Armenian Civic Activism in the Context of Post-Communist Political Culture

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Abstract

The landscape of Armenian civil society has recently changed. Since 2007 a new and increasingly visible actor has entered the stage: youth-driven, social media-powered, issue-specific civic activism is a new form of protest and political participation. The so-called 'civic initiatives' are loosely organised miniature social movements, mostly confined to Yerevan, but gradually gaining visibility. There have been more than 30 such initiatives in Armenia since 2007, with roughly one quarter of those resulting in a victory for the activists. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent these movements will grow in scope.

The new forms of social participation take place against the general backdrop of Armenian political culture, which suffers from a post-communist syndrome of disengagement and cynicism towards the public sphere. These values and opinions, however, are not static, and not necessarily shared by various socio-economic and demographic groups, present in the Armenian society. In order to accurately assess the odds of increased participation in social movements and other forms of non-conventional political participation, a more detailed analysis of trends and patterns of Armenian political culture is necessary. This paper looks at public opinion survey data (World Values Survey 1997 and 2011, Caucasus Barometer 2008-2013 and other nationwide representative surveys) to examine social and political participation (both actual and potential) among the Armenian population, with a focus on age cohorts, gender differences, and other socio-demographic variables. It also highlights the use of social media by various groups. The aim of the paper is to place the new Armenian social movements in the context of the political culture they operate in.

1. Introduction

Armenian civic and political life has had several phases: from dramatic and unprecedented levels of mobilisation of late 1980s and early 1990s to widespread cynicism and disengagement around the turn of the century. Some argue that civic and political participation is slowly recovering from a recession, citing 2008 presidential elections as a sign of relatively successful social mobilisation (though unsuccessful attempt at political leadership change).

An important new development in the realm of Armenian civil society is the relatively recent rise of a new type of activities and organizational structures called 'civic initiatives'. The term is a self-description used by a variety of issue-oriented, loosely horizontally structured groups of individual activists that unite around a common, often very specific cause (such as a prevention of construction in a public park, preservation of an architecturally valuable building, protests against a new mine and so on). These new forms of civic participation have emerged in 2008, have registered a number of victories since then (Ishkanian et al. 2013), and are by now an

important and highly visible element of Armenian civil society. For instance, in 2013-2014 a series of large scale well-organised protests against an unpopular pension reform caught the government and many analysts of Armenian civic activism by surprise. As a result, the implementation of the reform has been postponed for at least half a year. The Prime Minister resigned and the government was re-shuffled[1]. The most recent case of public activism was a protest against electricity price hike, mostly referred to in the English-speaking media as 'Electric Yerevan', although the protests spread beyond the capital. In June 2015 thousands of people took to the streets in a non-stop two weeks protests that blocked one of the capital's main streets, several hundred meters from the Presidential residence and the National Assembly.

With the exception of these two, usually civic initiatives are small in numbers and are often confined to Yerevan. Since 2007 there have been at least 37 such initiatives, 12 of which had at least partial success.[2] The core activists are young educated people; they use social media to organise and to spread information regarding their activities (Bagiyan 2015; Kankanyan 2015). This goes in line with existing literature on the newly emerging or transforming forms of civic and political participation in the 21st century.

The Arab Spring has highlighted the importance of social media, and drew researchers' attention to Facebook and Twitter (Breuer 2012; Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Social networks are described as a tool for political change (Raoof et al. 2013), empowering public voice of ordinary people worldwide (Kirkpatrick 2011). Internet has a positive effect on civic engagement; social media is able to facilitate collective action (Yang 2003). Some authors, on the contrary, do not consider social media as significant for movements' success, arguing that activists owe their achievements mostly to the traditional means of protests; social media is good in framing the protest, not in organising it (Metwalli 2010; Theocharis 2011; Tusa 2013; Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman 2012).

Some studies demonstrate that social networking enhances likelihood of citizen engagement in politics (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998) and impacts organisational membership and protest attendance (Schwarz 2012). Overall the importance of Internet is described as helping to build 'bridging' capital (Kavanaugh et al. 2005) which, in its turn, helps consolidating cooperative mutual engagement and promotes collective action (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000). There is also some evidence of the contrary process: some authors suggest that while usage of communication channels is on the rise, it narrows people's mobilising potential and makes them lose contact with their social environment (Nie and Erbring 2000; Van Laer 2010).

This paper looks at secondary data on various types of political and civic participation in Armenia, and contrasts it with data on use of Internet and social media. The aim is to explore the overall political culture in which new civic initiatives have to operate, and to juxtapose typical characteristics of a social media user and a potential activist, to see to what extent these two groups overlap.

2. Methodology

This paper uses data from the following surveys: the World Values Survey (third wave 1995-1998 and sixth wave 2010-2014); the Caucasus Barometer (2008-2013); Alternative Resources in Media 2011 and 2013; and the CIVICUS Civil Society Index survey 2014. All these surveys were based on nationwide representative samples of adult residents of the Republic of Armenia.[3]

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[1] Officially the resignation of the Prime-Minister was caused by other, unexplained reasons.
[2] Ongoing TCPA research project funded by Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN).
[3] ARMedia included younger respondents of 15+, WVS has 17+ respondents.

The World Values Survey (WVS) is a global research project that includes a broad range of socio-cultural and political topics. The survey is conducted periodically by local survey organisations or scholarly teams in close cooperation with and under the supervision of the WVS Association.The analysis in this paper is based on data from the third (1995-1998) and the sixth (2010-2014) waves of WVS because these are the only two waves that included Armenia. The specific dates of the WVS in Armenia were 1997 for the third wave and 2011 for the sixth wave.

The Caucasus Barometer (CB) is an annual nationwide representative survey that has been conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia by the Caucasus Research Resources Centres since 2008. Two nationwide representative surveys conducted by CRRC-Armenia in 2011 and 2013 called Alternative Resources in Media (ARMedia), focus specifically on media consumption patterns and media perceptions.

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory action-research project assessing the state of civil society in countries around the world. The CSI is initiated and implemented by local partner organisations, in partnership with the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The CSI consists of a number of assessment tools, including a nationwide representative population survey. Counterpart International Armenia was the local implementing partner of the survey. The database was requested directly from Counterpart.
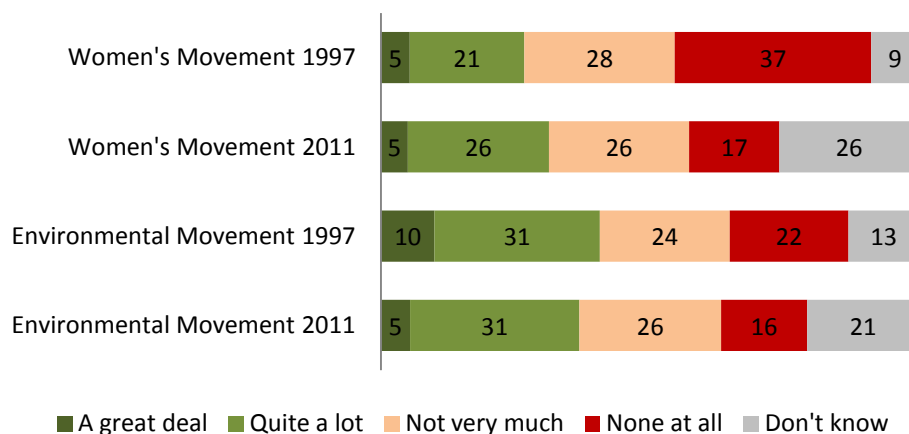
3. Descriptive Analysis of Survey Data

The first part of the analysis presents descriptive data on civic and political activism in Armenia, noting changes over time whenever possible. The purpose is to clarify the overall environment in which civic activism takes place. We assess overall culture of civic participation by looking at overall public perception of social movements, membership in various formal and informal groups and organisations, and volunteering. We then discuss political participation, because civic activism is very often not the end goal but a tool for bringing change, which, at the end of the day, is a political process, often aided by political activism. We look at overall interest in politics, conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation, the latter being the most important, since they are often utilized by civic activists. The third part of the descriptive analysis looks at the media landscape, and particularly at the use of social media as a source of information. The purpose is to assess the potential outreach of social media, which is heavily used by Armenian civic initiatives.

3.1. Civic Participation and Civic Activism

First, let us consider the overall public attitude towards civic activism. WVS survey has data on levels of confidence towards two types of social movements: environmental movement and women's movement. For both of those movements there are more negative than positive opinions: in 2011, 31% say they have either 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in women's movements as compared to 41% saying either 'not very much' or 'not at all.' For the environmental movement the percentage of positive vs. negative answers were 36% and 42%, respectively. The good news, however, is that WVS data shows a clear increase in confidence towards women's movement: the mean, measured on the scale from 1 'a great deal' to 4 'none at all' has changed from 3.05 in 1997 to 2.74 in 2011 (note that higher numbers mean less confidence, due to the way the responses are coded). Judged by the simple measure of the mean level of confidence, environmental movement has not gained in the eyes of the general public. Nonetheless, when examining the response categories in more detail, a slight shift in attitudes is noticeable: fewer people hold strong opinions (either on the positive or on the negative side), while the percentage of those undecided has increased, as depicted in Figure 1.

	A great deal	Quite a lot	Not very much	None at all	Don't know
Women's Movement 1997	5	21	28	37	9
Women's Movement 2011	5	26	26	17	26
Environmental Movement 1997	10	31	24	22	13
Environmental Movement 2011	5	31	26	16	21

Membership in various associations in Armenia remains dismally small and has even decreased compared to 1997: 7% of the population was active in at least one organisation in 2011 as compared to 17% in 1997. Art, music and educational organisations have membership of 1.5% of the population in 2011, other types of organisations have even lower numbers (see Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014:58 for the detailes based on WVS data). According to a survey conducted within the framework of CIVICUS CSI in Armenia in 2014, 2.4% of the population reported being a member of an informal civic group or a movement. No earlier data on participation in informal civic groups are available.

Unlike formal membership in associations, some informal types of civic engagement in the community seem to be on the rise in Armenia. Volunteering, particularly informal volunteering has increased in the recent years: according to CB data 31% of the Armenian population reported doing voluntary work in 2013 as compared to 22% in 2011.
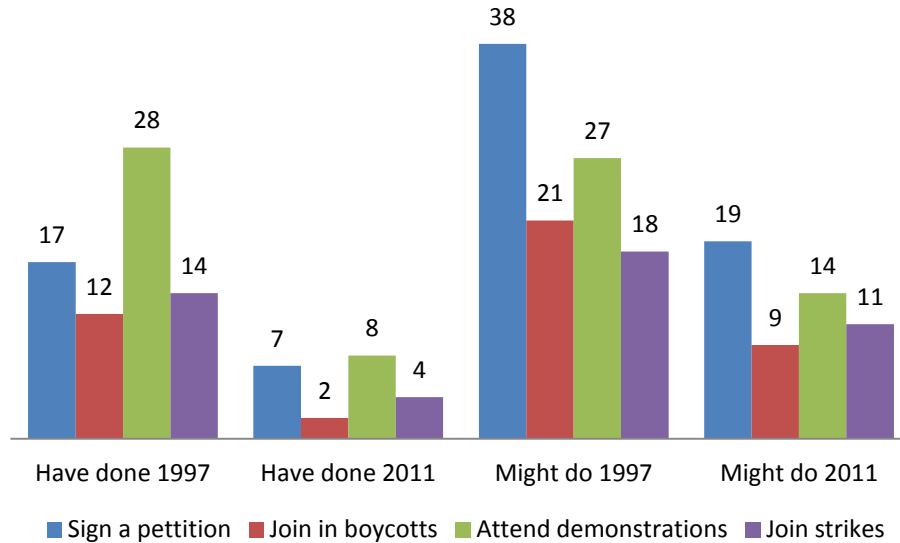
3.2. Political Participation

According to WVS data most Armenians are not interested in politics: 65% said they are either 'not very' or 'not at all' interested as compared to 35% who are either 'very' or 'somewhat' interested. Moreover, people today are a lot less interested in politics than they were in the early years of the newly independent Republic of Armenia: in 1997 13% stated that they are 'not at all' interested in politics while in 2011 the number of those completely disinterested had reached 35%.[4] While voter turnout remains relatively stable around 61% (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2015) membership in political parties and labour unions remains dismal: 2.1% and 0.6% respectively as recorded by WVS.

Non-conventional political participation in Armenia today is lower than in mid-1990s. For all the four types of non-conventional political actions measured in WVS (signing a petition, joining in boycotts, attending demonstrations and joining strikes) the percentages of both those who reported having done it and those who said they might do it have declined from 1997 to 2011, as evident from Figure 2 below.

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[4] The mean score for this question on a scale from 1 'very interested' to 4 'not at all interested' has changed from 2.47 in 1997 to 2.93 in 2011. Note that higher score means lower interest in politics.

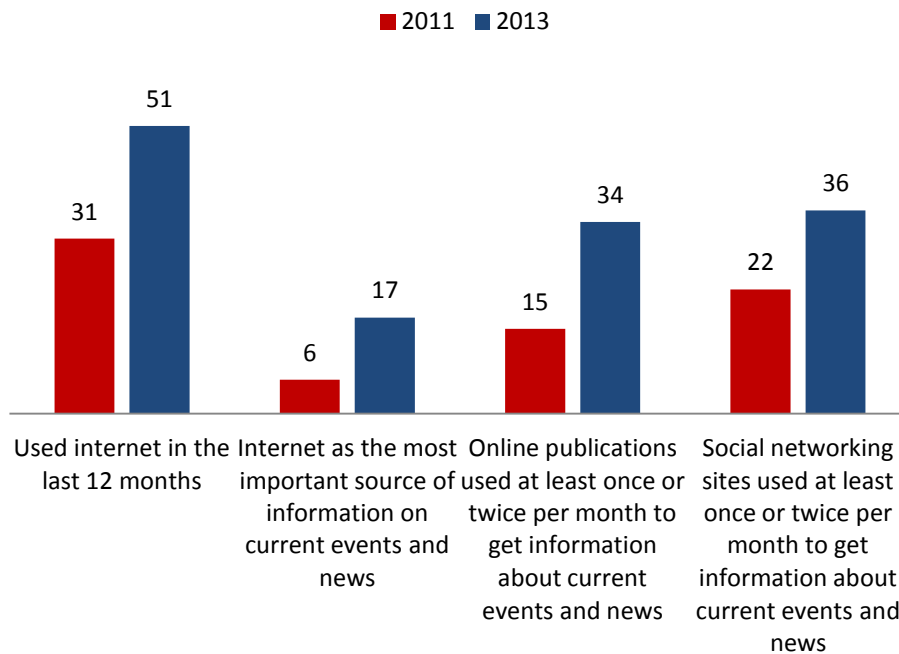**Figure 2 Political activism in Armenia (WVS, %)**

However, if we consider a more recent period in more detail, there is a reason to believe that there might be an increase in non-conventional political participation. According to CB data, the percentage of those who believe people should participate in protest actions has increased over the course of the past few years from 59% in 2008 to 70% in 2013.

3.3. Media Landscape, Use of Social Media

Since civic activism often relies on Internet and particularly on social media to spread information, mobilise support and organise some of its activities, it is important to understand Armenian online media landscape and its recent trends. ARMedia surveys provide a wealth of data in that respect.

The surveys show that the role of TV as an information source has somewhat diminished recently: 79% of people in 2013, as compared to 90% in 2011 name it as 'the most important source of information on current events and news'. The importance of Internet as a source of information has grown from 6% in 2011 to 17% in 2013. In general, Internet usage has increased from 31% of those saying they have 'used Internet in the last 12 months' to 51% reporting having done so. Online publications are used at least once or twice per month 'to get information about current events and news' by 34% of the population in 2013 as compared to 15% of the population in 2011. Use of social networking sites for the similar purpose has increased from 22% in 2011 to 36% in 2013. As Figure 3 below illustrates, the importance of Internet in general, and social networking cites in particular has grown. Trust towards these alternative sources of information has increased as well. On a four point scale (where one means no trust at all and four means 'trust very much') online media sources received an average score of 2.63 in 2011 and 2.73 in 2013. Trust towards social networking cites has increased slightly: from average 2.54 in 2011 to 2.59 in 2013.

Figure 3: Increased importance of Internet as an information source (ARMedia, %)

■ 2011 ■ 2013

	2011	2013
Used internet in the last 12 months	31	51
Internet as the most important source of information on current events and news	6	17
Online publications used at least once or twice per month to get information about current events and news	15	34
Social networking sites used at least once or twice per month to get information about current events and news	22	36

Odnoklassniki remains the most popular social networking site (with 17% and 23% of the population using it in 2011 and 2013, respectively), but Facebook is catching up: in 2011 only 3% of the population reported having a page or a public profile, while in 2013 the number grew to 12%. Among social network users the percentage of those who use it for sharing political and/or social news has increased from 16% in 2011 to 21% in 2013 (3.4% and 7.5% of the general population, respectively).

4. Inferential Analysis: Are Media Users same as Activists?

Descriptive data analysis in the previous section of the paper helps us understand the overall context in which civic initiatives operate in Armenia today and provides some comparison with recent and more remote past. This section looks at some variables in more detail. In particular, our goal was to understand who is more likely to partake in activism and to what extent potential activists are being targeted through social network information campaigns. Unfortunately, we have no single database that would contain information both on use of social media and on activism, so we are unable to directly compare these two elements. ARMedia has data on use of social networks but no data on activism, while WVS has data on activism but no data on use of social networks. To enable us to piece these two bits of information together, we project these onto standard variables that can be compared. We used basic socio-demographic variables: age, gender, education and income to depict a 'typical Armenian social network user' and compare that socio-demographic portrait with a 'typical Armenian political activist' to see whether there is a match between these two groups.

4.1. On the Receiving End of Online Information

As we have demonstrated in the descriptive section of the analysis, Internet usage is on the rise in Armenia. Assuming that civic initiatives rely on Internet, and particularly on social media, to spread information about their activities and mobilise support, who are the people on the

receiving end of civic initiatives' information campaigns? To understand that, we ran a number of statistical tests with the standard socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education and income) and four of the variables described above: use of Internet, trust towards online information sources (online publications and social networking cites in particular), and frequency of use of social networking cites to gain information about current events and news. We conducted tests for both years 2011 and 2013. Unless specified otherwise, we report results of statistical tests for the year 2013 only, while discussing a pattern that applies to both years, not to clog the paper with too many numbers.

Age: Younger people use Internet more. The average age of those who report using Internet in the past 12 months is 38 as compared to the average age of 56 for non-users for the year 2013; this difference is statistically significant.[5] Almost one third (27%) of those who reported having used Internet in the past 12 months, are between 25 and 34 years old; another 23% come from the age cohort of 15-24. Thus, people up to 34 years old make up half of the Internet users for the year 2013. There is a statistically significant correlation between age on one hand and trust both towards online media[6] and towards social networks[7] as sources of information: younger people are more trustful. The pattern is very clear and runs steadily through age cohorts, as depicted in Figure 4. Younger people are also more frequent users of social networking cites as a source to get information about current events.[8]

Figure 4: Average trust towards online information sources by age cohorts (ARMedia, mean on the scale from 1 'don't trust at all' to 4 'trust very much')
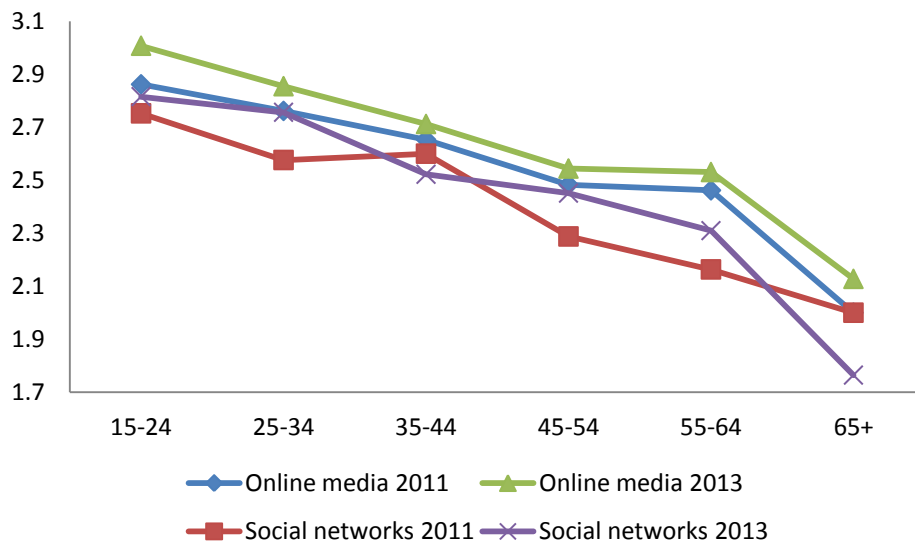
Gender has no influence of the likelihood to have used Internet in the past 12 months, neither does it influence trust towards online media and social networks. Interestingly, in 2011 males reported using social networking cites as a source of information for current events and news more frequently than females, with the difference being statistically significant.[9] By year

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[5] T-test: t(1397) = -20.997, p < 0.001 for year 2013.
[6] Pearson's correlation: r = -0.274, N = 677, p < 0.001 for year 2013.
[7] Pearson's correlation: r = -0.283, N = 647, p < 0.001 for year 2013.
[8] Pearson's correlation: r = 0.527, N = 1383, p < 0.001 for year 2013.
[9] T-test: t(1375) = -2.106, p < 0.05 for year 2011.

2013 however that discrepancy between genders has disappeared: females use social networking cites as a source of information as frequently as males.

Education influences the usage of Internet. Those who reported having used the Internet in the last 12 months have higher education.[10] For the year 2011 those more educated tend to be more trustful of online media[11], but the relationship disappears in 2013. Education does not seem to affect levels of trust towards social networks, but it does affect the frequency of using those as a source of information about current events and news: the higher the education, the more frequently the respondent will use social networking cites as a source of information.[12]

Income: Respondents from households, which perceive themselves to be relatively better off,[13] are also more likely to report having used Internet in the last 12 months.[14] They also report higher levels of trust towards online media[15] and social networks,[16] and are more frequent users of social networking cites as a source of information about current events and news.[17]

4.2. Actual and Potential Activists

Civic initiatives need popular support. If they want to attract more people to their cause, it is logical to target people that are more inclined towards taking political action. We use WVS data on four types of non-conventional political participation, discussed above (petitions, boycotts, demonstrations and strikes) as measurements of political activism. To simplify the analysis, we recalculated original variables into new dummy variables, grouping 'have done' and 'might do' response categories together thus creating a simple dichotomy between people who said they would never engage in the type of political activity mentioned and those who are willing or have already done so.

We look at each of the four types of political actions, assessing whether age, gender, education and income influence the likelihood of participation. We also note whether the picture in 2011 is different from that in 1997. Table 1 below summarizes the results of T-Test and Chi-square analysis. Only statistically significant results are reported.

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[10] T-test: t(1398) = 13.896, p < 0.001 for year 2013.

[11] Pearson's correlation: r = 0.128, N = 468, p < 0.005 for year 2011.

[12] Pearson's correlation: r = -0.272, N = 1384, p < 0.001 for year 2013.

[13] The survey does not include questions on respondent or household income levels. Instead the following question was used to estimate relative well-being of respondents: 'Please look at this card and tell me the answer which best reflects the current financial situation of your family/household? Money is not enough for food, Money is enough for the food, but not for clothes, Money is enough for food and clothes, but it is not enough for buying expensive things such as a TV and washing machine, We can afford some expensive goods (e.g., TV set or washing machine), We can afford expensive goods, to have summer vacation, to buy a car, but we cannot buy an apartment, We can buy even an apartment'.

[14] T-test: t(1373) = 14.289, p < 0.001 for year 2013.

[15] Pearson's r = 0.212, N = 661, p < 0.001 for year 2013.

[16] Pearson's r = 0.163, N = 629, p < 0.001 for year 2013.

[17] Pearson's correlation: r = -0.364, N = 1359, p < 0.001 for year 2013.

Table 1: Non-conventional political participation by socio-demographic variables, WVS

	Age	Gender	Education	Income
Petition	-	-	2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate
Boycott	1997: younger are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: men are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate
Demonstration	1997: younger are more likely to participate	1997: men are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate
Strike	1997: younger are more likely to participate	1997: men are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate

It is clear that in 1997 the distinction between those willing and unwilling to participate in non-conventional political activities was more pronounced: except petitions (for which age, gender and education did not matter) participants were likely to be younger more educated less earning males. In 2011 the differences have all but disappeared, with the exception of education, which matters for all four types of political participation now. Age and income do not matter anymore, gender matters only for participation in boycotts: men are more likely to do so.

Thus, education is the most important predictor of activism. In that sense there is a good match between the 'portrait' of an activist and a 'portrait' of a typical Internet and social networks user: more educated use Internet more often and turn to social networks to get information more often. Use of social networks as a tool to spread information and attract potential activist seems to be a good strategy to target those most likely to answer the call. In terms of other socio-demographic variables there is less of a match. For instance, we found that younger people use Internet and social networking sites as a source of information more often. But older people are just as likely to participate in demonstration as younger people. Hence, information spread through social networks misses out some potential joiners of older age. Same can be said about the income: better-off are more likely to be on the receiving end of Internet spread information, but worse-off are just as likely to partake in various types of activism. Our analysis shows that the 'right' people to target in an attempt to mobilise support are very heterogeneous, while Internet is only targeting a part of those.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The picture of Armenian political culture, depicted by the survey data discussed in this paper is not very encouraging for emerging civic initiatives, but there are a few silver linings as well. Factors that are potentially negative include low public confidence in social movements, extremely low membership in formal and informal organisations, and public attitude towards politics and political participation. People are disinterested in politics, even more so than in the early years of the newly independent Republic of Armenia. Given that attitude, it is probably a clever tactics of various Armenian civic initiatives to frame their activities as strictly non-political.

Non-conventional political participation in 2011 is less common than in 1997, but there is more heterogeneity in terms of participants: in 1997 young educated males with lower incomes were more likely to sign petitions and partake in boycotts, demonstrations and strikes. In 2011

age, gender and income levels lose their predictive power. Education still matters: the higher the education, the higher is the likelihood of participation.

Among findings that can be interpreted as good news for civic activism is the fact that confidence in social movements has increased since mid-1990s. Volunteering is on the rise. TV remains the main information source, but Internet is spreading fast. One third of the population uses social networking cites as sources of information about social and political events, making social networks a good venue for civic mobilisation. Drawing parallels between social media users and potential activists, we can see that social media reaches younger, more educated and financially better-off people, while potential activists come from all walks of life. Thus, if civic initiatives aim to mobilise larger public support, the organisers need to think how to spread information in addition to social networks, to reach those potential participants who are not users of social networks, or who are distrustful of them.

Acknowledgements

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