Bachelor paper Bachelor in Social Sciences

**Reasons behind non-participation**

The case of non-participation of Belgian young adults in the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse

**FIEN PAUWELS**

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	* + 1. **Introduction**

When looking at recent political news, it can be noted that there has been a lot of attention going towards the supposed decline on political participation among young people. (Tucker, 2020). As Putnam stated in 1995, there has been a decrease in political participation, but more contemporary research shows a more nuanced view of a shift in participation from conventional to more unconventional political participation. (Dalton, 2008) Conventional political participation gets defined by Stockemer (2014) as partaking in actions that have as a goal to influence the political process through elections, like voting and being a member of a political party. Unconventional participation gets defined by Saunders as “a host of forms of political participation outside of electoral politics” (Saunders, 2014, p. 575).

The decrease in conventional participation and the subsequent shift to more unconventional participation is especially visible among the younger generations. (Hartleb, 2017) Uncertainty still reigns on the subject of political participation, but one thing is pretty clear, the gap between politics and young adults is growing. Young adults with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years old are seen as the new political generation, but their interest in participation in formal or conventional politics is lacking. (Seongyi & Woo-Young, 2010) To counter this decrease, a lot of new initiatives have been set up to engage young adults more into the world of conventional political participation.

A lot of research has been conducted on new ways to engage the public with politics and to uphold large political participation of citizens. In this analysis, I will look at youth parliaments as an initiative to regenerate democratic politics among young adults.

Youth parliaments are seen as instruments to boost democratic legitimacy. They set out to engage young people with politics and learn them to voice their opinion and let them be heard. (Matthieu et al., 2020) If we look at the characteristics of youth parliaments, we can see that they form a bridge between conventional and unconventional participation, which makes them an interesting initiative to research. The bridge is formed because the design of youth parliaments is made to mirror that of the main electoral body, the parliament, but the practice itself falls out of the electoral arena. This means that through unconventional political participation, participants are introduced to the workings of conventional politics in pursuit of motivating them to participate in conventional politics.

While most studies on the subject of youth parliaments focus democratic credentials and normative approaches, the actual reasons for (non-)participation are not considered. Most of the normative research talks about youth parliaments’ representativeness but foregoes the lack of interest in participation among some young people. Matthieu et al. (2020) show in their research that, even though youth parliaments have great potential for restoring the relationship between young adults and politics, they don’t quiet reach their goals since they mostly attract young adults already interested in politics. Therefore, this thesis will investigate why the target population is still hesitant to participate in the JPJ. The research question that this paper will try to answer is: “Why do young adults with a baseline interest in politics not participate in the JPJ in Belgium? And how do their reasons vary along with their gender and personal political background?”

In this research, I will focus on the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse, hereafter referred to as JPJ, in Belgium. This choice was made on the basis of two reasons. The first reason is that Belgium in particular is an interesting country to study since its political landscape is very complicated. There are a total of six parliaments present in Belgium with each their own constituency and competencies. This intricate political system is often not very clear for the young Belgian citizens. A study done by the IEA in 2001 on civic and political knowledge among teenagers showed that the Walloon youth that participated in the study scored below average on the political knowledge test. This low political knowledge can be increased by participating in youth parliaments, but it can also be a barrier to participation since some interest or political knowledge is often required. (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2015; Matthieu et al., 2020)

The second reason the JPJ makes a good case is because it has no real policy output. (*Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie*, 2021) This means that the decisions that are made in the JPJ do not have any real political consequences. Because of this an interesting dynamic arises between the drive of young people to participate politically, and the output of their participation.

The last reason why the JPJ makes a good case to study non-participation in democratic regenerative initiatives, is that the JPJ is an established institution that organizes their event annually around the same period of time. The design of the JPJ is thorough and is professionally organized. *Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie*, 2021) Therefore, the JPJ is a relevant institution in the research on youth parliaments.

A study conducted by Matthieu et al. (2020) that evaluated the democratic credentials of the JPJ, showed that there was an over-representation of higher education students. Because of this, this research’s sample consists of only higher education students from Flemish universities. All disciplines will be looked at both on Bachelor level and, together with all their different branches, Master level. I chose to only look at the social sciences since there is a basis level of interest in politics present in these disciplines. This makes that interest is controlled for when looking at reasons for non-participation in the JPJ.

This research will start by a short overview on existing literature on the influence of youth parliaments and how they try to increase youth political participation. After this, there will be an explanation of the theoretical concepts on (non-)participation that will be used in this research and will serve as inspiration for the analysis. Furthermore, there is an assessment of the variation in participation when looked at gender and political background. Continuing, there will be an outline of the hypothesis and an in-depth explanation of the methodology behind this thesis. Afterwards, conclusions will be drawn out of the data using statistical analysis. Lastly, I will conclude by giving an overview of the main findings and propose ideas for further research on the topic of non-participation.

1. **Literature review**
	1. **Youth parliaments**

Because Putnam has shown in 1995 that there is a decrease in political participation, multiple initiatives were, and are still being, set up that try to revive political participation among young adults, one of which being youth parliaments. As stated in the introduction, youth parliaments are instruments to boost democratic legitimacy among young adults. Furthermore, they are set out to engage young people with the world of conventional politics through unconventional means. They teach young adults to voice their opinion in formal settings and teach them the ropes of parliament. (Matthieu et al, 2020)

A study done by Fuks in 2015 shows that there is a multitude of positive effects that youth parliaments can have on political socialization, which is key when trying to engage young adults more in politics. He found that values are easier to change than political motivation, knowledge, and attitudes towards political institutions. This means that values can change over time, but that once young adults are informed and motivated politically, they will be more likely to perpetuate that behavior in the future. Fuks also found that the participation in the Mineiro Youth Parliament, did not have effects on further political participation in the short term, but it does in the long term. This means that young adults who have participated in a youth parliament when they are young are more likely to engage themselves politically in their adult life. The same study also states that the effects of participation depend on the institutional design of the youth parliament, and that effects might change when there is a difference in design. (Fuks, 2015)

If design matters it is best to look at the democratic credentials of the JPJ itself. A coherent overview of the JPJ’s democratic credentials can be found in research done by Matthieu et al. (2020). According to this research, the JPJ scored high on some, but also lacked on other democratic credentials. The first good effect of the JPJ is that its participation is of high quality. Matthieu et al. state that young adults feel fully engaged with the JPJ and everyone can be included and respected. The same cannot be said about representation. Representation scores low as a democratic credential within the JPJ. This can be attributed to the fact that the young adults who participate are more likely to be male, highly educated, and come from parents who are also highly educated. This social group is already more likely to participate politically, which is then reflected in the JPJ. When reflecting on the cause of this, Matthieu et al. state that this might be the consequence of the recruitment process, and that changes to it might solve this representational flaw.

Initiatives like the JPJ, make sure that participation among adults is kept at higher levels throughout their lives. A study by Patrikios and Shephard (2014) shows that people who have participated in political initiatives before, are more likely to participate in the future. Their research on the representative nature and the impact of the Scottish Youth Parliament, hereafter referred to as SYP, shows also that there is a continuous positive effect on people who participate politically. In their research they show that a positive development of personal and social skills can be seen in young people who participate in the SYP. They do however find that the people who are volunteering in the SYP are disproportionally the same social groups that are known to volunteer more. This ties in with the results of Quintelier and Fuk’s study (2010; 2015) where they found that young people who have participated politically before, will continue to engage themselves later.

There have been a multitude of institutions set up to engage young people more with the world of politics. Though a lot of institutions exist, not everything has the same effect. A study done by Gerodimos in 2008 looked at forms of online youth mobilization and reviewed what forms had the desired effects. He showed that top-down youth mobilization efforts, like youth parliaments and online political forums, lacked appeal. The explanation for this is that those efforts lacked a clear goal, appeal, and relevant content. Young people did not get motivated because there was nothing specific they could get out of their participation. (Gerodimos, 2008) This lack of appeal for institutions with no clear outcome might serve as an explanation for the lack of participants in the JPJ. The JPJ’s design is made to look and act like the Belgian Federal Parliament but does not have any of the political power. (*Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie*, 2021) Even though the relevance of the JPJ is clearly stated for their participants, the goals might not be tangible enough to motivate them.

The research from Gerodimos ties together with research done by Milliken in 2001. In her research, she states that children will be more likely to participate politically when they receive a clear signal of value from their environment. Children must be encouraged for their participation and the ways in which to achieve it. This encouragement is the reason why Milliken argues for a large governmental push for youth parliaments. If we look at the JPJ, we can see that this is not the case. Recruitment is not advertised in all Belgian universities equally. This might make the students unaware of the existence of the JPJ and will cause them not to participate.

As pointed out by multiple researchers, the design of the youth parliament influences its output and its participants. (Fuks, 2015; Shephard & Patrikios, 2013) The aim of the JPJ is to familiarize young adults with the working of the Belgian Federal Parliament and by this engage them with conventional forms of politics through unconventional participation in the hope that political participation will increase. (*Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie*, 2021) This means that its main goal is not generate real policy proposals, but to educate young adults on Belgian politics. In this regard the JPJ was a success. Matthieu et al. (2020) found that the JPJ had transformative effects on political knowledge of the participants.

* 1. **Youth (non-)participation in politics**

Even though youth parliaments can have positive outcomes, participation in these kinds of initiatives is not always widespread and also differs across groups of young people. Therefore, we must look at the reasons why young people participate, or don’t participate, in youth parliaments. In order to gain deeper insights into this, the theoretical framework of my study builds on insights from previous studies on political participation with an explicit focus on reasons and motives for (non-)participation. The first highly relevant study I use as a framework is “Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics” by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). In this quantitative study, the researchers develop the Civic Voluntarism Model which states that there are three components that can predict whether a person will engage in politics. I have used this modes to try to answer my research question by incorporating its aspects in the design and analysis of my survey .

The second study I use to develop a framework is the study on non-participation by Jacquet in 2017. In his research, Jacquet sets out to find out why people do not participate in deliberative mini-publics. This qualitative research produces six explanatory logics of non-participation in mini-publics. His logic on non-participation can serve to explain more than just mini-publics and can be applied to different forms of unconventional political participation. In this paper his logics will be used to explain non-participation in youth parliaments, specifically the JPJ.

* + 1. Civic Voluntarism Model

Within the research looking at electoral participation, the Civic Voluntarism Model is often used. This model was coined by researchers Verba, Schlozman, and Brady in 1995 and is still widely used today. Often, the model is used for comparing different nations when talking about political participation, but it can also be used to explain engagement in all forms of politics whether it be conventional or unconventional. (Barkan, 2004) The Civic Voluntarism Model supposes that there are certain sociodemographic variables that can predict whether or not a person will engage in politics. These sociodemographic variables are threefold: resources, engagement, and recruitment. All of these components are seen to have an effect on a person’s will to engage in politics. (Barkan, 2004)

The first component is resources. Special emphasis is placed on this component because it is often seen as a condition that must be present prior to the other ones. (Rubenson, 2000) In the Civic Voluntarism Model, resources refer to money, time, and civic skills. Money is used by participants to support their political party or political cause. Time can be allocated by the participants to their political causes. Verba et al. define civic skills as ‘the communications and organizational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life.’ (1995, p. 304) When there are more resources available for someone, for example a person has more time to dedicate to politics, this person can participate politically with more ease than they could before. This can cause an increase in participation because the threshold to participation is lowered. Rubenson (2000) also states that there are many ways in which a person can gain more resources, but this depends on multiple factors. The first factor is whether a person is connected to an institution in which they develop civic skills. This can be a university or an activist group. The second factor is then what type of institution a person is connected to. For example, the civic skills that a person will learn in Mosque will be different than the civic skill learned while volunteering in a retirement home. (Rubenson, 2000) While being part of an organization can be of great help in increasing participation, the main component remains the increase of resources. Being affiliated is one thing, but the development of civic skills and the increase of resources remains the greatest factor. (Rubenson, 2000) In the case of this research, resources can be seen as enough free time to participate for example. Mathieu et al. (2020) stated in their study on the JPJ that there is an overrepresentation of university students in the JPJ. According to the resources dimension of the Civic Voluntarism Model, this can be because young adults who work will not have the time to participate and will not have the freedom and money to take a full week off to be able to participate.

The second component, engagement or also often called psychological engagement, refers to the amount that citizens feel inclined to become politically active. (Barkan, 2004) This engagement consists of four sub-components namely political efficacy, political interest, political information, and strength of party identification. (Kim & Khang, 2014) Researchers Kim and Khang (2014) explain why these different sub-components have different effects on political participation. Political efficacy makes that people will feel as their political actions will have an influence and that they actually make a difference in the world. When people have a high political interest, they will feel more inclined to act upon different political situations and participate. Furthermore, political knowledge makes a person able to express their own political attitudes in a comprehensive way. Lastly, party identification will predict and promote political participation because people will feel more inclined to participate in group than they do individually. All of these factors are correlated with and strengthen each other. (Kim & Khang, 2014) If we look at this component in light of the JPJ, we can see that there is often an overrepresentation of young adults who are known to participate politically. This might be people with an established interest in politics and the workings of the Belgian Federal Parliament. Political interest is one of the main reasons why a person would or would not participate in the JPJ. Therefore I chose a population of young adults with an established basic interest in the social sciences, and by that, politics.

The last component is recruitment by interpersonal networks. This means that people might have resources and engagement enough, but they will not participate until someone asks them to. This means that the network of the participant acts as a trigger for the political participation. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady refer to three common networks in which recruitment is prevalent: work settings, places of worship, and voluntary organizations. Even when people are non-politically involved in such networks, there will be a greater chance for them to participate politically when asked. This works in the same way as resources do, because when people have a greater network, they will be more stimulated to participate politically. (Kim & Khang, 2014) In the case of the JPJ, recruitment can be seen as advertising on the annual simulation that the JPJ organized. Only a few Belgian universities advertise for the JPJ and there might then be an overpopulation of students from those universities in the JPJ. A question I will therefore look at in this research is whether students will participate more in the JPJ if they have seen advertisement for it or if they are directly asked to participate by someone in their network. Furthermore, recruitment can also be looked at as the encouragement of friends and family. Whereas universities and their advertisement fit more into the work setting aspect of recruitment, friends and family fall more into the voluntary organization aspect. (Verba et al., 1995) I chose not to include places of worship in this analysis since religion has lost importance among young adults in Belgium. (Jeugd Onderzoeks Platform, 2013)

* + 1. Non-participation

Even though the Civic Voluntarism Model lays out the prerequisites needed for young adults to participate, it is often also valuable to look at the reasons why young adults do not participate. Research by O’Toole et al. (2003) and Jacquet (2017) shows that there are multiple reasons that are often referred to when asking people why they don’t participate in political initiatives. This section will go over reasons of non-participation put forward by Jacquet in his paper on mini-publics. Even though his research is not focused on youth parliaments, it is useful to look at his results because mini-publics are a deliberative form of unconventional political participation, similarly to youth parliaments.

The research of O’Toole et al. (2003) shows the existing literature on youth participation is flawed. It states that, because of a too narrow definition, non-participation in conventional politics is often seen as political apathy. This is often not true since an increasing share of young people does not want to participate in conventional politics since they feel alienated from political institutions. The political views of young adults are also often not encroached in the design of conventional political institutions. (O’Toole et al. 2003) Therefore, unconventional participation is more common among younger people.

As explained before, a lot of research has been conducted on ways to motivate young people to participate more in politics, but not much research has been done on reasons why they do not. Jacquet (2017) shows that deliberative and participatory initiatives lack pull to really engage people with politics. In his research, Jacquet focuses on the G1000, a deliberative initiative in Belgium. Even though his study focusses on people from age 18 and up, the results of this research can be used as a theoretical inspiration for this analysis because of their similarity in attainment goals. The qualitative analysis of Jacquet brings out six explanatory logics of non-participation. All of these logics can occur separately or in relation to each other.

The first explanatory logic of non-participation is “concentration on the private sphere” (Jacquet, 2017 pp. 647) In laymen’s terms this logic can also be described as ‘too busy’. People often prefer to spend their time doing something else which can include spending time with family and loved ones, hobbies, or work. If we compare this logic to the Civic Voluntarism Model, we can see that Verba et al. (1995) also saw that this was an important aspect. The resources component they put forward also states that participants need enough free time to be able to participate politically. Jacquet does not state however, that respondents do not have enough time, but rather that they want to spend their free time differently. When combining the two models, we can infer that if people have even more free time, they have enough to spend it in the private sphere and then have time left to spend it in the public sphere.

The second logic is “internal efficacy” (Jacquet, 2017 pp. 649) which relates to feelings participants have about their capability to make contributions in political spheres. They hereby mean that if the subjects have the feeling that their actions will not have the desired consequence, they will not be inclined to participate . People might often feel as if they don’t know enough to have an input or opinion on certain problems to adequately participate which Verba et al. (1995) also put forward in their Civic Voluntarism Model. Political efficacy is seen as a sub-component of psychological engagement. When people do not have enough psychological engagement with politics, they will not feel inclined to participate. (Kim & Khang, 2014)

“Public meeting avoidance” (Jacquet, 2017 pp. 650) is the third logic. This logic refers to the fear that participants might have of face-to-face interaction or confrontation with people who have a different opinion. This aspect is not explicitly put forward in the Civic Voluntarism Model but does seem like an important aspect. We might suppose that Verba et al. did not take this aspect in consideration because it is seen as a basis for political social interaction.

The fourth logic refers to the fact that some participants had planned different activities at the same time the mini-publics were held. Jacquet calls this logic “conflict of schedule” (Jacquet, 2017 pp. 650). Even though this logic seems similar to the first one, but there are differences between them. In the logic of concentration on the private sphere, people choose to spend time in their private sphere over the public sphere. In the conflict of schedule logic, they might have participated but unfortunately, they had other responsibilities. This logic is also not considered by Verba et al. who rely more on the willingness of people to participate politically and do not look at other factors influencing the resources of participants.

The fifth logic refers to what O’Toole et al. (2003) also pointed out, that participants feel disconnected with the political sphere. The dislike of politics by participants also falls under this logic of “political alienation” (Jacquet, 2017 pp. 651). When comparing this to the Civic Voluntarism Model we see that this fifth logic is a combination of psychological engagement and recruitment. People who feel more connected, either through party identification or recruitment networks, will be more inclined to participate. When there is a lack of political identification, people can feel disconnected and thus not participate. (Verba et al., 1995)

The last logic “mini-public’s lack of impact” (Jacquet, 2017 pp. 651) is less explicitly applicable to this research but is still interesting to consider. In this logic, participants might feel as if their participation will not change anything in the political landscape and will therefore not participate. This logic refers to the design of the deliberative and participatory initiative. Because the JPJ is only organized once a year and has no real legislative impact, this logic might also have an impact on participants’ will to participate. In the Civic Voluntarism Model there has been no reference to this aspect, but it might be of great impact in the decision of students to participate politically. It goes hand in hand with the logic of resources, since there is not an unlimited amount of it and people might often feel that they are thus better spend on a political action that has the largest impact possible.

The study done by Jacquet (2017) can be of great inspiration when setting up the quantitative research methods for this analysis. His logics are comprehensive and accessible and might help respondents better understand why they themselves think they don’t participate in these democratic innovations and initiatives. Jacquet’s model resembles and complements the Civic Voluntarism Model by Verba et al. even though one is used to explain participation and the other is used to explain non-participation.

* 1. **Variations in youth (non-)participation**
1. Gender

We have now looked at the reasons for participation and non-participation for young adults, but it might be interesting to look whether there are variations in participation within the population of young adults. The first variation I will discuss is gender.

Research by Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) reveals that there is a gender gap in political participation. According to them, this gap cannot be seen as an overall gap, but rather a difference in modes of participation between genders. Women are more likely to engage in private activism like signing petitions, boycott economic products and so on, which we described as unconventional political participation. (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010) Even so, women are more likely to vote than men when they have the same amounts of political efficacy and interest. Voting in this case constitutes as a conventional form of political participation. But when it comes to other forms of conventional political participation like being a member of a political party, activism in an organized collective, and general political contact, men are still more likely to participate than women.

Research by Welch (1977) suggests that there are three reasons for this gap/difference in participation between men and women. The first reason is the political socialization process in which women from a young age are discouraged from participating in politics. The stereotype of women being passive still stands in society and makes that women face more barriers when trying to act politically or participate in political activities. The second explanation that Welch (1977) puts forward is a situation explanation in which women are still seen to have familial responsibilities that keep them at home and out of the workforce, and by this also the political sphere. By bestowing these responsibilities on women they have less time to participate and will be socialized into thinking that their familial responsibilities come before their civic duties. Lastly, Welch (1977) puts forward a structural explanation that states that women are overrepresented in those demographic groups that statistically have the lowest level of political participation. Because women are more represented in disadvantaged groups such as those living in poverty, they will automatically have less chances to participate politically.

The last explanation of the gender gap/difference in political participation coincides with theories on social capital. These theories state that women have less access to social capital than men, and therefore they are less equipped to participate politically. (Lowndes, 2004) Social capital is a concept coined by Bourdieu (1986) which refers to a strong interpersonal network of acquaintances and groups that can help you develop your life. Within social capital, the gender gap/difference coincides with the gap/difference between people with a weak and strong personal political background.

1. Political background

If we look at social capital, we can see that there is a gap in political participation between those with high and low social capital. The reasons for this are highlighted in the Civic Voluntarism Model which states that recruitment is an important factor in the willingness of people to participate politically. (Verba et al., 1995) Recruitment refers to a strong interpersonal network that encourages individuals to assert themselves politically, which coincides with the creation of social capital. According to La Due Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) social capital is created through social interactions with others and a gradual interdependence between individuals. When this interdependence is dense and the social capital is thus high, recruitment will be more likely, and the chance of political participation will increase. Therefore, we can assume that there will be a participation gap between people with a high social capital and a low social capital.

This social capital will be higher among young adults with parents who have a history of political participation. When political socialization happens from a young age onwards, political knowledge and participation will be higher or more likely later in life.

1. **Literature summary and hypotheses**

As seen in previous literature, conventional political participation among young adults is in decline. Looking at voter turnout in Belgium isn’t the best measure for looking at political participation because of its compulsory nature. Besides it being obligatory, there is a slight decrease in voter turnout. (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 1946–2019) Together with the decline in voter turnout, we also see this trend in Belgium of a slight decline in political interest and knowledge among young adults, but that there remains a political drive. This drive is often outed by more unconventional methods of political participation like protesting and signing petitions. (Abts & Swyngedouw, 2014) There is however some hope within electoral politics because the average age of a member of parliament has decreased slightly. (Put & Maddens, 2019) Because of this decline, there has been a lot of focus on institutions designed the regenerate political participation among youths like youth parliaments, which will be this research’s main focus.

After looking at the previous literature on political participation of young adults and the institutions in place to revive it, we see that there is still a lot of research to be done on youth parliaments. Research on youth parliaments has mostly been focused on its influence on participants and its democratic credentials. However, Fuks (2015) and Matthieu et al. (2020) pointed out that there is not a lot of variety in participants of youth parliaments. The participants are often part of social groups that are known to engage themselves more with politics like, white males from educated backgrounds. This research will focus on the reasons why certain social groups do not feel the drive to equally participate in these political institutions (Fuks, 2015; Matthieu et al.., 2020; Patrikios & Shephard, 2014; Shephard & Patrikios, 2012)

Within the research on political participation, two studies will be used to further my analysis in this paper. The first one is the Civic Voluntarism Model which states that there are different socioeconomic factors that can predict whether or not a person will engage themselves with politics. Within the model, three components are put forward that can influence whether a person will participate politically: resources, engagement, and recruitment. (Barkan, 2004) The second study is one done by Jaquet (2017) on non-participation in deliberative institutions. Out of his qualitative study came forth six explanatory logics of non-participation that will be used in the design of the survey used as data for the analysis of the research question.

Furthermore, in trying to answer the research question, five hypotheses arise. The first three hypothesis rise out of the Civic Voluntarism Model of Verba et al. (1995) and non-participation by Jacquet (2017). In these theories we can see three major trends in explanation for political participation and therefore also non-participation. The first trend is “want”, which is based upon political interest, alienation, and comfort. When a person passes a certain level of political interest, they will be more likely to participate in a political initiative. Following that is political alienation, which means that a person has to feel connected and included in the political sphere of a country to want to participate. Furthermore, people have to feel comfortable enough to participate which can mean that a person feels good in front of a crowd to speak to them. Based upon the trend within the theories on political non-participation I have formed my first hypothesis which states that

***H1: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because they lack the necessary attitudes and dispositions: they are not interested in politics, they feel politically alienated, they display low levels of political efficacy, or they are not comfortable with its objectives***

The next trend in theories on political non-participation is “ability”, which alludes to time and knowledge. Time in this trend means that a person has enough free time to participate politically or that they feel as if it is important enough to spend their time on. Knowledge alludes to people knowing enough of the current political state or knowing enough about the workings of political initiatives for them to be able to participate. This trend of ability largely coincides with Jacquet’s resources. (2017) From this trend follows the second hypothesis of this paper namely

***H2: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because they lack the necessary resources and political abilities to do so, in particular time and political knowledge***

The third trend in the theories on political non-participation is “demand”. Demand means that people are not asked to participate. This asking can happen in different forms like directly or via advertisement. Out of this trend also follows the third hypothesis that states that

***H3: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because of demand-side factors: they are not informed about the event or are not invited to participate***

The fourth hypothesis that flows out of the theory states that there are differences in participation when we differentiate on gender and personal political background as stated in the theory on variations within political participation.

***H4: The reasons for non-participation in the JPJ vary according to the gender and personal political background of the young adults***

Within this fourth hypothesis, we make a distinction between the reasons for non-participation as connected to gender and personal political background. In the theory on the gender difference in participation, it is mentioned that women are less likely to participate on the basis of structural reasons and social capital. Therefore, we hypothesize that

***H4a: Female young adults are more likely to mention reasons linked to recruitment and political resources than male young adults***

Furthermore, we see that there is not only a gap in gender when it comes to political participation, but also in political backgrounds. In the theory it is mentioned that people will be less likely to participate when they are not recruited by their interpersonal networks. Because a strong interpersonal network is needed to gain high social capital and high levels of recruitment we can state that

***H4b: Young adults who talked more about politics at home or whose parents are politically involved are less likely to mention demand-side factors than other young adults***

Lastly, the fifth hypothesis is in line with the theory of the Civic Voluntarism Model of Verba et al. (1995) that states that people will be more likely to participate when they are recruited, have enough engagement, and enough resources. These three components overlap with the three categories found int he theories on (non-)participation. When these components are present, subjects will be more likely to participate, which is what will be researched in the fifth hypothesis:

***H5: Young adults who have a large interest in politics, have high political abilities, and have a personal political background, are more inclined to indicate that they consider future participation in the JPJ***

1. **Methodology**
2. **Case selection**

As mentioned before, this research will look at the reasons why young adults with a baseline interest in politics do not participate in the JPJ. To better understand this question, we will first have a look at the workings and characteristics of the JPJ. The JPJ gets defined as a youth parliament based on the categories drawn up by Shephard and Patrikios (2012). To better understand this, I will first go through the characteristics defined by Shephard and Patrikios (2012) namely: oversight, age range, size, selection, duration, representation, proceedings, other activities, and output and impact, and apply them to the JPJ.

The first characteristic of a youth parliament that is brought up by Shephard and Patrikios (2012) is oversight. Most of the world’s youth parliaments are organized and supervised by the government, however, this is not the case in the JPJ. In Belgium, the Flemish youth parliament is organized by the Flemish government, but on the Federal level it is a non-profit organization that has oversight on the JPJ. (Vlaams Jeugd Parlement, 2021) Even though the JPJ is not organized by the Belgian State, they do receive funds from the Belgian Senate and receive logistical and financial support from different sponsors like multiple Belgian universities. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021)

As Shephard and Patrikios (2012) mention in their research, there is no set duration for the assembly of youth parliaments. In the case of the JPJ they only meet once a year for seven full days. These seven days are filled with activities to let the young adults get acquainted with the workings of the Belgian Federal Parliament. Before the simulation week officially starts, participants will have to attend an introduction day where they will be introduced to the workings of all the different parties and commissions. In the actual simulation week, participants will first have a debate day in which all the debates and topics will be introduced. After that, the simulation officially starts, and participants will debate a full week on the aforementioned topics. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021)

Seven days might seem a short time, but it has no influence on the outcome and impact of the JPJ since they have no real power. The JPJ is an organization that is not affiliated with the Belgian Federal Parliament and has thus no legislative power to influence any decisions. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021) This is in contrast with many other youth parliaments since most have either the power to make reports, make recommendations, or even draft bills. (Shephard & Patrikios, 2012) Besides the simulation week, the JPJ also organizes small projects to promote participative democracy. An example of this is their collaboration with the Brussels Parliament in which they organize a simulation of the Brussels Parliament for high school students. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021)

As mentioned by Shephard and Patrikios (2012) there exist a large difference in age range between the different youth parliaments in the world. In case of the JPJ, they chose to include only young adults. This means that you can only participate in the JPJ if you are between the ages of 18 and 25. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021) When an age range is set, it means there are some consequences that come with it. Since the JPJ choses to only include young adults, there are some problems of representation that might come with it. Since the simulation is held on seven consecutive days, only higher education students or young adults without jobs will be able to attend. Therefore, it means that the representation of young adults within the JPJ will be low. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021; Shephard & Patrikios, 2012) Furthermore, this age range makes that no system of school-based acceptance can be used, which is why the JPJ opts to use a letter-based acceptance policy. All Belgian young adults are allowed to send in their letters and can be accepted after their letter is deemed good enough to ensure qualitative participation in the JPJ. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 2021) This letter-based acceptance policy is one of many selection procedures that Shephard and Patrikios (2012) found in youth parliaments from all over the world.

The next characteristic as defined by Shephard and Patrikios (2012) is size. Most of the youth parliaments mirror the size of their national parliaments in their youth parliaments. (Shephard & Patrikios, 2012) If we apply this logic to the JPJ and compare their number of participants to the number of seats in the Belgian Federal Parliament, we see that they do not mirror them exactly. There is a discrepancy of 50 between the number of people in the Belgian Federal Parliament and the JPJ, with the JPJ having a total amount of 130 participants of which 30 act as organization and 100 and senators. This is inconsistent with the 150 senators that have a seat in the Belgian Federal parliaments. (Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie, 202&1 De Kamer, 2021)

After looking at the characteristics defined by Shephard and Patrikios (2012), we see that the JPJ constitutes as a youth parliament when looking at its proceedings and activities, but it is unique in its output and impact. This makes that the JPJ constitutes as a good and representative case to inquire the reasons why young adults do not choose to participate in youth parliaments.

1. **Data collection**

When looking at different research methods, I found that doing quantitative research would be best to test the hypotheses I had set out. Therefore, I thought that it was best to administer a survey to find out what the reasons are why Belgian young adults do not participate in the JPJ. In the search for respondents, it seemed best to only include people in the survey that were allowed to participate in the JPJ at the current moment. (*Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | JPJ | Simulatie*, 2021) Hence, the most logical sample would be to only include people between the ages of 18 and 25. In the analysis of the survey, this translated in only using the cases where the respondent was born between the years of 2003 and 1996.

In my sample, I chose to only include Dutch speaking respondents. This choice was made on the basis of my own language skills. The JPJ allows young adults to participate from all sides of the language borders but including all languages in the survey would be too difficult for me to administer. When making the survey in my mother tongue I could ensure that all the questions would be easy to understand and could only be interpreted in the correct way. If I should have translated the survey into French or German, I would not have been able to ensure correct understanding of all of the survey questions.

Some representative problems have arisen when finding the correct sample. In a survey and research on non-participation in political institutions, it is hard to get the people you are interested in to participate since their disinterest in political initiatives is the main reason for including them in the sample. Even though the young adults included in the survey are people with a baseline interest in politics, they are not interested enough in participating in the JPJ. This means that when a survey arises in which they are asked about such an initiatives, the people I would want to reach are directly less interested in participating. This is something to keep in mind when interpreting the results that arise from this analysis.

The distribution of the survey happened trough Facebook groups, which is the second reason why I chose to administer my survey in Dutch. Facebook has access to your location and interests, which makes it harder to venture out and contact people and groups from different sides of the language border. Therefore, this research is not representative of all Belgian young adults and should be accounted for when generalizing the results that come out of this research.

I distributed the survey by pasting it in Facebook groups accompanied by a set message to explain the reason for the survey and the target audience. The Facebook groups were chosen on the basis that they are made for groups of people within the same field of study in one university. In total, I pasted my survey into groups from ten different fields of study and four different Flemish universities. The ten fields of study that I chose to include in the survey are Law, Social Sciences, History, Communication studies, Sociology, Social and Political Sciences, Political Sciences, Conflict and Development, International Political Sciences, and Criminology. The universities I chose to include are Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Universiteit Antwerpen, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and Universiteit Gent. As can be seen, there is a large variety within the fields of study, but they all have a baseline interest and knowledge in politics in common. This means that there is a smaller chance of interest being the main reason for non-participation. Furthermore, it can be said that the result from this survey is not applicable to the whole population of Belgian young adults but can be used to get an overview of the main reasons for non-participation.

After distributing the survey among all the different Facebook groups, I waited for the responses to trickle in. After a week and 100 responses, I sent new reminders in each Facebook group that I had sent my survey in before. This is the only reminder I have send, and it made my responses double, which led to total of 208 responses. From the total of 208 responses, 183 were valuable in the research which brings the actual response rate to 183 respondents.

The survey existed out of a total of 38 questions1. To start, the respondents were asked whether they agreed with the terms and conditions of this study in which they were promised full anonymity. After this, the first bloc of questions began to ask the respondents about their social economic status. This means that there were general questions geared towards categorizing the respondents. Examples of these questions include inquiries about gender, age, and field of study. After answering these general questions, respondents were given an infographic with information on the JPJ and its workings. I made this infographic myself to ensure that my respondents were well informed before answering questions on the main topic. Since one of my hypotheses states that a lack of knowledge would be a reason for non-participation, I thought it helpful to at least inform my respondents on a basic level on the main topic of the survey. After the infographic, I included a link to the website of the JPJ to make sure that respondents could seek out additional information if deemed necessary.

Next, the questions asked were more geared towards their knowledge of youth parliaments and the JPJ. Respondents were asked whether they had any previous knowledge of the topic and whether they had ever participated in an activity that promoted participatory democracy before. Subsequently, respondents that have never participated in the JPJ before, were asked what their reasons might be for not participating. For answering that question, I opted to use multiple choice with the option to add their own reason at the end. The fixed choices I used refer back to the reasons for non-participation and The Civic Voluntarism Model as described by Jacquet (2017) and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). Furthermore, to get a better insight in the reasons for non-participation I asked the respondents to identify how important each reason was for them.

1 See annex 7.1

After this block, the survey asked respondents for their interest in politics in general. Even though there should have been a base interest in the subject, it seemed logical to still test it. Question in this block asked about their political interest and their self-placement on the political left/right scale. Furthermore, respondents were asked for their involvement in politics and how often it was talked about growing up. Using all of these measurements would ensure a sound overview of how politically engaged the respondents are.

1. **Data analysis**

As stated before, the research question I will try to answer in this thesis is: “Why do young adults with a baseline interest in politics not participate in the JPJ in Belgium?”. To start the analysis of the data, I recoded the variable of “Have you ever participated in an activity of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse”. The reason for this was that participants had first gotten the question whether they had heard of the JPJ before. When participants indicated that they were unfamiliar with the institution, they did not get the question asking whether they had participated before, because the answer to that question would automatically be negative. Therefore, I recoded all of the missings in the variable of “Have you ever participated in an activity of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse” to a negative answer. The new variable is called “participation’.

***H1: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because they lack the necessary attitudes and dispositions: they are not interested in politics, they feel politically alienated or they display low levels of political efficacy, they are not comfortable with its objectives***

***H2: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because they lack the necessary resources and political abilities to do so, in particular time and political knowledge***

***H3: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because of demand-side factors: they are not informed about the event or are not invited to participate***

To test the first three hypotheses, I used one survey question to determine whether they were true namely: “We are interested in your reasons for not participating in the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse. Could you, for the following items, indicate to what extent they play a role in your consideration of not participating?”. Respondents then had the option to indicate for all the possible answers how much they agreed. Their agreement was based upon a 5-point scale in which 1 meant they fully disagreed, 2 meant they disagreed, 3 corresponded to neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 was agreed, and 5 meant they fully agreed. Possible answers were based on the theories of non-participation and the Civic Voluntarism Model. (Jacquet, 2017; Verba et al., 1995) The possible answers were:

* I prefer to spend my time elsewhere
* I am too busy
* I feel that my participation is meaningless
* I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know
* I have something else planned at the same time as the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held
* I do not feel connected to the political scene in Belgium
* Participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful
* I do not know anything about politics, so my participation is not helpful
* I am not interested in politics
* I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse
* Nobody asked me to participate

In the analysis, all of the possible answers were then divided up in the corresponding category defined above namely: want, ability, and demand. In the “want” category, there are six corresponding survey answers namely

* I prefer to spend my time elsewhere
* I feel that my participation is pointless
* I do not feel connected to the political scene in Belgium
* Participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful
* I am not interested in politics
* I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know

Above stated questions correspond to the “want” category since they inquire about the subjects’ political attitudes and dispositions. In the “ability” category there are three corresponding survey answers. These answers fit into the “ability” category since they inquire about subject’s resources and political abilities. The questions in this category are

* I am too busy
* I have something else planned at the same time as the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held
* I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful

Furthermore, there are two questions corresponding to the “demand” category of political participation. These questions ask the respondents about the influence of demand-side factors, such as being informed and being asked to participate. The corresponding questions are

* I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse
* Nobody asked me to participate

To test the first hypothesis, I looked at frequency tables2 of each variable and compared their means.

***H4a: Female young adults are more likely to mention reasons linked to recruitment and political resources than male young adults***

***H4b: Young adults who talked more about politics at home or whose parents are politically involved are less likely to mention demand-side factors than other young adults***

When trying to see whether the fourth hypotheses3, as stated above, are true, I first started with looking at the frequency table for men and women for all the answers to the question “We are interested in your reasons for not participating in the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse. Could you, for the following items, indicate to what extent they play a role in your consideration of not participating?”. After looking at the means and medians for both genders and all answer possibilities, I conducted an independent samples t-test to see whether there was a significant difference between the answers of men and women.

In the significance test, I tested he difference between genders on all answer possibilities of the same question. Therein, it was necessary to first look at the Levene’s test to see if there was a homogeneity of variance. After the Levene’s test, we can look at whether there is a significant difference between the means of both genders on all the answer possibilities of the question on reasons for non-participation.

To test hypothesis 4b I did the same thing as with gender, but I divided the sample into people with a large political background and a low political background. This division of political background is based upon two variables in the data set namely: “How often were politics discussed in your family when you were growing up?” and “Have any of your parents ever been members of a political party?”. To use these variables in an independent samples t-test, I first had to recode the variable “How often were politics discussed in your family when you were growing up?”. This variable had four categories which is to many for an independent samples t-test. Therefore, I recoded the variable into two categories: “politics were not much discussed” and “politics were often discussed”.

2 See annex 7.2

3 See annex 7.3

***H5: Young adults who have a large interest in politics, have high political abilities, and have a personal political background, are more inclined to indicate that they consider future participation in the JPJ***

Lastly, I tested the above mentioned fifth hypothesis4 by doing an independent samples t-test and a crosstab. In trying to answer the hypothesis, I compared three variables to the variables that asked whether responds would participate in the JPJ, regardless of a previous participation. The three variables that inquire after large political interest, high political abilities, and a large personal political background correspond to the three categories “want”, “ability” and “demand”. The first variable that looks at interest is the survey question “To what extent are you interested in politics in general?”. In this question, respondents could place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being non-interested in politics and 10 being very interested in politics. The second theme, political ability, was measured using a survey question in which students had to say how much they agreed with a certain statement. The statement that I used to measure political ability was “I consider myself capable of participating in politics”. This theme corresponds to the “ability” category that we find in the theories on political

(non-)participation. The third theme, I looked at in this hypothesis, large personal political background, corresponds to the “demand” theme found in the theory. The survey question used to measure this was “Is there anyone you know who has already participated in the Youth Parliament Jeunesse?”, because we can measure the willingness of the respondents’ networks to participate politically by asking whether one of their acquaintances has ever participated in the JPJ before.

The first two variables, “To what extent are you interested in politics in general?” and “I consider myself capable of participating in politics”, can be tested using independent sample t-tests to see whether there is a significant difference between the means of the two groups, people who are willing or not willing to participate in the JPJ. The third variable, “Is there anyone you know who has already participated in the Youth Parliament Jeunesse?” cannot be measured with an independent sample t-test so I had to use crosstabs to see whether there is a correlation between this variable and the variable on willingness of respondents to participate in the JPJ.

4 See annex 7.4

1. **Results**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean | Median | Group mean |
| Want  | I prefer to spend my time elsewhere | 3.61 | 4.00 | 2.65 |
| I feel that my participation is pointless | 2.97 | 3.00 |
| I do not feel connected to the political scene in Belgium | 2.58 | 2.00 |
| Participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful | 2.47 | 2.00 |
| I am not interested in politics | 1.85 | 2.00 |
| I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know | 3.00 | 3.00 |
| Ability | I am too busy | 4.13 | 4.00 | 2.89 |
| I have something else planned at the same time as the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held | 2.45 | 3.00 |
| I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful | 2.09 | 2.00 |  |
| Demand | I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | 3.32 | 4.00 | 3.62 |
| Nobody asked me to participate | 3.92 | 4.00 |

Figure 1

1. **Lack of attitudes and disposition**

***H1: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because they lack the necessary attitudes and dispositions: they are not interested in politics, they feel politically alienated or they display low levels of political efficacy, they are not comfortable with its objectives***

The first category “want” corresponds to the themes in the first hypothesis. In this category, we look at the seven corresponding answers to the survey question “We are interested in your reasons for not participating in the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse. Could you, for the following items, indicate to what extent they play a role in your consideration of not participating?”.

Because the survey question was a 5-point scale question in which respondents could say how much they agreed with the given statement, I chose to categorize the answers who had a mean above three as a relevant explanation as to why young adults do not participate in the JPJ. Within the “want” category, there is only one answer that has of a mean above 3. With a mean of 3.61, the answer “I prefer to spend my time elsewhere” is the third most important reason that young adults indicated in this survey. This reason corresponds to Jacquet’s theory of non-participation. (2017) Within his theory, Jacquet states that people often prefer the private sphere over the public sphere. That is why they chose to spend more time doing other things, often in the private sphere, than engaging politically.

Within this “want” category, we can also find the answer with the lowest mean. “I am not interested in politics” has a mean of 1.85, which is the only mean lower than 2.00. With the mean being the lowest, and not even crossing the 2.00-point, we can state that a lack of interest in politics is not an explanation as to why young adults in Belgium do not participate in the JPJ. These results do not align with the theory put forward in the Civic Voluntarism Model (1995) which states that interest is a factor that facilitates participation. As seen in the survey5, there is no lack of political interest from the subjects, but still 98.4% of the respondents has not participated in the JPJ. As a result of this data, we can state that interest might be a prerequisite for participation but is not enough to ensure participation.

The other reasons encompassed in this category all have a mean in between 2.00 and 3.00. Hence, we can state that all of these theories are neither important nor not important in explaining the non-participation of young adults in the JPJ.

The last reason categorized under “want” is “I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know”. This answer has a mean of 3.00 and a median of 3.00. Even though its mean is 3.00, I would not consider it an important explanation of non-participation since its median is 3.00 and not 4.00.

If we look at the “want” category as a whole, we can see that this category has the lowest group mean. Therefore, we can state that a lack of necessary attitudes and dispositions is not the main reason why students do not participate in the JPJ, even though preferring to spend their time elsewhere is one of the main reasons indicated for non-participation in the JPJ. This means that there is room for more in-depth research on the topic of attitudes and dispositions about participation in democratic regenerative initiatives, and the focus of young adults on the private sphere, rather than the public and political sphere. On the basis of the group mean being 2.65, we have reason to reject the first hypothesis.

5 See annex 7.5

1. **Lack of resources**

***H2: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because they lack the necessary resources and political abilities to do so, in particular time and political knowledge***

The second category of figure 1 depicts “ability” and inquires about resources and political abilities, which corresponds to the themes discussed in the second hypothesis. In this survey, the answers corresponding to this category are “I am too busy”, “I have something else planned at the same time the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held”, and “ I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful.”.

With a mean of 4.13, “I am too busy” is the most important reason that respondents indicated as an explanation for their non-participation. It is the only mean of answers that crosses the 4.00 threshold. This reason is an indication that participation in the JPJ is an activity in which respondents would only participate when they have enough free time to spend on it.

The second answer “I have something else planned at the same time the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held”, that falls within this category has a mean of 2.45. This means that it is not an important reason to explain the non-participation of young adults in the JPJ. An explanation of the lower mean on this variable might be that respondents had to actually have an idea of when the JPJ was planned, for them to know whether or not they had anything else planned at the same time. The reason presupposes an interest in participation since the respondents did want to participate, but did not have the ability because of other arrangements.

The third answer in this category, “I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful” has a mean of 2.09. This is a low mean compared to all of the other answers within this survey and it does not cross the threshold of 3.00, which thus means that it is not seen as an important explanation for non-participation. An explanation for this might be that all of the respondents study within the social sciences, which makes that they all have a basis of knowledge of politics. As seen in the survey6, they also feel that they are competent enough to engage in politics and that they are better informed than the average person, which gives the indication that ability might not be an important reason in explaining non-participation.

The group mean of the “ability” category is 2.89 which means that it does not cross the threshold of importance as an explanation for non-participation. The category encompasses the most important reason indicated by the respondents for non-participation and two more neutral reasons. We see that reasons directly asking about the influence of ability and resources lack in their results. Therefore, the lack of resources and political ability can not be seen as an important explanation for non-participation in the JPJ and we have reason to reject the second hypothesis.

6 See annex 7.6

1. **Demand-side factors**

***H3: Young adults do not participate in the JPJ because of demand-side factors: they are not informed about the event or are not invited to participate***

In the third hypothesis, we inquire about demand-side factors like being informed and invitations to participate, which corresponds to the “demand” category. In this category there are two corresponding survey answers: “I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse” and “nobody asked me to participate”. The first reason “I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse” has a mean of 3.32, which means it can be seen as an important explanation for non-participation of young adults in the JPJ. The other answer “nobody asked me to participate” has a mean of 3.92, which makes it the second most important explanation of non-participation.

The reasons looked at in the “demand” category can be explained with the recruitment component of the Civic Voluntarism Model of Verba et al. (1995) In this component, it is said that people will only participate when there is incentive coming from an interpersonal network. This interpersonal network is connected to both of the answer possibilities in this “demand” category. The first answer of never having heard of the JPJ, coincides with incentive from interpersonal networks because one can only be interested to participate when they know what something is. This is a very intuitive explanation for non-participation because it is clear that when a person has never heard of an initiative they will be very unlikely to participate in it. People will hear of the JPJ from a school, friends, or the JPJ organization itself and only then will be interested to participate. The second answer is more overtly related to recruitment since respondents seem to find it important to be directly recruited for initiatives such as the JPJ.

The group mean for the “demand” category is 3.26. This makes it the only group with a mean above 3.00. Hence, it can be concluded that demand-side factors such as being informed and invited are the most important explanations for non-participation in the JPJ. Because the demand group has a mean above 3.00 and both of the answers within the “demand category” have a median of 4.00, we can state that most of the respondents agreed or fully agreed with these reasons as explanations for their non-participation in the JPJ. Hence, we have reason to accept the third hypothesis as true.

1. **Variations based on gender and political background**
2. Gender

Figure 2

***H4a: Female young adults are more likely to mention reasons linked to recruitment and political resources than male young adults***

In the theory, we have seen that there is a gender gap, or at least a difference, in political participation. Therefore, I have stated in the fourth hypothesis that female students are more likely to indicate that they never participated in the JPJ because they haven’t heard of it or because nobody asked them to. Furthermore, the theory mentioned that women have less political resources at their disposal, which is why I state that women will also be more likely to indicate the lack of political resources as their reason for non-participation.

If we look at the results of the analysis of all the variables pertaining to reasons of non-participation divided by gender, we see that there are some significant differences to be found between men and women. Since there were very few of non-binary people in the survey, I made the choice to not include them in the analysis since their results would not be applicable for the whole population.

The first significant difference that we can see between men and women is for the variable “participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful”. We can see that women are more likely to indicate this reason as an explanation for non-participation in the JPJ than men. An explanation of this might be found in the literature by Welch (1977) who states that women are more likely to vote, but less likely to perform other forms of conventional political participation since they are more focused on familial spheres. This because voting has a direct political consequence and thus not take much time away from the private sphere.

The next significant difference can be found in the variable “I am not interested in politics”. While men have a mean of 1.45, women have a mean of 1.96 which means that they are more likely to indicate this as a reason for non-participation. Interest in politics can be linked to Welch’s explanation of socialization which states that women are less socialized to be interested in politics than men. Therefore, their lack of interest might make them less inclined to participate in political initiatives such as the JPJ.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference in the variable “I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know”. In this variable, women are more likely to indicate this as a reason for non-participation in the JPJ. This variable falls under the category of “want” in which respondents say that they are not willing to participate in the JPJ because of personal reasons of disinterest.

“I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful” is the fourth significant difference that can be found between men and women in their reasons for non-participation. This reason coincides with political abilities and resources. Women are more likely to indicate this reason as an explanation for their non-participation than men. An explanation of this might be found in that girls are less socialized into politics, which makes them less assured of their political abilities. This is also proven in the data7, in which we can see that there is a significant difference the self-assessment of political abilities. Men are more likely to indicate that they have high political abilities, which means that women are less assured of their own political abilities.

The next reason in which a significant difference in gender can be seen, is one linked to recruitment. The reason “I have never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse” is indicated more by men than it is by women. This means that women are less inclined to indicate knowledge of political initiatives as a reason for their non-participation.

7 See annex 7.7

In contrast to the previous reason, the other reason linked to recruitment is indicated significantly more by women than men. The reason “nobody asked me to participate” is the second most important reason for non-participation when we look at women only. This is in accordance with the hypothesis that states that women are more likely to indicate reasons linked to recruitment to explain their non-participation. Even though women are less likely to indicate having never heard of the JPJ as an explanation for non-participation, they are more likely to indicate that not being explicitly asked to participate is an important reason for non-participation. This might mean that women need more active recruitment than men, and that men are more influenced by passive recruitment such as posters and advertisement. This is an interesting dichotomy that can be investigated in future research.

1. Political background

***H4b: Young adults who talked more about politics at home or whose parents are politically involved are less likely to mention demand-side factors than other young adults***

As indicated in the theory on variations in reasons of participation, there should be a significant difference in demand side factors when we look at people with a large personal political background, and the people without such a background. Therefore, we assume that people who often talked about politics growing up and people whose parents were a member of a political party, are more likely to mention demand-side factors in explaining their non-participation in the JPJ.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean  | Median | Mean parents member of political party  | Median parents member of political party  | Mean parents not a member of political party  | Median parents not a member of political party  | t-test |
| I prefer to spend my time elsewhere | 3.61 | 4.00 | 3.88 | 4.00 | 3.60 | 4.00 | 0.344 |
| I feel that my participation is pointless | 2.97 | 3.00 | 3.12 | 3.00 | 2.94 | 3.00 | 0.589 |
| I do not feel connected to the political scene in Belgium | 2.58 | 2.00 | 2.65 | 2.00 | 2.58 | 2.00 | 0.861 |
| Participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful | 2.47 | 2.00 | 2.76 | 2.00 | 2.44 | 2.00 | 0.297 |
| I am not interested in politics | 1.85 | 2.00 | 1.76 | 2.00 | 1.85 | 2.00 | 0.730 |
| I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know | 3.00 | 3.00 | 2.88 | 3.00 | 3.01 | 3.00 | 0.738 |
| I am too busy | 4.13 | 4.00 | 4.24 | 4.00 | 4.12 | 4.00 | 0.589 |
| I have something else planned at the same time as the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held | 2.45 | 3.00 | 2.71 | 2.00 | 2.42 | 3.00 | 0.340 |
| I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful | 2.09 | 2.00 | 1.76 | 2.00 | 2.14 | 2.00 | 0.076 |
| I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | 3.32 | 4.00 | 2.76 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 0.159 |
| Nobody asked me to participate | 3.92 | 4.00 | 3.47 | 4.00 | 3.95 | 4.00 | 0.198 |

Figure 3

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean  | Median | Mean politics not much discussed  | Median politics not much discussed  | Mean politics often discussed  | Median politics often discussed  | t-test |
| I prefer to spend my time elsewhere | 3.61 | 4.00 | 3.76 | 4.00 | 3.60 | 4.00 | 0.493 |
| I feel that my participation is pointless | 2.97 | 3.00 | 2.84 | 3.00 | 2.98 | 3.00 | 0.526 |
| I do not feel connected to the political scene in Belgium | 2.58 | 2.00 | 3.08 | 3.00 | 2.50 | 2.00 | 0.030 |
| Participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful | 2.47 | 2.00 | 2.52 | 2.00 | 2.47 | 2.00 | 0.807 |
| I am not interested in politics | 1.85 | 2.00 | 2.16 | 2.00 | 1.78 | 2.00 | 0.070 |
| I am not comfortable speaking to a large group of people I do not know | 3.00 | 3.00 | 3.28 | 4.00 | 2.94 | 3.00 | 0.199 |
| I am too busy | 4.13 | 4.00 | 4.08 | 4.00 | 4.14 | 4.00 | 0.761 |
| I have something else planned at the same time as the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse is being held | 2.45 | 3.00 | 2.24 | 2.00 | 2.49 | 3.00 | 0.332 |
| I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful | 2.09 | 2.00 | 2.24 | 2.00 | 2.07 | 2.00 | 0.518 |
| I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse | 3.32 | 4.00 | 3.68 | 4.00 | 3.19 | 4.00 | 0.131 |
| Nobody asked me to participate | 3.92 | 4.00 | 3.96 | 4.00 | 3.88 | 4.00 | 0.769 |

Figure 4

To see whether there is a difference in demand-side factors when looking at political background, I first looked at all the reasons to participate divided along people with a high and low political background. After this we can look at the demand-side factors that we can see in figure 3 are “I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse” and “nobody asked me to participate”.

In the dataset we can see no significant difference. This means that people with a parent that is/was a member of a political party are not significantly different than people without one when looking at all of the reasons used as explanations for non-participation. Having a parent who is or was a member of a political party has no impact on the explanations that young adults give to their non-participation in the JPJ.

Furthermore, we can look at the difference between people who often talked about politics growing up and people who did not discuss politics that often growing up in figure 4. Here, we see that there is only one significant difference namely on the variable “I do not feel connected to the political scene in Belgium”. Here we can clearly see that people who did not discuss politics much growing up indicate this reason more than people who often discussed politics growing up. This difference could have been expected since discussing politics from a young age can create an interconnectedness between the individual and the politics of their country.

In general, we can thus conclude that hypothesis 4b can be rejected since there are no significant differences in the indications of demand-side factors between people with a large personal political background, and people without such a background.

1. **More inclination to participate because of high interest and political abilities, and a large interpersonal network**

|  |
| --- |
| Independent Samples T-test |
|  | **Levene’s Tst for Equality of Variances** |  | **t-test for Equality of Means** | **95% Confidence interval of the Difference** |
|  |  | **F** | **Sig.** | **t** | **df** | **Sig. (2-tailed)** | **Mean difference** | **Std. Error Difference** | **Lower** | **Upper** |
| To what extent are you interested in politics in general?” | Equal variances assumed  | 1.005 | 0.318 | 3.345 | 133 | 0.001 | 0.797 | 0.238 | 0.326 | 1.268 |
| Equal variances not assumed  |  |  | 3.889 | 132.549 | 0.001 | 0.797 | 0.235 | 0.332 | 1.262 |
| I consider myself capable of participating in politics | Equal variances assumed  | 6.521 | 0.012 | 2.105 | 152 | 0.037 | 0.351 | 0.167 | 0.021 | 0.680 |
| Equal variances not assumed  |  |  | 2.159 | 148.566 | 0.032 | 0.351 | 0.132 | 0.030 | 0.671 |

Figure 5

***H5: Young adults who have a large interest in politics, have high political abilities, and have a personal political background, are more inclined to indicate that they consider future participation in the JPJ***

As stated above, we looked at the fifth hypothesis by doing two independent t-tests for the variables “To what extent are you interested in politics in general?” and “I consider myself capable of participating in politics”, and a crosstab for “Is there anyone you know who has already participated in the Youth Parliament Jeunesse?”, whereby I look at these variables in relation to the variable “Would you be interested in participating in the Youth Parliament Jeunesse?”. I started off by looking at the variable that measured political interest. If we conduct an independent samples t-test for the variable of political interest and the variable measuring willingness to participate in the JPJ we can see that the test is significant at p<0.001. This means that there is a significant difference between the means of the two variables. Hence, we can conclude that there is a difference in willingness to participate when a person has low or high political interest.

After looking at political interest, we can continue by looking at whether high political abilities have an effect on the willingness of respondents to participate in the JPJ. When we run an independent sample t-test, we can see that the sigma is 0.037. This is smaller than 0.05 and therefore we can reject the null-hypothesis and state that there is a significant difference between the means of the two variables. This means that there is a significant difference between the means of people that state they have high, and the people that state they have low political abilities.

The last variable, “Is there anyone you know who has already participated in the Youth Parliament Jeunesse?” could not be computed using an independent sample t-test, so crosstabs had to be used to see whether there was a correlation between the willingness of respondents to participate in the JPJ, and their personal political background. In the crosstabs we can see that there are more people that know some who has participated before, that are willing to participate in the JPJ.

After looking at the crosstabs, we can conduct a chi-squared test that will tell us whether there is a significant correlation between the two variables and whether there is a positive or negative association. In the table8 we can see that the value of the Pearson chi-squared is 10.912 which is a strong positive association. If we then look at the significance level, we can see that the sigma is 0.001, which means that there is a strong significant association between willingness to participate and knowing someone who has participated in the JPJ before.

After looking at all of the independent variables, we can conclude that having a strong political interest, high abilities, and a strong personal political background are facilitators of participation in the JPJ. This is in line with the Civic Voluntarism Model of Verba et al. (1995) that states that engagement, recruitment and resources are facilitators of political participation. Even though most respondents have not yet participated in the JPJ, we see that there is a willingness to and that that willingness is facilitated by political interest, political abilities, and personal political backgrounds.

8 See annex 7.4

1. **Conclusion**

As was stated in the introduction, the decline in participation has brought about new democratic initiatives designed to regenerate political participation. Unfortunately, these initiatives lack in participants, which counter their democratic regenerative goals. This research has tried to find an answer to the question as to why young adults do not participate in the JPJ. By looking at a survey geared towards university students with a baseline interest in politics, we found which reasons were most likely to explain their non-participation and how this changes when looking at gender and political background.

I found that the main reason for non-participation among young adults in Belgium is “I am too busy”. The second most important explanation of student’s non-participation is that they prefer to spend their time elsewhere. This, together with being too busy, is linked to the theory of Jacquet (2017) in which he states that people often prefer to spend their time in private spheres rather than the public sphere. Furthermore, two other important reasons arise to explain non-participation among Belgian young adults namely “nobody asked me to participate” and “I had never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse”. These two explanations were first explored by Verba et al. (1995) who stated that recruitment is the main driver of participation. When this component lacks, participation will be less likely to occur.

After this, I looked at the variations in explanations given, divided by gender and political background. Hereby we saw that there are significant differences between men and women on four reasons: “participation has no political consequence and is therefore not useful”, “I am not interested in politics”, “I know nothing about politics, so my participation is not helpful”, and “I have never heard of the Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse”. When looking at political background, we saw that there was only one significant difference between people with large and small political backgrounds namely their connectedness to the political scene in Belgium.

Furthermore, I saw that having a strong political interest, high abilities, and a strong personal political background are facilitators of participation in the JPJ. This coincides with the Civic Voluntarism Model that stated that recruitment, resources, and engagement are drivers of political participation. (Verba et al., 1995)

Since little research on the topic of non-participation exists, this research can serve as an inspiration for many to come. Building on Jacquet’s qualitative research on reasons for non-participation, this research tests his results by including them in a quantitative survey in which respondents could indicate their relevance in explaining non-participation. In this research, I found that not every reason Jacquet lays out has the same relevance in explaining non-participation. Therefore, this research can serve as a basis for further research on why democratic initiatives lack the pull necessary for them to have an effect of the overall political participation of young adults.

I would suggest further research to be conducted on young adults that are not the main target audience for these new democratic initiatives. Because this research is conducted on young adults within universities and with a baseline interest for politics, the important reasons that come out of this analysis are not applicable to the whole population. Therefore, I would suggest that further research is done on young adults without higher education and a baseline interest in politics. When these reasons are known, democratic initiatives would be more effective in recruiting participants.

Some important themes also rise out of the results from this research. I have found a dichotomy between men and women in their reaction to recruitment. I found that men are more likely to be persuaded by passive recruitment. Opposed to that, we find that women need more than passive recruitment and are more likely to indicate that they need active recruitment in order for them to participate politically. These themes can be used in communication studies and might be interesting for democratic initiatives to use in order to attract more participants.

As stated above, research on these subjects like reasons for non-participation and its variation among gender lines, can be used by democratic initiatives. Since we have seen that these initiatives need enough participants in order for them to increase overall political participation, we can help this by providing the main reasons for non-participation. If these initiatives know these reasons, they might be able to anticipate them and by this attract enough participants to have a significant effect on the overall political participation of young adults.

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