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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Henn, M., Sloam, J., & Nunes, A. (2021). Young cosmopolitans and environmental politics: how postmaterialist values inform and shape youth engagement in environmental politics. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1994131>

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To cite this article: Matt Henn, James Sloam & Ana Nunes (2021): Young cosmopolitans and environmental politics: how postmaterialist values inform and shape youth engagement in environmental politics, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2021.1994131](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1994131)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1994131>



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YOUNG PEOPLE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

 OPEN ACCESS



Young cosmopolitans and environmental politics: how postmaterialist values inform and shape youth engagement in environmental politics

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ABSTRACT

Many of today's young people are politically engaged and increasingly supportive of progressive political causes. This is most evident in the youth leadership of the Green wave of environmental activism that gathered momentum in 2019. However, we know surprisingly little about the values that drive this mobilisation. In this article, we investigate the link between environmental activism and the emergence of 'young cosmopolitans' as a political force. Using data from the 2017 European Values Study, we analyse the views of 1,546 18-25-year-olds across ten established European democracies. We find that postmaterialist values, cosmopolitan attitudes and engagement in environmental politics are closely connected; young cosmopolitans are very civically and politically active; and, young environmental activists are particularly likely to be female with high educational attainment levels. Conversely, a significant minority of European youth (disproportionately male with lower educational attainment) are more materialist and nationalist. In the discussion, we explore the role of education and the need to re-think the climate emergency locally – connecting threats to the environment to challenges young people face in their everyday lives. We also explain how the persistence of postmaterialist values amongst younger generations through the Great Recession, suggests that the Green wave will continue post COVID-19.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 April 2021
Accepted 11 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Youth and politics; political participation; cosmopolitanism; postmaterialism; environmental activism

Introduction

In 2019, the world witnessed a surge in environmental activism that dominated the political headlines. The movement spread across the world – leading to the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of young people in climate strikes from school and spectacularly raising the profile of environmental issues on the political agenda. Green political parties increased their membership and political support, and government ministers were conspicuously eager to meet Greta Thunberg and lay down targets for the reduction of

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carbon emissions. Of course, youth environmental activism was not met with wholesale enthusiasm – action against climate change has become, after all, a key feature of the so-called ‘culture wars’ – but there can be little doubt that the protests transformed the political conversation in the run-up to important United Nations (UN) climate negotiations (leading to the COP26 Climate Conference in Glasgow in November 2021) and demonstrated the effectiveness of emerging forms of political action (led by Generation Z) to a world audience.

The new wave of environmental activism was transformative in the ways it mobilised young people: a dazzling array of participation across multiple arenas and platforms – from community action groups, to protests in city squares, to online global summits – coordinated online and through social networks (Fisher 2019; Pickard 2019; Wahlström et al. 2019; Pickard, Bowman, and Arya 2020). Increasing recognition of a *climate emergency* had facilitated a ‘quickenning of political participation’ – an intensification of political engagement in a time of crisis enabled by ‘digitally networked action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Sloam 2014). #FridaysforFuture was at the centre of this wave. The surge in environmental activism was also transformative in managing to advance ‘the environment’ and ‘climate change’ to the top of young people’s agenda and issue priorities, alongside more traditional economic policy areas. The protests, thus, provided ‘new frames of meaning [...] around which a following could be mobilized’ whilst developing ‘new weapons of social protest’ (Tarrow 1993, 286).

Elsewhere, in this special issue, the articles address youth activism in terms of the political mobilisation of young people and climate change activism. Here, we focus on how this wave of political engagement was embodied by particular values – post-materialism and cosmopolitanism – and the demographic characteristics of the young people who took part, as well as their broader practices of political participation. These questions speak to the nature of its appeal both across generations and within the current generation of young people. Using data from the latest round of the (2017) European Values Study (EVS), we analyze the views of 1,546 18–25-year-olds across ten established European democracies. We recognise that the most recent version of the EVS was conducted prior to the current Green wave of environmental activism and the first school climate strikes. Nonetheless, this is the most recent dataset available and offers us important insights into the interconnectedness of postmaterialist values, cosmopolitanism and youth environmental politics. The results do indeed find evidence of such theoretical and conceptual linkages. Results also indicate that young cosmopolitans and young environmental activists are both very civically and politically active and are particularly likely to be female and have high levels of educational attainment. However, we also find a large ‘education gap’ (in terms of level of educational attainment) between those who share these values and engage in environmental politics and those who do not. These findings highlight the role education plays in broadening and deepening youth engagement in environmental politics (as illustrated by the huge potential of citizen science – see the article from Flanagan and colleagues in this special issue),¹ and also suggest that youth engagement in environmental politics will be sustained in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, in a time of economic hardship.

Postmaterialism and the transformation of political participation

Political participation has changed dramatically over the course of recent decades. One of the main claims is that increased prosperity in postindustrial democracies from the 1960s onwards has created more prosperous and well-educated societies, leading to the individualisation of values and lifestyles and the increasing prevalence of postmaterialist values that emphasise self-expression and quality of life over economic security (Inglehart 1971). The argument is that, since the 1960s, each successive generation has become more oriented towards postmaterialist values (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Abramson 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2019). The knock-on effects for political participation have been profound – the weakening of attachments to and membership of political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012), and the emergence of new generations of ‘critical’ but ‘engaged’ citizens (Norris 2011; Dalton 2015) who prefer to engage in politics on a case-by-case basis with issues and causes that have meaning for their everyday lives (Amnå and Ekman 2014). From a positive perspective, Hay (2007: 154) explains: ‘the rise of post-material values had generated a better-educated, more savvy, less deferential and more critical electorate, less inclined to vote out of habit or out of simple respect for political authority, and less likely to be taken in by politics as a consequence.’ Additionally, younger generations tend to have broader repertoires of participation. Inglehart and Welzel (2005), for example, demonstrated how levels of participation with respect to petitions, boycotts and demonstrations doubled in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Federal Republic of Germany (and increased by around a third in the United States) between the 1970s and the 2000s. Dalton (2017: 93) similarly argues that, if we include other actions such as contacting local government, protesting, petition signing, political consumerism and online participation, ‘the contemporary US public displays a substantially higher level of activity than in the 1960s’. Furthermore, these repertoires for participation have diversified considerably over the past decade. In this respect, the emergence and growth of social media has been critical (Theocharis and Van Deth 2017; Boulianne 2020), allowing people to operationalise individual action frameworks through citizen-to-citizen interactions, from the ballot box, to the street, to social media platforms (Sloam 2014). On a less optimistic note, some authors have pointed out that these non-electoral forms of political engagement and new communication platforms are often dominated by those with more resources – in particular, those with high levels of educational attainment (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010; Sloam 2013). For these reasons, it is important to understand both the values and also the demographic characteristics of young political activists.

Although the political values and practices of today’s young people are unusually coherent as a generation – for example, the gap between support for the Labour Party versus the Conservative Party in the UK grew from around zero in 2010 to over forty percentage points in 2019 (Sloam and Henn 2019) – clearly not all sections of society have become more postmaterialist or engaged in the forms of political action associated with issue-based politics and identity politics. Young people from less well-off backgrounds and those who do not go to higher education are considerably more likely to be put off by politics per se (Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest 2005) or to turn to authoritarian-nationalist candidates, parties and causes. In fact, several authors who noted the decline in youth civic and electoral engagement in the 1990s and early 2000s, pointed

to the growing gap between student participation and the non-participation of students who do not go on to higher education (Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2010) – what Dalton (2017) terms the ‘participation gap’. Others have noted the tendency of young people with low levels of educational attainment (particularly, young, white men) to be more susceptible to authoritarian-nationalist causes (Sloam 2013 and 2014), such as the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump in the United States (2016 and 2020) and Marine Le Pen in France (2018). Whilst the ‘cultural backlash’, described by Norris and Inglehart (2019) as the rise of authoritarian-populist parties (capitalising on economic and cultural grievances, railing against political elites and scapegoating immigrants) is much more common amongst older generations, its appeal does therefore also extend to some groups of young people. So, there is a large ‘education gap’ between the majority of young people who support progressive politics, candidates, parties and causes, and those who are more likely to hold materialist or authoritarian attitudes towards politics. We would expect that these dividing lines are particularly clear to see on the subject of environmental politics. Alongside these trends, it has been argued that the lives of young people in postindustrial democracies have changed fundamentally over several decades – what Sloam and Henn (2019:, 20) refer to as ‘the shifting of tectonic plates’ – which have led to the changes in values and practices of political participation discussed above. Amongst others, these include structural changes in the labour market, ageing societies and democracies, and increasing ethnic diversity. These changes have generated greater ‘risk’ for younger generations in their transition to adulthood (Furlong 2016). However, these risks have multiplied and become more existential over the past decade through successive waves of crises, which – in turn – has politicised young Millennials and Generation Z,² leading to successive waves of political protest. Tarrow (1993) and others (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) emphasise how economic and social change are intimately linked to ‘cycles of protest’ and are a natural feature of political systems. However, Millennials and Generation Z have faced three dramatic crises in quick succession, which are particularly diverse in their causes and effects.

The 2008-2009 financial crisis and the following Great Recession led to sharp increases in youth unemployment and underemployment in most countries (Verick 2011; Bessant, Farthing, and Watts 2017). Furthermore, austerity in public spending placed a disproportionate burden on the younger generations (Henn, Oldfield, and Hart 2018). The Great Recession, thus, created a perfect storm for the mobilisation of the ‘outraged young’ in political protests across the world. In postindustrial democracies, economically left-wing and socially liberal movements arose with great force in 2011 – from Occupy Wall St. to the Spanish Indignados – to express their dissatisfaction with the political (and business) elites (Sloam 2014). These protests had both an economic and a cultural agenda, expressed through an internationalist leaning and approval of immigration and diversity (for example, around three quarters of 18–24 year-olds supported British membership of the European Union (EU) in the 2016 referendum), strong support for postmaterialist issues such as freedom of speech, alongside a preference for redistributive policies (such as increased taxation of high-earners as proposed by Bernie Sanders in the US).

This marked the emergence of young cosmopolitans as a political force, turning away from mainstream electoral politics to new horizontal, non-institutionalized forms of participation, whilst favouring candidates in elections who directly addressed their concerns

(Sloam and Henn 2019). This explains the overwhelming youth support for Jeremy Corbyn in the UK general elections in 2017 and 2019 and for Bernie Sanders in the races for the Democratic nominations in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential races. It also helps to account for the groundswell of support for young candidates with less left-wing but equally social liberal approaches, such as Justin Trudeau in Canada and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand. Sloam and Henn (2019) identify these young cosmopolitans, in demographic terms, as highly likely to have high levels of educational attainment (or to have remained in education beyond the earliest school leaving age), have an ethnic minority background, live in an urban environment, and be female. This article will explore the extent to which young environmental activists share these same characteristics.

The increasing recognition (particularly amongst younger generations)³ that the world was facing a climate emergency in 2018 and 2019, represented a second wave of crisis. Greta Thunberg's actions served, in Tarrow's (1993: 302) terms, to 'break the crust of convention', capturing the political *Zeitgeist*, and providing a model for others to follow. Her lonely protest in front of the Swedish Parliament building in Stockholm spawned a movement that became an international phenomenon in a matter of months, campaigning simultaneously across multiple arenas, across hybrid media systems and also hybrid public spaces (Fisher 2019; Pickard 2019; Wahlström et al. 2019; Mendez 2020). On 20 September 2019, an estimated six million (mostly) young people took part in strikes across 150 countries, including over a million in Germany, and over a quarter of a million in the UK and Australia (Taylor, Watts, and Bartlett 2019). Alongside #FridaysforFuture, as the movement became known, 2019 witnessed the rapid growth (in membership and activity) of direct action networks, such as Extinction Rebellion (Pickard 2019), as well as a large increase in support for Green Parties in parliamentary elections (Pearson and Rüdig 2020). In Germany, for example, the Greens scored 35% amongst 18- to 24-year-olds in the June 2019 European Parliament election – twice as much as the two catch-all parties (Social Democrats and Christian Democrats) combined (Bundeswahlleiter 2019). And, the Greens remained the most popular party amongst under 30s in the 2021 German Federal Election.

There is a significant body of research on the rise of young political activists in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Bessant, Farthing, and Watts 2017; Henn, Oldfield, and Hart 2018), and an emerging literature on youth mobilisation in environmental politics since 2018 (Pickard 2019; Wahlström et al. 2019). This article investigates the extent to which the assumptions made after the first wave of activism are relevant to the second. In other words, are young environmental activists defined by the same postmaterialist values, demographic characteristics and practices of political participation as young cosmopolitans? Can we draw a direct line between the two? These questions have added significance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they will shed light on how youth environmental activism might be sustained in the economic aftermath (which is, and will continue to be, felt most by younger generations). It also raises questions about the intra-generational differences in support amongst the younger generation, and how (if indeed environmental activism is dominated by groups with high levels of educational attainment and strong postmaterialist values) it might be possible to reach out to broader groups of young people.

Values and engagement underpinning environmental engagement and activism

As we have indicated, existing evidence demonstrates that successive generations of young people possess values that are increasingly socially liberal, postmaterialist and cosmopolitan in nature, and also that they are increasingly engaged in environmental politics. Nevertheless, there is little in-depth research on how young people's values and political activities interconnect with one another. This is crucial if we are to understand the persistence (or not) of environmental activism going forward in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we operationalise our key concepts of environmental engagement/activism, postmaterialism and cosmopolitanism (alongside broader attitudes towards politics and repertoires of civic and political engagement) as follows.

Firstly, we operationalise youth 'environmental engagement/activism' quite broadly. Although there is a significant body of research on how environmental activism takes place (Pickard 2019), as well as the demographic characteristics of environmental activists (Gillham 2008), relatively little attention has been paid to pro-environmental values and attitudes (Giugni and Grasso 2015). We examine all three dimensions within the context of a new wave of activism, to see if old explanations still apply and examine how broader values and attitudes (from satisfaction with one's political system, to self-positioning on the left-right spectrum) are reflected in those who are engaged in environmental politics, taking into account potential sociodemographic differences by age, gender, level of educational attainment, employment status and religiosity.⁴ Four items from the European Values Study (EVS) are used to test for environmentalism, including the extent to which young Europeans agreed with the statements: 'It is just too difficult for someone like me to do much about the environment', 'There are more important things to do in life than protect the environment', 'There is no point in doing what I can for the environment unless others do the same', and 'Many of the claims about environmental threats are exaggerated'. Lower scores on this index indicate higher levels of environmentalism. This composite measure exhibited good levels of reliability (Cronbach's Alpha score, $\alpha = .72$).

Environmental politics has been identified as a key pillar of postmaterialist politics (Inglehart 1995), and we wanted to test the empirical basis of this claim within the new wave of environmentalism. Although the postmaterialist thesis has been the subject of considerable debate in recent years (Abramson 2011; Flanagan et al. 2012; Grasso 2014; Brym 2016),⁵ it is widely acknowledged to have offered a significant contribution to the field of social and political value change, and been found to be in evidence in a range of different social, economic and temporal contexts (Janmaat and Braun 2009; Dalton 2015). A number of studies have found links between postmaterialist preferences and people's political participation and political engagement (Copeland 2013; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Theocharis 2011) which have endured even during austerity years following the ongoing global financial crisis (Henn, Oldfield, and Hart 2018). Moreover, we believe that Postmaterialism remains a powerful tool to explain the resurgence of authoritarian-nationalist politics and populist rhetoric after the Great Recession (Norris and Inglehart 2019), but also the surge in environmental activism since 2019. In this article, we use Inglehart's 12-item Postmaterialism index.⁶ We propose to test the veracity of this approach with respect to the structuring of young people's (diversifying) political

behaviour in contemporary European societies – especially of those who are environmentally engaged. In doing so, we follow the work of Henn, Oldfield, and Hart (2018) and Sloam and Henn (2019), but here we aim to specifically examine the extent to which post-materialist values underpin cosmopolitan orientations and environmentalism.

Cosmopolitan values have been identified as a central feature of young people's politics over the past decade (Keating 2016 and 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Sloam and Henn 2019). Whilst, the concept itself is contested (see: Delanty 2012; Lindell 2014), being 'cosmopolitan' is usually understood as supporting cultural difference and diversity, including an urge for moral concern and responsibility for the 'distant other', as well as involving the quest to find mechanisms and institutions for global governance. Our composite index was computed using a total of six variables. Four of those consider participants' trust in people from other religions and those with other nationalities as well as trust in the European Union and the United Nations. We also address the 'moral' dimension of cosmopolitanism (Lindell 2014) through variables that address whether it is important to guarantee basic needs for all and eliminate large income inequalities between citizens (Brock 2013).⁷ Lower scores on this index signify lower levels of cosmopolitanism. The index exhibited acceptable levels of reliability ($\alpha = .64$).

Finally, we wanted to understand how environmental activism, postmaterialism and cosmopolitanism aligned with individuals' broader repertoires of political and civic engagement. We began this aspect of the analysis by exploring young Europeans' participation in and attitudes towards formal politics: voting, interest in politics, satisfaction with the democratic system and self-positioning on the left-right spectrum. Whilst young people are sceptical about mainstream electoral politics (Norris 2011), they remain politically engaged in a wide variety of political activities (Sloam 2013; Dalton 2015). Furthermore, Sloam and Henn (2019) identify left-wing tendencies amongst many of today's young people. We therefore expect young European postmaterialists, cosmopolitans and environmentalists to be relatively critical of politics, located on the left of the political spectrum, and to vote in smaller numbers but to remain civically and political engaged. With that in mind, we tested for young Europeans' participation in voting as well as less formal methods of participation, such as signing a petition, joining a boycott, attending lawful demonstrations, and Joining unofficial strikes⁸ (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). We also considered their humanitarian and charity work, as well as their voluntary work in general, given the potential spill over into environmental activism.⁹ Alongside these action variables, we explored young Europeans' levels of satisfaction with democracy to establish their sense of 'external efficacy' in relation to the country they live in.

Methods

To investigate these research expectations, we use data from the most recent version (round 5) of the European Values Survey (EVS) conducted in 2017.¹⁰ The EVS is a large-scale, cross-national survey research programme that provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of European citizens. Our analyses draw on data from ten of the 30 countries¹¹ included within the EVS that were members of the European Union at the time of this particular wave.

Although the prominent #FridaysforFuture is part of an international movement of young school students involved in climate strikes, we opted for a larger age group in our analysis to include those young people involved in other environmental activist campaigns and (dis)organisations such as the RisingUp! group from which the environmental network Extinction Rebellion emerged in 2018 (Pickard 2019). We therefore selected young people aged 18-25, resulting in a sample of 1,546 usable cases. The large size of this youth sample enables us to explore their political and environmental engagement and participation across various subgroups (such as by gender, educational trajectory and employment status and others) without each of these falling to statistically insignificant levels.¹²

The statistical analyses comprised (i) descriptive analysis of the main characteristics of the sample, (ii) correlational analysis of the main sociodemographic variables to examine the extent to which they are linked to postmaterialism, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism, (iii) chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests to assess which politically-related factors contribute to cosmopolitanism and environmentalism. Finally, a (iv) binary logistic regression analysis was performed to investigate whether postmaterialist-materialist values, as well as key sociodemographic and politically-related variables, can account for additional variance in cosmopolitanism and environmentalism.

The data cleaning process involved inspecting cases with severe missing values (i.e. > 10%) in the variables investigated, which resulted in a total of 1,033 cases being excluded (mainly from the variables measuring cosmopolitanism and environmentalism). In addition, we examined cases with outliers, and this process led to no further cases being deleted. For the regression analysis, assumptions were checked in order to determine the suitability of the data. The variables used in the regression model were checked for multicollinearity by examining the Variation Inflation Factors (VIF). All VIF values were below five and not beyond the threshold of 10, indicating that there was no multicollinearity among the variables (Yan and Su 2009). Finally, the analyses were carried out with design weights (i.e. calibration weights) to correct for potential sample selection bias, and the data cleaning process resulted in a final sample size of 1,546 participants (after applying the weights).

Results

Descriptive statistics

All relevant sociodemographic and politically-related characteristics from the sample are summarised in Table 1. The mean age of the overall sample was 21 years ($SD=2.29$) and there was an equal gender split. With regards to participants' educational level, only 19.8% reported having higher levels of education. Overall, there was a relatively high degree of religiosity across the sample ($M=1.86$ on a five-point scale of 0-4, where 0 indicates *high* religiosity), and the young people were found to be mainly working in paid employment (44.9%) or students (42.4%). In terms of politically-related behaviours, the vast majority (66.6%) reported having always voted in national elections, whilst nearly three quarters of the young people in the sample were classified as having high (15.8%) or medium (57.3%) levels of informal (non-institutionalised) political participation. Respondents self-reported as marginally more left-ist (39.7%) than were right-wing (31.8%). Nearly half of the youth sample indicated that they were interested in politics

Table 1. Sample's main sociodemographic and political behaviour characteristics (N = 1546).

Variable		Dispersion Min. and Max.	Distribution	
			Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)
Gender (female, %)	773 (50)	-	.001 (.062)	-2.003 (.124)
Age (years) (mean, SD)	21.36 (2.29)	18–25	.77 (.06)	-1.997 (.12)
Educational level (n, %)				
Higher	306 (19.8)	-	-.072 (.06)	-.797 (.12)
Medium	840 (54.3)			
Lower	400 (25.9)			
Employment (n, %)				
Paid employment	695 (44.9)	-	.050 (.06)	-1.855 (.12)
No paid employment	195 (12.6)			
Student	656 (42.4)			
Religiosity (mean, SD)	1.86 (1.43)	0–4	.195 (.06)	-1.276 (.12)
Postmaterialism index (n, %)				
Materialist	158 (10.2)	-	-.117 (.06)	-.454 (.12)
Mixed	924 (59.7)			
Postmaterialist	464 (30.0)			
Vote national level (n, %)				
Always	1030 (66.6)	-	1.184 (.06)	-.107 (.12)
Usually	301 (19.5)			
Never	215 (13.9)			
Informal political participation (n, %)				
High political participation	245 (15.8)	-	-.106 (.06)	-.621 (.12)
Medium political participation	886 (57.3)			
Low political participation	416 (26.9)			
Political view (n, %)				
Left	615 (39.7)	-	.150 (.60)	-1.576 (.12)
Middle	439 (28.4)			
Right	492 (31.8)			
Interest in politics (interested, %)	724 (46.8)	-	.128 (.60)	-1.986 (.12)
Satisfaction with democracy (n, %)				
High	962 (62.2)	-	-.738 (.60)	-1.304 (.12)
Medium	160 (10.4)			
Low	424 (27.4)			
Civic engagement (n, %)				
High	92 (6.0)	-	-1.475 (.60)	1.114 (.12)
Medium	357 (23.1)			
Low	1097 (71.0)			
Cosmopolitanism index (mean, SD)	3.74 (1.34)	0–5	-.798 (.60)	-.336 (.12)
Environmentalism (n, %)				
High	707 (45.7)	-	.532 (.60)	-.912 (.12)
Medium	609 (39.4)			
Low	229 (14.8)			

(46.8%) and they expressed a high degree of satisfaction with democracy (62.2%). In terms of their 'civic engagement', a noticeable group (29.1%) reported either 'high or 'medium' voluntary, humanitarian and charitable work.

When considering where young people are situated on the Postmaterialism index, the majority were located within the mixed category (59.7%), with nearly a third classified as postmaterialist (30.0%) and only 10.2% classified as materialist. These findings appear to run counter to the expectations of Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), given that the pre-adult socialisation of these young people occurred under conditions of relative economic scarcity following the 2008 global financial crisis. However, as Sloam and Henn have recently observed, 'even under the austerity conditions of the current global recession, the materialist-postmaterialist cleavage retains importance – this is evident in terms of young people's political values, and particularly so with respect to their political participation' (2019, 30). In terms of the other two main variables

of the study, participants exhibited 'high' levels of environmentalism (45.7%), and occupied a relatively high position on the cosmopolitan index ($M=3.74$ on a 0–5 scale, where 5 indicates full cosmopolitan)

Sociodemographic factors contributing to postmaterialism, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism

Table 2 presents the zero-order Pearson correlations (r) for the two main variables of the study - environmentalism and cosmopolitanism - and the sociodemographic profile of these young Europeans. In terms of environmentalism, this variable was significantly associated with both gender [$r(1546) = -.14, (p=.00)$], and also with educational level [$r(1546) = .11, (p=.00)$]. These relationships help to shed light on the associations between these variables, specifically that young women tend to be more environmentalist than young men, and that those youth with higher educational levels also tend to be more environmentalist than their counterparts with lower levels of education (see Table 2). The results for cosmopolitanism indicate a similar and significant relationship with gender [$r(1546) = .11, (p=.00)$], with educational level [$r(1546) = -.10, (p=.00)$] and also with age [$r(1546) = -.09, (p=.00)$]. Again, the relationships between these variables suggest that young people with higher levels of education, young women, and also the *youngest* from the sample of 18- to 25-year-olds tend to be more cosmopolitan than other young Europeans. There is no evidence that religiosity is associated in any statistically significant way to either cosmopolitanism or environmentalism.

Employment status has also been identified in previous literature (Grasso and Giugni 2016) as having influence in shaping young people's political behaviours, especially in terms of the differences found between young students and those who already have a job or who have NEET¹³ status. This is reflected in the analyses for this paper, as employment status is found to have a statistically significant association ($p=.013$) with environmentalism. As Table 3 indicates, those young people who score highly on the Environmentalism index are more likely to be students (44.9%) than are those in paid employment (43.5%) or NEET (11.6%). Similarly, students are also more cosmopolitan than other young people with paid jobs or those not in paid employment ($p=.000$) (see Table 4).

Politically-related factors contributing to cosmopolitanism and environmentalism

Using Chi-square tests, Table 5 demonstrates that statistically significant differences are observed for several of the various politically-related behaviours of young people,

Table 2. Correlational matrix between environmentalism, cosmopolitanism, and sociodemographic variables (N=1546).

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Environmentalism (1)	1.					
Cosmopolitanism (2)	-.19**	1.				
Gender (3)	-.14**	.11**	1.			
Religiosity (4)	.01	.01	-.04	1.		
Educational level (5)	.11**	-.10**	-.09**	.08**	1.	
Age (6)	-.02	-.09**	-.01	-.14**	-.35**	1.

Note: Correlation is significant at ** $p < .01$ and * $p < .05$.

Table 3. Chi square tests between employment status and environmentalism (%).

	In paid employment	Not in paid employment	Student
Environmentalism			
High	43.5	11.6	44.9
Medium	44.8	12	43.2
Low	49.8	17.5	32.8

N=1546, $\chi^2=12.754$, $p<.05$

depending on their levels of environmentalism. Young Europeans with higher levels of environmentalism are more likely to position themselves towards the left (50.6%) in terms of their political views, rather than towards the political centre (25.4%) or to the right (24.0%). By way of contrast, nearly half of those youth with low levels of environmentalism report themselves as right-wing (46.3%), considerably more than those who occupy a middle (28.4%) or a left position (25.3%). In each case, these differences are statistically significant.

Nearly three quarters of those young Europeans with high environmentalism scores claim that they always vote in national elections (75.7%), and this voting rate is statistically significantly higher than for those with low levels of environmentalism (53.7%). These young high-level environmentalists also have medium or high levels of informal and non-institutionalised political participation (82.2%) which compares with the informal political activism rates of those with low levels of environmentalism (55.7%). Interestingly, youth that reported having high levels of environmentalism are considerably more likely to also report high levels of political participation (23.4%) when compared to those with medium (10.7%) or low levels of environmentalism (only 6.1%). Again, the relationship between environmentalism and this informal political participation variable is statistically significant.

The variable ‘Interest in politics’ is directly linked to environmentalism. A majority of those with high levels of environmentalism are likely to express such an interest (56.6%), whilst the opposite is the case in that those with only a medium (60.8%) or a low environmental score (63.3%) report that they are *not* interested in politics - these differences are statistically significant. There is no appreciable difference between level of environmentalism for those young people who are also civically engaged. However, there are statistically significant differences in that those with high environmental scores are considerably less likely to report *low* levels of civic engagement (65.1%) than are those with low environmental scores (82.5%). Finally, there is no evidence of any statistically significant relationship between environmental attitudes and level of satisfaction with democracy.

Table 6 considers the relationship between cosmopolitanism and these same politically-related variables. It summarises the results from one-way ANOVA analyses, where

Table 4. Mean comparison between employment status and cosmopolitanism.

	Mean	SD
In paid employment	3.60	1.401
Not in paid employment	3.39	1.366
Student	3.99	1.215

F(2, 1543) = 22.720, $p=.000$

Note: Cosmopolitanism ranges from 0 (not cosmopolitan) to 5 (cosmopolitan).

Table 5. Chi square tests between political behaviour variables and environmentalism.

	Environmentalism (%)			χ^2	df	P value
	High	Medium	Low			
Voting national elections				53.330	4	.000
Always	75.7	61.0	53.7			
Usually	15.8	21.5	25.3			
Never	8.5	17.5	21.0			
Informal political participation				104.179	4	.000
High political participation	23.4	10.7	6.1			
Medium political participation	58.8	58.5	49.6			
Low political participation	17.8	30.9	44.3			
Political view				77.057	4	.000
Left	50.6	32.5	25.3			
Middle	25.4	32.0	28.4			
Right	24.0	35.5	46.3			
Interest in politics				51.167	2	.000
Not interested	43.4	60.8	63.3			
Interested	56.6	39.2	36.7			
Satisfaction with democracy				3.204	4	.524
High	60.3	64.8	61.6			
Medium	11.2	9.7	9.6			
Low	28.6	25.6	28.8			
Civic engagement				30.637	4	.000
High	6.6	6.4	2.6			
Medium	28.3	20.2	14.8			
Low	65.1	73.4	82.5			

lower mean scores (from 0 to 5) relate to lower levels of cosmopolitanism. Interestingly, the group differences observed are each statistically significant. The data indicate that young Europeans who always vote in national elections tend to be more cosmopolitan in outlook ($M=3.89$) than those who report never to vote ($M=3.14$). Similarly, youth with higher levels of informal (non-institutionalised) political participation are significantly more cosmopolitan ($M=4.00$) than their contemporaries. Left-wing youth score more highly on the cosmopolitanism index ($M=3.98$) than those who position themselves towards the centre ($M=3.55$) or to the right ($M=3.61$). Similarly, those who are interested in politics are also more cosmopolitan ($M=3.92$) than are those who are not interested ($M=3.58$). Finally, young people who are most satisfied with democracy ($M=3.95$) and who are highly civically engaged ($M=4.13$) tend to have a considerably more cosmopolitan orientation than other youth.

Postmaterialism, left cosmopolitanism and environmentalism

Elsewhere, Sloam and Henn (2019) have identified the rise of cosmopolitan values and left-leaning attitudes amongst many young British millennials. The results from Table 7 allow us to examine (1) whether young left cosmopolitanism is evident across Europe, (2) if so, the extent to which this is underpinned by postmaterialist values, and (3) the connection between youth engagement and environmental politics. Results from correlation analysis demonstrate that there is a statistically significant relationship between postmaterialism and left-wing attitudes, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism. Young postmaterialists tend to be, more environmentalist [$r(1546) = -.23, (p=.00)$] and with a deeper cosmopolitan orientation [$r(1546) = .14, (p=.00)$] than other young people. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that young Europeans who score highly on our

Table 6. One-way ANOVA(s) between political behaviour variables and cosmopolitanism.

	Mean scores (0–5)	SD
Vote national elections		
Always	3.89	1.284
Usually	3.65	1.316
Never	3.14	1.449
F(2,1543) = 30.211, p=.000		
Informal political participation		
High political participation	4.00	1.152
Medium political participation	3.80	1.308
Low political participation	3.45	1.455
F(2,1543) = 15.354, p=.000		
Political view		
Left	3.98	1.229
Middle	3.55	1.395
Right	3.61	1.375
F(2,1543) = 17.237, p=.000		
Interest in politics		
Not interested	3.58	1.388
Interested	3.92	1.257
F(1,1544) = 26.203, p=.000		
Satisfaction with democracy		
High	3.95	1.280
Medium	3.68	1.355
Low	3.28	1.348
F(2,1543) = 39.322, p=.000		
Civic engagement		
High	4.13	1.156
Medium	4.01	1.204
Low	3.62	1.376
F(2,1543) = 15.923, p=.000		

Note: Cosmopolitanism ranges from 0 (not cosmopolitan) to 5 (cosmopolitan).

cosmopolitanism index are also more environmentalist [$r(1546) = -.19, (p=.00)$]. Finally, the data indicate that these particular young people are also relatively left-ist, politically – **Table 7** reveals a significant correlation between those who are left-inclined and post-materialist [$r(1546) = -.12, (p=.00)$], cosmopolitan [$r(1546) = -.12, (p=.00)$] and environmentalist [$r(1546) = .21, (p=.00)$]. Overall, these findings reveal statistically significant correlations between postmaterialist values, cosmopolitanism, left-right political position and environmentalism. They reflect the expectations set out earlier that young ‘left cosmopolitans’ have values that are rooted in postmaterialist concerns, embracing trust, respect and solidarity with others, aesthetics, preferences for more open and participative forms of democracy and a desire to achieve more humane and equitable societies. These same young people also have a deep regard for the championing of environmental protection and sustainability.

Table 7. Correlational matrix between cosmopolitanism, environmentalism, and Postmaterialism (N=1546).

	1	2	3	4
Environmentalism (1)	1			
Cosmopolitanism (2)	-.19*	1		
Postmaterialism (3)	-.23*	.14*	1	
Political view (4)	.21*	-.12*	-.12*	1

Note: Correlation is significant at * $p < .01$.

Predictors of cosmopolitanism and environmentalism

Following the previous analysis, it is clear that left-wing views, postmaterialist values, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism are all connected. Furthermore, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism are both influenced by several different factors, including sociodemographic variables (such as gender, employment status and also levels of education) and also politically-related variables (including voting, informal political participation, political interest, satisfaction with democracy and civic engagement). To investigate these patterns further, a binary logistic regression was conducted to identify the predictive impact of the different sociodemographic and politically-related variables on young Europeans' cosmopolitanism and environmentalism (see Tables 8 and 9). For the purposes of these analyses, cosmopolitanism and environmentalism were both recoded into binary variables (0 - not environmentalist, 1 - environmentalist; 0 - not cosmopolitan; 1 - cosmopolitan).

With respect to environmentalism, the full model containing all predictors was statistically significant, $\chi^2(20, N = 1546) = 205.26, p < .001$, indicating that the model was able to distinguish between respondents who are environmentalists and those who are not. In total, eight variables were confirmed as predictors of environmentalism (see Table 8). These were informal political participation (signing petitions, boycotting, lawful protests and unofficial strikes), Postmaterialism, cosmopolitanism, political view (left-right

Table 8. Binary logistic regression of the relationship between environmentalism, sociodemographic and politically-related predictors.

Variables (reference category)	B	SE	Wald	Sig.	Exp (B)
Gender (female)	-.473	.131	13.008	.000	.623
Religiosity (religious)	.150	.128	1.372	.241	1.162
Employment status (student)			3.521	.172	
Paid employment	-.109	.142	.591	.442	.897
No paid employment	-.375	.200	3.521	.061	.688
Educational level (Lower)			2.077	.354	
Higher	.251	.198	1.608	.205	1.285
Medium	.186	.150	1.524	.217	1.204
Postmaterialism (postmaterialist)			27.755	.000	
Mixed	-1.075	.226	22.689	.000	.341
Materialist	-.733	.162	20.380	.000	.481
Vote (never)			29.294	.000	
Always	.943	.183	26.536	.000	2.568
Usually	.416	.202	4.225	.040	1.516
Informal Political Participation (Low)			11.679	.003	
High levels of informal political participation	.815	.252	10.441	.001	2.258
Medium levels of informal political participation	.342	.145	5.540	.019	1.408
Political view (right)			20.193	.000	
Middle	.561	.155	13.072	.000	1.753
Left	.662	.167	15.734	.000	1.938
Interest in politics (interested)	-.296	.143	4.245	.039	.744
Satisfaction with democracy (satisfied)			2.564	.027	
Neither satisfied of dissatisfied	-.103	.148	.485	.482	.902
Not satisfied	-.279	.224	1.549	.021	1.322
Civic engagement (low levels of civic engagement)			5.375	.068	
Medium levels of civic engagement	-.094	.292	.103	.748	.911
High levels of civic engagement	.377	.169	4.968	.026	1.458
Cosmopolitanism (cosmopolitan)	-.382	.161	5.643	.018	.683
Intercept	.644	.311	4.286	.038	1.904

* $p < .05$

Table 9. Binary logistic regression of the relationship between cosmopolitanism, sociodemographic and politically-related predictors.

Variables (reference category)	B	SE	Wald	Sig.	Exp (B)
Gender (female)	-.277	.151	3.359	.006	.758
Religiosity (religious)	.054	.146	.135	.713	1.055
Employment status (student)			11.177	.004	
Paid employment	-.506	.167	9.213	.002	.603
No paid employment	-.595	.225	7.015	.008	.552
Educational level (Lower)			6.627	.036	
Higher	.590	.246	5.750	.016	1.805
Medium	.054	.170	.101	.751	1.056
Postmaterialism (postmaterialist)			11.542	.003	
Mixed	-.659	.264	6.250	.012	.517
Materialist	-.608	.185	10.857	.001	.544
Vote (never)			1.369	.040	
Always	.186	.209	.794	.037	1.020
Usually	.271	.235	1.320	.025	1.031
Informal Political Participation (Low)			3.991	.047	
High levels of informal political participation	.568	.285	3.962	.047	1.765
Medium levels of informal political participation	.163	.166	.975	.323	1.178
Political view (right)			5.070	.029	
Middle	.391	.185	4.482	.034	1.479
Left	.531	.185	.081	.051	1.479
Interest in politics (interested)	-.136	.165	.679	.410	.873
Satisfaction with democracy (satisfied)			17.294	.000	
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	-.668	.161	17.215	.000	.513
Not satisfied	-.214	.244	.767	.381	.808
Civic engagement (low levels of civic engagement)			3.682	.015	
Medium levels of civic engagement	.294	.419	2.005	.017	.764
High levels of civic engagement	.581	.194	2.091	.014	.832
Environmentalism (environmentalist)	-.358	.162	4.879	.027	.699
Intercept	2.290	.367	38.967	.000	9.870

* $p < .05$

position), vote in national elections, gender, interest in politics, and satisfaction with democracy. Together, these explained between 12.4 and 18.5% of environmentalism. Furthermore, the strongest predictor of being an environmentalist was voting, recording an odds ratio of 2.57. This indicated that respondents who always vote are over twice more likely to be environmentalist than those who did not vote, controlling for all other factors in the model. Voting was followed by informal political participation and left-right political views.

For cosmopolitanism (Table 9), again the full model was statistically significant, χ^2 (20, $N = 1537$) = 118.30, $p < .001$. Nine variables were identified as predictors of cosmopolitanism including Postmaterialism, environmentalism, satisfaction with democracy, vote in national elections, employment status, civic engagement, gender, political views (left-right), and educational level. The model explained between 8% and 13% of cosmopolitanism. The strongest predictive contributions to the overall model were educational level with an odds ratio of 1.81, confirming that respondents who have a higher educational level are considerably more likely to be cosmopolitans than those who have a lower educational position. This variable was followed by political view, and vote in national elections. That Postmaterialism is found to be one of the predictors of both environmentalism and of cosmopolitanism, suggests that – in line with expectations – postmaterialist values underpin young Europeans' cosmopolitan outlook and their engagement in environmental politics.

Discussion, conclusions and future perspectives

In this article, our intention was to investigate the underlying values that drive environmental engagement and activism - and in particular, to examine whether or not these parallel the values and preferences observed among those young cosmopolitans who have emerged as a new political force in Britain and in many other postindustrial democracies. Using evidence drawn from an analysis of over 1,500 young people living in ten 'established' European democracies, the findings reflect our initial expectations, in that there is a high degree of correspondence evident between young 'left cosmopolitans' and environmental activists. Each display strong postmaterialist values. In both groups, the young Europeans prioritise social justice and redistributive policies, with a vision for more humane and equitable societies. Young environmentalists and cosmopolitans both remain socially and culturally liberal and approving of diversity in all its forms. They are internationalist and inclusive, expressing solidarity with, and trust of, 'others' from different cultures and nationalities. Both groups are also economically left-wing. And finally, the data reveal that they are deeply engaged with environmental issues - championing environmental protection and sustainability.

Furthermore, given the shared values - and in particular, the postmaterialist outlooks - of these European young environmentalists and left-cosmopolitans, it comes as relatively little surprise that they share similar socio-demographic characteristics as well as political practices. Both groups are more likely to be female than male, and to have had extended educational careers beyond mandatory secondary schooling and/or to be in paid employment. Finally, these two groups of young people are likely to have relatively high levels of civic engagement, interest in politics, satisfaction with democracy and levels of (formal/institutionalized as well as informal/non-institutionalized) political participation.

In all of these respects, our findings corroborate and extend the recent conceptual work of Norris and Inglehart (2019) and of Sloam and Henn (2019), by identifying interconnections between young left-cosmopolitans and young environmentalists across Europe that are underpinned by postmaterialist values. For instance, our analyses in Tables 8 and 9 reveal that postmaterialist values are confirmed to underpin both cosmopolitanism and also environmentalism.

In terms of practical concerns and future perspectives, younger generations in established democracies are more socially liberal, postmaterialist and cosmopolitan in their values and attitudes than were previous youth generations and older generations today. Indeed, one of the key features of the so-called 'culture wars' is the importance of age as a variable in determining whether an individual is likely to be sympathetic to socially liberal (and often left-of-centre) or authoritarian-nationalist political parties and causes. What we have found in the selected European democracies is that young people's environmental engagement and activism is deeply connected to postmaterial values that prioritise concepts such as freedom and cosmopolitan values that see diversity as a strength, in contrast to materialist values that emphasise security and authoritarian-nationalist tendencies that see diversity and internationalism as a threat. Thus, engagement with environmental politics is underpinned by a fundamental shift in values.

Younger generations bore the brunt of the Great Recession. It seems as if they will also be the main socio-economic losers from the Coronavirus pandemic which has already left scars on these 'emerging' adults. Beyond the impact upon their physical health, a growing

number of studies have pointed to the negative effect of lockdowns on young people's mental health and upon their economic potential (from lost education, to the loss of precarious jobs, to the threat of eviction, and to the impact on lifetime earnings). And, this may be the thin end of the wedge, given the expected post-pandemic austerity measures, as countries attempt to restore their public finances. Yet, in this article we have confirmed both the persistence of postmaterialist and cosmopolitan values through the Great Recession, and the close connection between these values and environmental engagement. This bodes well for environmental movements in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another finding is that those young people who have scored highly on each of the postmaterialist, cosmopolitan, and environmentalist indexes are much more likely to have higher levels of educational attainment than young people who neither share these values nor engage with climate politics. Although climate change has become a chief concern amongst Generation Z – for example, it is one of the top three concerns for 18–24-year-olds in the recent US presidential election (CIRCLE 2021) – and the political allegiances of younger generations are relatively similar across their cohorts (for example, their overwhelming opposition to Brexit in the UK), the intra-generational 'education gap' cannot be ignored. Just as scholars of youth politics have identified political participation to be much lower amongst groups of young people with lower levels of educational attainment and from poorer backgrounds, so their engagement in environmental politics is also much lower.

This presents significant challenges for the environmental movement. How can it better reach out to young people from these backgrounds? In our view, the answer lies in making environmental issues more tangible with regard to issues of poverty and insecurities that permeate their everyday lives. For example, Sloam (2020) has shown how environmental issues such as lack of green spaces, pollution and lack of refuse collection, may be intimately connected to broader issues of crime, mental health and run-down neighbourhoods amongst young Londoners. In other words, to reach beyond groups of young postmaterialists and cosmopolitans, it is necessary to *make postmaterial issues more material* – to address local issues that impact on the everyday lives of young people from less privileged backgrounds. In this respect, much more could be achieved through schooling. For example, Hayward (2020) demonstrates how the concept of 'sustainable citizenship' can and should be embedded in every aspect of the school curriculum. Additionally, Flanagan et al. in this particular volume of the Journal of Youth Studies, conclude that engaging young people in environmental research can also bring huge benefits.

A further finding was that young men tend to be significantly less engaged in environmental causes than young women. Although there is a body of literature that has found that women are more attracted to social movements than to traditional political parties and institutions – due in part to the more hierarchical and patriarchal structures found in formal political organisations – we believe that more research needs to take place into the underlying values that underpin these differences. Why are young men less post-materialist, less cosmopolitan and less supportive of environmental causes than young women? We regard this, at present, as an open question that needs to be tested empirically amongst a new wave of environmental activists.

Finally, we would add that it is also important to note the temporal nature of the waves of crises described in this article. As economic problems tend to be cyclical in nature, the

climate emergency is a gathering crisis, which will only increase in severity (even if sufficient action is taken over the next few decades). In this respect, we perhaps need to re-consider whether engagement in climate politics will remain in the domain of ‘post-material politics’ or ‘cosmopolitan politics’ or whether it will morph into a material concern, as its economic and social costs become ever clearer.

Notes

1. Citizen science refers to the undertaking of research by members of the general public – including school children – to answer key scientific challenges (usually in collaboration with professional scientists).
2. ‘Generation Z’ refers to those born after the mid-1990s and coming of age from 2015 onwards. ‘Millennial’ refers to those born after the early 1980s and coming of age after 2000.
3. Younger generations are much more likely to see climate change as a threat, with action against climate change as a priority. For example, Pew Center (2019) research found climate change was viewed as a threat by 70% of Americans aged 18-30, but by only half of those aged over 50.
4. The educational attainment variable refers to the highest point of schooling achieved prior to leaving formal education, coded within the EVS documentation as: ‘lower’ (lower secondary school or below); ‘medium’ (higher secondary and post-secondary *non*-tertiary); and, ‘higher’ (other post-secondary and above). ‘Religiosity’ is used as a proxy ‘cultural’ variable in the absence of an ‘ethnicity’ variable in the EVS dataset. The religiosity index was created from a total of four questions concerning participants’ religious practices. Importantly, lower scores on this index indicate a higher level of religiosity and the construct exhibited good levels of reliability ($\alpha = .78$). Full details of these and other items mentioned are available from the authors on request.
5. The postmaterialist thesis is not without its critics. For instance, Flanagan et al. (2012) have argued that young people’s political engagement and political participation are cyclical in nature, and that in later life, these same young people will adopt behaviours and outlooks that more closely correspond with those of their older contemporaries. Grasso (2014) has claimed that the rejection of mainstream politics and attraction to ‘alternative’ politics by many young people is more a reflection of a ‘period’ effect such as the ideological nature of society at a particular point in time than it does of underlying economic conditions.
6. Details concerning the construction of this index are available in the EVS database, at <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>. The 12-item list can be found at: <https://ourworldindata.org/materialism-and-post-materialism>.
7. The actual questions used to create the ‘Cosmopolitan’ index included: ‘Please indicate how much you trust people from another religion’ and ‘Please indicate how much you trust people from another nationality’ (both cultural dimensions); ‘Please indicate how much confidence you have in the European Union’ and ‘Please indicate how much confidence you have in the United Nations Organisation’ (both political dimensions); ‘Please indicate how important this is for you: eliminating big inequalities in income between citizens’ and ‘Please indicate how important this is for you: guaranteeing that basic needs are met for all, in terms of food, housing, clothing, education, health’ (both moral dimensions).
8. The construct comprised through these four informal political participation items exhibited good levels of reliability ($\alpha = .78$).
9. The ‘civic engagement index’ was measured by combining two variables, including ‘Please indicate whether you belong to a humanitarian or charitable organisation’, and ‘Did you do voluntary work in the last six months’. Lower scores indicate that participants are civically engaged. The index exhibited acceptable levels of reliability ($\alpha = .54$).
10. For more details about the 2017 iteration of the EVS survey, please refer to: <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/about-evs/>.

11. These countries include the 'established' democracies that were members of the EU prior to eastern enlargement in 2004 - Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Great Britain.
12. Data were collected in 2017 and 2018 by adopting a mixed mode approach, where respondents were interviewed face-to-face for approximately one hour; this method was augmented by data that were also collected online through a web survey. The methodological features of the EVS study are available at: <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/survey-2017/methodology/>.
13. NEET refers to those people who are neither in education, employment nor training.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Arts and Humanities Research Council: [grant number AH/W00934X/1]; British Academy: [grant number VSFoFGC1\100020].

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