Voting Advise Applications (VAAs) and young voting behavior in European Election (2014)

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Abstract

Young European voters are in the centre of the crisis regarding the low turnout at the European Parliamentary elections. The question guiding this paper is how VAAs may encourage political interest and political participation among young Europeans in the European elections. Our results suggest that filling up the questionnaire may have an effect of activating young users previously disinterested in politics. This activation relies on the previous degree of disinterest of the user and it is correlated with the gender and the political preferences of the user. Furthermore, young users previously disinterested are more likely to declare that they will vote for a political party in the left of the political spectrum according to the two dimensions related with left and right of the Eu-Vox 2014. These effects are different by country and should be contrasted with future research on the political attitudes of Young Europeans.

Introduction

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have gained popularity among the European countries in the last years (Garzia and Marschall 2014). As a result, VAAs are a part of the electoral process for a growing part of the electorate, especially among young and connected citizens (Dinas et al., 2014). Because of VAA’s popularity, new statistical, normative and philosophical questions have arisen (Garzia and Marschall, 2014). According to the main line of literature, VAAs may stimulate the users to be more informed, more participative at the elections or even influence the final vote by changing their preferred party (Garzia et al., 2014). There is an ongoing debate on the potentialities of VAAs to fully represent the political landscape of the users, and the normative implications of launching VAAs for the democratic process of representative democracies (Anderson and Fossen 2014).

The design of a VAA relies on a rational model of voting influenced by the economic theory of democracy (Downs 1957). According to this theory, voters should compare their positions those that of the political parties in the most salient and important policy issues. Simplifying, that person would vote for the party which offers the largest number of preferred policies (Downs 1957). In that kind of model, it is assumed that the psychological and sociological factors not determine voting behaviour; neither those factors referring to the perceived competence of the political party in that policy area (Mendez 2012). There is strong evidence supporting the importance of these factors, but VAAs focus mainly on those “issue voters” whose voting decision is based mainly on “the policy stance of a party on a given set of policy issues” (Mendez 2012: 266). VAAs are unable to deal with some of the main theories of voting behaviour such as charismatic leadership, party identity, clientelism, strategic voting or competence of the political parties (Mendez 2012).

In spite of its intrinsic limitations, according to most of the researchers VAAs have had considerable effects in the electoral process of many European countries (Garzia et al., 2014). The results of different VAAs launched in European countries have shown dissimilar results, such as an increase of 6% in a German election
Regarding European elections, it has been signalled that VAAs may help to reduce the “European democratic deficit” (Ramos et al., 2017). Among other possible effects, it has been pointed out that VAAs may increase the electoral participation by activating those users previously disinterested in voting at the election before of starting the application process (Ramos et al., 2017). VAAs could act as a nudge to make citizens more interested into politics by providing them an attractive framework to compare themselves with the political parties. By providing information on the policy issues at stake and the positions of the political parties at the elections, VAAs can contribute to strengthen representative democracy by providing knowledge to the citizens and creating a common ground for political discussion (Fivaz et al., 2010).

In this paper, we aim to increase the evidence on the effects of VAAs by focusing on their most popular users: the young and connected European citizens. The lack of traditional political participation and the disinterest of the young Europeans regarding the European Parliamentary Elections is particularly worrisome, and there have been practical and theoretical attempts led by the European institutions to mitigate this problem (EU Youth Report 2015). Furthermore, there is strong evidence suggesting that the young Europeans find attractive the idea of filling a VAA as a way to increase their interest into politics and voting (Bruter et al., 2016). Therefore, we believe that studying the effects of previous VAAs on young users can provide valuable information for future VAAs and other innovative tools seeking a boost in the political participation and interest.

In the following, we study empirically whether filling up a VAAs’ questionnaire may increase political participation among young users. VAAs could articulate the desire of young people to engage politically and going to the polls by providing information of the positions of the political parties in salient policy issues. Being disinterested into politics but taking the time to fill up the questionnaire of the application show that the users are at least minimally interested in politics. Therefore, it appears that there is a window of opportunity to activate politically those users which are difficult to qualify as completely apathetic.

**Young European political participation**

The question regarding the lack of turnout at the European Parliamentary Election has been present since the beginning of these elections. The turnout has decreased election after election and has reached a troublesome percentage of 42.61% (Eurobarometer 2014). This lack of turnout has been related with the so-called “democratic deficit” of the European Union (Follesdal and Hix 2006). However, there has been a long discussion on the changes of the European elections nature after the start of the financial crisis, which could have brought the European topics to the national agendas challenging the traditional notion of saliency of these topics (Hagemann et al, 2017).

Young Europeans are in the centre of this crisis of representation. Certainly, the turnout of the young Europeans in the last election was a scarce 28%. Furthermore, in other indicators of traditional participation the young Europeans seems to be also uninterested. For example, this is the case when they are asked to participate in political parties or in conventional politics (Bruter et al., 2016). Regarding the EU institutions and political parties, young Europeans perceive them as too distant and not representative of their political interest (Torcal and Montero, 2006). This situation has been increasing election after election, and it’s have been probably exacerbated by the financial crisis of 2008 (Hobolt et al., 2016). Furthermore, this debate on the disconnection between young citizens and political reality is wider than European and has been present in the debate of many contemporary democracies in the last decade (Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg 2009).

Increasing political participation among young Europeans would not only be positive for improving the representativeness of the European Parliament. According to the preferences of the young Europeans, it would be also positive for the future of the European Union (Bruter et al, 2016). Even when they are less participative
at the elections, young Europeans have a better perception of the European Union and are more likely to be supportive of increasing European institution power and competences advancing toward a federal model (Eurobarometer 2014). For example, they have been the group of age with a better image of the European Union in many European surveys (Post-Electoral Survey 2014). Therefore, it seems that increasing the turnout among young European users might have a positive impact on the possibility of increasing the powers and competences of the European Union in the next decades.

The European institutions have made several attempts to increase the political participation and engagement of young Europeans. The EU Youth Strategy has as objective “to encourage young people to actively participate in society” (EU Youth Report 2015). According to the article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty, it is important “encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe” (Cammaerts et al., 2013). As the European Commission stated, one of the main priorities of the EU is “ensure full participation of youth in society, by increasing youth participation in the civic life of local communities and in representative democracy” (European Commission, 2009). However, the efforts made by the EU have not increased the level of participation to comparable levels of most of the national elections at the European countries. Furthermore, the lack of interest of the young Europeans is not restricted to the European Parliamentary Elections but it reaches national politics, political parties and institutions (Cammaerts et al, 2013). Some studies show that this is not a merely generational effect as the current young Europeans are participating less than other young generations in the past (Garcia-Albacete, 2014).

There is a huge amount of literature on the causes of this lack of interest in the conventional politics of the young people (Garcia-Abacete, 2014). Every researcher trying to disentangle the political interest among young people must confront the paradoxical situation of simultaneous apparent lack of interest in traditional spheres and enthusiasm in other forms of political participation (Bruter et Harrison 2009). It seems that there are some factors which preclude young people from participating in conventional politics but that makes them more prone to be part of other forms of political participation (Cammaerts el a., 2013).

Some of the researchers attribute an apathetic attitude to most of the young people towards politics (Kimberlee 2002). According to this perspective, this generation would care less over political issues compared with previous ones (Wattenberg 2006). Certainly, there are some indicators suggesting that some groups of young people show an apathetic attitude toward the functioning of representative democracies (Wattenberg 2006). Nevertheless, these results need to be contrasted with other studies which draw a different perspective. Defenders of a mere apathetic attitude as the main reason behind the lack of turnout among young Europeans must confront other data suggesting that the willingness of the youth to participate in politics is considerably significant (Bruter et al 2016).

Young Europeans are more participative than their older counterparts in demonstrating, signing online petitions or filling up online political surveys. For example, this is also the case with the VAAs, which are particularly successful among young citizens (Pianzola 2014). Considering these results, Cammaerts et al, (2014) suggest that young Europeans are willing to engage in political discussion, but they refuse to do it because of the perceived distance of conventional politics. According to the most common preferences of the young Europeans, citizens should play an important role on the political process and the opportunities to participate at the decision-making should increase (Cammaerts et al. 2014).

There is an increasing branch of literature and practical research on how to increase political interest and participation among young Europeans. For example, it has been discussed the possibilities opened by internet applications such as Twitter or Facebook (Cammaerts et al., 2014). In this scenario, VAAs appear as a promising tool for encouraging participation among young Europeans and influence their voting decision. In a survey made by Bruter et al (2016), young users were asked to evaluate some methods to increase their interest into politics. VAAs were proposed by the users ranging from 18 to 30 years old not only as their
favourite method but also as the more effective one (Bruter et al, 2016). Furthermore, VAAs seem to fit the self-declared preferences of the young Europeans regarding to political issues.

Given the promising expectations on VAAs regarding its possible influence on young Europeans political participation and voting behaviour, it seems worth to evaluate what has been the effects of previous VAAs on this group. For that, we study the most popular VAA launched for the European Parliamentary Election in 2014, the Eu-Vox 2014.

**Our database: EU-Vox 2014**

EU-Vox 2014 was a VAA launched during EU elections with the objective of triggering debates on the EU Parliamentary Elections. It reached great visibility: there were more than 400 European articles published on the EU-Vox 2014 in prestigious outlets such as The Guardian, The Economist, France TV or ANP. It was launched in all the European countries at the same time. The EU-Vox 2014 website was visited by 6.2 million users, and 2.4 million filled in the questionnaire. These figures represent the 1.49% and 0.57% of the European electorate. The former objective of reaching from 15 to 20 million was not accomplished. As an addition to other traditional VAAs, the EU-Vox 2014 included a Europeanism axis.

**Hypothesis**

*H1: Filling up the EU-Vox 2014 helped to find at least one very suitable political party to vote in the next European Election for some previously disinterested users*

This hypothesis refers to one of the main problems of the current European Parliamentary elections: scarce turnout. As we have previously seen, the effects on VAAs on political participation have been widely studied (Alvarez et al, 2014). After filing the EU-Vox 2014, the users have the opportunity of declaring the probability for voting for each one of the main political parties concurring to the European Parliamentary elections. We have taken into consideration those users who declare at the end of the questionnaire that they are going to vote to at least one party after declaring being previously disinterested. In previous research, it was found a correlation between the likelihood of finding at least a political party among previously disinterested users and filing the EU-Vox 2014 in Spain (Ramos et al., 2017). With this hypothesis, we go further in that line of research and we extend to the young Europeans.

*H2: The higher is the previously degree of disinterest, the least likely is the young user to find at least one suitable political party to vote for*

Once we can see whether the EU-Vox 2014 may have an effect on those disinterested users, it is important to know what kind of users are more likely to be affected relying on the intensity of their disinterest. As our index of disinterest captures four different questions, we can test the differences between those who we can consider “totally disinterested” and those whose degree of disinterest is not as high but are still declaring at the beginning of the questionnaire that are not interested in voting according to our index. Our hypothesis is that the more previously disinterested, the least affected by the EU-Vox 2014. In other words, it would be more difficult for that user to find at least one totally suitable political party to vote with absolute certainty. Therefore, according to our expectations, the EU-Vox 2014 has more probability of activate those disinterested users which are not in a state of total disconnection with the political parties.

*H3: The level of support for the European Union among the “disinterested group of users” has a positive effect on the probability of finding a party/voting for a party after filling up the EU-Vox 2014*
There is a huge literature on the impact of European news on the European behaviour and identity (Bruter et al. 2017). The complexity of defining Europeanism is massive because of the difficulties for perceiving how people is attached to their political community. Traditionally, it has been more thoroughly studied the Europeans support to the European Union than their identification with the entity (Gabel, 1998).

The notion of identity has no common ground on all the different European countries, and it is difficult to overcome these differences. This attachment to the European identity can be defined in civic and cultural terms (Bruter 2016). The former would relate to the degree that the Europeans feel they are citizens of the European Union. It echoes the notion of “constitutional patriotism” of Habermas (1992) and refer to the citizen’s identification of the European institutional systems as their own system. The concept of cultural identity relates with how fellow Europeans described themselves as a community, independently of the political system in which they are included (Bruter et al, 2016). It would relate with the issue of a common European heritage which may include many different traditions: from history to religion through political values and ethnic traditions (Bruter et al, 2016)

There are strong reasons to think that support and identification with the European project determine the probability of being activated after filling up the EU-Vox 2014. There are several studies pointing out the influence of the degree of Europeanism and the European voting behaviour (Hobolt 2009; De Vreese and Boomgaard 2005). However, it seems that in the 2014 European Parliamentary there was a change of tendency and, at least in some countries where anti-Europeanism was at stake, the degree of Euroscepticism was a predictor of the probability of voting (Hobolt et al 2017). For example, that situation would explain the prevalence of the UKIP in the European Parliamentary elections while maintaining its marginality at the national elections in the United Kingdom. However, as many of the studies in this area, we expect that the more pro-European is a person, the greater chances of finding a political party after filling the VAA.

There are many possible mechanisms to think on previously disinterested voters that are waiting for gathering enough information in order to “activate” their possibility of voting. For those looking with favourable eyes the EU, it seems that it should be easier to find a party to vote in the European Parliament if they tend to be supportive of the European project. Therefore, we expect that the more disinterested Pro-Europeans filling the questionnaire will be the more affected positively by the EU-Vox 2014, but we have some reasonable doubts on this point and may have expectations of changes among countries.  

\[ H4: \text{Previously disinterested young men -regarding women- have more chances to find political representation once they fill the questionnaire.} \]

There have been important studies on the importance of gender in voting behaviour. Traditionally, most of the studies has shown that women are generally more conservative and less participative in the elections (Inglehart, 2000). However, in the last decades there has been a realignment and the effects of gender into political behaviour are each time more complicated, especially in western democracies (Studlar et al, 1998). Therefore, it can be interesting what is happening with the new generations.

For the main line of research, this traditional gap between gender has disappeared in the European context, even leading to opposite conclusion in the surveys and research (Abendschön 2014). If we attend to political knowledge, men tend to provide more corrects answer in the European Election Studies and less “Don’t know” (Fraile et al., 2014). This gender gap in knowledge is well established in the literature (Giger 2009). This gap has important consequences and can lead to a misrepresentation of women (Althaus 2003).

In a complex, more distant and miss-communicated topic like the European elections, we expect that this gap in knowledge can make men more prone to participate after filling up the VAA questionnaire. Furthermore, there are traditionally more men filling the VAA. For example, in the EU-Vox 2014, almost 70% of the respondents were men. Considering the differences on the previous level of European political information
and the fact that the EU-Vox was strikingly more successful in attracting men than women, we expect that the effect on filing the EU-Vox 2014 among disinterested users will be higher on young men.

**H5: The previously young disinterested users that are activated are more likely to declare their intention to vote for economically leftist and socially liberal political parties**

As there is a self-selection bias on the users of the VAAs, who tend to be more leftist in the economic values and liberals in the social ones, we expect that those activated users previously disinterested will be more likely to be attracted by leftist and liberal parties.

### Methodology

- **Dependant variable: Being activated after filling the EU-Vox 2014**

In previous research, Ramos et al (2017) studied how the EU-Vox 2014 increased the likelihood of voting among the previously disinterested users of the application by helping them to find at least one suitable party to vote for. We extend this idea to the rest of Europe and to the young users to test the EU-Vox 2014 effect on political participation. Furthermore, we have increased the robustness of their empirical test by requiring maximum levels of certainty on the likelihood to vote for their preferred party at the end of the questionnaire. In our regression, we have only considered those users with a 10 (from 10) in the question “probability to vote for political parties from 1 to 10”. This question was made at the end of the questionnaire and we are taking it as a proxy of the declaration of being activated. As we show in the figure 1, there are strong differences in the probability of finding a political party relying on the levels of required likelihood of the user for voting for at that preferred political party.

It must be considered that in our regression we restrict the possibility of being activated by the EU-Vox 2014 to those declaring a 10 (in a scale to 10) of probability of voting to at least one political party. Therefore, we can consider with confidence that that user declaring a total certainty of voting was before a non-interested user. We are being very conservative, but we could extend the effects of being activated to those users declaring lower probabilities (from 9 to 5) of voting for at least one political party.

- **Index of disinterest**

To identify those disinterested users in the sample of the EU-Vox 2014 we selected four questions (markers) that signal a low interest in voting at the elections. For being considered as disinterested users, the users of the EU-Vox 2014 must declare clearly that they do not find any reason to vote to any political party. We have built up an index of disinterest expressing different degrees of disinterest ranging from 1 to 4, being 1 weak disinterest and being 4 a very strong disinterest in voting in 2014 EU elections. It must be taken into account that, independently of the degree of disinterest, those users are not likely to vote before of filling up the questionnaire regarding to at least one of the answers to the supporting questions provided at the beginning of the application. This index-variable is made up of four different questions signalling disinterest, namely: i) being not close to any political party, ii) being not interested in voting to any political national party in the national elections, iii) being not interested in voting and politics, iv) not finding any reason to vote to any party.

\[
\text{Disinterest index}=i+ii+iii+iv \in [0..4] \quad (1)
\]
Subjective indicators

For the self-placement position of the young VAA’s users, we rely on the data that the users give to the EU-Vox 2014 after filling the questionnaire. The users subjectively declare their position in a scale ranging from 0 to 10 in the three main dimensions of the European elections: Economic, Social and degree of support of the European Union scales. In the EU-Vox 2014, 0 means left/liberal/more supportive of the EU and 10 means right/conservative/less supportive of the EU.

Other Variables

To better capture the impact of filling up the questionnaire and being activated we have included significant control variables within the sample. We have included the classic gender variable which constitute one of the main hypothesis as a dummy (mean 0 women and 1 men). Furthermore, we are controlling also with the variable age within the sample of 18 to 30 years old. We have made additional regressions controlling with unemployment, level of education, religious attitudes and cosmopolitanism. However, the sample of users who effectively answer those questions is scarce and therefore we could not include them in our final regression. Furthermore, to avoid the effect of double party choosing we have focused only on those who had a clear preference (a singular self-declared higher likelihood to vote) for a party at the end of the survey.

Regression analysis

We have run the following model (1) to validate some of our hypotheses. We took as a sample all the previously disinterested young users of the EU-Vox 2014. We made it for the whole sample of Europe and for each of the countries. As we consider that there are some problems with certain countries in which the sample is not big enough, we took out those countries having not enough cases in the sample to conduct this study (Hungary, Netherlands, Malta, Northern Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Wales).

For the logistic regression in Table 1, we considered the equation below (1) with “$i$” representing the economic, values and Europeanism self-placement values; “$j$” representing gender and age; “$k$” representing the degrees of disinterest; and “$m$” meaning the binary “being activated”.

\[
\ln \left( \frac{p_m}{1 - p_m} \right) = \text{Constant} + \beta_i \ast X_i + \beta_j \ast X_j + \beta_k \ast X_k \quad (1)
\]

Results and discussion

Our results seem to suggest that effectively filling up the EU-Vox 2014 had an important effect on some young disinterested users. Filling the questionnaire led them to declare a maximum probability of voting to at least one political party (the most restrictive condition of probability 10 of 10). As it can be seen in the jitter plot (figure 1), there were young users who were disinterest before of filling up the questionnaire and finally found a suitable party to vote for with the maximum probability. Therefore, we find that H1 is correct because there is a considerable percentage of previously disinterested users declaring that they find at least one political party to vote for with total certainty after completing the EU-Vox 2014. Therefore, we can see that VAAs can have an impact on improving the turnout at the European election among young users. Our results are in line with previous research on VAAs and political participation (Ladner et al, 2010).
Furthermore, as it was expected the previously degree of disinterest had an effect in the possibility of declaring voting with the greatest possibility to one party after filling up the EU-Vox 2014. This can be seen in the jitter plot with those users comparing those users in the level 1 and 2 of disinterest with those in the 3 and 4. Furthermore, in the figure 2 can be seen that there were important differences among those previously disinterested users and those previously interested in the possibility of being activated after filling up questionnaire. As it was expected, the activation was more common in the previously interested user but was also real in the previously disinterested which were not totally disconnected of politics. In the regression it is proved that the more disinterested the user the least chances to be activated.
Regarding the support of the European Union as an indicator of being more likely to be activated by the EU-Vox 2014, our results are inconclusive. We cannot conclude from our regression analysis that the support to the European Union among young users correlates with the possibility of being activated with the EU-Vox 2014. As it can be seen at the regression, the results are non-significant in the European level and we only find significant results in some countries. Interestingly, two northern post-soviet countries (Estonia and Lithuania) experiences the higher positive correlation between the degree of support to the European Union and being activated to vote after filling up the EU-Vox 2014. It would be interesting for further research to have more data on Latvia.

With respect to gender, as we can see in the regression disinterested women are more likely to be activated after filling up the EU-Vox 2014. This result contradicts our previous hypothesis (H4), as we expected men to be more likely to be activated due to its massive predisposition of starting the process of the application. However, there is no country in the whole sample in which the men were more likely to be activated. This is one of the most interesting and surprising results as it gives an idea of the potentialities of VAAs for women. Further studies could try to acknowledge the reasons behind the lack of participation of young women in VAAs and, at the same time, the higher intensity of effects.

Finally, the results regarding our last hypothesis on the nature of the vote of those young users activated by the EU-Vox 2014 lead to interesting conclusions. As it can be checked with the regression, being more right in social values makes a user more likely to be influenced by the EU-Vox 2014. This is somehow unexpected, but a more detailed analysis gives us results more in line with our expectations. When we analyse what are the parties to which the previously disinterested users are going we find our expected results. As it can be seen at the figure 3, in the most important countries most of the activated previously disinterested users went to left political parties in social values. These results are not coincident in every country but are generally coincident. However, the case of the United Kingdom is striking and could be related with the special situation of the country with the European Union.
<table>
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<th>Maximum Likelihood For any Party</th>
<th>ALL</th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Croatia</th>
<th>Cyprus</th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>England</th>
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<td>0.0135</td>
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<td>(0.0652)</td>
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<td>0.0952</td>
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<td>-0.00127</td>
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<td>0.0651***</td>
<td>0.0411*</td>
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* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
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<td>0.198**</td>
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<td>-0.00835</td>
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<td>0.0250</td>
<td>0.0607</td>
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<td>-0.884**</td>
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<td>(0.341)</td>
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<td>(0.241)</td>
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<td>-0.354</td>
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<td>-2.698**</td>
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<td>(0.763)</td>
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Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to find out how young European can be encouraged to vote via VAAs. In the first part, we have discussed on the interpretations and causes that the literature gives to the lack of turnout and traditional political participation among young Europeans. Furthermore, we have discussed how VAAs could be a part of the measures adopted to increase youth political participation due to its apparent popularity among young Europeans. We have argued that apathetic attitudes do not fully explain the lack of traditional political participation among young Europeans and, therefore, we expect that some innovative tools related with e-democracy can be effective to change the trend toward voting among the youth. Secondly, we have examined what were the outcomes of filling up the EU-Vox 2014 among young Europeans previously disinterested in politics. Our results suggest that the EU-Vox 2014 was an effective way to help some young users to find at least one attractive political party with the declared highest change to vote for. Furthermore, the probability of being activated by the EU-Vox 2014 is highly correlated with the previous level of disinterest. This result suggests that filling up the questionnaire has little or insignificant effect on those users who were totally disconnected of political parties.

Moreover, in some unexpected results, we have seen how young women, despite being a minority among EU-Vox 2014 users, were more influenced by the online application at least in the sense of being activated by it. Furthermore, the degree of support to the European Union was not a predictor of being activated by the EU-Vox 2014 and it was only positively correlated in some post-soviet countries. As an interesting remark, we have come with the paradoxical result that even when being more rightist was correlated with being more likely to be activated by the EU-Vox 2014, most of the young users previously disinterested to vote went to political parties situated in the left spectrum of the European political landscape. Our research may be a first attempt trying to capture the logic behind young voters and Voting Advice Applications, especially in European elections.

Albacete, G. G. (2014). Young people's political participation in Western Europe: Continuity or generational change?. Springer.


