



Political Participation and Social Capital

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Abstract This chapter examines political participation as a key component of social capital in democratic societies. Following the tradition of Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work*, political participation reflects not only the pursuit of interests but also a civic sense that sustains institutional efficiency and social cohesion. In Italy, the crises of political parties and ideologies have transformed both the forms and meanings of participation: the decline of traditional engagement, such as voting or party membership, has been accompanied by the rise of new, hybrid modes, including social movements and civic activism. These changes challenge researchers to reconsider the contemporary relevance of social capital indicators measuring political participation, such as electoral turnout and newspaper readership, vis-à-vis their capacity to represent today’s civic culture. In this chapter, we take up this challenge by empirically analysing their evolution across Italian provinces between 2008 and 2024. We find that, although their salience has diminished due to social and technological

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changes (e.g., growing abstentionism, digital information flows), electoral turnout and newspaper readership continue to delineate a consistent geography of regional disparities in Italy's social capital, while enriching a diachronic perspective grounded in previous studies.

Keywords Social capital · Italy · Political participation · Electoral turnout · Newspaper readership

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Making Democracy Work* (Putnam et al., 1993), political participation has been considered a key aspect for defining and therefore measuring the social capital of a community. In the context of modern democracies, politics has become competition for power between groups of persons—parties, unions, movements—stakeholders sometimes in open conflict with each other. However, one of the factors of social cohesion distinctive of democracies is that this competition takes place in a framework of agreed rules, and political participation becomes and ends in itself besides being a means for pursuing class or category interests. In this perspective, inspired by Tocqueville's concept of democracy, Putnam interprets political participation as a central dimension of civic sense that leads citizens to take an interest in public affairs, lowering the transaction costs of democratic institutions and favouring their efficiency.

The political-participation dimension of social capital has remained the core of subsequent major studies on this concept (Almagisti, 2022; Bordandini & Cartocci, 2014; Cartocci, 2007; Sabatini, 2009), by virtue of its capacity to bring out the differences between the various areas of our country. Of course the different forms of political participation have changed in the course of time in relation to the economic, political, social and technological changes of recent decades. One example is the phenomenon of *not voting* (abstentionism), often used as an indicator of low civic sense, but which has come to have different meanings. An increasing number of citizens choose to actively punish the parties or candidates they previously voted for by withdrawing their support, without embracing alternative proposals. This behaviour is termed *election boycott* (Ferrara et al., 2023; Raniolo, 2024; Tuorto, 2006).

Since the first comparative analyses, Italy has always shown low confidence in institutional government and little interest or diffidence towards

politics, albeit with radical differences between the north and south of the country (see Chap. 2). Events such as Tangentopoli and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, together with the ideological crisis of the twentieth century further fuelled the idea of politics as a channel for imposing individual interests, even in areas that previously had high levels of party and trade union membership and other forms of militancy which reflected esteem for political participation as a primary dimension of participation in public life, while social participation was often directly or indirectly subordinate to political objectives or horizons (Almagisti, 2022; Baccetti & Messina, 2009; Florida, 2013; Trigilia, 1986).

Political participation is never just the pursuit of a rational aim and is driven by identity motivations related to sense of belonging to a community. After all, the theory of rational choice, according to which social action depends on individual capacity to calculate costs and benefits, fails to explain why many persons continue to vote for or support parties and movements where the probability that such behaviour influences the outcome of elections or changes policy choices is quite remote, making it rationally more expedient not to do so. If so many persons invest resources in political participation without hope of return, it is rather because apart from extrinsic or instrumental benefits related to policy choices, they are gratified by participation itself (Raniolo, 2024, p. 25). Thus the decision to take part in organisations or political institutions in which the individual has no weight is not explained in terms of the objectively unfavourable costs/benefits emphasised by rational-choice theorists (Olson, 1965; Hirschman, 1970), but rather in terms of a sense of belonging to an area, as pointed out by social-capital theorists like Putnam.

In the following sections we briefly review the literature on the different forms of political participation and then examine two indicators that we will use to capture this dimension in the construction of our index of social capital.

5.2 VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Being a complex phenomenon that can take many forms, political participation can only be measured through different indicators contextualised in the reference space and period. A first important classification of the forms of political participation regards the distinction between invisible and visible participation (Norris, 2000; Ekman & Amnå, 2012); both

categories are considered in the work of Putnam et al. (1993). Invisible participation is what people do daily without leaving any formal trace. For example, it regards taking an interest in collective questions via newspapers, television or informal exchanges with relatives and friends. Visible participation, on the other hand, leaves traces and takes place via different channels, from voting in elections (the least intense according to Milbrath) to occupying political or party positions (the most intense according to Milbrath).¹ More recent analyses (Norris, 2002; Pizzorno, 2008) have combined forms of visible participation, that we can call “conventional” and that operate via institutional channels, with “heterodox” forms of participation that are not confined within institutional borders but can overflow into illegality (such as refusing to pay the rent and bills, occupying premises, wildcat striking and the like).

These indicators are not constant over time. Pizzorno (1993, 2008) writes that the crisis of political parties and trade unions in late twentieth-century society obliges us to rethink the concept of political participation. Today the conventional visible participation typical of that period can be classified as “ritual” and “professional”, but alongside them there has developed what Pizzorno defines as “excess participation”, which regards movements and similar forms of activism in a hybrid position between political and social participation. According to Pizzorno, the progressive growth of alternative forms of participation, like social movements, intercepts a demand for solidarity, commitment and above all a sense of one’s own life. These new forms go beyond conventional politics, which is proving increasingly inadequate for today’s challenges. The intensification of the crisis of the political system feeds disaffection towards the traditional forms of political participation, especially electoral participation, in favour of non-mediated, less ideological, depoliticised forms of participation (Bosi & Zamponi, 2019; Raniolo, 2024). Other studies have pointed to an increasing number of disenfranchised citizens, who are critical but not extraneous to public life, and who express their disaffection towards political participation through voluntary work (Ignazi & Katz, 1995;

¹ In his essay *Political Participation* (1965), Milbrath structured a framework of political participation that included actions such as: starting political discussions; trying to convince others to vote in a certain way; wearing a political button; contacting an official; donating to a party; attending a political rally; contributing time in a political campaign; becoming an active party member; taking part in decisional or strategy meetings; fund-raising for political purposes; being a candidate for office.

Bordandini et al., 2024). In this framework, researchers have to tackle the challenge of adapting their categories to the spirit of the times, not regarding this phase as the decline of politics, but rather as having more hybrid forms of participation that have been termed multi-politics (Grossi, 2020) or post-politics (Ceccarini, 2022).

As many as three of Putnam's four regional indicators of social capital in Italy referred to traditional forms of political participation, namely: 1) turnout for abrogative referenda; 2) the frequency of preference votes expressed in national elections; 3) the number of newspaper readers. The first indicator was selected on the basis of the civic and universalistic character attributed to referenda before this character degenerated due to political manipulation.² The second indicator was selected as a negative measure of social capital on the basis of the assumption that expressing preference votes in the electoral system in force at the time of Putnam's research was motivated by personalistic and particularistic relations between candidates and citizens. The preference vote was subsequently

² In Italy, citizens can express themselves through referenda, exercising forms of direct democracy in different ways: referenda to abrogate laws and acts, referenda regarding constitutional laws and amendments, and consultive referenda. The former have been the most frequent, numbering 77 since 1978. Abrogative referenda, defined by art. 75 of the Constitution, allow the electorate to decide "the total or partial abrogation of a law or of an act having the value of law" when requested by at least 500,000 electors and approved by the majority of voters, proved that a quorum of at least 50% + 1 of electors go to vote. The collection of signatures to promote a referendum and going to vote have some aspects of an ideal indicator of social capital: they indicate commitment to changing society without or with only an infinitesimal advantage for the citizen concerned, excluding by virtue of their mechanism the risk of participation for reasons of clientelism that can afflict other types of vote. Limits of this indicator however can be that referenda are not held at regular intervals, that participation can be influenced by the fact that they may be held at the same time as local elections, and above all that the condition of reaching a quorum (the extraneous portion) may alter the validity of the indicator. Citizens who do not agree with the question to be put to referendum can choose not to sign the proposal, even though they have great civic sense. This behaviour now also extends to not voting once the signatures have been collected: indeed, since the referenda of 1997, various consultations have not reached the quorum, blocking the possibility of abrogation. Thus for those contrary to the referendum, i.e. who do not want abrogation of the law, it is more effective to aim for boycott of the referendum, "contaminating" the validity of the indicator of participation with aspects of political colour (extraneous portion). Regarding referendum topics, we examined province data on the collection of signatures in 2021 to promote referenda on euthanasia and the legalisation of cannabis. The data showed a strong correlation with other indicators of political participation, but since referenda are sporadic events, they cannot be combined with the other indicators of political participation.

limited and eventually superseded by new electoral laws in response to increasing anti-political sentiment, and could no longer be used as an indicator (Cartocci, 2007). The third indicator was selected because newspapers were a central source of news in Italy, assuming that their readership reflected the invisible commitment of citizens to “knowing in order to decide”, to quote Italian President Luigi Einaudi. Again, the deepening crisis of journalism, both in terms of credibility and catchment area, and the parcelling of information into many alternative streams, often online sources, calls for reflection on the real meaning of this indicator in the age of social media.

It is no longer true that visible participation concerns elections and invisible participation concerns newspapers. Society is changing and the different trends are contradictory and heterogeneous. The increasing role of digital media makes their empirical implications on a territorial basis difficult to analyse (Ceccarini, 2022; Raniolo, 2024). It is therefore unclear what the traditional indicators now measure. Our idea is that they maintain their capacity to capture a major dimension of civic sense. Although election turnout and newspaper readership no longer “monopolise” visible and invisible participation, they can continue to be exemplary manifestations, possibly even more coherent than before because they are now less linked to conformism.

5.3 ELECTION TURNOUT

Among the provincial indicators of visible participation in the literature, we chose election turnout, ignoring two of Putnam’s indicators (referendum turnout and preference vote) due to changes in the electoral system and the different value of not voting in referenda. Another indicator we considered was trade union membership, but again we discarded it because the trade unions we contacted were unable to provide separate provincial data.

Regarding election turnout, Cartocci (2007, p. 68) wrote that the proportion of electors who reliably decide to vote is a tribute to the legitimacy of institutional government. In our case, however, this indicator is gradually losing its validity due to the increasing weight of protest abstentionism (leading to an increase in the extraneous portion of the indicator). Nevertheless, in our opinion, the conventional indicator of visible participation continues to capture performance of a civic duty, if

we ignore particularistic motivations and specific political positions (the indicating portion of the indicator persists), and should therefore be included in the construction of an index of social capital.

The data on electoral turnout are expressed as a percentage of potential electors, i.e. all adults having full political rights, without limits of class, education or gender, who have the right to express their vote in referenda and local, national and European elections. All this data was provided at municipal level by the Ministry of the Interior, as open data on the Eligendo platform.³ We did not consider local elections because they take place at different times, unlike European and national elections.

Elections for the European and Italian parliaments are held every 5 years (unless the Italian parliament is dissolved prematurely). In the study period, we considered four national elections (2008, 2013, 2018, 2022) and four European elections (2009, 2014, 2019, 2024). For each of the annual data sets analysed (2008, 2013, 2018, 2022) we therefore considered two elections, which we combined as a mean, after checking that there was a significant positive correlation between abstentionism by province in the two types of election. In considering both elections instead of one, we reduced contingencies unrelated to civic sense that could affect participation and influence data fidelity, for example increased turnout due to other elections held simultaneously.

From an empirical viewpoint, we see in Table 5.1 that turnout for national elections decreased over time from about 1'80% in 2008 to just over 60% in 2022 (in parallel, turnout for European elections fell from 65% in 2009 to 49% in 2024). As expected, European elections had a lower turnout than those for the national parliament, often being perceived as less important or “second order” according to Reif and Schmitt (1980). Even with this difference, the geography of turnout at the two types of election was similar (Fig. 5.1), and this allowed us to aggregate the two elections in a single index of electoral turnout. At the most recent national elections, centre-north regions recorded the highest turnouts; the provinces of Bologna, Modena (Emilia-Romagna), Brescia, Bergamo (Lombardy) and Florence (Tuscany) exceeded 73%, whereas turnout was 50% in Calabria (Crotone and Reggio Calabria), with results well below the national mean in other provinces of the south and islands.

³ <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>.

Table 5.1 National and regional electoral turnout (percentage) in Italian and European parliamentary elections.

	2008 (IT)	2009 (EU)	2013 (IT)	2014 (EU)	2018 (IT)	2019 (EU)	2022 (IT)	2024 (EU)
National turnout (%)	81	65	75	57	73	55	64	48
Standard deviation of turnout between provinces (%)	5	11	6	10	6	11	7	9
Highest provincial turnout (%)	88 (BS)	80 (RI)	84 (PD)	73 (PU)	80 (PD)	70 (FI)	74 (BO)	65 (FI)
Lowest provincial turnout (%)	65 (KR)	40 (NU)	60 (RC)	36 (OR)	52 (RI)	34 (CL)	46 (KR)	30 (NU)
<i>Area</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Mean percentage turnout</i>						
North West	Aosta Valley	79	59	77	50	72	52	61
	Piedmont	81	73	76	67	74	65	66
North East (former white area)	Lombardy	85	74	79	67	77	65	70
	Liguria	79	67	75	62	72	60	64
	Trentino-South Tyrol	84	60	81	53	74	60	66
	Friuli-Venezia Giulia	81	64	77	57	75	56	66
	Veneto	84	72	81	63	78	63	69
Centre-North (former red area)	Emilia-Romagna	86	76	82	69	78	67	71
	Tuscany	83	72	79	66	77	65	69
	Marche	83	74	80	65	77	62	68
Centre-South	Umbria	84	78	79	70	78	66	69
	Lazio	82	72	77	60	70	58	65
	Molise	79	64	78	53	71	52	57
	Abruzzo	81	62	76	64	75	53	64
Sardinia	72	41	68	41	65	36	53	36

(continued)

Table 5.1 (continued)

<i>Area</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Mean percentage turnout</i>									
South	Campania	79	65	70	53	71	50	56	46		
	Apulia	76	68	70	50	69	48	56	42		
	Basilicata	75	68	69	49	71	47	58	42		
	Calabria	72	54	63	44	63	43	50	39		
	Sicily	74	49	65	43	63	37	57	38		

Data of 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2024, the authors' analysis. Source: Eligendo

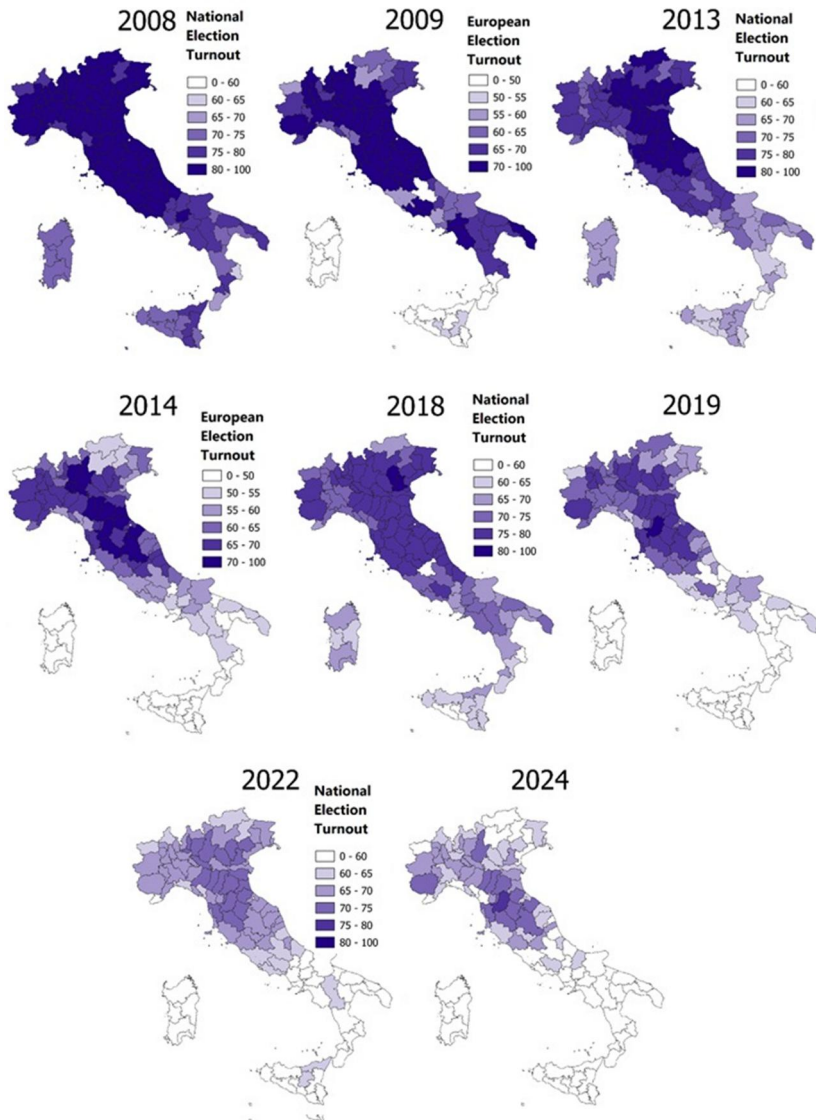


Fig. 5.1 Percentage turnout by province (national and European parliamentary elections). Data of 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2024; the authors' analysis. *Source* Eligendo. Map of provinces with names: see Appendix, Sect. A

Regarding the decrease in turnout, the data indicates that this occurred transversely in different regions, affecting areas with both high and low turnouts. The decrease happened at different paces: e.g. it slowed with the rise of populist forces in 2018 (Pritoni et al., 2018), to resume between the national elections of 2018 and 2022. As already mentioned, many factors can explain the rise in abstentionism: lack of interest, difficulty in getting to the polls (involuntary abstentionism), protest—but not all indicate a decrease in civic virtues (Ferrara et al., 2023; Pizzorno, 2008; Raniolo, 2024).

5.4 NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

Among our indicators, newspaper readership captures an individual habit that combines visible aspects of political participation. This choice is in line with Putnam et al. (1993) and Cartocci (2007), since reading the newspapers is a phenomenon that escapes the logic of individual costs and benefits and implies an interest in the community and others. It is a democratic rite *par excellence*, or in the famous definition of Hegel “the prayer of modern man”.

Today newspapers are not necessarily read in printed form but increasingly via digital media. In Italy, data on newspaper sales are collected by the company Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa (ADS), which certifies and makes available data on the monthly circulation of dailies and periodicals. For printed copies, ADS records individual (paid by the purchaser) and multiple sales (paid by third parties) as well as subscriptions. The data item we considered in our analysis was the circulation of printed copies by province. This excluded:

- the six sporting newspapers because their readership is not linked to interest in the community in the *bridging* sense that our indicators aimed to capture (Cartocci, 2007);

- printed copies that could not be assigned to a province (only about 2% in 2022);

- less significant local newspapers that ADS does not include in its list and for which data is therefore not available.

Data on online sales and subscriptions recently became available, but unfortunately not by province, so it was not useful for our analysis of the geography of social capital. Indeed, online purchases of newspapers, both

printed and digital, do not specify the provenance of the payments and therefore cannot be used for spatial analysis.⁴

The increasing number of digital sales (which can only be calculated at national level) is insufficient to make up for the sharp drop in printed newspaper sales recorded in Italy. Like electoral turnout, we may well ask whether this trend indicates a decrease in so-called invisible political participation. The question remains unanswered since so far it has not been possible to measure online sales of dailies by province, or even the trend of political participation via other channels, such as free online articles, foreign newspapers, forums, social networks, informal chats and so forth, which have made up for the lower sales of printed newspapers. Newspaper readership can however be used for a spatial comparison or cross-section of different provinces, as done by Cartocci (2007), excluding sporting dailies from the data.

Newspaper readership data indicate a certain stability (Table 5.2, Fig. 5.2), with virtuous provinces like Bolzano still at the top, counting about 80 copies per 1000 of population in 2022. Bolzano is followed by some provinces of Veneto (Trieste, Udine) and Emilia-Romagna (Parma, Piacenza). A sharp decrease with respect to the past is recorded in certain Ligurian provinces (especially Genoa which goes from second to 28th place in the period in question), and in provinces of Calabria and Sicily (which while they were always in low positions, go even lower). Indeed, Crotona (Calabria) is the province that boasts the least number of dailies read, about 2.4 copies per 1000 of population.

While all provinces show a decrease in newspaper readership, the trend seems more intense where readership was already low. For example, the only two provinces in which the 2021 figure is not less than half the 2008 figure were precisely Udine and Bolzano. The variance in the number of newspapers per capita in the provinces increased faster than the decrease in the mean, showing that internally, Italy is even more heterogeneous today.

⁴When we contacted exclusively online newspapers in an attempt to measure invisible political participation from a territorial viewpoint, they were unable to provide precise information on the distribution of accesses and subscriptions. This question also regards other aspects of political participation (such as creation and broadcasting of political content online), to the extent that it is now a sphere of political participation in itself: the digital arena that Raniolo (2024) distinguishes from traditional arenas (institutional, protest and community or civic arenas).

Table 5.2 Non-sporting daily newspaper circulation at national and regional level

	2008	2013	2018	2022
Total number of printed copies sold at national level	4,987,941	3,168,187	1,916,946	1,250,530
Total number of digital copies sold at national level	0	170,532	219,587	330,447
Printed copies per 10,000 of population	779	534	336	222
Standard deviation across provinces of number of printed copies per 10,000 of population	354	264	190	143
Province with highest number of printed copies per 10,000 of population	1719 (SS)	1321 (BZ)	994 (BZ)	799 (BZ)
Province with lowest number of printed copies per 10,000 of population	181 (KR)	82 (KR)	36 (KR)	24 (KR)

<i>Area</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Mean number of printed copies per 10,000 of population</i>			
North West	Aosta Valley	844	657	416	261
	Pidemont	642	472	326	206
	Lombardy	882	576	379	263
	Liguria	1324	933	570	321
North East (former white area)	Trentino-South Tyrol	1418	1105	809	603
	Friuli Venezia Giulia	1229	962	672	465
	Veneto	932	624	433	314
Centre-	Emilia-Romagna	1020	756	504	361
North (former red area)	Tuscany	941	634	388	260
	Marche	687	533	364	231
	Umbria	598	450	256	153
Centre-South	Lazio	621	376	227	121
	Molise	315	248	135	72
	Abruzzo	583	384	237	166
	Sardinia	1230	703	486	337
South	Campania	347	192	117	69
	Apulia	421	260	144	82
	Basilicata	369	258	132	58
	Calabria	442	227	106	55
	Sicily	523	316	125	73

Data for 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2022. Authors' analysis. *Source* ADS

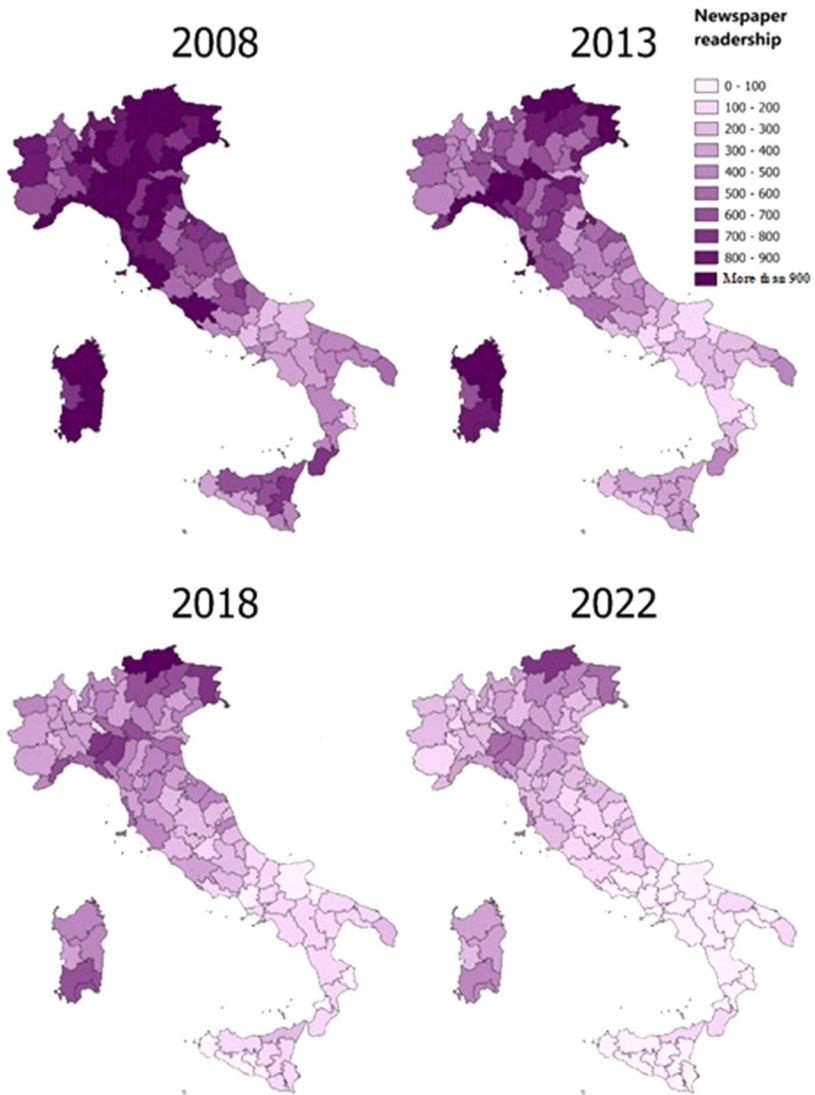


Fig. 5.2 Printed newspaper readership. Provincial mean per 10,000 of population; years 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2022. Analysis by the authors. *Source* ADS Map of provinces with names: see Appendix, Sect. A

The geography of newspaper readership recalls that of national and European election turnout, and more generally the distribution of social capital previously measured by Putnam et al. (1993) and Cartocci (2007).

5.5 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have seen that in its visible and invisible forms, political participation continues to be a key dimension of social capital, though non-conventional forms of political participation remain more important. The indicators we used, voter turnout for national and European elections and newspaper readership, are those proposed by Cartocci in *Mappe del Tesoro* (2007). They are territorial indicators (difficult to substitute) that have lost some of their validity over time, due to the increasing weight of election boycott and the increasing availability of digital information.

At empirical level, two main results emerge. First we found that our indicators of visible and invisible political participation trace geographies that persist in time and are mutually coherent (the correlation coefficient between electoral turnout and newspapers sold in 2022 was 0.41 and similar levels were recorded before then).

Secondly, the geography traced by the two indicators proved to be very coherent with that found in prior studies (Cartocci, 2007; Putnam et al., 1983; Putnam et al., 1993). In particular, we found a higher level of political participation in areas where there had been strong regional political subcultures (e.g. Baccetti & Messina, 2009; Caciagli, 1988; Trigilia, 1986)—the so-called “white” and “red” regions (Trentino-South Tyrol, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche)—and an increasing divide with respect to regions of the north-west, centre-south and south.

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