

It speaks to me: the influence of Covid-19 and the rise of far-right populism on youth voter turnout

Diz-me muito: a influência da Covid-19 e da subida do populismo de extrema-direita na participação eleitoral dos jovens

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Abstract

The increasing electoral abstention of young people is a global problem that has raised concerns both inside and outside the academy. However, recent research suggests that young people are significantly more likely to vote when causes or issues close to them are at stake. This article explores the influence of context (Covid-19 and far-right populism) on youth voter turnout. Using a triangulation of methods, data were collected both via a survey (n = 350) answered by a representative sample of young Portuguese people between 18 and 29 years old and through social media analytics (n = 2.373), analyzing the activity of users in the same age group on Twitter during the 2021 Presidential Election in Portugal. The results point to a strong mobilization power of the rise of far-right populism in young people's turnout, who demonstrate a willingness to express their opposition to these movements through voting. On the contrary, Covid-19 does not seem to be a mobilizing topic that young adults are passionate about, but it influences the electoral moment in two ways: negatively, by making it difficult or impossible to vote; positively, by reinforcing attention to the election campaign.

Keywords

populism, covid-19, turnout, young people

Resumo

A crescente abstenção eleitoral dos jovens é um problema global que tem reunido preocupação dentro e fora da academia. No entanto, investigação recente sugere que os jovens são significativamente mais propensos a votar quando estão em jogo causas ou temas que lhes são próximos. Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar a influência dos temas da Covid-19 e do populismo e extrema-direita na participação eleitoral dos jovens. Através de uma triangulação de métodos, cruza-se a recolha de dados via inquérito por questionário (n = 350) a uma amostra representativa de jovens portugueses entre os 18 e os 29 anos com uma análise à atividade (*social media analytics*) (n = 2.373) de jovens na mesma faixa etária, no Twitter, durante as Eleições Presidenciais de 2021 em Portugal. Os resultados apontam para um forte poder de mobilização da subida do populismo e da extrema-direita na participação eleitoral dos jovens, que demonstram vontade de expressar a sua oposição a estes movimentos através do voto. Pelo contrário, a Covid-19 não parece ser um tema que apasiona e mobiliza os jovens, mas tem influência no momento eleitoral de duas formas: a nível negativo, na dificuldade ou impossibilidade de votar e, a nível positivo, no reforço da atenção à campanha eleitoral.

Palavras-chave

populismo, covid-19, abstenção eleitoral, jovens

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the withdrawal of citizens from electoral participation in most Western democracies has been met with great concern (Norris, 2011). Age is one of the most determining factors in voter turnout (Smets and van Ham, 2013). Although young people have always been the age group least likely to vote (Schulmeister et al., 2019), youth electoral abstention has increased over the years (Blais et al., 2004; Franklin, 2004; Kitanova, 2019; Putnam, 2000; Schulmeister et al., 2019; Siegel-Stechler, 2019; Smets, 2015). This trend is accompanied by evidence of low party membership levels (Mycock and Tonge, 2011), with young people being portrayed as the most disenchanting with democratic institutions (Kitanova, 2019; Norris, 2004).

Some authors de-dramatize this phenomenon, claiming that young adults' political participation is not declining, but it is turning into new forms of more horizontal participation (Dalton, 2014; O'Toole, 2015; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018). This research line argues that young people prefer to get involved in specific causes (Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Norris, 2002) that have meaning for their daily lives (Norris, 2004; Sloam, 2013). However, what happens when causes that they value are on the table at election moments? Recent research indicates that young people vote significantly more when elections involve issues close to them (LaCombe and Juelich, 2019). Based on this theoretical framework, this study aims to explore the influence of Covid-19 and the rise of far-right populism in youth voter turnout, especially in the 18-29 age group, the least likely to vote (Cancela e Vicente, 2019). The 2021 Presidential Election in Portugal provides the conditions that make this analysis possible: on the one hand, the election took place in the middle of a pandemic and during general confinement; on the other hand, the electoral moment was marked by the galloping rise in the po-

pularity of a candidate representing a political movement considered populist and far-right (Rooduijn et al., 2019). To better understand the impact of the two themes, this study uses a triangulation of methods – a survey (n = 350) answered by a representative sample of young Portuguese people between 18 and 29 years old – and social media analytics (n = 2.373), studying the activity of users in the same age group on Twitter during the election campaign.

2. The political participation of young people

The literature offers two theoretical frameworks for young people's detachment from institutional politics: the life cycle hypothesis and the generational explanation. According to the life cycle hypothesis, young people's behavior stems from their contextual condition: a transition phase (Francés García & Santacreu Fernández, 2014), based on social and residential mobility, professional instability (Lobo et al., 2015) and inexperience in political life (IDEA, 1999). It is expected that as young people become adults, they will stop differentiating themselves from the rest of the population (García-Albacete, 2014; Nie et al., 1974). The generational explanation proposes that this behavior is specific to a particular generation or cohort and will accompany them for the rest of their lives (Lobo e Sanches, 2017). The generational hypothesis is more worrying because it means that young people will continue to have low levels of electoral participation as they grow (IDEA, 1999). In Portugal, the generational hypothesis seems to have gained strength lately: Cancela and Vicente (2019) advance that electoral abstention is spreading from the 18-29 to the 30-44 age group. Supporting the generational explanation, Blais and Rubenson (2013) argue that new generations see voting more and more as a mere right and less and less as a civic and moral duty.

Furthermore, researchers view the departure from institutional politics in two ways. On the one hand, some authors present a pessimistic view, associating this distance with a crisis of participatory democracy (Farthing, 2010; Putnam, 2000) sustained by apathy and alienation from the political process (Galston, 2001; Hay, 2007; Henn et al., 2005; Sloam, 2007; Stoker, 2006). The theory that young people show a relatively low interest in formal politics is accepted by most political scientists (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012). However, this argument goes further, stating that alienation applies to both formal and informal forms of participation (Fox, 2015; Grasso, 2014; Wattenberg, 2020).

On the contrary, other researchers contradict the crisis narrative and present a more optimistic view, arguing that the political participation of young people is not declining but rather transforming itself into new forms of political and civic expression that transcend traditional ones (Bauman, 2000; Dalton, 2014; Keating and Melis, 2017; Norris, 2002; O'Toole, 2015; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018). This analysis line emphasizes that youngsters prefer to get involved in specific causes and not with institutions (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Norris, 2002), causes which have more meaning for their daily lives (Norris, 2004; Sloam, 2013). This scenario poses a paradox for academics: if young people are sufficiently interested and politically knowledgeable to get involved in participatory politics (Kahne et al., 2014), why do they deviate from electoral participation (Fox, 2015)?

The answer may lie precisely in the causes. Recently, in an analysis of Millennials' voter turnout, LaCombe and Juelich (2019) concluded that the effect of age on voting could be canceled entirely – that is, young people get significantly more likely to vote – if issues or causes they value are at stake. This is an encouraging research clue, which may show that the logic of participatory politics can, in fact, open entry doors for formal participation (Jenkins et al., 2016).

3. Populism and far-right

Populism can be defined as a “style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with ‘the people’ not the elites” while remaining “silent about second-order principles, concerning what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 4). During the last decade, right-wing populism has achieved increasing popularity in Europe (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), bringing changes to electoral competition in many democratic societies.

For many years, Portugal was considered an exception in the scenario of populism (Santana-Pereira e Cancela, 2020; Silva e Salgado, 2018) and far-right growth (Mendes e Dennison, 2021) in Europe. Everything changed with the appearance of the Chega party – classified as “populist” and “far-right” (Rooduijn et al., 2019) – which in the 2019 Legislative Election wins a parliamentary seat with 1.3% of the votes. Two years later, André Ventura, leader and parliamentary representative of the party, was a candidate for the 2021 Presidential Election, reaching 12.5% of the polls' voting intentions (Dinis, 2021). It is important to contextualize that the polls were consensual in the victory of the incumbent president Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa in the first round, but left doubts about the second place, disputed by Ana Gomes (candidate associated with Partido Socialista and supported by Pessoas-Animais-Natureza and Livre parties) and André Ventura (candidate supported by Chega). Ana Gomes was the candidate who most directly opposed André Ventura and the political movement led by him, affirming her intention to outlaw the party if she were elected President (Lourenço, 2021). For his part, André Ventura considered Ana Gomes his “main opponent” – representing everything he wanted to defeat – and threatened to resign from Chega's leadership if the candidate got a better result than him in the election (Rico, 2020). With most polls giving Ana Gomes second place but some attributing it to André Ventura (Évora, 2021), the runner-up place was the great uncertainty of the election.

The relationship between populism and electoral participation has been a topic of debate in the last years, raising different hypotheses and interpretations.

One of the main lines of analysis is the motivations to vote for populist parties. The literature offers two central theses: cultural backlash and economic inequality. The cultural backlash theory emphasizes that the electoral success of populist parties is essentially a social phenomenon, representing a reaction against progressive culture change (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The economic inequality perspective points to the effects of the Great Recession as the main reason for the growth of populism: the crisis aggravated social inequalities, mainly in people with less eco-

nomic and educational resources (the 'losers of globalization'), which turned to populist parties as a result of their frustration (Zagórski et al., 2021). While the cultural backlash thesis is often linked to older generations who are against the new wave of progressive values (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), the economic inequality perspective may apply to younger cohorts, who are the biggest losers of the Great Recession (Ferrari, 2020). In fact, young people's financial difficulties tend to be related to political extremes (Uba & Bosi, 2022), including the far-right (Miller-Idriss, 2018). In the same vein, Zagórski et al. (2021, p. 418) concluded that right-wing populism attracts young voters more profoundly "where the economic prospects of the youth are more adverse, especially where the labor market is precarious for the youngest segment of the population".

The desire for security and growing concerns about their future economic stability seems to have made the new generation of young people more conservative than expected, more extreme in their positions, and more open to nationalist and populist messages (Twenge, 2017). In France, in the 2017 Presidential Election, more than half of voters under the age of 25 supported populist candidates: Jean-Luc Mélançon on the far-left and Marine Le Pen on the far-right (Bamat, 2017). In Greece, in the 2015 Legislative Election, voters under 25 were twice as likely to vote for the far-right party "Golden Dawn" than voters over 55 (Sakellariou, 2015). In the German elections for the Bundestag in 2017, the far-right populist party "Alternative to Germany" won more votes among the younger sections (Foa and Mounk, 2019).

Due to the economic crisis and the rise in precarious work that mainly penalized young people (Afonso, 2019), Portugal would theoretically be fertile ground for youth populism. However, there is no consensus regarding the relationship between Portuguese youngsters and populist parties. Santana-Pereira and Cancela (2020) concluded that young people tend to show lower levels of populism than older individuals. On the contrary, Heyne and Manucci (2021) point out that, similar to what happens in Spain with Vox, Chega tends to attract a younger, more modern electorate in Portugal. Indeed, young adults who usually do not vote and who are politically dissatisfied can be mobilized by populist parties (Immerzeel and Pickup, 2015), even if they do not share their ideology and just want to express their dissatisfaction with the political system (Franklin, 2004).

However, there are at least two more possible dynamics between youth and populism:

- (1) Being new to politics, this age group might be discouraged by this negative way of doing politics, promoting the idea that politics, in general, is uncivil (Immerzeel and Pickup, 2015; Mutz and Reeves, 2005);
- (2) As the populist parties become increasingly popular, it is also possible that young people with strong anti-radical-right beliefs feel encouraged to vote to keep these movements away from power (Immerzeel and Pickup, 2015).

Taking into account the hypotheses of demobilization, support-based mobilization, and opposition-based mobilization, the following question arises:

RQ1: How does the existence of a populist far-right candidate influence youth voter turnout?

4. Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for democracies around the world. To slow down the transmission of the disease, governments have restricted citizens' freedom of movement in several ways, including mandatory confinement measures unthinkable outside the context of war (Baccini et al., 2021). The pandemic has led to economic crises worldwide, reinforcing inequalities and increasing unemployment and poverty (Chudik et al., 2020).

By the time of the Portuguese Presidential Election in 2021, the number of infections globally was almost 100 million, reaching more than 200 countries and territories (Elflein, 2021). In Portugal, in the middle of the electoral campaign, the government implemented one more general confinement on January 15, 2021, due to the worsening of the epidemiological situation and the National Health Service's pressure. The effect of Covid-19 on the elections was unpredictable for researchers. Nevertheless, a record abstention was expected due to the pandemic's obstacles and fears and the election's characteristics: an uncompetitive election, where the incumbent president was a candidate and was the clear favorite (Lusa, 2021).

Rapidly growing, the literature on the political consequences of the pandemic has not yet reached a consensus. In the short term, some researchers highlight the negative impact of the fear factor on voter turnout (Fernández-Navia et al., 2020) and conclude that "holding elections during a pandemic may discourage voters from going to the polls and thereby weaken the democratic process" (Picchio and Santolini, 2021, p. 12). On the contrary, there is also evidence of electoral participation records in the middle of the pandemic (Baccini et al., 2021). In the long run, threats to democracy are foreseen due to the opening up to authoritarian and technocratic regimes, either by the populations' will or by the opportunism of governments and leaders (Amat et al., 2020). On the other hand, there is also evidence that the pandemic resulted in citizens' support for democracy and reconciliation between populations and democratic institutions (Bol et al., 2020). Also, according to the literature on the retrospective vote, the pandemic will impact the candidate's choice, rewarding or punishing incumbent candidates depending on the evaluation of their performance in managing the pandemic situation (Baccini et al., 2021).

Covid-19 should be a topic of interest to young people and potentially mobilize voter turnout since this generation is the most vulnerable to the economic consequences of the pandemic, both in the present (due to professional instability) and in the future (since it is estimated that the recovery from the global crisis will take decades) (Fronek & Briggs, 2021). In this sense, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: How does the Covid-19 pandemic influence youth voter turnout?

5. Method

5.1. Survey

After being evaluated through a pre-test, the survey was distributed online between January 24 and February 6, 2021, immediately after the Portuguese Presidential

Election (n = 712). The sampling technique was quota sampling – in which relevant population characteristics are defined, and it is guaranteed that the sample follows the distribution of these variables proportionally. To guarantee the sample's representativeness, we also used snowball sampling, asking participants to identify others in subgroups more difficult to reach (Coutinho, 2015). In this case, the variables considered most relevant were age (18 to 29 years old), sex, and geographic location by NUT II (a Portuguese nomenclature of territory units for statistical purposes), using the 2018 Electoral Registration Database as a reference. The representative sample consists of a total of 350 participants and is characterized as follows: 51% male and 49% female; 58% 18 to 24 years old and 45% 25 to 29 years old; 38% North, 20,6% Center, 25,7% Lisbon Metropolitan Area, 6% Alentejo, 3,7% Algarve, 2,9% Azores and 3,1% Madeira.

The operationalization of the variables under analysis was carried out as follows:

Youth voter turnout. Voter turnout was measured by answering the question “Did you vote in the 2021 Presidential Election?” using a binary yes-no answer. The affirmative or negative answer led to different sections, where we intended to ascertain the motivations for electoral participation and abstention. At the end of each section, we included an optional open-ended question, asking participants to freely express what other motivations influenced their decision to vote or not to vote.

Populism and far-right. Through a Likert scale in which “1” represented “totally disagree” and “7” was equivalent to “totally agree,” the participants who voted rated statements such as “The existence of candidates with more extreme views is a motivation to vote” and “The existence of populist candidates is a motivation to vote.” Using the same method, participants who did not vote expressed agreement or disagreement with the following statements: “The existence of candidates with more extreme views does not influence my decision to abstain” and “The existence of populist candidates does not influence my decision to abstain.”

Covid-19. Using a Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree), the young people who participated in the election demonstrated their degree of agreement or disagreement with the phrases “The context of the pandemic and the consequent home confinement led me to follow more closely this election than previous campaigns” and “The possibility of interrupting home confinement is a motivation to vote.” Likewise, the abstentionist youth evaluated the statements “I was unable to vote due to reasons related to Covid-19” and “I did not vote because I did not want to risk catching Covid-19”. Covid-19's influence was further measured through a final open-ended, optional question: “How did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your participation in the 2021 Presidential Election? (Decision to participate or not, choice of candidate, ...)”. The explanatory parentheses were added in the pre-test follow-up since the pilot test raised doubts about its clarity.

5.2. Social media analytics

The social media analytics data collection was made on Twitter, using the Buzzmonitor platform. Twitter was selected because it is the social media network that

gives young people the most opportunity to voice their political perspectives in a public context (James & Cotnam-Kappel, 2020). In addition to simple metrics analysis (e.g., number of tweets per day), we used the text analysis technique, a text classification and clustering approach, using Twitter to identify stories within a bigger trending topic (Ghani et al., 2019). Thus, we were able to pinpoint the most used words, including the candidates' names and other keywords that allowed us to identify discussion topics.

The sample was defined using a systematic approach. We first started by collecting all the tweets referencing the name of each of the candidates in the 2021 Presidential Election (Ana Gomes, André Ventura, João Ferreira, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Marisa Matias, Tiago Mayan Gonçalves, and Vitorino Silva), through tagging or not, from January 10 (the first day of the electoral campaign) to January 25 (the day after the election). This criterion created a universe of 247.766 tweets, corresponding to 75.630 public accounts. Some of these accounts were not Portuguese and therefore were deleted. The next step was to limit the users' age by considering only users who explicitly included age (between 18 and 29 years old) as part of the public biography. For this purpose, we searched key terms such as "18 anos", "18y" and "18yo" for each of the numbers between 18 and 29. The remaining accounts were deleted from the sample. We then searched by location – considering only accounts associated with a known location in Portugal, either shared by users or detected by the platform's artificial intelligence. The final step was to group the locations into wider NUT II groups to assess the sample's representativeness.

After applying these criteria, the sample was restricted to a universe of 7.137 publications and 2.373 users. Regarding the sex variable, the sample consists of 38% women, 31% men, and 31% unknown. The geographic distribution is similar to the nationally representative values: 26% Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, 38% North, 23% Center, 7% Alentejo, 4% Algarve, 1% Madeira, 0,4 % Azores. Compared to the 2018 Electoral Registration Database's reference values, Centro and Alentejo show a slight excess, and Azores and Madeira a slight deficit.

Assuming the methodological challenges that big data analysis – and especially social media analytics – pose, we followed the recommendations of boyd and Crawford (2012):

- (1) To reduce the possibility of error and bias, we opted for a more restrictive sampling strategy, preferring quality over quantity of data;
- (2) The need for ethical conduct has not been ignored even if we used only public data. The data were always analyzed as a whole and never at the individual user's level or the content of each publication, fully protecting users' privacy and well-being.
- (3) The sample is not seen as representative of young Portuguese people. There is prudence in interpreting the results, and the social media analytics data is always crossed with the survey data.

6. Results

Contrary to theoretical and empirical expectations, the data analysis suggests a high rate of young electoral participation: 89% of the participants (18-29 years old)

reported going to the polls on Election day. The potential influence of the contextual factors of populism/far-right and Covid-19 is analyzed below.

6.1. Populism and far-right

The results point to an impact of populism and the far-right on youth voter turnout: the vast majority considered that the existence of populist candidates (68%) and with extreme views (75%) motivated them to vote. Indeed, it is curious to note how the race for the runner-up place influenced the electoral moment's competitiveness perception. In an election in which the winner was assumed, 74% of the respondents felt that their vote was decisive.

Although they had the opportunity to express themselves about the impact of populism and extremism on voter turnout through a Likert scale, 31% of young people who answered the open-ended question "What other motivations led you to participate?" used this space to reinforce the need to stop this movement in Portugal. "Fighting extremist policies and ideas"; "not letting extreme positions gain a voice"; "not letting extremists come to power"; "fighting the existence of populist candidates"; "contributing to show the strength of non-extremist candidates in order not to normalize extremist political forces in the next election"; "stop a possible dictatorship [due to] populism present in these elections in the face of the far-right candidate" were some of the motivations pointed out. Other young people were more specific. Responses such as "fear of what the country would become if André Ventura won"; "not wanting Ventura to be President" or "in these elections, voting against André Ventura" give strength to the tactical vote theory, also pointed out as motivation for the participation:

More than ever, it is important to fight the extremist right-wing forces that have become more intense with the economic instability and inequalities that the pandemic has highlighted. Through voting, we fight for democracy, basic rights, and equal access to opportunities. I have never considered not voting, but now, the tactical and conscious vote and the involvement of society in the political sphere are more important than ever.

Seen as a consequence of populism and extremism, fascism is also of concern to the young people surveyed. "Prevent fascism from gaining more voice in Portugal"; "being represented and fighting fascism"; "not letting a fascist gain power"; "overcoming fascism"; "anti-fascism"; "stop the fascist" or "prevent fascists from governing" were some of the responses in this regard. Other young adults combine in their answers the fight against fascism and the view of voting as an unavoidable civic duty:

Voting is a privilege, and I don't want to waste this opportunity to contribute to my country. It is a truly egalitarian activity in which my vote is worth exactly the same as that of someone richer or poorer, with more or less education and more or less social and professional opportunities. We must avoid the advance of fascists like André Ventura, who threaten our freedom, basic rights, and democracy as a whole.

My vote, for the first time, in the Presidential Election was mainly motivated by

the fact that I deeply rejected the possibility of being elected President a 'person' and a party (CHEGA) whose values and ideologies are expressly fascist, racist, and sexist. I would not be able to sleep peacefully on election night if I knew that my abstention contributed to perpetuating a society in which inequality prevails, and freedom does not exist. Voting is not just a right that thousands of heroes of Portuguese history fought for; voting is one of the essential civic duties.

The analysis of the 18-29 year old users' social media activity on Twitter during the electoral campaign seems to meet the survey's results. If we take into account the names of the candidates, the most popular term in the universe of publications under analysis is "Ventura" (3.407 tweets) – with almost half of all publications – followed by "Gomes" (2.779 tweets), "Ana" (2.777 tweets) and "André" (2.756 tweets). This means that, regardless of the positive or negative attitude towards André Ventura, the populist candidate was one of the most discussed and referenced topics by the youth accounts under analysis.

If we filter out the candidates' names from the analysis, words such as "fascist" (276 tweets), "democracy" (262 tweets), and "history" (261 tweets) stand out among the most used terms, in agreement with the type of expressions used in the survey's open answers. André Ventura's controversial statement about Marisa Matias – stating that the candidate "is not very well in terms of image, always with very red lipstick, as if it were a plaything" – brought up the subject of chauvinism and sexism, evident both in Twitter publications and in the survey's answers. On Twitter, the terms "woman" (454 tweets) and "women" (432 tweets) are some of the most used by the young people under analysis, as well as "insult" (276) and "man" (288), which make a direct reference to Marisa Matias' response to André Ventura's comment: "the insult that André Ventura made against women says nothing about women, but everything about that man" (Lusa, 2021a). In the open-ended questions about the participation motivations, the role of women in political life was also highlighted:

Particularly the fact that voting has not always been an acquired right for women, so I recognize its importance as a right and a duty.

The fact that I feel I have an obligation, not only as a citizen but also as a woman, to exercise my right to vote. Many women died so that we can have the right to vote these days.

Enjoying my rights, enjoying my freedom, and honoring what so many people fought for. The vote is the appreciation of those who allow me to vote today and participate in politics as a woman.

I am a woman, and my right to vote is, unfortunately, still very fragile. I use this right because it is my duty! It's my voice!

There is uniformity between young adults' main themes on Twitter and the subjects brought up proactively by participants in the survey's open-ended questions. Considering that these are different samples of young people, it seems that the themes that interest this age group have a mobilizing power both through digital political participation and voter turnout.

6.2. Covid-19

The open-ended question “How did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your participation in the 2021 Presidential Election?” collected a total of 185 responses, equivalent to 53% of study participants. Among these, a little more than half (52%) of young people say that the pandemic had no influence on their participation, demonstrating a sense of civic duty that goes against what was expected by Blais and Rubenson (2013):

It did not influence me, I always participate in elections, and I insist on exercising my right to vote. I vote for the candidate with whom I identify the most and make sure to get informed about his/her electoral program.

Not voting is not an option, regardless of the context.

It did not influence. Neither my party beliefs nor my desire to participate in the election changed with the pandemic.

It didn't influence anything. I wouldn't vote only if I were infected or in isolation. If none of these conditions were met, I would vote the same as in any other election. The pandemic is not a justification for not voting. Since the abstention values are very similar to the previous elections, the pandemic only camouflaged the intentions of those who did not vote. In this case, the pandemic is like the beach, the heat, the rain, the cold, the holidays (excuses) of other years.

20% of the answers, on the other hand, suggest that pandemic-related ideas and policy were decisive for choosing candidates, as suggested by Baccini et al. (2021) and as the examples below show:

It influenced indirectly, as it forced candidates to discuss the potential use of Presidential powers in responding to the pandemic, which impacted my choice of candidate.

The only factor in which the pandemic influenced my vote was the choice of the candidate I voted for. Given the period we are in, I thought that the best decision had to be influenced by the times in which we live.

I believe that in a year in which we truly realize the importance of a robust health system, we realize the importance of having a strong, consistent person who can make conscious decisions and that supports the whole country. Covid-19 is not and should not be the reason to vote. Our right should only be seen as a duty, but the truth is that in times of suffering and weakness, society always keeps its eyes more open to what is truly essential.

Another popular topic (16%) was the influence of Covid-19 at the logistical level. Regarding participation, the respondents mentioned issues such as early voting and (in)security in the act of voting. On the other hand, the abstentionists indicated the difficulty or impossibility of voting due to prophylactic isolation or residential mobility.

I was in prophylactic confinement, and I was not allowed to vote because of deadlines.

I voted early because I thought there would be less chance of contagion since there were fewer people voting on that day.

The weight of the pandemic's impact on the physical act of voting is most evident when we consider that 51% of the abstainers demonstrated agreement with the statement "I was unable to vote due to reasons related to Covid-19". However, it is important to note that this "impossibility" sometimes hides a lack of information regarding the electoral act. Take as an example the following testimony, which ignores the existence of the possibility of early voting on mobility:

I was not allowed to travel to the continent to vote (I am displaced) due to my university's pandemic control rules. I can't vote here in the Azores because I haven't changed my tax address.

The feeling of insecurity resulting from the pandemic was another reason mentioned in the answers to the open-ended question. However, only 18% of young people who did not vote had pointed out fear as a reason for not doing so.

I considered not going to vote for fear of the pandemic. I voted with a feeling of insecurity.

Finally, another type of impact of the pandemic on youth political participation stands out in the data analysis: greater attention to the electoral campaign. In addition to 51% of the survey participants showing agreement with the statement "The context of the pandemic and the consequent home confinement led me to follow more closely this election than previous campaigns", some open responses also point in this direction:

It did not influence how I participated because I always make a point of participating. It did affect the extent that I had more willingness and time to dedicate myself to the topic. I saw all the debates, read articles, etc.

The fact that we were at home and we started talking more about politics on social media, I think that it really encouraged young people to use the right they have (to vote).

I think the fact that I was at home longer allowed me to pay more attention to the news and the candidates themselves.

I don't think it influenced the choice of candidate, but it resulted in greater attention to the media coverage of the election and the candidates.

The analysis of the daily evolution of publications on Twitter reinforces the possibility of paying more attention to the electoral campaign since participation peaks correspond to critical moments. During the election campaign period, the days that stand out are the following: January 12, the day of the debate with all presidential candidates (445 tweets); January 15, the day of Marisa Matias' response to André Ventura's insult (400 tweets) and January 17 (435 tweets), the early voting day. Election day and the following day registered participation records (2.651 and 1.039 tweets, respectively), adding up to 52% of all publications made.

In addition to potentially reinforcing attention to critical moments in the electoral period, the pandemic appears to have been one of the topics featured on Twitter in

the sample analyzed, as suggested by the use frequency of terms like “Covid” (242 tweets), “health” (168 tweets) and “pandemic” (131 tweets).

In general, the pandemic’s influence on youth voter turnout does not seem to be a direct result of the appreciation given to the topic, nor as a result of a concern with the country’s long-term economic stability. Nevertheless, although many young people do not report any pandemic influence, some positive and negative effects are identified. On a positive level, in the short term, the pandemic increased the attention paid to the electoral campaign and, in some cases, influenced the choice of the candidate. On a negative note, we point out the difficulty – or impossibility – of voting due to Covid-19.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The progressive abandonment of traditional politics by young people in favor of more informal types of political action is a scenario that has become widespread in most Western societies (Dalton, 2014; Francés García and Santacreu Fernández, 2014; Inglehart, 1997). Considering that electoral abstention reinforces social inequality (Lijphart, 1997) and calls into question the legitimacy of governments and democracy (Siegel-Stechler, 2019), young people’s new types of political participation – although important – do not solve the problem of low voter turnout (Sloam, 2011; Whiteley, 2012).

Recent research indicates that young people are significantly more likely to vote when issues or values which are significant to them are at stake in the election. This effect even nullifies any generational differences in participation (LaCombe and Juelich, 2019). In this investigation line, the present study sought to test this effect in the case of two potentially relevant themes for young adults between 18 and 29 years old: Covid-19 and the rise of populist and far-right movements.

The results are in line with the investigation by LaCombe and Juelich (2019), indicating a strong mobilization power of far-right populism. Young people were concerned about the potential impact of populism and extremism on their future and committed to protecting democracy from a movement they consider fascist. In this sense, the results contradict the literature suggesting a democratic antipathy and an attraction to political extremes by youth in several European countries (Foa and Mounk, 2019), including in Portugal (Heyne and Manucci, 2021). On the contrary, these data align with the investigation by Santana-Pereira and Cancela (2020), who concluded that young people in Portugal tend to have less populist attitudes than other age groups.

The Election results seem to reinforce this interpretation. According to Conselho Nacional da Juventude (2021b), a poll carried out in partnership with Universidade Católica Portuguesa at the exit of the Presidential Election revealed that André Ventura conquered less three percentage points among young people (9%) than the general population (12%). Despite the undeniable growth in popularity of the far-right populist movement – ranking third in the Election and in the youth vote context – this result seems to rule out the possibility that the youth is the main driver of populism in Portugal.

The same study reveals that young people aged between 18 to 30 years old – the least likely to vote (Cancela e Vicente, 2019) – voted as much or more (45% - 52%) than the rest of the population (45.77%) (Conselho Nacional da Juventude, 2021a,

2021b). This youth turnout rate is even more remarkable if we consider the official national participation result, 39.2% (PORDATA, 2021).

Although it is theoretically possible that the expressiveness of young people's participation is due to Chega candidate's ability to mobilize youngsters who do not usually vote, this possibility is not supported by the empirical results of this study. On the contrary, our research suggests that an increase in participation among Portuguese youth will tend to be due to "counter-mobilization" (Leininger and Meijers, 2020, p. 669) and not the popularity of the populist movement.

Covid-19 does not seem to be a topic that young people are passionate about. Unlike what happens with populism/extremism, young people do not seem to be mobilized by the potential consequences of the pandemic on their lives. A little more than half of the participants say that the pandemic did not influence their decision to vote. However, the impact of Covid-19 materializes itself in the short term in two different ways. On the one hand, negatively and directly, the pandemic created logistical difficulties to the act of voting – and even made it impossible in some cases – being one of the biggest reasons cited by young people for abstention. On the other hand, positively and indirectly, more than half of the respondents affirm that the context of the pandemic – based on isolation and confinement – resulted in greater attention paid to the electoral campaign. In addition to this closer monitoring influencing the candidate's choice, the news consumption can encourage electoral participation by decreasing the participation costs (Norris, 2000).

The data on youth participation in the Election – still low, but as high or higher than the rest of the population (Conselho Nacional da Juventude, 2021a, 2021b) – lends support to this second hypothesis. Thus, the results seem to corroborate the studies pointing to the reinforcement of democracy and democratic institutions (Bol et al., 2020) – instead of greater openness to authoritarian and technocratic regimes (Amat et al., 2020) – in the context of a pandemic.

This study has some limitations. Although it has no impact on the study's conclusions, the respondents' high electoral participation rate, contrary to expected, may reveal some bias in the sample. There are several reasons for this bias. First, people tend to over-report their electoral participation (Freire e Magalhães, 2002). Second, since the sampling technique is a mix of quota sampling and snowball sampling, there may be an intradiversity effect: even using many different dissemination points, diversity is limited to the researcher's network (Sergeant and Tagg, 2019). Finally, the sense of civic duty present in several open responses – which calls into question the theory of Blais and Rubenson (2013) – may indicate that to accept answering the survey without any counterpart, the study participants already have a certain degree of civic duty.

On the other hand, this study offers some relevant contributions. Firstly, it represents an advance in this research area by indicating that the causes-based incentive for participation materializes itself both offline and online. Secondly, the results make it possible to view the informal types of youth political participation – based on causes – as a gateway to institutional involvement, namely voter turnout. Thirdly, the chosen methodology – unusual in this area of studies – allows the subject to be approached through a different lens and gives young people the opportunity to express themselves freely, providing the researchers with a better understanding of their subjective realities (Ferreira,

2017). The high response rate to optional open-ended questions proves that young people want to be heard and reinforces the need to implement qualitative methodologies in the thematic area of young people's political participation. In an area that reunites so little consensus, hearing young people's stories in their own voice may be the solution.

Finally, on an encouraging note, we conclude that many young people are attentive to institutional politics and interested in expressing their opinion, especially in the matters that most affect them. It seems up to governments, parties, and political actors to invest in themes closer to young people's reality, capable of bringing them closer to the sphere of formal politics.

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