

Does Cohort Size Matter? Assessing the Effect of Youth Cohort Size and Peer Influence on Young People's Electoral Participation

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Abstract

Do the relative numbers of young people in the adult population affect their extent of participation in electoral politics? The answer to this question remains elusive in both the theoretical and empirical literature on youth political participation. In this study, we test the hypothesis that young people's cohort size has a significant effect on their electoral participation. Using individual level data from the World Values Survey and country level data from the United Nations Population Division, we ran a series of multinomial logistic regression analyses with 29 democratic countries. The findings show that youth cohort size exerts a negative effect on young people's electoral participation. The study finds this effect to be stronger for young people whose main source of information are their peers. The results of this study represent a major step towards improving our understanding of the effect of cohort size on cohort political behaviour; a topic so far neglected within the literature on youth political participation.

Key words

Youth Cohort Size, Voting, Peer Influence, Youth Bulge, Youth Political Participation

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Introduction

Young people's electoral participation has come under close scrutiny in recent years. On the one hand, they are seen as the polity least likely to vote in elections (Juelich & Coll, 2020; Quintelier, 2007, p. 165). Evidence from multiple surveys and analyses of voter turnout rates in many Western democracies have repeatedly pointed to the low participation of the younger generation in electoral politics (Kimberlee, 2002; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Henn and Foard, 2014; Pastarmadzhieva, Pastarmadzhieva and Sakal, 2021). The disengagement of young people from voting and other forms of institutionalised politics has led to their description as harbingers of a 'crises of democracy' (Farthing, 2010, p. 181). On the other hand, recent evidence showing increasing youth voter turnout rates (Harrison, 2018; Sloam & Henn, 2019), and the narrowing of the voting gap between the younger and the older generation in many developed democracies (Kamatayeva, 2021) continues to challenge the conventional narrative of youth apathy towards electoral politics.

Across the democratic world, countries continue to undergo demographic transition. United Nations population reports show that many developing democracies (new democracies in the developing world) are faced with large youth cohort size (YCS), due to the accumulated effects of high fertility rates and reduced infant mortality rates. Most developed democracies (established democracies in the industrialised world) on the other hand, have small YCS, due to persistently low fertility rates and rising life expectancy (United Nations, 2013, pp. 6-8; United Nations, 2018, p.14). Our interest in this study is to investigate YCS as a determinant of young people's electoral participation. We also seek to understand how peer influence interacts with YCS to influence electoral participation. Past empirical studies have looked to individual resources, political interest and civic skills (Dalton, 2009; Verba *et al.*, 1995), life cycle effects (Quintelier, 2007; Weiss, 2020), social capital (Putnam, 2000), issue based motivations (Harrison, 2018), institutional barriers (Juelich & Coll, 2020) and the combinations

of these factors for explanations to young people's electoral participation. Thus far, the potential effect of the demographic size of young people on their electoral participation remains unexplored in the literature. In this regard, our paper fills a crucial void in our understanding of how young people's relative numbers within the population may influence their own individual political participation.

The paper shows that YCS is a significant negative predictor of young people's participation in national elections. Our analyses reveal that as the YCS of a country increases, the young people within the country tend to vote less. Additionally, the dominance of peers as the main source of information for young people makes them refrain from voting when the YCS is large. Our findings are based on a series of multinomial logistic models, with country fixed effects and country clustered standard errors, ran on a combination of individual level data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and country level data from the UN Population database for 29 democratic countries. We believe that the findings of this paper are novel and contribute substantially, both theoretically and empirically, to the present debate on youth electoral participation.

We define youth as persons aged between 15-29yrs (Weber, 2019) and use the term interchangeably with 'young people'. We also use the expression 'youth cohort size' to represent young people's relative numbers within the adult population and 'youth bulge' to represent 'a disproportionately large number of youth, relative to the adult population' (Urdal, 2006). We also use the term electoral participation to refer to the act of voting in an election.

Literature Review and Theoretical Argument

Young people's electoral participation

Within the literature on youth political participation, young people's (dis)engagement with electoral politics has been a recurring theme. The conventional position suggests young people

as more disengaged from voting, compared to the older generation (Briggs, 2017; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015; Putnam, 2000). They are said to be ‘less plugged’ into the political process, and hence vote less frequently (Bergh et al., 2021, p. 1093). Multiple empirical studies report evidence in support of this position (Henn & Foard, 2014; Mycock & Tonge, 2012; Resnick & Casale, 2014; Wicks et al., 2014). More recently, however, evidence from the UK 2017 General Elections (Sloam & Henn, 2019), which saw an unexpectedly high youth turnout rate (18-24yrs) of 71 percent (Harrison, 2018, pp. 258–259), reports of rising youth voter turnout rates (18-29yrs) in some Nordic countries such as Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden (Symonds, 2020), and the narrowing of the voting age gap in many developed democracies in recent years (Kamatayeva, 2021) has re-ignited the debate on young people’s electoral participation. *But, is there reason to suspect that these observed patterns in youth electoral participation are in any way influenced by their relative numbers within the adult population?* Past research has surprisingly been silent on this relationship. Below, we present a brief theoretical argument on how we suppose YCS affects youth electoral participation and formulate two hypotheses for empirical testing.

Youth cohort size and youth electoral participation

Despite the dearth of literature, the work of Daniel Hart and his associates (2004) offers a good starting point for our theorisation. They argue in respect of the acquisition of civic knowledge by adolescents (and by extension, young people) that; ‘An adolescent living in a community in which a large fraction of the population is composed of children and adolescents, a child-saturated community, will interact more often with peers, and consequently will be more influenced by them, than will an adolescent in a community with relatively few children and many adults, or an adult-saturated community’ (Hart et al., 2004, p. 591). Such a situation can negatively affect the acquisition of civic knowledge by young people, as they tend to learn

more from their peers than from the more knowledgeable adults (ibid). As civic and political knowledge are both vital prerequisites for various forms of institutionalised political behaviours, including voting (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995), and young people are generally less politically and civically knowledgeable compared to adults (Quintelier, 2007; Zvulun and Harel, 2018; Weiss, 2020), we may reasonably expect that a youth bulge will have a generally negative effect on young people's electoral participation.

Intuitively, nonetheless, large YCS should hold significant advantages for increasing youth voter turnout. Ordinarily, their large numbers should give them political salience in the eyes of politicians (Posner, 2004), and particularly so in electoral politics where numbers are the deciding factor. In a sense, this should also give them higher political efficacy since their large numbers give them political power to influence the course of an election. Evidence suggests, however, that young people typically show dissatisfaction and disappointment in the political system and politicians (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015; Pruitt, 2017). This often ends up creating a shared negative evaluation of their own political efficacy in their interactions with each other, as they tend to believe their votes would end up changing nothing about the political system, and hence do not vote (Sola-Morales & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2017, p. 640).

Additionally, the youth bulge literature repeatedly links large YCS with increased disaffection, grievances and frustrations against the political system among the youth (Flückiger & Ludwig, 2018; Urdal, 2006; Weber, 2013). Analysts attribute this widespread disaffection in large parts to socioeconomic deprivation, arising from limited labour market opportunities for young people, due to labour oversupply and underemployment within economies which have not adequately modernised to absorb such huge numbers (Alfy, 2016; Brunello, 2010; Weber, 2019). This risk of cohort size induced deprivation is even more explicitly told in Richard Easterlin's famed hypothesis, in which he argues that the social and

economic fortunes of a group within the population vary inversely with its cohort size, all things being equal (Easterlin 1987, p 1). A major effect of this deprivation for young people is that it affects their transition into adulthood, often socially constructed in terms of the ability to live an independent life, afford basic necessities, complete their education, marry, rent their own accommodation, among others (Eguavoen, 2010; Ozerim, 2019). Life cycle effect interpretations for young people's disaffection towards voting argues that during this challenging phase of transition, young people tend to vote less both as a result of their disillusion with the political system, and also to focus on using the available time for improving their socioeconomic situations (Quintelier, 2007; Weiss, 2020).

An evident implication we can draw from this argument is that large YCS will increase the volume of young people who are comparatively politically deficient in terms of knowledge, hold shared negative opinions about their own political efficacy, and also struggling to navigate the path to adulthood, due to cohort size induced challenges in terms of labour market competition, wages, and stability in life. This should make their disaffection towards voting look normal within their circles, as they come across large numbers of peers with similar challenges and passive tendencies. We accordingly expect that;

H₁: The larger the YCS of a country, the lower the propensity that young people will vote in national elections.

Youth cohort size, peer influence and youth electoral participation

The growing influence of peers as one of the dominant routes to political socialisation among young people is well documented in the literature (Bergan et al., 2021; Dostie-Goulet, 2009). The present generation of youngsters are argued to learn and experiment with politics more through peer networks and influences, than most of the conventionally known channels of politicisation (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Friends are significantly more likely to inspire young

people's political interest and values, as they grow into adulthood and become increasingly detached from their families (Dostie-Goulet, 2009). While the rising influence of peers might overstate the declining importance of families and parents, they remain an important factor of political socialisation in this developmental period (Esau et al., 2019). Pilkington and Pollock (2015, p. 14) report, notwithstanding, that in 28 out of 30 locations across Europe, young people identified more with the political values and views of their peers than their families: peers such as partners (girlfriends/boyfriends) and best friends were found to hold political views closer to that of respondents, than those held by family (including father, mother and grandparents). A major reason for this, as Ellen Quintelier (2015, p. 54) argues, is the fact that peers are 'indisputably a part of young people's life: They are omnipresent, and they are constantly interacting with each other'. Importantly, these peer interactions among young people is further intensified by the frequent usage of social media platforms (Liang & Shen, 2018; Marino et al., 2020; Nesi et al., 2018).

The ubiquity of peers and the ever-expanding opportunities for social influence hold diverse implications for young people's political socialisation in general, and their electoral participation in particular. For instance, in Casey Klofstad's study (2011) on political conversations among college students, he found that civic talks among students increased the propensity of voting in elections by 7 percent: peer interactions proved critical for the purposes of information gathering, generating political interest and also recruitments into political activities. Similar positive influences of peers on youth electoral participation have been recently reported (Bergan et al., 2021). These notwithstanding, we believe this same positive mobilising power of peer influence for electoral participation, could be considerably stifled in the face of a youth bulge. Building from our earlier theorisation on the socioeconomic inconveniences faced by young people within a youth bulge (Weber, 2019; Flückiger & Ludwig, 2018), we suppose that the phenomenon will make available a large pool of peer

socialising agents who, as earlier argued, are relatively deficient in civic and political knowledge, and generally share the same or similar challenging life experiences as part of their transition into adulthood, have low confidence in the political system, and are more inclined to doubt their own political efficacy. Their discussions of the inabilities of the political system and politicians to improve their socioeconomic conditions, during their online and offline interactions as peers, should further strengthen their disaffection and consequent apathy towards voting. We accordingly expect that;

H₂: The negative effect of YCS on young people's electoral participation is stronger in the case of individuals under strong peer influence.

Data and Variables

To test our hypotheses, we analyse data on all democratic countries included in Wave 6 of the nationally representative WVS (Inglehart et al., 2014). The data was collected between 2010 and 2014. Our focus on democratic countries is based on the argument that democracy is the only regime type which allows for contestation and political participation (Dahl, 1971, pp. 4–6), and accordingly expected that the quality of democracy will have significant consequences on people's electoral participation. We categorised countries in the WVS as democratic or otherwise with the help of the Polity IV democracy index (Center for Systemic Peace, 2013)³. On the scale of -10 and +10, countries with values between 6 and 10 qualify as democracies. We chose Polity IV over other indices such as the V-DEM liberal democracy index because it produces a much better mix of developed democracies with small YCS and developing democracies with large YCS. The final list of countries is, therefore, more in sync with the

³ Accessed 9 Nov, 2020.

objectives of the study, compared with the output of the V-DEM index, which covers overwhelmingly Western democracies, typically known for their small YCS. Our sample included respondents between 18 and 29 years of age⁴. Table 1 in the Online Appendix shows the full list of 29 democratic countries included in the sample.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable of our analysis was the respondents' participation record in national elections. Respondents were asked if 'When elections take place, do [they] vote always, usually or never?'. In the sample, 54.23 percent of young people claimed to have always voted, 21.13 percent usually voted, and 24.64 percent never participated in elections. This measure of electoral participation is not without disadvantages. While we cannot change how the WVS formulated the question, it is important to reflect on its shortcomings. It has been shown that post-election survey data where respondents self-report their electoral participation often overestimate participation rates (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2012; Burden, 2000; Karp & Brockington, 2005). Morin-Chassé and associates (2017) surveyed the literature and found that this overestimation can be the result of (1) sampling error, (2) the respondents' inaccurate memories about past participation, and (3) deliberate misreporting of electoral participation to meet social standards (Näher & Krumpal, 2012; Stocké & Stark, 2007; Waismel-Manor & Sarid, 2011). With a suspiciously large share of respondents reporting strong commitment to voting, we suspect faulty memories and deliberate misreporting to be a source of concern in this data. Conclusions of this study have to be read in this light.

As per the differences between countries in our sample, participation in national elections is mandatory and enforced in Australia, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay. In Mexico and Turkey voting is compulsory but is not legally enforced. Figure 1 reveals that less than 30

⁴ In all countries, the voting age is 18.

percent are long-term participants in Pakistan, Malaysia and Estonia, while - not surprisingly - more than 80 percent always vote in Brazil, Peru, and Argentina.

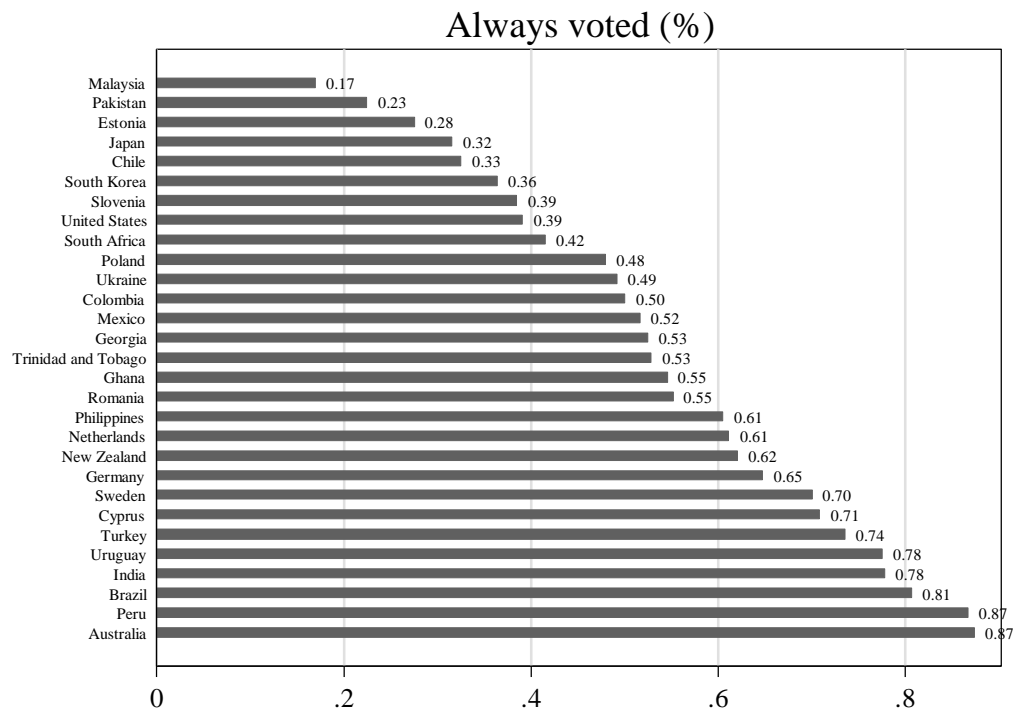


Figure 1 The share of young respondents claiming to have always voted

Independent variables

The main independent variable of the study is YCS, operationalised as the share of persons between 15 and 29 years of age within the adult population (15+years) of a country. Past estimates of YCS by leading theorists (e.g. Collier, 2000) had been done with the total population as the denominator. Urdal (2004) argues, however, that such an approach to estimating YCS is fraught with challenges because it underestimates youth bulges in countries with fast growing under-15 years populations, since they are typically overrepresented in such fast-growing populations. The inflated proportion of persons under 15 years of age, therefore,

ends up dwarfing the more economically and politically relevant working population that is typically estimated from 15 years and above (Urdal, 2004, p. 13). Data on YCS was borrowed from the United Nations Population Division database (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019)⁵. YCS in our sample ranges from 18.4 to 46.7 percent. At the time of the data collection Japan and Germany had a youth population smaller than 20 percent of the adult population. We observed the largest youth cohorts (above 40 percent) in countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, South Africa, Pakistan and Ghana.

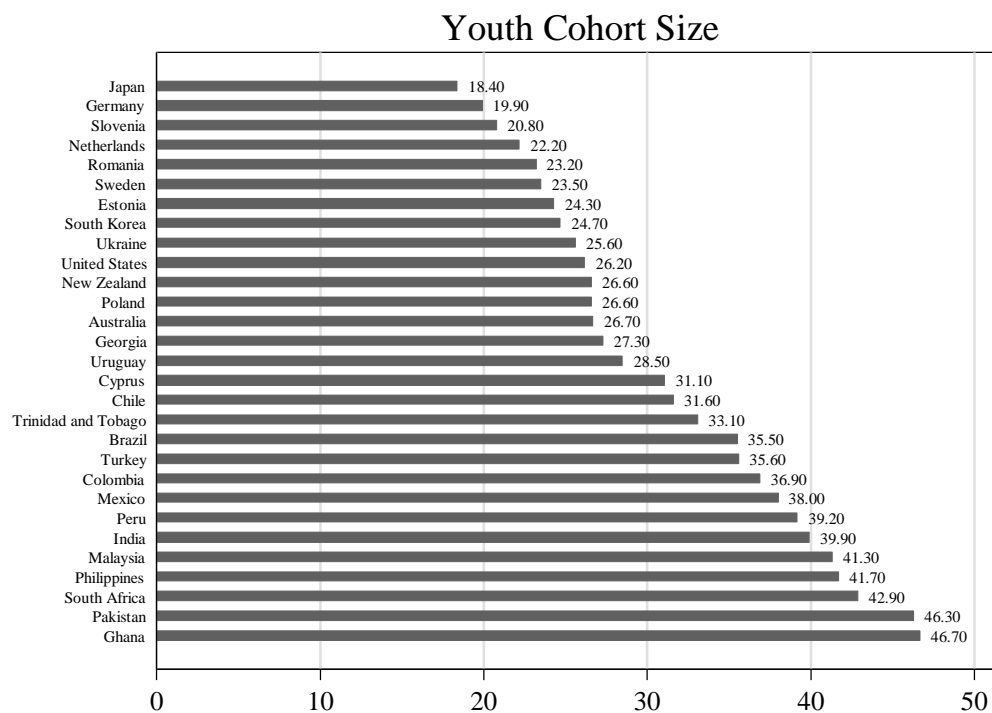


Figure 2 Youth cohort size in the sample

To map the importance of various sources in gathering information, respondents were asked the following question. ‘People learn what is going on in this country and the world from

⁵ Accessed: 9 Nov, 2020

various sources. For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you use it to obtain information never, less than monthly, monthly, weekly or daily'. The questionnaire lists 'friends and colleagues' as a source of information, which we call *Peer Influence* in the analysis, and use it to test the second hypothesis of the paper (H₂). The variable ranges from 1 to 5, with larger values indicating more frequent peer contact. Mexico, South Africa, Pakistan, and India are amongst the countries in which friends played the smallest role in gathering information, whereas in Brazil, Germany, Ghana, Sweden and Trinidad and Tobago, the importance of friends is the largest in our sample.

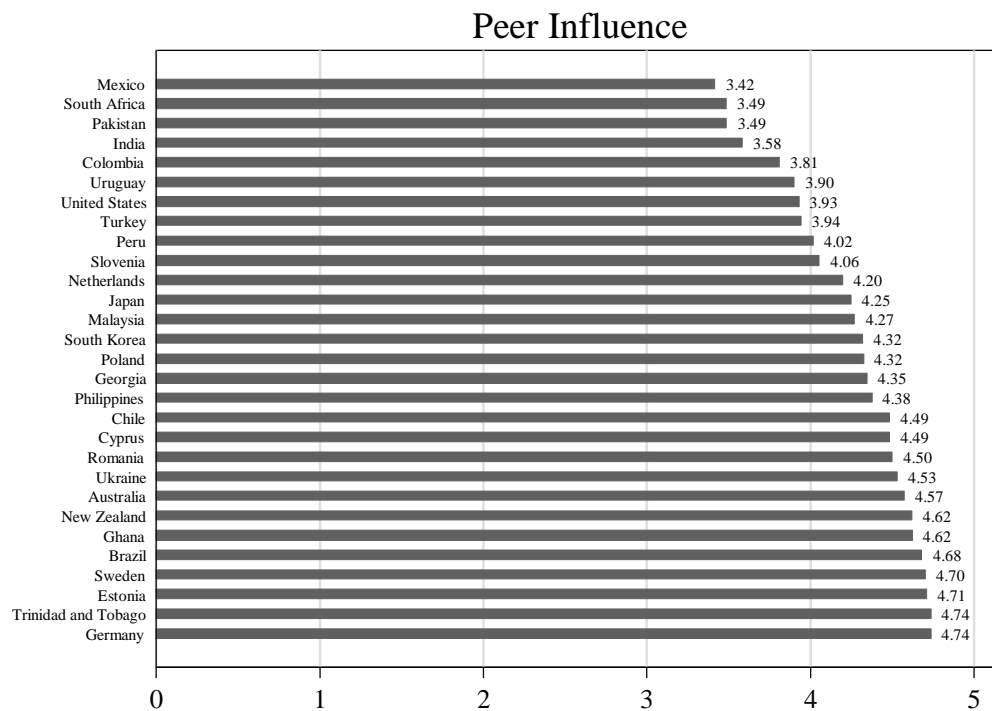


Figure 3 Average peer influence in the sample

Control variables

To obtain the net effect of the independent variables on young people's electoral participation, we control for additional factors in our models. Starting with individual sociodemographic indicators, we include *age*, *gender*, and *marital status*. Age is argued to correlate positively with institutionalised political participation, such that the older people become, the more they participate (Dalton, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Also, past studies suggest that men are generally more engaged in institutionalised politics than women (Burns et al., 2001; Norris, 2002; Pfanzelt & Spies, 2019). Finally, married people are argued to participate in institutionalised politics such as voting more than singles (Halimatusa'diyah & Prihatini, 2021; Struber, 2010).

Further, individual socioeconomic status is argued to be a key determinant of political behaviour within the resource-based model of political participation (Teorell, 2006). Resources such as *education*, *income*, and *employment* are reasoned to predict political participation by affording individuals the time, money and civic skills necessary for effective participation in politics (Brady et al., 1995). As a proxy for individual socioeconomic status, we used the age the respondent completed full time education, the individual's satisfaction with the household's financial situation and employment status.

Political attitude has long been seen as key antecedent to political behaviour (Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Verba & Nie, 1987). We, therefore, include young people's responses on their *interest in politics*, and their opinions on the *importance of politics* and *importance of democracy*. All three variables have received considerable attention in discussions on young people's political behaviour in past research (e.g. Foa and Mounk, 2016).

Various multilevel studies on political participation have emphasised the importance of macro level context in understanding individual political behaviour (Katsanidou & Eder, 2018; Kitanova, 2019). The literature suggests that country level or structural conditions affect

everyone in the society and are, therefore, appropriate indicators to gauge the mood of society, and the propensity for collective social response (Taylor, 2001, p. 18). However, our modelling strategy (see below) and the number of countries in our sample only permits us to control for a few country-level variables. Besides YCS, we include the *Polity IV score*, *mandatory voting* and *the number of compulsory school years* into the models. The rationale for controlling for the number of compulsory school years is that the extension of formal education further into the teenage years and beyond, increased and prolonged the dependency of young people and young adults, and concomitantly reduced their autonomy, with implications for their civic engagement in all kinds of ways. For the full list of the variables and their coding see Appendix 2.

Results

As due to a small sample size on the country level (< 30) the advantages of multilevel modelling cannot be fully exploited (Moehring, 2012), and following Primo et al. (2007) we opted for a single-level multinomial logit model with country fixed effects (FE) and country-clustered standard errors. This allowed us to reach convergence in all our models as well as avoid omitted variable bias on the country-level.⁶ The country fixed effects should incorporate all unmeasured country-level factors that may influence electoral participation on the individual level, such as historical and cultural effects. This is especially important, because YCS is interconnected with a number of macro factors such as development, and leaving out the country fixed effects would overestimate the importance of YCS in explaining participation. To assess the robustness of

⁶ For a discussion on the proper sample size on level-2 in logit models see Bryan and Jenkins (2016) and Maas and Hox (2004).

our approach, we estimated a simpler multilevel multinomial logit model as well, which is available in the Online Appendix. Our results are presented in two models. In Model 1, we test H₁, namely the effect of YCS on young people’s voting record. Our expectation is that the effect of YCS on young people’s electoral participation is negative. Following this and in response to H₂, Model 2 includes *Peer Influence* in interaction with YCS, to test the effect of YCS over the varying roles friends play in gathering information. Table 1 displays the effects of YCS, *Peer Influence* and their interaction. The category ‘Never vote’ is selected as reference. Positive coefficients indicate that the given regressor increases the likelihood of usually/always voting against never voting. For the full models see Appendix 4 in the Online Appendix.

Table 1 Multinomial logit models explaining electoral participation of young people.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Usually	Always	Usually	Always
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
YCS	-0.380* (0.008)	-0.125* (0.008)	-0.353* (0.016)	-0.075* (0.021)
Peer Influence	0.012 (0.024)	0.084* (0.026)	0.240* (0.098)	0.501* (0.146)
YCS × Peer Influence			-0.006* (0.003)	-0.011* (0.004)
Control variables included				
Intercept	13.278* (0.569)	1.877* (0.574)	12.094* (0.787)	-0.248 (1.147)
N	10093		10093	
LR test	3574.834*		3587.952*	
Pseudo R ²	0.177		0.177	
Log pseudolikelihood	-8317.274		-8310.715	

* p < 0.05

Entries are multinomial logit coefficients. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are clustered across countries. Country fixed-effects are included.

Reference groups: Mandatory Voting: Voting not mandatory; Gender: Male; Marital Status: Married; Employment Status: Unemployed

Beginning with Model 1, with larger YCS the likelihood of both usually voting and always voting is smaller than that of never voting. If YCS increases with one unit (i.e. one percentage point), the relative likelihood of always voting and usually voting is expected to decrease by a factor of 0.882 ($\exp(-0.125)$) and 0.683 ($\exp(-0.380)$) respectively. These results confirm our first hypothesis: increasing YCS suppresses young people's electoral participation. This model will serve as baseline to our further analysis.

Turning to H₂ and the moderating effect of *Peer Influence*, Model 1 shows that the influence of peers significantly affects one's electoral participation record. The more young people rely on their peers in gathering information, the more likely it is that they always participate at the elections - as revealed by Figure 4. This effect, however, is not sizeable: When peer influence is low (= 1) the probability of always voting is 0.499, while at the other end of the scale (= 5) the probability is not much higher (0.559). The effects in the other two groups (i.e. never votes, and usually votes) are also in the same spectrum.

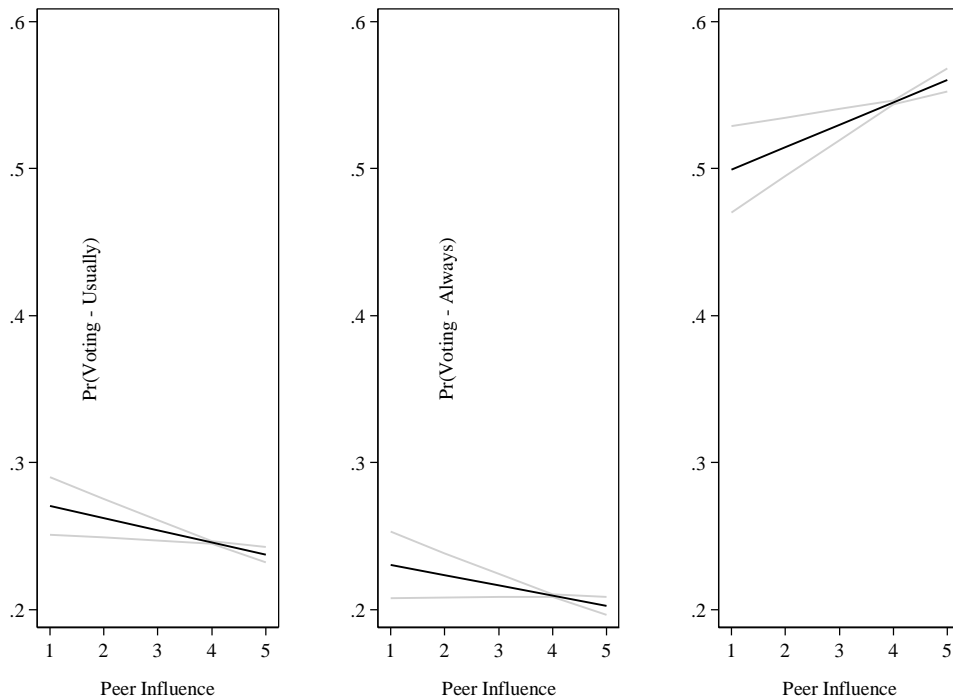


Figure 4. The predicted probabilities of electoral participation

But does peer influence affect the relationship between YCS and voting - as theorised in H₂? Figure 5 displays young people's predicted probability of voting over YCS and peer influence⁷. Each line on the figure represents one value of *Peer Influence*. The darker the line the stronger the influence of peers in gathering information. The probability of always voting (third panel in Figure 5) declines with increasing YCS, but at the same time, this decline is different across the values of peer influence. Young people whose primary source of information is their peers are the most likely to always vote when the YCS is small (probability = 0.678). Contrarily, when YCS is large, these same people are significantly less likely to always vote (0.467). At the same time, YCS does not affect voting when young people are not kept informed by their peers. Here, the range of probability of always voting across the whole

⁷ Due to the low number of observations on the country-level, and with the country dummies in the model, we could not calculate the margins. To produce the margins plot we removed the main effect for YCS from Model 2. The discussion of this problem is available in the Online Appendix.

spectrum of YCS is only 0.044. As for the categories of usually voting and never voting , we see a completely different picture. Large YCS combined with strong peer influence is associated with a comparatively high probability of never participating at the elections (first panel in Figure 5). The interaction of the two variables, however, shows no significant effect on the usually voting group (second panel). Put differently, the combination of the two variables neither generates apathy nor electoral commitment among young people who usually vote in elections: they seem unaffected. Substantively, what the results show is that the conflation of large YCS with strong peer influence increases the likelihood of young people never voting in a national election, and at the same time, decreases the likelihood of young people always voting in a national election. The results support H₂, but in interestingly nuanced ways. We reflect on these findings further in our discussions.

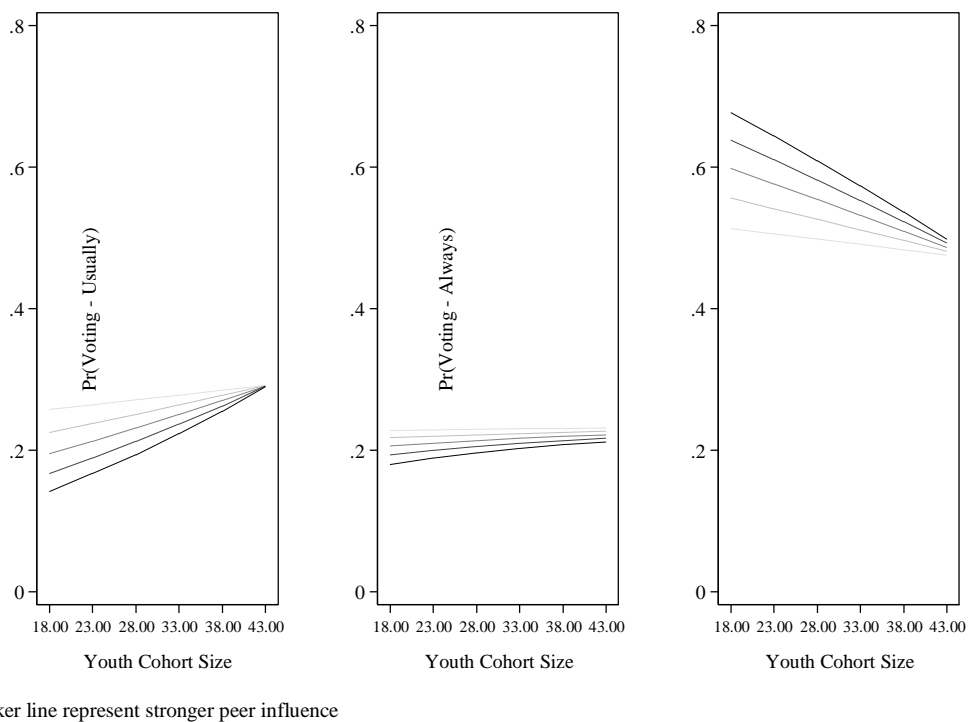


Figure 5. Young people’s predicted probabilities of voting over youth cohort size and peer influence

Regarding our control variables, across the two models presented above, we found only a minor departure from the literature. The quality of democracy demonstrated a negative significant effect on young people's electoral participation. In countries where voting is mandatory, electoral participation is – naturally – more likely than in countries with no such rules. The extent of compulsory education has a negative effect on participation: young people who spend more time in school among peers are less likely to usually and always vote. Regarding the individual-level variables in our models, as opposed to never voting, *age* associated positively with the propensity to usually and always voting. Consistently, the employed and people with high interest in politics were more likely to usually or always vote. The perceived importance of politics and democracy as well as being married positively correlate with the likelihood of always voting. Interestingly, we found no significant effect for gender, satisfaction with one's income and individual level education.

Discussion

The above analyses of the influence of YCS on young people's electoral participation through its main effect, and interaction with peer influence reveal some major findings of interest.

First, we found support for our first hypothesis: YCS has indeed a negative effect on young people's electoral participation. As the YCS of a country increase, it tends to suppress the likelihood of the young people within the cohort usually or always voting in national elections. Our explanation of this outcome relates to the impact of youth bulge on the young people within the cohort. We find Richard Easterlin's argument that all things being equal, the economic and social fortunes of a cohort are inversely related to its relative size particularly insightful in this context (Easterlin, 1987, p.1). As earlier argued in the theoretical section, youth bulge presents the unique challenge of the oversupply of a cohort with the same or similar

skillset onto the labour market (Apolte & Gerling, 2018; Juárez et al., 2020; Weber, 2019). Apart from the high competition among themselves for limited labour market opportunities which leaves many of them unemployed, the wages of those who are fortunate enough to gain meaningful employment are also often significantly reduced under such circumstances (Brunello, 2010; Korenman & Neumark, 2000).

Effectively then, young people growing within a youth bulge tend to have relatively fewer economic opportunities and generally more challenging transition into adulthood, compared to their peers in countries with small YCS. As the limited fortunes affect most of them and frustrations and grievances grow, we find it plausible that they will point to the government or political system as the cause of their predicaments (e.g., high levels of youth unemployment), and be increasingly disaffected within their ranks towards the political establishment. Also importantly, we believe youth bulge tends to exacerbate the life cycle effect on youth electoral participation. Given the limited opportunities available to young people growing as part of a youth bulge, the vast majority of the cohort are likely to experience significant delays in achieving the much appreciated social markers of adulthood, including finding gainful employment, supporting their significant others, completing tertiary education, renting their own apartments, marrying, among several others (Dassonneville, 2017; Smets, 2012). We think that the entrapment of a large cohort of young people within this stage of life where, in addition to their deficiencies in civic and political knowledge, they are also confronted with the challenge of gaining socioeconomic stability, can indeed mingle together to deflect their attention and priorities away from political participation in general, and voting in particular (Quintelier, 2007; Weiss, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, we find that across all the models, young people who are unemployed, students, and unmarried were least likely to vote. This is consistent with the predictions of the resource-based model of political participation, which predicts higher levels of political

engagement in response to the availability of resources (Brady et al., 1995; Leighley, 2001). The negative effect of large YCS may therefore in sum, be seen in the creation of a large pool of young men and women, undergoing almost the same kind of frustrating transition in life, who are likely to prioritise issues of direct biographical relevance to their individual lives, above spending their precious time voting for politicians they distrust anyway.

Second, the analyses show that our initial supposition on the influence of peers on the political socialisation and electoral participation of young people, in the face of their growing cohort size, is tenable. As can be seen in the baseline model (Model 1), peer influence on its own exerts a positive effect on young people's electoral participation. Figure 4 shows that the more young people gather information from their peers, the greater the likelihood that they will always vote in national elections. This supports past findings which suggest that civic talks among young peers increase their propensity to vote in elections, due to the power of peer influence to inform, inspire and also recruit them into political activities (Andolina, 2011; Bergan et al., 2021; Klofstad, 2011). However, when this same mechanism is analysed in interaction with the relative numbers of young people within the population, a different picture emerges. Figure 5 shows that, young people who have peers as main source of information are more likely to always vote when they are part of a small YCS. Contrariwise, the same group shows varying degrees of apathy towards electoral politics when they are part of a youth bulge and gather information mainly from their peers.

The panels in Figure 5 reveal that the combination of large YCS and strong peer influence induces two unique forms of youth voter apathy. In the first case, the interaction of the two variables tends to increase the probability of young people abstaining altogether from voting (i.e., never voting group in left panel). In the second case, we see from the right panel of Figure 5 that the same phenomenon also tends to decrease young people's probability of always voting at national elections. An evident insight these findings offer is that where peers serve as the

main source of information to young people, their burgeoning numbers within the adult population become inimical to their own political socialisation, much in line with the argument of Hart et al (2004), put forth in the theoretical section of this paper. We find young people's electoral apathy as a natural consequence of this situation. The reduced socioeconomic fortunes which come with being a member of a youth bulge, and the associated difficulties in transition into adulthood, can indeed conflate to dominate their conversations as peers, both offline (i.e., in-person) and also via social media. Given that they are civically and politically less well informed, critical of the commitments of the political establishment towards improving their conditions as a cohort, it is reasonable to expect that their resentments towards the political establishment and politicians would be amplified by their interactions within their large pool as peers. An obvious outcome of this interaction can therefore be voter apathy.

Conclusion

Our paper set out to ascertain whether the relative numbers of young people in the adult population of a country has any effect on young people's electoral participation. We also sought to understand if the role of peers in gathering information could potentially moderate this relationship. Our findings show that YCS is a significant predictor which exerts a negative effect. In other words, young people growing within a youth bulge are significantly less likely to usually vote or always vote in elections, compared to their peers in countries with small YCS. Also importantly, we found that the probability of always voting in elections decreases for young people growing within a youth bulge, whose main source of information are their peers. Members of youth bulges are also more likely to abstain from voting in an election.

The central finding of our paper implies that whether or not young people will vote in an election, depends among others, on social and demographic factors such as their relative cohort size within the adult population, who they talk to the most for information, and the

combination of both. We find this perspective presently unexplored in existing research and believe the findings of this paper provide a good basis for the incorporation of the demographic factor into existing theoretical and empirical frameworks for understanding youth electoral participation.

This said, we acknowledge some limitations of the present study. First, the research would have benefitted from more Waves of the WVS to better exploit longitudinal effects of interest. Unfortunately, missing data on key variables meant that we could only restrict our analyses to Wave 6. Second, we must reflect again on the disadvantages of our measure of electoral participation. Based on prior research, we think that inaccurate memories about past participation and deliberate misreporting of electoral participation to meet social standards may be a source of concern. Third, our choice of the single-level fixed effect models with country cluster standard errors may not have been without challenges, given the hierarchical nature of our dataset. However, a series of robustness checks presented in the Online Appendix supports that our approach is robust for the present purposes. Fourth, goodness-of-fit measures (Pseudo $R^2 = 0.177$, Count $R^2 = 0.318$) indicate that while our models are overall significant, their explanatory power is in the lower registers. This leaves plenty of tasks for future research in identifying further suspects in explaining young people's electoral participation. Fifth, an investigation into the relationship between YCS and the length of years young people spend in formal education, within the life cycle effect framework, could have yielded some further insights of interest to the present discussion. Our paper could, however, not examine this important interaction. Last, our choice of the Polity IV index over other indices in the categorisation and selection of the cases for the study may admittedly raise some concerns about comparability of countries. Further research could accordingly test our findings on alternative datasets, and also explore these dimensions we propose.

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