

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST

**THESIS SUMMARY**

Godfred Bonnah Nkansah

**Young People's Demography in Democracy: The Effect of Youth Cohort Size on Youth  
Political Attitudes and Behaviors in Democratic Societies (1995-2020)**

Article-Based Doctoral Dissertation

**Supervisors:**

Attila Bartha, Ph.D.

Zsófia Papp, Ph.D.

Budapest, 2023

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## Declaration

This is a portfolio (article-based) dissertation prepared in accordance with requirements stipulated under § 31 of the Doctoral Regulation of Corvinus University Budapest, September 2021 (JISZ-SZ/8/2021). The following articles constitute this dissertation.

## Publications:

Article 1: Nkansah, G. B. and Papp, Zs. (2022) ‘Does cohort size matter? Assessing the effect of youth cohort size and peer influence on young people’s electoral participation’. *Journal of Youth Studies*, pp. 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2053666> (*online first*).

Article 2: Nkansah, G. B. (2022) ‘Youth Cohort Size, Structural Socioeconomic Conditions, and Youth Protest Behavior in Democratic Societies (1995–2014)’. *SAGE Open*, 12(2), pp.1-16.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221096146> (*online first*)

Article 3: Nkansah, G.B., and Bartha, A. (2022) ‘Anti-democratic Youth? The influence of youth cohort size and quality of democracy on youth support for democracy’. *Contemporary Politics*, pp. 1-23.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2196877> (*online first*).

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## **1.0 Relevance and ambition of research**

This dissertation addresses an important yet frequently overlooked theoretical and empirical orifice of inquiry within the youth political attitude and participation literature. It investigates the relationship between youth cohort size (YCS) (defined in this study as the proportion of young people aged 15-29 years within the adult population of a country [15 years and above]), and youth political attitudes and political participation behaviors across both established and new democracies. This ambition of the study was inspired by an intuitive concern, and cues from some strands of the political demography literature which seemed to suggest that young people's cohort size and the well-known social and economic influences they are exposed to at such early stages of life, could potentially hold some answers to their political attitudes and participation behaviors.

A major concern within the academic and non-academic demographic literature has been the observation that the population-age structure of societies is changing. Whereas, on the one hand, Western established democracies are aging, new developing democracies on the other hand, are challenged with youth bulge (a disproportionately large number of young people within the adult population of a country) (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2013; Goldstone, Marshall and Root, 2014; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018; Korotayev *et al.*, 2022). And while many studies have examined the social, economic, and cultural implications of the changing age structure of societies, the political implications of these demographic dynamics are yet to receive adequate attention in mainstream political science research. As yet, nearly all the studies conducted on the political implications of the changing demographics of societies have been focused on the impact of such changes on political stability. The youth-sub population in particular has garnered the most interest in such research, having gained notoriety as the protagonists of most acts of political instability (Huntington, 1996; Goldstone, 2002; Urdal, 2006). Their burgeoning cohort size has been found to be a major catalyst and a reliable predictor of the likelihood of acts of political instability, and a major threat to democratic consolidation in countries with such demographic profiles (Cincotta and Doces, 2011; Weber, 2013; Goldstone, Marshall and Root, 2014).

The youth political attitude and participation literature on the other hand, shows enduring debates about young people's commitment to democracy as a political system, and their political behaviors in both institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics. While a strand of the argumentation sees young people as apathetic, disinterested and disengaged from

democratic politics (Kimberlee, 2002; Foa and Mounk, 2016; Mounk, 2018), the counter view sees them as actively engaged in democratic politics through unconventional forms of political repertoires and expressions (Norris, 2003; Dalton, 2009; Pontes, Henn and Griffiths, 2019). But is there reason to believe that the demographic changes currently being witnessed in both the established and developing democratic worlds could have significant implications for the political attitudes and behaviors of young people within such democracies? As I will soon show, a careful review of the literature reveals that the relationship between young people's cohort size and their political attitudes and participation behaviors has not yet been theorized and tested empirically.

Also importantly, the present debate on young people's political attitudes and participation behaviors have been typically limited in scope to the West and Australia; societies traditionally known for small youth populations and have unsurprisingly not considered the explanatory potential of young people's demographic size in understanding the observed patterns of attitudes and behaviors. Even where empirical studies have attempted to examine the relationship between youth political attitudes and behaviors and young people's cohort size within the wider literature, such as studies which examine their cohort size as a predictor of collective political activity, empirical investigations have focused on contextual level outcome variables such as the onset of violent and non-violent protests in a country (Ang, Dinar and Lucas, 2014; Costello, Jenkins and Aly, 2015; Romanov and Korotayev, 2019).

This dissertation argues that attention to the above lacuna in research from a wider geographical perspective is crucial for two important reasons. Firstly, a study exploring such a nexus holds the potential of improving our understanding of the implications of the ongoing demographic changes in both established Western and developing societies for the health and stability of democracy as a political system. Secondly, given the unique place of young people as the future torchbearers of the democratic tradition, gaining insights into the impact of their cohort size on their commitment to democracy as a political system, and associated political participation behaviors, can have important implications for youth policies and interventions aimed at improving socioeconomic and political outcomes among young people. This dissertation contributes seminal insights in this regard. It also reflects on the relevant theoretical, empirical and policy implications. Below, I present a brief review of the literature on youth political attitudes and participation behaviors and highlight the key gaps in the scholarship this dissertation seeks to contribute to addressing by its findings.

## 2.0 Literature review

An important subfield of political science with an enduring interest in both the theoretical and empirical literature is *political participation*. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, p.1) opine that “citizen participation is at the heart of democracy” and that “democracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely in the governing process”. Democracy as a political system is thus construed to lose its savor, ethos, meaning and distinctiveness without political participation. Closely connected to the central place of political participation within democratic practice is the debate on the kind of attitudes citizens of democratic societies must possess in order to protect the democratic culture. The conventional belief suggests that the more supportive people are of the democratic political system, the more they would participate in democratic politics (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). The alternative view, conversely, sees critical dispositions towards democracy as necessary attitudes required to enrich the democratic political culture (Norris, 1999, 2011; Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Stoker *et al.*, 2017).

The empirical verdicts on citizens’ attitudes and political participation have importantly been inconclusive. At the center of these empirical debates has been the *political attitudes and participation of young people*. It is fair to say that the dispositions and engagement patterns of the younger generations of advanced democracies have been among the most fiercely contested debates within the political science sub-discipline. The conventional evaluation of young people’s attitudes towards democratic politics and participation in institutionalized politics, for instance, indicts them for apathy and antidemocratic tendencies (O’Toole *et al.*, 2003; Mycock and Tonge, 2012; Henn and Foard, 2014; Foa and Mounk, 2016; Mounk, 2018; Parvin, 2018). They have even been infamously depicted as the “harbingers of an incipient crisis of democracy” (Farthing, 2010, p. 181). Summarizing this conventional verdict, Ellen Quintelier, noted some sixteen years ago that:

*“Such a conclusion is not unfounded: in almost every election young people are the least likely to vote, and these participation rates are continuously declining; the youth membership of political parties is dropping; young people are less concerned with politics, less politically knowledgeable, do not participate in social or political activities, are more apathetic, and have low levels of political interest, etc. For almost every activity or attitude, young people have the lowest score. Conventional ‘wisdom’ dictates that young people are ‘ignorant’, ‘apathetic’, ‘selfish’, ‘indifferent’, ‘alienated’, ‘disaffected’ and ‘disinterested’ when it comes to politics”* (Quintelier, 2007, p. 165).

Explanations advanced for the disengagement of young people from democratic politics in general and institutionalized politics, *in particular*, have been diverse. Three notable theories tested in the literature have been (1) life cycle effect theory (2) generational effect theory (3) issue-based or episodic participation theory. *Life cycle effect theory* supposes that young people show relatively low levels of commitment to politics due to the stage of life they find themselves in. As young people transitioning into adulthood, the challenges of gaining stability in life, including completing their education, finding gainful employment, finding a life-partner, and settling down in marriage, renting their own accommodation, among other social demands of adulthood, conflate to deflect their interest and attention as young people from politics, towards achieving these social markers of adulthood (Norris, 2003; Quintelier, 2007; Weiss, 2020). The *generational effect theory* on the other hand links the observed patterns to long term changes in the agencies and structures which shaped political socialization and participation in the past. It identifies factors such as rising levels of education, the changing demands of adult life in the contemporary world, the emergence of new forms and platforms for political participation, as having interplayed to diminish the loyalties and open dedication of young people towards institutionalized politics, in comparison to the older generation (Kimberlee, 2002; Norris, 2003).

In contrast to both the life cycle and generational/cohort effect explanations, advocates of *issue-based interpretations* to young people's political attitudes and participation patterns explain that young people support, engage, or disengage from politics based on the biographical relevance of the political issues which invite their involvement (Benedicto, 2013; Soler-i-Martí, 2015). Thus, suppose their electoral participation is essential to the implementation of a policy which prioritizes their concerns as youth, such as environmentalism, human and animal rights, multiculturalism, educational funding and even youth employment, young people are likely to show greater levels of support and commitment (Harrison, 2018; Sloam and Henn, 2019). Amnå and Ekman call this the phenomenon of 'standby citizens' who are normally disengaged, yet keep themselves informed on political happenings, and are willing to 'enter into the game' should they find important reasons to do so (Amnå and Ekman, 2014).

The alternative evaluation of young people's political attitudes and participation by contrast, hails them for expanding the understanding of political participation, through their interest and penchant for *non-institutionalized politics* such as peaceful demonstrations, signing of petitions and product boycotts (Marien, Hooghe and Quintelier, 2010; Sloam, 2016; Sloam, Ehsan and Henn, 2018; Treviño *et al.*, 2019). Their supposed unfavorable attitudes towards democratic



politics are also interpreted within this alternative framework as crucially important critical norms and dispositions, which, in difference to the dutiful loyalties expressed in time past - and even presently by the older generation to democratic politics and its handlers - help to increase performance and accountability within the political system (Dalton, 2009; Norris, 2011; Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Stoker *et al.*, 2017). The reasons the literature advances as explanations for young people's critical attitudes and changing patterns of political engagement majorly include *cultural and value change*. Theorists of this tradition, led by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, trace these changes to the evolution of industrialized societies from values that prioritized material benefits and social welfare in the post-World War II era, and which encouraged open support and loyalties to one's country and political leadership. In the stead of such patriotism has since the 1970s, arisen a new wave of cultural values which are post-material, and emphasize libertarian virtues of individualism, self-expression, freedom of speech, and elite-challenging attitudes, largely driven by higher levels of education and economic development within advanced democratic societies (Inglehart, 1990, 2016 [1977]; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

*Contextual explanations* of political attitudes and participation have also been proffered in some strands of the literature. For instance, the socioeconomic conditions of countries, particularly the levels of education and economic development have since long been put forth as important predictors of political attitudes and participation (Lipset, 1959; Norris, 1999; Abramson, 2014; Campante and Chor, 2014; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). A country's level and length of democratization is also argued to determine people's political participation (Nový and Katrňák, 2015; Kitanova, 2019).

## **2.1 Summary of literature review & research questions**

As seen from the above review of the literature, the geographic focus and explanations of the observed patterns in the political attitudes and participation behaviors of young people, have been mainly Western-centered, and importantly silent on the effect of the demographic size of young people on their political attitudes and participation. In other words, the potential relationships between cohort size and cohort political attitudes and participation remain unexamined in the literature. This study, therefore, attempts to address these two important gaps in the literature. It leverages the ongoing debates within both the theoretical and empirical literature to respond to the following research questions:

*(1) Does the proportion of young people in the adult population of a democratic country affect their political attitudes and political behaviors?*

*(2) What mechanisms moderate and/or mediate such relationships?*

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework: Life cycle effect and youth bulge**

Although, as seen above, multiple theories have been engaged by extant research to explain young people's political attitudes and participation patterns, this dissertation deemed the life cycle effect theory as particularly well suited for understanding young people's individual political attitudes and participation within the context of a youth bulge. Life cycle interpretations of young people's political disposition and participation behaviors have received considerable mention in extant literature (Leighley, 2001; Kimberlee, 2002; Norris, 2003; Quintelier, 2007; Panagopoulos and Abrajano, 2014; Weiss, 2020). They are strongly linked to the more general resource-based explanations to political participation, which identify access to resources such as employment, income, and education, as central to the availability of time, money, and civic skills to participate in politics (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1999; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010).

In sum, life cycle effect theory argues that young people's political participation, and general disposition towards politics is largely dictated by their place on the continuum of transition into adulthood, marked by social milestones such as marriage, employment, completion of education, housing, ability to support significant others, among others. A young person who has these milestones achieved in life, or significantly advanced in achieving these milestones is accordingly seen to be more likely to have the resources to actively engage in politics. By contrast, another who is struggling to meet these social markers of adulthood, is more likely to put premium on improving her socioeconomic situation, over her participation in political life. Many past empirical studies examining the causes and predictors of participation in both institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics among young people have identified factors such as income levels, employment status/condition, level of education, marital status and satisfaction with life and household income as among the strongest predictors of political participation (Quintelier, 2007; Dalton, 2009; Monticelli and Bassoli, 2019; Tzannatos, 2021).

While access to resources is clearly not the only known reason for political participation, as there are also incentive-based motivations (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Teorell, 2006; Bob-

Milliar, 2012), socioeconomic factors, nevertheless, seem to hold particular prominence in the case of young people. The important underlying question accordingly posed by the life cycle theory in this regards is, given the scarcity of resources, which option is likely to take preeminence in young people's decisions: the socioeconomic or the political? While the socioeconomic provides a pathway towards attaining social markers of adulthood, the political provides a route to citizenship expressions and input into the political process. An evident implication of the foregoing is that *the youthful stage of life is a crucial stage, during which key decisions are required to be made by young people: they must strike a delicate balance between their socioeconomic priorities and their political participation.*

An important but surprisingly neglected theoretical space (which is probed by this dissertation within the parameters of the life cycle effect theory) is the role young people's relative numbers within the adult population play in influencing their transition into adulthood on the one hand, and participation in politics on the other hand. Traditionally, the phenomenon of large cohort size for any group of people within the population has been associated with the increased risks of deprivation within the group. Richard Easterlin is famed for his hypothesis that the social and economic fortunes of a cohort vary inversely with the size of the cohort, such that the larger the cohort size, the higher the risk of socioeconomic deprivation of individuals who are part of the cohort (Easterlin, 1987, p. 1). It has also recently been discovered that members of large cohorts are the least happy in life owing to higher levels of social disintegration and deprivation, despite their large pool of peers (Ye and Shu, 2022). Especially in the case of large YCS, the cause of their social and economic deprivations is linked to increased competition among themselves as a cohort with relatively similar skillsets and work experiences, for limited employment opportunities on the labor market in economies which have not adequately modernized to absorb their burgeoning numbers (Korenman and Neumark, 2000; Flückiger and Ludwig, 2018; Weber, 2019). The average youth growing in a country with a youth bulge is accordingly relatively disadvantaged in terms of securing gainful employment, and even when employed, earning commensurate wages (Brunello, 2010; Moffat and Roth, 2017; Ozerim, 2019).

### **2.3 Main hypothesis**

*The main theoretical proposition based on the above arguments, and tested in this dissertation, is that youth bulge will exacerbate life cycle effects by delaying young people's achievement of the social markers of adulthood, and consequently engender lower participation in politics and*

*lower support for the democratic systems they are growing within.* Specifically, the study proposes that as the YCS of a democratic country increases, we can expect that the young people trapped within such a bulge will: *vote less in elections, will be less inclined to protest, and will also be less supportive of their democratic governments.* This will be due primarily to competition for limited labor market opportunities, which will end up deflecting their attention from the political events in life, as they strive to deal with their socioeconomic challenges. The same situation is envisaged to create an aversion in them towards the democratic political system, due to its perceived failure to improve their socioeconomic conditions as young people. In other words, young people in affluent societies with small YCS, spared the challenges of a youth bulge, are more likely to participate actively in politics, and also hold favorable opinions about democracy as a political system, than their peers in societies with disproportionately large youth populations. Specific theoretical propositions, developed out of the above general proposition, were tested in the three articles which constitute this dissertation. The next section briefly discusses the research design and methodology used to test the theoretical propositions.

### **3.0 Research design, data, and methods**

The study utilized large-n research designs, with country-year as the unit of analysis. The study undertook the purposive sampling of all democratic countries included in the World Values Survey (WVS) Waves 3-7, spanning the years: 1995-1998, 1999-2004, 2005-2009, 2010-2014, 2017-2020 respectively. The decision to limit the case universe to democratic countries was informed by the uniqueness of democracy as the only political regime type that allows for contestation and participation (Dahl, 1971, pp. 4–6), guarantees the protection of human rights (Lührmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg, 2018), allows for universal suffrage for voting, and also importantly accepts critical and dissenting opinions, authority defying, and elite-challenging repertoires of political expression such as citizen protests, as part of its inherent culture (Norris, 2002; Dalton, 2004; Dalton and Welzel, 2014). These political expressions importantly formed the central themes of the study.

The choice of WVS over other surveys was informed by the global and nationally representative nature of the survey, covering both poor and rich countries. It also provides longitudinal data which allows for the estimation of the long-term effects of variables on the values and behaviors of people (Inglehart *et al.*, 2014). The sampling of countries was done from the list of WVS survey countries, using the Polity IV democracy index in two of the

studies in this dissertation, and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) democracy index in the other study. The choice of these two indices over other indices such as the Variety of Democracy (V-DEM) liberal democracy index was informed by what I realized as the relative balance these two measures provide in the assessment of countries as democratic or otherwise. V-DEM for instance, excluded countries with large YCS such as India, Pakistan, Mexico, Malaysia, and the Philippines from some of its categorization of liberal democracies. By contrast, Polity IV, and the EIU index, scored these same countries as democracies, thus helping to provide a better mix of countries from both advanced and new democracies, with considerable variations in YCS. Since YCS was the main explanatory variable of interest to the study, the appreciable variations in the sizes across the selected democratic countries of interest was especially important for the purposes of the study.

The study utilized a combination of pooled individual level data for only young people (15-29 years), drawn from the WVS Waves 3-7 (1995-2020)<sup>1</sup> and country level data from the World Bank<sup>2</sup> the United Nations Population Office<sup>3</sup>, the Polity IV index scores<sup>4</sup> and the EIU democracy index<sup>5</sup>. Due to the categorical nature of the dependent variables, and the hierarchical structure of the data (individuals are nested within countries), the study utilized *single level multinomial logistic regression with country fixed effects and country clustered errors in the case of study 1*, and *multilevel binary logistic regression for study 2 and study 3*, to test the series of hypothesized main and moderated/interaction effect relationships. The predicted probabilities of the different values of the explanatory and dependent variables were also estimated using Stata software commands *margins* and *margins plot*. A total of 29 democratic countries were included in study 1. Study 2 and 3 on the other hand comprised 51 and 39 countries respectively. Tables 1 below provides the spread of the democratic countries included in the study

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<sup>1</sup> World Values Survey data accessible from ([www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org))

<sup>2</sup> World Bank data accessible from (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators#>)

<sup>3</sup> UN population data accessible from (<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>).

<sup>4</sup> Polity IV data available at <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>

<sup>5</sup> EIU data accessible from <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

Table 1. List and spread of countries included in the study.

<b>Western democracies</b>	<b>Post-soviet democracies</b>	<b>Global South</b>	<b>Other democracies</b>
Germany, Spain, Italy	Hungary, Bulgaria	India, Chile, Turkey, El Salvador	South Korea
United Kingdom,	Poland, Serbia, Latvia	Trinidad and Tabago, Pakistan,	Japan
France, United States	Czech Republic, Estonia	Malaysia, Indonesia, Mali, Philippines, Ghana, Peru, Brazil	Australia
Netherlands, Canada.	Slovakia, Macedonia	Guatemala, Thailand,	New Zealand
Sweden, Switzerland	Slovenia, Luthuiana	South Africa, Colombia,	Israel
Norway, Spain, Cyprus	Romania, Moldova	Bangladesh, Venezuela	
Finland,	Croatia, Georgia, Ukraine	Uruguay, Mexico, Argentina	

## **4.0 Articles in dissertation**

### **4.1 Study 1: “Does Cohort Size Matter? Assessing the Effect of Youth Cohort Size and Peer Influence on Young People’s Electoral Participation”**

The interest of this first study was to investigate whether YCS influences young people’s electoral participation, and whether peer influence moderates this relationship in any way. The study was designed in response to the ongoing debates on the state of young people’s electoral participation. Conventionally, the literature identifies young people as the most apathetic towards electoral politics. They are argued to be less connected to the political process, and accordingly vote less (Bergh, Christensen and Matland, 2021). Multiple empirical evidence gathered from opinion surveys and analyses of voter turnout rates and the voting gap over the past two decades point to the general disengagement of young people from electoral participation (Putnam, 2000; O’Toole *et al.*, 2003; Henn and Foard, 2014; Achen and Wang, 2019; Fraga and Holbein, 2020; Bergh, Christensen and Matland, 2021; Pastarmadzhieva, Pastarmadzhieva and Sakal, 2021). Evidence, however, continues to mount against this

conventional position. Studies which show that young people are beginning to vote more, and a resulting narrowing of the voting gap between the young and the old, continue to challenge the conventional narrative (Harrison, 2018; Sloam and Henn, 2019; Symonds, 2020; Kamatayeva, 2021). In this study, we examined whether the patterns observed in youth electoral participation are influenced by their cohort size within the population.

The study draws on two important theories which explain political behavior. The first is the life cycle effect theory, which supposes a curvilinear relationship between age and political participation behavior, such that young people's propensity to participate in politics increases with their transition into adulthood, and decreases in their old age (Norris, 2003; Panagopoulos and Abrajano, 2014; Weiss, 2020). In sum, the theory supposes that young people vote less during their youthful years because they are preoccupied with achieving social milestones of adulthood, such as getting employment, life partners, completing school and having their own places of residence, and are accordingly less motivated to follow and also participate in politics, particularly voting (Quintelier, 2007). Peer influence theory on the other hand also argues that young people growing within a youth bulge are more likely to be influenced by their peers within the bulge in their political socialization, particularly the acquisition of civic and political knowledge, which are both important precursors to political participation, than their peers who live in adult-saturated communities (Hart *et al.*, 2004). The reason for such strong peer influence is linked to the ubiquity of peers in the lives of young people (Quintelier, 2015), and how their regular interactions among themselves influence a common perspective among them on most issues (Pilkington and Pollock, 2015). Since young people are relatively less politically knowledgeable compared to the older polity (Zvulun and Harel, 2018), the influence of peers in their daily interactions with each other could consequently be argued to be reasonably inimical to their own political socialization and participation.

*The study accordingly tested the proposition that YCS will exert a negative effect on young people's propensity to vote in national elections, such that the greater the YCS of a country, the less likely the youth are to vote in national elections. Our argument built from the reduced social and economic fortunes which befall young people who grow as part of a youth bulge, and accordingly experience delays in achieving the social markers of adulthood. We also hypothesized that strong peer influence, owing to the creation of a large pool of peer agents by the existence of a youth bulge, will negatively moderate the relationship between YCS and youth voting propensities in national elections.*

The study revealed that an increase in the YCS of a democratic country exerts a significant negative effect on young people's likelihood to vote in national elections. The study also showed that when peers are the main source of information for young people, the situation on the one hand, reduces the likelihood of young people (growing as part of a young bulge) , always voting in elections. On the other hand, the same condition increases their likelihood of abstaining altogether from voting in national elections. The explanation offered for this outcome relates to how large YCS reduces the socioeconomic fortunes of the cohort, through limited labor market opportunities for such large pools of peers, which consequently deflects their attention from the political demands of life, towards the prioritization of the achievement of socioeconomic stability in life. The finding is largely in line with the predictions of the life cycle effect theory of political participation, which posits reduced engagement in voting among young people due to a prioritization of socioeconomic and biographical goals over politics (Quintelier, 2007; Dassonneville, 2017; Weiss, 2020). Accordingly, the study submits that whether or not a young person would vote in a national election should be viewed as a function of many factors, two of which include how many other young people there are in the population, and where young people primarily receive information

#### **4.2 Study 2: “Youth Cohort Size, Structural Socioeconomic Conditions and Youth Protest Behavior in Democratic Societies (1995 -2014)”.**

Following repeated arguments in the literature that the contemporary younger generation of citizens in advanced democratic societies are showing stronger proclivities for non-institutionalized political participation, notably protest activities, over institutionalized political activities, this second study aimed to examine how this propensity may also be influenced by their relative numbers in the adult population within both established and developing democracies. Past explanations to this changing focus of participation for young people have been deeply rooted in value change theory (Inglehart, 1990; Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sloam and Henn, 2019). Importantly, notwithstanding, evidence from the fields of conflict studies and political demography also suggest that young people's cohort size is a strong predictor of the likelihood of the onset of conflicts, violence, riots, and protests (Urdal, 2006; Weber, 2013; Alfy, 2016; Romanov and Korotayev, 2019; Ganie, 2020). Accordingly, the larger the YCS of a country, the greater the likelihood of political and civil instability in the country, with young people as the protagonists of such destabilizing activities. Their sheer numbers, coupled with labor market challenges for an educated bulge, are



particularly thought to be crucial conflating conditions which can precipitate violent actions (Goldstone *et al.*, 2010; Weber, 2019).

This study supposed that since young people are likely to engage in acts of political and civil violence, they would be even more likely to engage in non-violent protests such as peaceful demonstrations, since that presents less risks of injuries and fatalities. Given that their cohort size is a strong predictor for the onset of violent activities, the study again supposed that similar parallels could be drawn between their cohort size and peaceful demonstrations. The novelty of this study lies in the observation that, while YCS has been found to predict macro level protest and riot activities, a review of extant studies showed that the question of whether YCS predicts young people's individual level propensities towards protest activities remains unanswered in the literature. Also, the interaction of YCS with socioeconomic conditions and their consequent effect on young people's individual level protest behavior similarly remains untested in the literature. The study accordingly aimed to ascertain whether YCS influences individual youth protest behavior on the one hand, and whether structural socioeconomic conditions moderate this relationship on the other hand.

Two diametrically opposed theories of political participation provide the theoretical framework for the study. On the one hand, grievance theory argues that when people (including young people) feel relatively deprived, due to unfavorable socioeconomic and political conditions within a country, they are likely to express their displeasure with the political system through acts such as protests and conflicts (Gurr, 1970; Muller, 1979; Vrablikova, 2014; Asingo, 2018; Monticelli and Bassoli, 2019). Youth bulge is seen to exacerbate this likelihood through the creation of a large pool of unemployed and low earning young people, who face stiff competition among themselves for limited labor market opportunities, particularly where they are educated (Brunello, 2010; Ganie, 2020; Weber, 2019). This resource limitation is in turn, argued to affect their transition into adulthood through delays in the achievement of the social markers of adulthood, earlier discussed in this dissertation (Ozerim, 2019). Also, given that young people, by virtue of the stage they find themselves in life, have naturally stronger penchant for risking taking, high sense of idealism, peer influence and extremist attitudes (Cincotta and Doces, 2011; Weber, 2013), these factors are argued to conflate to make them more likely to engage in protest actions as a way of expressing their grievances. Drawing on the above arguments, *the study accordingly hypothesized that large YCS and its interactions with structural conditions, such as youth unemployment and education will increase young people's individual propensities to engage in demonstrations.*

The counterargument on the other hand, draws from the predictions of resource -based models of political participation such as the civic voluntarism model. The theory argues that resource availability, rather than scarcity, primarily predicts participation, such that the more resources a person possesses in terms of education, employment, and income, the more likely the person is to participate actively in politics (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Teorell, 2006; Dalton, 2009). Accordingly, since large YCS reduces the resource base of young people who form part of the bulge, due to widespread unemployment and low wages for even those employed, the phenomenon of youth bulge and its interactions with structural socioeconomic conditions will in this case, rather suppress young people's engagement in protest. Besides, as the social pressure to 'settle down' in life as an educated young person is high, an important implication the article draws from the foregoing argument is that young people growing within a youth bulge are more likely to focus on improving their socioeconomic conditions than to engage in political participation, and so much in time-consuming activities such as protests, which can sometimes take days, and weeks. As a counter hypothesis, therefore, *the study supposed that large YCS and socioeconomic conditions will in this case, reduce the likelihood of participation of young people in peaceful demonstrations.*

Consistent with the youth bulge theory, the study found that the larger the YCS of a country, the higher the propensity that young people growing as part of such a large group will participate in demonstrations. Importantly, however, the study also revealed that as youth unemployment rates begin to increase within a country with a youth bulge, the probability of engagement also begins to reduce significantly, and particularly in the face of rising levels of education. Put differently, rising joblessness tends to suppress the appeal of well-educated young people growing as part of a youth bulge from engaging in elite-challenging behaviors such as demonstrations. This was largely in contrast to expectations that a sense of socioeconomic deprivation within an educated youth bulge would precipitate grievance motivated engagements in demonstrations, much in line with the predictions of relative deprivation theory/grievance theory about collective action and social movements (Cincotta, 2009; Cincotta and Doces, 2011; Weber, 2013, 2019; Vrablikova, 2014). The study accordingly argues that economic security, rather than economic deprivation, is the more likely motivator of youth protest behavior in democratic countries with large YCS.

### **4.3 Study 3: “Antidemocratic youth? The influence of youth cohort size and quality of democracy on young people’s support for democracy”**

Debates about the political attitudes of young people in established democracies of mainly the West have seen the emergence of two main positions. The conventional position sees young people as apathetically disposed towards democratic politics. This is argued to be typified by their declining support for democracy as a political system, and a lackluster approach to the much-cherished civic culture, which so defined Western societies in the past (Putnam, 2000; Foa and Mounk, 2016). Some analysts point to a growing complacency among the younger generation towards democracy, owing to their lack of experience with alternatives to democracy (Corbett, 2016; Mounk, 2018, p. 122).

The counterview argues that young people’s present posture towards democratic politics can be understood within the framework of assertive/critical citizenship. Thus, contrary to claims that they hold a growing aversion towards democracy as a political system, young people are argued within this framework to, just like other better educated polity, manifest a new set of authority challenging and accountability demanding values and norms, which in fact, are a manifestation of their growing expectations of democracy as a political system, not a disapproval of the regime (Norris, 1999, 2011; Dalton, 2004; Dalton and Welzel, 2014). In other words, they can be described as a type of critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats: they support democracy as a political system but are dissatisfied with the way it is practiced (Klingemann, 1999; Dahlberg, Linde and Holmberg, 2015; Asomah and Dim, 2021). Even more importantly, these patterns of critical citizenship/dissatisfied democrats are argued to correlate with the quality of democratization of countries, such that the higher the level of democratization of a country, the stronger the support of citizens for democracy as a political system (Klingemann, 2014). The reasons advanced in support of this correlation include the strong institutions and structures of political socialization developed over many decades in established democracies of the West, which make it relatively easier for such democratic values to be transmitted from generation to generation (Nový and Katrňák, 2015; Kitanova, 2019).

In this study, we seek to address a key lacuna in the ongoing debate. Thus far, the potential effect of young people’s cohort size on their individual support or otherwise for democracy as a political system has been overlooked in empirical research. This is against the backdrop of a plethora of evidence which strongly links youth bulge with increased risk of democratic instability and deconsolidation (Cincotta, 2009; Cincotta and Doces, 2011; Weber, 2013). Democratic countries with large youth cohort sizes are argued to be particularly at risk of

unsuccessful transitions into established democracies, and particularly so if their share of youth is 35% or above (Urdal, 2006). Much of the risk posed by youth bulges to democratic instability is linked to three conflating phenomena which often accompany youth bulges. These are: increased socioeconomic deprivation of the youth (Korenman and Neumark, 2000; Brunello, 2010; Bricker and Foley, 2013), natural socio-biological changes during adolescence and youth adulthood which predispose young people to extremist, high risk and sometimes antidemocratic tendencies (Cincotta and Doces, 2011; Weber, 2013, 2019), and the creation of a large pool of peer agents who end up driving the socialization of young people, in favor of more ‘youth-youth’ over ‘adult-youth’ social and political learning experiences (Hart *et al.*, 2004; Weber, 2013). Particularly in terms of socioeconomic deprivation, young people growing within a bulge are argued to grow negatively inclined towards the political system, when they find opportunities for employment and income limited or lacking altogether: this is seen to lead to a weakening of the legitimacy of the political system in the eyes of the youth (Braungart, 1984; Ganie, 2020).

Building on the above theories linking youth bulge with democratic instability, we probe to establish whether across both established and new democracies, YCS has any relationship with the propensity of young people growing as part of such a cohort, to support democracy as a political system. Again, based on the aforementioned debate about the declining/rising support for democracy among young people, particularly in established democracies, the study further examines whether across the wider democratic world of both established and new democracies, the effect of YCS on young people’s support for democracy is conditional on the quality of democracy of the countries in which they live. *Our first proposition based on existing evidence is that YCS will exert a negative influence on young people’s support for democracy as a political system, such that the larger the YCS of a country, the lower the propensity of the youth to support democracy. For our conditional hypothesis, we suppose that the negative effect of YCS will be exacerbated in the case of individuals living in countries with low quality of democracy. (i.e., new democracies).*

Against conventional expectations, the study found that large YCS showed a strong positive association with young people’s belief in democracy itself as a political system. This effect was nonetheless conditional upon the quality of democracy in the countries in which young people lived. Although overall positive, the positive effect of YCS was found to be stronger for individuals in established democracies, than those in new democracies. As an explanation, the study argues that young people’s attitudes towards democracy can be viewed as one of critical

citizens/dissatisfied democrats (Norris, 2011; Klingemann, 2014, 2018). They support democracy and democratic culture as their preferred political system. And large YCS in this case creates a large pool of like-minded peers who re-enforce their core beliefs and preferences for democracy as a political system, although they may at the same time, hold reservations against the empirical outcomes of democratic governance.

## 5.0 Conclusion

### 5.1 Summary findings, theoretical and empirical implications

The summary finding of this dissertation is that a country's share of young people within the adult population may be viewed as a significant predictor of young people's political attitudes and participation behaviors. Put differently, cohort size exerts significant effects on cohort political attitudes and political participation behaviors. *Importantly, the larger the cohort size of the youth;*

1. The less likely that compared to their peers in democratic societies with smaller YCS, they will vote in national elections.
2. The more likely that compared to their peers in democratic countries with smaller YCS:
  - (a) They will participate in demonstrations as a way of expressing their reservations with the establishment.
  - (b) The less likely, however, that faced with limited labor market opportunities, those with higher education will participate in such protests.
3. The more likely that compared to their peers in democratic countries with smaller YCS:
  - (a) They will support democracy as a political system.
  - (b) Those living in countries with high quality of democracy/ established democracies will show much stronger support democracy than their peers growing as part of youth cohorts in new democracies.

The present findings have wide-reaching implications for both theory and empirical political science research. Firstly, the finding that large YCS within a country does not weaken popular support for democracy among the youth, despite the apparent challenges with socioeconomic deprivation youth bulge is evidenced to create, and the associated threats to democratic stability extant literature proffers, may require both theoretical and empirical re-examination in the light of the current evidence (for example, see, Cincotta, 2009; Cincotta and Doces, 2011; Weber,

2013). This study argues that in terms of their attitudes towards the democratic political system, young people behave like shrewd dissatisfied democrats, who would rather live in a democracy, despite all the concerns over the empirical outcomes of the regime, than opt for an alternative. They seem to have been able to establish a conceptual distinction between the preference for the democratic system itself, in terms of all that the democratic culture represents – including the freedom of expression, equality, voting rights, the space for elite-challenging and dissenting views, among others – and their grievances often underlined by population-related deprivation, which may cause them to abstain from voting or even go onto the streets in their large numbers to demonstrate. These reactions do not, however, represent their loss of faith, or despair, in democracy as a political system.

We can arguably claim, therefore, that most young people growing as part of a youth bulge support democracy as their preferred political system. However, they are less willing to vote in national elections, but more willing to protest, as a means of communicating their concerns to the establishment. Even so, when faced with rising unemployment, particularly among the better educated, who are conventionally thought to be more inclined towards elite-challenging political ventures, members of a youth bulge tend to shrink from the idea of engaging in protests. The present discourse on the link between youth bulge and democratic stability, which depicts youth bulges as threats to democracy would, therefore, need to consider the new evidence presented in this study.

Secondly, the findings that YCS suppresses electoral participation, and also in interactions with other contextual factors, decreases young people's propensities to engage in elite-challenging behaviors, brings into sharp focus, the ongoing debates about the changing trends of youth political participation. It appears that we are unlikely to see the active engagement of the larger proportion of youth in politics, particularly in developing democracies with the unfavorable combination of youth bulge and economic challenges. The changing preference from institutionalized to non-institutionalized political participation may accordingly be a more pronounced feature of youth in affluent democratic societies. It seems that for many developing democracies, however, the apathy towards politics cuts across both institutionalized and non-institutionalized activities. And while I am unable to authoritatively assert an impending crisis of political participation in developing democratic societies with youth bulge, given the reported apathy of the younger generation, who are incidentally the future torchbearers of the democratic flame, I think that the evidence presented in this study should be a cause for concern for democratic enthusiasts.

Lastly, the significance of the direct effects of YCS on young people's political attitudes and participation behaviors, presents an interesting case for empirical political science research. The revelation that cohort size affects cohort political attitudes and political participation opens a new empirical space, in which cohort size can, moving forward, be considered at the very least, as a control variable, if not the main explanatory variable, in future research on the predictors of political attitudes and political participation. These investigations can even be expanded to assess the situation of the cohort size of the older generation, to help improve our understanding in that respect also. The seminal insights generated by this dissertation can accordingly serve as the springboard for future research within the political participation subfield.

## **5.2 Implications for policy**

The findings of this study hold important implications for youth policy, particularly in developing democracies with youth bulge in the Global South. First, the study has demonstrated that the economic and social challenges which confront a youth bulge are also democratic challenges. And while it has conventionally been argued that targeted socioeconomic and technological investments into a youth bulge can deliver demographic dividends for a nation, understood largely in terms of improved social and economic outcomes, the evidence presented in this dissertation shows that such investments can as well produce *democratic dividends*. Policies which aim at improving the socioeconomic fortunes of young people hold the additional benefit of strengthening young people's participation in democratic governance through increased social and economic capitals which make available to them the time, income and civic skills to participate actively in politics (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Teorell, 2006; Dalton, 2009; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). Therefore, central to navigating the life cycle effects which hold back young people from effectively engaging in politics is the implementation of youth policies which increase young people's opportunities to gain employment, or pursue entrepreneurial choices. The *democratic dividend* on reducing youth unemployment should, hence, be an additional incentive for democratic governments committed to preserving democratic governance to implement pragmatic policies which can achieve such ends within the shortest possible time.

Second, given the negative effects of increased peer influence within a youth bulge on young people's electoral participation, and by extension, institutionalized political engagement, the implementation of policies which can counter such negative impacts are crucial. Citizenship education leveraging technologies and platforms currently used by young people, in addition

to the conventional systems of political socialization, such as the school and family systems can be strategically useful in this regard. As argued earlier in this dissertation, the strong socio-biological mechanism at play during the youthful stage of life renders young people considerably detached from traditional and familial values, and inclined more towards idealistic, anti-democratic and even extremists views often shared by their peers (Weber, 2013, 2019). Targeted citizenship education which leverages modern technologies to ‘invade’ the social platforms young people use to engage as peers can, however, yield the benefit of equipping them with the requisite information which can inspire their commitment to core democratic duties such as voting in national elections.

A third policy intervention to boost young people’s political engagements is institutionalizing youth representation as an affirmative action. This can be one of the ways of inspiring youth participation in politics and can include more young people in key political institutions, through mechanisms such as quotas for youth representation particularly in countries where they are overrepresented in the population, but severely underrepresented in power. This can give them a voice to advocate for needs and concerns of biographical relevance to them at different levels of the political governance structure. Since their large numbers give them political salience (Posner, 2004), the increased visibility of their peers within key political institutions, structures and processes can induce confidence and a sense of efficacy among them as a cohort within the population. The long-term benefit for democracy would include increased popular participation among the most politically apathetic but demographically salient group within the population, due to a feeling of relevance to the political establishment on the one hand, and a renewed sense of efficacy on the other hand.



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