Voters and Candidates of the Future

**The Intention for Electoral Participation among
Adolescents in 22 European countries**

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Abstract

Within the literature there is a growing concern about lower voter turnout rates among young age cohorts. In this article we investigate the reported willingness to vote among 72,466 14-year old adolescents from 22 European countries, taking part in the International Citizen and Civic Education Survey (ICCS, 2009). Results indicate that the willingness to vote remains quite elevated among this age group, but with a clear gender division. While girls are more likely to state that they will vote, boys are more likely to see themselves as a future election candidate. An open classroom climate at school contributes to the willingness to vote in future elections. The elements that are known to have an effect on the turnout level of adults, however, do not have a significant impact on the intention to vote among adolescents. This would suggest that the observed lower turnout rate among young age groups cannot just be attributed to an alleged lack of political motivation among adolescents, and that therefore other elements will have to be taken into account if we want to explain this downward trend.

Keywords: electoral participation, voting, adolescents, comparative research, Europe, ICCS 2009

Introduction

In most Western societies one can observe an ongoing concern about the sustainability and legitimacy of electoral democratic procedures and institutions, and empirical research indeed suggests that trends are rather worrisome in this regard. Research shows a structural decline with regard to electoral turnout, as fewer citizens turn out to vote (Blais, 2006). More troubling, it has been shown that especially younger age cohorts are responsible for the bulk of this decline (Rubenson et al., 2004). Dalton (2007) therefore suggests that for young age groups the act of voting no longer should be considered as the quintessential element of the concept of good citizenship. Wattenberg (2007) even wonders whether voting is still something to be done at all by young people. Furthermore, party membership too is in decline and in this case too, especially young citizens no longer seem interested in joining a political party (Hooghe, Stolle & Stouthuysen, 2004; Whiteley, 2011). While political parties and the electoral process they participate in, traditionally could be seen as the most important linkage mechanism between citizens and the political system, this form of linkage has been severely weakened in the current era (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011; Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009).

It has to be noted that while electoral and traditional forms of participation are in decline, this is not the case for emerging, non-institutionalized forms of political participation that are on the rise (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). As such, we can safely assume that adolescents will be highly motivated to perform these non-institutionalized acts, and there is not all that much discussion about that in the literature. This, however, renders the question of why young generations increasingly abstain from electoral participation all the more salient.

Various explanations have been offered for this observed decline of electoral politics among young age groups. In some of the older research, it was stated that younger age cohorts simply lack political interest or that they are less motivated to engage in political life (Putnam, 2000). Other authors, however, have argued quite convincingly that younger age cohorts actually do participate quite intensively, although no longer in conventional electoral politics (Gaiser, De Rijke & Spannring, 2010; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011; Zukin et al., 2006). A competing explanation focuses more strongly on the changing role of political parties in society. As parties pay more attention to their role in government, they are less firmly anchored in society, and they are less likely to represent the preferences of the population at large (Mair,

2006). In that case, political parties and electoral participation simply are perceived as less attractive mechanisms to get one's voice heard in the political process.

To a large extent, the debate about the decline of electoral democracy is focused on the role of younger age cohorts. First, all the indicators suggest that especially young age groups abandon electoral politics, while among older citizens stable habits of participation and party identification still can be found. Second, it has been shown that electoral habits that are picked up early in the life-cycle, continue to have an effect throughout the life-cycle. If citizens do not vote the first time they are allowed to, it is unlikely that they will pick up this habit later on in life (Franklin, 2004; Plutzer, 2002). Investigating the attitude of young citizens with regard to electoral politics therefore provides us already with some indications about the likely trends with regard to electoral turnout for the future. Third, research suggests quite strongly that even at an early age, adolescents already have well-developed ideas about how they will participate in political life once they are adults (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Spannring, Ogris & Gaiser, 2008; van Deth, Abendschön & Vollmar, 2011).

In this paper, we investigate the intention of early adolescents to participate in electoral politics, both by casting their vote during elections or by being a candidate in those elections. The analysis is based on a new comparative dataset, including information on 72,466 adolescents in 22 European Union member countries. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS, 2009) contains data on the intention to participate among 14-year olds. The comparative nature of the dataset allows us to investigate not only individual level determinants of the intention to participate, but also to take into account whether characteristics of the political system (especially the electoral system) already have an effect on the attitudes and the behavioral intention of adolescents. Doing so for an analysis dealing with adolescents has not been done before, but with regard to adults it has already proven to be useful and necessary to take both individual and contextual elements into account to understand the determinants for electoral participation (Blais, 2006; Fieldhouse, Tranmer & Russell, 2007; Karp & Banducci, 2007). This study contains data on the intention to participate among 14-year olds in 22 different political system, a step that has not yet been taken in previous research.

First, we briefly review the literature on the decline of electoral democracy, before introducing data and methods. We close with some observations on what the study of

adolescents indicates about the causes of the decline of electoral politics in Western democracies.

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Results: Intention to Vote

In the analysis, we first investigate the determinants of the intention to vote, before turning to the intention to be a candidate or join a political party. For reasons of clarity, we develop the model in a number of steps (Table 5). First, a null-model is estimated showing 12 per cent of intra-class correlation at the school level, but only 5 per cent at the country level. This suggests that schools are a meaningful element to include in the analysis, either because of the composition of their student body, or because the democratic character of the school indeed has an impact. The fact that intra class correlation at the country level remains limited to five per cent, however, suggests that the European countries and electoral systems do not differ all that much with regard to the level of electoral engagement among adolescents. In a first model, we only include basic background characteristics. The results show that girls are more likely to report future electoral participation, and the same is true for those with a higher socio-economic status. These background differences remain significant, even when controlling for political attitudes in Model II. When we introduce the school level variables in Model III, the hypothesis about an open classroom climate is confirmed: the perception of such a climate is significantly related to the willingness to vote. However, the effect is rather moderate compared to the effects of the socio-structural and attitudinal variables at the individual level. The effect of whether or not pupils have a say in the way their schools are being run, is not significantly related to adolescents' intentions to turn out to vote. The limited impact of the school-level variables is clear from the intra-class correlations as well. Adding the 'democratic school'-variables into the model reduces the ICC for the school-level with one percentage point only.

[Table 5 about here]

We also assumed that characteristics of the electoral system would have an impact on the intention to vote. It should be remembered, however, that we only have 22 observations on the country level, while most of the country level variables are strongly related, leading

inevitably to multicollinearity. Therefore we proceeded in a more elaborated manner, by introducing the country level variables one by one, in a separate model. All models of course included all the variables from the full model III reported in Table 5 (but not repeated in Table 6 for reasons of clarity).

The results of this exercise, however, are fairly disappointing. Not a single one of the country level variables comes even close to significance. Even a system of compulsory voting is not related to the intention to vote (Table 6, Model IV). Variables that have been shown to have an effect on electoral turnout, apparently are not related to the intention to vote among adolescents. A final test then, was the inclusion of adult turnout figures at the country level. As is clear in Table 6 and illustrated in Figure 1 in Appendix 3, however, even adult turnout is not significantly related to adolescents' willingness to vote.

None of the political or electoral system variables proves to be related to adolescents' willingness to vote as an adult. Since we are analyzing the intention to vote of 14-year olds, a lack of knowledge of and interest in these systemic elements might explain why we do not find a relation between these variables and adolescents' willingness to vote. Therefore, we also tested for cross-level interactions between adolescents' expected years of education and the systemic variables in the analysis. The better educated should be more aware of the political context in which they will vote as an adult and this should be reflected in their intended voting behavior.¹ As can be seen in Table 6 (Model V), the only significant interaction effect found is between students' expected years of education and the proportionality of the electoral system. Although the general effect of proportionality is negative, for students that expect to study for an extended period of time, a more proportional system increases the willingness to turn out to vote. We can assume therefore that if adolescents understand more clearly the proportional characteristics of the electoral system, this has a positive impact on their willingness to vote.

[Table 6 about here]

Results: Being a Candidate and Party Member

In the analysis reported in Table 7, we proceed in the same manner to explain our second dependent variable, the willingness to be actively engaged in the electoral process. Here the null model shows a much more limited intra class correlation of 6 per cent at the school level.

Differences between schools are thus more limited here than with regard to the intention to vote.

If we introduce the individual level background characteristics (Model I), it is important to note here that the gender effect runs exactly in the opposite direction as for the intention to vote. While girls were more likely to go out to vote, they are much less likely to indicate that they are considering to be a candidate in future elections. Some elements of the rather persistent gender gap with regard to political representation, obviously can already be found at this age. Furthermore, we do not find an effect of the expected years of further education here.

Adding the attitudinal variables in Model II leads to the expected results; those that are higher on political interest and efficacy, also are more likely to be a candidate.

Again in contrast to voting, the presence of an open classroom climate does not have an effect here, while we do observe a positive effect of the ability to participate in school governance. As was clear from the analysis on future voting behavior, for electoral participation as well the school-level effects are moderate. Having a say in decisions taken at school has a significant and positive effect on adolescents' willingness to participate in politics. The effect of student influence is much more limited compared to the effects of the individual-level variables, however. Furthermore, introducing the school-level variables does not reduce the variance left unexplained at this level.

[Table 7 about here]

With regard to the country level variables (Table 8), we proceed in exactly the same manner, by introducing the variables one by one to the model already developed in Table 7. Here too, however, the only conclusion to be drawn is that not a single one of the country level variables comes close to significance. Even if we were to apply a very liberal standard of significance, it is clear that none of the variables helps us to explain the country level variance. For this analysis too, we test whether adolescents' willingness to become politically active is related to the degree to which adults are politically active in the country they live in. Therefore we include information about the rate of party membership as a percentage of the electorate as a country-level variable. Once more, no significant relation is found between the institutional specific variable and adolescents' willingness to become politically active. These findings indicate that there does not even seem to be a correlation between adolescents' intention to become active in a political party, and the degree of party membership among adult age groups (Figure 2 in Appendix 3). In this analysis, we also tested interaction effects

with adolescents' expected years of education (see model V in Table 8). Only one of the interaction terms, however, is significantly related to adolescents' reported future political activities, and that is the interaction between years of stable democracy and expected years of further education. Pupils with a stronger academic orientation are more likely to respond in a more positive manner to the presence of a stable democratic climate in the country.

[Table 8 about here]

Discussion

Given the ongoing concern about the future of electoral democracy in Western societies, in this paper we reported on the intention to participate among adolescents, who might be considered as the future generation of voters, candidates and citizens. While we acknowledge that non-electoral forms of participation might be equally important, it has to be noted that in the literature there is no concern about young people's willingness to engage in these forms of political participation.

First of all, the data confirm that it is meaningful to question 14-year old adults about their attitude and intentions to participate. The structure of the data suggest that adolescents do not answer randomly, but in a well-structured manner. The factor analysis suggests a clear and theoretically relevant division between voting and more active forms of electoral participation, as we could expect theoretically.

At first sight, the results of the ICCS study in Europe provide reasons for optimism. Roughly 80 per cent of all adolescents claim that they are likely to vote, which is roughly in line with current turnout levels. It is quite striking to observe that we find these high percentages not only in the Scandinavian countries, which traditionally figure high on various political participation rankings, but also in countries as Ireland, Italy and Spain. Of course, it would be erroneous to assume that all the adolescents who claim that they will go out to vote, will actually do so in the future. Inevitably, quite a number of them in practice will not perform in the same manner as they now intend to do. Theoretically, however, it is interesting to note that the observed low turnout rates among young voters apparently are not caused by a generalized lack of political interest or engagement (Gaiser, De Rijke & Spannring, 2010). While at the age of 14, these adolescents still plan to go out and vote, apparently by the age of 18 only a small percentage of that group actually does so. This would indicate that all kinds of other

elements, like e.g., the obligation to register as a voter, play a role in this process. This kind of barriers, therefore, needs to be addressed in campaigns to bring out the vote among young citizens. Too often, these campaigns now aim at addressing the alleged lack of political interest among adolescents, while the current analysis in fact suggest that the willingness to participate in reality is quite high.

Another element suggesting that it is meaningful to ask adolescents about their intention to participate is the clear gender division we find at this age. While girls are more likely to report they will go out to vote, they are much less willing to be a candidate in elections. While this pattern earlier already has been found in a US sample of adolescents (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004), we now find exactly the same pattern across European societies. Again, this indicates that future efforts to increase female participation in the electoral process will have to take account of the fact that these differences are already present at the age of 14. Gender roles and gendered expectations that already have been acquired at this age, apparently play a role in this process, and therefore these gender concepts have to be taken into account in the study of gender differences in electoral representation.

The most puzzling finding in the current analysis, however, is that characteristics of the electoral system do not have an impact on the intention to vote among adolescents. Even if we limit ourselves to the characteristics that were found to be significant in the research by Blais and Dobrzynska (1998), we did not find any meaningful relations. So how can we explain that the variables that do have an effect on adult turnout do not have an effect on the intention to vote among adolescents?

A first possible explanation is that the intention to vote has little predictive power for what will happen later on in the life of these adolescents. Panel studies, following respondents over a longer period of time, however, allows us to question this assumption. Panel research shows quite clearly that respondents who already start to participate during adolescence will continue this habit even two decades later (Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Jennings & Stoker, 2004). We can assume therefore that the intention to vote has at least some predictive value.

It has to be remembered however, that the motivation to go out to vote is but one element of a complex interplay of various elements that eventually determine turnout. It can be argued that 14-year olds simply lack the experience with and knowledge of the political system to be aware of the macro-variables we control for in the analysis, causing the overly optimistic accounts of future electoral behaviour reported in the ICCS. Furthermore, other elements

might be legislation (e.g., with regard to voter registration), the complexity of the electoral process, the salience of the electoral campaign, and the effort political actors undertake to mobilize voters. All those elements do play a role. In *Voice and Equality*, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, 15) famously argued that there are three potential reasons for political passivity: “because they can’t; because they don’t want to; or because nobody asked”. The current analysis suggests that the low turnout among young age groups is not related with not wanting to vote, as a vast majority of adolescents indicates a willingness to vote. This would indicate that the “can’t” and the “nobody asked” should be investigated further. Future efforts to explain low voter turnout levels among young citizens, therefore should not focus on the alleged lack of political interest among this age groups, but rather on the presence of administrative barriers, and on the reluctance of political parties to concentrate their mobilization efforts on this age group.

The available evidence suggests quite clearly that there is a downward trend with regard to electoral participation among young age cohorts in Western democracies. Thus far, most of the research has focused on demand side explanations for this phenomenon, assuming that among young age groups there is less demand for electoral participation. The current analysis suggests this is not the case. These findings might be interpreted as a compelling claim to also investigate the supply side of the electoral process. Do political system offer sufficient meaningful opportunities for young people to participate, with regard to e.g., voter registration and other electoral procedures? On a broader scale it should be investigated whether the offer of electoral choices by political parties is sufficiently attractive to the voters and the candidates of the future.

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Table 4. Descriptive statistics for independent variables in the analysis

		Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Valid n
Individual level	Gender (0 = boy, 1 = girl)	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.50	71,618
	Immigrant background	1.00	3.00	1.14	0.46	70,948
	Number of books at home	0.00	5.00	2.47	1.34	71,643
	Expected future education (years)	0.00	9.00	6.39	2.25	70,772
	Highest parental educational level (years)	2.00	17.00	13.56	2.73	69,895
	Interest in politics and society	26.58	73.81	48.64	10.08	71,377
	Internal political efficacy	22.94	79.74	48.90	10.26	71,303
	Trust in institutions	20.21	77.35	49.34	9.70	70,934
School level (aggregated)	Open classroom climate	36.51	68.67	50.24	1.78	3,024
	Influence in school decisions	37.13	58.81	47.82	1.41	3,024
Country level	Human Development Index	0.74	0.89	0.84	0.04	22
	Freedom House Index	1.00	2.00	1.11	0.26	22
	Years of stable democracy	9.00	129.00	46.50	31.60	22
	Proportionality	0.72	16.73	4.95	3.50	22
	ENP	2.00	8.42	4.10	1.52	22
	Compulsory voting	0.00	1.00	0.18	0.39	22
	Adult turnout	29.44	98.39	68.65	15.29	22
	Adult party membership	0.74	17.27	5.13	4.48	20

Table 5. Intention to Vote: level 1 and level 2-variables

	Null Model	Model I	Model II	Model III
	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)
Intercept	-0.008 ns (0.050)	-0.791 *** (0.057)	-3.386 *** (0.051)	-3.892 *** (0.219)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>				
Gender		0.029 *** (0.007)	0.080 *** (0.007)	0.080 *** (0.007)
Immigrant background		-0.081 *** (0.009)	-0.122 *** (0.008)	-0.122 *** (0.008)
Expected years of education		0.072 *** (0.002)	0.050 *** (0.002)	0.050 *** (0.002)
Parents' highest years of education		0.014 *** (0.002)	0.012 *** (0.001)	0.012 *** (0.001)
Books at home		0.091 *** (0.003)	0.056 *** (0.003)	0.056 *** (0.003)
Political interest			0.017 *** (0.000)	0.017 *** (0.000)
Internal political efficacy			0.022 *** (0.000)	0.022 *** (0.000)
Political trust			0.020 *** (0.000)	0.020 *** (0.000)
<i>School-level variables</i>				
Open classroom climate				0.014 *** (0.003)
Student influence				-0.004 ns (0.003)
ICC school	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.08
ICC country	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.05

Data: Source: ICCS 2009. Entries are parameter estimates and standard errors (between brackets) of a multilevel OLS regression. Significance: ***:<0.001; **:<0.01; *:<0.05; ns: not significant.

Table 6. Intention to Vote: Country Level Variables

		Model IV No interaction	Model V With interaction
		Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)
A	Intercept	-5.154 *** (0.860)	-5.029 *** (1.143)
	Human Development Index (HDI)	1.510 ns (0.995)	1.329 ns (1.342)
	Expected years of education * HDI		0.023 ns (0.097)
B	Intercept	-3.927 *** (0.280)	-4.035 *** (0.318)
	Freedom House Index (FHI)	0.031 ns (0.158)	0.104 ns (0.206)
	Expected years of education * FHI		-0.011 ns (0.014)
C	Intercept	-3.957 *** (0.226)	-4.012 *** (0.233)
	Years of stable democracy	-0.001 ns (0.001)	0.002 ns (0.002)
	Expected years of education * Years of stable democracy		-0.000 ns (0.000)
D	Intercept	-3.862 *** (0.226)	-3.804 *** (0.232)
	Proportionality	-0.006 ns (0.012)	-0.024 ns (0.015)
	Expected years of education * Proportionality		0.003 * (0.001)
E	Intercept	-3.856 *** (0.246)	-3.967 *** (0.265)
	Effective Number of parties (ENP)	-0.009 ns (0.028)	-0.012 ns (0.036)
	Expected years of education * ENP		-0.003 ns (0.003)
F	Intercept	-3.886 *** (0.219)	-3.917 *** (0.222)
	Compulsory voting	-0.036 ns (0.106)	-0.008 ns (0.140)
	Expected years of education * Compulsory voting		-0.005 ns (0.010)
G	Intercept	-4.024 *** (0.287)	-4.205 *** (0.325)
	Adult turnout	0.002 ns (0.003)	0.004 ns (0.003)
	Expected years of education * Adult turnout		-0.000 ns (0.000)

Data: ICCS 2009. Entries are parameter estimates and standard errors (between brackets) of six separate multilevel OLS regressions. Country level variables included one by one in order to avoid multicollinearity. Each time all individual level and school level variables (see Table 5) were also included (not shown in the Table). Significance: ***:<0.001; **:<0.01; *:<0.05; +:<0.1; ns: not significant.

Table 7. Intention for Electoral Participation, level-1 and level-2 variables

	Null Model	Model I	Model II	Model III
	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)
Intercept	0.010 ns (0.037)	-0.093 * (0.044)	-2.487 *** (0.046)	-2.880 *** (0.230)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>				
Gender		-0.153 *** (0.008)	-0.097 *** (0.007)	-0.096 *** (0.007)
Immigrant background		0.075 *** (0.009)	0.039 *** (0.009)	0.038 *** (0.009)
Expected years of education		0.003 ns (0.002)	-0.019 *** (0.002)	-0.019 *** (0.002)
Parents' highest years of education		-0.000 ns (0.002)	-0.002 ns (0.002)	-0.002 ns (0.002)
Books at home		0.032 *** (0.003)	-0.005 ns (0.003)	-0.004 ns (0.003)
Political interest			0.014 *** (0.000)	0.014 *** (0.000)
Internal political efficacy			0.024 *** (0.000)	0.024 *** (0.000)
Political trust			0.017 *** (0.000)	0.017 *** (0.000)
<i>School-level variables</i>				
Open classroom climate				-0.004 ns (0.003)
Student influence				0.012 *** (0.004)
ICC school	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06
ICC country	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03

Data: ICCS 2009. Entries are parameter estimates and standard errors (between brackets) of a multilevel OLS regression. Significance: ***:<0.001; **:<0.01; *:<0.05; ns: not significant.

Table 8. Intention for Electoral Participation: Country Level Variables

		Model IV	Model V
		Without interaction	With interaction
		Coefficient (S.E.)	Coefficient (S.E.)
A	Intercept	-2.370 ** (0.715)	-1.842 * (0.826)
	Human Development Index (HDI)	-0.611 ns (0.811)	-1.229 ns (0.949)
	Expected years of education * HDI		0.096 ns (0.070)
B	Intercept	-2.973 *** (0.267)	-2.934 *** (0.282)
	Freedom House Index (FHI)	0.084 ns (0.123)	0.058 ns (0.148)
	Expected years of education * FHI		0.004 ns (0.011)
C	Intercept	-2.870 *** (0.234)	-2.780 *** (0.236)
	Years of stable democracy	-0.000 ns (0.001)	-0.002 ns (0.001)
	Expected years of education * Years of stable democracy		0.000 ** (0.000)
D	Intercept	-2.880 *** (0.234)	-2.856 *** (0.236)
	Proportionality	0.000 ns (0.010)	-0.003 ns (0.012)
	Expected years of education * Proportionality		0.001 ns (0.001)
E	Intercept	-2.819 *** (0.246)	-2.855 *** (0.253)
	Effective number of parties (ENP)	-0.015 ns (0.021)	-0.004 ns (0.026)
	Expected years of education * ENP		-0.002 ns (0.002)
F	Intercept	-2.901 *** (0.230)	-2.883 *** (0.231)
	Compulsory voting	0.107 ns (0.081)	0.059 ns (0.100)
	Expected years of education * Compulsory voting		0.007 ns (0.007)
G	Intercept	-2.940 *** (0.235)	-2.929 *** (0.237)
	Adult party membership	0.011 ns (0.007)	0.011 ns (0.009)
	Expected years of education * Adult party membership		-0.000 ns (0.001)

Data: ICCS 2009. Entries are parameter estimates and standard errors (between brackets) of six separate multilevel OLS regressions. Party membership figures not available for Malta and Luxembourg. Country level variables included one by one in order to avoid multicollinearity. Each time all individual level and school level variables were also included (as in Table 7, but not shown in the Table). Significance: ***:<0.001; **:<0.01; *:<0.05; ns: not significant.

¹. A different operationalisation of political sophistication might be based on self-reported political interest. Including this variable into the interaction, however, leads to similar but generally weaker results.