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Limitations of the KISS Principle and a Strong Organizational Society: A Rejoinder to Wollebaek and Selle

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ABSTRACT *In their discussion of my article, Dag Wollebaek and Per Selle agree with my central point that changes in the institutional and socio-political context are likely to affect the engagement-values relation over time, and that more theoretical and empirical research is required to better understand the underlying connections. They then highlight a number of weaknesses in my empirical analysis. First, they criticise the operationalization of the isolated-connected distinction I borrow from Paxton (2002, 2007), and point to the scope of engagement as a way of ‘keeping it simple’. Second, they express disbelief in the apparent strength of the correlations at the individual level compared to the aggregate level in my analysis, and assert that an ‘organizational society of broad scope’ is primary. In this rejoinder, I briefly discuss both comments.*

KEY WORDS: Voluntary associations, generalized trust, longitudinal analysis

Introduction

I was pleased to find in Wollebaek and Selle’s (2012) evaluation of my article (Geys, 2012) a firm expression of agreement with my central point: namely, that changes in the institutional environment within which voluntary associations operate are likely to affect the engagement-values relation over time. Consequently, rather than (often implicitly) assuming that this engagement-values relation is intertemporally stable, politicians taking cues from the vast research tradition on the causes and consequences of individuals’ civic engagement would be better served by indications of when, how and where targeted policies are most likely to bear fruit. A one-size-fits-all prescription is hardly ever optimal, but even the same policy might not remain optimal in a changing environment.

After agreeing with me on this central point, Wollebaek and Selle censure me for failing to address the obvious ensuing questions: namely, *which* (types of) changes matter and *how* do they matter? Interestingly, the remainder of their comment skilfully skirts these same issues, and instead concentrates on a number of empirical-methodological concerns (see below). It makes no attempt to take up the broader theoretical questions they argue are overlooked in my discussion. While this feels somewhat inconsistent, I very much agree that the questions that follow from my analysis are of critical importance. Yet, my aim was to point out an important gap in the literature and provide some evidence concerning its empirical relevance. Based on these insights, a recently started research project at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) takes as its focal point the role of various potential drivers of changes in the engagement-values relation over time – and will analyse these from both a theoretical and empirical perspective.

As mentioned, although concurring on the main point of my article, Wollebaek and Selle find a number of my empirical choices harder to swallow. First, they criticise the operationalization of the ‘isolated’-‘connected’ distinction I borrow from Paxton (2002, 2007), and point to the *scope* of engagement (i.e., the number of memberships) as a way of ‘keeping it simple’. Second, they express disbelief in the apparent strength of the correlations at the

individual level compared to the aggregate level in my analysis. On the first issue, I will point to some shortcomings of the KISS principle (short for *Keep It Simple, Stupid*) for civic engagement research, and argue that we instead need more encompassing measures that allow a more holistic approach to the topic. On the second issue, I made no claim regarding the relative strength of the individual- versus aggregate-level coefficient estimates (though I did compare each of these over time) for the simple reason that the unstandardized coefficients I reported do not straightforwardly allow such comparison. Additional analyses reported below, however, only partially support Wollebaek and Selle's (2012, p. 94) view that 'an organizational society of broad scope is primary and much more fundamental' than engagement at the individual level. Such a notion also appears to have limitations from a theoretical point of view.

Scope or connectedness... or both?

Following Paxton (2002, 2007) and my previous work (Coffé & Geys, 2008; Geys & Murdoch, 2008, 2010), I distinguished between 'isolated' and 'connected' associations based on members' (size-corrected) average level of additional memberships in order to get a more detailed view of the potential diversity of civic engagement relations. Wollebaek and Selle (2012, p. 94) first of all point out that implementing such distinctions using World Values Survey (WVS) data is based on an 'unwarranted and non-trivial assumption that one can infer from organizational type to organization'. As I pointed out in footnote 7 of my article, as well as in my earlier work (e.g., Coffé & Geys, 2007, 2008), I fully agree that information on association types (rather than memberships in actual associations) is much less than ideal. The underlying assumptions are very strong. Although these data limitations, in my view, are unproblematic to engage in methodological discussions about operationalization and measurement issues (as in Coffé & Geys, 2007, 2008; Geys & Murdoch, 2008, 2010), it evidently poses substantial risks in analyses of the engagement-values relation. Nevertheless, assuming that the bias this might induce in the estimated coefficients is stable over time, this should not affect my interpretation of the *change* in the observed correlations over time. All this, of course, is no excuse for keeping an obviously inferior practice in existence. Yet, addressing it will require a radical re-evaluation of the survey instruments we currently have at our disposal, and, preferably, the development of alternative data gathering efforts (as already pointed out by McPherson, 1983). I return to this below.

Secondly, they bring forward evidence based on Norwegian data (taken from, for instance, Wollebaek, Selle & Lorentzen, 1998) suggesting that the designation of certain association types as isolated or connected by Paxton (2002, 2007) and myself is inappropriate. Essentially, so they argue, it neglects individuals' multiple memberships within the same type (which are shown to be a common occurrence), the connection possibilities individuals have within associations (which are argued to depend on the size of the association), and the ties organizations may have to national-level parent organizations. Taking these issues into account would substantially change which associations (or types) are seen as isolated or connected.

All these points are well taken. Yet, they suffer from substantial shortcomings in their own right. To start with the latter issue, links to national associations are often mere formal ties, which need not necessarily imply larger network possibilities for each individual association's members. More importantly, however, the first two elements seem to suggest that every connection has equal value, whether it is within or across association types. Yet, clearly, connections within and across types may have quite different implications. To give an extreme example: When I am member of three youth groups, I am likely to mostly meet young people – while the socio-demographic diversity of my connections may become much broader when I am linked to a more diverse set of association types. This is important because it has been argued that the diversity of one's connections along important socio-demographic cleavage

lines is a crucial factor in determining the value of such connections: i.e., the so-called bridging-bonding distinction proposed by Putnam (2000) and Putnam and Goss (2002) and studied in, for instance, Stolle and Rochon (1998) and Coffé and Geys (2007). A roughly similar argument holds with respect to Wollebaek and Selle's designation of association size as an indicator of connectedness. In particular, connecting to 300 socio-demographically similar people within a big association is very different from interacting with a highly diverse set of individuals – even if this occurs in a substantially smaller association.

Consequently, concentrating solely on the *scope* of membership (i.e., the total number of memberships of individuals) – as Wollebaek and Selle suggest based on their previous work (Wollebaek & Selle, 2002, 2007) – is unlikely to be appropriate. Even though this admittedly 'keeps things simple', it also ignores a lot of valuable information. Rather, as also suggested in Geys and Murdoch (2010), the development of more encompassing measures capturing the multiple dimensions in which associations may differ (i.e., size, external connectedness, internal diversity, etc.) seems long overdue. Once again, however, the implementation of such an approach is constrained by the type of data we generally have available. While the Norwegian databases Wollebaek and Selle refer to appear quite rich in this respect – and, as such, may set important guidelines for future survey development – the WVS data, unfortunately, are not (or, at least, not yet). Data collection efforts within the above-mentioned research project will (hopefully) also allow us to go further in this direction.

Individual-level or aggregate-level?

The second main point raised by Wollebaek and Selle concerns the surprise they felt regarding the apparent strength of my individual-level findings relative to the aggregate-level ones. In their earlier work (Wollebaek & Selle, 2002, 2007), they put more stress on an aggregate-level mechanism that essentially rests on the presumed externalities of a vibrant civic society (often referred to as rainmaker effects; e.g., Putnam & Pharr, 2000; Newton, 2006). The underlying hypothesis is that 'a person weakly connected to a strong organizational society will be more likely to trust than a strongly connected person in a weak organizational society' because 'if organization society is strong, even those with weak individual connections benefit from its externalities' (Wollebaek & Selle, 2012, p. 94). As a result, 'an organizational society of broad scope is primary and much more fundamental' (Wollebaek & Selle, 2012, p. 94).

From a purely empirical point of view, this comment suffers from the 'straw-man' fallacy since it is based on a mis-interpretation of my results. As I reported unstandardized coefficient estimates and did not provide information on the means and standard deviations of my variables, evaluating the relative importance of my individual-level and aggregate-level results was impossible – and was therefore not attempted in my article. Moreover, calculating standardized coefficient estimates – which makes such comparison feasible – for the 2000 wave of the WVS suggests that a one standard-deviation change in engagement at the aggregate level is connected to a *stronger* (and not, as Wollebaek and Selle believed to see, *weaker*) change in trust than a one standard-deviation change in engagement at the individual level. Although a similar observation does not hold for the 1990 WVS wave, the close similarity between my 2000 WVS estimates and those reported by Wollebaek and Selle for the 2008 European Values Survey (EVS) sample suggests it does hold in their sample as well (assuming that the distributions of their underlying variables are roughly similar to mine). Though one clearly cannot have strong aggregate-level engagement without individual-level participation, a strong organizational society thus indeed appears somewhat more important, relatively speaking, than strong individual-level engagement in recent years.

Even so, the argument that '[l]iving in a society characterized by strong organizations has greater benefits than being an individual with many organizational ties' (Wollebaek & Selle, 2012, p. 94) – which, in the extreme, appears to eliminate the value of individual-level memberships altogether – has important shortcomings. This is not to say that I disagree with

the idea – more implicit in Wollebaek and Selle’s argument – that the meaning of an *individual’s* membership may differ depending on the extent and nature of associational life at the aggregate level. This appears supported by the data, as can be seen when including a cross-level interaction term in the empirical model for the 2000 wave of the WVS:

$$Trust_{ij} = -0.337(0.27) - 0.041(0.07)MEMBER_{ij} + 0.004(0.001)PERCMEMB_j + 0.009(0.001)MEMBER_{ij} * PERCMEMB_j + \sum_k \beta_{kj} X_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

Where MEMBER is an indicator variable equal to 1 if an individual acknowledges at least one association membership (0 otherwise), PERCMEMBER is the share of individuals in the country for which MEMBER equals 1 and X_{ij} is a vector of individual-level and country-level control variables. (Results for these controls are suppressed for reasons of space, but are similar to those reported in Geys, 2012.) This regression equation – with standard errors on the coefficient estimates between brackets – highlights two important things. First, the influence of a vibrant civic society on trust is stronger for individuals reporting at least one membership (0.004+0.009=0.013) than for those not reporting any memberships (0.004). Second, individual-level membership status is always positive related to trust over the observed range of PERCMEMBER (which is 16.4% to 96.5%), but this association substantially strengthens for higher values of PERCMEMBER (due to the positive interaction effect).¹

Assuming a (possibly unwarranted) causal connection, the latter result suggests that an individual connected through his/her membership to a strong rather than weak organizational society will be more likely to trust, in line with my interpretation of Wollebaek and Selle’s argument. However, and crucially, the first-mentioned finding indicates that membership at the individual level helps bring out the presumed externalities of a vibrant civic society. This, in turn, indicates that individual-level memberships play an important role even in a story based on rainmaker effects or externalities. Overall, therefore, stressing the benefits of a strong organizational society to the point of discounting any potential value in individual-level memberships (as Wollebaek and Selle appear to do, see above) seems overly restrictive.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, it should be kept in mind that an organizational society of broad scope may, when pursued as an aim in and of itself, also entail substantial risks under certain conditions. Evidence from Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany as well as its Weimar Republic, for instance, warns about the potential dangers of a strong organizational society in institutional environments where political institutions are weak: ‘German civil society was rich and extensive during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this nation of joiners should accordingly have provided fertile soil for a successful democratic experiment. Instead, it succumbed to totalitarianism’ (Berman, 1997, p. 424). Similarly, when a strong organizational society reflects a corporatist culture – in which associations build on the basis of patronage and common interests (e.g., Wiarda, 1996) – it may not lead to more, but rather to less, trust.

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Endnotes

¹ Specifically, the coefficient estimate is 0.213 at the minimum value of PERCMEMBER (i.e., $-0.041 + 0.013 \cdot 16.4 = 0.213$) and increases to 1.214 at the maximum value of PERCMEMBER (i.e., $-0.041 + 0.013 \cdot 96.5 = 1.214$).