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How can Evidence-based Policy Emerge from Empirical Data?

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Abstract:

Over the last three decades knowledge driven governance in the youth field has gained in importance. A conditional prerequisite is that evidence-based policy making emerges from empirical data analysis. This does not happen by magic. The following article starts from an in-depth analysis of a surprising indicator value, concerning young people's electoral participation in Luxembourg and finally, develops a view on how evidence could ideally be produced. Measuring a concept is obviously not enough; evidence should namely be firmly grounded in a new role of the researcher, a reflective professionalization going beyond traditional confines and embedded organizational structures allowing a fruitful interaction between social research and decision making.

Keywords:

governance in the youth field, youth participation, elections, evidence-based policy making, dashboard of EU Youth Indicators, youth policy development

Since the 1990s a large domain of evidence-based policy making has emerged in the European youth sector. An important step and an expression of the willingness to found policy making on a better knowledge and understanding of youth both at EU and member state level consists in the implementation of the Dashboard of EU Youth Indicators developed in the framework of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 (European Commission, 2009a). Policy relevant data are gathered in a simple and flexible structure and made available to a large audience (Eurostat, 2012a). Its importance has been acknowledged through a Commission paper (European Commission, 2011a) as well as through external assessment (ECORYS, 2011). The Dashboard of EU Youth Indicators is a flagship of an entire set of network elements[1] for evidence-based approaches. The present contribution generally aims at a better understanding of how evidence-based knowledge plays its role in youth related discourses. On the one side, this means creating a critical awareness for possible pitfalls, on the other side the analysis contributes in a constructive way to how evidence should be produced. Particularly, the following questions are addressed: How could the interaction in the triangle between decision makers, practitioners and researchers work in order to fulfil its promises? How could policy relevant analyses be provided on a secure and sensible basis? How to improve indicators and how to handle them?

In some areas related to the youth policy agenda, notably youth participation, indicators were missing and the European Commission wanted to fill these gaps by continuously launching Flash Eurobarometer surveys on youth (European Commission, 2007, 2011b-e, 2013). The data was collected by means of a telephone questionnaire. In 2011 about 27000 young people, aged between 15 and 30 years, took part in the survey. The indicator on electoral participation gives an unexpected result for Luxembourg, a

[1] Other tools available are the European youth research projects (European Commission, 2009b), the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) (Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, n.d. a), and the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) (Hoskins, 2006; Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth n. d. b), but also the Council of Europe's intergovernmental programme of policy reviews (Council of Europe, n.d.; Williamson, 2002 & 2008).

country where political voting is compulsory and non-voters can be prosecuted by law[2] and which usually counts as a high electoral turnout area. It comes up with a participation percentage slightly above 67% (European Commission, 2011b: 17), a result more than ten points below the European average and corresponding to a second but last rank among the EU member states. The evolution is very negative, compared to the former Flash Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2007: 45-46), for the participation rate has dropped by more than 10 points. Also the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) with a percentage of 73% for those intending to vote (Burton & Houssemand, 2010: 30-31) did not reveal the problem in its entire extent though it could already be read as a kind of hint. Thus a severe deficit in democratic participation in Luxembourg seems to have appeared recently. Generalizing the findings, electoral participation of young people in Luxembourg could indeed be estimated to a percentage of 67.2 ± 3.5 (confidence interval on a 95% level). The statistical result contradicts the everyday opinions held by those familiar with the situation.

Though non-voting is very often considered as 'a youth issue worthy of investigation and discussion' (Kimberlee, 2002: 86; see also: Phelps, 2012), the striking value revealed by Flash Eurobarometer has not been publicly commented. There was no reaction, neither by the policy making, the policy commenting nor the research community. An exception was the remark Marianne Milmeister made, while she was using the Flash Eurobarometer in delivering information to EKCYP (Milmeister, 2011: 7). She indeed requested further analysis. In 2013 a new Flash Eurobarometer comes up with a similar statement (European Commission, 2013: 13), suggesting an implausibly low participation. The rate of those in voting age participating in elections amounts to 68% for Luxembourg (computed from the values in table: European Commission, 2013: 13, T1). Again there is neither a political nor a social science reaction.

[2] Worldwide, Luxembourg is one of 26 countries where compulsory voting prevails, as well as one of the eight countries (with Australia, Belgium, Cyprus, Fiji, Nauru, Singapore and Uruguay) where sanctions can be taken for not voting (Blais, 2007: 625).

The problem we are eager to investigate lies beneath the surface; it refers to the question how surveys and survey findings can interact with political decision making.

To gain deeper insights into the interactions between empirical research and policy making, the research strategy adopted corresponds to the constant comparative method. It is applied as if in a Grounded Theory study (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1987; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Berg & Milmeister, 2011). Firstly, the construction of the unexpected results will be examined. Secondly, possible explanations and interpretations for the gap between the statistical result and a common sense reading will be offered. Then the field will be opened by considering how the electoral participation could be embedded into a broader context. As a conclusion, we present principles of a reflective approach, which can be useful for practitioners, decision makers and researchers as well as helpful in increasing the relevance of their interactions.

The construction and the meaning of the indicator

The original indicator is based on the following question: 'During the last 3 years, did you vote in any political election at the local, regional, national or EU level?' The questionnaire tried to eliminate those who were not old enough for voting by specifying: 'If you were, at that time, not eligible to vote, please say so.' Three answers are possible: (a) 'Yes', (b) 'No, did not vote in election' and (c) 'No, because you were not old enough to vote'. The frequency table for the Luxembourg sample looks as follows:

Table 1: Frequencies of participation in political elections of young people living in Luxembourg

During the last 3 years, did you vote in any political election at the local, regional, national or EU level? If you were, at that time, not eligible to vote, please say so.					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No, did not vote in an election	216	21.6	32.8	32.8
	Yes	442	44.2	67.2	100.0
	Total	658	65.8	100.0	
Missing	No, because you were not old enough to vote	330	33.0		
	DK/NA	12	1.2		
	Total	342	34.2		
Total		1000	100.0		

Data Source: Flash Eurobarometer data file (2011), table by authors

Two comments may be added to Table 1: Firstly, the low level of electoral participation may be underlined by a comparison with the all-Europe sample: there the group of voters amounts to a relative value of 79.9%, the one of non-voters to 20.1%. Secondly, the number of missing values is relatively high; it consists of two groups, a large one comprising the 330 respondents indicating not being old enough to vote, and a small one, 12 cases or 1.2%, who skipped the question. Moreover, a further analysis of the data shows a significant association between electoral participation on the one hand and the membership in political organisations and the attained educational level on the other hand. This can be read as a concurrent validity of the electoral participation indicator.

Explanatory analyses

Three lines of explanation for the above mentioned Flash Eurobarometer result could be imagined: a dysfunction of the built-in age filter, a lack of democratic participation linked to multiculturalism, a historical shift to a lesser degree of political participation. The following paragraph is dedicated to an examination of these three aspects in the light of the available data.

The questionnaire intended to eliminate those who were not of voting age. This was complicated for two reasons: (a) the electoral age is not the same in all member states, (b) the last elections occurred at different years in different member states. In Luxembourg the minimal age for voting is 18 and the last elections to take place before the survey were in 2009. Moreover for a minority, such as the individuals with double nationality, the question could also refer to elections in other countries. Finally, a group of respondents with different kinds of erroneous answers must have slipped through the net, as there are for example 53 persons aged 15 years indicating themselves as non-voters with no reference to the age limit. Obviously the proportion of 'false' non-voters is higher than the one of false 'voters', so the improper working of the filter biased the result. In order to quantify the effect a sample with definite relevant cases by selecting individuals who were over 20 years of age was examined.

Table 2: Frequencies of participation in political elections of young people living in Luxembourg and being definitely old enough to vote (>20 years)

During the last 3 years, did you vote in any political election at the local, regional, national or EU level? If you were, at that time, not eligible to vote, please say so.					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No, did not vote in an election	155	27.1	28.3	28.3
	Yes	393	68.8	71.7	100.0
	Total	548	96.0	100.0	
Missing	No, because you were not old enough to vote	13	2.3		
	DK/NA	10	1.8		
	Total	23	4.0		
Total		571	100.0		

Data Source: Flash Eurobarometer data file (2011), table by authors

Among the missing cases are 13 persons whose answer (they were not old enough to vote) stands in contradiction to their age indicated before. Nevertheless this analysis only leads to a slight correction; the participation percentage increases around 4 points to 71.7%, with the confidence interval ranging from 71.7 ± 1.41.

The second problem results from data collection. It operated inclusively, considering all residents, either nationals or non-nationals. In Luxembourg voting conditions for non-nationals differ from those for nationals. On a local level foreign voters have to be residents in Luxembourg for at least five years. Non-nationals cannot vote in national elections. In European elections a person has to be a national of a member state of the European Union and a resident in Luxembourg for at least two years. Generally, non-nationals have to apply for registration on the electoral rolls whereas Luxembourgers are listed automatically. A possible difference between nationals and non-nationals would have had a strong effect

because of a relatively high foreigner rate in the concerned age group; e.g. for the 20-29 years old it amounts to 39.5% for 2010 (Eurostat, 2012b; for a general description of the situation in Luxembourg, see: Berg, Milmeister, & Weis, 2013a). Unfortunately, the Flash Eurobarometer does not include information on nationality or migratory status. Supposing that respondents with a migrant background are normally overrepresented in a group preferring French to German as a questionnaire language, analysing electoral behaviour according to language choice can give an approximation of the effect of multiculturalism on the result.

Table 3: Frequencies of participation in political elections of young people living in Luxembourg (being definitely old enough to vote) according to language choice

Electoral participation by language choice					
			Language choice		Total
			German	French	
Electoral participation	Non-voters	Count	35	120	155
		%	15.2%	37.9%	28.3%
	Voters	Count	196	197	393
		%	84.8%	62.1%	71.7%
Total		Count	231	317	548
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data Source: Flash Eurobarometer data file (2011), table by authors

The former proportion of 28.3% of non-voters against 71.7% of voters significantly changes according to language choice. For those who have chosen German the percentage of voters rises to 84.8%, whereas in the other group it goes down to 62.1%. With the value of 84.8% the ranking of Luxembourg would shift from the bottom to the top group. A plausible hypothesis would be that the democratic deficit stated by the Flash Eurobarometer indicator is linked to migration, migrants being hit by political

exclusion. The currently available data do not allow comparing nationals and non-nationals with regard to their electoral behaviour. Nevertheless, an analysis covering the 1999 local elections in the city of Esch-Alzette (Milmeister, 1999) provided information. It shows two trends. First, the rate of foreign registered electors is rather low (only 15.2%). Second, the levels vary with age: the percentage of voters for the elder amounts to 20.6% whilst for those younger than 35 it becomes 7.4%.

The third explanation relates the low participation rate revealed by the Flash Eurobarometer to a European tendency of lowering turnout rates for the young (Fieldhouse, Tranmer & Russell, 2007: 803). The data used are the official election statistics published by the National Statistical Office (STATEC 2014). Because of differences at different levels, it is relatively tricky to operationalize electoral participation in terms of official statistics (Blais, 2007: 622). The first filter concerns citizens who are not registered on the electoral lists. This happens with EU and other foreigners who do not fulfil electoral conditions or who choose not to register. There is also a silent disenfranchising for those who are not on the lists because of their living circumstances, for instance nomads or homeless people. The second filter refers to those who do not show up at elections although they are listed. Thus the numbers of registered electors and actual voters differ. A third filter concerns blank and invalid ballots in the election urn, for not all voters express themselves pertinently enough to gain influence on the results. The following table shows an assessment of turnout values in national elections from 1999 to 2009.

Table 4: Electoral participation in the national elections of 1999, 2004 and 2009 in Luxembourg

	1999			2004			2009		
	Electors[3]	Voters	Valid ballots	Electors	Voters	Valid ballots	Electors	Voters	Valid ballots
Total	221 103	191 267	178 880	217 683	200 092	188 910	223 842	203 281	189 993
South	92 259	78 920	73 547	89 085	82 212	77 491	89 898	82 086	76 444
East	28 203	24 222	22 690	28 588	26 366	25 024	30 814	27 965	26 217
Centre	63 378	55 472	51 913	63 099	56 712	53 556	63 391	56 275	52 840
North	37 263	32 653	30 730	36 911	34 802	32 839	39 739	36 955	34 492
		% of votes	% of valid votes		% of votes	% of valid votes		% of votes	% of valid votes
Total		86.51%	80.90%		91.92%	86.78%		90.81%	84.88%
South		85.54%	79.72%		92.28%	86.99%		91.31%	85.03%
East		85.88%	80.45%		92.23%	87.53%		90.75%	85.08%
Centre		87.53%	81.91%		89.88%	84.88%		88.77%	83.36%
North		87.63%	82.47%		94.29%	88.97%		92.99%	86.80%

Data Source: STATEC, data file from 2012, table by authors

As can be seen, the percentage of voters compared to the total number of registered electors drops by around 6-14%. There is a further loss of 5-6% due to blank or invalid voting. With regard to our initial question we can conclude that there is a hidden rate of non-voters, both higher than traditionally admitted by 'popular wisdom' (Henn & Foard, 2012: 47), but still lower than the value reported by the Flash Eurobarometer.

[3] The percentage of voters takes into account the shortage due to electors who do not show up for voting. The percentage of valid votes additionally takes into account the shortage due to non-valid ballots in the ballot box. The remaining percentage finally corresponds to the rate of those registered who voted and expressed their preferences in a suitable way.

Finally, one could ask whether turnout levels vary by age. This could be understood as a democratic deficit regarding the youth segment. Uncommitted young people could be considered as a threat to democracy, a harbinger of an upcoming future crisis (Hooghe, 2004; Rossi, 2009; Farthing, 2010; Sloam, 2012). Such a historical reading suggesting that differences would not vanish with people coming to age understands turnout gaps generationally. For the UK, this argument has been developed by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (2012). Their study draws on the 2009/2010 election survey and explores the commitment of young people in Britain. They apply as a heuristic category the generational structure developed by Strauss and Howe (1998) for the U.S. Furlong and Cartmel provide some descriptive elements but do not confirm the hypothesis of significant generational differences in political engagement. In the case of Luxembourg it was difficult to find suitable data. But the records of the public prosecutor held some relevant clues. For the 2011 local elections, the age group distribution of electors officially reported for non-voting in the town of Hesperange (6487 registered electors, 13604 inhabitants) and in the city of Esch-Alzette (13834 registered electors, 30296 inhabitants) could be examined and compared to the age structure in the list of registered electors. Whereas Hesperange is an average size locality in the suburbia of Luxembourg with a high middle class presence, Esch-Alzette is the second largest town in Luxembourg located in the southern former steel industry district of the country and on the French border.

The generational structuring by Strauss & Howe (1998) was adopted as an analytical model. From this we distinguish four generations: the 'Silent Generation' (born 1925-1945), the 'Baby Boomers' (born 1946-1964), 'Generation X' (born 1965-1980) and 'Generation Y' (born 1981-2000) (Furlong & Cartmel, 2012: 19). However, we restricted the analysis to the population who had been submitted to compulsory voting. The age groups born in 1936 and in 1993 were not taken into account as not all of them, depending on their birth date, were under the compulsory regime.

Table 5: Electoral participation of the different generations (born 1937-1992) in Hesperange

			Reported non-voters	Registered electors	Non-participation rate
Generations	Silent Generation (before 1945)	Count	54	806	6.7%
		%	15.3%	14.3%	
	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Count	108	2125	5.1%
		%	30.7%	37.7%	
	Generation X (1965-1980)	Count	82	1661	4.9%
		%	23.3%	29.5%	
	Generation Y (after 1981)	Count	108	1040	10.4%
		%	30.7%	18.5%	
Total		Count	352	5632	6.3%
		%	100.0%	100.0%	

Data Source: Population Office Hesperange & Office of the Public Prosecutor (2011 elections), table by authors

Table 6: Electoral participation of the different generations (born 1937-1992) in Esch-Alzette

			Reported non-voters	Registered electors	Non-participation rate
Generations	Silent Generation (before 1945)	Count	143	1682	8.5%
		%	17.5%	14.5%	
	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Count	311	4402	7.1%
		%	38.0%	38.0%	
	Generation X (1965-1980)	Count	198	3237	6.1%
		%	24.2%	28.0%	
	Generation Y (after 1981)	Count	166	2257	7.4%
		%	20.3%	19.5%	
Total		Count	818	11578	7.1%
		%	100.0%	100.0%	

Data Source: Population Office Esch-Alzette & Office of the Public Prosecutor (2011 elections), table by authors

The following conclusions can be drawn for Hesperange: Baby Boomers are more numerous and the relative turnout for Baby Boomers and Generation X is slightly higher. But there is no evidence definitely confirming David Willetts' (Willetts, 2011) dramatic picture of a Baby Boomer domination. The most relevant value is the high non-participation rate in Generation Y in Hesperange (10.4%). The distribution does not allow a conclusion in favour of a generational interpretation: the differences we have indicated could well be just a matter of age. By breaking down the sample into five equal groups the trends are confirmed. In the category of reported non-voters the middle age groups are underrepresented whereas the youngest group is overrepresented.

In Esch-Alzette the silent generation shows the highest non-voting rate. Moreover we only found small variations both between generations and age groups. The comparison between Esch-Alzette and Hesperange rather supports the view that trends are not homogeneous all over the country. Nevertheless, one possible explanation for the higher non-participation rate in generation Y in Hesperange could be linked to the life circumstances of middle class youth such as that of studying abroad, whereas the generational interpretation can hardly be supported in neither case.

A second set of information was available at the public prosecutor's office. It gave information about non-voters who had excused their absence. We again checked the generational distribution.

Table 7: Distribution of excused and non-excused non-voting in Hesperange (born 1937-1992)

			Non-voting		Total
			not excused	excused	
Generations	Silent Generation (before 1945)	Count	16	38	54
		%	29.6%	70.4%	100.0%
	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Count	51	57	108
		%	47.2%	52.8%	100.0%
	Generation X (1965-1980)	Count	44	38	82
		%	53.7%	46.3%	100.0%
	Generation Y (after 1981)	Count	41	67	108
		%	38.0%	62.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	152	200	352
		%	43.2%	56.8%	100.0%

Data Source: Office of the Public Prosecutor (2011 elections), table by authors

Table 8: Distribution of excused and non-excused non-voting in Esch-Alzette (born 1937-1992)

			Non-voting		Total
			not excused	excused	
Generations	Silent Generation (before 1945)	Count	71	72	143
		%	49.7%	50.3%	100.0%
	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Count	208	103	311
		%	66.9%	33.1%	100.0%
	Generation X (1965-1980)	Count	142	56	198
		%	71.7%	28.3%	100.0%
	Generation Y (after 1981)	Count	96	70	166
		%	57.8%	42.2%	100.0%
Total		Count	517	301	818
		%	63.2%	36.8%	100.0%

Data Source: Office of the Public Prosecutor (2011 elections), table by authors

Generally speaking the rate of unexcused non-voters is higher in Esch-Alzette (63.2%) than in Hesperange (43.2%). A generational reading shows a similar pattern in both cases with excuse rates being lowest for Baby Boomers and Generation X, and highest for the Silent Generation and Generation Y. The high value for the Silent Generation could be explained by a strong degree of compliance, not shared by other groups. The high excuse rate for the youngest group might be explained by different scenarios, such as parental influence on young non-voters or again non-voting being due to young people's life circumstances (e.g. studying abroad). But generally it must be concluded that the data does not support the view of an upcoming crisis for democracy.

Electoral participation contextualized

Voting behaviour is difficult to record, for none of the available strategies – asking for future voting intentions, self-reported former voting behaviour, and administrative voting statistics – produce an entirely reliable image. Moreover, electoral participation represents a contingent event in young people's lives, which does not represent youth participation. Social actors are aware of this constellation: election officials for instance expounded that reported non-voting does not necessarily mean political protest, an apolitical attitude or even an intentional act. Excuses are often valid. In spite of non-voting being prohibited by law and being, systematically and in due form, reported to the juridical authority, the public prosecutor almost never comes to the point where he would instigate condemnation and actual punishment. Correspondingly, youth research literature does not consider a

narrow phenomenon such as electoral participation as an isolated phenomenon. Bryony Hoskins and Massimiliano Mascherini (2009) as well as and Wolfgang Gaiser, Johann De Rijke and Reingard Spannring (2010) produced a broader view which allows electoral behaviour to be contextualised. Both studies are empirically grounded and refer to large data sets – European Social Survey (ESS) and DJI[4]-Youth-Survey – and both present a comprehensible link between empirical data and foundational concepts. The argumentation keeps in line with Thomas H. Marshall's thinking on citizenship (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992), by for instance opposing political and social participation. Furthermore, a 'need for clearer definitions of participatory activities' (Gaiser et al., 2010) is expressed and the intention is to identify and accurately define measurable phenomena (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). In the tradition of Norman Verba and Sidney Nie (1972), they consider participation as a multidimensional, fragmented, specialized and non-cumulative social phenomenon (see also Newton & Giebler, 2008). Participation appears as an attractive concept covering a lot of heterogeneous issues but remains a problematic category, precisely because of its openness. Finally, both studies focus on two aspects: the individual agency as well as a differentiation of the European participation landscape. Hoskins and Mascherini (2009) select 61 basic indicators from the European Social Survey 2002 to construct the Active Citizenship Composite Indicator (ACCI). The underlying multidimensional framework shows the fragmented nature of participation as well as the way how it could be operationalized for quantitative research and benchmarking. The overall structure is confirmed through factor analysis (principal components). Basic indicators have been weighted following the judgments of 27 leading experts in the field of participation. The ACCI obviously shows bivariate correlations with its dimensions. The correlation coefficients, Pearson's r, indicate the weight of the different domains: protest and social change (.959), community life (.910), representative democracy (.833), democratic values (.481). Each dimension is subdivided into a set of three to seven subcategories, where, for example, representative democracy comprises engagement in political parties, voting turnout and participation of women in political life (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009: 469). It also allows a ranking of a top group of countries comprising Sweden, Norway and Denmark, followed by

[4] Deutsches Jugendinstitut

Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, Finland, United Kingdom and France. At the bottom there are mainly countries from southern and central Europe: Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Portugal, Greece, Poland and Hungary. The second study by Gaiser, De Rijke and Spannring (2010) draws on the DJI Youth Survey. The study considers both political and social participation. Political participation aims at influencing decision-making processes in the political systems whereas the predominant function of social participation is social integration and support (Gaiser et al., 2010: 428). Types of participation are defined by referring to two criteria: on the one hand forms of organisation, on the other hand objectives and contents.

Table 9: Types of participation

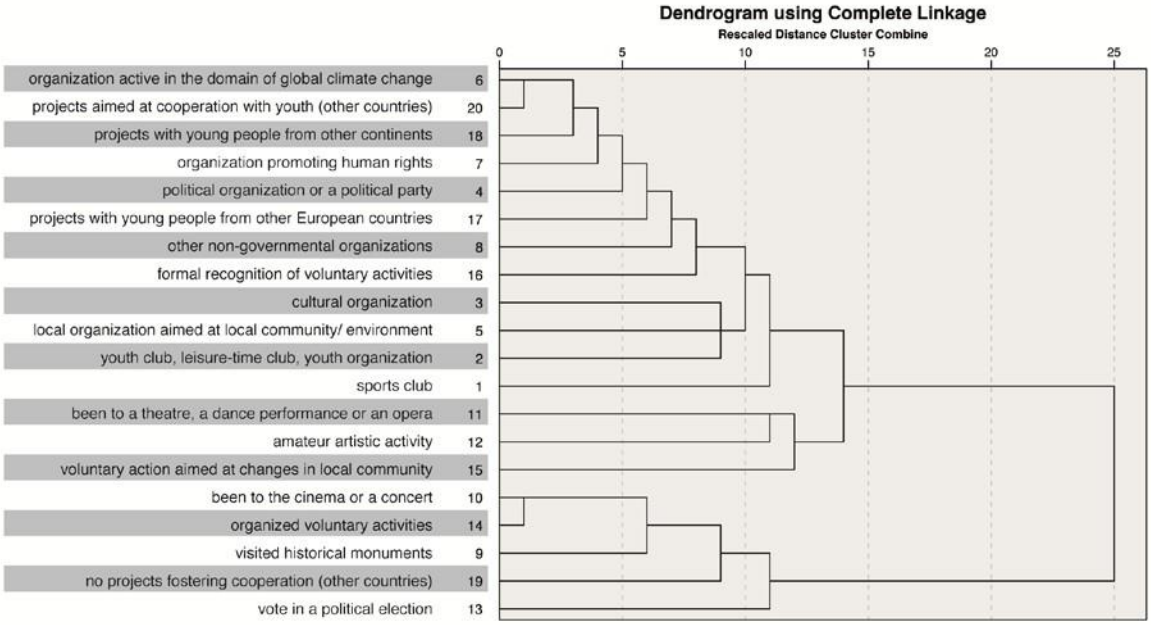
Contents/objectives	**Forms of organisations**		
	Traditional clubs, associations, organisations	**Informal groups (NGOs)**	**Activities (temporary/situative)**
Politics	Parties	Human rights, peace movement, etc.	Voting, demonstrations (unconvent./conventional)
Interests, group targets	Labour unions, professional associations	Women's/ men's groups, neighbourhood initiatives	Strikes organized by labour unions
Non-political or private interests	Sports clubs, social organisations	Animal rights groups	

Source: Gaiser et al., 2010: 429

Voting is in the eyes of young people 'the most important and logical form of democratic participation and exercise of political influence' (Gaiser et al., 2010: 437). Over the time period 1992-2003 Germany's electoral participation remained stable and at a high level (around 90%) (Gaiser et al., 2010: 440). The differentiated picture does not suggest a general decline of civic commitment and social capital in the sense of Robert Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' (Putnam, 2000).

In order to understand the fragmented nature of youth participation we submitted the Flash Eurobarometer data to a cluster analysis performed on variables. We chose hierarchical clustering which is a procedure classifying variables with regard to their reciprocal proximity and allows for an exploration of the internal structure of the participation field. As a proximity measure we chose Euclidian distance and as a clustering method we used furthest neighbours (Everitt, Landau & Leese, 2001: 60-62). The following diagram (Figure 1), a dendrogram, shows the divisions made at the different stages. On the left side variables are considered on their own, whereas on the right side all variables fuse into one cluster.

Figure 1: Cluster analysis by variables over all countries



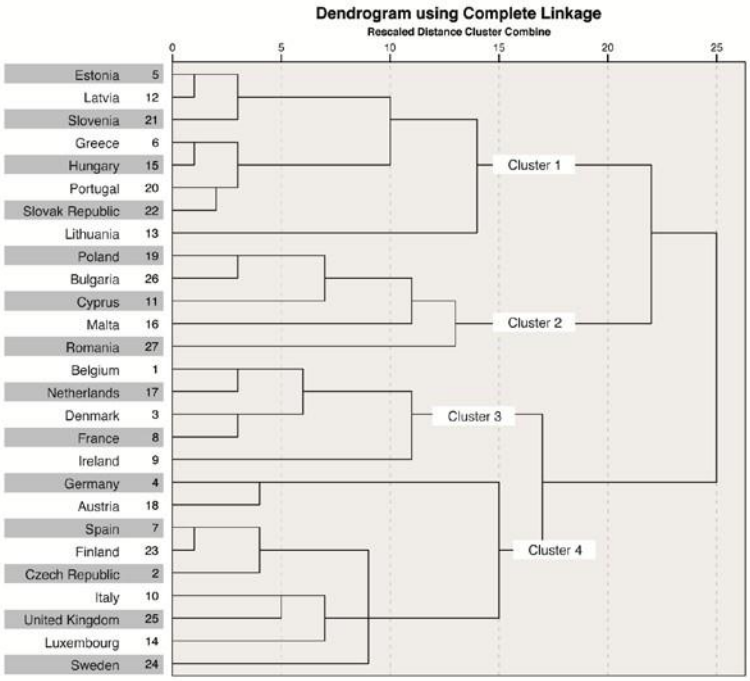
Data Source: Flash Eurobarometer data file (2011), dendrogram (SPSS) by authors

At first glance we find a thematic structure based on contents and organisational forms. Indeed looking at the three-clustered structure, we find in the middle cluster (11, 12, 15) mostly cultural or artistic activities, whereas in the top cluster there are associational activities. The bottom cluster (10, 14, 9, 19, 13) indicates more individual activities. The more political activities are divided from the less political ones. Considering electoral participation, one feature catches the eye: there is a relative distance between electoral participation and political party membership or the involvement in organisations aiming at political objectives. Electoral participation is located within the immediate neighbourhood of the following variables: not participating in projects fostering cooperation with young people from other countries, visiting historical monuments, taking part in organized voluntary activities or having been to the cinema or to a concert, in other words the more individual activities. Hence electoral participation as a form of democratic participation appears in a slightly different light. It is an easily accessible, low risk,

low cost and low effort form of participation. Actually, it can be performed individually and independently. It is not self-organized and may be more dependent on compliance to family rules than on self-initiated civic commitment. The same analysis undertaken for the Luxembourg cases shows a similar structuring into individual and associational activities with some minor reordering appearing. The position of electoral participation in the neighbourhood of individual activities is confirmed.

In a further step we changed the view from an agency to a national participation cultures perspective. By aggregation we assembled a country data file and computed aggregated variables by breaking down the initial data by country. The question is now whether country clusters can be identified and the position of Luxembourg can be helpful in understanding electoral participation. The dendrogram (Figure 2) shows a grouping of countries.

Figure 2: Cluster analysis by countries



Data Source: Flash Eurobarometer data file (2011), dendrogram (SPSS) by authors

Considering the four cluster solution we come to the following structuring: in cluster 1 and 2 we find mainly countries from eastern, central and southern Europe. The following countries are in cluster 3: Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, France and Ireland. Cluster 4 gathers Germany, Austria, Spain, Finland, Czech Republic, Italy, UK, Luxembourg and Sweden. The clustering does not correspond to the ranking obtained through applying ACCI (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009: 477). The differences between analyses at least suggest a certain caution before making a definite assessment grounded on an isolated data set.

In general, it can be concluded from the explorative clustering that the existence of hidden variables and a corresponding structuring of the available data is plausible. But it also appears that an in-depth analysis cannot be solely based on empirical data: In order to go further there is an obvious necessity to take into account interpretations by social actors themselves.

Conclusions and Prospects

The investigation into an implausible value of an electoral participation indicator which could have been considered as an insignificant statistical artefact reveals the complex link between social research and policy making. Political decisions do not emerge from empirical research automatically. Policy relevant empirical research runs aground if the gap between analysis and decision making is not suitably bridged.

The technical problems of the questionnaire could have been avoided by splitting the question about the voting age and the electoral behaviour into two separate parts, the first one concerned with the age of voting and the second one with the electoral behaviour. Moreover by including nationality and migratory status, one could have undertaken a variable study with age as an independent, electoral behaviour as dependent variables and the two new variables as covariates. Nevertheless, neither these minor improvements nor the quantitative multivariate analysis would have solved the entire problem. The actual matter, in particular, is going beyond measuring a relevant concept related to youth life; in general, this means overcoming a technological view of knowledge-driven policy-making. Nowadays, the production of reflective politically relevant knowledge implies changes on three levels. A first one concerns the researcher's role. Social research differs from engineering; it cannot be considered as 'a simple, self-evident, or straightforward matter' (Luke, Green & Kelly 2010: ix). Therefore it can no longer be conceived in a narrow way, but its focus should be enlarged. It has to open for a dialogue with field generated forms of practical knowledge; it needs comparisons following a breaking down inspired by a grounded understanding based on conversations with social actors; it requires a theory and data based contextualisation allowing to go beyond observable manifestations and to look beneath the surface of social processes. Thus, the illusion of research as a simple value-free statement of truths (see Douglas, 2009: 175-177) is discarded. Research acknowledges the complex task of explicating, reconstructing and questioning different types of knowledge occurring in the magic triangle and offering practitioners and decision-makers tentative solutions in the on-going orientation process. A second point concerns the methodological and disciplinary foundations of youth research. Such a reflexive approach could indeed best be supported by a combination of methods and of diverse disciplinary insights. It corresponds to a new reflective professionalization in youth studies, links theory based conceptualisation and empirical analysis. It goes beyond traditional confines, and is based on a suitable training for knowledge producers and knowledge users focused on the interaction of social research and decision making. Steps in this direction have recently been undertaken, e.g. by the M.A. EYS (European Youth Studies) Curriculum Development Project (M.A. EYS Consortium n.d.) or the ongoing initiative of building a

European platform concerned with learning mobility in the youth field (EPLM n.d; Berg, Milmeister & Weis 2013b). A final point aims at alternative organizational structures. We think of settings different from purely academic traditions, such as platforms, forums, multi-professional reviews with a diverse audience, co-governed research bodies. They all could work as active intermediaries (May & Perry 2011: 197-207) and help making European youth studies a part of an innovative, 'more reflexive, engaged and confident social research' (May & Perry 2011: 197).

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