CHAPTER 2


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Introduction and Research Questions

The current view in both society and academia suggests that western democracies are suffering the yoke of mass citizen withdrawal from channels of political participation. Connecting citizens to the state by means of participation in the political decision-making process is regarded as a prerequisite for proper democratic performance (Dahl 1971). As the political system in western democracies is equalitarian, in principle these systems are based on universal suffrage where each person should have equal influence (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). Consequently, democracies heavily depend on citizen pressure on the political decision-making process. Citizens are expected to engage in collective (political) action and hold political authorities accountable for their actions, which requires a certain level of political trust. This implies that democracy does not only depend on the form of its basic structure (Rawls 1971) but also on the qualities and attitudes of citizens (Kymlicka and Norman 1994).

If democracy’s wellbeing depends on actively engaged citizens, a disconnected public threatens to drain the lifeblood out of democracy. Putnam (2000, 2007) argues that democracy’s wellbeing is currently threatened by a widespread decline in civic engagement. Civic engagement would be created through day-to-day interactions in for instance voluntary associations or sports clubs. Such associational involvement fosters interpersonal and political trust, which benefits collective action (such as political participation). The social ties created within these associations are the glue of civil society and democracy. In addition, voluntary organisations may act as schools of democracy and nurture core democratic and participatory values (Van der Meer 2009).

A decline in civic engagement in general and associational involvement in particular would be detrimental for the democratic qualities and attitudes of citizens. Civic disengagement breeds distrust towards politics, which then would lead to declining political participation. According to Putnam “the most
visible symptom” (Putnam 2000, 23) of civic decline is citizen’s withdrawal from politics, exemplified by the half-empty ballot box during elections.

Yet, others find empirical evidence for countervailing trends in political participation (Dalton 2008; Inglehart 1997; Norris 2002; Norris 2011). Contrasting to Putnam’s (2000) observation of declining civic engagement and participation, Norris (2002, 2011) challenges the notion that low (or declining) political trust unambiguously lead to lower levels of political participation. According to Norris (2011), signs of disenchantment with politics such as falling voter turnout, declines in party membership and low political trust may mobilize people to participate in alternative (unconventional) modes of political participation. Political distrust as well as dissatisfaction with politics might encourage people to protest and challenge political regimes. In the same vein, Dalton (2008) suggests a shift in the repertoire of political activities employed by citizens. Instead of participating in traditional acts such as voting and party membership, citizens are crowding-out from conventional towards new, ‘alternative’ or ‘unconventional’ channels of political participation, such as demonstrating, in recent decades.

The bulk of research on political participation originates from the United States (e.g. Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995; Putnam 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). However, as the specific culture of the United States and the individualistic values rooted in the constitution set a very specific cultural milieu, there may very well be a case of American exceptionalism (Lipset 1996). Or, as Norris notes: “civic ills do not necessarily creep north over the Canadian border, let alone spread widely like a virus throughout Western political systems” (Norris 2002, XI). Moreover, trends in political participation have rarely been empirically studied cross-nationally in Europe (exceptions are: Kent Jennings and van Deth 1990; Marsh 1990; Norris 2002; Stolle and Hooghe 2011). Therefore, our research question reads: What have been the main trends in conventional and unconventional political participation in Europe over the past decades?

We aim to provide a longitudinal and cross-national European perspective, simultaneously comparing trends in both conventional and unconventional means of political participation. The arguments that motivate our research question are fourfold. First, the current literature produces contrasting theoretical expectations with respect to trends in conventional and unconventional means of political participation. These claims center around a widespread decline in participation (Putnam 2000) versus a shifting repertoire from conventional towards unconventional means of participation (Dalton 2008; Norris 2002). Second, apart from a few exceptions (e.g. Kent Jennings and van Deth 1990; Norris 2002; Stolle and Hooghe 2011; Verba et al. 1978), the current body of cross-national research focuses on either conventional or unconventional