



## Conclusions

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**Abstract** This concluding chapter synthesizes the volume's findings to assert the enduring relevance of social capital for Italian democracy. It confirms the persistence of the traditional North-South divide while revealing a significant internal reorganization: a relative decline in major metropolitan areas and the former "red regions," now overtaken by the Northern special-statute regions and the rest of the North-East. To better capture this complex shift of civic engagement, where political disaffection does not necessarily equate to a decline of civiness, the volume introduces a key methodological innovation: the construction of two distinct indices: a "classical" one and a "critical" one excluding electoral turnout. While social capital remains positively linked to economic development and public service quality, these correlations have weakened. The analysis depicts social capital as a foundational element for social cohesion and sustainability, demonstrating its significant impact, both theoretical and empirical, in reducing social isolation and fostering inclusion. While grounded in territorial data, the chapter opens new avenues for research into the interplay between bridging, bonding, and network forms of social capital with social inequality and societal well-being. Ultimately, this is a call to action: investing in social capital is indispensable for building cohesive and sustainable communities.

**Keywords** Social capital · Civic culture · Italy · Social sustainability · Social cohesion

This volume continues the tradition of research on the civic culture of the Italian people that arose in the 1950s-60s (e.g. Banfield, 1958; Almond & Verba, 1963) and developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s with a focus on the plural nature of Italy and its regional diversity. These studies abandoned the idea of considering Italy to have a single shared political culture, and began to contemplate the idea of three, four and even five different "Italies" (Bagnasco, 1977; Caciagli, 1988; Cartocci, 1987; Tullio-Altan, 1986; Trigilia, 1986).

Here we interpret social capital as a free, indivisible, collective, value-related and bridging resource (Cartocci, 2000), based on a sense of moral obligation towards others, an essential element for spontaneous and organised cooperation. It is a resource that makes democratic systems work better: economically, socially and politically.

Our empirical and theoretical references have been Robert Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti “Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy” (1993) and Roberto Cartocci (2007) “Mappe del tesoro. Atlante del social capital in Italia”. The main aim of this volume has been to map social capital in Italy at the provincial level at four time points: 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2022. We then concentrated on the links between social capital, cohesion and sustainability at theoretical-conceptual level.

The two parts of this final chapter concern the results emerging from our updating of the geography of social capital in Italy and an examination of the theoretical and empirical links between social capital, social cohesion and social sustainability, where we suggest some avenues for future research.

In order to capture changes in social capital, we chose indicators that can be compared diachronically and that target the two classical dimensions of social capital: social and political participation.

For social participation, we focused on the number of non-profit and sporting organisations and on blood donors. For political participation, we concentrated on non-sporting newspaper readership and on turnout at national and European elections. Diachronic analysis showed a slight increase in indicators linked to the social dimension and a clear decrease in those linked to the political dimension.

Building on the analysis of these indicators, we explored—conceptually and statistically—the relationship between electoral participation and other measures of social capital. Our findings clearly indicate that in the current historical context, not voting does not necessarily mean a lack of civicness. This empirical result led us to build two distinct indices of social capital: a “classical” index of social capital that includes electoral participation, and a “critical” index of social capital that excludes it.

Our geography of social capital, based on the classical and critical indices, confirmed the persistence of a divide between a north and centre-north, characterised by higher levels, and a south traditionally poorer in this resource. Besides this temporal continuity, we observed some major elements of discontinuity with respect to the regional map of social capital plotted by Putnam et al. (1993) on the basis of 1980s data and with respect to the provincial map plotted by Cartocci (2007) on data of the early 2000s. First of all, there was clear evidence of loss of primacy of the former red centre-northern regions, overtaken since 2008

by Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Val d'Aosta, the three northern special-statute regions.

Between 2008 and 2022, a progressive decline in social capital was observed in the large cities with respect to the smaller provinces in the same region. This was particularly evident in Bologna, Florence, Milan, Venice and Genoa. These results were substantially the same whether based on the classical or critical social capital index, although the provinces of Sardinia were distinguished by higher critical social capital index scores.

Besides updating the Italian map of social capital in order to capture any changes in recent moments of crisis, we also examined the relation between social capital, economic growth and quality of local services. As in the work of Putnam et al. and above all Cartocci, we detected a significant positive correlation between social capital and economic development. However, this correlation became less significant over the study period and curvilinear trends emerged where social capital tended to decrease above a certain GDP. For example, while the large northern city of Milan continued to rank in the top position for provincial per capita GDP, its stock of social capital showed a progressive decline. This suggests that economic growth can subtract resources (time, energy and motivation) from social and civic engagement, especially in large cities. It would be worth investigating this result to understand the dynamics of inequality (and hence the effective distribution of wealth) and how and to what extent the economic sphere influences social capital.

We also analysed the relation between social capital and quality of public services by building an index based on three indicators: the efficiency of the water distribution system, capacity to organise differentiated waste collection and availability of day-care places. The strong correlation detected confirmed the traditional link between social capital and the capacity of local government to organise efficient public utilities.

Finally, we evaluated the influence of social capital, economic growth and quality of services on three indicators of social cohesion and social sustainability: money spent on gambling (an indicator of social isolation), the quality of life of women (indicator of equality and well-being) and assigning 0.5% of income tax to one's municipality (indicator of closeness to local government). Our results showed that social capital played a central role in all these dimensions.

Here we have underlined the importance of promoting measures to increase social and political participation in order to foster the

collective action necessary to tackle future challenges in the name of well-being, cohesion, equality and a good quality of democracy. Political and social participation promotes a demand for public goods as distinct from particularistic benefits, while on the other hand, favouring selection of administrators capable of building efficient institutions, promoting trust, eliciting identity and therefore teaching civic culture. When civic culture is widespread and people can be certain that others embrace it, it makes sense for a citizen to pay taxes, reject corruption and clientelism and behave responsibly (Bordandini, 2015).

For many people, however, social capital is an unaffordable luxury, and for others it is an infantile illusion or an ideological relic. When daily life is not open and co-responsible, it is difficult for democracy to take root. Solid democracy requires a social fabric based on interpersonal trust extending beyond one's immediate circle and confidence that institutional government will sustain the system in moments of crisis, such as pandemics and economic depressions. This means promoting policies that can reframe daily interactions between the state and citizens in order to further good administration, public ethics and political and social participation (Bordandini, 2015).

The last part of the volume examined the theoretical connections between social capital on one hand and social cohesion and social sustainability on the other, and their empirical implications.

As we have seen, social sustainability is a many-sided concept that concerns the capacity of a society to ensure equal, lasting conditions of well-being for all its members, without impairing the possibility of future generations to enjoy the same opportunities. In recent decades, social sustainability has become increasingly central in academic debate and public policy, in parallel with growing awareness that sustainability extends beyond the environmental and economic spheres.

In this framework, cohesion and social capital can be considered two key elements of social sustainability. Social cohesion, or the integration and solidarity between the members of society, can be gauged with indicators such as interpersonal trust, sense of belonging and conflict mitigation, indicators partly shared with those traditionally used to detect bridging social capital, as we have seen. Social capital, cohesion and sustainability are not only linked but influence each other in a reciprocal manner: a society with high levels of social capital and cohesion is therefore also more sustainable (Nilsson et al., 2024).

However, these links are not always linear or positive. A cohesive society tends to be more sustainable due to solid social bonds and a strong sense of belonging that reinforce the networks of mutual support, but social cohesion based on exclusion can have the opposite effects. Societies that appear cohesive internally can actually exclude marginalised social groups, thus limiting their sustainability.

Social inequality plays a key role in these dynamics (McDonald et al., 2024). High economic and social disparities tend to erode cohesion, since they engender distrust, conflict and a widespread perception of injustice, which also damages sustainability. If social capital emphasises the quality of social relations and their capacity to generate collective goods, we cannot neglect the impact of social inequality: when resources and opportunities for a dignified life are distributed unequally, community sense of belonging weakens and social capital risks becoming exclusive, namely of the bonding type sensu Putnam, reinforcing close groups rather than fostering transverse connections that favour social sustainability. In this framework, the relation between the different forms of social capital as a collective resource (bridging and bonding) is worthy of further study. Research into social inequalities such as intergenerational, territorial, educational and gender inequality could give new momentum to theory formulation and empirical study of social capital as a collective resource.

As already mentioned, the literature on the role to assign to social capital and the forms it takes underlines the importance of having micro-level territorial data. Micro-level data support a comprehensive framework linking macro, meso, and micro levels. This interaction reveals how social bonds connect economic, material and cultural structures with actors and systems. In this context, social capital functions as both a dependent and an independent variable.

Our maps are reliable because they are based on territorial data free from the distortions typical of sample surveys and because they detect the effective behaviours of individuals. However, the territorial data we used has the limit of not detecting forms of sociality beyond that of bridging social capital.

The results obtained so far are significant, but leave some questions unanswered. What relation does social capital in the sense of civicness have with other forms of sociality? Is it possible to map different geographies for bridging, bonding and network forms of social capital? How can we intercept socio-cultural changes affecting the forms and intensity of social links while also optimising the indicators that enable us to observe them?

Through what mechanisms is social capital, conceived as a stock, activated across biographical trajectories, social interdependencies, varying action contexts, and situationally embedded choices? How do the different forms of sociality influence social sustainability and cohesion?

Understanding how communities shape their futures requires qualitative and quantitative approaches. Rather than offering definitive answers, this book opens new avenues of inquiry and calls for continued research.

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