Bbeyond Journal 9 (2026) 29-33

Graph of the week

Political participation in Italy: A multidimensional analysis based on ISTAT data

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ARTICLE INFO

Editor: Angeli Alexia

Keywords:

Political Participation

Civic Engagement

ISTAT Data

Gender Gap

Digital Citizenship

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the dynamics of political participation in Italy based on comprehensive empirical data released by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). The study reveals a long-term decline in "invisible" political participation—such as staying informed and discussing political issues—between 2003 and 2024, alongside persistent gender, educational, and geographical disparities. Younger cohorts, individuals with lower educational attainment, and residents of Southern Italy exhibit significantly higher levels of democratic detachment and distrust. However, while traditional media consumption has dropped, digital channels have emerged as a vital platform for civic expression, with over twenty percent of the population actively sharing socio-political views online. Ultimately, the paper highlights how political disengagement is deeply rooted in broader socioeconomic inequalities.

Political participation serves as a vital indicator of civic health, reflecting the extent to which a community is actively involved in the democratic governance of its State.

In modern democracies, this participation manifests across a wide spectrum of engagement, from active party membership to more passive and 'invisible' forms of keeping informed.

To evaluate these dynamics within the Italian context, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) released an extensive focus report on political participation in Italy on September 17, 2025[1]. This research is based on a representative sample of approximately 24,000 households and was implemented during the first trimester of 2024, providing a comprehensive, empirical look at the current state of civic engagement.

A major structural trend highlighted by the ISTAT research is the long-term decline in what is defined as 'invisible' political participation. Such form of engagement encompasses informal actions, such as staying informed about political affairs and discussing politics in social circles.

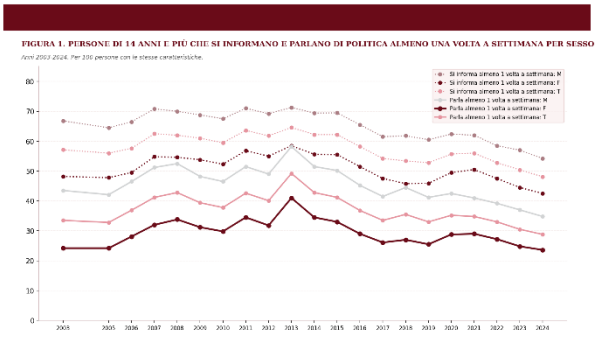


Figure 1. People aged 14 and older who follow and discuss politics at least once a week, by gender. Years 2003–2024. Per 100 people with the same characteristics. Source: ISTAT.

Between 2003 and 2024, Italy witnessed a general decrease in invisible participation, affecting both men and women, though to different degrees. In 2003, 66.7% of men and 48.2% of women regularly informed themselves about politics. By 2024, these values had declined significantly: regular political information fell by 12.6 percentage points for men and by 5.7 percentage points for women. Consequently, the historical gender gap narrowed from 18.5 percentage points in 2003 to 11.6 percentage points in 2024.

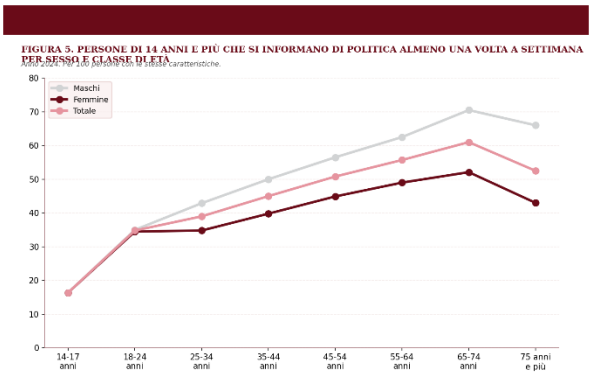


Figure 2. People aged 14 and older who follow the news about politics at least once a week, by gender and age group. Year 2024. Per 100 people with the same characteristics. Source: ISTAT

The level of engagement varies widely across different age cohorts. ISTAT data reveals that the lowest levels of political interest are concentrated among the youngest segments of the population, specifically those under the age of 24. Only 16.3% of youth aged 14 to 17 and 34.6% of young adults aged 18 to 24 inform themselves about politics at least once a week.

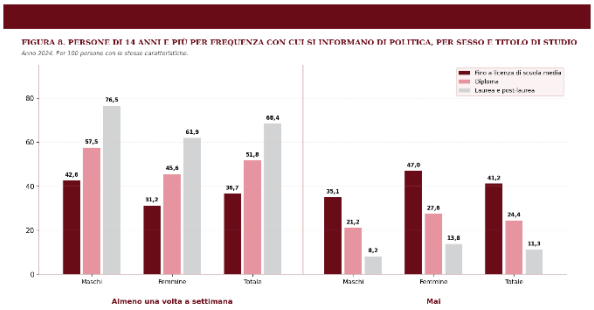


Figure 3. People aged 14 and older, by frequency of following the news, by gender, and by educational attainment. Year 2024. Per 100 people with the same characteristics. Source: ISTAT

[1] ISTAT, *La partecipazione politica in Italia*, Settembre 2025, https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Stat-Focus_Partecipaizone-politica_Anno-2024.pdf.

Education emerges as a powerful factor influencing political participation. Individuals with higher educational attainment show substantially higher interest, whereas those with lower education tend to observe politics with detached apathy, rarely seeking information or discussing political themes. Among university graduates, the share of those who regularly keep up with politics rises up to 68.4%. Yet, higher education presents an interesting paradox: instead of narrowing the gender gap, the difference in political information between men and women increases to over 14 percentage points. This means that educational advancement does not inherently erase gender disparities.

In addition to education, professional experience represents a crucial social determinant. The workplace acts as an interactive hub that fosters interpersonal relationships, discussion, and exposure to political issues. Furthermore, there is a clear vertical correlation: individuals occupying higher professional positions exhibit a stronger interest in politics and higher rates of democratic engagement.

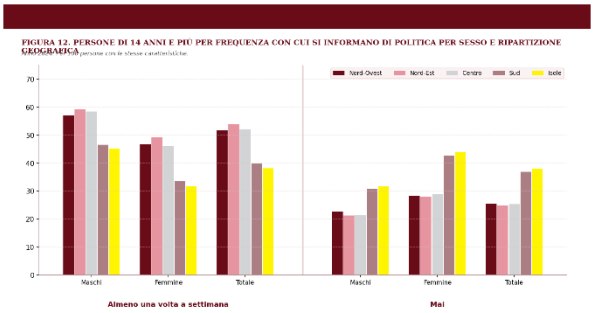


Figure 4. People aged 14 and older, by frequency of following the news, by gender, and by geographic distribution. Year 2024. Per 100 people with the same characteristics. Source: ISTAT

However, the research is distributed widely across Italy and underscores a significant geographical divide. Regions in the Center-North exhibit much higher levels of political participation than the rest of the country. A solid majority of the population in the Center-North informs themselves about politics at least once a week, compared to only around 40% in the South and Islands. The specific regions leading in the field of political participation are Friuli Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Trentino Alto Adige, and Emilia Romagna.

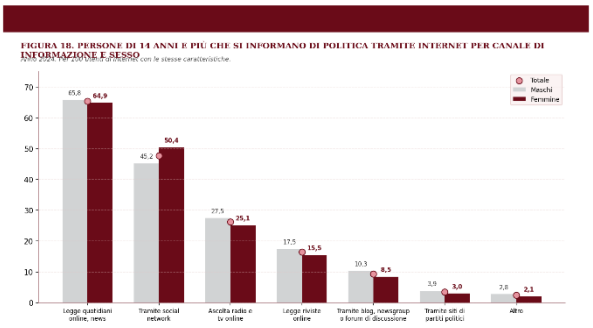


Figure 5. People aged 14 and older who get their political news online, broken down by news source and gender. Year 2024. Per 100 people with the same characteristics. Source: ISTAT

The channels through which citizens obtain political information are also shifting. Among traditional media, television remains the primary channel, followed by radio, printed newspapers, and informal circles of friends, relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances. However, comparing 2024 to 2003, both men and women have reduced their reliance on formal traditional media, while showing a slight increase in their use of informal networks.

In the digital landscape, online media has stepped in to offset some of this traditional decline. Roughly two-thirds (65.4%) of individuals who use the internet to find political information do so via online newspapers and editorial news sites. This high utilization directly compensates for the dramatic drop in the readership of traditional printed newspapers.

Social networks have also grown as a primary information channel. Notably, social networks are the only digital information channel where women display higher usage rates than men (50.4% versus 45.2%). Other

digital habits, such as online radio/TV streaming (used by one in four), online magazines, blogs, and political party web pages, draw smaller audiences.

To address the issue of democratic disengagement, the ISTAT study examines the 15 million citizens aged 14 and over who never inform themselves about politics. For nearly two-thirds of this group (63.0%), pure disinterest is the primary motive, relegating them to a state of passive disengagement. Over one-fifth (22.8%) express an active lack of trust in political institutions (active non-participation). Smaller shares attribute their detachment to politics being too complex (8.8%) or a lack of time (7.1%).

By applying a logistic regression model, ISTAT identified key variables that increase the probability of never informing oneself about politics, keeping other factors constant:

- Gender Gaps: Women have a 63% higher probability of never informing themselves compared to men.
- Education Thresholds: Having attained only compulsory schooling quadruples (4x) the probability of non-participation compared to university graduates, highlighting a strong educational divide for both genders.
- Age and Family Environment: Being young (Ages 14-34) dramatically increases the probability of non-participation. For young men, this probability is 5 times higher than for those aged 65 and over; for young women, it is double. Furthermore, living in a household where no member is politically active heavily reinforces individual disengagement.
- Well-being and Work: A low level of life satisfaction is associated with a higher probability of non-participation (odds ratio of 1.3 compared to highly satisfied individuals). Similarly, non-participation in the workforce, holding a lower job role, or holding foreign citizenship are significant predictors of political disengagement.

Such results confirm that democratic disaffection is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to simple demographics, but is heavily shaped by social stratification, family background, and subjective well-being.

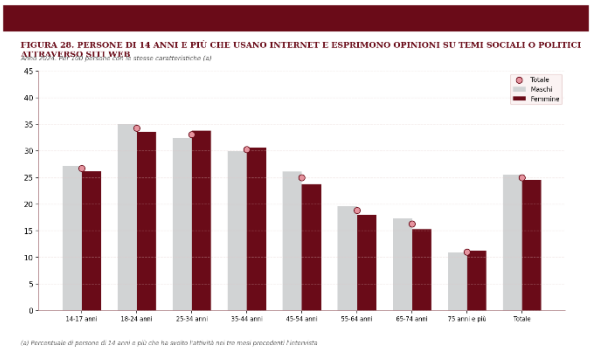


Figure 6. People aged 14 and older who use the Internet and express opinions on social or political issues through websites (e.g., blogs, social networks, etc.), by gender and age group. Year 2024. Per 100 people with the same characteristics. Source: ISTAT

While traditional avenues of participation are contracting, digital tools have opened new channels for active civic expression. Over the past decade, social media has transformed not only how citizens access information but also how they actively participate in public debate. In 2024, over 10.5 million Italian citizens expressed their opinions on social or political issues through websites and social platforms (such as X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube). This represents a notable rise from 2014, when only 6.5 million citizens engaged in online debates. This digital active citizenship now

accounts for 20.3% of the population aged 14 and over (representing one in four internet users), up from 12.2% in 2014. By providing accessible, real-time channels, these digital environments offer a key opportunity to engage broader, more diverse segments of the population, helping to bridge some of the traditional participation gaps.

The report analyzed reveals a series of main results.

First, it emerges that between 2003 and 2024, "invisible participation" decreased for both genders, and although the gap has narrowed, women continue to be less likely to get informed than men.

Among the structural gaps, it emerges that, for example, from an educational perspective, having only a middle school diploma quadruples the probability of not getting informed at all.

In addition, over 50% of the population inquires weekly in the Centre-North as opposed to 40% in the South and the Islands.

In particular, of the 15 million Italians who never get informed, 63% report complete disinterest, while 22.8% report distrust of institutions.

An interesting point that emerges compared to the past is that, in the face of the collapse of paper newspapers, 20.3% of the population aged 14 and over today express political and social opinions online.

The research highlights how low political participation in Italy is also linked to sociocultural inequalities, the family environment, and individual well-being.

It is important to emphasize, however, that thanks to digital, although traditional channels are declining, a new active citizenship is expanding, which could represent a new point to explore further.

References

ISTAT, *La partecipazione politica in Italia*, Settembre 2025, https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Stat-Focus_Partecipaizone-politica_Anno-2024.pdf.