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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Future orientation and political participation in Europe

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Abstract

Political participation is an inherently future-oriented activity. Whereas single country case studies suggest that future orientation can influence voting and non-electoral political participation (NEP), its cross-national generalizability and an empirical test of the national political and economic context that would moderate this relationship has not been conducted. We address this gap via a multi-level analysis of the European Social Survey 2018; the political opportunity structure, measured with a liberal democracy index, and economic instability are, respectively, the macro-level political and economic factors. We found that general future-orientation is correlated with voting and NEP even controlling for standard micro-level factors. Whereas the level of democracy does not change this relationship, higher levels of economic instability weaken the link between future orientation and political participation. Predicted probabilities are modest. Thus, there is empirical support for the theory that future orientation is associated with political participation across European nations.

Keywords Future orientation · Political participation · Europe · Voting

Introduction

A major theoretical premise of political participation is that it is an attempt to influence the future. That future may be in the short or long-term, but social change, of some kind, is a hoped-for consequence of those who vote, attend a public demonstration, sign a petition, and other common forms of participation. Empirical research suggests that thinking about the future, based on immediate and long-term interests, impacts personal development (Aspinwall 2005; Trommsdorff 1983); it

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also correlates with political attitudes (Jamróz-Dolińska et al 2023; Pérez and Tavits 2017) and political behavior (Lacy and Christenson 2017).

The few previous studies that explored the link between future orientation and political behavior are informative, but they have shortcomings. Some empirical studies focus on case studies of the West (Rapeli et al 2021; Knudsen et al. 2021; Fowler and Kam 2006; Schafer 2021); others focus on non-Western nations (Pérez and Tavits 2017; Jamróz-Dolińska et al 2023; Wang 2019; Ting 2018). There are no cross-national studies of this relationship based on nationally representative samples. As such, whereas we know that future orientation can correlate with political behavior, we have a gap in theory, and we do not know the empirical generalizability of this relationship across nations, including whether political and economic national conditions matter.

In this article, we ask: *To what extent does future orientation influence political participation?* To address this question, we use the European Social Survey 2018, the most recent cross-national dataset in which the appropriate item for future orientation appears.

Theory

Political participation

Theories of political participation implicitly assume that individuals participate because they hope for some kind of future change. We note Van Deth's (2014) rules for recognizing what participation is, and whether in its minimalist, targeted, or motivational forms, political participation is about the future (Yates et al. 2024). Even the European Social Survey, since 2002, prefaces their political participation questions as forward-facing: "There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?" The attempt to improve or prevent something does not connote immediate improvement or prevention – rather, they are hoped-for future possibilities. Thus, political participants, including those who wish that society would return to some imaginary past, push for a change that would occur in the near or distant future.

Future orientation

People can consider situations that are distant in time and place and, in so doing, plan for the future (Trommsdorff 1983; Seigner 2009). Envisioning a future is a fundamental aspect of personal development because it enables individuals to move from their self-centered perspective to consider broader social contexts and longer-term prospects (Liberman and Trope 2008). Visions of future events and different outcomes are crucial for decision-making and reconciling immediate versus long-term interests (Aspinwall 2005). General future orientation engages cognitive processes like anticipation and planning (Nurmi 2006; Seigner 2009). As people weigh

immediate versus distant outcomes of their behaviors (Stratham et al. 1994), their future expectations can shape their life trajectories (Hitlin and Johnson 2015).

Future orientation, conceptualized and measured in various ways, is associated with many forms of political participation (Knudsen et al. 2021; Schaefer 2021; Wang 2019). In the US, Schafer (2021) measured future orientation through a monetary discount rate (akin to "temporal discounting"), which involves respondents making choices between receiving smaller amounts of money now versus larger amounts later. Respondents were presented with experimental scenarios in which they chose between lower payments immediately or higher payments later. Those who chose immediate gratification were less likely to vote or donate. Wang (2019) used a similar "discount rate" measure for Ukraine and found that those with delayed gratification were more likely to be the first group after the core supporters to join a major protest. In Finland, Knudsen and Christensen (2021) found that the future orientation, as measured with the Considerations of Future Consequences (CFC) scale, is positively associated with institutionalized (contacting politicians, working with political parties, or writing letters to editors) and non-institutionalized (consumer boycotts, demonstrations, petitions, and political consumerism) participation. As such, in various places, future orientation, measured in many ways, is associated with a variety of forms of political participation. Whereas we have no theoretical reason to know how different measures of future orientation will associate with various forms of political participation, we do explore voting and non-electoral participation separately. We focus on general future orientation and political behavior, rather than a future orientation specifically about political issues (e.g., Rapeli et al 2021).

The future-oriented and the present-focused

Engaging in non-electoral participation (NEP) often requires sustained effort with uncertain or delayed outcomes. Even electoral participation, i.e., voting, requires planning ahead, remembering election dates, and organizing oneself to go to the polls—all actions associated with future-oriented political behavior (Knudsen et al. 2021).

To better explain the theoretical relationship between general future orientation and political participation, we posit two types of individuals based on their propensity to plan for the future. One is the future-oriented. People with a future orientation consider the long-term implications of their actions (Joireman and King 2016). Indeed, the future-oriented anticipate future problems and possess a desire to proactively find solutions (Monroe et al 2017). Thus we, as others have, consider it reasonable that the future-oriented are likely to think of the future and act politically.

Conversely, people who live one day at a time have a less future-oriented disposition and thus might be less democratically engaged (Knudsen et al. 2021). These present-focused individuals place less emphasis on the long-term implications of their decisions (Bulley et al 2016). They might see political participation, especially voting, as having little immediate payoff, and since elections determine policies that

unfold over years, they may struggle to see how their participation influences their immediate reality (Schaefer 2021).

Hypothesis *The greater the future orientation, the higher the probability to vote and to engage in non-electoral political participation.*

Other micro-level factors

Trust and efficacy

Empirical research suggests that political trust is positively associated with electoral participation, such as voting, and negatively associated with non-electoral participation (Hooge and Marien 2013; Crepaz et al. 2017; Katsanidou and Eder 2018). In a study of Finland, Knudsen et al. (2021) found that political trust moderates the relationship between future orientation and non-electoral participation, i.e., those with lower political trust are more likely to express concerns about future political issues and politically engage (see also Rapeli et al 2021). A likely yet untested expectation is that political trust would also be a significant factor in cross-national analyses with future orientation in the model.

A long-standing finding is that those who have higher internal and external political efficacy are also more likely to vote and engage in non-electoral participation (Finkel 1985; Oser et al 2022). Whereas there are no cross-national empirical studies that explore the link between future orientation, political efficacy, and participation, we anticipate that efficacy would matter. Thus, we expect that internal and external efficacy, and relatedly, interest in politics, to be positive and significant factors in the model.

Macrolevel factors

Macrolevel factors are associated with political participation (Dubrow et al 2008; Hooghe and Quintelier 2014; Quaranta 2018). The cross-national data we use provide an opportunity to theoretically and empirically explore two likely macrolevel factors that might be associated with the relationship between future orientation and political participation: the political opportunity structure, understood as the level of liberal democracy, and economic instability. Because there are few theoretical or empirical studies that link future orientation, political participation, and political and economic national contexts, we posit and examine possibilities.

Political opportunity structure

At the macro-level, the political opportunity structure provides the environment for individuals to express political demands; higher levels of democracy encourage

more participation (Dalton et al 2010; Williams 2023). Indeed, in Europe, post-communist nations with an historically lower level of democracy have lower levels of political participation than the rest (Hooghe and Quintelier 2014; Dvořák 2024). In theory, the political opportunity structure, through its political institutions, influences the micro-level conditions for participation, e.g., via cognitive liberation (McAdam 2013).

As such, we expect that national political conditions will matter, but for political participation in general. We focus on the political opportunity structure as measured by the quality of liberal democracy. High levels of liberal democracy encourage participation in formal political activities like voting, or NEP such as attending a demonstration, signing a petition, and more. In contrast, a lesser quality liberal democracy may lead to disillusionment with formal political processes and thus reduce the chances that future-oriented individuals will politically participate (Karp and Banducci 2008; Vrablikova 2014).

The political opportunity structure's association with future-orientation and political participation is unclear, and perhaps small. Theoretically, in countries with robust liberal democracy, future-oriented individuals would be more likely to perceive their efforts as impactful and thus engage in democratic processes. Despite recognizing the long-term importance of addressing political grievances, those living in a country with a low level of liberal democracy – where political grievances are chronic and solutions seem distant – may feel that their participation will not make a difference, resulting in lower probabilities of either voting or NEP.

Economic instability

Due to the paucity of the cross-national empirical literature on the topic, the theoretical link between economic instability, future orientation, and political participation is unclear. To explore the theoretical connections, we deconstruct each facet of the relationship and then pose a plausible empirical expectation.

We anticipate that economic instability would depress NEP and voting behavior. Empirical studies indicate that economic issues matter for participation: economic development, e.g., GDP, increases the likelihood of political participation (e.g. Stockemer 2014) and economic inequality, e.g., income disparities, depresses it (e.g., Solt 2015). Economic development and income inequality are akin to economic instability because all are rooted in the "resources" theory of political participation (Brady et al 1995). Resources theory states that, in addition to skills and organizational capacity, economic resources provide the money, time, and occupational experiences that are the foundation for democratic engagement; when such resources are low, participation is less likely. There are nuances. Economic inequality raises the probability of participation for those with more resources and lowers the probability of participation for those who have less (Solt 2015). Economic growth, measured with GDP, increases the probability of participation because it provides a general level of resources; a sudden economic contraction can cause grievances that also increase the likelihood of participation (Kern et al. 2015). We note that our place and period of study – Europe in 2018 – is somewhat far from the

2008 Global Financial Crisis and is before the 2020 Covid-induced inflation crisis and thus is not a context for sudden grievance.

Some social psychological theories suggest that economic instability leads to a perception of uncertainty that may inhibit future planning. From a temporal discounting perspective, when people perceive their economic environment as uncertain or unpredictable, they are more likely to focus on immediate needs rather than long-term goals (Jacobs and Matthews 2012). From a prospect theory perspective, in times of heightened economic uncertainty, individuals become hesitant to engage in activities that yield long-term benefits but require present-day sacrifices (for a recent overview in politics, see Stein and Sheffer 2024). Drawing also on resource theory (Brady et al. 1995; Solt 2015), economic instability undermines the perceived availability of economic resources, and individuals in unstable economic resource contexts may prioritize short-term behaviors over longer-term investments in themselves and their community. Individuals with fewer economic resources or those experiencing uncertainty about the future of their resources could be less likely to invest time and effort into future-oriented activities, including political participation. Thus, we anticipate that the future-oriented are less likely to participate in places where there are higher levels of economic instability.

Data and methods

To test our hypothesis and expectations, we analyze the European Social Survey (ESS)'s Time Orientation module that appeared in 2018 (Round 9) for 27 countries (ESS 2023). See Appendix A for the country list and descriptives of all variables.

We measure political participation in two ways. One is the non-electoral participation (NEP) battery from ESS that encompasses a wide range of actions, including contacting politicians or government officials, working in political parties or action groups, being involved in other organizations or associations, wearing or displaying campaign badges/stickers, signing petitions, participating in lawful public demonstrations, and boycotting products. This diverse array of activities captures various forms of civic engagement and political activism, from direct interaction with political entities to more public displays of support or protest.

From this battery, we created a dichotomous variable where 1 indicates individuals who engaged in at least one form of political activity, and 0 represents those who did not participate in any. Whereas the early literature conceptualized political participation along two dimensions, e.g. institutional versus non-institutional or conventional versus unconventional, recent studies have conceptualized and measured participation as a unidimensional construct (Ahn and Mutz 2023; Li 2021; Macías Mejía 2024). Notably, Koc (2021) used the battery of non-electoral participation items from the European Social Survey in his bi-factor analysis and showed that the general factor accounts for the majority of the common variance across different participatory acts. Therefore, in most European countries, political participation can be effectively modeled as essentially unidimensional.

Our other dependent variable is voting. The voting variable is based on the question, "Some people do not vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in

the last national election in [month/year]?" We treat it as a dichotomy where 1 represents individuals who voted and 0 denotes otherwise.

Our main independent variable for general future orientation is "Planning for the future," and it is based on the response to the statement, "Do you generally plan for your future or do you just take each day as it comes?" This item explores the degree to which a person focuses on, and prepares for, future events and outcomes. We reversed the original scale from 0 (indicating extensive planning for the future) to 10 (suggesting a day-to-day approach); the variable now is an assessment of where individuals fall on a continuum from predominantly present-focused to highly future-oriented.

We note that the European Social Survey only includes this specific measure of future orientation. Whereas multiple future orientation items would be ideal, there are no such batteries that appear in major international survey projects. We further note that the wording of this one item reflects a core component of future orientation—whether individuals habitually think ahead and plan – and is similar in concept to other measures of the general cognitive tendency to think ahead that have been employed in prior research on time perspective (e.g., Strathman et al.'s 1994 Consideration of Future Consequences (CFC) item, "I consider how things might be in the future and try to influence those things with my day-to-day behavior").

We include the major sociodemographic variables that typically influence political participation.[1] We limit age to a range of 20 to 80 years. As in other models of participation, education level is quantified by the number of years of education completed by respondents. To measure their personal economic situation, our model also includes the feeling about their household's income (see also Muliavka 2021). The original four categories are dichotomized with 0 = those who feel difficult and very difficult on present income and 1 = those who reported coping and living comfortably on their present income.

We also include several social psychological variables that are common in political participation models. The regression model incorporates an assessment of individual interest in politics, gauged through the survey item, "How interested would you say you are in politics—are you…?" Responses to this question are structured on a scale ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponds to being 'very interested' in politics and 4 denotes being 'not at all interested'. We reversed the original scale.

We have two measures of political efficacy. The first item assesses internal efficacy: the respondent's perceived ability to take an active role in groups involved with political issues, with responses ranging from 1 (not at all able) to 5 (completely able). The second item evaluates external political efficacy: "How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?" also on a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (a great deal). We conceptualized

[1] There are other possible factors, such as urban residence, that could impact participation. However, for our theory and these models, we chose to include only those factors that have a direct theoretical contribution to the model. We have no theoretical reason to suspect that these other factors would eliminate the relationship between general future orientation and either NEP or voting.

political trust as an individual's trust in a key national institution, and we focused on the parliament. It ranges from 0 = "no trust at all" to 10 = "complete trust".

Our macrolevel variable for the political opportunity structure, i.e., liberal democracy, is the Varieties of Democracy Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) (V-Dem dataset 2022). The LDI provides a measure of the quality of liberal democracy, focusing on both the electoral and rights-based dimensions of democratic governance. It evaluates the integrity of free and fair elections, the protection of civil liberties such as freedom of expression and association, and the effectiveness of checks and balances that constrain government power, as well as protection of minority rights.

We measure economic instability using the standard deviation of the Eurostat monthly Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) annual rate of change over a five-year period, from January 2012 to January 2017 (Eurostat 2022). The HICP captures the year-on-year percentage change in consumer prices for each month and is standardized across EU countries. By calculating the standard deviation of these monthly annual inflation rates, we capture the volatility of inflation—higher values indicate greater fluctuations in price changes and, thus, greater economic instability. Thus, the higher the value, the greater the instability. This measure assumes that stable inflation reflects broader economic predictability, while volatile inflation signals uncertainty that may affect individuals' future orientation and political behavior.

Analytical strategy

In this analysis, we used the individual-level ESS data combined with the country-level V-Dem and Eurostat data to employ multilevel logistic regressions with non-electoral political participation and voting as dependent variables, future orientation as the main independent variable, and a set of covariates. The multilevel approach accounts for the hierarchical structure of the data, where individuals are nested within countries, allowing us to model the fixed effects of these predictors and random variations across countries. The models include a random slope for future orientation, meaning that the relationship between individuals' propensity to plan for the future and their political behavior is allowed to vary across countries.

In the European countries we study, liberal democracy is usually accompanied by high levels of economic development and lower levels of economic instability (see also Quinn and Woolley 2001 and Gerring et al 2005). We are concerned with multicollinearity and model the political and economic contexts in separate base models. In addition to the base models, we include separate models with cross-level interactions between future orientation and liberal democracy index and economic instability to explore the effect of future orientation on NEP and voting in countries with various political and economic contexts.

Table 1 Multilevel logistic regression of political participation and voting on selected independent variables

	Political participation				Voting			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Future orientation	0.023***	0.022***	0.022	0.057***	0.039***	0.039***	0.082	0.040
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.049)	(0.019)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.064)	(0.031)
Gender: female	0.149***	0.149***	0.149***	0.150***	0.238***	0.238***	0.238***	0.238***
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Age	−0.002**	−0.002**	−0.002**	−0.002**	0.031***	0.031***	0.031***	0.031***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Years of full-time education	0.085***	0.085***	0.085***	0.085***	0.051***	0.051***	0.051***	0.051***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Feeling about household's income	0.108***	0.107***	0.108***	0.108***	0.354***	0.354***	0.354***	0.354***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.035)
Trust in parliament	−0.043***	−0.043***	−0.043***	−0.043***	0.062***	0.063***	0.063***	0.063***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Interest in politics	0.516***	0.516***	0.516***	0.516***	0.655***	0.655***	0.655***	0.655***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Internal efficacy	0.360***	0.360***	0.360***	0.360***	0.129***	0.129***	0.130***	0.129***
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
External efficacy	0.036**	0.036**	0.036**	0.037**	0.112***	0.112***	0.112***	0.112***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Liberal democracy index	4.714***		4.706***		0.285		0.546	
	(0.860)		(0.932)		(0.911)		(0.992)	
Economic Instability		−0.789***		−0.545*		0.011		0.017
		(0.278)		(0.305)		(0.230)		(0.252)
Future orientation x Liberal democracy index			0.001				−0.057	
			(0.063)				(0.084)	
Future orientation x Economic Instability				−0.028*				−0.001
				(0.015)				(0.023)

Table 1 (continued)

	Political participation				Voting			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Constant	−6.856*** (0.668)	−2.254*** (0.393)	−6.850*** (0.724)	−2.559*** (0.422)	−3.747*** (0.708)	−3.545*** (0.332)	−3.946*** (0.769)	−3.553*** (0.357)
Variance components								
Future orientation slope	0.0007	0.0007	0.0007	0.0006	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002
Country intercept	0.303	0.563	0.303	0.546	0.349	0.351	0.350	0.351
N individuals	38,267	38,267	38,267	38,267	36,463	36,463	36,463	36,463
Log-likelihood	−20,048.86	−20,055.83	−20,048.85	−20,053.89	−14,477.46	−14,477.49	−14,477.25	−14,477.49
Akaike inf. crit	40,125.71	40,139.67	40,127.71	40,137.79	28,982.92	28,982.98	28,984.51	28,984.98
Bayesian inf. crit	40,245.44	40,259.4	40,255.99	40,266.07	29,101.98	29,102.04	29,112.07	29,112.54

Entries are logit coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). Reference categories: gender = male, feeling about household income = difficult and very difficult. Sign.: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the multilevel logistic regression for NEP and voting, and for each of political and economic contexts. There are eight models. As a guide, the odd numbered models include the political context (level of liberal democracy), and the even numbered models contain the economic context (level of economic instability).

In Models 1 and 2, with NEP as the dependent variable, future orientation has a positive and highly significant relationship. Gender, education level, and subjective economic conditions for those living comfortably or coping with household income also matter. Age and political trust negatively associate with non-electoral political participation, a finding that matches previous studies (Hooghe and Marien 2013). As expected, external and internal efficacy, along with political interest, are strong positive predictors. We note that the liberal democracy index has a substantial positive association with NEP, and economic instability has a negative association.

For voting, in Models 5 and 6, future orientation has a significant positive association. Age has a significant positive relationship, as well as gender and subjective economic conditions. Political trust, political interest, and internal and external efficacy are all significantly related to voting propensity. We find that the liberal democracy index and economic instability have a non-significant effect on voting.

The predicted probability plots (Figs. 1 and 2) illustrate the relationship between future orientation and the predicted probability to engage in political participation and vote, holding other variables at their means or reference categories.

Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of future orientation on non-electoral participation. The effect of future orientation is associated with an increase in the predicted probability of individual participation from 43 to 48% at the levels from present-oriented to future-oriented. This suggests a modest positive relationship between future

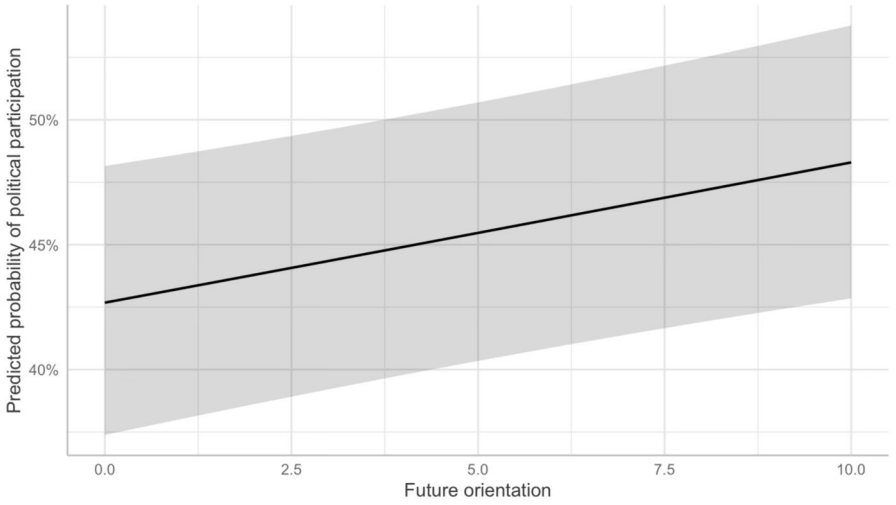

Fig. 1 The effect of Future orientation on the predicted probability of non-electoral political participation

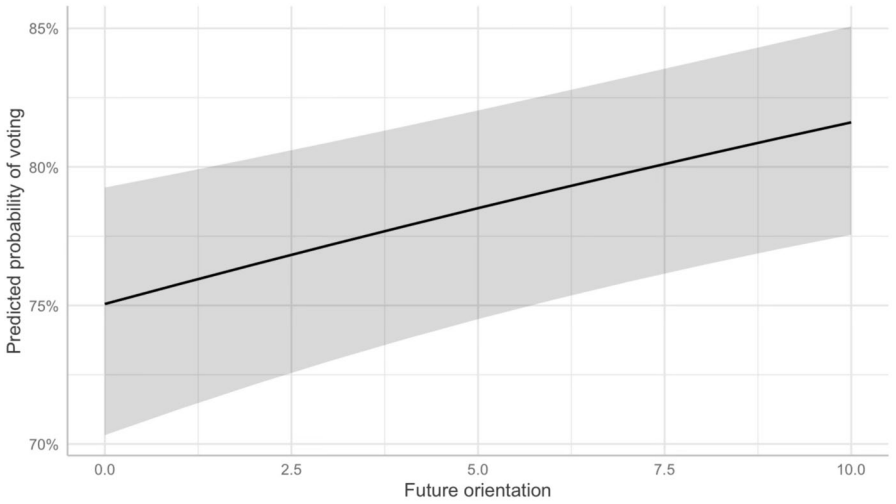

Fig. 2 The effect of future orientation on the predicted probability of voting

orientation and political participation. It suggests that individuals who plan for the future are more likely to engage in non-electoral political activities than those with a more present-focused orientation.

In Fig. 2, the predicted probability of voting is consistently higher than that for political participation and shows a positive relationship with future orientation. The predicted probability of voting increases from 75% at the lowest future orientation level to 82% at the highest level. This suggests that future-oriented individuals are more likely to vote than the present-oriented.

Both figures show that, while future orientation positively influences both non-electoral and electoral participation, its effect is more pronounced on voting behavior. In both, however, the effects are modest.

Cross-level interactions

Non-electoral participation

In Models 3 and 4, we include cross-level interaction terms for liberal democracy and economic instability with NEP as the dependent variable. The interaction between future orientation and the liberal democracy index is not statistically significant. As such, living in a highly democratic or moderately democratic country does not significantly affect the relationship between future orientation and NEP.

Model 4 investigates whether the relationship of future orientation on NEP is moderated by economic instability. In line with our expectations, the interaction term between future orientation and economic instability is negative and statistically significant. Thus, in more economically unstable contexts, the relationship between planning for the future and NEP is weaker.

To understand this relationship, we present the association between future orientation and the predicted probability of political participation at different levels of economic instability (Fig. 3). The effect of future orientation is positive at all levels of economic instability, but the relationship is stronger in economically stable countries. Moving from present-focused to future-oriented, the predicted probability of participation increases from 49 to 58% in more economically stable countries. The relationship between future orientation and participation is weaker in countries with higher economic instability. The predicted probability to participate increases from 37 to 40%. The interaction term is significant at $p < 0.05$. In short, economic instability moderates the link between future orientation and political participation—while future-oriented individuals are more likely to participate everywhere, the increase is much smaller in unstable countries than in stable ones.

Voting

In Models 7 and 8, we include cross-level interaction terms for liberal democracy and economic instability with voting as the dependent variable. Model 7 tests whether the relationship between future orientation and voting is moderated by the level of liberal democracy. The interaction term is not statistically significant from zero. This suggests that there is no clear evidence that the effect of future orientation on voting differs systematically across more or less democratic countries.

Model 8 examines whether economic instability conditions the relationship between future orientation and voting. Again, the interaction term between future

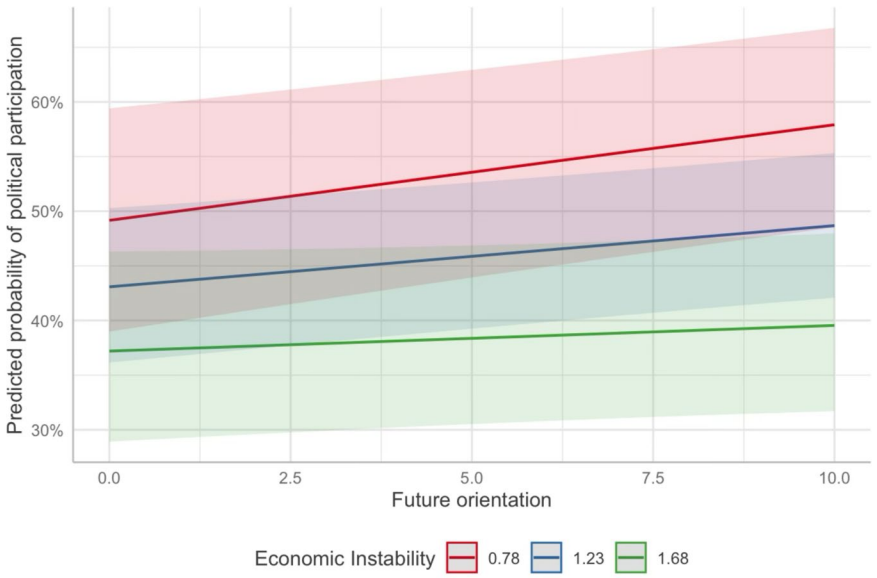

Fig. 3 The effect of economic instability on the relationship between future orientation and non-electoral participation

orientation and economic instability is not significant. This suggests that the level of economic instability does not significantly impact the relationship between future orientation and voting.

Conclusion

Political participation is inherently forward-looking. Yet, outside of a few single country studies, we do not know the extent to which, across nations, future orientation is correlated with participation. We investigated the role of general future orientation, i.e., planning for the future, in shaping non-electoral political participation and voting behavior with data from the European Social Survey 2018, the latest module that has the variables of interest. We explored how future-oriented thinking influences both voting and NEP, while accounting for the effects of political trust, efficacy, and the level of liberal democracy and economic instability in 27 countries. By integrating individual and contextual predictors, we aimed to improve theory regarding the influence of future orientation in political behavior across diverse national contexts.

We found empirical support for our main hypothesis: future orientation correlates with non-electoral participation and with voting. We note that the control variables are all significant and within their expected directions.

The unique data situation provided an opportunity to examine an unexplored aspect of the relationship between future orientation and political participation, i.e., the relevance of political and economic national contexts. Theory on political participation suggests that the political opportunity structure, which we specify as the level of liberal democracy, would matter. We found that, in Europe in 2018, liberal democracy improves the chances of NEP, but not for voting. However, in our examination of cross-level interaction terms, we did not find empirical evidence to support the idea that European countries with higher levels of liberal democracy particularly encourage the future oriented to participate.

The previous literature also suggests that the economic context would matter – but there are nuances. We blended political sociology's resource theory with social psychological insights into how economic uncertainty can influence future orientation, and we measured the economic context with economic instability. We found that economic instability is associated with a lower propensity for NEP. Crucially, we found a modest association between economic instability, future orientation, and NEP. Economic instability slightly diminishes the relationship between future orientation and NEP—i.e., the future-oriented are likely to participate in all European contexts, but less likely to do so when there is a high level of economic instability.

With regard to our research question, results suggest that future orientation is a significant and positive predictor of democratic engagement, but its role is modest. Although future orientation is associated with NEP and voting, it does not drastically alter their likelihood of doing so. These results suggest that future orientation plays a modest role in political behavior.

Future research can examine the mechanisms that link future orientation to political action. Perhaps the future-oriented might view voting and NEP as a civic

responsibility to help shape the future of their country. In their generalized forward-thinking way, they may see political participation as a means to ensure that their interests and those of future generations are represented.

Engaging in democratic processes often requires tracking political developments, learning about candidates, and understanding policy implications—activities that demand a long-term cognitive investment that the present-oriented may not be inclined to do. If they do not see immediate personal stakes in an election or civic movement, they might remain passive rather than be proactive by participating. Their decision to engage politically might be influenced by their immediate personal situation, rather than a calculated consideration of future possibilities. Future research can explore how their political behavior might be more influenced by current circumstances and immediate needs.

In short, we found that future orientation is a significant, yet modest, predictor of political engagement. The political opportunity structure, e.g., liberal democracy, and economic instability matter, but only for NEP. The results underscore the need for further cross-national studies to explore how variations in the political and economic context shape the relationship between future orientation and political behavior. These insights add depth to our theories of how future orientation can influence democratic engagement.

Appendix A: Descriptive statistics of variables included in the analysis

Variable	N	Mean / proportion	St. Dev	Min	Max
Political participation	45,907	0.46	0.50	0	1
Voting	42,209	0.78	0.41	0	1
Future orientation	46,071	4.85	2.96	0	10
Gender	46,276	1.54		1	2
Age	41,687	50.96	16.32	20	80
Years of education	45,634	12.99	3.97	0	22
Feeling about household's income	45,611	1.78		1	2
Trust in parliament	45,241	4.56	2.63	0	10
Interest in politics	46,193	2.37	0.92	1	4
Internal efficacy	44,909	2.14	1.07	1	5
External efficacy	44,906	2.27	0.96	1	5
Liberal democracy index	46,276	0.76	0.12	0.38	0.89
Economic instability	46,276	1.24	0.45	0.40	2.42

List of countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia.

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Author contribution J.D. conceived of the article, its direction and theory, and wrote the main manuscript text. O.L. conducted the analyses, wrote text for the methodology and results, and improved the theory.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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