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# Comparing Young Voters' Political Engagement in the United States and Europe

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The growing reluctance among youth to participate in politics and exercise their right to vote rings alarm bells across the globe. This study adopts a comparative perspective to identify factors that might help reengage youth in the political process by documenting the scope and pervasiveness of the problem in the United States and the EU. This cross-national study shows that the antecedents of youth turnout are highly similar in the United States and in the EU member states. The authors also find a strong and consistently positive effect of news media use and interactive communication (online and interpersonal) on youth turnout.

**Keywords:** *youth turnout; United States; European Union; political communication; cross-national comparison*

Elections play a vital role in democracy because they ensure representation of the popular will and enhance the legitimacy of political systems. Although democratic theory expects the public to exercise their right to vote energetically, the reality of contemporary elections reveals a broad decline in turnout rates across the globe (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002). Particularly worrisome in many countries is a growing reluctance among youth to participate in politics. Although young people's political and civic engagement in politics can take a variety of forms—participating or supporting political campaigns, becoming an active member in political organizations, contacting officials or networking with political groups—voting is still the most basic and arguably most important democratic act. Voting is of special relevance because it is an essential part of political socialization, a cornerstone of democratic stability, and a returning opportunity to exercise political influence (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1999).

## Aim of Study

Much of the literature on youth turnout is rather ethnocentric in the sense that it refers mostly to the experience in the United States yet is written in general terms as

though the structures and forces were universal. This is also a common problem in political communication research (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 2) and leads to the question of whether the concerns, causes, and consequences of low youth turnout discussed in the United States hold for other countries as well. Hallin and Mancini (2004) rightly pointed out that only comparative analysis can protect us from false generalizations. This is why we look beyond the United States to see what promotes, or depresses, youth turnout in other modern Western mass democracies. In terms of theory building, our aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the context dependency and conceptual meaning of youth turnout. More specific, we wish to move from overly American explanations to more general ones in predicting voter participation. Comparativists remind us that if replications in different systemic settings show the same stable effect, only then can the mechanism and its underlying theory be gradually generalized (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004).

First, we review the main factors advanced by U.S. scholars to explain youth turnout in the 2004 presidential election. In a second step, we examine which of these factors are also able to explain youth turnout in member states of the EU. This will allow us to identify those factors whose explanatory power can be generalized and distinguish them from nation-specific factors whose explanatory power is context dependent.

## **The U.S. Perspective**

The 2004 U.S. presidential election was unusual in the way that it produced one of the highest voter turnout rates in decades. Young voters especially contributed to this surge. The increase in turnout by 18- to 29-year-olds was higher than in any other age group, jumping from 40% to 49% between 2000 and 2004 (Current Population Survey, 2004). This spike has been described as “a sharp break from recent years” (Lopez, Kirby, & Sagoff, 2005, p. 1), yet there is little indication that it represents a fundamental turnaround in the longer term pattern (Vanishing Voter Survey, 2004). The long-term picture shows a steady downward development in U.S. youth participation: In 1972, 55% of the 18- to 29-year-olds said they had voted; in 2000, that figure had dwindled to 40% (Lopez et al., 2005). And these percentages are probably inflated because respondents in postelection surveys tend to exaggerate how faithfully they go to the polls.

The reasons provided to explain the unusual jump in the 2004 U.S. vote include extensive outreach efforts, divisive campaign issues, a polarizing president, and a tight duel between the candidates. But it is unlikely that such a confluence of factors will be in play in all future elections (Vanishing Voter Survey, 2004). This leads to the broader question of what the general factors are that influence young people to vote, regardless of the specific conditions of a single campaign.

This study takes a first step in the direction of cross-national theory building by documenting the scope and pervasiveness of the youth turnout problem in the United States and the EU. Taking the U.S. situation as a baseline, we reviewed the findings of five large-scale national surveys that focus on the most important factors causing young Americans to vote—or not to vote—in the 2004 presidential election.<sup>1</sup> We discuss the key findings of these surveys in our review of antecedents of youth turnout.

## The European Perspective

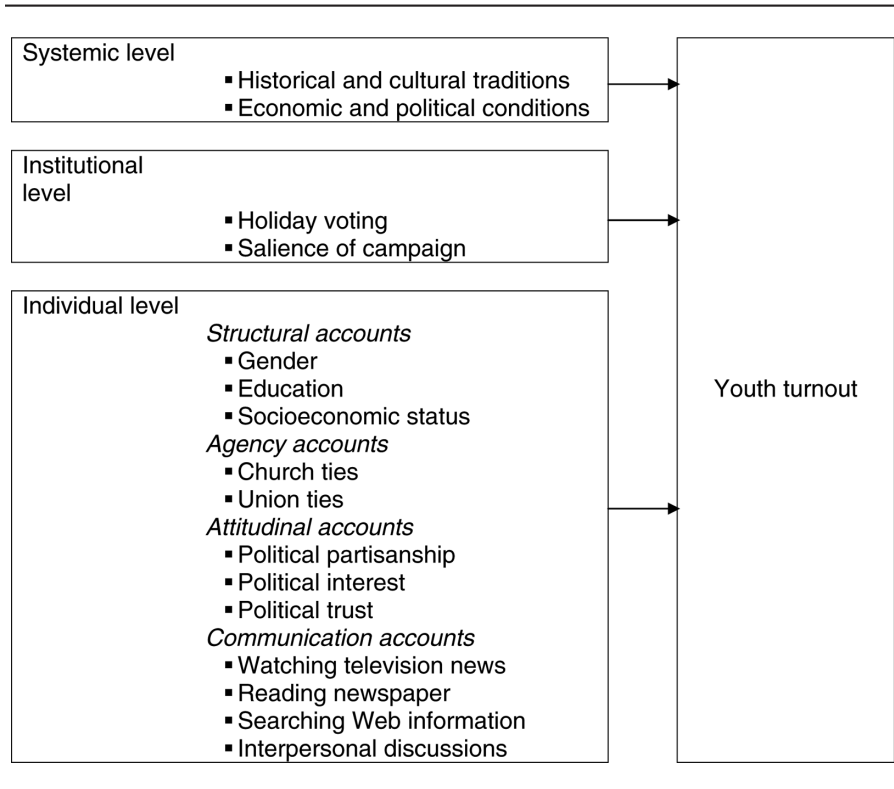
Electoral turnout in national parliament elections in Western Europe has been relatively stable since World War II, although it seems to have dropped by about 5 percentage points on average across most EU member states during the 1990s (Mair, 2001). Examination of participation rates in elections for the European Parliament (EP), however, provides a more alarming picture of erosion in voter participation. The turnout level for these elections that take place every 5 years has dropped from 63% in the first election in 1979 to 46% in 2004. In the most recent EP election of 2004, 186 million people—out of an electorate of 340 million—decided not to cast a vote. This level of abstention makes the 2004 EP election more comparable to the U.S. presidential election than most national elections in single European countries.

We chose to compare the 2004 U.S. presidential election with the 2004 EP election for five reasons. First, the EU covers a large and diverse area that as a whole, is more comparable to the United States than any single EU country by itself. Second, because the EP has gained more power in recent years, there is now almost as much “at stake” for European voters as for U.S. voters to turn out on Election Day. Third, the EU and U.S. elections both took place in 2004. Fourth, turnout in EP elections are less determined by EU- or EP-specific factors and more by general influences (Franklin, van der Eijk, & Oppenhuis, 1996; Rose, 2004; Schmitt & Mannheimer, 1991). Fifth and finally, because of these parallels, we expect broadly similar explanatory variables to be at play on both sides of the Atlantic.

## Hypotheses

Because our aim is to compare antecedents of youth turnout in different political and cultural contexts, we are confronted with the problem of equivalence. A solution to the challenges of comparability and equivalence is to use a universal base model that identifies relevant factors, places them on different levels, and allows for a systematic comparison level by level. In concurrence with previous comparative studies, we distinguish a systemic, institutional, and individual level. Figure 1 summarizes the model that underlies our empirical analysis.

**Figure 1**  
**Theoretical Model of Factors Determining Youth Turnout**



### Systemic Level

On the systemic level, we are first concerned with historical and cultural traditions in different world regions. In this regard, it is noteworthy that for decades, West European turnout levels have been consistently 10% to 20% higher than North American levels, despite the countries' broad similarities as postindustrial democracies (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002; Norris, 2002, chap. 3). Whatever the specific historical and cultural traditions may be that cause this difference, we are interested in whether this gap holds true in 2004 and more specific, whether it also applies to the specific age group of young voters (18- to 29-year-olds). Thus, based on historical patterns, we predict

*Hypothesis 1:* Youth turnout, on average, across West European countries will be higher than youth turnout in the 2004 U.S. presidential election.

With respect to economic and political conditions, global turnout studies suggest that states with lower levels of socioeconomic development experience lower levels of turnout (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002; Norris, 2002, chap. 3). The underlying assumption is that voters feel less inclined to support and participate in a political system when governments show restraint in public expenditures on health care and social security. This hypothesis is especially relevant with respect to the 2004 EP election. All “new” member states that joined the EU in 2004 have substantially weaker economies (measured in GDP per capita) than the “established” West European member states or the United States. Eight of the 10 new members are East European states that were dominated by Moscow until the Berlin Wall fell. Here, we predict

*Hypothesis 2:* The new Eastern European member states whose citizens are materially less well off and also have less experience with democratic institutions will show lower levels of turnout.

## **Institutional Level**

On the institutional level, we look at the structural context of political and media institutions—more specific, at the influence of electoral laws and news criteria. Our first variable is holiday voting as opposed to weekday voting. Motivational theories argue that turnout is higher in political systems that provide facilities that reduce the costs of voting. One way of achieving this is voting on a “rest day” rather than a weekday. Both Norris’s (2002, chap. 4) and Franklin’s (2004) global studies find moderate support for this hypothesis, and Patterson (2003, p. 201) cited the U.S. tradition of weekday voting as a contributing factor for lower turnout figures. We thus predict

*Hypothesis 3:* European countries with Sunday voting will show higher levels of youth turnout than European countries with weekday voting.

The second institutional variable we examine is the salience of an election. Salience refers to how important and visible a campaign is. In the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, media attention focused strongly on the so-called battleground or swing states.<sup>2</sup> Non-swing states fell victim to the rules of narrowcasting and targeting and were all but ignored by political advertisers and political journalists (Kaid & Dimitrova, 2005). It is noteworthy that youth turnout in swing states was substantially higher (52.9%) than in non-swing states (45.7%)—a statistically significant difference ( $t = 3.2$ ,  $df = 39$ ,  $p = .003$ ; calculation based on data from Current Population Survey, 2004). From this, we expect campaign salience to be a good predictor of youth turnout in Europe as well and predict

*Hypothesis 4:* Salient campaigns that generate above-average news coverage will have a positive effect on youth turnout in the EP elections.

## Individual Level

The previously discussed systemic and institutional factors help explain differences in turnout across various societies. The following set of individual factors is important in explaining who votes within particular societies. Norris (2002, chap. 5) grouped these individual-level factors into three categories, and to her three we add a fourth, examining structural accounts, agency accounts, attitudinal accounts, and communication accounts.

Structural accounts include gender, educational qualifications, and social class—all of which are related to civic resources (Norris 2002, chap. 5). The relevant U.S. experience shows that young women have become more likely to vote than young men; in the 2004 presidential campaign, the gap was 6 percentage points (Current Population Survey, 2004; Lopez et al., 2005). Like the gender gap, the education gap also has widened in the United States. In 2004, turnout among college-educated 18- to 29-year-olds was almost twice as high as among lesser educated youth (61% to 34% according to Current Population Survey, 2004; see also Emerging Electorate Survey, 2004; Lopez et al., 2005; Pace Poll/Rock the Vote Survey, 2004). First-time voters also tend to enjoy a higher socioeconomic status than nonvoters. In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, two thirds earned more than the American median income (Pace Poll/Rock the Vote Survey, 2004). Given the significance of structural accounts in the United States, we predict

*Hypothesis 5:* Young females with higher educational qualifications and higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be politically active in the European elections.

Agency accounts refer to the significance of mobilization agencies such as unions, churches, or other religious or community organizations (Norris, 2002, chap. 5). Putnam (1995) argued that the decline of such networks has reduced social capital and contributed to a long-term erosion of turnout among younger generations. In line with this assumption, the 2004 U.S. presidential election showed that first-time voters were very religious and closely tied to their churches. Close to 60% said they attend church services regularly, at least once a month (Emerging Electorate Survey, 2004; Pace Poll/Rock the Vote Survey, 2004). Thus, we predict

*Hypothesis 6:* Church ties will have a positive effect on youth turnout in Europe.

Attitudinal accounts encompass variables such as partisanship, political interest, sophistication, and political trust (Zaller, 1992). In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, it was notable that first-time voters displayed high levels of political trust: 66% said they were at least somewhat satisfied with the election overall, and 71% expressed confidence in the government to do what is right (Pace Poll/Rock the Vote Survey, 2004). New voters also expressed high political interest, with 59% saying they were very much interested and an additional 31% saying they were somewhat

interested in the presidential campaign (Pace Poll/Rock the Vote Survey, 2004). Finally, partisan and ideological youth reacted more positively toward campaign communication messages than independents or nonvoters (Youth Attitudes Toward Information Sources Survey, 2004). Because similar findings have also been reported from Europe (van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996), we predict

*Hypothesis 7:* Young people with strong political interest, strong party identification, and strong support for the political system are more likely to be politically engaged in European elections.

Communication accounts are of special interest to this study. They refer to the role of mass media and information consumption—both as potential mobilizers or demobilizers. Representing the demobilization argument, Putnam (1995) saw heavy TV watching as an important factor in why young people are less engaged in public life. Many communication scholars agree and have blamed the news media for contributing to voter apathy, cynicism, and abstention (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Patterson, 1993, 2002). The 2004 experience shows that despite high TV watching, young people in the United States do not seem to be particularly well informed about current events. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2004), Americans younger than 30 pay much less attention and are much less aware of major campaign events and less knowledgeable about the candidates than people older than 50. Close to two thirds (64%) of 18- to 29-year-olds said that they were “not too” or “not at all” interested in campaign news (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004). A postelection survey found that young American voters show little confidence in network news anchors. According to the Emerging Electorate Survey (2004), 18- to 29-year-olds did not trust Dan Rather of CBS News or Peter Jennings of ABC News any more than they trusted Comedy Central’s “fake news” anchor Jon Stewart of the satirical *Daily Show*. The study concludes that young Americans’ view of traditional news programs “is at best disinterested and at worst cynical” (Emerging Electorate Survey, 2004, p. 8). Yet these young voters did express rising interest in the Internet as a useful news source.

Other scholars came to different conclusions, viewing the mass media more as a mobilizer than a demobilizer. Norris (2000), for example, reported positive correlations between media use and political engagement; and Newton (1999) found that exposure to broadsheet newspapers and television news was positively associated with knowledge and political mobilization in Britain. With respect to the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, the Youth Attitudes Toward Information Sources Survey (2004) presents a more optimistic picture insofar as it finds that many young Americans still use a lot of traditional media. The survey sample of 15- to 25-year-olds relied heavily on newspapers and magazines (42%), television news (44%), family and friends (38%), televised debates (33%), the Internet (26%), and in last place, political ads on TV or radio (17%) to learn about politics. Regarding new media use, the survey finds that no demographic group uses the Internet more than

they use traditional news sources such as newspapers and television news. Although the Internet is described as a “powerful and efficient way to mobilize young voters who are already” (Youth Attitudes Toward Information Sources Survey, 2004, p. 5) involved in the political process, it is also characterized as less than ideal as a tool “to engage disaffected or disinterested young people”—mainly because this last group is unlikely to actively seek or use Web-based political information. Faced with these contradicting assessments of the traditional media and new media, we pose the following research question:

*Research Question 1:* Are young people who use traditional forms (such as reading newspapers or watching TV news) and new forms of mass communication (such as seeking political information online) more likely to be politically engaged in Europe?

Communication-related campaign effects, however, do not merely include the mass media. We, thus, distinguish between direct (personal) and indirect (mediated) campaign experiences (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Although most citizens rely on indirect sources of information, the engagement in interpersonal communication about politics and elections has long been known to boost knowledge and participation. In the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, interpersonal communication had a considerable effect on turnout of young people. Three times as many young voters as older voters (54% vs. 18%) said that a reason they voted was “my family or friends encouraged me to vote” (Vanishing Voter Survey, 2004). So far, only a few studies include analysis of both mediated and interpersonal communication (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999), but existing findings hint more to a virtuous than vicious effect of interpersonal communication. Our final prediction, therefore, is

*Hypothesis 8:* Interpersonal discussion of politics has a positive effect on young people’s political participation in EP elections.

## Method

To assess the level of voter participation in a comparative perspective on one hand and to investigate the degree to which observations in the United States can help understand variation in turnout in a European context on the other hand, we conducted a study of youth turnout during the 2004 elections for the EP. Our analyses draw on the 2004 European Post-Election Survey. The survey was carried out in the aftermath of the June 2004 elections in 24 of the 25 EU member states among the voting population (18 years and older).<sup>3</sup>

Our analyses are based on all respondents aged 18 to 29 at the time of the interview. Our key dependent variable was participation in the elections, which was coded as dummy.<sup>4</sup> This self-reported measure of turnout is subject to overreporting,

which is a well-known phenomenon and not higher here than in other studies (the same problem applies to the Current Population Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, for example). Possible overreporting does not pose a serious problem to our analyses because we are more interested in underlying explanations of variation in turnout than in total numbers.

Our independent variables include systemic-, institutional-, and individual-level variables (see Figure 1). Our system-level factors of historical/cultural traditions and economic/political conditions basically divide the EU nations into two groups, established Western member states with strong economies on one hand and new member states with weaker, postcommunist economies on the other hand. For the empirical analysis, we captured these divergent backgrounds with a dummy variable called new EU member, which signifies living in a relative low GDP area with limited democratic experience where people voted for the EP for the first time (see Table 1). Our institutional-level variables are holiday voting (coded as a dummy for nonweekday voting) and salient election campaign. For the latter, we use a dummy proxy for countries in which the national media spent an above-average level of attention to the EP elections; this information was recoded from a quantitative content analysis of EP campaign news coverage in all EU member states (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Our individual-level variables include gender (coded as female), education (recoded as a dummy for university degree), and socioeconomic status.<sup>6</sup> We included religiousness and union membership as indicators for mobilizing agency affiliations.<sup>7</sup> Political attitudes and personal predispositions were tapped using self-reported measures of political interest, interest in EP elections, partisanship,<sup>8</sup> and support for the EU. Our communication variables included frequency of watching national television news and frequency of newspaper reading,<sup>9</sup> searching campaign information on the Internet,<sup>10</sup> and engaging in interpersonal discussions about the elections.<sup>11</sup>

## Results

Hypothesis 1 proposes that turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds is still higher in Western Europe than in the United States, despite a record level of 49% of young Americans flocking to the polls in the 2004 Bush/Kerry contest. This hypothesis was supported, albeit by a small margin: As can be seen from Table 1 (column 7), average youth turnout in the established Western member states of the EU was 55.1% in the 2004 EP elections. It should be noted that the historical and cultural tradition of higher turnout in Western Europe becomes more manifest in national elections (Table 1, column 5) than in EP elections (Table 1, column 6) because many citizens consider the EU of secondary importance to their national government—a view, however, that is less and less warranted by the real power balance. In general, our results indicate

**Table 1**  
**European Youth Turnout in Systemic Context**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Country	Year of EU Entry	Electorate (in millions)	Historical and Political Tradition	Economic Condition: GDP per Capita <sup>a</sup>	Percentage Turnout <sup>b</sup> at Most Recent National Election	Percentage Turnout <sup>b</sup> at 2004 European Parliament Election	Percentage (N) Youthful Turnout at 2004 European Parliament Election
Established member states							
Austria	1995	5.8	West/Free market	31,264	84.3	42.4	49.4 (154)
Belgium	1957	7.5	West/Free market	30,509	91.6	90.8	—
Denmark	1973	4.0	West/Free market	32,106	87.1	47.9	49.1 (218)
Finland	1995	4.2	West/Free market	28,948	69.7	39.4	50.0 (144)
France	1957	36.8	West/Free market	28,636	60.3	42.8	76.8 (112)
Germany	1957	61.4	West/Free market	28,654	79.1	43.0	47.1 (104)
Greece	1981	9.4	West/Free market	21,222	75.0	63.4	59.8 (97)
Ireland	1973	3.0	West/Free market	31,174	62.6	59.7	69.8 (182)
Italy	1957	49.4	West/Free market	27,692	81.4	73.1	81.3 (160)
Luxembourg	1957	0.2	West/Free market	58,189	86.5	90.0	—
Netherlands	1957	12.1	West/Free market	29,322	80.0	39.3	62.7 (118)
Portugal	1986	8.9	West/Free market	17,859	62.8	38.6	51.2 (213)
Spain	1986	34.0	West/Free market	23,241	68.7	45.1	49.1 (275)
Sweden	1995	6.7	West/Free market	28,371	80.1	37.8	31.6 (389)
United Kingdom	1973	44.4	West/Free market	29,483	59.4	38.9	38.9 (651)
Mean for established members				29,778	75.2	52.8	55.1

New member states	Year	Turnout	Region	Sample Size	Mean	SD
Cyprus	2004	0.5	West/Middle East	20,300	91.8	71.2
Czech Republic	2004	8.3	East/Postcommunist	16,814	57.9	28.3
Estonia	2004	0.9	East/Postcommunist	14,426	58.2	26.8
Hungary	2004	6.0	East/Postcommunist	14,919	70.5	38.5
Latvia	2004	1.4	East/Postcommunist	11,585	71.2	41.3
Lithuania	2004	2.6	East/Postcommunist	12,574	58.6	48.4
Malta	2004	0.3	West/Free market	18,123	95.7	82.4
Poland	2004	29.4	East/Postcommunist	12,007	46.2	20.9
Slovakia	2004	4.2	East/Postcommunist	14,525	70.1	17.0
Slovenia	2004	1.6	East/Postcommunist	19,597	70.1	28.3
Mean for new members				15,487	69.0	40.3

Note: Belgium, Luxembourg, Lithuania, and Malta were excluded from youth analysis because of low subsamples in this age group. Data in columns 1 through 6 from CIA (2005) and Rose (2004); data in column 7 from European Post-Election Survey (2004).

- a. In U.S. dollars.
- b. Actual turnout, all age groups.
- c. Self-reported turnout in postelection survey among 18- to 29-year-olds only.

that West European youth appear to have retained a slightly stronger sense of civic duty with respect to voting than U.S. youth. (Please note that turnout rates are based in columns 5 and 6 on actual vote counts and in column 7 on self-reports.)

Youth turnout in the 2004 EP elections ranged between 81% in Italy and 21% in Slovenia. Despite considerable cross-national variation, one pattern is obvious: Voter participation was substantially lower in the new member states than in the established EU states (Table 1, column 7). More specific, low youth turnout was strongly correlated with nondemocratic political traditions (column 3) and weaker economic conditions (column 4). This indicates strong support for Hypothesis 2. To measure the explanatory power of economical and political conditions as compared to other predictors, we included the system-level variable political/economical conditions: new EU member in a multivariate analysis (see Table 2). The regression coefficient *B* denotes the independent effect of living in a new EU member state on youth turnout after all other impact factors are controlled for. A significant beta weight of  $-.416$  further backs our Hypothesis 2 that young people in countries that are materially less well off and also have less experience with democratic institutions are less likely to vote.

Unlike system-level factors, institution-level variables played no recognizable role for youth turnout in the 2004 EP elections. Sunday voting did not affect the turnout level among young citizens compared to weekday voting, and salience of election campaigns had a negative, significantly reducing effect on voter participation. Contrary to our expectations, Hypotheses 3 and 4, thus, were not supported (see Table 2). The irrelevance of Sunday voting fosters the assumption that young people lead more flexible lives where work and rest days have no clearly distinct meaning in relation to voting. It may also imply that an often-suggested change from Tuesday to holiday voting in the United States may not produce a boost in youth turnout. More difficult to explain is the fact that salient EP campaigns depressed young people's engagement. Again, contrary to expectations suggested by the U.S. experience, it appears that above-average media attention does not motivate young Europeans to take an election more seriously and to flock to the polling stations accordingly. To further disentangle this relationship, more knowledge about the content of the media coverage of the elections would be required (see de Vreese et al., 2006).

Turning to the individual-level factors, we found partial support for Hypothesis 5. Although higher socioeconomic status is a clear predictor of higher turnout in Europe as well, two other structural accounts—education and gender—had no measurable mobilizing effect despite their influential role in the U.S. campaign (see Table 2). Of the agency accounts we examined, religiousness was a much stronger predictor of youth turnout than union membership. This is a clear parallel with the U.S. situation and indicates strong support for Hypothesis 6 (see Table 2). This finding also implies that religious attachment—even in these secular times—is still of considerable significance for young people's political socialization. Of the attitudinal

**Table 2**  
**Logistic Regression of Factors Predicting Youth Turnout in the 2004 European Parliament Elections.**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	Interpretation
Systemic level	—	—	—	Hypothesis 1 supported Hypothesis 2 supported
	-.416***	.089	.660	
Institutional level	-.084	.105	.919	Hypothesis 3 not supported
	-.179*	.082	.836	Hypothesis 4 not supported
Individual level	.005	.080	1.005	Hypothesis 5 partly supported
Structural accounts	.008	.008	1.008	Hypothesis 5 partly supported
	.143***	.041	1.154	Hypothesis 5 partly supported
Agency accounts	.377***	.090	1.459	Hypothesis 6 supported
	.027	.132	1.027	Hypothesis 6 supported
Attitudinal accounts	.800***	.101	2.225	Hypothesis 7 mostly supported
	.604***	.058	1.830	Hypothesis 7 mostly supported
	.044	.058	1.045	Hypothesis 7 mostly supported
Communication accounts	.029	.017	1.029	Hypothesis 7 mostly supported
	.037*	.019	1.038	Research Question 1 answered in favor of positive news media effects
	.033*	.016	1.034	Research Question 1 answered in favor of positive news media effects
	.337***	.101	1.401	Research Question 1 answered in favor of positive news media effects
	.459***	.063	1.583	Research Question 1 answered in favor of positive news media effects
Constant	-3.037	.244	.048	Hypothesis 8 supported
<i>N</i>			3,351	
Percentage correctly classified			69.4	
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.27	

Note: Calculations based on European Post-Election Survey (2004). Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Malta were excluded because of low *n* in relevant age group of 18- to 29-year-olds. Data entries are *B*s, standard errors, and predicted probabilities. EP = European Parliament.

a. See Table 1 for data.

\**p* < .10. \*\*\**p* < .01.

accounts we measured, political partisanship and interest in the EP proved to be the strongest predictors for going to the polls. This association between political predispositions and electoral participation is well known from the U.S. context and, thus, confirms Hypothesis 7.

Finally, it is noteworthy that all communication variables are positively and significantly related to young people's decision to cast a vote. Those who discussed the European elections with friends and family, however, were especially more likely to turn out (which supports Hypothesis 8). In a similar manner, searching for information about the elections on the Internet was another strong predictor of youth turnout. In addition, we found that watching national television news and reading newspapers contributed positively to turnout. With respect to Research Question 1, we conclude that although the effects of media use and news exposure are debated in controversial terms in the United States, their role in Europe is clear: All modes of communication are positively correlated to young people's political engagement—interactive forms (such as personal conversations or Web searches) even more so than traditional one-way forms (such as newspaper reading or TV watching).

## Discussion

Attitudes regarding political participation are usually formed in the first three elections (Ellis, 2004). The years between 18-29, thus, are especially critical when young people are developing civic identities and voting habits they will take with them into adult life. Yet U.S. scholars seem to be accumulating "endless evidence" that young Americans are disconnecting from public life (Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 343). Observers from other mass democracies report similar evidence of young people's growing political disconnection (e.g., Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; Phelps, 2004). Our study was designed to go beyond isolated observations and to provide a cross-national comparative perspective on youth participation in elections. We demonstrated that the issue of low voter engagement is not exclusive to the United States and that the level of youth turnout in U.S. presidential elections is very comparable to youth turnout in "second-order national elections," such as the elections for the EP. Second-order elections are those that people perceive as less important for political office, national policies, and citizens' everyday lives. According to this concept, low participation has less to do with skepticism or opposition toward the system and more with people's perception that there is "not much at stake" (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). From a comparative perspective, it is interesting that the U.S. presidential election, which nominally classifies as a first-order election, produces only second-order turnout rates.

Our analysis of the factors affecting youth turnout in Europe was based on extant research from the United States and several European countries. In sum, our analysis

corroborates a number of findings known from the United States. Of utmost importance are variables on the individual level. For example, “structural” factors such as high socioeconomic status and “attitudinal” factors such as partisanship and political interest are positively related to youth turnout in both the U.S. and the European context. This stable finding allows us to generalize that apathy (a lack of interest in politics) and a feeling that “no one party stands for me” (a lack of partisanship) are severe threats to young people’s electoral participation across many mass democracies. With regard to socioeconomic status, it seems that “the young urban unemployed and unqualified ‘underclass’ who are switched out of society generally” (Ellis, 2004, p. 9) is a serious challenge to voter engagement in today’s democracies. Along this argument we also found—on the systemic level—that youth turnout is significantly lower in societies in which the economies are less developed and the experience with democratic institutions is limited.

Central in our findings is the important role played by campaign communication and mass media. Mediated communication has been singled out as one of the reasons for younger people’s disconnect to public life, while at the same time cited as one of the ways to motivate them to become engaged citizens. The current study provides results in support of the latter argument, which Norris (2000) has dubbed the “virtuous circle” perspective on the media-citizen interface. Exposure to traditional news sources such as newspapers or television news as well as Internet use and engagement in political discussions all contributed positively and significantly to EP turnout. In the context of the discussion in the United States about whether the media function more as a demobilizer or mobilizer, it is important to point out that we examined news media use only. The reported findings say little about the effect of infotainment programs, political talk, political comedy, or other forms of general media use. The positive impact of these other types of media on citizen knowledge and political engagement is subject to some debate (e.g., Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004; Prior, 2003).

Our findings with respect to the role of the news media have two important implications. First, youth turnout may be boosted as an effect of news media use. This implies that mobilizing efforts could also be aimed at fostering specific media use because news exposure is in turn a positive contributor to turnout (see Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). Second, there is good reason to further develop and advance campaigns targeted specifically at young citizens. Such campaigns may in turn spark Internet information searching and engaging in political discussions, both of which activities promote turnout (see Delli Carpini, 2000; Youth Attitudes Toward Information Sources Survey, 2004). We find distinct positive effects of information searching on the Internet, but to further advance our understanding of the role of the Internet for youth mobilization, we need to refine our measures of Internet use and exposure to model in more detail how differential use relates to turnout.

This study represents a first cross-national exploration of youth voter turnout. Our results show that there was considerable cross-national variation in youth turnout

across Europe; and more comparative research is required to understand the factors that create these variations and how these differences relate to explanations of youth electoral engagement in the United States.

## Notes

1. The five national U.S. surveys we consulted were

- *Current Population Survey* (2004). Jointly sponsored by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, this is the country's largest and most rigorous source of population statistics surveying 72,000 households. The November 2004 Supplement consulted here (which also forms the base for the much-cited analysis by Lopez, Kirby, & Sagoff, 2005) includes specific questions on voting and registration.
- *Pace Poll/Rock the Vote Survey* (2004). This poll is part of a three-wave study of first-time voters in the 2004 presidential election. It was initiated by Pace University and Rock the Vote, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting freedom of expression and empowering young people. The results reported here are from a nationwide telephone survey of randomly selected 520 "new voters" conducted November 4-11, 2004.
- *Emerging Electorate Survey* (2004). To answer the study's subtitle "What Young Americans Say About the 2004 Election," 1,200 people between the ages of 18 and 29 were polled in November 2004 by Luntz Research and Global Strategy Group on behalf of Declare Yourself, a national nonpartisan, nonprofit movement to motivate and inspire young voters.
- *Vanishing Voter Survey* (2004). This project was directed by Thomas Patterson and is based on seven national surveys about the participation of young adults in the 2004 presidential election. The results consulted here are from a nationwide telephone survey of 1,010 adults conducted November 3-7, 2004, by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.
- *Youth Attitudes Toward Information Sources Survey* (2004). An opinion poll of 1,000 people between the ages of 15 and 25 conducted November 17-24, 2003, by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group using professional interviewers. It was funded by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Gill Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the W. T. Grant Foundation.

2. We defined swing states as those that were decided by less than 5 percentage points in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Using this criterion, the swing states were Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. This list concurs with many news reports in the run-up to the election.

3. The European Election Study (EES) relies on different modes of data collection. It uses sample sizes ranging from about 500 to 1,500 in each member state. Response rates vary across the different member states. For documentation and additional information about the study, please consult the EES homepage at <http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net>. The EES was made possible by various grants. Neither the original collectors of the data nor their sponsors bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations published here. The data are available from the homepage of the EES and from the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (ZA) at the University of Cologne, Germany.

4. Question wording: A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of June 13, while others voted. Did you cast your vote?

5. EU nations whose European parliamentary elections received "above-average" news coverage included Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. Those nations receiving "below-average" coverage were Belgium, Britain,

Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, and Portugal.

6. Socioeconomic status was tapped using the following item:

“If you were asked to choose one of these five names for your social class, which would you say you belong to—the working class, the lower middle class, the middle class, the upper middle class or the upper class?”

7. Religious attachment was tapped using a self-reported measure of religiosity (question wording: Do you consider yourself as belonging to a particular religion?). This was recoded into a dummy variable. Union membership was coded as a dummy based on a self-reported measure of union membership.

8. Partisanship was included as a dummy based on the following item (recoding the first two categories into partisan): Do you feel yourself to be very close to this party, fairly close, or merely a sympathizer?

9. Both measured per week, ranging from 0 to 6 or 0 to 7 depending on each country's media system that may (or may not) include Sunday newspapers.

10. How often did you do any of the following during the 3 or 4 weeks before the European elections on June 10th? How often did you look into a Web site concerned with the election (often, sometimes, never)?

11. How often did you talk to friends or family about the election (often, sometimes, never)?

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