Voter Turnout and New Forms of Political Participation of Young People: A Comparative Analysis between Chile and Spain

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Abstracts
Introduction. The objective of this research is to explore the relationship between the voter turnout and the new forms of participation of young Chileans and Spaniards, as well their perception about politics and the forms of participation which seem most relevant to them. **Methodology**. In order to do this, a comparative analysis between the two countries, with a sample of 928 university students between the ages of 18 and 24 is realized. **Results**. The data showed some distrust of the current democratic system. Additionally, while voter turnout decreases in Chile and Spain, other unconventional –offline and online– political activities increase. **Conclusions**. Definitively, young people are seeking greater participation as citizens in political affairs. Likewise, although many students use social networks as channels to keep abreast of the activities of politicians, this use is still low compared to that of other public figures.

Keywords
Chile; Spain; voter turnout; political participation; youth; new media.

Contents
1. Introduction. 1.1. The Chilean case. 1.2. The Spanish case. 1.3. Objectives and research questions. 2. Methods. 3. Results. 3.1. Forms of political participation. 3.2. Perceptions, motivations and feelings in relation to politics. 3.3. New media and youth participation. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

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1. Introduction

Young people's indifference to politics in recent decades and above all the high rate of abstention in the elections are important issues for analysis (Carlin, 2006; O'Toole *et al*., 2003; Phelps, 2006; Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Wiseman, 2006). They show that there is a possible "crisis" of the Western democratic system worldwide (Alcántara, 1995; Bromley et al., 2004; Crozier et al, 1975; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Phar *et al.,* 2000; Shields, 2006). Voter turnout, that is to say, the vote, is one of the greatest evidences of the health of a political system (Miller, 1980; Payne *et al.,* 2002). However, it is necessary to question and find the socio-political and cultural motivations of this alleged widespread electoral abstention. The increasingly high indifference or rejection of young people towards the political system highlights the need for reflection and a closer examination of the possible causes of this phenomenon.

Anthony Downs's work on the rational abstention problem (1957) launched a debate on political participation that continues today. In this sense, could electoral abstention be seen as an individual rational choice or, on the contrary, as a symptom of a global civic crisis? In this regard, it is necessary to revise the meaning of the concept of political participation beyond the traditional electoral vote. As is evident, there may be many reasons why young people are not voting, and there is broad international scientific literature that suggests possible causes and motivations (Carlin, 2006; Delli, 2000; Heath, 2007; Kimberlee, 2002; O'Toole *et al.,* 2003; Pacheco, 2008; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). However, each country has its own peculiarities, and there are still many unresolved questions. Therefore, abstention must be analyzed in relation to a wide range of explanatory variables of different nature (Sáez, 1998) such as: country of residence, age, education, socio-economic status, ideology or gender. In fact, in comparing different systems and countries' quality of democracy, the Economist Intelligence Unit or Freedom House, for example, include political participation as one of the variables. Regarding ideology, it has been claimed to be one of the grounds for abstention, especially in countries that have strong partisan affiliation (Anduiza Perea, 1999; Boix and Riba, 2000; Justel, 1995). This is not to say that being right-wing or left-wing conditions voter behaviour, but rather that some contexts may have political offers that are not equally satisfactory for the right or for the left. (Barreiro 2002). Gender is a key variable in exploring the relationship between abstention and participation (Vasallo, 2012). However, it presents new theoretical and methodological challenges (García Escribano and Frutos Balibrea, 1999). Given the patriarchy dominance and the preponderance of the masculine culture, it could be inferred a weaker or lower level of female participation. In fact, some researchers have categorized female participation as anonymous and with altruistic ends (Astelarra, 1990). Nevertheless, some empirical research has shown that this variable appears to be insignificant (Norris, 1991). Therefore, further analysis is required. Thus, each case must be examined on its own merits.

Political participation not only makes possible the effective exercise of citizenship (Marshall and Bottomore, 1998) and allows to "partake" in institutional or social affairs (Merino, 1996), but also implies to exercise control and moderate the power of representatives (Guillen et al., 2009). It is important to understand political participation as a set of practices that go beyond the electoral vote, such as: the affiliation with any civic association, membership in political parties, participation in a student demonstration, rally or protest, the creation of a website or participation in an Internet forum or social network, to name only a few. In fact, citizen participation, of whatever kind it may be, is at the heart of democracy (Verba *et al.,* 1995). Moreover, it is a good indicator of welfare and the maturity of the democratic system itself (Gerodimos, 2010; Gerodimos and Ward, 2007). This implies, in turn, the development of a good concept of citizenship, which necessarily involves

sharing responsibilities, becoming involved in public life, or getting concerned with issues of general interest.

Specifically, some authors have indicated that while voter turnout decreases, other unconventional political activities expand, but more in line with the way that people experience community life and ways to participate in politics (Norris, 2002). Research into political participation is a multifaceted phenomenon (Teney and Hanquinet, 2012). Political engagement is currently divided into several repertoires: "conventional participation" versus "unconventional participation" (Contreras-Ibáñez *et al.,* 2005; Delfino *et al.,* 2007; Goldstone, 2003; Heaney and Rhodas, 2006; Maravall, 1981; McFarland and Thomas, 1996; Milbrath, 1965); individual "institutionalized" versus "non-institutionalized" participation (Ganuza and Francés, 2008; Hooghe and Marien 2013); or online versus offline participation (Dahlgren, 2011; Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Kim *et al.,* 2016; Resina de la Fuente, 2010; Visers, 2014; Zarzuri, 2005). However, there is no theoretical consensus about these categories that are currently changing.

In fact, the Internet has begun to transform political life (Cotarelo and Crespo, 2012; Chadwick, 2013) and has started to have a major impact on democracy (Barber, 1998; Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000; Hagen, 2000; Pal, 1997; Subirats, 2002). Likewise, the increasingly important role of new media among young people has led to a debate on the potential of the internet as a means of political communication that encourages youth participation (Anduiza Perea et al. 2000; Banaji and Buckinjam, 2010; Colombo Villarrasa, 2007; Cotarelo and Crespo, 2012; García Galera and Hurtado, 2013; Gerodimos, 2010; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Karakaya, 2005; Rudenko, 2009; Sampedro, 2011; Shadrin, 2000; Sirkkunen and Kotilainen, 2004; Ugarte, 2007; Ward 2005).

With respect to previous research, there are numerous studies that link youth, new media, and political participation (Coleman, 1999; Coleman and Rowe, 2005; Collin, 2008; Dahlberg, 2001; Gerodimos, 2010; Robles, 2006) that combine theoretical and empirical analysis. Even so, there are specific studies in Spain which have focused on the voting behavior of young people (Mateos and Moral, 2006) or the link between the Internet, youth, and politics (Author, 2015; Rubio-Gil, 2012; Subirats *et al.,* 2015). Recent empirical research –especially in Europe– is questioning the relation between trust in politics and new forms of participation pointing out variables such as socio-economic state and level of education (Dejaeghere and Hooghe, 2006; Thijssen *et al*., 2016). However, there still exists a lack of empirical research to analyze the causes of abstention of young people in relation to the new ways in which the youth participates in politics in Spain and Chile. Similarly, there is a lack of comparative studies on the link between civic motivations of young people and their ways of participating in politics, a fact that demonstrates the need to continue working on these areas.

Ultimately, in order to fully understand the relation between low voter turnout and new forms of participation, solid and convincing results will be generated to extrapolate the analysis of possible policy alternatives in the Chilean and the Spanish case. To that end, the following four criteria have been explored, which will give the keys to understanding the possible "crisis" of participation in the two countries surveyed: 1) Forms of political participation (conventional versus unconventional and offline versus online), 2) Perceptions, motivations and feelings associated with politics, and 3) new media and youth participation.

1.1. The Chilean context

For decades Chile has had high voter abstention rates. Specifically, since 1989 there has been a steady decline in voter turnout, especially among young people according to the 2014 "Democracy Audit", carried out by the United Nations for Development Program (PNUD). Just in the last election for mayors in 2012, for example, 44% of the population did not vote and 3% spoiled their ballots or cast a NOTA vote according to the 2012 "Democracy Audit", conducted by the Center for Public Studies (CEP). What really stands out within this 44% of non-voters is that the majority (69%) are young people between 18 and 24 years and young adults between 25 and 34 years of age (61%). Indeed, it is not only that there is 47% of the population expressing their dissatisfaction with the political system and not participating in politics on Election Day, but also, that this sector of the population is very young, which makes it a very non-accurate indicator.

Abstention is theoretically linked to socioeconomic status. In fact, particularly in the metropolitan area, the boroughs with higher levels of abstention in the 2013 presidential elections were: Puente Alto (66.30%), Alhue (67.80%) and La Pintana (65.45%), that is to say, low socioeconomic status communities. However, the truly relevant question that should be raised here is whether the failure rate implies a disaffection or disinterest in politics itself. If this statement were true, the question that should be raised is: what are the reasons for a democratic political system to not interest or engage young people? This apathy and disinterest may be due to a lack of participatory policies or poor general operation of the electoral system, but it may also be related to poor information provided by the mass media or inefficient use of new media.

While there are many academics who have analyzed various possible motivations for political disaffection and apathy towards voting in the case of Chile (Madrid, 2005; Parker, 2000, 2003; Torcal, 2001; Toro, 2007), there are fewer approaches that try to find out if this disinterest is towards the electoral system or to the political and anthropological foundation. Indeed, in the Chilean case, several researchers have analyzed the situation of the political system and expressed its intrinsic limitations (Garretón, 1990, 2002; Mayol, 2012; Mayol and Azócar, 2011; Moulian 1997). Others have questioned whether political participation must be understood beyond the merely institutional (Mardones, 2014). It is probably for this reason that abstention can be associated with feelings of disaffection, caused by the inefficiency of institutions, the lack of confidence in politicians or alienation (Montero et al., 1999; Torcal 2001)– phenomena that require further research.

Since compulsory voting existed in Chile until 2013, any study on the Chilean voter turnout can be perceived as biased by the electoral system itself– a hindrance to measure participation (Altman, 2004; Fuentes and Villar, 2005; Huneeus, 2005; Navia 2004; Toro, 2007). Thus, our study assumes a much more complex and extensive idea of participation. In this context, the idea that democracy is not just voting gains value. Evidently, for decades many Chilean citizens have seen the act of voting as an imposed obligation, which they have sometimes preferred to avoid fines or having to move or travel to vote. However, abstention rates have always remained low among young Chileans, regardless of whether their voting was compulsory or voluntary.

1.2. The Spanish Context

Similar to what happened in Chile, Spain's electoral abstention has become a major problem. For example, in the municipal elections of May 2011, a 33.8% abstention was recorded, as it appeared in the website of the Ministry of Interior of Spain. Meanwhile, in the general election held in November of the same year, the abstention rate was 31.1%, despite the results of a study published by the

Center for Sociological Research in October, which indicated that 83.6% of respondents surveyed were likely to vote (CIS, 2011a). In any case, the highest rate of abstention comes when deciding the representatives for the European Parliament. In this regard, in the last elections held on May 25, 2014, 56.2% of those eligible to vote did not go to the polls. However, beyond the low turnout, the fact is that this election marked a turning point in the Spanish democracy, as it glimpsed the breakdown of bipartisanship. Thus, the surprising progress of Podemos party as a political force appeared to be a response to the complaints shown by a large segment of the public, disappointed with the management of the other parties (Urquizu, 2015). At the same time, policy makers realized that new times, that required new faces, were coming. The day after the European Parliament elections, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba resigned as leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party, while Juan Carlos I abdicated the crown a week later (Díez, 2014).

Returning to the problem of abstention, this has traditionally been associated with socioeconomic status. In this regard, while it is evident that the differences are not as extreme as in other countries (Gallego, 2013), the fact is that the middle and upper classes do seem to have a higher participation rate in Spain, as seen in the data from the post-election polls that were conducted by the Center for Sociological Research (CIS 2011b, 2014). Meanwhile, with regard to age, it should be noted that, similar to what happened in the Chilean case, this is still more significant in the case of young people under thirty years of age (Alconchel, 2011; Francés García and Santacreu Fernández, 2014; Mateos and Moral, 2006; Serrano and Sempere, 1999), similar to what is happening in most European countries (Anduiza Perea, 2001; Laiz Castro, 2011). Although one can not rule out that this disaffection is influenced by certain characteristics of this age (Martín Hernández, 2006), this appears to be a consequence of high distrust of young people towards the current democratic system (Francés García and Santacreu Fernández, 2014), not towards democracy as political regime, regardless of whether the majority still see the vote as a civic and moral duty. This idea is reinforced by the fact that although this sector of the population goes the least to the polls, yet it is the most involved in unconventional forms of participation such as demonstrations or protests. In other words, as a rejection to the traditional political offer, young Spaniards move away from the institutionalized mechanisms of political participation, but still actively participate in national political life. Therefore, it cannot be argued that young Spaniards are not interested in politics, but rather that they conceive it differently. Thus, compared to casting a vote or being affiliated to a traditional party, they prefer to carry out other actions, which they consider more effective, as well as connecting to certain political organizations that propose a 'break', for example, from the current party system (Francés García and Santacreu Fernández, 2014).

1.3. Objectives and research questions

The overall objective of this research is to understand the relationship between voter turnout and new forms of participation of young Chileans and Spaniards. In order to do this, we analyze what the perceptions about politics and the most relevant forms for youth participation are, and evaluate how the new media are transforming the form of participation. Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the forms of political participation most frequently used by Chilean and Spanish students?

RQ2. What is the opinion of the Chilean and Spanish students about the electoral system and the activity of political parties?

RQ3. Do Chileans and Spanish students use social networks and new communication technologies for political purposes?

2. Methods

In order to address these questions, a quantitative methodology was developed to determine the views and perceptions of young Chileans and Spaniards. In total, 1,200 surveys were conducted on university students between 18 and 24 years of age. 600 of the surveys were carried out in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago de Chile, and the other 600 were conducted in Madrid, Barcelona and Seville. In the Chilean case the sample size was determined from a total population of 1.1152,125 enrolled university students, with a confidence level set to 95% and a margin of error of ±4. In the Spanish case, the sample size was determined from a total population of 1.532,728 enrolled university students with a confidence level set to 95% and a margin of error of ±4. In order to give a qualitative representativeness to the sample two differences were delimited between countries. First, as Chile is a very centralized country the survey was conducted only in Santiago, the most populated region with the most important universities and the most university students. However, Spain is a more decentralized country, and there are important and ranked universities in different regions. Thus, the survey was conducted in three of the most populated regions in the country with the most important universities, in the center (Madrid), the north (Barcelona) and the south (Seville). Second, in Chile, in addition to four public universities, there are numerous private schools where a high percentage of students enroll. Thus, the survey was conducted in the two public and private institutions with the largest enrollment. In Spain, on the contrary, the majority of students enroll in the public system, so the three institutions selected for the sample are public.

Table I. Gender, age and ideology of the participants.

	Chile (n=414)	Spain (n=514)	Total (n=928)
Gender			
Male	40.1%	35.4%	37.5%
Female	59.2%	63.4%	61.5%
ND/NA	0.7%	1.2%	1.0%
Age	M=21.3; SD=1.6	M=20.5; SD=1.3	M=20.8; SD=1.5
Ideology*	M=4.4; SD=2.9	M=3.6; SD=2.3	M=4.0; SD=2.6
Left	67.9%	82.6%	77.1%
Moderate-left	65.6%	75.3%	72.5%
Moderate	58.2%	61.9%	60.0%
Moderate-right	75.0%	50.9%	61.9%
Right	87.5%	64.3%	78.9%

*The ideology variable was measured on a scale of 0 at 10 (left-right), being 5 the centre. The average and the standard deviation were calculated without considering the subjects that marked the option DN/NA (Chile, 26,3%; Spain, 15,6%).

The data were collected between June and August 2014, for Chile, and between November 2014 and January 2015, for the Spanish case. Respondents were solicited to participate during class period in their educational institution by trained pollsters. As they give very simple instructions, and the questionnaire was anonymous, it is reasonable to infer that there were no influence responses to the

reported results. The master questionnaire was drafted in Spanish with minimal differences of language in the Chilean version to avoid misunderstanding due to linguistic codes.

After completion of the data collection period, we had to remove a series of questionnaires that contained errors and/or were not properly answered. Thus, the total was 928 surveys (414 young university students, residents in Chile and 514 young university students, residents in Spain). The Table 1 also provides data on age, gender and ideology of the participants, which together with the country of residence are the explanatory variables.

3. Results
3.1. Forms of political participation

Only 11.4% of young students surveyed −16.9% of residents in Chile and 7.0% of residents in Spain− indicated that they were not interested in politics, highlighting the apparent lack of interest in active participation. In this regard it is worth noting that their main interest is to stay informed and to be able to express their opinions, both in the Chilean and in the Spanish case (49.1% of young respondents), while only 11.6 % of the youth participate in political organizations, especially at work or in a university context. Furthermore, only 9.7% of young people in Chile and 16.9% in Spain acknowledged they were only interested to vote in national elections. In connection to this question, 70.3% of students in Chile had participated in a general election, while only 44.6% of students in Spain had cast a ballot. This discrepancy in the results could be due in part to the age of the respondents, as the elections were not held in the same year in both countries. In fact, when asked: "Did you vote in the last election?" the percentage of assertions was not the same, decreasing to 65.2% for Chile and rising to 68.7% in Spain. Thus, in response to the previous elections, it can be observed immediately that the behavior of young students in both countries is very similar.

Moreover, as it was already mentioned, a small percentage of young people indicated that they were not interested at all in politics. Accordingly, it is expected that, regardless of the turnout, students will carry out other activities related to politics. Within this context, cross-country differences must be made between the level of political participation and the form of engagement: conventional versus unconventional, and online versus offline participation. In reference to the level of political participation, significative differences were found with respect to the countries (p<0,023), but not with respect to the gender. Even though Chilean and Spanish youngsters have an average level of participation, the former are at ~~on~~ the extreme points of the possible range (being very participative or less). Additionally, there are significant differences concerning the level of participation according to the ideology, both in the two countries and with respect to the total (p<0,001). Individuals that are located on the left and on the centre-left are the most participative. This is particularly relevant because the turnout is similar across the whole ideological spectrum.

In reference to the forms of participation (conventional versus unconventional, online versus offline), cross-country differences were found, but not with respect to the gender. It is worth mentioning, on the one hand, that Spanish youngsters developed more unconventional actions, both online and offline, such as using the social media to follow political parties, boycotting products...). On the other hand, Chilean youngsters have a preference on conventional forms of participation, regardless the channel, as for example participating in surveys or belonging to organizations or political parties.

In connection with the interest and real participation of the respondents, they were asked what three actions they felt would impact the most in the decisions of government. Accordingly, students from both countries identified as the most important major participation in a peaceful demonstration and

all the representatives vote for a specific political party. However, while 50.6% of students in Spain regarded participating in a strike as a powerful action (only 26.1% of Chileans thought so), 52.9% of respondents in Chile believed that the third most rousing action was participation in civic groups such as unions or assemblies, an activity that was supported by 35.4% of Spaniards. In this sense, if we focus on this last action, it is clear how, despite considering them activities that can have a great impact, they do not take the initiative to put them into practice, which makes clear the lack of consistency between opinion and behavior.

3.2. Perceptions, motivations and feelings in relation to politics

In general, students in both countries favor a greater role for citizens in politics and agreed that the government should pay more attention to their requests, as they feel that politicians do not care about their opinions, while at the same time citizens should organize themselves to exercise their rights. Moreover, less than half of respondents in both countries believe that elections are the ideal way for citizens to influence policy, an idea that is less popular in Spain (29.0%) than in Chile (40.1%). Finally, it should be pointed out that in both cases, students would not vote for a young candidate who could defend their interests if he belonged to a political party that was not to their liking. The latter –although it can be understood as a preference for the party over the political candidate– must be regarded with caution, since it is possible that the students would think that if the political candidate belonged to a party contrary to their ideology, the candidate would not fight for their own interests, but for others. As shown in Table 2, questions related with citizen participation are those who have a larger difference of opinion in relation to the level of participation of the respondents. However, questions related to political leaders' actions are comparably valued, irrespective of the level of participation.

Table II. Opinions about politics of youth Chilean and Spanish by level of participation.

	Chile p	Spain p	Total p
Our country would be better governed if our politicians listen to what the people want.	0.004	0.010	0.000
I would like the citizens to have more opportunities to participate in political decisions.	0.016	0.000	0.000
I prefer a country where citizens organize to exercise their rights.	0.013	0.011	0.000
I would be interested in sending my opinions regularly to the government if it is easier than it is now.	0.012	0.006	0.000
Elections are the most efficient opportunity for a citizen to influence the political.	0.001	0.118	0.002
It is the fault of politicians if young people do not participate in political and democratic affairs.	0.495	0.456	0.107
I think that young people are not interested in political participation.	0.163	0.046	0.012
Political issues are too complex to have an opinion.	0.009	0.000	0.000

To defend my interests I would prefer to choose someone younger even if belonging to a political party that I do not like.	0.055	0.170	0.002
Politicians worry about the opinions of people like me.	0.510	0.520	0.150

As it was already noted, only 270 young respondents in Chile and 353 respondents in Spain voted in the immediately preceding election. It is worth noting that, while Chile had a higher voter turnout among those who were self-positioned to the right of the center of the ideological spectrum, in Spain it was the left and center-left wing voters the ones who exercised their right to vote the most. It should also not be overlooked that more than half of those who did not identify with any ideology did not vote in the previous elections (see Table 3). Also, it is interesting to see how there is a correspondence between participation in previous elections and the vision they have of the system. In this regard, there was a higher percentage of students from both countries who voted when they recognized that politicians were concerned with their opinions when they perceived that the elections were the most effective way for citizens to influence policy or when they showed a keen interest for current issues and political debates. By contrast, those who felt that "political issues are too complex to have a specific opinion on them" led the lowest turnout at the polls.

Table III. Voter turnout of youth Chilean and Spanish based on the ideology (%).

	Chile (n=414)	Spain (n=514)	Total (n=928)
Left	67.9	82.6	77.1
Moderate-left	65.6	75.3	72.5
Moderate	58.2	61.9	60.0
Moderate-right	75.0	50.9	61.9
Right	87.5	64.3	78.9
DK/NA	53.2	52.5	52.9

*The ideology variable was measured on a scale of 0 at 10 (left-right).

However, beyond the ideology and opinions, university students of both countries agreed on the main reasons that led them to vote in the last election. A substantial majority said they felt it was important to express their opinion by voting (73.3% in Chile, 65.7% in Spain), while others just assumed they voted because it was their duty (55.2% in Chile, 62.6% in Spain). Moreover, a high percentage of young people in Chile noted that they cast their ballots because they wanted a particular candidate or party to either win (59.3%) or lose (41.5%), an option that did not enjoy much acceptance among the Spanish students (36.8% for the former, 26.6% for the latter). Finally, both groups coincided again in rejecting the idea of voting because they had nothing better to do or did not have information on the candidates or a clear idea about for whom they would vote.

In regard to the reasons that led the other group not to vote (132 people in Chile and 155 in Spain), it is clearer in the case of Chile as the three most voted options were, in order: the lack of agreement

with the electoral system (21.2%), dissatisfaction with all political parties (20.5%) and the belief that voting would not change things (18.2%). Of these, only the second option was among the top three in Spain, supported by 18.1% of respondents. In any case, in the case of Spain, after the first option −"I could not go to vote that day for reasons beyond my will"– which was followed by 47.1% of university students who did not exercise their right to vote in the last elections, the rest had fairly similar percentages.

3.3. New media and youth participation

Finally, they were asked about their Internet use and, in particular, social networks to stay informed today, as well as their assessment of new forms of democratic participation. Regarding the first question, it seems clear that when it comes to being informed on the daily activities of their friends, all young people flock to Facebook. However, when it comes to information about sports, entertainment, or politics, the Spaniards make greater use of Twitter, while young Chilean students still prefer Facebook. At this point, a limitation of this study requires clarification, since the Chilean respondents could only check one of the possible options (Facebook, Twitter, blogs or WhatsApp), while the Spaniards were allowed to mark as many as they believed necessary.

In reference to the second question, with a rating ranging from 1 (very negative) to 4 (very positive), all respondents agreed in valuing very positively the use of new forms of democratic participation. In this sense, young students supported the need for a greater effort to involve citizens in political life, both online and offline.

4. Discussion

As it was indicated in the previous section, just over a tenth of the young people surveyed in both countries are not interested at all in politics. Thus, in light of the results obtained within the framework of this study, one could not talk about any real apathy among young people in political issues, as other authors such as Di Palma (1970), Bustos (1997), McCormarck (1998) or Megías (2006) have concluded. Moreover, the fact that the youth is abstaining from going to the polls need not imply disinterest in politics as it has been suggested, for example, Parker (2003).

In this sense, if university students in Chile and Spain do not recognize that they have a lack of interest in political issues, then, why are there such high abstention rates? In order to answer this question, first, one should ask what respondents understand by interest in politics and, second, how they understand that this should be reflected in real life. In this regard, the results suggest that most students are satisfied with being informed of current politics or having conversations about policy with friends, colleagues or family, while only a small percentage takes the plunge to real action, either in the online or offline world.

The relation between electoral abstention and the new forms of political participation used by the youngsters showed that both processes are independent. Thus, there is no evidence that they are correlated neither complementary. This would explain why besides low voter turnout, participation seems to be not so low. The fact that Chilean students have higher and lower levels of participation than Spanish, is precisely an evidence that each case has its own particularities.

The analysis of the most common or favorite forms of participation between students of both countries has shown two tendencies: first, that both conventional and unconventional forms increasingly overlap, and second, that Internet has not marked significant differences between forms

of participation. In fact, regardless of whether forms are preferred –conventional in the Chilean case or unconventional in the Spanish case–, the channel does not influence.

One of the current premises regarding the political participation of the youth is that this segment does not carry out certain conventional activities, such as exercising the right to vote at the polls or joining a political party, because they do not consider them to be truly effective, reinforcing the idea that young people distrust the current democratic system (Francés García and Santacreu Fernández, 2014; Morales Quiroga, 2008; Paramio 1999a, 1999b; Thezá Manríquez, 2003; Toro 2007). The results generally confirm the idea. As for the second highlighted initiative, militancy, young respondents tend not to join political parties because, once again, see little value in it. However, this should not be understood as a sign of disinterest in this segment in particular, for reducing the rate of militancy is a tendency in many democratic countries (Van Biezen *et al.,* 2012; Whiteley, 2011); although precisely in the countries analyzed, the inclination is not so drastic.

However, only a small percentage acknowledges real value in elections to influence political decisions, which would explain the high abstention rate, and the lack of a special feeling associated with casting or not casting the vote. In any case, it is interesting to see how there is a higher percentage of young people who decide to vote because they consider it important to express their opinion, simply because they understand that it is their duty, even though in Chile voting was compulsory until 2013. In other words, the study finds that more young people vote because they want to be heard, simply because they consider that it is their duty, which coincides with the call for greater participation of citizens in the above mentioned policy. Finally, in order to finish the issue of voter turnout, it is interesting to analyze the relationship between participation and ideological self-definition. In this respect, while in Spain left wing or center-left voters are the most active in the polls, in Chile voting corresponds to those who recognized themselves as right-wing voters. On the other hand, those who did not identify with any ideological position were the least involved in the electoral process.

Therefore, the research confirms the idea that young people, although possibly in line with other segments of the population, are abandoning certain conventional policy actions, such as party affiliation or the electoral vote (Morales, 2005; Norris, 2002). However, this should not be understood directly as a general lack of interest in politics. On the contrary, young people feel that citizens should have a greater role in political life in general. Indeed, Chilean and Spanish students share an opinion about electoral system and about political parties' activity. Moreover, both youngsters take up a stance to boost citizenship and increase participation. In the same vein, there is a common critical perspective about the role of politicians and the Government.

Regarding the use of Internet and social media, although many young Chileans and Spaniards track the activities of politicians on Facebook or Twitter, their interest is lower –with some minor differences between countries—to the one shown towards athletes, singers, actors, and other film and television celebrities. In short, the results denote that the sector of the youth surveyed is disenchanted with the current political system, which translates into the search for new actions beyond those offered by institutions. The problem is that, although they seem to show an interest in these alternative activities and consider them to be beneficial to the citizens to obtain greater power in democratic decisions, there are few who take the plunge and participate in such actions.

5. Conclusions

In light of the results, we can say that, rather than a lack of interest in politics in general, university students from Chile and Spain are disappointed with the democratic system of their respective countries. This is the result of two issues: first, shared negative opinions about political systems and politicians and second, positive opinions about strengthening the level of participation of all citizens in political life.

In this sense, although most Chilean students stated that they did not vote because of their dissatisfaction with the system and the political parties because they considered that such action would change nothing; in Spain, a high percentage said they did not participate in elections for reasons beyond their control, or because they simply did not have a clear idea about for whom to cast their vote. In short, this would confirm that there is not a causal or direct relationship between low voter turnout and participation. In fact, within the framework of this research, many more respondents said that they were involved in different and alternative forms of participation from vote (conventional or unconventional, online or offline forms of participation).

As for the feelings associated with exercising or not exercising their right to vote, although a large percentage admitted not feeling anything regardless of the action taken, it can be attributed to major differences between countries, especially between those who did not vote. Thus, compared to the pride and self-acknowledged interest of Chileans, a significant group of Spaniards said they were afflicted, which can be related to the manifest impossibility of exercising the right to vote. In short, although no assurances can be given as to the reasons that lead or not to casting a vote, one can still notice certain common trends. Those who vote do it generally as a matter of duty or obligation, to which they either do not feel anything, or feel proud and interested in politics. Opposite to these voters are those who do not vote because they do not agree with the system, or because they cannot agree with it philosophically, to which they either do not feel anything also, or feel proud and interested in politics, as is the case of those mentioned earlier, or afflicted as is the case of the latter.

It is clear that democratic participation is being transformed by the use of social networks and new media, which is reflected in the data about channels of information on policy today by university students from both countries. In this regard, although not the favorite subject of this population segment, virtual platforms have allowed young people to consume and to share information policy beyond their family, or even beyond their core group of friends and college classmates. In this respect, because students ask for greater involvement and political engagement, Internet may play a key role. Although many new forms of participation should not have significant impact on "real" politics, they are transforming the way citizens understand politics, feel active or participative.

In any case, in light of the results obtained, and in a changing context in which the Internet is much more than simply a communication tool among young people, the concept of political participation needs to be re-examined. It would also be necessary to further examine the reasons for youth abstention, and to supplement the study with other forms of research, either quantitative or qualitative, as this seems to be a matter of concern. This is especially true in post-dictatorial societies where democracy is still a young system. Similarly, there is a lack of consensus and a variety of concepts used in the literature to define similar processes. We are referring to the so-called indifference, disaffection, apathy, and distrust of young people towards politics, which makes the field blurrier than it should.

"All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards."

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