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Published on: 11 Jun 2009 - Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (Taylor & Francis Group)

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Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713433350>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2009

To cite this Article Quintelier, Ellen(2009)'The Political Participation of Immigrant Youth in Belgium',Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,35:6,919 — 937

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13691830902957700

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691830902957700>

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The Political Participation of Immigrant Youth in Belgium

Ellen Quintelier

Research on the political participation of ethnic minorities routinely reveals that immigrants have lower levels of participation, mainly due to their lower socio-economic status. This article investigates whether younger immigrants also display lower levels of political participation. It is based on a representative survey of 6,330 16-year-olds in Belgium. The results demonstrate that, while young immigrant people do not have lower levels of political participation, there are clear differences: participation is influenced by gender, socio-economic situation, mother tongue and sense of group identity, not by citizenship status, television or religion.

Keywords: Political Participation; Young People; Immigrants; Ethnic Minority; Group Identity; Belgium

Introduction

Research on the political participation of ethnic minorities consistently demonstrates low participation levels. It has been argued that ethnic minorities participate less than the majority population for multiple reasons: they are a minority group, they contend with language problems, and they operate in a lower socio-economic bracket; or simply because of their different origins. Fewer opportunities to participate as well as lower levels of social capital have been cited as additional reasons (Fennema and Tillie 2001). Finally, immigrants also suffer from a lack of political representation, which may in turn also discourage their political participation (Purdam *et al.* 2002).

One of the problems with the existing research on ethnic minorities is its general limitation to the American context. As a result, current literature on the political participation of ethnic minorities is restricted to the study of African-American (Uhlaner *et al.* 1989) and Hispanic migrants (Leighley 2001; Torney-Purta *et al.* 2007) respectively. In Belgium, however, most minorities are either of European or

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North-African origin. These are relatively recent immigrants, with very different historical experiences to the African-American population in the US (Pettigrew *et al.* 1998). In this article, I investigate the political participation of young people in Belgium by comparing the adolescent participation levels of the Belgian majority to those of the ethnic minority. Furthermore, I have subdivided the minority grouping to make a distinction between migrants from within the European Union, and those from without.

Literature

There are many studies on the political participation of immigrants. Some of them find negative or lower levels of political participation among immigrants, while others find positive or higher levels. Verba *et al.* (1995), for example, found that both Latinos and black people are less likely to participate than white people. However, we do not only find *negative* results for the levels of political participation; most authors find mixed results—minorities are sometimes more and sometimes less likely than whites to participate, depending on the exact type of participation and time period investigated. With respect to *time period*, some studies indicate that black women score higher on participation than white—for example during the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Cole and Stewart 1996). Depending on the *type of political participation*, research indicates that some political cultures in other countries are ‘more lively and particularly personal and informal’ (Rath 1983: 464). This could lead to greater occurrences of political contacting and networking between immigrants. Purdam *et al.* (2002) also found that turn-out levels between groups of different nationalities seem to differ in Great Britain. The *origin of respondents* also influences other forms of political participation: Uhlaner *et al.* (1989), for instance, found that whites and blacks in the US were not only more numerous among registered voters, but were also more likely to vote than both Latinos and Asian Americans. Jacobs *et al.* (2002) did not find significant differences in informal political participation between Belgians, Moroccans and Turks of comparable socio-economic level; however, female immigrants tended to participate less. Leighley (2001) argues that the results also depend on the *type of analysis*: bivariate analysis leads more often to lower levels of participation of minorities than multivariate analysis. Fennema and Tillie (1999, 2001) also argue that different ethnic groups, as observed with the Turks, Moroccans, Surinamers and Antilleans in their studies in the Netherlands, may have different levels of participation due to the ‘ethnic’ social capital of their groups.

Political participation might also be influenced by the varying degrees of political representation of immigrants. As minorities become better represented, they will be more likely to present their political opinions and desires to politicians, and to participate in other political activities (Leighley 2001). The Belgian party which is the most attentive to ethnic minorities, according to Crowley (2001), is the Green Party (*Groen!-Ecolo*)—they have the most immigrants on their lists. In spite of this, however, some authors have suggested that Green Party representatives were at best

unobtrusive in fulfilling their representational duties (Butler and Kavanagh 2001). Research by Jacobs *et al.* (2002) indicates that Turkish people in Brussels are well represented in political parties and trade unions alike.

Observing adolescents allows us to disentangle a number of possible causal factors in lower political participation rates. Young people are an especially important group within ethnic minorities, as immigrants are mainly younger than the norm, and because they constitute the future generation of voters (Merry 2005; Purdam *et al.* 2002; Russell *et al.* 2002). We expect to find only small differences between the political participation of immigrant and Belgian youth because most would have lived in Belgium for some years¹ and would have been exposed to similar opportunities and socialisation mechanisms through—among other things—schools and voluntary associations. Further, young people are already less politically active than the norm (Henn *et al.* 2002), and yet there are indications that young immigrants do even worse (Purdam *et al.* 2002; Torney-Purta *et al.* 2007). Because of these low levels of political participation among young people, we expect less variation between Belgian citizens and immigrants. However, if we find differences in political participation it might also be that young immigrants have fewer opportunities, or that they are less often asked, to participate (Verba *et al.* 1995).

Immigrants do not only differ in origin but, according to Rath (1983), they regularly deviate from the dominant culture in terms of mother tongue, religion and race. Indeed, being an immigrant or belonging to an ethnic minority has different dimensions. Ethnic minorities participate less intensively than members of the dominant group in society, as some may lack full citizenship while others are impeded by language barriers (Norris *et al.* 2004a; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Verba *et al.* 1995). However, a lot of these differences disappear when education, socio-economic situation and gender are taken into account (Norris *et al.* 2004a).

In the remainder of this article, I investigate factors that might influence the political participation of young ethnic people: their socio-economic circumstances, citizenship status and cultural identity (language, television use and group identity), and the role of women in other cultures (see Table 1 for a full list of variables and their response categories). My hypothesis is that lower socio-economic status, profound cultural identity and lower citizenship status all influence the political participation of immigrant youth. I also expect that women will participate less.

Socio-Economic Status

It is generally stated that less-educated people have lower levels of political participation (Nie *et al.* 1996; Parry *et al.* 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). Most groups of ethnic minorities have lower levels of socio-economic status: they have lower incomes (Verba *et al.* 1993), lower levels of education (Purdam *et al.* 2002) and lower occupational status (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006; Fridkin *et al.* 2006; Merry 2005; Purdam *et al.* 2002). So, the (lower) socio-economic background will also have a negative impact—it will reduce

Table 1. Variables used in the analysis

Variable	Response category
<i>Political participation*</i>	
1 Deliberately wore a patch, sticker, button or t-shirt for a political or social cause	0 = not participating; 1 = participating
2 Signed a petition	
3 Took part in a legal march or protest	
4 Raised or donated money for a cause	
5 Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	
6 Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	
7 Participated in illegal protest activities	
8 Forwarded an e-mail with political content	
9 Wrote or displayed a political statement publicly	
10 Attended a show or cultural event with political content	
11 Contacted a public official	
12 Was member of a political party	
<i>Gender</i>	
Dummy variable	1 = male; n = 3,358 (53.1%) 2 = female; n = 2,964 (46.9%)
<i>Socio-economic status*</i>	
1 How far do you expect to go in school (or how far did you go if you have completed your studies)?	1 = no diploma; 4 = university degree
2 What is the professional status of your mother?	1 = not working; 2 = employer; 3 = employee or self-employed
3 What is the professional status of your father?	1 = not working; 2 = employer; 3 = employee or self-employed
4 What is the highest level of education that your mother has completed?	1 = no diploma; 4 = university degree
5 What is the highest level of education that your father has completed?	1 = no diploma; 4 = university degree
6 About how many books are in your family's home (excluding newspapers, magazines and books for school)?	1 = none; 2 = 1–10; 7 = more than 500
<i>Socio-economic status (SES)**</i>	
	1 = low SES; n = 1,293 (30.9%); 2 = moderate SES; n = 1,733 (37.1%) 3 = high SES; n = 1,593 (32.0%)
<i>Group identity**</i>	
1 Please rate how close you feel to the following groups (immigrants, Muslims and black people) on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 means you feel close to the interests, feelings and ideas held by members of that group, and 0 means you feel distant from that group	1 = low; n = 1,714 (31.2%) 2 = moderate; n = 2,511 (45.7%) 3 = high; n = 1,266 (23.1%)
<i>Mother tongue**</i>	
Level of knowledge of official language	1 = low; n = 5,529 (88.3%); 2 = moderate; n = 166 (2.6%); 3 = high; n = 570 (9.1%)
1 What is your mother tongue (first language)? In Dutch-speaking schools: In French-speaking schools:	1 = Dutch, 2 = French or German, 3 = other; 1 = French, 2 = Dutch or German, 3 = other;
<i>Television use</i>	
Dummy variable: no television stations from another country/1+ television stations (French, Moroccan, German, Italian, Dutch, Turkish channels) from another country	1 = no ethnic television use; n = 3,923 (64.5%); 2 = ethnic television use; n = 2,158 (35.5%)
<i>Citizenship:**</i>	
Those (and their parents) who are:	1 = Belgian citizen; n = 5,529 (75.9%) 2 = Europe-born immigrant; n = 166 (12.8%) 3 = Non-Europe-born immigrant; n = 570 (11.3%)
<i>Religion</i>	
1 What, if any, is your family's religious background?	1 = Catholic; n = 3,944 (63.5%); 2 = Muslim; n = 505 (8.1%); 3 = none/other; n = 1,726 (28.4%)
<i>Immigrant friends</i>	
1 How many of your close friends belong to a different race to you?	1 = (almost) none (68.7%); 2 = a few (or more) (31.3%)

Note: * Scale composed of multiple questions; **Trichotomy: all categories summed and scale divided into three more or less equal parts.

political participation levels for ethnic minorities (Merry 2005; Uhlaner *et al.* 1989; Verba *et al.* 1995).

The socio-economic status of the family not only affects parents, it affects their children as well (Fridkin *et al.* 2006). Parents' schooling, economic level, nationality, country of birth and language used at home all have a significant impact on the success of their children (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Merry 2005). Students with a lower social and economic status, especially students within ethnic minorities, are more frequently directed towards vocational tracks (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006; Merry 2005; Oakes 1985). Because social class and ethnic-group membership are correlated, much of the variation in the political participation of different groups of people can be explained through class differences (Verba *et al.* 1993, 1995). The socio-economic status (SES) model has proved to be successful in explaining the differences in political participation between the white majority and the non-white minority (Junn 1999; Verba *et al.* 1995).

Gender

I also take gender into account, because research has indicated that women were often discouraged from participating (Almond and Verba 1963; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Burns *et al.* 2001; Campbell *et al.* 1960; Lane 1959; Milbrath 1965; Norris *et al.* 2004b; Verba and Nie 1978), even from a very young age (Easton and Dennis 1969; Greenstein 1965; Hess and Torney 1967; Hyman 1959). Public affairs were traditionally considered to be the domain of men; women showed less interest in politics, political involvement or partisanship, they voted less and were overall less politically active than men (Lovenduski 1986; van Deth and Jennings 1990). Women were also less represented at the different policy levels (Lowndes 2004). In general, the statement that men are more politically active than women is a truism that likewise holds among ethnic minorities (Jacobs *et al.* 2004). Some studies, however, indicate that, among young people, gender differences are smaller (Hooghe and Stolle 2004). I also look for differences between Belgian and immigrant boys and girls. In some cultures, it is still considered inappropriate for women to participate in politics; sometimes, too, young girls are expected to take care of their siblings and the household, which gives less time for political activity (Hart 1992; Roker *et al.* 1999; Soule and Nairne 2006). So we can expect the gender gap between immigrant male and female young people to be larger than the gap between Belgian girls and boys.

Cultural Identity: Language, Television Use and Group Identity

If we assume that ethnic minority participation is influenced by cultural factors, we should find that 'language at home', 'ethnic television use' and/or a 'strong group identity' are strong determining factors of political participation. A strong ethnic culture can influence political participation both positively and negatively. It can bring people of similar cultures together and so facilitate participation or,

alternatively, it can create closed environments and communities, thereby inhibiting political participation (McClurg 2003; McLeod *et al.* 1999a; Mutz 2002).

Firstly, minorities often lack a sufficient command of the official language of the country (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Uhlaner *et al.* 1989). Research indicates that non-native speakers participate less (Ayala 2000) and experience exclusion from political participation (McFarland and Thomas 2006). Torney-Purta *et al.* (2007) found that, among American 14-years-olds, those who spoke English at home had superior civic knowledge, which might have stimulated their level of political participation. However, Verba *et al.* (1995) did not find a significant relationship between language preference and political participation. In Belgium, those whose first language is either Dutch or French are advantaged by having greater access to political information—sufficient knowledge of the official language is necessary to communicate in or about political participation (Junn 1999; Verba *et al.* 1993). Not only does knowledge of the official language makes people more likely to communicate, it also works the other way around: ‘Social interaction creates opportunities for individuals to gather information about politics which makes them more likely to participate’ (McClurg 2003: 449). In Belgium, sufficient knowledge of one of the two official languages is clearly a major problem for immigrants, as indicated by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): Belgian students who speak neither Dutch nor French at home have lower scores for reading and mathematical literacy. Studies demonstrate that ‘[test score] improvements in Belgium [...] have been driven by higher-ability students’ (OECD 2004: 63), while non-native speakers do systematically worse on tests and make almost no progress. The difference in educational attainment between native Belgians and immigrants even became the topic of a Flemish policy document, *Today Champion in Mathematics, Tomorrow Also in Equal Opportunities*,² and in two of the five topics in the *Equal Educational Opportunities Decree*,³ which seeks to improve young people’s linguistics skills and intercultural education. Because of the poor results of immigrant participation levels in the PISA study, the French Community also took measures against ghetto schools (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006).⁴

So we expect that their lack of knowledge of the official language will make political participation more difficult for ethnic minority youth; they will have fewer contacts for engaging in political participation and more difficulty in making choices and in understanding other political actors (Shabani 2004; Verba *et al.* 1995). However, the data only enable me to distinguish between mother tongues, and not to assess proficiency in either Dutch or French. So, again, I can hypothesise that pupils who do not have French or Dutch as their mother tongue will have less knowledge of the official language and thus will participate less in politics.

Secondly, ethnic minorities are considered to have distinctive interests, different strategies of collective mobilisation and specific modes of access to the political process—i.e. through their own ‘ethnic’ media (Crowley 2001; O’Toole 2004). Minorities often have ‘alternative’ or ‘subaltern’ public spheres: for instance,

a hairdresser who works in a mosque. Mosques are also ideal places in which to stimulate political participation for Muslims (Jamal 2005). Fennema and Tillie (1999, 2001) argue that ethnic minorities have different 'ethnic' social capital. They also enjoy watching their own cultural television stations in their own languages, and this may influence young people's ethnic identity, feeling of belonging and internal group cohesion. Ethnic television-watching can work in both ways, however. On the one hand, as members of a minority group gradually perceive their ethnicity as more salient, one might argue that their political participation will increase—in favour of their own ethnic group (Miller *et al.* 1981; Uhlaner *et al.* 1989). On the other hand, the counter-argument could be that ethnic television creates a closed community attitude, with less political participation.

The third element of cultural identity is 'group identity', which is also related to the two aforementioned factors. Research shows that members of ethnic minority groups are more likely to consider themselves in ethnic terms than in terms which refer to a nationality (McCrone and Kiely 2000). Group consciousness can make ethnic minorities more open to political participation—for example, by striving for social changes (Guterbock and London 1983). Ethnic voluntary associations and networks also increase immigrants' ability and likelihood to participate and express their 'objective class interests' (Fennema and Tillie 2001; Guterbock and London 1983: 451). I will also measure whether higher levels of social solidarity and community commitment among immigrant Muslims and blacks lead to greater political participation (Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Miller *et al.* 1981). Leighley (2001) adds that people with lower socio-economic status (SES) levels are more receptive to group mobilisation, which is also the case for most young people. Larger and more concentrated ethnic groups also have greater influence on political decision-making and are more likely to be successful in terms of reaching goals (Leighley 2001). I argue, therefore, that the more they feel close to those groups, the more they will be likely to participate. However, in Leighley and Vedlitz's article (1999) the group cohesion factor is insignificant in every case.

Citizenship Rights

Granting citizenship or voting rights to minorities is considered to be an important stimulus for other forms of political participation. In Belgium, non-European immigrants can, under certain conditions, obtain voting rights at the municipal level due to their status as European citizens. In general, migrants from European Union countries have greater security with respect to their residence, and more rights, than immigrants from outside the European Union (Rath 1983). In Belgium, minorities can have full voting rights only at the municipal level but, in spite of this, only 15.7 per cent are registered to vote.⁵

On the other hand, lowering the barriers to the franchise stimulates political participation, though still below the levels of white citizens (Uhlaner *et al.* 1989; Verba *et al.* 1995). The rate of political activity for African Americans was lower than

for whites in the 1950s but, due to the lower barriers, the proportion who did participate increased dramatically (Verba *et al.* 1993). Once immigrants have crossed the threshold of political participation, i.e. through voting, they are just as likely to protest and make political contacts as native residents (Verba *et al.* 1995). Cole and Stewart (1996) argue that emancipation brings about a transformation of identity: as in 'black is beautiful' for African Americans and 'the personal is political' for women. Torney-Purta *et al.* (2007) also find evidence that US-born citizens are more politically active within the US than those who are born elsewhere. In this case, I would expect to find the Belgian citizens to be the most active group, European immigrants to be somewhat less politically active, and non-European immigrants the least engaged. I consequently divide my respondents into three categories: Belgians, European immigrants and non-European immigrants. I argue that the lower levels of these latter two groups are partly due to their citizenship status, but also to their different native language, their lower socio-economic position, and their preference for watching 'ethnic' television. I would also expect, especially for immigrants, that girls will participate less than their male counterparts and that immigrant group identity leads to lower levels of participation. I will test these hypotheses using data from the Belgian Youth Survey (BYS) of 2006.

Data

The BYS 2006 is a large-scale representative survey among more than 6,000 15–16-year-olds (3,358 males; 2,964 females) in 112 schools in both Dutch and French communities in Belgium. It is based on written questionnaires filled in by respondents from the 10th grade. The survey focused on the social and political attitudes of young people (Hooghe *et al.* 2006). Because we study *young* people, we expect to find only small differences because the socialisation of young people is highly standardised through similar schools, voluntary associations and activities; they also hold no professional status or income, both of which might influence their political participation. Nevertheless, we must take into account the effect that the socio-economic position of their parents will have on the youngsters' political participation.

I classify young people into three groups based on their citizenship status. *Belgian youth* are born in Belgium to parents who were also born in Belgium. In this way, I not only exclude first-generation immigrants, but second-generation immigrants as well. *European immigrant youth* are born in Europe and/or have at least one European-born parent. Most European immigrants come from neighbouring countries like the Netherlands and France, although a sizeable proportion comes from Italy. The third group, *non-European immigrants*, is made up of youth who are born outside the EU and/or have at least one parent born outside the EU25.⁶ Most come from Turkey or Morocco, but there is also a substantial section whose parents originate from the ex-colony of Congo. I hypothesise that the group of European immigrants will participate more politically than the non-Europeans because they

have more citizenship rights than immigrants from outside the EU, and share greater cultural similarities with Belgians, as stated in the European treaties.

I questioned political activism in thirteen forms: whether they had worn a patch, a sticker, a button or a T-shirt, had signed a petition, took part in a legal march or protest, raised or donated money for a cause, boycotted certain products, deliberately bought certain products, participated in illegal protest activities, forwarded an e-mail with political content, contacted a public official, wrote a political statement publicly, attended a show or cultural event with political content, or joined a political organisation or party in the previous twelve months. I also asked whether the 16-year-olds would vote should they be given the right. The answers should help me to determine whether there are indeed differences in these forms of political participation among Belgian, European and other immigrants, and whether socio-economic background, gender, cultural identity and citizenship rights are the causes of these observed differences. For the analyses, I use logistic regression analysis.

Analysis

First I determine whether there truly are differences in socio-economic status, mother tongue, television-watching, and social solidarity among Belgians, European and non-European immigrants. Table 2 shows that ethnic minorities are indeed characterised by lower socio-economic conditions. Here I measured socio-economic status on a 10-point scale, through the expected level of youth education, the professional status and educational level of the parents, and the number of books found at home. I computed all (equally weighted) variables to create a 10-point SES scale which was then divided into three, more or less equal, parts: low, moderate and high socio-economic status. Non-European immigrants are generally in a lower socio-economic position than European immigrants and Belgians—38 per cent compared to only 34 and 29 per cent of European immigrants and Belgians respectively.

Table 2 also shows the relationship between French or Dutch as mother tongue and origin of the respondents. Although it was not possible to measure the degree of knowledge of the official language, their mother tongue was used as an indicator. I expect young people with different mother tongues to be less proficient in the official languages of Belgium and to experience greater difficulty communicating in them. As predicted, young immigrants rarely claim one of the official Belgian languages as their mother tongue: 47 per cent of non-European immigrants have mother tongues that differ from either of the official languages, while the same is true for only 1 per cent of Belgians.

Respondents were then asked to choose their three favourite channels from a list of both Belgian and foreign television channels. If they watched one or more of the non-Belgian television channels (which included French or English television), they were categorised as watching 'ethnic' channels. As expected, non-European immigrants watch the most ethnic (Turkish, Moroccan, French etc.) channels, and Belgian citizens the least. A column for 'other' channels was also added because a small

Table 2. Characteristics of respondents (%)

	Belgians	European immigrants	Non-European immigrants	Total %
<i>Socio-economic position</i>				
Low	29.4	34.2	37.5	30.8
Moderate	37.7	35.4	34.9	37.1
High	32.9	30.4	27.6	32.1
N	4,034	641	507	–
Chi ² = 19.76*** (4df)				
<i>French/Dutch mother tongue</i>				
Native speaker	96.9	85.3	48.4	90.1
Other official language	2.0	4.6	4.9	2.7
Non-native speaker	1.1	10.1	46.7	7.3
N	4,683	793	697	–
Chi ² = 1889.43*** (4df)				
<i>Ethnic television viewing</i>				
Yes	26.8	49.6	65.1	34.0
'Other'	4.8	1.0	1.7	4.0
No	68.4	49.4	33.1	62.0
N	4,683	793	697	–
Chi ² = 507.01*** (4df)				
<i>Group identity</i>				
Low	35.8	25.0	6.1	31.6
Moderate	47.8	48.2	27.8	45.9
High	16.5	26.7	66.0	22.5
N	4,683	793	697	–
Chi ² = 691.59*** (4df)				

Source: Belgian Youth Survey 2006.

portion of respondents selected it. However, we will only use the division between 'ethnic' television channels and non-ethnic or Belgian in the subsequent logistic regression. Young immigrant people clearly watch the most ethnic television.

The extent to which young people associate with immigrants, black people and Muslims was also measured, as an indicator to assess each group's level of association to another cultural group. As expected, non-European immigrants score highest on this indicator (66 per cent), with European immigrants and Belgians placed somewhat lower at 26.7 and 16.5 per cent respectively.

From Table 2 we can conclude that Belgians have higher socio-economic levels, watch more Belgian television, are in most cases native speakers and feel less attached to immigrants, Muslims and blacks. These results are in concordance with the findings in the literature. I now explore whether these independent variables have an influence on the political participation of the three groups. Earlier, I said that I expected to find only small differences in the participation level because my respondents are still young, mostly second-generation immigrants, many of whom

have undergone socialisation processes similar to those experienced by Belgian youth. But, as Table 3 clearly demonstrates, there are significant differences between the participation of Belgians, European and non-European citizens: for two-thirds of the political acts we find clear, demonstrable differences. For protesting, boycotting, donating money and, to a lesser extent, voting and contacting, *we find the highest scores among non-European immigrants*. A lot of these differences can be explained when we look at the Muslim culture of 60 per cent of the immigrants: donating money to the family is very common, and drinking Mecca-cola could be seen as a boycott of Coca-Cola. Recent conflicts, such as the wearing of head-scarves in school and the Danish 'Mohammed cartoons', may have given Muslim youths more incentive to protest. On the other hand, wearing badges, stickers and T-shirts with political content, and signing petitions, are all activities more common to Belgian youths.

However, the overall trend is not what I expected: so far non-Europeans appear to be the most politically active group, ahead of both Belgians and European immigrants. We will see later whether this trend still holds when socio-economic background and other influential factors are taken into account.

I now turn to gender differences in participation levels (Table 4). Contrary to expectations, females appear to be more active than males. The difference is larger among Belgian (+0.24) than it is among non-European immigrant youth (+0.03). Although I expected to find the largest difference among the non-European immigrants, because many are Muslim and considered to be less active, this does not seem to be the case. Among Muslims, females are the most active, engaging in

Table 3. Percentage of those who participated in a particular activity in previous year

	Belgians	European immigrants	Non-European immigrants	Significance f-value
Legally protested	9.5	12.9	22.0	32.386***
Boycotted products	18.4	13.5	21.7	6.897***
Wore patch, sticker etc.	16.2	13.2	10.9	5.511***
Fund-raised	42.2	42.0	48.5	4.117**
Illegally protested	6.3	9.7	8.5	4.805**
Signed petition	40.1	38.6	35.6	3.715*
Wd have voted – intention	65.0	62.8	70.0	3.320*
Contacted public official	4.0	3.7	6.5	3.250*
Wrote pol. statemt publicly	4.5	4.7	6.2	1.291 (NS)
Attended pol. cultural event	12.7	11.2	14.3	1.108 (NS)
Delib. bought products	18.6	18.0	19.4	1.076 (NS)
Fwdd political e-mail	11.7	11.0	12.3	0.448 (NS)
Member political party	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.165 (NS)
Mean number of activities	1.93	1.87	2.14	
N	4,683	793	697	

Source: BYS 2006.

Notes: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Significance (f-value) indicates that there is a significant difference (or not) between at least two of the three categories. However, it does not indicate which differences are significant.

Table 4. Mean number of activities in which youngsters participated (max = 10)

	Belgians	European immigrants	non-European immigrants	Mean	Sig. f-value
Females	2.05	1.96	2.16	2.05	1.611(NS)
Males	1.81	1.78	2.13	1.84	6.395**
Significance t-value	-5.545***	-1.707(NS)	-0.267(NS)		

Source: BYS 2006.

Note: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

2.22 activities compared to 2.04 among males. There is no significant difference between Belgian, European and non-European females, but there is among males: non-European males (2.13 per cent) are more active than European and Belgian males (1.78 and 1.81 respectively). Therefore, we cannot conclude that (Muslim) females are less inclined to political activity.

The idea, then, that immigrant girls from other cultures are restricted from political participation does not hold: on the contrary, *non-European immigrant girls are the most active group*. I now use a binary logistic regression test in a multivariate manner to see if and how these characteristics influence political participation. Binomial logistic regression is used when the dependent variable is a dichotomy (0 = no political participation, 1 = political participation) and the independent variables are categorical. To interpret the model, I use the odds ratio 'Exp(B)'. An odds ratio (OR) higher than 1 refers to greater participation levels in a particular category; when the OR is close to 1, there is no significant difference in the level of political participation.

The multivariate analysis in Table 5 shows that the young women in the sample participate in politics significantly more than the young men. The influence of education and other SES variables is also highly significant: the higher someone's socio-economic status, the more he or she will participate. Group identity also stimulates political participation: the more the respondent identifies with immigrants, Muslims and blacks, the more politically active he or she will be. 'Mother tongue' has a different trend: it shows that speaking the official language of the region or speaking another language (but not Dutch, French or German) stimulates political participation. Only respondents who spoke a language other than the official languages of the region score worse, with half as much participation. This means that speaking Dutch in the French-speaking part of Belgium, and speaking French in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium significantly reduces the political participation of young people. Therefore, we cannot conclude that ethnic minorities' political participation is influenced by their fluency in either of the official languages. If we look to 'ethnic' television viewing, the different channels which respondents watch have no significant impact; neither does the respondents' citizenship status. So, contrary to expectations, ethnic television viewing does not influence political

Table 5. Logistic model for predicting political participation*

	Mean no. activities (max. 12)	Sig.	OR Exp(B)	With religion			With 'friends of a different race'		
				Mean no. activities (max. 12)	Sig.	OR Exp(B)	Mean no. activities (max. 12)	Sig.	OR Exp(B)
Gender									
Men (=ref.)	1.73			1.73			1.73		
Women	2.01	0.000	1.504	2.01	0.000	1.504	2.01	0.000	1.601
SES									
Low (=ref.)	1.49	0.000		1.49	0.000		1.49	0.000	
Moderate	1.91	0.000	1.468	1.91	0.000	1.465	1.91	0.000	1.416
High	2.32	0.000	1.779	2.32	0.000	1.810	2.32	0.000	1.763
Group identity									
Low (=ref.)	1.47	0.000		1.47	0.000				
Moderate	1.93	0.000	1.419	1.93	0.000	1.418			
High	2.36	0.000	1.848	2.36	0.000	1.855			
French/Dutch									
Native speaker (=ref.)	1.87	0.000		1.87	0.000		1.87	0.001	
Other official language	1.78	0.000	0.478	1.78	0.001	0.498	1.78	0.000	0.501
Non-native speaker	1.86	1.000	1.000	1.86	0.548	0.888	1.86	0.731	1.065
Ethnic television use									
No (=ref.)	1.95			1.95			1.95		
Yes	1.82	0.041	0.844	1.82	0.101	0.872	1.82	0.008	0.811
Citizenship									
Belgian (=ref.)	1.85	0.493		1.85	0.382		1.85	0.863	
European	1.79	0.869	1.019	1.79	0.784	1.031	1.79	0.647	1.050
Non-European	2.07	0.235	0.834	2.07	0.166	0.773	2.07	0.829	1.031
Religion									
Catholic/Christian (= ref.)				1.78	0.401				
Muslim				2.04	0.280	1.288			
Non-religious, Other				1.97	0.177	0.835			
Friends of a different race									
No (=ref.)							1.70		
Yes							2.25	0.000	1.462
Constant		0.000	2.449		0.000	2.549		0.000	2.791
Nagelkerke R ²		0.068			0.068			0.056	

Source: BYS 2006.

Notes: Dependent variable: political participation (0 = no participation; 1 = participation); *sum of all activities participated in, except intention to vote.

participation. We can thus argue that ethnic television channels are just as successful as Belgian television channels in stimulating political participation.

Thus, from this part of the analysis, *being a Belgian or a European or non-European immigrant has no influence on political participation*. Even if we predict the same model with the dichotomous variable Belgian/immigrant we get the same results and significances (and an even worse model, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.045$). So it clearly matters if you *feel* close to immigrants, but not if you *are* one. Using another model that discounts the group identity variable likewise reflects the negligible impact on political participation of being an immigrant (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.049$).

The logistic analysis and the apparent importance of group identity have caused me to consider the impact of religion on political participation levels. Because 60 per cent of the non-European immigrants are Muslim, and one of the indicators of group identity is ‘association with Muslims’, I wonder if the effect is influenced by religion. If we look to Table 5, we see that Muslims are somewhat more politically active than Catholics. Although taking other factors into account, we see that religion carries no significant influence on political participation. Religion is also not significant once group identity is deleted from the model.

Leighley (2001: 173) also argues that ‘racial and ethnic minorities will engage more when they reside among others like themselves’. This does seem to be the case, as Table 5 shows that young people who have friends of a different race—taking into account whether or not they are immigrants themselves—are more inclined towards political participation. However, a strong group identity also stimulates immigrants to political participation: the explanatory power of the variable ‘group identity’ seems to be larger than for the case of young people having ‘friends of a different race’. Therefore, the ideal participant is somebody who has both a high sense of group identity and a large and diverse network. A strong sense of group identity will probably stimulate the importance of their ethnicity and the levels of their political participation; they are also likely to be active in an ethnically diverse environment. This is no contradiction, because a strong ethnic identity does not always imply a homogeneous ethnic network.

Conclusion

In the theoretical part of the paper, I stated that young peoples’ socio-economic circumstances, cultural identity (language, television use and group identity) and citizenship status, and the role of women in other cultures, might influence political participation. However, in the empirical part I found that not all of these factors significantly influenced levels of political participation. Firstly, immigrants have lower levels of socio-economic status, which tends to reduce political participation. Secondly, being a young woman appears to *increase* the likelihood of participation, in contrast to expectations. Thirdly, and as predicted, a high sense of group identity, along with the presence of ethnically diverse friends, makes young people more likely to participate. On the other hand, ethnic television and a differing mother tongue do

not influence levels of political participation. Most importantly, I did not find, when controlling for other factors, any significant differences between the political participation of young Belgians and that of young immigrants, depending on their citizenship status. We can thus argue that immigrants in Belgium are relatively well integrated with respect to political participation; however, there may be some differences in the preferred activities.

Furthermore, it is not citizenship status but rather the intensity of association (group identity) with the immigrant population which stimulates political activity. Participation levels depend not on where you come from or what you believe in, but with which community you associate the most fervently. These findings are similar to those of Fennema and Tillie (1999, 2001) who argue that dense immigrant networks with a strong civic community, and ethnic associations, can increase the sense of group identity and, consequently, the level of political participation among ethnic minorities. From my analysis, however, it has become clear that having friends of a different race also significantly contributes to levels of youth political participation. A more diverse network makes people more likely to participate.

Some of these findings differ considerably from the previous research which I reviewed earlier. There are several explanations for these differences. First, mine is a representative survey of 16-year-olds, a population that is seldom studied in political science, and one which clearly differs from the total population. In the literature we already find that the differences in behaviour between Belgian citizens and immigrants might be smaller among young people because they are more alike, go to similar schools, frequent the same voluntary organisations etc. Secondly, most articles only focus on one independent variable (language, television) whereas I have considered multiple variables. I have also tested my assumptions not only bivariately but also multivariately. Therefore, we are less likely to find significant differences because other, though related, influential variables such as socio-economic status, group identity and the diversity of networks are controlled for. Thirdly, I also point out that immigrants in Belgium come from different countries to immigrants in the United States, where most international research on this topic is based. Immigrants to Belgium are recent immigrants and come from countries with relatively well-developed democratic political systems—such as European countries, Turkey or Morocco. Therefore, they might themselves be more democratic and more likely to participate. Fourthly, it is also important to select carefully which acts of political participation are surveyed. As I have shown in Table 3, immigrants and Belgians prefer different forms of political participation. These findings also stress the importance of surveying a variety of political involvements, especially those more likely to be performed by immigrants. My results generally confirm the importance of using comparative research to study the different forms of political participation employed by youth. Using representative data from non-American countries leads to substantially different findings.

For further explanation one would need to concentrate on the social capital literature, of which 'networks' is one of the central concepts. Accordingly, it is

possible that diverse networks increase the generalised trust necessary for political participation both in and between different networks (Putnam 2000). From my analyses it is clear that people who have bridging (e.g. diverse) networks are more likely to participate in politics. Moreover, future research should pay attention to the 'contact hypothesis', which states that heterogeneous networks stimulate political participation (Leighley 1990; McLeod *et al.* 1999b). Finally, my results indicate that, should the government wish to increase the political participation of young people, it must begin by encouraging immigrant communities to create groups and associations in which younger immigrants can easily participate.

Notes

- [1] I cannot control for this, however, but 76 per cent of the immigrants themselves were born in Belgium.
- [2] 'Vandaag kampioen in wiskunde, morgen ook in gelijke kansen' (2004–09) (Vandenbroucke 2004).
- [3] 'Gelijke Onderwijskansen'-decreet (2002) <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/EDULEX/database/document/document.asp?docid=13298>.
- [4] For further information see <http://www.contrateducation.be/index.asp>.
- [5] This is 0.2 per cent of the total voting population. Of the European residents, 20.9 per cent registered; see http://www.registrenational.fgov.be/rrn_fr/statelecpotentiels/statistiques/zsc612MV_310706_010806_c14.pdf.
- [6] Once one member of the family is born outside the European Union, they will be referred to as 'non-European' immigrants, even when the other parent is Belgian or European.

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