

## Electoral abstention and information sources among undergraduate university students

Jorge Mora Rojo<sup>1,2</sup>, Jose Manuel Tomás<sup>1</sup>, Víctor Yeste<sup>3,4</sup>, Eduardo Cebrián<sup>2,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Methodology for the Behavioral Sciences, Universitat de València, Spain, <sup>2</sup>School of Social Sciences, Universidad Europea de Valencia, Spain, <sup>3</sup>Department of Applied Statistics and Operational Research, and Quality, Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain, <sup>4</sup>School of Science, Engineering and Design (STEAM), Universidad Europea de Valencia, Spain, <sup>5</sup>Department of Economics and Social Sciences, Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain

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### Abstract

*A quantitative research study was conducted to examine electoral abstention among undergraduate students in Valencia during Spain's General Elections held in July 2023. Data were collected through a survey based on a questionnaire designed specifically for this purpose, focusing on the electoral behavior, socioeconomic and demographic profiles, and information sources. A multivariate statistic model was used to explain the likelihood of students non-voting. Key findings indicate that abstention it is not related to a demographic profile. However, a negative correlation with abstention was found among information sources such as party websites/social media, YouTube, printed press and TV, whereas a positive relationship was found with the use of blogs and forums.*

**Keywords:** *digital citizenship; social media; electoral abstention; online platforms; electoral programs; logistic regression.*

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### 1. Introduction

Our study on electoral behavior focuses on abstention in the last General Elections in Spain, held in July 2023, with university students in the city of Valencia as our target population. Electoral participation represents an important indicator of the health of a democracy, of social commitment (Varela et al., 2015), and of the level of voters' information in a society.

During this period, individuals form their comprehension of society and develop the capacity to understand and engage in politics, acquiring this knowledge through diverse socialization agents, with a notable emphasis on media channels. The initial formation of political attitudes defines one's political identity, which exhibits enduring traits that vary in intensity over the

years (Varela et al., 2015). Furthermore, young electoral population engage in elections less than adults (Espí Hernández, 2020).

The work of Shah et al. (2009) highlights the importance of information in socialization and the formation of civic citizens. They identify the four primary agents of socialization—family communication, debate activities in educational institutions, mass media, and peer discussion—as the foundation of communicative competence, which are interconnected. Thus, the media play a crucial role in providing information and understanding to young citizens about public affairs and electoral behavior (Goh et al., 2011; Moeller et al., 2014; Wlezien & Soroka, 2019).

We can distinguish between traditional media such as TV, newspapers, and radio, and media that have emerged with the penetration of digital technology including news websites, political party websites, social media, blogs, forums and podcasts (Soe, 2018).

The variety of sources can be a strong indicator of the interest in political life. If someone seeks information from different sources, they are likely to engage more deeply in understanding the various aspects of political events (Carlson, 2019). Consulted authors have observed a growing trend towards the use of emerging platforms, especially social media for consuming information, while there is simultaneous decrease in the use of traditional and digital media for this purpose (Kaid et al., 2007; Moeller et al., 2014). Similarly, Catalina-García et al. (2018) note that university students, categorized as the so-called true digital natives identified or Generation Z (Childers & Boatwright, 2021), preferentially use the Internet for information. However, there is a significant tendency for nearly all to combine on line news consumption with traditional media.

The utilization of online media allows the development of debating skills. Discussing political events reported in the news serves as a more accurate predictor of political involvement than mere exposure to the news (Shah et al., 2009). Furthermore, websites promote political participation by enabling interactive connections between citizens and parties (Norris, 2003).

## **2. Objectives**

This study aims to explain the likelihood of electoral abstention among university students in the city of Valencia during the General Elections of July 2023. It focuses on the impact of information sources while considering socioeconomic and demographic characteristics as control variables.

Specific objectives are: to investigate whether online information channels are better predictors of electoral participation than offline channels, and to examine the socioeconomic and demographic profile of the undergraduate students.

### 3. Methodology

Regarding electoral behavior, our interest lies in explaining participation in the last Parliamentary and Senate elections in July of 2023 in Spain. We consider a binary indicator: abstention and participation. Explanatory variables are defined in Table 1.

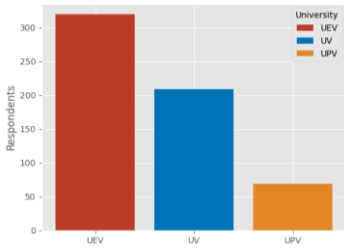
**Table 1. Exogen explanatory variables. Source: Own elaboration.**

<b>Control variables:</b> sex, year of birth, household income			
<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Values</b>
<b>Information</b>	<i>Platforms and social media:</i> sources use to follow current social news and political events	I1. What are the communication channels you use to get information?  I2. Do you use any of the following online media to get information?	Multiple choice: printed press, digital press, radio, TV, ChatGPT, SSNN, conversations  Multiple choice: Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, Tiktok, blogs, forums.
	<i>Electoral campaign:</i> reading of the political party programs	E2. Have you read the program of any party?  E3. Indicate whether you have consulted the website and/or SSNN of any party	Closed response: Yes/No.  Closed response: Both/only website/ only social media/ None.

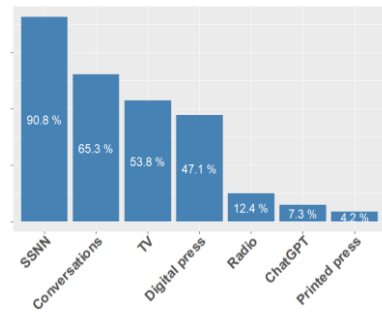
Sex is a binary variable; Birth year has been recoded into age in years; Household income is measured as an ordinal variable taking values:  $\leq 900\text{€}$ ,  $901-1.200\text{€}$ ,  $1.201-1.800\text{€}$ ,  $1.801-2.400\text{€}$ ,  $2.401-3.000\text{€}$ ,  $3.001-4.500\text{€}$ ,  $4.501-6.000\text{€}$ ,  $> 6.000\text{€}$ ; E3 was recoded into a binary variable: indicating whether individuals have consulted the website and/or social media of any political party and individuals or have not. Categories from items I1 and I2 were considered for the generalized linear regression as dummy variables indicating presence or absence. E2 and E3 were also considered as indicator of presence or absence.

Our research employed a non-experimental, cross-sectional design with a non-probabilistic intentional sample consisting of 598 undergraduate students across three universities in Valencia. Data were collected through a survey built ad hoc, with Google Forms platform. The survey was launched on September 7th, 2023 and concluded on the 25th of November 2023. The Universidad Europea de Valencia (UEV) ethics committee approved the research. The questionnaire was validated by 14 expert judges. The original questionnaire consisted of 55 questions, a final selection of 35 question was made. Inclusion criteria were: participants being enrolled in a university undergraduate program and to give informed consent in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. Participants received detailed explanation about their involvement and

the research objectives. At the UEV, educators directly distributed the survey to students, while at the Universitat de València (UV) and the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), students were approached on their way out of the different campus premises. The size sample for the universities surveyed can be found in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Distribution of survey respondents by university. Source: Own*



*Figure 2. Distribution information channels. Source: Own elaboration.*

A binomial logistic regression (BLR) was utilized to analyze the relationship between abstention and the explanatory variables detailed in Table 1. Two models have been run, the first includes variables I1, E2 and E3, while in the second model the SSNN category from I1 is substituted by the different online sources chosen by the student as specified in E2. We did not apply any variable selection method, since the aim of this research is to explore which variables present a statistically significant association with abstentionism. A p-value lower than .05 has been considered statistically significant in this study.

### **3. Results**

Firstly, it was noted that 13.5% of the sample, 64 out of 472 individuals, reported not having voted in the last General Spanish Elections.

The initial hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between the likelihood of abstention and the various media channels and sources through which students consult and gather information.

Model 1, detailed in Table 2, explores abstention using dummy variables for the different types of media, such as Digital Press, Radio or TV, along with control variables including Sex, Birth Year and Household Income of the respondent. Model's likelihood-ratio (LLR) test p-value, is  $.001 < .01$ , indicating with more than 99% of confidence that the model fits the data better than the null model, which includes the intercept as the only parameter. The model achieves a pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> of 0.1. It was found that only TV and Political party websites hold a significant negative relationship with abstention, which provides evidence that students who gather

information through either of these two channels are less likely to abstain. Moreover, social media and political party programs also present a weakly significant relationship,  $p$ -value  $< .1$ . This relationship is negative in the case of social media, but positive in the case of political party programs, which evidences that those students who use political party programs as a mean of information present a higher likelihood of abstention among their users. Among the control variables, none showed are significant association on the abstention of undergraduate students in Valencia.

**Table 2. Logistic regression Model 1 with media consulted by the student.** Source: Own elaboration.

Model 1				Model 2			
Variable	Coef	OR	p	Variable	Coef	OR	p
Sex	0.22	1,25	.49	Sex	0.50	1.65	.15
Birth year	-0.07	0,93	.37	Birth year	-0.05	0.95	.61
Household income	-0.07	0,93	.33	Household income	-0.07	0.93	.35
Printed press	-0.89	0,41	.43	Printed press	-0.68	0.51	.54
Digital press	-0.22	0,80	.51	Digital press	-0.35	0.70	.33
Radio	0.43	1,54	.37	Radio	0.27	1.31	.60
TV	-0.72	0,49	.03*	TV	-0.78	0.46	.03*
SSNN	-0.83	0,44	.08.	Facebook	0.67	1.95	.26
				Instagram	0.75	2.12	.08.
				YouTube	-0.85	0.43	.02*
				Twitter	-0.39	0.68	.25
				Tiktok	-0.48	0.62	.20
				Blog	0.80	2.23	.13
				Forums	1.02	2.77	.04*
ChatGPT	-0.14	0,87	.82	ChatGPT	-0.35	0.70	.59
Friends and family	-0.03	0,97	.93	Friends and family	-0.13	0.88	.70
Party programs	0.75	2,12	.07.	Party programs	0.63	1.88	.15
Party webs / SSNN	-0.93	0,39	.03*	Party webs / SSNN	-1.2	0.30	.01**
Pseudo R-Squared	0.107			Pseudo R-Squared	0.159		
LLR P-Value	.001**			LLR p-value	<.001***		

.  $p$ -value  $< .1$  \*  $p$ -value  $< .05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $< .01$

Because of the marginally significant relationship found for SSNN in Model 1,  $p$ -value = .08, Model 2 elaborates on this by specifying different SSNN channels as independent variables, as shown on Table 2. The thought behind this specification is that the weak significant relationship might be due from the relevance of certain social media platforms over others.

The LLR  $p$ -value  $< .001$  for Model 2 and the pseudo- $R^2 = .16$ , so it can be concluded with more than 99% confidence, Model 2 fits better the behaviour of abstention than the null model and it performs better than Model 1.

Analysis reveals that once all the social media platforms are considered individually, YouTube, Forums and Instagram show significant or weakly significant effects, while the rest of social media platform do not present significant effects on the abstention of undergraduate students in Valencia. Specifically, YouTube presents a negative relationship, which indicates that those students gathering information through YouTube are less likely to abstain. Conversely, student utilizing forums or Instagram as a mean for political information present a higher likelihood of abstention. Additionally control variables remain not significant in Model 2.

#### **4. Conclusions and Discussion**

The low abstention rate, 13.5%, suggests that the university population is more engaged commitment in electoral participation compared to older cohorts. If it is state that younger age ranges show higher electoral abstention, then from our results we can infer that they also show lower abstention compared to non-university youth.

We have chosen not to explore the potential causal link between information source usage and electoral participation, as such relationships could be spurious. Although, only 4 out of the 18 independent variables examined in model 2, were found to be significant, it is also important to reflect the strong effect achieved in certain predictors. Specifically, regarding the relationship between social media and turnout: for each person who did not go to the polls and received information via Youtube, approximately 2.3 chose to vote. Similarly, voter participation was a 61% and 47% higher among TikTok and X users. Conversely, we highlight the positive relationship obtained in the social networks from the Meta company, Facebook and Instagram, finding a ratio around double the individuals who chose not to vote; the use of blogs and forums also reached ratios higher than 2, nearly the triple among forum users.

Regarding traditional media, the strongest relationship with participation is observed in the activity of consulting parties' website or social networks, which showed a ratio of 3.3 voters for every one who abstained; Additionally, TV has also a positive relationship with electoral participation, classifying 2.2 people who participated for every one who did not.

Regardless of the effectiveness of communication programs, political parties are betting on electoral campaigns through online channels. The literature review suggest that young people have displaced traditional channels by online media as a source of information: Based on our findings we recommend that political parties prioritize engagement through YouTube, TikTok and X as social media, and also focus on enhancing their websites and partisan social networks.

Furthermore, young individuals who read the electoral programs also approach double the people who abstained. The use of blogs, forums, and the consultation of electoral programs is a more active attitude of information search and comprehension compared to the rest of the channels in which individuals are passive spectators of information consumption. In this way, students who have not voted have a more critical behavior and attitude. These results agree with the hypothesis posed by Boulliane, who argues that a greater frequency of use of social networks, blogs, or forums does not increase participation in voting.

On our final analysis on socioeconomic and demographic factors revealed that none of these variables were found to explain statistically participation behavior, corroborating Moeller's findings that age and gender do not have significant effect. Although Age was analyzed as a quantitative variable with its linear and quadratic effect, but also as a dummy variable, a null effect was always found. The introduction of gender as a control variable revealed that men were 65% more likely to abstain from voting. This finding supports Catalina-García et al.'s research, which noted differences in information consumption patterns between genders.

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