

Beyond Apathy: Representative Performance as a Driver of the Age Gap in Voter Turnout

Ayauzhan Kamatayeva  and Edurne Bartolome Peral 

Department of Social and Human Sciences, University of Deusto, Spain

Correspondence: Ayauzhan Kamatayeva (akamatayeva@gmail.com / a.kamatayeva@deusto.es)

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Abstract

Unequal electoral turnout between younger and older citizens has long been a topic of debate, and the size of this age gap differs from one country to another across Europe. Such cross-national variation has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature and thus raises the question of why some countries experience more severe representational failure in electoral turnout than others. A common interpretation is that younger citizens are depicted as apathetic, and their behaviour is intended to be read as a story of the absent generation from political life. While existing literature may show lower turnout among young individuals, attributing this solely to a lack of interest or engagement, it overlooks broader structural issues that may be at play. To move beyond this behavioural blame game, we analyse the relationship between political representation and the age gap in voter turnout using time-series cross-sectional data from rounds 1–11 of the European Social Survey. This research is built on the assumption that unequal participation is due not to a lack of interest in the public good but rather to the representative performance of institutions. Representative performance generally defines a set of descriptive and substantive forms of the representation that institutions are supposed to deliver a meaningful pathway to individuals to engage with electoral politics. Alongside other recent research, this work attempts to contribute to shifting the discourse away from the deeply rooted notion of absenteeism and toward a focus on the representation of institutions.

Keywords

age gap in turnout; institutional participation; political inequality; political representation

1. Introduction

One clear research pattern regarding electoral behaviour is that young people are less willing to participate in elections, unlike their older counterparts, contributing to a persistent age gap in electoral turnout. If this gap widens, the risk of electoral backsliding increases (Garnett & James, 2023). Lack of participation of a particular group, such as ethnic minorities, women, youth, and people with special needs, may contribute to flaws in democracy (Lijphart, 1997; Verba et al., 1995). Particularly, electoral absenteeism of underprivileged groups may point to a representational failure in politics that has been gaining more salience as a defining issue of current democratic institutions. When younger citizens feel that political institutions fail to represent their voices or address their priorities, abstention becomes not only an act of disengagement but a statement of distance from the existing political system, undermining its legitimacy (Kitanova, 2020; Mansbridge, 1999).

Despite a heightened focus on electoral apathy or alienation among youth, few have confronted the question of how universal this age-based pattern is. This has led to the age gap being neglected, including how it is expressed across countries and over time. As Smets (2012) rightly mentions, we do not know much about whether these experiences reflect a universal gap or if they are applicable only to some instances. In other words, while many scholars have shown that young people are less participative in institutional channels, there is not much scholarship to expand on and delineate the different sources of influence on political behaviour beyond age and other individual characteristics.

Indeed, the age gap pattern is not uniform. We have seen that the age gap has narrowed in several countries over the past decade due to civic education initiatives and electoral reforms. While in others, such as Ireland, Latvia, and France, the age gap remains wide, reflecting persistent socio-economic divides and institutional distrust. These contrasting cases illustrate that participation cannot be fully understood without situating it within national political contexts. Exploring these dynamics across countries is crucial because European democracies differ not only in their institutional designs but also in their civic cultures and trajectories of socio-economic developments. Economic crises, migration pressures, and the rise of populism have redefined relationships between citizens and states, creating new patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). Such developments provide fertile ground to understand how people and institutions interact to shape participation across age groups.

We argue that these cross-national and over-time differences in the age gap in electoral participation are, to a certain extent, a result of the representative performance of political institutions. This study develops the concept of *representative performance*—the extent to which political systems are perceived as accessible, responsive, and reflective of age-specific interests—to capture how institutions simultaneously embody nominal and substantive domains of inclusion. Demonstrated political responsiveness of institutions towards specific age groups in terms of prioritising and providing public goods in response to their demands could politically empower these age groups and turn passive citizens into active ones by engaging them institutionally (Henn & Foard, 2012; Sloam & Henn, 2019). Thus, the age gap in turnout might narrow when younger and older citizens both perceive institutions as capable of representing the plurality of social identities and age-specific interests.

By examining age-based inequalities in electoral participation through the lens of institutions' representative performance, this article contributes to current debates on the cultural and institutional foundations of

democratic participation. It expands the comparative scope of recent studies that link participatory equality to institutional inclusiveness, offering three main contributions: First, it situates the age gap in turnout within broader turnout inequalities and transformations of political culture. In this view, youth disengagement is understood as more than mere apathy, making age-specific representation a key test of democratic legitimacy—alongside other factors such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Second, it refines the conceptualisation of the meaningfulness of elections through representation. Third, it provides cross-national and longitudinal evidence from European democracies to explain why some contexts demonstrate engaged citizens across age groups while others reproduce structural inequalities among them. The bulk of previous literature is built on the American, British, and Canadian contexts, or single case studies of European countries, e.g., Switzerland and Belgium, leaving potential gaps in understanding how and why the age gap varies across political contexts that may alter the voting calculus. Particularly, the inclusion of Central and Eastern European countries adds context-wise diversity, ensuring differences across the development of political culture and institutions.

2. Understanding the Age Gap in Turnout Through the Representative Performance of Institutions

2.1. Explaining the Age Gap in Turnout: Insights From Existing Research

The worrisome trend towards increased disapproval of the institutional form of political participation among citizens continues to provoke debate across the globe (Boyle, 2024; Kostelka et al., 2023; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Of particular concern is the diverging participatory patterns across age groups, further reflected in the age gap in turnout. The proposition on turnout inequalities is prominent in the literature and contributes to the story of youth who are absent and disconnected from political life (García-Albacete, 2014; Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; O'Toole et al., 2003). Over several decades, such a narrative has tended to put blame on young individuals, portraying them as politically uninterested and unmotivated (Dermody et al., 2010; Sloam, 2014). However, rather than framing the issue of electoral absenteeism solely in relation to youth, the story should expand to capture the age gap and the explanatory factors behind it, revealing the complexity of structural and systemic factors at play.

From a behavioural perspective, voting may be irrational for all citizens, not just for young ones. Translated into the paradox of voter turnout, this notion highlights the inherent tension between the ideal of democratic participation and rational individual behaviour. The decision to vote or abstain in this regard depends on the expected welfare benefit (Downs, 1957). Although citizens may recognise the negligible impact of their input on the outcome, they also understand its strategic value in representative democracy (Marsh & Kaase, 1979). Thus, their goal is not only to affect the electoral outcome but to influence political processes indirectly, considering group interests (Edlin et al., 2007). Recent findings indicate that only a portion of the electorate votes instrumentally, while most voters act on habitual, norm-guided, normative, or value-rational grounds, which in turn characterises political culture (Blais & Achen, 2019). Yet, as Becker (2023) mentions, these norms can be disrupted by some institutional factors that activate an abstention script.

Despite the enhanced understanding, citizens' reliance on norms and habits does not fully elucidate their motives in their participatory decisions, or at least current challenges have begun to add new salience to

the equation. The same applies to a large body of literature that, after the third wave of democratisation, devoted attention to individual resources, which have been considered decisive in activating voting scripts (Brady et al., 1995; Plutzer, 2002; Quintelier, 2007; Verba et al., 1995). As the initial enthusiasm surrounding democratisation faded—the so-called “honeymoon effect”—scholarly attention has shifted toward attitudinal explanations such as lack of political interest and scepticism about political efficacy (Henn & Foard, 2012; Wattenberg, 2012).

Some scholars connect it only to electoral politics, highlighting the growing interest in non-institutional ways of participation (Sloam, 2014) and thus the emergence of critical democrats (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002) and the extension of citizenship from norm-guided to fully engaged (Dalton, 2008). A stronger sense of duty develops as people get older, depicting young people as those who tend to fall for the immediacy of engaged citizenship (Blais et al., 2004; Sloam & Henn, 2019). The association between age-based turnout inequality and differences in citizenship experience and participation preferences requires careful interpretation, despite the widespread narrative. Even though comparative studies show unequal patterns of institutional participation across age groups, non-institutional forms of participation tend to attract young and older adults more evenly in most countries (García-Albacete, 2014, p. 219). Both findings refer to a more intricate pattern in citizens' rationale over their political feedback, suggesting that institutional and non-institutional participation could be mutually inclusive. Therefore, the replacement or shift argument has not sufficiently addressed the age gap in voting.

Throughout the development of age-related participatory models, individual-level explanations at the backbone of political participation are inadequate for grasping cross-country variation, as they are extensively used in cases where citizens belong to the same geographical unit. Meanwhile, differences in the age gap across countries remain relatively understudied, showing discrepancies in understanding age effects (Bechtel et al., 2018; Cammaerts et al., 2014; Joshi & Och, 2019; Soler-i-Marti & Ferrer-Fons, 2015). The political and socioeconomic settings of each nation likely shape political culture, which may be spread differently among young and old individuals; thus, the weight of each vote may differ and refer to the prevalence and resilience of political institutions. Undoubtedly, contextual factors touch upon individuals' well-being and attitudes, for example, through exposure to external crises and the availability of welfare benefits to cope with them. They matter for the transition to adulthood and become particularly crucial during these crises. More specifically, García-Albacete and Lorente (2021) highlight meso-level dynamics that account for differences in political attitudes among youth across four Southern European countries, despite them being dramatically hit by the crisis, thus drawing our attention to institutions.

2.2. Linking Unequal Participation to Unequal Representation: Age and Institutions

Due to the transitional character of age, age-related political struggles receive less scholarly attention than inequalities rooted in enduring identities such as gender, race, and ethnicity (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Nevertheless, each stage forms shared experiences and collective interests (Erk, 2017; Velimsky et al., 2024). Apart from that, similar to existing prejudices around other social categories, age-based stereotypes do exist and develop on the grounds of knowledge and competence that particularly disqualify them from political life. Unlike gender or race, age discrimination strongly depends on the context, referring to an unclear predetermined hierarchy across age groups. Institutions, as a source for “the rules of the game” and an embodiment of entrenched societal norms (Norris, 2002), play a pivotal role in regulating the so-called

vicious cycle in which youth are excluded from both gaining and delivering expertise (Bessant, 2020; Kurz & Ettensperger, 2024; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022).

Although some may still perceive youth exclusion as less pressing than other forms of underrepresentation, such a view obscures the dynamics of institutional structure and the potential danger that successive generations may internalise electoral withdrawal as a response to institutional neglect. This scenario is somewhat alarming, as previous research has indicated that formative experiences during early adulthood can create lasting differences in political orientations and civic culture. These implications are not merely indicative of electoral backsliding; they signal an institutional deficit that gradually erodes democratic legitimacy.

This article suggests that the contextual explanations developed in previous studies may be incomplete, given that earlier research treats institutional effects primarily as formal arrangements and pays insufficient attention to turnout inequalities (Belschner, 2024; Best & Seyis, 2021; Boyle, 2024). Thus, this article aims to bridge the gap between political behaviour and representative performance of institutions, which have become ever more critical in tackling democratic backsliding across Europe.

We expect that national differences in the age gap could stem from varying representative performance. The latter forms a part of the representational capacity that pertains to norms and policies defining the extent to which citizens are descriptively (symbolically) and substantively represented, which is crucial for underprivileged groups, especially youth. Recent studies corroborate the positive trends in electoral engagement when individuals find themselves included and represented by institutions (Angelucci et al., 2024; Blais et al., 2014; Kurz et al., 2025). We argue that the representative performance of institutions plays an equally important role in influencing individuals' closeness to electoral processes, as it might also define the trajectories of political socialisation.

2.3. Defining Representative Performance of Institutions and Potential Impact on the Age Gap in Turnout

Elections are meaningful only if citizens receive a differentiated political supply and if institutional mechanisms effectively convert votes into political outcomes (Wessels & Schmitt, 2008). This article extends the logic by arguing that the perceived meaningfulness of elections is not uniform across the electorate. It is expected to vary across social categories—here, age—depending on the representative performance of institutions.

Grounded in Pitkin's (1967) framework, we conceptualise representative performance as the extent to which institutions provide descriptive and substantive inclusion of age-relevant demands, and we theorise how this performance conditions age-based turnout patterns. Perceived meaningfulness diminishes when youth are descriptively and substantively undermined in political discourse, frequently by parliaments and political parties. By contrast, older citizens may perceive greater value in voting when institutions visibly reflect their priorities and validate their standing within the political system.

Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which political institutions and actors mirror the demographic characteristics of the electorate. Scholars have predominantly employed this form to examine the issues of inequality regarding gender (Dingler et al., 2018; Kroeber et al., 2019), race (Velimsky et al., 2024), ethnicity (Griffin, 2014; Sobolewska et al., 2018), and social class (Carnes, 2012). The underlying

principle is to share characteristics between representatives and certain demographic groups that are likely to entail a better idea of the lived experiences of the latter (Mansbridge, 1999), and thereby bear symbolic appeals that may strengthen institutional legitimacy and reinforce political trust (Hayes & Hibbing, 2017).

There is growing evidence of the applicability of descriptive effects in studies on age-based disparities in political behaviour (Angelucci et al., 2024; Belschner, 2024; Kurz et al., 2025). Age serves as a basis for cognitive shortcuts in synthesising the meaningfulness of elections, where citizens instinctively assume peer candidates share their concerns. This could be highly relevant to low-information voters (Webster & Pierce, 2019), and young individuals have often been regarded as such. Age-relevant studies back this up, showing that individuals usually favour candidates from their own age cohort (McClellan & Ono, 2024; Sevi, 2021; Sipinen et al., 2024). Still, sharing demographic characteristics does not necessarily correspond to shared ideology and policy priorities. Therefore, although the presence of candidates from different age groups can enhance perceived fairness (Banducci et al., 2004; Hayes & Hibbing, 2017; Jones, 2016), relevant policy coordination for age-specific concerns could be more attractive for mobilising younger and older citizens.

Substantive representation deals with whether political actors and institutions articulate and realise the policy demands of specific groups (Plescia et al., 2019), revealing the logics behind visibility and credibility. Politicians are expected to have an intrinsic motivation to focus on issues in line with their age group-based socialisation and preoccupations. Through the lens of age-based self-interest theory, this assumption is based on the priority of policies placed differently between young and older politicians: while the former are expected to focus on the following postmaterialist and materialist issues of human rights, climate, education, and employment, the latter predominantly emphasise caregiving, healthcare, and retirement benefits (Goerres & Tepe, 2010; Joshi & Och, 2019). Such divergence in issue priorities could imply that the policy changes advocated by one group of politicians come at the expense of those prioritised by the other, for instance, expanding retirement benefits may limit education expenses (Krook, 2016).

The age group that sees relevant agenda-setting and receives tangible welfare or other benefits linked to their participation is more likely to continue engaging with institutional channels (Blais et al., 2014). Strengthened representation could incentivize active involvement and encourage newcomers to engage in electoral processes, both as representatives and as constituents, thereby setting in motion a positive feedback cycle, opposed to “the vicious cycle” (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018). However, existing findings on the relationship between age and substantive representation have been inconclusive (Angelucci et al., 2024; Campbell, 2003; Kissau et al., 2012).

Thus, the age gap in voter turnout reflects the extent to which elections and voting hold meaning for different age groups, contingent upon the representative performance of political institutions. Moving beyond structural evaluations of institutions, we focus on representative performance only to the extent to which institutions reflect the interests of distinct age groups, leaving policy responsiveness apart from the current article’s scope. Electoral turnout gains significance for both younger and older citizens when institutions provide visibility through descriptive and substantive representation. As Sloam and Henn (2019, p. 124) note, the degree to which institutions mirror voices and opportunities that are relevant to youth influences their willingness to engage with institutional channels.

Visibility and presence of age-specific interests within political structures provide a crucial lens for understanding patterns of withdrawal. When institutions visibly include diverse age cohorts, they might help

to sustain engagement; when they fail to do so, withdrawal is expected. Challenging the conventional perspective built on individual determinants of absenteeism invites the question of whether representative performance conditions age groups' decision to engage electorally, and thus the age gap in turnout varies across contexts. Based on this question, we propose two hypotheses:

H1: The age gap in turnout is smaller in contexts where the descriptive representation of youth is higher.

H2.1: The age gap in turnout is smaller in contexts where postmaterialist issues relevant to younger citizens are more visible and salient in party competition.

H2.2: The age gap in turnout is smaller in contexts where materialist issues relevant to younger citizens are more visible and salient in party competition.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data

To test our hypotheses, we combined individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS) with country-level data on elections from multiple databases. ESS provides survey results across European countries every second year, ensuring data accuracy, validity, and representativeness through face-to-face interviews with randomly selected respondents. Our empirical analysis draws on ESS Rounds 1–11, covering 29 European democracies.

Even though ESS is not explicitly focused on electoral processes, it includes an item asking whether an individual participated in the most recent elections. Given the post-electoral nature of the question and the survey's two-year cycle, we merged the specific round for each country with the closest preceding elections. During the process of merging, we applied two rules to avoid any confusion and overreporting issues. First, only one election per year and one ESS round were merged, excluding repeated elections within a single year (e.g., Greek and Spanish cases). Second, when two survey rounds were equally applicable to a single election, the choice was given to the closest one. Since ESS data collection varies by country, in some cases extending beyond the generalised years of 2002, 2004, and so on, this temporal variation was taken into account in merging strategies. Following these principles, we obtained election-based combinations of individual and contextual-level data, spanning more than 20 years of political life.

Country-level data were collected from several databases: World Development Indicators, International Labour Organisation, Varieties of Democracy, Comparative Political Dataset, Worldwide Age Representation in Parliaments (WARP), Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and Manifesto Project (CMP). These databases provide annual or election-year data on indicators of institutional and country-specific characteristics. Data collection on age-based descriptive representation required additional efforts. The core dataset relies on WARP, supplemented by the IPU and country-specific parliamentary websites to fill gaps. Missing data were filled in manually, for instance, using official parliamentary reports for the 2003 Estonian, the 2000–2008 Lithuanian, and the 2011 Slovenian elections. Data on substantive representation were obtained from the CMP (Lehmann et al., 2025), which includes policy items reflecting age-specific interests.

3.2. *Dependent and Independent Variables*

Although age gaps in turnout constitute a system-level inequality, the analysis examines the age gap in turnout by modelling individual turnout decisions while explicitly estimating differences in participation across age groups. Voting is recoded into a binary variable indicating whether respondents cast their ballots in the previous national elections. Age is modelled using the following categories: young (18–29), middle-aged (30–59), and older voters (60 and above), with the latter category serving as the reference group. This specification permits direct estimation of turnout differences between young and older respondents, as well as between middle-aged and older ones. Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File provides robustness checks using alternative age thresholds, where young corresponds to 18–34 and middle-aged to 35–59.

Representative performance of institutions is measured through descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation is operationalised as the proportion of MPs aged 30 and below in the legislature preceding the election. The number of MPs below 30 implies the extent to which youth are visibly presented and represented politically.

Substantive representation is measured using data from the CMP, which codes party election manifestos into policy categories based on the relative share of quasi-sentences devoted to each issue. The data is presented at the party-election level, allowing the construction of indicators capturing parties' policy priorities in national elections. Applying the visibility-based logic, substantive representation is operationalised as the unweighted mean of party-level policy salience across all parties contesting an election. This measure implies the extent to which specific policy concerns are visible in the overall campaign discourse, irrespective of parties' electoral gains. We rely on the party-system salience of postmaterialist and materialist indices that could be particularly relevant to youth. In the main analyses, we use narrow-scope indices, which offer a clear conceptualisation.

The core trade-offs in choosing the size of indices can be found in the Supplementary File. Narrow postmaterialist index puts emphasis on individual freedoms and civil rights, which is considered the closest to classical Inglehart postmaterialist values. A narrow materialist index presents core structural constraints of youth political participation related to education and employment concerns. Meanwhile, medium indices are used as robustness checks to assess sensitivity to alternative operationalisations. These main representation variables are standardised to ease interpretation and comparison across models.

3.3. *Control Variables*

At the individual level, we control for gender, education, and household income, which are found necessary in the resource-based model of political participation. Besides them, we control for whether the individual trusts institutions, operationalised from several items of trust in institutions, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. Another measure of political attitude is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the individual feels close to political parties. We also control for political interest and postmaterialist attitudes. These indicators of public attitudes are often considered as a driver of people's engagement in politics.

At the aggregate level, we control for institutional arrangements, particularly electoral system type and the application of compulsory voting. Prior research suggests that higher voter turnout is associated with

proportional systems compared to majoritarian ones (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018) and institutional reforms aimed at engaging underrepresented individuals through compulsory voting (Bechtel et al., 2018; Boyle, 2024).

Finally, the economic environment of countries offers key macro-level explanatory variables. The crises of 2008 and 2015 have shown how crucial and relevant economic determinants are in explaining public attitudes (Erk, 2017). Verba and Nie (1972) note the positive influence of economic prosperity on citizens' attitudes and interest in politics and point out that actions can back such positive feelings. Accordingly, we include GDP growth rate and youth unemployment rate.

3.4. Identification Strategy

The unit of analysis is individuals, nested within country-election contexts, which are in turn nested within countries. This hierarchical structure allows us to examine how representative performance of institutions conditions the age gap in turnout. In total, our study employed time-series and cross-country data containing 173,072 eligible respondents from 135 country-elections for 29 European countries.

For such hierarchical data with the binary variable of interest in turnout, generalised linear mixed-effects models with a logit link function can be applied to pin down the extent of representation affecting political behaviour across countries and over time. More precisely, by interacting age categories with representation variables in models, the analysis examines whether representative performance with visibility logic conditions age-based turnout inequalities. The resulting interaction effects are interpreted as differences in the turnout gap across different levels of representation, conditional on individual-level controls, and country-election contexts.

We proceed in a stepwise modelling strategy designed to (a) establish baseline age gap in turnout, (b) assess the role of individual-level resources and public attitudes, and (c) test whether descriptive and substantive representation condition turnout differently across age groups. Models were estimated in R using maximum likelihood with adaptive quadrature, applying survey weights. To capture cross-national and cross-election heterogeneity, all main models include random intercepts for countries and country-election contexts. In addition, we allow the effect of being young to vary across country-election contexts by specifying a random slope for the youth indicator at the election level. This structure reflects the expectation that institutional and representational contexts may moderate youth turnout differently across elections.

In line with best practice for interaction modelling in multilevel settings, the main models focus on theoretically central variables only. That is why we present models with macroeconomic controls in Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File. The reason lies in the risk of obscuring the interpretation of representation effects and inflating model complexity in interaction models. Apart from that, we provide additional models with alternative operationalisations of descriptive and substantive representation, age categories, and alternative random-effects structures in Appendix 1–6 in the Supplementary File.

4. Results

Differences in the age gap (young vs older citizens) in electoral turnout are conceptually distinct from overall turnout levels. Countries may show a narrow age gap because both age groups vote at high rates, or because both groups vote at low rates. Conversely, countries with a wide age gap may still have high overall turnout. The evidence of Belgium and Italy presented in Figure 1 corresponds to the narrowest age gap among the countries studied. The reason is that Belgium has compulsory voting, which ensures maximum participation of citizens in elections. Meanwhile, there is no such policy in Italy, thus it seems to indicate lower rates of participation by both groups. Overall, this complexity requires a more detailed consideration of contextual explanations.

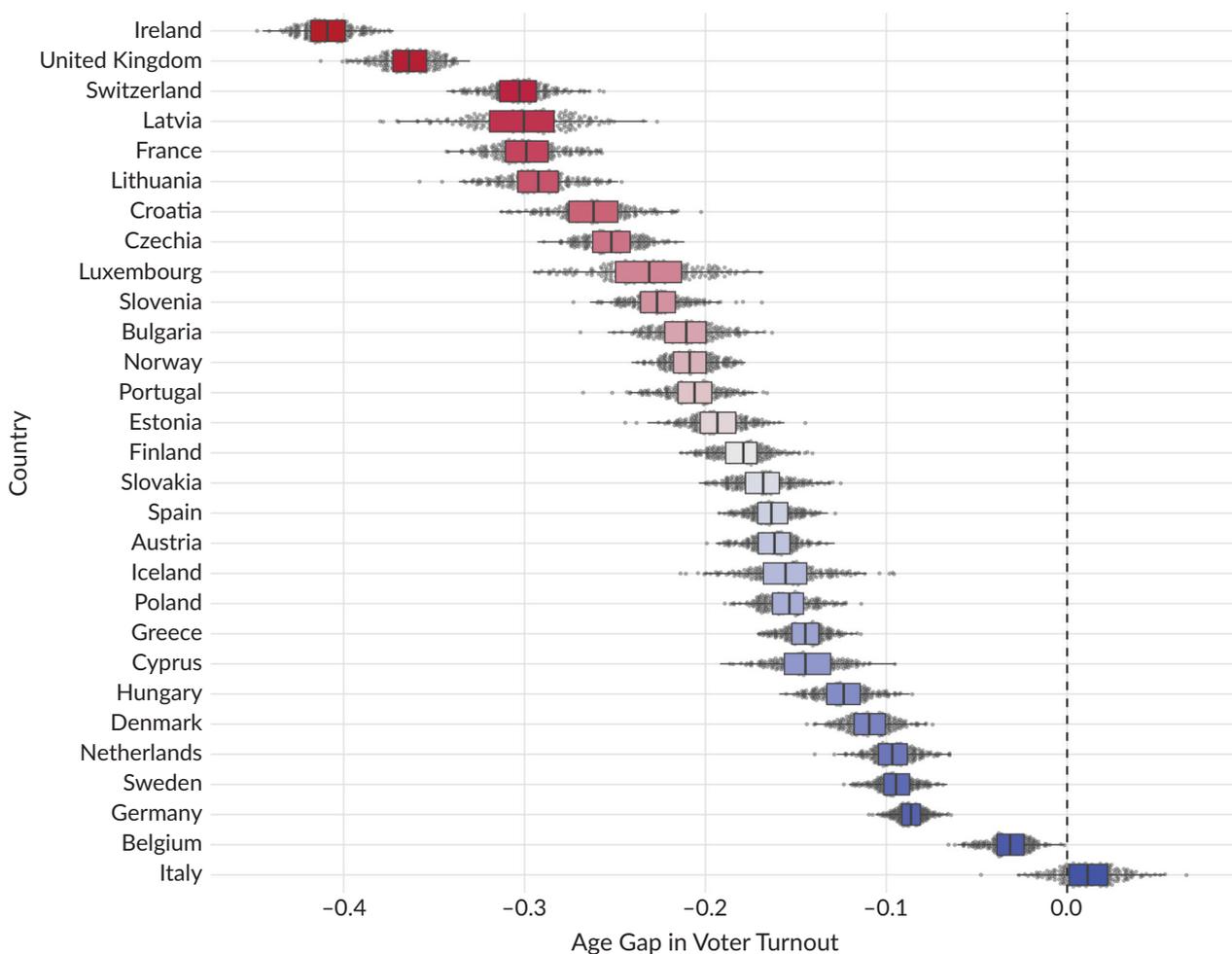


Figure 1. Age gap in voter turnout by country.

Even though descriptive statistics show high aggregate turnout (78.7%), there is a substantial difference by age, gender, educational level, country, and institutional context. Particularly, the age gap is well-pronounced (see Table 1) and quite heterogeneously distributed among European societies (see Figure 1). For example, in Bulgaria, only 57% of young individuals voted, versus 79% of their older counterparts; in Switzerland, the gap is even larger (48% vs 78%). Table 1 further presents Model 1–10 on multilevel logistic regression models, estimating the probability of voting as a function of age, representation, and individual and contextual controls.

Table 1. Multilevel logistic regression models.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Aged 18–29 (ref: 60+)	–1.038*** (0.031)	–1.183*** (0.038)	–1.207*** (0.045)	–1.201*** (0.040)	–1.124*** (0.039)	–1.125*** (0.045)	–1.213*** (0.040)	–1.219*** (0.046)	–1.138*** (0.045)	–1.132*** (0.046)
Aged 30–59 (ref: 60+)	–0.345*** (0.013)	–0.591*** (0.018)	–0.609*** (0.021)	–0.607*** (0.019)	–0.515*** (0.020)	–0.515*** (0.023)	–0.623*** (0.019)	–0.616*** (0.022)	–0.522*** (0.023)	–0.526*** (0.023)
Female		0.160*** (0.014)	0.165*** (0.016)	0.166*** (0.015)	0.166*** (0.015)	0.165*** (0.016)	0.163*** (0.015)	0.165*** (0.016)	0.165*** (0.016)	0.165*** (0.016)
< Lower secondary education		–0.308*** (0.026)	–0.279*** (0.028)	–0.273*** (0.027)	–0.291*** (0.027)	–0.292*** (0.029)	–0.272*** (0.027)	–0.281*** (0.028)	–0.294*** (0.029)	–0.290*** (0.029)
Lower secondary education		–0.350*** (0.020)	–0.338*** (0.022)	–0.333*** (0.020)	–0.336*** (0.020)	–0.337*** (0.022)	–0.335*** (0.020)	–0.339*** (0.022)	–0.338*** (0.022)	–0.337*** (0.022)
Post-secondary non-tertiary education		0.145*** (0.037)	0.173*** (0.042)	0.178*** (0.038)	0.169*** (0.038)	0.169*** (0.042)	0.174*** (0.038)	0.171*** (0.042)	0.167*** (0.042)	0.169*** (0.042)
Tertiary education		0.226*** (0.020)	0.229*** (0.023)	0.232*** (0.021)	0.230*** (0.021)	0.230*** (0.023)	0.235*** (0.021)	0.229*** (0.023)	0.230*** (0.023)	0.231*** (0.023)
Household income		0.233*** (0.008)	0.239*** (0.009)	0.239*** (0.008)	0.241*** (0.008)	0.240*** (0.009)	0.240*** (0.008)	0.239*** (0.009)	0.240*** (0.009)	0.240*** (0.009)
Close to the party		0.940*** (0.015)	0.904*** (0.017)	0.908*** (0.016)	0.903*** (0.016)	0.903*** (0.017)	0.905*** (0.016)	0.903*** (0.017)	0.902*** (0.017)	0.903*** (0.017)
Political interest: Not at all		–1.416*** (0.032)	–1.411*** (0.035)	–1.399*** (0.033)	–1.397*** (0.033)	–1.408*** (0.035)	–1.400*** (0.033)	–1.410*** (0.035)	–1.408*** (0.035)	–1.407*** (0.035)
Political interest: Hardly		–0.818*** (0.029)	–0.824*** (0.032)	–0.811*** (0.030)	–0.817*** (0.030)	–0.825*** (0.032)	–0.816*** (0.030)	–0.824*** (0.032)	–0.825*** (0.032)	–0.824*** (0.032)
Political interest: Quite		–0.222*** (0.030)	–0.228*** (0.032)	–0.214*** (0.030)	–0.220*** (0.030)	–0.228*** (0.032)	–0.219*** (0.030)	–0.228*** (0.032)	–0.229*** (0.032)	–0.228*** (0.032)
Political trust		0.158*** (0.008)	0.157*** (0.009)	0.157*** (0.009)	0.159*** (0.009)	0.158*** (0.009)	0.158*** (0.009)	0.157*** (0.009)	0.158*** (0.009)	0.158*** (0.009)
Postmaterialist attitudes		0.032*** (0.007)	0.019* (0.008)	0.020* (0.008)	0.018* (0.008)	0.017* (0.008)	0.020** (0.008)	0.019* (0.008)	0.017* (0.008)	0.017* (0.008)

Table 1. (Cont.) Multilevel logistic regression models.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
% MPs under 30			-0.013 (0.035)	-0.002 (0.027)	-0.236*** (0.031)	-0.249*** (0.040)	-0.009 (0.026)	-0.001 (0.034)	-0.234*** (0.040)	-0.237*** (0.041)
Postmaterialist salience				0.034 (0.025)	0.032 (0.024)			0.010 (0.033)	0.014 (0.032)	
Materialist salience			-0.042 (0.029)			-0.051 (0.028)	0.040 (0.028)			-0.017 (0.035)
Compulsory voting			0.540** (0.192)	0.620*** (0.142)	0.632*** (0.140)	0.560** (0.194)	0.559*** (0.141)	0.607** (0.189)	0.635*** (0.190)	0.562** (0.194)
Majoritarian system			-0.472 (0.354)	-0.444 (0.342)	-0.458 (0.330)	-0.464 (0.352)	-0.404 (0.359)	-0.457 (0.332)	-0.447 (0.331)	-0.462 (0.352)
Mixed system			-0.157 (0.114)	-0.132 (0.100)	-0.110 (0.099)	-0.137 (0.113)	-0.147 (0.100)	-0.133 (0.115)	-0.110 (0.114)	-0.138 (0.113)
Age 18–29 × % MPs under 30					0.351*** (0.042)	0.349*** (0.053)			0.347*** (0.053)	0.338*** (0.054)
Age 30–59 × % MPs under 30					0.293*** (0.023)	0.293*** (0.029)			0.292*** (0.029)	0.278*** (0.030)
Age 18–29 × Postmaterialist salience								0.068 (0.045)	0.071 (0.043)	
Age 30–59 × Postmaterialist salience								0.021 (0.018)	0.019 (0.018)	
Age 18–29 × Materialist salience							-0.074 (0.040)			-0.032 (0.048)
Age 30–59 × Materialist salience							-0.114*** (0.021)			-0.048 (0.026)
Intercept	1.735*** (0.104)	2.253*** (0.119)	2.263*** (0.118)	2.222*** (0.110)	2.195*** (0.107)	2.196*** (0.117)	2.223*** (0.114)	2.272*** (0.114)	2.204*** (0.113)	2.200*** (0.117)
N (individuals)	270,337	187,308	173,072	173,072	173,072	173,072	173,072	173,072	173,072	173,072

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Survey weights applied.

Model 1 offers three core findings. First, there is a large and systematic age gap in electoral participation. Compared to voters aged 60 and above, young citizens (18–29) exhibit substantially lower odds of voting. Middle-aged citizens (30–59) are also less likely to vote than seniors, but the magnitude of this gap is considerably smaller. The youth turnout penalty is roughly three times larger than the penalty observed for the middle-aged group.

Second, turnout levels vary substantially across countries and across elections within countries. The estimated standard deviations of the random intercepts at the country–election level (≈ 0.26) and at the country level (≈ 0.54) indicate pronounced contextual heterogeneity in baseline participation, justifying the three-level modelling structure (individuals nested within country–elections and countries).

Third, the size of the age gap in turnout itself varies significantly across country–election contexts. The variance of the random slope for young voters (≈ 0.073 ; $SD \approx 0.27$) indicates that the disadvantage associated with being young is not constant across elections. In some contexts, young voters are markedly less likely to participate, while in others the gap is considerably smaller. Moreover, the negative correlation between the random intercept and the youth slope (≈ -0.37) suggests that contexts with higher baseline turnout tend to exhibit smaller youth penalties. This pattern is substantively plausible and consistent with the idea that more inclusive participatory environments tend to reduce age-based inequalities. Together, these results provide a justification for examining contextual moderators of age-based turnout gaps through cross-level interactions.

Model 2 introduces a comprehensive set of individual-level controls capturing socioeconomic resources, political trust, and attitudes. The inclusion of these variables does not substantially attenuate the turnout inequalities. Across Models 3 and 4, age-based turnout inequality remains pronounced, and the youth turnout penalty continues to vary widely across country–elections. Contextual representation indicators do not exhibit consistent average associations with turnout, which is in line with the expectation that representative performance operates primarily through age-conditional mechanisms rather than uniform main effects. Compulsory voting, by contrast, displays a strong and stable positive association with turnout across all specifications.

Models 5 and 6 introduce cross-level interactions between age groups and descriptive representation. These models reveal a consistent and substantively meaningful pattern. Higher descriptive representation of young members of parliament is associated with higher turnout among young voters and, to a lesser extent, among middle-aged voters relative to seniors. In Model 5, importantly, these conclusions do not depend on the inclusion of postmaterialist issue visibility, as descriptive representation operates conditionally on age rather than as a uniform main effect. By contrast, material issue salience in Model 6 exhibits a weak and borderline negative association ($p \approx 0.071$), suggesting noisy and inconclusive evidence. In both models, descriptive youth representation is negatively associated with turnout among older voters but positively associated with turnout among younger and middle-aged voters, indicating a narrowing of the age gap in contexts with higher descriptive representation of youth.

Models 7 and 8 focus on cross-level interactions between age groups and substantive representation. Here, the evidence is notably weaker and less consistent. In Model 7, the interaction between material issue visibility and youth turnout is marginal ($\beta \approx -0.074$, $p \approx 0.061$), while the interaction for middle-aged voters is stronger

and statistically significant ($\beta \approx -0.114$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern suggests that material issue salience may be demobilising for middle-aged voters rather than mobilising for the young. In Model 8, substantive visibility effects remain unstable and do not robustly either improve youth participation or suppress the age gap. When descriptive representation is included only as a main effect in these models, it shows no average association with turnout, reinforcing the conclusion that its effects are heterogeneous and conditional on age.

Models 9 and 10 include cross-level interactions between age groups and descriptive representation alongside substantive representation. The results are fully consistent with the earlier findings. In both models, descriptive youth representation displays a negative main effect for the reference group (60+) and positive, highly significant interactions for young and middle-aged voters. For example, in Model 10, the main effect for seniors is -0.237 , while the interactions for young ($\beta = 0.338$) and middle-aged voters ($\beta = 0.278$) offset this negative association, yielding positive or near-zero net effects for these groups. This pattern clearly indicates a narrowing of the age gap in turnout in contexts with higher descriptive representation of youth. In contrast, substantive representation—whether measured through postmaterialist or materialist issue visibility—does not exhibit robust age-differentiated effects. In Model 9, postmaterialist visibility interactions are not statistically significant. In Model 10, the interaction for middle-aged voters is marginal ($p \approx 0.066$), while the youth interaction is null.

Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File reports model diagnostics and random effects estimates for all main specifications. Across models, variance components at both the country and country-election levels are sizeable, supporting the multilevel modelling approach. The standard deviation of the random slope for youth status at the country-election level ranges from 0.27 to 0.30, indicating substantial cross-context variation in the youth turnout penalty. Negative correlations between random intercepts and youth slopes suggest that contexts with higher baseline turnout tend to display smaller age-based inequalities, although this pattern is not uniform across specifications.

All models converge successfully under standard optimisation procedures. Information criteria of AIC and BIC (Akaike Information Criterion and Bayesian Information Criterion, respectively) consistently favour specifications that include representational variables and age-conditional interactions over baseline models. The main findings are robust to a range of sensitivity checks. Adding macroeconomic controls, such as GDP growth and youth unemployment, does not materially affect the estimated interaction effects, and these variables show no consistent association with turnout once individual-level characteristics are accounted for. Results are also stable across alternative definitions of youth (extending the upper age threshold to 34) and across different random-effects structures, which yield nearly identical fixed-effect estimates. These diagnostics altogether indicate that the observed age-conditional associations between descriptive representation and turnout are stable across reasonable alternative specifications, while remaining appropriately limited in scope.

5. Discussion

5.1. Assessing the Hypotheses

The results provide clear evidence that descriptive representation conditions age-based inequalities in electoral participation. Across Models 5 and 6, a substantial baseline age gap in turnout persists, but its

magnitude varies systematically with the presence of younger MPs. In contexts where youth are more strongly represented among political elites, turnout among young voters and, to a lesser extent, middle-aged voters, increases relative to seniors. This pattern is consistent with the expectation that descriptive representation functions as a mobilising cue for underrepresented groups.

At the same time, higher levels of youth descriptive representation are associated with slightly lower turnout among older voters. While this pattern contributes mechanically to a narrowing of the age gap, the analysis does not support strong claims about demobilisation among seniors due to “inexperienced young MPs.” The observed association may reflect contextual covariation or participatory substitution, but identifying such mechanisms would require stronger causal leverage than is available in the present design.

By contrast, Models 7 and 8 show that substantive representation, measured through issue visibility, does not generate similarly consistent age-conditional effects. In the joint interaction models (Models 9 and 10), the inclusion of descriptive representation yields a coherent pattern: for the reference group of older voters, higher descriptive representation is associated with lower turnout, whereas for young and middle-aged citizens, the net association becomes neutral or positive once interactions are taken into account (see Figure 2). This pattern indicates that higher descriptive representation narrows the turnout gap primarily by increasing relative participation among youth, in line with Hypothesis 1. The consistency of this finding across specifications suggests that descriptive youth representation constitutes a robust correlate of cross-national variation in age-based turnout inequalities in European democracies.

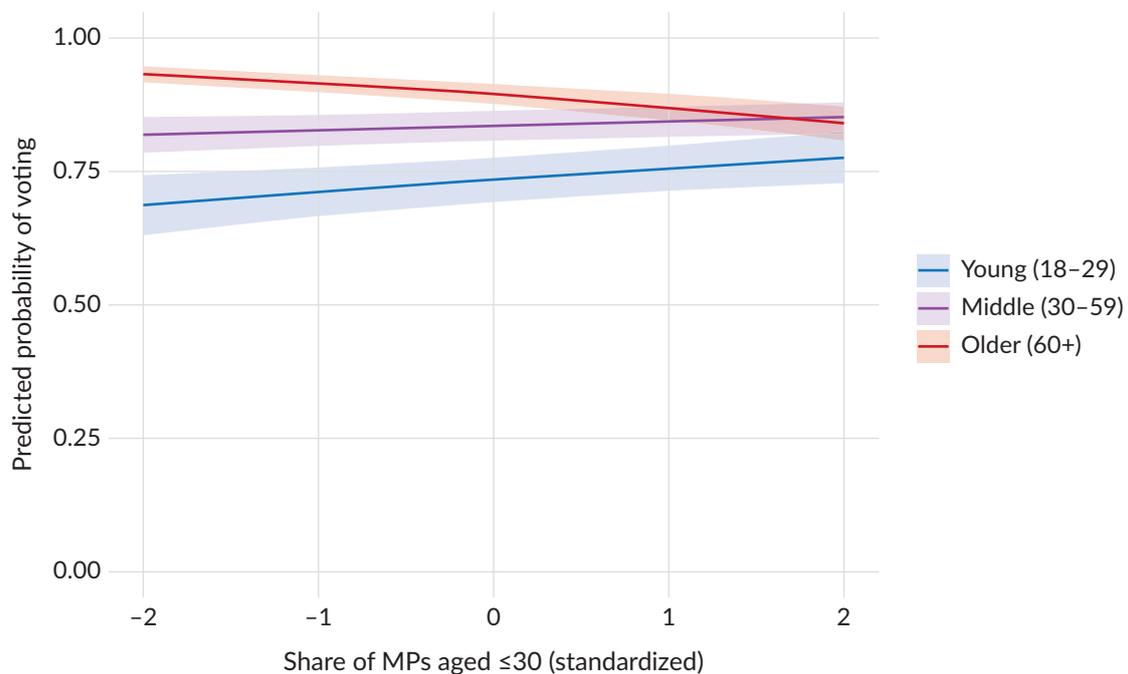


Figure 2. Predicted probability of voting by age group and descriptive representation. Note: Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Hypothesis 2 addressed the role of substantive representation, distinguishing between postmaterialist (H2.1) and material (H2.2) youth-relevant issues. With respect to H2.1, the analysis presents no evidence that the greater salience of postmaterialist issues in party manifestos moderates the age gap in turnout. Postmaterialist

issue visibility does not systematically mobilise younger voters, nor does it demobilise older voters in ways that would narrow age-based participation gaps (see Figure 3).

For H2.2, which anticipated that greater visibility of youth-relevant material issues would reduce the age gap in turnout, the results likewise do not reveal stable or youth-specific moderation effects. While some models (e.g., Model 10) suggest that higher material issue salience may be associated with lower turnout among middle-aged citizens, these effects are not sufficiently consistent to support the hypothesis as formulated. Rather than mobilising younger voters, material issue visibility appears, at most, to be weakly associated with demobilisation among non-youth groups, a pattern that warrants further investigation but falls outside the theoretical scope of the present analysis (see Figure 4). Overall, interaction terms involving substantive representation are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero in most specifications.

Evaluated against the stated hypotheses, the evidence provides strong support for Hypothesis 1, while Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2 receive little support under the operationalisations employed here. Descriptive youth representation emerges as the more consistent correlate of age-based turnout inequality, whereas substantive issue visibility plays a limited and unstable role. Taken together, these findings point to a clear asymmetry between descriptive and substantive representation in shaping age-based turnout inequalities. While the visible presence of younger legislators is consistently associated with higher relative participation among young voters, the articulation of youth-relevant postmaterialist and materialist issues in party programs does not appear sufficient to mobilise this group electorally. This pattern suggests that the symbolic and credible dimension of representation through descriptive presence and policy outputs may be more consequential for youth engagement than parties' programmatic emphasis.

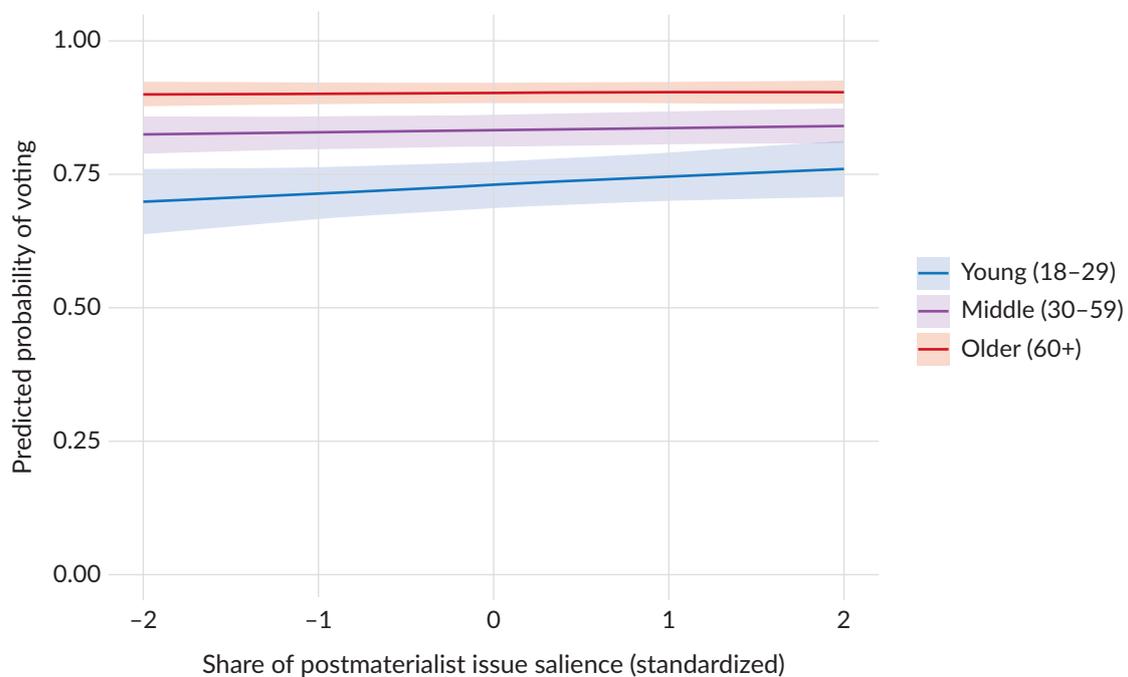


Figure 3. Predicted probability of voting by age group and substantive representation for visibility of postmaterialist issues.

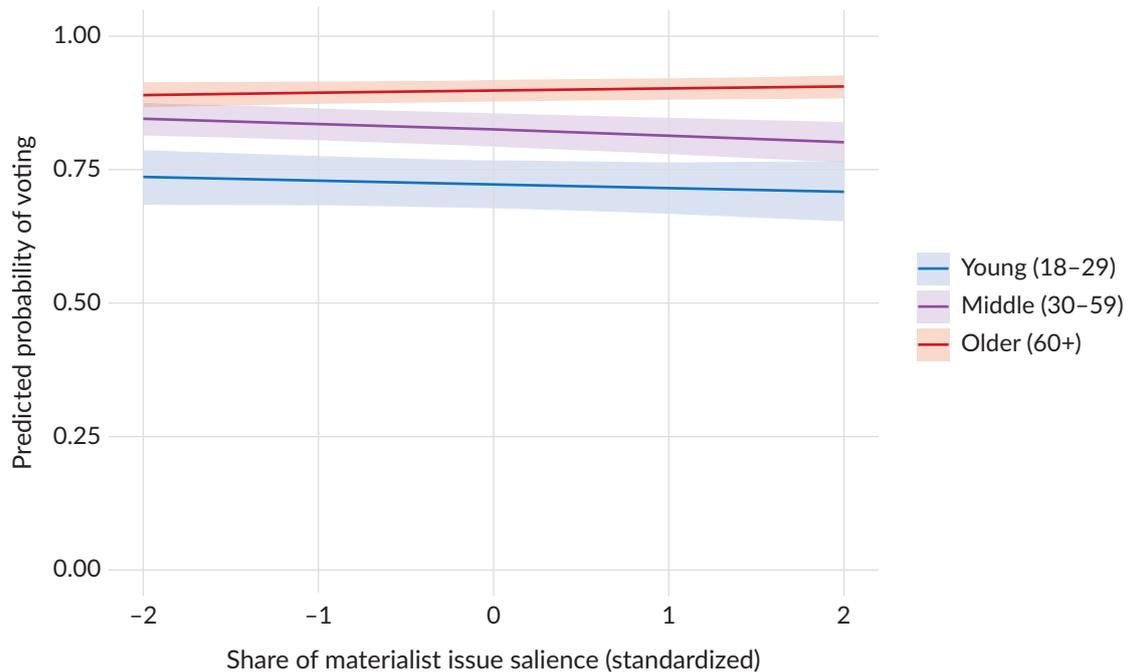


Figure 4. Predicted probability of voting by age group and substantive representation for visibility of materialist issues.

One plausible interpretation is that descriptive representation signals institutional openness and accessibility in ways that issue agendas cannot fully substitute. Even when youth-relevant concerns receive attention in party competition, younger voters may remain sceptical of institutional responsiveness in the absence of representatives who visibly share their generational experiences. In this sense, descriptive representation may enhance the perceived meaningfulness of electoral participation by conveying recognition and inclusion, rather than by promising specific policy outcomes.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. Although lagged measures of descriptive representation are employed to better align political context with turnout decisions, reciprocal dynamics between participation and representation cannot be fully excluded. Due to age-related stereotypes, expectations, and limited opportunities within political organisations, young candidates are underrepresented in politics (Roberts & Wolak, 2023), which might perpetuate youth exclusion from institutional politics and maintain turnout inequalities. Even if electoral participation and political representation are likely to be mutually reinforcing over longer time periods, unfortunately, this dynamic cannot be fully identified with time-series cross-sectional data.

The findings also highlight limitations inherent in a visibility-based operationalisation of substantive representation. The indices used here capture agenda-setting and issue articulation in party competition rather than policy responsiveness or implementation. As a result, they provide only a partial account of how substantive representation may shape electoral participation in the given context. Future research could incorporate credibility-based or outcome-oriented measures, such as legislative behaviour, policy outputs, or

distributive outcomes, to fully assess how responsiveness to age-specific demands influences turnout across the age groups.

In addition, the empirical focus on parliamentary composition and party manifestos necessarily limits the institutional scope of the analysis. Other arenas of political representation, including party recruitment and candidate selection processes, youth-oriented policy programs, and broader welfare governance arrangements, may also shape age-based participation patterns. Incorporating these institutional domains would provide a more comprehensive understanding of cross-national variation in representational performance.

It should be noted that while compulsory voting is shown to substantially increase turnout and reduce participation gaps, it does not by itself resolve deeper inequalities in political engagement or representation between age groups. Nevertheless, these robust and strong findings on compulsory voting led us to another important task of identifying which institutional reforms or governance arrangements foster more inclusive forms of representation for future research. Beyond institutional design, political culture and historical legacies may also condition both representation and participation, particularly in newer democracies, and may help explain persistent regional differences, such as the well-documented East–West divide.

Finally, the contrast between age and other social categories, such as gender, emphasises that the relationship between representation and electoral participation is group-specific and shaped by distinct socialisation processes and institutional trajectories. While women tend to participate at higher rates than men despite persistent descriptive underrepresentation, age-based participation appears more closely linked to signals of inclusion within political institutions. This comparison highlights the importance of specifying the conditions under which representational mechanisms matter for different groups. Extending the framework developed here to other underrepresented segments of the population, therefore, represents a promising direction for future research.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the persistent age gap in electoral participation across European democracies and why the extent of this age-based inequality varies across countries and elections. Instead of generalising low youth turnout as being the result of apathy and thus as a uniform individual-level phenomenon, the analysis approached the age gap as a context-dependent inequality shaped by institutional and, particularly, representational capacities. Using multilevel models that combine individual surveys with country–election data, the study examines whether representative performance of institutions moderates the relationship between age and turnout.

The empirical results suggest three main points. First, the age gap in turnout is wide, systematic, and highly uneven across countries and elections. Young individuals' turnout shows considerably lower rates than their older counterparts, and this difference cannot be fully addressed by individual-level explanations based on resources and attitudes. Even after controlling for these factors, the extent to which youth are electorally absent and the size of the gap vary across country–election contexts, thus requiring additional consideration of contextual explanations.

Second, descriptive representation of youth shows a robust and consistent moderation effect for the age gap in turnout. Countries with higher shares of young political representatives exhibit a smaller age gap in turnout. The decline in the difference in turnout between young and older citizens is driven by increased participation of young citizens. Such an outcome denotes the role of the presence of the same-group members within political institutions that could signal inclusion to underrepresented groups.

Third, the results on substantive representation, operationalised through the visibility of materialist and postmaterialist issues that are particularly relevant to youth, refer to this form's limited role in the moderation. Visibility and salience of issues do not necessarily mean the electoral mobilisation of young citizens, nor do they result in stable age-conditional effects that would mitigate the turnout gap. This asymmetry between descriptive and substantive representation might suggest that symbolic and policy dimensions of representation matter more for the underrepresented group's participation than parties' programmatic emphasis alone, at least when substantive representation is defined through agenda-setting rather than policy responsiveness.

Thus, representative performance affects the social and cognitive mechanisms that underpin turnout: young people who lack role models or symbolic inclusion are less likely to develop pro-voting scripts and norms. This is why the age gap in turnout should be understood as a consequence of differentiated levels of electoral meaningfulness across age groups: a gap shaped by representative performance and biases to a certain extent, not simply by individual indifference. The absence of a social group from institutional participation should still be examined as a rational response to systemic representational (in-)capacity, not just dismissed as political apathy.

These findings, therefore, contribute to ongoing discussions on political participation and representation in several ways. They challenge deeply grounded convictions that present youth abstention as mainly due to apathy or disengagement, showing instead that institutional contexts, precisely the representative performance of institutions, differ in how heavily they reproduce or reduce age-based inequalities. They also present the conceptual complexity and hence importance of differentiating between different dimensions of representation within different forms and of taking into account their effects conditionally across social groups, rather than expecting uniform implications.

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that the age gap in turnout is neither inevitable nor uniform. The age gap could be conditioned by the representative performance or even the representational capacity of institutions. The unveiling and addressing these dynamics meaningfully are a cornerstone for sustaining democratic political culture and inclusive participation in ageing societies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

We confirm that OpenAI's ChatGPT was used for grammar and style improvements during the preparation of this manuscript. No content generation or data analysis was performed using AI tools. The authors take full responsibility for the final content.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors

Ayauzhan Kamatayeva is a doctoral candidate and Marie Skłodowska-Curie early-stage researcher at the University of Deusto. Her research interests revolve around the interplay of macro-, meso-, and micro-level explanations of political behaviour and public attitudes across different contexts and levels of governance.

Eduarne Bartolome Peral is an associate professor at the University of Deusto and a program director of the European Values Study for Spain. Her teaching and research interests focus on political culture, political values, and attitudes in comparative perspective, and the application of experimental models.