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THE USE OF INDICATORS IN RESEARCH ON INSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY YOUNG PEOPLE – CRITICAL REMARKS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

WYKORZYSTANIE WSKAŹNIKÓW W BADANIACH NAD INSTYTUCJONALNYM UCZESTNICTWEM POLITYCZNYM MŁODZIEŻY – UWAGI KRYTYCZNE Z PERSPEKTYWY BAŁKANÓW ZACHODNICH

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Abstract: This paper critically reviews indicators of institutional political participation used in comparative research on young people. The two indicators considered here are (1) contacting politicians and (2) membership or involvement in political parties, as direct involvement and communication with political actors. Every indicator measuring individual behaviour involves at least four dimensions: the behaviour itself, its underlying motivations, its substantive content, and its effects on the individual and the wider social environment. We should consider all four dimensions when interpreting findings, including in national studies, but comparative research requires particular caution. Young people's motivations for contacting politicians, joining political parties, and staying active vary significantly across Europe, regardless of participation levels. For example, in Serbia, different forms of political participation may result from different types of clientelist relationships. Ideally, following Brady's (1999) suggestion, we should complement behavioural indicators in comparative research with indicators capturing the motivations underlying participation, its substantive content, and its expected outcomes. To do so, we would need to make more extensive use of qualitative methods available to large-scale research infrastructures (such as cognitive interviews). With new indicators, we could interpret data from extensive research like the ESS or WVS more reliably and accurately.

Keywords: young people, institutional political participation, comparative research, clientelism

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Streszczenie: Artykuł stanowi krytyczny przegląd wskaźników instytucjonalnego uczestnictwa politycznego wykorzystywanych w badaniach porównawczych młodzieży. Analizie poddano dwa wskaźniki: (1) kontaktowanie się z politykami oraz (2) członkostwo lub zaangażowanie w partie polityczne, traktowane jako formy bezpośredniego zaangażowania i komunikowania się z aktorami politycznymi. Każdy wskaźnik służący do pomiaru indywidualnych zachowań obejmuje co najmniej cztery wymiary: samo zachowanie, leżące u jego podstaw motywacje, jego treść oraz konsekwencje dla jednostki i szerszego otoczenia społecznego. Przy interpretacji wyników należy uwzględniać wszystkie cztery wymiary, również w badaniach krajowych, jednak szczególnej ostrożności wymagają badania porównawcze. Motywacje młodych ludzi do kontaktowania się z politykami, wstępowania do partii politycznych i pozostawania w nich aktywnymi różnią się znacząco w poszczególnych częściach Europy, niezależnie od poziomu uczestnictwa. Przykładowo w Serbii różne formy uczestnictwa politycznego mogą wynikać z różnych rodzajów relacji klientelistycznych. Zgodnie z propozycją Brady'ego (1999) wskaźniki behawioralne stosowane w badaniach porównawczych powinny być uzupełniane wskaźnikami pozwalającymi uchwycić motywacje leżące u podstaw uczestnictwa, jego treść oraz oczekiwane rezultaty. W tym celu konieczne byłoby szersze wykorzystanie metod jakościowych dostępnych w ramach dużych infrastruktur badawczych, takich jak wywiady kognitywne. Wprowadzenie nowych wskaźników umożliwiłoby bardziej rzetelną i trafną interpretację danych pochodzących z szeroko zakrojonych badań porównawczych, takich jak ESS czy WVS.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież; instytucjonalne uczestnictwo polityczne; badania porównawcze; klientelizm

Introduction

This paper critically reviews the use of indicators of institutional political participation in comparative research on young people. Created at a specific time, within a socio-political context, and with certain theoretical backgrounds, we believe that using such indicators in comparative frameworks, which include diverse socio-political structures and practices of young people, requires additional precautions in analysis and in the methodological procedures for instrument design.

The literature on political participation recognises citizen participation as a necessary but insufficient condition for democracy. Not all participation is democratic in its motivations, goals, or outcomes, and higher levels of participation do not necessarily indicate a greater degree of democracy (Norris, 2002, p. xii). Yet citizens' capacity to influence collective decisions remains central to democratic government (Verba & Nie, 1972, pp. 1–3). Much of the literature on participation and its operationalisation developed through research on established democracies, and this focus on relatively similar institutional contexts may have encouraged assumptions that participatory acts have similar meanings. Although scholars (Brady, 1999; Verba & Nie, 1972) have cautioned against overlooking differences in political systems and historical experiences when extending cross-national comparisons, operationalisations of participation in large-scale comparative social surveys have remained focused on behavioural indicators that do not adequately capture its content.

When we say someone participates in a political party's activities, is a party member, or has contacted a politician, we describe behaviour, and measuring its frequency is certainly useful. But it is insufficient to understand what that behaviour represents. Every indicator measuring individual behaviour involves at least four dimensions: the behaviour itself, its underlying motivations, its substantive content, and its effects (outcomes) on the individual and the wider social environment. We should consider all four dimensions when interpreting findings, including in national studies, but comparative research requires particular caution. For example, young people's membership in political parties provides some information about the extent of political mobilisation among young people in different societies. However, understanding the nature of this mobilisation, and making meaningful cross-country comparisons, requires attention to several key aspects. First, we need to understand why young people

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join political parties. The motivations may be programmatic and ideological, but also personal and instrumental, and may vary considerably depending on the sociopolitical context. Second, we need to understand the substantive content of participation itself, which may also vary from clearly defined institutional mechanisms for participation and decision-making within parties, and the representation of interests within institutions through party channels, to the dominance of informal, clientelist, and even corrupt practices involving small cliques within parties and institutions. Finally, the effects of participation also vary, because they may serve different political functions and produce different consequences, ranging from strengthening political pluralism, trust, and democracy to reinforcing political control, concentrations of power, authoritarianism, and institutional distrust, while weakening democratic practices and potential. When using behavioural indicators in research concerning young people, we should exercise caution. The assumed theoretical links between behaviour and its effects, whether empirically examined or merely postulated within specific social contexts or regions, should not be treated as universal models but as assumptions that require exploration and testing.

This paper addresses three research questions: To what extent do the commonly used indicators of institutional political participation assume *measurement* equivalence across different sociopolitical contexts? Does research on clientelist practices among young people challenge these assumptions? How can research methods be improved to address these challenges?

Young People and Institutional Participation

In the literature that investigates the relationship between young people and institutional[1] forms of participation, there is a high level of agreement that the broader decline in institutional political participation has been particularly pronounced among young people (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015), that young people are less likely to vote than older adults (Fieldhouse et al., 2007), that there are fewer and fewer of them in political parties and trade unions, and that they are less and less willing to directly contact their political representatives (Norris, 2004; Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; Henn & Foard, 2014). The consequence of the withdrawal of young people from the traditional political field is interpreted in light of the general trends associated with the *crisis of democracy* and *democratic deficit* (Norris, 2011), but also the opportunities to express their views through new forms of participation (often called *unconventional*, *non-institutional* or *elite-directing*). Although young people are more present in new forms of politics than older people, there is no agreement on whether new activities compensate for old ones, so that the results show that young people are increasingly involved in them (Marsh et al., 2007; Renström et al., 2021; Norris, 2004; Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; Henn & Foard, 2014), and that participation is more or less constant (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015) or even declining (Fox, 2015). Regardless of interpretations of why party membership and relationships with elected representatives are decreasing, and of participation shifts toward new forms, we cannot be certain what these behaviours mean across contexts.

How Participation is Measured in Two Large Comparative Studies

In discussing the selection of ESS indicators of political participation, Jacques Thomassen (2001) draws on Verba and Nie's (1972, p.2) definition:

[1] Although in the literature there are different forms of theoretical explanation and operationalisation of participation that include membership/engagement in political parties and contacting politicians that are traditional, conventional (van Deth, 2001), or elite-directed (Inglehart, 1990), in this paper we will use the term *institutional participation* without drawing fine distinctions between them.

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"*political participation* refers to those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take", and Brady (1999), who summarises previous definitions and research. Brady (1999), citing several definitions (Verba & Nie, 1972; Kaase & Marsh, 1979; Nagel, 1987; Parry et al., 1992), singles out four common elements: 1. political participation is an activity (not an attitude; it does not include reading newspapers and following the media); 2. actors are citizens (not the elite); 3. politics refers to "the authoritative allocation of values by the government" (Brady, 1999, p.738); and 4. participation aims to influence the outcomes.[2] Brady also assumes that "free and autonomous participation establishes the democratic character of a regime" (Brady, 1999, p. 737)[3], while Verba and Nie (1972, p. 4) accept the assumption that in their research in the United States, participation assumes that "citizens [who are] autonomous and the best judges of their own interests" and focus on the ways in which citizens' interests and needs are adequately represented. Substantially, participation involves concrete activities aimed at influencing political decisions, undertaken by free individuals or groups in pursuit of their interests.

A second important point is that Verba and Nie and Brady recognise that the same behaviour can have different causes, motivations, content, and outcomes. In their analysis of contacting politicians in the United States, Verba and Nie (1972) note that the same behaviour may involve different motivations and intended outcomes, and thus represent different forms of participation. They distinguish between particularised contacts, where the anticipated benefits are confined to the individual or their family, and contacts aimed at advancing the interests of groups of citizens, communities, or society as a whole. Among potential requests based on personal interests, they even include "asking a precinteman about a patronage job" (p. 66). Brady (1999) is also cautious, explicitly calling for indicators that address "the nature of the activity, the target of the attempt to influence politics, and the nature of the issue involved" (pp. 768–769), suggesting that behaviour alone is insufficient to understand political action. Such indicators would help distinguish participation aimed at influencing political decisions from manipulation in authoritarian regimes. "Asking about the reasons behind participation might be especially useful for determining the intent of an action. ... this kind of interpretation might be fundamental for understanding voting and nonvoting in an authoritarian regime where voting is required, and nonvoting is punished. In this case, those not voting in order to protest are the true political activists, and voters who voted only to avoid punishment could hardly be said to be exercising political influence." (Brady, 1999, p. 768).[4] Although these authors develop their theoretical assumptions primarily in relation to established democracies, they recognise the risks associated with using the same indicators in comparative research. They suggest that context shapes participation, with differences arising across countries, regions, and social groups (e.g., classes).

These considerations raise two important questions that this paper discusses. First, can

[2] Like Van Deth (2001), Thomassen (2001) extends the scope of what counts as political beyond a narrow focus on influencing government, in response to changes characterising contemporary politics: "the decline of traditional politics and the rise of new politics and the self-reliance of the civil society" (Thomassen, 2001, p. 196).

[3] Citing some of the same authors as Brady (1999), Van Deth (2001) introduces a distinct dimension of participation, the voluntary nature of participation, specifying that participation is not carried out under the pressure of the ruling class or the law.

[4] Brady explicitly states that *participation* does not have the same meaning across societies and historical periods. He also refers to the example from Verba and Nie discussed above, which shows that contacts with politicians and representatives can have entirely different meanings depending on the motivations and objectives underlying them (p. 778).

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clientelism and party patronage be classified as participation in societies where they constitute dominant rather than occasional practices? If we include the criteria of voluntariness and freedom, the question becomes the extent to which these practices reflect coercion or individual choice. Second, how can we distinguish genuine participation from various practices of manipulation and mobilisation without additional indicators which reflect the differences between them?

The theoretical basis underpinning the WVS[5] situates these indicators within the shift from materialist to postmaterialist values. Inglehart identifies an accompanying shift from *elite-directed* to *elite-directing* participation in Western democracies. Party membership (the elite-directed repertoire) declines in popularity as broader access to education and longer periods of schooling strengthen self-expression values and increase people's capacity to engage more freely in political life, contributing to the growth of issue-oriented forms of participation. "Membership in traditional bureaucratic organisations mainly seems to encourage elite-directed rather than elite-directing forms of participation. It may not reflect the impact of public preferences on elite decisions, so much as the successful marshalling of the public by elites" (Inglehart, 1990, p. 338). Inglehart and Welzel (2005) associate the mass mobilisation characteristic of industrial societies with the rationalisation of authority rather than emancipation from authority, a process that can lead to the predominance of either democratic or authoritarian forms of participation (p. 59). They emphasise that mobilisation does not necessarily mean the same thing across countries. It may be driven by instrumental values and expectations of economic prosperity (as in some post-socialist countries), but it can also be "intrinsically motivated if people value democracy's civil and political liberties as ends in themselves" (p. 119). Notably, they recognise that the formal aspects of participation do not reveal its substantive character, explicitly making this point in their analysis of voluntary activity in associations: "Neither public confidence in institutions nor activity in associations is necessarily linked with democracy's focus on human choice. Simply knowing a society's level of activity in associations does not tell us whether its people support authoritarian principles or democratic principles" (pp. 254–255). Although the authors acknowledge that elite-directed participation can involve varying degrees of freedom and elite control, depending on the political context, they do not examine the content of participation itself. Instead, they link behaviour (participation) to values and the wider sociopolitical context (including levels of democracy, corruption, political legacies, and other factors). This brings us back to the question posed at the outset: do behavioural indicators alone tell us enough about the character and outcomes of participation, particularly in comparative research?

How does the comparative literature[6] on youth use these indicators? Some studies (e.g. Grasso, 2016) account for the social-political context in their research design and analytical strategy. They compare only countries considered part of the same political cluster, most often that of established democracies. This approach functions as a *relatively safe comparative strategy* because it reduces contextual heterogeneity. However, the question remains whether behaviours, even across similar contexts, share the same motivations, substantive content, and outcomes. Another series of studies compares young people's participation across several social-political contexts. Such studies follow two approaches: some

[5] The documents addressing the development of WVS and EVS indicators, at least those available to us, provide no explanations of how these indicators were developed or how decisions about their selection were made.

[6] The examples are illustrative and do not constitute an exhaustive analysis or a systematic review of the literature on this topic.

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define regions *a priori* and attribute particular contextual characteristics to them (Haerpfer et al., 2002; Norris, 2002; Gozzo & Sampugnaro, 2016), while others use contextual indicators to measure specific features of the social context (Stanojević et al., 2023). For example, Norris (2004) divides countries into European regions to examine generational and life-course effects on participation. Although her analysis identifies differences between clusters of societies, it focuses on the degree, not the quality, of participation and assumes that exposure to democracy works similarly across contexts. Despite this, can we assume that the nature of *democracy* is the same across very different societies, and that it has the same effects on motivation for (non)participation and political outcomes? The last group of studies draws on cross-national data but does not incorporate country-level contextual indicators (or clusters) into the empirical analysis (Kiisel et al., 2015; Lello & Bazzoli, 2023). Empirical findings show cross-national differences discussed through contextual interpretations that are not tested, while some results remain unexplained and call for further analysis.

Indicators of (Institutional) Participation in Comparative Research

The indicators analysed in this paper were selected according to two criteria. First, they measure institutional political participation, a topic youth studies have paid less attention to than non-institutional forms. This relative neglect requires reassessing the theoretical assumptions underlying their measurement and interpretation. Second, major comparative surveys, such as the World Values Survey (WVS), European Values Survey (EVS), and the European Social Survey (ESS), have used them. The two indicators considered here are (1) contacting politicians and (2) membership or involvement in political parties, as direct involvement and communication with political actors.[7] In our analysis, we focus on these indicators because they involve interpersonal relations that may entail autonomous and legitimate influence, but also dependency and power asymmetries.

In the WVS and EVS, questions on political party membership have been used since the first wave. The WVS includes two versions: one asks respondents to indicate whether they are members of political parties, while the other asks whether they are active or inactive members. Since WVS Wave 7, an indicator of contacting government officials has also been used, without a defined time frame and with the response options "have done", "might do", and "would never do".

Within the ESS, we can track how indicators change across research waves. The ESS included a question about party membership until the V wave, when it was eliminated. In the IX wave, the question on activism in political parties was reformulated as engagement during the previous twelve months with a political party or action group. In the X and XI waves, this question was modified and, in a sense, expanded because it no longer required work but also included donations to, or participation in, a political party or another pressure group. Across all ESS waves, researchers used an indicator to measure contact with a politician, government official, or local government official. The instruments developed in these studies did not address the motivations behind young people's political participation, the content of that participation, or its probable outcomes.

[7] We exclude voting because it is a discrete, periodic act tied to the electoral cycle.

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Table 1

Dimensions of Institutional Participation in Three Comparative Studies

	ESS			WVS			EVS		
Wave	**I-V**	**VI-IX**	**X-XI**	**1, 2, 4**	**3, 5, 6**	**7**	**1, 2, 3, 4**	**5**	**6**
Party membership	Are you a member of any political party?			Belong to political parties or groups	Active or inactive membership	Active or inactive membership	Belong to political parties or groups		Active or inactive membership
Party activism	Have you worked in a political party or action group?		Have you donated to or participated in a political party or pressure group?	Unpaid voluntary work for political parties or groups			Unpaid voluntary work for political parties or groups		
Contacting politicians or public officials	Have you contacted a politician, government or local government official?					Contacting a government official			

Indicative Examples

Participation in a political party or a similar group varied widely among young people in Europe: from 0% in Portugal and Slovakia to 12.8% in Iceland. The relationship between contextual indicators of democratic governance (such as the rule of law, control of corruption, and voice and accountability) and young people's participation in political parties suggests no linear association. Rates of contacting government officials also vary substantially, ranging from 2.4% in Montenegro to 19% in Iceland. By contrast, there is a positive correlation[8] between contextual indicators and contacting government officials, suggesting that young people are more likely to contact their representatives in more democratic countries. Even here, however, substantial variations from this pattern are evident. These brief comparisons suggest two important points. The first example suggests that either the contextual indicators are inadequate or the individual-level behavioural indicators are not precise enough to identify contextual differences. The second example shows that context can explain some of the variation. However, as the qualitative example discussed later will illustrate, this association may be partly spurious, given differences in the nature of contacting politicians across countries.

Research on participation in the countries of Eastern Europe (Stanojević &, Petrović, 2018; Cvejić, 2016; Bliznakovski, 2021; Gordy & Efendic, 2019; Ledeneva, 1998; 2006; 2013), Southern Europe, such as Greece (Sotiropoulos, 2018; Afonso, et al., 2015; Triantidis, 2016) but also Central European countries, such as Hungary (Mares & Young, 2019) show that political participation can be largely a matter of clientelism shaping the political field. This means that many (young) people enter politics with instrumental goals, and their engagement creates and reproduces informal support networks and political exclusivism in access to public resources. Young people's motivations for contacting politicians,

[8] Pearson's correlations between participation levels and Control of Corruption, Rule of Law, and Voice and Accountability are 0.443, 0.442, and 0.434, respectively, all statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

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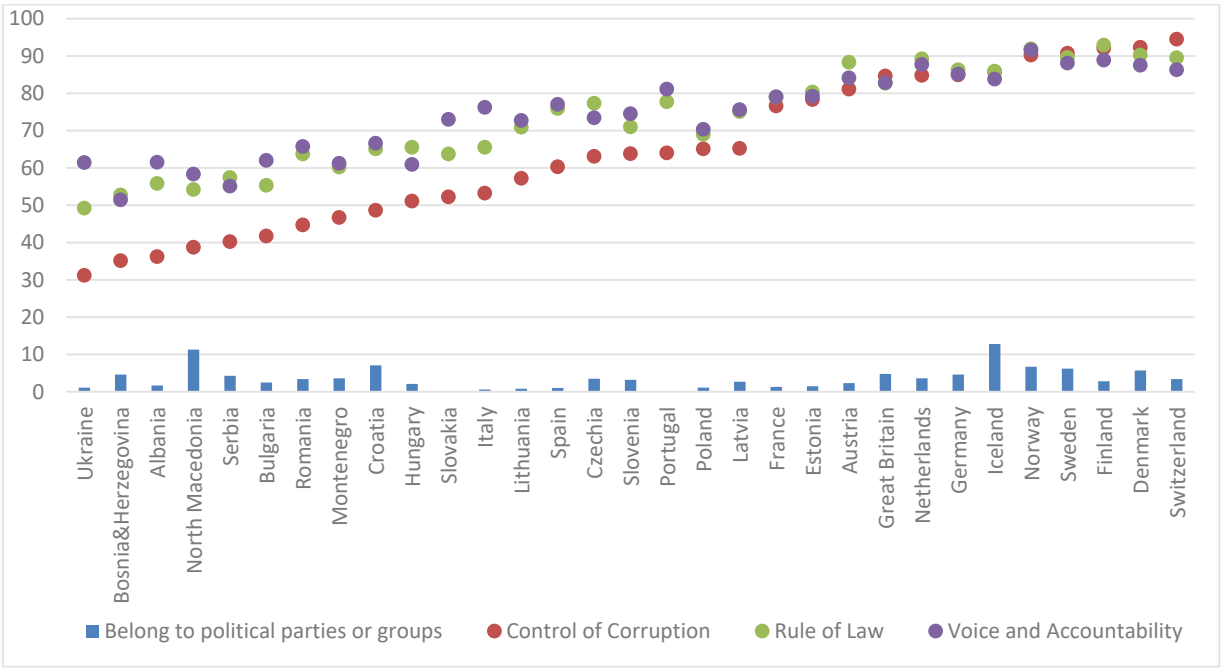
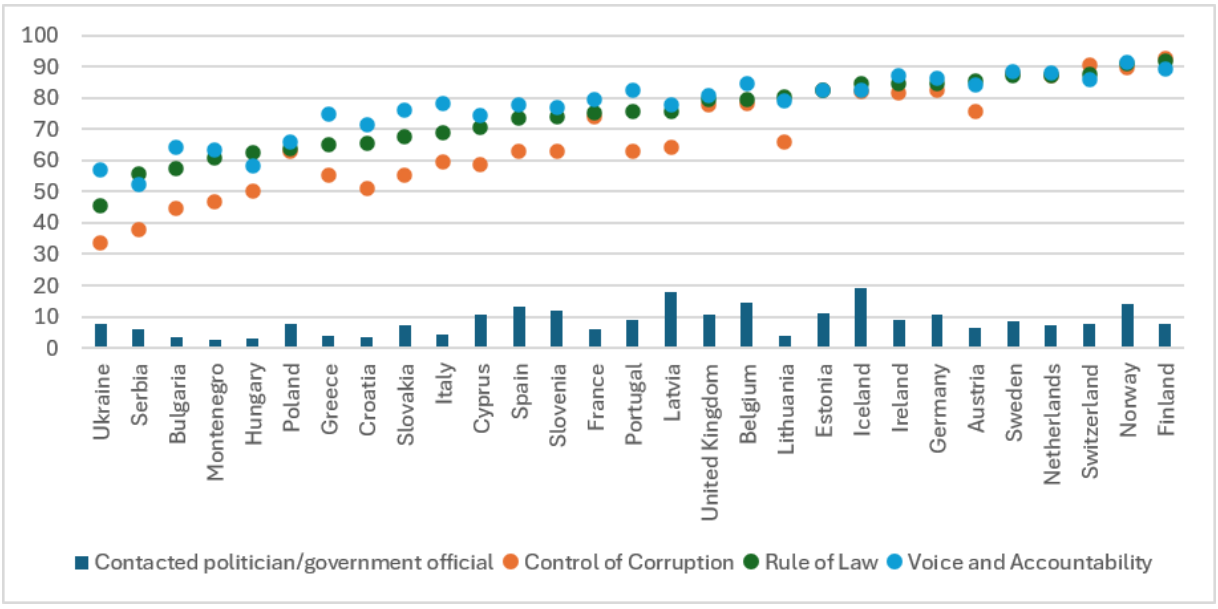


Graph 1: Belonging to a Political Party or Group Across Europe – Young People Aged 18-30

Source – EVS Wave 5 and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators for each country's survey year.



Graph 2: Contacted Politicians across Europe – Young People Aged 15-30

Source – ESS round XI and Worldwide Governance Indicators (2023)

joining political parties, and staying active could vary across Europe, regardless of participation levels.

One study on young people in Serbia could be an indicative example (Stanojević & Petrović, 2018; Stanojević & Petrović, 2021). It suggests several

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overlapping motivations for young people to get involved in party work, and different practices related to politicians and party networks. Participation often arises from personal instrumental motives, particularly the prospect of securing a job through the political party. Participants frequently described political parties as "informal employment agencies" they joined to secure employment, usually in the public sector and preferably in a permanent position. This understanding of the party's role shapes the political culture, with clientelist expectations shared by both parties and some young people. For some, this instrumental motivation underpins a long-term strategy of joining the party, working continuously within it, and gradually advancing through its ranks or within public administration or state-owned enterprises. Others become active primarily before elections, participating in campaigns and mobilising committed voters in exchange for the prospect of future employment. For some young people, particularly entrepreneurs, the party also provides access to lucrative contracts with central or local government, opportunities to secure business through rigged tenders, or simply a way to keep their businesses operating without political pressure.

It can also express informal solidarity with friends and relatives who need help. When someone is looking for a job, they may also see a political party as a channel for finding employment. To show solidarity, their close friends and relatives may join the party alongside them and become active members. A key clientelist practice involving young people is securing committed voters. This entails recruiting a certain number of people who pledge to vote for a particular party in the next election. They must submit their contact details as evidence, allowing party headquarters to verify the pledges by contacting the prospective voters. To help friends or relatives meet these quotas and keep or obtain employment, young people may agree to join the party, participate in its activities, or pledge their vote in the next election as an expression of solidarity.

It can be an expression of 'pressure' to keep a (permanent) job or access some of the privileges it provides. For some young people, joining or staying in a party, along with participating in its activities, becomes part of a chain of dependency and pressure that may intensify as the regime becomes more authoritarian. Leaving the party or becoming less active may be seen as breaking the rules of informal exchange, creating pressure to stay involved or increase involvement once a favour has been received.

But here too we can detect, albeit to a relatively small extent, genuine activism based on the importance of the party's ideology and programme. Although many young people acknowledge the importance of party programmes and ideology, only a small number, and exclusively those outside the ruling parties, cite these as their primary motivation for party engagement. However, we cannot be certain whether these represent genuine values or a strategy to criticise those in power, as such criticism frequently invokes corruption and clientelism (Stanojević & Petrović, 2021).

When we compare these findings with behavioural indicators, we see that Serbia ranks among the top countries for young people's involvement in political party activities. However, personal, instrumental motives and clientelist practices largely shape this participation, and without additional studies, we cannot be certain about other countries.[9]

Discussion - Correction Proposals

Ideally, following Brady's (1999, p. 769) suggestion, we could complement behavioural indicators in comparative research with indicators

[9] We can interpret relations with politicians similarly. In countries without a representative system, contacting politicians is not part of a tradition of direct contact, while informal connections can help explain some of the variance in this practice. In countries such as Serbia, contacting politicians primarily means asking for a personal favour rather than expressing concern about a public issue.

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representing the motivations underlying participation, its substantive content, and its outcomes. Indicators of participation motivations may range from personal, instrumental considerations to programmatic and ideological commitments. Substantively, participation may take the form of face-to-face contact, letters/e-mails, or social media exchanges. These interactions may involve suggestions, criticism or requests, but also informal clientelist exchanges, corruption, or blackmail. Finally, expected outcomes may include broader social change or improvements in the position of one's group (such as an ethnic minority or social class) as well as obtaining employment for oneself or a family member, retaining a job, or avoiding the loss of social benefits to which one is legally entitled.

To do so, we would need to make more extensive use of qualitative methods available to large-scale research infrastructures (such as cognitive interviews). Qualitative insights could serve two purposes. First, they would help us better understand what behavioural indicators mean across all participating countries. By revealing cross-national differences in meaning and the contexts relevant to interpreting them, these insights would enable researchers to better understand differences between countries or groups of countries (even without developing new indicators). Second, they could inform the development of new indicators that represent the motivations, substantive content, and outcomes of participation in large quantitative surveys. [10]

With new indicators, we could interpret data from extensive research like the ESS or WVS more reliably and accurately. Although qualitative methods informed the ESS questionnaire, their role is relatively reduced and limited.[11] With a qualitative approach, such as a cognitive interview, we would gain insight into the meanings respondents attach to their answers. The diversity of responses could demonstrate the need to develop additional indicators that capture meanings and practices more precisely. For example, in Serbia, different forms of political participation may result from different types of clientelist relationships. Such participation may be motivated by personal gain (or the preservation of existing social privileges), as well as by solidarity with family members or friends. Qualitative insights would allow deeper exploration of respondents' interpretations and motives. Thus, political participation would be placed outside the framework of binary oppositions, participation or absence of participation, and would comprise diverse motives (from instrumental to altruistic) for participation as well as outcomes of participation (representation of interests or social closure in informal networks). More importantly, this approach would yield potential answers to how to research political participation in different societies. In some societies, decisions about (non)participation in political life are not based solely on expressed individualism, complete freedom of choice, and public interest. With cognitive interviews, we can develop optimal question wording (for use in the quantitative approach) that asks how and why someone undertakes political participation. In the example above, even questions about the reasons for other people's political participation (known to the respondent) could be important. For example, how many people do you personally

[10] The cost-effectiveness and the balance between questionnaire length and the prevalence of the phenomenon under study could constrain the introduction of new indicators. However, if space in the core questionnaire is limited, new or rotating modules, or panel designs that allow for shorter question batteries, can offer alternative ways to incorporate these indicators.

[11] Within the ESS, cognitive testing is used to assess and improve equivalence of meaning across countries. The process typically involves several countries from different regions and cultural contexts and informs recommendations for refining questions (Widdop et al., 2011; Rutherford et al., 2024). This method serves its purpose well and provides rare evidence that the meaning and content of certain practices differ. One option is to broaden its role beyond validation to provide more systematic, in-depth insights into differences across all surveyed societies.

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know who have practised certain forms of political participation, directly or indirectly, to obtain material and existential benefits? Or, how many people do you know who have been pressured to do (perform) a certain political activity, etc.?

Beatty and Willis (2007) explain how to use data collected using cognitive interviews. "For example, the verbal material generated by such interviews could consist of (1) respondent elaborations regarding how they constructed their answers, (2) explanations of what they interpret the questions to mean, (3) reports of any difficulties they had answering, or (4) anything else that sheds light on the broader circumstances that their answers were based upon" (Beatty & Willis, 2007, p. 288). In our case, we could argue that the second meaning refers to examining the meanings respondents attribute to survey questions. In this respect, cognitive interviewing can assess and ensure *meaning equivalence*. Furthermore, the fourth of the aforementioned meanings may be particularly relevant for identifying the specific contexts within which respondents situate their answers. Such an application of cognitive interviewing can reveal the specific characteristics of a social context that directly shape how respondents interpret survey questions. In this case, cognitive interviewing helps assess and improve *measurement equivalence*. If we further develop the aforementioned applications of cognitive interviewing in the context of the European Social Survey, we could identify several ways to modify the questionnaire's existing structure. The first has already been mentioned – identifying the meanings that respondents are assumed to attribute to survey questions when answering them. If deviations from the expected outcomes are identified at this level, the questions can be restructured accordingly. Alternatively, they may be substantially modified if such changes would lead to a more consistent interpretation among respondents. However, for the purposes of this paper, cognitive interviewing can provide a basis for proposing new questions that complement existing ones. For example, a question about contacting politicians could be supplemented with additional questions designed to establish how important this indicator is for assessing democracy in a particular country. The formulation of such supplementary questions will depend directly on participants' responses in cognitive interviews. In this respect, cognitive interviewing and survey research should be viewed as ongoing, mutually informing processes through which researchers continuously develop and evaluate new approaches. Cognitive interviewing does not occupy a fixed position at the beginning or the end of the process. Rather, it should be regarded as a phase that needs to be revisited repeatedly throughout the research process.

Conclusion

Research on two aspects of young people's institutional participation has illustrated the range of practices and motivations, as well as possible societal outcomes, that may underlie these forms of engagement. Practices documented in Serbia and elsewhere in the Western Balkans and Europe, such as clientelism, corruption, and informal political exchange, suggest that participation itself can be constrained rather than freely chosen, motivated by personal instrumental motives, and contribute to the reproduction of authoritarian structures. Without understanding the motivations, substantive content, and outcomes of participation, our comparisons may be misleading or insufficiently precise. Although these indicators were theoretically justified in the comparative longitudinal studies discussed above as a means of tracing the historical shift from institutional to non-institutional participation, they remain embedded in survey instruments and are commonly interpreted independently of those theoretical assumptions. We therefore propose introducing additional indicators to capture these behaviours more precisely and/or using qualitative research to understand the meanings these behaviours carry across countries.

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