.178**	.468**	--		
Sum_disint	.080	.318**	-.028	.232**	.313**	--	
Sum_disreg	.038	.213*	.123*	-.142*	.206**	.163**	--

Moving on to young people on the left, triangulation highlights a clearer convergence. In both countries, qualitative representations emphasize a transformative orientation of participation, characterized by concepts such as rights, justice and equality. Quantitative data confirm this structure, especially in Colombia, where activism and self-efficacy are strongly interconnected. In Italy, on the other hand, although significant associations emerge, these appear more fragmented: the qualitative lexicon refers to a strong political commitment, but the statistical correlations show a less cohesive network, suggesting a possible gap between declared political identity and the perception of its effectiveness. In summary, there is a more solid convergence among young left-wingers in Colombia than in Italy, where quantitative data do not always support the semantic density observed qualitatively.

Finally, the subgroup of non-partisan young people highlights a particularly interesting area for triangulation. In Italy, qualitatively, participation still appears to be institutionalized around voting but accompanied by widespread skepticism towards institutions. Quantitative data only partially confirm this picture: although voting and civic participation emerge as central, they are not significantly correlated with other dimensions of political behavior, remaining marginal. In Colombia, on the contrary, the narratives describe a picture in which corruption and mistrust are an integral part of social representation, and quantitative data confirm this structure by showing that activism coexists with perceptions of social disintegration and institutional instability. In this case, therefore, there is a more marked convergence between qualitative and quantitative levels, with statistical associations reinforcing discursive representations.

Overall, triangulation shows that the convergence between qualitative and quantitative data is most evident in Colombia, especially among young left-wingers and non-partisans, where statistical relationships confirm the internal consistency of social representations. In Italy, on the other hand, the picture appears more fragmented: qualitative narratives evoke a norma-

tive and politicized lexicon, but quantitative connections are less structured, suggesting a potential gap between intentions, perceptions and practices. This comparison highlights how triangulation not only strengthens the empirical validity of the analyses but also allows us to identify interpretative divergences that enrich our understanding of social representations, offering insights into the cultural and institutional specificities of the two contexts.

4. Conclusion

The results presented strongly confirm the initial assumption: Italian and Colombian youth are by no means uninterested in politics, but interpret participation in plural ways, often alternative to conventional models linked to parties and institutional representation. The joint analysis of social representations and quantitative data has shown that distance from traditional channels does not correspond to passivity, but rather to a semantic and practical rearticulation of active citizenship, shaped by local political, cultural, and historical contexts. In particular, left-wing youth in both countries appear to be the most consistent in combining a transformative vision of politics with behaviors oriented toward collective action and social change. Right-wing youth, although less conflict-oriented and more aligned with institutional dimensions, exhibit notable differences: in Italy, the value-based reference is strong and positive, whereas in Colombia, it takes on more instrumental and critical connotations. Finally, non-affiliated youth perhaps represent the most significant challenge to classical interpretations of participation: although distant from ideological affiliations, they maintain a clear understanding of what it means to participate and adopt a critical attitude, albeit diverging across contexts – more argumentative in Italy, more structurally distrustful in Colombia.

Overall, the data confirms the need to rethink the analytical categories through which youth political participation is studied, moving beyond dichotomies such as engagement versus apathy or conventional versus non-conventional, in favor of a more fluid perspective capable of capturing ongoing transformations. Youth participatory practices are nourished by new expressive modalities, constructed outside traditional political arenas, and directly question the legitimacy of institutions and existing forms of representation. Understanding these dynamics means not only describing a generational shift but also reflecting on the necessary conditions for a genuinely inclusive, responsive, and multilevel democracy – one that makes room for the voices of young people as fully agentive subjects in the political and social spheres.

The study aims to contribute to the literature by addressing the gaps highlighted, in particular, by Weiss (2020). Specifically, the research focused on the definitions and meanings that young people construct and share regarding political participation, and it was designed as an intercultural and comparative investigation between two countries, Italy and Colombia. Although this is a preliminary exploratory study, it is important to acknowledge its most evident limitations. The use of psychometric measurement tools may expose results to social desirability bias. To mitigate this risk, the following strategies were adopted: anonymity, separation of thematic sections, neutral instructions, balancing of direct and reverse items, and randomized order of questions. The questionnaire was also supplemented (in the section on socio-demographic data) with an objective/indirect behavioral measure of political participation through a self-report item on behavior adopted in the previous election held in the respective countries.

During the investigation, the most significant challenge involved reaching university students who declared affiliation with a specific political party or movement. This was observed in both Italy and Colombia, particularly among young people who openly expressed right-wing views. Another limitation concerned the excessive imbalance in the subsample of participants who identified as “non-partisan”.

However, these findings are part of an ongoing study. We intend to expand the student sample shortly to better balance the different respondent groups. Furthermore, it will be necessary to broaden the participant pool to include not only university students but also adult groups with diverse occupations and backgrounds. Particular attention will be devoted to participatory modalities recognized as “non-conventional,” as these are rapidly growing and of great heuristic interest. Specifically, the dimension of online political participation will be included as a constitutive aspect of the future phases of research.

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