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Living Up to Your Own Standards? Patterns of Civic Norms and Volunteering in Germany

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Abstract

One of the most significant challenges facing contemporary societies is the increasing polarization of social and political ideologies. Against this backdrop, it is highly important to understand the foundations of social cohesion in order to effectively address this trend. One of the fundamental pillars of social cohesion is volunteering, which entails contributing to a collective good through unpaid work in an organization or association. While a substantial body of research has been dedicated to examining the socio-structural and sociodemographic correlates of volunteering, the relationship between norms and volunteering behavior has received comparatively less attention. In this study, we employ the concept of citizenship norms to empirically explore the patterns of civic norms, particularly norms of solidarity and norms of participation, and volunteering. Furthermore, we investigate how these patterns differ across societal groups, including age, gender, education, and religion. Our quantitative analysis is based on data from a population survey in Germany, with approximately 1,800 respondents. We find that civic norms relate to volunteering, with participation norms showing a stronger link than solidarity norms. These relationships are not moderated by moral and socio-structural factors but remain consistent across different societal groups.

Keywords

civic norms; social norms; social capital; solidarity; volunteering

1. Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, major crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian war on Ukraine, and the climate crisis, seem to act as catalysts for deep-seated problems. Challenges like perceived social divides, increasing individualization, the impact of social media on trust in political institutions, and the rise of populist parties put both social and political stability to the test (Diamond & Skrzypek, 2024). The most recent examples of these developments are the political actions of the Trump administration in the USA as well as the results of the German federal election of 2025, where the radical right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became the second-strongest force in parliament. Against this backdrop, political pundits remind us of what philosophers but also empirical social scientists have repeated over and over since the 19th century: Social cohesion is key to achieving societal and democratic stability (Fonseca et al., 2019). Alexis de Tocqueville identified, in *Democracy in America*, civil society as a space where political processes were negotiated within small entities of society (de Tocqueville, 1835/2000). Walzer (1996) later termed this discovery "political society." According to Walzer, democracies are stronger when rooted in societies with high levels of social cohesion. Social cohesion not only fosters democratic resilience but also enhances economic development (Knack & Keefer, 1997). This conclusion was also prominently shared by Robert D. Putnam in his study of Italian regions (Putnam et al., 2004). Societies with strong social bonds are more resilient, economically stronger, fairer, and better equipped to promote democracy (Dekker & Halman, 2003; Durkheim, 1893/2019; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Putnam, 1995, 2001; Stolle, 2003; Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2009; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Wilson, 2000).

One of the key aspects of social cohesion is voluntary engagement. According to Wilson (2000, p. 215), "volunteering means any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization." It is well-understood how sociodemographic and socio-structural factors are linked to volunteering (Wilson, 2000, 2012). Yet, the relationship between norms and volunteering remains fairly understudied. This is surprising given psychological research showing that norms are related to actual behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Bicchieri, 2006, 2016; Cialdini et al., 1991). Drawing on Dalton's (2008) concept of norms of good citizenship, we aim to help close this research gap and study how these civic norms relate to volunteering. Civic norms are supposed to capture an individual's notion of what it means to be a "good citizen," distinguishing among several norm dimensions: participation, solidarity, autonomy, and social order.

We argue that norms of participation and solidarity, in particular, are positively related to volunteering. Citizens who regard participation and solidarity as integral to their civic duties are more likely to volunteer in order to live up to their own standards. In additional and rather exploratory analyses, we study whether moral and socio-structural factors, like age, gender, education, and religiosity, amplify these relationships. Investigating the interplay between individual characteristics, norms, and voluntary engagement can shed light on how social cohesion might be strengthened. Against the backdrop of the current crises affecting Western democracies, such insights may guide efforts to reinforce social bonds and promote long-term democratic resilience.

To study the link between civic norms and volunteering empirically, we use data from the EXPSOLIDARITY project, a project on values, motives, and practices in social volunteering. In the course of this project, a representative population survey was conducted in two waves between December 2022 and January 2023 ($N \approx 1{,}800$). Formal volunteering serves as the dependent variable in our analyses and is correlated with

participation norms and solidarity norms taken from Dalton's (2008, 2021) concept of good citizenship. Additionally, moral and socio-structural factors (age, gender, education, religiosity) are included as control and moderating variables.

The empirical analysis demonstrates a positive relationship between civic norms and volunteering, with participation norms showing a stronger link than solidarity norms. A one-point increase in the respective indices is associated with a 10 and 6 percentage point rise in the likelihood of volunteering. However, religiosity and education appear to have an even stronger connection to volunteering than civic norms, while age is not significantly related, and men are more likely to volunteer than women. Further analyses investigate whether the link between civic norms and volunteering varies across societal groups, considering moral and socio-structural factors as moderators. The results show no significant interaction effects, indicating that while the distribution of civic norms differs across groups, their relationship with volunteering remains consistent.

2. The Link Between Civic Norms and Volunteering

Wilson (2000, p. 215) defines volunteering as "any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization." Volunteering can further be classified into formal and informal types (Ackermann, 2019; Henriksen et al., 2008; Lee & Brudney, 2012; Wang et al., 2017). Formal volunteering involves participation within structured organizations, such as sports clubs or church youth groups, whereas informal volunteering occurs outside of institutionalized contexts. For example, assisting an elderly neighbor is considered informal volunteering. This article focuses on formal volunteering, which typically demands significantly greater time, effort, and commitment from participants compared to informal volunteering (Ackermann, 2019).

Social norms are defined as "the rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws" (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). For this study, we adopt a specific conceptualization of norms derived from political science research. The concept of citizenship or civic norms has been profoundly influenced by Dalton (2008, p. 78), who defines them as "a set of norms of what people think people should do as good citizens." Dalton's conceptions of norms do not exactly follow the psychological distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms. Yet, the conception is closely related to injunctive norms capturing what individuals think is expected from them in order to be perceived as a "good citizen."

Following this conceptualization, four categories of civic norms can be identified: participation, solidarity, autonomy, and social order (see Table 1). Citizen participation in politics and society is fundamental to democratic systems. It encompasses institutionalized, non-institutionalized, and social forms of engagement. Political participation, in particular, serves as a key source of legitimacy in democratic regimes. Beyond that, societies are expected to benefit from high levels of social participation, as it fosters social cohesion. Solidarity represents the horizontal dimension of civic norms, referring to the ethical and moral responsibility toward fellow citizens. This sense of social responsibility manifests in caring for others and supporting those in need (Zmerli, 2010). It is closely linked to the concept of social citizenship, which emphasizes collective solidarity (Dalton, 2008; Denters et al., 2007). Autonomy pertains to the self-perception of citizens as independent, self-governing individuals. Autonomous citizens actively seek information, critically monitor

government actions, and try to understand the arguments of others in discussions (Dalton, 2008; van Deth, 2009). Finally, social order constitutes the fourth category of civic norms. It reflects the extent to which citizens accept the rule of law and demonstrate a willingness to adhere to legal regulations, such as tax compliance.

Table 1. Categories of civic norms.

Categories	Norms
Participation	Always vote in elections
	Be active in social or political organizations
	Choose products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons
Solidarity	Support people in your own country who are worse off than yourself
	Help people in the rest of the world who are worse off than yourself
Autonomy	Try to understand the reasoning of people with other opinions
	Keep watch on the actions of government
Social Order	Always obey laws and regulations
	Never try to evade taxes

Source: Based on Dalton (2021, p. 27).

We argue that there is a link between two categories of Dalton's (2021) conception of civic norms, namely norms of participation and norms of solidarity, and volunteering. Norms can be perceived as guidelines for behavior that exhibit their effect on behavior through mechanisms like socialization, social learning, and social image and self-image. This theoretical argument is grounded in psychological theories and research. As a fundamental theoretical framework, Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior is particularly useful, as it posits that behavioral intentions, and consequently actions, are shaped in part by subjective norms. Subjective norms refer to a combination of an individual's own normative expectations and their perception of the expectations of significant others regarding a particular behavior.

The relationship between norms and behavior can be theorized in various ways. We draw on Gross and Vostroknutov (2022) to explore potential mechanisms. First, one mechanism for the action-guiding effect of norms is the internalization of norms through socialization. As individuals undergo socialization, they internalize the norms of the dominant social groups surrounding them. Consequently, norm violations elicit negative emotional responses, such as guilt or shame (Giguère et al., 2014). This imprinting process begins in childhood and is reinforced through observations of rewards and punishments associated with adherence to or deviation from social norms (Gavrilets & Richerson, 2017; Horne, 2003).

Second, social learning processes are considered a key mechanism for the relationship between norms and behavior. It is argued that social norms derive their effectiveness from observation, imitation, and adaptation to the behavior of others (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009; Keizer et al., 2008). Individuals are influenced by the actions of those around them and are more likely to follow norms when they perceive that others adhere to them as well (Bicchieri, 2006; Tremewan & Vostroknutov, 2021). According to Bicchieri (2006), norm adherence depends on three interrelated expectations: Individuals follow norms when they observe others following a norm (empirical expectations), when they have the impression that others expect that they themselves should follow this norm (normative expectations), and when norm violations can be noticed and

sanctioned (conditional expectations). Thus, the mere existence of a norm does not necessarily lead to compliance. Instead, widespread adherence often requires a critical mass of supporters for the norm to become firmly established (Lindström et al., 2018). Conversely, observed norm violations can trigger a downward spiral, in which compliance decreases significantly over time (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009; Engel & Kurschilgen, 2020).

Third, social image and self-image are considered potential mechanisms influencing norm adherence. Individuals tend to follow norms to be perceived as fair, honest, and trustworthy by those around them, reinforcing their social image (Bursztyn & Jensen, 2017). The desire to be seen positively by others is regarded as a fundamental human motivation (Grimalda et al., 2016). At the same time, people strive to maintain a morally upright self-image, which motivates them to adhere to norms even in the absence of external observation.

To summarize, the link between norms and actual behavior is argued to be largely driven by moral and social obligations that are mainly shaped through processes of socialization, social learning, and self-consistency. Building on these theoretical perspectives, we argue that civic norms are linked to volunteering. Specifically, we assume that participation norms and solidarity norms play a crucial role in motivating individuals to engage in voluntary activities. Volunteering means playing an active role in society. This should be particularly appealing to individuals who hold strong norms of participation. Moreover, volunteering often means contributing to an improvement of living conditions for others, either in their immediate surroundings or in well-off places. These considerations of charity should be particularly relevant for individuals who hold strong norms of solidarity. Thus, we formulate the following two hypotheses that will be tested empirically in the following:

H1: A person, who strongly supports norms of participation, will be more likely to volunteer.

H2: A person, who strongly supports norms of solidarity, will be more likely to volunteer.

3. Data, Measurement, and Methods

3.1. Data

To examine the relationship between civic norms and volunteering, we draw on data from the project Experiencing Solidarity: Values, Motives, and Practices in Caring Communities and Social Volunteering (EXPSOLIDARITY). This representative population survey was conducted in two waves between December 2022 and January 2023 using the online access panel of Bilendi & respondi. The primary objective of the survey was to gather data on social cohesion, volunteering, civic norms, motives, and political attitudes in Germany. For this study, we utilize both waves of the panel, resulting in a final sample size of approximately 1,800 respondents. In the initial sample (first wave of the panel), quotas of age, gender, and education have been applied to ensure that the sample is representative of the German population in these respects. To enhance the quality of the sample, individuals, who have answered the survey in an extremely short time ("speeders") have been excluded.

3.2. Measurement

The dependent variable in our research design is formal volunteering. Building on prior surveys like the Swiss Volunteering Survey (Freitag et al., 2016) we measure formal volunteering using the following question:

> We are now interested in all your voluntary activities that you carry out for an association or organization. We are interested in voluntary tasks and work that you carry out unpaid or for a small expense allowance. Have you carried out one or more such activities in the last four weeks?

We create a dichotomous variable based on this question that indicates whether a respondent has at least carried out one voluntary activity within the last four weeks (1 = applicable, 0 = not applicable). Figure 1 shows that around one-third of our respondents actively engaged in volunteering.

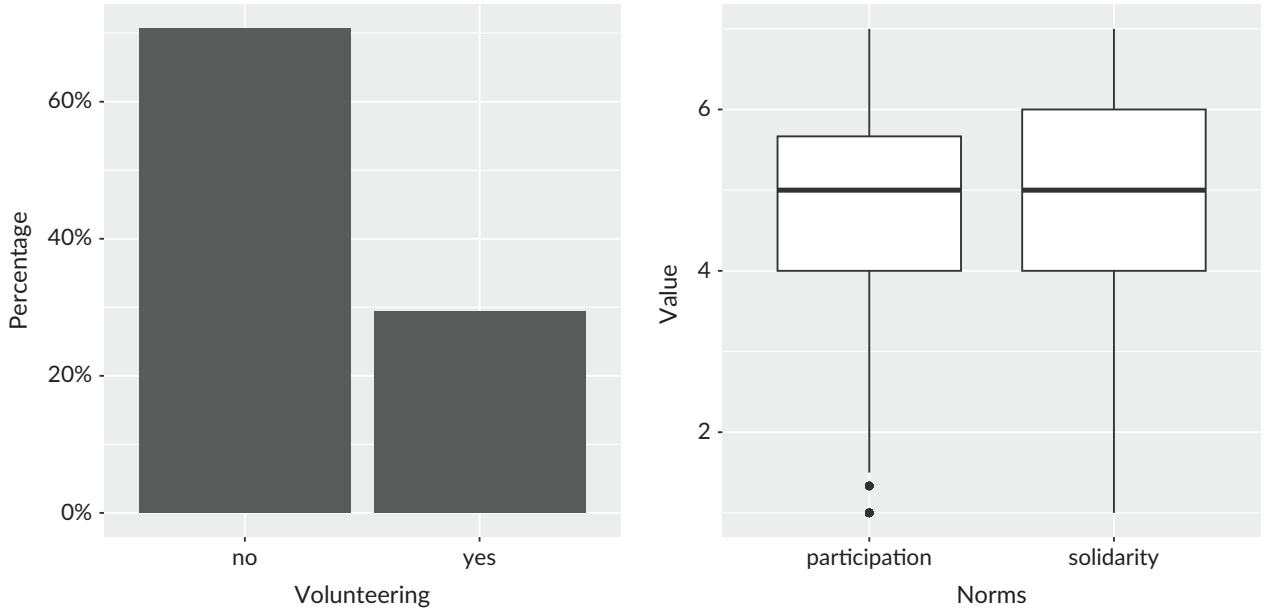

Figure 1. Distribution of the main variables. Source: Data derived from the EXPSOLIDARITY population survey.

Our main independent variables are measures of civic norms. We use the question proposed by Dalton (2008, 2021) to capture the different categories of civic norms:

> There are different opinions about what makes a good citizen. What do you think: To what extent the following things are important to be a good citizen? That someone…
>
> (a) …always votes in elections.
>
> (b) …never tries to evade taxes.
>
> (c) …always obeys laws and regulations.
>
> (d) …keeps watch on the actions of the government.

(e) …is active in social or political associations.

(f) …tries to understand the position of people with other opinions.

(g) …chooses products due to political, ethical or environmental reasons, even if they're more expensive.

(h) …helps people who are badly off in their own country.

(i) …helps people who are badly off in other countries.

Respondents rated their answers on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 7 (*absolutely important*). Since our primary focus is on participation and solidarity norms, we construct two summary indices to capture these categories. The participation index is based on items (a), (e), and (g), while the solidarity index is derived from items (h) and (i). Figure 1 shows the distribution of the two indices. The median value is 5 for both of them; the dispersion is slightly higher for norms of solidarity which show an interquartile range from the scale values 4 to 6.

In addition, our empirical models include moral and socio-structural variables as control and moderating factors. Age is measured as a continuous variable, capturing respondents' age in years. Gender is coded dichotomously (0 = male, 1 = female). Education is categorized into three levels: low (primary education), middle (secondary education), and high (tertiary education). To measure religiosity, we use the centrality of religiosity scale (Huber & Huber, 2012), which assesses religiosity independently of denominational affiliation and captures the importance that religion and religious practice has in someone's life. Specifically, we apply the version of the scale, which consists of seven items covering different dimensions of religiosity, also including meditation and non-theistic elements. It consists of the following questions that are combined into an index of religiosity:

1. How often do you think about religious issues?
2. To what extent do you believe that God or something divine exists?
3. How often do you take part in religious services?

4a. How often do you pray?

4b. How often do you meditate?

5a. How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?

5b. How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that you are in one with all?

Answers were captured on a 5-point scale: not at all, not very much, moderately, quite a bit, and very much so (for item (2)) respectively never, rarely, occasionally, often, and very often). To generate the index of religiosity, the mean value of five items is calculated. Therefore, the highest value of (4a) and (4b) is taken as well as the highest value of (5a) and (5b). The index captures religiosity as a metric scale.

3.3. Method

To analyze the relationship between civic norms and volunteering, we estimate logistic regression models. Given that the correlation between our two main independent variables—norms of participation and norms of solidarity—is approximately 0.6 (see Supplementary File, Figure S1), we estimate separate models for each independent variable. To enhance model estimation and facilitate the interpretation of the effects, all continuous variables are mean-centered.

4. Norms of Participation and Solidary Support Volunteering

Turning to the results of our empirical analysis, Figure 2 presents the average marginal effects derived from our two main regression models. In both models, volunteering serves as the dependent variable. Model 1 includes norms of participation as the main independent variable, while Model 2 includes norms of solidarity. At least three key conclusions can be drawn from the regression results. First, norms play a significant role in volunteering. A one-point increase in the participation norms index is associated with a ten-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of volunteering. The effect of solidarity norms is slightly weaker, with a one-point increase in the solidarity norms index corresponding to a six-percentage-point increase in volunteering propensity. Figure 3 presents the predicted probabilities of volunteering over the course of the two main explanatory variables. Other continuous variables in the model are set to their mean and dichotomous variables are fixed at the reference category. The left figure illustrates that an increase over the full range of support for participation norms (minimum to maximum) is related to an increase in the predicted probability of volunteering by almost 25 percentage points. An increase over the full range of support for solidarity norms is related to an increase in the predicted probability of volunteering by about 13 percentage points, as the right figure shows. Again, this indicates that participation norms are substantially more important for volunteering than solidarity norms. Second, although civic norms are important, they are surpassed by religiosity and education as value and socio-structural foundations of volunteering. The effects of these factors exceed those of civic norms in both models, suggesting that religiosity and education are stronger correlates of voluntary engagement. Third, regarding the additional control variables, we find that age is not significantly related to volunteering in our sample, while men exhibit a higher likelihood of volunteering than women. This indicates that formal volunteering in associations and organizations remains a form of civic engagement that is more appealing to men than to women. In conclusion, these initial findings emphasize the overall importance of norms of participation and norms of solidarity for volunteering, while also highlighting the dominant role of religiosity and education in shaping voluntary engagement.

Alternative model specifications support the discussed findings and indicate that norms of participation are more important for the propensity to volunteer than norms of solidarity (see Supplementary File, Table S1). If both norms are included in one model (Model 3), only the link between norms of participation and volunteering remains positively significant. This finding is confirmed if the entire model of civic norms by Dalton (2021) is included in the regression analysis (Model 4). Interestingly, this analysis shows that norms of social order are negatively related to volunteering. The correlation between norms of autonomy and volunteering is not significant.

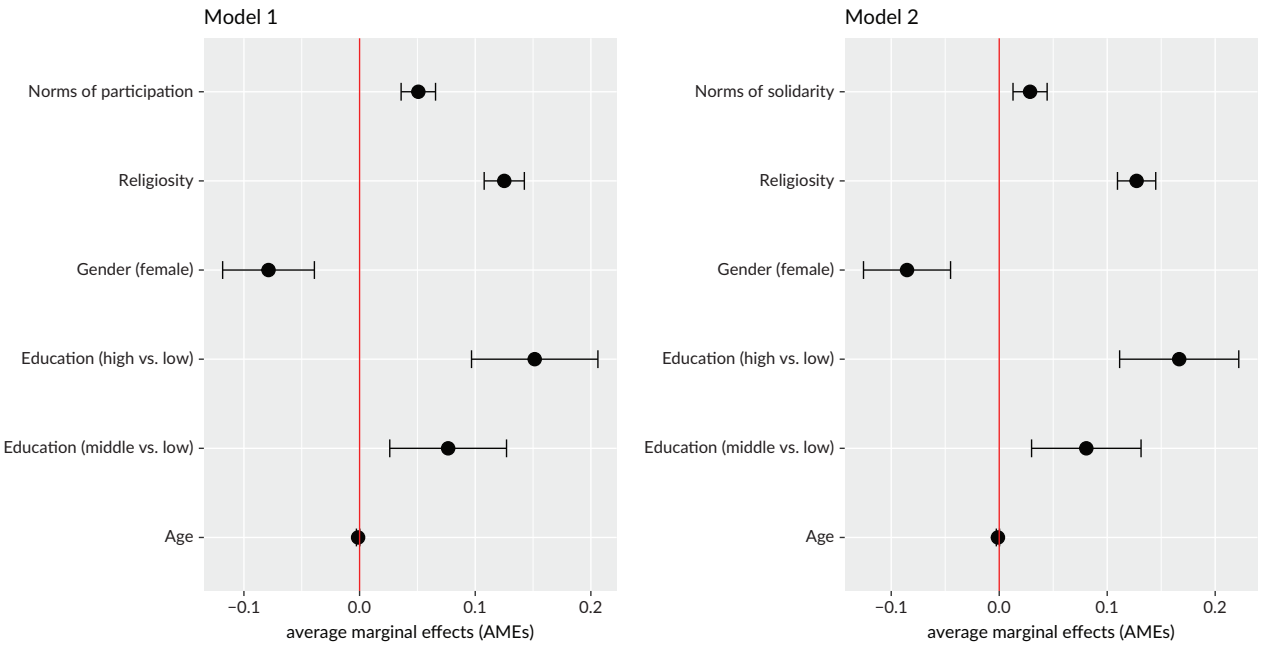

Figure 2. The link between civic norms and volunteering. Notes: The figure shows average marginal effects based on the logistic regression models presented in Table S1; black points indicate the AME and horizontal lines indicate the 95% confidence interval. Source: Data derived from the EXPSOLIDARITY population survey.

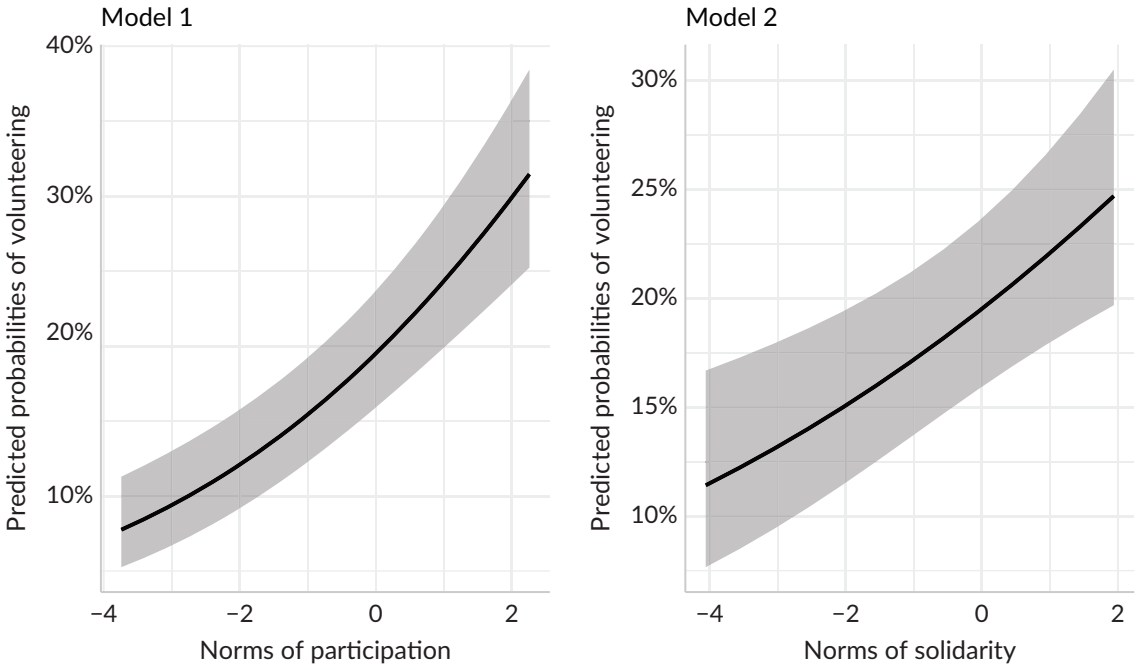

Figure 3. Civic Norms and Predicted Probabilities of Volunteering. Notes: The figure shows predicted probabilities of volunteering across the range of civic norms based on the logistic regression models presented in Table S1. Black lines indicate the prediction, grey areas indicate the 95% confidence interval. Source: Data derived from the EXPSOLIDARITY population survey.

5. Additional Analyses

In a series of additional analyses, we examine whether the relationship between civic norms and volunteering varies across different societal groups. Given the role of socio-demographic characteristics and values for both, norm conformity and volunteering, it is plausible that these factors moderate the link between civic norms and volunteering. This means that the strength and significance of this relationship could vary depending on individual characteristics.

Overall these analyses are rather explorative. Building on existing literature on norm conformity, we have reasons to expect age and gender to be relevant moderators. Regarding age, research suggests that norm conformity tends to decrease with age (Foulkes et al., 2018; Pasupathi, 1999), as older individuals appear to be less susceptible to social influence and peer pressure. Consequently, participation and solidarity norms may have a stronger association with volunteering among younger cohorts. Gender may also influence norm-compliant behavior, particularly in the context of volunteering. Women are more strongly socialized into caring and volunteer work due to both subjective self-perception and structural conditions, reflecting individual values and societal expectations. Therefore, it can be expected that women who strongly endorse participation and solidarity norms are more likely to volunteer than men (Gerstel & Gallagher, 1994; Greeno & Maccoby, 1986). In addition, we test whether education and religiosity moderate the relationship between civic norms and volunteering. Our theoretical expectations for these two factors are less clear-cut and the analyses are rather explorative.

The results are presented in Table 2. Again, separate models are estimated for participation norms (Model 5 to Model 8) and solidarity norms (Model 9 to Model 12). To enhance interpretability, we also estimated separate models for each expected interaction. However, all interaction coefficients are insignificant. This indicates that the relationship between civic norms and volunteering is not influenced by moral or socio-structural factors. While the distribution of norms may vary across groups, their effect on volunteering remains consistent. The positive impact of civic norms on voluntary activities holds across all groups.

Table 2. Civic norms, volunteering, and the moderating role of morality and social structure.

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
(Intercept)	−2.81*** (0.20)	−2.81*** (0.20)	−2.81*** (0.20)	−2.83*** (0.20)	−2.78*** (0.20)	−2.80*** (0.20)	−2.79*** (0.20)	−2.80*** (0.20)
Norms of participation	0.28*** (0.04)	0.28*** (0.06)	0.29*** (0.09)	0.36** (0.12)				
Norms of solidarity					0.15*** (0.04)	0.20** (0.06)	0.15 (0.09)	0.18 (0.11)
* Age	−0.00 (0.00)				−0.00 (0.00)			
* Gender		0.01 (0.09)				−0.10 (0.09)		
* Education (middle)			−0.02 (0.11)				−0.07 (0.12)	
* Education (high)			−0.00 (0.11)				0.08 (0.11)	
* Religiosity				−0.03 (0.04)				−0.01 (0.04)
Age	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)
Gender	−0.44*** (0.11)	−0.44*** (0.12)	−0.44*** (0.11)	−0.44*** (0.11)	−0.46*** (0.11)	−0.45*** (0.11)	−0.46*** (0.11)	−0.47*** (0.11)
Education (middle)	0.46** (0.16)	0.46** (0.16)	0.46** (0.16)	0.45** (0.16)	0.48** (0.16)	0.48** (0.16)	0.48** (0.16)	0.47** (0.16)
Education (high)	0.85*** (0.16)	0.85*** (0.16)	0.85*** (0.16)	0.84*** (0.16)	0.91*** (0.16)	0.92*** (0.16)	0.91*** (0.16)	0.91*** (0.16)
Religiosity	0.70*** (0.06)	0.70*** (0.06)	0.70*** (0.06)	0.70*** (0.06)	0.69*** (0.06)	0.69*** (0.06)	0.69*** (0.06)	0.70*** (0.06)
AIC	1927.99	1928.08	1930.05	1927.51	1944.95	1945.60	1946.69	1946.76
BIC	1971.87	1971.96	1979.41	1971.39	1988.75	1989.40	1995.97	1990.56
Log Likelihood	−956.00	−956.04	−956.02	−955.76	−964.47	−964.80	−964.34	−965.38
Deviance	1911.99	1912.08	1912.05	1911.51	1928.95	1929.60	1928.69	1930.76
Num. obs.	1781	1781	1781	1781	1764	1764	1764	1764

Notes: Levels of significance: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Source: Data derived from the EXPSOLIDARITY population survey.

6. Conclusion

This study enhances our understanding of voluntary engagement by examining the role of civic norms. While the socio-structural and sociodemographic determinants of volunteering are well-established, the influence of norms in this context remains surprisingly underexplored. Drawing on theoretical frameworks

from psychology, we posit that norms exert strong behavioral effects through processes of socialization, social learning, and self-consistency.

Using data from a representative population survey conducted in Germany, our empirical analyses demonstrate that norms of participation and solidarity are significantly positive related to voluntary engagement. Our findings confirm a stable link between civic norms and volunteering, with participation norms exhibiting a stronger association than solidarity norms. This supports the idea that individuals who internalize participatory and solidarity-based responsibilities as part of their civic identity are more likely to engage in voluntary work. However, our results also highlight that religiosity and education play an even greater role in shaping volunteering behavior than civic norms. When examining group differences, our analyses reveal that the relationship between civic norms and volunteering remains consistent across different societal groups. No significant interaction effects were found between civic norms and moral or socio-structural factors. While the distribution of civic norms may vary, their influence on volunteering is independent of factors such as age, gender, education, or religiosity. This indicates that civic norms function as a universal rather than group-specific foundation for volunteering.

At least three findings should be highlighted and might immediately lead to new research questions. First, it is important to consider the relative substance of the relationship between civic norms and volunteering. Our findings show a consistent positive relationship that one could interpret as norms being an important motivational basis for volunteering. At the same time, education and religiosity seem to be even more important. This hints at the importance of values that are probably even more fundamental than norms, as well as the importance of civic and factual knowledge that individuals acquire through education. Future research should test whether motivation, values, and knowledge are the mechanisms that are at play to better understand the complex relationship between civic norms, religiosity, education, and volunteering. Second, the substantive effect of norms of participation is bigger than the effect of norms of solidarity. Thus, to motivate individuals to volunteer, it might be particularly important to strengthen the participatory nature of it. For many, volunteering seems to be not only an act of solidarity and selfless charity, but also a means of self-realization and the development of self-efficacy. Associations and organizations should therefore give their volunteers the opportunity to shape the structures in which they carry out their voluntary work. Third, one could argue that the insignificance of the interaction effects in our study is a good sign in terms of the effectiveness of civic norms. It means that norms do not have stronger effects for certain groups, like highly educated or highly religious persons. Thus, to foster volunteering as an important aspect of social cohesion, societies should also think about how to strengthen civic norms in the first place. Different societal groups benefit from these norms in similar ways meaning that stronger norms could strengthen civic engagement across all parts of the society.

Although our study yields important findings, its shortcomings should be kept in mind and considered when thinking about future developments in this line of research. The evidence presented is based on survey data that can always be affected by social desirability, meaning that respondents answer survey questions in a way they perceive as expected by their peers. This is particularly relevant for behavioral measures, like our dependent variable volunteering, because we do not know whether respondents report actual or desired behavior. Moreover, the evidence we provide is correlation. Thus, we cannot be entirely sure about the causal direction of the relationships that prove to be significant. Based on theoretical arguments, we have good reasons to assume that causality runs from norms to behavior. Yet, we cannot rule out that civic

engagement also fosters civic norms in the respondents using cross-sectional data. Experimental or longitudinal data would be necessary to investigate the issue of causality. Finally, the geographical scope of our study is limited. We present a single-country study using German survey data. It would be desirable to test with comparative data whether our findings travel to other geographic contexts and whether country-specific factors affect the relationships. It is, for instance, plausible that the link between participation and solidarity norms and volunteering is contingent on the welfare state regime or other political institutions in a country (Ackermann et al., 2023). Finally, our survey was conducted shortly after the Covid-19 pandemic. We cannot rule out that this time, in which many associational activities have been restricted by official regulations, impedes our findings. Formal volunteering was not a typical activity for practicing solidarity norms at this time. It would therefore be interesting to see replications of our study with a greater time lag to the pandemic.

In conclusion, our findings underscore the importance of fostering civic norms as a means to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience. In light of ongoing crises, like rising political polarization, the erosion of trust in institutions, and the fragmentation of social networks, voluntary engagement can serve as a stabilizing force in democratic societies. Given that participation and solidarity norms enhance civic engagement, democratic societies should support initiatives that cultivate these norms, for instance in the field of civic education.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data and the R-script to reproduce the analyses was uploaded to the OSF-repository of the corresponding author: https://osf.io/3psfy

LLMs Disclosure

For language editing, we made use of the following LLMs: ChatGPT-4o mini and DeepL.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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