



## Individual determinants of social behavior

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### ABSTRACT

By using unique data from the section on social behavior of the Bank of Italy's 2004 Survey of Household Income and Wealth (SHIW), the paper studies the individual determinants of several aspects of social behavior: attitudes to cooperating with anonymous others; interest in politics; participation in groups and associations; and propensity to rely on favoritism both in finding a job and in dealing with government red tape. Our findings suggest that these different aspects of social behavior are only weakly correlated to each other and are explained by different individual determinants. We find that older and more educated individuals display a greater willingness to cooperate, a stronger interest in politics, and more intense association activity. By contrast, the likelihood of relying on favoritism does not depend on age and education. We also find that home-ownership is associated with good social conduct, while urban residence has mostly a negative impact on public behavior. Finally, having left-wing political opinions increases the interest in politics, while it does not affect the other aspects of social behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

A growing body of research documents that measures of *good* social behavior are associated with effective public policies and more successful economic outcomes. Putnam (1993) jump-started this research by showing that Italian local governments are more efficient where there is greater civic engagement. Knack and Keefer (1997) find that a one-standard-deviation increase in a survey-based measure of country-level trust increases economic growth by more than one-half of a standard deviation. Hall and Jones (1999) argue that social infrastructure is the fundamental determinant of productivity. In short, trust, reciprocity and habits of cooperation minimize transaction costs and spur economic success.

While the effects of social behavior on economic outcomes have been thoroughly explored, much less is known about the individual characteristics of those who behave in a socially desirable way.<sup>1</sup> Who are the people endowed with a higher degree of public spirit? What are the characteristics of those who behave more honestly or those more closely involved in the local community? Previous attempts to pinpoint the individual determinants of social behavior have been made by Alesina and La Ferrara (2002) and Glaeser et al. (2002). Both papers are based on the case of the U.S., which is at

most only indicative of European experience of civic virtues. Alesina and La Ferrara (2002) focus on the GSS question of how much a respondent trusts other people; however, Glaeser et al. (2000) have raised important questions about the reliability of this measure, showing that subjects who describe themselves as trusting do not act more trustingly in a standard trust game.<sup>2</sup> To overcome the difficulties of such measure, Glaeser et al. (2002) use organization membership as a proxy of good social behavior. Yet, as the authors themselves recognize, this measure is incomplete as it does not touch on aspects of social behavior that are not captured by group membership.

As many have pointed out (see, among others, Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000), social behavior is *multidimensional*. It includes many aspects of social life that cannot easily be combined. For instance, those who are mostly inclined to trust people or to cooperate with anonymous others are not necessarily the same as those who play fair in a job-finding game – when their key interest is at stake – and avoid relying on favoritism to achieve the intended result. Again, those who are interested in politics do not necessarily match those who are better endowed with civic virtues or involved in community activities such as religious or volunteer groups. As will be shown below, our results suggest that there is considerable individual heterogeneity in the determinants of the various aspects of social life.

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<sup>1</sup> An individual decision-making model for the accumulation of social capital is provided in Rupasingha et al. (2006).

<sup>2</sup> The literature on discrepancies between survey-based measures of trust and the result from experimental settings has expanded a lot in recent times (see, for instance, Sapienza et al., 2007).

This paper tries to add to the previous literature by using the special section on social behavior of the Bank of Italy's 2004 Survey of Household Income and Wealth (SHIW). The survey distinguishes several aspects of social behavior: attitudes to cooperating with anonymous others; interest in politics; participation in groups and associations; and propensity to rely on favoritism, defined as the help of family, friends and acquaintances both in finding a job and in dealing with government red tape. Our findings strongly support the idea that social behavior is multidimensional: its different aspects are only weakly correlated to each other and are explained by different individual determinants.

The results can be summarized as follows. We find that older and more educated individuals display a greater willingness to cooperate, a higher interest in politics, and more intense association activity. Being female mostly impacts negatively on these aspects of social behavior. By contrast, the likelihood of relying on blood ties and personal acquaintance in the job market or vis-à-vis bureaucracy does not depend on age and education. Women refrain more from relying on favoritism. For all the aspects of social behavior considered, we find that individuals in the South always display a lower degree of public spirit. We also find that home-ownership is associated with good social conduct, while urban residence has mostly a negative impact on public behavior. Finally, having left-wing political opinions increases the interest in politics, while it does not affect the other aspects of social behavior.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the data and the variables. Section 3 presents the empirical evidence. Section 4 concludes.

## 2. Data and variable description

The data source is the Survey of Household Income and Wealth (SHIW). This survey is conducted every 2 years by the Bank of Italy on a representative sample of about 8000 households (see Brandolini and Cannari, 1994, for details).<sup>3</sup> The SHIW collects detailed information on Italian households, such as age, education and income. An important feature of the SHIW is the fact that the *standard* information on demographic and economic aspects, which is recorded regularly every wave and is similar to that collected by other surveys, such as the American PSID or CPS, is supplemented by special sections. Below, we exploit the 2004 wave of the survey, which includes a special section on social behavior.

The section distinguishes different aspects of social behavior: attitudes towards civic virtues; interest in politics; participation in groups and associations; and tendency to rely on favoritism in finding a job and dealing with government red tape. The dataset includes 3798 observations.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the measures of social behavior (the dependent variables), Table 1 also gives the means and standard deviations for the other variables used in the paper (the description of the variables is in Appendix A).

- (i) The strength of norms of civic cooperation, which refers to individual attitudes to cooperating with anonymous others, is assessed from the responses to questions about whether each of the following behaviors can “always be justified, never be justified, or something in-between.”

(a) “not paying a fare on public transport”

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	St. dev.	Min	Max	Obs.
Dependent variables					
CIVIC	23.210	5.462	0	27	3798
POLITICS	0.252	0.434	0	1	3798
ASSOCIATIONS	0.128	0.334	0	1	3798
REF WORK	0.815	0.389	0	1	3798
REF RED TAPE	0.879	0.327	0	1	3798
Basic individual determinants					
Age	55.048	16.447	19	97	3798
Female	0.384	0.486	0	1	3798
Education					
Elementary school or none	0.324	0.468	0	1	3798
Junior high school	0.290	0.454	0	1	3798
High school	0.299	0.456	0	1	3798
Bachelor degree	0.083	0.276	0	1	3798
Post-graduate	0.002	0.047	0	1	3798
Employed	0.433	0.495	0	1	3798
Marital status					
Single	0.116	0.320	0	1	3798
Married	0.635	0.481	0	1	3798
Separated or Widow	0.249	0.433	0	1	3798
Children 0–12	0.091	0.357	0	1	3798
Family income	0.030	0.027	0	1.023	3798
Family wealth	0.206	0.335	0	7.941	3798
South	0.329	0.470	0	1	3798
Additional individual determinants					
Mover	0.224	0.417	0	1	3660
Home-owner	0.676	0.468	0	1	3798
Urban resident	0.183	0.387	0	1	3798
Left	0.529	0.445	0	1	3798

Notes: The description of the variables is in Appendix A.

- (b) “keeping money you obtain by accident when it would be possible to return it to the rightful owner (for example, if you found a wallet with the owner's name and address, or if you were given too much change at the supermarket check-out)”

- (c) “failing to report damage you've done accidentally to a parked vehicle”.<sup>5</sup>

Respondents choose a number from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable). Our dependent variable CIVIC is built by reversing these scales, so that larger values indicate greater cooperation, and summing values over the three items to create a scale with a 27-point maximum.<sup>6</sup> We find that the share of individuals who assessed all the above items as never justifiable is high (43 percent in our sample), while the average assessment is slightly above 23 points.

- (ii) A long tradition going back at least to Tocqueville (1932) suggests that interest in public issues is a key sign of public virtue. Awareness of the issues that are relevant for society at large is captured from the responses to the question on individual interest in politics. Our dummy POLITICS takes on the value of one for those who declare they are very or fairly interested in politics. Roughly 25 percent of the respondents in our sample fall in this category.
- (iii) Putnam (1993, 2000) argues that organization membership contributes to effective social collaboration, since associa-

<sup>3</sup> SHIW micro-data are publicly available at [www.bancaditalia.it](http://www.bancaditalia.it).

<sup>4</sup> The special sections are considered to be quite demanding for the respondents and very expensive for the Bank of Italy. This explains why the questions included in a special section are put only to a subset of the respondents. In our case, the social behavior questions were put to 3798 households (out of the 8000 households included in the 2004 wave of the SHIW).

<sup>5</sup> Our measure for civicness is thus similar to that of the notable paper by Knack and Keefer (1997), which also provides an illustration of the cross-country correlation between this measure and other qualitative and anecdotal evidence on civic norms.

<sup>6</sup> Below, we also present evidence about the determinants of each single underlying behavior summarized in CIVIC.

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