



**Contextual Determinants of the Age Gap in  
Voter Turnout across Europe**

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## **Abstract**

A common interpretation of the age gap in electoral turnout is that younger cohorts are apathetic and part of a generation that is absent from political life. Still, youth political participation differs across European countries, and cross-national variation in *the age gap* has been rarely examined in the literature. This paper, therefore, argues that unequal voting in Europe is due not to a lack of interest in the public good but rather to a combination of contextual and individual factors. This study examines young and older individuals' engagement with electoral politics in 26 European countries using the European Social Survey data between 2008 and 2018. Specifically, this study addresses the questions of (1) what context-related factors determine the age gap in voting between old and young citizens and (2) why the age gap in voting *is* smaller in some countries than in others. The results show that the age gap varies considerably across countries. The OLS and FE regressions results suggest that government expenditure, the share of migrants, and the age of democracy influence the level of age gap in voting. The findings on macroeconomic and immigration factors raise methodological concerns.

**Keywords:** age gap, political participation, voting, Europe.

## **Introduction**

One of the consistent findings of electoral engagement is that younger citizens are less likely to vote than older citizens. This behavior creates a turnout inequality between old and young citizens. So far, many studies mainly approach the issue using the contexts of the US, UK, and Canada. However, little is known about whether their stories refer to the universal age gap or the gap is restricted to certain countries. Once the first question is addressed (see Figure 1), the next step is to explain why there is the age gap in voting most severe in some countries and not in others. For example, a public opinion survey results suggest that the ratio between old and young voters is 7.2 in Portugal, while it is 3.7 in the Czech Republic in 2010 (see Appendix: Round 5).

Of all the indicators of "engagement" in democratic government, the act of voting seems primary. For democracies to thrive, the electorate must become informed about what various candidates are likely to do if they win a seat in government. Then the electorate must show up to vote for the candidate they think will do the best work. If

people do not vote, they may be showing their ignorance of what is going on in government, and their ignorance may be a sign of apathy or disaffection with the government. Or, by failing to vote, citizens may be showing a general apathy towards the government or a belief that none of the candidates offer a better set of priorities and abilities than any competing candidates. Most scholars consider that the proportion of the electorate that votes should be interpreted as a sign of health in a democracy. If many individuals, especially those from underprivileged groups, do not vote, their reasons for not voting are generally attributed to flaws in the democracy. Thus, this paper has taken great interest in why people refrain from voting, and in particular, why voting rates vary according to age groups. As we understand more about why old and young individuals vote or do not vote, we hope to gain insights into what forces in a society increase engagement in political processes so we can understand what tends to bring a society toward greater democracy.

Much of the empirical data focuses on the individual-level explanations of electoral absenteeism, such as lack of personal resources due to their unstable position in the society, lack of political knowledge and interest (Norris 2003, O'Thoole et al. 2003, Franklin 2004, Quintelier 2007). The role of individual factors in explaining the "cost" of voting is indispensable, but they are only components of a much bigger picture. An argument that I am going to develop in this paper underlines the importance of contextual determinants. Drawing on the *Silent Revolution in Reverse* by Inglehart (2018), an effect of the recent economic and immigration crises and democratic backsliding is believed to shape the socioeconomic context of countries significantly and thus differently affect citizens' attitudes towards government, own communities, and incoming migrants. In other words, the external shocks might set a new trend in public attitudes by creating momentum based on both demand- and supply-side factors. On the demand side, people experience economic deprivation and social discontent. On the supply side, new and established parties exploit the silent issue and develop new mobilizing channels. The interplay of these factors incentivizes one to either vote or ignore electoral politics.

Although the consideration of broader contextual determinants has gained wide currency in recent years (Pultzer 2002, Fieldhouse et al. 2007, Boubasch 2012), there is no consensus among scholars on what type of contextual explanation might be the most plausible accounting for age effect on the decision to drop their votes into the ballot box. Three main strands of literature addressing voting behavior are of explanatory

interest. The first one is based on the economic downturn (Radcliff 1992, Gallego 2007, Schneider and Makszin 2010, Bousbah 2012). The second one is built on the impact of the massive migrants' flow (Friedberg & Hunt, 1995; Rydgren, 2005; Edo et al., 2019). While the third one relies on the age of democracy (Percy-Smith, McMahon, & Nigel Thomas 2019; Kitanova 2019). Yet, this paper points out that the contextual explanations developed in previous studies might be incomplete due to several shortcomings such as (i) a limited geographical focus; (ii) a lack of comparative analyses among several countries (prevalence of single case-studies); and (iii) a lack of studies considering the recent period aftermath and during the euro and refugee crises. This work seeks to fill the gap by analyzing whether different macroeconomic and political indicators account for the different levels of political engagement among age groups across countries. Thus, the research question of this paper is *Why is the age gap smaller in electoral turnout in some countries than in others?*

To answer the research question, *the* paper developed a quantitative study including aggregate-level determinants. A set of OLS and FE regressions were run for estimating the effects of the predictors on the age gap (country\*years, N=131) using STATA. For the analysis, this paper applied data for 26 European countries from the European Social Survey Rounds 4-9 between 2008 and 2018. I expected that the panel data might shed light on the moderating effect of the contextual determinants on old and young citizens' decision to vote across countries and over time by assuming that external shocks undoubtedly affect individuals' political attitudes. The findings reveal that one of the macroeconomic indicators (government expenditure), immigration, and age of democracy matter.

The current study proceeds as follows: In the next section, I present a theoretical framework and relevant literature review identifying the importance of contextual determinants of voting, i.e., macroeconomic, immigration, and political contexts. In the subsequent section, I explain the rationale behind the choice of main variables, data, and methods to test the paper's main assumptions. Then I provide the analysis results revealing the association between the contextual variables and the age gap. The last sections discuss the main findings and make reflections on the work limitations and further recommendations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Voting is a cornerstone in sustaining the system of checks and balances within democratic regimes. With each election, citizens face a choice of either voting or abstaining, and if they do vote, decisions for which candidates prefer. Political views can also be translated into activities that are not directly related to elections or formation of new governments, and all citizens constantly face opportunities to engage in these sorts of activities. When citizens choose among the range of involvement they can take with elections and non-electoral political activity, they are pushed and pulled by a bewildering range of influences. In considering the basic question of whether to engage at all, the political science literature has focused on two basic influences pulling citizens toward involvement: a sense of duty or obligation; and a sense of identity as engaged citizens, or at least aspirations to be engaged in righteous civic activity (Hooghe & Oser, 2015). Some political scientists have suggested that older cohorts are more likely to be pushed into political involvement by a sense of duty, whereas younger cohorts more often feel pulled by the ideals of engaged citizenship (Norris, 2003; Sloam & Henn, 2019). The fact that younger citizens vote at lower rates than older ones combined with the observation that motives for younger citizens' participation differ from that of older citizens, suggests that motives for participation may shape whether persons participate in elections.

Issues of inequality and representativeness between older and younger voters have been at the heart of the discussion on the political engagement of citizens (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011). The fairly common assertion is that younger people less often practice their voting rights (Wattenberg, 2002; O'Toole, Marsh, & Jones, 2003). To this paper, that means greater efforts exerted for explanatory factors underlying younger people's voting but not older. The critical situation in youth participation remains largely debated (Putnam, 2000; Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007). The recent findings reveal that the age gap in voting is not because of the youth disengagement with politics but due to the shift in their preferential mode of exercising their political rights (Sloam, 2016). Being alienated from the electoral politics and not trusting in the institutions make young citizens tend to see more meaning in protesting, signing petitions, going for demonstrations, and following online movements (Norris, 2003; Spanning, Ogris & Gaiser, 2008; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Sloam and Henn, 2019). This is a case for western European countries that face a crisis of shrinking an electorate and declining interest of citizens to engage with political parties (van Biezen et al.,

2012). However, another strand of the recent literature reveals that young people's absenteeism can be equally seen in both formal and informal ways of political involvement (Grasso, 2014; Fox, 2015). Either way, there is a sense that younger cohorts' motivation is not directed toward cooperating more closely within political structures. But is this motivation lacking for all European young people? Is the age gap in voting universal for European countries?

The extensive literature on political participation draws attention to two main approaches of how age plays a role in managing the interaction between individual and aggregate level determinants of electoral turnout (Albacete 2014; Maggini 2017; Sloam & Henn 2019). One approach follows a life-course or developmental explanatory model, in which younger generations have life circumstances or conditions associated with early adulthood that make them less likely to vote, but as they grow older, accumulate wealth, become invested in society, and realize the importance of politics, they become more likely to vote. The other approach suggests cohorts or generations differ in their voting habits in ways that are likely to be sustained throughout their lives.

The formative years that younger and older generations experience are seen as a root of their different level of engagement with elections according to the generational approach, which suggests voting hinges on the climate of socialization when and how citizens are born and raised. 'Political generation' is a Mannheim's concept (1952) that highlights the period of socialization for each generation that might later have an effect on their involvement across time (Zukin et al., 2006). Based on this expected effect, some generations are more inclined to vote than others. In one of the main studies on generational effects, the voting turnout decline is accounted for by the downward trend in participation among younger generations (Franklin et al., 2004). There is a concern that the upcoming replacement of the current electorate with a more indifferent generation brings serious institutional problems.

The generational approach is mainly based on the ideological positioning of citizens. In comparison with a younger generation, the older generation is more conservative in terms of their economic and social preferences. Of course, there will be heterogeneity of the ideas among members of the same age group, but in general, older generations have invested more time and sacrificed more of their lives within the existing system, and so they will tend to be less radical on average. It is believed that the early years' experience is fundamental in the value formation, which further shapes some traits in political behaviour (Butler & Stokes, 1974). Thus, the gradual

replacement of older generation cohorts by new ones entails the changes in electoral politics (Franklin et al., 1992; Grasso, 2016). However, how individuals settled and socialized are subject to changes over time, resulting in value change between and within cohorts.

Political behaviour might be affected at the juncture between the rise of the salience of issues and political awareness among society (Goerres, 2009). For example, the recovery period in the aftermath of the second world war marked a harsher economic climate between 1960 and 1980 (Osgerby, 1998), meaning that citizens, particularly young people faced decades of insecurity. The weakening of ties among community members and the strengthening of the impetus for technological advancement has further complicated the socialization process of young people in the following decades. First and foremost, the issues of electoral volatility and decline in youth participation are mentioned in this grip of rising turbulence and deepening uncertainty. It is, therefore, possible to assume that collecting together these changes might have a cumulative effect on the formation of a new generation. Similarly, to this shift, the Euro crisis, rise of populist forces, massive influx of immigrants, and Brexit have created another chain of inherent uncertainties and risks. Due to the above-listed events, the experience of political socialization might differ for current young adults. In the context of this paper, the analysis of generational replacement is not possible due to a lack of sources for comparative study of long-term patterns. This research therefore intends to examine any participatory changes for the last decade.

Sloam and Henn (2019) argue that these events have revived a youth interest in institutional channels. Their politicization can be seen in the support for left-wing parties, predominantly new ones such as PoDemos. New political parties' success is associated with the participation of more young citizens due to the ideological arrangements. The current availability of a choice of parties allows young people not to limit their consideration as older people do. Franklin and van Spanje (2012) offers a concept of political maturity, a certain point when political habits develop, which defines individuals' involvement and vote choice. The period of political maturity among older people corresponds to the time of lesser diversity of parties. This implies that their set of considerations is limited based on their early socialization, and hence they are less likely to support newer parties (Wagner & Kritzing, 2012). Does this mean that the rise of new parties is due to younger people's support? Goerres (2009) mentions the difference in emphasis on issues between new and old parties present and

shows that these issue preferences correspond to how depending on which how young and older people endorse their campaigns. Taking into account the primacy of economic concerns among older people and global issues among young people, the latter ones are expected to show their electoral support for new parties.

Young individuals are more associated with the issues of post-materialism not only because of the generational effect but also because of having fewer responsibilities in economic terms to preserve and increasing the existing wealth (Goerres, 2008). Consequently, older people might have more incentives to cast their votes rather than the younger part of society. Issues of the settlement are a root of the explanation of the life-cycle effects; this refers to enough preoccupations with individual goals and visions among younger individuals, and consequently to weaker civic commitment. Those who are settled and less preoccupied with finding their way in life—those who are older—can turn their attention to electoral politics.

According to the life-cycle approach, a widening age gap in voting is currently happening because of a de-standardization in educational, occupational, and familial aspects. Younger individuals have hence less political resources than older parts of society. However, when they achieve a point of stabilization in educational, labour, and personal endeavours, it is expected that they will demonstrate higher electoral participation. During their later adulthood, individuals cannot ignore socio-political issues anymore, and the necessity arises to show their civic position (Lane, 1959; Strate et al., 1989). Young citizens have been therefore facing a more complex and extended transition process to adulthood in comparison with their parents and other ancestors' experience in the past (Arnett, 2004; Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Flanagan, 2013). This transformation in the experience of early adulthood might be particularly seen in increasing years spent on education, later ages of marriage and reduced childbearing, and more-demanding requirements for entry-level jobs (Billari & Kohler, 2002; Kennedy, 2004). A more heterogeneous and long-lasting transition process brings significant disparity in voting between these two age groups (Smets 2012).

The recent financial and immigration crises have brought a jolt to the economic and political systems of European countries. Austerity measures and worsened economic well-being of people caused a decline in electorate support for mainstream parties. Discontent with the governing authorities is especially prevailing among young people who have been remarkably affected by the economic recession (Erk, 2017). A number of studies show that they have struggled with a budgetary reduction in



education, higher university tuition fees, a poor labour market, and a decline in living standards (Castells, 2012; Verick 2009). A positive part of this strain might be an increase in youth political engagement, albeit with anti-establishment parties and campaigns. The literature often disregards the nexus between voting and non-institutional modes of political engagement insofar as these activities are treated to exclude each other. Dalton (2008) believes that individuals who engage with one repertoire of political activities tend to follow other activities within it rather than from another repertoire. Moreover, a conceptual difference between voting and protesting is also presented. Norris et al. (2005) considers a former institutional activity as supportive and a latter non-institutional activity as opposing to democracy. Protests imply ideas going against with respect to governing practices (Oser, 2017).

Considering these activities as two separate ends of political participation is too sharp. Excluding protests from the democratic equation seems to limit room for political manoeuvre and further demands for governmental accountability. Individuals might express their discontent through both casting their votes and protesting. This line of reasoning has some support in recent studies (Harris & Gillion, 2010; Kriesi, 2012). Electoral turnout and protests are closely intertwined, notably at the time of rising discontent over political and economic issues. Despite belonging to two different repertoires, they might be complementary to each other. Galais (2014) suggests that protesting does not entail abandoning institutional political participation, and on the contrary, it reinforces the persuasive power of citizens. This paper considers the growing youth-led protests as a possible predictor of their electoral interest.

Many established democracies have experienced a rise of mainly youth-led movements emphasizing individualism, tolerance, and care about climate change. In parallel with this left-libertarian wave, some young people have found a solution through conservatism and protectionism. Norris and Inglehart (2018) point out the rising significance of both left-right economic and cultural cleavages. Efforts to describe the rising division of cultural and political standpoints of citizens as a pattern of broader groups may ignore intra-group differences.

In addition, the concept of the cultural axis can obscure the nuances of parties and movements opposed to mainstream politics. For example, young people can be liberal in the question of global warming, and at the same time, be conservative in the question of terrorism. Similarly, we can observe how different might be attitudes of cosmopolitan young people in Spain and the UK in relation to the EU aftermath of the

austerity program (Sloam & Henn, 2019). Furthermore, the attitudinal difference might be translated into mainly protest movements, Spanish Indignados, in former and Remain votes in the latter countries (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, Della Porta 2015). In the UK, the Remain voters were typically more highly educated, mostly young and female individuals, whereas those who voted for Leave were generally older than 50 years, poorly educated, mostly male, and had enjoyed less success in their professional life (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Jennings & Stoker, 2016). Even though the outcome of the EU referendum clearly demonstrates whose votes have prevailed, it might also tell about the revival of young people's electoral interest. Thus, the local socioeconomic and political context is crucial in assessing how struggles and attitudes might be translated into votes.

### **Contextual explanations of the age gap in voting**

Regardless of the approach that makes a certain group of people less engaged with electoral politics, the age gap continues to exist and differ across countries (see Appendix). The above-mentioned explanatory approaches seem more applicable to individuals belonging to one context. These theories have not given much attention to variation in voting across countries and over time. Individual resources are not enough for this purpose since the distribution of age, gender, and others might be more or less the same in European countries. Social networks concurrently with individual characteristics cannot account for contextual variation, as these channels might solely serve for mobilization. Individuals' affiliation with such a network is quite stable in time (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). However, their membership in voluntary and other types of organizations does not necessarily indicate that these networks are exercised continuously.

Even in the case of possessing a higher level of civic values, people might decide differently how to engage with political participation depending on the circumstances. Contextual variation in voting has been rarely examined in the literature (Blais 2000; Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell 2007; Grimm and Pilkington 2015; Soler-i-Marti and Ferrer-Fons 2015; Grasso 2016). These "circumstances" therefore should be considered, and thus it presents the main purpose of the study. This paper argues that socialization context is a key element in motivating citizens to vote or not. The contextual assumptions to explain the cross-country differences in voting are twofold. First, the divergence of electoral participation between young and old citizens may differently

appear depending on socioeconomic indicators of the countries. Second, the resilience of democratic political structures and culture may also be a point of difference for citizens to differently perceive the cost and benefit of voting.

### ***Economic explanations: Macroeconomic environment***

Empirical studies on economic voting indicate that the electoral choice is subject to change when people face economic hardship (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000). Although there are some findings on the potential electoral effect of the economic performance of countries (Taylor, 2000), little attention has been paid to the relationship between macroeconomic factors and voting (Franklin et al., 2004; Tillman, 2008).

One strand of the literature suggests that the decline in macroeconomic indicators threatens to cripple the political order (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). The deterioration of the economic environment gives rise to discontent with public institutions and further unrest among citizens, which could adversely affect electoral turnout. Citizens prioritize their personal necessities; hence it weakens the sense of civic responsibility (Rosenstone, 1982). Electoral participation loses all or part of its intrinsic value as a voice and the ability to impact decision-making processes. In this regard, the decision to ignore elections can be viewed as a manifestation of disapproval with mainstream actors (Perrella, 2009). In a similar vein, resource-based participatory models (e.g., civic voluntarism and cognitive mobilization models) highlight that worsening in the economic well-being of people also affects their involvement in protests (Kern & Hooghe, 2015).

Another strand of literature claims that considerable weakening of aggregate economic activity serves as a trigger for wider engagement of citizens with politics. This theory of mobilization is applied to both institutional and non-institutional activities. Collective mobilization of citizens' disaffection with governing politicians and parties might happen in the form of casting their ballots in favour of other entities. The incumbent government is found to be responsible for the malfunctioning of the economy and, as a result, other related systems. In the eyes of citizens, voting is seen as a way how the current situation can be improved by other actors who share this discontent (Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Arceneaux, 2003).

Besides voting, a sense of collective deprivation might lead to contentious actions such as protests (Gurr, 1970). Instead of waiting for the next elections, individuals'

preferable means of participation might switch to protests. Recent findings mention that there is indeed increasing popularity of alternative modes of involvement either during the euro crisis or in the aftermath of adopted drastic austerity policies (Della Porta, 2015; Quaranta, 2016). However, there is a continuing debate about the role of economic recession in undergirding citizens' political interests and protests. Some authors believe that the euro crisis has brought a strong protest mood, stressing that there is no other occasion for causing a protest wave (Vassalo & Ding, 2016). On the contrary, others contend that the macroeconomic environment is of no importance, at least when it comes to alternative political participation (Schoene, 2017).

While there is widespread interest in examining the effect of economic conditions as a contextual factor on the types of participation, very little emphasis has been placed on whom it is most appealing and how it distributes across countries. This paper extends beyond the prior studies and addresses the relationship between macroeconomic indicators and the age gap in voting. Contextual determinants of economic development may differently shape political engagement incentives among different social categories. This is reasonable to expect since we have observed a turnout inequality across different age categories (in the previous section). Changes in macroeconomic factors (e.g., unemployment rate, inflation rate, others) could either hamper or drive the voting capacity of individuals with different socialization experiences. As above-mentioned, the likelihood of voting is high among citizens with sufficient and stable resources, while those without tend to stay politically indifferent (Dalton, 2017; Scholzman et al., 2012).

The first model I want to explore is one that suggests that when times are hard, all age cohorts disengage from voting, but younger cohorts disengage more (Rosenstone, 1982). This conforms to the models of relative power (Solt, 2015) in which younger cohorts have less power, and the resource-based model of engagement (Verba et al., 1995; Solt, 2016), in which the younger cohorts, with fewer resources will be more forcefully pushed away from participating in voting. If this model accurately fits observed youth voting patterns in the European Union, I would expect to see a further influence based on the state's involvement in ameliorating bad economic conditions. That is, in times of economic insecurity, those nations with the least investment in public welfare and common goods will impose the greatest insecurity on the poor (over-represented among the young), and thus will have greater age gaps in voting; whereas those with more robust welfare expenditure and public investment will see less

disengagement and smaller age gaps (Kern & Hooghe, 2015). Any observed correlation between welfare effort or size of the public expenditure compared to total economic activity might have other theoretical explanations. For example, citizens in a more collective society with greater socialization of public goods might be socialized to more closely identify with the government and state, and therefore might have stronger commitments to institutional participation in the political process (i.e., voting), but it's beyond the scope of this paper to examine which of the various theories best explains what we observe; the point is that the model that says people suffering from economic insecurity are less likely to vote and acknowledging that older cohort in Europe have less economic insecurity than younger cohorts predicts greater age gaps in voting should be exacerbated by worse economic problems and ameliorated by greater state involvement in the economy. It will suffice my purposes to see if this is even the case in Europe

The second scenario implies that individuals, especially young ones, may be mobilized due to external shocks. According to the traditional theory of social movement, individuals get involved with collective action in response to resentment resulting from perceived unfairness and relative deprivation; the latter points to the living quality disparity that citizens have between what they expect and what they have (Gurr, 1970). Individuals' mobilization within democracies is more likely to occur when a sharp contraction in the economy unexpectedly comes after an extended period of economic growth. Basically, people's expectations of gradual betterment in their personal well-being encounter considerable obstacles. Citizens' expectation is closely associated with social benefits and other material needs. Kern and Hooghe (2015) find a positive relationship between the unemployment rate and informal political engagement. In the studies on gender and education gap in voting, the likelihood of voting of unprivileged people depends on the extent to which the labor market is regulated (Schneider & Makszin, 2010; Bousbah, 2012). The extent to which labor policies are regulated defines resource allocation among citizens. A blind spot of the assumption based on relative deprivation is that the line between civilian unrest, organized protest, and voting may be quite blurred (Welzel et al., 2005). In the context of countries that are chosen for this paper, these protests are nevertheless considered as legal and peaceful ones. Moreover, as is assumed earlier, voting and protesting can go hand in hand. The dissatisfied group of citizens can also be driven to cast their votes by new political figures representing their interests which differ from the mainstream

actors. The salient issues and anti-establishment sentiments are exploited to draw the attention of those individuals and consequently gain their votes (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Kriesi & Hernandez, 2016). Existing research shows that such political figures and parties are more successful in recruiting citizens who are at the margins of the labour market (Lubbers et al., 2002).

According to this scenario, macroeconomic instability and a worsening of socioeconomic performance could drive people, particularly youth groups, to engage with politics. Thus, it is expected that the higher the level of macroeconomic instability, the greater political mobilization of deprived social groups, predominantly youth. The rise in voting among younger individuals brings to a lesser age gap. In short, this second scenario predicts the opposite of the first. When times are bad, the youth will be angry, and more likely to vote. If the government is failing to invest in providing social welfare, this will also antagonize young voters, and help mobilize them to go to the polls to “throw the bums out” of government. If times are good and economic indicators are hopeful, and if the government is contributing to social equality through massive welfare expenditures, youth will be especially complacent, less likely to vote, and we should see greater age gaps in voting.

The mass or group assessment of the economic recession, without doubt, has an effect on their political engagement. Consequently, it is expected that particularly those countries that are largely affected by weak macroeconomic performance experience potential changes in the age gap. A few studies support it by providing recent evidence on the rising number of protests in Southern Europe (Ejraes, 2017), the region that has been considerably hit by economic downturn and increasing jobless rates. For both scenarios, an exit for all and a mobilization for unprivileged groups, the age gap between young and older voters is more likely to be shrunken under unfavourable macroeconomic conditions. This leads to the first hypothesis of the paper:

*H1: The age gap in turnout is less in those countries, which were heavily affected by the economic downturn than in others*

### ***Economic explanations: Immigration***

A massive and continuous flow of immigrants has undoubtedly impact national policies and society; and provokes anti-immigration attitudes (Dustmann et al., 2011). Immigrants can be seen as an excessive labour force that creates competition for jobs and resources in destination countries (Friedberg & Hunt, 1995; Rydgren, 2005;

Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Barone et al., 2016). Apart from the economic concern, a substantial influx of immigrants might give rise to concerns and perceptions of the threat posed to national culture and identity (Blinder, 2015; Sides & Citrin, 2007). The cultural side of concerns is more applicable to older citizens (Lancee & Sarrasin, 2015). Despite this viable channel of mobilization of locals (Scheepers et al., 2002), the theoretical framework of this paper is limited to the consideration of the economic aspect of immigration. As earlier mentioned, youth electoral absenteeism contributes more to the electoral representativeness issue hence defining certain theoretical scope.

The immediate result of the real or perceived concerns was a negative reaction against immigrants that has led to a growing electoral success of radical right-wing parties (hereafter RRP) (Lubbers et al., 2002; Coff et al., 2007). Several scholars highlight that the anti-immigration attitude translates into electoral support for far-right parties (Norris et al., 2005; Halla et al., 2017). There is extensive literature available on the RRP vote those points at a close relationship between a rising influx of immigrants and growing support for the RRP (Arzheimer, 2009; Berning, 2016; Edo et al., 2019; Patana, 2020). Over the last decade, we have seen a marked increase in popularity of these anti-immigration parties across Europe (e.g., AfD, Golden Dawn, Front National, FPÖ, Sweden Democrats, Vlaams Belang, and UKIP). The extent of the geographical distribution of immigrants and its effects nevertheless are unequal across European countries. This paper aims to consider the possibility of activation of electoral interest on the presence of immigrants among young and old locals. It is admitted that the link between individuals' decision to vote or not and the influx of migrants theoretically remains elusive since intermediary cognitive and emotional changes are needed to build a full picture of the behavioural change due to exogenic forces. The assumption of these contextual determinants lies in the moderating effect of them to wake the "dormant citizens." I argue that the number of immigrants might play a role in moderating the relationship between individuals' dissatisfaction and their decisions to engage with elections. Particularly, young locals are more likely to be vulnerable to the high number of immigrants since young citizens have less stable status as a labour force vis-à-vis older citizens in Europe.

The high unemployment rate of youth indicates how vulnerable they are in the European labour market. Görlich, Stepanok, and Al-Hussami (2013) list several reasons why young workers are more prone to suffer from economic instability - a low level of job protection, lack of working experience, and the reluctance of employers to invest in

their training. The cost of severance payment and dismissal compensation also shifts the equation in favour of older citizens (ibid., p.4; Neumark & Wascher, 2004). In periods of economic downturn, the level of youth unemployment goes up more dramatically and recovers more hardly compared to the general unemployment (Ryan, 2001). The euro crisis was especially detrimental to the professional ambitions of individuals aged between 15 and 25. This age group has experienced a struggle of finding jobs in almost all EU member states, while a few of them had more severe surges than the rest (James & Wiczer, 2014). The situation with youth unemployment is more deplorable in Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal. At the same time, the southern region has been experiencing socioeconomic strain exceptionally hard; their frontiers currently present areas where large-scale arrivals of immigrants and refugees take place. Suffice it to state, young people are more likely to be subject to labour competition with immigrants than their older counterparts. For example, the flow of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE) negatively affects reducing employability of low-skilled youth in Great Britain (Blanchflower & Shadforth, 2009).

Although the unemployment issue among young people is not explicitly caused by immigrants, the sentiments may be accumulated and persisted. The scapegoating of outgroup members is commonplace in the context of economic recession (Dollard et al., 1939). Arzheimer (2009) identifies four mainstream explanations of the RRP's success – anti-immigration media concentration and unemployment, crime, and immigration rates. The exposure to the prevailing economic and political situation, along with heightened media presence (Perrin, 2015), is more likely to be higher among youth. The amount of media consumption of youth is positively associated with xenophobic and extreme far-right ideologies in Europe (Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015). Furthermore, the prevailing support for RRP parties in the electorate comes from young voters (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). In contrast, older people express positive attitudes towards immigration across 25 countries, suggesting that they are not economically threatened (Schotte & Winkler, 2018).

As it is suggested, there are two ways how differently the influx of immigrants might cause negative attitudes between two age groups of local citizens. The empirical findings demonstrate that the level of professionalism among migrants determines which group of society (low-skilled or high-skilled) develops negative sentiments. For example, low-skilled citizens are more likely to negatively treat low-skilled migrants. The relationship between the number of immigrants and youth unemployment is indeed



multidimensional and context-specific, depending on the social profile of immigrants (Abrams & Eller, 2017). Assuming that the majority of migrants are less qualified workers, I propose that the massive arrivals of immigrant settlers can be particularly upsetting to young individuals. Therefore, I expect that the flow of immigrants might affect the age gap between young and older voters. Specifically, the direction of its effect can be expressed in the following hypothesis:

*H2: The age gap in turnout is less in those countries, which were heavily affected by the massive migrants stock than in others.*

### ***Political explanations: Democracy***

Along with macroeconomic and immigration's effects, a political system is highly relevant to consider in examining the age gap in voting since the political environment under which people socialize affects their decisions to engage (Snell, 2010; Grasso, 2016). Duch et al. (2001) highlight that citizens need to have enough democratic experience to develop their knowledge and trust in economic and political institutions. One of the possible ways to measure the democratic experience of countries is an age of democracy (Lipset, 1959; Inglehart, 1988). Most analyses regarding the effect of the democratic maturity of countries on electoral turnout cover the EU-15 countries. Moreover, the potential cross-national differences in voting between young and older citizens have so far received little attention since young people are blamed for being 'apathetic regardless of their context of political socialization. I aim, therefore, to empirically contribute by examining the relationship between turnout inequality between two age groups and the age of democracies in the respective countries. Even though all states that I include in the study are democracies, it is expected that turnout inequality between young and older citizens differs across countries depending on their age of democracy.

According to conventional wisdom, old democracies have a long-standing tradition of political involvement, meaning that citizens have a strong predisposition to vote (Barnes, 2004; Nový & Katrnak, 2015). There are also other democracies that have relatively experienced the recent regime change. It is reasonable to assume that the historical experience and socio-political development of new democracies, especially in the case of post-Communist countries, are distinct from advanced democracies. Thus, it is essential to consider the democratic experience.

Democracies with similar processes of regime transition and consolidation are more likely to share similarities in their political norms and activities. The comparison of electoral outcomes between countries of Central and Eastern (hereafter CEE) and Western Europe shows that the former experiences lesser involvement of citizens in elections. If even the post-communist states opened the first chapter of “democratic life” with great enthusiasm of people to engage with politics, these sentiments have significantly weakened. The first-wave elections’ attendance was, as on average, about 80%, which is closely linked to their competitiveness and transparency (Karp & Milazzo, 2015). A series of studies argue that electoral participation has been sharply falling ever since (Pacek, Pop-Eleches, & Tucker, 2009). Kostadinova (2003) interprets the low voter turnout in countries with communist legacies as a sign of continuing regime transition. New democracies might still have some legacies of the former system, such as the centralization of power in the hands of only one or a few, limited freedom of expression and press, and as a consequence, lack of participatory culture among people. And that is why citizens, particularly young ones, in new democracies are more likely to have a weak sense of citizenship and deeply embedded mistrust in institutions. This might be due to young people’s socialization period corresponding to the early democratic years of the country and its evaluation on comparative disadvantage in comparison with established democracies in neighboring countries. In contrast, young people from advanced democracies have early exposure to democratic culture through their parental experience and develop an understanding of how meaningful and effective their votes are.

The sense of civic responsibility over electoral participation is found to be greater in the United States and the United Kingdom (Almond & Verba, 1963). While similar incentives to participate in elections have not been found in Germany and Italy. On the basis of Almond and Verba’s work (1963), it is possible to conclude that established democracies are more successful in building conditions for active citizenship than newly established ones. The concept of active citizenship involves participatory norms and culture, which present individuals’ loyalty and ensure political participation (Jackman & Miller, 2004). The rationale behind this difference is that these norms and cultures are not sufficiently developed and spread within relatively little time spent for democratic consolidation in new democracies. Since the formation of democratic norms and culture is a gradual process (Mishler & Rose, 2001). I believe that the shared norms on participatory practices among citizens are a strong determinant of voting or

abstaining. In democracies such as Italy or Hungary, people are less likely to share the same political norms as in the United Kingdom. This discrepancy in the political norms might obviously appear not only across countries but also within countries. For example, Almond and Verba (1963) find evidence of the differences in electoral participation among similar educational groups within and across countries. People can possess a set of similar sociodemographic characteristics; for instance, in Hungary and the United Kingdom, however, their motivations to engage with politics might be different because of their socialization and political opportunities. It is therefore expected that the political norms and participatory activities also vary between young and old people of one democracy and, as a result, across democracies.

The climate of distrust is still rife in the former Communist bloc. Instead of the reformers, the previous political order might be blamed for instability and internal struggles otherwise (Stokes, 2001). The persistence of these sentiments that are usually endemic to authoritarian countries is due to corrupt practices (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Many post-Communist governances across the South Caucasus and Central Asia have been identified with corrupt and crime patterns, and the CEE countries should not be exceptions in this regard. Many CEE citizens are unhappy with political entities and figures who seek personal gain and illicit enrichment (Kostadinova, 2009). Not only the CEE democracies but also other new and advanced democracies face varying levels of distrust in national parliament, political parties, and politicians. Nevertheless, the extent of citizens' distrust found in the former communist countries is way greater (Bowler & Karp, 2004).

The issue of declining participation levels among Western European citizens although is on the agenda of national and EU level bodies. Three widely mentioned potential causes of the declining trend in voting are economic turmoil, pervasive corruption, and unfair electoral competition (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Birch, 2010). One of the crucial components of democracy is a political rivalry in the run-up to the national elections. It is closely associated with some other important activities such as campaigning, generating media coverage, and sustaining party systems. Following the whole pre-electoral processes that seem competitive enough should mobilize people's interest and consequently encourage them to vote (Franklin et al., 2004). The competitive atmosphere of elections also ensures the responsiveness of political parties to the needs of more groups (Powell, 2000). Such elections are the way how to meet people's demands and increase their satisfaction level with democracy (Pietsch, Miller,

& Karp, 2015). The prevailing intra-party conflicts make it uneasy about differentiating between mainstream and opposition actors (Roberts, 2008). This confusion among citizens hinders their ability to cast their ballot meaningfully (Tavits, 2005). In authoritarian countries, citizens abstain from elections because of a lack of transparency and competition.

The communist system trained, or better to say, applied its political and ideological indoctrination to citizens to eradicate pluralism. The extent to which these attitudes had been entrenched among people might determine the pace and path of cognitive transformation to democratic values. According to Inglehart's (2018, p.12) theory on cultural evolution, this shift takes more time and needs to be completed by the generational replacement. In line with Inglehart, Neundorf (2010) highlights the difference of attitudes towards democracy between young and old people. However, there are some evidence on already existing pro-democratic forces and impetus before the breakup of the former USSR (Gibson et al., 1992). Moreover, the pace of adopting a set of democratic ideals might depend on life-cycle effects (Mishler & Rose, 2007), which means that it does not necessarily take a long period of one generational change.

The concept of political socialization suggests that early year experience matters in developing democratic ideals and responsibilities. More years of democracies mean more ingrained patterns of democratic thinking and consequently fewer patterns of non-democratic views. Citizens in advanced democracies, regardless of their age, are more likely to cast their ballots rather than those in new democracies. The age gap in advanced democracies thus is expected to be less since both older and younger groups have a favorable environment to develop democratic culture. Whereas in new democracies, I expect that older people vote more than young people meaning that they have a wider gap in electoral participation. Old voters in new democracies are more likely those who have had democratic aspirations before the regime transition. While young voters in new democracies are more likely those who see current imperfections that push them away from formal politics. This discussion eventually brings us to the following hypothesis:

*H3: The age gap in turnout is less in those countries, which are established democracies, than in new democracies.*

## **Research Design**

The empirical analysis of this paper relies on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for individual-level data and other resources such as the World Bank, OECD and Polity IV for aggregate-level data. The ESS is based on a biannual and cross-sectional survey. It collects information through face-to-face interviews using random sampling of respondents and thus ensures representativeness of the data. Consistency of the survey design and wide geographical coverage allow applying data for comparative purposes. The Rounds 4-9 of the ESS are chosen for this paper due to i) the higher country-representativeness of the dataset in relation to previous rounds and ii) the period covering the recent major events. The dataset consists of information for 24 EU member states, Norway and the UK.

### ***Main dependent and independent variables***

The main purpose of the paper is to examine the age gap in electoral turnout across European states. Thus, the dependent variable is the age gap in turnout in every country. Many authors have already taken age as the factor determining electoral participation (Gallego, 2007; Quintelier, 2007; Pacheco & Plutzer, 2007; Bousbach, 2012). However, age is generally considered as a voting predictor without paying attention to the inequality between young and old voters since researchers applied it as a continuous variable.

In the ESS, the item 'vote' is used to question whether the respondent voted in the last national elections. I link reported votes to a certain age category in each country, allowing us to examine any turnout equality between young and old people's turnout rates for each country. I operationalize it by calculating a ratio between the % of the turnout of old people and the % of the turnout of young people. Values greater than 1 mean that old people vote more than young people. In the context of this paper, the respondents who are aged between 18 and 34 years old are considered young people. The selection of a lower limit is due to the fact that this age enables individuals to vote in almost all countries of the world. While the upper limit is set under the concept of the establishment phase that comes from the middle to late 30s (Rappoport & Rappoport, 1980). It is characterized as settling down period and considered important to determine the necessary range for this study, providing a full picture of youth and contextual determinants that shape an individual's life before adulthood. Consequently, the rest of them who are older than 34 are defined as older people.

Economic conditions of the countries are tested as one of the main contextual-level independent explanations for the turnout inequality across Europe. The relevance and exceptional importance of economic determinants are explained in the framework of the recent economic and migration crises. A well-functioning economic system causes positive attitudes to develop towards the political system, strengthens political interest, and bestows the feeling that one's potential participants will be politically effective (Verba & Nie, 1972). I use four variables that refer to the economic conditions of these countries: annual GDP growth, annual unemployment rate, annual inflation rate and government expenditure (as a % of GDP) that come from the World Bank and OECD databases for the year that precedes each round of the ESS.

Strong social and cultural cleavages are reflected in strong religious and ethnic divides, which might affect the mobilization or disincentivizing of some individuals (Kayser & Wlezien, 2011). Following the potential effect of the excessive amount of migrants on voting, I operationalize the number of migrants as a share of the total population in each country as another context-level independent variable. The data comes from the World Bank database for the year that precedes each round of the ESS.

Another independent variable is the age of the democracy, which measures the number of years since the most recent regime change (Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013). Countries that have been democratized before 1980 are defined as 'old or established democracies' and the rest as 'new democracies'. It should be noted that drawing the line between old and new democracies is a subjective matter and classifying a diverse list of countries in only two categories could perhaps be seen as misleading. However, I decided to follow the logic of existing research, where a simple distinction has been applied (Kitanova 2019). In line with these studies, I consider countries transitioning from authoritarian rule during the 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington, 1991) as new democracies. However, Portugal and Spain are placed in the group of old democracies since they have been recognized as democracies for almost 40 years (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Norris et al., 2005). Thus, in this paper, I operationalize the age of democracy as a continuous variable by taking its log. Here, I test the assumption that the electoral participation among young and older people varies within different ages of democracies and across individual countries.

## Research Method

### Overview and Descriptive Statistics

The goal of this section is to provide estimation analysis determining how various economic and political factors impact the differential participation of younger and older citizens in national elections. There are 26 European countries entering the dataset at the core of this exercise, which represents a panel data for the even years in the span from 2008 to 2018. The main dependent variable is constructed as follows: for each country-year observation I calculate the relative proportions of old and young voters and then compute their percentage difference such that  $DV = (\%old - \%young) / \%young * 100\%$ , which represents a determinant of age gap in the voter turnout. The threshold value that I use to disentangle the young from the old is 35 years of age. As a robustness check, in the appendix I present estimation results by decreasing the cutoff value to 30 years. Figure 1 below presents a bar chart with percentage age gaps averaged across the time frame for each country. More comprehensive information on the changes in turnout inequality between two age groups across countries and over time can be found in Figures 3-8 (see Appendix).

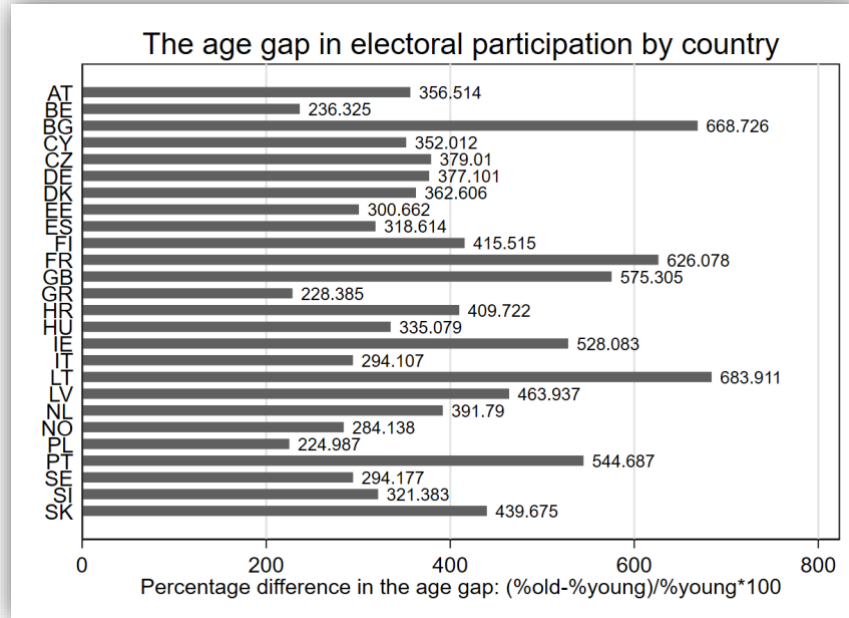


Figure 1. The age gap in electoral participation by country

It can be observed that the age gaps are quite heterogeneous across countries ranging from just under 225% in PL to almost 684% with a mean around 400%. A grouping was made based on countries' macroeconomic, political, and geographical

backgrounds to find patterns. Overall, the story with Nordic countries seems coherent. The relative economic and political stability of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland promotes a more stable age gap in voting. There is a considerable rise in the age gap among Finnish citizens in 2014 and 2018. It is assumed that this rise accounts for the social and political challenge that might disincentivize young people to use the conventional mode of political engagement.

In contrast, the age gap in Western European countries is not homogenous. Belgium has the lowest age gap, and thus it is one of the outlier countries. The key undoubtedly lies in compulsory voting that contributes to higher and more equal electoral participation (Kuźelewska, 2016). Whereas Great Britain, Ireland, and France have the highest age gap for all years.

The age gap is relatively low in the CEE and South European countries, with a few deviant findings from Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Bulgaria. Interestingly, the figures on Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Portugal show a constant, colossal turnout inequality between 2008 and 2018. The unexpected widening in the age gap among Slovak and Latvian voters occurred in 2018. Attempts to capture some tendencies through general grouping have brought mixed results, leading us to more detailed consideration of the contextual explanations in the following sections.

As regards the descriptive statistics of key variables in the dataset, the mean unemployment rate was at a mark of roughly 8.4% and the mean inflation rate was 1.87%, which is in line with inflation targeting objective of 2%. Government expenditure on average constituted just over a fifth of the GDP across countries with a mean GDP growth at around 1.56%. The next step is to analyze the effect of these chief economic and political factors on the age discrepancy of voters in national elections by turning to the regression analysis framework.

### *Identification Strategy*

Prior running regression, it was vital to proceed with some checks. A variance inflation factor (VIF) test was chosen to identify the degree of multicollinearity among independent variables prior to adding dummy variables. The mean value of VIF was 1.5 and individual values were lower than 2.0 which indicates very low probability of correlation between predictors. Breusch-Pagan and Cook-Weisberg test was performed to identify presence of heteroskedasticity (the null hypothesis that variance is homoskedastic). Test indicated presence of heteroskedasticity (Prob > chi2 = 0.0000).



Thus, it was decided to use robust standard errors to mitigate the problem. Shapiro-Wilk test were performed to check normality of residuals. Test indicated that residuals are not normally distributed ( $\text{Prob}>z = 0.00025$ ). Even though assumption is violated, the following plot (see Figure 2) shows that there was not a substantial departure from normality, thus the assumption of normality is not significantly violated.

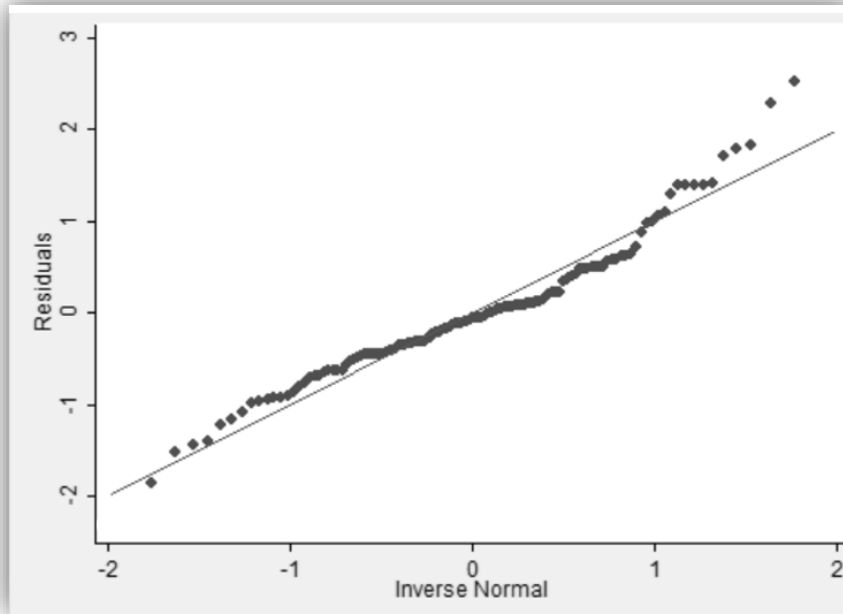


Figure 2. Normality of residuals

The most commonly used approach in the vast majority of applied work in social sciences to pin down the effect of one variable on another is to undertake regression estimation via the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). The regression equation would then be given by:

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot x_{1,it} + \dots + \beta_6 \cdot x_{6,it} + a_i + d_t + u_{it}$$

where  $y_{it}$  is a percentage differential in the age between young and old voters for country  $i$  in year  $t$ ;  $x_{j,it}$  represent the set of six main regressors including GDP growth, unemployment rate, inflation rate, government expenditure as a fraction of GDP, log age of democracy and share of immigrant population;  $a_i$  is an individual time-invariant unobserved characteristics of countries;  $d_t$  represents time-varying factors affecting all the countries unanimously and  $u_{it}$  is an idiosyncratic residual term. There are two main issues with running this regression: first, it is very likely that the underlying condition of zero conditional mean is violated because unobserved fixed characteristics in  $a_i$  are

likely correlated with at least some of the independent variables. This is what call the problem of endogeneity in econometrics. As an example, a likely candidate for such fixed effect could be ideological beliefs held by citizens in a given country – there is an apparent relation of this factor not only to the age gap in the voter turnout, but also to the age of democracy or the share of immigrants.

Second, and perhaps more straightforward issue is a violation of independent and identically distributed observations. Clearly, Spain in 2007 and Spain in 2009, for instance, are two strongly interrelated units. For these reasons, coefficients retrieved via OLS would turn out to be substantially biased. In order to partially resolve these estimation obstacles, one could use so-called Fixed Effects (FE) estimator, which in essence is an OLS on the transformed data. To run it, we first subtract the average over time for each variable in the equation also known as within transformation:

$$y_{it} - \bar{y}_i = (\beta_0 - \beta_0) + \beta_1 \cdot (x_{1,it} - \bar{x}_{1,i}) + \dots + \beta_6 \cdot (x_{6,it} - \bar{x}_{6,i}) + (a_i - a_i) + (d_t - \bar{d}) + (u_{it} - \bar{u}_i)$$

$$\tilde{y}_{it} = \beta_1 \cdot \tilde{x}_{1,it} + \dots + \beta_6 \cdot \tilde{x}_{6,it} + \tilde{d}_t + \tilde{u}_{it}$$

By subtracting the mean over time for each variable, we see that the individual unobserved effects in  $a_i$  get eliminated from the regression equation, thereby allowing us to run OLS on the newly created variables denoted by tilde without worrying about endogeneity concerns coming from these time-invariant variables. Identifying condition in the FE estimation is so-called “strict exogeneity” which requires that the error term  $u_{it}$  is not correlated with any of the regressors  $x_{j,it}$  in all periods. It is a rather restricting assumption but as long as we include the main variables that are likely predictors of the age gap, we sufficiently reduce the potential threats of endogeneity. Another important aspect to keep in mind when working with panel data is to use cluster-robust standard errors at an individual country level. In the next subsection, I provide the regression results for both OLS and Fixed Effects estimation approaches.

## Results

The first three models (A.1-A.3) in Table 1 portray OLS coefficients while the next three models (B.1-B.3) showcase FE regression estimates. Models A.1 and B.1 include the main set of regressors, while models A.2 and B.2 additionally control for the year

controls. Lastly, models A.3 and B.3 include some interaction terms of interest on top of it. The dependent variable in each regression is a percentage difference in the voter turnout between old and young people such that the coefficients represent the percentage changes in the age gap.

DV: Age Gap in Voting	Model [A.1]	Model [A.2]	Model [A.3]	Model [B.1]	Model [B.2]	Model [B.3]
	OLS	OLS	OLS	FE	FE	FE
GDP growth (%)	-2.85 (3.57)	-4.45 (4.42)	-5.03 (4.26)	-4.75 (3.64)	-4.82 (4.04)	-6.26 (3.92)
Govern. spending as share of GDP (%)	-25.94*** (7.64)	-24.10*** (6.99)	-25.74*** (7.61)	-37.43* (18.35)	-38.5** (18.44)	-40.01** (16.51)
Unemployment Rate (%)	2.90 (2.89)	3.67 (3.14)	3.31 (3.60)	8.75 (5.32)	6.69 (5.93)	5.17 (5.68)
Inflation Rate (%)	-8.66 (8.20)	3.85 (9.33)	4.70 (9.56)	0.79 (4.27)	1.81 (7.78)	-1.60 (8.15)
Immigrants as share of population (%)	-8.72*** (2.99)	-8.29*** (2.92)	-8.47*** (3.11)	5.44** (2.51)	3.60* (2.11)	1.10 (2.26)
Log age of democracy	179.82 (52.51)***	169.31*** (49.01)	188.31*** (52.86)	1,003.79*** (203.03)	493.49 (330.60)	-86.05 (412.08)
Unemployment rate X Year 2009			3.50 (8.81)			0.79 (3.98)
Govern. spending share X Year 2009			13.32 (12.28)			11.18 (8.90)
Immigrants share X Year 2017			1.60 (10.51)			6.44 (8.72)
Log age of democracy X Year 2017			-149.78 (116.69)			-194.25* (104.83)
Constant	707.94*** (134.29)	592.75*** (138.56)	598.72*** (167.06)	-609.59 (394.32)	234.85 (741.69)	1,235.66 (784.13)
Year dummies	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Standard errors	Robust	Robust	Robust	Clustered	Clustered	Clustered
Observations	131	131	131	131	131	131

\*\*\*- $p < 0.01$ , \*\*- $p < 0.05$ , \*- $p < 0.1$

Table 1. Results from the OLS and FE regression models of the effect of key economic and political factors on the age gap in electoral participation

As regards main economic factors, one percent increase in the GDP growth is associated with a 2.85% decrease in the age gap holding all other factors constant in the simple OLS regression. The magnitude of this effect is inflated when controlling for year dummies to negative 4.45%. These estimates are likely to be biased following the discussion in the previous section, which is roughly confirmed when we look at the FE coefficients which range from negative 4.75% to negative 4.82%. It is important to note that estimates in this regression analysis are likely to be very noisy given a small sample size of countries, yet they do provide some important insights into the key determinants of the age gap and their relative contribution.

One percent increase in the unemployment rate leads to 2.90-3.67% increase in the voter turnout age gap using models A.1-A.3 and to 6.7% rise when using model B.2 with year dummies. In the aftermath of economic crisis, the effect of unemployment rate is only exacerbated as the coefficients rise to almost 7% (3.31+3.50) using OLS and to almost 6% (5.17+0.79) using Fixed effects method. The estimates for the effect of inflation rate are highly noisy and statistically insignificant: one percent increase in the rate of inflation is associated with a 3.85% wider age gap using OLS and a 1.81% rise in the age differential using FE with year dummies.

In this vein, the effect of the government spending's share in the GDP was shown to have quite *significant effect*, both economically and statistically: one percent increase is linked to a 24-25% decrease in the age gap when using OLS. The figures further grow in their magnitude to negative 37-40% once estimated with FE. Interestingly, in the post economic crisis period the effect of government spending's share in the GDP is dampened to around negative 12.5% (-25.74 + 13.32) using OLS and roughly negative 29% (-40.01 + 11.18) using FE for the year 2009 in the dataset.

When it comes to other determining factors, OLS regression estimates show that a one percent rise in immigrants' share of the population, for instance, lead to a roughly 8.3-8.5% decrease in the voters' age differential. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this *significant effect* flips a sign when using Fixed Effects models such that the coefficient is positive 3.6% using the year dummies. Although we should trust FE estimates more, this clearly drastic change should nevertheless come with a caveat of small sample size. To assess the impact of immigration crisis of 2015-2016 on this relationship, I include an interaction term for the immigrants' share of the population and the year 2017. Using the OLS model, one percent increase in the share is linked to a roughly negative 7% (-8.47+1.60) effect on the age gap, while the FE estimate on the other hand gets inflated to around 7.5% (1.10+6.44) indicating the positive effect of the crisis on widening the voters' age discrepancy.

The last but not the least is a relationship with the age of democracy. Using the models A.1-A.2, one percent increase in the age of democracy is associated with 1.7-1.8% increase in the age gap. Fixed Effects estimator produces the effect of roughly positive 4.9% when including the year dummies in the regression. By looking at an interaction between the log age of democracy and the year 2017, I aim to examine the cumulative effect of the recent crises and Brexit. One can see that in that period, a one

percent rise in the democracy age is linked to a 0.4% (1.88-1.49) increase in the age gap using OLS.

As a robustness check to assess whether the estimates would maintain their sign and magnitude, I also try changing the age threshold determining the cutoff between young and old from 35 to 30. The regression estimates are presented in Table 2 in the Appendix. Overall, apart from some changes in the size of coefficients, the main directions of effects generally remain intact. The effect of GDP growth increases in magnitude to 6-8% for OLS and to 10-14% for FE. Government expenditure's share in the total output plays a bigger role with an associated negative effect of roughly 58% and 85% in the voters' age gap using OLS and FE, respectively. The impact of immigrants' share is bigger in size using both OLS and FE with the same pattern of opposite signs (-20% and 8.5%). Similar pattern is observed for the log age of democracy, whose coefficient stands at 3.6% and 18.5% using two respective estimators.

### **Discussion**

These findings indicate that the macroeconomic argument is not wholly convincing. The overview of the dataset suggests that such an outcome might be due to the automatic stabilizers that immediately mitigate the impact of economic recessions and balance economic growth among European countries. Nevertheless, government expenditure has a statistically significant effect on citizens' involvement in elections. However, the direction of the relationship does not support the current paper's assumption (Hypothesis 1). The result implies that a higher amount of government spending contributes to a lower age gap in voting. Although the relevant theoretical section (p.12) points out the importance of state expenditure and labor regulations, it assumes that the cut in the governmental expenditure disincentivizes both age groups ("exit for all") and thereby lowers the age gap. While the finding suggests that the cut in the state budget is more likely to disincentivize only unprivileged social groups, thus widening the age gap. In line with this finding, Radcliff (1992) highlights that the generous state benefits help to ease the burden of economic hardships on citizens' electoral engagement. The literature review generally labels young people's position in society as vulnerable. However, the youth and old people-orientated social policies and welfare state vary across European countries. The relatively more stable and lower age gap between old and young citizens in Nordic countries might probably be due to the

generous social protection. The finding on governmental expenditure needs to be further examined, taking into consideration the welfare models.

Even though the analysis shows a statistically significant association between the share of migrants and the age gap in voting, the immigration effect is becoming somewhat ambiguous. The OLS and FE regressions provide us with contradictory results on the direction of the immigration effect. As FE results have a positive effect, the finding is inconsistent with the paper's assumption (Hypothesis 2). The finding suggests that the higher share of migrants is associated with the slight increase in the age gap. However, the ambiguity between outcomes leads us to three concerns. First, the current way of measuring the immigration impact might be misleading. The total share of migrants per country does not necessarily mean that these migrants are equally distributed within the country. For example, a few areas of Italy (e.g., Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio) have the highest share of migrants compared to the rest (Varella, 2021). The public attitudes towards migrants and their vote choice (i.e., in favor of anti-immigration parties or not) might vary depending on the concentration of migrants in their neighborhood. Thus, there remains work on the immigration proxy to increase the internal and external validity of the analysis. The line of the current paper's reasoning might still be relevant, but it fails to capture the cross-regional complexity within the country. Secondly, as suggested earlier, the sample size is small and unequal. Unfortunately, some ESS Rounds lack data for more exposed countries to the immigration flow (e.g., Greece). Thirdly, the mechanism of the immigration argument can be complicated with disregarded confounding factors. The local media coverage and political parties' mobilization strategies on the immigration issue have been extensive and generally successful regardless of the rate and concentration of immigration. This attention may trigger citizens' interest and further electoral engagement in favor of RRP parties. The recent studies based on issue salience and issue ownership have become more relevant as the emergence of a new structural conflict in Europe is transforming traditional dimensions of the political competition (Kriesi et al., 2008). For instance, the case of Hungary clearly shows how the mobilization of the electorate occurs with a relatively negligible number of migrants within the country. Bíró-Nagy (2021, p.19) concludes that 'Fidesz managed to score goals focusing on migration...'. Thus, this paper admits that the immigration argument also needs a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the age gap in voting and the influx of immigration. In addition, the interaction term for the

immigrants' share of the population and the year 2017 does not give a considerable difference to conclude that the immigration crisis had an impact on old and young people's voting.

The analysis implies that the argument on the age of democracy is compelling and insightful. Interestingly, the finding suggests that the effect of this predictor is positive and statistically significant, meaning that established democracies are more likely to have a higher age gap in voting. The direction of the relationship between main variables is the opposite of the one we seek (Hypothesis 3). Relying on the previous findings, we know that young people are more electorally active in older democracies than new ones (Barnes 2004; Nový & Katrnak 2015, Kitanova, 2019). Thus, the relatively smaller age gap in voting among new democracies can refer to the low electoral turnout for both age groups. This is not surprising since, as earlier suggested, many new democracies might still preserve the legacies of the former system. The formal regime transition does not fully entail accepting democratic culture and settings in post-Soviet states, primarily if the new governing elite consists of the same members as those appointed to the former cabinet. In contrast, the relatively higher age gap in voting among old democracies can refer to low electoral turnout for youth and high electoral turnout for older people. For instance, *Figure 1* shows that the age gap is high in Ireland, Great Britain and France. Grasso (2014) and Fox (2005) claim that the current generation of young people is very distant from electoral politics. Instead, youth in advanced democracies are more inclined to engage with non-governmental organizational and non-institutional activities compared to younger counterparts in newly established democracies (Percy-Smith, McMahon, & Nigel Thomas 2019, Kitanova, 2019). This finding might be a symptom of democratic deficit in neglecting certain social groups and, as a result, those switching their participation channels. However, this pattern does not apply to all established democracies. For instance, the ratio between young and old voters is the most stable and lowest in Belgium, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark over the last decade. Despite the persisting electoral volatility across Europe, electoral participation remains relatively stable and high in the Scandinavian countries (Elklit & Togeby, 2009). Because of this inconsistency among established democracies, the coefficients of predictor are negligible.

There are three sources for electoral findings on the Scandinavian countries- the political institutions, political mobilization, and political culture (ibid. p.84). While the institutional perspective and mobilization channels go beyond the scope of this paper,

the importance of political culture, particularly active citizenship, has been mentioned earlier. According to Hernes (1988), citizenship is regarded as ‘activist, participatory and egalitarian’. The results indicate that citizens in the Scandinavian countries are the most participatory, followed by the Western and Central European countries. Mediterranean and Eastern European countries result in the least active involvement. These findings align with the previous findings on citizenship studies (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2008). For example, most Scandinavian young people consider voting in national elections highly effective for the political system’s functioning (Amnå, Ekman, & Almgren, 2007). However, the other evidence suggests that the electoral interest of these citizens is triggered by policy concerns instead of the political system (Söderlund, 2008). As a result, parties gain retrospective votes based on their performance. It builds a bridge between government expenditure and social policies; and requires further research on the current challenges of age inequality in social provision across Europe.

### **Conclusion**

Turnout inequality matters and age remains one of the main predictors of the issue. There is a gap that needs to be addressed on the universality of age disparity in voting across Europe and context-related determinants accounting for the country-level variance in electoral participation of old and young individuals. The existing literature mainly draws conclusions from single or a few case studies; this paper, therefore, makes its modest contribution by developing the comparative study.

The major goal of this research was to examine the age gap between old and young voters among European countries. The findings indicate that the character of turnout inequality is not present with the same strength everywhere. Therefore, the contextual explanations suggested in this paper differently moderate citizens’ decision to vote or abstain. We have seen that the state expenditure, immigration, and age of democracy are statistically associated with the research object. However, they are not fully coherent with the initial assumptions. The extensive theoretical review might leave the impression that the research scope is too broad, resulting in incoherent stories.

Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that the theoretical framework has broadly developed under the strategy to identify general patterns and plausible stories with contextual explanations. Overall, despite these diverging outcomes and incoherent frameworks, the findings raise three potential points for further research. First, a better



strategy for assessing macroeconomic effects (e.g., macroeconomic index) should be developed. Second, some regional patterns across countries and government expenditure suggest considering the role of social policies and the welfare state. Third, throughout the paper, protests were mentioned several times and thus are motivated to question whether what we see on voting can be extrapolated to other modes of participation.

In addition, the presentation of both generational and life-cycle effects on political participation was motivated by the interconnectedness of political socialization and personal resources. However, the full incorporation and analysis of these approaches were impossible due to the lack of longitudinal data. Moreover, some interactions were added to examine the period effect for the major events in Europe for the last decade. The analysis suggests that considerable changes have not occurred in 2009 and 2017 concerning the age gap in voting.

As far as the limitations of this estimation analysis are concerned, the biggest one is undoubtedly a small sample size. With as few as 26 countries, albeit the time dimension that increases the number of observations to 131, the estimates are rather noisy with high sensitivity to model specification or estimation method. We have seen that the coefficient associated with the immigrants' share's effect on the age gap, for instance, flips aside when we switch from OLS to FE while statistical significance remains intact. Despite these diverging results, one should nevertheless be inclined towards the Fixed Effects estimation, one of the workhorse methods of panel data analysis due to identification issues discussed in the previous section. Even though sample size does raise concerns, it ought to be pointed out that the focus of this work is on European countries in a specific time frame, which mechanically poses restrictions on the number of observations. Future research on this or related topics could incorporate an alternative approach by using the individual-level data. Although country-specific economic and political indicators would lack variation, working with individual observational data would overcome the main issues concerning the sample size. For such data with a binary response variable indicating whether a given person has voted or not, a multi-level logit approach could be utilized to pin down the causal links of interest.

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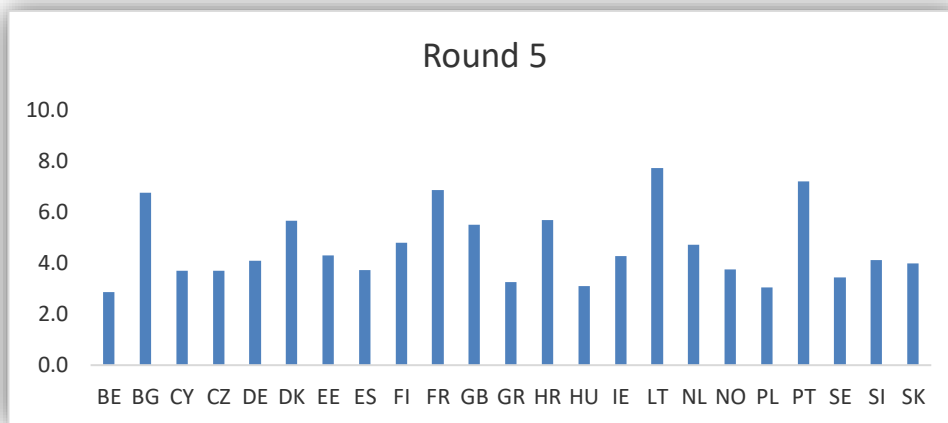
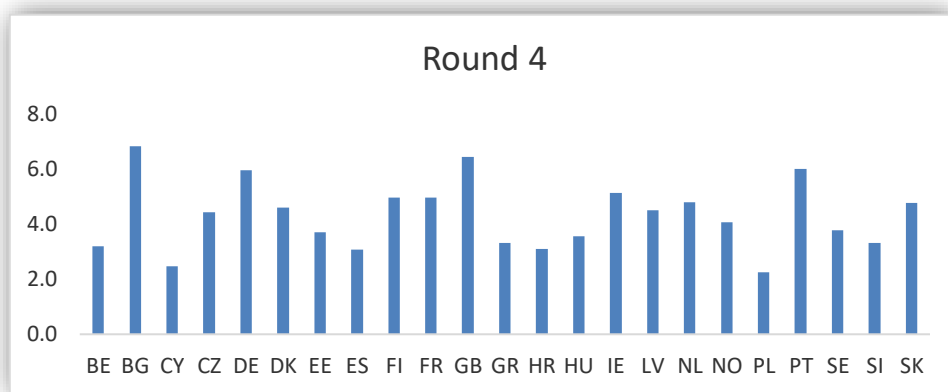
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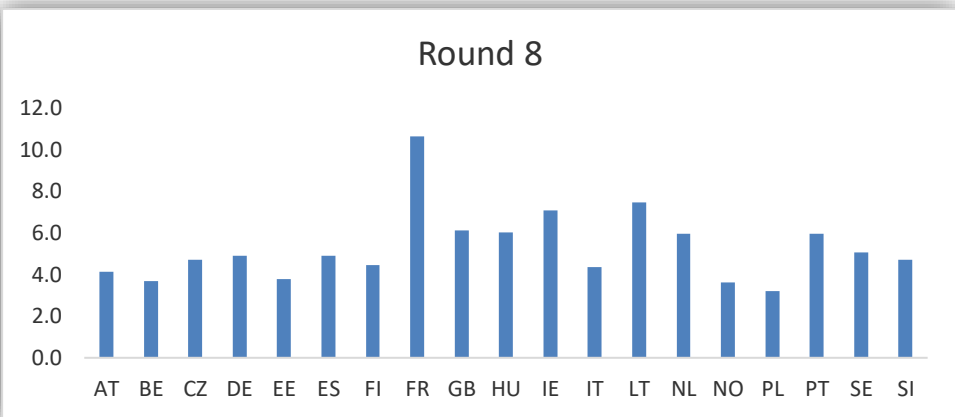
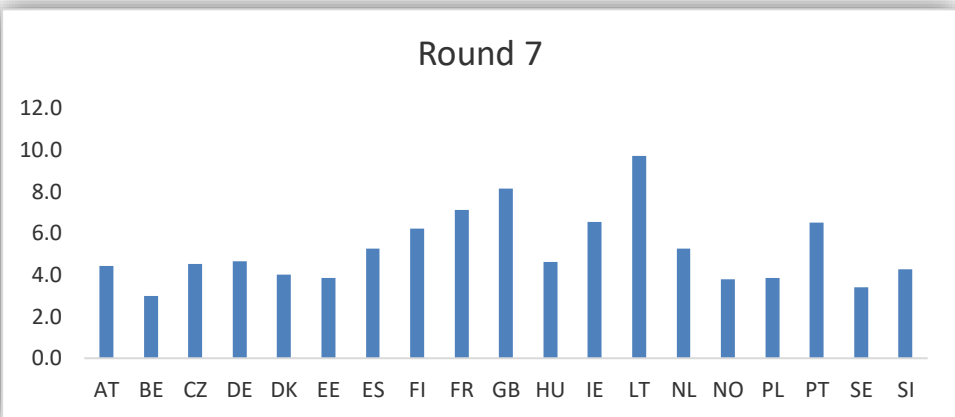
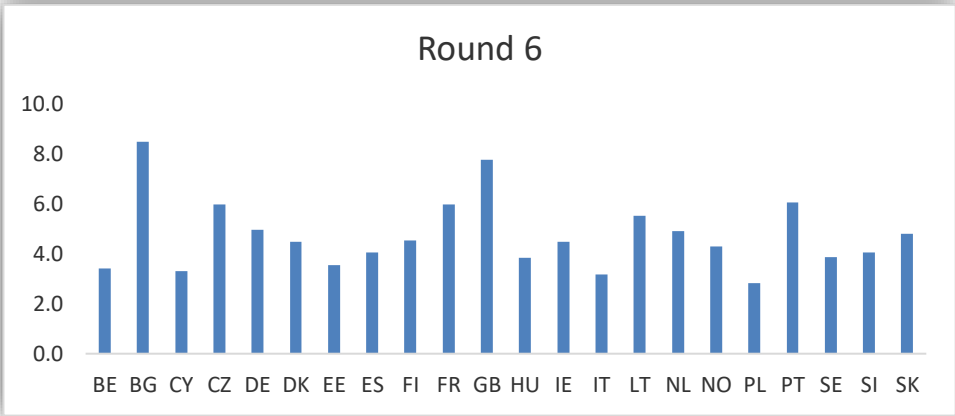
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## Appendix

Figures 3-8. The ratio between old and young voters across 26 European countries between 2008 and 2018 for ESS Rounds 4-9





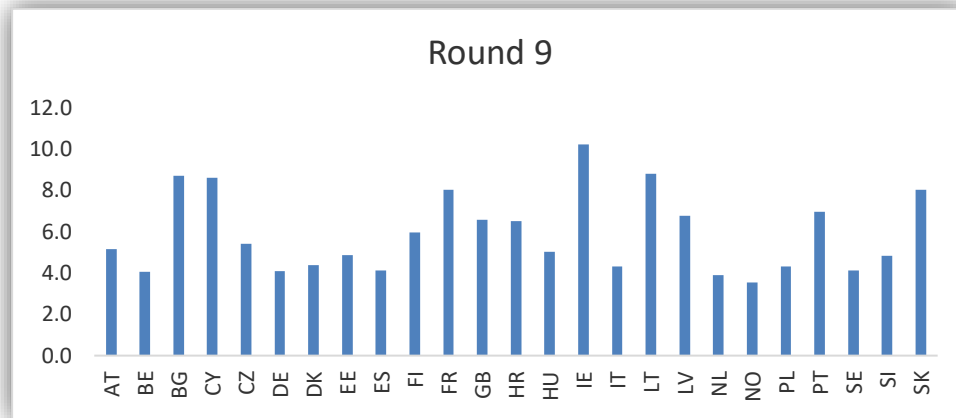


Table 2. Results from the OLS and FE regression models of the effect of key economic and political factors on the age gap in electoral participation (age threshold = 30)

DV: Age Gap in Voting	Model [A.1]	Model [A.2]	Model [A.3]	Model [B.1]	Model [B.2]	Model [B.3]
	OLS	OLS	OLS	FE	FE	FE
GDP growth (%)	-2.90 (6.25)	-5.68 (7.87)	-7.93 (7.77)	-10.11 (6.74)	-9.87 (7.19)	-13.54* (7.73)
Govern. spending as share of GDP (%)	-58.16*** (16.08)	-54.27*** (14.89)	-58.82*** (16.38)	-86.76** (36.97)	-85.24** (40.01)	-85.91** (33.75)
Unemployment Rate (%)	4.66 (6.06)	6.54 (7.01)	6.56 (8.50)	13.55 (14.10)	10.61 (15.08)	7.32 (13.54)
Inflation Rate (%)	-22.22 (17.0)	-1.26 (19.05)	0.67 (19.21)	2.15 (10.82)	2.93 (20.25)	-6.01 (14.0)
Immigrants as share of population (%)	-20.44*** (7.04)	-19.43*** (6.82)	-19.37*** (6.49)	8.59 (7.09)	8.60 (5.93)	4.19 (6.10)
Log age of democracy	384.22*** (119.24)	361.58*** (112.93)	410.71*** (119.21)	2,323.14*** (597.22)	1,847.52** (858.63)	745.08 (1,091.15)
Unemployment rate X Year 2009			2.33 (14.21)			-6.21 (14.0)
Govern. spending share X Year 2009			35.94 (23.79)			31.94* (17.84)
Immigrants share X Year 2017			2.56 (28.01)			14.66 (24.30)
Log age of democracy X Year 2017			-410.64 (283.82)			-336.42 (268.86)
Constant	1,559.89*** (284.42)	1,354.58*** (303.0)	1,369.33*** (366.88)	-1,429.78 (1,011.31)	-699.72 (1,734.12)	1,174.37 (1,898.0)
Year dummies	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Standard errors	Robust	Robust	Robust	Clustered	Clustered	Clustered
Observations	131	131	131	131	131	131

\*\*\*- $p < 0.01$ , \*\*- $p < 0.05$ , \*- $p < 0.1$