

## Holger Onken, Dirk Lange

### Social Background, Civic Education and Political Participation of Young People – the German Case

Due to social and political change the process of young citizens' political socialization was put on a new basis in West European democracies over the last decades. In this article we discuss some aspects of this development and show their consequences. We analyse empirical findings from Germany, focussing on the relevant social factors which influence the individual propensity to participate in politics. The impact of the financial and economic crisis in Europe on political attitudes will also be considered, taking in account sociological aspects. Based on the empirical findings we discuss implications for civic education. In contrast to many discussions in literature about this issue, in which the focus is on the need to put the various influences of political socialization into a broader context, we argue that the parental social background is the crucial upstream factor, prior to e.g. civic education. The conclusion indicates that a group-specific educational approach, taking into account the social background, is the most promising one for reaching the normative goal of civic education: Politically self-determined citizens.

Aufgrund der sozialen und politischen Veränderungen ist die politische Sozialisation Jugendlicher in den Westeuropäischen Demokratien auf eine neue Grundlage gestellt worden. In diesem Beitrag diskutieren wir Aspekte dieser Entwicklung und zeigen, welche Folgen sich aus diesen ergeben. Wir analysieren empirische Befunde aus Deutschland mit dem Schwerpunkt auf die Frage, welche sozialen Faktoren relevant sind für die individuelle politische Partizipationsbereitschaft. Der Einfluss der Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise in Europa auf politische Einstellungen wird dabei ebenfalls betrachtet. Dies geschieht unter Berücksichtigung der soziologischen Aspekte. Auf Grundlage der Ergebnisse fragen wir nach den Folgen für die politische Bildung. Im Gegensatz zu dem in der Literatur häufig vertretenen Ansatz, die politische Sozialisation in einem breiten Kontext zu betrachten, verweisen wir auf die hohe Bedeutung des Ausgangspunktes von Sozialisationsprozessen, die soziale Herkunft. Diese ist anderen Faktoren der politischen Sozialisation, wie der politischen Bildung, vorgelagert. Um das normative Ziel der politischen Bildung zu erreichen, den „politisch selbstbestimmten Bürger“ ist ein gruppenspezifischer Ansatz, der die soziale Herkunft berücksichtigt, am vielversprechendsten.

#### Keywords:

Political participation, civic education, social background, information behavior

#### 1 Introduction

The capability of social and political organizations to educate and socialize citizens has been weakened over the last two decades. We can observe this development, mainly triggered by social change and globalization processes, in West European democracies. Studies show empirical evidence that the involvement of citizens in politics is declining, we also witnessing less political participation and waning civic commitment (Dalton 2004). These developments affect mainly traditional

associations, interest groups and political parties (Gaiser, Rijke and Spanning 2010) that still constitute the main channels of political influence. Hence one can expect a weaker integration of citizens into the political systems. Such changes could have impact on the significance of civic education within democracies.

The goals of political education are often seen and described as directive for a certain behavior or aimed at adopting a certain attitude, referred to as "education for good citizenship" (Farnen 1990, 99). The objective of "democratic education" is to generate a subjective appreciation of the democratic order among citizens. Consolidation of democratic principles and rules is considered as a condition for the development of democratic citizenship. The acceptance of the democratic order shall be elevated through the transfer of democratic values and knowledge about the function of democratic institutions. *Civic education*, in contrast to democratic education, is not aimed at the reproduction of political structures. Instead civic education is aiming at a civic consciousness that leads to politically mature and self-determined citizens. Learning students should

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acquire the ability to locate themselves within a plural society, to recognize their interests, to form their own opinion, and the capability to get involved in the political discourse (Lange 2008). According to a participatory concept of democracy this happens mainly by civic or political engagement of politically interested citizens and by a high turnout in elections. Civic education aiming at a potentially higher scale of political engagement among young people should not give the impression that political participation has to take place in a conflict-free sphere. Instead it should be made clear that open discussions, the exchange of arguments and a constructive conflict management are important aspects of democracy (Haus 2011, 17).

The motivation for civic or political engagement can develop from individual interests and intensions to contribute to the public good. Political socialization, determining how citizens behave in these terms, is a lifelong process. However, foundations and standards for the individual political behavior are mainly settled in the first two decades of life. Individual behavior patterns increasingly solidify with increasing age. Hence the early years of political socialization determine to a significant extend if and how frequently political participation takes place during the course of life.

How much attention does the young generation pay to politics? How pronounced is their intention to get involved? Which factors influence different views on the economic crisis in Europe? We investigate these questions with a group-specific approach, under consideration of the social background and the educational goals. In the following section we analyse which factors influence the willingness of young people in Germany to participate politically. We use data from two surveys conducted in 2009 and 2012 by the institute of political science of the Leibniz University of Hannover among students aged 16 to 25. The first four tables show survey data from 2012. In table 5 we take data from 2009, when we asked for views on the crisis. At this time, the respondents underwent the impression of the financial and economic crisis. For both surveys we do not claim full representativeness for Germany, disadvantaged groups, such as unemployed young people, might be underrepresented. However, we aim to compare different groups within our samples. In this respect the data gives substantiated information.

## 2 Social background and the willingness for political participation

Prerequisite for a self-determined political participation is a certain degree of interest in politics. Empirical findings of the Shell Youth Studies findings show, with some fluctuations, a decline of political interest among young Germans in a long term perspective. In 1991 57% of young people between 15 and 24 evinced political interest whereas in 2010 the share was 40% (Schneekloth 2010). On a different data basis, Kroh (2006: 190) concludes that the interest of youngsters in politics was stable between 1985 and 2003.

To investigate the willingness for political participation we developed an index consisting of several components: the general political interest of the questioned students, the value they assign to vote in elections, their appreciation towards civic and political engagement. Each question was metrically scaled from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating a weak willingness to participate and 5 indicating a strong willingness (Lange, Onken, Korn 2013, 32). On the basis of the index we identified three groups, which differ with regarding to their willingness for political participation.

Political issues are often perceived as overly complex. This explains the importance of education as a factor of influence on the political interest and the willingness to participate (Reinhardt and Tillmann 2002, 50). In table 1 we distinguish between youngsters with the intention to start or pursue higher education (i.e. aiming for an academic degree); and those who do not. Most of them had chosen to undergo a vocational training in the German "dual system".

	Respondent aims for higher education	
	Yes	No
Willingness to participate		
High	38%	18%
Medium	54%	48%
Low	8%	34%
N = 975	526	449
Source: ownsurvey, 2012		

The results show differences between both groups. Young people who do not aim for an academic qualification are particularly overrepresented in the category "low willingness to participate in politics". On the contrary, those who aspire a higher educational degree, show a higher willingness to participate than the reference group.

Our data supports the premise that social characteristics are very important for the probability of political participation. However, one cannot conclude that the impact of family-background is very direct. We argue there is a chain of conclusions with social origins as the initial point (see figure 1 below). Higher economic resources within the family and advanced occupational parental background tend to foster a social environment stimulating youngster's political interest (e.g. the course of education) as table 2 shows.

Pupils from parental homes providing a white-collar and high-income environment aspire far more often an academic degree than youngsters with a blue-collar and low-income background (Wernstedt and John-Ohnesorg 2008). Another consequence of the social origin, and partly related to the choice of the educational course, is the nature of social circles and networks youngsters' live in. How do personal circles deal with "politics"? Discussions about political issues with friends and within the family do not seem to be popular among young people (see also table 4). Less than 15% of the participants in our sample talk often or very often with



friends about politics. However, the analysis shows that youngsters with a blue-collar – low-income background discuss politics even less: only 7% of the respondents from the lowest income group discuss political questions with friends often. The connection between the income-situation of the family and frequency of political discussions is still measurable between the two income-groups in the middle, but much weaker.

Vocational family-background and educational goal: "higher education"				
Occupation	Blue-collar	White-collar	Self-employed/business owner	Public servant ("Beamt er")
Share higher-education	38%	66%	57%	75%
N=904	277	294	229	104
Disposable monthly family-income and educational goal: "higher education"				
Income	Less than 1000€	1000-1999€	2000-2999€	3000€ and more
Share higher-education	24%	44%	57%	69%
N=826	74	214	267	271

Source: own survey, 2012

The two factors discussed in table 2 influence the subjective self-assessment about the own position within the social stratification. Table 3 points in the same direction as suggested above: a higher position within the social stratification leads to a higher willingness for political participation.

Willingness for political participation	Underclass and lower middleclass	middleclass	Higher middleclass and upper class
High	25%	30%	33%
Medium	48%	54%	51%
Low	27%	16%	16%
N=967	168	498	301

Source: own survey, 2012

### 3 Sources for political information

In the context of the analysis of young people's information patterns about politics we ask for the importance of civic education. Where do students get their information and knowledge about politics from? The answer to this question shows that even "in times of the new media" the traditional media still plays a major role. T.V. was mentioned most frequently by far as an important source for information.

	Overall result	Willingness to participate		
		Low	Medium	High
Television	80%	67%	84%	82%
Civic education	51%	48%	59%	39%
Newspapers	47%	28%	47%	59%
Web-pages	42%	27%	42%	53%
Discussions with family members	27%	15%	27%	37%
Discussions with friends	17%	7%	16%	25%
Internet-blogs	8%	6%	6%	12%
Seriously, I'm not interested in politics	3%	14%	0%	0%
N	1008	194	523	291

Source: own survey, 2012 (multiple answers were possible)

It is noticeable that the group, showing a low willingness to participate in politics is generally more reluctant to mention any source, compared to the other groups. The exception is the category "civic education" which is mentioned more frequently by those showing a low willingness than those showing a high willingness to participate. Also notable is the frequent mentioning of civic education by the large "medium-group", 59% of them label it as an important source of information. Another remarkable result is that media which require a more active search behavior (web-pages and internet-blogs) or normally comparatively demanding (newspapers) are more often used by those students stating a high disposition to get involved in politics. The frequency of direct conversations about politics with family members and friends rises recognizably with the respondent's willingness to participate. From this we conclude that politically interested youngsters look actively for political information, while the less interested tend to avoid. The implication of these findings on civic education is that it should focus more on types of schools which courses do not lead regularly to higher education.

### 3. In times of crisis? Student's perception of the economic situation in 2009

For most of the German citizens, the economic crisis in Europe, starting in 2007, was an abstract threat so far. However, temporarily there was a broad public discussion in the media about the possible consequences of the economic crisis in general and the labor market in particular.

In table 5 we analyse the attitudes of young Germans towards the crisis. The three groups regarding differences in political interest have been operationalized in a similar way as the groups differ in the willingness to participate in politics in section 1 above (Lange and Onken 2013, 66). Similar to the index above, social characteristics determine the degree of political interest.



Statement*	Overall result (agreement)	Low political interest	Medium political interest	Strong Political interest
The crisis has a negative impact on my personal job perspective	50	54	51	41
The consequences of the crisis are not foreseeable, but I suspect worse to come	40	43	40	37
As in every crisis there are opportunities also in this one	35	25	35	49
Political and economic leaders won't draw any consequences – until the next crisis	24	19	25	26
The crisis will not proceed as bad as anticipated	13	11	14	13
My personal future will not be affected by the crisis	12	11	10	18
All in all one can say the government acted in the right way in the crisis	11	3	11	20
The state should stay out of the economy, despite the crisis	7	6	6	12
N	1124	231	687	206

\*multiple answers were possible, source: own survey, 2009

Negative statements with pessimistic expectations are generally mentioned more often than statements with optimistic expectations. However, we see one significant exception: almost half of those showing a strong political interest see opportunities in the crisis. Youngsters belonging to this group also much more often conclude the government acted right in the crisis. The results suggest that stronger political interest leads to higher resilience groups against adopting “negative” political attitudes or showing signs of resignation.

#### 4. Discussion

In sections above we discussed the importance of social factors for the probability of political participation.

Obviously the impact of such a static sociological concept like “*how a person is socially*” on his or her political interest, attitudes and participation is very indirect. There is no doubt about the importance of social networks for political participation (McClurg 2003: 459). These findings suggest the diversity of social networks and the question how important politics is within them have an impact on the probability of political participation (Quintelier, Stolle and Harell 2012). But what triggers the probability whether someone grows into what kind of network? It is the social characteristics that determine in many cases to a large extent pathways of political socialization.

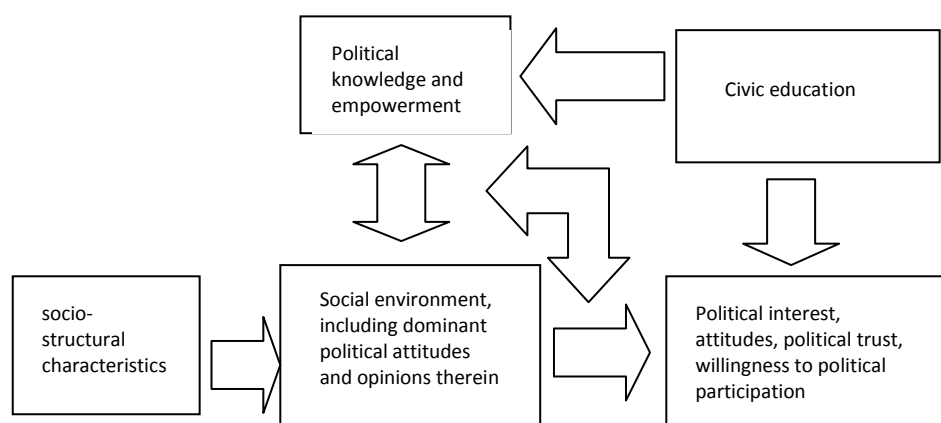


Figure 1: Causal model of factors influencing the willingness for political participation

Social characteristics are the starting point of many aspects of social life, the course of education, social contacts, friendships and activities, discussions about politics within and outside the family. The individual origins determine the chance whether an individual develops a certain degree of interest and whether he or she gets involved in politics.

When it comes to civic education it seems that students who do not need it look for it, while those who need try to avoid it. This applies also to the contact with political contents in the media. Our data indicates that a specific group-approach taking into account social factors is the most promising.



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