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Life-cycle and political participation: Do young people participate differently due to the life stage in which they are?

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In the last decade, young people have been seen as the major suspects behind declining turnout rates, the desertion of parties' grass roots members, a rising anti-party sentiment and the decline of associative life in Western democracies. But young people have always participated differently than adults. The general and classical assumption in political behavior is that young people participate less politically because of the life stage in which they are. The interest, resources, and networks necessary to overcome the costs of participation come with adults' roles and responsibilities. However, a direct test of this widespread assumption does not confirm the expectation. On the contrary, acquiring adult roles has an overall negative impact on political participation in many European countries. To better understand the relationship between the transition to adulthood and political participation this paper proposes and tests the argument that the transition to adulthood requires some time to bring along those participatory factors, particularly at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A longitudinal comparative study across Europe is conducted paying particular attention to the construction of empirical tools that allow the comparison of the transition to adulthood and participation in an equivalent way across time, gender and countries. Results shed new light in how the life-cycle hypothesis actually works.

Introduction

Recent literature on young people and politics has lead to very different portrayals. On the one hand, young people are seen as the major suspects behind declining turnout rates across Western countries (e.g. Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte, 2004; IDEA, 1999; Franklin, 2004; Franklin, Lyons, and Marsh, 2004; Wattenberg, 2003; Fieldhouse, Tranmer, and Russell, 2007; Wattenberg, 2008). They also have been said to be apathetic (Sloam, 2007; Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest, 2005; Henn and Weinstein, 2006), distrustful and unsupportive of democratic institutions (Dalton, 2004), and not interested in public affairs (Wattenberg, 2003; Blais et al., 2004; Rubenson, Blais, Fournier, Gidengil, and Nevitte, 2004) or willing to participate in collective efforts (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, they have been praised for their stronger commitments to society and civic engagement (Dalton, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini, 2006; Gauthier, 2003), their ethical behaviours and creativeness in trying to improve the society (Zukin et al., 2006; Dalton, 2008; Stolle, Micheletti, and Berlin, 2010), their stronger support for engaged norms of citizenship (Dalton, 2008) and for transforming political activism (Norris, 2003, p. 222).

What all these studies have in common is that they have concluded – or just assumed – that differences in young people's participation are the product of generational differences. The few studies that have explored both generational and life cycle differences conclude that the sources of declining turnout are generational and not the result of life cycle effects (Blais et al. 2004, p. 227; Franklin 2004, p. 216). This conclusion is based on the finding that the comparison of

generations when they had the same age results in lower participation of the most recent cohort. On her part, Norris (2003, p. 16) concludes that there is a persistent generational shift towards cause-oriented political actions. Again this conclusion is based on the comparison of two different cohorts when they had the same age.

The distinction between life cycle and generational explanations is vital for understanding the consequences of young people's participation. If young people participate less – or participate differently – just because they are at a relatively unsettled stage in the life cycle, we can expect their political behavior to change as they grow up. It would be a matter of patience until they finish school, settle in their careers and form a family. On the contrary, if generational forces are at work and they are retrieving from representative institutions due to the distinctive context in which they were socialized politically; their engagement may constitute a long-time phenomenon.

As a matter of fact, there is nothing new in the conclusion that young people participate less in institutional activities and more in unconventional or extra-parliamentary forms of action. The relationship between political participation and age is one of most consistent findings in political behaviour research since its seminal studies. Voter turnout rises with age, reaches its peak in the forties and fifties and gradually declines above sixty (Lane 1959, pp. 216-19; Milbrath 1965, p. 134; Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974; Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960[1980], pp. 493-94). On the other hand, participation in protest activities decreases with age, it is mainly a youth domain (Marsh 1974, p. 124; Marsh and Kaase 1979, pp. 101-04; Kaase 1990, p. 43).

The usual explanation for young people's differentiated participation is just that they are young. Political participation differs across the life cycle. Attitudes and concerns are not the same in youth, adulthood or retirement. Each of these stages is associated with different situations such as being married, having children, working or studying, etc, and therefore to different levels of resources and interest when it comes to political participation. For this reason, any study exploring voter turnout, political attitudes, values or behavior includes age as one of its explanatory factors.

In the last decades, the transition to adulthood has been delayed. In comparison to some decades ago, citizens enter the labour force and form a family at a later age. Being young, as a life stage, lasts now longer. In addition, the transition to adulthood is a more demanding process. For example, for young people at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the challenge is not only the difficulties they face to enter the labor market, it is also the conditions they are offered to do so. As Mills and Blossfeld (Mills and Blossfeld, 2005) indicate, growing atypical employment conditions such as fix-term contracts may lead to unemployment and create temporal uncertainty.

Bringing these two arguments together offers a plausible alternative explanation to the generational approach often suggested. If younger citizens participate less institutionally because of the life cycle stage in which they are, and the transition to adulthood has been delayed significantly, this delay might account for the larger gap observed between young people and

adults in comparison to former cohorts. We can expect their lower participation in institutional politics to be a delay in their “start-up” of political involvement. In the same line of reasoning, the detected higher levels of involvement in non-institutional modes of participation in some countries might also be the result of a prolonged youth.

Some studies have already suggested that more consideration should be given to young people’s changing transition to adulthood as a reason for their lower levels of participation in institutional activities (O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, and McDonagh, 2003; Kimberlee, 2002). However, the scarce evidence offered is limited to one point in time and hence does not allow to draw any conclusion regarding generational versus life cycle explanations (Quintelier, 2007). In addition, this study proposes that young people’s higher levels of participation in non-institutional activities or “creative” new forms of participation can also be the result of a longer youth life stage.

This article concentrates on exploring the validity of the life cycle hypothesis to account for younger citizens lower levels of involvement in politics. In other words, it tries to answer the following question: *Do young Europeans participate relatively less because of a delayed and more complicated transition to adulthood?* In doing so the general assumption that younger citizens participate less in institutional activities and more in non-institutional forms of participation due to the fact that they are young is first reviewed. Second, I present the conceptualization and measurement of the transition to adulthood as a process. The life cycle hypothesis is then tested across European countries. The test consists in examining how institutional and non-institutional participation change as citizens move forward in the transitional process. The hypothesis is supported in the case of non-institutional participation. However, the results also show that the relationship between the transition to adulthood and institutional political participation is not as straightforward as usually assumed. Reaching adulthood only has the expected positive effect on institutional participation in few countries. In the majority of cases it has a negative effect.

For this reason, the last part of this article is devoted to further exploring how the transition to adulthood influences political participation. To understand why the transition to adulthood does not have the expected positive effect on young people’s institutional political participation an explanation is suggested: that transitional events can have a negative short-term effect at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Why does political participation change across the life cycle?

Life-cycle refers to the relationship between age and the life stage in which an individual is. As shown by many studies, political participation rises gradually with age, reaches its peak in the forties and fifties and gradually declines above sixty (Lane 1959, pp. 216-219; Milbrath 1965, p. 134; Nie et al. 1974; Campbell et al. 1960[1980]). This well documented relationship is usually interpreted as a signal of the life stage in which an individual is. This implies that political

participation varies over a person's life span. And this variation is commonly understood as the result of the differentiated characteristics of life stages.

Skills, resources and interest in political affairs come with middle-age responsibilities. Marriage brings stability and integration in the community (Stoker and Jennings, 1995). Having children increases social needs such as education, playgrounds, etc., and therefore, raises political awareness (Lane, 1959, p.218). Once in employment a person develops certain skills and the working environment conveys social networks and exposure to mobilization agencies (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Furthermore, economic security and resources are higher (Lane 1959, p. 218; Verba and Nie 1972). All these roles entail stability and experience, they also imply the development of the knowledge about politics that makes political participation easier and more meaningful (Strate, Parrish, Elder, and Ford, 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993).

In comparison to adults, younger citizens are less integrated into their community (Milbrath, 1965, pp. 134-135), have not been exposed to politics (Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 139) and are busy with other concerns such as preparing their professional career or forming a family (Glenn and Grimes 1968, pp. 563-566; Verba and Nie 1972, p. 139). They also lack resources and recruitment networks. They have less civic skills since they are just beginning to establish their careers. Moreover, those who enter into tertiary education, will not have completed their education at this stage (Schlozman, Verba, Brady, and Erkulwater, 1999, p. 3). They are also different in terms of time availability. Due to their lower level of commitments such as family or full-time employment, they have more free time than adults (Schlozman et al., 1999, p. 9). Regarding money, they might still be living in their parents' home or just starting their independent life. In both cases they can be expected to have a lower amount of money at their disposal. The same is true regarding recruitment networks. They have fewer roots to the community since they are in a transitional stage of their life. Younger citizens also have weaker psychological identifications since these develop with time (Campbell et al., 1960[1980]) and lower political interest. In the words of Rosenstone and Hansen "as people grow older, in short, they accumulate information, skills, and attachments that help them to overcome the cost of political participation" (1993, p. 137).

Finally, senior citizens are less involved in politics than the middle age group. Retirement and an empty nest imply a drop in social networks. In addition, the costs of getting engaged in certain activities increase with physical infirmities (Milbrath, 1965, pp. 134-135) and, in some cases, they lack a mobilizing partner (Stoker and Jennings, 1995). The only exception is their higher propensity to vote, which has been explained as the result of habit over their lifetime and residential stability (Strate et al., 1989; Goerres, 2007).

How exactly the individual mechanisms – for which each of these aspects affects political participation – work has not been examined systematically.¹ Instead, the usual assumption in political behaviour research is that individuals' levels of political participation will increase as

¹Testing those mechanisms would require panel data that follows individuals across time. Data that would allow to trace individual's transitions and specific events – acquiring a new job, forming a family – to political participation is rare. An exception is the "Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study" in the United States (see

the transition to adulthood is completed. We can expect that once fully reached adulthood, younger citizens' political participation will resemble that of middle-aged citizens, both in its levels of involvement and modes of participation. Furthermore, we can expect that a delayed and more complicated transition to adulthood explains the relatively higher age gap in comparison to the 1970s.

Although the reviewed studies regarding age and political participation mainly concentrate on institutional forms of participation - particularly turnout - we can also expect the life cycle hypothesis to help us understand why younger citizens participate to a higher extent in non-institutional activities. Classical studies presented evidence of their higher involvement in confrontational politics (Kaase and Barnes, 1979, p. 524). During the late sixties and early seventies students protest was mainly a youth movement. Recent research also confirms that young people participate to a higher extent in specific non-institutional political activities such as demonstrations. And that it is particularly students who are involved in this type of participation (Caínzos, 2006; García-Albacete and Martín, 2010). The stability of this finding across time suggests it is a characteristic of their life cycle rather than a cohort characteristic.

Nevertheless, it has also been suggested that citizens are opting for different and "emerging" modes of participation (Gauthier, 2003; O'Toole et al., 2003; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). According to Norris (2002, p. 215-216), political activism has been reinvented. This would be particularly true for younger generations, who are less willing to participate in traditional agencies and more likely to opt for specific activities of choice (Norris 2002, p. 222; 2003). However, this statement is not supported by the findings of rigorous comparisons across time (García-Albacete, 2011). Neither in comparison to adults, nor in comparison to young people in the 1970s. Furthermore, these authors assume that the reason behind young people's differentiated participation is the dissimilar context in which they were socialized. It is a generational - or rather cohort - transformation. Notwithstanding this claim, the expectation proposed here is that, in those few countries where young citizens' participate more in non-institutional activities than adults (Denmark, Spain and Finland, as shown in Garcia-Albacete 2011), their higher participation can also be the result of a prolonged youth. As young citizens move forward in the transition to adulthood their participation in non-institutional activities will decrease.

Even if the Political Action Study in the 1970s showed that higher youth participation in unconventional activities was a long term change, Marsh and Kaase (1979, p. 101) offered some reasoning regarding why protest potential is associated with youthfulness. Young people enjoy the physical energy, the freedom from work and family responsibilities and have the time required for this kinds of political activity. Furthermore, they are more vulnerable to strong ideological motivation and more prone to contest the authorities. In their own words: "Protest potential is therefore held to be primarily an outcome of the *joie de vivre* of youth itself". This "natural" protest potential of youth has to take account, however, of social and political change. That is

Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Jennings, 1987; Stoker and Jennings, 1995; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers, 2009). Unfortunately, this type of data is not available for cross-country analysis in Europe.

to say, even if younger citizens have more potential for protest, according to Marsh and Kaase, only societal changes facilitate radical changes in political behaviour (p. 102).

If we include the protest potential of young people in the argument, we can further develop the general expectation presented before: Young citizens' lower levels of institutional participation will vanish once they have fully integrated into adulthood. Furthermore, young citizens' higher involvement in non-institutional participation will disappear once they have completed the transition to adulthood.

Changes in political participation as young people complete the transition to adulthood

In order to test these expectations, the levels of political participation of individuals at different stages of life can be compared. Using middle-aged adults as the baseline category, we can compare those young citizens who have already acquired adult roles and those who have not.

This test is performed by using the first round of European Social Survey (ESS) conducted between 2000 and 2002.² In comparison to other available international surveys it includes a large number of European countries, an extensive battery of political participation modes and several measures on family composition and employment status. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results only established democracies are selected. In total seventeen countries are included in the analysis.³ In addition, identifying changes in how the transition to adulthood might affect political participation requires a longitudinal perspective and therefore to compare across time. For this reason, the Political Action Study (PAS), conducted between 1974 and 1977, is also used.

Political participation is measured by means of two additive scales developed elsewhere (García-Albacete, 2011). The theoretical argument underlying these instruments is that political participation can be understood, and measured, as a latent continuum.⁴ The two scales are the result of exploring the latent structure of political participation by using the stochastic cumulative scale analysis procedure proposed by Robert Mokken (1971).⁵ Applying this procedure to the pooled European Social Survey dataset showed the existence of two dimensions. The first scale includes actions related to the electoral process; the second one

²Details on the survey, data and fieldwork documentation can be found in <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

³The countries included are: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Sweden.

⁴Already in the 1972, a latent construct of political participation, or more exactly of "protest potential", allowed examining and locating individuals on an ordered continuum going from mild forms of participation to more extreme actions (Marsh, 1974, 1977). The basic question underlying this dimension is "Think about protest. Generally speaking, how far are you prepared to go?" (Marsh, 1977, p.48). Building on the idea of studying political participation as a latent continuum, an unidimensional ordered scale including both conventional and unconventional modes of participation was successfully constructed in the 1980s (van Deth, 1986).

⁵See also van Deth (1986) for the same strategy.

contains non-institutional forms of participation.⁶ These two scales were tested for a large number of countries and proved to establish an identity-set of actions with cross-national validity. To overcome the limitations implied in the use of identical indicators cross nationally, the identity-set was used as the basis to include national-specific items in the instruments (Przeworski and Teune, 1966). As a result, the final measure of political participation combines a cross-national, identical set of indicators for all countries as well as a set of nation-specific indicators. In this way, non-identical but equivalent scales were obtained for reliable and valid measurement of political participation in cross-national research.⁷

The indicators of political participation are additive scales ranging from 0 “no participation” to 1 “participation in all the activities”. The first scale includes three forms of participation in all the countries: voting, contacting politicians and working for a political party. It also includes country specific combinations and up to two more items among the following: being a member of a traditional political organization (political parties and trade unions) and donating money. The second scale contains also three modes of participation in all countries: signing petitions, attending lawful demonstrations, and participation in illegal protest activities. It is complemented with country specific combinations of the following political activities: displaying political badges, boycotting products, and buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons.

To examine how levels and modes of political participation change once completed the transition to adulthood we also need a measurement of that transition. There are five events that are usually considered the markers of the transition to adulthood: forming a partnership, moving out of the parental home, leaving school, entering the labor market, and having a first child (Gauthier, 2007; Gauthier and Furstenberg, 2002; Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg, 1976; Shanahan, 2000, p.627). Information regarding whether respondents passed through those steps is available in the ESS.⁸

In addition, we need to be aware that the transition to adulthood can take different paths, and not necessarily an unique sequence of events. Since the early 1970s, the proportion of young adults following what used to be a chronological succession of events – starting with finishing school, entering the labour market, moving out of the parental nest, forming a partnership and ultimately having children – has declined in all advanced industrial countries (Rindfuss,

⁶The exact wording used in the questionnaire is: “There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Contacted a politician, government or local government official; worked in a political party or action group; worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker, signed a petition; taken part in a lawful public demonstration; boycotted certain products; deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons; donated money to a political organization or group; participated in illegal protest activities”. In addition electoral participation is included according to whether respondents voted in the last general election.

⁷The detailed process is available in García-Albacete (2011)

⁸Unfortunately, we do not have information regarding the timing of those events. Also, with cross-sectional data we can not examine the real effect of events, that is to say, the change in participation when passing from being at school to enter the labour market. We can only compare individuals in different situations. Despite this limitation, we can still address the differences between those who have completed their education, for instance, to those who have not. Furthermore, although the term “event” is not entirely accurate, it will be used to simplify the argumentation.

1991; Modell et al., 1976). First, because family trajectories have become more dissimilar across individuals, with more people choosing different paths (Gauthier, 2007). Second, because the transition from school to work no longer can be considered a single event, but rather an increasingly longer transition that differs across countries in its timing and sequencing (Scherer, 2001). Furthermore, the continuous investment in lifelong learning during early working careers has blurred the transition process (Wolbers, 2003) and increased the number of young adults in double – work and study – situations. Given the complexity, the transition to adulthood is better described as a process than as a event (Hogan and Astone, 1986, p. 112).

Therefore, an indicator of the process transition to adulthood is constructed in the form of an additive scale ranging from 0, for those individuals that have not passed through any of the events, to 5 for those who have finished education, left the parental nest, are living with a partner, have entered the labour market and have at least one child.⁹ In this fashion the indicator takes account of the transition as a process not imposing a specific sequence of events. In addition, we can expect the transition to adulthood to have a differentiated effect according to the level of education achieved and gender.¹⁰ Therefore, they are included in the equation as control variables.¹¹

As a baseline model to compare, Ordinary Least Squares regressions are estimated including institutional and non-institutional participation as dependent variables and the equivalent youth and adulthood categories developed by García-Albacete (2011). These models use the ESS data collected in 2002. In order to facilitate the comparison of subsequent models all cases with missing values in any of the variables included in the equation were dropped from the analyses. Regarding the models, due to data availability for the different variables used along this chapter, the complete analyses could only be performed for fourteen out of the seventeen countries previously selected.¹²

This baseline model brings information regarding the level of participation of young people in comparison to adults across European countries. A gap in institutional participation is observed

⁹The information of these events comes from the following questions in the ESS questionnaire. Living with a partner comes from two direct questions regarding whether the respondent lives with husband/wife and partner. Note that those who are separated, divorce or widowed are also included as having passed the event “being married” in the transition scale. Having at least one children and having left the parental home comes from question regarding household composition. Having finished education and have a job come from questions regarding employment status.

¹⁰As will be further discussed, the reason for including education in the models is that the starting conditions of specific events can change the effect of the transition to adulthood on political participation. For example, early drop-outs from school will dampen participation rather than push it. Unfortunately, the studies used here do not include a sample of young people large enough to further differentiate between educational levels and the transition to adulthood. With regard to the inclusion of gender as a control factor in the model, the specific effects of the transition to adulthood on participation for men and women has been explored elsewhere (García-Albacete, 2011). For the moment, and in order to detect general patterns, both education and gender are included in the model.

¹¹Education is measured as the number of years of education completed.

¹²The problem is that the number of cases for some specific situations such as completing all the steps of the transition to adulthood and being young are very low, resulting in inconsistent results and omissions of main variables in the analyses. For the sake of clarity only the fourteen countries for which the complete examination is possible are presented in the text. The information regarding the three countries excluded –Switzerland, Norway and Luxembourg– is available from the author.

in every country between young people and adults. Furthermore, the expectation that young citizens participate more in non-institutional activities is corroborated only in three countries: Spain, Denmark and Finland. For the sake of space only the analysis for the pooled sample is presented here (Model 1 and model 4 in Table 1).

The question to answer here is whether that participatory gap disappears as citizens move forward in the transition to adulthood. To do so the referred indicator labeled “transition to adulthood” is included in the former multivariate model. The expectation is that as citizens complete steps in the transition to adulthood institutional political participation increases whereas non-institutional participation decreases.

To facilitate the interpretation of the results only two pieces of information are presented below. The complete results of the analyses for the pooled sample are presented in Table 1. Summaries of the effects resulting of the replication of the analyses across countries are presented in Tables 2 and 3. These summaries show the countries in which each factor has a significant effect ($p < 0.05$) and its direction (positive or negative).¹³

Table 1 (Model 2) shows that, as expected, the transition to adulthood has a positive and significant effect on institutional political participation. Furthermore, as shown in Table 2, the separated analyses across countries also confirm that institutional political participation increases significantly as citizens complete steps in the transition to adulthood in more than half of the countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Greece and Sweden. In the remaining six countries the relationship is also positive but not statistically significant (see the summary in Table 2).

The expectation regarding the effect of the transition to adulthood on non-institutional political participation is the opposite to institutional participation. If higher participation in non-institutional activities is a youth characteristic, as individuals move forwards to adulthood their involvement in this type of actions will decrease. This expectation is supported by the analyses. Table 1 shows that the transition to adulthood has a negative and significant effect on the likelihood of participation in non-institutional activities. Furthermore, in twelve countries the transition to adulthood also has a negative effect on participation, of which in four it is statistically significant. Moreover, comparing Model 4 and 5 in Table 1 shows that once included the transition to adulthood in the model the positive effect of being young disappears. That is to say, as young people progress in the transition to adulthood they no longer participate more than adults in non-institutional participation.

This effect is confirmed in three out of the four countries in which youth participation in this type of activities is higher (see Table 3, Model 2). The relationship between completing the events included in the transition to adulthood and non-institutional participation is not only negative but, after its inclusion, the positive effect of being young disappears in the two countries we observed it was positive: Denmark and Spain. The only exception to this finding is

¹³Detailed analyses are available from the author.

Table 1: Effect of the transition to adulthood on institutional and non-institutional political participation in fourteen European countries.

	Institutional participation			Non-institutional participation		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Young	-0.0675*** (0.00354)	-0.0515*** (0.00404)	-0.0447*** (0.00932)	0.0117*** (0.00322)	0.00513 (0.00397)	0.0121 (0.00844)
Gender: Male	0.0330*** (0.00300)	0.0342*** (0.00300)	0.0343*** (0.00300)	-0.0127*** (0.00291)	-0.0130*** (0.00291)	-0.0129*** (0.00292)
Years of education	0.00109*** (0.000169)	0.00113*** (0.000169)	0.00113*** (0.000169)	0.00152*** (0.000159)	0.00152*** (0.000159)	0.00152*** (0.000159)
Transition to adulthood		0.0106*** (0.00129)	0.0115*** (0.00170)		-0.00331** (0.00117)	-0.0021 (0.00171)
Young * Transition			-0.0021 (0.00259)			-0.0022 (0.00234)
Constant	0.283*** (0.00316)	0.239*** (0.00627)	0.235*** (0.00779)	0.136*** (0.00306)	0.150*** (0.00574)	0.145*** (0.00779)
N	18052	18052	18052	19973	19973	19973
R ²	0.026	0.03	0.03	0.006	0.006	0.006

Note: Figures represent OLS regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. Levels of significance: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Source: European Social Survey 2002.

Finland, where as citizens become adults they also participate more in non-institutional political activities. Contrary to what recent studies suggested, the results presented here reveal that being young no longer translates into higher levels of involvement in non-institutional modes of participation. Or at least, it only does in three of the countries analyzed here: Denmark, Spain and Finland. In addition, the results of this test indicate that it is a characteristic of the life stage in which they are.

To this point we can conclude that completing the steps of the transition to adulthood has the expected effects: positive on institutional participation and negative on non-institutional participation. However, these results refer to the general population but we are interested in explaining how young people's political participation changes as they become adults.

For that reason, the former models are further developed with the inclusion of an interaction term between being young and the transition to adulthood (see Tables 2 and 3, Model 3).¹⁴ According to the life cycle hypothesis the expectation is that completing the transition to adulthood has the same effects when concentrating on young adults. And that the interaction will show a positive effect for institutional participation and a negative effect for non-institutional participation. The results of this test for the pooled sample are included in Model 3 and

¹⁴An important question here is how many young people have completed the transition to adulthood and if there are enough cases to conduct more detailed analyses. Apart from Switzerland, Norway and Denmark (as commented in footnote 12 before) the remaining analyses were not problematic. Only in Italy the number of young people who have completed three or more steps in the transition to adulthood is very low. This will be taken into account when interpreting the results. The frequency of cases for each country can be consulted in Figure 14 in the Appendix.

Table 2: Summary of the effects of the transition to adulthood on institutional political participation in fourteen European countries, 2002

	Model 2		Model 3	
	(+)	(-)	(+)	(-)
Transition to adulthood	Pooled sample			
	Austria			
	Belgium			
	Denmark			
	Finland			
	France			
	Greece			
	Ireland			
	Sweden			
	Young x Transition			Ireland

Note: Summary of countries in which each factor has a significant ($p < 0.05$) and positive (+), or negative (-) effect on political participation. The results are based on separate country OLS regression analyses. See Table 1 for other variables included in the model.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002.

Model 6 in Table 1. Both coefficients are negative and non-significant. However, the replication across countries further qualifies the results. Looking at the results summarized in Table 3 for non-institutional participation shows that being young and moving forward in the transition to adulthood has the expected negative and significant effect in five countries: Germany, Denmark, Spain, France and Ireland. With the exceptional result of a positive effect in the Netherlands. On the contrary, the coefficients of the interaction between being young and the transition to adulthood on institutional participation has an unexpected negative sign. As young people move forward in the transition to adulthood their levels of institutional participation decrease in a number of countries (Germany, Denmark, France, Italy and Portugal). Only in Ireland we find the expected positive effect.

However, the sign and direction of the interaction term might be hiding varying effects of being young as they move in the transition to adulthood. For instance, being young might have a negative effect on institutional participation when only none or just one of the steps in the transition to adulthood has been completed but a positive effect when all five steps have been completed. To further explore this relationship and grasp how young people levels of participation change as they move forward in the transition to adulthood, the marginal effects – and their corresponding standard errors – of being young on political participation must be computed (Brambor, Clark, and Golder, 2006). How the effect of being young on participation changes as individuals complete the steps in the transition to adulthood is presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 3: Summary of the effects of the transition to adulthood on non-institutional political participation in fourteen European countries, 2002

	Model 2		Model 3	
	(+)	(-)	(+)	(-)
Transition to adulthood	Finland	Pooled sample Denmark Spain Greece		
Youth x Transition			The Netherlands	Germany Denmark Spain France Ireland

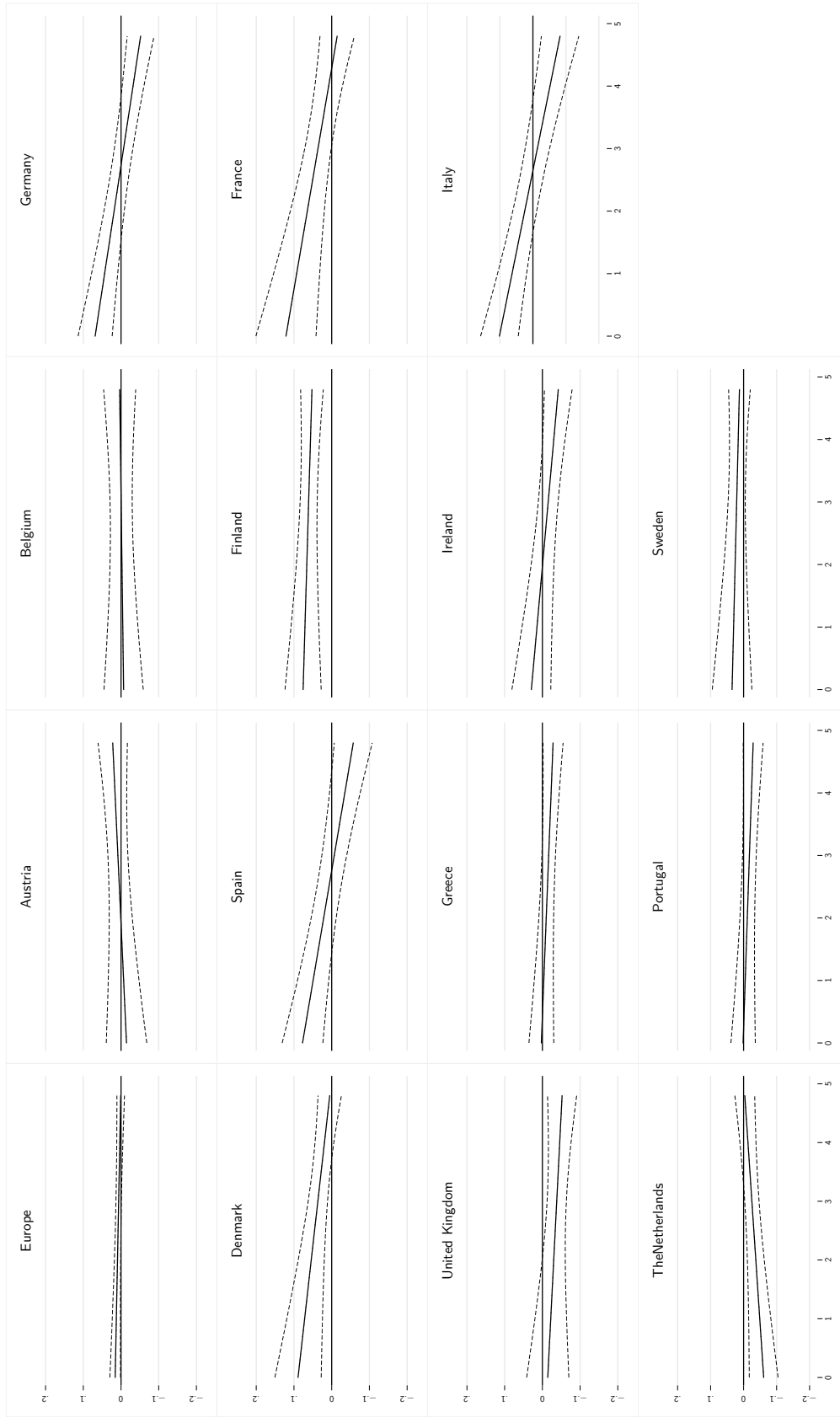
Note: Summary of countries in which each factor has a significant ($p < 0.05$) and positive (+), or negative (-) effect on political participation. The results are based on separate country OLS regression analyses. See Table 1 for other variables included in the model.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002.

Starting with non-institutional participation, Figure 1 illustrates how young people participate more in non-institutional activities when they are in an early stage of their transition to adulthood. For example in Germany, young people's participation is significantly higher than that of adults until they have completed one step in the transition to adulthood. As soon as they have completed two steps their level of participation is no longer different than adults, and when they have completed the five steps young adults' participation is even lower. The relative decrease in non-institutional participation is also observable in Denmark, Spain, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Ireland and Italy. As already observed, in Finland young people participate more in this type of activities independently of how many steps they have completed in the transition to adulthood. Hence, we can conclude that in those countries where youth's involvement in this type of participation is higher it is only due to the life stage in which they are. As soon as they acquire job and family responsibilities their participatory levels will resemble those of adults.

Young people's participation in institutional activities as the transition to adulthood progresses shows a more complex picture across countries, which is illustrated in Figure 2. According to the life cycle hypothesis, we would expect their participation to increase as they complete a higher number of events. However, this expectation is only confirmed in three out of fourteen countries: Belgium, Ireland and Greece. In Spain, United Kingdom and the Netherlands, their participation remains the same. Finally, in a majority of countries young people's participation decreases as they complete events in their transition to adulthood.

So far we have seen that the transition to adulthood, in general, increases participation. But when focusing on young citizens the direction is reversed. This unexpected finding contradicts the widespread assumption that young people participate less in institutional participation due to the life stage in which they are, and therefore raises a number of questions. The first one is

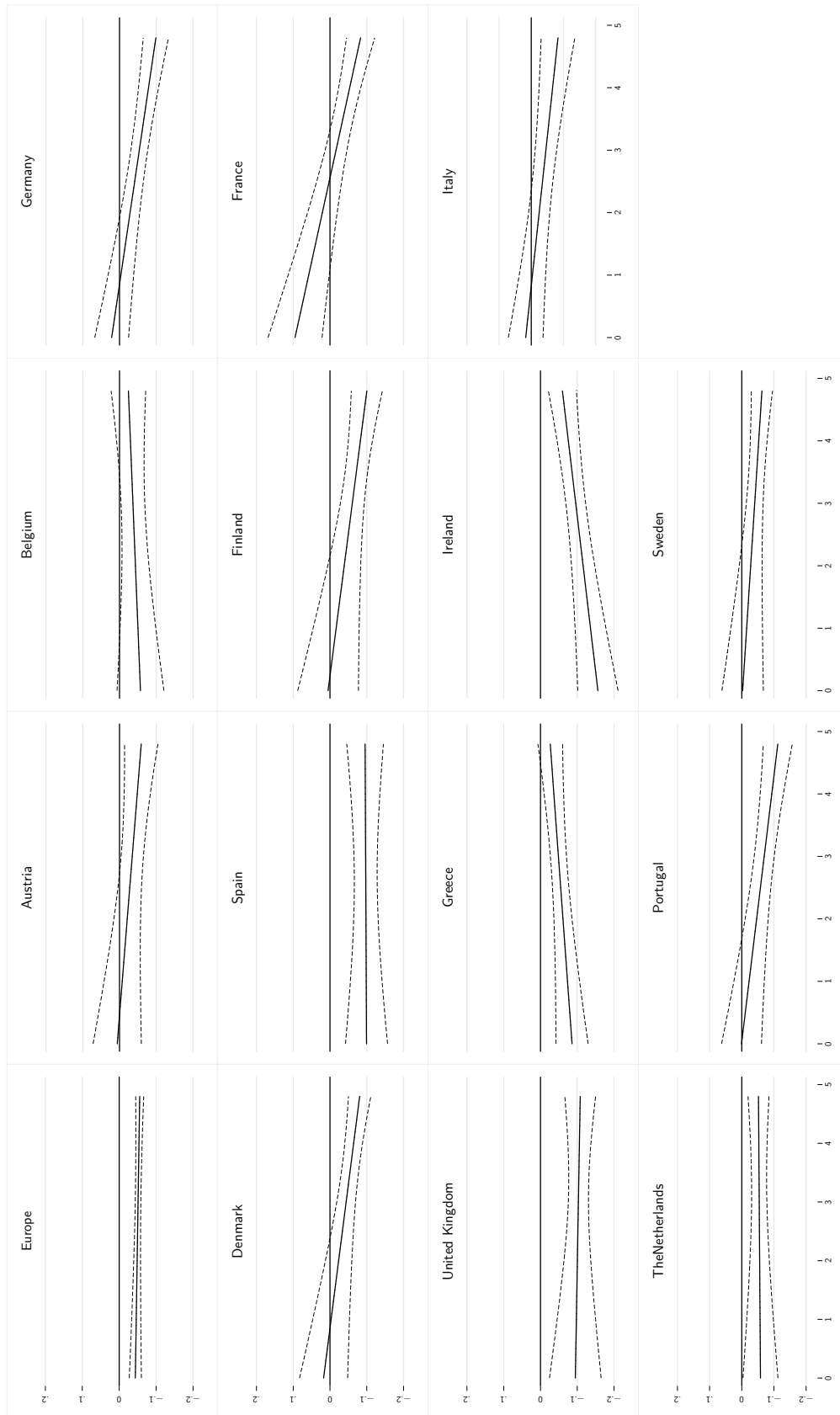
Figure 1: Marginal effect of being young on levels of non-institutional participation as respondents move forward in the transition to adulthood, 2002



Number of events completed in the transition to adulthood

Dashed lines give 95% confidence interval

Figure 2: Marginal effect of being young on levels of institutional participation as respondents move forward in the transition to adulthood, 2002



Number of events completed in the transition to adulthood

Dashed lines give 95% confidence interval

whether this is a new phenomenon. Does the transition to adulthood have the opposite effect that it used to have in a number of countries? This could be the result of societal changes discussed before such as a more flexible labour market in terms of working hours and residence. It could be the result of the fact that the transition is now a more demanding process.

This question can be answered by examining how the transition to adulthood influenced individuals' levels of institutional participation in the 1970s. To do so the former analyses are replicated with data from the PAS. The construction of the transition to adulthood indicator includes only four events instead of the five events included in former analyses. In addition, the step "living with a partner" included in the ESS is replaced by "being married".¹⁵ Figure 3 illustrates the results of replicating the analyses with data from the 1970s. The results clearly discard the possibility that the negative relationship between completing the transition to adulthood and youth's political participation is a new phenomenon. As in 2002, in 1974 young people's participation in institutional activities also decreased as they completed the – in this case four – steps in the transition to adulthood.

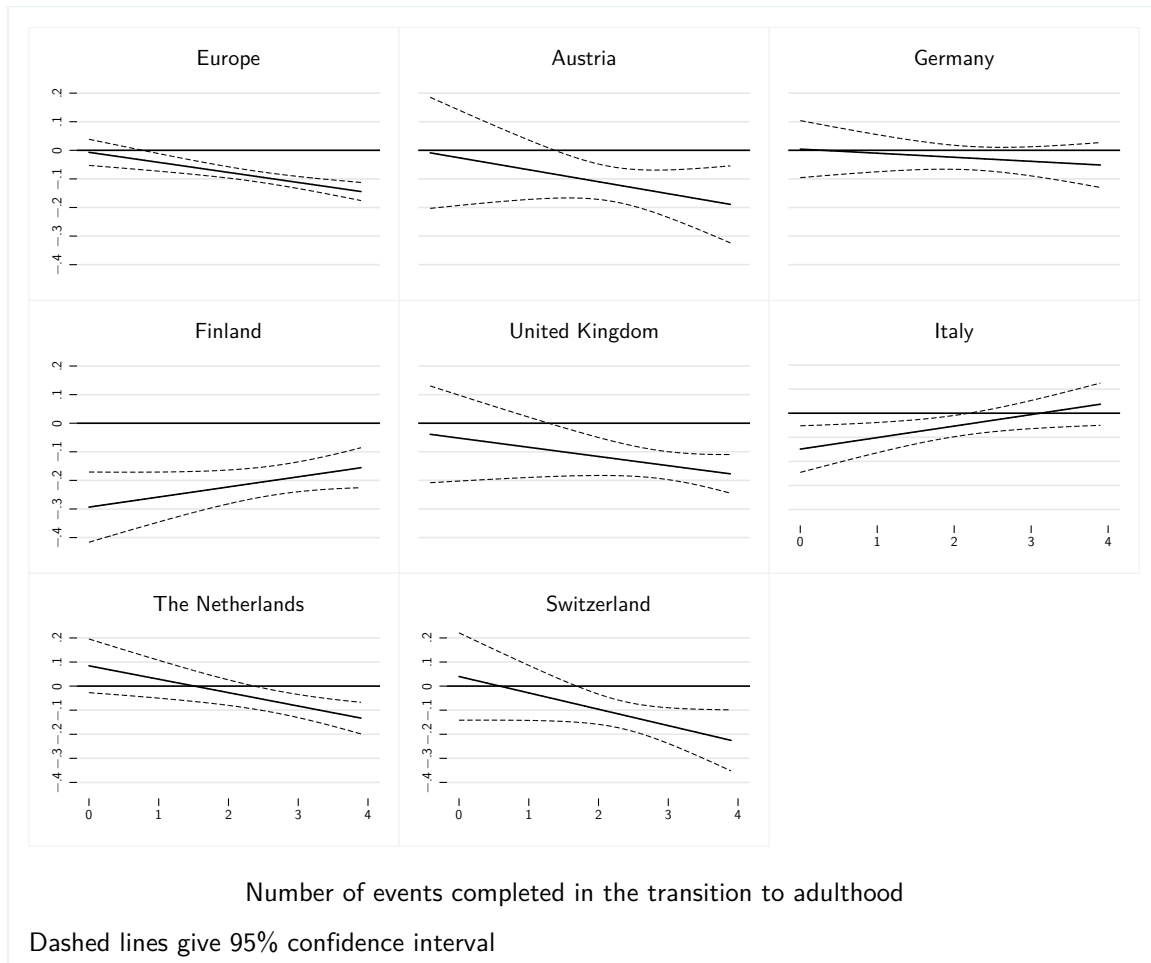
So far the exploration corroborates the expectation regarding non-institutional participation. Younger citizens in some countries are more active in non-institutional political activities because they are young. As they complete the transition to adulthood their levels of participation in this type of activities are no longer different from adults.

However, the results also show that the relationship between the transition to adulthood and institutional political participation is not as straightforward as usually assumed. First, because it only helps to understand younger citizens' participation in a small number of countries. Secondly, because in a majority of countries, completing the transition to adulthood decreases the likelihood to participate in institutional activities. Furthermore, we have seen that this is not a new phenomenon, since this pattern was already observable in 1974. This is an unexpected result since the life cycle explanation has been widely used to explain the political behaviour of young people since the 1960s. Other studies have also failed to detect the expected increase in participation as young citizens complete the transition to adulthood. For example, Highton and Wolfinger (2001, p. 208) conclude that undertaking adult roles does not uniformly or appreciably increase the turnout of young Americans, suggesting that explanations for young people's lower voter turnout should be sought elsewhere.

Nevertheless, such a widespread explanation of political behaviour deserves further attention before being rejected. For this reason, the second part of this chapter is devoted to further exploring how the transition to adulthood influences institutional political participation. I

¹⁵In the Political Action Study information regarding whether the respondent lives with his or her parents is not available. In addition, information on whether the interviewees have children is only available for three countries (the Netherlands, Finland and United Kingdom). Therefore the scale is constructed with three or four events depending on the country. In addition, data regarding cohabitation is not available, so marriage is used as a substitute. Note that those who are separated, divorced or widowed are also included as having passed the event "being married" in the transition scale. Information on having a job and having left school comes from the question on employment status

Figure 3: Marginal effect of being young on levels of institutional participation as respondents move forward in the transition to adulthood, 1974



propose that increasingly uncertain conditions in which the transition to adulthood takes place has resulted in a short-time negative effect on political participation.

Transition to adulthood and institutional participation: An exploration of short term effects

As introduced, an explanation to the negative relationship found is that the transition to adulthood is a demanding process that temporally removes citizens' attention from politics. The evidence presented so far already points in this direction. We have seen that the transition to adulthood, and the individual events it comprises, have a general positive effect on institutional participation. However, concentrating on young people the direction changes. This results might be reflecting a negative short-term effect of the transition to adulthood.

Three arguments support this expectation. First, as Stoker and Jennings (1995) demonstrated in the case of marriage, while in the long-term marriage leads to an increase in political

involvement, all marital transitions – in the short term – depress participation, and especially among younger people. Transitions have a disruptive effect in people’s life and require some time to adjust to the new situation. This disruptive effect can also be expected regarding education and work related transitions.

Second, there is evidence that forming a family at a very early stage of life implies an accumulation of disadvantages for voter turnout (Pacheco and Plutzer, 2007, 2008). That is to say, the effects of marrying or having children are not the same depending when they take place. Teen parenthood, for instance, is likely to come accompanied by early marriage and dropping out of the educational system. In turn, these events imply a reduced educational attainment, low income, and therefore inhibit participation.

A third argument is that some of the expected benefits of the working environment such as civic skills, social networks or economic resources might require some time to develop, and therefore, might only influence participation some time after they take place. This suggestion might be particularly relevant for new cohorts of the population given the increasing flexibility of the labour market, temporal contracts, involuntary part-time employments and required job mobility. The economic security and necessary resources to participate politically might come only later in an individual’s career. In addition, a more uncertain labour market might be more demanding on young people’s time and attention. They might just be too busy building their careers to pay attention to politics.

A direct test of this hypothesis requires including in the statistical models information regarding the timing in which individuals completed those steps, such as how long ago did they marry or enter the labour market. Unfortunately, this information is not available in the European Social Survey or in any other international political participation study.¹⁶ Still, an approximation can be conducted by exploring the effect that each event has across age. If the expectation of short term effects is correct, we should observe that the levels of participation of those who are married or have a job are only higher than those who have not yet completed the transition after a certain age. That is to say, an age cutting point after which involvement in institutional activities is significantly higher.

To test whether there is such a cutting point, a series of models are estimated that include an interaction between life events and age. This interaction differs from the previous one between youth and the transition to adulthood in that it does not separate life stages. By interacting each event with age we can examine the effect across the full range of age.

¹⁶To my knowledge there is no survey data available that includes both detailed information regarding the timing of life cycle stages or events together with measures of political participation. Other possibilities for this test were considered, such as the German Socioeconomic Panel. However, the study does not include political behaviour information, only attitudes. There are reasons to expect life transitions to have differentiated effects on attitudes and behaviour. While political orientations develop in an early stage in life (Prior, 2010; van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar, 2011) and are persistent across time (Sears, 1983; Prior, 2010), participation is more dependent on other factors such as resources or mobilization networks.

In an exploratory fashion, models are run separately for each event and country. These analyses concentrate on the three life events that have a general positive effect on institutional political participation: living with a partner, being in paid employment and having at least one child.¹⁷ In addition, the same analyses are presented using as the modifying variable having completed the transition to adulthood. As before, the test consist in including a multiplicative interaction term in a multivariate regression model that controls for education and gender. However, instead of including youth and adulthood life stages, the marginal effects of each event are now computed across age. In total, four models are run for every country, each of them including having a job, living with a partner, being a parent or having completed the transition to adulthood.¹⁸ For the sake of clarity, only some examples of the results are shown below. The complete graphical display is available in Figures 10 to 13 in the Appendix.

This test brings some more light to understand the relationship between becoming an adult and institutional political participation. Not surprisingly, the results differ across countries and events. Nevertheless, they can be organized in three different patterns.

The first pattern found is that in some countries the events already have a positive significant effect at an early age. That is the case, for instance, in Austria, where those who have a paid employment participate to a higher extent in institutional activities than those who do not have a job (see Figure 4). This pattern was also found in another five countries regarding having a job (Austria, Belgium, Greece, Ireland and Spain), in three for living with a partner (Belgium, Greece and Ireland), two countries regarding being a parent (Belgium and Greece) and the same two countries regarding having completed the transition to adulthood (Belgium and Greece). This pattern supports the expectation that completing steps in the transition to adulthood increases the likelihood to participate in institutional activities. Furthermore, the fact that having a job – in the example from Austria in Figure 4 – only has a significant positive effect on institutional participation until certain age – in this case 40 years old – further supports the life cycle hypothesis. Incorporating to the labour market particularly increases participation for younger people.

A second pattern indicates that in some countries, one or several of the events have no significant effects at any age. That is the case for instance in the Netherlands, where having a job does not imply a higher likelihood to participate in institutional activities at any age (see Figure 5). This result was found in only three countries for having a job (United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Sweden), five countries when looking at the effect of having completed the transition (Spain, United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands) and in a larger number of countries regarding family transitions: eight countries concerning living with a partner (Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal) and seven regarding having children (Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland and Portugal).

¹⁷Earlier tests showed that some events have a negative effect in few countries. Additional information is available from the author.

¹⁸Again, due to the large number of analyses summaries are offered in the text and the graphical display in Figures 10 to 13 in the Appendix. A more detailed report is available from the author.

Figure 4: Marginal effect of having a job on institutional political participation across age in Austria

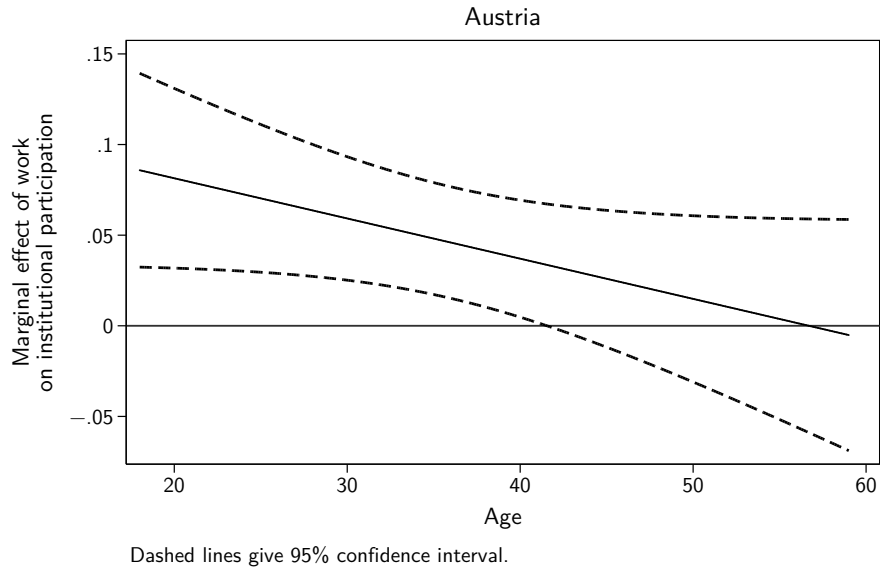
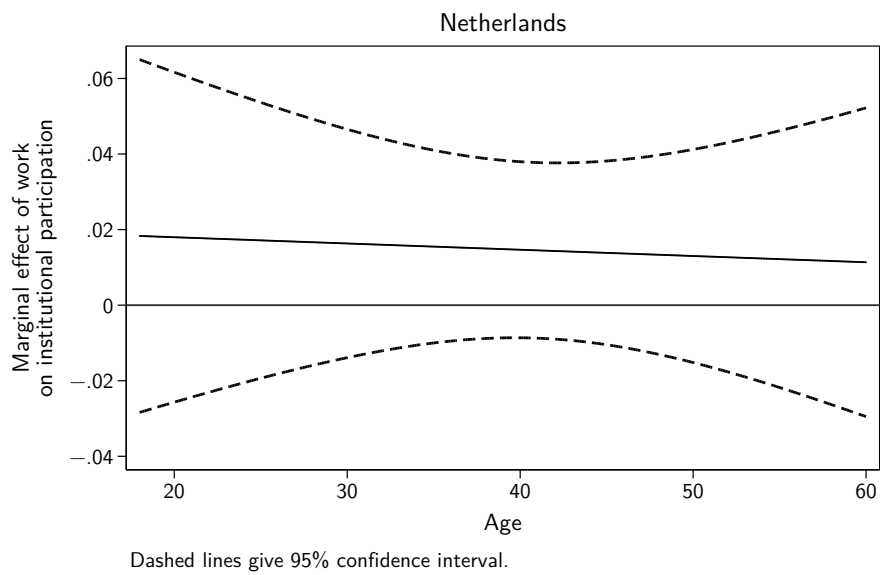
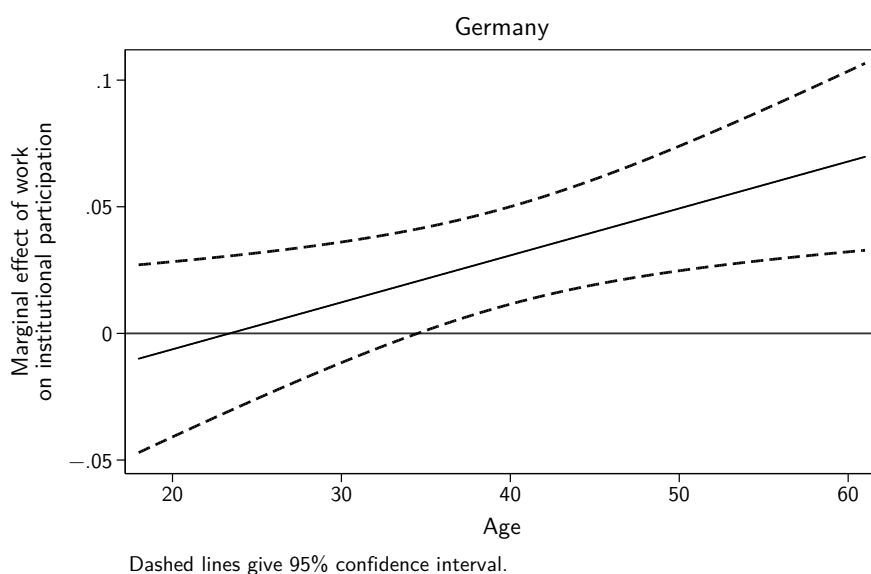


Figure 5: Marginal effect of having a job on institutional political participation across age in the Netherlands



Finally, in some countries the events have a statistically significant positive effect on institutional participation but only after a certain age. This is for instance the case of Germany, where those who have a job are more involved in this type of activities only after the age of 35 (see Figure 6). The frequency of this pattern across countries is of six cases regarding having a job (Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy and Portugal), three for living with a partner (Austria, Finland and Sweden), four for having at least one child (Austria, Denmark, Finland and France) and seven for having completed the transition to adulthood (Austria, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Portugal and Sweden)

Figure 6: Marginal effect of having a job on institutional political participation across age in Germany



This last pattern offers some support to the expectation that the transition to adulthood has both short and long term effects. That is to say, events might not have a direct positive effect on institutional political participation immediately but require some time, for instance, to develop civic skill or social contacts at the work place. It is also possible that some events such as forming a family only have a positive effect on the likelihood to participate institutionally if they take place after a certain age. As discussed before, teen parenthood, for example, can result in cumulative disadvantages in terms of resources to participate.¹⁹

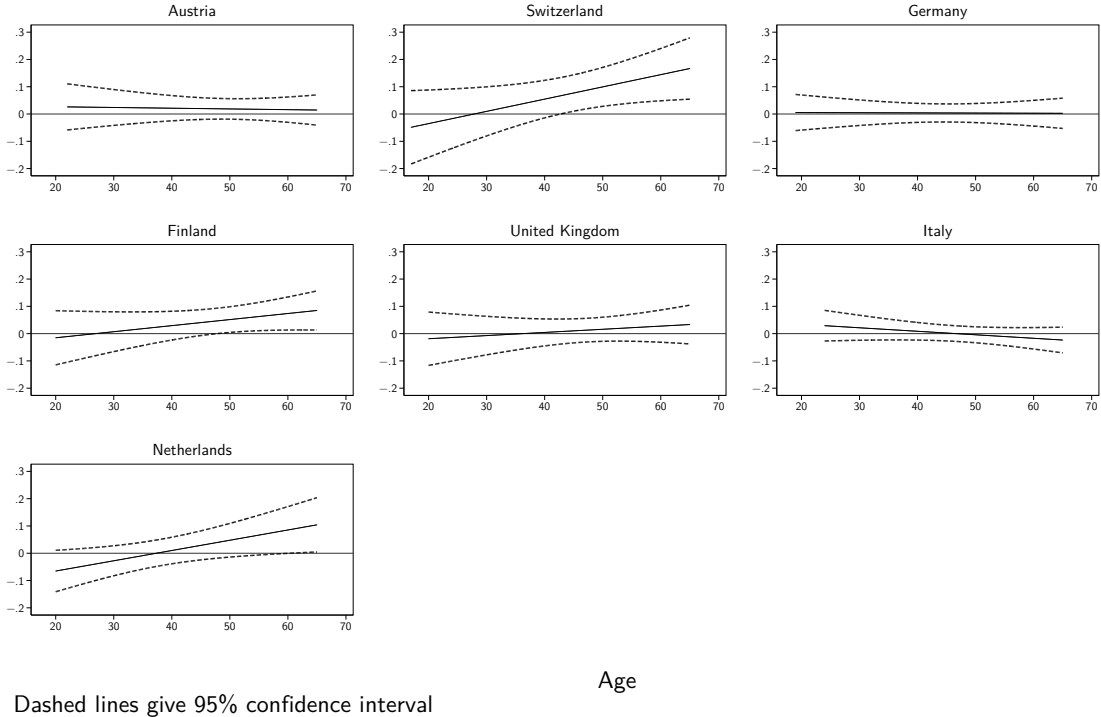
Which countries and events fit to each of the three patterns will be further discussed in the concluding section of this article. For the moment, let us turn the attention to the 1970s. As discussed in the former section, the negative relationship between transition to adulthood and institutional political participation is not a new phenomena. It was also observed in Austria, Switzerland, Britain and the Netherlands in 1974. To see if the same patterns help understanding

¹⁹The cumulative disadvantages argument could be tested comparing respondents at an early age according to whether they have completed the transition or not. However, the sample is not big enough for that differentiation (the number of cases can be consulted in Figure 14 in the Appendix). On its part, further testing the argument regarding the disruptive effect of transitional situations and periods would require some information on when those transitions took place. These are, nevertheless, interesting venues for future research.

the negative effect of being young and going through the transition to adulthood on political participation the same exploration is now conducted with the PAS data. Did the transitional situations also require some time to positively influence individuals' likelihood to participate in institutional activities? How having a job, being married or having at least one child influence institutional participation across age in 1974 is depicted in Figures 7, 8, and 9, respectively.

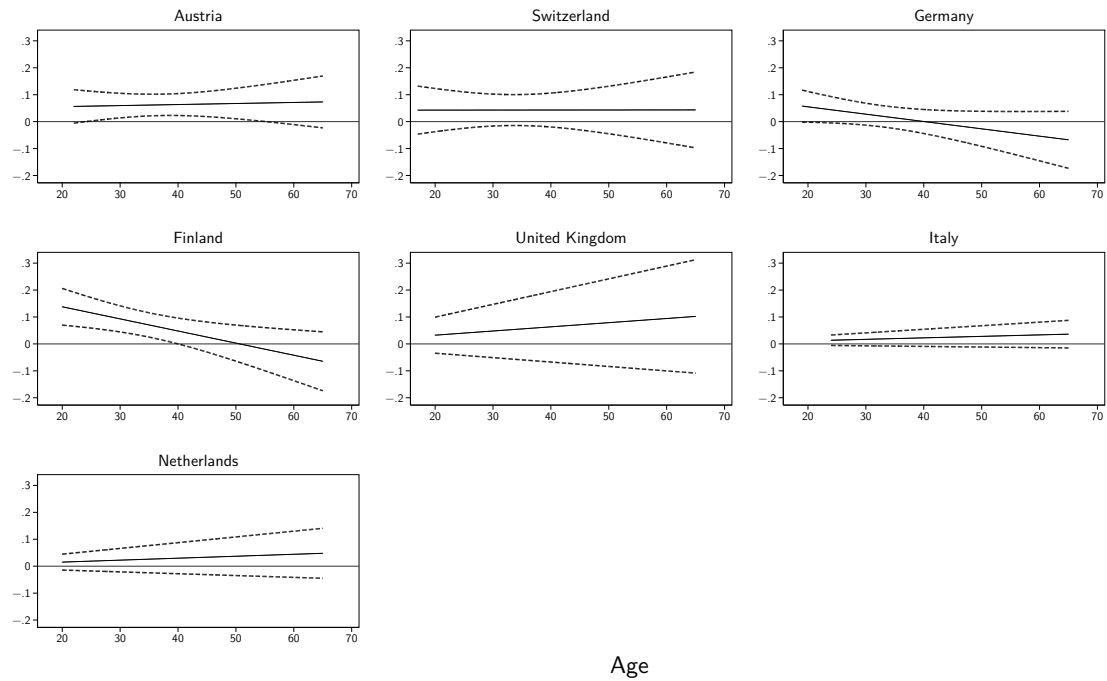
Contrary to 2002, the results do not show the existence of three differentiated patterns in 1974. Only the first two patterns are found. Either the influence of each event is already positive in an early age or has no effect at all. The only exception is the effect of being married in the United Kingdom. However, the main message from this test is that in 1974 the steps in the transition to adulthood do not change institutional participation across age in the large majority of cases.

Figure 7: Marginal effect of having a job on institutional political participation across age in seven European countries, 1974



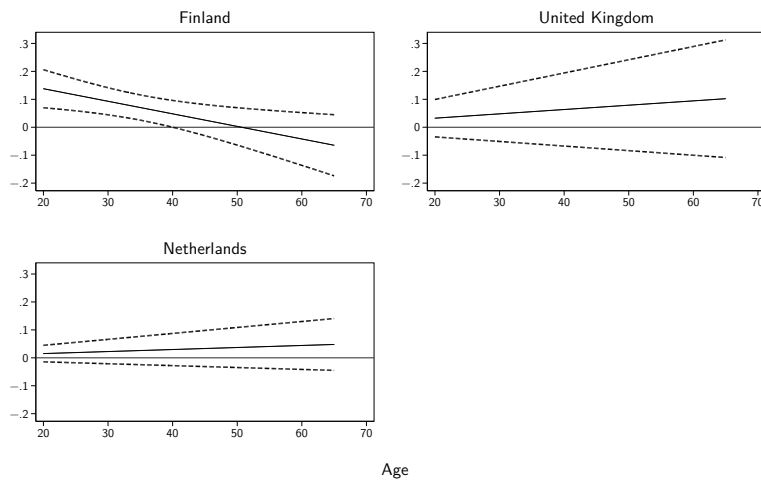
Taken together, the exploration of how events influence institutional participation across age offers some insights that transitional periods require some time to adapt, to develop the expected resources to participate, or to start under specific conditions. Furthermore, the no existence of this pattern in 1974 can indicate that it is the result of the higher complexity of the transition to adulthood at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Figure 8: Marginal effect of being married on institutional political participation across age in seven European countries, 1974



Dashed lines give 95% confidence interval

Figure 9: Marginal effect of having at least one child on institutional political participation across age in seven European countries, 1974



Dashed lines give 95% confidence interval

The influence of the transition to adulthood on institutional political participation across countries: Different patterns

At this point, I recapitulate what was learned so far to see if the results shed some light on how the life cycle stage in which young people are influences institutional political participation across countries. To do so, Table 4 summarizes the results of the diverse analyses conducted in this chapter. For each country it includes in the first column the effect of the transition to adulthood operationalized as a linear process on institutional participation. A (+) sign indicates that the first analyses showed a positive effect, as young people move forward in the transition to adulthood their likelihood to participate in institutional activities increases. On its part, ⊙ indicates that the transition to adulthood did not show any effect on young people’s institutional political participation. A (-) sign is included in those cases were the transition to adulthood showed an unexpected negative effect. In addition, the following columns in the Table include how each event, or the full transition to adulthood influence institutional participation across age. A (+) effect indicates that that specific event has a positive effect, a number is used in those cases where an event or the transition to adulthood have a positive effect after that age, finally, “NS” indicates that there is no significant effect.

Table 4: Summary of the effects of the transition to adulthood and each event on institutional participation across age in fourteen countries, 2002

	Effect of transition	Work	Live with partner	At least one child	Full transition	Full transition (country-specific)
Pooled sample	+	+	+	+	+	+
Austria	-	+	32	28	35	33
Belgium	+	+	+	+	+	+
Germany	-	35	NS	NS/50	39	38
Denmark	-	31	NS	28	28	27
Spain	⊙	+	NS	NS	NS	NS
Finland	-	33	31	34	34	34
France	-	31	NS	38	35	35
United Kingdom	⊙	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Greece	+	+	+	+	+	+
Ireland	+	+	+	+	NS	NS
Italy	-	34	NS	NS	NS	34
The Netherlands	⊙	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Portugal	-	36	NS	NS	37	35
Sweden	-	NS	30	NS/47	39	39

Note: Cells indicate the direction (+) or (-) of the effects of each event on institutional participation. ⊙ indicates the transition to adulthood as a process has no effect. NS indicates that the effect is statistically non-significant. Numbers indicate the age after which the event increases participation. Source: European Social Survey 2002.

The results in Table 4 allow grouping countries according to three main findings. First, in some countries the transition to adulthood has a clear positive effect on institutional participation, these are Belgium, Greece and Ireland. In a larger second group of countries the transition

to adulthood showed a negative effect on young people's institutional participation. However, looking at the effect of each event across age contributes to understand this finding. In all the countries in which a negative relationship was found all or at least some of the events included in the transition also have a positive effect on institutional participation but only after certain age. Finally, there are three countries in which the transition to adulthood has no positive or negative effect and for which the different analyses conducted here do not contribute to clarify: the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

This study proposed that before concluding that the relative lower levels of participation of young people are due to cohort (or generational) characteristics, we should pay closer attention to what being young means at the beginning of the twenty-first century, examine the effect of the generalized delay in the transition to adulthood and explore the conditions in which the transition takes place in comparison to some decades ago. The empirical analysis of this proposition gathered evidence indicating that indeed, young people's lower participation at the beginning of the twenty-first century is at least partly the result of transformations in how and when the transition to adulthood takes place.

The usual assumption in political behavior research is that individuals' institutional participation increases and non-institutional participation decreases as they acquire adult roles. Regarding non-institutional participation the stage in life cycle in which young people are indeed explains their higher involvement. In those few countries in which young people participate more in this type of activities than adults (Finland, Denmark and Spain), they do so because they are young, that is to say, because of the life stage in which they are. As soon as they enter adulthood - measured as a transitional process - their comparative participatory advantage disappears.

For institutional participation, the assumption that participation increases as individuals acquire adult roles has not been questioned before. However, the results presented here show that the relationship between the transition to adulthood and institutional political participation is not as straightforward as usually assumed. Definitely, it is not that straightforward at the beginning of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, moving forward in the transition to adulthood only increases young people's levels of participation in institutional activities in a small number of countries: Belgium, Ireland and Greece. Once Belgian, Irish and Greek young people acquire adult roles, their levels of participation are the same as adults. On the other hand, and contrary to what would be expected, in Austria, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Portugal and Sweden, moving forward in the transition to adulthood does not bring the expected benefits for institutional political participation, it even decreases the likelihood to participate in institutional activities.

Therefore, the empirical evaluation offered here, alike former examinations (Highton and Wolfinger, 2001) fails to capture the expected change. Despite the lack of panel data at hand, the existence of short term effects proved to be a promising explanation. The argument is that transitional events, despite having a positive long term effect on participation, suppose a disruption on individual's lives and temporarily take attention away from politics. It requires some time to adapt to a new situation. Indeed, in all those countries where the transition to adulthood has a negative effect on participation in 2002, the results also showed that its effect turns positive but only some years later.

Furthermore, they may also be the result of a more general trend related to the increasingly uncertain conditions in which the transition to adulthood takes place today. The comparison across time supports the expectation that differences are brought about not only by a longer transitional stage, but also by the more demanding or uncertain circumstances in which young people acquire adult roles in 2002. In 1974 the transition to adulthood either had a positive effect or no effect at all. There is no indication that the transitional events required a longer time to bring the expected participatory benefits.

Two interrelated societal transformations were stressed throughout this study on how the transition to adulthood has resulted in a delay of citizen's political "start up". One is that the transition to adulthood is a longer stage in life and the second that it takes place in more uncertain and complex conditions. The effect that the conditions of the transition to adulthood have on political participation is increasingly relevant in light of rising levels of youth unemployment and welfare constrains. For example, entering the labour market is a crucial step in the acquisition of adult responsibilities. The workplace exposes individuals to fundamental political mobilization networks (Lane 1959, p. 218; Verba and Nie 1972; Strate et al. 1989). In addition, the transition to adulthood is a particular critical period for the political development of those individuals that do not hold certain levels of political engagement at a very early age (Jennings et al., 2009, p. 793).

However, a more convincing test should be directed to address the validity of this interpretation. A better understanding of how both aspects influence participation requires the use of more specific and detailed data on the timing of events, individual family trajectories, and uncertain labour conditions. Ideally, there should be data that follows the same individuals across time. Or less ideal but still an improvement, there should be youth studies with larger samples that allow testing the correlation between diverse transitional trajectories and political participation. Other datasets such as Labour Force and Quality of Life in Europe surveys could also be used for an exploration at the aggregate level directed to corroborate the patterns found in this study. In addition, a comparative design across countries focusing on institutional determinants regarding welfare state could explain why in some countries the transition to adulthood has the expected positive effect on levels of political participation whereas in a majority of countries it requires longer time.

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Appendix

Figure 10: Marginal effect of living with a partner on institutional political participation across age in fifteen European countries

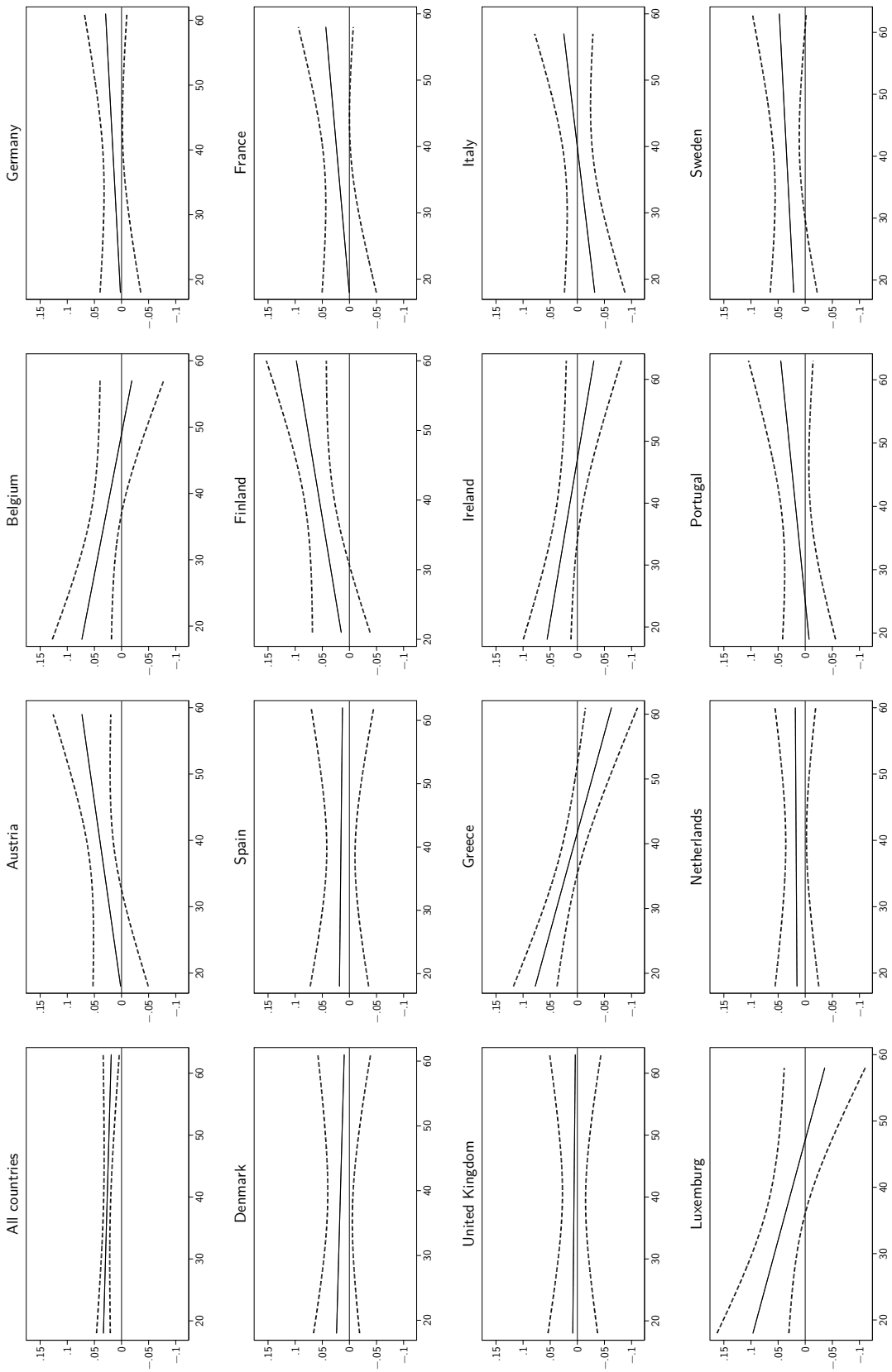


Figure 11: Marginal effect of having a job on institutional participation across age in fifteen European countries

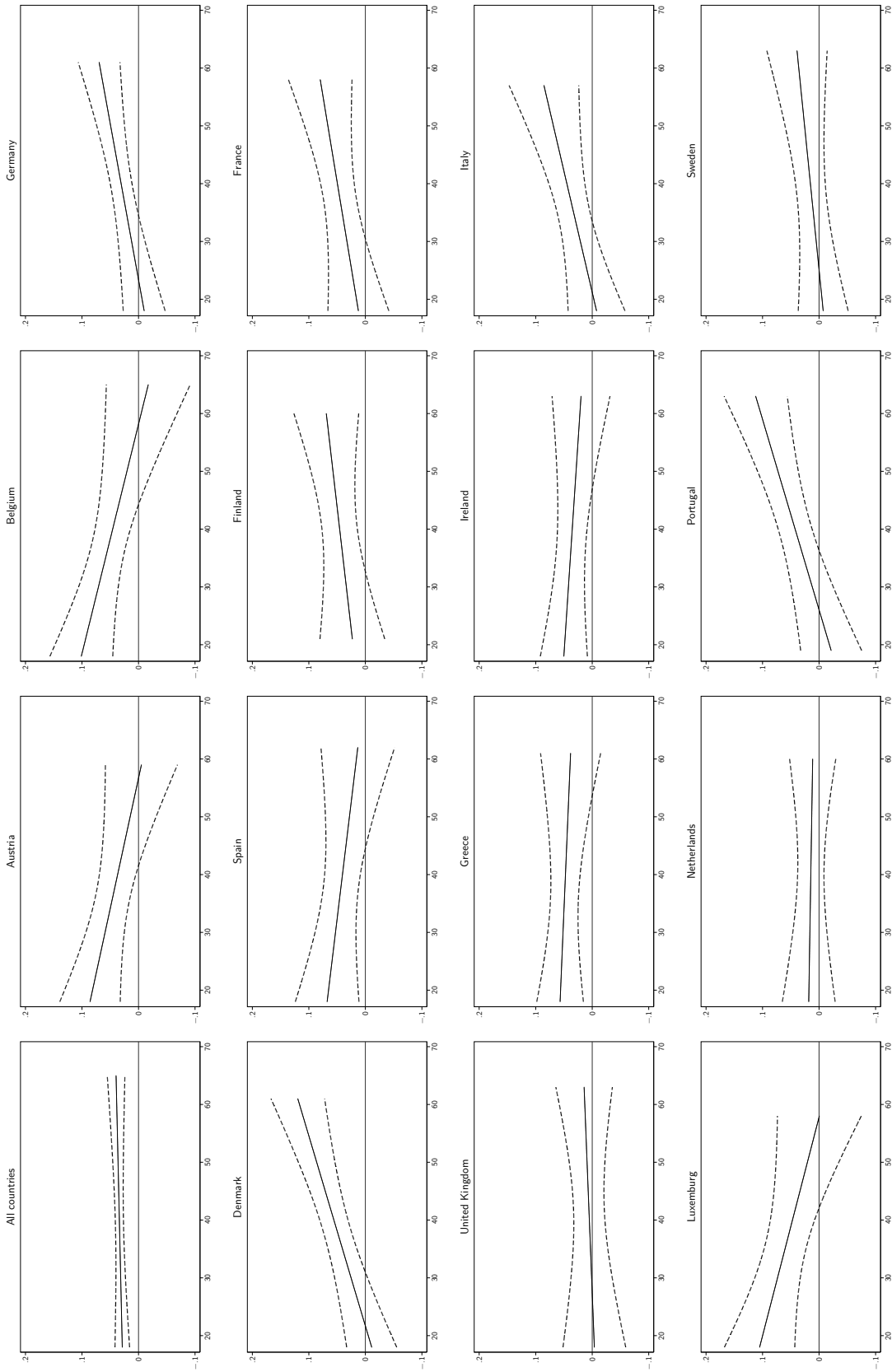


Figure 12: Marginal effect of having at least one child on institutional political participation across age in fifteen European countries

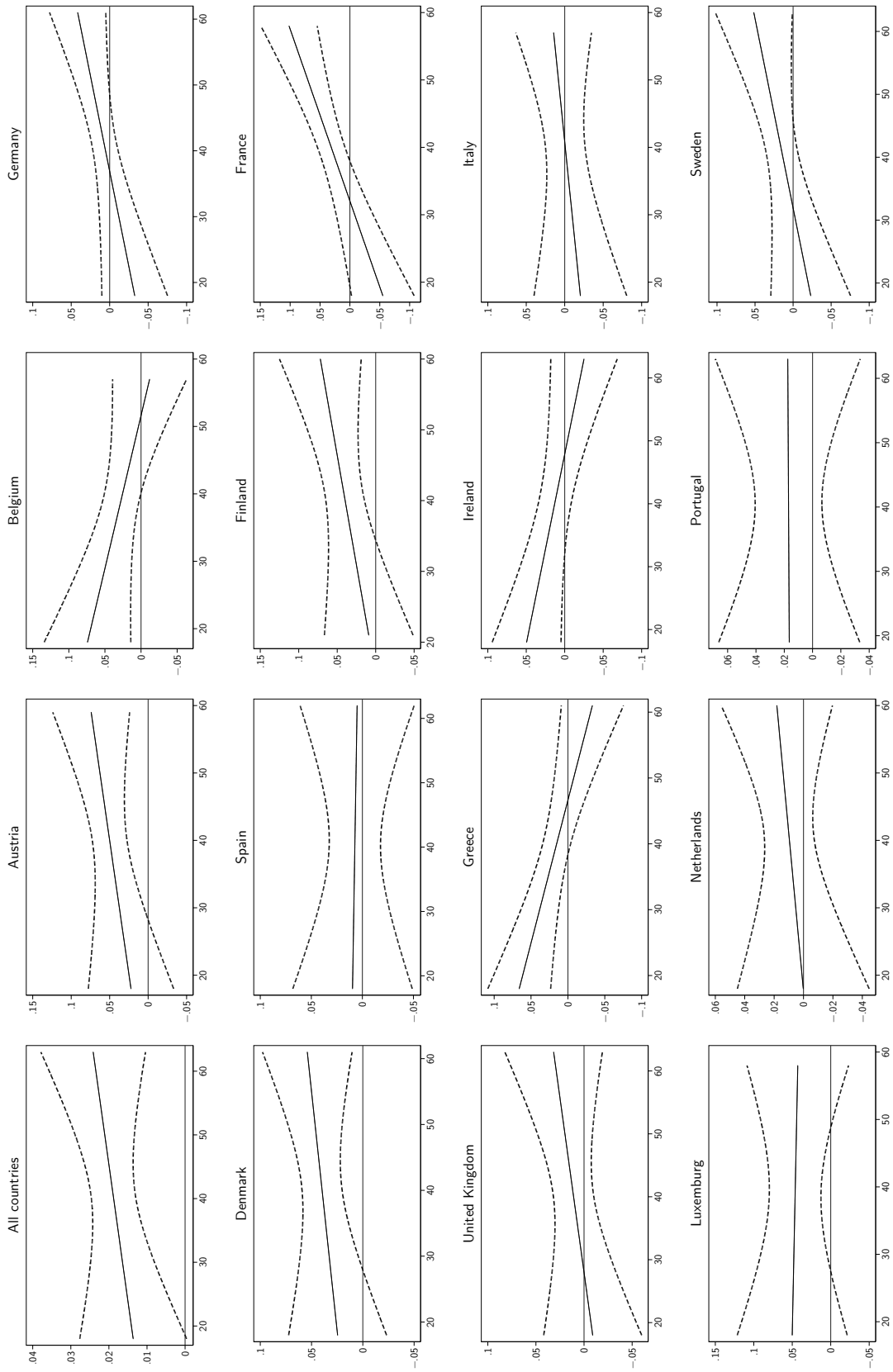


Figure 13: Marginal effect of having completed the transition to adulthood on institutional political participation across age in fifteen European countries

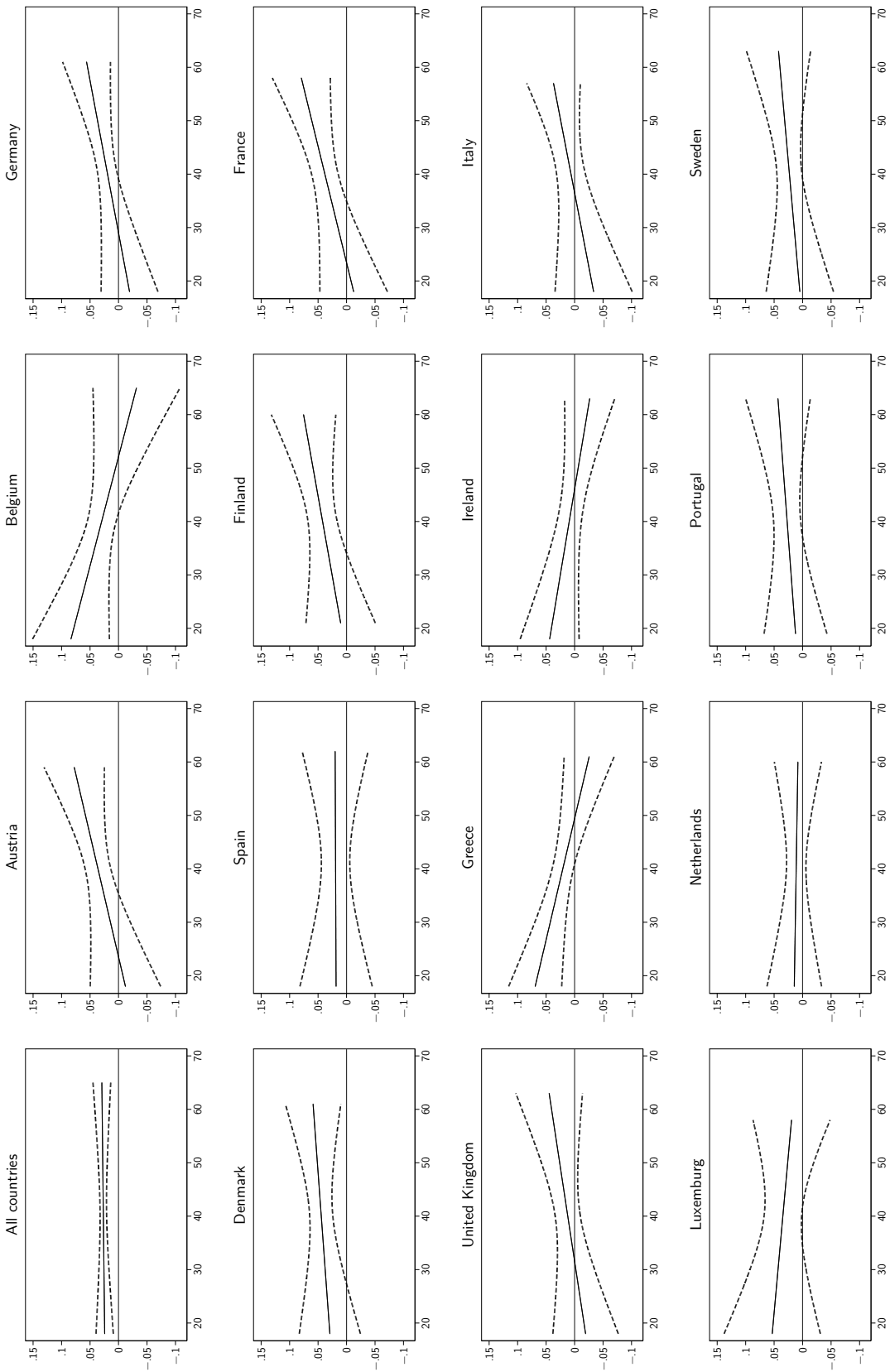


Figure 14: Frequency of young people who have completed the steps in the transition to adulthood across countries, 2002

