

## **Exploring youth political participation in Flanders**

*Bram Vanhoutte*

Participation is highly valued in Flanders. Local youth policies are made in consultation with young people and thus are participatory by method. (Schillemans & Bouverne-De Bie, 2005). Next to formal political participation in local or regional policymaking, several other possibilities exist to be engaged in society. This study explores the different forms of political participation among Flemish youth. Next to outlining differences between participants and non-participants in both formal and alternative forms of political action, this article examines the relations between political, alternative and societal participation. What characterises young people who are in one or several ways politically active? Can differences in terms of participation in associations, or in norms accompanying citizenship be found?

From a research point of view, people who do not participate in conventional politics, represent an interesting group. Usually a lower interest in formal politics, such as voting, is considered as the basis for lack of involvement. Verba, Nie et al (1978) give two possible explanations for the relations between political interest and political involvements. The abstention hypothesis states that certain groups are generally less interested in politics and henceforth politically apathetic. A second explanation is that these groups are not less involved, but that they participate less because of certain barriers that exist for them. This is the inhibition hypothesis. This study looks at the outcomes of applying these hypotheses to other forms of politics. Does conventional political participation, i.e. voting intention, makes a difference when it comes to being an active citizen?

This article begins with a short overview of a more conventional political behaviour, such as voting in contexts, where voting is a compulsory obligation. In relation to this, the popularity of alternative political action is explored. Secondly different profiles in political action and their relation to socio-demographic background characteristics are examined based on a sample of Flemish young people. Finally, the social participation of Flemish youth is assessed and the conclusions for citizenship are distilled. The data used were gathered by the Flemish Youth Platform in the framework of the first measurement of the youth monitor. This survey is a representative cross-sectional study on the Flemish youth between 14 and 25 years old.

## *Political behaviour and citizenship: theoretical reflections*

### *Political behaviour: what exactly is political?*

Some authors see a decline of political participation all around, others see this decline in formal political interest countered by a one-off issue approach, or by rising new forms of political action. These different opinions show that the definition of what is political plays an important role.

In this contribution political participation is understood in a broad sense, as the spectrum of behaviours of civilians, aimed at directly or indirectly influencing the government or its policy. Conventional forms of participation, such as having a clear voting intention or political interest, and unconventional forms of political participation, like for example ethical consuming, are both taken into account. Conventional participation consists of primarily those acts of political involvement directly or indirectly related to the electoral process (Barnes & Kaase 1979, p 84.). Unconventional participation is defined as “behaviour that does not correspond to the norms of law and custom that regulate political participation under a particular regime” (Barnes & Kaase 1979, p.41).

Political involvement among young people runs less along traditional channels such as voting and expressed political interest, but more through modern ways such as the Internet, says Ragi (2005). Through explorative research among students Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti (2005) found that ethical consuming appeals most to young people who have lost their trust in political institutions. In the Flemish youth survey the popularity of unconventional forms of political action was examined among the other subjects. A second point of interest was to examine in how far these alternative forms of political action are related to other forms of political action, as well as to involvement in society in general.

### *Citizenship*

In theories around citizenship the definition of Marshall (1950) is used quite often. In this view citizenship is a complex of rights and duties in the nation-state that count equally for all citizens. Consisting out of three different components, citizenship has a civil, a political, and a social dimension. Marshall's institutes for citizenship rest on an implicit normative framework, which makes democracy work. This normative citizenship consists out of support for values such as tolerance, solidarity, equality and a minimum of political participation.

Due to changes in societies these three forms of citizenship are in decline, but a new form arises, Turner (2001) argues. Citizenship in our late modern society has to be seen in new specific ways. Where before people were citizens because they were serving their country, adding to the growth of the national gross product, or contributing by augmenting the population, now people are citizens

through associative participation and locally engaged actions. Participating in voluntary organisations stimulates active citizenship, focussing on global and normative rather than local and materialistic issues. The skills, knowledge and values that are needed to cooperate with others, are formed through participation, and voluntary associations can be seen as a practice ground for democracy.

In this study the link between political behaviour, participation in voluntary associations and civic values in Flanders is examined. If active citizenship consists of participating in society and supporting civic values, what kind of political behaviour does an active citizen in Flanders express? Who is the active citizen in Flanders in terms of social background?

### *Exploring political participation*

#### *Voting intention: less intention – less participation?*

Belgium is, together with Greece, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, one of the few countries with compulsory voting from 18 years onward. In other countries, where voting is not compulsory, the election turnout and voter registration are used as indicators for conventional political involvement, next to party membership and attending political meetings. In Belgium the turnout cannot be interpreted as an expression of political interest. The intention to cast a valid vote is used instead as an indicator for conventional political participation, since people can also have the intention not to vote, to vote blank or to vote invalid. This intention to cast a valid vote was derived from a question asking which party they would vote for if there were elections today. People with no valid voting intention thus could not choose between the different parties, or had no intention voting valid.

**Table 1: Frequencies of voting intention of the Flemish population 14-25 years old (N=2503)**

	<i>14-17</i>		<i>18-25</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>
<b><i>Valid voting</i></b>	<b>61.7</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>81.5</b>	<b>1349</b>	<b>75.3</b>	<b>1822</b>
<b><i>Blank, Invalid or not voting</i></b>	<b>38.3</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>598</b>
<i>Blank</i>	13.4	103	8.3	138	9.9	240
<i>Invalid</i>	4.3	33	4.2	69	4.2	102
<i>Not</i>	20.5	157	5.9	98	10.6	256
<i>Missing</i>	4.3	34	2.8	48	3.3	82

About 25% of the young people would consciously not vote, vote blank or invalid. This can reflect that they are not interested in politics, or that they think that voting is not a useful way to be politically engaged. In comparison with some decades ago young people in many European countries are less inclined to go voting (Hooghe & Kavadias, 2005). Important is to notice that the age from which young people are entitled to vote, which is 18 years old in Flanders, plays a key role in their voting intention. One possibility is that achieving the voting age stimulates making a choice between the

different parties. Where before 18 having a party affiliation only had fictional political impact, achieving the right to vote creates an urgency to decide which party fits most to the ideas about society one has.

**Table 2: Frequencies of voting intention of the Flemish population 14-25 years old by gender**

	14-17				18-25				Total			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
<b>Valid voting</b>	<b>65.3</b>	262	<b>52.9</b>	211	<b>80.9</b>	717	<b>77.5</b>	631	<b>76.0</b>	980	<b>69.4</b>	843
<b>Blank, Invalid or not voting</b>	<b>30.2</b>	121	<b>43.1</b>	172	<b>17.2</b>	152	<b>18.7</b>	153	<b>21.2</b>	274	<b>26.7</b>	325
<b>Missing</b>	4.5	18	4.0	16	2.0	17	3.1	3.8	2.7	35	3.8	47

Further analysis revealed a gender gap; almost half of the females younger than 18 would not vote valid. This gender gap in voting intention is especially visible before the voting age. These differences can be interpreted in more than one way. One traditional explication in terms of gender roles is that boys are expected and stimulated to be more involved in the public domain, where girls are more involved in the private domain. This difference in political interest can also be seen as a gender specific difference in taste, in preference. Important here is to understand that this difference is not a choice, coinciding with gender by coincidence, but the result of a different political socialisation. Another explanation of the gap could lie in a difference in cognitive self-image between boys and girls: Where boys easier believe they are able to take a decision in terms of choosing a certain party, girls could be more hesitant in expressing their voting intentions. It is striking to notice that once the voting age is achieved, the gender differences disappear. It points towards the positive impact of the obligation to vote, since it stimulates young people to have an opinion on party politics, and express a voting intention.

*Unconventional political action: pre-dominance of positive support?*

Now that the conventional political engagement of young people has been explored, their unconventional political participation is examined. The question posed here was if the respondent had undertaken the actions listed in table 2 in the last year.

**Table 3: Frequencies of Flemish between 14-25 who have undertaken one of the alternative political actions in the last year (in %), split up by gender**

Item	Male	Female	Total
1. Signing a petition (also through the Internet)	<b>47.3</b>	<b>52.2</b>	49.7
2. Talking about politics with friends, family, colleagues...	<b>70.5</b>	<b>65.9</b>	68.3
3. Participate in a manifestation	7.7	6.4	7.1
4. Participate in a strike	6.9	4.8	5.8

5. Supporting charity financially	<b>46.7</b>	<b>54.5</b>	50.5
6. Boycotting a product (consciously not buying a product because of the company, country or way it was produced)	10.4	13.3	11.8
7. Bought a product just because it has been produced in an environmentally or animal friendly way, or because it has the guarantee that it has been made under good labour conditions.	<b>31.1</b>	<b>41.5</b>	36.1
8. Consulting a political website	<b>21.9</b>	<b>12.1</b>	17.2

According to this study, the majority of 14 -25 year olds (68%) talks about politics. More than half of them signed a petition, and the same proportion donated money to a good cause. Ethical consuming is being actively done by a large minority of the Flemish youth. It is quite striking that a positive form of action, such as buying a product because it's been made in good circumstances, is done by twice as much people than a negative action, such as boycotting. This illustrates that doing something extra is easier than changing actual patterns of behaviour. Young people in Flanders are less inclined to strike and demonstrate, although the legitimacy of these forms of action has been augmenting the last decades. It seems barriers still exist to participate in these actions, or that young people do not believe in the impact of demonstrations as a tool for political action. Important to know is that during the period covered by the survey, no major "emotional" manifestation took place. The term emotional manifestations, refers to manifestations triggered by an event that plays on the emotions and the sense of righteousness of people, rather than on "rational" policy questions such as employment, union legislation, etc. (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2006). Examples of these kinds of manifestations are the 'white march' in Brussels, where demonstrators reacted against the way the government and police had handled the investigation and prosecution of the infamous kidnapper and paedophile Dutroux, and to a lesser extent the demonstration against the war in Iraq. These emotionally charged manifestations attract a larger public than the traditional manifestations around social-economic or political problems (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001).

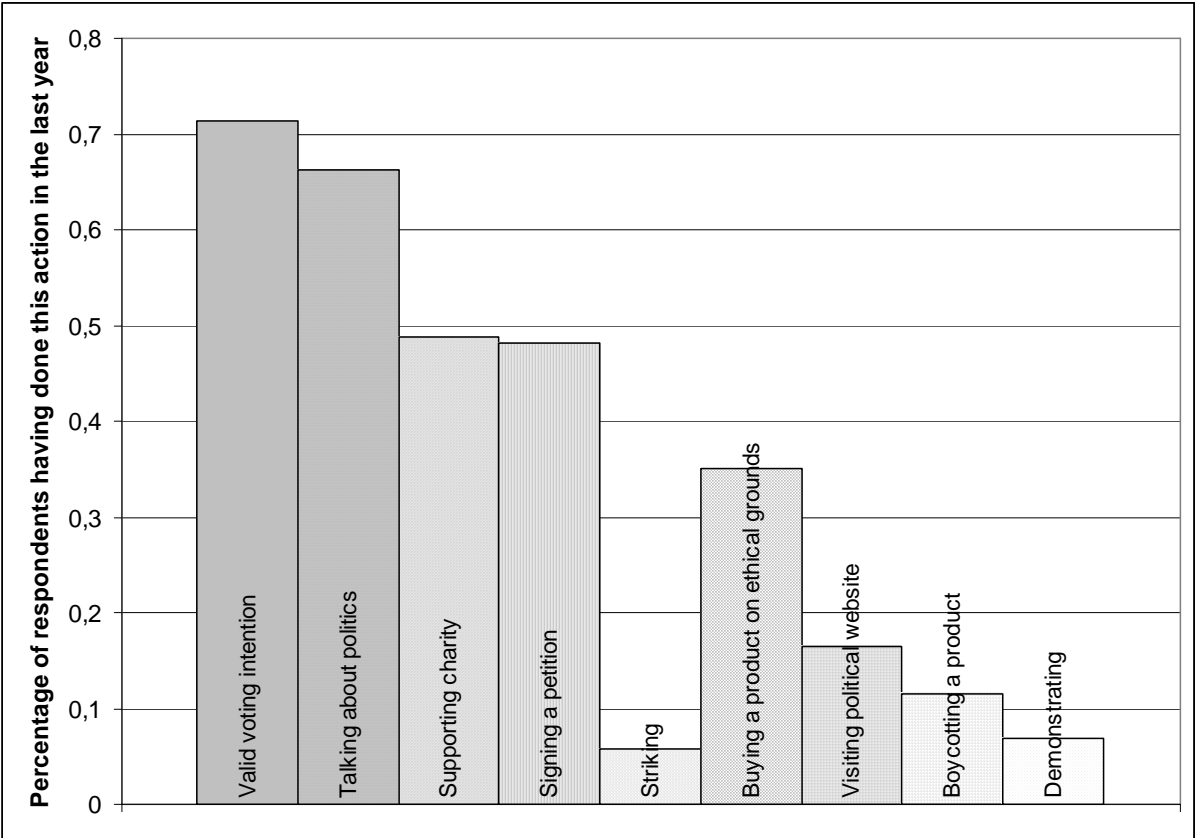
Certain actions have a different impact along gender lines. Signing a petition, supporting charity and ethical consuming are more popular among young women, while talking about politics and consulting a political website is more popular among men. It is probable that the cultural traditions are responsible for these differences. Gender roles in society do not spread themselves only through interests and tastes, which explains the male dominance in computer related action, but also in the psychology of young people: women are "supposed" to be more compassionate, which explains their higher proportion of signing petitions and supporting charity.

### *Analysing political and social participation*

#### *Political participation*

Since both conventional and alternative forms of political action are examined in this study, it can be interesting to use different approaches towards the subject. To find an order of difficulty in these actions the average number of actions done by participants of every action was examined. In this way an order in the different actions was found going from easy to do to hard to do that is presented in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Percentage of respondents participating in an action, ranked from a low to a high degree of political involvement (N=2503).**



It can be seen that for most of the items the actions easier to undertake such as having a valid voting intention, talking about politics, supporting charity or signing a petition, have been done in the last year by more respondents than the harder actions, such as demonstrating, boycotting a product or visiting a political website. This means that there is a big probability that people that have done one of the more difficult actions, such as for example boycotting a product, will probably have done most of the easier actions, in the example this would be voting, talking about politics, signing a petition and consuming ethical. One exception is striking. Very few young people strike, but the action is not very high on the ladder of difficulty. This means that although people, who have striked in the past year, have participated in most of the ‘easier’ political actions, there were not a lot of strikers. This can be explained by the fact that only one out of three young people in our sample is working, which makes

the chance to participate in a strike lower. Next to that, strikes in school or in higher education are very exceptional in Flanders.

To know for sure that apples are not compared to oranges, some further analysis was necessary. Two different dimensions<sup>i</sup> were found, one that measures the involvement in several political actions, and another that had striking and manifesting as the strongest items. This means attending strikes and manifestations do not influence participation in other forms of political action among young Flemish. As a result, striking and manifesting are excluded from the following analysis.

A point of more importance is to which extent young people differ in the political actions they undertake. In other words, groups of young people who distinguish themselves through their political behaviour were further analysed<sup>ii</sup>. Young people in the same group make use of the same kinds of political action, while young people belonging to different groups strongly differ in their political action.

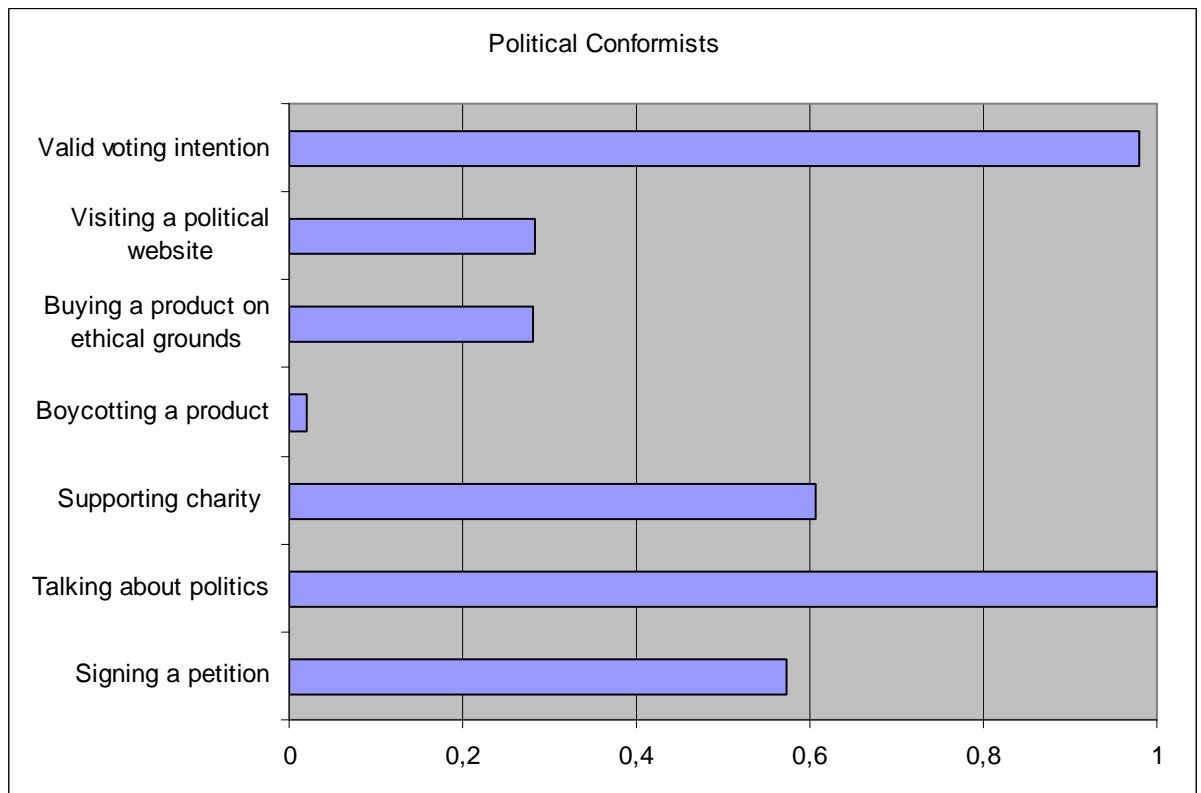
**Table 4: Cluster profiles Political action. Chance to answer positively on every item**

Indicators	Politically conform	Politically inactive	Supporters of direct action	Political activists
	(N=806) (34.2%)	(N=663) (28.2%)	(N=437) (18.6%)	(N=448) (19%)
1. Signing a petition (also via internet)	.572	.143	.519	.908
2. Talking about politics with friends, family, colleagues...	.999	.345	.365	.962
5. Supporting charity financially	.606	.002	.716	.886
6. Boycotting a product (consciously not buying a product because of the company, country or way it was produced)	.021	.000	.076	.523
7. Bought a product just because it has been produced in an environmentally or animal friendly way, or because it has the guarantee that it has been made under good labour conditions.	.280	.000	.453	.964
8. Consulting a political website	.284	.050	.002	.314
9. Voting intention	.980	.630	.350	.935

According to its characteristic political behaviour, the clusters were named “politically conform”, “politically inactive”, “supporters of direct action” and “political activists”.

The politically conform cluster contains about one third of the respondents. Their profile shows us that they talk about politics and have the intention to vote. They also tend to sign a petition, or support charity. Buying a product because of ethical concerns is something this group is less inclined to do. In comparison to the other groups they have a bigger chance to visit a political website. Because this group expresses a favour for more traditional ways of political engagement, such as voting and talking about politics, and is on average medium or less inclined to use unconventional ways of political engagement such as ethical consuming or signing a petition, this group is called the “political conformists”. Their pattern of political action comes close to the more traditional approaches of political participation. They are the spectators of the political arena.

**Figure 2: Cluster profile: Political Conformists**

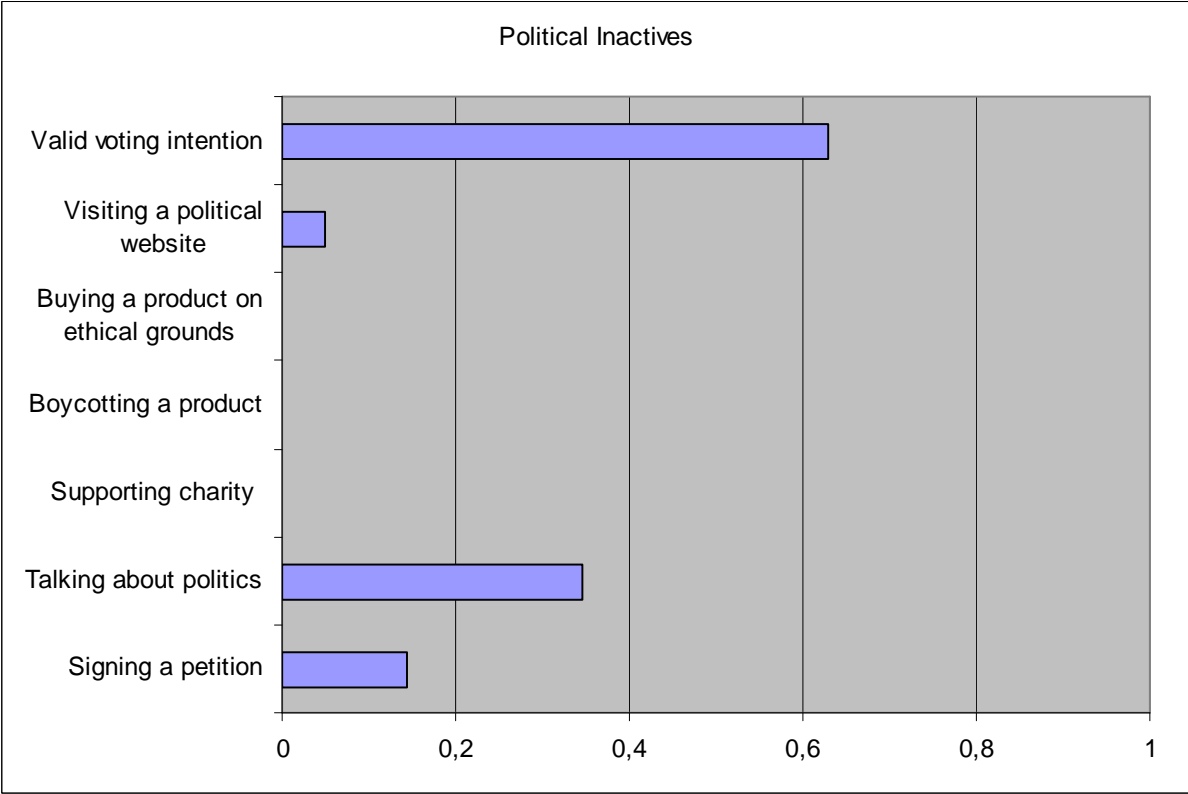


The second group is not so politically active. They have a high chance of voting valid, but they don't talk much about politics. They are not likely to sign a petition. This cluster contains 28% of the respondents. They aren't very keen on participating through the traditional political channels, but even less so by alternative forms of political action. They have the lowest chance to do an action on every item in comparison to the other groups, except for voting valid, where the third cluster has the lowest



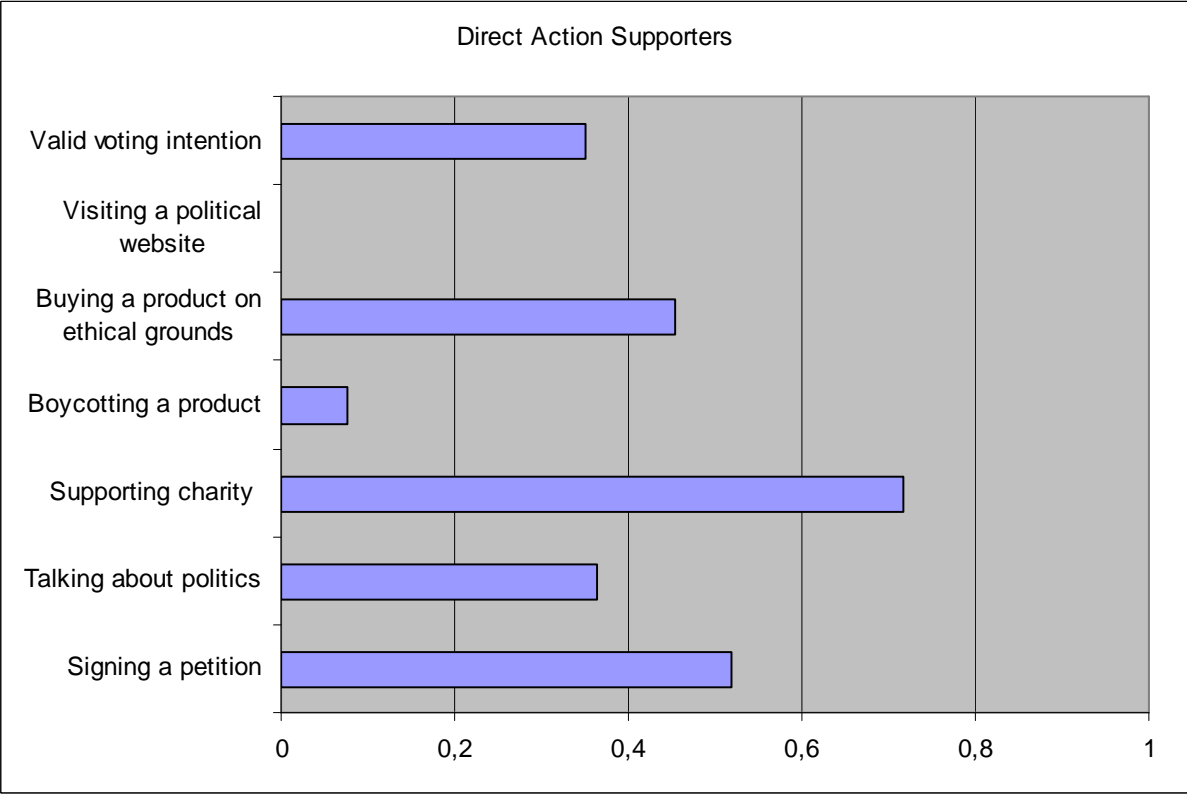
chance. Because of their low level of involvement they are named the “politically inactive”. They are more or less apathetic when it comes to politics.

**Figure 3: Cluster Profile: Political Inactives**



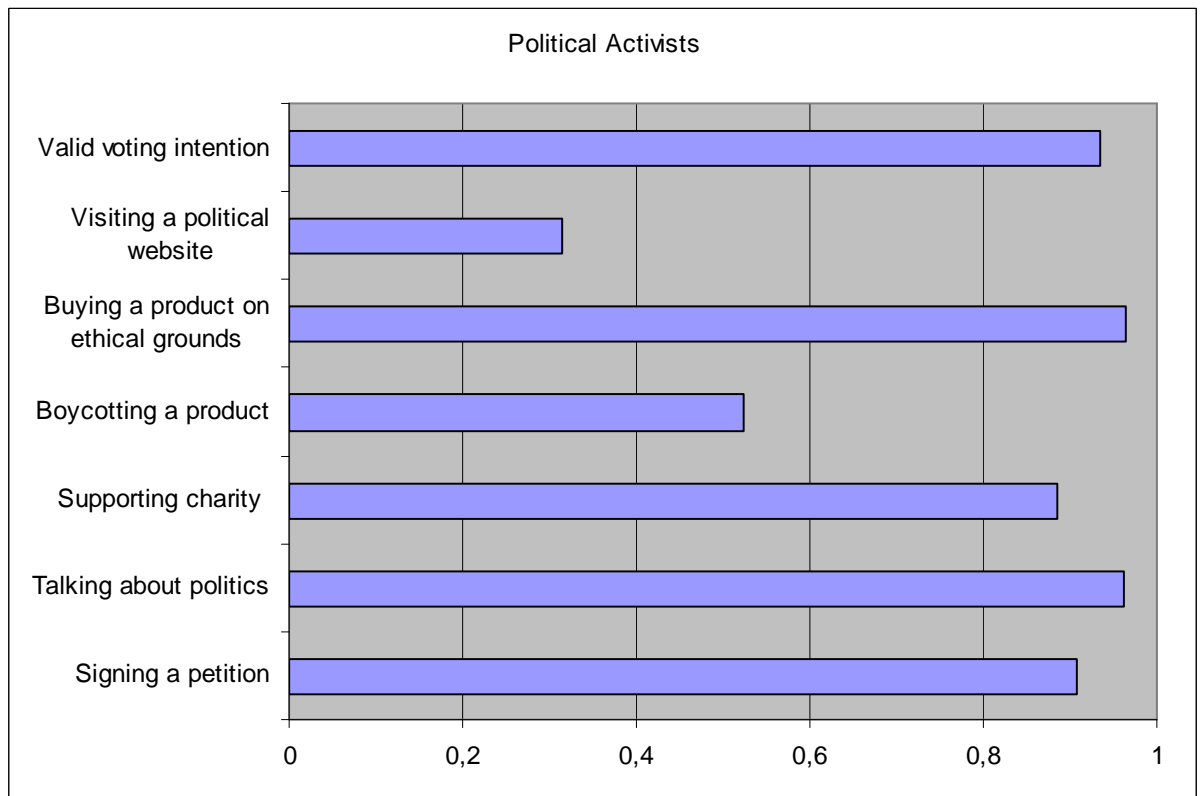
The third cluster can hardly be described as politically active. This group contains 18.6% of the respondents. They have the lowest voting intention. This low political interest shows itself as well in the low chance to talk about politics and in not consulting the web in relation to political subjects. What distinguishes them from the other less politicised group is that they are open for forms of direct political action, which do not ask for long-lasting engagements, such as supporting charity, signing petitions, or buying a product out of ethical concerns. In this respect they are as politically active as the political conformists. for this reason they are named the “direct action supporters”.

**Figure 4: Cluster Profile: Direct Action Supporters**



The last group is politically active just as the first group, but they differentiate themselves from the first group because they sign petitions, support good causes and consume ethically. They form about 19% of the young people. The high chance on both boycotting and consciously buying a product is quite unique; none of the other groups boycotts products to the same extent. This group is named the “political activists”. A rejection of conventional forms of politics cannot be observed, this group combines both forms of action.

**Figure 5: Political Activists**



To discover what plays a role in political behaviour, a look at the composition of the different groups is needed. The analysis of which socio-demographic groups are classified in a particular group instead of in another is sketched according to young people's background. This allows deducing the social position of young people in terms of their profile of political participation.

**Table 5: Clusters political action in Flanders among 14 -25 year olds: Beta coefficients from logistic regression<sup>iii</sup>**

	Political Conformists (N=806) (34.2%)	Political inactives (N=663) (28.2%)	Supporters of direct action (N=437) (18.6%)	Political activists (N=448) (19%)
Constant	.05***	7.39***	2.41**	.02***
Female (ref.: male)	<b>.66***</b>	.86(ns)	<b>1.66***</b>	1.32*
Age (in years)	1.11***	.90***	.88***	1.09***
High education level (ref.: Low education level)	<b>1.99***</b>	<b>.30***</b>	<b>.62***</b>	<b>2.65***</b>
At least one parent diploma of higher education (ref.: No parent higher education)	1.14(ns)	.62***	1.19(ns)	1.25(ns)
Involvement with religion /				

philosophy of life (ref.: indifferent)				
Borderline religious and doubting	1.18(ns)	.79*	.90(ns)	1.22(ns)
Highly involved	1.23(ns)	<b>.53***</b>	.76(ns)	<b>1.94***</b>
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.084	.159	.068	.99

*\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001; (ns)= not significant*

An example of how to interpret the coefficients in the table can be useful here. In the political conform group we see that having a high education level has a coefficient of almost 2. This means that compared to people with a low education level, it is two times more probable for people with a high level of education to have a political conform behaviour. Being female on the other hand makes it less probable to be present in this group, compared to being male. Being older increases the possibility to be political in this way. To sum up we can say that the conformists mainly consist out of men. Higher educated also take part in this way of politics more then lower educated. This group consists of people on the older side of the range.

Young people with a high education have three times less chance than lower educated of being politically apathetic. An additional influence in the same direction comes from the educational level of the parents. People that are not engaged in politics are somewhat younger as well. People who are not involved in religion or any other philosophy of life have about two times the chance to be politically less engaged. This group is the most socio-demographically homogenous group, as indicated by the explained variance.

The third group, which shows a more unconventional political behaviour, is composed of more girls than boys. They are younger. They also have a lower level of education, but to a lesser extent than the inactive group.

The political activists group contains more higher educated and people involved with life philosophy. This group is also somewhat older. More women seem to prefer this profile of political action.

It's striking that young men are over-represented in the politically conventional group, and young women are significantly more present in the groups with a profile for alternative forms. The least political active groups are considerably lower educated and younger. For about 40% of the young people unconventional forms of politics play a role in their political behaviour. For 18% this is the only way of participating in politics. This could mean that formal politics as a closed system is less accessible for women, lower educated or younger people. The more direct ways of having an impact on society, through consumption, signing a petition or donating to charity seem more fitted to express a voice in society. Since these ways of being engaged directly relate to their environment and interests,

instead of focusing on parties and power balances, alternative forms of politics learn young people that the political is everywhere, and does not only take place within parliament. This is clearly not the only way in which young people engage in politics; about half of Flemish young people talks about politics or has a clear voting intention. In this way, the alternative forms of political action can be seen as a stepping-stone towards understanding the conventional political arena.

### *Social participation*

In the scope of citizenship not only political participation plays an important role, being embedded in social networks is also seen as a structural indicator for a more democratic civic behaviour. As a cross validation of the influence of social and political participation on citizenship, ethnocentrism will be used. Ethnocentrism is based on a pervasive and rigid ingroup-outgroup distinction; it involves stereotyped negative imagery and hostile attitudes regarding out-groups and submissive attitudes regarding in-groups, and a hierarchical, authoritarian view of group interaction in which in-groups are rightly dominant, and out-groups subordinate (Adorno et al. 1969, p.150). It is an attitude that fully opposes democratic citizenship values such as solidarity, attachment to democratic political procedures. A higher score on the ethnocentrism scale means a more ethnocentric attitude, and henceforth a lower level of citizenship. In the theoretical outline the relation between social participation and civic values was explained. Here the validity of this argument can be tested. Furthermore it is examined to what extent a particular political behaviour corresponds to societal participation. Does conventional participation go along with more social participation than unconventional participation or vice versa?

**Table 6: Score for every cluster on indicators social participation and citizenship**

Group	Indicators Social participation		Indicator citizenship
	Average number of associations of which one has been member (out of 7) <sup>iv</sup>	“Recent” Associational Participation (% yes) <sup>v</sup>	Score on ethnocentrism scale (sum scale 1-100) <sup>vi</sup>
Political conformists	3.16	66	41
Political inactives	2.36	52	51
Supporters of direct action	2.89	66	43
Political activists	3.77	76	31
Total	2.99	63	43

The politically conventional group and the group that supports direct action have about the same level of social participation. The politically apathetic group is clearly less socially active. The most socially engaged group is the activist group. It seems a higher level of political engagement goes hand in hand

with a higher social engagement: the activist group has participated in the most kinds of association, and they also have the largest proportion of recent participation.

A vulnerable group in the context of active citizenship is the apathetic group. They do not participate in conventional or unconventional political or social ways. This group consists mainly out of lower educated or people coming from a lower social background. They seem to be disconnected in every way examined in the community, not being involved politically, socially or religiously. The discourse that sees participation and involvement as a way to include people does not apply to these young people.

Looking at the different forms of political participation, it is clear that citizenship is most present in the activist group. Young people with a conventional form of citizenship do not seem more engaged in society or less ethnocentric than individuals that participate in short term engagements such as petitions.

### *Conclusions*

Unconventional forms of politics are quite popular among young people in Flanders. About half of young people has signed a petition in the last year, or has supported a good cause. Over a third buys products because of ethical concerns. The groups of youngsters that combine these forms of politics with political apathy, consist more out of lower educated and women, get into contact with political themes. A lower level of education stays a very decisive indicator of the group with low political engagement. The unconventional forms of politics play a role among young people, but they do not replace the traditional political channels. A large group of young people is only engaged in politics in conventional ways.

In the framework of active citizenship it is remarkable that young people who do not participate politically, in general are less involved in associational life as well. Young people, who combine both traditional and unconventional ways of political participation, are significantly more active in associations, and support values associated with citizenship such as tolerance more.

When introducing the subject, the question was posed whether inhibition or abstention was more applicable to the less politically active parts of Flemish youth, and whether this picture changed when looking at alternative forms of political participation. Based on these data both hypotheses can be confirmed somehow. The lower educated seem to be more politically apathetic. Also more informal forms of politics do not attract them. So they mainly abstain from politics. It seems politics are not a language in which the lower educated can express themselves. Two ways are open to change this: on one hand the language of politics can be made more transparent, for example by translating political

issues into several possible choices – on the other hand the possibilities for learning this language should be multiplied, by including (young) citizens more than the obligatory vote every few years. For women it looks like if possibilities to be politically active on a practical way arise, such as signing a petition or consuming ethically, they engage more than men in these forms. Where young men mostly either are politically active in a conventional way or not, women are more attracted towards concrete and direct ways of politics. Young women seem to understand politics better than men if it comes down to the practical translation of words into deeds. This suggests that if politics are seen not only as discussing “politics” or voting, but also encompassing more direct ways of influencing society, women are equally or even slightly more engaged than men.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> Using non-linear principal components analysis (PRINCALS)

<sup>ii</sup> Using hierarchical cluster analysis

<sup>iii</sup> We examine the socio-demographic background by using logistic regression. The beta coefficients in the table reflect the comparison with the reference category of the ratio that a certain event will happen against the probability that this event will not happen. If the coefficient is 1 there is no different outcome between the tested and the reference category. If the coefficient is lower than 1, it is less probable that someone with this characteristic will be classified in this cluster instead of in another, if the coefficient is higher than 1 it is more probable. The significance of the coefficients is indicated by the stars. A significant coefficient indicates that the associations found in the sample can be generalised to the entire population. The explained variance  $R^2$  is a measure of how well the model explains the differences in every group.

<sup>iv</sup> Youth associations, youth clubs, community youth work, sports associations, hobby associations, cultural associations, social associations, organising a party/festival/neighbourhood party

<sup>v</sup> Approaching measure, not absolute percentage

<sup>vi</sup> For technical details see JOP, 2007