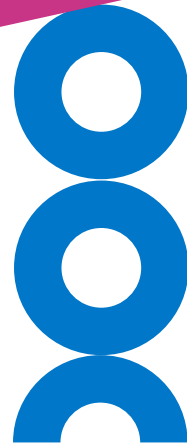


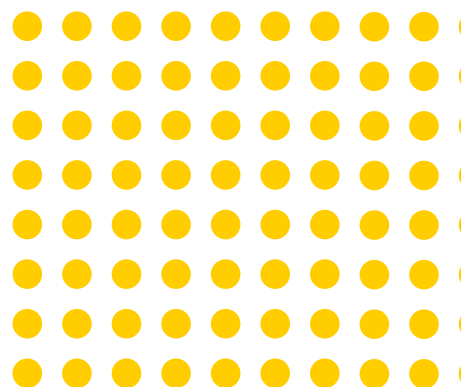
How does volunteering succeed and fail in promoting solidarity through active citizenship?

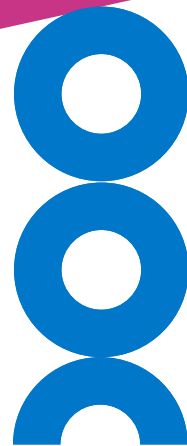
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION • VOTER TURNOUT •
YOUNG GENERATIONS • VOLUNTEERING



Dr Stuart Fox

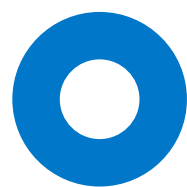
Dr Stuart Fox is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Exeter. His research examines generational differences in political behaviour, and particularly the growing divides between both younger and older generations, and young people from poor and wealthy backgrounds. His current projects examine the effects of volunteering on political engagement, and examine the potential for volunteering programmes to reduce inequalities in young people's electoral participation.

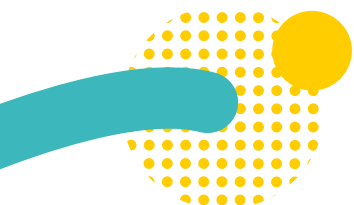
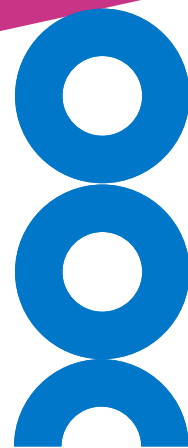




ABSTRACT

Political participation is fundamental to European solidarity, representing important ways in which people act as agents of solidarity, and express their right and fulfil their obligation to be active citizens. The generational decline of voter turnout in Europe constitutes a challenge to European solidarity as more and more young people – particularly from poorer backgrounds – develop lasting habits of non-voting, and elections are increasingly decided by the preferences and interests of older and wealthier citizens. Volunteering programmes, such as European Solidarity Corps, have capacity to address this challenge, and recent research provides encouraging evidence that volunteering boosts the electoral participation of young people from the poorest households. That research also identifies serious challenges, however, including the persistently low participation in volunteering programmes of young people from the poorest backgrounds – who need the support the most and have the most to gain from such schemes – and the benefits of volunteering being substantially stronger for young men than young women. This article examines the threat that generational turnout decline poses to European solidarity and the latest academic research into the potential for volunteering to help address it. It also discusses the limitations of our current understanding of that potential and identifies key questions for future research and collaboration.





Introduction

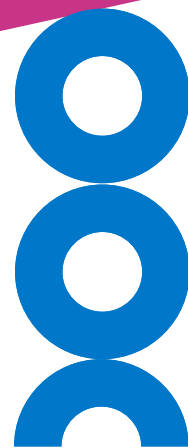
Political participation – that is, activities such as voting, protesting, petitioning, standing for office or volunteering that individuals or groups engage in to affect political events and decisions, and to express their political identities, values and interests (Fox 2014) – is fundamental to European citizenship. It represents the point at which European solidarity and European democracy meet. On the one hand, political participation is a manifestation of one's desire to bring about positive change in their community and the means by which someone becomes an agent of solidarity delivering that change. On the other hand, political participation represents the ways in which European citizens both express their rights and fulfil their responsibilities to participate in the democratic government of their societies. Evidence that political participation is declining, or of biases in those who are likely to participate and be heard by political elites when they do so, is a serious challenge to both the vibrancy of European democracy and opportunities to achieve European solidarity.

Generational turnout decline constitutes such a challenge. Young people in Europe, particularly those from poorer households, are becoming increasingly unlikely to vote in elections compared with their parents' and grandparents' generations at the same age. This not only leaves today's young people under-represented in deciding election results – with consequences for how much

politicians are prepared to prioritise the interests of young people relative to their more electorally active elders – but also lays the foundation for widening socio-economic and generational divides in turnout in the future. This is because voting is habitual, and those who get into the habit of voting in their first elections are likely to keep voting throughout adulthood, whereas those who get into habits of non-voting are likely to remain lifelong abstainers. Today's young non-voters are likely to remain non-voters in future, leading to overall turnout declining further still as older, more active generations die, thus, challenging the effectiveness and possibly even legitimacy of democratic governments. In addition, the concentration of non-voting habits among poorer young people means that future elections will be decided increasingly by the interests of their wealthier peers, and that socio-economic inequalities in political representation will be even wider than they are today.

Concern about widening inequalities in voter turnout has led to a renewed interest in the potential for volunteering programmes to increase young people's democratic engagement. Recent research has made substantial progress in the benefits of volunteering for the political participation of young people, showing that participating in volunteering schemes can increase political interest, knowledge and self-confidence, and raises the likelihood of young people voting in their first elections.



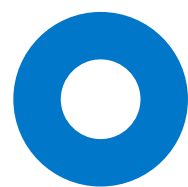


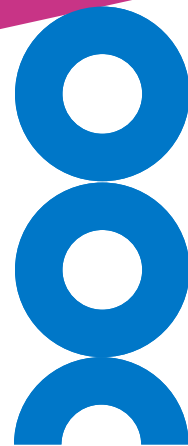
Moreover, this benefit is greatest for those from the poorest and least politically interested households. In this regard, there are several ways in which volunteering succeeds at promoting European solidarity to be celebrated. Recent research also shows, however, that the benefits of volunteering for political participation may be skewed by sex, with young women receiving far less of a boost to their chances of voting than young men. In addition, efforts to recruit more young people from poorer backgrounds to volunteering programmes – and so ensure that the benefits of volunteering get to those who need them most – have met with limited success. These constitute, for now at least, the failings of volunteering as a way of promoting European solidarity.

Finally, there remain unanswered questions about the kinds of volunteering programmes and activities that are most effective at promoting political participation. This makes designing policies and initiatives that can overcome the limitations of current efforts to promote solidarity through volunteering very difficult. This paper suggests that answering these questions is where our efforts for research, collaboration and policy-change must concentrate.

Generational Turnout Decline and the Challenge to European Solidarity

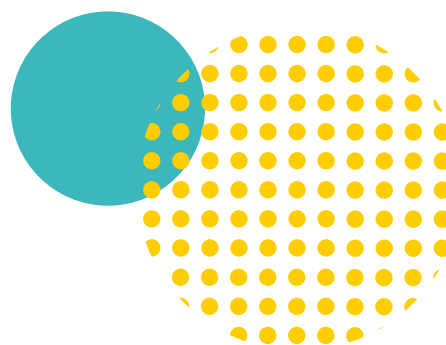
The link between political participation and European solidarity was articulated effectively through the 4Thought for Solidarity project (Knoch and Nicodemi 2020; see also Buffet 2020). It explored understandings of solidarity in Europe, showing that – while such understandings are varied and reflect the personal values, lived experiences, and professional context of individuals and organisations – they are characterised by four cornerstone concepts: human rights, empathy, inclusion, and active citizenship. Political participation and European solidarity are connected through active citizenship that refers to the “capacity for thoughtful and responsible *participation in political, economic, social and cultural life*” (Council of Europe, n.d., emphasis added). In other words, participating in community life to express political values, identities and opinions, contribute to decision-making, and influence the decisions and behaviour of other political actors (whether other people, politicians, governments, or corporations) is recognised as a key component of being an active European citizen. 4Thought for Solidarity also emphasised the importance of *acting* to bring about positive social change as integral to solidarity. This means that to be in solidarity with someone means acting to deliver the change our communities require, not just thinking, feeling or demanding that such changes should occur; or put another





way, it means people should aspire to be agents of solidarity rather than simply cheerleaders for it (Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). Political participation is one way in which people can strive to deliver solidarity by participating in political life to bring about (or, at least, try to bring about) positive change in our communities. This can take the form of voting for parties promising a policy that will help those in need, protesting against a corporation failing to reduce carbon emissions, boycotting products based on exploitative industrial practices used to produce them, or volunteering to pick up litter, or buy food for elderly neighbours.

Therefore, political participation sits at the heart of our understanding of European solidarity, and active citizenship is a cornerstone of solidarity that demands we participate responsibly in democratic life, while to be in solidarity requires us act to deliver the positive changes we want to see in our communities. Participating in politics is one of the ways in which we become agents of solidarity acting to deliver the positive change we wish to see, and through which we live up to our obligations of being active, democratic citizens. This is why participating in politics can be seen as a social good in and of itself – even if we do not always personally agree with the political agenda being promoted – but also why evidence of a declining tendency to participate in politics can be seen as a deterioration in European solidarity.



Generational turnout decline refers to the falling likelihood of young people to vote in elections relative to previous generations of young people at the same age and is one of the major challenges European democracy and solidarity faces. It occurs because voting is largely habitual (Franklin 2004; Jennings et al 2009): we get into habits of voting or non-voting that persist throughout most of our adult lives depending on our experiences and the influences we were exposed to during adolescence and early adulthood. Young people have always been less likely to vote than their elders and then to become more likely to vote as they get older because the circumstances of young adulthood (such as not yet being married, owning a home or having a stable job) aren't as conducive to political engagement as those of middle and old age (Smets 2016). However, our early experiences of politics are vital in determining whether we are likely to start, and then carry on, voting as we progress into adulthood. For example, if we are raised by politically active parents, who regularly

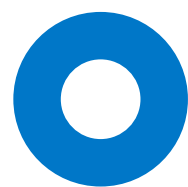
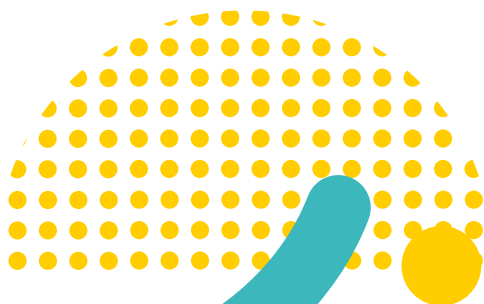




vote and discuss politics in the family home, we are more likely to develop an awareness of political issues, knowledge about political processes, and values that encourage political participation as we grow up, making us likely to vote in our first elections. As we get older and repeat these behaviours, they 'crystallise' and become less likely to change, and eventually become habitual. Our tendency to vote, be interested in politics, consume political news, espouse values that encourage political participation, etc. then become largely stable features of political identity (Dinas 2013; Plutzer 2002). If, on the other hand, we are raised by politically disengaged parents, who do not vote and may not even value democratic participation, we are far more likely not to be interested in or knowledgeable about politics, not to value political activity, and not to vote in our first elections.

We still experience the same 'crystallisation' of our early political characteristics, but it is a habit of non-voting that is likely to form. The problem Europe faces today is that more and more young people – particularly from poorer households – are developing habits of non-voting that persist even as they age and their life circumstances become (in theory) more conducive to voting (Grasso 2016; Smets 2016; Fox 2015; Garcia-Albacete 2014; Franklin 2004; Lello and Bazzoli 2023; Flanagan et al 1998; Martin 2012; Sloam et al 2021;).

This is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, which uses data from the European Social Surveys to show the reported turnout of six generations in national elections since 1999 for nine European countries: the Pre-War generation (born before 1926); the Silent Generation (born 1926 – 1945); Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964); Generation X (born 1965-1980); Millennials (born 1981 – 1994); and Generation Z (born since 1995).



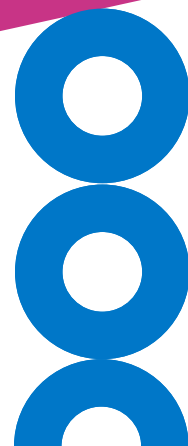
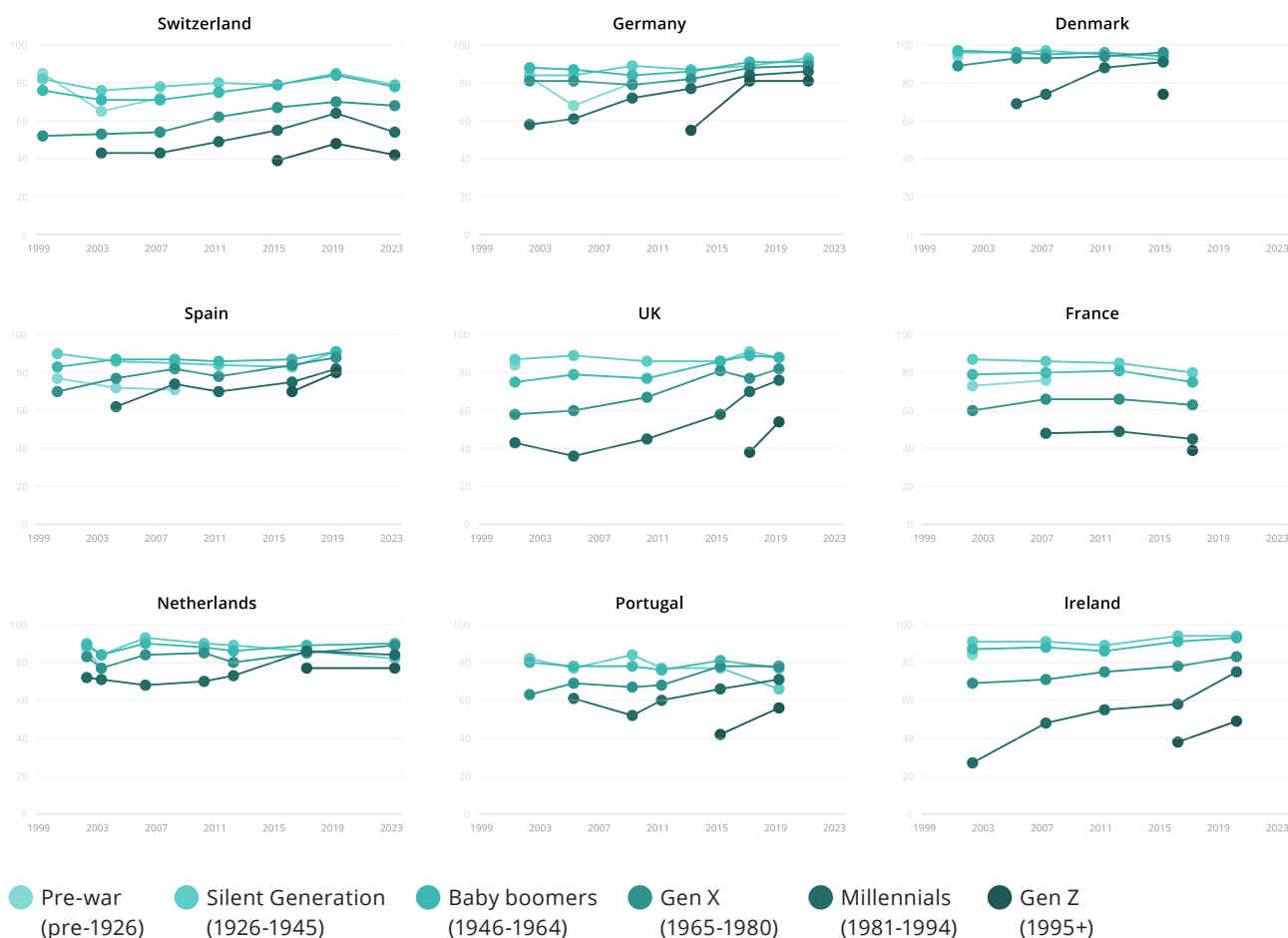


Figure 1 — Voted in last national election, 1999–2023 (%)



Source: European Social Surveys, 1999–2023

Figure 1 shows the turnout of all six generations since 1999: the size of the generational differences varies from one country to another – the generational decline is particularly sharp in the UK, Ireland and France, for example, and much smaller in Germany and the Netherlands – and from one election to another (see Kitanova 2020 for an analysis of

youth turnout and political engagement variation across Europe). There is a clear overall trend, however, in which the two youngest generations (Millennials and Gen Z, indicated by darker lines) are voting at much lower rates than older generations, a gap which persists even as the Millennials and Gen Z have aged and become more likely to vote.



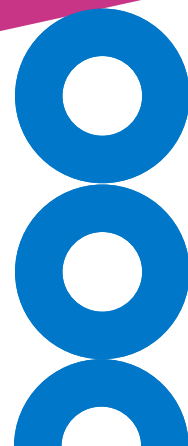
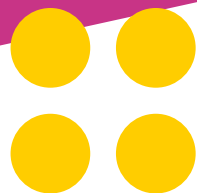
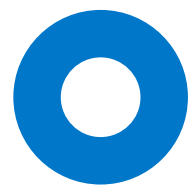
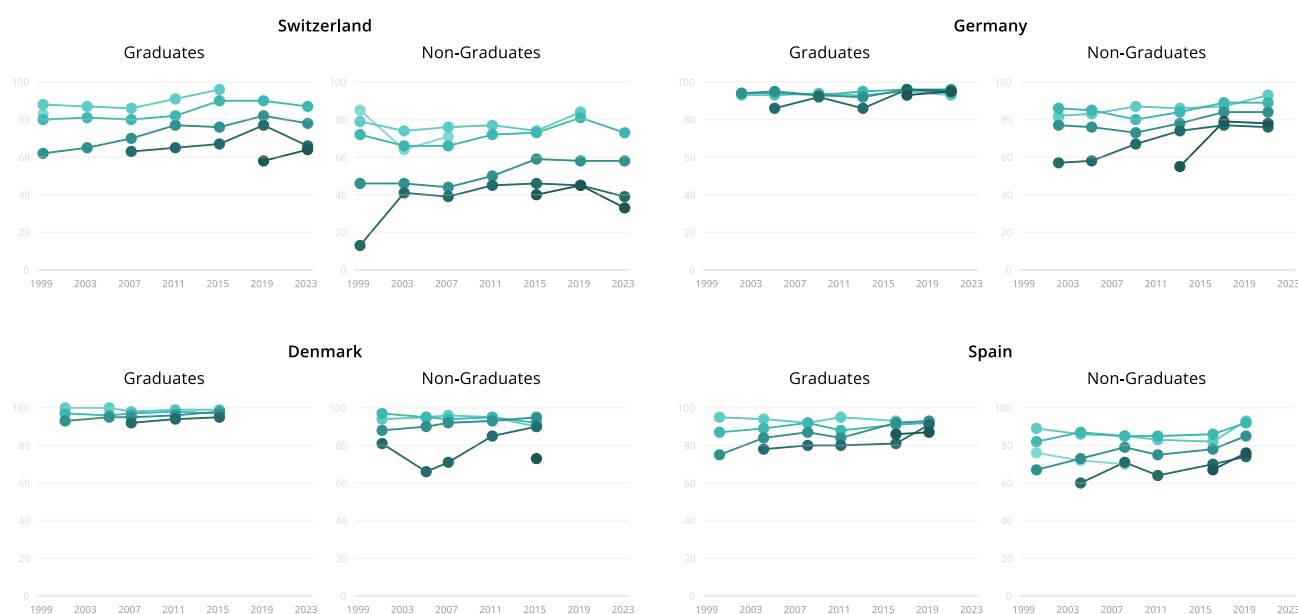


Figure 2 shows how this generational divide is concentrated among the poorest Millennials and Gen Z by breaking the generations into those with a tertiary education qualification and no such qualification (labelled as 'graduates' and 'non-graduates' for simplicity). Young people who go to university are highly likely to have been raised by wealthier parents who themselves have a tertiary qualification, higher incomes, stable jobs, and own their homes – and such people are more likely to be politically engaged and vote in elections (Verba et al 1995; Whiteley 2012; Sloam et al 2021; Martin 2012;

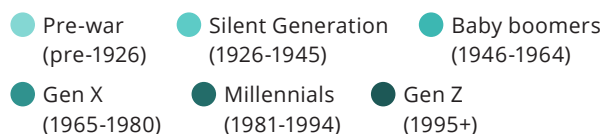
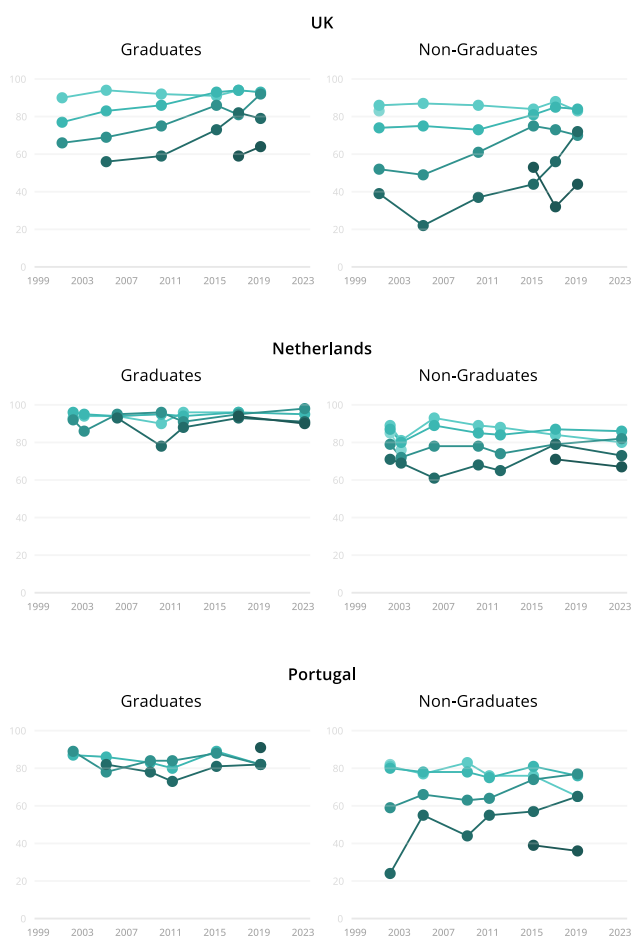
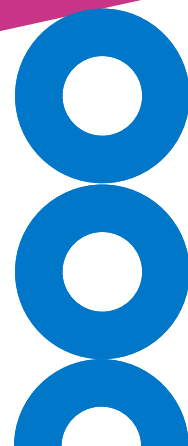
Garcia-Albacete 2014). People who don't have tertiary qualifications are more likely to have lower incomes and rely on less secure housing, which make them less likely to be politically engaged and vote. They are in turn less likely to socialise their children into being politically engaged or voting when they reach adulthood (Flanagan et al 1998; Neundorf et al 2016).^[1] As Figure 2 illustrates, it is Europe's poorer young people who are by far the least likely to develop habits of voting in elections, and so it is their turnout that lags behind the most, compared to that of their elders.

Figure 2 — Voted in last national election of graduates vs. non-graduates, 1999–2023 (%)



EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

Stuart Fox

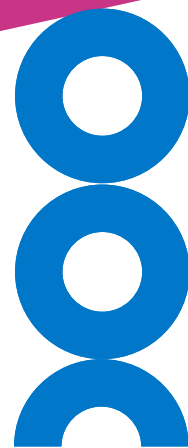


Source: European Social Surveys, 1999–2023

This is the generational decline of electoral participation that threatens European solidarity. European elections are increasingly decided by the interests and preferences older, more highly educated and wealthier voters, while younger and poorer citizens are increasingly under-represented in electoral processes. Moreover, unless efforts are made to reconnect particularly young people

from poorer households and communities with democratic politics, the wealth inequalities in political participation and representation will grow, as more and more young adults from poor backgrounds develop lasting habits of non-voting that are passed on to their own children, while their wealthier counterparts continue to vote in (relatively) high numbers.



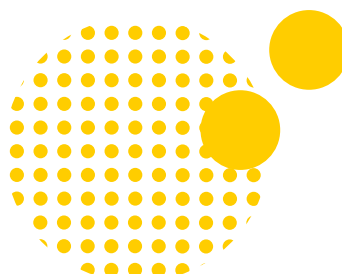


Is Falling Turnout a Problem Given the Growth of Protest Politics?

An increasingly common response to concern about falling voter turnout points to changing trends in non-electoral political participation – particularly those associated with protest such as demonstrating, petitioning, or boycotting – and argues that while young people are becoming less likely to vote, this is compensated for by their greater participation in protest politics (Pickard 2021; Sloam 2016; Vromen et al 2015; Zukin et al 2006). Rather than worrying about why young people are becoming less likely to vote, some argue we should focus instead on the failure of our political systems and politicians to be more responsive to protest politics (Cammaerts et al 2014).

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that the extent to which younger generations are participating in non-electoral political activity is frequently exaggerated (see, for example, Grasso et al 2019; Fox 2015; Lello and Bazzoli 2023). While protest politics has become more common in some countries in recent years, and young people are often as likely – and in some cases, marginally more likely – to participate in such acts than older generations, the actual numbers of people (of any age) protesting is small. Figure 3, for example, shows the generational trends in taking part in demonstrations using the European Social Surveys. As with voting, there is

considerable variation in the trends across the nine countries. Protest is typically more common in Spain, France, and Germany than Switzerland, Ireland, and the UK, for example. However, in all of them the numbers of those who take part in demonstrations are dwarfed by the numbers of people voting (note that the y-axes in Figure 3 stop at 40%, whereas in Figures 1 and 2 they go up to 100%), and none have seen a sustained growth in demonstrating since the turn of the millennium. Moreover, while Millennials and Gen Z tend to protest more than the oldest generations, we do not observe clear, sustained generational gaps that mirror those seen for voting in any of the nine countries. In short, there is no evidence that those Millennials and Gen Z who are not voting are instead embracing protest as an alternative way of expressing their views and pursuing their political agendas. Protest politics is a minority pursuit, and one for which the socio-economic divides are typically larger than those seen for voting (Lello and Bazzoli 2023; Grasso and Giungi 2022).



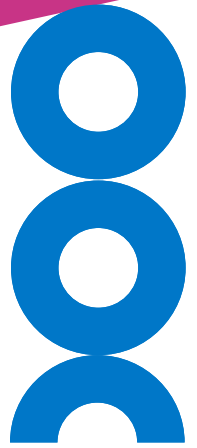
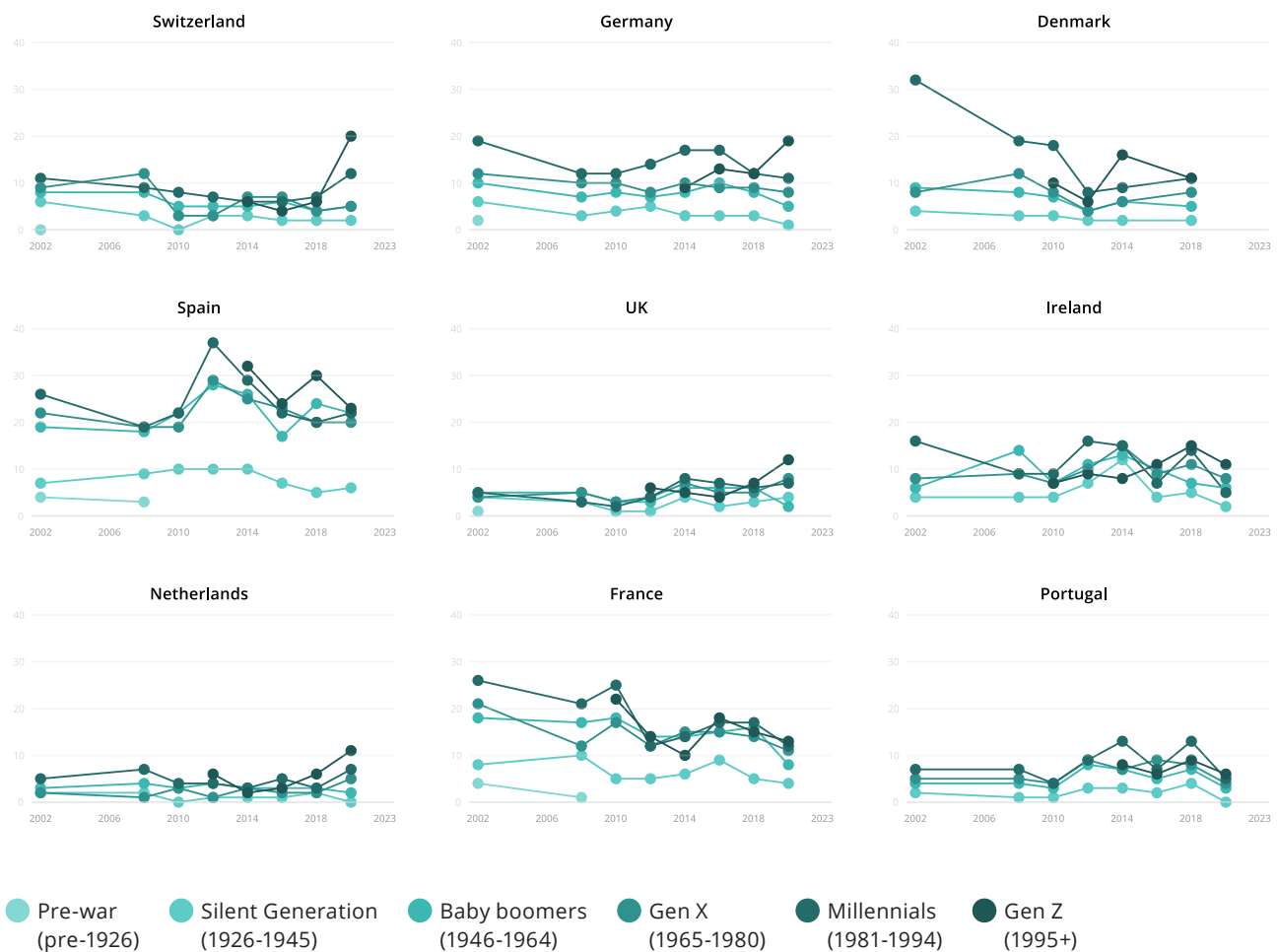
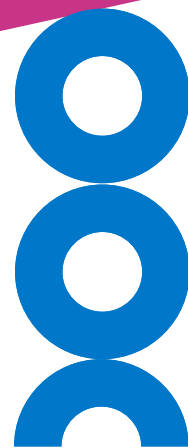


Figure 3 — Demonstrated in last 12 months, 1999–2023 (%)



Source: European Social Surveys, 1999–2023



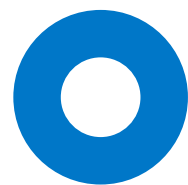


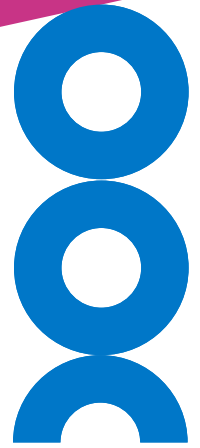
The second problem with the argument that protest compensates for generational turnout decline is that while non-electoral political activity is a valuable way of promoting solidarity that should be supported and encouraged, it does not perform the same democratic function as voting. While protest and voting can be used to express opinions, show support, or voice objections, elections and referendums are also relied upon to make constitutional decisions, and to select elected representatives who serve in legislatures and governments. Politicians are elected to represent policy agendas, ideologies, and communities; they scrutinise and hold to account the executive with constitutional powers (such as to compel witnesses to appear before inquiries) unavailable to non-legislators; and they vote on legislation that then becomes (or changes, or repeals) laws. There are no substitutes for selecting such representatives other than through elections, and it is not clear how protest politics or even other more deliberative forms of decision making (such as citizens' assemblies) could command the same level of public support and have the same constitutional legitimacy. This is not to say that the institutions of democracy cannot or should not be changed to make them more open to other forms of political expression; rather it is to point out that at present no such mechanism for non-electoral forms of political participation to replace the critical functions of electoral participation in Europe's democracies exists on a national or international scale. Unless such changes are implemented, voting in elections

and referendums will retain their critical importance as determinants of the make-up and policy agendas of governments and legislatures. The under-representation of certain groups – such as young poor people – in elections and referendums, therefore, will continue to have serious consequences both for those groups themselves, and European democracy and solidarity.

Volunteering and the Promotion of European Solidarity

Volunteering has long been studied as a way of promoting political engagement and participation, and interest in its potential to do so has grown in light of generational turnout decline (e.g., Taylor 2021; Kim and Morgul 2018; Charlton 2023; Brady et al 2020). Such research faces serious obstacles, however, to reliably identifying the effects of volunteering on subsequent political participation. The most difficult is the challenge of accounting for the fact that most young people who volunteer are likely to vote in adulthood regardless, because both their volunteering in childhood and voting in adulthood are consequences of their upbringing (see Figure 4 for an illustration of those relationships).^[2] Most young volunteers come from wealthier households, and are raised by parents with high levels of education and income who are politically active (Quintelier 2008; Taylor 2021; Wilson and Musick 2000). Such parents are likely to possess the resources that make political

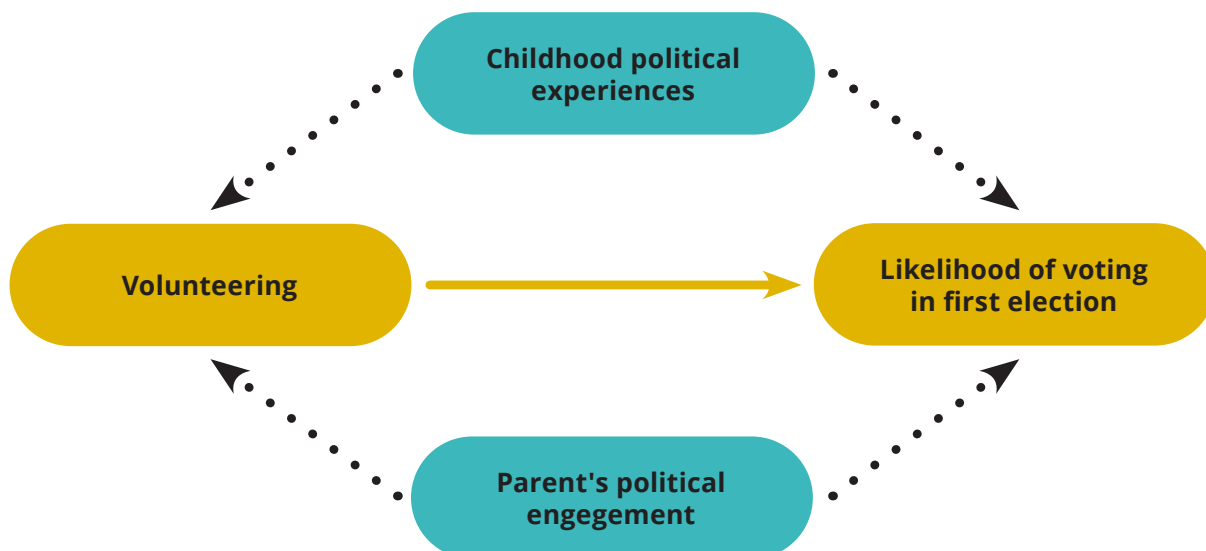




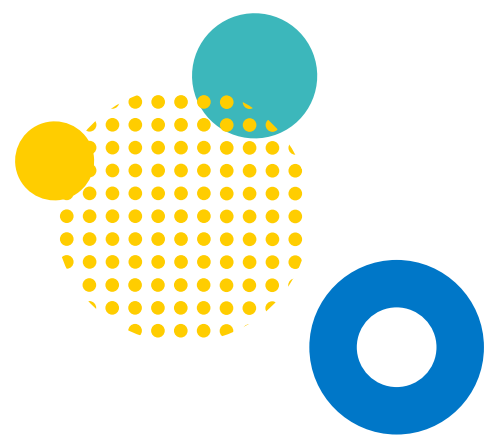
participation easier for them and their children. As a result, those children are likely to be socialised in a way that promotes political participation, thus, making them more likely to volunteer and, when they reach adulthood, vote. For such children, it is conceivable that volunteering has little or no effect on their subsequent political participation but is rather an expression of the active citizenship they are being socialised into express from a young age.

For those raised by poorer, less politically active parents, however, it is far less likely that they will be socialised into voting when they reach adulthood (or volunteering during childhood). For them, volunteering could be a valuable source of the experiences, social networks, and skills that encourage political participation, and to which they have far more limited access during their socialisation than their wealthy counterparts.

Figure 4 — The Influences of Prior Socialisation on Volunteering and Voting



Source: Author





The Successes of Volunteering in Promoting European Solidarity

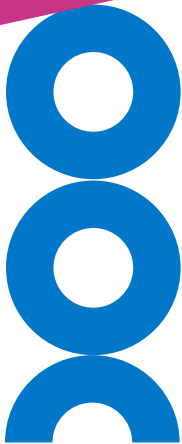
Fortunately, there is a growing academic literature that uses data and methods allowing the effects of volunteering to be identified in a way that (at least partially) accounts for the influence of young volunteers' wider political socialisation. Some of these studies argue that volunteering has little or no effect on young volunteers' subsequent political participation, pointing instead to the influence of their parents' socio-economic status or political engagement, or the efforts of schools in promoting political engagement (Newman and Rutter 1993; Kahne et al 2013). Kim and Morgul (2018), for example, examined the benefits of volunteering on numerous outcomes – including voting – using data from the US and found that, while young people who volunteered were more likely to vote, this was explained entirely by young volunteers being more likely to be raised by wealthier, politically engaged parents.

If, however, we consider whether the effect of volunteering might be different depending on the prior political socialisation of the young volunteer, we find evidence that while the benefits for most volunteers are indeed small or non-existent, the benefits for those *who would otherwise be unlikely to vote upon reaching adulthood* because they were raised by poorer, politically disengaged parents are substantial. Metz and Youniss (2005), for example, looked at the effect of service learning

programmes on school children's anticipated political activity in the US. They found that there was a greater increase in anticipated political participation among those who were less inclined to engage with politics before their service learning activity. Van Ingen and Kalmijn (2010) and MacFarland and Thomas (2006) considered the benefits of joining voluntary associations for young people on their access to social capital in adulthood. They found that while all members of voluntary associations benefited to some extent, for those with limited social capital to begin with – because they were typically raised in poorer homes and by less educated parents – there was a much greater benefit from voluntary association participation.

The first study to consider whether volunteering increases specifically first-time voter turnout, and whether that benefit is stronger for those from poorer households, is my own research, *Social Action as a Route to the Ballot Box* (Fox 2024). It used data from Understanding Society – a UK-based, annual survey which interviews all members of participating households every year – to examine the effect of volunteering in childhood on the likelihood of newly eligible voters turning out in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 UK general elections, and while accounting for i) how interested in politics the volunteers were before they volunteered, and ii) how politically engaged their parents were. The analysis compared the effect of volunteering on first-time voter turnout for those raised in politically engaged and disengaged



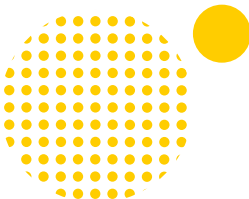
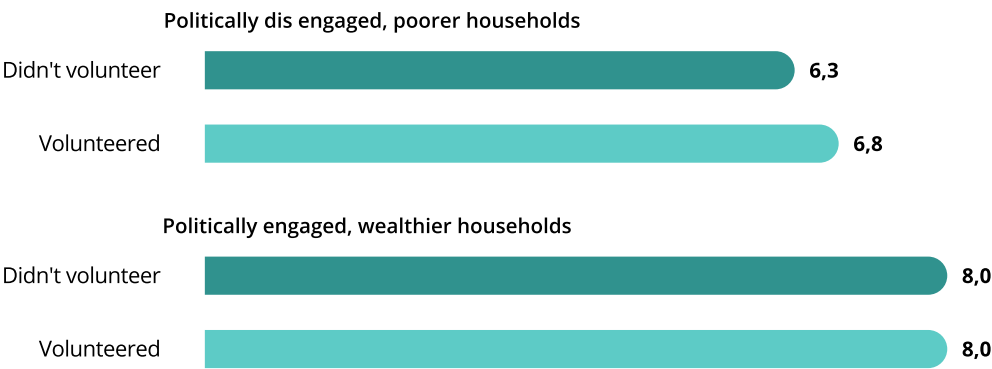


households. A politically engaged household had at least one parent who reported being interested in politics, while a disengaged household had no parent with such an interest. Parents in engaged households were also more likely to be highly educated, have higher incomes and to own their homes than those in the disengaged household.

Respondents were asked how likely they were to vote in their first election on a scale from 0 (meaning ‘certain not to vote’) to 10 (meaning ‘certain to vote’). The average score for all first-time voters was 7.5, and this increased to 7.7 among those who volunteered; in short, the benefit of volunteering appears, at first glance, to be tiny. Once the

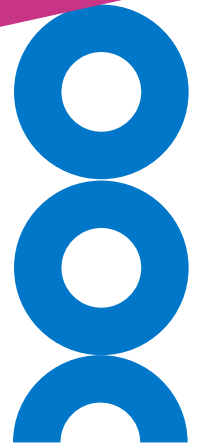
political engagement of respondents’ parents was accounted for, however, larger volunteering effects emerged. As Figure 5 illustrates, the average vote likelihood for those raised in politically engaged households was 8.1; if they volunteered, it did not change at all. For those raised in politically disengaged households, however, volunteering increased their likelihood of voting by 0.5 points, from 6.3 to 6.8 (a statistically significant difference).^[3] It did not eliminate the gap between those from engaged, wealthier households and those from disengaged, poorer households, therefore, but volunteering did provide a much stronger benefit to the latter and helped reduce their relative under-participation in their first election.

Figure 5 — Effect of volunteering on likelihood of voting in first election by parents’ political engagement in the UK



Source: Fox (2024) analysis of Understanding Society data

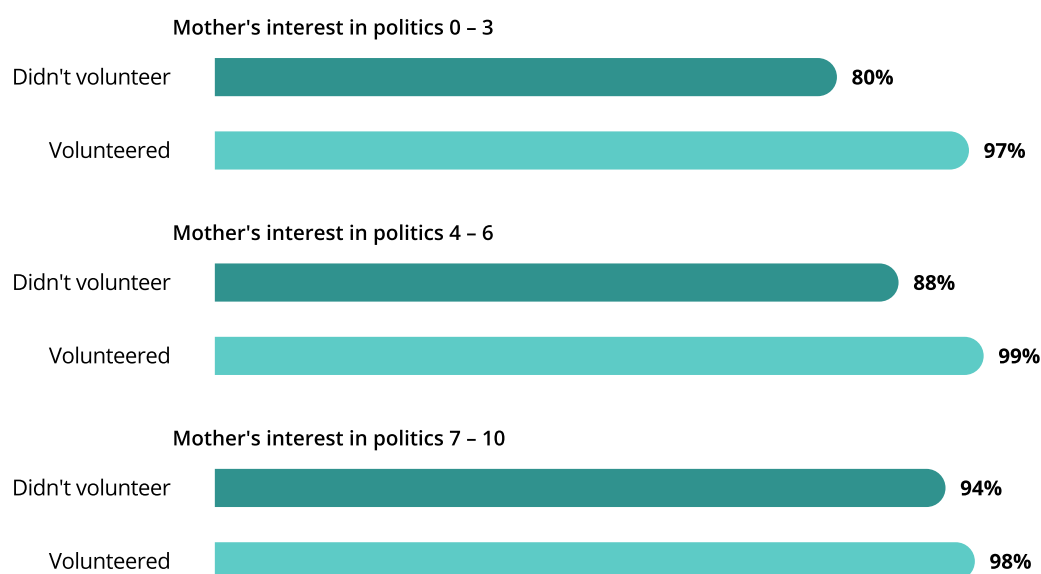




There is similar evidence of this ‘volunteering’ boost from Switzerland. The Swiss Household Panel Survey (SHP) is very similar to the UK’s Understanding Society and can sustain similar analyses to examine how volunteering affects voting after accounting for parents’ political engagement. Figure 6 shows the proportion of Swiss under-30s (from the 2020 wave of the survey) who said that they would vote in a Swiss Federal election (regardless of who they would vote for) depending on i) whether they had

volunteered in the year before the election and ii) the political engagement of their mother.^[4] The SHP asked respondents how interested they were in politics on a scale from 0 (meaning ‘not at all interested’) to 10 (‘very interested’): the respondents were divided into those whose mothers gave scores of 0 to 3 (meaning largely uninterested in politics), 4 to 6 (moderately interested), and 7 to 10 (very interested).

Figure 6 — Vote Intention in Swiss Federal Election by Volunteering & Mother’s Political Interest



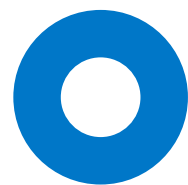
Source: Swiss Household Panel

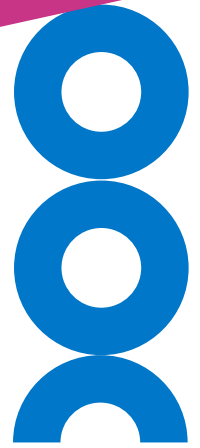




While most young people expected to vote – over 80% (also reflecting the universal tendency of survey respondents to exaggerate their chances of voting) – there was a clear increase in anticipated turnout if the respondents had volunteered. This increase was largest for those whose mothers were the least politically engaged (and likely to be poorer). Among those whose mothers were almost disengaged from politics (i.e., scored 0 to 3 on the 0 to 10 scale), 80% of those who didn't volunteer said they would vote in the next federal election, compared with 97% who did volunteer – a statistically significant 17-point increase in anticipated turnout. For those whose mothers were moderately politically engaged (i.e., 4 to 6 out of 10), there was still a significant increase, but it was smaller, at 11-points. For those whose mothers were very engaged (i.e., 7 to 10 out of 10), the increase in anticipated turnout was barely 4-points and not statistically significant.

These volunteering boosts are small: a 0.5 increase on a 0-10 vote likelihood scale, for example, or a 17-point increase in those intending to vote in an election will not see young people from poorer backgrounds voting in the same numbers as their wealthier peers or their elders. It is important to remember, however, that voting in elections is a **habit** formed over years and through a complicated process involving numerous external influences. This includes the political characteristics of one's parents and experiences (such as choosing to vote in one's first election), which potentially can be influenced by volunteering. It also reflects the decision to vote in one's first elections, which is itself influenced by several different factors (such as parents' political behaviour, how interested one is in politics, the context of the election etc.), of which whether the individual volunteered is only one. The survey data presented above represents a snap-shot of only one point in a decades long process of political socialisation, and we would not expect to see drastic changes in voting behaviour as a result of volunteering (or any other initiative) in a single election. We are not seeking a quick fix in this data: we are looking for reliable evidence that by encouraging young people to volunteer, we can help them become more likely to vote in their first elections and develop a habit that will make them likely to keep voting through adulthood. This is exactly what the analyses discussed above provide.

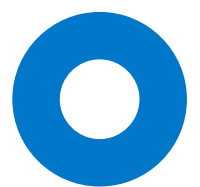




The Limitations of Volunteering in Promoting European Solidarity

Recent research also identifies some limitations to the benefits that volunteering provides. Explaining and addressing these limitations must be a major focus of future research and collaboration. The first is evidence that the benefits of volunteering are far greater for young men than young women. The clearest evidence for this comes from the UK: Figure 7 shows the same data as that in Figure 5 (based on Fox 2024), but with respondents divided by sex, as well as their parents' political engagement, and whether they volunteered. There is still a clear divide between those raised by politically engaged and disengaged parents, with the latter seeing a greater benefit from volunteering, but young men are greater beneficiaries of volunteering than young women regardless of their background. The group least likely to vote are young men with politically disengaged parents:

their average likelihood of voting was 6.3 out of 10. If they volunteered, however, this increased to 7.0. Among young women from such households, their vote likelihood increased only from 6.6 to 6.9. Among young men from politically engaged households, their likelihood of voting increased from 8.1 to 8.3 if they volunteered, while that of young women from such households did not change – it stayed at 8.0 regardless of whether they volunteered. While the result of this is that the sex divide in voting (which, in recent years, has seen young women become more likely to vote than young men) is almost eliminated – there were no significant differences in the likelihood of young men and women from engaged/disengaged houses voting respectively – it nonetheless occurs because young men receive a far greater benefit to their adult political participation if they volunteer compared with that of young women.



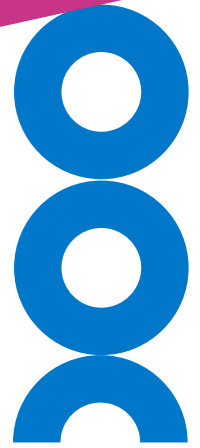
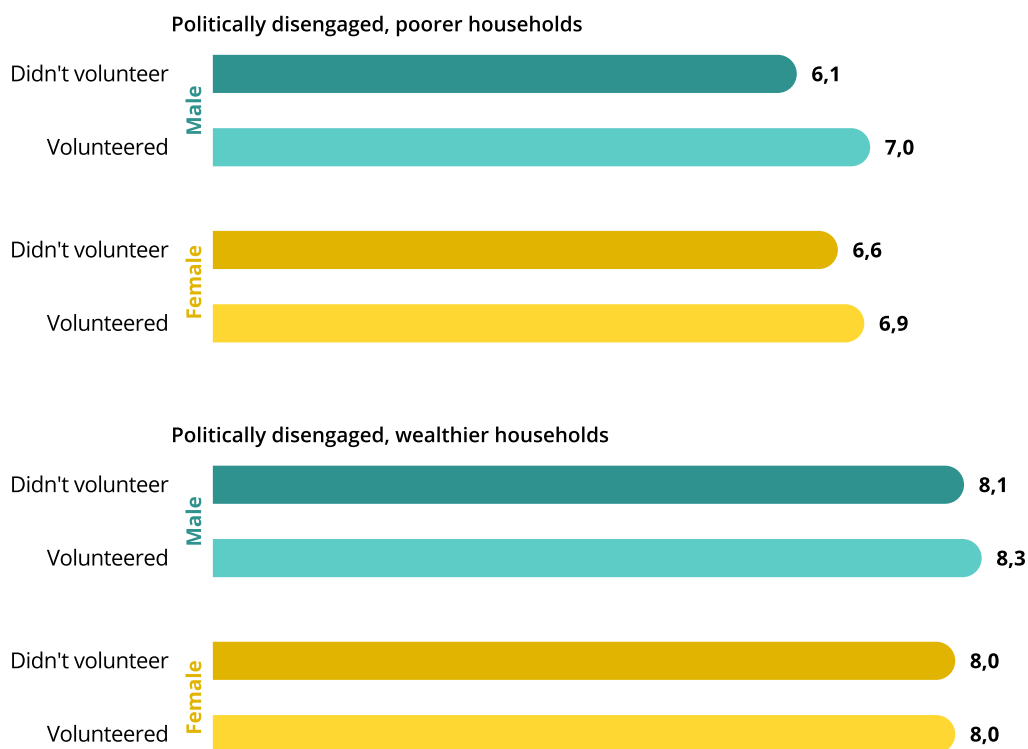
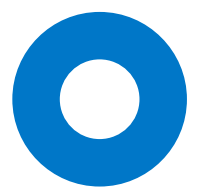
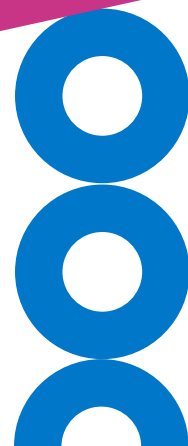


Figure 7: Effect of volunteering on likelihood of voting in first election by parents' political engagement and sex in the UK



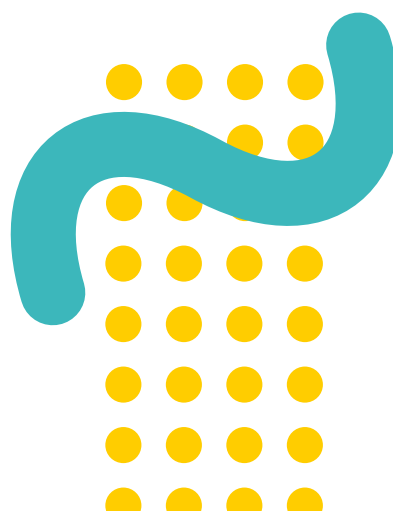
Source: Understanding Society





The explanation for this difference is not yet clear – more data and research are required – but the most plausible theory is that this reflects differences in the types of volunteering young men and women are likely to engage in. Women (of any age) are more likely to volunteer than men, but they are less likely than men to volunteer for organisations and programmes most directly related to politics (such as political parties or pressure groups) or the economy (such as trade unions) (Birdwell et al 2013; Wilson 2000). Such organisations are more likely to provide the kinds of social capital, transferable skills, networks, and knowledge that facilitate political participation than organisations far less directly related to the world of electoral politics – such as organisations relating to social care, children’s education, health, hobbies, or religion, in which women are more likely to volunteer than men. Moreover, when they volunteer, men are more likely to take on leadership positions, while women are more likely to perform lower level, manual and administrative roles (European Volunteer Centre 2004; Cicognani et al 2012). Leadership positions are more likely to bring volunteers into contact with useful networks and give them chances to develop transferable civic skills relating to leadership, team working, research, and public speaking that are more helpful in encouraging political participation.

The second limitation of volunteering relates to the extent to which volunteering programmes such as European Solidarity Corps can attract young people from poorer, politically disengaged households. As mentioned above, many of the activities associated with active citizenship – including volunteering – are dominated by people from wealthier households who are more likely to be politically engaged, and who are more likely to raise politically engaged and active children. Such young people not only have less to gain than those from poorer backgrounds from volunteering, but they also have less need of the benefits volunteering programmes offer, because they are highly likely to vote (or protest, sign petitions, boycott, etc.) regardless. If the potential of volunteering programmes to promote European solidarity and active citizenship are to be realised, participation in such programmes needs to involve high numbers of young people from poorer backgrounds.



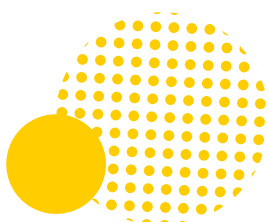


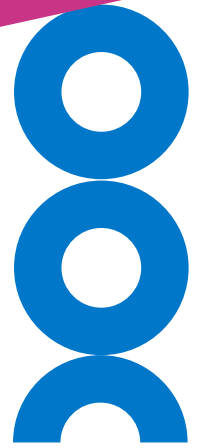
This is an area in which, despite much research and commendable efforts from a host of governments, academics, civil servants, and third sector professionals, progress has been limited. Plenty of academic research shows that volunteering – whether in community associations, service-learning schemes such as National Citizen Service, or international volunteering programmes such as European Solidarity Corps – continues to be dominated by young people from wealthier backgrounds and who are disproportionately likely to go into higher education (Birdwell et al 2013; Voorpostel and Coffe 2012; Filsinger and Freitag 2019). The 2020 European Social Survey, for example, shows that 11% of Millennials in Europe with primarily school or no qualifications volunteered, compared with 25% of those with higher education qualifications; for Gen Z, the equivalent figures were 13% and 31% respectively. Participation in volunteering programmes has much to offer young volunteers and the communities their volunteering supports; but if European volunteering programmes are to achieve their potential in helping to reverse generational turnout decline and promote European solidarity, these socio-economic inequalities must be reduced.

Conclusion and Questions for the Future

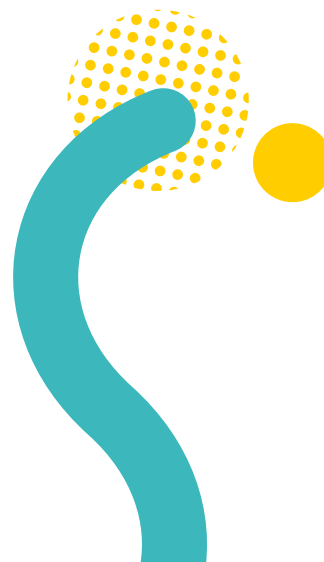
Recent research into the effects of volunteering on political participation shows that volunteering programmes, such as European Solidarity Corps, can be powerful mobilisers of European solidarity. They support young people in becoming agents of solidarity by facilitating the activities through which they can deliver positive change, encourage active citizenship and have the potential to help address one of the major challenges to European democracy: generational turnout decline and the widening inequalities in turnout between those from wealthier and poorer backgrounds. By boosting the participation of young people from poorer backgrounds in their first elections, volunteering can help reconnect them with electoral politics and foster lifelong habits of voting, and so combat the growing under-representation of young people – and especially the poor – in political decision-making.

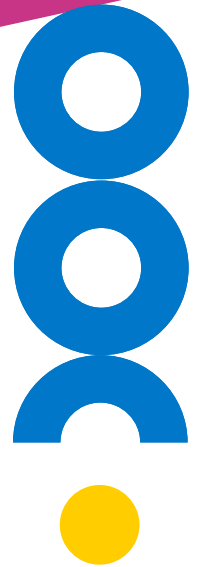
However, some challenges remain: the benefits of volunteering are stronger for young men, particularly those from poorer backgrounds. Given that young women have become more likely than young men to vote in many European democracies in recent years (Grasso and Smith 2021), this at least helps reduce that divide. It is nonetheless concerning that young women derive less of a benefit from volunteering – at least as far as political participation is concerned.





An additional challenge is the persistent difficulty in broadening the socio-economic characteristics of those who participate in volunteering programmes and ensuring that those who both have the greatest need for the benefits of volunteering and the most to gain from it (i.e., young people from the poorest households and communities) are taking part. Both issues require further research. We still do not know why young men gain more from volunteering than young women when it comes to political participation - and if the theory that this is driven by the types of volunteering activities young men and women are likely to engage in is supported, we need to understand better how more young women from poorer backgrounds can be encouraged to volunteer in ways that are more productive of the social capital, transferable skills, and political knowledge that promote political participation. Furthermore, the lack of progress in broadening the socio-economic profile of volunteers through Europe is testament to the necessity of further efforts to identify and implement strategies that will encourage volunteering among those from the poorest backgrounds and who are unlikely to enter higher education. Maximising the potential for volunteering to promote European solidarity relies heavily on our success on addressing these challenges, and it is here that future research and collaboration efforts should be concentrated.





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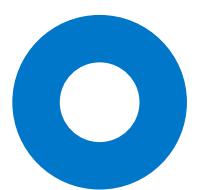
[1] Specifically, the data divides those who have a tertiary education qualification from those who do not. For the majority of European Social Surveys respondents, a tertiary qualification refers to a degree, though for some it may refer to other qualifications obtained from a university (such as a nursing or teaching qualification). Such a distinction is of little importance for explaining generational trends in political behaviour, however, with the major difference being between those who obtain a university qualification and those who do not. For simplicity, those with tertiary qualifications are simply referred to as ‘graduates’.

Highest education qualification is a useful proxy for socio-economic circumstance because it is related to both respondents’ own circumstances in later life (someone with a degree, for example, is more likely to have a higher income and to own their home than someone without a degree) and those in which they were raised (people whose parents have a degree are more likely to go to university themselves, and such parents are more likely to have higher incomes than parents without degrees).

[2] One of these is access to the necessary data: most studies of volunteering rely on self-selecting samples of volunteers or former volunteers, which are very poorly suited to reach generalisable conclusions about the effects of volunteering, and there are few surveys with representative samples that include measures of both volunteering and political participation (see Fox 2024; Marta and Pozzi 2008; Birdwell et al 2013; Hill and Stevens 2010)

[3] These figures were calculated using structural equation models which simultaneously estimated the effect of volunteering on first-time voter turnout while controlling not only for childhood political interest and parents’ political engagement, but also other factors associated with the likelihood of someone both volunteering and engaging with politics in adulthood. These factors included sex, age, interest in politics, believing voting to be a civic duty, and political efficacy. The full details of the models can be found in Fox (2024). The estimates of the effect of volunteering were also tested to determine whether they were ‘statistically significant’: this is a measure of the likelihood that the effect of volunteering is ‘real’ – meaning something likely to be found in the population and not just the sample participating in the survey. In social science, any statistical effect calculated as having a 95% probability or greater of being found in the population is identified as statistically significant, meaning we have sufficient confidence to generalise from the analysis of survey data to the wider population.

[4] Data on respondents’ mothers’ political engagement was used because i) women are more likely to respond to household surveys than men, and so there is more data available relating to respondents’ mothers than fathers; and ii) research shows that it is the political characteristics of children’s mothers that has a much stronger impact on their political socialisation than that of fathers (Fox et al 2019; Quintelier et al 2014; Coffee and Voorpostel 2011). These analyses were replicated using data on respondents’ fathers, and using data from both parents together, the results of which were not substantially different. Please feel free to contact the author for more details or to get the results of those additional analyses.





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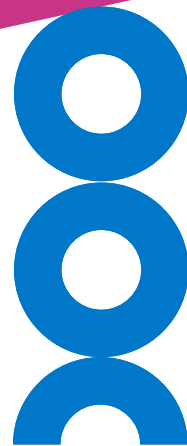
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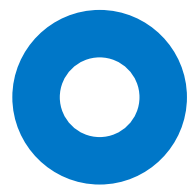
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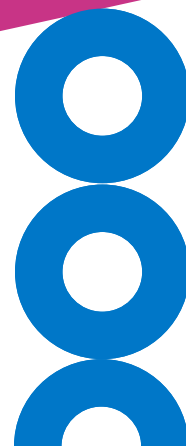
SALTO European Solidarity Corps

SALTO ESC supports National Agencies and organisations in the youth field and beyond with the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme. The mission is to explore the potential of solidarity as a core value in European societies and to promote the use of the European Solidarity Corps as a tool for understanding and living solidarity. SALTO ESC coordinates networking activities, training, seminars and events that will support the quality implementation of the programme and maximise its impact. By doing this, SALTO ESC contributes to building a European Solidarity Corps community of organisations.

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EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

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