**Middle-class formal volunteering over time: Case of Switzerland (2006-2020)**

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**Abstract:**

**The middle class is considered the most relevant group for formal volunteering. However, the middle class is shrinking, raising the question of the consequences for volunteering in general. Based on four samples of the Swiss Volunteering Survey from 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019 containing over 5'000 individual responses, we test whether the intensity of middle-class volunteering changes over time.**

Our results show that the middle class plays an essential role as a source for formal volunteering compared to other parts of society. The relationship between the middle class and volunteering is positive, though non-significant. There are no significant changes over time in the volunteering development of the middle class.

**Keywords:**

**Formal volunteering, Middle class, Human capital, Values, Structural equation model, Swiss volunteering survey**

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# ****Introduction****

Long-term social changes are reflected in various areas, including volunteering. Studies examining the sociodemographic characteristics of volunteers confirm that volunteering results from socialization and value formation (Bortree & Waters, 2014; Son & Wilson, 2011, 2012). Accordingly, lower social inclusion indicates a lower intention to volunteer. Thus, research on whether someone volunteers for a non-profit organization (NPO) essentially concentrates on characteristics such as gender, education, affiliation to a particular religion, or belonging to minority groups. Characteristics typically defining a middle class – education, good jobs, and good family background are positively correlated with resources for formal volunteering. In particular, the middle class is described as a part of society that is very important for volunteering (Dean, 2016, 2021). These people tend to volunteer more, and the middle class is perceived as an essential reservoir for volunteering (Hustinx, Grubb, Rameder, & Shachar, 2022; Seabe & Burger, 2022).

The voluntary engagement of the Swiss population is surveyed regularly and shows an essentially constant development over the last two decades. At the same time, according to official statistics, the middle class in Switzerland has been shrinking continuously in recent years (BFS, 2021). Thus, it raises an important question of whether this sociodemographic development endangers volunteering.

In our study, we want to examine the long-term development of middle-class involvement in formal volunteering. With data available at four points in time over the period from 2006 to 2020, the Swiss Volunteering Survey (Freitag, Manatschal, Ackermann, & Ackermann, 2016; Freitag & Steffen, 2006; Lamprecht, Fischer, & Stamm, 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen, Traunmüller, Gundelach, & Freitag, 2010) offer a solid basis for the analysis of the development of volunteering. Our analysis focuses on the relationship between middle-class status and formal volunteering. Additionally, we examine the sociodemographic and psychological characteristics of those who volunteer to gain insights into trends in the development of volunteering in the middle class. Therefore, our research questions are: How important is the middle class for volunteering in Switzerland? Does the engagement of the middle class in volunteering change over time?

The structure of the article is as follows. Following this introduction, the second section provides an overview of the current discussion on willingness, availability, and knowledge and skills as factors influencing volunteering with a focus on human capital, middle class, and social values in three subsections, including the definition of the structure of the tested model. The third section summarizes data from the Swiss Volunteering Survey and the structural equation model. In the results and discussion, we present the comparison among the social classes, focusing on the middle class in the long term. The final section concludes.

# Theoretical foundation, hypotheses

## Willingness, availability, and skills/know-how for volunteering

The question of why people volunteer depends on three aspects: the willingness, know-how and skills, and availability of people who engage in volunteering. First, volunteers must be willing to participate in non-profit organizations (NPOs) activities (readiness/willingness). Internal motivation plays a significant role in volunteering (Kim, Fredline, & Cuskelly, 2018). Personal characteristics complemented and further shaped by socialization provide the foundation for people to be able and willing to volunteer. Positive engagement experiences increase volunteers' willingness to volunteer repeatedly (Zanin, Hanna, & Martinez, 2022) and even encourage others to volunteer (Güntert, Neufeind, & Wehner, 2015; Lee, Kim, & Koo, 2016). We, therefore, expect the volunteering rate to be stable across the four datasets of the Swiss Volunteering Survey. We assume that volunteering is only done when the experience is positive.

Second, volunteers need the appropriate knowledge and skills (competencies) to be helpful to an NPO (Hager & Brudney, 2011; Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, & Oppenheimer, 2018). It relates not only to the education level achieved but also to training provided by NPOs by themselves according to their particular needs and expectations.

Third, volunteers must not be prevented from engaging (availability) by external barriers (e.g., work schedule, etc.) (Hager & Brudney, 2011). Volunteers must dispose of resources they can provide for volunteering. It concerns not only time, although time is the most crucial resource for volunteering, but also financial resources and framework provided by the NPOs (Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007). The same authors (Sundeen et al., 2007) add necessary information about volunteer opportunities to know to whom and where to help.

## Human capital as a factor influencing volunteering

From that perspective, human capital plays an important role. Belonging to the middle class is usually described as an assumption that someone disposes of resources for volunteering (Einolf & Yung, 2018) and increases the chances of being asked to volunteer or actively looking for volunteering. It is because of middle class relates to disposing of human capital. It concerns the availability of time, financial resources, social contacts, and know-how to complete volunteering tasks successfully.

Regarding human capital, several characteristics play a role in volunteering. For example, homogeneous societies with higher social trust are associated with higher levels of volunteering (Rotolo & Wilson, 2012). In addition, people from majority societies feel more involved in society than others (Bortree & Waters, 2014) and thus volunteer more. Education and religion increase the likelihood that people will volunteer (Son & Wilson, 2011, 2012) because they have broader social networks and more contacts with others (see figure 1 for the structure of the model and annex 1 for the operationalization of the human capital). The initial items include the following characteristics: demographic subgroups based on ethnicity, education, or employment status (Sundeen et al., 2007), social contacts expressed as the size of the household and length of a stay at the same place, together with the intensity of religious activities, age, and gender.

**Figure 1: Tested model**

Middle class

*Availability*

Human capital

Time availability

H2

H1

*Willingness*

H3

Orientation to people and society

Formal volunteering

H4

Trust

Activism

In the frame of the availability of resources (Hager & Brudney, 2011) and the status theory and the resource-based approach to volunteering, we will test hypothesis H1. This hypothesis sounds that belonging to the middle class determines engagement in volunteering positively through human capital and time availability(for the model's graphical expression, see figure 1). For example, a study by Einolf and Yung (2018) shows larger time disposal and work experience for retired people. Time availability also concerns the unemployed (Seabe & Burger, 2022). On the other side, employed people dispose less time to volunteer. Thus, availability of non-work time expressed by working less than 50%, being retired or unemployed, support by employers,

**H1: Does the human capital increase formal volunteering through the amount of available time moderated by belonging to the middle class?**

Busy people dispose of less time to volunteer. On the other side, they can contribute financially. Thus, they are less likely to engage personally with their time and may be more generous in charitable giving.

Time and lack of resources belong to the main barriers to volunteering. Funding is involved as buying some services provides time for volunteering (for example, transport ability or child care). Sundeen et al. (2007) point out nine barriers to volunteering. These barriers relate to the ability to volunteer, such as (i) poor health, (ii) transportation issues (e.g., not owning a car), paid expenses related to volunteering (e.g., fuel consumption (Wilhide, Peeples, & Kouyate, 2016) or access to the internet (Piatak, Dietz, & McKeever, 2019)), (iv) no availability of an employer volunteer program, (v) no match of skills and activity in an NPO, and (vi) no information about that an NPO needs volunteers.

Availability issues include (vii) not having time and (viii) the need for child care. Last but not least, willingness is driven by the interest in volunteering (Fedorenko & Sun, 2015). In the long run, volunteers may change their skills and availability. Thus, in the long term, willingness is the most crucial aspect of being a volunteer or not. In our model, we express willingness as the interest of people in other individuals and society as a whole (see figure 1).

Lack of time is the most common barrier, followed by an unwillingness to volunteer and poor health. Non-volunteers cite lack of time as the main reason for their low engagement (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018; Sundeen et al., 2007), although non-volunteers have similar time constraints as volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018). About half of people start volunteering after being asked to do so (Shandra, 2017).

## Middle class

There is no single definition of the term middle class. For example, Nguyen and Romy (2017) use intervals of monthly income to define who belongs to the middle class. They define the middle class as those households with incomes between 70% and 150% of the Swiss median. Such a broad definition results in about two-thirds of the population belonging to the middle class in Switzerland. Banerjee and Duflo (2008) use the definition of Easterly (2001). They define the middle class as the population with an income between the 20th and 80th percentile.

For our purposes, we define the middle class based only on income. Adding good jobs as a combination of the definitions of Nguyen and Romy (2017) for income and Pressman (2007) for good jobs (if someone works 50% of the time or more) drastically reduces the size of the middle class (table 1).

For the analysis of the role of the middle class in volunteering, it is necessary to narrow down the term middle class to use the given answer categories of the Swiss Volunteering Survey (see table 1). We need to adjust the definition according to the frequency of responses to the income question in the Swiss Volunteering Surveys. As a result, the size of the middle class may vary slightly across surveys. The definition could be adjusted by adding categories such as good jobs (Pressman, 2007). This definition provides us with the following situation displayed in table 1 if we apply income solely as a criterion or a combination of income and good jobs. If we apply the additional education criterion, the middle class's size will be even smaller. Thus, we decided to apply the definition of Nguyen and Romy (2017) concerning only income.

**Table 1: Swiss middle class according to income and jobs**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Monthly income in household (CHF)** | | **N (2006)** | **N (2009)** | **N (2014)** | **N (2019)** |
| less than 3000 | | 911 | 645 | 389 | 466 |
| *Middle class* | *3000-5000* | *1’730* | *1’437* | *972* | *932* |
| *5001-7000* | *1’528* | *1’312* | *1’019* | *1’002* |
| *7001-9000* | *837* | *786* | *787* | *810* |
| 9001-11000 | | 484 | 420 | 523 | 604 |
| 11001-15000 | | 262 | 281 | 392 | 500 |
| more than 15000 | | 136 | 140 | 260 | 435 |
| Do not know | | 612 | 406 | 595 |  |
| No answer | | 910 | 1’063 | 784 | 253 |
| Total | | 7’410 | 6’490 | 5’721 | 5’002 |
| Disposable income | | 6’101 | 6’650 | 7’176 | 6’609 |
| 70% (Nguyen and Romy. 2017) | | 4’271 | 4’655 | 5’023 | 4’626 |
| 150% (Nguyen & Romy, 2017) | | 9’152 | 9’975 | 10’764 | 9’914 |
| The middle class in the population (%, based only on income) | | 69.6 | 70.4 | 64.0 | 57.8 |
| The middle class in the population (%, based on income and job) | | 31.7 | 12.0 | 28.5 | 28.3 |

*Source: BFS, the lower and upper values in the surveys only sometimes fit into the categories of the 150% defined by Nguyen and Romy (2017). For consistency across all four time periods, we used the three categories that cover the particular middle-class income*

The second hypothesis tested (H2) is whether belonging to the middle class (defined by income) influences participation in volunteering (see figure 1).

**H2: Does belonging to the middle class increase chances of becoming a volunteer?**

## Social values and volunteering

Volunteering also relates to prosocial values and identities. People with prosocial values are more motivated and more likely to volunteer (Shantz, Saksida, & Alfes, 2014). Identity, values, and mainly belonging to a community or a group of people belong to attributes of supporting volunteering (Grönlund, 2011). As willingness to volunteer, we use a concept of orientation to society and people. It covers a positive orientation toward other individuals (representing values and orientation to help others) and a positive orientation toward society as a whole (representing belonging to a community and being interested in what is happening in society).

We will test the hypothesis (H3) that people’s orientation toward society and other people increases participation in volunteering moderated by belonging to the middle class. For example, people with disabilities are generally less likely to volunteer because they are generally less likely to be approached by non-profit organizations to volunteer. In contrast, they engage in informal volunteering similarly to people without disabilities (Shandra, 2017). In the case of volunteers that engage ten or more hours weekly in an NPO, Einolf and Yung (2018) add that personal values are crucial for such a high engagement, and these people did not need to be asked to volunteer. Thus, willingness to volunteer depends on the personality of the volunteers. People with fitting characteristics would rather become volunteers than have someone ask them to volunteer.

For Switzerland, Ackermann (2019) used the five-factor model of personality. This model includes openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability. It tests the effects of personality on formal (for NPOs), informal (at home or in the neighborhood), and online volunteering. We use a similar approach to test individuals' orientation toward society and other individuals and their effects on formal volunteering.

We operationalize this construct by available data from the Swiss Volunteering Survey. The first part of the concept relating to society (interest in society as a whole) is operationalized through trust in political institutions of all kinds and engagement to help others.

The second part of the concept relating to a positive orientation toward other individuals is operationalized through trust. It concerns whether people trust strangers, friends and relatives, how often they meet them, and whether they are social, communicative, and friendly to others. The issues of activism (an active interest in politics, participating in referendums, and voting in elections) are used as separate factors because they can relate to a split society. Thus, hypothesis H3 is:

**H3: Does orientation toward society and people moderated by belonging to the middle class increase formal volunteering?**

Moreover, we work with trust as a factor in engagement in volunteering. Trust belongs to the cornerstone of social capital (Putnam, 1993), which is understood as trust, norms and mutual support. It also reflects a general trust in persons and institutions (Kneidinger, 2010, p. 25). Societies with a high degree of social capital are those of higher voluntary engagement, and these can cope with problems better than those with low social capital (Hollenstein, 2013, p. 46).

**H4: Does trust in other people moderated by belonging to the middle class increase formal volunteering?**

We summarize the hypotheses in table 2 and figure 1.

**Table 2: A summary of hypotheses**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| H1 | ↑ Human capital → ↑ Availability of time (moderated by the middle class) → ↑ Volunteering |
| H2 | ↑ Middle class → ↑ Volunteering |
| H3 | ↑ Positive orientation toward society and other people (moderated by the middle class) → ↑ Volunteering |
| H4 | ↑ Positive trust toward other people (moderated by the middle class) → ↑ Volunteering |

# Methods

## Data

For the proposed study, we use the data from the four rounds of the Swiss Volunteering Survey (Freitag et al., 2016; Freitag & Steffen, 2006; Lamprecht et al., 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen et al., 2010). All these datasets are publicly available in the FORS database (https://forscenter.ch).

The Swiss Volunteering Survey is a survey that was repeated in four periods 2006, 2009, 2014, and 2019 (publishing results in 2006, 2010, 2016, and 2020). These surveys were conducted on four different samples, so they do not represent panel data. However, all four surveys contained the same groups of questions with only little variations. These subgroups of questions cover (i) living situation, trust, and political attitudes; (ii) segmentation concerning formal and informal volunteering; (iii) motivation and incentives for volunteering; (iv) socio-demographical information. The core of the survey contains the same questions allowing the results to be examined at different points in time.

From the list of questions of the Swiss Volunteering Survey, we use the variables from the answers of all respondents to define our constructs in the model (see Annex 1). The data from the Swiss Volunteering Surveys sometimes differ in the structure of the information collected (see the differences in Annex 1). In the processing, we use all available and relevant variables across all Swiss Volunteering Survey data collections (Freitag et al., 2016; Freitag & Steffen, 2006; Lamprecht et al., 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen et al., 2010) fitting theoretically to the constructs tested in the models. If variables are only available for some of the Swiss Volunteering Survey, we will use those as well but will point out that fact when discussing the results.

## Methods

To test the causal chains behind the relationship between the middle class and volunteering and to estimate the intensity of the influence of the concepts of willingness and availability, we apply structural equation modeling in its partial least square form (PLS-SEM). We applied it to selected variables from the Swiss Volunteering Survey Switzerland dataset (see Annex 1). We define volunteers as those who volunteered in the last four weeks or at any time previously.

SEM analyzes the relationships between latent constructs in the model to look for causal relationships between them, including mediation and moderation effects. For methodological information, see Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2014); or Mehmetoglu and Venturini (2021). This approach has already been applied in volunteer and third-sector research (Hengevoss & von Schnurbein, 2022; Hersberger‐Langloh, Stühlinger, & von Schnurbein, 2020; Son & Wilson, 2011, 2012). In our analysis, we aim to test the model displayed in figure 1.

We construct reflective latent variables (marked as ovals) human capital, time availability, orientation to society and people, trust, and activism. Their initial composition is described in annex 1, and composition after running optimization of the models in table 4. In the models, we also use two single variables (marked as rectangles). First, the middle class (or belonging to a group with a lower income or belonging to a group with a higher income) is defined as described in table 1. Second, formal volunteering represents people who volunteered within the last four weeks or, if not within the last four weeks, but previously.

For our analysis, we use the *plssem* package in STATA 17 SE (Venturini & Mehmetoglu, 2019). This package applies standardization of variables used as items when estimating latent constructs. This package estimates the model in three steps. First, latent variables' scores are iteratively estimated for each latent variable. We used bootstrapping to estimate the reflective latent variables by applying 7'500 iterations for each latent construct with the imputation of missing values (using k-means nearest neighbor for imputation). Second, measurement model parameters (weights/loadings) are estimated. Third, the package applies regression analysis using the ordinary least squares method to estimate the effects among the variables in the model.

From a systemic perspective, our research will reveal whether there are more fundamental changes (with an awareness of the limitations of internal validity) that may affect the success of non-profit organizations in attracting middle-class volunteers.

The model shown in figure 1 represents the general shape of the model. The definition of latent constructs can differ (see annex 1) across the four Swiss Volunteering Survey datasets according to the variables available and used and the final structure of the tested model. Comparing the results from the four Swiss Volunteering Surveys allows us to identify differences in volunteer engagement within the 2006-2020 period. The comparison will also allow us to test whether there are societal changes in volunteering in Switzerland.

# Results and discussion

## Descriptive statistics

First, we compare volunteering size in the middle class and the other parts of society. Table 3 shows that participation in volunteering was always relatively higher in the middle class compared to other parts of society, except in 2014. The share of volunteering middle class decreased from 81.4% in 2006 to 66.8% in 2014. Then, it increased again. In comparison, the other parts of society volunteered at a decreasing pace from 2006 till 2014. Then the trend changed, and the data reports an increase in volunteering in 2019.

**Table 3: Comparison of volunteering in the middle class with other classes**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Middle class 2006 | | | Middle class 2009 | | | Middle class 2014 | | | Middle class 2019 | | |
| yes | no | total | yes | no | total | yes | no | total | yes | no | total |
| Volunteering | yes | 1´994 | 783 | 2´777 | 976 | 339 | 1´315 | 1´842 | 1´071 | 2´913 | 1´960 | 1´425 | 3´385 |
| % | 81.4 | 79.8 | 81.0 | 74.2 | 69.6 | 73.0 | 66.8 | 69.3 | 67.7 | 71.6 | 71.2 | 71.4 |
| no | 455 | 198 | 653 | 339 | 148 | 487 | 914 | 475 | 1´389 | 776 | 577 | 1´353 |
| % | 18.6 | 20.2 | 19.0 | 25.8 | 30.4 | 27.0 | 33.2 | 30.7 | 32.3 | 28.4 | 28.8 | 28.6 |
| total | 2´449 | 981 | 3´430 | 1´315 | 487 | 1´802 | 2´756 | 1´546 | 4´302 | 2´736 | 2´002 | 4´738 |
| % | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source: Own calculations based on Freitag et al. (2016); Freitag and Steffen (2006); Lamprecht et al. (2020); Stadelmann-Steffen et al. (2010), Middle class defined according to income size, volunteering means being a volunteer last four weeks or anytime previously.*

Second, we shortly describe the consistency and reliability of the constructs in our model. Table 4 shows the variables we used in constructs and their quality measured by Cronbach's alpha and Dillon-Goldstein's rho. Note that when using Cronbach's alpha, an assumption that all items are equally important is present, while this condition is relaxed for Dillon-Goldstein's rho. We also need to point out that we face a trade-off. We can either include all theoretically justified variables in the models at the cost of making the model weak or focus on selecting variables with a strong association with the latent constructs, even if a relatively small number of them remain in the models. In our case, we chose the latter approach, except education in the latent construct of human capital. We refer those readers interested in comparing the original list of theoretically justified variables and the remaining variables in the models to table 4 and annex 1. We dropped most of the items in the constructs to improve the reliability and validity of the model. Only in the case of human capital did we leave education at the university level in the model at the cost of worsening the overall reliability of the model, as we see education as an essential item defining human capital.

The reliability of the constructs is at a reasonable level. The Dillon-Goldstein's rho is only four times of 17 cases lower than 0.7 (see table 4), while Cronbach's Alpha is almost always below the threshold of 0.7. According to that, an assumption that all items are equally important was not present, while Dillon-Goldstein's rho confirmed the reliability of the constructs under the condition of unequal importance of the items (Mehmetoglu & Venturini, 2021).

**Table 4: Descriptive statistics for the tested models**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Construct | Items | 2006 | | 2009 | | 2014 | | 2019 | |
| Model | Factor loading | Model | Factor loading | Model | Factor loading | Model | Factor loading |
| HUMAN CAPITAL | work (Y/N) | α=0.424, AVE=0.482 DG rho=0.681 | 0.869 | α=0.550, AVE=0.730, DG rho=0.825 | 0.842 | α=0.342, AVE=0.447, DG rho=0.659 | 0.886 | α= 0.432, AVE=0.479, DG rho=0.680 | 0.874 |
| age | 0.820 | 0.853 | 0.721 | 0.807 |
| household size |  | 0.629 |  |  |
| university | 0.133 | 0.092 | 0.186 | 0.139 |
| TIME | pensioned | α=0.426, AVE=0.609, DG rho=0.746 | 0.945 | α=0.648, AVE=0.578, DG rho=0.801 | 0.881 | α=0.705, AVE=0.772, DG rho=0.871 | 0.880 | α=0.685, AVE=0.758, DG rho=0.862 | 0.903 |
| work less than 50% | 0.570 | 0.634 | 0.878 | 0.838 |
| employer support |  | 0.746 |  |  |
| TRUST | trust in people generally | a one-item construct | 1.000 | α=0.706, AVE=0.528, DG rho=0.816 | 0.765 | α=0.529, AVE=0.679, DG rho=0.809 |  | α=0.774, AVE=0.584, DG rho=0.843 |  |
| trust in friends |  | 0.594 | 0.844 | 0.778 |
| trust in neighbors |  | 0.731 |  | 0.888 |
| trust in strangers |  | 0.801 | 0.803 | 0.851 |
| trust in relatives |  |  |  | 0.469 |
| ACTIVISM | interest in politics | α=0.560, AVE=0.685, DG rho=0.811 | 0.736 | one-item construct | 1.000 | α=0.546, AVE=0.680, DG rho=0.808 | 0.738 | α=0.463, AVE=0.650, DG rho=0.788 | 0.816 |
| participation in elections | 0.910 |  | 0.903 | 0.797 |
| ORIENTATION TO SOCIETY AND PEOPLE | meeting friends | α=0.000, AVE=0.475, DG rho=0.636 | 0.554 | one-item construct | 1.000 | α= 0.179, AVE=0.370, DG rho=0.621 | 0.808 | α=0.831, AVE=0.399, DG rho=0.763 | 0.836 |
| solidarity with others/help | 0.802 |  |  |  |
| communicative |  |  | 0.449 |  |
| trust in government |  |  |  | 0.596 |
| trust in the political system |  |  | 0.506 |  |
| trust in parliament |  |  |  | 0.576 |
| trust in canton |  |  |  | 0.572 |
| trust in municipality |  |  |  | 0.531 |
|  | | GoF=0.772  N=7'410 | | GoF=0.519  N=6'490 | | GoF=0.638  N=5'721 | | GoF=0.703  N=5'002 | |

*Notice: Reliability measures (*α *= Cronbach’s alpha, DG rho = Dillon-Goldstein’s rho); AVE = Average Variance Explained, GoF = Relative Goodness of Fit*

The information on how much variance on average the construct capture in its associated items (AVE) is higher than the required value of 0.5 in 11 cases of 17 constructs (three of those not fitting the requirement are because of including a university degree as an item in them). The models achieved acceptable values of the relative goodness of fit (two of four are above 0.7, and one is almost at 0.7).

## Role of human capital in volunteering

Human capital influences the other latent variables in our models. The impact of human capital on time availability is negative in our estimations (except for the year 2009). An explanation for this is that people with higher human capital work more, thus having less free time available. The relationship of human capital to whether people care about others and society comes out positive for three periods, except in 2006. Moreover, a significant negative relationship is between activism and human capital. Activism is connected with an interest in politics, but at its core, it can divide society.

The relationship between human capital and the middle class was positive for 2006, 2009, and 2019, while it was negative in 2014 but significant only for 2006 and 2019 (see table 5). Thus, in general, people belonging to the middle class possess human capital.

The human capital effect on volunteering is indirect in our models, mediated by the availability of resources (time) and willingness to volunteer. The analysis confirms the direct and positive effect of time availability on volunteering in the years 2009 and 2019 (see table 5, the other two estimates are insignificant) and the amount of available time moderated by the middle class (H1) only for the year 2014.

**Table 5: Estimations of latent constructs’ effects on volunteering**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Time | Trust | Orientation to society | Activism | Middle class | Volunteering |
| 2006 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Human capital | -0.776\*\*\* | -0.021\* | -0.183\*\*\* | -0.134\*\*\* | 0.451\*\*\* |  |
| Availability of time |  |  |  |  |  | 0.027 |
| Trust |  |  |  |  |  | 0.063\*\*\* |
| Activism |  |  |  |  |  | 0.095\*\*\* |
| Orientation to society |  |  |  |  |  | -0.007 |
| Middle class (MC) |  |  |  |  |  | 0.013 |
| Time\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.052 |
| Trust\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.001 |
| Activism\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.002 |
| Orientation to society\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.001 |
| 2009 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Human capital | 0.826\*\*\* | -0.043\*\* | 0.038\*\* | -0.053\*\*\* | 0.004 |  |
| Availability of time |  |  |  |  |  | 0.150\*\*\* |
| Trust |  |  |  |  |  | 0.102\*\*\* |
| Activism |  |  |  |  |  | 0.174\*\*\* |
| Orientation to society |  |  |  |  |  | 0.092\*\*\* |
| Middle class (MC) |  |  |  |  |  | 0.016 |
| Time\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.010 |
| Trust\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.004 |
| Activism\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.021\* |
| Orientation to society\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.002 |
| 2014 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Human capital | -0.879\*\*\* | 0.025\* | 0.102\*\*\* | -0.051\*\*\* | -0.097\*\*\* |  |
| Availability of time |  |  |  |  |  | -0.007 |
| Trust |  |  |  |  |  | 0.130\*\*\* |
| Activism |  |  |  |  |  | 0.283\*\*\* |
| Orientation to society |  |  |  |  |  | -0.005 |
| Middle class (MC) |  |  |  |  |  | 0.003 |
| Time\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.024\* |
| Trust\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.033\*\* |
| Activism\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.003 |
| Orientation to society\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.010 |
| 2019 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Human capital | -0.827\*\*\* | -0.101\*\*\* | 0.060\*\*\* | -0.201\*\*\* | 0.398\*\*\* |  |
| Availability of time |  |  |  |  |  | 0.126\*\*\* |
| Trust |  |  |  |  |  | 0.154\*\*\* |
| Activism |  |  |  |  |  | 0.239\*\*\* |
| Orientation to society |  |  |  |  |  | 0.017 |
| Middle class (MC) |  |  |  |  |  | 0.128 |
| Time\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.135 |
| Trust\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | 0.010 |
| Activism\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.010 |
| Orientation to society\*MC |  |  |  |  |  | -0.018 |

*Note: Significance levels: \*p <0.1, \*\*p <0.05, \*\*\*p <0.01.*

From this perspective, it is logical that NPOs turn to people with perceived high human capital, including the middle class (Dean, 2016, 2021), as they dispose of resources. NPOs ask these people for charitable donations as well as for help in the form of volunteering. However, time is a limited resource in the middle class. If people with higher human capital have good jobs, they likely have enough money but only a little time because they spend it at work. This conclusion complies with some other research (see, for example, Grizzle, 2015, for both income and time availabilities). An explanation lies in the lack of time, as it appears to be the most significant reason for someone to refuse to volunteer (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018; Sundeen et al., 2007). Thus, it is understandable that these people can participate in philanthropic activities, but asking them to volunteer may only sometimes be met with a positive response.

## Middle class and volunteering

In the case of our core hypothesis (H2), whether belonging to the middle class increases the chances of becoming a volunteer, we cannot confirm this hypothesis as the results are statistically insignificant. On the other side, the estimates are consistently positive for all years.

We also tested the models for the remaining groups of the population. The results (which we present as a comparison of volunteering of middle- and other classes in table 6) confirm the theoretical assumption that the low-income (high-income) group dispose of less (more) of human capital and takes part in volunteering accordingly.

The estimates support the role of the middle class in volunteering. Estimates for people with lower income are negative and significant for all four samples. Estimates of volunteering in people with higher income are inconclusive – in three cases, they are positive (and even significant in 2006) but negative in 2009. It supports the theoretical expectations of the importance of the middle class in volunteering (Dean, 2016, 2021; Hustinx et al., 2022; Seabe & Burger, 2022).

**Table 6: Comparison of volunteering across societal classes**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Lower income** | **Middle-class income** | **Higher income** |
| 2006 | -0.035\*\* | 0.013 | 0.023\* |
| 2009 | -0.034\*\* | 0.016 | -0.016 |
| 2014 | -0.031\*\* | 0.003 | 0.009 |
| 2019 | -0.058\*\*\* | 0.126 | 0.024 |

*Note: Significance levels: \*p <0.1, \*\*p <0.05, \*\*\*p <0.01.*

The estimated size of the influence of the middle class on formal volunteering is relatively weak for all four periods, but we see an increasing tendency for volunteering (from 0.013 in 2006 to 0.126 in 2019). This increasing contribution of the middle class to volunteering and the increasing share of volunteers in the middle-class population in 2019 led to a compensation of the volume of volunteering, contrasting to decreasing size of the middle class in Switzerland.

## Values, personality, and volunteering

Values represented in latent constructs of orientation toward others and society and trust are not significant indicators of whether people engage as volunteers. First, two negative (2006, 2014) and two positive (2009, 2019) estimates of the relationship between orientation towards individuals and society and involvement in volunteering emerge. The moderation effect of the middle class on volunteering through an orientation toward society and people is always insignificant, though positive, except in 2019. Thus, we cannot confirm hypothesis H3.

Second, a different picture appears in the case of trust. It is positively correlated (and significant) with volunteering in all four datasets. Moreover, the moderation effect of the middle class was positive and significant in 2014 (but insignificant and with various relationships in other data samples, see table 5). Thus, hypothesis H4 is confirmed for the year 2014.

From this perspective, our results confirmed the high relevance of willingness to volunteer and especially the importance of trust. The direct effect was positive and significant for trust and orientation toward the society in 2009. A significant moderation effect of the middle class appeared in 2009 on trust. The other estimates were insignificant. Willingness to volunteer depends on personality and values representing belonging to a community and the existence of social capital in society. This finding confirms the theoretical expectations that trust in society correlates with higher volunteering (Hollenstein, 2013, p. 46; Kneidinger, 2010, p. 25; Putnam, 1993). Individual approaches to helping others, especially trust in others, represent values confirming previous research in this field (Ackermann, 2019; Einolf & Yung, 2018; Shantz et al., 2014). People with prosocial values are more motivated and more likely to be engaged in volunteering. Identity, values, and especially belonging to a community or a group of people belong to attributes of supporting volunteering (Grönlund, 2011).

We summarize the results concerning hypotheses in table 6.

**Table 6: Confirmation and rejection of hypotheses**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| hypothesis | Year | | | |
| 2006 | 2009 | 2014 | 2019 |
| H1 | + | - | ✓ | + |
| H2 | + | + | + | + |
| H3 | + | + | + | - |
| H4 | - | - | ✓ | + |

*Notes: ✓ = hypothesis confirmed, + = insignificant estimation, but the estimations are in an expected direction, - = insignificant estimation, and the estimations are in an opposite direction than expected.*

# Conclusions

In our research, we aimed to answer the questions on how important is the middle class for volunteering in Switzerland and whether the engagement of the middle class in volunteering changes over time.

Our study contributes to the understanding of volunteering in three aspects. The first of our results is that the middle class is an essential source for formal volunteering in comparison to other social classes. Our results show a positive, though insignificant relationship between the middle class and volunteering. As the main reason for this result, we see the defining factor of the middle class – having a good job that makes the time being unavailable for volunteering. The involvement of this class may be limited by the fact that these people are employed and do not have enough time available.

The second aspect points out the role of the middle class in volunteering compared to other classes. The importance of the middle class is evident, especially in comparison to the people with lower income, where the estimates of this group's contribution to volunteering were consistently negative.

The third finding concerns a positive orientation toward others and society, and trust. Especially trust plays a crucial role in increasing the chances that people become volunteers. When middle-class people are interested in society, and other people and they trust other people, they also tend to volunteer.

Concerning the development of volunteering in the middle class over time, there are no significant changes across the four periods investigated in our research. We have seen decreasing trends in volunteering of the middle class between 2006 and 2014, but this trend changed in 2019, which also compensates decrease in the size of the middle class.

We are aware of the limitations of our research. We tested volunteering in four periods, but the same set of variables to construct latent variables was not available for all of them. This issue mainly concerns the latent variables of orientation toward others and society. Although we suppressed some of the items when optimizing the validity of the models, the models in four years still would need to apply the same items in constructs all the time.

The second issue concerns the definition of belonging to the middle class. We have used a definition that has helped us apply the same approach in all four data samples. However, the categories do not precisely follow the income categories used in definitions of the middle class. Thus, further research should aim at the precision of defining the middle class and its relationship to volunteering through resources and collecting panel data, as our research is based on four separate datasets.

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**Annex 1: Variables used in the structural equation modeling**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Latent variables** | **Variable** | **Information about content** | **Numbering of the variables in the Swiss Volunteering Survey** | | | |
| **2006** | **2009** | **2014** | **2019** |
|  | Formal volunteering | Volunteered in last four weeks (q10) or any time previously (q11) | q10 and q11 | q10 and q11 | q10 and q11 | q100 and q110 |
|  | Middle-class income (selected three categories) | Categories as displayed in table 1 | sd23 | sd23 | sd23 | sd26 |
| Orientation toward society and people | Communicative | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  | q05a2 |  |
| Trust in government | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  |  | q02201 |
| Trust in parliament | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  |  | q02202 |
| Trust in courts of justice | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  |  | q02203 |
| Trust in canton | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  |  | q02204 |
| Trust in municipality | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  |  | q02205 |
| Trust in media | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  |  | q02206 |
| Trust in political institutions | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) | q08 |  | q0201 |  |
| Engagement in helping other people | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) | q29.1 | q29.1 | q29.1 | Q290\_01 |
| Solidarity among people | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  | q03a |  |
| Cohesion among generations | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  |  | q03a6 |  |
| Frequency of meeting with friends | Categories from: 1-never, 7-every day | q01 | q01 | q01 | q010 |
| Trust | Trust in strangers | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) | q02 | q02 | q02a2 | q020 |
| Trust in neighbors | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  | q02.01.03 |  | Q021\_03 |
| Trust in friends | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  | q02.01.02 | q02a | Q021\_02 |
| Trust in relatives | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) |  | q02.01.01 |  | Q021\_01 |
| Activism | Taking part in referendums | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) | q0602 |  | q04\_1 to \_12 |  |
| Regular voting in elections | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) | q0601 |  | q03a5 | Q040\_01 |
| Interest in politics | Intensity from 0 (min) to 10 (max) | q05 | q05 | q06 | q060 |
| Availability of time | Support by the employer | Categories: 1 – yes, 0 - no | sd20 | sd20 | sd20 | sd20 |
| Time of commuting to work | In minutes from 0-480 | sd19 | sd19 | sd19 |  |
| Being pensioned | If not employed (sd14), being pensioned (Sd15) | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 |
| Being unemployed | If not employed (sd14), being unemployed (Sd15) | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 |
| Being home | If not employed (sd14), being home (Sd15) | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 | sd14 and sd15 |
| Working at 50% max. | Employed only partly (up to 50%) | sd14 | sd14 | sd14 | sd14 |
| Human capital | Education | Categories from 1-no education, 14-university (the highest value depends on how many categories used the survey) | sd21 | sd21 | sd21 | sd21 |
| university | 1-university or universities of applied sciences, 0 - other | sd21 | sd21 | sd21 | sd21 |
| Employed (Y/N) | Employment or freelance work no matter of what size (1/0) | sd14 | sd14 | sd14 | sd14 |
| Intensity of religion | interraction of religion (0-ateist, 1-religious, and frequency of taking part on religious meetings during a week) |  |  |  | Sd22 and sd23 |
| Size of the household | number of people living in a household | sd08 | sd08 | sd08 | sd09 to sd12 |
| Time living at the same place | 1-since birth, 2 – longer than 10 years, 3 – three to 10 years, 4 – one to three years, 5 – up to one year | sd03 | sd03 | sd03 | sd03 |
| Swiss nationality | Swiss nationality (1), or other (0) | sd05 | sd05 | sd0502\_1 | sd04 |
| Gender | man (1), or woman (0) | sd02 | sd02 | sd02 | sd01 |
| Age | year of birth | sd01 | sd01 | sd01 | age |

*Source: Swiss Volunteering Survey (Freitag et al., 2016; Freitag & Steffen, 2006; Lamprecht et al., 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen et al., 2010).*