

The Phenomenon of Political Dropouts: Age, Abstention and Political Institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Does low turnout matter? In this paper I start from the contention that, in long-standing democracies, the real question is not *if* turnout matters but *when* it matters. Or, to put it otherwise, any real threat to democracy lies not in citizens not voting per se, but in their not being in a position to vote when it is appropriate to do so. One aspect of being in such a position has to do with access to the ballot box. In the mature democracies, much has been learned and accomplished with regard to mechanisms to enhance voter access. Moreover, use of the new information technologies (“E-democracy”) raises new challenges in this regard, not only with regard to access to the ballot-box, but also on the information side. Though I am concerned with the information side in this paper, I shall not directly address this complex issue here - except to suggest that, like postal voting, but to a potentially far greater degree, E-democracy is a two-edged word when it comes to political participation. There is little evidence so far that it brings into the electoral arena those otherwise excluded. Its main function appears to be to facilitate voting for those who would normally vote in any case, but at the risk of distancing people from the human exchange that has been a key dimension of politics.¹

My work centers on the information needed to cast a vote – electronic or otherwise. While often neglected, there is a fundamental distinction between informed citizens choosing not to vote and potential voters failing to vote due to lacking the minimal information needed to distinguish among the choices – including the choice not to participate. This is the distinction I develop in this paper. What follows should be seen more than anything else as a work in progress, setting out the agenda for the research required to empirically test this distinction and apply it to research agendas and policy choices designed to enhance political participation. I concentrate on young people since it is now well established that a key factor in the declining turnout witnessed in most democratic countries is generational. Generally speaking, young people tend to vote less today than they did before; and, despite being better educated, they tend to be less attentive to and (thus) informed about the choices available than were young people in earlier generations. If the two phenomena are, as they appear to be, closely connected, it is not an exaggeration to characterize it as one of political dropouts. They are unlike the often highly visible young people – here identified by the rather simplistic term political protesters - who consciously choose to substitute traditional means of political participation, including and especially voting, by extra-parliamentary and non-conventional forms of political participation. Political dropouts, like school dropouts, disappear from public and, until recently, policy makers’ view.

While abandoning politics and rejecting mainstream politics are two separate phenomena, with different consequences, they are not easy to distinguish in practice. Here, the new

technologies muddy the water. To the extent that one can speak of a generational political culture, it is expressed increasingly via the channels of communication afforded by electronic information technology. In this context, mainstream politics, it is suggested, becomes inherently uninteresting to them: why should they be interested “in the timing of entry into the Euro or the funding of public transport. It is this essential tedium of politics that breeds apathy.”² In effect, those who do engage in mainstream politics are expected to successfully compete with electronic celebrities,³ to make their world as interesting as those that can be entered at the push of a button on a TV remote controller, computer mouse, or playstation joystick. From this perspective, when young people are inattentive and abstain from participation, the failure can be attributed to traditional politics’ incapacity to adapt to the new conditions.

Given the choice, such an approach tends to see evidence of the abandonment of politics rather than of the rejection of mainstream politics. A good example is provided by one interpretation of data about British youth. The Electoral Commission (2002: 18) found young non-voters “disproportionately inclined to claim that they did not vote because they were ‘not interested in politics’ or that it made little difference who won the election. They were also much more likely than other non-voters to claim that the entire voting process was ‘unimportant,’ ... to complain that ‘no one party stands for me’ or that they felt ‘powerless’ in the electoral process.” Following up on these results, a 2003 study of newly eligible British voters found roughly half the young people surveyed stated having little or no interest in politics or the recent election. Yet, the authors, rather than seeing this as evidence of a large, politically uninterested group of young people, chose to focus on the fact that 71 percent agreed that “there aren’t enough opportunities for young people like me to influence political parties,” to conclude that young people are “sufficiently interested in political affairs to dispel the myth that they are apathetic and politically lazy” (Henn and Weinstein, 2003).

Such an interpretation fits into the wider tendency to give abstainers the benefit of the doubt by political scientists understandably reluctant to point fingers, to call someone politically lazy.⁴ We see this in the tendency to pose survey questions that allow respondents to cast the best light on the situation: we accept “interest in politics” at face value seldom probing whether that interest was actually invested into any efforts to gain political information. Yet the two are not unrelated, as a simple American experiment showed clearly.⁵ And, at worst, we use surveys that invite such an interpretation. The British survey cited above is a good example of what happens when respondents are given the costless choice of blaming others or admitting to being “apathetic and politically lazy.”

The typical survey, thus, allows political dropouts to pass for political protestors. Both are likely to answer ‘yes’ to the question of whether they agree that “all politicians are the same, that “no party stands for me,” that politicians and parties are doing a bad job of informing us. Yet the effects of their choices are by no means the same. Those whose responses reflect an informed choice to instead participate in non-traditional political activities and voluntary organizations will be in a position, i.e. sufficiently informed, to vote in the future, when the situation changes either objectively, or in terms of their own

interests.⁶ This is not the case for the uninformed and inattentive political dropouts. As I have argued in my work generally, and as I insist here, the crucial difference is that of knowledge. If we wish to distinguish the two phenomena, we will need to know much more than we do about what young people actually know about politics, and not just their attitudes toward it.

Fortunately a number of recent national studies do measure political knowledge, though few specifically study young people, and even fewer are comparative. Some of this literature is the result of countries with low and declining turnout, such as the US, the UK and Canada, addressing abstention from voting, especially on the part of young people, with some urgency. A positive effect of this development is that we are beginning to fill the gaps in comparative research. Nevertheless, without a systematic effort to gather adequate political knowledge data, especially data that can be used comparatively, important gaps will remain. Like the British surveys cited above, the most prominent publicly or foundation financed studies seeking to explain declining youth political participation in the US (Keeter et al., 2002), and Canada (Pammett and Leduc, 2003), do not ask questions of political knowledge. My own research (Milner 2002) sets out what we do know about comparative political knowledge, stressing the limits encountered due to the absence single general set of political knowledge questions used in international surveys. In this paper I make a first step at integrating into this analysis the findings of this emerging and still far from adequate literature on youth political participation. I begin with a brief discussion of the effects of political institutions upon turnout in general and of young people in particular, showing that political knowledge is an important intervening variable. I then directly address the relationship between political knowledge and youth political disengagement – the phenomenon of political dropouts - and end with plea for consideration of a few policy choices that could break the vicious circle.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, AND VOTER TURNOUT

The recent secular decline in voter turnout in established democracies⁷ has been especially acute in the United Kingdom as well as my home country of Canada, both of which used to rate average or better among comparable countries. The recent steady and sharp decline (from 77.7 in 1992 to 59.4 percent in 2001 in the UK, and from 75 in 1988 to 61 percent in 2000 in Canada) has seen them join the traditionally low-turnout United States (along with Japan and Switzerland) at the bottom. One result has been a questioning of longstanding political institutions in an effort to reduce the “democratic deficit.”

The most specific aspect of this discussion concerns the effects of the electoral system, given the well documented fact of higher average voter turnout in countries using PR electoral systems.⁸ Much of the discussion centers on votes counting more under PR, but this explanation does not take us very far, since, even under PR, a single vote, for all intents and purposes, never changes the outcome. Once we add the fact that parties under PR have an incentive to mobilize all potential supporters and not just those in winnable districts, we in effect introduce the more relevant factor of political knowledge. This is

because, fundamental to mobilization, especially when the electoral rules encourage this - as they tend to do in PR countries (Bowler, Carter, and Farrell 2000) – is the task of informing potential voters.

So are voters better informed are PR? The comparative data allowing us to use political knowledge as dependent variable (with electoral systems), or independent variable (with turnout) is far from ideal since there is as yet no single general set of political knowledge questions used internationally. Nevertheless, it is possible to derive insights from the responses to the political knowledge questions in recent national election surveys coordinated by the CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems group based at the University of Michigan) each of which includes at least three knowledge questions pertaining to political institutions and actors.⁹ A useful recent compilation is provided by Grönlund who combines the results for 19 CSES countries without compulsory voting. The most striking aspect of the data is that it confirms the importance of political knowledge when it comes to turnout: respondents with low education levels but a high level of political information reported turning out at 83 per cent, more than 5 percent above the overall average.

As far as the effect of electoral institutions is concerned, Grönlund compares the 32,000 respondents from the 12 countries with PR electoral systems with the 17,000 in the 7 countries with FPTP and other non-proportional (majoritarian) systems. As expected, he finds reported turnout proved higher among the former systems (79.7 percent) than with the latter (77.2 per cent).¹⁰ Though the CSES data does not lend itself to nation-to-nation comparisons of political knowledge since the political knowledge questions differ, there is no reason to believe the questions harder or easier in the proportional or non-proportional countries. Hence we can take Grönlund's finding that the correlation between years of education and political knowledge is significantly higher in the non-PR countries – at .32 - than in PR ones¹¹ - .24 – as strengthening the claim that higher turnout under PR is related to its effect on political knowledge.

The finding that people with low educational resources are more informed under PR goes against conventional thinking: FPTP defenders claim voting is a simpler proposition since it is typically a choice between keeping the bums in or kicking them out. This is to view voters as living only in the present. In reality, it is proportional systems that enhance the political knowledge of those with marginal educational resources by providing potential voters with a political map that is relatively clearly drawn and stable across time and space. Since parties under PR are not subject to the volatility of FTPT, which blows up their strength when they do well, and shrivels it when they do poorly, there is a relative stability and consistency of the features of the political map. PR electoral systems make it easier to identify with a political party, and to use that identification as a guide through the complexities of issues and actors over time and from the local to the national political arenas. By thus simplifying a complex political reality, PR fosters political participation especially at the lower end of the education and income ladders where information is at a premium.

If the problem is primary generational, however, the relationship of electoral systems to turnout at the aggregate level is not an adequate indicator of the degree to which electoral system reform can affect turnout in the UK, US and Canada? Moreover, though the drop experienced was not as great as in FPTP Britain and Canada, certain traditionally high-turnout PR states, specifically Finland and Norway, also experienced a real decline. In legislative elections, turnout in Finland declined from 77.3 to 65.2 percent between 1987 and 1999,¹² and from 81.5 to 73.1 between 1989 and 2001 in Norway. As we shall see, the four Nordic countries, which share important aspects of culture and institutions, differ significantly. In New Zealand, which adopted the MMP form of PR in 1996, we see a kind of spike, pushing turnout upward in 1996, only to see the decline begun in the 1980s resume in 1999. Similarly, the numbers casting ballots were disappointing for the new assembly in Scotland, which uses an MMP form of PR, turnout fell in 2003 to 49.4 percent from 58.8 percent recorded in 1999.

Still, a connection does exist. In examining the factors accounting for differences in turnout level for voters between 18 and 29 years old in 15 Western European countries, the International IDEA (1999) report suggested that the most significant factor was whether the electoral system facilitated access to representation in parliament for small parties. In countries using such—PR--systems, IDEA estimated the youth turnout rate to average almost 12 percentage points higher than in those which did not. Political knowledge, as argued above, has something to do with this relationship – even for young people it would appear. In 2003, the National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey assessed 3,250 young adults in nine countries on their awareness of geographical aspects of current events. Out of 56 questions that were asked across the ten countries surveyed, young Americans on average answered 23 questions correctly (just above last place Mexico), with young people in Canada (27) and Great Britain (28) – the other two FPTP countries in the survey - faring almost as poorly. The two PR, high-turnout countries, Sweden (with 40) and Germany (38), led, followed by the countries with more mixed systems, Italy (38), France (34) and Japan (31).

Such a correlation itself proves nothing, but it does allow us to continue to look to institutions even when focusing on young potential voters. It is important to stress that Germany and Sweden, along with other high turnout countries in Europe have used PR for many years and at all levels. And it is the fact of proportionality being built into the political landscape so that citizens' experience is consistent over time and space, that, I argue, helps account for higher levels of political knowledge and thus turnout under PR. In New Zealand, PR has only made it in fits and starts to local elections,¹³ while Scotland, which operates in the context of Westminster's FPTP environment, is only now moving to introduce STV for local elections. Nevertheless, we know that there is a group of knowledgeable people, especially younger people, who feel unrepresented by the parties that can win seats under FPTP and thus more likely to vote under PR since the parties they support – most often Green or anti-globalization, but also libertarian – have a real chance of winning representation. This helps explain the turnout spike in New Zealand's first MMP election in 1996 (Karp and Banducci, 1998), the same may be said of Scotland's 58.8 percent recorded in 1999. We should note also that the overall number potentially affected is relatively small. In Canada, given that the young are if anything

more “mainstream” in their political attitudes than their elders,¹⁴ PR would bring only a small number of supporters of excluded parties to the polls. This could be somewhat higher in Britain given the widely expressed active dislike of the candidates by young voters (Mori, 2001: 21). We need keep in mind as well those thus attracted are less likely to be political dropouts than political protesters, less likely therefore to make abstention permanent. Looked at over time, bringing the protesters to the polls earlier in their lives than they otherwise do is not the same thing as averting political dropouts.

One added dimension of the institutional factor in the UK and Canada has to do with the fact that the outcome of recent elections was effectively a *fait accompli* – an outcome that would have been less certain had these elections had been fought under a different electoral systems. This would have meant a heightened interest in the election in the media and, generally, in the environment surrounding young people arriving at the voting. We can infer that this had a marginal effect on the levels of abstention on those who arrived at the voting age during this period. How large a group might have actually voted is of course speculation. One measure would be the 6.5 percent of Canadian respondents 18 to 24 who gave the absence of a contest as reason for non-voting. This, it should be noted, is very small given that overall 9 percent of abstainers gave this response (Pammett and Leduc, 2003: 17). Perhaps one might add some of the young abstainers who gave general lack of interest in politics (28 versus 25 percent of abstainers overall) as the reason, who would have been made interested enough to vote if the election were a real contest. Given that in Britain young people who did not vote in 2001 were more likely than all other non-voters to believe that the act of voting was a meaningless or insignificant one, and that nothing would change whatever the outcome (Electoral Commission, 2002: 27), it is conceivable that more competitive elections could have brought a somewhat larger proportion of young abstainers to the ballot box. Since voting or abstaining when first given the chance to vote becomes a habit for a small but not negligible number (Franklin 2003), this is a factor in explaining the phenomenon of political dropouts.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, CIVIC DUTY AND POLITICAL DROPOUTS

If institutions do not tell nearly the whole story of turnout decline among the young, we need to ask what other factors account for this change and the extent to which these are linked to political knowledge. We begin with a brief recapitulation of what we know about turnout decline per se. The International IDEA report (1999) examining political participation of young people in 15 Western European countries, found that while young people have generally tended to vote less than their elders, by the early 1990s the gap between average turnout for citizens 18 to 29 and for those over 30 had grown to 12 percent. In virtually all countries, though some clearly more than others, somewhere in the latter 1980s significantly fewer young people were arriving at voting age ready to exercise the franchise.

Data from many countries illustrate this. According to the US national election survey, turnout among those aged 18 to 24 went down from 50 percent in the 1972 presidential election, when 18 year olds were first permitted to vote, to about 32 percent in 1996,

(while overall turnout fell by only 6 percent). In the 2001 UK election, overall turnout sank to a post-war low of just 59 percent, with only 39 percent of young people casting a vote (MORI 2001).¹⁵ The Elections Canada study revealed that only 26 percent of those 18 to 24 turned out to vote in the 2000 federal election (Pammett and Leduc, 2003).¹⁶

In traditionally high turnout Finland non-voting has increased most markedly among the young: the turnout gap between those 19 to 24 years of age and the overall average rose to 17 percentage points in 1999 (Martikainen, 2000). For Norway, Bjorklund (2000) finds particular effects of age upon turnout in local elections, the level at which there has been an especially worrying decline. In 1999, only 31 percent of those born after 1975 voted, a number rising steadily by age cohort to 72 percent for those born between 1930 and 1945.¹⁷

One aspect of this phenomenon is the decline in young people's sense of a civic duty to vote. For example, in fall 2001 (after September 11 when patriotic feelings were at a maximum), 49 percent of young Americans said voting is of little no importance to them. Bjorklund stresses a change in attitudes toward voting. He signals a "dwindling support for voting as a form of civic virtue.... The difference between cohorts is pronounced. It is in the youngest cohort that most often sticks to the [voting as] self-interest alternative" (Bjorklund, 2000: 19). Twenty percent described it as a responsibility, and only 9 percent as a duty.¹⁸ The European Social Survey in 2002 asked "to be a good citizen, how important would you say is it for a person to vote in elections?" in 20 European new and old democracies, using an 11 point scale from extremely unimportant to extremely important. Overall, the average was 7.388, while for those under 25, the average was 6.755. There was significantly less variation between age groups by country in the overall sample, than among the young, with the difference generally greater in the old democracies (See Table 1).¹⁹

Yet civic duty is not unrelated to political attentiveness and, thus, to the primary factor identified here, political knowledge. A decline in the sense of civic duty means that young people are less inclined to seek the information needed to vote meaningfully; yet turning out to vote is more than ever dependent on an adequate level of political knowledge. This is illustrated by the remarkable generational difference in the UK, where 63 percent of those who claimed they were 'not at all interested in news about the election' cast a vote nevertheless, but this was the case for only 16 percent among the 18–24 year olds (Electoral Commission, 2002:29).

While comparative measures are scarce, there is no shortage of national surveys to illustrate differences in levels of political knowledge. While it has not always been the case, there is nothing new in the fact that young people, though somewhat more educated than their elders, know less about politics. Other things being equal, young people have less experience and fewer responsibilities, hence less reason to inform themselves. But current numbers are worrisome, especially at the lower educational levels. Grönlund's CSES data confirms that at all levels of education, 18 to 35 year-olds are less knowledgeable on political matters. Holding education constant, he finds that for those with less than completed secondary education, the average score on the three or more

CSES political knowledge questions was .40 for the 18-35 year-olds, compared to just under .50 for the 34-55 year olds, and .53 for those 55 and over. For those with secondary or vocational school completed, the disparity was essentially the same, (with the youngest groups' score rising to .53). Only when we get to those who completed university, is the disparity reduced - by roughly half - with the youngest group averaging .65 right answers (Grönlund 2003).

Numerous recent national studies have delved into this relationship. For example, Chiche and Haegel (2002: 280) show that 18-29 year old French men and women are over 10 percent less politically knowledgeable than those above 30. Rose tested the knowledge of local political actors, institutions and policies in Denmark and Norway finding that: "Given differences in educational levels that exist among younger and older age cohorts in both countries, however, it is every bit as remarkable to note that age is consistently related to political knowledge, even after educational differences are held constant. Older people, in short, display higher levels of political knowledge, regardless of their educational attainment" (Rose 2003:6).

American data casts this as almost entirely a generational phenomenon, a reflection of the degree of effort to keep up with news.²⁰ The Times Mirror Center (1990) analyzed survey results from the 1940s through the 1970s revealing that previous generations of young people knew as much as, if not more, than their elders. Parker and Deane, (1997) report that on average, 36 percent of those under 30 answered the information questions correctly, compared with 45 percent of those aged 30-49 and those 50 and over. Only 26 percent of young people answered campaign-related questions correctly, compared with 38 percent of those 30-49 and 42 percent over those 50 and over. On national politics, young people averaged 32 percent correct, compared to 44 percent of middle aged Americans, and 48 percent of those 50 and older. Similarly in Canada, in a 1990 survey carried out for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 56 percent of 18 to 29 year olds were able to answer at most one of three political knowledge questions compared to 40 percent for the sample as a whole. By 2000, as reported by Paul Howe, the younger group was lagging further still: fully 67 percent of 18 to 29 year olds scored no more than one out of three²¹ compared to 46 percent for the sample as a whole (Howe 2001).

In a later paper Howe (2002) penetrated more deeply into this phenomenon. He compared data from 1956 Gallup polls testing political knowledge, with those from the political knowledge items in the 2000 Canadian Election Study.²² Age differences turn out to be significantly more important in 2000, especially among those with no more than a high-school education. The Canadian data graphically illustrates the combined effect of age and political knowledge on turnout. "Not only are the young less informed about politics today than they were forty-five years ago ... they are also more likely to allow this condition to influence ... the decision to vote or not to vote" (Howe, 2002a). In 1956, the difference in reported turnout level between the groups at the lower and upper ends of the knowledge scale was 17 percentage points; moreover, for the youngest age group (21-29 years), the figure was actually lower - only 12 points separated the groups. In the 2000 election study, the overall gap in turnout between the knowledgeable and ignorant had

risen to thirty-two points, but now the relationship to age was reversed: "A 43 point gap separates the least and most knowledgeable respondents in both the 18 to 20 and 21 to 29 age groups. With increasing age, this relationship weakens, to the point that among those 50 and older, only thirteen points separate the two groups" (Howe 2002).

Addressing electoral abstention among young people in North America clearly requires addressing political inattentiveness. In asking abstainers why they failed to vote in the 2000 election, Pammett and Leduc (2003: 17) found 18 to 24 year-old respondents to have the *lowest* tendency (27.3 percent versus 34.4 percent overall) to cite a failing in the political process as a reason. The UK Electoral Commission found young people were much less likely to blame their non-participation upon issues of "inconvenience or happenstance" (2002: 21). Clearly something beyond the various effects of institutions on turnout underlies the phenomenon of dropouts. A clue is provided in the Howe's finding noted above that the effect of age in Canada is significantly more important today than in the 1950s among those with no more than a high-school education: those under 30 are 30 percent lower in political knowledge than those over 50 with high-school education or less. It is no exaggeration to say that young, relatively poorly educated Canadian males have effectively stopped paying any attention to politics (Howe, 2002a). Of course class has always affected political participation. In the US the voting rate of persons below the poverty line is about 25 percent, compared to 65 percent for those above it (Leighley and Nagler, 2000:1). But the effect of age appears to be changing. Current indications are that non-voting young people can be expected to abstain in later years, which was far less the case in earlier years when the norm was one of "life experiences... dampening the biases in patterns of political participation attributable to socioeconomic status" (Strate *et al*, 1989: 456).²³

In this sense, political dropouts are a phenomenon that transcends the political, with roots in socio-economic conditions and policies. As a political scientist concerned with institutions, I do not propose to try to analyze these phenomena in their complexity. Nevertheless, the overall thrust of the relationship is clear. Socio-economic changes have significantly transformed non-voting among young, poorly educated males from a life-cycle to a generational phenomenon. The labour market in contemporary societies has effectively excluded from any kind of secure position a large number of young people, especially males, lacking the necessary levels of literacy and numeracy. To put it baldly, they fail to act as political citizens (vote, or even pay any attention to politics) because they are excluded from social citizenship. Far more lack what their counterparts in the 1950s and 60s had, namely the economic and educational resources to (aspire to) be full citizens, able to contribute to family and community.

While systematic empirical exploration of this phenomenon must await further stages of this research, the European Social Survey data is suggestive. Looking at the bottom line of Table 1, we see that average reported overall turnout was 80.3, dropping to a worrisome 52.7 for those under 25.²⁴ Limiting ourselves to Europe and leaving aside the new democracies of Eastern Europe and countries with compulsory or quasi-compulsory voting for the moment, we find that both absolutely, and in comparison to older citizens, reported voting among young Danes, Swedes, Dutch, Germans and Austrians is high,

while that among British, Irish, Swiss, Spanish and Portuguese youth to be low. A systematic analysis of these and similar figures would show, I suspect, that differences in the economic situation of generations helps explain variations in the number of political dropouts, adding to the explanation provided by institutional differences.

THE NORDIC COUNTRIES AS CASE STUDY

As a test case of the type of analysis required, I look a bit more closely at the ESS data for the high civic-literacy (Milner 2002) Scandinavian countries. We can observe in Table 1 that all four are, as expected, among the leaders in overall reported turnout. However, Finland and Norway switch to the low side in reported youth turnout. Both are also above the mean when it comes to the difference in the importance the young place on voting as an act of good citizenship compared to the population as a whole. In Sweden, young people both vote and think it important to do so at levels almost as high as the population as a whole. Sweden's status as a virtuous outlier corresponds to the above noted leading score of Swedish young people in the National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey. (While the other Nordic countries did not participate in this survey, Germany's high score in the ESS – see Table 1 - also corresponds to its second ranked placing in the survey). As far as Denmark is concerned, there is a drop between the entire population and youth people in both cases, because the former is so high, we can hardly see the levels for young people as worrisome.

There are other questions in the ESS which cast some light on these differences and which I shall explore in a future paper with Svante Ersson. For example, while Finland and Norway resemble each other on reported voting and on whether a good citizen is expected to vote, they are dissimilar on the importance given to being active in voluntary organizations. On a scale from 0 to 10, from extremely unimportant to extremely important, on the overall level, the Norwegian average is slightly higher than to Finnish one, 5.9 to 5.5, the latter being the mean for the ESS countries, for young people, the Norwegian mean drops only to 5.7, but the Finnish one plummets to 4.9. This latter difference suggests that the decline in youth voting in Norway is more an expression of the rejection of mainstream politics than an abandonment of political involvement per se. Indeed, in response to the question of whether politics is important in their lives, it is the young Norwegians that stand out.²⁵ Finland, in contrast, shows more signs of the phenomenon of political dropouts (Martikainen 2000). The explanation for this difference plausibly lies in the extremely high unemployment levels suffered especially by poorly educated Finnish youth during the economic crisis of the 1990s, a crisis from which Norway and to a large extent Denmark and a lesser extent Sweden were spared.

Finland is an outlier among its Nordic sisters; it is not an outlier in the wider European context. The phenomenon of political dropouts is far more disturbing elsewhere, most of all Spain according to the ESS data in Table 1. The case of Norway could prove somewhat exceptional, if it is true that increased abstention by young people reflects political protest as much as it does political dropouts. This would make it the exception that proves the rule, the rule being that political dropouts. And we should be wary indeed

about addressing the exception rather than the norm in our analyses and policy recommendations.

CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As noted at the outset, this is a work in progress, setting out an agenda for research into the phenomenon of political dropouts. The main conclusion, unsurprisingly, is a call for further comparative research using surveys including a battery of political knowledge questions, which would enable us to distinguish the politically uninformed young non-voters from the political protesters. At this point we can draw only very tentative conclusions from the experience of countries that appear to have succeeded at avoiding or tackling the problem of political dropouts.

In doing so, I build also on the conclusions and observations drawn from my previous work on civic literacy (Milner 2002; Part IV), stressing the point that there is a long-term cost to be paid by societies that do not meet the challenge of declining turnout, and that it is a cost paid by those least able to pay it. In a democratic society, “les absents ont toujours tort.” Excluding those with low resources from informed political participation makes it less likely that policies needed to improve their chances to attain those resources will be implemented, the result of which will be further abstention on their part, and so on – a classic vicious circle.²⁶ I show that in the 20th century it was the Nordic countries as much or more than anyone else that broke the vicious circle, attaining the highest levels of civic literacy. I suggest that if anyone is to succeed in meeting the current generational challenge, it is most likely to be the Nordic countries. Based on my understanding of institutions and policies in these countries, especially Sweden, I end by setting out the bare lines of a strategy to address high and growing levels of political dropouts in countries like Canada and the UK. At the core is the third element, an approach to civic education. It is preceded by two other aspects which establish a framework in which civic education can be effective.

1. **POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS.** In themselves, institutional reforms can have only a limited effect; moreover, they must be tailored to existing conditions. Nevertheless, institutions provide the necessary context for needed policies. The general rule is that electoral systems and complementary rules and regulations concerning media access, party financing etc., be such as to ensure – and allow citizens and actors to expect - that all legitimate political positions will be represented in all relevant democratic institutions from the local to the national and beyond, at a level reflecting their core support in the population.

2. **FUNCTIONAL LITERACY:** In a comprehensive survey conducted in 20 countries in the 1990s, less than 10 percent of adults in the four Nordic countries had literacy skills below those needed to function in today’s world, compared to over 20 percent in the US and UK (OECD, 1997; 2000). Acquiring the skills and habits of literacy (and numeracy) must be made a priority throughout the educational system, reinforced by appropriate programs of access to libraries, publications, high-speed Internet, etc). The goal is that all those intellectually

capable acquire the skills and knowledge to take their place as full citizens, able to contribute to family and community. One aspect of this is that practically all young people should still be at school – one aspect of which are dual programs linking educational institutions with on-the-job training – when they reach the age of citizenship. Fewer dropouts from education mean fewer political dropouts.

3. CIVIC EDUCATION: As a result of the above programs - i.e. with practically all young people still at school when they reach the age of citizenship - a society is in a position to provide of civic education to the group to which it should be addressed at the time it should be provided. This is the year or two before the age of citizenship is attained. Since they are about to be called upon to vote, it is appropriate, and likely to be more effective, to offer 16 and 17 year-olds content stressing the responsibilities of political participation at the different levels, and the information for doing so effectively.²⁷ Moreover, a crucial aspect of providing that information is the input from and contact with the relevant political actors. Specifically, the courses should give an important place to the positions taken by the different parties on relevant issues, local, regional and national, regularly inviting the parties' specialists in these areas into the classroom.²⁸ This is a more natural and applicable option within the proportional institutional framework set out in #1, in which the various parties has a legitimate and relatively stable political presence at each level.

In this way the wall between political life and “real” life that serves to justify political uninvolvedness is removed – a wall that is especially high and strong in the United States.²⁹ Moreover, timing is important. There is little in the literature to suggest that civics courses given during adolescence have an appreciable lasting effect.³⁰ The exception appears to be civics courses given at the end of the period of secondary education. The Swedish upper secondary students' compulsory civics courses, I suggest, help account for their Sweden's remarkable score in the ESS questions in Table 1.³¹ A second aspect of timing concerns the objective of avoiding school dropouts becoming political dropouts, so that such course to be given at a time when virtually all young people are still at school. This is the case with Sweden where virtually all young people are still in school at that age.³² But most countries are not in that position. For countries unable to sufficiently reduce high school dropout rates, an additional institutional change might be called for, namely to reduce the minimum voting age to 17 or even 16, so as achieve this.

Lowering the voting age is a reform currently being proposed by Franklin (2003). I would agree, at least where needed to permit compulsory civics courses to be given at the appropriate time. The underlying logic is to seek to establish a “habit of citizenship” at the most propitious stage of maturation. If, in the first few years that one is first eligible to vote, one is preoccupied with things other than politics and public affairs, not only is one unlikely to vote then, but the habit of non-voting is more likely to be established. Following Plutzer (2002), Franklin states: “voting is costly and the costs of learning to vote are considerably raised if a person's first election falls during the period immediately

after leaving high school [since] the four years that follow are fraught with the problems of early adulthood ... years in which young adults are only starting to establish the social networks that will ultimately serve to guide their political choice and motivate their vote” (Franklin 2003: 8). Franklin cites evidence of a secular decline in turnout after the minimum age was reduced, typically to 18, in different countries. His explanation is that those aged 18 to 20 are typically in a period of transition, in the process of withdrawing from their home and traditional school environment without fully settling into another. Most became voters later in life, but some didn’t and, he argues, some of these would have done had their first opportunity to vote been later, when they were in a better position to develop the habit. This same logic, he argues, today applies today, but to 16 and 17 year olds.

The above is far from the last word. But it rests firmly on the contention that the phenomenon of political dropouts is reaching a point where it should command the urgent attention of policy researchers and decision-makers in a number of democratic countries. Of course, if one instead interprets low turnout as an expression of the good judgment of young people on the failings of political elites, then such an approach is entirely unnecessary. But, for all the lack of comprehensive evidence, I would suggest that the ball is in the court of those who off the latter interpretation.

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TABLE 1

Country	Acronym	Voted-total	Voted-1980s	Important to vote-total	Important to vote-1980s
Austria	AUT	88,46	74,6	8,07	7,38
Belgium	BEL	85,23	53,5	6,56	6,4
Czech Republic	CZE	65,93	61,4	6,16	5,93
Denmark	DNK	93,67	78,9	8,87	7,76
Finland	FIN	81,7	54,5	7,59	6,71
Germany	DEU	85,3	72,8	7,55	6,95
Greece	GRC	90,56	59,8	8,12	7,66
Hungary	HUN	80,93	69,2	8,26	7,86
Ireland	IRL	75,87	41,8	7,7	7,24
Israel	ISR	78,66	38,4	7,98	7,2
Italy	ITA	89,45	76,4	7,51	6,65
Luxembourg	LUX	64,74	12,8	8	7,32
Netherlands	NLD	86,33	74,8	7,48	6,8
Norway	NOR	83,66	50	8,19	7,17
Poland	POL	66,16	48,2	7,65	7
Portugal	PRT	72,49	41,3	7,13	6,5
Slovenia	SVN	80,21	42	6,74	5,99
Spain	ESP	77,67	27,4	6,43	5,12
Sweden	SWE	86,96	81,4	8,38	8,05
Switzerland	CHE	68,98	17,6	7,37	7,03
United Kingdom	GBR	72,35	41	7,16	6,37
Total		80,3	52,7	7,61	6,96

NOTES

¹ Those convinced the E-democracy is the solution to the democratic deficit need to address a scenario like the following: for a small fee, private Internet based companies send citizens a questionnaire. You respond electronically about who you are and what you think, and, in return, they inform you which candidate/party for every possible election conforms most suits you. Not only that but your profile will remain with them (you can update it periodically) and every election that comes up they will send you the name of the appropriate candidate/party. And one day, when the technology is sufficiently reliable, they will be able to vote for you. No fuss, no bother ... no politics.

² Hugo Young in *The Guardian*, 14 March 2002, quoted in Electoral Commission (2002: 22), which adds that a forthcoming analysis uses MORI data to demonstrate that apathy in 2001 might be better termed ‘positive abstention.’ See also Stolle and Hooghe (2001)

³ In his April 7, 2004 review in the Toronto Globe and Mail of *Wildly Sophisticated*, a mass market career management book for young women by Nicole Williams, Harvey Schachter notes “What is to be said about a book that has two inspirational quotes from Jennifer Lopez but none from Carly Fiorina, the high-profile female CEO of Hewlett-Packard? It also ignores prominent American women like Patricia Russo, chairman of Lucent; ... presidential advisor Condoleezza Rice; management writers Frances Hesselbein and Rosabeth Moss Kanter; and New York Senator Hilary Clinton but quotes celebrities Drew Barrymore, Beyoncé Knowles, Kate Hudson, Elizabeth Hurley, and Nicole Kidman, and ponders the meaning of a photograph of Chelsea Clinton seated with Gwyneth Paltrow and Donatella Versace at a fashion show... ‘This photograph is a powerful reminder of the birds of a feather phenomenon. The people we associate with influence the way people perceive us. Choose to associate with people who reflect who and what you are.’”

⁴ Political scientists suffer from a professional deformation that makes us prone to underestimating the importance and effect of low political knowledge. It lies simply in the fact that as individuals, political scientists are, by definition, knowledgeable about politics. For example, Blais’ (2000: 143) concludes his recent insightful analysis of possible explanations of voting and non-voting. He asks why he himself usually votes, and responds that he believes in democracy and it would be inconsistent to abstain. But, he adds, in the final paragraph of the book, that he would not vote if the parties or candidates were indistinguishable so that it made no difference who won. But he does not suppose that in such a case there might be differences unknown to him that, were he aware of them, the outcome would matter enough for him to vote. Unable to imagine such a situation concerning him or herself, the political scientist can miss the fact that this is just the situation many others are in.

⁵ In the experiment, the order in which political interest and political knowledge questions was altered. When first asked about their interest, 75.9 percent reported following politics most or some of the time; however, when first asked political knowledge questions, the percentage expressing interest dropped to 57.4 percent (Scharzw and Schumer, 1997).

⁶ This does not mean we should make no effort to get those involved in non-mainstream activities to vote, by the kind of institutional reforms discussed below. This is because their abstention, stripped of the analysis underlying it, finds its way into the wider generational culture and thus contributes to the legitimacy of abstention in and of itself, thus in effect legitimizing politically dropping out.

⁷ An analysis of turnout in 20 countries found an average decline of 5 percent, from 83 percent in the 1950s to 78 percent in the 1990s (Dalton 1996, 44-5. See also Franklin 2002; Wattenberg 1998).

⁸ The most recent estimate, by Farrell (2001) for the last election in 39 democracies where voting is not compulsory, found turnout averaged 68.2 percent in non-proportional systems compared to 70.8 percent in proportional systems. Estimates based on earlier data were higher: for Lijphart (1997) it was about nine, while, using percentage of voting age population, a difference similar to that found by the International IDEA in its report “Voter Turnout from 1945-1997” using voting age populations rather than registered voters (see also Ladner and Milner 1999).

⁹ Each CSES team independently determines the content of their three political knowledge questions making an effort that their content be such that they could be answered correctly respectively by roughly 2/3, 1/3, and 1/2 of respondents.

¹⁰ The difference was lower than what he calculated to be that in the official electoral data in those countries (72 per cent average in the proportional countries and 65 per cent in the majoritarian ones).

¹¹ Personal communication, December 2003.

¹² For presidential elections the drop was lower, from 85.2 percent in 1988 to 76.8 in 2000.

¹³ A new law allows local authorities to run elections under STV as well as FPTP. For the 2004 municipal elections, only 10 have chosen the former. (See http://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/Resource-material-STV-Information-Index?OpenDocument#four).

¹⁴ Canadian data shows that young people, though less attentive and informed, are in fact more supportive of “politics as usual” than older Canadians, O’Neill found 18-27 year-olds to be roughly 10 percent more satisfied with Canadian democracy and elections than other age groups, and comparatively even more willing to view the federal government as fair and effective. Nor are they any less distrustful of multinational corporations than older Canadians. In fact, they are less prone to seem than as too powerful than all groups except those 28-37 (O’Neill, 2001).

¹⁵ The British election survey for 1997 reports verified turnout among those 18-24 was more than 25 percent lower than for those over 25 (Campbell, 2002).

¹⁶ The Canadian Election Study has been following the four most recent cohorts in its latest surveys. It finds a life-cycle effect amounting to an increase of about 15 points between the ages of 20 and 50, but that generation is replacing life-cycle as the key factor in the absence of young people among voters. “At the same age, turnout is 3 or 4 points lower among baby boomers than it was among pre-baby boomers, 10 points lower among generation X than it was among baby boomers, and another 10 points lower among the most recent generation than it was among generation X at the same age. This translates into a total generational effect of over 20 points” (Blais et al, 2002: 48). While the Xers consistently vote less than the two older groups, the post Xers not only vote less than all others, but have actually been increasing in the proportion of abstainers.

¹⁷ As for Spanish non-voters, Anduiza (2002) found them to be significantly younger than voters. “They have paid less attention to the campaign and they have talked little about politics during the campaign” (Anduiza, 2002: 9).

¹⁸ This is a survey of 1,500 Americans between the ages of 15 and 25 commissioned by the Council for Excellence in Government's Center for Democracy and Citizenship and the Partnership for Trust in Government, in cooperation with Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE).

¹⁹ I wish to thank Svante Ersson of Umea University for these calculations.

²⁰ The Pew Research Center Biennial News Use Survey (of 4,002 adults taken in spring 1998) revealed that only 33 percent of Americans aged 18-29 made an effort to keep up with the news compared to 68 percent of seniors (Bennett, 1998). The lack of knowledge is attributed to lack of attentiveness. “Americans over age 50 are much more attentive to a variety of types of news, particularly when compared with those under age 30. This comes across clearly in the attention paid to politics and policy. Those over 50 are almost twice as likely as members of Generation X to say they follow national politics and domestic policy very closely, and 10 percentage points more likely to follow election campaigns and international politics.” Looking at the results of one Pew survey, A study of first-year college students (reported in the *New York Times*, 12 Jan, 1998: A10), found "a record low of 26.7 percent thought that 'keeping up to date with political affairs' was a very important or essential life goal, compared with 29.4 percent in 1996 and a high of 57.8 percent in 1966."

²¹ In 1990, they were asked: who is the Prime Minister? Who is the Liberal leader? Who is the NDP leader? In 2000 their task was to identify the prime minister, finance minister and official opposition party.

²² The 1956 Gallop surveys showed respondents a list of 10 prominent political figures, of which two were Canadian, and asked them to identify the country and position of each, as well as a list of Canada's ten provincial premiers and asked them to identify their province. The 2000 CES included an unprecedented number of knowledge items: the names of the leaders of the Liberals, PC, Alliance and NDP, the name of the federal finance minister, and the name of one's provincial premier.

²³ Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) showed that during the high mobilization period in the United States in the 1960s and 70s, political participation increased from age 18 to 65 only marginally for the best educated, but significantly (from 20 to over 50 percent) among the least well educated Americans.

²⁴ Note that given that many were too young to vote, the N is quite small. As we see in the table below.

Number of respondents – design weight

Country	Good citizen-total	Good citizen-1980s	Voted-total	Voted-1980s
Austria	2214	244	2063	177
Belgium	1876	192	1753	127
Czech Republic	1324	86	1309	70
Denmark	1485	110	1421	76
Finland	1985	181	1749	33
Germany	2889	212	2666	162
Greece	2533	194	2362	122
Hungary	1655	152	1636	130
Ireland	2019	215	2035	213
Israel	2461	349	2259	242
Italy	1193	107	1137	72
Luxembourg	1509	188	1214	117
Netherlands	2355	185	2217	123
Norway	2035	173	1946	124
Poland	2053	292	1959	224
Portugal	1465	145	1432	104
Slovenia	1492	166	1405	112
Spain	1667	165	1590	95
Sweden	1982	173	1871	129
Switzerland	2023	209	1599	91
United Kingdom	2046	183	1906	117
Total	40262	3921	40262	3921

²⁵ Bjorklund notes that “In single-issue activity, which in contrast to electoral participation has shown an upward trend, the youth is the most active group. In addition, the youngest cohort (born after 1975) breaks with the general trend, as the non-voters are somewhat more active in single-issue participation than the voters. Political engagement is thus channeled in other directions than the electoral arena” (Bjorklund 2000).

²⁶ I show elsewhere (Milner 2002; Part IV) that in effect excluding those with low resources from informed political participation makes it less likely that policies will be chosen to address their socioeconomic needs – and vice versa: a classic vicious circle.

²⁷ In the United States this means a de-emphasis emphasize volunteering. There is mounting evidence that the great stress on youth volunteering that has characterized the American response to declining civic engagement has not had the desired effect. For example, one study found that service experiences did not change “the students’ assessments of the value of elections” nor their “definitions of what civic responsibility is and should be” (Hunter and Brisbin, 2000:625)

²⁸ One complementary idea proposed in The International IDEA Report on Youth political participation (1999) is to organize mock elections in the schools, an idea taken on board recently by Elections Canada.

²⁹To take a blatant example, it was reported that the Corporation for National Service, major funder of service learning, explained its refusal to allow participants in Americorps to attend the “Stand for Children” rally in Washington DC, as follows: “National Service has to be non-partisan ... it should be about bringing communities together by getting things done. Strikes, demonstrations and *political activities* [my emphasis] can have the opposite effect” (Cited in Walker, 2000).

³⁰ A recent US study finds practically no positive effects on later voting of exposure to various forms of civics related courses in high school. (Lopez 2004). Civics courses taken one hour per week from grade 7 or 8 by practically all German students (Händle et al, 1999) seem to have little effect on the adolescents, while in the Dutch case, there was a correlation only for the less than 10 percent of students (Hahn, 1998: 15) who took the civics course (called “society”) as a part of their formal program leading to the final examination (Dekker, 1999) suggests that its effects are likely to prove short-lived.

³¹ Westholm, Lindquist and Niemi (1989) found that upper secondary students taking civics courses were more likely to retain knowledge about international organizations (11 percent more) and international events (6 percent more) when retested two years later than those in a control group.

³² In Sweden, only 2 percent leave school at the end of compulsory schooling at age 16 (Skolverket, 1998).