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comparing Italy and the United Kingdom

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THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM: COMPARING ITALY AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT

It is a common theme in the literature on voter turnout that advanced Western democracies have entered a period of political disengagement and that it is young people, in particular, that participate less (Park 1995; Blais, Gidengil et al. 2004; Franklin 2004; Norris 2004). In this paper, I analyse data from the three waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) and show that while young people are in general less likely to be politically involved than their elders, these differences are greater in the United Kingdom than in Italy. In addition, I show that controlling for education accounts for differences in political participation between young and older people in Italy. However, education does not appear to mediate youth political involvement in the United Kingdom so that normative concerns about youth political disengagement appear to be more appropriate for the latter of the two countries.

INTRODUCTION

It is a common theme in the literature that advanced Western democracies have entered a period of political disengagement and that political participation is becoming increasingly irrelevant to the lives of Western citizens (Mulgan 1994; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Levi and Stoker 2000; Van Deth 2000; Mair 2006). It is common for social commentators, especially in Britain, to point to the low levels of turnout, party membership and political participation to adduce evidence for these theories (Teixeira 1987; Lawson and Merkl 1988; Parry, Moyser et al. 1992; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Dalton 1996; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Idea 2002). With few exceptions (Schumpeter 1952; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2003; Rosema 2006), low participation levels are generally understood as having negative implications for societal integration and democratic practice (Almond and Verba 1963; Barber 1984; Dahl 1989; Dalton 1996; Van Deth 2000; Mair 2006), and more so in light of the argument that it is young people, socialised into a new depoliticised climate, that are participating less than they used to (Park 1995; Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995; Coughlan 2003; Blais, Gidengil et al. 2004; Franklin 2004; Norris 2004; Henn, Weinstein et al. 2005; Milner 2005; Electoral Commission 2006).

Education is one of the key determinants of political participation. Blais, Gidengil et al. (2004) show that education has become a more powerful determinant of voting in Canada in recent years and there is similar evidence for the United States (Lyons and Alexander 2000; Miller and Shanks 1996). In particular, they find a differential impact of education on turnout between age groups: newer cohorts of educated young people vote less than older age groups with the same education level (Blais,

Gidengil et al. 2004: 232). Rubenson et al. (2004) find that education has a larger effect on young citizens' likelihood of voting than it does for older people. While several studies look at age group differences in turnout, there are only a handful of studies examining whether there are age group differences for other political activities (Norris 2004) and virtually none that address whether important intervening variables such as education level have a differential effect for young people's political activism across nations. In this paper, I employ data from Round 1-3 (2003-6) of the European Social Survey (ESS) to look at young people's political activism relative to that of their elders in Italy and the United Kingdom in order to address the question of whether young people are similarly disengaged from the political process relative to their elders in different nations, or whether there are important differences between young people's political involvement in different countries and what factors may play a role in explaining these. In particular, I wish to test whether education levels have a differential effect on young people's political activism in these two nations.

My analyses bring attention to the diverging patterns of participation obtaining between different age groups and to the cross-national peculiarities of young people's political involvement which are often obscured by the widespread reliance on European aggregate level data in the literature. I find that while young people are in general less likely to be politically involved than their elders, these differences are more marked in the United Kingdom than in Italy.

Moreover, the remarkably strong influence of education for political activism amongst young people Italy reminds us of the capital importance of analysing the relative impact of different factors for political activism amongst different groups. However, more education does not seem to have an influence in attenuating the disparities in political involvement between young people and their elders in the United Kingdom, so that the concerns about youth political disengagement appear to be more appropriate for this country. I conclude by discussing some possible reasons as well as the implications of these findings for young people's disengagement from the political process, and to suggest directions for future research.

THEORY

There is a flourishing literature on young people's disengagement from politics in the United Kingdom but there is virtually no research on young people's political involvement in Italy. Age has always been one of the key socio-demographic controls for political involvement and empirical studies generally find that young people are less politically involved than their elders, It is not in the scope of this paper to evaluate whether these differences are due to age or cohort effects but it is nonetheless important to note that there are divisions between two schools in the literature. Life-cycle theorists tend to argue that the lowest levels of political involvement can be expected amongst young people because they are more concerned with "the struggle for partners, house, career opportunities, and the like" (Van Deth 1990: 302). Theorists of political generations postulate that the levels of political interest do not reflect specific positions in the life cycle of individuals but rather differences in the political-historical contexts of socialisation (Inglehart 1990: 77, Van Deth 1990: 303, Bennett 1986: 96, Van Den Broek 1996: 82).

In general, attempts to address the relative importance of either thesis tend to stress the primacy of generational effects (Barnes et al. 1979: 524, Jennings 1987; Blais et al. 2004). There is evidence in the literature that the generation born after 1970 is the least politically involved, whereas the 'protest generation' (which came of age in the radicalising period of the late 1960s and early 1970s) exhibits the highest levels of political involvement (Van Deth and Elff 2000: 17, Van Den Broek 1996). For

example, modelling the curvilinear effects of age and year of birth by replacing them with cubic spline transformations, Van Deth and Elff (2000: 12) show that across Europe and in all three decades under investigation (1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) the 1970 generation is the most politically involved.

This paper focuses on whether there are differences in political involvement between young (18-30) and older people (31-70) in both countries and what is it that might account for these in terms of other explanatory variables. Apart from age, gender and education have also been identified as important socio-economic predictors of political involvement by several authors (Dawson and Prewitt 1969: 143-180, Glenn and Grimes 1968, Lane 1959: 143-6, Milbrath 1965). As politics has historically been the domain of men, the literature argues that political interest and participation should be affected by gender roles (Dalton 1996, Berelson et al. 1954, Almond and Verba 1963: 390, Di Palma 1970: 235, Verba et al. 1978: 263, Bennett 1986: 72). Topf (1995: 63) shows that in Southern Europe these differences are more marked. However, others have argued that with the growing liberalisation of gender roles, the importance of gender for political involvement should decline and more so amongst the young (Van Deth and Elff 2000: 18, Topf 1995). Being married and in paid work are also said to be positive influences on conventional political participation since they act as proxies for stability and connection to the community (Rubenson et al. 2004).

In addition, since Almond and Verba (1963), survey evidence has generally confirmed that education is linked to a citizen's level of political knowledge, interest and sophistication (Van Deth and Elff 2000: 15, Converse 1972, Lazarfeld et al. 1944, Milbrath 1965) and the better educated have been found to be more likely to have the time, money, access to political information, knowledge and ability to become politically involved (Dalton 1996, Verba et al. 1993, Verba and Nie 1972, Parry et al. 1992). Educational inequality for access to political resources is an important issue that deserves further analysis in terms of age group and cross-national differences. Blais, Gidengil et al. (2004) show that education has become a more powerful determinant of voting in Canada in recent years and there is similar evidence for the United States (Lyons and Alexander 2000; Miller and Shanks 1996). In particular, they find a differential impact of education on turnout between age groups: newer cohorts of educated young people vote less than older age groups with the same education level (Blais, Gidengil et al. 2004: 232). Rubenson et al. (2004) find that education has a larger effect on young citizens' likelihood of voting than it does for older people.

However, empirical evidence shows that socioeconomic factors explain only about 15 percent of the variance in the levels of political involvement in Western democracies (Van Deth 1990: 305). The literature identifies two other kinds of predictors of political participation: group effects and political attitudes (Dalton 1996: 54). In the first group, party attachment and membership in voluntary organisations represent possible influences on participation (Dalton 1996: 55). For example, party attachment can promote party membership and party work as well as stimulate to action because of group-based partisan forces in elections. In addition, it has historically been argued that membership in voluntary organisations offers the opportunity to develop skills which play a key role in prompting more overtly political participation (Clark 2001:5, Olsen 1972:318, Verba and Nie 1972: 186) as well as providing a useful heuristic for determining whether participation in political activities is worthwhile (Uhlener 1989).

In the second group, ideological identification, political interest, satisfaction with the way democracy and other institutions work in one's country and other political values may help explain variations in levels of political involvement (Van Deth and Elff 2000, Van Deth 2000, Norris 2004, Dalton 1996). Being left wing is often said to encourage more political involvement due to the traditional anti-status quo stance. Political interest, "the degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity" (Van Deth 1990: 278), generally understood in terms of reported levels of subjective political interest (Van Deth and Elff 2000: 2) is generally associated with increased political activity. Political awareness,

measured by time spent reading about politics on newspapers is also said to have a similar effect since those who know more about politics will know what activities are available and where to direct their action (Fisher et al. 2007).

Dissatisfaction with the present state of things has been said to influence participation patterns (Farah et al. 1979). However, the causal role of dissatisfaction is debated in the literature: some argue that satisfaction increases support for the political process and thereby participation, whereas others suggest that dissatisfaction might stimulate efforts for change. Moreover, both these theories may be correct but only apply to certain forms of participation. Additionally, the literature also discusses the role of ideological differences for participation (Verba and Nie 1978, Verba et al. 1995), with the general argument being that if participation influences the law-making processes, then the question of whether activists are drawn equally from different political camps has important implications for the representativeness of democracy (Dalton 1996: 56).

Political participation is understood as consisting in those activities which supplement the established democratic representative political mechanisms and which involve at least some degree of social interaction and organisation (Parry et al. 1992). Verba et al. (1978: 46) posited an important distinction between political interest and political participation. The latter should be seen as an attitude driving participation, whereas participation itself is the dependent variable that needs to be explained because it captures the actual activities that people engage with politically. Verba et al. (1978) defined political participation as “those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba et al. 1978: 46). As the phrase “legal activities” indicates, the seminal literature drew a clear distinction between ‘conventional’ and ‘unconventional’ participation (Barnes and Kaase 1979, Marsh 1977, Adrian and Apter 1995).

Recently, theorists have argued that this way of understanding participation has become anachronistic since demonstrations and other ‘unconventional’ forms of participation have become mainstream and more so amongst the young (Norris 2004, Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001, Norris et al. 2004). As early as 1975, Tilly argued that protest, like other forms of participation, has simply become another way of mobilising public opinion and influencing governmental agendas (Tilly 1975). Dalton (1996: 69) argues that protest has become common amongst the educated and politically sophisticated middle classes and that rather than being spontaneous outbreaks aimed at overthrowing the established political order, modern demonstrations are consciously organised by parties and social movements.

As such, Norris (2004:4) suggests that it becomes clearer to distinguish between citizen-oriented actions, relating to the traditional organs of participation such as parties, and cause-oriented repertoires characteristic of new social movements, which “focus attention upon specific issues ... exemplified by consumer politics.” The argument is that if young people display different patterns of activism associated with cause-oriented politics and the rise of new social movements, then this development has important implications for how we understand political participation. Limiting our investigation to the traditional agencies of participation would therefore underestimate young people’s engagement through modern agencies (Norris 2004). Dalton (1996) however, argues that young people are only the most likely age group to participate in ‘protest politics’ and that older people are generally more likely to participate in all other political activities. Whatever the case, the theoretical subdivisions between forms of participation available in the literature remind us of the importance of looking at different forms of political activism separately in order to investigate whether the imputed disengagement of young people is reflected across countries and across forms of participation.

DATA AND METHODS

To investigate young people's political involvement relative to their elders, this paper draws upon Round 1-3 (2002-6) data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for Italy and the United Kingdom. However, because the Italian data for Round 2 was collected late (2006) and the British data for Round 2 (2004) did not include education levels, only the data from Round 1 (2002) is for both nations; the rest of the Italian data is from Round 2 (2006) and the rest of the British data is from Round 3 (2006). This yields two observation years (2002 and 2006) for each nation despite using a three wave survey. Therefore, survey year is the variable of interest in the analyses.

The ESS is a well-respected "academically-driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations"¹ and therefore, particularly appropriate for the purposes of our investigation. In particular, the ESS is one of relatively few studies available for comparative and cross-national analyses of political interest containing the simple self-placement question: "How interested would you say you are in politics?" which avoids the complications related to the distinction between interest and behavioural utterances or consequences of interest.

Other studies relying on Eurobarometer data have had to sacrifice the advantages of using this measure, possibly introducing motivations or goals of the individual other than curiosity about politics by using questions on the frequency of political discussion (Van Deth and Elff 2000: 3). The ESS also contains useful measures of whether the respondent has actually participated in a series of political activities in the 12 months previous to the survey interview, thereby bypassing the problematic implications of "action potential" questions included in other cross-national surveys, which in the words of one author reflect "not what [respondents] will do but what they think they ought to do" (Topf 1995: 99). Moreover, by asking questions relating to activities performed in the last year, it avoids measuring individuals' lifespan activism which would clearly bias levels of participation in favor of older people. These and other variables used in the analysis are listed in the APPENDIX.

There are only a few studies (Norris 2004) ways in which young people's patterns of political involvement relative to those of their elders differs between individual nations and none on whether there are differential effects of important intervening variables such as education levels across nations. It is important to investigate whether the well-documented findings on youth apathy in the United Kingdom are replicated for other individual European nations and to test whether there are differential education effects. In order to focus the discussion and conduct in depth analyses on the whole repertoire of political participation, I compare the United Kingdom and Italy since there are good reasons to believe that some of the attitudes that Almond and Verba (1963) cited as causing Italy's democratic instability (partisan attitudes in the political struggle, a mistrust of the social environment) are the very same factors sustaining political participation in Italy today. Historically, scholars have described Italy as possessing a politically engaged and ideologically entrenched national culture (De Grand 1989), and identification with the left-right political divide continues as an important element of Italian politics both culturally and institutionally. By contrast, contemporary social commentators tend to describe the United Kingdom as beset by popular political apathy and disengagement. It is therefore interesting to explore whether these differences hold also for younger generations and whether intervening variables such as education levels have a mediating effect.

¹ From the ESS website, <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>.

Given the focus on the differences between young people and their elders in terms of political involvement, the sample is divided into two age groups: young people (18-30 years of age) and older people (31-70 years of age)². This allows the investigation of differences in proportions between young people and their elders in Italy and the United Kingdom, but also between young people in the two nations for eight indicators of political participation available in the ESS (voted, party membership, party work, contacted politician, signed a petition, demonstrated, boycotted products for political reasons, wore a campaign badge or sticker).

For the regressions on citizen-oriented activism, I created a mean scale from 0 to 1 where zero indicates that the respondent has participated in none of the activities, and one indicates that the respondent has participated in all of the following four activities: voting, being a party member, working for a party, and contacting a politician. For cause-oriented activism, I created a mean scale from 0 to 1 where zero indicates that the respondent has participated in none of activities, and one indicates that the respondent has participated in all of the following four activities: signing a petition, boycotting a product for political reasons, demonstrating and wearing a campaign badge or sticker.

Both scales tested positively to principal component analysis on a tetrachoric matrix (for binary variables) and Mokken's method. The citizen-oriented items loaded on a single component with an eigenvalue greater than one ($e=2.42$; 60.72% variance explained) and they each had Loevinger H coefficients greater than or equal to .40 (Mokken's suggested cutoff); the Loevinger H coefficient for the citizen-oriented activism scale was .50. The cause-oriented items also loaded on a single component with an eigenvalue greater than one ($e=2.51$; 62.83% variance explained) and they each had Loevinger H coefficients greater than or equal to .40; the Loevinger H coefficient for the citizen-oriented activism scale was .45.

ANALYSIS

Age group differences in political activism

The first two columns (all) in Tables 1 and 2 confirm findings in the literature that young people (18-30 year-olds) are generally less politically active than older people (31-70 year-olds). In Italy, older people are significantly more likely than younger people to vote, contact a politician, sign a petition and boycott products for political reasons (4 activities); young people, however, are significantly more likely to demonstrate and display a campaign badge or sticker (2 activities) (all, Table 1). In the United Kingdom, differences are more marked: older people are significantly more likely to vote, be party members, work for a party, contact a politician, sign a petition, and boycott products (6 activities) (all, Table 2). The net difference is therefore of 2 activities in Italy and 6 in the United Kingdom. Therefore, overall, young people are less likely to be involved in political activities in more activities than their elders in both countries. However, this discrepancy is more marked in the United Kingdom than in Italy.

Dalton (1996: 78) argues that young people are the most likely age group to be engaged in 'protest politics'. However, this only appears to be the case in Italy (all, Tables 1 and 2), where young people are significantly more likely to participate in public demonstrations than older people; there are no significant differences in the United Kingdom. Therefore, Dalton's (1996) argument that 'protest politics' is the domain of the young does not apply to the United Kingdom.

² We exclude people younger than 18 to ensure comparability across forms of participation. We restrict elders to people aged less than 70 since very old people may exhibit lower levels of participation due to infirmity.

Table 1

The first two columns (all) in Table 3 compare young people's political activism in the two countries. Young people in Italy are significantly more likely than young people in the United Kingdom to vote, be a party member, work for a party, and demonstrate (4 activities); young people in the United Kingdom are significantly more likely to sign a petition and boycott products for political reasons (2 activities). Therefore, overall, young people in Italy are more likely than young people in the United Kingdom to be politically active not just relatively to their respective elders but also when directly compared to their age-group counterparts.

One might argue that this is purely due to cross-national differences in repertoires of political action (Topf 1995) so that differences between young people in the two nations are purely replicating differences between the two nations at the general population level. However, the first two columns (all) in Table 4 show that this is not the case and that situation is in fact reversed with British older people being significantly more politically active than older people in Italy in a greater number of activities. Older people in Italy are significantly more likely than older people in the United Kingdom to vote, be a party member, and demonstrate (3 activities); older people in the United Kingdom are significantly more likely to contact a politician, sign a petition, boycott products for political reasons, and wear a campaign badge or sticker (4 activities).

Table 2

The upper portion of Table 5 (all), shows that amongst young people in both Italy and the United Kingdom voting is the most popular activity however a far greater proportion of young Italians vote compared to their British counterparts (respectively, 81% and 50%). In the United Kingdom, this is closely followed by a low intensity activity: signing a petition (35%), whereas in Italy the next most popular political activity is arguably quite demanding: demonstrating (16%). Boycotting products is a relatively popular activity amongst young people in the United Kingdom but not very popular in Italy (respectively, 15% and 6%). In both nations, about 10% of young people said that they contacted a politician and wore a campaign badge or sticker in the 12 months prior to the survey interview. In both nations, the least popular activities amongst young people were those that required the most continued commitment: being a party member and working for a party. However, three times as many people said they were engaged in these in Italy compared to the United Kingdom (1% in the United Kingdom and 3% in Italy). Overall then, young people in Italy are significantly more likely to vote and generally more likely to be involved in more demanding activities (demonstrating, working for a party, being a party member) than young people in Britain.

Table 3

The literature suggests that there are differences between young and old in terms of political activism, with the young generally being more disengaged. These findings are confirmed in both nations, though the differences between young and old people in the United Kingdom are more marked. The literature also reports that there are differences between countries in terms of the repertoires of political action (see Topf 1995). Overall, findings in this section show that Italians are in general more likely to vote, be a party member, work for a party and demonstrate whereas British respondents are more likely to sign a petition and boycott products for political reasons. However, differences in the repertoires of political action between the two nations do not account for the greater political engagement of young people in Italy compared to their British counterparts since older people in Britain are more likely to be engaged in a greater number of political activities compared to their Italian counterparts whereas the reverse is true for young people.

Table 4

Young people in Italy are on the whole more politically active than their British counterparts. This is not just relative to their elders but also holds when comparing young people in the two countries directly, in terms of the number of political activities that they are more likely to engage in, as well qualitatively, in terms of the intensity of the activities, since young people in Italy are more likely to engage in more demanding activities than their British counterparts.

Age group differences in political activism amongst the university educated

Apart from age, education has consistently been highlighted as one of the most important predictors for political activity in the literature. Since Almond and Verba (1963), survey evidence has shown that education is linked to a citizen's level of political knowledge, interest and sophistication (Van Deth and Elff 2000: 15, Converse 1972, Lazarfeld et al. 1944, Milbrath 1965) and the better educated have consistently been found to be more likely to have the time, money, access to political information, knowledge and ability to become politically involved (Dalton 1996, Verba et al. 1993, Verba and Nie 1972, Parry et al. 1992). Blais, Gidengil et al. (2004) show that education has become a more powerful determinant of voting in Canada in recent years and there is similar evidence for the United States (Lyons and Alexander 2000; Miller and Shanks 1996). In particular, they find a differential impact of education on turnout between age groups: newer cohorts of educated young people vote less than older age groups with the same education level (Blais, Gidengil et al. 2004: 232). Rubenson et al. (2004) find that education has a larger effect on young citizens' likelihood of voting than it does for older people.

However, while cross-national studies of the age gap in turnout include education along with age as control variables (Fieldhouse et al. 2007.), and both education and age are generally found to have a positive influences on political participation there are no studies which attempt to unravel whether there are cross-national differences in the way in which education level mediates differences in political activism between older and younger people or whether education mediates differences between the same age group in different countries. Being older is meant to have a positive effect on political activism as is being more educated. Perhaps then, one of the reasons why young people in Italy are more politically active than young people in Britain, both in relation to their elders and when compared directly, is that being educated is a more important predictor of political activism amongst young people in Italy than in the United Kingdom.

Table 5

Columns 5 and 6 (university education or higher) in Tables 1-4 show differences between age groups in Italy and the United Kingdom as well as differences between countries for older and younger people amongst those with a university degree or higher qualifications (Masters, PhD). The main difference between levels of political activism between the general sample and the university educated is that for virtually every activity the proportion rises or stays the same amongst those with a university education (the only exception is boycotting products amongst young Italians, which falls from 6 to 5% amongst those with a university education).

In terms of the differences between young and old university educated respondents in the two nations, Table 1 shows that in Italy, amongst those with a university degree or higher, there are no longer any significant differences in political activism between younger and older people. However, Table 2 shows that this is not the case in the United Kingdom. Even amongst those with a university degree,

older people are significantly more likely than younger people to participate in the same 6 activities that they were more likely than younger people to participate in without controlling for university education. Moreover, Table 3 shows that the differences between young people in Italy and the United Kingdom stay the same when we focus on the university educated. On the other hand, Table 4 shows that amongst the university educated, the differences between 31-70 year-olds in Italy and the United Kingdom become weaker, with older Italians still only significantly more likely to vote and demonstrate and older British respondents still only significantly more likely to boycott products and sign a petition.

Table 5 shows that young people in Italy are generally more likely to be involved in more demanding activities (demonstrating, working for a party, being a party member) than young people in Britain. The lower portion of Table 5 which looks at the ranking of political activities amongst university educated young people in Italy and United Kingdom shows that whether respondents have a university degree or not, the ranking of activities is virtually the same in the United Kingdom, with low intensity activities such as signing a petition or boycotting products at the top of the list. However, the pattern in Italy changes amongst this group. In Italy, both the second and third most popular activities after voting are now demanding ones: contacting a politician (30%) and demonstrating (23%); working for a party and being a party (both 7%) member go up a rank, above boycotting products (5%). Overall then, amongst the university educated differences between young people in Italy and the United Kingdom persist in terms of the difference between activities that each group is more likely to involve in relative to the other. Moreover, amongst the university educated, they are arguably greater in qualitative terms: with more demanding activities ranking higher in Italy than in the United Kingdom.

To summarise the findings in this section, being more educated mediates the differences in political activism between younger and older people in Italy, but not between younger and older people in the United Kingdom. To a lesser extent, controlling for education also mediates the differences between older people in Italy and the United Kingdom (when we focus on the university educated, both groups are significantly more likely than the other to engage in two activities so there is no net difference). However, education does not mediate differences in political activism between young people in Italy and the United Kingdom: even we control for university education, young people in Italy are significantly still more likely to engage in the same four activities (voting, being a party member, working for a party and demonstrating) whereas young people in Britain are still more likely to engage in the same two individualised activities characteristic of consumer-politics (signing a petition and boycotting products). Moreover, amongst the young and university educated, the differences in political activism are arguably greater in qualitative terms: with more demanding activities ranking higher in Italy than in the United Kingdom. These findings show that having a university education narrows the differences between young and older people in terms of political activism; and it increases the differences between young people in Italy and young people in the United Kingdom. Therefore, being educated has a greater effect for political activism amongst young people than older people in Italy and a greater effect amongst young people in Italy compared to young people in the United Kingdom.

Citizen and cause-oriented repertoires

Theorists have argued that since ‘unconventional’ forms of participation have become mainstream (Norris 2004, Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001, Norris et al. 2004) it becomes clearer to distinguish between citizen-oriented actions, relating to the traditional organs of participation such as parties, and cause-oriented repertoires characteristic of new social movements, which “focus attention upon

specific issues ... exemplified by consumer politics” (Norris 2004:4)ⁱ. Following Norris (2004) the activities in this part of the analysis are recoded into two scales (where 0 indicates participation in none of the activities and 1 in all of them):

- (1) citizen-oriented activism (voting, being a party member, party work, contacting politicians) and
- (2) cause-oriented activism (signing a petition, demonstrating, boycotting products for political reasons, wearing a campaign badge or sticker).

Table 6

Table 6 shows that In Italy, older people are significantly more likely to participate in citizen-oriented activities than young people; these differences are not longer significant amongst university educated respondents. In the United Kingdom, older people are significantly more likely to participate in both citizen and cause-oriented activities than young people; these differences persist amongst just university educated respondents. Young people in Italy are significantly more likely than young people in the United Kingdom to be involved in citizen oriented activities and young people in the United Kingdom are significantly more likely than young people in Italy to be involved in cause-oriented activities; however only differences for citizen-oriented activities with young Italians being more active persist when focussing just on university educated respondents. Older people in Italy are significantly more likely than older people in the United Kingdom to be involved in citizen-oriented activities whereas older people in the United Kingdom are significantly more likely than older people in Italy to be involved in cause-oriented actions; these differences persist when focussing on university graduates.

Age effects on citizen and cause-oriented activism

Table 7

Table 7 models the effect of being young on citizen and cause-oriented activism in Italy and the United Kingdom amongst all education levels and just those with a university degree or higher. These findings mirror those in Table 6. Being young has a negative effect on citizen-oriented activism in both nations; however, while being young has no effect on citizen-oriented activism amongst the university educated in Italy, the effect remains negative and similar in magnitude in the United Kingdom. Therefore, having a university degree has a greater impact on young people’s citizen-oriented activism in Italy than in the United Kingdom. Moreover, Table 7 also shows that being young has no effect on cause-oriented activism in Italy whether amongst the general sample or just the university educated. In the United Kingdom however, being young has a negative effect on cause-oriented activism irrespective of education levels.

Overall, then the findings in this section show that there are no differences between younger and older people in Italy in terms of cause-oriented activism and having a university degree removes the differences in citizen-oriented activism between younger and older people in Italy. There are differences in both citizen and cause-oriented activism between younger and older people in the United Kingdom and both persist even amongst university graduates. Comparing young people in the two countries, even we control for university education, young people in Italy are still significantly more likely than young people in the United Kingdom to engage in citizen-oriented activities ; however, amongst university graduates, young people in Britain are no longer significantly more likely to be involved in cause-oriented activism than young people in Italy.

Age, education and interaction effects on political activism

Table 8

Table 8 models the effects of being young, having a university degree and their interaction effect on citizen and cause-oriented activism in Italy and the United Kingdom. As in Table 7, being young has a negative effect on both citizen and cause-oriented activism in the United Kingdom, but just on citizen-oriented activism in Italy. Having a university degree has a positive effect on both repertoires in both countries. In Italy, there are significant interaction effects between being young and having a university degree for both forms of participation. Model 2 for citizen-oriented activism in Italy shows that having a university degree offsets the negative effect of being young since the sum of the coefficients is almost zero (-.006). No such interaction effect is observed in the United Kingdom where, judging from the magnitude of the coefficients, being young has a greater negative effect on citizen-oriented activism than in Italy. So, for citizen-oriented activism, there are greater differences between young and older people in the United Kingdom than in Italy but even having a university degree does not attenuate these differences. Model 2 for cause-oriented activism in Italy shows amongst the young, having a university degree has a negative effect on cause-oriented activism (sum of the coefficients -.08). This confirms findings reported in Table 5 that when controlling for a university degree cause-oriented activities are superseded by citizen-oriented activities in the ranking.

Group effects and further socioeconomic determinants of political activism

Previous research shows that apart from age and education, other socio-economic determinants of political activism are gender, marital and occupational status (Table 9, Model 1). The ESS also contains a measure for group effects: party attachment can promote party membership and party work as well as stimulate to action because of group-based partisan forces in elections (Table 9, Model). Table 9 controls for these variables and shows that the interaction effects between age and having a university degree persist in all four models of political activism in Italy. Controlling for both socioeconomic indicators and party attachment leaves the effect of being young negative and significant as in Table 8 (for citizen oriented activism in both nations and cause-oriented activism just in the United Kingdom). Table 9 shows that controlling for party attachment doubles the model fit for citizen-oriented activism in both nations. As for cause-oriented activism, the picture is more mixed: party attachment improves the model fit about four-fold in Italy, whereas it falls short of doubling the model fit in the United Kingdom. It appears then that cause-oriented activities in Italy are still in some way related to parties.

Given that the most-popular cause-oriented activity in Italy is participating in a demonstration and that these are often called by left-wing parties, then a possible explanation for the improved model fit is that being attached to a left-wing party has a strong positive effect on cause-oriented activism in Italy. Therefore, since having a university degree and being young in Italy has a negative effect on cause-oriented activism a possible reason for this is that young university graduates are *less* likely to be attached to a party. Moreover, Model 2 for citizen-oriented activism in Italy shows that controlling for party attachment accounts for the positive effect of having a university degree. Therefore, it appears that the university educated have stronger feelings of party attachment in Italy. This may also explain why having a university degree offsets the negative effect of being young in Italy if amongst young people with a university degree party attachment is stronger. Being married has a positive effect on citizen-oriented activism in both countries; whereas being employed has a positive effect on both citizen and cause-oriented activism in Italy. In terms of the other socio-economic variables, being male has a positive effect on citizen-oriented activism in Italy whereas being female has a

positive effect on cause-oriented activism in the United Kingdom. Perhaps then, a reason why having a university degree in Italy offsets the negative effect of being young is that the effect of being male is stronger amongst university graduates.

Table 9

Attitudinal determinants of political activism

Models 1 in Table 1 control for attitudinal determinants of political activism: dissatisfaction with the present state of things, ideology (in particular being left-wing), and political interest have all been shown to be important determinants of political activism in previous research. Controlling for attitudinal determinants of political activism improves model fit in both countries for both forms of political activism and particularly in Italy. In particular, being very interested in politics has a positive effect in both countries and for both repertoires of political action and particularly so in Italy. Controlling for attitudinal variables weakens the negative effect of being young in both Italy and the United Kingdom for citizen-oriented activism and also for cause-oriented activism in the United Kingdom. Therefore, two other reasons why being university educated in Italy offsets the negative effect of being young are that young university graduates have higher levels of political interest or perhaps are more left-wing. Being dissatisfied with the present state of things has a positive effect on cause-oriented activism in both nations. In Italy, being young has a negative effect on cause-oriented activism when controlling for attitudinal determinants and the negative effect of the interaction between being young and having a university degree becomes stronger. Given that demonstrating is the most popular cause-oriented activity in Italy, perhaps the reason why young university graduates in Italy are less likely to be involved in cause-oriented actions is that they are less dissatisfied with the present state of things so they feel less need to engage in demonstrations to voice their discontent. Moreover, being female has a positive effect on cause-oriented activism when controlling for attitudinal determinants, so perhaps, another reason why young university graduates are less likely to involve in this repertoire is that fewer females have university degrees than males.

Further interaction effects

Models 2 in Table 10 control for further interaction effects derived from our analysis in the previous two sections. The conditional effect hypotheses derived for citizen-oriented activism were: (1) given that party attachment accounted for the positive effect of having a university degree, one reason why having a university degree offsets the negative effect of being young in Italy is that party attachment is stronger amongst young university graduates. Model 2 for citizen-oriented activism in Italy however shows that this is not the case since the relevant interaction term is not significant (partyattXdegreeXyoung). (2) Given that being male had a strong positive effect for citizen-oriented activism in Italy, a reason why having a university degree in Italy offsets the negative effect of being young is that the effect of being male on citizen-oriented activism is stronger amongst university graduates. Model 2 for citizen-oriented activism in Italy shows that this is indeed the case since the relevant interaction term is positive and significant (maleXdegreeXyoung). (3) Given that controlling for attitudinal variables weakens the negative effect of being young on citizen-oriented activism, one reason why being university educated in Italy offsets the negative effect of being young is that young university graduates have higher levels of political interest. Model 2 for citizen-oriented activism in Italy shows that this is indeed the case since the relevant interaction term is positive and significant (polintrXdegreeXyoung). Therefore, two reasons why having a university degree has a greater effect on citizen-oriented activism amongst young people in Italy is that university graduates are more likely to be male and that young university graduates are more interested in politics.

Table 10

The conditional effect hypotheses derived for cause-oriented activism were: (1) given that the most-popular cause-oriented activity in Italy is participating in a demonstration and that these are often called by left-wing parties and that since having a university degree and being young in Italy has a negative effect on cause-oriented activism a possible reason for this is that the effect of being attached to a party is *weaker* amongst young university graduates. Model 2 for cause-oriented activism in Italy shows that this is not the case since the relevant variable is not significant (partyattXdegreeXyoung). (2) Given that being female has a positive effect on cause-oriented activism when controlling for attitudinal determinants, perhaps one reason why young university graduates in Italy are less likely to involve in this repertoire is that the university graduates are more likely to be male. Model two for cause-oriented activism shows that this is not the case since the relevant interaction term isn't significant (maleXdegreeXyoung). (3) Given that controlling for attitudinal determinants increased the negative effect of being young and having a university degree on cause-oriented activism in Italy and that demonstrating is the most popular cause-oriented activity, perhaps the reason is that being dissatisfied has a weaker effect on cause-oriented activism amongst young university graduates. Model 2 for cause oriented activism in Italy shows that this is not the case since the relevant interaction term is not significant (dstf2XuniversityXyoung). Therefore it is hard to account for the negative on cause-oriented activism of being a young university graduate in Italy.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I confirm findings in the literature that young people are in general less likely than their elders to be politically interested and to participate in political activities. Italians are however more likely to be involved in political activities which require repeated contact and effort, and overall, the greatest differences in participation between young people and their elders are to be found in the United Kingdom. Therefore, my empirical results bring attention to the diverging patterns of participation obtaining between different age groups and to the cross-national peculiarities of young people's political involvement which are often obscured by the widespread reliance on aggregate level data in the literature. Most importantly, I find that young Italians are more likely to be involved in protest politics than their elders and more likely to be involved in demanding political activities than their British counterparts who are, on the other hand, more likely to be involved in activities characteristic of "consumer politics" (Norris 2004).

In addition, the remarkably strong influence of having a university degree amongst young Italians is testimony to the capital importance of analysing the relative impact of different factors for political involvement amongst different groups. In conclusion, while I did find that young people were in general less likely to be politically involved than their elders, these differences were more marked in the United Kingdom than in Italy. Amongst university graduates, young Italians exhibited the highest levels of participation in citizen-oriented actions. On the other hand, education does not appear to mediate youth political involvement in the United Kingdom, so that normative concerns about youth political disengagement appear to be more appropriate for the latter of the two countries.

APPENDIX

Variables for analysis

Variables	Coding	ESS Questionnaire Item
Young	Recode of year of birth 1 18-30 yrs 0 31-70 yrs	In what year were you born?
Male	Recode of gender 1 male 0 female	(Interviewer-coded)
Married	Recode of marital status 1 married or civil partnership 0 other	What is your marital status?
University	Recode of education level 1 university or phd 0 other	What is the highest level of education you have achieved?
Political interest	1 very interested 0 other	How interested would you say you are in politics?
Party identification	Recode of two items 1 not close to any party 2 quite close to a party 3 very close to a party	Do you feel closer to a particular party than all other parties? How close do you feel to your party?
Left	1 strongly agree 0 other	Governments should reduce differences in income levels
Dissatisfaction	Mean scale of 6 items alpha 0.78	how satisfied are you with how (1) democracy works in [country]? (2) life as a whole,(3) economy, (4) government, (5) education,(6) health services
Occupational status	1 in paid work 0 other	Which of these descriptions applies to what you have been doing in the last 7 days?
Voted	Dummy variable 1 yes 0 no	Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last election?
Party member	Dummy variable 1 yes 0 no	Are you a member of any political party?
Party work, contact politician, signed petition, demonstrated, boycott, badge	Dummy variable 1 yes 0 no	There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?

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ⁱ Norris (2004: 4) argues that young people display different patterns of activism associated more with cause-oriented politics than their elders, and that by limiting our investigation to citizen-oriented forms of activism associated with the traditional agencies of participation, such as parties, we underestimate young people's engagement relative to their elders. If Norris' argument is correct, one would expect (1) younger people to be more likely to be involved in cause rather than in citizen-oriented actions in both nations, (2) older people to be more likely to be involved in citizen-oriented activism than young people in both nations, (3) that differences between older and younger people should be more marked for citizen as opposed to cause-oriented activism. However, Table 6 shows that both young and older people in Italy are on average more involved in citizen as opposed to cause-oriented actions (young -.9, older -.17); in the United Kingdom, however, the patterns fit Norris' prediction with young people being more likely to be involved in cause than citizen-oriented actions and older people more likely to be involved in citizen than cause-oriented actions (though for both age groups the difference between repertoires is very small, -.2). In terms of the differences between young and older people by repertoire, these also conform to Norris' prediction: they are larger for citizen-oriented activism than for cause-oriented activism in both Italy (-.8 citizen, -.0 cause) and the United Kingdom (-.9 citizen, -.7 cause).

Table 1. Comparison of proportions: Political activism by age group in Italy

	All				University education or higher			
	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N
<i>Voted</i>	81%	92%	0.000	2229	88%	94%	0.167	266
<i>Party member</i>	3%	4%	0.363	2349	7%	6%	0.791	269
<i>Worked for party</i>	3%	4%	0.482	2351	7%	8%	0.865	269
<i>Contacted politician</i>	10%	15%	0.007	2348	30%	26%	0.585	267
<i>Signed a petition</i>	14%	19%	0.008	2344	21%	34%	0.074	269
<i>Demonstrated</i>	16%	11%	0.002	2351	23%	25%	0.762	269
<i>Boycotted products</i>	6%	9%	0.038	2350	5%	15%	0.068	269
<i>Campaign badge</i>	11%	8%	0.036	2349	11%	17%	0.324	268

Table 2. Comparison of proportions: Political activism by age group in the UK

	All				University education or higher			
	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N
<i>Voted</i>	50%	75%	0.000	3463	62%	83%	0.000	1045
<i>Party member</i>	1%	3%	0.007	3585	1%	4%	0.011	1086
<i>Worked for party</i>	1%	4%	0.004	3588	1%	6%	0.001	1088
<i>Contacted politician</i>	10%	21%	0.000	3587	17%	30%	0.000	1088
<i>Signed a petition</i>	35%	45%	0.000	3582	47%	55%	0.028	1085
<i>Demonstrated</i>	5%	5%	0.428	3588	7%	8%	0.523	1088
<i>Boycotted products</i>	15%	30%	0.000	3582	24%	43%	0.000	1085
<i>Campaign badge</i>	10%	10%	0.766	3587	12%	13%	0.775	1087

Table 3. Comparison of proportions: Political activism amongst 18-30 year-olds in Italy and the UK

	All				University education or higher			
	UK	IT	p-value	N	UK	IT	p-value	N
	18-30 yrs	18-30 yrs			18-30 yrs	18-30 yrs		
<i>Voted</i>	50%	81%	0.000	1062	62%	88%	0.001	262
<i>Party member</i>	1%	3%	0.002	1233	1%	7%	0.007	272
<i>Worked for party</i>	1%	3%	0.019	1234	1%	7%	0.007	273
<i>Contacted politician</i>	10%	10%	0.748	1234	17%	30%	0.064	273
<i>Signed a petition</i>	35%	14%	0.000	1232	47%	21%	0.001	271
<i>Demonstrated</i>	5%	16%	0.000	1233	7%	23%	0.001	273
<i>Boycotted products</i>	15%	6%	0.000	1233	24%	5%	0.003	273
<i>Campaign badge</i>	10%	11%	0.439	1234	12%	11%	0.873	273

Table 4. Comparison of proportions: Political activism amongst 31-70 year-olds in Italy and the UK

	All				University education or higher			
	UK 31-70 yrs	IT 31-70 yrs	p-value	N	UK 31-70 yrs	IT 31-70 yrs	p-value	N
<i>Voted</i>	75%	92%	0.000	4630	83%	94%	0.000	1049
<i>Party member</i>	3%	4%	0.002	4701	4%	6%	0.396	1083
<i>Worked for party</i>	3%	4%	0.263	4705	6%	8%	0.494	1084
<i>Contacted politician</i>	21%	15%	0.000	4701	30%	26%	0.239	1082
<i>Signed a petition</i>	45%	19%	0.000	4694	55%	34%	0.000	1083
<i>Demonstrated</i>	5%	11%	0.000	4706	8%	25%	0.000	1084
<i>Boycotted products</i>	30%	9%	0.000	4699	43%	15%	0.000	1081
<i>Campaign badge</i>	10%	8%	0.025	4702	13%	17%	0.085	1082

Table 5. Ranking of political activities amongst 18-30 year-olds in Italy and the United Kingdom

All				
Ranking	United Kingdom 18-30 yrs		Italy 18-30 yrs	
1	Voted	50%	Voted	81%
2	Signed a petition	35%	Demonstrated	16%
3	Boycotted products	15%	Signed a petition	14%
4	= Contacted politician = Campaign badge	10%	Campaign badge	11%
5	Demonstrated	5%	Contacted politician	10%
6	= Worked for party = Party member	1%	Boycotted products	6%
7			= Worked for party = Party member	3%
University education or higher				
Ranking	United Kingdom 18-30 yrs		Italy 18-30 yrs	
1	Voted	62%	Voted	88%
2	Signed a petition	47%	Contacted politician	30%
3	Boycotted products	24%	Demonstrated	23%
4	Contacted politician	17%	Signed a petition	21%
5	Campaign badge	12%	Campaign badge	11%
6	Demonstrated	7%	= Worked for party = Party member	7%
7	= Worked for party = Party member	1%	Boycotted products	5%

Table 6. Citizen and cause-oriented activism

	All				University education or higher			
	Italy: young vs. old				Italy: young vs. old			
	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N
<i>Citizen-oriented</i>	.21	.29	0.000	2353	.32	.33	0.835	269
<i>Cause-oriented</i>	.12	.12	0.982	2352	.15	.23	0.089	269
	United Kingdom: young vs. old				United Kingdom: young vs. old			
	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N	18-30 yrs	31-70yrs	p-value	N
<i>Citizen-oriented</i>	.14	.25	0.000	3588	.20	.30	0.000	1088
<i>Cause-oriented</i>	.16	.23	0.000	3588	.22	.30	0.000	1088
	Young: United Kingdom vs. Italy				Young: United Kingdom vs. Italy			
	UK 18-30 yrs	IT 18-30 yrs	p-value	N	UK 18-30 yrs	IT 18-30 yrs	p-value	N
<i>Citizen-oriented</i>	.15	.21	0.000	1234	.20	.32	0.000	273
<i>Cause-oriented</i>	.16	.12	0.001	1234	.22	.15	0.060	273
	Old: United Kingdom vs. Italy				Old: United Kingdom vs. Italy			
	UK 31-70 yrs	IT 31-70 yrs	p-value	N	UK 31-70 yrs	IT 31-70 yrs	p-value	N
<i>Citizen-oriented</i>	.25	.29	0.000	4707	.30	.33	0.048	1084
<i>Cause-oriented</i>	.23	.12	0.000	4706	.30	.23	0.001	1084

N.B. Based on a scale of 0 to 1 where 0 indicates participation in none of the activities and 1 in all 8 of them.

Table 7. Age effects on political activism

	Citizen-oriented activism				Cause-oriented activism			
	All Italy	UK	University or higher Italy	University or higher UK	All Italy	UK	University or higher Italy	University or higher UK
N	2353	3588	269	1088	2352	3588	269	1088
R ²	3.70%	5.35%	0.02%	4.35%	0.00%	1.05%	1.08%	1.22%
Young (p-value)	-0.090** (0.000)	-0.107** (0.000)	-0.007 (0.834)	-0.103** (0.000)	.000 (0.982)	-0.063** (0.000)	-.080 (0.089)	-0.071** (0.000)

Table 8. Age, education and interaction effects

	Citizen-oriented activism				Cause-oriented activism			
	Italy Model 1	Model 2	UK Model 1	Model 2	Italy Model 1	Model 2	UK Model 1	Model 2
N	2353	2353	3588	3588	2352	2352	3588	3588
R ²	5.12%	5.41%	8.66%	8.67%	2.38%	2.62%	4.55%	4.55%
Young University	-0.077** .064**	-0.084** .052**	-0.109** .073**	-0.112** .071**	.005 .110**	.013 .126**	-0.065** .099**	-0.062** .101**
universityXyoung		.078*		.009		-0.093		-.009

Key : p < 0.001** p ≤ 0.01* p ≤ 0.05

Table 9. Socio-economic determinants of political activism and group effects

	Citizen-oriented activism				Cause-oriented activism			
	Italy Model 1	Model 2	UK Model 1	Model 2	Italy Model 1	Model 2	UK Model 1	Model 2
N	2351	1994	3585	2969	2350	1994	3585	2969
R ²	8.10%	19.47%	9.18%	17.68%	2.96%	13.90%	4.83%	8.99%
Young University	-0.073** .042**	-0.060** .015	-0.102** .072**	-0.089** .062**	.008 .119**	.026 .080**	-0.066** .101**	-0.057** .091**
universityXyoung	.080*	.095**	.008	.006	-0.091	-0.082	-.009	.001
Male	.033**	.028**	.007	-.000	.000	-.013	-0.024*	-0.028**
Married	.017	.018	.026**	.029**	-.012	-.015	-.011	-.007
In paid work	.039**	.038**	-.005	.003	.025	.024	.006	.005
Party attachment		.090**		.096**		.117**		.087**

Key : p < 0.001** p ≤ 0.01* p ≤ 0.05

Table 10. Attitudinal determinants of political activism and further interaction effects

	Citizen-oriented activism				Cause-oriented activism			
	Italy		UK		Italy		UK	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
N	1957	1957	2931	2931	1957	1957	2931	2931
R ²	24.95%	26.89%	20.19%	20.76%	22.01%	22.79%	12.61%	12.94%
Young University	-.051**	-.027	-.086**	-.107**	-.043**	-.029	-.045**	-.108
	.002	.029	.051**	.015	.062**	.058	.081**	.054
universityXyoung	.089**	-.068	.010	.071	-.098*	-.026	.001	.031
Male Married In paid work	.022*	.028**	-.007	-.017	-.022	-.007	-.036**	-.038**
	.022*	.023*	.029**	.028**	-.006	-.005	-.002	-.000
	.040**	.040**	.004	.005	.030*	.029**	.007	.006
Party attachment	.070**	.068**	.082**	.080**	.091**	.084**	.071**	.065**
Dissatisfaction Left-wing	.001	.001	-.002	-.002	.013**	.009*	.012**	.009*
	.017	.017	-.014	-.015	.017	.016	.015	.016
Political interest	.158**	.178**	.100**	.074**	.230**	.234**	.139**	.141**
partyattXdegree		.012		.011		-.000		.012
partyattXyoung		-.010		.007		.040		.022
partyattXdegXyng		.030		-.025		-.060		-.023
maleXdegree		-.032		.037		-.080		-.030
maleXyoung		-.023		.010		.188		.038
maleXdegXyng		.132		-.060		.017		.039
polintrXdegree		-.164**		.027				
polintrXyoung		.085		.143*				
polintrXdegXyng		.194		-.076				
dstfXdegree						.017		.009
dstfXyoung						.012		.007
dstfXdegreeXyng						-.028		-.007

Key : p < 0.001** p ≤ 0.01* p ≤ 0.05