

Are Today's Young People Active Citizens? A Study of Their Sensitivity to Socio-Political Issues and Their Social Participation

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Abstract

This article focuses on two facets of young people's active citizenship: their experience of being impacted by socio-political events and their participation behaviour. The idea that underlies the study is that to better understand the relationship between young people's perception of socio-political reality and their multiple ways of exercising active citizenship, we need to conceptualize more broadly what constitutes "the political". Since today's youth engagement includes many different forms, research should focus on what young citizens themselves experience as impacting, going beyond traditional measures of political interest. We conducted a survey among university students (N = 969, 72.7% female) in Spain that included an open-ended question about events that had particularly impacted them in the past year and measures of their experience and willingness to engage in conventional and unconventional political and civic participation. The content analysis established four categories of impacting events: "national politics" and "international politics", which correlated with conventional political participation; events categorized as "social life" and "social justice" were associated with unconventional/civic participation. The results also suggest that most of the participants are, in fact, active citizens, which challenges the view of young people as "disaffected citizens". We conclude that the analysis of their specific socio-political sensitivities helps to understand the intensity and concrete orientation of their actions.

Keywords

political interest, active citizenship, conventional and unconventional political participation, civic participation, youth

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en dos facetas de la ciudadanía activa de los jóvenes: su experiencia de verse afectados por los acontecimientos sociopolíticos y sus conductas de participación. La idea que subyace al estudio es que, para comprender mejor la relación entre la percepción que tienen los jóvenes de la realidad sociopolítica y sus múltiples formas de ejercer la ciudadanía activa, necesitamos conceptualizar de forma más amplia lo que constituye "lo político". Dado que la implicación de los jóvenes de hoy incluye muchas formas diferentes, la investigación debe centrarse en lo que los propios jóvenes ciudadanos experimentan como impactante, yendo más allá de las medidas tradicionales de interés político. Realizamos una encuesta entre estudiantes universitarios (N = 969, 72,7% mujeres) en España que incluía una pregunta abierta sobre acontecimientos que les habían impactado especialmente en el último año y medidas de su experiencia y disposición a participar en actividades cívicas y políticas convencionales y no convencionales. El análisis de contenido estableció cuatro categorías de acontecimientos impactantes: "política nacional" y "política internacional", que se correlacionaron con la participación política convencional; los acontecimientos categorizados como "vida social" y "justicia social" se asociaron con la participación no convencional/cívica. Los resultados también sugieren que la mayoría de los participantes son, de hecho, ciudadanos activos, lo que cuestiona la visión de los jóvenes como "ciudadanos desafectos". Concluimos que el análisis de sus sensibilidades sociopolíticas específicas ayuda a comprender la intensidad y la orientación concreta de sus acciones.



Palabras Clave

interés político, ciudadanía activa, participación política convencional y no convencional, participación cívica, juventud

Non-Technical Summary

Background

This study is based on the notion of active citizenship (AC). AC represents a conception of citizenship in which individuals play an agentive role and take ownership of the socio-political life of society. According to AC frame, citizens' involvement is manifested in all forms of social participation which are based on the principles of respect for rights and dignity, tolerance and equality. Thus, AC is constituted by various actions of democratic participation that are not limited to electoral behaviour and it is crucial for the legitimacy and effective functioning of democratic governance in both "old" and "new" democracies. Numerous studies tried to learn about young people's AC to determine, among other things, whether the future of democracy is safeguarded, because it will undoubtedly depend on their involvement. It is generally found that young people are quite detached from traditional politics and have little interest in it, while they are actively involved in other AC actions.

Why was this study done?

What is the political and engagement with it? Our main argument is that to understand the reality of young people as active citizens it is important to know what aspects of socio-political life they experience as impactful, going beyond traditional measures of political interest, and to study their relationship to AC behaviours. By doing this, it is possible that a more complex picture emerges where the young no longer appear as apathetic but as citizens who engage with challenges facing society including those that are not on the agenda of the major parties and elites of mainstream politics.

What did the researchers do and find?

In a survey (anonymous and voluntary) we asked young Spanish university students whether any of the events of the last year (2018) had had an impact on them and if the answer was affirmative, we asked them to describe which events they had been impacted by. We found that out of 969 participants, only 151 said that nothing had particularly impacted them. The content analysis of the responses of the rest showed that the events could be grouped into 4 categories: national politics, international politics, social life, and social justice.

We found that more than half of the students had experience of AC and that they named more events, revealing a close relationship between sensitivity to socio-political issues and active participation. Regarding the future, the intention to participate in non-conventional and civic forms (e.g., volunteering, activism) was stronger and was related to being impacted by events categorised as social life and social justice. In contrast, the intention to participate conventionally (e.g., political party membership) was lower and was associated with the impact of events in national and international politics. The comparison between women and men revealed that a pattern persists where women are less oriented to traditional mainstream politics both in terms of its impact on them and their intention to participate.

What do these findings mean?

As in the previous research, the findings evidence an important relationship between being impacted by socio-political events and the AC actions. They also reveal that most of the participants are not indifferent, they care about what happens at the socio-political level, but not exclusively about political events in the traditional sense (political decisions and processes), but also about other problematics such as climate emergency, gender equality and violence, poverty. Moreover, precisely the impact of the events that relate to social life and social justice is connected to the actions of AC that go beyond political party membership and include activism, volunteering and other ways of contributing to society.

These results have an applied value and can be used to design strategies to foster AC. For example, addressing in depth negative and controversial issues related with social life and social justice events in educational settings can sensitize young citizens and stimulate their AC. Moreover, in gender-oriented interventions, women can be encouraged to realize that they have a say in national and international political agendas so that they can be as much active protagonists in this field as men.

Policy makers, citizens, including young people and researchers themselves may conceive of the term and exercise their *citizenship* in different ways (see in Condor, 2011; Condor & Gibson, 2007). Reflecting this, there exists an extensive

literature on the conceptualization of citizenship and its relationship to "formal" politics (e.g., Isin et al., 2008). In this regard, several researchers (e.g., Lister, 1997; Lister et al., 2003; Turner, 1993) have argued that citizenship should be conceptualized as a practice, recognizing the agency of citizens, and involving their participation, meaningfully constituted in interaction, and embedded in the sociocultural context.

In this article, we focus on political and civic participation as the behavioural components of *active citizenship* (AC) (Enchikova et al., 2019). AC is defined as "participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy" (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009, p. 10). The notion is based on the developments from several disciplines including political psychology, educational sciences, sociology, or political science. It is a multidimensional construct that includes 1) participating in representative democracy (e.g., voting); 2) participating in actions that promote social change, influence socio-political life and ensure accountability of political institutions to citizens (demonstrations, social movements, boycotting certain products, etc.); 3) participating in various facets of civic society that reinforce the social fabric (e.g., social and cultural associations, NGOs); and 4) possessing democratic values (social inclusion, human rights, etc.) (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). This way, AC encompasses, on the one hand, activities defined as *civic participation*, focused on providing benefits for the community (Zukin et al., 2006) and *political participation*, which contains all actions aimed at directly or indirectly influencing political decisions (Verba et al., 1995). On the other hand, it includes actions conceptualized as *conventional* that intend to influence the political process through the electoral arena (Verba et al., 1995) and *unconventional* participation that aims to influence politics through non-institutionalized means (Amnå, 2012). Although several taxonomies have been proposed to reflect the increasing diversity of forms of AC (e.g., Zukin et al., 2006), it is clear that the notion of AC goes far beyond voting behaviour and reflects multiple forms of citizens' engagement.

We draw on this construct because it serves as an umbrella concept to refer to multiple diverse ways of exercising citizenship in today's society and because it refers to those actions that are underpinned by a set of shared values that emphasise tolerance and respect for human rights. The notion of AC reflects the challenge of ensuring the optimal functioning of democracy, and 'learning for active citizenship' has guided education policies in the European Union (see European Commission, 2007), although some authors (e.g., Biesta, 2009) criticise the implementation of AC in European higher education as depoliticising the content of the concept.

Before proceeding further, given the relevance of political, cultural, and historical context in the understanding and exercise of citizenship (e.g., Haste, 2004; Lister et al., 2003), it is important to note that the research we draw upon has mostly been conducted in Western democratic countries. In this sense, established democracies are concerned with the revitalization of citizens' involvement. However, for the legitimacy and effective functioning of democratic governance in both "old" and "new" democracies the issue of citizens' participation and ownership of democratic practices is crucial (Biesta, 2009).

Young People's Active Citizenship

Are today's young people active citizens? The relevance of this question is largely based on the need to ensure healthy democracy and also because AC can promote very different benefits such as, increasing personal and collective well-being, empowering people, and fostering a sense of citizenship (Cicognani et al., 2015). Moreover, the pattern of participation established during people's youth shapes their AC during later life stages (e.g., Greenfield & Moorman, 2018). In this sense, a strong interest of young people in political issues is considered especially critical for their future as active citizens. It has been found to develop during youth, especially during the so-called "formative years" (Verba et al., 1995) and to be quite stable throughout adulthood (e.g., Neundorff et al., 2013).

At the present times, however, both in public opinion and in the media, as well as in scientific research, there are two opposing views on whether young people are engaged or not. From the pessimistic perspective of the "disaffected citizen" (Loader, 2007), it is argued that there is a crisis of youth participation and a progressive apathy (e.g., Putnam, 2000), reflected in the decrease of participation in electoral processes and other forms of representative politics (e.g., Blais et al., 2004), which may lead to the weakening of democratic citizenship (Loader, 2007). For example, according to the European Social Survey, about 50% of Spanish youth in the period 2002-2015 were disaffected from politics (Benedicto & Ramos, 2018), and this tendency was also evidenced in other European countries (e.g., Quaranta et al.,

2021). A recent study conducted in 2022 in 27 European countries has shown that on average, only 8% of young Europeans have participated in a political party or organization (European Commission, 2022).

It is argued that young people are less interested in politics than adults because the mainstream political system leaves them out by not addressing the issues that specifically affect them (Marsh et al., 2006; O'Toole et al., 2003) and because many consider politics boring, irrelevant to their own lives, and not very comprehensible (e.g., Kiesa et al., 2007; Zukin et al., 2006). In any case, from the point of view of traditional formal politics, young people are seen as disengaged.

The more optimistic view speaks of "cultural displacement" and maintains that young people are not necessarily less interested in politics than previous generations, but that conventional political activity no longer seems adequate to address the concerns associated with contemporary youth culture (Loader, 2007). Studies conducted over the past 20 years have demonstrated youth's interest and engagement in a range of unconventional and civic forms of participation (e.g., Quaranta, 2016; Youniss et al., 2002) evidencing that the variability of AC actions is broader now than it was decades ago (Amnå, 2012). For instance, in 2022 17% of young Europeans have participated in voluntary organizations, 15% in those dealing with climate emergency, and 10% in organizations focused on human rights (European Commission, 2022). It is argued that contemporary youth prefer other forms of participation, less structured and more based on individual engagement (e.g., Zukin et al., 2006) and on looser, horizontal, and informal networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This tendency seems to be rooted in the modification of the understanding of citizenship (Norris, 2011) and in the evolution of civic values in advanced democracies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Dalton, 2008) based not so much on duties and obligations as on solidarity and ethical commitment to social and political problems. These changes and the increasing diversification of modes of AC may even be modifying the dynamics and the very way of doing politics in today's society (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010; Zukin et al., 2006).

But what is "the political"? Given the variety of ways in which young people exercise their AC, it is to be expected that there exists a wide range of socio-political issues and events that are related to youth participation. This study conducted in Spain aims to examine, first, which socio-political events are experienced as impacting by young people. Second, it analyses how sensitivity to certain specific types of socio-political issues is linked to the involvement in society as active citizens through various forms of participation, not limited to voting. Third, it tests whether the impact of events and active participation are shaped by gender and political ideology.

We next review the literature relevant to our research questions, then present the empirical research, and finally discuss the results.

Interest in and Sensitivity to Political Issues and Their Relationship to AC

Political interest is considered a prerequisite for active and democratic citizenship (e.g., van Deth & Elff, 2004) and an important component of "political capital", along with attention and political knowledge (Zukin et al., 2006). It expresses the degree to which politics arouses citizens' curiosity (van Deth, 1990) or their willingness to pay attention to politics (e.g., Lupia & Philpot, 2005). It is conceptualized as a motivational variable (Silvia, 2008) and an important antecedent of political participation (e.g., García-Albacete, 2014; van Deth & Elff, 2004; Verba et al., 1995). In the case of young people, Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014), analysing nationally representative data from 20 European countries collected in the European Social Survey, have shown that interest was one of the strongest predictors of all forms of youth participation, both conventional and unconventional.

Youth involvement is not necessarily fixed or unchanging (Chrysochoou & Barrett, 2017). The socio-political situation of the society in which they live can be an important macro factor in shaping their interests, attitudes, and behaviours. Thus, for example, in Spain the percentage of "critically politicized" young people, characterized by having a high interest in politics but being dissatisfied with democracy and distrustful of political institutions and actors, has grown from 14.5% to 31.5% as a result of the economic crisis and the massive collective response (15M social movement) to it. And these were the young people most willing to engage in all forms of social participation (Benedicto & Ramos, 2018). Similarly, and supporting the "cultural change" perspective, a recent study (INJUVE, 2021) finds an appreciable increase in interest in politics among Spanish youth between 2004 (24% very or fairly interested) and 2019 (37%). It is

argued that since 2008 there has been an important politicization that has brought with it an increase in interest in politics, which is maintained above all among those who lived through the events of 15M in their impressionable years.

In summary, empirical studies support the idea that certain historical periods have the potential to awaken and shape young people's involvement. On the other hand, experiences during this life stage may influence their general awareness of political and social issues and the specific focus of their interest. One of the factors that can foster sensitization to socio-political life is having experienced an event that triggers emotional and cognitive responses. Thus, [Stattin et al. \(2017\)](#) have evidenced a greater increase in political interest and emotional reactions to political life among those Swedish adolescents who reported that they had experienced such events. In addition, they have found that the type of catalytic event may vary from person to person, suggesting that socio-political events do not have a uniform impact on all youth. What does seem to be fairly universal is that in most cases they are events that challenge or threaten young people's views of justice, fairness and morality, and provoke their concern. Thus, it is possible that some events particularly impact young people and thus awaken or increase their AC via civic or political participation. This impact will not only be cognitive (interest), but also affective (e.g., emotions of indignation or hope) and motivational (desire to do something); nor can it be homogeneous, as some issues will be of particular relevance to some individuals. Therefore, the study of events that have produced impact on young citizens can be illuminating of their sensitivity to specific problems facing society. Moreover, it can help explain the ways in which young people become active in socio-political life, as they need to find the way of involvement that is meaningful to them ([Chrysochoou & Barrett, 2017](#)).

How to Study Political Interest? What Is “The Political”?

Political interest has been operationalized in a number of ways. For example, it has been conceived as psychological involvement manifested in the activities of paying attention to the news, following information about political issues or having emotional reactions to such issues (e.g., [Amnå, 2012](#); [Barrett & Pachi, 2019](#)). In many studies focused on the relationship between participation and political interest, the way to find out the degree of such interest has consisted basically in asking if one is interested in politics. This formulation seems to be rooted in conceiving participation as a form of representative democracy and focused on conventional ways of doing politics (e.g., through voting), while the range of topics that young people consider central to their society is much broader. Thus, a recent study conducted in Spain has evidenced that the indicator of general interest in politics has only been strongly related with interest in issues associated with traditional politics (e.g., elections, political parties, social policies) and not so much with interest in "materialistic" issues (e.g., education, housing, employment) or "new issues" (e.g., LGTBI+ rights, animal rights, gender equality, climate change) ([INJUVE, 2021](#)). Here it seems that "politics" is experienced by young people as something detached from several central issues for today's society, and that interest in electoral activity or in the performance of politicians is not related to interest in other subjects.

However, it is plausible that some issues that do not fit the traditional definition of "the political" (and ways of measuring political interest) are related to or even act as triggers for young people's AC. In this case, interest in topics related to traditional or conventional politics may not be the only type of interest that characterizes young engaged citizens, and their interest in social issues beyond representative politics may be associated with other types of social sensitivity and, therefore, AC. In this regard, among young people in the Czech Republic interest in politics was only associated with political participation (protests) and had no relation to other forms of active participation in society (e.g., volunteering) ([Šerek et al., 2017](#)). Given the diversification of forms of AC, research can focus not only on the general degree of interest in politics, but also on which issues, topics and events have an impact on young people, going beyond political parties and mainstream political life. This approach would widen the focus and understand "the political" more broadly. It could also help explain the relationship between particular social and political issues and specific types of AC actions.

Who Are the Most Socially Engaged?

In terms of gender, there is still a tendency for men to show greater interest than women in mainstream political issues and to be more involved in formal political activities related to parties (e.g., [Cicognani et al., 2012](#); [European](#)

Commission, 2022). Women are more involved in community activities such as volunteering than men (e.g., Hustinx et al., 2012), while large differences are no longer observed in voting or signing petitions (Coffé, 2013). Among young Spaniards in 2019, being a woman increased the probability of being interested in specific public policies and "new issues" along with the tendency to participate in a non-institutional way through non-conventional participation actions (INJUVE, 2021).

Political ideology has been linked in numerous studies to specific issues and actions. Thus, a greater left-wing ideology is often associated with forms of AC that challenge the political system and focus to a greater extent on equality and social justice (e.g., Kende et al., 2017). Among young Spaniards, being on the political left is associated with a greater interest in "new issues" that emphasize the rights of different groups and focus on social justice issues, while being located on the right implies less awareness of these issues and a greater interest in traditional politics (INJUVE, 2021). At the same time, beliefs and ideologies may be linked differently to various types of AC. Thus, a greater left-wing ideological orientation is associated with unconventional political participation such as activism, but not so much with civic participation such as volunteering (Zlobina et al., 2021).

The Present Study

The concept of AC is used extensively in relation to the youth both at the level of political and educational practices and in research, and AC has been studied among both school-age and older young people, as can be seen in the literature reviewed above. In social research, youth has become an elastic term and refers to young people aged between 15 and 25 (Sherrod, 2006) or even up to 30 or 35, reflecting the complex and fragmented transitions from childhood to early adulthood (Vieira & Gamundi, 2010).

In this study we focus on young university students in Spain. Although entering university represents another educational stage different from the school years, from a sociological point of view it does not necessarily mean a change of life phase. In the case of Spanish youth, as well as Italian young people, the transition to adulthood (e.g., economic and residential independence, adoption of adult roles) is rather delayed (Vieira & Gamundi, 2010). At the same time, university students differ from school-age young people in that they have already acquired their rights as full citizens by reaching the age of majority (18 years old in Spain). This potentially enables them to participate in all available AC initiatives just like adults.

The first objective of this study was to explore what socio-political events had impacted young Spanish university students. Unlike several previous studies that asked participants to evaluate a closed list of topics, this research was based on the inductive method, where free responses to an open-ended question were subsequently categorized by the research team. The aim was to validate and enrich the previous empirical evidence. The following hypotheses were put forward:

H1a: There would be an important variability of the number and the types of events mentioned as impacting.

H1b: Apart from events related to "conventional" political life (elections, political parties, etc.) other types of events would be mentioned as impacting.

Another difference with respect to previous studies was that, instead of querying about young people's interest in the issues, we asked which events had particularly impacted them. Methodologically and theoretically, this is somewhat different, since being impacted implies both a cognitive and emotional response, possibly reflecting psychological involvement in socio-political life, not mere interest. Also, the number of possible responses was not restricted in the study, and participants were given the option of answering that nothing had particularly impacted them. In this way, the presence, the number, and the type of events mentioned as impacting were used as indicators.

The second objective was to study the relationship between the types of events that had an impact on respondents and their active citizenship behaviours, both in terms of their actual participation and their intention to carry out various forms of active citizenship in the future. We put forward the following hypothesis:

H2: Greater mentioning of events related to "conventional" political life (the actions of national and international political parties, relations between them, elections, etc.) would be related to higher intention to engage in political participation (e.g., being a member of a party or union).

Given the mixed evidence regarding other forms of participation, no further hypotheses were advanced.

Additionally, we aimed to analyse the differences in the participation profile of young people considered "indifferent" or "disaffected" (those who did not identify any event as having an impact) and those who mentioned at least one event. We hypothesized that:

H3: "Indifferent" young people would have less previous experience in AC and less intention to do so in the future compared to the rest.

The third objective was to analyse the relationship between participants' gender and political ideology and the events they experienced as impacting, as well as their disposition towards AC actions. The following general hypotheses were put forward:

H4: There would be differences between women and men in terms of the issues that have an impact on them and the forms of AC they intend to carry out in the future.

H5: A more left-wing political ideology would be related to mentioning events related to social equality and justice issues and to unconventional social participation.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We aimed to collect data from public university students in Spain. To this end, members of the research team went to classrooms at a public university in Madrid and invited undergraduate students to answer a paper-pencil survey. The data collection procedure was non-probabilistic and incidental. The participation of the students was voluntary and anonymous, and they previously signed an informed consent that included the description of the objectives of the study and confidentiality statement. Data were collected between November 2018 and January 2019.

A total of 969 university students studying for degrees in social sciences (social work: 359 persons, 37% of the sample; political science: 205 persons, 21.2%; criminology: 139 persons, 14.3%; sociology: 266 persons, 27.5%) participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of 20.41 years ($SD = 2.28$). 26.6% (258 persons) were male, 72.7% (704 persons) female and 0.6% (6 persons) indicated their gender as "other". As regarding their political ideology, 68.6% said they were "extreme left" and "left" while 2.5% said they were "extreme right" or "right".

Measures

Being impacted by social and political events. First, a closed-ended question with two response options (Yes/No) asked participants if they had been impacted by any event in the last 12 months. Responses were coded as a dichotomous quantitative variable (0 = "not impacted", 1 = "impacted"). Second, if the answer was affirmative, participants were asked to describe briefly which events had impacted them.

Through a content analysis of the responses to 118 of the questionnaires, 4 general categories were established by the research team, which in turn were broken down into several subcategories. These initial categories were used to categorize the answers given in the rest of the questionnaires, and subcategories were generated and modified according to the content of the new answers. In those cases, where categorization was not evident, a panel of three judges decided the assignment to a particular subcategory. It was impossible to categorize a total of 13 responses, either because they were unintelligible or because they referred to personal issues. Table 1 presents the general categories and the subcategories with an exemplification of the most frequently reported themes.

Table 1*Impacting Events: Categories, Subcategories, and Their Exemplification*

| Categories and Subcategories | Exemplification |
|-------------------------------|---|
| National Politics | |
| Elections | Repetition of the elections General elections 2019 Consequences derived from these (PSOE-UP pact, C's fiasco) |
| VOX party | Rise of VOX |
| Catalonia | Procés Sentence |
| Police violence | |
| Fighting between parties | The parties are unable to reach an agreement |
| Social policy | |
| Political corruption | ERE case |
| Political Imprisonment | Incarceration of the Altasua youngsters |
| International Politics | |
| International conflicts | Conflicts in Syria, Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia |
| Protests | Yellow vests in France Protests in Hong Kong, in Latin America |
| U.S. policy and politics | Trump's impeachment International policies (conflicts with China) |
| Brexit | |
| Extreme right | Rise of the extreme right around the world |
| Police violence | |
| Social Life | |
| Climate emergency | Fires in Australia and Amazonas Fridays for Future movement |
| Feminism | March 8 demonstrations |
| Refugees | Deaths in the Mediterranean Asylum and refugee status issues |
| Immigration | Underage who immigrate alone Rejection of immigration |
| COVID | Social alarm about COVID-19 |
| Crimes | |
| Social movements | |

| Categories and Subcategories | Exemplification |
|------------------------------|--|
| Pensions | Protests for more decent pensions |
| Historical memory | Exhumation of Franco |
| Social Justice | |
| Gender Violence | Several trials related to gender violence |
| Poverty | Economic inequality Social class-based inequality |
| Racism | |
| LGBT | Homophobic acts |
| Evictions | |

Once the responses had been categorized, quantitative variables were created. One variable recorded the total number of events mentioned by the participant; four other variables recorded the number of events belonging to the four major categories established ("national politics", "international politics", "social life", "social justice").

Experience in active citizenship: two dichotomous questions (No = 0, Yes = 1) were used to evaluate the experience of past and current social participation focused on social problems. A single indicator was created to reflect the experience of participation (0 = no experience; 1 = experience).

Intention to carry out different forms of active citizenship. Participants estimated the likelihood of engaging in seven forms of AC in the near future (1 "not at all likely" – 7 "very likely"): 1) being a member of an association with social purposes, 2) volunteering in an NGO, 3) activism or militancy in a social movement, 4) being a member of a political party, 5) being a member of an alternative political group (e.g., popular unity candidacy or assembly-based political organization), 6) participating freely without establishing commitments, getting involved in the causes considered by oneself most important at each moment, and 7) social entrepreneurship that meant working in a social initiative cooperative to solve problems faced by society. An exploratory factor analysis (principal components, oblique rotation) found two factors explaining 61.8% of the variance. One factor grouped the items of the disposition to become involved in conventional political participation (membership in a political party and membership in an alternative political group), and the other factor grouped the rest of the items, which referred to unconventional political and civic participation (volunteering, associationism, activism, free participation, and social entrepreneurship). Cronbach's alpha was .65 and .71, respectively.

Socio-demographics: participants also reported their age and gender (coded as 1 "male", 2 "female", 3 "other").

Results

Being Impacted by Events

In relation to the first objective, descriptive analyses were carried out. Firstly, the results showed that 151 participants (15.6%) were indifferent to socio-political events since they answered "No" the quantitative variable of the impact of these events. The remaining 818 (84.4%) mentioned between 1 and 10 events in the open-ended question. Of them, 230 people (28%) mentioned one event, 229 participants (28%) mentioned two, 180 (22%) mentioned three, and 101 (12%) mentioned four events as impacting. The mean was 2.53 events, $SD = 1.10$.

Secondly, the analysis of the frequencies of the topics identified showed that the events categorized as "national politics" were the most mentioned, followed by those classified as "social life", "social justice" and, in the last place, were the events of "international politics" (see Table 2). These results confirm our hypotheses H1a and H1b regarding

the variability of events and that not only events related to conventional politics are experienced by young people as impacting.

Table 2

Impacting Events: Frequencies and Percentages of Categories and Subcategories (n = 818)

| Categories and Subcategories | Frequency | % |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| National Politics | 1780 | 73.7 |
| Elections | 284 | 34.8 |
| Vox | 260 | 31.9 |
| Catalonia | 204 | 25.0 |
| Police violence | 43 | 5.3 |
| Fighting between parties | 24 | 2.9 |
| Social policy | 11 | 1.3 |
| Political corruption | 10 | 1.2 |
| Political Imprisonment | 7 | 0.9 |
| Other | 52 | 6.4 |
| International Politics | 258 | 24.0 |
| International conflicts | 112 | 13.7 |
| Protests | 72 | 8.8 |
| U.S. policy and politics | 23 | 2.8 |
| Brexit | 18 | 2.2 |
| Extreme right | 17 | 2.1 |
| Police violence | 5 | 0.6 |
| Other | 11 | 1.4 |
| Social Life | 615 | 52.4 |
| Climate emergency | 217 | 26.6 |
| Feminism | 155 | 19.0 |
| Refugees | 30 | 3.7 |
| Immigration | 27 | 3.3 |
| COVID | 23 | 2.8 |
| Crimes | 17 | 2.1 |
| Social movements | 15 | 1.8 |
| Pensions | 15 | 1.8 |
| Historical memory | 15 | 1.8 |
| Other | 55 | 7.8 |
| Social Justice | 330 | 32.6 |
| Gender Violence | 198 | 24.3 |
| Poverty | 32 | 3.9 |
| Racism | 31 | 3.8 |
| LGBT | 24 | 2.9 |
| Evictions | 16 | 2.0 |
| Other | 29 | 3.6 |

Next, Pearson correlations were carried out. The results showed that mentioning events classified as "national politics" correlated significantly with mentioning "international politics" events, $r = .09$, $p = .02$, and with citing less events classified as "social life", $r = -.10$, $p = .007$. Meanwhile, mentioning "social life" events was significantly associated with naming "social justice" events, $r = .11$, $p = .002$. This suggests a tendency to be more sensitized either to political issues in their more traditional sense or to social and community issues.

Active Citizenship Behaviours

The analyses revealed that of the whole sample, 54.6% had experience of AC. Regarding the future engagement, the intention for “unconventional/civic” forms was higher than that for “conventional political”, $t(919) = 6.31$, $p = .035$, although there was a significant correlation between them, $r = .28$, $p = .001$. In addition, youth with previous AC experience had a significantly higher intention to participate both unconventionally/civically, $t(966) = 12.18$, $p < .001$, and conventionally, $t(964) = 5.02$, $p < .001$.

To fulfil our second objective and study the relationship between the types of events experienced as impacting and AC, firstly, we compared the number of events mentioned by young people with and without experience of participation (see Table 3). We found that, except for “social life” events, $t(812) = 1.73$, $p = .094$, people who already had been involved in AC named significantly more events than those with no prior experience.

Table 3

Number of Events Mentioned by Participants With and Without Previous Active Citizenship Experience: Means (Standard Deviations)

| Participant | Total | International | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| | | National Politics | Politics | Social Life | Social Justice |
| With experience ($n = 529$) | 2.74 (1.59) | 1.16 (0.93) | 0.37 (0.68) | 0.75 (0.87) | 0.46 (0.73) |
| Without experience ($n = 439$) | 2.25 (1.19) | 1.02 (0.81) | 0.24 (0.55) | 0.66 (0.71) | 0.33 (0.58) |

Secondly, the analysis of correlations between the types of events and the intention of future participation showed that the total number of events mentioned as impacting correlated significantly positively with the intention to carry out both types of AC (conventional and unconventional/civic), evidencing that greater impact is associated with higher levels of AC. In addition, being more affected by issues related to national and international politics correlated with a stronger intention to participate in politics in a conventional way, while mentioning as impacting more events related to “social life” and “social justice” issues was related to a higher intention of unconventional/civic forms of AC.

These results (see Table 4) seem to validate our measure in general and the categorization of events. They also show that there is a correspondence between orientation towards a particular type of AC and sensitivity to certain socio-political issues and events.

Table 4

Correlations Between Number of Events and Forms of Active Citizenship

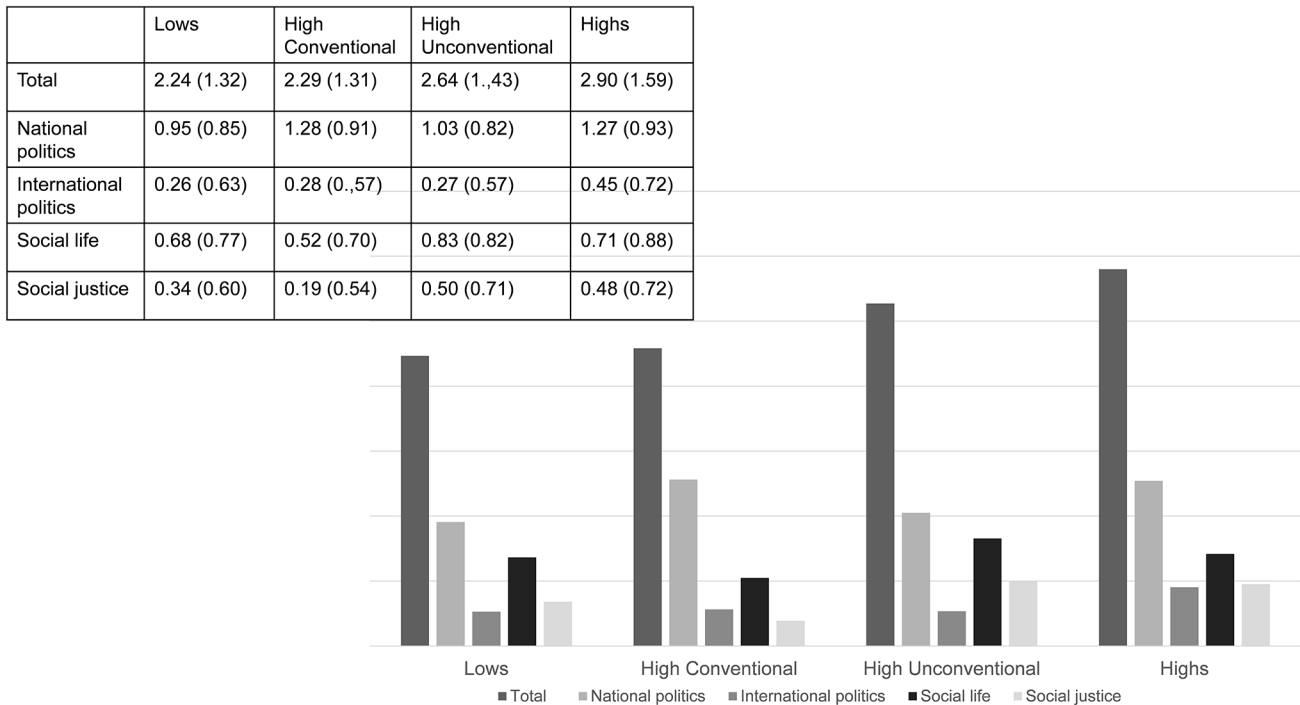
| Form of AC | N Total | International | | | |
|----------------------|---------|-------------------|----------|-------------|----------------|
| | | National Politics | Politics | Social Life | Social Justice |
| Conventional | .124*** | .155*** | .115** | -.048 | .002 |
| Unconventional/civic | .169*** | .031 | .055 | .100** | .148*** |

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

To go deeper, we created four profiles of participants based on their degree of intention to participate conventionally and unconventionally/civically, establishing the empirical mean as the cut-off point. We obtained that 334 participants (34.5%, “lows”) had low intention with respect to both types of AC and 230 (23.5%, “highs”) were high in both intentions. In addition, 114 participants (11.8%) had only high intention for conventional involvement (“high conventional”) and 289 (29.9%) prioritized unconventional/civic involvement (“high unconventional”). Figure 1 shows the means of impacting events for each profile.

Figure 1

Descriptive Statistics (Means and Standard Deviations) and Bar Chart of the Number of Events by AC Profile



Mean comparison of the events mentioned by the participants (ANOVA, with post hoc DMS analyses) evidenced significant differences between the profiles. The total number of events mentioned was significantly higher among "high unconventional" and "highs" respondents as compared to "lows" and "high conventional", $F(3, 809) = 9.876, p < .001$. National political events: "highs" and "high conventional" named significantly more events than "lows" and "high unconventional" participants, $F(3, 809) = 7.236, p < .001$. International politics: "highs" mentioned a larger number of events than the rest, $F(3, 809) = 4.443, p < .01$. Events classified as "social life": "high unconventional" participants mentioned a greater number of events than "lows" and "high conventional", $F(3, 809) = 3.661, p < .01$. "Social justice": "high unconventional" and "highs" mentioned significantly more events of this type than did "high conventional" and "lows", $F(3, 809) = 6.812, p < .001$. In sum, this analysis confirmed that the impact of a given type of events varies depending on the AC profile.

Finally, we compared "indifferent" individuals, that is, those who reported not being impacted by any socio-political event in the last 12 months, and those who had been affected by at least one event. We found that the "indifferent" had lower lever of AC practices: their experience of participation was significantly lower, 40.4% vs. 57.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 14.66, p < .001$, and their intention to engage in conventional, $M = 1.72, SD = 1.21$ vs. $M = 2.39, SD = 1.71$, and unconventional/civic participation, $M = 3.83, SD = 1.24$ vs. $M = 4.18, SD = 1.30$, was significantly lower than that of the "non-indifferent" group, $t(965)_{conventional} = -5.80, p < .001$; $t(966)_{unconventional} = -3.16, p = .003$. We also found that the "indifferent" were somewhat younger than the rest, $t(962) = -2.14, p = .034$ and were less leftist, $t(933) = 3.51, p = .001$.

To achieve our third objective of analysing the role of gender and political ideology, we performed comparative and correlational analyses.

Regarding gender, since only six persons identified with non-binary gender, they could not be considered for the analyses carried out. We found no significant differences between women and men in the total number of events mentioned. However, women named significantly fewer national, $t(808) = 3.46, p = .001$, and international, $t(808) = 5.25, p < .001$ events than men. In contrast, women mentioned significantly more "social life" $t(808) = -6.21, p <$

.001, and “social justice”, $t(808) = -4.20$, $p < .001$ events. Regarding AC, although there were no significant differences in prior experience between women and men, $\chi^2(1) = 0.87$, $p = .349$, women had a lower intention of conventional political engagement, $M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.48$ vs. $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.86$; $t(958) = 8.40$, $p < .001$, and a higher intention of unconventional/civic participation, $M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.26$ vs. $M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.30$; $t(960) = -6.30$, $p < .001$ than men.

Political ideology correlated significantly with all the variables of number of events mentioned and intention to engage in AC behaviours (range .09 - .31) except with the impact of national political events, so that the more left-wing, the greater the number of issues mentioned and the greater the intention to participate conventionally and unconventionally/civically.

Discussion

This study focused on the perspective of young Spanish university students. Without claiming to be an exhaustive study, since a large but not representative sample was available, it aimed to explore the universe of their sensitivities and concerns, as well as their actions as active citizens. The fact that almost 85% of the participants had named at least one event as having an impact on them, and the fact that on average between two and three events had been mentioned, seem to reject the view of young people as apathetic or indifferent, at least from the point of view of their interest in political and social life. Moreover, more than half had claimed to be actively involved in some form of AC, and the intention of future engagement was also very high, especially for unconventional/civic participation. All these data seem to support the “cultural displacement” perspective and portray young people, at least those studying at public university and pursuing social science degrees, as engaged in their society.

The study had as its first objective to explore what socio-political issues Spanish university students experienced as impacting. The analyses revealed a wide range of events mentioned (Hypothesis H1a confirmed), being those of traditional politics only a portion of them (Hypothesis H1b confirmed). The “national politics” events relevant to young people had to do with tensions and relations between political parties, the rise and fall of new parties, and with the consequences of some political decisions and processes (e.g., political imprisonment, corruption). In the case of “international politics” there was a similar tendency to mention political actors and also conflicts, in this case mostly between countries, which could fit with the view of “traditional politics”. However, events related to unconventional political participation (protests and social movements) carried out in other countries were also frequently mentioned. Events classified as “social life” reflect concerns about the climate emergency, feminist issues, those related to the refugee tragedy, and, less frequently, events related to immigration, historical memory, crime, the situation of retirees, or the anticipation of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in the period of the survey had just arrived. Finally, events categorized as related to “social justice” issues that impacted the study participants had to do with gender violence, poverty and evictions, racist acts or the situation of the LGTBI community. It can be observed that some of the events belonging to the latter two categories (e.g., climate emergency or gender violence) were mentioned with similar frequency to those of “national politics” (elections, VOX, Catalonia). This illustrates once again that in the perception of young people, important socio-political events are not reduced to those related to politics understood in the traditional sense.

The diversity of socio-political interests in Spanish youth has been previously evidenced in a recent study in Spain (INJUVE, 2021). Similarly, Stattin et al. (2017) have found that very different events aroused the interest of Swedish youth in political life. This way, both previous studies and our research provide a more complex and diversified picture of the concerns and sensitivities of today’s youth living in Western democracies. Moreover, they seem to challenge the previously shared idea that young people of the same generation are impacted by the same national and international events (see in Stattin et al., 2017). Moreover, it is striking that, as in other studies, most of the events mentioned as impacting are of a negative nature or connotation. This data and the fact that the higher the number of events mentioned, the more intense the intention to engage in AC, suggest that those issues that are perceived as negative or as social problems are associated with a more active citizenship. This result suggests a direct application for motivating youth participation: addressing negative and controversial issues in depth in educational and political socialization

settings (Stattin et al., 2017) along with exercises focused on socio-political problem solving (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006) can stimulate youth interest and active citizenship.

Our second objective was to analyse the relationship between the type of events that impressed young people and their AC behaviours. The results show that, in general, the sensitivity of individuals to the problems facing society is associated with their active participation in it. The differentiation by types of events and modes of AC has allowed for a much more nuanced analysis of this relationship and represents a valuable contribution of this study. Thus, confirming our second hypothesis (H2), we found that the impact of "national politics" and "international politics" had a significant correlation only with the intention to engage in conventional participation, while "social life" and "social justice" were significantly linked to the intention to engage in unconventional political and civic forms of AC.

Analysing the prevalence of impacting events in the four profiles established (degrees of intention to become conventionally and unconventionally/civically involved) was useful to understand the relationship between the impact of events and the type of AC. We found that although "national political" events prevail in all profiles, students who prioritize conventional participation and those who favour both types of engagement are more sensitized than the rest to this type of events, and that the "highs" are also sensitized to international events. On the other hand, we observe that those who prioritize unconventional/civic involvement are more impacted by "social life" and social justice-related events than those who prioritize conventional participation or the "lows".

We can conclude that the indicators used in this study (the number of impacting events in general and by type) seem to be revealing both of the general degree of involvement of young people in society – since they are systematically associated with all the variables of AC – and of the specific orientation of this involvement. Moreover, these indicators seem much more precise in reflecting the concerns of today's youth and allow us to broaden the notion of "the political" by including issues that young people themselves experience as relevant to the socio-political reality.

It is striking that unconventional/civic participation, which includes associationism or activism, is not related to the impact of events representing the traditional political realm but has significant correlations with events that certainly represent central challenges for modern societies (climate emergency, gender equality, racism, minority and refugees' rights). This seems to meaningfully link a broader understanding of "the political" with new forms of doing politics or at least to actively participate as engaged citizens.

The data do not allow us to establish causal relationships. Thus, the comparison of "indifferent" or "disaffected" young people with those who had been impacted by at least one event evidenced that the "indifferent" had significantly less experience of AC and less intention to get involved in the future (Hypothesis H3 confirmed). However, it is not clear whether the experienced impact of the events stimulates AC or vice versa. In this regard, it has often been argued that political interest generally precedes active participation (e.g., Verba et al., 1995), but the empirical evidence is inconclusive and suggests that the relationship may be more complex. Thus, Šerek et al. (2017) in their longitudinal study found causal effects of unconventional participation (protests) on interest in politics, and no inverse effects.

Regarding "indifferent" young citizens, we found that they were younger and of a more conservative ideology than the rest, and that this group is in the minority among undergraduates studying social sciences. Future research could study whether this same profile is found in other university careers and whether its proportion is similar.

Comparing the type of engagement of women and men, and thus responding to our third objective, we found that women were significantly less interested than men in traditional politics, both in their mention of impacting events and in their intention to engage in conventional participation (Hypothesis H4 confirmed). This confirms the persistence of the trend observed in numerous investigations (e.g., Cicognani et al., 2012; European Commission, 2022). We also found that women showed a greater sensitization with events linked to "social life" and "social justice", as well as a greater willingness to participate unconventionally/civically, replicating what has been found in previous research (e.g., Coffé, 2013; INJUVE, 2021). The available data do not allow explaining these differences, but it is possible that gender socialization has an impact on the trends found, as well as the gender-differentiated opportunities and limitations to exercise AC that exist in the general context and are shaped by social and cultural norms (Galligan, 2014).

Finally, we confirmed (Hypothesis H5) that a more left-wing political ideology is associated with all forms of involvement in society, both with respect to awareness of events and active citizenship.

The results of this research should be considered in light of the limitations of the study. First, the participants were university students. Considering that educational level is an important factor in explaining social engagement

(see in Crossley, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006), the conclusions cannot be automatically generalized to the rest of Spanish youth. Moreover, the participants in our study were social science undergraduates, which may make them particularly engaged with societal issues, as their training is focused on social problems. It is also possible that this type of degree attracts people with a greater disposition towards active citizenship. Despite this, however, Crossley (2008) found no results to support the special idiosyncrasies of this student profile in explaining social participation. Second, as mentioned in introduction, the socio-political context and historical events shape the way citizenship is conceived and practiced (Haste, 2004; Lister et al., 2003). Thus, Spanish young university students may experience different pressures and opportunities compared to those in other countries. In this sense, a study analysing the consequences of having been politically socialized during the economic crisis that began in 2008 has shown higher percentages of 'critical generation' (high dissatisfaction with democracy and high political engagement) in Spain and Greece compared to Italy and Portugal (García-Albacete & Lorente, 2022). At the same time, the latest data show that the levels of different types of AC of young Spaniards are very similar to average European levels (European Commission, 2022).

To conclude, this research draws on the notion of active citizenship as a framework. AC implies a conception of citizenship that recognises the agency of people who can take ownership of issues relevant to their society through their direct and wide-ranging participation. Furthermore, it is assumed that AC is crucial for democratic stability and that young people play an important role in it. We aimed to approach youth engagement with their society from a more open perspective than that adopted in previous studies. Starting from the idea that today's young people or at least those living in Western democracies participate in many more ways than a few decades ago (e.g., Amnå, 2012; Quaranta, 2016; Youniss et al., 2002; Zukin et al., 2006) and that this may even be changing the understanding and ways of doing politics (Amnå, 2012; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010), we sought to broaden the focus of analysis and conduct an open-ended study of what events in today's reality impact youth and how they relate to their AC practices. Undoubtedly, the list of events recorded is not representative, nor is the sample used. However, our main objective was not so much to provide an exhaustive picture as to highlight the fact that many different issues are linked to the active citizenship of young people today. Indeed, and this represents a clearly novel contribution, we were able to demonstrate how different impacting events experienced by young people are differentially associated with their conventional and unconventional or civic ways of contributing to society. Therefore, we argue that what constitutes "the political" probably should be reconceptualised and expanded to include issues that directly impact young people (Loader, 2007), who are not "tomorrow's citizens" but are already so today.

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