MASTER'S THESIS

INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Political Participation of Young People

How do young people perceive their political participation and their opportunities for participation?

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Abstract

A vast amount of literature has been dedicated to political participation of young people. How do young people perceive the political participation? Some argue that the decreasing participation of young people is balanced with increased political participation outside the traditional methods. Others warn of increase in disinterest in politics, which can affect the functioning of the democratic systems and institutions. Studies have been largely focused only on quantitative methods to try and explain the political participation of young people. This paper presents an analysis of data from three focus groups conducted in Gothenburg with 12 students. The students are European Union citizens from Sweden, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Spain, Germany and Austria. The study analyzes qualitatively the types of political participation young European Union citizens use, their motivations for political participation, their attitude towards the European Parliament elections and the factors that affect the political participation among young people.

The study finds that the participants are engaged in politics and in political participation. Some of the participants use very often issue-oriented participation, such as political consumerism. The empirical data shows that the popular political consumerism among the participants does not link to low trust in government, as has been suggested in the existing literature. In contrast to what some other studies have suggested, I did not find evidence supporting increased focus on online participation than offline political participation among these young people. Regarding the European Parliament elections, the study supports the claims that European elections decrease the political participation. The data suggests that the participants in the discussions are less interested in European elections. However, there is not much support for the theory of European elections as "second-order" elections – theory that links the low political participation with the perceptions of the citizens that the European elections are less important than the national elections and less is at stake. The lack of knowledge and information are new factors that are possible explanations for the low participation in European elections and those factors should be further evaluated.

Key words: political participation, young people, focus groups, European Parliament elections

Introduction

Can a democratic system and its institutions function, if the political participation of the citizens constantly decreases? Decline in the voter turnout in the last decades in the democratic societies have raised many questions and many are concerned with the future prospect of democratic systems, where the population is less and less interested in taking part in the political process (Putnam 1995; 2000; Grönlund and Milner 2006; Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco 2007).

Many have focused on and warned that there is a decline in the political participation of the young people (18-30 years) which endangers the functioning of the democratic systems in the future, when the young generations today, will take the role as the main electorate.

But, if young people are voting less today, does this mean that they are less interested in the political process of the society in which they live? Some would argue that young people are now focusing on more untraditional and diverse political participation types, than before. The Internet and social networks have started to transform the political involvement of the citizens (Norris 2003; Sloam 2007). Rather than a decline some argue that there is an evolution in the political participation.

The aim of this study is to give more understanding and contribute to the debates investigating why young people choose to participate in politics, what are their perceptions towards it and which factors affect their political participation. The research question of the study is:

- How do young people perceive their political participation and their opportunities for participation?

Clearly, the political participation of young people, as a very important and complex subject, deserves the great attention it gets. This study investigates the perceptions, motives and opportunities young people have when they politically participate. The thesis does so by asking young people about the types of political participation they use, their perceptions of politics, motivations for participation, understanding and attitude towards the European elections. For the purpose of the study I conducted three semi-structured focus group discussions with a total of 12 students in Gothenburg, Sweden. One of the groups is only with

Swedish students and the other two groups are with international students, citizens of European countries, other than Sweden.

The semi-structured focus group discussions can provide richer data, as the participants are discussing among themselves, brain-storming and complementing each other in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, where their responses are not already constructed on a scale, but everyone express their unique opinion and experience.

To help develop my focus group analysis I follow the article "On What Citizens Mean by Feeling ""European": Perceptions of News, Symbols and Borderless-ness" by Michael Bruter (2003). Similarly to Bruter, I try to examine critically the existing literature and identify the gaps. Using the empirical data from the focus group discussions, this study adds up to the understanding of the perceptions of the young people about political participation, which predominantly has been studied by using survey data. Rather than testing existing theory, using the richer data from the focus group discussions, this study will focus on factors and conclusions that are brought up in the focus groups and that could add up to the theoretical understanding of the political participation of young people.

The study is particularly useful and adds up to the existing literature in three ways. First, the data shows that young people do not necessarily focus more on online than offline political participation. The participants in the discussions perceived the online discussions as often leading to frustration when disagreement arises. Second, the empirical data finds evidence that the young people use issue-oriented political participation and political consumerism. However, contrary to the existing literature, the focus group discussions did not find support for a strong connection between political consumerism and low trust in government. The often used political consumerism was explained with the personal desire of the participants to act, to do something good and to take a stance in the society they live, but not necessarily connecting their activism to any actions of the government. And third, in accordance to the existing literature, the focus group discussions show that the young people are less engaged in European elections. In the literature the predominant explanatory factor for this is the feeling of the voters that the European elections are less important and matter less. I find evidence in the data that the participants are less active in European elections, but not because they perceive that their vote is less important in the European elections, but because they lack knowledge and information regarding the European Union. In the empirical data from this study there is evidence that maybe more explanations exist and they should also be evaluated.

The study finds that as a whole, the young people who participated are politically active. The main motivations they shared for political participation are to try and bring change and to participate in the processes in the society they live. All of the above mentioned and interesting findings will be thoroughly examined in the Data Analysis and Results section.

First, the study will focus on a literature review of the political participation studies, with focus on young people. Then, I will examine the literature from the perspective of the focus groups as a qualitative method for data collection. In the next part, the paper will shortly focus on the actual design and conduct of the three focus group discussions. In the last two parts, I present and analyze the data and the results, discuss the limitations of the master's thesis and finish with an overall conclusions and suggestions for future research.

I.   Literature Review on Political Participation

In the past decades *political participation* has been a center of attention of many scholars and a reason for debates in the political science due to its importance for the society and its democratic developments. Traditional forms of participation, such as voting and partisan membership, have been declining, especially in the US, but also in the Western societies, suggesting a threat to the functioning of the democratic institutions and decreasing interest in politics among citizens (Putnam 1995; 2000; Grönlund and Milner 2006; Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco 2007).

As Verba et al. (1995) describe it, political participation is the opportunity given to the citizens to express their views and concerns on political matters towards government officials. Voting is a central concept in political participation; however, it is not the only one. Political participation is not only about choosing representatives, but also communicating with them and other citizens about the political matters and expressing views. This can be achieved through various participations, including protest, boycott, discussions with friends, forming groups, voluntarism, signing a petition among others. Conway (2000) describes political participation as the diverse activities used by people to influence government and political decisions. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) explain that political participation is important because in a democracy, the levels of involvement of the citizens have a direct impact on the system's impartiality. Political participation is important for the very existence of the proper functioning of the democratic institutions.

1. Young people and political participation

A great deal of the focus on political participation in the last years has been on *young citizens*. The decrease in voting numbers among young people is a concern that the future electorate may be less politically engaged, which will have a negative impact on the functioning of the democratic institutions. Young people now are thought to be less politically interested than the generations before (Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco 2007; Putnam 2000;). Delli Carpini (2000) presents the young generation as less interested, more cynical and less knowledgeable in the sphere of politics. On the other hand, Sloam (2007) argues that young people are still interested in politics, but they have shifted the ways of political participation towards different modes of political participation. Henn and Foard (2012) argue that young people now are interested in politics, but the problem is that they feel disconnected from its processes. And this corresponds to Norris (2003) who argues that young people might vote less today, but they are more likely than previous generations to be involved in other types of participation – awareness raising, volunteering and informal political action. Zukin et al. (2006) explain that young citizens in America have not become less engaged, but have found new ways of political participation, including the online social networks.

2. Political knowledge

In the political participation literature a central concept is the political knowledge. Kad, McKinney and Tedesco (2007) point out that young people often explain their decreased political participation with lack of political knowledge. Carpini and Keeter (1996) define political knowledge as the information about politics that people have in their long-term memory. Information, according to Kad, McKinney and Tedesco (2007), is very diverse, especially during election campaigns, and comes to the people in many different forms – debates, advertising, and news. Murphy (2000), in his study, shows that young people often express the lack of information as a main determinant of not voting. Kad, McKinney and Tedesco (2007), conducting focus groups in the USA, conclude that the central explanation of young people's not voting is that they lack knowledge and sufficient information. Their research found out that young people perceive themselves to be less confident in their political information and knowledge in comparison to older people. Grönlund and Milner (2006) emphasize on the importance of knowledge of political parties and actors that voters need to have in the democratic society.

Information, knowledge and participation are concepts that are interrelated (Kenski, Stroud 2006). Grönlund and Milner (2006) argue that knowledge is vital for democracy to function, as it provides the opportunities for citizens to compare and also evaluate politicians and policies on their past actions and activities. But they also argue that this is not enough and it is important to study the institutions' ability to provide and to foster that kind of knowledge. More information available and provided means that more knowledge about policies and politicians can be acquired. Thus, more knowledge increases the likelihood for the citizens to participate in the political processes.

3. Online political participation

When we study young people's political participation, a great deal of attention should be devoted to online participation. Ellin (2003) insists that the Internet provides people with access to political information, which increases the likelihood of further political activities and further political participation. Contrary to that, Norris (2001) and Graber (2006) argue that the Internet does not contribute to the amount of political participation, as those who seek information on the Internet are the people who are already interested in politics.

There is a debate whether the Internet and social networks increase the political participation. However, it is clear that the Internet has a great impact on young people and online political participation exists. Zukin et al. (2006), in the debate on whether young people are now less politically active, explain that young people in America have not become less engaged, but have found new ways of political participation, including the online social networks. It is necessary then, for this study to also have a focus on the online political participation of young people, as a part of the debate.

However, not all young citizens' political participation is online. *Offline social networks* have been long studied. Offline social networks involve family, friends and school and they have a great impact on the information, knowledge and efficacy of individuals. Lin (2003) argues that, if people are engaged in more political discussions it increases the chances that they will be involved in political participation. People are social beings and it is not enough to study political participation based on the individual character, we should take into account the social surroundings of the individual (McClurg 2003; McClurg 2006). McClurg (2006) argues that networks increase the level of engagement. People are more likely to be engaged in politics and in participation, if they are surrounded by people who are engaged. Larger social

networks increase the chance for political participation (McClurg 2003; Klofstad 2005). Networks can provide knowledge, assist in creating political views, and develop confidence which increases political participation (McClurg 2006). Kofstad (2005), in his study, finds that more political discussions increase the civic and political participation by 13%. However, McClurg (2006) adds that participation also depends on agreement. If networks share your political preferences, it increases the chances for participation. Disagreement in social network discussions decreases the likelihood of the discussant to further participate politically (Ulbig and Funk 1999; Mutz 2002). McClurg (2006) also stresses the importance of the quality of information that people are exposed to in social networks. The high quality political discussions, he argues, increase the chances of political participation – *"there is a benefit of having knowledgeable discussants"* (p. 748). Also, discussions only based on politically-relevant information increase the likelihood of participation (McClurg 2003).

4. Trust, duty and political participation

Another important concept when we talk about political participation is the concept of *trust*. There is no consensus in the literature about a possible linkage between trust towards government and political participation of citizens. The dominating idea, in earlier research, has been that distrust by the citizens, towards the government, can lead to lower political participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Stokes 1962). When in the United States there was a simultaneous drop in the voter turnout and the trust in the government, this has been believed to be evidence that support the argument that lower trust in the government leads to lower political participation (Levi, Stoker 2000). However, Miller (1980) and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argue that there is no link between trust in government and voting and engagement in politics.

Another point of view points that distrust encourages political participation, or at least some types of political participation (Gamson 1968, 1975). It can be argued whether citizens who trust the government would be less interested in political participation, because they trust their representatives to make the right decisions, or lower levels of trust would discourage citizens to participate. It is a relevant discussion whether lower levels of trust act as stronger stimuli for political participation, as those who distrust would like change. Luks (1998), in his study, found that the distrusting were not more likely to vote than those who trust the government, but they were likely to be involved in more diverse forms of political participation. Levi and Stoker (2000) explain that, regarding trust, on an individual level, it is important to consider

that distrust will be an important determinant only if it is present in several succeeding administrations.

A sensitive topic in the literature about political participation is the question why do citizens at all go to vote or participate politically. Democratic political systems are based on the idea of high participation by the public. Some scholars suggest that citizens feel the need to fulfill their *civic duty* (Blais 2000). Norms based on the duty of the individual as a citizen encourages people to participate (Dalton 2008). Dalton (2008) also argues that today we are facing a shift from a duty-based involvement to citizenship of engagement. He explains that there is no decrease in the sense of duty or a decrease in the political interest of the young people as much as a change in the pattern and the ideas of political participation. Dalton (2008) sees these changes not as a threat to the democratic institutions, but as a new horizon of opportunities to expand the political participation. It is an interesting issue, worth investigating, whether young people acknowledge political participation as their duty as citizens under democratic norms and values or as means for a change and defense of own interests as citizens.

5. Political consumerism

A relatively new specific form of political participation is the *political consumerism*. Micheletti el al. (2003) define political consumerism as individuals' preference of one product or producer over another because of ethical or political considerations.

Broadly identified as buying or boycotting certain products for political reasons, Stolle et al. (2005) argue that political consumerism is more often used by citizens who lack trust in the government. In their study among students from Canada, Belgium and Sweden, they find that political consumerism *"...has become an integral part of the political action repertoire..."* (p.262). The company Nike is given as an example of often being targeted by political consumerism against its use of child labor and bad working conditions. Stolle et al. (2005) suggest that citizens who are unhappy with the government's policy in relation to such acts and people who do not believe that the authorities will change anything, use political consumerism instead. Their results suggest that consumerism, for political purposes, is now a form of activism. Also, they find out that it is especially common in Scandinavia where political consumerism is one of the three most preferred forms of political participation. These arguments correspond to Sloam (2007), Norris (2003) and Dalton (2008) who all agree that

while traditional forms of political participation are on a decline, other, more unconventional forms are becoming more popular in the democratic societies. Young people now prefer more informal and more style-oriented forms of participation such as the political consumerism (Stolle et al. 2005).

When we study political consumerism Stolle and Hooge (2003) suggest that we should take into account the motivation behind the consumerism and how often it is executed. They argue that action can be defined as political consumerism only if it is motivated by political or ethical reasons and if it is not a rare or individual case, but a frequent engagement. Stolle et al. (2005) findings suggest that political consumerism is widely spread in Sweden, which suggests that young people in Sweden use more often unconventional political participation methods.

6. European elections as "second-order" elections

One of the focuses of this Master thesis is on *European Parliament elections*, often referred in the literature as different and *"second-order" national elections* (Franklin and Hobolt 2011; Hix and Marsh 2007; Hobolt and Spoon 2012). The theory of the "second-order" national elections was introduced by Reif and Schmidt (1980). It argues that people behave and vote differently in these elections because less is at stake; "second-order" or European Parliament elections are less important for citizens. The primary elections are the national elections and all other votes are in the background of the national elections. Voter turnout in European Parliament elections is averagely 30% lower than the turnout in national elections (Frankiln and Hobolt 2011).

What Hix and Marsh (2007) argue is that citizens often use the European elections as a mean to punish and express dissatisfaction with their national governments. European elections are less important, less identifiable, as parties campaign less, and when they do, they do it on national level issues. European elections are often perceived as a tool to express dissatisfaction and to punish parties on national level (Sasmatzoglou 2013).

Blais (2006) focuses on the perceptions of importance that individuals have regarding the elections. He argues that citizens feel their vote matters more in smaller countries with fewer potential voters. Another point he makes is that people are more engaged where parliamentary responsibility increases. In the "second-order" European Parliament elections, where there are

over 500 million voters, people feel that their vote is insignificant and matters less, which decreases the possibility of political participation.

Another aspect of the European elections is the European skepticism, as not many Europeans identify themselves with Europe, rather than with their states. Hix and Marsh (2007) explain that people who are pro-European are more likely to politically participate on European elections. De Vries et al. (2011) argue that on an individual level what matters most is voters' attitude towards Europe. Being pro or against Europe matters when you consider voting or participating politically. It is interesting to study if apathy and skepticism towards the European Union decreases the levels of political participation. This can be compared to the "second-order" elections theory as an explanation for lower participation in European elections.

7. Critical discussion

In this section I raise questions and examine more critically three specific issues that are interesting and important for this master's thesis and the research question. The three issues concern more specifically the online political participation, the issue-oriented political participation and the European elections as "second-order" elections.

There is a lack of consensus in the literature whether the Internet and social networks increase the political participation of young people. Ellin (2003) explains that the increased possibilities and information provided by the Internet increase the possibility for a further political participation. However, it is not clear if the Internet and social networks serve as a tool for "recruiting" young people who have not been interested in politics to gain more interest and start their online participation online. It is possible that only people who are already interested in politics and are participating politically just use the Internet as one more channel for their participation (Norris 2001; Graber 2006). Another area of doubt is what use of the Internet in particular can lead to an increase in the political participation. Maybe reading news, blogs and articles provides more information and knowledge, which might result in more participation. But, on the other hand, online discussions, the social networks and too much information and false information might draw people away from political participation, leading to frustration and apathy. Also, it is not clear what types of political participation are expected to increase – the involvement in political discussions, the desire to be more informed or even voting. We need more theoretical understanding and knowledge

about this issue in order to better understand the link between the Internet usage, the social networks and the political participation. The focus group discussions used for this study will give us more detailed empirical data about the perceptions of the young people concerning these issues. In my questionnaire for the discussions I asked the participants to answer questions specifically related to online political participation, social networks and involvement in online discussions.

Another important issue is the issue-oriented political participation and the political consumerism, as part of it. As a relatively new topic of interest for scholars, there is not much theoretical knowledge about the issue-oriented participation. Stole et. al (2005) in their study show interesting, but controversial conclusions. Showing that the political consumerism is growing in popularity among young people, especially in Scandinavia, they connect the political consumerism to lack of trust in the government. As Scandinavia is not well known for low trust of the citizens towards their governments, I find these arguments weak. More theoretical knowledge about the motivations and factors that affect young people's decision for issue-oriented participation and political consumerism is necessary. More data is necessary to see what the actual reasons are for young people to choose more issue-oriented political participation and political consumerism. Possible reason might be a personal involvement in a specific issue. Also, some might think that it makes more sense and difference when you concentrate your actions directly towards specific issues, like environment, rather than politicians and personalities. There is an increase in the political consumerism, maybe it is stronger in the Scandinavian countries, but we need also to understand more of the "why" and "how". Is the issue-oriented participation part of the evolution of the political participation of the young people and which factors explain this shift? Is there any evidence of increased political consumerism as a result of low trust in government? The topical focus group discussions with richer empirical data can help in adding up to the existing theoretical knowledge, which is obviously not rich enough on these issues for solid explanatory purposes.

Another interesting topic in the political participation literature concerns the European elections. Relatively new, the European elections and the voters' attitude towards them have been studied a lot. One specific theory is trying to explain the lower voter turnout and certain apathy among the voters towards the European elections. The "second-order" elections theory explains that the European voters consider the European elections less important than the

national elections. Reif and Schmidt (1980) argue that European voters prefer to vote more on national elections because they consider the national election more important. Hix and Marsh (2007) also argue that the European elections are both less important and less known by the voters as a result of less campaigning. There is vast literature on the issue with a debate mainly pointing out to the dissatisfaction of the voters with the Union and the perceptions that the elections are less important. These are the main explanatory factors for the lower voter turnout in European elections in comparison to national elections. In my questionnaire for the focus group discussions I have a set of questions specifically for the European elections:

- *In what way are the European elections different from national elections? Do you consider national and European elections equally important? Why? How much would you say that your vote in the European elections can influence politics? Does it differ in national elections?*

Using a more topical focus group discussion for collecting data, this study will contribute to the theoretical debate, focusing on the perceptions and the factors that affect the political participation of young people in European elections. More knowledge is necessary for the studying of the specific reasons behind the low voter turnout in European elections. Only euro skepticism and voters' perception that the national election is more important is not enough for explaining the lower political participation. If voters think that the national elections are more important than the European elections this does not mean that they will not vote or participate politically in the European elections. New data could provide with new explanatory factors that will add up to the existing literature.

Most of the literature in the political participation is survey-based and somehow takes for granted that younger and older generations view politics the same. This results in the assumptions that same mechanisms of participation apply to any age. But this may not hold and it is important to study the perceptions of young people, the factors that affect their political participation and to try to answer more "how" and "why" questions that will contribute with new theoretical knowledge to the existing political participation debates.

In the next section I will examine the focus group discussions as a method for gathering empirical data and will discuss its strengths, weaknesses and limitations.

II.   Focus Groups as a Method

Focus groups are a qualitative method for gathering data that relies on a group interview, where several people participate simultaneously in a discussion (Kitzinger 1995; Morgan 1996; 1997; Hesse-Biber and Leavey 2006). The most important characteristic of the focus group interview is that there is an ongoing interaction between the interviewees and the presence of a moderator with an important role in constructing and controlling the discussion (Morgan 1996; 1997). To understand the idea behind focus groups and its advantages it is important to outline the group interaction as the most important feature of the focus groups. The method has proved to be significantly useful in understanding the way people think and why people think in a particular way. This adds up a great amount of significant data to the simpler question of just what people think (Kitzinger 1995).

As Morgan (1997) explains, focus groups are not a new method in qualitative research. They were mentioned as far back as Bogardus (1926). However, focus group interviews are not a very popular method throughout the 20th century, but just to grow in popularity in the social science in the late 80's and throughout the 90's. Today, focus group interviews are a popular method not only in research marketing, where they are thought to be extremely useful, but also among social scientists, with a still growing popularity and interest (Morgan 1997). The increase of the use of focus groups use as a qualitative method, in the last decades, by social researchers, indicates that they are a valuable and reasonable technique for collecting data (Morgan 1996).

Compared to other qualitative methods, focus group interviews are not very different from individual interviews or participant observation, in relation to the fact that all methods have their strengths and weaknesses (Morgan 1996; 1997). The most important thing is, while conducting a focus group interview, to keep in mind all the possibilities and limitations that one can face.

Morgan (1997) explains that the focus group provides the ability to observe a sufficient group interaction on a specific subject, controlled by the researcher, for a very limited time. Compared to the participant observation, focus groups can be more concentrated, specific and less time consuming. However, there is a down side to the more controlled approach of the focus groups. The ability of the researcher to point and guide the discussion means that it is no more a very natural discussion and setting for the interviewees, something that participant

observation is providing (Morgan 1997; Kitzinger 1995). This means that when the moderator is also interacting in the discussion, we cannot really rely on a very natural interaction in the group. That is why it is essential that the moderator intervenes as least as possible in the group discussion.

Kitzinger (1995) talks about the "group effect" in focus group interviews as a very important and valuable distinction that provides a setting of several participants interviewed together. The "group effect" contributes to the discussion, as people generate ideas from each other and also gain confidence to express their opinion; the discussants ask and answer questions and respond to each other. However, as Morgan (1996; 1997) explains there is also a more negative effect of the group interaction. An individual can sometimes find the setting in a group hostile and this can make him or her unwilling to express its own opinion. Also, people can be more reluctant to share personal information in front of a group of people, or if they are afraid that their opinion is different than others'. That is why it is the moderator's task to try to lead the discussion in such a manner that encourages disagreement, which in the same time does not create any hostile environment for any of the participants.

Compared to individual interviews, focus group interviews provide less information about each and every individual's opinion on the topic and require more control by the moderator, as a discussion between several people can easily and quickly jump from one topic to another that is irrelevant to the researcher's needed data (Morgan 1996; 1997). On the other hand, Morgan (1997) argues that the setting in a group discussion can make an individual more relaxed, compared to one-on-one interview, where the interviewee is the center of attention, which can be a burden sometimes. Morgan (1996), accounting to Fern (1982), explains that in focus groups participants would only express maximum two thirds of the ideas that they would otherwise express in an individual interview. The less ideas shared would sometimes mean less data and arguments to build a study on, which is a limitation of the method. But, on the other hand, fewer ideas shared by the participants can contribute to a more focused and concentrated data.

There is a dilemma in conducting focus group interviews in relation to the control that a moderator exercises on the discussion (Morgan 1996; 1997). If the moderator controls less the group discussion, then a more natural setting created in the interaction can lead to a more free-flowing conversations and to a more natural environment that can possibly provide a better data. On the other hand, the less control over the group the moderator has, the more

likely it is that the discussion will shift away from the original topic and from the essentials of the researcher's ideas for the interaction and data needed. The data used for this research was collected using a semi-structured focus group interviews that allowed for a more natural setting in the interaction between the participants that provided with sufficient data and in the same time managed to direct the discussions towards the desired topics.

Morgan (1996) emphasizes standardization, as a source of both possible advantages and disadvantages of focus group interviews. He explains standardization as the extent to which in all focus groups of a certain study are used exactly the same questions. A better comparison between the different groups can be achieved through standardized questionnaires in all the groups in a research. On the other hand, building on the experience of every group discussion, the researcher can modify the questions in order to achieve better results with every following group discussion, but this will decrease the ability for a more thorough comparison between the data of the different focus groups (Morgan 1996).

The overall strength of the focus groups, described by Morgan (1997) is that they are able to provide specific data on a specific topic, in a limited time. However, the fact that there is a moderator during the actual discussions always leaves a certain amount of doubt about how accurate and natural the answers of the participants are, but this goes for every qualitative method. A group discussion can be a limitation for the researcher as well as strength for the data collection. A strong advantage of focus groups is the interaction process between the participants during the discussion. The exchange of ideas and opinion is of value to understand more in-depth arguments and behaviors. It is unavoidable that the group as a whole influences what individuals participating in it would say. But this is a setting that needs to be accounted for by every researcher conducting a focus group. Creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, where the moderator is just helping the discussions without intruding, would make the participants feel more comfortable and thus, more inclined to share their own opinion, without being too much influenced by the others' opinion.

Focus groups provide a better understanding of peoples' experiences, how ideas are constructed and why and how impressions and information develop (Kitzinger 1995). However, a researcher should not neglect the limitations of the focus group discussion that were already mentioned, but should try to minimize their effects and account for them in the research. In the next part of the study I will focus on how I designed and conducted the focus groups.

In the next section I will focus on the actual design of the three focus groups that I conducted with students in Gothenburg, Sweden.

III. Design of the Study

For the purpose of the study, I organized three focus group discussions. The first group was only with Swedish students. The other two groups were with students who study in Gothenburg and are all from European Union countries, other than Sweden. An important limitation of the study is that I was not able to travel to different countries to make focus group discussions. This meant that the only option was to look for European Union students in Gothenburg. That way the international students were students who live abroad and to some extent away from their national political environment.

The focus groups were semi-structured - I had prepared a list of questions before hand. However, during the discussions sometimes I asked additional questions, in order to get more clarity or to emphasize on an interesting point made in the course of the discussions. The list of questions was not strict to follow, but rather the discussions itself allowed for flexibility. In the questions list there were 7 main questions with several sub questions. In the appendix at the end is provided the list. The questionnaire was carefully designed and modified after I made a mock focus group just to test how the questions allow for free flow of the discussion and how good the questions relate to the study.

Morgan (1996; 1997) explains that different individuals will be more or less inclined to participate in group discussions depending on the topic, or the setting of the group. He proposes that a pretest of a group discussion is a good way to understand in advance what can be the strengths and weaknesses of conducting a focus group on a desired topic. For this purpose I conducted a pretest focus group that helped me understand more about the interaction in the groups and the amount of involvement needed to be able to get more natural data on the topic of political participation of students and in the same time to be able to steer the discussion in the limits of the desired topic. The main insight in the test focus group that I conducted was a misunderstanding about what is considered political participation and what is not. Thus, in the beginning of every of the real focus groups I started by explaining what is meant by political participation and what is considered as a type of political participation. Second, the pretest that I conducted proved effective and useful, as it served as a good experience that allowed for improvement in the questionnaire used for the actual focus

groups, without affecting the possibility of a good comparison of the data from the different groups. For the pretest group I had prepared twelve main questions and the discussion was too long. The participants were tired at the end, which affected their answers, interest in the topic and concentration. Thus, for the real focus groups I reduced the questionnaire to seven main questions. And third, some of the questions were too long and hard for the participants to understand, so I made the questions shorter and easier to understand for people with no or little political science background.

The initial questions were more general, regarding political participation and types of political participation, and then they got more specific and focused on every individual's motivation, frequency and types of political participation. The last third part of the questions concerned the European Parliament elections and how they compare to national elections. Before the start of every discussion I took several minutes to introduce the topic and to explain what is meant by political participation and what types of political participation there are. The purpose of this was to make sure that everyone have the most basic and same start level in the discussion and that no one will be left out of the discussion just because they are not sure if what they have been doing is considered political participation.

Due to the time limitations of the study, I had only four weeks to find and recruit participants to agree and take part in the discussions. The recruiting process was divided into three stages. First, I made a poster, which I put on the information and advertising boards in as many as fifteen departments of the Gothenburg University. More than sixty posters were put in a one week time. The second stage was to advertise the poster and the discussion groups online on Facebook groups. Online, the main target was the international students. I advertised the poster and the focus group discussions in numerous student Facebook groups with an audience of thousands of students, both international and Swedish. The third stage was to ask for assistance the administration of the Gothenburg University. Through the large student email database the administration was helpful enough to send emails to the students with a short description of the project and the poster.

This recruiting process helped me gather twelve students, four Swedish and eight international and I organized three semi-structured focus group discussions. I was the leader of all three discussions. All of the discussions lasted between fifty-five minutes and one hour and fifteen minutes. With almost zero participation in the discussions, my task was only to guide the discussion in the frames for the needs of the study. I never expressed an opinion, but

rather asked questions, made sure that everyone participated and tried to gather more data in notes, such as reactions and mood of the participants, while all the discussions were tape-recorded. All the efforts were made to encourage participants to speak freely and express their own opinion as much sincerely and unbiased as possible, in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. After the discussions, I transcribed the tape-recordings to ensure better data analyzing and understanding of the discussions.

The first focus group discussion was conducted on 11th April 2014 with four Swedish students, all females and students in Gothenburg. The second discussion group was conducted on 16th April 2014 with four international students from European Union countries – two from Bulgaria, one female and one male, one female from Germany and one male from Austria. The last, third discussion group was conducted on 18th April 2014 again with four international students – two from Romania, both females, one male from Lithuania and one female from Spain. The timing of the discussion groups was carefully chosen – in the middle of the study periods, comfortably away in time from exam periods, to ensure than students would have more free time and willingness to participate.

In Table 1 below are listed all the participants, their first name, age, sex and their country of origin. All participants are in the age range 23-29, which is important as the study focuses on political participation of young people who are students in higher education programs. They all come from diverse study programs with as little as possible political science background of the studies. It is worth mentioning that an obvious limitation and weakness of the study is that with only twelve participants it raises questions concerning the external validity of its findings.

When quoting a participant from the discussions here, I will use only his/her first name and the group he or she participated in. The groups will be identified as "Sweden Group", "International Group 1" and "International Group 2".

In the next part of the study I will present the overall results of the focus groups discussions and analyze the most interesting opinions and findings, regarding young people's political participation and perception of politics.

Group	Name	Age	Sex	Country of Origin
Sweden	Moa	24	Female	Sweden
	Maria G.	23	Female	Sweden
	Marilyn	25	Female	Sweden
	Maria	23	Female	Sweden
International 1	Andreas	25	Male	Austria
	Martina	23	Female	Germany
	Ivan	29	Male	Bulgaria
	Radost	24	Female	Bulgaria
International 2	Irene	23	Female	Spain
	Konstantin	23	Male	Lithuania
	Noemi	25	Female	Romania
	Elena	26	Female	Romania

Table 1. Demographics of the participants in the focus group discussions

IV. Data Analysis and Results

1. Online political participation, knowledge, social networks and discussions

In this section I will examine the main points that were discussed in the literature review. Using the new empirical data gathered with the three focus group discussions with young people in Gothenburg, the main focus will be on the online political participation, the issue-oriented participation and the political consumerism and the European elections as "second-order" national elections.

In the political participation literature in the last decades the predominant view is that young people's political participation is in decline, especially in terms of voting (Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco 2007; Putnam 2000; Delli Carpini 2000). However, other scholars argue that only traditional political participation is in decline among young people, who now prefer to focus more on other untraditional types of participation (Norris 2003; Sloam 2007; Zukin et al. 2006). These other types include online participation, with the Internet becoming more and more influential. The social networks, blogs and online sharing are considered by some to have become the preferred participation methods for young people.

Some of the most popular online political participations include commenting and sharing on social networks, writing articles on blogs, participating in discussions on blogs and social networks, follow parties and representatives' pages on social networks, search online for political information, visit websites of parties, donate money online, sign online petitions, among others.

An interesting result from the discussion groups is that many participants shared that they are less active online and more active offline. They prefer and trust more the offline participation. Maria G. from Sweden Group said:

"I encourage political participation online, but sometimes it is just bound to not be a conversation, but just a monologue from like ten people and then I get pretty annoyed, so I usually don't participate too much online. {...} Let's say that of my last ten political participations, one is online and nine is offline. I am not active online at all."

Some of the young people preferred to get involved in politics more often offline - boycotting, which is extremely popular, and also more political discussions offline. Those participants are not very active on social networks when it comes to political discussions and sharing political information. Online participation is seen more rather passive than active stance. Online participation leads often to misunderstandings than talking to a person face to face. Maria from Sweden Group explained:

"{...} personally I don't like or feel very comfortable participating in discussion online {...} online creates more possibilities for misunderstanding."

Signing petitions, sometimes sharing articles of interest and reading online news and articles is the most common political participation online. But compared to their overall participation it is only a small part of their political participation.

On the other hand, another part of the participants, those who were less active in their political participation, seem to get more involved online, when they get involved at all. When they discuss politics they would do it more often online. If they sign petitions they would sign more often online petitions, if they read any politically related information it would be online. Of course, the more online political participation of some of the participants might be connected to one of the clear weaknesses of the present study – the fact that the focus groups were conducted in Sweden and the international participants live abroad. Living abroad, far

from their domestic, national politics could oblige them to be more active online than offline. The Internet could offer the information and the opportunity for them to get involved from distance. Andreas from Austria, from International Group 1 said:

"When I read online newspapers, my main topics of interest are not political topics, but when it is on the first page and I think it is something interesting, and then I read it. More online than offline, maybe only online."

And Elena from Romania, International Group 2, shared the same opinion:

"I would say I sign online petitions, sometimes talking with friends and talking on Facebook, it's like maybe more online participation."

The data from the focus group discussions shows that there are participants who prefer to get involved more in offline participation and these are the young people who as a whole shared that are more politically active. Also, some participants shared that their political participation is mainly on the Internet, but as a whole their participation is not very diverse and frequent. This difference does not support the claim in the literature that young people prefer to get involved in online participation. The Internet is often seen by the participants as one more source of political information, but on the other hand, political communication and discussion online can lead to frustration, which eventually might draw people away from the online political communication. Future research is very much needed here to study the difference between online and offline political participation and why some young people would prefer offline participation and other online participation.

Political discussions have been considered in the political participation literature mainly from two perspectives. One is that political discussions increase the knowledge and the frequency of political participation (Lin 2003; McClurg 2006) and the other one is that political discussions that lead to disagreements, also lead to confusion and frustration, which can reflect into a decrease in the political participation (Ulbig and Funk 1999; Mutz 2002).

In the discussion groups I asked the participants how often they were discussing politics with friends, family or at school and then how do discussions influence their knowledge, confidence about politics and their overall political participation.

Almost half of the participants confirmed that they discuss politics very often, on regular basis, mostly with friends and in school, some with family also. Marilyn from Sweden Group explained, when asked if she discuss politics with friends and family:

"Yeah, friends in school and not in school, my boyfriend. I don't live near my parents, but when I am at home we discuss a lot politics as well."

They discuss politics often, not only for a special occasion but on a regular, everyday basis. Politics is considered an important part of their lives; they are willing to be involved in the politics, as politics influence their lives and they would like to also have an impact on the processes that would in a way determine their future.

But what happens when you disagree with someone when discussing politics? All of the participants, who said they discuss politics often, said that sometimes they get confused during a discussion, even frustrated, if they disagree with someone. However, disagreeing and frustration is not a cause for decrease of political participation rather than an increase. Disagreements during political discussions urge the participants to argue more about their point of view and develop further their ideas, which help them understand better their own ideas, thus, increase their knowledge. Also, disagreement is considered an inspiration for reading more and acquiring more knowledge from other people. Overall, the participants were definite in their opinion that more political discussions lead to more political knowledge and increased political participation. Maria G. from Sweden Group expressed her opinion:

"{…} when you talk to someone who disagrees with you or does not understand your opinion, you have to be more specific, you have to actually argue for what you believe in. {…} I think it definitely develops participation more, all kinds of discussions."

Marilyn from Sweden Group also added:

"{…}political discussions is always increasing my knowledge about politics, because you either learn something or maybe you teach someone something and especially if you discuss something with someone who is not agreeing with you it can really open your mind, like I don't have all the answers {…}."

Martina from Germany, International Group 1, said:

"I am not sure if political discussions in any way increase or decrease my political participation, but I would definitely say that is good to discuss politics, it is important because of the world we live in, we should be aware of what is going on and discussing with other people increases your knowledge, I guess."

Konstantin, from Lithuania, International Group 2 added:

"Discussions make me look for more information and participate more in different activities."

It is not only that political discussion is considered to be good for the development of political knowledge and participation, but also disagreeing is considered to increase the knowledge and participation. This is evidence that supports the argument that frequent political discussions increase the political participation.

What was common for all participants was that the students perceived discussions as something good that improves both their knowledge and political participation. Political knowledge, in their opinion, is improved in two ways. First, by learning something new from the person you talk to. And second, when disagreeing and arguing, students claimed they do not get frustrated, but rather curious and this makes them prompt to search and read more about the certain issue. Maria from Sweden Group, when asked about the effect political discussions have on her political participation, she explained:

"With the people I agree with, it leads to more political participation, but with the people that confuse me, sometimes that inspires me to read more about their kind of view or understand them better."

And Konstantin from Lithuania, International Group 2, said:

"There is a lot of information available nowadays, so it is impossible to follow everything. Talking about what impressed people around me helps to keep me informed"

Also, all groups agreed that political discussions increase before elections and both they and their friends talk more about politics and thus, get more involved into political participation before elections.

Frequent political discussions increase the political knowledge and increase the political participation of young people. Disagreements and arguing during discussions do not so much draw people back from participation as it makes them more curios and is an inspiration for more knowledge. Future research in this area should focus more on the specific types of political participations that increase with discussions. Also, more understanding is needed on how exactly political discussions influence international students' political participation.

2. Issue-oriented political participation and political consumerism

The next topic I will discuss, with the empirical data gathered from the three semi-structured focus group discussions, concerns the issue-oriented political participation of young people and the political consumerism.

Political consumerism, as buying or boycotting certain products or brands with political reasons, has been more popular in the last decades and scholars have increasingly studied it. Some studies have concentrated on Scandinavia where political consumerism is thought to be particularly visible and popular. Stole et. al (2005) controversially connects the political consumerism of citizens with low trust in governments.

Several of the participants in the discussions are very much involved in buying and boycotting brands and products for social and political reasons. The political consumerism was strongly expressed in half of the participants and they shared that they do it for strong political and social reasons, not so much personal, as health. They are much involved and interested in certain issues and not so much in the perspective of the politicians and the personalities. Some of the main reasons were environmental and in relation to poor working conditions of companies. The stronger political consumerism, I would say, is an expression of the stronger issue-oriented thinking of some of the students. Maria G. from Sweden Group explained her political consumerism:

"{...} I guess I am boycotting meat in general. Part of it is because of politics and part of it just because health and other issues. I do think we over consume meat and I think that we, as far as I know, we don't need that much meat, and we should have a more sustainable lifestyle. So probably like a green political party view it's the sustainability {...}."

And Moa from Sweden Group added:

"I am the same with meat. Mostly because of the consumption and the environment and also what happened, there was a year ago, the pasta brand Barillo. I did not buy that. And I also boycott some Israeli products."

Konstantin, from Lithuania and from International Group 2 explained:

"I boycott a certain chain of newspapers in my country and other products that belong to a corrupt businessman and a politician."

Several of the participants pointed out the political consumerism as a very frequent participation. All of them are boycotting brands and products on everyday basis, both for personal, health reasons and for political reasons. The most active boycotting is the meat boycotting - being vegetarian and boycotting meat because of health reasons and not agreeing with the policy of animals breeding and unnecessary meat overconsumption. They have also mentioned boycotting brands such as Barillo, H&M, Le Pain Francais, Israeli products, all for political reasons. Moa from Sweden Group explained her political consumerism:

"Yeah, I am also a vegetarian for several reasons – health, animal rights, environmental reasons. When it comes to food, it's health and environmental issues, so I try to buy ecological and organic food and fair-trade and so on."

This strong political consumerism of those participants is supported by high involvement in international organizations, as support members of issue organizations. This adds up to the more issue-oriented point of view when it comes to political participation. All of them said they are members of issue organizations, and gave examples such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International and the Republican Organization in Sweden. Those students get involved more actively in politics for specific issues, rather than for political personalities or parties. The level of political consumerism is very high and it is reinforced by support for issue-oriented organizations, which, as a whole, constructs thinking and actions oriented more towards specific political issues rather than party politics or personalities.

To understand more about the perceptions of the young people about their political consumerism I asked them a question that was not in the prepared in advance questionnaire. I asked the participants if they use political consumerism because they are unhappy with the government's actions over a certain issue, because they do not believe that the government has the resources to cope with a certain issue, because they were willing to help the

government in its efforts towards the specific issue or for another reason. I linked this question to the argument in the existing literature connecting the political consumerism with low trust in the government. None of the participants I asked (only those active in political consumerism) linked their activism to low trust in government. The predominant opinion was that they did political consumerism without any thought of the government, but rather because they felt it was a good thing and right thing to do. The political consumerism and their actions in their mind were not directly linked to the government, but to the issue only. Maria from Sweden Group said:

"*I don't think I have thought about it so specifically, about what the government does for these issues. I focus more on the actual product. When I am boycotting, I haven't actively been thinking about the government.*"

And Moa from Sweden Group added:

"*... I do think it's more for moral, for myself, that I want to be a good person and taking a stance for this, but I don't believe it will be a big change. So I do it probably more, because I want to show the company, not so much the government, but the company that I don't agree, but I think it's a pretty powerless action in the end.*"

The data from the focus group discussions support the claim that political consumerism is growing in popularity. However, there is no support for a link between political consumerism activism and low trust in government. The participants in the focus group shared that they justify their political consumerism with their personalities and the desire to be a good person, stand behind a good stance without putting a thought into it about the actions or inactivity of the government.

3. European elections as "second-order" elections

The third main topic that will be examined concerns the European elections and the theory that relates to the European elections as "second-order" national elections. Since the first European elections took place in 1979 scholars have been studying the phenomenon of European Union elections and how they differ from national elections. According to a popular theory, national elections are more popular among citizens and have significantly higher voter turnout than European elections, because they are perceived as more important elections for the individuals, or as called "first-order" elections. This is opposed to the European elections,

in which the citizens are not that interested, their vote is considered to matter less, with the decisions felt to be more unimportant for the individual and called "second-order" elections (Reif and Schmidt 1980; Franklin and Hobolt 2011; Hix and Marsh 2007; Hobolt and Spoon 2012).

In the last part of the focus group discussions the focus was on European Parliament elections and more specifically comparing these elections to the national elections. In general, in all three groups, the participants were less interested and less knowledgeable about European elections. In all three groups, the discussions were oriented towards why there is less interest in the European Parliament elections and how they are different elections than national elections.

There was an obvious consensus in all three groups that people perceive the European and national elections differently. The European elections were defined as too far away and detached from the people. The decisions and outcomes of the European elections were not felt by the populations and so they felt them less important and insufficient for their own interest.

Noemi from Romania, from International Group 2 explained:

"I think that people think that European elections are so much invisible for the people and the outcome of the elections. You know, it should be very visible; unfortunately the information does not reach every house and there is a big difference between what happens in the European Parliament and what happens on the micro level in every country."

According to the participants, the ordinary people consider the European elections as something that takes place far from them, something they do not know much about and something that does not have an impact on them. There is lack of information on micro level, which, combined with the real distance between the people and the European Union both as scale of decision making and actual kilometers, detaches the European Parliament elections from the individuals. The national elections are the elections that really impact the people and the decisions made on national level are the decisions that change the life of the voters, at least in its visible part. People would like to see the results and this is hard on the European level.

Irene from Spain, from International Group 2 said:

"You know it is something far for the people, you don't really see what you vote for, you do not see the result maybe, you know. But in national you know what you are voting for."

There is a consensus among the three groups regarding the perception that the national elections are of bigger interest for the people and the participants specifically. There is also a consensus that one of the reasons for that is the lack of information about the European elections, there is less campaigning, compared to national elections, which leads to less knowledge. There is an information gap and knowledge insufficiency regarding the European Union and European Parliament elections. Maria, from Sweden Group, confessed:

"I didn't even know until recently that there is an election (European Parliament election) this year."

Judging by the participants' comments it is clear that the people do not know much about the European Union as a whole, how it functions and its mechanisms.

When I asked the participants in the groups to compare the national and the European elections and to say which one is more important the majority of the participants agreed that the national elections are more important. There were several reasons for that, mainly corresponding to having more knowledge about national elections and that the national elections are closer and their results have a direct impact on a daily basis for the people. Elena, from Romania, from International Group 2 explained:

"I think that we have so many issues and people prefer to think about their domestic things more."

National elections represent the domestic issues and problems of the people. Thus, they are perceived as more important and higher on the agenda of the individuals.

In the discussion groups there was a consensus about the importance and the problems with European elections. Some of the participants shared the opinion that national elections are more important. It is interesting what reasons were given for the European elections' lack of popularity and importance compared to the national elections. The majority of the participants agreed that there is lack of knowledge regarding the European Union, its mechanism, institutions, as well as the elections in particular. Less campaigning for the European elections adds up to the less information. Some of the participants themselves admitted they either did

not even know until recently there were to be held European elections in May, or that they just lack basic information about the functioning of the Union. This lack of knowledge, according to them, is one of the main reasons for the people to feel detached and uninterested in the European elections. Maria G., from Sweden Group, explained her view:

"{...} the process (the European Union elections) so much further away, it feels like you are more detached. And also, there are so many different parties and actors within the EU that I don't know much about{...}It makes it hard to know your position. And in the Swedish election you can actually meet someone who is supporting the other side, and you couldn't do that in the European elections."

A very good illustration of the fact that national elections are perceived as "first-order" elections is that this year (2014) in May are the European elections and in September are the national elections in Sweden, and still according to the participants in the discussion, now (April 2014, just one month before the European elections and more than 5 months before the national elections) there is bigger TV campaign and bigger interest towards the national elections in Sweden. Maria from Sweden Group said:

"{...}perhaps since there are general elections in Sweden in September, people are less interested in discussing the European parliament elections."

And Marilyn, from Sweden Group, also added:

"I noticed they aren't discussing it (the European elections) on the news. I haven't heard for it yet, only once, I think. So, that's surprising and they are already talking about the national elections in September."

The lack of information and knowledge are central problems that make European elections both more sophisticated and disinteresting for the citizens. The individuals feel the European Union too far away, as something distant and the decisions it makes are not as important as those on national level. The results of the European elections and the policies are not visible for the people; the citizens do not feel the impact of European policies as they feel the impact of national policies – on a regular basis. Also, the people identify themselves not with Europe, or the European Union and its policies, as much as with their national identity. Martina, from Germany, International Group 1, explained:

"I think that people feel more detached from and they don't say I am European, they say I am Bulgarian, for example.{...} I agree that the European Union elections are more distant and there is less information, personally I have no idea how the Union works."

Another important reason for the citizens to feel more attached to the national elections is that they prefer to take care first of their domestic issues, the issues that concern them directly and on everyday basis. A nation that has enough of its own domestic problems is not ready to deal with issues on a more global level, before it resolves its own issues. Andreas, from Austria, International Group 1, said:

"I think that we have so many issues and people prefer to think about their domestic things more."

When asked about how much their vote would matter on European and national level, the answers were not very similar or with a definite pattern. Some of the participants considered their vote equally important in both elections, others thought it is more important in one election or the other elections, taking into account both the low voter turnout in European elections and also, the less voters on national elections compared to European. However, the influence of the vote turned out to be not as important determinant for the involvement in European elections as the knowledge and the information about the European elections.

In the empirical data there is evidence, which support the claim that European elections decrease the level of participation. The participants have less knowledge about European elections, which explains also the decreased interest and the less political participation. There is not much attention, campaigning and information in the media about European Union institutions and elections, which creates even greater gap between the voters and the European Union. People identify themselves with their national countries, rather than with Europe and are preoccupied with domestic issues that have a direct and regular impact on the citizens; all these factors increase the disinterest of the citizens with the European elections and define the elections as "second-order". However, there is less evidence to support the claim that the decreased political participation in European elections is due to the perception that one's vote matters less in those elections. There is more evidence to support the argument that the political participation in European elections decreases because of lack of information and knowledge about these elections. The less information the voters have decreases their knowledge about the European as a whole which decreases their interest and political

participation. The less campaigning about European elections is one of the reasons for decreased information. The majority of the participants in the focus groups do not think that their vote matters less in the European elections or that the European elections are not important. They explain their low interest and low participation with the lack of knowledge and information about the European Union and the European elections.

Obviously there is a big difference in how young people perceive European and national elections. If, as this study suggests, the main reasons for the low political participation in European elections is less knowledge and information, which lead to lower interest, then future studies should concentrate on how knowledge and information affect the individuals' perception of the European elections and how the European Union can provide more information and knowledge about itself to the citizens.

Limitations of the Study

This study inevitably has its limitations and it is important to account for them.

One of the most obvious limitations of this study is the scope. The strictly limited amount of 20 weeks and the lack of sponsorship affected the process of recruiting participants for the focus groups. The time limitation did not allow for more than 12 participants to take part in the three focus group discussions. The number of the participants does not allow for generalizability and external validity of the conclusions derived from the empirical data.

Another aspect of the recruiting process was that on the poster that advertised the focus group discussions was mentioned that the discussions were going to be about young people's perceptions of politics and European elections. This means that probably only young people interested in politics have signed up for the study. Thus, this master's thesis does not claim to be representative for all young people.

The lack of sponsorship did not allow me to travel abroad and conduct focus group discussions with international students in their domestic environment. Thus, the international students that participated were all students in Gothenburg. This limitation meant that the international students were living abroad, away from their domestic politics and the events related to it. This has an effect probably on their increased online participation, as the Internet allows for a compensation of the distance with timely information and keeping in touch with people. The fact that the international students were living abroad also has an effect on their

lower political participation and the limits of the types of the political participation they use, as they have less contacts with people abroad and are away from their national politics.

There are also limitations connected to the method I used for collecting the data – focus group discussions. The setting in the focus group discussions sometimes allows for fewer ideas to be shared by each one of the participants, as four participants share their perceptions in a limited time scope. Also, the fact that there are other people who are listening to your stories might have made some participants less inclined to share more personal and sensitive information. The group effect influences the individual's answers. But this also goes the other way around, where the effect of the group helps the individual to better express his or her opinion and think of ideas that otherwise alone would not have come up with.

Conclusion

Political participation is an area of great interest for scholars, especially in the last decades. Concerns have been raised due to the decreasing traditional political participation of the citizens – voting in elections and partisan membership. The concerns are dedicated to the fact that the proper functioning of the democratic institutions themselves depends on the participation and involvement of the citizens in the political processes.

Numerous studies have been dedicated to better understanding of the political participation of young people. On the one hand, scholars are concerned that less and less young people get involved into political participation. In the last couple of decades there is a constant decrease in the voter turnout among the young populations (18-30 years). The decrease in the traditional political participation among the young people is seen as a threat for the future development and functioning of the democratic system. If young people today are less and less involved in the political processes this means that in the next several decades the process will only worsen as those generations will step up in the place of the older generations that were once more politically involved and active.

On the other hand, some argue that, although there is a decline in the traditional political participation among the young people today, simultaneously with this process there is an increase of the untraditional political participation. With the growing influence of the technology and the Internet, young people are more inclined to use diverse methods for political participation. The social networks, blogs and online discussions, among others, have

added up to the political participation options, widening the possibilities for getting involved in the political and social processes in the democratic world.

The complexity and the importance of the issue of political participation and the influence of the younger generations, make the matter of extreme interest. This is why it is important to study young people's perceptions of politics and the factors and motivations that affect their political participation. The democratic system and the proper functioning of its institutions depend on the political and social involvement of its citizens. Before we can say if the democratic system and institutions are in danger, we must understand better the young generations' methods and motivations for involvement in any political participation.

Using focus group discussions, this study aims at understanding what types of political participation young people use, how often they do that, what are the motives behind it and adds to the theoretical understanding of which factors affect the political participation among young people. Also, there is a focus on European elections, as opposed to national elections, which can help us understand better some of the problems that lead to lower voter turnout and to present new explanatory factors for the lower interest towards European elections. The focus on European elections is important, as the European Union is dedicated to increase its influence, but it is not clear how legitimate that would be if only between 30% and 40% of the populations vote in European Parliament elections.

The focus group discussions, as a method, used to provide the empirical data for this study, proved very successful. During the discussions the students could supplement each other, discuss among themselves, brain-storm, which gives richer data than only survey questionnaire or individual interviews.

The results of the study show that political discussions with friends and family increase both the political knowledge and the political participation of the participants in the focus groups. However, not much support was found for the claim that young people focus more on online political participation, as many of the participants focused more on offline rather than online. However, online channels are frequently used mostly for searching for political information, reading articles and news, among others. The data from the focus group discussions does not support the predominant opinion in the existing theory that young people focus more on online political participation. The Internet and social networks definitely have an impact, but it is not clear whether the Internet and its possibilities attract people who otherwise are not

very active politically or it is just one more channel for participating for people already interested in politics.

The study showed that half of the students who participated use often issue-oriented political participation and are involved in political consumerism regularly. After finding out about the political consumerism activism of the participants and the issue-oriented participation by monthly donations to issue organizations, it was even more interesting to discover the motivations behind these activities among the young people. No evidence was found to support the already mentioned in the literature link between political consumerism and low trust in government. The participants who were active in their political consumerism shared that they do not link their choices to any government actions or inactions. The motivations for their actions are explained with the fact that they want to send a message to the companies and because they feel that this is the good thing to do, a responsible stance in the society they live.

This study contributes to the theoretical knowledge in one more debatable topic concerning the European elections and the low political participation and interest towards those elections. There is support for the claim that in European elections the political participation decreases. However, less support was found for the claim in previous research that the lower participation is because of the perception that the vote is less important in the European elections. The data pointed out that less knowledge and information among the participants, regarding the European Union as a whole, is the main reason for the lower political participation. The lack of knowledge decreases the interest and the participation of the people. This lack of information is driving them away or at least it is not making them interested. There is not much understanding compared to national elections and when there is lack of understanding and a feeling that the process takes place very far and has no impact on the individual, then the interest decreases. This does not correspond with the predominant idea in the existing literature linked to the "second-order" elections, which explains the low voter turnout and low political participation in the European elections with the perception of the citizens that these elections are less important and less is at stake compared to national elections. Also, the detachment of the European Union from the citizens and the less campaigning before European elections are among the main causes for the low political participation.

I should mention that the clear weaknesses and limitations of the study remain and influence the results. Due to the time limitation of the study and the lack of sponsorship, all focus groups had to be conducted in Sweden. This meant that the international students were all young people who live abroad; they are away from their national politics, from the environment they known better. This has an impact on their political participation, the frequency and probably is an explanation for the increased online participation – being away from their countries, a way to stay closer to the dynamics is to use the Internet. Another limitation is that, due to the time limit, only 12 participants were involved in the discussion groups. This negatively affects the possibility for an external validity of the study and export of the conclusions to a wider group of citizens.

Even with its limitations, the study provides significant data helping us to understand better why and when young people participate politically and what are some of the factors that explain their political participation. Considering its policy implications, the study can be used by NGOs and government institutions. All actors involved and interested in the political participation of young people and its impacts on the society and the democratic systems can find the conclusions useful in information and election campaigns. The study is a good starting point for further analysis on the more specific issues raised here - which are the specific types of political participation that increase due to frequent political discussions? Future research could focus more on why some young people would emphasize more on online and other on offline participation. Results, that should be further studied, are the more specific motivations behind the issue-oriented political participation of young people. Also, if some students are more active and participate more often than others, then a study is needed to examine the specific factors that enable and motivate some to be more active than others. And last, but not least, future research should focus its attention on how the European Union can increase the knowledge and information about itself and to become more attractive for the young people, as the main reason for their lack of interest and low voter turnout is the lack of knowledge and information.

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Appendix:

Focus groups questionnaire: (depending on the developments of each discussion, some of the questions were paraphrased and changed, or some new sub questions were added, while others were skipped)

1. How politically knowledgeable do you consider yourself compared to your friends and family?

2. What types of political participation have you used? For example, do you vote, have you worked for an election campaign, have you participated in demonstrations, have you signed a petition or expressed in any other way opinion on political issues?
   - *How often do you do any political participation online? (Every day/once a week/only if there is a special event?*
   - *How often do you do any political participation offline? (Every day/once a week/only if there is a special event?*
   - *Do you get involved in any online discussions?*
   - *There is a specific political participation called political consumerism, when people buy or boycott different products or producers because of political reasons. Can you remember any time that you did something like this?*

3. How often do you participate politically – when there is an ongoing campaign, all the time, or just for a specific occasion or event?
   - *Tell me about the last occasions you remember voting/ discussing politics/ expressed in any other way view on a political issue.*

4. What is the most important motivation for political participation for you?
   - *Is political participation an important responsibility of a citizen?*

5. When do you search for political information – all the time, just before elections or another specific occasion?

- *When was the last time you remember using Google, read a book or asked people for information regarding a political issue?*

6. How often do you discuss politics with your family/friends/school – every day/once a week/only when something important happens?
    - *Do you feel more confident in your political knowledge after discussing politics?*
    - *As a result of discussions do you get more or less involved in political participation?*

7. In what way are the European elections different from national elections?
    - *Do you consider national and European elections equally important? Why?*
    - *How much would you say that your vote in the European elections can influence politics? Does it differ in national elections?*