

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



PIDOP – Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation

An EU-funded research project investigating the processes which influence political and civic participation by young people, women, minorities and migrants in Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and the UK

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 3: What do existing survey data tell us about citizen participation?

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INTRODUCTION

Changing patterns of citizen participation

In many countries, voting and other traditional forms of political participation have declined in recent years, with citizens exhibiting growing levels of political apathy and increasing distrust of politicians and political institutions. However, other forms of civic participation are increasing in frequency, with citizens turning to volunteering, charitable activities, consumer activism and campaigning on behalf of environmental and human rights causes. So, while traditional forms of political participation such as voting are currently in decline in many European countries, new forms of public engagement and activism seem to be arising.

The decline in voting and the growing cynicism towards politics and politicians poses a serious threat to the perceived legitimacy of governance. It is important for European institutions and national governments to understand the factors which are influencing this shift away from conventional politics towards other forms of activism.

Using existing data from previous surveys to identify the causes of different kinds of participation

There are many previous surveys which have been conducted into the different forms of participation. The data from these surveys can be analysed using advanced statistical techniques to identify patterns of political and civic participation in different countries, and to identify differences in these patterns within countries and between countries. The data can also be analysed to explore the possible causes of these differences in patterns of participation.

Four types of participation

There are four broad categories of participation which can be examined in this way. These are:

- Voting
- Other conventional political activities such as:
 - Membership of a political party
 - Running for political election
 - Working on political election campaigns for candidates or parties
 - Donations to political parties
 - Trying to persuade others to vote
- Non-conventional political activities such as:
 - Membership of groups or campaigning organisations with a political focus
 - Participating in protests, demonstrations and marches
 - Signing petitions
 - Writing letters or emails to politicians or public officials
 - Writing articles or blogs with a political content for the media
 - Participating in fundraising events for a political cause
- Civic activities such as:
 - Helping other people in one's own community
 - Membership of community organisations and other non-political organisations (e.g., religious institutions, sports clubs, etc.)
 - Undertaking organised voluntary work
 - Giving money to charities
 - Fund-raising activities for good causes
 - Consumer activism: buying or boycotting particular goods or services in order to support specific causes

KEY OBSERVATIONS

There is variability but also some consistency in patterns of participation across countries

Our analysis of previous survey data has revealed a great deal of variability in all four types of participation both within and across countries.

However, some clear consistencies across countries are also apparent. For example:

- Younger people aged under 25 and ethnic minority individuals are less likely to vote in all countries
- Younger people are also less likely to be involved in conventional activities in all countries
- Males are more likely to be involved in conventional forms of participation in all countries

In some but not all countries, younger people and ethnic minority individuals are more likely to be involved in non-conventional forms of political activity.

As far as civic engagement is concerned, there are differences between countries, but there is comparatively less variability within countries.

Intentions do not always translate into actions

Analysis of data collected since 1973 reveals consistently high *intentions* to vote each year (always above 90% of the sample). This is noticeably higher than the self-reported voting *behaviour* of individuals. It is also considerably higher than the actual levels of voter turnout in each country. This demonstrates the disconnection between voting intentions and actual behaviours.

Variability in the psychological factors that are linked to participation

There is a high degree of variability both within and between countries in the psychological factors that are linked to participation. These factors include:

- Interest in politics
- Attentiveness to political issues and affairs, for example, on television, in newspapers, on the internet, etc.
- Internal efficacy – beliefs about one’s own ability to understand and to participate in politics
- External efficacy – perceptions of the responsiveness of government and political institutions to citizens’ views
- Opinionation – holding opinions about civic and political matters
- Ideological identity – whether one holds an extreme position on either the right or the left of the political spectrum or whether one holds a more moderate centrist position
- Social trust – how much one trusts other people in general
- Institutional trust – how much one trusts institutions such as the police, the legal system, politicians, parliament, etc.
- Perceived discrimination – the perception that one is discriminated against because of the group to which one belongs

For example, levels of political interest and attentiveness vary widely across countries, from 20% of the population through to 65% depending on the country.

However, overlaid on this variability are some consistent patterns. For example:

- Attention to political broadcasts on television are always higher than attention to politics via other media sources
- There are lower levels of trust in politicians than in any other institutions across all countries

Links between psychological factors and the various forms of participation

There is consistent and strong evidence that people who have high levels of interest in politics and high levels of internal efficacy:

- Show high levels of all four types of participation, including civic engagement
- Are more likely to hold opinions, and this high level of opinionation further increases both their involvement in non-conventional political activities and their level of civic engagement

For each of the four types of participation, there is also a moderate influence of institutional trust. However, this influence varies according to the type of participation involved. For example:

- Individuals who have high levels of trust in institutions are more likely to vote, but are less likely to participate in other

ways

- Conversely, those people who feel that they are discriminated against because of the group to which they belong are less likely to vote, but are more likely to participate in other ways

Other differences in the drivers of each form of participation are also evident. For example:

- There is a greater tendency to vote and to be civically engaged among those who are more attentive to politics, but higher levels of attentiveness result in lower levels of non-conventional participation

Perceptions of the responsiveness of government and political institutions to citizens' views are also variably linked with forms of participation. For example:

- High perceived responsiveness increases the tendency to be involved in conventional and non-conventional activities, but shows no direct influence on voting behaviour

Links between the political and legal institutions of a country and levels of participation

With the exception of voting, differences between countries in average levels of participation are also linked to differences in the political and legal institutions of those countries.

In particular, the extent to which the government within a country is accountable and efficient, and a country's record in relation to the rule of law, are both very important factors. In this context:

- Accountability and efficiency means that corruption is controlled, that the financing of political parties is disclosed, and that the freedom of the press is ensured
- A country's record in relation to the rule of law means that the judiciary is independent, courts are impartial, and minorities are legally protected

Participation levels are higher in countries identified as having an accountable and efficient government, and in countries which have a good record in relation to the rule of law. These institutional features are important predictors of levels of participation by citizens (in addition to the psychological predictors noted above).

Institutional features also play a role in moderating the individual drivers of political participation. For example, the magnitude of differences in participation between males and females, and the magnitude of differences in levels of political interest and internal efficacy, are dependent on the institutional context in which individuals are situated.

Can citizens be grouped into different types based on their overall pattern of participation?

Citizens can be grouped into four distinct classes of people based on their overall pattern of participation:

- **Those who are both politically and civically active** – These individuals participate in all four ways to a high extent, and are more likely to be older, male, and not from an ethnic minority group.
- **Those who are inactive both politically and civically** – These individuals have a very low tendency to participate in all four ways, and are more likely to be younger, from ethnic

minority groups, and are less likely to be male than those in the politically active group.

- **Those who have high levels of both non-conventional and civic activity** – These individuals are involved in non-conventional political activity and are civically engaged, but are less likely to vote or to be involved in conventional political activities. Compared to the politically and civically active group, this group is more likely to be young. Ethnic minority individuals are more likely to be in this third category than in the first category, but they are even more likely to be in the second, inactive, category above.
- **Voting-only** – These individuals are similar in demographic makeup to the politically and civically active group, but members are more likely to be female.

Summary of the main findings

In summary, the findings of this research show that participation is affected by all of the following factors:

- **Macro institutional factors**
 - The extent to which the government within a country is accountable and efficient
 - A country's record in relation to the rule of law
- **Demographic factors**
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Ethnic status
- **Psychological factors**
 - Political interest
 - Political attentiveness
 - Internal efficacy (beliefs about one's own ability to understand and to participate in politics)
 - External efficacy (perceptions of the responsiveness of government and political institutions to citizens' views)
 - Opinionation
 - Ideological identity
 - Social trust
 - Institutional trust
 - Perceived discrimination

However, apart from political interest and internal efficacy, the precise way in which the remaining psychological factors impact on participation varies according to the prevailing macro factors, demographic factors and the type of participation involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

National governments need to show that they are accountable and efficient

National governments that wish to enhance levels of political and civic participation among their populations should ensure that their own mode of operation is always fully transparent, accountable and efficient. This includes controlling corruption, disclosing the financing of political parties, and ensuring the freedom of the press.

National governments need to ensure their country's record in relation to the rule of law

National governments that wish to enhance levels of political and civic participation among their populations should ensure their country's record in relation to the rule of law. This includes guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary, the impartiality of the courts, and the legal protection of minorities.

Interventions need to be tailored to specific subgroups within the population

Forms and levels of participation, and influences on participation, vary according to age, gender and ethnic status. Policymakers, educationalists and activists who are developing interventions aimed at enhancing levels of political and civic participation should take into account that different forms of intervention may be required for younger vs. older individuals, women vs. men, and ethnic minority vs. majority individuals.

Interventions need to be tailored to specific types of participation

Psychological influences on participation vary considerably according to the type of participation concerned. Policymakers, educationalists and activists who are developing interventions aimed at enhancing levels of political and civic participation should take into account that different forms of intervention may be required to enhance different types of participation.

Citizenship/civic education should aim to enhance political interest and internal efficacy

Policymakers, educationalists and activists who are developing interventions aimed at enhancing levels of political and civic participation should focus on amplifying the political interest and internal efficacy of citizens. These two characteristics can be targeted most directly and effectively through educational interventions in schools. To this end, there should be better and more effective education within schools that enables young people to acquire an interest in political and civic affairs, fosters their understanding of political and civic matters, and supports the development of the skills which are required to participate actively in the political and civic life of their country.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

PIDOP is a multinational research project funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme. The project is examining the processes which influence political and civic participation in eight European states – Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.

The research is examining macro-level contextual factors (including historical, political, electoral, economic and policy factors), proximal social factors (including family, educational and media factors) and psychological factors (including motivational, cognitive, attitudinal and identity factors) which facilitate and/or inhibit political and civic participation.

A distinctive focus of the project is the psychology of the individual

citizen and the psychological processes through which macro-level contextual factors and proximal social factors exert their effects upon citizens' participation. Young people, women, minorities and migrants are being examined as four specific groups at risk of political disengagement. The research is exploring the differences as well as the overlap between civic and political engagement.

The overall aim of the project is to explain how and why different forms of participation develop or are hampered among citizens living in different European countries and contexts.

Methodology

The research has involved three strands, as follows:

- New political and psychological theories of political and civic participation have been developed. These theories concern the nature of political and civic participation, the different types of citizens that can be identified on the basis of their patterns of participation, and the various factors and processes which drive citizen participation.
- Existing data from previous surveys have been analysed using advanced statistical techniques. The surveys which have been used include the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, International Social Survey Programme, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the World Values Survey.
- New data on political and civic participation have been collected from ethnic majority and minority populations. These data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including focus groups, individual interviews and survey methods. Data have been collected in nine different national locations across Europe. In each location, data were collected from members of the ethnic majority group and from members of two ethnic minority or migrant groups. In total, data have been collected from 27 ethnic groups living across Europe.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Project website	http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/pidop/
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Further reading	PIDOP policy briefing papers PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 1 (2011). <i>What can be learnt from the analysis of current policies on participation?</i> PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 2 (2011). <i>What do young people believe and think about citizenship and participation?</i> All policy briefing papers may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website. PIDOP presentations A large number of papers from the PIDOP project have been presented at conferences in 2010 and 2011. These may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website.