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Who crosses the norms? Predictors of the readiness for non-normative political participation among adolescents



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether adolescents' readiness for non-normative political participation (i.e., readiness to confront social rules for political reasons) was predicted by their interpersonal problems (with parents, teachers, and classmates), low optimism, and political beliefs (political self-efficacy and distrust in public institutions). A structural equation model using two-wave longitudinal data from Czech high school students ($N = 768$; 54% females; age range at $T1 = 14\text{--}17$, $M = 15.97$; $T2$ data collected 1.5 years later) showed that the changes in adolescents' readiness for non-normative participation were predicted by their lower institutional trust. Interpersonal relationships or optimism had no cross-sectional or longitudinal effect on the readiness for non-normative participation. These results suggest that the main source of adolescents' readiness for non-normative political actions lies in their political beliefs, while the effect of adolescents' interpersonal problems is less clear.

Adolescence is characterized by the development of political orientation, including attitudes toward political participation (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012). Political participation can encompass many forms (e.g., Ekman & Amnå, 2012). One line of prior research focused on two specific forms of political participation, normative and non-normative. While normative participation refers to legitimate, socially accepted forms of political expression (e.g., voting), non-normative participation encompasses more radical activities, which include confronting the system, violating social rules, and being potentially violent, such as participating in illegal protests or demonstrations (Glatz & Dahl, 2016; Kuhn, 2004; Saha, 2000; Tausch et al., 2011; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013).

These two forms of participation are not mutually exclusive and they both result from overall participatory tendencies of adolescents. Yet, young people differ in their preferences for types of participation, and prior research raised a question of who would engage in non-normative – that is, confrontational, subversive, or even illegal and violent - activities (Glatz & Dahl, 2016; Norris, Walgrave, & van Aelst, 2005). A number of previous studies addressed this question with a specific focus on radical protests and demonstrations, examining the role of contextual factors and collective and inter-group processes (Bernhagen & Marsh, 2007; Cameron & Nickerson, 2009; Klandermans, 2014; Mannarini, Roccato, Fedi, & Rovere, 2009; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

In our study, we adopted a slightly different approach: we examined the individual and relational factors connected to the adolescents' readiness for non-normative political participatory activities. Since adolescence is an important period in the formation of political orientations and attitudes (Eckstein et al., 2012), the focus on the process of formation of preferences towards future political actions should contribute to our understanding of political behavior. Although these preferences do not necessarily determine the actual behavior, there is some evidence that adolescents' readiness for political action is connected to their future participation, as shown, for instance, by longitudinal studies on German young adults (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2013) or Swedish adolescents

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(Glatz & Dahl, 2016). We believe that by focusing on adolescents' readiness for non-normative participation, we can construct a more complex picture of young people's political preferences, particularly in those contexts where non-normative participation is uncommon, with rare opportunities for young people to actually participate in non-normative political actions.

The Czech Republic, where this study was conducted, represents exactly the type of context in which non-normative participation is rather uncommon. Attitudes of Czech adolescents to political violence, which is dismissed by about 87% of them, and their expected future participation in illegal protests are close to international averages (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). Based on the analyses of protest events and young people's self-reported participation, political activism in the Czech Republic is only rarely radical or challenging the political system (Čisář, Navrátil, & Vráblíková, 2011; Šerek, Petrovičová, & Porubánová-Norquist, 2012). For many young Czech, non-normative participation is one of the least preferred forms of political participation (particularly compared to legal non-institutionalized participation), and it is perceived as both ineffective and ethically questionable by them (Šerek et al., 2012).

In order to provide a deeper understanding of how preferences for non-normative participation are formed, our study examined two presumptions. First, since some non-normative (especially violent) participation could be seen as a form of problem behavior, we asked whether a preference for such activities is connected to youths' problematic development, indicated by poor interpersonal relationships and a negative outlook regarding their future lives. Second, in line with Gamson's (1968) hypothesis, we investigated whether readiness for non-normative participation is based on adolescents' political beliefs, namely trust in public institutions and political self-efficacy. Moreover, a possible indirect link from problematic development to readiness for non-normative participation via institutional trust was considered.

1. The role of problematic development

The first presumption considered the possibility that preference for non-normative participation is an outcome of problematic development. Specifically, we examined whether readiness for non-normative participation is linked to a person's poor relationships with parents, teachers, and peers, which indicate adolescents' poor psychological well-being (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Raja, McGee, & Stanton, 1992; Wilkinson, 2004) and are a potential impetus for problem behavior (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Goldstein, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2005). Thus, in line with Kuhn's (2004) suggestion, we asked whether adolescents' readiness for non-normative participation is an expression of their problems with family and school. Many prior studies focused on the role of family and peers in youth political participation and attitudes (Dahl & van Zalk, 2014; Quintelier, 2015). For example, a study on German early and middle adolescents showed that authoritarian parenting was positively associated with political alienation (Gniewosz, Noack, & Buhl, 2009). A study on Swedish early and middle adolescents found that an undemocratic and controlling family climate contributed to readiness to use illegal political actions (Glatz & Dahl, 2016). Kuhn's (2004) study showed that German adolescents spending less time with parents were more willing to use violent political action, and Schmid's study (2012) revealed that parents and peers influenced social responsibility and in turn, also illegal or violent actions of 16-year-old Germans. With regard to the school environment, data from Sweden showed that adolescents who perceived their teachers as unfair were more likely to be involved in illegal political activities (Dahl & Stattin, 2016).

Overall, prior findings suggested that the quality of the relationships within families, peer groups and school can be linked to adolescents' non-normative political orientations and behaviors. Based on these studies, we presume that adolescents' interpersonal problems in multiple domains are related to more general negative expectations and behavioral patterns that are extrapolated towards the society, and might result in adolescents' higher readiness for non-normative political participation. For instance, young people experiencing a lack of understanding, extreme control, frequent discord, or conflicts with authorities at home or school, might tend to challenge authorities also outside these contexts. In this sense, Gniewosz et al. (2009) proposed that experienced lack of understanding and influence, caused by authoritarian parenting, undermine the development of trust between the individual and the society. Utilizing the reactance theory, Glatz and Dahl (2016) similarly proposed that the perception of controlling environment within undemocratic family can result in broader reactions in the form of readiness to engage in illegal political actions. Thus, considering the substantial role of family, peers and teachers in adolescents' development as well as political behavior, we examined whether those with worsened parent, peer and teacher relationships incline more towards non-normative actions.

Further, considering that poor psychological well-being is associated not only with low quality of social relationships but also with some personal dispositions, we focused on the role of low optimism. Dispositional optimism, that is, the expectancy of positive outcomes for oneself, constitutes a specific psychosocial resource (Taylor & Seeman, 1999). Low optimism indicates adolescents' vulnerability to symptoms of depression and has been found linked with poor psychological (and physical) well-being (Carver & Scheier, 2009; Scheier & Carver, 1992). Thus, since low optimism indicates a worsened psychosocial state, we asked whether it is connected with an increased inclination for non-normative activities.

2. The role of political beliefs

Our second presumption considered the notion that participation in protest activities has become relatively "normalized" in current society (Aelst & Walgrave, 2001; Norris et al., 2005); hence, it is possible that non-normative participation might reflect adolescents' specific political beliefs but not their overall problematic development. According to the classic Gamson's (1968) hypothesis, a preference for non-normative participation stems from a combination of low trust in public institutions and high political self-efficacy. Efficacy beliefs in general have been proposed as a crucial factor that helps to explain both normative and non-normative activities (Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009; Manganelli, Lucidi, & Alivernini, 2014; Vecchione & Caprara,

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