

The voice of the youth: How personalized politics on social media affect youth voter turnout

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Abstract

Introduction: Over the last decades, scholars have criticized and investigated the continuous decline of voter turnout among young adults in Western societies, as it threatens the concept of a representative democracy. With the generational gap widening, the youth is significantly under-represented in the political dimension. In order to ensure future stability of the democratic system, it is crucial to mobilize the youth.

Aim: Generally, personalized politics in previous literature refers to the strategy politicians use to present themselves as individuals due to their use of social media. Thus, previous literature demonstrates a research gap regarding personalized politics in a manner that utilizes personalized political campaign communication as a tool to engage with and mobilize the youth in elections. Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore the effects personalized messages can have on behavioural political engagement and voting intentions among young adults legible to vote.

Method: This study was conducted by means of an online survey. A total of 147 participants with ages ranging from 18 to 28 participated in the survey. To analyze the data, reliability analyses, analyses of variance for each dependent variable, and linear regression analyses for the moderator were conducted.

Results: The results showed that personalized political messages increased voting intentions and political engagement among the sample. There was no significant moderation effect of political interest on voting intentions and political engagement found.

Conclusion: In order to ensure well-functioning democracy in Western societies, it is crucial to mobilize the youth and encourage them to partake in elections. With the rise of technologies and social media, plenty aspects of daily life are subject to personalization. Hence, efforts to make politics more personalized could be used to re-introduce young adults to institutionalized politics. Therefore, personalized democracy might be the beginning stages of a new generation of politics, which adapts to the digital shift in society. The effort of innovating personalized political campaigns to include young adults in the political dimension and adapting to their forms of political activism can be an effective endeavour during electoral campaigns. Hence, the durability of the democratic system could be ensured through a process of adjusting electoral campaign strategies over time.

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, scholars have continuously expressed concerns regarding low participation rates of young adults in political processes (Eckstein, Noack & Gniewosz, 2012; Sloam, 2016; Mannerström, Lönngvist & Leikas, 2017; Osman, Miranda & Jourde, 2020). This phenomenon has been recorded in the United States (Anderson & Stephenson, 2018; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010) and European Union (Sloam, 2016; Mannerström, Lönngvist & Leikas, 2017) alike, demonstrating that the problem of decreasing youth voter turnout affects Western democracies in general. Young citizens feel like they are not being represented by the political system, as there is lacking political activity invested in their concerns, which distances the youth from the political dimension (Barret & Pachi, 2019). Due to young voters expressing that they have not been sufficiently represented by politicians (Sloam, 2016), there is a decrease in voter turnout in their age category, which creates a continuous cycle of the youth feeling ignored by politicians and thus withdrawing from political participation even further (Sloam, 2014). This process has been considered as the beginning of a crisis (Sloam, 2014) within the political institution because participation in politics of all legal adults is a grounding factor of democracy. Democracy depends on representation, which requires eligible citizen to use their right to political participation in order to elect those politicians who address the cumulated interests of the society (Manning, 2014; Ponts, Henn & Griffiths, 2019). According to Sloam (2014), this political crisis can most prevalently be attributed to “young people [...] hav[ing] become alienated from mainstream electoral politics” (p.664), due to factors such as decreasing trust in political institutions and individualization of values further distancing the youth from the institution that strives for representative democracy. Due to young adults being less likely to participate in institutionalized activities (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010), the political dimension is being adapted to and maintained by older generations, demonstrating a clear chasm between the language and social priorities of different generations (Zhu, Chan & Chou, 2019). If the youth cannot be mobilized to partake in voting, democracy may lose its legitimacy of representing society.

Due to the problematic nature of this phenomenon, literature has made several attempts to determine antecedents of youth political engagement in order to come up with methods to encourage increased political participation among young adults. The most promising case regarding youth mobilization was the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election. During Obama’s first election, voting turnout for young adults (18 to 24) was higher than it has been since 1972 (Anderson & Stephenson, 2018). During his campaign, Barack Obama used digital

media more intensively than any other candidate and utilized data analytics and behavioural modelling to appeal to potential voters (Bimber, 2014). Based on this example, scholars have turned their focus onto the role of social media as a tool to re-introduce young adults into the political dimension and promote their engagement in political processes. Additionally, with politics being introduced to social media, personalized politics have become a topic of interest.

Personalized politics can be used as an umbrella term including several strategies of political communication. The main topic of study regarding personalized politics concerns the strategy of candidate-centred politics and image-marketing in order to attract potential voters. However, there is lacking research whether personalized political messages, which appeal to the target audiences personal political preferences, can be used to engage the youth online, as well as translate this online engagement into offline voting behaviours. Therefore, there is still a research gap regarding offline mobilization (i.e., voting behaviours) of the youth. Based on the aspect of young adults feeling alienated by traditional politics and reporting lacking representation, and the increased online engagement that emerged due to personalized politics, this study aims to examine whether personalized politics can be used to translate online engagement into offline voting intention. Hence, the following research was conducted to answer the research question:

RQ: To what extent do personalized political messages affect offline voting intentions among young adults?.

In the following sections of this paper, there will first be a theoretical framework in order to identify antecedents of political engagement and voting intentions, as well as introduce types of personalized politics that exist, leading to the usage of personalized campaigns. The presented framework serves to creating the hypotheses of this research. Next, the method section will detail the research methodology and introduce the salient constructs correlating to the hypotheses. Then, the results section presents the analysis of results, which will then be interpreted in the discussion. The discussion section further serves to evaluate the limitations of this study, which will be used to suggest recommendations for further research into political communication in the conclusion.

2 Theoretical Framework

In order to explore whether personalized political messages affect voting intentions among young adults, several constructs must first be conceptualized. The terms political engagement and political participation will be elaborated on based on previous literature. Further, the role of social media in youth political engagement will be explained, and how social media can be used as a tool by politicians to learn about the interests of the youth, which serves as input to create personalized campaign messages. Last, the aspect of personalized politics will be discussed in regards to potential voting intentions among young adults.

2.1 Political engagement

In order to understand adolescents' withdrawal from political participation, scholars have conducted extensive research into the determinants of political engagement. Literature refers to political interest as one of the most crucial antecedents of political engagement (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013; Hochman & Garcia-Albacete, 2019). Blais and St-Vincent conclude in their research that political interest is one of the strongest determinants for voting intentions and describe interest as "the best individual-level predictor of perceiving high benefits and low cost in voting, as well as having an opinion about which is the best candidate or party in an election" (p.395). This is in line with the argument by Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013), who propose that low participation rates in political activities among the youth can be attributed to a lack of political interest. Interest is a common explanatory variable for political behaviour (Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013), and has also been labelled as a "prerequisite for an active and democratic citizenry" (Hochman & Garcia-Albacete, 2019, p.257). Previous research shows that successful development of political interest during young adulthood, often aided by education, can provide an indication whether individuals are likely to be politically engaged during their adulthood (Hochman & Garcia-Albacete, 2019).

2.1.1 Youth political participation

While political interest, and thus education, are considered antecedents of political engagement, the issue of decreasing voter turnout among adolescents exists even among those with rich education regarding political socialization. However, Manning (2014) argues that young adults are not absent from the political dimension and demonstrate high interest in current societal issues and campaigns. Even though the youth may be absent from formal political participation (i.e., voting), studies regarding youth political engagement show that

young people are engaged in a variety of alternative forms of political participation, such as demonstrations (e.g., Fridays for Future), online petitions, boycotting of products, and engagement in online discussions (Ponts, Henn & Griffiths, 2019; Sloam, 2016; Mannerström, Lönngvist & Leikas, 2017; Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Osman, Miranda & Jourde, 2020). Further, Soler-i-Marti (2015) describes that the emergence of political protests and political boycotting (e.g., of animal products) as forms of participation over recent decades can be attributed to the youngest generations, who play a central part in these forms of political participation. Hence, adolescents, while still interested in politics, seek out alternative, none-electoral, ways to traditional participation. This can be attributed to a development in the way the youth interacts with the political dimension, which focuses on an informal approach to supporting personal causes issue-based activities (Mannerström, Lönngvist & Leikas, 2017; Osman, Miranda & Jourde, 2020). While young adults show interest in the political dimensions, their engagement with non-institutionalized forms of political participation does not alleviate the issue of lacking voter turnout and misrepresentation of adolescents in society.

2.1.2 Personalization of politics

Although adolescents are actively engaging with politics, their absence in traditional electoral campaigns and participation most noticeably affects democracy. With the diversification and continuous individualization of younger generations, Sloam (2016) described the emergence of personalization of politics. Political engagement is driven by individual-based motivation, such as experiences, emotions, and social justice commitments (Mannerström, Lönngvist & Leikas, 2017; Sloam, 2016), which is in line with the support of personal causes and alternatives to traditional participation, such as the Friday for Future demonstrations. The factors of individual-based motivation does not prelude to selfish motivations, but can include empathetic feelings towards experiences of other people, which, for example, led to the emergence of rallies against social injustices (Mannerström, Lönngvist & Leikas, 2017). Young adults focus their political participation efforts toward change-oriented campaigns to solve matters that affect them. While change-oriented activism is gaining importance, and the motives and interests of young citizens becomes increasingly diverse, politicians are no longer able to sufficiently engage and represent these citizens (Sloam, 2016). Especially with the emergence of social media, mainstream politicians widely fail to adapt to new forms of communications and are thus unable to address the concerns of the younger generation (Sloam, 2014). Hence, it is necessary to examine the effects social networks have on the

political dimension and how they change the interaction between political candidates and young voters. In order to mobilize the youth to vote, their engagement with online political campaigns is insightful. With increasing focus on personal causes and online campaigns, methods are necessary to translate this engagement into offline voting participation.

2.2 Social networks

Scholars have hypothesized that the lower level of political engagement among young people is being driven by political inattentiveness (Anderson & Stephenson, 2018). However, the example of the 2008 American presidential election demonstrated that young people can be mobilized to vote. During Obama's first election, voting turnout for young adults (18 to 24) was higher than it has been since 1972 (Anderson & Stephenson, 2018). Barack Obama's campaign was successful due to his usage of social media in order to gather data about potential voters, which was then used for behavioural modelling to directly approach potential voters, especially young adults (Bimber, 2014). Thus, it is crucial for politicians to understand how to mobilize adolescents. Anderson and Stephenson (2018) argue that social environments can motivate young citizens and impact their political attitudes, thus, in order to mobilize young voters, political discussion should be moved to social networks to encourage youth political engagement.

Research shows that social context considerably affects political engagement within adolescents, as climates of open discussion allow people to inform themselves about political issues. Having sufficient access to information and discussion of such encourages the development of political opinions, which strongly predicts further participation in institutionalized activities such as voting (Anderson & Stephenson, 2018; Wray-Lake, 2019; Hao, Wen & George, 2014). Regarding the prospect of finding information, findings by Anderson and Stephenson (2018) suggest that social networks facilitate a place for discussion among young people, which, in the context of political exchange, is beneficial to increasing political encouragement. According to Baumgartner and Morris (2010), young adults are using social networks to participate in politics (i.e., discussing politics among peers and interaction with candidates (Wray-Lake, 2019)) and as a source for political news (Hao, Wen & George, 2014), allowing a generation that has been alienated from traditional politics to engage with this dimension in their preferred language and medium. Hence, social media networks offer a place for politicians to learn about the political behaviours of the youth and their political interests, in order to gather information and appeal to them and include their issues in campaign programs.

2.2.1 Social media networks

Social media offer constant updates about political news to young adults, as well as allowing them to interact with varying opinions. This presents the political landscape to young adults in a manner more suited to those feeling underrepresented by traditional politics. The way social media facilitates engagement with politics for young adults can increase their political participation (Zhu, Chan & Chou, 2019; Hao, Wen & George, 2014). More specifically, Marquart, Ohme and Möller (2020) state in their research that 50% of young adults use social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter for news consumption and to discuss happenings in different countries. Due to the importance new media has in shaping the social life of 'digital natives', social media can be used to facilitate electronic political participation in order to encourage the youth to engage (Hao, Wen & George, 2014). Apart from forms of participation such as online voting and opinion surveys that aim to facilitate democratic participation (Hao, Wen & George, 2014), Xenos and Moy (2007) show that online campaign information facilitated information seeking among young adults, which positively influenced future political engagement for those interested in these campaigns. Therefore, social media networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have become the new communication medium politicians use in an effort to appeal to young voters (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2016). Utilizing the dynamic nature of social networks and the potential for interactive discussion, politicians have been presented the opportunity to modify their communication to present themselves as representatives of the experience of adolescents (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2016). Zhu, Chan and Chou (2019) elaborated further that available information influenced potential voters' perception of political candidates and that interactions positively predicted future offline political participation. Hence, party leaders and candidates in electoral campaigns have built and maintain their social media presence, using portals like Twitter and YouTube to engage the alienated youth through various forms of media and entertainment (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Street, Inthorn & Scott, 2012).

2.3 Personalized politics

With the emergence of political debate within social media networks, the concern about youths' continuous withdrawal from traditional political participation has gradually been replaced by a sense of hope for new media to kindle political engagement among young people anew (Bennett, 2012). With the emergence of political debate on social media, communication styles used by politicians are changing, emphasizing the development towards personalized politics (Meeks, 2017; McGregor, 2018). However, while there is hope for this

new style of politics to engage adolescents, personalized politics have a bad reputation among scholars for being ‘candidate-centred’ (Meeks, 2017; van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer, 2012; McGregor, 2018). It has been argued that the focus of electoral candidates’ personas would trivialize politics by shifting the focus away from political parties and programs toward emotional-based evaluation of politicians and their ideas, which is seen as irrational decision-making (McGregor, 2018; Caprara, 2007; Garzia, 2011). Nonetheless, there is empirical evidence that suggests that personalization enhances engagement by appealing to a broad spectrum of voters online, who reply to and discuss the material (McGregor, 2018). Thus, it is possible to analyse the ways in which online engagement with personalized politics affects adolescents’ voting intentions.

Loader, Vromen & Xenos (2016) further elaborate that the use of social media by politicians opens up the traditional political dimension to a personalized approach towards politics, which could allow for more socially inclusive and democratizing forms of politics as compared to the traditional, rigid political practices that pose heavy limitations for younger generations and excluded them from the political system (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2016).

Personalized politics is an umbrella term that includes several different communication strategies. Larsson (2019) describes the most common type of personalization that is being studied in literature, which is privatization. Privatization emphasizes that politicians are ordinary humans, which includes efforts taken to portray the politician as a private individual, rather than as the representative of political affiliations. Another major type of personalization commonly found in political science studies is described by Pedersen and Rahat (2019), in that an individual candidate becomes more important than the party they belong to. This strongly relates to the strategies of image marketing and celebrity politics, which, according to Street (2012), are the means by which politicians use social media and insights from cultural studies to communicate with citizens, which demonstrates a shift in the contemporary political dimension away from traditional governance. The shift that politicians underwent toward the role of ‘celebrities’ allows for closer interaction with potential voters, aiming to get closer to the youth, as people tend to support those they can identify with (Madore, 2009).

While political sciences emphasize personalized politics in relation to the political candidate itself, there is a research gap concerning the personalization of electoral campaigns themselves to target young audiences. Although the new communication medium of social networks lends itself to facilitate discussion between politicians and potential voters, so that candidates can adjust their campaigns to appeal to a wider audience, studies about this topic in

relation to youth turnout is scarce. This is in line with the statements made by Marquart, Ohme and Möller (2020), who argue that political candidates do not use social media platforms to their full potential, even though the process of familiarizing oneself with candidates and their issue positions via social media can increase political engagement and voting intentions among the youth. Further, the authors state that personal interests shape the experience of information gathering online, which demonstrates the potential of addressing these interests for campaigns.

Young adults engage with politics in a manner that is based on ethical principles that affect their daily lives (Soler-i-Marti, 2015). This demonstrates a shift away from traditional political interests and concerns (e.g., socio-economic, national, religious) towards a diverse dimension of political conflicts affecting everyday life including, for example, gender, the environment and food consumption (Soler-i-Marti, 2015). This shift in interests also serves to explain the cause-oriented engagement of the youth. Thus, whether young adults' personal concerns are being addressed is crucial to increasing support and vote intentions (Caprara, 2007; McGregor, 2018). Garzia (2011) illustrates that pre-campaign market research can be employed in order to identify salient societal concerns in order to shape candidates' image according to the desires of potential voters. Meeks (2017) describes that personalized campaign websites made participants feel as though politicians were open to their ideas and issues, which positively affected subsequent evaluations of the politician. This is in line with the role of social media and the way reality is presented in a personalized manner there (i.e., predictive algorithms, targeted advertisements based on preferences and search histories) (McGregor, 2018). With more aspects of reality being personalized, it is natural for the political dimension to evolve in a way that includes personalization to engage potential voters.

2.3.1 Voting intention

While scholarship describes the effects of personalized politics on online engagement and alignment with political candidates, the aspect of offline voting intentions, especially among adolescents, has not been studied in detail. Enli and Skogerbo (2013) mention that social media allows candidates to involve potential voters in discussions to mobilize them for upcoming elections, as social media provides a space to reach young adults, specifically, when compared to traditional media. The effects of this direct communication on voting intentions are not being studied, however.

One distinct instance of personalized political communication being used to address young voters was Obama's re-election in 2012. Bimber (2014) mentions that his communication

campaign resulted in mobilization of voters, however, the use of big data and behavioural modelling is not a viable step to take in political campaigns nowadays due to online privacy regulations. Similarly, Bajaj (2017) describes the case study of the 2014 Indian General Elections, during which the use of Twitter helped politicians to appeal to young voters. The winning party used social media in order to “deliver targeted messages that aligned and resonated with voter preferences” (Bajaj, 2017, p.258), which positively affected their outcome during the election. The winning party was able to mobilize the youth to vote by assigning importance to their beliefs, values, and ideas and adjusting communication in a manner that is appropriate to the social climate (Bajaj, 2017). However, the results of this case study may be uniquely affected by the, at this juncture, uniqueness of a political party using social media, which allowed them to set the political agenda and gain advantage over rival parties.

With the knowledge provided by previous research regarding the possibilities personalized politics provide to electoral campaigns, the following research model and hypotheses have been proposed in an effort to answer the research question.

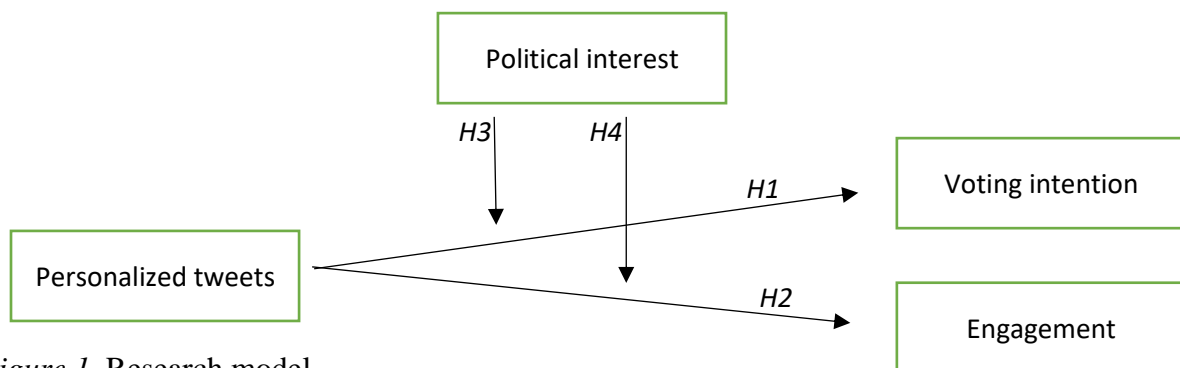


Figure 1. Research model

H1 Personalized messages during political campaigns have a positive effect on young adult's voting intentions.

H2 Personalized messages during political campaigns have a positive effect on young adult's political engagement.

H3 Political interest has a moderating effect on the relationship between personalized messages and voting intentions.

H4 Political interest has a moderating effect on the relationship between personalized messages and political engagement.

3 Research Methodology

In order to test the research model, an experiment with two conditions was designed. The two conditions differed in terms of the stimulus that was presented to participants. The first condition included personalized political tweets that were shown to participants. These personalized tweets were designed to appeal to participants' interest in political topics and explicitly addressed this interest in a way that emphasized that this topic would be included in the politician's campaign. The second condition was composed of a control group, in which the stimulus consisted of non-personalized tweets. The stimuli used in this condition consisted of general messages politicians use on social media that do not explicitly deal with any of the societal issues young adults are concerned about. Based on the stimuli participants perceived, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire by indicating their voting intentions and engagement toward the political candidate. In the following, the research will be explained in detail.

3.1 Procedure

The experiment was conducted as an online questionnaire in Qualtrics. Additionally to using the SONA research management system, a link to the survey was sent to potential participants within the personal network of the researcher, who were asked to share the survey link to their respective networks, thus making use of the snowballing sampling technique.

Participants were being told that they would see several tweets that were taken from an unnamed politician's campaign. Participants were asked to read these tweets carefully and answer several questions regarding their attitudes towards political engagement and potential voting intentions with the content of the tweets in mind. Finally, some socio-demographic questions, such as age, gender, and educational background were asked. At the end of the experiment, participants were thoroughly debriefed about the true nature of the experiment. It was clearly stated that participants are able to opt-out of the study, should they no longer want their data to be recorded.

After an introduction, which first introduced a false aim of the study to participants in order to ensure that their consequent answers would not be influenced by the topic, participants were randomly assigned to one out of two conditions. The conditions were equally distributed with a randomizer, thus, participants would either be assigned to the control group and see the stimuli material that included general tweets, with no specific political topic addressed, or they would be exposed to political tweets addressing a particular

topic. Before interacting with the stimuli, participants were asked to indicate their degree of political interest and choose one political topic of interest out of a list of three topics (i.e., global warming, the refugee crisis, and healthcare). The three topics were chosen by the researcher based on the current political climate and societal concerns at the time of the creation of the survey. However, Further, to distract participants from the significance of their choice regarding a political topic and the subsequent stimuli material, this first section of the instrument also included a section that, as is described to the participants, aims to identify their personality type. Therefore, items have been adapted from Russo and Amna (2016) and Gosling, Rentfrow and Swann (2003) that relate to the Big Five personality types. As this part was added to deceive participants about the true aim of the study, these items were not part of the analysis, as the data was inconsequential to the research question.

During the second part of the study and based on the indication of interest in a current political issue of the participant, stimuli material was presented. Here, participants that were allocated to the personalized group would see a selection of tweets specifically addressing their indicated topic of interest. Participants within the control group were shown general, non-personalized tweets instead. A selection of the stimuli can be seen in *Figure 2* below. After having seen the stimuli, participants were asked to complete the last part of the study, which included questions regarding their voting intentions and political engagement. All items were measured by a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The complete questionnaire can be found in *Appendix II*.

Non-personalized tweets



Personalized tweets



Figure 2. Examples of the stimuli used for each condition.

3.1.1 Stimuli material

In order to create the stimuli material, a selection of realistic politicians' tweets, posted on Twitter.com, were used as inspiration and manipulated by the researcher in a manner conducive to the experiment. Factors such as name, profile picture, and date were altered in order to prevent recognizability. The corpus of tweets included five tweets that did not address any political topics as such, which acts as the stimulus for the control group, and another five that dealt with a current societal topic of interest that are to be used for the experimental condition. The tweets used for the experimental condition were further altered, so that the mentioned topic could be replaced with one of three varying topics of interest – global warming, the refugee crisis, and healthcare concerns – without introducing any additional factors.

The stimuli have been chosen based on credibility, meaning that participants should evaluate the tweets to be real and posted by politicians during their campaigns. Factors such as engagement with the tweet were taken into account, as well as the checkmark behind the person's name that verifies the Twitter account. Regarding the content, for the control group, material was chosen that, while part of an electoral campaign, is featureless. There are neither distinct appeals to any target group nor mentions of specific societal issues the politician aims to target. The stimuli for this group were meant to replicate the content that leaves young adults feeling as though politicians do not represent them or their interests. For the personalized condition, the stimuli should counteract the feeling of young adults feeling under-represented, by explicitly addressing a societal issue that is of interest to them. A selection of tweets was chosen that explicitly mentioned a political topic in an active way, which were then manipulated to fit the topics participants were asked to choose from (e.g., climate change).

The complete list of stimuli material can be found in *Appendix I*.

3.1.2 Manipulation Check

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure that the stimulus material between the two groups has been effectively manipulated. Therefore, participants were asked two questions in relation to the material they have observed to gauge whether they perceived the tweets to be personally relevant to them, and whether the candidate, who composed the tweets, understands their interest. Thus, the items '*I consider these tweets to be important to me*' and '*The candidate seems to understand my concerns*' were added by the researcher.

A t-test was conducted to check the significance of the manipulation, hence, whether the independent variable personalization was perceived as such among participants within the relevant condition. The t-test demonstrated that there was a significant effect for the manipulation $t(145) = 4.5, p = .000$ between the intervention ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.21$) and the control group ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.51$). Thorough analysis of the manipulation check showed that 29 participants failed the manipulation check, nonetheless, the significant effect demonstrated that the manipulation was perceived as intended.

3.1.3 Measures

This instrument served to collect data for several measures. Political engagement and voting intentions served as dependent variables, while political interest was used as a moderator variable. In order to ensure the internal consistency of the constructs, a reliability analysis was performed by computing the Cronbach's alpha. An alpha score of $>.70$ has been adapted for acceptable reliability.

Engagement. The scale for measuring political engagement consisted of four items ($\alpha = .71$). The items used for this scale, for example '*I believe political engagement to be important to society*' and '*I would express my support for this candidate*' were adapted from an existing scale created by Eckstein, Noack & Gniewosz (2012). The scale adapted from the authors included one item that did not reliably measure political engagement during the factor and reliability analyses. Hence, the item '*My participation in politics is necessary to influence political decisions*' has been removed from the construct. Nonetheless, political engagement could be measured reliably.

Voting intention. This construct consisted of two items ($\alpha = .89$), namely '*I would like this candidate to run in the next election*' and '*I would vote for this candidate if he ran in the next election*', which were taken from the scale developed by Lee and Oh (2012).

Political interest. The moderator political interest was constructed with three items ($\alpha = .78$). Two items were developed by previous research from Russo and Amna (2016), which includes the items '*I am interested in politics*' and '*I am interested in what is happening in society*'. The third item '*I regularly follow the news*' has been added by the researcher.

3.2 Pre-test

Prior to publishing the questionnaire to participants, a pre-test was conducted to ensure that all items were understandable and that the true aim of the study was not apparent to participants, hence, that the deviation of the personality test was acting as intended and that subsequent

attitudes towards the stimulus were not biased. Further, the pre-test was used to determine whether the stimulus material was perceived as intended. Two students (24 and 25) were contacted via Skype and asked to think-aloud while completing the survey. It became apparent that all items were easy to understand, however, input was given regarding the sequence of questions. Based on the insights given by one participant, the order of the questionnaire starts with participants being asked to indicate their degree of political interest and choose a political topic of interest, and then being presented with the questions regarding personality. Therefore, the second participant did not report that they did not expect the true aim of the study before having had read the debrief. Therefore, the deviation from the true aim of the study worked, ensuring that answers regarding the political candidate and voting intentions were unbiased. Further, the students were asked to evaluate the stimulus material. Each student was assigned to one condition of the experiment to test the stimuli. The participants described the stimuli as intended, with the personalized tweets seeming personal and relevant to the student, while the participant in the control group mentioned that the tweets felt shallow expressionless. Based on these insights, the survey was deemed functional and was distributed to participants.

3.3 Participants

The sample of this study consists of 147 participants, who were evenly distributed among the experimental conditions, with 72 participants having been subjected to personalized stimuli, and 75 participants within the control group. The age range of participants goes from 18 to 28, with the average being 22 years ($M = 22.18$, $SD = 2.77$). There is an even distribution among gender, with 73 (50%) male participants and 67 (45.9%) female participants. Six participants (4.1%) indicated 'Other', and one participant did not fill out this question. Regarding educational level, the majority of participants (53.1%) indicated having graduated from high school, with the next most prominent group having obtained a bachelor's degree (29.9%).

There was a statistical even distribution of participants among conditions. The mean age for the personalized condition was 22.51, while the mean age for the control group was 21.87. As for gender, there were 36 male participants in the personalized condition and 37 within the control group. Similarly, there were 34 female participants in the personalized condition and 33 within the control group.

Apart from age being the main requirement, as the study focusses on young adults, students were approached to take part in the study in order to measure political interest. While political interest has been described as a crucial antecedent of political participation, previous

literature mentioned education as a factor that influences political interest (Eckstein, Noack & Gniewosz, 2012; Witschge & van de Werfhorst, 2019). According to Mannerström, Lönngvist and Leikas (2017), an interplay of personal, social, as well as economic factors is necessary for political engagement to evolve among the youth. Hence, a school environment fostering open discussion can positively influence adolescents' attitudes toward the political system, which reflects in their interest regarding political engagement. Hence, as students are proposed to have had the highest degree of political socialization, their political interest should be developed accordingly. In order to test the moderation effect of political interest, students are the optimal participants due to their previous education.

4 Results

This chapter presents the results of the statistical analyses of collected data. Analyses of variance were conducted to explore the effects of personalized stimuli on voting intentions and political engagement. Additionally, a regression analysis was performed to test for moderation effects of political interest on the relation between personalized messages and the two dependent variables.

4.1 Analysis of Variance

For the following analyses, the general linear model was used and an alpha level of .05 was adopted for all analyses. In order to explore the relationship between personalized stimulus, voting intentions and engagement, and analysis of variance was conducted. Using the experiment conditions (personalized vs. not personalized) as independent variable and voting and engagement as dependent variables, the following results can be reported.

There was a significant main effect of the personalized stimulus on voting intentions, $F(1, 145) = 26.28, p = .000$. The group subjected to personalized stimuli had, on average, a higher mean score on voting intentions ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.27$) than the control group ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.37$). Further, the difference between the two groups was significant, with an estimated effect of 1.12 points on a 7-point Likert scale on voting intentions for participants who saw personalized stimuli. This is in line with H1, therefore, supporting the hypothesis.

For the second dependent variable, engagement, a significant main effect of the personalized stimulus has been found, $F(1, 145) = 19.62, p = .000$. The group with personalized stimuli reported a higher average mean score ($M = 5.16, SD = 0.82$) than the control group ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.12$) regarding political engagement. The difference between the two groups is significant, with an estimated effect of 0.72 points within the group with personalized stimuli. These results indicate support for the hypothesis H2.

Additional linear regression analyses have been conducted in order to test whether political interest acts as a moderating variable to the relationship between personalized stimuli and voting and engagement. In the analysis with voting intentions as the dependent variable and political interest as a moderator, there was less variance accounted for in this model ($R^2 = .13$) than there was in the model without the moderator ($R^2 = .14$), with a non-significant moderation, $p = .711$. Thus, there is no support for hypothesis H3, which, therefore, is rejected. The same phenomenon was observed for the analysis with engagement as the dependent variable and political interest as a moderator, with less variance accounted for in

this model ($R^2 = .11$) than in the model without a moderation effect ($R^2 = .15$), with the moderator being non-significant, $p = .966$. Therefore, H4 must be rejected as well. Among the two conditions, the average scores for political interest were similar among the personalized ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.27$) and not personalized ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.32$) condition.

Table 1. *Overview of support for hypotheses.*

Hypothesis	Result
H1	Supported
H2	Supported
H3	Rejected
H4	Rejected

5 Discussion

5.1 Main findings

The research question of this study was *to what extent do personalized political messages affect offline voting intentions among young adults?*. To answer this question, the hypotheses that were formulated are being evaluated based on whether they were supported by the data analysis. Then, the results will be used to provide a general overview on the inferences that can be made about personalized democracy in society and how it can be used to solve the issue of decreasing youth voter turnout.

First, it was expected that personalized messages have a positive effect on political engagement and voting intentions among young adults. As both hypotheses were supported by data, it can be concluded that personalized campaign communication that targets young adults by appealing to their issues and interests is indeed useful for mobilizing the youth. These findings are in line with the foundations of the theoretical framework, with Meeks (2017) elaborating that personalized campaigns by means of addressing potential voters concerns made them feel as if politicians were invested in their interests, which increased evaluations of the candidate and their political stance. This also serves as a way to solve the issue of young voters not being represented by the political system, which was one of the drivers leading to young adults being alienated from the formal political dimension (Sloam, 2016; Barret & Pachi, 2019).

Secondly, as several scholars have emphasized the importance of political interest as a predictor of political engagement in previous literature, hypotheses 3 and 4 proposed that political interest would have a moderating effect on the relationship between personalized messages and the dependent variables. These hypotheses were not supported by data and, thus, had to be rejected. While political interest has been considered crucial in political studies for decades, with Zaglovits and Zandonella (2013) arguing that the youth's low participation in formal politics can be attributed to a lack of political interest, there are scholars who contest that positioning. Manning (2014) proposes that a lack of political interest is not the salient issue of decreasing voting turnout, as young adults indeed demonstrate a high interest in societal issues and are engaged in alternative ways of political engagement, such as activism. Therefore, while political interest is certainly crucial to interact with the political dimension in general, it is not a reliable antecedent of mobilizing the youth. This is further emphasized by the non-significant moderation effect of political interest on voting intentions and engagement behaviour.

Regarding the information provided by previous literature and the results of the data analysis, it can be concluded that democratic societies suffering from increasing withdrawal of the youth from formal political activities can benefit from political candidates effectively using personalized campaign communication. As demonstrated by literature, young adults are indeed not apathetic to politics. The youth merely engages in ways that seems most conducive to their change-oriented approach to politics, rather than being invested in traditional political discussions focussing on socio-economic differences, for example. There is a clear shift in the political trajectories that are salient among the youth and among older generations, which aligns with the emergence of social media as the new tool for individuals to receive political information without the added influence of traditional media (Marquart, Ohme & Möller, 2020). While political interest is certainly a driver of political engagement, the interpretation that decreasing voting turnout can be traced back to the youth being disinterested does not seem to account for this shift away from formal political participation, hence, it can be theorized that the effects of personalized messages on voting intentions is greater than the effect of interest. Altogether, in the age of digital media and social networks, in order to combat decreasing turnout, it is necessary to mobilize the youth by adapting to their activism, which brings forth the importance of introducing personalized democracies. Innovating personalized communication campaigns by understanding the political movement of the youth and including it in the political program, as well as using traditional media to address formal political concerns, could lead to greater mobilization of the youth.

5.2 Limitations and future research

There were limitations to this research that need to be considered, however, they will act as a starting point to provide recommendations for further research. The first limitation deals with the method of data collection itself. Using a quantitative survey, while allowing for a greater sample to collect data from, does not provide any in-depth detail about participants' attitudes and intentions. While data analysis demonstrated significant main effects of personalization on voting intentions and engagement, this research would have benefitted from information about participants' motivations and thoughts when confronted with the stimuli material and how it affected them. Thus, it is strongly recommended to study the topic of personalized political campaigns that aim to target young audiences further, and to include qualitative research to get in contact with this target audience. If it is possible to answer the question as to why they would want to support a candidate, and to what extent their voting intentions would

likely translate to actual behaviours, more specific recommendations can be given to society as a whole in an effort to balance out the democratic landscape.

A second limitation stems from the sampling strategy used within this research, which was snowball sampling. Due to this strategy, the dataset consists of a more homogenous sample than would be required to ensure representativeness of young adults and, thus, not allowing for reliable inferences. As the survey link was spread through personal networks, participants were mainly university students or graduates, which leaves a considerable proportion of young adults unaccounted for. It would be recommended to conduct further study which includes young adults with various degrees of education and use the research simultaneously to test the construct of political interest more extensively. Another issue of this sampling strategy is that young adults from more than one democracy, which could have an affect on the validity of the research. Manning (2014) explains that the contexts of engaging with politics differ extensively from country to country. Thus, to control for any outside factors, such as varying political systems, not included in the model, it is recommended to continue further research country-wise in order to investigate the respective political system more thoroughly.

Next to the limitations, recommendations can also be made for future research. It is strongly recommended to continue efforts to explore personalized politics and how young adults interact with them. With this study having demonstrated that personalized politics do indeed affect voting intentions, future research can be made to explore this area more thoroughly, such as the effects of party identification or established viewpoints can have on personalized politics. Additionally, within the dimension of personalized politics, it is recommended to conduct quantitative research with young adults in order to gain insights into their thoughts regarding politicians representing them and including their interests in political campaigns. Conducting extensive, semi-structured interviews with young adults, allows the participants to elaborate on their thoughts about what constitutes as personalized political messages to them, and how they should be implemented by political candidates to seem credible. These insights could significantly enrich the literature regarding personalized politics and how to utilize them to encourage young adults to vote. Further, it is recommended that the concept of youth political engagement is being studied in a way that includes the political activism of the youth as part of their engagement. With this study having measured engagement among young adults reliably, future steps can be taken to broaden the conceptualization of political engagement beyond formal politics.

5.3 Conclusion

This paper started out by illustrating the issue of decreasing voter turnout among young adults in Western democracies. Due to democracy as a concept depending on political participation of all legal adults in order to remain representative, this poses a salient issue to society as a whole. Using previous literature, the role of young adults in the political dimension has been illuminated, explaining that adolescents are not apathetic to or uninterested in politics, but rather feel underrepresented by formal politics and have, thus, been alienated from institutionalized political engagement. Young adults do, however, engage in alternative forms of politics that lends itself to the ethical, individual-based societal issues the youth is concerned about, as well as mobilized several change-oriented activism campaigns and other alternative forms of political engagement (e.g., Fridays for Future, the BlackLivesMatter movement, Pride Parade, etc.). With individual-based motives being main factors in youth's politics, hypotheses for a research model have been created, where personalized messages during political campaigns are proposed to increase political engagement and voting intentions among the youth.

After having conducted the data analysis, it became apparent that personalized politics are an important factor in appealing to the youth and mobilizing them to engage in formal politics (i.e., voting). In line with the shift that moved media consumption and news coverage away from traditional forms of media towards social media networks, the younger generations greatly value action-based and change-oriented forms of interactive political activism over traditional politics as is still being practiced by older generations. However, as the youngest generations grow older, should the generational gap not be bridged until then and young adults are continuously being alienated from formal politics, the concept of democracy itself is being threatened. Hence, personalized democracy seems to be the political communication strategy that should become more salient in today's age. If political candidates take the initiative to understand and align themselves with the activism of the youth, therefore aiming to represent the young and give their voices meaning, there is evidence that the young are more likely to engage and vote in elections. Due to young adults using alternative forms of political engagement to make their voice become heard, politicians hearing and responding to them could be the first step to re-introducing this generation to formal politics.

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Appendix I

Stimuli Material

Stimuli – Climate change



Follow

We won't ignore the issues of climate change.

5:39 PM - 12 Mar 2020

204,000 Retweets 300,000 Likes

7.8K 204K 300K



Follow



Follow






Follow



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Stimuli – Healthcare





[Follow](#)



Today I invited children from across our country to ask me their questions about the future of our country.

We spoke about public healthcare, education, science, tech and much more

7:49 PM - 30 Jan 2020

46,000 Retweets 170,000 Likes


 4.9K  46K  170K 

[Follow](#)

We won't ignore the effects of this unprecedented pandemic and economic crisis.

5:39 PM - 12 Mar 2020

204,000 Retweets 300,000 Likes

 7.8K  204K  300K 

[Follow](#)

The pandemic represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day.

4:57 PM - 27 Mar 2020

83,000 Retweets 124,000 Likes

 5.3K  83K  124K 




[Follow](#)

If we're serious about facing the virus, we can't just talk the talk, we've got to walk the walk and take on powerful special interests

9:46 AM - 12 Mar 2020

17,000 Retweets 72,600 Likes





 8.3K  17K  72K 

[Follow](#)


Coronavirus will not be solved by those driven by private profit.
It will be solved by the bravery of NHS workers on the frontline.
By communities coming together in all their diversity.
By the Government taking bold action in the interests of all.

5:39 PM - 27 Mar 2020

102,000 Retweets 129,000 Likes

 1.8K  102K  129K 

Stimuli – Refugee crisis



Follow

We won't ignore the refugee crisis.

5:39 PM - 12 Mar 2020

204,000 Retweets 300,000 Likes

7.6K 204K 300K



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Stimuli – Control group



Appendix II

Questionnaire

All items use a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree

I am interested in politics

I am interested in what is happening in society

I regularly follow the news

I see myself as:

Extraverted, enthusiastic

Considerate, kind

Reliable, self-disciplined

Anxious, easily upset

Open to new experiences, curious

Reserved, quiet

Sympathetic, warm

Disorganized, careless

Calm, emotionally stable

Conventional, uncreative

I consider these tweets to be important to me

The candidate seems to understand my concerns

I believe political engagement to be important to society

My participation in politics is necessary to influence political decisions

My voice is represented in politics

I would express my support for the candidate

I would like this candidate to run in the next election

I would vote for this candidate if he ran in the next elections

Age

Gender

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

Appendix III

Search log

Research question: To what extent to personalized political messages affect offline voting intentions among young adults?

Date	Source? Database (db), Book (b), Internet (url)	Search terms and strategies (Search profile incl. Boolean operators)	How many hits (how many relevant)	Related terms/authors	Notes
10.03	Scopus	personalization AND politics	333 (not many relevant results)	Celebrity politics, Image-marketing, personalization	Personalization in this case often refers to a particular politician, does not relate to the RQ
10.03	Google Scholar	"personalized politics"	34.600 – sorted by relevance and since 2016 (not many relevant results)		The search query needs to be more specific
10.03	Google Scholar	"personalized politics" AND youth	82.300 – sorted by relevance and since 2016 (first three pages offered relevant results)	Social networks, engagement, political activism	More results regarding personalized messages and appealing to the youth. Many results already linked with social media and political activism of the youth
03.06	Google Scholar	"political interest" AND youth	2.780.000 – sorted by relevance and since 2016 (first two pages offered good results)	Political engagement	Search was used for additional information, offered relevant information regarding political interest among young adults and personalization